



**THE SECRET LIFE OF SALVADOR DALÍ AS LITERARY TEXT**  
*by Fèlix Fanés*

At the end of the Spanish Civil War, Salvador Dalí's oeuvre seemed to become fragmented. Between 1939 and 1944, he produced considerably fewer works. More significantly, very few of his oil paintings were of high quality, and fewer still reflected great ambition. His autobiographical text *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí* also reflects this state of mind. Even though he makes no clear mention of any crisis in the book, the text oozes a notable unease that Dalí tries to combat by attributing renewed importance to the Renaissance, classicism, order, and hierarchy as figures that counter the "fragmentation, experimentation, and skepticism" characterizing modern life. Nonetheless, the demand for a new aesthetic order cannot conceal the feeling of fragility that drips from these pages, a feeling so apparent at times that it even leads us to ask ourselves, Could it be that at that moment Dalí thought his life experience was the most valuable aspect of his work, and so he decided to transform it into a literary work, just as another artist, Benvenuto Cellini, had done in a similar situation several centuries ago? Might he not have been thinking that what he had experienced, the people with whom he had spent time, the milieus he had inhabited, would be all that would ultimately remain of him—and for that reason he had to tell his story, give it form? In other words, wasn't he inventing a career as a writer in order to escape from the "crisis" then gripping him, that was leading him to a clear end of a stage in his life?

By the time things had gotten to this point, Dalí had already written a significant body of literary works (poems, stories, essays), which had appeared in various newspapers and magazines. Some pieces, such as *La Femme visible* (1930), *L'Amour et la mémoire* (1931), and *La Conquête de l'irrationnel* (1935) had been published as *plaquettes*. Although certain writings contained autobiographical

references, such as “L’alliberament dels dits” and “Rêverie,” Dalí’s plan to write some of his memoirs cannot be understood as a continuation of his previous stage. Rather, it was a way of escaping from the situation in which he found himself, artistically speaking. As the beginning of a writing career based on long, very ambitious texts intended to capture a broader audience, *The Secret Life* should be linked above all with his next book, the novel *Hidden Faces*, with which it has more than one point of contact. In this light, *The Secret Life* should be understood less as a document about Dalí’s life and more as a “literary” project. It is a novel about his own life, written prior to the novel about the “society” in which part of that life was led—the latter being the subject of *Hidden Faces*.

What are the characteristics of this literary project? Let us say first that the “I” is the center of the story. And it is not so much because we see everything through this lens as because the “I” is the object being explained. The willingness to describe the protagonist’s subjectivity, to expose his inner workings, is what sets *The Secret Life* apart from other memoirs of a similar nature. We expect an autobiography to sum up the public, or “exterior,” activity of a “personality”. That, among other reasons, is what interests us, given that the protagonist sets a “social” example. Generally speaking, intimacy, not to mention “private matters,” is excluded from autobiographies. The “great men” express themselves through their actions—political, scientific, economic, philanthropic—that have changed the world, and those are the only matters of interest.

In the case of Salvador Dalí, this perspective is reversed. True, he begins with the raw biographical material that is more or less conventional: birth, family, education, entrance into professional life, success, international recognition. But then he puts together a book whose focus is primarily to use the narrative of the events he mentions to explain—in fact, “reveal”—what is hidden beneath his public career. The author hopes to share what he calls “secrets forever sealed” with the reader.<sup>1</sup> The idea, then, is to present the “hidden” part of the person as the center of a story in which episodic biographical events are merely connective tissue. In other words, Dalí wants to explore the obscure mechanisms that have constructed the “I” that is the

story's protagonist, who in turn is the "I" that narrates it. More than memoirs, we are faced with "confessions," a type of literature with rules of its own. This type of literature has its own rules and developed out of the framework of autobiographical writing, yet has moved away from it considerably.

