Art History
Department of Philosophy, History, Culture and Art Studies
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IDEAL AND DISINTEGRATION

DYNAMICS OF THE SELF AND ART AT THE FIN-DE-SIÈCLE

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ACADEMIC DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the dynamics of the self and art in the context of the Symbolist art and aesthetics of the fin-de-siècle. The purpose is to open new perspectives into how the self and its relationship with the world were understood and experienced, and to explore how these conceptions of selfhood suggest parallels with questions of art and creativity in ways that continue to affect our perceptions of these issues even today.

The decades around the turn of the twentieth century were a period of intensifying preoccupation with questions of subjectivity as the coherence and autonomy of the self were constantly being threatened in the rapidly modernizing world. This issue is examined through an analysis and discussions of artworks by the Finnish artists Pekka Halonen and Ellen Thesleff, the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch, the Swedish author and artist August Strindberg, and the Danish artist Jens Ferdinand Willumsen. The artworks are considered as active participants in the discourses of the period and as sites of intellectual and artistic reflection.

Self-portraits are the most obvious products of artistic self-examination, but the highly subjective attitude towards art indicates that in a way every work of art can be perceived as a self-portrait. Symbolism, therefore, constitutes a point in art history where old definitions of self-portraiture were no longer sufficient. Art came to be understood as a form of knowledge and a source of truth. Hence, the creative process turned into a method of self-exploration motivated by an attempt to transcend beyond everyday consciousness in order to achieve a heightened perception of the self and the world. At the same time, the focus of the artwork shifted towards an immaterial space of imagination. Hence, the work of art was no longer understood as a finite material object but rather as a revelation of an idea. The constant need for self-exploration was also related to an ever increasing questioning of traditional religiosity and a subsequent interest in religious syncretism, as well as in various mystical, spiritual, and occultist ideologies, which affected both the form and content of art.

Subjectivity is often perceived as one of the defining features of Symbolist art. However, due to the content-oriented approach, which until recent years has dominated art historical research on Symbolism, the meaning of this subjective tendency has not been properly analysed. Although the emphasis on subjectivity obviously had a great impact on the content of the new art, which became increasingly concerned with mythological and fantastic material, it also worked on a more abstract level affecting the ways that the meaning and status of art were understood. The approach taken in this study is based on an idea of the interconnectedness of form and content. Through this critical perspective, this study takes part in an international current of research which seeks to redefine Symbolism and its relation to modernism.

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A research project is a continuous process that has no clear beginning and no end. I have been interested in art for as long as I can remember, and in that sense this has been a lifelong endeavour. More specifically, perhaps, the origins of this particular study can be seen to reach back to my early years as a student of art history at the University of Helsinki. At some point – I do not remember exactly when and why – I came across the writings of the Finnish art historian Salme Sarajas-Korte. The way that she was able to integrate literary, scientific, philosophical, religious, and mystical ideas in her studies of Symbolist art made a lasting impression on me. I embraced this model because it enabled me to bring together my different fields of interest and it also gave me a whole new perspective into art and its place and meaning in the world. Ever since this early encounter my work has circulated around questions of Symbolism, modernism, identities, theories of art at the fin-de-siècle, mysticism, the interconnections of art and science, and so on. Through these themes I also came into contact with Professor Riikka Stewen and Juha-Heikki Tihinen, who encouraged me to continue on the path that I had discovered, and who later also came to be the supervisors of this thesis. I am immensely grateful for their wisdom and insight which has guided me through this lengthy journey, and for their friendship which has made it so much more enjoyable.

My warmest thanks are also due to all my teachers at the University of Helsinki. I feel especially indebted to Professor Ville Lukkarinen for his many helpful comments, and for the wonderful collegial atmosphere that he created in his seminars. In addition, I must thank Professor Riitta Konttinen, who with her warm encouragement gave me the first push towards a career in art history.

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In the course of this process I have often had the feeling that I am chasing an ideal that is forever just out of reach. The perfect revelation is always around the next corner, it is never here and now. I have felt like the poor floating head in Edvard Munch's painting *Vision* (1892), never able to reach the luminous realm inhabited by the pure white swan. The ideal is high and mighty but we are always shackled to this world. And if he ever gets close enough to see the swan more clearly, he will notice that its plumage is dirty; even the ideal is tainted. But the only thing we can do – artists, writers, researchers – is to continue our chase. Sometimes this may require a plunge into the hidden depths below the surface where new kind of truths are waiting to be discovered. To give up would mean losing the force that is driving us forward, and that is what gives this whole effort its meaning. It may be an inherently melancholic mission, but that does not mean that it does not have its moments of joy, excitement, and exhilaration.

London, 6 January 2014

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INTRODUCTION

> *The mystery of modern life. Man has become a new creation. His heart has a different beat. It beats to a new rhythm. Formerly people remained still. They grew like plants and flowers. Now they are torn from their soil. They are near to flying. But they are not yet birds. That is why it is like the fluttering of birds which are sick and near to death.*
>
> *He is here, omnipresent, in my chamber. That is terrifying. Why does he not speak, nor call out to me? Or does he call? Does he call day and night, in the evening when I retire, and in the morning when I rise? Does he call within my own Self? Is he within my own Self? For there is always something within, watching. And I recall two moments in my life when it seemed as if an eye was seated deep within, an eye older than my own Self, older than my mother, watching me, watching.*
>
> *Perhaps in the end it is the commandment we should see, this matter of life and death. Not only see, but feel in our inmost hearts how exceeding good it was. And feel within us terror and reverence and cast ourselves down on our knees and forget our own little selves, because our own selves found in the great Life about us a Self so jubilant and so mightily splendid that we trembled with ecstasy if we could but sense within us the faintest trace of that great Self.*
>
> — Sigbjørn Obstfelder[1]

The quotations above are from the fragmentary and unfinished novel *A Priest's Diary* (*En præsts dagbog*, 1900) by the Norwegian author Sigbjørn Obstfelder. Obstfelder's life story and the intensely personal quality of his work are perfect manifestations of the spirit of the fin-de-siècle.[2] His entire oeuvre fits within one

[1] Obstfelder 1987 [1900], 20, 22, 47.

[2] Obstfelder's poetry and prose were highly appreciated by Rainer Maria Rilke, and he identified with Obstfelder's personality and fate to the extent that he is even believed to have served as a source of inspiration for the protagonist in Rilke's semi-autobiographical novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910). Rilke's novel deals with similar issues of modernity and existential anxiety as *A Priest's Diary*. It appears

decade, the 1890s, between the appearance of his first collection of poems in 1893 and the posthumous publication of *A Priest's Diary* after his death from tuberculosis at the age of thirty-three. In his lifetime he suffered several nervous breakdowns, and in 1891 he was confined to a mental institution for a few months. In Obstfelder's novel religion is not something to be taken for granted, and it can no longer bring comfort and assurance. The omnipresence of God is an equally disturbing idea as is the thought of his absence. If God is to be found anywhere, it must be inside oneself. After a visionary experience the protagonists tries to calm himself down, telling himself that it was only nerves that had turned his visions into flesh and blood, "visions that lie held in the brain from the time of your forefathers, from medieval times indeed."[3] But this thought is perhaps even more frightening:

> *If those terrible inner storms and those glowing visions were in fact not reality, were not called into existence from above or from without but emerged from the dark labyrinth of my inner being can there then be anything more mysterious in the whole compass of our thoughts and dreams and visions and imaginings than this convoluted thing we call the Self"*[4]

Everything that exists is contained within the self, and religion has become a private and personal experience, exactly as William James also considered it in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902).[5] Obstfelder's diarist tries to find a solution to his spiritual quest in a unifying monistic belief – "There is but one substance, and energy is its soul" – but in the end it fails to provide any comfort. The horror and the suffering in this world are too overwhelming. "Is the world anything more than a gigantic midden where men and beasts endlessly and incessantly pour out their impurities?" he asks himself. [6]

I have chosen these passages from *A Priest's Diary* for the opening of this investigation on the dynamics of the self and art at the fin-de-siècle, because to me they reflect the quintessential spiritual attitudes of the period, expressed in deeply personal and intimate manner: the quest for individuality and the simultaneous horror of being alone in the world, the existential anxiety caused by the instability of modern life, and the cautious hope for a future where mankind will gain a higher awareness and will be better attuned to the rhythms of the universe.[7] Moreover, the

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however, that although Rilke wished to give the impression of having known Obstfelder personally, this was in fact not the case. See Schoolfield 2009, 217-222; Metzger & Metzger 2001, 155-156.

[3] Obstfelder 1987 [1900], 66.

[4] Obstfelder 1987 [1900], 66.

[5] James defines religion as "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine." James 1963 [1902], 31.

[6] Obstfelder 1987 [1900], 50.

[7] This recalls the modern voice that according to Marshall Berman was shared by all the great modern spirits of the nineteenth century, including Nietzsche, Strindberg, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Marx: "The voice resonates at once with self-discovery and self-mockery, with self-delight and self-doubt ... The voice is ironic and contradictory, polyphonic and dialectical, denouncing modern life in the name of values that modernity itself has created, hoping – often against hope – that the modernities of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow will heal the wounds that wreck the modern men and women of today." Berman 1982, 23.

fragmentary and unfinished form of *A Priest's Diary* relates to another aspect of my thesis; it can be seen as a manifestation of the fin-de-siècle quest for the ideal that is always just out of reach. It suggests a parallel with the open-ended and indeterminate quality that I have observed in the artworks that I have studied, and I believe that it reflects an important tendency in the art of the period.

The self and art are both extremely complicated concepts that have served as the basis for a fair amount of philosophical and artistic speculation, and both perform central roles in the phenomenon that is known as the modern. Moreover, both are categories of human experience that do not easily yield to discursive articulation. Therefore, art may be considered the perfect medium to express aspects of selfhood that cannot be put to words. The fin-de-siècle is often viewed in terms of a "crisis" of the self. If we believe that the greatest achievement of modernity was the establishment of an autonomous, unified self, then looking into the fin-de-siècle ideas, we cannot help noticing that this famous self was starting to disintegrate before it had even been properly constituted. The discovery of the unconscious, indicating a loss of control over the self, the theory of evolution which questioned not only the privileged status of mankind but also the whole concept of an immortal soul, or the Nietzschean view of the self as a bundle of struggling and drifting drives, are just a few examples of the forces that were threatening the autonomy of the self in the rapidly modernizing world. If, on the other hand, we believe that this instability and ambivalence is a fundamental component of modern selfhood, then, instead of a crisis, we may see a point of culmination.[8]

Moreover, the idea of the self at the fin-de-siècle is inherently connected with the changing conception of the work of art, which was no longer understood as a finite material object but rather as a revelation of an idea. Its meaning was transposed from the material entity towards an "imaginary space" where the artist, the artwork, and the viewer come together.[9] This kind of artwork is an expression of the artist's individual self, but in order to be meaningful, it cannot stop at mere subjectivity but must seek to go beyond to reach a more universal level of meaning. The artists, who were no longer satisfied with copying nature as it appeared to their eyes, turned inward and probed the very sources of their inner being. However, this self-exploration was not so much an end in itself; rather, it was a method of developing a new kind of vision. This visionary conception of art is to be understood as a conscious reaction against the scientific and materialistic ideals of the modern world. At the same time it comprises an aesthetic statement encouraging the artists to find new means of expressing their personal visions.

The relationship between the self and art is examined in this study within the context of the Symbolist aesthetic, through an analysis and discussions of artworks by the Finnish artists Pekka Halonen (1865-1933) and Ellen Thesleff (1869-1954),

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[8] If we are to believe Jonathan Dollimore's claim, it is not so much a question of a modern (or postmodern) crisis but rather of a recurring instability in the Western idea of individuality, which derives from our obsessive relationship with the destabilizing and fragmenting forces of death and mutability. See Dollimore 1998.

[9] 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. See Reynolds 1995. I shall explain below why I believe it to be a useful and appropriate concept also when discussing Symbolist art.

the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch (1863-1944), the Swedish author and artist August Strindberg (1849-1912), and the Danish artist Jens Ferdinand Willumsen (1863-1958). The decision to focus on Nordic art was based on the observation that a certain idea of the North was present in the European culture of the fin-de-siècle.[10] Almost anything that came from the Northern part of Europe – anything that was not of "Latin" origin: the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, the operas of Richard Wagner based on Nordic mythologies, and the novels and plays of August Strindberg, for example – could be seen in terms of this notion. The Finnish art historian Salme Sarajas-Korte has noted that the Nordic artists who were studying and working in Paris were very keen on this idea, and were even inclined to believe that it was now Scandinavia's turn to assume the leadership of humanity's intellectual advance. This belief was supported by the popular theosophical formulation of different world periods, according to which it was time for the "Northern race" to take over.[11] This admiration for everything that came from the North was also evident in Berlin where a group of Nordic artists and writers who gathered at the tavern called Zum Schwarzen Ferkel became a constitutive part of German modernism.[12] The most comprehensive study of the Ferkel group has been carried out by Carla Lathe in her doctoral dissertation from 1972. Lathe has emphasized the modernity of the group:

> *They were not just a collection of nature mystics, but Moderns: European in outlook, disrespectful of convention, unlimited in enterprise. Not languishing for bygone splendours but curious like the Moderns of the Renaissance, researching every field of study, turning their zest for discovery to the arts, science, medicine."*[13]

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[10] I use the term "Nordic" instead of "Scandinavian" in order to include Finland. In English, "Scandinavia" is sometimes used as a synonym for "Nordic" but that term more properly refers only to Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. Although between 1809 and 1917 Finland existed only as an autonomous part of the Russian Empire, Finland has a long shared history with Sweden, and in the late-nineteenth-century Swedish was still the dominant language of the upper classes. Therefore, there was an intimate exchange of culture between Finland and the Scandinavian countries, and when Finnish artists travelled in Europe they often sought the company of the Scandinavians. However, the idea of mythical "Northernness" was also an important element of Russian culture at the time, and Finland's close cultural ties with Scandinavia should not be taken to indicate that there was no cultural exchange with Russia. But this is an issue that is in need of further research and cannot be taken fully into account within the constraints of this study.

[11] Sarajas-Korte 1966, 56-57. This is, of course, an idea that after the Second World War has gained a very different meaning.

[12] The official name of this old wine bar, located at the corner of Unter den Linden and Neue Wilhelmstraße in Berlin, was "Gustav Türkes Weinhandlung und Probiesrtube," and it was believed that it had been frequented by the likes of E. T. A. Hoffman, Heinrich Heine, and Robert Schumann. According to the legend, it was the leading figure of the group, Strindberg, who gave it the name "Zum Schwarzen Ferkel," after an old wine sack that hung outside the locale, and which in Strindberg's eyes looked like a black piglet. Strindberg has described the atmosphere of the place in his novel *The Cloister* (*Klostret*, published posthumously in 1966). In addition to Strindberg, the core of the group consisted of the Finnish writer Adolf Paul, the German writer Richard Dehmel, the physicians Carl Ludwig Schleich and Max Asch, and the Pole Stanisław Przybyszewski, who was a medical student and an aspiring writer. After the Ferkel's reputation as the hub of radical bohemian artistic and literary circles in Berlin had been established, several Finns and Scandinavians came there to look for inspiration when they passed through town. See Aarseth 1997; Lathe 1972; Lathe 1979; Paul 1915; Söderström 1997.

[13] Lathe 1972, 24.

All the artists whose works I am discussing spent long periods of time studying and working in the artistic centres of Europe, particularly in Paris and Berlin. Their work is therefore examined in the context of the European fin-de-siècle, but the Nordic background gives these artists and their works a certain marginality and outsider quality. "Northernness" is defined in opposition to European decadence, as an abstract concept that is not solely attributed to the Nordic artists, but for them it comes as a "natural" privilege that is considered to constitute a part of their artistic originality.

This conception of the North as myth and idea, which was constructed in an international rather than Nationalistic context, provided a preliminary perspective into the research material. However, in the course of the research process, I became interested in the fascinating dynamics of the self and art that I discovered in the material. It was obvious that this was a general issue concerning the art and culture of the fin-de-siècle and not something that was specific to the Nordic countries. Hence, it seemed more fruitful to focus on a small number of works that appeared to offer the richest basis for a discussion of these particular issues. The idea of the North remains an undercurrent in the research perspective, but I have anchored the discussion around particular works of art, broadening the perspective from the specific issues related to these works towards more general aesthetic and philosophical questions concerning the self and art at the turn of the twentieth century.

The time period is defined as "fin-de-siècle" which is a fairly well established concept, although the exact temporal limits vary to a certain extent.[14] It can refer to the end of the nineteenth century or the decades around the turn of the century.[15] For the purposes of the present study, the fin-de-siècle is not understood purely as a temporal designation, but suggesting also a cultural climate, a particular cast of mind or a "mood," as it was defined by the Hungarian-German author Max Nordau (Simon Maximilian Südfeld) in his highly influential book *Degeneration* (originally published in German as *Entartung* in 1892). According to Nordau, "Fin-de-siècle is a name covering both what is characteristic of many modern phenomena, and also the underlying mood which in them finds expression."[16] His use of the term is pejorative but his conception of the phenomenon is nevertheless illustrative. Nordau described the time period in terms of degeneration of culture, an end, but it can be understood as much as a beginning; even Nordau himself connects it to modern phenomena. The British journalist, and author Holbrook Jackson, noted in his book *The Eighteen Nineties* (1913) that Nordau's degeneration actually might have been more properly termed "regeneration" because in Jackson's analysis, the 1890s was, "in spite of its many extravagances, a renascent period, characterized by much mental activity and a quickening of the imagination, combined with pride of material

[14] The term "fin-de siècle" originated in a play of 1888 by two obscure Parisian writers. According to Shearer West "It referred not just to the fact that the nineteenth century was coming to a close, but it signified a belief that the end of the century would bring with it decay, decline, the ultimate disaster." West 1994, 1.

[15] West has defined fin-de-siècle as a generation, roughly 1870-1914. West 1994, vii.

[16] Nordau 1993 [1892], 1.

prosperity, conquest and imperial expansion, as well as the desire for social service and a fuller communal and personal life."[17]

The defining feature of the fin-de-siècle can thus be described in terms of a tension between optimism and pessimism; it suggests nostalgia for a lost world, and at the same time an aspiration for modernity. A certain change of attitude can also be sensed in the work of many Nordic artists working in the 1890s. In Denmark this phenomenon is sometimes referred to as "det sjælelige gennembrud," variously translated as "the breakthrough of the soul" or the "psychological breakthrough." This means a move away from realism and naturalism towards a more subjective kind of art that draws from the world of dreams, fantasy and myth.[18]

The Symbolist aesthetic is to be understood here as a descriptive rather than a classifying term. My intention is not to claim that the artworks that compose the material of this study should be labelled as "Symbolist." Rather, I am hoping to show that the Symbolist aesthetic and intellectual milieu can provide a meaningful context for an examination of these artworks. They take part in many of the discussions that are associated with the Symbolist phenomenon, such as the idea of inwardness, individuality, artistic originality, and the question of man's relation to the world. Moreover, the Symbolist aesthetic, with its emphasis on subjectivity, suggests a specific set of issues in relation to the self. Indeed, the introspective attitude that is a central tenet of Symbolism means that all artistic expression is filtered through the self. As the art historian Filiz Eda Burhan has suggested, this may be described as an inversion of the Naturalist perspective; the Symbolists artist "exchanged Naturalism's 'window of the world' for a looking glass and in its celebrated 'mirror of reality,' he sought only his own image."[19]

Attempts to define Symbolism have usually stressed either formal features or subject matter in order to grasp the essential characteristics of Symbolist art.[20] My approach, however, is based on an understanding of Symbolism as an aesthetic and philosophical orientation which affects form as well as subject matter. I have also wanted to demonstrate the continuity of Symbolist ideas into the twentieth century and beyond. Therefore, in order to understand the most innovative qualities of

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[17] Jackson 1976 [1913].

[18] The Danish writer Helge Rode published in 1913 a book entitled *Det sjælelige Gennembrud*. Rode emphasized his generation's idealism and non-dogmatic religiosity against Georg Brandes and the so-called "modern breakthrough" of the previous generation which had been centred on realism and rationality. Rode 1928 [1913]; on the subject of the "modern breakthrough," see Ahlström 1974.

[19] Burhan 1979, 14.

[20] In his pioneering study *Synthetist Art Theories* (1959), H. R. Rookmaaker established a distinction between Synthetism and Symbolism. He labelled as Symbolists the sentimental and allegorical artists of the Rose+Croix, as well as Moreau, Redon, and Bresdin, whereas Synthetists were the artists that he perceived as more innovative in stylistic terms, such as Cezanne, van Gogh, and most importantly Gauguin. According to Rookmaaker, the art of the Symbolists was new only in terms of subject matter: "They did not shrink from deformation or from fantastic beings, but in their forms they always followed the naturalistic way of representation with its perspective, shade, and plastic quality." Interestingly, despite his quite indisputable technical originality, Munch is grouped together with the Symbolists, apparently due to his choice of subject matter (e.g. the femme fatale, which Rookmaaker perceived as typical for the Symbolists). Rookmaaker 1959, 66-70, 84. On the issue of defining Symbolism, see also Facos 2009, 1-3.

Symbolist art and at the same time avoid perceiving Symbolism as nothing but a prologue to twentieth century abstraction, I believe it is necessary to abandon a purely formalist as well as an entirely content-based definition in favour of a critical perspective based on the interconnectedness of form and content. Recent studies have increasingly called attention to the diversity of the Symbolist phenomenon – in terms of both geography and the ideological background. Rather than attempting to define Symbolism as a specific philosophical foundation, it is understood more broadly as referring to an artistic search for meaning in the world without necessarily committing to any particular belief system. In addition, it has become more and more apparent that the geographical centre of this artistic phenomenon that previously was considered mostly French (following the model of its literary predecessor) may in fact be in the "peripheries"; in almost all European countries the art of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century exhibits features that may be described as Symbolism.

Out of all recent studies on Symbolist art, I have found Rodolphe Rapetti's book *Symbolism* (*Le Symbolisme*, 2005) most profitable for my purposes. Rapetti approaches Symbolism as part of an intellectual current that swept over Europe in the late nineteenth-century. This philosophical trend challenged the dominant materialistic and positivistic ideologies, and turned instead towards an idealist theory which refuted the validity of material appearances.[21] Rapetti presents the intellectual background of the movement in a manner that is both coherent and multifaceted, and he also pays careful attention to the interaction of formal and thematic issues. His study reveals a radical tendency in Symbolist art, which sought to cross technical boundaries in order to liberate creativity beyond technical norms and to dematerialize the work of art. Rapetti draws attention, for instance, to the innovative techniques employed by an artists like Fernand Khnopff whose art has often been viewed as Symbolist only in terms of subject matter. He explains, however, that Khnopff, like many other Symbolist artists, sought to dissolve the borders between different artistic techniques, retouching photographs of his drawings and sculptures, or producing polychrome plaster sculptures that come halfway between sculpture and painting.[22]

In my understanding of the Symbolist context, I am also greatly indebted to Sarajas-Korte's extensive study on Symbolism in Finland, which appeared already in 1966. This study, as well as Sarajas-Korte's many subsequent contributions into the research of Symbolist art, approached Symbolism as an important link towards twentieth century modernism instead of perceiving it as nostalgic, overtly literary, and anti-modern – this is a perspective that only recently has gained a central place in Symbolism research.[23] Moreover, Sarajas-Korte was one of the first researchers to

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[21] Rapetti 2005, 12.

[22] Rapetti 2005, 147-174, 153-156.

[23] Sarajas-Korte 1966. In more recent studies, the continuation between Symbolist and modernist art has been particularly emphasized by Facos (2009) and Rapetti (2006). Both studies also take into account the geographical diversity of the Symbolist phenomenon. The relationship between Symbolism and modernism has also been examined in the context of the international research network *Redefining European Symbolism 1880-1910*, which has organized several conferences and exhibitions in the recent years. The exhibition on Symbolist landscapes,

take fully into account the importance of various mystical, literary, and philosophical currents in the formation of the Symbolist aesthetic. Her study is therefore an indispensable source of material and insight concerning the entire European context.[24] Riikka Stewen's and Juha-Heikki Tihinen's numerous studies, which have continued, transformed, and updated the research tradition that was initiated by Sarajas-Korte, have also provided important starting points for my approach. Tihinen's doctoral dissertation on the art of Magnus Enckell (2008), which focuses specifically on questions of selfhood and identities, and the related issues of gender and sexualities, has been of particular importance.[25]

Of the more recent studies, I have also referred extensively to the writings of Michelle Facos, Barbara Larson, Patricia Mathews, and Debora Silverman, which have provided important insights into the interactions of aesthetic ideas and the cultural context of the late nineteenth century.[26] In addition, the articles in the 1995 exhibition catalogue *Lost Paradise: Symbolist Europe* have opened vital perspectives into the multiple literary, philosophical, religious, scientific, and ideological sources that the artists drew from. This was the first large scale publication that treated Symbolism as an international phenomenon. The contributions by Jean Clair, Rodolphe Rapetti, and Petr Wittlich have been particularly fruitful for the purposes of the present study.[27]

The more form-oriented perspectives presented by the pioneering scholar of modern art, Robert Goldwater, and the art historian and Munch scholar Reinhold Heller have also been useful for my understanding of the Symbolist aesthetic.[28] Although, the distinction presented by Goldwater between allegorical *Gedankenmalerei* and "true" Symbolism appears to me somewhat artificial and, in any case, too restrictive for my purposes, his book offers an important outlook into the interconnectedness of form and content in Symbolist art. Goldwater identifies Symbolism with the capacity of content to be communicated directly through form.[29] Heller's approach is particularly important for my understanding of Symbolism due to the strong emphasis he places on technique and its relation to meaning. Heller's aim, however, is to establish an absolute set of criteria which can be employed to distinguish Symbolist artworks from other related but different tendencies, and in

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which was seen in Amsterdam, Edinburg and Helsinki in 2012-2013, and the accompanying publication (*Van Gogh to Kandinsky. Symbolist Landscape in Europe 1880-1910*, 2012, ed. by Frances Fowle) in particular have emphasized the role of Symbolism as part of modernism.

[24] In addition to her doctoral dissertation from 1966, Sarjas-Korte has produced numerous articles on fin-de-siècle art and culture, some of which have been published in Swedish, English, French, and German. A revised and supplemented version of the doctoral dissertation was published in Swedish translation in 1981.

[25] Tihinen 2008. Tihinen's analyses, which draw from a wide variety of sources including literature and poetry, popular culture, science, and philosophy, are primarily concerned with historical reconstructions, but on a more implicit level these are reflected in the light of present-day culture where these issues also hold a central place.

[26] Facos 2009; Larson 2005; Mathews 1999; Silverman 2000.

[27] Clair 1995a; Rapetti 1995; Wittlich 1995.

[28] Goldwater 1979; Heller 1985. Goldwater's book *Symbolism* was published posthumously six years after the author's death.

[29] Goldwater 1979, 18.

order to do this, he believes we must recover the exact meaning of Symbolism as it was understood in the 1890s.[30] In comparison, my approach is based on an understanding of Symbolism as both a historical phenomenon and a narrative structure produced in the process of art historical research. I believe, therefore, that reconstructing the Symbolist phenomenon "exactly as it was" is neither possible nor desirable.

As a historical phenomenon, Symbolism started to disintegrate before it had even been properly established. As the art historian Robert R. Delevoy puts it, "the mythical discourse the word denotes began to disperse and ramify even before it could be identified." Delevoy has described the Symbolist art scene as "an archipelago of lonely islands."[31] This poetic description seems to correspond very well at least to the way many fin-de-siècle artists themselves wanted to perceive their situation. The quest for individuality and originality meant that they did not wish to be identified with any particular group. In addition, there was a great confusion of terms and "isms" in the late nineteenth century. The Swedish artist Olof Sager-Nelson's report of the Paris art scene in 1894 offers a revealing illustration of the situation:

> *Here are so many directions, the kind of searching that I don't think has ever existed before, but also decadence like never before. Here are Pointists, Synthetic Impressionists, Neo-Impressionists, Pre-Raphaelites, Primitive Symbolists, etc. Classifications make me sick ... The only true symbolism that exists is in ourselves, and it expresses itself in so much nobler and more credible ways than what these men are capable of.*[32]

The Symbolist poet, author, and art critic Albert Aurier wrote in 1891 that a new term in the form of "iste" was needed for the new direction in art led by Paul Gauguin: "synthétistes, idéistes, symbolistes, comme il plaira."[33] The artist and critic Maurice Denis, on the other hand, had in 1890 tried to establish the term "neo-traditionnisme," but he later abandoned it in favour of "symbolisme." The essays published by Aurier in the beginning of the decade were important contributions to the theory of Symbolism in visual art but his death at the age of 27 in 1892 left the issues unresolved.[34] Gauguin sailed off to Tahiti in 1891, to return only briefly in 1893-95 before his permanent departure to the South Seas. These events left the young generation of artists without an obvious leader. Therefore, as Goldwater has pointed out, there is "the danger of redefining definitions that at the time were not so

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[30] Heller 1985, 147.

[31] Delevoy 1982 [1978], 12.

[32] "Här äro många rigtningar, ett sökande som det nog aldrig har varit, men också en dekadance som aldrig förr. Här e pointister, syntetiska impressionister, neo-impressionister, prérafaeliter, primitiva symbolister m fl. Klassificeringen äcklar mig. ... Den enda sanna symbolism som existerar är den i oss själva och den tar sig uttryck mycket mycket noblare o trovärdigare än dessa herrar förmår." From a letter to the artist Albert Engström, 23 April 1894. Cited from Torell 2004, 113.

[33] Aurier 1893, 209 ("Le Symbolisme en peinture - Paul Gauguin").

[34] See Simpson 1999, 249.

clear, theories whose general drift was understood but whose structure was still vague, concepts whose logic was less important than their resonance."[35]

Symbolism has often been understood as being anti-scientific but this is an oversimplification of the case. The symbolist artists and writers were opposed to the positivist attitude that they associated with all the negative sides of modernity. Aurier, for example, stated that mysticism was the only thing that could still save the society from brutality, sensuality, and utilitarianism brought on by positivist science.[36] However, the opposition to science was often more a question of rhetoric than anything else. The positivistic science of the day constituted a useful opponent in the artists' self-reflection, but in truth they utilized many scientific ideas in their art, and they did not necessarily consider science as being antithetical to mysticism.[37] Moreover, it was specifically the contemporary natural sciences that the Symbolists were criticizing. According to Aurier, mathematics was the only true science, and he conceived it to be closely related with mysticism. Mathematics was an exact and rational science whereas the modern natural sciences, "the obtuse bastards of science," were inexact and incapable of producing accurate solutions; hence they inevitably led to scepticism and a fear of thinking.[38]

At the end of the nineteenth century art shared a fundamental mission with both science and mysticism; in their unique yet not entirely separate ways they all strived at revealing unknown and invisible worlds.[39] This mission was supported by new technological innovations: microscopes were employed to discover the unknown worlds of the infinitely small, the microbes and cellular structures; telescopes were directed towards the starry nebulas above, inspiring wild dreams of space travel and fantasies of planetary inhabitants; the newly discovered x-rays enabled one to see through matter that previously had been impenetrable for human vision; and underneath the surface of the earth palaeontologists were exploring lost worlds of ancient monsters and subhuman creatures. Scientists and mystics alike were discovering invisible energies flowing through matter, such as electricity or magnetic fluid. Scientists employed technical tools and other scientific methods to reveal their discoveries, but the scientific discourse of the time also contained a fair amount of speculation. Mystics, on the other hand, tended to rely on introspection, believing that the truth can be comprehended in a state of mystical revelation. However, to

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[35] Goldwater 1979, 78.

[36] "… c'est le mysticisme qu'il faut aujourd'hui, et c'est le mysticisme qui seul peut sauver notre société de l'abrutissement, du sensualisme et de l'utilitarisme." Aurier 1893, 201 ("Essai sur une nouvelle méthode de critique").

[37] Aurier, for instance, refers to Charles Henry's scientific theories of line and colour, which he finds interesting but all too superficial. Aurier 1893, 302 ("Les Peintres symbolistes")

[38] " ... et quand je dis: "la science", il ne faut point entendre la mathématique, la seule science à proprement parler, mais bien ces bâtardes obtuses de la science, les sciences naturelles. Or, les sciences naturelles, ou sciences inexactes, par opposition aux sciences rationnelles ou exactes, étant, par définition, insusceptibles de solutions absolues, conduisent fatalement au scepticisme et à la peur de la pensée." Aurier 1893, 175 ("Essai sur une nouvelle méthode de critique")

[39] On the Symbolists' attitude to science, see Burhan 1979, 20-24; Cordulack 2002; Larson 2005.

describe this visionary state, they often borrowed from the language of modern science, describing it in terms of hypnosis or somnambulism.[40]

Various forms of mysticism and occultism provided a welcome antidote to secular views that threatened to altogether wipe out any kind of idea of a soul. However, as the cultural historian Alex Owen, who has studied the connection between modernism and occultism, has pointed out, the occult conceptions of selfhood were not so far removed from the scientific formulations. Owen explains the occult self as being "conceived in the context of the timeless teachings of the 'ancient wisdom' but ... predicated on a modern elision of the self and consciousness that underwrote the most recent formulations of subjectivity."[41] Modern occultists held that the recent scientific discoveries like electricity, hypnotism, or the theory of evolution were nothing but new formulations of knowledge that had previously been part of the secret doctrine and available only for initiates. They understood scientific explorations into the realm of the invisible as proof that modern science was getting ever closer to ancient wisdom.[42] To complete this task, modern science would have to let go of the external, the surface of things, and instead, like the science of the ancient temples, concentrate on revealing the invisible. The French poet and occultist Edouard Schuré wrote in his highly influential book *The Great Initiates* (*Les Grands Initiés*, 1889) that the ancient science "did not describe the universe as born of the blind dance of atoms, but it generated atoms through the vibrations of the universal soul."[43] These notions appealed to the artists who were not contended with copying the objects of the visible world but were searching for revelation through their art. Furthermore, many scientists were willing to admit that there existed unknowable and mysterious forces outside the realm of science. For instance, the German naturalist and philosopher Ernst Haeckel, whose ideas were very popular among the Symbolists, sought reconciliation between science and religion.[44]

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[40] See, for example, du Prel 1885, 120-159 and passim; 1896 [1854], 200-201; Schuré 1977 [1889], 340, 345. On metaphors of hypnosis in the Symbolist aesthetic, see Mathews 1999, 76-78; Rapetti 1995; Rapetti 2005, 254-264.

[41] Owen 2004, 116. A brief note on the terminology: The terms "mysticism" and "occultism" are used here (as often is the case) rather loosely and often interchangeably. Owen has explained their difference in the following way: mysticism refers to an immediate experience of a mystical union whereas occultism specifically means a systematic study of a hidden reality. SeeOwen 2004, 21-22. However, for the purposes of this study it is generally not necessary to differentiate between the terms. Both can be understood as referring to a broad and eclectic spectrum of beliefs and ideas with the shared notion that there are hidden realms beyond everyday reality. Lynn L. Sharp has employed the term spiritism (a translation of the French word "spiritisme") to refer to the widely spread French phenomenon which was based on the belief in reincarnation and spirit communication – related movements in the English speaking world are usually called "spiritualism" but in French this term is understood in the sense of being the opposite of materialism. The French spiritist movement, which was founded in mid-century by Allan Kardec, is an earlier phenomenon than the fin-de-siècle upsurge of occultism, but it did continue to exist alongside occultism, and the two were in many ways interconnected. Their main difference, according to Sharp, is that while the earlier spiritism incorporated ideas of social reform, such as socialism and the equality of women, fin-de-siècle occultism was more concerned with the individual. Sharp 2006, xi, 91-122, 163-193.

[42] See Owen 2004, 34-40; Williams 2003, 160-161.

[43] Schuré 1977 [1889], 194.

[44] See Haeckel 1895 [1892] ("Monism as connecting Religion and Science"); Di Gregorio 2005, 487-498; Richards 2008, 343-390.

Modernity appeared to have separated the self from the world, and it seemed that art would offer the best available means for bridging the gap. The culture of the fin-de-siècle was characterized by a quest to find something more fundamental than the fleeting world of appearance. Nothing was to be taken for granted, all beliefs and ideologies had to be tried and tested. Whatever the fundamental truth was, there appeared to be no other way to reach it but through the self. The modern experience where, "All that is solid melts into the air," as Marx put it in the Communist Manifesto, could offer an exhilarating sense of liberation: the modern individual, liberated as he was from theological constrains, was free to establish his own truths and formulate his own vision of life. But this freedom, which had no solid foundation outside the subjective conception of the individual, could very easily result in a sense of complete meaninglessness.[45]

The philosopher Andrew Bowie has identified two opposed responses to modernity, exemplified by German Idealism and the philosophy of Schopenhauer, which, despite their opposition, both attach a great significance to art. Art is considered "either as that which provides images of what the world could look like if we were to realise our freedom and thus establish an appropriate relationship to the rest of nature, or as the sole remaining means of creating illusions which will enable us to face a meaningless existence."[46] Moreover, these two positions also "share a suspicion that the dominance of quantifying forms of rationality as the increasingly exclusive principle of modern life is part of what gives rise to the crises of meaning in modernity.[47] These opposing tendencies are reflected in the conflicted nature of the Symbolist aesthetic. The challenge of maintaining the ideal unity of art and life while at the same time realizing its impossibility led to pessimism, melancholia, and world-weariness. Yet, the culture of the fin-de-siècle also contained a strong belief in progress and liberation through art. As Aurier put it in 1892, "There will be a century of art, joy, and truth, following a century of science, despair, and deceit."[48]

Although Max Weber famously associated modernity with the "disenchantment" of the world, alongside this process of secularization and rationalization there was a strong current of "re-enchantment." Those who were disappointed with the traditional forms of religion often sought for alternative spiritual outlooks instead of rejecting all religiosity.[49] In her book *Van Gogh and Gauguin: the Search for Sacred Art*, Debora Silverman has emphasized the critical role of religion in the development of modern art, not merely in terms of subject matter, but first and foremost as something that affects the very foundations of aesthetic thinking. Hence, she has focused on the ways different forms of religion affected conceptions of the status of the self, the value of the image, and the meaning of the visible world. She describes the motivation behind the artistic mission of van

[45] Berman 1982, 15-36.

[46] Bowie 2003, 4.

[47] Bowie 2003, 4.

[48] "Ce sera le siècle de l'Art, de la joie, de la vérité, succédant au siècle de la Science, de la désespérance, du mensonge."Aurier 1893, 204 ("Les Peintres symbolistes").

[49] See Sharp 2006, xiii-xviii; Owen 2004, 10-11.

Gogh and Gauguin as an attempt to "discover a new and modern form of sacred art to fill the void left by the religious systems that they were struggling to abandon but that nonetheless left indelible imprints in their consciousness, shaping their theories of life, attitudes towards reality, choice of subjects and repertoire of artistic techniques." Despite their personal and artistic differences, they both in their own ways worked towards a shared goal: "to achieve spiritual ends through the plastic means of pigment, canvas, and primer."[50]

The purpose of the present study is to generate novel perspectives into how the self and its relationship with the world were understood and experienced at the fin-de-siècle. Moreover, its aim is to explore how these dynamic and multifaceted conceptions of selfhood suggest parallels with questions of art and creativity in ways that continue to affect our perceptions of these issues even today. The first chapter serves as an opening into the questions of the self and art at the fin-de-siècle. It initiates the focal points of this study: the meaning and constitution of the self, the Symbolist aesthetic, the creative imagination as an idea that conceptualizes the interconnectedness of the self and art, and the notions of indeterminacy and open-endedness as central components of the artistic practice of the fin-de-siècle. The issues that are introduced here will be taken up and reworked throughout the study in connection with particular artworks.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 each take as a starting point a specific work of art. Chapter 2 examines Pekka Halonen's self-portrait from 1893 in the context of the special issues of seeing and knowing that are inherent in the genre of self-portraiture. Halonen's self-portrait, which refuses to answer the viewers gaze, questions the traditional link between seeing and knowing, and hence constitutes a radical break with the tradition of self-portraiture. It presents the self as a process of developing consciousness. The artist seeks a union with nature, and this mystical experience transforms his vision, so that he becomes capable of seeing the spiritual dimension of things.

Chapter 3 is centred on Edvard Munch's painting *Vision* (1892), which is discussed in terms of a dynamic interplay of mind and body, surface and depth, and ideal and disintegration. If in Halonen's self-portrait the experience of the artist is represented as an ecstatic, although perhaps somewhat frightening, ascent into a mystical realm, *Vision* embodies a rather more painful descent into the unknown abysses of the unconscious. However, it also suggests that perhaps new kinds of truths may be discovered through this experience which shatters the foundations of the individual self.

Chapter 4 discusses Ellen Thesleff's small and intimate self-portrait, which provides an exceptionally rich basis for an examination of notions of modern selfhood at the fin-de-siècle and their relation to art, science, and mysticism. Thesleff's self-portrait has features that resist the idea of the work of art as a finite object, and its introspective technique can be seen to contribute to the meaning as much as the subject. Hence, it demonstrates that the mystical and occult ideologies at the fin-de-siècle were an important factor in the development of a thoroughly

[50] Silverman 2000, 3, 6, 13-14.

modern conception of art which no longer perceived the work of art as a closed material entity but as indeterminate and "processual," and existing in an imaginary space where the artist and the viewer come together.

Chapter 5 explores the special case of Strindberg's photographic self-portraits, relating them to questions of photographic subjectivity, and to his experimentation on the borders or art and science. The aim of Strindberg's photography was to capture the essence of being with the help of a mechanical device. Here a new technological innovation is utilized for magical and mystical purposes. Similarly to Thesleff's self-portrait, Strindberg's photographs reflect on the subjective and objective dimensions of art, and like Thesleff's self-image that is oriented towards the creative process rather than the end product, Strindberg's photographic experimentations seek to release the image from the constraints of materiality.

Chapter 6 looks into the complex relationship between the self and the world. It expands on many of the issues that have already been referred to throughout the study. This chapter elaborates on the problem of the disintegrating self and its parallels with the structure of the artwork through an examination of two creative processes, the *Frieze of Life* by Munch and the *Great Relief* by Willumsen. The purpose of these discussions is to illustrate the dream of expressing the totality of the self and the world through art. This is manifested in a "processual" orientation that no longer limits itself to a single work of art. The *Frieze of Life* and the *Great Relief* can be seen as attempts to create total works of art which, like the Greek tragedy as it was understood by Nietzsche, would formulate a synthesis of the Apollonian and the Dionysian powers; works of art, that is, that would acknowledge the horror of existence but would still be able to affirm life.

In order to familiarize myself with the cultural context of the fin-de-siècle, I have read a large number of both literary and scientific texts from the period, majority of them in their original language. For direct quotes I have used translations whenever satisfactory ones have been available. In the cases where I use my own translations I always provide the original text in a footnote. However, the aim of this study has not been merely to interpret the artworks in the light of the cultural context, but rather to see them as active participants in the discourses of the period and as sites of intellectual and artistic reflection. As I shall go on to argue, a certain sense of indeterminacy and a multiplicity of meanings become 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 expresses 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.*[51]

Therefore, my approach in this study is intentionally eclectic; I do not want to subject these incredibly rich works of art to a particular theoretical approach.

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[51] The Munch Museum, MM N 29, 1890–1892. English translation cited from Tøjner 2003, 134.

Instead, I have drawn from a very broad spectrum of sources, and rather than explaining the artworks I am hoping that my analysis will make them appear more complex. Mieke Bal has formulated quite well the underlying attitude that I, too, have been following throughout the research process. Art, according to Bal, "is both entirely artificial – that is, not 'natural' – and entirely real – that is, not separated from the ideological constructions that determine the social decisions made by people every day." From this it follows that "nothing about art is innocent: It is neither inevitable, nor without consequences."[52]

[52] Bal 2006 [1991], 5.

1. **Beda Stjernschantz**, *Aphorism*, 1895.

2. **Beda Stjernschantz**, *Pastoral (Primavera)*, 1897.

1 THE SELF AS ART

It is meaningful, we believe, to speak of a poetic analysis of man. The psychologists do not know everything. Poets have other insights into man.

— Gaston Bachelard[53]

COGITO ERGO SUM?

What is the *true* self and where is it located? Does it reside in the physical form of the individual or in the mind? Can these two be separated? Is there a part of the self that can survive death? How is this self related to the world? These were all questions that the fin-de-siècle artists, writers, and scientists tackled with great enthusiasm. Throughout the nineteenth century, the Cartesian conception of the self as an immaterial substance separated from the material body had increasingly been called into question. Yet the belief that the "I" refers to an individual, immaterial, and perhaps even immortal soul was extremely persistent. Rather than a belief, it is perhaps more to be seen as a continual hope, or a dream, or an ideal. The painting *Aphorism* (1895, fig. 1) by the Finnish artist Beda Stjernschantz (1867-1919) may serve here as an introduction to the complex issues concerning the self in this period. The artist's model was her 13-year-old brother Torsten, but clearly this painting is not to be seen merely as a portrait. On the bottom left of the canvas is an inscription "Cogito, ergo sum" and below it the name "Descartes". The boy, dressed in black robes, meets the viewer's gaze with a solemn look on his pale young face. His hands are making a sign: the fingers are joined together so that they appear to be forming the number eight. Is it the symbol of infinity that he is presenting to us?

The boy's young age suggest a connection with the themes of childhood and puberty. In the nineteenth century, childhood came to be associated with purity, innocence, originality, and mystical union with the cosmos. The French twentieth-century philosopher Gaston Bachelard has written about the nucleus of childhood

[53] Bachelard 1971 [1960], 124-125.

which lies permanently hidden within the human soul in a manner that echoes these nineteenth-century conceptions. According to him, art has a privileged perspective into the self, because it is in a state of poetic reverie that we can descend back into this unlimited existence of timelessness and immutability. Poetic reverie can awaken within us the cosmicity of childhood, but it is impossible, even in a work of art, to make the original reverie come back to life. Therefore, a sense of nostalgia and longing always enters into poems about this sublime state of happiness. It is a longing towards a place beyond time, where nothing ever changes, nothing is ever lost. The search for the child within thus becomes a melancholic affair.[54]

Arthur Rimbaud was one of the most central exemplars of the Romantic-modern preoccupation with childhood, and his work has had a huge impact on modern art and literature. This is no doubt partly due to his powerful and fascinating personality – indeed as a poet whose literary career was over before the age of twenty, he is in his own person a perfect embodiment of the child-genius. The theme of childhood is prevalent throughout his oeuvre, from the early poems, through *Une Saison en enfer* to the *Illuminations*, and there is always a connection between the child and the poet. Rimbaud's poetry exemplifies the fascinating duality that permeates nineteenth century conceptions of childhood: on the one hand, childhood refers to something forever lost, an original paradisiac existence that can never be regained; yet, on the other hand, the child within is understood as the inner self, the core of our being. The child symbolizes both loss and persistence.[55] Another painting by Beda Stjernschantz captures this sense of nostalgia for a timeless existence. The painting known as *Pastoral* or *Primavera* (1897, fig. 2) represents a landscape of eternal spring where primroses are forever blooming, the trees are just bursting into leaf and the river of time stands still. The beautiful young people who inhabit this idyllic landscape have all sunken into a state of blissful reverie. The girl dressed in white in the foreground is gathering spring flowers into her lap, the young boy behind her is playing the flute, and further away, another young boy is staring into the stagnant water of the river whilst a girl is placing a wreath of flowers on his head.

The boy by the river could be Narcissus – perhaps the one we encounter in André Gide's *Le Traité du Narcisse* (1891), that is, Narcissus relocated in the Garden of Eden where the beautiful forms blossom only once because everything is already perfect and nothing needs to change.[56] Or, maybe he is Antinous, the beautiful youth who was loved by Emperor Hadrian. In Victor Rydberg's poem, which Stjernschantz had a few years earlier copied into her notebook, Antinous is pictured in eternal springtime on a blossoming shore with a lotus wreath on his head.[57] According to the legend, Antinous drowned in the Nile, and it was believed

[54] Bachelard 1971 [1960], 97-141; on the cult of childhood, see also Boas 1969.

[55] Ahearn 1983, 16-22.

[56] Gide 1946 [1891], 15-21; on Gide's Narcissus, see also Levine 1994, 140-145.

[57] Rydberg's poem was published together with an essay on Antinous in the collection of essays on cultural history entitled *Romerska kejsare i marmor* (Roman Emperors in Marble) which appeared in 1877. Rydberg 1897, 213-234. Stjernschantz's friend and colleague, the Finnish artist Magnus Enckell also wrote a poem about Antinous which was probably inspired by Rydberg's treatment of the theme. Enckell identified strongly with the

that he sacrificed himself for the sake of his lover. Rydberg's poem reflects the idea that this sacrificial death endowed Antinous with the secrets of life and death. Generation after generation goes by, each one trying in vain to wake the youth from his dream so that he would reveal his secret. Only Antinous, who remains in the state of timeless reverie, can perceive the eternal and immutable truth beneath the forever flowing river of change which carries with it nothing but appearances.

The child within, the core of the self, the paradisiac sate – these are all reflections of an ideal that is impossible to attain. The longing for a return to childhood entices a longing for timelessness and happiness. It is, in this sense, a pertinent metaphor for the mission of the Symbolist art of the fin-de-siècle which strives at representing the truth behind appearances. The child, having only recently appeared into this world, is still close to her original home in timelessness. If we were able to get in touch with the child within, then perhaps we could regain what we have lost by coming into being in time. After the loss, memory becomes the primary means of reaching back to the state of unity. The memory of paradise is buried deep within us, it is the foundation of our being, but it can never be reached. Obstfelder also wrote about the longing towards this childhood sense of being at home in the cosmos. This passage reflects the belief that to find again this sense of cosmic unity would mean finding oneself and finding peace:

> *I yearn for the world of my childhood. The sun that shone over me then, the evening star that rose above the grove, the grass I lay in. What I saw, what I heard, what I breathed in, these things I want to see, to hear to breathe in anew. It is as though something had gone out of me, as though I had been living in a dream, as though I would find myself again when those things which were then around me and within me returned again. Then there would be peace, great peace.*[58]

The young boy in *Aphorism* is wearing a black robe that gives him a timeless appearance and alludes to a world of mystical initiation. He is on the verge of forgetting, perhaps has already forgotten, but he can still remember that he has forgotten. Therefore, he can serve as a master and initiator for those who have already sunken so deep into forgetfulness that they have been deprived of all connection with what has been lost.

What about the reference to Descartes? Should we see the painting as an illustration of Descartes' famous statement that the act of thought proves existence? The Cartesian *cogito*, the very cornerstone of autonomous and rational selfhood, presents the self as consciousness, as the self-awareness of the thinking subject. It separates the thinking mind from the material body: we can only be certain of the existence of this consciousness, this pure intellectual being, everything else remains

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figure of Antinous and connected the mythological message of the story with a mystical idea of beauty, timelessness, and perfection. Sarajas-Korte 1966 168-171.

[58] Obstfelder 1987 [1900], 36. Similar considerarions on the idea of childhood can also be found in Enckell's notebook entries from the 1890s, see Sarajas-Korte 1966, 158.

doubtful.[59] The cogito marks the beginning of modern philosophy in the sense that the truth was no longer conceived to rely on a pre-established pattern imprinted on the universe by a deity; instead, it was founded on the rational capacity of the human mind which had to legitimate itself as the source of truth. For Descartes, God was still needed to ascertain the connection between ourselves and the universal order of things but the introspective philosophers of the following centuries, most importantly Immanuel Kant and the German Idealists, shifted the orientation of philosophy more and more towards the subject.[60]

In the latter part of the twentieth century, the Cartesian view of the self as unitary, transcendental, and rational was radically questioned by postmodern critics. Indeed, it became a symbol of modernity and everything that seemed to be wrong with it.[61] The origins of this development can be located in the nineteenth-century discourses of selfhood. Romantic idealism at the beginning of the century had already initiated a shift away from the rational and empirical conception of man towards a model based on inwardness and intuition. Investigations into the unconscious realm of the human mind constituted an additional force that was shattering the established criteria of selfhood. Towards the end of the century, Romantic spirituality was giving way to more complex and increasingly distressing perspectives.

The philosophy of Schopenhauer was one of the central influences behind the artistic return to self. For Schopenhauer, the knowing "I", the subject that thinks and perceives, is not our real self. In fact, it is nothing but a function of the brain. Our experience creates a dichotomy between subject and object but in the world in itself no such division exists. The "I" that perceives is not a thing at all and it is not identified with the individual human being. The fact that we think of ourselves as unified selves is, according to Schopenhauer, a "miracle *par excellence*."[62]

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[59] As Jerrod Seigel has noted, the Cartesian certainty emerged from doubt, which functioned "as a kind of giant broom, sweeping the mind clean of questionable and unproved opinions in order to prepare it for the reception of truth." The one thing that could not be doubted was the existence of the doubter: "To doubt one's own existence is only to pile doubt on doubt, to repeat and extend the doubters own deed; hence each time his existence is called into question it is by that very act only reaffirmed again." Seigel argues, however, that the customary tendency to establish a general theory of selfhood on the basis of the cogito may in fact be somewhat erroneous. In *The Passions of the Soul* Descartes described the soul as being intimately connected with the body, and even in the *Discourse on Method* "he needed to regard the thinking subject at one and the same time as purely reflective and as composite, since only in the first guise could its existence survive the winds of doubt, and only in the second could it establish the required contrast between its own imperfections and the perfect being that was God." Therefore, it may even be asserted that Descartes did not have a single theory of selfhood, and that the cogito only applied to the subject of knowledge. Nevertheless, Descartes yearning for mathematical exactitude led him to consider the multi-dimensional notion voiced by the cogito as superior to the other perspectives. Seigel 2005, 56-57, 73-74.

[60] See Bowie 2003; Seigel 2005, 56-74; Taylor 1989, 143-158.

[61] For a discussion on the postmodern critique of Cartesianism in the context of visual culture, see Doy 2005, 11-33.

[62] Janaway 1994, 43. Regarding the philosophy of Schopenhauer, I have found Christopher Janaway's interpretations particularly useful, and I am primarily relying on his views in my own account. His book *Schopenhauer* (1994) provides a very appoachable introduction to the basics of Schopenhauers theory, and *Self and World in Schopenhauer's Philosophy* (1989) focuses on the aspects that are particularly relevant for the present study.

Individuality is an illusion; and not only that, it is also the source of our suffering. The thing in itself, the metaphysical essence of things, according to Schopenhauer, is "will." The will manifests itself in the human being as an essentially blind process of striving; in the unconscious functions of nourishment, reproduction, or survival. The misery and suffering of everyday life is associated with the will. Art could offer a partial release from the will and hence from suffering but a permanent escape could only be achieved through love and mystical ascetism. The Symbolists were attracted to Schopenhauer's because of the great importance he gave to art. Moreover, they identified with the underlying sense of yearning for something more. In this "metaphysical homesickness,"[63] they recognized an affinity with the Platonic theories that formed the basis of their aesthetic thinking. The opening words of Schopenhauer's main work, "The world is my representation," became a catchphrase for the fin-de-siècle. This sentence was understood as a justification for extreme subjectivism, and many admirers of Schopenhauer's philosophy perhaps never came any further than that in their studies.[64] However, for some fin-de-siècle minds the popular Schopenhauerian philosophy may have served as an initiation into a more profound perception of idealistic philosophy.

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has traced the modern concept of the self based on an idea of inwardness from its origins in Plato's conception of the self, through Augustine and Descartes, to its culmination in Romanticism, and its continuation on to the twentieth century.[65] According to Taylor, the starting point of this idea of the self is in the self-assured certainty of the Cartesian method but Romanticism brought with it a radical transformation. The Romantic idea of inwardness was based on the view that we find the truth particularly in our feelings. Self-examination could no longer take us to God but it could still deliver us beyond ourselves: into the larger nature from which we emerge. This, however, can only be accessed through an inner voice in us. It means the discovery of a new power of expressive self-articulation, that is, the power of the creative imagination. This by no means replaces the earlier power of disengaged rational control, but these two contradictory views continue to exist side by side: "A modern who recognizes both these powers is constitutionally in tension."[66]

To return, then, to Stjernschantz's painting, Stewen has suggested that perhaps the cogito is not presented to the viewer as an answer to the problem of existence but as a question, and the enigmatic position of the fingers anticipates a difficult answer. Perhaps Descartes' words in *Aphorism* should be read through a late nineteenth

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[63] Young 2005, 5.

[64] See Burhan 1979, 21-22.

[65] Taylor argues in his book *Sources of the Self* (1989) that the modern self is based on an idea of inwardness, that is, "the sense of ourselves as beings with inner depths, and the connected notion that we are 'selves.'" This kind of self-conceptualization may seem quite natural to us, but Taylor emphasizes its historical specificity: it is the mode that has become dominant in the modern West. Taylor 1989, x, 111.

[66] Taylor 1989, 390. In addition to the notion of inwardness, the other important components of modern identity that Taylor takes into account in his survey are the affirmation of ordinary life, and the notion of nature as an inner moral source. Taylor 1989, 131-135, 156.

century "deconstruction" of the cogito. [67] In *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) Nietzsche writes:

> *... a thought comes when 'it' wishes, and not when 'I' wish, so that it is falsification of the facts of the case to say that the subject 'I' is the condition of the predicate 'think.' It thinks; but that this 'it' is precisely the famous old 'ego' is, to put it mildly, only a supposition, an assertion, and assuredly not an 'immediate certainty.' ... perhaps someday we shall accustom ourselves, including the logicians, to get along without the little 'it' (which is all that is left of the honest little ego).*[68]

Nietzsche's conception of the self as a bundle of struggling and drifting drives with no unified core was among the most acute threats presented against the autonomy of the self. The self, for Nietzsche, was not an entity. The idea of a unified subject was nothing but a fiction, and on this fictitious belief we have built our conception of everything else in the world.[69] If we eliminate the subject, then the object will also disappear, and, as a consequence, we have also gotten rid of such "hypothetical entities" as "substance", "matter," and "spirit."[70] Nietzsche's views are in many ways contradictory to the idealistic perspective that was important for the Symbolist artists who in their art sought a connection with the truth beyond appearance. However, as I will go on to argue, this idealism was perhaps more to be seen as a dream and an aspiration than a true philosophical foundation for their art. Although these artists desperately wanted to believe in some kind of higher level of existence, they found that keeping their faith in the modern world was getting increasingly difficult. Nietzsche provided an alternative perception of truth. Whereas the idealistic vein of thought considers the truth as good and something we need to aspire for, in Nietzsche's mind the truth, on the contrary, is too horrible for us to sustain.[71] In both cases, however, the truth is something that threatens our sense of individual subjectivity. In Neoplatonic philosophy, self-knowledge is the means to reach the universal truth, the Absolute, The God within, or the realm of Ideas – whatever one wishes to call it. The experience of the individual is nonetheless the only way to attain this fundamental level of reality, and it can only be reached in fleeting moments of ecstasy when awareness of the lower levels of the self is lost.[72]

EXPRESSING THE INEXPRESSIBLE

The French art historian Jean Clair has described Symbolism as the last heir of Romantic *Naturphilosophie* in its effort to unite man and the world. Clair maintains

[67] Stewen 1998, 151.

[68] Nietzsche 1968 [1886], 214.

[69] On Nietzsche's conception of the self, see Kain 2009 36-41, 51, 55, and passim; Nehamas 1985, 141-234; Seigel 2005, 537-567;

[70] Nietzsche 1968 [1901], 297-298 (*The Will to Power*).

[71] See Kain 2009, 15-26.

[72] See Hadot 1998 [1989], 23-34.

that the very word *sym-bolon* conveys the fundamental idea behind the Symbolist project, which he perceives as "... nothing but a desperate attempt to re-establish links between fragmented representations of the subject, to recapture a unity threatened by the dislocating forces that the new psychology was only just beginning to define and remedy." Symbolist artists sought unity in the Romantic spirit but at the same time they realized the impossibility of attaining it by means of a material work of art. Clair has observed that in addition to the unifying tendency (sýmbolon: "to throw together") there was also a diabolical tendency (diabolos: "that which divides") which leads to psychological as well as physical disintegration. Indeed, he notes that Romanticism already contained in itself the seed of its own dissolution, that is, "The crisis of the subject and the collapse of the primacy of the conscious mind."[73] The Symbolist movement was powered by a 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.

The German art historian Hans Belting 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.[74] His claim is that this seemingly auto-destructive tendency has in fact been precisely what has fuelled art and driven it to search for new means of expression. 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. The old masterpieces of bygone eras, thereafter, gained an aura of melancholy for they seemed to have succeeded in the task that for the modern artist had become impossible to complete.[75] At the same time, these artworks, as sublime as they were, appeared to be completely separated from the modern existence of the fin-de-siècle artist. Consequently, new forms of art would need to be invented if art was to have any significance in the modern world. In order to keep the

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[73] Clair 1995a, 20; Clair 1995b, 126, 128.

[74] In his book *The Invisible Masterpiece* (2001) Belting presents a conceptual history of art centred on the idea of absolute art. He traces the history and development of the modern conception 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.

[75] Belting 2001, 12. There probably is not a 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 Nochlin 1994, 7-8.

ideal alive, then, one would have to somehow liberate it from the constraints of the art object.[76]

The starting point for Belting's thesis is the novel *The Unknown Masterpiece* (*Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*, 1831) by Honoré de Balzac. It is a story about a work of art that remained hidden inside the studio of the old artist Frenhofer for several years. This painting was to become the artist's ultimate masterpiece, but when he finally revealed it to his friends, they could see nothing but a wall of colours. Frenhofer had destroyed the whole painting by effacing and repainting it time and time again in the effort of making a work of art that would surpass reality. The story of Frenhofer's failed masterpiece has both fascinated and unnerved modern artists like Cézanne, Gauguin, and Picasso. Belting discusses several real-life versions of the story, such as Cézannes metamorphoses of *The Bathers* or Rodin's *Gates of Hell*, which just like Frenhofer's masterpiece gained a mythical status by remaining in an unfinished state in the artist's studio. These are examples of works of art in which the creative process of the artist has gained mastery over the end product. So in fact, as Belting puts it:

> *... the long-hidden work was not, after all, Frenhofer's masterpiece, but a failed attempt to make* art itself *visible in an authoritative and definitive epiphany. While in real works, art necessarily becomes an object, the ideal of art had to be released from such reification in order to serve the unbound imagination. As long as no-one was able to create the kind of work that qualified as absolute art, painters and sculptors could continue in the hope that one day this remote goal would be realized.*[77]

I have quoted this passage because it sums up Belting's central thesis in an illustrative and clear manner, and even more importantly, because it contains concepts that are central for this study and for my application of Belting's theory. These concepts are "epiphany" and "imagination." The concept of imagination, which Belting does not treat in his book apart from a couple of passing remarks, is essential for a profound understanding of modern art and its shift away from the material object. The conflict between the work and idea can also be considered as a conflict between imagination and its manifestation.

The concept of the symbol as it was understood in the Romantic context provides the basis for the aesthetic theory of Symbolism.[78] The meaning of the

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[76] Belting sees the new kinds of artistic practice that emerged in the twentieth century, such as performance art, conceptual art or video installation, as manifestations of the attempt to free art from the compulsory effort to produce works, while still holding on to the goal of producing art. Belting 2001, 14-15.

[77] Belting 2001, 11.

[78] The centrality of Romanticism and the post-Kantian philosophical tradition has been discussed by several writers as an important element of the intellectual background of modern art (e.g. Bowie 2003; Mul 1999; Rosenblum 1975; Wiedman 1979). Studies on Symbolist art, however, usually have not laid special emphasis on this aspect. At least to a certain extent, this can be explained by the fact that Romantic ideas were often transmitted indirectly through the writings of Baudelaire or through mystical ideologies, for example. Indeed, in the eclectic cultural climate of the fin-de-siècle, it is often very difficult to identify the specific sources for particular ideas. Nevertheless, in an intellectual environment where the "Latin" civilization was perceived to be in a state of decadence, and all things German were given high prestige, it was not unexpected that artists turned towards German philosophy in order to find inspiration and support for their beliefs. Certainly, there were those

symbol in the specific Romantic sense can best be articulated as an opposition to allegory. The philosopher Tzvetan Todorov summarizes it in the following way in his book *Theories of the Symbol*:

> *[The symbol] is productive, intransitive, motivated; it achieves the fusion of contraries; it is and it signifies at the same time; its content eludes reason: it expresses the inexpressible. In contrast, allegory ... is already made, transitive, arbitrary, pure signification, an expression of reason.*[79]

This modern conception was initiated by Kant, who identified the symbol with intuition rather than abstract reasoning. In the formulations of Goethe and Schelling, among others, the symbol was then established as a cornerstone of Romantic theory.[80] The symbol evokes a visualization of the invisible; it is a revelation of something that otherwise would be beyond our reach. Art is no longer understood in terms of imitation but as *revelation*. Thomas Carlyle, for instance, wrote:

> *In the Symbol proper, what we can call a Symbol, there is ever, more or less distinctly and directly, some embodiment and revelation of the Infinite; the Infinite is made to blend itself with the Finite, to stand visible, and as it were, attainable there.*[81]

Carlyle was an important transmitter of German Romantic thought for the Symbolist generation; his popular book *Sartor Resartus* presented these difficult philosophical notions in very approachable form. Carlyle's popularity in late nineteenth-century France was at least partly due to Hippolyte Taine's influential publication *L'Idéalisme anglais* (1864) which was devoted to the philosophy of Carlyle. Although Taine has often been seen as a materialist and a positivist, and his approach towards art criticism was enthusiastically refuted by Aurier, his influence on the Symbolist aesthetic should not be ignored.[82] In fact, it may be argued that Taine was as much an idealists as he was a positivist. In a letter to a friend in 1862 he claimed to be in accordance with Carlyle's view that the man of genius has insight, that is, an immediate perception of the essence of things: "You who are

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among the Symbolist artists and writers who were reading, for example, Kant, Hegel, Novalis, or Schelling. Remy de Gourmont, for instance, was well versed in German philosophy, and he referred directly to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in his definition of Symbolism, stating that because the Absolute as such is unknowable, it must be formulated in symbols. Hence, it is only the element of the Absolute that can appear in the personal that Symbolism can express. See de Gourmont 1911 [1892], 223-224 (*Le Chemin de Velours*). In the context of literary Symbolism, the German influence has always been a more central subject than in the context of Symbolist visual art. Lehmann, for example, placed a strong emphasis on it in his seminal study on the intellectual basis of the Symbolist aesthetic. He writes that while Naturalism and Realism were considered to be of a largely French origin, the idealistic current that rebelled against them was "represented mainly by early nineteenth century German philosophy enjoying an Indian summer in a tropical climate – Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer." Lehmann 1950, 37.

[79] Todorov 1982 [1977] 2, 206. Originally published in French as *Théories du Symbole* (1977).

[80] See Todorov 1982 [1977], 198-221.

[81] Carlyle 1900 [1836], 254 (*Sartor Resartus*).

[82] On Taine's influence on the theory of Symbolism, see Burhan 1979, 78-90.

familiar with my ideas, you know very well that I am actually an idealist."[83] Taine combined different elements from Platonism to nineteenth century Realism in his conception of art. He believed that art copied from nature but in a way that made it more perfect. A great artist was someone who knew how to bring into accordance the expression and the idea, the sensation and the sentiment.[84] As we shall see below, this is not so different from Aurier's view of the subjective and objective elements of art. In addition to his views on Carlyle, many Symbolist were familiar with Taine's psychological study *De l'intelligence* (1870), which as Burhan has pointed out, "offered artists an argument against Naturalism, while providing them with most of the theoretical material needed to construct a theory of symbolist representation in art."[85]

The Romantic notion of the symbol also underlies the ideal of the absolute work of art as described by Belting – and, as Belting has pointed out, this quest for a unity of matter and form, work and idea was a fundamentally impossible project.[86] Taylor has used the term "epiphanic" to describe this kind of art which is a revelation of something that is otherwise inexpressible. The epiphany, according to Taylor, "is our achieving contact with something, where this contact either fosters and/or itself constitutes a spiritually significant fulfilment or wholeness."[87] The modern work of art, according to Taylor, is "the locus of a manifestation which brings us into the presence of something which is otherwise inaccessible, and which is of the highest moral or spiritual significance; a manifestation, moreover, which also defines or completes something, even as it reveals."[88] This view of art defines the artist as an exceptional being. As someone who delivers "epiphanies," the artist must possess a rare vision and be able to see things that ordinary people are incapable of perceiving. Referring to the conception of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Taylor defines the symbol in the Romantic sense as "the translucence of the eternal in the temporal." The perfect work of art is thus understood as the perfect unity of form and matter: "In a perfect work of art, the 'matter' – the language of a poem or the material of a sculpture – should be entirely taken up in the manifestation; and reciprocally, what is manifested ought to be available only in the symbol, and not merely pointed to as an independent object whose nature could be defined in some other medium."[89]

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[83] "Toi qui connais bien mes idées, tu sais bien qu'en somme je suis un idéaliste." Goetz 1973, 50. Both Goetz and Burhan also point out Taine's enthusiasm for Hegel. Goetz has noted, moreover, that Taine's world view was inherently pessimistic, but he belived in the evolution of new art form that would me more suited for the needs of future societies. This was most certainly also something that the Symbolists were able to relate to. Burhan 1979, 78; Goetz 1973, 52-54 and passim.

