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Lure of the Abyss: Symbolism of Surface and Depth in Edvard Munch's Vision (1892)

I want life and its terrible depths, its bottomless abyss.
– Stanisław Przybyszewski[1]

Symbolist artists sought unity in the Romantic spirit but at the same time they were often painfully aware of the impossibility of attaining it by means of a material work of art. Their aesthetic thinking has typically been associated with an idealistic perspective that separates existence into two levels: the world of appearances and the truly existing realm that is either beyond the visible world or completely separated from it. The most important aim of Symbolist art would then be to establish a direct contact with the immaterial and immutable realm of the spirit. However, in addition to this idealistic tendency, the culture of the fin-de-siècle also contained a disintegrating penchant which found support, for instance, in the Nietzschean "deconstruction" of such entities as the "self" and "spirit." According to Nietzsche, there was no fundamental level beyond the shifting and changing world of appearance, and therefore we should embrace change rather than attempt to go beyond it. The Symbolist movement, in fact, appears to be powered by the tension created by these opposing aspirations, and to understand this complex phenomenon, one has to take into account both sides: the one that is trying to hold on to the ideal, and the other that is at the same time ripping it apart.

This article reflects on this more general issue through analysis and discussion of a specific work of art, the painting *Vision* (1892) by Edvard Munch. This unconventional self-portrait represents a distorted human head floating in water. Peacefully gliding above it is a white swan – a motif that is laden with symbolism alluding to the mysteries of life and death, beauty, grace, truth, divinity, and poetry. The swan clearly embodies something that is pure and beautiful as opposed to the hideousness of the disintegrating head. The head separated from the body may be seen as a reference to a dualistic vision of man, and an attempt to separate the immaterial part, the soul or the spirit, from the material body. However, the setting is intentionally ambiguous: is the fundamental truth to be found in the realm of universal abstractions represented by the swan or is it hidden below in the abyss? Perhaps new kinds of truths and artistic visions could be discovered beneath the shimmering surface?

For Munch himself, *Vision* was one of the central images of the 1890s. It was shown in all his major exhibitions between 1892 and 1898, including the scandalous *Verein Berliner Künstler* exhibition of 1892.[2] Moreover, when in 1893 Munch started assembling the series entitled Love,

which would later evolve into the *Frieze of Life*, he planned to use Vision as the central image around which the other works would have been arranged. He decided to leave it out only after having been discouraged by the Danish artist Johan Rohde, who considered the whole painting a failure because he thought its symbolism was confusing and unclear.[3] I believe, however, that what makes *Vision* such a fascinating image is probably related to the very same qualities that gave Rohde the reason to perceive it as a failure: the symbolism of this painting is extremely rich and complex. It is a work of art that refuses to yield to a simple and one-sided interpretation.

Due to this richness of meaning, it is impossible to follow all the leads that Vision's symbolism may suggest, but the purpose of my analysis is to present this painting in a way that appreciates the dynamic interplay of meanings that is manifested in it. As I shall go on to argue, a certain sense of indeterminacy and a multiplicity of meanings became important elements of artistic production at the fin-de-siècle, and in order to appreciate this quality, my interpretations also have to remain to a certain extent open-ended. Munch himself expressed this idea in a very straightforward manner:

> Explaining a picture is impossible. The very reason it has been painted is because it cannot be explained in any other way. One can simply give a slight inkling of the direction one has been working towards.[4]

1. Edvard Munch, *Vision*, 1892, oil on canvas 72x45 cm, Munch Museum, Oslo. Photo: Munch Museum / Munch-Ellingsen Group / BONO, Oslo 2014.

Technical Innovation and the Creative Process

Most of this article is devoted to a rather "literary" analysis of the symbolism reflected in the contrast between the misshapen head and the white swan, and the two levels of being that they suggest, but it is important to note that the formal qualities of this painting also add to the meanings that are read into it. I shall therefore begin with a brief discussion of the technically innovative elements of *Vision*, which reflect a broader tendency in the art of the period. The painting has features that resist the idea of the work of art as a finite object; it has an open-ended quality which draws attention to the process of its making, thus emphasizing its artificial character. At the same time, by remaining unfinished and sketchy, it eludes object status, instead harking towards something beyond materiality, something that is impossible to express directly in the material object. This indeterminacy of form corresponds with the multiplicity of meaning in Munch's *Vision*.

The poet Max Dauthendey, who had been highly impressed with Munch's 1892 exhibition and with *Vision* in particular, described Munch's brushstrokes as "colorful colonies of bacillae."[5] This metaphor connects Munch's work with contemporaneous scientific concerns. In addition, it refers to the unfinished quality of the painting as something that gives it life; "a colony of bacillae" is not a static entity but a continuously changing, living process. Munch's desire to breathe life into his artworks went so far that he wanted to make room for physical transformation of the object. Reinhold Heller has suggested that *Vision* might have been subjected to one of Munch's notorious "kill-or-cure treatments" which left his paintings weather-beaten and occasionally mouldy or covered in bird-excrement.[6] Munch's biographer Rolf Stenersen has given a lively description of these unconventional working methods:

> An untiring experimenter, he tried everything – sometimes even squirting colors onto the canvas. Had he labored long and fruitlessly he might threaten his picture: "Watch out or I'll give you a shower!" Or he might subject the picture to a more fiendish penalty by leaving it out in the open at the mercy of the sun and rain for weeks – a treatment he called the "horse cure." As a result, he might by accident discover new color effects that would give him the necessary impetus to continue working on the canvas.[7]

These methods not only allowed the forces of nature to transform the colour and structure of the painting but they also opened it to the natural effects of time and aging.[8] This kind of experimentation into nature's way of creating has obvious affinities with August Strindberg's ideas about the role of chance in the artistic process. In the essay entitled "The New Arts! or the Role of Chance in Artistic Creation" ("Du hasard dans la production artistique," 1894) Strindberg explained artistic creativity as an organic process controlled by imagination rather than consciousness. "Imitate nature closely," he states, "above all, imitate nature's way of creating." This, according to him, will be the art of the future, and an artwork like this is endowed with the gift of life, it "remains always new, it changes according to light, never wears out."[9] Strindberg put these ideas into practice in his own painterly activities, which were based on a method of imaginative perception. The artist sets his imagination into work by a process of alteration between the roles of the creator and the receiver, and between conscious and unconscious acts. Hence the artwork appears to come into being organically, simulating the creative processes of nature. Yet, at the same time, the alternation of roles introduces the artist's conscious control into the process.[10]

In Strindberg's essay the imitative aspect of art as such is not called into question but instead of copying *natura naturata*, the outward appearance of nature, the artist is to imitate *natura naturans*, the creative spirit of nature.[11] Rather than concentrating on the work of art as a material object, Strindberg emphasized the creative process of the artist which was associated with the processes of nature as well as the creative power of God. However, whereas Strindberg relied on unconscious automatism to introduce effects of the larger nature into his paintings, Munch always retained more control over the process of painting. Nevertheless, his method of scratching and scraping, painting over, and repeating adds a certain element of unconsciousness and contingency into the process. Antonia Hoerschelmann has compared this "modern aspect" of Munch's working method to Andy Warhol's "Factory Concept." This is reflected, for instance, in an anecdote describing Munch's manner of instructing the lithographer about colours by closing his eyes and blindly pointing the colours in the air. He would then go out for a drink and leave the printer to get on with his work. According to Hoerschelmann, the anecdote demonstrates Munch's disregard for the physical presence of the artist during the production of his works. He consciously made room for an element of chance and even allowed other people's intentions to influence the outcome. Similarly to the creative process carried out by Strindberg, Munch also shifted back and forth between active and passive elements of creativity.[12]

