



The Tragic Myth of Millet's 'Angelus'

By Dawn Adès

1. The documents

In 1963 Dali finally published a book he had written in the early 1930s: *The Tragic Myth of Millet's "Angelus"*. The book had, apparently, been lost. Its original impetus, as Dali explained in his text, was an obsession with Millet's famous 19th century painting of peasant piety, the *Angelus*, which appeared suddenly in his imagination in full colour and loaded with unconscious meaning: "the most troubling, the most enigmatic, the densest, the richest in unconscious thoughts that has ever been."¹

The *Angelus* haunts his work at the time and the extraordinary text, which treats Dali's obsession as a psychoanalytical case study, has long been recognised for the light it sheds on his paintings of the 1930s but has often been taken as a retrospective account. It was, in fact, a major experimental surrealist work in its own right which deserves to take its place among publications such as Breton and Eluard's *L'Immaculée Conception* (1930) and Breton's *Les vases communicants* (1932).

When the book was published in 1963, Dali wrote a new Prologue which claimed that the manuscript had been mislaid when he and Gala left Arcachon hurriedly in 1940 "a few hours before the German invasion". Finding it again twenty-two years later, Dalí continues, he read it and decided to publish it as it was, "without changing a comma."² A group of manuscripts, including the final typescript of the book complete with corrections and revisions by André Breton, which were among Dali's papers when he died and are now housed at the Fundacion Gala-Salvador Dalí in Figueres, provide incontrovertible proof that *The Tragic Myth* was written as he claims in the 1930s, that it

was then ready for publication and that when he did finally do so in 1963 he didn't change a comma.^{3]} He added only the new prologue, more illustrations and a few notes. However, another aspect of Dali's account is now known to be false. The manuscript was not lost at all, but had been in Dali's possession all along. In 1945 he wrote to Caresse Crosby from Del Monte Lodge, Pebble Beach in California about some "business" that might concern them both should she be interested: "I have the Tragic Myth of Millet's Angelus, in French, (psychoanalytical essay), and a collection of poems in French".⁴ Dali asks Crosby whether she could place them in Paris and assures her that no-one else is involved. Crosby, at whose mansion in Virginia Dali had written *The Secret Life*, and who had overseen its handsome publication by Dial Press in 1942, responded from Paris that she wouldn't have time to place any of his 'oeuvres' but could publish one of his poems in her new review *Portfolio*, published by the revived Black Sun Press. Whether Dali made other attempts to publish the book is so far unknown. It was certainly not written during the war while Dali was in the USA and there is overwhelming evidence that it was completed in 1933-4 and was probably ready for publication by 1934.

Simultaneously with the written investigation of the *Angelus* the theme erupts in his paintings, displacing William Tell as Dali's favourite myth, or rather providing its counterpoint in his personal psychodrama. In 1933, at the Pierre Colle Gallery in Paris and at Julien Levy's in New York he showed *Gala et l'Angelus de Millet précédant immédiatement la venue des "anamorphes coniques"* [Gala and the Angelus of Millet preceding the imminent arrival of the Conical Anamorphoses]; at Levy's he added *The Angelus of the afternoon* and the following year *Archaeological Reminiscence of Millet's "Angelus"*.

Some of the illustrations that finally appeared in the book, examples of American folklore proving his argument about 'peasant eroticism', were gathered by Dali while in the USA during the war, such as *Hard Times on the Farm*. But the majority of the illustrations had already been collected in the 1930s; several had appeared in his 1933

Minotaure article “Interpretation Paranoïaque-critique de l’Image obsédante de “L’Angélus” de Millet”: Leonard’s *Virgin, Child and St Anne*, and Millet’s *Angelus, Harvesters* and *Maternal Precaution*. Many of the popular religious or natural history images were probably collected in the 1930s during the preparation of the manuscript. One photograph certainly belongs to the original project and can be dated to 1933. The otherwise unidentified photograph entitled *Coffee service, cherries and Angelus* was commissioned from Brassai in 1933. The photographer, close at the time to the surrealists, collaborated with Dalí on the “Sculptures involontaires”, [Involuntary Sculptures] a selection of which were published in *Minotaure* no.3 [1933]. On the same contact sheets as the “Sculptures involontaires” are some glamorous shots of Dalí and Gala in their modernist apartment in Paris in 1933 and several of the “Coffee service, cherries and Angelus”, an arrangement by Dalí of some of the key objects relating to his obsession.⁵

The book Dalí was writing about the Angelus was already famous in his circle by 1933, but the only published text related to it to appear at the time was the illustrated article “Interpretation Paranoïaque-critique de l’Image obsédante de “L’Angélus” de Millet”.⁶ This was evidently the title Dalí originally intended for the book itself; the *Minotaure* text is announced as the “prologue” to the “Interpretation Paranoïaque-critique de l’Image obsédante de “L’Angélus” de Millet”, with the sub-title: “nouvelles considérations générales sur le mécanisme du phénomène paranoïaque du point de vue surréaliste.”⁷

The surrealists requested Dalí for an article. Eluard and Breton were preparing material for Skira’s glossy new journal *Minotaure* and for the two final issues of *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* at the same time. That some caution had to be exercised regarding the content of articles for Skira’s new review is evident from a letter Paul Eluard wrote to Dalí in April 1933. For their own journal, *SASDLR*, Eluard asks Dalí for a four or five page text on the Angelus, but for *Minotaure* he suggests just the preface: “Mais il est nécessaire que vous envoyiez votre article: peut-etre la preface a l’Angelus serait-elle indiquée..

