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THE MADNESS OF SALVADOR DALI

Charles I. Glicksberg

IT IS STRANGE that the United States, though indifferent to the Surrealist craze, should have paid homage to the extraordinary personality of Salvador Dali and welcomed his art. Surrealism in the United States—that is, in one sense, a stupendous paradox. It marks a violent reaction against specialization in mechanics and the worship of speed, efficiency, power. But our machine civilization—the serrated silhouette of skyscrapers against the Manhattan horizon, the delicate webbed structure of suspension bridges, the whirl of dynamos, the manufacture of atomic bombs at Oak Ridge—is in itself a Surrealist phenomenon.

Surrealist art represents a revolt against standardization, rationalism, the hegemony of pragmatic values. It suggests the fantastic; it stresses the irrational and the abnormal in the midst of our megalopolitan, technological culture. The creative personality of the Surrealist surrenders to the life of untrammelled imagination as expressed in line and color, in metaphor and myth. Nature, the city, machinery, moonlight, snow, faces, people, are given a Surrealist interpretation. The artist restores the swan to its primordial purity of form and grace of motion; the internal agitation of a fluid is conceived abstractly so that it is utterly unlike any perceptual object. The ego, the creative unconscious, animates everything: insects, symbols, objects, colors, shapes. Salvador Dali creates such enigmatic paintings as “Uranium and Atomica Melancholica Idyll,” in which the unconscious portrays how matter reacts when subjected to the choking pressure of space, and “Napoleon’s Nose Transformed into a Pregnant Woman, Strolling His Shadow with Melancholia among Original Ruins.”

Salvador Dali is the anarchist among the Surrealists, the one who will brook no orthodoxy, not even in the camp of the irrational. He is

mad, he declares, and therefore a genius. Eccentric, unpredictable, irrepressible, he has been repudiated by the leaders of the Surrealist movement, but this has in no way checked his flair for the sensational, his mania for incessantly publicizing the greatness of Dali. Like his paintings, his poetry and fiction and autobiography are a "scientifically" planned demonstration of madness in action, madness as a creative method.

The Secret Life of Salvador Dali speaks of a Dalinian philosophy, but the philosophy that emerges in this amazing autobiography makes neither rhyme nor reason, nor is it meant to do any such thing. The revolt against the rational and the intelligible constitutes one of Dali's chief claims to originality. This autobiography marks another milestone in Dali's career of mystification and simulated madness. Now busily adapting Surrealism to literary as well as pictorial ends, he assumes any attitude, commits any action, however grotesque or abnormal, which sustains his power-hungry ego. Crowned imp of the perverse, he stretches the spirit of contradiction to the limit. His narcissism is cosmic in its scope.

If he yields to any discipline or principle of order, it is only because he fears that he may be destroyed by the conflict of his inordinate desires. If he could only gratify simultaneously the most contradictory and perverse desires, pain and pleasure, cruelty and compassion, eroticism and asceticism, love and hate, religious faith and monstrous blasphemy, sadism and masochism, he would be satisfied, though probably not for long. Since that is impossible, he will pour forth, in *The Secret Life of Salvador Dali*, the uncensored contents of his tormented soul. Here is a frightening human portrait, the confession of a morbidly confused and pathological genius. In watching his tortuous introspections, the rise and consummation of his illicit desires, the obsessional and fetichistic character of his unconscious mind, the reader begins to understand some of the workings of the Surrealist aesthetic. Salvador Dali, as artist and writer, may not be typical—for that matter, can there be a typical Surrealist?—but he does possess sufficient genius, or the simulacrum of genius, to hold us fascinated, even though we may suspect that frequently he is perpetrating a hoax.