Both Strindberg's and Munch's approaches can be seen as attempts to find new ways of making art that would be liberated from the constraints of imitation and materiality. This issue was noted by Heller in an article written already in 1985, in which he discusses Munch's works along with works by Gauguin, Degas, and Khnopff as examples of an almost contradictory interplay of overt materiality and

dematerialization. Heller has observed that although the Symbolist aesthetic was based on an idealistic view, the paintings at the same time appeared to contradict this idealism in the way that they draw attention to their materiality and the process of their making. Hence, he perceives Symbolist art not in terms of "a disjunction between the material and the ideal," but rather as a dialogue between these two postulates.[13] The technical innovativeness of Symbolism has only recently gained more emphasis in art historical research. It has been examined very convincingly by Rodolphe Rapetti who has stressed the quest for immateriality as one of the essential features of Symbolist art:

> The Symbolist period was marked by a feeling of disgust towards painting, not only painting that pursued the truth of appearances but also painting that cultivated the glamour of the craft for itself. Instead, Symbolism favored a painting that disembodies itself, leaving its assigned path, through the impersonal brushwork of Neo-Impressionism or the use of "prismatic" colors, or a stress on color at the expense of pictorial substance, or a Cloissonnist stylization that eschewed all illusionism, or the allusions to fresco in the work of Puvis de Chavannes and later Gauguin, or simply subjective and imaginary coloring.[14]

Dario Gamboni's discussion of "potential images" assesses a broader phenomenon in the development of modern art, but it also adds to this new conceptualization of Symbolism and its relationship to modernism. Potential images, according to Gamboni, are intentionally ambiguous – both iconographically and in terms of representation. Their visual ambiguity gives them an open-ended and processual quality, and they depend on the imagining activity of the perceiver to come fully into being. This kind of indeterminacy and open-endedness has always been a part of pictorial presentation, but Gamboni maintains that it became a major trend in the nineteenth century, originating at Romanticism and intensifying towards the end of the century.[15]

Contemporary critics like Stanisław Przybyszewski and Albert Aurier were conscious of these developments and they encouraged artists to experiment and find new means of expression. Aurier emphasized the artist's right to exaggerate, attenuate, and deformate the directly signifying elements, such as forms, lines, and colours, not only according to his subjective vision, which happens in realist art as well, but also according to the idea that was to be expressed.[16] He also wrote about Van Gogh's paintings in which the materiality becomes so tangible that it is literally "flesh." Yet, even with this overwhelming materiality, the spirit who knows how to find it, can grasp the thought, the essential idea beneath the surface.[17] Although Aurier valued sophistication of technique, he preferred awkwardness to the overblown perfection of Salon art. Awkwardness is not something an artist should pursue as such but it can be valued as a sign of sincerity.[18] Too much perfection, it seems, can destroy the originality of artistic expression.

When Przybyszewski published his little book on Much's art in 1894, he called attention to the expressive power of colour and form in Munch's art. He saw it as the result of looking with the inner eye of "individuality," by which he means the unconscious. Munch's art, therefore, constitutes a radical break with tradition: "All previous painters were in effect painters of the external world, and they clothed every feeling they wished to express in the garb of some external process, allowed all mood and atmosphere to emerge from the external setting and environment." Munch, on the other hand, "attempts to present psychological phenomena immediately through colour" and "his shapes and forms have been experienced musically, rhythmically."[19] Przybyszewski's description reflects Munch's desire to render form and colour directly and universally meaningful. At the same time, it endows the artist with the ability to see beyond what ordinary people are capable of perceiving. It represents, therefore, a thoroughly modern transformation of the Romantic conception of the artist as a visionary.

The role of technical innovation in Munch's creative process may also be interpreted in terms of the ideas presented by Hans Belting, who has argued that throughout the modern period (that is, the era of the art museum and the avant-garde), artistic production has been based on an ideal of absolute art that is impossible to capture in any single material object.[20] His claim is that this seemingly auto-destructive tendency has in fact been precisely what has fuelled art and driven it to search new means of expression. Belting talks about "an almost pathological fear of perfection" in the works of Cezanne and Rodin which was manifested as the aesthetics of the *non-finito*:

> Works turned into nothing but preliminary devices that were not intended to attain a final form – devices not for a work but a vision of art behind the work. It was this vision that now came to represent the utopian idea of the former masterpiece. The idea could carry conviction only in the absence of realization; the individual work simply occupied the place of a perfection that was already impossible (...) The goal was no longer the perfected work, but the ceaseless perfection of an artistic vision that transcended simple visibility.[21]

The absolute work of art encompassed the ideal that served as a yardstick for all actual works but it could only exist beyond the actual material object. It was an unattainable dream that loomed somewhere behind the creative process and it could be manifested in the work of art only as long as it remained in an unfinished state.[22] The processual and open-ended tendency in Munch's art may be perceived as

a strategy to come to terms with the impossible ideal. It transposes the focus of the artwork from the material object towards an "imaginary space" where the artist, the artwork, and the viewer come together.[23]

The Swan and the Ideal

There are several text fragments and sketches relating to the theme and subject of *Vision*. This is a feature that is typical for Munch's working methods; with an almost compulsory determination he would repeat themes, motifs, and subjects, both in writing and in pictorial form, sometimes with less and sometimes with more variation.[24] The opposition of the "I" that dwells in the murky water and the pure and unattainable swan is present in all versions of the text. In one fragment, written on a page that also contains a drawing of a drowned man and a swan, he writes:

> I lived down in the depths in the midst of slime and creatures – I forced myself up to the water's surface, longing for the bright colours – A dazzling white swan glided there on the glossy surface which mirrored its pure lines – it also mirrored the light clouds in the sky – I tried to reach it with my hands – asked for it to come to me – but it could not – It could not reach over the circle of mud and slime that was around me . . .[25]

The swan, which is the clearly mythological and narrative element of the painting, was a widely used motif in nineteenth century art, decoration, poetry, literature, and music.[26] With its gracefully curving long neck, it was naturally suited for decorative purposes of the Art Nouveau aesthetic. The shape of the swan peacefully gliding in a pond is uncomplicated and easily recognizable, and it carries appropriate associations of idyllic harmony and the beauty of nature with a slightly melancholic undertone of romantic longing. Although this motif was almost banal in its popularity, Munch managed to turn it into a rich and complex symbol, taking advantage of its familiarity. Precisely because the swan carries such a wide range of associations, it was possible to induce it with several parallel layers of meaning.[27]

The Finnish artist Axel Gallén (Akseli Gallen-Kallela[28]) with whom Munch had a joint exhibition in Berlin in 1895 employed the motif of the swan in many of his works. For instance, in the painting *Lemminkäinen's Mother* (1897), the swan appears as a multifaceted symbol reflecting the ideal of art, the mysteries of life and death as well as sexuality.[29] The painting depicts the mother of the hero Lemminkäinen lamenting over her son's dead body. According to the legend described in the Kalevala, Lemminkäinen attempts to hunt the holy bird which lives in the river that borders the realm of death, but he is killed and dismembered in the process. His mother gathers the pieces of her son's body from the dark water and brings him back to life. The swan is seen in the background, gliding in the pitch-black water of the river, gazing directly at the viewer. It has escaped completely unharmed from Lemminkäinen's defiant effort to catch it, whereas the brave hero is now at the mercy of his mother's love. The swan thus becomes a symbol of something that is impossible to attain. As the bird who reigns in the river that separates this world from the realm of death, it is in possession of the secrets of life and death.

The association of the swan with death is embodied also in the ancient myth of the swan's song, according to which the mute bird only sings at the moment of death. The swan, being the bird of Apollo, has the gift of prophesying, and therefore is not afraid of dying. In classical mythology, the swan carries associations of unity, harmony, originality, and the lost Golden Age. This tradition was passed on to the fin-de-siècle generation through Romanticism and Neoplatonic mysticism. Gallén's fin-de-siècle interpretation of the theme adds yet another level of mythical syncretism into the image. The theme of resurrection and the Pietà-esque composition connect Lemminkäinen with Christ. The descent to the realm of death and the dismemberment of the hero, on the other hand, link him with the mythical figure of Orpheus.

