



To Situate Sublimation

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To Situate Sublimation*

JEAN LAPLANCHE

translated by RICHARD MILLER

Everything in Leonardo da Vinci's childhood "memory" denotes a *symbolic figure of seduction* (what better parable could there be?), of the implantation of the maternal desire that is destined to mark the child and, ultimately, the adult. This is what Leonardo means when he says that his preoccupation with the flight of birds had been preordained by destiny. And how is it possible, as we witness the beating of the kite's (to give it its true name) tail, to mistake the sexual play to which Freud here makes direct reference: the interaction between breast and mouth (an act in which we all too often overlook the role of the breast as one of the mother's erogenous zones); and of course, and Freud stresses this, the interaction of lips with lips, "impassioned kisses." Through the autoerotic/narcissistic image of lips touching lips what we have denoted here is the fact that the moment of seduction is—or immediately becomes—a moment of turning in on oneself, of retrogression into fantasy; in seduction it is the mark of what I have called *self* time, *auto* time. Lastly, when we gaze back upon this childhood memory we realize that it is obviously here that we must locate the role of the mother's fantasy penis. But we must now take into account the objection raised from the genetic viewpoint (which makes the "phallic" operative at approximately four years of age, considerably later than orality and anality): the mother's fantasy penis is not the one the child imagines

* This essay is an excerpt from Laplanche's lectures published in *Problematiques III: La Sublimation*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1980. [The Strachey translation, which conflates instinct and drive under the same term, *instinct*, has not been altered when cited. By now the criticisms of this translation are well known. The distinction between drive and instinct, however, is fundamental to the work of Laplanche and is, therefore, respected in the translation of his text. In *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, Laplanche redefines *Anlehnung* (Strachey's *anacisis*) as "finding support" or "propping" and gives it a conceptual value it does not have in standard translations of Freud. Laplanche shows that *Anlehnung* describes a structural relation in which the sexual drives lean, or are propped up, on the biological instincts. A massive deviation, which takes place through a metaphorization of the instinct's aims and an internalization and metonymic displacement of the instinct's objects, detaches sexuality from the vital order of self-preservation. —Ed.]

around the age of four, it is the one the mother continues to envy, particularly during nursing, the one that will sometimes be the focal point on which the gamut of her inchoate desires, unified and perhaps solidified, will be directed. Lacan's formulation, a reprise of Freud, at once springs to mind: the child is the mother's phallus. Things, however, are much more complex in the sense that the phallus is now not embodied solely in the child. The breast itself, alternating with the child, oscillating with it, we might say (to pick up the image of beating wings), also occupies this fantasy site of the phallus being thrust between the lips of the suckling child.

Around 1897 Freud, coming to grips with what we now call the seduction theory, expressed its essence in the following equation: adult perversion = childhood neurosis; whence this autocriticism: given the fact that there are so many neurotics, can it be conceivable that there is really such a large number — necessarily even greater — of perverse parents? This objection breaks down if we agree to replace the overt perversion of an unsatisfied female with this quasi-structural datum of the mother/penis relationship. In *Leonardo* we have a return to this seduction theory in which we have found the truth of "propping." And the seduction fantasy, the "childhood memory of Leonardo," brings us closer to what I have called the object-source. In any event, if we cannot be certain (who would dare?) that Leonardo's fantasy is *itself* the object-source, we can posit that it is one of its closest preconscious figurings.¹

Thus, going perhaps a bit further than did Freud, we have singled out the essential element that makes this fantasy a kind of paradigm of seduction. The scenario represents seduction, but it itself is close to what is laid down by seduction, the object-source. Which brings us to the self-representative character of fantasy, *fantasy representing not only a content in a scene but the way in which it is itself produced*. We can say, although this kind of word play is subject to examination, that *the fantasy of implantation represents the implantation of fantasy*.

We can read in Freud a fairly lengthy discussion of the reality contained in this scenario: is it really a memory? Or is it, purely and simply, an *a posteriori* construction? Is it a mixture of construction and mnestic elements? The discussion is not unique to this essay; we can find it set forth at least at equal length, for example, when we come to the primal scene in *The Wolf Man*. It is a problem Freud never quite worked out, particularly when it came to invoking a pure and simple adult reconstruction. This position, which is that of Meyer Shapiro and also of Viderman (and also of Jung), the thesis of a complete inadequation of the infantile elements when it comes to constructing the analytic interpretation, is one of which Freud is quite well aware, and he rejects it only after having gone to great lengths in his attempt to refute it. For Freud, if there

1. I note that since *L'inconscient, une étude psychoanalytique*, 1961, the path followed by Serge Leclaire has often paralleled my own. Here, I would refer to his notion of "representation of the representative" in his *On tue un enfant*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1975, pp. 62 ff.

is construction it is important that such construction express in some way a profound truth, one present very early on, from childhood:

If, then, Leonardo's story about the vulture that visited him in his cradle is only a fantasy from a later period, one might suppose it could hardly be worth while spending much time on it. One might be satisfied with explaining it on the basis of his inclination, of which he makes no secret, to regard his preoccupation with the flight of birds as pre-ordained by destiny. Yet in underrating the story one would be committing just as great an injustice as if one were carelessly to reject the body of legends, traditions and interpretations found in a nation's early history. In spite of all the distortions and misunderstandings, they still represent the reality of the past: they are what a people forms out of the experience of its early days and under the dominance of motives that were once powerful and still operate today; and if it were only possible, by a knowledge of all the forces at work, to undo these distortions, there would be no difficulty in disclosing the historical truth lying behind the legendary material. The same holds good for the childhood memories or phantasies of an individual.²

Freud, then, to the eventual advantage of the theory of drives, goes beyond this opposition between memory and reconstructed fantasy. For him, this truth is the same as the fantasies of origins and myths of origins, like that of the founding of Rome: oracles, divine interventions and, at the very foundations of artistic or scientific interest (here we again run up against the problem of sublimation), as a basis for reference and outside stimulus with regard to the subject, as an avatar of the "inner foreign body," that which we call "vocation" or "inspiration."

