

“New Skin, a New Land!”: Dalí’s American Metamorphosis

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It is a phenomenological function of skin to record. Skin re-members, both literally in its material surface and metaphorically in resignifying on this surface, not only race, sex and age, but the quite detailed specificities of life histories [...] Skin is the body’s memory of our lives.

Jay Prosser
“Skin Memories”

“WHAT DOES SKIN have to do with autobiography and autobiography with skin?” Sidonie Smith asks in a 1994 essay entitled “Identity’s Body” (287). In his 1942 autobiography, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, the eccentric Spanish artist addresses this very question, acknowledging that to theorize skin is to theorize boundaries, surfaces, façades, and protective layerings, while to theorize autobiography is to negotiate similar dialectics between reality and surreality, truth and fiction, revelation and concealment. Skin, in fact, is a central sign in *The Secret Life*, a book in which Dalí problematizes the interface between innocence and experience, interior and exterior, and the stability and tractability of his own highly celebrated public persona. This is a strategy which Dalí employs in the *Secret* of the title of his work, in which he suggests the permeation of the social mask

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or psychological skin in order to access presumed essential truths about the book's subject.

This study examines the dialectics of membrane and metamorphosis in the written and painted work of Dalí's early American exile and argues for a polysemic and intertextual reading of the imagery of wrinkling, moulting, piercing, and flaying as they trace the boundaries and bridges between text and body, skin and canvas, subject and nation. As a trope, skin is given mention throughout *The Secret Life*, and Dalí employs it most pervasively in three conceptual strands. The first of these is in relation to the mapping of age and experience upon the body's exterior, something which fascinates a child who, Dalí claims, longs for the wisdom and maturity of age. The second is evident through the author's insistence on the somatic, comparing the bodily interior to that of the ideal paradise of the womb, while the corporeal exterior becomes, under traumatic circumstances, the abject other. The third and, considering the trajectory of the book, the most important use of epidermal imagery for Dalí is his conceit of the casting off of the old skin of his former atheist, surrealist, and revolutionary self to be replaced by a new religious, reactionary, and classicist persona. Dalí's use of skin in the text, as sign, simile, and synecdoche therefore exemplifies Smith's observation that in life narratives, "the body of the text, the body of the narrator, the body of the narrated I, the cultural body, and the body politic all merge in skins and skeins of meaning" (287).

While famous for his work as a painter, and for his extravagantly eccentric public persona, few people are aware that Salvador Dalí was also a prolific, surprisingly erudite, and highly gifted, albeit idiosyncratic, writer. As one in a long line of memoirs, treatises, essays, and even a novel, Dalí published his four-hundred-page autobiography *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí* in 1942 while still in his late thirties and at a time of great change in his creative and political life, beneath the shadows of the Spanish Civil War and World War II. While Dalí began writing his memoirs in 1938 while staying in La Posa on the hills of Monte Carlo during the time of the Munich Crisis, by the time he had finished the manuscript in the summer of 1941, he had, like much of Europe's population, been profoundly affected by world politics, as well as a number of personal events. These included his expulsion from the surrealist movement at the hand of the surrealist ringmaster André Breton, his witnessing the desecration of his beloved native Spain in the event of the Civil War, and forced exile from France and Spain to the United States to escape the horrors of World War II.

These events triggered a tremendous epistemological change for Dalí and a seismic shift in the direction of his career, as he duly declares in his

memoir. While Dalí had had a long history of left-leaning sympathies, the artist uses *The Secret Life* as a vehicle to announce his move to the extreme right, which, while not overtly stated, included Francoist sympathies. Likewise, having been a lifelong atheist to this point, Dalí announces his exuberant embrace of the Catholic Church and, having been perhaps the most prominent and well-known member of the Paris surrealist group for an entire decade, postexpulsion, Dalí claims to have rejected surrealism and emphatically declares to have become what he calls “classic.”¹ This new stylistic phase, which lasted from approximately 1939 to 1945, indexed a decided move away from surrealist imagery, Freudian paradigms, automatism, and abstraction toward what the artist presumably believed to be a more traditional figurative mode reminiscent of Renaissance painters such as Leonardo and Raphael, and the move resulted in a sort of kitsch academicism intended for an American audience Dalí presumably believed would appreciate this new style.

When he released *The Secret Life*, Dalí was living as an exile with his wife Gala in the United States, where he was enjoying tremendous celebrity thanks to several highly publicized exhibitions, events, scandals, and projects throughout the 1930s and early 1940s that had made Dalí the darling of the American press.² Dalí’s memoir was originally written in

1 As Dalí writes in *The Secret Life*, “To be classic meant that there must be so much of ‘everything,’ and of everything so perfectly in place and hierarchically organized, that the infinite parts of the work would be all the less visible.” More specifically, he explains that “Classicism thus meant integration, synthesis, cosmogony, faith, instead of fragmentation, experimentation, scepticism” (354).

2 This was in large part thanks to numerous exhibitions, coverage in the popular press, commercial enterprises and his three previous, highly publicized voyages in 1934, 1936, and 1939. In fact, throughout the 1930s and early 1940s Dalí had exhibited in two Carnegie Internationals and had held five one-man shows at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York. The artist had also taken part in the first surrealist exhibition in the U.S., *Newer Super Realism*, held at the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, Connecticut; he had shown in the landmark *Surrealism: Paintings, Drawings, and Photographs* at the Julien Levy Gallery in 1932; and in 1936 he exhibited twelve paintings in the seminal group exhibition *Fantastic Art Dada Surrealism* at the MoMA. Dalí continued to actively exhibit his work, the highlight of which was a prestigious 1941 MoMA retrospective which was subsequently sent on an eight-city tour throughout the U.S.

