

# The Phenomenological Loss of the Soul

by Mark Daniel Cohen

Edvard Munch: The Modern Life of the Soul

*Hyperion*, Volume I, issue 1, May 2006

**HYPERION:  
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS**



**The Phenomenological Loss  
of the Soul**

**Edvard Munch: The Modern Life of the Soul**  
**The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY**  
**February 19 – May 8, 2006**

**by Mark Daniel Cohen**

If there are dead souls, they float up in variation. They arise like spectra to the introspective eye. They are modulated by signatures, tempered to a range of staves, keyed to play in the tonalities of nullity and agony, in the pitches of nothingness and anguish, in the registers of soundlessness and song. They enter upon us in either vacancy or torment, descend in the diaphane deadening of the sensate or plunge to the dying fall and the dirge.

For the imagination of nullification comes in palettes. We conceive of our eradication, congenitally it seems, in two variants—in vaporous negation as a thinking vacuum capable of thinking its own non-existence, capable of thinking that it cannot think, or feel, or live, and in the tormented degradation of what plummets endlessly toward nothingness, intimately and ever aware of nothing so much as its incipient nothingness, until, in fact, in the end, it becomes nothing. We know ourselves in our darker insights, in the moments during which we are willing to see the encroaching truth, as void or as capable void, as corpses or as patients, as dead or as dying. We are caught between death and mortality. Keats found himself poetically captured in the intrinsic dilemma, and he envisioned “easeful Death” in order to elude mortality, in order to sidestep the “hungry generations” that he felt treading him down. And Beckett hovered in the borderland, touched sensitively by the sweet piquancy of its delicate and inexorable bleakness.

Such considerations are appropriate in the question of Edvard Munch, for Munch is a visionary of the dusk of the spirit, a seer and portrayer of the twilight of the human enterprise, of the occlusion of our hopes and our possibilities for success in life. His is a vision of the mortality that constitutes existence, of the death that is in life. He is keenly alive to the touches of decay in ordinary events, to the promise of ultimate failure in the exercises of the passions of the soul, to the final bad news we all must face. He is vibrantly aware of it all, and his paintings and prints seem to glow with the deposit of brooding darkness and flame with the torment of the knowledge of where we are headed. His art is the living awareness of the necessary death of the things we cherish.

And as such, Munch’s art is ill at home in our time, for his imagination of disaster is the diametric opposite of our own. Unlike the mind that created the candle flames of dark insight and willing confession that shimmer on his surfaces, we are at a loss in the darkness. Unlike his honed sensitivity to the import of doomed circumstance, we are deadened to the imagination of death, we are paupers in the dreaming of disaster. Where Munch sees the dusk, we fail to see; where he feels the touch of mortality, we feel nothing; where he senses the proximity of death in the warmth of family, the possibility of love,

the levitating moments of deep introspection, we know nothing of death and live as if we are going to live forever.

And as such, Munch is as well ideally appropriate to, and indispensable for, our time, for, if art is capable of teaching—or, if in a time of nullified feelings, art remains capable of teaching—then he may be the tonic for the degradation of our ardencies and the ignorance that resides where we should possess our deepest knowledge, the vacuum that stands for the heart of our wisdom of life. It would be to our gain, even though there is nothing to regain—the darkneses that Munch saw are necessary darkneses—for there is a nobility in the imagination of destruction and a dignity to the insight into the necessity of death. We acknowledge so in our regard for the tragedies of Shakespeare, of Moliere, of the Greek dramatists. Giacomo Leopardi, the nineteenth-century Italian poet, once observed, “All works of genius have this in common: even when they demonstrate and make us perceive the inevitable unhappiness of life, even when they express the most dreadful despair, they nevertheless comfort the noble soul that finds itself in a state of depression, disillusionment, nullity, boredom, and discouragement, or in the most bitter and deadening misfortunes. Such works rekindle our enthusiasm, and though they treat and represent nothing but death, give back (to us) that life that had been lost.” Nietzsche asserted much the same point: “All good things are powerful stimulants to life, even every good book which is written against life.” Even every good painting.

So out of keeping now is Munch’s work that, at the recent extensive exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York—an exhibition that appeared from February 19 to May 8, 2006, and that covered the entirety of the artist’s career—room after room of riveting, compelling, and often well-known paintings contained an atmosphere of strangeness that surrounded the works like an aura. Despite its status as a key development in early Modernism—or in the preparation for Modernism, if we take Munch as a precursor of the German and French Expressionists—Munch’s art has entered the realm of history, for it has the air of the museum about it, the air shared by work that comes from another period of time, that seems as if created by a mind not entirely like our own, from a world not entirely like our own. In slightly more than 100 years, Munch’s art has gone from the esoteric to the exotic—what he created to teach insight into, as the subtitle of the exhibition put it, “The Modern Life of the Soul” has been transformed by time into souvenirs from another time, a time that had a different sense of mortality.

