Sigmund Freud, Sublimation, and the Russian Silver Age

Ana Siljak

Freud's lengthiest and most exhaustive exposition of sublimation and its particular relationship to knowledge and creativity is acknowledged to be his *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood*, published in 1910. It has been called "fundamental to psychoanalytical thought," and the "foundational" text on sublimation.[1] Freud had already discussed the idea of sublimation – the redirection of sexual impulses away from their original objects and toward "higher" pursuits – in numerous theoretical texts prior to his work on Leonardo. Curiously, however, Freud chose to develop his theory most fully through an idiosyncratic psychological biography of Leonardo Da Vinci.

A few explanations have been advanced for Freud's interest in Leonardo. Leonardo had already been canonized by the nineteenth century as a particular kind of modern genius: a man with a rare combination of dispassionate analysis, an urge to experiment, a daring imagination, and an incredible artistic talent. He inspired Goethe, Kant, and Stendahl to see him as a misunderstood prophet of the Enlightenment. His art was similarly perceived as enigmatic: the *Mona Lisa*, most probably painted between 1503 and 1506 was, in the nineteenth century, already the iconic painting it is to this day. Writers as diverse as Theophile Gautier, Jules Michelet, and George Sand mused upon its beauty, and, in particular, the "mystery" of the *Mona*

[1] Rossella Valdre, *On Sublimation: A Path to the Destiny of Desire, Theory, and Treatment* (London: Karnac Books, 2014), 20-22. Bradley Collins notes that dozens of books and articles have been written on this single work. Bradley I. Collins, *Leonardo, Psychoanalysis & Art History: A Critical Study of Psychobiographical Approaches to Leonardo Da Vinci* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 3.

Lisa smile.[2] Some scholars have argued that Freud saw himself in Leonardo – a dispassionate scientist who was far ahead of his time.[3]

It is my contention that Freud chose Leonardo as his exemplar of sublimation for a very particular reason – he was inspired to do so by his reading of the then quite popular historical novel, *Leonardo Da Vinci*, written by the Russian religious poet and author, Dmitrii Merezhkovskii, in 1900 and translated into the German in 1903. Moreover, this reading did not merely furnish Freud with a few biographical facts to support his overall psychobiographical theories. Rather, the very essence of Freud's argument, that sexuality is at the root of human knowledge and creativity, is one developed in Merezhkovskii's novel, albeit from a religious-philosophical perspective alien to Freud. In brief, I will argue that it was Freud's reading (and rewriting) of a fictional text by Dmitrii Merezhkovskii that contributed greatly to Freud's full exposition of sublimation, particularly regarding the role of sexuality in the production of art and knowledge. In other words, Freud refined his presentation of sublimation as a theory in responding to a particularly Russian religious understanding of Eros and its power.

---

[2] Jutta Birmele, "Strategies of Persuasion: The Case of *Leonardo da Vinci*," in Sander L. Gilman et al., eds., *Reading Freud's Reading* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 129-151, esp. 133-134; Donald Sassoon, *Becoming Mona Lisa: The Making of a Global Icon* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), 103, 111, 124-125, 128-129.

[3] John Farrell, 'The Birth of the Psychoanalytic Hero: Freud's Platonic Leonardo' in *Philosophy and Literature*, xxxi, no. 2 (2007), 233–254, esp. 234-235; K.R. Eissler, *Leonardo Da Vinci, Psychoanalytical Notes on the Enigma* (New York: International Universities Press, 1961), 10; Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (New York: Norton, 1998), 272, and Alan C. Elms, 'Freud as Leonardo: Why the First Psychobiography Went Wrong' in *Journal of Personality*, lvi, no. 1 (1988), 19–40.

Freud's theory of the sublimation of sexuality is based in his much broader view of human sexuality and the unconscious. His starting point is the libido, the voracious, biological sexual appetite that is awakened in infancy and smolders deep within the subconscious of every human being. It is an animalistic drive, one that often cannot be acknowledged if it is directed toward an object deemed socially inappropriate (such as one's mother or father). In such instances, the impulse must be deeply suppressed within the human subconscious. The act of repression, however, is insufficient to contain the full force of the libido. Libidinal energy, for Freud, is sometimes described in mechanistic terms: it is a force that must be released, either directly, on the original object of libidinal desire, or, if that is not available, on a suitable substitute. On other occasions, a chemical metaphor is used: sublimation is the transformation of one kind of drive into another, much as water is transformed into vapor. In either case, sexual impulses are transferred or transformed away from their original object toward another (socially acceptable) and often "higher" object, such as scientific inquiry or artistic creativity. In this sense, sublimation is an act of redirection – taking a primal, biological urge and forcing it to take a different path. From these animal strategies civilization was born.[4]

Freud began to think about sublimation as early as 1897, and later explored the concept as related to major human cultural achievements, especially in a 1908 work entitled "Civilized

---

[4]Farrell, "Birth," 242; Louis Rose, *The Freudian Calling: Early Viennese Psychoanalysis and the Pursuit of Cultural Science* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 105-106; Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, "Freud on Unconscious Affects, Mourning, and the Erotic Mind," in Michael Levine, ed., *Analytic Freud: Philosophy and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 197-198; Marguerite La Caze, "Sublimation, Love and Creativity," in Levine, ed., *Analytic*, 261-264. Eckart Goebel places particular emphasis on the mechanical, "hydraulic," aspect of Freud's understanding of sublimation in *Beyond Discontent: "Sublimation" from Goethe to Lacan* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 124-128.

Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness." By 1909, Freud was committed to writing about Leonardo and his "genius," wishing to find a key to Leonardo's scientific acumen and creative potential. For Freud, sublimation would be the solution to the "mystery" of this multifaceted personality, and the theory would score a major triumph if it could account for this most renowned of virtuosi. To uncover the secret of Leonardo's career, Freud looked at Leonardo's writings, but also carefully analyzed a variety of Leonardo's artistic works, including sketches and paintings. The famous *Mona Lisa* was of particular, if predictable, interest. All of these works, according to Freud, provided clues to the source of Leonardo's encyclopedic knowledge and artistic talent. They all allowed him to construct a complicated "psychobiography" (one of the first of the genre) of the great man. In late 1909, this work became all-consuming, and Freud wrote to Jung that his work on Leonardo had become an "obsession."[5] The result was, in the first place, a presentation to the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society in December 1909, and then, six months later, the publication of *Eine Kindheitserinnerung des Leonardo da Vinci*, as volume 7 of the *Papers on Applied Psychology*. This work was translated into English as *Leonardo Da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood*.[6]

In the book, Freud begins with his usual provocative approach – axiomatically stating that the key to human personality is found in sexuality. In Leonardo's case, Freud believed that a true psychologist had to begin with a curious and telling fact – that Leonardo was reportedly a lifelong ascetic, consistent in forgoing all sexual pleasure, even refusing to discuss sexuality or engage in sexual humor. Such behavior distinguished him from his contemporaries and was thus

[5] Gay, *Freud*, 274; Elms, "Freud," 22.

[6] Rose, *Calling*, 101; Gay, *Freud*, 274; H Israëls, 'Freud and the Vulture' in *History of Psychiatry*, iv (1993), 577–586, 580-581.

a key to understanding his uniqueness. In other words, Freud believed that Leonardo's "cool repudiation of sexuality" and his genius were closely linked.[7]

For Freud, not only was sexuality at the root of personality, but early sexual experiences were the most formative in human psychological development. Before he began writing his essay on Leonardo, Freud had already written volubly on the importance of sexual experiences in childhood for the formation of a sexual personality (including in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, published in 1905, and *On the Sexual Theories of Children*, published in 1908).[8] Freud tested these insights in his approach to Leonardo's sexual life, or rather, lack thereof. Leonardo's asceticism, according to Freud, had its source in his experiences as a very young boy. Freud's psychobiography of Leonardo thus begins with Leonardo the child, as recalled in the adult Leonardo's earliest memory – a very peculiar dream:

> It seems to me that I was always destined to be so deeply concerned with vultures; for I recall as one of my very earliest memories that while I was in my cradle a vulture came down to me, and opened my mouth with its tail, and struck me many times with its tail against my lips.[9]

From this single account of a single dream, Freud was able to develop an all-encompassing narrative about Leonardo's childhood experiences and their impact on his psychological development. The vulture in the dream, according to Freud, referenced an ancient

---

[7] Sigmund Freud, *Leonardo Da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*, trans. Alan Tyson (New York: Penguin, 1963), 99.

[8] Birmele, "Strategies," 132.

