

Schreber's assertion that he, too, could stare at the sun without danger revealed the importance of establishing a divine lineage. In this way, wrote Freud, Schreber "rediscovered the mythological method of expressing his filial relation to the sun, and has confirmed us once again in our view that the sun is a symbol of the father."³¹ Relating the iconography of Schreber's hallucinatory delusion to his biography was his obsession with his own biological lineage. He fabricated a delusional ancestry from the "Margraves of Tuscany and Tasmania";³² in so doing, he created a version of the "family romance," by elevating his forebears to nobility. Elevating his father to the sun is an even loftier expression of the family romance, although in more symbolic guise.

Freud related the myth of the eagle's test for legitimacy to one of the key precipitating factors of Schreber's delusion—namely, his failure to have children. He had married a woman fifteen years his junior in 1878, one year after his older brother's suicide at the age of thirty-eight, and six years before his first breakdown. All six of his wife's pregnancies ended in miscarriage. Schreber solved his inability to produce descendants by the delusion that he was the woman, who, impregnated by the paternal sun, would continue the lineage of his family.

Alberti's Sun

In the fifteenth century, in Italy, the humanist author Leon Battista Alberti took as his personal emblem a winged eye.³³ It appears, together with Alberti's profile, in two reliefs; one is Matteo de' Pasti's medallion of c. 1446–50, in which the profile is on the obverse and the eye on the reverse [55]. At the top of the eye is a pair of eagle's wings, and emanating from each corner are rays. Below is the motto "Quid Tum," meaning "What then?" or "What next?" and surrounding it, a laurel wreath. In the other relief [56], a self-portrait plaque, the eye is placed under Alberti's chin.

The sun is part of the emblem's latent content in contrast to Schreber's sun, whose manifest character resulted from his delusional disintegration. The winged eye must be understood personally as well as in the context of fifteenth-century imagery. By pursuing the cultural, mythological, and biographical associative threads of the emblem's iconography, it is possible to arrive at an interpretation. Alberti himself connected the eye to God, because he is "all-seeing."³⁴ In this view, Alberti was sustained by the Egyptian hieroglyphic tradition, known in the Renaissance, in which God was represented by an eye. The eye, in turn, was associated with the sun and related as such to kings, mythological gods, the Christian God, and



55. *Matteo de' Pasti*, Medallion Portrait of Alberti with Winged Eye, 1446/1450. *National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Samuel H. Kress Collection.*



56. *Leon Battista Alberti*, Self-Portrait Plaque, c. 1435. *National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Samuel H. Kress Collection.*

Christ. The wings create the impression that Alberti's eye is in flight and evoke the eagle's role as Jupiter's attribute.

Since all of these features—eye, wings, rays of the sun—have phallic meaning in the unconscious, they can be related to the father's role in procreation. The biographical implications of Alberti's emblem, like Schreber's sun, derive from his conflicted identification with his father. Alberti's illegitimate birth contributed to his lifelong concern with lineage and to his adoption of the eagle's wings as part of his emblem. The myth of the eagle's totemic test for legitimacy was well known in fifteenth-century Italy through the works of Aelian (*On Animals* II, 26) and Saint Ambrose (*Patrologia Latina* XIV, 231); since Alberti was a classical scholar and papal secretary, there can be little doubt of his acquaintance with these texts.

Alberti's preoccupation with the father's role in the family has many facets. In his *Book of the Family*, Alberti advises fathers to be watchful; if his son is wayward, according to Alberti, the father's blindness is to blame. In his book on architecture, Alberti refers to Janus, the Roman god of gateways, as "father Janus."³⁵ The significance of that image lies in the fact that Janus has two faces, with eyes in the front and the back of his head. As a result, he sees those who approach the gate and those who leave by it at the same time.

Alberti recognized his own father's failures in watching out for him. His father died when he was sixteen, and Alberti's illegitimate birth allowed unscrupulous relatives to interfere with his inheritance. It is also possible, though not documented, that Alberti held his father responsible for the family's exile from Florence. Alberti's birth, in Genoa rather than in the city with which he identified, created another broken link that he continually tried to repair.

