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Freud opens his ingenious and revealing essay on the Moses of Michelangelo with a disclaimer. He had, he said, no more than a layman’s knowledge of art: neither in his attitude to art nor in the way in which he experienced its attractions, was he one of the cognoscenti. He goes on:

Nevertheless, works of art do exercise a powerful effect on me, especially those of literature and sculpture, less often of painting. This has occasioned me, when I have been contemplating such things, to spend a long time before them trying to apprehend them in my own way, i.e. to explain to myself what their effect is due to. Whenever I cannot do this, as for instance with music, I am almost incapable of obtaining any pleasure. Some rationalistic, or perhaps analytic turn of mind in me rebels against being moved by a thing without knowing why I am thus affected and what it is that affects me.

And then as if for a moment conscious that he might appear to be imposing his own personal peculiarities, a quirk of his own temperament, upon a subject with its own code, with its own imperatives, he hastens to concede what he calls ‘the apparently paradoxical fact’ that ‘precisely some of the grandest and most overwhelming creations of art are still unsolved riddles to our understanding’. Before these works we feel admiration, awe—and bewilderment. ‘Possibly’, Freud goes on with (I am sure) a measure of disingenuity:

some writer on aesthetics has discovered that this state of intellectual bewilderment is a necessary condition when a work of art is to achieve its greatest effects. It would be only with the greatest reluctance that I would bring myself to believe in any such necessity.

Anyone acquainted with Freud’s style will at once recognize something typical in this whole passage, in the frank and easy way with which

* Paper read to The British Society of Aesthetics.
from the beginning he takes the reader into his confidence: typical, too, that Freud should be unable to renounce this natural way of writing even when, as here, the work on which he was engaged was ultimately to appear anonymously.

Nevertheless, for all its frankness, the passage that I have quoted is problematic. There are two questions to which it immediately gives rise, and to which some kind of answer is required if we are to use it as providing us with an entry into Freud’s views about art. The first is this: When Freud says that for him there is a peculiar difficulty in obtaining pleasure from a work of art if he cannot explain to himself the source of this pleasure, are we to take his words—as he professes to want us to—as a purely personal avowal? Or is it that what constitutes for Freud the peculiarity of his situation is simply the deeper understanding he feels himself to have of human nature and human achievement: that the attitude to art from which he cannot free himself is one that must come naturally to anyone affected by psycho-analysis, and that it is only in ignorance of psycho-analysis that any other attitude—for instance, that of delight in bewilderment—could be conceived? And the second question is: What kind of understanding or explanation did Freud have in mind? More specifically, we know that by 1913, the date of the Michelangelo essay, Freud had already subjected a large number of psychic phenomena, normal as well as pathological, to psycho-analytic scrutiny: dreams, errors, jokes, symptoms, the psycho-neuroses themselves, phantasies, magic. And so it is only natural to ask which of these phenomena, if any, was to serve as the model, so far as the type of explanation it received, for the understanding of art?

The first question is one that I shall return to later. Meanwhile I should simply like to draw your attention to a passage from another and certainly no less famous essay that Freud wrote on a great artist, ‘A Childhood Memory of Leonardo da Vinci’, which dates from the spring of 1910. Writing of Leonardo’s insatiable desire to know and to understand everything that he encountered, Freud quotes two sayings of Leonardo’s, both to the effect that one cannot love or hate in any but a faint or feeble way unless one has a thorough knowledge of the object of one’s love or hate. Freud then goes on:

The value of these remarks of Leonardo’s is not to be looked for in their conveying an important psychological fact; for what they assert is obviously false, and Leonardo must have known this as well as we do. It is not true that human beings delay loving or hating until they have studied and become familiar with the nature of the object to which these affects apply. On the contrary they love impulsively, from emotional motives which have nothing to do with knowledge, and whose operation is at most weakened by reflection and consideration. Leonardo, then, 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.

Very obvious, you may think. It will be no less obvious why I have quoted this passage. For it must be emphasized that the two sayings of Leonardo with which Freud takes issue do not refer simply to human loves and hates: they are addressed to what we feel about anything in nature. Indeed in the longer of the two passages that Freud cites Leonardo is—or at any rate Freud takes him to be—expressly defending himself against the charge that a scientific attitude towards the works of creation evinces coldness or irreligion. If, then, Leonardo’s attitude, so understood, is thought by Freud to deserve these strictures, it is worth setting them by the side of Freud’s own attitude to art, as we so far have it, and wondering why they do not apply to it.

