

Mythological References in the work of Salvador Dalí: the myth of Leda

Rosa M. Maurell

Centre for Dalinian Studies

Hora Nova, May 30, 2000

In both Salvador Dalí's written work and his pictorial work there are many mythological references. We will look now at the myth of Leda.

The oil painting entitled *Leda atòmica* (1949) is in the Treasure Room of the Dalí Theatre-Museum in Figueres. In painting this work, Salvador Dalí took inspiration in the classical myth. The most popular version recounts that Leda was the daughter of the king of Aetolia, Thestius, and of Eurithemis. Leda married Tyndareus, who upon his expulsion from Lacedaemon was taken in at Thestius' palace. Zeus, father of the gods, fell in love with the beautiful Leda and, when rejected by her, turned himself into a swan. It is said that the same night that Tyndareus coupled with Leda, so too did Zeus, in the form of a swan. Two eggs resulted from the union of Leda with the swan, and each egg gave birth to twins: Castor and Pollux – called the Dioscuri – and Helen and Clytemnestra. One member of each set of twins was immortal and the other mortal.

Dalí began painting his Leda from 1945, in the United States. The painting depicts Leda face-on, sitting on a pedestal, and with her left hand caressing a swan which has drawn near as if to kiss her. Around the main figure are various objects such as a book, a set square, an egg which might represent the fruit of the union between Leda and the swan, from which the twins were born. In the background are the rocks of Cape Norfeu, situated between Roses and Cadaqués, on either side, serving as a reference to the painter's own land.

Leda Atòmica was planned following divine proportion as laid down by Luca Paccioli, from the Italian Renaissance period. Leda and the swan are set in a pentagon inside which has been inserted a five-point star of which Dalí made several sketches. The harmony of the references was calculated by the artist following the mathematician Matila Ghyka, who was at that time teaching at the University of San Diego. His works showed that divine proportion lies at the foundation of any work. Dalí, unlike his contemporaries who took the view that mathematics distracted from or interrupted artistic inspiration, considered that any work of art, to be such, had to be based on composition, on calculation.

His wife and muse sat as his model, and in Dalí's interpretation we see that love is treated in a more spiritual manner than it is in the work of other painters, who saw the more carnal side of the myth in the physical union of Zeus-swan and Leda, as did Michelangelo or Nicolas Poussin. Here, all is ethereal, no part touches any other; not even the sea touches the land. Indeed, in his work *Hidden Faces* he already conveys to

us an intense love without physical contact, which he called "cledalism". In other works by Dalí such as the *Madonna of Portlligat* (1952) or *Rhinocerotid Figure of Illissus of Phidias* (1954) the central figures are also in a state of levitation.

To remain with the classical theme, it is said that Dalí identified with Pollux and that his dead brother, Salvador, might represent the mortal twin, Castor, while from the other couple his sister Anna Maria would be the mortal Clytemnestra and Gala the divine Helen, whose beauty was so great that it led to war between the Greek and Trojan peoples.

The painter might easily have identified his wife with Helen, because she was for him a source of inspiration, and contemplating her he was capable of creating sublime works.

Finally, in one of his works Salvador Dalí tells us the purpose of his work: "I started to paint the *Leda Atòmica* which exalts Gala, the goddess of my metaphysics, and I succeeded in creating "suspended space."