Il est nécessaire pour Skira que votre texte ne soit en rien porNOgraPHIque [sic]. Arrangez-vous...”⁸ The scars from Dalí’s *SASDLR* text “Rêverie”, judged by the PCF to be pornographic, were still evidently raw and Eluard was probably aware of the explosive and scandalous nature of Dalí’s new myth. Nothing on the *Angelus* was to appear in *SASDLR*, but Dalí did take care, in his fashion, over the text that appeared in *Minotaure*.

The manuscripts in the FGSD include handwritten texts for this *Minotaure* article, “Interpretation Paranoiaque-critique de l’Image obsédante de “L’Angélus” de Millet”, and for *The Tragic Myth* itself. The contrast between them is very revealing. It not only supports the suggestion that the former was written independently of the book itself, specifically for the surrealists to publish in the new journal, but also throws light on the remarkable genesis of the latter.

The *Minotaure* article evidently cost him a great deal of trouble; there are several versions in Dalí’s hand, with numerous variations and corrections. The dramatic alterations in the size, flow and style of the script testify to sharp mood changes and frustrations. Again and again Dalí would begin with the title, “nouvelles considerations generales...” followed by the opening lines of the text in an elaborately scrolled script. At one level he was aiming to create a showpiece, giving the script itself a visual presence, as in the preface to his Pierre Colle exhibition catalogue of June 1933, which took the form of a letter to Breton and begins and ends with the reproduction of Dalí’s decoratively looped handwritten words. But the meticulous and rather baroque scripted openings in the successive manuscripts of the *Minotaure* text are followed invariably by a progressive degeneration of the handwriting, the words become scrawled and even more illegible, and then he abandons that version and starts again. This suggests uncertainty, reluctance, or a writer’s block. One version with scrupulously numbered pages in Dalí’s hand is prefaced with a single sheet of paper in Gala’s writing: “Prologue de l’Angelus de Millet”.

The very first line of the “prologue”, often written out several times, originally started: “En 1929 et dès debuts trop vagues de la femme visible...” [In 1929 and from the too vague beginnings of the visible woman...]. The phrasing obviously gave him trouble, and it may be that he had help with the final, elegant rendering with which the *Minotaure* text eventually opened: “Dès 1929 et les débuts encore incertains de *La femme visible...*”⁹ Dalí, clearly, took great pains over this text, which was denser and more contorted than most of his publications, (though no less so than the article by Jacques Lacan that immediately followed it in *Minotaure*, “Le problème du style et les formes paranoïaques de l’expérience”.)

Dalí’s article is very interesting for several reasons. While asserting its surrealist credentials it simultaneously challenges the bases of surrealism, announces the new myth and engages in a dense discussion of the merits of psychoanalysis and especially the new research of Jacques Lacan on paranoia. It falls into two quite distinct sections: the theoretical “prologue” and a page of illustrations of paintings by Millet together with the Louvre Leonardo *Virgin, Child Jesus and St Anne* [sic], with commentaries under the heading “Preliminary presentation of some documents towards the interpretation of the Crepuscular Simulacrum: Millet’s Angelus”. This page has a direct connection with the book, in which the same illustrations were eventually to appear, and he mentions in a caption the “flagrant and unconscious ‘erotic fury’” of the Angelus. But this is the only hint of the “paranoiac-critical interpretation” of the image. The text itself does not develop the idea of the ‘erotic fury’ of the Angelus, but revisits the relationship between critical paranoia and what Dalí criticises as the “passivity” of automatism and the dream. Core surrealist concerns are attacked from a general theoretical perspective and the language is high-pitched, polemical and quite unlike the lucid, specific and analytical interpretation of the *Angelus* in *The Tragic Myth*. It is very different in character from the book and was probably written specifically for *Minotaure*; it was not included when *The Tragic Myth* was published in 1963, when Dalí added a new prologue.

The multiple re-writing of this text is in startling contrast to the manuscript of the book *Le Mythe Tragique de l'Angelus de Millet*. This, to judge by the extant documents in the FGSD, caused Dali no difficulty and was written down with virtually no revisions. It was Dalí's practice to revise even when making a "fair copy", but the original manuscript for *The Tragic Myth* is written in a surprisingly even (if not easily decipherable) hand throughout; the text flows without interruption and although there are some additions and crossings out they are relatively few. The confidence and continuity visible in the handwritten text are quite unlike the re-workings and repetitions of the *Minotaure* text. At first sight it looks as if it could be an "automatic text" like Breton's for *Les champs magnétiques*, but Dali's well-known rejection of automatism makes it extremely unlikely. Dali himself claimed that the narrative, with its complex interpretation of his obsession with the *Angelus*, was complete in his head when he began it. The manuscript would thus visibly corroborate Dali's account at the beginning of *The Tragic Myth* of the effect of the vision of the *Angelus*: the entire interpretation was already "'present' and 'obvious' in my mind."

According to Dali, his sudden admiration for Millet's *Angelus* was greeted with scepticism by his surrealist colleagues, who were repelled by its Christian devotional character and unconvinced by his halting attempts to justify himself. This is rather strange given that Dali was normally extremely articulate and loquacious. He makes a point, however, of contrasting this public awkwardness in the face of his friends' misgivings with an inner confidence. The entire drama behind its sudden appearance and the whole idea for the book were, he claims, in fact already clear to him. "I can say that I already knew 'almost everything' about the transformation of the picture; I understood, I saw very clearly 'what it was about'. The interpretation which, afterwards, took shape, of the *Angelus* or rather my future attempt at interpretation was already entirely 'present' and 'obvious' in my mind since the initial delirious phenomenon."¹⁰ This claim and the means Dali found to document it are corroborated in various ways, not just by the published book but by the unpublished manuscript and typescripts for *The Tragic Myth of Millet's Angelus*.

