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# **The Surrealist Woman: the Art of Remedios Varo**

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the  
Renée Crown University Honors Program at Syracuse University

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## **Abstract**

Surrealism—a literary and artistic movement that has often been criticized for being misogynistic—stemmed from the idea of representing the unconscious mind, unburdened by societal norms. Several female surrealist artists and writers did emerge during the movement, including Remedios Varo, a Catalan surrealist painter. Throughout the early stages of her career, Varo was barely recognized by her male surrealist counterparts. Varo's gender and background influenced her interpretation of femininity. When comparing Varo's paintings with those of another famous Catalan surrealist, Salvador Dalí, the difference in the representation of women is striking. Unlike Varo, Dalí conformed to the typical depiction of the surrealist women as an object of desire or horror. Dalí's representation of women is heavily influenced by their roles in society and treatment at the time. On the other hand, Varo broke the mold of the standard surrealist woman and depicted independent women in search of individual identities. Unlike Dalí, Varo ignored the social boundaries that had been set forth and attempted to freely express her unconscious mind, creating empowering surreal images of women.

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## **Executive Summary/Introduction**

In the world of surrealist art, Salvador Dalí is a name that would not go unrecognized, while another artist from the same period and movement, Remedios Varo, is a much less known figure. Varo's contribution to the surrealist movement is not well documented or often celebrated like that of Dalí, but her work was significant. Varo broke the mold of surrealist art, as defined by the works of Dalí, by reconstructing the role of women in her paintings. Women were often objectified and praised for their physical appearances in surrealism, as seen in many of Dalí's paintings. However, Remedios Varo portrayed women in a different light, giving them a purpose and strength in her paintings. Women are not shown as objects, but as subjects in Varo's scenes. They are not idle or passive, but active and powerful.

## **Origins of Surrealism**

The French poet André Breton lived from the late nineteenth century into the twentieth century. Despite his many accomplishments, Breton may be mainly known as the father of surrealism. He was educated in medicine and showed interest in psychology and the human psyche. To further his knowledge on this topic, Breton turned to the works of Sigmund Freud ("André Breton"). Freud's expertise in psychoanalysis relied heavily on the distinction between the conscious and the unconscious mind. In 1924, Breton used Freud's explanation of the unconscious mind to lay the foundation for the surrealist movement in his essay "The Manifesto of Surrealism." Therefore, it is important to understand Freudian psychoanalysis in order to understand surrealism.

Sigmund Freud was born on May 6, 1856 in Freiburg, Germany. He received his degree in medicine from the University of Vienna and continued on to specialize in psychiatry (Newton 19). Freud was incredibly interested in the causes and effects of mental illness. He sought to discover a method he could use to understand the inner workings of the minds of the mentally distressed and alleviate their suffering.

The success of psychoanalysis relies heavily on the distinction between the conscious and unconscious mind. In one of his works, *The Ego and the Id*, Freud defines the conscious mind as the part containing information that is currently being processed, or something that is at the front of the mind. The unconscious, however, contains the thoughts that are not currently being perceived, which can include the thoughts that are “capable of becoming conscious.” Freud also defines preconscious, or thoughts that are not readily “capable of becoming conscious,” which he refers to as repressed thoughts (*The Ego and the Id* 3-5). Freud explains how preconscious thoughts can become conscious again through “word-presentations” or associations that are linked with that specific memory.

According to Freud, the beginning stages of psychoanalysis came about in 1880 when Dr. Joseph Breuer was treating a young girl who was prone to hysteria and fits (“The Origin and Development of Psychoanalysis” 180). The patient would often suffer what Freud called “physical and mental disturbances,” left parts of her body paralyzed and interfered with her ability to speak clearly (182). Breuer found that hypnotizing the patient helped her reveal parts of her past that

were repressed. After Breuer woke his patient, she was temporarily relieved of her fits. Breuer also found that specific events from her memory triggered certain actions that were previously unexplainable. For example, the girl refused to drink anything, but could not explain why. Through hypnosis, Breuer discovered that the patient had once witnessed a dog sneaking a drink from a glass of water, which disgusted her. This memory was subconscious, but it was able to influence her conscious thought.

What is surrealism? In “The Manifesto of Surrealism,” Breton defines surrealism as “dictated by thought in the absence of any control exercised by reason, free of any aesthetic or moral concern” (Breton 19). In this way, Surrealism frees one from the constraints of society. The everyday rules and laws that people follow do not apply in surrealism. Instead, they are bound only by the limits of their unconscious minds. By re-creating the unconscious world in a physical form, surrealism forms a bridge between the dream world and reality. Breton explains how surrealism transforms a piece of the imagination into something concrete, “I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality, if one may so speak” (Breton 11).

## **Varo & Dalí**

Out of all the male surrealists painters, why choose Salvador Dalí's work to compare to Remedios Varo's? When looking into the works of an artist, background is significant to interpretation. Surrealism was an immense movement, spanning several continents. Surrealism has been documented in many different countries including Russia, Venezuela, and Canada. Several aspects of Varo and Dalí's lives coincide. They were both born in the same decade in Catalonia, an autonomous northern region of Spain and educated in the fine arts at the Academia de San Fernando (Kaplan 29). Another important overlap in their education was their ties to surrealism as it progressed in Paris, France. Although Dalí became involved in the movement several years before Varo, they both participated in and learned from the same group of surrealists headed by André Breton. Therefore, their first exposures to surrealism were very similar and heavily based on "The Manifesto of Surrealism."

The surrealist paintings of Varo and Dalí have been compared before in Gloria Duran's article "The Antipodes of Surrealism: Salvador Dalí and Remedios Varo." In her work, Duran concludes that Dalí and Varo's representation of surrealism reveal the two extremes, shock and wonder, respectively (303). These two extremes can also be seen in their portrayal of femininity, as will be discussed later. Duran does not go into depth about how the two artists lives could have contributed to their two very different styles; however, she does mention that their gender was probably a compelling factor. "[T]he differences between Varo and Dalí in their interpretation of surrealism are



derived not from the age of the painters, nor the countries where they worked, but from differences of sex, personality, life experience, and philosophy, all of which attracted them to the extreme poles of the movement” (Duran 306).

