



Memories, words, meanings and the free association of Leonardo da Vinci, Freud, his translators, his readers and this author.

“The Imbroglia” of an entanglement of multiple stories.

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In a forthcoming work (Un approche psychanalytique des phénomènes sociaux et culturels. Mythe dans l’art et l’histoire : à propos de Leonardo et son vautour et du David de Michel-Ange) this author included a mention of Freud's famous work “A Child's Memory of Leonard da Vinci” (1927). It is based on a childhood dream of Leonardo included in his memories, in which he is seen lying in bed and a bird (a “nibbio”) resting on him, touching his lips with its tail. Freud, we imagine that starting from a German translation, he understands that Leonardo refers to a vulture and launches a series of interpretations based on that image. The original Spanish translator, Luis Lopez de Ballesteros, who worked during Freud's lifetime and who received very positive criticism from the master for his work, comments in a footnote that in reality this is a bad translation from Italian and that where Freud understood that he was referring to a vulture, in reality Leonardo was referring to a kite. They are certainly very different birds. One related to death, carrion, corpses, decay. The other is an elegant, energetic bird, which may suggest vitality, power, life.



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The “vulture” identified by Freud in *The Virgin & Child with Saint Anne* by Leonardo (Harris, 2018)

But immediately the editors of the book to which the chapter belongs (Galli Carminati *et al.*, 2020) pointed out to me that things were more complex than they seemed. There is a curious confusion in the translations from Florentine Italian into the various European languages and there is an overlap of meanings since, depending on the language, the translation could be understood by vulture or by kite. To make things even more complicated, kite in English describes both the flying toy – which in Italian is called “aquilone”, i.e. big eagle! – and the bird of prey. And it could also be translated into French as “cerf-volante” which also serves to describe the stag beetle, a large insect. Kite – the toy – in Spanish is “cometa”, which also means (in Spanish and Italian), shooting star. So, the kite’s tail which softly touches Leonardo’s lips in his dream is also the shooting star’s tail bathing with its particles the celestial bodies...



A stag beetle – *Lucanus Cervus* – in French *cerf-volant* that also means kite.

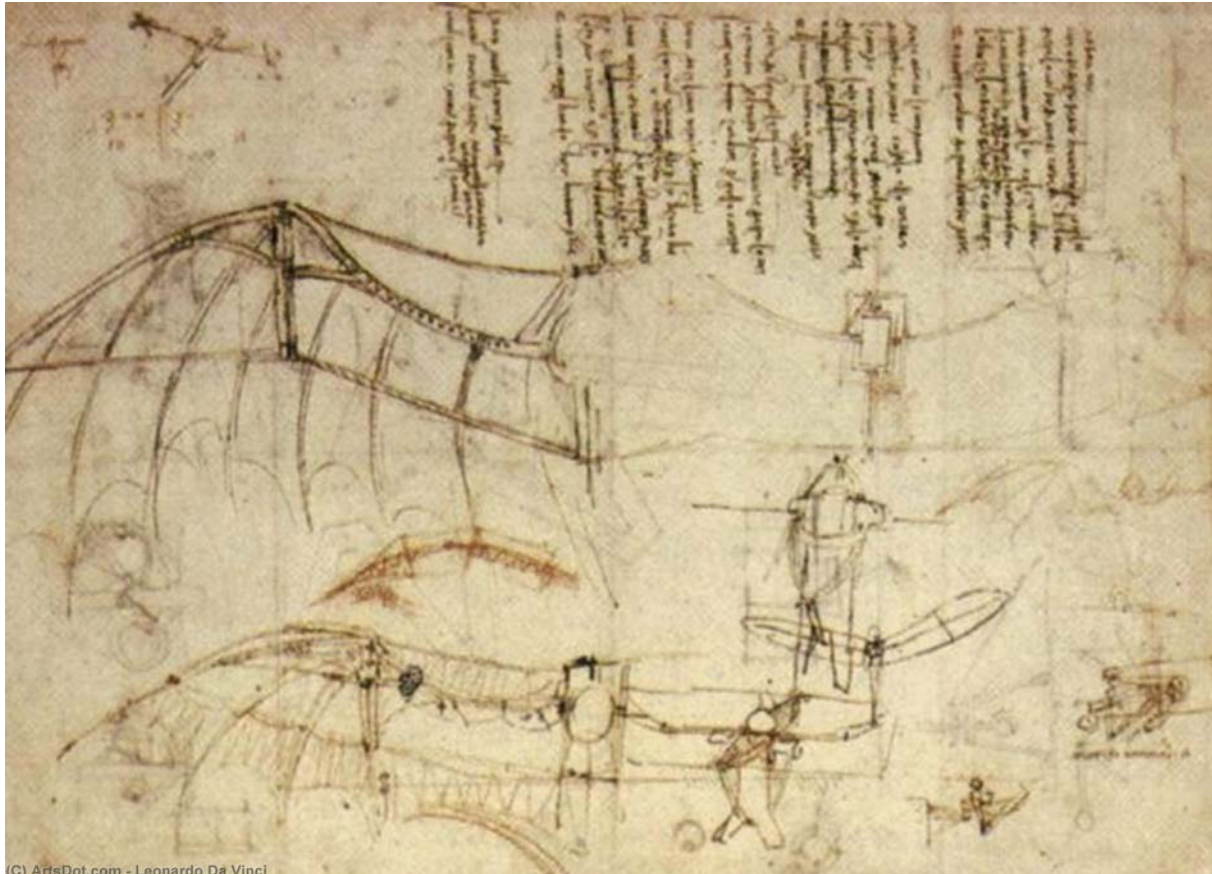
The question thus becomes more and more intricate and the multiplicity of meanings and associations generates a network in which Leonardo, Freud, this author, the publishers of the book cited, and five languages intertwine generating a waterfall of meanings and associations. A true “imbroglio”.



