

By Mladen Dolar

Irma revisited

At no point in his career did Freud make such an emphatic gesture as in the beginning of *The interpretation of dreams*, when, after some initial maneuvers, after examining the previous theories of dreams to prove that he has done his homework, he set up a single specimen of a dream, a paramount case which should serve as a model, the didactical example of what he wanted to do, the demonstration of his new method, the probing stone of the new theory which he proclaimed to be nothing less than the first scientific theory of dreams. It would seem that we are justified to expect that the example was most carefully chosen, so that here, if anywhere, we can hold Freud by his word, by every word of it, also by every unspoken word. Freud said himself that with this specimen dream the secret of dreams and their functioning was revealed to him, and the place where he got his revelation is the place where he now wants to initiate us, to share his secret, the spot where he crossed the epistemological threshold is to be turned into the general entry for everybody. Thus in one single step we find ourselves at the entry of a new science, that is, of a discourse which is a-subjective, impersonal and universal, and at the same time at the closest to the personality of its founder, who now proposes his own private entry as

the point of universal entry, even more, his own dream which entails great portions of his personal biography, down to its embarrassing details. He puts at stake his own unconscious, his own personal position on that July day 1895, the position of a father, a husband, a doctor, a friend, a scientist, a discoverer, all intertwined. The dream offers us parts of his intimate biography and at the same time, at the very same place, the most universal structure, the general key to all dreams, an explanatory model, or even what one could call the *matheme* of the dream.ⁱ

Insofar as this dream is posited from the outset as the birthplace of psychoanalysis, the place of its discovery, there is a self-referential streak in it. The discovery dream is also a dream about discovery, about the very conditions of discovery of psychoanalysis. This is immediately obvious: Irma is Freud's patient, she is a hysterical patient who in the dream addresses Freud with her demand. Hysteria, to put it briefly, presents a strange kind of epistemological problem, which consists not merely in the question about what kind of disease it is, how to understand it and how to treat it, but more fundamentally it raises the question of whether it exists at all. Its very existence seems to be an epistemological paradox. It displays a vast panoply of rather

i Here is the text of the dream, as a reminder and for reference: «A large hall—numerous guests, whom we were receiving—among them was Irma. I at once took her on one side, as though to answer her letter and to reproach her for not having accepted my solution yet. I said to her: 'If you still get pains it's really your own fault!' She replied: 'If only you knew what pains I've got in my throat and stomach—it's choking me.'—I was alarmed and looked at her. She looked pale and puffy. I thought to myself that after all I must be missing some organic troubles. I took her to the window and looked down her throat, and she showed signs of recalcitrance like women with artificial dentures. I thought to myself that there was really no need for her to do that.—She then opened her mouth properly and on the right I found a big white patch; at another place I saw extensive whitish grey scabs upon remarkable curly structures which were evidently modelled on the turbinal bones of the nose.—I at once called Dr. M. and he repeated the examination and confirmed it. Dr. M. looked quite different from usual, he was very pale, he walked with a limp and his chin was clean shaven ... My friend Otto was now standing beside her as well, and my friend Leopold was percussing her through her bodice saying: 'She has a dull area low down on the left.' He also indicated that a portion of the skin on the left shoulder was infiltrated (I noticed this as he did, in spite of her dress.) ... M. said: 'There's no doubt about it, it's an infection, but no matter, dysentery will supervene and the toxin will be eliminated.' ... We were directly aware, too, of the origin of the infection. Not long before, when she was feeling unwell, my friend Otto had given her an injection of a preparation of propyl, propyls, ... propionic acid ... trimethylamin (and I saw before me the formula for this printed in heavy type). ... Injections of that sort ought not to be made so thoughtlessly. ... And probably the syringe had not been clean.» (Freud 1977: 182)

dramatic and spectacular bodily symptoms—convulsions, all sorts of pain, suffocating, paralysis of various parts of the body, the loss of voice, anorexia, attacks, screaming—all this in a very ostentatious and theatrical fashion, which easily leads the observers to the suspicion that all this is perhaps staged, simulated, acted, so that finally all these terribly suffering patients may just be putting on an act, there is nothing wrong with them, there is no real physical cause to all this, they are just deceiving us, faking and pretending. All the more since there doesn't seem to be any somatic cause or deficiency. Hence Freud's constant concern, incessant questioning, anxiety: didn't I overlook something somatic? Did I miss some real palpable illness with a decent diagnosis and therapy such as they befit real medicine? Can all this be just psychological, all in the mind? Briefly, hysteria presents itself as a spectacular effect without a proper cause, as a striking bodily symptom without a bodily cause—there is a missing cause, a missing link. This oscillation is structural, it seems that we are caught in a dilemma: either a 'real' bodily illness, then we are dealing with somatic causality, that is, causality of nature; or else we are faced with a theatre, an appearance, a show, a simulacrum of an illness which lacks a proper cause. Where does the psychological begin, where does the bodily end? Is there a 'psychic causality' which would then be centered around a missing cause, a missing link in the chain, a causality altogether different from its 'natural' counterpart? Psychoanalysis must of course avoid and circumvent this dilemma, it starts by not being caught in it. Where the 'real' somatic cause lacks, psychoanalysis doesn't simply see an appearance, a simulation, a mirage—it is in this very appearance, in this simulacrum, that there is a moment of truth. It is an appearance which has to be taken most seriously. But what does it conceal?

