

Mad Genius: Art, Illness, and Recovery

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Art historians and psychologists alike have long been fascinated by the tentative relationship between art and mental illness. A number of well-known artists have grappled with severe mental health issues, which has led others to question whether there is a link between psychopathology and creativity.¹ The emergence of Expressionism, a movement characterised by an externalisation of the artist's inner psyche, in the late nineteenth century seemed to crystallise this concept of a 'mad genius'.² It was decided that those who suffer from psychological illnesses are inherently more creative than those who do not. Whilst commonly accepted as fact rather than theory, relatively few studies have evaluated this relationship.³ The most cited studies to this effect were conducted by Nancy Coover Andreasen⁴ and Kay Redfield Jamison⁵ in the late 1980s. Both identified significant overlap between creativity and mental illness in their participants, and therefore imputed causality. However, Judith Schlesinger's extensive review confirms that both studies lack the sample size and scientific rigour necessary to prove a causal link.⁶ Despite this, Schlesinger acknowledges that a large number of creative people have suffered from mental illnesses, citing Albert Rothenberg's three-decade investigation into the 'Creative Process'.⁷ In such cases, the mental illness of an artist can be seen

to have a considerable influence on their art. We will examine the work of Tracey Emin (1963–) and Edvard Munch (1863–1944) in this light to better understand the symbiotic relationship between art and mental health.

Despite being separated by a century, Emin and Munch are united by their contributions to Expressionism. This relationship was recently laid bare in the 'The Loneliness of the Soul' exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts. Both artists demonstrate a 'shared commitment' to revealing unfiltered emotion in every piece.⁸ To do so, many of their works draw on their own experiences of mental suffering. Emin has spoken openly about her experience with alcoholism, depression, anorexia, and insomnia.⁹ In 1998, she had a major depressive episode that would later inspire one of her most famous installations. By contrast, Munch's account of his mental health issues uses less explicit diagnoses. However, extensive analysis of Munch's diary entries indicates that his 'nervous crisis' and subsequent hospitalisation in 1908, was brought on by anxiety, alcoholism, and agoraphobia. Munch was intensely agoraphobic, particularly in situations where he saw no means of escape.¹⁰ He is also thought to have suffered from Bipolar Affective Disorder, evidenced by his turbulent mood swings, paranoid delusions, and intermittent hallucinations.¹¹ Ultimately, both artists' mental health issues can be attributed in part to their childhood trauma. At a young age, Munch lost both his mother and sister to tuberculosis. He was only 15 when his sister begged him to save her from a slow death by

1 Anna Abraham, 'Editorial: Madness and creativity—yes, no or maybe?' (2015) 6 *Frontiers in Psychology* 5.

2 Anthony White, 'Art and Mental Illness: An Art Historical Perspective' in unknown (ed), *Art and Mental Illness: Myths, Stereotypes and Realities* (Neami Splash Art 2007) 24–29.

3 Judith Schlesinger, 'Creative mythconceptions: A closer look at the evidence for the "mad genius" hypothesis' (2009) 3(2) *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* 62.

4 Nancy Coover Andreasen, 'Creativity and mental illness: prevalence rates in writers and their first-degree relatives' (1987) 144(10) *American Journal of Psychiatry* 1288.

5 Schlesinger (n 3).

6 *ibid.*

7 Albert Rothenberg, *Creativity and Madness: New Findings and Old Stereotypes* (Johns Hopkins University Press 1990).

8 Rosemary Waugh, 'The enduring connection between art and mental health' (*Art UK*, 4 November 2020) <<https://artuk.org/discover/stories/the-enduring-connection-between-art-and-mental-health>> accessed 24 March 2021.

9 Tracey Emin, *Strangeland* (first edn, Sceptre 2005) 200.

10 Anne McElroy Bowen, 'Munch and Agoraphobia: His Art and His Illness' (1988) 15(1) *RACAR: Revue D'art Canadienne/Canadian Art Review* 23.

11 VY Skryabin, AA Skryabina, MV Torrado, and EA Gritchina, 'Edvard Munch: the collision of art and mental disorder' (2020) 23(7) *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 570.

