Munch: A Modern Velázquez?

Allison Morehead

Allison Morehead is Associate Professor of Art History and in the Graduate Program in Cultural Studies at Queen's University, Canada. She is the author of *Nature's Experiments and the Search for Symbolist Form* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), and articles on French and Scandinavian modern art and the psy-sciences. Her current work includes the exhibition project *Munch and Medicine* and the book *Gambling and the Modern Imaginary*.

morehead@queensu.ca

ABSTRACT

This article considers the significance of the art critic William Ritter’s airing of a comparison between Munch and Velázquez in a lengthy text written in the wake of Munch’s major solo exhibition in Prague in 1905. In suggesting that Munch might be a “hospital Velazquez,” Ritter engaged the work of Julius Meier-Graefe and R.A.M. Stevenson, but offered an ambivalent view of the emerging histories of modern art.

Keywords

Edvard Munch, Diego Velázquez, Modernism

In a long text published in 1906, the year after Edvard Munch held a major exhibition in Prague, the Swiss critic William Ritter mentioned that some “friends” of his, “young pranksters” he called them, had likened Munch’s work to that of the seventeenth-century Spanish artist Diego Velázquez. Ritter was quick to point out, however, that if the comparison had any merit it would have to be qualified. Munch was not just any Velázquez, but rather “a laboratory and hospital Velazquez, a Velazquez of bismuth and gray ointment, lemon juice and grenadine, of black coffee, of absinthe, of vitriol and urine; a Velazquez of the American bar with the sad cocktail and macabre nightmare, one who knows the Schopenhauerian and surgical tightrope act of the art student/medic.” While Ritter appeared reluctant – or at least feigned reluctance – to fully embrace Velázquez as an adequate point of comparison for the work of an artist he also called a “Norwegian daubster,” he added to his friends’ opinions or perhaps paraphrased or mocked them by including the sensational list of modern institutions and amenities – laboratory, hospital, black coffee, absinthe, the American bar – that made Munch sound like a very modern Velázquez indeed.1 Considering Ritter’s text and the moment in which it was written, this essay examines the role of Velázquez in the emerging histories of modern art that were
familiar to Munch’s own circles. I look in particular at the work of Julius Meier-Graefe and Robert Alan Mowbray Stevenson, in order to gauge the significance of the comparison as well as Ritter’s self-styled ambivalence about connecting the work of the Spanish master with what he understood to be Munch’s troubling new painting.

Munch, who rarely deigned to compare himself to any artist, wondered later in life why no one had made the connection between his full-length portrait figures and those of Velázquez, whose work had greatly impressed him on his first trip to Paris in 1885. What Munch claimed to have taken from Velázquez (and from the work of Thomas Couture) on this first trip inserted him into the same lineage, he insisted, as Édouard Manet, a statement by which Munch, in the 1920s or 1930s, explicitly positioned himself within a formalist history of art. Although Ritter’s text was in his library with a personal dedication, perhaps Munch had forgotten or even strategically ignored it, for Ritter had in a sense rejected the validity of the comparison, suggesting that Velázquez was a much superior painter to Munch. Munch, Ritter wrote, retained none of Velázquez’s aesthetic appeal. While the Spanish artist had dignified and aestheticized his “scrofulous aristocrats…in their grey and pink, white, black and silver finery,” Munch had depicted the “monomaniacs and neurasthenics, the depraved and the anemic, the prostitutes and the alcoholics” in all their modern ugliness. “Pushed to this point,” Ritter wrote, “ugliness becomes fantastic and the cult of ugliness acquires almost a kind of beauty in reverse that will undoubtedly remain the only excuse and the only explanation for such art.” If Munch was like Velázquez, Ritter argued, then it was only in the sense of his being an inverse Velázquez.

By the time Ritter published his text in 1906, Velázquez had been safely installed as a key progenitor of modern art, and in particular the formalist lineage that began with Manet, so much so that he was perhaps overdue for a toppling. An exhibition held at the Vienna Secession in 1903, *Development of Impressionism in Painting and Sculpture (Entwicklung des Impressionismus in Malerei und Plastik)*, had included works by Velázquez among those of El Greco, Francisco Goya, Johannes Vermeer, J.M.W. Turner, John Constable, and the French Romantics in its inaugural rooms (ill. 1).

As Robert Jensen points out, the 1903 exhibition was one of the earliest, predating Roger Fry’s shows at the Grafton Gallery in London (1910–12), the Sonderbund exhibition in Cologne (1912), and the Armory Show in New York (1913), to attempt a historical account of modern art and at a moment when the very notion remained contentious. The path laid out for the visitor introduced in the exhibition’s first rooms the earliest rumblings of an anti-classical or anti-academic style in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries, before presenting the works of the French impressionists, above all Manet whose paintings formed a centerpiece of the show (ill. 2).

This was followed by the work of the Secessionists, then a room of Japanese prints, and finally a room called “Breakthrough to Stylization” (“Übergänge zum Stil”), which included works by Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh, and the Nabis. Although by 1903 Munch had made his presence known in Vienna with two works shown at the Secession of 1901 (he would show twenty at the Secession of 1904), and although his works...
would not have been utterly out of place in the “Breakthrough to Stylization,” he was not included in this most up-to-date presentation of the lineage of modern art, despite the fact that it was principally organized by one of his close friends.