The erotic dimension of the symbolism of the swan can be connected with the Eros philosophy that was propagated by Stanisław Przybyszewski in the bohemian artistic circles of Berlin in the 1890's. Przybyszewski, who was an aspiring writer as well as a student of neurology, was equally well versed in psychological research, occultism, and Satanism. Przybyszewski's ideas were founded on the Schopenhauerian view of the erotic force as the basis of all creativity, artistic as well as biological.[30] The swan, as a symbol of sexuality, represents the sparkle of life in the realm of death; a reminder of the regenerative force that creates new life from death. Gallén's swan is hence connected with the secrets of both love and death; it is desirable and dangerous at the same time, and forever unattainable. The swan in *Vision* is similarly elusive, and Munch also came to embrace the idea of the interconnectedness of life, death, and sexuality. Moreover, in both Munch's and Gallén's paintings the attempt to capture the ideal represented by the swan leads to bodily disintegration. Although the ideal is desirable, it is also something that threatens the integrity of the self.

Heller has suggested that the swan in *Vision* could also be seen as an image of woman as an object of desire. However, he notes that it reflects both the sensuality and the inapproachability and innocence of the woman, representing her plural nature as it was perceived by Munch. He then concludes that *Vision* is not only an image of Munch's conception of woman but it also expresses his view of art; it is a

"visualization of artistic imagination." *Vision*'s swan, as the swan of Apollo, is "the singer of art's immortality."[31] Hence, we can interpret *Vision* as a vision of life and death and also a vision of art. The swan can then be seen as a symbol of the ideal that the artist is forever chasing yet never able to achieve. The artist's tragedy seems to lie in his inability to separate his mind from the repulsive bodily functions and desires that are dragging him below the surface and keeping him away from the pure and beautiful ideal. This brings to mind the swan imagery in the poems of Mallarmé and Baudelaire. Mallarmé's poem "Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui" is arranged around the cygne-signe wordplay which reflects the idea that swans have the ability to understand signs. The swan appears as a messenger of a higher and brighter reality, caught in icy frost but still remembering the other reality beneath the ice and hoping for the new day to break it free. A similar image can be found in Baudelaire's poem "Le Cygne," in which the bird is dragging its wings in the dirty ground, homesick for its native lake, and desperately thirsting for a refreshing stormy rain. Both poems describe the severe conditions of artistic creativity, and the artist's infinite longing for the higher realm.

This theme of the artist chasing the ideal can also be reflected in connection with another artwork by Gallén. In the painting *Conceptio Artis* (1895), a man is trying to catch the secret of art and life symbolized by an elusive sphinx. The painting, which today exists only in fragmentary form, came into being as the result of a close exchange of ideas between Gallén and the author Adolf Paul, who was staying in Berlin and moving in the same circles with Munch and Przybyszewski. Apparently due to unfavourable criticism the artist decided to cut the painting into pieces circa 1919.[32] As an image of the artist and his mission, *Conceptio Artis* can also be understood as an allegorical self-portrait. Here the sexual metaphor is emphasized: the artist is represented as a naked man with a strong and vital body, and the seductive sphinx alludes to the motif of the femme fatale. The word "conception" in the name of the painting may refer to conception in the sense of the idea of art, or it can allude to conception as fertilization or impregnation. The second sense underlines the parallel between artistic and bodily creativity; the male artist is trying to capture the artistic ideal in order to fertilize it. This is the ultimate mystery from which art is born. But rather than this erotic dimension that we find in *Conceptio Artis*, Munch's *Vision* emphasizes the unattainability of the swan. As Heller has suggested, the swan may be seen as a symbol of the ultimate ideal of art. This can be connected with the myth of the swan as the bird of Apollo. Since Apollo was the god of music and poetry, as well as of light and knowledge, the swan of Apollo was associated with the divine aspects of art and the artist.

The world of the swan is that of universal abstractions, the timeless and eternal world of the spirit. It is attractive because of its clarity and coherence. Yet the deep and dark abyss also has its appeal as the potential realm for new kinds of artistic discoveries. *Vision*, then, becomes a perfect illustration of the melancholic situation of the modern artist. In terms of the self, the swan represents the pure soul separated from the body. But perhaps this is, in the end, nothing more than an illusion. Perhaps the truth is hidden beneath the surface, and one who has seen it can never go back to believing in the illusion. In one text fragment connected to the theme of *Vision*, Munch writes:

> I who knew what was concealed beneath the bright surface I could not be reconciled with one who lived in the world of illusions – where the pure colours of the sky were reflected on the sparkling [surface].[33]

Orpheus and Other Disembodied Heads

The head in *Vision* appears to be completely separated from the body. It is trying to remain on the surface of the water, although it clearly has its home in the dark realms below where the body of the artist still resides – the body is not seen in the painting but it is visible in some of the studies. The disembodied head was a widely used motif in late nineteenth-century art, particularly in the works of Odilon Redon. Robert Goldwater maintains that Redon's solitary heads typically do not carry any specific allegorical or religious reference. Rather, the head "suggests without being named, the soul or the intelligence, struggling to free itself of its corporeal inheritance and to rise towards union with a pantheistic spirit."[34] This interpretation summarizes the general symbolism of the disembodied head – particularly as it was employed in the Symbolist context. However, by examining some of the mythological allusions of this motif we can elaborate on its multiple meanings. Dorothy M. Kosinski has observed that several of Redon's disembodied heads can in fact be identified as Orpheus.[35] Other popular myths featuring the motif were the biblical story of Salome and Saint John the Baptist, and the ancient legend of Medusa. Through these associations, the motif of the disembodied head is capable of suggesting both spirituality and violence. It may refer to an idea of the mind of the artist as pure, spiritual, and immortal, capable of seeing beyond the limitations of the visible world. Yet, the heightened sensitivity of the artist also means that he is prone to extreme suffering.

Redon's earliest rendering of the figure of Orpheus, *Head of Orpheus Floating in the Water* (1881) is the most unusual one, and the one that appears to be most directly related to *Vision*, because the head is floating in an upright position. One of the studies Munch made of the theme of

Vision, in fact, bears a very close resemblance to the charcoal drawing by Redon. Munch has with just a few lines sketched a head with black hair, not unlike the bushy mop in Redon's image, and a white swan is hovering above the head. In Redon's drawing instead of the swan there is a shining white triangle or pyramid, which, like the swan, can be interpreted as a symbol of ideal perfection.[36]

The myth of Orpheus has several different associations which link it with many of the most central issues of late nineteenth-century art and culture. Occultism and religious syncretism gave the figure of Orpheus an elevated status as prophet, priest and initiator – a parallel and sometimes even a replacement for Christ.[37] In the highly influential book *The Great Initiates* (*Les Grands Initiés*, 1889), the French poet and occultist Edouard Schuré represented Orpheus as one of the initiates into the ancient mysteries. The figure of Orpheus is associated with both Apollo and Dionysus and in this sense comes to symbolize the dual nature of man. According to the legend accounted by Schuré, Orpheus was the son of Apollo and a priestess, and was initiated into the mysteries in Egypt by the priests of Memphis. He then returned to Greece and formed a synthesis of the religion of Zeus and that of Dionysus. His followers received the sublime message through his teachings, and they passed it on to the people through religious rituals and poetry.[38] The mystical initiation was thus directly connected with poetry and art.

The Symbolist artists of the late nineteenth-century found in the figure of Orpheus a profound expression for their complex aesthetic-religious attitude. Kosinski has noted that they were the first artists since antiquity to depict the severed head of Orpheus.[39] Gustave Moreau's painting *Orpheus* (1865) had great influence on subsequent Symbolist renderings of the myth. It depicts the moment of victory after the tragic death when the Thracian maiden, who is holding the head in her arms and contemplating it peacefully, has become aware of its power. The head of Orpheus is here an image of the eternal isolation of the artist, misunderstood and martyred and venerated only after his death. The death by dismemberment transforms Orpheus into a victim and a martyr and simultaneously sets the stage for the triumphant victory of his transcendence of death with the magical power of song and music. In Symbolist representations of the head of Orpheus an atmosphere of melancholic mourning is combined with the implication of victorious transcendence.

