



Leonardo da Vinci, by Sigmund Freud

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[Illustration: LEONARDO DA VINCI]

Leonardo da Vinci

A PSYCHOSEXUAL STUDY OF AN INFANTILE REMINISCENCE

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[Illustration]

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Leonardo Da Vinci *Frontispiece*

FACING PAGE

Mona Lisa 78

Saint Anne 86

John the Baptist 94

LEONARDO DA VINCI

I

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.

Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) was admired even by his contemporaries as one of the greatest men of the Italian Renaissance, still even then he appeared as mysterious to them as he now appears to us. An all-sided genius, "whose form can only be divined but never deeply fathomed,"[1] he exerted the most decisive influence on his time as an artist; and it remained to us to recognize his greatness as a naturalist which was united in him with the artist. Although he left masterpieces of the art of painting, while his scientific discoveries remained unpublished and unused, the investigator in him has never quite left the artist, often it has severely injured the artist and in the end it has perhaps suppressed the artist altogether. According to Vasari, Leonardo reproached himself during the last hour of his life for having insulted God and men because he has not done his duty to his art.[2] And even if Vasari's story lacks all probability and belongs to those legends which began to be woven about the mystic master while he was still living, it nevertheless retains

indisputable value as a testimonial of the judgment of those people and of those times.

What was it that removed the personality of Leonardo from the understanding of his contemporaries? Certainly not the many sidedness of his capacities and knowledge, which allowed him to install himself as a player of the lyre on an instrument invented by himself, in the court of Lodovico Sforza, nicknamed Il Moro, the Duke of Milan, or which allowed him to write to the same person that remarkable letter in which he boasts of his abilities as a civil and military engineer. For the combination of manifold talents in the same person was not unusual in the times of the Renaissance; to be sure Leonardo himself furnished one of the most splendid examples of such persons. Nor did he belong to that type of genial persons who are outwardly poorly endowed by nature, and who on their side place no value on the outer forms of life, and in the painful gloominess of their feelings fly from human relations. On the contrary he was tall and symmetrically built, of consummate beauty of countenance and of unusual physical strength, he was charming in his manner, a master of speech, and jovial and affectionate to everybody. He loved beauty in the objects of his surroundings, he was fond of wearing magnificent garments and appreciated every refinement of conduct. In his treatise[3] on the art of painting he compares in a significant passage the art of painting with its sister arts and thus discusses the difficulties of the sculptor: "Now his face is entirely smeared and powdered with marble dust, so that he looks like a baker, he is covered with small marble splinters, so that it seems as if it snowed on his back, and his house is full of stone splinters, and dust. The case of the painter is quite different from that; for the painter is well dressed and sits with great comfort before his work, he gently and very lightly brushes in the beautiful colors. He wears as decorative clothes as he likes, and his house is filled with beautiful paintings and is spotlessly clean. He often enjoys company, music, or some one may read for him various nice works, and all this can be listened to with great pleasure, undisturbed by any pounding from the hammer and other noises."

It is quite possible that the conception of a beaming jovial and happy Leonardo was true only for the first and longer period of the master's life. From now on, when the downfall of the rule of Lodovico Moro forced him to leave Milan, his sphere of action and his assured position, to lead an unsteady and unsuccessful life until his last asylum in France, it is possible that the luster of his disposition became pale and some odd features of his character became more prominent. The turning of his interest from his art to science which increased with age must have also been responsible for widening the gap between himself and his contemporaries. All his efforts with which, according to their opinion, he wasted his time instead of diligently filling orders and becoming rich as perhaps his former classmate Perugino, seemed to his contemporaries as capricious playing, or even caused them to suspect him of being in the service of the "black art." We who know him from his sketches understand him better. In a time in which the authority of the church began to be substituted by that of antiquity and in which only theoretical investigation existed, he the forerunner, or better the worthy competitor of Bacon and Copernicus, was necessarily isolated. When he dissected cadavers of horses and human beings, and built flying apparatus, or when he studied the nourishment of plants and their behavior towards poisons, he naturally deviated much from the commentators of Aristotle and came nearer the despised alchemists, in whose laboratories the experimental investigations found some refuge during these unfavorable times.

The effect that this had on his paintings was that he disliked to handle the brush, he painted less and what was more often the case, the things he began were mostly left unfinished; he cared less and less for the future fate of his works. It was this mode of working that was held up to him as a reproach from his contemporaries to whom his behavior to his art remained a riddle.