From Dalí's handwritten pages a first typewritten copy was made. The typist was probably not Gala herself because there are a number of subsequent corrections in Gala's hand, and missing words are filled in where the typist couldn't read Dalí's appalling handwriting. (The evenness and continuity of the written narrative was not accompanied by any improvement in Dalí's orthography or script formation.) A gap is left at one point in this first typescript with the indication: "ici se place la communication d'André Breton". [This is the place for André Breton's communication]. A clean typescript was then sent to Breton, who made extensive revisions.

The section of the page left blank in the typescript for "André Breton's communication" is filled in by Breton himself. This "communication" relates to the "paranoiac-critical interpretation of secondary phenomena"; Dalí has recounted playing with stones on the beach until suddenly he is struck by the resemblance of two pebbles he has placed upright to the figures in Millet's *Angelus*. An involuntary association between these "miniature monuments" and the menhirs and dolmens of prehistoric Europe is supplemented by Breton's recollection of two megaliths on the Ile de Sein, Finistère, whose deeply worn outlines have given them the appearance of a sexually differentiated couple. Although the passage is written in the third person and is seamlessly integrated in the published book it is in fact entirely written into the typescript – in green ink – by Breton himself. A post-card of the Ile de Finistère standing stones, known as *Les causeurs*, was among the original illustrations.

Breton appears to have acted as editor and copy-editor – in other words he makes corrections but also editorial comments. In pink crayon at the top of the typescript is a note in Breton's handwriting "il y aurait lieu je crois de remplacer partout le mot quaternaire [quaternaire] par tertiaire?" [There is a case I think for replacing the word quaternary by tertiary], which indeed is done in the final published book. A pencil note in the margin beside the paragraph about the entomologist Fabre reads "vérifier dans Fabre." [check in Fabre]. Breton made his corrections in green ink in his meticulous handwriting. They aim to improve the French and do not change the sense of the

original, but do involve considerable re-phrasing. To take one typical example: the penultimate paragraph in the 'Conclusion' in Dalí's original typescript, which reads "Mais toutes ces déclarations de modestie au sujet de la présente expérimentation surréaliste..." becomes "Mais que toutes les précautions oratoires qu'il m'advierait de prendre au sujet de l'expérimentation surréaliste..."¹¹ The elegance of Breton's prose, of which this is a characteristic sample, contribute on occasion to the overall effect of this very remarkable book.

The corrected text was returned to Dalí by Breton. Why it was then not published remains a mystery. The text was prepared for publication in or not long after 1933; in addition to the evidence for this date discussed above there is the fact that Dalí was working on the etchings for the *Chants de Maldoror* in 1934 and the Appendix on the *Chants de Maldoror* formed part of the original manuscript. Phrases from the Appendix such as "épaules ramollies des nourrices hitlériens", [soft shoulders of the Hitlerian nurses] may have contributed to the crisis that led to the farcical "trial" of Dalí for suspected fascist sympathies in February 1934. Breton's editorial assistance could have taken place following the reconciliation with Dalí after the trial, when he re-asserted his full allegiance to the movement. One can only speculate about the reasons for its non-publication at the time.¹²

Is there a problem in reconciling the even and uninterrupted hand of the first manuscript, and the considerable extent of the corrections and revisions made by André Breton to the final typescript? The most significant explanation of the latter is that Dalí's text was of sufficient importance to the surrealist movement and its current preoccupation with psycho-analysis to warrant meticulous and detailed editorial intervention by Breton himself. It also confirms that Dalí's text was not regarded as 'automatic' or as related to *récits de rêve*, which would have obviated any interference.

2. Interpretations

Dalí starts his book with a statement: “En juin 1932 se présente subitement à mon esprit, sans aucun souvenir proche ni association consciente permettant une explication immédiate, l’image de l’*Angelus* de Millet.”¹³ This sentence brilliantly manipulates narrative and suspense, starting a story but keeping back the subject of the mysterious event to the very end: an effect unfortunately hard to replicate in English prose. “In June 1932, the image of the Angelus suddenly presented itself in my mind, without any related memory or conscious association” renders its meaning but not its effect.

The historical pinpointing of a moment of revelation or an encounter (June 1932) has many echoes in surrealism: Max Ernst similarly recorded the birth of frottage, “on the tenth of August 1925” in *Beyond Painting*.¹⁴ It was a way of affirming the documentary character of the incident and became a regular surrealist trope. Breton, in his text “La Nuit du tournesol”, which was published in *Minotaure* no 7 (1935) and was to become part of *L’amour fou*, (1937), prefaced his account of a revelatory encounter with a note about his method: “Surrealism has always proposed that a story should take as its model medical observation. Not a single incident should be omitted, not a name modified lest the arbitrary intervene. The foregrounding of the immediate, devastating irrationality of certain events demands the strict authenticity of the human document that registers them.”¹⁵

