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Toward a Definition of Leonardo da Vinci's *Anti-Umanesimo*

Central to the Humanistic world-view of the Italian *Quattrocento* is the conception that the intellectual order the human mind can impose on life is superior to any metaphysical or naturalistic position. The historical patterns created by man have organized a humanized cosmos, which is to be preserved from the chaotic manifestations of reality. As a result, nature and humanity represent a raw material to be transformed into man-made forms. The Humanist has thus prepared a number of moulds in order to formalize life; one need only mention archetypal patterns and ideal resemblances in history, linear perspective, treatises, and a consistent reliance on the classical past.

Such a leading development, however, did not annihilate more limited and immediate approaches to reality; hedonism and the *carpe diem* motifs were indeed popular in the fifteenth century. The names of Lorenzo de' Medici and Luigi Pulci are usually familiar in the context of a less-than-idealized conception of art. The more intellectualized features of love assume the evidence and gravity of an equine simile in the case of Lorenzo's girlfriend, Nencia. In his famous *Canzone di Bacco* Lorenzo encourages the following life style: 'Quant' è bella giovinezza, / che si fugge tuttavia! / Chi vuol esser lieto, sia: / di doman non c'è certezza.'[1] Similarly, Luigi Pulci reduces the romantic world of chivalry to the Gargantuan and coarse physiology of his Morgante. Although mainly centred on the sixteenth century, Eugenio Battisti's *Antirinascimento* does identify exotic and fantastic expressions in the fifteenth-century context of Italian art.[2]

Aware of Humanistic exemplarity and naturalistic undercurrents, Leonardo da Vinci consciously exposed the limitations of *Umanesimo*, which he attacked by means of experience and on account of an unshakable faith in the perfection of Nature's mould. In the eyes of Leonardo, nature itself has form, order, and purpose; it is for man to learn from it without being distracted by a dead world of books and erudition. Although indebted to *Umanesimo* and sensitive to the world-views of Piero della Francesca and Leon Battista Alberti, Leonardo reacted against them. His lesson was to reappear in Giorgione and, later, in figures like Galileo and Giordano Bruno.

1 Lorenzo de' Medici, *Canzone di Bacco*, in *The Penguin Book of Italian Verse* (Baltimore: Penguin 1965). 142

2 Eugenio Battisti, *L'Antirinascimento* (Milan: Feltrinelli 1962)

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In light of this historical evolution, which exemplifies a development parallel to *Umanesimo*, this essay proposes to solidify Leonardo's historical position as expressive of the notion of *Anti-Umanesimo*. This term was proposed in the early 1960s by Rocco Montano in a brief but suggestive study of Renaissance and Baroque aesthetics,[3] and this investigation intends to apply it in greater depth – and with a degree of personal interpretation – to the artistic and cultural framework of the *Quattrocento*.

It must be emphasized that the term *Anti-Umanesimo* is critical inasmuch as it proposes constructive alternatives to the values it either modifies or dismisses. Moreover, this study will suggest that Leonardo and Piero della Francesca often pursued similar goals, although employing quite different means. In support of this critical label, the sixteenth-century opposition of art to nature, or the return from the former to the latter, has found a reputable definition in the concept of the *Counter-Renaissance*;[4] much of its meaning can be extended to the notion of *Anti-Umanesimo*. Pierre Francastel recognizes Leonardo and Giorgione as the last generation of the *Quattrocento*, while Kenneth Clark seems to identify Baroque features in Leonardo's conception of art. In classifications more strictly consistent with a chronological approach, Michael Levey includes Leonardo's early works in the Early Renaissance, which identifies the fifteenth century as an age of transition. Frederick Hartt instead locates Leonardo in the sixteenth-century context of the High Renaissance. From a larger philosophical point of view, Ernst Cassirer repeatedly underlines Leonardo's original position with regard to the Humanists, but he does not alter the conceptual unity of the individual and the cosmos in Renaissance philosophy. The concept of *Anti-Umanesimo* will thus follow the organic growth of Leonardo's art in terms of chronological periodizations and artistic evolutions.[5]

Erudition and rhetoric exemplified much, but not all, of the intellectual environment that surrounded Leonardo in his early years in Florence. Eugenio Garin has convincingly pointed out the influence Neoplatonic thought might have had on Leonardo.[6] With regard to his integration of

3 Rocco Montano, *L'Estetica del Rinascimento e del Barocco* (Naples: Quaderni del Delta 1962)

4 Hiram Haydn, *The Counter-Renaissance* (New York: Gower Press 1960)

5 Pierre Francastel, *La Figure et le lieu* (Paris: Gallimard 1967); Kenneth Clark, *Leonardo da Vinci* (Baltimore: Penguin 1973); Michael Levey, *Early Renaissance* (Baltimore: Penguin 1967); Frederick Hartt, *History of Italian Renaissance Art* (New York: Prentice-Hall 1969); Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell 1963). On the subject of synchronic developments and diachronic evolutions, see Claudio Guillén's essay, 'Second thoughts on literary periods,' in *Literature as System* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1971) 420–69.

6 Eugenio Garin, *Scienza e vita civile nel Rinascimento italiano* (Bari: Laterza 1972), chapter 3, pp 57–85. See also Giovanni Gentile, *Il pensiero italiano del Rinascimento* (Florence: Sansoni 1968), especially chapter V, pp 151–72.

empirical research and mathematical principles, the artist's intellectual proximity to the Platonic-Ficinian emphasis on rational and absolute structures is evident. Garin finds 'il limite stesso dello sperimentalismo di Leonardo in queste "ragioni" matematiche, presupposto metafisico piuttosto che strumento logico della ricerca.'[7] The definite stress Ficino placed on the necessity of the central position of the sun indirectly led speculative eyes toward explorations beyond the Ptolemaic system, which no longer satisfied minds like those of Pico della Mirandola and Leonardo da Vinci.