Having taken a detour via seduction, are we now so far from the problem of sublimation? Not very, because in both instances we have a question of a sexual and nonsexual relationship: on its first level seduction can be described as the eruption of sex into the so-called asexuality of the child, an eruption into self-preservation; inversely, sublimation can be regarded as the path of energy of the sex drive or impulse towards nonsexual activities. Yet in Freud's *Leonardo* this problem of sublimation, a major theme in Freudian thought, is far from being univocal, and this adds to a number of the difficulties that arise. First, although sublimation is most often regarded as a transformation of some sexual activity into nonsexual activity, as a "destined impulse," we find several passages where what is in question is the genesis of *objects*, of myths or illusions. Thus the gods are said to have been born out of a sublimation of the genital

2. Sigmund Freud, *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood* (1910), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, London, The Hogarth Press, 1957, XI, p. 84.

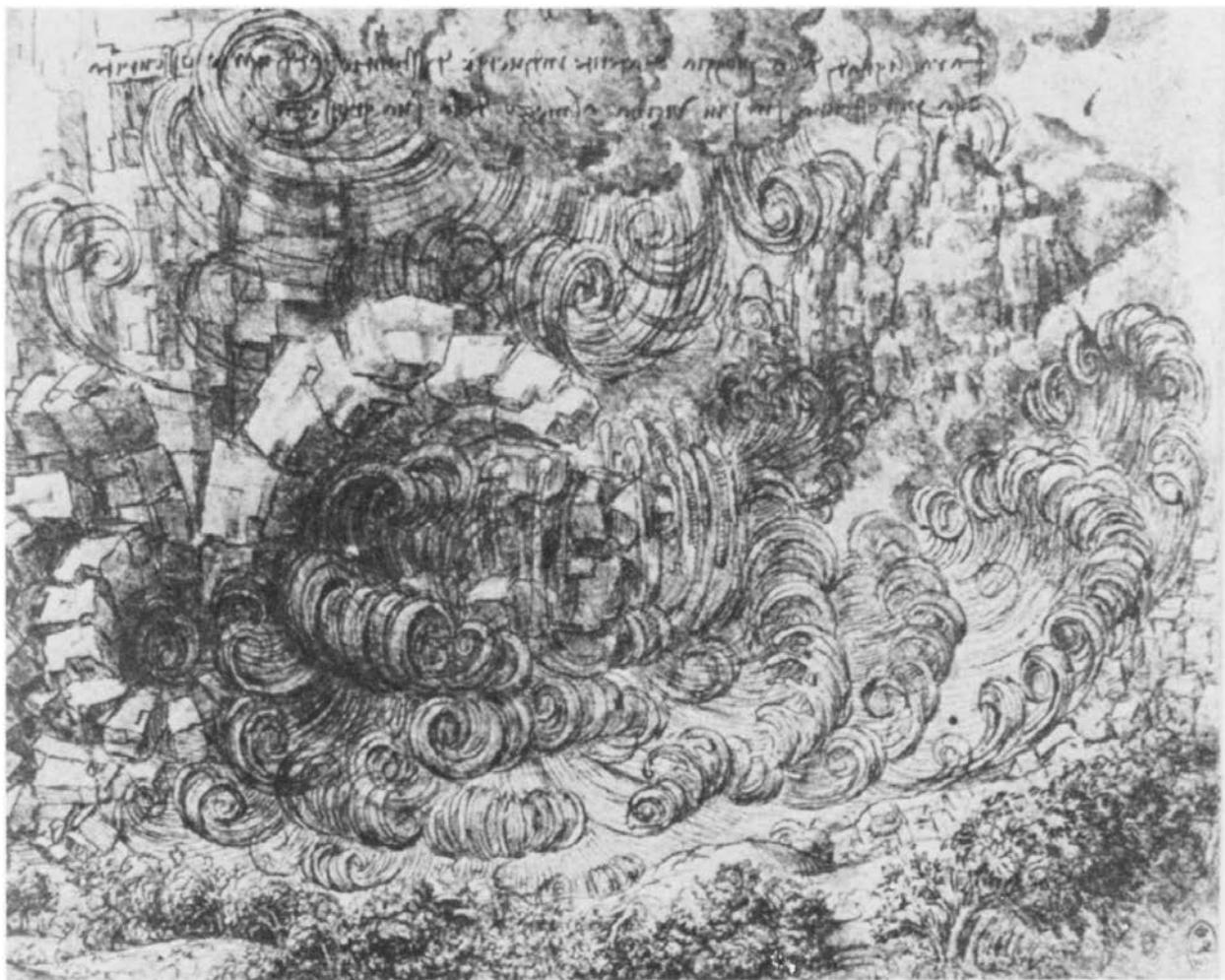
organs, or that God and Nature (basic coordinates in Leonardo's work) are sublimations of the parents.³ Thus duality between impulsive sublimation and what we refer to as the symbolization of objects "from above" seems less important to me than another duality, namely, that in Leonardo we are dealing not with *a* sublimation but actually with two major activities in which an enigma is posed at the outset: on the one hand, the activity of pictorial creation and, on the other hand, the activity of scientific investigation. In Leonardo these two activities are very intricate and frequently shore each other up; thus, Leonardo's drawings are props for his anatomical investigations or his researches into flight; inversely, scientific anatomical research or a broad-based investigation of nature itself sets as its goal or its alibi the desire to succeed in creating a painting more faithful to the truth. Freud, however, along with many other authors, stresses this antagonism. He dwells—at the very beginning of the article—on the braking of the pictorial activity by an increasingly intense—not to say obsessional—intellectual research, so that almost all creative energy finally comes to be channeled into knowledge without any possibility for possible reconversion. "Nothing," Leonardo wrote, "can be loved or hated if you do not first know it." Which Freud interprets thus: it is obviously a theoretical error to say that one cannot love and hate without knowledge: all our experience of emotional life proves the contrary. However, it is true with regard to the development of Leonardo himself to say that he finally made love and hate subordinate to knowledge. "Leonardo, then," Freud writes,

could only have meant that the love practised by human beings was not of the proper and unobjectionable kind: one *should* love in such a way as to hold back the affect, subject it to the process of reflection and only let it take its course when it has stood up to the test of thought. And at the same time we understand that he wishes to tell us that it happens so in his case and that it would be worth while for everyone else to treat love and hatred as he does.⁴

Here I must dwell on this notion, so crucial in psychoanalysis, of an *impossibility of transformation*, i.e., the fact that in certain areas the passage from, the conversion of, some site into another, some psychic reality into another, is not possible in both directions. The major instance of this impossibility or this great difficulty of transformation is offered by the anxiety theory: the conversion of libido into anxiety is, if not in one direction, at least very difficult to achieve in the other; the transformation of anxiety into libido calls for a much greater effort than the libido's passage to anxiety. Here we have an energy

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 123 ff.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 74.



