

Surreal Sexuality: A Psychobiographical Exploration of Salvador Dalí

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Exploring the life and history of Salvador Dalí is akin to traversing a field of truths interspersed with minefields of lies and self-creations. Ian Gibson remarks in his biography of Dalí that it is difficult and dangerous to search for the true Dalí as the artist has so cleverly crafted and promoted his own realities. Which at times are blatant falsehoods of events, and at others, creations of pure fantasy (Gibson, 1998). It is possible to navigate these minefields towards plains of truth, the danger however, lies in the intriguing and beautifully spun stories of the artist. Who in their telling, not only ensnares you to his self-weaved realities, but seems to have entrapped himself as well. The real Dalí, that is the true man behind the cleverly crafted façade, may never be known; yet for this author there exist three prominent questions in relation to the enigmatic Salvador Dalí that may bring us closer to understanding him.

When one thinks of Salvador Dalí, they most often conjure an image of a mad-eyed man with a swirled mustache, or perhaps they recall images of some of his more recognizable works such as *The Persistence of Memory* (Dalí, 1931; Image 1).

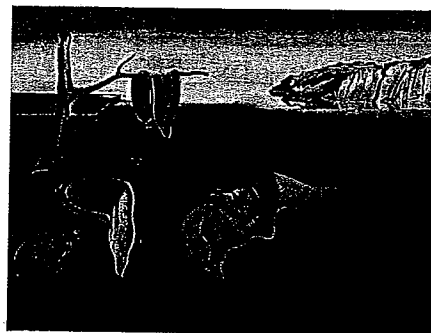


Image 1. *The Persistence of Memory* (1929). Dalí's most well-known work.

As the most widely known Surrealist of the 20th century, the artist and his works are a permanent fixture of our collective history. Yet for many, his surreal perception is one that is not

these elements and obsessions mirrored in his artwork, leading the author to believe that there must be something that ties these two factors together. The author hypothesizes that there is a connection between the sexual obsessions of Dalí and his artistic perceptions origins. For Salvador Dalí, art does not so much imitate life as it sharply, and without compassion, displays the innermost desires and conflicts of the artist. For Dalí, art IS sex and its supporting palate is one of personal history and self-confusion.

With any exploration, the beauty and experience lies in the journey, not the destination. It is the purpose of this paper to examine Salvador Dalí's psychological landscape through the lens of psychobiography in an attempt to discover the origins of Dalí's artistic perception and sexual obsessions, as well as explore what relationship may exist between the two. As with any expedition, the journey to understanding Dalí must start at the beginning.

In a spacious apartment in Figueres, Spain, Salvador Felipe Jacinto Dalí entered the world on May 11, 1904 to a grieving Felipa Domènech and Salvador Dalí Cusi. Nine months and ten days prior to the birth of Dalí, Felipa and Salvador Cusi lost their firstborn son, who was also named Salvador (Gibson, 1998; Caws, 2008). It is plausible that the immediacy of Dalí's birth following the death of his brother was an attempt to balm the families wounded hearts and this event, despite its occurrence before Dalí's birth, was to have a lasting effect on the painter. From the sparse and scattered information available on Dalí's early years, a picture of a semi-typical Spanish family appears (Caws, 2008). Though not overly wealthy, Salvador Cusi was securely employed as a Notary for Figueres, a position that provided a certain level of stature and community recognition within Spanish society at the time. There are numerous accounts of Salvador Cusi's political leanings and intensive temperament from both the artist himself, as well as surviving documents and articles (Gibson, 1998; Caws, 2008). An extreme atheist (though he

The family's close relations and social standing within their community helped to promote their son's artwork, culminating in his first art exhibition at the age of 13 organized by his father and staged in the family's home. A year later at the age of 14, Dalí was presented in his first public exhibition and as a tender youth he officially sold the first two pieces of his artwork, cementing his name as a serious artist (Gibson, 1998). These few years, and the events that occur within them are instrumental in grasping the enigma that is Salvador Dalí. Following the path set before him by the overbearing Salvador Cusi, Dalí would attend multiple artistic institutions in an effort to support and cultivate what Cusi remarked as the only talent the boy possessed (Gibson, 1998). Thru his formal schooling, as well as the hypercritical eyes of his family and the family's friends, Dalí would be given the beginnings of artistic recognition. With his fanciful perception of reality, and so encouraged by his family, Dalí's imagination would become not only the mechanism of his fame, but would aid him in producing his public identity. A facsimile of his fantasy, this persona would be one of the artist's greatest creations.