A fanatic who submits to the tyranny of his imagination, a slave to his capricious impulses, Salvador Dali leads a completely introverted existence. Endowed with the delicate sensibility of the Spanish temper-

ament, he composes drawings that remind one at times of another "possessed" artist, El Greco, though they lack his religious intensity of vision. For Dali's curse is that he is mystical without having undergone the first stage of the mystical discipline—the annihilation of the oppressive self. Fantastically egocentric, he is ruled by an almost infantile faith in the omnipotence of thought. Just as at school he would hurl himself down a flight of stairs in order to create a tremendous impression, so today he indulges in sensational stunts (all dictated, of course, by the fiat of the unconscious) in order to make the public realize that he is Salvador Dali. Willful, hypersensitive, satanic, he is, like a spoiled child, a law unto himself. There is a method, however, to his madness. His perversions, his rages, his sudden, uncontrollable impulses, his gratuitous acts of cruelty, his diabolism, his paranoiac obsessions, are all measured for the dramatic effect they will produce. Salvador Dali, cashing in on the creative value of mental disease at this hour of history, plays his part to perfection.

A rebel since childhood, he is against everything on principle determined to do things differently from others, resolved at all costs to exalt his unique ego. Here is a characteristic expression of the individualism that gave birth to the cult of unintelligibility in literature and art and to the deification of the irrational. Whatever Salvador Dali did had to be different—different even from Surrealism. In fact, he considered himself the only real Surrealist painter. He excoriates the "idealist narrowness" of André Breton, the founder of the Surrealist movement because he ventured to criticize a Dali painting which contained scatological elements. What difference, asks Dali grandly, can there be between excrement and a piece of rock crystal when both spring from the common soil of the unconscious? And he is emphatically right if we accept his peculiar logic, the logic of the unconscious. If Surrealism is the free, unfettered expression of the unconscious, and excrement is one of its products, then it must be accepted without reservations. Was Salvador Dali not reproducing with Surrealist fidelity his paranoiac images, his automatic feelings and visions?

His psychic aberrations afforded irrefutable proof of his mad genius. His fighting motto was "The irrational for the sake of the irrational," but when he saw what was happening to him as the result of his attempting to live by this motto, he later changed it into another slogan, more in conformity with what he is pleased to call the Catholic

essence: "The Conquest of the Irrational." But if the irrational is progressively conquered—and what else has civilized man been engaged in doing through the centuries?—what then becomes of Surrealism?

There was no other alternative for Dali but to turn against Surrealism when it hardened into an "official" movement and became infected with a political ideology. He was disgusted with the political activities of the Surrealist group, its militant espousal of "pure" Communism. Taking stock of his resources, he resolved to let nothing—neither friends nor sects nor politics—stand in the way of his individual fulfillment. Collectivism spelled death. His solution was to remain, as ever, intransigently and incorruptibly alone. Yet his aloneness had to fortify itself with the trappings of tradition. After the cataclysm of the Second World War, which he declares he foresaw, there would arise, he believes, on the ashes of Europe "only an individualist tradition that would be Catholic, aristocratic, and probably monarchic. . . ."

He sees clearly enough the malaise of his age, the sickness from which it suffers without hope of recovery. It is dying "of moral scepticism and spiritual nothingness." Material progress, the cult of the machine, the triumph of scientific positivism, have destroyed the hierarchy of the spirit. Mechanical civilization will be swept away by a supremely destructive war. Voicing a profound hatred of humanitarianism and rationalism, he upholds the aristocratic, the irrational, the mysterious. Dali alone will live. Surrealism was Dali's spiritual child; Dali was the supreme incarnation of Surrealism. He was mad but his madness was creative. The only difference between him and the insane, he asserts, is that he is not insane.

