

Crisis, Fantasy and Creativity in Vienna:

Freud, Kohut, and the Waltz

By,

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The ability to live in reality without fundamental distortions or delusions is one of the defining characteristics of mental health. The same might be said of societies: healthy ones have non-delusional appraisals of their situational realities and have pragmatic strategies for dealing with imposing problems. Like pathological individuals who turn away from reality and enter a world of fantasy, societies can also turn away from reality and desire a regressive return to a previous state, such as a sizeable portion of the American electorate refusing to believe that global warming is a grave danger and fantasizing that it can return to an idealized America of the 1950's. This "turning away" from reality to fantasy indicates that a crisis is occurring in which an established way of life is no longer fully viable either for a person or nation; the old certainties that limit anxiety are wavering and the future is unclear.

However, crisis and the ensuing flight into fantasy need not lead only to a regressive pathology, but can also generate new possibilities, for fantasy is the psychic womb from which creativity is birthed. That is, fantasy can be a distortion of reality, an attempt to escape reality, and/or a birthplace for creating new realities. All of these aspects of fantasy were strikingly present in fin de siècle Vienna, which lived in a

delusional fantasy that it was the capital of a powerful, coherent empire--a fantasy which was disastrous insofar as it is implicated in the causes of WW I, but which also helped birth a generation of artists, musicians, and medical scientists--especially Freud--who created new possibilities for art, architecture, music, and our understanding of the human psyche. Indeed, it was Freud and a later Viennese psychoanalyst, Heinz Kohut, who constructed two of the most profound theories for understanding why and how fantasies arise in the human soul. Hence, it is to this wondrous city that we now turn in order to grasp the psychological and cultural dynamics of fantasy in human life.

Vienna, city of waltzes and dreams

In 1914, just at the commencement of the war that would shatter the Hapsburg fantasy of being a powerful empire, Rudolf Siecznski composed one of the most famous of the Viennese waltzes: "*Wien, du Stadt meiner Träume.*"—Vienna, city of my dreams. Paris had its artists, London and Berlin were power centers, but Vienna was the city of waltzes and dreams.

Fourteen years before Siecznski composed his lilting waltz, another Viennese composed a book on dreams that would become the foundational text for the new field of psychoanalysis with its extraordinary powers to explore the unconscious depths of the human mind. The unconscious fantasies and forces that Freud discovered in his consulting room found a compelling expression in the works of the great Viennese artists Klimpt, Kokoschka, and Schiele. I contend that the waltz, psychoanalysis, and

expressionism in Viennese art are all deeply interconnected through the fantasy of ecstatic eternal union, a dream-like fantasy in which erotic and narcissistic elements swirl around each other, united like a pair of Viennese waltzers.

The waltz scandalized the courts of Europe when it was invented, for it validated the romantic couple as the primary reality of the social world, and in so doing negated the formal structures of group dances, like the quadrille, and undermined the tradition of arranging marriages for social propriety and advantage. We are bi-pedal creatures and as such feel normal in any kind of movement or dance that is constructed around a two-two or four-four beat, but the waltz is in three quarters time and that throws us out of our pragmatic gait into a magical space. Unlike any other dance, the Viennese waltz swirls one into an alternative dream-like world, the fantasy of total union with a partner, a floating above all the problems of the world, a sense of exhilaration unlike any other experience.

The fantasy that the swirling motion of the waltz could fuse two separate beings into an eternal unity crept into every nook of Viennese life. You can find it in the flowing forms of Kokoschka's paintings; in the vibrant fluidity of shapes in Klimpt's voluptuous works; in the mystical tonalities of Mahler's symphonies, and in Freud's notion that at the deepest layers of psychological thought we *condense* separate realities into singular images. Even Viennese pastries swirl with such delectable creams and fillings that they alone are reason enough to come to the city. Vienna, the city of the waltz and romance, the city of dreams, the city of fantasy.