And yet, not entirely. Nietzsche observed, “A joke is an epitaph on an emotion.” The emotional density of the works, the sheer thickness of mood they carry, is the foundation of the sense of the strange about them, it is the quality by which they differ in extremis from the art we have become accustomed to seeing in galleries today, the art we accept as speaking for our time. Yet, there is no humor in this exhibition—no inadvertent humor that results from the temporal distance over which we view these works, from the alien quality about them. No one laughs at these paintings and prints,

and this fact, along with Nietzsche's guidance, tells us that the emotions Munch evokes are not dead, that they have not come to seem quaint and overwrought—that Munch's sense of mortality, his sense of the imperative of knowing the darkness about us, remains within our capabilities. Put simply, Munch continues to speak to us, regardless of how we argue the nature of art and regardless of how we characterize ourselves and the contemporary world.

The density of drenching mood is the heart of the seeming strangeness to these works, but it is not merely a matter of the vigor of the emotional import. Munch's work is distinctive among the range of Expressionist Art, not for the emphasis on the dark vision—Expressionism is marked by dark visions, from the nightmarish dreams of Soutine's fish and animal carcasses to the works of the members of Die Brücke and the German Expressionists, such as Käthe Kollwitz, George Grosz, and Otto Dix, who drew their tone and subjects from the First World War and, in some instances, from intimations of its approach. Unlike them, Munch set his sense of desolation in domestic scenarios—with figures walking through city streets and milling in drawing rooms and bedchambers. With most of the Expressionist painters, most of the artists who in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries distorted the rendition of appearances to convey an intensity of emotional response, the images are iconic—visual formulations that seem, at their best, the visual “name” for the emotion itself. With Munch, the image is narrative—we sense ourselves looking in on a moment drawn from an ongoing story, we get a glimpse in media res of a tragedy unfolding. (Perhaps only Kollwitz matches Munch in narrative ability, but her stories are drawn from the war. They are perhaps the most devastating images of war ever rendered into fine art.)

It is likely this quality, the rendering of small but devastating terrors of domesticity, that underlies the standard alignment of Munch with the dramatists Ibsen and Strindberg. (Munch knew them both, created over his lifetime hundreds of works based on Ibsen's plays, and designed sets for several productions. Portraits of both dramatists were included in the exhibition.) If one had to select one play to serve as the literary equivalent of Munch's art, Ibsen's “When We Dead Awaken” would serve well—a story that blooms into a monumental tragedy as one listens to the seemingly innocuous conversations, as one hears dialogue that seems almost entirely idle talk, a story of characters who die well before they die, whose souls die and who spend the majority of their lives as living corpses, and who attempt, one last time, to live again before they finally die. James Joyce wrote of Ibsen's manner, and of this very play, “At some chance expression the mind is tortured with some question, and in a flash, long reaches of life are opened up in vista, yet the vision is momentary unless we stay to ponder on it.” Ibsen's plays are devised to evoke such moments and hold them before the mind. Munch's small but not so small tragedies are just such pondering. Where other painters rendered the idealized iconic imagining, the invented image drawn from the dreaming mind, Munch, like a great dramatist, selected the perfect moment from the stream of time that floats a developing story, the moment that somehow sums up the emotional reality of the entire event. His images

Edvard Munch, *Evening on Karl Johan Street*, 1892  
Oil on canvas, 33 11/16 x 47 5/8" (85.5 x 121 cm),  
Bergen Art Museum, Rasmus Meyers Collection  
© 2006 The Munch Museum/The Munch-Ellingsen Group/Artists  
Rights Society (ARS), New York

find in real circumstances and portray what T. S. Eliot called the “objective correlative”—the naturally arising images that are the “formula” for a particular emotion, “such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.”

