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Space, Time and Edvard Munch

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# Space, time and Edvard Munch

NOTWITHSTANDING his links with European expressionism and his pictorial explorations of the psyche, Edvard Munch never entirely severed himself from his roots in the Norwegian naturalism of Christian Krohg, his *de facto* teacher, and Hans Jaeger, his spiritual mentor. Art, they believed, should reflect an artist's personal experience and hence be autobiographical. If these tenets are broadened to include imaginative constructions derived from past experiences they could be said to apply to much of Munch's work.<sup>1</sup> In his later years he consciously resisted modernism, stating in 1910 that he was working 'contrary to the modern style'.<sup>2</sup> He painted a large number of portraits which, despite much variation in style and at times caricatural exaggeration, are basically realistic likenesses clearly intended to produce acute characterisations of the individuals portrayed. Nearly all these portraits, moreover, derive their virtues from personal contact with the sitter; the lack of such contact in the case of his portrait of *Friedrich Nietzsche* produced a clumsy and contrived result. Jaeger and Krohg further maintained that the emotions felt by the artist when he worked should be intelligibly communicated by his work, so that all its viewers could share his emotions and benefit from his experience. Munch's espousal of this didactic social purpose differentiates him from most late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century modernists. It links him, in fact, to a much older artist, G.F. Watts, who, like Munch, believed art should be made accessible to the people through the pictorial decoration of public buildings. Both Watts and Munch painted a series of symbolic pictures dealing with love, life and death which they wished to hang as an ensemble in a great hall, though neither achieved this aim. Watts's series which he called the *House of life* was conceived about 1850, over forty years before Munch's similar series, the *Frieze of life*.<sup>3</sup>

Munch's development should, therefore, be seen in the light of an underlying commitment to nineteenth-century attitudes and regarded less as a renunciation of realism than

as a subjective extension of it. One of the ways in which such an extension of this commitment is apparent can be discerned in Munch's use of geometrical perspective in certain pictures. Towards the close of the 1880s he began to employ a type of composition that he often used thereafter in outdoor scenes. It consists of a deep recession in parallel or nearly parallel perspective, usually accompanied by a figure or figures moving or facing into and/or out of the recession. Sometimes a figure or group of figures is placed in the extreme foreground, truncated by the base line, thus relating the picture space to that of the observer. These elements could have been derived from Krohg's *Village street at Grèz* (Fig.21), one of two surviving fragments of a large picture of 1882 entitled *Sunday morning*.<sup>4</sup> It shows part of a foreshortened street along which a woman advances and several figures carrying umbrellas retreat, including a man in the extreme foreground truncated by the base line. Both this fragment and the complete design of the destroyed *Sunday morning* find echoes in several of Munch's paintings.<sup>5</sup> Even more germane to Munch's subsequent practice is the *Fisher boy* of 1885 by Hans Heyerdahl, a painter he admired and whose influence he acknowledged (Fig.22).<sup>6</sup> Shown in profile, the boy sits dreamily in the extreme foreground, his truncated figure forming a *repoussoir*. Behind him the platform and building recede in perspective, with figures facing inwards and outwards. Comparable constructions were frequently employed by Munch.

A striking fact about Munch's perspective compositions is that they first appeared in their most distinctive form at approximately the time he began to incorporate in his art elements derived from neo-impressionism, symbolism and *art nouveau*. These developments involved the flattening of forms and spaces into two-dimensional patterns, in order to portray subjective concepts instead of objective percepts. Foreground *repoussoir* can readily be assimilated into such patterns. So can the receding lines formed by deep perspectives, but only to a limited degree, because the sense

<sup>1</sup>In Act 1 of Ibsen's play *Fruen fra havet* (*The Lady from the Sea*) of 1888, the aspiring sculptor Lyngstrand describes the genesis of such an imaginative construction. See H. IBSEN: *Samlede værker*, Cristiania [1907], Vol.V, pp.22-24.

<sup>2</sup>Letter to Herbert Esche, 15th December 1910, private collection (copy in the Munch Museet, Oslo), quoted in A. EGGUM: *Edvard Munch, Paintings, Sketches and Studies*, tr. R. CHRISTOPHERSEN, London [1984], p.258.

