



Fig. 1 Oskar Kokoschka. *The Awakening*. From *Die träumenden Knaben* (Vienna: Wiener Werkstätte, 1908). Lithograph, 25.8 × 29.3 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. (Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY)

ing and celebrates the imaginary world, particularly the experience of the artist's connection to the remote and distant landscape of imagination and the unconscious. As a poet and artist, Kokoschka turned to something beyond historical life. A close examination of the set of poems and images traces this development.

We begin with the poet's sexual awakening, which takes place in his troubling erotic

dreams. The dream phase is signaled by the line "and I fell down and dreamed," which first appears on page 1. The poem mirrors the way that dreams merge waking experiences. According to Freud: "The dream-content . . . is expressed as it were in a pictographic script, the characters according to their pictorial value instead of according to their symbolic relation."⁶ In *Die träumenden Knaben*, events and images do not follow waking rational

sequence. Irrational, subjective elements are emphasized within a nonlinear narrative.

The poetry undulates and attempts to capture the essence of the erotic, set in a strange landscape populated by mysterious creatures. The narrator is compelled by his own emerging sexuality, yet he is also terrified by its newness and strangeness. At times, he is ashamed of his impulses; however, in passage after passage, the discovery of sexuality is praised and exalted. The sexual impulse is described as compelling, enchanting, and beautiful; but it is also terrifying:

. . . next to you, seeing your arm,
bending, a story so fragile it ceases to be
as soon as anyone touches it.
I see behind all words and signs
(Oh, how joyful I am!)
that you resemble me,
how you resemble me.

Do not come closer.

The last line of this excerpt introduces the ordinary in the sense that the poet's voice, after a passage of intoxicating joy, suddenly breaks the mood by asking the loved one to keep away.

Plate 7 illustrates the result of Kokoschka's explorations, introducing the theme of isolation and the division of the sexes. Mountains frame the figures of Adam and Eve, and the sky has become white; two birds fly about picking at the flowers, and a stag rests. Three boys gesture in the hills, and the trees are ripe with berries. Kokoschka speaks of consummation:

I reach into the lake and plunge my
hand
into your hair.

Kokoschka wants to banish shame:

Away sinful, fraudulent scruples!
There are bright fires in the dwarf
forests.

In the dream, he must overcome bourgeois scruples and find love as a complete man, wholly unfettered by shame—"hesitancy and longing, baseless shame"—which is itself shameful because it cripples love. This is the essence of the work: the banishing of shame and the initiation of the poet into the world of dreams. *Die träumenden Knaben* orchestrates this process in a hallucinatory and expressionist manner, moving between various dream states. Freud describes the conflation of images in the nonlinear narrative of the dreamworld. The dream acts "like the painter who, in a picture of the School of Athens or of Parnassus, represents in one group all the philosophers or all the poets."⁷ Freud further observes that dreams are "not clothed in the prosaic language usually employed by our thoughts, but are on the contrary represented symbolically by means of similes and metaphors, in images resembling those of poetic speech."⁸

What relates Freud's early work on dreams to Kokoschka's work is the use of *ekphrasis* as a means of describing the visual world of dreams, focusing on expressive qualities without allegiance to linear narrative.⁹ Kokoschka himself was deeply invested in the concept of individual experience and vision, and the use of the unconscious and the irrational to create art. The artist once remarked to J. P. Hodin, "Since the Renaissance the thread of life has been broken; that is what is called Rationalism. The Dark Ages are still visionary, but with the advent of intellectual Classicism and Humanism the only admissible approach has been logical."¹⁰ For Kokoschka, the composition of *Die träumenden Knaben* moves beyond rationalism. The artist stands in the

landscape and observes the events and processions around him, an ecstatic and expressive example of poetic *ekphrasis*:

I wait beside a Peruvian tree of stone,
 its many-fingered leaf arms reach
 like frightened wrists and fingers
 except that a contorted band of lighter
 color
 lures the mute animals in the dark air
 away from falling starflowers,
 quickening the blood,
 in fours and fives, out of the green
 breathing sea forests
 where it quietly rains.
 They creep away, waves beating
 over the woods, penetrating
 the rootless, red-flowering,
 unnumbered air-twigs—
 like hair in seawater they dive and suck
 out of this wind through green waves.

This fragmentary imagery forms a dream-like aesthetic experience. The narrator encounters strange creatures in a kinetic landscape, trees reach out, animals proceed in rhythm with a breathing sea forest. Kokoschka's poetry creates a surreal world that fluctuates between the conscious and the unconscious. Freud describes the process of dream formation as one in which "displacement-transference and displacement of psychical intensities [occur]. Dream displacement is one of the chief methods by which distortion is achieved."¹¹

However, in keeping with the labyrinthine world of dream states, Kokoschka's lines do not always distort or create a particularly nightmarish quality. They also explore the sensuality of human love:

Once I was alone in my white room,
 yet perhaps even then I carried you
 inside.
 Now you stay and speak to me,

a voice issuing from pollen-heavy
 flowers.