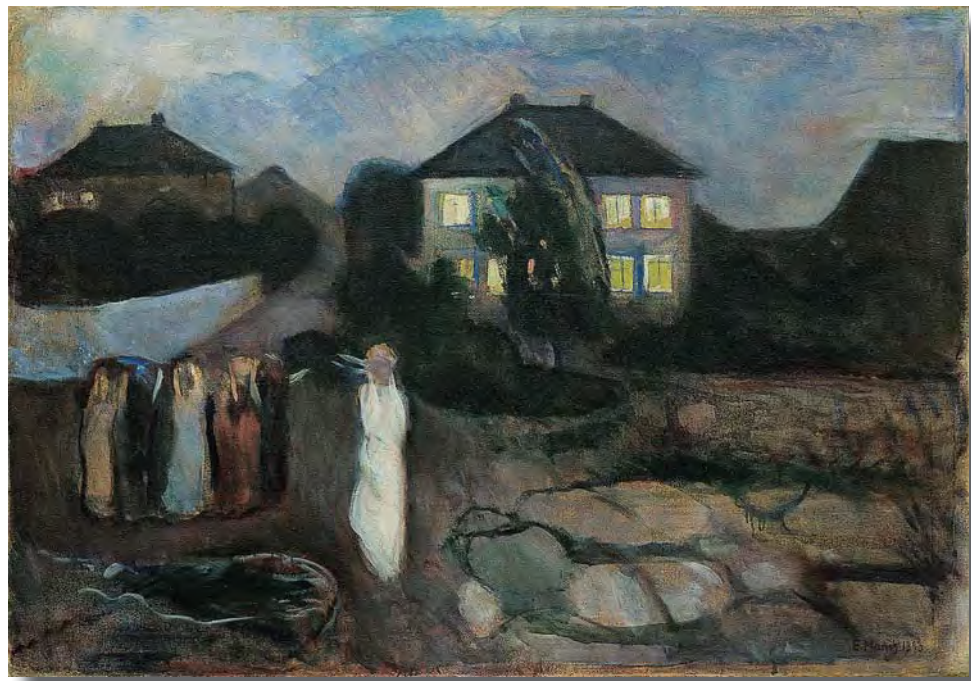
Thus, the distinctive quality of Munch’s art is its intelligence about emotion, or rather, its thinking into the emotional realities of life—the meaning and value of the sheer events that constitute the natural course of existence. It is not facts that Munch was after, but the implications of the facts, which are revealed in the emotional tonality of the event and are as real as the facts themselves, as objectively present as material fact. In short, the emotional significance of the event is inherent in the event, and the lesson to be drawn is real. Munch thought of his work as pursuing an understanding—he wrote of *The Frieze of Life* (a term he used for the principal works of the 1890s and the 1900s, the period in which he found his mature style and produced his most recognizable works) that, in those paintings, he wished to “understand the meaning of life [and] help others gain an understanding of their lives.” He wished to understand: to discover a meaning that was not for him alone, and to teach that meaning to others, for whom it would be, presumably, as pertinent as it was for him. And thus, the distortions of fidelity to life were not understood by Munch to record merely his own emotional reactions. They were renderings of his discoveries of something there to be discovered, something outside of him, something capable of being understood, thought about, for it is something to be observed, conceived, considered, and conveyed. The emotional shadings are universals—as universal as are the crises that repeat in every life. And thus, his dark vision is not one of a suffered nullification of feelings but of a keenly observed and felt comprehension of the meaning of life, a sensitivity to

and, necessarily, a sufferance of the twilight truths of existence.

In works throughout the exhibition, one could see the intelligence, the sheer thoughtfulness, of the emotional comprehension of the realities of life. In *Evening on Karl Johan Street*, 1892, and again in *Angst*, 1894, figures walk along a street and close



to a body of water, staring straight ahead, staring straight out of the canvas, with a look of dull terror on every face. But the dullness is not of the wits; their eyes are not blank but are alive with fear. These are not people who have become senseless. Rather, they are people in shock—aware of their condition and in a state of ceaseless horror.



In *Melancholy*, 1891, Munch virtually gives us Rodin's *Thinker*, 1880, reconceived—the long evening sky and the dim mauve and teal stretch of rocks and sand tells us unmistakably what the sole, lonely figure is pondering. In *The Storm*, 1893, a work composed in such flat layers and in such a self-containing space it could be the design for a stage set, the emotional density is so heavy and permeating, it seems the very air the figures breath, it seems the very substance of the winds of the storm. And it blows with such ferocity, the figures hold their hands to their ears. They know what assails them, they are aware, and they struggle to fend off the awareness. And, they are rendered with such quick and so few twining, vertical strokes, they seem to the viewer little more than flames, lit wicks being blown to a terrified brightness by the gale.

At the heart of Munch's vision are the lessons of love, and they have been digested and their false promises dispelled—they have been thought through. In *Summer Night's Dream (The Voice)*, 1893, a young woman stands in a forest before a lake on which a small boat is passing with two figures, which we somehow know are a man and a woman. The woman leans forward with a quality of yearning, and the moon streaks the water with a column of light, which along with the tree boles makes a setting of phallic images. This is an image of burgeoning desire. Yet, it is an evening image, an image of illumination descending, not mystery arising, for it is sheerly quotidian in its details, and the woman's eyes are purely black. The tonality of foreboding is in the physical situation, in the scenery itself. It is not an extrapolation of the woman's feelings—she is aware only of her yearning, and in *Mystery of the Beach*, 1892, we find a similar scene in similar dark hues, but, in this case, it is a landscape without figures. The dark mystery is there, of its own.

The Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. H. Ingens Larsen and acquired through the Little P. Bliss and Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Funds.  
 © 2006 The Munch Museum/The Munch-Eilingsen Group/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York  
 Edvard Munch, *The Storm*, 1893  
 Oil on canvas, 36 1/8 x 51 1/2" (91.8 x 130.8 cm)

Edvard Munch, *The Dance of Life*, 1899-1900  
Oil on canvas, 49 3/16 x 75 3/16" (125 x 191 cm)  
The National Museum of Art, Architecture, and Design/National Gallery, Oslo.  
© 2006 The Munch Museum/The Munch-Ellingsen Group/Artists  
Rights Society (ARS), New York

In *The Dance of Life*, 1899-1900, Munch makes his most deliberately symbolic statement about the nature of life. The painting embodies the central themes of his work, as he phrased them in speaking of this work: "the awakening of love, the dance of life, love at its peak, and finally death." The four states are represented by four figures or pairs of figures—a lone young woman gazing at the dancing couples, a young couple staring into each other's eyes, an older couple swaying in passionate embrace, and an old woman staring at the dancing figures. Death is never far from the consideration of love in Munch's work, but here it is more than acknowledged—it is the dominant tone of this deliberation on the meaning of life. The entire work is done in somber tones of green, blue, red, and black. The young girl standing to the side looks forlorn in her solitude, and the old woman, representing death, is positioned to the other side of the painting, in a similar pose, to match her. The girl's lust for life has no joy in it as seen here, and it implies death. And all the faces, including those of the embracing couples, seem like skulls, with sunken eyes and yellowing or graying skin. The sober and forlorn tone of this work is not a function of the minds of the figures portrayed or of the painter in response to the scene—it is posited as the nature of the situation per se. Life itself is such as this.

In essence, what we see in these works is Munch as the Romantic sufferer. As they come to us through him, it is the traumas and fortunes of life that possess an epic proportion—they are, in fact, and as simple fact, terrible. The enormity of felt comprehension, the epic nature of the emotionality, is in the nature of life and not in the sufferer. (The view of Romanticism as little more than aesthetic ego-inflation has always been a misreading, or a biased reading, emphasizing the Byronic rendition and ignoring the Wordsworthian, or even Keatsian, sensibility of heightened sensitivity to the lessons that nature can be found

to teach regarding the meaning of existence—the tradition of humility before the enormity of emotional life in response to nature. It is a misreading that, in the visual arts, has extended itself down to the estimation of Pollock in the minds of many contemporary artists and art observers.)





Art such as this, art of tonal density in which everything portrayed is steeped with the emotion of its incursion into the life of the observer, art that reveals the emotional truth, is not what we have been accustomed to in our time, and the reason stretches back beyond the contemporary period. In fact, the story of Modernism is the story of the intellectualization of art. The turn toward the idea in place of the emotion is not an invention of Conceptual Art and is not a failing, if it is a failing, of the Post-War era. Ever since the development of Cubism, visual art has been increasingly focused on conveying an idea rather than the emotions, which is to say that life as found in Modern Art has been decreasingly comic, touching, tender, piquant, and tragic. Cubism was a thought about the possibilities of artistic rendering and the new scientific conception of the world at the start of the century. Abstraction followed from it and moved even farther into a terrain in which there was nothing for the emotions to embrace. Surrealism attempts an emotional response, but it is one deliberately beyond the pale of normal emotionality. The incursion into new terrain of emotional and intellectual response is the very point of the method. Of course, there have been exceptions—Ernst, Dali, and above all Giacometti, along with others—but the principal effort in visual art for more than a century now has been in new thoughts about artistic vision and not about intensity of emotional reaction, or the invocation of an emotionally rich view of life. Clement Greenberg's view that Modern Art initiated a search on the part of artists for the foundations of their methodology, a stripping down of each mode of artistic creation to its essential aspects—a version of art for art's sake—is little more than an admission that art was not to be about the emotional response to existence, which is as much as to say, and one must believe that Munch would have said as much, that art was no longer in the business of wisdom. It is difficult to say the same of Modernist literature—Modern and experimental writers such as Joyce, Eliot, Faulkner, Nabokov, and many others knew something about life and meant to say it. But with the exception of master artists of the last century who clearly saw deeply into the human dilemma—again, Giacometti chief among them—visual art has been oriented on something other than a depth of comprehension regarding the nature of the human condition, and any explanation of an alternate purpose is little more than an excuse. Those who have something profound to say always will say it.

So, it is little wonder that Munch may seem strange now. It has been a long time since art aspiring to insight and the conveying of wisdom was the norm, which is to say that it has been a long time since a Nietzschean tragic art has been the norm, or the expected ambition on the part of the serious artist.