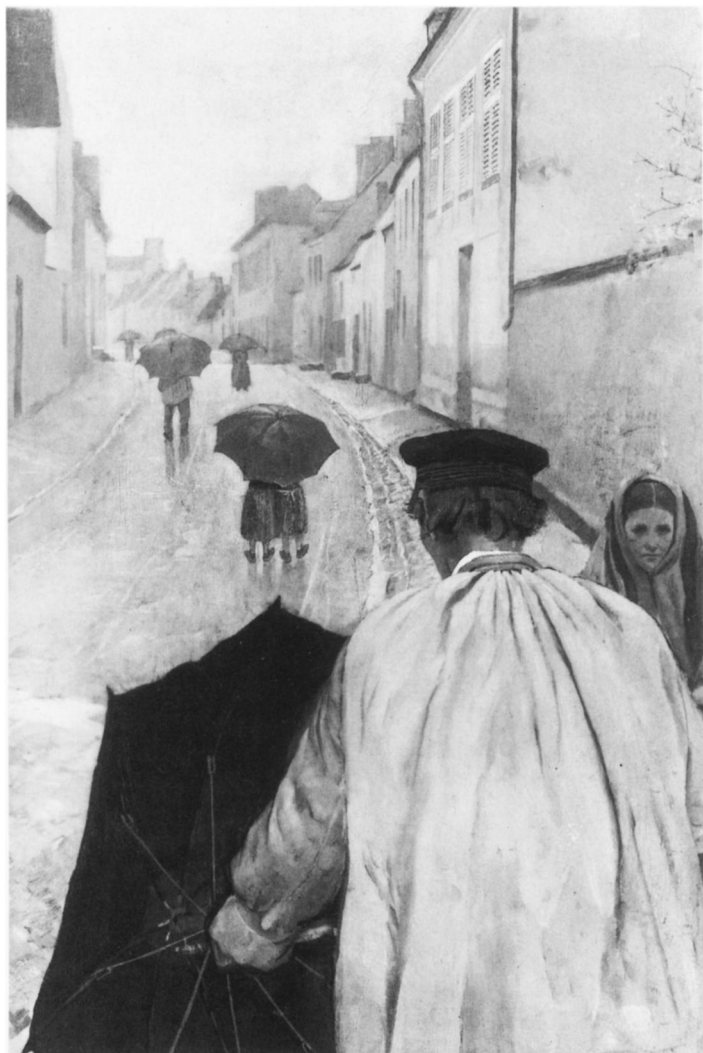
<sup>3</sup>Despite obvious differences, the parallel between Munch and Watts is also close in other respects. While young children both lost their mothers through tuberculosis, both had fanatically religious fathers, both suffered from depression and at times hallucination, both were of delicate health yet lived to be octogenarians, both painted many portraits, including self-portraits, both painted scenes of working-class life, both often retouched and had difficulty finishing paintings, both painted many later replicas or variations of early compositions, especially subjects connected with their personal mythologies, both were concerned with time and memory (Watts's first allegorical picture was *Time and oblivion*), and both had sympathetic contact, though to different degrees, with anarchist thinkers, Jaeger in the case of Munch, Prince Kropotkin in the case of Watts. There is not much evidence of direct influence of the older artist on the younger, but three of Watts's erotic subjects, *Orpheus and Eurydice*, *Diana and Endymion* and *Fata Morgana*, are reproduced in R. MÜTHER: *Geschichte der Malerei im XIX Jahrhundert*, Vol.III, Munich [1894], a work highly regarded in Munch's Berlin circle (see R. HELLER: *Munch, his Life and Work*, London [1984], p.233) and there is some kinship in mood and configuration between them and Munch's *Madonna* of c.1894 and related drawings. Several Munch drawings and prints (e.g. *Man*

and woman, a drawing of c.1890, Munch Museet OKK365; *Lovers*, a lithograph of 1896, Sch.71; and *Man and woman kissing*, coloured woodcut of 1905, Sch.230) bear a resemblance to Watts's *Paolo and Francesca* (best known in version of 1872-75 in the Watts Gallery, Guildford).

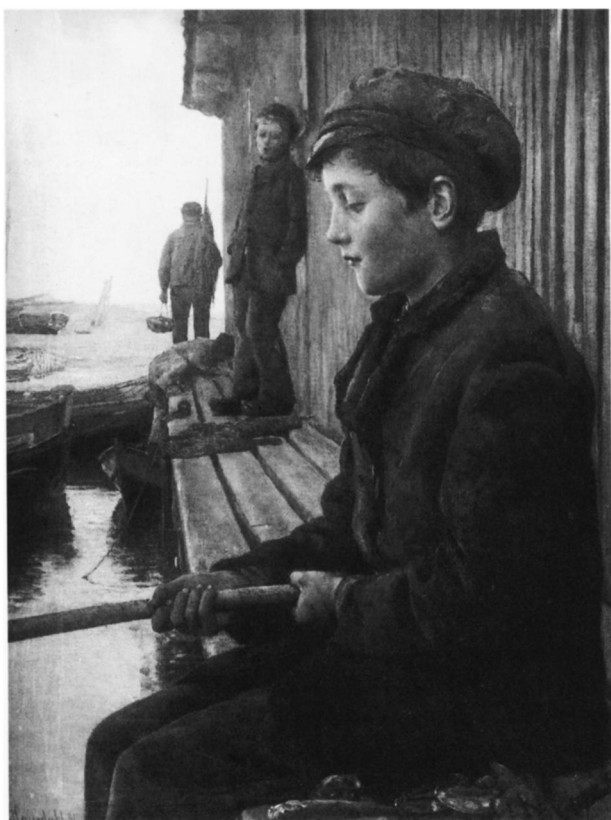
<sup>4</sup>The original picture was cut up because it would have cost too much to transport to Norway. See E. WERENSKIOLD: 'Christian Krohg', *Samtiden* [1925], p.531; P. GAUGUIN: *Christian Krohg*, Oslo [1932], p.80 (Gauguin calls the fragment in question *Man with umbrella*); O. THUE and I. WIKBORG: *Christian Krohg*, exh.cat., Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo [1987], pp.82-87 (both surviving fragments reproduced).

<sup>5</sup>For example, *Promenade des Anglais, Nice* (1891), *Karl Johansgate in rain* (1891), both in the Munch Museet, Oslo, *Spring day in Karl Johansgate* (1890), in the Bergen Picture Gallery. Kirk Varnedoe ('Christian Krohg and Edvard Munch', *Arts Magazine*, LIII, 8 [April 1979], p.88) states correctly that Munch could only have seen *Sunday Morning* in fragments but does not point out that he would almost certainly have known the general design *in toto* from a preliminary oil sketch which survived (now in Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo, reproduced in THUE and WIKBORG, *op.cit.* at note 4 above, p.83).

<sup>6</sup>Munch told his friend Jens Thiis: 'I owe more to Heyerdahl than to Krohg'. (J. THIIS: *Edvard Munch og hans samtid*, Oslo [1933], p.80). Munch's personal contact with Heyerdahl ended in a quarrel, but at an exhibition many years after the latter's death he is reported, after having gazed for a long time at Heyerdahl's *Death of the workman* (Kunstforening, Trondheim), to have walked away muttering: 'All the same, he was a great painter' (*ibid.*, p.146n.). See also T. ASLAKSBY: *Hans Heyerdahl 1857-1913*, Drammen [1981], pp.21-23.



