Edvard Munch made in total four oil-paintings on canvas of Marat. The one I am looking at is *The death of Marat II*(1907) – it is named number M 4 in the catalogue of The Munch Museum in Oslo. The painting is also part of the Google Art Project and available online here:
http://www.googleartproject.com/collection/the-munch-museum-oslo/artwork/the-death-of-marat-ii-edvard-munch/469025/

Introduction

Levinas' thinking on death can be described as a phenomenological examination where the subject's relation to the Other, the subject's emotions suffering, sorrow and pain and the conditions solitude and loneliness are examined. But before going into all this something should be said about the role of the Other (person) in Levinas' overall philosophy. Towards the end of his first major work *Totality and Infinity* from 1961, Levinas describes the Other with some examples: as a brother, as a stranger and as the poor.[i] Levinas explains that the Other presents himself as an equal to the subject. In meeting the Other the Other's face calls the subject to responsibility. In meeting the Other not only the subject's freedom is put into question, the meeting calls the subject to responsibility. With a focus on the Others face one could suspect the face disclose an inward world that the Other carries inside in Levinas' philosophy, but it does not, rather the face "…calls to me above and beyond the given that speech already puts in common among us.[ii]" The Other's face calls the subject above and beyond speech. In Levinas thinking every social relation leads back to the presentation of the Other like a shunt "…to the same without the intermediary of any image or sign, solely by the expression of the face.[iii]" In his thinking on death Levinas' focuses both on the subject's own death and the death of the Other, but not on the subject's experience of loss when someone dies. Levinas begins with the subject's proximity to the Other in his understanding of death. As an example of dying, Levinas refers to a scene in Shakespeare's Macbeth. I find this turn to Shakespeare amazing and will try to understand the relation between death, suffering and loneliness so important in Levinas' thinking by looking into another work of art, one not referred to by Levinas. What I in the following more precisely would like to do is to use Levinas thinking on death as a key for interpreting Edvard Munch's painting *The Death of Marat II (The Murderess) 1907.* Levinas exemplifies dying by

using Macbeth, and exemplifies the Other as a brother, a stranger and the poor. I believe Levinas chose his examples with great care. But instead of dwelling on these characters in the following I will use the painting of Marat when trying to understand his thinking on death.

Suffering

Despites the before mentioned fundamental proximity, Levinas holds that every human individual stands in a distance to other individuals and exists in solitude. Levinas describes existential solitude as one of the human individuals' ways of being, but do not address the Robinsonade neither the problem of other minds in modern philosophy.[iv] Instead he thinks that the subject in its existence is isolated and might experience solitude as a consequence of isolation, and relates existential solitude to suffering, sorrow and pain. To Levinas suffering is the mode of being closest to death and an end of existential solitude, not because suffering can end in death, but because existential solitude is unbearable. This unbearableness represents by darkness in Levinas' thinking – suffering is outside of all light, as he says. Death is unknown and cannot take place in in the light. Death is like a hollow and will always be unknown and surrounded by darkness. For the subject death is like a mystery, and the subject cannot relate to death as if death was something inside of himself. At the same time the subject's relation to death is part of the subject's relation to the Other, in Levinas' thinking, and with this understanding he separates from thinkers he otherwise got familiarities to – and disagrees with – as Heidegger, Sartre and Kierkegaard. They all think that death gets into the selfhood of the subject and individuates it.[v] For Levinas it is the relation to the Other – the infinite responsibility – that is comparable to the subject's relation to death. To him the subject relates to death as something on the outside of itself, as something never graspable, and through suffering, sorrow and pain the subject for himself and in himself make proximity to death graspable. This proximity to death in pain and suffering need not be the subject's own, also the Others pain and suffering might do proximity to death graspable to the subject.

Levinas narrows his position by saying that the suffering and pain he wants to address in relation to death is physical, and not what he calls a moral pain. On moral pain he says that

it is possible to remain dignity and innocence while suffer and simultaneously be free. Physical pain he relates to loneliness and says that suffering is not fully exposed in what we are shown through our suffering. One part of the suffering is veiled, and in a definite sense not known to us. This part of the suffering represents something outside of the subject and remains in darkness. Neither the physical nor the moral pain holds the clarity of the factual. In his thinking Levinas associates light to joy, involvement and all attachment. Every reachable and absorbed object that can become knowledge got light. Objects of sensation and emotion might tread into the light, while death and suffering remain in darkness. This lack of light should not be seen as a negation, as he says, but expresses that death is unknowable. Levinas tries to drag the concepts suffering, sorrow and pain closer to the subject's reality in his thinking. Through the insight that death itself is not suffering or pain Levinas points to the relations between these concepts and the unknown darkness they got in common. There are some important differences between these concepts. Levinas holds that death will always be the future for the subject; that it is never here. Our inability to grasp death means that what he calls the end of the subject's virility and heroism are out of reach too. Levinas illustrates a moment of death with a scene from Macbeth. It is the scene where Macbeth realize that the end is near; the moment when Wood comes marching. This makes Macbeth tell Macduff about his malediction, and Levinas sees this scene as the end of Macbeth's virility and heroism. Levinas' reference to this scene in Macbeth made me want to find another work of art to try to interpret here.