The rays emanating from the corners of Alberti's emblematic eye can be related to a statement in his autobiography, the so-called *Vita anonima*, or *Anonymous Life*, which reveals his struggle to identify with his father. He claimed that a "ray" in his chest (*pectore radium*) facilitated his ability to see through other people and know their intentions.³⁶ In contrast to Schreber, who became the passive recipient of the sun's rays, Alberti reversed passive into active so that the rays originated with him. Despite the paranoid flavor of Alberti's "X-ray vision," he never succumbed to disintegration, as Schreber did.

One additional feature of Alberti's preoccupation with the watchful eye is apparent if the hair in his self-portrait plaque is compared with that



57. The Sun in Leo, engraving. From *Rosarium philosophorum*, Frankfurt, 1550.

in Matteo's medal. In the self-image, Alberti has leonine hair, thereby linking the motif of the lion with Janus as a watchful guardian (see Chapter 3). The phallic associations of the lion, like the features of the winged eye, are explicit in ancient art. The first-century B.C. Roman tintinnabulum in Figure 41, which also "guarded" an entrance, has the hindquarters and tail of a lion.

In the zodiac, known in antiquity and the Renaissance, the sign of Leo has solar associations. The sun is at its hottest point when approaching Leo, who is the "house of the sun." When so depicted in zodiac iconography, the sun entering Leo's mouth emits rays that resemble those of Alberti's winged eye [57]. The most convincing biographical connection of these motifs with Alberti is the fact that he himself adopted the name Leon—his given name was Battista. It is also suggestive in this regard that the Marzocco, or lion, was the symbol of Florence, the native city of the exiled Alberti family.

For Alberti, the emblem of the winged eye was a kind of totemic image, condensing motifs related to the sun in the intellectual, humanist context of fifteenth-century Italy. The specific selection and arrangement of motifs, however, also had biographical significance for Alberti. The eye on both the medal and the plaque is frontal, whereas Alberti's head is in profile. The viewer, therefore, confronts the detached eye directly—as Schreber confronted the sun.

There is a psychological continuum of sorts in the totemic relationship of

Alberti, van Gogh, and Schreber to the sun. All three men had elder brothers. Alberti's lived, and they were apparently on good terms. Van Gogh's died before he was born, which put him in the problematic role of a "replacement child," only somewhat relieved by the birth of his younger brother, Theo. Schreber's elder brother committed suicide at the age of thirty-eight. It is possible, in all three cases, that the older brother assumed a paternal role, whether in reality or fantasy. Van Gogh's distant sun could thus be seen as a conflation of his austere and emotionally distant father with his literally absent older brother.

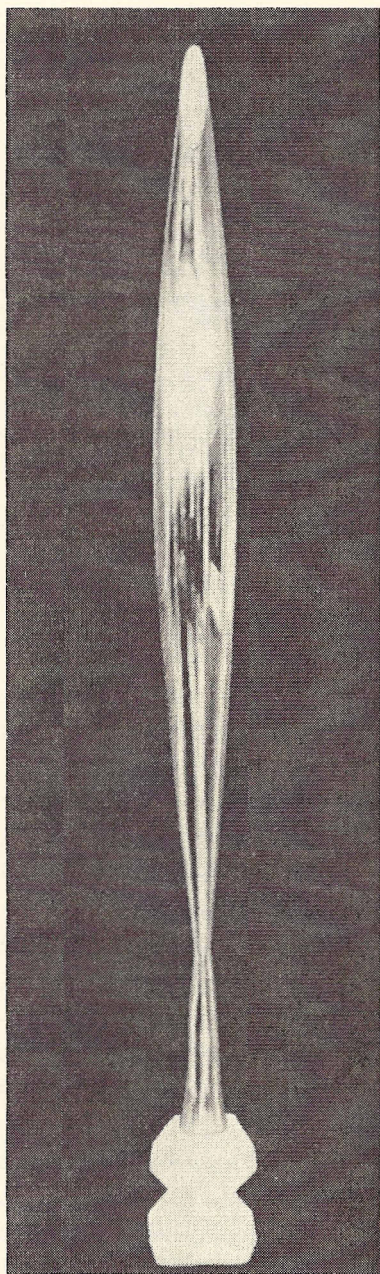
Alberti never married; he was a rabid misogynist and probably homosexual. Van Gogh was heterosexual, but was drawn primarily to prostitutes, or debased women. Schreber married and tried to have children, but became convinced that he had turned into a woman. Even after his final discharge from the hospital and partial return to sanity, he continued to live with his wife, believing that he was a woman.