The history of women’s rights and treatment during the period in which Dalí and Varo painted is key to their interpretation. Like surrealism, feminist movements and female political progress can be chronicled all over the globe. The focus of the paper will be on the history of women’s rights in Spain from the early 1900s into Francisco Franco’s rule. Varo and Dalí’s lives overlapped through their shared Spanish roots. Although both artists spent years living outside of the country’s borders, their efforts were heavily influenced by Spanish culture and historical events. Even Varo, who was living in Mexico when she painted the majority of her works, created sceneries that were reflective of Spain, not Mexico. Duran notes that the landscapes in Varo’s paintings are not a direct depiction of Mexico (306).

Many of Dalí’s works are focused on one female figure, his lover Gala. In his paintings, Gala is portrayed as a very passive figure, clearly acting as Dalí’s muse, but not demonstrating an independence of her own. *Leda Atomica*, as seen in Figure 1, is an example of how Dalí used Gala as his muse. Dalí paints nude Gala sitting on top of a golden pedestal, where she is being idolized for her beauty. Other female figures shown in Dalí’s works are disfigured and nude, showing women as powerless, sexual objects. He uses these women’s bodies to project male emotion and very rarely, if ever, gives woman her own voice or story.

On the other hand, it seems as if Remedios Varo broke the mold of the idle woman image in surrealist art by creating an active, independent female that is the subject of so many of her paintings. Dalí's characterization of women as objects, property, and muses reflects an awareness of the social climate for women in Spain under the rule of Franco. While Dalí's representation of women shows a very conscious effort to maintain this female image, Varo's illustration of women shows a more subconscious desire for women to be viewed as successful and intelligent members of society. According to André Breton's essay "The Manifesto of Surrealism," surrealism is a movement that seeks to display the thoughts of the unconscious mind in a conscious manner, linking the dream-world and reality (19). By using Breton's definition of surrealism in relation to the representation of women in their paintings, the works of Varo are far more surreal than those of Dalí.

## **Chapter I: The Life of Remedios Varo**

Remedios Varo was born in Catalonia in 1908 (Kaplan 11). Her Spanish roots included both Basque, on her mother's side, and Andalusian, on her father's. In short, her family ties spanned the Iberian Peninsula. As one of a multiple children, Varo was very close to her family, especially her father (Kaplan 15). Varo's education in the fine arts began when she was a teenager, but before she attended art school she went to a Catholic school, which was customary in Spain. At the time, Spanish Catholic school was very traditional and strictly enforced religious principles. Fortunately for Varo, who expressed dislike for the restrictions placed on her by religion, she turned away from traditional education in order to learn artistic skills. This new educational path began at the Escuela de Artes y Oficios in Madrid (Kaplan 28). From here she moved on to the Escuela de Bellas Artes, before finally enrolling in the Academia de San Fernando, one of the most well-known art schools at the time. Salvador Dalí also attended this academy and records show that Varo's time at the school did overlap with his; however, it is not known whether they ever met. According to Kaplan, two years after Varo became a student at the academy, Dalí was expelled (29). This incident is paralleled by Varo and Dalí's shared involvement with Breton and the surrealists in Paris. Once again, we see the lives of Varo and Dalí intertwining and, yet again, Dalí was cast out of this group without any documentation that the two surrealist artists were ever introduced (Duran 304).

In 1930, when Varo was still a very young woman, she married artist and anarchist Gerardo Lizarraga (Kaplan 30). Varo became involved with the

surrealists in Paris, after leaving Spain to be with her lover the French surrealist poet Benjamin Péret. The two of them spent several years in Paris working with this group of artists and writers. The political climate of France changed abruptly when Hitler and the Nazis took control of the majority of France in 1940. As a result, many intellectuals and artists fled. Péret and Varo reestablished themselves in Mexico City, along with several other surrealist artists and writers, including Esteban Frances, José and Kati Horna, Wolfgang Paalen and Alice Rahon-Paalen, Eva Sulzer, and Leonora Carrington (Colvile 1-2). Others, including André Breton, stayed in France, but went to Marseille, one of the cities in France that Hitler had not taken over. This exile created a separation between Varo and many members of the surrealist group in Paris. Although Varo spent most of her life in exile, she never forgot her Spanish roots. “She was considered a Spanish artist in exile who later explored surrealism, with little or no influence from the cultural reality of Mexico” (Lozano 19).

Although her paintings may not have directly depicted the physical environment of Mexico, her painting style was clearly influenced by the liberating culture and new art that she discovered in her new surroundings, where Varo painted many of her most famous works. The tight reigns placed on female surrealists in Paris were not as prevalent in Mexico, and she found herself among other female surrealists, such as Leonora Carrington, who would become one of her best friends. The creative atmosphere in Mexico is also reflected in Frida Kahlo’s paintings, which were often labeled surrealist too, and Kahlo’s personal style of illustrating female pain was ground-breaking. Many of Varo’s paintings

depict scenes that some categorize as Magical Realism, a subject that famous Columbian author Gabriel García Marquez was well-known for (Duran 305). Some of the aspects considered Magical Realism in Varo's paintings include mythological beasts, the manipulation of space, and machine-human hybrids (Lauter 114). All of these subjects can also fit under the umbrella of surrealism, emphasizing the limitless creativity of the subconscious mind.

As previously mentioned, Varo was a much less known artist than Dalí, which is reflected by the lack of literary works published about her life and artwork. Like the work of many artists, Varo's paintings did not become famous until after her death in 1963 (Lozano 17), which is not to say that her work was not recognized while she was alive. According to Luis-Martín Lozano, Varo had two of her own personal exhibitions while she lived in Mexico (17). Although very few of her paintings were displayed, these art shows reveal that she was accepted as a successful independent artist by those in her community. Despite her local success, Varo's reach also extended beyond Mexico. Throughout her lifetime, Varo's paintings were included in several art exhibits in many major cities worldwide.

