

Salvador Dalí: A Few Leitmotifs

Sources

- Lubar, Robert S. *The Salvador Dalí Museum Collection*. Bulfinch, 2000.
- occasional websites

Jean-Francois Millet's "Angelus" (1857-59)

- The Angelus (Latin for "angel") is an old devotion in honor of Christ's incarnation which originated with the 11th-century monastic custom of reciting three Hail Marys during the evening bell.. The name comes from the opening words: Angelus Domini nuntiavit Mariæ ("... the Angel of the Lord declared unto Mary ...") and is practised by reciting as versicle and response three Biblical verses describing the mystery
- "what Dalí's paranoiac interpretation uncovers in the Angelus as the basis for its universal appeal is: 'the maternal variant of the immense and atrocious myth of Saturn, of Abraham, of the Eternal Father with Jesus Christ and of William Tell devouring their own son'. This maternal phantasm, first espied in the etchings, emerges from behind the shadow of Oedipus into brilliant, technicolour daylight in the Spectre of Sex Appeal. (Davis Loma's The haunted self: surrealism, psychoanalysis, subjectivity)

Ants

- The Font (1930): "the substitution of a horde of ants for the mouth, which resembles a pubis, simultaneously serves to represent and conceal the object of the child's anxiety" (Lubar 59).

Crutches

- "In *The Secret Life*, Dalí described the crutch as a symbolic support: 'I inaugurated the "pathetic crutch,"' Dalí informs the reader, 'the prop of the first crime of my childhood, as the all-powerful, and exclusivist post-war symbol—crutches to support the monstrous development of certain atmospheric-cephalic [pertaining to the head] skulls, crutches to immobilize the ecstasy of certain attitudes of rare elegance, crutches to make architectural and durable the fugitive pose of a choreographic leap, to pin the ephemeral butterfly of the dancer with pins that would keep her poised for eternity.' The reference to childhood memories establishes a complex psychoanalytic provenance for the symbol, while shedding considerable light on Dalí's adult relationship with Gala. In 'The Story of the Linden-Blossom Picking and the Crutch,' a semi-apocryphal 'True Childhood Memory' from *The Secret Life*, Dalí narrates the circumstances of his 'first crime.' The event takes place in the orchard of the Pitchot family estate, El Molí de la Torre, during the gathering of the linden blossoms. Three peasant women, one with particularly 'turgescant breasts,' take their place on ladders that are erected under the trees, while a fourth figure, a girl of twelve (that is, a 'child-woman'), captivates the young painter. Dalí instantly falls in love with the girl, christening her Dullita, the same name as that of another childhood sweetheart. In Dalí's mind, Dullit and her incarnation, Dullita Rediviva, fuse with that of a third fantasy woman, Galuchka, a retrospectively invented image of Gala herself. 'The three images of my delirium mingled in the indestructible amalgam of a single and unique love-being,' Dalí writes. As if to draw nearer to the object of his desire, whose back is turned to him, Dalí gently touches Dullita with a crutch he discovered days earlier in the attic of Sr. Pitchot's house, fantasizing that the instrument is his scepter [penis?]. His response to Dullita, however, is filled with ambivalence: 'Dullita with a single moment of her presence had come to trouble, annihilate and ruin the architecture of the narcissistic temple of my divine solitude. . . .' the scepter/crutch, then, functions as a fetish object and a symbolic support for Dalí's ego, which is threatened with annihilation through (con)fusion with Dullita, his love object. Dalí in turn links this threat to the idea of abjection—a kind of foreclosure of the self—in an episode concerning a maggot-infested, dead hedgehog, which he pokes with the crutch, robbing his kingly scepter of its magic and transforming it into a 'frightful object synonymous with death'" (Lubar, 80).
- "Dalí devises an elaborate ruse whereby he coaxes the woman to mount her ladder and disentangle his toy top from a rose vine climbing the front of the house: 'If the blossom-picker were to set up her ladder close to this window and climb up to a given height,' he plots, 'I should be able to see her breasts set in the frame of the window as if altogether isolated from the rest of her body, and I would then be in a position to observe them with all the voracity of my glance without feeling any shame lest my desire be discovered or observed by anyone. While I looked at the breasts I would exercise a caressing pressure by means of my crutch's bifurcation upon one of the hanging melons, while attempting to have a perfect consciousness of its weight by slightly lifting it.' The story is a kind of origin myth for the coming into being of subjectivity . . . Dalí can only indulge the fantasy for so long. By the end of the narrative, he overcomes his aggression toward Dullita/Dullita Rediviva/Galuchka/Gala,