A kite – *Milvus Migrans* – (Kraft, 2008) on the left and a kite – flying toy – on the right.



It is not surprising that when Leonardo tried to invent a glider, he took inspiration from the kite's wings.



Leonardo da Vinci. Study of a flying machine with articulated wings. Pen and ink on paper.
Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Atlantic Codex, f 854r.

Giuliana Galli Carminati (2020) added complexity to the mystery as he made me see that the scene described in Da Vinci's dream (if we are faithful to the idea of “nibbio” as kite) represents an old mythological scene that comes from ancient Egypt. Osiris, Egyptian god of fertility was hated by his brother Seth, envious of his ability and strength. One day Seth murders him and tears his body into fourteen parts, which he hides in different places in Egypt. Isis, his sister, who loves him deeply, asks her sister Nephthys for help and they both decide to look for all the parts of Osiris' body because they trust, Isis will then be able to resurrect him. She locates thirteen out of the fourteen parts as she cannot find Osiris' phallus. Tradition says that body part was devoured by the fishes of the Nile. Isis builds a new phallus for her brother-god and copulates with him, generating their son Horus, with the head of a hawk and the body of a man, who will be god and King of Egypt. Representations of the divine copulation have been found in many places in Egypt. Osiris lying on the bed and a kite, or a woman with bird's wings resting on his body in a mating attitude.



Posthumous union of Osiris with Isis transformed into a kite, funeral temple of Sethi 1st
(Tausch, 2011).

It is obviously interesting in a psychoanalytic reflection, that Leonardo's dream could not only represent a production of the artist's psyche but also evokes a primitive scene present in ancient cultures. Here, the phallus appears, or rather its absence. Osiris-Leonardo is a character castrated by his brother in revenge for his generating capacity. It is a woman, Isis, who solves the castration and gives back a penis to the god, then generating the one who will succeed them both. As is usual in the context of ancient Egypt, the bond is incestuous, and it is the copulation between brothers that resolves the castration. In this way we could say that Isis could represent a substitute for the mother and the access of Osiris to his mother-sister is what allows the god to recover his virility and power. After that experience, Osiris will not only be the god of fertility but also the god of death, after his journey through the underworld. It seems very tempting to consider this being linked to two antithetical principles (fertility and death) from the perspective of the fundamental drives (Eros and Thanatos) Freud described. It may be that those principles just pick up something that is and was inscribed in the history of civilizations. In this way, the Freudian proposal would be a contemporary reading of a myth present in all cultures. A myth that represents the eternal ambivalence between life and death, creation and destruction, love and aggression, which has accompanied human beings since the beginning of time.



