



The title of this essay should suffice as its dedication. Note being taken from the outset, however, of the discrepancy between a reminiscence that has arisen from the depths of the earliest years and a work of painting whose artifice would equal that of a memory of childhood. On one hand, the fable of the supposed vulture that Freud noticed in the writings of Leonardo da Vinci, and that served as his point of departure for the masterpiece of “construction in analysis”—despised by most art historians—that is *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*: a book indeed dubious, improbable, but wherein, regardless of what history makes of this construction and its validity, we recognize, to quote Meyer Schapiro (not sparing however in his criticisms), “the hand of a master.”¹ And on the other, a work by Piero della Francesca, one whose analytic implications will be measured against the echoes that it can awaken in both individual and collective memory: a “childhood memory,” reader please note, not *of* but *by* Piero della Francesca, the emphasis being less on the possessive relation than on the agent.

More is at stake here than a nuance, and it matters all the more because after the fifth centenary of his death, with its attendant celebrations, scholarly gatherings, publications, and restoration work, the name Piero della Francesca calls forth a discursive figure very different from the one that is the gist of Freud’s essay on Leonardo da Vinci: the same

Leonardo that Vasari already presented as an artist wracked by doubt, always dissatisfied with himself, and whose major works would bear the stamp of incompleteness, his creative faculty having been disturbed, perturbed, even repressed, and perhaps inhibited by an unbridled curiosity or, as Freud writes, by a craving for knowledge (*ein Wissensdrang*), an investigation-drive (*ein Forschungstrieb*, and even *ein Forschertrieb*: literally, “an investigator-drive”) that was ever more consuming and domineering, and that supposedly came to occupy him completely.² Whereas today the name Piero della Francesca references not so much a man or a personality as an oeuvre. An oeuvre that, even in its most lacunary and fragile aspects, even in those parts of its precious core that are irremediably threatened, seems to possess a matchless assurance, authority, and determination, and to have no truck with what Freud called “a pattern of not finishing anything.”³ The truth about Piero’s Roman work seems hard to establish, apart from some remains discovered in Santa Maria Maggiore in 1913, and that Roberto Longhi was tempted to attribute to him, at least hypothetically (which brings us back, through the idea of a corpus, to the notion of “construction” central to our project).⁴ But if the frescoes in Arezzo are gradually fading into a delicately colored haze, the reasons for this are not merely technical, as can be said, by contrast, of the *Battle of Anghiari* or the *Last Supper* by Leonardo: the one having disappeared in the seventeenth century, the other surviving only as traces that are all the more fascinating because, unlike the “hyper-realistic” reconstructions in California’s wax museums, they give fantasy free rein.⁵

The brilliance that now emanates from the name Piero della Francesca in the history of art, the clarity, the sense of completion and timelessness that radiate from his work are, however, a bit deceptive. Doubtless linear perspective, which occupied him for so long, was not, at least in its principle, an evening occupation but on the contrary presupposed, for production of the whole of its effect, both the full light of day and a “focused” quality, or at least a clarity of image and a precision of graphic construction that contrasted with the blur of “atmospheric” perspective, the *sfumato* that bathes Leonardo’s distant views. To be sure, Piero’s figures have the monumental impassability, the paradoxical appearance of archaism associated with an imperious metric, one that seems to renew with a venerable antiquity that Longhi did not hesitate to char-

acterize as “Egyptian” or “Etruscan,” and wherein he saw proof of the “underground” persistence of an immemorial figurative tradition whose reemergence at a given moment can coincide with a turning point in the history of artistic creation.⁶ We are very far here from the physiognomic enigma of the *Mona Lisa*. And yet Piero’s figures, even his compositions, are not without their share of the mystery that often resulted from perspective at its most subtle. And this whether we are dealing with the *Flagellation of Christ* in Urbino, usually dated 1445–1450 (before the great Arezzo cycle), where the rigorous coherence of the geometric construction only increases the eloquence of the marked difference in depth-of-field between the two parts of the scene, thought to correspond to two moments in time, if not to two distinct time periods, that of the gospels and that of contemporary history; with the *Annunciation* in Perugia, where, as pertinent as it ought to be, reconstruction of the floor plan reveals that a compact group of columns oddly interposes itself between the Virgin and the angel of the Annunciation opposite her⁷; or even with the *Montefeltro Altarpiece* in the Brera, one of his last works, contrived such that the egg suspended in the apse seems, if viewed frontally, to be directly above the Virgin enthroned at the crossing of the transept: with the result that what might be an ostrich egg is reduced, as an effect of recession, to the dimensions of a duck egg.⁸ Quite apart from the fact that Piero was not just the painter who is familiar to us. The great treatise that he left behind, the *De prospectiva pingendi*, is indeed connected to one of the basic elements of his art; even so, it makes scant reference to painting, evidencing by contrast a passion for geometry and mathematics that is surprising in an artist whom nothing seemed to predispose to such work, and whose oeuvre, after Vasari’s time, would not attain its present unmitigated glory until the start of the twentieth century—at the very moment, paradoxically, when modern painting, under the joint protection of Cézanne and cubism, pretended to have dispatched “scientific” perspective.