and through his love object, establishes a new sense of self. The final image finds the couple on the rooftop of Sr. Pitchot's tower at sunset. The figures 'merge' symbolically through the sacrifice of the toy top [which Dalí had placed in a rose vine so that the woman would have to mount a ladder to reach it], which Dalí hurls into empty space, and the crutch is magically transformed from a 'symbol of death' into a 'symbol of resurrection!'" (Lubar 80).

Eggs, Fried

- *Oeufs sur le Plat sans le Plat* (1932): "Dalí mused over the extended associations of fried eggs in *The Secret Life*, linking their presence in his work to a fantasy of intrauterine regression: "[T]he intrauterine paradise was the color of bell, that is to say, red, orange, yellow, and bluish, the color of flames, of fire; above all it was soft, immobile, warm, symmetrical, double, gluey. Already at that time all pleasure, all enchantment for me was in my eyes, and the most splendid vision was that of a pair of eggs fried in a pan, without the pan; to this is probably due that perturbation and that emotion which I have since felt, the whole rest of my life, in the presence of this ever-hallucinatory image. The eggs, fried in the pan, without the pan, which I saw before my birth were grandiose, phosphorescent and very detailed in all the folds of their faintly bluish whites. These two eggs would approach (toward me), recede, move toward the left, toward the right, upward, downward; they would attain the iridescence and the intensity of mother-of-pearl fires, only to diminish progressively and at last vanish. The fact that I am still able today to reproduce at will a similar image, though much feebler, and shorn of all the grandeur and the magic of that time, by subjecting my pupils to a strong pressure of my fingers, makes me interpret this fulgurating image of the eggs as being a phosphene, originating in similar pressures: those of my fists closed on my orbits, which is characteristic of the foetal posture" (Lubar 71).
- "On the one hand, the egg represents the embryonic child in the womb, protected by its maternal container. But it is also an image associated with the male anatomy, signifying testicles (in Castilian, *buevos* [eggs] is slang for "balls"). What is more, the yolk of the egg suggests the brilliant light of the sun, which is both a source of life and a catalyst for delirium: to gaze upon the sun is to risk blindness, insanity, even death" (Dalí 71).

Eyes (Bleeding)

- *La Main* (1930): a clear reference to the eyes of Oedipus (Lubar 61).
- "Memor of the Child-Woman" (1931): "bleeding eyes of the statue (an obvious allusion to the eyes of Oedipus and the castration complex" (Lubar 67).

Fish

- "it should be kept in mind that Dalí maintained the association of fish head/woman/phallus in *The First Days of Spring* of 1929 (cat. no. 34), where the fish alludes to both male and female genitalia, and constructed one of his first "Objects of Symbolic Functioning" in 1931 using a woman's high-heeled shoe. IN all three works, the fetishistic implications of the leg, shoe, fish, and bird (traditionally a surrogate for female genitalia) locate meaning within the arena of abjection and sexual perversion pathologized by Freud and Krafft-Ebing but championed by Dalí and the French surrealists" (Lubar 47).
- *The First Days of Spring* (1929): "the anxiety of sexual awakening . . . inscribed . . . by means of sexual symbols that are drawn from Freud's writings: the phallic form of a fish whose head protrudes from a fantastic jug with female attributes . . ." (Lubar 55).