Leonardo da Vinci. A Study of a Deluge.

model that Freud does not develop, a typical model of entropy.⁵ Of course, psychoanalysis plays metaphorically with quantums of energy, but it would be appropriate to rely not only on the law governing the transfer of energy but also the second law of thermodynamics, namely, the fact that certain types of energy represent a degradation of other types and that we cannot retrace our steps to the source without making an additional effort and with considerable loss. With Leonardo, Freud detects such an impossibility of transformation between pictorial activity and the activity of intellectual research. If we read on, however, we find that the analysis is based upon two slightly different points of view:

5. "A conversion [*Unsetzungen*] of psychical instinctual force into various forms of activity can perhaps no more be achieved without loss than a conversion of physical forces" (*Ibid.*, p. 75).

Because of his insatiable and indefatigable thirst for knowledge Leonardo has been called the Italian Faust. But quite apart from doubts about a possible transformation of the instinct to investigate back into an enjoyment of life—a transformation which we must take as fundamental to the tragedy of Faust [because Faust, after having been a scientist into his old age, reverts to youth and to direct instinctive satisfactions]—the view must be hazarded that Leonardo's development approaches Spinoza's mode of thinking.⁶

What Freud means here is that with Leonardo we go from knowledge of the first type to that of the second and then on to a third—in other words we move toward a knowledge that is increasingly more pure, increasingly removed from the emotions. The impossibility of transformation is made very clear, as is the impossibility, or the extreme difficulty, of the return of the sublimated to the active (*Lebenslust*, joy, desire or pleasure of living).

Further on, a clear difference is made in characterizing the two activities in question:

Then, when he made the attempt to return from investigation to his starting point, the exercise of his art, he found himself disturbed by the new direction of his interests and the changed nature of his mental activity. What interested him in a picture was above all a problem; and behind the first one he saw countless other problems arising. . . . He was no longer able to limit his demands, to see the work of art in isolation and to tear it from the wide context to which he knew it belonged.⁷

The major problem in Freud's *Leonardo*, from the viewpoint of sublimation, is that although two activities (painting and intellectual investigations) are presented to us, both sublimated and struggling against each other, sublimation is also, and most frequently, evoked only for the intellectual activity, and the struggle between the two activities is in the end an inability to "de-sublimate," to return, even partially, to the instinctual—to the point that the pictorial activity becomes something much closer to the instinctual, to what Freud calls "enjoyment of life," than to intellectual activity.

One of the reasons for this difference is obviously the fact that research activity lends itself to the schema of sublimation much better than does the genesis of plastic activity. We have already made a rapid survey of this when considering the fate of the notorious "drive to know" (*Wisstrieb*). We should recall first that Freud himself spoke out on occasion against the endless multiplication of the number of "drives": creating a particular drive for each

6. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

and every activity is eventually tantamount only to an increase in purely verbal solutions. And what is this drive to know? Is it a drive? Is it a sexual drive? What can our schema of reinforcement—or, as I have called it, propping—and seduction contribute to this problem of knowing? Here I turn to the text of the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* and, in particular, to Chapter V of the second essay, “The Sexual Researches of Childhood,” a chapter written in 1915 and thus added to the *Three Essays* after the publication of *Leonardo*:

At about the same time as the sexual life of children reaches its first peak, between the ages of three and five, they also begin to show signs of the activity which may be ascribed to the instinct for knowledge or research [*Wisstrieb*: instinct for knowledge; *Forschertrieb*: instinct for research]. This instinct [for knowledge] cannot be counted among the elementary instinctual components, nor can it be classed as exclusively belonging to sexuality [which means that it is thus a decomposable instinct and that its components are not solely sexual]. Its activity corresponds on the one hand to a sublimated manner of obtaining mastery, while on the other hand it makes use of the energy of scopophilia. [Here other elements are being introduced: *Bemächtigung* or “mastery,” and *Schaulust* (Freud sometimes uses the word *Schautrieb*); we use the word “scopophilia,” even though it is a fairly recherché translation of a term that is very common in German: *Lust*, combining as it does both desire and pleasure, is almost untranslatable in either French or English.] Its relations to sexual life, however, are of particular importance, since we have learnt from psycho-analysis that the instinct for knowledge in children is attracted unexpectedly early and intensively to sexual problems and is in fact possibly first aroused by them.⁸

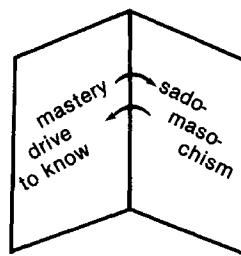
A short text that appears to be quite precise but that can nevertheless plunge us into confusion. Why? First, as a general rule Freud speaks of *Bemächtigung* and *Bemächtigungstrieb*, the drive for mastery, as one with a non-sexual basis. In placing it in our dihedron, we would set it on the left-hand side, the side of self-preservation. But then, isn’t it in a way absurd to say that the drive for knowledge is a sublimation of the drive for mastery if the drive for mastery is not sexual and therefore, by definition, cannot be sublimated? Going a bit further than this somewhat categorical contradiction, we perceive that this is perhaps merely an ellipsis in Freud’s thinking. The “drive for mastery” makes its appearance in the *Three Essays* a few pages earlier with regard to sadomasochism, also in a text that does not date entirely from either 1915 or 1920,

8. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), S.E., VII, p. 194; comments in brackets by J. L.

but which has been profoundly reworked. There, Freud sets forth an analysis of sadism and suggests a genesis for it in line with the propping schema. And he tells us that sadism, as a sexual impulse, derives from a drive or nonsexual activity that strives simply to extend the ego's mastery over the object. At the outset, therefore, there must have been some activity of mastery that did not derive pleasure from the destruction of the other and that transforms itself sexually only through propping and repression.⁹ "Cruelty in general comes easily to the childish nature, since the obstacle that brings the instinct for mastery to a halt at another person's pain—namely a capacity for pity—is developed relatively late."¹⁰ At its outset the drive for mastery in the child does not stop short at the pain of another person but, and this is a crucial fact, neither does it seek out that pain: *pity and sadism go together*, but there is an activity that consists in establishing domination over the outside world, destroying it if need be, an activity that, in itself, is not sexual. Here is how Freud completes the passage in 1915:

It may be assumed that the impulse of cruelty [and here, therefore, a sexual impulse] arises from the instinct for mastery and appears at a period of sexual life at which the genitals have not yet taken over their later role.¹¹