21. *Village street at Grèz*, by Christian Krohg. 1882. 102 by 70 cm. (Rasmus Meyers Samlinger, Bergen).



22. *Fisher boy*, by Hans Heyerdahl. 1885. 84 by 66 cm. (Private collection, Oslo).

of the third dimension remains strong. In the famous *Scream* of 1893 (Fig.23) the foreground figure is almost absorbed by the curvilinear flow of landscape and sky, and is thus threatened with becoming part of a subjective two-dimensional pattern. But this pattern is opposed by the deep perspective of the causeway with its fence, augmented by the diminished scale of the figures in the background. Hence there is a conflict between two different space conceptions: two-dimensional 'organic' curvilinearity and three-dimensional 'inorganic' rectilinearity. The contrast balances the design and creates tension. But the chief function of the perspective is surely to preserve objective reality, to show the scene as occurring in a real world that is not simply a figment of the imagination. In fact the scene records a real-life incident. Munch's description of what happened is well known:—

I was walking along the road with two friends. The sun set. I felt a tinge of melancholy. Suddenly the sky became a bloody red.

I stopped, leaned against the railing, dead tired. And I looked at the flaming clouds that hung like blood and a sword over the blue-black fjord and city.

My friends walked on. I stood there, trembling with fright. And I felt a loud, unending scream piercing nature.<sup>7</sup>

Quite apart from the impossibility of rendering a sound visually, even using expressionist techniques, the picture does not and could not match the description. For, whereas the latter consists of a narrative sequence in which successive events occur over a span of time, the former presents only the terminal point of that sequence. In a still picture it is not possible to give direct expression to the passage of time, since forms are revealed simultaneously, not sequentially. It is possible, however, to allude to it through implied movement, especially between points of varying distance from the observer, who will intuitively estimate the time required to traverse the distance between nearer and farther points by the means of locomotion represented. In the *Scream* Munch employs this device to encompass the anecdote. From the description we know it began with the two friends adjacent to the narrator, whom they would have equalled in pictorial scale had the scene been represented at that point. By the end, they have moved away into the background, their scale much diminished. They now belong to the past, and their distance in space measures the time that has elapsed since they left the narrator. The unbroken flow of the perspective thus indicates both continuity of extension and continuity of duration. Munch, it would seem, was not only concerned to preserve the naturalistic world of three dimensions that could easily have been lost in embracing a purely expressionist mode, but also at pains to introduce time, the fourth and most subjective dimension.

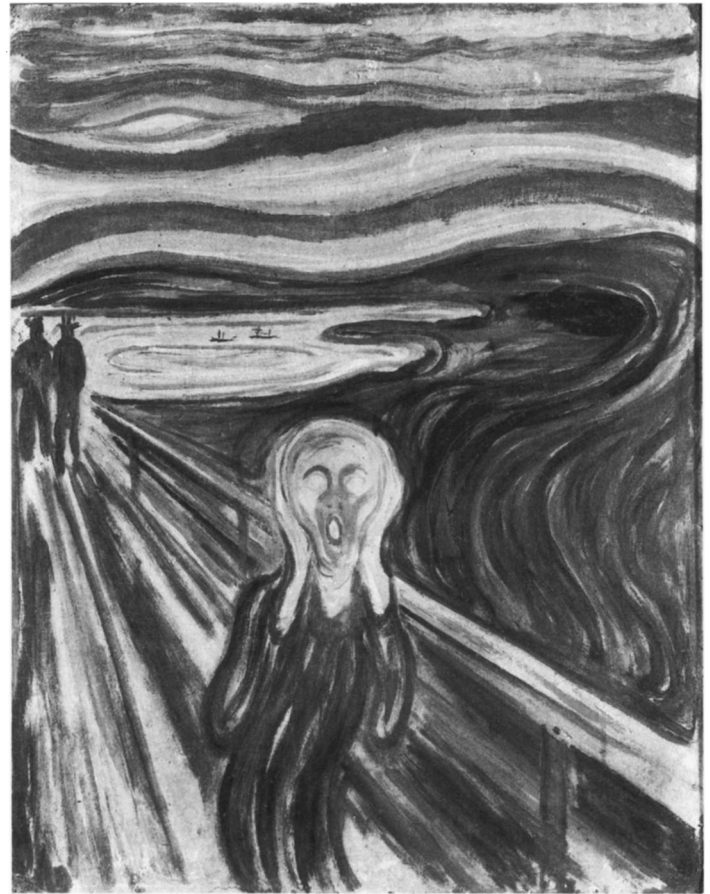
Friendly contemporary critics (and even Munch himself) sometimes compared his art to music, without offering any very explicit reason. Were it based on the usual grounds of synaesthesia or similar conjuring of mood, the comparison might seem arbitrary — no more applicable to Munch than to many other painters. But music is a tem-

<sup>7</sup>Munch recorded the incident several times, with slight variations: see R. HELLER: *Edvard Munch: The Scream*, London [1973], pp.103-09. The version quoted here is the earliest, a diary entry of 22nd January 1892 (*ibid.*, p.107).



poral art, an aural shaping of a stretch of time, and if Munch's painting were felt to suggest a similar shaping in visual terms the comparison becomes understandable.<sup>8</sup> 'Time', wrote Bergson in his *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, 'in so far as it is a homogeneous medium and not concrete duration, is reducible to space.' And again: '... we are compelled to borrow from space the images by which we describe what the reflective consciousness feels about time and even about succession; ...'<sup>9</sup> While no precise analogy can be drawn between Munch's use of perspective and Bergson's abstruse theory of the psychological relations of time, space and motion, some points of resemblance can be detected, and a direct or indirect influence of the philosopher on the painter is possible. Bergson's book was published in Paris in 1889, the year Munch came to live in that city. This was soon after he had first employed his deep-perspective type of composition, but before the earliest examples which plainly incorporate the dimension of time.