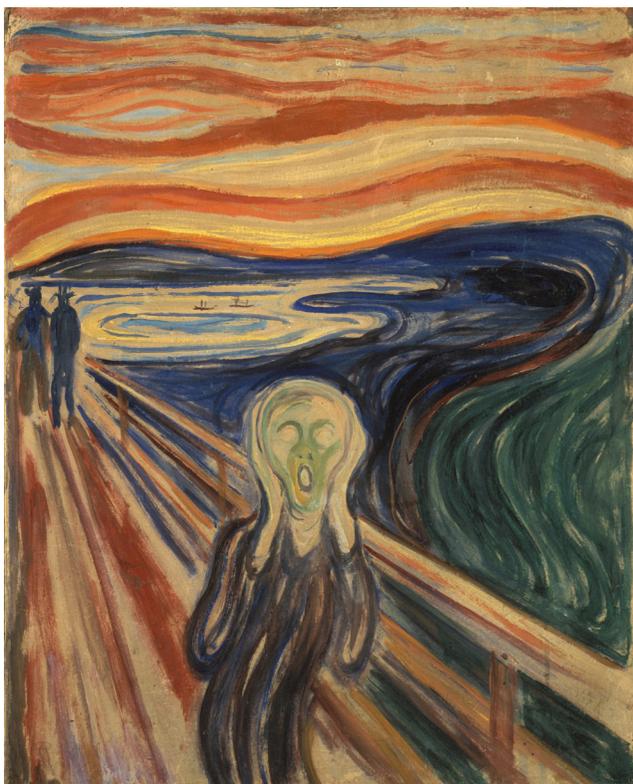


Fig 1. The Scream (Edvard Munch 1893, oil, tempera, and pastel, 91 x 73.5cm) Nasjonalmuseet. Wikimedia Commons. <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edvard_Munch_-_The_Scream_\(1895,_signed_1896\)_-\(8477718108\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edvard_Munch_-_The_Scream_(1895,_signed_1896)_-(8477718108).jpg)>.

fever.¹² Similarly, Emin was 13 when she was raped,¹³ and only 19 when she underwent a deeply traumatic abortion.¹⁴

The artwork of Munch and Emin often reflects these traumatic experiences of mental suffering, and thus highlights the significant influence psychopathology can have on creative output. In Munch's case, perhaps the best example of this is *The Scream* (1893, fig 1).¹⁵ This painting is not simply viewed, but experienced. The distorted contours of a bleeding sky drag the viewer into a place of unease, so that they too feel as though they're spiralling out of control. In this way, the piece communicates Munch's own experience of a 'psychotic break', detailed in his diary:

I was walking along the road with two of my friends. Then the sun set. The sky suddenly turned into blood, and I felt something akin to a touch of melancholy. I stood still, leaned against the railing, dead tired. Above the blue black fjord and city hung clouds of dripping, rippling blood. My friends went on and again I stood, frightened with an open wound in my breast. A great scream pierced through nature.¹⁶

In his attempt to embody such an anxiety-provoking hallucination, Munch used expressive, frenzied brushwork and scribbles of oil

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Emin (n 9) 24.

¹⁴ *ibid.* 153.

¹⁵ Skryabin, Skryabina, Torrado, and Gritchina (n 11).

¹⁶ Reinhold H Heller, *Edvard Munch: The Scream* (first edn, Viking Press 1972).

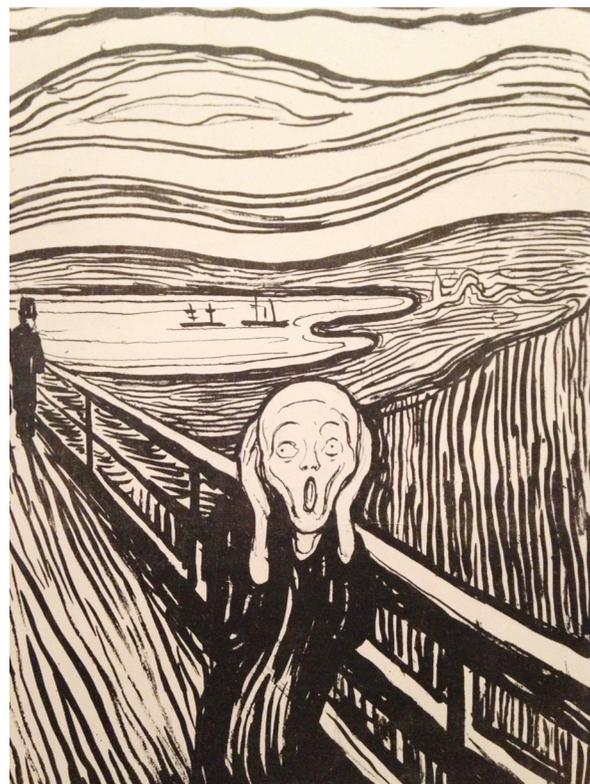


Fig 2. The Scream (Edvard Munch 1895, lithoprint, 44 x 25cm). Munchmuseet. Maurizio Pesce, Wikimedia Commons. <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edvard_Munch_-_The_Scream_\(1895,_signed_1896\)_-\(8477718108\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edvard_Munch_-_The_Scream_(1895,_signed_1896)_-(8477718108).jpg)>.