Other lines describe sexual contact in the language of hallucinatory sensuality:

Night. The heat overcame me
 there in the woods.
 The copulating snake stroked her skin
 against a hot stone, the water-stag
 rubbed
 his horns on the cinnamon bush.
 I smelled the musk of the animals
 in the undergrowth.

The poet identifies with these sexually active creatures. Momentarily peaceful, the stag in plate 5 may symbolize the development of the young poet entering his first sexual season. The fluctuation and shifting of the language signals to us the entrance into the dreamworld.

I lie in dream for anxious hours, sobbing
 and twitching like a child helplessly
 driven from the lair into pubescence.
 This is not infancy I endure,
 nor manhood, only boyhood:
 hesitancy, and longing, baseless shame
 of growing, greenness, overflowing
 feelings,
 loneliness.

Kokoschka once described the book as a love letter to the young Swedish Kunstgewerbeschule student Lilith Lang, with whom he was infatuated at the time. This passage reveals the confusion of a boy's sexual awakening.¹² However, the greater part of Kokoschka's visionary poem speaks of the sweetness of a new love affair, where shame has no place:

A maiden visits me.
 Your lean, unlined fingers should hang

on my knees like sated flowers.
 The green trees love you, and the red
 hands
 embroidered on the blanket in the hut
 love you,
 I say aloud, the sea grass on which you
 lie loves you, too.
 I could almost say it: a man loves you.

Here Kokoschka describes two separate phases of a dream. The mood changes radically; the nightmare of the first extract is not the same dream as the idyllic bed-of-sea-grass dream, in which the poet feels no shame. Rather, he now experiences diffidence (or fear of diffidence)—or, perhaps, a sense of the difficulty of articulating such powerful emotions. By varying the length of the verse line and by breaking the phrases with a slash at unexpected intervals, Kokoschka underscores the dissonance of the dream.

The poem's dream sequences demand a reading that does not follow a straightforward pattern. Gaps force the reader to make intuitive leaps and to participate in the dissonant, irregular, and surreal dreamworld that reflects the unconscious. These narrative gaps are deliberately abstracted and stylized to elicit a specific response in the reader. Freud also emphasizes the power of poetic dissonance to illuminate the creative visual power of dreams in *ekphrasis*: "The way in which dreams treat the category of contraries and contradictories is highly remarkable. It is simply disregarded. 'No' seems not to exist so far as dreams are concerned. They show a particular preference for combining contraries into a unity or for representing them as the same thing. Dreams feel themselves at liberty, moreover, to represent any element by its wishful contrary; so there is no way of deciding at first glance whether any element that admits of a

contrary is present in the dream-thoughts as a positive or as a negative."¹³

Kokoschka seeks to recast poetry and imagery from the natural world to a landscape of memory, dream, wakefulness, and sleep. In so doing, his project is tied, poetically and conceptually, to Freud's account of dream work. Beyond the explicit exploration of dreams, Kokoschka's inventive formal tactics must also be examined. It is the artist's intention to represent objects of the world apart from their usual reality, mirroring Freud's interpretation of dreams: "But just as the art of painting eventually found a way of expressing by means other than the floating labels, at least the intention of the words of the personages represented—affection, threats, warnings, and so on—so too there is a possible means by which dreams can take account of some of the logical relations between their dream thoughts."¹⁴

Kokoschka imposes formal and conceptual shifts upon his book of graphic images and poetry. He subverts formal traditional artistic and literary structures of allegory, mythology, and naturalism. If we regard Kokoschka's *Die träumenden Knaben* as a collection of short verses representing a night of dreaming, the work can be seen as a suite of expressionist lyric poems about the dream state. Observation, memory, thought, and feeling are organized in a variety of ways. The poet takes pleasure in the innocence of youth and the stirring of a new sexuality.¹⁵ The poetry thus resembles the work of Rimbaud and Baudelaire, who pioneered the notion that the artist must yield to the powers of the unconscious.

Kokoschka's 1912 lecture "On the Nature of Visions" reveals his conceptualization of the mind's shifts between the conscious,

waking world and the unconscious dream-world: "If I am asked to make this all plain and natural the things themselves must answer for me, as it were bearing their own witness. For I have represented them, I have taken their place and put on their semblance through my visions. It is the psyche, which speaks."¹⁶ In *Die träumenden Knaben*, Kokoschka transforms natural objects and empirical reality through the unconscious and dreams. Taken together, the poem and lithographs are the aesthetic representation of the psychic space of the dream. They constitute an early example of dream thought in the creative world. The artist exists on the margin between fantasy and nightmare. For Kokoschka, the intangible spiritual world existed as an organic whole outside of the material and natural world: "This experience cannot be fixed; for the vision is moving, an impression growing and becoming visual, imparting a power to the mind. It can be evoked but never defined."¹⁷ Freud describes such encounters in the imaginative terrain of the dream: "the words which put together in this way are no longer nonsensical but may form a poetical phrase of the greatest beauty and significance."¹⁸

Freud believed that artists have a flexibility of repression and that psychoanalysis can provide information about the creative process. He thought that we overestimate the conscious character of intellectual and artistic production.¹⁹ In 1914, Freud wrote, "Unconscious psychic activity enabled us to get the first glimpse into the nature of poetic creativeness."²⁰ Further, in the 1907 essay "Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's *Gradiva*," Freud suggested that the artist draws on sources not yet available to science; he has access to the world of the irrational unconscious dream state.