Dalí appeared in *Vanity Fair* in 1934, and in 1936 he was even featured on the cover of *Time* magazine, while his exhibitions were reviewed in *Life*, *Art Digest*, and many other mass-circulation periodicals. Diversifying from his already broad output of painting, prints, assemblage-making, and writing, he saw the erection of his notorious “surrealist funhouse” for the 1939 New York World’s Fair, the Dream of Venus pavilion, and had a bewildering array of projects underway, many of which were commercial in nature. Dalí collaborated,

French (the artist was still, at this point, limited to French, Castilian, and Catalan), to be translated into English and published in America for the U.S. mainstream market. This was in keeping with the artist's public declarations that he had embraced academic art, de facto rejecting modernism and the avant-garde, and had become an artist "for the masses" (Case Harriman 27). While the book is a remarkable literary achievement in its own right, Dalí's high profile in America in the early 1940s ensured that critical response to *The Secret Life* was abundant, and the work garnered notice from some of the most important writers of the period, running the gamut from the highest praise to outright revulsion.³

The Secret Life is indeed rich soil for any number of exegetical approaches, consisting, as it does, of an extravagant congeries of fact and fiction, true and self-admittedly false memories. Behind the deliberate obfuscation, the extravagant hyperbole, and the diatribes, however, Dalí's autobiography follows a relatively straightforward account of his lifeline, beginning in the womb and following Dalí's life up to the point of his writing the autobiography, when he was in his late thirties. While pursuing a relatively close map of the events of his life, however, the work is also very much moulded in the format of a *Künstlerroman* or "coming of age" artist's novel, much as it is a conversion narrative in the tradition of St Augustine's famous *Confessions*, echoed in Dalí's embrace of Catholicism at the end of the book.

Finding himself in exile both from Europe and the surrealist movement and already enjoying formidable, although from the standpoint of artistic integrity, decidedly dubious celebrity in United States, Dalí also uses his memoir as a vehicle to reinvent or, to use his metaphor, "rebirth," his public image. While the baroque, eccentric, and exuberant prose of

for instance, with Duke Fulco di Verdura on jewellery designs and produced drawings and advertisements for U.S. *Vogue* and other high-profile American magazines. His ballet *Bacchanale* also premiered at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York in 1939, followed by another, *Labyrinth*, choreographed by Léonide Massine, in 1941 (Ades 489–98; Dervaux 14).

3 British writer George Orwell, appalled by what he viewed as Dalí's unbridled egotism and amorality as much as by his right-wing politics, embraced the latter perspective and famously described *The Secret Life* in a 1944 *Saturday Book* review as "a book that stinks." "If it were possible for a book to give a physical stink off its pages," Orwell hisses, "this one would." If this were not enough to disparage Dalí's infamous work, the British writer further claims that "The point is that you have here a direct, unmistakable assault on sanity and decency; and even—since some of Dalí's pictures would tend to poison the imagination like a pornographic postcard—on life itself" (Orwell 175–76).

his life narrative goes a great distance to obscure the invested nature of the book—and Dalí undoubtedly draws upon and plays with a beguiling variety of styles, schools of thought, and conventions—*The Secret Life* is in fact a highly strategic document or public relations exercise intended to both depict and formulate a new image for Dalí in America’s collective eye. Dalí’s use of the imagery of skin, which he employs so liberally throughout *The Secret Life*, is very much entwined with the artist’s consciousness of his own performance as Dalí. So too Dalí’s awareness of his own performativity, as regards the required iteration of his public persona and its own ability to undermine the gravitas and truth value of this very performance, through overstatement and self-conscious play with issues of veracity and falsehood. In this sense, Dalí’s memoir is indeed a carefully constructed, self-conscious, and highly public speech act performed in exile in America, intended to both sustain and undermine the artist’s already considerable celebrity in the United States.

While Dalí’s autobiography is notable for its efficacy in terms of public relations, perhaps the most novel aspect of *The Secret Life* for the period is the author’s insistence upon his own embodiment and the pronounced focus on so many seemingly insignificant events of his body. Noting the surprising historical “reluctance of autobiographers to focus thematically and psychologically on the body,” Roger J. Porter writes that “Even Rousseau subordinated descriptions of bodily function to his predominant concern—his relation to society” (quoted in Eakin 184). Shirley Neuman also considers “this near-effacement of bodies in autobiography” and cites this tendency as a form of cultural repression. For Neuman, the origins of this aversion to the body in Western autobiography come from the dualist tradition of separating the mind from the body, or the soul from somatic, and stems, she argues, from the originary conceptions of subjectivity which derive from Platonic, Christian, and Cartesian models (quoted in Eakin 184).

Considering critical problematics involved in the coalescence of autobiography and issues of the body, perhaps the unsettling effect of Dalí’s life narrative on many critics at the time and place of its first publication stems from the very fact of the work being so decidedly body-centric and the destabilizing outcome of this focus on the established primacy of the mind versus spirit paradigm. Dalí’s assertion of the embodied experience very much undermines this received dichotomy by simply refusing to recognize it or, perhaps more accurately, shifting the tension between the mind and the body to that of bodily interiority and exteriority, in the sense of private life versus the public, performed self, or social epidermis.

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Dalí's insistence throughout *The Secret Life* on his body as a container for the subject, and skin or mask as the substrate of his public persona, destabilizes fixed notions of subjectivity and particularly the mind-body formulation, as he suggests the skin's value as a surface of flux and change as something shedable, replaceable, and self-regenerating.

