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## The Adult Reader of Children's Literature

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# The Hidden Fairy Tale: Oskar Kokoschka's *Die träumenden Knaben*

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ABSTRACT – Kokoschka's first literary work *The Dreaming Youths* (*Die träumenden Knaben*) was published in 1908. The work includes a poem with eight colored and two black and white lithographs. Although the young artist was commissioned by the Wiener Werkstätte to make a children's picture book, the end result seemed quite different: a sort of personal tale of self-discovery and sexual awakening during puberty placed in a dream scenario. Kokoschka himself remembers in his autobiography only following the task in the first lithograph. The aim of this paper is to show how Kokoschka actually continued to draw on the language of fairy tales, although apparently taking distance from it. The crucial role of children's literature in adult life emerges especially within the process of shaping childhood memories and approaching traumatic experiences. The use of fairy tales becomes, therefore, an autobiographical urge and a means to tell personal experience through a universal language.

KEYWORDS – fairy tale; fin-de-siècle; Kokoschka; dream; Freud; Brothers Grimm; Comenius; picture book; fish; mermaid.

This visible nature, and this common world,  
Is all too narrow; yea, a deeper import  
Lurks in the legend told my infant years  
Than lies upon that truth, we live to learn.  
F. Schiller, *The Piccolomini* (transl. by S. T. Coleridge)

“My dreams are like the / north / where snow mountains hide ancient fairy tales”<sup>1</sup> writes Oskar Kokoschka (1886-1980) in *The Dreaming Youths* (*Die träumenden Knaben*), his first literary work published by the Wiener

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<sup>1</sup> “meine träume sind wie der / norden / wo schneeberge uralte märchen verbergen” (Kokoschka 1996, 20-21). Unless otherwise indicated translations are mine. Kokoschka's colored lithographs are visible in: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/illustratedbooks/26721>.

Werkstätte in 1908. With these few verses the young artist creates an interesting link between dreams and fairy tales. Moreover, he sums up a thought that runs throughout his work: the idea that there is a “truth” to be discovered which lies hidden beneath the surface. This point of view was indeed widely shared in fin-de-siècle Vienna and influenced many pioneers of that time (Timms 1996; Kandel 2012). Especially Freud showed how dreams reveal their meaning not in the manifest but rather in the latent content. Dream analysis, which Freud calls the “royal road to the unconscious”, discloses what lurks behind the masks of social conventions and cultural models; it allows access to the unconscious material of the psyche. Likewise, fairy tales convey at the same time overt and covert meanings. That is, they can be interpreted in Freudian terms of manifest and latent content in order to reveal deeper meanings related to the unconscious (Freud [1899] 1942; Bettelheim [1976] 1991; Lüthi [1947] 2005). However, as Kokoschka suggests, in *The Dreaming Youths* fairy tales are still to be discovered.

Initially only a few recognized the significance of *The Dreaming Youths*, while today it is considered one of the great art books of the twentieth century, as well as an early example of expressionist poetry. Printed at first in five hundred copies, the book includes a long poem and a series of lithographs created between the end of 1907 and the beginning of 1908. The book presentation took place in June 1908 at the Wiener Kunstschau<sup>2</sup> along with the display of the now lost tapestry design titled *The Dream Bearers* (*Die Traumtragenden*). These works immediately aroused the interest of critics albeit mainly in a negative sense; through Kokoschka’s provocative and controversial attitude, he earned himself the legendary nickname of “wild savage”, “Oberwildling” (Hevesi 1909, 313). At the art show, Kokoschka met the architect Adolf Loos, his most important mentor in the years to come, who procured him portrait commissions and introduced him to the cultural circle around Karl Kraus and Peter Altenberg. Despite his closeness to Klimt and his “group”, Kokoschka began to take distance from the decorative style of the Jugendstil, laying bare the hardest and most disconcerting aspects of existence. Later a new edition of *The Dreaming Youths* was published in 1917 by the German publisher Kurt Wolff in Leipzig with slight variations<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Without being yet accompanied by images, the text of *The Dreaming Youths* was first read in 1907 in the Kabarett Fledermaus (Yates 1996, 23-58).