[9] Freud, *Leonardo*, p.117. This story about Leonardo's childhood has been exhaustively debated, and most details above are contradicted by the historical evidence. This has not prevented those favorable to Freud's interpretation from claiming that Freud's analysis of Leonardo remained essentially correct. For the details of the debate, see Collins, *Leonardo*, 45-48. I will discuss the question of the mistranslation of the word "vulture" below.

cultural symbol of motherhood that traced back to early Christian theologians and even back to the Egyptians. The vulture symbolized virgin motherhood – vultures were believed to conceive without mating. The vulture in Leonardo's dream thus simultaneously represented Leonardo's own mother and his absent father, or, in other words, the story of Leonardo's confirmed illegitimate birth. Leonardo grew up alone with his mother in his earliest childhood years, and the boy was all that the mother had. She lavished her deep affection on this young child, and therefore the tail of the bird represented this affection – a violent sexual affection that was symbolically captured by the vulture thrusting her tail into Leonardo's mouth.[10]

Freud thus interprets Leonardo's dream as an expression of Leonardo's aroused and then repressed love for his own mother – his feelings for her were inappropriate and therefore hidden in the recesses of his subconscious. Freud then links this to another piece of evidence gleaned from sources about Leonardo's life – that he had been accused, but acquitted, of seducing young boys. Freud had already developed a theory that homosexuality had its origins in childhood, when young boys experienced the overbearing love of a doting mother combined with an absent or aloof father.[11]

Indirectly, Leonardo's love for his mother, transformed into a desire for other men, became an enormous physical and psychological force that Leonardo had to release. For reasons Freud does not clearly explain, Leonardo chose not to release it in the sexual act, but it was this

---

[10] Freud, *Leonardo*, 121-137.

[11] Ibid, 138-142. Further discussion of Freud's view of homosexuality, especially as laid out in *Leonardo*, can be found in Whitney Davis, *Queer Beauty: Sexuality and Aesthetics from Winckelman to Freud and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 199-203; and Richard Halpern, *Shakespeare's Perfume: Sodomy and Sublimity in the Sonnets, Wilde, Freud, and Lacan* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 60-65.

fateful choice that made him a genius – this ability to take intense sexual desire, displace it from its original object or objects, and then channel it into dispassionate scientific analysis and intense artistic creativity. In Freud's terms, Leonardo "sublimated" these intense desires, and allowed the full force of his socially unacceptable passions to pass into the fully legitimate and higher pursuits of science and art. The terms borrowed from physics are not accidental, sublimation is described as a process in which a force that is dammed up in one place will be released through another opening. Here is the extended metaphor, regarding Leonardo's scientific aims:

> He had merely converted his passion into a thirst for knowledge; he then applied himself to investigation with the persistence, constancy and penetration which is derived from passion, and at the climax of intellectual labour, when knowledge had been won, he allowed the long restrained affect to break loose and to flow away freely, as a stream of water drawn from a river is allowed to flow away when its work is done.[12]

The satisfaction of intellectual and creative pursuits is a thus Leonardo's substitute satisfaction, one that can only be achieved through denying the original object of desire.

In Leonardo, Freud sees sublimation as directed primarily toward an insatiable desire for knowledge – his sexual desire converted itself into a desire to do research. Attainment of abstract knowledge acts as a substitute for the sexual act. Freud believed that such sublimation, again, has its origins in childhood, as children begin very early to "research" sexual questions. Some of these children, when they learn to repress their sexual impulses, repress their curiosity as well. But more exceptional types are able to channel the repressed impulses into a more complete and more broad-ranging curiosity. Indeed, for Freud, in exemplary cases such as Leonardo's, the sublimation of sexual instinct into a quest for knowledge is so perfect that the quest itself avoids sexual themes, and can find satisfaction in the attainment of knowledge of a

[12] Freud, *Leonardo*, 107.

scientific and abstract sort. Freud notes that Leonardo wrote little about sexuality or the sexual act – evidence of the perfect replacement of one object of his sexual impulses for another.[13]

But Leonardo also sublimates his sexual energies into art, and here Freud looks for a very different kind of evidence. In art, Freud finds visual clues to the original psychological impulses that were sublimated in the creative process. Freud's was thus a novel approach to art appreciation – seeking the evidence for a psychological state in symbolic images within the artwork, using a methodology similar to the one elaborated in his *Interpretation of Dreams* (published in 1900). For Freud, if art is sublimated sexual desire, then traces of the original object of desire must be found in the artwork. Unlike scientific inquiry, creativity cannot fully escape the original object of sexual desire.[14]

For this reason, Freud proposes in Leonardo that sublimation provides the solution to the art interpretation question that dogged so many observers of the portrait of the Mona Lisa: the "mystery" of her smile.[15] For Freud, the portrait was painted "with the help of the oldest of all of his erotic impulses" -- his childhood love for his own mother. Freud offers a guess: the Mona

---

[13] Freud, *Leonardo*, 114-115. Freud makes a somewhat contradictory exception later in the text (172-174), suggesting that Leonardo's obsession with flight and flying machines was evidence of a sublimated desire for the sexual act. More on Freud's link between sexuality and knowledge can be found in Rachel B. Blass, 'A psychoanalytic understanding of the desire for knowledge as reflected in Freud's Leonardo da Vinci and a memory of his childhood' in *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, lxxxvii, no. 5 (2006), pp 1259–1276.

[14] Freud, *Leonardo*, 154-163. For the similarities between *Leonardo* and *Interpretation* in the elucidation of the meaning of symbols, see Rose, *Freudian*, 110; Sarah Kofman, *The Childhood of Art: An Interpretation of Freud's Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 60-61.

[15] Freud explicitly addresses the "powerful and confusing" effect of the smile on observers of the painting. Freud, *Leonardo*, 150.

Lisa must have had a smile that reminded Leonardo of his own mother, "the smile that he had lost and that fascinated him so much when he found it again in the Florentine lady... [and] awoke something in him which had for long lain dormant in his mind." It was an ambivalent smile, one that characterized, according to Freud, all women who love: "perfect representation of the contrasts which dominate the erotic life of women. . . between the most devoted tenderness and a sensuality that is ruthlessly demanding – consuming men as if they were alien beings." [16] Leonardo's mother lavished this kind of doting but fiercely demanding love on her son, and he now acted in response to that affection by using his desire to paint a perfect depiction of the source of his desire. Not only that, but every painting thereafter, such as *Leda* and *John the Baptist*, according to Freud, had traces of the smile that betrayed all of Leonardo's suppressed longings:

> The familiar smile of fascination leads one to guess that it is a secret of love. It is possible that in these figures Leonardo has denied the unhappiness of his erotic life and has triumphed over it in his art, by representing the wishes of the boy, infatuated with his mother, as fulfilled in this blissful union of the male and female natures.[17]

The circularity of Freud's argument here is in full force – Leonardo must have sublimated his desire for his mother in his painting, the Mona Lisa therefore is a product of sublimated desire, which means her smile is the smile of the original object of desire, which reveals that desire for his mother must have led Leonardo to paint the portrait. In any case, it is clear that, for Freud, sublimation, in all of its intensity, leaves the traces of sexuality on the higher products of its vital essence.[18]

---

[16] Freud, *Leonardo*, 150-151, 154-155.

[17] Freud, *Leonardo*, 162-163.

[18] The circularity of Freud's use of artistic evidence to reveal psychological states is discussed by Collins, *Leonardo*, 31.

For Freud, sublimation was the source of all culture, not simply artistic and scientific pursuits. All higher human endeavors were the products of unsatisfied libidinal impulses, and clues to the libidinal roots of human creations could be found within the creations themselves. Leonardo was a true genius utilizing his deepest libidinal urges for works requiring incredible talent and artistic mastery. But ordinary human beings also experienced sublimation on a more mundane level: "Observation of men's daily lives shows us that most people succeed in directing very considerable portions of their sexual instinctual forces to their professional activity." In some, this leads to genius, in others, to normalcy. Nevertheless, all of human achievement is powered, to some extent, by the instinctual that is suppressed at the very early stages of human development.[19]

When Freud finally finished his Leonardo essay with relief, both because he had rid himself of his "obsession" and because his essay was so well received. Even after serious mistakes in the text were discovered, he never revised his conclusions. Later he would write to Lou Andreas Salome that this was "one of the most beautiful things" he had ever written.[20]

The footnotes of *Leonardo* reveal that Freud consulted many sources in his research, but it is clear that, of all of them, the German translation of historical novel by Dmitrii Merezhkovskii, *Leonardo da Vinci*, was primary. In 1906, Freud included the book in a short list of less famous works that had influenced him. Freud's copy of the novel is held in his library in

[19] Freud, *Leonardo*, 25.Eckhart Goebel claims that Freud was not always consistent in his discussions of the effects of sublimation. He also points out the difficulty of Freud's circular reasoning that culture creates sublimation, which then creates more culture. See Goebel, *Beyond*, 115

[20] Gay, *Freud*, 273-274.