The Secret Life commences with a series of anecdotes concerned with various aspects of Dalí's life to date. This is soon followed by the chronology of his life narrative proper by demarcating the beginning of his life within someone else's skin—that of his mother's, as described in what Dalí claims are his memories of intrauterine life. Dalí's insistence on the prenatal experience here both extends the diachronic reach of his autobiography to an absurd degree and reinforces the theme of spiritual and creative rebirth in Dalí's postsurrealist, postavant-garde period. Inspired by the writings of a former member of Freud's inner circle, the Austrian psychoanalyst Otto Rank, Dalí bases his description of the interior of the womb on Rank's 1924 book *The Trauma of Birth*. This work deviated from Freud's doctrine of the primacy of the Oedipus complex as the "originary trauma" in human experience by positing the hypothesis that birth is the first disruptive sensory or psychological experience to which humans are subject and, depending on the quality of the birthing process, will shape the social and psychic success of an individual's entire life as a consequence. Paraphrasing Rank, Dalí writes that

[i]t seems increasingly true that the whole imaginative life of man tends to reconstitute symbolically by the most similar situations and representation that initial paradisiacal state, and especially to surmount the horrible "traumatism of birth" by which we are expelled from the paradise, passing abruptly from that ideally protective and enclosed environment to all the hard dangers of the frightfully real new world. (27)

This is the first of a number of instances in *The Secret Life* in which Dalí places himself within a protective layer, this time the foetal sac, a place he describes as "divine"; in fact, Dalí tells us, "it was paradise" (27). External to this soft and silent haven, however, is the locus of the "hard dangers" of the "frightfully real" world. This tension, between interior and exterior, hard and soft, is one upon which Dalí plays throughout his life narrative and to which he refers in *The Secret Life* as the "morphological aesthetics of the soft and the hard" (304). Invariably this dialectic refers to issues of metamorphosis, especially as it relates to the skin, womb, shell, mask, or even the hard cover of the book itself.

While the reader is not privy to the details of Dalí's actual birth, the artist next ruminates upon the life cycle when he describes himself as a young boy. According to Dalí, he became fascinated with old age as a child, inscribed as this state was with wrinkles which limned the wisdom of life lived and time passed, as compared to the malformed lumps of flesh he disparages his young companions as. In a long passage in chapter 5, Dalí considers his nurse Lluçia and grandmother, writing "I adored old age!," struck as he is by the elders' "parchment-like flesh on which the effaced and complete manuscripts of their life were written" as compared to the "crude, brand new and apathetically unconscious flesh of my schoolmates, who no longer even remembered that they too had already been old a while ago when they were embryos" (67).

By reading the skin of his elders, Dalí positions himself as anticipating, from a very early age, his maturity which, the finale of the book explains, was to entail his epiphanic conversion to Catholicism and tradition. Describing himself as the "Anti-Faust" (that is, someone who longed to age rather than, like Faust, to seek eternal youth), Dalí recalls that "As a child I adored that noble prestige of old people, and I would have given all my body to become like them, to grow old immediately!" "Let the labyrinth of wrinkles be furrowed in my brow with the red-hot iron of my own life," he writes, "let my unformed childhood soul, as it ages, assume the rational and aesthetic forms of an architecture, let me learn just everything that others cannot teach me, what only life would be capable of marking on my skin!" In equally exuberant prose, Dalí continues to champion the wrinkle as a form of life writing, inscribing experience, knowledge, and spiritual development upon the flesh. "The smooth-skinned animal of my childhood was repugnant to me and I should have liked to crush it" he claims. For "I already knew that only the wear and decline of the flesh could bring me illuminations of resurrection." In each of Lluçia's and his grandmother's wrinkles Dalí claims that he

read this force of intuitive knowledge brought to the surface by the painful sum of experienced pleasures and which was already the force of those germs of premature old age that crumples the embryo, an unfathomable force, a subterranean and Baccic force of Minerva, a force that twists the hundreds of tendrils of the shoots of old age on the young vine-stalk and that soon effaces the strident laughter of the ageless and retarded face of the child of genius. (67-68)

These take many forms in *The Secret Life*, but the most traumatic are invariably keyed to Dalí's sensorium and, in particular, his skin.

By positing skin as an indicator of life experience and of spiritual maturity, Dalí sets up the narrative trajectory of the entire book: from the “retarded face of the child of genius” to the painfully ecstatic knowledge of the “Baccic force of Minerva,” that is, the metaphysically and psychically mature or complete human. But as the novelistic determinacy of his book requires, based as it is on the coming of age novel or conversion narrative, there must be assaults upon the protagonist’s progress, and in Dalí’s case these involve neurotic episodes that function as displacements to help the artist cope with the suffering of loss or the psychic harm of rejection. These take many forms in *The Secret Life*, but the most traumatic are invariably keyed to Dalí’s sensorium and, in particular, his skin—that protective shell that preserves the safety and sanctity of his subjectivity.

The first of these episodes recounted in *The Secret Life* occurs when, in 1929, Dalí has just completed the filming of a project with his friend the Spanish filmmaker Luis Buñuel. Contrary to the critical disaster Dalí anticipated it would be before it was released, the film, the now famous *Un Chien andalou*, was to become a watershed in avant-garde cinema. Having been utterly exhausted by the lugubrious task of dressing up dead donkeys as props to look as cadaverous as possible, Dalí describes how he went back to his hotel alone and “utterly dejected.” He soon becomes frightfully ill from the stress and disgust and is confined to his hotel room for several days. Staring at the ceiling from his bed, the artist focuses upon some insects alighted upon the plaster and believes that a tick has fallen from its perch and fastened itself to his back. Dalí fixates so intensely on this tick that he becomes convinced that “[i]t was as if it were formed of my own flesh, as if it constituted an inherent and already inseparable part of my own body.” In typically comic hyperbole tinged, in this case, with pathos, Dalí writes that “instead of an insect it had become a terrifying germ of a tiny embryo of a Siamese twin-brother that was in the process of growing out of my back, like the most apocalyptic and infernal disease” (214).