In the European tradition, confessions are identified with the attitude of "opening one's heart" and revealing, with a certain shamelessness, the various corners of one's own intimacy. In confessional literature, professional activity occupies a place similar to that assigned to private life in a conventional autobiographical narrative: i.e., secondary. By contrast, what tends to be hidden in most memoirs—vile deeds, base passions, envy, persecution complexes, delusions of grandeur, sexual activity, ambition, crime—becomes the axis around which the gears of this fascinating literary machine turn. If St. Augustine addresses God with his list of sins in hand, Jean-Jacques Rousseau offers the chronicle of his faults to the reader, with nothing left to be revealed. "I have been silent about nothing bad, added nothing good [. . .]. I have shown myself as I was, contemptible and low . . ." <sup>2</sup> Rousseau's desire to tell all gives rise to the image of a personality made of weaknesses, exaltations, audacities, and contradictions; the image is of an "I" exemplary not for its morality but for its nakedness, contradiction, and fragile equilibrium: in other words, for its modernity. But the same act of "*Mettre l'âme au nu*" assumes an equivocal game with the truth. Each person's inner world is something only that person knows. Hence, in this type of narrative, lies and deceit are usually lying in wait around every corner. This is what Blanchot has called "*mystérieuse fausseté*" in Rousseau's work. <sup>3</sup> Does this invalidate Dalí's writings? Of course not. The "confessions" are not based on agreement with preexisting reality, about which we are informed that we never know what is true and what is a lie. Rather, they are based on how they adapt to an internal rule of genre that does not exclude distortion and invention but in fact deems them essential. It would be a mistake to think that the "lack of truth" in this case has anything to do with "lies." Nothing is true because nothing has a stable existence. Information about the real world is significant only as a function of the discourse that gives it order. And that discourse evolves by following an internal logic that dances

on the edge of any kind of moral or social control: an internal logic that is literary but also mental. (There is a common paranoiac strategy in all confessional narratives.)

In some ways, Dalí's autobiographical book fits into the terrain opened up by Rousseau's text, while in others it moves away from it. Yet if Rousseau's "*fausseté*" was not clear—"mysterious," according to Blanchot—Dalí, by contrast, declares his wish to make it clear from the start. There is a good reason his book starts off with a series of childhood memories, some labeled "false" and others "true." It is a double warning. Dalí is showing us that there is no barrier between truth and lie, reality and fiction, but he also reminds us that in the world of interior life, these categories are useless. In certain psychological processes, confusion between what is real and what is imaginary predominates, and it is impossible to establish a clear distinction between what really happened and what took place only in the mind. The background for this type of thinking is easy to identify. Sigmund Freud's influence on Dalí's painting has always been recognized. Something similar can be said about Dalí's writings, and *The Secret Life* is no exception. Here as well, Freud's intellectual weight appears to be decisive.

This conviction reinforces the book's abundant references to food, to the mouth, and to sucking as a sensual and almost erotic activity, along with the detailed references to excrement and the perversions derived from it. There are also constant allusions to sex in its most diverse forms—hermaphroditism, homosexuality, masturbation—which are almost always linked to unstable emotional states. ("Anxiety" is one of the words most frequently repeated). The "geologic," "melancholy," and "rocky" landscape of Cadaqués often serves as a primitive background for the age-old nature of the internal conflicts presented by the narrative. Without psychoanalysis, many of the "mysteries" that the book "unseals" would not be understood. One could even say that *The Secret Life* is largely the history of how an "ego" is constructed in orthodox Freudian terms. In the first half, the subject, utterly absorbed in himself, struggles desperately with his own drives without being able to channel them toward the outside, such that they build up to the point of crushing him. In the second part, another character (Gala as object) appears, allowing the protagonist to channel his

energy into amorous passion, and thus to develop as a subject. Within the context of this classic psychoanalytic framework, the protagonist's struggle with his father also takes on Viennese overtones, and the abundant sadism that pervades the first half of the book makes sense.

From the beginning, the narrator describes himself like this: "I clutched at pleasure with boundless, selfish eagerness, and on the slightest provocation I would become dangerous."<sup>4</sup> Often, however, no provocation was necessary at all. The fiendish impulses set forth in the first part of the book, when the narrator attempts to describe an "I" who takes extraordinary narcissistic pleasure in violence—probably because (as Freud would have explained) destructive fury "fulfil[ls] . . . the latter's old wishes for omnipotence."<sup>5</sup> Still, this is a violence without sexual intent, far from de Sade, whose works in any case Dalí had read, knew well and had even used years before. (Strangely enough, however, Dalí cites de Sade only once in the book, and only in passing.) The evil that rears its head in *The Secret Life* seems to have a different origin. "[I]f you were endowed for cruelty, you were also endowed for work,"<sup>6</sup> the protagonist says to himself, using a phrase that echoes Lautréamont's *Les chants de Maldoror* (1869). Lautréamont is quoted twice in *The Secret Life*; first when the protagonist brings up "the spirit of evil" that inspires the poet, and later, after a new act of cruelty, when he acknowledges that "the shadow of Maldoror was hovering over my life."<sup>7</sup>