Dying on canvas

I will try to understand Levinas' thinking on death while doing an interpretation of Edvard Munch's painting of Marat. Generally we can say that Munch's paintings often show personifications of abstract ideas through conceptualizations of emotions like love, loneliness, shame, anxiety and jealousy. Munch had a great talent for this, and this is why I thought of his paintings while reading Levinas; their availability of emotional expression. But I want to achieve another goal as well. I want to find out if another work of art than the one Levinas himself points to might give some insights to his thinking on death. Levinas uses Macbeth. I would like to see if another example might be possible. To me it seems like Levinas is making some kind of indirect explanations when he uses Macbeth as an example.

Simply put it seems like dying becomes heroic because of Macbeth the hero. One could ask if not even Macbeth even in the chosen scene holds other additional characteristics than virility and heroism. Overall we find many scenes, and painting, about dying and in using one not mentioned by Levinas I want to dig a bit deeper into his thinking of death. It is not given that the painting suits Levinas thinking the way Macbeth does, but I hope an interpretation of the painting seen in relation to Levinas thinking might give new insights.

Munch painted a murder, and the picture of the murdered and the murderer gives an opportunity to reflect on death. In death Levinas finds darkness, he describes the dying persons suffering and solitude. I want to look for this in Munch's painting. Munch made the painting while staying in Warnemünde in 1907. Warnemünde was a sleepy port at Germany's northern coast. The theme of all his paintings from there is his own earlier experiences as in so many of his paintings. Munch himself experienced great loss in his early years. As 15 years old he had lost both his sister and his mother, and many of his best known paintings shows their sickness and dying. The factual starting point for the paintings of Marat and Corday is an episode with a gun. Munch shot his own hand in the turbulence around leaving Tulla Larsen to whom he was related the years 1898 – 1902. It should be said that the shooting episode never threatened the life of neither Tulla Larsen nor himself. If we take all the paintings that Munch made in Warnemünde into consideration it might be said that they express some specific negative emotion in all their commonness.[vi] With powerful and clearly marked vertical, but also some horizontal strokes Munch builds up plains in these pictures, and to great extend in my chosen picture of Marat and Corday. He's strokes gives a small hypnotic effect. In his thinking on death Levinas describes, as mentioned, emotions he says got a common ground and a relation to death. In Munch's paintings from the early twentieth century, and to a large extent the pictures he showed at his exhibition in Prague in 1905, a bit before staying at Warnemünde, Munch focused on painting *his own* emotions and experiences.[vii] In *The Death of Marat II (The Murderess)*, 1907, we find the well-known characters from the French revolution, Corday and Marat. Marat became a well-known motive through Jacques-Louis David's famous painting from 1793, and Corday became a well-known person by killing Marat. David dwells with Marat's suffering in his painting. An understanding of his murder Corday's action is hard to find. She is not part of David's painting.

But in Munch's painting we can see how Corday stands as if she likens a column in the room

after her killing of Marat. Munch has placed Marat on his bed. Corday does not look aggressive where she stands in the foreground of the picture. To me it seems like some kind of inner silence that has sunken into her. Over Marat's face lays a shadow. The darkness in the green area over his head contrasts the light falling on Corday, and in the paintings overall composition the laying Marat makes a contrast the standing Corday so that the two characters balances the painting. Munch painted Corday so that her feet are pointing a little bit outwards. It does not look like she rests on her feet. On the contrary it seems like she strives upwards in the vertical axis of the picture. The area to the left of her got a blue color, slightly brighter than the rest of the blue beside her. Corday looks downwards. It says that Corday fooled Marat by giving him names of the Girondins, and that the names were Corday's excuse for visiting Marat with assassination as a hidden agenda. Corday came from a royalist family and fooled Marat to believe that she wanted to betray the Girondins. During the case against her after the killing resulting in her death she argued she prevented Marat from getting 100.000 Girondins killed. But in fact Marat had no such power. Marat supported the Sans-Culottes and was much of their link to the Jacobins. Munch's painting should be seen as symbolic, but I think that this historical background is important for understanding this much used motif. Levinas, in his thinking, says that death is something hidden and unknown, something dwelling in darkness. A painting on the other hand is very direct and even displaying. When I look at Munch's painting of Marat and Corday I get a feeling as if I have seen something that one in fear turns away from. I find the painting demonstrative, like an opening to something hidden and veiled that Munch drags out into the light; the murder Corday should be seen. The light falls on her body.