<sup>3</sup> About the variants in Kokoschka’s overall work, see Denkler 1966; Mazza 2008.

When introducing this work, usually it is only briefly mentioned that its existence is connected to the wish to have a children's picture book made: in October 1807 Fritz Wärndorfer, one of the founders and then director of the Wiener Werkstätte, asked the young artist to draw a children's book. At that time Kokoschka was a student at the Kunstgewerbeschule (School of Applied Arts), where he was strongly influenced by the Vienna Secession since several of its main representatives were teaching there. To this regard, Kokoschka recalls in his autobiography:

The original assignment was to draw a children's book; it should be colored lithographs. But only in the first sheet I did stick to the task. The other sheets were then created with my verses as free pictorial poetry. I called the book that way, because it was a kind of report in words and pictures about my state of mind at that time.<sup>4</sup>

As the artist himself has spoken of a "love letter"<sup>5</sup> and not of a fairy tale, generally scholars point out that he has created an autobiographical fantasy, a dream poem, a phantasmagorical vision, a book of dreams. And yet, traces of the original idea remain in the definition of "fairy tale for adults", often superficially attributed to the book due to the undeniable fairy-tale atmosphere, that is however loaded with strong erotic and sensual tensions perceived as too "adult" and, therefore, unsuitable for innocent eyes. This definition has indeed never been adequately explored, nevertheless, saying that *The Dreaming Youths* is a "fairy tale for adults" excludes not only children, but also young adults from the critical discourse on the work, while childhood and youth are essential to Kokoschka's creative vision<sup>6</sup>. The aim of this paper is to show how the reference to children's literature is actually crucial for the understanding of the work itself as well as for Kokoschka's artistic develop-

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<sup>4</sup> "Der Auftrag lautete ursprünglich, ein Kinderbuch zu zeichnen; es sollten farbige Lithografien sein. Aber nur im ersten Blatt hielt ich mich an die Aufgabe. Die anderen Blätter entstanden dann mit meinen Versen als freie Bilddichtung. Ich nannte das Buch so, weil es eine Art Bericht in Wort und Bild über meinen damaligen Seelenzustand gewesen ist" (Kokoschka 1971, 52).

<sup>5</sup> "The book was my first love letter. But she had already gone out of my life by the time it appeared" ("Das Buch ist mein erster Liebesbrief gewesen, doch war sie bereits aus meinem Lebenskreis verschwunden, als das Buch erschien". Kokoschka 1971, 52).

<sup>6</sup> References to children's peculiar way of seeing are detectable throughout Kokoschka's work. Moreover, the artist paid great attention to teaching, especially to young people. On this topic see, for example, Toub 1994.

ment. Trying to detect the fairy-tale elements in the text and pictures, it is impossible to make a clear distinction between a fairy tale for adults and one for children (Zipes [1983] 2012, 3). In fact, to say it with Jack Zipes, “one can speak about the single literary fairy tale for children as a symbolic act infused by the ideological viewpoint of the individual author” (*ibid.*). Moving in the same direction, Perry Nodelman underlines that authors of literature for children are mainly adults. In other words, he suggests that when it is about a so-called fairy tale for children, an adult is always hiding behind it (Nodelman 2008; Richter and Vogt 1974). However, in *The Dreaming Youths* the dynamic is reversed since the work is not immediately recognizable as a “classical” fairy tale, while the author’s presence is actually very strong. Perfectly in line with Kokoschka’s approach of bringing to light the truth hidden beneath the surface, in this case, it’s not about an author hiding behind the fairy tale, but rather about fairy tales hidden behind the author’s overwhelming presence.

Then twenty-one years old, Kokoschka recalls his youthful and unrequited love for Lilith, a young student at the Kunstgewerbeschule, in a series of seven fantastic dreams. The young, unnamed boy and the girl Li are put in an imaginary setting which changes all the time (island, forest, see, lake), with lots of flowers and plants, and populated by birds, fish, and other animals. In the last lithograph entitled “The Girl Li and I” (“Das Mädchen Li und Ich”. Kokoschka 1996, 39) one can even recognize a self-portrait of the artist. That is, Kokoschka tells an autobiographical story drawing significantly from the language of fairy tales which he learned as a child (Kokoschka 1971, 31-46). Therefore, it will be interesting to intertwine these different autobiographical moments. Hence, if it is true, as stated by the author, that he has performed the task of creating a fairy tale only in the first lithograph, however, while moving on to the autobiographical account of sexual awakening expressed through the dream scenario in the rest of the book, this does not mean that he has really abandoned the fairy-tale dimension.