London, and it reveals that he read the German translation very carefully, making markings on 38 pages of the text, beginning on page 149 and continuing to the end of the book. Only one other book cited in his Leonardo essay is found in his library, and it contains no markings.[21]

Freud scholars often mention Freud's reliance on Merezhkovskii's novel, but rarely dwell on the full significance of Freud's use of it. Instead, the book is mostly seen piece of popular fiction, an "erudite potboiler," and thus an accidental source of some of Freud's biographical facts and interpretations of Leonardo.[22] For instance, scholars usually dwell on the fact that

---

[21] The edition Freud used was Mereschkowski, Dimitri Sergejewitsch, *Leonardo da Vinci*, trans. Carl von Giitschow, 2nd ed. (Leipzig; Schulze, 1906). For an analysis of Freud's list of "good" books, and Merezhkovsky's place on the list, see Peter Gay, *Reading Freud: Explorations and Entertainments* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 95-124. The other book in the Freud Library is Marie Herzfeld's *Leonardo da Vinci. der Denker, Forscher und Poet. Nach den veroffentlichen Handschriften*. Translated and edited by Marie Herzfeld (Jena: E. Diederichs, 1906). See Harry Trosman and R D Simmons, 'The Freud library.' in *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, xxi, no. 3 (1973), 646–87. I would like to thank the Freud Library, and particularly Bryony Davis, for providing me with scans of the pages of the Merezhkovsky novel which contain Freud's markings. I will further discuss the nature and significance of Freud's markings below.

[22] Rose, *Calling*, 99; Alan Tyson, "Editor's Note," Sigmund Freud, *Leonardo da Vinci: A Memory of His Childhood* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 4; Farrell, Halpern, *Shakespeare's Perfume*, 61; `Davis, *Queer Beauty*, 201. Collins, citing E.H. Gombrich, does acknowledge that there are multiple aspects of Leonardo's biography that Freud used; and Peter L. Rudnytsky states plainly that "it is clear that Freud's reading of Merezhkovsky was decisive in crystallizing his interpretation of the book." See Collins, *Leonardo*, 188, and Peter L. Rudnytsky *Reading Psychoanalysis: Freud, Rank, Ferenczi, Groddeck* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 7. Even scholars of Freud in Russia have ignored the full significance of Freud's reading of Merezhkovskii. Anna Lisa Crone, for example, devotes a single paragraph and one footnote to Freud's reading of Merezhkovskii in her well-reviewed book, *Eros and Creativity in Russian Religious Renewal: The Philosophers and the Freudians* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 55, 108fn. Alexander Etkind also mentions Merezhkovskii's influence on Freud in passing, in *Eros of the*

Freud used the version of Leonardo's dream of the bird as recounted by Merezhkovskii, which introduced one of the more significant errors into Freud's text: the bird was mistranslated as a "vulture" into the German, when it should have been translated as a "kite," an error of foundational significance, since Freud's entire argument about Leonardo's love for his mother rests on a complicated cultural understanding of the vulture as a bird that symbolizes "motherhood."[23] But otherwise, it is implied that only Freud's original mind could glean anything of use from the novel's pages. Peter Gay, for example, is positively withering about Merezhkovskii and genuinely puzzled that Freud might find anything of value in Merezhkovskii's "unreflective, undiscriminating, almost philistine" novel, or that he might tolerate "Merezhkovsky's muddy and pretentious metaphysics."[24] Jutta Birmele is less strident, and is unique in her serious attempt to understand what Freud gathered from Merezhkovskii's account, but she concisely sums up Freud scholarship on this subject: "it is difficult to appreciate from our perspective what Freud and his contemporaries saw in Merezkovsky." Both Gay and

---

Impossible: The History of Psychoanalysis in Russia (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 26. Jenifer Presto is also brief on the subject, but definitive: Merezhkovskii's Leonardo had a "profound effect" on Freud (though she does not elaborate). I will slightly disagree with her contention that Merezhkovskii discovered "sublimation" before Freud below. See *Beyond the Flesh: Alexander Blok, Zinaida Gippius, and the Symbolist Sublimation of Sex* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 4-5.

[23] Freud's mistranslation of Leonardo's word for kite (*nibbio*) from the Italian was first noted in 1923 by the art historian Eric Maclagan and has been thoroughly discussed since (including by James Strachey, editor of Freud's collected works), with various scholars debating both the origin of the error and its significance to Freud's overall argument. Han Israëls provides the most thorough summary of the discussion and his interpretation of the error in Israëls, 'Freud and the vulture'. See also Collins, *Leonardo*, 45-48.

[24] Gay, *Freud*, 166-167. Gay, *Reading Freud*, 101, 106.

Birmele are quick to point out the distinctly religious project that shaped Merezhkovskii's novel, and both contrasted this with Freud's supposed "training as a scientist," whose "philosophy was grounded in scientific empiricism," to use Birmele's words.[25]

Temporarily leaving aside the question of whether Freud really was a "scientist," using anything like an empirical method in his intensely speculative writings on Leonardo, it is important to note that Freud's interest in Merezhkovskii was broader and deeper than these scholars would care to admit. Freud did not simply read Merezhkovskii's *Leonardo*, he also read the entire trilogy, entitled *Christ and Antichrist*, of which *Leonardo* was only the second volume. Freud separately praised the third volume, *Peter and Alexis*, for its treatment of the hostility between father and son. Furthermore, Merezhkovskii's essay, *Tolstoy and Dostoevsky* provided material for Freud's famous essay *Dostoevsky and Parricide* (1928); and Merezhkovskii's novel about Egypt, *The Messiah*, as well as his book of aphorisms, *The Secret of the East* (both in Freud's surviving library) contain plot elements identical to those found in *Moses and Monotheism*.[26] Finally, in Freud's *Leonardo* itself, there are multiple tributes to Merezhkovskii's writings: both the novel and the entire trilogy of which it is a part are characterized as "great," and Merezhkovskii is lauded as a "psychological novelist." Most importantly, pace Birmele, Freud credited Merezhkovskii as one of only two authors who understood the "peculiarity" of Leonardo's "emotional and sexual life"; and Freud praised Merezhkovskii for daring to base his entire novel "on this understanding."[27] Thus Freud

---

[25] Birmele, "Strategies," 136-137.

[26] These details are all presented in James Rice, *Freud's Russia: National Identity in the Evolution of Psychoanalysis* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1993), 99, 115, 123, 126, 210.

[27] Freud, *Leonardo*, 105-106, 116, 143-146, 154

scholarship understates the case when it considers Merezhkovskii as a mere source for a few facts about Leonardo's life – clearly, Freud gathered important psychological insights into sexuality from Merezhkovskii's novel.

Merezhkovskii's influence on Freud is mapped with remarkable accuracy in the markings that Freud made in his copy of the text. Freud almost never wrote commentary in the margins of his books, and even his markings are few and far between. When he marked a passage with a vertical line in the margin, it was an indication that the passage deserved special emphasis or should be quoted.[28] A close look at the 38 passages Freud marked in Merezhkovskii's Leonardo demonstrates that almost every biographical feature of Leonardo found in Freud's essay is also found in Merezhkovskii's novel, including: his deep affection for his mother (Merezhkovskii invents a scene where Leonardo sleeps in his mother's bed, which Freud marked); his love of knowledge; his sexual chastity; hints at Leonardo's attraction to boys and the accusation that he seduced them; the vulture dream; the desire to fly; and the relationship with the Mona Lisa as a "secret of love." Freud explicitly acknowledged that he took from Merezhkovskii the theory that Leonardo's mother visited him in her old age, and that Leonardo's mother had a particular smile, which followed Leonardo all of his life. Moreover, nearly every Leonardo quote in Freud's text is also marked by Freud in his copy of the Merezhkovskii text.[29]

---

[28] Trosman and Simmons, "Freud Library," 651.

[29] Markings in Freud's copy of Merezhkovskii's *Leonardo* that note the above can be found on 158, 162, 164, 172, 252, 288, 289, 333, 363, 364, 367, 368 369, 374, 377, 379, 460, 474. Birmele thus errs when she claims that Freud left unmarked the passage where Leonardo climbs into his mother's bed. She also erroneously claims that Merezhkovskii discredited the accusations of homosexuality against Leonardo, failing to notice the passage where Merezhkovskii strongly hints at a deep attraction between Leonardo and one of his young pupils. Birmele, "Strategies," 137-138.

