

Imagination and memory in Vico and Joyce

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Joyce's friend Arthur Power recounts a conversation during which the two discussed, among other things, what happened between Leopold Bloom and Gerty MacDowell in Chapter thirteen of *Ulysses*. "Nothing happened between them", was Joyce's response. "It all took place in Bloom's imagination" (Power 1974: 32). But where is that?

In *Finnegans Wake* (Joyce 1964) imagination is a topos with subdivisions including "magic nation" (FW 565.29), "mad imogenation" (FW 251.17), and "museyroom" (FW 8.09). When Shem is disturbed by one of the *Wake's* numerous bad dreams, Anna Livia's comforting words are "Sonly all in your imagination, dim. Poor little brittle magic nation, dim of mind" (FW 565.29). Imagination is a frail thing unless, following Vico's counsel that imagination is memory, it is strengthened and made enduring by being turned on the mnemonic wheel which is both Ixion's agonized wheel of fate and the "crosskisses" (FW 111.17) of Vitruvian humanity. It is memory, not imagination, which is the source of bardic power in Joyce as repeated invocations in the *Wake* demonstrate: "Now by memory inspired", we are told, "turn wheel again to the whole of the wall" (FW 69.05). On one level, the reference is to Magazine Wall in Phoenix Park, locus of the *Wake*, but on another it is to memory's creation of a whole out of a hole and to the operation of the potter's wheel turning clay around a central point out of which grows a pot which is whole and entire around a center which is hole and empty. So, in Joyce as in Vico, memory is almost infinitely plastic, tensile, susceptible to moulding and shaping, balancing – like Wallace Stevens' jar in Tennessee (Stevens 1972: 76) – a world around it and, ordering that world around a fulcrum or focal point, becoming the world in and of itself.

Imagination is a margin or circumference, memory a center or originary point. One of the marginal notes to Chapter II.ii of the *Wake* labels the book's progress to "Old Vico Roundpoint" (FW 260.14) as "imaginable itinerary through the particular universal" (FW 260.R3). Imagination is precisely that capacity to particularize the universal, to operate metonymically upon the world, to margin/alize the text, to generate cognitive maps and models. But without memory, imagination's products are transient – mere itineraries, it-

erations of loci without a schema. With memory comes time, for memory is "morrowy" (FW 295.17) which gives us "Rest in peace!" and "But to return" (FW 295.15) in sequence. On which Issy's rude footnote comment is "Say where! A timbrellfill of twinkletinkle" (FW 295.F2), for in the coming together of memory and imagination is described a site of revolution which may bring creation or destruction, one emerging out of the other. This is also the site and occasion of death and the fall which generates textuality.

To put Joyce's cycle of memory and imagination in Vichian terms, then, one might say that the *ricorso* is confounded by and compounded of both and that both memory and imagination are potential in every moment of dreaming and waking. And as in Vico, geometry provides a training-ground for both. "When I'm dreaming back like that I begins to see we're only all telescopes" (FW 295.10) says Shem after drawing the Euclidean "geomater" diagram for his brother Shaun. Euclid's Proposition 2 becomes an anatomically-based *mappa mundi* which serves as both telescope and "telluspeep" (FW 275.L2) modelling the "verbivocovisual" (FW 341.18) transmission of the text imaged as emerging from "the obluvial waters of our noarchic memory" (FW 80.25) to encounter Jove's thunderbolt which is "his rude word" (FW 80.28). Out of the watery anarchy, the alluvial silt, of amniotic memory figured as Noah comes the ark/arc of the text born/e of and in and on the waters of Anna Liffey.

What next? "After sound, light and heat", we are told in the same chapter of *Finnegans Wake*, "memory, will and understanding" (FW 266.18). In this "allnights newsery reel" (FW 489.35) the conditions of imaginative production are as essential as those of physical production. If, according to both Joyce and Vico, imagination is memory and the study of geometry serves to strengthen memory, what are the functions of will and understanding and in what ways are they related first to memory and, ultimately, to imagination? Or, to summarize our progress thusfar: if Bloom's imagination is his memory and if, so to speak, Bloom is the memory of *Ulysses* – which is to say that *Ulysses* is a teaching machine which operates mnemonically – then what are the functions of will and understanding in relation to the Joyce system as mnemonic repertoire or *speculum* (see Weir 1989)? To work with this question we need to go beyond the Vichian axioms with which we have until now been concerned and begin to consider the operations of the Vichian "Mental Dictionary" as cognates of Joycean memory and imagination under the Wakean heading of "mememormee" (FW 628.14). In other words, to consider the question of self-identity and its relation to cognition and volition in Vico.

We can begin this quest with rather surprising and, I think, pleasant observation that in what the *Wake* classifies as "prefall paradise peace" (FW 30.15),

memory was free of its postlapsarian association with death, and mnemonic repetition was free both of the threat of forgetting and of the need to repeat *in extenso*. In fact, prelapsarian memory – like both pre- and postlapsarian imagination – may well have been relieved of the need of repetition at all and have achieved instead the epiphanic status to which after the Fall it has constantly attempted to return. This mnemonic *ricorso* in Joyce is an enactment of the Vichian *verum factum* principle since in the attempt to redress “the defects of their operation, inasmuch as in them the true is convertible with what is made” (Vico 1982: 55) – and what is made is the mnemonic *ricorso* itself.