Marat lays dead in the background kept out from us the living by Corday who stands in the foreground. Can we find any guilt or regret in Corday? It says that Corday surprised Marat and strokes him right in the heart. In Levinas philosophy we got the imperative "Thou shalt not kill" as the first premise, the grounding premise. Levinas would probably not have any sympathy or understanding to offer Corday, but reject and condemn her action in accord with his starting point – our infinite responsibility to the Other.[viii] Levinas condemns all violence and every murder. In an interview from 1993 he points out very clearly that the core of justice is the demand never to regard the Other as mean,[ix] like we know this position from Kant's categorical imperative. The death of the Other affects me into my identity as a responsible I, according to Levinas. It affects my, as he says, not-substantial identity and my endless responsibility. The death of the Other affects my identity as me.

This is neither a second-hand experience nor a privileged death experience. It changes the subject in itself, it repeals the subject as the same, creates repealing into the subjects own self. The subject's self is no longer the same, as he says. And in thoughts like these Levinas narrows Heidegger's view on death. Heidegger says that being-towards-death got an anxiety leading *Dasein* into proper (eigentlich) being. *Dasein* gets into a reflection of its selfhood. But Levinas thinks that the subject's affinity for the death of the Other and its meaningfulness is stronger than any anxiety, and precisely this is what Levinas find missing in Heidegger's approach. For Levinas the death of the Other is a message with a meaning that changes the subject. It is not an experience for the subject, but an exceeding that change the subject's relation to itself. For the subject it seems like an influence, but at the same time as passivity, it is like an influence of something incomparable. The death of the Other is the influence of something not present, something more intimate than any intimacy, as he says.[x] If we should take these insights with us back to Munch's painting, we would have to look for guilt or regret in Corday. But it seems like Corday has reached some kind of silence standing in the foreground of the picture surrounded by light, and it does not look like regret.

Murder in Levinas' Philosophy

A sequence of time can be read into Munch's painting. Marat lies behind Corday standing in foreground. As foreground one could say that Corday somehow gathers a future, a present and a past. The scene Munch painted is the aftermath of the killing. In my impression we get a propensity regarding the killing, as in the present. We know of the peaceful past when Marat was alone in his home. Seen in relation to the title *The Death of Marat II (The Murderess)* we have to regard the picture as the titles future. For at the canvas Marat *is* already dead. Another way reading a dimension of time into the painting is to say that Marat by lying in the background of Corday, is left behind her and can be seen as past to her. Corday seeks out of the picture, upwards and into the light with Marat placed behind her. The action of killing is a now, and what we see is at the aftermath of this present. Corday stands in the room looking tranquilly. In this way the painting captures actions where Corday through Munch's title and composition becomes part of the three mentioned situations.

Death will always be the future, Levinas says, as he points out that death is never the present – as long as the subject lives death is future. Levinas' does also think that death marks the end of the subject's virility and heroism, as with Macbeth. But in addition to time and the absence thereof we got the existential solitude in dying according to Levinas; the subject's loneliness and suffering, sorrow and pain. Trying to interpret the painting according to Levinas thinking, one have to ask if it is reasonable in any sense to say about Corday that she is experiencing existential solitude? Her calmness after the murder might give us an impression like these, but she murdered Marat, fooled him, was his enemy, so the reason for her eventually solitude is her own action; her killing. And what I have described as an inner silence, that in my view her closed expression, her closed eyes and her closed moth gives an understanding of, does not give the impression that she is suffering, in pain or sorrow, and most importantly; she is alive. So could it be wiser to search for an existential solitude, for loneliness and suffering, sorrow and pain in Marat? Before moving on to Marat something more should be said about murder according to Levinas thinking.