Turning now to the second of the two questions, I shall anticipate the course of this lecture to the extent of saying that Freud seems to find in a variety of mental phenomena suitable models for the interpretation of art: that in attempting to explain art he assimilates it now to this, now to that psychic phenomenon for the understanding of which he had already devised its own explanatory schema. The richness of Freud’s aesthetic lies in the overlapping of these various suggestions: though, as we shall see, how the suggestions are actually to be fitted together is an issue to which Freud barely applied himself.

However, before either of the two questions that arise out of the Michelangelo essay can be answered, there is a third which requires our attention. And that is the question of what texts we are to consult, and what relative assessment we are to make of them, in arriving at a considered estimate of Freud’s views. In addition to its obvious priority, this question has the additional advantage that, if taken early on, it might save us time later. For a mere review of Freud’s writings on art and of their relative weight could show us where his central interests lay: it could show us the kind or kinds of understanding he sought and the significance that he attached to this. It could save us from certain mistakes.

For the first thing to be observed about Freud’s writings on art is that some of them are only peripherally about art. A fact that emerges from Ernest Jones’s biography is that Freud, for all his lack of arrogance, felt himself, in a way that is perhaps vanishing from the world, to be one of the great, to belong in a pantheon of the human race: and for this reason
it was only natural that his thoughts should often turn to the great figures of the past, and that to understand the inner workings of their genius should be one of his recurrent ambitions. Freud, we may think, wrote about Leonardo in much the same spirit as later, at one of the dark moments of European civilization, he was to write to Einstein: it was the conscious communion of one great man with another.

My claim is, then, that the essay on Leonardo—and much the same sort of claim could be mounted for the essay on Dostoievsky—is primarily a study in psycho-analytic biography: and the connexion with art is almost exhausted by the fact that the subject of the biography happens to be one of the greatest, as well as one of the strangest, artists in history. For if we turn to the text of the essay, and ignore the straightforward contributions to psycho-analytic theory, which are inserted, as it were, parenthetically, we shall see that the study falls into two parts.

There is, first of all, the reconstruction of Leonardo’s childhood, for which the evidence is recognized to be scanty: and then there is the history of Leonardo’s adult life, which is, of course, adequately documented, but which is presented by Freud in such a way it can be connected up with earlier events. In other words, seen in an overall way the essay is an attempt to exhibit—not, of course, to prove but, like the clinical case-histories, to exhibit—the dependence of the adult capacities and proclivities on the infantile and in particular on infantile sexuality. More specifically, the dependence of later on earlier experience is worked out in terms of fixation points and successive regression. To Leonardo are attributed two fixation points. The first or earlier one was established in the years spent in his mother’s house when, experiencing as an illegitimate child her undivided love, he was seduced into a sexual precocity in which intensive sexual curiosity and an element of sadism must have been manifestations. In time, however, a conjunction of internal and external factors—the very excess of the boy’s love for his mother, and his reception into the nobler household of his father and his step-mother by his fifth year—brought on a wave of repression in which the blissful eroticism of his infancy was stamped out. He overcame and yet preserved his feelings for his mother by first identifying himself with her and then seeking as sexual objects not other women but boys in his own likeness. Here we have Leonardo’s second point of fixation, in an attenuated homosexuality; for he loves boys only as his mother loved him: in an ideal fashion.

It is against this childhood background that Freud then reviews and interprets the successive phases of Leonardo’s adult life. First, there was a phase in which he worked without inhibition. Then gradually his powers of decision began to fail, and his creativity became enfeebled.
under the inroads of an excessive and brooding curiosity. Finally, there was a phase in which his gifts reasserted themselves in a series of works that have become justly famous for their enigmatic quality. These last two phases Freud then proceeds to connect with successive regressions, in a manner that had become familiar since the Three Essays. First, there is a regression to a strong but totally repressed homosexuality, in which the greater part of the libido, profiting from pathways laid down in a yet earlier phase, seeks and finds an outlet in the pursuit of knowledge—though, as we have seen, at a heavy cost to the general conduct of life. This, however, is then overtaken by a regression to the earliest attachment: either through some internal transformations of energy or by a happy accident—Freud suggests a connexion with the sitter for the Mona Lisa—Leonardo, now at the age of fifty, returns to enjoy his mother's love in a way that allows a new release of creativity.