More importantly, Freud's borrowing of these significant details from Merezhkovskii's novel point toward a deeper influence of the novelist on the psychoanalyst. Freud saw Merezhkovskii as a writer with particular insight into sexuality, the Leonardo case being but one manifestation of this broader achievement. Freud's borrowings from the Russian author influenced his own approach to Leonardo's sexuality and its implications for understanding his genius. To fully grasp this, however, it is important to see Merezhkovskii's novel as more than a trite piece of fiction. It is, instead, a literary expression of Merezhkovskii's aesthetic and philosophical world view, particularly a view of the sexuality shaped within the distinctive artistic-philosophical culture of the Russian Silver Age, in which Merezhkovskii played a vital role. For Merezhkovskii, as for Freud, knowledge and art were indeed erotic products, albeit of a very different sort.

The Russian "Silver Age," is a retrospectively characterized philosophical, literary, and artistic phenomenon that arose in Russian during the last years of the Imperial Russian state. Silver Age writers, painters, philosophers, and theologians shared a common fundamental aesthetic philosophy best described as "symbolism," an aesthetic that sought to reconceptualize human attitudes toward art and beauty. For the symbolists, artistic endeavor had a distinct link to the spiritual, and to the divine, and thus had a privileged place in approaches to knowledge, faith, and even human relationships.[30]

[30] General histories of Russian symbolism and the Silver Age include Irina Paperno and Joan Delaney Grossman, eds., *Creating Life: The Aesthetic Utopia of Russian Modernism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); Avril Pyman, *A History of Russian Symbolism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); N.A. Bogomolov, et al., eds., *Russkaia literatura rubezha vekhov (1890-e – nachalo 1920kh godov)* (Moscow, 2000); M.A. Voskresenskaia,

The foundational symbolist principles that undergird the Silver Age are best expressed in Merezhkovskii's own artistic manifesto, cumbersomely entitled: "On the Reasons for the Decline and on the New Currents in Russian Literature." In this text, Merezhkovskii accuses the modern technological and industrial era of the late nineteenth century of causing "the absence of a higher idealistic culture, the civilized barbarism amidst the grandiose inventions of technology." "In essence," he writes, "the entire generation of the end of the nineteenth century carries in its soul an indignation against the suffocating, deadly positivism that lies like a stone on our hearts." The purpose of art, for Merezhkovskii, was revolt –a revolt in the name of the spiritual, the divine, and in the name of elevating humanity above the mechanistic principles that governed the age.[31]

In the symbolist project there is something of the Romanticism of the early nineteenth century, a similar yearning for the reawakening of spiritual life and for an artistic quest for the supernatural. Unlike the Romantics, however, Silver Age poets, philosophers, and artists of all kinds sought to avoid what they saw as the dualism of Romantic impulses: the flight from the material into the spiritual, the preference for the "soul" over the "body," and the celebration of the "ideal" over the "real." Symbolism, instead, sought the reconciliation of binary opposites, integrating previous literary and artistic theories of "realism" into a higher, spiritual synthesis.[32]

Simvolism kak mirovidenie serebrianogo veka: Sotsiokul'turnye faktory formirovaniia obshchestvennogo soznaniia rossiiskoi kul'turnoi elity rubezha XIX-XX vekov (Tomsk: Izd-vo Tomskogo Universiteta, 2003).

[31] D. Merezhkovskii, "O prichinakh upadka i o novykh techeniakh sovremennoi russkoi literatury," in D. Merezhkovskii, *L. Tolstoi i Dostoevskii. Vechnye sputniki* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo 'Respublika', 1995), 536-537.

[32] On the relationship between the Silver Age and Romanticism, see J. D. West, "Neo-Romanticism in the Russian Symbolist Aesthetic," *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 51, No. 124 (July 1973), 413-427; and Clemena Antonova, "'The world will be saved by beauty': The Revival of Romantic Theories of the Symbol in Pavel Florenskii's Works," *Slavonica*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (April 2008), 44–56.

The work of the Orthodox theologian and philosopher, Vladimir Solovev, figured heavily in the symbolist project, particularly in its aesthetics. Two key Christian principles in Solov'ev's philosophy were particularly important: "materialization of the spirit (incarnation) and the spiritualization of matter (transfiguration)." When Christ was born, God became man, and this incarnation of the divine into the human became the model of future Christian understanding of the "person": as a combination of divine potential and human reality.[33] When Christ was transfigured on Mount Tabor, this too served as a turning point in the relation between God and man – human beings were shown that earthly flesh could be "divinized," achieving not a renunciation of the human for the divine, but an overcoming of the dualism between flesh and spirit, between the material and spiritual. For Solov'ev, the human endeavor that could best serve the task of awakening humanity to its divine potential was art. The task of art was "internally transfiguring, spiritualizing matter," or "the transformation of physical life into its spiritual counterpart." [34]

Following Solovev, Silver Age poets and writers described this type of spiritually driven art as "symbolic," and "symbolism" became the aesthetic theoretical expression of Solovev's theological principles. Merezhkovskii, for example, saw the "symbol" as a powerful means of rebelling against the realist art of the day, but without a flight into the meaningless abstractions

---

[33] Irina Paperno, "The Meaning of Art: Symbolist Theories," in Paperno and Grossman, eds., *Creating Life*, 1; An excellent exposition of the importance of understanding Orthodox Christian theology, especially the theology of icon and "Logos," for key figures in the Silver Age can be found in Steven Cassedy, *Flight from Eden: The Origins of Modern Literary Criticism and Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). The discussion of incarnation and transfiguration can be found on 107-108.

[34] Paperno, "Meaning," 13.

of philosophical or religious speculation. A symbol was, like incarnation and transfiguration, a raising up of the material into the spiritual, an infusing of the divine into the earthly. As a concrete example of the mechanism of a symbol, Merezhkovskii deployed the Parthenon:

> In the Acropolis above the architrave of the Parthenon some traces have been preserved of a bas relief that depicts an everyday and evidently insignificant scene: nude, well-built youths lead young horses and tame them calmly and joyfully with muscular arms. All of this is executed with great realism, even naturalism, if you wish, with a knowledge of the human body and nature….At the same time, they affect the viewer quite differently. You sense in it the breath of *ideal* human culture, a *symbol* of the free Hellenic spirit. A human tames a beast. This is not simply a scene from ordinary life, it is also a whole revelation of the divine side of our spirit.[35]

The symbol thus did not abandon realism or the material, but rather sought to show how the material world could point to the limitless and to the eternal.

The symbolist project did not confine itself to a reworking of artistic or literary principles – its aims were far higher. Moreover, the Christian elements of the symbolist project were sometimes appropriated and adapted to more Jewish and even pagan worldviews. Using as their motto Fyodor Dostoevsky's dictum that "beauty will save the world," symbolists of all inclinations believed that the quest for a new aesthetics would lead to spiritual regeneration in Russia and Europe. This desire to transform humanity through art led to the complete identification of art with life. Art as "life-creation" (*zhiznetvorchestvo*) played an essential role in the aesthetics of the symbolists. Artists turned their lives into art not merely by using biographical material for their poetry and literature, but by seeking to make their lives conform

[35] Merezhkovskii, "O prichinakh," 537.

to their aesthetic beliefs. [36] Perhaps the most articulate reflection on *zhiznetvorchestvo* came from the poet Valerii Briusov:

> The abyss between the artist's 'words' and 'deeds' disappeared for us when it turned out that creation is merely a reflection of life and nothing more….Whoever accepts Verlaine's verses must accept his life; whoever rejects him as a person, let him reject his poetry; it is inseparable from his person…Let the poet create, not his books, but his own life.[37]

For the Silver Age, Eros played a central part in the quest for incarnation and transfiguration in art and, for many poets and writers, it was also the source of the project of "life-creation." Like the overall symbolist project, the Silver Age theory of Eros evolved against the modern conceptions of sexuality that prevailed in late-nineteenth century Russian society. In the 1890s, Russian traditionalists and radicals battled over the questions of prostitution, divorce, free love, and contraception. The vocabulary of the debate was increasingly borrowed from the scientific theories of sexuality migrating from Europe, including Richard Kraft-Ebbing's influential *Psychopathia Sexualis*, translated into Russian in 1887, which detailed the various sorts of sexual disorders prevalent in modernity. Sexuality was also debated in literary circles by a number of prominent writers, including Leo Tolstoy, who greatly influenced public conversation on sexuality in 1889 with the distribution, and later publication, of his short story, "The Kreutzer Sonata." Both in the story, and then openly in an "explanation" published afterward, Tolstoy forcefully argued that "love" in modern society was little more than a thin veneer of respectability covering brutish, animalistic passions that degraded men and

---

[36] See Antonova, "World." See also Paperno, "Introduction," 1; and Andrew Reynolds, "Living Is an Art: Some Recent Books on Russian Modernism," *Journal of European Studies*, Vol. 26 (1996), 195-208.