The head of Orpheus also reflects the belief that the body is a prison of the soul, and that this world can be transcended by releasing the soul from the body. The head separated from the body and miraculously continuing to sing and prophecy is a perfect manifestation of the idealist and anti-materialist aesthetics of Symbolism. The distorted head of *Vision*, on the other hand, although perhaps reflecting the wish to release the soul from the body, does not contain the promise of victory and transcendence. The pure ideal symbolized by the swan remains out of reach and the artist is condemned to his earthly existence. Symbolist depictions of the head of Orpheus can most often be interpreted in terms of the creative process: the head torn apart from the body symbolizes the painful yet potentially transcendent process of artistic creativity. Despite this violent undertone, these artworks are usually characterized by calmness, serenity, and ethereal beauty. The distorted head in *Vision* is in stark contrast with this; if it refers to the myth of Orpheus, it does so with a heavy dose of dark, pessimistic irony.

However, if the head in *Vision* is interpreted as that of Orpheus, then the white swan also becomes an image of the beloved Eurydice: she is what the artist most desires, the perfect ideal, and the harmonious Apollonian unity. The artist is doomed to destroy his ideal; like the fateful backward glance of Orpheus that sends Eurydice back to Hades, the artist's attempt to reach the ideal is ultimately destructive. Yet his desire will never end, and it is what keeps him going. In Maurice Blanchot's essay "The Gaze of Orpheus" ("Le Regard d'Orphée," 1955) Eurydice is "the limit of what art can attain; concealed behind a name and covered by a veil, she is the profoundly dark point towards which art, desire, death, and the night all seem to lead."[40] The gaze of Orpheus symbolizes the simultaneously creative and destructive power of artistic inspiration.[41]

Another self-portrait in which Munch represents himself as a disembodied head is the small watercolour and ink painting entitled *Salome-Paraphrase* (1894–98). The man's head is trapped in the woman's hair falling down and folding around his neck. The faceless woman is composed of black lines of Indian ink painted over the red background giving her an immaterial appearance; like the swan in *Vision*, she is perhaps nothing but a thought hovering above the man's head – but this makes her no less real. The woman does not need to be physically present to enforce his power over the man. Munch was interested in telepathy, and he believed that human beings communicated consciously and unconsciously sending and receiving signals that function like electricity or a telegraph. He also explained that in the paintings of the *Frieze of Life*, the long hair represents waves of communication.[42]

The shape of the woman's hair resembles a vagina or a uterus from which the man's head is emerging.[43] Woman is the mystical birth giver and the secret behind all life. She is the reason for all of his suffering, but without her life would not exist at all. The name Salome in the title defines her as the castrating woman, the destroyer of men. Salome was one of the most popular "femmes fatales" in the art of the fin-de-siècle. Her legend was accounted thousands of times

in paintings, sculptures, and decorative objects, as well as in dance, music, plays, and poetry.[44] The reference to Salome also contains an allusion to the artist as Saint John the Baptist. The woman's hair around the man's neck folds itself into arms with which the woman holds the severed head of the martyr. John the Baptist was a saint, a prophet, and a martyr, and hence a perfect model for an image of the artist as a misunderstood visionary who sacrifices his own happiness for the sake of his art.

Gustave Moreau made numerous paintings and drawings of the legend of Salome, and in the painting *The Apparition* (1876) the head of Saint John is hovering in the air like a vision, radiating divine light. Some of Redon's images of disembodied heads can also be identified as Saint John. For instance, in a charcoal drawing from 1877, known as *Martyr* or *The Head of Martyr on a Plate* or *Saint John*, the head of Saint John rests peacefully on a plate. This extremely simplified image very closely resembles Redon's depictions of Orpheus. It is also possible to perceive the head in *Vision* as that of Saint John the Baptist; the circle on the water around the head could then refer to the plate on which the martyr's head was placed. Or perhaps the circle could also be seen as a fallen halo, turning this image into a representation of the artist as a fallen prophet. These allusions to prophecy and martyrdom present the artist as both heroic and misunderstood, and as an outsider in the sense of being at the margins of society, as well as in the more elevated sense of belonging to the select few who have gained a more profound understanding of the world. The religious associations sublimate the pain and emphasize the fact that this artistic suffering is something completely different from the everyday troubles of ordinary people. The suffering has a specific purpose; its aim is to give the artist the ability to see beyond the illusions and appearances of the ordinary world.[45]

Nocturnal Visions

Vision appears to represent some kind of a visionary experience but it is something very different from what we may see in the images of spiritual vision and enlightenment which are quite common in Symbolist art. How, then, should we understand the painful state of the artist? I have already suggested that the surface of the water refers to two levels of being – the pure and beautiful realm of light above and the watery depths of unconsciousness below. In this sense *Vision* resembles Redon's painting *Closed Eyes* (*Yeux Clos*, 1890) which has become an emblem of Symbolist art and aesthetics. This painting represents an androgynous figure with closed eyes and a calm, dreamy expression. Only the head and shoulders are visible, the rest of the body is hidden below the surface of water.[46] In both *Vision* and *Closed Eyes* a human figure emerges through the surface of the water, and appears to be in between the two levels. The suggestion of watery depths below the surface in *Closed Eyes* may be seen as a reference to the realm of the unconscious, but the androgynous figure has an expression of calm and pleasurable ecstasy and seems to be in a state of ascent rather than descent. The painting embodies an experience of emerging from the unconscious depths towards a higher consciousness. The shimmering light that is reflected on the surface of the water, illuminating the right side of the figure's face and neck emphasizes the atmosphere of spiritual enlightenment. In *Vision*, on the other hand, the figure is neither descending nor ascending; it is as if he was caught in a limbo between the two realms. This painting is like a more pessimistic and ironic interpretation of the theme of Redon's *Closed Eyes*. The ecstatic dream has turned into a disturbing nightmare.

Munch's *Vision* embodies a Baudelairean antagonism between "spleen and ideal," between our disgusting bodily existence and the world of the ideal which perhaps will always remain unattainable.[47] The soul yearns to separate itself from the corporeal being and purify itself in the realm of the spirit which also reflects the ideal order of art, but man is doomed to his earthly existence, and must endure terrible suffering. However, as we shall see, Munch also followed Baudelaire in his contention that heaven and hell alike could serve as sources of artistic inspiration. This dual aspiration is reflected in his famous claim in *Mon cœur mis a nu:*

> There is in every man, at all times, two simultaneous tendencies, one toward God and the other to Satan. The invocation to God, or spirituality, is a desire to ascend: that of Satan, or animality, is the joy of descending.[48]

In her study concerning the myth of the poet as seer in Romantic literature, Gwendolyn Bays has distinguished between two kinds of seers and two kinds of visionary experiences: the "nocturnal" or "orphic" experience is related to the unconscious as it was later conceptualized by Freud, while the "mystical" experience pertains to the Platonic-Plotinian experience. Bays argues that until the mid-eighteenth-century, the Platonic-Plotinian mode was the predominant one, but the discovery of the unconscious at the beginning of the nineteenth century opened up a new mode of visionary literature which originated from the visions of the unconscious. The "nocturnal" visionaries described their experiences using symbols of water, darkness, and descent, as opposed to the symbols of fire, light, and ascent employed by the mystics.[49] This distinction may be employed as a useful tool for analysing the different aspects of the visionary experience. However, we should also be aware that a lot of the interesting tension in Symbolist art stems precisely from the conflict between an aspiration towards light and purity and the simultaneous lure of the dark abyss. Bays's interpretation places too much

emphasis on the "confusion of ways" between the mystical and the nocturnal experiences. Bays views Symbolism, along with Surrealism, as a rebirth of the Romantic idea of the poet as seer. However, she maintains that while the theoretical ideal of the Symbolists was the search for the Absolute, that is, the Neoplatonic mystical experience (which had also been appropriated by the Christian tradition), they mistakenly resorted to the means of occultism and the unconscious to achieve this. In other words, their aim was to ascend but instead they descended. Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and several other Romantics and Symbolists, are defined as "nocturnal seers ... because of the dark regions into which they delved at such a terrible price to their health and sanity."[50]

Rimbaud is one of the most famous representatives of the poetic tradition that sought to transcend the conscious mind, and his example demonstrates that the visionary experience of the artist did not necessarily bring about personal happiness. To become a visionary and to be able to see beyond the everyday world of appearances, the artist must open himself to intense suffering as well as to joyful ecstasies. Rimbaud did not hesitate to hurl himself into a frenzy induced by drugs and alcohol in order to capture his dark vision. He found inspiration from Baudelaire, who in *Paradis Artificiels* had accounted his own hashish-infused dreams. For Rimbaud, these dreams and visions were the true substance of poetry, and he believed that the "disorganization" of his senses caused by intoxication would make them more acute. This meant a descent into hell, and it was a form of self-sacrifice. What was important was the mission, not the individual. Even if the individual perishes, he will have done his part in leading mankind in its road to progress. Other "horrible workers" will come after him and continue the mission.[51] For Rimbaud, suffering was both the cause and effect of artistic creativity; the extreme sensitivity or the artist makes him more prone to pain and suffering but this pain can also heighten his vision.