## **Chapter II: History of Women's Rights in Spain**

Salvadore Dalí's representation of women was consciously influenced by the gender roles instilled at the time, especially in relation to women in Spain, a country that had a significant role in the lives of both Dalí and Remedios Varo. The perception of women as objects and muses can be seen, not only in Dalí's paintings, but within the social climate of Spain before and under the rule of Franco. Varo's portrayal of women in her artwork can be interpreted as a subconscious reaction against the lack of women's rights and equality in Spain. Throughout Varo's lifetime, equality for women in Spain fluctuated depending on the group in control of the government. Feminist movements began to pick up momentum during Varo's early childhood and young adult life, and the formation of the Second Republic in 1931 marked an era of democracy for Spain. During this time, several issues concerning women's rights were addressed, and progressive laws were passed, pushing toward gender equality. In 1936 the Second Republic was still very young when the Spanish Civil War broke out, lasting three years. The war ended leaving Spain with a new government under the dictator Francisco Franco. Franco's reign marked another era for women's rights in Spain that lasted more than a decade after Varo's death.

There had been several feminist movements before the birth of Varo in 1908. While Varo was a child and before the birth of the Second Republic of Spain, several feminist groups formed, promoting a change for women both politically and socially. One of the most well-known groups was the Asociación Nacional de las Mujeres Españolas (ANME) or the National Association of

Spanish Women. This group was formed in 1918, primarily by women of the middle class, to support women's suffrage (Sanfeliu 115). The first organized public demonstration of women rallying for their right to vote occurred in 1921 and was led by two other significant feminist groups, the Cruzada de Mujeres Españolas and the Liga Internacional de Mujeres Ibéricas e Hispanoamericanas. This demonstration was critical because the women that participated represented several different social classes and backgrounds, illustrating female solidarity on the topic of women's suffrage.

Democracy entered the typically monarchial Spanish society with the formation of the Second Republic in 1931. With the new government came a more accepting space for feminine action. Not long after the Second Republic was formed, women officially were given the right to vote. This huge step toward gender equality gave women political strength through the ability to participate in the choosing of the leaders of their government. The right to divorce was also granted under the Second Republic of Spain. Gender issues appeared to be moving closer to equality during this period of Spanish history; however, the Second Republic did not last long.

The Spanish Civil War broke out in 1936 with a coup d'état. Those that supported the liberal Second Republic became known as the republicans, while the conservatives, in favor of returning Spain to its more conventional roots, were known as the nationalists. The republicans were made up of people from many different backgrounds including intellectuals and artists, many of which were also atheists. The nationalists supported and were supported by the Catholic Church,

which emphasized the traditional Christian lifestyle for Spaniards and was rooted in a patriarchal society.

As republicans lost more and more control over Spain, it became unsafe for many liberals to stay in the country. During this time, many intellectuals and artists fled, fearing for their lives. When the war ended in 1939, the nationalists took control of the government. Franco, a general throughout the war, became the country's dictator. Franco believed in following the Catholic faith and wanted the people of Spain to do the same. For women, this meant a return to the traditional roles of wife and mother. Women were encouraged to leave their jobs and return to their homes to take care of their husbands and raise their children. This encouragement was achieved through manipulation and governmental incentives for women who chose to marry and have children. Franco and the Catholic Church attempted to redefine the idea of gender equality by creating the "patriotic and religious ideology" (Di Febo 217). This ideology promoted the idea that men and women were equal if they both worked to be patriotic to their country and faithful to the Catholic Church by performing traditional gender roles.

Several of the laws that were created under the Second Republic were abolished when Franco took control. In 1941, divorce became illegal once again and abortion was punishable by imprisonment (Di Febo 222). Both laws were setbacks for the feminist movement. Without access to divorce, some women (and men) were trapped in unhappy marriages, which was particularly restrictive for women who were considered the property of their husbands. Lack of access to abortion left many women in difficult situations, especially given that Franco



and the Catholic Church were against the use of contraceptives. Under the law, people could be arrested for even promoting the use of contraceptives.

In 1934, a very conservative fascist group founded a new branch of government named the Sección Femenina (Di Febo 225). When Franco became Spain's leader, the mission of the Sección Femenina was redesigned to encourage women and teach them how to be the ideal woman, as described by Franco and the Catholic Church. With the help of the Sección Femenina, women were trained at a young age to be "cheerful, supportive, self-sacrificing wives, waiting for the return of their husbands to a spotless home and happy family" (Jones 314). The idea of the perfect housewife and homemaker was supported through required classes, organized by the Sección Femenina, that focused on the learning of traditional domestic chores such as sewing, cooking, and childrearing.

The submissiveness of the "ideal woman" was also reflected in several civil laws that were passed under Franco's rule. The independent woman was not a tangible lifestyle for a woman in Francoist Spain. Females were limited in various ways. Women could not choose their own employment or working hours nor could they have a bank account or a passport, which was only granted if a husband signed off on it (Jones 312). A woman's legal rights were also limited because she was seen as a possession handed down from father to husband.

It should be noted that Varo was living in Mexico when she painted many of her best works, including all four of the paintings that will be discussed in Chapter IV. Despite the physical distance she was from her home country, Varo's paintings suggest that her heart was never very far from Spain. Many of her

paintings address her status as an exile, both literally, as a political exile, and metaphorically, as a female surrealist artist working in a male-dominated environment (Everly 15). As stated by Gloria Duran, the physical scenes in most of Varo's paintings show little Mexican influence (306). Instead, the environments and architecture that she included in her scenes echo the landscape of Catalonia.

Varo's surrealist works can be interpreted as directly and purposefully contradicting the idea of femininity as portrayed by Franco and the Catholic Church. "[T]he official attitude toward women in post-Civil War society had roots in the traditional Spanish culture that had supported patriarchal norms and defined woman as a possession or an object rather than as an individual in her own right" (Jones 312). This perception of women as property and objects is demonstrated in the paintings of Dalí, whose portrayal of women is heavily based on the societal norms, reflecting a very conscious attitude toward women of the time. On the other hand, Varo's paintings provide a view into her subconscious desire for female independence by showing women as the active subjects in her works.

### **Chapter III: Femininity & Surrealism**

Understanding the overall perception of women within the surrealist movement is key to appreciating the female image portrayed in both Remedios Varo and Salvadore Dalí's works. Although surrealism was a vast movement that can be traced back to many different regions worldwide, Paris, France, has often been referred to as the birthplace of surrealism. Outside their native country of Spain, Paris is another location that unites both Varo and Dalí. Varo moved to Paris in 1937 to be with her lover Benjamin Péret (Kaplan 55). Unfortunately, this move resulted in her permanent exile from Spain, when Franco's regime denied re-entry to the country to all those who had been affiliated with the Republican Party. It was in Paris where Varo was exposed to several of the crucial members of the surrealist movement, including André Breton and Paul Eluard. During the Spanish Civil War, Dalí fled to Paris in 1936, the year before Varo arrived ("About Dalí"). Dalí was well acquainted with Breton, whom he had met during his second trip to Paris in 1929. Under Breton, a close-knit group of artists and writers operated in Paris, some of which considered themselves surrealists, while others were not as dedicated but still quite interested in the movement.