Terrified, in a scene reminiscent of the notorious eye-cutting scene in *Un Chien andalou*, Dalí slices the tick off his body with a razor blade, only to discover that it was not a tick at all, but a mole with which he had been born and had seen a hundred times before. The vignette culminates with a gory spectacle of Dalí’s blood smeared throughout the hotel room, to the horror of hotel staff and a hastily-summoned physician, duly mystified by the artist’s self-mutilation. After this episode, Dalí is left ruminating upon the nature of his transgression against his own flesh and upon the painful failure of his sojourn to Paris, which he had intended to conquer, or, to

use his expression, to “put in the bag.” *Un Chien andalou* seemed to Dalí at this point to be “a complete failure”; his timidity prevented him from “shining” among Parisian society; a proposed exhibition had been repeatedly put off; and most disheartening of all, instead of enjoying a longed-for tryst with an elegant Parisian woman, masturbation became a supremely depressing enterprise in the heart of gay Paris, where Dalí sensed all about him “the gleaming foam of the thighs of feminine beds” (216).

Dalí’s staging of the penetration of his flesh signifies here in a number of ways but primarily as an assault upon the self image, or *imago*. According to Jay Prosser, in his study of skin imagery in autobiography, self-mutilation and other “non-accidental skin symptoms” point to childhood memories or unconscious fantasies “too traumatic to become conscious.” As such, skin disorders and traumas “appear as returns of an unspeakable repressed event” (Prosser 54). After recovering from the lesion of the tick/mole and therefore, by displacement, excising the failure and resulting despondency of his botched attempt to conquer Paris, Dalí decides to return to Spain. At this point the artist writes that he felt a resurgence of his health, as if he were revisiting the “eternal paradise” of his mother’s womb or, more specifically, Spain’s national bosom. His confidence returns and he writes that, like a worn pelt, “I thus hung my illness on the coathanger of the Gare d’Orsay, as though it had been an old coat which could no longer be of the slightest use for the summer on which I was embarking” (217). Well versed in psychoanalysis and the rhetoric of sublimation, Dalí explains to his reader the degree to which his illness had been a psychosomatic displacement or coping mechanism deployed in order to buffer himself from his own failure and writes that “If, another winter, I should again need an illness to shelter me from the inclemencies of my bad luck I prefer to buy a brand-new coat” (217). Through this means the artist adds another link in the semantic chain of the skin-like covering, in this case to be removed or exchanged like a worn garment, a theme which reaches its apotheosis in the finale of the book.

The emphasis on the imagery of the protective covering is corroborated in Dalí’s text with his discussion of the hard shell of the crustacean, in which the corporeal exterior is hardened like a rigid carapace. At the beginning of chapter 1, Dalí introduces his concept of the “hard and soft,” writing that

[t]he crustacean is thus able, with the weapons of its anatomy, to protect the soft and nutritive delirium of its insides, sheltered against all profanation, enclosed as in a tight and solemn

vessel which leaves it vulnerable only to the highest form of imperial conquest in the noble war of decortication: that of the palate. (10)

This comparison is repeated in the narrative formulation of Dalí's relationship with Gala, who creates an armour for him, inside of which is the soft meat of Dalí's person, as it is with the crustacean. Indeed, toward the end of the book, Gala becomes Dalí's armour or, more accurately, his mother, who protects him in the womb of her presence and fortitude. "Instead of hardening me, as life had planned," Dalí explains,

Gala with the petrifying saliva of her fanatical devotion, succeeded in building for me a shell to protect the tender nakedness of the Bernard the hermit that I was, so that while in relation to the outside world I assumed more and more the appearance of a fortress, within myself I could continue to grow old in the soft, and in the supersoft. (316–17)

The extent to which Gala provides a virtual protective shell or womb-like refuge for Dalí is evident in a second neurotic episode later in the text, when Dalí finds himself utterly lost and vulnerable without her. Some time during the Spanish Civil War, Dalí is left alone in a hotel in Tre Croci near Cortina in Italy to recover from overtaxation while Gala found it necessary to go to Paris for a fortnight. Just at this time Dalí received news that the Spanish anarchists had shot some thirty of his friends in Cadaqués, near his home in Port Lligat, and as a result Dalí must make up his mind to return to Spain to share the fate of his countrymen. Presumably as a nervous reaction, bereft as he was of the "petrifying saliva" of Gala's "fanatical devotion," Dalí almost goes mad fixating, as he did with the imaginary tick, upon what he believes is a piece of snot attached to the bathroom wall in his hotel room. In an attempt to remove the offending globule with a fingernail, Dalí discovers that, like the tick which affixed to his back, the snot becomes lodged in the skin under his nail and he is unable to remove it.

The snot was, it turned out, solid and sharp, resulting in a painful splinter that caused Dalí's hand to swell to the point where the artist was wracked with terror that the mucous had infected it incurably. "None of the tortures of the civil war could be compared in intensity with the imaginative torment which I endured during that frightful early Alpine afternoon," Dalí writes with characteristically comic verve, "I felt death weigh within my hand like two ignominious kilos of gesticulating worms"

(367). The following day Dalí discovers that upon close examination the nasal mucous is actually a piece of hardened glue that had been long dried on the wall in the hotel bathroom. Relieved, he falls asleep and upon awakening immediately recognizes this as a sign that he “knew that I should not leave for Spain” (367).

In this episode the piercing of the body with what Dalí calls the “false mucous” becomes, as did his fixation with the imaginary tick, a cipher, both acting as a locus of displacement for Dalí’s having to face a terrifying decision and as a sign that he should not put himself in danger. Here, as Smith suggests regarding the relationship between the body and the autobiographical text, for Dalí, “[t]he body functions as a powerful source of metaphors for the social. It offers itself up, in bits and pieces, in its blood, immune system, organs, in its topography and pathology, for use in constructing the social environment and assigning persons their places in that environment” (270).