Now it is in connexion with this attempt to interpret Leonardo's adult life is the light of certain childhood patterns that Freud appeals to particular works of Leonardo all drawn from the late phase: the Mona Lisa, the Paris and London Madonna and Child with St. Anne, and the late androgynous figure paintings. If we read the relevant section of the essay (section IV) carefully, we see what Freud's procedure is. He uses the evidence provided by the pictures to confirm the link he has postulated between this last phase of Leonardo's activity and a certain infantile 'complex', as Freud would have put it at that date. Note that Freud does not use the evidence of the pictures to establish the infantile complex—that depends upon secondary sources and the so-called 'infantile memory' from which the essay derives its title: he uses it to establish a link between the complex and something else. But, we might ask: In what way do the pictures that Freud cites provide evidence? And the answer is that the evidence that they provide comes from certain internal features plus certain obvious or seemingly obvious trains of association to these features. So in the Louvre picture he associates to St. Anne's smile the caressing figure of Leonardo's mother: to the similarity of age between St. Anne and the Virgin, the rivalry between Leonardo's mother and his step-mother: and to the pyramidal form in which the two figures are enclosed, an attempt on Leonardo's part to reconcile 'the two mothers of his childhood'. I have said enough, I hope, to show how misleading it is to say, as is sometimes said, that in the Leonardo essay Freud lays down a pattern for the explanation of art based on the model of dream-interpretation. It is true that with certain very definite qualifications Freud does in the course of this essay treat a number of works of art as though they were dreams: the qualifications being that the associations he employs are not free, and that the trains terminate on an
already established complex. But there is nothing to suggest that this is the proper way to treat works of art if one wants to explain them as works of art: all we can safely conclude is that he thought this a way to treat them if one wanted to use them as biographical evidence. There are, indeed, ancillary pieces of evidence to suggest that Freud's interest in the Leonardo essay was primarily biographical. This certainly is in accord with the reception that the original draft of the essay received—and presumably invited—when it was read to the Vienna Psycho-Analytic Society a few months before its publication. The minutes reveal that in the discussion it was only Tausk who referred to the paper as 'a great critique of art' as well as a piece of psycho-analysis and his remark went unheeded. Again, both in the original draft and in the final essay the feature most emphasized by Freud in Leonardo's works is certainly not an aesthetic feature: that they are very largely unfinished. And, finally, it must be significant that Freud made virtually no attempt to identify in the work of the last phase any correlate to the fact that though this phase too marks a regression, nevertheless it was a regression that enabled a new release of creativity.

If we now turn back from the Leonardo essay to the essay on the Moses of Michelangelo, with which I began, we find ourselves involved with a totally different enterprise. Indeed, if we consider both essays to be (roughly) studies in expression, then it looks as though they mark out the ends of the spectrum of meaning that this term has occupied in European aesthetics. For if the Leonardo essay concerns itself with expression in the modern sense—that is, with what the artist expresses in his works or with Leonardo's expressiveness—then the Michelangelo essay is concerned with expression in the classical sense—that is, with what is expressed by the subject of the work, or the expressiveness of Moses. (The distinction is, of course, over-simple: and it is, of course, significant that there has been a continuous theory of expression in European aesthetic.)

Let us look for a moment at the problem that Michelangelo's great statue sets the physiognomically minded spectator. We may express it in a distinction used by Freud—and, of course, our aim anyhow is to get as close as possible to the problem as he conceived it—and ask initially whether Moses is a study of character or a study of action. Those critics who favoured the later interpretation stressed the wrath of Moses and contended that the seated figure is about to spring into action and let loose his rage on the faithless Israelites. The wrath is evident, but the projected movement is not indicated in the statue and would moreover contradict the compositional plan of the tomb for which it was intended. Those critics who favoured the former interpretation of the statue—that
is, as a study in character—have stressed the passion, the strength, the force implicit in Michelangelo’s representation. Such an interpretation can remain free of implausibility, but it seems to leave too much of the detail of the statue uncovered and it insufficiently relates the inner to the outer. Freud’s interpretation is that we should see the figure of Moses, not as being about to break out in rage but as having checked a movement of anger. By seeing it as a study in suppressed action, that is self-mastery, we can also see it as a study in character and at the same time avoid any inconsistency with the compositional indications.