Gala

- *Portrait of Gala* (1932-33): "Gala entered Dalí's art shortly after their first meeting, although the so-called *First Portrait of Gala* was not painted until 1931, and her image did not appear with any regularity until 1933. Initially, Gala's presence in Dalí's painting was symbolic: many of the artist's psychoanalytic narratives relating to themes of castration, Oedipal guilt, and paternal retribution were conceived in response to his anxieties about sexual initiation" (Lubar 78).
- "The many pet names he had for her, including Gradiva, Noisette Poilue (hairy hazelnut), and Lionete (little lion), suggest the multivalent nature of his identification with Gala, whom Dalí imagined as both a primal mother *and* a paternal imago, an omniscient figure without gender. In *Portrait of Gala*, the artist's muse appears as the all-powerful phallic mother, commanding the foreground space of the tiny oil painting in front of a brilliantly illuminated olive tree, which, like the burning bush of biblical narrative, suggests the force of Gala's presence" (Lubar 78).

Grasshoppers

- *Profanation of the Host* (1929-30): “Grasshoppers, which Dalí associated with abjection and horror, are strategically appended to the central structure and to the faces of three of the masturbators” (Lubar 57).
- *The Font* (1930): “A sign of abject terror, the grasshopper has phallic associations for Dalí and, like the fish, is a bisexual creature” (Lubar 60).

The Great Masturbator (Self-Portrait)

- *La Main (Les Remords de conscience)* (1930): “By 1927, Dalí had begun to explore the theme of autoeroticism as a subject in visual representation, executing a series of paintings over the next two years in which onanism is associated with putrefaction and the mortification of the flesh. With *La Main*, Dalí joined the subject of masturbation to an ever more complex narrative of sexual anxiety and Oedipal guilt, using the broad themes of psychoanalytic theory to bracket his perverse fantasies” (Lubar 60).
- *La Main (Les Remords de conscience)* (1930): “Yet the physical appearance of the bearded masturbator also suggests that he identifies with the father, whose power he must overcome if he is to achieve union with the idealized female figure behind him, a Medusa-like creature who threatens the masturbator with castration and death” (Lubar 60).

Heads, Bald and/or Hydrocephalic

- “The Average Bureaucrat” (1930): “Upon receiving word on December 6, 1929, of his expulsion from the family home, Dalí shaved his head in an act of defiance against the threat of symbolic castration. Over the next four years he produced a series of paintings in which the image of the father obsessively dominated his subject matter in the form of mythical and historical figures (William Tell, Lenin, civil servants, the grasshopper child, members of the family group from Jean-Francois Millet’s *Angelus*, and, later, Sigmund Freud) with grotesquely enlarged, often distorted, bald heads, or hydrocephalic, anamorphic skulls. Referring at once to the threat of emasculation by a ruthless father and the sublimation of unresolved Oedipus desires, these disturbing paintings collectively explore the theme of masochism: the desire for and resistance to symbolic incorporation and authoritarian control” (Lubar 62).

Hermaphrodite

- *Memory of the Child-Woman* (1931): “Signs of the Oedipal drama abound in Dalí’s great painting. The hermaphroditic bust that emerges from the biomorphic structure in the center recalls the mythical phallic mother, in whose omnipotence, Freud argued, the male child believes until the anxious moment of sexual identity formation, when he discovers the mother lacks a penis. According to Freud, the primal scene sets into motion a complex fantasy of castration for the young male child, who attempts to allay his fears through a process of recognition and disavowal of maternal difference.

Key

- *The Font* (1930): “The key is in turn a conventional symbol of the Freudian unconscious (note the presence of keys, screws, ants, and a woman’s head painted in the curious object on the lower right in conjunction with an image of ideal feminine beauty in the form of a French postage stamp representing Marianne)” (Lubar 60).
- *Memory of the Child-Woman* (1931): “two large keys—phallic symbols in Freud’s lexicon—and a fountain spouting water from a partially exposed plaster wall suggest the act of coitus” (Lubar 68).