pastels. Furthermore, he emphasised the heightened sensitivity to his surroundings through the stark contrast between the muted central figure and the vivid, oversaturated primary colours of the sunset. The painting thereby indicates Munch's mental turmoil during the late nineteenth century.

Contrary to popular belief, Munch's diary entry suggests that it is not the figure screaming, but nature itself. This personification of the environment is best illustrated through Munch's bold lithograph print of the same scene (fig 2). The absence of colour spotlights the swirling lines of the background, thought to represent 'the waves of sound he heard in nature'.¹⁷ The unsteady quality of the lines also gives us the impression nature's scream is vibrating through the print. Turning to the central figure, we can see its amorphous body is bent over, as if recoiling from the surroundings. And yet, this shape echoes the oscillating lines of the background, which in turn suggest the figure is 'inextricably bound to his environment'.¹⁸ Munch stresses this through his use of a vertiginous perspective. Our attention is directed to the bridge, which seems to stretch out indefinitely and offers no route to safety.¹⁹ Furthermore, the homologous depiction of the figure and its surroundings seems to

¹⁷ Giulia Bartrum (as quoted in Alexander Smart, 'The radical prints of Edvard Munch: New ways to express moods and emotions' (*Christie's*, 9 April 2019) <<https://www.christies.com/features/The-prints-of-Edvard-Munch-9795-1.?fbclid=IwAR1i8iqhX0IDjAo2aASc7OJm972A6pOQffwblsX0V1wYBtarW0zVlt4gbgg>> accessed 25 February 2021).

¹⁸ Campbell Crockett, 'Psychoanalysis in Art Criticism' (1958) 17(1) *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34.

¹⁹ McElroy Bowen (n 10).