What I should like to stress here, in addition to the commentary accessible to everyone, is that a propping relationship exists between self-preserved mastery, the adaptation of the outside world, and sado-masochism. When Freud tells us later—this time with regard to the drive for knowledge—that that drive is a sublimation of mastery, we can attempt to apply that schema to our dihedron reciprocally:



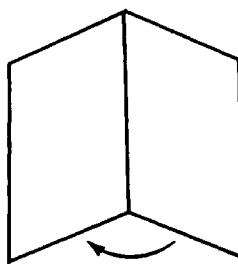
To interpret sublimation in this way as the inverse of propping is of course to apply a somewhat mechanical schema, the very one Freud himself suggests

9. Cf. Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.

10. Freud, *Three Essays*, pp. 192-193.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 193.

in his short text on “Pathways of Mutual Influence” (in *Three Essays*). However, without abandoning our dihedron model, there may be another, non-“mutual” way of understanding the return from sadism toward sublimated activities. For example, we can imagine something that would resemble a refolding of the sexual level back onto the level of self-preservation.



In any event, what we do grasp is the special link between knowledge and the drive for research and between sadism or sado-masochism. Which is obviously in line with the analysis of Leonardo as well as with the analysis of a condition very like obsessional neurosis: the obsessional character of Leonardo’s relationships with intellectual investigation.

The other meaning of this text is that the drive for knowledge “works with the energy of *Schaulust*,” the drive or desire to see. Earlier, I asked a question: Freud often stated that it was not a matter of multiplying drives willy-nilly, of singling out a drive anywhere one chanced to note some specific activity. So what about this “drive to see”—is it another partial drive but one with what appears to be a very special status? Mastery and sado-masochism—the drive for cruelty—can be connected fairly clearly to anality, particularly via mastery of the sphincter. What makes the drive to see in a way special is that in Freud it always appears independently of precise reference to any given libidinal phase. The drive to see cannot be assigned to the oral phase, the anal phase, the phallic phase, etc. Nevertheless, it too evidences this propping movement, and the elements of a description of the propping up of voyeurism-exhibitionism—in other words, the sexual drive to see—on the activity of seeing—appear in the text of *Instincts and their Vicissitudes* as well as in the article *The Psycho-analytic View of Psychogenic Disturbance of Vision*. The activity of seeing is thus considered to consist of two sections, one nonsexual and self-preserved: after all, sight enables each creature endowed with it to orient himself in the world, quite apart from any question of sexual pleasure, and from this point of view Freud links it directly to touch: the act of seeing is an extension of the act of touching. This is linked to the whole Freudian theory of perception, which views perception as consisting of a sending out of feelers, of sensitive tentacles, at rhythmic intervals. Imagine the cilia of a protozoan or the horns of a snail endowed with

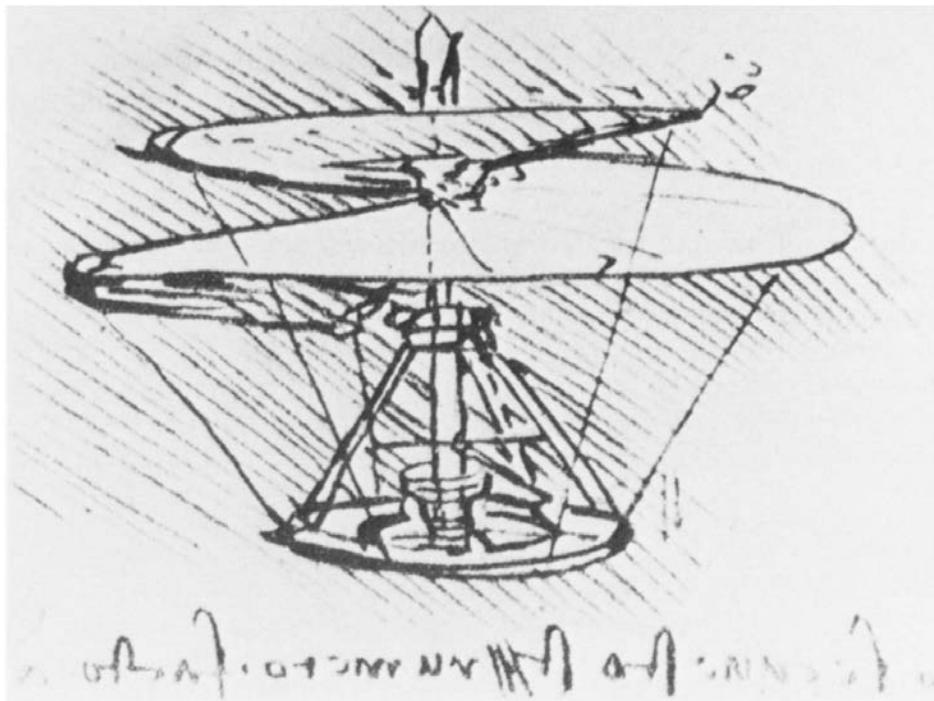
a kind of in and out movement . . . indeed, the snail's horns do bear sight organs. That is the image Freud has in mind when he connects sight to touch and compares it to a gathering in of samples from the outside world. The non-sexual activity of seeing, in the propping process, becomes a drive to see as soon as it becomes *representative*, that is, the interiorization of a scene. I am thinking of the preeminence of seeing in the theory of dreams, as well as in the theory of the unconscious, of what Freud calls thing-representations, that which forms the material of the unconscious, which are for the most part conceived on the visual representation model.

Thus the drive to see is made up in part of control or mastery and in part of the energy of the vision, both of which occur in interiorization, for to interiorize is also to master (as in such notions as that of the "omnipotent" control of the object). Mastering and seeing have a nonsexual aspect, and in *Leonardo* Freud rapidly constructs a theory entailing the propping of the drive for sexual investigation on those nonsexual activities. Here is his conclusion: "The instinct for knowledge in children is attracted unexpectedly early and intensively to sexual problems and is in fact possibly first aroused by them."¹² Which means: the drive for sexual investigation, which we know led to the investigation and creation of the theories of infant sexuality, is founded in a nonsexual activity; *however*, perhaps in the end its bases did not exist *prior* to the awakening of sexuality. Here we have what I was trying to indicate with regard to the dihedron schema, namely, that the plane of self-preservation is so defective that in certain cases it can be almost virtual and cannot be made active other than at the moment when the right-hand plane (sexuality), as it is called, arouses it. Thus we have a propping reinforced or buttressed by something it has itself brought into being. In other words, the notion of propping still holds surprises.

