

“Everything Created by God Is Pure”

The Image of God in Emanuel Vigeland’s Programme of Art in His *Tomba Emmanuelle* in Oslo

Quicquid Deus creavit purum est — Everything created by God is pure. The Norwegian artist Emanuel Vigeland (1875–1948) had these words inscribed above the entrance to his mausoleum, *Tomba Emmanuelle*, in Oslo (Fig.1). They may be interpreted as a type of creed, exemplified and illustrated by the paintings and sculptures on the theme of *Vita* (life) which Vigeland had completed in the mausoleum from 1927 up until his death more than 20 years later.

In the following I shall attempt to explain the nature of the image of God visualized by Emanuel Vigeland when he carried out the artistic decoration of the burial chamber-to-be. I shall describe and interpret the large painting on the far wall as well as the accompanying text. To start with, I shall offer a brief description of the artist’s background, with special attention to his upbringing and childhood environment, which I see as crucial in the development of his view of life. This presentation is based on many years’ study of original sources concerning Emanuel Vigeland’s life and works. I should, however, like to point out that the article is merely a first attempt at an interpretation of his image of God, and that in my research I am primarily endeavouring to reach a psychological understanding of Vigeland as a man and as an artist.

Emanuel Vigeland was born in 1875 into a craftsman’s family in the south of Norway. His father was a respected and skilful cabinet-maker with his own workshop whose life, unfortunately, took a dramatic and tragic turn for the worse. At this point in time a revivalist pietist movement was sweeping over the south and west of Norway and in the 1870s had reached Mandal (Dehli 1932: 74–75), the small town where Emanuel grew up together with his three elder brothers. Their father was deeply involved in religious life, and as pietism was strict and serious, the home environment also became so. The second eldest brother, Gustav, who was

to become Norway's most famous sculptor, looks back upon this period in time in his memoirs. He tells of how it was often packed with people in their home while their father was reading from the Bible or singing psalms. Everybody had to sit as quiet as a mouse, especially since their father's violent and dominant character did not tolerate any mischief or lack of attention (Wikborg 1983: 20).

As for their mother, she also seems to have participated in religious life, even if in a more passive fashion. Like most of the others in the community, she went to prayer meetings, which in reality were religious assemblies at which a lay-preacher spoke. These sermons were characterized by a concrete and drastic imagery, intended to penetrate even the most apathetic of souls.¹ Emanuel, who had to accompany his mother to these meetings, well remembered even in old age the horrors the preacher threatened his audience with if they did not lead a righteous life: they would be doomed to the eternal fires of hell. The same threat of punishment and retribution came Emanuel's way in religious instruction at school and caused him much anguish (Vigeland s. a.: 5-6).

This anguish must have been accentuated through the change in personality which his father underwent. The latter was not able to cope with the demanding religious life in the long run and started to drink instead, abandoning his faith. At that time Emanuel was about six years old. His father, who was already subject to a violent temper, now became completely uncontrolled and disregarded every social consideration.² He turned violent towards wife and child (Vigeland s. a.: 7-8), neglected his work, and ran into debt to the extent that he had to be placed under guardianship.³ His sexual escapades resulted in a child with a local girl.⁴

The mother responded to her husband's violent style of life by periodically leaving him when things became too difficult, moving to her father's

¹ The expression *brimstone preacher* was often used about those speakers who depicted every kind of horror in hell as punishment for their sinful listeners. This included being stricken by fire and brimstone as described in Revelation 14: 10.

² Elisaeus Thorsen's lack of discretion (we are referring to E. Vigeland's father, that is) expressed itself among other things in his opening of an unlicensed pub on the ground floor of his and the family's house. There he himself served beer and schnapps to his customers. On 11.11.1884 he was fined for the illicit sale and serving of schnapps. Letter to the writer of this article from Statsarkivet in Kristiansand 24.5.1989, JNR 881/1989, A544/MLM.