In a more generally Platonic context linked to the idea of art as a copy of a copy, Leonardo makes a statement strikingly parallel to such a notion: 'perchè la pittura è partorita da essa natura; ma per dire piv corretto diremo nipote di natura, perchè tutte le cose evideti sono state partorite dalla natura, delle quali cose partorite è nata la pittura, adunque rettamente la dimanderemo nipote di natura, parete di dio (I, p 327).[8] Although indicative of a certain familiarity with general propositions of a Platonic frame of mind, these observations cannot endorse any systematic interpretation of Neoplatonism.[9] Furthermore, Leonardo's continuous, almost obsessive, concern with an energetic and vitalistic representation of life might preserve traces of the Platonic frenzy, which Giordano Bruno was to call an *eroico furore*, toward the end of the sixteenth century.

Still in light of Leonardo's Humanistic background, Kenneth Clark has analysed the kind of influence the antique exercised on the painter, who 'discovered in antique art images of violence and mystery.' Clark underlines the fact that 'a great deal of antique art is as far from our established concept of classicism as antique mythology is from a serene rationalism.'[10] It suffices here to point out a selection of works that reflect classical influences: *Drawings of Heads* (Windsor 12276v), *Old Emperor and Grotesque Heads* (Windsor 12495r), *Studies of Horses* (Windsor 12315), *Studies of the Male Figure* (Windsor 12640), *Figure of a Young Man in Profile* (Windsor 12540).[11] Exposure to classical art probably reached a peak when Leonardo visited Rome between 1500 and 1503. The *Vitruvian Man* testifies to a theoretical and a priori approach quite different from Leonardo's usual defini-

7 Garin, *Scienza*, p 74.

8 *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, 2 vols., ed. J.P. Richter (New York: Dover 1970). All references are to this edition, with page number indicated in the text.

9 This Neoplatonic presence is underlined by Lionello Venturi in *La critica e l'arte di Leonardo da Vinci* (Bologna: Zanichelli 1949). See also Gentile, *Il pensiero italiano*, pp 144–9. Gentile maintains that Leonardo leans toward the metaphysical naturalism of Giordano Bruno and Tommaso Campanella, instead of Galileo's scientific naturalism.

10 Kenneth Clark, 'Leonardo and the Antique,' in *Leonardo's Legacy*, ed. C.D. O'Malley (Berkeley: University of California Press 1969) 2.

11 The numeration follows the *Manuscripts at the Royal Library, Windsor*, catalogued by Kenneth Clark.

tion of man.[12] Moreover, his *Notebooks* contain a treatise on painting, although not one as pragmatic and complete as that of Leon Battista Alberti. In the cartoon *St Anne, the Virgin and the Child*, the physical solidity of the figures, the flowing and rhythmic sweep of the draperies impressed Bernard Berenson and Kenneth Clark in terms of Hellenistic influences. The latter, however, draws a distinction which is generally representative of Leonardo's contact with, and interpretation of, antiquity: 'On the counts that Mr Berenson found so Greek, both as humanity and as form, what complications have intervened. For although the Greeks invented intellectual curiosity, they never succeeded in combining it with what we call their sense of beauty. On the contrary, they banished from their smooth, symmetrical images anything that could suggest the restless, unsatisfied life of the mind, and it was precisely for this intellectual disease Leonardo was determined to find a beautiful embodiment. So when all is said of Leonardo's debt to antique art ... it remains no more than the point of departure for a far more intricate and mysterious journey.'[13]

In spite of these influences, Leonardo's sketch of the old emperor crowned with a laurel wreath clearly illustrates his Anti-Humanistic position, when one compares it with a similar wreath that crowned the Humanist Leonardo Bruni in the tomb sculpted by Bernardo Rossellino.

With the Humanistic platform of Leonardo's *Anti-Umanesimo* outlined, it is time to turn to his attack on the Humanists, before engaging in an analysis of his independent approach. In the Introduction to his *Libro della Pittura*, Leonardo makes a statement that is overtly critical of Humanistic erudition: 'So bene che per non essere io literato, che alcuno prosuntuoso gli parà ragionevolmente potermi biasimare coll'allegare jo essere homo sanza lettere ... diranno che per non avere io lettere non potere ben dire quello, di che voglio trattare or no sano questi che le mie chose son piv da esser tratte dalla sperietia, che d'altra parola, la quale fu maestra di chi bene scrisse' (I, p 14). This candid recognition of a lack of academic sophistication was almost heretical at the time, if one only compares it to the illustrious line of Florentine Humanists; one of them even assumed a name, Pletone, which is similar to that of Plato (Platone in Italian). The Humanists were men of letters in the first place, and their literary erudition often overlooked other fields of investigation. Leonardo's criticism is meant to enlighten people, since 'se bene come loro no sapessi allegare gli autori molto magiore e piv degnia cosa allegherò allegando la sperietia maestra ai loro maestri ...: me inventore disprezzeranno' (I, p 15). The exploits of human ingenuity are

12 In addition, Leonardo states in his *Notebooks*: 'L'imitatione delle cose antiche è piu laudabile che quella delle moderne' (I, p 244).

13 Clark, 'Leonardo and the Antique,' 33–4.

thus based on the experience of the external world, which remains the true battlefield of knowledge and wisdom.