Let us return to the drive to know and its two components as set forth in the *Three Essays*: the drive to see and sado-masochism derive from the drive for mastery. This breakdown, schematic as it is, can easily be discerned in the case of Leonardo. In fact, the visual component makes the opposition between the two areas of sublimation Freud indicates less abrupt: on the one hand Leonardo's intellectual activity and, on the other hand, his activity as a draughtsman and painter. And indeed, everyone at all interested in his work has noted the profoundly visual, machine-oriented, constructivist character of Leonardo's intellectual investigations, his constant reliance on schemas. I recall the following typical aphorism: "Since the eye is the window of the soul, the soul always goes in fear of seeing itself deprived of it."¹³ The eye is the window

12. *Ibid.*

13. K. R. Eissler, *Leonardo da Vinci: Psychoanalytic Notes on the Enigma*, New York, International Universities Press, 1961, p. 243.



Leonardo da Vinci. Helicopter or Aerial Screw.

of the soul, and it can also be said that the eye is the window of intellection: there can be no intellection other than through the visual, and, as has been noted, every time Leonardo in his research arrives at the limits of the representable he falls back upon the most banal, traditional medieval theories. To the extent that estimations of the true value of Leonardo's scientific activity differ widely (an argument that can be found more fully set out in Eissler's book). In a way, Leonardo's work can be said to live on his acquired reputation, but his place in the advancement of the sciences is extremely problematic: for some — and not without reason — Leonardo is an extraordinary observer, a technician of genius, but one unable precisely to liberate himself from his sight. But I merely wanted to mention this debate, and I shall not dwell on it.

The components of mastery, linked to sado-masochism, are also clearly set forth by Freud in both their direct expressions and their more often neutralized aspects. Freud lays stress on such extraordinary features as the following: a gentle man, filled with pity, who follows condemned men as they are being led to the torture in order better to study their features and thus be better able to render reactions of pain and terror in his drawings. Leonardo was an extremely gentle man, which did not prevent him from accompanying Florentine princes to war and from inventing implements of war for their use. In short, the sado-masochistic origins of Leonardo's researches and machinery are easily traced.

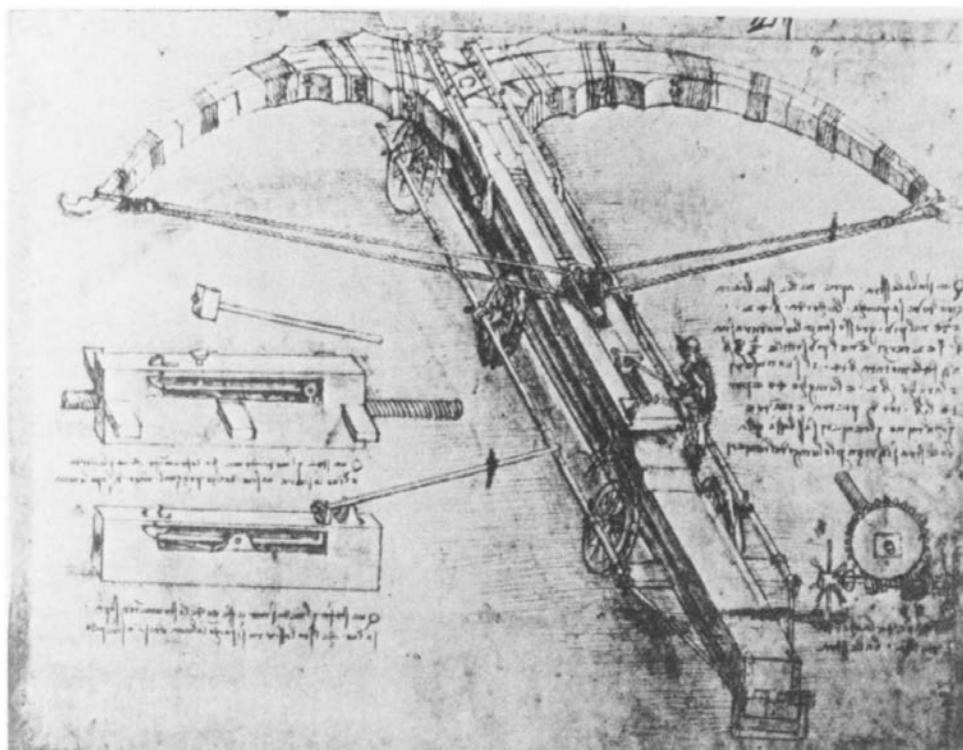
However, my time for this lecture is drawing to its close, and I should like to go back to Freud's development of sublimation, to the passage that lies at the center of our interest — and of our perplexity as well.

We consider it probable that an instinct like this of excessive strength

[in the life of an individual] was already active in the subject's earliest childhood, and that its supremacy was established by impressions in the child's life. [This is the first part of the hypothesis underlying sublimation; now for the second:] We make the further assumption that it found reinforcement from what were originally sexual instinctual forces, so that later it could take the place of a part of the subject's sexual life.¹⁴

In the case of Leonardo, Freud tells us very little about the nonsexual bases of sublimated activity, of this "excessively strong instinct," or "preponderant tendency." What interests him is not the child's investigation prior to the precise moment when sexual investigation enters the scene, is grafted on. Grafted? In the *Three Essays* we have seen that it is more than that, since there the question is whether or not it is purely and simply a matter of the awakening of the drive for investigation itself. From that point of view there is not, in action, any nonsexual investigation that is enriched by infantile sexual research, but all research activity begins at the moment it is aroused by sexual activity. What is the activity of investigation, after all? Is it the same thing as intellectual activity, as the functioning of the intellect? Here too, distinctions must be

14. Freud, *Leonardo*, p. 77.



Leonardo da Vinci. Great Crossbow.