Clearly, Dalí’s emphasis on his own body, and especially his sustained imagery of the womb, the hard shell, and the epidermis in their roles as protective coverings, becomes, as Smith suggests, a “powerful metaphor for the social”; in this sense, a figure of the barrier between Dalí’s supersoft interior and the harsh realities of the outside world. The question remains, however, as to how this signifies more concretely in *The Secret Life*. How and why does Dalí stage these minor bodily events as such momentous and graphically rendered spectacles? In her study of contemporary performance art, *Performing the Body*, Amelia Jones poses a similar question and asks what happens when works of art “overtly stage their relationship to the viewer as corporeal, invested, mutual, intersubjective”? Most importantly, considering issues of reception in terms of Dalí’s mid-century, Middle American audience, Jones asks, “What happens when these works pose themselves in a theatrical mode: one that, by definition, acknowledges their contingency on an ‘audience’?” (Jones 41). In order to answer these questions as they relate to Dalí’s literary performance of the perforation of his flesh, it is necessary to turn to what is presumably the other of Dalí’s skin—that is, what it is that assaults and makes necessary his emphasis on the protective layering of the hide or hard shell.

In both these episodes, Dalí believes he is assaulted by something that can only be described in terms of the abject, manifest in the imagined tick or what he calls the “false mucous.” The implication is that Dalí is sublimating various traumatic events or difficult decisions with unsavoury objects that function as metaphors for the world outside his body and which represent assaults on both his body and his psyche. According to Julia Kristeva,

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in her seminal writing on the abject and its signification, “[e]xcrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death” (Kristeva 71). More succinctly, Kristeva writes simply that “[t]he abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to the I” (2).

Dalí’s highlighting of the permeation of his body and subjectivity by the abject other underscores the artist’s social anxiety and therefore problematizes the very act of autobiography in the sense of the subject’s exposure to the reader via the self-revelation presumed to be fundamental to the genre. In this sense, Dalí puts into discourse the issue of mediation between writer and reader, the permeation of the skin or imaginary of Dalí’s text and therefore destabilizes the promise of this and, by extension, all autobiographical access to the proverbial thing itself—that is, to the truth or core of Dalí’s self, or the presumed secret of *The Secret Life*. Nevertheless, Dalí’s insistence upon the invasion of the abject, particularly as it violates his flesh, perhaps also tries to bridge this gap, by creating a sort of textual *punctum*, in the sense that Roland Barthes employs this term to signify visual “slippages” in photographs that reify an image, generating a sudden direct and emotive contact between the viewer and the viewed (40–73). In other words, while the reader is conscious of Dalí’s text as a work of fiction, merely *based* on a true story, the one place where one might peep through a crack in the narrative façade is through the implied cause and effect of Dalí’s traumatic episodes, where Dalí’s narrative skin, as well as his literal skin, is permeated and Dalí is left vulnerable to or honest with the reader, if for a fleeting moment.

In her *A Manifesto for Cyborgs*, Donna Harroway asks “Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?,” a query that considers the ability of technology to extend human awareness to realms beyond the mere fleshly enclosure (178). In the final chapter of *The Secret Life*, Dalí explores similar conceptual territory, although while Harroway looks to new technologies for the expansion of consciousness and embodiment, Dalí turns to an older form of information dissemination: that of the book, as a means of extending not only his sphere of consciousness but also the reach of his public communications for the understanding and promotion of his performative project. In this sense, Dalí’s work might be read in terms similar to cultural theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who conceive of books as “bodies without organs,” a fitting metaphor for an artist who so often works with imagery of detumescence and the empty shell. Like Deleuze and Guattari, then, when

approaching Dalí's autobiography, "[w]e will ask what it functions with, in connection with what other things it does or does not transmit intensities, in which other multiplicities its own are inserted and metamorphosed, and with what bodies without organs it makes its own converge" (4).

For most of *The Secret Life*, Dalí presents the reader with a self that is malformed, "unwrinkled," or inexperienced in life's lessons, where boundaries between Dalí's interiority and the social sphere are easily and painfully violated, evidently resulting in distressing outcomes. This is before Dalí announces his conversion to Catholicism at the end of the book, in which he transitions or morphs from the old, surrealist, avant-garde, left-leaning Dalí to what he calls the "Anti-Surrealist," the reactionary, academic painter he aspired to be at that period.⁴ Speaking, as *The Secret Life* does, to an American mainstream audience, Dalí announces his rebirth on U.S. soil to the North American masses. "I had a growing desire to feel myself in contact with a 'new flesh'" he writes, before his "conquering" of America, "with a new country that had to yet be touched by the decomposition of Post-War Europe. America!" (324).

Dalí did indeed conquer America, primarily through courting the press, and became such a celebrity in the later 1930s and early 1940s that the artist and his work were in fact everywhere in the United States, ranging from fashion houses to shop windows to the design studio to the ballet to the New York World's Fair and the Museum of Modern Art. America, it seemed, simply could not get enough of Dalí or the surrealist style that served as his veritable trademark, and his public success was a truly popular culture phenomenon, so much so that in his *History of Surrealist Painting*, Marcel Jean writes that "Dalí had launched one of those crazes which regularly grip everyone in America, from top to bottom of the social scale, like an epidemic." "The Dalínian version of Surrealism," he explains, "was apparently the latest brilliant successor to the Coué method, mah-jongg, the Charleston, the song *Valencia*, and so many other dazzling and ephemeral fashions" (261).