In this regard, I would like to recall first of all, that the literary fairy tale derives from the folktale which, in turn, seems to tell in symbolic form the rites of passage from childhood into adulthood<sup>7</sup>. So, similar to fairy

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, it is not easy to define the historical rise and meaning of a folktale (Zipes [1983] 2012, 6). However, most of the constitutive elements of fairy tales date back to rites and myths that concern the cycle of initiation (Propp [1949] 1992; Propp [1966] 2000; Bettelheim 1954).

tales, *The Dreaming Youths* deals with the transition period of puberty<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, artistically it is the expression of transition: if on the one hand Kokoschka dedicates “in admiration” *The Dreaming Youths* to Klimt and, in fact, there are many elements, both in the text and in the lithographs that draw on the Jugendstil, on the other hand there are clues that indicate a clear detachment (Husslein-Arco and Weidinger 2008). A reference to this transition, and perhaps a sign of gratitude for his master, can be found in the second colored lithograph “The Boat” (“Das Schiff”. Kokoschka 1996, 15), in which a man in a black tunic supports a young man who could be Kokoschka himself<sup>9</sup>. In sum, *The Dreaming Youths* can be considered as the representation of a personal initiation rite told through the universal language of his childhood fairy tales which re-emerge in fragments within his adolescent dreams.

One of the most interesting statements related to our discourse is that of the art critic Ludwig Hewesi who defined *The Dreaming Youths* as a “fairy tale not for children of the philistines” (Hevesi 1909, 313). In other words, this definition stresses the fairy-tale nature of the work and points out one of the possible characteristics of this genre, namely, its subversive character as it is not suitable for a certain type of audience<sup>10</sup>. Kokoschka's *The Dreaming Youths* is to be considered in the wake of works that break with the bourgeois moral code of the older generation, such as Wedekind's *Spring's Awakening* (*Frühlings Erwachen*, 1891)<sup>11</sup> and other works in which adolescents and children seem to have lost their innocence. Particularly eloquent in the depiction of the sexualisation of children are some pictures published in the popular art periodical *Jugend* in which children assume provocative sexual poses, especially in the illustrations dealing with the original sin<sup>12</sup>. In line with this

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<sup>8</sup> The popularity of fairy tales nowadays is probably due to the fact that “the tale takes up and continues ‘initiation’ on the level of the imaginary” (Eliade 1968, 202).

<sup>9</sup> The sense of being in a transition phase is also given by the fact that only one foot of both figures is visible. On the symbolic meaning of lameness and monosandalism, see Ginzburg [1989] 2008.

<sup>10</sup> On the subversive nature of fairy tales, see Zipes [1983] 2012.

<sup>11</sup> About Wedekind's influence on Kokoschka, see Borowitz 1974. Most likely Kokoschka had seen Wedekind's *Spring's Awakening* directed by Max Reinhardt on tour in Vienna in summer 1907. Further influences from other previous plays directed by Reinhardt, such as Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* (1903), can be detected in Kokoschka's work, especially in *Murderer, the Hope of Women*.

<sup>12</sup> The art periodical questioned the innocence of children in several pictures. See, for example, the following illustrations: Josef Rudolf Witzel, “The Reversed Fall of Man”,

trend, Freud challenged the angelic stereotype of children from a medical point of view. In 1905, he published *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (*Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie*), in which he discussed sexual manifestations in infancy and childhood. Kokoschka himself was interested in representing sexual awareness in children<sup>13</sup> as can be seen in *Children Playing* (*Spielende Kinder*, 1909). The group portrait, that illustrates two children of the Stein family while playing, is considered a masterpiece of Kokoschka's early Expressionism. Certain aspects of this painting are actually anticipated by *The Dreaming Youths*, where the link to Freud is even more evident.

