

Salvador Dalí or the Persistence of Memories --True and False

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"Salvador Dalí is not a trustworthy source of information about himself." So begins the introduction to Ian Gibson's 1997 biography, *The Shameful Life of Salvador Dalí*. From an early age, the painter consistently distorted the details of his life, and he encouraged interviewers to do the same by supporting the publication of his unsubstantiated verbal reminiscences (27). He did not like biographers, and perhaps the well-known, but false, versions of events disseminated by the painter himself in sources such as *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí* were his largely futile attempts to "forestall such meddlers" (27), and to put them on the wrong track. Another, more probable explanation of so much prevarication, according to Gibson, is the painter's desire to protect his standing as a somewhat mythical figure from mere mortals who might, either intentionally or inadvertently, destroy the Dalinian myth and rehumanize its hero.

He told lies, or at the very least consistently embellished the truth, in order to protect his status. Had he done the same to create it? A myth, by definition, concerns "some superhuman being or some alleged person or event, with or without a determinable basis of fact or natural explanation" (Webster 946). Was Salvador Dalí aware of the relative unimportance of truth as he went about creating his myths? Or had they simply sprung automatically and fully formed from either his unconscious or his dreams? What was the source of the heroic tales and legendary stories that he depicted on canvas and in print? Perhaps clues to the answers to these questions of truthful content can be found by examining the theory and the application of the painter's paranoiac-critical method, and the personal paranoia that lay beneath them.

Salvador Dalí, the would-be demigod, began his artistic career at the same time that the Spanish translations of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* and theories of infantile sexuality were beginning to circulate among Spanish intellectuals. It was also a time when André Breton and the Surrealists were pressing Freud's ideas into the service of a revolution that was seeking to liberate the imagination from the conscious mind and promote the unconscious as a quarry for poetic images. Dalí soon fell under the influence of Freud and the Surrealists in his quest to

depict on canvas the memories of his childhood and youth.

In a lecture given in Barcelona on March 22, 1930, Dalí talks about the relationship of psychoanalysis, the surrealist image, and paranoia, "a form of mental illness which [according to the painter,] consists in organizing reality in such a way as to make it serve for the control of an imaginative construct" (qtd. in Gibson 306). He describes a visual image that he had recently obtained through the paranoid process that could be perceived as both a woman and a horse, and suggests that by means of a "more violent paranoiac intensity," a third, fifth and perhaps, even thirtieth image might be obtained (306). He then muses that "it would be interesting to know what it is that the image really represents, which [version of it] is the truth" (306); and he concludes this part of the lecture wondering if "the images we have of reality are in fact a product of our paranoiac faculty" (306), instead of some mutually agreed-upon objective reality within which we all operate.

By the summer of 1930, Dalí had coined the phrase "paranoiac-critical thought," described it as "harnessing the paranoiac and active component of our thinking processes [so that] it will be possible (simultaneously with automatic procedures and other passive states) to systematize confusion and contribute to the total discrediting of the world of reality" ("The Rotten Donkey," qtd. in Gibson 308) (1), and declared the multiple image its primary visual manifestation.(2)

He continued to fine-tune the description and definition of his paranoiac critical method for several years. In an article published in 1933, he boasts that "el delirio paranoico constituye ya en sí mismo una forma de interpretación" (Sí 36); and in deference to the Surrealists, he stresses the importance of dreams in the process:

La irracionalidad general que se desprende del aspecto delirante de los sueños y de los resultados automáticos, unida a la coherencia creciente que presentan éstos a medida que su interpretación simbólica tiende a hacerse más perfectamente sincrónica con la actividad crítica, nos empujan, por necesidad lírica, a la reducción exacerbada hasta lo concreto de lo que nos ha sido suficientemente aclarado para que, de esos llamados delirios de exactitud obsesiva, podamos inferir la noción de *irracionalidad concreta* (Sí 34).