Such a critical assessment of the Humanistic world-view inevitably led Leonardo to look for exemplary substitutes. The result was a total re-evaluation of Nature. While its fluctuations were feared by the Humanistic mind, which considered its general stability inferior to human order, Leonardo identified in movement and change expressions of the vital and universal order of Nature. In the eyes of Leonardo, Nature does not represent a raw material, but incorporates an order as lasting and stable as that expressed by Piero della Francesca's mind. With regard to this new attitude, Ernst Cassirer makes a basic remark: 'For Leonardo, nature no longer signifies the realm of the formless – the mere matter that opposes itself to the principle of form and its dominion. Viewing it only through the medium of art, Leonardo does not see nature devoid of form, but rather as the very realm of perfect and complete form itself.'[14] Starting from opposite poles, Piero and Leonardo converged toward parallel, though different, conceptions of reality. Patterns of an orderly cosmos are imposed by Piero on his artifacts, whereas Leonardo discovers similar networks in the depths of nature itself. Convinced that 'la neciessità è maestra e tutrice della natura' (II, p 285), Leonardo concludes that causes and effects are governed by an inevitable necessity, which can be apprehended in as rational terms as a mathematical formula. Obviously such knowledge is to be pursued by means of experience. The *natura naturata* of *Umanesimo* is opposed by the *natura naturans* of Leonardo's *Anti-Umanesimo.*

Still dependent on medieval phraseology, from lady *Fortuna* to St Francis's lady *Povertà,* Leonardo considers experience his mistress, just as perspective becomes an unreachable lady for Paolo Uccello. However, this personification does not undermine Leonardo's rigorous experimentalism: 'La sperieza, interprete infra l'artifitiosa natura e la umana spetie, ne insegnia ciò che essa natura infra mortali adopera, da neciessità costretta non altrimenti operarsi possa che la ragio, suo timone, operare le assegni ... La sperieza no falla mai, ma sol fallano i vostri giuditi, promettendosi di quella efetti tali che ne' nostri esperimeti causati no sono ... a torto si lametan li omini della innocente sperientia, quella spesso accusando di fallacia e di bugiarde dimostrazioni' (II, pp 288–9). The scientific discipline that such Humanists as Leonardo Bruni and Lorenzo Valla applied to linguistic investigations was paralleled by Leonardo's outlook on reality, as an anticipation of the scientific approach of Machiavelli and Galileo.[15]

14 Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos,* 162

15 Ugo Spirito, *Machiavelli e Guicciardini* (Rome: Edizioni del Leonardo 1945) 28, states in this connection: 'Nell' opera di Leonardo sono le stesse premesse ideali che spiegheranno il pensiero di Machiavelli. Esse possono riassumersi tutte nel consapevole passaggio dalla filosofia alla scienza o dalla metafisica all'esperienza.'

As a scientist and an inventor Leonardo struggled throughout his life to reconcile the twofold connotations of his cherished word *sperienza*. On the one hand it means *experiment*, that is, a scientific inquiry into the world of particulars aimed at analysing the relations between effects and causes. However, Leonardo's experimentalism was linked to, and conditioned by, the wider context of *sperienza*, which identifies a suprascientific, if not poetic, knowledge of the archetypal causes of nature. Moreover, Leonardo's unorthodox experimentalism is basically intended to discover the principles of the phenomenal world, without any definite interest in their scientific completion. For Renaissance minds like Leonardo and Giordano Bruno, science is part of human knowledge, and experience includes man's faith and destiny. This attitude justifies the discrepancy between the enormous number of drawings and sketches related to the world of particulars and the handful of paintings in which Leonardo represented the more universalized features of his world. Like Machiavelli's *virtù* and the *sprezzatura* of Castiglione, Leonardo's *sperienza* is presented as a mistress because it embodies his ultimate ideal of a total knowledge of life.

Representative of an orthodox Humanistic position, Piero della Francesca considers the science of mathematical perspective as a 'scientia necesaria alla pictura.'[16] His treatise on painting is nothing but a mathematical representation of space; in his case, mathematics and geometry express an orderly cosmos. Consistent with this position, Leonardo makes unequivocal statements on this subject: 'No mi legga, chi non è matematico, nelli mia pricipi ... e vuoi poi colla moltitudine de' soffistichi ingannare te e altri, sprezzando le matematiche sciezie, nelle quali si contiene la uerità, notitia delle cose che in lor si cotegono' (I, p 11; II, p 302). The principle of mathematical proportions is strictly applied to the parts of the human body in his notes on anatomy, which he extends to trees and even water; accordingly, 'tutti i rami delli alberi in ogni grado della loro altezza givnti insieme sono equali alla grossezza del loro pedale. Tutte le ramificationi dell'acque in ogni grado di loro lunghezza, essendo d'equal moto, sono equali alla grossezza del loro principio' (I, p 205).

