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AND ITS FUNCTION IN HIS
MENTAL LIFE**

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THE ART OF EDVARD MUNCH AND ITS FUNCTION IN HIS MENTAL LIFE

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Edvard Munch (1863-1944), though scarcely known in the United States, has long been recognized by European art critics as one of the great modern painters and as a leader of the expressionist movement. He is a national hero in Norway and has been described by Stenersen (1) as the 'poet-genius of the North'.¹

Several aspects of Munch's career are of psychological interest. This paper deals particularly with a change in the function of Munch's art in his psychic economy and discusses how this change was reflected in the character of his paintings. The change took place after a psychotic episode which occurred when Munch was forty-six years old (1908-1909). The works of the fifteen-year period preceding this illness are macabre in content and unusual in technique. They often depict scenes of turbulence and anguish which the artist imagined, or scenes of illness and death which he recalled from his childhood. They are harsh and powerful in effect. His paintings after the psychotic break are more tranquil, decorative, and traditional. But the artist developed new attitudes toward his paintings at this time. He became extremely reluctant to part with them.

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¹ Rolf Stenersen, who knew Munch better than anyone else during the last twenty years of the artist's life, kept a diary of Munch's comments and activities and in 1946 wrote an intimate biography of him, a valuable account of his psychopathology and genius. Stenersen made unusual sacrifices to make himself useful enough to Munch to be able to maintain a relationship with the artist. Unless otherwise noted, the information about Munch in this article is from Stenersen's book, *Edvard Munch: Close-Up of a Genius*.

He hated to sell them, and when he traveled he felt lost without them. He called them his children and expressed affection and annoyance toward them, or physically abused them, as if they were living beings.

The changes in Munch's art and his relationship to it correspond to changes in his life. Before the psychotic break, he led an active, turbulent life. After the break, he became more and more a recluse. His relationship to his paintings replaced, at least in part, his relationships to people.

It will be seen that before and after Munch's psychosis his paintings served different functions in his psychic economy. Before the psychosis Munch was attempting to gain mastery of his conflicts by re-creating his disturbing experiences in his paintings. After the psychosis, he sought a solution to his difficulties through his relationship to the pictures themselves. For instance, Munch, who often felt in danger of being overstimulated visually, depicted in numerous pictures of his earlier period an individual overwhelmed by his visual experiences. In his later period the paintings themselves served him as an external barrier against visual overstimulation. He surrounded himself with them and seemed to look at the world through them.

Munch was an unusually lonely man. Closeness, whether it involved friendship with a man, sexual intimacy with a woman, or even looking at a person, was frightening to him. He suspected his men friends of plotting against him. A sustained sexual relationship was impossible for him since he felt it would 'sap his strength'. His concept of closeness between two individuals as revealed in his art was of a destructive incorporation of one by the other.

He felt endangered by closeness to the inanimate objects of nature, which to him were alive. He feared the countryside as he feared a woman. He felt in danger of being enveloped or penetrated by it. Closeness to nature was a threat to his sense of separateness and body integrity. He tended to project

aspects of himself, such as his incorporative impulses, onto his environment, and he was also in danger of bringing disturbing aspects of his environment into himself. Munch believed that human beings are like empty vessels capable of being filled by waves which emanate from everything. By flowing into people, these waves affect their minds and change their bodies.

Munch had a special tendency to introject visually. Unable to keep disturbing aspects of his environment outside himself, he was often overwhelmed or excessively stimulated by the things at which he looked. His relationships with casual acquaintances and with important love objects as well as with his environment were disturbing because of this tendency to visual introjection.

His illness must have been related to his severe deprivations in childhood, of which he often spoke with bitterness. He stated that he never recovered from the death of his mother, who died of tuberculosis when he was five. That he witnessed her death, which followed a pulmonary hemorrhage, gave this trauma a visual quality and may well have contributed to his fear of visual overstimulation. Seven years later, he witnessed the death of his youngest sister, Sophie, who like his mother died of tuberculosis.

He never recovered from his feeling of loneliness. He attempted to resolve it by introjecting his mother, but when he did so he felt dead. His tendency to introject her is revealed by his representations of himself as a moribund old man, even in the self-portraits of his younger years. He said that the smell of death emanated from his self-portrait, *Spanish Influenza* (2, *plate 53*), painted after his recovery from a respiratory disease. His attempts to resolve his feelings of loneliness through fantasies of reunion with his mother were equally dangerous, for to him the condition of union with her was death. These fantasies of reunion with his mother may have been early determinants of his conception that closeness between a man and a woman is dangerous.