Perhaps it was Krohg who first introduced Munch to the idea of equating distance from picture plane with distance in time. Kirk Varnedoe has pointed out how in the older master's *Albertine in the police doctor's waiting room* of 1886-87 (Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo) the heroine in effect appears twice. The picture illustrates Krohg's own novel *Albertine*, the story of a prostitute. In the background she is shown at the time she embarks on her profession, a still innocent girl about to enter the police doctor's consultation room for the examination required by the authorities; in the foreground we see a 'premonitory symbol' of what she later became, a seasoned whore.<sup>10</sup> Such space-time progressions, often called 'simultaneous narrative', were far from new, however, and both Krohg and Munch would have been familiar with examples in Quattrocento Italian art. Apart from a few obviously symbolic compositions, Munch did not, as a rule, violate naturalistic pictorial rationality by duplicating figures in this way. On at least one occasion, however, he probably did. In a painting of 1891-92 called *On the highroad* (Fig. 24) an old woman stands adjacent to the picture plane with the lower part of her figure truncated by the base line while in the background a young man and a young woman recede along the road into the distance. It is reasonable to suppose the old woman is looking back into the past with her mind's eye and recollecting a romance of her youth. She stands in profile, thereby suggesting only lateral extension, though in a drawing of the subject (Munch-Museet, Oslo), she is shown with her head turned back slightly, in *profil perdu*, presumably in order to look at the retreating lovers. All implied movement in a picture will carry some suggestion of time, but with lateral movement this is only slight, because unless the angle of vision is abnormally wide changes of position do not entail any appreciable variation in distance from the observer. And if a figure in profile is obviously stationary, as in this case, it will appear virtually timeless. Munch occasionally favoured such figures, like



23. *The scream*, by Edvard Munch. 1893. Tempera on panel, 83.5 by 66 cm. (Oslo Kommunes Kunstsamlinger, Munch Museet, Oslo).

Heyerdahl with his *Fisher boy* employing them to express a state of passive, dreamy contemplation; whereas activity and movement demand the dimension of time, in contemplation the sense of time is lost.

The *Scream*, for all its expressionist distortions, is conceived as straightforward narrative, realistic in its equivalence of perspective space and time. In *On the highroad*, however, the distance of the background figures is insufficient to suggest a realistic correspondence to the great distance in time between youth and old age. The space-time relationship is therefore metaphorical rather than literal. Moreover the background represents metaphorically the old woman's memory, not the direct perception of the spectator. Such representations of space and time, not as real dimensions but as products of the imagination, occur in many of Munch's pictures. The subject of the experience may be either the artist himself or the foreground figure in the picture.

Obviously movement along a space-time perspective can be of two kinds, either regression into the past or progression into the future. Munch employed the first in one and both in the other of two different compositions

<sup>8</sup>In praising Munch's *Evening* (also known as *Melancholy* or *The Yellow Boat*) Krohg gave a hint of having experienced the picture in this way: 'A long shoreline that moves inwards over the picture and becomes a delicious line, which is remarkably harmonic. This is music. . . . It may even be that this is related most closely to music and not to painting, but in any case it is brilliant music' (C. KROHG: 'Munch', *Verdens Gang* and *Dagbladet* [27th November 1891], reprinted in *Kampen for tilværelsen*, 2nd ed., Oslo [1952], pp.174-75 and quoted

in HELLER, *op.cit.* at note 3 above, p.82). What is remarkable here is that the musical quality is not identified with colour, as is commonly the case, but with linear recession.

<sup>9</sup>H. BERGSON: *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, Paris [1889], Eng. tr. by F.L. POGSON, as *Time and Free Will*, London [1910], 6th ed., 1950, pp.98, 91.

<sup>10</sup>VARNE DOE, *loc.cit.* at note 5 above, p.90. The painting is also reproduced in THUE and WIKBORG, *op.cit.* at note 4 above, p.141.



24. *On the highroad*, by Edvard Munch. 1891-92. 65 by 90.5 cm. (Oslo Kommunes Kunstsamlinger, Munch Museet, Oslo).

believed to relate to the death of his father in 1889, which had affected him profoundly. A drawing of about 1890 called the *Path of Death* shows an old man with bent back trudging along a road into the distance, in the midst of a desolate landscape.<sup>11</sup> It can credibly be interpreted as the artist's father passing out of his son's life into the past. *Death at the helm*, a painting of 1893 (Fig.25), presents a more complex conception. The old man in the foreground, a typical truncated figure in profile, sits hunched in a boat steered towards us by a skeleton. Death is his destination, its realm lying beyond the picture plane, which he and the boat have already breached. In the background happy, sunlit yachts sail away in the opposite direction, into the past, doubtless representing joys that can never return. Despite the title, strictly speaking the skeleton is not a symbol of death, which occurs in the future, but of the insuperable forces of mortality, acting through time, that propel Munch's father towards it. He himself is shown objectively, in a state of timeless contemplation, but the scene in which he is placed apparently represents the four-dimensional content of his imagination. Thus, as in *On the highroad*, the picture assumes a shift of perception on the part of the viewer; from his own eyes to the mind's eye of the *repoussoir* figure in the picture. Shifts of this sort recall what is sometimes demanded in mannerist paintings, for

example Parmigianino's *Vision of St Jerome* in which we are shown both the sleeping saint and the vision as he sees it.