In his book *The Story of Art*, Gombrich highlights Kokoschka's ability to represent the richness and complexity of children's inner world and states about *Children Playing*:

To us it looks amazingly lifelike and convincing, but it is not hard to understand why this type of portrait aroused such opposition. [...] In the past, a child in a painting had to look pretty and contented. Grownups did not want to know about the sorrows and agonies of childhood, and they resented it if this subject was brought home to them. But Kokoschka would not fall in with these demands of convention. We feel that he has looked at these children with a deep sympathy and compassion. He has caught their wistfulness and dreaminess, the awkwardness of their movements and the disharmonies of their growing bodies. To bring all this out he could not rely on the accepted stock-in-trade of correct draughtsmanship, but his work is all the more true to life for what it lacks in conventional accuracy. (Gombrich 1978, 550-51)

So, according to Gombrich, Kokoschka is able to tune into the world of childhood, a period subject to the idealization of adults, but which presents all the hardships of growth. To this regard it has been noted how the artist's empathy in *Children Playing* stems from an intimate identification with the two children (Shapira 2001, 507). In *The Dreaming Youths* the author's identification is even stronger as the poetic self coincides most likely with Kokoschka's own voice. Combining expressionistic verses, whose meaning is almost incomprehensible, with eight colored and two small black and white lithographs, which do not necessarily reflect the content of the text, Kokoschka tackles the theme

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March 3, 1904; Ludwig von Zumbusch, "The Fall of Man", August 3, 1909; and the cover pages published on January 2, 1987 and on March 13, 1897 (Shapira 2001, 511-16).

<sup>13</sup> Probably Kokoschka was aware of Freud's theories on sexuality as they were widespread in fin-de-siècle Vienna. About Freud's influence on Kokoschka, see Kandel 2012, 164-65.



of the discovery of corporeity and the awakening of sexuality in adolescents, dwelling above all on the contrasting feelings that accompany this experience. This is how the poetic self expresses itself:

not the events of childhood go through me  
and not those of manliness  
but boyishness  
a hesitant desire  
the unfounded shame before what is growing  
and the youth  
the overflowing and loneliness  
I recognized myself and my body  
and I fell down and dreamt love <sup>14</sup>

The inner flow is graphically rendered in the text by the choice to write the nouns in lower case and to eliminate much of the punctuation creating a cascade of words that affects the reader <sup>15</sup>. The emotions that emerge in contrasting ways during puberty, i.e. fear, shame, desire, guilt, excitement, aggressiveness, are represented in dreamlike scenarios which are central both in the text and in the images, creating an intense dialogue between the two mediums, even when they seem to take distance from each other. As far as the rather obscure textual part is concerned, one can however identify a structure composed of a prologue and a series of seven dreams, each of which is introduced by “and I fell down and dreamt” (“und ich fiel nieder und träumte”).

The dreamlike appearance of the pictures is expressed not only by the symbolic characterization of the objects and by bright colors, but also by the depiction of various moments in time simultaneously within each single image. This is a type of composition that, while on the one hand could be traced back to medieval art, on the other is undoubtedly typical of dreams. The abundance of elements that populate the lithographs, but also the text, recall some

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<sup>14</sup> “nicht die ereignisse der kindheit gehen durch mich / und nicht die der mannbarkeit / aber die knabenhaftigkeit / ein zögerndes wollen / das unbegründete schämen vor dem wachsenden / und die jünglingsschaft / das überfließen und alleinsein / ich erkannte mich und meinen körper / und ich fiel nieder und träumte die liebe” (Kokoschka 1996, 21).