Munch's childhood was bleak. Both his parents expected him to be self-denying and frugal. The family was without adequate financial resources, as Munch's father, a doctor who worked in the slums of Oslo, would not take money for his treatment of the poor.

Little is known about the artist's mother, but her deathbed letter (3) which Munch kept all his life, reveals her as a self-sacrificing woman who warned her children against evil and offered them the hope of reunion with her after death if they renounced worldly values and followed the religious teachings of their father.

Of his father, Munch had this to say: 'Father had a difficult temper, inherited nervousness, with periods of religious anxiety which could reach the borders of insanity as he paced back and forth in a room praying to God. . . . When anger did not possess him he could be like a child and joke and play with us. . . . When he punished us, he could be almost insane in his violence. Disease and insanity were the black angels on guard at my cradle. . . . In my childhood, I always felt treated in an unjust way, without a mother, sick; and the threat of punishment in hell hung over my head' (2).

He was cared for after his mother's death by his Aunt Laura. She fostered his early interest in painting and encouraged him to make a career in art even though his father disapproved. Despite his gratitude to Laura for all she did for him, Munch in his later years expressed the feeling that she too had failed him.

During his twenties, Munch studied art in Norway and on the Continent. He traveled a great deal and moved in Bohemian circles. When he was twenty-seven, his father died. For the next two years Munch was bedridden with bronchitis, a disease that had plagued him as a child. When he was twenty-nine, he departed from academic tradition and developed the techniques which characterized the works of his prepsychotic period.

Until his psychotic episode, Munch had numerous stormy affairs with women but always avoided marriage. He was suspicious of women, describing them as vampires and as having 'nutcracker muscles in their thighs'. He believed that only the strongest man could afford to marry. About a friend who had married, he said, 'After a few months he was only soup. It was as if she had pulled out all his teeth. The whole man was only mush. One had to pull him out of her arms as he lay on her bosom. She was terrible, and he was ashen and empty-eyed.'

In 1902, when he was thirty-nine, Munch had an especially upsetting experience with a girl from whom he was trying to separate. She used many stratagems to maintain his interest in her, but when these failed she arranged to have him walk in on her while she lay in bed as if dead. When Munch still refused to marry her, she threatened suicide with a gun. Munch attempted to dislodge the gun from her hand and in doing so had the tip of his left ring finger blown off. After this injury he was ashamed to have his hand exposed and wore a glove to conceal the injured finger.

After the shooting, Munch became increasingly argumentative with and suspicious of his men friends. Between 1902 and 1905, he had a series of barroom brawls. After one in 1905 when he shot at a colleague and missed him by only an inch he became so disturbed that he fled Norway to Germany. In 1907, he received psychiatric treatment in Germany for eight or nine months and was later hospitalized in Copenhagen (1908-1909) for an illness characterized by anxiety, severe agoraphobia, and ideas of persecution.

The poem *Alpha and Omega*, which he wrote in the sanitarium, reflects the turmoil he felt during this period. The story concerns a man, Alpha, and a woman, Omega, who live alone on an island. Alpha loses Omega's love to the beasts, snakes, and flowers of the field. Omega embraces the beasts, yielding to the allure of their soft fur and their hypnotic, glittering eyes. In a jealous rage, Alpha fights the animals for

Omega's love, but is defeated by them. When Alpha sees the offspring of Omega and the beasts, he is in despair. The sky and the sea change to blood and he turns away in terror from the scene, covering his ears to keep out the 'cries of nature'. He murders Omega and is in turn torn to pieces by her children (4).

The anguish Munch felt in the decade 1892-1902 found expression in his paintings of the period, which were considered by the critics Rudlinger (8) and Deknatel (2) as Munch's most valuable and characteristic works. These paintings are macabre in content and unusual in technique.

Munch's fear of incorporating objects and of being incorporated by them found expression particularly in the art of this period. In *The Vampire* (2, *plate 12*) he showed a woman embracing a man and sucking out his blood. In *The Kiss* (Fig. I [Cf. 2, *plates 8 and 136*]), closeness between a man and a woman was depicted by a fusion of their bodies into a single form so that their individual outlines were obliterated. In *Separation* (Fig. II [Cf. 2, *plate 96*]) a woman's long hair was shown coiled about a man's neck, binding him to her. In this and in many other paintings of the period, women's hair symbolized the engulfing, smothering tendencies which Munch ascribed to women.