[84] Goetz 1973, 50-52.

[85] Burhan 1979, 81.

[86] Belting 2001, 12.

[87] Taylor 1989, 425. On the notion of epiphanic art, see also Rabinovitch 2002, 29-33. According to Rabinovitch, "The epiphany embodies the uniquely modern experience of the sacred. Expressed in mutable, mundane images, the epiphany lies on the threshold between the secular and the sacred. Characterized by a heightened sense of significance, and charged by fluid boundaries in time and space, the reflective capacity of the epiphany informs the experience of secular insight, revelation or self-realization, and religious meditation." Rabinovitch 2002., 33.

[88] Taylor 1989, 419.

[89] Taylor 1989, 379,421.

A purely mimetic understanding of the work is no longer enough, even if the works may still contain descriptive elements. In fact, Taylor distinguishes two different ways for an artwork to be epiphanic. The first pattern, which he calls "epiphanies of being", was dominant with the Romantics. This kind of work portrays something, for example, nature or human emotion, but its aim is to render the object "translucent" so that some kind of spirituality or deeper significance shines through it. The second pattern became dominant in modernist poetry and non-representational art in the twentieth century. Here, more than ever before, the locus of the epiphany shifts to within the work itself and it is no longer clear what the work portrays or whether it portrays anything at all.[90] The Symbolist art of the fin-de-siècle usually more or less follows Taylor's Romantic mode but in the increasing instability of form evident in the work of Paul Gauguin, Odilon Redon or Edvard Munch, for example, there is also a certain affinity to the second mode. [91] It must be noted, that there are important continuities between the epiphanic art of Romanticism and of the twentieth century. As Taylor points out, the Romantic era developed a rich language of talking about the organic unity of the work of art or the creative process which also applies to later epiphanic art. He maintains that this is a conception of art that has run continuously through the modern world since Romanticism and it "encompasses not only an aesthetic of the work of art but also a view about its spiritual significance and about the nature and situation of the artist."[92]

What is particularly important in the concept of the symbol as it was understood by the Romantics and later reformulated by the Symbolists is the way that it defined the ideal work of art as organic, dynamic, and "processual."[93] It is, therefore, inherently connected with the notion of the creative imagination, which will be the subject of the following section. The creative imagination is precisely the capacity that is needed to create as well as receive symbolic works of art. Moreover, the Romantic concept of the symbol is related to the idea that it is not the work of art that imitates nature but the artist; the work of art is only able to imitate products of nature whereas the artist can imitate the dynamic processes of nature. In his imitation of the productive principle of nature, the artist's creative capacity emulates the

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[90] Taylor 1989,419-420.

[91] Sari Kuuva has discussed the dynamic quality of the symbols employed by Munch in her dissertation *Symbol, Munch and Creativity: Metabolism of Visual Symbols* (2010). She uses the concept of "metabolism," borrowed from Munch's own vocabulary, to describe the way Symbols are born, established and transformed in Munch's visual repertoire. Kuuva perceives this kind of flexibility in the use of symbols as specific for Munch's artistic practices, and Munch's oeuvre inarguably offers one of the most fruitful sources for a discussion of this phenomenon. However, the basic idea that the meaning of the symbol is dynamic and not based on convention, that it is capable of reflecting different, even completely opposing, meanings in different contexts, is according to my conception, a very central notion of the Symbolist aesthetic.

[92] Taylor 1989, 420, 425.

[93] By the somewhat technical term "processual" I mean art that is oriented towards the creative process rather than focusing on the work of art as a material object. I shall give a more detailed definition of this term in the last section of this chapter.

divine creativity of God. Hence, in the creative processes of art, the mind of the artist intersects the divine power of God.[94]

THE CREATIVE IMAGINATION

> *One will then see fantasy and mathematics – that is, oil and water – form a union so close as to be chemical. One will see the bluish vapors of mysticism hanging in thick velvety ranks, and an analytical instrument, as sharp as a scalpel, slicing through them. But this writing also throngs with exotic blooms, flowers from other worlds, flowers never seen by mortal man. Ghosts stalk by daylight, and ordinary men stand bathed in phosphorescent glow. A hellish red darts to and fro in the heavenly blue. There is no distinguishing the lamb of innocence from the hyenas of evil. Infinity is confined in a pea, and the spark of a moment sets worlds afire. The incomprehensible is stated in a mathematical formula, and the crystal-clear emerges as the world's great mystery. You light a match with the starlight that took three million years to reach the earth, and the ABC's of your primer become the most indecipherable of hieroglyphics.*[95]

With these words the Swedish Decadent-Symbolist author Ola Hansson describes the "imagination for which neither time nor space exists" in the poetry and novels of Edgar Allan Poe. Poe was for him, as for Baudelaire and for many other late nineteenth century artists and writers, a prime example of a poetic genius. Imagination appears in Hansson's description as a mystical and magical power that unifies all opposites: fantasy and mathematics will combine to produce exotic, otherworldly flowers. It also has the power to form links between the microcosm and the macrocosm: "Infinity is confined in a pea."[96] Hansson's account reflects the notion of the creative imagination which the fin-de-siècle inherited from Romanticism – although in many ways they also transformed and even negated the Romantic tradition.[97] Taylor considers the idea of the creative imagination as something that is still central to our culture. This is a concept that has retained its

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[94] Todorov 1982 [1977], 153, 167-173; Engell 1981, 347-350.

[95] Cited from Anderson 1973, 190. Hansson's essay "Edgar Allan Poe" was first published in an abbreviated German translation in 1889. Anderson's book *Poe in Northlight* contains a translation of the original Swedish text which appeared in 1921.

[96] This conception reflects the famous opening lines of William Blake's poem "Auguries of Innocence" (from the collection of notes known as *The Pickering Manuscript*, c. 1807): "To see a world in a grain of sand, / And a heaven in a wild flower, / Hold infinity in the palm of your hand, / And eternity in an hour." Cited from Blake 1982, 490. Blake was another poetic hero for the Symbolists, and his poetry also served as an important source for the mystical theory of the correspondences.

[97] Taylor discusses three important transformations of the Romantic vision that took place towards the end of the nineteenth-century. The first transformation came with the art of despiritualized nature in Realism/Naturalism. The second transformation is termed "epiphanies of anti-nature," and it is exemplified by Baudelaire who affirmed the spiritual but rejected the Rousseauian belief that nature was good. The third transformation arises from the philosophy of Schopenhauer, and it is embodied in their art that relates to the wild energy of an amoral nature. Taylor 1989, 430-447.

status as the supreme power behind all art production, and it is the element that most fundamentally binds together the modern conceptions of the self and art.

The idea of the creative imagination developed throughout the eighteenth century and by the end of the century it had been established as the supreme power behind art and literature. A more general shift, particularly in German philosophy, from empirical to psychological accompanied and fuelled the rise of the creative imagination. It became a unifying notion which brought together empirical and idealist directions and introduced art and aesthetics as central subjects in philosophical discussions.[98] The literary historian James Engell, who gives a very comprehensive account of the development of the notion of the creative imagination, has stressed the centrality of this notion in the historical phenomenon that we call the modern. Imagination, writes Engell, "dramatized and made articulate a great dialectic between matter and spirit, nature and the inner psyche, materialism and transcendentalism, as well as between the concrete sensuous images of poetry and the 'fading coal' of its inspiration." And, as the concept gained in popularity among art and literature as well as philosophy, its connotations multiplied. Instead of a static state of being, the creative imagination was understood as an active and dynamic energy that holds the potential to synthesize opposing forces: to unite spirit with matter, man with nature, and the subjective with the objective. It has endowed art with the power of liberation and transcendence.[99]

The creative imagination is, in effect, the element that transformed the mimetic conception of art into an expressive and creative one. It is the power that the artists uses to impose the epiphanic quality into the work of art; and it is also the essential capacity required of the audience to properly understand the meaning of the artwork.[100] When a work of art was no longer understood in terms of imitation, but conceived to be an entirely new being that makes something manifest while at the same time completing it, art gained an unprecedented importance for human life – even in some respects replacing religion. Moreover, the new aesthetic orientation, which defined beauty as an experience rather than a quality of the object, opened the way for a whole new understanding of what is beautiful. The horrid, the ugly, even the disgusting could also be deemed as beautiful if it provoked a certain kind of aesthetic response.[101]

It is impossible to avoid mentioning the name of Kant when talking about imagination; he laid the basis from which the later Romantic thinkers developed

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[98] Engell 1981, 97-102.

[99] Engell 1981, 3-10. Engell has also emphasized that although this concept is identified with Romanticism was in fact created by the Enlightenment. Hence, rather than being a Romantic invention, the creative imagination is to be seen as the central element that shaped and sustained Romanticism. Engell 1981, 3-4. On the concept of imagination before the Romantic age, see also Cocking 1991.

[100] Taylor 1989, 368-390.

[101] This is the kind of beauty that Hansson found in Poe's writing: "Poe's fiction is ... beautiful as hectic fever, beautiful as madness, beautiful as horror, beautiful as doomsday. It sends a shudder of pleasure through our marrow and bones, but a pleasurable shudder of dread as though we saw the universe extending before us beyond measure, without end, like a single expanse of sunlight, and out over this expanse there suddenly fell a shadow so inexpressibly, unembraceably great that nothing in heaven or earth can cast such a shadow save for one thing: Death." Cited from Anderson 1973, 217.

their understanding of the concept. Kant provided no clear and simple definition for imagination, but his interest in the subject reflects his awareness that he was dealing with an important and complicated issue. Kant recognized two dimensions of imagination that he attempted to synthesize; one was reproductive and empirical and the other productive and transcendental. This synthesizing effort renders imagination the capacity to act as an instrument of unity between the various faculties of the mind and also for unity of the mind with the external world. Moreover, it was precisely in the realm of art and aesthetics that this synthesis could most effectively take place. Kant associated the power of productive imagination with the notion of creative genius. This was the power to create something new and self-sufficient instead of copying and imitating something that already exists. For Kant, imagination remained always closely tied with intellect but in the context of aesthetics and poetry he also connected it with the notion of "free play." Imagination then becomes capable of capturing the dynamic activity of the world and not merely the objects in their material form.[102] The importance given to the power of imagination, which resembles the creative power of God, made it possible for the Romantic thinkers to attach such a great philosophical value to fine arts.

Before the invention of the concept of creative imagination, that is, imagination as productive rather than merely reproductive, artistic creativity was considered primarily in terms of divine inspiration. For Plato, for example, artists were not conscious creators but divine mediators of God's message. In *Ion* he states, for instance, that "a poet is a light and winged thing, and never able to compose until he has become inspired, and is beside himself, and reason is no longer in him."[103] This model of the creative activity persisted until the Romantic poets internalized the divine power and started to perceive themselves as creators. However, the ecstatic notion of creativity survived along with the new internalized power, and in the Symbolist theorization these two were assimilated so that the individual self was understood to contain in itself the potential to connect with a more universal level of being.

The concept of imagination had been the subject of debate throughout the nineteenth century. The scientifically orientated Naturalism that emerged in mid-century had rendered the whole idea highly suspicious, and it was concerned to be nothing but a mechanical function of the mind. However, the Symbolists, under mystical and occultist influence, re-established a positive attitude towards the Romantic notion. Indeed, the idea of the creative imagination forms the basis of the Symbolists' understanding of the work of art as dynamic and expressive, almost a living being, and the conception of the artists as a divine creator. The late nineteenth century also transformed the Romantic notion, placing emphasis on unconscious creativity and questioning the absolute control of the artist over the artwork.[104]

Baudelaire's conception of the creative imagination and his aesthetic interpretation of the theory of correspondences were probably among the most

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[102] Engell 1981, 128-139.

[103] Plato: *Ion,* 534b.

[104] This issue has been discussed by Carlson 1996 and Gamboni 2002.

influential sources for these ideas for the Symbolist generation. For Baudelaire, Imagination was "the queen of faculties" – it was a mysterious gift, resembling the creative power of God that transformed the artist's vision into a work of art.[105] The visible world, according to Baudelaire, was nothing but "a storehouse of images and signs to which the imagination will give a relative place and value; it is a sort of pasture which the imagination must digest and transform."[106] Baudelaire distinguishes between two kinds of artists; the *realists* or *positivists* are those who want to represent "things as they are", whereas the *imaginative* are those who say "I want to illuminate things with my mind, and to project their reflection upon other minds." One group believes that it is copying nature while the other is seeking to paint its own soul.[107]

Imagination indicated for Baudelaire the ability to perceive the mystical correspondences between the visible and the invisible worlds. The most crucial point is that he did not understand the workings of the imagination as purely subjective; they were based on an innate, universal language which can be communicated directly. The Swedenborgian doctrine of the correspondences, which became a central notion in the Symbolist art theory, holds that there are three hierarchically arranged worlds – the natural, the spiritual, and the celestial – and the correspondences are the links between these levels. Every object in the natural world reflects its spiritual image, which in turn is a representation of a divine archetype.[108] Baudelaire provided the Symbolist generation with an aesthetic interpretation of the theory of correspondences. He believed that correspondences can be either horizontal or vertical, that is, either synaesthetic or transcendental. Synaesthesia meant, for example, that a sound can suggest a colour and vice versa. Transcendental correspondences, on the other hand, exist between the visible and the invisible worlds.[109]

Baudelaire's poem "Correspondances" was quoted by Aurier in his 1891 article on Gauguin and Symbolism, as well as by the Polish author Stanisław Przybyszewski in the article he published on Munch in 1894. Aurier maintains that

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[105] Baudelaire's conception of the creative imagination is expressed in the most complete form in his "Salon de 1859," reprinted in *Curiosités esthétiques* (1868). Baudelaire cites the following passage from the book *The Night Side of Nature* by the English novelist and spiritualist Catherine Crowe: "By Imagination, I do not simply mean to convey the common notion implied by that much abused word, which is only *fancy*, but the *constructive* imagination, which is a much higher function, and which, in as much as man is made in the likeness of God, bears a distant relation to that sublime power by which the Creator projects, creates, and upholds his universe" Baudelaire 1868b [1859], 269. On Baudelaire's conception of imagination, see also Hiddleston 1999, 39-41.

[106] "Tout l'univers visible n'est qu'un magasin d'images et de signes auxquels l'imagination donnera une place et une valeur relative; c'est une espèce de pâture que l'imagination doit digérer et transformer. Baudelaire 1868b [1859], 274.

[107] "Je veux illuminer les choses avec mon esprit et en projeter le reflet sur les autres esprits." Baudelaire 1868b [1859], 275.

[108] Bentz 2002, 141, 351-362; On Baudelaire and Swedenborgianism, see Wilkinson 1996, 217-247.

[109] In his Wagner essay, for example, he writes: "ce qui serait vraiment surprenant, c'est que le son ne pût pas suggérer la couleur, que les couleurs ne puissent pas donner l'idée d'une mélodie, et que le son et la couleur fussent impropres à traduire des idées; les choses s'étant toujours exprimées par une analogie réciproque, depuis le jour où Dieu a proféré le monde comme une complexe et indivisible totalité." Baudelaire 1861, 14. Baudelaire found in Wagner's music a perfect articulation of his own theory of correspondences.

only the superior man, illuminated by *extase*, is able to walk as a master through the fantastic temple “Where the living pillars/ Sometimes let out confused words.” Whereas the rest of the human herd, remaining fooled by the appearances and denying the absolute ideas, passes blindly “Through the forests of symbols/ Which observe him with familiar glances.”[110] For Aurier, Baudelaire’s poem embodied the power of “ecstasy,” which indicates the ability to perceive the ideas behind appearances. This was the highest capacity of the artist, as well as something that was required of the viewer if she was to truly understand the meaning of a work of art.

Przybyszewski’s term for this capacity was “individuality.” It is the facility that gives sense impressions their intensity and quality binding them all together so that most heterogeneous things are perceived as equivalent because the individual responds to them all with the same emotion: “there is color to line, perfume for tone: Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.”[111] Przybyszewski, who had studied medicine in the early 1890s, was keenly interested in modern psychology. He, like many other members of the bohemian Berlin group, was familiar with the notion of suggestion as it was discussed by Hippolyte Bernheim and the Nancy school, as well as with the positivist pathologies of Théodule Ribot. Here, however, he seems to be referring to the mystical philosophy of Carl du Prel,[112] who was a very influential figure among the Berlin group. Przybyszewski explains that what he means by individuality is the transcendental consciousness, the immortal part of the individual, more commonly known as the unconscious.[113] This is very similar to du Prel’s description of what he calls the “transcendental subject”, which is the part of the human mind that prevails in unconscious states, such as somnambulism or clairvoyance. Unlike some other early theorists of the unconscious, du Prel held that the transcendental subject remained an individual.[114] This may at first glance seem to be quite far removed from the Romantic concept of the creative imagination, but when we consider, for example, William Blake’s description of the world of imagination as the infinite and eternal world to which we return after death, we can see that there are obvious similarities.[115] The new psychological and psycho-physiological theories appeared to provide scientific proof for the Romantic theories of synaesthesia and the supremacy of the imaginative mind.

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[110] “Où de vivants piliers/ Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles ... A travers les forêts de symboles/ Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.” These lines are quoted directly from Baudelaire’s poem. Aurier 1893, 214.

[111] The latter part is in French in the original, quoted directly from Baudelaire’s poem. Przybyszewski 1894, 15.

[112] Karl Ludwig August Friedrich Maximilian Alfred, Freiherr von Prel; generally known in literature under the abbreviated French version of his name, Carl du Prel.

[113] Przybyszewski 1894, 14.

[114] Edouard von Hartmann’s “unconscious,” for instance was an undifferentiated absolute. See Weber 2007, 598.

[115] In the essay “A Vision of the Last Judgement” Blake wrote: “This world of Imagination is the world of Eternity; it is the divine bosom into which we shall all go after the death of the vegetated body. This world of Imagination is Infinite and Eternal, whereas the world of Generation, or Vegetation, is Finite and Temporal. There exists in that Eternal World the Permanent Realities of Every Thing which we see reflected in this Vegetable Glass of Nature.” Cited from Blake 1982, 555.

Aurier's extase and Przybyszewski's individuality both refer to the ability to perceive the correspondences between the material and the spiritual worlds, but neither of them uses the term imagination in this context. Przybyszewski, however, talks about imagination in the novel *Overboard*, where he has the artist called Mikita, a character modelled after Munch, state the opposition between himself and the Naturalists, in terms of imagination. Mikita accounts a discussion he had with a Naturalist painter whom he calls a "potato artists." When questioned about why he would paint something "which nature made a thousand times more beautiful, and the significance of which was after all not so profound," the Naturalist exclaims that potatoes are nature and everything else is nonsense:

> *Imagination! Fiddlesticks! Imagination is merely an aid to be used in none but cases of extreme necessity.*[116]

Imagination is here precisely the component of art which the naturalists are lacking but which for an artist like Munch was the most central aspect of creativity. It appears, however, that in the fin-de-siècle context other related terms were often preferred instead of imagination.[117] It may be that the concept of creative imagination was so strongly identified with Romanticism that the new generation, although adopting the concept more or less in its original form, wanted to develop new labels for it in order to make it more modern. It is also likely that the concept itself had become such a commonplace that it no longer needed to be discussed at greater lengths.

In the course of the twentieth century the concept of imagination became more and more controversial. The literary scholar Lisa Rado describes imagination as a term that is "alternately infuriating and exhilarating in [its] imprecision." It has been linked with the theories of autonomous subjectivity and the creative genius, and as these conceptions have fallen out of fashion, imagination has also become "something from which many literary critics – even if they secretly envision one – will go great lengths to dissociate themselves."[118] Yet, the concept of the imagination still has an important role in our understanding of art and creativity, even if we may feel hesitant to employ the term with its heavy load of associations. The literary scholar Dee Reynolds has explored the role of imagination in nineteenth century Symbolist poetry (Stéphane Mallarmé and Arthur Rimbaud) and twentieth century abstract painting (Vassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian) in an attempt to reassess and relocate this concept in the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century context. Reynolds argues that the practices associated with the poems of

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[116] Przybyszewski 1915 [1896], 18. *Overboard* is the first part of the novel trilogy *Homo Sapiens*, believed to be a roman à clef describing Przybyszewski's own experiences in Berlin and Munich. The protagonist is a writer called Erik Falk, 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*).

[117] Mathews has noted that the term "intuition" is very closely related to imagination in the Symbolist context. Aureir and the Symbolists preferred this term due to its association with the mystical tradition (Plotinus was an important source for Aurier's conception of intuition). Intuition referred to the capacity to perceive the correspondences between the visible and the invisible world. Mathews 1986a, 38.

[118] Rado 2000, 1-2.

Rimbaud and Mallarmé and the paintings of Kandinsky and Mondrian, which have often been understood in terms of self-referentiality of the artwork and the autonomy of the poetic or pictorial sign (sometimes called *autotelism*),[119] were in fact not an end in itself, but "a means to new modes of signifying, in which the imagination of the receiver performs a central role."[120] Reynolds describes imagination as a "*process* of image production that does not culminate in the formation of a final, stable, and coherent image." An *imaginary image* (linguistic or visual) is one that by means of suggestion exceeds its powers of presentation yet at the same time negates itself in the process. The interaction between the poetic/pictorial medium and the imagining activity of the receiver generates an "imaginary space" where the artwork fully comes into being.[121]

ALBERT AURIER AND THE SYMBOLIST WORK OF 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.[122] I shall attempt to demonstrate, however, that a similar tendency of transposing the focus of the artwork from the material object towards an "imaginary space" is to be found in Aurier's aesthetic theory, and, as I will go on to argue, it is also evident in the artistic practices of many Symbolist artists. It appears to me, moreover, that the ability to perceive the analogues between developments in literature and the visual arts was evident already in the late nineteenth-century context. The art historian Juliet Simpson has called attention to the similar concerns in Gauguin's work and literary Symbolism: "a mediation of symbol through structure, and a similar search to invigorate a worn out repertory of symbolic conventions by means of a dramatic challenge to realist and Impressionist modes of representation."[123]

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[119] The "autotelic" quality can here refer for example to Mallarmé's discovery of beauty in nothingness. It means that the work of art is considered completely self-contained and self-sufficient. Taylor discusses the autotelic artwork in connection with "epiphanic" art, and according to him it is an influential strand of thought starting with the Symbolists' endeavor to retain the epiphanic power of art, yet, somewhat paradoxically, to detach the artwork from anything that is beyond it. This kind of artwork presumably would offer the ultimate epiphany. Taylor 1989, 419-420.

[120] Reynolds 1995, 2.

[121] Reynolds 1995, 3. This idea of an "imaginary space" resonates with Belting's attempt to establish the concept of the image as something that exists on the boundary between mental and physical existence. It is our imagination that animates the image and draws it from the medium. Hence, the image should neither be conflated with nor separated from the medium which embodies it. Belting has discussed this issue in the book *Bild-Anthropologie*, which appeared in 2001. I have been referring to the revised English edition from 2011. See Belting 2011, 2, 15-21.

[122] Reynolds., 7, 225.

[123] Simpson 1999, 213-214. Simpson points out, however, that only a small number of contemporary critics were able to grasp these parallels. Simpson 1999, 214. Simpson has presented the most comprehensive examination of Aurier's theory of Symbolism in his book *Aurier, Symbolism, and the Visual Arts*. Another important

Reynolds, in contrast, maintains that it is at the "juncture of the Impressionist dissolution of the object and liberation of colour and a Symbolist aesthetics of suggestion that painting can be said to focus on an ontological transformation of the medium which leads directly into abstraction, and which is comparable to that which takes place in the poetry of Rimbaud and Mallarmé." Reynolds is here referring to Impressionism which becomes "open to 'Symbolist' interpretation," such as Claude Monet's paintings in the 1890s. She remarks that Mallarmé especially admired Monet, and that his "fascination with Impressionism was closely bound up with its dissolution of the object."[124] However, it may be pointed out, as Reynolds in fact notes in another context, that Mallarmé also admired Odilon Redon.[125] Indeed, in Redon's art one may easily see the kind of emphasis on the imagining activity of the perceiver that Reynolds discusses in her book. This attitude is evident also in Redon's own writing, where he refers to imagination and the indeterminate, suggestive power of images several times, emphasizing also the active participation of the viewer:

> *My drawings inspire and do not define themselves. They determine nothing. They place us just as music does in the ambiguous world of the indeterminate. They are ... the repercussion of a human expression placed, by permitted fantasy, in a play of arabesques, where, I do believe, the action which will be derived in the mind of the spectator will incite him to fictions of great or small significance according to his sensitivity and according to his imaginative aptitude for enlarging everything or belittling it."*[126]

The Symbolist subjective attitude towards colour also epitomizes this non-mimetic inclination, revealing that colour was understood as an autonomous expressive element. The art historian Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff has conceptualized the Symbolist use of colour in terms of two different approaches that she calls *colour ascetism* and *synthetist colour*. The Synthetist artists' use of bright saturated colours to create a fantastic effect has been the primary focus of the discussion on Symbolist colour whereas the ascetic palette has received much less attention. However, both of these late nineteenth-century approaches to colour reflect a manipulation of representational codes in order to complement artistic vision. Indeed, von Bonsdorff suggests that the extreme simplification of the palette could be seen as an equivalent of the cubistic manipulation of form that took place in the twentieth century. These colour manipulations can thus be seen not only as a reflection of the subjective

contribution to this subject is Patricia Mathews's dissertation *Aurier's Symbolist Art Criticism and Theory* (1986). Mathews presents a lucid and coherent synthesis of Aurier's theory which provides a good introduction to his aesthetic thinking. However, precisely due to the completeness and consistency of this synthesis, Mathews's interpretation is somewhat problematic, particularly if one is interested in more detailed analysis of Aurier's theoretical ideas. Aurier's theories exist only in piecemeal and fragmentary form; hence, the synthesizing effort carried out by Mathews necessarily hides many of the interesting discontinuities and contradictions in Aurier's writing.

[124] Reynolds 1995, 203-204.

[125] Reynolds 1995, 85.

[126] Redon 1986 [1922], 22-23.

attitude, but also as a manifestation of the de-materializing tendency of Symbolist painting.[127]

Hence, I would argue that the artistic phenomena that Reynolds mainly associates with Impressionism such as liberation of colour and the dissolution of form were also an important part of Symbolist art. I believe, in fact, 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. Reynolds's account of the artwork based on the imagining activity has important affinities with Charles Taylor's definition of the "epiphanic" work of art. Taylor has also emphasized the role of imagination and the Romantic conception of the symbol in this epiphanic inclination which he associates with the era of modern art originating at Romanticism and continuing on to the twentieth century. Although he does not specifically refer to the imagining activity of the receiver, it is quite obvious that the epiphany cannot come into being without the receiver's active participation. At the same time the work of art as the locus of this revelation must contain in itself the epiphanic potential.[128] Dario Gamboni's theory of the potential image also places a strong emphasis on the imagining activity of the perceiver. In his book *Potential Images*, he writes that "a fundamental characteristic of modern and (for some) post-modern art, that is the body of art considered as representative of the last two centuries, is the establishment of an open relationship in which the viewer is called upon to collaborate in the development of a work in progress."[129] For Gamboni, Symbolist art as well as poetry are central representatives of this tendency. He uses the term "potential" precisely in order to situate the image in the interaction between artist, work, and beholder. Potential images "become actual during the act of contemplation in a creative way; they are not predetermined."[130]

In order to illustrate this issue, I will present a rather detailed examination of the aspects of Aurier's theory that I find most important in this context. I will draw attention to his understanding of the ontological status of the artwork, and the active role that he gives to the perceiver. I believe these are the most interesting and potentially radical elements of his theory. I hope to demonstrate that Aurier did in fact give a very elevated status to the work of art, which according to him was almost like a living being; it was essentially immaterial, that is, it had an immaterial soul just like a human being, but its meaning and content was inseparable from the form.[131]

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[127] von Bonsdorff 2012; see also Rapetti 2005, 103; Silverman 2000, 104-110, 113-114.

[128] See Taylor 1989, 419-455.

[129] Gamboni 2002, 241

[130] Gamboni 2002, 19.

[131] Simpson has summarized Aurier's argument on the interconnection of form and content as he expressed it in his poetic description of Gauguin's *Vision after the Sermon* (1888) which opens his article on Gauguin: "Indeed, as Aurier goes on to argue, it is through the revelation of painting as a system of signs which intimate the symbolic nature of phenomena – as is shown in Gauguin's *Vision* that the Idea-ist element can be grasped. The constant use of linguistic metaphors effectively reinforces Aurier's conception of the essentially non-mimetic, emblematic character of the visual symbol in 'idéiste' art and returns us to the intertextual theme of the poem and

Aurier, like many other Symbolist artists and theorist, maintained that the ultimate aim of art was to gain direct access to the world of ideas in the Platonic sense, and hence symbolism has been connected with a dualistic perspective, often described in terms of a Neoplatonic theorization. However, I believe Aurier's Platonism should be understood first and foremost as a strategy to elevate the status of the artistic innovations of Gauguin and the Nabis; to intellectualize them, so that they would be seen as parallel with literary Symbolism. He turned to Platonist and Neoplatonist theorizations in order to justify the position of the plastic arts by arguing their right to the ideal, even though they cannot separate themselves too much from materiality.[132]

Moreover, if we consider this issue in the light of Belting's theories, the pronounced Platonism of Symbolist theory may appear less like a philosophical basis for their aesthetic thinking and more like an attempt to hold on to the ideal that seemed to be getting more and more elusive. Belting does not at any point mention Symbolism in his study, but one might argue that the tendency to completely merge together idea and work, while at the same time realizing the impossibility of this endeavour, has nowhere been as emphasized as in the Symbolist art and aesthetics of the late nineteenth century. Aurier's theorization of the Symbolist quest for dematerialization of the artwork is a perfect manifestation of this tendency. In his formulation, the Symbolist work of art, despite the unavoidable materiality of the object, truly exists only in the immaterial realm of imagination. However, this dematerialization by no means indicated a denigration of the status art; rather on the contrary, it endowed art with the power to liberate the mind beyond the constraints of the material world. Moreover, although Aurier's theory in its insistence on the timeless ideal contains a nostalgic thread, it also encourages artists to find new means of expression in order to make art meaningful in the modern world.

Aurier's passing away in 1892 left his literary and theoretical efforts unfinished. His best known and most often quoted piece of writing is the essay "Le Symbolisme en peinture – Paul Gauguin" which was published in the *Mercure de France* in 1891. It has often been seen as a manifesto for the new art, but it was in fact created for a more particular purpose: to promote Gauguin's art as parallel to the latest literary innovations, and more specifically, on Gauguin's part, to draw attention to his works

commentary on the *Vision*. Drawing both on a Baudelairean theory of correspondences and Swedenborgian mysticism, Gauguin's art is compared to a hieroglyphic text which translates colour and form into 'un langage spécial', the signs of 'un immense alphabet que l'homme de génie seul sait épeler'. At several points, Aurier makes a metaphoric connection between the awakening of vision required to perceive material reality as a network of symbolic correspondences or signs, and the process suggested in Gauguin's painting." Simpson notes that the most important point here is how Aurier then "goes on to show how this system of signification is mediated through the formal structure of the Idea-ist work itself." Simpson 1999, 225-226. In this context Aurier specifically calls attention to the role of deformation and he acknowledges also the universally and individually expressive potential of form. Aurier 1893, 114-115 ("Le Symbolisme en peinture – Paul Gauguin").

[132] In "Les Peintres symbolistes" Aurier compares the latest developments in the plastic arts to those in literature. He writes: "Dans les arts plastiques – et c'est seulement de ceux-ci que je parlerai au cours de cette étude, car leur réclamation du droit à l'idéal est d'autant plus concluante qu'ils ne sauraient, eux, vivre en se séparant trop de la matière – dans les arts plastiques, ce sont les mêmes protestations, les mêmes désirs." Aurier 1893, 294.

that he wished to sell in order to raise money for his travels.[133] Aurier was planning to write a longer essay on art criticism which probably would have given a clearer picture of his theory and method. The manuscript was published as "Essai sur une nouvelle méthode de critique" in the *Œuvres posthumes* edited by Remy de Gourmont (1893). For the most part this essay consists of a refutation of the Tainean method of criticism based on the concepts of *moment*, *milieu*, and *race*.[134] For Aurier, the true artist is always an *isolée*; not a typical representative of his circumstances, but, on the contrary, someone who has the ability to transcend them.[135] Remy de Gourmont has attached an isolated passage at the end of the essay, which he assumes to be its conclusion. This fragment contains an explanation of the work of art as a completely new being that has a soul to animate it, and which we must love in order to properly understand it.[136] This is a reformulation of certain ideas that Aurier had been developing in the essay entitled "Les Peintres symbolistes" which he had published in the *Revue Encyclopédique*, April 1892. This is the part of Aurier's theory which most obviously suggests a parallel with the ideas presented by Reynolds.

In the Gauguin essay, Aurier wanted to distinguish Symbolism from Impressionism which to him was nothing but a more refined and spiritualized form of realism.[137] However, before this essay Aurier had written quite favourably about certain impressionist artist, particularly Pissarro, and in "Les Peintres symbolistes," as well as in his articles on Renoir and Monet written in the same year, he seemed to be once more accommodating Impressionism in the formation of the new idealist art. Instead, as representatives of realist art, he mentions two of the most established academic artists, Meissonier and Bouguereau.[138] Simpson, who has carefully studied the art criticism of the period, talks about a "general reappraisal" of Impressionism which took place between 1890 and 1892 and in which Aurier's articles played an important role. The Impressionist fragmentation was now understood in terms of Mallarméan suggestiveness, and artists like Pissarro, Monet, and Renoir were seen to

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[133] Simpson 1999 216, 220.

[134] For an introduction to Taine's art criticism, see Goetz 1973.

[135] Aurier paraphrases Baudelaire's poem "Le Cygne" in his discussion of the artist as a swan that has accidentally fallen into a puddle, unable to fly back to the heavens because its wings have been soiled by the mud of the swamp. A scientific critic, according to Aurier, will only pay attention to the stains in the plumage of the swan: "Prenez garde, M. Taine, le désir d'étudier ces taches à la loupe conduit à prendre le cygne par le cou et l'étrangler – comme Tribulat Bonhomet." Aurier 1893, 179-180 (Essai sur une nouvelle méthode de critique); Doctor Tribulat Bonhomet is a character created by Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam to represent the bourgeois mentality. In the short story "Le Tueur de Cygnes" Tribulat Bonhomet strangles a couple of white swans and hears their dying song. Although, as a rationalist, he is unable to understand the meaning of this song, it sends him into a state of ecstasy. This is, however, not the poetic ecstasy of someone who can perceive the "Cieux inconnus" that the swans are singing about; the ecstasy of Bonhomet is described in grotesque physical terms: "chancelant, comme en un spasme," "perdu en une torpeur voluptueuse," "résorbant sa couteuse extase." See Hackett 1983, 808.

[136] Aurier 1893, 201-202 ("Les Peintres symbolistes").

[137] "L'impressionnisme, c'est et ce ne peut être qu'une variété du réalisme, un réalisme affiné, spiritualisé, dilettantisé, mais toujours le réalisme." Aurier 1893, 201-202.

[138] Aurier 1893, 221-244, 296.

share the Symbolist aim of revealing the essence of the object.[139] Moreover, the poetic potential inherent in Impressionist art was seen to reflect similar values as the art of Puvis de Chavannes, whose modernity was based on a renewal of tradition.[140] Aurier also pointed out the similarity between the new Symbolist art and the art of foregone eras; artists like Fra Angelico, Mantegna, Memling, Dürer, Rembrandt, and Leonardo have all been Symbolists because they have endeavoured to present other things than concrete and immediate reality. In fact, according to Aurier, there is no true art without symbolism.[141]

Reynolds refers to Aurier's theories only in passing. She comments briefly on the Gauguin article, maintaining that it is "couched in terms that could more properly be applied to allegory than symbol." She then points out that "It is clearly the symbol which has the closest affinities with the imagining activity outlined here and which forms the basis of the continuity between Symbolism and abstraction." Reynolds cites Aurier's claim that "le signe, pour indispensable qu'il soit, n'est rien en lui-même ... l'idée seule est tout" (the sign, although it is indispensable, is nothing in itself ... the idea alone is everything).[142] Later she concludes that Aurier "denied any autonomous role to the material sign."[143] However, if we look more closely at Aurier's article, it becomes clear that in this context Aurier is not referring to the artwork as a *sign*; he is talking about objects in the world that the artist uses as material for his work, like "letters in an immense alphabet."[144] The necessity to manipulate the pictorial sign follows from this principle; the audience of dilettantes with no sense of the mystical correspondences will not be able to perceive the objects in the painting as anything but objects. Hence, to avoid this confusion, the artist must steer clear of the representation of concrete reality, illusionism, and trompe-l'œil:

> *The strict duty of the ideist[145] artist is, therefore, to make a reasoned selection of the multiple elements combined in objective reality; to express clearly the ideic significance of the object using in his work nothing but general and distinctive lines,*

[139] This is similar to what Reynolds means by Impressionism that is "open to 'Symbolist' interpretation." Simpson 1999, 203-204.

[140] Simpson 1999, 200-202.

[141] Aurier 1893, 298.

[142] Reynolds 1995, 27; Aurier 1893, 213 ("Le Symbolisme en peinture – Paul Gauguin").

[143] Reynolds 1995, 33.

[144] Aurier writes: "Aux yeux de l'artiste, en effet, c'est-à-dire aux yeux decelui qui doit être l'Exprimeur des Êtres absolus, les objets, c'est-à-dire les êtres relatifs qui ne sont qu'une traduction proportionnée à la relativité de nos intellects des êtres absolus et essentiels, des Idées, les objets ne peuvent avoir de valeur en tant qu'objets. Ils ne peuvent lui apparaître que comme des signes. Ce sont les lettres d'un immense alphabet que l'homme de génie seul sait épeler." Aurier 1893, 213 ("Le Symbolisme en peinture – Paul Gauguin").

[145] Aurier uses the term "idéiste" when referring to Symbolist art in order to distinguish it from "idéalisme" by which he means academic art. See Aurier 1893, 212 ("Le Symbolisme en peinture – Paul Gauguin").

shapes, and colours, along with a few partial symbols that support the general symbol.[146]

This means that the artist will always have the 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 is to be expressed.[147] Aurier elaborates on this issue in the *Révue encyclopédique* essay where he explains that great artists like Puvis de Chavannes, Henner, Moreau, Carrière, and Rodin, are Symbolist because

... they have not looked for beautiful forms for the sole enjoyment of beautiful forms, beautiful colours for the sole enjoyment of beautiful colours; they have endeavoured to understand the mysterious meaning of the lines, lights and shadows, in order to use these elements, which one might call alphabetic, to write the beautiful poem of their dreams and their ideas.[148]

The "idea," as Aurier employs the term, is something very abstract and it obviously cannot be represented in the same way that Naturalistic art represents the visible world. But as Simpsons has pointed out, Aurier's use of the term is somewhat vague and it is unclear how exactly he perceives the relationship between the work and the idea.[149] Although this remains a theoretically problematic issue, it would be

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[146] "Le strict devoir du peintre idéiste est, par conséquent, d'effectuer une sélection raisonnée parmi les multiples éléments combinés en l'objectivité, de n'utiliser en son œuvre que les lignes, les formes, les couleurs générales et distinctives servant à écrire nettement la signification idéique de l'objet, plus les quelques symboles partiels corroborant le symbole général." Aurier 1893, 215 ("Le Symbolisme en peinture – Paul Gauguin").

[147] "... 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." Aurier 1893, 215 ("Le Symbolisme en peinture – Paul Gauguin") .The penchant for a simplification of forms may also be perceived in terms of alchemical purification. Aurier sometimes described the creative process as a "transmutation," and the idea of purity through reduction is central to his expressive theory. In the article on Vincent van Gogh, for instance, Aurier likens Van Gogh's creative process to alchemical processes. Moreover, for symbolist theorists, alchemy often functioned as a metaphor for revealing the absolutes beneath appearances. See Mathews 1986a, 26-28, 63-83; Mathews 1986b, 97-98.

[148] "... ils n'ont pas cherché les belles formes pour la seule jouissance des belles formes, les belles couleurs pour la seule jouissance des belles couleurs, ils se sont efforcés de comprendre la mystérieuse signification des lignes, des lumières et des ombres, afin d'employer ces éléments, pour ainsi dire alphabétiques, à écrire le beau poème de leurs rêves et de leurs idées; ils ont été des symbolistes." Aurier 1893, 296.

[149] See Simpson 1999, 231. Lukkarinen has argued that a logical consequence of the Platonic duality between the sensory and spiritual realms is that the work of art as a visual sign will be understood as nothing but a carrier of meanings and it will be deprived of any intrinsic value. Hence, he groups Aurier theoretically with the French author, occultist, and organizer of Rosicrucian art salons, Sâr Joséphin Péladan who propagated a literary and allegorical art. In this context he has also called into question Aurier's centrality as a Symbolist theorist. He maintains that the Platonic mysticism that was promoted by Aurier was only one intellectual current among many directions in the subjective art of the nineteenth century. See Lukkarinen 2007, 113-115, 123-130. It must be pointed out, however, that in contrast with Péladan, Aurier does not say anything about subject matter. Like Aurier, Péladan was opposed to naturalism but for him content was more important than style and, in fact, many of the artists who exhibited in his Salons were in stylistic terms quite close to Naturalism. What Péladan did not approve of in Naturalist art was not the style but the trivial subject matter. For him the subject in itself was a symbol, and therefore certain subjects were entirely banned from his salon; for example, scenes of contemporary life, scenes of country life, and landscapes except in the style of Poussin. Subjects that were welcomed included

too simplistic to assume that what Aurier meant was that the work of art is an allegorical representation of a Platonic Idea. For Aurier the work of art was dynamic and its meaning was not fixed. In addition, we must keep in mind that the pronounced Platonism that is evident in Aurier's writing served a specific function: he was using it as a weapon against bourgeois materialism and positivist science, and to explain the new art that was rebelling against established norms of representation.

Reynolds cites Denis's complaint that even the knowledgeable critics "have happily confused mystical and allegorical tendencies, that is, the search for expression through the subject, with symbolist tendencies, that is, the search for expression through the work of art."[150] Denis is, however, not referring to Aurier in his critique; he specifically mentions Georges Lecomte.[151] Simpson has observed that Denis's criticism was generally directed against writers like Alphonse Germain and Camille Mauclair who had adopted the terms of Aurier's Neoplatonist mysticism but had attacked Gauguin and instead applied these terms to promote art that was based on traditional academic ideals.[152] Only later, in an article published in 1934, looking back to the period of Symbolism, Denis expressed a somewhat critical view of Aurier's mystical and literary standpoint, stating that the artists themselves were probably too fond of the material and sensational side of painting to install themselves completely in the realm of the spiritual and the intangible.[153] Moreover, Denis appears to suggest that the complexity of Aurier's theoretical formulations had led to confusion, and had thus provided an impetus for the artists of the Rose+Croix, who also assumed a Platonic theory of art but turned it into a dogmatic set of rules governing the subject matter of the works to be exhibited in the Rosicrucian Salons.[154] In the 1890s, however, the sharpest edge of Denis's criticism, like that of Aurier's, was directed against academic art and Naturalism. What he was most of all opposed to, was overtly literary and banal subject matter. And like Aurier, he talks

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catholic dogma, eastern religions (except for those of the "yellow races"), allegory, the sublimated nude, and the expressive head in the style of Leonardo and Michelangelo. See Pincus-Witten 1968, 211-216; Sarajas-Korte 1966, 44.

[150] "... se soient plu à confondre les tendances mystiques et allégoriques, c'est-à-dire la recherche de l'expression par le sujet, et les tendances symbolistes, c'est-à-dire la recherche de l'expression par l'œuvre d'art. " Reynolds 1995, 33. This passage is cited from the essay "Le Salon du Champ-de-Mars. L'exposition de Renoir", originally published in 1892 in *Revue Blanche*, reprinted in Denis 1920, 17.

[151] The sentence from which Reynolds cites only the latter part, in its entirety reads: "Nous nous étonnons que des critiques renseignés, comme M. Georges Lecomte, se soient plu à confondre les tendances mystiques et allégoriques, c'est-à-dire la recherche de l'expression par le sujet, et les tendances symbolistes, c'est-à-dire la recherche de l'expression par l'œuvre d'art." Denis 1920, 17.

[152] Simpson writes that in Germain's and Mauclair's criticism: "Aurier's Platonist and poetic defence of Gauguin's innovations was seen only to have contributed to the view of Gauguin as a painter of literary and philosophic constructs. This was the reason for Denis's objections. In the following year, Aurier modified his notion of Symbolist art." Simpson 1999, 234-238.

[153] Denis 1934, 176.

[154] "L'élément fragile du Symbolisme fut celui que le Symbolisme littéraire affichait indiscrètement, l'abus des métaphores bizarres, des poncifs moyenâgeux, de l'obscurité tout le cliquant pseudo-mystique cher aux poètes, cher à la Rose-Croix (dont nous ne fréquentons les manifestations qu'avec méfiance)." Denis 1934, 178; see also Simpson 1999, 234.

about innovation based on tradition, deformation, and the emotional power of art and its ability to provoke "the ecstasy of the Alexandrians."[155]

The most obvious and perhaps fundamental difference between the views of Aurier and Denis appears to be that for Aurier (who was a poet) it was important to emphasize the essential immateriality of the work of art, whereas Denis (who was a painter) was more concerned with the material and sensual dimension of art. Particularly in his writings of the 1890s, Denis accentuated the expressive potential of pure form more empathically than Aurier. For Denis, the pure arabesque is the most expressive thing in art, and it is the antithesis of trompe-l'œil.[156] Yet, those who have seen his writings as anticipating twentieth century abstract art have read more to them than what was intended. For Denis, art was always connected with nature. On several occasions he expressed his aesthetic formulation in terms of objective and subjective deformation. The artists' right to deformate, as we have seen, was expressed by Aurier as well, and also on a more general level Denis's conception clearly resonates with Aurier's theorization of the objective and subjective dimensions of art. Denis refers in this context to Gauguin's advice to search for the mysterious centres of our thought, as well as to Baudelaire's conception of imagination as the queen of faculties. In order for art to be more than a "visual sensation that we remember," and to become a "creation of our spirit," we must liberate our sensibility. Thereby art becomes a "*subjective deformation* of nature." "Objective deformation" is the necessary corrective of the theory of equivalents, that is, the obligation of the artist to express his personal vision in terms of a decorative, aesthetic, and rational composition. According to Denis, this was the element of art that the Impressionist completely ignored because it did not comply with their idea of improvisation.[157]

In his 1892 article, Aurier endeavoured to construct a philosophical justification for the compatibility of the emotional and idealistic dimensions of art. His argument is that a work of art contains an emotional and an idealistic element, and these compose the subjective and objective dimensions of art. Because the human soul is united with the cosmos, the artwork expresses more than individual emotions; the work of art is connected with the universal psyche and therefore has the potential to express universal truths. In order to establish that the artwork is more than an expression of personal emotion, he presents a logical chain of reasoning which proves that art is indeed capable of expressing the universality of the psyche. The tone of Aurier's argumentation seems to derive from the German idealistic tradition rather than from Plato or Plotinus. Moreover, the idea of the unity of the soul and cosmos is a recognizably Romantic idea, and one that was revived by the Symbolists. This point becomes clear if we compare Aurier's formulation with

[155] "Définition du Néo-Traditionnisme," originally published in 1890, reprinted in the collection of theoretical writings and criticism entitled *Théories*. Denis 1920 [1890], 10. See also Denis 1920, 20-24 ("À propos de L'exposition d'A. Séguin") and 25-29 ("Préface de la IXe exposition des peintres impressionnistes et symbolistes.")

[156] Denis 1920 [1890], 7 ("Définition du Néo-Traditionnisme")

[157] Denis 1920 [1909], 268 ("De Gauguin et de van Gogh au Classicisme").

Schelling's definition of the *Kunstprodukt*, which Engell summarizes in the following way:

> *Through creative imagination the mind affirms its own existence by joining its subjective impulses and perceptions with the particulars of nature. The resulting work of art, or* Kunstprodukt*, is itself real and objective, a token and a promise to man; it* symbolizes *the union of the mind's free and wilful consciousness with the independent and given nature of the cosmos.*[158]

From Aurier's rather complicated theoretical meanderings we can extract his argument concerning the subjective and objective dimensions of art based on the identity of the soul and the cosmos and the subject and the object. The Symbolist writers were predisposed to express their views in a language that in the eyes of later generations can appear as vague mysticism. In some cases this vagueness may be due to a theoretical confusion on behalf of the writer – Jean Moréas, for instance, was criticized by fellow Symbolists for misunderstanding the whole concept of the symbol, confusing it with metaphor or allegory.[159] At other times, however, we can recognize more comprehensible patterns underneath the strange vocabulary. Aurier's theory of Symbolism is a case in point. The concept of imagination can help to explain his apparent oscillation between subjective and objective, and material and spiritual perspectives. Aurier's argument is that because the human soul is united with the cosmos, the artwork expresses more than individual emotions; the work of art is connected with the universal psyche and therefore has the potential to express universal truths.[160] Aurier excuses himself for the "off-putting jargon and all the messy scholastics," and arrives at a conclusion: "*In the nature every object is, in fact, nothing but a signified idea.*"[161] As we can see, the idealist side of art is inseparable from the emotional side, and, consequently, the subjective and objective dimensions cannot be held apart.

In the Gauguin essay Aurier had emphasized the artist's right to manipulate the forms, lines, and colours according to his personal vision and according to the idea that was to be expressed. He repeats this thesis in "Les Peintres symbolistes," referring at the same time to a Baudelairean conception of art as a mysterious language.[162] In *L'Art romantique* (1868), Baudelaire had famously presented the idea (which he had adopted from Delacroix), that nature is a dictionary for the artist. From this immense "magasin d'images et de signes," the artist finds the elements which the power of his imagination transforms into works of art. Aurier, however,

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[158] Engell 1981, 301-302.

[159] Remy de Gourmont, for example, wrote that: "La théorie symboliste, si abstruse pour moi, est cependant Claire à quelques-uns. Elle est pour M. Moréas sans mystères: il sait que symbole veut dire métaphore, et s'en contente." Charles Morice notes in a similar vein: "Si nous donnons au mot symbole un sens précis, le talent de Moréas s'arrangerait mal de cette définition. Il s'exprime directement ou par des allégories; et il y a une confusion perpétuelle entre l'allégorie et le symbole." Lehmann 1950, 252.

[160] See Lehmann 1950, 299-301.

[161] "... rébarbatif jargon et toute cette hirsute scolastique ... *Dans la nature, tout objet n'est, en somme, qu'une Idée signifiée*" [Aurier's emphasis]. Aurier 1893, 301.

[162] Aurier 1893, 302.

goes one step further in his reformulation of this idea; he does not compare the objects of nature to *words* but instead talks about *letters*, by which he means the aesthetic elements such as line and colour.[163] This indicates a further shift away from the objects of nature towards an autonomously expressive language of art:

> *In the art understood in this way, the end is no longer the most direct and immediate reproduction of the object; all elements of the pictorial language, lines, planes, shadows, lights, and colours, turn into abstract elements that can be combined, attenuated, exaggerated, and distorted according to their own expressive mode, in order to reach the overall goal of the work: the expression of a certain dream, an idea, a thought.*[164]

This passage articulates a conception of the work of art based on an interconnectedness of form and meaning: the idea is expressed through formal means that are modified according to the overall significance of the work of art. In addition, Aurier explains that the artist is more than an “algebraist of ideas” who writes the ideas with mathematical precision. In addition he must possess a transcendental capacity of emotion, which “causes the soul to quiver before the undulating drama of abstractions.”[165] This ecstatic capacity of the artist finds a parallel in the experience of the receiver who senses the sympathetic radiation of the artwork and responds to it with an aesthetic emotion.[166] Like the emotional faculty of the artist, the aesthetic emotion of the viewer is nothing like the everyday emotionality of “music-hall songsters and manufacturers of chromolithographs.”[167] It is a transcendental spiritual capacity, which perhaps might also be described as the power of imagination. It is the sublime power that reveals the mystical correspondences behind the objects of the phenomenal world (Aurier quotes Baudelaire’s poem Correspondences in this context). [168]

This insistence on the emotional element of art combined with the pure Platonic idealism finds an explanation in the discussion of the unity of soul and cosmos in “Les Peintres symbolistes.” This is also the basis for Aurier’s account of the masterpiece. Aurier describes the creation of the artwork as a union between the soul

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[163] Baudelaire 1917 [1868], 10, 12; Rookmaaker 1959, 24, 154-155.

[164] “Dans l'art ainsi compris, la fin n'étant plus la reproduction directe et immédiate de l'objet, tous les éléments de la langue picturale, lignes, plans, ombres, lumières, couleurs, deviennent, on le comprendra, les éléments abstraits qui peuvent être combinés, atténués, exagérés, déformés, selon leur mode expressif propre, pour arriver au but général de l'œuvre: l'expression de telle idée, de tel rêve, de telle pensée.” Aurier 1893, 302. Similarly, Gauguin himself had written in 1885 about the expressive power of form an colour: “The straight line suggests infinity; the curve limits creation... . The colours are even more revealing, though less susceptible of multiple effects than lines, because of their power over the eye. There are hues that are noble, others common; tranquil and consoling harmonies, others that stimulate through their boldness.” From a letter to Emile Schuffenecker, January 14, 1885. Cited from Dorra 1994, 187.

[165] “... qui fait frissonner l'âme devant le drame ondoyant des abstractions.” Aurier 1893, 217 (”Le Symbolisme en peinture – Paul Gauguin”).

[166] Aurier 1893, 303 (”Les Peintres symbolistes”).

[167] Aurier 1893, 217 (”Le Symbolisme en peinture – Paul Gauguin”).

[168] Aurier 1893, 214 (”Le Symbolisme en peinture – Paul Gauguin”).

of the artist and the soul of nature. The artwork that is thus born has a soul which, like the human soul, serves as a link between spirit and matter:

> *The complete work of art is thus* a new being, *one can say absolutely alive, since it has a soul to animate it that is the synthesis of two souls; the soul of the artist and the soul of nature. I would write almost a paternal and maternal soul. This new being, almost divine, because it is immutable and immortal, must be considered likely to inspire whoever communicates with it under certain conditions, emotions, ideas, special feelings, proportionate to the purity and profundity of his soul.*[169]

The viewer's experience of the artwork parallels that of the artist's before the object, and it is characterized as communion of two souls; one is inferior and passive (the human soul), the other superior and active (the soul of the artwork). The viewer senses the influx of the artwork, its "sympathetic radiance," known as the sentiment of the beautiful or the aesthetic emotion. Interestingly, Aurier uses the language of sensual love to describe this most spiritual of experiences. To understand the work of art, he explains, one must love it, and to "penetrate it ... with immaterial kisses."[170] The metaphorical slip from spirituality to sexuality may here again be seen as a reflection of an attempt to hold on to the elusive ideal of pure and absolute art that is forever being threatened by materiality and sensuality.[171] But the love of a "sublime image" is purer and even more truly love than human love because it is not stained by sexuality.[172] In the passage at the end of "Essai sur une nouvelle méthode de critique" he writes:

> *To understand God, one must love Him; to understand a woman, one must love her; understanding is in proportion to love. Hence, the only way to understand a work of art is to become its lover. ... It is even easier to have true LOVE for a work of art than for a woman because in the work of art materiality barely exists and hence love will almost never degenerate into sensualism.*[173]

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[169] "L'œuvre d'art complète est donc un être nouveau, on peut dire absolument vivant, puisqu'il a pour l'animer une âme, qui est même la synthèse de deux âmes, l'âme de l'artiste et l'âme de la nature, j'écrirais presque l'âme paternelle et l'âme maternelle. Cet être nouveau, quasiment divin, car il est immuable et immortel, doit être estimé susceptible d'inspirer à qui communie avec lui dans certaines conditions, des émotions, des idées, des sentiments spéciaux, proportionnés à la pureté et à la profondeur de son âme." Aurier 1893, 303.

[170] Aurier 1893, 303.

[171] In fact, the Platonic and Neoplatonic theory where Aurier turned in order to establish a solid basis for his idealism already contains an element of desire, and therefore death and destruction, as has been observed by Jonathan Dollimore. Plato's Symposium, according to Dollimore, is "an account of how sexual desire, originating in traumatic division of perfect wholes, became an experience of incompleteness, loss and lack which ruined identity – and so severely that desire henceforth becomes an experience haunted by death. Dollimore 1998, 12.

[172] Aurier 1893, 303.

[173] "Pour comprendre Dieu, il faut l'aimer; pour comprendre la femme, il faut l'aimer; la compréhension est proportionnelle à l'amour. Le seul moyen de comprendre une œuvre d'art, c'est donc d'en devenir l'amant... . Il est même plus facile d'avoir pour une œuvre d'art l'AMOUR véritable que pour une femme, puisque dans l'œuvre d'art la matière existe à peine et ne fera presque jamais dégénérer l'amour en sensualisme." Aurier 1893, 201.

Most remarkable here is the conception that "in the work of art materiality barely exists." We must, of course, understand this in connection with Aurier's endeavour to justify the possibility, indeed the existence, of visual art that, despite its necessary materiality, is concerned with the "ideist substratum that is everywhere in the universe and which, according to Plato, is the only true reality."[174] Hence, he is trying to shift the essence of the artwork from the material object towards the idea that is manifested by it. But keeping in mind that the work of art is an entirely new being, it is not sufficient to understand this as a mimetic relationship in which the artwork simply represents the idea. The power of the artwork derives from its capacity to serve as a medium through which the artist as well as the viewer can come in touch with the more fundamental level of being. The viewer responds to the artwork according to his inner capacities (according to the "purity and profundity of his soul").The work of art thus becomes a locus for the imagining activity of both the artist and the viewer.

Despite the somewhat perplexing combination of technical, spiritual, and sensual language employed by Aurier, we can recognise here a certain similarity with Reynolds's theory of the imagining activity and the concept of the "imaginary space." It appears that in Aurier's theoretical framework, the essence of the artwork does not exist in the material object as such; the work of art only fully comes into being in the interaction with the viewer. The active constructive role given to the viewer also brings to mind Gamboni's account of the "potential image," as an image that depends on the viewer's state of mind to come fully into being, as well as Belting's description of the "non-finito" as the masterpiece that is only completed in our imagination. In these formulations, as in Aurier's theory, conscious manipulation of the formal structure of the artworks serves a purpose of dematerialization. We must note that the encounter between the artwork and the viewer is ultimately described by Aurier as passive surrendering to the superior being that is the work of art. Nevertheless, in this divine communion of the souls, the artwork becomes dynamic and its meaning is no longer fixed:

> *... was it not only one unforgettable moment of intimate encounter when we started to truly listen and to truly understand the harmonious language of these sublime images, to converse with them like with divine lovers, to penetrate the intimacy of their dazzling souls, sensing that they would always reveal some new and miraculous joys.*[175]

[174] Aurier 1893, 301 ("Les Peintres symbolistes").

[175] "... ne fut-ce point seulement de cette minute inoubliée d'intime rapprochement que, tous nous avons commencé de vraiment entendre et de vraiment comprendre l'harmonieuse langue de ces images sublimes, de converser avec elles ainsi qu'avec de divines amantes, de pénétrer en l'intimité de leurs âmes éblouissantes, pressentant qu'elles auraient toujours à nous révéler quelques nouvelles et miraculeuses joies, éternellement?" Aurier 1893, 304 ("Les Peintres symbolistes").

INDETERMINACY, PROCESSUALITY, AND DEMATERIALIZATION

In the discussion above, it has become apparent that the fin-de-siècle quest for the invisible and inexpressible in art was reflected in an increasing questioning of established norms of pictorial representation. The impressionists and the *plein air* painters had already rebelled against the academic requirement of the *fini*, which meant hiding all the individual brush strokes and giving the painting a smooth and polished surface. The visible brushstrokes of impressionist painting are usually seen as a method of capturing the spontaneity of visual experience, but in addition this technique also leaves the process of the production of the art work visible to the viewer.[176] Many artists of the Symbolist generation had begun their careers in the Impressionist context, and, as we have already seen, the strong opposition between Impressionism and Symbolism established by Aurier in his Gauguin essay was a one-off, and not in any way a fundamental element of his theory. Therefore, it would be too simplistic to believe that these nineteenth century manifestations of artistic avant-garde did not share any common ground.

Munch sometimes talked about the importance of capturing the first effect or the atmosphere of an object or a view or a human being on the artist. But for him this meant something very different from the purely visual effects of the Impressionists, because "one sees with different eyes at different times." The way one sees is affected by various inner and outer aspects, psychological and environmental, such as moods and mental states, intoxication, temperature, time of day, etc. This is what Munch means by truthfulness in painting; it is "the human aspect" and it is the only thing that gives art deeper meaning. Art is not, as the "detail painters" think, about reproducing every object by staring at them one by one and painting them as one sees them then. Instead, they must be painted the way they appeared when they first made such an impression on the artist.[177]

Gamboni has noted that Impressionism occupies an ambivalent position in relation to Realism and Symbolism because it can be seen as the final embodiment of realism as well as the beginning of a shift towards Symbolism. Many artists and critics of the 1890s, who were by then already well aware of the latest developments of Monet's paintings, adopted the second point of view.[178] At the very least, the Symbolists sympathized with the rebellious tendencies of Impressionism. However, the visible brushstrokes were so strongly coded as "Impressionist" that the Symbolist artists more or less abandoned them in favour of more simplified techniques that were intended to give the artwork a suggestive quality pointing beyond the visible world. Still, the idea of spontaneity was something that the Symbolists also embraced in their artistic practices. In their works this is manifested, for example, in an open-endedness and indeterminacy in the structure of the artwork. The central

[176] Barasch 1998, 62-63; on the concept of the *fini*, see also Boime 1986, 20-21.

[177] The Munch Museum, MM T2761, Sketchbook from 1889-1890. English translation cited from Tøjner 2003, 145.

[178] Gamboni 2002, 65.

difference between these two approaches can be stated in terms of the function of these manipulations of the artwork's structure: for the Impressionist they served a primarily visual purpose, whereas for the Symbolist their function was intellectual: their aim was to create a sense of immateriality and mystery.[179]

Somewhat paradoxically, this indeterminacy in the form and structure of the artwork simultaneously draws attention to the creative process behind the work of art and to the work itself as a "made" object. Hence, in Impressionist painting the quest for spontaneity resulted in paintings that were overtly material with thick impasto and radiant colours, whereas in Symbolism, the sketchy and unfinished quality served an opposite purpose of diminishing the effect of materiality in the artwork. This open-ended inclination works simultaneously in two opposing directions, both emphasizing and eluding the artist's presence in the art object. The visible brushstrokes, blank spaces where the canvas shows through, and the layers of pentimenti are direct indexical signs of the mental as well as physical activity of the artist. At the same time, the artwork retains an openness which gives it a sense of extending beyond the limits of material existence. Silverman has seen van Gogh's and Gauguin's different approaches to painting as manifestations of these opposing tendencies: van Gogh was motivated by a "labor theology" which led him to "maximize the materialization of the painting surface" in his effort to "render the infinite tangible," whereas "Gauguin's quest for sacrality immerses him in developing stylistic practices to dematerialize the physical surface of the canvas." [180]

This effect perhaps nowhere finds an equally innovative expression as in the experimental working techniques of Munch, which aimed at inducing the matter of paint and canvas with the living spirit of nature. Particularly in the early stages of his career he was constantly attacked by the more conservative critics who perceived his work as unfinished and sketchy.[181] In the 1930s he appeared to be still defending himself against those critics, when he wrote:

> *It is better to paint a good, unfinished painting than finish a bad one. – Many believe that a painting is finished when as many details as possible have been completed. – A single line can be a finished work of art.*[182]

This kind of open-ended and unfinished quality reflects the notion that materiality was something that had to be played down in order to make the work of art truly meaningful. The sensual and material exterior of the artwork had a seductive potential. Aurier notes this danger when he writes about van Gogh's

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[179] See Heller's account of Munch's relationship with French Impressionism. Heller writes: "Whereas French Impressionism was an impression of the eyes, Munch's 'impressionism' was an impression of the emotions." Heller 1969, 99.

[180] Silverman 2000, 6, 110-111.

[181] See Buchhart 2003, 23. In contrast, the Finnish art critic Sigurd Frosterus who wrote about Munch's 1909 exhibition in Helsinki understood the meaning and purpose of the unfinished quality in Munch's work. He wrote that Munch's genius is manifested in his instinctive capacity to avoid everything that is irrelevant, and if his images were made "complete" and "finished," they would become theatrical. Frosterus 2000, 232 ("Edvard Munchin näyttely Ateneumissa," 1909)

[182] The Munch Museum, MM T 2748, 1930. English translation cited from Tøjner 2003, 145.

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.[183] 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.[184] Too much perfection, it seems, can destroy the originality of artistic expression. Hence, the seemingly unfinished, open-ended quality of the artwork can be understood as a strategy of de-materialization. Rapetti 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.*[185]

Similarly, Heller has observed the almost contradictory interplay of overt materiality and dematerialization in the technically innovative art of the 1890s. He discussed works by Gauguin, Degas, Munch, and Khnopff as examples of this tendency. In Gauguin's fresco-like paintings, for instance, "the emphatic presence of the technique and material in the produced image achieves the effect of accenting the artificiality of the picture – its deviation from the visual model of natural forms rather than its adherence to an illusionistic practice."[186] Heller connects this kind of technical experimentation directly with the mystical and philosophical ideologies which considered art as a form of knowledge. He concludes, therefore, 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.[187]

Following Belting theorization, we can also perceive these contradictory tendencies in terms of the quest for the absolute ideal that was impossible to capture in a material work of art. 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*:

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[183] Aurier 1893, 262. ("Les Isolés: Vincent van Gogh")

[184] Mathews 1986a, 76.

[185] Rapetti 2005, 103.

[186] Heller 1985, 149

[187] Heller 1985, 152

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.[188]

Gamboni maintains that this kind of indeterminacy which, of course, has been a part of pictorial presentation throughout centuries, became a major trend in the nineteenth century, originating at Romanticism and intensifying towards the end of the century. In Gamboni's description of the potential image, we may recognize interesting affinities with Reynolds's theory of the imagining activity. Potential images come into being in the interaction between the work of art and the viewer. They are images that are "established – in the realm of the virtual – by the artist but dependent on the beholder for their realization, and their property is to make the beholder aware – either painfully or enjoyably – of the active, subjective nature of seeing."[189] Thus, they depend on the imagining activity of the perceiver to come fully into being. Visual ambiguity gives the artwork an open-ended and processual quality. Its meaning and even its ontological status are not predetermined but in a constant dynamic process. In the Symbolist context, the importance of ambiguity lies most of all in the potential of creating a sense of mystery through the means of representation instead of resorting to mysterious subject matter. Gamboni stresses that this ambiguity, "is not only iconographic but, more importantly, it affects representation and the distinction between figuration, ornament and abstraction."[190] He discusses the work of several artists that are often associated with Symbolism, most importantly Gauguin and Redon. In fact, he sees Redon as one of the central representatives of the potential tendency.[191]

In *The Open Work* (*Opera Aperta*, 1962), Umberto Eco discussed this kind of deliberate ambiguity as a central and defining feature of modern as opposed to traditional or "classical" work of art. Eco argues that the open work captures the experience of modernity; its formal characteristics reflect the meaninglessness and disorder experienced by the modern subject.[192] A conscious poetics of the open work, according to Eco, appears in late-nineteenth century Symbolist poetry, which in its search for suggestiveness opens the work to the free response of the viewer. Eco sees as a programmatic statement of the open work in Mallarmé's famous lines: "Nommer un objet c'est supprimer les trois quarts de la jouissance du poème, qui est faite du bonheur de deviner peu à peu: le suggérer ... voilà le rêve." (To name an object is to suppress three-fourths of the enjoyment of the poem, which is composed of the pleasure of guessing little by little: to suggest ... there is the dream.) Eco

[188] Belting 2001, 202.