The character of the man reveals itself in his reactions when the world was on the brink of war. When civil war broke out in Spain, his mother country, he remained unconcerned. He would not take sides. He would remain faithful only and always to the Dalinian self. And what did Dali do while his countrymen were locked in a death-struggle? He traveled in Italy so that he might devote himself completely to his work of "esthetic cosmogony and synthesis." The phenomena of war and revolution intensified his aesthetic passion, "and while my country was interrogating death and destruction, I was interrogating that other sphinx, of the imminent European 'becoming,' that of the Renaissance. I knew that after Spain, all Europe would sink into a war as a consequence of the communist and fascist revolutions, and from the

poverty and collapse of collectivist doctrines would arise a medieval period of reactualization of individual, spiritual and religious values." Dali the Surrealist had at last come to the realization that the one thing needful for the salvation of mankind was to revitalize the theology of the Middle Ages. While the world lay plunged in a sea of blood and death, he reaffirmed his faith in the wonder-working efficacy of magic, Dalinian magic. In the midst of chaos and horror, his sole thought was to escape the net of history, to salvage his artistic genius, for fear that his unique originality would be impaired. Therefore, without any regard for the flagrant contradictions involved in the irrational leap, he embraced the Catholic essence. Since Nazism and Communism would both be swallowed up by the Catholic, European tradition, his religious synthesis, as he formulated it, was rooted "in the real and unfathomable force of the philosophic Catholicism of France and in that of the militant Catholicism of Spain." That sets the seal of opportunism on his erratic but shrewdly calculated career.

The Secret Life of Salvador Dali brilliantly exemplifies the statement by Arthur Rimbaud: "I end by finding the disorder of my mind sacred." This Surrealist autobiography is the Bible of disorder, the apotheosis of the abnormal. It is an exhibitionistic dance, a delirious monologue, a nightmare of narcissism. With exultant pride he describes his fetichistic impulses, his phobias and obsessions. One day he suggested a "thinking-machine," which would consist of a rocking chair from which would hang numerous goblets of warm milk. This was more than Louis Aragon, the French novelist and poet who subsequently seceded from the Surrealist movement and became a staunch Communist, could stand. Indignantly he cried out: "Enough of Dali's fantasies!" It was more urgent to provide milk for the children of the unemployed.

Surrealism is not only the negation of reason and meaning, it is also the symbolic enactment of suicide. Indeed, many Surrealists have agreed that suicide is a way out, and some were sufficiently "logical" in their behavior to act on this conviction. That was the Surrealist culmination of their anti-social, life-denying, and destructive activities. But not Salvador Dali. He believed too strongly in his divine mission. Let civilization perish, if it must be. Long live Dali! It is always Dali, Dali, Dali—a litany of autistic praise, a monomaniacal refrain of self-glorification. He is the symbol of a neurasthenic age.

Having fed on the work of Sigmund Freud, he immediately identi-

fied himself with all the major clinical symptoms described in the literature of psychoanalysis. Dali, in telling the story of his call on Freud in London, just before the founder of psychoanalysis died, unwittingly writes a fitting epitaph on the tombstone of Surrealism, which is rejected by both the Marxists and the Freudians. Freud said that in classic paintings he looks for the subconscious, but "in a surrealist painting, for the conscious." That epigram exposes the limitations and defects of the movement. The Surrealists, despite all their professions to the contrary, are the *conscious* explorers of the unconscious.

Dali's knowledge of Freudian literature helped him to cultivate his mania for introspection, his habit of investing the most trifling and fortuitous incident with occult significance. He loves to indulge in hyperbole and paradox. The bird, he declares in a footnote, "always awakens in man the flight of the cannibal angels of his cruelty." And this is supposed to explain and justify his delight in crunching a bird's tiny skull. Food, sleep, dreams, reveries, leaves, pieces of wood, clouds, towers, shoes, bread, caverns, trees, especially certain kinds of trees, exercise a potent spell on his creative unconscious. In painting he materialized the phantoms of his weird imagination, making them as vivid and real as tangible objects. Destined, as he puts it, to a truculent eccentricity in art, he derived immense satisfaction from constructing surrealist objects. Once with fanatical pertinacity he busied himself with fashioning a "hypnagogic clock," which consisted of a huge loaf of French bread on a pedestal. While eating snails one day he professed to discover the morphological secret of Freud: namely, that Freud's cranium was exactly that of a snail. One chapter of his autobiography, entitled "Intra-Uterine Memories," develops the theory Otto Rank expounded in his book, *The Trauma of Birth*. In his florid style, Dali announces that the imaginative life of man symbolically reconstructs the paradisaical state of the embryo in the womb; the aim of art is to transcend "the trauma of birth."

