

## *Salvador Dalí: The Question of Genius*

By Annette Norwood

On April 19, 1958, Salvador Dalí was the guest on *The Mike Wallace Interview*. Mr. Wallace introduced Dalí by describing him as “a self-confessed genius with an ingenious flair for publicity.” When the subject of Dalí’s clowning came up, Wallace said, “Despite your hijinks, time and again you have called yourself a genius and you’re very serious about this.” Dalí, expanding on the idea of being a genius in the fields of both painting and comedy, said that he was a genius “in many different fields” and went on to single out his personality as being “more important” than any of the “little facets of [his] activities.” Later in the interview, Dalí, who had been challenged concerning his feelings toward death, responded by describing himself as a “contradictory and paradoxical man.”<sup>1</sup>

In keeping with Dalí’s last statement, the question of his genius doesn’t lend itself to simple or straightforward answers. In putting together the story of Dalí’s genius, I will go back to an incident from his childhood that gives a decidedly different view of Dalí than that of a genius. I will also provide Dalí’s definition of himself as a genius and show how it fits in with historical observations on the subject of genius. The story of Dalí as a genius includes his childhood adulation of a figure of great genius, Dalí’s self-concept, his goal setting and his hard work. There will also be a consideration of what was important to Dalí and of how he dealt with certain weaknesses from his childhood, either accepting or overcoming them.

And now I turn to Dalí’s own narration of an experience from his childhood, a narration that initially aroused my interest in the question of Dalí’s genius. This story was recorded in the multivolume work entitled *A Dalí Journal*,<sup>2</sup> which was written by A. Reynolds Morse, cofounder of The Dalí Museum with his wife Eleanor.

The setting for this narration by Dalí was the dining car of a train “jostling across the plains of America”<sup>3</sup> on March 21, 1963, as Dalí and his wife Gala, along with Mr. and Mrs. Morse, headed to California, where “a very lucrative portrait commission”<sup>4</sup> awaited the artist. On this occasion, Dalí was talking about his father, who, as Dalí said, “had a very violent temper and was, in general, a very difficult person to get along with.”<sup>5</sup> This particular story had to do with the time Dalí’s father “got so angry he forced a teacher to leave town.”<sup>6</sup>

As Mr. Morse records the story and what led to it:

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<sup>1</sup> Mike Wallace, “Interview with Salvador Dalí” on *The Mike Wallace Interview* (Television transcript, interview with Salvador Dalí, April 19, 1958). Available:

[http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/multimedia/video/2008/wallace/dali\\_salvador\\_t.html](http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/multimedia/video/2008/wallace/dali_salvador_t.html) [November 10, 2015].

<sup>2</sup> Unpublished manuscript A. Reynolds Morse (with Eleanor R. Morse), *A Dalí Journal* (1956-1992), vol. I-XVI.

<sup>3</sup> Unpublished manuscript Morse, *A Dalí Journal* (1963-1965), vol. V, 26.

<sup>4</sup> Unpublished manuscript Morse, *A Dalí Journal* (1963-1965), vol. V, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Unpublished manuscript Morse, *A Dalí Journal* (1963-1965), vol. V, 23.

<sup>6</sup> Unpublished manuscript Morse, *A Dalí Journal* (1963-1965), vol. V, 26.

The painter said that he never was any good at all in either spelling or mathematics. What started him off on this recollection was a large advertisement he had pulled from the newspaper. He drew the sheet of crinkled paper from his jacket pocket and showed us the ad. It was a large, very ornate \$1,000,000 representing some sale. "What is *dees* \$2000?" Dalí asked us. We said no, not 2000; it was a million. How did he get 2000? He explained it was quite obvious to him:  $1000 + 1000 = 2000$ . We explained about the commas, and he laughed, saying that he had just never understood such things. I had retorted, "Well, then, Dalí, how on earth did you ever get through grade school in Figueras?" . . .

At the Institute in Figueras, he said, he was so bad in his lessons that several teachers were volunteering to help him with special tutoring. One day he came home with a "good" mark ([that is], approved) in spelling. When he showed the grade to his father, the senior Dalí blew up. "Approved!" he roared. "Impossible! That teacher is surely a dishonest man! You are so completely stupid you could not possibly get such a grade!" Then pulling his black fedora firmly down on his head, he strode in a towering rage down to the school and blasted the teacher apart. The notary continued his persecution of the poor teacher who had dared to give Salvador a good grade until the man was actually forced to leave Figueras and find a job elsewhere.<sup>7</sup>

The characterization of Dalí by his father as completely stupid, at least as far as spelling and math were concerned, stands in stark contrast to Dalí's own description of himself as a genius. In fact, one of the books that Dalí wrote is entitled *Diary of a Genius*, the thesis of which Dalí explains in this way:

This book will prove that the daily life of a genius, his sleep, his digestion, his ecstasies, his nails, his colds, his blood, his life and death are essentially different from those of the rest of mankind. This unique book, then, is the first diary written by a genius. And it is more than that: it is written by the unique genius who has had the unique fortune to be married to the genius Gala, the unique mythological woman of our time.<sup>8</sup>

In the face of such a formulation of genius by Dalí, it would be well to consider not only Dalí's life and thought, as they bear on this subject, but also to look at the concept of genius itself, as others have explained it.

