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# Freud's Fever Children

## 1. FREUD'S FEVER CHILD

One of the most famous dreams in Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) is the dream of the burning child. It is not one of Freud's own. Nor is it even dreamt by a patient directly; rather, it is *re-dreamt* by her, offered as a citation of yet another dreamer. Freud places the dream at the beginning of Chapter VII of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. By opening his final and most theoretically ambitious chapter with it, Freud signals that something crucial is at stake. Yet, immediately after recounting the dream, Freud insists that nothing genuinely new occurs in it. If the dream is remarkable, he tells us, it is because the fulfillment of a wish appears here without disguise. Here is the dream as Freud reports it:

> A father had been watching beside his child's sickbed for days and nights on end. After the child had died, he went into the next room to lie down, but left the door open so that he could see from his bedroom into the room in which his child's body was laid out, with tall candles standing round it. An old man had been engaged to keep watch over it, and sat beside the body

> murmuring prayers. After a few hours' sleep, the father had a dream that his child was standing beside his bed, caught him by the arm and whispered to him reproachfully: *'Father, don't you see I'm burning?*' He woke up, noticed a bright glare of light from the next room, hurried into it and found that the old watchman had dropped off to sleep and that the wrappings and one of the arms of his beloved child's dead body had been burned by a lighted candle that had fallen on them.[1]

Freud's commentary on the dream point in two directions. On the one hand, he calls it a "model dream" (*vorbildlich*) and even describes it as moving. On the other hand, he insists that there is nothing particularly remarkable about it: "The explanation of this moving dream is simple enough and, so my patient told me, was correctly given by the lecturer." Its singularity, Freud claims, lies only in the absence of disguise. With a fire already burning in the next room, the father *ought* to have woken immediately; indeed, Freud suggests that the father correctly interpreted the external stimulus in his sleep and may even have gone to bed with a worrying suspicion that the old man watching over the dead child was not up to his taks, he could not step in the father's place. The father's guilt—his sense of having relinquished responsibility—creates a preconscious tension that the dream both responds to and displaces.

But instead of waking at once, the father wishes to continue sleeping. The dream is thus a fulfilment of a wish: to have the child alive again and to continue sleeping. "The dream was preferred to a waking reflection because it was able to show the child as once more alive." The external stimulus (the fire in the adjoining room) is thus recruited into the service of the wish: it becomes material for a dream-work that briefly restores the lost child in order to preserve sleep. The dream thus seems only to confirm the theory of the pleasure principle—a theory Freud has developed throughout *The Interpretation of Dreams* and which is meant to guarantee the validity of psychoanalysis as a science (and Freud as a recognized professorial figure in the public realm).

Most interpreters have not found Freud's explanation sufficient.[i] The words spoken by the child and the powerful image seem to

i Very strong interpretations are for example, Cathy Caruths *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins

carry a weight that is in excess of a simple warning about the fire in the adjoining room. Freud himself acknowledges that "the content of the dream must have been overdetermined." The sentence the child utters may indeed echo words once spoken while he was still alive, but within the dream they acquire an additional, intensified function. They are overdetermined.

If the father's dream were simply a product of the pleasure principle, if its aim were merely to revive the child in order to preserve sleep, then why does the child not return with consoling words—why not reassure the father, ease his guilt, promise that he is now at peace, cured of his fever, resting in heaven? Why, instead, does the child utter *exactly* the words: "Father, don't you see that I am burning?" (*Vater, siehst du denn nicht, daß ich verbrenne?*). The words name not merely the fire in the next room, but a burning that exceeds death. The child persists in a life beyond life, a life that cannot burn out, a life in the register of *unbearable jouissance*. The gesture of tugging the shirt, the words, the frightening gaze goes beyond the pleasure principle.

These words introduce an overwhelming foreign *jouissance*, something that does not fit the father's wish at all. There is nothing in the theory of wish-fulfilment that would predict or support the child returning with this specific utterance. On the contrary: the very *manifest content* of the dream—the child's particular reproach, seems to go beyond Freud's explanation, and run against not simply the father's wishes, but perhaps also Freud's.

As Freud remarks in a footnote—and as Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar have particularly emphasized[2ii]—*The Interpretation of Dreams* repeatedly shows that the unconscious is revealed in the excess of the manifest form over the latent content. The unconscious is not simply located "beneath" the dream in some hidden meaning; it inheres in the form itself, in the surplus of *form* over content. The father might find pleasure, for a brief moment, in the dream of his child alive again,

University Press, 1996, and, more recently, with a slightly different emphasis Alenka Zupančič: *Disavowal (Theory Redux)*. New Jersey / UK: John Wiley & Sons / Polity, 2024.

ii Mladen Dolar writes concisely: «The reconstruction of the latent text behind the strata of distortion is far from presenting us with the unconscious *in persona*. On the contrary, we are on the track of the unconscious only in the space between the two, in the irreducible interval between the manifest and the latent, in the surplus of distortion over the 'true' content, in the dream-work that produced the distortion.» (after Zupančič 2008: 24).

but the particular form of this life, the burning body and the words, are beyond the latent wishes.