This Vichian spiral provides us with a way of dealing with the fact of the postlapsarian inscription of anamnesis and aboulia across the Wakean cycle of mnemonic repetition for if memory cycles constantly toward a moment of redemption from time, it also encounters the fact of its own momentary amputation in the very succession of loci required in the composition of a memory theater or *speculum* such as the Joyce system is. These moments of “little death”, or what I classified as *ictus* in *Writing Joyce* (Weir 1989: 52), are constituted by the diachronic enactment of the reading process in its *ricorsive* and recursive movement from repetition to redemption, the moment when – theoretically, at least – the Vichian conversion of “what is made” into “the true” is achieved. This is the moment of imagination and its flaming out – “like shining from shook foil”, as G. M. Hopkins puts it (Hopkins 1967: 66) – is the coming together of memory and imagination, the moment toward which, for both Joyce and Vico, all history moves and which renders superfluous the practices of both Joycean catechism and Vichian Mental Dictionary. This is the moment which the Joyce system epitomizes through and in catachresis, the operation of pun structures as cognitive epiphanies, moments of semantic compression which, enacted, trope the operation of the whole system as a vast performative.

How do we get there? Two responses: (1) by linking mind and body via “speech”; (2) by theorizing the Mental Dictionary. Both responses are necessary in Joyce and, of course, both are Vichian. As Vico puts it in the *Scienza nuova* (Bergin – Fisch 1984 [1948]), “a man is properly only mind, body and speech, and speech stands as it were midway between mind and body” (*New science*: 1045). Speech as neurosemiotic phenomenon achieves articulation for Vico through writing for in Vichian grammarology “all nations began to speak by writing, since all were originally mute” (*New science*: 429). The earliest expression of the “Mental Dictionary” consisted of those clichés, proverbs and idioms which preceded fables and were, in fact, concise, pun-like compressions of the fable as narrative genre.

Governed by the principles which Vico knew as the Renaissance form of the art of memory, the Mental Dictionary in its most elementary form began with the hewing "out [of] topics, which is an art of regulating well the primary operation of our mind by noting the commonplaces that must all be run over in order to know all there is in a thing that one desires to know well" (*New science*: 497). As Donald Phillip Verene has noted, the Vichian memory theater, which is the full articulation of the Dictionary as mnemotechnic and semantic field, is "an *original* place from which to set in motion one's powers of memory" (Verene 1981: 143 [Verene's emphasis]) – a point of origin which enables us to compensate for our human inability to remember back to the origin of the world itself but only to the origin of the human world which is embedded in our language. The *verum factum* principle is, in other words, bounded by our postlapsarian drive toward redemption through memory – which is to say toward pun (or fable or exemplum or allegory) through mnemonic repertoire or Mental Dictionary.

Since, as Vico maintains, "it is an eternal property of the fables always to enlarge the ideas of particulars in imagination" (*New science*: 816), the Mental Dictionary comprised of particulars is the record of memory's journey toward universals which, by definition, exceed its human grasp. Hence memory's "imaginable itinerary through the particular universal" (FW 260.R3) is as close as we can get to the prelapsarian world of imagination since "the human mind, which is indefinite, being constricted by the vigor of the senses, cannot otherwise express its almost divine nature than by enlarging particulars in imagination" (*New science*: 816). As we have seen, this is the state Joyce designates as "prefall paradise peace" (FW 30.15) toward which imagination inclines but, bound by memory, can return only fitfully in waking dreams of another world.

Called upon, then, to sketch a mnemonic map which would serve the pedagogical purpose of occasioning the transient experience of imagination as memory, Joyce sought to employ readerly "will and understanding" in the service of memory in order, through the activation of a vast mnemonic repertoire, to set the poles of memory in opposition across the gap of the imagination and, throwing that switch which is the enactment of the text as performative, to achieve in the reader that moment of otherwise unattainable prelapsarian bliss which is imagination not recollected but experienced as a point of origin. In this sense, then, *Finnegans Wake* in particular – and the Joyce system more generally – attempt to subvert memory's brush by the wing of time and death, and to restore a lost mode of imaginative perception. In terms of the rhetoric of the Joyce system, this movement is represented by the paradigm of catechism and catachresis as *technai* or modes of system pro-

duction with the former repeatedly in process of extinguishing itself in favor of the latter as the system spirals ricorsively toward its own end. For Vico this operation involves what he calls the “cleansing” of the eyes of poetic history and geography (*New science*: 741); for Joyce it involves the articulation of a vast textual system, a semiotics of mnemotechnic, a composition of place in metonymic – in fact, in axiological – relation to its “precedent decomposition” (FW 614.34) in and through performance. Joyce’s fabled remark to Frank Budgen that “imagination is memory” (Budgen 1970: 187) may then be seen not only as a quintessentially Vichian strategy for the negotiation from particular to universal but also as no less than a trope of reading as redemption, a momentary stay against the dissemination of memory across itself – “mememormee” (FW 628.14) – and beyond into death.

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