Freud echoes words that Vasari placed in the mouth of Leonardo da Vinci when, near death and describing the course of his illness with detachment, the latter supposedly expressed regret for having offended God and man by not having worked at his art as he should have⁹—but only to observe immediately thereafter that, despite the improbability of

this story (*diese Erzählung*), it was nonetheless invaluable as evidence of what men of that time might have thought about Leonardo. On this point as on others, however, Vasari's text is wholly consistent with the idea that the investigator, the "researcher," clearly prevailed over the artist in Leonardo. Did Freud mean by this that the idea would first have made its way under cover of the legend that began to take shape around Leonardo even during the latter's lifetime, long before Freud took account of it and tried to elucidate the process whereby the investigative drive might come to inhibit an artist's creative power: the analysis offering the example of a subtle transition from an instance of reception to one of production? But if the theme of the artist who is incomparable but too often prevented, for obscure reasons, from bringing his enterprises to completion, if this theme or motif was already present in Vasari, like that of the brake put on the painter's activity by the limitless curiosity that he allegedly manifested from earliest youth, the author of the *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* was nonetheless far from suspecting the extent and systematic character of the investigations undertaken by Leonardo in the most diverse areas; only the publication of his manuscripts, toward the end of the nineteenth century, made it possible to assess this. As Freud emphasizes, "it was left to us to recognize the greatness of the natural scientist (and engineer) that was combined in him with the artist"¹⁰; and, by the same token, to put the one and the other (the researcher and the artist) on the scales, namely to use them as one would an antagonistic couple whose analysis might have heuristic value. Even so, Vasari was the first to give narrative shape and force to an enigma that, over time, has come to function as a *topos*, a commonplace, a recurrent figure of discourse, and one that took on a new resonance when Freud began to take an interest in Italian art, and more particularly in Leonardo da Vinci, as is evidenced by the many citations found in the little book to which the one you are now reading is dedicated, and more than that: which it takes as its model, and—reader take note—whose form and general organization, including specific turns of phrase and footnotes (not to forget its final paragraph), it deliberately pastiches, in the rather vain hope of reconnecting, through this homage in parodic form, with what constituted its mainspring, its movement, its *impetus* without compare.

In terms of reception, a parallel with the fortune of Piero's art in the

first years of the twentieth century presents itself. The painter's oeuvre indeed seems to demand the perspicacity of historians as well as the ingenuity of interpreters. But it doesn't follow from this that its riddle can be solved like a police investigation. Being signed, the Urbino *Flagellation* poses no problem of attribution. The same cannot be said of its iconography; however brilliant, the "solution" that amounts to seeing in it a message addressed by Cardinal Bessarion, by way of Piero, to Federico da Montefeltro, and meant to incite him to embark on a crusade against the Turks throws no light on the operations that, even today, are those of a picture that Montaigne, during his visit to Urbino, got to know in terms that were already the traditional ones.¹¹ A picture that cannot be regarded only as a historical document, and that demands—a matter of the gaze—something other than a strictly semantic and retrospective approach: if a painting owes everything to the context into which it is born, how are we to understand that it need not lose all its force of attraction, its powers of seduction, once this context has vanished but can remain efficacious until the present that is our own, until the here and now? That is, without ignoring the power of "metamorphosis" dear to André Malraux, the problem of what Marx so aptly called the "eternal charm of Greek art."¹² To say nothing of its "beauty," however understood.