Historically, Dalí was a man out of his time. The political and socioeconomic climate of Spain helped to shape the artist's politically rebellious nature (as well as the influences of Salvador Cusi) (Gibson, 1998). Transferring from monarchy to republic, the unrest in Spain played a prominent part of Dalí's self-definition. The artist participated in rallies as well as questionable and daring contributions to political newspapers. Second only to the artist's wife Gala, these scandalous engagements in his teen years would aid him on his transformation to a fully crafted persona by adulthood (Gibson, 1998; Caws, 2008). Although she was the wife of another man who was friend and patron to the artist, 25-year-old Dalí pursued the 35-year-old Gala with a single minded purpose. The artist's pursuit and eventual coupledom with a married woman brought shame and outrage to the more reserved and traditional Salvador Cusi despite the

reality and artistic expression. The next great leap, and arguably the most profound exodus from the remnants of realism to the ascendancy of the surreal occurs with the Surrealism movement circa 1924-2004; a style that would become synonymous with Salvador Dalí (Caws, 2008; Swinglehurst, 1996; MET, 2016).

While this paper refers mainly to the artistic portion of Surrealism, it must be noted that the Surrealism movement encompassed not only art, but intellectual philosophy and publications as well (MoMA, 2016). The primary goal of Surrealism was to divert from the rational; to explore the irrational and subconscious in an effort to break free from what the Surrealist's felt were the oppressive societal rules of the time. Dalí would immerse himself in this movement including publications, political actions, his art, and eventually the entirety of his identity (Gibson, 1998; Rubin, 2005). The accepted father of the Surrealist movement was none other than renowned psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (MoMA, 2016; López, 2001). For Surrealist's, the works of Freud became doctrine to their cause, primarily due to their emphasis on the subconscious, as well as the struggle between the pleasure and reality principles. For a movement based on a desire to shuck the societal norms and explore other than the rational, *Three Essays on Sexuality*, and *The Interpretation of Dreams* spoke to the core of the Surrealists being. The first translation of Freud's full works from their native German was completed in Spain in 1922 (Gibson, 1998). At this time, an impressionable 18 year-old Salvador Dalí was attending the Residencia de Estudiantes in Madrid (Gibson, 1998). The school's library carried the newly printed translations of Freud's essays, and it is here that Dalí began his lifelong admiration of Freud and his deeply personal identification with the psychoanalyst's theories (Gibson, 1998; Caws, 2008).



Image 5. The Figures Fair (circa 1921). Example of Dalí's more realistic artistic perception prior to his exposure to the works of Sigmund Freud.

In *The Figures Fair* (Dalí, 1921; Image 5) the remnants of Cubism can be seen in the shapes and colors, yet the piece retains a semblance of reality in the content and positioning of the characters and tents. Opposite this structured representation of a possibly realistic scene or event, you have *Night-Walking Dreams* (Dalí, 1922; Image 6).

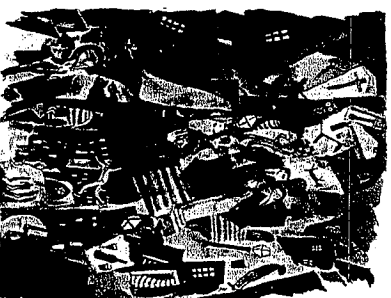


Image 6. Night-Walking Dreams (1922). Dalí's shift in artistic perception following his exposure to Freud is vividly presented here.

As the title suggests the piece exudes an evening atmosphere with dark and muted coloring. The shape of the paintings elements still retains cubist presentation, yet the placement of the paintings figures and scenes are a drastic departure from the artist's former works. Here we see the effects of Freud and the birth of Dalí surrealism. The eye and hand at the center of the

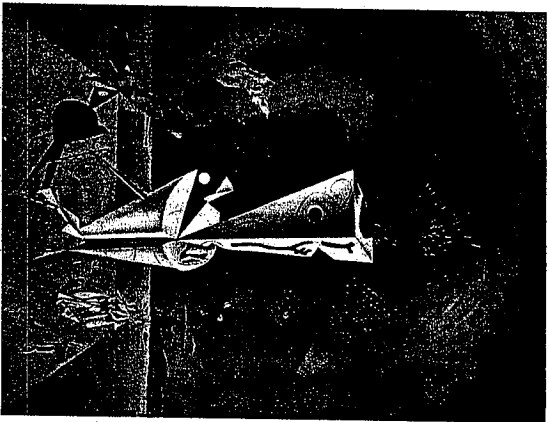


Image 7. *Apparatus and Hand* also known as *Gadget and Hand* (1927). Dalí's onanistic obsessions are magnified in this painting.