<sup>15</sup> This choice is not respected in all variants (Mazza 2008, 133). In this regard I would like to mention that Jakob Grimm was in favor of a spelling reform in order to eliminate the use of capital letters for German nouns. This represents a further link to Grimm, of which Kokoschka's mentor Adolf Loos was however a great admirer.

of Freud's reflections (Berland 2008; Rand and Torok 1993) on the role of internal stimuli in the aetiology of dreams as described in *The Interpretation of Dreams*:

This explains the remarkable tendency of dreams to delude the eyes with numbers of similar or identical objects. Thus we see outspread before our eyes innumerable birds, butterflies, fishes, coloured beads, flowers, etc. Here the luminous dust in the dark field of vision has assumed fantastic forms, and the many luminous points of which it consists are embodied in our dreams in as many single images, which, owing to the mobility of the luminous chaos, are seen as moving objects.<sup>16</sup>

However, this multiplicity of elements that all together affect the eye of the viewer, typical of dreams, can be found, as far as Kokoschka is concerned, in another source that has to do with children's literature. In his autobiography Kokoschka remembers the impression made by the very first book given to him by his father before he could even read:

My first book – it had a life-long effect on me – was the picture book *Orbis Pictus* by the bishop of the Moravian Brethren Church Jan Amos Comenius.

In this book he displayed to the youth pictures of everything he believed existed. For each picture, explanations could be learned in four languages. However, I first stuck to the pictures, because this was the real world that was waiting for me.<sup>17</sup>

*Orbis Sensualium Pictus* (*Visible World in Pictures*), written by the Czech educator Comenius and published in 1658 is by many considered as the first

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<sup>16</sup> “So erklärt sich die merkwürdige Neigung des Traumes, ähnliche oder ganz übereinstimmende Objekte in der Mehrzahl dem Auge vorzuzaubern. Zahllose Vögel, Schmetterlinge, Fische, bunte Perlen, Blumen u. dgl. sehen wir vor uns ausgebreitet. Hier hat der Lichtstaub des dunkeln Gesichtsfeldes phantastische Gestalt angenommen, und die zahlreichen Lichtpunkte, aus denen derselbe besteht, werden von dem Traum in ebenso vielen Einzelbildern verkörpert, die wegen der Beweglichkeit des Lichtchaos als bewegte Gegenstände angeschaut werden” (Freud [1899] 1942, 32-33). Trying to explain the multiplicity of images in dreams, Freud quotes here W. Wundt.

<sup>17</sup> “Mein erstes Buch – es hat ein Leben lang auf mich gewirkt – war das Anschauungsbuch ‘Orbis pictus’ des Bischofs der Mährischen Brüdergemeinde Jan Amos Comenius. In diesem Buch führte er alles, was seiner Meinung nach existierte, in Bildern der Jugend vor Augen. Zu jeder Abbildung konnte man in vier Sprachen die Erklärungen lernen. Ich hielt mich allerdings erst an die Bilder; denn das war die wirkliche Welt, die auf mich wartete” (Kokoschka 1971, 38).

children's picture book. The intent of the work was to educate children by giving space to a visual approach which "was a breakthrough in education for the young [...] Unlike treatises on education and grammatical handbooks, it is aimed directly at the young and attempts to engage on their level" (McNamara 2014). Comenius never ceased to inspire Kokoschka (Kokoschka 1919; 1976), he fascinated him so much that he even wrote a drama about him called *Comenius* (1972). The pictures in *Orbis Pictus* tend to concentrate the most things simultaneously in order to display the world to children's eyes. But what really seemed to interest Kokoschka in the book, were the anatomical illustrations of the muscles, skeleton, and organs (Kandel 2012, 159-60). Similarly, the invention of X-rays made a great impression on him later, as they allowed one to investigate the inside of human bodies. The urge to bring out what lies beneath the surface forged Kokoschka's way of seeing, he "associated the 'truth' of a person with the internal physical layers revealed underneath the skin"<sup>18</sup>. Not surprisingly, the style in his early portraits has been called "nerve painting or soul painting" (Kramer 2002). Adolf Loos even stated about him that he had "X-ray eyes" because he could go through the people's skin. Moreover, this fascination for dissected bodies highlights once again a parallel with Freud who recognizes in the dissected bodies a metaphor of self-analysis (Freud [1899] 1942, 481; Reinhardt 2020, 31-35). This shows all the difficulties of looking into the soul of another person as well as into one's own. The invasive character of self-knowledge and self-awareness is also an issue in *The Dreaming Youths*. Just at the beginning of the poem a red fish is torn apart:

red fishling  
fishling red  
I stab you to death with the triple-bladed knife  
tear you apart with my fingers  
that there be an end to this mute circling