While his absence from the exhibition might have stemmed from contingencies, it seems more likely to have been the result of a conscious decision by the German critic and dealer Julius Meier-Graefe, who had recently taken on the mantle of art historian. Meier-Graefe had been a major supporter of Munch’s beginning when the two met in Berlin in the early 1890s, writing articles about the artist and coming to act as his dealer, especially encouraging Munch’s efforts in the realm of printmaking (ill. 3).
But in 1903, Meier-Graefe seems to have been less concerned with promoting Munch and much more interested in launching his new historical account of modern art, which he would initially lay out in the first edition of a book that appeared in 1904, the Developmental History of Modern Art: Comparative Considerations of Visual Art, as a Contribution to a New Aesthetics (Entwickelungsgeschichte der modernen Kunst: vergleichende Betrachtungen der bildenden Künste, als Beitrag zu einer neuen Aesthetik). This monumental work gave overwhelming precedence to French art and only a small, albeit intriguing role to Munch as a Norwegian outlier. Meier-Graefe's account established, as Patricia Berman has argued, transhistorical and transgeographical "genealogies of genius" that linked together past and present masters such as El Greco and Paul Cézanne, and emphasized a logic of internal artistic development based on formal problems for artists to solve. It normalized impressionism and the French modernisms that derived from it as addressing the most central questions of modern art.

Although Meier-Graefe would soon downgrade Velázquez in favor of El Greco after a six-month stint in Spain in 1908, prior to that, for Meier-Graefe, Velázquez was one of a select group of artists who had broken significantly with tradition. In doing so Velázquez had become one of the artistic personalities – the word personality was crucial – who inaugurated a modern, individualistic approach to painting. As Meier-Graefe wrote in The Young Menzel (Der junge Menzel) published in 1906, modern artists "found in Velazquez not only an abundance of contrasts but also the possibility of avoiding the unnatural difference between background and figure. As a result of combining these two, the entire surface [of a painting by Velázquez] makes up a seamless whole." The idea of Velázquez as a modern painter who excelled in achieving an overall ensemble that nevertheless captured what the artist had perceived had been even more pronounced in an earlier book by the Scottish critic R.A.M. Stevenson, The Art of Velasquez, published in 1895. Stevenson's biographer, the critic and curator Sidney Colvin, claimed in 1901 that Stevenson's "'Velasquez' deserves to be a classic," and went on, "Probably in no other book, English or foreign, is the psychology of artistic vision expounded with so much lucidity and resource, or the nature of the purely pictorial, as distinguished from the literary and historical, appeal of the painter's art set forth in such cogent and attractive words." While Stevenson's book, with its emphasis on the "purely pictorial," certainly had an impact on English painters and critics including Roger Fry and Walter Sickert, its influence outside an Anglophone context is less well understood. While we cannot be certain to whom Ritter referred when he spoke of his "young prankster" friends, perhaps he was making sly reference to unrecorded opinions of Meier-Graefe or even more likely Eberhard von Bodenhausen, the latter also a member of Munch's Berlin circle (ill. 4). For von Bodenhausen had translated Stevenson's book on Velázquez for the German edition published in 1904, the same year that Meier-Graefe's history appeared.

In his more extended meditation on Velázquez's modernity and in particular his connection to impressionism, Stevenson insisted that Velázquez had "taught his eye so to report sight that he could render the familiar or the unfamiliar and could communicate directly with what was before him without the intervention of traditional rules or scientific study." He, Stevenson wrote, “alone painted reality” rather than “some decorative
convention.” In effect, for Stevenson, this made Velázquez a “prophet” of impressionism, in that “he made composition, modeling, and style, the slaves of his impressions,” and simultaneously submitted himself to the overall logic of the canvas. Stevenson addressed the irony in naming a portrait rather than a landscape painter as the father of impressionism, simply by suggesting that by virtue of the fact that Velázquez made his home at court, people were the reality in front of which the artist most often found himself. This is the same formalist argument that would soon be applied to Paul Cézanne; whether the artist was painting Mont Sainte-Victoire, apples, or his wife Hortense, the problems of painting nature – in all its infinite variety – remained the same.

Again, we cannot be certain who Ritter’s “young prankster” friends were, but given the ways in which writers such as Meier-Graefe and Stevenson situated Velázquez in relation to modern painting and in particular impressionism, it seems probable that the comparison to Munch was based on at least two assumptions underpinning Velázquez’s role in the emerging histories of modern art: the idea of an anti-traditional, artistic personality intent on forging his own path, and the idea of truthfulness, even – perhaps especially – an awful truthfulness, presented in a self-contained, harmonious ensemble.

In one other way, however, the comparison between Velázquez and Munch seems pertinent albeit in contrast to later narratives of modernism. For while an artist like Cézanne would be celebrated for the particular solutions he brought to the problem of form, and above all his characteristic digital stroke and technique of passage, Stevenson had made a virtue out of the formal variety demonstrated by Velázquez, whose “breadth of view led him in his later pictures to vary his manner of painting according to the sentiment of his impression, so that you will find in his work no pattern of brushwork, no settled degree of intimacy in the modeling, no constantly equal force of realization in edges and, in short, no fixed habits or methods of expression.” While Stevenson saw this aspect of Velázquez’s work as a mark of the artist’s genius and a crucial aspect of the modernity of his facture, Meier-Graefe could not easily incorporate a similar assessment of Munch into his history of art, for it was precisely Munch’s lack of form and stylistic inconsistency that made his inclusion in Meier-Graefe’s historical account of modernism problematic.