In a recent publication devoted to *Secrets of Genius*, Lev Grossman presents the historical background of the concept:

The idea of genius is an old one, and its meaning has shifted and transformed in curious ways over the centuries. To the Romans a genius was a spirit that belonged to a person or a place, a kind of ghostly companion who determined one's identity and one's fate. Genius only became something exceptional in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when a

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<sup>7</sup> Unpublished manuscript Morse, *A Dalí Journal* (1963-1965), vol. V, 27-28.

<sup>8</sup> Salvador Dalí, *Diary of a Genius*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Creation Books, [1964], 1998), 13.

rather magical idea arose: that there was an entirely other order of human beings, possessed of an ineffable extra mental increment that enabled them to do things we ordinary people couldn't.<sup>9</sup>

In the book *Divine Fury: A History of Genius*, Darrin McMahon provides insight into what was happening in the arts and letters in the 18<sup>th</sup> century:

Deprived of powerful patrons and increasingly dependent for survival on the proceeds of their work, writers and artists strove to define unique personalities and styles in order to highlight claims to the ownership of their creations. Originality and copyright developed in tandem, and the new creator of "genius" dramatized the emergence of the modern artist and self.<sup>10</sup>

Now to bring the discussion of genius to Dalí's time, I turn to McMahon's citation of Will Durant, "the American popular historian" who wrote *Adventures in Genius* in 1931, which, incidentally, was the year Dalí painted *The Persistence of Memory*. As Durant noted: "In an age that would level everything and reverence nothing," the worship of genius was the "final religion," demanding obeisance, not critique. "When genius stands in our presence," Durant declared, "we can only bow down before it as an act of God, a continuance of creation."<sup>11</sup>

It is interesting to note that early on Dalí admired and identified with Napoleon, who is a prominent figure in the history of genius, being renowned specifically as a genius of the Romantic Period. As Dalí writes in his self-styled autobiography, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, "At the age of six I wanted to be a cook. At seven I wanted to be Napoleon. And my ambition has been growing steadily ever since."<sup>12</sup>

Returning to McMahon's book, in the chapter devoted to "Romantic Genius," he writes of Napoleon:

The portrait common to virtually all Romantic reflection on Bonaparte was that of an omniscient and omnipotent genius. That such characterizations rested to a considerable degree on Napoleon's own prodigious talents is without question. Time and again, his admirers and detractors alike marveled at his vision, his intense focus, and his ability to master vast quantities of information with apparent ease. They were equally astounded by Napoleon's seemingly limitless energy, his capacity to work for great stretches of time while others ate, amused themselves, or simply collapsed in exhaustion. As a leader, and above all as a general, Napoleon possessed imposing psychological strengths, enabling him to marshal his personality to great effect. . . . Finally, the vast range of his curiosity and knowledge – from his youthful dabbling as

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<sup>9</sup> Lev Grossman, "A Fire in the Flint" in *Secrets of Genius: Discovering the Nature of Brilliance*, ed. Neil Fine (New York: Time Home Entertainment, 2013), 7.

<sup>10</sup> Darrin M. McMahon, *Divine Fury: A History of Genius* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 72.

<sup>11</sup> McMahon, *Divine Fury*, xiv.

<sup>12</sup> Salvador Dalí, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, trans. Haakon M. Chevalier (London: Vision Press, [1942], 1949), 1.

a writer and *philosophe* to his mature concern for science and support for the arts – meant that he could seduce across an astonishing array of interests.<sup>13</sup>

In his discussion of this Romantic genius, McMahon also points out “Napoleon’s self-conscious efforts to construct his genius” and concludes, “Not only did Napoleon play a role in fashioning his image, this image played a role in fashioning him.”<sup>14</sup>

As far as Dalí is concerned, his early admiration of Napoleon is pertinent because of the part it plays in his presentation of himself in his writing. However, because of Dalí’s habit of building a myth around himself, independent corroboration of his feelings toward Napoleon would make them even more telling. Such corroboration can be found in a book written by Ana Maria Dalí, *Salvador Dalí as Seen by His Sister*.<sup>15</sup> As Ana Maria tells us:

My brother always said he wanted to be Napoleon. Once on our way to a hermitage, he was so tired he could hardly walk. Our [aunt] tieta made a paper hat on his head and told him he was Napoleon. That perked him right up. He mounted a rod-like [make-believe] horse and rode merrily up the hill heading to the hermitage. When he slowed down all he needed to pep up was for Tieta to pretend to sound drums and he would mount his Pegasus to gallop to the hermitage in spit[e] of his intense fatigue. When he arrived he did not fall off the horse his vivid imagination had created.<sup>16</sup>

In the same way that a warning about Dalí’s mythmaking is needed when talking about his writing, so, too, should there be a word of caution concerning Ana Maria’s book. First of all, Dalí did not like it, and that’s putting it mildly. Second, one should take into account certain limitations in Ana Maria’s style of relating past events. As Dalí biographer Ian Gibson has written, “. . . the narrative was as chronologically confused and imprecise as that of the *Secret Life* . . . .”<sup>17</sup>

Ana Maria’s book upset Dalí so much that in January 1950, the month following its publication, he had cards printed up “to warn collectors and biographers” about what his sister had done. His expulsion by his family in 1930, as Dalí wrote, meant that he was responsible for his achievement of worldwide success, being aided only by “God, the light of the Empordà and the heroic daily abnegation of a sublime woman, [his] wife, Gala.” Dalí continued, “Once famous, my family accepted a reconciliation, but my sister could not resist speculating materially, and pseudo-sentimentally, with my name . . . .”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> McMahon, *Divine Fury*, 116.