Many of Leonardo's later admirers have attempted to wipe off the stain of unsteadiness from his character. They maintained that what is blamed in Leonardo is a general characteristic of great artists. They said that even the energetic Michelangelo who was absorbed in his work left many incompleted works, which was as little due to his fault as to Leonardo's in the same case. Besides some pictures were not as unfinished as he claimed, and what the layman would call a masterpiece may still appear to the creator of the work of art as an unsatisfied embodiment of his intentions; he has a faint notion of a perfection which he despairs of

reproducing in likeness. Least of all should the artist be held responsible for the fate which befalls his works.

As plausible as some of these excuses may sound they nevertheless do not explain the whole state of affairs which we find in Leonardo. The painful struggle with the work, the final flight from it and the indifference to its future fate may be seen in many other artists, but this behavior is shown in Leonardo to highest degree. Edm. Solmi[4] cites (p. 12) the expression of one of his pupils: "Pareva, che ad ogni ora tremasse, quando si poneva a dipingere, e però no diede mai fine ad alcuna cosa cominciata, considerando la grandezza dell'arte, tal che egli scorgeva errori in quelle cose, che ad altri parevano miracoli." His last pictures, Leda, the Madonna di Saint Onofrio, Bacchus and St. John the Baptist, remained unfinished "come quasi intervenne di tutte le cose sue." Lomazzo,[5] who finished a copy of The Holy Supper, refers in a sonnet to the familiar inability of Leonardo to finish his works:

"Protogen che il penel di sue pitture Non levava, agguaglio il Vinci Divo, Di cui opra non è finita pure."

The slowness with which Leonardo worked was proverbial. After the most thorough preliminary studies he painted The Holy Supper for three years in the cloister of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan. One of his contemporaries, Matteo Bandelli, the writer of novels, who was then a young monk in the cloister, relates that Leonardo often ascended the scaffold very early in the morning and did not leave the brush out of his hand until twilight, never thinking of eating or drinking. Then days passed without putting his hand on it, sometimes he remained for hours before the painting and derived satisfaction from studying it by himself. At other times he came directly to the cloister from the palace of the Milanese Castle where he formed the model of the equestrian statue for Francesco Sforza, in order to add a few strokes with the brush to one of the figures and then stopped immediately.[6] According to Vasari he worked for years on the portrait of Monna Lisa, the wife of the Florentine de Gioconda, without being able to bring it to completion. This circumstance may also account for the fact that it was never delivered to the one who ordered it but remained with Leonardo who took it with him to France.[7] Having been procured by King Francis I, it now forms one of the greatest treasures of the Louvre.

When one compares these reports about Leonardo's way of working with the evidence of the extraordinary amount of sketches and studies left by him, one is bound altogether to reject the idea that traits of flightiness and unsteadiness exerted the slightest influence on Leonardo's relation to his art. On the contrary one notices a very extraordinary absorption in work, a richness in possibilities in which a decision could be reached only hesitatingly, claims which could hardly be satisfied, and an inhibition in the execution which could not even be explained by the inevitable backwardness of the artist behind his ideal purpose. The slowness which was striking in Leonardo's works from the very beginning proved to be a symptom of his inhibition, a forerunner of his turning away from painting which manifested itself later.[8] It was this slowness which decided the not undeserving fate of The Holy Supper. Leonardo could not take kindly to the art of fresco painting which demands quick work while the background is still moist, it was for this reason that he chose oil colors, the drying of which permitted him to complete the picture according to his mood and leisure. But these colors separated themselves from the background upon which they were painted and which isolated them from the brick wall; the blemishes of this wall and the vicissitudes to which the room was subjected seemingly contributed to the inevitable deterioration of the picture.[9]

The picture of the cavalry battle of Anghiari, which in competition with Michelangelo he began to paint later on a wall of the Sala de Consiglio in Florence and which he also left in an unfinished state, seemed to have perished through the failure of a similar technical process. It seems here as if a peculiar interest, that of the experimenter, at first reënforced the artistic, only later to damage the art production.