Having just edited *The Tragic Myth* perhaps Breton had this in mind as an authentic human document registering the ‘devastating irrationality of certain events.’ But what exactly is this text? The unusual nature of surrealist writings and their resistance to conventional literary categories had been noted by Walter Benjamin in relation to the first wave of surrealist publications of the 1920s. As he rightly said in 1929, of Breton’s *Nadja* (1928), Aragon’s *Paris Peasant* (1926) and *Treatise on Style* (1929), these are “demonstrations, watchwords, documents, bluffs, forgeries...but at any rate not literature”, being concerned literally with experiences.¹⁶ Following the *Second Manifesto*, which marked a crisis in the movement and a sense of the need to re-launch

the intellectual adventure and remove “the traces of political opportunism”¹⁷ associated with the Aragon affair, there was a new wave of writings inspired by psychoanalysis and of a clearly experimental character. Salvador Dali, new recruit in 1929, was regarded by Breton as a key mover: “it seems to me as though surrealist experimenting were about to be unreservedly resumed and with an extension of scope. This experimenting, by the way, has during the last two years regained momentum under the master-impulse given to it by Salvador Dali...”¹⁸ The material Breton chose for the surrealist number of *This Quarter* (September 1932), from which his comment comes, prominently features Dali, with poems, film scenario, extracts from *The Visible Woman* and a new text “The Object as revealed in surrealist experiment.” The ‘experimenting’ Breton has in mind is intricately linked to, though not restricted to, mental states and madness. *The Visible Woman* (1930) had introduced Dali’s concept of paranoia; a section of *This Quarter* is devoted to “Surrealism and Madness”, which is followed by translations by Samuel Beckett of three of the five essays in “The Possessions” from Breton and Eluard’s *Immaculate Conception* (1930), in which they simulate disturbed mental states such as “delirium of interpretation” and “senile dementia”. The text “Delirium of Interpretation” simulates a paranoiac who sees the world through an obsession with birds: “...man continues to believe himself on the face of the earth as the blackbird on the buffalo’s back, on the face of the sea as the gull on the crest of the waves...”¹⁹

These short essays in simulation were not, the authors stress, indebted in any way to “clinical texts”, even as pastiches. Their potential lay in the poetic resources of these ‘outlawed regions’ of the mind, and ‘we would even go so far as to ...declare that, in our opinion, the “simulation essayed” of the maladies virtual in each one of us could replace most advantageously the ballad, the sonnet, the epic...and other decrepit modes.”²⁰ It would seem that this rejection of “clinical texts” conflicts with Breton’s later statement about medical observation as the model for surrealist stories. However, Breton probably thought of “The Possessions” as akin to ‘surrealist texts’, the automatic texts and *récits de rêve*. They were produced in a ‘state of poetic tension’, which could be understood as a variation on automatism. The experimental was not, however,

restricted to texts like “The Possessions”. The surrealists’ interest in psychoanalysis reached a new peak in the early 1930s and in tandem with the furore created by Breton’s attacks on asylum doctors in *Nadja* and in the *Second Manifesto* (translated in “Surrealism and Madness” in *This Quarter*), prompted them to focus on mental illness, obsessions, dreams and phantasies and to think about the kinds of models they might follow or invent that would be appropriate to the “demonstrations” or “documents” in this realm that they would produce. The border between experience and expression, perception and representation had always been one Breton sought to erase. To document and interpret, record and analyse are the twinned processes of the pseudo-science of psychoanalysis. Dream analysis and Freud’s case histories offered precedents in this direction, not least because of the ambiguity they reveal about the nature of the “authentic”. Here surrealism is at its most edgy and fascinating, enemy of the view that ‘experience’ must be lived to be authentic, rather than experienced in dreams (or obsessions).

In “The Object as revealed in surrealist experiment.” Dali refers to the ‘vital character’ of the surrealist experiment involved in *The Immaculate Conception*. Without defining its role too closely Dali credits simulation with the potential to establish a link between automatism and the world of things. He proposes a dazzling series of collective experimental schemes in which objects are the interface between dream/automatism and action/experience.

In 1932 Breton published *Les Vases communicants*, which according to Dali amounted “to a third surrealist manifesto”. It is dominated by Breton’s interpretations of his own dreams and close, often highly critical engagement with Freud. Breton comments on two obstacles to the psychoanalytical method of dream interpretation. The first is the social barrier of privacy, the fear of unveiling intimate facts and breaking confidences, by which Freud, despite his laudable “liberté d’esprit”, [mental liberty] is nonetheless constrained. Peculiarly, “sexual preoccupations apparently play no role in his personal dreams” although they are preponderant in his interpretations of others’ dreams.²¹ This leads Breton to the second problem, which is that the latter are mostly the dreams of

the “disturbed”, of patients, “hysterics”, who are susceptible and suggestible. While in no sense intending to reduce the importance of sexuality in unconscious life, which he believes is “the most important discovery of psychoanalysis”, Breton regrets the disparity between the frankness in the interpretations of the latter and the reservations in Freud’s interpretations of his own dreams. He himself intends, he says, to try to be the “imprudent observer” of his dreams.²²

This, then, is the atmosphere in which Dali conceived and executed *The Tragic Myth*. He was as familiar as any of the surrealists not only with Freud but also with the recently published work of Jacques Lacan, as well as with other psychologists and phenomenologists like Kolnai, and, full of ambition to excel not only as a painter but also as a writer, was celebrated by Breton as the instigator of a new experimental era.²³

Dali claimed that the meaning of the *Angelus* – that is, its meaning for him – was revealed to him simultaneously with its sudden appearance, but this still needed explication and a method to recount it. He later described *The Tragic Myth of Millet’s Angelus* as a “psycho-analytical essay”, and it is via an original adaptation of psychoanalytical models that he found a solution, including drawing out the ‘detective story’ aspect of psychoanalytical case studies. The ‘events’, primary and secondary, are systematically narrated, and then analysed. The ‘initial delirious phenomenon’, that is, the sudden vision of the *Angelus*, was quickly followed by a series of chance incidents, encounters, fantasies and reveries, “secondary phenomena” in which the *Angelus* “intervened with remarkable ‘exclusive insistence’”. These phenomena are first described, then interpreted by Dali, who mobilises some of the classic psychoanalytical tools: childhood memories and associations. Not, however, dreams. “Je ne rêve absolument pas de l’*Angelus*.” [I absolutely never dream of the *Angelus*].²⁴

Dreams are not part of the paranoiac-critical activity, which by contrast operates on the external world, reading into it meanings derived from Dali’s own obsession.