Surely the death of Marat cannot be seen in any other way than the death of an individual, but Levinas' finds a universal aspect as well in his thinking on murder. On murder Levinas holds that we in the passion for it approach death as nothingness, and that the spontaneous intentionality of this aims at annihilation. In murder of the Other we identify death with nothingness.[xi] But, as he says, this nothingness present itself as a sort of impossibility, for the Other cannot present himself as Other outside of my conscience, and inside of my conscience the Others face expresses my moral impossibility of annihilating him. This impossibility looks at me from the eyes I want to extinguish, and therefor Levinas consider the annihilation in murder as a purely relative annihilation. And in this it seems most plausible to consider the Other inside of the murder's own conscience as something particular. Further, Levinas says that my own death cannot be deduced from the death of the others by analogy, but is inscribed in the fear I can have for my being, and my fear of violence, because what I am exposed to in death is absolute violence, like a murder in the night.[xii]

Levinas' thinking on the loneliness actualized in relation to death and pain is rightly not only the dying subject's but also the Other's, and even though Levinas is not addressing murder in this context here, I would like to hold on to Marat for a while. For Levinas Macbeth becomes an example of how death is the end of a person's virility and heroism. What I want

to do is investigate if Marat can exemplify Levinas' view of death, eventually Corday, or Munch's painting as a whole. Marat is dead, his face has a shadow and is surrounded by a dark green color, and Corday is alive and stands in the foreground and the light falls over her. Levinas says that death is like a hollow and cannot take place in the light. Death got some of the qualities of darkness, and it seems like Levinas holds that death got particularity in common with loneliness and solitude. To Levinas suffering, sorrow, pain, solitude and loneliness got proximity to death. Some of the qualities of the darkness surrounding death are attached to them, and this is what Levinas calls the unknown. Levinas holds that the subject in its existence is isolated and might experience unbearable existential solitude, and it is this state of solitude he relates to sorrow, suffering and pain. This suffering got a quality ungraspable for the subject and it is precisely this quality that is part of death, as he says. Levinas holds that it is possible to come closer to an understanding of the darkness in death through an understanding of the death of the Other. The way of doing this is by seeing how the others suffering, sorrow and pain relates to death, as he says. For David the suffering is the main topic when painting Marat, but Munch's painting is different. When Munch did his painting the death of Marat was a well-established motif, and Marat's suffering often expressed in paintings and sculptures. Did Munch paint Marat's pain, sorrow and suffering, his loneliness and existential solitude? At the canvas Marat's feet are pointing inwards further into the background of the painting away from the one looking at it. In this respect Marat is by himself and can be considered lonely, but on the other hand; Marat accepted Corday's visit before she killed him, and it seems strange to consider Marat as solitude. Eventually we can understand solitude in a more abstract way – as a part of dying. We can consider that dying creates an existential loneliness and solitude. We must at least state that Marat by being murdered has been in pain and has suffered.

The Other's suffering and death

There are two points underlying the subject's relation to death that need to be addressed. The first is about duration: Levinas holds that for the subject death will always be the future. The second is about time: Levinas holds that the isolated subject does not relate to time, but that time should be seen as a part of the subject's relation to the Other.[xiii]

Levinas writes about a dimension of time when describing the relation to the Other in his second main work *Otherwise than being or beyond Essence* from 1974. Here he says that the proximity between the subject and the Other opens up a distance of diachrony.[xiv] The diachrony opens up as a result of the fact that the subject and the Other do not share a past in common. Levinas calls this difference in past the subject's non-indifference with the Other. The diachrony points to the infinite responsibility for the Other, and even though this does not explain why the isolated subject does not relate to time, it does tell how time is part of the relationship with the other in Levinas thinking.

Death and knowledge seems to be antagonists in Levinas thinking. Levinas says that knowledge holds some of the qualities of the light, by eating what is unique and outstanding.[xv] One reason for this is that knowledge is something universal contrasting the particularity of the subject in its existential loneliness. Levinas writes: "It [the subject] finds itself enchained, overwhelmed, and in some way passive. Death is in this sense the limit of idealism."[xvi] Moreover death's very existence is made of alterity; the subject's solitude is not confirmed by death but broken by it, as he says, and this is the reason why the subject's relation to the Other got aspects of the subject's relation to death in it. We recognize the Other as resembling us, but exterior to us; the relationship with the other is a relationship with a mystery. The Other's entire being is constituted by its exteriority to us and by its alterity. On the death of the Other Levinas writes:

"In the totality of the historiographer the death of the other is an *end*, the point at which the separated being is cast into totality, and at which, consequently, *dying*, can be passed through and past, the point from which the separated being will continue by virtue of the heritage his existence had amassed… What "still remains" is totally different from the future that one welcomes, that one projects forth and in a certain measure draws from oneself. For a being to whom everything happens in conformity with projects death is an absolute event, absolutely a posteriori, open to no power, not even to negation… the non-reference to the common time of history means that mortal existence unfolds in a dimension that does not run parallel to the time of history and is not situated with respect to this time as an absolute."[xvii]

Levinas uses Macbeth to illustrate the subject's time and experience in dying. Macbeth understands that he is going to die. Wood who comes marching is really powerful, and Macbeth says: "Ring the alarm-bell!…" To Levinas this exemplifies how death marks the subject's limit of suffering and also the limit of the subject's heroism and virility. Macbeth knows that he will lose the battle. Levinas sees his will to fight the one overpowering him as something virile and heroic. To this it might be remarked that not all dying is heroic and virile. We could point to Corday who does not think of Marat that she killed as a hero, and that we sometimes will find differences in perspectives on the one dying. Levinas tells that death got a future, but that this future is not the dying subject's future. To the dying subject death is passivity.