By 1935, in "La conquista de lo irracional," widely considered Dalí's definitive word on the subject, paranoiac critical activity is defined as: "[un] método espontáneo de conocimiento irracional basado en la asociación interpretativa-crítica de los fenómenos delirantes" that "traspasa tangiblemente el mundo mismo del delirio al plano de la realidad" (Sí 23). Additionally it is, "una fuerza organizadora y productora de azar objetivo" (23) and "se trata de la organización sistemático-interpretativa del sensacional material experimental surrealista

disperso y narcísico" (24). This statement is followed by a long list of potential sources of "acontecimientos surrealistas de la jornada" including "la polución nocturna, el falso recuerdo, el sueño, la fantasía diurna, la transformación concreta del fosfeno nocturno en imagen hipnagógica o del fosfeno del despertar en imagen objetiva, el antojo nutritivo, las reivindicaciones intrauterinas," (24), etc.

Ian Gibson speculates that Dalí's obsessive interest in creative activity based on paranoid thoughts may have resulted from a combination of two potential factors: his knowledge of a history of clinical paranoia in his own family, and his latent homosexuality. Gibson verified from Dalí's cousin, Montserrat, that by 1930, the painter was aware that his paternal grandfather, Gal, had been driven to suicide by paranoid delusions. In light of the sometimes explosive outbursts of his father and uncle, Gibson believes that the painter "must have wondered if he himself had not inherited a paranoiac tendency" (310). Secondly, Dalí was no doubt aware of Freud's statement in *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* that paranoia "regularly arises from an attempt to fend off excessively strong homosexual impulses" (qtd. in Gibson 310); and given his fears of being gay and of engaging in sexual activity of any kind, one can easily imagine the impact these words must have had on the painter. According to Gibson, the convergence of these two sources of paranoia may have led to the elaboration of the paranoiac-critical method which, "by confronting paranoia through its simulation, sought to bring the potential incidence of the disease under control" at the same time that it functioned as "a deliberate defence against a sexual temptation that racked [Dalí] with anxiety" (310).

Since the stated goal of the paranoiac-critical method is "the total discrediting of the world of reality," it comes as no surprise that the images generated by means of delirious phenomena have little or no basis in what is generally perceived as objective reality. To the contrary, there is widespread agreement concerning the falseness of images of reality arising from paranoid thought. (3) Dalí was not interested in the sole depiction of delirious phenomena that were true; he was interested in the depiction of delirious phenomena, in general, and as he began to portray episodes from his own past filtered through the prism of paranoid activity, Freud provided him with a perfect model of how to do this – a mythical model wherein truth and mendacity, and the accuracy of specific details, were secondary to the larger universal or irrational truth that he was striving to represent. Freud had appropriated the story of *Oedipus Rex* to interpret the "universal" and irrational desire of every young boy to murder his father and marry his mother, and Salvador Dalí would utilize a similar strategy to interpret the delirious and paranoid thoughts of his unconscious, and transfer them to the plane of irrational concreteness. Dalí's first myth, which he sometimes referred to as "Anti-Oedipal," was based on the legend of William Tell, the symbol of paternal authority who puts his son's life in mortal danger to prove himself as an archer and to win a bet. It is a tale of castration, which pre-empts and renders meaningless the Oedipal myth. It arises from obsessive thoughts that Dalí was

having in 1929 and the early 1930s, resulting from a crisis in his relations with his own father. Between 1929 and 1933, the painter produces several paintings bearing the name of the Swiss hero. However, as Dawn Ades points out in *Dalí*, "there is almost nothing apart from the titles which indicates that these paintings have anything to do with the legend of William Tell itself" (70). What the painter is doing, according to Ades, is following Freud's belief that legendary figures like Oedipus and Tell retain an inexplicable hold on the human imagination for generations because they are, at a deep level, embodiments of primeval dream material with a latent or 'real' content underlying the surface narrative. And without a doubt, the dream material/real content underlying the surface narrative in these paintings is related to Dalí's banishment from his family's home, which his father describes in a letter to Federico García Lorca in the following terms:

I do not know if you are aware that I had to throw my son out of the house. It has been extremely painful for all of us, but for dignity's sake it was essential to take such a tremendous decision. In one of the paintings of his Paris exhibition he committed the vile act of writing these insolent words: "I spit on my mother." Imagining that he was drunk when he wrote it, I asked him to explain himself. But he would not do so, and insulted all of us again. ... He is pathetic, ignorant and an incomparable pedant, as well as being totally shameless. ... He has even sunk to the level of accepting the money and food given to him by a married woman, who, with the consent and approval of her husband, is keeping him well fed until she finds something better. (Gibson 291).