This aesthetics of sickness and suffering had a deeply personal meaning for Munch. Ever since the turn of the 1890s when he started to diverge from Naturalism, he had to defend himself and his art against several accusations of sickness. In 1891 he was the subject of a particularly violent attack on behalf of a twenty-six-year-old medical student Johan Scharffenberg who, using the ideas put forward by the Hungarian-German author Max Nordau, set out to prove that Munch's art was the product of a mind degenerated by inherited illness and therefore a threat to the health and sanity of Norwegian youth. Munch himself was in the audience, along with many of his friends who came to his defence. Nevertheless, the image of Munch as a sick man lingered in the minds of the Norwegian public.[52] A sign of these conflicts can also be seen in Munch's most famous image: in the 1893 version of *The Scream* in the National Gallery in Oslo, a handwritten comment can be made out in the blood red sky, stating: "Could only have been painted by a madman" ("Kan kun være malt af en gal mand!"). It is not entirely clear whether Munch has written it himself or if it was added by a visitor in one of his exhibitions, but what is significant is that Munch allowed it to remain there.[53]

However, although Munch genuinely seemed to believe in his own inherited sickness, we should not automatically perceive this in terms of pessimism. It can also be understood as conscious role-playing; he assumed the role that was forced upon him, but endeavoured to turn it into his advantage. As Patricia Berman has pointed out, Munch truly believed that extreme emotional states as well as a marginal position in relation to the bourgeois society were stimulating forces which could lead to a new kind of aesthetic.[54] Among Munch's friends and colleagues the interest in mental disturbances was motivated first and foremost by the desire to perceive the world in a way that was different from ordinary consciousness. This was the reason why they studied the very latest developments of psychological and neurological research. Some of the most popular sources for these artists and writers were Théodule Ribot, Hippolyte Bernheim, and Max Nordau. All these thinkers questioned the coherence of the human subject, and instead represented the human mind as fragmented and irrational, controlled by unconscious impulses.[55] Przybyszewski was well aware of Munch's tendency to venture into unknown terrain when he wrote:

> Munch paints the delirium and the dread of existence, paints the feverish chaos of sickness, the fearful premonitions in the depths of the mind: he paints a theory which is incapable of logical elucidation, one which can only be experienced obscurely and inarticulately in the cold sweat of direst horror, the way in which we may sense death although we properly cannot imagine it to ourselves.

Considering the centrality of the idea of creative suffering in Munch's art, it is probably not too implausible to propose that the tangled wisps of hair in *Vision* could also refer to Medusa's mane of snakes.[56] The head of Medusa has been throughout the history of art one of the most popular motifs of the disembodied head. Medusa was one of the three Gorgons, the mythical female monsters whose one look could turn men and beasts into stone. Unlike her gruesome sisters, however, Medusa was mortal and originally very beautiful. According to Ovid's account of the legend, Neptune became enamoured of her and seduced her in the temple of Minerva. This provoked the anger of Minerva who punished Medusa by changing her beautiful hair into snakes. Medusa was killed by the hero Perseus who, using a mirror to avoid her petrifying look, cut off her head.[57]

In fin-de-siècle culture the most common association of the figure of Medusa, stemming from the myths fascinating combination of beauty and horror, was that of the femme fatale. Jean Delville's *Idol of Perversity* (1891) is one of the most blatant expressions of this theme. Sigmund Freud has associated the head of Medusa with castration anxiety, and Patricia Mathews interprets Delville's work in these terms: "The femme fatale's seductively veiled body, trance-like gaze, and especially her medusa-like hair, are classic Freudian signs of castration anxiety."[58] Munch's many female figures with long dangling strands of hair can be associated with Medusa as the threatening woman. However, the distorted half-rotten head floating in water is clearly no castrating femme fatale. If we wish to apply the myth of Medusa to this work, we have to look for other associations. In Nordic fin-de-siècle literature Medusa also functioned as a symbol of pessimism and decadence. The myth of Perseus's encounter with Medusa was seen to reflect the existential position of man in the modern world.[59] To avoid the look of Medusa, then, means avoidance of facing the horrible truth that existence is fundamentally meaningless and that we are powerless in the face of fate. This Medusa as a symbol of fatalism and disgust for life we encounter in Gustaf Geijerstam's novel *Medusas huvud* (Head of Medusa, 1895), as well as in the novels and essays of Munch's friend Ola Hansson.[60] In *Sensitiva amorosa* (1887), a collection of pessimistically inclined novels about the impossibility of love in the modern world, Hansson reflects on the fate that works like the petrifying look of Medusa: "... is it fate, the old malignant fate raising its Medusa head in front of the modern fatalist?"[61] And is his essay on Edgar Allan Poe (1889/1921) he writes:

> What he depicts in human nature is its basis in nature and its night side, the secretive, the abnormal, in the darkness of which all proportions are twisted awry, obsessions rise up like the heads of Medusa, anguish stalks like some ghost at midnight, incomprehensible impulses shine like a woman's sea-green eyes, which must be pursued wherever they lead, no matter whether it is as revolting as bathing in warm blood and your hair stands on end.[62]

The Medusa head as a symbol of the horror and disgust of life is also present in Munch's own writing. He associates it with the loss of innocence at the onset of sexuality.[63] Munch was haunted by the painful image of his youthful love affair with an older woman, Millie Thaulow, whom he calls "Mrs Heiberg" in his diaries. In 1890, five years after the affair had ended, he writes:

> Was it because she took my first kiss that she robbed me of the taste of life – Was it that she lied – deceived – that she one day suddenly shook the scales from my eyes so that I saw the medusa's head – saw life as unmitigated horror – saw everything which had once had a rosy glow – now looked grey and empty.[64]

The association with sexuality and desiring women may serve as a link between the myth of Medusa and that of Orpheus. The death of Orpheus is caused by desiring women who kill him because they are jealous of his eternal love for Eurydice.[65] According to his own account, Munch became aware of the horror of life as a result of his first sexual experiences with an older woman. Hence, the desiring woman is seen as the origin of the horror of life. Sexuality is the fundamental reason for all suffering, and it is intrinsically linked with death. The deathly power of vision is also connected with both myths: the man who looks directly at Medusa will be turned to stone; in the Myth of Orpheus, the fateful backward glance sends the beloved Eurydice back to Hades.

Matters of Life and Death

Munch's art manifests a constant struggle with religious questions and coming to terms with the idea of death. He was unable to find any consolation in the Christian faith and its promise of salvation and eternal life. Yet the futility of life without any idea of an afterlife was hard to bear.[66] He had rebelled against his father's pietistic Christianity already during his Bohemian period in the 1880s but he was never averse to religion or spirituality as such.[67] The problem for him was how to find a spiritual outlook that would be suitable for the modern world in which the existence of God seemed doubtful to say the least.