Fin de siècle Vienna was full of fantasies of idealized unions. Emperor Franz Joseph waltzed with his beautiful Bavarian cousin Elizabeth, fell in love with her, and married her, creating a fantasy union of beauty and power. But in reality the marriage was so awful that Franz Joseph took an actress for a permanent mistress, and Sisi was assassinated on one of her desperate escapes from the realities of an impossible husband and rigid court proprieties. Their son, Archduke Rudolf—heir to the throne—was not allowed the romantic union he fantastically desired and committed suicide. In fantasy, there was a unified and powerful Austro-Hungarian Empire, symbolized by the Emperor, Franz Joseph, who had been on the throne for more than half a century. In reality, the army was seriously outdated and had recently been badly defeated in the Franco-Prussian War and the Second War of Italian Independence. The multifarious ethnic groups that made up the empire were never integrated, and their fragmenting rebelliousness would bring it down. Vienna had the fantasy that it was the most civilized of cities, leading the world with its astonishing artists, musicians, writers, scientists, and architects—many of whom were Jewish. At the same time, in reality, a poisonous anti-Semitism was dangerously intensifying, and in this supposedly upright Catholic city, prostitution with its accompanying diseases seemed to be the main sexual outlet for men.

Perhaps the distorting presence of all these fantasies helped Freud generate a theory that explored in depth why fantasy arises so powerfully in the human psyche and how it plays such a significant role in both psychopathology and creativity.

Freud, fantasy, and creativity

For Freud, the prototypical psychological process is wishing, and what we wish for--what we dream about--is a fantasy. The reason why fantasizing or dreaming is seen by Freud as the basic psychological activity is that it embodies conflict, since what we wish for is typically either forbidden or unavailable. In short, the psyche is always in a kind of crisis because it embodies dangerous conflicts, and it produces fantasies to help ease the tension of these conflicts.

The primal forbidden object is, of course, the incestuous object, and an unresolved unconscious longing for this fantasy object will, for Freud, underlie most psychopathologies. However, this oedipal longing is also the ground both for creativity and our extraordinary valuation of the creative object. Perhaps the most vivid contemporary account of a Freudian understanding of creativity comes from New York psychoanalyst, Donald Moss:

The ‘creative’ object is, then, regardless of its elegance, one which, on its face, or via its mode of production, is thought of as irregular and unruly. By irregular and unruly I mean that the object or process thought “creative” is one which has apparently broken (a) rule(s) and/or violated regulations. The “creative” object is, in this sense, always transgressive. When we think of an object or person as “creative,” we are implicitly expressing our awareness of and appreciation for a successful transgression. . . .The “creative” object’s special status involves it simultaneously violating law and receiving our sanction” (2017, p. 67).

In short, the motivation both for creators to create and for us to be drawn to creative objects is that we, unconsciously, find our buried transgressive desires for the fantasized incestuous object expressed in them. Insofar as creativity always involves

breaking codes or standard practices, it symbolically expresses our fantasy and longing to be transgressive. However, since the creative object involves the re-experiencing of an unfulfilled wish, the engagement with creative production is always “something of a mixed blessing” (2017, 67). This is why “we rarely protest when the time comes to leave [the creative object]; we habitually welcome our return to reliably repetitive and decidedly non-creative quotidian objects” (2017, 68).

Further, we not only tend to idealize the creator and the creative object-- since they express our deepest fantasy—but also envy them for doing what we rule-bound persons can’t do. Moss concludes that since creative objects are filled with erotic wish, idealization, and envy, they become fetishes, and this explains why we fetishize the creative process, artist, and created object to the enormous degree that we do.

This Freudian conception of creativity as stemming from the ultimate transgressive wish and as magically producing over-valued fetishistic objects certainly can be used to interpret the works of Klimpt, Schiele, Kokoschka, and Schnitzler, all of whom seemed obsessed with the transgressive erotic in their creative productions and real love affairs. Fantasies of transgressive sexuality not only infused much of the high art in fin de siècle Vienna, but also characterized much of the actual sexual activity of the city. According to Stephan Zweig, Vienna was so seething with transgressive sexuality that he imagines that half the single women in the city worked as prostitutes (1943). This allegation is supported by a 1912 poll of male medical students who were asked who first introduced them to sex, and 75% confessed that it was a prostitute, 17% said it was a maid or waitress, while only 4% said it was a potential spouse (Makari, p. 142). Affairs

among the privileged classes seemed rampant; even women partook of them—witness the famous affairs of Alma Mahler with Walter Gropius and Oscar Kokoschka.