³ The father was placed under guardianship on account of drunkenness on 30.3.1886. Information supplied by the Vigeland Museum, Oslo.

⁴ The child, a son, was born on 25.2.1884. Letter to the writer of this article from Statsarkivet in Kristiansand 20.3.1991. JNR91/57/3, A544/MLM.

home at a farm outside Mandal. Little Emanuel went along too — he loved his grandfather, who was a quiet and friendly man (Vigeland s. a.: 1).

Emanuel's father ended his life abruptly, dying of tuberculosis when the boy was ten years old. In adult life Vigeland never wanted to return to Mandal; memories of life there were far too painful. In the same way as he regarded his grandfather's home as a paradise, he regarded Mandal as hell on earth.⁵ His father had offended and humiliated the entire family with his behaviour. In such a small community as Mandal, where everybody knew everyone else and kept track of each other's doings, Emanuel must have felt a tremendous degradation.

His father's sudden change and wild style of life affected every member of the family and must also have exercised a disturbing influence on the development of Emanuel's personality. His father had previously been the boy's chief male model, but following the radical change was hardly able to satisfy this need (Freud 1955: 105–110). Through the contact with his grandfather, however, Emanuel obtained another male model for a few years until the old man's death in 1884, something which evidently meant a lot to him.

One has the impression, in viewing Vigeland's artistic work, of meeting up with two different artistic personalities. On the one hand we have the pious church artist who decorated a series of churches in Norway, Sweden and Denmark, with stained glass windows his forte.⁶ On the other hand we have the strongly self-conscious and partly challenging creator of the mausoleum *Tomba Emmanuelle*. Neither side of the artist's personality seems to have anything to do with the other. This may be a consequence of a disturbed ego development.⁷

In 1926, when Emanuel Vigeland had just turned 50 and stood at the height of his artistic career as a church painter, he had the chapel-like building erected which was later to become his mausoleum.⁸ It was built in order to serve as a studio, and what Vigeland had in mind was to make it a museum for his works after his death. It is possible that he had intended right from the start being buried in this studio-cum-museum. He originally planned simply to decorate the interior with a fresco on the south wall.

⁵ The matter of E. Vigeland's attitude towards Mandal is based on Vigeland's notations among his remaining property at Slemdal, Oslo.

⁶ Concerning E. Vigeland's work for the church, see Albrektsen 1976.

⁷ See Mangs och Martell 1995 for a concise presentation of how psychoanalysis looks at the development of the individual.

⁸ Concerning the mausoleum, its origins and the work of art, see Wadell 1986; see Wadell 1993.

Some years later, however, he extended the programme to include all of the walls. In 1942 he converted the space into his own burial chamber by blocking up all the windows and apertures with the exception of the entrance on the north side. He gave the building a name of its own, calling it as the Etruscans would *Tomba Emmanuelle*. His ashes rest in an egg-shaped natural rock which he had prepared as an urn and placed over the entrance to the chamber.

Vigeland composed a text in addition entitled *Vita*, which was to have its particular place in the mausoleum.⁹ It is a sort of confession of faith with reference to the entire work of art and comprises 13 paragraphs in praise of God the Creator. It was evidently written in the 1940s after the decoration work in effect had been finished. Its message also tells us how the artist wished to be seen by posterity. As with the inscription above the entrance, the text reads in Latin. The following English translation is from the original Norwegian:

*Mighty is God. His is the power, and the will of men and women
 expires and life is created.
 For the sake of this life must the strongest prevail, lest
 our human race perish and the earth remain barren and void.
 That which in blind sensual ecstasy is thus created, neither of them knows
 of it,
 for they are merely slaves to humanity and servants of their God.
 Present is God when the first struggle in woman's womb takes place,
 and seed by the thousand speed to reach the ovum.
 For thousands of centuries they have striven to unite,
 life to create and the world to shape.
 And why ? why ? oh why ?
 Greatest is the miracle when the child's head appears from within
 the warm womb of the mother : God's masterpiece.
 Weary but blissful she lay, following the painful pangs of birth,
 while the father raises the child aloft towards God.
 No power can halt the flow of life, for God accounts for all.
 In conception God is He who gives, and in death it is He who takes back.
 When thus my hour is nigh, my body weary and my mind dull,
 let me then face the sun and quietly pass away.
 Fire so pure, receive my body so that, fully cleansed, it can meet God.*

⁹ The written text, which is printed on parchment and framed in copperwork, has never been given a permanent place but is housed in a room adjoining the mausoleum. Text page reproduced in Wadell 1993: 102.

