

Map 1.07



The frontispiece of Vico's 1744 edition of *The New Science*, called the *dipintura*, was very designed by Rosicrucians steeped in the emblem book tradition of visual puzzles. Homer, the triangle-in-circle divine eye of God, and *Metafisica* standing on the globe of the cosmos (not the earth), which is in turn balanced precariously on an altar erected by the first humans in a clearing in the primal forest of antiquity, are locked in the the main triangulation. Objects representing human institutions (marriage, burial, navigation, writing, trade, power of the state, etc.) are arranged in the foreground. Homer gazes at the final object, the only one *not mentioned* in Vico's description of the image: the helmet of Hermes. Homer, the blind poet, seems to "see" the invisible helmet, and through this we are able to identify this as the *objet petit a*, by which the desire of the image is put in the form of an anamorphic condition.

Consider that the *dipintura* was intended to be viewed in a shadow-box whose eye-hole at the divine eye aimed the viewer toward a mirror reflecting the engraving pasted on the side nearest the viewer. The image would in this construction literally look back at the viewer. The reverse angle would directly demonstrate Vico's main dictum, that the *New Science* was to be understood as emanating from the unconscious of the reader, who realized in the order of his/her own ideas the same pattern of "ideal eternal history" encountered in the sequence of institutions and stages followed by all cultures in their development from mythic to conceptual stages of thought. The shadow-box view would connect the "blind spot" of the helmet of Hermes to the reader's

own "blind spot," his/her collaboration in the creation of this strange text. It is the reader who becomes the creator of *The New Science*, looking through the eye piece that is, on the reverse side, represented as the eye of God. But, the point is also that the reader mis-recognizes his/her role, is a psyche separated from the body, a wandering soul subject to the laws of authentic(ating) travel. This period of anonymity, in which the reader is like the Hitchcock hero who is wrongly accused of some crime and forced into flight, a journey of learning, where disguise plays many roles.

The *dipintura* contains the secret of Vico's most famous dictum, stated in *Ancient Wisdom*: *verum ipsum factum (est)*. Normally, this is translated as "humans may know perfectly only that which they have made themselves." The ambiguity of Latin allows for other meanings, including the one that anticipates Claude Lévi-Strauss's idea of bricolage as a means of "thinking through things." Even the more commonly accepted meaning, where human knowledge is compared to God's knowledge through creation, allows for theological ambiguity within God's knowledge, as a knowledge not maintained as a manual of operations or rule-book but as a dynamic time experiment requiring the initial alienation of the world as Other. In this somewhat Manichaean view, God creates the world as chiaroscuro — contrasting light and dark forces — and then sets it in motion. This speculation is grounded in Vico's own elaborate and particular use of shadow references, and his uncontested emphasis on blindness and invisibility in the *dipintura*. When Vico, in his *Autobiography*, describes his personality as both choleric and melancholy, the "dry line" connecting seasons corresponding to these two humors establishes a *cardus*, a north-south line that, connecting angels with demons, resonates throughout his account of genius, which drew on the late Mannerist theory that wit combined the fire of heroic madness and the cold reason of melancholy.

1.07 / Axis-Curve (∂)

Vico described his major work, *The New Science*, as a merger of the interests of philosophy and philology. What does this mean? Philosophy has retained its meaning into the modern era. What Plato did 2500 years ago is recognizable and its methods and ideas are as contemporary now as then. Philology, now associated with the comparative study of languages and their literatures, not so long ago included ethnography, folklore, eschatology, and speculative etymology, such as Vico undertook in his work *On the Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*. The larger idea of philology included customs, cultural institutions, and the history of concepts themselves, to the extent that these could be reflected in human speech and writing. Vico's Big Idea was to see an even closer relationship, a dialectic connection the ideality of ideas — a self-developing pattern of evolution — with the seemingly contingent or random circumstances of human cultures as material responses to highly variable geographical and historical conditions. Vico argued that variability, or even randomness, was required for the perfection of the process he called the "ideal eternal history," a sequence of stages carrying culture from the mentality of myth to the rationality of modernity. Vico however asserted that the historical sequence was evident not just in the development of the human individual but in the structure of any process or experience whatsoever. This connection of the macro- with micro-levels of events and things focused instead on the pure exchange that was simultaneous or even prior to the components it related. That is to say, accident is not accident until something contrasts with it as cause, form is not form without the formless.

This sentiment was not uncommon and possibly can be traced to Heraklitus's slogan, *panta rei* (everything flows). In a more domesticated setting, it is an issue of scale, an insistence on looking to the fine-grained levels of time and space, the small, seemingly minor inconsistencies and errors that, instead of being exceptions to be ignored, are the keys to the structure of the whole. After all, such is the nature of Freud's concept of the unconscious, or at least our access to it. Looking at slips of the tongue, denials, substitutions, errors, and omissions, psychoanalysis additionally specified that speaking and listening constituted the medium of discovery. The surface of the psyche was indeed curved, but every snapshot seemed to pledge allegiance to the frame that isolated it as a finite, representative "view." The quadratic frame was simultaneously an artifact of the evolution of the page as a material basis of printing, the development of painting on pieces of wood or canvas that could be detached from the walls that displayed them, and a reference to the cosmic system of winds, the "four quarters" that bounded the sensible universe and separated it from the ideal Emyrean realm. Each side of the snapshots of reality, even those made in language, refers to a journey made to the limits encountered at the north, south, east, and west of experience and sense perception. Without a doubt, these are not unconnected but linked, even if only a metaphor can approximate the situation. The River *Okeanos* bound not just the visible world but visibility itself, and the four directions of any frame were linked to the problematic combination of circle and square.

Giambattista Vico, *Ancient Wisdom of the Italians* (1710). Vico was one of the first to combine "chance and necessity" in such a way that Aristotle's themes of causality could be linked to modern science's Darwin-based formula. *Tuchē*, human affordance/opportunity could, in the context of "blind nature" (Aristotle's automaton), give rise to ideal formal designs that replicated a single logic across scales and environmental spectrums. But, following a theo-psychological model rather than an objective one, Vico used enunciation — the first word of Jove, embodied by the thunder, as his first cause. This in effect "out-Darwined" science by grounding universality in a theory of the subject.

———, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico* (1744).

———, *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico* ((1725–31, 1818).