One technical aspect of Munch's work of this period, his characteristic handling of backgrounds, can perhaps be partially understood in similar terms. During this period Munch usually painted the backgrounds of his pictures in long parallel lines, sometimes straight, sometimes curved to follow the contours of the main figures on the canvas. In his lithographs, he made a similar use of striations. His use in his woodblocks of the parallel lines formed by the grain of the wood was a technical innovation in this medium. A clue to a psychological meaning of these striations is furnished by the observation that hair and striations encompassed the figures of Munch's paintings in the same way. In *Ashes* (2, *plate 16*) it is impossible to de-



FIG 1.

THE KISS (1897-1902).

WOOD-CUT



LITHOGRAPH

SEPARATION (1896).

FIG II.

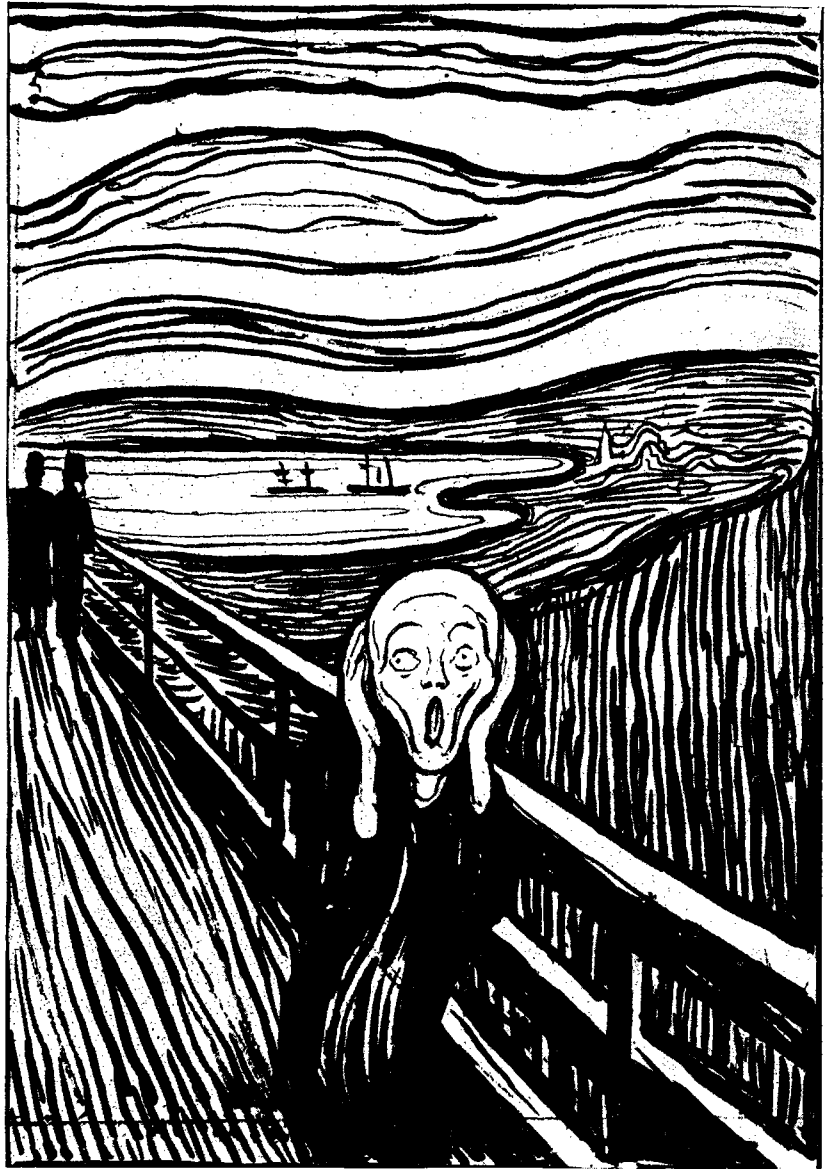


FIG III.

THE CRY (1895).

LITHOGRAPH



FIG. IV.

THE DEAD MOTHER (1901).