*Lay these ashes, which once was a life for better or for worse,
in the ovary-shaped stone, in memory of my dear MOTHER.
And underneath, on the golden base of the urn, shine the letters GOD.*

Right from the moment the visitor enters the mausoleum through a narrow passage, Vigeland demonstrates his desire to dictate and shape the mood. The headroom is so low that the visitor has to bend his knees and lower his head to enter. Consciously or not, he is obliged to make a bow, as it were, to the artist whose ashes lie in the urn above the doorway.

Inside the narrow passage a room comes into view whose spaciousness is felt, it seems, rather than observed. Here within a strange mood prevails, as if one were in a large, underground cave, dimly lit here and there, but not sufficiently to be able to form a clear idea of how far the space stretches. The acoustics add to the peculiarity of the mood. The least movement gives rise to a series of echoes which rumble and roll through the room and cause the visitor to be on his guard.

As soon as the eye has grown accustomed to the pale light issuing from the floodlighting, one discovers that the walls and ceiling are covered with pictures painted directly on the plaster. They represent a multitude of naked figures which appear to be hovering in space, filling the room as if it were the very universe.

Let us concentrate now on the picture on the far wall. This was the one with which Vigeland started to decorate the room in the autumn of 1927. It should immediately be pointed out, however, that the painting we now see before us is not from the 1920s. That one suffered serious frost damage during the war in the winter months of the 1940s. Vigeland saw fit quite simply to demolish the wall and produce a fresh painting, which is what we now have before us. The motif is the same as in the original version, but the composition itself has been changed. It is more complex and has more consciously been arranged as a whole. Above all, however, a new powerful sense of movement and illusion of depth is present, of great significance to the overall impression.¹⁰

In the centre of the composition, high up on the wall, a man is seen kneeling against a powerfully illuminated background (Fig. 2). He is holding a baby in each of his hands, lifting them up towards the light. Below, on the ground in front of him, a woman has just given birth and the newborn baby is still wrapped in its foetal skin. A host of babies are swarming

¹⁰ The comparison between the composition from the 1920s and the one from the 1940s is based on photographs which E. Vigeland had taken of his works of art by the Norwegian photographer O. Vaering. Photographic plates in the Vaering Archives, Oslo.

around the man's thighs. This group forms a kind of hub around which, like a tremendous wheel, a mass of people move in a clockwise direction from left to right. To the left, men and women are engaged in sexual intercourse in the midst of pregnant women and other women giving birth. Towards the edge of the mass movement and a little lower down on the right, children are romping with their mothers while the men, evidently already out of the game, tumble like dying insects down into the murky depths below.

The first impression that comes to mind for an art historian confronted by this composition is that the model for it seems to have been a picture of *The Last Judgment* in the spirit of Rubens. In place of the Supreme Judge, the Son of Man, however, Vigeland has chosen the figure of a man worshipping, bearing his own features. The uplifted face, closed eyes and open mouth suggest an inspired and trance-like state of mind (Fig. 3). It is possible to imagine this inspiration proceeding from the fountain of light which spreads like a cloak from behind the man, enveloping him (cf. Psalm 104: 2). We are led to associate with the halo surrounding the figure of Christ in *The Last Judgment*, for example in Michelangelo's painting in the Sistine Chapel. Such an interpretation of the meaning of the light in this picture is not, however, unambiguous. Vigeland has probably been toying here with representations of the worship of the sun and of the sun as the source of energy of life.¹¹ My support for such a supposition lies partly with other works by the artist and partly with the *Vita* text mentioned earlier from the 1940s.