As Øivind Storm Bjerke argues, Ritter’s text, among many other things, signals just how contested the definitions of modernism were in 1906. Ritter’s airing of the comparison between Velázquez and Munch, and his ambivalence in regards to its validity, is but a cipher of these debates at this moment. For while Meier-Graefe – spurred, no doubt, by the writings of proto-formalist critics such as Maurice Denis – would soon choose the characteristic and much more consistent forms of El Greco and Cézanne over the variety displayed by Velázquez and Munch, that issue was still, it seems, somewhat open for debate in 1906. While Ritter seemed reluctant to fully buy into the comparison, highlighting what he saw as Velázquez’s far superior use of color, in other passages, in particular in the way Ritter described Munch’s painting Inheritance (ill. 5), Ritter betrayed the logic in calling Munch a modern Velázquez, and especially a “hospital Velázquez.”

Ill. 6: William Ritter, dedication to Edvard Munch in Études d’art étranger (Paris: Mercure de France, 1906)
Ritter’s lengthy text about Munch expanded upon two shorter articles the critic published in the Gazette des Beaux-Arts and the Mercure de France in 1905, which reviewed Munch’s massive exhibition of works at the Mánes Exhibition Association in Prague in February 1905. The catalogue for this exhibition listed 75 paintings and 46 prints making it, as Bente Torjusen and Bjerke have pointed out, by far the “most comprehensive” exhibition Munch had had up until then outside his native Norway. Munch himself was very excited about the invitation from Mánes, writing to his family that he hoped Prague would bring him both “honor” and “gold.” Although it seems that the “gold” was not forthcoming – he sold very little from the show – he nevertheless continued to attach great importance to the exhibition long after it was over. This may have been, at least in part, because Prague was the last showing of the original components of his Frieze of Life series before Munch began selling off individual paintings later in 1905.

The longer essay on Munch appeared the year after the exhibition, in a volume of essays on “foreign art” that Ritter published in French in 1906. Moreover, although the text was as far as possible from a straightforward celebration of Munch’s unique achievement, its length and rhetorical ambition testify to the seriousness of Ritter’s intense grappling with what he had seen of Munch’s work in Prague. This was the tenor of Ritter’s personal dedication to the artist in the copy he sent to Munch, which is still in the library of the Munch Museum (ill. 6): “To the poet of physical defects and contemporary ugliness, whom I know not whether to praise or to abhor, as testimony of at least a real willingness to understand.” At the same time, as Bjerke has argued, it was as much a virtuoso critical performance, typical of a fin-de-siècle genre of art criticism aligned with neo-idealism that had already become the object of scorn and parody, as an attempt to understand Munch’s work and by extension the current state of modern art by, in a sense, getting “inside” of it.

Ritter reads Inheritance as depicting a woman whose downfall has been provoked above all by the vice of alcoholism. He identifies her as a “wench…seated…in a vestibule of a clinic or a doctor’s [office]…a little impertinent black hat with its red feather…perched on that gnawed face.” He describes the child in her lap as “the greenish fruit of her loins, colorless like eau-de-vie, about to rejoin the alcohol of the fetus jars, thin and twisted like the root of the mandrake, head too big, splatters of red around the neck and – a horrible detail – the immense wide brown eyes looking around.” Ritter calls the work a “specialist painting, fit for the amphitheater of the medical school; but for a museum…never.” And yet, he admits, that unlike other paintings by Munch in the Prague exhibition, with their keyed up, clashing colors, this particular painting betrays a “sinister harmony of maliciously neutral tones…The green skirt, that black hat against that wall of mercilessly neutral green against which, in the upper right corner, are posted notices, one orange, another the red of sealing wax.” This “horror,” he concludes, is in fact one of the “beautiful works” – Ritter himself puts “beautiful works” in quotation marks – and one of the exhibition’s most “successful” – again, “successful” appears in quotation marks. It is perhaps, he summarizes, the best example of “the inverted ideal,” to which he adds “nothing else.”

If Inheritance is the best example of “the inverted ideal,” then it is probably the best work by which to judge Munch as an inverse Velázquez. Two extraordinarily sensitive portraits by Velázquez, of Francisco Lezcano and Sebastián de Morra, pendant works,
each about three quarters the size of Munch’s Inheritance, offer an intriguing comparison to Munch’s fin-de-siècle depiction of a mother and child (ills. 7 and 8).

The juxtaposition, like Ritter’s text, enables us to see Inheritance with fresh eyes, as a surprisingly coherent and seamless ensemble of muted, “merciless” greens, oranges, and reds, to combine the words of Meier-Graefe, Stevenson, and Ritter. Munch, in a letter to a friend and patron, himself referred to this painting as especially “poster-like.” But alongside his emphasis on the work’s formal arrangement, Munch insisted, as the first historians of modernism did of Velázquez, on the underlying truthfulness with which he had presented the scene – a terrible scene of a mother weeping over her syphilitic child – which he claimed to have actually witnessed in a hospital for venereal disease. In the
end, the comparison between Velázquez and Munch situates Munch’s apparent modernism in his abilities to create “truthful ensembles,” a skill that tested the artist to his heroic limits when reality – modern reality – is deemed extreme in its ugliness. It was a comparison that made sense in 1906, when the formalist discourse of modernism was still in its infancy, when Velázquez and Munch could be just as or at least almost as modern as El Greco and Cézanne. Ritter’s text, especially in those passages invoking Velázquez, reveals the provisional nature of the emerging discourses of modernism in 1906, as there remained uncertainty over whether modernism’s most critical acts were going to be anti-heroic engagements with the ugliness of modernity or a heroic imposition of form on a troubling world.

**III. 8:** Diego Velázquez, *Portrait of Sebastián de Morra*, 1644. Oil on canvas, 106.5 x 82.5 cm. Prado Museum, Madrid.
NOTES


7 The Vienna exhibition took place in January–February 1903, during which time Munch was holding major solo exhibitions in both Berlin and Leipzig. The extant correspondence between Munch and Meier-Graefe, which includes only five letters from Meier-Graefe to Munch between 1900 and 1914 and no dated letters from Munch from the same period, appears to shed no light on whether the two discussed either the Vienna exhibition or Meier-Graefe’s Developmental History of Modern Art.