[189] Gamboni 2002, 18.

[190] Gamboni 2002, 10, 105-106.

[191] Gamboni 2002, 68-77.

[192] See Eco 1989 [1962], 142.

maintains that the most significant thing "is to prevent a single sense from imposing itself at the very outset of the receptive process." This kind of suggestiveness which uses the symbol as a "communicative channel for the infinite," is an aesthetic phenomenon that continued to gain in importance throughout the 20th century.[193]

Lathe has defined this phenomenon in terms of an "amor vacui." She conceives this "love of a void" which leaves space for imagination as a central element of Symbolist art and literature, and sees it as the crucial feature which sets these "moderns" apart from Naturalism and its love details resulting from a "horror vacui." Moreover, this was a phenomenon that affected all fields of art from literature to architecture. This modern art "suggest ventures into space, fragmentary expeditions into the unknown, struggles and tensions with the unconscious rather than repetitions of conscious observations, and it prefers understatement rather than overstatement, design rather than detail, a degree of abstraction rather than naturalism.[194]

By focusing our attention on these kinds of subversive tendencies in fin-de-siècle art it is possible to construct an alternative "story of art" to the dominant one that culminates in abstraction. Gamboni calls attention to an important point that historians of modern art have often tended to overlook: representation was never completely abandoned, and after the Second World War the opposition between figuration and abstraction was more or less rejected.[195] The evolutionary narrative, which claims nonfigurative abstraction to be the logical and inevitable goal of the progression of modern art, has been surprisingly resilient. It is evident, for example, in Reynolds's reflection on the relationship between Symbolism and twentieth century abstraction. Reynolds's dismissal of pictorial Symbolism, be it conscious or not, reflects an attitude according to which visual art at the late nineteenth century was somehow lagging behind poetry and did not reach the same level until the appearance of non-figurative art at the beginning of the twentieth century. "[T]he specificity of the poetic and pictorial mediums," writes Reynolds, "is vital in *explaining why* abstract art did not emerge sooner" [my emphasis].[196] She also observes that there was a strong tendency towards abstraction in the aesthetics of Symbolist painting "in theory if not in practice."[197] A similar evolutionary scheme has been presented by Mark A. Cheetham who, in fact, perceives Gauguin as a founder of abstract art.[198] However, as H.R. Rookmaaker pointed out already in 1959, the meaning of the term "abstraction" as it was employed in the late nineteenth-century by Gauguin and Van Gogh, for instance, was quite different from

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[193] Eco 1989 [1962]8-9. David Robey points out in his introduction to *The Open Work* that its significance lies in the way that it "anticipates two of the major themes of contemporary literary theory from the sixties onward: the insistence on the element of multiplicity, plurality, or polysemy in art, and the emphasis on the role of the reader, on literary interpretation and response as an interactive process between reader and text." Robey 1989, viii.

[194] Lathe 1972, 1-3 and passim.

[195] Gamboni 2002, 9.

[196] Reynolds 1998, 7.

[197] Reynolds 1998, 33.

[198] Cheetham 1991, xii.

the non-figurative abstraction of the next century.[199] Even if we can establish a narrative link between the two usages of the term, it does not mean that their meanings are identical. Moreover, this kind of narrative appears to claim that with abstraction the ultimate dream was achieved; that the idea and the work were completely merged together. If this were true, that of course would have meant the end of art.

Certainly, there exists a historical continuation as well as an ideological affinity between Symbolist and abstract art. Both Kandinsky's and Mondrian's early works reveal strong Symbolist tendencies, and these artists continued to base their artistic production on the spiritual ideologies that were prevalent also in the cultural climate in which Symbolism was formulated (such as Neo-Platonism and Theosophy).[200] Yet, if we consider Symbolism as nothing but a prologue to abstraction, we will easily dismiss or perceive as reactionary those artistic transformations which did not lead the way towards abstraction. Hence, abstraction can be seen as the culmination of some tendencies that had their origins in the art and culture of the late nineteenth century, but as we very well know, it was not the only possible outcome of these artistic stirrings. On the contrary, the twentieth century witnessed a previously unparalleled plurality of art forms. Figuration continued to exist along with non-figurative art, and it continued to be a vital part of visual art, developing into new forms, such as Surrealism and Expressionism – the roots of which can also be located in the nineteenth century Symbolism. Redon's artistic practices, for example, did not directly lead to nonfigurative abstraction, but this does not mean that it should be considered reactionary or overtly "literary." Indeed, Redon's art has very innovative qualities, and if we wish to perceive it from the evolutionary perspective, it clearly points the way towards Surrealism.

The artist and historian of art and religion, Celia Rabinovitch has explored the formation of Surrealist art on the basis of nineteenth-century ideologies in her book *Surrealism and the Sacred* (2008). She considers Surrealism most of all as particular state of mind and as a reaction against the domination of rationalism. In her interpretation, Surrealism is based on similar notions of revelation, epiphany, and the creative imagination as the Symbolist movement. Indeed, she considers the creative imagination as the source of modern consciousness.[201] Rabinovitch provides in her book an important alternative reading of the history and formation of modern art, which does not follow the dominant model of perceiving it as a progressive development towards abstraction. She maintains that modern art is built on and supported by a sense of ambivalence. She describes the "positive new identity of modern art" in words that clearly reflect similarities with the slightly earlier phenomenon that is the subject of the present study:

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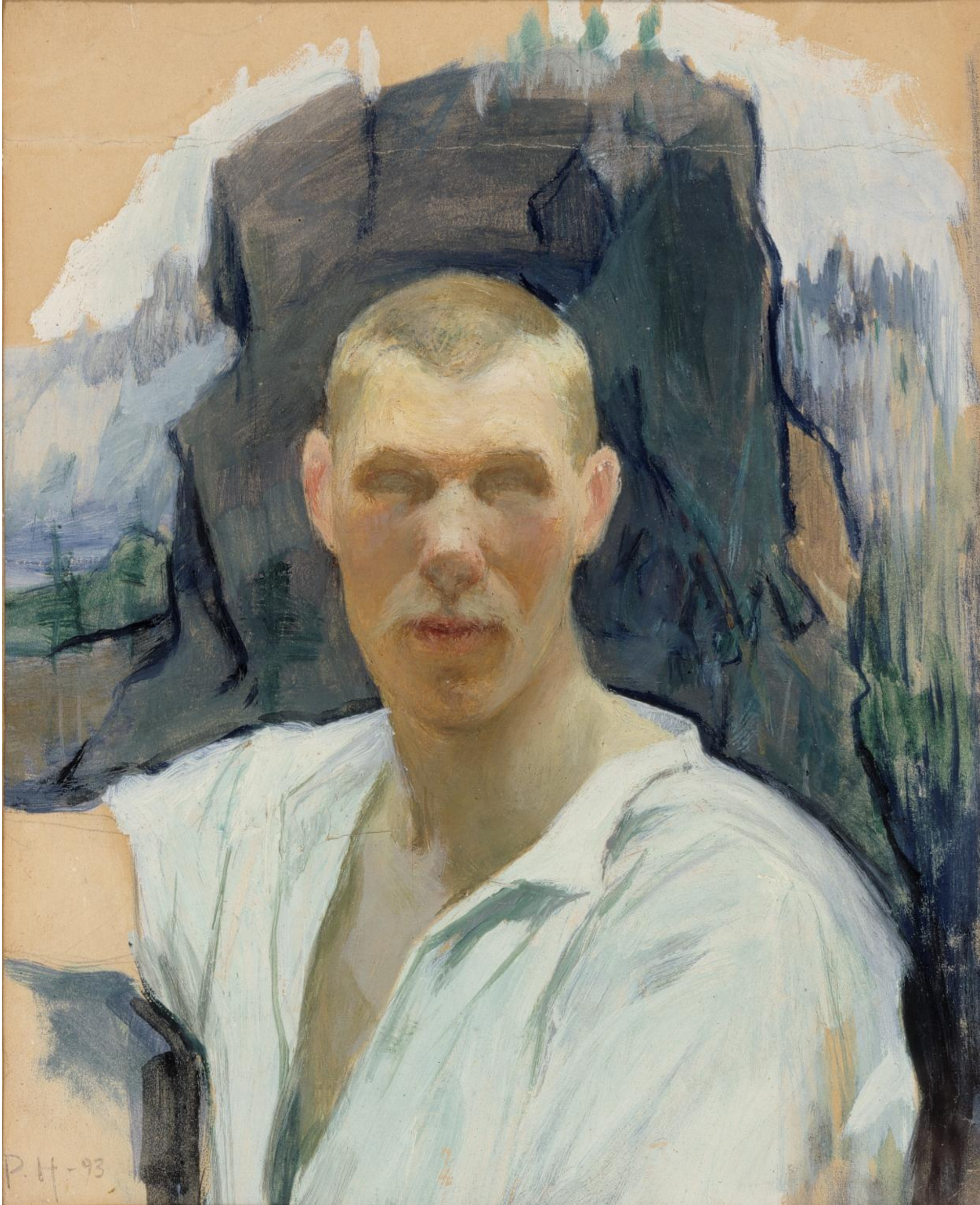
[199] According to Rookmaaker, when Gauguin wrote in a letter to Schuffenecker in 1888 that "art is an abstraction," he meant "that a work of art has a structure of its own which may be widely different from nature perceived naturalistically, although there is an invariable intention to represent the subject according to its structure and meaning." Rookmaaker 1959, 129-130, 113 n v, 129 n ap.

[200] The spiritual background of abstract art was thoroughly examined by Sixten Ringbom in his pioneering study *The Sounding Cosmos* (1970). See also Tuchman (ed.) 1986.

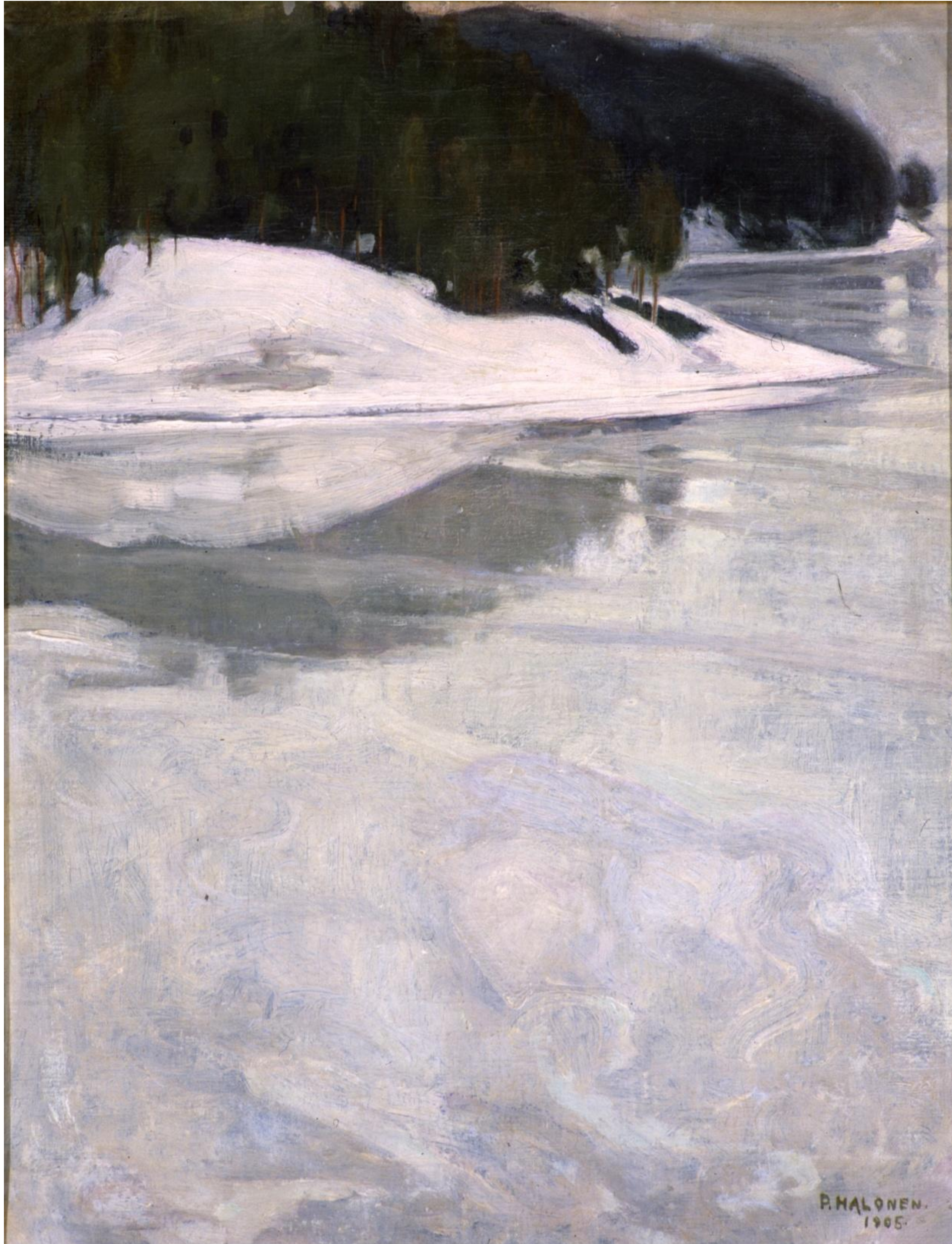
[201] Rabinovitch 2002, xvi-xvii, 4-6, 29-33.

Ambivalence, contradiction, and ambiguity constitute the meaning in modern art. The disordering of the senses called for by the surreal state of mind deliberately invokes new cognitive resolutions, new ways of seeing the world. Surrealism tests the limits of human imagination by turning our awareness inward to the imagination and the creative process itself.[202]

[202] Rabinovitch 2002, 229.

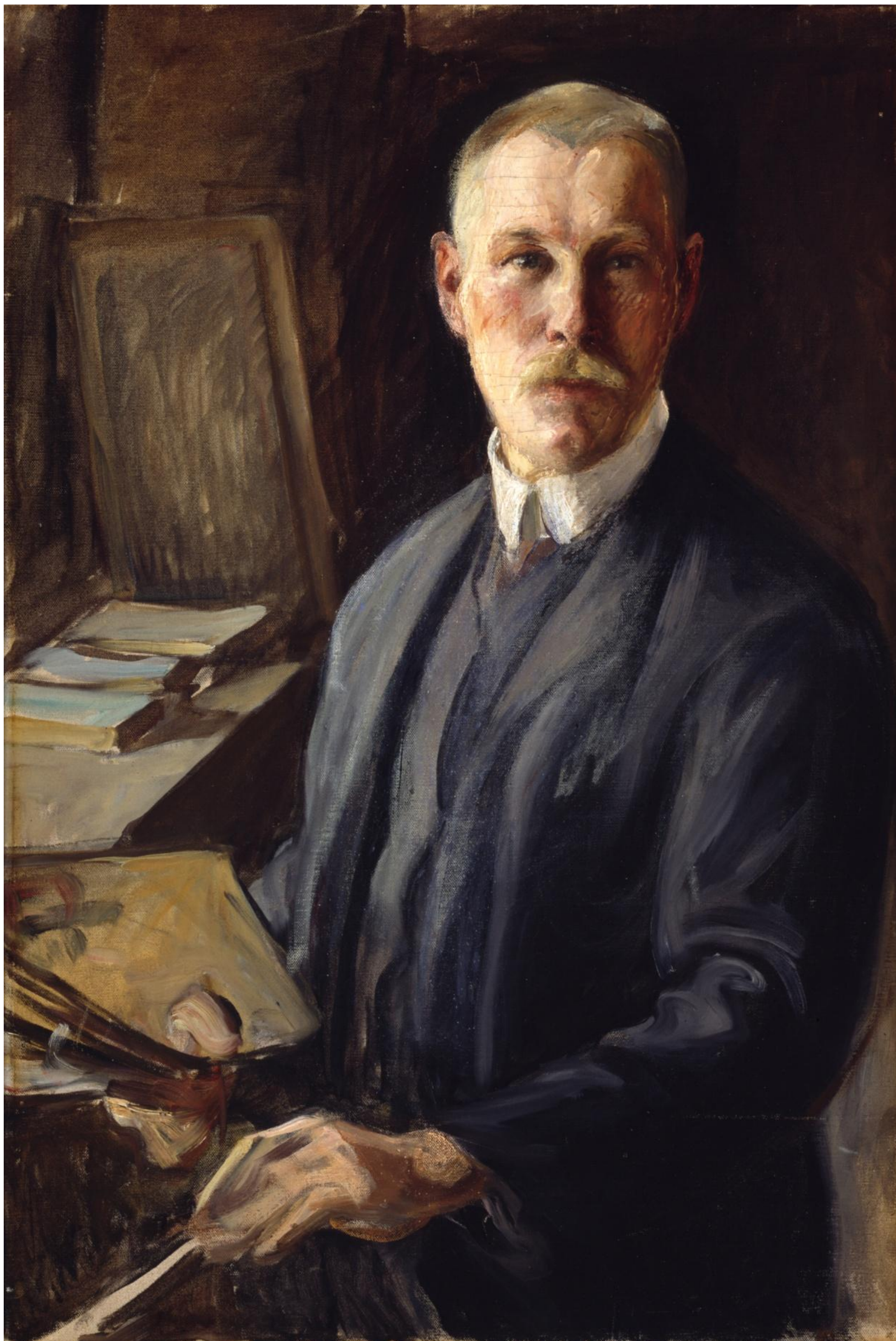


3. **Pekka Halonen**, *Self-Portrait*, 1893.



4. **Pekka Halonen**, *Thaw*, 1905.

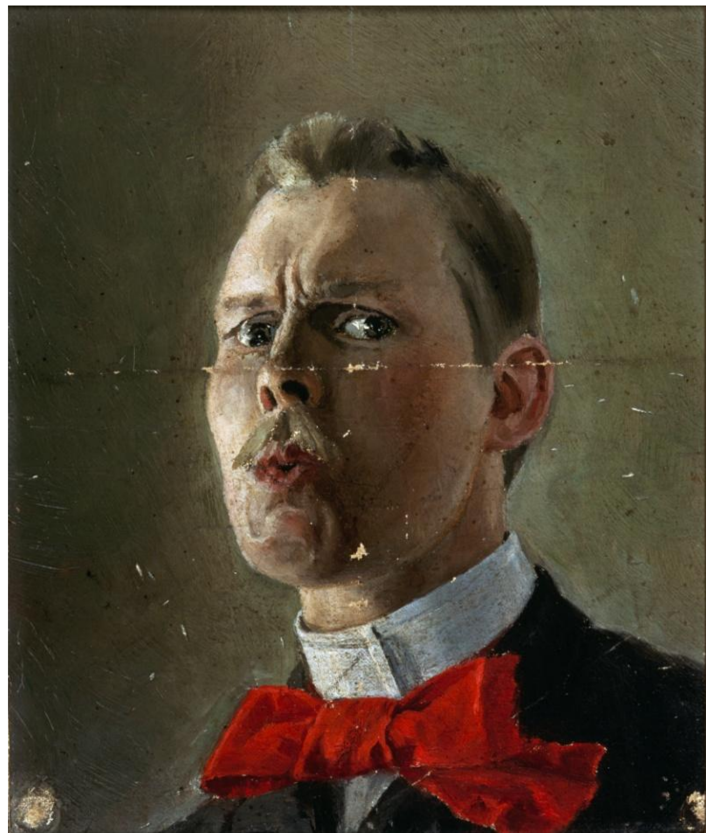
5. **Pekka Halonen**, *Double-Portrait*, 1895.



6**. Pekka Halonen**, *Self-Portrait*, 1890s.

7. **Pekka Halonen**, *Self-Portrait*, 1906.

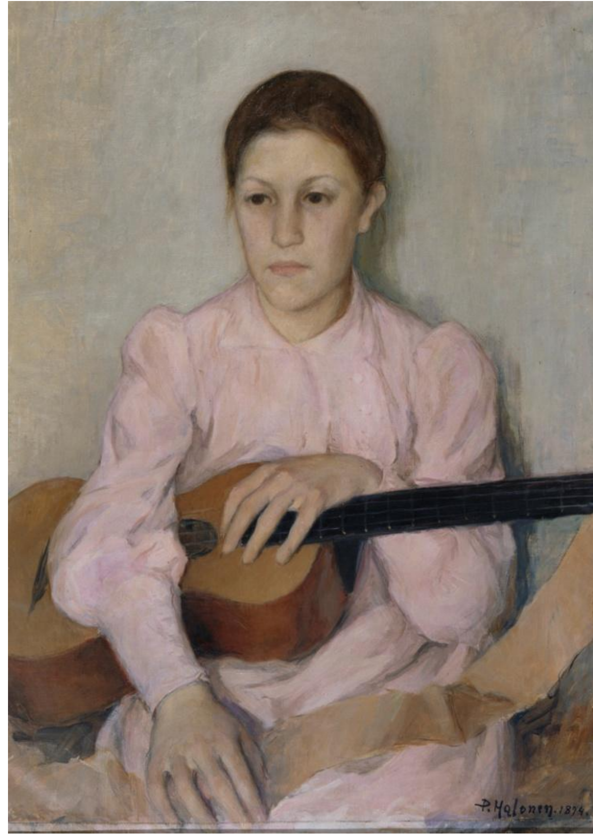
8. **Pekka Halonen**, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1900



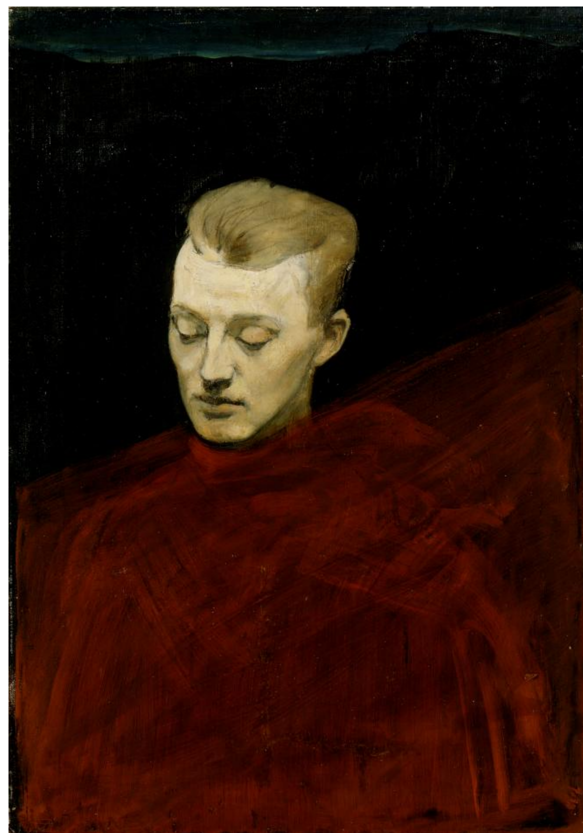
9. **Pekka Halonen**, *Self-Portrait, Whistling*, 1891.

10. **Ellen Thesleff**, *Thyra Elisabeth*, 1892.

11. **Paul Gauguin**, *Jug in the Form of a Head, Self-Portrait*, 1889.



12. **Pekka Halonen**, *After the Music Lesson*, 1894.



13. **Magnus Enckell**, *Head (Bruno Aspelin),* 1894.

2 SEEING BEYOND – PEKKA HALONEN

Oh! how rare, in truth, among those who pride themselves with having "artistic dispositions," how few the fortunate ones whose eyelids of the soul have been opened so that they can exclaim with Swedenborg, the visionary genius: "This very night the eyes of my inner man were opened: they became capable of seeing into the heavens, into the world of ideas and into hell! ..." And yet, is this not the preliminary and necessary initiation that the true artist, the absolute artist, must undergo?

— Albert Aurier[203]

A young man stands with his white shirt unbuttoned and the sleeves rolled up against a background of an ambiguous landscape. Light descending from above hits his forehead giving him an enlightened appearance. He is squinting in the bright light or perhaps blinded by it. The eyes are the most salient feature of this small and seemingly unfinished painting: they have no irises. They are painted with the same skin tone as the rest of the face, only slightly darker. Something resembling a forest can be made out in the background, and a bluish grey mass of brushstrokes that could be seen as a rocky mountain face. The painting is executed very sketchily with plain paper showing through in the background.

There is something disturbing about this self-portrait by Pekka Halonen (1893, fig. 3). It has a haunting quality which does not reveal itself until closer inspection. Of course, the strange eyes as well as the ambiguous scenery could be explained by the fact that the painting has an unfinished appearance. Moreover, it was never exhibited in the artist's lifetime; it made its first public appearance in Halonen's

[203] "Oh! combien rares, en vérité, parmi ceux qui se targuent de 'dispositions artistiques', combien rares les heureux dont les paupières de l'âme se sont entr'ouvertes et qui peuvent s'écrier avec Swedenborg, le génial halluciné: 'Cette nuit même, les yeux de mon homme intérieur furent ouverts: ils furent rendus propres à regarder dans les cieux, dans le monde des idées et dans les enfers ! ...' Et pourtant, n'est-ce point là la préalable et nécessaire initiation que doit subir le vrai artiste, l'artiste absolu?" Aurier 1893, 210 ("Le Symbolisme en peinture – Paul Gauguin").

memorial exhibition in 1936.[204] This could be regarded as an indication that the artist himself did not consider it a finished work. However, the fact that the painting is signed points to the opposite direction; the initials P.H. in the lower right hand corner can be understood as a conscious gesture that declares the self-portrait permanently unfinished.[205] The sketchy and unfinished appearance of the painting draws the viewer's attention to the creative process behind the work. The artist's presence is manifested on two levels: in the depicted person and in the visible brushstrokes which have not yet quite completed their task of turning the work into a convincing illusion of reality. The artwork appears to be, as it were, in a state of becoming.

Halonen probably painted this self-portrait after his arrival in Paris in November 1893. This was his third visit and the one that would crucially change his views on art and life. Sarajas-Korte writes about a religious crisis experienced by Halonen during his Parisian winter of 1893–94. Together with his friend, the Finnish artist Väinö Blomstedt, he studied A.P. Sinnet's *Esoteric Buddhism* which he found so profound and strange that it made his hair stand up.[206] In the beginning of the year 1894 Halonen and Blomstedt became students in Paul Gauguin's private academy. It is, however, very likely that Halonen had been exposed to the ideas expressed by Gauguin and his followers even before he became his student. Ever since the pioneering monograph of Pekka Halonen by the Finnish art historian Aune Lindström (1957) the 1893 self-portrait has been considered by many writers as one of the first works that Halonen made under Paul Gauguin's influence.[207] In the winter of 1891–92 Halonen had studied at Académie Julian where the influence of the Nabis was still strong, and he also shared living quarters with Magnus Enckell, an art student from Finland, who was by then already deeply immersed in Parisian Symbolism.[208] When Halonen came to Paris again in 1893 he became a regular at the Crémerie hosted by Madame Charlotte and frequented by avant-garde artists and writers from all over Europe, including Gauguin himself.[209] Gauguin had returned from his first stay in Tahiti, and the exhibition of his works in the galleries of Durand-Ruel had caused a great stir in the Parisian art world in the autumn of 1893.

If we examine the self-portrait against this biographical background, we may perhaps interpret it as experimentation on the new artistic ideas that Halonen was processing at the time of its making. A self-portrait always represents its author as a "self" but also as an artist – as the originator of the creative act that constitutes the work of art. Hence, it formulates a statement about the author's conception of art and the role of the artist. A self-portrait is in one sense a very private work – particularly one that remains in the artist's possession. Although the intimacy of self-portraiture may sometimes be nothing more than an illusion, it will nonetheless give the artist

[204] Ahtola-Moorhouse 2008, 80

[205] This has been suggested by Stewen 2008, 114.

[206] Sarajas-Korte 1966, 112

[207] See, for example, Lindström 1957, 82; von Bonsdorff 2005, 78-79; Stewen 2008, 104.

[208] Sarajas-Korte 1966, 63; on the Académie Julian, see Rewald 1956, 272-276.

[209] See Gutman-Hanhivaara 2008; von Bonsdorff 2005, 77-79.

more freedom for experimentation than a portrait of another person would. Besides, a self-portrait sometimes has the sense of being an aesthetic confession of faith. Gauguin's *Self-Portrait with Emile Bernard* (*Les Misérables*, 1888, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam) is a famous example. The painting was dedicated to Vincent van Gogh, and was sent to him in exchange for a self-portrait Vincent himself had painted for the occasion. Gauguin represented himself as Jean Valjean, the tragic hero of Victor Hugo's novel, thus proclaiming himself a victim of society. The robust face of the artist is presented against a fiery yellow background decorated with flowers.[210]

Gauguin's aesthetic concerns are reflected in an often quoted letter to his friend Emile Schuffenecker written in October 1888, probably very soon after he had completed the self-portrait. In the letter Gauguin explains that he is in a process of a stylistic transformation that perhaps has not yet fully begun to bear fruit, but he considers this self-portrait to be among the best things he has done so far:

> *I have done the self-portrait which Vincent asked for. I believe it is one of my best things: absolutely incomprehensible (for example) it is so abstract. Head of a bandit in the foreground, a Jean Valjean (Les Misérables) personifying also a disreputable Impressionist painter, shackled always to this world. The design is absolutely special, a complete abstraction ... The color is far from nature; imagine a vague suggestion of fire like a furnace radiating from the eyes, seat of the struggles of the painter's thought ... Chamber of a pure young girl. The impressionist is pure, still unsullied by the putrid kiss of the École des Beau-Arts.*[211]

Both the painting and the text manifest an endeavour to find new means of artistic expression in accordance with the aesthetic attitude that Gauguin and his fellow artists had been developing. The "impressionist artist" in the painting is presented as proud yet still somewhat uncertain of the exact direction he should take in this artistic development. The attitude of the represented artist combined with the bold stylistic experimentation turn this painting into an artistic manifesto. In Gauguin's painting, as he explains in the text, the eyes are the seat of the artist's "struggling" thought. Their look is not veiled like in Halonen's self-portrait, but the eyes are directed to the extreme left, thus avoiding the viewer's gaze. The artist appears to be absorbed in his own thoughts.

Halonen's self-portrait can be interpreted in terms of a similar stylistic transformation and search for a new language of art. The artist is seeking to express something that is still somewhat undefined in his mind and hence difficult to formulate. Stewen has interpreted these blind eyes as a "symptom" indicating something excessive and inadequate that enters the painting unconsciously.[212] Yet this painting already contains elements that later become conscious themes in Halonen's art. Blindness, muteness, and introversion, as we shall see, are key

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[210] See Silverman 2000, 17-45.

[211] Cited from Silverman 2000, 32. As we can see, at that time Gauguin was still calling himself an Impressionist.

[212] Stewen 2008, 112

elements in Halonen's aesthetic thinking.[213] The same veiled eyes re-appear in a self-portrait painted circa 1900 (fig. 8), and again in one painted in 1915. In a double-portrait of himself and his wife from 1895, Halonen has given the veiled look to his wife Maija (fig.5). It seems clear that these blind eyes are something that we need to explore further. In this chapter I will discuss this self-portrait in connection with the themes of seeing and non-seeing that constitute a central element in Halonen's art. These issues are examined in the broader context of the aesthetic developments of the fin-de-siècle. I want to remind the reader that my purpose is not to subordinate the artworks that I am discussing to these general tendencies but rather to view them as taking part in the discourses of the period, and consider them as sites of aesthetic and intellectual experimentation.[214]

SEEING AND KNOWING

The self-portrait, as representation of a self, makes a statement about how that self is understood, and enters into a discussion about selfhood. In addition, the self-portrait is also an image of the artist, and it is entangled with questions of creativity and artistic identity. Self-portraiture is a genre of art with a history, usually considered to have its beginning in the Renaissance and the new sense of individuality and the elevated status of the artist that came with it.[215] Hence, the history of self-portraiture is intrinsically linked with the birth of modern, autonomous selfhood. We are so familiar with this genre that the implicit problems of reading such an artwork are not obvious to us and are often overlooked. First of all, it must be kept in mind that a self-portrait is a *work of art*. This rather banal sounding statement is not always so self-evident. The problems of dealing with self-portraits, or with any other kinds of portraits, stem from their double nature; they ask to be seen as both a work of art and as an actual person – and these two perspectives are difficult to sustain simultaneously.[216]

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[213] See Lukkarinen 2007, 17-35.

[214] In my analysis of Halonen's self-portrait I am greatly indebted to the insightful discussions that have been presented by Ville Lukkarinen and Riikka Stewen. My intention here is to expand on certain themes that have been already suggested in their writings. See Lukkarinen 2004, 177-185; Lukkarinen 2007; Stewen 2008.

[215] Joseph Leo Koerner has called the German Renaissance, centred on the figure of Albrecht Dürer, "the moment of self-portraiture." Koerner 1993.

[216] See Brilliant 1991, 7. Richard Brilliant's book *Portraiture* was one of the first more theoretically ambitious presentations of the genre. His conception of portraiture as a particular phenomenon of representation that is deeply interconnected with issues of subjectivity is similar to my basic understanding of the genre. Brilliant notes the fact that art historians have been predominantly occupied with questions of dating and attribution of individual portraits instead of focusing on the more complex issues concerning this genre. Since the publication of Brilliant's book, the situation has changed to a certain extent as interest in portraiture and self-portraiture has increased. This was reflected, for instance, in the 2005 exhibition *Self-Portrait: Renaissance to Contemporary* (National Portrait Gallery, London), which brought together artists' self-portraits from across periods and places within the tradition of western painting, and was accompanied by a publication with insightful contributions from prominent writers like Joseph Leo Koerner and T.J. Clark (ed. by Anthony Bond & Ludmilla Jordanova).

The philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin has reminded us that we should always keep a distance between the artist and the artwork:

> *We find the author (perceive, understand, sense, and feel him) in any work of art. For example, in painting we always feel its author (artist), but we never* see *him in the way we see images he has depicted. We feel him in everything as a pure depicting origin (depicting subject), but not as a depicted (visible) image. Even in a self-portrait, of course, we do not see its depicting author, but only the artist's depiction. Strictly speaking, the author's image is a* contradictio in adjecto. *The so-called author's image is, to be sure, a special type of image, distinct from other images in the work, but it is an* image *and it has its own author who created it.*[217]

Following Bakhtin's idea, the art historian Joseph Leo Koerner has added that in fact, "Every picture becomes a self-portrait to the extent that we experience and interpret it as the unique product of a particular person." And from this, of course, follows that "proper" self-portraits (where artist and sitter are known to be the same person) tell us no more about the author than any other image that we consider to be by the same artist.[218] Nevertheless, even if we agree with Bakhtin and Koerner that the self-portrait does not in fact reveal anything special about the artist, it cannot be denied that when we discuss self-portraits we talk about works of art that have been made by a certain individual of him- or herself. Regardless of whether we are able to name that individual or not, as soon as we decide that a work of art is indeed a self-portrait we establish a special link between the work and the author. But the self-portrait is also a work of art in its own right, and the "self" that is being described cannot be un-problematically equated with that of the author. It is, of course, entirely possible to talk about a self-portrait without any reference to the real historical person whom we assume to be the author of the work. But as soon as we have any kind of knowledge or even speculations about the identity and biography of the assumed author this tends to affect our interpretation.

Because of the familiarity of the genre, self-portraits appear to be fairly simple representations of the artist's external features. In addition, self-portraits are often considered exceptionally intimate and confessional works of art that hold a special place in the artist's oeuvre. Julian Bell, in his introduction to the book *500 Self-Portraits* (2000), has described self-portraits as "points of solitude" and calls self-portraiture a "singular, in-turned art."[219] Self-portraits are supposed to have their origin in a quiet, solitary self-examination that renders visible in the artwork, not just the exterior self, the physical features, but also some kind of inner self. This is what gives the self-portrait its atmosphere of intimacy. In addition, self-portraits have an atmosphere of presence – this is the sense of "coming face to face with another person," that Laura Cumming talks about in her book on self-portraiture. According to her, "no matter how mediocre the image, how brief and faltering its illusion," it is always there, not just in self-portraits but in other kinds of portraits as well. But, as

[217] Bakhtin 1986, 109.

[218] Koerner 1993, xviii.

[219] Bell 2000, 5, 7.

Cumming points out, the person in the portrait soon reverts to an image. Self-portraits, she writes "go further in claiming the two to be one and the same ... A person and a picture all in one."[220]

The sense of presence is also derived from the strange fictional situation that we are forced into when we are faced with a self-portrait. According to the naturalist model of representation, when we look at a work of art, we assume the place of the artist in front of her object. However, when we are looking at a self-portrait this place is fundamentally impossible for us to assume: we are looking at what the artist saw when he or she looked into the mirror. In self-portraiture, the subject and object become confused in multiple ways. The artist is also the model; the subject of the artwork is also its object. When the viewer takes her place in front of the canvas, she also assumes the place of the artist in front of her model, that is, herself. The viewer is then both inside and outside this confusing exchange of looks.[221]

Moreover, despite its apparent intimacy and sense of presence, the self-portrait is also a conscious act with endless possibilities for posing and self-fashioning. As soon as the artist decides to turn her self-examination into a work of art, this process becomes public and it turns into communication. It is tempting to compare the self-portrait to Lacan's concept of the mirror stage. This concept refers to an observed stage in the development of a child but it also constitutes a metaphor for the construction of subjectivity. The mirror stage is the moment when the subject for the first time compares herself to another, and loses the original state of unity. She then assumes the first image that she sees, the mirror image, as herself. The subject recognizes herself in the image but this recognition is an illusion, a *méconnaissance*, because the mirror image represents the look of others. However, the mirror stage is necessary for the formation of individual selfhood, and through it the undifferentiated psyche of the infant becomes a part of the social reality. In the original state of unity there is no such thing as an individual self.[222] When an artist makes a self-portrait, we can imagine it as a return to the origins of the self, to the first moment of self-consciousness. We think that in front of a self-portrait we can get close to the inner being, but when the artist looked at herself to make the portrait, she assumed the look of an outsider – when the artist looks in the mirror she does not see herself but another.[223]

The artists of the fin-de-siècle were extremely conscious of these kinds of issues that concern not only self-portraiture but representation in general. The fundamental question is: how to represent abstract ideas? The self is not something that can be perceived with the physical senses. We can see the outward appearance of a person but that is not the *self*. As a self-portrait that refuses to look back, Halonen's painting constitutes a break with tradition. Its intention appears to be to represent something

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[220] Cumming 2009, 6.

[221] See Clark 2005.

[222] Lacan discussed this idea in the article "Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du JE, telle qu'elle nous est révélée dans l'expérience analytique," first published in 1949. Lacan 1977; see also Laplanche & Pontalis 1973, 250-52.

[223] See Melchior-Bonnet 2001, 246-82.

that is beyond mere likeness, beyond surface appearance. In this sense, it also takes part in the art historical current that questions the whole idea of imitation of nature. One reason why self-portraiture of this period has been somewhat neglected as a subject for research might be its entanglement with the concept of "likeness." The representation of "likeness" has been considered the most important task of portraiture right from its beginning as an independent genre of art. Being so closely tied with imitation of nature it has not been viewed as particularly "modern," and it does not very well fit the story of modern art as a consistent progression which culminates in "pure abstraction." However, as I have already argued, this conception of the development of art is very limited, and it fails to take into account the fascinating and truly radical ways that fin-de-siècle art is related to the new conceptions of art and selfhood.

Although veiled looks and closed eyes are by no means unprecedented in the history of self-portraiture, a quick glance through a book like Bell's *500 Self-Portraits* confirms our suspicion: they always appear as an anomaly. Instead, on almost every page we encounter the very familiar piercing look that we immediately recognize as a consequence of examining the face in a mirror reflection.[224] Self-portraiture as genre is based on a special relationship between seeing and knowing. The act of making a self-portrait constitutes an act of self-reflection – in all senses of the term. As viewers we take part in this strangely enchanting fiction which aims at convincing us that what we are faced with is indeed a *self*.

Western modernity has been associated with a privileging of vision. This "ocularcentrism" is believed to have originated already in ancient Greece. Plato's writings appear to evidence this centrality of sight. Plato compared the human eye to the sun and he grouped the sense of sight together with intelligence and the soul and not with the other senses. Martin Jay, who has studied the meaning and metaphors of vision in Western culture, has noted that in Plato's philosophy "vision" actually seems to refer to that of the inner eye and not to physical perception. Our physical eyes are imperfect and hence susceptible to illusion. Jay also points out that the dangerous potential contained in vision is evident in Greek mythology in the figures of Narcissus, Orpheus, and Medusa. It appears, then, that there is an inherent ambivalence in our attitude towards vision. Jay, however, maintains that these contradictory attitudes have in fact served to increase the power of vision:

> *For if vision could be construed as either the allegedly pure sight of perfect and immobile forms with "the eye of the mind" or as the impure but immediately experienced sight of the actual two eyes, when one of these alternatives was under attack, the other could be raised in its place. In either case, something called vision could still be accounted the noblest of the senses.*[225]

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[224] See Bell 2000.

[225] Jay 1993, 29. Stuart Clark has discussed the many ambiguous and negative evaluations of vision that existed even during the "ocularcentric era." He argues that the collapse of the "representational" model of vision collapsed gradually between the early fifteenth and the late seventeenth-centuries. The visual skepticism of the early modern period was founded partly on the philosophical skepticism of the ancient Greeks. Clark 2007, 20, 266.

Jay considers Descartes an important founder of "modern ocularcentrism." His philosophy is based on the idea of the "disembodied eye" which was shared by modern science and Albertian art. The inherent ambiguity of vision also lies at the heart of Cartesian philosophy, because for Descartes it was, in the end, the mind (or the soul, *âme*) that sees and not the physical eye.[226] This perspective turned the whole world into "representation", that is, a picture constructed by the look. The film theorist and art historian Kaja Silverman has described the dramatic consequences of this shift in the self-understanding of the human subject in her book *The Flesh of my Flesh*; instead of looking for similarities between himself and other living beings, "he strove to be unique, freestanding, and identical to himself."[227] Descartes sought to reach this goal by isolating himself from the world and making his individual self the foundation of his knowledge and being. However, this failed to provide the sense of solidity that he was yearning for, and hence he restored God to the supreme position. Silverman notes that this description of the rise of Cartesian ocularcentrism is the basic story of the modern self, but there was also another modernity; "one that looks back to Ovid and Leonardo instead of Descartes, and that emphasizes kinship instead of separation."[228] The Swedenborgian theory of correspondences and its popularity in the nineteenth century is one manifestation of this worldview based on a sense of similarity and continuation instead of difference and individuality. Darwin's theory of evolution is another thoroughly modern example.[229]

The ocularcentric bias continued throughout the Enlightenment, although it was also contested in the sensationalist tradition established by philosophers like John Locke who claimed that it was only through sensation, and not some innate intuition or deduction, that we acquire ideas of things that supposedly exist outside ourselves. Still, sight continued to be considered the noblest of senses, and the followers of both Descartes and Locke perceived the mind in terms of a metaphor of the camera obscura.[230] Romanticism, with its revival of the Neoplatonic conceptions of ideal beauty that can be perceived only with the eye of the mind, marks a point where the enlightenment trust in sight begins to wane, and the ambivalent attitudes increase. New technological innovations like photography could be seen as a validation of the scopic regime, or alternatively as proof of its falsity. The rise of positivist science placed emphasis on the passivity of vision contesting the active perception of Cartesian philosophy.[231]

Impressionist art with its aspiration to passively record the visual experience seems to follow the positivist model of seeing. Yet, at the same time, the visible brush strokes, fragmentary perspectives, and avoidance of spatial illusion increased

[226] Jay 1993, 81

[227] Silverman 2009, 2.

[228] Silverman 2009, 2.

[229] Silverman 2009, 3.

[230] Jay 1993, 85. See also Crary 1992 [1990], 25-66.

[231] Ian Hacking has summarized the difference: "Cartesian perception is the active rendering of the object transparent to the mind. Positivist seeing is the passive blunting of light rays on opaque, impermeable "physical objects" which are themselves passive and indifferent to the observer."Hacking 1975, 33.

the self-reflective quality of painting. The Impressionists took the privileging of vision to an extreme point where its link with knowledge and the mind was beginning to crumble. The Symbolist aim can in this sense be seen as both a continuation and a complete reversal of the Impressionist mission: they wanted to surpass the visual experience and represent the mental image directly. These artistic concerns are connected with a general shift away from the rational and empirical model of man towards a conception based on inwardness and intuition. Seeing was no longer conceived as the primary model of cognition. However, self-portraiture as a genre is connected with the privileging of vision and the tendency to associate seeing with knowing.[232] Halonen's 1893 self-portrait is exceptional precisely because it refuses to look back, and as I have already remarked, this reflects a more general inclination in his art. But Halonen did also paint self-portraits that look directly at the viewer. I will discuss two self-portraits like this briefly in order to establish some points about the tradition of self-portraiture. I will then return to the question of the veiled look in the 1893 self-portrait and examine it against this background.

In a self-portrait painted in 1891 during his first stay in Paris, the young artist has puckered his lips as if he was whistling and is gazing directly at the viewer from underneath his creased brow (fig. 9). This very unusual facial expression brings to mind the self-portrait etchings by Rembrandt, which Bal has described in the following way:

> *The etchings narrativize the self-exploration and representation. The first one* [*Self-portrait in a cap, with eyes wide open*, 1630, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam] *especially relates the shock of self-reflection, representing the face so close to the work's surface that the figure seems to draw back after literally hitting the mirror. Here, the viewer's place is absorbed, the piercing eyes of the figure discouraging a comfortable viewing position.*[233]

Bal has noted that these kinds of self-portraits, which emphasize self-exploration and self-representation, suggest an implied mirror rather than an implied viewer.[234] In comparison with the effect of bluntness and sincerity in Rembrandt's self-representation, Halonen's self-portrait appears more aloof. The stiff white collar and the red bow give the young man a dandyish appearance. This self-portrait seems to demonstrate a nascent self-awareness of the artist. He is posing in front of the mirror and assuming the look of the "other" that is reflected back to himself. Yet there is also a sense of self-conscious frankness in this self-portrait. The unusual and somewhat awkward mine creates a slight distortion into the interplay of intimacy and posing. As with the Rembrandt self-portrait, the face appears to be too close to the

[232] T.J. Clark has discussed these issues in an article that explores the special circumstances of looking in self-portraiture. See Clark 2005.

[233] Bal 2006 [1991], 251.

[234] Bal 2006 [1991], 251.

surface making the viewer withdraw. This effect, in Bal's words, "problematizes the conflation of represented self and successful representation."[235]

In another self-portrait which in all likelihood was executed sometime in the 1890s, the artist appears standing at his easel, paintbrush and palette in hand (fig. 6). His look is direct and sincere and the whole composition is very typical for a self-portrait. Here Halonen is presenting himself as an artist, as a man of the craft. The pose and the facial expression bear such a striking resemblance to a very well-known self-portrait that one begins to wonder whether it can even be a coincidence – although we must keep in mind here the old truism that a self-portrait always resembles another self-portrait more than it resembles any individual person. The self-portrait that I am referring to is the one by Jacques-Louis David which he famously painted in prison in 1794.[236] This particular work is the starting point for T.J. Clark's article on the look of self-portraiture. According to the basic fiction of self-portraiture, what we are looking at is what the author of the self-portrait saw in the mirror. Now, if this fiction is taken seriously, we enter into a vertiginous loop of an endlessly oscillating exchange of looks. The look of self-portraiture, says Clark, can only be expressed with a sentence that is designed to go on forever. It is: "The look of someone looking at him or herself looking at the look he or she has when it is a matter of looking not just at anything, at something else, but back to the place from which one is looking…" But this "epistemological anxiety" is not the be all and end all of the look of self-portraiture. The kind of look that we encounter in David's (and Halonen's) self-portrait is "the look of mastery: of containment, detachment, distance, *sang froid*, self-possession."[237] It is, in the end, impossible to say whether the intensity of the look is supposed to indicate that it can penetrate through the surface to some truth within or whether it is saying the exact opposite, that it is only concerned with the appearances. According to Clark this is a crucial element of the look in self-portraiture, it always contains the potential for these alternate readings. Indeed, this "oscillation is what the look *is*."[238]

When we are faced with a self-portrait like this, we are looking at a body, that is, the exterior of the individual human being, yet we immediately assume that we are also looking at a self. Clark refers here to Taylor's discussion of the incredible power and persistence of the model of our selves as having an inside and an outside.[239] Clark explains the persuasiveness of this model by linking it to the inherent connection that exists between seeing and understanding; that is, that understanding is conceived as a seeing of the mind. If understanding is like seeing, then, conversely, seeing must be a kind of understanding. Hence, the type of self-portraiture of which David's and Halonen's paintings are representatives, appears to

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[235] Bal 2006 [1991], 255.

[236] Jacques-Louis David, *Self-Portrait*, oil on canvas, 80.5 x 64.1 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris. David had been an active supporter of the Robespierre regime and was sent to prison after its downfall. It is believed that he avoided a death sentence partly due to his accomplishments as an artist. For a detailed examination of David's self-portrait, see Clark 1994.

[237] Clark 2005, 57.

[238] Clark 2005, 57.

[239] Clark 2005, 64; Taylor 1989, 111-112.

be more than the likeness of an artist; it is a representation of the activity of self-examination:

> *... we are being shown someone seeing the thing he or she understands best, or, at least, in a way nobody else could. And the understanding the self has of itself* is too a kind of seeing*; or shall we say, it is a process that can only be properly imagined after the model of seeing: that is, as a discrete, continuous, immediate proceeding from a centre: a movement out, as of some Will, but at the same time a stillness and receptivity, as of some Eye to which the world comes.*[240]

This kind of self-portraiture is familiar to us, and we recognize it as a pictorial mode. In addition, it is based on a very familiar way of perceiving the self. This is a mode of self-understanding that, as Taylor has explained, has become so persistent that we find it hard to even imagine what an alternative picture might be.[241] Although this basic assumption generally retained its power throughout the twentieth century, the picture was getting somewhat more complicated already in the nineteenth century discourses of selfhood. A self-portrait that represents the artist as blind, that refuses to enter into the exchange of looks, constitutes a radical split from the rules and traditions of the genre; therefore, its epistemological complications are somewhat different. Indeed, this kind of self-portrait spells out a conscious break with the tradition and with the model of selfhood that comes with it. The refusal to look can be seen as a function of the inward turned attitude of this work, and it also serves as an invitation for the viewer to reflect on his or her own self. Thus the relationship between the self and other, between subject and object, becomes increasingly complex. The basic model of inside and outside remains unchanged, but, although the self-portrait still presents the exterior self, the blindness of the eyes emphasizes interiority. In a sense, then, Halonen's self-portrait is a representation of the inherent paradox of self-portraiture that strives to represent anything other than the body. It underlines the fundamental impossibility of representing what is inside.

BLINDNESS AND INNER VISION

The blind eyes in Halonen's self-portrait seem to refer to some kind of inner vision that instead of looking at the sensory world is directed at a spiritual realm. In order to suggest some possible interpretations for the meaning of these blind eyes, I will look into the theme of inner vision in fin-de-siècle art, followed by a discussion of the specific Symbolist motif of the closed eyes. I believe this kind of primarily subject-oriented analysis can certainly offer insight into the self-portrait as well as into Halonen's artistic endeavours more generally. However, it will become apparent that the painting contains multiple levels of meaning which are manifested in the execution of the work as well as in its subject matter. Hence, in the final section of this chapter I will examine the self-portrait and its theme of blindness in the broader

[240] Clark 2005, 64.

[241] See Taylor 1989, x.

context of Halonen's oeuvre in order to generate a level of interpretation that is more directly connected to the work as a whole; that is, an interpretations that takes into account the form as well as the content.

Blindness as a metaphor of transcendental vision has a long history in Western culture. In antiquity it was personified most famously by the divinely inspired seer Teiresias and the blind poet Homer. They may have lost the use of their eyes but they had received something far more precious in compensation: the divine gift that implicated a contact with another world. Blindness in this sense is associated with madness: both are of supernatural origin (caused by the intervention of either gods or demons), and therefore have an element of something sacred. Blindness and madness are considered as both a curse and a blessing.[242] The concept of inner vision is found already in the writings of Plato, and it became a central idea in the Neoplatonic tradition. In Plato's *Phaedo* Socrates explains that one might lose the eye of the soul if, in trying to understand the true existence, one relies too much on the senses: "... I was afraid that by observing objects with my eyes and trying to comprehend them with each of my senses I might blind my soul altogether."[243] This passage, however, has nothing to do with the arts as such, although it may have inspired later generations of artists to search for artistic expression based on the eye of the soul. Plato's relation to art was famously controversial. In book X of the *Republic*, Socrates explains that poetry is imitation thrice removed from truth; it imitates the visible world which in itself is nothing but a reflection of the world of Ideas. The stories told by the poets were considered by Plato as immoral as well as false, because they would unnecessarily stir the passions of men and blind them to truth. Hence, although he acknowledges his admiration for poetry, Socrates famously excludes Homer and the other poets from the ideal state.[244]

In *Ion* Plato presents his own theory of poetic creation as opposed to the Homeric model. The opposition between the Homeric and Platonic models of poetic creativity constitutes an opposition between the conception of art for art's sake and art as a means of accessing the truth. According to the Platonic mode, artists are not conscious creators but divine mediators of God's message.[245] This ecstatic theory of artistic creation became a central thread in the Neoplatonic tradition. In the philosophy of Plotinus, the spiritual world is both within us and outside us. The human soul occupies an intermediate position between God and matter, and during the ecstatic state the soul is able to lift itself to the supreme level. Then we can identify ourselves with the divine Self and are moved by its beauty. This higher realm of truth is always within us, and thus this move upward to the supreme level, is also to be perceived as a move inward.[246] Plotinus uses the metaphor of sculpting one's own statue to describe the process of self-development through purification:

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[242] Barasch 2001, 30-36.

[243] Plato: *Phaedo*, 99e.

[244] Plato: *Republic*, 595a-608b.

[245] See Bays 1964, 3-4.

[246] Hadot 1998 [1989], 26-27.

Withdraw into yourself and look. And if you do not find yourself beautiful yet, act as does the creator of a statue that is to be made beautiful: he cuts away here, he smoothes there, he makes this line lighter, this other purer, until a lovely face has grown upon his work. So do you also: cut away all that is excessive, straighten all that is crooked, bring light to all that is overcast, labour to make all one glow of beauty and never cease chiselling your statue, until there shall shine out on you from it the godlike splendour of virtue, until you shall see the perfect goodness surely established in the stainless shrine.[247]

Representing an ordinary man, according to Plotinus, is not art. Art as imitation of reality had no more worth for Plotinus than it had for Plato. But Plotinus perceived the possibility of another kind of art that would have the potential to access the truth, the eternal model, behind the appearances. Connection with this higher realm can be achieved by turning inward and relying on the vision of the inner eye. In order to understand, one must refuse to see: "you must close the eyes and call instead upon another vision which is to be waked within you, a vision, the birth-right of all, which a few turn to use."[248] Pierre Hadot, who has studied the metaphors of vision in the philosophy of Plotinus, writes that "[t]he metamorphosis of inner vision thus has its counterpart in the metamorphosis of physical vision." We can discover the world from within ourselves, and in the same way we can learn to see the spiritual dimension behind the appearances.[249]

The idea of artistic inner vision is something that has been rediscovered and revived several times throughout the history of Western art. The literary historian Gwendolyn Bays has called it the "perennial philosophy of poetry."[250] In the aesthetic theory of Romanticism the concept of artistic inner vision gained unforeseen importance as it came to be associated with the newly conceived idea of the creative imagination. For William Blake, for example, the imagination represented a mystical union with the absolute; the world of imagination was the only thing that truly existed. Blake's understanding of the concept of imagination stemmed largely from the occult and esoteric tradition of Jacob Boehme, Paracelsus, and Swedenborg. The concept of imagination, understood as uncontrollable fantasy, has often carried negative connotations in Western culture, but in the occult tradition it has always been held in high esteem.[251] Imagination is in this context understood

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[247] Plotinus: *The Enneads*, I, 6.9.

[248] Plotinus: *The Enneads*, I, 6.8.

[249] Hadot 1998 [1989], 35.

[250] Bays 1964, 3. In her book *Orphic Vision. Seer Poets from Novalis to Rimbaud*, Bays offers a comprehensive and insightful account of the Romantic myth of the poet as a seer. However, some of her views on the organization of the human mind containing a "superconscious" as well as an unconscious realm, and her ideas about the potentially beneficial effects of psychedelic drugs may from today's perspective appear controversial to say the least. On the idea of the artist as seer in the nineteenth-century see also the section "Priest, Seer, Martyr, Christ" in the exhibition catalogue *Rebels and Martyrs. The Image of the Artist in the Nineteenth Century*. Sturgis & Wilson 2006.

[251] On the concept of imagination in occult thought, see Gibbons 2001, 92-102. Gibbons has pointed out that "(t)he writers who were responsible for the Romantic rehabilitation of the imagination were deeply versed in mystical (and especially Behmenist) writings: Blake, Coleridge, Schlegel, Tieck, Novalis, Schelling, etc. It is true, nevertheless, that there were also non-occult sources for the Romantic thought about the imagination. Even

as the faculty for perceiving the ideas in a state of ecstasy. For Eliphas Lévi (Alphonse Louis Constant), one of the key figures of modern occultism, “Imagination is in effect the soul's eye; therein forms are outlined and preserved; thereby we behold the reflections of the invisible world; it is the glass of visions and the apparatus of magical life.”[252] Bays describes the Romantic seer-poet as “one who possessed magic vision of the kind which could be found both in the wisdom of ancient Magi and in the modern discovery of Mesmer.”[253] Franz Anton Mesmer’s discovery of magnetism, which later found a more scientific formulation as hypnotism, seemed to offer scientific proof for the ancient phenomenon.

Swedenborg was a major inspiration for mystically inclined artists and writers throughout the nineteenth century. But even if Swedenborg was often stated as the origin of these ideas it is not very likely that many artists or writers actually had direct contact with the oeuvre of the Swedish mystic. Swedenborgianism was transmitted particularly in the context of modern occultism, particularly through the popular doctrines of Mesmerism and freemasonry.[254] Eliphas Lévi published in the 1840s a long poem called “Les Correspondances” which served to popularize the Swedenborgian theory of correspondences, and was a possible source Baudelaire’s poem “Correspondance.”[255] In addition to Baudelaire, Balzac was an important transmitter of Swedenborgian ideas in the nineteenth century. The concept of inner vision has a central place in *Le Livre Mystique* (1831-1835), a trilogy of novels containing *Louis Lambert*, *Séraphita*, and *Les Proscrits*. The character of Louis Lambert in the novel of the same name is a prime example of a Romantic visionary. The gift of inner vision, that is, the ability to perceive “the things of the material universe and the things of the spiritual universe in all their ramifications original and causative” is called “le Spécialisme.” It is the ability of the greatest human geniuses. Specialism binds together the notion of the inner eye with intuition: “The perfection of the inner eye gives rise to the gift of Specialism. Specialism brings with it Intuition. Intuition is one of the faculties of the Inner man, of which Specialism is an attribute.”[256] Although not physically blind, Louis Lambert’s exceptional genius derives from his capacity for inner vision. His destiny, in the end, is to become entirely isolated from the rest of the world, his existence reduced into a trancelike silence. This is the melancholic position of the artist genius: his exceptional

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some of these, however, lead back ultimately to esoteric thought; e.g. The Shaftesburian tradition, which itself was grounded in Neoplatonism.” Gibbons 2001, 99.

[252] Cited from McIntosh 1972, 149. According to McIntosh, Lévi's significance in the history of occultism is that "he helped to change the popular concept of magic. Whereas magic had hitherto been regarded by most people as a means of manipulating the forces of nature and by many as a dangerous superstition, Lévi presented it as a way of drawing the will through certain channels and turning the magician into a more fully realised human being." McIntosh 1972, 152.

[253] Bays 1964, vii.

[254] See Wilkinson 1996, ix. On the widespread influence of the occult in French nineteenth century literature see also MacIntosh 1972, 195-205.

[255] Wilkinson 1996, 24-26, 217-220.

[256] Balzac 1889 [1832] 253.

sensitivity renders him capable to understand things that are impossible to communicate to ordinary human beings.[257]

Balzac's knowledge of Swedenborg's works was probably limited but he was an important transmitter of the literary myth of Swedenborg as first and foremost a mystic.[258] This perception of Swedenborg is reflected also in Aurier's description of him as a "génial halluciné." Aurier presents Swedenborg as a somewhat questionable authority, prone to the most grotesque ramblings, but a visionary genius none the less, and a model for all artists who are seeking to express truths beyond appearances.[259]

In his essay on Gauguin, Aurier also refers to Plato's famous metaphor of the cave. With this metaphorical description Plato illustrates the distinction between truth and mere appearances. For Aurier, Gauguin represented an artist who had broken his chains and escaped from the cave. If for some people his vision seemed distorted, it meant only that they were still prisoners of the cave, thinking that mere appearances were the truth. Aurier returns to this thought in his second article on Symbolist art, "Les Peintres symbolistes," in which he writes: "Almost all of us are prisoners of Plato's cave, who see nothing but shadows, and deny the luminous sky and the reality of things."[260] The reference to the metaphor of the cave illustrates a central point in Aurier's Symbolist aesthetic: that art was not about appearances. The Symbolist artist's aim was not to represent the world as it appeared, not to imitate it, but to create art that was directly connected with a higher realm, here described as the Platonic world of Ideas. Hence, the concept of artistic inner vision and the idea of the artist as a seer were more than mystically inclined quirks. The essential tenet of this doctrine constitutes an aesthetic point of view that continued on to the twentieth century – and one that still holds its validity today. That is, the idea of art as a means of arriving at new knowledge.

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[257] Bays has suggested that Louis Lambert can, in fact, be considered a kind of self-portrait presenting two different aspects of the author's personality: "Louis is Balzac the seer or the 'spiritualist', while the *je* of the story is Balzac the artist and man of the world, the 'materialist'." According to Bays, this can be seen as a manifestation of the spiritual dilemma of the author: if he becomes too absorbed in mysticism, it may suffocate the artistic side, and he could end up in complete isolation like Louis Lambert. Bays 1964, 105-106

[258] Wilkinson 1996, 156-184.

[259] See the quotation from Aurier's essay "Le Symbolisme en peinture – Paul Gauguin" in the beginning of this chapter. Aurier continues: "Ailleurs, dans un traité rempli, au reste, des plus grotesques divagations, le même Swedenborg, de l'autorité un peu contestable duquel je ne voudrais cependant point abuser, surtout en des questions d'art, écrit ces phrases profondément divinatrices, que je souhaiterais voir en épigraphe de tous les traités d'esthétique et méditées par tous les artistes et par tous les critiques ..." This is followed by a lengthy quotation from *Arcana Coelestia,* in which Swedenborg explains the theory of correspondences. Aurier 1893, 210.

[260] "Presque tous, nous sommes les prisonniers de la caverne platonicienne, qui, ne pouvant voir que les ombres, nient le ciel lumineux et la réalité des êtres." Aurier 1893, 301.

CLOSED EYES

The visionary experience is a highly personal one and fundamentally mystical. It is not something that can be easily communicated. Traditions of religious art have found ways of representing this essentially un-presentable phenomenon, for example, in the case of the Christian tradition, through particular compositional and narrative strategies. One of the most important details pointing at an inner experience is the depiction of the eyes, their inward turned look which represents the private and personal visionary experience linking this world to the other.[261] In Symbolist art the theme of inner vision and concentration on the mysteries of the universe was often expressed in figures with closed eyes. The motif is usually encountered in extremely simplified works with a limited colour scheme and minimal narrative content, showing only the face, and sometimes the neck and a bit of the shoulders of the human figure.[262] The most famous example is Redon's painting *Closed Eyes* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris) which has become an emblem of Symbolist art and aesthetics.[263] This painting represents an androgynous figure with closed eyes and a calm, dreamy expression against a pale blue background. Only the head and shoulders are visible, the rest of the body is hidden below the surface of water.

In Halonen's self-portrait the eyes are not exactly closed but their veiled look can nonetheless be considered in this context. The blindness of the artist appears to indicate that he is concerned not with the visible world but with some other realm that cannot be perceived with physical vision. Wittlich has noted that the theme of Redon's painting, the interconnectedness of the visible and the invisible, finds expression on two levels. First, through the painting technique, "in the luminous sfumato that seems to waver between line and a range of colours that scarcely strays from grey, giving the picture its general atmosphere and its impression of perceptible silence and spatial ambiguity." Second, it is manifested in the concrete symbols of closed eyes and the water's surface suggesting two levels of existence. The "cosmic sleeper" is between two worlds, the visible and the invisible.[264] Similarly, in Halonen's painting we can interpret the blind eyes as a concrete symbol suggesting the theme of the painting. This thematic dimension is enforced by the indeterminacy of the work's structure: the ambiguous scenery and the seemingly unfinished quality of the work.

There are several examples of the motif of the closed eyes employed in this sense in Finnish art of the fin-de-siècle. Ellen Thesleff painted a version of the theme in *Thyra Elisabeth* (1892, fig. 10), a portrait of the artist's younger sister. Magnus Enckell's painting *Head*, which will be discussed below in connection with Halonen's *Double-Portrait* is another example. In Thesleff's painting the young woman has closed her eyes and tilted her head slightly backward turning her face

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[261] See Stoichita 1995, 18.

[262] Stewen 1996, 18.

[263] I am referring here to the most famous version of this image. Redon made several versions of the work, the first of which is from 1889 and know as *Au ciel*. See Leeman 2011, 228-229.

[264] Wittlich, 1995, 235.

towards the light falling from above. The background has been painted with a golden yellow tone that forms a barely perceptible halo around the head. The dreamy appearance of the woman brings to mind Redon's *Closed Eyes*. Stewen has connected *Thyra Elisabeth* with the long European tradition of representations of female saints.[265] She associates Thesleff's painting with Gauguin's ceramic vase that represents the head of the artist that Gauguin made probably sometime in the beginning of 1889 (fig. 11). This extraordinary self-portrait could even be seen as the immediate predecessor of Halonen's self-portrait. Indeed, even their facial features are somewhat similar; both have the same moustache, the slightly lumpish nose, the crease between the eyebrows indicating concentration and, most significantly, the veiled eyes.

In Gauguin's self-portrait the viewer's attention is drawn to the unusual technique: it is a vase. It therefore represents the artist metaphorically as a vessel that can become filled with something from outside itself.[266] This reflects Plato's conception of the artists expressed in "Ion," where he compares the poet to diviners and holy prophets. In Halonen's painting, as in *Thyra Elisabeth,* the "divine light" falling from above suggests the same idea although it is expressed in more conventional terms. In both paintings, the light in fact has a double meaning; it can be seen as a divine ray of light shining from above, from an outside source of truth that can only be reached by turning inward, away from the visible world, and, at the same time, the light generates a halo-like effect which, together with the full-frontal position, gives the depicted person a saintly status. Ville Lukkarinen, who has written extensively on Halonen's oeuvre, has observed that the heavenly light makes even the dark rock behind Halonen's head appear as a halo.[267] Henri Dorra has seen in Gauguin's self-portrait the head of "the messiah on the way to Mount Calvary." In a letter written in 1888 to Vincent van Gogh Gauguin had exclaimed: "What a long Calvary an artist's life is!" The rim above the artist's forehead suggests the crown of thorns, and the red glaze dripping down the face can be seen as rivulets of blood. "The closed eyes and proud lips convey a sense of noble resignation," writes Dorra, "but also of sadness – the calm expression suggesting the sublimation of suffering through meditation."[268] The agony of the misunderstood artist is presented here as the quiet and resigned suffering of Christ. It is the duty of the artist to tolerate the pain because it is all for a higher cause. In *Still Life with Japanese Print* (1889) Gauguin painted the self-portrait vase filled with flowers, suggesting thoughts that almost unconsciously bloom from the artist's head.