<sup>14</sup> McMahon, *Divine Fury*, 118.

<sup>15</sup> Unpublished manuscript Ana Maria Dalí ([1949], 1998), *Salvador Dalí as Seen by His Sister*, trans. Griselda Boler (trans. chap. 1, Annette Norwood, n.d.).

<sup>16</sup> Unpublished manuscript A. M. Dalí ([1949], 1998), *Salvador Dalí as Seen by His Sister*, trans. Boler, chap. 2, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Ian Gibson, *The Shameful Life of Salvador Dalí* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 509.

<sup>18</sup> Gibson, *The Shameful Life of Salvador Dalí*, 510. See Vicenç Altaió (ed.), *Dalí: Una vida de libro = A Life in Books*, document trans. Ida Conesa (Barcelona: Destino, 2004), 208, for reproduction of card.

Mr. Morse, having heard “several tirades . . . from Dalí about his sister’s book” by 1956, wrote that Dalí’s main objection to it was Ana Maria’s “attempt to normalize him ‘before 1929,’” the year in which he met Gala. In Mr. Morse’s words:

“This tends, [Dalí] asserts, to destroy the legend he and Gala have worked so hard to create, that he has (a) always been a genius and (b) always been sort of crazy. To stabilize this Dalinian view and to enshrine Gala, a stone wall has been built which excludes his childhood years “before Gala” in order to strengthen his fiction of being a crazy, exhibitionistic showman from his infancy.<sup>19</sup>

Now that I have provided this extra information about Ana Maria’s book and its reception, I want to go back to something that she wrote about Dalí, his father and their mealtime discussions:

During meals my father and brother discuss everything. They were never quiet. The rest of the family would listen in silence. Sometime[s] their conversations were so interesting, that my father in the heat of the discussion would forget to go to the “Sport” club, where he usually met with his friend, rarely failing to appear. He was beginning to find his son a great companion, and both being exalted, and always right, their talks were animated, sharp, and their arguments energetic and full of conviction.<sup>20</sup>

As can be seen in this passage, in Dalí’s discussions with his father, he gained practice in defending his position, which to him was always right. Dalí’s propensity for not accepting ideas coming from anyone but Gala and for refuting them persuasively was noted by Mr. Morse years later:

Both of the Dalís have one trait in common. If one suggests an idea – any idea – they reject it at once. In Dalí’s case, if one offers a premise, he will immediately take a totally opposite position. For example, at Del Monte, I found a large piece of “Dalinian” kelp by the shore. I put it on a tree on the terrace like a phallus, and Dalí totally ignored it. If you exclaim, “O, THAT is a Dalinian anything,” the reply always is, “On *le* contrary, is *le* opposite, and myself is *explaine why*.” This is always said with an emphasis that makes one feel utterly insufficient to the moment.<sup>21</sup>

Given Dalí’s habit of setting himself apart from others as an adult, the question of how he felt about himself as a youth in comparison to his peers seems natural, especially in consideration of his tale of his father calling him completely stupid. In *Diary of a Genius*, Dalí says, “From my earliest childhood, I have had the vicious turn of mind to consider myself different from ordinary mortals. In this, too, I am being successful.”<sup>22</sup> Since the truth of this self-characterization cannot be taken for granted, it helps to find confirmation elsewhere, and

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<sup>19</sup> Unpublished manuscript Morse, *A Dalí Journal* (1956), vol. I, 460.

<sup>20</sup> Unpublished manuscript A. M. Dalí, *Salvador Dalí as Seen by His Sister*, trans. Boler, chap. 6, 20.

<sup>21</sup> Unpublished manuscript Morse, *A Dalí Journal* (1963-1965), vol. V, 92.

<sup>22</sup> Dalí, *Diary of a Genius*, trans. Howard, 79.

in this case, a personal journal entry that Dalí made at the age of 15 will do. At that time, Dalí wrote, "I was looking at the stupid and, as usual, pointless students and I smiled. It was a superior smile; but it was not haughtiness; but the fruit of knowing myself and knowing them."<sup>23</sup>

Francisco Javier San Martín wrote an article entitled, "Dalí, automitólogo," which loosely translated means "Dalí, Self-Mythologizer."<sup>24</sup> In it, he offers the following insights concerning Dalí:

He needs the isolation and the distance of a star, so that everything will revolve around him. His public life is merely the counterpoint of his need for solitude, for protection, and for work which is often frenetic and obsessive. Dalí wants to be expelled, because this is the condition of a genius, his inevitable solitude in the heights. This melancholy, twilight myth is turned to the *positive* by Dalí, who makes of solitude, of rejection, and of isolation the metaphor of his unique genius.<sup>25</sup>

Returning now to Dalí's youth and to his smile as he considered the stupid, pointless students around him, perhaps, besides relating to his own estimation of his abilities, his comment had to do with his willingness to set goals and to work hard to achieve them. Later in the same year, 1920, Dalí writes in his journal about what he has resolved to do and be:

The culmination and perhaps the most important event in my life, since it showed the path I was to take, was the following decision (approved by the family): I shall finish my schooling quickly, if need be doing my two remaining years in one. Then I shall go to Madrid, to the Academia de Bellas Artes. There I intend to spend three years working madly. . . . Then I shall get a grant to spend four years in Rome; and on my return from Rome I shall be a genius and the whole world will admire me. I may be scorned and misunderstood, but I shall be a genius, a great genius, because I'm sure of it.<sup>26</sup>

Although not all happened as he had resolved, Dalí did end up going to the Academia de Bellas Artes and eventually spent time in Rome.