11 Meier-Graefe’s reflections on this trip, including his disappointment in Velázquez and new appreciate for El Greco, appeared in Julius Meier-Graefe, Spanische Reise (Berlin: Fischer, 1910).

12 Cited in English translation in Kenworth Moffett, Meier-Graefe as Art Critic (Munich: Prestel, 1973), 141.

13 Colvin, “Stevenson, Robert Alan Mowbray,” 357.

14 In an unpublished article from 1894, Fry wrote, “That Velasquez and Reynolds were Impressionists perhaps need not surprise us.” Roger Fry, “The Philosophy of Impressionism,” (1894), in A Roger Fry Reader, ed. Christopher Reed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 12. It seems likely that Fry was aware of Stevenson’s teachings and writings at an early date, especially since they shared a connection to Cambridge, where Stevenson completed his BA at Sidney Sussex College in 1871 and his MA in 1882, the same year he taught painting at Cambridge in conjunction with the Slade professor and later curator at both the Fitzwilliam and British Museums, Sidney Colvin. Roger Fry went up to King’s College, Cambridge in 1885. Sickert mentions Stevenson’s criticism on a couple of occasions with tempered admiration. See Walter Sickert, The Complete Writings on Art, ed. Anna Grützner Robins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 134–35, 155.


16 R.A.M. Stevenson, The Art of Velasquez (London: George Bell and Sons, 1895), 104–5, 75. Stevenson’s book followed closely, but differed markedly from Carl Justi’s biographical account, Diego Velázquez und sein Jahrhundert (Bonn: M. Cohen, 1888), which was translated into English in 1889 and to which it was undoubtedly a response.

17 Stevenson, Art of Velasquez, 75.


19 Bjerke, ”På terskelen til modernismen,” 55.

20 Maurice Denis discusses the comparison between Cézanne and both Velázquez and El Greco in his influential article, “Cézanne,” L’Occident, no. 70 (September 1907), in Du ciel à l’Arcadie, ed. Jean-Paul Bouillon (Paris: Hermann, 1993), 134–35. Fry would translate this article for the Burlington Magazine in 1907 and in his introductory note to the translation, Fry lingered over this particular point. See Roger Fry, “Introductory Note to Maurice Denis, Cézanne,” in A Roger Fry Reader, 77–78.


also Arne Eggum, Pål Hougen, Bente Torjusen, Svein Erik Soland, Edvard Munch og den tsjekkiske kunst (Oslo: Munch Museum, 1971).


29 Bjerke, “På terskelen til modernismen,” 63.


31 The claim is made in the same letter to Dr. Max Linde, cited above, and supported by a letter from Alfred Hauge to “Erik,” circa November 1896. See Ydstie, “Edvard Munch’s Painting Inheritance,” 203, 216n1, 216n4.
Myth of 1910. Reading Edvard Munch’s 
Alpha and Omega

Elin Kittelsen

Elin Kittelsen has worked at the Munch Museum with Munch’s correspondence and holds a MA in Comparative Literature from the University of Oslo. Her thesis “Edvard Munch’s unfinished novel. Problems and perspectives” (2014) focused on our methods for understanding and reading Munch’s unfinished literary projects. An earlier version of this essay was presented at Litteraturhuset in Oslo at the conference Edvard Munch and/in modernism in 2013.
elinkittelsen@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Is Edvard Munch’s Alpha and Omega (1908–10) a fable of the past? Traditionally considered a work pointing backwards, to the 1890s, this article provides examples of how the text-image portfolio also can be read as a myth of the contemporary, deeply embedded in the 20th century. The close reading also shows how Munch explores central artistic ideas in writing that are not found elsewhere in his ouvre, suggesting the potential of a more independent approach to his texts.

Keywords
Edvard Munch, Alpha and Omega, Alfa og Omega, Adam and Eve, Myth, Darwin

In the vast maze of texts left behind upon the death of Edvard Munch, the story Alpha and Omega (1910) stands out as the only work of literary fiction he ever published. The text accompanies a suite of lithographic works of the same title and is written in an omnipotent biblical voice, emphasizing the ambitious mythic scope of the story – it is nothing less than a rewriting of Genesis, a founding myth according to Munch.

Introducing the two main characters Alpha and Omega as “the first people on the island” (ill.1), Munch draws up an Eden-like situation: the island they inhabit is rich with animals, trees, and flowers; the days are “days of pure sunshine” and at night, the couple lean against one another, watching the moon.

Yet, despite the striking ambition and intertextual complexity, the text (and the work it belongs to) has had a reputation of being outdated in the Munch literature, emphasizing the “recycling of personal motifs and iconography” and how it builds on a decade-old idea. Munch had been interested in “The First Humans” for a long time.
the topic was first explored by the artist in the 1890s, and the theme was repeated in a series of sketches exhibited in 1904. Regardless of this fact, when the German artist Emil Nolde saw the work, he was “ganz entzückt von den Blättern,” a view shared by most international critics. Yet, one scholar symptomatically remarks that it is “a little difficult to understand this enthusiasm.”