The possibility of treatment of hysteria is the very possibility of psychoanalysis. This possibility was encapsulated in the formula "the talking cure"—the phrase stems from Anna O., the first hysterical patient, who put it in a nutshell: the mysterious missing cause is tackled by talking, not simply to fill it in, but rather to make its gap visible. If the psychoanalytic treatment of hysteria is possible, then we have to conceive of a different causality where the word affects the body. The bodily symptom is a signifying knot, an enigma, and there is a word to solve the enigma, to undo the knot. "The conversion hysteria", says Freud: a signifying impasse is converted into the body, the language of words is translated into the language of the body, but the thread one

has to pull to undo this knot is on the side of the words, not on the side of the somatic causality. This is the initial wager of psychoanalysis.

THE BROKEN KETTLE

This may sound fine, but there is a problem: the patients, the women patients, foolishly resist, they don't want to accept Freud's interpretation, they resist his solution, their body is not the willing medium for words, their symptoms persist, the pains continue, they are not obedient, they wouldn't listen. They show stubbornness and indocility. Is this the problem of bad patients or of a bad doctor? And this is the starting point of this dream: what does this new therapy mean, this action of words upon the body? Under which conditions is it possible? Is Irma a bad patient and Freud a good doctor or the other way round? What is the measure of a good therapy?

Irma resists, she refuses to accept Freud's explanation, she defies him, she complains, her pains wouldn't vanish. Irma is an enigma, it is not quite clear what she wants and what could cure her. It would have been nice if it turned out that her troubles were of somatic nature, then one could comfortably refer her to the usual medical means (ultimately the pills and the knife). Or if this is not the case, then one could perhaps refer her to that other treatment of hysteria which has been around for centuries and millennia, the suggestion that circulated secretly or openly both in the folk wisdom and in some of the most illustrious heads—starting with Plato, from whom the very notion of hysteria actually stemsⁱⁱ—namely the suggestion that having sex will settle all the problems. All these women really lack is having sex. Irma is a widow and the marriage would certainly cure all her troubles. In this way sexuality would step in into the place of the missing cause, it would fill in the gap of the missing link, it would reinscribe the problem into the chain of the causality of nature, and we would arrive at a comforting image: absence of sex causes all the hysterical circus, and its presence will put things back into their rightful natural places. Thus psychoanalysis would only theorize what the folk wisdom (including the folk wisdom of Plato) knew all along, and no wonder that the folk wisdom always saw in psychoanalysis the theory of omnipresent sexuality as the secret cause of everything, that is, a theory cut down to the measure of the folk wisdom. Sexuality is not an answer, but a question.

ii Cf. *Timaeus*, 91 b-c.

Freud attempts to treat hysteria with his new method, but he gets incessantly stuck, there is the stubbornness of his patients and of their symptoms that wouldn't dissolve, he is powerless, and the dream of Irma's injection is the dream of his failure, his impotence in the face of hysterical trouble, and hence the dream of his self-justification for this failure. This is at least how it appears at first sight, in the first and most obvious reading, and this is the main point that Freud himself draws in the interpretation that follows the dream: self-justification. The dream is an attempt to defend his doctor's honor which has been put on trial. To every criticism of his actions the dream opposes a counter-argument, an excuse which should pacify and defeat the supposed adversary. Every suspicion of insufficiency and incompetence is countered by a specimen of his conscientious and meticulous behavior, every instance of possible negligence is countered by an example of his scrupulousness. But the trouble is not that this series of counter-arguments fails, quite the opposite, it is ruined by its own success, it succeeds all too well, so well that with all the arguments taken together it loses all credibility. The arguments of self-justification are mutually incompatible, the plea overstates its point and thus amounts to the argument of the broken kettle.¹ Freud's overzealous desire to exculpate himself got the upper hand in the dream and thus bungled his plea in the very act of fulfilling it. It amounts to the admission of guilt, of his doctoral incapacity.ⁱⁱⁱ