The role of the mother is, of course, a crucial one in such dynamics. Unfortunately, less is known of the mothers in question than of the fathers. Alberti's mother died when he was two. He mentions her only one time, and then indirectly, in his writings. Van Gogh's mother is more in evidence. At the time of his birth, she was probably still depressed from her first son's death. Derivatives of van Gogh's relationship with his mother are implied by his perpetually unsatisfied longing for maternal love from a woman. Of Schreber's mother,³⁷ it can be said that she failed to interfere with his father's physical abuse, which was a constant threat to his body image. To create a satisfactory mother, Schreber had to become one himself.

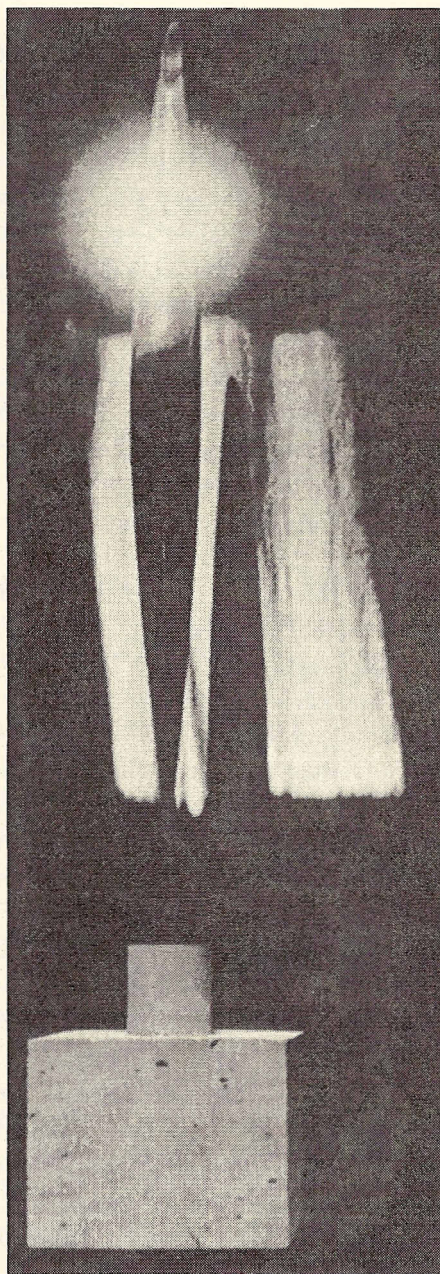
The psychological comparison of these three men for whom the mental image of the sun held such power is significant in terms of the ego. The synthetic quality of Alberti's genius fortified his ego. His humanist ability to assimilate antiquity with contemporary intellectual concerns and his personal life is reflected in the highly condensed character of his emblem. Van Gogh's genius sustained him only to the age of thirty-seven, when his final breakdown culminated in suicide. Schreber, despite his superior intelligence and legal training, tried but failed to kill himself. In his case, the synthetic function of the ego broke down completely, causing a hallucinatory regression.

Postscript: Brancusi's Sun

Brancusi repeated the motif of *Bird in Space* in nineteen marble and bronze sculptures [58]. In representing birds, these sculptures have a phallic quality;



58. Constantin Brancusi, *Bird in Space*.
Peggy Guggenheim Foundation, Venice.



59. Constantin Brancusi, *Bird in Space*.
Studio Photograph of

they are erect and "in space," but not in flight. They are fictively airborne, but literally immobilized.

According to Sidney Geist,³⁸ Brancusi's *Birds* were self-images, and their highly polished bronze surfaces were a symbolic way of standing up to his father as the sun. The reflection of the bronze countered the sun's light, much as Schreber and van Gogh believed in their ability to confront the sun directly. That Brancusi was at least partly aware of these hidden meanings is suggested by a photograph he made about 1928 of a bronze *Bird* reflecting sunlight in his studio [59]. Geist believes that this photograph concretizes and confirms the artist's need to "outface his father." That he does so indirectly, or in effigy, indicates the role of his *Birds* not only as self-images, but also as apotropaic devices. They symbolically defend him from the power of his "solar father."