Dali's philosophy of aesthetics, his relation to Freudianism, the interpretation he gives of his paintings, the analysis he makes of his own personality, contribute appreciably to our knowledge of the Surrealist movement, whose aberrations, to be understood, must be studied in the cultural context of the contemporary scene. The art of the irrational is the child of intellectual despair. The discovery of chance as a creative principle signified the end of the socially responsible, richly endowed

artist. Everything else has failed us, these rebellious Surrealists declare. Let us therefore drift and perhaps the winds of chance and the oceanic tides of the unconscious will bear us to the Happy Isles where, recovering our lost innocence of vision, we shall find unsuspected treasure of beauty. Dada, the spirit of absolute negation, came before Surrealism. Surrealism as embodied in Dali's ambition to portray concrete irrationality is sprung from the loins of Dada.

Salvador Dali's first novel, *Hidden Faces*, is, as might be expected, no novel but an exfoliation of the author's personality, a *tour de force*. It probes the sources of pleasure and pain, hatred and fear, perversion and loneliness, magic and ennui. There is little portrayal of character by means of action; all we get is states of mind, shifting, intensely presented in a fluid, euphuistic prose. The novel has its historical antecedents in the work of Sade, Huysman, Baudelaire, Lautreamont, the whole school of the "decadents." Though filled with a Surrealist content, the novel is given depth by Dali's insight into the weaknesses of the people constituting the upper strata of French society before its "fall" in 1940: the weary, the sophisticated, the selfish, and the cynical, the jaded seekers after unusual sensual pleasures, the pederasts, the smokers of opium, the political mountebanks. There are no wholesome human and social relationships in these pages, no satisfaction in love, no spontaneous giving, no real happiness, no wisdom and no faith, only the horror of existence and a terrifying boredom.

The satanic yet majestic personality of Grandsailles, his perversions and obsessions, his indulgence in magic, his erotic adventures: these form the basis of a rambling, inchoate novel couched in a turgid baroque style. Every page is pitched in a high key. The sentences writhe in the throes of delirium; the words are steeped in the juice of fantasy and passion. The plot unwinds like a hideous serpent in a garden of chimeras. Now and then realistic details are introduced: the Resistance movement in France, the heroic quality of the French peasants, the pathological character of Hitler, the political intrigues in North Africa; but the story for the most part moves in an atmosphere far removed from reality. Here is a sample of his inflated prose. He is reflecting on the events in Paris before the Munich Pact. France slept a drugged dream of forgetfulness. Everyone suffered from *folie d doute*: Hitler alone was decisive in his actions.

Confronting the hell of the inevitable reality each being, guided by his regressive desire of intra-uterine protection, shut himself up in the paradise cocoon that the caterpillar of their prudence had woven with the soothing saliva of amnesia. No more memory—only the chrysalis of the moral pain of things to come, nourished by the famine of future absences, by the nectar of facts, and the leaven of heroisms dressed in the immaterial banners of sterile sacrifices and armed with the infinitely sensitive antennae of martyrdom. This chrysalis of misfortune begins to stir, for it is getting ready to burst the silk walls of the prison of its long insensibility, to appear at last in the unparalleled cruelty of its metamorphosis at the hour and at the exact moment which will be signalled to it by the first canon (*sic*) shot. Then an unheard-of being, unheard-of beings, will be seen to rise, their brains compressed by sonorous helmets, their temples pierced by the whistling of air waves, their bodies naked, turned yellow by fever, pocked by vegetable stigmata swarming with insects and running down a skin tiger-striped and leopard-spotted by the gangrene of wounds and the leprosy of camouflage, their swollen bellies plugged to death by electric umbilical chords, tangling with the ignominiousness of torn intestines and bits of flesh, roasting on the burning steel carapaces of the punitive tortures of gutted tanks.