Nonetheless, there is some ambiguity here, because although Dali insists that critical

paranoia is itself the interpretive activity, thereby avoiding the problem with dreams of the conscious post-facto recording of the fading dream, with the consequent division between “manifest” and latent”, one of the models Dali undoubtedly draws on is that of the Freudian interpretation of dreams: description (manifest content) then analysis (latent content). He even uses, to an extent, this language: the vision of the Angelus was “invested with latent intentionality”. Although he is resistant to dream interpretation as a model, because it is not sufficiently objective and the dream itself is too passive and hard to communicate, he nonetheless cannot entirely ignore it. He conflates a subject’s own interpretation of his/her dreams (as in Breton’s *Les vases communicants*), the ‘delirium of interpretation’ of the external world by the paranoiac and the analysis of the ‘trouble’ by the psychoanalysts.

The picture was initially invested for him with an extraordinary psychic charge, the meaning of which is then uncovered through the “secondary phenomena”. These consist both of directed reveries and of chance encounters on which Dali projects the over-riding obsessional idea. (It is the associations, memories, reveries and their interpretation that give birth to his varied and striking Angelus iconography). Dali takes an almost scientific care with the nosology of this process, which he describes as “paranoiac-critical” (the term is Dalí’s).

Jacques Lacan’s *De la psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité* which had been published in 1932 is one of the key sources for Dalí’s notion of the term “paranoia”, from which he developed his “paranoiac-critical” method. Dalí’s first publication of material related to Millet’s *Angelus*, the 1933 *Minotaure* text “Interpretation Paranoïaque-critique de l’Image obsédante de “L’Angélu” de Millet”, announced his debt to both Freud and Lacan. Dalí refers in glowing terms to the young psychologist, who, according to Dali, simultaneously demolished the constitutionalist idea of “folie raisonnée” current in psychiatry and confirmed his belief in “critical-paranoia” as a new form of surrealist activity. Lacan’s thesis not only gave for the first time “an homogeneous idea of the phenomenon [paranoia], outside the mechanistic

miserias in which current psychiatry is mired”, but also “perfectly accounts for the objective and communicable hyper-clarity of the phenomenon, thanks to which the delirium takes this tangible and irrefutable character which places it at the very antipodes of the stereotypes of automatism and the dream”.²⁵ Lacan diagnosed his patient as suffering from a paranoid psychosis, presented as a systematised delirium of interpretation, consistent with an over-riding idea however irrational, which was usually distinct from hallucinations, and rooted in the external world. Dali shared some of his new terminology with Lacan; his notion of a systematised delirium and its “secondary” manifestations may be roughly based on *De la psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité*, in which Lacan describes “primary” and “secondary” traits in Aimée’s personality.

In “Interpretation Paranoïaque-critique de l’Image obsédante de “L’Angélus” de Millet” Dali reproduces Leonardo’s *St Anne, Virgin and child*, in reference to Freud’s “Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood”, in which Freud explored Leonardo’s sexuality and relations with his mother. Dali refers to Freud’s “double reading” of a vulture in the skirts of the virgin, with the caption: “The whole figure constituted by the child’s mouth and the tail of the famous invisible vulture coincides intentionally with the head of the child in Millet’s *Harvesters*.”²⁶ Freud’s notion of the “maternal vulture”, though based on a misapprehension, chimed perfectly with Dali’s interpretation of the Angelus as the maternal variant of the myth of the vengeful Father.

The Tragic Myth is not just sourced in psychoanalysis; the very structure of the book is modelled on case histories. It is rigorously ordered in three parts with subdivisions: the first describes the “Initial delirious phenomenon, secondary phenomena produced around the obsessional image and critical considerations of the initial delirious phenomenon”.²⁷ The second part covers the “phenomenology of the Angelus” and “the paranoiac-critical activity operative on the secondary phenomena”²⁸ and the third and final part is the “Tragic Myth of Millet’s Angelus” itself with the conclusion:

“hypothetical possibilities of new methods of scientific investigation based on the paranoiac-critical activity.”²⁹

This organisational model closely follows that in Freud's *Psychoanalytische Bemerkungen über Einen Autobiographisch Beschriebenen Fall Von Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)*, commonly known as the “Schreber Case”, originally published in 1911. This is similarly organised in three parts: “Case history”, “Attempts at Interpretation” and “The Mechanism of Paranoia”. The subject of the Schreber Case must have especially attracted Dalí, although his “outcome” turns in a different direction. It concerns not the clinical study of a patient but the analysis of a published autobiography by a man with a distinguished professional career who suffered from extraordinary delusions, the end result of which was that he believed his body had to be transformed into a female in order to have sex with God. Freud proposes in the final part that the detachment of the libido from an external object takes an exaggerated form “and is used for the aggrandizement of the ego. A return is thus made to the stage of narcissism...in which a person's only sexual object is his own ego. On the basis of this clinical evidence we can suppose that paranoiacs have brought along with them a *fixation at the stage of narcissism*, and we can assert that the length of *the step back from sublimated homosexuality to narcissism* is a measure of the amount of regression characteristic of paranoia.”³⁰ Similarly for Lacan the relations between “narcissistic fixation”, “homosexual impulse” and the libido are central to the case of “Aimée”. Dalí purports to be interested only in the mechanism of paranoia in terms of its potential application as a form of delusional interpretation, and to what extent the strength of his fascination with it might itself derive from repression of the notion of “sublimated homosexuality” remains an interesting question.