As already intimated with respect to the *Scream*, certain of Munch's compositions demand that we differentiate between, on the one hand, geometrical perspective, which represents the third dimension and implies the fourth, and, on the other, curvilinear *art nouveau* fusion which presents a pattern in two dimensions and can imply the third, but only adumbrate the fourth. With this distinction in mind it is possible to elucidate the well-known *Girls on the pier* of c.1900 (Fig.26), of which Munch later painted several variant versions. This picture has been interpreted as a puberty motif, with the tree and its reflection forming a phallic symbol.<sup>12</sup> But it can also be seen as a representation of time and memory in human life. The girls, in a state of contemplation, are firmly anchored to the railing, the continuity of which is emphasised by the absence of supporting posts and the extent of which may be taken to mark the limit of clear and continuous memory. Beyond the perspective of the pier the distant shore, rendered as a flat *art nouveau* pattern, would then represent a dim, detached memory of the distant past.<sup>13</sup> The girls gaze into the water 'reflecting on the reflection', so to speak, of their early life.

<sup>11</sup> Munch-Museet, Oslo, T252; reproduced in EGGUM, *op.cit.* at note 2 above, p.10.

<sup>12</sup> A. EGGUM: 'Major Paintings', in *Edvard Munch: Symbols and Images*, exh.cat., Washington D.C. [1978], p.62.

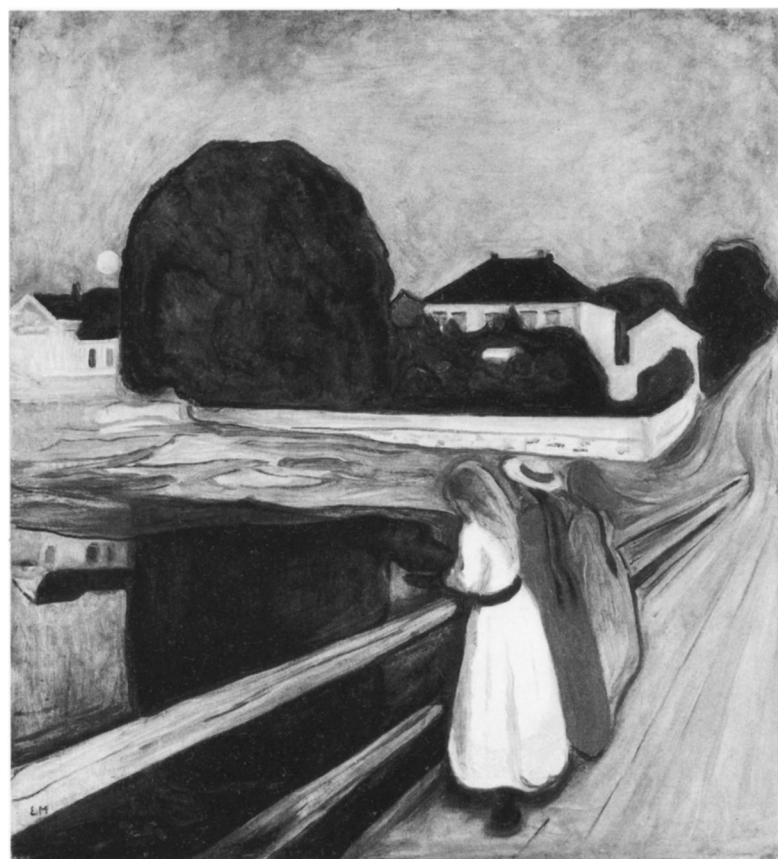
<sup>13</sup> Some of Munch's works depict static, discontinuous memory images of this sort without the intervening perspective lines of continuous memory. An example

is *Separation* (c.1896, Munch Museet), where the sorrowing man in the foreground is directly backed by a receding seashore landscape flattened and feminised by linear fusion with the curvatures of the girl he has lost, who is shown in profile. He faces forward but his progress into the future is blocked by a bloodied plant; he seems imprisoned in the present.





25. *Death at the helm*, by Edvard Munch. 1893. 100 by 120.5 cm. (Oslo Kommunes Kunstsamlinger, Munch Museet, Oslo).



26. *Girls on the pier*, by Edvard Munch. 1899-1901. 136 by 125.5 cm. (Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo).



27. *Family on the road*, by Edvard Munch. 1902-03. 197 by 122 cm. (Thielska Galleriet, Stockholm).

A more obvious instance of a space-time progression occurs in *Family on the road* of 1902-03 (Fig.27). Three generations are shown in chronological sequence from rear to front, with a fourth in the future implied by the doll the child holds. Mother, child and doll face the front, with implied movement forward into the future, whereas the grandmother, in profile, does not advance. Her day is done, she will soon die and can only meditate on the vaguely-remembered past, represented by a distant symbolic perspective; the distant past fades out of reality and can be represented subjectively. The little girl's hat resembles a halo; she and her doll evidently refer to the motif of Madonna and Child. The idea of associating religion with generation had appeared several years earlier in the *Madonna* of 1894-95, about which the artist wrote: 'Now life shakes the hand of death. The chain is forged which

binds the thousand generations that are dead to the thousand generations yet to come'<sup>14</sup> – a statement clearly indicating his concern with time.