Such a mathematical platform constitutes the backbone of Leonardo's concept of perspective and art in general. While 'prospettiva è ragione dimostrativa per la quale la sperientia conferma tutte le cose' (I, p 32), 'quelli che s'inamora di pratica saza scietia, so come 'l nochiere che etra navilio sanza timone o bussola che mai à certezza dove si uada; sepre la pratica debbe esser edificata sopra la bona teorica della quale la prospettiva è guida e porta' (I, p 18). At this point, however, experience intervenes in order to avoid the simplifications elaborated by Piero della Francesca and Leon Battista Alberti. As a result, Leonardo states that 'La perspectiva, la qual s'astende nella

16 *De Prospectiva Pingendi* a cura di Nicco Fasola (Florence: Sansoni 1942) 128

pictura, si divide in tre parti pricipali, delle quali la prima è della diminuitione che fan le quatita de' corpi in diverse distantie; La seconda parte è quella che tratta della diminuitio de colori di tali corpi, – Terza è quella che diminuisce la notitia delle figure e termini, che ànno essi corpi in varie distatie' (I, p 17).[17] The uniform lighting of Piero's works is foreign to Leonardo's concern with shadows and atmospheric effects. Piero is interested in the exact mathematical diminution of size and shape at a distance, which he controls. Leonardo instead is involved in rational adjustments as well as in perceptual distortions. Consequently, mathematical and perceptual space come together in a more comprehensive integration.

Consistent with this evolution, Leonardo's studies of natural alterations are aimed at achieving an understanding of reality as absolute as Piero's mastery of rational patterns. The latter's construction of immutable forms is opposed by the former's analysis of the possible variations of perceptual vision, according to which 'tutte le cose vedute parrano maggiori di mezza notte, che di mezzo dì e maggiori di mattina che di mezzo dì' (I, p 22). Similarly, Leonardo compares simple and complex perspectives: 'La seplicie prospettiva è quella che è fatta dall'arte sopra sito equalmente distante dall'ochio con ogni sua parte, – prospettiva conposta è quella che è fatta sopra sito il quale co nessuna sua parte è equalmente distante dall'ochio' (I, p 56).

Experience and science finally converge in Leonardo's formulation of his total conception of space, which drastically alters Piero's system of linear perspective. Articulated in a pyramid receding toward a vanishing point, the compositions of Masaccio and Piero della Francesca concentrate space toward that vanishing point. The landscape background of Leonardo, instead, seems to open toward a variety of directions, as is apparent in such works as the *Virgin of the Rocks* and *St Anne, the Virgin and the Child.* It seems as if the pyramid had been reversed, so that the vanishing point has been shattered. The viewer's eye, and not the base line of the painting, constitutes the point of departure for spatial constructions. Accordingly, Leonardo remarks: 'Prospettiva è regione dimostratiua per la quale la sperientia conferma tutte le cose madare oll'ochio per linie piramidali la loro similitudine' (I, p 32). The notions of finite and infinite are no longer concentrated in the symbolic connotations of the vanishing point, but in a perceptual centre, the eye, in which the forms, colours, and 'tutte le spetie delle parti dell'universo so

17 Leonardo states on the atmosphere interposed between the eye and visible objects: 'L'obbietto si dimostrerà tanto più o meno noto in una medesima distatia, quato l'aria, interposta infra l'ochio e esso obbietto, sarà più o me rara; Adunque conoscedo io che la maggiore o minore quantità dell'aria interposta infra l'ochio e l'obietto rede all'ochio più o me confusi li termini d'essi corpi, tu farai li perdimeti delle notitie d'essi corpi tanto nella medesima proportione infra loro quale è quella delle loro distatie dall'ochio d'esso risguardatore' (I, p 129).

ridotte in v punto' (I, p 19) Obviously, such a unity becomes fragmentary and relative as space is created in front of the eye; Leonardo has given life to a psycho-physiological space which closely reflects the dimensions and phenomena of perceptual vision.

Recovery of the perceptual world inevitably led Leonardo to dismiss such theoretical abstractions as the vanishing point of linear perspective. Furthermore, he could not entertain the Humanistic ambition of giving the infinite, which cannot be perceived in a real space, a finite representation by means of linear perspective. Hence, Leonardo states that 'non si debbe desiderare lo inpossibile' (II, p 297). Moreover, he attacks those who claim to 'scrivere ch'ài notitia di quelle cose, di che la mete vmana non è capace, e non si possono dimostrare per nessuno esenplo naturale' (II, p 302). In the case of Leonardo, theory is intimately connected to, and often verified by, experience. Because of its causality, experience stands very close to science and mathematics, whereas the Humanists generally considered empirical knowledge as the first step in a series that would lead to superior abstractions. With an almost mathematical precision, nature is given order and direction by Necessity, which 'costrigni colla tua leggie tutti li effetti per breuissima via a participare delle lor cause!' (I, p 19) Reliance on such a principle facilitated Leonardo's understanding of the scientific principles and the poetic reasons of life's stability in the midst of growth and death, change and decay.

In addition to these differences, one should parenthetically consider instances in which both the *Umanista* and the *Anti-Umanista* moved away from their positions. In an essay on images made by chance, H.W. Janson analyses a passage of Alberti's *De Statua*, in which the writer suggests that the sculptor ought to be receptive to 'certain outlines which through some light changes could be made to resemble a natural shape.'[18] Similarly, Leonardo states in his *Libro della Pittura* that spots on the wall could indeed inspire 'varie invetioni' (I, p 254). Clearly, such attitudes are inconsistent with Alberti's rational order and the Necessity of Leonardo. Although reliance on chance remained exceptional in the fifteenth century, it assumed an increasing importance when Francesco Guicciardini and Michel de Montaigne recognized that history and life are largely subjected to chance and accidents.[19]

While Leon Battista Alberti and Piero della Francesca cherished completion, clarity, and the creation of an artistic realm immune to time and space

18 H.W. Janson, 'The "Image Made by Chance" in Renaissance thought,' in *Essays in Honor of Erwin Panofsky*, ed. Millard Meiss, 1 (New York: New York University Press 1961) 254.

