

Patrick Werkner, “Body Language, Form and Idea in Austrian Expressionist Painting”

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Figure, nude or portrait as the representation of a psychic state: this was a nineteenth-century idea which came to Egon Schiele from the late Symbolist painting of the fin de siècle. It was an idea that he dramatized to the utmost. The way had already been paved in Viennese Jugendstil, and in the painting of Gustav Klimt in particular, but the radical shift to a true “art of expression” took place only in the generation of Kokoschka and Schiele.

Schiele’s self-portraiture, in particular—a theme he pursues with almost manic obsessiveness—is the reflection of a process which exhausts all the possibilities of bodily expression, every area of apparent ugliness and morbidity, and subjects the organism to a succession of near-terminal ordeals. Schiele was fascinated by the complex of relationships between inner experience and its external manifestation. The depiction of the body encompassed, for him, the whole range of the formal possibilities that were suggested by his experience of himself and his fellow creatures. “I always think that the greatest painters have painted figures,” Schiele wrote in 1911. The figure, for him, is the vehicle of expression. The outline of a nude delineates the drama of human life; the surface of a naked body in a watercolor becomes a psychic landscape.

Schiele’s Self-Portraits

Schiele confessed that he had “the craving to experience everything.” His self-portraits are a visual record of that experience. In them there is no basic distinction between the image of his head and that of a semi-nude or nude figure. The grimace, the scream, the contorted face, are the exact counterparts of the crouching, tense, springing pose, and of the body seen in the form of a cross, a phallus or a geometrical figure. There are traces of a wide variety of influences in this: the gaunt, huddled youths of George Minne, the figures of Ferdinand Hodler, with their heavily symbolic eurhythmics—both artists had an honored place in the exhibitions of the Vienna Secession—and Oskar Kokoschka’s graphic linear images of adolescents.

The pictorial structure, throughout Schiele’s work, tends to be a matter of drawing. His watercolors and oil paintings are markedly less painterly in conception than are those of Kokoschka, let alone Richard Gerstl. Within the Leopold Collection, this contrast emerges clearly from a comparison of two major works of early Austrian Expressionism: Gerstl’s *Nude Self Portrait* (1908) and Schiele’s *Seated Male Nude* (1910). Gerstl in his self-portraits records his own nakedness and then imparts an emotional consent to it in the process of painting—a process in which the surrounding space plays a decisive part. With Schiele, on the other hand, the figure always draws its life from its own gesture, its own outline, and the configurations that emerge within that outline. The texture of the painting within the figure is the servant of this process; and the space in which the figure moves is there to allow it to emerge in all the vividness of its contours. The relief of the figures shows the imprint of the space; their surface reflects a modeling imposed by the intrusive influence of that space. Gerstl links person and space through a painterly technique derived from Impressionism; Schiele replaces this with an emphasis on line and plane—and thus a sharper distancing of the human being from the world

around him. Schiele's early figures—and trees and flowers—accordingly seem isolated and exposed.

Schiele opened up additional expressive possibilities through the freedom of his use of color; and this applies to his nudes in particular. On a figure's back, for instance, red, green, blue and yellow tones flow into each other or are set down abruptly side by side. A head is colored red and lilac, as if ready to burst, or frozen in a corpse-like pallor. Knees and ankles assert a life of their own in harsh blue; genitals, nipples and lips are emphasized in crimson: the solar plexus becomes a yellow-green globe. The same profusion of colors may be applied to a single hand or face. This expressive exaggeration of color has its formal counterpart in the stretching or cramping of a body, or of one part of a body and in the paroxysms that shake a whole figure or express themselves through a look.

It is in his self-portraits that Schiele carried all this to its extreme. Here, self-caricature alternates with self-contortion, tragic gesture with narcissistic pose. The self-portraits—especially those of 1910 and 1911—constantly force the body to an extreme, as if Schiele were consuming himself in flames.

The personal reminiscences of Schiele which were written—long afterwards—by friends such as Arthur Roessler and Heinrich Benesch describe him, by contrast, as a shy and introverted individual. There was something about him that made one think of a "messenger from some unknown, far-off place," and he was a striking person to meet, as the portrait photographs of him also make clear. At the same time, he was "calm and cheerful" and practiced "the art of life in the fullest sense of the word." Albert Paris Gutersloh called him "one of the few good, generous human beings." He is described as never once having been "angry, or even annoyed," and as always calm, never vehement or passionate: a striking set of descriptions, if we look at them in conjunction with Schiele's early self-portraits.

His was clearly a contradictory personality, as is further shown by comparing characterizations of this sort—"a little diffident and a little confident"—with his own words. In 1913, in a letter to his mother, with whom his relationship always remained tense, he wrote: "In me, through my autonomous will, all fine and noble effects are combined ... I shall be the fruit whose decomposition will produce eternal living creatures; so how great must be your joy that you brought me into the world?"