Varo's attachment to surrealism grew as she participated in this group, but as a woman, her involvement was limited. Several critics have proclaimed surrealism to be a misogynist movement that actively renders femininity in a negative light. Ruth Markus examines one aspect of this negativity toward women by examining the use of the praying mantis (Markus 33). The female

praying mantis is known for decapitating her mate during or after intercourse. According to Markus, many male surrealist artists depict females in their paintings in the tone of the praying mantis, revealing the women as both sexually appealing and dangerous. This critic specifically cites Dalí's work, *The Specter of Sex Appeal*, as an example (Markus 34). The illustration of women as both desirable and threatening not only shows them as dark and twisted figures, but clearly implies that their worth is defined by the way that they are perceived by men. Without the male specter—a concept that Dalí plays with in several of his works—the female entity has no significance. Her sole purpose is to reflect the male's lust. The female praying-mantis is a representation of the “femme-fatale,” (Orenstein 33). The “femme-fatale” is another way of describing the perilous female who constantly torments her male counter-part, drawing him in with her sex appeal and leading him to his doom. Gwen Raaberg also identifies this objectification of women in her article “The Problematics of Women in Surrealism.” Raaberg does not mention the idea of the praying mantis-female, yet her description of the portrayal of femininity is strikingly similar. She describes women in surrealist paintings being used as “object[s] for the projection of unresolved anxieties” and having a “male subject seeking transformation through a female representational object” (Raaberg 8-9). This male subject-female object dynamic is prominent in the works of Dalí. As the subject of the painting, the man is the dominant figure, while the woman as an object is left without an individual identity.

There are some critics that believe the surrealist movement was not demeaning to women and, in fact, was a source of empowerment for female surrealist artists and writers. Katharine Conley is one of these critics. She defends her theory in her book *Automatic Woman: The Representation of Women in Surrealism*. She writes, “I take this view from the simple fact that so many women were attracted to the group, not just as companions of the men, such as Gala Eluard (later Gala Dalí), but as artists in their own right” (Conley 3). Conley does not deny that the movement contextualized women through several negative elements; instead, she claims that the benefits of the movement to female surrealist artists outweighed the negative effects. Under this presumption, the depiction of women for their beauty and innocence and/or as a muse gave females an influential voice.

Although Varo’s willingness to be part of the surrealist movement may support Conley’s view of surrealism as empowering to women, the female objectification found in many male surrealists’ paintings provides strong evidence in opposition to her theory. If this portrayal of women actually gave them an influential voice in surrealism, then this effect would result in the recognition of women surrealists by the men that were accredited with the founding of the movement. Instead, many times the women that participated in the movement and created surrealist works of their own were only referred to in literature as the lovers of the male members. Georgiana Colvile states, “Breton’s very male group, well ensconced in Paris prior to the war, had maintained the women in a peripheral situation, putting them on pedestals as love-partners and muses, and

had barely tolerated them as fellow artists and writers” (2). Conley also alludes to this idea when she mentions that women were “not just the companions of the men.”

It could be argued that female surrealists were in many ways enigmas. The use of the female body as an object set a precedence for the women surrealists and left them with an internal conflict. Raaberg describes this conflict, “[T]he concept of ‘woman’ objectified by male needs was in direct conflict with the individual woman’s subjective need for self-definition and free artistic expression” (2). As surrealist artists, women found it difficult to express themselves freely when the example they were meant to follow inherently contradicted their independence. The works of the male artists depicted women as tools to be used in surrealism, but not as autonomous creators themselves.

The ideal surrealist woman was defined by Breton as the “femme-enfant,” also known as the woman-child (Orenstein 33). The woman-child represents the silly woman with the mental maturity of a child, hence the name. According to the male surrealist writers and painters, the woman-child’s lack of intellect made her less in touch with reality and, therefore, more connected to her unconscious mind, which again contradicted the role of female surrealists, such as Varo. Both the “femme-fatale” and the “femme-enfant” left little room for the female artists to be seen as both surrealists and intellectuals. Even if their works did show this “ideal” surrealist woman, by creating their own artwork, they themselves were not representing this image.

After being forced to flee Europe in 1941, Varo found herself in a new environment in Mexico. With this new world came the freedom to redefine herself and create a new identity as a female surrealist painter. According to Colvile, when women that were involved in surrealism in Europe were exiled to the Americas, they either distanced themselves from surrealism or continued to make surrealist art, while redefining the movement (14). Varo took the latter path, breaking through the gender roles that had restricted her creativity in Paris. Many of her best works were painted while she lived in Mexico because it provided her with an artistic freedom that she had not experienced while in Europe.

In Mexico, Varo discovered her love for science and exploration (Lusty 62). In this new world, where she was not hindered by Breton and the male surrealists' who idolized the "femme-enfant" and the "femme-fatale," Varo was able to develop and paint her own personal interests, such as alchemy, psychoanalysis, and scientific discovery. Through her depiction of scientific discovery, Varo was able to reinvent the surrealist woman as an active subject and adventurer. These themes can be seen in several of Varo's works discussed in Chapter IV.

## **Chapter IV: Works of Remedios Varo**

The image of woman as seen by the “femme-enfant” is representative of a very conscious pursuit by Salvador Dalí and many other male surrealists to create the surrealist woman. By consciously enforcing the concept of an ideal surrealist woman, artists such as Dalí and André Breton contradicted the root of surrealism as a movement that projects the unconscious mind. Social rules and laws of the time were very involved in the formation of this ideal woman, as seen by the history of women’s rights in Spain. Therefore, Dalí’s representation of females in his paintings is reflective of reality and not of the subconscious. As a surrealist artist, Remedios Varo consistently painted scenes that focused on women and Spanish culture. Varo ignored the idea of “femme-enfant” and depicted women as the subjects in her paintings, revealing independent and intellectual female figures. Through the analysis of several of Varo’s works, it can be argued that her paintings represented women in an active role, ignoring the very conscious pursuit by male surrealists to portray women as silly sex objects. In the context of the portrayal of women, Varo’s paintings were not influenced by societal roles and, therefore, are more surrealist than the works of Dalí.

