

Edvard Munch's *To the Forest*: Nature as Medium and Metaphor

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ABSTRACT

MARA C. WEST: Edvard Munch's *To the Forest*: Nature as Medium and Metaphor
(Under the direction of Mary D. Sheriff)

Edvard Munch, in his many paintings and prints, frequently utilizes biological concepts and botanical imagery as explanatory metaphors for human problems. Munch's biological and natural motifs seem heavily indebted to nineteenth-century scientific and philosophical thinking, particularly Vitalism, and the ideas of Nietzsche. Munch's woodcuts include some of his most interesting visualizations of the themes of biology; the woodcut *To the Forest* (*Mot Skogen*) is one such work in which biological concepts are central to its meaning. References to the natural world occur in both the representation of a forest, while its very medium is wood. The woodcut is thus a nexus where, in its medium and its message, nineteenth-century ideas about nature, science, love and the human soul, coexist in a struggle for coherence.

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I. Introduction

*Art is man's need for crystallization. - Nature is the vast kingdom, which nourishes art. - Nature is not only that which is visible to the eye. It is also the inner images of the mind. - The images upon the reverse of the eye.*¹

For all its fire-haired *femmes fatales* and morose, jealous lovers, nature imagery figures prominently in Edvard Munch's art. Munch persistently links the psyche, the "inner images of the mind," with the vast kingdom of nature. Munch's ideas about nature appeal to contemporary scientific and philosophical thinking, while his nature-imagery tends to serve as metaphor for the workings of the psyche and the human emotional life. Munch's nature is thus made meaningful through the institutions of science and letters, while retaining romantic qualities: in particular, it is valued as a field of immunity to the mediating and alienating influences of culture.

Munch links the soul with the biological, as will become evident in looking at his works from the "Frieze of Life," in which paintings with titles such as *Metabolism* and *Fertility* feature prominently. The familiar representation of a shore on the Oslo Fjord and the ubiquitous pillar-shaped reflection of the moon, for example, frequently form the stage for his psychosexual dramas; Munch's trees and forests tend to rival the figures in size and expressive importance. While Munch's journals indicate that, throughout his career, his driving interest was the exploration of the human psyche and the nature of love, the centrality of tree and forest symbolism in the art in which he explores these themes has been largely overlooked. The sheer numbers of trees represented of in Munch's visual explorations of human psychological and sexuality suggests of the importance that biological metaphors play in these images. Munch's woodcuts include some of his most interesting visualizations of the themes of nature and biology.

¹"Kunst er menneskets trang til krystallisation. Naturen er det evig store rike hvorfra kunsten får sin næring. Naturen er ikke alene det for øiet synlige. Den er også sjælens indre billeder – billeder på øiets bakside." Munch's "Journals", N 57, 1907-8, reproduced in P. Tøjner, *Munch med Egne Ord*, p. 131.

The woodcut *To the Forest* (*Mot Skogen*) is one such work in which nature imagery is central to its meaning.

To the Forest is one of the few motifs that Munch conceived directly for the woodcut medium – most of his other print designs were based on previously completed paintings. He first made the woodblocks for *To the Forest* in 1897, and pulled many impressions (both by himself and with the help of professional printers) in several varied color schemes, only a few of which are reproduced here (Figures 1.1 - 1.3). In the center of the 1897 version of *To the Forest*, the figures of a man and a woman are depicted as simplified forms with their backs to the viewer. The figures retreat from the picture plane, the world, the canvas, and turn toward a wall of trees. The figures are separated from the background by a faint white outline. Fingers of sky extend downward, between the treetops into the forest below. Simplified forms represent the figures; the male figure seems a mere silhouette, while the figure of the woman is indicated with rough gouges in the wood. A striking feature of this woodcut is the visible wood grain, which runs across the print horizontally like a force field, adding a layer of visual complexity. The work was created from two woodblocks: a key block made from aspen and used to produce the basic outlines of the image, and a color block, made from oak. Munch sawed the color block into six interlocking pieces in order to ink each section separately, a technique that is considered to be his own innovation.² Munch's "jigsaw" technique allows for multiple colors to be laid down in one impression – in contrast to the more common method of creating the image through a succession of impressions in which a single color is applied. One result of this method is the creation of an outline effect where the pieces fit together and the colors border on one another. The sky forms one piece, the foreground another, and the figures also have been cut as a separate piece. The couple is distinguished from the dark forest background by a faint line surrounding them, much like a membrane. Munch reworked the blocks in 1915 to print a new version (Figure 1.4). He reworked the key block into a new color block, making changes to the figure of the woman to

²E. Prelinger, *Master Printmaker*, pp. 80-2; G. Woll, *Complete Graphic Works*, p. 13.

obscure the contour lines of the body to give the effect of clothing. He also made changes to the background, adding thin lines to indicate individual trees, set against the uniform mass of forest which remains from the earlier version.

The virtues of nature are extolled in late-nineteenth-century Scandinavian and German art, where they constitute a dominant trend. The neo-romantic work of Akseli Gallen-Kallela (Figure 1.5), the decorative, organic *jugendstil* designs of Gustav Klimt (Figure 1.6), the Norwegian Harald Sohlberg's evocative landscapes (Figure 1.7), all attest to a celebration of nature and derive symbolic meaning from its imagery. I would like to read Munch's woodcuts as exemplifying the use of biological symbolism as a poetic, metaphoric incorporation of what I (following historian of philosophy Gregory Moore) call the "biologism" of nineteenth century Europe. By this I mean a widespread cultural fascination with biology, along with its implications for human life and society, in the wake of Darwin's theorizing of the evolution of species. I also refer to biology as one important component of a new and rapidly developing scientific realm, which increasingly could be felt as cleaving itself from the traditional means of sense-making in the world, most notably that of theology. While previous Munch scholarship has tended to focus on the human figures in his oeuvre, reading his works in terms of the artist's personal views of women and sexuality, focusing on Munch's ideas about the relation between the sexes, I would like to read *To the Forest* in relation to the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche and the philosophy vitalism, especially as those address issues of life and nature. Munch's process of creating the woodcut incorporates his hand and design, the work of the wood-engraving tools, and also the "work" of nature. Natural processes create the growth rings in the trunk of the tree, which become the grain in the wood plank, and which are reproduced along with the image when it is printed. Although chosen and manipulated by the artist, the patterns of grain are determined by the natural growth of the tree. This 'collaboration' of art and nature contributes to the meaning of the woodcut. Munch's visible wood grain invokes the organic as a permeating presence, as the substrate upon which the psychological and sexual, the life of the soul, thrives.

In Nietzsche's writings, the focus on "life" as the only goal and criterion of values is an idea that is central to his philosophy.³ Nietzsche's influence on *fin-de-siècle* thinkers and his elevation of "life" as the only legitimate criterion of values influenced the resurgence of nature worship and vitalist ideas, particularly in Scandinavia.⁴ "Vitalism" is the idea that all life forms are connected and animated by a life principle.⁵ Vitalists envision the world as a unit animated by a "life force." This life force (or *élan vital*, soul, or force, as some thinkers associated with vitalism call it), is an unknowable substance or quality that is the breathe of life in otherwise inanimate matter.

Nietzsche's emphasis on life as the highest

Nietzsche's popularity at the end of the century coincides with the rise of symbolism in the arts. His critiques of positivism and modernity's faith in science and his opposition to the liberalism of the 1870s and 1880s appealed to artists in the midst of overthrowing the dominance of naturalism and the so-called "social-problem" literature in Scandinavia. As a reaction against the perceived materialism of the age, adherents of both the vitalist and the symbolist movements share a belief in universal spiritual truths that lay beyond or within the tangible material world. In 1892, G. -Albert Aurier, in an important early work of symbolist criticism, described the symbolist movement in the visual arts as a movement against positivism, one that expressed a yearning for a more spiritual approach to creativity and knowledge:

After having proclaimed the omnipotence of scientific observation and deduction for eighty years with childlike enthusiasm, and after asserting that for its lenses and scalpels there did not exist a single mystery, the nineteenth century at last seems to perceive that its efforts have been in vain, and its boast puerile. Man is still walking in the midst of the same enigmas, in the same formidable unknown, which has become even more obscure and disconcerting since its habitual neglect. A great many scientists and scholars today have come to a halt, discouraged. They realize that this experimental science, of which they were so proud, is a thousand times less certain than the most bizarre theogony, the maddest

³Nietzsche urges, in *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, p. 62, "life is to rule over knowledge, over science," because, "knowledge presupposes life and so has the same interest in the preservation of life which every being has in its own continuing existence," See also F. Amrine, "'The Triumph of Life': Nietzsche's Verbicide."

⁴H. Beyer, *Nietzsche og Norden*.

⁵B. Weber, "Life".

metaphysical reverie, the least acceptable poet's dream, and they have a presentiment that this haughty science which they proudly used to call 'positive' may perhaps be only a science of what is relative, of appearances, of 'shadows', as Plato said, and that they themselves have nothing to put on old Olympus, from which they have removed the deities and unhinged the constellations.⁶

Aurier's declaration, which describes the new direction in the visual arts (headed by Van Gogh and Gauguin) has much about it that is specifically Nietzschean, and that reflects the dissatisfaction with scientism and a mechanistic view of life that fueled the vitalist movement.