19 Kenneth Clark, *Leonardo da Vinci*, 82, comments on the same passage analysed by Janson as follows: 'Nothing could be farther from the precepts of academic classicism than the use of stains in walls as a stimulus to the imagination. This procedure was followed by Goya, one of the most anti-classical of all painters.'

in the form of development and process, Leonardo returned to the phenomenal world and its intimate correspondences with human nature. Like the Humanists, Leonardo is not interested in a mere imitation of nature; his landscapes are as unrealistic as those arranged by Piero and Botticelli. At the heart of their conception of art, be it metaphysical, humanistic, or naturalistic, there lies a common attempt to capture and express the ultimate reasons of man's relationships with life.

The Humanist's potential for a Godlike function was implemented by means of simplification, abstraction, and reduction; nevertheless, he remained aware of the fact that control of life as a whole and in its complexity is beyond the artist's powers. Leonardo, instead, moves in the very midst of life in order to capture its everlasting principles. The *Adoration of the Magi, Mona Lisa*, and the disquieting *St John the Baptist* mark the stages of one of the most daring, and perhaps unmatched, adventures the human mind ever engaged in. At the end of it, Paul Valéry considered Leonardo as 'the artist of the world itself.' He was able to find and understand relations 'between things of which we cannot grasp the law of continuity.'[20]

Restricting the focus of this study to Leonardo's paintings, the *Adoration* exemplifies an original statement of the artist's *Anti-Umanesimo*. In the Humanistic tradition, the *istoria* contributes to the narrative and compositional order of the work of art. Needless to say, a limited number of noble and exemplary subjects enhanced the total quality of the artifact, as repeatedly recommended by Alberti in his treatise *On Painting*. Although a rather large number of figures are crowded in the same pictorial space, Masaccio is still able to organize his story in three moments in *The Tribute Money* (1425). The *Adoration of the Magi* (1470s) of Sandro Botticelli, which represents an immediate precedent to Leonardo's, belongs to that tradition, with an emphasis on the concept of epiphany; in his hands, the subject becomes a courtly tale.

A first glance at Leonardo's *Adoration* suffices to shatter the notion of tales or contemplative moments of Christian faith, as further illustrated in Ghirlandaio's *Adoration of the Shepherds* (1485). Something eventful is taking place in Leonardo's painting, which presents a moment pregnant with mysterious and electric vitality. Whatever its subject, the *Adoration* illustrates neither a clear story nor a world in an aloof state of being. A similar interpretation in the form of a dramatic revelation is repeated in the *Last Supper*. But then, what is the subject of Leonardo's *Adoration*, and how has he interpreted it? Giulio Carlo Argan suggests that Leonardo centres on the concept of 'epifanìa è fenomeno; dunque nel fenomeno e non nell' astratta *idea* si manifesta il divino.'[21] Epiphany implies manifestation, revelation. It

20 *Variety* (New York: Harcourt 1927) 183, 234.

21 Hartt, *History of Italian Renaissance Art*, 394–96; Clark, *Leonardo da Vinci*, 37–43; Guilio Carlo Argan, *Storia dell'arte italiana*, 2 (Florence: Sansoni 1969) 264.

traditionally refers to the Magi, the Baptism of Christ in the river Jordan, and the miracle at the wedding of Cana. In all three events, epiphany involves affirmation, preservation, and recognition of life; the stress lies on continuity and becoming. Therefore, epiphany does not elevate life to a contemplative moment of adoration, but it integrates the human and the divine into an instant of lasting validity. The moment of the biblical adoration is projected into the context of divine manifestations. Instead of developing a literary narrative, the story is reduced to a climactic nucleus of surprise and revelation. Contact with the divine may humble and threaten, but it certainly gives life new purpose and energy, in terms of a communion of the outer and the inner, the spiritual and the physical.

It is apparent that Leonardo deals with the divine manifestation in anti-Humanistic terms. In the *Adoration* the artist brings the divine to an immediate contact with life, which denies the possibility of developing an *istoria*; as life proliferates in one moment from one space to another, so the actions taking place in the painting occur simultaneously. This unification of time is enforced by a similar unification of space, which, at this early stage of Leonardo's art, still follows a rather strict application of the Albertian system of linear perspective.

At this point, basic problems begin to arise. In the case of Piero della Francesca, time, space, and humanity are all raised to an ideal and rational level. Leonardo's humanity, instead, is emotional and alive. Consequently, he has created a mathematical and illusory space, or, as Erwin Panofsky would say, a psycho-physiological conception of time and humanity.[22] The result is a complex system in interrelationships.

In terms of the narrative, the background with classical ruins in the *Adoration* is populated with horseback riders and people painfully moving along a staircase. Their classical identification is determined more by the architectural surrounding than by historical evidence; in point of fact, they are as ahistorical as the main group in the foreground. Confronted with the classical-contemporary dilemma, Leonardo excludes neither; historical ambiguity seems to favour the representation of humanity in general. Such a proposition finds endorsement in Leonardo's concern with the danger of finished figures. On the one hand, they violate atmospheric blurring, and they can also lead to the same error of artists who, 'per fare le figure itere, guastano i componimeti' (I, p 291). This statement can shed some light on the unfinished figures in the foreground of the *Adoration*. Rather than individualized features, Leonardo seems to represent areas of human expression. His figures do not tell a story, but express mystery and surprise; their unfinished forms reflect their states of mind. In this connection Leonardo recommended that a figure is most admirable when, by its actions, it 'meglio

22 Erwin Panofsky, 'Die Perspektive als "symbolische Form"' in *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg*, 4 (1924–5) 258–330.

esprime la passione del suo animo' (I, p 292). This position is not conceptually different from that of Piero della Francesca, whose aloof and geometric figures aptly convey the painter's world-view. Nevertheless, the artistic implications are quite different. Leonardo states that human and animal figures should 'fugire il legnioso' (I, p 295), which is the effect of several of Piero's figures. In this context, it suffices to glance at the latter's *Baptism of Christ*, in which the wooden stiffness of Christ's engaged leg has been often related to the trunk of the tree standing next to him.