The character of the man Leonardo evinces still some other unusual traits and apparent contradictions. Thus a certain inactivity and indifference seemed very evident in him. At a time when every individual sought to gain the widest latitude for his activity, which could not take place without the development of energetic aggression towards others, he surprised every one through his quiet peacefulness, his shunning of all

competition and controversies. He was mild and kind to all, he was said to have rejected a meat diet because he did not consider it just to rob animals of their lives, and one of his special pleasures was to buy caged birds in the market and set them free.[10] He condemned war and bloodshed and designated man not so much as the king of the animal world, but rather as the worst of the wild beasts.[11] But this effeminate delicacy of feeling did not prevent him from accompanying condemned criminals on their way to execution in order to study and sketch in his notebook their features, distorted by fear, nor did it prevent him from inventing the most cruel offensive weapons, and from entering the service of Cesare Borgia as chief military engineer. Often he seemed to be indifferent to good and evil, or he had to be measured with a special standard. He held a high position in Cesare's campaign which gained for this most inconsiderate and most faithless of foes the possession of the Romagna. Not a single line of Leonardo's sketches betrays any criticism or sympathy of the events of those days. The comparison with Goethe during the French campaign cannot here be altogether rejected.

If a biographical effort really endeavors to penetrate the understanding of the psychic life of its hero it must not, as happens in most biographies through discretion or prudery, pass over in silence the sexual activity or the sex peculiarity of the one examined. What we know about it in Leonardo is very little but full of significance. In a period where there was a constant struggle between riotous licentiousness and gloomy asceticism, Leonardo presented an example of cool sexual rejection which one would not expect in an artist and a portrayer of feminine beauty. Solmi[12] cites the following sentence from Leonardo showing his frigidity: "The act of procreation and everything that has any relation to it is so disgusting that human beings would soon die out if it were not a traditional custom and if there were no pretty faces and sensuous dispositions." His posthumous works which not only treat of the greatest scientific problems but also comprise the most guileless objects which to us do not seem worthy of so great a mind (an allegorical natural history, animal fables, witticisms, prophecies),[13] are chaste to a degree--one might say abstinent--that in a work of *belle lettres* would excite wonder even to-day. They evade everything sexual so thoroughly, as if Eros alone who preserves everything living was no worthy material for the scientific impulse of the investigator.[14] It is known how frequently great artists found pleasure in giving vent to their phantasies in erotic and even grossly obscene representations; in contradistinction to this Leonardo left only some anatomical drawings of the woman's internal genitals, the position of the child in the womb, etc.

It is doubtful whether Leonardo ever embraced a woman in love, nor is it known that he ever entertained an intimate spiritual relation with a woman as in the case of Michelangelo and Vittoria Colonna. While he still lived as an apprentice in the house of his master Verrocchio, he with other young men were accused of forbidden homosexual relations which ended in his acquittal. It seems that he came into this suspicion because he employed as a model a boy of evil repute.[15] When he was a master he surrounded himself with handsome boys and youths whom he took as pupils. The last of these pupils Francesco Melzi, accompanied him to France, remained with him until his death, and was named by him as his heir. Without sharing the certainty of his modern biographers, who naturally reject the possibility of a sexual relation between himself and his pupils as a baseless insult to this great man, it may be thought by far more probable that the affectionate relationships of Leonardo to the young men did not result in sexual activity. Nor should one attribute to him a high measure of sexual activity.

The peculiarity of this emotional and sexual life viewed in connection with Leonardo's double nature as an artist and investigator can be grasped only in one way. Of the biographers to whom psychological viewpoints are often very foreign, only one, Edm. Solmi, has to my knowledge approached the solution of the riddle. But a writer, Dimitri Sergewitsch Merejkowski, who selected Leonardo as the hero of a great historical novel has based his delineation on such an understanding of this unusual man, and if not in dry words he gave unmistakable utterance in plastic expression in the manner of a poet.[16] Solmi judges Leonardo as follows: "But the unrequited desire to understand everything surrounding him, and with cold reflection to discover the deepest secret of everything that is perfect, has condemned Leonardo's works to remain forever unfinished." [17] In an essay of the Conferenze Fiorentine the utterances of Leonardo are cited, which show his confession of faith and furnish the key to his character.

"*Nessuna cosa si può amare nè odiare, se prima no si ha cognition di quella.*"[18]

That is: One has no right to love or to hate anything if one has not acquired a thorough knowledge of its nature. And the same is repeated by Leonardo in a passage of the Treaties on the Art of Painting where he seems to defend himself against the accusation of irreligiousness:

"But such censurers might better remain silent. For that action is the manner of showing the workmaster so many wonderful things, and this is the way to love so great a discoverer. For, verily great love springs from great knowledge of the beloved object, and if you little know it you will be able to love it only little or not at all."[19]

The value of these utterances of Leonardo cannot be found in that they impart to us an important psychological fact, for what they maintain is obviously false, and Leonardo must have known this as well as we do. It is not true that people refrain from loving or hating until they have studied and become familiar with the nature of the object to whom they wish to give these affects, on the contrary they love impulsively and are guided by emotional motives which have nothing to do with cognition and whose affects are weakened, if anything, by thought and reflection. Leonardo only could have implied that the love practiced by people is not of the proper and unobjectionable kind, one should so love as to hold back the affect and to subject it to mental elaboration, and only after it has stood the test of the intellect should free play be given to it. And we thereby understand that he wishes to tell us that this was the case with himself and that it would be worth the effort of everybody else to treat love and hatred as he himself does.