The same two human beings as on the mausoleum wall also appear in a large painting probably from the 1930s, this time against a background showing a brilliant sunrise which occupies almost half the surface (Fig. 4). The scene evidently depicts Paradise. The man and the woman appear to be the first couple on earth and their offspring the first human baby. With the father lifting up the child and the rays of the sun filling the sky, a connection is forged between the sun and a new life. The sun is the creator of life. The sun is life itself.

¹¹ Representations of the sun were common in both the visual arts and literature from the turn of the century and several decades into the present century. Particular mention may be made of Edvard Munch's decoration of the University Festival Hall in Oslo, where the sun supplies the central motif. This painting, as well as the preceding studies, particularly *The Human Mountain*, exhibits ideas and thoughts also present in E. Vigeland's painting on the far wall of the mausoleum. Concerning Munch's representations of the sun, see Svenaeus 1973: 268–281.



Fig. 1. E. Vigeland's studio, at a future date his mausoleum, Slemdal, Oslo. State before 1942. Photo: Vaering.



Fig. 2. E. Vigeland's mausoleum, Slemdal, Oslo. The far wall. Photo: Vaering.



Fig. 3. E. Vigeland's mausoleum, Slemdal, Oslo. The central motif of the far wall. Photo: Bo Harringer, 1989.



Fig. 4. E. Vigeland: Man lifting up his new born baby towards the sun. Oil on canvas, 205 x 220 cm. E. Vigeland's museum, Slemdal, Oslo. Photo: Fritz Solvang, 1995.

In his *Vita* text Vigeland comments on the scene with the man and the woman in the following way: *Weary but blissful she lay following the painful pangs of birth while the father raises the child aloft towards God.* The reference to God here might well coincide with Christian trains of thought in the same way as the halo around the God-worshipper. In an earlier version of the text, however, it says that the man lifts the child up to the *sun*.¹² This suggests that *God* and *sun* may be synonymous concepts. In the final version the sun is also mentioned in an eschatological context when Vigeland speaks about his own death and requests to be able to *face the sun and quietly pass away*. In this case the sun appears not only to stand for life but also for rebirth, in the same way as in many pre-Christian or non-Christian religions.¹³

The significance of the sun in both picture and text in the examples mentioned leads me to the hypothesis that Vigeland was, directly or indirectly, influenced by the German biologist Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919).¹⁴ Haeckel's popularization of Darwin's theory of evolution had an enormous success. His books were published in one edition after another. A number of them were available in cheap popular editions and he was soon translated into other languages. It is not, however, a pure distillation of Darwinism which Haeckel offers us. Instead he combined Darwin's scientific ideas with notions taken from German romanticism and, not least, from Goethe. Thus he has achieved a peculiar blend of science and religion, a doctrine he called monism.¹⁵

According to Haeckel, the sun was the source of life, a tenet supported by the current scientific belief that the Earth originated through separation from the Sun and that organic life on earth had only been able to evolve under the influence of sunlight. Man himself was a consequence of this and his existence in the last resort depended on the light and heat supplied by the sun (Haeckel 1925: 229–230). Haeckel was a fervent opponent of all

¹² A handwritten manuscript in which the word God has been crossed out and replaced with the word sun. Manuscript among E. Vigeland's remaining property at Slemdal, Oslo.

¹³ Burial grounds preserved from neolithic times, such as Newgrange in Ireland, indicate that the entire construction was planned in accordance with the movements of the sun. Possibly it was thought that the sun would awaken the dead. See Green 1991: 30–31.

¹⁴ I should like to express my warm thanks to Professor Emeritus Benkt-Erik Benktson, who many years ago drew my attention to the fact that it is probably Ernst Haeckel's ideas which are reflected in the *Vita* text of Emanuel Vigeland.