The motif of the closed eyes and the idea of turning inward also bring us to the topic of memory. Memory became a central working tool for the artists who were becoming less concerned with the appearance of things and more with the spiritual dimension shining through them. It was the faculty of memory that allowed access to a realm of truth inaccessible through the senses. This is an important concept in the

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[265] Stewen 1996, 17-19.

[266] Cheetham 1991, 7; Stewen 1996, 19-20; Wittlich 1995, 237.

[267] See Lukkarinen 2004, 178.

[268] Dorra 2007, 121.

Neoplatonic tradition, and for the Symbolist artists it provided a philosophical justification for self-exploration. The notion behind this art of memory is the conception that the immortal soul, between incarnations, dwells in the heavenly spheres in connection with the Ideas. When it is integrated with its physical bodily form it forgets its original home in the world of ideas, but through contemplation and turning into itself, the soul can remember where it came from, and comprehend the truth behind appearances.[269] The ideas can be perceived by closing the bodily eyes and instead relying on inner vision, on memory. Aurier reflects on this notion in his novel *Ailleurs*, writing that we can unconsciously remember the times when our souls resided in the Eden of pure ideas.[270]

Cheetham describes Gauguin's ceramic self-portrait as the most dramatic image of the "return to self" in late nineteenth century art. According to him, in this work "memory is a method for synthesizing diverse inspirations, very often recollections of the artist's own ideas and visions, in order to achieve depth of experience that can only come through inner experience but whose source lies beyond the individual artist."[271] The return to self entails here a plunge into something larger. This idea echoes Aurier's account of the synthesis of subject and object, the soul of the artist and the soul of nature, as the basis of all true art. As has been noted above, Aurier understood the human soul as being connected to the soul of the cosmos. Hence, when the artist invests the artwork with his own soul, it will also gain contact with the universal psyche. Through this immersion, the artwork becomes capable of expressing more than just personal thoughts and feelings.[272]

Like Redon's famous rendering of the motif of closed eyes, Halonen's self-portrait can be interpreted in terms of introspection and the idea of different levels of existence. By turning inward and using his capacity for spiritual vision, the artist can perceive the spiritual dimension behind the visible world. Moreover, the divine light falling from above, conceived as a metaphor of the universal psyche, could be interpreted as a reflection of the synthesis of the subject and object that Aurier considered the basis of artistic creativity. However, we must note that Halonen's painting has none of the dreamy quality of the Symbolist theme of the closed eyes. The human figures in Redon's *Closed Eyes* and Thesleff's *Thyra Elisabeth* appear to be in a pleasurable state of ecstatic fulfilment. These artworks manifest the Symbolist idea of solipsistic reverie which indicates a contact with a more fundamental level of being. Neither does Halonen's self-portrait have the sense of spiritual suffering that is evident in Gauguin's presentation of himself as Christ in Calvary. The man in Halonen's painting appears to be in a state of enlightenment, yet there is something perplexing in the look of his unseeing eyes. The scenery behind him seems imaginary, yet no less real than the man standing before it. The Symbolist theme of closed eyes and inner vision can be employed to decipher the

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[269] Plato develops this concept of anamnesis in his dialogues *Meno* and *Phaedo*, and at the fin-de-siècle it was popularized in Schuré's *The Great Initiates.*

[270] Aurier 1893, 31-32.

[271] Cheetham 1991, 7.

[272] Aurier 1893, 299-301.

meaning of the blind eyes in Halonen's self-portrait, but one still has a feeling that some level of interpretation is missing. Perhaps a broader look into attitude of silence and inwardness in Halonen's art would give us a more profound understanding of this enigmatic work of art.

THE ART OF SEEING BEYOND

In its refusal to communicate, Halonen's art has been seen variously as incomprehensible and abstruse, or alternately, as all too unproblematic and therefore uninteresting. His landscape paintings are random fragments of nature, completely devoid of any narrative content.[273] The human figures appear self-absorbed, occasionally reading, writing, or playing an instrument, but more often just immersed in their own thoughts, either completely motionless or performing some simple everyday task. Even in a painting like *After the Music Lesson* (1894, fig. 12) where the young girl with the guitar at first sight appears to be looking at us, we soon come to realize that her gaze is turned inward. The girl is no longer playing her guitar but the sounds are still lingering in her ear. It seems that the music has transported her somewhere beyond the mundane everyday existence. Music is the theme of this and several other paintings by Halonen, and musicality is a central element of Halonen's art also on a more abstract level. Critics who have been sympathetic towards his work have often compared it to music and poetry.[274]

Lukkarinen has employed Michael Fried's concept of *absorption* to describe this introverted quality of Halonen's art. Fried famously utilized this term in his book *Absorption and Theatricality* (1980) to describe an art historical mode of representing the human figure completely absorbed in their thoughts or in the activities that they are performing. This is opposed to the mode of theatricality; the theatrical mode assumes a beholder whereas in order to sustain the illusion of absorption, the figure or figures have to appear completely oblivious to the beholder's presence. Fried sees this as a strategy of neutralizing or negating the beholder's presence before the canvas. This attitude of absorption creates a fictional situation that contains an inherent paradox: the painting can attract the beholder only by denying his presence.[275] Fried has discussed this phenomenon in the context of the anti-Rococo art criticism of Denis Diderot and other eighteenth-century writers. In Fried's opinion the demand for pictorial unity that was promoted by these critics was ultimately about the demand that the painting as a whole, and not just the figures depicted in it, declare its unconsciousness of the beholder.[276] Lukkarinen has observed a similar trait is Halonen's paintings where the human figures turn into abstract elements akin to forms of nature. They are not presented as psychological actors and the viewer has no opportunity to establish any kind of relationship with

[273] See Lukkarinen 2005, 70-74.

[274] See Lukkarinen 2007, 12-13.

[275] Fried 1980, 66, 108.

[276] Fried 1980, 101.

them. The mysterious quality of these artworks is no longer produced in the fictional world of the painting, as an attitude of contemplation that was typical for Symbolism. The artwork as a whole has turned inward and is refusing to communicate, thus leaving the viewer at a distance.[277]

This absorptive attitude is connected with a self-reflective quality in Halonen's art. Lukkarinen has pointed out that Halonen's landscapes often create a strange effect as if the surface of the water or ice was bending and flattening out towards the viewer (fig. 4). The foreground of the painting then no longer participates in the pictorial illusion and instead turns into a flat field of paint in which the artist's presence is indicated by the clearly visible brushstrokes. It is this self-reflectivity which gives these landscape paintings the highly subjective quality that in a sense turns them into self-portraits.[278] These indications of the creative process behind the work, which suggest an intimate relationship between the artist and his object, draw the viewer into the image and at the same time leave her at a distance.

In the self-portrait, the most intimate relationship appears to be between the artist and nature. Rather than representing a process of self-reflection, this self-portrait embodies an experience of absorption into nature at large. Lukkarinen has called attention to the strangeness of the scenery in the background. The shape of the rock is too unrealistic to be a natural formation that one might find in a Finnish landscape. Yet, there is something in the dark colouring of the vegetation that somehow resembles fir trees that makes the viewer – at least a viewer who is familiar with Finnish nature – to perceive it as a Finnish landscape. The rock formation reflects the shape of the artist's head like a shadow or, indeed, a halo. Lukkarinen has described this strange visual motif in terms of Georges Didi-Huberman's concept of the *quasi-subject* (*quasi-sujet*). Didi-Huberman has used this concept to describe blocks of stone or other similar objects that appear anthropomorphic in a very abstract sense. They have a sombre human-like presence that is withdrawn and aversive rather than being in any way appealing or engaging. This term has most often been applied to describe mid-twentieth century sculptures that are abstract but still contain anthropomorphic features.[279] The rock formation in Halonen's self-portrait could thus be seen as a reflection of the artist, or perhaps the artist has emerged from the rock as a kind of doubling of this natural element. In any case, the artist and nature seem to be fundamentally interconnected.[280]

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[277] Lukkarinen 2007, 28-29, 33.

[278] Lukkarinen 2004, 157-185.

[279] Lukkarinen 2004, 178-179; Lukkarinen 2007, 25.

[280] Lukkarinen finds an iconographical background for this motif in the Renaissance tradition of paintings like Andrea Mantegna's *Madonna of the Caves* (*Madonna delle Cave*, c. 1488-1490) or Leonardo's famous *Virgin of the Rocks* (*Vergine delle Rocce*, c. 1483-1486, 2nd version c. 1494-1508). In these paintings the virginal purity of nature symbolizes the virgin birth and the permanence of nature, which are opposed to the sinfulness and transience of humanity. St. John the Baptist is also present in Leonardo's painting, possibly due to his association with the desert. Through this association we arrive to the theme of the lonely hermit seeking to approach God in the desert. St. Francis and St. Gerome are also often represented in the desert surrounded by rock formations. In addition to this Renaissance tradition, Lukkarinen also sees a possibility of connecting Halonen's self-portrait to the romantic-expressive painting *Water Sprite* (*Näcken / Strömkarlen*, 1884) by the Swedish artist Ernst Josephson. Lukkarinen 2004, 179-181.

In his self-portrait, Halonen, then, appears as an artist who not only draws inspiration from nature but also associates his own creativity with the creative power of nature.[281] That is, in his art he does not copy the appearance of nature, the *natura naturata*, but instead, by becoming one with nature, he will be able to imitate nature's own creativity, *natura naturans*. This 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 truthfully. This also reflects the idea that nature is in a constant state of becoming and thus must originate from spirit.[282] Stewen has suggested that the fragmentary quality of Halonen's landscape paintings may reflect the impossibility of expressing the pervasive and overwhelming experience of this kind of mystical union with nature. This experience is the beginning of the artwork but it can never be attained as a whole. Stewen relates this idea to the 1893 self-portrait, and concludes that as an aesthetic statement about the nature of Halonen's art it is not to be considered unfinished: the experience of merging with nature which forms the basis of his artistic practice cannot be expressed in any form of completeness; it can only be reflected in fragmentary, unfinished form.[283]

The open-endedness of the artwork (the "non-finito" or the "potential image") blurs the distinction between a finished masterpiece and a study. It also blurs the distinction between the artwork and the viewer, and challenges the absolute power of the artist over the work. This parallels contemporary developments in psychology, particularly the gradual discovery and exploration of the unconscious, which, as Gamboni points out, "supported and nourished an understanding of artistic creation that set boundaries to the artist's control over his work and gave legitimate status to the subjective participation of the observer."[284] Incompleteness stimulates the imagination. It leaves the work of art open to an infinite number of interpretations. Moreover, this subversive tendency reflects a general shift or disruption in Western aesthetics which resulted in a new kind of dynamic of the artwork. Theodor Adorno located the beginning of this shift in the last works of Beethoven:

> *Ever since Beethoven's last works those artists who pushed integration to an extreme have mobilized disintegration. The truth content of art, whose organon was integration, turns against art and in this turn has its emphatic moments. Artists discover the compulsion toward disintegration in their own works, in the surplus of organization and regimen; it moves them to set aside the magic wand as does Shakespeare's Prospero, who is the poet's own voice. However, the truth of such disintegration is achieved by way of nothing less than the triumphs and guilt of integration. The category of the fragmentary – which has its locus here – is not to be confused with the*

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[281] Here Lukkarinen connects the self-portrait with Axel Gallén's works from the same period which also embody the idea of seeking inspiration from nature and in this process becoming one with this source of creativity. See Lukkarinen 2004, 181-185.

[282] Engell 1981, 83, 319, 333, 358.

[283] Stewen 2008, 112-114.

[284] Gamboni 2002, 183.

category of the contingent particularity: The fragment is that part of the totality of the work that opposes totality.[285]

We can see in this quotation how the idea of the fragment becomes a model for the exemplary work of art, and hence the relationship between the part and the whole becomes configured in a novel way. The Western aesthetic and epistemological tradition stretching from Aristotle via Augustine to Hegel and beyond had emphasized totality and wholeness but the whole no longer corresponded to the modern world. This phenomenon became particularly apparent after the Second World War but its origins can already be seen in the Romantic preference for the fragment which was reflected, for instance, in the fascination with ruins in architecture as well as poetry and painting.[286] The Romantic conception of the fragment was dominated by the tendency to perceive the fragment as a whole in itself. This idea is most elegantly expressed in Friedrich Schlegel's philosophical fragment about fragments: "A fragment, like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a hedgehog."[287] In the context of the fin-de-siècle, however, the more tragic and melancholic associations of the fragment gained emphasis. The fragment may still allude to the ideal unity that its very fragmentariness suggests, but at the same time it signals the ultimate impossibility of achieving wholeness. Even so, to admit this impossibility may also entail a sense of liberation. In this more ambivalent sense, the idea of the fragment is intimately connected with modern subjectivity. The wholeness and integrity of selfhood, as we know, were increasingly being called into question towards the end of the nineteenth century – and this process of fragmentation continued on to the twentieth century. It became an important theoretical component of psychoanalysis and postmodernism.[288] The fragment, hence, appears as yet another metaphor which brings together the self and art. It is not strictly the opposite of the ideal – as we contended, it always carries with it allusions of wholeness – but it can offer a more positive alternative in terms of conceptualizing both the self and art. The artist's refusal to complete the painting may be interpreted in terms of "the fear of perfection" described by Belting.[289] By

[285] Cited from Balfour 2009, 84. Balfour's article offers an excellent analysis of Adorno's conception of the fragment.

[286] I am relying here on Balfour's analysis. Balfour names Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" as an important example of the new positive valuation of the fragment. Balfour 2009, 87.

[287] Schlegel 1991, 45. Peter Firchow translates the German word "Stachelschwein," which literally means "thorny pig," as "porcupine." While this may be the linguistically more correct translation, several commentators have argued that the metaphor of a hedgehog more aptly represents Schlegel's original idea: while the porcupine is serious and defensive and seeks to close out the rest of the world, the hedgehog analogy is more humorous and retains a sense of openness to the surrounding world. See Innes 2008, 142-143.

[288] In the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan, the failure to sustain identification with an ideal image of the self leads to an experience of bodily fragmentation. Kaja Silverman has noted, however, that this kind of fragmentation appears as a failure only if we hold on to an ideal of wholeness and unity. She suggests the possibility of incorporating a sense of lack and fragmentation into our subjectivity, and thus avoid the sense of "otherness" that results from the "fantasy of body in bits and pieces." Silverman 1996, 9-37. See also Nochlin 1994. Nochlin has discussed fragment, and particularly the bodily fragment, as a metaphor of modernity.

[289] Belting 2001, 202.

leaving the artwork unfinished, and therefore "open," the artist avoids locking the ideal outside of it. By remaining in this state of incompletion it points beyond itself to a vision outside the material limitations of the work. The instability of its formal structure leaves it up to the viewer's imagination to complete this vision.

The spiritual union of the artist and nature that is manifested in Halonen's self-portrait resembles the ecstatic experience of a mystic. Aurier, as we have seen, talked about ecstasy in his discussion of the creative process of the artist, and he claimed to borrow this concept directly from the "Alexandrians", by which he means Neoplatonic philosophy. For Aurier, this capacity for ecstatic vision was the highest gift possessed only by the select few.[290] The aesthetic experience was perceived by Aurier as a mystical union of souls which he described using a very sensual language. The work of art comes to being as a result of a union between the soul of art and the soul of nature.[291] In this merging of subject and object the ecstasy of the aesthetic experience thus unsettles the very foundations of being and individuality. But this temporary loss of the self experienced by the artist in the act of creation does not imply a total abolition of the self. On the contrary, it involves an experience of the immutable and immortal essence of the self.

In the Neoplatonic philosophy of Plotinus, ecstasy was the name for the mystical union with the Absolute. The true self, the sparkle of divinity contained within us, can only be reached in fleeting moments of ecstasy, and it means losing awareness of the lower levels of the self.[292] The blinded vision in Halonen's self-portrait may be interpreted as an indication of an ecstatic experience; for a fleeting moment the artist has lost all contact with the phenomenal world around him, and instead, has gained a deeper awareness of the true essence of being. In this case, this fundamental essence appears to be the larger nature from which we as individuals have emerged. The ecstatic state serves as a bridge between the two levels of being; the individual and the universal, the physical and the spiritual. The self that is lost is the rational and controlled side of the subject. Perhaps the hidden interior side that temporarily takes over is indeed the truer self, but as we have seen, this experience is an extremely fragile one. Rather than fulfilling the promise of certainty and assurance that it implies, it only serves to enforce the sense of elusiveness. The experience of unity can only be attained for a few fleeting moments of unconsciousness. This, according to Pierre Hadot, is the "whole paradox of the human self: we only are that of which we are aware, and yet we are aware of having been more fully ourselves precisely in those moments when, raising ourselves to a higher level of inner simplicity, we lose our self-awareness."[293] But this oscillatory movement between consciousness and unconsciousness is the only way we can raise ourselves to the divine sphere. And once we have reached this state, we will be able

[290] Aurier 1893, 214 ("Le Symbolisme en peinture – Paul Gauguin"); On Aurier's conception of "ecstasy", see also Mathews 1986a, 37-38.

[291] See Aurier 1893, 302.

[292] Hadot 1998 [1989], 32.

[293] Hadot 1998 [1989], 32.

to experience not only our selves but the whole world in a different way. The metamorphosis of inner vision also entails the metamorphosis of outer vision.

The Symbolist conception of the work of art as a manifestation of something entirely new and otherwise inexpressible defines the artist as an exceptional individual with the ability to perceive things that are unattainable and incomprehensible for ordinary human beings. In order to become an artist, one must turn inward and probe the very foundations of the self. This road inward can potentially lead outward into some higher realm of existence. In any case, it is an experience from which one awakens with a new sensibility. Halonen's self-portrait could then be seen as a reflection of a process of artistic initiation. It becomes an image of awakening from a naive unity, from the dream of harmonious oneness that was perhaps never more than an illusion. Awakening to a sense of loss perhaps, but at the same time to a deeper consciousness of what has been lost. Maybe in order to know, one must first forget. Perhaps self-consciousness can only be achieved by shattering the primordial unity, and the mystical union with nature can only be reached after first having separated from it. This idea is central to the esoteric understanding of the myth of the fall as the story of the human psyche that falls from its original home in heaven. Schuré described this in *The Great Initiates*:

> *[The soul] enjoys heaven without understanding it. For in order to understand it is necessary first to have forgotten it and then to remember it; it is necessary to have lost it and to have found it again. She [the soul] will know only by suffering; she will understand only by falling.*[294]

If one looks very intently into the eyes of Halonen's self-portrait it appears that the skin-coloured paint is forming into irises, as if the skin was just there and then beginning to turn into eyes.[295] Could we, then, interpret the eyes in Halonen's self-portrait as embryonic eyes that are in the process of developing a new kind of vision? They bring to mind Schuré's description of the disciple in the first stage of initiation, when the "thick scales of matter which had covered the eyes of his mind" had fallen off. He has been torn away from the visible world and cast into "limitless spaces."[296] Halonen's friend and roommate Magnus Enckell wrote in his sketchbook around the same time about himself as an initiate into the mysteries in a way that resembles the path of initiation accounted by Schuré in *The Great Initiates*. Enckell describes himself as a guardian of mysteries inside a temple, moving from room to room until he finally reaches the "innermost sanctum" where all the barriers will crumble, and "everything will be revealed to our eyes and restored to our hearts. Time will no longer exist."[297] Aurier also refers to the process of developing spiritual

[294] Schuré 1977 [1889], 199.

[295] Stewen has observed that is impossible tell whether the artist had first painted the eyes and then covered them up with paint. Stewen 2008, 107.

[296] Schuré 1977 [1889], 320

[297] Sarajas-Korte 1966, 157-158; Sarajas-Korte 1995, 286. The sketchbook is undated but Sarajas-Korte has concluded that, based on the material that is discussed in it, it must belong to Enckell's second period in Paris, 1893-94.

vision as “the preliminary and necessary initiation that the true artist, the absolute artist, must undergo.”[298]

By examining two later self-representations by Halonen, we can establish an interesting continuity reflecting the artistic development that originates from the experience of reawakening that is expressed in the 1893 self-portrait. The first painting I wish to discuss in this context is the *Double-Portrait* that Halonen painted of himself and his wife Maija in 1895, the year they were married. Maija is shown with her eyes closed and her head slightly bowed. The whole face is luminous and it looks as if light is radiating through her closed eyelids. One might even see an echo of Gauguin’s visionary self-portrait vase in the representation of the face and the glossy skin which brings to mind the glazed surface of the ceramic vase. The artist himself stands behind her wife leaning forward but almost wary of touching her, as if in admiration of this strangely luminous being before him. His eyes now have irises but there is still something disturbing about them, something indeterminate. It is as if the paint is somehow refusing to turn itself into a representation of eyes. The muted colour scheme of violets and blues and diluted browns and greys in the background accentuates the sense of mystery. Everything is painted very thinly, the canvas showing through here and there. In the background there seems to be some kind of a landscape of thin tree trunks against a grey sky.

The *Double-Portrait* has parallels in the art of the period. Its composition resembles Enckell’s painting of his friend and fellow artist Bruno Aspelin, called *Head* (1894, fig. 13), and the portrait of a young woman by Beda Stjernschantz known as *Irma* (1895-1896, Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki). Both paintings in their previous stages contained two figures. Enckell’s painting represents the solitary head of a man floating between a red and a black area which split the canvas diagonally into two parts. The luminous face is seen in three-quarter view with closed eyes and a serene, enlightened expression – all this bears not an insignificant amount of resemblance to the female figure in the *Double-Portrait.* An x-ray image of the painting reveals that originally there was another head beside the one that we see now, one with a more severe expression.[299] In Stjernschantz’s painting *Irma* we encounter the sincere look of a young girl against a background of stylized irises. An old photograph of the painting shows it in its previous form as a double-portrait. It was exhibited in this form in Helsinki in 1895, and a newspaper review of the exhibition reveals a less than enthusiastic reception which may explain why the artist decided to cut the canvas.[300] The second figure that was removed seemed ecstatic and almost immaterial. She was shown with her head slightly bent backward, eyes closed and long hair flowing down her back in a pose that resembles the ethereal female figures painted by Thesleff in the early 1890s, such as *Girl with Guitar* (1891, Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki) and *Thyra Elisabeth*.

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[298] Aurier 1893, 210 (”Le Symbolisme en peinture – Paul Gauguin”).

[299] Sarajas-Korte 1966, 195

[300] Sarajas-Korte 1966, 234.

Tihinen has referred to the possibility of interpreting the disappeared figures in *Head* and *Irma* as images of *doppelgangers*.[301] The idea of an immaterial double was central in the modern occult theories. This personal double was the subject's link into a higher realm. Carl du Prel described the human mind as Janus-faced: one face inhabits the ordinary world of sensory experience, whilst the other, the *transcendental subject*, is the part of the mind that prevails in altered states of consciousness, such as hypnotism, trance, dreams, somnambulism or clairvoyance.[302] He maintained that the Janus-faced individual was one and the same in the two alternate states of consciousness. To be more precise, it is not a question of two separate worlds, but of a different perspective on one and the same.[303] The transcendental subject is in fact the actual individual, and the waking personality is just a phenomenological excerpt of it. Carl du Prel connected this with an evolutionary idea of the human consciousness. He believed that as the psychological and sensory abilities of humans continue to develop in the course of evolution, the part of the Janus-face that now lives in the realm of unconsciousness will gradually emerge into consciousness.[304] The development and education of the senses is the key to this transition towards a higher state of being. When our senses become more highly tuned, the world will appear to us in new ways. In dreams and abnormal mental states, such as trance or delirium, when the threshold of sensation is lowered, we can momentarily become aware of our future state of being.

The name of Carl du Prel is not well known today but he was an influential figure particularly in the German speaking part of Europe. Sigmund Freud in his *Interpretation of Dreams* calls him "that brilliant mystic," and among other well known readers were Rainer Maria Rilke, Vassily Kandinsky, Thomas Mann and Arnold Schönberg.[305] He also had avid readers in the Nordic countries, including Strindberg and Hansson, who did their part in disseminating du-Prelian ideas among their fellow Northerners. Several of du Prel's writings were translated into Swedish almost immediately (a Swedish translation of *Die Philosophie der Mystik* was published in 1890), and when the Finnish author and newspaperman Kasimir Leino published an article on occultism and spiritualism in 1894, he mentioned du Prel as one of the leading figures of this movement in Germany.[306]

There is certainly something that sounds familiar in connection with our analysis of Halonen's 1893 self-portrait, although I do not necessarily want to suggest that Halonen's paintings should be read in terms of du-Prelian mysticism. These kinds of ideas were extremely popular, and from Schuré's *The Great Initiates*, for instance, we can find a very similar view expressed in slightly more esoteric and mythical terms but, nonetheless, hearkening towards modern scientific ideas like hypnotism:

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[301] Tihinen 2008, 86-91.

[302] du Prel 1885, 378-390; see also Weber 2007, 598.

[303] du Prel 1885, 282-283.

[304] Sommer 2009, 61; Weber 2007, 558.

[305] Sommer 2009, 59; Weber 2007, 595.

[306] Leino 1894, 14.

With hypnotized persons, somnambulists and clairvoyants, sleep acquires new faculties which to us seem miraculous but are the natural faculties of the soul when it is detached from the body. Once awakened, these clairvoyants no longer remember what they saw, said and did during their sleep. However, in one of their sleeps, they recall perfectly what happened in the preceding sleep and sometimes foretell with mathematical exactness what will happen in the next one. Therefore they have two consciousnesses, two distinctly alternating lives, but each has its rational continuity and revolves around the same individual.

It is therefore in a very deep sense that the ancient initiate poets called sleep the brother of death. For a veil of forgetfulness separates sleeping from waking as it does birth from death. As our earthly life is divided into alternating parts, so in the immensity of cosmic evolution the soul alternates between incarnation and spiritual life, between earth and heaven. This alternate passage from one plane of the universe to another is no less necessary to the development of the soul than the alterations of waking and sleeping to the corporeal life of man.[307]

The theories of du Prel had also been aesthetically interpreted by Strindberg and Hansson, both of whom employed the combination of mysticism and Darwinism to construct their own theories of artistic hypersensitivity and the evolution of human consciousness. This provided for them a much needed antidote for decadent pessimism; in the light of du-Prelian mysticism the nervousness and hypersensitivity of modern man was not a sign of degeneration but quite the opposite – it was an indication that our senses were in the process of becoming more refined.[308]

This idea of developing new sensitivities resonates with the idea of a metamorphosis of vision which was discussed in connection with Halonen’s self-portrait. But how would the idea of a spiritual double fit with a portrait of the artist and his wife? Perhaps the mystical union between man and nature has now found expression as a sacred union between a man and a woman. With its atmosphere of intimacy, mystery, and sacrality, the *Double-Portrait* may be seen as an image of the perfect marriage – of becoming whole. In a letter to his fiancée, Halonen had written about their forthcoming marriage as a “spiritual journey” that they are about to embark on together. Referring to a worry expressed by Maija about losing her independence after they are married, he says that he hopes they would be able to forget all these conceptions about the rights of husband and wife. On the journey that is about to begin, these kinds of things mean nothing: “On this journey there will be no fear of one taking over the other's independence; there will be only one independence, and both of us will be equal masters of it.”[309]

Schuré explains the perfect marriage as the “transfiguration of love” in which man represents the creative force of the mind, whereas woman personifies the plastic creativity of nature. The perfect union of man and woman in body, soul, and spirit, forms a miniature of the universe.[310] This idea had already found a somewhat

[307] Schuré 1977 [1889], 340.

[308] Holm 1957, 89-90, 96, Anderson 1973, 90.

[309] Undated letter, cited from Ilvas 1990, 44.

[310] Schuré 1977 [1889], 355.

grotesque expression in the bizarre sculpture by Willumsen known as the *Family Vase* (1891, fig. 32). It is a larger than life-size triple-portrait of Willumsen, his wife Juliette, and their newborn son. According to the artist's own description it was meant to represent the creative energy of nature which also found its expression in art.[311] The creative power of the woman, according to the esoteric doctrine, is love, and when the man fertilizes the feminine soul with his knowledge and will, she becomes his ideal: "Through her his ideal becomes alive and visible; it becomes flesh and blood."[312] Although the masculine principle is needed to fertilize the feminine soul, the woman is just as important as man and even more divine:

> *Woman, forgetting herself, lost in her love, is always sublime. In this forgetfulness she finds her celestial rebirth, her crown of life, the immortal radiation of her being.*[313]

The loving woman, in her forgetfulness, returns in memory to the heaven of her origin. She can then serve as a spiritual guide to the man. When the woman and man compose a harmonious whole, she becomes, in a sense, his spirit-double.

To conclude this analysis let us compare these earlier self-representations, the *Double-Portrait* and the 1893 self-portrait, with one that was painted in 1906 (fig. 7). Here the artist is again wearing a white shirt with the top buttons undone, immediately suggesting a connection with the 1893 painting, but in this later self-portrait his vision finally appears fully developed. He is no longer drawing back but is unblinkingly staring ahead, holding his head up high, and facing the viewer with serenity and artistic pride. He looks down at us and the point of view gives him a messianic appearance. The light is no longer falling from above but radiating from the man himself, perhaps from the heart. No landscape in the background, nothing but a greyish brown colour. It is as if he has now completely internalized the creative sources; he can finally look at the world around him with the calm assurance that the spiritual reality will always be there shining beneath the surface.

In his art, Halonen never abandoned a direct contact with the sensory world. Although his landscapes have a highly spiritual atmosphere, they are always painted on location. But his view of the world is selective: he only painted either wild untouched nature or the idyllic scenery around his home; and when he painted people, it is Finnish country folk or members of his own family. We never encounter urban landscapes or people in his art, and never even the slightest hint of darkness or ugliness, of anything sinister. In his studio home he built a private world away from the bustling modernity.[314] In this sense it was not reality that he represented but an

[311] See Bodelsen 1957, 13. The *Family Vase* will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

[312] Schuré 1977 [1889], 355-356.

[313] Schuré 1977 [1889], 355-356.

[314] The idea of the home as a symbol and an expression of the interior realm of the psyche also suggest the possibility of understanding the home as a kind of a self-portrait. Silverman has connected the rise of psychological interiority to the increasing emphasis on interior decoration. This idea finds its most obvious manifestation in Joris-Karl Huysmans's novel *À Rebours* (1883), in which the elaborate interiors crafted by the protagonist des Esseintes become embodiments of his synaesthetic visions and fantasies. In Huysmans's novel the private interior of the home also provided a refuge from the nervous excitement caused by the modern life of the metropolis. Silverman 1989, 77-79.

idealized and subjective view of it. C.M. Bowra has described the Romantic tension between inner and outer vision in his 1950 book *The Romantic Imagination*:

> *Every poet has to work with the world of the senses, but for the Romantics it was the instrument which set their visionary powers in action. It affected them at times in such a way that they seemed to be carried beyond it into a transcendental order of things, but this would never have happened if they had not looked on the world around them with attentive and loving eyes.*[315]

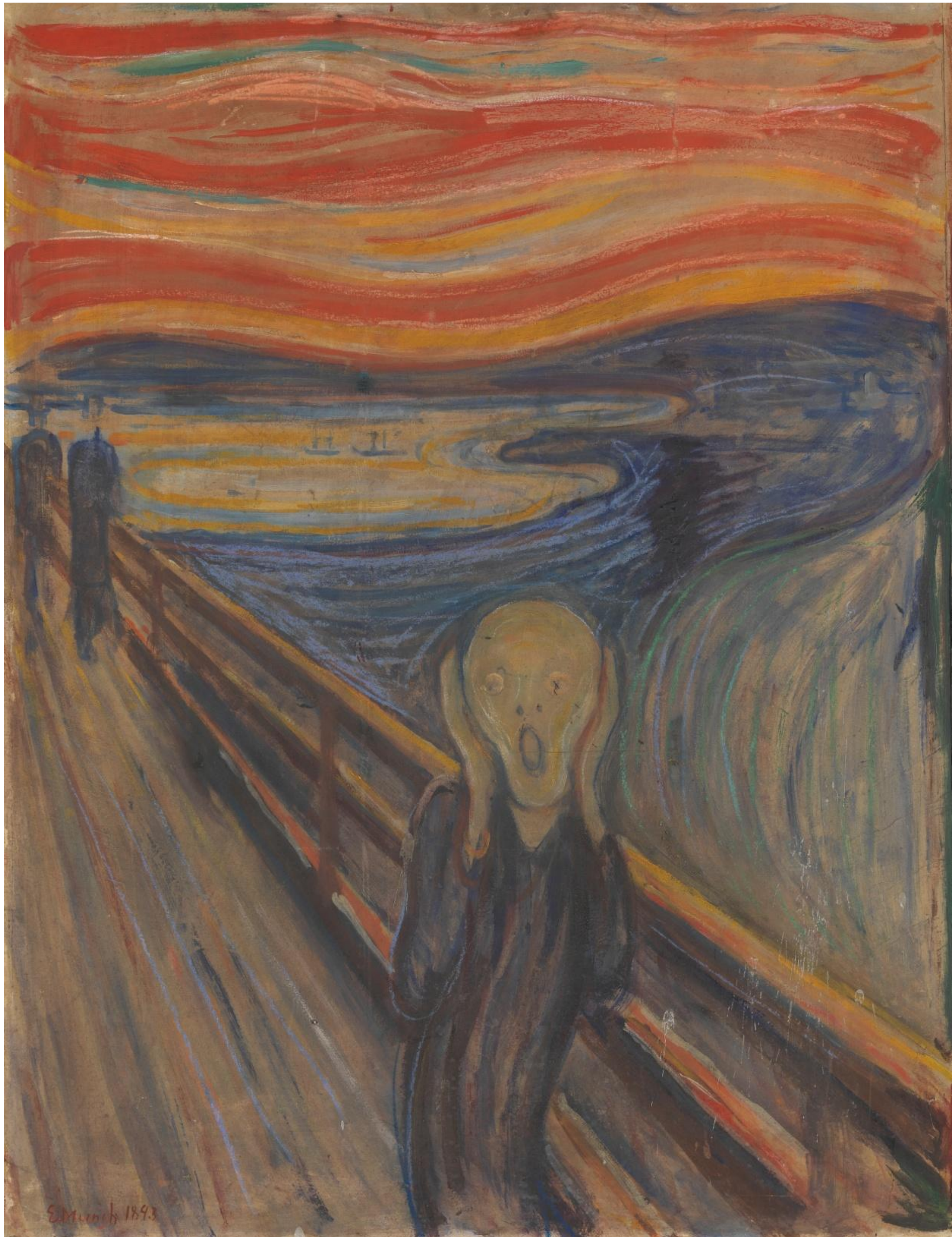
I believe this description reflects very well the aesthetic attitude of Pekka Halonen. Lukkarinen appears to be correct in his contention that Halonen was more like a Romantic *poète naïf* than a Baudelairean *artiste maudit*.[316] Halonen always retained a somewhat Romantic perception of nature. For him nature was fundamentally good and pure; it possessed a redemptive potential and people could live in harmony with it.[317] The attitude towards nature in the culture of the fin-de-siècle contained these opposing tendencies: Baudelaire and Huysmans, for example, perceived nature as evil and aimed at an aesthetic of artificiality. Gauguin on the other hand believed in the purity of the primitive man living in harmony with nature. For him it was not nature as such that was corrupt but the attitude of the civilized man towards that nature from which he had become alienated.

[315] Bowra 1961, 12.

[316] Lukkarinen 2004, 178; see also Lukkarinen 2007, 117-118.

[317] On Halonen's relationship with nature, see von Bonsdorff 2008.

14. **Edvard Munch**, *Vision,* 1892.



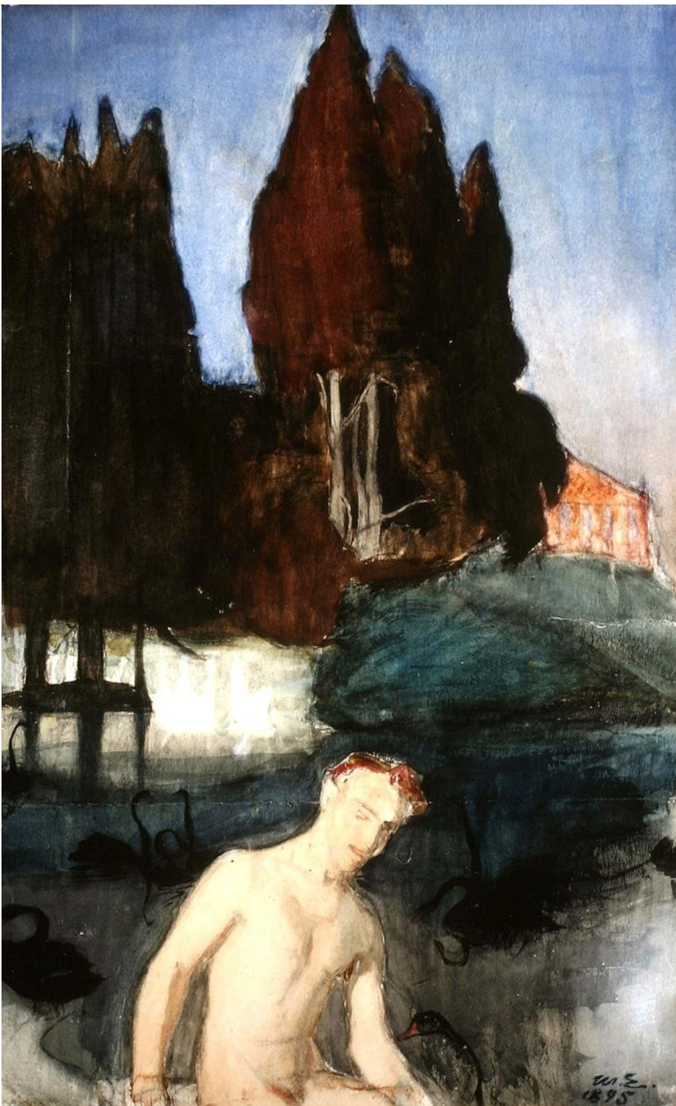
15. **Edvard Munch**, *The Scream*, 1893.

16. **Edvard Munch**, *Self-Portrait with Lyre*, 1896–97.

17. **Axel Gallén**, *Lemminkäinen's Mother*, 1897.

18**. Axel Gallén**, *Conceptio Artis*, 1894.

19. **Odilon Redon**, *Head of Orpheus Floating in the Water,* 1881.



20. **Magnus Enckell**, *Fantasy*, 1895.

3 LURE OF THE ABYSS – EDVARD MUNCH

I want life and its terrible depths, its bottomless abyss.

— Stanisław Przybyszewski[318]

In the painting *Vision* (1892, fig. 14) by Edvard Munch, we encounter a human head with distorted facial features floating on a watery surface. 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 water around the head looks muddy while higher up where the swan is gliding it is clearer. The head is painted rather sketchily, and hence cannot really be considered a "likeness" of the artist. Nonetheless, several thematic as well as compositional features suggest that it should be – or at least that it could be – considered a self-portrait. The frontal position and the shape of the head recall other self-portraits by Munch, and its relation to the swan invites the viewer into a dialogue.[319] Moreover, in his writing, Munch referred to the human figure in the first person and to the swan as "she" or "it."

There are several text fragments written by Munch himself that are connected to the motif of *Vision*, as well as a number of sketches and studies. This is a feature that is typical for Munch's working methods; he repeated themes, motifs, and subjects

[318] Przybyszewski 1915 [1894], 33. This comment is made by the protagonist of the novel *Overboard* (1896), the writer Erich Falk, who was probably modelled after the author himself.

[319] Müller-Westerman has connected *Vision* with two other self-portraits painted around the same time, *Self-Portrait with Skeleton Arm* (1895) and *Self-Portrait beneath a Female* Mask (c. 1893). In all three works the head of the artist is related to an object that is placed above or beneath it: a swan, a female mask, and a skeletonised arm. Müller-Westerman sees these paintings as precursors for the *Frieze of Life*, recognizing in them the central themes of life, love, and death. She suggests that Munch stopped exhibiting *Vision* after 1898 because he had in the paintings *Red and White* (1894) and *Woman. Sphinx* (1893-94) found a more condensed form for the thematic interplay that he dealt with in *Vision* and *Self-Portrait beneath a Female Mask*. Müller-Westerman 2005, 27, 38.

with an almost compulsory determination, both in writing and in pictorial form, sometimes with less and sometimes with more variation.[320] It seems that most of the texts relating to the subject of *Vision* were written around the time the painting was made, but at least one version probably predates the painting (it is found in a sketch book dated 1889-1891), and one text which includes a drawing has been dated c. 1896 in the 2005 exhibition catalogue, which, if the dating is correct, would suggest that this subject occupied Munch's thoughts for several years.[321] In any case, it seems clear that Munch considered *Vision* an important work. It was shown in all major exhibitions between 1892 and 1898, including the scandalous *Verein Berliner Künstler* exhibition of 1892 that was closed after having been open to the public for only one week.[322] Moreover, when in 1893 Munch started assembling the series *Love* which would later evolve into the *Frieze of Life*, he planned to use *Vision* as the central painting around which the other works would have been arranged. He decided to leave it out only after having been discouraged by the Danish painter Johan Rohde.[323]

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. These two contrasting elements suggest two levels of being: the dark and disgusting depths below the surface, and the shining bright realm of the swan above it. In a text fragment from 1892 Munch writes:

> *She was a swan – who with its long slender neck glided gently over the water – it looked mild-eyed around him – looked into the water, which was bright blue with white clouds, just like the sky above – or so it believed. – I lived down there in the depths. I rowed among the blue-black worms, green-brown slime and all kinds of hideous creatures and was reminded of a time – when I still lived on the surface, in all that blue light – when I did not have all this slime in my lungs. – I was terrified of my own shadow – fear gripped me and I had to go up to the bright colours. I forced myself up from the bottom – I raised my head above the surface of the water – it was so glaringly bright – it hurt my eyes. There was the swan – it was so fine – it had such gentle eyes – it was so dazzlingly white. – I stretched out my hands – it came nearer – it did not move*

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[320] This aspect of Munch's art was the focus of the 2003 exhibition entitled "Theme and Variation" (Albertina, Vienna). It has been examined most extensively in connection with the *Frieze of Life* in which it finds its most comprehensive expression, but it is also evident in works created outside the context of the Frieze; e.g. in the context of the exhibitions *Edvard Munch: Symbols and Images*, 1978, and *Edvard Munch: Love, Angst, Death* 1980, as well as in the numerous publication by the former director of The Munch Museum, Arne Eggum. See Hoerschelmann 2003a. On the relationship between Munch's artistic and literary activities, see Torjusen 1986. It is important to keep in mind that Munch's texts are equally a part of his artistic production, and hence they cannot be used unproblematically to "explain" his paintings. They require just as much interpretation as the images. However, they can be used to shed light on his thoughts and ideas about the subjects and themes of his paintings, as well as on his more general ideas about art and life.

[321] 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 2005, 56 n12.

[322] The exhibition was re-opened on December 26 at the *Equitable-Palast*. See Heller 1969, 29-30,31; Heller 1984, 100-101, 111; Müller-Westerman 2005, 29, 56 n5.

[323] Heller 1969, 33-37; Heller 1973, 229; Müller-Westerman 2005, 29.

– just glided nearer and nearer – until it was so near I thought I could grab it and embrace it and press its white breast to mine – rest my head on its soft feathers but it came no nearer – it glided around me in a circle. – Come to me, I said – then I saw that its breast was dirty and noticed – that the water around me was cloudy and filthy – and I saw my reflection in the muddy water –how pale it was – I heard a terrible shriek – and I knew I had cried out – the swan took fright – it glided away from me – the water like the sky above was bright blue – did she believe it was like that beneath – and she looked around with gentle, happy eyes.[324]

In the part where Munch talks about the times that he can still remember when he lived above the surface we can recognize the idea of the "fall" which I have connected with Halonen's self-portrait from 1893. I concluded that the "fall" and the forgetting was something necessary for the artist in order for him to remember and become reunited with the nature that is also his original home. It was understood in terms of an artistic initiation – as an opening of the "inner eye." Only after this process is completed, the artist may gain a higher awareness and see beyond the surface of things. Munch's artist, however, has fallen into the abyss, and the brightness above is too much for him to bear. Although this poor creature of the depths appears to be longing for the shimmering realm inhabited by the pure and beautiful swan, we still get the feeling that the truth about our existence dwells in the depths, and the world of the swan is nothing but an illusion. This distinction between reality and illusion is also a central part of the thematic content of this artwork. This interpretation is supported by the position of the swan in relation to the head; the reflection of the swan in the water's surface points directly at the head, and in one of the drawings it appears to emerge from the head like a balloon, suggesting that we should interpret it as something that is projected from the mind of the human figure. Moreover, the name *Vision* and the unfinished quality of the execution add to the sense of unreality in the painting, suggesting that we should interpret the whole scene as a mental image or an apparition, something produced by the imagination of the artist.[325] Besides, the decomposing eyes do not appear to be capable of any kind of physical vision. This painting, too, appears to reflect a visionary experience but this is something very different from what we saw in Halonen's 1893 self-portrait.

When *Vision* was first exhibited shortly after its completion it was the subject of both enthusiastic praise and harsh criticism. The German poet Max Dauthendey, who saw Munch's exhibition in Berlin in 1893, wrote a poem inspired by *Vision* which appeared in the literary journal *Blätter für die Kunst*. Later in his memoirs he returned again to the painting, calling it a "tragedy" and praising the artist's "unbelievable power ... to represent the man and his destruction just as incidentally as man usually only treats nature while looking incidentally down on his fellow creatures."[326]

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[324] The Munch Museum, MM N 110, 1892. English translation cited from Müller-Westerman 2005, 29-30.

[325] In fact, in the 1892 exhibition catalogue, the painting was listed as *Vision* (*En Illustration*) (Vision; An Illustration), which further emphasized its being an imaginary scene, an illustration of something produced in the mind of the artist. See Heller 1973, 227, 248 n79.

[326] Heller 1973, 213.

Heller assumes, based on the lively description of the painting's colour scheme by Dauthendey, that the colours had originally been brighter but had been muted by Munch's legendary "horse cures," which included leaving paintings outside for days to be exposed to the elements. According to Heller, this would also explain why Dauthendey was so impressed with the painting that after the harsh treatment had probably lost some of its expressive power. However, Heller also explains Dauthendey's admiration by the powerful symbolism of the painting created by the juxtaposition of the swan and the head of the drowned man.[327]

Rohde, on the other hand, considered *Vision* a failure because he thought its symbolism was confusing and unclear. After the initial controversy, however, *Vision* was more or less forgotten. Munch never exhibited it after 1898, and in 1973 when Heller published his article on the symbolism of the swan in *Vision*, he noted that this painting usually resides in storage at the Munch Museum. [328] My interest in this painting was awakened when I saw it in the 2005 exhibition of Munch's self-portraits. It was also discussed at some length in the exhibition catalogue by the Swedish art historian Iris Müller-Westerman.[329] What makes *Vision* such a fascinating work is probably related to the very same qualities that gave Rohde the reason to consider it a failure: the symbolism in *Vision* is extremely rich and complex, and it refuses to yield to a one-sided, simplistic interpretation. *Vision* is indeed, to borrow the words of Müller-Westerman, "a peculiar painting that poses more questions than it answers."[330] In this chapter, I will examine the multifaceted symbolism of *Vision*, juxtaposing it with several other works by Munch and other contemporary artists. I will suggest a number of different ways of understanding the painting in order to demonstrate the multiple levels of meaning that are reflected in it. It is impossible to follow all the leads that its symbolism may suggest, but I hope that my analysis will present this painting in a way that appreciates the dynamic interplay of meanings that is manifested in it. This unconventional self-portrait is understood here as a site for an on-going discourse concerning the meaning of art and the role of the artist in the modern world.

Although most of this chapter is devoted to a more "literary" analysis of the symbolism reflected in the contrast between the misshapen head and the white swan, it is important to note that the formal qualities of this painting also add to the meanings that are read into it. There is an ambiguity in the painting which is manifested in the formal execution of the work as well as on thematic level. Dauthendey's wrote in a letter in 1893 that Munch's brushstrokes were "like colorful colonies of bacillae."[331] This metaphor, with which he describes the initial confusion that he felt in front of the paintings, clearly connects Munch's work with contemporaneous scientific concerns. In addition, it refers to the unfinished, indeterminate quality of the painting as something that gives it life; "a colony of

[327] Heller 1973, 213.

[328] Heller 1973, 209-212, 219-218.

[329] See Müller-Westerman 2005, 27-32.

[330] Müller-Westerman 2005, 29.

[331] Heller 1973, 210.

bacillae" is not a static entity but a continuously changing, living process. Dauthendey explains in the letter that after he had removed his pince-nez, the artworks truly started to live, and he could feel their invigorating effect not only in his mind but also in his blood:

> *Suddenly I saw, I felt, I understood everything. The strokes blurred together into nuances and six-, seven-part tone clusters appeared where other painters are able to obtain with their broad brushstrokes only a single tone. The shadows glowed as in nature, the lights flickered, and everything came to life. A shudder passed through my blood, and I felt as if I were someone who had long been alone and suddenly finds himself surrounded by laughing, happy young people – that is how young those colors made me feel.*[332]

THE SWAN AND THE IDEAL

The swan is the clearly mythological, narrative element of the painting, and I have already suggested that it should be interpreted as a representation of something that is pure and beautiful as opposed to the hideousness of the head and what lies hidden beneath the surface. But there are several different ways of interpreting its more exact meaning. The swan was a widely used motif in fin-de-siècle art and culture. 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. This combination of decorative and symbolic qualities explains the swan's immense popularity in nineteenth century art, decoration, poetry, literature, and music.[333] Wagner had based his opera *Lohengrin* on the medieval legend of the Swan Knight, a mystical rescuer who arrives in a boat drawn by swans to defend a damsel in distress. Wagner's patron Ludwig II of Bavaria, known as the "Swan King," identified strongly with this legend, imagining himself both as the knight in shining armour and as the aloof, pure, and majestic swan. His castle known as Neuschwanstein was decorated with swan motifs and scenes from *Lohengrin*.[334]

Other musical works reflecting the mythological symbolism of the swan were Pyotr Tchaikovsky's ballet *Swan Lake* and the *Swan of Tuonela* by Jean Sibelius.[335] Sibelius' composition was part of his Lemminkäinen Suite which was based on the

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[332] Heller 1973, 210.

[333] See Heller 1973, 214-225.

[334] In Ludwig's lifetime the castle was actually known as New Hohenschwangau, named after the palace his father had built on the ruins of an old castle called Schwanstein. Only after Ludwig's death his castle came to be called Neuschwanstein. See McIntosh 2012, 15, 182-184.

[335] The premiere of Sibelius' composition was in 1895, the same year that the famous revival version of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*, was first staged for the Imperial Ballet in St. Petersburg. The new version, which laid the foundations of this ballet's enormous success, was produced two years after Tchaikovsky's death by his brother Modest Tchaikovsky together with the choreographer Marius Petipa and the composer Riccardo Drigo. Brown 2007, 109-110.

legend of the hero Lemminkäinen from the Finnish epic *Kalevala*. In the *Kalevala*, the swan is a holy bird and it lives in the river that borders the underworld realm of death known as Tuonela. The one who kills the swan must pay for the crime with his own life. The Finnish artist Axel Gallén (Akseli Gallen-Kallela),[336] with whom Munch had a joint exhibition in Berlin in 1895, created his own variation of the theme in the painting *Lemminkäinen's Mother* (1897, fig. 17).

In Gallén's painting, the swan is a multifaceted symbol reflecting the ideal of art, the mysteries of life and death as well as sexuality. 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 and 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 overall theme of the painting is the power of maternal love which can even overcome death, but the painting has several layers of meaning, and one of them is connected to the swan.[337] 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. This mythical element reflects a more universal symbolism of the swan.

The association of the swan with death is embodied in the ancient myth of the swan's song, according to which the mute bird only sings at the moment of death. In Plato's *Phaedo* Socrates, at the face of his own death, explains to his disciples that because men are themselves afraid of dying they interpret the swan's final song incorrectly. The swan does not sing in sorrow and lament at the face of death; it rejoices in anticipation of the good things that will come.[338] The swan, being the bird of Apollo, has the gift of prophecy, 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 Neoplatonic mysticism and Romanticism. Certain classical allusions can be identified already in the *Kalevala* which was compiled in the Romantic spirit of the early nineteenth century.[339] Gallén's fin-de-siècle interpretation of the theme adds yet another level of mythical syncretism. The theme of resurrection and the Pietà-esque composition connect Lemminkäinen with Christ. The descent to the realm of

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

[337] See Sarajas-Korte's interpretation of the Swan motif in *Lemminkäinen's Mother* in Sarajas-Korte 2001, 249-250

[338] Plato: *Phaedo*, 84e-85b.

[339] The physician and amateur philologist Elias Lönnrot based this epic poem on the traditional oral poetry that he had collected on his field trips to Karelia. However, he exercised a lot of freedom in combining the fragmented material into a coherent and unified story modelled after the great European epics, such as the *Iliad* or the *Nibelungenlied*.

death and the dismemberment of the hero, on the other hand, link him with the mythical figure of Orpheus.

At the same time with *Lemminkäinen's Mother*, Gallén was working on another painting in which the motif of the swan is combined with a theme from Finnish mythology. In the painting *Maidens of Tapiola* (1895, private collection), the swan is very different from the unattainable holy bird of Tuonela; it is bright red and seen swimming amongst sensuous bathing maidens.[340] Lemminkäinen is also present, but not as the tragic hero of *Lemminkäinen's Mother*. Here he appears engaged in an act of love with one of the maidens. The red swan is an erotic symbol echoing a different kind of ancient mythology. In the myth of Leda and the Swan, Zeus takes the form of a swan in order to seduce the beautiful Leda. This erotic image which embraces the phallic qualities of the swan's physiology has been a favourite motif in art throughout centuries. In fin-de-siècle imagination the roles of Zeus and Leda were reversed, and Leda came to be represented as a dangerous seductress. She thus turned into yet another manifestation of the popular theme of the femme fatale.[341]

Sarajas-Korte connects the erotic dimension of the symbolism of the swan with the Eros philosophy that was propagated by Stanisław Przybyszewski in the bohemian artists' circles of Berlin in the 1890's. Przybyszewski, who was an aspiring writer as well as a student of neurology was an influential member of the Ferkel group, and 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.[342] The red swan symbolizing life and regeneration seems to be the complete opposite of the white swan inhabiting the river of death. Yet, in a later painting by Gallén we encounter a red swan gliding in the black river of Tuonela (*By the River of Tuonela*, 1903, Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki).[343] Sarajas-Korte has pointed out that the swan in *Lemminkäinen's Mother* was also originally going to be red, and it was at a quite late stage of the artistic process that the artist decided to give it the light greyish tone.[344] The red swan that glows mystically in the black river is like a synthesis of Gallén's swan symbolism. It is a 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 a multilayered symbol that is connected with the secrets of both love and death; it is desirable and dangerous at the same time, and forever unattainable.

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[340] The painting was planned as a part of a large triptych which was never fully realized. The only part that was completed was the right panel depicting the receding of paganism at the onset of Christianity. The centre panel would have been a folkloristic Madonna painting, and *Maidens of Tapiola* was going to be the left panel representing a fantasy of a past Golden Age, a Kalevalian paradise. Sarajas-Korte 2001, 248.

[341] These kinds of transformations of the myth can be seen in the works of such artist as Max Klinger or Felicien Rops. See Heller 1973, 221.

[342] See Lathe 1972, 38-39, 40.

[343] The painting is a preparatory work for the frescoes that Gallén made in the mausoleum built by industrialist Fritz Arthur Jusélius for his daughter Sigrid who died at the age of eleven. The frescoes started to deteriorate very soon and were later completely destroyed by fire. Copies were made by Gallén's son Jorma Gallen-Kallela.

[344] Sarajas-Korte 1996, 55-57; Sarajas-Korte 2001, 253.

The swan in *Vision* is similarly unattainable, and as we shall see below, Munch also came to embrace the idea of the interconnectedness of life, death, and sexuality. Heller has suggested that the swan in *Vision* could also be an embodiment of woman as an object of desire. However, he notes that it reflects both the sensuality and the inapproachability and innocence of woman, representing her plural nature as it was perceived by Munch. Heller concludes that *Vision* is not only an image of Munch's conception of woman but it also expresses his view of art; *Vision*, he writes, is a "visualization of artistic imagination." *Vision*'s swan, as the swan of Apollo, is "the singer of art's immortality." Hence, we can interpret *Vision* as a vision of life and death and also a vision of art. The swan can thus be seen as a symbol of the ideal that the artist is forever chasing yet never able to achieve.[345]

The motif of the swan was almost banal in its popularity at the end of the nineteenth-century. Nevertheless Munch, like Gallén, managed to turn it into a rich and complex symbol, while taking advantage of its familiarity. Precisely because the swan carried such a wide range of associations these artists were able to infuse it with several parallel layers of meaning. 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. This is exactly what we have seen at work in Gallén's use of mythological elements. Stewen has examined Enckell's painting *Fantasy* (fig. 20), which exists in two versions, both from 1895, as an example of this method.[346] She identifies Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as the common source for most of Enckell's mythological themes but instead of referring to just one Ovidian motif, the paintings combine elements from different stories. It is difficult to even identify the main figure because he "not so much tells a story as conceals the mystery which would bind the fragments into a whole."[347] The mythological allusions in Munch's *Vision* seem to follow a similar paraphrastic logic. Enckell's *Fantasies* also have thematic similarities with *Vision*, which is why I shall devote some space to a discussion of these works.

In both versions of *Fantasy* a young man with a wreath of red roses on his head is seated by a pond with black and white swans. The man is surrounded by the black swans whilst the white ones are further up above his head, out of reach like the swan in *Vision*. In one of the versions the young man is holding a lyre, the instrument associated with both Apollo and Orpheus. These paintings constitute an interesting parallel for *Vision*, not only because of the swan motif, but also due to the self-reflective quality which makes it possible to view them as extended self-portraits. Moreover, the sense of duality and conflict in these paintings is similar to the contrast between the two levels of existence in *Vision*. Sarajas-Korte has interpreted the young man in *Fantasy* as a representation of the artist's melancholic self. She associates the painting with the ancient duality of the Apollonian and the Dionysian forces that had been popularized by Nietzsche in *The Birth of the Tragedy*. These

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[345] Heller 1973, 227, 231-232, 243.

[346] The other version is in Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki.

[347] See Stewen 2000, 50-54, English traslation 116-117.

Nietzschean elements are combined with echoes of Parisian mysticism and of the influential art of Arnold Böcklin.[348] Sarajas-Korte has interpreted the black birds as symbols of the Dionysian pain that lies at the heart of all creative work. The white swans represent the eternal ideal of beauty and the secrets of life and death.[349] The androgynous appearance of the young man reflects the ideas propagated by the fashionable and charismatic personality known as Sâr (Josephin) Péladan, the organizer of Rosicrucian art salons.[350] One of Péladan's objectives was to demonstrate the superiority of androgynous sexuality. The androgyne was perfect because in him the feminine and masculine sides were in balance.[351]

Both versions of *Fantasy* represent a dynamism between light and darkness – this was a theme that Enckell, too, pondered in a notebook from his time in Paris in 1893-94."Life is a struggle between light and darkness," he writes:

> *Light creates its own shadow and cannot kill it without being extinguished itself. Is that the goal, then? The suffering is terrible, since in fighting it we turn all powers against us ... Have not all who have suffered felt that liberation from suffering is like a sin?*[352]

Ejnar Nielsen's vignette in the October 1893 number of the Danish Symbolist journal *Taarnet* expresses this theme in a simplified, almost schematic formulation, and the swan motif connects it with Enckell's *Fantasies* as well as with Munch's *Vision*. The vignette is like a yin and yang symbol with swans; a single white swan on the black side, and a black swan on the white side.[353] It presents the opposition

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[348] Jean Sibelius had given Enckell a detailed description of Böcklin's painting *Die Gefilde der Seligen*, and when Enckell travelled to Italy in 1894 his journey went through Switzerland and Germany giving him the opportunity to see Böcklin's works himself. Sarajas-Korte 1994, 10-12; Sarajas-Korte 2001, 248. On Böcklin's influence on fin-de-siècle art, see Rapetti 2005, 47-52; Tihinen 2011.

[349] Sarajas-Korte 2001, 248.

[350] Péladan had founded in 1888 an esoteric brotherhood called "Ordre Cabbalistique de la Rose + Croix" together with the occultists Stanislas de Guaïta, but he soon fell into conflict with the anti-Catholic views of Guaïta and the rest of the group. In 1892 he went on to form a separate group which he called "Ordre de la Rose+Croix Catholique du Temple et du Graal." The same year he organized the first Rosicrucian art salon (Salon de la Rose + Croix) at Durand-Ruel's gallery. These salons were organized until 1897, and particularly at the beginning they received a lot of positive as well as negative attention. Alphonse Osbert, Alexandre Séon, Jean Delville, and Fernand Khnopff were among the artists who were most closely identified with Péladan's circle. See Pincus-Witten 1968.

[351] Mathews 1999, 113-114.

[352] Sarajas-Korte 1966, 159. English translation cited from Sarajas-Korte 1994, 29. A similar theme can also be found in Enckell's best known work of the 1890's *The Awakening* (1894), which represents a young man sitting on what at first sight appears to be a bed, but closer inspection reveals a lack of realistic detail; this is not a real space but rather a stage where the drama of the painting unfolds. The young man in the painting is sensual and androgynous which also connects this painting to the subject of the two Fantasies. The androgynous appearance, like the realms of light and darkness, suggests a theme of balancing opposites. Whether we see this painting as an image of the awakening of sexuality or as an awakening to a higher consciousness (or perhaps both), it seems clear that the man is somehow caught between two realms of being. His foot is touching the dark area at the bottom of the canvas, but it is unclear whether he is pulling away from the darkness or rather about to step into it. See Reitala 1977, 124; Sarajas-Korte 1966, 190-193; Stewen 2000, 46-54; Tihinen 2000, 74-76; Tihinen 2008, 51-52.

[353] See *Taarnet*, October 1893, 36.

between the two realms as a harmonious yet dynamic equilibrium. Finding a balance between the opposing principles is also one of the fundamental teachings of esotericism and alchemy. When the forces of darkness and light, spirit and matter, masculinity and femininity are in balance, we enter the realm of divinity. If the soul fails to unite itself with the spirit, with divinity, it will be ruled by the body and its passions. Hence, in the esoteric doctrine, the body must always be subordinated to the spirit, and the immaterial soul, united with the spirit, is the truly existing thing which only in its earthly existence becomes united with a material body.[354] According to Schuré, Pythagoras teaches us that the great inner problem of the whole humanity is "the problem of the soul, which discovers within itself an abyss of darkness and light." This soul realizes that it is not of this world, because this world is not enough to explain its existence. When the soul gains consciousness of these mysterious depths, it is on the way towards divinity, because through the narrow gate of the self leads the way to "the vastness of the invisible universes."[355]

Interestingly, there is a remarkable difference between the two versions of *Fantasy*. In one version the man is completely in the dark area, his head bent down and his eyes tightly shut. As with *Vision*, there appears to be a conflict between the two realms. The artist is perhaps trying to reach towards the light, yet unable to resist the lure of darkness. In the other version – the one in which the man is holding a lyre – he has straightened his back, and the white swans are now above his head like a shining halo. His eyes are wide open, his red lips slightly parted, and the expression on his face is both sensual and enlightened. Sarajas-Korte focuses on this version in her interpretation. She assumes the one without the lyre to be the earlier version and she believes it to be unfinished.[356] Stewen, on the other hand, considers the one with the lyre to be the first version – noting, however, that no chronological relationship between the two versions can actually be established. It is, nevertheless, tempting to construct a narrative between them, a movement from light to darkness or from darkness to light. In Stewen's interpretation the fundamental tension in these paintings arises from the problematics of love and sensuality. The enlightened boy with the lyre is in the realm of Apollo, his head surrounded by the white birds of light, whereas in the second version "the figure is distorted, like in a photograph with too-long exposure; the ears have become the pointed ears of a faun or satyr, the face has swung down, away from the light and towards darkness."[357] Here, as in Munch's *Vision*, sexuality and animality are contrasted with purity and light, and man appears torn between these two directions. In the satyr *Fantasy* the boy has taken one step towards the dark realm, and simultaneously he has become distorted and more akin to the decomposing head in *Vision*. The realm of darkness, the underworld of unconscious drives, poses a threat to our individuality, but there is at the same time something seductive, something that lures us to throw ourselves into the Dionysian

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[354] The "threefold law" according to which man consists of body, soul, and spirit, is presented in by Schuré as the cornerstone of esoteric science. See Schuré 1977 [1889], 316-319, 338-339.

[355] Schuré 1977 [1889], 325-326.

[356] Sarajas-Korte 1994, 12.

[357] Stewen 2000, 54-58, 118.

experience. The satyr was for Nietzsche a symbol of the Dionysian. It represents Nature – like its Romantic counterpart, the sentimental figure of the idyllic shepherd – but the satyr is the image of Nature "as yet unchanged by knowledge."[358]

Later, in a series of drawings and paintings from 1917-18 representing a young man or boy struggling with a swan, Enckell returned to the motif of the swan, once again connecting it in a complex manner with the themes of sexuality and art. In the painting *The Man and the Swan* (1918, Serlachius Museums, Mänttä), the straightforward eroticism of the image is emphasized by the phallic neck of the swan. Tihinen has discussed this image in terms of a tradition that has its origins in Michelangelo in which the myths of Leda and the swan and Zeus and Ganymede are merged together. In both myths Zeus transforms himself into an animal in order to seduce the object of his desire. The man in Enckell's painting is not represented as a victim; he appears to be the one who is approaching the swan, and he has grabbed a firm hold of the swan's neck.[359] The Finnish architect and art critic Sigurd Frosterus has interpreted the theme of the painting as the artist's struggle with his subject, and Sarajas-Korte proposes in a similar vein that the swan should be seen as a symbol of absolute beauty and the mystery of life and death.[360]

The Finnish art historian Harri Kalha has analyzed Frosterus' interpretation as an attempt to sublimate the homoeroticism of the painting, and he has also noted the pathologizing tendency of Frosterus' reading of Enckell's art.[361] However, as Tihinen has suggested, the simultaneous references to both classical mythology and homoerotic desire in *The Man and the Swan* may be seen as self-conscious irony or "camp." This can be related to Sarajas-Korte's interpretation of the swans in the *Fantasies* in terms of the Apollonian and Dionysian principles of Nietzsche. The motif of the swan contains both dimensions; the ecstatic eroticism of the Dionysian and the Apollonian sublimity and idealism.[362]

The almost violent gesture of the man grabbing the neck of the swan may also lead one's thoughts to Tribulat Bonhomet, the fictional character invented by Villiers de l'Isle-Adam.[363] The satirical figure of Bonhomet is an embodiment of bourgeois rationality and egotism. In the story entitled "The Killer of Swans" ("Le Tueur de cygnes," 1887), he discovers that the swan sings beautifully when it is dying. To find proof for this theory, the "rationnel-docteur" actually strangles some swans to death with his bare hands. The swans are described as "artistes" and "oiseaux-poètes," and their timeless beauty and grace is contrasted with the grotesque and sadistic modernity of Bonhomet. The literary historian C. A. Hackett has argued that Bonhomet is a more ambiguous character than what he might at first sight appear to

[358] Nietzsche 1968, 59, 61 (*The Birth of Tragedy*).

[359] Tihinen 2000, 80-82; Tihinen 2008, 41-43.

[360] Frosterus 2000 [1950], 181 ("Magnus Enckell, persoonallisuus"); Sarajas-Korte 1994, 28.

[361] Kalha 2005, 158-162.

[362] Tihinen 2008, 42-43.