made. Obviously, we know that the intelligence is not a function proper only to man; numerous investigations have enabled us to acquire a precise knowledge of the development and limits of animal intelligence as a function of adaptation. It is obvious that such intellectual activity (the development of intelligence) is not libidinal (using that term in its strict psychoanalytical sense). It is neutral. Obviously, it can be put at the service of sexuality, but more often it operates in the service of instincts for self-preservation. I would say that there is a difference between *intelligence*, as an adaptive combinatory activity, and *investigation*, and that that distinction operates through sexuality. With investigation we go from a potentially complex research, from a "misleading" but one that does not posit an object, one that is not "thetic" (to borrow a philosophical term), to the search for something hidden, something necessarily capable of representation, beyond appearances. It is not surprising that the "hidden" and "representable" should be linked to the emergence of the sexual. To it we should, in an absolutely correlative manner, add that it is a matter of something interiorized, a kind of representative schema that is already no more than fantasy. Here I am referring to one of Freud's texts I have already alluded to, *On the Sexual Theories of Children* of 1907. These "theories" are those elaborated by the child to explain a certain number of puzzles within the strict framework of some *investigative* activity. What initiates them, the source of their itch, one might say, is always a puzzle posed by the parental world, some concealment, some secret, some private conversation, some reserve or stand-offishness—in short something real, something material, supposed to be hidden behind appearances. I have already had occasion to emphasize a kind of paradox Freud sustains, both in the text of *On the Sexual Theories of Children* and in *Three Essays*. The text of *On the Sexual Theories of Children* begins something like this: if someone from another planet, a Martian for example, came down to earth, which of his observations of human beings would strike him the most forcibly? The most outstanding and striking puzzle, the one requiring the most explanation, would be the difference between the sexes, between men and women. If he had to draw up a system of signification he would be forced to take this distinction between men and women into account. I dwell on this because here (the Martian and the child are obviously the same) Freud is positing precisely the notion that male-female distinction is not only sexual difference, as has since been maintained, but also a more general distinction, the *habitus*, social functionings, ways of dressing and behavior, in short what from a certain viewpoint we call "gender" as opposed to sex.¹⁵ Freud goes on (I shall paraphrase) to say something like: You will say that I am obsessed by sexuality and the phallus, and that I'm going to tell you that for the child the number one puzzle, the one that initiates the earliest childhood sexual theories, is the difference in genders. But that is not what I am going to say! For the child the prime puzzle, the one that

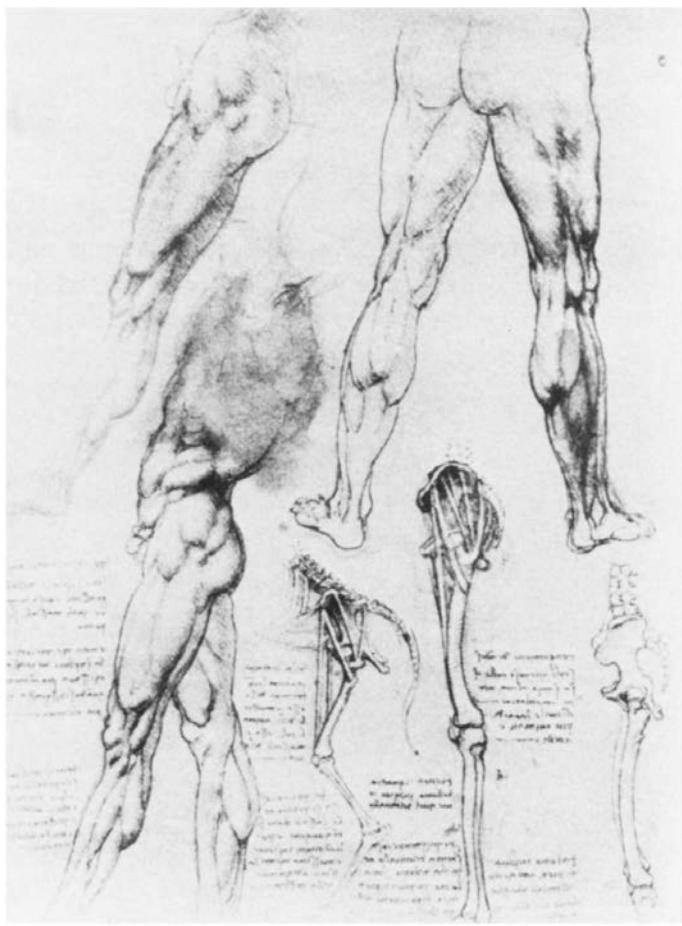
15. Cf. *Problématiques II*, note, p. 33.

triggers the earliest childhood sexual theories, is not the male-female distinction but rather the question: "Where do babies come from?" It is the mother's bearing (or even expecting) a child that most usually serves as the point of departure for such childhood investigation. I would go so far as to say that the element of seduction and intrusion is clearer in investigations involving birth. After all, from the outset the child regards the world of genders as a natural given, as natural a given as are the distinctions that gradually emerge between animate and inanimate. But the arrival of another child is always somehow an event that seems to spring from nowhere, from nothing. The other important aspect in the panorama I am attempting to fill in (that of investigation linked to fantasy construction) is the parents' refusal to put forward any adequate explanation. Instead, there are false explanations that are proffered in the form of "sexual theories" of fecundation, gestation, and childbirth. So that—as Daniel Lagache has demonstrated in this regard—Freud is here describing the primal psychic conflict, the first "Oedipal" conflict, centered around this struggle for knowledge—and, of course, for power—between the parents, who deny adequate theory and *representation*, and the child seeking to acquire them. The first split, as Freud tells us, occurs here. Is it wrong to speak of seduction with regard to this situation brought on by the birth of another child? I would say that here perhaps there is not necessarily an event that pinpoints seduction but, rather, a situation or a structure of seduction. In such a situation seduction is not the contribution by the parents—albeit alien, outside—of theories—that of the stork, for example—to fix notions. For something to function as an element for traumatization and seduction it is not enough for it to come to the child from outside. The theory of the stork is not a childhood sexual theory. In the end it plays a very small role in the child's development, other than as additional proof of the duplicity, of the basically deceitful nature, of parents. However, in such a situation we can pick out what is traumatic in the proper sense of the term. From a quantitative viewpoint I mean by traumatic an external contribution that provokes an excitation in the child that is too strong for him to connect with; qualitatively, I mean a lack of proportion between, on the one hand, the child's capabilities of elaboration at the moment, his available intellectual equipment, and, on the other hand, the level of the problem with which he is confronted. In the last analysis, this situation, which I do not shrink from calling seduction, or a propping situation, poses a "selfish" problem of survival: will this other person who is going to be born take my place? How can other people be made on the same model, out of the same mold, as I? Am I not the only one, unique? Will the other one be preferred over me? A problem of survival, in line with the instincts for self-preservation, that can also be found fully set forth in another text dealing precisely with propping up, *A Child is Being Beaten* (where, too, the problem of the other child that leads to the fabrication of the whole gamut of fantasies, leading up to the sado-masochistic fantasy "a

child is being beaten"). On the one hand, therefore, we have a problem of self-preservation and, on the other hand, through it, mysterious questions about the link between the parental couple which eventually come to include a dimly comprehended bodily topography. In the notorious theories of childhood sexuality all that can not be reformulated other than through the child's actual first-person erogenous experiencing: whence the innumerable theories every child is led to develop regarding copulation and childbirth.