In the painting *The Empty Cross* (1899–1901) Munch presents an allegorical image of the world in which all traditional moral and spiritual values have lost their meaning.[68] The cross stands empty and the blood red sun is shining its last rays upon the barren landscape. Munch himself is dressed in the black robes of a monk – he is playing with the literal meaning of his surname.[69] Behind his back a group of people appears to be engaged in all kinds of immoral activities, whilst others have fallen over the cliff into the angry sea and are struggling against drowning. These floating heads are not unlike the one that we encounter in *Vision*. In a text related to this image, Munch writes:

> Purple red as through a sooty glass the Sun is shining over the World – On the hills in the Background stands the empty Cross and weeping Women pray to the empty Cross – the Lovers – the Whore – the Drunkard – and the Criminal are on the ground below – and to the right in the Picture –nis a Slope down to the Sea – Men are stumbling down the Slope – and Terrified – they cling to the Edge of the Cliff – a Monk stands in the midst of the chaos, staring bewildered, and – with

> the terrified Eyes of a Child at all this – and ask why, whereto? – It was me now – furious Love and Vice in the Town – the terror of Death was lurking behind – a blood-red Sun shines over everything – and the Cross is empty.[70]

We can see a reflection of Munch's hollow-cheeked appearance in several figures in the background: in the man pressing his head into the whore's breast, in the face of the man sitting on the ground behind the monk's head, as well as in one of the floating heads. The image of Munch himself as a drowning man connects this work directly with the theme of *Vision*. *The Empty Cross* represents the artist as an outsider. He turns his back to the sensual pleasures of life and chooses the ascetic life of a monk. But the question remains: "why, whereto?"

Berman has noted how modernity and Christian tradition come together in Munch's work – particularly in many of the subjects associated with the *Frieze of Life*.[71] For instance, in the famous *Madonna* – to take a very straightforward example – allusions to the Holy Virgin are brought together with associations of the modern woman as the desiring and dangerous "femme fatale." The painting originally contained a wooden frame, the reflection of which can still be seen in the lithograph version of the motif: the woman is enclosed within a frame decorated with spermatozoa, and in the lower left-hand side corner sits a little foetus, sadly hugging itself and gazing at the viewer with empty, round eyes. The woman, shown at the height of sexual ecstasy, is at the same time fulfilling her sacred duty as the birth giver. Yet, death is reflected in her face; the shape of the skull can easily be perceived through her features. And the sad little foetus resembles the Peruvian mummy which Robert Rosenblum has suggested as a possible visual source also for the figure in The Scream.[72] The image of this very same mummy was also employed several times by Gauguin – most famously in his monumental painting about life and death and the meaning of existence, *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (1897). In both Gauguin's and Munch's art this mummy figure appears as a symbol of the interconnectedness of life and death. For Munch, as for many of his contemporaries, the monistic idea of death as transformation provided a release from the dualistic system which appeared to be the source of all human suffering. However, the new secular religion ultimately failed to provide the soothing assurance that Munch was searching for. In his notebook he describes an experience in Saint-Cloud outside Paris where he lived in 1889–90. A sensation of the approaching spring on a winter day awakened his faith in the eternal cycle of life. However, we can see that the warm and joyful feeling of unity with the cosmos does not last very long and he ends up feeling "chilled to the bone":

> To me it seemed as if becoming united with this life would be a rapturous delight, to be one with the earth at all times fermenting, always being warmed by the sun, and nothing would pass away. That is eternity. – I would be united with it and from my rotting body plants and trees would sprout. Trees and plants and flowers. And they would be warmed by the sun, and nothing would pass away. That is eternity. – I stopped suddenly. As if from a funerary chapel, freezing cold, a slight breeze rose up. And I shuddered, and went home to my room, chilled to the bone.[73]

The cosmos may be immortal but from the point of view of the individual this conception provides very little comfort. Still, the monistic and cyclical perspective remained the best available solution to the questions of life and death – and one which could incorporate both spiritual and scientific perspectives into one system of belief that was ancient as well as modern.

The notion of death generating new life was something that occupied Munch's thoughts throughout his life, and it was an idea that kept him going as an artist. Heller may be correct in his conclusion that the swan in *Vision* represents immortality. But the word "vision" in the title is to be understood as something that is not really true – an illusion. Perhaps, then we should understand that the disgusting bodily existence beneath the surface is the fundamental level of truth, and the realm of the swan on the shimmering surface is nothing but an illusion. Whether we believe the truth of existence to be found by means of ascent or descent depends on what kind of truth we are looking for. The Platonic truth exists, as it were, above the phenomenal world, in the pure heaven of eternal abstractions – this is the realm of the swan. Nietzsche, on the other hand, situates the truth behind or below the world of appearances. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, the Apollonic state is compared to a blissful dream, whereas the Dionysian resembles intoxication. The Dionysian artist may be pictured "sinking down in his Dionysian intoxication and mystical self-abnegation."[74]

In an undated note Munch has written about life as a beautiful illusion, like reflection of air and light on the surface of water. But the horrible truth – death – is hiding in the depths:

> And life is like this calm surface – it mirrors the bright colours of the air – pure colours – the hidden depths – with their slime – their creatures – like death – [75]

This passage echoes the Nietzschean idea that life as we know it is nothing but a reflection on the surface, a beautiful illusion. The disgusting and unavoidable truth of death and destruction resides in the abysses below. The swan in *Vision* could then be seen as a beautiful illusion, the "Apollonian veil," which serves to hide the horrible truth. The Dionysian, however, is also "the eternal life beyond all phenomena" and "the eternal and original artistic power."[76]

The duty of the artist would then be to delve into the depths no matter how painful it may be, and find joy in this experience of self-abnegation. To become a true artist, one must be prepared to descend into unknown depths and to endure enormous suffering, and this also involves an abandoning of one's individuality in the traditional sense.

Vision reflects a rather pessimistic view of the world, but Munch was not prepared to draw away from life and to find release in solipsistic resignation. His artistic activities attest to a constant search for meaning. The Christianity of his father, which according to Munch was verging on insanity, was not an option. Neoplatonic idealism was impossible to reach – the feathers of the swan were stained – and a Schopenhauerian ascetism would have estranged him from the very substance of his art. For an artist who wanted to unravel the mystical forces behind life, an active engagement with life, no matter how horrifying it may be, was absolutely essential. Przybyszewski translated this artistic attitude into words in his novel *Overboard*:

> What I want? What I want? I want life and its terrible depths, its bottomless abyss. To me art is the profoundest instinct of life, the sacred road to the future life, to eternity. That is why I crave great big thoughts, pregnant with meaning and content, thoughts that will lay the foundation for a new sexual selection, create a new world and a new understanding of the world. For me art does not end in rhythm, in music. Art is the will that out of nonexistence conjures up new worlds, new people.[77]

A longer and somewhat modified version of this article has been published as one chapter of my doctoral dissertation *Ideal and Disintegration – Dynamics of the Self and Art at the Fin-de-Siècle* (University of Helsinki, 2014).

Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

1 Stanisław Przybyszewski, *Homo Sapiens: A Novel in Three Parts*, trans. Thomas Seltzer (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1915), 33.This comment is made by the writer Erik Falk in the first part of the novel trilogy, entitled *Overboard* (1896), believed to be a *roman à clef* describing Przybyszewski's own experiences in Berlin and Munich. The character Falk is probably modelled after the author himself. The novels were originally published in German as *Über Bord* (1896, *Overboard*), *Unterwegs* (1895, *By the Way*) and *Im Malstrom* (1895, *In the Maelstrom*).

2 The exhibition was closed after having been open to the public for only one week. It was re-opened on December 26 at the Equitable-Palast. See, for example, Reinhold Heller, *Edvard Munch's "Life Frieze": Its Beginnings and Origins* (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University 1969), 29-30,31; Reinhold Heller, *Munch: His Life and Work* (London: John Murray 1984), 100-101, 111; Iris Müller-Westerman, *Munch by Himself* (London: The Royal Academy) 2005, 29, 56 fn5.