The literary theme, so rationally served by the pictorial medium in the fresco cycles of Masaccio and Piero della Francesca, only represents a suggestion, a starting point in Leonardo's *Adoration*. This intellectual nucleus then grows to energize the whole canvas. Present but impalpable as the principle of life itself, the subject of the painting neither illustrates nor develops a story. Instead it presents the kernel of a phenomenon of birth and revelation involving the totality of life, as an archetypal reality that exceeds literary, spatial, and chronological sequences; it only suggests assimilation and rejection, which promote a state of becoming as persistent or ephemeral as each individual can make it. The fundamental role that the *istoria* played in the Humanistic conception of *ut pictura poesis* ('As is painting, so is poetry')[23] was deliberately attacked by Leonardo, who asserted the superiority of painting over sculpture and poetry:

E se tu poeta figurerai una storia colla pittura della penna, el pittore col pennello la farà di piu facile sadisfatione e me tediosa a essere copresa: se tu dimaderai la pittura muta poesia, acora il pittore potrà dire del poeta orba pittura; or guarda quale è più dannoso morbo o cieco o muto; se 'l poeta è libero come 'l pittore nelle iuetioni, le sua fintioni no sono di tata sadisfatione ali omini quato le pitture, perchè se la poesia s'astede colle parole a figvrare forme, atti e siti, il pittore si move colle propie similitudini delle forme a cotrafare esse forme; or guarda qual'è piv propiquo all'omo o 'l nome d'omo o la similitudine d'esso omo; il nome dell'omo si uaria i uari paesi è la forma non è mutata se no da morte. (I, p 327)

It is against this proposition that a more detailed analysis of the *Adoration* ought to be conducted. With regard to the backround, struggle and tension are suggested by men and animals, but no clearer reading can be deduced. Furthermore, no apparent connection can be drawn between the two groups at both sides. Likewise in the foreground, where the ring of people surrounding the Virgin can only suggest individual reactions. Rejection of human and literary co-ordination is necessary in order to preserve the moment of surprise and manifestation. Hence, logical connections between background

23 On the subject, see Rensselaer W. Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting* (New York: Norton 1967).

and foreground are shattered. Communication between the Virgin and the figures around her is blocked by the dark, empty space at the centre of which she is located. The logic of a historical narrative is thus followed by a cumulative display of human and natural processes. Since no literary story unifies the artwork, the manifestation of the divine assumes as many shapes and results as each human being can absorb; the result is a multitude of different attitudes. Hence, the manifestation of the phenomenon is never completed, but still happening. Interrupted links and empty spaces preserve the mystery and permanence of life.

Such an interpretative context facilitates an understanding of the architectural structures in the background of the *Adoration*. Human artifacts are crumbling, while nature takes over, in a manner strikingly similar to that of such Venetian painters as Carpaccio and Giorgione. On the other hand, a triumphant *tree of life* stands behind the Virgin. Historical artifacts pass and vanish, but the archetypal forces of man and nature survive in the end. In pictorial language, this cyclic permanence of life is expressed by the mother and child, as well as by the old and young men framing the canvas on both sides.

As a whole, the *Adoration* is enhanced by a series of contradictions. It exemplifies a continuous, if not systematic, confrontation between the values of *Umanesimo* and *Anti-Umanesimo*. The *istoria* is suggested but not developed; mathematical space adjusts the phenomenal world. Traditional values are extended to a different context, thus leading *Umanesimo* to a point of crisis. While the old is no longer satisfactory, the new is still vague in the mind of the artist. Leonardo's position looks forward to the *Tempest* of Giorgione.

Inevitably, Leonardo's *return to nature* opens a Pandora's Box with regard to man's assessment of reality. An immediate result of this attitude is a severe criticism of the ideal and self-contained world-view of the Humanists. Art and man's quest for knowledge become a phenomenon, since completion would deny fidelity to life. In this context, Karl Jaspers generalizes about Leonardo as follows: 'He no doubt intended to finish his work, but with him completion was not an ultimate aim or criterion. The purpose of his visual thinking transcends the finished work. It was no accident that Leonardo was not satisfied with any of his works ... Leonardo's aim was not a rational scheme of the universe, but knowledge growing from concrete perception.'[24] Under these circumstances, art finds stability by moving into the depths of life, instead of removing itself from it.

If nature is to be assumed as a basic point of reference, the artwork must recognize it within the boundaries of human interactions. This conscious-

24 Karl Jaspers, *Three Essays. Leonardo. Descartes. Weber*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Harcourt Brace 1964) 10, 49.

ness is further reflected in Leonardo's use of the vernacular, which was a more appropriate language for new ideas; as Ernst Cassirer remarks: 'The liberation from medieval latin, the gradual construction and development of the *volgare*, as an independent scientific form of expression was the necessary prerequisite for the free development of scientific thought and its methodological ideals.''[25] Leonardo's vernacular treats its subject matter in terms which are more concrete and scientifically precise than Boccaccio's prose, which, unless used in dialogue form and in the low style of everyday life,[26] remains burdened with evident traces of involuted Ciceronianism. By contrast, Leonardo anticipates the scientific prose of Machiavelli and Galileo.