That Dalí fully intended to cater to the American market he makes clear in chapter 11 of *The Secret Life*. While writing about mass American taste, Dalí opines that "Europeans are mistaken in considering Americans incapable of poetic and intellectual intuition." Indeed, according to Dalí,

4 As a footnote in *The Secret Life*, Dalí writes that "I felt that I needed, among other things, to have someone write a pamphlet on me bearing a title something like 'Anti-Surrealist Dalí.' For various reasons, I needed this type of 'passport,' for I am myself too much of a diplomat to be the first to pronounce such a judgement" (207 fn).

“America chooses with all the unfathomable and elementary force of her unique and intact biology.” And what America had undoubtedly chosen was what she “did not have,” and “all that America ‘did not have’ on the spiritual plane I was going to bring her, materialized in the integral and delirious mixture of my paranoiac work, in order that she might thus see and touch everything with the hands of liberty” (325).

At this point in his memoir, Dalí brings together the previous skin-related tropes he has used in the book so far in order to illustrate his own presumed metamorphosis, from former avant-garde, left-leaning, atheist surrealist to academic, reactionary, pious classicist. “To live!” Dalí writes in the epilogue,

[t]o liquidate half of life in order to live the other half enriched by experience, freed from the chains of the past. For this it was necessary for me to kill my past without pity or scruple, I had to rid myself of my own skin, that initial skin of my formless and revolutionary life during the Post-War Epoch. It was necessary at all costs that I change skins, that I trade this worn epidermis with which I have dressed, hidden, shown myself, struggled, fought and triumphed, for that other new skin, the flesh of my desire, of my imminent renaissance which will be dated from the very morrow of the day this book appears. (393)

Here Dalí returns to the idea of the cast-off overcoat, or the sloughed pelt of his “previous” life, which, as he states, is intimately entwined with the declarations and life narrative with which he presents the reader. Also, the extent to which Dalí conflates the idea of his own skin with the very materiality of the volume that is *The Secret Life* becomes evident, as Dalí states that his renaissance will be dated “from the very morrow of the day this book appears.”

According to Frédérique Joseph-Lowery, a Dalí scholar who recently transcribed and published the entire French manuscript of *The Secret Life*, with revisions and *scraffito* included, the manuscript itself very much carries symbolic or sacrificial connotations. Joseph-Lowery considers the many hundreds of original pages of Dalí’s work, mostly on yellow foolscap and various American hotel letterheads, and likens them in a very literal way to the artist’s sloughed skin similes. For Joseph-Lowery, these “deposits of skins” testify to the upheaval in Dalí’s life at the time he wrote his book, indexing the “many displacements and the discontinuity upon which the autobiographical practice of the painter is dependent.” This “moult” or

shedding represents to Joseph-Lowery “concrete proof of the process of dematerialization of the body of the writer” (18–19).⁵

Dalí continues to conflate the concepts of career, skin, and text in the long declaration that closes the end of *The Secret Life*:

I am at this moment, as I write these lines, in the midst of making the last convulsions, which are in reality the end of this chapter, which will allow me to shuffle off and completely detach myself from the prison of my old skin, exactly as snakes do [...] when toward the end of certain transparent October days they leave hanging all along the rocks of the beach of Monterey the torn shreds of their old lyrical epidermis. (393)

Dalí intends to present his new self/skin to America as a completely new package, far from the presumably dissolute surrealist he was previously known as and well distanced from the other émigrés and refugees who had flooded American ports during the war years:

New skin, a new land! And a land of liberty, if that is possible! I chose the geology of a new land that was new to me, and that was young, virgin and without drama, that of America. I traveled in America, but instead of romantically and directly rubbing the snakeskin of my body against the asperities of its terrain, I preferred to peel protected within the armour of the gleaming black crustacean of a Cadillac which I gave to Gala as a present. (393)

In this passage, Dalí suggests that this skin of his former self is very much entwined with his public persona and, in particular, with his influence as an artist, a writer, and a celebrity. Dalí may have shed his old skin, he tells us, but “Nevertheless all the men who admire and the women who are in love with my old skin will easily be able to find its remnants in shredded pieces of various sizes scattered to the winds along the road from New York via Pittsburgh to California.” Further, in equally graphic and eccentric prose, the artist writes that,

I have peeled with every wind; pieces of my skin have remained caught here and there along my way, scattered through that “promised land” which is America; certain pieces of this skin have remained hanging in the spiny vegetation of the Arizona desert [...] Other pieces of my skin have remained spread out

⁵ Translation mine.

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like tablecloths without food on the summits of the rocky masses by which one reaches the Salt Lake, in which the hard passion of the Mormons saluted in me the European phantom of Apollinaire. (393–94)