[37] Bryusov, "A Holy Sacrifice," in E. Peterson, ed. and trans., *The Russian Symbolists: An Anthology of Critical and Theoretical Writings* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1986), 68-69.

transformed women into mere objects of lust. The only solution was sexual abstinence, both within marriage and without.[38] Even more controversial was the eclectic and idiosyncratic Vasillii Rozanov, who sought, from the 1890s on, to remove all shame and stigma from the sexual act, fertility, and childbirth. His was an outright revolt against what he perceived to be the Christian hatred of sexuality, and Rozanov celebrated what he knew of pagan fertility cults, and advocated, among other things that the church require all newlyweds remain in church after the marriage ritual until the marriage was consummated.[39]

For many Silver Age thinkers, including philosophers and theologians such as Nikolai Berdiaev and Pavel Florenskii, and poets such as Viacheslav Ivanov and Merezhkovskii himself, these debates were premised on a misconception of sexuality. The asceticism of Tolstoy, the scientific approach of Ebbing, the biological reductionism of Rozanov, all of these were too rooted in the material understanding of sexuality prevalent in modernity. For Silver Age thinkers, Eros needed to be rehabilitated, as a concept that could overcome the philosophical materialism and mind/body dualism. Merezhkovskii and his Silver Age counterparts sought a religious response to the question of love, especially sexual love, which would expose both the poverty of materialist philosophy and the hatred of the flesh supposedly characteristic of traditional Christian Orthodox and Platonic approaches to sexuality. Here they returned to the

---

[38] Interpretation and contextualization of the Kreutzer Sonata can be found in Cynthia Hooper, "Forms of Love: Vladimir Solov'ev and Lev Tolstoy on Eros and Ego," *The Russian Review*, Volume 60, Issue 3 (July 2001), 360–380; and in Laura Engelstein, *The Keys To Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 218-220.

[39] See Anna Lisa Crone, *Eros and Creativity in the Russian Religious Renewal* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 70-71; and the online manuscript Evgenii Bershtein, "The Notion of Universal Bisexuality in Russian Religious Philosophy," 211-212, 214.

core principles of the Silver Age philosophy, infusing the material with the spiritual through concepts such as incarnation and transfiguration.

Yet again, it was Vladimir Solovev who pointed the way. Solovev sought explicitly to respond to Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata* and the scientific works of Kraft-Ebbing in his 1892 essay, the "Meaning of Love."[40] Borrowing from, but heavily modifying, Plato's insights on Eros as expressed in the Symposium, Solovev saw Eros as the diametric opposite of Tolstoy's "lust." For Solovev, the attitude toward Eros depended on the perspective from which it was viewed. If seen as the mere satisfaction of biological desires, then it was indeed "shameful." To desire another's body, and then to satisfy that desire, Solovev equated with the then much discussed abnormality of "fetishism" – the unnatural desire for a part of a human being as opposed to the whole. Sex with a prostitute was, in his words, the acting out of a fetish – as it was the desire for the dead flesh of the prostitute, and not for her entire person, body and soul. The modern world, Solovev believed, was thus fetishistic: placing primacy on the material aspect of sexuality. Even marriage, if viewed simply as the legal regulation of biological desires, was a trivial thing, unworthy of the spiritual side of a human being. But, crucially, Solovev was very careful to explicitly dismiss purely "spiritual" love as no less "impotent," because it refused or denied the material reality of the beloved.[41]

---

[40] Hooper, "Forms," 361.

[41] Vladimir Solovev, *The Meaning of Love*, ed. and trans. Thomas R. Beyer, Jr. (Lindisfarne Press, 1985), 76, 79, 82-83; Hooper, "Forms," 362-363. On the Platonic origins of Solov'ev's philosophy, see Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, "The Transfiguration of Plato in the Erotic Philosophy of Vladimir Solov'ev," *Religion & Literature*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Summer, 1992), 35-50. Olga Matich argues that Solovev champions an "erotic utopia," but her conception of his work relies on a theory of sublimation that I will address later in this essay. See Matich, "The Symbolist Meaning of Love: Theory and Practice," in Paperno et al, ed., *Creating*, 24-50, esp. 26-32.

Viewed properly, sexuality, for Solovev, had to be understood as a divine gift – one that blessed those who possessed it. Love forces human beings out of themselves, requires them to see the "other" in a different light, that accords "for another the same absolute central significance which…we are conscious of only in our own selves." More importantly, it allows people to see the other as both empirical and fleshly, and at the same time, in all of their divine potential – "in God." Solovev designated this as the two-fold nature of love:

> We love, in the first place, the ideal being…the being whom we ought to install in our ideal world. And in the second place, we love the natural human being, who furnishes the living personal material for the realization of the former, and who is idealized by means of it…in the sense of its actual objective transformation or regeneration.[42]

Eros, then, was the means of personally achieving the theological aims of incarnation and transfiguration. In true love, for Solovev, the "Divine essence receives the means for its definitive, ultimate incarnation in the individual life of a human." And true love also "is the regeneration of the flesh, its salvation, its resurrection from the dead."[43]

The Silver Age conception of sexuality was heavily influenced by Solovev, and poets, artists, and thinkers used Solovev to explore the central question of the relationship between sexuality and artistic creativity. Because, as Solovev defined it, both art and love aspired to the uniting of the material and spiritual in symbolic fashion, and both sought the transfiguration of matter, then Eros was the key impetus to art, broadly conceived. We can see this in a number of poetic and philosophical essays written by Silver Age figures. Viacheslav Ivanov, poet and classicist, wrote prominently on the importance of Eros for art: "When an aesthetic phenomenon is experienced erotically, the artistic creation becomes symbolic. The enjoyment of beauty, like

---

[42] Solovev, *Meaning*, 51, 92-93

[43] Solovev, *Meaning*, 93, 83

an attraction to physical beauty, becomes the initial step in an erotic ascent...The symbol is the creative principle of love, the guiding Eros."[44] And Nikolai Berdiaev, the Christian existentialist philosopher, wrote in a similar vein: "Love is the way to revealing the secret of the person, to a comprehension of the person in the depth of his being…In God the lover meets the beloved; in God he sees the beloved person….Erotic energy is the eternal source of creativity."[45] Merezhkovskii and Zinaida Gippius paid tribute to Solovev's new formulation of a Christian understanding of sexuality in making "marriage" the central topic of the Religious-Philosophical Meetings they organized in 1901-1903. These were attended by important figures within the Russian Orthodox Church and by many of the artists and philosophers of the Silver Age, including Nikolai Berdiaev, the artist Alexander Benois, and the poet Valery Briusov. Five of the 21 panels were devoted to the topic of "Marriage," more than any other subject, and Merezhkovskii participated heavily in the discussions of sexuality.[46]

While Solovev was ambiguous about the relationship of Eros to sexual consummation (in places in the "Meaning of Love," he declares it to be where love should finally end, not where it begins), for many artists of the Silver Age, true Eros avoids it. Some, like Berdiaev and the poet Alexander Blok, justified this privileging of celibacy by observing that procreative love leads to death (through the creation of new human beings destined to die). But others emphasized more strongly that the rejection of physical lust constituted the rejection of a poor substitute for the

---

[44] Ivanov, "Thoughts about Symbolism," in Sibelan E.S. Forrester and Martha M.F. Kelly, eds., *Russian Silver Age Poetry: Texts and Contexts* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2015), 323.

[45] See Berdiaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act* (New York: Semantron, 2009), 214-224.

[46] S.M. Polovinkina, *Zapiski peterburgkikh Religiozno-filosofskikh sobranii* (1901-1903gg.) (Moscow: Respublika, 2005), 214-353, esp. 215, 228, 251-255.

true aim of Eros, which was divine ascent. True love leads to transfiguration, sexual consummation is mere fleshly union, unworthy of the full power of Eros. Zinaida Gippius, Alexander Blok, and Nikolai Berdiaev all celebrated the ability of Erotic desire to achieve human transformation, if the temptation of lust was avoided. Berdiaev put it most simply: "Sex energy contains the source of creative ecstasy and the prophetic vision of genius...sex life is possible, even much more intense, without the sexual act."[47]

Dmitrii Merezhkovskii's biography of Leonardo Da Vinci was written against and within these debates. Merezhkovskii's Leonardo modeled the idea of Eros as the source of transfigurative and symbolic art, making Leonardo the exemplar of Silver Age "life creation." For Merezhkovskii, Eros was central to the story of Leonardo – both of his scientific research and his artistic work. Indeed, like Freud after him, Merezhkovskii believed that Leonardo's scientific genius and creativity were founded on Eros.