In this work Dalí sublimates his struggle with masturbation and masturbatory fantasies by presenting them as the focal center of his artwork. The enlarged and veined red hand protrudes through the head of the Apparatus, replacing or representing the brain that is consumed by sexual thoughts and the impulse for self-gratification. Surrounding the central figures representation of masturbation are smaller and grotesquely shaped components of sexual fantasy. A disjointed female torso, floating misshapen breasts, and the replaced left hand of the Apparatus with a twisted, reddened and gorged female personification which lets loose silhouettes of its image (Dalí, 1927). Strong support of Dalí's onanistic obsessions comes from his own diaries (aged 15-16) through the beginning of 1920 from January to May, he writes;

societally views on masturbation during the time of Dalí's ascent to puberty were of general disgust at best, and at worst an act that would not only condemn one to Hell, but would drain the man of his maleness and bodily fluids, leaving him impotent and spent of all masculinity (Gibson, 1998; Woodward, 2006). Another of the artists' works that most prominently displays the discord that Dalí was internalizing is *The Great Masturbator* (Dalí, 1929, Image 4) Dalí explains the imagery of the piece himself;

[it reflected] the guilt of a face completely extinguished vitally by so much masturbation: the nose touches the ground and has a horrible boil. Every time I lose a bit of sperm I have the conviction that I've wasted it. I feel guilty. (as cited by Gibson, 1998, p. 283)

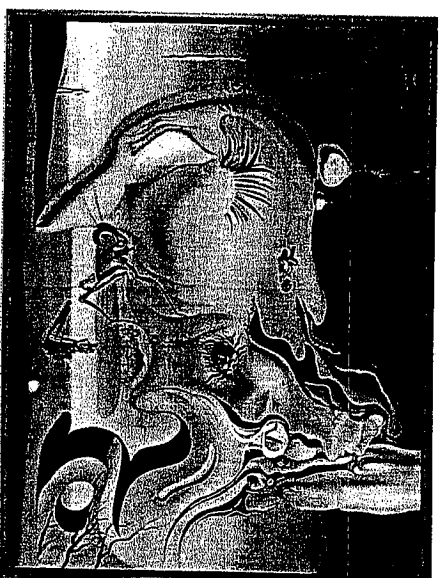


Image 4. *The Great Masturbator* also known as *Face of The Great Masturbator* (1929). Dalí's personal feelings of shame and disgust concerning masturbation are illustrated here.

Next to the artist's explanation of the prominent face within the piece, a female form emerges from the head. Her face turned gently towards the flaccid and covered penis of a disembodied male. A lion's head extends from the woman's shoulder, jaws wide and tongue salivating. The

The foremost obsession of Dalí was of onanistic impulses, gratification from masturbation, and an accompanying shame as reported previously from his journal entries. This obsession would continue through Dalí's life, with recounted experiences with the artist's particular brand of fetishism well into his 60's from friend Amanda Lear as well as others (Lear, 1987; Gibson, 1998). The artist is reported to have not only organized orgy style parties at his flat in Paris in 1969, but to have directed the players in their movements to his personal satisfaction while masturbating to the scene before him, with the 'actors' all possessing an androgynous appearance (Lear, 1987; Gibson, 1998). Reports of Dalí asking young men and women to pose for his art while surreptitiously masturbating behind the canvases were reported as well (Gibson, 1998). In *Three Essays On the Theory of Sexuality* Freud hypothesizes on the fixation of sexual obsessions outside of traditional intercourse. He explains that extraneous sexual impulses outside of traditional heterosexual intercourse (i.e. impotence, fear of intercourse, etc.), will increase an individual's propensity to linger at a particular, and subsequently abnormal stage of their sexual development (Freud, S., & Strachey, 1975, para. 54). Freud would go further with this train of thought, eventually defining the psychosexual stages of development that identify at which age range and at what stage an individual would theoretically encounter developmental issues that would lead them to develop abnormalities in their sexual desires (Engler, 2013; Freud, S., & Strachey, 1975).