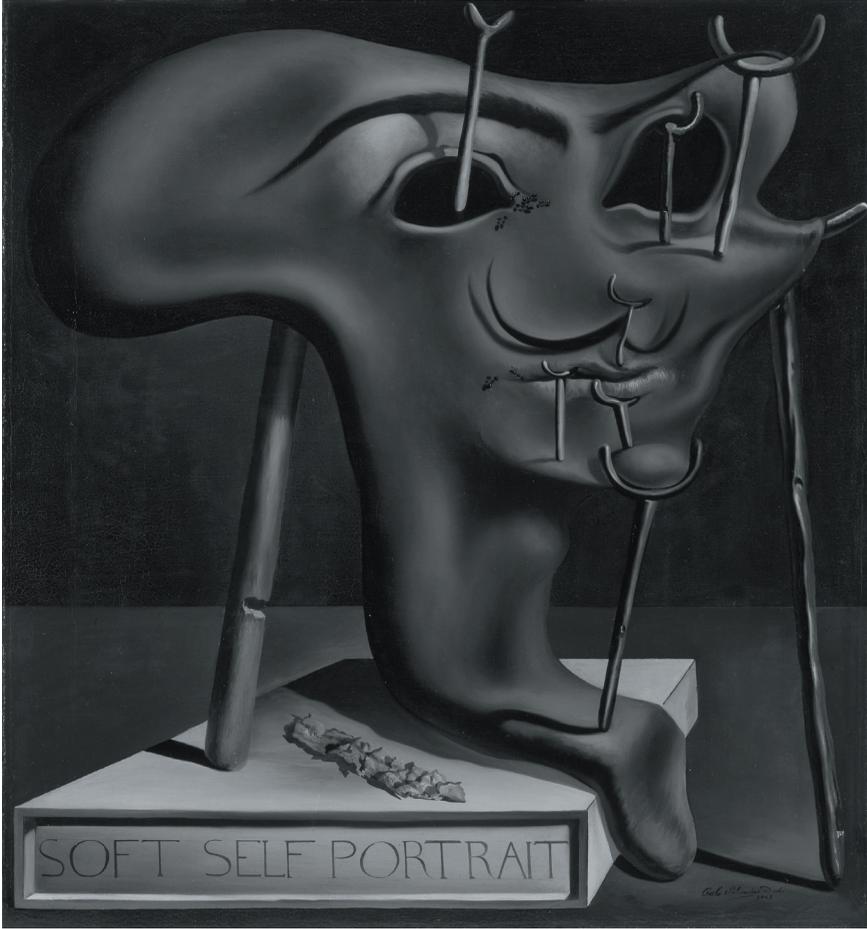
Dalí continues in this lyrical mode, claiming that pieces of his shed skin have been deposited, in fact, across the United States, represented by the American flag, that is, “lost in the folds of that night of the future illuminated by fifteen stars large as closed fists filled with seeds of liberty, and stirred by the patriotic wind which, coming from the fifteen states, makes the erect, fecundating and immobile serenity of the banners even more glorious.” Dalí’s interest in the national body here, and his own body as metonymic of the body of Spain and the body of Europe, is reflected in the same passage when he writes that “[t]he old Greco-Roman civilization, after the experience of all those vain revolutions, and beneath the inquisition and the distress into which war has plunged it, it too is painfully changing its skin, dramatically finding its new skin, the skin of its tradition, still buried under chaotic hell” (394).

Here Dalí is offering a first-hand account of the momentous change Europe was undergoing as a result of the Spanish Civil War and World War II, while pointing to the “New World” as a safe haven and exemplar of victory, growth, and liberty. Equally, Dalí is participating in the rhetoric, generated primarily by fascist organizations, of the “New Man”—the supposed ideal human tied up with utopian visions of societal regeneration or rebirth used to legitimate much of the war, destruction, and genocide of the period. This is most evident in Dalí’s rubric of the personal renaissance couched safely in the bosom of tradition, a concept used in Francoist, National Socialist, and Italian Fascist propaganda in order to promote, respectively, the New Spain, the Master Race, and the New Rome.

While Dalí may well be nodding, if not ingratiating himself to Francoist and other regimes in *The Secret Life* through his renunciation of the avant-garde, surrealism, and atheism, and in particular by his embrace of tradition and Catholicism, Dalí’s use of the skin metaphor is primarily a highly self-directed and intensely personal one. Dalí’s choice of and consistent iteration of imagery of his own hide underscores his sense of embodiment in terms of the outer layer of subjecthood: as a trace, a face, a façade, and an inherently unstable construct that can be manipulated and changed at will. All highly apropos for an artist whose literary and visual corpus was obsessively autobiographical throughout his life and who was, perhaps more than any other artist of any time, intensely aware of his public persona and the politics and mechanics of his own performativity. It might

be said that Dalí's autobiographical works of the early 1940s have as their primary theme the performance of the self, or the skin of his public face, and that this is the very subject of *The Secret Life* and a number of Dalí's important postsurrealist artworks of the period.

That Dalí was engaged with the imagery of skin and its semantic value in terms of his stated personal and public transformations is evident in a number of his paintings of the late 1930s and early 1940s equally as much as it is in his autobiography. Certainly, the relationship between the highly body-centric language Dalí sustains in his life narrative in order to illus-



Salvador Dalí, *Soft Self Portrait with Grilled Bacon*, 1941, oil on canvas, Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, Figueres, Spain. © Salvador Dalí, Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí (2009) / SODRAC (2009).

trate the embodied and embattled subject, and his painting of the period, comprises an interdisciplinary project that has been virtually ignored in Dalí scholarship. Four paintings in particular reference Dalí's epidermal preoccupation, the first three being his *Original Sin* (1941) depicting worn, cast off leather shoes next to a spry, nude female foot; *Daddy Longlegs of the Evening, Hope!* (1942), a work indexing the war with its distressed military aircraft and foregrounding the flayed pelt of an elongated female form; and *Geopoliticus Child Watching the Birth of the New Man* (1943), in which a male nude emerges from a pliable, skin-like egg that is also the planet Earth. That these works can be viewed as autobiographical, referring to Dalí's own life and renaissance, is hardly an issue when discussing any aspect of the oeuvre of an artist whose work is intensely, if not obsessively, self-referential. As Robert S. Lubar suggests, "To speak of self-portraiture in Dalí's work is, in an important sense, redundant, as Salvador Dalí—the man, the artist and the person—is the privileged subject of his life's work" (11).