### ***Exploration of the Sources of the Orinoco River***

*Exploration of the Sources of the Orinoco River* (1959) is one of Varo’s most recognized paintings. As seen in Figure 2, the painting depicts a woman sailing in an orange vessel through a dark forest of bare trees. The vessel appears to be made from a coat: the outside is decorated with buttons and a pocket, while the sails resemble outstretched lapels. The boat is steered by an intricate system



of strings that are intertwined with the woman's own coat. As the viewer's eye traces the outline of the boat, it becomes apparent that the woman's hat and the top of the boat are one in the same. The protagonist and her vehicle are almost inseparable. The strings connect to the lapel-sails as well as a pair of feathered wings that emerge from the top of the vessel. The subject of the painting stares intensely at the source of the Orinoco River, a river that runs through Venezuela.

The setting of the painting reflects a dreamlike state. The forest is dark and foggy, creating an eerie environment. In the painting, Varo is representing a subconscious world, a surreal world. There are several aspects of the painting that make it surreal, such as the source of the river, a bottomless glass goblet. As the goblet sits on top of a table found within a hollowed tree, water leaps from it, defying gravity. The volume of the goblet seems limitless, producing enough water to supply a river. The hollow tree that houses the goblet is not a finite space, as one would expect. Instead, the space inside the tree continues on, following a winding path with no end in sight. Varo breaks the usual plane of the artwork, redefining space and creating a world in which basic physics do not apply.

*Exploration of the Sources of the Orinoco River* depicts a female protagonist in an active role. The woman appears unyielding in her quest for the source of the river. She both physically and metaphorically controls her destiny through the manipulation of the strings that she holds. They give her the power to decide her fate. The boat appears to have as much control over her as she does the boat. In her biography of Varo, Janet Kaplan refers to this painting,

mentioning the inability of the protagonist to escape the boat. Kaplan notes, “Here the traveling outfit, while a wonderfully inventive means of transport, acts also as a form of restraint, binding the woman into her boat” (169). This restraint might reflect Varo’s feelings as a female surrealist artist.

The person-machine fusion is a common theme in Varo’s paintings. Machines are created by people for a purpose, to do something for them. Utility belts were invented to speed up production, and trains were designed for quicker transportation. By creating a woman that is part machine, Varo gives them a goal and creates activity. Varo is shows that women in surrealism need to participate and serve a purpose.

When viewing the paintings, the spectator is shown a vision of Varo’s unconscious mind. Unlike many surrealist paintings of the same era, a woman is the main focus of the work. Even more rare, the woman here is portrayed as a subject, not an object. Kaplan states that the surrealists valued the “youthful beauty and innocence in women” (56). *Exploration of the Sources of the Orinoco River* does not depict a beautiful, young woman; rather, it shows a determined woman who is seeking the truth and discovering the world around her. The focus is not on how she looks, but on what she is doing and how she interacts with her environment. The female figure is fully clothed in a gender neutral jacket and hat that do not accentuate her female physical features. The viewer can tell that the woman in the painting is not naive and helpless because she seeks to educate herself. She sails independently and does not rely on others. She refuses to be discouraged or held back.

The representation of women in Varo's painting is significantly different from the way women are shown in the paintings of Dalí, whose *The Temptation of St. Anthony* (1946) is one example of how he portrays femininity (Figure 3). There are two women in this painting, both of which are nude and lacking agency. One of the women stands on top of a golden pedestal that is carried on the back of an elephant-like creature, caressing her breasts as the wind blows through her hair. The torso of another woman can be seen through the window of a structure that is carried toward St. Anthony by another elephant. These women are objects of desire, something that St. Anthony, the hero of the painting, must resist. Unlike in Varo's painting, the subject of *The Temptation of St. Anthony* is a man. All three of the people in this painting are nude. The woman on the pedestal is standing with her back arched and her hands on her breasts, offering her body to St. Anthony. The other woman is presenting her body through a window with her head hidden from sight, sending the message that her bare body is the part of her that is valuable. St. Anthony's nude body faces away from the viewer, exposing the tensed muscles of his back. His nudity is meant to dramatize his struggle, while the nudity of the women is clearly meant to emphasize their power to seduce. The women are only included to test his willpower. As portrayed in much of Dalí's work, women only have value because of men's sexual desire.

According to many surrealists, the ideal woman in surrealism is "uncorrupted by logic or reason," (Kaplan 56). She is idolized for her beauty, but not her brain, as seen in *The Temptation of St. Anthony*. In Varo's painting, the vessel that the woman controls was made for her, by her. The tactful placement

of the strings and cords that control the boat align specifically with the loops and buttons of her jacket. Conversely, the women in Dalí's painting are controlled by the elephants that carry them. They are meant to be the man's entertainment and property, unable to make decisions for themselves. As an inventor AND explorer, the woman in Varo's painting clearly has knowledge of both logic and reason, but it does not *burden* her. Instead, it sets her free and it allows her to understand the world more clearly as an active member of society. The two women in Dalí's painting are not contributing to society like the female explorer. Their only purpose is to please the protagonist of the painting, St. Anthony. However, they are not welcomed gifts. In fact, St. Anthony uses all of his strength to resist them, among other gifts that he is being offered. These women personify the sins meant to besmirch a holy man. The bodies and beauty of these women are used to control a man, while the woman in *Exploration of the Sources of the Orinoco River* uses her brain and cleverness to create her own adventure.

### ***Leaving the Psychoanalyst (1960)***

Like *Exploration of the Sources of the Orinoco River* (Figure 2), *Leaving the Psychoanalyst* was also painted toward the end of Varo's life. The subject of the painting is a woman wearing a heavy green cloak, as seen in Figure 4. The cloak covers most of her body, with the exception of her hands and most of her face. In the cloak is the impression of the part of her face that is now uncovered, suggesting that the woman has recently removed the cloak from her face. The moment is set in a circular courtyard in the center of which is a small well. Dark heavy clouds linger above the courtyard, creating an atmosphere similar to the one depicted in *Exploration of the Sources of the Orinoco River*.

