

***Leonardo de Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood (1910):  
Freud's "Only Beautiful Thing"***

“Leonardo is the Hamlet of art history whom each of us must recreate for himself.” -- Kenneth Clark

“Whoever turns biographer commits himself to lies, to concealment, to hypocrisy, to embellishments, and even to dissembling his own lack of understanding, for biographical truth is not to be had.”—Letter to Arnold Zweig, 31 May 1936

“We read of the kite that, when it sees its young ones growing too big in the nest, out of envy it pecks their sides, and keeps them without food.”—Leonardo, *Notebooks* 2.20.121

What genre is Freud’s strangest of books? Biography? Fiction? Art criticism? Mythology? Some form of all four doing the work of the others in tandem? Freud called it a “pathography,” a term first coined in German around 1899. The word suggests a narrative of an illness, yet if this is so, then Freud obviously meant the term in a far more flexible sense.

The diverse legends about Leonardo da Vinci began as early as Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives of the Artists* (1550), and it seems his work has been periodically rediscovered in such a way that he represents a new ideal for a new generation. Most of his manuscripts were not available to the general public until circa 1880, and a veritable industry has grown up around him since then. Yet how little is really known about him! We do not know if the father was absent, the mother present, etcetera.

“That which is included in narrative paintings ought to move those who behold and admire them in the same way as the protagonist of the narrative is moved. So if the narrative shows terror, fear or flight or, indeed, grief, weeping and lamentation, or pleasure, joy and laughter and similar states, the minds of the beholders should move their limbs in such a way as to make it seem that they are united in the same fate as those represented in the narrative painting. And if they do not do this, the painter’s ability is useless.”—Leonardo, *Tratto dell’arte*

Freud’s book raises for us the task of biography—its need for narrative, its followability, the use of its historical sources, the nature of particular psychological or sociological causes, the deeper question of what constitutes historical evidences. In these senses, *Leonardo de Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood* is both an exercise in hermeneutics and in rhetorical persuasion. Freud is not only offering an exegesis of the various clues—notebooks, dreams, memories, paintings, and record, he is also trying to create for his readers a mystery story.

### Chapter I Commentary

Compare Brill’s translation of the opening paragraph with the Standard Edition version:

When psychoanalytic investigation, which usually contents itself with frail human material, approaches the great personages of humanity, it is not impelled to it by motives which are often attributed to it by laymen. It does not strive “to blacken the radiant and to drag the sublime into the mire”; it finds no satisfaction in diminishing the distance between the perfection of the great and the inadequacy of the ordinary objects. But it cannot help finding that everything is worthy of understanding that can be perceived through those prototypes, and it also believes that none is so big as to be ashamed of being subject to the laws which control the normal and morbid actions with the same strictness.

What we find are a number of problematics from the get-go:

- The frail versus the great: Leonardo is in a special category.
- The pledge not to blacken the radiant or sublime or to lessen the gulf between greatness and normality.
- The worthiness of understanding, however, makes a challenge to the idealizations of Leonardo and his genius.
- There is, then, the great need a fuller patho-biography, one that explains Leonardo in more scientific terms.

The nature of hero worship—that which we idealize, we also desire to humiliate. Leonardo is for Freud, the proto-scientist, the Italian Faust. He is also the observant master who never seemed to finish anything, which for Freud is a powerful clue to the disorder underneath the calm exterior.

“The greatest gifts are often seen, in the course of nature, rained by celestial influences on human creatures; and sometimes, in supernatural fashion, beauty, grace, and talent are united beyond measure in one single person, in a manner that to whatever such an one turns his attention, his every action is so divine, that, surpassing all other men, it makes itself clearly known as a thing bestowed by God (as it is), and not acquired by human art. This was seen by all mankind in Leonardo da Vinci, in whom, besides a beauty of body never sufficiently extolled, there was an infinite grace in all his actions; and so great was his genius, and such its growth, that to whatever difficulties he turned his mind, he solved them with ease. In him was great bodily strength, joined to dexterity, with a spirit and courage ever royal and magnanimous; and the fame of his name so increased, that not only in his lifetime was he held in esteem, but his reputation became even greater among posterity after his death.”-- Giorgio Vasari, *Life of Leonardo da Vinci*