When Dalí associates being scorned and misunderstood with genius, he is expressing ideas on the subject that have been in circulation for some time. Earlier I quoted from Lev Grossman in order to give historical background on the concept of genius. If I had continued

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<sup>23</sup> Salvador Dalí, *A Dalí Journal 1920: Impressions and Private Memoirs of Salvador Dalí, January 1920*, trans. Joaquim Cortada i Perez (Cleveland, OH: The Reynolds Morse Foundation, 1962), 32.

<sup>24</sup> Francisco Javier San Martín, "Dalí, automitólogo" [Dalí, Self-Mythologist], *Arte y Parte*, vol. 104 (April/May 2013), 62-91.

<sup>25</sup> San Martín, "Dalí, automitólogo," 76. My trans. "Necesita el aislamiento y la distancia de una estrella, para que todo gire a su alrededor. Su *vie publique* no es sino el contrapunto de su necesidad de soledad, de protección, de trabajo, a menudo frenético, obsesivo. Dalí quiere ser expulsado porque esta es la condición del genio, su inevitable soledad en las alturas. Este mito crepuscular, melancólico, es puesto *en positivo* por Dalí, que hace de la soledad, del rechazo y del aislamiento, la metáfora de su genio único."

<sup>26</sup> As cited in Altaió (ed.), *Dalí: Una vida de libro = A Life in Books*, 41.

with the passage from Grossman, I would have soon come to these observations: “To be a genius was to be both blessed and cursed, to be both more and less than human. Geniuses were misunderstood and ostracized by society.” At this point, Grossman quotes the famous 19<sup>th</sup> century Irish author, Oscar Wilde: “‘The public is wonderfully tolerant,’ . . . Wilde wrote. ‘It forgives everything except genius.’”<sup>27</sup>

Dalí’s declaration of his intent to be a genius also included the recognition that he would need to work hard. John Cloud, another contributor to the publication *Secrets of Genius*, presents the idea that long hours of practice are necessary. As Cloud explains:

. . . a lively debate has begun over what might be called the 10-or-10 rule of genius. As popularized by writer Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Outliers: The Story of Success*, it states that someone can achieve lasting influence in a field – any field, from chemistry to singing to pitching for a baseball team – only after 10 years of dedication or 10,000 hours of practice. That’s how long it takes, the argument goes, to earn the right to be called a genius.<sup>28</sup>

Ana Maria Dalí bears witness to her brother’s early dedication to painting:

Often, at break of day, he is ready to go paint; other times he stays in his studio, but works always from dawn to sunset, and when in late afternoon we go for walks along the many paths that surround Cadaqués – each totally different, but within the classic ambiance that characterizes the area – my brother still works. Not for an instant does he stop contemplating intensely, the light, the clouds, the sea and shore, capturing the most minute details.<sup>29</sup>

Among the many accounts of Dalí’s hard work as an adult, there is the one of what it was like when he was working on the Walt Disney film *Destino* with Disney studio artist John Hench:

From 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day, for weeks, Dalí feverishly turned out picture ideas and Mr. Hench drew continuity sketches. “His mind was going furiously,” Mr. Hench said. “So many things came up, and so many things evolved.”<sup>30</sup>

Jean-Hubert Martin, Head Curator of the 2012 to 2013 Dalí retrospective at the Pompidou in Paris, observed that “it was through painting that [Dalí] made his name and without it, he undoubtedly would never have achieved the fame he enjoyed.”<sup>31</sup> Martin also noted the breadth of Dalí’s interests:

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<sup>27</sup> Grossman, “A Fire in the Flint” in *Secrets of Genius*, ed. Fine, 7.

<sup>28</sup> John Cloud, “Inside the Dazzling Mind” in *Secrets of Genius: Discovering the Nature of Brilliance*, ed. Neil Fine (New York: Time Home Entertainment, 2013), 12.

<sup>29</sup> Unpublished manuscript A. M. Dalí, *Salvador Dalí as Seen by His Sister*, trans. Boler, chap. 4, 12.

<sup>30</sup> John Canemaker, “The Lost Cartoon by Disney and Dalí, Fellow Surrealists,” *The New York Times* (September 7, 2003), 70 AR.

<sup>31</sup> Jean-Hubert Martin, “Dali *artiste*” in *Press Release. Dalí, 21 November 2012 – 25 March 2013* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, Communication and Partnerships Department, November 8, 2012), 21.