Yet, there is another aspect to the matter, for critical judgment must be applied to the very foundation of Munch's stated aesthetic ambition and to the supposition in all art that claims the emotional understanding on the part of the artist is applicable to anyone other than the artist, is an adequate guide to insights concerning life itself. For the aesthetic proposition has self-evident difficulties. Specifically, it is Munch's supposition, as conveyed in his work, that the emotional tonality is outside the observer, is in the scenario or situation

itself, that must be examined. In Munch's case, there are material reasons to doubt the proposal. Look carefully at Munch's renderings of women—they are all clearly accretions of the male gaze. The women in *Madonna*, 1894-95, and *Mermaid*, 1896, are sirens—objects of male desire. Even to this male writer, it is self-evident that no woman could see herself in this manner. The woman of *Vampire*, 1893, who bites the neck of the man she embraces, is almost comically the object of a masculine fear, and here the initial emotion may well be on its way to moribund, or so we may hope. The young woman in *Summer Night's Dream (The Voice)* is little better, upon examination. She leans forward with yearning, and, once one considers it, obviously toward the object of her gaze, her yearning for him. This is not an image of blossoming desire so much as it is an image of feminine response to desire, and the evening darkness is in the eye of the man to whom she responds. And, the woman in the lithograph *On the Waves of Love*, 1896, is shown surrounded by and lying among undulating lines of pleasure that seem to fuse with her hair. This would be one of Munch's few images of hope were it not for the undeniable bias that it punctuates. The men in his paintings brood and think on the general plight; the women luxuriate and yearn and threaten.

There is obviously nothing universal in this. What matters most in these observations is the indication of the perils in the reliance on personal emotional reaction to establish the foundation of insight into the implications of life and its episodes. Clearly, Munch is painting in many cases his own projections onto circumstances that, apart from his projections, are repeated in every life: the beginnings and the failures of love, the loss of loved ones, the approach of death. It can be objected that art has always relied on emotional response, that incorporation of the emotional response is precisely what distinguishes art from other forms of knowledge. But the uncritical trust in one's personal viewpoint and one's personal reactions to outside stimuli, to such a degree that the reactions are taken to be part of the outside stimuli themselves, is not a portion of art's perennial trust. Such a naïve acceptance of individual impulses as universal components of reality may be specific to Expressionism, with something else occurring in art generally and largely before the Modern era, a judgment more tempered and experienced. (Certainly, the justification for trust in personal emotional response has been struggled with and argued by many Modern artists in their writings, from Kandinsky to the Abstract-Expressionist Robert Motherwell.)

In his uncritical reliance on personal viewpoint, Munch may be engaging in something that is more contemporary than is his refusal to forsake emotion entirely—something that may be called the Phenomenological error. As will be evident to anyone reading this essay, the attempt to deal with Phenomenology per se is rife with difficulties: the field of endeavor is far from having become an organized movement and scholarly work has yet to specify reliably any general attributes that hold for all major exponents. There is something perilous even in raising the term, and the matter can be dealt with here only in the most cursory way. But, there is a reason to approach the subject, because it appears after some reflection to sit at the heart of an increasingly dubious

and increasingly practiced philosophical approach.

To begin, the distinction ought to be made between Phenomenology as a method and Phenomenology as an accumulating series of propositions, if not quite a philosophical movement, even if only *de facto*. The Phenomenological method is not what is being observed here, although it ought to be noted that the method in its general Husserlian sense has certain doubtful aspects. There are no clear logical errors in the method driven by the instruction “Zu den Sachen!”, in the bracketing of existence and, through the epoché, the systematic attempt to determine the necessary conditions for the possibility of the experience of the phenomenon by the examining of experience to determine its requisite conditions. It is, as it were, an attempt to determine the specifications of the Kantian transcendental ideals without the reliance on assertion—to feel one’s way towards those specifications, so to speak, from within. Even so, judgments must be made and judgments can only be made on the basis of axiomatic assertions, which are not given if one is to accept the necessary conditions of experience as possessing the status of, say, mathematics. Even though everything asserted by the Phenomenological method can be demonstrated to be logically coherent, there is something that is not being said. But this matter is better approached by examining briefly Phenomenology as a philosophical position.