This riddle is intensified, in the matter of Piero's work, by the contrast between the universality that we now tend to ascribe to it and its having been so deeply rooted in an allegedly provincial region. From the sixteenth century, the geographic implantation of the painter's most important creations in an area remote from Tuscany, far from the great metropolitan artistic centers, meant that this work could easily fall into oblivion, despite Vasari's emphatic praise even in the first edition of his *Lives* (Florence, 1550). Vasari, who was himself a native of Arezzo and who could have studied at his leisure the frescoes in San Francesco that Stendhal, when he passed through the city, didn't even glance at. And this, it must be said, despite the objective role that the work could have played precisely because of its seemingly eccentric geographic location: the strategic location of the city of Urbino, with whose destiny his name is linked, on the boundary between the principal power centers of the Italy of the day, and the princely policies inaugurated by Duke Federico

da Montefeltro meant that some of the greatest figures of the period could be encountered there, until Bramante and the young Raphael departed for Rome. Not to mention that, as Roberto Longhi showed in 1914, if we accept that there is a connection between the foundations of Giovanni Bellini's style and perspective, then the meeting between the man who must be seen as the father of great Venetian painting and *perspectiva artificialis* as Piero understood it would have taken place in Rimini and Pesaro: that is, in the same atmosphere within which it was given the master of Borgo to carry out the bulk of his activity.¹³

Now it was because of this same perspective, as much as because of the theoretical activity deployed in this domain by Piero della Francesca, that his name, if not his art, would long remain present in memory, and above all in book-based memory. The presence in Urbino of two treatises, one—*De prospectiva pingendi*—dedicated to Federico de Montefeltre and the other—*De quinque corporibus regularibus*—to his son Guidobaldo, was known to specialists. Beginning with a compatriot of the painter, Luca Pacioli, who after profiting from his lessons exhumed the second of these treatises from the ducal library and was so bold as to publish it under his own name after Piero's death, a case of out-and-out plagiarism: as if, not satisfied with usurping the honor due his teacher, he was obliged, as Vasari wrote, to blot out his name¹⁴—with the result, as Longhi writes (a rapprochement that in the present context takes on a singular relief), that his student's coarsely metaphysical, astrological-Platonic interpretation of his principles seems like an attempt “to turn the genius from Borgo into a magus and holy man along the lines of Leonardo.”¹⁵

Vasari was not alone in denouncing the larceny committed by Pacioli, which he indeed expanded, without providing additional information, to encompass the many books written by Piero before his death. “*E venuto Piero in vichezza ed a morte, dopo avere scritto molti libri*” (“And when Piero grew old and died, after having written many books”): the wording is ambiguous, indicating either that Piero reached an advanced age before writing his books (although another treatise, *Dell'abaco*, dates from at least twenty years earlier), or that he died after having put the finishing touches on them. In 1583, in his preface to *Due regole della prospettiva pratica* by Vignola, Ignazio Danti would still write of the

way Piero del Borgo put regular bodies and other compositions into perspective, despite fra Luca's having taken credit for this¹⁶: reference to the painter's scientific activity being in this instance purged of all magical and metaphysical connotations; as it had been previously in other architectural treatises, for example translations of Vitruvius by Cesariano (Como, 1521) and by G. B. Caporali (Perugia, 1536), where Piero is classed among the "moderns," and even in *La Pratica della prospettiva* by Daniele Barbaro (Venice, 1569), who declared Piero's theoretical work out of date even as he too appropriated part of the text and many of the diagrams from *De prospectiva pingendi*.

The oblivion into which the painter's oeuvre subsequently fell would lift only at the end of the eighteenth century, when the Abbé Lanzi, at the same time that he accorded Piero a position in the foreground of the Italian artistic landscape, went so far as to compare him to the Greeks, "who made geometry serve painting."¹⁷ Now it is precisely this point, the binding together of art and geometry, that should be the focus of debate: if we set aside the work, often admirable, of scholars both local and renowned, the ready-made arguments of establishment critics who judged Piero's art against the measure of "realism" or "naturalism" (until Cézanne and Seurat, Cubism and *pittura metafisica* more or less explicitly took up the relay), and the growing interest of art-lovers, connoisseurs (beginning with the great Cavalcaselle), and the art market in his work, a commonplace that was by no means new imposed itself, toward the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, in the ever-growing literature devoted to the painter from Borgo; from Woltmann, who pronounced Piero's style "petrified [or should we say: stupefied (*médusé*)?] by scientific knowledge" and judged his technical contribution greater than his artistic one, to Berenson, who said he felt that the painter was "clogged by his science," and even Adolfo Venturi, who, while insisting on the historical importance of Piero's work, opined that in his case "geometric rationales sometimes prevailed over artistic ones,"¹⁸ this topos returned regularly, and its relation to the strictly contemporary one that would be Freud's point of departure in his own analysis of the Leonardo "case" is clear. Not to mention the *Introduction à la méthode de Léonard de Vinci* by Valéry, which preceded it by some twenty years.