Freud's a bit abrupt conclusion from this analysis of the dream is that this dream, and hence in principle every dream, is a

iii «I was not to blame for Irma's pains, since she herself was to blame for them by refusing to accept my solution. I was not concerned with Irma's pains, since they were of an organic nature and quite incurable by psychological treatment. Irma's pains could be satisfactorily explained by her widowhood (cf. the trimethylamin) which I had no means of altering. Irma's pains had been caused by Otto giving her an incautious injection of an unsuitable drug—a thing I should never have done. Irma's pains were the result of an injection with a dirty needle, [...] whereas I never did any harm with my injections. I noticed, it is true, that these explanations of Irma's pains (which agreed in exculpating me) were not entirely consistent with one another, and indeed that they were mutually exclusive. The whole plea—for the dream was nothing else—reminded me vividly of the defense put forward by the man who was charged by one of his neighbors with having given him back a borrowed kettle in a damaged condition. The defendant asserted first, that he had given it back undamaged; secondly, that the kettle had a hole in it when he borrowed it; and thirdly, that he had never borrowed a kettle from his neighbor at all. So much the better: if only a single one of these three lines of defense were to be accepted as valid, the man would have to be acquitted.» (Freud 1977: 196-197)

wish-fulfillment, the oneiric fulfillment of desire, *Wunscherfüllung*. *Quod erat demonstrandum*. This is the thesis which the whole book will try to pursue and demonstrate, through thick and thin, and with this thesis *The interpretation of dreams* stands and falls. This is the thesis which this inaugural dream tried to introduce, it is here that it makes its first appearance and gets its first exposition, this dream is like its crucial experiment, in the parlance of the theory of science.

If dreams are wish-fulfillments, the fulfillment of which wish is the dream of Irma's injection? Here we are in for some surprises, one can immediately raise at least two questions.

1. Is the desire (wish, *Wunsch*) which Freud offers as a solution, is this desire unconscious at all? Aren't we dealing simply with a hurt vanity that tries to justify itself, a revenge on the real and imagined critics? There is like a childish spite, private vindictiveness and malevolence, which would all be expressed in a more civil manner in conscious life, yet: is there anything surprising in this secret wish? Isn't this rather an expected reaction which in the dream acquired an exaggerated form? Aren't those latent thoughts rather the run-of-the-mill grievances that we encounter all the time? Is this the unconscious, the supposedly great new discovery? What's the big deal? Is this commonplace desire supposed to revolutionize the science of the psychic? Do we not find here simply the hurt ego, very much an everyday occurrence, in the place where we were supposed to find the subject of the unconscious? Briefly, the latent thoughts don't seem to be very latent, the unconscious desire doesn't seem to be unconscious at all.

2. Where is sexuality in all this? Is this supposedly unconscious desire in any way linked to sexuality? Is this hurt narcissism sexual in any respect? If this dream is the fulfillment of this wish, then this wish, as it appears, is not unconscious and not sexual, which was Freud's general claim. And there was no lack of critics to point out that Freud, with his specimen dream, didn't deliver what he promised to deliver.

Now is the time to start counting the interpretations, the various interpretative models, and Freud's interpretation which immediately follows the dream deserves to get the honorary number one. By interpretation number one we will refer to the model based on self-justification. There is still a long way to number six.

FREUD THE ALPHA MALE?

Freud's friends and contemporaries were quick to surmise that this interpretation is insufficient and that there were things that Freud omitted to tell. It all happened in the rather narrow circle of the Viennese Jewish community and of the medical profession. In order to come to a different insight something very simple will suffice: one has only to insert the real names of the cast. Freud replaced all the names with invented ones, but this dream is to be read as a *roman à clef*. The names of the main characters of our story is no secret, it was no secret to the people who knew Freud at the time, and they can be easily reconstructed today.^{iv} Let us only have a look at the female cast for the moment: the role of Irma was played by Anna Hammerschlag-Lichtheim, her friend was Sophie Schwab-Paneth, and the third woman was Mathilde Breuer (born Altmann, the wife of Josef Breuer). Freud was on close friendly terms with all of them, he knew them for a long time, he knew their husbands, he knew their families. And once we insert those three names, we cannot but be totally perplexed: Mathilde, Sophie, Anna – these are the names of Freud's three daughters. And if these names coincide, there is a very simple explanation for it: the three women which feature in the dream were all three the godmothers to Freud's daughters, and it was from the godmothers that the daughters got their names. With a very curious special case: Anna, Freud's youngest daughter, the one who will carry the torch of psychoanalysis after his death, Anna was actually born four and a half months after this dream, and it was only later that Irma, i.e. Anna Hammerschlag, will become her godmother and give her her name. There is this massive detail which Freud keeps silent about, namely that his wife was pregnant at the time of the famous dream. Irma fulfilled her dream-role by becoming Anna's godmother, and Anna thus became the dreamchild, as it were, the child of this dream.

I had insisted on their names [those of my children] being chosen, not according to the fashion of the moment, but in memory of people I have been fond of. Their names made the children into *revenants*. And after all, I reflected, was not having children our own path to immortality?²

iv Here I rely on Lisa Appignanesi's and John Forrester's account in their justly acclaimed book *Freud's Women* (Penguin 2000) as an invaluable source of information.