The reference to the "the maddest metaphysical reverie" seems to refer to Nietzsche's pronounced literary style, which, particularly in *Zarathustra* in which his philosophy is presented though a fictional narrative, could more appropriately be labeled as evocative reverie, rather than proper academic philosophy. Nietzsche's metaphysical reverie, furthermore, is often narrated in his works as the ravings of a madman. Aurier's passage recalls, also, Nietzsche's famous assertion, voiced in *The Gay Science* by The Madman, that "God is dead!"⁷ Whether his philosophy can be aligned with the category of "vitalist" thought is debatable, but it is clear that vitalist thought was familiar and appealing to Nietzsche as a metaphor. Comparing mechanism and vitalism, Nietzsche writes:

Neither of the two explanations of organic life has been hitherto successful, neither the one from the perspective of mechanics, nor the one from the perspective of the mind [vitalism]. I emphasize *the latter*. [...] The governance of the organism occurs in such a way that both the mechanical as well as the mental world can be invoked only symbolically as a means of explanation.⁸

Nietzsche here points to his pervading viewpoint that any "explanation", whether scientific or historical, is ultimately only one interpretation among many. However, he justifies his preference for a vitalist interpretation by asserting that mechanistic knowledge of the organism is not

⁶Aurier, "Les Peintres Symbolists" (translated in Nochlin, *Impressionism and Post-Impressionism*, p. 135).

⁷Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, Book Three, 118. This passage demonstrates Nietzsche's use of the metaphor of organic decomposition to describe the supplanting of religion by natural science. He continues: "Do we still hear nothing of the grave diggers who are burying God? Do we still smell nothing of the divine decomposition? – Gods, too, decompose! God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!"

⁸From Nietzsche's notebooks, cited in Moore, *Nietzsche, Biology and Metaphor*, 42.

sufficient in itself to explain the phenomena of life. Vitalism, at any rate, (Nietzsche seems to suggest) has the advantage of lending itself (perhaps as metaphor only) to the philosophical project to explain the unknowable, without pretending to be a science in the strictest sense.

Mikhail Bakhtin, in his 1926 essay “Contemporary Vitalism,” situated the philosophy in a historical framework, as a recurrent trend of thought in western culture. Vitalism re-emerges in the late nineteenth century, Bakhtin explains, as a reactionary movement, as the hopes of positivism and modern scientific progress begins to fade. Bakhtin summarizes the history of the movement:

Vitalism was almost unknown to the second half of the [Nineteenth] century, with its shining accomplishments in the natural sciences, especially in chemistry. It seems to have completely left the scene. But at the very *end* of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of our own, vitalism has returned with new vigor.

This contemporary, reborn form of vitalism differs substantially from its parent philosophies of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries. ... Modern vitalism had to review and radically reevaluate all of its positions. The naïve dogmatism of the old vitalism became utterly untenable. For this reason we may term contemporary vitalism “critical vitalism”, in contradistinction to the old vitalism. By this we in no way want to say that vitalism has actually succeeded in making itself critical. We do not think it has; we hope to convince the reader that vitalism, by its very nature, can never transcend dogmatism; in other words, that in the final scientific analysis, it may only be a matter of personal faith, in no way a basis for scientific knowledge.”⁹

As described by Bakhtin, “critical” vitalism is a reaction against nineteenth-century positivism.

Proponents of late nineteenth-century vitalism perceive science to be no less dogmatic than religion, and find the methods of positivist science incapable of solving the “world riddles.”¹⁰

Much of the later work that Munch produced, after the turn of the century, clearly exhibits an alliance with the philosophy of vitalism. In particular, the triptych *Men Bathing* (1907-8) has been read as a vitalist work, most recently by Patricia Berman. The triptych incorporates vitalist thought in portraying strong, healthy male bodies striding and posing under the life-giving rays of the sun. As Patricia Berman explains, “the representation of the male nude could be viewed as a

⁹Bakhtin, “Contemporary Vitalism,” pp. 80-81.

¹⁰Ernst Haeckel, in *Die Welträthsel* (1901) set out to explain the mysteries of life, according to a “monist” philosophy.

Nietzschean and vitalist hero, funneling the primal energies of sea and sun into the urban art gallery or living room.”¹¹ Elsebet Kjerschow, curator of an exhibition at the *Munchmuseet* of Munch’s late works and the vitalist theme, notes that the painting is “often described as a modern altarpiece consecrated to life itself, where the male body is shown as the physical temple for the vital forces of life.”¹² Similarly, his mural cycle created for the festival hall at the University of Oslo has been considered in light of contemporary vitalism. Patricia Berman, for example, finds Munch’s ultimate expression of a vitalist philosophy in the pantheistic symbolism of these murals. Comprising nine panels, the central canvas in this piece is a large painting of the sun, its yellow and orange rays radiating away from the panel and penetrating into the neighboring panels. Berman writes of this cycle that, “at once identifiably Norwegian and thematically universal, *The Sun* symbolizes the mythic national bonds with nature, and the universal desire for fusion with a metaphysical nature spirit.”¹³

In the woodcut *To the Forest*, Munch demonstrates an affinity with vitalist philosophy in ways slightly different from his later work as described above. In this print from the 1890s Munch’s demonstrates an affinity with vitalism through his emphasis on the role of biology in human emotional affairs. In *To the Forest*, Munch attempts to present a view of human drives through the metaphor of natural processes, as fundamentally determined and made meaningful through biology. The forest represents, most clearly, Nature; the man and woman, a sexually involved pair, and more pointedly the *Ur*-mating pair: Adam and Eve. The meaning of the imagery is open, and hints simultaneously at a utopian ideal of a return to organic wholeness, while also suggesting the Genesis tale of the expulsion of Adam and Eve into the wilderness. The narrative content of the image can be

¹¹Berman, “Body and Body Politic in Edvard Munch’s *Bathing Men*,” 83.

¹²Kjerschow, “Livskraft: Vitalismen som Kunstnerisk Impuls, 1900-1930.”

¹³Berman, “Making Family Values,” 157. See also Berman’s *Monumentality and Historicism*.

interpreted allegorically as being about a “return to nature” – both desired and feared. The visual symbols of “tree” and “forest” are layered on top of visible wood-grain, resulting in an object whose very medium is permeated by references to nature.

II. Nineteenth-Century Biological Metaphor and the “Berlin-bohème”

Munch's use of ideas from biology, vitalism and Nietzsche's philosophy of life in *To the Forest* should be situated within the context of his social milieu, particularly the bohemian gatherings with which Munch was associated in Kristiania (now Oslo) and Berlin. These bohemian circles were important mixing grounds for new ideas – both scientific and philosophical – and the latest trends in art. August Strindberg and Stanislaw Przybyszewski were two of the key figures in these bohemian gatherings, and each played a significant role with regard to the popularization of ideas about biology, vitalism, and Nietzsche, among the members of these café-society gatherings. The lives of these two writers came into contact with Munch's in the early 1890s, when Munch also began to spend winters in Berlin and to frequent the bar known as the *Zum Schwarze Ferkel*. This bar was a popular meeting place of the Berlin bohème; many important avant-garde writers and artists of Scandinavia were regulars in the *Schwarze Ferkel* gatherings, forming a constellation around its most famous member, the Swedish writer August Strindberg.¹⁴ The group that gathered there included, in addition to Przybyszewski, the literary critic Georg Brandes, and the Swedish writer Ola Hansson. Several of the members of these gatherings, with whom Munch socialized while in the German capital, were keenly interested in Nietzsche's ideas and helped to promote them among the Scandinavian and German literary public. Like many artists and intellectuals in Europe, Munch began to read Nietzsche in the early 1890s when his writings suddenly became popular.¹⁵ The influential Danish literary critic Georg

¹⁴R. Dittmann, *Eros and Psyche*.

¹⁵Although Nietzsche had been publishing books in small numbers since *The Birth of Tragedy* in 1872, it was the publication of the polemical and controversial *Der Fall Wagner* in 1888, which brought him instant

Brandes was one of the first to take serious notice of Nietzsche, delivering what were among the first lectures on the philosopher at the University of Copenhagen in 1888.¹⁶ In these lectures and in essays, Brandes introduced the still unknown Nietzsche to a broad Scandinavian audience.¹⁷ In Norway, the periodical *Samtiden* also was an important source for Nietzsche's writings, and it published excerpts, as well as critical texts by important Scandinavian writers such as Arne Garborg and Ola Hansson.¹⁸ Hansson, in addition to publishing his own essays on Nietzsche, also translated his works into Swedish.

At the time of the *Schwarze Ferkel* gatherings, August Strindberg was already a famous and influential playwright, and was at this time increasingly devoted to his amateur scientific studies. His autobiographical novels *Klostret* (1897, *The Cloister*) and *Inferno* (1898) also document the *Schwarze Ferkel* and the bohemian artists who met there to drink and socialize, and to discuss ideas and projects. Strindberg's journal entries from this period describe his experiences among the Berlin bohemians and the beginning of his scientific activities. The scene that Strindberg describes in *Klostret*, circa 1892, suggests a pervasive sense of the exhaustion of the ideals of the 1880s. Strindberg writes that the group

had talked themselves and each other to a standstill. All subjects of discussion were drained dry and no one believes what anyone else said, since skepticism was the watchword. All the blasphemies and curses they could think of had been hurled at existence, since they no longer saw a chance of penetrating more deeply into the riddle of the universe by means of physiology.¹⁹

As Strindberg describes the scene, the Berlin bohemians glimpse the limited relevance of scientific progress in their search for answers to life's questions, and await a new mode of

fame and notoriety. See R. Hollingdale, *Nietzsche*; C. Forth, *Zarathustra in Paris*; S. Aschheim, *Nietzsche Legacy in Germany*.

¹⁶For a summary of the reception of Nietzsche in Scandinavia, see H. Beyer's *Nietzsche og Norden*.

¹⁷H. Beyer, *Nietzsche og Norden*, (Nietzsche and Scandinavia) pp. 168-9.

¹⁸Garborg's review of Hansson's *Friedrich Nietzsche* appeared in *Samtiden*, vol. I (Bergen: 1890).