ETCHING

termine where hair stops and striations begin. In *The Cry* (Fig. III [Cf. 2, plates 11 and 87]), a frightened figure turns from a striated red sky in much the same manner as the child in a later etching (Fig. IV [Cf. 4, plate 199]) turns from her dead mother, whose long hair covers the pillow. Just as a woman's long hair represents engulfment by the woman, the striations of the background represent engulfment by the environment. While these striations threaten the individual with engulfment, they accentuate the distinctness of his body outline. They obscure boundaries and they make boundaries. They depict the merging of an individual with his environment and at the same time they protect him from dissolving into it. They represent both the threat of dissolution and a defense against it. Munch did in fact have a fear of dissolving into his surroundings; he stated that he was afraid he would become a gas and float away.

In contrast to the works mentioned in the preceding paragraphs, other works of the period reveal Munch's feelings of loneliness and separation. They show withdrawn individuals, isolated from other people and from nature. Taken together, Munch's works of the period reveal his dilemma: if he became too close to people he was in danger of being incorporated by them, but if he kept his distance he felt alone and abandoned.

Related to Munch's fear of incorporating objects or being incorporated by them was his fear of sensory, especially visual, introjection. He seldom allowed himself to perceive his environment. According to Stenersen, he rarely stopped to look around when he was outdoors. 'He looked as if he walked in his sleep. When he did look up, he commented on the strong impressions he received. He did not seem to be used to looking at things.' Munch perceived visual stimuli as intense and disagreeable and tried to avoid them. It may be said that he had an unusually strong tendency to introject visually and that this tendency was frightening to him. His fear of sensory, especially visual, introjection is expressed in *The Cry* (Fig. III). In this work a figure, terrified by a land-

scape that swirls around him, covers his ears and turns his head to avoid all perception of the scene, as if to save himself from being overwhelmed by the environment.

It has already been suggested that the swirling red landscape may represent Munch's dying mother. It will furthermore be recalled that in *Alpha and Omega* the landscape turns to blood and that *Alpha* shuts his ears to the 'cries of nature' just before he murders *Omega*. When the poem was published, this murder scene was illustrated by a drawing of *The Cry*. It may be said then that one aspect of Munch's fear of visual overstimulation by his environment was his fear of re-experiencing the visual trauma of witnessing his mother's death. The bloody landscape which penetrates and overwhelms the observer represents the shocking sight of Munch's dying mother, which could not be avoided or shut out.

Munch attempted to handle the anxieties stemming from his childhood visual trauma by active mastery. He repeatedly painted death and sickroom scenes. He was preoccupied with his childhood memories and said, 'I don't paint what I see, but what I saw' (2). That his childhood trauma had a visual quality may account not only for his fear of visual overstimulation, but also for his attempts to master his fear of such stimulation through a visual medium of expression, painting.

In his later life, Munch had another kind of visual injury to which he again reacted by an attempt at active mastery through painting. After he developed a visual scotoma from an intraocular hemorrhage, he portrayed this blind spot as a dark area of color integrated into the organization of a painting. In fact, he painted a series of pictures each containing this blind spot, so that it is possible to chart the recovery of his vision from a study of his paintings.

This attempt at active mastery of his fear of visual overstimulation is also seen in his painting techniques, particularly in those techniques that produced glare in his canvases, and in his use of jarring subject matter. This glaring quality has been pointed out by many critics. Deknatel (2) mentioned that even

Munch's darks glow with light. Munch achieved glare in his paintings by using strident, contrasting colors and sharp contrasts of dark and light. In his graphic works he achieved it by using parallel black and white lines. This glaring quality seems to be Munch's depiction of his feelings of visual over-excitation when stimulated by his environment. Christian Skredsvig (6), in discussing how Munch painted *The Cry*, reports that the artist became frightened after looking at a sunset and then felt depressed by the thought that he might not be able to re-create in paint the horror he experienced in viewing the scene. The artist felt that others would see the sunset only as colored clouds, while he wished to present the viewer with a vision of 'coagulated blood'. Munch spoke of his desire to overwhelm others when he stated, 'I want the viewers of my paintings to have a profound experience, to feel in awe as though they were in church' (2).