Even here, distinctions must be made at the start, distinctions between those species of Phenomenology that, despite the purposively non-empirical orientation of the enterprise, acknowledge the position of Phenomenological events (put simply, experience, or perception) within the larger realm that incorporates the empirical, and more significant still, the ontological (going by such titles as “Naturalistic Phenomenology,” “Generative Historicist Phenomenology,” “Hermeneutical Phenomenology,” and “Realistic Phenomenology”), and, on the other hand, those Phenomenological projects that do not so acknowledge the position of the empirical, or the position of the Phenomenological event within the empirical, and ultimately the ontological realms. There seems little difficulty with projects of the first sort, and little power to them, for such inquiries are clearly by and large matters for scientific investigation, the vicious circle of self-justifying initial assumptions aside, and with them aside, evidently we should go to the lab if we wish to perceive how it is we perceive. However, projects of the other sort, those that do not acknowledge the position of the empirical, the position of the larger world in relation to the perception of the phenomenon, run the risk of dispensing with such a world entirely. The epoché is a risky affair, so used, for it is significant to doubt existence only if the gesture is strategic, only if the gesture is at some point revoked and existence and the world are re-asserted. It is much like the employment of irrational numbers in algorithms, such as the use of the square root of negative one—much can be accomplished but, if the irrational component is not removed somewhere along the way, the solution to the algorithm, as measured by practical value, is nonsense. So, too, with the epoché—if we finish our negotiations with the mysteries of existence by continuing to doubt existence, we risk ending up in an absurdity, for we risk

ending up in solipsism. This is as much as to say that the epistemological circle in Phenomenology is a significant problem—the difficulty involved in having Phenomenological stipulations determined in reference to appropriately selected examples of hypothetical experience and the determination of the accuracy of the hypothetical examples (the accuracy of the hypothesis) through reference to the Phenomenological assertions. In short, there is no outside standard of judgment with the unrevoked employment of the epoché, which is functionally comparable to the assertion of no outside world, no world outside direct experience.

In short, it is all a matter of whether one, in the end, chooses to bracket the Phenomenological realm within the ontological realm, or the other way round—whether ontological assertions are taken to be mere constructions of our thoughts with no further potential significance or possibly true claims regarding the nature of a world beyond the range of our senses. More briefly still—it is all a question of what one takes to be truth, for that will be the outside standard, outside all other matters of consideration, which are then bracketed within it. If perception is the only issue of truth, then there is no world; there are only our thoughts about the “world.” And, if the world is the truth, then we are perilously close to attempting science when we attempt Phenomenology, but at least we are not asserting ourselves to be the prisoners of our own minds, or, more properly, of someone’s Mind.

The bracketing of the world within the mind would seem at first to be a position that would arise only as a matter of inadvertency. However, consideration of the more recent strains of philosophy, particularly among those devoted to the most current species of Post-Structuralist thought, would suggest the possibility that, to some degree, the postulation of such a scenario is precisely the driving impulse. It is therefore worth a few moment’s effort to consider the possibility that such an impulse is the real motive behind the growth of interest and effort in Phenomenology, at least in some quarters—to consider that there is a Phenomenological impulse that has been developing and that is seeking a philosophically justifiable position that would reject the increasingly sophisticated ontological description of the world—in short, the scientific picture of the universe, accepted as an unvarnished truth.

Working with this hypothesis, offered as only a hypothesis, it is possible to suggest that the Phenomenological impulse has roots earlier than might have been suspected, that it can be traced back, at least, to Goethe’s dispute with Newtonian science. Goethe wished a new science, as he argued his case in his books on botany, morphology, and meteorology, as well as in his *Theory of Colors*, which was written to dispute Newton’s *Opticks*. What Goethe found lacking in science was the “living quality” of the object of study. He saw science as too mechanistic, arid, and arithmetic a conception of the world, typified by Newton’s theory of, specifically, light—an inherently unobservable, theoretical quantity—as opposed to color: what light is when perceived, when experienced in life. The principle of experience is definitive for Goethe in this—in *The Theory of Colors*, he asserts, “our senses themselves do the

real experimenting with phenomena, testing them and proving their validity, in so far as phenomena are what they are only for the respective sense in question. Man himself is the greatest, most universal physical apparatus." It is phenomena specifically that Goethe wished to make the object of science—the world as it appears, not as it is presumed to be when we are not looking, as best we can make out what it must be.

What Goethe wanted to avoid was a world conceived without human sensibility anywhere to be found in it—a machine conception of purely cause-and-effect eventualities in which no place was available for mind as mind. And there is, of course, the inherent potential absurdity of the mind rendering a picture of the universe that contains no mind in it, leaving the human mind as looking at the universe from without, from somewhere other than within the world. However, what Goethe stipulated was at least as bad, and not very much different—a world that was entirely human centered, with everything of reality nothing other than what the human mind makes of it. He rendered, or wished to, a world in which we make all that is, in which everything is dependent upon our mental experience. For it seems evident that Goethe did not see the contradiction in his own statement—if “phenomena are what they are only for the respective sense in question,” then when we experiment with phenomena, what is being investigated? What is extant and available to examine? Is this not merely a vision of the senses examining themselves? For there are nothing but phenomena, and phenomena exist only within our sensory experience. Attempting to remove us from the God-like position of standing outside the world and examining it as under a microscope, Goethe put us in the God-like position of creating all we survey.