The psychosexual stages of development argue that through each 'stage' there is a conflict which the individual must overcome to move onto the next stage of development. During this trial, the individual could develop issues and maladaptive behaviors if they have severe difficulty in overcoming it. Should they not pass through the stage successfully they would most certainly encounter consequences with further stages as well as unsuccessful

development and a crucial element to successful navigation of the genital stage (Engler, 2013; Knight, 2013).

As recounted in his biography on the artist, Gibson reports the comments of fellow students on the extremely introverted and shy nature of Dalí: "The Salvador of those early days at the 'Resi', he recalled, was 'literally sick with timidity', the most self-conscious person he had ever met. He blushed frequently and appeared totally uninterested in girls" (Gibson, 1998, p. 132). This level of shyness existed beyond the latency stages end at puberty, as these observations above were given of the 19 to 20-year-old Dalí. His further difficulty in socialization led him to form small but intensive attachments throughout his life beginning with the renowned Spanish poet Federico García Lorca (Gibson, 1998; Lear, 1987). Numerous and well documented rumors surround the pair, hinting at a strong emotional and physical relationship between the two men (Gibson, 1998). Dalí remarks in the *Secret Life*:

[...] the personality of Federico García Lorca produced an immense impression on me.

The poetic phenomenon in its entirety and 'in the raw' presented itself before me suddenly in flesh and bone, confused, blood-red, viscous and sublime, quivering with a thousand fires of darkness and of subterranean biology, like all matter endowed with the originality of its own form. (as cited by Gibson, 1998, p. 140)

Another passage in the *Secret Life* is the closest to public admission of the affair with Lorca ever made by Dalí. He writes; "...Federico García Lorca, came and darkened the virginal originality of my spirit and my flesh." (as cited by Gibson, 1998, p. 159)

Though our scientific and psychological understanding of homosexuality has progressed much since the time of Freud, there are still correlations to the latency stage of psychosexual development. As described by Knight, children in the latency stage maintain a dual-gender

traced back to the young Dalí's exposure to the medicinal text on venereal diseases that his father revealed to him during the early days of his latency stage (Gibson, 1998). Moreover, this incident fueled an immense fear of the female genitalia, as well as the female form and heterosexual intercourse in general (Kováry, 2009).

A great motivator to this fear, outside of the imminence of disease, was the artist's anxiety over his penis and the implications of his perceived 'impotence' in the face of heterosexual intercourse. Continuing his train of thought on his sexual fears in his publication, *Unspeckable Confessions*, the artist explains:

But above all, for a long time I experienced the misery of believing that I was impotent. Naked, and comparing myself to my schoolfriends, I discovered that my penis was small, pitiful and soft. I can recall a pornographic novel whose Don Juan machine-gunned female genitals with ferocious glee, saying he enjoyed hearing women creak like watermelons. I convinced myself that I would never be able to make a woman creak like a watermelon. And this feeling of weakness ate away at me. I tried to hide the anomaly, but often I was the victim of inextinguishable attacks of laughter, hysterical, even, which were a sort of proof of the disturbances that agitated me profoundly. (as cited by Gibson, 1998, pp. 11-112)

The artist's horror at his perceived physical deformity furthered his belief that contrary to the machismo of Spain, the male identity was a fragile corporeality which could not maintain its existence in the face of the female sex (Kováry, 2009; López, 2001). This deepened the artist's issues with intimacy and touch. Likewise, the impact of his mother Felipa's death from uterine cancer in 1921 shook the 16-year-old Dalí to his core. The power and danger of the female sexual organs would fuel his fears and onanistic obsessions profoundly. In his piece titled *The*

never achieved successful transition to the genital stage vis-à-vis his struggles in the latency stage is supported.