---

Ill.1: Edvard Munch: Alfa og Omega/Alpha and Omega, 1910 (previously dated 1908–09). Published text. The Munch Museum (Oslo).
In particular, the hesitation and assumption of outdatedness stems from the emphasis placed on the gender dynamics in the story, a way of reading *Alpha and Omega* that has been faithful to the artistic intention. It is in many ways a tale of unstable, irrational feelings: Alpha discovers Omega in the forest erotically entangled with a snake, the first of her many encounters with the animals on the island. When Omega decides to leave their secluded life behind, an anxious Alpha is left alone with a group of her half-breeds. The story ends in violence: Eventually Omega returns, and approaches her former lover – Alpha responds with anger, beating her to death. In order to avenge her murder, the group of hybrid children and animals attack Alpha from behind and kill him. The rather absurd narrative has been interpreted as a commentary on the failure of the sexual freedom practiced in Bohemian circles in Kristiania, and as a work that “summed up what had interested Munch and other important artists in the past few decades, rather than pointing to the future.” This view of the work as outdated has been repeated in later studies: “The perspectives on women and the pessimism regarding the future expressed in the series belong in the symbolism and decadence of the 1890s,” it is noted. “Problems that seemed serious in the 1890s have 15 years later become a satiric fable from the past.”

While many of these observations are valid, important details that could question this conclusion have been left out from previous discussions. Readings have been limited in their approach for several reasons: A tradition for keeping interpretation close to Munch’s intentions, a tradition of treating Munch’s texts as mirrors of the images, and, in this particular case, as Gerd Woll has pointed out, a strong focus on the narrative: the work has “usually been discussed and analyzed in terms of the story itself.” However, if we are willing to liberate ourselves from these (often) dominating modes of reading, new and interesting details are unveiled. Here, I focus my attention on two scarcely discussed elements in the text: Omega’s boredom, and the final violent rebellion of the half-humans. My aim is to point out a few new ways in which *Alpha and Omega* may be contextualized and opened to new interpretation, and in doing so, questioning the assumption of *Alpha and Omega* as a work out of touch with the contemporary. Rather than being a work pointing to the 1890s, these examples show how *Alpha and Omega* not only investigates critical issues of modernity, but how it is a situated and responsive work that contains powerful representations of time-specific issues of its own decade.

THE TEXT AS AN EXPANSION OF THE PORTFOLIO

First of all, we need to consider that Munch’s text could still be seen as answering to the narrow, time-specific discourse that had evolved around the graphic portfolio. This responsive element of the text has gone unnoted, as there has been substantial confusion regarding the time of writing – the years 1908, 1909 and 1910 are all identified in the literature. One suggestion is that the text was written and published as part of the group of graphic works from 1908 or 1909, also entitled *Alpha and Omega*. The 22 black and white lithographic images (Woll 336–357) follow the major lines of the written story, and there should be no doubt that the images and the text are integral parts of the same work – later on, they were sold together. Munch had the lithographic prints made in Copenhagen.
gen, during the eight months that he spent at Dr. Jacobson’s clinic following his so-called (and infamous) mental breakdown.

Even if this explanation seems plausible, Gerd Woll has made a strong claim that the text was added to the portfolio later on, in 1910. Munch’s correspondence supports her view: “I sent you my poem Alpha and Omega,” Munch writes in a letter to his friend Sigurd Host, dated April 1910, “it had to finally leave the drawer!” From his last remark, it is plausible to conclude that the text was not yet in public circulation in the spring of 1910, something that is supported by his correspondence with Gustav Schiefler. When Munch sends him the text in the spring of 1910, Schiefler seems confused; this is clearly new material to him. “It is a pity,” he writes, “that it is mine and not your description that appears in Kunst und Künstler” – Schiefler had written a semi-literary interpretation of Alpha and Omega in Kunst und Künstler earlier that year.

Concluding that the text was added to the portfolio in 1910 has several important implications. For one, the timing influenced reception – most of Munch’s audience and critics saw the graphic work exhibited without the text. The Alpha and Omega portfolio was first exhibited at Blomqvist in Kristiania in March 1909, while Munch himself was still at the clinic. The lithographs then went on to be exhibited in Kristiansand, Copenhagen, and at the Secession für Zeichende Künste in Berlin. The text was never a part of any of these exhibitions, and we can assume that the text was largely unknown and marginalized in the ouvre from the beginning, and never reached a wide group of readers (the exception being private collectors, possibly 80 or 90 in total). Further, the timing also affects the perception of the work as a whole. As previously noted, the graphic work was created at Dr. Jacobson’s clinic. That Munch continued the work at a later stage, while living in the small southern town of Kragerø, and working on his first drafts of the monumental Aula decorations, should be a clear proof that we need to consider this image-text project as more than an “asylum piece” or a product of his mental state.

Viewing the text a later expansion of the Alpha and Omega portfolio also opens up for comparison with other written material that appeared between the spring of 1909 and to the exhibited graphic narrative: In one exhibition catalogue, the island is said to be “desolate” (øde), in another catalogue it is said to be placed in the “north”. In addition, it is noted that Alpha and Omega are living in the ancient past (urtid). While Gustav Schiefler’s text in Kunst und Künstler keeps significantly closer to the lithographic prints, even he adds new details. For instance, he claims that the children are Alpha’s children (“Alfa and seine Nachkommen”) and that Omega “swims back to the island” (“Omega ist schwimmend zurückgekehrt”). It is interesting that Munch seems to correct Schiefler on certain points in his own text: The children are her children (“hendes Børn”), not the “Nachkommen” of Alpha, as Schiefler writes, and Omega does not return by swimming, rather, “the fallow deer brought Omega back.” His text is also notably unspecific compared to the exhibition texts: the word urtid is left out, and the island does not have a specific geographic location.

