THE ONTOPOIESIS OF LEONARDO DA VINCI’S BRAINSTORM DRAWINGS

Creative phenomenology enters spontaneously into the working of life in its circuits ... thus, we do not proceed by deciphering already ciphered scripts. On the contrary, we dwell in the ciphering itself.

Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka

I am an art critic, so when I read philosophy, I test it in terms of the art I know. My philosophy books are annotated with lists of images. Among the most heavily annotated are those by Anna Teresa Tymieniecka, especially her latest book, *Logos and Life Book 4: Impetus and Equipoise in the Life-Strategies of Reason* (2000). Here the image that most struck me as analogous to her argument and also her writing style was Leonardo’s sketch for a composition for a Madonna and Child at the British Museum, a type of drawing that drawing expert Carmen Bambach calls “a great conceptual breakthrough for the history of art.”

Tymieniecka’s philosophy is very applicable to the situation of Leonardo’s brainstorm sketches, because, as Laurence Kimmel has explained, her philosophy calls for a clear view from within the interstices that form the patterns of evolving life. ...

It does not aspire to a god’s eye view of reality, but develops a view from within; it takes the course of an immersion into the creative mix that constitutes the total experience of existence – the cognitive, emotive, and volitional activities of human mind and culture. ... it searches out the web of relations that together form the living tissue of a changing world. There are key moments in this form of inquiry that entail both intimate engagement and reflective distancing in order to discern the larger patterns of involvement in the creative process of which one is ... a part. These movements require an active sense of both existential imminence and rational ascendance.

Leonardo’s compositional drawings, in which he tries to be a “second nature,” take us to the heart of Tymieniecka’s focus on the *Logos* of life; she, in turn, brings us right into the picture. “Phenomenology properly understood,” she says, “did not intend to invent a method, evidentiary or intuitive, but to devise an impartial way of clarifying the ways in which humans cognize/constitute their reality.”

---

*A.-T. Tymieniecka (ed.), Analecta Husserliana XCI, 3–11.*
Leonardo’s drawing techniques will prove an exception to Alfred Gell’s opinion that “the cognitive processes of any mind, especially over a whole biographical career, are inaccessible private experiences which leave only the most undecipherable traces.” If, as Bernard Berenson wrote, Leonardo’s drawing is “perhaps as near to an approach to the actual transfer to paper of a visual thought as a man has ever achieved,” we should be able to find Leonardo’s thought processes in them, especially in the messy, confusing “brainstorm” sketches that he worked with after 1500 where ideas literally pour onto the paper – with little precision – in an intuitive, stream-of-consciousness process of exploration.

We have four times more drawings by Leonardo da Vinci than of the most prolific sixteenth-century artist. Hoarder he may have been, but these drawings must have been significant to him for he had to move them around in his many travels, from Florence, to Milan, to Florence, Milan, Rome and finally to Amboise where he willed them intact to Francesco Melzi, who in turn, kept them like relics. Drawings were lost in the dispersal after Melzi’s death, but still we have a rich deposit of evidence about Leonardo’s creative process, a process that would be extremely influential to the tradition of western art.

Leonardo’s drawing method was revolutionary. As Bambach says, he insisted that the initial sketches be fresh, something quite new for the Renaissance. For master artists of the earlier Renaissance, drawing was a one-shot proposition; they were expected to compose works by assembling “finished” drawings for a composition. This is comparable to Ansel Adams’ technique where the photographs were so fully planned beforehand that a single shot was all that was required – or to Mozart’s reputed copying out whole scores directly from his mind.

Andrea Verrocchio, Leonardo’s teacher, developed another technique. He made rapid sketches that capture a child’s varied positions (Louvre, Paris RF 2). Leonardo made drawings like this, as well as full, individual studies for compositions, e.g. the Metropolitan Designs for a Nativity or Adoration of the Christ Child, etc. (no. 17.142.1). The interest of this study, however, is his unusual technique of sketching using simultaneous multiple views in figures, e.g. an ink and wash over traces of charcoal Madonna and Child with a Cat (London, British Museum 1856-6-21 recto) or the Windsor Horseman on blue prepared paper of (mid 1480s, Royal Library 12358) where the effect of the alternate views is almost cinematographic, a neat trick when the medium is unforgiving metalpoint. By the