### Chapter II Commentary

"This writing distinctly about the kite seems to be my destiny, because among the first recollections of my infancy, it seemed to me that, as I was in my cradle, a kite came to me and opened my mouth with its tail, and struck me several times with its tail inside my lips." That Freud was misled by a mistaken translation of "kite" as "vulture" is well-known, and many learning this refuse any creditability to the book. Those who seek to defend it, tend to point to other kinds of psychoanalytical details that Freud overlooked, or ways in which the vulture image may be rescued. Meyer Schapiro's 1956 study is an example of the first, while James Strachley's note on the Standard Edition is an example of the second. There are other reasons to read the book, one being what it reveals about Freud.

Another is perhaps what it also illustrates about the strange inter-reaction of legend and history. For Freud, legend is itself a form of historical memory, something like his notion of the dream-work. The legends of the past contain illusions that responded to the powerful desires of a culture. In this sense, legends are like childhood dreams and memories; they did not actually take place, yet they do reveal that something took place in the past that formed and shaped future development. Freud's own "tale" of history is like that of Vico or Herder. The age of heroes did not write their own history; that task remains for the age of reflection.

Leonardo's vulture (i.e. kite) dream/memory is itself a kind of legend of his childhood, and Freud intertwines both individual and cultural psychoanalytical imagery to build his case. Mut as a kind of archetypal mother goddess is interesting perhaps more for what it reveals about Freud and his theories than about Leonardo's actual childhood or for that matter, the actual mother-vulture-hermaphrodite-foot-fetish-virgin birth associations he is able to unpack in this chapter and the next.

### Chapter III Commentary

Chapter 3 is strange. Is it the center of Freud's account, or is it a marginal set of sidenotes? Along with development of the Mut thesis, he discusses such ideas as female penis envy, the basis of Leonardo's conjectural homosexual attachment, and two pieces of "evidence," that is readings of ledger notes upon Leonardo's parents' deaths. There is something rather odd about Freud's interpretation of Leonardo, gay but only latently so, neither acting upon neurotic inhibition of thought nor upon neurotic compulsion of action, but instead a balance of action and control, though one finally that in its perfectionism completes little. In one way, all this is at the heart of Freud's project of "explaining" Leonardo, and yet in other ways it is only part of a larger interpretative work—another example of Freud's love of puzzle-solving, his strange mix of speculation and data—much like that of detective fiction.

"If the painter wishes to see beauties that charm him, it lies in his power to create them, and if he wishes to see monstrosities that are frightful, ridiculous, or truly pitiable, he is lord and God thereof; and if he wishes to generate sites and deserts, shady and cool places in hot weather he can do so, and also warm places in cold weather. If he wishes from the high summits of the mountains to uncover the great countrysides, and if he wishes after them to see the horizon of the sea, he is lord of it, and if from the low valleys he wishes to see the high mountains, or from the high mountains the low valleys and beaches, and in effect that which is in the universe for essence, presence, or imagination, he has it first in his mind and then in his hands, and these are of such excellence that in equal time they generate a proportionate harmony in a single glance, as does nature."—Leonardo, *Notebooks*

### Chapter IV Commentary

The smile of the Mona Lisa del Giocondo was become the stuff of cliché. Yet Freud's body of sources justifies its continued examination, in that it reveals its own complexity, the complexity of viewer responses, and the complexity of its creator. The complexity of these three aspects—painter, painting, viewers across space and time—is then emblematic and exemplary of Freud's dualism. The world, according to Freud is a world of conflicting energies and forces, and its meaning arises from the economy of its compromises and breakdowns.

I think that "St. Anne and Two Others," i.e. *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*, is closer to the heart of the book than the vulture/kite memory. Freud's evidence reaches its strongest conviction here—at least for Freud, and the additions of the 1919 Pfister "discovery" (once seen, it cannot be entirely ever unseen) and the 1923 comparison with the London cartoon only strengthen this centrality. Here, Freud discovers the relations of the two mothers, the deep emotions each has for Leonardo, and the emotional centrality of Leonardo as beloved child.