It is a blunder of the first order, and uncharacteristic of the great thinker, unless it is not—unless it is just the kind of mistake a mind of that characteristic and caliber would commit. For here we see an early example of the Phenomenological impulse and its error—the error of placing our minds around the world, of bracketing the world within the realm of experience so as to infuse the events of the world with the quality of living experience, or, more, to retain that quality during scientific inquiry—and we come upon them emerging from the mind of a great artist. The Phenomenological error may well be a function of the artistic impulse, or the impulse toward an artistic approach to the world on the part of philosophers, perhaps in response to the very thing to which Goethe was reacting: the encroachment of the scientific explanation. Such a speculation suggests that Phenomenology, if so conceived and with certain portions of its enterprise removed from this consideration, may well be an attempt on the part of philosophy to adopt the prerogatives of art, perhaps having lost the claims it once had to the prerogatives of the more recent field of science, natural philosophy having long ago taken on a new name and departed to another hallway of the university.

Which returns this speculation to Munch. His reliance on his personal emotional responses as a measure of the truth of existence is not a great deal different, categorically, from Goethe's insistence on incorporating

the full complement of sensory stimuli into scientific inquiry—both involve employments of internal responses in the investigation and deciphering of the world at large and both are potentially engagements in the Phenomenological error of mistaking one's internal life for the whole of reality, of making oneself in some manner the measure of the truth of things. The same would hold for Expressionism in general—a practice of excessive reliance on the personal standing in for the objectively available and the failure to account for the very possibility of the ontological. There are gradations and inflections here, but the core misjudgment is essentially the same. However, in the case of Munch, the recognition of the structural pattern of the Phenomenological error—the inverse bracketing of the world within the realm of phenomena rather than the other way round—can lead us to a better “reading” of the artist's work, to a more profitable view of his accomplishment. Even if this puts us at odds with the artist's own view of his work, to rely on his stated purposes would involve us in the intentional fallacy, and worse, would involve us in cheating ourselves of our better chance. And it remains the case that Munch may well have done better than even he knew. It is our purpose to rely on our own eyes, and make the best of what we see.

The suggestion here is that we re-bracket Munch's visions within the realm of the objectively real, that we return what he experienced and rendered to the world and observe his images as the products of a mind living in a factual scenario. The women in his paintings are shown to us as only a perceiving mind experiences them. The people walking down Karl Johan Street are not in shock but reflect the shock felt by a mind that perceives them as they approach him. And in *The Scream*, 1895 (a lithograph version was displayed in the exhibition), the world does not in fact ripple with the vibrations of horror, and the portrayed figure does not hear the world screaming and does not scream to the world—the observer sees the portrayed figure surrounded and engulfed by a shriek that seems to distort the entirety of reality. In short, there is always a perceiving mind, which is the only true subject of the works, and each image shows us what that mind believes it sees. That mind is the subject of Munch's art.

Viewed in this way, the subject of Munch's work is the isolated mind—the mind lost within itself, captured by its own emotions, sleeved by its own reactions to the disappointments and failures of existence and tormented by its own feelings in reaction. It drowns in its own ocean, and in this, Munch's art can be seen truly as universal, for this is our lot. For each of us, it is impossible to remove our face from the mirror and see the world as it is, coolly and bereft of our own pretensions. We are tormented, and we are tormented by ourselves. Seen thus, the truest painting Munch produced is *Self-Portrait in Hell*, 1903, in which he painted himself—just one more subject, in the end—alone in a personal purgatory, standing naked among the flames of his unending torture. There is a hell on earth, and it is the mind.

This is the imagination of disaster that Munch delivers to us—the ultimate alertness to the growing dusk of our positions, the living sense of how

lifeless our lives ultimately are, and ultimately will become. It is a mature art, an art of the most thorough maturity, for it envisions and evokes for us a mature conception—a fully felt understanding of itself and its position coupled with a knowledge of the world in which it lives. This is the mark of the adult mind: it rejects all delusion and all folly; it faces the darkest of facts, precisely as Nietzsche demanded we do. And seen in this way, Munch produces an art that fulfills the final responsibility of art: to mature the members of the society in which it occurs.

And seen in this way, the art of Edvard Munch is the tonic appropriate to our time, for we live in the depths of the deadness of the soul, in a time in which it makes perfect sense that we would be pulled by an impulse to imagine the entire world as a function of our own imagining, as a thing we make and, thus it is implied, we might learn to make as we wish. For we live now in the Culture of Oblivion. People have become, largely, oblivious—nothing gets through to them, no danger disturbs their thoughtless routines, and no responsibility will be tolerated if it disrupts the general impulse to leisure and vapid self-amusement. We have been entertained into a dullness of feeling and wit, into a deadness of the soul—experientially, Phenomenologically, we have lost our souls, for we no longer feel them, and so it follows that we would do the same to the entire world. For there is little difference in the end between the imagining that we imagine the world and the historically previous colonization of the globe—either way, it is we who dream that we take dominion over all creation. Only a culture in the depths of decadence could presume so much, and dream so poorly.