We have analysed the *Adoration* as a masterpiece in which Leonardo manipulates imitation in favour of innovation. We now turn to an artistic statement that is representative of the artist's mature genius. Leonardo finally integrates the perpetuity of nature with that of human life in the *Mona Lisa* (1502–4), who embodies an ineradicable expression of the universal permanence of life as the intuition of an everlasting moment. The smile of *La Gioconda* testifies to Leonardo's praise of the activities of the human mind, as he states in his *Notebooks*: 'Siccome il ferro s'arruginiscie sanza esercitio, e l'acqua si putrefa e nel freddo s'agghiaccia, così l'ingiegnio sanza esercitio si guasta' (II, p 294). In historical terms, Piero della Francesca's portraits of *Battista Sforza* and *Federigo da Montefeltro* (1465) exemplify a world-view totally controlled by the artistic mind. Having structured reality so as to eliminate the possibility of change and error, Piero forces man and nature (one could also refer to the *Baptism of Christ* and the *Flagellation*) to reflect the geometric designs of his mind. Nature is thus denied phenomenal complexity, while Battista Sforza visualizes a profile looking nowhere. She illustrates an artistic projection in which the chances and processes of life have been frozen in a moment of intellectual perfection.

Piero's artistic outlook entails an analysis of the tools needed for its implementation. Before Leonardo da Vinci and his three-quarter profile, Renaissance portraiture is largely two-dimensional, as illustrated in the straight profile of Battista Sforza. The outline of her head does not suggest any realistic continuation on the other side of the painting, which would otherwise imply the three-dimensional depth of a totally realized character. Were that to occur, the artist would have given to the painting a complete spatial dimension, and thus an identity of its own. Under these hypothetical conditions, the portrait would have been *released to life*, as Pirandello would say,[27] in that it would have acquired a personality indepen-

25 Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos*, 57.

26 See Erich Auerbach's remarks on Boccaccio's prose in *Mimesis*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1968) 203–31.

27 See Pirandello's Preface to *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, trans. Eric Bentley, in *Drama in the Modern World: Plays and Essays*, ed. Samuel A. Weiss (Boston: Heath 1964) 559–68.

dent of the artist. In light of the Pirandellian tension between life that changes and the fixed immutability of form, Renaissance protagonists are not generally *released to life*. They are often stopped at the threshold between nothing and eternity, where they remain forever dependent on their *artifex* for a *raison d'être*. Such a conceptual position accounts for the theoretical nature of *Il Principe* of Machiavelli, the protagonist of Alberti's *Della Famiglia*, and *Il Cortegiano* of Castiglione.

Another stylistic feature conducive to the artist's mastery of his art is exemplified in the painter's linear approach. Reliance on clearly defined outlines allows the artist to exert a definite control on forms and surfaces. Precise outlines and a lighting evenly shed throughout the canvas define a reality that is much clearer than reality itself.

While the physical existence of Battista Sforza was limited to expressing a projection of Piero della Francesca's self, Leonardo finally releases Mona Lisa to life; triumphantly, she walks across the threshold open onto eternity with a body and a personality of her own, in an environment that fully expresses the phenomenal world. Under these conditions, the artist's mastery of his artifact reaches the climactic point where fulfilment and defeat become successive moments of an inevitable process.

The profile of Battista Sforza gives expression to a face as lifeless as an empty shell. Mona Lisa, instead, stares at the viewer, thus establishing a direct rapport with the world around her. The three-quarter profile gives Mona Lisa weight and dimension, while Piero's clear outlines are dismissed by Leonardo, who states that 'li termini delli corpi sono la minima cosa di tutte le cose ... li termini laterali d'essi corpi è la linia termine della superfitie, la qual linia è di grossezza invisibile; aduque tu pittore no circudare li tua corpi di linie, e massime nelle cose minori che 'l naturale, le quali no che possino mostrare li termini laterali, ma li lor menbri per distantia sono invisibili' (I, p 29). Such a position evidently endorses the painterly approach in general, and the Baroque positions of Caravaggio and Velazquez in particular.

Consistent with such an artistic attitude, Leonardo's *chiaroscuro* undermines the clear linearity of fifteenth-century painting, which neatly separated light from shadow, figures from environment, as is the case with Piero della Francesca. The *chiaroscuro* deals with a reality which is not under the total control of light and reason. Instead, it exemplifies the complexities of life, as they were to fascinate Machiavelli, Guicciardini, and Montaigne in human and historical terms. In addition, it must be pointed out that *chiaroscuro* and shadows do not express absence or negation of light, but they identify different and yet fundamental expressions of it. By the same token, *chiaroscuro* becomes a stage in the cycle of life, not a negation of it. Clearly, Leonardo explores those areas where natural and human contours blur and antagonize each other. If linear perspective gives the illusion of reality,

Leonardo's *complex perspective* and *chiaroscuro* illustrate the illusoriness of reality and the complex relationships between man and nature, as a comprehensive anticipation of Baroque art.