The basket that the woman is holding is filled with various items, including a small clock, a pair of glasses, a key, and thread. In her other hand, the woman holds a small white ghostly head of a man that she has taken from her basket. She holds the head carelessly by the tip of his beard over the well, ready to dispose of it. The woman's facial expression is blank and she does not waste her time looking back at the head that she is tossing away. Her cross-legged stance and outstretched wrist suggest an attitude of defiance.

In the background of the painting there is a sign in the doorway on which the letters "FJA" are inscribed. The letters stand for Freud, Jung, and Adler, three well-known psychotherapists of the time (Duran 301). As a surrealist painter, Varo was greatly influenced by their contribution to psychoanalysis and the development of the connection between the conscious and unconscious mind. In particular, Varo's reference to Carl Jung is present throughout several of her

paintings. According to Gloria Duran, many of Varo's works contain symbols that Carl Jung described as characteristic in the search of self-identity or "wholeness" (305). Although Duran does not describe which of Jung's symbols that she incorporates, the general idea of self-discovery is prevalent in Varo's works. In both *Exploration of the Sources of the Orinoco River* (Figure 2) and *Leaving the Psychoanalyst* (Figure 4), a single woman is depicted in search of her independence.

The symbolism in tossing away the head of a man becomes even more powerful when Varo's Spanish background is taken into account. During the twentieth century, the traditional Spanish family was patriarchal. In Varo's own family, the head of the household would have been her father. The life of a woman was ultimately controlled by her father until she married, when the power was transferred to her husband. By tossing her father's head into the well, the woman in the painting is metaphorically breaking free of the restraints put on her by a patriarchal society.

The female figure in the painting is leaving the psychoanalyst's office, as the title states. Psychoanalysis is used to unlock unconscious thoughts and memories that are affecting the conscious mind. It is a way of exploring the mind to find the root of a problem, which could be a past experience or relationship. In her analysis of the painting, Kaplan states that the basket is filled with "psychological waste," and as the woman lightens the load, a layer of her veil comes off (155). Here, the head symbolizes an unhealthy relationship, which is one of the many things that are affecting the woman psychologically. Her visit

has exposed this issue, and as she leaves, she is able to remove it from her basket of troubles.

The male head is significant to the interpretation of the painting. There are several aspects of Varo's life that she could be reacting to by tossing away this bearded figure. Her home country, Spain, to which she could not return had been under the reign of Franco for twenty-two years when Varo painted this work. Under his rule, women were denied independence and the right to have an individual identity outside of being a mother and wife. These standards for women were largely supported because of the patriarchal precedents set forth by the government and Catholicism. The action of tossing away the head of a male figure implies rebellion against these patriarchal norms, revealing Varo's subconscious feminist beliefs by reclaiming power for women as individuals.

Dalí painted *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans, Premonition of Civil War* the same year that the Spanish Civil War began. This painting reveals a deformed and mutilated female body that is physically ripping itself apart, as seen in Figure 5. This representation of the female figure is distinct from that of *The Temptation of St. Anthony*. Unlike the seductress women in Dalí's *Temptation*, the woman in this painting is the main focus and, quite literally, the subject. However, the female body is being objectified and used to project Dalí's feelings of unease. In Finkelstein's analysis of the painting he states, "The facial expression of the figure tearing itself to pieces combines frenzy and ecstasy" (159). Dalí not only uses the shredded female form to show his anxious feelings,

but also his sexual desire. In his work, women are usually synonymous with sexual desire.

Although *Leaving the Psychoanalyst* (Figure 4) and *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans, Premonition of Civil War* (Figure 5) are both paintings of a woman, they are incredibly different in how she is represented. Dalí's use of the female body to show his own madness and lust implies that woman is a tool for male projection. This implication takes away her independence as the subject of the painting and exposes the objectification of her body. Dalí's interpretation of women is clearly being influenced by the societal norms of the time, revealing a very conscious female image. His painting is reflecting reality, not the unconscious.



### ***Visit to the Plastic Surgeon (1960)***

Another painting that Varo completed within a year of *Exploration of the Sources of the Orinoco River* and *Leaving the Psychoanalyst* was *Visit to the Plastic Surgeon*, which can be seen in Figure 6. The dark cloudy sky and the style of the architecture is reminiscent of the background of *Leaving the Psychoanalyst*. The same dark looming sky is present in all three of the previously mentioned works.

The intriguing tone of the painting compels the viewer to question Varo's attitude toward plastic surgery. The woman, who is the subject of the work, and assumed to be Varo herself, is ringing the doorbell of the plastic surgeon's office, while looking back over her shoulder at the viewer. Her face is covered in a transparent veil, revealing an unrealistically long nose. Her expression is serious and her eyes are wide, yet her gaze is steady. It seems she is daring the viewer to cast judgement on her decision to have cosmetic surgery. As she rings the bell, she stands in a Gothic-style pointed archway, leaning close to the door. Her dress sweeps back as she positions herself to enter the office. This stance suggests a sense of urgency, as if she is trying to hurry inside to remain unseen.

To the left of the doorway is a display window with a mannequin, like those found in front of retail shops. The mannequin, just like in retail stores, serves to display the merchandise that can be purchased in the office. However, instead of clothing or jewelry, the office advertises a female body with three sets of breasts, an exaggerated curvy figure, and long blonde hair. Just as a shop

would only display merchandise that is considered desirable, the office does the same, implying that the model's figure is an attractive one.

The model in the display case serves to mock the idea of plastic surgery. Varo uses a surrealist style to create an unrealistic image for women. The model is a hyperbole by exaggerating the feminine physical features that are deemed desirable by society. Varo plays with the concept of the ideal female body and questions the limitations of cosmetic surgery. Text printed on the glass window exclaims that there are no limits to the alterations that can be done. This question of beauty and perfection is reflective of the value that many male surrealist artists placed on the physical beauty of a woman. Varo mocks their idea of a perfect female body with this hyper-feminine, surgically modified woman. She also mocks herself for secretly desiring to surgically alter her own appearance (Kaplan 185).