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<sup>18</sup> See Cernuschi 2002, 20. Kokoschka painted "face masks" for his actors: he covered the surface of their skin with lines representing arteries, veins and nerve endings. Moreover, in some cases, he traced the skeletal musculature over the actors' clothes. The same patterns can be found in some of his illustrations such as, for example, the sketches for *Murderer, the Hope of Women* (Innes 1984, 105-08). Probably this kind of depictions is also the result of Kokoschka's fascination for the primitive masks he had studied at Vienna's Ethnological Museum. In particular, the representation of the oceanic mask in Kokoschka seems to blend with the motif of the échorché (Gandelman 1986, 61-68).

red fishling  
fishling red  
my little knife is red  
my fingers are red  
in the bowl a fishling sinks dead  
and I fell down and dreamt love <sup>19</sup>

The red fish has been puzzling scholars: on the one hand, the stabbed and torn apart fish was seen as a transposition of Lilith's "red peasant-weave skirt" (Kokoschka 1971, 52), so that the whole scene becomes the expression of an autobiographical fantasy of rape and mutilation. On the other hand, the fish could refer to the author's sexuality and thus becomes the representation of self-mutilation (Reinhardt 2020, 36-39). However, the prologue, which is outside the dreamlike dimension since it serves as an introduction to the dreams, clearly takes on the features of a fairy tale, in fact, it sounds like a nursery rhyme. In his book *Re/Casting Kokoschka*, Claude Cernuschi assumes that some elements of *The Dreaming Youths*, at first traced back to Freud's studies, seem to find their origin in literary sources: "in Grimm's fairy tales, for example, motifs of young children, gardens, and flowers, as well as scenes of mutilation and murder, frequently occur" (Cernuschi 2002, 115-18) <sup>20</sup>. We must not forget that there are fairy tales with terrible and gruesome details such as those contained in the first of the seven editions of the Brothers Grimm *Children and Household Tales* (*Kinder-und Hausmärchen*, 1812/15). These tales "are often about 'wounded' young people" (Zipes 2014, XXXV) and depict conflicts which still exist today. These are indeed fairy tales "not for children of the philistines", however, like *The Dreaming Youths*, they convey unique wisdoms through their uncomfortable and disconcerting content. Kokoschka seems to refer exactly to this type of narrative, when he recalls the fairy tales hidden under the whiteness of snow mountains. Among all possible references to the Grimms' tales, I would like to recall *The Golden*

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<sup>19</sup> "rot fischlein / fischlein rot / stech dich mit dem dreischneidigen messer tot / reiß dich mit meinen fingern entzwei / daß dem stummen kreisen ein ende sei // rot fischlein / fischlein rot / mein messerlein ist rot / meine fingerlein sind rot / in der schale sinkt ein fischlein tot // und ich fiel nieder und träumte" (Kokoschka 1996, 9).

<sup>20</sup> Cernuschi highlights that some elements in Kokoschka's *The Dreaming Youths* seem to refer to Freud's essay "Screen Memories" ("Über Deckerinnerungen", 1899). However, the scholar identifies the common influence of literary sources in both works (Cernuschi 2002, 118).

*Children* in which a fish is cut into pieces to give birth to something else and thus continue the narration <sup>21</sup>:

“Listen,” said the fish, “Take me home with you and cut me into six pieces. Give two to your wife to eat, two to your horse, and plant two in the ground. You’ll reap a blessing by doing this. Your wife will give birth to two golden children. The horse will produce two golden foals. And two golden lilies will grow from the earth.” (Grimm 2014, 206)

In *The Dreaming Youths*, the fish cut into pieces starts the narration as well, giving space to the following seven dreams, however a symbolic number in the fairy tale genre. The horror core serves to initiate the tale and, therefore, the inner evolution of the protagonist. Moreover, the image of the fish refers to an episode of Kokoschka’s childhood. In his autobiography (Kokoschka 1971, 37-39) the artist recalls his fascination for an older female friend with a wooden leg. Sometimes she embarrassed him with her caresses. In those moments tears came to her eyes. She often told the little boy fairy tales and stories about famous heroes and heroines. His favorite tale was the one of *Melusine*, a female spirit of fresh waters, who similarly to a mermaid is a serpent or fish from the waist down. But one day a tragedy occurs: the woman drowns herself in a well. Therefore, Kokoschka is abruptly confronted with death of which he struggles to become aware. To overcome this traumatic experience, he uses fairy tales: he imagines the woman in the water with her wooden leg finally transformed into the waving tail of a fish. Very significantly he does not resort to a magic dimension to escape in a parallel fantasy world, but he uses it to cope with the difficulties of growth.