¹⁵ In recent times interest has centred on Haeckel to investigate the extent to which his ideas were borrowed and used by Nazism. See Gasman 1971.

metaphysical religions, particularly Christianity. He considered, however, the worship of the sun to be the most worthy of all theistic forms of belief and easy to conform with monism. In his book *The Riddle of the Universe* he tells how deeply moved he was when he saw Parsees in India offering their devotion to the sun at sunrise and sunset (Haeckel 1925: 230).

In view of the foregoing, I should like to interpret the flood of light behind the worshipper as the primitive force in our existence, the source of life itself: the sun, in fact. According to Haeckel, the sun may also be referred to as God since God and nature in his view are one and the same (see below). This will explain why in the *Vita* text Vigeland used the concepts of sun and God synonymously. The representation on the far wall would now appear to be intelligible. With the sun as the focal point, the masses move in an everlasting rotation around the universe. The sun is their creator and the sun controls them and their degree of fertility. The worshipper occupies a quite particular place in the system, which is the natural right of the divinely inspired artist.¹⁶ He might also be dubbed *son of the Sun*, praying for a blessing for himself and for his children, who may then represent his artistic work.

Further passages in the *Vita* text show that Vigeland professes himself an adherent of a popular-Darwinian conception of life with elements of Christian ideas. It seems hardly possible, however, to make a clear distinction between the two notions. He describes man's existence as a struggle involving the survival of the fittest in which reproduction is the task at hand in order to keep the flame of life alive (cf. Haeckel 1925: 220–221). It is also clear that, in his view, mankind is without a free will.¹⁷ Men and women are controlled by a "blind intoxication of the mind" and are slaves to the continual reproduction of the species. This train of thought links up with the materialistic ideas expressed by Haeckel and for which Darwinism forms a basis.

When Vigeland describes how the male sperm cells aspire to reach the ovum, it sounds like a repeat of Haeckel explaining how millions of male ciliated cells swarm around the female ovum (Haeckel 1925: 52). Since Vigeland at the same time insists on the omnipotence of God, however, and that in its urge towards reproduction mankind is the *servant of God* (a common Biblical expression), it is doubtful whether he had really been thinking along the materialistic lines of Darwin and Haeckel in which God

¹⁶ E. Vigeland was impressed by the fact that the Swedish archbishop, Nathan Söderblom, (1866–1931), whom he highly appreciated, addressed him in a letter with the words *Dear divinely inspired artist*. Letter 5.12.1922 in Upsala University Library.

¹⁷ Ernst Haeckel rejects the idea of a free will. Haeckel 1925: 190, 285.

constitutes an abstract concept. For Darwin the great *selective divinity* was the same as his *struggle for life* (Haeckel 1925: 215). Haeckel's descriptions of God, when seen in isolation, can easily be confused with Christian ideas, and the similarity is perhaps intentional. Haeckel speaks, for example, of God as omnipotent and the ultimate cause of all around us: God is the creator, in other words, the origin of everything. God and nature are one and God's spirit and force are present in all natural phenomena (Haeckel 1866: 451–452). Haeckel also insists that everlasting life in accordance with Christian tenets is a superstitious notion (Haeckel 1925: 160). From a scientific point of view, however, both matter and energy are indestructible and the entire cosmos therefore immortal (Haeckel 1908: 24).

With Haeckel it is never a matter of a personal god (Haeckel 1925: 222–223), although this, in spite of everything, may well be the case with Vigeland. This is quite plainly revealed in the eleventh paragraph of the *Vita* text in which he prays for the fire to take charge of his body after his death *so that, fully cleansed, it can meet God*. He clearly imagines a personal resurrection and an encounter with a personal god. These are pious Christian thoughts, such as his grandfather would have nourished. A Christian train of thought is also reflected in the Norwegian wording which translates as *In conception God is He who gives and in death it is He who takes back*. The quotation almost coincides with a verse from the Book of Job, which reads: *The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord* (Job.1: 21).