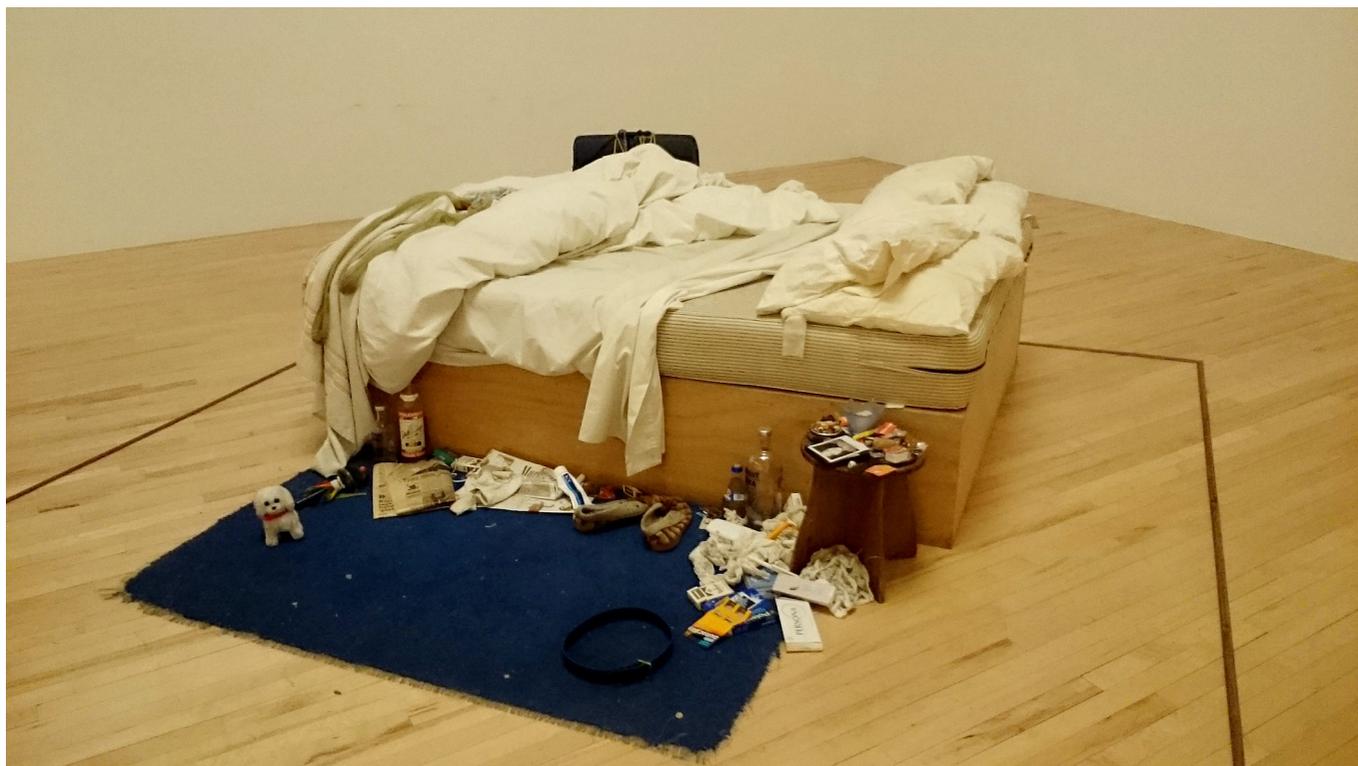


Fig 3. My Bed (Tracey Emin 1998, mattress, linens, pillows, and objects, 79 x 211 x 234cm) at Tate Britain. Karen Bryan, Europe a la Carte (<<http://www.europealacarte.co.uk/blog/>>). <https://www.flickr.com/photos/europealacarte/20538244693?fbclid=IwAR0HIGY6lO-aL8OEgkLOYZnNrDaL_EnNxcC0AFNXm33U6vieqDQ-lvQhg>.

encapsulate Munch's fear of dissolving into the sky.²⁰ In this respect, we would agree with Anne McElroy Bowen that the painting was predominantly influenced by Munch's own agoraphobia.²¹ However, the viewer does not need to share in Munch's specific anxieties to engage with the piece. Instead, they can identify their own concerns in the figure. In this way, Munch demonstrates how an artist's personal experiences of mental illness can be distilled into a universal symbol of inner turmoil.

Tracey Emin's autobiographical *My Bed* (1998, fig 3) exemplifies how an artist's own suffering can be transformed into a captivating piece of conceptual art. Despite facing significant controversy when first exhibited for the 1999 Turner Prize, the readymade quickly became one of the most iconic works of contemporary art. The installation preserves the entirety of Emin's dishevelled bed after her four-day long depressive episode that same year.²² The depiction of her surroundings is candid, littered with empty vodka bottles, used condoms, tissues, dirty clothes, and an overflow of cigarette butts. Devoid of context, this collection of objects could be misconstrued as a vulgar shock tactic. However, as Jonathan Jones explains, the contents were not 'contrived to shock but really were what surrounded her bed. She was putting a personal crisis on display, as manifested by her most immediate and intimate physical surroundings'.²³ Each object was made

meaningful through its interaction with Emin's depression. In this way, *My Bed* is an exemplary readymade: it simply redefines 'found objects' with intrinsic value to the artist and presents them as art. Because of the conceptual nature of this style, we would argue that understanding Emin's experience is valuable for appreciating her bed as art. Like *The Scream*, what is most compelling about the unguarded exhibition of *My Bed* is its ability to connect the viewer to the universality of suffering.

However, the compelling nature of suffering as a subject matter can often distract the viewer from the contextual influences that contribute to a piece's ingenuity. In his historical analysis of 'Art and Mental Illness', Anthony White identifies a tendency in literature to overemphasise the 'internal worlds' of artists, and consequently isolate their work from 'the wider artistic, historical and cultural context in which it was produced'.²⁴ It is paramount that our analyses of *The Scream* and *My Bed* consider the contexts within which the artists worked. Munch was not living and working in a vacuum, and a range of influences are present in his artwork. For example, aspects of *The Scream* that are thought to be symptomatic of his fragile mental state, such as the pulsating perpetual motion of his brushwork, or the bird's eye viewpoint, build on the Impressionist tendencies of the time.²⁵ Similarly, *My Bed* is in keeping with both the introspection of Expressionism and the conceptual innovation of the Young British Artists. Emin and her contemporaries were challenging the notion of 'fine art' through their shocking use of alternative media.²⁶ Emin's *My Bed* uses this novel approach to

20 Stanley Steinberg and Joseph Weiss, 'The Art of Edvard Munch and its Function in his Mental Life' (1954) 23(3) *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 409.