Zoltan Kováry goes further into this particular obsession of the artist in his analysis of Dalí's issues with women, stating a case of 'vagina dentata' plagued him (Kováry, 2009, para. 19). His theory that the artist maintained a deep fear of the vagina and by proxy the entirety of the female form is given support through Dalí's words on his fear of sex in his publication *The Tragic Myth of Millet's Angelus*:

... a decisive traumatic incident of exceptional savagery that happened in my earliest childhood and was directly related to the Oedipus complex. In this particular case it is a question of a recollection or a 'false recollection' of my mother sucking or devouring my penis. (as cited by Kováry, 2009, p. 3)

In this quote we see not only the depth of Dalí's fear, but also his continuing identification with Freudian theory. As mentioned previously, one must be careful of taking the artist's admissions as fact not only due to his self-created persona and realities, but due to the immense influence of Freud (Gibson, 1998; Lear, 1987). It is common for Dalí's personal recollections and publications to regurgitate Freudian theory through what we can assume are false recollections as colored by his knowledge of the psychoanalysis works (Kováry, 2009; Woodward, 2006). It is more likely that Dalí's 'traumatic incident' concerning his mother is a false construction due to his exposure to the psychoanalyst (Kováry, 2009, para. 19). However, this recollection (even if false) highlights Dalí's fear of the feminine, and increases the importance of his penial shame; specifically, in the context of heterosexual intercourse.

The last question this exploration of Dalí seeks to answer is if there exists any correlation between the artist's famously unique perception, and his infamous sexual proclivities. With the

There's no doubt that I'm a completely theatrical type who only lives in order to "pose" ...I'm a "poseur" in my manner of dressing, in my manner or talking and even in my manner of painting, in certain cases... This is why I've let my hair grow long, and have sideburns... In a short time I've made important advances along the path of farce and deceit, [fast growing accustomed to being] a great actor in this even greater comedy that is life, the farcical life of our society, (as cited by Gibson, 1998, pp 121-122)

The 'true-self' of Dalí, as explored previously, was a personality rooted in shyness, shame, and awkward attempts at socialization. Here the artist admits to consciously crafting his ideal-self due to the Freudian fueled introspection of his shortcomings. This diary passage not only exemplifies the artist's strives towards self-actualization, but gives evidence to his knowledge of public perception and the need to market himself and his art.

Dalí truly was a master at publicizing himself and his work. In his essay *The Surreal Life of Salvador Dalí: Media Darling for Nearly 30 Years*, Edward Rubin explores the impact that Dalí was to have on not only the art world, but the world as a whole through his cleverly mastered public persona (Rubin, 2005). Perhaps it could be that the nature of Surrealism is a break from the rational, and the Surrealist movement would have been a jar to American senses no matter the way in which it was presented. Yet beginning in November of 1934 a surreal shock-and-awe campaign was waged upon an unsuspecting and admiring public as Dalí first presented himself and his art to North America (Gibson, 1998). Carrying over to the new year, Dalí became an obsession of the press, purposefully staging erotic dreamscapes at a formal ball held in his honor, increasing his speech rhythm, and perfecting his iconic bug-eyed stare (Gibson, 1998). The art was well received, on its merit as well as its novelty, and Dalí's fame became a fixture in the New World as well as the Old. Rubin remarks that in this way Dalí truly

a place of congruence between their 'true-self' and 'ideal-self'. While the likening of the creative process as a psychological curative was novel in Rogers' day, it is now largely accepted as an important part of positive mental health (Rogers, 1961; Engler, 2013).

In a study on the relationship between self-actualization and the creative process, Manheim found that there was a strong correlation between the artistic creation process and an individual's growth towards self-actualization (Manheim, 2013). This study supports Rogers' hypothesis that creativity goes far in increasing self-awareness and self-actualized development. Although this paper has held a more maladaptive tone in regards to Salvador Dalí's development and artistic representations of trauma, could his art in fact be his most sound and adaptive behavior? Though the subjects of his work are mainly of a socially appalling auto-erotic nature, Dalí's works are the healthiest and soundest area of his life. Speaking to the healthiness of a creative individual and the creative processes relationship to the 'good life', Rogers explains that a creative individual may not be adjusted to, nor a conformist of their culture. These creative individuals could be considered depressed, yet they would be able to move towards personal satisfaction, and true self-actualization through their gift of creativity via their artistic works (Rogers, 1961).

For Dalí, his deepest needs were often the source of his greatest shame and self-confusion. Yet even the artist's strangest sexual proclivities are not so profound as to label him as entirely socially unacceptable, especially by today's societal standards. He was not adjusted to the culture of his time, nor was he a conformist. However, it is his very lack of conformity and maladjustment that made him the most famous artist of the 20th century. Truly a man out of his time, the artist's self-awareness, and subsequent artistic representation of his self-assessed psychological landscape created a tremor across the world's consciousness and cemented his

large pair of scissors hinting to the castration fear that is prominent in Freud's Oedipus complex theory (Gibson, 1998).