While Freud's theory of fantasy as generated from transgressive sexuality might work to explain many of the artistic productions of Vienna along with its seedy sexual underbelly, it has difficulty explaining the city's most important all-encompassing fantasy—that Vienna was the capital of a coherent powerful empire. We might see the illusory belief as arising from an oedipal longing to have a oneness with the mother, but, in fact, there is a simpler, less contorted way of explaining this fantasy: it arises from the narcissistic need for greatness.

Kohut, Vienna, and narcissistic fantasies

Kohut grew up in post-war Vienna, a city of the vanquished, a city whose economy was in constant turmoil, a city that had gone from being the capital of the second largest empire in the world after Russia to being the capital of a small, somewhat insignificant country. This city that was reeling from profound narcissistic wounds would produce in Heinz Kohut that psychoanalyst who would most deeply explore how narcissism, especially injured narcissism, fuels so much of what we do in human life.

Both Freud and Kohut see the psyche as initially in a state of narcissistic libido, but Freud accentuates the sexual side of libido while Kohut emphasizes the narcissistic elements in it. Indeed, we might re-describe Kohut's psychology of the self as a psychology that explores the primitive narcissistic pressures to establish satisfactory

relationships to perfection and grandiosity. The idealizing and mirroring transferences he discovered derive from these narcissistic pressures; while the selfobject needs he revealed are in relation to the modulating and integrating of these pressures. The healthiest way to integrate these narcissistic pressures, according to Kohut, is to transform the sense of perfection into ideals, and grandiosity into ambitions for the realization of the ideals--thereby forming a coherent nuclear self. However, these narcissistic pressures can also fuse together to form powerful narcissistic fantasies--fantasies that can be delightfully delusional--as when children fantasize about having superpowers, dangerously pathological as with demagogues, or a womb for creativity.

If I were to construct an account of how narcissistic fantasies arise, I would say that the archaic pressures to relate to perfection and grandiosity fuse with social images of greatness, such as being a princess or action hero in childhood, or a movie idol, sports star, glamorous model, and so on a bit later. These fantasies can persist side by side with a well-formed self, often confusing it or taking it away from what Kohut called its nuclear program, or Bollas called its destiny (2011). As such, narcissistic fantasies are in tension with the self, for they can capture the narcissistic energy we need to form a self and lure us either into being variations of socially prescribed codes or into a dreamlike existence in which we really never accomplish very much because we are lost in grandiose fantasy. Sometimes, we can be so consumed by a narcissistic fantasy that we can't enjoy or appreciate our actual accomplishments, even if they are substantial, because they are just not great enough.

Narcissistic fantasies can be riveting not only for persons but also for whole societies, for groups also have ideals and a relation to grandiosity. Kohut, himself, analyzes Weimar Germany as a country that not only had its grandiose pole shattered in the loss of WW I, but had also lost its ideals. In such an impoverished self-state, it was susceptible to being captured by the archaic grandiose fantasy of a paranoid leader. “The groups which are formed around the personality of a paranoid leader, [rather than a messianic leader], are not tied together by the convergence of their idealizing love, by an ego-ideal held in common. They are principally united by their sharing of an archaic narcissistic conception of the world that must destroy those who are different and by the identity of their grandiose fantasies embodied in their leader. They are held together by a common grandiose self” (1985, 54-5).

What amazed persons about the Nazi take-over of Austria was how enthusiastically welcoming the Austrians were for Hitler’s presence. Rather than being opposed to this take-over by Germany, they waved swastika flags as Hitler entered Austria and gathered in record numbers in Vienna’s Heldenplatz to cheer him. Eric Kandel writes, “Of all the cities under Nazi control, Vienna was the most debased on Kristallnacht. Jews were taunted and brutally beaten, expelled from their businesses, and temporarily evicted from their homes.” He quotes Simon Wiesenthal, the leading Nazi hunter after World War II, as saying, “‘compared to Vienna, the Kristallnacht in Berlin was a pleasant Christmas festival’” (2006, p. 28).