Dalí proclaimed himself a genius and consequently claimed to be able to exercise his talent in all fields of creative activity. Nothing was to resist his curiosity and his creative bulimia. He was greedy for novelty and assimilated every new invention and technology with disconcerting ease, as if the world in which he lived was too narrow and archaic for him.<sup>32</sup>

Daniel Giralt-Miracle has also written of Dalí's thirst for knowledge and desire to express himself through different media. As he stated:

Usually, when Dalí got a bee in his bonnet about some subject, he devoted himself to it full-time and compulsively, "restlessly and without order", as he himself revealed in reference to reading and writing, an activity he not only never left off, but one he even sometimes considered taking up in place of painting. Although eventually it was his painting that made him famous, he never abandoned writing, either as an instrument of controversy and debate, or of reflection and creation, or as a means for building up his own personality, because, as he saw it, the true artist must not have only one medium of expression, because all of them are valid ways of manifesting oneself.<sup>33</sup>

As the previous quotation demonstrates, writing was one of the ways in which Dalí expressed himself, but in spite of his accomplishments as an author, Dalí never overcame his weakness in the area of spelling. A native Catalan speaker, Dalí began his schooling with instruction that was conducted solely in Spanish. Following two years of this, his father enrolled him in a school in which the instruction was conducted in French. As Ian Gibson has observed:

As a result of the six years he spent in [this] school, Dalí fulfilled his father's aspirations by acquiring excellent spoken French, although with a thick Catalan accent. The language's unphonetic spelling was beyond him, however, and he never mastered it. Nor did he ever learn to spell Catalan and Spanish correctly.<sup>34</sup>

Dalí's book, *Diary of a Genius*, was first published in a French edition in 1964 as *Journal d'un génie*. Francisco Javier San Martín, in his comments on Dalí's spelling errors, begins with this title itself:

*Journal d'un jenie*: only a true genius and not an impostor can write the word *génie* in the title of his book with two spelling errors. His record, apparently, was to write the word *révolution* with four errors, thus maintaining the unbeatable average of one error per syllable.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Martin, "Dalí *arteur*," 21.

<sup>33</sup> Daniel Giralt-Miracle, "The Story of a Fascination" in *Dalí: Una vida de libro = A Life in Books*, ed. Vicenç Altaió, English trans. Andrew Langdon-Davies (Barcelona: Destino, 2004), 340.

<sup>34</sup> Gibson, *The Shameful Life of Salvador Dalí*, 74-75.

<sup>35</sup> San Martín, "Dalí, automitólogo," 76. My trans. " *Journal d'un jenie*: solo un auténtico genio y no un impostor puede escribir en el título de su libro la palabra *génie* con dos faltas de ortografía. Su récord, al parecer, fue escribir la palabra *révolution* con cuatro faltas, manteniendo el insuperable promedio de un error por sílaba."



I don't doubt that Dalí would have accepted San Martín's association of errors with genius. While Dalí may have felt that his position was always right, he didn't mind making mistakes. As Mr. Morse wrote in 1963, "I kidded Dalí briefly about some of the mistakes in his new book, and Gala interjected that they were all minor ones. Dalí replied that errors were to be expected in a work of genius."<sup>36</sup> In *Diary of a Genius*, Dalí responds to someone else's errors by writing, "Mistakes are almost always of a sacred nature."<sup>37</sup>

To Dalí, who felt that "technique was a mechanical skill that anyone could learn,"<sup>38</sup> ideas were what was important. As Mr. Morse recorded in his journal, Dalí said that "ideas are the real essence of life and quite difficult to come by."<sup>39</sup> Walt Disney also expressed this sentiment: "'We have to keep breaking new trails,' he said. 'Ordinarily, good story ideas don't come easily and have to be fought for.'" Disney continued, "'Dalí is communicative. He bubbles with new ideas.'"<sup>40</sup> Picasso, for his part, wrote about Dalí's brain ever churning like an outboard motor.<sup>41</sup> Dalí's studio assistant, Isidor Bea, described him as "truly a human dynamo, a Vesuvius of ideas." According to Bea, Dalí would "start some architectural detail which seemed rather ordinary at the outset, and then it would explode into something beautiful and utterly fantastic as the artist developed it."<sup>42</sup>

Dalí, instead of being discouraged when conditions weren't favorable to painting, was happy to spend time thinking and generating ideas. On a visit to Dalí's home in the summer of 1956, the Morses found him laid up with a swollen knee. Dalí shared with them his feeling "that the present interruption in his painting . . . was good, as it gave him time to think and reorganize his concepts of the several pictures on which he was now working."<sup>43</sup> Dalí went on to say that

his mind was teeming with ideas . . . . The longer he rested, the more projects he conceived. In fact, he said that he almost worked out a positive theory of immortality as he lay there in the white, high-ceilinged bedroom overlooking the Bay of Port Lligat.<sup>44</sup>

Dalí writes about his facility in generating ideas in *Diary of a Genius*. On September 2, 1953, he was visited by a gentleman who was "by profession a whaleman," from whom he requested the gift of "several vertebrae of this mammal."<sup>45</sup> His request prompted the following reflection by Dalí:

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<sup>36</sup> Unpublished manuscript Morse, *A Dalí Journal* (1963-1965), vol. V, 6.

<sup>37</sup> Dalí, *Diary of a Genius*, trans. Howard, 34.