However, the Munch text also adds new, important complexity when it is brought into the portfolio in 1910. In the Schiefler text, Omega escapes on a deer (“Hirsche”), across a bay (“Bucht”); this seems to be a precise description of the images. In Munch’s text, new details appear: she escapes on a fallow deer (“daadyr”) “across the ocean”; creating a small
gap between the text and the images that could be said to destabilize the work. We are in fact presented with two separate narratives of Alpha and Omega in the portfolio. Even if the text seems to mirror the existing lithographic work on a surface level, the two do not fully correspond, and when we investigate the text-image relationship from this perspective, important new text-specific details and differences appear. From this, it could be argued that Munch's text is not only responsive to the texts that came to surround the artwork in 1909 and 1910, but also an expansion of the artwork itself.

EXISTENTIAL VOID: OMEGA AND BOREDOM

Even if it has gone unnoticed in previous studies, boredom is perhaps the most prominent text-specific detail that enters the Alpha and Omega portfolio in 1910. As a central and critical issue of modernity, Omega's boredom presents itself as a way of opening Alpha and Omega to a broader set of contexts. The term first appears towards the end of the story, where Omega experiences a crisis or breakdown. She cries heavily, after encounters with several animals:

Omega was tired and bored of not being able to possess all the animals of the island. She sat down in the grass crying violently, and then she got up and ran ill around the island and met the pig. She kneels down and hides her body in her long black hair, and she and the pig looked at each other.

But Omega was still bored; one night, when the golden moon column was rocking in the ocean, she escaped on the back of a fallow deer over the ocean to the light green land under the moon.

What is striking in this section, if we look beyond the rather dramatic plot, is the introduction of the term “bored” (kjed). While it appears twice in the text (“Omega was tired and bored”, ”But Omega was still bored”), boredom is never explicitly mentioned in the lithographic series – Munch named the scene in question Omega Weeping (Woll 352, ill. 2).

The state of boredom is thus specific to the text alone. One could discuss the translation of the word kjed – it could also be understood as træt, lei (“tired”), the general, existential tiredness common in decadent literature. When I translate it to “bored,” it is because Munch deliberately used the word kjed instead of træt, and while the two words træt and kjed could refer to a similar condition in 1890 and 1910, “bored” highlights the contextual importance of the word in a much more acute way than “tired”.

What is the position of boredom in Munch's art? To my knowledge, bored, boring or boredom are not terms used in any of the titles of his paintings and graphic work. However, the vocabulary of boredom seems central in Munch's writing. For instance, in a fragment that remains of an unfinished novel, written around 1890, the main character Brandt is having dinner with a group of acquaintances, and he is struggling with the small talk: “[t]he women were sitting, looking at him – How they thought he was boring – he suffered terribly by this thought.”21 His worries could be tied to a lack of self-esteem, and his preoccupation with appearance, but they are also a product of the fear of boredom.
and the constant need for entertainment and distraction in the group. In this unfinished novel, the motif of the _bored woman_ appears several times: “I am so easily bored,” as one of the women complains, and this complaint reappears in the draft of a comic play, _From the City of Free Love_, written much later on, in 1904 or 1905. In the play, the rich “Dollar Princess” takes interest in a poor singer, a new arrival to town. The condition of boredom is introduced early on:

The Dollar Princess is sitting with her friends and drinking Champagne with the feet on the table.

**Dollar P.** – Oh God – how boring

**The others** Oh God how boring


“Oh God – so boring” is in fact the first line she utters in the play, and the line is then repeated by her choir of friends. As this demonstrates, Omega’s boredom is not an isolated case – boredom is an explicit condition Munch developed in his writing.

Not only does the boredom in _Alpha and Omega_ mark a continuation of Munch’s previous literary projects, but it also connects the text to the literature and philosophy of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Boredom (and the bored woman in particular) is central to
modern literature\textsuperscript{25} – two key texts include *Madame Bovary* (1856) by Gustave Flaubert and *Hedda Gabler* (1890) by Henrik Ibsen, where boredom leads to infidelity, lies, and ultimately suicide. Both works were well-known to Munch – he did stage scenery for *Hedda Gabler* in 1906–1907, and in his unfinished novel, Brandt actually imagines himself as a character in *Madame Bovary* (or at least, a story very much like it): He had read in French novels “of similar situations,” the “young sweet promiscuous wife,” “bored in the countryside.”\textsuperscript{26} While boredom and tiredness often have been regarded a topic of decadent literature and *fin de siècle* of the 1890s, one could argue that it is perhaps better understood as one of the deep, consistent topics of modernity. In his study on boredom, philosopher Lars Fr. Svendsen queries: “Is modern life first and foremost an escape from boredom?”\textsuperscript{27} According to him, boredom results from the emptiness and lack of meaning that forces people to the limits of moral behavior in order to fill a void: it “forces a movement towards transgression.”\textsuperscript{28}

**III. 3:** Lester Ralph: *Eve and the tigers*, 1906. Illustration from *Eve’s Diary* by Mark Twain.
It is particularly interesting to read *Alpha and Omega* in the context of *Eve's Diary*, one of the very last works by American writer Mark Twain, published only a few years prior to *Alpha and Omega*, in 1905–06. In *Eve's Diary*, Twain rewrites the story of Adam and Eve in a rather playful way (there is a brontosaurus involved), and much like Munch's Omega, Eve is highly curious, restless, and investigative.

("It tires me just to sit around and watch the tree," she utters. "If there wasn't anything to find out, it would be dull." Twain's Eve takes an interest in a range of odd animals – in one of the scenes, Eve "found some tigers and nestled in among them and was most adorably comfortable, and their breath was sweet and pleasant." (Munch, on his account, makes Omega put "her small hand" in the mouth of a tiger, "cuddling its teeth" (ills. 3 and 4).