The William Tell canvasses resulted from Dalí's attempt to systematize and make tangible the dangerously obsessive ideas regarding his father that were tormenting him during this difficult period. No sooner had he received the news of his banishment in December of 1929 than he shaved his head, placed a sea urchin on it, and had his friend, Luis Buñuel, photograph him, in this his first allusion to the legend of the menacing paternal symbol that was going to figure prominently in his work for the next few years.

In 1930 he painted *William Tell*, (<http://web2.infoguard.net/lubo/vision/gallery/dali/index.php?gallery=8#>) which was exhibited at the Pierre Colle Gallery in Paris the following June. Paul Moorhouse describes its obvious allusions to castration in his book, *Dalí*:

The hero has become a bearded father figure wielding a pair of scissors, his intent made apparent by the obsessive repetition of phallic references in the painting. His own penis and that of the horse are fully exposed and are echoed in the egg-cup motif on the plinth and the eggs in the nest.

The youth's genitals are concealed by a leaf, so that it is unclear whether castration is impending or has happened. The water gushing from the hole in the wall is, however, suggestive of mutilation (qtd. in Gibson 335).

This painting was followed by *The Youth of William Tell* and *The Old Age of William Tell*, both of which were exhibited by Colle in 1932. (*The old age of William Tell* <http://web2.infoguard.net/lubo/vision/gallery/dali/index.php?offset=7&gallery=8>) Unfortunately for fans of the William Tell myth, the whereabouts of the first canvas are unknown. Dawn Ades makes the following assessment of the second:

[t]he faint hints of an expulsion from the Garden of Eden in *William Tell* are made much more explicit in *The Old Age of William Tell*, where the young and sorrowing couple depart banished like Adam and Eve. But in place of paradise is the old man, the father, tended by two women, in a scene which recalls the story of Lot and his daughters [or the senior Dalí with his wife and sister-in-law]. Secret and ambiguous sexual activity takes place behind a sheet, as in a dimly recalled childhood memory" (70).

In 1933, Dalí produced two paintings titled *The Enigma of William Tell*. The smaller one has been lost, but was part of his first American exhibit, at Julien Levy's gallery in New York. It was reproduced in the fifth issue of the magazine, *Minotaure*, and appears to have been a companion piece to the *Spectre of Sex Appeal* (1932), with which it shared many common images.

(*Enigma of William Tell* <http://randomimage.us/23623.html?PHPSESSID=3e91b6f5b52bbd6cfd5e2f21549652ca>) The larger *Enigma*, the one with the face of Lenin and a grotesquely elongated buttock held up by a crutch was described by the painter himself in 1974: "Sigmund Freud has defined the hero as he who revolts against parental authority and ends by defeating it. *The Enigma of William Tell* was painted at the moment the young Dalí revolted against the authority of his father but didn't know whether he would be victor or vanquished" (qtd. in Ades 90). The father with the face of Lenin holds the baby Dalí in his arms. The child has a raw lamb chop on his head, about which, as Carlos Rojas points out, the painter has offered two different explanations: it symbolizes either his father's desire to devour the young, defenseless Dalí, or the sacrificial substitute that will replace the son at the moment of actual bloodletting (Rojas 147). Next to Tell's foot are two nuts that are about to be crushed. One is empty, but Gala is inside the other, suggesting, therefore, that the father was out to kill, not only his son, but his son's partner, as well (Gibson 378). (4)

In June of 1932, as Dalí's paranoid activity was becoming increasingly obsessive, evolving from the theme of castration to that of the death of the son and his beloved at the hands of the father, he received a visual image of an early

childhood memory (5) that would lead to the creation of *The Tragic Myth of Millet's Angelus* (1963), the book describing the origins of his second great myth, which also deals with the death of the son, although this time at the hands of the mother. The figures from the *Angelus* had begun to appear in Dalí's work as early as 1930 and would continue for several years in canvasses like *Meditation on the Harp* (1932-34) (*Meditation of the harp* http://www.salvadordalimuseum.org/collection/surreal/meditation_on_the_harp.p *The Atavism of Dusk* (1933-34) (http://www3.baylor.edu/~Jesse_Airaudi/Documents/Picturesfolder/DaliAtavismof and *Portrait of Gala* (1935); but it was not until the publication of his paranoiac-critical analysis of Millet's painting that the interested observer could begin to fully understand its significance in Dalí's work. He describes the initial vision or "phenomenon" in the following terms:

[T]he image of the *Angelus* of Millet suddenly appeared in my mind without any recent recollection or conscious association to offer an immediate explanation. This image was composed of a very clear visual representation and in colors. It was almost instantaneous and was not followed by other images. It left me with a profound impression, I was most upset by it, because, although in my vision of the aforementioned image everything "corresponded" exactly to the reproductions that I knew of the picture, it nevertheless "appeared to me" absolutely modified and charged with such a latent intentionality that the *Angelus* of Millet suddenly became for me the most troubling of pictorial works, the most enigmatic, the most dense, the richest in unconscious thoughts that had ever existed (*Angelus* 3).

This initial vision gave rise to a series of delirious secondary ones, none of which occurred while he was sleeping. These included such random phenomena as inadvertently arranging a group of small pebbles and stones to resemble the bowed figures of the two peasants, imagining that he saw them carved out of the sculptured rocks of Cape Creus, in northern Cataluña, and fantasizing them as sculptures of colossal dimensions as night fell during a visit with Gala to the hall of the insects in the Madrid Museum of Natural History. Suddenly, everywhere he looked, he saw the man and woman of Millet's painting.

While they increasingly became the focus of his delirious thoughts, he realized that he was not alone in his obsession with the painting. It was the subject of countless reproductions, and he began to encounter them more and more frequently in the world of objective reality. It was depicted on tombstones and postcards and was the subject of magazine cartoon parodies; and one day while driving through a village near Cadaqués, he caught a glimpse in a shop window of a coffee set that showed it on both sides of each little porcelain cup. As Dalí

himself said to his friends about all the *Angelus* sightings: "it's enough to drive you crazy" (19). He did not know how to reconcile this all-absorbing, undeniably violent delirious force that had taken over his imagination with the "miserable, tranquil, insipid, imbecilic, insignificant, stereotyped, and conventional to the most mournful degree" (40) nature of the original childhood memory. He finally arrived at the inevitable conclusion that "*something is happening*" (Dali's emphasis) in the painting. Like myths and legends, it had retained an inexplicable hold on the human imagination for several generations. Therefore, it had to possess an underlying, more universal meaning than what it depicted on its surface.

The majority of parts two and three of *The Tragic Myth of Millet's Angelus* are dedicated to the task of examining critically the chain of paranoid images that the painting spawns in Dali's mind, and their subsequent transformation into myth. He begins with the atmosphere, which he associates with some of his most delirious childhood recollections of pre-twilight and twilight, when he would go to the fields near his town, listen to the sounds of the insects and plunge himself into "infinite reveries" of the "tertiary age." He then considers "the expectant attitude of the woman." The longest chapter of the book is dedicated to the female figure and its bowed pose, which he calls the "prelude to imminent violence" (55). His paranoid thought processes conflate this figure with his recollection of the insects at twilight, and the result is a truly menacing figure: the female praying mantis poised to devour the male after mating with him. In comparison with the praying mantis, the male figure assumes an inferior position. Dali remembers a paranoiac-critical *Angelus* that he and André Breton had seen in some giant stone monoliths while on vacation in Sein (Finistère, Bretagne), and he is particularly vexed by the "evocation of the male figure so much smaller than that of the woman and entirely pierced by holes" (65). The small and perforated male returns him to the fantasy of himself and Gala in the hall of insects at the Natural History Museum. The lovers identify with the two figures, producing in Dali a terror corresponding to the terror of his own death which he had to suppose would be "the consequence of this ferocious act, eminently tragic and disproportionate to [his] physiological and vital capacities" (79). He admits here quite candidly that "[t]he fate of the male mantis had always seemed to me to illustrate my own case when faced with the act of love" (79).