<sup>38</sup> Unpublished manuscript Morse, *A Dalí Journal* (1963-1965), vol. V, 101.

<sup>39</sup> Unpublished manuscript Morse, *A Dalí Journal* (1963-1965), vol. V, 101.

<sup>40</sup> Canemaker, "The Lost Cartoon by Disney and Dalí, Fellow Surrealists," *The New York Times*, 70 AR.

<sup>41</sup> As cited in unpublished manuscript Morse, *A Dalí Journal* (1959-1961), vol. III, 248.

<sup>42</sup> Unpublished manuscript Morse, *A Dalí Journal* (1959-1961), vol. III, 81.

<sup>43</sup> Unpublished manuscript Morse, *A Dalí Journal* (1956-1959), vol. II, 40.

<sup>44</sup> Unpublished manuscript Morse, *A Dalí Journal* (1956-1959), vol. II, 41.

<sup>45</sup> Dalí, *Diary of a Genius*, trans. Howard, 95.

My capacity to profit from everything is unlimited. In less than an hour I have listed sixty-two different applications for these whale vertebrae – a ballet, a film, a painting, a philosophy, a therapeutic decoration, a magical effect, a hallucinatory method . . . , a morphological law, proportions exceeding human measurement, a new way to pee, a brush. All this in the shape of a whale's vertebrae.<sup>46</sup>

Dalí, however, was interested in something that went beyond generating a series of creative ideas. He felt that it was important for an artist to have a philosophy which would provide the underpinnings for his work. Dalí called this philosophy his *cosmogony*, and in *Diary of a Genius*, he wrote that he was busy creating it in what must have been his early years with Gala, perhaps in the early 1930s.<sup>47</sup> In his 1942 book, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, he writes, "For Cosmogony is an 'exclusive whole.' Cosmogony is neither Reaction nor Revolution – Cosmogony is Renaissance, hierarchized and exclusive knowledge of everything."<sup>48</sup> Mr. Morse records Dalí's perspective in this way, "Art to be really great, [he] said, must have a definite philosophical content, and each painter must build a cosmogony peculiarly his own."<sup>49</sup>

Dalí not only put a great deal of thought into his paintings, but he also gave thought to his self-presentation. In this regard, the idea that he was a little crazy was important to him, probably owing to the popular association of genius with madness. In an intimate gathering at Pierre's Wine Room in December 1958, in a discussion of just "how few people were able to distinguish between [his] intellectual eccentricities and his actual ones," Dalí shared his thoughts on the subject, as Mr. Morse recalled:

The confusion was excellent for the present. It led people to think that he was REALLY crazy, when of course he was not. If we explain everything now, Dalí went on, the legend of his madness that he had been building up all these years would collapse, and people would quickly forget he was a genius and look upon him as just another painter. It is far better for the time being to sustain his eccentricities and to capitalize on them, for they lend color and dimensions, originality and spice to his ideas. They fill his personality out to the full dimension of all the wild things people have come to expect. He said that his paintings were evidence enough that he was not entirely mad, and that they will eventually become recognized for what they really are – expressions of a genius who in his lifetime was grossly misinterpreted.<sup>50</sup>

The topic of madness in relation to genius is included in a book by Anna Vives, *Identidad en tiempos de vanguardia*, or to give the entire title in English, *Identity in Avant-garde Times: Narcissism, Genius and Violence in the Work of Salvador Dalí and Federico*

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<sup>46</sup> Dalí, *Diary of a Genius*, trans. Howard, 95.

<sup>47</sup> Dalí, *Diary of a Genius*, trans. Howard, 25.

<sup>48</sup> Dalí, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, trans. Chevalier, 387.

<sup>49</sup> Unpublished manuscript Morse, *A Dalí Journal* (1956), vol. I, 55.

<sup>50</sup> Unpublished manuscript Morse, *A Dalí Journal* (1956-1959), vol. II, 402.

*García Lorca*.<sup>51</sup> Of the four discourses on the theme of genius that Vives presents, that of Cesare Lombroso is the most closely related to Dalí's self-representation as being nearly crazy. "Lombroso considers that melancholy . . . , depression, timidity, and egotism are products of a privileged intellect."<sup>52</sup> He also points out a relationship between melancholy and megalomania.<sup>53</sup> Taking as a point of reference Lombroso's contention that "hallucinations, ghosts, divine visions, and other apparitions plague the lives of geniuses . . . ,"<sup>54</sup> Vives lists the titles of 33 works by Dalí that contain these words or similar ones.<sup>55</sup> Among these works are The Dalí Museum's own paintings *The Ghost of Vermeer of Delft Which Can Be Used as a Table* (1934) and *The Hallucinogenic Toreador* (1969-1970).