3 See Heller, *Edvard Munch's "Life Frieze,"* 33-37; Reinhold Heller, "Edvard Munch's 'Vision'," *Art Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1973): 229; Müller-Westerman, *Munch by Himself*, 29.

4 Manuscript 1890–1892, The Munch Museum: MM N 29. English translation cited from Poul ErikTøjner, *Munch in His Own Words*, trans. Ian Lukins and Jennifer Lloyd (Munich: Prestel 2003), 134.

5 Heller, "Edvard Munch's 'Vision'," 210.

6 Ibid. 213.

7 Rolf Stenersen, *Edvard Munch: Close-Up of a Genius*, trans. Reidar Dittman (Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag1969), 40.

8 Nowadays most of Munch's paintings have been conserved to death, so to speak; they have been cleaned and varnished to stop and even reverse the natural transformation that the artist had intended as a continuous process. See Dieter Buchhart, "Disappearance – Experiments with Material and Motif," in *Edvard Munch: Theme and Variation*, ed. Antonia Hoerschelmann and Klaus Albrecht Schröder (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz 2003), 27.

9 Strindberg, "The Role of Chance in Artistic Production," in *Selected Essays*, ed. and trans. Michael Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996), 103-107.

10 See Strindberg's description of the creation of the painting *Wonderland* (1894). Strindberg, "Role of Chance," 106.

11 *Natura naturans* is a concept that was employed by Friedrich Schelling and Samuel Taylor Coleridge to describe the imaginative power of nature which presupposes a bond between nature and man's soul. Only by capturing this power would the artist be able to imitate nature truly. This also reflects the idea that nature is in a constant state of becoming and thus must originate from spirit. See James Engell, *The Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1981), 83, 319, 333, 358.

12 Antonia Hoerschelmann, "Crossover: Munch and Modernism," in *Edvard Munch: Theme and Variation*, 14-15.

13 Reinhold Heller, "Concerning Symbolism and the Structure of Surface," *Art Journal* 45, no 2 (1985): 149, 152.

14 Rodolphe Rapetti, *Symbolism*, trans. Deke Dusinberre (Paris: Flammarion, 2005), 103. On the Symbolists' use of colour as an expressive tool, see also Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff, *Colour Ascetism and Synthetist Colour: Colour Concepts in Turn-of-the-20th-Century Finnish and European Art.* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Helsinki, 2012).

15 Dario Gamboni, *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art*, trans. Mark Treharne (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 10, 18. 105-106.

16 "... non seulement suivant sa vision individuelle, suivant les modes de sa personnelle subjectivité (ainsi qu'il arrive même dans l'art réaliste), mais encore de les exagérer, de les déformer, suivant les besoins de l'Idée à exprimer." G.-Albert Aurier "Le Symbolisme en peinture – Paul Gauguin," in *Œuvres posthumes*, ed. Remy de Gourmont (Paris: Mercure de France, 1893), 215.

17 Aurier, "Les Isolés: Vincent van Gogh," in *Œuvres*, 262.

18 Patricia Mathews, "Aurier and Van Gogh: Criticism and Response," *Art Bulletin* LXVIII, no I (1986): 76.

19 Przybyszewski, *Das Werk des Edward Munch* (Berlin: S. Fischer, 1894) 13-14. English translation cited from *Art in theory 1815-1900*, ed. Harrison et al., 1046-50.

20 In his book *The Invisible Masterpiece* (London: Reaktion Books 2001, trans. Helen Atkins) Hans Belting presents a conceptual history of art centred on the idea of absolute art. He traces the history and development of the modern conception of art from its beginnings at Romanticism to the period after the Second World War when art production increasingly turned away from the traditional idea of the "work" as the definitive end of the creative process. The book was originally published in German in 1998 as *Das Unsichtbare Meisterwerk. Die modernen Mythen der Kunst*). The English edition omits three chapters from the original German version.

21 Belting, *Invisible Masterpiece*, 202.

22 Belting, *Invisible Masterpiece*, 12. There probably is no better illustration for this idea than Henry Fuseli's *The Artist Overwhelmed by the Grandeur of Antique Ruins*, 1778-79. The modern artist who sits in mourning is physically dwarfed by the size of the sculpture fragments that are all that remains of the magnificent whole that once was there. Even in fragmentary form – or perhaps precisely due to their fragmentary form – the grandeur of these monuments of the past is too much for the artist to bear. See Linda Nochlin, *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity* (London: Thames & Hudson) 1994, 7-8.

23 I borrow the concept of an "imaginary space" from Dee Reynolds who uses it in the context of nineteenth century Symbolist poetry and early twentieth century abstract art. As is evidenced by her choice of material, Reynolds does not establish parallels between Symbolist poetry and Symbolist visual art. She claims that the disruption of communicative codes of Symbolist poetry where the medium itself becomes an object of aesthetic transformation does not become a central issue in painting until the advent of abstract art. I believe, however, that the theoretical construction that Reynolds presents in her book captures a phenomenon that is central to modern art and with a few modifications would be applicable to very different kinds of artistic production. See Dee Reynolds, *Symbolist aesthetics and early abstract art: Sites of imaginary space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995), 7, 225, and passim.

24 This aspect of his art was the focus of the 2003 exhibition entitled "Edvard Munch: Theme and Variation" (Albertina, Vienna).

25 Manuscript c. 1896 (?), The Munch Museum: MM T 2908. The drawing has previously been dated for c. 1892 but Müller-Westerman suggests a later date because the arrangement of the text and picture resembles Munch's illustrations to Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*, which he created in Paris in 1896. See Müller-Westerman, *Munch by Himself*, 2005, 56n12.

26 Heller, "Edvard Munch's 'Vision'," 214-225.

27 Riikka Stewen has employed the term "paraphrase" to describe the way Symbolist artists worked with this kind of cultural material. They used elements of myths and legends, allegorical images, poems, etc. in an allusive and fragmentary way that transforms and alters their meanings. Riikka Stewen "Rakkauden kehissä: Magnus Enckellin mytologiat" / "I kärlekens kretsar: Magnus Enckell's mytologier" / "Circles of Love: The mythologies of Magnus Enckell," in *Magnus Enckell 1870-1925*, ed. Jari Björklöv and Juha-Heikki Tihinen, trans. Tomi Snellman and Camilla Ahlström-Taavitsainen (Helsinki: Helsingin kaupungin taidemuseo 2000), 50-54.

28 Axel Gallén started to sign his paintings with the more Finnish sounding name Akseli Gallen-Kallela from 1907 onwards.

29 My discussion of *Lemminkäinen's Mother* is based largely on Salme Sarajas-Korte's interpretation of the painting. See Salme Sarajas-Korte, "Axel Gallénin joutsensymboliikasta," in Juha Ilvas, ed., *Akseli Gallen-Kallela* (Ateneum: Helsinki 1996); Salme Sarajas-Korte, "Valon ja pimeyden lintu," in *Pinx. Maalaustaide Suomessa 1: Suuria kertomuksia*, ed. Helena Sederholm et al. (Espoo: Weilin+Göös 2001).

30 See Carla Lathe, *The Group Zum Schwarzen Ferkel: A Study in Early Modernism* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of East Anglia 1972), 38-39, 40.

31 Heller, "Edvard Munch's 'Vision'," 227, 231-232, 243.

32 See Minna Turtiainen, "We Could Amuse Ourselves by Teaching the Symbolists Symbolism," in *Fill Your Soul! Paths of Research into the Art of Akseli Gallen-Kallela*, trans. Jüri Kokkonen (Espoo: The Gallen-Kallela Museum, 2011).

33 Cited from Müller-Westerman, *Munch by Himself*, 30.

34 Robert Goldwater, *Symbolism* (New York: Harper & Row 1979), 119.

35 Dorothy M. Kosinski, *Orpheus in Nineteenth-Century Symbolism* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press 1989), 199.