21 McElroy Bowen (n 10).

22 Tate Britain, Tracey Emin's My Bed at Tate Britain (*Youtube*, 30 March 2015).

23 Jonathan Jones, *Tracey Emin: Works 2007–2017* (first edn, Rizzoli 2017) 8–33.

24 White (n 2).

25 Rachel Sloane, 'Edvard Munch. Chicago' *The Burlington Magazine* (London 2009) 151(1274) 347.

26 Tate, 'Young British Artists (YBAs)' <<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/y/young-british-artists-ybas>> accessed 25 March 2021.



Fig 4. The Sick Child (Edvard Munch 1907, oil paint on canvas, 118.7 x 121cm). Tate Britain. Wikimedia Commons. <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edvard_Munch_-_The_sick_child_\(1907\)_-_Tate_Modern.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edvard_Munch_-_The_sick_child_(1907)_-_Tate_Modern.jpg)>.

breathe new life into the twentieth-century Expressionism that first inspired her. Therefore, Emin and Munch are not simply disturbed geniuses, but creators who responded to and influenced contemporary movements in art.

Additionally, the relationship between mental illness and art is made more complex when we consider how an artist's creative output might enable their recovery. Both Emin and Munch, albeit to different extents, used their art as a therapeutic mechanism for processing their childhood trauma.²⁷ Emin in particular, has been incredibly vocal about the 'purgative and healing' power of making art.²⁸ Throughout her career, she has returned to scenes of her sexual assault to let the adolescent girl within her scream.²⁹ Perhaps the most poignant example of this can be seen in her monprint *Beautiful Child* (2009). The simple print consists of a young naked girl, representative of Emin at the time of her assault, and a bodiless penis. The expansive white background seems to emphasise the isolation of her childhood self. However, what is most striking about the piece is the rough castration of her attacker. It seems that the physical act of pressing paper onto the ink surface and sketching let Emin take back control over her experience. In this way, *Beautiful Child* supports Christine Fanthome's argument that the immediate and inalterable quality of the monprint made it an ideal medium for Emin to process the emotions associated with her trauma.³⁰

27 Christina Blomdahl, Birgitta Gunnarsson, Suzanne Guregård, and Anita Björklund, 'A realist review of art therapy for clients with depression' (2013) 40(3) *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 322.

28 Miguel Medina, 'Tracey Emin: Life Made Art, Art Made from Life' (2014) 3(1) *Arts* 54.

29 Turner Contemporary, 'BBC HARDTalk with Tracey Emin' (2012) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=og5FqDxPUKg&t=116s>> accessed 23 March 2021.

30 Christine Fanthome, 'Articulating authenticity through artifice: the contemporary relevance of Tracey Emin's confessional art' (2008) 18(2) *Social Semiotics* 223.

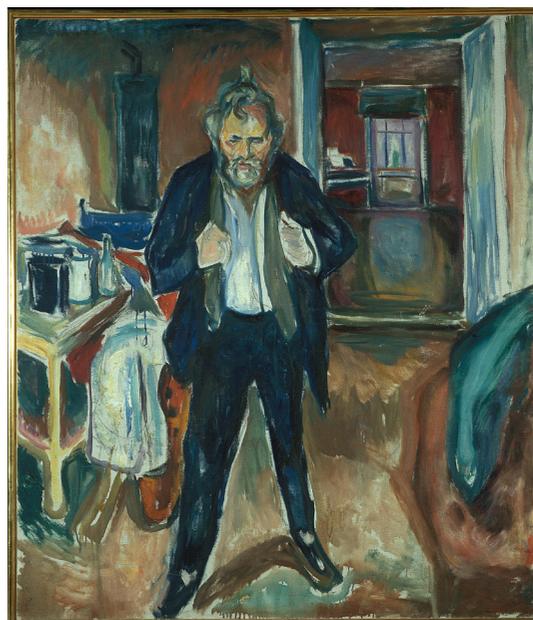


Fig 5. Sleepless Night. Self-Portrait in Inner Turmoil (Edvard Munch 1920, oil on canvas, 150 x 129 cm). Munchmuseet. Wikimedia Commons. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edvard_Munch_-_Sleepless_Night_-_Self-Portrait_in_Inner_Turmoil_-_MM.M.00076_-_Munch_Museum.jpg>.