And it seems that in his case it was really so. His affects were controlled and subjected to the investigation impulse, he neither loved nor hated, but questioned himself whence does that arise, which he was to love or hate, and what does it signify, and thus he was at first forced to appear indifferent to good and evil, to beauty and ugliness. During this work of investigation love and hatred threw off their designs and uniformly changed into intellectual interest. As a matter of fact Leonardo was not dispassionate, he did not lack the divine spark which is the mediate or immediate motive power--*il primo motore*--of all human activity. He only transmuted his passion into inquisitiveness. He then applied himself to study with that persistence, steadiness, and profundity which comes from passion, and on the height of the psychic work, after the cognition was won, he allowed the long checked affect to break loose and to flow off freely like a branch of a stream, after it has accomplished its work. At the height of his cognition when he could examine a big part of the whole he was seized with a feeling of pathos, and in ecstatic words he praised the grandeur of that part of creation which he studied, or--in religious cloak--the greatness of the creator. Solmi has correctly divined this process of transformation in Leonardo. According to the quotation of such a passage, in which Leonardo celebrated the higher impulse of nature ("O mirabile necessita ... ") he said: "Tale trasfigurazione della scienza della natura in emozione, quasi direi, religiosa, è uno dei tratti caratteristici de manoscritti vinciani, e si trova cento e cento volte espressa...."[20]

Leonardo was called the Italian Faust on account of his insatiable and indefatigable desire for investigation. But even if we disregard the fact that it is the possible retransformation of the desire for investigation into the joys of life which is presupposed in the Faust tragedy, one might venture to remark that Leonardo's system recalls Spinoza's mode of thinking.

The transformation of psychic motive power into the different forms of activity is perhaps as little convertible without loss, as in the case of physical powers. Leonardo's example teaches how many other things one must follow up in these processes. Not to love before one gains full knowledge of the thing loved presupposes a delay which is harmful. When one finally reaches cognition he neither loves nor hates properly; one remains beyond love and hatred. One has investigated instead of having loved. It is perhaps for this reason that Leonardo's life was so much poorer in love than those of other great men and great artists. The storming passions of the soul-stirring and consuming kind, in which others experience the best part of their lives, seem to have missed him.

There are still other consequences when one follows Leonardo's dictum. Instead of acting and producing one just investigates. He who begins to divine the grandeur of the universe and its needs readily forgets his own insignificant self. When one is struck with admiration and becomes truly humble he easily forgets that he himself is a part of that living force, and that according to the measure of his own personality he has the right to make an effort to change that destined course of the world, the world in which the insignificant is no less wonderful and important than the great.

Solmi thinks that Leonardo's investigations started with his art,[21] he tried to investigate the attributes and laws of light, of color, of shades and of perspective so as to be sure of becoming a master in the imitation of nature and to be able to show the way to others. It is probable that already at that time he overestimated the value of this knowledge for the artist. Following the guide-rope of the painter's need, he was then driven further and further to investigate the objects of the art of painting, such as animals and plants, and the proportions of the human body, and to follow the path from their exterior to their interior structure and biological functions, which really also express themselves in their appearance and should be depicted in art. And finally he was pulled along by this overwhelming desire until the connection was torn from the demands of his art, so that he discovered the general laws of mechanics and divined the history of the stratification and fossilization of the Arno-valley, until he could enter in his book with capital letters the cognition: *Il sole non si move* (The sun does not move). His investigations were thus extended over almost all realms of natural science, in every one of which he was a discoverer or at least a prophet or forerunner.[22] However, his curiosity continued to be directed to the outer world, something kept him away from the investigation of the psychic life of men; there was little room for psychology in the "Accademia Vinciana," for which he drew very artistic and very complicated emblems.

When he later made the effort to return from his investigations to the art from which he started he felt that he was disturbed by the new paths of his interest and by the changed nature of his psychic work. In the picture he was interested above all in a problem, and behind this one he saw emerging numerous other problems just as he was accustomed in the endless and indeterminable investigations of natural history. He was no longer able to limit his demands, to isolate the work of art, and to tear it out from that great connection of which he knew it formed part. After the most exhausting efforts to bring to expression all that was in him, all that was connected with it in his thoughts, he was forced to leave it unfinished, or to declare it incomplete.