Why were the Viennese so receptive to Hitler and so vicious with Jews? I think Kohut’s theory that a country that has had its ideals and sense of greatness shattered will

be susceptible to a paranoid leader's primitive grandiose fantasy rings deeply true. The narcissistic rage that ensued after the terrible defeat of the Central Powers in WW I could now erupt within the grandiose fantasy of an indomitable pan-German Reich. Those seen as different (the Jews) must be destroyed. I surmise that had pre-WW I Austria not been lost in a grandiose fantasy about its Empire's power and importance, it might not have been so susceptible to the archaic grandiose fantasy of the Nazi Reich.

Although narcissistic fantasies can dangerously distort our relation to reality and underlie vicious attempts to eliminate otherness, they can also be the basis for creativity. Indeed, Kohut identified creativity as one of the five chief characteristics of a mature narcissism (1966). He found that the creative person, like a child, retains a somewhat magical relation to his environment, and, like a child whose narcissism is still robust, can transform his experiences into creative productions. While he acknowledges that the ambitious/grandiose side of narcissism can motivate the artist to seek fame and an audience, he finds that it is the idealizing sector of the self that is the most important ground for creative activity, in which the created object "is cathected with narcissistic libido and thus included in the context of the self." (1966, p. 112) That is, artistic products are felt by their creators to be expressions of their sense of self-perfection.

Kohut further writes "that for the creator, the work is a transitional object and that it is invested with transitional narcissistic libido" (1966, p. 114). As such, it seems that creativity is located in a psychic space that exists between the archaic perfection of the child and the maturely organized narcissism of the adult, and, obviously, is meant to invoke Winnicott's notion of a transitional object that is both real and has magical

powers. Thus, for Kohut the created object is not a substitute for the incestuous object and need not involve any sense of erotic transgression; rather the creative process and the creative object are birthed out of a kind of psyche in which the magical relation to the environment and an early sense of the goodness/perfection of one's productions have been retained into adulthood. The role of fantasy is crucial in this process in so far as creative productions arise out of our abilities to have idealized visions that relate more to inner images than to the pragmatic alteration of reality. In the artist, fantasy passes into ideals that are then realized in creative productions.

The “transgressiveness of creativity” we are likely to affirm in the Freudian account of creativity receives a different narrative with Kohut. There are two kinds of ideals lurking within the Kohutian soul—one is located in a core singular self while the other set of ideals has been subsumed from the wider social order. There is often a tension between what the social ideals command and those that the individualized self needs to express. Selves are always a bit transgressive in their idiosyncratic spontaneity rather than their social conformity. It is not, as Freud would have it, the erotic desire for a forbidden object that lies behind transgressive creativity but a singular self asserting its originality. In this vision, we can have creativity without assuming an underlying guilt!

This account of creativity as arising from the self’s expression of its singularity rings true when we look at great artists, architects and musicians, for there is something strikingly unique about their works--something that expresses the particularity of the self rather than their being simply a variation of an artistic code. Klimpt, Kokoschka, and Schiele might all be fin de siècle Viennese artists participating in the invention of

expressionist/modernist art, but their works are each unique and recognizable unto themselves. Especially when one looks at the self-portraits of Kokoschka and Schiele, we get further validation of Kohut's theory that the works of a creator are unique expressions of their sense of perfection. Even if those self-portraits are full of agony and fragmentation, they are attempts to "perfectly" express the distinctive inner world of the artist.

Further, we can say that the reason why we are so attracted to created objects and the process of creativity is because they embody our deepest psychological need—to create a unique and singular self. However, we need to add that while individual artists might be unique, they also belong to cultures and have a relation not only to the aesthetic ideals of that culture but to the national narcissism of their countries. If that narcissism is prideful and infectious—as it was in the Golden Age of Athens, the Italian city states in the Renaissance, the Netherlands in the 17th Century, and, yes, fin de siècle Vienna, it can infuse artists with a vitality and creative verve that is difficult to find when such national narcissism is waning or deflated. Hence, it is often a fusion of an ascendant country's robust narcissistic fantasies with the fantasies of its artists that produces the greatest art.