Munch had a special pride in his vision, which may have been a reaction to his feeling that he had been hurt visually. He believed that his vision was especially penetrating. On one occasion he depicted a model as insane. Later when she actually became psychotic he boasted that he had seen the woman's incipient psychosis before anyone else. He was proud of his photographic memory, stating that objects stuck to his optic nerve. He felt that the way he perceived nature was unique and that his vision was more acute and sensitive than that of others. In a picture of a pine tree on a green slope, he painted the green of the slope traveling up the trunk of the tree. He defended this peculiar effect by maintaining that this was his first visual impression and hence the correct one. He justified his right to remain true to his visual experience by pointing out that before the impressionists discovered the true colors of objects, painters saw in nature only those colors found in the paintings of the old masters.

Munch's pride in the qualities of his own vision was such that in some of his paintings he attempted to project these qualities upon the canvas. For example, he sometimes painted

the objects in the center of the canvas distinctly and those near the edges fuzzy, as if out of focus. Similarly, he painted his own eyelashes as vertical striations on a picture of his sister Sophie. As has been mentioned, he painted his own scotoma. In imposing his own qualities upon visual stimuli, Munch dealt actively with them rather than experiencing them passively, so that he felt less helpless before them and consequently less frightened.

His fidelity to his first visual impression of an object may be understood in dynamic terms as a protection against his fear of destroying by introjection an object which he perceived, and may be understood genetically as a manifestation of a fear of experiencing a sudden loss such as his mother's death. He rationalized his inability to face the loss of his first impression by maintaining that one's first visual impression has intrinsic artistic value. If he first perceived a shadow on a dog as part of the pigmentation of the animal's skin, he could not subsequently visualize or paint the animal without including the 'spot'.

To Munch the moon was circular, and when it appeared in any other shape he failed to recognize it as the moon. To protect himself from a sense of loss when the moon waned, Munch went so far as to maintain that there were two moons, the other moon being out of sight at the North Pole. He felt sexually excited by moonlight and disturbed at night when the moonlight was not present. Stenersen notes that a recurrent motif in Munch's paintings, a tubelike reflection of the full moon on water, resembles the artist's characteristic drawing of the male genitalia. Thus it appears that the image of the full moon (penis-breast) was to Munch a protection against castration anxiety, as though to see or to represent a phallus gave him assurance of possessing one. His fear of castration was a manifestation on the phallic level of his fear of bodily disintegration, which has been previously discussed.

A further expression of Munch's need for a visual representation of the phallus is found in his treatment of women's hair.

There is evidence that the long red hair of the women in his paintings represents not only the incorporating tendencies which he attributed to women but also the female phallus. Phyllis Greenacre (5) notes that a woman with red hair often represents a phallic woman in dreams or in fantasies. In some of Munch's paintings, women's hair is depicted as penetrating the man. In others spermatozoa are shown coming from a woman's hair (2, *plate 16*). Thus the woman's hair and the background striations which are an extension of it, like the stylized representation of moonlight, resemble a fetish and serve the artist as a defense against castration anxiety.

Another characteristic of Munch's art of this period was an absence of atmospheric effects. Vistas and empty spaces, as well as airiness and diffuse light, were avoided. In real life Munch had agoraphobia. He walked close to walls. In many of the paintings of this period he filled the canvas with objects and structures (striations and wood grain) so that scarcely any empty space remained. He sometimes represented shadows as solid objects (*Puberty* [1, *plate 15*]). Moonlight on water was not represented as a shimmering reflection but as a solid tube of color (*Summer Night* [1, *plate 76*]).

Munch's avoidance of atmospheric effects was related to his fear of engulfment by the air and dissolution into it, and his fear of respiratory incorporation of objects. Fantasies about the decay of his mother's body, as well as a fear of inhaling her germs, must have been early determinants of Munch's subsequent fear of air. In a painting of his mother entitled *Whiff Off a Corpse*, he represented a child turning from his dead mother, holding his nose between his fingers. Munch was horrified by the thick smoke at his cousin's cremation. He loathed the odor of hyacinths, which he called the odor of death. He had a hypochondriacal dread of inhaling dust or germs, and he feared drafts and temperature changes.