The artist had once taken into his service the investigator to assist him, now the servant was stronger and suppressed his master.

When we find in the portrait of a person one single impulse very forcibly developed, as curiosity in the case of Leonardo, we look for the explanation in a special constitution, concerning its probable organic determination hardly anything is known. Our psychoanalytic studies of nervous people lead us to look for two other expectations which we would like to find verified in every case. We consider it probable that this very forcible impulse was already active in the earliest childhood of the person, and that its supreme sway was fixed by infantile impressions; and we further assume that originally it drew upon sexual motive powers for its reënforcement so that it later can take the place of a part of the sexual life. Such person would then, e.g., investigate with that passionate devotion which another would give to his love, and he could investigate instead of loving. We would venture the conclusion of a sexual reënforcement not only in the impulse to investigate, but also in most other cases of special intensity of an impulse.

Observation of daily life shows us that most persons have the capacity to direct a very tangible part of their sexual motive powers to their professional or business activities. The sexual impulse is particularly suited to yield such contributions because it is endowed with the capacity of sublimation, i.e., it has the power to exchange its nearest aim for others of higher value which are not sexual. We consider this process as proved, if the history of childhood or the psychic developmental history of a person shows that in childhood this powerful impulse was in the service of the sexual interest. We consider it a further corroboration if this is substantiated by a striking stunting in the sexual life of mature years, as if a part of the sexual activity had now

been replaced by the activity of the predominant impulse.

The application of these assumptions to the case of the predominant investigation-impulse seems to be subject to special difficulties, as one is unwilling to admit that this serious impulse exists in children or that children show any noteworthy sexual interest. However, these difficulties are easily obviated. The untiring pleasure in questioning as seen in little children demonstrates their curiosity, which is puzzling to the grown-up, as long as he does not understand that all these questions are only circumlocutions, and that they cannot come to an end because they replace only one question which the child does not put. When the child becomes older and gains more understanding this manifestation of curiosity suddenly disappears. But psychoanalytic investigation gives us a full explanation in that it teaches us that many, perhaps most children, at least the most gifted ones, go through a period beginning with the third year, which may be designated as the period of *infantile sexual investigation*. As far as we know, the curiosity is not awakened spontaneously in children of this age, but is aroused through the impression of an important experience, through the birth of a little brother or sister, or through fear of the same endangered by some outward experience, wherein the child sees a danger to his egotistic interests. The investigation directs itself to the question whence children come, as if the child were looking for means to guard against such undesired event. We were astonished to find that the child refuses to give credence to the information imparted to it, e.g., it energetically rejects the mythological and so ingenious stork-fable, we were astonished to find that its psychic independence dates from this act of disbelief, that it often feels itself at serious variance with the grown-ups, and never forgives them for having been deceived of the truth on this occasion. It investigates in its own way, it divines that the child is in the mother's womb, and guided by the feelings of its own sexuality, it formulates for itself theories about the origin of children from food, about being born through the bowels, about the rôle of the father which is difficult to fathom, and even at that time it has a vague conception of the sexual act which appears to the child as something hostile, as something violent. But as its own sexual constitution is not yet equal to the task of producing children, his investigation whence come children must also run aground and must be left in the lurch as unfinished. The impression of this failure at the first attempt of intellectual independence seems to be of a persevering and profoundly depressing nature.[23]