This is a most curious remark. Children are actually ghosts, the revenants, their names are chosen on the model of the people we care for so that they would live their afterlife for them, they are by their names doomed to be the impersonations of the dead. Their life already starts as an afterlife.^v

When in 1908 Karl Abraham confronted Freud with some questions concerning this specimen dream and discretely pointed to some other dimensions that may lie in it, Freud immediately pleaded guilty: “In this dream there is a hidden sexual megalomania [i.e. Freud’s own]. The three women, Mathilde, Sophie and Anna, are my daughters’ godmothers, and I have them all [*und ich habe sie alle*]. There should be one simple therapy for widowhood. Intimacy, of course.”^{vi} Irma and her friend Sophie are both widows. “[A]nd I have them all”—the godmothers, but also their revenants, the daughters? Me, alpha male, Me, the primal father who has unlimited claim to all women?

If we look at it in this light, the dream is anything but the dream of self-justification. It is rather the dream of self-indulgence, the indulgence in a most unrestrained sexual fantasy. Suddenly its secret is, according to Freud’s own words, the sexual megalomania. And if in the first interpretation there was a mystery of absent sexuality, then on this second account we have nothing but sexuality. There is an overkill of sexuality, but a kind of sexuality which can be reduced to the fantasy of male omnipotence. Clearly, what else do man possibly want than to have all women? What does a man want? Freud never posed that question, there doesn’t seem to be an enigma, it seems to be perfectly obvious. The only trouble is we don’t need Freud to tell us this, and no need for the unconscious either. The aforementioned folk wisdom will do the job, the one which sees in psychoanalysis the reflex of its own pansexualism.

If there is a justified suspicion that interpretation number one (Freud’s own) falls short, then it is equally clear that number two will not do either. Interpretation number two: sexual megalomania. The sexuality which is so massively present in it doesn’t need psychoanalysis. This is the spontaneous, i.e. the misguided ubiquitous theory of

v Freud chose the names of his children himself, fully exerting his paternal authority on this point. His three sons were named Jean Martin after Charcot, Oliver after Cromwell and Ernst after Brücke – the sons after great scientists and political figures, the daughters after the friends of the family. Hm.

vi Quoted in Appignanesi & Forrester 2000: 124.

sexuality which informs the received opinion, the doxa, the general prejudice, and which sees in psychoanalysis its own reflex.

COMPETING PREGNANCIES

If we now follow the male part of the cast, we head in the direction of the third interpretation. The medical authority from the dream, Dr. M., is of course Josef Breuer, who in the year of the dream, 1895, co-authored with Freud *The Studies on Hysteria*. Otto is Oscar Rie, the family doctor of Freud's family. Leopold is Ludwig Rosenstein, another medical colleague and partner at cards. But the key person, the star actor, doesn't directly appear in the dream, he makes his appearance in the middle of Freud's interpretation, in his free associations. That was of course Wilhelm Fließ, Freud's closest friend and confidant in front of whom he had no secrets. It was in correspondence with Fließ that psychoanalysis first got its shape, he was for Freud the subject supposed to know, the figure of transference to whom Freud addressed all his theoretical attempts and tried to justify all he was doing before this instance of the supposed authority. Fließ was for Freud the *Besserwisser*, the one who know more.

But this friendship was on grave trial. Something happened that is of great importance for understanding this dream. Freud had a patient, Emma Eckstein, who shared with Irma the hysterical symptoms, the same age and the status of a widow, she was like Irma's double. Freud says himself that Irma is a *Sammelperson*, a person composed of various persons, and Emma is certainly a prominent part of this collectivity. Emma displayed the paramount Fließ symptom, namely, she kept bleeding from her nose. Fließ was an otorinolaringologist and his bizarre pet theory was that there exists a special connection between the nose and the female genitals. And here was a patient who profusely bled from her nose. Fließ suggested an operation and Freud agreed, eager to remove any suspicion of an organic cause. In February 1895, some five months before the dream, Fließ performed the operation himself and after that returned to his home in Berlin. Freud's subsequent letters acquire an increasingly worried tone, since there were postoperative complications. She didn't stop bleeding, her condition went from bad to worse, until Freud decided to call in his experienced colleague, Ignaz Rosanes, who duly examined Emma, cleaned the wound, removed the coagulated blood and much to his surprise he found in her nose a piece of bandage, a cloth half a meter long, which Fließ failed to remove after the operation. At which point

Emma started to bleed profusely, she turned completely white, her pulse failed, there was a moment of mortal danger, and it was only the quick action of the experienced Dr. Rosanes that saved her life. But the scandal was there: Fließ bungled the operation. Fließ, Freud's big ideal, his big Other, his *Besserwisser*, committed a terrible error, his competence was at stake, he looked like a charlatan, the word got around and his reputation dwindled.