‘Here we are fully back’, Professor Gombrich has written of this essay, ‘in the tradition of 19th-century art-appreciation’:* and this tradition he partially characterizes by referring to its preoccupation with the ‘spiritual content’ of the work of art. The evident conservatism of Freud’s method in the Michelangelo essay does in large measure warrant Professor Gombrich’s judgement, and yet I think that if we look carefully at the text there are some scattered counter-indications that should warn us against taking it—what should I say?—too definitively.

It is a matter of more than local interest that in the Michelangelo essay Freud expresses his deep admiration for the critical writings of an art historian whom he had first encountered under the name of Ivan Lermolieff. This pseudonym, he later discovered, masked the identity of the great Giovanni Morelli, the founder of scientific connoisseurship. Now it was Morelli more than anyone else who brought the notion of ‘spiritual content’ in art into disrepute. Admittedly what Morelli primarily objected to was not spiritual content as a criterion of value or of interpretation but its employment in determining the authorship of a particular painting; and it was just to set this right that he devised his own alternative method, which consisted first in drawing up for each painter a schedule of forms, showing how he depicted the thumb, the lobe of the ear, the foot, the finger-nail and other such trifles, and then in matching any putative work by a given painter against his particular schedule item by item. Nevertheless once Morelli’s method had been applied to determine authorship, the old idea of spiritual content had received a mauling from which it could not hope to recover.

It is, then, worth observing that it was precisely for his method, with all that it involved in the reversal of traditional aesthetic values, that Freud admired Morelli so much. ‘It seems to me’, Freud wrote, not lightly we may be sure:

that his method of inquiry is closely related to the technique of psycho-analysis. It, too, is accustomed to divine secret and concealed things from despised or unnoticed features, from the rubbish-heap, as it were, of our observations.

Nor was Freud's admiration merely formal. Quite apart from the intriguing but quite unanswerable question whether the anonymity of the Michelangelo essay might not have had as one of its determinants an unconscious rivalry with Morelli, Freud would seem to have used in pursuit of physiognomy a method markedly like that which Morelli evolved to settle issues of connoisseurship. The somewhat self-conscious attention to trifles, to measurement, and to anatomical detail suggests that even if Freud's critical aims were conservative, the methods he was prepared to envisage for achieving them were not so constricted. This point is one to which we may have to return. And finally it must be observed that Freud both at the beginning and at the end of his essays endeavours to link, though without saying how, the physiognomy of Moses with an intention of Michelangelo.

And now I want to turn to the third and only other extended essay that Freud wrote on art or an artist. (I exclude the Dostoievsky essay because though almost the length of the Moses essay, it contains so little on its nominal subject.) In the summer of 1906 Freud had his attention drawn by Jung, whom he had not yet met, to a story by the North German playwright and novelist Wilhelm Jensen (1837–1911) entitled *Gradiva*. Though Freud later referred to the work as 'having no particular merit in itself', which seems a fair judgement, it evidently intrigued him at the time and by May of the following year it had become the subject of an essay, 'Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's *Gradiva*'. Unfortunately in the new Standard Edition of Freud's works the practice of printing Jensen's story as well as Freud's text has not been followed. The reader who relies upon Freud's résumé is unlikely to appreciate fully the deftness and subtlety with which he interprets the text: in the résumé text and interpretation are in close proximity.