We inhabit now a condition past all impact, all influence, all reaction. It is a state of being that swallows up all input. More than apathy, this condition is a bell jar that withdraws all incoming signals. We believe we live in an onslaught of information, but the truth is that nothing touches us, and the imagination of disaster has deserted us. We think we know better, but we avoid thought even as we think that we don't—and what we believe is that nothing terrible can happen to us. Even after 9/11, and the train bombings in Madrid, and the transit bombs in London, and the Iraq War, and the numerous other terrorist events, we are impervious to reality and take life as children do—as if nothing could touch us and all dangers were merely televised.

This is the stage after the Age of Anxiety—it is the age in which we no longer care enough to be anxious about meaning, in which we are content for



© 2006 The Munch Museum/The Munch-Ellingsen Group/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York  
Edvard Munch, *Self-Portrait in Hell*, 1903  
Oil on canvas, 32 5/16 x 26" (82 x 66 cm)  
Munch Museum, Oslo

everything to mean nothing. And so we live in a place defined by corporate culture, in which everyone is little more than the job that one has lucked into, in which the social environment of the white collar workplace is designed to be a surrogate family, the purpose of which is to instill a sense of devotion that results in the dedication of more hours and energy to one's work that one is being paid to give—it is a form of exploitation, and it is a lie. (I am probably one of the few publishing art critics who has held a job as a corporate executive, and I held it for years—I know whereof I speak.) And so we live in a place of political hypocrisy on all sides, of political bankruptcy in which the left is floated on a philosophy of mere worlds with no sense of the needs of capable action, with no memory of the requirements of political organizing, and the right is loud with calls for maintaining standards and proceeds to corrupt and destroy through mere incompetence everything it touches, destroying every standard it purports to esteem. And the entire political system is dedicated to answering the demands of the short attention span, which is not a function of cultural shifts or of the electronic information technologies but is a result of mere laziness and the political demand for convenience over principle, and it amounts to our insistence that we be governed by demagoguery and placated into a continuous stupor.

And the war continues, and it continues because no one cares, or not enough do. For the American Republican Party has set its own standard, as we have declared it is our business to do without quite realizing what we thus do to ourselves. It is by their own words that measure them now: Where is the outrage? And, where is the outrage now? It is nowhere to be found. And so, we are all guilty of murder, because we do nothing to stop this abomination, and we do nothing because we do not believe—not as a political body do we believe—that it is all really happening. This enterprise has been proved to be nothing other than the immature use of violence, the blind instinct to strike out after having been hurt, conducted on a global scale. And it was not done for the reasons given, and not for reasons behind the reasons given, for it was not done and is not being done by anyone—it is being done and has been done by us all. The individual actions committed by individuals are nothing but the machinery. This is our accomplishment, us as a body, and it is something more than Nietzsche's herd instinct that is at work here. It goes beyond that. This blind instinct to strike out was the function of what can be called the herd mind. Such a mind is most surely functionally there, which is not to say that it exists, that it is an objective fact, that it is extant, but that it is as good as extant. If it did, in fact, exist, nothing would be any different from the way it is now, nothing would have transpired any differently from the way it has—and *that* is Phenomenology.

As I write this, the news tells us that the majority of Americans do not object to the NSA eavesdropping on their phone calls. This is the one point on which the Bush Administration continues to have majority support, and it is the one point among all those polled that directly and immediately affects everyone. There is no outrage and there is not likely to be, for the truth of the matter is no one cares. We live in an absurdity and we have grown small and childlike in it.



And so, assuming that art can make a difference, that art can make something happen, that art is in fact capable of maturing the members of the society in which it occurs, the art of Edvard Munch is distinctly appropriate to our time. For, seen properly, seen for the torment it portrays within a world recognizably our own, within a world that recognizably is the world, it is the vision of an adult mind, a mind that knows that life is a matter of life and death, a mind that knows terrible things do happen, and that we must deal with life on its own terms and not think we can make anything of it we wish, just by wishing, just by imagination. It is an art that shows there is dignity and nobility, not in suffering, but in the willingness and capability to face suffering, and that is something that we, and our time, sorely lack.

**Image on first page:** Edvard Munch, *On the Waves of Love*, 1896, Lithograph, Comp.: 12 3/16 x 16 1/2" (31 x 41.9 cm), Sheet: 15 3/16 x 19 5/8" (38.5 x 49.8 cm), Munch Museum, Oslo.

**published in *Hyperion: On the Future of Aesthetics*, a web publication of  
The Nietzsche Circle: [www.nietzschecircle.com](http://www.nietzschecircle.com), Volume I, issue 1, May 2006**