Freud tried to do his best to protect him, to comfort him, this was the moment to express his loyalty and fidelity. He wrote in two letters:

You did it as well as one can do it. [This] remains one of those accidents that happen to the most fortunate and circumspect of surgeons [...] Of course, no one is blaming you, nor would I know why they should. [...] For me you remain the physician, the type of man into whose hands one confidently puts one's life and that of one's family [...]

If we now turn back to our dream and read it in the light of this anecdote, one immediately sees the parallels: the terrible wound which opens up in the hysterical body, in the dream displaced from the nose to the throat; Freud who has to call the help of another experienced doctor; the toxin that will eliminate itself. But the point now seems quite different: it is not the matter of Freud's own self-justification and defense of his own doctor's honor, a huge displacement has taken place: the one who needs justification and whose reputation needs protection is Fließ. One has to cover up his striking deficiency, his incompetence, a blow to his reputation, as if Freud was using the most classical form of denegation: "Fließ didn't commit any error", "this is not my mother". Briefly, the dream now appears as the dream of Freud in a transferential relation, the dream about the subject supposed to know, precisely at the point where the subject was shown not to know. One has to hold on to his status of the knowing subject, one has to cover up his lacks, one has to disguise the fact that the Other doesn't know. So all the elements of the dream are suddenly transposed into the function of the axis of transference, all of them bear an additional transferential weight.

If in interpretation number two we had the omnipresent sexuality and the omnipotent male who claimed all women, now in interpretation number three sexuality again vanishes, or rather it becomes

derivative of the transference relation between two men. The problem of femininity and of sexuality becomes the side-product of another problem.

This is the starting point of the very influential interpretation of this dream published in 1954 by Erik H. Erikson and which presents a break in the literature about Irma. Erikson insists on the fact which was pointed out by many interpreters that Freud doesn't say a word about his wife's pregnancy at the time. His latent thoughts were quite preoccupied with this fact, although in a veiled form, they turned around the question of pregnancy and birth. From here Erikson made another step to the thesis about "competing pregnancies" which is supposed to be the real theme of this dream. Just as his wife Freud was pregnant himself, he was at the point of giving birth to a prodigious child, the immense new discovery; in one word, he was pregnant with psychoanalysis. But if Freud was pregnant with this new idea, if Freud was thus the mother of psychoanalysis, who was the father? According to our interpretation number three, and this is Erikson's view, the answer is clear: Fließ.

That a man may incorporate another man's spirit, that a man may conceive from another man, and that a man may be reborn from another, these ideas are the content of many fantasies and rituals which mark significant moments of male initiation, conversion, and inspiration; and every act of creation, at one stage, implies the unconscious fantasy of inspiration by a fertilizing agent of a more or less deified, more or less personified reason or spirit.⁴

So there is the fantasy of a spiritual pregnancy, which is the inter-male pregnancy, the thing between men, not an unusual fantasy which in a sublimated form pertains to the moment of creativity, inspiration and spirit as such. In this fantasy, the sexual difference plays a distinctive role: in feminine pregnancy there is the fertilization of the body, but for the fertilization of the spirit it takes a man, that is, it takes two men. And who would fit better into this role than Fließ? So the dream of Irma's injection would thus ultimately be a transference dream in which Freud tries to conceive psychoanalysis together with Fließ, and this is the pregnancy that he is far more concerned with than his wife's, which seems trivial in comparison. We shouldn't be led astray by the star cast of women and their hysterical theatre, on this third

account this is rather the story about the exclusion of femininity, it is the story about two doctors, not a story about hysteria and the nature of feminine desire. There is the fantasy of procreation without sexual difference, the sublimated spiritual male community.

FREUD THE FEMINIST?

Those are the extreme consequences of our interpretation number three, the transferential interpretation, and they form the backdrop for interpretation number four, which we can call the feminist one and which turns things upside down again. At first sight one could draw the consequence that number three leads directly into feminism, namely into the critique of Freud's supposed misogyny. Freud of the patriarchal order, Freud of the contempt for women, Freud who castigates and rebukes the stubborn intractable women, the hysterical patients: there was no lack of women authors who followed the path of this quick feminism. E.g. Sarah Kofman:

The irreducible women who wouldn't open their mouths, who refuse to accept the 'solution' of their analyst, this man, whose sympathy is reserved for the 'sympathetic', obedient women, will replace the obstinate ones for those that he finds more intelligent, the ones who open their mouths and follow his advice, accept his solutions. [...] The blame is always on the side of women and the dream is a plea for Freud's innocence. [...] Psychoanalysis gives the word to women only in order to take it away from them all the better, so that their discourse could be all the better subjected to the discourse of the master.^{vii}