We must acknowledge that it at least hovers over the text. And it does so in two senses. I have already implied that the protagonist's cruelty has a certain relationship with Maldoror. I would like to add something further in that regard. The literary figure of Lautréamont appears in the pages of the *Chants* like a counter-figure: enemy of humanity, poet of crime, cultivator of evil, original blasphemer, a sadist who does not flinch from singing the praises of excrement, Maldoror feels closer to violent beasts than to his fellow human beings. That "spirit of evil" in fact casts itself "like a shadow" over Dalí's text. Maldoror's second appearance is in the style of this narrative. André Breton called Lautréamont's language "solvent" and at the same time, a "germinal plasma."<sup>8</sup> A dark bundle of phrases held together by a

string of metaphors that weave a violent, bellicose text with a spasmodic rhythm, leaving the reader breathless—this is the prose model that inspired Dalí. The stylistic differences between *The Secret Life* and Dalí's other earlier writings, which sensitive readers usually detect immediately, most likely lie in the influence of Lautréamont.

The person touched by the “spirit of evil,” the “I” that narrates the eventful process of its own construction (Dalí's alter ego just as the narrator of the *Confessions* may be that of Rousseau), the “shadow” cast toward the future by the evil, distressing, and dark Maldoror, cannot abandon cruelty just like that, since he was cultivated so brilliantly and laboriously in the first part of the story. Once liberated—after Gala appears—from the narcissistic corset that was holding him back, he would have to find something new to replace the constant slaps, the kicks dealt unceasingly, the happiness in the face of pain and the blood of others. To achieve the necessary supplementary doses of aggression and violence, why not crack the whip of history's reactionary vision? Couldn't repression provoked by order be a form of suffering? And doesn't steely, hierarchical submission ultimately become a source of disdain and humiliation? Doesn't the lack of freedom bring with it a perverse game of master and slave?

The story's internal logic enables the adolescent anarcho-syndicalist, the 1920s communist, and the 1930s Surrealist in service of subversion to proceed to view revolutionary disorder (which he knew so well, having participated in it) with scorn. He transforms the extremism of yesteryear into a new version of the opposite persuasion—from extreme left to extreme right, the important thing was to roam the margins. By embracing a reactionary political ideology, he expressed political thought that did not lack for a line of argument while also maintaining the dose of punishment demanded by the story's internal laws. According to the narrator's frame of mind, the sequence of events that had led him to those conclusions could be put in this order: the “mechanization” of the world, with its most immediate consequence (the appearance of the “masses” as the protagonists of history), had ended up creating an environment that was conveniently exploited by unions and

political parties, and which could only culminate in the chaos of revolution and civil war (and the catastrophe of fascism). In the face of such circumstances, “only an individualist tradition that would be Catholic, aristocratic, and probably monarchic” could put to rights a society impoverished by so many conflicts and contradictions.<sup>9</sup>

Dalí uses a variety of metaphors to illustrate this political yearning: for example, the perfection of the cupola as an expression of a unique period—the Renaissance—which the narrator elevates to the category of a model that conflicts with the situation in which he lives. His praise for that era—“the startling and perfect achievement of the human spirit in the realm of aesthetics”<sup>10</sup>—actually represents just one more element of a broader demand: Catholicism as a structure—“the perfect architecture”—that sustains the new world Dalí advocated and hoped to see emerge. Political intention and artistic activity are tightly interwoven in a cross fire of metaphors. In the context of that line of argument, “form” came to occupy first place, provided that the concept was understood to be a lack of freedom, unchanging rules, and a hierarchy of values. “How much time,” exclaims the narrator, “how many revolutions, how many wars would be needed to bring people back to the supreme reactionary truth that ‘rigor’ is the prime condition of every hierarchy, and that constraint is the very mold of form[!]”<sup>11</sup>

I have already implied that French literary tradition had an enormous influence on Dalí’s text. In the second part of his autobiography, he replaces the initial sadism with a conservatism that is no less aggressive, exchanging the kick in the head for the Catholic, apostolic hair shirt, or the broken glasses of the doctor attacked by the boy narrator for an artistic form that should be Jesuitic and inquisitorial at the very least. Upon taking that step, upon turning from antisocial violence to antisocial politics, from the extreme left to the extreme right, Dalí forged a connection to more than the reactionary European thought being revived at that time by such authors as Spengler, who had been at the height of his fame until not long before. In all likelihood, Dalí also extended a tendency that was deeply entrenched in France: the conservative, Catholic, and monarchic ideology of Barrés, Maurras, and company. This group cast its “shadow” over the text as much if not more than did Maldoror.

