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## **The Birth of the Psychoanalytic Hero: Freud's Platonic Leonardo**

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### **The Birth of the Psychoanalytic Hero: Freud's Platonic Leonardo**

*John Farrell*

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Though the intellectual force of Freudian psychoanalysis grows weaker and weaker with time, its importance for the understanding of twentieth-century intellectual culture only increases. Freud made psychology a key ingredient in the century's conception of its own uniqueness and modernity. He claimed to initiate a decisive break with the past, but he also claimed to recover the past, indeed all of human behavior, on new, scientific grounds. What Freud proposed was not just a new way of thinking about psychology but a new psychology, one that would permit unprecedentedly intrepid investigation of the past and the unconscious sources of its ways of thinking. But whereas Freud hoped to give us a new psychology of knowledge, what he did was to reintroduce one of the oldest psychologies of knowledge in a moderately disguised form. I will attempt to show this and assess the implications through a close examination of Freud's treatment of Leonardo da Vinci, a man he considered one of the great forerunners of the modern intellect.

Psychoanalysis is both a theory of the psyche and a scientific movement. Its dual nature makes it almost a unique element in the culture of modern science. Freud and his followers repudiated the separation between institutional affiliation and intellectual commitment that had been carried down from seventeenth-century England. The original form of the psychoanalytic movement was a throwback to that of the ancient philosophical academies.<sup>1</sup> Almost from the beginning of psychoanalysis its founders had recourse to a canon of dogma with the primacy of the libido at its center. Adherence to this canon, and the rituals of initiation and training surrounding it, became the basis for **[End Page 233]** an exclusive intellectual and professional commitment that separated initiates from the professional community at large.

It is well known that the founders of psychoanalysis made use of psychoanalytic theory to explain the movement's adversarial relationship with the outside world. The doctrine of resistance to the libido allowed Freudians to interpret the hidden motives of anyone who might disagree with them. The ire of critics could be cited as proof of the intensity of unconscious repression applied to sexuality, the incredulity of unbelievers

as evidence of an unwillingness to endure the wounds to human narcissism exacted by the Freudian system, and even slips of the tongue could be turned against unwitting opponents. The fact that psychoanalysis was greeted with hostility in some quarters was taken to prove that the universal tendency of humankind was to resist its teachings, and the lapsing away of prominent disciples illustrated the difficulty of living with these hard truths. Heretics were pitied as weaklings unable to face up to the power of the unconscious, unable to keep themselves from disguising it with it some pale reflection of the ego. And so the embattled history of psychoanalysis became part of the empirical evidence of its validity in a way that could never have occurred with a theory generated in the normal research environment. The doctrine of resistance seemed to have been designed as much for polemical as for analytic purposes. Like the monster in *Forbidden Planet*, the fifties Freudian fairy tale, the more psychoanalysis was resisted, the more it grew. The self-confirming value that could be derived from the history of the movement as a cultural scandal even led Freud to exaggerate the hostility of his early reception and the intensity of his early isolation. With the doctrine of resistance, Freud had imported into science the style of the avant-garde, which feeds upon rejection, outrage, and the breach of bourgeois manners. The concept of "resistance to psychoanalysis" is still in use among psychoanalysts today.

The argument from resistance, however useful it may have been as a defense mechanism of psychoanalytic rhetoric, leads to a troubling theoretical question: If the truths of psychoanalysis are naturally repugnant to humankind, so much so that we have a powerful constitutional tendency to hide them from ourselves, what could have liberated Freud and his followers to unearth these unwelcome secrets from the depths of their own psyches? If we take the "resistance to psychoanalysis" as a...

JOHN FARRELL

THE BIRTH OF THE PSYCHOANALYTIC HERO:  
FREUD'S PLATONIC LEONARDO

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