Dalí's paranoiac-critical interpretation of the *Angelus* reads into it a dramatic scenario of eroticism and death, which becomes an original variant of the Oedipal myth. The innocent figures of the praying couple, through a process of association, become highly sexualised, and are subjected to an identity shift; wife and husband mutate into mother

and son, the former transforming through multiple associations into a terrifying aggressor. Dalí in the final section of his book describes the three successive stages of the myth. In the first, the stillness of the couple in the *Angelus* becomes a sinister immobility, the twilight which Dalí has earlier connected to the ancient eras of the earth symbolises atavistic sensations and the woman – the mother – has an “expectant” attitude announcing imminent sexual aggression. In the second phase Dalí “sees” that “the son has coitus with his mother from behind”.³¹ The instruments of rural labour, and in particular the wheelbarrow, are interpreted as sexually charged not just through a Freudian symbolism but from the evidence of peasant lore and sayings. In the third and final phase the woman, the mother, is identified with the praying mantis, which devoured the male during copulation. (A footnote added later explains that this only occurred when the mantis was in the unnatural state of captivity). The idea of the female consuming the male was threaded through the earlier “delirious” erotic and cannibalistic associations with milk, tea cups and cherries, while the maternal was embodied in the *Angelus* in the filled sack, the ploughed earth and the basket. Dalí concludes with his impression that the frozen posture of the male, with whom he identifies himself, reveals him as “already dead”, and that the myth itself is the “the maternal variant of the immense, atrocious myth of Saturn, Abraham, the Eternal Father with Jesus Christ and William Tell himself devouring their own sons.”³²

Having reached this tremendous dénouement of his paranoiac-critical document, Dalí proceeds to step back and reflect upon his method. The document is, he insists, of “extreme authenticity” but, he adds, only clarifies a minute part of the real content of the *Angelus*. Its value lies in its wholly experimental character, and as such has analogies with the “great “paranoiac reveries” of philosophy and history and also of scientific investigation where experimental activity reaches the most ambitious degree of objectivity.”³³

There is a fundamental difference between *The Tragic Myth* and the Schreber case, and Freud’s studies of Leonardo or of Michaelangelo which are also both undoubtedly

models for *The Tragic Myth*. Unlike Freud in the studies of Leonardo and Michaelangelo, Dali is not proposing an interpretation of the artist (Millet) via his works, but of the unconscious meaning it holds for himself.³⁴ Moreover he is here, as Freud was to say to him of his painting *Metamorphosis of Narcissus*, presenting both the case and the interpretation – he has done the work of analysis himself, revealed the unconscious mechanisms of association.

3. A question of proof

What did Dali mean by insisting on the ‘extreme authenticity’ of the document? That it was an account of a real delusion? An account of a simulated delusion? An accurate interpretation of either? (I am reminded of Freud at the end of his Schreber case: “It remains for the future to decide whether there is more delusion in my theory than I should like to admit, or whether there is more truth in Schreber’s delusion than other people are as yet prepared to believe”³⁵) That its internal coherence and consistency proved its status as paranoia, which, subjected to Dali’s interpretive genius becomes ‘critical-paranoia’? Paranoia itself, he suggests, is a true analogy of all attempts to document and interpret the world, including history and philosophy. From this radically de-constructionist position, which finally alarmed Breton and the surrealists, Dali proposes that the experimental is what is most authentic and objective. (“The only difference between myself and a madman is that I am not mad.”)

In the original book Dali was adamant that the ‘tragic myth’ concerned himself alone, not Millet. It was nothing to do with the painter nor with what he intended in the picture. However, when Dali returned to the subject in the early 1960s his position on this was more ambiguous. He seems to have felt that to have his document corroborated by something within the picture would support the objectivity of the incident and the authenticity of his interpretation.

The belated publication allowed him to incorporate some new material and expand on his original interpretation with additional illustrations.³⁶ One of these is the x-ray photograph of the *Angelus*, made by the Louvre on Dalí's request, which reveals a dark shape in the ground at the feet of the peasants. Dalí claims that this represented a coffin, that of the dead son, which Millet was persuaded to paint over because Salon taste had shifted away from the overtly sentimental and melodramatic. Dali presents this as confirmation that the painting's grand mythological theme was that of the death of the son. "This grand theme of the death of the son, essential sentiment which emerged from my Tragic Myth of Millet's *Angelus*, was confirmed for me, after my thesis was finished, without my having been able, until very recently, to verify it."³⁷

It was Gala who reminded Dali of the original 'mental experiment' behind the book. After the revelation of the x-ray at the Louvre, Gala commented to Dali: "if this result is proof, it will be rather wonderful; but if the whole book was only a pure construction of the mind, that would be sublime."³⁸

Coda.

The recuperation of the forgotten book in 1963 sent Dalí back to the "myth" of the *Angelus* and inspired two of his greatest paintings: *Portrait of My Dead Brother* (1963) and *Perpignan Station* (1965) in which the *Angelus* theme as interpreted by Dali takes on a new twist. His extended visual interpretations of the *Angelus* in the early 1930s dwelled on the sexual encounter of the couple, on female aggression and the fate of the male, on the atavistic desires symbolised by their transformation into geological remnants, stalactite and stalagmite, ruins and skeletons. One painting from this period, however, *Meditation on a Harp*, movingly depicts a lost son at the feet of an embracing but already ghostly couple. But by the 1960s the theme of the death of the son is given powerful religious as well as sexual connotations, especially in *Perpignan Station*.