On the subject of creatures released to life and in contact with their environment, the background landscape of *Mona Lisa* presents fantastic mountains which are loosely related to the Alps. Furthermore, rivers and mountains are all pervaded by a foggy atmosphere encompassing earthly waters and their airy condensations.[28] The fluvial curves are continued in those of the lady's arms; expressing a system of natural and human correspondences, they define her as emblematic of human life as the rivers are of nature. In one of his philosophical maxims Leonardo states: 'Molte volte una medesima cosa è tirata da 2 violetie, cioè neciessità e potentia; l'acqua piove, la terra l'assorbisce, per neciessità d'omore, e 'l sole la sveglie no per neciessità, ma per potetia' (II, p 286).[29] Necessity leads Mona Lisa's smile, and potency rejuvenates it eternally. As a result, time is liberated from chronological limitations. The destructive powers of time are acknowledged by Leonardo in one of his *morals*: 'O tepo, consumatore delle cose, e o invidiosa antichità, tu distruggi tutte le cose, e consumi tutte le cose da duri deti della vecchiezza a poco a poco co leta morte! Elena quando si specchiaua, vededo le vizze grinze del suo viso, fatte per la vecchiezza, piagnie e pesa seco, perchè fu rapita due volte' (II, p 291). Mona Lisa evidently represents an alternative in favour of eternal youth, which is reiterated by the relation between the watery life-cycle in the background and her perpetual smile. Such a smile testifies to the continuity of life, and any particular interpretation of her motivations would bring that lasting manifestation of life to an individual conclusion.

From the artist's point of view the smile of Mona Lisa testifies to his life-giving powers, which are celebrated by the creature of art beyond the artist's own ingenuity. On the other hand, however, that smile of self-

28 Kenneth Clark, *Leonardo da Vinci*, 113, comments on the landscape of the *Mona Lisa*: 'To Leonardo, a landscape, like a human being, was part of a vast machine to be understood part by part and, if possible, in the whole. Rocks were not simply decorative silhouettes. They were part of the earth's bones, with an anatomy of their own, caused by some remote seismic upheaval.'

29 Leonardo was previously concerned with the continuity of life, as further clarified in the following statement concerning physiology and physical geography: 'Facciamo nostra vita coll'altrui morte. In nella cosa morta rima vita dissensata, la quale ricogiuta alli stomachi de' viui ripiglia uita sesitiva e itellettiva' (II, p 131). 'Nessuna cosa nasce in loco doue no sia vita sensitiua, vegetatiua e rationale, nascono le penne sopra li uccelli, e si mutano ogni ... nascono l'erbe sopra li prati e le foglie sopra li alberi, e ogn'ano in gra parte si rinovano; adunque potremo dire, la terra avere anima vegetativa e che la sua carne sia le terra, li sua ossi sieno li ordini delle collegationi de' sassi, di che si compongono le motagnie, il suo tenerume sono li tufi, il suo sangue sono le uene delle acque' (II, pp 220–1).

confidence also expresses a personality emancipated from the artist. In light of the human drama of artistic creation, fulfilment and exhaustion become two facets of the same culminating moment. This new relation between artifice and artificer does not diminish human ingenuity, but it does imply a limitation with regard to the artist's *retention* of his artwork at the threshold of eternity. Piero solidifies that retention by denying life to Battista Sforza. This creative relation became a dramatic tension in Michelangelo's late works, from the *St Matthew* to the *Slaves*. His *non-finito* testifies to the drama of an artist who has been caught between his commitment to finish his work of art and his desire to preserve control over it by not cutting the umbilical cord between the block of marble and the finished figure. In this way, the artwork remained bound to the sculptor's undelivered blows. In the case of Leonardo and Michelangelo, one could conclude that the *artifex's* ingenuity is extended to what no longer belongs to him as well as to that which he refuses to bring to life.

At the beginning of this investigation, the *Vitruvian Man* was presented as a theoretical and Humanistic expression of Leonardo's art; starting with perfect geometric shapes like the square and the circle, Leonardo adjusted the human body to them. However, after having analysed Leonardo's studies of human proportions – one might indeed wonder whether the artist could not have achieved such a harmonious correlation between the natural and the abstract even by means of an inductive process; instead of being reciprocally subordinated, they simply coincided. At this point, the expression of Leonardo's art is similar to that of Piero della Francesca, although they started from opposite poles. Inasmuch as they pursued a harmonious world-view that found deeper truths and a lasting stability in artistic creations, *Umanesimo* and *Anti-Umanesimo* remained closely related; Piero would have supported Leonardo's conviction that 'cosa bella mortal passa e no d'arte' (I, p 326).

It is also in a Humanistic vein that Leonardo advises artists not to crowd their compositions with too many figures, even though he does so himself in the *Adoration*. With regard to the Humanistic conception of a finished work, Leonardo makes this orthodox statement: 'Somo dano è quado l'openione avanza l'opera' (I, p 291). Once again, Leonardo was the first to transgress his own affirmations. Therefore, it could be suggested that the incompleteness of his *Notebooks*, the *Adoration*, and the *St Jerome* may be partly due to the fact that such works did not need to be actually completed, since they had already been finished in his mind. Even completion became a phenomenon independent of the traditional requirements of artistic representation. It seems that Leonardo warned others against his own inclinations.

It could thus be concluded that Leonardo was perfectly aware of the limitations and possibilities of his *Anti-Umanesimo*. On the one hand, the

artist recognized the security which the rational propositions of *Umanesimo* had elaborated. However, they also exposed the trappings of abstraction and conformity. On the other hand, Leonardo realized the dangers of a pursuit of knowledge which may lead to discrediting the very notion of human limitations, moving from a knowledge of life to a rather Faustian challenge of the very laws of creation. At the end, the most lasting lesson of Leonardo's *Anti-Umanesimo* is probably to be found in relation to the values of *Umanesimo*. In this context, theory cannot exceed practice, just as ideals cannot override necessities. Beyond excesses in both directions, the search for a harmonious balance between golden moments and phenomenal instants encouraged the formulation of a world-view that would be receptive to the order of the human mind and the smile of life.

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