What Vigeland has in mind when writing the name of God at the bottom of the urn is less easy to guess. Perhaps, in the spirit of Haeckel, he wishes to emphasize the presence of God in all matter: the fact that all matter is God, even the rock itself. Possibly we are dealing with an act of magic. The one does not have to exclude the other.

In Sigmund Freud's words, *psycho-analysis... has shown us that a personal God is, psychologically, nothing other than an exalted father* (Freud 1957: 123). This means that he is a copy of the father, with all the magnificence in which he once appeared to the small child (Freud 1964: 163). We will remember that Emanuel's father was still hard at work and involved in his religious activities during the youngest son's first five years of life. The memory of this strong, strict, indeed fearful father, prevailing over all and everyone, is at the root of Emanuel Vigeland's image of God. What is notable is the absence of any expression of warmth and love. There was, however, something else about his father which provoked the sense of anguish in the child. The ambiguous and ambivalent picture of God in which Vigeland confuses Darwinian/monistic and Christian trains of thought may

indicate that he was trying with scientific support to get to grips with anguish-laden traits of a sexual nature in the father image. He attempted to rationalize them with the help of science, thereby rendering them less menacing.

When Vigeland looks forward to a personal encounter with God after death this, in my view, is ultimately a reconciliation with his father which he is hoping to attain. It is a father who did not acknowledge his son with his love and who therefore must have saddled him with a grave sense of guilt.

Emanuel Vigeland found an excellent self-image of his relationship with his father in *The Prodigal Son*, as described in Luke 15: 11–32. As a child he must have heard the parable many times, since it was among the most popular of the revivalist preachers' narratives (Wadell 1993: 113 note 7). It was above all the return to the paternal home, with the father embracing and blessing his son, which became Vigeland's favourite motif. He repeated it in each and every church that he decorated. *The Prodigal Son* is also the self-image which unites the church artist with the creator of the mausoleum. Vigeland has namely used Auguste Rodin's celebrated sculpture of *The Prodigal Son* as a model for the figure of the worshipper, in all probability unaware of having done so.

The ambiguous picture of God with its blend of Darwinian/monistic and Christian representations is also exemplified in the already mentioned motto over the entrance to the *Tomba Emmanuelle*. The text is written in Latin, the old language of the western European church and a language which also stood for learning and wisdom.

It is not only, however, the form of language which has been taken from the Bible. The choice of words and the means of expression have also been borrowed, from I Timothy 4:4, in which Paul writes *...for everything created by God is good*. Vigeland replaces *good* with *pure* without regard to context and allusion in Paul. The apostle is referring to food while Vigeland's subject is the body and sexuality as depicted in his burial chamber.

There is hardly any support in the Bible for the view expressed here by Vigeland. He would seem to have fetched it from Haeckel, who brings serious charges against Christianity for its contempt for women and for degrading woman and considering intercourse with her as an impure act (Haeckel 1925: 291–292). Haeckel's point is that physical intercourse is as important as the spiritual, and he is of the opinion that "the more highly advanced a civilization, the more one in fact acknowledges the ideal value of sexual love". He finds support for this in his claim that "woman is the inspiring source of the highest achievements of art and poetry". Vigeland

thus assimilates Haeckel's view of sexuality, transferring it to his image of God, which thereby takes the shape of a monistic god, clad in Christian clothing.

The motto *Quicquid Deus creavit purum est* by its very position serves as an invocation for the artist. It is there to protect him and his works from condemnation by his fellow beings. Nobody shall be bold enough to assail him or that which he has created.¹⁸

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¹⁸ On a pencil drawing depicting a couple making love and a female nude in various postures, E. Vigeland made a notation which belongs to the same world of ideas as the mausoleum and its paintings. It reads, in translation from the Norwegian: *When you see a naked human body and are vexed at what you see, then reproach God for what He has created, if you dare.* The drawing, 334 x 217mm, among E. Vigeland's remaining property at Slemdal, Oslo.

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