![Image of Tiger](https://example.com/tiger.jpg)


The two women both deal with boredom through transgression: While Omega makes her flight from the island, Eve travels on the back of an elephant to the corners of the world. With a sense of dread and desperation, she acknowledges that she is soon to have emptied the world of new things to explore: "I think there are many things to learn yet – I hope so; and by economizing and not hurrying too fast I think they will last weeks and weeks. I hope so."

Reading *Alpha and Omega* through the prism of Omega's boredom sheds light on a topic that has escaped attention in the previous Munch literature. Most notably, we see how the pattern of boredom and repeated transgression relates to a larger set of contemporary discourses and texts. More specifically, it seems to open a dialogue with Twain's recently published *Eve's Diary*. Such a connection in turn shifts the interpretation of the story: Rather than rejecting Omega's behavior as mirroring a bohemian attitude of free...
love, one could argue that Omega represents the modern human being, subject to boredom as a modern condition. In the attempt to liberate herself from boredom – which really is existential emptiness – she searches for the entertainment of lovers, drama, and change in general. The situation eventually drives her to madness – she cries violently, she becomes ill; when Munch pictures her in *Omega Weeping*, she is in a raw, disintegrated state. Reading her on these terms, her escape could be understood in terms of existential necessity, as rescue or survival, rather than a childish search for new entertainment. It is an act of desperation; her restlessness and sexual promiscuity are only symptoms of the structural, unbearable emptiness in which she is trapped.

**A MYTH FOR THE MODERN WORLD?**

What happens if we take *Alpha and Omega* seriously as the founding myth it mimics; a genre that aims at explaining the foundations of society? As a third and final contextual suggestion, I propose that we view *Alpha and Omega* in this light. In particular, the concluding paragraph in the text calls for attention: “[…] he was attacked from behind by all her children and the animals of the island, which tore him apart. The new race filled the island.” The scene is pictured in *Alpha’s Death* (Woll 357, ill. 5), where we see the group of half-animals cheering over Alpha’s dead body, “[s]mall pigs, small snakes, small apes and small ungulates, and other Bastards of the human race.” In this violent finale, we witness not only the end of Alpha and Omega, but also the end of humans – the last ‘pure’ human is dead; the world is taken over by human-animal “bastards.”

**III. 5:** Edvard Munch: *Alpha’s Death*, 1908–09. Lithography, 287 x 502 mm. Woll. no 357, MM G 357. The Munch Museum (Oslo). Photo: not specified.
How should we to understand this? I find a particularly fruitful theoretical approach in the essay “Ulysses, Order, and Myth” (1923), written by the poet and critic T.S. Eliot. In the essay, Eliot argues that we have to understand myths as necessary to represent the modern world. He claims that we, through myths, are capable of understanding and representing our own time – myth gives “a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.” In technical terms, this is done through what Eliot defines as the mythic method – working within myths, but also creating a subtle connection to the present time. Applying this to Alpha and Omega, which seemingly is without any references to the contemporary, it is interesting to see how modernity is actually signed through two small words, “bored,” which only first came into use in the 18th century, and “the fallow deer,” Alpha’s Death (Daadayr), (ill. 6) an animal that was imported to Norway around 1900.

If Alpha and Omega could be read as a way of giving shape to the experience of living in 1910, as Eliot suggests, what world is mirrored in the concluding paragraph of Munch’s text? One experience that seems to be reflected is the implication of a world according to Charles Darwin’s evolutionary science. Darwin’s theories had been experienced as a radical shift for writers like Garborg, Bjørnson and Kielland, and represented “the overthrow of the old order […] the assault on traditional beliefs concerning God, the universe and humanity’s position in relation to each.” In The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex (1871), Darwin had argued that humans are descendants of apes, and in doing so, he reduced humans to “Godless primates sharing ancestors with other ‘savage’ animals.” This seems like a precise description of Alpha and Omega,
where Munch provides us with the mythical explanation for this. Darwinism was widely accepted among Norwegian scientists by 1910, and discussions had mainly shifted to its implications on genetics and explanations of social and cultural traits. Even if it is a coincidence that Alpha and Omega was first exhibited in the year of the 50th anniversary of On the Origin of Species and 100th anniversary of Charles Darwin’s birth, an event that was widely celebrated, it still makes Darwinism an acutely relevant context for Munch’s myth.

The final paragraph could also be read in terms of the political situation in 1910. When Alpha is torn apart by “all her children and the animals,” who then take over the island, the situation could be interpreted as a concentrated mirror of political concerns of the time, reflecting what was the decade of the masses. Between 1900 and 1909, the number of eligible voters in Norway was more than tripled, giving the large masses political power for the first time. In 1905, Russia had its first revolution, an event commented upon in Munch’s correspondence, and in 1906, Rosa Luxemburg published her influential pamphlet The Mass Strike, which agitated for revolt of the masses.

This interpretation is supported by the fact Alpha and Omega is written in what could be defined as the most explicit political phase in Munch’s art. Munch had been exposed to radical political movements most of his life. Frank Høifødt has suggested that “Munch was sympathetic to the subversive ideology of both Hans Jæger and the Russian nihilists at a very early age,” and in her study on the worker motif, Gerd Woll devotes a substantial part of her discussion to Munch’s possible relationship with socialism; noting his interest in Karl Marx, and the presence of books such as Die Anarchisten (1891) and Rosa Luxemburg’s letters (1920) in his private library.