¹⁹Strindberg, *Klostret*, p. 20. "Nu hade man pratat ut sig och varandra, alla diskussioner voro uttömda, och ingen trodde vad den andra sade eftersom skepsis var lösen. Alla hädelser och bannor över tillvaron voro utslungade, då man på fysiologiens väg ej kunde intränga i världsproblemet."

questioning and of narrating the world to each other. In Strindberg's case, these sentiments coincide with a growing interest in mysticism, via Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772).²⁰ His novel *Inferno* describes his interest in the occult and his critiques of scientism and mechanistic interpretations of the world. He records as well the popularity of ideas derived from Nietzsche and vitalist or monist ideas among his peers. He writes,

Säsongens stora tilldragelse I Paris var Herr Brunetières härsfri om vetenskapens bankrutt. Hemmastadd I naturvetenskaperna sedan min barndom, sedermera anhängare av Darwin, hade jag upptäckt otillräckligheten I den vetenskapliga metod som erkände mekaniken I världsalltet utan att medgiva tillvaron av mekanikern. Systemets svaghet rörde sig i en allmän urartning av vetenskapen som hade utstakat åt sig en gränslinje utanför vilken man icke fick gå. Vi ha löst alla problem: universum har inga gåtor mera. Denna inbilska lögn hade retat mig redan omkring år 1880 och under de femton följande åren hade jag företagit en revision av naturvetenskaperna. ...

Emellertid och eftersom alla erkände materiens enhet och kallade sig monister utan att vara det, gick jag vidare, drog de ytterste konsekvenserna av läran och eliminerade gränserna mellan materien och det man kallade anden. Sålunda hade jag I boken *Antibarbarus* år 1894 avhandlat svavlets psykologi, som jag ändrade till dess ontogeni, d.v.s. svavlets embryonala utveckling.

[The great event in Paris that year was the call to arms raised by the critic Brunetière about the bankruptcy of science. I had been well acquainted with the natural sciences since my childhood and had tended towards Darwinism. But I had discovered how unsatisfying can be the scientific approach that recognizes the exquisite mechanism of the world but denies the existence of a mechanic. The weakness of the theory was revealed by the universal degradation of science, which had marked out for itself a boundary line beyond which no one was allowed to go: 'We have solved all problems, the Universe has no secrets left.' This presumptuous lie had annoyed me even in 1880, and for the past fifteen years I had been engaged upon revising the natural sciences. ...

Meanwhile, whereas all were agreed in recognizing the unity of matter and called themselves monists without really being so, I went further, drew the ultimate conclusions of this doctrine, and eliminated the boundaries between matter and what was called the spirit. In my book *Antibarbarus* I had discussed the psychology of sulphur and interpreted it in the light of its ontogeny...]²¹

²⁰Eighteenth-century Swedish mystic, whom Strindberg considered a spiritual mentor. See Strindberg's *Ockulta Dagboken (Occult Diary)*, the personal diary from which Strindberg assembled and edited the notes that became the novel *Inferno*. This diary describes Strindberg's increasing obsession with alchemical experiments.

²¹Strindberg, *Inferno*, pp. 53-4 (trans. pp. 126-7). Strindberg also refers the reader, in this text, to his scientific book *Sylva Sylvarum*, published in 1896, "in which, proudly aware of my clairvoyant faculty, I penetrated to the very heart of the secrets of creation, especially to those of the animal and vegetable kingdom."

Although Strindberg observes that science has left many questions unanswered, and although he has given up hope in science's capacity to give life meaning, he is unable to reject science altogether. Strindberg – like Ernst Haeckel – tries to employ science in the service of a sort of spirituality. He endeavors to prove through scientific means, that the world is united – whether by spirits or “life principle” or mystical forces. In this way, science becomes relegated to the status of tool, useful for understanding hidden, and more meaningful, spiritual truths.

Stanislaw Przybyszewski – who was also prominently involved with the *Schwarze Ferkel* group – is another figure linking the worlds of art and science in his work. He was a friend of both Munch and Strindberg, and had been a medical student in Berlin where he trained in the developing science of neurology. His studies in the science of the brain, nerves, and cognition had its correlate in his poetry, which, like Munch's art, is concerned with explorations of ‘the psyche’.²² During his medical studies in the years 1889-1893, Przybyszewski had been a student under the naturalist Ernst Haeckel, from whom he would have learned about the theory of evolution and Haeckel's monist philosophy first-hand. During that same period, he encountered Nietzsche's philosophy through fellow Berlin bohemian and *Ferkel* member Ola Hansson. Przybyszewski subsequently published his own thoughts on the philosopher in his series, *Zur Psychologie des Individuums* (1892), where he compares the genius of Nietzsche with Chopin's music.²³ Przybyszewski also found a sympathetic voice in Munch's art; in an article on Munch's Berlin exhibition of 1894, titled “*Psychischer Naturalismus*,” Przybyszewski interprets Munch's art and individualism as forming an organic totality.²⁴ In an essay published in the first book devoted entirely to Munch, Przybyszewski links the individualist creativity of Munch with a Darwinist metaphor of development and the immortality of genetic traits:

²²For an account of the role that Przybyszewski played in the Berlin bohème, see Roman Taborski, “Stanislaw Przybyszewski – Forgotten and ... Recollected Inspirer of European Modernism.”

²³Przybyszewski, ““Zur Psychologie des Individuums. I - Chopin und Nietzsche.” Part II in the series is an essay on Ola Hansson.

²⁴Przybyszewski, “Psychischer Naturalismus,” in *Die neue deutsche Rundschau*, February 1894.

I was confronted with the revelation of a pure individuality, with the creations of a somnambulistic, transcendental consciousness, commonly called the subconscious. You may call it whatever you please; I call it individuality ... For me, individuality is the immortal, the inalienable. It is the basis onto which through hereditary transmission new characteristics are grafted; it is the medium of hereditary transmission. ... The individual is the collecting point of all the characteristics that are typical for all parts of a whole chain of development; it is a pan-genesis in the Darwinian sense: each seed contains the complete human being with all his characteristic traits.²⁵

For Przybyszewski, as for Munch, individuality is analogous to the immortal soul. The passage quoted above offers just such a view of the nature of the individuality, which requires biology as its vehicle but which nevertheless transcends the body. It is an example of how the concepts and vocabulary of heredity and evolution found their way into art criticism, and were used in interpretations of Munch's art and personality.

An interest in both biology and Nietzsche can be glimpsed in the many notebooks Munch kept over the course of his life. The journals weave fiction and autobiography, sketches, narrative vignettes and prose poems. In quasi-Biblical and scientific terms, Munch writes of origins and principles, always based in his subjective experiences. In the following passage, for example, Munch writes his own creation narrative in a cadence reminiscent of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*. Munch's narrator surveys the world from above – like Zarathustra on his mountain – and observes its genesis out of chaos, and the origin of living species:

Jeg stod på et høit bjerg og så hele verden ligge under meg – verden fra siden tusinder år. Jeg så de små og de store kloder som adlydende naturloven gik sine bestemte baner. Jeg så den lille klode jorden som den gik sin gang rundt solen. Jeg så hvor den stofvexlingen begyndte – hvordan luften tærede på den hårde masse – og overgangsformen mellem stenen og atmosfæren dannedes: Det levende – mennesker dyr og planter. Ønsket lå der efter forvitring. I kraft af ønsket paredes mennesker og dyrene og blomsterne sig. Adlydende loven – elskede manden kvinden og – fødte børn.

Jeg så hvordan menneskerne formeredes – hvordan de smaledes i masser – og hvordan de fordelte sig over jorden. Og når massen havde forklumpet sig – og traf andre masser – kjæmpede de at for den stærkeste skulde seire – som – de andre levende – som myrene.

...

Du ufattelige – du som sidder inde i Protoplasmen – der du som et stort mystisk hoved er tegnet på himmelen. Gud – det der ikke kan fattes – som ikke kan tænkes – den store hemmelighed – jeg ved du er retfærdig.

Jeg synder – har aldrig ønsket denne verden – uden min vilje er jeg her. Og jeg hørte en stemme indi mig. Menneskehed – ingen er ond – som planten vend dine blade mod

²⁵Przybyszewski, *The Work of Edvard Munch: Four Essays*, 1-2.

solen når den skinner. Mennesker glæd dere når dere kan elske hverandre – tål hverandre – og så glæd dig når du engang skal dø. Vær glad du når det store ønske skal opfyldes når individet har gjort sin lille misjon – giver sitt stof til atmosfæren og jorden.

[I stood on a high mountain and saw the whole world spread at my feet – the world from thousands of years back in time. I saw the small and the large planets that adhered to the laws of nature and moved in their predestined orbits. I saw that little planet Earth as it moved on its orbit around the sun. I saw where the change in matter began – how the air corroded the hard matter – and the transitional form between stone and the atmosphere was created: the living – human beings, animals and plants. After disintegration desire was born. By virtue of this desire, the human beings, the animals and the plants mated. Obeying the law – man and woman made love and – bore children.

I saw how humans multiplied – how they gathered together in groups – and how they were spread about the world. And when one mass had bunched together – and met other masses – they fought in order that the strongest might win – like – the other living masses – the marshes for example.

...

You who are incomprehensible – you who are part of the protoplasm – you who are like a vast mystical head drawn upon the heavens. God – who cannot be comprehended – who cannot be imagined – the great secret – I know you are just.

I sin – I have never been at one with the world – I stand here humbly – and I heard a voice inside me. Human being – nobody is evil – like the plant, stretch your leaves towards the sun when it shines. Human beings – be joyful when you can love one another – and be joyful when the time comes for you to die. Be joyful when the great wish comes true, and the individual has completed his little mission – donor of matter to the atmosphere and the earth.]²⁶

In this passage, Munch describes God in biological terms (“you who are part of the protoplasm”), and makes reference to the evolutionary mechanism of the survival of the fittest (“They fought in order that the strongest might win”). Munch makes little distinction here between God and biological processes, and his poetic image of the cosmos centers on the primal, and for him primary, act of sexual union between a man and a woman. In Munch’s biological view of the cosmos, sexuality functions as a sort of conceptual hinge, linking the human with the divine and with eternity. It is the material mechanism of the propagation of (finite) life on earth and as such it represents that which separates humanity from the eternal. As a universal means by which human beings connect with one another and assure the continuation of their blood lines, however, sex becomes the act by which humans are able to connect with the generations that precede them, and also with those that will survive beyond

²⁶Munch, *Journals*, N 655, reproduced in P. Tøjner, *Munch, med egne Ord*, pp. 103-4 (*Munch in his Own Words*).

their own life. In this sense, sexuality is for mankind a moment of contact with the eternal, and a fulfillment of humanity's biological destiny.