Perpignan Station and *Portrait of my Dead Brother* bring this aspect of the “tragic myth of the Angelus”, the death of the son, dramatically into the foreground. In *Portrait of my Dead Brother* Dalí’s explicit allusions to the *Angelus* itself are visually quite marginal, with a small almost grisaille scene in the distant landscape, representing not the peasant couple themselves but two Millet-like figures loading a sack onto a wheelbarrow, and beyond them a naked couple who anticipate the sexual encounter in *Perpignan Station*. The central theme concerns a different dead son, a figure entirely absent from the *Tragic Myth* – an elder brother who died nine months before Dalí was born. Encouraged by the psychiatrist Dr Roumegère Dalí began to think of himself and this brother whose loss haunted him as the mythological Dioscuri.³⁹ The cherries in the *Portrait of my Dead Brother* take on a quite different meaning from the sexual one they held in *The Tragic Myth*, where over and above the erotic connotations of juicy consumption, “paired” cherries linked by their stalks took on the silhouette of the immobile, expectant figures of the Angelus couple, one slightly inclined towards the other, secretly locked by the same “lien vital et incestueux qui unit le couple jumeau des cerises.”⁴⁰ In *Portrait of my Dead Brother*, by contrast, “the cherries represent the molecules, the dark cherries create the visage of my dead brother, the sun-lighted cherries create the image of Salvador living.” There is one further, striking link to *The Tragic Myth*: embedded as a double image across the brow of the boy and into the sky is the dark shape of a vulture, an unmistakable reference to the famous vulture perceived by Freud in the skirts of *Leonardo’s St Anne, Virgin and Child* and key to the artist’s infantile sexual phantasy, to which Dalí had referred in “Interpretation Paranoïaque-critique de l’Image obsédante de “L’Angélus” de Millet”, There is thus in *Portrait of my Dead Brother* a coded reference to Freud’s interpretation of Leonardo’s memory of a vulture that “came down to me in my cradle and opened my mouth with its tail, and struck me many times with its tail against my lips.” Freud’s account of the elision of memories of suckling with an aggressive sexual act had easily fed Dalí’s own fantasy of maternal aggression, as he had elaborated it in *The Tragic Myth*. In *Perpignan Station* Dalí orchestrates his entire grand composition around the idea of the dead son/Christ, and this time identifies fully with it himself, in a magnificent display of aggrandized ego.]

Notes

This is a substantially revised version of the essay "Der tragische Mythos von La Gare de Perpignan", published in *Salvador Dali La Gare de Perpignan, Pop, Op, Yes-yes, Pompier*, ed. G. Kolberg, Museum Ludwig, Köln, 2006

1. Salvador Dali *Le mythe tragique de "L'Angélu" de Millet* Jean-Jacques Pauvert, Paris 1963, p.17. Physically the book with its tipped in plates and elegant linen cover with strap and buckle has a slightly anachronistic air, as if aiming to take its place among the great surrealist books of the 1930s. English trans. Eleanor Morse *The Tragic Myth of Millet's Angelus* Salvador Dali Museum, St Petersburg, FL. **198**
2. Ibid. p.7
3. Dali added a new preface, extra illustrations and some notes in italic which were inserted when he corrected the proofs.
4. Cresse Crosby Collection, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, USA. Documents reproduced by Marijke Peyser-Verhaar in *Salvador Dali et le mécénat du Zodiaque*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Utrecht, 2008
5. Centre Georges Pompidou, Brassai collection, Box 25, "Arts", nos 456-458
6. [Paranoiac-critical interpretation of the obsessional image of Millet's Angelus] *Minotaure* no 1, Paris 1933 pp 65-67.
7. "New general considerations on the mechanism of the paranoiac phenomenon from the surrealist point of view"
8. "you must send an article: perhaps the preface for the Angelus. It is crucial that your text should not be PORNOGRAPHIC in any way. Take care of it..." Paul Eluard *Lettres à Gala 1924-1948* Gallimard, Paris 1984 p. 213
9. *Minotaure* no. 1 p. 65. The full sentence is: "Since 1929 and the still uncertain beginnings of *The Visible Woman*, I have announced that "the moment is near when, by a process of thought of an active and paranoiac character, it will be possible, (simultaneously with automatism and other passive states) to systematise confusion and contribute to the total discrediting of the world of reality"."
10. Tragic Myth p. 17
11. Ibid p 91
12. Dali vigorously defended himself against a number of charges in a letter to Breton (3 February 1934, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art). The surrealist leader was alarmed by Dali's anti-humanitarianism, fascination for Hitler and apparent disrespect for Lenin (*The Enigma of William Tell*). Dali points out that he would undoubtedly be persecuted by the Nazis for his books as for his 'feminising' of Hitler. He ends by declaring his commitment to 'surrealist discipline' and cordial relations temporarily resumed between Dali and Breton. But from the mid 1930s Dali grew increasingly distant from the surrealists, partly as a result of his increasing commercial success both in Europe and the USA. Dali had never followed surrealist orthodoxy and the harmony between him and the movement only lasted as long as his inventive interpretations of surrealism were seen as reinvigorating and chimed with its direction. By his own account Dali had ambitions to take over the movement; recognising that this was impossible probably coincided with the success that meant he no longer needed it. The publication of the book probably depended on a surrealist-friendly publisher. Its sexually explicit and shocking content might have made it more difficult to place as the political climate darkened in the 1930s.
13. TM p. 17
14. Max Ernst "Beyond Painting" *Max Ernst: Beyond Painting* Wittenborn, Scultz New York 1948 p.7.
15. André Breton *L'amour fou* Paris 1937 p. 47 [C'est sur le modèle de l'observation médicale que le surréalisme a toujours proposé que la relation en fût entreprise. Pas un incident ne peut être omis, pas même un nom peut être modifié sans que rentre aussitôt l'arbitraire. La mise en évidence de l'irrationalité immédiate, confondante, de certains événements nécessite la stricte authenticité du document humain qui les enregistre.]

