Afterthought: Of Maker’s Knowledge

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We have been invited to offer afterthoughts on the 2010 San Giorgio Dialogue: Protecting Nature or Saving Creation? The Dialogue’s manifesto urged that to move on from somewhat sterile past exchanges between science and religion we should explore the tension between doctrines of nature and of creation. The high tension had somehow to be discharged because the sciences have apparently been able to demonstrate imminent ecological threat but not mobilize an adequate response. Meanwhile, religions have an impressive track record in mobilization, even if their capacity to get to grips with natural phenomena seems a bit uneven. The very first thing I learnt during the Dialogue was the intricate relation between the (somewhat religious) language of apocalypse and messianism, and the (somewhat technological) language of geo-engineering and planetary boundaries. As the Economist recently cautioned in its commentary on the arrival of the anthropocene epoch: “the invocation of poorly defined tipping points is a well worn rhetorical trick, stirring the fears of people unperturbed by current, relatively modest, changes.”

I soon learnt, too, that the tension that affects relations between nature and creation relies in part on the notion of maker’s knowledge. This is the principle that we know best—or indeed we only know well—what we make. One application of the principle is that creation’s often been taken to be nature’s making, so there is a long-term puzzle about the very status of nature as artifact. It is also a principle with some pleasingly posh and well-timed philosophical ancestry, much in evidence at just the period several historians judge the conflicts of western European natural science and religion began to reach toxic levels. It appeared in Francis Bacon’s alchemically ambitious claim that anyone who can make a substance with all and only the properties of gold thus knows the causes of all gold’s essential properties. It was pithily set out in Thomas Hobbes’ mathematical and political polemic that the only “demonstrable arts” are those where the artist has power to construct the subject: “Geometry is demonstrable; for the Lines
and Figures from which we reason are drawn and described by ourselves; and Civil Philosophy is demonstrable, because we make the Commonwealth ourselves.” Hobbes reckoned natural philosophy undemonstrable because we did not make nature. And in his brilliant attempt at recovery of the oldest Italian wisdom, the Neapolitan friar Giambattista Vico declared “the true is what is made”: because mathematics and civil society are human creations, they can be the subject of sciences.

Perhaps the speed with which I sensed how fundamental was the question of our best knowledge’s dependence on the work of making was because my stay on San Giorgio started with a tour of the remarkable exhibition, *The Arts of Piranesi*, set up next door to the monastery in an exhibition space converted from the island’s former warehouses. On show was a vast array of Piranesi prints from the Cini Foundation collections, alongside a multi-dimensional mobile digital projection of the delirious spaces of the *Carceri* and a set of material recreations of furniture designs taken from *vasi, candeliabri, cippi, and Diverse Maniere d’adornare i cammini*. The key (certainly ambiguous) word here is re-creation. The great Venetian architect was much affected by Giambattista Vico’s contemporary arguments about the work of history and creation. In his own version of the inquiry into the oldest Italian wisdom, Piranesi famously declared it was never enough to imitate ancient models: the maker must display the possession “of an inventive, and, I had almost said, of a creating Genius.” Neither the experience of sitting inside the penally claustrophobic flight simulator nor, even more obviously, gazing awestruck at stereo-lithographed realizations of Piranesi’s ornamental designs, whether Etruscan vases or English coffee houses, were in any way recapitulations of events that had once happened back in the eighteenth century nor of objects that had ever quite existed in Piranesi’s Roman workshops. On the contrary. These were in some sense unknown and unprecedented novelties, generated creatively through what its makers describe as a mix of organic modeling software and traditional modeling skills.

Many observers (such as, notoriously, the early nineteenth-century English opium eater and journalist Thomas de Quincey) had responded to the *Carceri* with narcotic reveries of flight through those visionary topographies. Yet none had quite sought to make them until now. Some of the images in *Diverse Maniere d’adornare i cammini* record finished work, but most viewers have instead been impressed by the ambiguities, inconsistencies, and downright confusions of Piranesi’s shadowy project. Some have even judged the designs simply impossible to reproduce. Not so. Evidently the modern artifacts on display at San Giorgio cunningly conveyed forms of knowledge directly linked to the work both of past and of present artists. The nature of Piranesi’s arts was marvelously grasped through these creations. Here was a rather dramatic and seductive demonstration that the capacity to make something was both a precondition of truly knowing the thing and also a graphic sign it could be known: thus a good start for reflections on the creation of nature and the nature of creation.