[363] Tribulat Bonhomet first appeared in the story called *Claire Lenoire*, published in 1867, and then reappeared in several short stories which were collected in one volume and published as *Tribulat Bonhomet* in 1887. Even after the publication of the stories in book form the character continued to live in the author's imagination and he kept inventing new Bonhomet anecdotes and incidents. See Hackett 1983, 804-805.

be. In addition to being an embodiment of bourgeois mentality, and as such an object of ridicule, he is also, in part, a portrait of the author, "and a portrait in which each reader will recognize something of himself."[364] After having killed the swans, the memory of their song sends him into a state of rapture which can be read as a parody of artistic ecstasy. Bonhomet may then also be seen as a caricature of the artist who is desperately searching for an aesthetic revelation. In his grotesque way, Bonhomet genuinely tries to appreciate the music of the swans:[365]

> *Bonhomet, with his eyes closed, aspired in his heart the harmonious vibrations. Then, staggering like in a spasm, he collapsed on the bank and stretched out on the grass, lying there on his back in his warm and waterproof clothing. And there, the Patron of our era, lost in a voluptuous torpor, re-savoured in the depths of himself, the memory of the sweet song – although tainted with a sublimity that to him seemed old-fashioned – of these dear artists. And re-absorbing his comatose ecstasy, he ruminated in a bourgeois manner its exquisite impression until sunrise.*[366]

Le Tueur des cygnes has an epigraph taken from Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*: "Les cygnes comprennent des signes" (The swans understand signs). This wordplay brings about associations of the symbolism of the swan in the poetry of Mallarmé – an artist that Villiers greatly admired. Hackett has observed that "*Le Tueur de cygnes* is also *Le Tueur de* signes," because the sacred birds understand certain signs that Bonhomet cannot comprehend, and this is one of the reasons why he kills the swans.[367] Mallarmé's work was motivated by his ambition to capture the totality of existence in a work of art. In his poem "Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui" the cygne-signe connection is strongly emphasized. The swan is a messenger of a higher and brighter "Apollonian" 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 "The Swan," 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.[368]

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[364] Hackett 1983, 815.

[365] Hacket 1983, 809.

[366] "Bonhomet, les yeux fermés, en aspirait, en son cœur les vibrations harmonieuses: puis, chancelant, comme en un spasme, il s'en allait échouer à la rive, s'y allongeait sur l'herbe, s'y couchait sur le dos, en ses vêtements bien chauds et imperméables. Et là, ce Mécène de notre ère, perdu en une torpeur voluptueuse, ressavourait, au tréfond de lui-même, le souvenir du chant délicieux — bien qu'entaché d'une sublimité selon lui démodée — de ses chers artistes. Et, résorbant sa comateuse extase, il en ruminait ainsi à la bourgeoise, l'exquise impression jusqu'au lever du soleil." Villiers de l'Isle-Adam [1887] 1908, 11.

[367] Hackett 1983, 806-807.

[368] See Sarajas-Korte 1994, 22; 2001, 247-248. Aurier uses a similar image of a swan with tainted plumage to describe the fate of the artists who cannot escape the influence of their environment: "Ils sont en quelque sorte des cygnes qui, par hasard tombés dans un bourbier, tâchent de se renvoler vers le ciel, mais dont les ailes ont été souillées par la boue du marécage." He makes this comment in the context of a denouncement of the Tainean scientific criticism which, according to him, concentrates only on the blemishes in the white plumage of the swan. Aurier 1893, 180 ("Essai sur une nouvelle méthode de critique").

Le Tueur des cygnes takes up this well established symbolism but transforms it into an ironic and satirical image of the fate of art and the artists in the modern world. Perhaps the irony that we perceived in the juxtaposition of erotic and sublime elements in *The Man and the Swan* could also be understood in terms of the artist's desperate attempt to capture the ideal. How can the artist hold on to the ideal without grabbing it by the neck and strangling it to death? Similarly, in Munch's *Vision*, the swan seems to be an emblem of this kind of elusive artistic ideal. In the text, Munch wrote that as the swan came closer, he noticed that its plumage was dirty, and when he tried to reach it, he only managed to frighten it away. The artist's self cannot reach the ideal; hence, it is in a state of disintegration, literally decomposing.

This theme of the artist chasing the ideal can also be connected to 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,[369] 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.[370] There is, however, a gouache painting of the same theme made in the previous year, in which the composition remains intact (fig. 18). This version is stylistically more rough and unfinished and there is more tension in the man's posture, making him seem more physical and even somewhat bestial.

As an image of the artist and his mission, *Conceptio Artis* can be understood as an allegorical self-portrait. 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 accentuates 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* give emphasis to 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

[369] The existing parts of the painting are in the collections of the Gallen-Kallela Museum in Espoo, Finland.

[370] On the various stages of this painting, see Turtiainen 2011.

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]."[371]

ORPHEUS AND OTHER DISEMBODIED HEADS

The head in *Vision* appears to be 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.[372] Even so, the suggestion of two levels of existence, one below, and one above, is so strong that it detaches the head from the body, and its detachment is underlined (literally) by the dark stroke of paint on the surface of water below the chin. Hence, I believe it is justifiable to perceive *Vision* as an image of the disembodied head. This motif, which has been popular among artists throughout the history of Western art, appears several times in Munch's art, and often in self-portraits. In a self-portrait lithograph from 1895 Munch has represented himself as a head hovering in darkness above a skeletonised arm (*Self-Portrait with Skeleton Arm*, 1895, The Munch Museum, Oslo). A thin white strip on the upper border of the image, which bears the inscription "Edvard Munch – 1895," makes the image seem like an epitaph for a deceased person. The skeleton arm is an allegorical element that emphasizes the symbolism of life and death. In Müller-Westerman's interpretation the skeleton arm refers to the transient nature of life, whereas the head is a metaphor for the immortal thoughts of the artist that are preserved in his artworks after death.[373] As an image of the artist, *Self-Portrait with Skeleton Arm* also reflects the idea that the head is the artist's prime faculty – not the hand, not even the eye, but the head, that through inner vision can sense the ideal. But this can only be done by separating the thinking, intelligent part from the part that is driven by animal instincts, sexuality, and dirty bodily functions.

The head separated from the body suggests a dualistic vision of man, and an attempt to separate the immaterial part, the soul or the mind, from the material body. It was a popular motif particularly in the art of Odilon Redon. 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."[374] This interpretation summarizes the general symbolism of the disembodied head – particularly as it was employed in the

[371] Cited from Müller-Westerman 2005, 30.

[372] See undated manuscript, Munch Museet, MM T 2908. The page contains a drawing of a drowned man and a text fragment related to the theme of *Vision*..

[373] Müller-Westerman 2005, 36. The composition of this work is based directly on a portrait of Stanisław Przybyszewski which Munch had executed in 1893–94.

[374] Goldwater 1979, 119.

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, for instance, that several of Redon's disembodied heads can in fact be identified as Orpheus.[375] Other popular myths featuring the motif were the biblical story of Salome and Saint John the Baptist, and the ancient legend of Medusa. We shall see that 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. The head separated from the body may also refer to the notion that the artist is able to overcome his painful existence and use it to fuel his creative energy.

Redon's earliest rendering of the figure of Orpheus, *Orpheus' Head Floating on the Waters* (1881, fig. 19), is the most unusual one, and the one that most closely resembles *Vision*, because the head is floating in an upright position just like the head in Munch's painting.[376] In all later depictions of the head of Orpheus by Redon, the head rests on a lyre. 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.[377]

Kosinski has written about the centrality of the myth of Orpheus for the nineteenth-century. The myth had 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.[378] Schuré represented Orpheus as one of the great initiates. He is associated with both Apollo and Dionysus and in this sense comes to symbolize the dual nature of man. He is called the son of Apollo and in his role as teacher and pacifier becomes identified with the great God of light, but he is also the initiator into the mysteries of Dionysus. Schuré explains that Orpheus, the son of Apollo and a priestess, was initiated into the mysteries in Egypt by the priest of Memphis. He then returned to Greece and formed a synthesis of the religion of Zeus and that of Dionysus: "The initiates received the pure light of sublime truth through his teachings, and this same light reached the people in a more tempered but no less beneficial form under the

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[375] Kosinski has identified at least five. Kosinski 1989, 199.

[376] According to Leeman the original name of the work is *Le Mystique*. However, it is unclear when and by whom the name connected with Orpheus came to be associated with this work. Leeman 2011, 142.

[377] Gösta Svenæus was the first to point out the similarity between Munch's sketch and Redon's *Orpheus' Head Floating on the Waters*. He has noted that Munch could have seen this work in the Durand-Ruel Gallery in Paris in 1892. Svenæus 1973, 73.

[378] 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 1989, 256.

veil of poetry and enchanting festivals."[379] The mystical initiation was thus directly connected with poetry and art. 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.

The Symbolists found in the figure of Orpheus a profound expression for their complex aesthetic-religious attitude. Kosinski has noted that the Symbolists were the first artists since antiquity to depict the severed head of Orpheus.[380] Gustave Moreau's painting *Orpheus* (1865, Musée d'Orsay, Paris) 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 artists, misunderstood and martyred and venerated only after his death. An atmosphere of melancholic mourning is combined with the implication of victorious transcendence. The intensity of the hypnotic gaze brings to mind another painting by Moreau, *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (1865, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), which also contains elements of tragedy and mystery. Both paintings represent an encounter with the unknown.

Jean Delville's painting of the head of Orpheus floating in water (*Dead Orpheus*, 1893, Royal Museum of Fine Arts of Belgium) has the same serene and mournful atmosphere as Moreau's. The head is placed on a lyre, and the face has an idealized androgynous beauty (which Delville actually borrowed from his wife who was his model for the painting).[381] Both Redon's and Delville's renderings of the myth seem to reflect the impact of Moreau's painting but both omit the figure of the Thracian maiden from the images, thus simplifying the composition and intensifying its symbolic potential. The place of the maiden is adopted by the viewer who is invited to contemplate on the mystery of the magical head. Moreau, Redon, and Delville, all depict Orpheus after the triumphant finale; his body may be torn into bits and pieces but the head, the container of his immortal soul, continues its magical song. The figure of Orpheus is in these cases connected with 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 of Orpheus, separated from the body and miraculously continuing to sing, is the ultimate symbol of artistic transcendence. It reflects 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, they are characterized by calmness, serenity, and ethereal beauty. The distorted head in *Vision* is in stark contrast with this; it seems

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[379] Schuré 1977 [1898], 231. See also Kosinski 1989, 1-2, 205.

[380] Kosinski 1989, 193-194.

[381] Kosinski 1989, 198-199.

incapable of transcendence. 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 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." The gaze of Orpheus symbolizes the simultaneously creative and destructive power of artistic inspiration.[382] Kaja Silverman, in her analysis of Blanchot's Orpheus, writes: "Orpheus cannot create without approaching her but he must do so without looking at her, because if he turns around to face her, his work will be ruined."[383]

In a later self-portrait by Munch we can detect a more direct reference to Orpheus (*Self-portrait with Lyre*, 1896-97, fig. 16). In this rather violent image the artist's naked body can be seen to merge with a lyre, the instrument of Orpheus. His cramped fingers are plucking the chords and his face is grimacing with pain. This is a very different image of the artist than the helpless and undignified martyr of *Vision,* although pain and suffering appear to be the destiny of the artist in both cases. In *Vision* the artist's tragedy lays precisely in his inability to separate his mind from the repulsive bodily desires that are dragging him down, keeping him away from the ideal, whereas here we encounter a psychophysiological unity of mind and body. The centre of artistic creativity seems to have shifted from the head to the heart. The red colour of the lyre quite obviously refers to blood, and its shape next to the artist's chest resembles a heart, or perhaps an arrowhead pointing to the heart. In his notes Munch writes:

> *I do not believe in art which is not forced out by the human urge to open one's heart. All art – literature as well as music – must be produced with one's heart blood - Art is one's heart blood.*[384]

A similar idea is manifested in the motif of the "flower of pain" which Munch produced in several versions. In the watercolour known as *The Flower of Pain* or *Blood Flower* (1898, The Munch Museum, Oslo. fig.?) we encounter again the bare upper body of the artist indicating the physicality of the creative experience. Blood is oozing from the heart, forming a red stream as it hits the ground, and from this stream a flower is growing. The head is bent back and one hand is grasping the

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[382] Kosinski 1989, 125-126.

[383] Silverman 2009, 6. "The Gaze of Orpheus" is the central essay of the collection of critical works entitled *L'Espace littéraire*.

[384] "Jeg tror ikke på den kunst som ikke er tvungen sig frem ved menneskets trang til at åbne sit hjerte. Al kunst ... literatur som musik må vare frembragt med ens hjerteblod – Kunsten er ens hjerteblod." The Munch Museum, MM N 29,1890-92.

bleeding chest. The painting is a study for the cover of the journal *Quickborn* that Munch was editing together with Strindberg. Munch also made a woodcut version in which the robust carving technique makes it appear as if he has shed his skin to reveal the flesh beneath it. This suggests the idea of an extreme hypersensitivity of the artist: he has no skin to protect him, and thus every tiniest outside stimulation can send a pang of pain through his body.[385]

Munch returned to the theme once more in the beginning of the twentieth century in the painting *The Flower of Pain. Motif with Sunflower* (1904-1906, The Munch Museum, Oslo). In the earlier version the flower seems quite fragile, its star-shaped head probably suggesting some kind of spiritual enlightenment.[386] Heller has identified the flower as an "alrune" or mandrake, a plant which is connected with witchcraft and magic.[387] The body on the other hand is strong and dynamic, similar to the muscular body of the *Self-Portrait with Lyre*. In this later version, however, the flower is a strong and sturdy sunflower, whereas the body of the artist looks weaker with a sickly purplish skin tone. The posture is calm and resigned quite unlike the convulsing body of the earlier versions. The hands are pressed against the ground, supporting the reclining body. In the earlier versions the artist is visible only from the waist up, whereas the rest of the body seems to be buried in the black ground, as if he was himself growing from the same ground as the flower that his heart-blood is fertilizing. In the later version, however, the hips and genitals are also visible. The head is held up and the face is shown frontally with eyes like two reddish black holes. It seems then, that in the first version the artist is feeding the frail flower with his strong body that can take the pain and suffering. In the later version the strong flower is draining the blood from the weakening artist who is resigned to his fate of handing over his bodily vitality in exchange for the thriving of his art.

The pain that is feeding creativity is of a spiritual origin but it is channelled through the physical body, through "heart blood." Heart blood means life, and life is in the rhythm of the beating heart and the circulation of blood. The artist, thus, gives his life to the artworks; he gives birth to the living beings that are the works of art – Munch often referred to his paintings as his children. Heart-blood is in fact both a physical and a spiritual metaphor, because the heart is not simply a bodily organ but also the seat of our most fundamental and sincere sentiments. Nietzsche's

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[385] See Cordulack 2002, 46-47.

[386] A similar idea is reflected in Piet Mondrian's early painting *Passionflower* (1908) represents an ecstatic figure with flowers on her shoulders, which clearly refer to some kind of spiritual awakening. In the painting *Evolution* (1910-11), which has obvious links with the du-Prelian theory of evolution of the human consciousness, the flowers have turned into stars.

[387] The symbolism of the mandrake plant is connected with Munch's favourite themes, sexuality and death. It was believed to have the power to cure love-sickness, but when it was picked it uttered a terrifying scream. It was also believed that mandrakes drew from semen dripping from hanged men. *Alruner* was also the name of a collection of poetry by the Danish Symbolist poet Emanuel Goldstein, published in 1892, for which Munch made the frontispiece. He asked Goldstein to send himself a picture of a mandrake, but in the end he used a variation of *Melancholy* for the image. Goldstein was a close friend of Munch's in the early 1890s. See Heller 1984, 165; Howe 2001, 52-53.

Zarathustra says: “Write with blood and you will experience that blood is spirit.”[388] Hence, through his heart-blood, the artist gives the artworks both a body and a soul.

The bleeding wound in the chest can also be associated with the wound on the side of Christ. The figure of the suffering artist thus turns into a Christ-like heroic and misunderstood martyr. Munch also depicted himself as crucified Christ surrounded by a mocking crowd in the painting *Golgotha* (1900, The Munch Museum, Oslo),[389] and even in the poor distorted figure in *Vision* we can see a reflection of Christ’s martyrdom. There is a very unusual self-portrait by Emile Bernard from 1891 which, incidentally, is also known by the name *Vision* (*Vision, Symbolist Self-Portrait*, Musée d’Orsay, Paris), and which suggests parallels with Munch’s *Vision* also in terms of theme and composition. Bernard has depicted himself at the bottom of the canvas, and in the place of the swan in Munch’s painting, there is a hovering head of Christ. The red and orange background is populated with naked men and women. The image of Christ painted full face and wearing a crown of thorns derives from the Veil of Veronica tradition, the miraculous image that was not made by human hands but imprinted on the cloth with which Saint Veronica wiped Christ’s face on the way to Calvary. The image of Christ in Bernard’s painting can be interpreted in biographical terms, as a sign of his recent return to the Catholic Church, but he also appears to identify himself with the figure of Christ. Moreover, the reference to the Veronica tradition can be understood as an allusion to the mystical origin of art. Christ is shown here as a disembodied head, his strange and somewhat distorted appearance bearing a certain amount of resemblance to the head in *Vision*, and the artist himself looks pale, anxious and uncertain. Both Munch’s and Bernard’s *Vision*’s represent an inner vision of the artist, and both paintings reflect the artists role as a suffering and misunderstood martyr.

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.[390] He had rebelled against his father’s pietistic Christianity already during his Bohemian period in the 1880s but he

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[388] Nietzsche [1885]1971, 152 (*Thus Spake Zarathustra*).

[389] This painting was completed in the beginning of the year 1900 when Munch was recovering from a nervous breakdown in the Kornhaug Sanatorium, a health spa in the mountains of central Norway. Caricatures of important figures from Munch’s life can be identified among the mocking crowd. Patricia Berman has observed that the red streak that runs across the sky is reminiscent of the bloody skies in *The Scream* and *Angst*, and hence this formal element connects the painting Golgotha thematically to these earlier works, evoking a similar emotional effect. She also notes that the inscription “Kornhaug Sanatorium 1900” which identifies the date and place of the painting was highly unusual for the artist and it can be seen to articulate his wish to bring forth the autobiographical connections of the theme. Berman views this as an example of the performative tendency in Munch’s self-portraits. Berman 2006, 44. See also Heller 1984, 173; Müller-Westerman 2005, 66-70.

[390] 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 1969, 65.

was never averse to religion or spirituality as such.[391] 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 a notebook entry from 1892 he reflects on the notion of death as transformation, identifying the soul or the spirit with a "life germ":

> *The Life Germ – or if one prefers, the soul or the spirit – It is foolish to deny the presence of the soul – For one cannot deny the existence of the life germ – One must believe in immortality – as one can maintain that the life germ – the spirit of life must still exist after the death of the body – This ability – to keep a body together – to bring the substance to development – the life spirit, what happens to it – Nothing perishes – one has no example of that in nature – The body as dead – does not disappear – The substances separate – are converted . The fanatical belief in one single religion – for instance, Christianity – brought with it unbelief – brought with it a fanatical belief in a non-god.*[392]

Here Munch presents the idea that Christianity no longer had relevance in the modern world; it had lost its power by turning into "a fanatic belief in a non-god." In the series of paintings and drawings with the motif of "The Empty Cross" Munch presents an allegorical image of the world in which all traditional moral and spiritual values have lost their meaning.[393] 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.[394] 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 –is 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 –*

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[391] See Berman 2006; Heller 1969, 48-52.

[392] The Munch Museum, MM T 2760, sketchbook from 1891-1892. English translation cited from Woll 1978, 237.

[393] See Berman's interpretation. 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 according to Berman perceives as "a complex philosophical system whose inherent contradictions shaped his bohemian identity. Berman 2006, 35-37.

[394] See Heller 1984, 165.

the terror of Death was lurking behind – a blood-red Sun shines over everything – and the Cross is empty.[395]

In the Indian ink and water colour version of *The Empty Cross* (1899–1901, The Munch Museum, Oslo) 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.[396] 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?"

The art historian Patricia 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*.[397] 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 for the figure in *The Scream* (fig. 15).[398]

This theme of the interconnectedness of life, death, and sexuality is expressed most blatantly in the small watercolour and ink painting entitled *Salome Variation* (1894–98, also known as *Salome-Paraphrase*).[399] Here Munch again depicts himself as a disembodied head, and the symbolism of woman's hair that was typical for Munch's work is presented in this self-portrait in a direct and quite disturbing way. 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

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[395] "Purpurrødt som gjennem et sodet Glas skinner Solen over Verden – På høiden i Baggrunden står Korset tomt –og grædende Kvinder beder til det tomme Kors. – Elskende – Horen – Drankeren – og Forbryderen fylder Terænnet nedenunder – og modhøien i Billedet – går en Skrænt ned til Havet – ned mod Skrænten stuber Menneskene ud – og Rædselslagne – knuger de sig til Skræntens Kant – Midt i Kaosset står en Munk og stirrer rådløs og – med Barnets Forskrækkede Øine på alt dette –og spørger Hvorfor Hvortil –Det var mig nu – ude i Byen rasende Elskov og Laster – Dødens Skræk lurede bag – en blodrød Sol skinner over det hele – og Korset er tomt." The Munch Museum, MM T 2730, sketchbook from 1908.

[396] The image of the man with the whore is a reference to the gouache *Young Man and Whore* (1893).

[397] Berman 2006, 36.

[398] Rosenblum 1978, 7-8.

[399] Edvard Munch, *Salome Variation* (1894-98), water colour, Indian ink and pencil on paper, 46 x 32,6 cm, The Munch Museum, Oslo.

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 explained also that in the paintings of the *Frieze of Life*, the long hair represents waves of communication.[400] The shape of the woman's hair resembles a vagina or a uterus from which the man's head is emerging.[401] Woman is the mystical birth giver and the secret behind all life. She is the reason behind all of his suffering but at the same time, without her, without woman the birth-giver, 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.[402]

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. Moreau made numerous painting and drawings of the legend of Salome, and in the painting *The Apparition*, which exists in several versions, the head of Saint John is hovering in the air like a vision, radiating divine light.[403] Some of Redon's images of disembodied heads can also be identified as Saint John. For instance, in the charcoal drawing from 1877, the head of Saint John rests peacefully on a plate (*Head of Martyr in a Bowl, Saint John*, 1877, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo). 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 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 accentuate the fact that this artistic suffering is something completely different from the everyday troubles of ordinary people. The suffering has a specific

[400] 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." The Munch Museum, MM N 43, 1933-1940. English translation cited from Tøjner 2003,148. See also Tøjner 2003, 97-98.

[401] Cordulack compares it to a scientific drawing of a cross-section of uterus. Cordulack 2002, 72-73.

[402] See Bernheimer 2002, 104-138

[403] Gustave Moreau, *The Apparition*, undated, watercolour, 106 x 72.2 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

purpose; its aim is to give the artist a heightened vision that sees beyond the illusions and appearances of the ordinary world.[404]

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. In fact, this has been suggested by 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.[405] 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 and from the blood that oozed out the winged horse Pegasus and his brother Chrysaor were born.[406]

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, Galleria del Levante, Munich) is one of the most blatant expressions of this theme. Freud has associated the head of Medusa with castration anxiety, and 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."[407] Munch's many female figures with long dangling strands of hair can be associated with Medusa as the threatening woman.[408] 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 functioned as a symbol of pessimism and decadence. The myth of Perseus' encounter with Medusa was seen to reflect the existential position of man in the modern world.[409] To avoid the look of Medusa, then, means avoidance

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[404] See Sturgis & Wilson 2006, 139.

[405] Tihinen 2008, 85.

[406] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book IV, 774-803.

[407] Mathews 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). Freud 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 1999, 258 n19.

[408] Although another, perhaps even more appropriate parallel for Munch's hair symbolism can be found in Maurice Maeterlinck's symbolist play *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1893), in which the woman uses her long hair to tie the man to herself. *Pelléas et Mélisande* was first performed in 1893 and later adapted by Claude Debussy into an opera which premiered in 1902.

[409] Ahlund 1994, 19.

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.[410] 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?"[411] 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.*[412]

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.[413] 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 St. Cloud 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.*[414]

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.[415] 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 understood 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.

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[410] See Holm 1957, 63-64.

[411] Hansson [1889] 1997, 149.

[412] Cited from Anderson 1973, 199.

[413] 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.

[414] The Munch Museum, MM T 2770, 1890. English translation cited from Eggum 2000, 25.

[415] Kosinski 1989, 15-18, 189-205

SYMBOLISM OF SURFACE AND DEPTH

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. [416] 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. I shall return to my analysis of the duality in *Vision* which I interpret in terms of a symbolism of surface and depth. I have already suggested that this painting represents some kind of a visionary experience but it is something very different from what is more often seen 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 in *Vision*?

In her study concerning the myth of the poet as seer in Romantic literature, Bays has distinguished between two kinds of seers and two kinds of visionary experiences: the "nocturnal" or "orphic" experience is related to the Freudian unconscious, while the "mystical" experience pertains to the Platonic-Plotinian experience. This conflict, according to Bays, has an ancient history, and it parallels an opposition between what she calls the "Homeric" and the "Platonic" modes of poetic creativity. The Homeric conception defines the artist as magician and art hence involves a lowering of consciousness, whereas the Platonic theory considers the creative process as a heightening or quickening of consciousness. 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.[417] 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 modern 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. Moreover, as we shall see, it is often unfeasible to hold apart these two seemingly opposing goals.

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,

[416] 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.

[417] Bays 1964, 4, 19-20.

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; their vision may be more accurately termed the orphic vision to distinguish it from the mystic vision with which it has been so often confused."[418] Rimbaud's example demonstrates that the visionary experience of the artist does 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 wrote in his famous *lettre du voyant*:

> *The Poet makes himself seer by long, gigantic and rational derangement of* all the *senses. All forms of love, suffering, and madness. He searches himself. He exhausts all poisons in himself and keeps only their quintessences. Unspeakable torture where he needs all his faith, all his superhuman strength, where he becomes among all men the great patient, the great criminal, the one accursed – and the supreme Scholar! – because he reaches the* unknown*!"*[419]

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. For Rimbaud, this meant a self-sacrificial descent into Hell; 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.[420] For Rimbaud, as for Baudelaire, suffering was both the cause and effect of artistic creativity. The artist's extreme sensitivity makes him more prone to pain and suffering but this pain can also heighten his vision. The artist must be strong enough to bear the suffering in order for it to have a beneficial effect. In the poem "Bénédiction," Baudelaire writes about the suffering which for the poet is a blessing because it purifies him so that he can receive the holy pleasures:

> *Be blessed, my God, who sends us suffering*
> *As a divine remedy for our impurities*
> *And as the best and the purest essence*

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[418] Bays 1964, 7, 14.

[419] "Le Poète se fait *voyant* par un long, immense et raisonné *dérèglement* de *tous les sens*. Tous les formes d'amour, de souffrance, de folie; il cherche lui-même, il épuise en lui tous les poisons, pour n'en garder que les quintessences. Ineffable torture où il a besoin de toute la foi, de toute la force surhumaine, ou il devient entre tous le grand malade, le grand criminel, le grand maudit, – et le suprême savant! – Car il arrive à l'i*nconnu*!" Letter to Paul Demeny, 15 May 1871. Cited from Rimbaud 2005, 376-377.

[420] Letter to Paul Demeny, 15 May 1871. Cited from Rimbaud 2005, 376-377.

Who prepares the strong for holy pleasures![421]

In the culture of the fin-de-siècle, mental as well as physical illness could be seen as a sign of degeneration, but also as a metaphor, or even a prerequisite, for artistic creativity. The Italian doctor Cesare Lombroso discussed the connections of genius and madness in the highly influential book *The Man of Genius* (*L'Uomo di genio* 1863, published in French as *L'Homme de génie* in 1889). His claim was that certain forms of mental illness can stimulate genius and even turn an average mind into exceptional intelligence. According to Lombroso, a true genius was necessarily mad. Lombroso's student Nordau, on the other hand, did not accept the link between madness and genius. In his view the artists who cherished their questionable mental condition were merely degenerate. Patricia Mathews, who has studied the connections between creativity and pathology in French fin-de-siècle culture, has noted the similarities between artistic and scientific views on madness and genius. The artists and writers were generally in agreement about the fact that there was a strong link between genius and madness; many even concluded that true geniuses were necessarily mad. The main differences in their thoughts were connected with the valuation of these mad geniuses and in the direction of the causation. According to the scientific view, certain artists and writers were degenerate individuals, and they were to blame for the miserable state of modern society. The artists on the other hand viewed it conversely: in their mind it was precisely the oppressive and degenerate modern society that was the reason for their suffering. This caused the artists to view themselves as outsiders; they wished to withdraw from the world that did not understand or appreciate their visions.[422] The literary scholar Barbara Spackman has distinguished between the "Lombrosian" rhetoric of sickness employed by the critics of decadence, and the "Baudelairean" rhetoric that was adopted by the writers who were the targets of this criticism. They reversed the negative criticism, taking it as a proof that they were, indeed, misunderstood geniuses.[423]

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. As some of the most popular sources for these artists and writers, Lathe mentions Théodule Ribot, Hippolyte Bernheim, and Max Nordau. All these thinkers "presented the human complex as an irrational conglomeration of fragments which vacillated with the nerves' reactions to memories, associations, environment, suggestion, unconscious urges." [424] Lathe has also emphasized the importance of Nietzsche's philosophy as an inspiration for Munch, particularly when it comes to the notion of pain and

[421] "Soyez béni, mon Dieu, qui donnez la souffrance/ Comme un divin remède à nos impuretés/ Et comme la meilleure et la plus pure essence/ Qui prépare les forts aux saintes voluptés!" Bénédiction is the first poem of the first part of *Les Fleurs du mal*, entitled "Spleen et ideal." Baudelaire 1868a, 87.

[422] Mathews 1999, 50-53, 55-63.

[423] Spackman 1989, 105-151.

[424] Lathe 1983, 198.

suffering as a stimulant to creativity.[425] Nietzsche also believed that suffering had to be in proportion to the strength of the person. In *The Gay Science* he wrote, for instance, that he owed to his sickness "a higher health – one which is made stronger by whatever does not kill it," and to this he believed to owe his entire philosophy.[426] Lathe assumes that the knowledge of Nietzsche's mental illness probably affected the reception of his works among Munch and his friends. According to her it "gave rise to numerous depictions of self-destruction and of madness and genius," and for Przybyszewski it gave the impetus to study neurology.[427]

These notions of creative suffering and illness as a stimulant to artistic creativity were important undercurrents in Munch's artistic thought, and they had a deeply personal meaning to him. Munch thought that he was sick with an incurable inherited illness. This belief was most directly expressed in the painting *The Inheritance* (1897-99, The Munch Museum, Oslo), of which he writes:

> *The woman bends over the child who is infected with the sins of her fathers ... The child stares with huge deep eyes into the world it has involuntarily entered. Sick and frightened and questioning it looks out into the room – surprised at the realm of pain it has entered, and already with the question why.*[428]

Munch then explains that he has wanted to convey "the old familiar 'Ghosts' phenomenon" referring to Ibsen's play about inherited disease, but he also identifies himself with the diseased child; for him life is something that he can only observe from afar, through a brightly lit window. Because of his inherited sickness, he will always be an outsider: "It was also about my life. My why."[429]

Ever since the turn of the 1890s when Munch 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 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.[430] 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: "Kan kun være malt af en gal mand!" (Could only have been painted by a madman). 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

[425] Lathe 1979, 23.

[426] Nietzsche [1882] 1970, 680-81. See also Bernheimer 2002, 7-23; Dollimore 1998, 242-244.

[427] Lathe 1979, 23. Przybyszewski also chose Nietzsche as one of his case studies in his book *Zur Psychologie des Individuums* (1892).

[428] The Munch Museum, MM T 2730, sketchbook from 1908. English translation cited from Tøjner 2003, 95.

[429] The Munch Museum, MM T 2730, sketchbook from 1908. English translation cited from Tøjner 2003, 95.

[430] Heller 1984, 155; Berman 1993, 629-630.

allowed it to remain there.[431] However, although Munch genuinely seemed to believe in his own inherited sickness, we should not automatically perceive this as a sign 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 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.[432]

According to Bays, the Surrealists, unlike the Symbolists, did not make the mistake of confusing their experience with the mystical one but knew that they were dealing with the unconscious realm of the human mind. However, she maintains that they made the even greater error of attempting to eliminate the role of conscious control altogether. When André Breton proclaimed Rimbaud as the father of Surrealism, he read "only half of the Rimbaldian doctrine."[433] An artist may draw inspiration from the unconsciousness but the conscious side of the mind is needed in order to turn the unconscious dream into a work of art. It remains somewhat unclear, however, where exactly Bays locates the fundamental difference between the Surrealists and the Rimbaldian doctrine. She writes that despite this alleged error, what Breton's advocates is in the end "quite feasible."[434] That is, that through the liberation and exploration of the unconscious mind the Surrealist artist and poets may make fuller use of these powers that previously have been employed in artistic production only to a limited extent.[435]

This appears to be very close to the basic tenet of the Rimbaldian doctrine. Like Rimbaud, the Surrealists consciously sought altered states of consciousness in order to attain new kinds of artistic experiences. Rabinovitch has argued that, although the Surrealists were on the side of the irrational, they also "created a new epistemology that includes the symbolic transformation of experience in art and religion – an unorthodox definition of knowledge made by the interpenetration of sacred and profane worlds evoked by modern experience."[436] Moreover, Rabinovitch has emphasized the interconnectedness and inseparability of the experiences of ascent and descent, which he understands as a central notion of Surrealism, as well as of the nineteenth-century conceptions that the Surrealists drew from. Baudelaire, for example, "envisioned this descent – like the ancient mystery religions of Cybele and Attis, Hermes and Dionysus, or the death and resurrection of Christ – as a U-shaped route – 'the way up is the way down'—through which is achieved an ultimate, if mortal, illumination."[437] It appears, therefore, that there was an inherent ambivalence in this poetic tradition which sought to transcend the limitations of the conscious mind. There was no clear dividing line between a pathological experience of

[431] Heller 2006, 17, 32 n1, n2.

[432] Berman 1993, 629.

[433] Bays 1964, 17-18.

[434] Bays 1964, 17-18.

[435] Bays 1964, 17-18.

[436] Rabinovitch 2002, 8-9.

[437] Rabinovitch 2002, 83.

agonizing derangement and a blissful sensation of creative ecstasy. This is, however, not a question of confusion but rather an important element of the tradition. I would argue that the enduring power and fascination of Romantic as well as Symbolist art and poetry originates from this oscillation between ascent and descent. For Baudelaire, for instance, heaven and hell alike could serve as sources of artistic inspiration, and he was very much aware of this dual aspiration as is suggested by his famous claim in *My Heart Laid Bare* (*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.* [438]

When Przybyszewski published his little book on Munch's art in 1894, he was conscious of the artist's tendency to venture into unknown terrain. It is reasonable to assume that Przybyszewski's views were not too far removed from Munch's own ideas about his art. Munch and Przybyszewski were close friends at the time, and like the other contributors to the book, Franz Servaes, Willy Pastor, and Julius Meier-Graefe, they belonged to the bohemian group of artists who met at the Zum Schwarzen Ferkel.[439] According to Przybyszewski, Munch was the first artist "who has ever undertaken to represent the most subtle and inconspicuous of psychological processes just as they appear spontaneously in the pure consciousness of individuality, and quite independently of any mental activity on our part."[440] Przybyszewski explains that by "individuality" he means the transcendental consciousness that is usually called "the unconscious." This he describes in terms that are very similar to those used by Carl du Prel, who distinguishes the transcendental Subject from the conscious Ego. The transcendental side of our being is manifested in sleep and related states, such as trance, hypnosis, or somnambulism. This part of our being, which is unknown to our conscious Ego, is immortal and inherently more sensitive than our everyday self. Carl du Prel suggested that in the course of evolution this hidden part will slowly emerge into consciousness.[441] Similarly, Przybyszewski describes individuality as "the immortal dimension of man":

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[438] "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." Baudelaire 1920 [1869], 57. *Mon cœur mis a nu* was published posthumously in 1869 as part of the *Journaux Intimes*.

[439] Christoph Asendorf has pointed out that "Przybyszewski's Munch book was not the product of casual cooperation but a document of the personal and intellectual relationship between the individuals involved." Heller has also commented on the relationship between Munch and Przybyszewski which he has described as "homoerotic." It is not entirely clear how he would have us to understand the meaning of the term in this context but it is clear that he suggests that their relationship involved at least an element of intellectual, if not physical, intimacy. They addressed each other as "Edzin" and "Stachu," and their closeness apparently irritated Strindberg. See Asendorf 2003, 84; Heller 1984, 104.

[440] Przybyszewski 1894, 16. English translation cited from Harrison et al. (ed.) 1998, 1046-50.

[441] Du Prel 1885, 391-420.

... precisely because it is so infinitely more ancient than the relatively recent human brain itself, precisely because it is so infinitely more receptive than the brain, and precisely because it possesses such infinitely more sensitive organs of feeling and perception than the brain, such individuality constitutes the primal ground and source of psychic life, saturates the impressions, leads life to these impressions, pours life out into them in a mighty blood-stream of affects, feelings and passions.[442]

Strindberg and Hansson connected a du-Prelian evolutionary vision with notions of creative suffering and artistic hypersensitivity. According to this view, the evolution of art, the personal development of the individual, and the evolution of the species are all interconnected. The development and education of the senses is the key to this transition towards a higher state of being. When our senses become more highly tuned, the world will appear to us in new ways. In dreams and abnormal mental states, such as trance or delirium, when the threshold of sensation is lowered, we can momentarily become aware of our future state of being. In Strindberg's fantasies, the man of the future would be a refined type with weak muscles and a high forehead. He would be an evolutionary step away from the animal past of man: "Everything reminiscent of the beast will disappear."Bodily weakness could thus be seen as a sign of heightened mental capacity. It signified also a lack of virility which was not necessarily seen as a negative thing since it could implicate that one was in control over his bodily desires and was able to channel all his creative energy into his art.[443] Hansson employed a combination of mysticism and Darwinism to construct his own theory of the evolution of human consciousness. For him this provided a much needed antidote for decadent pessimism: the nervousness and hypersensitivity of the modern man was not a sign of degeneration but quite the opposite – it was an indication that our senses were in the process of becoming more refined.[444]

Przybyszewski also calls attention to the expressive power of colour and form in Munch's art, which he sees as the result of looking with the inner eye of "individuality." According to Przybyszewski, Munch's art 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

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[442] Przybyszewski 1894, 13-14. English translation cited from Harrison et al. (ed.) 1998, 1046-50.

[443] Brandell 1974, 100. Strindberg saw himself as one of those hypersensitive geniuses who serve as an evolutionary link towards the man of the future. He referred to this idea, for example, in the essay "Sénsations détraquées" written in 1894 and first published in *Le Figaro Littéraire* 1894-95. English translation in Robinson (ed.) 1996, 122-134.

[444] Holm 1957, 89-90, 96; Anderson 1973, 90. Poe represented for Hansson a transitional link in the development towards the man of the future: "With this abnormal acuity of the faculties, so remarkable in Poe, he apprehends more than does the ordinary person, more comprehensively and more deeply; he encompasses a broader area, plumbs a deeper bottom. He perceives what the ordinary person cannot perceive: events within the physical and spiritual world that become apparent and can be grasped only by his more finely differentiated organs. Just as his nerves of sight and hearing are so sensitive that they are set in motion by the least movement of air, which produces no sense of sound or light to the ordinary person, the least perceptible and the quietest vibrations of the human soul disclose themselves in the most distinct fashion to his spiritual nerve endings, to his sensibility and disposition." Cited from Anderson 1973, 197.

environment." Munch, on the other hand, "attempts to present psychological phenomena immediately through colour." He paints landscapes that are "envisaged within the soul, as images of some Platonic anamnesis perhaps; his shapes and forms have been experienced musically, rhythmically." [445] Although Przybyszewski refers here to a "Platonic anamnesis," we seem to be more in the nocturnal realm of the unconscious:

> *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.*[446]

Moreover, he Przybyszewski adds that Munch's "works are the products of a mind in the most volatile state of consciousness imaginable ... quite different from that belonging to the recent brain of the conscious personality ... we are talking rather of phenomena which, psychologically considered, manifest themselves on the level of pure and individual life, of the phenomena of spiritual vision, of clairvoyance, of dreams and suchlike things."[447] This notion clearly resembles the theories presented by du Prel, who held that the as yet undeveloped transcendental-psychological faculties of man can offer glimpses of the higher level of consciousness in exceptional conditions, such as trance, delirium, or somnambulism. He emphasized that these are not morbid states even if they may appear so from the standpoint of ordinary sense-consciousness.[448] Thus, in du Prel's theory, what may seem to indicate descent into the unconsciousness from the point of view of ordinary consciousness is in fact to be seen as ascent from the transcendental perspective.

Let us, then, consider Munch's *Vision* in the light of these ideas. The surface of the water, as we have already contended, 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* which has already been discussed briefly in connection with Pekka Halonen's 1893 self-portrait. 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 of being. If we consider Redon's work in Bays's terms, it appears as a representation of the condition of mystical vision. Although the suggestion of watery depths below the surface may be seen as a reference to the realm of the unconscious, 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. Similarly, the divine light

[445] Przybyszewski 1894, 13-14. English translation cited from Harrison et al. (ed.) 1998, 1046-50.

[446] Przybyszewski 1894, 28. English translation cited from Harrison et al. (ed.) 1998, 1046-50.

[447] Przybyszewski 1894, 28. English translation cited from Harrison et al. (ed.) 1998, 1046-50.

[448] du Prel 1885, 116, 120.

falling from above in Halonen's self-portrait situates the painting in the realm of mystical rather than nocturnal vision, although, as we have seen above, the experience that it describes is somewhat ambiguous; it does not appear to be painful or agonizing in any way, but neither does this self-portrait have the dreamy appearance on Redon's painting. *Vision*, on the other hand, can be seen as an illustration of a conflict between the two visionary experiences. The suggestion of the dark abysses below the surface refers us to the nocturnal realm in Bays' distinction, but the figure is neither descending nor ascending; it is as if he was caught in a limbo between the two realms. The artist seems to be conscious of the conflict and aspires to ascend towards the swan, but is barely able to hold his head above the surface of the murky water. 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.

However, the setting of the painting is intentionally ambiguous; is the fundamental truth to be found in the realm of universal abstraction represented by the swan or is it hidden in the deep and dark abyss? Perhaps new kinds of truths and artistic visions could be discovered beneath the shimmering surface. 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 Apollonian 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."[449]

In an undated note Munch writes 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 –* [450]

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 therefore be interpreted as a beautiful illusion, the "Apollonian veil" that hides the horrible truth. The Dionysian, however, is also "the eternal life beyond all

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[449] Nietzsche 1968 [1886], 38. The first edition of *The Birth of Tragedy* appeared in 1872 with the title *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music.* A second edition with only a few changes and corrections appeared in 1878. In 1886, the same year that *Beyond Good and Evil* was published, the remaining copies of both editions were reissued with a new preface entitled "Attempt at a Self-Criticism," and a new title page which now read *The Birth of Tragedy Or: Hellenism and Pessimism*. The old title page was retained but it now followed the new preface.

[450] "Og livet er som denne stille flade – den speiler luftens lyse farver – rene farver – det skjulte dybet – med sit slim – sine kryb – som døden –" The Munch Museum, MM N 613, undated.

phenomena" and "the eternal and original artistic power."[451] The duty of the artist would then be to delve into the depths no matter how painful the experience 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 involves also an abandoning of one's individuality in the traditional sense.

Munch sought reconciliation between the opposing aspirations in monistic and psychophysiological ideologies. This is reflected in such works as *Metabolism* (1898-1900 and c. 1918, fig. 27), *Death and Life* (1894, The Much Museum, Oslo) and *Art* (1893-95, The Munch Museum, Oslo) which deal with ideas of transformation and regeneration. However, around the time Munch painted *Vision*, the dualities of life and death were yet to be reconciled in his mind. In this sense, *Vision* is related to his most iconic painting *The Scream* which represents the ultimate horror, that is, the fear of death. 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. The disgusting bodily existence beneath the surface is the fundamental level of truth. The realm of the swan on the shimmering surface is nothing but an illusion.

Vision reflects a pessimistic view of the world, but Munch was not prepared to draw away from life and to find release in solipsistic resignation. His art in the 1890s and at the turn of the century attests 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 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.*[452]

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[451] Nietzsche 1968 [1886], 104, 143.

[452] Przybyszewski 1915 [1896], 33.

21. **Ellen Thesleff**, *Self-Portrait*, 1894-95.

22. **Ellen Thesleff**, *Decorative Landscape*, 1910.

4 THE SELF AS SUBJECT AND OBJECT – ELLEN THESLEFF

For I is another. If brass wakes up a clarion, it is not its fault. This is obvious to me: I am present at the blossoming of my thought: I watch, I listen: I draw a stroke of the bow: the symphony makes its stir in the depths or comes with a bound on the scene.

— Arthur Rimbaud[453]

Only insofar as the genius in the act of artistic creation coalesces with this primordial artist of the world, does he know anything of the eternal essence of art; for in this state he is, in a marvellous manner, like the weird image of the fairy tale which can turn its eyes at will and behold itself; he is at once subject and object, at once a poet, actor, and spectator.

— Friedrich Nietzsche[454]

Ellen Thesleff's self-portrait from the 1890s, made with pencil and sepia ink on paper, epitomizes the fin-de-siècle attitude of inwardness and the desire to plunge into the very core of one's own being (fig. 21). It is a small-scale work with a very intimate quality. A pale face emerges from the darkness of the background. The eyes are open and directed at the viewer but it is impossible to meet their gaze. Like Munch's *Vision* and Halonen's 1893 self-portrait, Thesleff's self-image represents the subject in full-frontal view. I have already noted the saintly or Christ-like quality of frontal portraits. Moreover, the full-frontal view is often considered the most communicative mode of representation; the subject of the image faces the viewer and engages her to an exchange. Louis Marin has observed that "a full-face portrait

[453] "Car Je est un autre. Si le cuivre s'éveille clairon, il n'y a rien sa faute. Cela m'est évident: j'assiste à l'éclosion de ma pensée: je la regarde, je l'écoute: je lance un coup d'archet: la symphonie fait son remuement dans les profondeurs, ou vient d'un bond sur la scène." Rimbaud's letter to Paul Demeny, 15 May, 1871. Cited from Rimbaud 2005, 374. I have slightly modified the translation.

[454] Nietzsche 1968 [1886], 52 (*The Birth of Tragedy*).

functions like the 'I-You' relation."[455] Cumming, however, maintains that frontality may in fact be "the best way of disregarding the viewer."[456] There is an obvious attraction in the symmetric relationship between the frontal image and the frontal viewer, but Cummings invites us to think of the iconic self-portrait by Dürer from 1500 "where everything is displayed all at once, a maximum frontage that gives the eye nowhere to relax."[457] Thesleff's self-portrait, rather than being a communicative image, appears to turn inward. At the same time, however, it is not completely closed; it has a self-reflexive quality that refers to the creative process. Hence, it invites the viewer to project her own subjectivity into the image and to take part in the process of self-exploration. The artist has looked into the mirror to see herself but instead of stopping at mere surface appearance, she has penetrated deep into the realm of subjectivity.

Despite its small size and unassuming technique, this self-portrait was highly praised already in the 1890s and has come to be viewed as one of the highlights of Thesleff's oeuvre, and a masterpiece of Finnish fin-de-siècle art.[458] Sarajas-Korte has given a very poetic description of it, seeing it as the result of intensive self-exploration. According to her, this self-portrait has a sense of open yet enigmatic depth, grand and simple peacefulness, and melancholic harmony. The artist has achieved contact with the depths of her own mind and the expression has condensed into almost nothing but the soul.[459] Stewen has connected the work with an idea of beauty that extends beyond individual subjectivity; it is no longer a self-portrait of a woman but a suggestive image that evokes a mood.[460]

Thesleff's self-portrait offers an alternative outlook on the plunge into the unconsciousness which has been discussed above. As with Munch's *Vision*, it may be consider as an image of the artist searching for the sources of his or her creativity. In Thesleff's image, the experience does not seem to be painful but rather appears as a blissful union with some kind of cosmic oneness. Nevertheless, in both cases the ultimate foundation of artistic creativity lies somewhere beyond the individual self, and it can only be reached through a descent into the deepest recesses of the individual mind. In this chapter I shall explore the various ways in which this self-portrait can be understood to take part in contemporaneous discourses of selfhood and subjectivity, and how these are connected with ideas about art and creativity.

The drawing technique suggest that the self-portrait started out as a sketch or study and only gradually developed into the final state in which we now see it and understand it as a finished and completed work of art. This processual method is also

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[455] See Brilliant 1991, 43.

[456] Cumming 2009, 156.

[457] Cumming 2009, 156.

[458] See for example Bäcksbacka 1955, 24; Sarajas-Korte 1998, 37; Sarajas-Korte 1966, 225.

[459] "Omakuva on pitkän itsetutkiskelun tulos ... Työssä on avointa, mutta samalla arvoituksellista syvyyttä, suurta yksinkertaista rauhaa ja melankolista harmoniaa. Hiljaisessa rauhassa hän on tavoittanut kosketuksen oman mielensä uumeniin. Hienopiirteinen piirtimen kudelma antaa työlle syvyyttä ja omakohtaisen elämyksen rikkautta. Viiva yhtyy viivaan, hän palaa yhä uudelleen työnsä ääreen, kunnes ilmaisu on tiivistynyt miltei pelkäksi sieluksi." Sarajas-Korte 1998, 37.

[460] Stewen 1987, 129.

reflected in the fact that the work has been signed and dated twice: November 1894 and October 4th 1895. Sketches and studies with numerous layers of pentimenti can also be found in Thesleff's sketchbooks but it seems significant that this self-portrait was clearly considered a finished work of art. It was shown publicly for the first time at the Finnish Art Association's spring exhibition in 1895, then only as a pencil drawing. Later in the same year it was exhibited again, this time with the added sepia ink in the background. It appears, therefore, that the first version was completed in November 1894, and the final changes were made almost a year later. Meanwhile, the artist may have returned to it several times. It has even been suggested that there are hidden images camouflaged among the swirling pencil lines.[461] In some printed images something like his can perhaps be made out but in closer inspection they vanish out of sight so that it becomes impossible to determine what it is that one is looking at. Nonetheless, certain parts of the work, at least some brownish lines below the chin, appear to be underneath the pencil drawing and have no apparent connection with the composition, suggesting that the artist started sketching her face on a piece of paper that already contained some drawings. This observation gives support to the assumption that the self-portrait started out as a sketch – or perhaps as an exercise of imaginative perception in the manner of Leonardo.

In the essay entitled "Introduction to the Method of Leonardo da Vinci" (1899), the poet Paul Valery comments on Leonardo's fascination with the face: "And he is obsessed by the face, that illuminated and illuminating thing, the most intimate of visible things and the most magnetic, the most difficult thing to look at for its own sake."[462] Thesleff's self-portrait has often been associated with the meditative faces of Leonardo's human figures, and the artist's admiration for Italian Renaissance art is well documented. In 1894 she travelled to Italy accompanied by the singer Ingeborg von Alfthan who was to study singing in Bologna. She travelled around the country, and found a veritable paradise in Florence. On her way home she stopped in Milan where she admired Leonardo's *Last Supper*. In her later life, Italy was to play an important role in her art. [463]

In Paris, where Thesleff spent long periods of time in the 1890s, the art of the Italian Renaissance was enthusiastically promoted by Aurier and Péladan, among others.[464] Péladan advocated a return to tradition in a sense that was somewhat different from the views of Aurier, although their aesthetic ideas were based on a similar Platonic-idealist theoretical foundation. Aurier believed that one had to turn

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[461] Schalin 2004, 70. Ahtola-Moorhouse has speculated on the possibility of perceiving hidden images in Thesleff's later paintings. 1998, 92-96. However, instead of looking for hidden images, the visual ambiguity of Thesleff's artworks might be more appropriately discussed in terms of what Gamboni has called "potential images."

[462] Valery 1929 [1894], 52.

[463] See Bäcksbacka 1955, 21-25; Sarajas-Korte 1966, 132-134; Sarajas-Korte 1998, 32-34; Schreck 2008, 29.

[464] Enckell was an enthusiastic admirer of Leonardo; according to Nils Gustav Hahl, in the 1890s he could spend hours in front of Leonardo's Saint John the Baptist, mesmerized by its androgynous beauty. Hahl 1942, 15-16 (*Magnus Enckells liv och konst intill färggenombrottet 1908*, 1929). Sarajas-Korte assumes that Hahl's notion is based on information given to him personally by Ellen Thesleff or Väinö Blomstedt. She points out, moreover, that Enckell's notebooks from the same period show that he was studying Leonardo's *Trattato* at Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Sarajas-Korte 1981, 150-151, 349 n19.

to the masterpieces of foregone eras in order to grasp the idea behind them and bring it back to life, whereas Péladan maintained that the absolute peak of art had already been achieved in the art of the Italian Renaissance, particularly in the works of Rafael, Michelangelo, and Leonardo. Despite the dogmatic character of Péladan's theory, and even if many artists wished to keep a certain distance from him and his salons, he was a highly influential figure in fin-de-siècle Paris. Towards the end of the 1890s he started to fall more and more out of fashion, and after that many artists wanted to avoid being associated with him although a few years earlier they may have been among his admirers.[465]

It is interesting to note in connection with Thesleff's self-portrait head that one of the subjects that were welcomed into the Rosicrucian salons, was the noble and expressive head in the style of Michelangelo and Leonardo. Moreover, chiaroscuro was among the most important expressive means of art according to Péladan, and colour was a secondary feature which could not in itself create the beauty of the artwork.[466] Ascetic colour scheme and chiaroscuro are central features in Thesleff's self-portrait as well as in the rest of her oeuvre from this period.[467] The self-portrait, as a Leonardesque expressive head would have met the requirements of Péladan's salons. Except for one important detail; that it was made by a woman. Artworks made by women did not stand a chance of being accepted into the salons, no matter how well they might have conformed to the criteria.[468]

In addition to the fashionable ideas of Péladan and Aurier, another reason for young fin-de-siècle artists to turn to the art of the old masters – perhaps somewhat paradoxically – was the quest for originality. To know oneself, as the ancient Delphic oracle advises, was the only way to reach a deeper understanding of the self and the world. Self-knowledge was therefore essential in order to become an artist. Too much outward influence, on the other hand, could be detrimental. In order to foster and cherish their originality, many young artists turned to the works of the old masters in the hope of revealing the ideal of art that they were believed to contain. This art had the ability to elevate the soul above and beyond everyday reality. Belting has written about the fin-de-siècle fascination with the *Mona Lisa*. The emblematic smile of the *Mona Lisa* seemed to embody the mystery of the soul and the mystery of art, but in the light of modern science this "morbidly ecstatic cult," as Belting calls it, started to seem anachronistic. Belting thus interprets the cult of the *Mona Lisa* as a protest against modern reality, but at the same time he sees it as a completely modern phenomenon. The mythical status of the *Mona Lisa* was not established until Walter Pater's essay on Leonardo which was first published in 1869, and reappeared in 1873 as part of his influential – even scandalous – book *The*

[465] See Sarajas-Korte 1966, 43-45, 84-89. Sarajas-Korte notes that Enckell was one of the few artists who continued to acknowledge Péladan's importance for his artistic development. Sarajas-Korte 1966, 84. On Péladan and his salons, see Pincus-Witten 1968.

[466] Péladan 1894, 102-103; see also Sarajas-Korte 1966, 44-45.

[467] See von Bonsdorff 2012, 272-307; Sarajas-Korte 1966, 213-225.

[468] The Finnish sculptor Ville Vallgren, who himself exhibited at the Salon de la Rose + Croix, has written that there were only two women whose artistic abilities were appreciated by Péladan: George Sand and Judith Gautier. Vallgren 1916, 167. Judith Gautier was the daughter of the writer and critic Théophile Gautier.

Renaissance.[469] The cult of this enigmatic painting thus appears as a manifestation of modern nostalgia. The *Mona Lisa* represented the timeless ideal that was constantly being threatened in the modern world. She "seemed to be watching over the modern mystery of the soul," writes Belting: "a mystery that was threatened by a positivist view of the body. But she also embodied the mystery of art, which was felt to be threatened by the demands of realism."[470]

In Pater's influential account, "Lady Lisa", who is "older than the rocks among which she sits," stands as "the embodiment of the old fancy, the symbol of the modern idea."[471] Leonardo's art is described as fascinating yet half repellent, containing a secret wisdom that only the mind of a true genius can grasp. Pater compares Leonardo's working methods to alchemy or divination. In his studies of nature, he "learned the art of going deep" by

> *... [brooding] over the hidden virtue of plants and crystals, the lines traced by the stars as they moved in the sky, over the correspondences which exist between the different orders of living things, through which, to eyes opened, they interpret each other; and for years he seemed to those about him as one listening to a voice silent for other men.*[472]

In Thesleff's self-portrait, the drawing technique adds to the contemplative attitude that renders the work utterly subjective. At the same time it seems to be striving towards a certain universality that goes beyond the individual self. The extreme simplification situates the figure, like those of Leonardo, somewhere beyond time and place. Rather than a representation of an individual, a likeness, a mere self-portrait, this work might be understood as a representation of abstract selfhood. The meditative attitude is manifested also in the introspective facial expression of the figure; the artist appears to be in a state of creative trance. The soft sfumato, which in Gamboni's description is one of the factors in the "potentiality" of the image, emphasizes the enigmatic atmosphere. The effects of light and shadow are not employed merely as tools of creating a visual illusion; they are used as an instrument of evoking a mood. The psychological power of this self-portrait stems from its ability to challenge the viewer by inviting her to participate in this process of self-examination.

UNCONSCIOUS CREATIVITY AND IMAGINATIVE PERCEPTION

Thesleff's small and intimate self-portrait has features that resist the idea of the work of art as a finite object. The soft Leonardesque chiaroscuro of the face has been

[469] Belting 2001, 137-152. On the "mystery" of the *Mona Lisa*, see also Sassoon 2001.

[470] Belting 2001, 140.

[471] Pater 1998 [1873], 80 (*The Renaissance*).

[472] Pater 1998 [1873], 66 (*The Renaissance*).

created with tiny pencil lines that have explored the features little by little. The traditional functions of line and colour are abandoned: the line refuses to provide any kind of solid structure, and instead of naturalistic colour, there is nothing but the silvery grey of pencil lead and the dark muted brown of sepia ink. The eye of the viewer constructs a unified picture but in reality the face is composed of small intertwining lines that almost resemble automatic drawing – a method used by mediums to communicate with spirits, and later taken up by the Surrealists in the twentieth century who developed it into an artistic technique for exploring the workings of the unconscious. The idea of the unconscious as a source of artistic creativity is often associated primarily with Surrealism but the Symbolist generation was already fascinated with these emerging psychological ideas. The Symbolist artists were interested in all extreme states of the human mind where something unknown to the conscious part of the self seemed to take over. This was manifested in numerous representations of people in hypnotic or somnambulistic states, but it also had its bearing on the formal and technical side of art and on the whole process of art production as the artists strived to get in touch with the unconscious mind, experimenting with psychic automatisms and allowing chance to affect the outcome of the artwork.

In the late nineteenth-century context, we may interpret Thesleff's drawing technique with the crisscrossing and swirling pencil line as a reflection of an endeavour to explore the creative potential of the unconscious mind. The method resembles the Surrealists' quest to liberate the creative imagination by means of experimental methods based on psychic automatism and trance states.[473] Before the Surrealists turned this into a conscious artistic method, this kind of technique was employed in mediumistic art. Jules Bois, the French writer with strong occultist inclinations, published in 1907 a book entitled *Le Miracle Moderne* in which he devoted a fair amount of space for a discussion of mediumistic art. For Bois mediumistic art is the product of an unconscious mind, and it comes about similarly to the natural processes: in the same way as an embryo develops, as the planets are formed, and as humans are born and then die. "The unconsciousness," he writes, "is the great Pan":

> *Nature and its infallible geneses ferment in its womb. It unfolds the mystery hidden in the heart of the universe. It unites the subjective phenomenon to the objective, explains to us the dark abyss of things by the secret buried in the roots of the individual being. These invisible artists, buried in ourselves, manifest themselves in certain predisposed temperaments. They reveal to us our inner being, far richer, more fertile, and far more original than our superficial personality.*[474]

[473] See Rabinovitch 2002, 60.

[474] "L'Inconscient en effet, voilà le grand Pan; la Nature et ses infaillibles genèses fermentent dans son sein. Il déroule le mystère caché au cœur de l'univers. Il unit le phénomène subjectif à l'objectif, nous explique l'abime ténébreux des choses par le secret enfoui aux racines de l'être individuel. Ces artistes invisibles, enfouis en nous-mêmes, se manifestent chez certains tempéraments prédisposés. Ils nous révèlent notre être intérieur, beaucoup plus riche, beaucoup plus fécond, beaucoup plus original que notre personnalité superficielle." Bois 1907, 157-8.

The most famous representatives of this phenomenon in fin-de-siècle Paris were the playwright Victorien Sardou and the artist Fernand Desmoulin. Sardou drew sceneries of the Planet Jupiter, including houses owned by Mozart, Zoroaster, and the prophet Elijah. Desmoulin was admired by Zola and in his conscious state made meticulous paintings devoid of any mysticism, but in an unconscious state launched into a whole different aesthetic mode painting and drawing strange landscapes and authentic portraits of deceased persons even in total darkness. The drawing technique in some of his unconscious portraits consisting of crisscrossing lines that seem to bring out the image little by little bear a striking resemblance to Thesleff's self-portrait. Bois notes an affinity between Symbolism and the mediumistic art. He writes that the Symbolist artists – whose incontestable leader, according to him, was Redon – also turned away from the visible world into an unconscious realm to find material for their art.[475]

The Swedish artist Ernst Josephson experimented with automatic drawing and writing in the late 1880s, the most famous example of this being the manuscript *Vid himmelrikets portar* (At the Gates of Heaven) which was produced in the summer of 1888 while Josephson was staying on the island of Bréhat in Bretagne with the artist Allan Österlind. The manuscript records a series of spiritual visitations during which Josephson believed that his hand was guided by the spirits of various great artists, such as Michelangelo and Rembrandt, as well as by Swedenborg who became his spiritual guide. Josephson had been introduced to spiritualism by Madame Dupois who was an ardent follower of the occultist Allan Kardec. These experimentations marked the beginning of a new phase in Josephson's career, which has usually been interpreted mainly in terms of the psychological crisis that followed and developed into acute paranoid schizophrenia. In his introduction to *Vid himmelrikets portar*, the Swedish art historian Peter Cornell has argued, however, that this new direction in Josephson's art should not be interpreted merely as a sign of his mental collapse. Rather, we can see *Vid himmelrikets portar* as an early example of the interconnectedness of occultism and artistic creativity which became an important element of Symbolism and later Surrealism. Josephson was intuitively approaching an artistic method that allowed him to move beyond the realistic style that he felt had come to its end. Cornell compares Josephson's spiritualistic art with Strindberg's approach in the autobiographical novel *Inferno* in which the figure of Swedenborg also plays an important role. Indeed, Cornell suggests that *Inferno* might be understood as a "simulated paranoid schizophrenia."[476] In any case, Strindberg's literary and artistic experimentation during the so called Inferno period demonstrate a psychological crisis which was combined with an interest in magic and occultism, and resulted in a radically new approach to art.

Strindberg explored the creative potential of the unconscious mind in his artistic activities, and he discussed the technique of automatic art in the short essay "The New Arts! or the Role of Chance in Artistic Creation" (1894), explaining it as an organic process controlled by a creative imagination rather than consciousness.

[475] Bois 1907, 161-162.

[476] Cornell 1988, xx-xxv.

"Imitate nature closely," he states, "above all, imitate nature's way of creating. This 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."[477] Here we come again to the dual concept of nature: the *natura naturata*, and the *natura naturans*; 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. Strindberg offers a detailed description of the creation of the painting *Wonderland* (1894, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm). He begins the process with a vague idea of a design of "a shadowy wood from which the sea can be seen at sunset." With this in mind he gets to work with his palette knife – he claims to own no brushes:[478]

> *I distribute the colours on the cardboard and mix them so as to obtain the rudiments of a design. The opening in the centre of the canvas represents the horizon with the sea. Now the interior of the wood, the network of branches and twigs, is extended in a group of colours, fourteen, fifteen, pell-mell, but always in harmony. The canvas is covered; I step back and take a look! Confound it! I can see no trace of any sea; the illuminated opening shows an endless pink and bluish light in which vaporous beings, without body or definition, float like fairies with trains of cloud. The wood has become a dark subterranean cave, barred by brambles: and in the foreground – let's see – why, rocks covered with unknown lichens – and there, to the right, the knife has smoothed down the colours too much, so that they look like reflections in water. Well then! It's a pool. Perfect! – But above the water there is a patch of white and pink, whose origin and meaning I cannot explain. One moment! – a rose! – The knife goes to work for a couple of seconds and the pool is framed in roses, roses, what a mass of roses! – A touch here and there with my finger, which brings the rebellious colours together, blends and dispels the crude tones, refines, gives air and the picture is done!*[479]

Here Strindberg can be seen to take the method of imaginative perception to an extreme. The artist sets his imagination into work by a process of alternation between the roles of the creator and the receiver, and between conscious and unconscious acts. Thus 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.

Gamboni compares Strindberg's method to that of Redon; for both artists "the appearance of the finished work and its effect corresponds to its genesis, which itself illuminates the process of perception and cognition."[480] Artworks that are thus created are always new as their meanings are not fixed. However, at least for Strindberg, there were different levels of meaning that were hierarchically related; there is an exoteric meaning that can be grasped by everyone, and an esoteric

[477] Strindberg 1996 [1894], 103-107. The text was written in French and published in the Paris journal *Revue des Revues* under the title "*Du hasard dans la production artistique*,"15 November 1894.

[478] This statement appears to be somewhat inaccurate as some of the finer details in his paintings have obviously been painted with brushes. However, he did seem to prefer to work with palette knives for the most part.

[479] Strindberg 1996 [1894]. 106.

[480] Gamboni 2001, 177.

meaning that is understood by the artist himself and the chosen few.[481] In *Wonderland*, the esoteric meaning is related to a battle between light and darkness. In an article which examines Strindberg as a pictorial artist, the Swedish art historian Per Hedström has observed that Strindberg's method was both in line with and, at the same time, radically different from the ideas of the Symbolists. The esoteric meaning that he adheres to the painting reflects the Symbolist view of art that is only accessible to the initiated. However, Hedström argues that the openness of both the creative and the interpretative processes set Strindberg's methods radically apart from "literary orientated Symbolism." Hedström's analysis of Strindberg's artistic activities is accurate for the most part but, as has probably become clear by now, the kind of open-endedness that he talks about is in my understanding a central element of Symbolism. Moreover, Hedström describes Strindberg's method as random and haphazard and claims that "the viewer is free to assign to the picture whatever content he chooses."[482] However, Strindberg's working methods were not in truth completely random, but rather, as I have explained above, they were based on an oscillation between the active and passive elements of creativity. And even when he allowed chance and unconsciousness to take control of the process, we must understand that for him these were not random forces. According to his Swedenborgian belief system, every single detail of our existence had meaning for those who were able to decipher the messages that they entailed. Nevertheless, Hedström appears to me to be correct in his statement that Strindberg's method in this sense can be seen to anticipate such twentieth century artistic currents as Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism – in which, it should be noted, the element of "randomness" was, just like with Strindberg, only one side of the creative process and the artist's conscious control was the other.[483]

Thesleff's self-portrait resembles Strindberg's paintings in the sense that in both cases the open-ended quality of the image draws attention to the process of its making, thus emphasizing its character as a "made object." At the same time, by remaining unfinished and sketchy, the image appears to elude object status, instead signalling something beyond materiality, something that is impossible to express directly in the material object. Heller has discussed this kind of contradictory tendency in which the insistent presence of the technique and material produces an effect of artificiality and immateriality. According to him it was a central feature in the technically innovative art of the 1890s, and he has connected it with the idealistic aesthetic which attempted to gain direct contact with a spiritual realm of existence. Yet, Heller has also noted that Symbolist art demonstrates a "constant dialectic ... between material manifestation and spiritual signification."[484] I have already suggested that this phenomenon should be seen as an outcome of the continuous effort to come to terms with the impossible ideal. The indeterminacy of the form blurs the distinction between a finished masterpiece and a study as well as between

[481] Strindberg in a letter to a childhood friend Leopold Littmansson, cited in Hedström 2001, 48.

[482] Hedström 2001, 48,55.

[483] See Hedström 2011, 55.