This emphasis on the dialectics at work between interior and exterior and how these play out in the imagery of the skin is nowhere more evident or more self-reflexive than in Dalí's painting of 1941 entitled *Soft Self Portrait with Grilled Bacon*, a work that was featured as the frontispiece of the 1942 edition of *The Secret Life* and one in which Dalí portrays himself as nothing less than a flayed pelt. This canvas depicts Dalí metonymically as the skin from the artist's head and face, propped up with a number of Dalí's famous crutches.⁶ The figure is golden bronze like the colour of cooked meat and sports Dalí's by then well-known handlebar moustache. The eyes are mere sockets, out of which swarm black ants, and the mask-like pelt is propped upon a plinth, giving it the aspect of a traditional bust, upon which are inscribed the words "Soft Self Portrait." Next to the bust atop the pedestal is a neatly placed strip of cooked bacon.

The artist described this painting in his own words at a later date as "an anti-psychological self-portrait." "[I]nstead of painting the soul, that is to say, what is within," he claimed,

I painted the exterior, the shell, the glove of myself. This glove of myself is edible and even tastes a little rank, like hung game; for that reason there are ants and a rasher of fried bacon in

6 While Dalí's definitions of his own symbols are notoriously unreliable, he offers some insight regarding the image of the crutch in *The Secret Life*. Here he writes of his discovery of a crutch in an attic, an object to which he is immediately attracted. "The superb crutch!" he writes. "Already it appeared to me as the object possessing the height of authority and solemnity" (90).

the picture. Being the most generous of all artists, I am forever offering myself up to be eaten, and thus afford delicious sustenance to the age. (Descharnes and Neret 359)

This “glove of myself” is, of course, Dalí’s flayed or shed epidermis and corresponds with the description at the end of *The Secret Life* of Dalí’s having sloughed off his old skin like a reptile as part of the process of metamorphosis. This remnant of the artist formerly known as Dalí, a sort of death mask taken from the deceased, is presumably what remained after Dalí’s stated rebirth, much like the pages of Dalí’s autobiography in their materiality. Certainly, like a genuine sculpted bust, the viewer encounters an interpretation of a real person and, likewise, not a direct image of Dalí but an artistic rendering of Dalí, or a mask, representing nothing less than his own masquerade. “In *The Secret Life*,” writes biographer Meredith Etherington-Smith, Dalí “deliberately recreates his life as a work of art. He looks in the mirror and he describes the mask, not the face” (279). While ostensibly a “means of contact” with the artist or author through first-hand interpretation, like Dalí’s autobiography, *Soft Self Portrait*, with its image of an image of a remnant of Dalí’s face, equally distances the audience from the subject and in fact renders Salvador Dalí, and his secret life, more elusive than ever.

According to Dalí’s analysis, *The Soft Self Portrait* renders Dalí as both a flayed skin, a “glove” of himself and that which is decidedly a mask, or what he left behind. While this image may well depict Dalí’s former persona or performed, public self, Dalí’s gustatory allusions cannot be overlooked as the artist describes himself, in word and paint, as “hung game,” nicely browned, with a piece of bacon nearby.⁷ Indeed, by “offering myself up to be eaten,” Dalí confirms once again his insistence on his public self, his exterior, served up to be consumed in a literal as well as a metaphorical sense. “[W]hile already preparing the grill of my transcendental prosaism on which, when the day came,” Dalí writes of his early years in *The Secret Life*,

I would come and fry the mushrooms, the chops and the sardines of my thought (which I knew were destined to be served some day—fried to a turn, and good and hot—on the clean cloth of the table of the book which you are in the midst of reading) in order to appease for some hundred years the

⁷ The versatility with which Dalí employs images of himself, as skin and as meat, is further extended in Charles Stuckey’s observation that suggests Dalí’s possible use of word play in this work, writing that “the odd detail of a strip of bacon (lard in French) is evidently a visualized pun (for the homonym l’art).”

spiritual, imaginative, moral and ideological hunger of our epoch. (176)

While Dalí makes no small claim here for his autobiography to do no less than appease “the hunger of our epoch,” in the epilogue of *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, the author again returns to birth imagery and that of skin in order to signal his stated metamorphosis. “I am thirty-seven years old” he writes, “and it is July 30th, 1941, the day I promised my publisher that I would finish this manuscript.” Symbolically completing the task of shedding the skin of his former life through the cathartic process of writing his autobiography, Dalí explains that he is “completely naked and alone in my room”—that is, unambiguously the tabula rasa he has once again become, the naked newborn who turns to the wardrobe mirror to peruse the freshness of his new being. But while born anew, Dalí claims also to have come full circle as, having experienced first hand so many events of the first half of the twentieth century, he claims that he is “the most representative incarnation of post-war Europe; I have lived all its adventures, all its experiments, all its dramas” (399). As such, Dalí rejects the modern experiments, the avant-garde, and the left-focussed politics of the period and highly self-consciously “reinvents” himself according to a model with which he sees fit to present and therefore market himself in the New World. “My metamorphosis is tradition,” he declares at the closing of his memoir, “for tradition is precisely this—change of skin, reinvention of a new original skin which is precisely the inevitable consequence of the biological mould of that which preceded it” (394).

Returning to Smith’s question posed at the beginning of this paper as to the relationship between skin and autobiography: evidently, where Dalí is concerned, the two have much in common. Throughout *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, the book’s author and subject never ceases to foreground the dialectics between bodily interior and exterior and the effect of the moulting, flaying, and piercing of the skin as it maps the boundaries and bridges between book and body, pelt and canvas, subject and nation. “New skin, a new land!” Dalí exclaims in his epilogue, as an incantation, a wish, and a promise: a performative gesture intended to both communicate and bring about Dalí’s American metamorphosis. Considering Dalí was to remain in exile in the United States for eight years, this formula proved to be extremely successful, raising Dalí’s profile and celebrity to unprecedented levels for any artist in mid-century America. This is fundamental to what Dalí calls his “Dalínian myth,” a myth which he carefully constructs in his memoir and summarizes as nothing less than “Death and resurrection, revolution and renaissance” (394).

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