The Body as a Vehicle of Expression

The figures in Schiele's early paintings live by gesture. There is barely one of them that is not characterized in this way. The whole body becomes a means of formal creation, both in its overall form and in detail. The face and hands, in particular, are elements in a stylized body language which involves a large number of recurrent formal devices.

This does not mean that it would be possible to extract a canon of symbols which could be used to interpret any given painting by Schiele. Unlike Alfred Kubin, for instance, whose work, with its manifold references to literature, philosophy and artistic Symbolism, lends itself to study in terms of these references, Schiele confronts us with a body of painting based on a highly private mythology, which draws on the resources of the unconscious. Similarly, those letters in which he himself provides explanations of his paintings or information on their content give little more than generalized points of reference, and reflect a highly emotive style of self-interpretation; whereas Kubin's stance seems very much more intellectual.

It was not only in pictorial art that the human body was coming into its own as a vehicle of expression. Its true medium was "free expressive dance," the influence of which on Viennese art has already been described elsewhere. Here it is sufficient to point to Schiele's enthusiasm for Ruth Saint-Denis, whose appearances in Vienna were described in such glowing terms by Ludwig Hevesi. (Karl Kraus's counterblasts, in *Die Fackel*, were provoked not so much by the performer's "graceful, serpentine skill" as by the "nimble stylistic fingerwork" of the reviewers.) There is just one, myth-laden account of a meeting between Schiele and Ruth Saint-Denis. It appears that she became his ultimate criterion of physical suppleness: when Roessler showed Schiele his collection of Javanese shadow puppets, with which the artist then played for hours on end with astonishing skill, Schiele's comment was that they were even better than Saint Denis's dancing. The sharp, vivid outlines of the shadows on the wall fascinated him so much that Roessler let him choose one puppet as a gift. Schiele chose "a grotesque figure of a demon with a weird profile."

One artist friend who shared Schiele's fascination with the expressive potential of the body was Erwin Osen, who took part in the "Neukunstler" (New-Artists) exhibition in 1909. Nearly a decade older than Schiele, Osen was a former scene-painter who now did a mime act in cabaret with a female partner named Moa. Like Schiele, he was interested in the body language of the sick; he did a number of drawings at the Steinhof mental hospital to illustrate a lecture on "Pathological Expression in the Portrait." Mime van Osen, as he sometimes called himself, shared a studio with Schiele for a time. According to Roessler, Schiele was under the spell of Osen and of his companion, Moa, who was "a willowy dancer with a bone-white face which froze into mask-like immobility beneath blue-black hair ... with an unseeing look in the big, jet-black, melancholy eyes which glinted dully beneath the heavy, long-lashed eyelids, with their brown-blue shadow." Schiele repeatedly drew both Moa and Osen, the latter in a series of ecstatic mime attitudes. A number of Schiele's portrait and nude drawings of Osen bear close analogies to his self-portraits.

Experiencing Pain, Desolation and Death

After Schiele's art broke free of the aesthetic of the Vienna Secession, it developed into a constant confrontation with the basic issues of human existence, and specifically with the polarity of life and death. Until the very late works—in which life and death are seen as a whole, however melancholy that whole may be—the atmosphere is one of profound anxiety and distress. "All is living dead" is the last line of one of his poems."

As a child, Schiele lost his eldest sister; when he was fourteen his father died after years of insanity. Adolf Schiele, stationmaster and "senior official of the Imperial and Royal State Rail ways," seems to have succumbed to a progressive paralysis. He is said to have received a succession of imaginary guests, whom he invited to stay for dinner, while his family was obliged to play along with the delusion. Left unsupervised for a moment, he took all his stocks and shares, or so we are told, and burned them in the stove.

The adolescent Schiele was undoubtedly troubled by his father's behavior - all the more so because he was clearly very attached to him. As late as 1913, he wrote that he thought of his father with sorrow and visited the places that he associated with his memory. In 1910 he told his sister of "a fine spiritist incident: I was awake, but held captive by the spirit who had made himself known to me in my dream; for as long as he was speaking to me, I was rigid and speechless." Anton Peschka adds: "The night before, [Egon] said his Papa had been with him."

Two years later, Schiele wrote of his painting *Hermits* that it was "more a vision," the culmination of his "experiences in the years following the death of my father."

Schiele's experiences of death, sickness and pathological behavior found their way into his painting from 1909 onwards. Roessler tells us that he spent months "drawing and painting proletarian children. He was fascinated by the ravages of the sordid sufferings to which these innocents are exposed." Through his acquaintance with a gynecologist, Erwin von Graff, he was able to do drawings in the women's hospital in Vienna. His depictions of pregnant and sick women and girls amount to a counter-manifesto to the refined female portraiture of the Secessionists.