By the late nineteenth century, this literary tendency had found that a pro-aristocracy stance offered a way out of the crisis arising from the loss of individuality in an increasingly mechanized society that was developing a mass culture. Dalí not only maintained a similar ideology but also a clearly familiar style. Haakon Chevalier, who translated *The Secret Life* into English, wrote [addressing Dalí], “You never use one word where two will do. You are a master of the mixed metaphor, of the superfluous epithet, you weave elaborate festoons of redundancy around your subject and illuminate it with glittering fireworks of hyperbole . . .” etc.;<sup>12</sup> fireworks centered mainly, as Moreas desired, on the “*trope ardi et multiforme*”,<sup>13</sup> in which Dalí shows that he has reached the same masterly heights. Within this context, we should not be surprised that in his prologue to *Hidden Faces*, Dalí refers to his novel as perhaps being “Huysmanian” in nature.<sup>14</sup> This is not the first time Dalí has cited Huysmans. In *The Secret Life*, he refers directly to the character of des Esseintes—the protagonist of *Against Nature*—in order to compare him with the narrator of his own book: “Just as des Esseintes [. . .] [so am I].”<sup>15</sup> Dalí’s text presents various other points of contact with Huysmans’ novel in addition to the citation mentioned.

The character of Floreas des Esseintes is built upon two basic principles. On the one hand, there is his devotion to artifice, which takes different forms throughout the novel: imprisonment in luxury, glorification of gemstones, digressions about literature, submission to art; an intellectual stance that leads him to sing the Church’s praises: “[The Church] was at the center of everything . . . Art did not exist except in her and through her”; or “. . . the Church, during the Middle Ages, saved philosophy, history, and literature from Barbarism; it also rescued the plastic arts.”<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, the figure of des Esseintes is based on contempt for humanity, an attitude that becomes apparent in various ways: enmity with “society that tyrannizes us”; rejection of the “all-powerful public” that dictates fashions in “ideas” and “style”; praise for solitude. Both routes offer a way to escape the “urge to sequester himself from a loathsome age of shameful duplicity,”<sup>17</sup> which arouses an enormous desire for evil on the part of the protagonist, as we shall see in the celebrated Chapter 6.



“At the very least they should have been more thoroughly explained in terms of that diabolical perversity which insinuates itself—particularly in the context of sexual vice—into exhausted minds. Indeed it does seem to be the case that nervous disorders and neuroses create fissures in the soul through which Evil may penetrate,”<sup>18</sup> Huysmans writes, in a discussion of his character’s mood. Huysman’s protagonist is quite similar to the narrator of *The Secret Life*: He too is imprisoned in aristocratic insolence through the construction of a complex, exclusive universe of culture and pleasure. He too spurns humanity, which he finds insipid and lacking individuality. He too is given over to the aesthetics of religion, particularly Catholicism, which he considers to be architecturally perfect, like a cupola.

In addition to the overlaps in style, sensibility, and intellectual attitude, there is one final connection between the two works. Huysmans’ novel, which caused a huge stir when it was first published, was republished in the early twentieth century with a new prologue by the author. (The novel was originally published in 1884 and the prologue in 1903.) There, Huysmans acknowledges that *Against Nature* developed not from his being tired of the naturalism to which he was linked until that time—as had been speculated in those days—but from his being tired of the genre of the novel itself, at least as it had been understood up to that point. “[T]hen, the urge seized me,” he wrote, “. . . to break the limits of the novel, to introduce into it art, and science, and history, in a word to no longer use this form except as a frame in which one could incorporate work of a more serious nature.”<sup>19</sup>

Is this not also the goal of *The Secret Life*? Might not the book have arisen out of the need to respond to this challenge, that is, to create—as Huysmans wished to do—an open text that could contain art, science, and history, in order to challenge the limits of literature? “Literature was stifling within its limitations.” Huysmans did not write this sentence. Neither did Dalí. It belongs to Georges Bataille, expressing the concept that in the 1920s tempted a new generation—that of Bataille and Dalí—to challenge the rules and definitions that governed literary space. When following the path opened by such writers as Sade, Rimbaud, or Lautréamont, the “postwar”

generation, especially the Surrealists, contemplated expanding the limitations of literature. The novel was one of their main preoccupations. None of the Surrealists' narrative texts were written as fiction; rather, their intention was to document dream life and the space where dreams roam free, yet at certain unexpected moments come into contact with reality. In a word, they cease to be novels in order to become autobiographical documents. Breton's *Nadja* and Aragon's *Paris Peasant* fall into this category. Soupault's *Last Nights of Paris* can be considered part of it also, and—after reading the prologue—so can *Story of the Eye* by Bataille himself. However, I would not want to be misinterpreted. I am not saying that *The Secret Life* belongs to this series of texts, nor am I saying that it should be considered a Surrealist work (inside or outside the canon). What it does share is the ambition to break through the boundaries of the literary text, or in any case to explore its limits.