It is surely significant that Kokoschka's autobiography *Mein Leben* (1971) begins with a great fire on the night of his birth. Flames light the sky as if to signify the visionary talent of the infant, perhaps this symbolism related to a conflation of his own birth and conception with the creative process. Kokoschka believed in the portentous symbolism of his birth night, just as he believed in his ability to look into the souls of the people he painted. This "visionary" talent manifests itself in a lifetime of remarkably stirring work and in Kokoschka's polemical belief in the artist as visionary, a medium into the world of dreams and the unconscious. He claimed that he had inherited the gift of second sight from his mother and described his memories as if they were visions; orchestrating fantastic compositions of intense color and detail, anticipating his hallucinatory dreamscape poetry. This is one of the most important connections between the imaginative trajectories of Kokoschka and Freud: just as Kokoschka saw his visions and dreams as sources of creativity, so was Freud fascinated by the complex creative and poetic power of dream work.²¹

Finally, as expressed in his visionary poem, Kokoschka sees dreams as a mysterious vehicle for the truth of a deeper reality:

my dreams
are like the northern, snowbound
mountains
that hide the ancient fairy tales.

Kokoschka seeks the deep human truths hidden away in dreams like the ancient wisdom of the folk tradition, buried in remote communities far removed from the daytime world of logic.

NOTES

1. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: Bard, 1998), p. 349; repr. from *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London: 1953–1974), IV–V (1900–1901).

2. Nicholas Rand and Maria Torok, "Questions to Freudian Psychoanalysis: Dream Interpretation, Reality, Fantasy," *Critical Inquiry* 19 (Spring 1993):570–599. It should be noted that Kokoschka rejected the association with or the influence of psychoanalysis, although he acknowledged in his autobiography that expressionism was a contemporary rival of Freud's development of psychoanalysis. See Oskar Kokoschka, *My Life*, trans. David Britt (London: Thames & Hudson, 1974), p. 66. However, it should also be observed that Kokoschka's autobiographical narratives generally place a sometimes exaggerated emphasis on his singularly independent powers of artistic innovation.

3. J. P. Hodin, "The Foothills of Art," in *Oskar Kokoschka: The Artist and His Time* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1966), p. 68.

4. Because of this seemingly illogical order of relationships, it can be said that the juxtaposition of the lithographs creates images that can be compared to the iconic and resonant simplified images or dream fragments (condensation) as described by Freud, and the text of the poem as the more complex dream thoughts. Condensation occurs in dreams when multiple images become one image or narrative and when a complex narrative becomes simple, like a metaphor. Displacement occurs when an image or symbol becomes conflated with another related thing like the poetic trope of metonymy.

5. All quotations are from the original translation by R. Berland, A. Fisher, and Dr. K. Berland. I would especially like to acknowledge Mrs. George Mauner for her comments on the original text.

6. Freud, p. 312.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 349.

8. *Id.*, *On Dreams* (1901), in *The Standard Edition*, V (1900–1901), p. 74.

9. *Id.*, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 315. Freud describes this same process as condensation, in which fragmentary and incomplete images and events are brought about by omission. The process is not plastic but a part of the unconscious, which cannot be measured in the same way that one can evaluate the conscious mind.

10. Hodin, p. 68.

11. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 343.

12. Carl E. Schorske introduced the idea of the stream of consciousness in the poem and asserted that *Die träumenden Knaben* shares the common expressionist theme: shame. For Schorske, the book evokes a confused, frustrating erotic dream, complemented by illustrations of despairing figures in nightmarish landscapes awash in anxiety. Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1981), pp. 328–335.

13. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 353.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 348.

15. Peter Vergo, *Art in Vienna, 1898–1918: Klimt, Kokoschka, Schiele and Their Contemporaries* (London: Phaidon, 1975), pp. 190–191. Vergo describes the lines of *Die träumenden Knaben* as full of "mock naiveté," as in such verbal images as "my body is like a tongue-damp tree."

16. Oskar Kokoschka, "On the Nature of Visions" (1912), in Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 170–174.

17. *Ibid.*

18. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 312.

19. *Id.*, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (Part III) (1916–1917), in *The Standard Edition*, XVI (1916–1917), pp. 25–26.

20. *Id.*, *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement*, rev. and ed. James Strachey, trans. Joan Riviere (New York: Norton, 1967), p. 14.

21. While Freud believed in the artistic genius's access to the unconscious mind and a marked freedom from repression, Freud himself was generally indifferent to contemporary art, and his own collection consisted primarily of antique and Renaissance objects.