His paranoid fantasies soon transform the praying mantis from lethal lover into murderous mother. The catalyst for this transformation is "the element of warm milk [which he confesses] very frequently intervenes in [his] fantasies" (83). In his delirious thoughts, he is troubled by the impulse to plunge the *Angelus* into a bucket of warm milk. At first he is not sure which figure would be submerged, but he soon concludes that it has to be the man. His paranoia then associates the submerged man with a baby kangaroo, drowning in milk in its mother's pouch. The praying mantis morphs into a mother kangaroo, and Dali states that "[t]he male figure in the *Angelus* plunged in warm milk is to me like the image of the buried man, drowned and dead in the maternal element, in the maternal warmth,

that warmth corresponding to the desirable side that reveals the original and dreaded eroticism to us" (88).

The small and perforated male figure, with whom the painter identified in the fantasy with Gala, is now a son as well as a lover. Similarly, the female figure (Gala in the earlier fantasy) is both lover and mother. "[T]he identification of Gala and [himself] with the couple in the *Angelus* is fulfilled" (88), because as the painter confesses: "Gala in reality took the place of my mother to whom I owe my terror of the sexual act and the belief that it would fatally bring about my total annihilation" (88).

In an attempt to explain why his mother is responsible for his fear of sex, he speculates that it must be the result of "a decisive traumatic incident of exceptional savagery that happened in my earliest childhood and was directly related to the Oedipus complex" (88). In the very next paragraph he writes: "In this particular case it is a question of a recollection or a 'false recollection' of my mother sucking or devouring my penis. The submersion of the person in the *Angelus*, that is to say of ME in the mother's milk, can only be interpreted as an expression of the fear of being absorbed, annihilated, eaten by my mother" (89).

(6)

It seems clear from his recollection of this memory -and his vacillation with respect to its factual accurateness- that for the purpose of myth creation, its veracity is of little or no importance. The myth is derived from a series of delirious phenomena originating from the same obsessive source. Dawn Ades calls it "a *tour de force* of mental disequilibrium" (143), adding that, in spite of his claim of totally discrediting the world of reality, the painter has utilized his paranoiac-critical method to formulate "an objective interpretation of the painting based on his own personal neurotic sexual fear, or rather unexpectedly awakened memories of it" (144).

Dalí has created the companion piece to his legend of William Tell, and has completed his metamorphosis from young artist with paranoid tendencies into larger than life mythic hero and depicter of universal primal fears. The *Angelus's* hold on the public is explained; and more importantly, for his own peace of mind, the painter has succeeded in systematizing and concretizing some of his most delirious childhood "memories." The son, who was in danger of imminent destruction at the hands of his father, is ultimately devoured by the cannibalistic mother, while would-be biographers and other Dalí scholars are left to ponder in bemusement where the facts end and paranoid fantasy begins.

Notes

(1). It is here that he begins to part company with the Surrealists and their project – articulated in the first *Surrealist Manifesto* - to bring about "the future

resolution of these two states, dream, and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality a *surreality*" (qtd. in Ades 98). Dalí, on the other hand, as Dawn Ades points out "wanted to maintain the opposition between reality and surreality, between the irrational and the rational, not bring about a future resolution" (98).

(2). During the 1930s Dalí painted many canvasses containing double images. *Invisible Sleeping Woman, Horse, Lion; The Invisible Man; and The Endless Enigma* are a few examples. It is interesting to note, notwithstanding, that very few of these images figure prominently in the William Tell or *Angelus* paintings.

(3). *The Language of Psychoanalysis* provides the following definition of paranoia: "[c]hronic psychosis characterised by more or less systematised delusion, with a predominance of ideas of reference but with no weakening of the intellect and, generally speaking, no tendency towards deterioration" (296).

(4). The William Tell theme appears in additional paintings and in Dalí's poem "The Great Masturbator." For an extensive analysis of this topic, the reader is referred to the chapter, "Guillermo Tell," in Carlos Rojas's *El mundo mítico y mágico de Salvador Dalí*.

(5). A reproduction of the painting had hung in the hallway outside the classroom of his elementary school in Figueres.

(6). An x-ray of the *Angelus* taken at Dalí's request reveals the presence of a black shape below the surface of the ground in the painting, that Millet chose to delete from the finished canvas. Dalí, insisting that its presence helps to explain the public's longstanding fascination with the painting, is convinced that it is the coffin of the dead son.

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