Jensen's *Gradiva* is subtitled 'A Pompeian Fancy', and it tells the story of a young German archaeologist, Norbert Hanold, who has so withdrawn himself from the world that his only attachment is to a small Roman plaque of a girl walking with an elegant and distinctive step, which he had first seen in the museum of antiquities at Rome and of which he has bought a cast. He calls the girl Gradiva, he spins around her the phantasy that she came from Pompeii and after several weeks of quite vain research into her gait and its distinctiveness or otherwise, he sets off to Italy, heavily under the influence of a dream in which he watched Gradiva perish in the Pompeian earthquake. On his journey south life is made intolerable for him by the endless German honeymoon couples and by the flies. He hates, we may discern, the untidiness both of love and of life. Inevitably he drifts to Pompeii and the next day at noon,
entering the house to which he has in phantasy assigned Gradiva, he sees the double of the girl in his beloved plaque. Are we to believe that it is a hallucination or a ghost? In fact it is neither; it is, as Norbert Hanold has to realize, a live person, though she appears to humour him in the belief that they knew each other in another life and that she has long been dead. There is another meeting, two further dreams, and all the while there is the pressure on Hanold of having to accept how much of his phantasy is proving to be real. Ultimately there is a revelation, by the time that Hanold is prepared. The girl is a childhood friend of his who has always been in love with him. He on the contrary had repressed his love for her and had only allowed it to express itself in his attachment to the plaque, which, it now turned out, in so many respects, some of which had been projected by him on to it while others must have been the causes of his initial attraction to it, precisely reflected her. Even the name that he bestowed on the plaque ‘Gradiva’ was a translation of hers, ‘Bertgang’. By the end of the story his delusion has been cast off, his repressed sexuality breaks through and the girl has restored to her ‘her childhood friend who had been dug out of the ruins’—an image obviously of inexhaustible appeal to Freud, who was to draw upon it over and over again each time he elaborated his favoured comparison between the methods of psycho-analysis and the methods of archaeology.

It is natural to think of ‘Delusion and Dreams’ as lying on the same line of inquiry as the Michelangelo essay but projected well beyond it. Both essays are studies in the character or mood or mind of the subject in a work of art, but in the earlier essay the inquiry is pursued with what seems a startling degree of literalness. ‘A group of men’, is how it begins, ‘who regarded it as a settled fact that the essential riddles of dreaming have been solved by the efforts of the author of the present work found their curiosity aroused one day by the question of the class of dreams that have never been dreamed at all—dreams created by imaginative writers and ascribed to invented characters in the course of a story.’ And Freud then proceeds to grapple with this question in such detail, giving a lengthy analysis of Hanold’s two dreams, that the reader might feel, when he reaches the last sentence of the essay, that it could have come somewhat sooner. ‘But we must stop here, or we may really forget that Hanold and Gradiva are only creatures of their author’s mind.’

Such a reaction on the part of the reader would, however, be misguided, for the important fact is that Hanold’s dreams can be interpreted. To put the matter another way: The introduction of dream-interpretation into the essay might bring to mind Freud’s attempt to unravel the late compositions of Leonardo which seemed to have something in common with dream-interpretation, and therefore one might conclude
that there was a coincidence of method between the two essays. But that, on the evidence to date, would be unjustified. Anyone who accepts the leading ideas of psycho-analysis would agree that these must be in principle a way of eliciting the latent content of the Leonardo works: the two open questions are whether the evidence permits this to be done in practice and if so, whether Freud succeeds in doing it. However, there can be no corresponding assurance that it must be possible to elicit the latent content of Hanold’s dreams, and in consequence the primary interest of Freud’s ‘Delusion and Dreams’, or at any rate the central part of it, is the way it shows that Hanold’s dreams can be interpreted: the actual interpretations it gives are important, but they are of secondary importance.

If this point is accepted, then Freud’s effort to decipher the delusions and dreams of Norbert Hanold no longer has to be regarded as the product of confusion between fiction and reality. For looked at the other way on, it can be seen as the attempt to reveal the steps by which Norbert Hanold’s beliefs and wishes are indicated—and in this respect it clearly refers to an aesthetic feature of Gradiva. And an analogous point can be made for Freud’s physiognomic researches into the Michelangelo Moses. For in this study Freud is to be seen, not simply as revealing to us the deepest mental layers of a particular representation, but as indicating how these layers, particularly the deepest of them, are revealed in the corresponding statue. And now perhaps we can see one way in which Freud diverges, if only in emphasis, from the nineteenth-century appreciation. For Freud is at least as interested in the way in which the spiritual content of a work of art is made manifest as in the spiritual content itself: and when we take into account the ‘trivial’ ways in which he thought deep content was most likely to manifest itself, the divergence, maybe, visibly grows.

