

The Phenomenological Loss of the Soul

by Mark Daniel Cohen

Edvard Munch: The Modern Life of the Soul

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of the Soul**

**Edvard Munch: The Modern Life of the Soul
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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
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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