A similar emphasis on both the destructive and the creative aspects of the forces of nature appears strongly in Nietzsche's first book, *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* (1871, "The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music"). In this text of unabashed support of Wagnerian music, Nietzsche argues against Johan Joachim Winckelmann's interpretation of the art of the Greeks as embodying a "noble and simple grandeur."²⁷ He posits a contrasting Dionysian principle, which is characterized by irrationality, sensuality, dissolution – in short, all that is opposed to rationality and the organizational abilities upon which the building of civilizations is dependant. The Ancient Greeks, with Attic tragedy, achieved a synthesis of these two principles, which managed to be life affirming while reconciling the Greeks with the specter of death. Wagnerian opera, in Nietzsche's view, revived this synthesis of the two principles, offering men of the nineteenth century a similar hope for a reconciliation of sensuality and nihilism. This Dionysian principle can be thought of as a sort of natural principle, in that it is similar to the concept of instinct. It also, as a reflection of a drive toward the dissolution of boundaries and individuality, metaphorically functions like organic decomposition; the "goal" of the Dionysian principle is both ecstasy and death. Furthermore, the Dionysian force, with its association with unbounded instinct, and its usefulness for life, recalls inevitably Darwin's theory of evolution and the survival of the fittest.

Darwin's idea of natural selection and evolution's metaphors of struggle and opportunism can be related to Nietzsche's elevation of "life" as the only defensible measure of the value of a given law or instinct.²⁸ *On the Origin of Species*, which introduced Darwin's theory of evolution

²⁷Winckelmann, "Gedanken über die Nachahmung der Griechischen Werke in Malerei und Bildhauerkunst" ("Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture").

²⁸In her chapter on "Nietzsche's Darwin" (pp. 97-112) in *The Nick of Time*, philosopher Elizabeth Grosz argues that Nietzsche did not read much of Darwin's writings, but was familiar with Darwin's sources and

and the mechanism of natural selection, was published in 1859; the so-called ‘Darwinian revolution’ that occurred in the decades that followed prompted the widespread conversion of most biologists to some form of evolution as a unifying theory of life.²⁹ The book was widely read even among non-scientists, and there followed a cultural preoccupation with the vocabulary and explanatory power of biology, evolution and degeneration, which could function as metaphors for social and human issues.³⁰ The metaphors and vocabulary of evolution and development, survival of the fittest, etc., of Darwin’s theories entered into the broader culture lexicon of the *fin-de-siècle*. Darwin’s theory inspired a vast amount of secondary literature, and had an enormous impact on nineteenth-century social, literary and artistic discourses.³¹ Two of the most important writers who worked to popularize Darwin’s theory of evolution were Thomas Huxley (1825-1895) in England, and Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919) in Germany. Haeckel is an example of a proponent of a “critical vitalism” (Bahktin’s term) for his faith in science as the key to the “riddles of the universe”, and for his search for scientific proof of anti-scientific ideas, such as “cell-souls”. Haeckel was a contemporary of Darwin, who saw Haeckel as taking the idea of evolution further than he himself had dared: he wrote, in a letter to Haeckel in 1868, “your boldness sometimes makes me tremble.”³² In books such as *Monism as Connecting Religion and Science: Confession of Faith of a Man of Science* (1893; Engl. trans 1894), the popular work *The Evolution of Man* (1896) and *Die Welträtsel* (1899, *The Riddles of the Universe*), Haeckel infused his biological writings with the monist idea of the unity of life. Monism, which is similar in spirit

commentators (such as Ernst Haeckel) and was critical largely of the social Darwinism that arose in the aftermath of *On the Origin of Species*. Also see Deleuze and G. Moore on this issue.

²⁹M. Bowler, in *The Non-Darwinian Revolution* argues that the conversion to the Darwinian view of species formation among mid-nineteenth century scientists and intellectuals has been overestimated.

³⁰The old idea of the inevitable decline of civilizations was reconfigured in the nineteenth century in biological terms, as a degeneration of society, a sort of reverse-evolution. See M. Nordau’s *Entartung* (1892, *Degeneration*); Nietzsche, *Der Fall Wagner*.

³¹For a full account of Darwin’s impact on nineteenth-century scientific thought, see P. Morton’s *The Vital Science*.

³²Letter to Haeckel dated November 19, 1868. Cited in D. Riepe, *Haeckel’s Theory*, p. 5.

to vitalism, proposes the idea of a single ultimate life force, or world soul, and rejects the duality of matter and mind.³³ Haeckel is thus representative (like Strindberg), as philosopher Gregory Moore notes, of “a significant number of nineteenth-century thinkers who, while publicly renouncing metaphysics, began to smuggle theistic ideas back across the frontiers of science, secreting them into their theories in a disguised form.”³⁴ This disguised theism in Haeckel occurs in his “monist” idea that all substance, “regardless of whether it is inorganic or organic, possesses life”, that is, “all things are *ensouled*, crystals as much as organisms.”³⁵ Haeckel’s books were popular and widely read in the 1890s, but are largely discredited now. He had an interest in the intersections between art and nature, and is now best known for his fanciful yet careful drawings of microscopic life-forms, as well as some highly speculative attempts to schematize the evolutionary history of organisms, known as his *Tree of Life* (figure 2.1).³⁶ Munch too, in an entry headed *Notes of a Madman*, wrote “The hard mass of the stone is also alive,” and depicted in an accompanying drawing the inanimate mineral with human features (Figure 2.2).³⁷

It is against these competing interpretations of Darwinism, in a culture caught between the scientific and the spiritual, that we can find in Munch’s woodcuts their most resonant meanings. Patricia Berman has noted that Munch seems to have derived from Nietzsche a conviction of the necessity for man to “re-engage with virgin nature as a path to a new humanity.”³⁸ For example, he writes in his journal, indicating the meaning that the scientific discover of the vibrations of atoms, could have for Munch:

³³K. Jayne, in “The Cultural Roots of Edvard Munch’s Images of Women,” argues that Munch likely read Haeckel’s *Confession of Faith of a Man of Science*.

³⁴G. Moore, *Nietzsche, Biology and Metaphor*, p. 7.

³⁵E. Haeckel, *Kristallseelen* (Leipzig, 1925), vii. Cited in G. Moore, *Nietzsche*, p. 7.

³⁶In *Kunstformen der Natur* (1904, *Art Forms in Nature*) Haeckel produced lithographs of microscopic organisms exhibiting aesthetic patterns and forms.

³⁷*Kunskapens Trae på Godt og Ondt*, reproduced in Tøjner, *Munch*, 124-5. For a discussion of Munch and monism see P. Berman’s essay in “Edvard Munch’s ‘modern life of the soul’,” 90-91.

³⁸P. Berman, *Monumentality and Historicism*, 153.

Alt er bevægelse – alt lever i sten – i kristal – i luft i mennesket. (Alerede I mine optegnelser for 20 år siden).

[All is movement and life – even in stone – in crystal – in the breath of man. (Already in my journal 20 years ago)]³⁹

The well-known Norwegian writer Knut Hamsun seems perhaps to have much affinity with Munch's "psychic naturalism." Hamsun, like Munch, was one of the driving forces behind the movement rejecting naturalism and the "social-problem" literature of the 1880s. Hamsun, again like Munch, promoted a neo-Romantic art embracing nature and the psyche as its central concerns. In 1891, Hamsun delivered a series of lectures in Norway, in which he promoted his own brand of "psychic naturalism," where "contradictions in the inner man [should be] considered as quite natural phenomena." Hamsun's novel *Pan* (1894) is in many ways a sort of quintessential neo-Romantic work, which also forms its own criticism. *Pan* tells the story of a man who tries, but fails to make his own "return to nature", in the sun-drenched woods of Northern Norway at mid-summer. In Hamsun's work, as in Munch's, a sexual relationship with a woman drives the narrative, and forms a parallel to the man's failure to truly unite with nature as he so wants. In the work of both Munch and Hamsun, nature is used both as a sort of mirror of, and metaphor for, the soul.

³⁹Munch, journal entry, January 30, 1930 (on feeling vindicated by a recent scientific discovery that "matter is ether vibrations"), cited in Tøjner, *Munch*, p. 111. My translation.

III. Trees of Knowledge, Trees of Life.

*Nature is a temple, where the living
Columns sometimes breathe confusing speech;
Man walks within these groves of symbols, each
Of which regards him as a kindred thing.*
-- "Correspondances", Charles Baudelaire⁴⁰

In the previous section I have tried to identify Munch's position within a German and Scandinavian bohemian culture fascinated by the discoveries and metaphors of biology. This interest in biology was shared by leading figures of the Scandinavian avant-garde, and it was here that Munch, like Strindberg and Stanislaw Przybyszewski, began to view issues such as the relation between the sex, sexuality, the nature of the soul, and nature itself, through the lenses of biology and evolution. Ernst Haeckel's monist theories and Nietzsche's philosophy of life were especially relevant for this circle of artists and intellectuals. Munch's journals attest to a personal interest in the scientific and philosophical ideas of the day, and also display a varied use of biological metaphor. Like Nietzsche, Munch employed metaphors of biology to explain or to depict emotional, psychological, and spiritual concerns. The question remains of how these biological metaphors impact Munch's work, and more specifically, how the woodcut *To the Forest* employs the metaphors of biology and reflects a vitalist impulse. *To the Forest*, we will see, incorporates biological metaphors in both its form and content – in Munch's use of botanical and religious symbolism, and also by his exploitation of formal properties unique to the woodcut. In this section I will explore two important symbolic elements of the woodcut that are directly tied to biological metaphor: the first is the male-female sexual pair; the second is the use of tree

⁴⁰Baudelaire, *Flowers of Evil*, p.19.

and forest imagery. The first of these elements – tree and forest imagery – is represented in Munch’s woodcut by the background, the forest “to” which the male and the female figures seem to be setting out.