Isis with winged arms – wall painting at Karnak – (Unknown, 1360BC)

In this line, Da Vinci's dream evokes in us an associative chain that places the artist in an identification with Osiris (and other gods of antiquity) representing therefore the generative capacity, the creation and at the same time the destructive layer. In short, the two poles that would sustain the artistic work (Paglia, 2006). A divine woman will be the one who saves the artist from his condition of castration, from being incapable of generating life, a product of the hatred of the brothers who envy him, of all of us who have not been touched by the grace of creation. A divine woman who will give him back his creative capacity and will rise him out of the world of the dead. Like Osiris himself, the artist needs a rebirth that frees him from fault and death.

Tim Gihrig, editor at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, says that Osiris' phallus lived a true epic. In early Christian periods, Coptic monks who occupied ancient Egyptian temples systematically destroyed the images of Osiris in the bas-reliefs on the walls, especially those depicting divine intercourse with his sister Isis. Repeating the destructive fury of Seth, they tore apart the body of the god and eliminated especially the phallus created by Isis. It seems that sometimes the traces of the destruction suggest that the god's penis was carefully separated from the body, as if it were a powerful relic. Again, a phallus and its absence seem revelatory of profound currents: desire, envy ...and hatred

Moving forward in history, we see that in the Roman world it is Dionysus who represents the ancient Osiris of the Egyptians. He is the deity of ecstasy, euphoria, liberation from drives and also the protector of theater and the performing arts. He was also attributed the ability to visit the world of the dead where it was said he had gone to rescue his mother Persephone. Also like the Egyptian god, he was torn to pieces by his enemies. Once again, the creative explosion is linked to passionate unbridled joy, sexual pleasure and is also found on the other side of death. Dionysus was castrated, wounded... and in spite of everything, he resurrected and became again powerful, linked to life and fertility forever.



It is a pity that Freud did not know (or use) this information. What ideas would have come up in his mind? Freud in his text reflects on how the vulture is seen in various cultures as a representation of the Mother and even, in some places, they represent the vulture as a mother carrying a penis. Perhaps if he had had this Egyptian narrative in mind he would have thought of Isis the mother vulture-kite who does not possess a penis of her own, but carries one to give it to the dead god, repair his castration and push him into a new life.

A true entanglement in which gods, myths, cultures, languages and civilizations intertwine to give rise to an associative chain in which Leonardo seems to place himself as the new Osiris, the one who will have to fuse libido and aggression, Eros and Thanatos in order to overcome castration and generate a new and powerful king. Maybe the Mona Lisa, the Last Supper or the Virgin of the Rocks are the equivalent of that powerful Horus, born to reign over men and gods. Jorge Luis Borges ends one of his sonnets with these verses: " ...over the shadow that I am gravitates the shadow of the past; it is infinite ". In every life the infinite history of the world oozes and our dreams also represent in some way the dreams of all men throughout the ages. Freud's genius is perhaps that he was able to capture in contemporary concepts underground currents of wisdom and certainty that had always belonged to humans. Envy, hate, destruction, sex, mystery, creation belong to our dreams just as they belong to the history of man. Leonardo's dreams are the dreams of all of us and of our ancestors throughout history.

Christiane Desroches-Noblecourt, great lady of French Egyptology, published her memoirs under the title "Sous le regard des dieux" (in the sight of the gods). The ancient gods, and the new ones, personify the desires, hopes and fears of men, always vigilant of our becoming. The gaze of the gods that watch over us is our own gaze. Leonardo and his vulture or kite, Isis and Osiris, Dionisius and the dark Coptic monks of the ancient temples are only knots in the infinite associative network that envelops us and gives meaning to our life.

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