Similarly, we would argue that the physical act of painting offered Munch some relief from his anxieties. Like Emin, Munch returned to the scene of personal trauma: he depicted his sister's death at least six times. Interestingly, the first and fifth versions of the *The Sick Child* series (1907, fig 4) have scratch marks on the surface of the canvas, which Munch attributed to scraping and repainting the scene 'countless times'.³¹ It is likely that this physical process was necessary to work through his residual feelings of anger and guilt surrounding the subject matter. The painting itself shows a frail girl clasping the hands of her grieving companion. Contrary to many of his other pieces of an autobiographical nature, Munch does not include himself in this scene. Instead, he paints what he remembers. Michelle Facos argues that Munch's vertical brushstrokes let the viewer see the scene as he once did, through 'tears or the veil of memory'.³² Perhaps Munch's absence from the painting is also symbolic of the powerlessness he felt when his sister begged for him to save her life. That said, in the same way Emin used her art to castrate her attacker, Munch seems to have given his sister the inner peace he could not offer her on her deathbed. However, unlike Emin, Munch almost obsessively repeated the exact same composition each time he revisited the scene. While it is likely the act of painting provided Munch with temporary relief, his rigid depiction of the memory seems indicative of his inability or unwillingness to fully process his trauma.

The prevailing narrative of the 'mad genius' in the late nineteenth century is likely to have shaped Munch's sense of identity as an artist and influenced his willingness to engage in recovery. He once said: 'Without anxiety and illness I am a ship without a rudder ... My

31 Mille Stein, 'Patterns in Munch's painting technique' in Gary Garrels, Jon-Ove Steihaug, and Sheena Wagstaff (eds), *Edvard Munch: Between the clock and the bed* (first edn, Yale University Press 2017).

32 Michelle Facos, *An Introduction to Nineteenth-Century Art* (first edn, Routledge 2011) 339.

sufferings are part of myself and my art. They are indistinguishable from me, and their destruction would destroy my art. I want to keep those sufferings.³³ This suggests that Munch's fear of losing his creativity, spurred on by the 'mad genius' trope, outweighed his desire to recover. In this way, Munch seems to exemplify Perpetua Neo's argument that the relationship between art and mental illness is often self-fulfilled.³⁴ While Munch is known to have experienced some form of recovery,³⁵ he never fully overcame his nervous disposition.³⁶ His continued struggle with mental illness is reflected in the subject matter of some of his later self-portraits, like *Sleepless Night. Self-Portrait in Inner Turmoil* (1920, fig 5). The scene depicts Munch in old age, his fists raised, as if at odds with himself. In contrast, Emin's more recent explorations of mental suffering are inspired by an image of herself that is 'out of date'.³⁷ Emin has recovered from her mental struggles, whilst still drawing creative inspiration from the memory of how she once felt.³⁸ This engagement with recovery suggests that Emin does not consider her creativity to be contingent on her suffering. In this way, Emin has likely benefited from the dismantling of the antiquated 'mad genius' trope that inhibited Munch's own recovery.

The lives of Edvard Munch and Tracey Emin exemplify the symbiotic relationship between art and psychopathology. Their experience of mental illness has clearly inspired their subject matter and enriched their creative output. This in turn has let them evoke feelings with which the viewer can identify. Furthermore, both Emin and Munch demonstrate how the creative process can help an artist work through and recover from their mental health issues. While Munch's art alleviated some of his symptoms, he was ultimately held captive by the concept of the 'mad genius', and thus never able to fully break free from his sufferings. In contrast, Emin's own account of her recovery suggests that she has not fallen into the same cycle. Moreover, the undiminished relatability of her recent work proves that this distance from her lowest emotional state has not inhibited her creativity. Emin demonstrates that the recovered artist can still access the intensity of feeling required to convey the most troubling aspects of the human experience.

33C Marcelo Miranda, C Eva Miranda, and D Matías Molina, 'Edvard Munch: disease and genius of the great norwegian artist' (2013) 141(6) *Revista médica de Chile* 774.

34Lindsay Dodgson, 'Creativity and depression don't go hand in hand, but it can seem like they do — here's why' (*Insider*, 27 July 2018) <<https://www.insider.com/the-link-between-creativity-and-mental-health-2018-7>> accessed 21 February 2021.

35Russell R Monroe, *Creative Brainstorms: The Relationship Between Madness and Genius* (first edn, Irvington Publishers Inc 1992) 73.

36Garrels, Steinhaug, and Wagstaff (n 31) 17–19.

37Jones (n 23) 8–33.

38*ibid.*