Although time only permits a mention of the detailed descriptions made by Anna Vives<sup>56</sup> to explain how Dalí incorporated and adapted ideas of German philosopher Nietzsche into his autobiographical writings, this mere mention illustrates Dalí's interest in philosophy and indeed in scholarly writing in a broader sense, including, of course, the writings of Sigmund Freud. As Ralf Schiebler has observed, "Psychoanalysis dominated [Dalí's readings] until the second world war, after which the natural sciences took over."<sup>57</sup> Thomas Banchoff, a mathematician who knew Dalí personally, recently wrote:

Salvador Dalí created many images that were inspired by ideas from science and mathematics as well as literature and philosophy. He paid great attention to the major scientific events of his lifetime and very much appreciated being taken seriously by professional scientists and mathematicians . . . .<sup>58</sup>

Anyone who is familiar with Dalí's reputation for incorporating mathematics into his later works has probably been wondering about my earlier mention of his self-revelation about having had difficulty with math. To Dalí's credit, there is a difference between the way \$1,000,000 is written in English and the way it is written in French and in the Spanish of Spain (\$1.000.000). As far as money is concerned, despite Dalí's love of it, Gala was the one who was responsible for handling theirs. As far as math is concerned, the question still remains of whether Dalí really had difficulty with it when he was young. There is also the

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<sup>51</sup> Anna Vives, *Identidad en tiempos de vanguardia: Narcisismo, genio y violencia en la obra de Salvador Dalí y Federico García Lorca* [Identity in Avant-garde Times: Narcissism, Genius and Violence in the Work of Salvador Dalí and Federico García Lorca] (Oxford, England: Peter Lang, 2015).

<sup>52</sup> Vives, *Identidad en tiempos de vanguardia*, 72. My trans. "Lombroso considera que la melancolía . . . , la depresión, la timidez y el egoísmo son productos de un intelecto privilegiado."

<sup>53</sup> Vives, *Identidad en tiempos de vanguardia*, 72.

<sup>54</sup> Vives, *Identidad en tiempos de vanguardia*, 73. My trans. "Alucinaciones, espectros, visiones divinas y otras apariciones plagan la vida de los genios . . . ."

<sup>55</sup> Vives, *Identidad en tiempos de vanguardia*, 73-74.

<sup>56</sup> Vives, *Identidad en tiempos de vanguardia*, 102-109.

<sup>57</sup> Ralf Schiebler, *Dalí: Genius, Obsession and Lust*, trans. Fiona Elliott (Munich, Germany: Prestel, 1999), 75.

<sup>58</sup> Thomas Banchoff, "The Math Connection" in Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland: 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition Illustrated by Salvador Dalí* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015 [In association with the National Museum of Mathematics, New York]), xvii.

related question of how he seemingly was able to overcome this purported lack of aptitude when he was older.

In *Diary of a Genius*, Dalí accounts for his difficulties as a student by saying:  
I was never capable of being an average pupil. I would either seem completely unteachable and give the impression of being utterly dumb, or I would fling myself on my work with a frenzy, an application and a will to learn that astonished everybody. But to awaken my zeal, it was necessary to offer me something I liked. Once my appetite had been whetted, I became ravenously hungry.<sup>59</sup>

I would guess that this explanation by Dalí is a good description of how he managed to master the math he used in his later works, but I think that when he was young more than a disinterest in math was involved.

In a journal entry Dalí made when he was 15, he described his experience in attending a concert and then returning home:

I had a wonderful night, I have seen many things in my dreams. My imagination flew so far away . . . I was so happy and I found everything wonderful and nice . . . I went back home. In my mind I still could hear the cries of the violin, the clear notes of the piano . . . I was still in a trance . . . It was one o'clock . . . [. . .] On my bed-table I found the algebra book open and sheets of paper covered with equations were scattered on the table, covering it. I felt in the innermost of my soul a bitterness . . . I saw the misty and soft forms disappear like a dream. They were diffusing themselves; they were hurrying to dissipate. The facts of life were there. For tomorrow we had to present the problems solved . . . !<sup>60</sup>

In a Mike Wallace interview that took place later than the one with which I began, Dalí spoke of his brother who died prior to Dalí's birth. As usual, Dalí was inaccurate in regards to the age at which his brother died, which was actually 22 months old. This is Mr. Morse's summary of what Dalí said in the interview:

For 7 years his analyst had been probing the matter of the Dalí family's greater love for his dead brother named Salvador also, who had died at the age of 3 before Dalí was born. He was a precocious mathematical genius . . . with such a strong personality that anything the second (and present) Salvador did was always in the shadow.<sup>61</sup>

Mr. Morse also records a story Dalí told him about the time a notary, who was left in the library to await Dalí, disturbed papers with mathematical calculations on them. This same story, told in a slightly different way, appears as Dalí's entry for September 6, 1952, in *Diary of a Genius*.<sup>62</sup> The story as Dalí related it to Mr. Morse is as follows:

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<sup>59</sup> Dalí, *Diary of a Genius*, trans. Howard, 19.

<sup>60</sup> Salvador Dalí, *A Dali Journal 1920*, trans. Cortada i Perez, 53. Ellipsis points appear in original.

<sup>61</sup> Unpublished manuscript Morse, *A Dali Journal* (1962-1963), vol. IV, 51.

<sup>62</sup> Dalí, *Diary of a Genius*, trans. Howard, 60.

[Dalí] had been involved in innumerable mathematical calculations for his *Nuclear Cross*. Each component cube had to be mathematically figured so as to retain its perspective no matter from what angle it was viewed. These calculations, along with others for his *Christ of St. John of the Cross*, were all piled on the library table. Dalí had issued strict instructions that no one was to touch them – not the maids, not Gala, absolutely NO ONE. Dalí said he was constantly referring to them, and he knew precisely where each detail was.