As the members of the *Family on the road* are exclusively female – with the possible exception of the doll – it would seem that Munch may have had reservations about the masculine contribution to procreation. In a curious way this attitude had appeared before in the painting called *Fertility* (Fig.28), a timeless profile composition of obviously Genesitic derivation. All the important elements in the picture – the cherry tree laden with fruit, the basket of cherries, the field of vegetables, the pregnant woman – exemplify the idea of the title, except the man who appears to gaze dumbly at the stump of a lopped-off branch.<sup>15</sup> Here there may well be an autobiographical allusion, referring to Munch's own reluctance or incapacity to marry and be fertile. This was the time when his mistress Tulla Larsen was pressing him to marry her and he refused, in part at least, because of the disease in him and his family – alcoholism, insanity and tuberculosis.<sup>16</sup> Cut stubs of tree branches and the cut faces of logs of wood are motifs he included in a number of works of around the turn of the century and again after moving to Kragerø in 1909. In some of these works he creates a perspectival plunge into the depth by placing logs orthogonally and exaggerating their length by employing a short line of sight. An interesting example is the *Woodcutter* of 1913 (Fig.29). Here we see the entire tree in perspective and can picture the stages of its existence from the distant past in the background up to the point in the foreground where and when it has been chopped from its roots. In front of the felled tree, beside its stump, stands its slayer, the woodcutter. Placed in profile, he appears as a contemplator divorced from time, not an operator married to it. His body is inert and seems to have no coherent connection with the axe he apparently holds, the instrument of his previous activity. Presumably thoughts of death, remorse, and perhaps infertility occupy his mind. It may seem inconsistent that the tree has subsequently been sliced into three logs. These cuts, however, serve to provide a space-time scale, and, having been made after the tree's death, are not incidents in its life, to which the deep perspective may be taken exclusively to refer. Their colour and brushwork relate them less to the tree itself than to the rest of the scene, which is essentially a flat, timeless pattern linked to the profile of the woodman, executed in the looser, more angular, broken manner of Munch's later years.

Whereas an arboricide can turn away to meditate on mortality, a homicide must face the future within the framework of his active life. In the *Murderer in the avenue* of 1919 (Fig.30) victim and perpetrator are in reversed situations; the latter becomes protagonist instead of the former. The corpse, for whom time has stopped, lies laterally in the middle-ground marking the point where and when the deed was committed, while the murderer rushes forward into the future beyond the picture plane, the base line of which – perhaps symbolically – already decapitates him. Both figures have merely been sketched in rough outline over

<sup>14</sup>MS. Munch Museet T2547, quoted in EGGUM, *op.cit* at note 2 above, p.116.

<sup>15</sup>Simplifications of form and discrepancies of scale and overlapping render his exact line of sight ambiguous, but the resulting flatness causes it to seem directed at the stump.

<sup>16</sup>'Should we sick people establish a new home with the poison of consumption eating into the tree of life – a new home with doomed children –' (MS. Munch Museet, T2732, quoted in *ibid.*, p.171).





28. *Fertility*, Edvard Munch. 1898. 120 by 140 cm. (Private collection).

the completed painting of the road, as though constituting but a trivial incident along the avenue of time.

References to time may be detected in some of the paintings of male or female bathers that Munch produced in the early years of the new century. In *Bathing boys* of 1904 (Fig.31) the foreground figures on the beach, standing stiffly as though trying to assert masculine maturity, receive relatively realistic treatment. The background bathers, on the other hand, are fused into simplified curved shapes suggestive of embryos or primitive organisms. Ostensibly this is caused by the refraction and rippling of the water but in fact the distortion is exaggerated and affects just as much the parts of the bodies above the surface of the water that are seen directly. The flat, flowing pattern of the background could be taken to represent a blurred memory of the past. Interpreted thus, distance in space once more indicates distance in time, the equation in this case applied to human evolution. Whether the reference is ontogenetic or phylogenetic is not clear. It could be both, perhaps evincing an awareness of the recapitulation theory of Ernst Haeckel, well known at this time, according to which the embryological development of the individual mirrors the evolution of the species.<sup>17</sup>

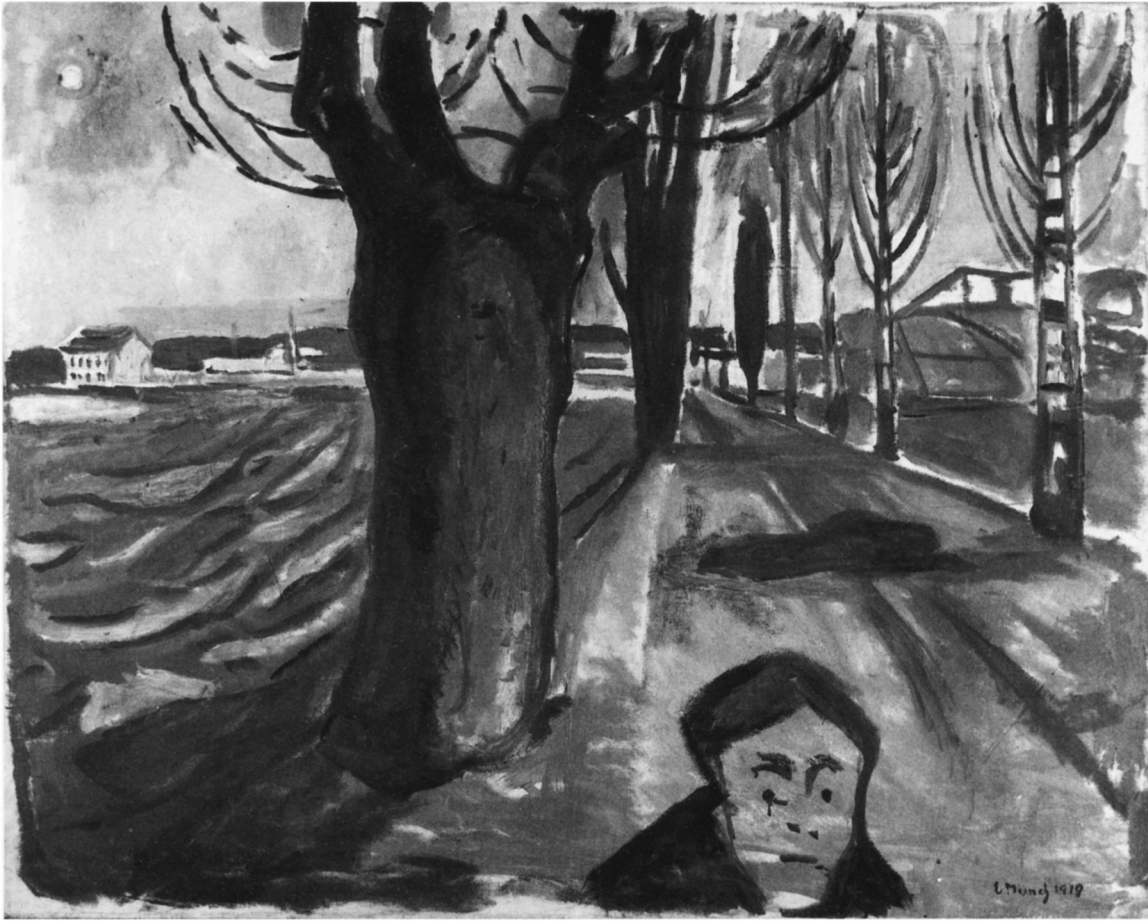
Probably partly because of his upbringing in Grünerløkke, a working-class district of Christiania (Oslo), as a middle-class child surrounded by relative poverty, and his early exposure to the radicalism of Jaeger and Krohg, Munch sympathised with the working classes. Especially in