If the period of infantile sexual investigation comes to an end through an impetus of energetic sexual repression, the early association with sexual interest may result in three different possibilities for the future fate of the investigation impulse. The investigation either shares the fate of the sexuality, the curiosity henceforth remains inhibited and the free activity of intelligence may become narrowed for life; this is especially made possible by the powerful religious inhibition of thought, which is brought about shortly hereafter through education. This is the type of neurotic inhibition. We know well that the so acquired mental weakness furnishes effective support for the outbreak of a neurotic disease. In a second type the intellectual development is sufficiently strong to withstand the sexual repression pulling at it. Sometimes after the disappearance of the infantile sexual investigation, it offers its support to the old association in order to elude the sexual repression, and the suppressed sexual investigation comes back from the unconscious as compulsive reasoning, it is naturally distorted and not free, but forceful enough to sexualize even thought itself and to accentuate the intellectual operations with the pleasure and fear of the actual sexual processes. Here the investigation becomes sexual activity and often exclusively so, the feeling of settling the problem and of explaining things in the mind is put in place of sexual gratification. But the indeterminate character of the infantile investigation repeats itself also in the fact that this reasoning never ends, and that the desired intellectual feeling of the solution constantly recedes into the distance. By virtue of a special disposition the third, which is the most rare and most perfect type, escapes the inhibition of thought and the compulsive reasoning. Also here sexual repression takes place, it is unable, however, to direct a partial impulse of the sexual pleasure into the unconscious, but the libido withdraws from the fate of the repression by being sublimated from the beginning into curiosity, and by reëncoring the powerful investigation impulse. Here, too, the investigation becomes more or less compulsive and a substitute of the sexual activity, but owing to the absolute difference of the psychic process behind it (sublimation in place of the emergence from the unconscious) the character of the neurosis does not manifest itself, the subjection to the original complexes of the infantile sexual investigation disappears, and the impulse can freely put itself in the service of the

intellectual interest. It takes account of the sexual repression which made it so strong in contributing to it sublimated libido, by avoiding all occupation with sexual themes.

In mentioning the concurrence in Leonardo of the powerful investigation impulse with the stunting of his sexual life which was limited to the so-called ideal homosexuality, we feel inclined to consider him as a model example of our third type. The most essential point of his character and the secret of it seems to lie in the fact, that after utilizing the infantile activity of curiosity in the service of sexual interest he was able to sublimate the greater part of his libido into the impulse of investigation. But to be sure the proof of this conception is not easy to produce. To do this we would have to have an insight into the psychic development of his first childhood years, and it seems foolish to hope for such material when the reports concerning his life are so meager and so uncertain; and moreover, when we deal with information which even persons of our own generation withdraw from the attention of the observer.

We know very little concerning Leonardo's youth. He was born in 1452 in the little city of Vinci between Florence and Empoli; he was an illegitimate child which was surely not considered a great popular stain in that time. His father was Ser Piero da Vinci, a notary and descendant of notaries and farmers, who took their name from the place Vinci; his mother, a certain Caterina, probably a peasant girl, who later married another native of Vinci. Nothing else about his mother appears in the life history of Leonardo, only the writer Merejkowski believed to have found some traces of her. The only definite information about Leonardo's childhood is furnished by a legal document from the year 1457, a register of assessment in which Vinci Leonardo is mentioned among the members of the family as a five-year-old illegitimate child of Ser Piero.[24] As the marriage of Ser Piero with Donna Albiera remained childless the little Leonardo could be brought up in his father's house. He did not leave this house until he entered as apprentice--it is not known what year--in the studio of Andrea del Verrocchio. In 1472 Leonardo's name could already be found in the register of the members of the "Compagnia dei Pittori." That is all.

II

As far as I know Leonardo only once interspersed in his scientific descriptions a communication from his childhood. In a passage where he speaks about the flight of the vulture, he suddenly interrupts himself in order to follow up a memory from very early years which came to his mind.

"It seems that it had been destined before that I should occupy myself so thoroughly with the vulture, for it comes to my mind as a very early memory, when I was still in the cradle, a vulture came down to me, he opened my mouth with his tail and struck me a few times with his tail against my lips."[25]

We have here an infantile memory and to be sure of the strangest sort. It is strange on account of its content and account of the time of life in which it was fixed. That a person could retain a memory of the nursing period is perhaps not impossible, but it can in no way be taken as certain. But what this memory of Leonardo states, namely, that a vulture opened the child's mouth with its tail, sounds so improbable, so fabulous, that another conception which puts an end to the two difficulties with one stroke appeals much more to our judgment. The scene of the vulture is not a memory of Leonardo, but a phantasy which he formed later, and transferred into his childhood. The childhood memories of persons often have no different origin, as a matter of fact, they are not fixated from an experience like the conscious memories from the time of maturity and then repeated, but they are not produced until a later period when childhood is already past, they are then changed and disguised and put in the service of later tendencies, so that in general they cannot be strictly differentiated from phantasies. Their nature will perhaps be best understood by recalling the manner in which history writing originated among ancient nations. As long as the nation was small and weak it gave no thought to the writing of its history, it tilled the soil of its land, defended its existence against its neighbors by seeking to wrest land from them and endeavored to become rich. It was a heroic but unhistoric time. Then came another age, a period of self-realization in which one felt rich and powerful, and it was then that one experienced the need to discover whence one originated and how one developed. The history-writing which