Trees and forests have a long history of religious, mythological, and folkloristic symbolism, and meaning in Munch’s woodcut is dependent on the associations drawn from these traditions. From single iconic trees, such as the Biblical tree of knowledge, to the sacred groves of early religions, and the dark forests of folktales, trees seem to exert a powerful pull on human imagination and mythmaking. Marina Warner has written, “A religious symbol offers itself for discovery, and when it’s unwrapped, does not contain the same gift for every recipient. Meaning is not enclosed within a symbol, waiting to be revealed. The tree of life cannot be identified, labeled, and sorted into a filing cabinet as the scientific hunters of the nineteenth century did with their specimens from all over the world.”⁴¹ Many religious and mythological traditions envision a tree of life, or world-tree, as a metaphor for the cosmos and the structure of the universe.⁴² The tree of life is also a symbol of regeneration because of its seeming death in autumn, and “rebirth” in the spring. The crucifix, for example, is thought by some to derive, or to retain its symbolic valence in part from just such an association of the tree with regeneration, and some Christian imagery in fact depicts the cross as a tree.⁴³ James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1890) describes tree-worship among early Europeans:

In the religious history of the Aryan race in Europe the worship of trees has played an important part. Nothing could be more natural. For at the dawn of history Europe was covered with immense primeval forests, in which the scattered clearings must have appeared like islets in an ocean of green. [...] From an examination of the Teutonic words for “temple” Grimm has made it probably that amongst the Germans the oldest sanctuaries were natural woods. However this may be, tree-worship is well attested for all the great families of the Aryan stock. Among the Celts the oak-worship of the Druids is familiar to everyone. Sacred groves were common among the ancient Germans, and tree-worship is

⁴¹M. Warner, “Signs of the Fifth Element, p. 43.

⁴²J. Frazer, *Golden Bough*; Schama, *Landscape and Memory*.

⁴³S. Schama, *Landscape and Memory*.

hardly extinct amongst their descendants at the present day. At Uppsala, the old religious capital of Sweden, there was a sacred grove in which every tree was regarded as divine.⁴⁴

The tree occupies a central place in Nordic mythology, where the Yggdrasil – the great ash tree – is the cosmic tree at the center of the universe. It is recorded in the Scandinavian saga *Havamal*, where the god Odin declares: “I know of nine worlds, nine spheres covered by the tree of the world, / that tree set up in wisdom which grows down to the bosom of the earth.”⁴⁵ Thus in Scandinavian mythology the tree of life and the tree of knowledge/wisdom are united in this powerful image of a great tree spanning all of existence.

The mythical and religious significance of forests is as ancient as tree symbolism. Ideas about the forest are related to the evocative associations with individual tree symbols; forests, however, also have their own unique meanings and connotations in myth. Forests are nature supreme, the dark space where instinct reigns; they occupy a position as the antithesis of civilization in Romantic art and literature.⁴⁶ Simon Schama writes about forests in the rhetoric of European nationalist discourse, where forests, because of their powerful mythic associations, can be symbolized as the spiritual “home” of the tribe (e.g. the *Wald* of German lore). The political power of the forest as symbol should also be linked to the Romantic heritage positioning civilization against Nature, with nature, supremely represented by the wild forest, occupying the

⁴⁴J. Frazer, *Golden Bough*.

⁴⁵From the *Havamal*, cited in R. Cook, *Tree of Life*, p. 12. The Yggdrasil Tree is described in a famous study of Nordic myths written by Munch’s uncle, P. A. Munch (1810-1863): “When the gods held their solemn assemblies, to which came all the Æsir, they resorted to the ash Yggdrasil, the tree of the universe. Here was their principal sanctuary. The ash Yggdrasil spread its branches abroad over the whole world. It had three roots: one among the Æsir, another among the Rime-Thursar, a third in the depths of Niflheim. Beside the root in Niflheim there was a fearsome well, Vergelmir; there lay a dreadful serpent, Nidhogg, which, together with a great number of other serpents, gnawed without respite at the root of the tree, threatening to destroy it. Beside the root that rested with the Rime-Thursar there was also a well, which belonged to a Giant, the wise Mimir; in it lay hidden the highest wisdom, and from it Mimir drank each day. Beside the third root, which stretched out to the Æsir, there was also a well, called Urd’s Well. It was here that the gods held their assembly. Among the branches of the ash many animals had their resort.” This book, *Nordens Gamle Gude- og Heltedags* (1840, translated in 1926 as *Norse Mythology: Legends of Gods and Heroes*), was favorite reading material for Edvard as a child.

⁴⁶See M. H. Abrams’ classic *The Mirror and the Lamp* for a summary of attitudes toward nature in the literature of romanticism.

position of authenticity and truth.⁴⁷ Romantic artist Caspar David Friedrich's *Chasseur in the Forest* (Figure 3.1) from the early Nineteenth century can be read as a potent illustration of a nationalist mobilization of forest imagery, in which the majestic (German) woods seem ready to swallow the (French) soldier.

As an example of the spirituality with which the Romantics imbued the forest, take Friedrich's *The Cross in the Mountains* (1808, Figure 3.2). In this strangely unorthodox altarpiece, the evergreens on a mountaintop vie with the crucifixion at its summit for prominence, creating a somber and mysterious scene. It is reminiscent of familiar representations of the Mass of St. Gregory, but one in which the spectators of the crucified Christ's miraculous appearance in the flesh have been displaced by German pine trees. In relation to this painting, Simon Schama writes:

The evolution of the Tree of Life and the wooden cross to images like Caspar David Friedrich's explicit association between the evergreen fir and the architecture of resurrection may seem esoteric. But in fact it goes directly to the heart of one of our most powerful yearnings: the craving to find in nature a consolation for our mortality. It is why a grove of trees, with their annual promise of spring awakening, are thought to be a fitting décor for our earthly remains. So the mystery behind this commonplace turns out to be eloquent on the deepest relationships between natural form and human design.⁴⁸

The Tree of Knowledge seems especially to have captured Munch's imagination.⁴⁹ Over a number of years, Munch assembled a journal/portfolio, known as *The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil*, which seems to be Munch's attempt to give poetic and visual expression to his personal philosophies of love and life. The portfolio combines lithographs, drawings, short prose texts and poetic fragments. The texts describe the universe in terms of desire, sexuality and reproduction, and view the world in vitalist terms, as being united by a "life spark", which is present even in inanimate matter. Munch writes his own version of genesis:

Jorden elskede luften. Luften
tærede på den og jorden blev

⁴⁷See S. Schama, *Landscape and Memory*.

⁴⁸S. Schama, *Landscape and Memory*.

⁴⁹Genesis 2:9, 3:3-4 and 3:22. Summarized in M. Warner, *Tree of Life*.

luft og luften blev jord
Trærne strakte sine grene
mod himlen og åd luft
Trærne løsnete sig fra
jorden og det blev mennesker
Alt er liv og bevægelse
selv i jordens indre er
livets gnister

[The earth loved the air. The air
consumed it and the earth became
air and the air became earth
The trees stretched their branches
heavenwards and consumed the air
The trees broke away from
the earth and became human beings.
Everything is alive and in motion
even at the center of the earth
there are sparks of life.]⁵⁰ (Figure 3.3-3.4)

In this passage, we see that Munch suggests a sort of evolution from tree to human where in an organic movement of desire, the air, the earth and the trees come together to produce man. He imagines a poetic, and biological, affinity between tree and man, and also indicates a biological-version of a Genesis story. Forest landscape, also, is central to the *Frieze*, and serves a function here that can shed light on its role in *To the Forest*. A familiar landscape setting can be seen in paintings such as *Summer Night's Dream/The Voice* (1893—figure 3.5). Here we see a grove of trees, set against the edge of a beach, with a column of moon reflected on the water. Munch achieves an even more archaic, evocative image by transferring this motif to the woodcut (1896—Figure 3.6). The basic features of this landscape are reworked often in Munch's oeuvre. For example, in *Moonlight* (1895—Figure 3.7), we can see that same landscape from *The Voice*, this time emptied of figures, full of evocative moodiness and symbolism. This site is one that Munch identified in his journals as Åsgårdstrand on the Oslo fjord, which was the scene of a pivotal dramatic moment in one of his early, formative, love affairs. The trees have been

⁵⁰Munch, "*Kunskapens Træ på Godt og Ondt*," cited in P. Tøjner, *Munch, med Egne Ord*, p. 118. For a discussion of the history of this portfolio, see G. Woll, "The Tree of Knowledge," pp. 229-244.

identified by Reinhold Heller as belonging to the *Borre* woods near Åsgårdstrand – a famous Viking burial site.⁵¹ Munch's journals also frequently appeal to the evocative power of tree symbolism; Munch often uses the tree as a metaphor for the human psyche, as in this telling passage from his private journals (as translated by J. Gill Holland):

*And there is only
a little piece
hewn...out of
the trunk
the root is not there
--and a person
is indeed a tree
[...]
Humans are a
Tree which has
torn their roots
free from the earth
that is the inter-
dependence between a
tree's most delicate
branches and
its roots—
a tree feels
where a bough
grows out—
it is presentiment
it is fate
—and here are two
trees—
two people ...*⁵²

In a similar way, Darwin's meta-image used the figure of the tree to describe the evolution of life, picturing the history of species diversity as a large branching tree. The trunk represents our common ancestor and all of the forking "branches" represent the evolving families of organisms, developed and diversified into numerous distinct species.⁵³ Thus, images of the tree intersect on many levels with concepts of life and its organization, of biology and evolution, of growth and regeneration, and of the cycles of life and death.