Kohut's theory that the singular self needs to express its ideals in creative productions emerges out of a wider Romantic tradition in which not only artists but also cultures need to express something deeply unique about what it means to belong to that culture. The Romantic movement, which was especially powerful in Austria, called for each country to express its unique genius—proclaiming that countries should go back to folk roots, costumes, songs, traditions and forge a distinctive nation out of these singular

expressive traits. The notion that the uniqueness of each people should be the basis of political autonomy was one of the forces that helped undermine and eventually destroy the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It was a counter-ideal to the narcissistic fantasy of empire.

This account raises the question of what the difference is between a fantasy and an ideal. Both fantasies and ideals participate in images of perfection, but fantasies need have no relation to genuine possibilities in reality while an ideal has to have some relationship to reality—the unique abilities, traits, or predispositions of the person or nation in relation to actual possibilities in the world. The self starts to become real when we begin to transform the perfection and grandiosity of our fantasies into actual ideals that lure us to create new realities. In order for this actualization to happen, the self needs to connect to the perceptive and rational powers of the ego. As Aristotle says, the difference between wishing and choosing is that in choice we deliberate about the actual means to achieve our ends. That is, the self needs to invoke the powers of the ego and use them in order for an actualized self to come into being.

However, such a connection is not easy, for the ego and the self often have conflicting agendas. The ego's fundamental tasks are, first, to negotiate the organism's relation with its social and natural environments, and, second, to keep the interior world of the psyche as coherent as possible. As such it must value power, distance, and organization. It functions best when it is keenly rational and not enveloped in strong emotions or erotic longings. The self, however, is idiosyncratic, spontaneous, erotic, and somewhat oblivious to the demands of reality. Hence, the ego, especially when it is captured by a narcissistic fantasy, can ignore or repress the needs of the self in order to

feel successful in the world. The same is true of nations: the pragmatic functions of the government often make rulers become obsessed with power and control to the detriment of supporting the artistic genius of a people. In a healthy person and nation the ego functions serve the ideals of the self or people; however, circumstances often prevent such a felicitous relation from occurring. Unfortunately, it is also true that all too often the ego becomes tyrannical in its quest to control circumstances and crushes or ignores the voice of the self.

Freud, Kohut, and Vienna

How do we put Freud and Kohut together on the importance and role of fantasy in human life? Is there an even deeper fantasy that might underlie both our transgressive wishes and narcissistic fantasies? My contention is that the Viennese waltz fantasy of achieving an ecstatic wholeness or completeness is not only such a fantasy, but a compelling force that lies behind much of what we humans seek in life. It is a fantasy that tends to arise powerfully in times of crisis, for a crisis always involves some kind of fragmentation or rupturing of stable structures, and we find ourselves longing to once again feel whole. The seeking of wholeness is the motivation we have for both working through difficult fragmenting problems in psychotherapy and for seeking a profound connectedness with others.

This force/fantasy invests the narcissistic pressures to attain satisfactory relations to perfection and grandiosity, for that which is whole or complete is perfect, and it is great insofar as it lacks nothing. It is also the fantasy that underlies erotic fantasies that

seek a fused sexual union with a partner or becoming autoerotically complete in oneself, as Klimpt's and Schiele's drawings of women pleasuring themselves portray.

It is also the fantasy/force that invests creativity. As Kohut says, the creative individual feels more connected to his environments than the pragmatic adult and is more connected with himself and his environments through his creative productions. Even the transgressive aspect of creativity can be interpreted as attempting to make experience more whole by bringing the forbidden or neglected into the created object, as Klimpt, Kokoschka, and Schiele did.