Propping in the drive to know, the *Wisstrieb*. The first paradox of this propping is (and we have stressed this) what is being propped up, i.e., sexual investigation, will arouse and then support—that is, prop up in another sense—that upon which it is supposed to rest, i.e., self-preservation. Here then we have an inverted relationship that impels us to consider the whole of the theory of the relationship between our two "drives"—self-preservation and sexual—in a highly relative perspective. The second paradox is that, in sublimation at least, what is being propped up, sexual investigation, is not subject, or at least not completely, to repression. There seems to be a kind of subtle game being played here at this moment between sublimation and repression. Thus I come to the final passage in Freud's argument, in which, jumping over intermediate, so-called "neurotic" solutions, he arrives at the type proper to sublimation. His argument goes something like this: the third type, the rarest and most perfect, eludes, thanks to its special qualities, both thought inhibition and thought compulsion [which were both neurotic results]. Sexual repression also occurs, but it does not result in the emergence of a partial drive of sexual desire in the unconscious. On the contrary, the libido stands aloof from repression, it is sublimated from the beginning [this "from the beginning" is highly important, and it is what I should like to bring out here (*von Anfang an* = from the beginning): from the beginning, it has escaped vis-à-vis repression] into the desire to know and reinforces or buttresses the already powerful drive to investigate. Here too, investigation, research, becomes to a certain extent *compulsion* [*Zwang*] and substitution [*Ersatz*] for the sex act, but because of the radical difference in basic psychic processes (sublimation rather than emergence from the depths of the unconscious) [sublimation thus forestalls the formation of a symptom arising from repression] the characteristics of a neurosis being absent, the subjection to complexes arising out of childhood sexual investigations does not occur and the drive can freely work actively in support of intellectual interests. However, sexual repression—which, through the sublimated libido, has been strengthened—continues to mark the drive by forcing it to eschew sexual subjects.

Here we have something that is truly very subtle: sublimation is not a repression and yet there is still a turning back! Schematically we have: it is not a repression, i.e., that at the very site where something has been repressed some *Ersatz* does not emerge in the form of symptom; nevertheless, there is



Leonardo da Vinci. A Study of the Anatomy of Legs.

repression of part of the instinctive action, notably and namely, repression of the part that was an investigation aimed at a properly sexual object, and thus *repression with regard to the object*, a barred route. And there is still an *Ersatz*, but, if we may use the term, through derivation, collaterally, and not as neurotic symptom produced at the site where the repression occurred. I know that all this may seem a bit far-fetched, but this is the problem of sublimation in Freud—and, I might add, even more so because, to be precise, the so-called avoidance of the sexual object in the course of intellectual investigations is not all that clear in Leonardo's case because in all his famous drawings we can see him carrying out a kind of investigation into the anatomy and physiology of the sexual relationship.

In bringing my course this year to some kind of (provisional) conclusion, in ending my research into this problem of "sublimation," I should like to set up a marker here to indicate the path along which one might at some future time go further into this question. I have indicated that I found Freud's notation suggestive, of course, for bringing sublimation into rapport with propping, but, on the other hand, how insufficient I have found the notion that that relationship would be quite a simple one, namely, that sublimation is nothing but propping in reverse, the return of the sexual to the nonsexual. Now we can see

in what way that schema is insufficient: it is because it does not take into account the element of repression. In fact at least for some part of the drive, sublimation is certainly one means through which it can escape repression. However, in spite of everything it is correlative to a repression, and in particular to a repression having to do with a certain type of object, the properly sexual object.

If we preserve the notion that sublimation is very close to propping, we will probably have to understand the notion of *an Anfang*, from the beginning, in a special way. Sublimation is not a retrogression, a second retrogression relative to the earliest period of sexual awakening: propping and sublimation, in a way, may even go together. "From the beginning" there is a kind of coupling when something is being sublimated. True sublimations are "precocious"; Freud makes this very clear, particularly with regard to the vividly solid case of sublimation in the mind of Leonardo. I believe that we must attempt to conceive of sublimation as occurring at the very same moment as the first incidence of sexual excitation, at the moment of the emergence of the first vague or partial sexual drive. However, the term *precocious* has a temporal, chronological connotation that risks implying that sublimations occur only in the very earliest years of life. Are there not, however, occasions (admittedly rare) when a "delayed" sublimation might occur, and, in particular, must we abandon the notion of any sublimation occurring during the course of an analytic cure? If I substitute for the adjective *precocious* the adjective *original*, it goes without saying that the notion of *original* does not apply solely to the years of one's origin. We must therefore entertain the notion that the sexual instinct is not something that springs into being once and only once, but that, taking this Freudian theory as being valid, there is in the human being (essentially, of course, but not solely, in the child) a capacity unceasingly to create the sexual, almost from the commencement of life, on the basis of all kinds of external shocks, beginning with the *new*, of which the traumatic represents only the most striking paradigm.

And here we come to yet another question that I would like to mention in passing, one whose elements—for Leonardo—can also be found in Eissler: this is the question of knowing, almost "quantitatively," whether or not the activity sublimated in the life of an individual is concurrent with actual sexual activity or if, on the contrary, they should both be considered as progressing parallel to each other. If, on the one hand, we agree that the sexual drive is from the beginning a given *qua* sexual drive, like a quantity of unalterable libido,¹⁶ and if, on the other hand, we agree that sublimation is a way of diverting a part of that sexuality, it seems obvious that we would therefore regularly find in the "creator"—and, more generally, in anyone who devotes himself to a sublimated activity—a lessening of sexual activity. Eissler—among others—shows us how

16. Not taking into account modifications arising from physiological age differences.

much more complex this all is: sometimes, indeed, sublimation does work in opposition to sexuality, but sometimes, on the contrary, the two complement each other, work together; which is along the lines of what I am attempting to suggest today, namely, that sublimation can be linked to a kind of neogenesis of sexuality.