Varo's use of surrealism to create this unattainable appearance for a woman is incredibly ironic because many male surrealists did just that by placing the value of a female on being young and beautiful. As previously mentioned, many of Dalí's paintings either show women nude with perfectly proportioned idealized bodies, or disfigured and almost grotesque. Dalí shows women, as they are perceived by men, at two extremes -- the ideal vision of beauty and perfection on one end and as disturbing and threatening figures on the other. Both of these images are based on male perception. The women in Dalí's paintings are not given their own identities or adventures. An example of one of Dalí's disfigured, ominous female creatures can be seen in *The Specter of Sex Appeal*, Figure 7.

According to Deborah J. Haynes, these dismembered female figures can be found in several works by male surrealist artists, such as Max Ernst and Hans Bellmer. Haynes states that these illustrations are based on “patriarchal and misogynist attitudes about women” (26).

The female mannequin in *Visit to the Plastic Surgeon* (Figure 6) can be compared to the female figure found in Dalí’s *The Specter of Sex Appeal* (Figure 7). Both representations of women are very surreal and emphasize the reconstruction of the female form. Varo’s female figure almost appears to be a scientific experiment, breaking the boundaries of surgical alterations and recreating the female body as a sexual object. The body that Varo presents is meant to exemplify the ideal female form in a satirical manner. The body type portrayed does not exist, which implies that the ideal female body in the real world is also fictional. On the other hand, the female figure in Dalí’s painting is another example of the mutilated female form that is so widely seen throughout surrealism. She is the “femme-fatale” or the praying mantis described earlier, personifying death and eroticism at once. Here, Dalí is simply using the subconscious to recreate an image of women that has been seen for years, while Varo is using dream-like figures to question what makes a woman beautiful.

The dismembered female form is one of the surrealist themes that has caused critics to deem the movement misogynist. The distortion of the female form is a manifestation of Dalí’s anger and sexual frustration, and he metaphorically takes his anger out on women.

### ***Encounter (1959)***

*Encounter*, as seen in Figure 8, is another of Varo's works that she completed later in her life. There are several similarities that draw this work and the three previously mentioned works together. The subject in all four paintings is a solitary female in a dark setting, who seeks to discover. In *Encounter*, a woman stares straight ahead, while she lifts the lid to a small box. Within the box lies the woman's own head, but not in decapitated form. The eyes that peer out are alive and well. The two heads of the same woman share a vibrant blue dress, which physically ties them together. The eyes of the woman who is opening the box are unfocused and exhausted, while the eyes that peer from within the box look toward her. Metaphorically, the woman is contemplating her own existence. Around them, the room is almost empty and dark. In the background, there are more chests, like the one containing her head, that are neatly arranged on a shelf. Is this where she keeps the other pieces of herself?

In *Encounter*, the woman is physically rediscovering herself. Varo creates a visual to help the reader see the search for self-identity in a more literal form. This painting could be an illustration of Varo's struggles as a female surrealist artist. As previously mentioned, female surrealists were enigmas on some level. As artists and intelligent contributors of surrealist work, women were not playing the part of the "femme-enfant," which, according to some was the ideal surrealist woman.

In Dalí's painting *Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee Around a Pomegranate a Second Before Awakening*, as seen in Figure 9, a nude woman

lays outstretched on the ground with her head tilted away from the viewer. Behind her, two tigers are bounding toward her. One of the tigers is being devoured by a giant fish that emerges from a large pomegranate, while an elephant with impossibly long thin legs passes in the distance. The elephant is similar to those found in Dalí's painting *The Temptation of St. Anthony* (Figure 3). A rifle is pointed at the woman's left arm. The woman in the painting is completely unaware of the dangers she faces.

This representation of the female figure is a powerful example of the "femme-enfant." According to many surrealists, the unintelligent woman was the closest to the unconscious that a person could be. Mindlessness was attributed to the lack of thought occurring in the conscious mind, which meant that the unconscious mind was more easily accessed. Men, however, were not praised for being mindless or lacking intelligence, exposing sexism within the movement. The "femme-enfant" is an unrealistic expectation for women and is reminiscent of the ideal submissive woman that was encouraged by Franco and the Catholic Church.

Varo and Dalí's paintings drastically differ in respect to the parts of female body on which they chose to focus. Like in many of Dalí's works, the face of the woman in *Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee Around a Pomegranate a Second Before Awakening* is turned away from the viewer. A few examples of other Dalí paintings that feature women with their faces turned away include *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans, Premonition of Civil War* (Figure 5) and *The Bleeding Roses*. In all three of these paintings, the women are nude and

their bodies on full display, but their faces are hidden. The focus is on their physical form. In contrast, Varo's paintings often reveal women that are fully clothed in a conservative fashion. Even their hair is often hidden from the viewer. The focus is not on their bodies, but on their faces, particularly their eyes. Varo uses her female figures' eyes to communicate their emotions and create a connection between them and the viewer.

## **Conclusion**

Remedios Varo and Salvador Dalí were both Spanish surrealist painters from Catalonia. They studied in the same fine arts school and were influenced by many of the same surrealists. With similar backgrounds, one would expect that their paintings would share several aspects. However, their styles are remarkably different, especially in the way women are represented in their paintings. Women in Dalí's paintings follow the mold cast by male surrealists before him, defining women as mindless objects. Their usefulness is limited and they are not shown as individuals. If they are not shown as sexual temptresses, they are represented as grotesque and deformed. This second female image encourages the idea that women are dangerous to men. Either way, the function of a woman in Dalí's paintings is based on her value to men. His attitude towards women was heavily influenced by female roles in Spanish society. The illustration of women as objects is reflective of their treatment as men's property in Franco's Spain.

Varo represents women as independent and searching for self-identity. Her women are intelligent individuals with the ability to explore, travel, and reason. She does not depict the "femme-enfant" or the "femme-fatale." Varo ignored this model of the "ideal surrealist woman," which was set forth by male surrealists before her, allowing her to open her mind and truly convey the unconscious.

Female surrealist artists rarely received recognition as independent artists by their male counterparts in Paris. In Mexico, Varo found a very different world that liberated her from these misogynistic constraints. She was recognized for her

paintings while living in Mexico, and her works were later rediscovered after the interest in surrealism waned. Varo was not the first woman to take traditional surrealist techniques and make them her own, but her contribution to the movement was incredibly valuable and deserves recognition. Her representation of women shows a powerful desire to discover herself outside of the traditional roles that were set forth for her.