Merezhkovskii repeatedly emphasized that Leonardo was chaste. In the novel, observers regularly opined that he "did not love ordinary, coarse male talk about women," and he refused sexual activity not from any religious or moral impulse, but rather, "just as he did not eat meat, because it seemed to him not forbidden, but repulsive, so he stayed away from women, because every physical possession seemed to him not sinful, but crude." But this did not mean that Leonardo failed to experience erotic desire – quite the opposite. In the novel, Leonardo chose not to express his Eros in sexual consummation, but both spoke and lived the deeply held belief that that his scientific research and his artistic productions were erotic efforts.[48]

---

[47] Berdiaev, *Meaning*, 201. The anti-procreative and chaste ideal of the Silver Age is discussed extensively in Matich, *Erotic Utopia* and in Presto, *Beyond the Flesh*.

[48] Dmitrii Merezhkovskii, *Voskresshie bogi, ili Leonardo da Vinci* (Moscow: LitRes, 2000), 448, 531.

The link between love and knowledge is explored throughout the novel, and Freud marked some of the most important passages developing the theme. One character in the novel declares that Leonardo feels curiosity "like an inextinguishable lust, like a hot coal, which nothing can extinguish." Indeed, one of the central puzzles in *Leonardo* is precisely the question of how love and knowledge are linked. At one point, Leonardo's student Giovanni states the philosophical dilemma in this fashion: "The apostle asserts that knowledge comes from love, but Leonardo that love comes from knowledge. Which is right? I cannot decide this, nor can I live without deciding."[49]

In the novel's initial pages, it appears that Leonardo believes that Eros is tightly bound to dispassionate knowledge: that a detached, scientific view of the world would be rewarded by an omniscient, godlike embrace of that world. This interpretation of Leonardo would be in tune with the nineteenth-century vision of Leonardo as a proto-Enlightenment figure, a daring genius who challenged the dark superstition of religion and promoted reason and analysis as necessary for true, comprehensive knowledge. As noted by Rachel Blass, Freud precisely underscored this approach to Leonardo's scientific endeavors, because when Freud "longs for the reign of what he refers to as 'our God Logos,' as he expresses his hope for the domination of reason in mental life, it appears to be the unifying aim of Eros that he has in mind."[50] Throughout the novel, as Freud observed through his markings, Leonardo is seen calmly observing a spider eating his victim and impassively sketching the faces of condemned men as they are led to execution. This view of Leonardo is best expressed through a nightmare of Giovanni's, in which a cold and ruthless "double" of Leonardo appears to the student and declares:

---

[49] Merezhkovskii, *Voskresshie*, 175, 186

[50] Blass, "Psychoanalytic," 1269

> there is no Christ, but there is love; great love, the daughter of great knowledge, he that knows all, loves all...Before there was love from weakness, miracles, and ignorance; but now, through power, truth, and knowledge, inasmuch as the Serpent did not lie: taste the of the Tree of Knowledge, and ye shall be as the gods.[51]

Merezhkovskii, on the other hand, suggested something subtler: Giovanni's dream misled him, – Leonardo both believed that all-comprehending knowledge of the world and of the Creator of that world would lead to an all-encompassing love of it, and vice versa. The wholeness of being requires love and knowledge to be intertwined. Here again, Merezhkovskii attempts to overcome the materialism and dualism of the modern age by presenting Leonardo as the "forerunner," a kind of prophet of the Russian symbolist project itself, a man who endeavored to synthesize the material with the spiritual. This truth is finally revealed to Giovanni a painting, Leonardo's *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne*:

> St. Anne is like an eternally youthful Sybil....a smile of snakelike wisdom, reminding Giovanni of Leonardo's own smile. Next to her, the youthful clear face of St. Mary radiated a dovelike simplicity. Mary was perfect love, Anne was perfect knowledge. Mary knew, because she loved, and Anne loved, because she knew. And it seemed to Giovanni that, for the first time, he understood the words "great love is the daughter of great knowledge.[52]"

St. Anne and St. Mary thus symbolized the two paths to human understanding: through religious love leading to revelatory knowledge, and through contemplative knowledge leading to the acquisition of the love of God and His creation. "Great love is the daughter of great knowledge"

---

[51] Merezhkovskii, *Voskresshie*, 315. Freud's portrait of Leonardo corresponds closely to Giovanni's nightmare: "There is scarcely any doubt that Leonardo had prevailed over both dogmatic and personal religion, and had by his work of research removed himself far from the position from which the Christian believer surveys the world." But he also critiqued Leonardo's assertion that love is the daughter of knowledge – saying that Leonardo failed to see that the pleasure he felt at the accomplishment of scientific research was not love, but the release of sublimated sexual affect that inspired his scientific endeavors. See Freud, *Leonardo*, 106-107.

[52] Merezhkkovskii, *Voskresshie*, 502

was thus no unidirectional, causal statement, but an expression of a loving relationship between two halves of a human being, the reason and the soul. True knowledge could only be acquired through love of the created world, and true love of that world was reinforced and strengthened by knowledge of it, in all of its scientific and intimate detail.[53] For Merezhkovskii, scientific endeavor was indeed erotic – it was a kind of divine ascent – a desire to know the God-created universe. This was at the root of Leonardo's scientific genius.

The relationship between Eros and art is more clearly expressed in the novel. The most definitive example is found in the depiction of Leonardo's painting of the portrait of the Mona Lisa. The chaste Leonardo experiences, for the first time, the acute and unconsummated longing of Eros during his painting of the portrait – an Eros that is symbolically expressed in the portrait itself. Like Freud, Merezhkovskii is clear that the brilliance of the portrait is rooted in the strength of Leonardo's erotic desires.

Though the painting of Mona Lisa's portrait was always done in the presence of others, gestures and oblique conversations lead to the formation of a strong, secret bond between Leonardo and his sitter. They "understand one another, almost without words, at a mere hint," and Leonardo feels that "she had words which suddenly made her akin to him, close, closer than all that he knew, his sole and eternal companion and sister." For the first time in his life, Leonardo is tempted to abandon his self-imposed chastity, and succumb to sexual temptation, in Merezhkovskii's phrasing, "to cross over the charmed circle which separated fantasy from life."

---

[53] Freud marked this passage in his edition of the text. In his own work, he only mentioned the "smile," that was so like the Mona Lisa smile. For Freud, this was further evidence that Leonardo was still under the influence of his mother's powerful smile, and painted it in both St. Anne (which represented Leonardo's grandmother) and Mary (who represented his own mother). Freud, *Leonardo*, 156-157. The "smile" will be discussed further below.

But he refrained. In a passage that reads as almost Freudian, Merezhkovskii explains the result of this deferral of desire: "But each time this wish appeared, he would repress it, and every time that he was victorious over her living charms, the ghostly figure of her was banished to the canvas, and became more lifelike and more real." The process can be interpreted as sublimation: the repression of physical sexual desire transfers it from its original object to a substitute on canvas, and the portrait thus contains traces of what is suppressed.[54]

Unconsummated Eros leads to beautiful art. Passages like these have led scholars of sexuality in Russia to argue that Merezhkovskii, along with other Silver Age artists and writers, championed "sublimation" as the key to spiritual flourishing. Olga Matich argues specifically that Silver Age writers wanted sublimation as a kind of "arousal" without "consummation," which created an aesthetics of "neurasthenia" and an obsession with "blood, castration, and fetishism." For Jenifer Presto, this symbolist "sublimation of sex" distinctly calls for a Freudian interpretation of the aesthetic practice of symbolism. The fact that these Russian authors formulated their ideas before Freud was first translated in Russian in 1911 led one scholar to argue that they "advanced a theory of sublimation similar to Freud's before Freud," as if two parallel theories of sublimation developed unconnected one with another.[55] It speaks to the modesty of Russian scholars that they cannot imagine that Freud would have been influenced by Russian theories of sexuality.

Freud's theory of sublimation was not taken from Merezhkovskii's novel, since Freud had long developed his views on sexuality before reading the text. But it is clear that, in the case of Leonardo, Freud's main interlocutor was Merezhkovskii: Freud clearly wrote his fullest

[54] Merezhkovskii, *Voskresshie*, 53.

[55] Matich, *Utopia*, 7-8, 17; Presto, *Beyond*, 6-7; Crone, *Eros*, 1.

expression of the theory of sublimation in engagement with Merezhkovskii's ideas. Freud found in Merezhkovskii's novel the original, convincing, if fictional, psychobiography, which placed great emphasis on the psychological makeup of the genius Leonardo – as a man able to take his most fervent desires and bend them toward scientific and creative expression. Freud chose Leonardo as the subject of his essay on sublimation precisely because Merezhkovskii had presented him with the basic outlines of such a study. This is at the heart of Freud's declaration that Merezhkovskii shared his own understanding of sexuality as laying at the heart of Leonardo's genius.

Merezhkovskii's influence on Freud also helped to shape the style of the Leonardo essay. Freud scholars have commented on the literary and speculative style of Freud's *Leonardo,* and Freud himself acknowledged that if critics accused him of writing a "psychoanalytic novel," he could not dismiss the accusation out of hand. Later, he confessed in a letter that his Leonardo essay was "partly fictional."[56] Freud found something seductive in the freedom of fiction to speculate on the life and mind of another, without requiring the verification of observable fact. This was what he admired in Merezhkovskii, and what he could not resist replicating in his own work.