However, the years 1908–1910 mark the introduction of new motifs such as the beggar and the workers (first appearing in 1908 and 1909), as well as other representations of economic inequality. If we turn to Munch’s literary work, political aspects were already present in From the City of Free Love (1904–5), in which war, politicians and labor unions are mentioned, and where the main character is taken to court for being “an Anarchist and dangerous to your surroundings.” In an alternative draft, the term socialism appears – here, the main character is prosecuted for “calling Mr. Baboon a socialist.” While the comic aspects are obvious, the presence of such concepts reflects how aware Munch was of the major political discourses at the time.

In sum, Alpha and Omega seems to mirror a world without God, laws or authority, where humans are left to themselves and their own shifting, irrational feelings. The work also provides the reader with a strikingly accurate representation of the sentiments of the decade: the raging, violent masses, part animal, taking over the world. While this is not necessarily a normative or political stance, it still raises a series of potentially difficult questions, such as the connection between modernism and fascism, issues of race, and anti-democratic tendencies.
READING MUNCH. A FEW CONCLUDING REMARKS

Having located *Alpha and Omega* in relation to twentieth-century cultural and political shifts, evidence suggests that we need to view the work as more contemporary and socially aware than the previous literature has suggested. Several elements point to *Alpha and Omega* being deeply situational and embedded in the discourses of the first decade of the twentieth century and not only as anachronistic Bohemian tale. On a general level, the text is tied to broader ideas such as boredom, Darwinism, and politics, and on a much more specific level, we could read it in relation to the publication of *Eve’s Diary* in 1906, as well as other texts and events.

More broadly, this essay also highlights important issues regarding method and mode of reading. Several productive, new perspectives on reading Munch’s texts have been introduced during the last decade, for instance by Mai Britt Guleng, who has informed our understanding on how the writing is linked to memory and creativity, and Per Thomas Andersen, who has discussed the fragmentary form. However, the tendency in both research and curatorial practices to focus on Munch’s texts as textual mirrors of the images seems to have passed unquestioned. As this essay shows, the text often works in a different way than the images; for instance, boredom is a concept that is investigated solely in the *Alpha and Omega* text, but not in the images. In conclusion, we could benefit from paying closer attention to how Munch is making use of the material-specific potential of texts, as he does elsewhere in his experiments with different artistic mediums. The texts provide a separate artistic landscape, with its own set of motifs, such as boredom, silence, sound, travelling and time; all topics that are more readily investigated in text than in image. In future studies, it thus seems vital that we read the texts closely and autonomously, looking specifically for new text-specific motifs and intertextual spaces that could enrich our understanding of Munch’s writing and his work in general.

NOTES

1 Edvard Munch, *Alfa og Omega*, MM UT 32, The Munch Museum. Published text. All translations are my own.
3 For a very good account of the history of the idea, see Gerd Woll, “Alpha and Omega. Munch’s Pictorial Fable of the First Two Human Beings” in *Edvard Munch: Alpha & Omega*, 77f, and Gerd Woll, *Edvard Munch – Samlede grafiske verk* (Oslo: Orfeus, 2012), 260. Examples of early drawings include MM.T.00319, *Mann og kvinne svømmer (De første mennesker)*, 1895. There are also other drawings and sketches dated 1895 that seem related to *Alpha and Omega*, such as *Kvinnen, tigere og bjørnen (De første mennesker)*, and *Alfa og strutsen* (MM.T.01372).
6 Woll, “Alpha and Omega. Munch’s Pictorial Fable of the First Two Human Beings,” 75.
7 In two retrospective letters to Jens Thiis, Munch writes that the work is a comment on gender dynamics, “mocking certain enactments between man and woman –”. The letters are undated, but are written in the early 1930s, as comments to Thiis’ upcoming biography on Munch.
9 Eggum, "Alfa og Omega," 54.
10 Gerd Woll, "Alfa og Omega. Munchs billedfabel om de første to mennesker" in Edvard Munch og Danmark (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009), 44.
11 Woll, 'Alpha and Omega. Munch’s Pictorial Fable of the First Two Human Beings,” 64.
13 Gerd Woll makes this claim several places: In Samlede grafiske verk, “Alpha and Omega. Munch’s Pictorial Fable” and "Alfa og Omega. Munchs billedfabel.”
18 Gerd Woll (2009) gives an excellent account of the history of this work with elaborate details of printing, exhibitions and marketing strategies.
19 Woll, Samlede grafiske verk, 260.
27 Lars Fr. H. Svendsen, Kjedsomhetens filosofi (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1999), 38.
28 Svendsen, Kjedsomhetens filosofi, 38.
30 Twain, Eve’s diary, 697.
31 Twain, Eve’s diary, 706.
32 Twain, Eve’s diary, 696f.
33 Twain, Eve’s diary, 706.
35 Svendsen, Kjedsomhetens filosofi, 25f. The word boredom was introduced to English in 1760, and German langweile a few decades earlier. The Danish kjedsomhet is first mentioned in the early 1700s.
36 The fallow deer were imported to private parks in southern Norway by wealthy landowners. For instance, seven fallow deer was imported to the island Hankø in 1899. For more on the topic, see: snl.no/dåhjort.
37 Dag O. Hessen and Thore Lie, Mennesket i et nytt lys: darwinisme og utviklingslære i Norge (Oslo: Cappelen, 2002).
39 Childs, Modernism, 47.
40 Hessen and Lie, Mennesket i et nytt lys, 245.
44 A few examples include Caricature: The Rich Man (Woll 374) and Caricature: The Money-bag and the Poor Painter (Woll 376) from 1910, and Workers and Man with Top Hat from 1916 (Woll 527).
45 Edvard Munch, MM T 2786, The Munch Museum, notebook, not dated, 22.
46 Edvard Munch, MM T 2803, The Munch Museum, notebook, not dated, 7.