But let us return to Bataille's sentence, "Literature was stifling within its limitations." This sentence is part of a text, similar to that of Huysmans, that grew out of a retrospective look at the work itself and the historical, intellectual, and moral circumstances from which it arose.<sup>20</sup> The book begins as follows, "I belong to a turbulent generation, born to literary life in the tumult of surrealism." The writer acknowledges that when viewed with perspective, the "tumult" was vital and can be found at the heart of all of his work. In an attempt to define it, he writes, "Literature is either the essential or nothing." Then he adds, "I believe that the Evil—an acute form of evil—which it expresses, has a sovereign value for us."<sup>21</sup>

Dalí's written work—and his non-written work as well—grew out of the same tumult to which Bataille alludes. Evil, as a kind of final, unvarnished experience of truth, is essential to it. "[H]atred . . . to you my treasure was entrusted," Rimbaud wrote.<sup>22</sup> It is the writer, the artist, who has the capacity to transmit this experience to a world cloaked in the illusions of conformity, alienation, and loss of identity. "In evil we are independent; we are beings ensconced within ourselves," Walter Benjamin wrote of Dostoyevsky.<sup>23</sup> If evil can take many forms, the literature emanating from it can do so as well. One of them is autobiographical confession. In *The Secret Life*, a new chapter in this history has been written by emphasizing a psychopathological "I," by

mixing truth and deception, by turning to violence and sadism, to a reactionary vision of the world—and even to the use of style itself, complex and perverse. George Orwell unceremoniously described it as foul: “It is a book that stinks”;<sup>24</sup> perhaps because he did not realize that in an age of decomposition, pure or obvious stench, that is, literary stench, can come to have a certain moral value.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Salvador Dalí, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, trans. Haakon M. Chevalier (New York: Dover Publications, 1993), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions and Correspondence, including the Letters to Malesherbes*, ed. Christopher Kelly, Roger D. Masters, and Peter G. Stillman, trans. Christopher Kelly, *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 5 (Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College; published by the University Press of New England, 1995), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *Le Livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), 63.

<sup>4</sup> *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Civilization and Its Discontents,” trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), 81.

<sup>6</sup> *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, 152.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 74, 202–3.

<sup>8</sup> André Breton, *Anthology of Black Humor*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1997), 133.

<sup>9</sup> *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, 262.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 352.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>12</sup> Haakon M. Chevalier, “Translator’s Foreword,” in Salvador Dalí, *Hidden Faces* (New York: William Morrow, 1974), vii.

<sup>13</sup> Jean Moreas, “Manifeste du symbolisme,” in Jean Moreas, *Les premières armes du Symbolisme* (Paris: Vaniers, 1889)

<sup>14</sup> Salvador Dalí, “Author’s Foreword,” in *Hidden Faces*, xiii.

<sup>15</sup> *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, 367–68.

<sup>16</sup> Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*, trans. Margaret Mauldon (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 186, 65.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 189

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 193

<sup>20</sup> In fact, this sentence also appeared in an introduction to *La Littérature et le mal* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), an anthology of previously published essays, later published in English as *Literature and Evil*, trans. Alastair Hamilton (London: Calder and Boyars, 1973). It did not include a study of *Les Chants de Maldoror* because, as Bataille wrote, “[it] stood so well on its own that it seemed superfluous.” (introductory unnumbered page)

<sup>21</sup> *Literature and Evil*, introductory unnumbered page.

<sup>22</sup> Arthur Rimbaud, *A Season in Hell and Other Poems*, trans. Norman Cameron (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1994), 137.

<sup>23</sup> Walter Benjamin, “El surrealismo. La última instantánea de la inteligencia europea” (1929), in *Iluminaciones I* (Madrid: Taurus, 1980), 56. Translation by Trudy Balch.

<sup>24</sup> George Orwell, “Benefit of Clergy: Some Notes on Salvador Dalí” (1944), in *The Collected Essays*, vol. 3 (London: Penguin, 1970), 185–95.