A few words about the other field of Leonardo's activity, painting. We have noted the paradox in Freud's theory—Freud was not quite sure how to deal with it: sometimes he considers it as directly instinctual (*Lebenslust*, pleasure in living), in contrast to sublimated—theoretical—investigation, and sometimes, on the contrary, he sees it as a sublimation in contrast to some other sublimation. It is the second viewpoint that finally wins out at the end of the essay, when pictorial sublimation is deemed to be more retarded, later, like a second wave, occurring basically during puberty and linked to genital development, linked a great deal more directly with homosexuality, but in the end obscure in origin:

Leonardo emerges from the obscurity of his boyhood as an artist, a painter and a sculptor, owing to a specific talent which may have been reinforced by the precocious awakening in the first years of childhood of his scopophilic instinct. We should be most glad to give an account of the way in which artistic activity derives from the primal instincts of the mind if it were not just here that our capacities fail us.¹⁷

One can see that Freud, more clearly here than with the drive for investigation, hesitates to assign instinctual sources to the “representative” activity *par excellence* (and which I myself would perhaps qualify as sexual activity *par excellence*), the artistic or literary creation evidenced in Leonardo—even if, after all, here too partial sources may be assignable to the instinct to see and to anality (since the anal components in Leonardo's life are easy to detect). The difference, the contrast, between intellectuality and artistic creation is one of the basic arguments of Freud's *Leonardo*, an argument to which Freud probably preferred not to posit any overly hasty—and particularly overly comprehensive—solution.¹⁸

In this discussion today I am leaving many questions and many areas unexplored. Creation and perversion, for example: for what is basically being

17. Freud, *Leonardo*, pp. 132–133.

18. In the file dealing with this question we shall insert a passage from “Civilised” *Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness*: “An abstinent artist is hardly conceivable; but an abstinent young *savant* is certainly no rarity. The latter can, by his self-restraint, liberate forces for his studies; while the former probably finds his artistic achievement powerfully stimulated by his sexual experience. In general I have not gained the impression that sexual abstinence helps to bring about energetic and self-reliant men of action or original thinkers or bold emancipators and reformers.”

sublimated—and Freud put great stress upon this—are polymorphously perverse impulses, each working on its own behalf, the so-called pregenital impulses, and not genital sexuality. However, there is also a second aspect (and it is perhaps the paradox of perversion that it is understood both in the sense of polymorphous childhood perversion and in the sense of a working out of a proof for the Oedipus complex and the castration complex in adult perversions): Freud does not fail to note the connection between certain sublimated activities and perversion, understood in the sense of separate psychopathological structures. Leonardo and homosexuality: we are obviously dealing with something that is transposed almost directly into his painting. And, oddly enough, nowhere is there denial or disavowal (the key term for Freud in the theory of perversions) of this with regard to Leonardo's painting. Lastly, a third point in this rapid inventory of the relationships between sublimation and perversion: if we agree with the hypothesis that sublimation accompanies, from the beginning, the emergence of the sexual drive, it seems to us that it must also be somehow linked to the act of seduction that characterizes the neogenesis of sexuality, that is, to what we are obliged to call a deviate version of self-preservation.

Another question left hanging is not perhaps so far removed from this: the question of the object and the question of the ego, which we can temporarily bring together under the provisional title "synthesis." Here we find a very clear connection with one of Freud's followers, Melanie Klein, who in sublimation has laid stress on this aspect of totality. Any sublimation, she maintains, is reparation, linked to the depressive phase, to the threat of seeing the object and subject correlative fall to bits, destroyed. All love, any relationship between real objects, is reparation, the creation of the object as a totality guaranteeing my own wholeness. That is a viewpoint essential for sublimation. On the right-hand side of our dihedron there are only primary processes, more or less clumsy or more or less successful attempts at synthesis; there is the ego; there is what we call synthesis or genital primacy. Now, if we speak of genital primacy as a way to coordinate partial drives in this kind of unity created by adult sexual relationships, can we not also say of sublimated activity that it is in a way a substitution for genital primacy, another way of coordinating pregenital activities under a kind of primacy, that of a work, a task, a result to be achieved; but a synthesis which, unlike the genital synthesis, may perhaps emerge out of repression or rejection, rejection of the genital, for example? In the *Three Essays* Freud rather summarily sets forth his ideas on the "beautiful": beauty quite obviously has a sexual basis, the beauty of the body; but, he adds, you will note that in beautiful bodies the sexual, the genitalia, are always and universally looked upon as ugly. How universally applicable that statement really is, I am not sure; however, it seems obvious to me that if we go along with Freud's remark, at least as it applies to art up until a fairly recent date, the "fig leaf" is not only a sign of prudery, it may also point to one of the basic tenets of aes-

thetics, that of a certain rejection of the genital as a condition necessary to the emergence of the beautiful.

Above all I have attempted to eschew synthesis in a theme such as the one I have explored so cursorily this year because I have dwelt principally on the metapsychology of drives, which I believe to be an indispensable basis for discussing sublimation. At a later date I shall attempt to consider it as given, and I should like to hint at two areas of sublimation that I have more or less avoided and that I should like at some future time to go into more thoroughly. First I would mention *fire*, referring you, for example, to a remarkable aside of Sandler and Joffe, the London pyrophile.¹⁹ What are the links between fire and sublimation: doesn't the term sublimation in itself imply a transformation of solids into gas through fire? We also think of those burned at the stake, tortured by fire, of the Prometheus myth—and I feel that there may be more than one interesting notion to be gleaned from an author who has utilized a psychoanalytical term in his own way but with such a wealth of connotations: I refer to Gaston Bachelard and his famous *Psychoanalysis of Fire*. The other area is that of cooking and gastronomy, taking in not only its hedonistic aspect, but its wealth of cultural and social ramifications and determinations: table manners, cooking rites and customs, gastronomic pleasure as the confluence and source of a multiplicity of discourses, relationships, inter-human linkages. It is striking to note that psychoanalysis has almost totally neglected this field, save to split it up into two domains: pleasure as "function," i.e., satisfying the basic drive of hunger and, in contrast, oral sexuality, orality as sexual pleasure. I would venture to say that the situation of this activity, of this site that is of such great social value in all civilizations, between self-preservation and sexuality, seems to me to call for careful examination in order to attempt to discern in it the elements that can enlighten us concerning the instinctual mechanisms involved. Thus, although we have not reached the point where we can posit the elements of a cohesive theory, we can lay plans for the step-by-step exploration—not of sublimation but, rather, of sublimations.

19. Cf. J. Sandler and W. G. Joffe, "A propos de la sublimation," *Revue française de Psychanalyse*, 1967, no. 1, pp. 13-14.