What came out of Freud's borrowing and reworking of Merezhkovskii's text was not identical to the original, because it is erroneous to define the Silver Age approach to sexuality as "sublimation." Sublimation is, as Crone quite rightly notes, steeped in "Freud's intransigent atheism and materialism," and thus cannot be reconciled, in its very premises, with the theologically grounded views of human nature developed by Solovev and Merezhkovskii.[57]

---

[56] See Gay, *Freud,* 269; Birmele, *Strategies,* 144-145.

[57] Crone, *Eros,* 2.

Freud had to rewrite the Merezhkovskii narrative to make it a story about sublimation, and reimagine the Merezhkovskii tale using the terminology and insights of psychoanalysis. As such, the Leonardo essay is a distinct product of what George Makari has called Freud's anxiety over the scientific status of psychoanalytic thought, and his continuous efforts to ground psychoanalysis on objectively observable phenomena. Freud may have believed that Merezhkovskii intuited extremely important connections between sexuality, research, and art. But that intuition could not remain in purely in the subtle realm of fictional symbolic truth; it had to be reduced to unicausal, mechanical, and objectively observable principles. In the end, however, Freud had no actual evidence of Leonardo's state of mind and found his sources in Merezhkovskii's insights. It would thus be difficult to contrast Freud's "analysis" with Merezhkovskii's "fiction." Instead, it is better to see Freud's essay as something else: as a kind of "scientific" narrative or scientific fiction.[58]

A closer analysis of the quotations Freud used in his book, especially the crucial "vulture" quote, reveals just how much rhetorical effort Freud expended to render his interpretation of Merezhkovskii's narrative scholarly and "scientific." Every quotation attributed to Leonardo in Freud's text is also found, marked, in Freud's copy of Merezhkovskii's novel, including the vulture dream passage. In *Leonardo*, Freud disguised his tracks, however, by

[58] Rudnytsky briefly also argues for Freud's borrowing of Merezhkovskii's narrative style, writing "because Freud based his study of Leonardo on a fictionalized treatment, his admission that he may have written only a "psychoanalytic novel" places his work in its proper generic context." Rudnytsky, *Reading*, 7. For Freud's scientific anxiety, see George Makari, *Revolution in Mind: The Creation of Psychoanalysis* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), esp. 105-107, 115-116, 120-122, especially for Freud's efforts to make the study of sexuality scientific. I am indebted to Harold Mah for pointing out this aspect of Freud's project.

attributing the Leonardo quotes to numerous other sources, both German and Italian, nearly all of which were published after the German translation of the novel. It is this attempt to hide the true source of his quotations that is obscures the real reason for the "vulture" error. By consulting other German and Italian sources that contained the quote about the dream, Freud had ample opportunity to learn that the word "*nibbio*" was actually the word for kite. (James Strachey, editor of Freud's English language works, was one of the first who tried to blame this error on Marie Herzfeld's book on Leonardo, which Freud also cited multiple times in his text. But her translation was accurate.) The work of Hans Israëls has convincingly demonstrated that Freud himself was aware of two translations of *nibbio*, since he alternated between them when he presented his Leonardo findings to the Vienna Psychological Society in 1909, sometimes speaking of the bird in the dream as a "vulture" and sometimes as a "kite."[59]

Why did he keep a translation he knew was erroneous? The simplest answer is that, by the time he had come around to bolstering his psychobiography with a host of scholarly sources, sources which would give his speculations scientific and scholarly grounding, Freud was already wedded to the complicated psychoanalytic theory of the vulture as symbol of illegitimate motherhood that he had developed after reading Merezhkovskii. His later research on Leonardo, and his accumulation of multiple, scholarly, sources on Leonardo's life and work was not

[59] Israëls, "Freud," 580-581. Israëls's article contains a direct transcription of the quote from the minutes of the lecture, and he is definitive regarding Freud's intentional use of the word "vulture" translation despite his awareness that it was a mistranslation.

intended to investigate this question more fully, but rather to lend a scientific, scholarly veneer to a speculative counter-narrative based on a single piece of fiction.[60]

Additionally, the vocabulary that Freud used to rewrite Merezhkovskii's novel also points toward Freud's intense desire to make all psychological insight scientific. Freud systematically stripped away the symbolic, spiritual elements in Merezhkovskii's psychological constructs, radically simplifying all multifaceted interpretations into monocausal explanations, rendered in clinical language. Multiple examples of this process can be found by comparing the two texts. For instance, both Merezhkovskii and Freud place great importance on Leonardo's fundamental creative impotence – his inability to finish any task that he began, especially his portrait of the Mona Lisa and his painting of the Last Supper. According to Merezhkovskii, this impotence was symbolic of his status as "precursor" or "forerunner," the man who foresaw the true path toward human flourishing in the full reconciliation of the material with the spiritual -- of science and art – but therefore also as the one destined to fail to accomplish the magnitude of his chosen task. Freud, after carefully noting these passages in Merezhkovskii's novel, rewrote Leonardo's impotence as simple impotence – the consequence of a sexual chastity so complete and final, that it harmed Leonardo's mind. For Freud, impotence was pathological: "the almost total repression of a real sexual life does not provide the most favourable conditions for the exercise of sublimated sexual trends...a process which can only be compared to the regressions in neurotics."[61]

---

[60] This directly contradicts Peter Gay's argument that Freud discovered this quote "amidst the vast morass of Leonardo's notebooks." Gay, *Freud,* 270.

[61] Freud did agree that Leonardo was a kind of forerunner, and quoted Merezhkovskii's "admirable" summation of Leonardo: "He was like a man who has awakened in the darkness, at too early an hour, when all others are still

A second example can be found in the competing interpretations of the dream of the "vulture" and Leonardo's general obsession with flight. For Merezhkovskii, the "vulture" dream was part of Leonardo's desire to become the symbolic reincarnation of Icarus – to use science to give "wings" to humanity so that it could spiritually soar toward the transcendent. The dream was much like Leonardo's later waking fantasy of flying "on the back of a great swan," a similarly hubristic desire for mankind to achieve spiritual heights. In the novel, Leonardo whispers: "There shall be...there shall be wings! If not I, then another, all the same. The spirit did not lie: those who know shall have wings like the gods!" In Freud's psychoanalytic version, not only is the dream itself reduced to verifiable evidence of a mother's sexual advances on her son, but dreams and fantasies of flying in general are rendered as "nothing else than a longing to be capable of sexual performance," which is born in childhood. Leonardo was "frustrated" in his fulfillment of this desire, but we moderns need to know that "aviation, too, which in our day is at last achieving its aim, has its infantile erotic roots."[62]

Finally, Freud's scientific rewriting of the Merezhkovskii narrative renders spiritual love into a basic egoistic energy, whose physical force must be released. For Freud, love had to become instinctual sexual desire in order for it to become a proper object of scientific analysis. As mechanical force, it could be redirected, expressed, or suppressed – with the help of the psychoanalyst, guiding the patient to healthy management of the sexual urge. By objectifying

---

asleep." Merezhkovskii, of course, was referring the Leonardo's status as a cultural and spiritual John the Baptist. Freud reinterpreted the quote to praise Leonardo as a dispassionate scientist, ahead of his time, much like (as some scholars think) Freud himself.

[62] Merezhkovskii, *Voskresshie*, 413; Freud, *Leonardo*, 173. The passage below it, regarding the wonder of flight, was quoted by Freud in *Leonardo*, 172.

desire, one could make it passive in the face of scientific study, and controllable with the help of expertise. [63]

This can best be seen in Freud's revision of Merezhkovskii's story of the painting of the Mona Lisa. In Merezhkovskii's tale, desire is not something egoistic, originating solely in a single person, but rather something that arises as external to both the lover and the beloved. Moreover, it is a desire expressed not as a mechanical force, but an emotional and spiritual relationship. Leonardo and Mona Lisa shared a "secret of love" -- a mutual erotic bond, "a secret which drew them together and set them apart from all." In the novel, Leonardo himself reflects that he had as little use for the abstract, disembodied "Platonic" view of love as he did for the "crude" sexual act. True to the Solovevian belief that Eros overcomes dualism, Merezhkovskii instead portrays the love between Leonardo and Mona Lisa as both spiritual and physical. They felt a spiritual kinship: "She had sayings which would suddenly make her akin to him, near to him, nearer than all those he knew."[64] But that kinship was also expressed through their physical and material bodies: "the living Mona Lisa herself was beginning to resemble Leonardo more and more, as is sometimes the case with people who live together uninterruptedly for many years," indeed, she looked like "a feminine double of Leonardo himself." Even an outside observer could see that the bounded, limited nature of their

[63] Goebel makes this point as well, insisting that, for Freud, "all love is rooted in sexual desire, and that love is at heart, a material and biological urge that must be expressed in some fashion." Goebel, *Beyond Discontent*, 137-138. Makari argues that, from the very beginning, Freud wished only to see mental states as originating in the patient alone, so that the cure would rest in the proper reordering of the patient's mind. For him, this was the key to rendering psychoanalysis scientific. See Makari, *Revolution*, 58-59.