Nevertheless suppose we confine ourselves for the moment to those arts in which revelation of character—of the character, that is, of the subject of the work, not as yet that of the artist—is a significant aesthetic feature: it cannot be a feature that is unconstrained, otherwise it would cease to be aesthetic. There must be some element in the work that makes for concealment, or at any rate that slows down the pace of revelation. Does Freud say anything about this other, constraining factor—and the interrelation of the two? In Gradiva the constraining factor is not hard to identify: it is Norbert Hanold’s growing self-consciousness or, as Freud calls it, his ‘recovery’, which is in part an internal process and is in part effected through the agency of Gradiva. Now Freud had a very natural affection for this particular artistic compromise: it has a natural poignancy, and it also exhibits an obvious affinity with psycho-analytic
treatment. If we are concerned how the two factors interrelate, Freud has, implicitly at any rate, some interesting observations about this when he writes about the ambiguous remarks that abound in *Gradiva*—for instance when Norberg first meets the seeming *revenant* from Pompeii, he says in reply to her first utterance: ‘I knew your voice sounded like that.’ Freud’s suggestion is that the use of ambiguity by the author to reveal the character of his subject ahead of the process of self-knowledge is justified in so far as the ambiguously couched revelation corresponds to a repressed piece of self-knowledge.

Freud, however, has no desire to impose the pattern of revelation versus self-knowledge on all art for which it makes sense. In perhaps his most interesting piece on art, a few pages entitled ‘Psychopathic Characters on the Stage’, written in 1905 or 1906 but only published posthumously, Freud writes of those literary compositions in which the alternate current is supplied by action or conflict.

If we now ask: How explicit is to be our understanding of what is revealed to us? Freud’s view is that it need not be explicit. Indeed even in the most deeply psychological dramas, generations of spectators have found it difficult to say what it was that they understood. ‘After all’, Freud writes, ‘the conflict in *Hamlet* is so effectively concealed that it was left to me to unearth it.’ Indeed Freud’s point goes beyond this. It is not simply that our understanding need not be explicit but that in many cases there are dangers in explicitness, for explicitness could give rise to resistance if the character suffers from a neurosis which his audience shares with him. So here we have another virtue of what I have called the alternate current—namely that it serves what Freud calls ‘the diversion of attention’. And one effective way in which it can do this is by plunging the spectator or the reader into a whirlpool of action from which he derives excitement while yet being secure from danger. And another contributory factor to this same end is the pleasure in play that is provided by the medium of the art: the element of ‘free play’ that had been so heavily stressed in Idealist aesthetics.

And perhaps at this point we should just look back again for a moment at the Michelangelo essay. For we can now see a reason why in certain circumstances it might be, not merely just as acceptable, but actually superior that the revelation of expression should be achieved through small touches, through the trifles to which both Morelli and Freud, though for different reasons, attach such weight. For these trifles can more readily slip past the barriers of attention.

And now once again it is necessary to reverse our point of view. For the diversion of attention, as we have so far considered it, seems to belong to what we might call the ‘public relations’ of the work of art.
Its aim seems to be to secure an easy popularity for the work or, more negatively, to avoid disapproval or even to evade censorship. However, if we now look at this process from the artist’s point of view, we may be able to see how it can be regarded as contributing to the aesthetic character of the work. But first we must broaden our analysis somewhat. In the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement Freud wrote: ‘The first example of an application of the analytic mode of thought to the problems of aesthetics was contained in my book on jokes.’ We have by now become habituated to the idea that Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious could be made use of in explicating some of the problems of art, but it is perhaps insufficiently appreciated that the credit for this initiative must go to Freud himself.