I want to jump ahead and compare this to a much more fitting description of the dream, although Lacan does not mention this particular dream. Lacan points out in *Seminar X*, that nightmare stages an unbearable encounter with a foreign jouissance—an intrusion of enjoyment that the subject cannot integrate.

> The correlative of the nightmare is the incubus or the succubus, the creature that bears down on your chest with all its opaque weight of foreign jouissance, which crushes you beneath its *jouissance*. The first thing that appears in the myth, but also in the nightmare such as it is experienced, is that this creature that weighs down with its jouissance is also a questioning being, and even reveals itself in the developed dimension of the question known as the riddle. The Sphinx, don't forget, who in the myth arrives on the scene prior to all of Oedipus' drama, is both a nightmarish figure and a questioning figure.[3]

Doesn't this description in fact resonate far more deeply with the dream of the burning child? In this dream, the child is an interrogating being, he becomes a kind of Sphinx: he presents his foreign *jouissance*, his unbearable presence, and his words as an enigmatic riddle addressed to the father. As Lacan suggests, the nightmare is not simply defined by terrifying content; its horror lies in a failure of *form*—in something that cannot be fully constituted as a representable scene. It is the form of something from which one cannot quite wake, something that resists integration into reality, that cannot be symbolized or properly experienced.[iii]

## 2. LACAN'S FEVER CHILD

In *Seminar XI*, Lacan returns to the dream of the burning child and re-reads it against Freud's own theory of wish-fulfilment, in a re-reading that has become classical. Lacan argues that the father does not awaken

iii This is how both Caruth and Zupančič formulates it: trauma is not experienced, but «outside» experience (that is what makes it properly traumatic). It is therefore not so much a particular content, but the form of something that can never be known to begin with. See Caruth 1996 and Zupančič 2017.

because of the external stimulus—the fire in the adjoining room—but rather awakens in order to escape the Real that the dream itself has begun to stage. It is true that the father may, for an instant, imagine the child still alive; such a wish can indeed trigger the dream, allowing sleep to continue and granting one final vision of the lost child. Yet within this wish, another, utterly unbearable dimension suddenly emerges – not reality, but the Real, that which is unassimilable to waking consciousness. Thus, the awakening is not simply caused by the external event of the fire. On the contrary, it is the *child's words*—their reproach, their impossible demand, their traumatic charge of jouissance—that become intolerable. The father wakes in order to flee from this impossible address. He wakes, paradoxically, into the reality of a dead child and a burning room because that reality is much more bearable than the Real convoked within the dream. As Lacan puts it:

> When everybody is asleep, including the person who wished to take a little rest, the person who was unable to maintain his vigil and the person of whom some well-intentioned individual, standing at his bedside, must have said, *He looks just as if he is asleep*, when we know only one thing about him, and that is that, *in this entirely sleeping world, only the voice is heard*, *Father, can't you see I'm burning? This sentence is itself a firebrand*—of itself *it brings fire where it falls*—and one cannot see what is burning, for the flames blind us to the fact that the fire bears on the *Unterlegt*, on the *Untertragen*, on the *Real*.[4]

Lacan thus reverses Freud's original perspective (and he does so by returning to Freud's letter, to the child's words). It is not, as Freud proposes, that the pleasure principle permits the father to dream of the child for a moment longer, only to be interrupted by the harsh reality of the fire in the next room—a reality that finally becomes too strong for the dream to contain. Rather, Lacan reverses this logic: the father wakes in order to escape a more unbearable reality, the Real, that erupts within the dream itself.

This Real is not the fire in the adjoining room; it is what is carried by the child's words, the dimension Lacan names the jouissance of the Other—a traumatic excess that cannot be symbolized or integrated into the subject's reality. Awakening, then, is not a rupture imposed from outside but a mode of defence from the Real: a retreat into "reality," into the comparatively manageable framework of causal

explanations and urgent tasks (rushing into the next room, waking the old man, putting out the fire). These actions offer a practical narrative in which the father can situate himself, a world of conscious and waking reality.

As Alenka Zupančič has pointed out, urgency itself can function as a continuation of sleep, the "zeal with which we jump up and react, reach out, express concern, outrage, solidarity, is of course laudable, but it also often carries in itself a surplus dimension of serving its own purpose." The rush into urgency, contains a surplus over its apparent practicality. The frantic rush to respond, to solve, to act can itself, paradoxically, operate as a kind of snooze function—"the purpose of disawoving the fire that bears on the real in the Lacanian sense." [5] In this sense, the father wakes not to confront the truth of the dream but to seek refuge in the comforting demands of "something to be done," which spare him from facing what the child's words reveal.