[484] Heller 1985, 152.

the artwork and the viewer. By questioning the absolute power of the artist over the artwork, this open-ended and processual tendency also parallels contemporary developments in psychology, particularly the gradual discovery and theorization of the unconscious.

The idea of the *potential image* discussed by Gamboni as well as the concept of the *non-finito* in the sense it was defined by Belting are conceptions of the image understood as something indefinite and undetermined. Gamboni has noted that in Redon's works the suggestive quality is often created by means of *pentimenti* which turn the image into a kind of "intentional palimpsest." "By leaving partly visible the various stages and states of an open-ended procedure," writes Gamboni, "Redon calls to attention the genesis of the work and invites the spectator to retrace it or to follow it by trying to co-ordinate and complete the features he interprets as he identifies them."[485] One of the most refined examples of this phenomenon in Redon's oeuvre is the lithograph *There Was Perhaps a First Vision Attempted in the Flower* (1883), in which several superimposed images are combined together: sunflowers, an eye, a head, a balloon. This image is part of the album *Les origins*, the theme of which is organic and spiritual evolution from mythical, prehistoric, and microscopic creatures to man and his spiritual quest. The potential character of the image reflects this evolutionary theme; the image is offered in a state of becoming.[486]

Gamboni also compares Redon's technique to Leonardo's method of imaginative perception – and, as we have seen, a similar comparison may be made with Thesleff's self-portrait. Gamboni has noted that while earlier writers viewed imaginative perception as a more or less passive and accidental experience, Leonardo turned it into an active tool for the artist and identified the mind of the perceiver as the origin of the images.[487] In a famous passage of his *Trattato della Pittura*, Leonardo encouraged artists to look at stains on the wall, stones of mixed colours, ashes, mud, clouds, etc. to feed the imagination. This passage, writes Ernst Gombrich,

> *... suggests that Leonardo could deliberately induce in himself a state of dreamlike loosening of controls in which the imagination begun to play with blots and irregular shapes, and that these shapes in turn helped Leonardo to enter into the kind of trance in which his inner visions could be projected on to external objects. In the vast universe of Leonardo's mind this invention is contiguous with his discovery of the "indeterminate" and its power over the mind, which made him the "inventor" of the* sfumato *and the half-guessed form. And we now come to understand that the indeterminate has to rule the sketch for the same reason, per* destare l'ingegnio*, to*

[485] Gamboni 2002, 70.

[486] See Gamboni 2002, 71; See also Larson's interpretation of Redon's image as a reflection of Haeckelian monism and the idea that man had no separate soul but shared in universal psychic activity, and even his highest intellectual capacities have their origins in the instincts, sensitivities and reflexes of lower organisms: "Redon's fantastic plant, with its eye turned skyward, suggests conflation of the vegetal with the human, and man's aspiration toward the unreachable realm of the heavens."Larson 2005, 63.

[487] The Renaissance theorist Leon Battista Alberti, for instance, had explained the origins of sculpture by referring to accidental, natural images that people attempted to complete. Gamboni 2002, 27, 29-30.

stimulate the mind to further inventions. The reversal of workshop standards is complete. The sketch is no longer the preparation for a particular work, but is part of a process which is constantly going on in the artist's mind; instead of fixing the flow of imagination it keeps it in flux.[488]

Gombrich's description points out several features of Leonardo's drawing technique that resonate with our discussion on the role of imaginative perception and the idea of the potential image: the active, creative power of imagination, indeterminacy, the sense of mystery created by means of sfumato, and processuality. In her self-portrait, Thesleff seems to be experimenting on a consciously Leonardesque method, thus turning her work into an artistic manifesto. This, as Belting has pointed out, is a function of the modern masterpiece bound by the obligation of expressing the "truth" of art yet always falling short its noble aim.[489] Thesleff goes one step further than Leonardo, declaring the sketch itself a masterpiece.

In Thesleff's self-portrait, as in Redon's lithograph, the processual quality of the work of art is emphasized, and form and meaning become completely intermingled. The self that is represented is not understood as stable and unified; it is in a constant state of coming into being. Both the self and the image have that indeterminate and processual quality that, following Gamboni, might be termed "potential." The self is constructed in the creative process and the suggestive power of this self-portrait stems from its ability to challenge the viewer. Imaginative perception is here an integral part of both image production and reception. Hence, we can see how the sense of mystery in Thesleff's self-portrait derives from the subject matter, that is, the self understood as mysterious and difficult to express in a work of art, but it is reflected also in the method. The mysteriousness of the self that the artwork represents corresponds to the indeterminate and processual quality of the artwork. To employ this kind of technique in a self-portrait makes a statement about the constitution of the self, and at the same time, the artwork can be seen as a declaration of an aesthetic programme. The self appears as something that is fundamentally unknown, something beyond the reach of everyday consciousness.

Thesleff's self-portrait is an example of a late nineteenth century artwork in which the formal qualities and subject matter are intermingled in such a way that the form contributes to meaning as much as the content does. The sketchiness and the self-reflexive qualities point towards the process of the making of the artwork, and shift the focus from the object towards the receiver, or rather towards an imaginary space constituted in the interactions between the work and the viewer. By remaining in a processual state, the self-portrait points beyond itself to a vision or an ideal behind the work. But the instability of its pictorial form leaves it up to the viewer to complete this vision. This introduction of an imaginary space renders art its liberating potential. The creative imagination, understood as an active and dynamic force is capable of capturing the ideal unity that no work of art can ever contain in its

[488] Gombrich 1985 [1966], 61

[489] Belting 2001, 201-224.

mere materiality. Historian and theoreticians of modern art have often perceived abstract art as the fulfilment of the Romantic dream of absolute unity. Belting also sees the development of abstract art as a "dramatic turn," but rather than fulfilling the dream, it signalled the beginning of a defeat. [490] The whole point of the absolute ideal was precisely its elusiveness; it would be attainable in the utopian future where the roles of art and life would be reversed. Hence, writes Belting, "the utopian vision undermined its own authority when it claimed to have become reality":

> *As a result, the image of an ideal future was obliterated by an ideal present. Thus it was that "modernism" as an attained goal lasted for only a short time before meeting powerful counter-forces. This gave the wrong impression that modernism in art had been defeated by its enemies, when in fact it had been defeated by its own ideals.*[491]

The abstract artists sought the absolute by means of form and at the expense of content but they only managed to separate these two with their attempts to saturate form with meanings which were supposed to be universal but were in truth more arbitrary than ever before. "Because it avoided figuration," Belting notes, "abstract art quickly turned into a vehicle for religious, hermetic, or socialist ideas, as though these were inherent meanings of the forms themselves – and shared their universal truth."[492] If the abstract artists had indeed succeeded in their endeavour to universalize art and completely merge together the work and the ideal, would that not have meant the end of art? Piet Mondrian did in fact envision the abolishment of the single work of art. He was in search for universal art completely divorced from the individual artists and the work. But fortunately his art remained completely personal and original: "One hundred Mondrians as fellow-artists would have been a nightmare – or perhaps they would have degenerated into mannerism and mere decoration."[493]

Hence, it becomes apparent that while pure abstraction may be the logical conclusion of one vein of development in the history of modern art, the open ended and processual quality of Thesleff's self portrait situates it in the context of another "story of art" – one that gradually gives up the dream of a finite work of art. As Belting has explained, in the avant-gardes of the twentieth century, the ideal of absolute art was more or less abandoned as the completed and finite work of art was no longer considered the proper goal of the creative process. The ultimate representative of this tendency is Marcel Duchamp's *Large Glass* (1915-1923, Philadelphia Museum of Art) in Belting's words "a hybrid between a work and an idea (that) was not expected to produce a final result." The artist himself declared it "definitively unfinished."[494]

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[490] Belting 2001, 18, 294-314.

[491] Belting 2001, 295.

[492] Belting 2001, 294-295.

[493] Belting 2001, 314.

[494] Belting 2001, 11-14, 320; de Duve (ed.) 1991.

PSYCHOLOGY, OCCULTISM, AND THE MODERN SUBJECT

Filiz Eda Burhan has explored the sources of Symbolist art in the interaction of esoteric doctrine and psychological theory. Her pioneering contribution to the conceptualization of the Symbolist aesthetic has been highly praised yet has remained relatively unknown. She argues that psychological theory and the occult revival provided for the Symbolist artists and theorists many of the central ideas in their aesthetic programme. Most importantly, Burhan maintains that the Symbolist definition of art as a symbolic representation that reveals a correspondence between the artist's subjective emotional state and a larger totality of nature could be conceptualized in both psychological and occultist terms; both emphasized the subjective nature of vision, and the ability of the human mind to operate with visual symbols.[495]

Thesleff's self-portrait offers an exceptionally rich basis for an exploration of these issues. She has contemplated the constitution of the self in a little poem or meditation that was included in the collection entitled *Dikter och tankar* (Poems and thoughts), published in 1954.

> *"Three persons in one (myself) –*
> *1 the primal man in me that has always existed*
> *2 that which feels and lives the living life*
> *3 genie the one who can go outside itself and see inside itself.*
> *God is inside oneself"*[496]

Although we do not know exactly when the poem was written – the poems in the collection were written between the late 1890s and the 1940s – one feels tempted to read it alongside the self-portrait. This juxtaposition opens up several paths that can be followed. The poem presents the self as a multiple construction where temporal and timeless, spiritual and material sides unite. The mind can separate itself from the body and see inside itself. It can reach God because God is inside every person. Perhaps, then, the almost immaterial being in the self-portrait should not be seen as a representation of the physical self of the artist but rather as an image of the spiritual part of the self that "can go outside itself and see inside itself." The ecstatic expression on her face suggests a contact with the unconscious realm, as she probes the inner core of her being in order to create. If we compare the self-portrait with the poem, we might conclude that even though the self appears multiple in the poem, it

[495] See Burhan 1979, 67-148. Of course, despite the affinities between occultist conceptions and psychological theories, their obvious dissimilarities should also be noted. The most important difference is that while the psychological theorist recognizes a correspondence between objectivity and subjectivity, the occultist or mystic adds a third term to this equation: that of divinity. Burhan summarizes: "For the psychologists, then, the mind 'creates' the world in the act of perceiving it, while for the mystic, perception is the act of recognizing that the mind and nature are parallel creations of God." Burhan 1979, 130-131.

[496] "Tre personer inom en (jag själv) – / 1 urmänniskan i mig som alltid funnits / 2 den som känner och lever i det levande livet / geniet den som kan gå ur sig själv och se in i sig själv. /Guden finns inom en själv." Thesleff 1954, 29.

is still understood to contain a unified core – the spark of divinity buried deep below the layers of the mind. The self-portrait, however, has no such solidity. The eye of the viewer constructs a unified picture, but in reality, the face is composed of softly curving and intertwining pencil lines. The contemplative technique draws attention to the making of the artwork as a process that extends through time. This process itself becomes a method of self-exploration. The image comes into being organically, and the artist is no longer fully in control of the creative process.

The constitution of man and the status of the soul were subjects of an ongoing debate in the late nineteenth century. Traditional religious ideologies were increasingly being questioned, and there was a great need for alternative perspectives concerning the nature of man and his place in the world. The new scientific psychology provided one set of answers to these burning issues, while those who yearned for a more spiritual perspective often turned towards esoteric and mystical ideologies. The scientific materialists held that there could be no such thing as an immaterial soul existing apart from the body, and science should steer clear of any metaphysical speculation. Hysteria, hypnotism, and the related phenomenon of multiple personality were means of exposing the spirit phenomena to scientific scrutiny. The French psychologist Théodule Ribot wanted to reject the idea of the unity of the ego as anything other than a metaphysical illusion. He was one of the leading figures in the effort to secularize the soul and to place it under scientific scrutiny. According to Ribot's theory, there was not a fundamental difference between conscious and unconscious mental processes; consciousness was merely the "narrow gate" through which the psychic activity appears to us.[497] "[T]he self is coordination," he writes:

> *It oscillates between the two extreme points where it ceases to exist: pure unity and absolute in-coordination ... The unity of the ego in the psychological sense is the cohesion, during a given time, of a number of states of clear consciousness, along with others that are less clear and a host of physiological states which, though not accompanied by consciousness like the others, still operate equally powerfully if not more so. Unity means co-ordination.*[498]

The Canadian philosopher and intellectual historian Ian Hacking has argued that the new "sciences of memory" were created quite consciously in order to secularize the soul: "There could be no science of the soul. So there came to be a science of memory."[499] Hacking has studied the phenomenon of multiple personality which was a central part of psychological study in the late nineteenth century, along with the better known field of hysteria. Multiple personality, in fact, was thought to be a

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[497] Hacking 1998, 206-207.

[498] "... le moi est une coordination. Il oscille entre ces deux points extrêmes où il cesse d'être: l'unité pure, l'incoordination absolue ... L'unité du moi au sens psychologique c'est donc la cohésion, pendant un temps donné, d'un certain nombre d'états de conscience clairs, accompagnés d'autres moins clairs et d'une foule d'états physiologiques qui, sans d'être accompagnés de conscience, comme leurs congénères, agissent autant qu'eux et plus qu'eux. Unité veut dire coordination." Ribot 1888 [1884], 171-172 (*Maladies de la personnalité*).

[499] Hacking 1995, 219.

bizarre form of hysteria, and both served as a basis for the construction of new dynamic models of the mind. Multiple personality appeared to provide proof against the unitary ego: there seemed to be two persons, two souls, in one body.[500] The mission of Ribot and his positivist colleagues was not to attack religious or spiritualist ideas as such. Rather, they wanted to provide a surrogate for the scientifically problematic concept of the soul – and this they found in the study of memory.[501] Ribot's notions about the constitution of the human mind were adopted by Nietzsche in his questioning of the unity of the ego. He paraphrases long sections of Ribot's *Les maladies de la mémoire* in *The Genealogy of Morals*.[502] These kinds of ideas appealed also to artists and writers who wanted to find alternatives to the Christian view of the immortal soul as the basis of our being. Strindberg and Hansson, for instance, studied Ribot to find support for their pessimistic and deterministic perceptions.

Occultism and various mystical ideologies also provided alternative models of subjectivity in which the self was understood as multiple rather than singular and unified. The connection between occultism and modernism has been examined in two important studies which have confuted the view that these tendencies should be seen as retrograde and anti-modern. Alex Owen has concentrated on British context, whereas Corinna Treitel has discussed the connection of occultism and modernity in the German speaking part of Europe. Owen has demonstrated that the newly conceptualized subjectivity of the nineteenth century had direct links with occultism. Far from being anti-modern, fin-de-siècle occultism was in fact a constitutive part of modernity. In the German context, even more so that elsewhere, occultism has been a highly sensitive subject because it has been seen as a part of the irrationalist current that prepared the way for the rise of Nazism. However, Treitel's study aims to demonstrate that there was much more to German occultism than proto-Nazism, and that it was in fact a fundamental part of German modernism.[503]

The modern occultism of the late nineteenth century insisted on being scientific and rational. Its aim was to re-establish the link between science and religion that the occultists believed had been lost in the Enlightenment project and particularly with the positivist science of the nineteenth century. The new psychological conception of the mind based on the unconscious and the occult understanding of the self can both

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[500] Hacking points out, however, that in the end the phenomenon of multiple personality tells us nothing about the construction of the self. Hacking perceives multiple personality disorder as a discursive field on which the sciences of memory were developed in the nineteenth century. The sciences of memory served as a public forum for discussing the questions of the soul which otherwise would have remained outside the scientific realm. Moreover, Hacking also uses multiple personality as an example of the formation of human types, and how our conceptions of these types in turn affect the people we are talking about. He calls this "the looping effect of human kinds." Multiple personality, according to Hacking, is a perfect illustration of this phenomenon which he explains in the following way: "People classified in a certain way tend to conform to or grow into the ways they are described; but they also evolve in their own ways, so that the classifications and descriptions have to be constantly revised." Hacking 1995, 21, 208, 219, 228-233.

[501] Hacking 1995, 207-208.

[502] Hacking 1995, 197.

[503] Owen 2004; Treitel 2004. On the tremendous influence on both esoteric doctrine and psychological theory on Symbolist art and theory, see Burhan 1979.

be seen as attempts to find a solution to the inherent paradoxes of the modern self in the way that they sought to negotiate the seemingly oppositional relationship between the known and the unknown, the rational and the irrational. And they were both interested in "occluded" phenomena, in something that cannot be known by our everyday consciousness. The occult self, although conceived as containing multiple levels, was understood to be ultimately unified. In its very core it contained an immortal and immutable element. In this sense, it is in stark contrast with the new psychological formulations which perceived the self as fundamentally fragmented. Nonetheless, these two positions shared the assumption that there are hidden parts of the self beyond rational consciousness, and that these unknown parts have a great power over the conscious everyday self.[504]

The secular sciences of the mind had a certain amount of shared ancestry with modern occultism, as has been demonstrated in Henri F. Ellenberger's survey which traces the history of the unconscious as a psychiatric concept from exorcism and various forms of "primitive" medicine, through magnetism, and its later more scientific formulation as hypnotism.[505] Occultists like Eliphas Lévi or Edouard Schuré identified the new scientific discoveries such as electricity and magnetism as the same magical forces that had been part of esoteric knowledge for centuries, and in the new medical descriptions of hypnotism they recognized the ecstatic state of the initiate when the mysteries of the universe are being revealed to him. In Schuré's description, Pythagoras initiating his disciples appears like a hypnotizer who controls the listeners with the sound of his voice making them swoon into hypnosis and then calling them back again. And the priestess falling into "ecstasy" brings to mind a hypnotized woman in one of Charcot's performances at the Salpêtrière acting out the different stages of hysteria:

> *At times a priestess, entering into a state of ecstasy at the harmonious voice of Pythagoras, seemed in her attitude and in her shining face to incarnate the ineffable beauty of her vision. And the disciples, seized with a religious ecstasy, looked on in silence. But soon, with a calm and certain gesture, the master brought the "inspired" prophetess back to earth. Slowly her features relaxed, she slumped into the arms of her companions and fell into a deep lethargy from which she awakened troubled, sad and exhausted from her journey.*[506]

Hence, the new psychological conception of the mind based on the unconscious and the occult understanding of the self can both be seen as attempts to find a solution to the inherent paradoxes of the modern self in the way that they sought to

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[504] Owen 2004, 114-115.

[505] Ellenberger 1970. In a recent book on the unconscious viewed from a more philosophical perspective, Nicholls and Liebscher have noted that "despite its invaluable contribution to the history of Western psychiatry and psychoanalysis, Ellenberger's study must be regarded as being methodologically inadequate." This is because Ellenberger's study is based on the assumption that the unconscious is an objective fact that was just waiting to be discovered, whereas more recent interpretations usually emphasizes the possibility that the unconscious was not so much discovered but rather invented (in the sense that human sciences necessarily play a role in creating their own subject.) Nichols & Liebscher, 2010, 3.

[506] Schuré 1977 [1889], 345.

negotiate the seemingly oppositional relationship between the known and the unknown, the rational and the irrational. Both emphasized interiority and viewed psychic activity as an interaction between conscious and hidden parts of the mind.[507] The occultists, similarly to the medical psychologists, understood the self in terms of consciousness and memory, but they made a clear distinction between the earthly "personal self" and a timeless "permanent self." According to Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, the founder of the Theosophical Society, the term "Self" should only be applied to the "Higher Self, which is one with the Absolute.[508]

The threefold constitution of man presented in Thesleff's poem reflects one of the fundamental esoteric teachings. According to this doctrine man consists of body, soul, and spirit. The body is completely of this world and perishes at death. The spirit, however, is immortal and indivisible, and these two parts are linked together by the soul. Schuré, for example, refers to the threefold constitution of man several times in *The Great Initiates*. In the chapter that deals with the teachings of Krishna he writes:

> *Earthly man is threefold, like the divinity he reflects: spirit, soul and body. If the soul unites with the spirit, it attains Satwa, wisdom and peace; if it remains wavering between spirit and body, it is ruled by Raja, passion, and goes from object to object in a fatal circle; if it gives itself over to the body, it falls into Tama, irrationality, ignorance and temporary death. Every man can observe this in himself and in those around him." In the chapter on Jesus, Schuré writes that according to the esoteric teaching, "man is threefold, consisting of body, soul, and spirit. He has an immortal and invisible part, the spirit; a perishable and divisible part, the body. The soul which links them, shares in the nature of each.*[509]

Probably the most acute threat to the autonomous and unified self at the fin-de-siècle was presented by the gradual discovery of the unconscious which climaxed with Freud's publications in the early twentieth century, but his ideas were by no means unprecedented. Particularly in the German speaking part of Europe, the tradition of Romanticism was still continuous, and the Romantic idea of a World Soul was identified with the modern concept of the unconscious.[510] One central question concerning the unconscious realm was whether it should be considered "closed" or "open." Those who considered the hidden mind "closed" thought of it as containing only things that had passed through the conscious mind; forgotten memories or impressions that had been only fleetingly perceived, and memories of daydreams or fantasies. The German philosopher Max Dessoir, for example, developed a theory of the "Doppel-Ich" according to which the human mind consists of two different layers called *Oberbewußtsein* and *Unterbewußtsein*, or "upper consciousness" and "under consciousness." In dreams and hypnosis the secondary level of the mind comes temporarily to the foreground. Other theorists, however

[507] See Owen 2004, 114-147.

[508] Blavatsky 2007 [1889], 128-130, (*The Key to Theosophy*); Owen 2004, 112.

[509] Schuré 1977 [1889], 107,455.

[510] See Bowie 2010; Ellenberger 1970; Nicholls & Liebscher 2010.

maintained that the hidden part of the mind was “open” and in communication with a mysterious realm. German Romanticism had been highly influenced by the discoveries of the early magnetisers. Schelling who, as Bowie puts it, “has some claim to being the first person to use the term ‘unconscious’ in the kind of ways which have been important in modern thought,” believed that magnetic somnambulism could establish a link between man and the World Soul.[511] The conception of the unconscious as “open” was prevalent in the mystical-occultist tradition. It was believed that through the self led a route to an objective reality, but one which could only be reached by turning inward.[512] If the unconscious realm is conceived as open, then the return to self becomes a plunge into something larger. To go inside oneself, then, means going outside of oneself. We have already discussed the idea of artistic inspiration as a loss of the self in connection with Pekka Halonen’s 1893 self-portrait and Gauguin’s self-portrait vase. Gauguin’s vase can be seen as an illustration of the ecstatic experience of the artist in which the artist becomes filled with something from outside himself. In Thesleff’s self-portrait, the processual technique which gives the image a sense of open-endedness might suggest something similar; by reaching into the deepest recesses of her mind, the artist has fund a connection with a larger realm outside of her individual being.

THE SELF AS OTHER: HYSTERIA AND ECSTASY

Thesleff’s self-portrait is not only an image of an artist; it is also an image of a woman. If we examine it in the context of late nineteenth-century images of women, it is possible to connect the facial expression with an art historical topos which represents a woman in an ecstatic or hysterical state, overwhelmed by inner visions. Representations of ecstatic women became increasingly popular towards the end of the nineteenth century as they were connected with contemporary studies of hysteria and hypnosis. As a very popular example, one might mention Jules Bastien-Lepage’s painting *Joan of Arc* (1879, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), which represents the moment of Joan of Arc's divine revelation in her parents’ garden. The woman appears to be in a completely unconscious state, unaware of her surroundings; the only thing that remains real and meaningful is the voice that she is hearing inside her head. Stylistically the painting is a strange combination of naturalism and fantasy. The source of the inner voices is depicted in the background where the hazy images of the two saints are hovering in mid air. The representation of Joan of Arc, on the other hand, clearly reflects the imagery of clinical hysteria. This connection was apparent in the eyes of contemporary critics. Jules Claretie, for instance, commented that the woman resembled a hysterical woman who has escaped from doctor Charcot’s clinic.[513]

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[511] Ellenberger 1970, 145-146; Bowie 2009, 57.

[512] Owen 2004, 148.

[513] See Kortelainen 2003, 253-259. Kortelainen discusses this image at length in her book 2003 book examining the cultural history of hysteria.

Hysteria was the "disease à la mode" at the late nineteenth-century, and it found several different expressions in the art and literature of the period. Doctor Jean-Martin Charcot investigated depictions of exorcism and religious ecstasy in search for a history for hysteria. His patients on the other hand mimicked this pictorial language in their hysterical attacks. Charcot turned the little known hospital of Salpêtrière into a "Temple of Science" which he opened to the general public during his Friday morning lectures. Charcot himself acted as the master of ceremony in these theatrical spectacles. He hypnotized young women who had been diagnosed as hysterics and they would then act out the different stages of hysteria. Various dramatic effects were employed in these performances – women demonstrating tremors in different diseases were brought in wearing hats with long feathers to make their responses more visible to the audience, for example – as well as drawings and photographic projections.[514] It is no wonder, then, that these lectures never failed to draw in vast audiences, and that there were often artists and writers among the curious crowd.

Although Charcot held on to his positivistic attitude, it appears that he was at least to a certain extent aware of the radical implications of his discoveries. He was fascinated by artistic creativity, and before choosing medicine as a profession he had also contemplated a career as an artist. His students, among them the young Sigmund Freud, have noted the visual emphasis of his teaching methods as well as his personal taste for the fantastic. The publications *Iconographie Photographique de la Salpêtrière* (1878) and *Nouvelle Iconographie de la Salpêtrière* (published every year 1888–1918) were illustrated with photographs of patients in various stages of the hysterical attack and detailed drawings of different symptoms, as well as images of artworks which were thought to manifest hysterical symptoms.[515] Through Charcot's clinical hysteria demonstrations and through his photographical publications, the imagery of hysteria disseminated the visual culture of the fin-de-siècle. Georges Didi-Huberman, who has studied the photographic imagery of hysteria, has discussed hysteria as a "spectacle." He has noted the "*extreme visibility*" of the pain of hysteria, and, according to him, "hysteria was covertly identified with something like an art, close to theatre or painting." So much so that it almost turned into an art historical phenomenon. [516] This visual emphasis meant that the imagery of hysteria was a particularly suitable source for an artistic expression of an altered state of consciousness.

Hysteria was represented directly as a subject of art in such works as André Brouillet's painting *Doctor Charcot's Lecture at the Salpêtrière* (1887, Descartes University, Paris), or Jacques Loysel's sculpture *La Grande Névrose* (1896, private collection). More commonly, however, the imagery of hysteria was employed on a more metaphorical level. Rapetti assumes that direct representations remained rare at

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[514] See Ellenberger 1970, 95-96.

[515] See Silverman 1989, 91-106. Silverman has argued that Charcot's greatest contribution as a clinician was his invention of a new visual language for diagnosis. Before him nervous diseases had been identified in post-mortem investigation, whereas Charcot created a systematic method of correlating external symptoms with internal disorders. Silverman 1989, 94.

[516] Didi-Huberman 2003 [1982], xi, 3-4.

least partly because these kinds of images often gained an awkwardly brutal tone.[517] Bastien-Lepage's Joan of Arc is a typical image of hysteria because in this work of art hysteria appears, as it were, on two separate levels. On the one hand, the bodily gestures of hysteria function as a metaphor for a psychological state in which mystical visions and inner voices have taken over the rational mind; on the other hand, the historical persona behind the legend of Joan of Arc could be posthumously diagnosed in terms of modern clinical hysteria – Charcot, in fact, considered her to have been a hysteric.[518]

It was particularly the images of women in a state of religious ecstasy which most often manifested echoes of the imagery of clinical hysteria. Moreover, hysteria was intimately connected with female sexuality. Although men, too, could demonstrate hysterical symptoms, the disease was considered a female malady. There was a little department for male patients at the Salpêtrière but these men were not considered to be full-blown hysterics. Their symptoms sometimes involved severe convulsions but they did not usually express the strong emotional states that were emblematic for the star patients of Charcot's demonstrations. The term "hysteria" is etymologically based on the Greek word "hystera," meaning the womb. This was unquestionably one of the reasons why this illness was so strongly associated with women and female sexuality. Too little or alternately too much sexual activity could be considered as a trigger for hysterical symptoms.[519] In such images as Munch's *Madonna* or Gustav Klimt's *Judith I* (1901, Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, Vienna) the ecstatic appearance of the woman echoes both the imagery of hysteria and sexual ecstasy.

The inward-turned eyes and the contemplative mood of Thesleff's self-portrait can undoubtedly be interpreted in terms of ecstatic, perhaps even hysterical vision. We can certainly see echoes of the imagery of hysteria in the somnambulistic expression on her face. Even so, medical hysteria does not seem to offer an appropriate framework for this self-portrait. A more fitting context for the work may perhaps be constructed if we think about the specific ways the imagery of hysteria was employed in Symbolist art. Rapetti has discussed hysteria as an important, albeit in most cases indirect, visual source for the Symbolists. The clinical side of hysteria generally did not interest the Symbolist artists, but the imagery of hysteria could be employed as a metaphor for expressing the ecstatic state experienced by the artist. It purported an altered state of consciousness that opened the way to other worlds beyond everyday experience and beyond the rational.[520] Despite the attempts to examine hysteria objectively and scientifically, there remained an aura of mystery surrounding the whole phenomenon. The body of a hysteric appeared as a symbolic

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[517] Rapetti assumes that direct reresentations remained rare at least partly because these kinds of images often gained an awkwardly brutal tone. Rapetti 1995, 228.

[518] Kortelainen 2003, 255.

[519] Kortelainen 2003, 91-104; Uimonen 1999, 30-31.

[520] See Rapetti 1995, 224-234; Rapetti 2005, 254-264.

reflection of some kind of irrational and unconscious torment, but the exact meanings of the repetitive gestures could not be deciphered:[521]

> *As a sign of the irrational, hysteria consecrated the break between the individual and the outside world, creating a metaphorical microcosm that drew other people to watch even if it kept them at a distance. Hysteria was just asking to be deciphered, all the while remaining obscure.*[522]

Towards the end of the nineteenth-century the scientific community was becoming more and more convinced that hypnosis had revealed something very important about the human mind, namely that it contained an unconscious realm that in various ways affected the conscious mind. The enlightenment belief in rational self-mastery was thus seriously being called into question. The Symbolists' insistence on communicating their artistic messages by means of suggestion rather than through mimetic representation had obvious connections with the new psychological ideas. The concept of suggestion and the subjective tendency at large meant that creative activity was understood in terms of interior psychic processes that were considered at least to a certain extent unconscious. Charcot's and Bernheim's theories of hypnotism and suggestion were popularized among artists, writers, philosophers and journalists and they served as catalysts for new models of the human mind. Charcot discovered the particular susceptibility of hypnotized subjects to visual material, such as coloured discs and signs. The experiments carried out by Charcot and his colleagues at the Salpêtrière revealed that certain colours provoked particular emotional responses is the patients; the colour red trigger joy and pleasure, blue provoked sadness, and yellow produced signs of panic and fear. This scientific discovery resonates with the Symbolist artists' search for an emotionally meaningful visual language by means of directly expressive colour and form. [523]

Moreover, the hypnotic state often produced visual hallucinations, and Charcot and his colleagues observed a particular tendency in the hypnotized patients to act out these "inner visions" during the last stage of hypnosis. Hippolyte Bernheim, the director of the Ecole de Nancy, who questioned Charcot's conviction that hypnotic suggestibility was a pathological characteristic found only in hysterics, explained the mind as a receptor for the flow of external stimuli. The ability of the brain to transform ideas into images was not a morbid operation but a normal function of the brain. Charcot believed that patients became receptive to suggestion only in the hypnotic state, whereas Bernheim found that the exact opposite was actually true, that is, that hypnotism was a function of suggestion. Bernheim argued that in our daily life we are all subject to sensorial hallucinations. As Silverman has observed, in their emphasis on the visual dimension of this psychic dynamism and on the power of imagination, Bernheim's theories paralleled the contemporaneous aesthetic

[521] Rapetti 2005, 258-259.

[522] Rapetti 2005, 259.

[523] See Silverman 1989, 84-88.

theorization by the Symbolists. These scientific discoveries appeared to provide scientific proof for the idea of the dissolution of the boundaries between inner and outer reality which the Symbolists embraced.[524]

Moreover, hysteria and other nervous illnesses provided a model for artistic sensibility. Many artists and writers considered themselves neurotics, because nervous sensitivity was seen as a sign of artistic genius. They based their artistic identities on characteristics like intuition, spirituality, hypersensitivity, and emotionality.[525] Even hysteria, despite its being viewed as a feminine ailment, was sometimes associated with artistic hypersensitivity.[526] For Baudelaire, for example, hysteria implied an ecstatic state where everyday objects revealed their spiritual significance. He wrote that he had "cultivated [his] hysteria with delight and terror."[527] Aurier's description of Vincent van Gogh as "[t]his robust and true artist ... with the brutal hands of a giant, the nervousness of a hysterical woman, the soul of an enlightened one" is another illustrative example of this association between creativity and hysteria.[528] This kind of extreme sensitivity of the artist, which might even manifest itself as feminized hysteria, had to be balanced off with robust masculinity in order for it to be productive in any way. The feminized identity that was embraced by many male artists of the fin-de-siècle can be understood as part of their rebellion against bourgeois masculinity. The Symbolist (male) artist was in many ways like a hysterical woman: intuitive, exceptionally sensitive, and capable of experiencing strong emotions. However, the same attributes that in a male artist were seen as signs of genius, were in a woman considered as manifestations of her natural weakness.[529]

It is, hence, extremely risky as well as unusual, for a woman to evoke the imagery of hysteria in her self-portrait. I believe the best way to understand it is to perceive this self-portrait as an expression of a certain kind of aesthetic "credo." This image is not to be seen as a portrait of a woman but rather as a manifestation of the kind of artistic creativity which arises from the desire to probe the very foundations of our being. At the deepest level of existence, individuality is abolished, and, hence, things like gender and sexuality also lose all meaning. The ecstatic state, as we have seen was an important part of the creative process as it was understood by the

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[524] Silverman 1989, 84-88.

[525] Mathews 1999, 74.

[526] The stages of hysteria were described by Charcot as "visionary, hallucinatory, ecstatic, and similar to intoxication, all states reminiscent of the experience of the ecstatic inspiration described in the Symbolist aesthetic," and, moreover, "terms such as 'hyperesthésie' and 'émotivité' were as common in discussions of hysteria as they were in the Symbolist aesthetic. Mathews 1999, 76-77.

[527] Cited from Dorra 1994, 7.

[528] "Ce robuste et vrai artiste ... aux mains brutales de géant, aux nervosités de femme hystérique."Aurier 1893, 265 ("Les Isolés: Vincent Van Gogh"); English translation cited from Mathews 1999, 78.

[529] Mathews 1999, 74. Christine Battersby, who has traced the relationship between gender and genius from the ancient period to the twentieth century, has observed that genius resembles woman but is *not a woman*. The genius possessed characteristics that were coded as feminine, such as intuition, emotionality, and sensitivity, and his creativity resembled the biological creativity of a woman. Yet, "a woman of genius" has been considered an oxymoron in our culture. As Lombroso wrote in *L'Uomo di genio*, "there are no women of genius; the women of genius are men." Battersby 1989, 3-4.

Symbolists. In Chapter 2 I have already referred briefly to the concept of creative ecstasy that indicates a temporary loss of the conscious self. However, it was suggested that this loss, according to esoteric and Neoplatonic traditions, may in fact indicate a connection with a more fundamental level of being. Ecstasy has a central place in Aurier's conception of the aesthetic experience. The ecstatic state unsettles the very foundations of being and individuality, of subject and object. The artist, the work of art, and the viewer all take part in this mystical union of the souls. Aurier claims to borrow his conception of ecstasy directly from Neoplatonic philosophy.[530] In the philosophy of Plotinus, ecstasy was the name for the experience of mystical union with the One. As we have seen, Aurier understood ecstasy as an experience that was necessary for both the creative process and for the aesthetic experience. The ecstatic state serves as a link between the physical and the spiritual world. Similarly to the hysterical attack it means a temporary loss of the self. But the self that is lost is the rational and controlled side of the subject; the hidden interior side that takes over may in the end be the more real self. The loss of self, experienced by the artist in the act of creation, does not implicate a complete abolition of selfhood. On the contrary, it indicates a contact with the very fundamental levels of the self, the immutable and immortal core of our being. But this experience is an extremely fragile one. In the Neoplatonic philosophy of Plotinus, the true self, the God within us, can only be reached in fleeting moments of ecstasy, and it means losing awareness of the lower levels of the self.

The term "ecstasy" is derived from the Greek word "ekstasis," which literally means "standing outside yourself." It is an experience of going outside of the ordinary self-consciousness. Thesleff's self-portrait, as we have seen, can be seen as a manifestation of a process of self-exploration. The artist is the active subject behind this process but this subject also looks upon itself as an object. This chapter opened with a famous quotation from Rimbaud's *lettre du voyant* in which he proposes a new "objective" poetry that would come to replace the overtly subjective aesthetics of the Romantics. In Rimbaud's aesthetic doctrine, poetry is equated with an altered state of consciousness, and the unconscious, uncontrolled, and passive side of creativity is emphasized. The ecstatic experience of creativity may be perceived in terms of a mystical enlightenment or alternately as a descent into the unconscious – and as we contended in the previous chapter, it is not always possible to separate these two experiences. [531] The new objective poetry that Rimbaud was promoting was based on a different conception of the ego: it must look upon itself as an object. The ego thus takes a passive role in the creative process: the poet is

[530] Aurier 1893, 214 [Le Symbolisme en peinture – Paul Gauguin]; On Aurier's conception of "ecstasy", see also Mathews 1986a, 37-38.

[531] Most of what we know about Rimbaud's aesthetic ideas, apart from what can be established on the basis of his poetry, derives from the two letters that he wrote to his former professor Georges Izambard and to the poet Paul Demeny in May 1871, known as *lettres de voyant*. The first letter, addressed to Izambard is very short and somewhat sarcastic in tone: the former enthusiastic pupil seems to be accusing his teacher for lack of originality. The second letter, to Demeny, is much longer but here, too, the argumentation is incoherent and sentences are sometimes incomplete. It seems as if the poet was in a hurry, impatient to share his revolutionary ideas. See Ahearn 1983, 161-183; Bays 1964, 166-206.

"present at the blossoming of (his) thought." Self-study is the basis of this kind of poetry:

> *The first study for a man who wants to be a poet is the knowledge of himself, completely. He looks for his soul, inspects it, tests it, learns it. As soon as he knows it he must cultivate it; It seems simple: in every mind a natural development takes place; so many* egoists *call themselves authors, there are many others who attribute their intellectual progress to* themselves*! – But the soul must be made monstrous: in the fashion of the comprachicos, if you will! Imagine a man planting warts on his face and cultivating them.*[532]

The kind of cultivation Rimbaud advocates here obviously means more than the ordinary self-development experienced in the process of reaching maturity. This cultivation will depend upon something which is outside as well as inside the poet – in this 'otherness' in which his ego participates. "Je est un autre" refers to this process in which the ego observes itself as an object and becomes aware of itself, and the object and subject thus become identical.[533] Bays has traced the basis of this idea back to Sully Prudhomme's preface to his translation of *De Rerum Natura*, where he writes:

> *Every man pronounces "I" spontaneously, as soon as he feels some interest in distinguishing himself from other beings, but few men are capable of descending into themselves to consider this ego and to seek to make of it an idea. Reflexive consciousness does not limit itself to feeling the ego; it thinks it (*elle le pense*).*[534]

This is probably more or less what Rimbaud means when he writes: "It is wrong to say: I think. One should say: I am thought."[535] This sentence also brings to mind Nietzsche's "deconstruction" of the Cartesian cogito in *Beyond Good and Evil* which has been discussed in Chapter 1. Indeed, both Nietzsche and Rimbaud view poetry as a process of unselving which aims at regaining contact with a more elemental level of existence which has been obscured by overtly subjective perspectives.[536]

Rimbaud's poetry and his aesthetic theory compose a meaningful comparison with Thesleff's self-portrait for several reasons. First of all, Rimbaud's poetry reflects an interconnectedness of form and content that we have already established as an important tendency in the art of the fin-de-siècle, and, that is also evident in the self-portrait. Second, the idea of childhood as an original paradisiac state and the

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[532] Rimbaud's letter to Demeny, May 1871. Cited from Rimbaud 2005, 377.

[533] See Bays 1967, 168, 185.

[534] Cited from Bays 1967, 184. Sully-Prudhomme's ideas, again, can be traced back for the large part to Schelling's philosophy of identity in his System of *Transcendental Idealism* (1800). "Schelling, objecting to the Kant-Fichte thesis that the phenomenal world is the product of the subjective consciousness, maintains that it is not correct to say that the ego produces the nonego without also to its converse: that the nonego also produces the ego. Just as there is no object without a subject, so there can be no subject without an object …" Bays 1964, 184.

[535] From Rimbaud's letter to Izambard, May 1871. Cited from Rimbaud 2005, 371. I have slightly modified the translation.

[536] See Ahearn 1983, 163.

foundation of our being, which is a central theme in Rimbaud's poetry, may also be connected with Thesleff's self-portrait – I shall return to this subject shortly. Finally, the notion of ecstatic revelation and the unconscious nature of creativity may be employed to shed light on the similar thematic in Thesleff's work. In his contextual study of Rimbaud's poetry, Edward J. Ahearn has discussed Rimbaud's theme of creative ecstasy in relation to the nineteenth-century current of ecstatic writing. Ahearn sees Blake and Nietzsche as the most important references for Rimbaud in this sense because both question traditional divinity and its denigration of the body. Instead, they adopt "a view of the body as both animal and divine, and which lead to celebration of existence and universe." Moreover, both manifest a sense of ecstatic revelation which in Nietzsche's writing is conceived as Dionysian frenzy and in Blake's as apocalyptic vision in which man is reintegrated with universal reality. Ahearn discusses the poem "Génie" as the most fruitful example of Rimbaud's ecstatic poetry. It is, he writes, "a generous celebration of man and world as already present, immanent, dynamic, divine":[537]

> *Here the distant, punishing, redeeming Christian divinity and the related features of adoration, sin, guilt, humility, and charity are presented as superstitions. Opposed to them is an instantaneous relationship with divinity – a relationship simultaneously of love and pride.*[538]

I believe that the experience that is reflected in Thesleff's self-portrait should also be understood in terms of this kind of ecstatic union with a universal energy rather than as a manifestation of Platonic-Christian ascetic mysticism based on self-abnegation.

COSMIC REVERIE AND THE OCEANIC FEELING

Let us return momentarily to the Leonardesque quality of Thesleff's self-portrait. Above, I have discussed it as an exercise in a technique of imaginative perception, which in the context of the late nineteenth-century may indicate an attempt to get in touch with the unconscious creative sources of the human mind. In his essay on the technique of Leonardo, Valery described imaginative perception as the universal human capacity for creativity. According to him, it is the power which is required in all human invention – in science as well as in art; and it is the opposite of the blindness that results from seeing through the intellect, that is, through pre-established concepts. The ability to see well means the ability to attain a state of "reverie," in which one becomes "one with what he looks at."[539] In this kind of mental state form and movement become intermingled:

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[537] Ahearn 1983, 108-112, 127.

[538] Ahearn 1983, 128.

[539] Valery [1894] 1929, 43.

If a thousand vibrations seem to be a continuous sound, if a drop of rain looks like a descending line, or the roughness of this paper appears to be one polished plane; and if the duration of the impression be the sole cause, then inversely, a stationary form may be replaced by a corresponding dynamism in the periodical transcendence of a carefully chosen thing or element ... For the imagination, everything moves in some degree.[540]

This kind of imaginative perception in which the mind becomes united with a cosmic energy seems to be at the heart of the creative experience that is reflected in Thesleff's self-portrait.

From the beginning of the twentieth century, Thesleff's art became more colourful and dynamic; the emphasis shifted more and more towards colour, form, and a sense of movement.[541] However, rather than moving towards non-objective abstraction, her art assumed the kind of ambiguity and indeterminacy of form that Gamboni has written about. The intensive sensitivity and the vibrant colours of many of her twentieth-century paintings bring to mind Redon's late pastel works – and they also share the same sense of immateriality that follows from the dissolution of form. Moreover, from the early years of the nineteenth century onwards, a sense of cosmic energy that merges the human being with her environment became an increasingly central element in Thesleff's oeuvre. In the painting *Decorative Landscape* (1910, fig. 22), for example, the composition is dominated by large trees that burst with colour and energy, and the human figure is very small in comparison, almost disappearing in the flourishing nature. The human being thus appears to be a part of the surrounding nature and through it connected with the entire cosmos.[542] The beautiful scenery resembles the Romantic image of paradise, yet it is alive with a fertile energy, and has nothing of the melancholic nostalgia that so often appears in Symbolist images of the paradisiac state of being, such as Stjernschantz's *Pastoral* (*Primavera*, 1897, fig. 2), which was discussed in Chapter 1. In Thesleff's paintings, paradise appears to be present in the here and now, reflected in the cosmic energy that is forever flowing through the universe.

If we look at Thesleff's works from the 1890s in the light of these later developments, their immateriality becomes more apparent, and we may also perceive a sense of hidden energy beneath the surface of melancholic silence; the ethereal landscapes are beginning to vibrate and the almost otherworldly human figures appear to be immersed into a cosmic sense of being. Even in turn-of the-century paintings like *Lydia* (1898) and *Thyra Thesleff* (1900), where the Art Nouveau style precision and heavy outlines at first sight appear to solidify the form, the undulating line energizes the image, thus endowing it with mystical immateriality.[543] In the self-

[540] Valery [1894] 1929, 44.

[541] The new turn that Thesleff's art took around 1905-1906 was in the Finnish press immediately linked with Kandinsky whose works were exhibited in Helsinki in 1906. Thesleff's sister Thyra studied art and design in München and was friends with the Swedish artist Carl Palme who was connected with the Phalanx group, and was probably partly responsible for getting Kandinsky's works to Helsinki as early as 1906. Sarjas-Korte 1998, 45-46.

[542] See Schreck 2008, 41-42.

[543] For images, see *Ellen Thesleff: Värien tanssi / Dance of Colours*, 109, 127.

portrait from 1894–95 this feeling of energy derives from the network of interweaving pencil lines that seem to be in a constant process of condensation. The sense of movement and energy that emerges from beneath the surface of quiet contemplation draws attention to the technique and the creative process behind the work of art. This dynamism between quiet contemplation and energetic movement is paralleled by the tension between unity and dissolution in terms of both the image and the self that is being represented.

To add one more level to the meanings of Thesleff's self-portrait, allow me to suggest a comparison with the idea of poetic reverie discussed by Bachelard. According to Bachelard, poetic reveries help us descend deep within ourselves and liberate us from our name; these reveries can counteract the process of individuation. Poetic reverie is different from the nocturnal dream which abducts our being from us and has no subject; the dreamer cannot formulate a *cogito* because there is no guarantee of his existence. In the deepest abysses of our dreams, writes Bachelard, we "brush intimately against nothingness, our nothingness." The dreamer of reverie, on the other hand, "knows that it is he who is absenting himself."[544] Poetic reverie unites imagination and memory, and revives the cosmic solitude of the child that is without history and individuality:

> *Then there lives within us not a memory of history but a memory of the cosmos.* Times when nothing happened *come back. Great, beautiful times from the former life when the dreaming being dominated all boredom ... Such times manifest their permanence in a rediscovered imagination. They are included in a different duration from experienced duration, in that non-duration which provides the great reposes experienced in an existentialism of the poetic. In those times when nothing was happening, the world was so beautiful!* [545]

Bachelard's conception of cosmic reverie that takes us back to a more universal sense of being reveals an affinity with the idea of a timeless paradise of childhood that forms the core of our individual self and at the same time links our individuality with the cosmos. This theme has been central to western art and poetry since the Romantic period, and it can also be connected with the Symbolist aesthetic and the ideal of absolute art.[546] Similarly to the ideal of absolute art, the "inner child" that

[544] Bachelard 1971 [1960], 145-150.

[545] Bachelard 1971 [1960], 119-120.

[546] The idea of childhood as a state of original innocence was established already in the eighteenth century in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's treatise on education and child-rearing, *Émile ou de l'éducation* (1762). Rousseau's philosophy is based on the idea that humans are naturally good and noble but have been corrupted by civilization. The primary aim of child-rearing would then be to foster this natural innocence. The idea of a "noble savage" became a corner stone of Romanticism, and it was one of the origins of the late nineteenth-century cult of "primitivism." The child, like the "noble savage" has intuitive wisdom, a natural appreciation of beauty, and sensitivity to moral values. Swedenborg was another important originator of the cult of childhood. According to him, children were the highest form of human life "this side of paradise." Children were innocent in the sense that they had no knowledge of good and evil, truth and falsity. Swedenborg also saw an affinity between children and angels; he believed that when a child dies, she is taken to heaven where she is taught to understand what is good and true, and when she has been perfected in intelligence and wisdom, she becomes an angel. See Boas 1966, 8, 48-49

lies at the core of our being is something that has a very strong effect on us but we can never fully grasp it. The child can be rendered present through art but ultimately it always remains lost.

Thesleff's friend and fellow artist Magnus Enckell has pondered the idea of the inner child as the core of the self in a notebook entry from the early 1890s: "I wanted to throw away all manliness, all womanliness in you and you must then finally begin to thaw when the child within comes out."[547] Around the same time Enckell painted a series of images of young boys. Most of the boys in these paintings are still safely within the realm of childhood. However, in the painting *The Awakening* (1894, Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki), the boy is somewhat older, at the threshold of childhood and adulthood, between innocence and experience. Munch has famously explored this theme in his painting *Puberty* (1894–95, The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo) which is a rather straightforward image of the horror of awakening sexuality. Although the composition in both paintings is quite similar, the symbolism in Enckell's painting is more complex. The painting has often been interpreted in Neoplatonic terms as a representation of a spiritual awakening.[548] Stewen, however, has suggested a different Platonic interpretation that connects the painting with the myth of metempsychosis. The physical awkwardness of the young man in the painting might refer to an awakening of sexuality which at the same time means forgetting the world of Ideas.[549] The melancholic look in the boy's eyes then refers to the end of childhood and the loss of the original sense of unity.

The "awakening" becomes forgetting. But this is a necessary forgetting that the individual must go through in order to reach adulthood. In the original state of unity, there is no individuality and no knowledge. Enckell writes in his notebook about this sense of unity that he felt as a child, but "That was not *life*!" He continues: "I can see a life so fully alive, but it is no longer the life we live, where pain is the most beautiful thing and almost a duty – life between two people with it between them."[550] Little earlier in the same notebook he writes that two people who love each other have the divine between them. "God is love", he writes, "Will you not then understand that love is God."[551] Love is the way back to the original unity, and love is only possible after the awakening of sexuality. In Plato's *Symposium* we find the idea of love ascending from the particular to the universal, from beautiful bodies to beautiful minds, through the beauty of laws, institutions, and the sciences, until the vision of universal beauty is revealed to the eye of the mind.[552] This idea was central in the mystical idealism promoted by Péladan, who held that love in all its manifestations, including sexuality, led to divinity and perfection.[553] *Symposium* also contains the story of original androgyny, according to which the first people revolted

[547] Magnus Enckell's sketchbook, c. 1893-94, cited from Sarajas-Korte 1966, 158.

[548] See Reitala 1977, 124-127; Sarajas-Korte 1966 190-193.

[549] See Stewen 2000, 46-48.

[550] Magnus Enckell's sketchbook, c. 1893-94, cited from Sarajas-Korte 1966, 159.

[551] Magnus Enckell's sketchbook, c. 1893-94, cited from Sarajas-Korte 1966, 159.

[552] Plato: *Symposium*, 211b-c.

[553] Sarajas-Korte 1966, 44.

against the gods and were split in half as punishment. After the split they have been endlessly searching for the other half to once again become whole.[554] The human longing for love is, therefore, fundamentally a longing for an original paradisiacal state of being – for oneness, that is.

If we now return to Thesleff's little self-portrait, we might perhaps interpret the androgynous and almost immaterial being as an image of the inner child: the core of the self, the foundation of the individual. There is, another painting which supports this interpretation: a portrait of a little boy that Thesleff painted in Italy in 1896. The composition of this painting is exactly the same as in the self-portrait from 1894–95: the monochrome background, the full-frontal face, the curved line of the shoulders. Even the contemplative expression of the boy's face is almost identical with the self-portrait; only the eyes which in the self-portrait are wide open are now half-closed, gazing downward.

The sense of universality that extends beyond the personal self in the self-portrait also connects the image with the theme of androgyny. In the Parisian mystically orientated Symbolism, spiritual androgyny was the highest ideal. Androgynous beauty reflected the dream of a foregone era of beauty, harmony, and happiness. The androgynous ideal binds together several popular themes of the fin-de-siècle; it reflects a typical tension between sexuality and spirituality, and the Platonic conception of love is connected with the idea of a lost paradisiac state. In the Judaeo-Christian mystical tradition, Adam before the creation of Eve is seen as the original androgyne. This Adam is completely asexual; sexuality appears only as a consequence of the fall. Similarly, in the myth included in Plato's *Symposium*, sexuality appears only after the destruction of the original androgyny. The androgynous ideal connected with artistic creativity allowed male artists to possess features that were coded feminine yet were considered favourable for an artistic personality, such as intuition, emotionality, and sensitivity.[555] To associate this theme with the self-portrait of a female artist, of course, adds a level of complexity to the issue. The ideal androgyne was an adolescent youth; female androgyny was considered a perversion, and often associated with lesbianism or the image of the femme fatale.[556]

Hence, the connection of Thesleff's self-portrait with the androgynous ideal should not be understood too literally. Rather, it can be seen to reflect similar artistic ideals that also gave birth to the cult of the androgyne. The immateriality of the image, and the concentration on the head which appears almost disconnected from the body, reflect a dualistic view. Like the floating head in Munch's *Vision*, Thesleff's self-portrait appears an image of the artists who is trying to reach the ideal by separating the mind from the body and its desires which always keep it shackled to this world. The androgynous appearance serves as a metaphor for spirituality; on

[554] Plato: *Symposium,* 189d-193d.

[555] Mathews 1999, 74, 76.

[556] Péladan, for example, defined the female androgyne as a degenerated femme fatale in his book *La Gynandre*. According to Péladan, "L'Androgyne" was a virginal young man who was still somewhat feminine, whereas "La Gynandre" is a woman who mimics the masculine features, and is trying to assume the power that belongs to men. Mathews 1999, 115-116.

the mystical level of the self all individuality is lost and gender has no longer any meaning. Moreover, the androgynous appearance can be connected with the idea of the inner child, as the state of the child before the awakening of sexuality is also in a sense androgynous.

This idea of the inner child gains a particular meaning in the context of artistic creativity. For Schopenhauer every child is to a certain extent a genius, and the genius is to a certain extent a child. Schopenhauer described childhood as a paradisiac state of happiness, the lost Eden to which we yearn to return for the rest of our lives. This original innocence is forever lost at the onset of puberty.[557] This idea was adopted by Baudelaire for whom genius meant a newly discovered childhood. In the essay "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863) he describes the convalescent, who has recently returned from the shadows of death and now sees the world anew. The artist-genius is like a convalescent who, after having recovered from an illness, sees everything more clearly than ever before; he is a child-adult whose mind has the openness of a child but the analytic strength of an adult.[558] To become an artist one must first become oneself, and the core of the self can be reached by "throwing away all manliness, all womanliness" – that is, by returning to the un-individuated state of childhood.

In the poetry of Rimbaud, as Ahearn has observed, the search for the foundations of personal selfhood is often connected with a sense of more deeply felt sense of universal Being. The first poem of the *Illuminations*, "Après le deluge" (After the Flood), presents a parable of the origin and development of human civilization which is associated with the poet's situation. The poem begins in a world of purity and newness right after the primeval waters of the Flood have subsided, yet as soon as this image is evoked, it is already lost, overcome by the destructing power of civilization. The children who inhabit this world are in mourning, inside houses where the windows are still wet, looking at marvellous images, or standing in the village square under the pouring rain. At the end of the poem the waters are called back again, and we realize "that the poetic act Rimbaud desires must somehow recreate, bring back to consciousness, this ungraspable source."[559] The poem, "Enfance" (Childhood) which is the following poem in the *Illuminations*, continues on the same theme, presenting "the child's origin, its fusion with nature and its emergence from the liquid world." According to Ahearn these poems reflect the "experience of loss, which indeed provides the dynamic structuring principle of this literature."[560] This is a common feature in all of Rimbaud's child poetry, as well as of the Romantic child poetry before him. The child embodies "a link with the origin

[557] For Schopenhauer childhood is a state of pure intellect without the interference of will. When this state is lost at puberty, the intellect becomes enslaved by the will. "Every child is to a certain extent a genius, and the genius is to a certain extent a child. The relationship shows itself primarily in the naiveté and sublime simplicity which is the characteristic of true genius." Boas 1966, 69..

[558] Baudelaire 1964 [1863], 7-8.

[559] Ahearn 1983, 15-16.

[560] Ahearn 1983, 19.

of being, a link that endures, that is rendered present in these texts, yet one that is also, and inevitably, lost."[561]

The "oceanic" ego state which is reflected in these poems by Rimbaud recalls the concept of the oceanic feeling that was developed in the correspondence between Freud and Romain Rolland. This curious and often overlooked strain in Freud's thought forms the basis of the psychoanalytic theory of mysticism. Freud's views of religion and mysticism are notoriously complex. During his friendship with Jung he had written to his colleague about his discovery that religion derived from childhood helplessness, and in *Totem and Taboo* he offered a complementary interpretation appealing to the Oedipus complex. In the short essay "Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices" (1907), he concluded that based on the similarities between religious and obsessive rituals, "one might venture to regard obsessive neurosis as a pathological counterpart of the formation of a religion, and to describe that neurosis as an individual religiosity and religion as a universal obsessional neurosis."[562]

Freud's most complete repudiation of religion came with *The Future of an Illusion.* Rolland's and Freud's discussion on the oceanic feeling was a consequence of their exchange of opinions over this particular text.[563] Rolland described the sentiment that he believed to be the basis of all religion in a letter he sent to Freud after having received from him a copy of *The Future of an Illusion*. It was, according to Rolland, a spontaneous sentiment that was separate from all established religions, "the simple and direct fact of *the feeling of the 'eternal'*." It is a subjective sensation, yet it is "common to thousands (millions) of men actually existing, with its thousands (millions) of individual nuances." Rolland himself claimed to be very familiar with this "oceanic" sentiment: "All through my life, it has never failed me; and I have always found in it a source of vital renewal."[564] Rolland's philosophical and religious views were an eclectic combination of the philosophies of Spinoza, Leibnitz, and the pre-Socratics, Eastern religion, the ethics of Tolstoy, and his native catholic Christianity. Parsons describes his outlook as "an unchurched, highly eclectic, mystical philosophy of life."[565]

In his letter, Rolland expressed a hope that Freud would subject this oceanic feeling to analysis. Freud took up the challenge in the first chapter of *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930). There he associated the oceanic feeling with the primary ego-feeling; it reflected the primary state of the infant in which one had felt omnipotent and immortal. He wrote that our adult ego-feeling is "only a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive – indeed, an all-embracing – feeling which

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[561] Ahearn 1983, 22.

[562] See Peter Gay's introduction to *The Future of an Illusion* in Gay (ed.) 1989, 685. In the lecture "Dreams and Occultism," which is included in the *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1933), he begins by denouncing mysticism but at the end of the lecture he questions his own scepticism: "If one regards oneself as a sceptic, it is a good plan to have occasional doubts about one's scepticism too. It may be that I too have a secret inclination towards the miraculous which thus goes halfway to meet the creation of occult facts." Freud 1964, 53. On Freud's attitudes towards religion and mysticism, see also Jones 1957, 374-436.

[563] See Parsons 1999, 19-85.

[564] Rolland's letter to Freud, December 5, 1927. Cited from Parsons 1999, 36-37.

[565] Parsons 1999, 51.

corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world about it." He then suggests that this primary ego-feeling may persist in many people side by side with the adult ego-feeling which is "more sharply demarcated." If this were to be the case, then "the ideational contents appropriate to it would be precisely those of limitlessness and of a bond with the universe – the same ideas with which my friend elucidated the 'oceanic feeling'."[566]

Here, as in Rimbaud's poetry, childhood is connected with a sense of oneness with the universe, and the child within is perceived as the core of our individual self that at the same time connects us with a more universal level of being. This inner being is also the source of artistic creativity. Ever since Romanticism, the mystical experience had been considered to be beneficial, even a prerequisite, for artistic creativity. Indeed, the re-establishment of the lost links between man and the cosmos was the ultimate Romantic dream – and it was believed that by descending deep into the root of our own being we can find a connection with the larger nature from which our individuality has emerged. Thesleff's self-portrait has a sense of intimacy but it also keeps the viewer at a distance. The image invites the viewer to take part in the process of self-exploration, but the self that is revealed in the process is a kind of universal subjectivity rather than the individual self of the artist or the viewer.

Hence, we can perceive in this self-portrait a tension between individuality and universality; the heightened sense of individuality at the same time seems to indicate dissolution of the borders separating the individual self from the cosmos. However, this is nothing like the horror of dissolution and disintegration that we encounter in Munch's *The Scream*, which will be discussed in Chapter 6. Rather, it is a sort of pleasurable reverie, in which the self gains a sense of unity with the cosmos. This kind of feeling of oneness is at the heart of the mystical experience. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), William James writes that this is the common ground that we find in all mystical traditions from Hinduism and Sufism to Neoplatonism and Christian mysticism: "In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness."[567] Like the Surrealists of the twentieth century, Thesleff appears to be pursuing the original sense of unity, the oceanic feeling, through an artistic method based on an altered state of consciousness which can liberate the imagination, and hence may lead to the prolonged state of illumination that we have called the epiphany.[568] Moreover, similarly to a Surrealist work of art, Thesleff's self-portrait "tests the limits of human imagination by turning our awareness inward to the imagination and the creative process itself."[569]

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[566] Freud 1961, 68; see also Parsons 1999, 39-40.

[567] James 1963 [1902], 419.

[568] See Rabinovitch 2002, 60.

[569] Rabinovitch 2002, 229.

23. **August Strindberg**, *Self-Portrait from the Gersau Series*, 1886.

24. **August Strindberg**, *Self-Portrait with Daughters Greta and Karin from the Gersau Series*, 1886.

25. **August Strindberg**, *Self-Portrait*, 1892-93.

26. **August Strindberg**, *Self-Portrait taken with the "Wunderkamera,"* 1906,

5 PHOTOGRAPHING THE SOUL – AUGUST STRINDBERG

I don't care about my appearance, but I want people to see my soul and it comes out in these photographs better than in others.

Gold is sunlight photographed and fixed.

— August Strindberg[570]

Ever since its invention in the 1830s, photography has been connected with both art and science. It is therefore no surprise that someone like August Strindberg, who moved freely between both worlds, would be fascinated with this modern technique. Strindberg's interest in photography was awakened at a very young age in the beginning of the 1860s when he was allowed to borrow his cousin's camera, and it continued throughout his life. The early images have not survived, but we know that around the same time Strindberg developed an interest for the natural sciences, which would suggest that right from the beginning he associated photography with scientific experimentation.[571] His photographic activities were always closely related to his other artistic and scientific endeavours – indeed, it appears that photography offered for him a perfect medium for combining these fields of interest that in his mind were always inherently interconnected.

This chapter examines the photographic self-portraits of August Strindberg as a special case in the dynamic between the self, the world, and art at the fin-de-siècle. I have already discussed the similarities between Strindberg's paintings and the technique of Thesleff's self-portrait. Below, we shall see that his photographic experimentation also suggests a parallel with Thesleff's work. Strindberg's photographic self-portraits manifest a similar tension between the subjective and

[570] Strindberg quoted by his friend Gustaf Eisen ("Strindberg som fotograf," Vecko-Journalen, Stockholm, 1920:14). Cited from Hemmingson 1989b, 167; Strindberg's statement cited from Granath 2005, 23.

[571] Hemmingson 1989b, 15.

objective dimensions of the self and art and, like Thesleff's self-portrait, they reveal an intensive process of self-exploration. For Strindberg the photographic technique served as an experimental tool for investigating the essence of the self and for examining the relationship between the self and the world. This self-exploration is directly connected with the technical innovation that at the time was only slowly becoming accepted among artist and critics as a serious artistic technique. Those who were willing to dismiss the artistic potential of photography felt that this technique could only capture the appearance of things.

Photography was included in the Paris Salon for the first time in 1859. Baudelaire wrote a scornful commentary on this new art form which he considered to be the most mortal enemy of art. The only role that he was willing to allow for photography was that of a very humble servant of art and science.[572] Aurier expressed a similarly hostile attitude towards photography in "Les Peintres symbolistes," and like Baudelaire he connected photography with the fashionable preference for exact reproductions of nature in academic painting and sculpture. Aurier argues that if the purpose of a work of art was to be the most exact copy of the material reality of things, then that would lead to the ridiculous conclusion that Pierre Petit or Nadar are greater artists than Gustave Moreau or Puvis de Chavannes.[573] Munch, who was himself an avid photographer, wrote that the camera cannot compete with painting as long as it cannot be used in heaven or hell.[574] In Strindberg's mind, however, photography had a very specific relationship with the truth behind appearances. He was a stern believer in the capacity of photography to penetrate beyond the surface of things and reveal a deeper level of truth that was not visible to the naked eye. As Linda Haverty Rugg puts it, Strindberg seemed to consider his photographic self-portraits "not as appearances but apparitions."[575]

To shed more light on Strindberg's understanding of the meaning of photography and his endeavours to capture the essence of the self in his photographs, I will also discuss at some length his "celestographs" and "crystallograms" which link together science and art. Strindberg's artistic and scientific experiments reflect a cosmic vision about the interaction between heaven and earth that he wished to explore through these activities. The ultimate motivation, however, appears to be the endeavour to understand the meaning of his own existence within this immense cosmos. His conceptions are a combination of Romantic Naturphilosophie, alchemical ideas, and the most recent scientific perspectives. He perceived the psychic crisis that he described in his autobiographical novel *Inferno* as a kind of initiation, after which he received a more profound understanding of the meaning of everything.

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[572] Baudelaire 1868b [1859], 261.

[573] Aurier 1893, 294-295, 297.

[574] "Fotografiapparatet kan ikke konkurere med maleriet sålænge det ikke kan brukes i himmel eller helvete." The Munch Museum, MM N 63,1929.

[575] Rugg 1997, 81. In her book *Picturing Ourselves*, Linda Haverty Rugg examines the connection between photography and autobiograhy, both of which she perceives as tools for examining and articulating self-hood. Strindberg is one of her "cases."

STRINDBERG'S SELF-PORTRAITS

When Strindberg first started to photograph himself he was motivated at least partly by the need to take more direct control over his public image. However, at the same time, the photographic images attest to an attempt to explore the self in a way that would be scientific and objective. Later Strindberg became more and more occupied with an exploration of the alchemical nature of the technique. This is reflected in the photographic experimentations during the 1890s which parallel his investigations in the fields of chemistry and alchemy, but the idea of penetrating into the very essence of things is also reflected in the photographic self-portraits that have survived from this period, as well as in his later experimentation with the so called "Wunderkamera"– a photographic device that he constructed together with the Swedish photographer Herman Anderson. Strindberg distrusted all kinds of lenses and preferred to use simple self-made devices or, as in the case of the celestographs and the photograms of crystallization that he produced in the 1890s, he employed a technique of direct exposure without using any camera at all.

Before going into an analysis of his later activities, let us begin by a brief discussion of Strindberg's first foray into photographic self-portraiture. It will become clear that although his attitudes changed quite radically during the crisis period in the 1890s, right from the beginning Strindberg claimed for photography a privileged ability of capturing the essence of things.

In 1886 Strindberg moved to Gersau in Switzerland together with his first wife Siri von Essen and their three children. With a recently purchased camera he started to take pictures of himself and his family.[576] He had plans to publish these images as a book accompanied with his own captions. When Strindberg submitted his proposal to the publisher Albert Bonnier, he attached an explanatory letter in which he wrote:

> *The photographs show the terrible misogynist Aug Sg. in 18 realistic situations ... As you will see the pictures are not samples of beautiful photography, but just what they say they are.*[577]

Little is known about how the photographic process took place. It is possible that in some cases it was in fact Siri von Essen who released the shutter. In the letter to Bonnier, Strindberg maintains that the pictures were taken by his wife, but it appears that at least in some cases he used a delayed shutter as has been reported by Strindberg's daughter Karin.[578] This is true of all his later self-images as well: we can never be quite sure who it was that actually took the picture. Nevertheless, it

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[576] Strindberg is the primary character in 25 out of the total of 37 shots. Lalander & Höök 2001, 103.