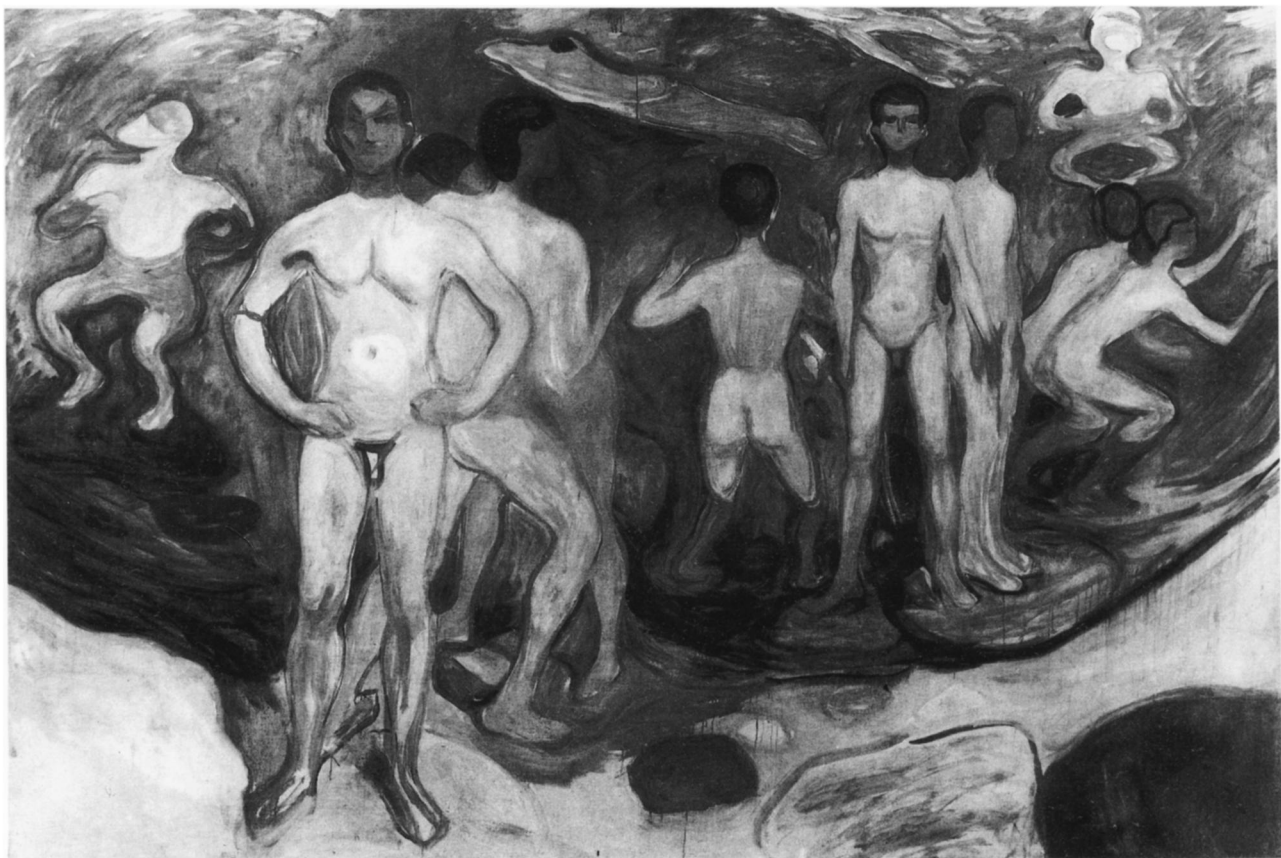
29. *The woodcutter*, by Edvard Munch. 1913. 130 by 105.5 cm. (Oslo Kommunes Kunstsamlinger, Munch Museet, Oslo).

<sup>17</sup>The theory was popularised by Haeckel in his book *Die Welträtsel*, Bonn [1899], which became a best-seller.