Image 9: *William Tell* (1930). Dalí's intense issues with his father are represented here.

What theories could we apply to their longstanding issues, and to Dalí's admitted hate/love relationship with the man? Outside of the Oedipus complex, could there be other psychological theories to aid us in grasping the man's fear of the feminine, and the artists represented issues with his own masculinity?

Another fascinating trail to follow would be the artist's issues with the feminine. What was the true relationship between Dalí and his mother, and what correlation does that

actualization; to deny that his 'ideal-self', and his true desires would be accepted or understood. By fully giving himself to Surrealism and through his internalization of Freudian theory, Dalí was able to shuck the societal norm. To create and promote an exaggerated expression of his true and ideal selves, amalgamating both his fears and desires into what is both an incomprehensible individual, and a fully actualized personality. It is somehow fitting that the obfuscation of his efforts towards positive mental health occurred. That one had to work hard to explore his personal landscape, just as intently as one would examine his paintings. For Dalí, art truly was his incarnation of intercourse. His paintbrushes were his lovers, the colours his true friends. He made love to his canvases, and allowed us to witness the most sacred part of his soul. Ensnaring us all in the beauty and confusion of his surreal sexuality.

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Appendix



Picture 1: *The Persistence of Memory*, 1927



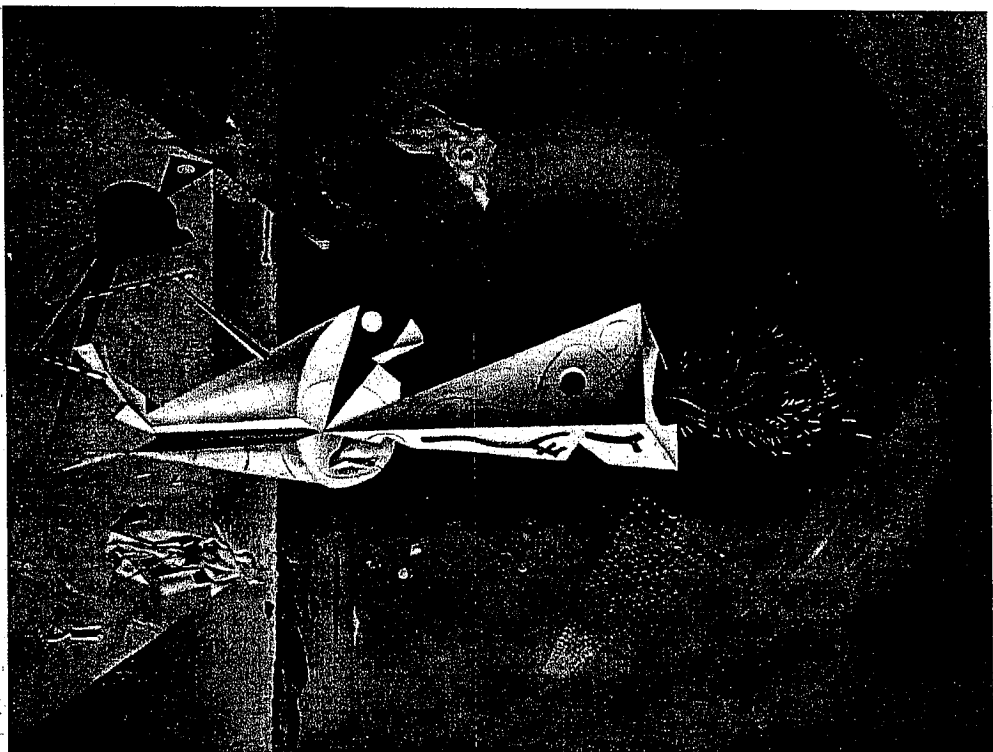
Picture 2: *The Metamorphosis of Narcissus*, 1937



Picture 4: *The Great Masturbator*, 1929 (also known as *Face of the Great Masturbator*)



Picture 5: *The Figueras Fair*, circa 1921



Picture 7: *Apparatus and Hand*, 1927



Picture 9: *Gaillaume Tell* (also known as *William Tell*), 1930