[577] Cited from Lalander & Höök 2001, 104. This proposal was rejected by the publisher, and was only achieved in 1997, when Bonniers published them in facsimile as a Christmas book. Six of the Gersau photographs were reproduced in Herman Esswein's *August Strindberg: En studie och en öfverblick*, which appeared at the time of Strindberg's 60th birthday in 1909. Lalander & Höök 2001, 114-115.

[578] The claim that the photographs were taken by his wife has sometimes been interpreted as an attempt to trick the publisher into paying two fees instead of just one. Lalander & Höök 2001, 104; see also Hemmingson 1989b, 34.

seems clear that it was Strindberg himself who staged the photographs and directed the process, and it therefore makes sense to treat them as self-portraits. In these photographs we see Strindberg posing in different roles: as a writer at his desk, as a musician playing the guitar, as a father of the family surrounded by his children, or playing a board game with his wife. In several images he poses as a gentleman in a top hat and a long black coat, holding in his hand a cigarette as the self-conscious sign of the bohemian artist, and in one photograph he even appears as a Russian nihilist. The accompanying texts attach an additional autobiographical level to these photographic self-images.[579]

The photographs have obviously been staged – the technology of the period was not yet advanced enough to even allow for the possibility of spontaneous snapshots – but they nonetheless reflect a belief in the objective and naturalistic potential of photography. Strindberg himself called the Gersau images "impressionist photographs." However, as we shall see in the last section of this chapter, the subjectivity that these photographs reveal is far more complex than it would at first sight appear to be. This is due to the role-playing that in the end eludes coherent subjectivity. In this sense it can be seen to anticipate twentieth-century developments in both self-portraiture and in theories of the subject. Despite the apparent spontaneity of these images, they contain also an element of darkness and silence. "Not a single portrait is broken by a smile," as the German art historian Uwe Schneede has observed:

> *It is as if this man Strindberg has been in a permanent state of deadly earnest, obsessed by the passionate thought of being taken seriously, and as if this dogged battle with a taunting, persecuting, insulting world had furrowed [his] brow, eyes, and mouth. In some of the pictures, this bitterness rises to monumental heights as if he were already beyond life with others.*[580]

One of the inspirations behind the Gersau series seems to have been the photographic interview of the chemist Michel-Eugène Chevreul that was published in *Le Journal Illustré*, 5 September 1886. In the series of images, Chevreul is shown engaged in a lively conversation with the famous French photographer Gaspard-Félix Tournachon, known as Nadar. The photographs were taken by Nadar's son Paul who had recently taken over his father's studio.[581] The interview was published one month after Chevreul's one hundredth birthday, and it was entitled "L'Art de vivre cent ans" (The Art of Living a Hundred Years). It was the first photographic interview of its kind, and awakened wide interest in France. Rugg has noted, however, that it is not immediately evident how this piece of photo-journalism

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[579] Another interesting example of this kind of "autobiographical role-playing" is a photograph taken in 1891 in the Stockholm archipelago. Here he appears to assume the role of the protagonist of the novel *By the Open Sea* which had appeared in the previous year. He is dressed in a raincoat and a striped woollen beret, leaning against the lichen-covered rock as if attempting to dissolve into the surrounding nature. His eyes are fixated on a distant point, reflecting the white light of the sea and the sky.

[580] Cited from Billeter 1986,10.

[581] Hemmingson 1989b, 34.

provided inspiration for Strindberg's photographic endeavours. She has observed certain important differences between the images of Chevreul and Strindberg's Gersau photographs. First of all, Strindberg's photographs of himself are more clearly staged and none of them pretend innocence of the photographer – this would indeed be rather absurd as the photographer, at least in some cases, was the subject himself. In all images he looks directly at the camera and poses self-consciously. In the Chevreul images, on the other hand, Nadar's back is turned to the camera which creates an effect of being unaware of its presence. There is difference also in the relationship between the texts and the images; in the Chevreul interview, the text supposedly reproduces speech that was uttered precisely at the moment the photographs were taken, whereas in Strindberg's case the relationship is more enigmatic, and the texts seem to refer to thoughts of the subject rather than actual speech, thus emphasizing interiority.[582]

In some cases the correspondence between the text and the image appears almost arbitrary. For example, in the photograph of Strindberg playing the guitar, the text reads "It doesn't help to eat grass" ("Det hjälper inte att äta gräs," fig. 23). This is, in fact, a quotation from Strindberg's story "Utveckling" (Development) included in the collection *Svenska öden och äventyr* (Swedish Destinies and Adventures). Several of the captions are literary references, mostly to Strindberg's own works, or, as in the case of the photograph were he poses as a gardener, the caption "Well, we have to become gardeners" ("Jo, vi måste bli trädgårdsmästare", fig. 24) is an allusion to the closing words of Voltaire's *Candide*. This reference to gardening can also be seen in terms of Strindberg's self-fashioning as an "Agrarian Socialist."[583]

By inviting the viewer to imagine that these captions convey what the subject was thinking at the time the photograph was taken, the texts add to the confusion between inner and outer that is inherent in all photography. This is an idea that is readily acceptable to the viewer despite its peculiarity, because of the persuasive power of photographs that makes us trust their ability to penetrate into the essence of things, and even render thoughts visible.[584] Rugg has concluded that the most important aspects of the Chevreul piece that inspired Strindberg were the interview format and the idea of capturing the "essence" of the subject by using a series of photographs. She maintains that the title of the interview suggest that it reveals a secret: "the essence of Chevreul's longevity, his reason, literally, for being alive." In a similar vein, Strindberg's Gersau series presents "a testament to Strindberg's character as artist and *pater familias.*" Hence, both photographic pieces rely on the power of photography as evidence: "Nadar's proves the existence of a lively centenarian and Strindberg's responds those who accuse him of misogyny and blasphemy with evidence of blissful domesticity."[585]

Strindberg's photographic activities reflect the overall shifts in his artistic attitudes. Right from the beginning he claimed for photography a privileged

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[582] Rugg 1997, 95.

[583] Lalander & Höök 2001, 107-109.

[584] Rugg 1997, 21.

[585] Rugg 1997, 95-98.

representative power. In the Gersau photographs he was still committed to the naturalistic project of recording every minute detail of reality in order to capture the essence of things. However, in the beginning of the 1890s, at the onset of his so called Inferno period he became increasingly interested in penetrating the surface of the visible world in order to grasp what goes on underneath it. His photographic endeavours, too, gain in mystical and psychological intensity. At this point he also experienced something of a writer's block. It appears that he had come to a dead end on his path of naturalism, and he had to find a completely new way of perceiving the world in order to be able to write again. His photographic experiments had a decisive role in this endeavour. In a letter written to Ola Hansson in 1892, he exclaimed: "I've thought of becoming a photographer to save my talent! – as a writer!"[586] The newly awakened interest in science, occultism, and alchemy took Strindberg's artistic project onto a whole new level. During the course of the 1890s Strindberg's photographic activities became increasingly experimental, culminating in the pursuit of revealing the invisible sources of life through chemical investigation that included the use of photographic techniques. His very last photographic self portrait, taken in 1906 reflects the occultist attitude of penetrating the soul.

I shall explore the questions of photographic subjectivity in more detail in the final section of this chapter. Let us just note for now that in his later self-portraits, Strindberg assumed an approach that was in stern contrast with the one he developed during the Gersau series. Rather that offering multiple perspectives and details, he endeavoured to reveal the essence of his own being through a kind of "alchemical distillation" in which the individualizing layers were removed in order to reveal the core of his subjectivity. Harry G. Carlson, who has examined Strindberg's "reawakening" as an artist after the Inferno period, maintains that it was precisely the artistic experimentation during the period of crisis that enabled him to discover the power of imaginative perception, and hence it also played an important role in his search for new means of literary expression. As is well known, during the years of the crisis Strindberg had declared himself finished with drama and fiction, and when he re-emerged as a dramatist, his vision had completely changed. After the Inferno period he developed a novel conception of drama that questioned established norms concerning the unity of character and narrative, and the handling of time and space. Plays like *To Damascus* and *A Dream Play* contributed to a radical change of direction in modern theatre.[587]

EXPERIMENTS WITH ART, SCIENCE, AND MAGIC

Strindberg was not alone in his hope and belief in the ability of the photographic image to record the visible as well as the invisible. Jennifer Tucker, who has studied the relationship between photography and nineteenth-century science, has noted that although photography has been perceived as a medium of truth ever since its

[586] Hemmingson 1989b, 74.

[587] Carlson 1996, 3.

invention, its status was also questioned right from the beginning. Still, faith in the absolute truthfulness of photography remained strong throughout the century. Like other new technical devices, such as the telescope and the microscope, the camera was able to reveal things that the naked eye was unable to perceive.[588] Tucker has also noted the special relationship that existed between photography and spiritualism; both were concerned with invisible forces that existed on the threshold of scientific understanding. Moreover, the chemical processes performed in the darkroom created a sense of mystery and evoked associations with alchemy.[589]

While Strindberg was influenced by the attempts of the spiritualists to photograph spirits, and probably on one level motivated by the hopes of establishing proof for occult and alchemical phenomena, his photographic experiments also manifested direct parallels with his paintings. He was inspired by the suggestive and purely visual side of photography at least as much as he was relying on it for scientific and occult purposes. As the artist and writer David Campany has observed in an essay on Strindberg's photographic experiments, when Strindberg's photographic activities started to move away from description, he became more and more interested in the medium's potential as a means of visionary suggestion.[590] Like his experimental method of painting that invited the element of chance to interfere with the image production, his "celestographs" and "cristallograms" explored the poetic dimension of nature's creative potential. The celestographs were made by exposing a photographic plate directly to the night sky. No mechanical apparatus or even a lens was involved in the process, and the image that appeared as a result was not a photograph of the night sky in any conventional sense. Its visual resemblance to the sky dotted with the light of heavenly bodies was, in effect, incidental – probably formed by microscopic particles in the air and impurities in the chemical process. However, this made the whole phenomenon no less fascinating to Strindberg. Indeed, it appeared to prove his Swedenborgian vision of the universe where the microcosm and the macrocosm correspond with each other.

In the celestographs, the connection between the image and the object is not indexical but analogous. Campany writes that in these images:

> *... what we see could be the heavens, or just a patch of ground, or mere photochemical stains. For Strindberg they were perhaps all these things at once, indivisibility: the infinite heavens and the earth, base material and the lofty representation, fact and wish. Worldly matter and the stars could resemble each other and be thought as part of the same whole.*[591]

Similarly, in the photograms that explored the process of crystallization, Strindberg was interested in capturing the impression of natural processes that reflect analogies between living nature and similar processes in seemingly inanimate matter. He noticed that when brine solutions were left to evaporate on sheets of glass the

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[588] See Tucker 2005, 4, 23, and passim.

[589] Tucker 2005, 51-52, 77-78.

[590] Campany 2005, 115.

[591] Campany 2005, 115.

residue would create crystal formations that resembled various plant forms, such as ferns, grass, or tree branches. It seemed to him that these crystal formations were imitating living matter. The photogram was then created by laying the glass on photographic paper and making an exposure.

The same oscillation between the active and passive sides of creation which we have observed in Strindberg's paintings also occurs in his photographic experiments and, similarly to the paintings, it is often quite difficult to determine what it is exactly that we see in these images. Olle Granath has suggested that Strindberg's paintings can be seen as an artistic manifestation of the monistic principle. "It is quite conceivable," he writes, "that, swept up in the act of painting, Strindberg experienced himself as realising his monism by raising a craft to the level of poetry, his paintings reconciling earth, sea, and sky into a single element."[592] Hence, it becomes apparent that the same monistic principles guided his writing, his painting, and his scientific experimentation during the 1890s. Douglas Feuk has written that in the landscape paintings from 1894 "the boundaries between air and water or earth and light often appear fluid":

> *Each element looks as though it could be dissolved and transmuted into one of the others, and the real "subject" of the paintings is probably his dream of a secret concordance in which "everything is in everything" – and able to become everything else.*[593]

Although Strindberg was not able to produce any major literary works during the most intense period of his crisis, he did write numerous short essays in both Swedish and French. These were published in the daily press, in literary as well as scientific journals, and in the collections *Vivisections* (1894) [594] and *Jardin des Plantes* (1896), and they dealt with a very wide spectrum of subject matter including alchemy and chemistry, hypnotic suggestion, biology, and art criticism. These writings reflect his wide interest in the theories of Ribot, Charcot, Darwin, Haeckel, du Prel, and towards the end of the decade with increasing vigour, Swedenborg. Although the essays in the collection *Jardin des Plantes* appear as speculations on the physiology of plants and insects or, in the case of the opening essay "Stenarnes suckan" (The Sighing of Stones), on the mineral realm, their fundamental purpose lies in the exploration of what we have already seen to be the most acute issue of the fin-de-siècle – that is, man's place in the world and his relationship to God.[595] The artistic and scientific aspects in these texts are as deeply interconnected as in his photographic and painterly activities, and often quite directly related to them. For example, in "The Sighing of Stones" he ponders the process of crystallization in a way that reflects the motivation behind his simultaneous photographic experiments.

[592] Granath 2005, 23.

[593] Feuk 2001, 120.

[594] The first volume of the *Vivisections* was published in 1887 and mainly explores themes connected to the naturalistic dramas that he was working with at the time.

[595] See Robinson 1996, 13.

He wonders if it is possible for the elements to carry "memories" of their previous forms of existence:

> *... has this water in the form of steam, which may have passed through the lifecycle of plants several times, taken on and retained impressions of the plants' forms, or has the water itself, since it left the lower stage of crystal form, its own higher aiming ability to shape the formation of crystal aggregates more freely, and is it water that has given form to plants or vice versa?*[596]

Likewise, in his chemical and photographic experiments, the ultimate motivation seemed to be the hope of exploring the creative forces of life. Strindberg described himself during this time as a monist and a transformist. He believed that the potential for life was present everywhere in nature, even in seemingly inanimate matter, such as stones and minerals. In these ideas he was influenced in particular by the writings of Haeckel. According to the monistic principle that was popularized by Haeckel, all organic as well as inorganic matter is composed of a single substance that is capable of growth and transformation. Referring to Lavoisier's law of the conservation of matter, Haeckel used the process of crystallization as an example of matter seemingly coming into being anew. Like the opposite process of matter apparently vanishing, as in burning, it is a question of transformation.[597]

In 1892 Haeckel delivered a lecture in Altenburg entitled "Monism as connecting Religion and Science. The Confession of Faith of a Man of Science" ("Monismus als Band zwischen Religion und Wissenschaft, Glaubenskenntniss eines Naturforschers"), which was published in the *Altenburger Zeitung* and later in the same year reproduced in the Berlin journal *Freie Bühne für den Entwickelungskampf der Zeit*. Since then it has been published as a book in several editions. The first English translation appeared in 1895. The purpose of this lecture, as the title suggests, was to establish a bond between religion and science. It summarized Haeckel's earlier considerations on this theme, and it contained a basic formulation of the ideas he continued to reflect on in his later publications, most importantly in the extremely popular book *The Riddle of the Universe* (*Die Welträthsel*), but that did not appear until 1899.[598] Hence, in the 1890s the little book on monism was probably the most approachable introduction to Haeckel's ideas.

In the book *Antibarbarus*, published in German in 1894 and in Swedish in 1906, Strindberg endeavoured to establish a monistic chemistry. Haeckel points out in his lecture that the latest advances of chemistry have suggested that the elements may be reducible to one single original element but so far no further light has been shed on this issue: "Our modern analytical chemistry remains for the present at a standstill, in presence of some seventy irreducible elements, or so-called primary substances."

[596] "... har detta vatten i ångform, som många gånger kanske passerade växternas kretslopp tagit och bibehållit intryck av växternas former, eller har vattnet själv, sedan det lämnade kristallformens lägre stadium, en egen högre strävande förmåga av friare formbildning i kristallaggregaten, och är det vattnet som givit växterna formen eller tvärtom." Strindberg 1921 [1886], 216-217.

[597] Haeckel 1895 [1892], 17.

[598] Di Gregorio 2005, 487-525.

However, he assumes that it was only a matter of time until empirical proof of the existence of this matter would appear, and its discovery would probably realize the alchemists' dream of producing gold from other elements.[599] Strindberg's attempt seems to be a direct answer to this challenge proposed by Haeckel. From the point of view of modern chemistry Strindberg's contribution may have value only as a curiosity but, as is always the case with Strindberg's scientific writing, its poetic value highly exceeds the scientific impact. As Granath puts it, Strindberg's "scientific studies are as it were an attempt to prove what he had already discovered in his art; or conversely, they had their proof, indeed their very apotheosis, in his paintings."[600] Similarly, Feuk has written that while certain texts that Strindberg wrote in the 1890s are rich with overtly alchemical imagery, even the "more practical experiments are essentially a kind of magical-poetic-invocation":

> *He once referred to his formulae and laboratory records as "sonnets in chemistry," and his imagination seems to draw him into the closest empathy with the matter burning in his china crucible. From these experiments we learn less about the chemical substances and more about Strindberg the man and his desire for change.*[601]

However, none of this should be taken to indicate that Strindberg was not serious in his scientific activities. He sent reports of his experiments to scientific journals (some of which were actually published), and he had high hopes for *Antibarbarus* which he thought would revolutionize modern chemistry and earn him honour and publicity as a man of science. He actually sent a copy of *Antibarbarus* to Haeckel, who wrote back to thank him for not having said anything "crazy" in it.[602] He also sent his celestographs along with a written report to Camille Flammarion, the founder and first president of the Société Astronomique, who was known to take an interest in occult and mystical phenomena. Strindberg did not, however, receive any kind of response from the astronomer.[603]

Some commentators have seen a discrepancy in Strindberg's thought between Haeckel's approach which they have interpreted as essentially materialistic and Strindberg's own spiritual emphasis. Carlson assumes that Strindberg liked to cite scientific sources as proof of his own position in the avant-garde of modern science, and he was perhaps too eager in this project to worry about any contradictions.[604] Carlson's judgement is probably correct to a certain extent but in the case of Haeckelian monism we do not need to assume a contradiction between materialistic and spiritual perspectives. For Haeckel, matter and spirit composed an indivisible unity where one could not exist without the other. He defines the monistic principle as "the conviction that there lives 'one spirit in all things,' and that the whole

[599] Haeckel 1895 [1892], 20, 25, 29.

[600] Granath 2005, 23.

[601] Feuk 2001, 118.

[602] Sprinchorn 1982, 55.

[603] Sprinchorn 1982, 12.

[604] Carlson 1996, 213; Sprinchorn 1982, 55.

cognisable world is constituted and has been developed, in accordance with one common fundamental law."[605]

Moreover, Haeckel emphasizes that the inorganic and organic worlds are essentially unified.[606] He maintains that monism is not to be understood as materialistic no more than it is to be understood as spiritualistic. These terms, according to him, are ambiguous and convey absolutely nothing; they could quite easily be substituted one by the other. Monism, however, is clear and unambiguous: "for it an immaterial living spirit is just as unthinkable as a dead, spiritless material; the two are inseparably combined in every atom."[607] Haeckelian Monism, although sometimes considered a crudely materialistic ideology, can also be perceived as a reformulation of Romantic *Naturphilosophie*. The Haeckelian idea of "one spirit in all things" is not very far from the Romantic view of matter being constantly informed by a creative spirit. Like the Romantic naturalists before him, and unlike most of his contemporary physicists, he provided a vision of nature in its entirety. He, in fact, adopted the idea of cosmic unity from Goethe's *Faust*, but rather than systematically applying Goethe's thought, he employed the figure of Goethe as an ideal of a man who was able to combine art and science, and beauty and truth.[608] Moreover, Haeckel identified an artistic element in nature's way of creating. His elaborate illustrations of radiolarians, medusae, and molluscs in *Kunstformen der Natur* (1899-1904) induced the minutest detail of nature with a sense of beauty, organic symmetry, and the fantastic. The fact that beauty was found in these forms of nature appeared for Haeckel as proof that there was a bond between man and nature; this bond was constituted by the presence of "the spirit" everywhere in nature from humans to radiolarians.[609]

In *Inferno* Strindberg expressed his belief in the unity of mind and matter, which he considered to be the true meaning of monism:

> *... at a time when everyone was recognizing the homogeneity of matter, all proclaiming themselves to be monists without being so in fact, I went a step further, drawing the final conclusion from this doctrine and eliminating the frontiers separating matter from what was called mind.*[610]

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[605] Haeckel 1895 [1892], 3

[606] Haeckel 1895 [1892], 3

[607] Haeckel 1895 [1892], 58.

[608] Di Gregorio 2005, 488. Di Gregorio also points out that although Haeckel considered science to be the foundation of all knowledge, he did not believe it should be allowed to have the final word; science was merely the basis on which philosophical truths were to be constructed. Di Gregorio 2005, 496.

[609] See Breidbach 2010, 14. Breidbach argues, moreover, that Haeckel's vision of nature was filtered through the Art Nouveau aesthetics of the period. This made his images highly approachable for contemporary audiences, and they were then in turn applied as elements of Art Nouveau decoration. The most famous example of this is René Binet's monumental entrance gate to the Paris World Exposition in 1900, modelled after one of Haeckel's images of radiolarians. Breidbach 2010, 14-18; see also Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt's article in the same volume, Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 2010.

[610] Strindberg 1968 [1898], 143.

He related the monistic principle directly to alchemical ideas and to the Swedenborgian mysticism that had been introduced to him first through Balzac's *Séraphita* and later directly through an enthusiastic reading of *Arcana Coelestia*. Feuk has observed a kind of alchemical reverie in the celestographs and crystallographs which reflects "mediation over the links between the micro and the macro cosmos, between the earth-bound and the celestial, between light and dark, gold and dross..."[611] In the novel *Inferno* the whole world becomes a network of symbols that have a highly personal meaning for the author. Whether it was a demonic force or a benevolent guiding spirit, there always appeared to be some higher power that was sending him messages and guiding his way in life. When one day on his way to the Luxemburg Gardens he sees a shop sign bearing his own initials, he perceives it as a good omen. Then chance leads him to a book stall where he picks up a book by the Spanish chemist and toxicologists Mathieu Orfila which he opens at random and immediately finds support for his hypothesis about sulphur containing carbon. A couple of weeks later he discovers a boarding house named Hôtel Orfila and makes his home there. All kinds of apparently accidental signs contained personal messages: a walnut germ examined under a microscope revealed an embryo with its hands clasped in prayer, and pieces of burned coal turned into sculptures that were fine enough to fool a painter friend (Strindberg is probably suggesting that it was Munch) into believing that they were sculptures made by the Norwegian artist Theodor Kittelsen – and not only that: they even had the power to frighten away sparrows that had come to Strindberg's window in search of bread crumbs. Strindberg understood this as a confirmation "that there was a resemblance there perceptible even to animals and that there is a reality underlying the play of inert matter and flames."[612] According to Strindberg's worldview, everything was subject to a great universal plan. Hence, the accidental images, which appeared in his celestographs or in his paintings, had the potential to carry highly important messages from a realm that was unattainable for the conscious mind. All this was a manifestation of the "theology of chance" that he had spoken about in a letter to his friend L. Littmansson in 1894: to create art that was original and always new, one had to work according to the creative powers of nature.[613]

Strindberg's tendency to interpret seemingly meaningless everyday occurrences as the interference of evil powers has sometimes been understood as a sign of paranoia. There is no doubt that the so called Inferno period was a time of great psychological stress for the author, and he probably suffered a nervous breakdown or two. However, the novel *Inferno* reflects the popular ideas of the period, according

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[611] Feuk 2001, 127.

[612] Strindberg 1968 [1898] , 152.

[613] Strindberg was dreaming about composing music the same way he was painting, and he had come up with an idea for a Music-Kaleidoscope: "Du vet att man i väfverierna ritar mönster efter Kaleidoskop och derför äro byxtygerna alltid nya om våren. Hvarför inte ge ny musik fortuite om hvar vår. Slumpens teologi. Arbeta som nature, icke efter nature. Mins du att Ekström sökte att det skulle se tillfälligt ut. Han arbetar som Nevers-porslin uppfinnare; stänkvälling på måfå; inte två pjäser lika, aldrig tröttande. / Så målar jag! Derför kunna inte mina taflor kopieras (och svårligen säljas!)" Strindberg's letter to Littmansson, Aug. 13 1894, cited from Eklund (ed.) 1968, 10, 215.

to which exceptional sensitivity and even mental illness could be beneficial for artistic creativity.[614] Moreover, the vision of the whole cosmos as a network of personally meaningful symbols was an idea that Strindberg clearly adapted from the writings of Swedenborg. Hence, rather than seeing it as a case history of a mental illness, we should understand *Inferno* as first and foremost a work of fiction, and as an expression of a the interconnectedness of art and life in a very modern sense.[615] As Granath puts it, Strindberg was "beginning to live out the symbolism that his contemporaries were merely committing to paper."[616] Furthermore, this was no temporary whim but an idea Strindberg continued to process throughout the rest of his life. This is manifested, for instance, in his speculations about cloud formations that he wrote about in *A Blue Book* (*En blå bok*, 1907), and later continued to explore in a series of photographs (1907-08). Strindberg perceived reoccurring patterns in the clouds and concluded that what he was seeing were not clouds but the "high places" that Swedenborg wrote about, where unknown beings reside.[617]

As tempting as it may seem to disregard at least the most bizarre elements of Strindberg's photographic experiments as nothing but the products of a disturbed mind, Campany has correctly pointed out that we should not dismiss the forces that motivated his intellectual and artistic activities:

> *Rational and irrational, mad and tame, they emerge from the profound questions that are within photography itself: What is the relation between appearance and meaning? Does photography offer impartial knowledge or a surface for imaginary projection? Does it have any value outside conventional uses? These are questions neither art nor science have entirely contained. Strindberg may have grasped over a hundred years ago that they never would.*[618]

Besides, in one sense, the celestographs indeed reveal a scientific phenomenon. Feuk has observed that "the dual view, whereby the starry sky and the earthly matter appear to move within and trough one another" in fact represents things precisely as scientists nowadays believe them to be:

> *All elements heavier than hydrogen and helium are created by nuclear reactions in the interior of stars, and are hurled out into space particularly during gigantic supernova eruptions. Almost every atom that goes to make up our earthly world – rocks, plants,*

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[614] Strindberg was also very well aware of the latest developments of neurology; during his Berlin years spent most of his time among doctors and neurologists rather than with artists and writers. Lathe 1972, 32-33.

[615] Olof Lagercrantz, in his 1979 biography, discouraged too literal readings of Strindberg's autobiographical novels (e.g. *The Son of a Servant*, *A Fool's Defence*, *Inferno*, *Legends*, and *Black Banners*). Lagercrantz 1979, 315 and passim. Granath, moreover, points out that Strindberg was highly theatrical even in his private life, "staging his own life and making grandiose appearances in the pages of his books" – and he was by no means unaware of the publicity value that these acts contained. Granath 2005, 29.

[616] Granath 2005, 24.

[617] Hemmingson 1989b, 128.

[618] Campany 2005, 119

human beings – must once have been inside exploding megastars, and thus in a dizzyingly material sense we do in fact consist of astral matter.[619]

PHOTOGRAPHIC SUBJECTIVITY

Strindberg discovered in photography a very fruitful medium for exploring the relationship between science and art, and when he pointed the camera towards himself, questions of subjectivity, the soul, and life and death, were introduced into this interplay of ideas. The Gersau images, as we saw in the beginning of this chapter, reflected the naturalistic attitude of Strindberg's literary activities from the period. They have a psychological intensity that is personal, yet in the end leaves the viewer at confusion. Despite the illusion of naturalism, the role-playing in these images does not allow the viewer to construct a coherent image of the author. In this sense, these images can be seen to anticipate the complexities of self-presentation that are involved in twentieth-century art and photography. The most obvious comparison can be found in the photographic self-portraiture of Cindy Sherman, the series *Untitled Film Stills* in particular. Admittedly, Sherman's still images from non-existent films go several steps further in their role-playing and questioning of an established identity. Every attempt to ascertain an original is futile; the shots are not based on any existing film, and it hence becomes doubtful who is acting and in which role. Their nature is that of simulacra; they are copies without an original – and the question then is, whether this is indeed the true nature of our self.[620] Yet, Strindberg's Gersau series can be seen to reflect a similar playfulness and a sense of narcissism and pride mixed with doubt and anxiety that has become Sherman's trademark. Moreover, both Sherman's and Strindberg's images deal with the interplay between private and public dimensions of identity. In fact, what we encounter in this comparison is something that is fundamental to self-portraiture in general – that is, the relation between subjectivity and representation.

However, as the literary theorist Ernst van Alphen has contended, in Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* this paradigmatic relation is reversed, and thus the standard view of the portrait is turned inside out: "We don't see a transparent representation of a 'full' subjectivity, instead we see a photograph of a subject which is constructed in the image of representation."[621] For Sherman this reversal served as an arena for deconstructing established notions of subjectivity – most of all notions of femininity in her case.[622] Similarly, in Strindberg's Gersau pictures the role-playing and the questioning of established categories of identity result in a confusion of subjectivity. On one level, Strindberg's motivation for the series was to offer a different view of his character from that established in the media. That is, he wanted to offer an image of domesticity instead of the view of him as an impossible character and a

[619] Feuk 2001, 127.

[620] Krauss 1994, 17; see also Jones 2006, 35-79.

[621] van Alphen 1997, 244.

[622] van Alphen 1997, 244-5.

misogynist. However, this new image of Strindberg that comes to view from the photographs is too multifaceted to offer even the slightest illusion of coherence. The Gersau series can thus be seen to represent in a detailed way the different aspects of the person known as "Strindberg." We can see that the more layers we add to this subject, the more its essence becomes confused and faded. It appears that through this project it became more and more obvious to Strindberg that the essence of things does not reside in the multiplicity of naturalistic details.

Strindberg's experiments with photography from the 1890s are based on a very different attitude towards the photographic technique, but similarly to the Gersau images, they deal with questions of photographic subjectivity and with the relationship between the image and reality. Strindberg's later photographic self-portraits completely counteract the idea of photographic likeness. Moreover, they most adamantly question the belief that the essence of the subject resides in this likeness. But he never fully abandoned his belief that a fundamental core of the self existed beneath the shifting surface.

As we have seen, Strindberg was always interested in the interplay of passive and active elements at work in the creative process. Photography, due to its passive character of mechanical reproduction would appear to remain on the surface level of things. However, for Strindberg, it was precisely the passive element in creativity which was able to imitate nature's way of creating – that is, the *natura naturans* aspect – and hence to penetrate beneath the surface. The later images reflect also the deep suspicion that Strindberg felt towards photographic apparatuses and, in particular, towards lenses – both those of the camera and of the eye. He was interested in the construction of the eye and how it affected vision. For instance, he had a theory that the concave form of the retina caused us to perceive everything as having a round shape, like the earth, the ocean, and the horizon. Already in the 1880s Strindberg had discovered in the writings of Nordau the idea that the earth perhaps was not round.[623] Hence, in his photographic images he attempted to overcome the restriction of not only the photographic medium, but also of our physical vision which he believed created a falsified perception of reality.

During the 1890s, Strindberg came up with an idea of establishing a photographic studio specializing in "psychological portraits." This would have involved a partly occultist working method and the use of a "camera obscura" which he believed to enhance the psychological effect of the resulting image. The Strindberg-memoir written by the author Adolf Paul, who was Strindberg's friend and admirer during their time in Berlin, contains an account of these plans which, in the end, were never put into operation. Paul's book has a somewhat scornful tone resulting from the resentment he later felt towards his former idol.[624] Paul explains that Strindberg had made for himself a camera out of an old cigar box. It had no lenses at all, only a cardboard sheet with a hole in it. The longer exposure time necessary for this kind of camera gave Strindberg the opportunity to induce a kind of

[623] Hemmingson 1989a, 91-92.

[624] Hemmingson 1989a, 74-75.

hypnotic suggestion on his subjects – or “victims” as he himself called them according to Paul:

> *“I have prepared a story for myself,” he said, “which contains all possible moods. I tell this story to myself while I am exposing the plates and gazing fixedly at the victim. Without suspecting that I am forcing him to do so, only under the influence of my suggestion, he is obliged to react to all the moods I go through in the meantime. And the plate fixes the expression on his face. The whole thing lasts exactly thirty seconds – my story is carefully calculated to fit the measurement. In thirty seconds I have captured the whole man!”*[625]

Strindberg was interested in invisible energies, and he believed that photographs could contain a telepathic power. In 1896 he had come into contact with the study *L’Extériorisation de la sensibilité* (The exteriorization of sensitivity, 1895) by the French occultist Albert de Rochas. In this study de Rochas stated that two people can affect each other at a distance through the power of invisible energies. This appeared to explain for Strindberg the strange sensations that he had been experiencing of some malevolent power attempting to bring him to harm. Moreover, de Rochas claimed that it was possible to store an individual’s sensitivity into an external object, such as a glass of water, or, most significantly, into a photograph. Brandell has pointed out that Strindberg took Rochas’s initial ideas several steps further in his own interpretations. For Rochas it was only the “sensitivity” and not the entire human being (the soul) that could be exteriorized. [626] Strindberg, on the other hand, appeared to believe, at least according to Paul’s description, that with this psychological method he would be able to “capture the whole man” in the photographic image.

This idea was something that Strindberg had been developing already before his encounter with de Rochas’s study, and it had a great significance for him throughout the rest of his life. Already in 1895 when he was alone in Paris, separated from his family, he had been experimenting with a portrait of his young daughter Kerstin, trying to induce a mild illness on her, so that the family would be reunited. Around the same time his three children from the first marriage became seriously ill, which he interpreted as proof of the power of these experiments. In the beginning of the twentieth century when he started to make enlargements of photographs with the help on his old friend, the photographer Herman Anderson, he also felt that the images would bring him into contact with their subjects. In a 1906 letter to Harriet Bosse (his third wife, whom he had by that time already divorced) he writes about the portraits of his mother and of his daughter Anne-Marie (Lillan) – whose image he had previously described as “supernaturally beautiful.”[627] His account reflects the great psychological meaning that these images had for him, and also the way that he considered them as works of art:

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[625] Paul 1915, 36-37. English translation cited from Hemmingson 1989b, 158.

[626] Brandell 1950, 104-105.

[627] Hemmingson 1989b, 107-108.

Today I received a great artwork. Mother's portrait, the larger-than-life-sized face only, from the photograph taken in Helsinki two years ago (Large hat and Coat), but without the hat this time. It is Botticelli, broad strokes, glorious tones, and a grain *like in an old oil painting. But the picture of Lillan lights up the whole room where she sits at a window behind the palm tree in Beethoven's place.*[628]

Paul mentions a self-portrait completed according to the "psychological" method: an image of Strindberg beside a shield with the head of Medusa carved by himself. If this image ever existed, it unfortunately has not survived.[629] There are, however several photographic self-portraits from the early 1890s representing Strindberg as a bohemian artist. It should be noted that we do not in fact know whether these were taken by Strindberg himself, but since it was probably Strindberg himself who staged the photographs and no name of another photographer has ever been attached to them, I believe we may conclude that these images, just like the Gersau series, can be treated as self-portraits. These images were taken with a normal camera with lenses, but they nonetheless reflect a very strong psychological tension. Particularly the image in which Strindberg faces the viewer directly has a strangely hypnotic and somewhat daunting effect (fig. 25). He appears as a stern and dark figure, wrapped inside his big black overcoat, stock-still, his gaze turned inward and dark shadows lingering on his brow. It seems as if the gaze of this gloomy creature is pulling the viewer towards the dark realm where his own mind already resides. This image very closely resembles Christian Krohg's portrait of Strindberg from 1893 (The Ibsen Museum, Oslo). The pose and the facial expression are similar, and he is even wearing the very same clothes. Strindberg posed several times for the Norwegian painter in Berlin, and Krogh painted altogether seven portraits of him. In the 1893 painting, as in the photograph, Strindberg's appears as a disturbed yet highly imposing figure. The contrast between light and darkness is more emphasized in the painting than in the photograph. A strong light hits one side of the head while the other side remains in the shadows, indicating perhaps the battle between these two opposing powers that was going on inside him.

In the beginning of the twentieth century Strindberg gave up painting altogether but his interest in photography only intensified. In 1906 he joined forces with Herman Anderson in order to create a series of life-size portraits. He believed that the face-to-face quality of these images would allow for an intimate communion between souls. Anderson was known to have alchemical leanings, and he had written articles about the philosophical meaning of photographs. One of his articles explored the question of "soul" in portrait photography, and it was probably this one Strindberg had in mind when he contacted his friend in order to start collaboration. The extent of Strindberg's photographic activities during this period is revealed in an account given by the naturalist Gustaf Eisen who visited Strindberg's flat in the same year, and found all chairs, tables, and couches covered with photographs, most of them images of Strindberg himself:

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[628] Cited from Hemmingson 1989b, 111.

[629] Hemmingson 1989b, 76

The heads were almost full-size and I thought that was the greatest fault about them. They all had a certain indefiniteness of line, something that seemed attractive since few people, if any at all, see objects as sharply in reality as they are in the picture.[630]

Strindberg explained to Eisen that Anderson was working under his supervision, "because I am seeking the truth as eagerly in the art of photography as in everything else ..."[631] Anderson begun his work by making blow-ups of old photographs, but was soon allowed to start his original photography. Together they constructed the so called "Wunderkamera" with which Strindberg was finally able to fulfil his dream of life-sized portrait photography. These portraits reflect the same idea of a close contact between the image and the object that Strindberg had already been exploring in the photograms of crystallization. The camera that was used for the portraits has not survived but it must have been a large apparatus as it was designed for photographic plates of 24x30 cm. It had a very simple biconvex lens taken from ordinary binoculars.[632] Inspired by Strindberg's simple working methods, Anderson started to take portrait photographs of Swedish cultural figures with a small ordinary camera and no special lighting. Among the photographs in this series, there are several images of Strindberg.[633]

Strindberg's self-portraits taken with the Wunderkamera (fig. 26) reflect a similar tension between subjectivity and universality that we encountered in Thesleff's self-portraits. As I have already noted, these later photographic activities are based on a method and attitude that in a certain sense are completely opposite to the ones at work in the Gersau series. The Gersau photographs were based on an idea of seriality whereas in the later self-portraits he attempted to capture the fundamental nature of himself in one single image. An analogy with alchemy is particularly appropriate here: it was a question of minimizing all naturalistic details in order to reveal the essence of the self, that is, the soul. Moreover, like Thesleff's spiritualized self-image, Strindberg's photographs appear to be striving towards a sense of immateriality. Indeed, the photographic medium here serves as a perfect tool for dematerialization of the image. The object status of a photograph is far more questionable than that of a drawing or a painting. Of course, this issue has become more acute than ever during the era of digital images, but it has always been an element of photography. In Strindberg's photographic portraits this immateriality is combined with a sense of presence. Indeed, the magic of photography, at least in Strindberg's mind, would allow the person in the image to be truly present – no less present than if he was there in person, or perhaps even more so.

Let us finally note that Strindberg, who was untrained as a painter, was never able to paint human beings. Therefore, the camera offered for him a truly privileged means of capturing his own likeness. However, after the first naturalistic self-portraits, what he truly wanted to capture with photography was the soul. His later

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[630] Gustaf Eisen, "Strindberg som fotograf," Vecko-Journalen, Stockholm, 1920:14. Cited from Hemmingson 1989a, 167.

[631] Hemmingson 1989a, 168.

[632] Hemmingson 1989b, 118.

[633] Hemmingson 1989b, 124-5.

self-portraits are in this sense most intimately related with the contemporaneous attempts to photograph spirits. Similarly to spirit photography that sought to prove the existence of spirits, Strindberg aimed at establishing scientific proof for the existence of the soul. At the same time these experiments attest to his interest in the subjective and irrational possibilities of photography. Moreover, if his photographic self-portraits are understood as works of art, they take part in the process of dematerialization that becomes a central element of art at the fin-de-siècle and beyond. A photograph as an object lies somewhere between materiality and immateriality. In the age of digital images the immaterial character of photographs has become more apparent, but even with analogue photography we cannot really claim that the image resides in the paper print, nor can it be identified with the negative.

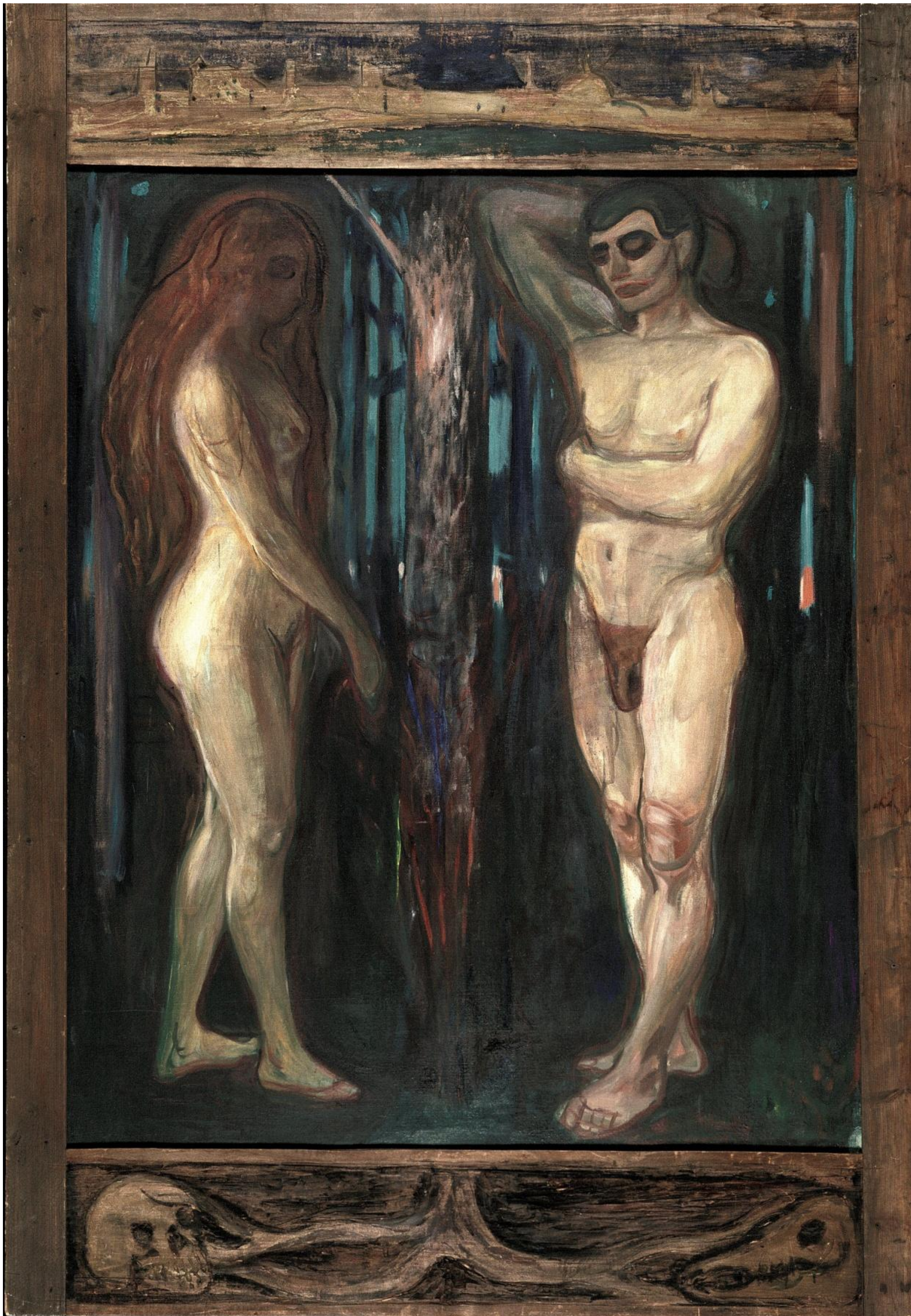
A photograph is an object made of light, and in this sense it is completely immaterial. Yet, its indexical quality, its tendency to always point towards an original, connects it to the physical world in a very concrete sense. Rugg has suggested that photographs supply a metaphor for the decentred self because they offer multiple views and versions of the same person. At the same time they "re-anchor the subject in the physical world." She notes that even if "as inhabitants of the poststructuralist world" we have become distrustful of the evidential power of photographs, we should also keep in mind the large extent to which photographs are used for verification of identity in passports, drivers' licences and other such documents.[634] No matter how sceptical we have become, we still have a tendency to accept the objective role of photography, and this belief "allows us to admit photographs as evidence in courts of law and persuades some that the spirits of the dead or heavenly emissaries can be captured on photographic film."[635] Roland Barthes stated that "the photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity."[636] Rugg, however, reformulates this argument, noting that "the photograph is not the 'advent' of the self's otherness, but a convincing piece of evidence for something already suspected."[637] The photographic self-portrait is in this sense, a confirmation of Rimbaud's declaration of the self as other. It produces a visible trace of the process of objectifying the self.

[634] Rugg 1997, 1-2.

[635] Rugg 1997, 5.

[636] Barthes 1981 [1980], 12.

[637] Rugg 1997, 17.



27. **Edvard Munch**, *Metabolism*, 1898–1900 and c. 1918.

28. **Edvard Munch**, *Moonlight,* 1895.

31. **J.F. Willumsen**, *Reflection*, 1896,

32**. J. F. Willumsen,** *The Family Vase*, 1891.

Page 206: 29. **J.F. Willumsen**, *The Great Relief*, 1893–1928
Page 207: 30. **J.F. Willumsen**, *Jotunheim*, 1892–1893.

33. **J. F. Willumsen**, *The Great Relief. Plaster model*, 1894.

34**. J. F. Willumsen**, *The Great Relief. Plaster model*, 1914–1925.

6 THE SELF AND THE WORLD

And now! The brain's thought, the eye's vision, microscope, telescope, spectroscope, they have drawn back the curtain upon a design, a network, a mesh behind the mists of substance. Behind the muscles, behind the green leaf, behind the hard stone, in among cells, in among planets. A glorious design of curving, sweeping lines with radiant interspace... Some cells change under combustion; some dance themselves to death. Every line contorts itself, every spiral incurvates itself ... Just look at those long straight threads linking member to member, those most visible to the human eye. Watch them, row upon myriad row of them, as they so faintly begin to tremble, so imperceptibly assert their will – creating the new, drawing new lines, twisting and turning. See, as the urgency grows, the strangely intricate play of those curving lines! ... Everything out there is within me. My soul, my body emerged from the volcanic eruption of the worlds.

— Sigbjørn Obstfelder[638]

EVERYTHING OUT THERE IS WITHIN ME

Freud wrote in 1917 about the three fundamental humiliations that human narcissism has had to endure in the hands of science. The first of these was the cosmological humiliation caused by the realization that man was not, after all, the centre of the universe. The second, biological humiliation came with the theory of evolution which robbed man of his privilege of having been specially created. The third, most bitter blow to man's craving for grandiosity came with the conceptualization of the unconscious, which we should keep in mind, predated Freud's publications – it was already originated in the Romantic idea of the world soul. This realization meant that man was no longer "master in his own house, but that he must remain content with the veriest scraps of information about what is going on unconsciously in his own mind."[639] Jean Clair has noted that if we accept Freud's analysis, we can see his

[638] Obstfelder 1900 1987 [1900], 39-41.

[639] Freud 1963, 285.

work as an attempt to heal these wounds inflicted on human narcissism by the advancement of science. Art rather than science would serve as a cure to restore the lost position of humanity. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud describes art as the prime example of "satisfaction through phantasy"; art induces in us a "mild narcosis" which can temporarily withdraw us from the pressure of vital needs, although it is not strong enough to make us forget real misery.[640] Through the resuscitation of myths, beliefs and religious syncretism humanity would reclaim its place at the centre of the cosmos; through the exercise of his unique capacity for abstract thought and awareness of his own death he could rise again on the top of biological hierarchy; and by probing the innermost secrets of his own soul, he could come to know his own self.[641] The fin-de-siècle preoccupation with the self can be seen as an answer to these threats that resulted from the realization that the self was inherently unknowable. The heroic and flamboyant self of Romanticism was replaced by a self that was threatened and elusive: "If the Self exists, where are its boundaries? For they fade the moment we seem to grasp them, and we must wonder if they ever really existed."[642]

Clair perceives this loss of coherent self as the very cornerstone of the Symbolist project, and we might add that is a very unstable foundation indeed. Even so, Clair points out that the moment of the self in disintegration is also the moment of the recovery of this very same self. This is manifested as a psychological attitude of quiet repose and inwardness.[643] Moreover, the threatened position of the self functioned as a driving force for artist to find new ways of conceptualizing this self that appeared to be in a state of disintegration.

The passage from Obstfelder's *A Priest's Diary*, cited at the opening of this chapter, manifests the fin-de-siècle endeavour to reunite man's soul with the cosmos. The new scientific discoveries are not perceived here as threats but rather as revelation, and as the basis of a new belief system that will come to replace traditional religiosity. However, despite its scientific origin, this new world view was to be fundamentally spiritual. Obstfelder's attempt to re-establish the bond between science and religion can be seen to echo the popular Haeckelian perspective. The artistic quest to find synthesis of the self and the world, and the increasingly subjective approaches which often ultimately sought to reach a more universal level of meaning, meant that self-exploration became both the method and the aim of almost all artistic activity. In terms of self-portraiture this meant that it became increasingly difficult to define this genre; the traditional rules and definitions no longer applied. The move away from mimetic representation meant that the concept of likeness was no longer a suitable criterion for analyzing and defining self-portraiture. However, this by no means indicated that the importance of self-

[640] Freud 1961, 80-81.

[641] This brief analysis of Freud's thought has been given in an introduction written by Clair to the catalogue of the 1995 exhibition *Lost Paradise. Symbolist Europe*. According to Clair Freud is "perhaps the last of Symbolism's intellectual heirs", and he notes that Freud's solution to the problem of humanity's lost position is strikingly similar to Symbolist ideology. Clair 1995b, 21-22.

[642] Clair 1995b, 125.

[643] Clair 1995b, 135.

portraiture somehow decreased. On the contrary, the self was seen as the fundamental source of art, and everything was filtered through it.

Munch's art composes one of the most comprehensive manifestations of the fin-de-siècle search for unity between the self and the world. Due to its subjective and autobiographical nature it is extremely difficult to separate self-portraiture from other works in Munch's oeuvre. This issue arose also for the organizers of the 2005 exhibition of Munch's self-portraits (Moderna Museet, Stockholm; The Munch Museum, Oslo; Royal Academy of Arts, London). Iris Müller-Westerman, who was the curator of the exhibition, explains that in addition to the more traditional self-portraits ("outwardly recognizable works") "allegorical, 'inwardly' recognizable works" were also chosen for the exhibition "in order to examine the artist's view of himself more deeply." However, reservations had to be made, "because Munch's work has strong autobiographical features, many of the stylized male figures, especially in Munch's art before 1900, represent the artist himself. Yet, if all these pictures were defined as self-portraits, the differences between them and his other works would become blurred."[644] The exhibition included several paintings which perhaps would not be defined as self-portraits in any traditional terms, such as *The Flower of Pain* (1898, The Munch Museum, Oslo), *Golgotha* (1900, The Munch Museum, Oslo), and *The Dance of Life* (1899–1900 The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo). On the other hand, *Death in the Sick Room* (1893, The Munch Museum, Oslo), which deals with the death of Munch's sister and obviously had a deeply personal meaning for the artist, is not treated as a self-portrait. As we can see, these kinds of definitions and limitations cannot avoid being to a certain extent arbitrary.

In this chapter I will take up this issue, but instead of perceiving it as a question of finding a meaningful definition, I shall approach this "stretching of borders" as an artistic phenomenon in itself. It is considered here as a reflection of the most fundamental philosophical issues of the period. I interpret it as a manifestation of the changing status of the artwork, as well of the new conception of the self and the endeavour to reassess its place and meaning in the context of the modern world. To demonstrate this idea, I will examine two artistic processes, both of which are perceived here as manifestations of the search for meaning and purpose in the modern world, and both can be seen as expressions of the idea that in a creative process the self becomes absorbed into a larger realm of being. Moreover, they both exemplify the processual orientation that becomes an important element of art at the fin-de-siècle. The first example is the cycle of works by Munch which he began assembling in the 1890s, and later named the *Frieze of Life*. The second, example is the sculptural wall known as the *Great Relief* by J.F. Willumsen (fig. 29), which was completed in 1928 but, similarly to Munch's *Frieze*, the creative process behind the work extended through several decades. When the *Relief* was completed, however, the process ended – although, as we shall see, the monument that stands at the end of this endeavour no longer corresponded with the artist's original idea. Munch's *Frieze*, on the other hand, remained an open-ended ensemble of works, both

[644] Müller-Westerman 2005, 16; see also Eggum 1978, 11.

“constant and variable,” as Heller has described it.[645] Certain motifs were always included when the *Frieze* was exhibited, whilst others appeared perhaps once or twice after which they were no longer considered to be parts of the ensemble. Moreover, several paintings exist in multiple versions, and there is no definitive way of distinguish between an “original” and a “copy.” An additional level of confusion results from Munch’s notoriously unreliable dating and his tendency to change the names of his paintings.[646] Munch’s biographer Rolf Stenersen has commented on this issue, giving a lively account of Munch’s reasoning about the dating of his paintings:

> *In his later period, he might add a few brush strokes to paintings that had been standing around for many years and then supply such works with very recent dates. On the other hand, paintings completed in the 1930s might be given dates going ten to fifteen years back. “Of course I realize that I painted that picture right now ... However, I've had it ready in my mind for a long time – actually, it's probably fifteen years since I first sketched it. The fact is, I haven't had time to finish it until now. So it ought to be marked 1906-1908.”*[647]

Both Munch and Willumsen were probably motivated by the anti-bourgeois and anti-commercial aspects of creating large-scale works (or an ensemble of works in Munch’s case) instead of making individual paintings that would have been easier to sell. Aurier wrote as a conclusion to his famous definition of Symbolism, that the original purpose of art cannot have been anything other than to decorate the walls of human edifices with thoughts, dreams, and ideas. Easel painting, on the other hand, was an invention of the commercial spirit of decadent societies. In Gauguin Aurier saw a “décorateur de génie,” and hence he ended his article with the famous exclamation: “Walls! Walls! Give him walls!”[648] Aurier believed that in the new era that was about to begin, the materialistic art of the nineteenth century, the art of the Salons and of the bourgeoisie, would be displaced by a new form of art that was to be idealistic and mystical. Aurier maintained that art and mysticism were the only remaining means towards liberation that were available for the modern man. Among the artists of this new movement Aurier mentions Willumsen, although not entirely in a positive sense, calling him a caricaturist.[649]

In addition to the anti-commercial penchant, the fin-de-siècle preference for mural paintings and other large-scale works reflected the conception that art would come to replace traditional religion. According to Willumsen, the sole purpose of art was the inner development of mankind, everything else was superfluous or even harmful. Art for him was a method of expression, it was a “language just like

[645] Heller 1969, 15.

[646] Stenersen 1969, 94.

[647] Stenersen 1969, 94.

[648] Aurier 1893, 216, 219 (“Le Symbolisme en peinture – Paul Gauguin”).

[649] Aurier 1893, 293-94, 309 (”Les Peintres symbolistes”).

literature and music," and it had no value in itself.[650] Hence, Willumsen originally wanted to place his *Relief* in a public setting so that people would be forced to interact with it, and this would encourage their spiritual development. Similarly, Munch's art can be seen as a manifestation of the whole process of his spiritual searching. Heller has connected Munch's preoccupation with seriality directly with his monistic belief: "As the paintings combined into the cycle devoted to themes of life, love, and death, their totality expressed the belief that individual moments, situations and experiences were but the inferior parts of Monism's eternal, constant unity."[651]

MUNCH'S *FRIEZE OF LIFE* AND THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Munch's oeuvre in its totality, and particularly his works from the 1890s, may be seen as a continuous process of self-reflection that aims at relocating the self in the world and re-establishing the lost unity. His creative activities were always centred on his own subjective experience but at the same time he wanted to express something more general and universal; not merely his own experiences and emotions but the whole human condition and its agonizing uncertainty.[652] This is reflected in his desire to present his works in cyclical form, beginning in the composition of six paintings under the title *Love*, which was exhibited in Berlin in 1893. The series gradually developed into the *Frieze of Life*, in which the original theme of love was complemented by sections devoted to existential fear and death. All these aspects were interconnected in Munch's personal philosophy of life. The origins of the *Frieze* have been thoroughly documented by Heller in his doctoral thesis from 1969, and his many subsequent publications have elaborated on the subject. Hence, I will offer here only a brief summary of the different phases of the *Frieze*, the purpose of which is to give the reader an idea of the ongoing creative process that constitutes this work of art as a whole.[653]

I have already mentioned the anti-commercial motivation behind Munch's desire to create a large ensemble of paintings. Another reason behind the serial idea was Munch's desire to make his paintings more comprehensible. In 1892 he wrote in a letter to the Danish artist Johan Rohde about a series of paintings on the subject of "love and death" that he was working with, stating that many of his paintings already belonged to it. The publicity that Munch had received after the scandalous Verein Berliner Künstler exhibition of 1892 had resulted in several large exhibitions around

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[650] "... Malerkunsten ikke har noget Maal I sig selv. Nei, den er kun et Middel til at udtrykke Noget, er ikke selv et Maal, den er et Sprog ligeson Literatur og Musik ... Alt som ikke er gjort for at forbedre menneskene og bringe dem nærmere Fuldkommenheden, er overflødelig, ja skadeligt ..." Willumsen in an interview with the Norwegian artist Christian Krohg in 1903. Krohg 1920, 296.

[651] Heller 1984, 103-104.

[652] Patricia Berman has observed that the way Munch employs elements of his own life in his art could be viewed as a kind of performance, the real aim of which is to present the "modern life of the soul." Berman 2006, 46.

[653] The primary sources for my account have been Heller 1969, Heller 1984, and Heller 1993.

Germany and Scandinavia. Munch later explained that when he saw his works exhibited together he realized that they communicated together, and that their overall effect was something much more profound than the sum of the individual parts:

> *When they were hung together, suddenly a single musical note passed through them all. They became completely different from what they had been previously. A symphony resulted.*[654]

In Berlin, the ideas that circulated among the members of the Ferkel group also provided Munch with new material for his art. For instance, the erotically charged interpretations of Schopenhauer's philosophy can be seen reflected in Munch's vision of love as a battle between the sexes. Moreover, the importance of his close relationship with Przybyszewski during that time must not be overlooked. Przybyszewski was keenly interested in the most recent developments in neurology and psychology, particularly in the theories about the rhythmic transmission of thought waves through the power of hypnotism or suggestion.[655] During this period, Munch's art gained in psychological intensity as he integrated these ideas into his art. This did not mean only that he adopted new kinds of subject matter; it entailed a transformation in his attitude towards the artistic process as a whole.

In December 1893, after having spent an extremely productive summer and autumn in Norway, Munch was back in Berlin to set up an exhibition of his new paintings at a rented gallery space at 19 Unter den Linden. Six paintings were arranged under the title *Studie zu einer Serie: Die Liebe* (Study for a series: Love). The names of the paintings were listed as: *Sommernachts-Traum* (A Summer Night's Dream), *Kuss* (Kiss), *Liebe und Schmertz* (Love and Pain), *Das Madonna-Gesicht* (The Face of a Madonna), *Eifersucht* (Jealousy), *Verzweiflung* (Despair). Heller has identified them as the paintings that later have become known as *The Voice*, *Kiss*, *Vampire*, *Madonna*, *Melancholy-Jealousy* (*The Yellow Boat*), and *The Scream*. He notes, however, that it is impossible to say exactly which paintings were on display as all of these motifs exist in several versions from the period 1892–93. Nevertheless, these subjects are still considered central to the *Frieze*; they constitute one side of the thematic whole that Munch had written about in the letter to Rohde – the theme of love. The other side – the theme of death – was not to be arranged as part of the series until the 1902 exhibition at the Berlin Secession. But the theme of death was present already in the 1893 exhibition in the form of the painting entitled *A Death*, later known as *Death in the Sick Room*. This impressive painting, which embodied Munch's memory of the death of his sister, was placed at the top of the entrance stairway to the exhibition space, so that is served as a dramatic introduction to Munch's works.[656]

Munch's series has obvious links with other serial artworks which were made around the same time. The theme and title of the first version of the *Frieze* suggests a

[654] Letter draft to Jens Thiis c. 1933, cited from Heller 1984, 103.

[655] Lathe 1972, 21-22.

[656] Heller 1993, 30-31.

connection with Max Klinger's series of etchings entitled *A Love* (1887). This comparison was made already by Heller in his 1969 dissertation. Klinger's cycle is a moralizing narrative account of a young upper-class woman who enters into a love affair. Her initial happiness quickly turns into guilt and shame, and she finally ends up dying in childbirth. The psychological effect and the tone of Schopenhauerian pessimism give a sense of modernity to Klinger's quasi-Naturalistic rendering, but compared to Munch universalizing approach, Klinger's work appears anecdotal and literary – this is evident already in the naming of the series as "*Eine* Liebe," whereas Munch's cycle was "*Die* Liebe."[657]

Munch continued to display the series *Love* throughout the 1890s in Germany, as well as in France, Norway, and Sweden. He kept adding new works to the whole so that by the 1895 joint exhibition with Axel Gallén at Ugo Barroccio's gallery in Berlin the number of paintings had reached fifteen. During the latter part of the 1890s Munch was mostly occupied with turning the motifs of his paintings into graphic works. He began assembling a portfolio of prints with the title *The Mirror* in which he united the theme of love with the theme of death.[658] Munch briefly abandoned the cycle between 1897 and 1899, and when he returned to it he was seeking to finally harmonize the components of love and death. The results were exhibited at the Berlin Secession in 1902. A totality of twenty-two paintings, most of which he had painted between 1893 and 1895, was arranged in thematic sections on the walls of the exhibition building. The theme of the left-hand wall was the awakening of love, and it contained paintings like *Red and White* (1899-1900, The Munch Museum, Oslo), *The Kiss* (c. 1893, The Munch Museum, Oslo), and *Madonna* (1894, The National Museum Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo). On the next wall were paintings related to the theme of blossoming and dying of love: *Ashes* (c. 1895, The National Museum Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo), *Vampire* (1893, The Gothenburg Museum of Art), *Jealousy* (1895 Bergen Kunst Museum, Rasmus Meyer Collections). Then came anxiety and fear of life with paintings such as *Golgotha* (1900, The Munc Museum, Oslo) and *The Scream* (1893, fig. 15). And finally, on the right-hand wall was the theme of death represented by paintings like *Metabolism* (fig. 27) and *Death in the Sickroom*, which had already been displayed as an introduction to the 1893 exhibition of the *Love* series.[659] Heller has noted, however, that whereas in 1893 death had been presented as an ironic but optimistic beginning of the series, it now appeared as a fatalistic and pessimistic conclusion.[660]

The *Frieze* was then exhibited in a very similar composition in Leipzig in 1903 where Munch had it photographed, then in 1904 in Christiania and in 1905 in Prague. The project seemed to be completed. Munch was willing to sell the *Frieze* as a totality, but when no suitable buyer appeared, he started to sell the individual

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[657] See Heller 1969, 153-155.

[658] The original title for the series seems to have been "Love." Høifødt assumes that the name change is related to the enlargement of the theme to include more metaphysical subjects, such as *In the Land of Crystals* and *Metabolism*. Høifødt 2003, 53; see also Torjusen 1986.

[659] For full listing of paintings at the exhibition, see Heller 1993, 34 and Guleng 2013, 132.

[660] Heller 1993, 34.

paintings. He did, however, receive other large commissions in the following years. In 1903 Munch was commissioned by Max Linde to make a series of decorative paintings for the children's room of his house, and in 1906 he was asked by the theatre director Max Reinhardt to paint a decorative frieze for the Deutsches Theater. Neither of these projects was entirely successful; Linde ended up sending the paintings back to the artist, although he did pay him in full, and the paintings in the Deutsches Theater were taken down after a few years and the room was redecorated. The big chance for Munch came, however, when he received the commission to make paintings for the University Aula in Christiania, and after this project had been finished, the *Frieze* came back to life again. In fact, in his mind these two projects were thematically connected. According to Munch, "the *Frieze of Life* represents a close observation of the sorrows and joys of the individual – the university decorations represent the great eternal forces."[661]

In 1918 Munch exhibited a series of paintings at Blomqvist's gallery in Christiania (Oslo), now for the first time under the title the *Frieze of Life* (*Livs-frisen*). The totality contained new versions of several of the paintings that he had sold after the Prague exhibition, and images that he had painted for Linde and Reinhardt were included among the motifs from the 1890s. Despite the harsh criticism that the exhibition received, the dream of uniting the *Frieze* had been awakened. Munch then started to assemble the paintings in his studio in Ekely, not as a memory of the past but as an ongoing artistic process. He published a little manifesto to explain the idea behind the *Frieze*, probably as an attempt to answer to his critics. It becomes clear from the text that he had hopes of completing the *Frieze* which he still considered to be unfinished. He would only need to find a suitable space for it. [662]

The *Frieze* was exhibited again in 1927 in Oslo and Berlin, and Munch continued to paint new versions of the motifs well into the 1930s. In a photograph taken on the occasion of his 75th birthday in 1938, Munch poses in his studio in Ekely surrounded by paintings from the *Frieze*. Heller writes of this photograph: "The Frieze of Life, elevated into an icon of Munch's life itself, becomes the paradigm of his entire career."[663] Heller perceives this image as a closing of the project: the artist is present but no longer seems to be involved with the paintings. It may well be that the case was now settled in Munch's mind and that he no longer felt the need to continue the process. But in terms of the totality, the ensemble of artworks called the *Frieze of Life*, this photographic image has no authority. After Munch's death, the *Frieze* has continued to live on. Although no definitive whole can be established – because no such thing ever existed – each individual image that is somehow related to the *Frieze* contains in itself an idea of the whole.

Here we may re-evoke the Romantic concept of the fragment which has already been discussed in connection with Halonen's self-portrait. The individual paintings

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[661] "Livsfrisen er det enkelte menneskes sorger og glæder set paa nært hold – Universitetsdekorationerne er de store evige kraefter." Cited from Edvard Munch: *Livs-frisen* (1919, 3), Munch Museum, MM UT 23.

[662] Edvard Munch: *Livs-frisen* (1919), Munch Museum, MM UT 23.

[663] Heller 1993, 26.

may be considered as fragments in the specifically Romantic sense which became the model for the perfect work of art: although they are whole and complete as individual works they also refer beyond themselves to a larger whole. Yet precisely because the whole that they suggest is in itself a processual and organic idea rather than a complete and finished totality, the whole as well as the individual parts retain a sense of incompleteness and indeterminacy that stimulates the imagination.[664] Munch himself employed the metaphor of crystal and crystallization to describe his artworks and art in general: “Art is man’s need for crystallization.”[665] Strindberg, as we have seen, was also interested in the process of crystallization, which he studied in his experimental photograms. Crystallization creates interesting visual effects but both Munch and Strindberg were also fascinated by its metaphorical dimensions. The idea of the artwork as crystal did not suggest for Munch something dead and static; rather it referred to the notion of the artwork as a living being: “An artwork is a crystal – crystals have a soul and a will, and an artwork must also have these.”[666]

The metaphor of crystallization has obvious links with the monistic ideologies. Haeckel had used it in his 1892 lecture on monism to exemplify the law of the conservation of substance: “if any body seems to vanish (as, for example, by burning), or to come anew into being (as, for example, by crystallisation), this also is simply due to change of form or of combination.”[667] Crystallography played a very important role in Haeckel’s attempts to establish a continuation between organic and inorganic matter. He had written about crystals already in his first major publication *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen* (General Morphology of Organisms, 1866) in which he studied the underlying geometry of all living things. He argued that the primordial organisms that existed on the border between organic and inorganic matter were very similar to crystals, which stood at a similar position on the side of inorganic matter. He maintained, moreover, that the simplest living organism had appeared spontaneously as a result of a process very similar to crystallization. He continued to develop this theory throughout his career, and in his last scientific work entitled *Crystal Souls* (*Kristallseelen*, 1917) he set out to prove what Goethe already had intuited – that crystals have souls.[668]

Munch’s desire to breathe life into his artworks went so far as to make room for the physical transformation of the object. His notorious “kill-or-cure” treatments which left his paintings weather-beaten and occasionally mouldy or covered in bird-excrement are well known. Stenersen has described Munch’s unconventional working methods:

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[664] Heller has observed this tendency in Munch’s work, although he does not elaborate on the issue. He writes: “Each painting, although physically distinct and with a unique motif, became a spiritual fragment serving to aid in the creation of a greater unit; combined, they were to be a total statement of human love and death.” Heller 1969, 43.