⁵¹R. Heller, *Scream*, p. 58.

⁵²J. Holland, *The Private Journals*, p. 54.

⁵³C. Darwin, *Origin of Species*, pp. 171-2. Cited in Moore, *Nietzsche*, p. 30.

Munch's series of paintings called the *Frieze of Life* (*Livsfrisen*) is illustrative of his fascination with the idea of biology as destiny; here one also finds representations of trees and forests as prominent and recurring motifs. The Frieze is an attempt to represent life in its totality, with the themes of sexuality and love – in their various permutations – as universal and fundamental life-concepts, defining each stage in the life of a man. In this series of paintings, Munch's work and ideas are synthesized into a sort of narrative, in which multiple canvases are arranged to tell this story about life. Munch wrote in a leaflet accompanying the exhibition in 1918:

Frisen er tænkt som en række dekorative billeder, der samlet skulde gi et billede av livet. Gjennem dem snor sig den bugtede strandlinje, utenfor ligger havet, som altid er i bevægelse, og under trænes kroner leves det mangfoldige liv med dets glæder og sorger.

[The Frieze is intended to be a series of decorative pictures which should as a whole give a picture of life. Through it winds the undulating coastline, edged by the ever-moving sea. Below the crown of trees life is played out in all its variety, with its joys and sorrows.]⁵⁴

The Frieze evolved from an earlier-conceived “Love” series of 1893 and grew to twenty-two paintings that were first exhibited as the Frieze of Life in Berlin in 1902. The Frieze was divided into four thematic parts: *The Seeds of Love*, *The Blossoming and Fading of Love*, *The Angst of Life*, and *Death*, each theme occupying its own wall. Several of these paintings, such as *Fertility* (1898) and *Metabolism* (1899), incorporate the themes and tropes of the biblical Genesis story. In *Fertility* (Figure 3.8), the two figures are situated within a rural, agricultural setting, they are dressed in peasant clothing and the woman carries a basket with which to collect fruit from the apple tree. Here, the association of degeneration is downplayed, while the “Adam” and “Eve” figures are associated with an optimistic, pastoral vision of organic fertility. The couple seems to be in harmony with the land, the calm postures under the fruit bearing tree is suggestive of the fecundity of their environment and of their relationship. By titling this painting “fertility”, Munch makes clear his emphasis on the biological and physiological nature of sexuality. In his woodcut

⁵⁴Munch's essay, “Livsfrisen” (Frieze of Life”) for the catalogue of the 1918 exhibition of his work in Blomqvist's gallery in Oslo. (Translation from A. Eggum, *The Frieze of Life*, p. 61)

of the same title (Figure 3.9), depicting a nearly identical scene, the intimate connection of the couple with the fertile land is made even clearer. The curving, arching lines of the large blooming plant that spans the space between the feet of the couple metamorphose imperceptibly into the flowing lines of the woman's skirt and the dim outlines of the man's legs. The bodies of these two figures are formed by long, vertical gouges, which mirror the lines of the plants surrounding them as well as the vertical trunk of the tree. The faces of the figures, contrastingly, are indicated through thick horizontal gouges connecting them visually to the long horizontals of the landscape's horizon. The placement of the tree, in both the painting and the print, is central, as is its meaning as visual representation of the fruitful reproduction, and as a reminder of the biological nature of human sexuality.

The references to the Genesis story, cited above, bring the focus around to the second type of symbolic imagery in Munch's work, which is also in play in *To the Forest*: the sexuality implied by the embracing nude woman and clothed man. The figures in *To the Forest* can be thought as a reference to Adam and Eve, where their turn "to the forest" could refer to the narrative of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden after the fall. The passage in Genesis reads:

And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, and tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. (Gen 2:8-9)

From man's rib God creates woman, who convinces man to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil:

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die. (Gen 2:15-17)

And to Adam he said, 'Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return. (Gen. 3:17-19)⁵⁵

⁵⁵S. Prickett and R. Barnes, eds, *Bible*.

The story of Adam and Eve as told in Genesis links their discovery of sexuality to humanity's bondage to the earth and to toil and death – in other words, to dependence on a biological life cycle. The role of Eve in the fall of humanity and the expulsion from the Garden of Eden has been reinterpreted throughout the history of biblical writings and scholarship.⁵⁶ The story of Adam and Eve has lent itself to interpretations that read the story as a cautionary tale of treachery and the dangerous sexuality of women. This continues in the fin-de-siècle, when references to the Eve of the fall are a familiar misogynist trope.⁵⁷ That Munch's art also takes part in this cultural fascination with the collision of sex and death in the figure of a woman has been frequently noted. The Adam and Eve figures in *To the Forest* re-deploy the biblical pair as a sort of secularized *Ur-couple*, linking sexuality with a fatalistic biological destiny. Munch's frequent use of the Adam and Eve motif indicates the centrality of sexual reproduction to his personal cosmology and philosophy.

The significance of biology in Munch's grand statement about life, as expressed in the *Frieze*, is made clear by the pride of place occupied by the painting *Metabolism* (Figure 3.10). In his 1903 exhibition in Leipzig, this painting occupied its own wall, directly opposite *The Dance of Life* (1899-1900). The painting would have had a significant rhetorical force in the context of the *Frieze* because of its physical separateness and its placement opposite to the monumental *Dance of Life*. Where the *Dance of Life* represents the ages of life, and human sexuality in its social context (the figures in the painting seem variously to suggest lust, jealousy, love, separation and alienation) *Metabolism*, conversely, represents the biological underpinnings of Munch's view of life in terms of sexuality. The thematic significance of *Metabolism* thus understood is hinted at by Munch's insistence that the painting is

⁵⁶J. Phillips', *Eve: The History of an Idea*.

⁵⁷See, for example, J. Hutton's article on Mary Cassatt's *Modern Woman* panel of 1893, depicting modern-day Eves picking the fruits of knowledge. Also see E. Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (New York: 1986) and B. Dijkstra's *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: 1986).

Motivet i det største billede med de to, manden og kvinden i skogen, ligger måske noget til siden for idéen i de andre felter, men det er likefuldt nødvendig for den hele frise som spænden er det for beltet. Det er billedet av livet som døden, skogen som suger næring av de døde og byen, som gror op bag trækronerne. Det er billedet paa livets sterke, bærende kræfter.

[The motif of the largest painting depicting the couple – the man and the woman in the forest – lies perhaps a little out of line with the ideas in the other paintings, but it is anyway as necessary to the whole *Frieze* as the buckle is to a belt. It is the picture of life as well as death, the forest that draws sustenance from the dead and the city that rises behind the crowns of the trees. It is the picture of life's strong, constructive forces.]⁵⁸

Metabolism, thus, functions as a sort of hinge, a lynch pin in Munch's grand view of the important universals of life. Metabolism as a biological process both creates energy and breaks down organic material in consumption and decomposition. It spans the life cycle of the organism, linking the life-producing function of sex with the death-ward activity of decomposition. *Metabolism* could thus be read as a concise representation of the biological and vitalist elements that I have been discussing, and which are at work in *To the Forest*.

Metabolism depicts two naked figures standing on either side of a tree - their resemblance to well-known representations of Adam and Eve, such as Dürer's famous etching, is unmistakable, and the tree that divides them therefore is the Tree of Knowledge.⁵⁹ The Adam and Eve story has been interpreted as a narrative of the origins of the divide between nature and culture, or wilderness and civilization. In this interpretation, Adam and Eve's attainment of sexual knowledge precipitates the expulsion from the garden and into the world, commencing the human destiny of sin and death. Yet the story also narrates the mythical movement of humanity from its pre-Lapsarian ignorance into knowledge and the establishment of culture.⁶⁰ The themes of degeneration and growth extend beyond the painted canvas of *Metabolism* into the wooden frame that surrounds it. Munch created his own frame for this painting, on which he made carved

⁵⁸Munch, "Livsfrisen". My translation.

⁵⁹The painting was originally called *Adam and Eve*.

⁶⁰For a history of representations of the Garden of Eden and its relationship to ecology and perceptions of nature, see C. Merchant, *The Death of Nature* and *Reinventing Eden*.

images in relief. Above the branches of the tree, for example, a cityscape carved into the frame, appearing as a sort of crown – man-made foliage, or the fruits of civilization. The representation of the city at the top of the wood frame indicates, perhaps, that civilized man is the culmination of the life cycle, or of human evolution. This culmination only exists because, on the reverse of the life cycle, organisms continually “donate their matter back to the atmosphere and the earth”: at the bottom of the picture, the tree’s roots reach down into a prostrate skeletal human corpse, which decays under the earth, providing the nourishment for the tree and for the life depicted above-ground.⁶¹ We can relate this concept not only to the prevalence of physiology and to Munch’s atheism, but perhaps also to Nietzsche’s image of the dead, decaying God – in other words, Munch’s *Metabolism* represents a view of life as ruled by the laws of nature and the fundamentally biological nature of mankind. By representing the biblical Adam and Eve story under its biological title, *Metabolism* reconfigures the “fall” as an organic death, a biological degeneration, in which the death and decomposition of the individual is the inverse of growth and procreation. But it also intimates that this biological process is also a prelude to culture and to life; perhaps it can be read also as endorsing Darwin’s evolutionary narrative, in which death and degeneration are the very requirements for the survival of the species. Sex, then, is the nearest reminder of the biological processes that will reduce the lover, eventually, to the corpse and back to the earth.⁶² Sexual reproduction is not only a source of fantasy or anxiety for Munch, but it is also the origin, the original problem, and the meaning, of life.

The combination of these two themes – arboreal and sexual symbolism – in *To the Forest*, points to an idea of a sort of spiritual merging of the human with nature. This is a dreamed of state of harmony, a Romantic return to the bosom (both figuratively and

⁶¹Also see Nordau’s polemical *Entartung* for a nineteenth century idea of decadence as an urban phenomenon.

