A Dialogue with Edvard Munch

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We're sitting outside a bar in Oslo. The warmth of the disappearing summer sun still lingers on the brick walls of the building and in the heavy cast iron chairs. I have just been inside and picked up two beers. I set the glasses on the little round table and sit down.

- *So, maybe I can explain this better if I relate what you said to a book I've worked on.*

- Okay?

- *Actually, an essay. "The Origin of the Work of Art" by Heidegger. You know, the German philosopher I also wrote about. It's from 1935/36.*

- No, not really. I mean, you've talked a lot about him before and I recall your thesis and all, but I haven't read anything by him myself. Maybe someone told me about him back in Berlin, though. Several of the others were obsessed with German philosophy. But I really didn't follow those drunken lectures very close. I was more into Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, you know? Everyone was at that time. But yes, I just listened to that podcast you told me about. The one in which you...

- *The one about Kant?*

- Okay, well, in that case... It's not easy for me to keep up. I'm getting very old. It was fun though.

- *Yeah, it was.*

- And German.

- *Yes...*

- But my point was, when I painted, I often wanted to convey certain ideas about what it means to be a human being in the world. Indeed, what you could call philosophical ideas. Both concerning the individual and the great forces that we're all subjected to. You recall "to explain to myself life and its meaning,"[1] right?

- *Yes.*

- But from my perspective, this was a case of rather explicit symbolism. The human mountain, the sun and all the paintings I have of Adam and Eve.

- *The apple tree paintings?*

[1] The Munch Museum, MM N 46, fol. 3r.

- Yes, all of them. The uncountable life-death paintings, drawings, and prints, and of course the frieze... I mean, yes, it's not like I was unaware of the stylistic choices I made. Quite the opposite. But it's true like they've said, I absorbed everything and made it my own. From the Sistine Chapel, to Krohg, all the French ones, to Böcklin... But the ideas were something separate, embodied in the motifs, I think. Or held up by them, if you will. And who are you to say otherwise, really? It was I who made them.

- *Come on, what authority does that give you? You called them your children...*

- Coquetry...

- *...but children leave their parents and get a life of their own, right?*

- Yes, but that's not the point.

- *But I think you're pretending it's simpler than it is.*

- How?

- *Well, yes, in a sense your art, or at least, a lot of works you've made, can be seen as illustrations of... if not specific philosophical ideas, then...*

- I'm not talking about illustrations of philosophy books. Except that Baudelaire thing that never manifested, maybe. But that wasn't philosophy.

- *No, I get that. But if you claim that the stylistic or formal explorations that you made, and the... let's call it "content" of your paintings, developed separately, then one could argue that what you're doing is just to find new clothes to dress up the ideas you already have formulated in your head, and that the visual execution is subservient to the ideal core of the works, right? Just an illustration of something pregiven?*

- No, this is where you get it all wrong. The two things can develop parallel to each other without the one becoming submissive to the other.

- *But don't you think that it's better to try to understand the interdependence of the two, rather than keeping them separate?*

- Now you're making it more difficult than it is. I mean, I get how you can interpret a motif and see it as a reference to or as a representation of real life, or more accurately, as a representation of a perspective on reality and therefore expressive of a viewpoint on the real. At the same time, the execution of this content may vary a lot. I can paint the same motif in many different ways. I have done this more times than I can count. The basic idea still stays the same, even though I use different colors. I have the original

image at the back of my eye. But even though both the idea and the form of the painting need to be well executed for the painting to work, as I've said before, "a good picture with ten holes is better to have than ten poor paintings without holes."[2]

- *Okay, I think I remember why I thought of Heidegger, but let me take one other thing before I get to him. I loved this book on Van Gogh and Gauguin by Debora Silverman.*

- *Never heard of her.*

- She's well after your time. If I remember correctly, her point was that even though Van Gogh and Gauguin both were Christians and both, at least eventually, explored a form of symbolistic idiom, the way they treated the painterly surface differed a lot.

- Well, obviously.

- *Yes, but... that was not the point. I mean, she connects the surface quality of their paintings, and thus their individual versions of a symbolistic pictorial idiom, to their religious upbringing. Gauguin was raised in a Catholic family with its strict hierarchical division between spirit and matter. In his symbolist art – just think of his painting Vision after the Sermon – the surface is entirely flat and matte. It is as if he wants to make the surface of the painting as invisible as possible, while remaining anti-naturalist at heart. What matters is the spiritual content that is symbolized in the work, and he's using the material surface quality, the affordances of the types of painting he's using, to bring forth this... meaning. The symbolic content, its spiritual reality, is expressed by the surface itself. I mean, it's like he's actively trying to avoid painting like Bastien-Lepage or something. Van Gogh, on the other hand, was raised in a church of solid, Protestant work ethics that preached God's presence in the material world, and in toil and sweat. And you can see that in his works as well. The Holy is not represented as withdrawal of matter, as in Gauguin, but as there, in the impastos that Van Gough is, as it were, plowing through with his brushes. My point – or rather Silverman's – is that even though both operated within a symbolistic idiom, trying to represent a super-sensible reality, they are in a sense already shaped by a metaphysical pre-conditioning that is brought over into the very way they build up the surfaces of their paintings.*

- I'm not sure if the same applies to me. My father was not as pious as people think, but I still got my share of Protestantism...

[2] The Munch Museum, MM N 38, fol. 1.