[665] “Kunst er menneskets trang til krystalisation.” Munch Museum, MM T 2785, 1908(?). Munch repeats this statement several times in his notes.

[666] ”Et kunstværk er en krystal – som krystallen har sjæl og vilje må kunstværket osså ha det.” Munch Museum, MM N 63, 1919.

[667] Haeckel 1895 [1892], 17.

[668] Di Gregorio 137-138, 537-539.

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.'"[669]

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. This kind of experimentation with nature's way of creating has obvious affinities with Strindberg's ideas about the role of chance in the artistic process, but 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.[670] Nevertheless, his method of scratching and scraping, painting over, and repeating adds a certain element of unconsciousness and contingency into the method. Moreover, Strindberg's photograms also investigated the effects of nature's own processes. Hence Munch's method can be seen as a combination of the two ways that Strindberg employed chance in order to explore and imitate the workings of the *natura naturans* in the artistic process.[671] Unfortunately many 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.[672]

THE HORROR OF EXISTENCE

Shelley Wood Cordulack, who has examined Munch's *Frieze of Life* from a psycho-physiological perspective, has observed that the landscapes in the paintings serve as

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[669] Stenersen 1969, 40.

[670] 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 "shows that Munch was not concerned with the physical presence of the artist as author during the production of his works but instead believed that the element of chance and other people can be involved on an equal basis in the process of realizing the fundamental idea proposed by the artist. Munch shifted back and forth between the interplay of built-in randomness and precise instructions and between the pure, perfect printing skill of another's hand and personal intervention on the part of the artist." Hoerschelmann 2003b, 14-15.

[671] See Buchhart 2003, 24-27. It must be pointed out that although there are obvious parallels in the working methods of Strindberg and Munch, it is not clear to what extent it is a question of a direct influence of one over the other. It is perhaps more plausible to consider it in terms of affinity and similarity of ideas. The two artists knew each other well and were in close contact at times in both Paris and Berlin, but there is no evidence that Munch, for instance, had read or was even aware of Strindberg's article on the role of chance in artistic production. Carlson assumes that in his artistic efforts Strindberg was probably influenced by Munch (and not the other way round). Carlson 1996, 296.

[672] See Buchhart 2003, 27

a unifying backdrop which turns the assembly of paintings into an organic, living whole. The landscapes, as she puts it, are “analogous to a kind of living tissue.”[673] In fact, this analogy works on several levels; the undulating lines in the landscapes serve as a visual connector that links the individual paintings together, but at the same time, there is also a more literal sense in which the landscape elements actually resemble different kinds of human tissue – neural, arterial, venous, muscular, fibrous, glandular, or epidermal. Cordulack has noted, for instance, how the landscape in the painting *Moonlight* (1895, fig. 28) resembles a cross section of human skin tissue, and the strange earth formations in the painting *Mystery of the Beach* (1892) bring to mind an image of a nerve-cell.[674] This nerve form can thus also be understood as a reflection of Munch’s own nervous state as an artist, and hence the landscape image turns into a kind of self-portrait.[675]

These “living” landscapes connect the physiological aspects with the monistic idea that everything in the world, including seemingly inanimate matter such as sand and rocks, contains the potential for life. The landscapes reflect the immersion of the self into the world. The physical elements are intrinsically connected with their manifestations as psychic sates – and vice versa. Obstfelder’s description of the “glorious design of curving, sweeping lines with radiant interspace,” the lines that twist, turn and contort themselves, and spirals that incurvate themselves brings to mind an image that greatly resembles many of Munch’s artworks from the 1890s. In the most famous image of the *Frieze*, *The Scream*, the dissolution of the self and the world is given a most disturbing expression.[676] Instead of a harmonious union, we witness a sensation of the most fundamental horror of a disintegration of the borders between the individual and his environment.

Because *The Scream* has become such a popular image, its meaning, at least in the minds of the broader public, has tended to become somewhat banal and one sided. It is seen quite unproblematically as an expression of the anxiety experienced by the modern man. A common misconception about this image is to think that the voice is coming from the figure’s mouth. However, Munch’s own writings on the

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[673] Cordulack 2002, 28.

[674] Edvard Munch, *Mystery of the Beach*, 1892, oil on canvas, 100 x 140 cm, private collection.

[675] Cordulack 2002, 28-35. Asendorf has suggested that one possible theoretical source for the undulating lines, currents and rays which appear to suggest some kind of flow of energy, could be found in Karl von Reichenbach’s “Od” theory – an attempt to explain magnetic phenomena by postulating a universal force called “Od”, which resembles electricity, gravity, or heat, and flows through people and matter. This theory was advocated by Munch’s long-standing patron Albert Kollman, whose ideas were appreciated by the whole Ferkel group. Asendorf 2003, 85-87. This notion of energetic forces that flow through matter is reflected also in the writings of Przybyszewski and Strindberg. For example, in *Inferno* Strindberg describes himself as electrically charged. Strindberg 1968 [1898], 86.

[676] *The Scream* exists in two painted versions; one is in the National Gallery (now part of the National Museum of Art, Architecture, and Design) in Oslo, and the other one is in the Munch Museum. Only the National Mueum version is signed and dated but both were previosuly assumed to originated from 1893. However, 1910 is nowadays considered a more correct date of origin for the Munch Museum version. In addition, there are several variations of the image in different techniques, including pastels, greaphics, and drawings. See Storm Bjerke 2008; Topalaova-Casadiego 2008; Ydstie 2008.

subject make it very clear that it is the scream of nature that the artist is hearing.[677] He is pressing his hands against his ears in order to avoid hearing this horrifying sound. However, it might, in the end, not be entirely wrong to think that it is the figure who is screaming; the open mouth suggests that he has joined the terrifying choir of nature; he is the origin of the voice as much as everything else that belongs to nature. The horror of nature is at the same time the primeval horror in the very core of his being. The anxiety of the figure is manifested not just in the facial expression but also in the expressive colours and lines.

What, then, is this ultimate horror? What is the most terrifying element that unites the self with the totality of the living world? I will propose here a Nietzschean interpretation, and conclude that the ultimate horror, the one that Munch struggled to come to terms with throughout his life, was death. The androgynous, un-individuated appearance of the figure suggests that this fear of death is a very primitive, fundamental emotion that extends its power throughout the living nature. It is found already in the most archaic and simple forms of life composed of nothing but a single cell. Indeed, if we look at the face of the figure in *The Scream*, does its shape not invite a visual comparison with a simplified scientific drawing of a cross section of a cell? The cell theory was a very central subject that emerged in nineteenth-century science, and also in Munch's writing the cell or the protoplasm appear as the fundamental elements of life.[678] In one of his sketchbooks he writes:

> *Everything is in us, and we are in everything. World is a living cell and we are bacteria – on its surface – God is in us, and we are in God.* [679]

The primitiveness of the emotion, as well as the interconnectedness of life and death is reflected in the figure's resemblance to both a foetus and a mummy. Rosenblum has suggested that one visual source for the figure in *The Scream* could be the same Peruvian mummy that fascinated Gauguin and whose posture is constantly repeated in his figures of anguished women.[680] I have already noted that the foetus in the lithograph version of Munch's *Madonna* (1895–1902) also bears a resemblance to the mummy. This observation underlines the idea of interconnectedness of life, death, and sexuality. The cultural historian Jonathan Dollimore has argued that this connection of death and sexuality is a pervasive feature of Western culture. According to him, there is a recurring instability in the Western idea of individuality, which derives from our obsessive relationship with the

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[677] For different versions of the text relating to the subject of *The Scream*, see Tøjner 2003, 96. The 1895 lithograph version also bears the inscription: "Ich fuhlte das grosse Geschrei durch die Natur." In the Munch Museum version the detail of the eyes in which the pupils are nearly erased underlines the sense of this being an inner experience. See Storm Bjerke 2008, 22.

[678] Cordulack 2002, 36-37. In a sketchbook from c. 1891-92 we can find drawings of cell-like structures and in the drawing *Encounter in Space* (c. 1899) male and female figures are enclosed inside a circle so that the composition resembles a cell. Cordulack interprets this drawing as an expression of Munch's views about basic biological origins and drives that unite the entire humanity. Cordulack 2002, 37, 102.

[679] "Jorden er en Celle levende og vi er Bakterier – på dens overflate – Gud er i os og vi er i Gud." Munch Museum, MM T 2759, undated.

[680] The mummy was exhibited at Trocadéro and probably at the 1889 World's Fair. Rosenblum 1978, 7-8.

destabilizing and fragmenting forces of death and mutability. However, he maintains that his "crisis of the individual" is also the source of some of the greatest art created in the Western culture; Western metaphysics and Western religion derive from the experience of change and loss and the consequent attempts to distinguish between appearance and reality.[681] Although desire and sexuality are connected with procreation, and hence should be on the side of life, what attaches them to death is the experience of change and mutability. Western religion and metaphysics arise from this experience of mutability and the concomitant endeavour to separate the fleeting world of appearances from a more fundamental level of existence:

> *Broadly speaking, the world we experience was said to be the world of appearances, the domain of unreality, deception, loss, transience and death – to be contrasted with an ultimate, changeless reality which was either deeper within or entirely beyond the world of appearance. This immanent or transcendent reality was also said to be the source of absolute, as distinct from relative, truth, and even of eternal life. Some of the greatest literature in the West derives from the tension between the desire for that ultimate reality to exist, and thereby redeem loss, and the conviction that, in reality, it does not.*[682]

Sexual desire, conceptualized in this way, provides a parallel for the artistic search for the ideal in the sense that both are by their nature "impossible."As Dollimore puts it, "the very nature of desire is what prevents its fulfilment." [683]

If *The Scream* is seen as an image reflecting the horror of death and the dissolution of the borders between the self and the world, then Munch's images of decomposing bodies supporting life that grows on the surface present the same idea from a different perspective. They can be seen as attempts to overcome the horror. Munch executed this motif in several versions. A pen and ink drawing from 1893-95, in which a man and a woman are asleep inside a cocoon-shaped formation from which a single plant is growing, is entitled *Art* (The Munch Museum, Oslo). This image emphasizes Munch's conception that art is a living thing and a part of nature's process.[684] Therefore, art is also immortal, and it reflects man's need for immortality. The painting *Metabolism*, which in the photographs from the 1903 Leipzig exhibition of the *Frieze* can be seen displayed as a centrepiece of the ensemble, also represents this motif of life's interconnectedness with death. In his 1919 manifesto, Munch explained that although the subject of *Metabolism* may seem a bit different from the other paintings of the series, it is, nonetheless, as important to the whole as a buckle is to a belt.[685] In *Metabolism* a man and a woman, Adam and Eve, stand on either side of a large tree. The realm of death below the surface is shown in the frame where we can see human and animal skulls feeding the roots of the tree. This painting underwent significant changes at some point before the 1918 exhibition at

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[681] Dollimore 1998, xiii, xxii.

[682] Dollimore 1998, xiii.

[683] Dollimore 1998, xvii.

[684] See Cordulack 2002, 95-96.

[685] Edvard Munch: *Livs-frisen* (1919, 2), Munch Museum, MM UT 23.

Blomqvist. In the Leipzig photographs the painting can be seen in its original form with the wooden frame. Instead of the tree there was a strange looking plant or flower with an embryo growing inside it. The embryo-plant emphasized a sense of biological mysticism, whereas the "Tree of Knowledge" as the central motif of the painting suggests a symbolism of the fall. The fall of man brought sexuality into the world, and hence also originated life. Before the fall there was no time and no death. The fall started the endless cycle of procreation and death – that is, life.[686]

The dualistic principle that lies at the basis of Christianity and Platonism, and which was transformed into the modern conception by Descartes, divides our being into body and soul, matter and spirit. This view also contains the idea that man occupies a privileged position in the world as the centre of the universe. But as the theory of evolution and other modern scientific perspectives were questioning this scheme, the dualistic world view was beginning to crumble, and the whole existence of God appeared more and more doubtful. Haeckel, however, understood the monistic principle as a natural outcome of the development of human civilization, in which "every great advance in the direction of profounder knowledge has meant a breaking away from the traditional dualism (or pluralism) and an approach to monism." God, according to this conception, was no longer to be understood as an external being over and above the material world but as a "'divine power' or 'moving spirit' within the cosmos itself.[687]

Haeckel wrote that immortality could be understood in the scientific sense as conservation of substance, and it was "therefore the same as conservation of energy as defined by physics, or conservation of matter as defined by chemistry."[688] Hence, from the monistic perspective, the conception of a personal immortality was to be abandoned but the cosmos as a whole was immortal. Munch pondered this idea in a notebook from 1892:

> *It is necessary to believe in immortality ... Nothing ceases to exist; there is no example of it in nature. The body that dies does not disappear. Its components separate one from the other and are transformed.*[689]

For Munch, as for many of his contemporaries, monism, and the concomitant idea of immortality 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":

[686] See Dollimore 1998, 44,91.

[687] Haeckel 1895 [1892], 15.

[688] Haeckel 1895 [1892], 51; see also Di Gregorio 2005, 503-504.

[689] Munch Museum, MM T 2760, sketchbook from 1891–92. English translation cited from Heller 1984, 62.

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.[690]

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 what kept him going as an artist. It seems that it was the fundamental thought that motivated his *Frieze of Life*. When the *Frieze* is examined from this perspective, it becomes possible to perceive it as an attempt to create a total work of art in the spirit of Greek tragedy as it had been described by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*. In Nietzsche's interpretation, Greek tragedy appeared as a superior alternative to Schopenhauer's "Buddhist negation of the will." He discovered in tragedy the possibility to affirm life; to see its beauty and sublimity while at the same time retaining awareness of all the cruelty and suffering that it entailed. In tragedy the Apollonian and Dionysian powers reach a synthesis which reveals the totality of life – everything is included: beauty as well as horror, ecstatic joy as well as suffering, life and death. For Nietzsche, the Dionysian principle meant the affirmation of life – and life is a concept that includes both the life of the individual and the life as totality. Philip J. Kain summarizes Nietzsche's thoughts on this issue:

Life is larger than the individual. The individual may perish, indeed must *perish, but life continues. Insofar as the individual identifies only with itself, it sees that life does not need it or care about it. It will suffer and die while life as a whole continues to flourish – and that is the horror of existence. Insofar as the individual identifies with the primordial life of the whole, however, the individual can experience an intoxicating, blissful unity and has no difficulty in affirming life.*[691]

Nietzsche's answer to the question of change and mutability was not to transcend it but rather to embrace it and to identify with it completely in a Dionysian ecstasy. He perceived the Western metaphysic with its tendency to search for an immutable truth behind appearance as the power that also produces decadence. Dollimore notes, however, that Nietzsche's identification with change also contains

[690] Munch Museum, MM T 2760, sketchbook from 1891–92. English translation cited from Heller 1984, 63.

[691] Kain 2009, 9. In my interpretation of Nietzsche's ideas I am greatly indebted to the perceptive and lucid analysis of his philosophy carried out by Kain in his little book *Nietzsche and the Horror of Existence* (2009). Kain establishes the concept of "terror and horror of existence" at the centre of Nietzsche's philosophical system. Around this concept, Kain is able to construct a wonderful synthesis of the Nietzsche's total vision of life, which quite often has been seen as contradictory and obscure.

an embrace of death in its urgent need simultaneously to energize and to annihilate selfhood."[692]

THE GREAT RELIEF BY J.F. WILLUMSEN: LIBERATION OR RECURRENCE?

As we have seen, Munch had hopes of finding a place to set up his *Frieze* permanently and thus to bring this project into completion. This dream was never realized and hence the *Frieze* retained its processual and indeterminate form. Willumsen's *Relief*, on the other hand, was completed in 1928 as the gigantic sculptural wall composed of various types of stone and gilt bronze which nowadays resides in the Willumsen Museum in Frederikssund, Denmark. Like Munch's *Frieze*, the *Relief* was something that occupied the artist's thoughts for several decades, and when the opportunity arose to finalize the project, he embraced it enthusiastically.[693] However, the final artwork no longer captures the idea that Willumsen had in mind at the beginning of the project. The inner struggle that characterizes the creative process of this artwork has given the end product a very peculiar quality that is grotesque as much as it is sublime. The existence of this melancholy work of art, in all its gargantuan grandiosity, contradicts its whole idea. It appears as a monument to an ideal of art that, by the time the work was finally completed, had already become extinct. A museum dedicated solely to the work of the artist may seem like an appropriate setting for Willumsen's "magnum opus." Considering, however, the original thought process behind it, a museum could hardly be an ideal place for it. To serve its ethical purpose, the sculpture was to be surrounded by people and life. The museum setting adds to the somewhat heavy and stagnant feeling that the *Relief* exudes.

The first drawings and plaster models for "Væggen" (The Wall) date back to the early 1890s (fig. 33). The idea for a decorative wall had been triggered by Willumsen's visit to the World's Columbian Exposition, organized in Chicago in 1893 to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's arrival in the New World in 1492.[694] The city in the middle of dynamic urban development was a great inspiration for Willumsen, and he was highly impressed by the restaurants and

[692] Dollimore 1998, 238.

[693] In 1923, at the time of his 60th birthday, Willumsen received an official commission from the state of Denmark to complete the project. The relief was carved in marble in Carrara, Italy. Willumsen did not himself take part in the carving process, but he chose carefully the different kinds of stone that were to be used for different parts of the sculpture, and he observed the work closely. The relief was then installed in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Copenhagen. It was later moved to the Willumsen Museum in Frederikssund which was inaugurated in 1957. The museum was built to contain the collection of artworks donated by the artist himself, including his collection of antiquities. One of the rooms was designed specifically for the *Great Relief* to showcase the different stages of the project. In addition to the final sculpture from 1928, the room contains plaster casts, drawings, and sculptures relating to the project. The *Relief* is nowadays officially a part of the Danish cultural heritage. It is included among the 108 artworks that compose Denmark's Cultural Canon established by the Cultural Ministry of Denmark. Its status as a "masterpiece" is, thus, officially established.

[694] Also known as the Chicago World's Fair.

commercial spaces decorated with precious materials that reminded him of Byzantine church interiors.[695] This made him think of a new kind of public artwork that would serve a decorative purpose and at the same time encourage people to ponder its deeper meaning and to develop their inner capacities.[696] One part of the exposition was the so called World Parliament of Religions which was the first large scale attempt to create a dialogue between different religions of the world. It had various aims, and not all of them were necessarily altruistic – at least it seems that the Christian delegates did not hesitate to exploit the opportunity to flaunt the superiority of their religion.[697] Nevertheless, as a whole this event can be seen to reflect the broader tendency in the late nineteenth century towards religious syncretism. This was indeed a major event – it was by far the largest of the individual conferences that were held in conjunction with the Exhibition – and it was certainly something that would have interested Willumsen, who at the time was developing his ethical conception of art. The artwork that he then began to plan was to be the ultimate embodiment of this artistic ideology. It was to be made in ceramics inlaid with other materials, and he expected it to take up to two years to complete the project.[698]

However, the vision Willumsen had in mind when he first came up with the idea for the *Relief* proved to be even more difficult to turn into a work of art than what he had expected. He had trouble finding a way to come to terms with it, and it appears that the completion of this highly ambitious project was hindered more by an inner confusion than by external circumstances. In a letter from 1893 Willumsen expresses an almost painfully explicit formulation of the endeavour to find a synthesis of the work and the idea:

> *I am working on the sketch for the great wall, that is to say, I am working on an Idea that has not yet become clear to me, for I have come to the conclusion that an artwork's Idea must be discovered by the artist. When this Idea is complete, the sketch is also finished...*[699]

Willumsen continued to work on the *Relief* throughout the 1890s and the first decade of the twentieth century, at times more intensively, at times abandoning it altogether for several years. He struggled to come to terms with the idea, making plaster casts and ceramic pieces of individual figures. Some parts of the Relief were exhibited and sold separately, and they thereafter gained the status of an individual work of art. The head of the giant on the left, which has come to be known as *Reflection* (fig. 31), was made in 1896 in four versions with different coloured

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[695] Mentze 1953, 105.

[696] Buurgård 1999, 17.

[697] Rabinovitch 2002, 99.

[698] Buurgård 1999, 17.

[699] "Jeg arbejder altsaa paa denne Skitze til den store Væg, det vil egentlig sige at jeg arbejder paa Ideen som ikke endnu er kommen til Klarhed for mig, jeg er nemlig kommet til det Resultat, at et Kunstværks Ide maa vaere opfunden af Kunstneren. Naar denne Idee er færdig, er Skitzen ogsaa færdig ..." Letter to Johan Rohde, 28 Dec. 1893. Cited from Buurgård 1999, 17-18.

glazing, and individual versions of the figures of *Weakness* and *War* were made in 1897.[700] By the outbreak of the First World War, Willumsen had begun to compose against a wall in his studio a full-size plaster assemblage which later became the basis for the final execution of the work (fig. 34).

The *Relief* has given a great deal of trouble for those who have endeavoured to interpret it. The difficulties partly follow from the fact that it remained unfinished for such a long time. The most ambitious attempts have been made by Merete Bodelsen in 1957 and Lise Buurgård in 1999. Buurgård relies on the artist's notebook entries and letters from the 1890s in order to establish a summary of his intentions. This has obviously been a frustrating task as Willumsen is notorious for his poor writing skills and obscure argumentation. On this construction based more on the texts than on what is seen in the works itself, Buurgård then applies a rather heavy apparatus of Jungian psychoanalysis. Her attempt has been to establish a "system" that would explain all of Willumsen's work. This kind of totalizing interpretation is, of course, quite far from what I am trying to establish here. Buurgård's account, nonetheless, gives us some clues to follow on our quest, and I shall be referring to her work here and there.

Bodelsen, on the other hand, has interpreted the *Relief* as a reflection of the ideas expressed in Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*. Bodelsen's detail to detail interpretation is meticulous and perhaps too literal. For every little detail in the work she finds a corresponding part in the text. According to Bodelsen, the general idea behind the work is *Palingenesis*, the rebirth of the world. As we shall see later, this interpretation may not be completely off. However, the basic problem here, for our purposes, is that Bodelsen's interpretation only applies to the first plaster design of the work. Similarly, Roald Nasgaard's interpretation falls short in that it locates the work only in the first plaster cast version. Nasgaard considers the final version a complete failure and of little artistic interest, it is "a staged demonstration of truth but because it is neither precise nor logical it is merely confused."[701] According to Nasgaard, if the relief has anything interesting about it at all, it is only for what it reveals about Willumsen's ideas of the nineties.[702] For Nasgaard and Bodelsen, whose studies focus on Willumsen's time in Paris in the 1890's, this is of course an understandable solution. But for those of us who are interested not just in the first sketches but in the whole work, a disconcerting yet unavoidable question arises: Where is it? The plaster cast cannot be considered the final work but neither can the 1928 version. The "work" is neither here nor there, it lies somewhere in between, in the creative process of the artist ceaselessly trying to capture the idea.

In the following analysis of the *Relief*, I will suggest some possible ways of interpreting the complex symbolism behind it, but a comprehensive interpretation of this work is not my real purpose, and as we shall see, the continuous artistic process

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[700] One version of *Reflection* has a turquoise copper glaze (Victor Petersens Willumsen Samling, Hjørring), two versions were made with brown copper glaze (Museum of Art and Design, Copenhagen; private collection), and one has a light sand colour (Thielska Galleriet, Stockholm).

[701] Nasgaard 1973, 225.

[702] Nasgaard 1973, 225-227.

of transforming ideas means that no solid foundation can be established. In fact, my aim is to demonstrate that the fundamental task that this artwork was intended to complete is precisely what prevents its materialization. And when it finally takes a material form, it is no longer the same work that it was in the beginning of the process. However, to do justice to this unconventional work of art, we perhaps should not consider it only in terms of the end of the process, but rather focus on the process itself. Appreciating its processual quality we can understand it in terms of what Belting has called the "non-finito," as a work that is nothing but a preliminary device for approaching the ideal that is always necessarily out of reach.[703] However, before elaborating on this subject, let us begin by examining the different elements of the sculpture in order to suggest some ways to understand what and how they signify.

The *Relief* presents a grandiose vision of art and life: two giants emerge from the primordial sea of chaos, and around them the maelstrom of nude bodies floats by in a ceaseless process of coming into being and passing away. The giants are surrounded by an assemblage of other strange creatures. The central figures can be interpreted as self-portraits of the artist – the one on the left in particular bears a resemblance to the artist himself – and hence the whole revelation appears as a subjective vision of the artist who is placed at the centre of his own universe. The dual structure reflects an idea of two opposing principles that are contained in the self and the world and that motivate the circular movement of life. This basic composition remained more or less unchanged throughout the process. The two large figures on the left, a man wearing a dress and a woman in shiny armour, are called *Weakness* and *War*, respectively. The group of figures on the right went through several changes. In the first plaster version there are two women in dresses and the naked man, or perhaps a hermaphrodite, as Merete Bodelsen assumes.[704] In the final version this has evolved into a group composed of a man wearing an overall and carrying a hammer on his hip, a voluptuous woman bursting out of her clothes, and in front of them a naked young couple. It appears that the figures on the left are intended as an embodiment of unbalanced and dangerous intermingling of femininity and masculinity: the masculine woman symbolizing war, and the feminized man symbolizing weakness. In contrast, on the right, the *Golden Couple*, almost merged together, is a symbol of the harmonious balance between the opposing principles.

The dual structure seems to be an appropriate starting point for an interpretation of the complex symbolism behind the *Relief*. The notion of duality was something that occupied Willumsen's thoughts in the 1890s, and it is the theme of one of his major works from the period, *Jotunheim* (fig. 30), which he finished in 1893 before starting to work on the *Relief*. Willumsen had visited Norway during the previous summer, and in a catalogue text for an exhibition in Copenhagen in 1895 he describes the experience that had inspired him to make the artwork:

[703] Belting 2001, 201.

[704] Bodelsen 1957, 44.

The clouds drifted away and I found myself on the edge of a cliff looking over a mountainous landscape up in the north, severe and brutal, covered with eternal ice and snow, a world not fit for human life.[705]

According to Willumsen own account, the side reliefs were created under this severe impression in which he became aware of "the two poles of power, the destructing, 'the negative', and the creating, 'the positive'." This, he explains, is also the idea that he develops further in the *Relief*: "a duality in life, the struggle of two kinds of forces in our being." These two forces, two sides of our being, will be known for as long as there are humans on this planet.[706]

Jotunheimen is a mountain range in southern Norway named after Norse mythology; the name literally translates to "The Home of the Giants." Although *Jotunheim* is clearly an expression of Nordic spirituality, I am not convinced that Willumsen had a specific mythological idea when he decided to make a painting of this mountain area. It is possible, as has been suggested by Bodelsen, that the trip to Norway was at least partially inspired by the writings of Carlyle.[707] But the fascination with mountains might also stem from a more general Romantic idea of mountains as a place of spiritual enlightenment; mountains are a recurring subject in Willumsen's art and, for example, in the 1902 painting *Sun over Mountains of the South* (Thielska Galleriet, Stockholm) the spiritual meaning is clearly indicated by rays of sun emanating from above the clouds. However, there is one literary work that can be suggested as a direct source for *Jotunheim* and, as I shall argue, also as a starting point for the symbolism of the *Great Relief*. The central panel of *Jotunheim* displays a scene of icy mountains, a landscape not fit for humans, where only spirits can roam. This brings to mind Balzac's vision of Norwegian landscape in the mystical novel *Séraphita*. For Balzac, the icy world of the north was a symbol of a more spiritualized level of being:

... what human eye was strong enough to bear the glitter of those pinnacles adorned with sparkling crystals, or the sharp reflections of the snow, iridescent on the summits in the rays of a pallid sun which infrequently appeared, like a dying man seeking to make known that he still lives ... Every extreme principle carries with it an appearance

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[705] "... Skyerne dreve bort, og jeg befandt mig ved Randen af en Afgrund og saa ud over et bjergfyldt Landskaab højt mod Nord, alvorlig og brutalt, dækket med evig Is og Sne, en Verden ubeboelig for Mennesker." Cited from Krogh 2006, 192.

[706] Mentze 1953, 103, 105, 112. This statement indeed suggests a connection with Carlyle. In *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* (1841) he writes: "The primary characteristic of this old Northland Mythology I find to be Impersonation of the visible workings of Nature. Earnest simple recognition of the workings of Physical Nature, as a thing wholly miraculous, stupendous and divine. What we now lecture of as Science, they wondered at, and fell down in awe before, as Religion. The dark hostile Powers of Nature they figure to themselves as 'Jötuns,' Giants, huge shaggy beings of a demonic character. Frost, Fire, Sea-tempest; these are Jötuns. The friendly Powers again, as Summer-heat, the Sun, are Gods. The empire of this Universe is divided between these two; they dwell apart, in perennial internecine feud. The Gods dwell above in Asgard, the Garden of the Asen, or Divinities; Jotunheim, a distant dark chaotic land, is the home of the Jötuns." Carlyle 1906 [1841], 17.

[707] In *Sartor Resartus*, Carlyle sends his protagonist to the North Cape and to Jotunheimen, the land of the Jötuns, which he also describes in *On Heroes and Hero-Worship*. Bodelsen 1957 39-40; Carlyle 1900 [1836] , 208-209; Carlyle 1906 [1841] , 35-37.

of negation and the symptoms of death; for is not life the struggle of two forces? Here in this Northern nature nothing lived. One sole power – the unproductive power of ice – reigned unchallenged.[708]

If the landscape in the middle reflects the world of the Spirit, then human life is represented in the frames on both sides. On the left, we see the people who engage in spiritual activities. According to Willumsen's explanation, they are studying the correspondences between the infinitely large (symbolized by a star nebula above), and the infinitely small (symbolized by a mass of microbes below).[709] Silvery strings connect these two realms together, and the men, trapped in the network of these correspondences, are depicted in a state of deep concentration, striving to understand the mystery of the universe. On the right, we have the opposite, the purposeless and the indifferent. The joyous figures in the middle are those concentrating on earthly pleasures. The meaninglessness of their life is illustrated by the two men below, one of whom is weaving a net whilst the other one is at the same time undoing it. The icy world of the mountains is the realm of the androgynous figure of Séraphita-Séraphitus. If a human were to enter this world, he would surely perish. But with the power of the mind this spiritual realm can be comprehended. That is the fundamental purpose of human life: to come to know the higher truth behind everyday existence. But this is no easy task; Séraphita-Séraphitus is, in fact, a perfect personification of the unattainable ideal, soothing and terrifying at the same time, and representing something that neither the male nor the female protagonist can have, but that they can only approximate in their earthly union. Séraphita explains to Minna, the female protagonist, that even though we are very small, "we become great through feeling and through intellect":

With us, and us alone, Minna, begins the knowledge of things; the little that we learn of the laws of the visible world enables us to apprehend the immensity of the worlds invisible.[710]

Here we can establish a connection with the symbolism of the *Great Relief*. Willumsen himself has called the two giants emerging from the sea of chaos *Intellect* (*Forstanden*) and *Emotion* (*Følelse*), and later *Reflection* (*Refleksion*) and *Instinct* (*Instinsktet*).[711] In a notebook entry from 1894 he characterizes emotion and intellect as "two unknown creatures that live inside us."[712] These two figures can therefore be understood as two sides of the self. In *Jotunheim* the opposition of the two sides is clearly spelled out, and it is obvious which one we are supposed to value higher. Similarly, in the *Relief* we see the negative side of weakness and war on the left and the positive side, culminating in the harmonious union of the *Golden Couple*, on the

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[708] Balzac 2004 [1834] , 6 (*Séraphita*).

[709] For Willumsen's description of the work see Buurgård 1999, 39.

[710] Balzac 2004 [1834] , 13.

[711] Buurgård 1999, 21; Krogh 2006, 112; Mentze 1953, 116.

[712] "... med udviklet Sand er [man] I Stand til at Skelne og tale om Følelse og Forstand som to fremmede Væsner der bo I os." Cited from Buurgård 1999, 21.

right. According to the explanation of the *Relief* that Willumsen accounts in his memoires, we are to understand that the *Golden Couple* is a symbol of beauty, truth, and hope for the future. It is made of heart and spirit as opposed to the cold rationality and technology represented by the left hand side of the *Relief*. The giant on the left is the personification of mindless power and egoism. The giant on the right is the opposite; he has closed his eyes for all surface appearance because for him, the "rich realm of the spirit is enough."[713] Heart and spirit, it seems, have to be completely divorced from intellect and rationality if there is to be any hope for mankind. This is, however, an *a posteriori* explanation that builds on an interpretation by Godfred Hansen from 1948,[714] and has clearly been affected by the historical developments of the twentieth century. Even though Willumsen claimed that Hansen's interpretation was very close to his own thoughts, it does not seem like a satisfactory explanation for the *Relief* – not in terms of the beginning of the process, nor referring to the monument standing at the end of it. And most importantly, it is not in line with Willumsen's attitude as an artist and his view of art and life. For instance, in 1894 he claims that an artist must be "like a philosophical scientist" who discovers new ways to think, states new truths that have not been said before, and finds new combinations of forms that have not been put together before.[715] This in no way suggests an artistic attitude of pure emotion divorced from intellect.

Moreover, in the *Relief,* the two giants stand side by side, as conductors of the eternal cycle of life that goes on around them. In contrast to the blissful and dreamy appearance of the giant on the right, the giant on the left seems to be more aware of the pain and suffering in the world around him. He is holding the hand of the other giant, pressing it firmly against his heart. Should we not understand this as an indication of their mutual importance for life and for art? The two sides of our being, and of all human life, intellect and emotion, may be opposed but they are also interconnected. Intelligence divorced from emotion only results in suffering, but the union of these two forces is what makes us great. The giant on the right has his eyes closed – a motif that often refers to spiritual vision. The closing of the physical eye means opening the eye of the mind, and turning away from the fleeting world of appearances towards another realm of existence. The giant on the left with his eyes open, the expression on his face indicating deep concentration can thus be interpreted as the conscious, rational side of the self, while the giant on the right refers to the unconscious and irrational world of dreams and emotions. This seems to reflect a search for an ideal where all the opposites are united – the ultimate dream that had persisted throughout nineteenth century – or perhaps ever since Descartes established the fundamental duality of body and soul. And like the Romantics before him, Willumsen believed that art had the potential to do this task.

[713] Mentze 1953, 115.

[714] Willumsen claims that Hansen's interpretation of the relief was very close to his own thoughts. Mentze 1953, 112.

[715] Buurgård 1999,18.

The two opposing principles personified by the giants remain separate, although they are interconnected. Instead, in the *Golden Couple*, we see a union of two opposites: the feminine side represented by the voluptuous woman, grasping the hand of the man with the hammer, the personification of masculinity, and pressing it against her heart. The *Golden Couple*, symbolizing the intermingling of these opposites, is executed in gilded bronze. The choice of a different material for this part of the sculpture supports the conclusion that we should see it as the focal point of the artwork. It can be understood as a symbol of a new life, a new golden age, and at the same time, it is a symbol of the perfect artwork. It is a *mise en abyme* referring to the whole of the work and towards infinity. Far from offering a stable basis for the symbolism of the work, it instead sets it in an infinite motion, an oscillation between different possible meanings.

The unity of opposites is also one of the central alchemical principles, and it is often represented allegorically as a union between a man and a woman, as a spiritual marriage, or in the image of the androgyne. The union of male and female, the "Chemical Wedding" or the "Sacred Marriage," is one the crucial operations in the creations of the precious philosopher's stone which could transmute base metals into gold and earthly man into the divine. The chaotic procession of life represented in the *Relief* which culminates in an androgynous union suggests an alchemical metaphor, which in the late nineteenth century was often employed in connection with the artistic process. A drawing by Willumsen from 1897 depicts a naked couple surrounded by a yellow glow, completely merged together, and very closely resembling an alchemical drawing of the androgyne. The male and female figures of the *Golden Couple* are represented more realistically and remain separate, but the golden colour that they have been given again leads our thoughts to alchemy. For Péladan, who was fascinated by the androgyne and often employed alchemical metaphors, the androgyne represented the plastic ideal of art.[716]

This theme of a synthesis between masculine and feminine principles is expressed also in the ceramic sculpture known as the *Family Vase*, a triple portrait of Willumsen, his wife, and their newly born son (fig. 32). The theme of biological creativity is connected with artistic creativity.[717] This work was probably inspired by

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[716] See Pincus-Witten 1968, 36-37, 44; Abraham 1998, 35. *The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosencreutz* (1616), an alchemical treatise attributed to the mythical founder of Rosicrucianism, Christian Rosencreutz, also has several affinities with the ideas that are presented in the *Relief* and other works by Willumsen. The text is an allegorical description divided into seven days, like the Genesis, which accounts the sacred marriage of the king and the queen. At the same time it represents an inner path of initiation which occurs through various alchemical transformations. *The Chemical Wedding* embodies the idea that all cosmic processes are cyclical, and that death is not the end but the originator of life. The esoteric doctrine of "as above, so below" is embedded in the structure of the story, which on one level represents the sacred marriage, and on another level accounts the inner journey of initiation. We are to understand that these two levels are inseparable; the union of the king and queen is the same as the inner union of the initiate. See Goodrick-Clarke 2008, 112-114.

[717] This notion found an even more direct expression in the etching *Fertility* from the same year. According to Willumsen this little work marked the beginning of a new artistic direction for him. See Mentze 1956, 76-77. The etching depicts a pregnant woman and an ear of grain constantly sprouting itself. The inscription below reads: "Ancient art has its ancient language that people have little by little begun to understand/ new art has a new language that people must learn before they can understand it." The inscription clearly states that this work is not

the ceramic self-portraits of Gauguin, who at the time was a close personal friend of Willumsen's. Incidentally, one of Gauguin's ceramic self-portraits nowadays resides in the same room with the *Family Vase* at the Danish Design Museum in Copenhagen (fig. 11). In his review of the 1889 Universal Exhibition Gauguin praised the decorative arts, and above all he praised ceramics as an ancient technique and the one that most resembled the creative act of God (as we know, Willumsen's *Relief* was also originally meant to be executed in ceramics):

> *Ceramics are not futile things. In the remotest times, among the American Indians, the art of pottery making was always popular. God made man out of a little clay. With a little clay you can make metal, precious stones – with a little clay, and also a little genius.*[718]

Willumsen, like many of his contemporaries in the 1890s believed that the upcoming century was in need of a new form of art, and to discover this, one had to turn to the old masterpieces of foregone eras. When he first arrived in Paris in 1888, he went directly to the Louvre to see the works of the Old Masters which he believed would provide inspiration far beyond the academic art of his own day. But to his disappointment, the old paintings seemed utterly devoid of life; the colours were dull and dark and the people in them neither looked nor behaved like living beings.[719] As Belting has observed, the old masterpieces had, in the eyes of the modern viewer, gained an aura of melancholy.[720] They belonged to a moment of art that had been lost forever. One would have to somehow revive the idea behind them and bring it back to life. Willumsen, like many others, went further back in history to establish a basis for his new art. The bright colours and simplified forms of the arts of ancient Egypt and Assyria made a lasting impression on him, and probably inspired him to start experimenting with ceramics.

With the two faces looking at different directions, the *Family Vase* resembles a representation of *Janus*, the Roman god of beginnings, endings, and change. In this sense it is obviously connected to the birth of the son who was called Jan and was born in January, at the beginning of a new year. However, this is merely a starting point for its symbolism. Willumsen was aware that the audience might have difficulties in deciphering the meaning of his work – after all, it was written in the new language of art that they perhaps were not yet able to understand. So when the *Family Vase* was exhibited Willumsen wanted it to be accompanied by a text that he had written to explain it:

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just about fertility of human or plant life: it is a declaration of the fertility of art, its constant renewal. The relationship between the creative forces of nature and culture is also the subject of the *Family Vase*.

[718] Gauguin: "Notes on art at the Universal Exhibition", *Le Moderniste illustré*, July 4 and 11, 1889. Cited from Gauguin [1974] 1996, 30-31.

[719] In his memoirs published in 1953, he looks back to his first visit in Paris: "Jag søgte straks til Louvre og den gamle Kunst, men blev ikke betaget, som jeg vist burde vaere blevet. Ingen av disse Mestre gengav Livet, det rige, pulserende Liv, jeg søgte; Menneskene, som disse Kunstnere havde malt, saa hverken uud eller teede sig, som levende Mennensker gøer. Farverne svarede heller ikke til dem, jeg saa omkiring mig, de var mørke og unaturlige, netop det jeg var kommet for at arbejde mig bort fra." Mentze 1953, 42-43.

[720] Belting 2001, 206.

The father, the mother and their new-born child. The eternal stability of the law of procreation is indicated by one foot treading on the other. Under the mother's head there is an ornamental border of stylized ancient trees in harmony with the heavy form of the composition. The heads of the Father and the Mother are stylized with a glossy blue enamel. In contrast, the child is treated naturalistically with a natural skin-colour and a sebaceous glaze; by this contrast between the stylized and natural I have indicated the developed and the undeveloped. Composition in ceramics. 1891.[721]

The stylized form of the parents is contrasted with the naturalism of the baby to establish an opposition between developed and undeveloped forms of art. The feet, perhaps borrowed from an Egyptian Sphinx, can be interpreted as referring to culture. In other words, they symbolize the masculine side of the creative process, whereas the ancient trees might be seen in terms of the feminine principle, that is, nature.[722] Clinging to the side of his father, the baby faces the same direction, the future, firmly supported by culture and backed up by nature. The procreative laws of nature are juxtaposed with the creativity of art. Both are bound by similar eternal laws of birth, decay, and death. This reflects a cyclical model of recurrence rather than a linear development. Perhaps, then, we might interpret the *Family Vase* as a challenge to the unilinear understanding of the development of art. Naturalism, which was hailed as the culmination of the evolution of art, beginning in "primitive" form and gradually developing towards perfection, is here represented as the helpless newborn infant. It is not the end of the process but rather a new beginning: it is the embryonic form of the new art that is born out of tradition.

The biological metaphor of artistic creativity was not unusual in the fin-de-siècle culture. Emile Zola had famously employed the metaphor of art as giving birth in the novel *His Masterpiece* (*L'Œuvre*, 1886).[723] Aurier, too, resorted to the language of sensual love when he described the creation of the artwork as the result of a union between the soul of the artist and the soul of nature and Munch, as we have seen, applied the vital processes of the physiological body in various metaphorical ways.[724] The esoteric doctrine adds a spiritual level to the biological

[721] "Faderen, Moderen og deres nyfødte Barn. Formerigslovens Stabilitet betegnes ved at den ene Fod træder paa den anden. Under Modrerns Hoved er en Ornamentkrave af stiliserede gamle Træer i harmoni med Kompositionens tunge Form. Faderens og Moderens Hoveder er stiliserede og paalagte en blaa, glansfuld Emalje, Barnet derimod er behandlet naturalistisk og har en kjødlignende Farve og en fedtagtig Glasur; ved denne Forskjel mellem Stil og Natur betegner jeg det udviklede og uudviklede. Komposition I Keramik. 1891." Bodelsen 1957, 13; English translation cited from Bodelsen 1957, 68.

[722] Peter Michael Hornung has suggested that the feet might have been borrowed from an Assyrian lamassu sculpture that Willumsen perhaps had seen at the Louvre. Pia Guldager Bilde writes: "Hvis denne antagelse (Hornungs) er korrekt, viser det en opfattelse af relationer mellem de to køn, hvor kvinden, der med de stiliserede urtræer forneden er forankret i og går i eet med naturen, mens manden derimod bogstaveligt talt er baseret på kulturen. Drengebarnet, skønt endnu ufærdigt i farven, følger i faderens fodspor og vender som ham." Guldager Bilde 1996, 48-49. Whether the feet are borrowed from Assyrian or Egyptian sculpture, it seems clear enough that they are supposed to represent culture, whereas the old trees refer to nature.

[723] Zola employed both masculine and feminine metaphors of procreation in the novel that took him exactly nine months to finish. The artist's failure is described as impotence and as not being able to push out something that exists inside the stomach. Zola [1886] 1893, 274, 311.

[724] Aurier 1893, 302.

process of giving birth. The human soul is considered immortal, and between incarnations it dwells in the realm of the Spirit. At birth this pre-existing soul is called to be unified with a physical body, and at death they are once again separated. This alteration between two lives is necessary for the development of the soul. Conception, thus, becomes a sacred act, and the father, mother, and the child form a human trinity corresponding to the divine trinity of body, soul, and spirit. Man represents the creative force of the mind, whereas woman personifies the plastic creativity of nature. The perfect union of these beings in body, soul, and spirit, forms a miniature of the universe.[725] The *Family Vase* can thus be seen in terms of the perfect marriage as a harmonious union between the feminine and masculine creative forces that are the fundamental principles behind all life and all art. This idea of a harmonious union of the sexes later finds a more subtle expression in the *Golden Couple* of the *Great Relief*.

In the *Family Vase* we see a first expression of a notion of recurrence instead of linear progress, as well as the idea of opposing principles, here manifested as the masculine and feminine sides of artistic and biological creation. These ideas are taken up again in the *Relief*. Furthermore, we see here the intermingling of art and life, which is also a major theme in the *Relief*. The *Family Vase* can be understood as a representation of the circular development of life which on a metaphorical level corresponds to a circular development of art. The two giants in the *Relief*, one of them severe and upright, the other softer and more feminized, can also be understood as personifications of the two sides of the creative artist, masculine and feminine, which represent the driving forces behind all creativity, both biological and artistic. With Willumsen, it seems, art and life are always inseparable; when he talks about art, he also means life, and vice versa. Art and life both follow the same eternal laws of creation.

Although the basic structure of the *Relief* remained more or less unchanged from the beginning of the process, when we compare the different versions, there are some important and revealing differences. The changes in the composition reflect shifts in the overall ideology that the work embraces. It seems that the late Romantic belief in liberation through art transforms into a cyclical view of recurrence. In the first version, there is an upward movement: the poor lost souls are on their way towards liberation. The naked man/hermaphrodite in the upper left part, in the place later occupied by the *Golden Couple*, is reaching out his arm to pull them up, and above, we see the bodies floating harmoniously. However, in the final version there is more of a circular motion. The man riding a wave in front of the giant on the right is clearly reaching upward, towards the *Golden Couple*, whereas behind the stretched out arm of the giant on the left is a woman plunging down into the depths of the water. The circular movement makes us think of recurrence, but is this the Nietzschean version with no purpose or end, or should we still hold on to the promise of liberation? In Willumsen's thought the cyclical development of art seems to be connected with the esoteric idea of repetitive cycles of death and rebirth. This is also the ideology behind the dual forces of creation and destruction that

[725] Schuré 1977 [1889], 355-358.

Willumsen wanted to express in *Jotunheim*. According to the esoteric doctrine, the cyclical movement will eventually result in liberation. This will take thousands and millions of centuries of births and rebirths, but finally humanity will reach the highest spiritual level, and the cosmic evolution will come to an end.[726] The *Golden Couple*, as a symbol of art as the perfect unity between opposing principles, would then represent the promise of liberation through art, the final destination of humanity.

The two giants as two sides of the self, intellect and emotion, are the conductors of the eternal cycle of life. Perhaps we could see the relief as the representation of two opposing but interconnected forces behind art and life, rather like the Apollonian and Dionysian principles described by Nietzsche. According to him, the perfect balance between the Apollonian and Dionysian as it appears in tragedy can in fact be "symbolized by a fraternal union of the two deities: Dionysus speaks the language of Apollo; an Apollo, finally the language of Dionysus; and so the highest goal of all art is attained."[727]

To follow this vein of thought we must be careful to steer clear of a too literal interpretation. I am not suggesting that one of the giants should be seen as a personification of the Apollonian principle and the other as the Dionysian side. It is not even clear which one would be which. It has been suggested that the figure on the left is Apollo and the figure on the right is Dionysus.[728] If we assume that Willumsen had only a very brief and banal understanding of Nietzsche's thought (and this is by no means impossible), then this might be plausible to at least some extent. The Apollonian side would then represent intellect and the Dionysian side would refer to instinct. But this is, of course, quite far from Nietzsche's original formulation.[729] And in fact, one might also argue that the blissful appearance of the figure on the right seems much closer to the dreamlike Apollonian harmony than to the primeval ecstasy of the Dionysian, whereas the figure on the left seems much more aware of the Dionysian "horror of existence." Perhaps we might conclude that the intellectual mind is aware of the horror, and understands that this is the truth. But with the help of emotion, we can also see beauty. Kain has argued that Nietzsche uses the term "Dionysian" ambiguously, sometimes referring to the ecstatic yet destroying torrent of life indicating the death of the individual, but at other times it is used to refer to a situation where we have enough of a protective veil to experience the raging torrent without perishing. What we need is "illusion, lies, or to put it more

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[726] See Schuré 1977 [1889], 481.

[727] Nietzsche 1968 [1886], 130 (*The Birth of Tragedy*).

[728] "Relieffets centrale figurer er to forbudne 'giganter', det Nietzsche'ske modsaetningspar, der apollinske, oprindeligt kaldet Forstanden, siden omtolket til Refleksion og det dionysiske, kaldet Instinktet." Guldager Bilde 1996, 53.

[729] In this context one should also keep in mind the popularizations of Nietzsches' theory that were made, for example, by George Brandes in his lectures and Julius Langbehn in his book *Rembrandt als Erzieher* (Rembrandt as Educator, 1890) Langbehn adopted from *The Birth of Tragedy* the notion that the Dionysian power of music can make the meaning of the drama immeditely clear to us "from the inside" ("von innen heraus"), and made it into a leitmotif of his work. It then became a catchprase to descibe the subjective tendencies in the art of the period and it was applied, for instance, to Munch's paintings. Swedenborg was also for Langbehn one of the central examples for the power of inner vision. See Lathe 1972, 19-21; Nietzsche 1968 [1886], 129.

congenially – *art*."[730] The *Golden Couple*, a symbol of art as a beautiful illusion, can thus be interpreted as the promise of liberation that motivates human life. Perhaps, when Willumsen finally reached the end of the process, the grandiose vision of the relief was no longer supposed to represent the truth because the truth no longer corresponded with beauty.

If we think about the *Great Relief* as a process, the Apollonian and Dionysian principles can be seen at work on another level. The Apollonian principle is the one that holds onto the ideal, whereas the Dionysian side is at the same time ripping it apart. Idealism leads to pessimism; the attempt to hold on to the ideal while at the same time realizing its impossibility leads to melancholia in the Freudian sense of identification with the loss.[731] Yet, even in the Nietzschean view there is ultimately a possibility of liberation. Embracing the unavoidable suffering makes us stronger, and after millennia of suffering we perhaps gain the strength to "build a new heaven." It seems that even for Nietzsche love is the only possible way towards liberation: in order to become strong, we must love every single moment of our lives.[732] The creative process behind the *Great Relief* is motivated by the tension between these opposing tendencies, the optimistic belief in liberation through art and the Nietzschean view of the horror of existence. These two sides are deeply intermingled, often impossible to separate from one another.

IMPOSSIBLE MASTERPIECES

Willumsen's struggle to come to terms with the *Great Relief* appears to be connected with the changing status of the artwork. The artwork was no longer understood as a material object but as a revelation of an idea that is not properly outside or inside the work of art, it is defined and completed as it is made manifest. The ultimate ideal behind art is then the total interconnectedness of idea and work. But as Belting has so brilliantly shown, this is a dream that can never be achieved, and in the avant-gardes of the twentieth century it was more or less abandoned as the completed and finite work of art was no longer considered the proper goal of the creative process.[733] The questioning of the absolute finiteness of the work of art was evident already at the end of the nineteenth century, when Willumsen started to work on the *Great Relief* and Munch on his *Frieze of Life.* It is reflected, for instance, in Aurier's conception of the aesthetic experience as the merging of two souls. According to Aurier, to be an artist, one must be able to read the "mysterious, yet miraculously expressive" language of nature composed of "lines, planes, shadows, and colours,"[734] and to understand that the objects in nature are nothing but signified

[730] Kain 2009, 9.

[731] See Freud 1957, 244-253 (*Mourning and Melancholia*).

[732] Kain 2009, 59-61

[733] Belting 2001, 11-14.

[734] "…les objets, c'est-à-dire, abstraitement, les diverses combinaisons de lignes, de plans, d'ombres, de couleurs, constituent le vocabulaire d'une langue mystérieuse, mais miraculeusement expressive, qu'il faut savoir pour être artiste." Aurier 1893, 301 ("Les peintres symbolistes").

Ideas.[735] The artwork that is thus produced is an entirely new being, the product of the synthesis of two souls: the soul of the artist and the soul of nature. To understand this almost divine being, one must love it, and to "penetrate it with immaterial kisses."[736] As we know, Willumsen's intention had been to place the relief in a public setting, which indicates that he was expecting an active participation from the viewer. The motivation behind this for Willumsen was primarily ethical: the purpose of art was to encourage the spiritual development of humanity. But the liberating potential of art is connected to an aesthetic ideal. When the artwork is understood not simply as a material object but as an ongoing process of becoming, it has the potential to radically change our understanding of the world we live in. This at least was the dream.

In *The Invisible Masterpiece* Belting accounts the story of another monumental sculpture that has significant parallels with the *Great Relief* – Auguste Rodin's *Gates of Hell*.[737] The *Gates of Hell* were cast in bronze between 1926 and 1928, circa ten years after the artist's death; in 1928 the *Great Relief* also reached its "final" stage. Both sculptures were long in the making and in both cases we end up with an object that can be understood as a final and completed work of art. But in neither case can the "work" be located exclusively in the end of the process. In Rodin's case this is perhaps more obvious, as the artist had already passed away by the time the bronze casts were made. Willumsen, on the other hand, was himself an active participant in the finalization of the project. He never let go of his dream of the ultimate masterpiece, whereas in Rodin's case, as Belting explains, the secret of the work's success lies precisely in its rejection of masterpiece status.[738]

Whereas Munch's *Frieze* has come to be viewed as one of the great achievements of fin-de-siècle art, and one that anticipates twentieth century modernism, Willumsen's relief has failed to reach a similar status. However, as an artistic endeavour it was no less ambitious. These two artistic processes, Munch's *Frieze* and Willumsen's *Relief*, both in their own ways appear to be attempting the impossible; they are intended as solutions to the fundamental questions concerning the relationships between the self, the world, and art. Both the *Frieze* and the *Relief* can be interpreted as extended self-portraits. Although none of the paintings or graphic works associated with the *Frieze* is a self-portrait in the traditional sense, many of them contain figures that can be identified as the artist, and more importantly, all of them are perceived through the deeply subjective and autobiographical attitude that was the trademark of Munch's art throughout his career. In the *Relief* the two central figures actually resemble the artist outward appearance, and hence can be interpreted as self-portraits in a more traditional sense. But more importantly, the *Frieze* and the *Relief* are works of art in which the whole

[735] "Dans la nature, tout objet n'est, en somme, qu'une Idée signifiée." Aurier 1893, 301 ("Les peintres symbolistes").

[736] Aurier 1893, 302 ("Les peintres symbolistes").

[737] Auguste Rodin, *The Gates of Hell*, c. 1880-1890 (cast in bronze 1926-28), bronze, 635 cm x 400 cm x 85 cm, Musée Rodin, Paris.

[738] See Belting 2001, 216-224.

world appears as a personal vision of the artists. Yet, rather than remaining on this subjective level, they at the same move towards a more universalized vision in which the self becomes immersed in the totality of the cosmos. The processual tendency reflected in these artworks manifests the questioning of the object status of the artwork. The creative process becomes more important than the end product. But as we can see particularly in Willumsen's case, it was not easy to give up the dream of creating the absolute masterpiece. This fixation with the idea of synthesizing the work and the idea, matter and spirit, the self and the cosmos, into one total work of art, was ultimately the cause of Willumsen's failure. Munch's *Frieze*, on the other hand, can be seen as a more successful endeavour to synthesize art and life precisely because it never reached a finalized and fixed state. In the *Frieze of Life* the self and the world compose a fragmentary and processual whole that finds expression through art.

Rapetti has written about a fin-de-siècle "obsession with incompletion" which is connected with the conception of the artist's oeuvre as an organic and constantly evolving entity. In this context, Rapetti discusses the paintings of Gustave Moreau and Eugène Carrière, Rodin's *Gates of Hell*, and Munch's *Frieze of Life*.[739] Like Munch, Moreau believed that his works communicated more as a whole than when they were viewed individually. Hence, during the final years of his life he transformed his home into a museum where his life work would be commemorated. Although Moreau intended his finished paintings to fulfil the requirements of the academic *fini*, he also wanted to have his sketches and studies on display so that they would offer glimpses into the continuous creative process that went on in the artist's mind. His reluctance to stop working on his canvases reveals that at least on certain occasions the process became more important than the creation of a finished work of art. He left behind several easels holding unfinished paintings on which he appeared to have been working on every day until his death. Rapetti assumes that he probably "consider[ed] the easels permanent and the process unending."[740] Rapetti recognizes a similar processuality and interpenetration of art and life in Munch's *Frieze*:

> *The coherence of the work is here related to the immateriality of the artist's conception. The constant recommencement of which the cycle was based and its overtly autobiographical nature – even though it dealt with general human issues on a symbolic register – make it seem like a living organism. Nothing separates it from Munch's own life, whose vagaries it shares; there is not even any typological unity that might lend it some autonomy.*[741]

This kind of intermingling of the self and art was, of course, something that gained great emphasis in the avant-gardes of the twentieth century, and it also affected the meaning of self-portraiture in a way that had very radical consequences. Roger Marcel Mayou has discussed the emergence of body art in the mid twentieth-century as an important point of culmination in terms of self-portraiture. Body art to

[739] See Rapetti 2005, 198-211.

[740] Rapetti 2005, 199.

[741] Rapetti 2005, 202.

him "does not represent a break in tradition, but on the contrary expresses all the psychological aspects implied in it through an explosion of the self."[742] The use of artists own body as the medium can be seen as a fulfilment of the dream of totally merging the self with art. In the same way as in Munch's and Willumsen's creative processes, the self is the medium through which the world is understood. In body art, however, "The artist does not introduce himself to a created work, he is art, and his personality is no longer subjected to passive treatment, it is shown as real."[743]

[742] Mayou 1986, 20.

[743] Mayou 1986, 20.

CONCLUSIONS: DYNAMICS OF THE SELF AND ART

In this study I have examined a number of fin-de-siècle artworks as sites of an ongoing discussion concerning the meaning of art, the role of the artist, and the constitution of selfhood. The subject of this study was originally conceptualized in terms of self-portraiture, and the initial motivation was the understanding that self-portraits compose a crucial, and so far somewhat overlooked aspect in the otherwise ample research concerning questions of the self and identities in the culture of the fin-de-siècle. However, in the course of the research process, it became more and more apparent that Symbolism constitutes a point in art history where it becomes increasingly difficult to define self-portraiture and to set the limits of the genre. The traditional rules of self-portraiture were constantly being questioned, and the highly subjective attitude towards art in general suggests that in a way perhaps every work of art from the period could be seen as a self-portrait. Aurier wrote, referring to Zola's famous definition of art as "nature seen through temperament," that in the final analysis, a work of art is simply "a *visible sign* of this temperament," it is "a symbol of this temperament, the symbol of the *idéique* and sensitive whole of the artist."[744]

Hence, it would have been too restrictive to include only self-portraits in the conventional sense in the research material. This explains, for instance, why a self-portrait by Beda Stjernschantz (1892) has not been treated in this study, although it was one of the first artworks that I started to work with at the beginning of the process – I had already written about it in my master's thesis which I completed in 2006. However, I realized at some point that the paintings *Aphorism* and *Pastoral* (*Primavera*), although not self-portraits in any traditional sense, were deeply entangled in questions that were most crucial for this study; questions of identity, the constitution of the self, immortality, the soul, and so on. It became clear that old definitions were no longer sufficient as the self and subjectivity emerged as the

[744] "... un *signe visible* de ce tempérament ... un symbole de ce tempérament, le symbole de l'ensemble *idéique* et sensitive de l'ouvrier." Aurier 1893, 298 ("Les Peintres Symbolistes").

fundamental core of all creative activity. Self-exploration was considered essential in order to become a fully conscious human being and a true artist, and individuality, originality, and subjectivity were the most highly valued qualities. Self-knowledge was a means to reach a more fundamental level of understanding; to be an artist, one had to possess an intensely personal vision but at the same time be able to express universal truths. The constant need for self-exploration was also related to an ever increasing questioning of traditional religiosity and a subsequent interest in religious syncretism. The idea that all religions contain the same truth in the core of their doctrines was connected with the idea of art as the new religion. Art was understood as a form of knowledge and a source of truth. Therefore, the creative process became a form of self-exploration motivated by an attempt to transcend beyond everyday consciousness in order to achieve a heightened perception of the self and the world. The fundamental, and ultimately unattainable, aim of art (and perhaps also of science, and religion) was to decipher the riddle of the self. Both art and science were constantly seeking new means to penetrate deeper into the mysteries of life, and to discover new truths. The fin-de-siècle artists turned inward in order to find a more fundamental level of being but it was not always clear what the exact meaning of this was. The experience of the individual subject was nonetheless the only available means for reaching a contact with this realm. In some cases the artists adopted the Romantic way and sought to connect with the larger nature through self-exploration. However, unlike with the Romantics for whom nature was fundamentally good, the nature that the artists like Munch encountered had a deeply ambivalent character. New scientific discoveries, such as hysteria, hypnosis, and multiple personality, contributed to novel ways of understanding the self as something that is not singular and unified but multiple and exceedingly incoherent.

The creative condition of the artist, which in the fin-de-siècle context was often understood in terms of an ecstatic or visionary state, transforms both the self and the external world. This transformation can be either pleasurable or painful; it can be felt as a peaceful merging into the cosmos, or it may entail a horrific sense of dissolution verging on madness. In either case it appears as a process of unselving. The conscious and rational side of the self is temporarily lost, and some deeper, more fundamental level of being takes over. In the artworks that have been discussed in this study, this experience finds various expression, but in each case it appears as more or less ambivalent, ranging from the melancholic contemplation in Thesleff's self-portrait to the desperation of Munch's V*ision,* and culminating in the primal horror of *The Scream*. Clair has noted that whereas in Romanticism the landscape appeared as a state of mind, in Symbolism this formula was reverted:

> *... the state of mind becomes the landscape. But it is an empty landscape, a deserted world without any centre of circumference ... Thus, the search for an essential identity perceived as the Self's proximity with itself – this perilous and many-faceted game – soon comes to be experienced as a loss of self, as an illusion that the mind can never truly grasp.*[745]

[745] Clair 1995b, 125.

Rather than attempting to represent the self as a conscious and autonomous being, Symbolist self-portraits often explore the extreme states of mind in which the subject becomes alienated and dissociated from itself. This alienation can be perceived in terms of an immersion into a more fundamental level of being where the self and the world become united. However, there appears to be no other access point into the larger totality than the self, and hence this unifying perspective is always in danger of turning into solipsism. Strindberg, as we have seen, believed that his personal self was inherently linked with the larger totality of existence. He described himself as a monist but his vision of the world was highly subjective. Indeed, during the Inferno period the entire surrounding world appeared to him as a network of personal symbols. Moreover, the kind of immersion into the cosmos that was preached by Schopenhauer, that is, the kind that led into self-abnegation, did not appeal to him because the self was the focal point of all existence and without it there was nothing: "Everything I know – and it is so little! – derives from my self, the central point of my being." Hence, "the supreme and final aim of our existence" had to be "the cultivation of one's self."[746]

It is easy to see the attraction of self-portraiture in this context. As a form of art dedicated to self-exploration, it is perfectly suited for the purposes of the new subjective art. At the same time, self-portraiture is so fundamentally linked with outward appearances that the whole genre had to be reinterpreted if its meaningfulness was to be maintained. As we know, self-portraiture has proved to be surprisingly persistent and it is still today considered an important form of artistic creativity. However, the definitions of the genre have become more and more fluid – to the extent that it is no longer entirely clear if such a genre exists as anything else than an art historical structure. Today's artists have more freedom than ever before to play with this genre without entirely committing to it.[747] At least to a certain extent, this situation is to be perceived as a consequence of the developments that were taking place in the art of the late nineteenth-century. The German art historian Erika Billeter explained the situation of twentieth century self-portraiture in 1986 in a way that I believe still holds true of at least certain currents of contemporary self-portraiture:

> *We note that recent art displays a strong orientation of the artist towards his own person, but self-representation no longer has anything to do with self-analysis or critical illustration of the life lived by the artist. The circumstances of his life no longer impel the artist to portray himself. His person merely provides material for his art ... The self becomes both medium and source of the picture. The painter uses his own person to illustrate the content of the picture, which ultimately only he can explain.*[748]

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[746] Strindberg 1968 [1898], 187-188 (*Inferno*).

[747] Amelia Jones talks about "self imaging," meaning works of art or artistic processes which are not necessarily self-portraits in the traditional sense, but which "enact the self (and most often of the artist her or himself) in the context of the visual and performing arts." Jones 2006, xvii.

[748] From the introduction to the exhibition catalogue *Self-Portrait in the Age of Photography: Photographers Reflecting their Own Image*. Billeter 1986, 11.

Moreover, Billeter correctly observes that the background of the twentieth-century situation can be traced back to the developments that culminated in the nineteenth-century:

> *Extreme narcissism and the outspoken need to view oneself as imitation per se of all that occurs has led painters to a total fusion of ego and art, of life and image. These representations of the self are the outcome of a prolonged process dating back to the Renaissance, which ... gained momentum in the nineteenth century so that the artist was guided more and more by his own person and his irritation with life and society. The artist zeroed himself and ultimately turned himself into the content of art. Reference to oneself has never been so strong. The viewer, no longer able to identify with the pictorial self, has been shut out.*[749]

The basic question of self-portraiture might be stated as "Who am I? " But in the context of the present study, a more appropriate question might be "What is the 'I'?" These artworks reflect a tension between individuality and universality. On one level they are all deeply subjective, but at the same time they seem to be striving towards a more general level. They are not simply representations of a subject but of *subjectivity*. Perhaps this is what all self-portraits are fundamentally about. At least it seems to be so according to the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy who claims that the self-portrait, rather than being the representation of a subject is, in fact, the "execution of subjectivity or of being-self as such."[750] In the context of the fin-de-siècle this issue becomes acute. The fashionable self-exploration that in the course of the nineteenth-century had, to borrow Peter Gay's words, "grown into a favourite, and wholly serious, indoor sport" was turning into something quite different in the artists' minds.[751] The new form of subjectivity was intrinsically paradoxical in the sense that self-examination was understood primarily as a method, and the results were to be fundamentally "suprapersonal."[752] The two creative processes which were discussed in the final chapter of this study, Willumsen's *Great Relief* and Munch's *Frieze of Life*, manifest this phenomenon in a most palpable manner, and they also reveal how this new subjectivity is connected with the changing status of the artwork. In these processual works of art the self becomes completely immersed into the world, and the sole purpose of art is to examine this totality. These are not self-portraits in any traditional sense, and their function is not to represent "a self" as an individual. What they intend to reveal is selfhood on a more abstract level. They reflect the whole idea of what it means to be a human being. The work of art, like the self, is perceived not as a closed and complete entity but as a process of becoming.

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[749] Billeter 1986, 11.

[750] Nancy 2006, 228.

[751] Gay 1996, 4.

[752] See Wittlich 1995, 237. Wittlich refers here to Aurier's definition of the purpose of painting as the expression of the idea through symbols which take on a life of their own. According to Wittlich, Redon's painting *Closed Eyes* meets the requirements of the new subjective art: "... it juxtaposes a reference to Michelangelo and a limitless stretch of water. The motif of the watery depths evokes a symbolism of the unconscious and creates a spatial disorientation of the pictorial object. On the surface of the water, there is a blurred reflection of the face, which introduces a psychological dimension." Wittlich 1995, 237.

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