⁶²For a discussion of the impact of the science of physiology on Munch’s art, see S. Cordulack, *Munch and the Physiology of Symbolism*.

literally) of nature. In this fantasy, the tree is a symbol of the biological processes – metabolism and regeneration – that are associated with the psyche. These elements of the life cycle are also implied by the sexual connotations of Adam and Eve. The physiological metabolic process – the cycle of life which ensures aging and death, and then rebirth as decomposed material is “recycled” through the life of another organism – is one of the dominant metaphors of the *Frieze of Life*. Munch’s use of the figure of the tree in combination with motifs about sexuality, therefore, relies on the tree’s function as a universally readable symbol, upon which characteristically nineteenth-century ideas about the sexes and sexuality can be projected, in the guise of fundamental and universal “truths”.

IV. “Woodiness”, and Attention to Surface

One of the most striking aspects of *To the Forest* is the wood-grain that traverses the image, competing with the engraved design for visual dominance. The wood-grain is a trace of the wood – a property of the medium – from which the woodblock was cut. As a visible trace of the tree, however the grain acquires the metaphoric potential of the tree and its symbolism. This formal aspect of *To the Forest* contributes to the meaning of the work by setting the narrative and the concept of the motif – the move towards nature that sexuality represents for Munch – within nature itself, with the tree as its medium.

Munch created his first woodcuts in Paris in 1896, seizing upon the rising popularity of woodblock printmaking. Woodcuts were just coming into vogue among the avant-garde, as artists such as Felix Vallotton and Gauguin had begun experimenting with the woodcut in the early 1890s.⁶³ Around 1893-4, Gauguin produced the ten innovative woodblock prints, which he had intended to publish in book form as *Noa Noa* (Figures 4.1 and 4.2). Gauguin made the simple gouged lines and the rough-hewn and imperfect look of his woodcuts serve a primitivizing purpose in the resulting prints. The prints were circulated informally in Paris among acquaintances of Gauguin, and Munch is likely to have, at the very least, known of them.⁶⁴ Munch’s woodcuts similarly attempt to communicate something of an emotional, experiential aura through the medium. In Munch’s case, the “primitive” simplicity of the woodcuts expresses

⁶³H. Furst, *The Modern Woodcut*; J. Baas, *Artistic Revival of the Woodcut in France*. One factor responsible for the “rebirth” of the woodcut was the sudden arrival of Japanese woodblock prints in Europe in the 1880s, which, of course, were extremely influential in the development of modernism. Another important factor was the development of photomechanical technologies for the reproduction of images in print. Formerly, the woodcut had been the cheapest and easiest way to mass-produce images; it was now barely used in publishing.

⁶⁴R. Field, “Gauguin’s *Noa Noa* Suite.”

the simplicity of an artist's collaboration with nature. Munch's wood grain could also be understood as indicating a psychological state, one unrefined by culture and more in tune with the instincts and the forms of nature than those of civilized society. A Hamsun-esque protest against civilization and desire to unite with the forests, with nature, could be intended; in Hamsun's story *Pan*, the narrator's attempted return to a harmonious relation with nature is foreclosed by his own inner contradictions and desires.

Both Gauguin's and Munch's attention to creating unique surface effects can also be related to a symbolist aesthetic. Jean Moréas, in his foundational Symbolist Manifesto, wrote that "in this art, scenes from nature, human activities, and all other real world phenomena will not be described for their own sake; here, they are perceptible surfaces created to represent their esoteric affinities with the primordial Ideals."⁶⁵ The emphasis on the 'perceptible surface' of the work of art is a distinguishing characteristic of symbolism and a break with naturalism.⁶⁶ Munch, too, consciously made a break with the Naturalist style that had dominated Scandinavian arts through the 1880s. He aligned himself with a subjective attention to inwardness and the emotional experience of being when he wrote in an often-quoted journal entry, "I do not paint what I see, I paint what I saw," (rejecting Zola's famous account of naturalism as "nature seen through a temperament"). His paintings represent "esoteric affinities with primordial ideals" in his manner of using color for expressive value, and in the rough, unfinished surface of his paintings. In the woodcuts, the use of color is equally expressive and even arbitrary relative to nature. The visible grain of the wood also is a technique for representing esoteric affinities. Munch draws attention to the surface of the woodcut not only through abstracted design of his motifs but also through his efforts to introduce a pattern of wood-grain from the block into the print. As one early commentator wrote, "he creates a miraculous marriage whereby the figures seem to emerge from

⁶⁵Originally published in *Le Figaro*, 1886.

⁶⁶Robert Goldwater characterizes symbolism as "a manner of painting that accentuated the pictorial surface and the autonomous existence of the work of art." Quoted in Heller, "Concerning Symbolism," p.148.

the very soul of the wood.”⁶⁷ Richard Shiff could be describing Munch’s work when he writes of the symbolist outlook that, “the permanent reference was the human spirit itself, not something outside it. They often conceived of this human spirit as integral with a universal world-spirit.”⁶⁸ In a woodcut the gouges and cuts forming the design tend to remain discernable in the print, forbidding any convincing naturalism. In Munch’s woodcuts, the printing process itself – in which colors are applied in large areas, monochromatically, one per impression or sawed-off section, short-circuits the subtle gradations achieved in painting. With his method of sanding and thick gouging, Munch exaggerates the abstractness of the woodblock print – his prints announce themselves as surface, as a product of the artist’s technique.

Munch’s practice of going to lengths to create prints that retain the imprint of the wood-grain – often by sanding away the soft wood between the grain, for example – can be related to other surface-enhancing techniques he used. Late in his career, for example, Munch developed the practice of leaving his paintings outdoors in his outdoor studio after painting them, exposing them to the weather to be “improved by nature”. (Munch was in the habit of referring to his work as his “children with nature.”) He called this treatment the “horse cure” and considered it a sort of collaboration with nature, which finished his paintings by leaving its traces in the form of fading, cracks, water damage, or mold.⁶⁹ Reinhold Heller has written about Munch’s “horse cure” as a means by which the artist emphasized the materiality of the work.⁷⁰ He proposes this materiality of surface as Munch’s devotion to a psychological symbolism, a desire to translate subjective intuitions into universal but truths beyond the visible.⁷¹ In a way, the surface of the paintings becomes an element of Munch’s psychological symbolism, where the weathered canvas seems to

⁶⁷R. Avermaete, *La gravure sur bois moderne de l’occident* (Paris, 1928), quoted in E. Prelinger, *Symbolist Prints*.

⁶⁸R. Shiff, “Cezanne and the End of Impressionism,” pp.47-9.

⁶⁹P. Tøjner, *Munch med Egne Ord*.

⁷⁰R. Heller, “Concerning Symbolism.”

⁷¹R. Heller, *His Life and Work*.

speak of a wounded psyche, a weathered soul. Sue Prideaux describes the horse cure as an “exciting Darwinian test of fitness.” She writes that “one of the objects of the horse-cure was to obtain a dry, matte, fresco-like surface on the paintings; another was to incorporate the idea of time into the canvas. It gave the pictures the character of being in the process of decomposition.”⁷² The effect of incompleteness that Munch sought for his work had something to do, as well, with being integrated with the random and unpredictable effects of nature.⁷³ The result is a work that is inexorably a thing, a two-dimensional object – or organism – which has its own existence in the world. Munch’s paintings and prints were simply to exist as real objects in the world, rather than being limited to their significance as rarified art objects.

The lines that are created by Munch’s “jigsaw” technique, by which he cut out sections of the color block for individual inking, are another material aspect of the woodblock-making process, that contribute to the formal qualities of the resulting impressions. In particular, an outline of Munch’s cut surrounds the two figures, appearing to encase them in a sort of membrane. As a result, the figures are distinguished and set apart from the background and the rest of the print. While they are separated formally from the forest, the outline has the effect of making the couple appear as a unit, in which their embracing arms extend into the space of the other – the light-colored arm of the female penetrating the black mass of the male, and vice-versa.

A striking example of his use of the gouges is the evocative *The Kiss* (1889—Figures 4.3 and 4.4) in which the space he has gouged out to indicate the couple’s faces, takes on the appearance of a knotty tree-trunk, as if the lovers are two ancient trees which have merged to become one.

⁷²S. Prideaux, *Behind the Scream*, p. 273.

⁷³This is familiar ground for Munch and other artists associated with the Berlin bohemians. For example, see Strindberg’s 1895 essay, “On the Role of Chance in Art.”

V. Conclusion

The design of *To the Forest* incorporates familiar themes in Munch's oeuvre: the hopes and disappointments of love, conflict between the sexes, the mirroring of human psychological states in nature imagery. The connection between love/sex and death is a theme that recurs in his paintings from the 1890s; the biblical Adam and Eve, as we have seen, abound in Munch's work during this period. In these prints, the human psychosexual drama is linked with nature, symbolized by the forest. This linking of human drives with nature is expressed through a union of form with content. As direct impressions from the wood, his prints emphasize their materiality and making, but they also show an interest in aligning art (the artist's design) with natural processes.

As indicated by a narrative interpretation of the title, the couple is in the process of joining up with the forest; they move toward nature, toward the biological. The act of sexual union brings them closer to nature. This movement "to the forest" indicated by the title evokes complementary and contradictory associations. One of the most apparent associations that the title seems to refer to is the Biblical narrative of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden. However, because of the ambiguity of Munch's "To" (or "mot," in Norwegian, which means "against, towards, to") the couple could be interpreted as moving out of the Garden and into the earthly wilderness. Conversely, they could represent a fantasy of returning *to* the Garden, and to an innocence and original harmony with nature.