NOTES

1. Freud, "On Dreams," S. E. V, 1901, p. 667.
2. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, S. E. V, 1900, p. 608.
3. Freud, "On Dreams," S. E. V, 1901, p. 674.
4. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, S. E. XVIII, 1920, pp. 7-64.
5. Published in 1923, *The Ego and the Id*.
6. S. E. V, 1901, p. 681.
7. Ernest Jones, "The Theory of Symbolism," in his *Papers on Psycho-Analysis*, London, 1950.
8. George Devereux, "The Self-Blinding of Oedipus in Sophokles: *Oedipous Tyrannos*," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* XCIII (1973): 36-49.
9. In Catherine Johns, *Sex or Symbol*, Austin, 1982, figure 51.
10. Bertram D. Lewin, "The Body as Phallus," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* II (1933): 24-47.
11. See Ernest Jones, "The Madonna's Conception through the Ear," in vol. 2 of his *Essays in Applied Psychoanalysis* (2 vols.), New York, 1964, pp. 266-357.
12. For a discussion of the eye/breast equation in a series of idols from Tell Brak, see Renato Almansì, "The Breast-Face Equation," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 8 (1951): 43-70.
13. For two studies of divination in Mesopotamia that consider the issue of the origins of dreams and omens, see Ann Guinan, "The Perils of High Living: Divinatory Rhetoric in Summa Alu," in Hermann Behrens, Darlene Loding, and Martha T. Roth, eds., *DUMU-E-DUB-BA-A: Studies in Honor of Ake W. Sjöberg*, Occasional Publications of the Samuel Noah Kramer Fund, 11, Philadelphia, 1989, pp. 227-35, and Ann Kessler Guinan, "The Human Behavioral Omens: On the Threshold of Psychological Inquiry," *BCSMS (Bulletin of the Canadian Society of Mesopotamian Studies)* 19, Toronto, 1990, pp. 9-13.
14. For this observation, I am indebted to Bradley Collins.
15. Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1968, p. 129.

16. Cf. Avigdor W. Poseq, "Bernini's Self-Portraits as David," *Source: Notes in the History of Art* IX, no. 4 (Summer 1990): 14–22.
17. Hibbard, *Caravaggio*, New York, 1983, p. 262.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 159.
19. For a discussion of the maternal subtext of this painting, see H. R. Graetz, *The Symbolic Language of Vincent Van Gogh*, London, 1963, p. 165.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 231.
21. Albert J. Lubin, *Stranger on the Earth*, New York, 1972, especially Chapter 12.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 221.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 207.
24. Freud, S. E. XII, 1911, pp. 9–82.
25. William G. Niederland, *The Schreber Case*, New York, 1974.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
27. Freud, "Notes on a Case of Paranoia," S. E. XII, 1911, pp. 80–82.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 80, fn. 4, and S. Reinach, *Cultes, mythes et religions*, vol. 3, p. 80, Paris, 1905–12, 4 vols.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
30. For references to other examples, see *ibid.*, p. 81 and fn. 2.
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 81–82.
32. Niederland, *The Schreber Case*, p. 87.
33. Cf. Renée Neu Watkins, "L. B. Alberti's Emblem, the Winged Eye, and His Name, Leo," *Mitteilungen des kunsthistorischen Instituts in Florenz* IX (1960): 256–58; and Laurie Schneider, "Leon Battista Alberti: Some Biographical Implications of the Winged Eye," *Art Bulletin* LXXII, no. 2 (June 1990): 261–58.
34. Watkins, "L. B. Alberti's Emblem," pp. 256–58.
35. Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, trans. J. Rykwert, N. Leach, and R. Tavernor, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1988, vol. VII, p. 2.
36. Leon Battista Alberti, in R. Fubini and A. M. Gallorini, eds., "L'autobiografia de Leon Battista Alberti. Studio e edizione," *Rinascimento* XXII (December 1971): 76.
37. Cf. Robert B. White in Niederland, *The Schreber Case*.
38. Sidney Geist, "Brancusi's *Bird in Space*: A Psychological Reading," *Source: Notes in the History of Art* III, no. 3 (Spring 1984): 24–32.