However, when this fantasy of achieving a totalizing wholeness assumes a narcissistic presence that is fueled in part by narcissistic rage, it can become a hideously destructive force driving persons, countries and/or sub-groups to want to eliminate or control otherness—other countries, other races, other genders—anything that expresses an essential difference and is thus seen as a threat (Riker, 2107, ch. 8). As such, it seems to be the fantasy/force underlying the politics of empire-building that has characterized so much of human history, and the Fascist attempt to establish total control by eliminating otherness.

The major way to counter the destructiveness of the narcissistic drive to attain total control over others is through the recognition that it is only by interacting with that which is other or different that a self or nation can develop, and develop it must to retain its vitality. That is, development is the attempt to extend oneself into a more whole, complete human being by integrating more complexity into self-structure. The most difficult truth about reality is that it retains an inescapable otherness that cannot be

controlled--an otherness that often threatens us but without which there would be only a dull repetitive sameness. As Jessica Benjamin says, we need to recognize the independent reality of others to grow out of our immature narcissism (1988). The waltz might fuse the partners into a unity, but each is a different, separate human being without which the waltz cannot happen. The erotic can sustain itself only insofar as it allows otherness to exist in connection.

This leads me to say that while I am pushed by the drive for wholeness to find a unifying fantasy lying behind both the Oedipal and narcissistic fantasies, I also need to validate their differences from each other, for each has its own dynamic and each needs different kinds of therapeutic work in order for us to integrate and transform the fantasies into real ideals for intimacy and achievement. We need both Freud and Kohut.

In sum, erotic and narcissistic fantasies underlie and invest almost all of what humans do either individually or collectively. They provoke a great deal of our misery and painful destructiveness, but also lie behind our soaring creativity. The final question we need to address is what determines whether our fantasies will lead to creative production of new possibilities, to dangerous denials of real problems, or, worse, to violence in the attempt to establish absolute control. This is a difficult question with too many variables to answer with any clarity, for creativity always involves destructiveness of previous models, and destructive attempts to annihilate or control others are often attempts to create a new kind of world. While I offer no conclusive answer to this important question, I can suggest that it is the extent of trauma in a crisis that is the key factor determining whether the fantasy will lead to creativity or pathology. Fin de siècle

Vienna was not significantly traumatized and its fantasies helped spawn magnificently creative works in art, architecture, music, literature, and the sciences; post-WW I Germany was severely traumatized, seething with rage, and its narcissistic paranoid fantasies nearly led to the destruction of western civilization.

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Three quarters of a century has now past since WW II and here we are in Vienna, a gloriously re-built city that retains the beauty of its past with its magnificent museums, glorious Ringstrasse, gracious parks, and music everywhere. Dancers waltz on as Vienna hosts myriads of glamorous balls each year. Klimpt and Kokoschka have been established as world famous, important artists, and the genius of Gustav Mahler is now fully recognized. Freud and psychoanalysis have transformed how we think about ourselves and how we go about becoming healthier human beings.

But Vienna is no longer bathed in the fantasy of being the capital of a glorious empire, and with the loss of this narcissistic fantasy seems to come the loss of its ability to produce creative geniuses. Worse, it, along with the rest of the west, seems to be in a crisis, a crisis of whether it can sustain its liberal values in the face of massive shifts in peoples and spurned populations asking for the goods and opportunities that previously only privileged classes and nations enjoyed. This crisis has led many to a regressive fantasy that wants to erect borders within the psyche and around nations to keep the unwanted different out. It is the regressive and anxious pull of the core fantasy to a world of undifferentiated sameness.

If we are to search for creativity in this time of crisis, we first need to affirm the human need for wholeness achieved through sameness but confront the delusional fantasy that a regressive world of sameness can or ought to be established or re-established. Then we need to generate creative fantasies of new and different possible worlds. Many of these will be just fantasies, but some of them, like the fantasies of the artists and scientists of fin de siècle Vienna, will be new visions of who we might be as human beings, new visions of how we might creatively include the otherness that seems so threatening to us now. While I am for the most part pessimistic that this will happen; I find that psychoanalytic self psychology with its emphasis on empathy and the selfobject needs we each have for both others and otherness offers one of the most creative new possibilities for how we might transform our shallow, narcissistic, and paranoid world into a genuine humankind community.

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