Yet, this feminist critique is very extraordinary concerning this particular dream. The strange thing is that the critique doesn't seem to do anything else but to repeat Freud's own objections. Those are precisely the objections that indeed appear in the dream itself, but not as Freud's own theory or his solution, but precisely as the object of Freud's own self-criticism. There is an element of Freud's self-irony in the dream: his own therapeutical zeal, the imposition of his solution, the excessive wish for therapeutical success, the failed self-justification in face of criticism – this is precisely what Freud analyzes and takes apart as the elements of his dream, and this is what leads him

vii In feminist literature one can find a lot more along these lines.

to the argument of the broken kettle, that is, to his ironic failure. The wish-fulfillment ultimately appears in this dream as a joke, the joke of the broken kettle—and this is actually the joke that Freud will take up in his book on jokes also as a sort of specimen joke, the specimen joke taken from the specimen dream⁶—the joke where the argument produces the opposite effect, the argument in support of a certain thesis undermines this thesis and proves the contrary. So this sort of feminist interpretation merely repeats the move which constitutes Freud's own self-criticism. Shall we say that it doesn't quite get the joke?

The feminist interpretation which deserves the status of number four is of a different nature and circumvents this trap. The feminist interpretation worthy of its name can be found, e.g., in Shoshana Felman's insightful paper (in *What does a woman want?*).^{viii} It starts from the point that the dream indeed speaks about the analyst's and the male attempt to control the feminine hysterical desire, but what it shows is precisely the failure of this attempt. The dream runs into the impasse of the attempt of the analyst to impose his solution on the hapless patient and then blame her if she didn't accept it ("it's all her fault, I told her so"). Briefly, the truth is on the side of the obstinate patient, not on Freud's side, she was right and he wasn't, and this according to Freud's own analysis of this dream. The plea for self-justification fails, the dream itself criticizes Freud's wish for self-justification. The dream is critical of Freud's awoken theory, it undermines his solutions, it displays the deficiencies of his theory, it shows the point where it fails, and this is where Freud sees the point to be learned from. If this is an inaugural dream, then precisely by the fact that Freud sees that the dream is more correct than his endeavor while awake.

Thus model number four, the feminist one, takes a different path from the previous one which was based on the fantasy of male spiritual community and its self-fertilization, the birth of psychoanalysis out of the spirit of transference. No, says model number four, this is not a story of two doctors and their elimination of women. The source of this dream is ultimately a confrontation with the feminine desire, with the enigma of the hysterical body and its pain. The theories that

viii Shoshana Felman: *What Does a Woman Want?* The Johns Hopkins University Press 1993, pp. 68-120. One has to add Joan Copjec: *Read My Desire*. MIT Press 1994, pp. 119-126, and Elisabeth Bronfen: *The Knotted Subject*. Princeton University Press 1998, pp. 55-98. For many insights in this paper I am indebted to these three readings.

Freud conceives in his communion with Fließ turn out to be ineffective when faced with the hysterical symptom. The omnipotence is the other name for the impotence. The hysterical desire, i.e. desire as such, desire *par excellence*, shatters the position of therapeutical control, the excepted position of medical knowledge, and Freud can give birth to psychoanalysis only insofar as he can no longer control the course of hysterical desire.^{ix} The theory emerges precisely at the point where the desire of control fails, and consequently at the point which can be seen as the failure to be a good doctor by the criteria of the medical order. The moment of truth emerges where the therapist cannot name or fix or reduce desire. And so one could say that the wish-fulfillment in this dream points precisely at the emergence of desire in its irreducibility, in its non-satisfaction, in its being unplaceable in the medical, therapeutical discourse, that is, ultimately in the discourse of the master.

THE WOUND

Before moving on to our sixth and last model, which is, as you have correctly guessed, Lacan's, let me briefly point out interpretation number five, which appears only as another sideshow in the dream, but it gives a different twist to our model number four. Thus far we were dealing with two oppositions: there was the sexual divide on the one hand, and the divide between doctors and patients on the other. The two oppositions fatefully coincided: on the one side the male doctors (analysts, surgeons), and in the neat division on the other side the female patients. It may seem like the femininity was ultimately a disease, and that the males were called upon to cure it. Yet Freud's own interpretation offers also another path, a secondary one, it is true, yet important. It deals with another field of dream thoughts, namely with Freud's concern about his own health, his anxiety, his vulnerability, the fear of bodily decay. It first appears when he looks into Irma's mouth which appears to him like a wound, there is the swarming substance of life, oozing with decay, like a metastasis – too much life which is deadly; there is the thought of the patient who died, then the concern about his daughter Mathilde. The key point is that Irma's symptoms remind Freud of his own symptoms—the heart trouble, the pain in his left

ix As Freud put it in a letter to Fließ: «It [The Interpretation of Dreams] completely follows the dictates of the unconscious, on the well-known principle of Itzig, the Sunday rider. 'Itzig, where are you going?' 'Do I know? Ask the horse.'» (Freud 1985: 319).