- *That's where Heidegger comes in, I think. Silverman focuses on the impact of theology on art, or on Van Gogh and Gauguin in particular, but Heidegger contends that everyone is shaped by such metaphysical pre-conditioning, regardless of religious beliefs. We all have some implicit understanding of what it means for everything around us, and ourselves, to be. And art, like philosophy, tries to engage with this "background knowledge" that informs, well, everything. Art is, according to Heidegger, nothing but the fastening of this understanding in something that is, a work, the setting-into-work of truth.*

- I'm not following. When I was painting, I was just picking or constructing motifs that I found deeply significant, and I tried to find the best way of executing them in paint. In my early years, I said I wanted to paint "living people who breath and feel, suffer and love."[3] And in a sense, I never stopped doing that. Even in my last works, I painted my world, how I saw and experienced it, even though there was a war raging.

- *But that's the point, right? You were trying to get to the lived reality, not merely as it looked or how you were told it was or supposed to be. And by doing so, I think you managed to engage with the very basic level of understanding that Heidegger points at.*

- Maybe, I'm not sure. But what does this have to do with what we talked about earlier? About style and ideas?

- *Well, Heidegger claims that the distinction between form and content is inappropriate to understand art the way that he thinks we should. Even if we take them as mere analytical tools to distinguish between inseparable aspects of a work of art, they cloud what we're trying to get at.*

- And we talked about whether painting, or pictorial art, could be envisaged as a form of philosophy, or pictorial thinking, as you called it.

- *I think Silverman has a good point when she's writing about Van Gogh and Gauguin. At least that's my hunch. She manages to, sort of, go in-between form and content by focusing on the way paint is applied to the canvas. And then connect this to theology.*

- You're thinking of the surface?

- *Yes, and how painting on the one hand can be something material and on the other ideal, but that both spring out of the same field, the surface. That the surface is thicker than one might expect, and more charged with possible meanings than we're maybe accustomed to think.*

[3] The Munch Museum, MM UT 13, 7.

- I've experimented so much with this that I don't know what to say. From thick impastos to thinned down paint that sucks into the canvas or paper or cardboard or whatever I got my hands on. Varnish, no varnish, some varnish here and there. You know I sometimes let some of my paintings stand out in the wind and rain? I see that some people even think that the damages were intentionally put there as part of the works! Ha-ha! It was mere convenience. That this should somehow have anything to do with metaphysics and the Holy is beyond me.

- *Yes, maybe it's a dumb idea. I don't know. But there's something there...*

- Maybe, but I think you need to think through this more properly. And maybe talk more with someone who knows a thing or two about painting.

- *You're right. It's difficult. But regardless, I'm pretty sure about this. Philosophy, at least the part of philosophy that tries to come to terms with what it means to be – a human, nature, things, whatever – does not enjoy an exclusive privilege in those questions. Scientists seem to deal with this as well. But actually, Heidegger is famous for claiming that science does not think. He said this in some lectures that were later published as What Is Called Thinking?. His point is that "thinking" should be reserved to the basic, philosophical exploration of what it means for things – and all things, as such – to be, and that scientific work is always based on a certain interpretation of what it means to be. If scientists start questioning, say, the essential nature of mathematics or society or art, they are no longer doing science, but philosophy – thinking. You cannot use the methods of art history to understand what art or history is, just as you cannot use the methods of shoemaking to understand what shoes are. But Van Gogh's painting of shoes can give insight into the essential nature of shoes, Heidegger claims...*

- So, do you think that painting is more like science or philosophy? I think science, maybe. I generally tried to paint things I saw or experienced, or remembered, just as they were or felt, not merely as they looked. I studied them intently, methodically even, though I was a fast painter. And in that way, I feel closer to the scientists, as I explored the world as it appeared around me, not questioning what you call the essential nature of the world. However, saying that, returning to what I said before, I have these paintings with metaphysical aspirations, through the symbolic content of the works, the sun, the human mountain, metabolism, and so on. And these are more philosophical, don't you think?

- *Yes, but my point is not that painting – art –is generally more like philosophy than science, or the other way around, but merely that a sort of thinking at all can go on, too, in painting, or on the painting, the surface. And that this is not only possible, but actual in many, or at least some, works throughout the history of art. I don't know how to phrase this because I can't make up my mind. Despite the explicit metaphysical symbolism in the paintings you're mentioning, I don't think it's about that. Or at least, not just that. I think that there's something about the way that the surface is constructed, built up as it were, and the way this material thing somehow gives the appearance of a vision, an image, or a world, that is crucial. Thinking is not some ideal substance that can be embodied in this or that medium – for instance language or pictures – but something that arises from or through the affordances of language and pictures. Painting is the exploitation of this possibility of meaning-making that lies in the application of pigment and binder on some form of support. And this is always done in one way rather than another, which means that painting shows something in this or that way. And it is on the level of this way of making something intelligible that I think that painting comes to resemble or parallel philosophical thinking.*

- Okay. What you seem to say is that art and thinking meet on the surface of the painting, I mean, on the way the surface is made and how it gives rise to the motif.

- *Yes, something along those lines.*

- I can relate to that, even though I'm not sure if I understand.

- *Good. Maybe it's not always necessary to understand. You artists have done this without any elaborate philosophical theories to support you.*

- Maybe, maybe not. I for one appreciated the impulses I got from others. I think it would be good for artists, art historians, philosophers, and others to continue this dialogue, because there is much we don't understand about art and thinking, and what goes on on the surface.

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