Lion

- *The Font* (1930): “The stylized lion to the right of the couple represents the father, the sign of paternal authority under which this nightmarish scene of desire, guilt, and retribution is enacted” (Lubar 60).

Medusa

- *The Font* (1930): “the serpentine coils of the figure’s hair, in conjunction with her stony, petrified countenance, allude to the myth of Medusa, which Freud interpreted in relation to the male child’s recognition and disavowal of the mother’s absence of a penis and the corresponding threat of his own emasculation” (Lubar 59).

Moon

- *The Ram* (1928): “*The Ram* foreshadows the inaugural filmic metaphor in *Un Chien andalou*, in which a man on a balcony looks out at the moon as a thin cloud cuts across its path. Symbolizing the romantic love, the moon/cloud metaphor is then transformed in a horrific sequence in which the camera zooms in on a woman’s eye as it is sliced by a razor blade. Indeed, a similar contrast of sentimentality with horror and abjection is suggested in *The Ram*, in which the profile of a face is transposed over a full moon beside the emaciated ram and the carcass of a rotting bird in the center foreground” (Lubar 52).

Pen & Inkwell

- *Catalan Bread* (1932): “[the painting] plays on the idea of sexual difference, or, more precisely, the collapse of gender boundaries. The pen and inkwell are conventional Freudian attributes for male and female, pointing us toward the bisexual ideal” (Lubar 73).

Putrefaction

- “Over the course of 1928, Dalí executed a series of paintings of rotting fish, birds, and donkeys in which the idea of the “putrefacto” took on new and more complex meanings. From its original conception as a term of harmless derision designating cultural provincialism, staid bourgeois manners, and excessive sentimentality, it came increasingly to signify an almost exalted state of abjection, decay, and perversion in direct opposition to the bourgeois social order. By July 1930, under the full impact of surrealism, Dalí went so far as to include putrefaction among the three great simulacra (in addition to excrement and blood) as agents of systematic demoralization (Lubar 47).

Roses

- *Memory of the Child-Woman* (1931): “the roses refer to female genitalia” (Lubar 68).

Spoon

- *Suez* (1932): “the image of an elongated spoon, stretching like a tightrope across an enormous canal or trench, is clearly implicated in Dalí’s theories of psychic cannibalism and ‘edible beauty.’ The curiously ‘bisexual’ form of the soft spoon in *Suez* has scatological associations. A phallic container of sorts, the spoon is the object through which Dalí links ideas about sexual regression and the symbolic death of the gendered (social) subject to acts of physical ingestion and the loss of boundaries between the interior and exterior worlds” (Lubar 68).

Steps

- *The First Days of Spring* (1929): “the presence of steps in deep shadow, a classic Freudian reference to sexual intercourse (Lubar 55).

Trees, Cyprus

- *Suez* (1932): “The cypress trees in the background, a motif Dalí borrowed from the German artist Arnold Böcklin, signify death, while three limp pieces of cloth allude to formlessness and dissolution” (Lubar 69-70).

Vagina & Penis

- *Anthropomorphic Beach* (fragment) (1928): “The hairy finger pointing upward toward a soft, blood-red piece of sponge leaves little room for the imagination, as the finger/phallus association achieves its most concrete form to date in Dalí’s work” (Lubar 51).

Watches

- *Memory of the Child-Woman* (1931): “while a lithographic print of stop watches in the lower right indicates the contrary, arrested sexual activity and/or the persistence of amorous memories” (Lubar 68).

Water, Running

- “suggests a dual sacrifice, pointing us toward a narrative of guilt and repressed desire as the latent subject of the painting. Indeed, Dalí would explore this theme more overtly in his scandalous bather compositions of 1928 (cat. nos. 28 and 29).
- *Memory of the Child-Woman* (1931): “two large keys—phallic symbols in Freud’s lexicon—and a fountain spouting water from a partially exposed plaster wall suggest the act of coitus” (Lubar 68).