This episode shows a clear reference to *The Dreaming Youths*. In the first lithograph, “Sleepers” (“Schlafende”. Kokoschka 1996, 11) there is a sleeping woman surrounded by water and fish in which similarities with his childhood friend can be grasped. In confirmation of this, there is one more detail that has been completely ignored so far: on closer inspection, those that pop out of the woman’s dress are not feet but a fish tail. The allusion to the figure of Melusine is also confirmed by the name of the poem’s heroine Li. Kokoschka states in his autobiography that the female protagonist of *The Dreaming Youths* is Lilith Lang a Swedish girl coming “from the lost bird forests of the North” (1971, 52), when in reality she was the sister of his

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<sup>21</sup> Fairy tales arise from some kind of lack or mutilation, that destabilizes the status quo and forces the hero to act (Calvino [1996] 2019, 122; Propp [1966] 2000).

friend Erwin Lang. This indicates how the artist tried to emphasize the fairy-tale origin of the girl, moreover, I would like to recall that the myth of Lilith is closely related to the figure of Melusine. This mythical reference is indeed a common thread that connects many of the female figures created by the artist (Grazioli 1999, 115-35). In this way, Kokoschka defines a very strong core that runs throughout his works and that originally draws on fairy tales<sup>22</sup>.

Of course, the accounts conveyed by Kokoschka in his autobiography are retrospective projections of an adult on the years of childhood and youth and, therefore, their truthfulness can be debated (Cernuschi 1961, 118). However, Kokoschka shows the fundamental function of fairy tales in the life of an individual. This function is more evident in children:

[...] a child needs to understand what is going on within his conscious self so that he can also cope with that which goes on in his unconscious. He can achieve this understanding, and with it the ability to cope, not through rational comprehension of the nature and content of his unconscious, but by becoming familiar with it through spinning out daydreams – ruminating, rearranging, and fantasizing about suitable story elements in response to unconscious pressures. By doing this, the child fits unconscious content into conscious fantasies, which then enable him to deal with that content. It is here that fairy tales have unequalled value, because they offer new dimensions to the child's imagination which would be impossible for him to discover as truly on his own. (Bettelheim [1976] 1991, 7)

As one moves away from childhood, fairy tales tend to hide and disguise themselves, even though maintaining their influence on adulthood. Exactly this process Kokoschka seems to represent in *The Dreaming Youths* when he talks of hidden fairy tales and of having followed the task to create a tale only in the first lithograph. In other words, even if fairy tales are not always visible and take on the most different forms, their presence is constant. Comenius, from whom Kokoschka had learned the art of seeing, also follows a similar procedure: although he wanted to create a book which displays only the visible world, in *Orbis Pictus* he refers continuously to the invisible, to what you can't see at first sight, to what has still to be discovered. It is within this context that the new aesthetic awareness of Kokoschka emerges, at first intu-

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<sup>22</sup> I would like to point out that the motifs of fish and water associated with the female are also recurrent in Klimt's work ("Fish Blood", 1898; "Goldfish", 1901/2; "Water Snakes I", 1904/7; "Water Snakes II", 1907/7). See Cernuschi 2002, 212.

ited in *The Dreaming Youths* and later theorized in his essay *On the Nature of Visions* (*Von der Natur der Gesichte*, [1912] 1919) in which visions, both optical and inner, conscious and unconscious, have a crucial role (Timpano 2011). To say it with Kokoschka's own words: "The life of the consciousness is boundless. It interpenetrates the world and is woven through all its imagery. Thus it shares those characteristics of living which our human existence can show. [...] There is no more room for death; for though the vision disintegrates and scatters, it does so only to reform in another mode" (Kokoschka 1947, 285).

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