



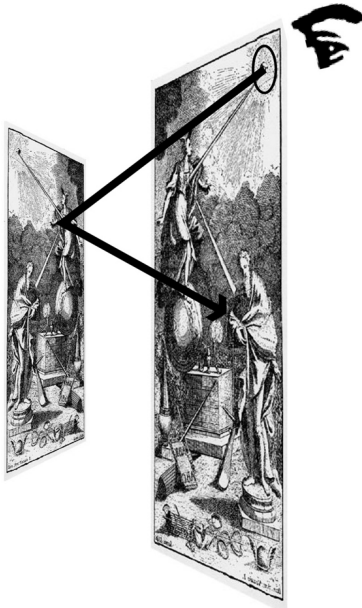
Ignota Latebat

The *impresa* shows Metafisica holding a mirror and a “triangle.” The perspective of the drawing allows that the triangle is possibly a right triangle, either isosceles, $45^\circ/45^\circ/90^\circ$ or a “30-60-90.” The 90° angle is the one furthest from the picture plane. The top angle is the one closest to the reader, tilted toward the picture plane. The 30° or 45° acute angle is at the bottom (Metafisica is holding this almost as if it were a pen), and, still surmounting the globe of the physical world, she is contemplating the triangle through a mirror, not looking at it directly. She rests on a plinth but there is no indication that this is necessarily an altar. It could be something purely “architectural,” and a further indication of this is that the “triangle” is really called a “square” (*squadra*) by carpenters everywhere, since it is used to “square” pieces of wood being fit together but can also be used to determine plumb (verticality), ratios, and a lot of other stuff. Carpenters, like masons, have secrets they have preserved since antiquity, and the utility of the carpenter’s square is a part of that lore.

As a square, it nonetheless has three parts, making it possible to compare to the divine oculus of the *dipintura*, but as a quadration it is more interesting to consider how it relates to other kinds of “quadra” and quadrations, one type of which is the very image (*quadra*) used to introduce the idea of a New Science.

Treating the *impresa* as the reader’s state of mind before the *New Science*, the *dipintura* as representing the state after raises the question of why Vico would be so didactic. If this is his intention, there would be more hints from him about this, but the big clue he gives is his exercise of imagining a *dipintura* “in reverse,” i.e. with all of the positive images shown broken, as a kind of proof-by-obverse of the *New Science*. I think Vico is referring to the same kind of experiment he mentions in one of his inaugural lectures, about staring at a bright image in the visual field and then looking away to see the after-image. Since he brings this up in the context of *conatus* — which is present in the after-image as demonstrating the momentum of the visible world, invisible until we see it in the negative — the negative experiment is very interesting.

Metafisica is telling us how to read *The New Science*, but she first tells us how to read the *dipintura* — as if through a mirror. Because the reader takes a central role in creating the New Science in the act



of reading, the reader looks through a hole that is the divine oculus at a mirror where the reader may at first perceive that he is seeing an image plainly displayed, i.e. he does not yet recognize that it is *his eye* in the place of the divine oculus. He sees things correctly but to construct this, there must be an image on the obverse surface that the reader looks through.¹

This could be an actual box that the reader could use, with the *dipintura* pasted on one interior wall and a mirror opposite an opening through which the user peeks. The reader can anticipate this based by taking *Vico's impresa* as a form of "instructions." The motto, *Ignota Latebat* may indicate that the "she" in "she lay hidden" is the reader's own *Metafisica*, constructed as the surface that faces away from the reader toward a mirror which the reader holds, the book of *The New Science*. Construction of such a mirror-box would actually materialize a merger between the *dipintura* and the *impresa*.

The reader and reading "square up" *The New Science*, as per *Vico's* description of the "proof of the body" (§330). Quadration resonates with other uses of four in Italian and other languages (rectify/rectification, orthos, quadrare, right, etc.). The helmet of Hermes "signalizes" this relationship and use of the reflection of the

dipintura, and *Vico* would have been aware of most of the tradition of *Hermes* through his classical erudition.² *Hermes* is not simply a messenger, but a conductor of souls — a "psychopomp." To a great extent, this sets up the *New Science* as a kind of necromancy — which in a general sense is what all books are, even when the authors are still alive. But, the boundary between life and death is a key point, because the boundary can be realized as one of those problematic cases where you can cross but you can't cross back, at least not in the same way. In this, *Vico* seems to sympathize with *Dante's Vita Nova* and may be thinking, as *Dante* was thinking, about the overtones between "new" and the number 9, which *Dante* employed extensively as a psychopompic agency.

This is not number symbolism; a few things about the number 9: as a sigma value (the sum of the numbers taken singly in any number, e.g. the sigma of 372 is 3+7+2, or 12, which is then 1+2, or 3) has been used in Vedic mathematics for centuries to check the correctness of sums and multiplications. You can "remove" or "cast out" nines and the value remains unchanged. *Vico's* idea of literary composition seems to be similar. You can add or subtract this or that idea but the science itself is resilient to any and all changes. You can mistake it, underestimate it, falsify it, screw it up however you like, but it is still the same science because it is not content *per se*. It is not based on interpretation, which requires the idea of a "transitive" boundary between the text and the reader, but rather on dialectical reading, where the reader "sees himself reflected in the work," i.e. a metaleptic reading.

If anything, the *impresa* is about metalepsis. *Metafisica* "sees what she herself is holding in her hand," a construction tool, a square, a principle of rectification. But, *seeing herself* is a part of it, a part of the proof, as *Vico* states in §330. This is the case for why the "triangle" is really a right triangle or, more correctly regarded, a square. If the triangle is *not* a carpenter's square, if it is an equilateral triangle like the one containing the divine eye, then *Metafisica* is *even more instructing us* on how to view the *dipintura*. She is superimposing her own gaze within that of the triangle.

Note: *Vico* characterizes *Metafisica* as a "false goddess" because, in my view, he must identify divine providence with God to avoid prosecution by the Inquisition. But *The New Science* says precisely that human make their own world — that they, not God, are in the position of the divine eye. *Metafisica* is what they construct with the imaginative universal. *Metafisica* also has a winged head because she communicates with the *caelum* (heaven/wedge) that *Vico* cites as the key — *agutezza* of wit (again, a "triangular" idea). *Vico* and the reader are Actæons to *Metafisica's* *Diana*.

1 D. Kunze, "Who's on First?" in Soumyen Bandyopadhyay, Jane Lomholt, Nicholas Temple, and Renée Tobe, eds., *The Humanities in Architectural Design: A Contemporary and Historical Perspective* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2010), 177–178.

2 D. Kunze, "Skiagraphy and the *Ipsum* of Architecture, *Via* 11, "Shadow" (1990): 62–75.