30. *The murderer in the avenue*, by Edvard Munch. 1919. 110 by 138 cm. (Oslo Kommunes Kunstsamlinger, Munch Museet, Oslo).



31. *Bathing boys*, by Edvard Munch. 1904. 194 by 290 cm. (Oslo Kommunes Kunstsamlinger, Munch Museet, Oslo).



32. *Workers returning home*, by Edvard Munch. 1913-15. 201 by 227 cm. (Oslo Kommunes Kunstsamlinger, Munch Museet, Oslo).

his later years he painted and drew a great many scenes of working-class life. 'Now it is the time of the workers' he wrote in 1929.<sup>18</sup> And a friend of the period described his attitude thus: 'Munch had radical opinions, possibly from personal reasons. He felt himself to be a worker of the world. He considered it was now the workers' era, it was their turn to take over the bourgeois positions. This was around 1928-29. Apart from that he didn't want to get mixed up in politics'.<sup>19</sup> These statements, with their references to time, and hence in this context to social history, should be borne in mind in considering his masterpiece of 'social realism', the *Workers returning home* of 1913-15 (Fig. 32), a deep-perspective composition with great emphasis on the forward movement of the workers. They seem to move into the future, which is to be theirs. The effect is enhanced by means of a shifting perspective which in conjunction

with the truncated figure in front produces an almost cinematic effect. As the foreground approaches the picture plane the station point rises, resulting in distortion of the central figure. The men seem actually to be moving past us, out of the picture. The advance appears all the stronger by contrast with the inward plunge of the perspective, which is accompanied by a few tiny moving figures of middle-class aspect; they retreat into the past where, in Munch's view, they belong.<sup>20</sup> To stimulate the march into the future, past and present conditions are depicted as grim. Colours are gloomy and discordant. With a blank wall on one side, the road seems oppressive and confining, like a prison yard. The workers look dazed or drugged, their faces generalised and brutalised by hard, unprofitable labour, like those of some of Millet's peasants. Incidentally Munch almost never painted specific portraits of working-

<sup>18</sup>Letter to Ragnar Hoppe, dated February, 1929, quoted in G. WOLL: *Munch and the Workers*, exh.cat., Newcastle-on-Tyne Polytechnic Gallery [1984], p.17.

<sup>19</sup>F. HATZ: 'Memories of Meetings with Edvard Munch', *Edvard Munch*, exh.cat., Malmö Konsthall [1975], p.42.

<sup>20</sup>A lithograph of 1916 called *Workers returning home and a man with a top hat* (Munch Museet, Okk G/1506-7/St.167 – not in Schiefler) shows a similar scene but from the standpoint of a bourgeois contemplator. The top-hatted man stands in profile as though paralysed, watching the workers, one of whom glares at him hostilely, march past him into the future.





33.



34.

34. *Ten to twelve*, by Christian Krohg. 1924. 79 by 33 cm. (Present whereabouts unknown).

33. *Between the clock and the bed*, by Edvard Munch. 1940-42. 149.5 by 120.5 cm. (Oslo Kommunes Kunstsamlinger, Munch Museet, Oslo).

class people;<sup>21</sup> evidently individuality was still to be considered the prerogative of the bourgeoisie, the day of the workers in fact lay in the future.

Near the end of his life, in the self-portrait known as *Between the clock and the bed* (Fig.33), Munch introduced the idea of time in relation to his own life and death. The elderly artist faces the front, passively but stoically. Behind him, through an open doorway, can be seen pictures he painted in the past, representing the active concern of his life. Now he has stepped forward into another room, the passive phase of life adjacent to death. The clock on the left also faces the front; having no hands or numerals on its dial, it tells no time but simply refers to its passage, for the exact time of death cannot be foretold. The clock stands in the same room as the artist but against the wall behind him, which could mean that most of his time has elapsed. To the right, a little in front of him, is a truncated bed, doubtless symbolising the death he must meet very soon. It is set transversely and flattened into a two-dimensional pattern, for the state of death is timeless. Above it on the wall behind, corresponding to the clock on the other side of the doorway, hangs a painting of a female nude, possibly alluding to sleeping companions of the past.

<sup>21</sup>Exceptional are two portraits of the seaman Børre Eriksen (c.1910-11, Munch Museet), but these were painted in connection with using him as the model for the old man in the mural *History* in the University Aula, Oslo.

Such a picture is obviously autobiographical, but so of course to a degree are all self-portraits, and of these Munch painted a great many throughout his career. While egoism was no doubt necessary for such a practice it does not fully explain it; not all egoistic artists continually painted themselves. But as has been pointed out, autobiography was an important point in the naturalistic doctrine of Jaeger and Krohg out of which Munch emerged, and Krohg himself also painted many self-portraits. And as a reminder of Munch's enduring link with the naturalism of his youth it may be noted that the very conception of *Between the clock and the bed* derives from a late self-portrait of 1924 by his old teacher called *Ten to twelve*, which similarly associates the idea of impending death with a clock (Fig.34).<sup>22</sup> Krohg's clock-face is also blank, but the picture's title designates a single advanced point in a symbolic time scale presumably ending at twelve o'clock, whereas Munch represents time by means of progression in the visible third dimension. By identifying time with space-depth he sought to overcome the narrative deficiency inherent in naturalistic painting, just as with his 'internal realism' he tried to extend its range in other ways.

<sup>22</sup>The relationship between the two pictures was noted by OSCAR THUE ('Edvard Munch og Christian Krohg', *Kunst og Kultur* [1973], p.238). In 1969 Krohg's portrait belonged to Even Krohg, Oslo. It is reproduced in O. THUE: *Christian Krohgs Portretter*, Oslo [1971], pl.120.