Merging has been an important concept in my discussion of this woodcut. The merging of the couple is represented in the edges of their bodies, which form a single line, and the faint outline – where the woodblock has been cut – that unites the two

figures in a single round mass. The two heads seem to touch, almost to merge into one another; the woman's hair, which is draped down over her shoulders and onto the man's arm, connects the two forms. Merging is also implied along with the implicit sexual narrative of the motif. The suggested movement into the forest also represents a sort of Bacchic union with wild nature, I would argue, a theme in keeping with Nietzsche's discussion of the Dionysian in *Birth of Tragedy*.⁷⁴ The Dionysian is the drive to ecstatic merging into the universal. As Nietzsche explains it, "not only is the bond between human beings renewed by the magic of the Dionysian, but nature, alienated, inimical, or subjugated, celebrates once more her festival of reconciliation with her lost son, humankind."⁷⁵ Munch's woodcut suggests that the sexual bond that promises (or is bound by the logic of) this reconciliation between man and nature that the Dionysian principle represents. The visible wood-grain, which runs across the image and across the figures, is a reminder not only of the materiality of the process (an attention to surface that is in keeping with Symbolist ideas) but also points to a biological view of life in which the human psychosexual drama is linked with Nature.

⁷⁴M. Strawser, in "Dionysian Painting," has discussed Munch's paintings in relation to Nietzsche's concept of the Dionysian.

⁷⁵F. Nietzsche, *On the Birth of Tragedy*, p. 18.

Images



Figure 1.1. *To the Forest*, 1897



Figure 1.2. *To the Forest*, 1897.



Figure 1.3. *To the Forest*, 1897.



Figure 1.4. *To the Forest*, 1915.



Figure 1.5. Akseli Gallen-Kallela, *Waterfall at Mantykoski*, 1892-94.



Figure 1.6. Gustav Klimt, Birch Forest, 1903.



Figure 1.7. Harald Sohlberg, *Sun Glean*, 1894.

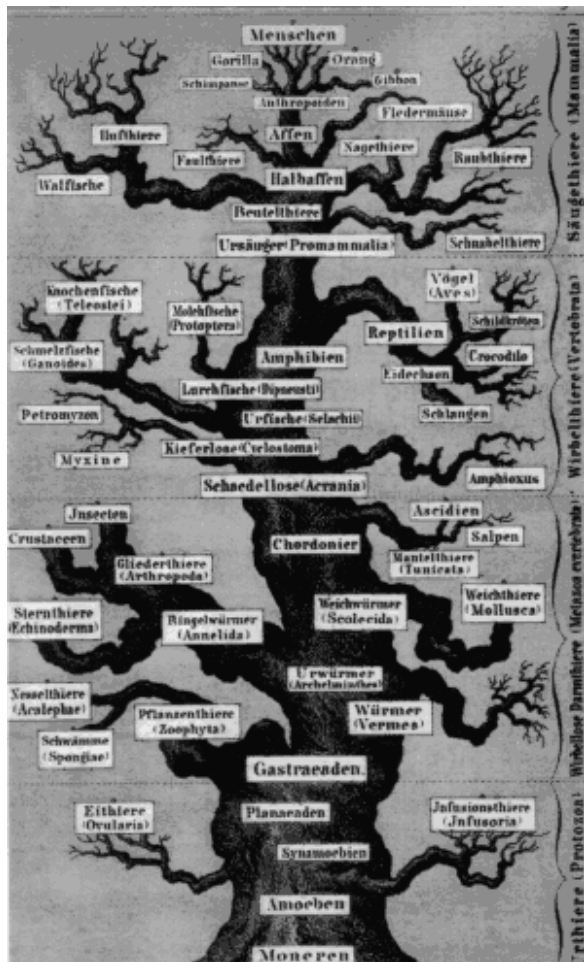


Figure 2.1. Ernst Haeckel's Tree of Life, 1870.



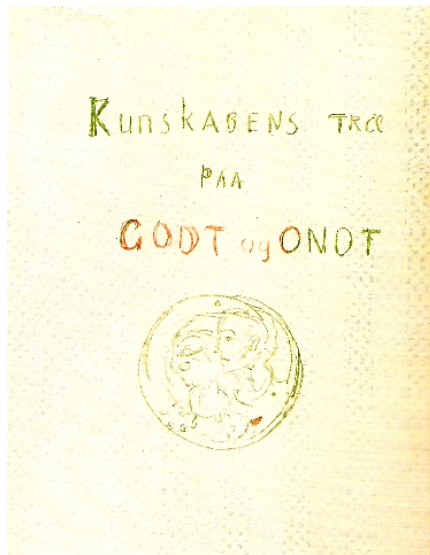
Figure 2.2. Page from Munch's journal, "Notes from a Madman. The hard mass of the stone is also alive."



Figure 3.1. Caspar David Friedrich, *Chasseur in the Forest*, 1813-14.



Figure 3.2. Caspar David Friedrich, *The Cross in the Mountains*, 1808.



Figures 3.3 – 3.4. Pages from Munch's journal



Figure 3.5. *Summer Night's Dream/The Voice*, 1893.

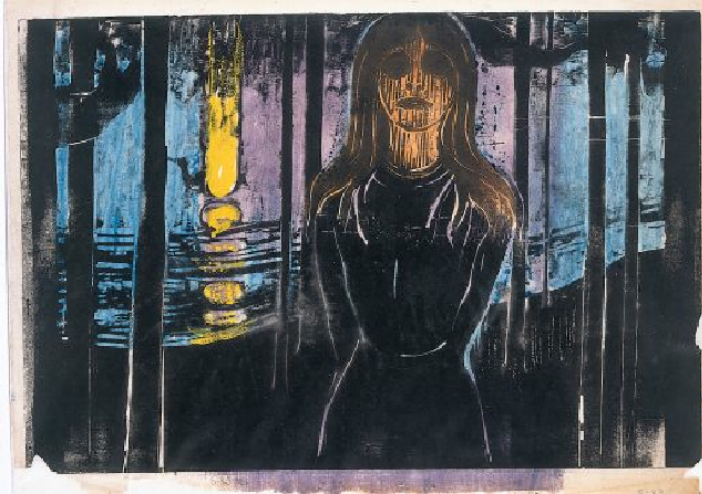


Figure 3.6. *Summer Night's Dream/The Voice*, 1896.

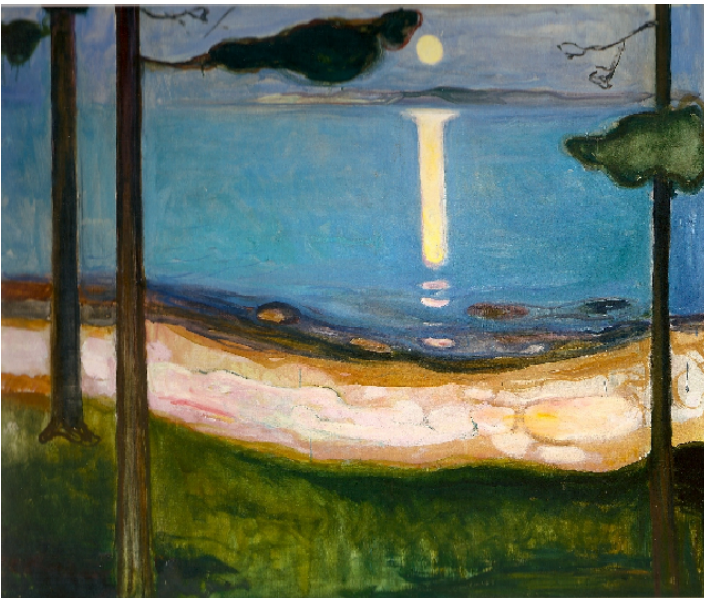


Figure 3.7. *Moonlight*, 1895.

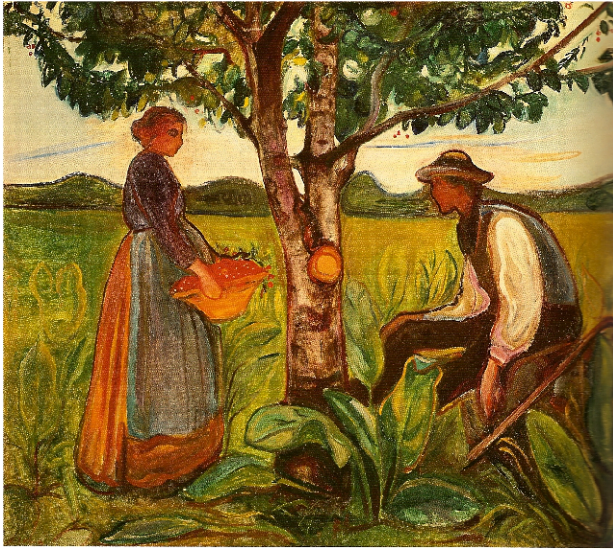


Figure 3.8. *Fertility*, 1898.



Figure 3.9. *Fertility*, 1898. Woodcut.



Figure 3.10. *Metabolism*, 1899. Oil on canvas with wood frame carved by the artist.

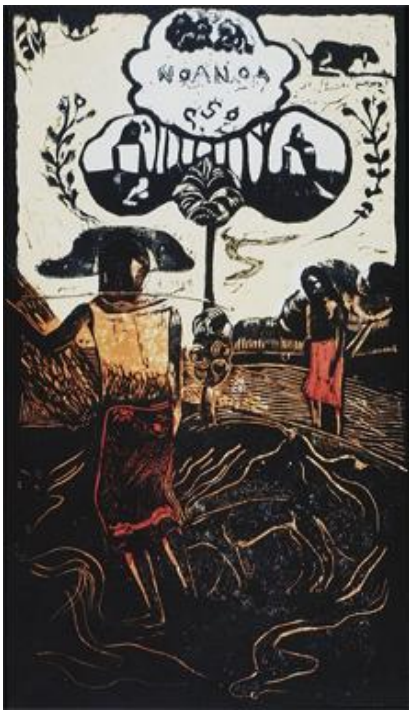


Figure 4.1. Gauguin, *Noa Noa*, 1893-4.



Figure 4.2. Gauguin, *Noa Noa*, 1893-4.



Figure 4.3. *The Kiss*, 1897-98.



Figure 4.4. *The Kiss*, 1897-98.

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