At the canvas Marat's face lay in the shadow, he looks death and peaceful. But the sheet of the bed is bloody, and the one arm of his hangs listless down against the floor. Levinas says that death makes the subject's activity to passivity, and that death shares this ability with suffering. Marat has been in pain, suffered and now he is dead. He lies passively on his bed. Munch has placed him so that his body point inwards into the picture, like he's moving into death and darkness away from us looking, away from Corday.

To me it seems implausible to look for an understanding of death in Corday whom murdered Marat. In Levinas thinking we might get insights on death in the death of the Other, but as mentioned Levinas regards murder as a relative annihilation and says that the face of the Other will still be in the murders conscience. Therefore it seems more promising to look at Marat himself in Munch's painting, and leave Corday behind. Marat's suffering is not the main theme of Munch's painting, but seen as the Other in Levinas' thinking it must be Munch's ability to express Marat's suffering, sorrow and pain, his loneliness and solitude that makes the death of Marat – as the Other according to Levinas – graspable for us looking at the painting. But even though this might give us some insights on dying Levinas describes our knowledge as light and death as something unknown, hollow and dark. Light and knowledge are something general in Levinas philosophy, something that reduces both darkness and particularity. Therefore, by getting knowledge you are at the same time reducing the particular by making what you examine – death – general. If we are given insights by looking at the painting it is by an understanding of Marat's suffering. To Levinas

suffering is the mode of being closest to death. The understanding must be seen as an understanding of something particular; as the death of Marat and not dying in general. Through the proximity to the Other we grasp something about death by looking at the dying Marat at the canvas, and what we see in this hollow and unknown darkness is, according to Levinas, a part of Marat's suffering that belongs to death and that Marat himself does not recognize. To Levinas this insight is not an experience for the one looking at the painting but an exceeding that changes the subject's relation to itself.

NOTES

[i] Emmanuel Levinas(1969): *Totality an Infinity* Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, page 212 – 214

[ii] Emmanuel Levinas(1969): *Totality an Infinity* Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, page 212.

[iii] Emmanuel Levinas(1969): *Totality an Infinity* Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, page 213.

[iv] This presentation of Levinas thinking on death builds to large extends on the third of the four lectures Levinas gave at Collège philosophique de Jean Wahl in Paris in 1946 and 1947. Emmanuel Levinas (1987): *Time and the Other.* Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, pp.67-79, for the theme solitude see page 42 ff.

[v] Martin Heidegger (1962): *Being and Time.* Oxford: Blackwell. § 49, page 292.

[vi] Sissel Biørnstad (ed.) (1999): *Munch og Warnemünde.* Oslo: Munch-museet Labyrinth Press, page 51.

[vii] Sissel Biørnstad (ed.) (1999): *Munch og Warnemünde.* Oslo: Munch-museet Labyrinth Press, page 123.

[viii] Emmanuel Levinas (1969): *Totality and Infinity.* Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, page 199.

[ix] Jodalen og Vetlesen (1997): *Closeness an ethics.* Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, page 54.

[x] Emmanuel Levinas (2000): *God, Death, and Time.* California: Standford University Press, page 12.

[xi] Emmanuel Levinas (1969): *Totality and Infinity.* Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, page 232.

[xii] Emmanuel Levinas (1969): *Totality and Infinity.* Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, page 233–235. Stanley Cavell points to a similar point regarding violence and the singular Other in Levinas' thinking in his essay "What is the scandal of skepticism?" in his *Philosophy the day after tomorrow,* Harvard University Press 2005, page 145, but his references to Levinas' oeuvre are others than mine.

[xiii] Emmanuel Levinas (1987): *Time and the Other.* Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, page 39, 57.

[xiv] Emmanuel Levinas (1974): *Otherwise than being…* London: Kluwer Academic publishers, page 89.

[xv] Emmanuel Levinas (1987): *Time and the Other.* Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, page 65.

[xvi] Emmanuel Levinas (1987): *Time and the Other.* Pittsburg: Duquesne

University Press, page 71.

[xvii] Emmanuel Levinas (1969): *Totality and Infinity.* Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, page 56.