shoulder, the rheumatism. It is as if Freud himself would, at a certain point step over on the other side, the side of the patient, the identification with the patient—he crosses the line which separates the two categories. The symptom is also his own symptom, not just an object of investigation on the other side of the barrier. If one wants the most persuasive proof of this, then we must remember the fact that Freud's greatest and gravest disease which defined much of his life was throat cancer. It was the source of a constant insufferable pain, it was the object of various operations (most notably in 1923). This is the part where the dream of Irma's injection turns out to be a prophetic dream, or rather: one could see his later grave illness as Freud himself always saw the symptoms, as the knot of the signifier inscribed in the body, as the revenge of the signifier, the revenge of the inaugural dream, this dream of discovery—a punishment for discovery? You cannot look into women's throats with impunity—if you do that, you might be punished by the wish-fulfillment. Briefly, it is not simply Irma's throat which is at stake, but Freud's own. When he looks into Irma's throat, he sees his own future—like a *menetekel*, “this is you”, in a sense which is totally unmetaphorical. Interpretation number five: there is a common wound of the doctor and the hysterical patient, they share their wound, they share their throat, they speak from the same throat. It is like their umbilical cord which ties them together and places them on the same side. There is a point where the symptom functions as their common symptom.x

THE ABYSS AND THE LETTER

Finally, Lacan as number six. The models we have been considering thus far displayed a certain graduation of reflexivity. On the one hand the answer to the enigma of the dream was offered by a certain content: self-justification, sexual megalomania, transference, confrontation with hysterical pain and desire, identification with the patient and her symptom. But on the other hand, it appeared that desire—and this dream should prove that the dream is the fulfillment of desire—is not reducible to any of those contents, not reducible to any particular meaning that those models offer, but that it traverses them all. That

x Kafka was Freud's alter ego, although the means are very different. One can be reminded of Kafka's story «The country doctor», where the doctor, summoned in the middle of the night to see a sick child, discovers a wound on the child's body, a fatal wound swarming with small worms. Another *menetekel*.

the nature of desire coincides precisely with the impossibility to reduce it to any of those models which would name its truth. In each of those models there is a moment of “this is not it”, “it is not only this”, though to be sure none of these models is simply erroneous. Each of them sheds some light on a particular aspect of desire, they each present a certain take on desire. But perhaps the desire is what connects all those different stories without being reducible to any of them, it consists in the very way in which it cannot be pinned down to their meaning. So that the fulfillment of desire has the necessarily reflective form of finding this fulfillment precisely in the impossibility of its being reduced to a clue, that is, in its being maintained as desire. With desire every episode ends with a “to be continued”.

Lacan’s reading, developed during two sessions of his *Seminar II* in March 1955, tries to elude this pinning down of desire to meaning and propose something like an allegorical model, with two climaxes. The first part leads to the moment when Irma opens her mouth, and this confrontation with an abyss brings about “the spectral decomposition of the Ego”: the mouth swallows the ego, as it were.

The first part reaches its climax with the emergence of this terrifying anguishing image, this Medusa’s head, when this literally unnamable thing is revealed, the bottom of this throat which, with its complicated elusive form evokes both the primal object *par excellence*, the abyss of the female sexual organ which is the source of all life, and at the same time the devouring mouth which engulfs everything, the very image of death. [...] the revelation of the real [...] the essential object which is no longer an object, but something where all words stop and all categories fail, the object of anxiety *par excellence*.⁷

The object of anxiety emerges precisely as irreducible to any content—it can be the genitals or the devouring mouth, the pulsating substance of life and its deadly metastasis, the wound, the excrescence. But what makes it an object is the abyss, the black hole in the middle of being, which by definition one can never see—all that we ever see is “the event horizon”, the real which curves and bends the very space of visibility, but is itself invisible. This is the place in the dream where Freud should have woken up (this was already Erikson’s observation), but he didn’t. If we follow the Lacanian adage that we only wake up in order

to be able to continue to sleep, then Freud didn't want to wake up, he didn't want to sleep awake, so he slept on. And he dreamed.

The second part leads us to the second *menetekel*, the second "this is you", presented by the formula of trimethylamin. What does this formula mean, what is its secret? Trimethylamin is a chemical substance which apparently plays a certain role in sexual chemistry, at least according to Fließ's theory, so that this formula would present like the missing cause, the missing link in the causal chain which would fill in the continuity of natural causality. With that substance we could pin down the human sexuality, and subjectivity, to a chemical formula, the magic formula we have been looking for. The basis in chemistry would hopefully turn psychoanalysis into a serious science. But all this comes to nothing, this is precisely the formula in a dream, and of a dream, made of such stuff that dreams are made of.