In his portraits, in his self-portraits and in his ecstatic nudes Schiele is constantly searching for the hidden, demonic, unwhole aspect; and there is no difference in principle between these and the "pathological" subjects. All these images blur the distinction between sickness and health, between the normal and the abnormal; all spring from the skeptical vision that reveals the scars, the vulnerability, the shadow side, that lie concealed behind a sleek personal facade.

Schiele saw the abyss that lies beneath apparently innocuous appearances; he was aware of death in the midst of life. From 1909 onwards, he constantly reverted to the theme of motherhood; and in 1910 and 1911 he produced three paintings in which the beginning of life is brought into contact with death. The painting *Dead Mother I* focuses on the head and hands of a newborn child, which seems still to nestle in its amniotic sac. What surrounds the face is dark, however, and covers the child's mother like a shroud, so that we see only her tilted head and one hand.

Dead Mother I may be seen as an expressive intensification of Klimt's *Mother with Children* (1909/10), which was painted concurrently with the first version of *Death and Life* (finished in 1915). Schiele's painting does more than document his closeness to Klimt, whom he had once taken as his model: it also shows how Klimt himself remained bound to the theme of the fragility of life from the time he gave it its first monumental expression in the university murals. It was Klimt, therefore, who supplied Austrian Expressionism with one of its leitmotifs.

Eros and Sexus

"The erotic work of art has a sanctity of its own!" Schiele's pronouncement is at once a defense of his own work and a recognition of the existential profundity of Eros. His fascination with death constantly interacted with his urgent concern with sex; and his early Expressionist work can all be reduced to the field of tension between Eros and Thanatos. It was logical that his "craving to experience everything", his irrepressible curiosity, should lead him into a taboo area. Drawings and watercolors of the female nude are numerically the largest section of his output. The centrality of this topic in his work is matched by its analogous position in that of Klimt. The gaunt, bony, long-limbed girls in Schiele's nude and semi-nudes, the contortions of their bodies and the often daemonic treatment of their images, form a marked contrast with the mostly soft, rapt, self-absorbed nudity that Klimt depicts. The uncompromising nature of Schiele's erotic images and of his own life-style led in 1912 to his spending twenty four days in prison after a trial in which one of his erotic drawings was ceremonially burnt.

It is a striking fact that Schiele created a series of highly expressive portraits of men and comparatively few portraits of women. In view of the harshness of his style, however, it is hardly surprising that he received few commissions for female portraits. A portrait of a lady, in turn-of-

the-century Vienna was meant to show her as beautiful and elegant, and often it swamped her in a mass of ornament which converted her into a piece of stage decor. By contrast, all one could expect from Schiele was to be stripped of pretence and twisted out of shape

The clear division between a man's world, which might be intellectual enough to tolerate experiments in expressivity, and a woman's world, whose function was to present an image of refined sensuality, reflects the prevailing tension between the sexes. The consequent atmosphere of compulsion and obsession strongly affected Schiele, and it was not until his later years that he found his way to a more relaxed treatment of erotic themes as in *Reclining Woman* (1917) or *Pair of Woman Squatting* (1918).

His early confrontation with the themes of the nude and sexuality is worlds apart from the vital, primitive nakedness that appears, for instance, in the work of the members of the Dresden group Die Brücke. The primal naturalness of all that is sexual, its closeness to the nature of existence itself, as embodied in the early works of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner or Erich Heckel, stands in total contrast to the sexual question as Schiele presents it. The sensual freedom that emanates from the paintings of the Fauves or the early German Expressionists is poles apart from the melancholy, even tragic, nature of Schiele's eroticism.

It is characteristic of him that he often uses props to heighten the erotic effect of what he shows. Stockings and underclothes, shoes and ribbons, are sexual fetishes often emphasized through color. A lifted skirt, a hand-gesture, a look from beneath lowered eyelids, shows Woman as seductress, as an enticing, animal creature. There are, however, also sympathetic, compassionate images of his mostly youthful models, tender embraces and sensitive renderings of the individual figure. Schiele shows a preference for girls around the age of puberty; in his own adolescence, his sister Gertrud, four years younger than himself, had modeled for him, in some cases naked.

The predominant image in his early Expressionist figure work is that of the nude as an inscrutable, an ecstatic or a suffering being, very much as in his self-portraits, and with the same body language, gestures, and handling of form and color. However, in contrast to his frequent nude self-portraits, Schiele seldom incorporated female nudes in his early oil paintings. For one thing, he had a ready market for drawings and watercolors of this subject; and for another, it was easier to capture in a drawing the fleeting, spontaneous quality of the pose, of a movement or a mood.