One day the local notary . . . called on Dalí in connection with some matters pertaining to his father's estate. (In Spain, the notary is a public office of considerably more stature than in the United States.) When the man arrived, it was in the afternoon, and he was told that Dalí could not be disturbed at his work – that he always painted till the daylight waned, and there were no exceptions to this rule. This piqued the notary, but he did go away and returned later in the evening. After the maids admitted him, they led him into the library to await Dalí. There, with a single, vast, perfunctory gesture, he swept all Dalí's sacred papers to the floor in order to make room to spread out his own documents.

When Dalí came in and saw the disarray of his own papers, he was so furious that he literally took the notary by the collar and ejected him from the house, slamming the front door behind him. The official soon returned with two armed policemen and had Dalí arrested for interfering with the course of the law. As Dalí explained it, the man simply saw an excellent opportunity to get some valuable personal publicity out of the matter, but before the fracas was all over, the artist said that he had to go all the way to Madrid to see some top government officials to convince them he was not a subversive, crazy character after all!<sup>63</sup>

In *Diary of a Genius*, Dalí himself notes help he received in the area of geometry:

So I was awakened at five o'clock. The master mason Prignau [*sic*] had arrived. I had asked him to come and help me work out the geometrical aspects of my picture. We shut ourselves into the studio till eight o'clock, I sitting down and giving orders:

"Draw another octahedron, but one leaning more, now another concentric one . . ."

And he, industrious and as agile as a prosaic Florentine pupil, produced everything almost as fast as I could utter my thought.<sup>64</sup>

This master mason must surely be Emilio Puignau, the builder who worked on additions to Dalí's home in Port Lligat and who helped Dalí with the "hard mechanical work" on paintings like *The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory*, according to Ian Gibson.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Unpublished manuscript Morse, *A Dalí Journal* (1956), vol. I, 340-342.

<sup>64</sup> Dalí, *Diary of a Genius*, trans. Howard, 34. Ellipsis points appear in original.

<sup>65</sup> Gibson, *The Shameful Life of Salvador Dalí*, 508, 517.

Perhaps mathematical calculations themselves were challenging to Dalí, but he seems to have come to have an excellent grasp of mathematical theory. Mr. Morse recalled an occasion when Dalí was showing someone his painting *The Madonna of Port Lligat*:

The man inquired about the meaning of the egg suspended on a string over the head of the Madonna. The man happened to be a famous mathematician and himself observed that Dalí used the egg as a symbol of fertility. No, Dalí told him, that is not what it means. It is a symbol of the violent controversy that went on during the Middle Ages as to the exact mathematical relationship of the diameter and circumference of the egg. These discussions involved many of the early mathematicians in what is now a forgotten topic. Dalí then proceeded to quote some of the mathematical formulas involved; and according to his guest, these could not be known to more than a dozen scholars in the entire country!<sup>66</sup>

Even toward the end of his life, Dalí's mind stayed active and sharp, as Thomas Banchoff recounts in an incident related to mathematics:

In 1983 I visited Dalí in Púbol, the castle that he had bought for Gala and where he retired after she died. He was under the care of nurses, who brought him out to see our latest film of the Veronese surface, one of his favorite four-dimensional subjects. He became quite animated when he identified an elliptical umbilic catastrophe developing in one part of the film, where a single point expands into a hypocycloid with three cusps. The nurses were afraid that he was ranting, and I had to explain that he was making a perfectly correct comment on the geometric phenomena that he was already incorporating into a series of works based on Catastrophe Theory, a mathematical model for sudden qualitative changes that appear during a continuous process – specifically, the painting he had decided would be his last work, *The Swallow's Tail* (1983).<sup>67</sup>

I would like to conclude by highlighting Dalí's 1966 work *Darkness and Light*, which he gave to Dr. Maxwell Maltz, the author of *Psycho-Cybernetics*, a self-help book that includes goal setting, visualization, making mistakes and correcting course. Dr. Maltz described the painting in this way, based on what Dalí had told him about it:

In the center of this painting is a world divided into two parts. The left is a world in shadow from frustration. Here, in the middle, you have a man's image, shrunken to the size of a small potato, moving away from reality, toward the black angel of destruction. Below you see a ship without any sails about to capsize in the rough seas of frustration. Now, the other half of man's inner world is of sunlight, of confidence.

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<sup>66</sup> Unpublished manuscript Morse, *A Dalí Journal* (1956), vol. I, 58-59.

<sup>67</sup> Banchoff, "The Math Connection" in Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, xxviii-xxix.

Here, man's image is ten feet tall and is walking toward the sun. Below you see a ship in calm waters about to reach port. And what is this port? Peace of mind! . . .<sup>68</sup>  
It is not hard to see how Dalí could relate to *Psycho-Cybernetics*. He set the goal of being known as a genius, and he was constantly moving toward that goal.

It is up to each person to decide for themselves whether or not Dalí was a genius. For my part, I think that Dalí had an extraordinary mind.

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<sup>68</sup> Maxwell Maltz, *The New Psycho-Cybernetics: The Original Science of Self-Improvement and Success That Has Changed the Lives of 30 Million People*. (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 2001), 316.