[64] Merezhkovskii, *Voskresshie*, 531-532

relationship as sitter and artist was overcome through their divinizing love for each other, and so that which was limited both temporal and materially simultaneously became infinite and limitless: "Leonardo and Monna Lisa were like two mirrors, which, reflecting one into another, were deepening into infinity."[65]

Such closeness required avoiding the sexual act – what Merezhkovskii termed "the temptations of the abyss."[66] But, unlike "sublimation" in the Freudian sense, the suppression of Leonardo's temptations does not mechanically turn into a portrait that is an exterior expression of an interior state of an individual artist. This is no mechanical redirection of sexual energy. Instead, the sitter and the artist, by avoiding the expression of their bond in sexual consummation, choose to express it in something more mystical:

> could he have desired a more perfect union with his beloved than these profound and mystical caresses, -- in the construction of an immortal image, of a new being, which was conceived and born of them both, even as a child is born of its father and mother and is her and him together. [67]

The metaphor of "birthgiving" was carefully selected. For Merezhkovskii, the eschewing of physical caresses is not a subconscious suppression of a physical instinct, but a choice in favor of a spiritual bond, one that does not deny the material but is expressed within it. Because their love is not consummated, it can be "incarnated" in the painting, and the physical painting reveals and points toward a more mystical understanding of the way in which two people can become, in transfigured terms: "one flesh." Here we see the influence of Solovev – despite the denial of sexual consummation there is not a denial of the "material," or of the flesh. Rather, the

---

[65] Ibid, 516-517

[66] Ibid, 532

[67] Ibid, 532

relationship demonstrates the power of Eros both for incarnation and for transfiguration in art. Moreover, the very process of painting the portrait, as described by Merezhkovskii, exemplifies the Silver Age view of art as "life-creation," in this case, the rendering of a living, actual relationship onto a canvas.[68]

For Freud, by contrast, the Mona Lisa, as a living woman, had to be written out of the story. She could have no effect on Leonardo except as an external stimulus to his sexual desire. Her personality was unimportant, she was key to Leonardo's painting only insofar as she possessed a "smile," one that triggered Leonardo's old desires. For Freud, the entire importance of the narrative rests on Leonardo's internal state:

> Leonardo was fascinated by Mona Lisa's smile for the reason that it awoke something in him which had for long lain dormant in his mind – probably an old memory... When, in the prime of life, Leonardo once more encountered the smile of bliss and rapture which had once played on his mother's lips as she fondled him, he had for long been under the dominance of an inhibition which forbade him ever again to desire such caresses from the lips of women.

The smile triggered an old desire, the old desire created energy that had to be expressed, so Leonardo redirected that energy to the canvas. The only trace of his original internal drive is found in the painted "smile" – the sole clue to the meaning of the portrait. This, for Freud, was the true interpretation of Merezhkovskii's phrase, "secret of love." No longer a shared secret between lovers, it is now a lonely secret of a solitary individual suffering from suppressed sexual desire, and it is only hinted at on the canvas that receives that desire.[69]

---

[68] Plato had a similar view of Eros as procreative. See Stella Sandford, 'Sexually Ambiguous.' in *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, xi,no. 3 (2006), pp 43–59.

[69] Freud, *Leonardo*, 154, 162-163

The difference between sublimation of sexuality, as elaborated by Freud, and transfigurative Eros as expressed by Merezhkovskii has multiple implications. In the first place, Freudian Eros is based on self-deception. Farrell has noted that Freud inverted the old Platonic model of Eros in a particular way, by arguing that while Plato thought that Eros sought the ultimate truth, Freud believed that Eros needed to be repressed and redirected in order for truth to be revealed. In other words, sublimation involved lying to oneself about the truth of one's impulses:

> Freud's Eros is a mirror image of the Platonic and finds there its true model. Freud was aware that, when it came to the doctrine of Eros as the fundamental intellectual force, he and Plato were in agreement. The difference between them arises only when we set Eros in relation to truth. For Plato, Eros ultimately seeks truth as its fulfillment, however much human beings must strain the horses of their nature in the right direction. Freud's Eros, by contrast, is an Eros of error: it achieves fulfillment in the life of fantasy.[70]

This is true in Freud's rewriting of Merezhkovskii's novel as well – Leonardo no longer chooses to love the Mona Lisa in transfigurative fashion, but is deceived by his desires to paint her as an expression of desire for his mother. Art is thus similarly reduced to a kind of self-deception, in which a single, hidden "real" meaning is veiled and can only be revealed using the scientific expertise of a psychoanalyst. Freudian art interpretation thus follows what Kuspit has described as Freud's own suspicion of visual art as a medium of expression that had the potential to elicit a variety of emotional states, some of which could elude scientific categorization. Freud overcame this anxiety by insisting that art could be boiled down to a few core psychoanalytic explanations. As Kuspit writes: "The paradox of art for Freud is that just when it is most successful as art it

[70] Farrell, "Birth," 246-247.

hides, even falsifies, the psychological truth. It is the irony of sublimation: aesthetic sublimation is a big lie, psychologically speaking, however necessary socially."[71]

A second effect of the Freudian reading of Eros as egoistic, internal phenomenon (and thus subject to scientific analysis and control) implicates the philosophical approach to human relationships. In Freud's rendering, our desire for another is purely the product of our own internal biological drives – and hence that other is easily replaced by another person, or by an object or creative process. The full objectification of the other is thus the inevitable result of Freudian sexuality. Jean Laplanche sees this as the problem of "the other" in Freudian psychoanalysis. Insofar as others impinge on our consciousness, they do so entirely through the mediation of our ego, and their own desires and personalities have little import except as filtered by the individual. He writes:

> Sublimation, in so far as it is referred by Freud to a sexual drive whose origin is conceived as wholly biological and endogenous, is unable to account for the opening out and creativity of the human being...Cultural activity is an opening out on to the other, an address to the other. Can it not be related to that opening caused *by* the other, the veritable dehiscence or gaping-open in the young biological individual provoked by the 'seduction' of the other?[72]

This problem of the "other," combined with the view of Eros as "self-deception," bequeaths to modern sexuality a hermeneutics of suspicion, always seeking the "real" meaning of relationships in egoistic, biological essentialism, discounting the reality of the "other" in interpersonal relations.

---

[71] D. Kuspit, 'Freud and the visual arts' in *Journal of applied psychoanalytic studies*, ii, no. 1 (2000), 25–39.

[72] Jean Laplanche, 'The Theory Of Seduction And The Problem Of The Other' in *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, lxxviii (1997), 653–666.

What is lost, then, in the Freudian rewriting of Merezhkovskii is a fuller vision of Eros as "transfigurative," requiring individuals to perceive human relationships and culture as a whole as containing the potential to reveal the "other" as a total human person. For Merezhkovskii and other writers of the Silver Age, the force of Eros is precisely aimed at driving the individual out of herself or himself, and entering into the reality, the life, the subjectivity of another. This view of Eros was later developed more fully by the Silver Age theologian Pavel Florenskii, who would later argue quite forcefully against the psychological interpretation of love in the modern era. According to Florenskii, the "psychological" view "doomed" individuals to "the self-enclosedness of ontological egotism and purely internal states." Such modern individuals "love only illusorily, not going out of themselves through love."[73] For Florenskii, this ignored the fundamental power of love, in which "the overcoming of the boundaries of selfhood, in the going out of oneself, for which spiritual communion 'one with another' is necessary." In his words:

> The metaphysical nature of love lies in the supralogical overcoming of the naked self-identity I=I and in the going out of oneself. And this happens when the power of God's love flows out into another person and tears apart in him the bonds of finite human selfhood. Owing to this going out of itself, I becomes in another, in not-I, this not-I.[74]

---

[73] Pavel Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters*, trans. Boris Jakim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 57.

[74] Ibid, 67-68. The similarity of Florenskii's language here to that of Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas has been noted by a few scholars. But the possibility of some kind of influence has never been fully explored. See Alexander V. Kozin, 'Iconic wonder: Pavel Florensky's phenomenology of the face' in *Studies in East European Thought*, lix, no. 4 (2007), 293–308; and David Patterson, *Exile: The Sense of Alienation in Modern Russian Letters* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2015), 80-81.