Freud distinguished three levels to the joke, each marking a successive stage in its development. All three levels rest upon a primitive substrate of play, which initially comes into operation with the infantile acquisition of skills—specifically so that we may now single it out for attention, the skill of pleasure. Play generates what Freud calls functional pleasure, the pleasure derived from using idly, and thus exhibiting mastery over, a human capacity. On this substrate the lowest level is the jest, a piece of play with words or concepts with one and only one concession to the critical judgement: it makes sense. A jest is a playful way of saying something, but the something need be of no interest. Where what is said claims interest in its own right, we have the joke: for the joke is constructed round a thought, though the thought, Freud insists, makes no contribution whatsoever to the pleasure that is specific to the joke. The pleasure—at any rate on the level with which we are concerned—derives entirely from the element of play, and the thought is there to give respectability to the whole enterprise by falsely claiming credit for the pleasure. And now we are ready to move to the third level—the tendentious joke. With the tendentious joke the whole machinery that we have so far considered—namely, the jest with a thought to protect it—is now used itself to protect a repressed purpose, either sexual or aggressive, which seeks discharge. But if we are to come to grips with this complex phenomenon, we must discriminate roles. The joker makes use of the joke in order to divert his attention from the impulse that seeks expression, and the joke is expected to achieve this for him by the discharge of energy it can secure. But unfortunately the one person for whom the joke cannot perform this service is the joker: it is something to do with the fact that the joker has made the joke that prevents him from indulging freely in the possibility of play that it offers. The joke is incomplete in itself or, more straightforwardly, the joker cannot laugh at his own joke. Accordingly if the joke is to fulfil the purpose of
the tendentious joker, he requires an audience to laugh at the joke—though of course the hearer could never have laughed at it if he had made it himself. However, with the audience, too, there is a danger, though the other way round: for it is the very openness of the invitation to play that might meet with censure if it is too blatanty extended. Hence the presence of the thought which is required to divert his attention from the joke so that he may laugh at it. And his laughter licenses the joker in his ulterior purpose. In so far as the joke falls flat or is denied acclaim, the joker will feel unable to afford the repressed impulse the release he had surreptitiously promised it.

How far this analysis of the tendentious joke may be applied to art is uncertain, and perhaps it would be out of place to demand a general answer. There would seem, however, to be two respects in which a parallel holds. In the first place, what Freud calls the radical incompleteness of the joke parallels in psychological terms what is often called the institutional character of art—as well perhaps as suggesting the psychological machinery on which that institution rests. Secondly, there is a parallel between the uncertainty in the hearer of the joke about the source of his pleasure, and the diversion of attention that is predicated of the spectator of the work of art. Indeed it should now be clear why ‘diversion of attention’ should be an aesthetic aspect of the work of art, and not just a cheap bid for popularity. And while on this point it is worth observing that we are now in a somewhat better position to consider the first of the two questions that arose out of my opening quotation—when I said, you will recall, that it was unclear how far Freud’s emphasis on understanding as a prerequisite of appreciation was a purely personal avowal, or whether it indicated a theoretical position. We have now gone far enough to see that part of understanding how it is that a work of art affects us is recognizing the confusion or the ambiguity upon which this effect in part depends. One of the perennial warnings of psycho-analysis is on the dangers of trying to be clearer about our state of mind than our state of mind.

Indeed it looks as though the ‘diversion of attention’ required of the spectator of the work of art is far more thoroughgoing than the corresponding demand made on the hearer of the joke. For the spectator not merely uses what we may call the scenario of the work of art to divert his attention from the element of play, he may also have to use the element of play to divert his attention from the more disturbing content of the work of art. In this respect he combines in himself the roles of the maker and the hearer of the tendentious joke.

And this leads us to a large question, to which so much of this lecture has pointed. We might put it now by asking: Is there, according to
Freud, anything parallel in the work of art to the purpose that finds, or seeks, expression in the work of art? An understanding of psychoanalysis should warn us that this question is unanswerable. For outside the comparative inflexibility of the neurosis, there is no single unchanging form that our characters or temperaments assume. There are constant vicissitudes of feeling and impulse, constant formings and reformings of phantasy, over which it is certain very general tendencies pattern themselves: but with a flexibility in which, Freud suggests, the artist is peculiarly adept. The artist expresses himself in his work—how could he not? But what he expresses has not the simplicity of a wish or impulse.

I should like, very briefly, in conclusion to point out one shortcoming in Freud's treatment of art which can be associated with what was for long a shortcoming in his treatment of the mind. The notion of the unconscious originally enters Freud's theory through its connexion with repression: then it proliferates and becomes identical with a mode of mental functioning called the primary process: finally, Freud recognized that certain unconscious operations had a function which was not exhausted either by the contribution they made to defence, or by the part they played in the ongoing processes of the mind. They also had a constructive role to play in the binding of energy or, what is theoretically a related process, the building up of the ego. It was the study of identification, in which Freud included projection, that led him to revise his views in this direction. But no shadow of this new development was cast over Freud's views on art for the simple reason that there are not extended studies of art from this period. The unconscious figures in Freud's account only as providing techniques of concealment or possibilities of play. In a number of celebrated places Freud equated art with recovery or reparation or the path back to reality: in the case of Leonardo, as we have seen, he attempted to document this moment. But nowhere did he indicate the mechanism by which this came about.