36 See Gösta Svenæus, *Edvard Munch: Im männlichen Gehirn* (Lund: Vetenskaps-societeten i Lund 1973), 73. Svenæus was the first to point out the similarity between Munch's sketch and Redon's *Orpheus' Head Floating in the Water*. He has noted that Munch could have seen this work in the Durand-Ruel Gallery in Paris in 1892.

37 The Myth of Orpheus has several similarities with the story of Christ: both are teachers of the people, both transcend death, and both end up in martyrdom followed by the ultimate victory. In the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke Orpheus becomes almost a substitute for Christ. See Kosinski, *Orpheus*, 256.

38 Edouard Schuré *The Great Initiates: A Study of the Secret History of Religions*, trans. Gloria Rasberry (Great Barrington, MA: SteinerBooks 1977), 231. See also Kosinski, Orpheus, 1-2, 205.

39 Kosinski, *Orpheus*, 193-194.

40 Maurice Blanchot, "The Gaze of Orpheus," in *The Gaze of Orpheus and other literary* essays, ed. P. Adams Sitney, trans. Lydia Davis (Barrytown NY: Station Hill), 99.

41 Kosinski, *Orpheus*, 125-126.

42 In a letter draft to Jens Thiis he writes: "The bowed line also relates to the discovery of and belief in new energies in the air. Radio waves, and the new communication methods between people. (The difference is that I symbolised the connection between the separated entities by the use of long waving hair it also occurs in the *Frieze of Life*.) The long hair is a kind of telephone cord." Notebook 1933-1940, The Munch Museum: MM N 43. English translation cited from Tøjner, *Munch in His Own Words*, 148.

43 See Shelley Wood Cordulack, *Edvard Munch and the Physiology of Symbolism* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press 2002), 72-73. Cordulack compares the shape to a scientific drawing of a cross-section of a uterus.

44 See Charles Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Culture of the "Fin de Siècle"* in Europe, ed. Jefferson T. Kline and Naomi Schor (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press 2002), 104-138

45 See Alexander Sturgis and Michael Wilson, "Priest, Seer, Martyr, Christ," in *Rebels and Martyrs: The Image of the Artist in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Johanna Stephenson (London: The National Gallery 2006), 139.

46 I am referring here to the most famous version of the work, the oil painting which nowadays resides at Musée d'Orsay in Paris. Redon made several versions of the work, the first of which is from 1889 and know as Au ciel. See Fred Leeman, "Yeux Clos," in *Odilon Redon: Prince du Rêve 1840-1916*, ed. Marie-Claude Bianchini, trans. Marc Binazzi (Paris: Grand Palais 2011), 228-229.

47 The first part of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* (1861) is entitled "Spleen et ideal," and many of the poems also deal with the dual sense of being.

48 "Il y a dans tout homme, à toute heure, deux postulations simultanées, l'une vers Dieu, l'autre vers Satan. L'invocation à Dieu, ou spiritualité, est un désir de monter en grade: celle de Satan, ou animalité, est une joie de descendre." Charles Baudelaire, *Journaux Intimes: Fusées, Mon cœur mis a nu*, ed. Adolphe Van Bever (Paris: G. Crès, 1920), 57.

49 Gwendolyn Bays, *The Orphic Vision: Seer Poets from Novalis to Rimbaud* (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press 1964), 4, 19-20.

50 Bays, *Orphic Vision*, 7.

51 Ibid. 14.

52 Heller, *Munch*, 155; Patricia Berman, "Edvard Munch's Self-Portrait with Cigarette: Smoking and the Bohemian Persona," *The Art Bulletin* 75 (1993): 629-630.

53 Heller "'Could Only Have Been Painted by a Madman,' Or Could It?" in *Edvard Munch: The Modern Life of the Soul*, ed. Kynaston McShine (New York: The Museum of Modern Art 2006), 17, 32 n1, n2.

54 Berman, "Edvard Munch's Self-Portrait with Cigarette," 629.

55 Lathe, *The Group Zum Schwarzen Ferkel*, 198.

56 This has been suggested by Juha-Heikki Tihinen who refers to Vision in connection with Magnus Enckell's painting *Head* (1894) and the theme of the disembodied head. Tihinen links Vision primarily with Redon's Orpheus motif but he notes that it can also be viewed in terms of the head of Medusa or the myth of John the Baptist and Salome, connecting it thus with the theme of the "femme fatale." See Juha-Heikki Tihinen, *Halun häilyvät rajat: Magnus Enckellin teosten maskuliinisuuksien ja feminiinisyyksien representaatioista ja itsen luomisesta* (Helsinki: Taidehistorian seura 2008), 85.

57 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1955), Book IV, 774-803.

58 Patricia Matthews, *Passionate Discontent: Creativity, Gender, and French Symbolist Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 96. Freud discussed the myth of Medusa in connection with castration anxiety and a fear of women in the essay "The Medusa's Head" ("Das Medusenhaupt," 1922) in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology, and Other Works: The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XVIII, ed. and trans. James Strachey and Anna Freud (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), 273-274. Mathews notes that "Freud's readings are culturally appropriate in the Symbolist context not because the artists or writers knew his work but because he came out of a fin-de-siècle culture, had worked in Paris, and thus had personal insights into the possible motivations for such imagery." Mathews, *Passionate Discontent*, 258n9.

59 Claes Ahlund, *Medusas huvud: dekadensens tematik i svensk sekelskifteprosa* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis 1994), 19.

60 See Ingvar Holm, *Ola Hansson: en studie i åttitalsromantik* (Lund: Gleerups 1957), 63-64.

61 Ola Hansson, "Sensitiva Amorosa," *Lyrik och essäer* (Stockholm: Atlantis 1997), 149.

62 Ola Hansson "Edgar Allan Poe" in Carl L. Anderson, *Poe in Northlight: The Scandinavian Response to His Life and Work* (Durham: Duke University Press 1973), 199. Hansson's essay was first published in an abbreviated German translation in 1889. Anderson's book contains a translation of the original Swedish text which appeared in 1921.

63 This is a theme that Munch has famously treated in the painting *Puberty* (1894-5), and in the several version that he made of this subject.

64 Manuscript 1890, The Munch Museum: MM T 2770. English translation cited from Arne Eggum, *Edvard Munch: The Frieze of Life from Painting to Graphic Art* (Oslo: J.M. Stenersens Forlag A.S. 2000), 25.

65 Kosinski, *Orpheus*, 15-18, 189-205

66 Stenersen writes: "Munch, evidently unable to believe in anything transcendental, did not want to rot away, become gas and crumbs. He hoped death was a transition into a new existence, but he had seen too much spiritual and physical need to be able to believe in God. There would have to be some other meaning to death – something he could not comprehend." Stenersen, *Edvard Munch*, 65.

67 See Heller, *Edvard Munch's "Life Frieze*," 48-52; Patricia Berman, "Edvard Munch's 'Modern Life of the Soul'," in *Edvard Munch: Modern Life of the Soul*.

68 Berman argues that rather than as an image of a Nietzschean spiritual void of modernity, this image can be connected with the theme of the *Frieze of Life* as an embodiment of "the modern life of the soul," which she perceives as "a complex philosophical system whose inherent contradictions shaped his bohemian identity." Berman, "Edvard Munch's 'Modern Life of the Soul'," 35-37.

69 See Heller, *Munch: His Life and Work*, 165.

70 Sketchbook 1908, The Munch Museum: MM T 2730.

71 Berman, "Edvard Munch's 'Modern Life of the Soul'," 36.

72 Robert Rosenblum, "Edvard Munch: Some Changing Contexts," introduction to *Edvard Munch: Symbols and Images* (Washington: The National Gallery of Art 1978), 7-8.

73 Sketchbook from 1891-92, The Munch Museum: MM T 2760. English translation cited from Heller, *Munch: His Life and Work*, 63.

74 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy, in The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library 1968), 38; On Nietzsche's conception truth, see also Philip J. Kain *Nietzsche and the Horror of Existence* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009), 15-26.

75 Undated manuscript, The Munch Museum: MM N 613.

76 Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 104, 143.

77 Przybyszewski, *Homo Sapiens*, 33.