This is the Armageddon as pictured by the febrile imagination of a Surrealist. The war appears to Dali in the image of the ruthless warfare of primordial nature when ineluctable laws of the jungle operated to wipe numerous species off the face of the earth. Men are like insects, and Dali likes to conceive his characters as praying mantidae. Though they may come together in the fury of passion, desire will not assuage their loneliness nor save them from destruction.

Hidden Faces is but another chapter in Salvador Dali's career of self-revelation. His exhibitionistic frenzy is incurable—and intolerable. His paintings and photographs, his autobiography and fiction, illustrate the twin themes of sexual perversion and necrophilia. He loves to paint faces of the dead, the decaying corpses of animals, mutilated skulls, dead donkeys putrefying on the top of grand pianos. What if he is an excellent draftsman? His work, both in pigment and prose, is a methodical defiance of the norms of sanity, an attack on life itself. George Orwell, in *Dickens, Dali & Others*, condemns Dali as being as anti-social as a flea. The magic of art cannot condone such moral rotteness. If he is a good artist, he is, in Orwell's phrase, "a disgusting human being," "a diseased intelligence."

Individualism run amok, as in the work of Dali, that is the curse of

the modern age. Uncurbed individualism is the polluted source of unintelligibility and irresponsibility in modern literature and art. The ego is the architect of the universe, the demiurge of destiny. The world of the senses is reduced to an evanescent, incorporeal, dreamlike effect. Surrealism may have utilized some of the discoveries of psychoanalysis in developing its method of "free" association and psychic automatism, but the result is a negation of the scientific outlook and a travesty on literature and art. The intellect no longer operates in harmonious co-operation with the eye and the other senses; there is vision without reflection; the imagination is split off from consciousness; the unconscious is rendered absolute. This retreat not only into subjectivity but *unconscious* subjectivity represents a furious revolt against reason. Surrealism is a projection in terms of art of the contemporary chaos: war, revolution, economic breakdown, moral bankruptcy, the alienation of the self, the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the atomic bomb. By accepting the contemporary chaos, by merging with the horror and accentuating the disorganization and despair, the Surrealist hopes to make his art meaningful.

Salvador Dali has at least taken the trouble to formulate his system of aesthetics. He is never at a loss for an answer when asked what he is trying to achieve both in his painting and writing. Instead of depicting the everyday world of humdrum reality, formalized and commonplace, he seeks to portray the world of dream and myth, the world in all its beauty and freshness as it must have appeared to the eye of Adam when he first walked in the Garden of Eden. Dali paints and writes what he feels, what his unconscious dictates, not what the eyes traditionally behold. The watches in his paintings melt. Men and women, objects and landscapes, houses and plants and insects are shaped by the alchemy of the unconscious. Forms coalesce into grotesque and marvelous composites, like the beautiful monsters in the mythology of Greece. Reality, to be truly seen, must be observed not only with ideas but with the emotions, the imagination, the whole past of memory. Perception is enormously enriched by images that arise spontaneously in the mind, by strange associations, by unexpressed wishes and desires. Dali encourages his paranoiac activities, his states of delirium. His "The Persistence of Memory" with its flaccid watches is a good example of Surrealist imagination at work. His painted monstrosities are startling—by arrangement, and they have been used commercially to enrich

the art of advertising in the United States. He is convinced of his own superlative genius and takes no pains to hide that fact. He has transformed madness into a demoniacal creative principle. Long live Dalí!