There is very little literature on the women surrealists in comparison to the male surrealist writers and artists. Research on this topic continues to reveal how women played a serious role in the movement, by actively contributing and portraying surrealism through the eyes of a woman. The exploration of this subject continues to reveal many new artists and artworks that can enhance our knowledge and provide insight into the feminine side of the surrealist movement.



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## Appendix



**Figure 1.** Salvador Dalí. *Leda Atomica*. 1949. Oil on canvas. Fundación Gala-Salvador Dalí, Figueras. *The Portable Dalí*. New York: Universe Publishing, 2003. Pg 275. Print.



**Figure 2.** Remedios Varo. *Exploration of the Sources of the Orinoco River*. 1959. Oil on canvas. Private collection. *Bad Reputation: a Feminist Pop Culture Adventure*. Web. 25 April 2014.



**Figure 3.** Salvador Dalí. *The Temptation of St. Anthony*. 1946. Oil on canvas. Musées Royaux des *Beaux-Arts de Belgique*, Brussels. Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium.



**Figure 4.** Remedios Varo. *Leaving the Psychoanalyst*. 1960. Oil on canvas. Private collection. Image from: *Remedios Varo: Unexpected Journeys* by Janet A. Kaplan. New York, NY: Cross River Press, 1988. Plate 135. Print.

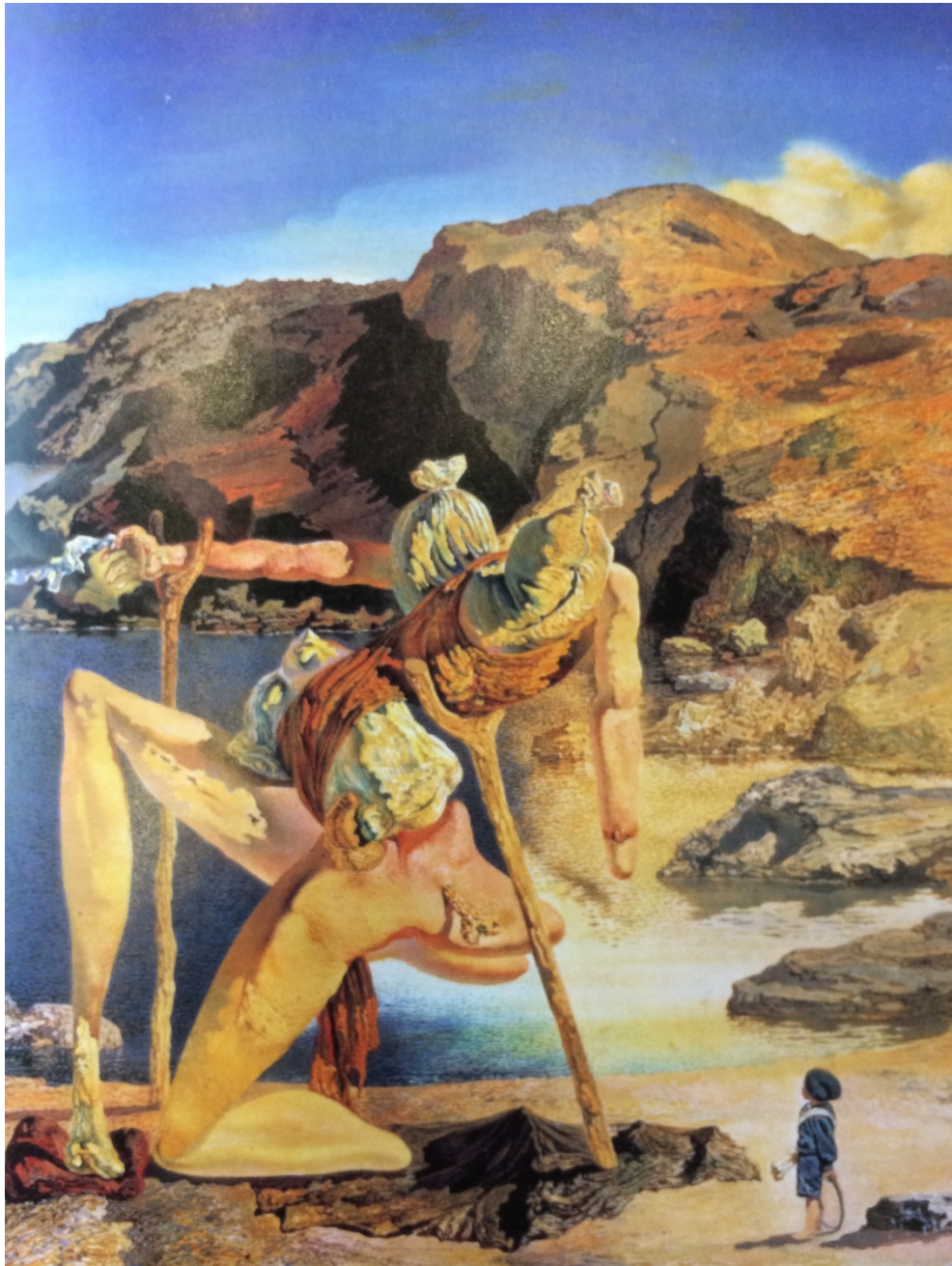


**Figure 5.** Salvador Dalí. *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans, Premonition of Civil War*. 1936. Oil on canvas. Philadelphia Museum of Art. *Philadelphia Museum of Art*. Web. 25 April 2014.



**Figure 6.** Remedios Varo. *Visit to the Plastic Surgeon*. 1960. Oil on masonite. Dr. Jaime and Margery Asch. *Remedios Varo: Unexpected Journeys* by Janet A. Kaplan. New York, NY: Cross River Press, 1988. Plate 168. Print.





**Figure 7.** Salvador Dalí. *The Spector Sex Appeal*. 1934. Oil on canvas. Fundación Gala-Salvador Dalí, Figueras. *The Portable Dalí*. New York: Universe Publishing, 2003. Pg 149. Print.



**Figure 8.** Remedios Varo. *Encounter*. 1959. Oil on canvas. Private collection. Wordpress.com. Web. 25 April 2014.



**Figure 9.** Salvador Dalí. *Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee Around a Pomegranate a Second Before Awakening*. 1944. *The Portable Dalí*. New York: Universe Publishing, 2003. Pg 250. Print.