To summarize, Munch's art in his prepsychotic period was a means whereby the artist attempted to gain active mastery of disturbing material. Many works of the period dealt

directly with the death of Munch's mother, a shocking event which he witnessed at the age of five. Other works dealt with the artist's intense fears of destructive incorporation of objects and of abandonment or loss. Destructive incorporation was represented in works showing a man engulfed by a woman. Frequently the woman's hair or its extension in the background striations surrounded the man. It is probable that the danger of engulfment by a woman represented a projection into the woman of the artist's own incorporative impulses. In other works atmosphere or the landscape took the place of the incorporating woman. Munch's fear of overstimulation by the environment was a manifestation of his fear of incorporation of objects through the senses. He 'took in' objects through his eyes, nose, and ears, and this sensory incorporation was experienced as destructive to himself or to the object. The situation of a person warding off invasion through the senses was frequently depicted. Munch's experience of visual overstimulation was expressed in the bright, strident qualities of some of his paintings. He feared losing part of himself or part of his environment. Genetically this fear may be related to his experience of the loss of his mother, and dynamically to his fear of losing objects through destructive incorporation of them. He feared the loss of external objects (the moon) and even of artifacts of his own perception (the 'spot' on the dog), and by painting these objects he reassured himself that they were not really lost. His castration anxiety was one aspect of his fear of loss. He defended himself against it by repeated inclusion of phallic symbols in his paintings.

After Munch's recovery from his psychotic episode (1909) he led an isolated life. He lived alone but for his housekeeper, whom he locked out of his part of the house. He rarely had visitors. Anyone who did manage to visit him was required to say little and to listen attentively and look at the floor while Munch spoke. He could not bear to talk to more than one person at a time.

After 1909, Munch's pictures were more colorful and decorative than those of his prepsychotic period. He became more interested in formal values and less interested in content. He continued, as he had always done, to copy his old paintings, but the copies, according to Stenersen, do not evoke the macabre emotions of the originals.

Along with the changes in his life and art came a change in his relationship to his pictures. They became his main love objects. He referred to them as his children and could rarely be persuaded to part with them in spite of the fact that they brought high prices and were in great demand. Occasionally if he was dissatisfied with a painting he beat it with a whip, claiming that this 'horse treatment' improved its character. Once when Stenersen persuaded Munch to sell a painting, the artist said, 'Go in and fetch your love. She has been strutting with pride all day because you like her.' Munch could scarcely do anything when he was separated from his paintings. He was restless and bored until he was with them again.

Kepecs (7) reports on the analysis of a young man who looked at the world through a kind of screen so that objects appeared hazy to him. After working through oral material in his analysis, this patient began to cook for himself and the screen disappeared. Analysis revealed the screen to be 'a phantom of the mother's breast'. Because of his fear of starvation the patient kept the image of the breast in front of him. The screen, however, was not only a protection against starvation, but also a 'barrier to the perception of reality'. Munch had a relationship to his paintings that corresponds to the relationship of Kepecs's patient to his screen. The paintings were to Munch a source of oral supplies and also a barrier against excessive visual stimulation. In his postpsychotic period he found inspiration mainly from looking at his own paintings. Without them he could not paint.

Munch's relationship to his paintings in his later period may explain why the paintings of this period are more tranquil in both content and technique than are his earlier ones. In the

period before his psychotic episode, his fear of visual overstimulation and his conception of the dangers inherent in an interpersonal relationship found expression in the content and technique of his pictures (for example, in *The Cry*). After his psychotic episode, his pictures themselves protected him against visual overstimulation, and they provided him with objects that he could feed and by which he could be fed without the fears that made his relationships to human beings so turbulent. His paintings gave him a sense of completion and autonomy since through them he re-established a secure mother-child relationship, a relationship without the dangers to his body inherent for him in a real object relationship. Consequently his fear of bodily disintegration that was expressed in his earlier paintings was diminished and was no longer expressed in his paintings.

Munch's pictures were in a sense between himself and the outside world and part of each. They were separate enough from him so that he could project aspects of himself onto them and close enough to him so that this projection was not onto a real external object. For instance, he denied that he was jealous of other artists, but maintained that his pictures were so jealous that they could not bear being exhibited with the works of others.

By painting an object, Munch could retain it as a part of himself yet not have to keep it as an introject. He could project it onto the canvas. One day Stenersen brought a stranger to see Munch. After the stranger had left, Munch said, 'You should not have brought him here. Don't you know that I'll have to take him into my mind and then I'll have to paint him?'

As Munch became less separated from his art, he became more separated from the outside world. His art, which he felt to be almost a part of himself, became a kind of supplement to his own ego. Through it he was able to handle and assimilate his sensations, and through it he developed a sense of autonomy and identity.

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