It would seem as if the Surrealist is seeking salvation by thriving on unprincipled anarchy. It is not so. No man is alone, even in his hour of death. Always within him, however irresponsible and alienated, he carries the image of "the other," the social self. Even suicide, the final annihilation of the self, is a social act. And the Surrealist writer and artist in his madness of repudiation has not severed the umbilical chord that binds him to the body of humanity. If society is atomistic, disorganized, a competitive chaos, it is the height of selfishness to remain rational, humane, a member of the opposition. If madness is the tune to which the contemporary world blithely dances then he will join. Consistent to the end, he will do everything in his power to speed up the dance of death, to hasten the climax of this cataclysm, in order that a flash of beauty may emerge from the catastrophic. This is his perverse offer of love. He denies his individualism by exaggerating it to an intolerable degree. He lays himself willingly as a sacrificial victim on the altar of this collective insanity. If all must perish, he will lead the way.

These, then, are the peculiar symptoms of irrationality in the life of our time—symptoms which Salvador Dalí has heightened by a touch of the macabre and the pathological. They are observable not only in literature and art but also in politics, philosophy, and psychology. For this is a disease that is not isolated and cannot be; it cuts through the entire civilization of our age, infects every organ, seeps into the blood, flows like madness into the brain.

Some may shrug their shoulders and say, "What of it?" A little touch of madness makes all men kin. These writers and artists are temperamental by nature; like Dalí, they need some special eccentricity, some excess, to make the mechanical routine of life bearable. All this, however, is not to be taken too seriously. Every epoch has had its neurotics, its fanatics, its lunatic fringe. These symptoms of irrationality will gradually pass away and society return to sanity.

No mistake could be more dangerous than this easy assumption of cycles of recurrence. This epidemic of unreason is unprecedented in scope and violence. There are not only ruinous wars and economic conflicts on an international scale but ideological warfare, psychic hate,

the losing battle of reason against the mobilized forces of unreason. The atavistic impulse comes to life disguised as a new literary and artistic movement. Primitivism is revived; it is no longer primitivism but an artificially induced dementia, the production of emotionalism run wild. It is no longer pure but self-conscious, imitative, hysterical, in its attempt to recapture the wild ecstasy and instinctive abandon of savages in African jungles. Associated with this is the relapse into animality, the restimulation of the biological senses, without the distorting mediation of thought. And if one sinks into animality, into sensualism, why not become once more like unto a child, and win back the lost Eden of infancy, the truth, the bliss, the power that were then magically at our disposal?

This is the nature of the obsession which rules these neo-primitives, these atavistic Surrealists, these reborn children: they wish to murder thought, to revolt against reason. Down with the bloodless, abstract intellect! The unconscious was what they needed, and lo! the unconscious was born. They retreated into this cave with indecent haste, for what they wanted was to be covered over with darkness, to be buried in layer after layer of mindless oblivion. Observe how in *The Life of Don Quixote and Sancho*, Unamuno, a Spaniard like Dali, protests against the last words uttered by the dying Goethe: "Light, light, more light!" What he craves, on the contrary, is warmth and more warmth, "for we die of cold and not of darkness." What the world desires, according to Unamuno, is to be deceived "either with the illusion antecedent to reason, which is poetry, or with the illusion subsequent to reason, which is religion."

It is doubtful if these things will be forgotten, even if they finally pass. The wheel of Karma dictates otherwise. We are morally responsible for our thoughts and actions, and the kind of literature and art we produce represents a moral choice. Whatever we do is causally connected with the past and the future. There is no escape from the universal principle of causation and cultural continuity. All that we have thought, imagined, suffered, striven for, achieved, is the result of what we are and foreshadows what we shall become. The abnormalities of our time are not to be discounted as freakish whims or Bohemian histrionics. Dali is sick but he is terribly in earnest, and his unmistakable aim is to convert us, to infect us with his disease. These hysterical suicide-threatening writers and artists are confessing our own secret

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thoughts and wishes. What they threaten they eventually perform. The symbolic nature of their act does not make it any the less significant and dangerous. Being artists they are not satisfied to destroy themselves alone; they must drag their culture down with them. The twilight of the gods? It is perhaps the twilight of humanity we are witnessing. Long live Dali!