16. Walter Benjamin "Surrealism: Last [latest] Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia"[1929], *Reflections* Schocken Books, New York, 1986, p. 179
17. André Breton "Surrealism Yesterday, To-day and To-morrow" *This Quarter* Surrealist Number, Paris, September 1932 p. 38. The guest editor of the issue was Breton. The editor, Edward W. Titus, introduced it, explaining that the surrealists would only contribute if there were no non-surrealist collaborators, and that he had been obliged to ask Breton to eschew politics because of Anglo-American censorship.
18. Breton *ibid.* p. 39
19. Breton and Eluard "Simulation of the Delirium of Interpretation Essayed", rendered into English by Samuel Beckett. *This Quarter* p. 127
20. Breton and Eluard, "The Possessions", *ibid.* p.120
21. Breton *Les vases communicants* p. 33 "les preoccupations sexuelles ne jouent apparemment aucun rôle dans ses rêves personnelles."
22. *ibid.* p. 34
23. On Dali, Lacan and Kolnai see David Lomas *The Haunted Self* Yale 2000
24. *Tragic Myth* p. 19
25. Dali, *Minotaure* no.1 p.66 "une idée homogène du phénomène, hors des misères mécanistes ou s'embourbe la psychiatrie courante"; "rende parfaitement compte de l'hypercuite objective et "communicable" du phénomène, grâce à laquelle le délire prend ce caractère tangible et impossible à contredire qui le place aux antipodes même de la stéréotypie de l'automatisme et du rêve"
26. *ibid.* p. 67 "L'ensemble constitué par la bouche de l'enfant et la queue du célèbre et invisible vautour maternel interprété par Freud dans le tableau de Léonard, coïncide intentionnellement avec la tête de l'enfant dans *Les Moissonneurs* de Millet"
27. "Phénomène délirant initial, phénomènes secondaires produits autour de l'image obsédante and considérations critiques du phénomène délirant initial"
28. "phénoménologie de l'Angélus", and the "activité paranoïaque-critique exercées sur les phénomènes secondaires"
29. "possibilités hypothétiques de nouvelles méthodes d'investigation scientifique fondées sur l'activité paranoïaque-critique."
30. Sigmund Freud *Psychoanalytical Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)* 1911 [1910], Pelican Freud Library vol. 9, Case Histories 11, 1984, p. 211
31. "le fils effectue avec sa mère le coït par derrière" TM p. 81
32. "variante maternelle du mythe immense et atroce de Saturne, d'Abraham, du Père Éternel avec Jésus-Christ et de Guillaume Tell lui-même dévorant leurs propres fils." TM p. 89
33. TM p. 91
34. Freud "Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood [1910]" and "The Moses of Michelangelo [1914]", Pelican Freud Library vol. 14, Art and Literature 1987
35. Freud Schreber Case, *op.cit.* p. 218. Freud, in the third and final section of the Schreber Case, 'The Mechanism of Paranoia', admits that Schreber's 'rays of God' resembled 'a concrete representation and projection outwards of libidinal cathexes' and thus were curiously like 'endopsychic perceptions of the processes whose existence I have assumed in these pages as the basis of our explanation of paranoia.'
36. A number of the new illustrations, several found in the USA, concern his interest in "rural eroticism" symbolised by the pitchfork and the wheelbarrow, of which he continued to collect examples, and which, he adds, is finding expression in his current film "The wheelbarrow of flesh".
The original scenario of this film notes ten manifestations of the wheelbarrow: it has been Table for food; Nuptial bed; Coffin; Cupboard; Cradle; Bird's nest; Cat's bed; Flesh wheelbarrow; Altar to pray etc. etc.; Cross "at the end". From his collection of "peasant erotic memorabilia" he adds as frontispiece to *The Tragic Myth* an "image of American pioneers": a comic postcard. The mother, "a variant of the Egyptians' phallic mother with vulture head" uses her husband as plough and wheelbarrow, his virility depersonalised into a "simple vehicle of social productivity" while the triumphant Sun/Son beams down.
To the 1963 proofs Dali added a note: The Tragic Myth was "the most overwhelming 'secret' scenario for whoever would dare to make the most ambitious film."

37. TM p. 19 "Ce grand theme mythique de la mort du fils, sentiment essentiel qui se degageait de mon Mythe Tragique de l'Angelus de Millet, me fut confirme, une fois finie ma these, sans que j'eusse toutefois pu, jusqu'a ces derniers temps, le verifier."

38. "A la suite de cet evenement, Gala me dit: 'Si ce resultat fait prevue, ce sera assez merveilleux; mais si tout le livre n'était qu'une pure construction de l'esprit. Alors ce serait sublime!'" TM p. 19

39. See *Dali The Centenary Retrospective* p. 402

40. TM p. 69 "...the two personages inclined towards one another and secretly interlaced by an invisible life line, by the same vital and incestuous link that unites the twin-couples of the cherries."