"You must not give to drapery a great confusion of many folds, but rather introduce only those held by the hands or arms; the rest you may let fall simply where its nature makes it flow; and do not let the nude forms be traversed by too many lines and broken folds. Figures dressed in a cloak should not show the shape so much that the cloak looks as if it were next to the flesh. For surely you would not wish that the cloak should be next to the flesh since you must realize that between the cloak and the flesh are other garments which prevent the shapes of the limbs from being visible and appearing through the cloak. And those limbs which you show make thick of their kind so that there may seem to be other garments under the cloak. The limbs of a nymph or an angel should be shown in almost their original state, for these are represented clad in light draperies, which are driven and pressed against the limbs of the figures by the blowing wind."—Leonardo, *Notebooks* 4h

### Chapter V Commentary

The last chapters of the book are in many ways a predecessor to both *Totem and Taboo* and *The Future of an Illusion*, for Freud offers us another substitution for a dark evolutionary genesis. Freud's animus against his own father's failures and against God the Father is present throughout, including the predictable claim that the Leonardo was free to be a scientist because he was free of his father's early binding role on his imagination. So odd, as if all natural science were homosexual in its attachments. We don't really know what Leonardo's religion was, though a kind of broad theism is a safe guess; he may have even thought himself a faithful Catholic in his own heterodox way, or not. The great swan prophecy is both mythic and religious, and Freud's close reading of it actually helps ground those nuances more fully.

### Chapter VI Commentary

The last two/three paragraphs are particularly revealing for we see an earlier form of Freud's mythic goddess Ananke (Necessity). Again, compare Brill's translation of the last two paragraphs with the Standard Edition:

The impulses and their transformations are the last things that psychoanalysis can discern. Henceforth it leaves the place to biological investigation. The tendency to repression, as well as the ability to sublimate, must be traced back to the organic bases of the character, upon which alone the psychic structure springs up. As artistic talent and productive ability are intimately connected with sublimation we have to admit that also the nature of artistic attainment is psychoanalytically inaccessible to us. Biological investigation of our time endeavors to explain the chief traits of the organic constitution of a person through the fusion of male and female predispositions in the material sense; Leonardo's physical beauty as well as his left-handedness furnish here some support. However, we do not wish to leave the ground of pure psychologic investigation. Our aim remains to demonstrate the connection between outer experiences and reactions of the person over the path of the activity of the impulses. Even if psychoanalysis does not explain to us the fact of Leonardo's artistic accomplishment, it still gives us an understanding of the expressions and limitations of the same. It does seem as if only a man with Leonardo's childhood experiences could have painted Monna Lisa and Saint Anne, and could have supplied his works with that sad fate and so obtain unheard of fame as a natural historian; it seems as if the key to all his attainments and failures was hidden in the childhood phantasy of the vulture.

But may one not take offense at the results of an investigation which concede to the accidents of the parental constellation so decisive an influence on the fate of a person, which, for example, subordinates Leonardo's fate to his illegitimate birth and to the sterility of his first step-mother Donna Albiera? I believe that one has no right to feel so; if one considers accident as unworthy of determining our fate, it is only a relapse to the pious aspect of life, the overcoming of which Leonardo himself prepared when he put down in writing that the sun does not move. We are naturally grieved over the fact that a just God and a kindly providence do not guard us better against such influences in our most defenseless age. We thereby gladly forget that as a matter of fact everything in our life is accident from our very origin through the meeting of spermatozoa and ovum, accident, which nevertheless participates in the lawfulness and fatalities of nature, and lacks only the connection to our wishes and illusions. The division of life's determinants into the "fatalities" of our constitution and the "accidents" of our childhood may still be indefinite in individual cases, but taken altogether one can no longer entertain any doubt about the importance of precisely our first years of childhood. We all still show too little respect for nature, which in Leonardo's deep words recalling Hamlet's speech "*is full of infinite reasons which never appeared in experience.*" Every one of us human beings corresponds to one of the infinite experiments in which these "reasons of nature" force themselves into experience.

Leonardo is a genius, then, only in terms of a random combination of forces that Ananke (natural necessity) has brought into existence. And this natural explanation for Leonardo is to be trusted whether the actual details of his life and ability are satisfactorily explained. Indeed, for Freud it is a better theodicy: one in which the stoic clarity of an indifferent world is a better picture than that of a just and provident Creator. In a sense, Freud wishes to “authorize” not only Leonardo, but God. For to explain is to control, even if that control is only one of tragic endurance.