In his nudes of models and of himself, Schiele worked with a sureness of line which was capable of characterizing a figure in a single outline or a few strokes. When critical accounts of Schiele's style refer to an "encounter with the rational," which is supposed to have led to the clear line in his later portrait and nude sketches, there is a tendency to overlook the fact that in his early Expressionist work, too, the line has an expressive autonomy of statement - a feature that springs ultimately from the linear and planar style of the Vienna Secession.

Transcendence and Realism

"I paint the light that comes out of all bodies", wrote Schiele in 1911. This approach, firmly based in reality and equally firmly transcending that reality, encapsulates his program as an artist. Schiele was too fascinated by the phenomenal forms of life to be satisfied with an abstract image; equally, he could never have allowed himself to be circumscribed by what was optically perceptible.

The aspiration to paint "the light that comes out of all bodies" is based on a concept which goes back to Romanticism: that of all-pervading harmonies and an animate universe. This was an idea that fascinated a variety of artists around the turn of the century, and it achieved wide currency, especially in its various theosophical formulations. It is not possible to establish whether Schiele actually read the works of H. P. Blavatsky, Annie Besant or Rudolf Steiner, but they were undoubtedly discussed in the circles in which he moved. In two letters—unfortunately impossible to verify by reference to original manuscripts—Schiele writes of "astral light."

It seems highly speculative, however, to suppose that any specific image by Schiele was prompted by the idea of astral vibrations which extend and transcend the visible spectrum. The same applies to attempts to detect the influence of Steiner in the "haloes" and auras that appear round several of Schiele's heads. There are figures with "haloes" in a number of Symbolist and Jugendstil paintings; and Impressionism and Post-Impressionism furnish examples of figures that expand and transcend their limits by similar means. This use of the aura was intensified in Expressionism as a way of expressing what happens within the psyche.

Like Kokoschka, Schiele painted visionary paintings, especially portraits. With Schiele, however, there is more of a hallucinatory element. Paintings such as *Poet* or *Self-Seer II*, based on images of Schiele himself, belong to a series of works painted in 1910 and 1911 in which his troubled self-image, often nude or semi-nude, is brought into contact with an alter ego, thus doubling or multiplying the act of self-portraiture. The mostly closed or half-closed eyes, the smoldering, sightless eye-sockets, point to inner processes in the figures depicted. The titles alone of such paintings by Schiele as *Procession*, *Madonna* and *Youth on his Knees before God the Father* are sufficient indication of their visionary and in many cases metaphysical content. The same goes for the related self-portraits, and for the large painting *Hermits*, one of Schiele's most important works. In one of his letters, Schiele wrote that this painting showed "the bodies of men weary of living _ suicides - but men of feeling." Here, too, Schiele has portrayed himself, as is proved by a self-portrait study for the painting.

In and around 1912 changes took place in Schiele's work which—without any abrupt transitions—point to the end of his early Expressionist phase. These changes can be traced most clearly in his self-portraits, which now take on a comparatively lyrical aspect. They are no longer so strongly marked by angst, ecstasy and visionary hallucinations as before. This tendency can be clearly detected, for instance, in *Self-Portrait with Winter Cherry* and in *Portrait of Wally*. Schiele's visionary paintings now started to look more like paintings of ideas than explosions of raw emotion. The treatment of the nude, and of erotic subject-matter, became less daemonic. The theme of motherhood was taken up again, but no longer so exclusively dominated by the idea of death. *Mother with Two Children* combines echoes of Christian iconography—the Pieta and the Virgin and Child—into a tragic image of the family. In *Blind Mother* of 1914, the theme becomes a pretext for a composition organized in a succession of planes and spatial elements. This painting reflects, much more clearly than the earlier *Dead Mother I*, the artist's encounter with the art of the rest of Europe; although Cubist tendencies found their way into his work only in a highly refracted form.

A similar new concern with spatial relationships appears in *Cardinal and Nun* of 1912. The erotic subject of this work, to which Schiele gave the alternative title *Caress*, is a paraphrase of Klimt's *The Kiss*. The presentation of sexual love as a problem—and even in Klimt's work an abyss opens next to the lovers—is emphasized by Schiele not only through the layout of the composition but through the clerical status of the persons portrayed.

From 1912 onwards, Schiele's drawings place increasing emphasis on concrete reality; in portrait drawings, for example, there is a clearer concern with the external physiognomy of the sitters. All in all, these changes were the prelude to a line of development which led to the considerably more realistic manner of Schiele's last years.

[...]

After 1945, Modernism began to revolve around abstraction, and Schiele, as a supposedly provincial offshoot of European Modernism, was credited with local importance at best. International recognition came only toward the end of the 1950s. This reflected a new attitude to the representation of the figure and the object in art, together with a renewed appreciation of the importance of the symbol. The artistic practice of the 1980s—in which painting, and figuration in particular, are vital elements—goes to confirm the continuing relevance of Schiele's art, however different the premises on which it was originally produced. [...]