Like an oracle, this formula doesn't provide any answer to anything. But the very way in which it is enounced, its enigmatic hermetic character, presents an answer to the question of the meaning of the dream. This answer could be shaped on the model of the Islamic formula—there is no God but God. There is no other word, no other solution of your problem, but the word. [...] there is no other word of the dream except for the very nature of the symbolic. [...] the symbols have always only the value of symbols. [...] But this word doesn't mean anything, except that it is a word.⁸

This formula is purely self-referential. The signifier of meaning means only that it means, without disclosing what it means. This is the point which Lacan will later call S_1 , which is nothing but a symbolic trait as such, the symbolic reflected into itself, a sign without a semantic content whose counterpart is not an ego, but a "headless subject" (*acéphal*). Even more, this is a letter, not just any signifier, but a scientific formula, which is taken here not for its scientific validity in chemistry, but only for its value as a formula, that is, a *matheme*. And the dream could be seen as the trajectory that leads first to the unfathomable shape of *objet a*, the abyss of the real, but doesn't stop there, it makes another passage, a *forçage*, as it were, to the emergence of a *matheme*—the line that announces the trajectory in later Lacan to the mathematical formalization and the function of *matheme*.

We didn't find the missing link, the missing cause of all hysterical theatre, the solution, but what we found in its place is the formula of trimethylamin, the self-reflective signifier that names the place of the missing link, it emerges in its place, but without establishing a continuity which would make the mysteries of human sexuality explainable by means of chemistry. It rather marks the place of the break in the chain, the place of the impossibility of reassembling it. What matters for Lacan is not the role it plays in sciences of nature, but its nature as formula, the letter, that is, the science of nature brought to its minimal signifying operation, the spelling out of the real, quite literally, by the senseless letter. Science spells out the real of nature by a formula which doesn't make sense.

THE NAVEL

Freud himself didn't conceptualize it in this way, but he makes another sort of self-reflective move instead. His way of doing this is through his notion of the navel of the dream which he introduces in a footnote in the midst of the interpretation of this specimen dream. "There is at least one spot in every dream at which it is unplumbable—a navel, as it were, that is its point of contact with the unknown."⁹ And then he comes back to this idea at more length later in the book:

There is often a passage in even the most thoroughly interpreted dream which has to be left obscure; this is because we become aware during the work of interpretation that at that point there is a tangle of dream-thoughts which cannot be unraveled and which moreover adds nothing to our knowledge of the content of the dream. This is the dream's navel, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown [*dem Unerkannten aufsitzt*]. The dream-thoughts to which we are led by interpretation cannot, from the nature of things, have any definite endings; they are bound to branch out in every direction into the intricate network [*die netzartige Verstrickung*—an internet, a rhizome] of our world of thought. It is at some point where this meshwork is particularly close that the dream-wish grows up, like a mushroom out of its mycelium.¹⁰

So there is a point which adds nothing to the content, it is a pure signifier, and at that point the dream reaches into the unknown, into the rhizomatic unfathomable network—but this point condenses and

summarizes the rhizome, so to speak, it is its point of reflection into itself. The navel is not an innocent metaphor. It is both the sign of the link and of the severance of that link. It is the sign of separation, a cut, a break, it is a scar that manifests our disconnection from the origin, the source, the scar of the structure, and the scar of a wound which cannot be healed. Furthermore, it also has the shape of a knot, and perhaps one should read it as a miniature version of the Borromean knot that Lacan was so fond of and which he used in order to “illustrate” the intertwining of the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real. So the dream is a wish-fulfillment, but only through the navel which is itself meaningless, uninterpreted and uninterpretable, the point of reflection of the impossible source of desire, of the impossible source of subjectivity and its missing cause. It refers to the intersection of the surplus object, the abyss, and of the surplus signifier, which ultimately takes the shape of the *matheme*.

Thus this dream itself, the dream of Irma’s injection, ultimately functions as the navel, the navel of psychoanalysis, the mark of its birth, but at the same time there is the side of the inscrutable, a knot, a labyrinth, the moment we try to seize its meaning. It is the mark of our connection with Freud, the discoverer, the founding father, the teacher, the master, and at the same time the mark of the severance of this tie, since the formula it offers, the formula of trimethylamin, the formula of interpretation of dreams, is no magic formula that one could hold on to as one can to a formula in physics, but something to be reinvented, always anew. It is a core of theoretical work, an opening of theoretical elaboration, and a call for a practice, our battle cry.

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- 1 Freud 1977: 119-120
 - 2 Ibid.: 626
 - 3 Masson 1985: 118 and 125
 - 4 Erikson 1954: 48-49
 - 5 Kofman 1980: 55 (my translation)
 - 6 Freud 1976: 100 and 266-7
 - 7 Lacan 1978: 196 (my translation)
 - 8 Ibid.: 190, 191, and 202 (my translation)
 - 9 Freud 1977: 186, footnote.
 - 10 Ibid.: 671-2

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