We might also put it differently: in waking life, we are occupied with practicalities—we rush into action, into tasks, into urgency. It is, of course, horrible enough that the child's corpse has caught fire and that the father must run around looking for water to extinguish it. Yet this is, by far, preferable to encountering the child in the dream. Urgency gives the father something to do. In this sense, urgency—this sense of "really doing something"—functions as an escape from the Real carried by the dream, from the unbearable guilt inscribed in the child's words. The father wakes up to continue sleeping.

What seems not sufficiently emphasized in many commentaries, however, is the address itself, the "fire-brand words," as Lacan calls them. A tiny alteration in the phrasing would shift the dream entirely. Imagine the child saying, "Father, I'm burning"—a mere report. Or, "Why am I burning?"—a question that need not implicate the paternal function. But the actual sentence is different: it contains both interrogation and invocation. It names the father—indeed invokes the *Name-of-the-Father*—and simultaneously reveals the dreamer's inadequacy in that position. The unspoken supplement is: *Are you really a father, if this could happen to me?*

When we read this dream at the conclusion of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, it becomes clear that it carries something beyond the psychic life of a single subject. It reads like a parable with broader historical resonance. This, in my view, is one reason Freud's patient repeated the dream, and why Freud repeated it again in his text. It "caught" like a wildfire because the "fire-brand" words transmit not simply a

personal trauma but a historical one. Or perhaps "experience" is not the right word. It is the voice of something that fails to manifest as experience proper—something that cannot appear as lived history, but instead returns only in the form of the dream, or in the literature of the period.[iv]

The dream thus announces the collapse of paternal authority and the emergence of something new. Lacan refers to this shift with the punning formula *père ou pire—the father or worse*. What appears in the dream is not the reassuring figure of the Father who guarantees meaning and stability, but its underside: the moment when the symbolic function falters and what takes its place is something *worse*, something that no longer organizes the subject's world but instead exposes him to the Real.

In the scene of the burning child, the Father emerges not as the bearer of the Name-of-the-Father but as the one called into question, exposed, stripped of symbolic consistency. The child's address does not call forth the paternal function; it reveals its failure. The father is reduced to the empirical subject who let catastrophe occur. This is precisely what Lacan indicates with *père ou pire*: the paternal function, once destabilized, gives way not to liberation but to a more disturbing figure—one marked by guilt, impotence, and the intrusion of the Real.[6]

There is, thus, another dimension of the child's words that can be detected—namely, the possibility of the perverse father, or what Lacan, with characteristic wordplay, calls *père-version*. As Freud remarks at one point, perversion is the "other side" of neurosis; when the paternal function falters, the opposite of impotence is not mastery but the father's enjoyment of the child's suffering. This, too, would be unbearable—indeed, *worse*.

On one level, the words "Father, don't you see that I am burning?" announce the father's failure: he is not a "good enough" father.

iv One of the most important aspects of Caruth's work on trauma in psychoanalysis, is precisely to link it *literary* representation: «If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing.» (Caruth 1996: 3). In fact ,around the turn of the century there seems to be such a proliferation of such «fever-children»: there is for example, Georg Trakl's the boy Elis, Kafka's «Country Doctor» or Walter Benjamin's descriptions of having a fever as a child in *Childhood in Berlin*, something he claims gives him his particular split perspective, his melancholic-messianic view of history.

Yet they can also be heard as an accusation of *perversion*: perhaps the father *does* see that his child is burning, but prefers to do nothing about it—or even enjoys it in an obscene way. This is the other face of the father function: not the Symbolic Father who provides law and limit, but the *father-jouisseur*, the obscene father whose gaze is charged with enjoyment. As the symbolic father declines, this obscene version comes to the fore and gathers strength.

Perhaps this offers another way to hear the words of the dream. Something radically new is happening at the turn of the century—around 1900—precisely when Freud is writing. The decline of paternal authority does not simply leave a vacuum; it ushers in a different kind of "fever," one in which perverse fathers proliferate.[7] The *père-version* becomes the new figure of authority—forms of leadership driven not by symbolic legitimacy but by enjoyment. In this sense, the dream indicates a shift in the political structure of the modern world, a world increasingly shaped by perverse fathers, including the populist leaders who emerge across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.[v]

That is to say, the father does see and lets it happen. In this moment, another father emerges: the obscene father–*jouisseur*—the primal father of *Totem and Taboo*, the one with unrestricted access to jouissance, whose power is no longer constrained by law, responsibility, or symbolic mediation. Freud is often accused of defending the father, of reinforcing patriarchy and phallocentrism. Yet he is better understood as diagnosing what happens when the symbolic, Oedipal Father declines. Across Freud's case histories, the paternal figure oscillates between two poles: impotence and excess. Either the father is weakened, fragile, dependent—requiring care, nursing, or protection, as in Dora or the early hysterics—or he appears as an obscene figure who enjoys "too much," as in the Rat Man, the Wolf Man, and most dramatically the paternal figures in the Schreber case.[8] The paternal function, in Freud, is not stable; it is a position that vacillates between *too little* and *too much*.

If we attend to what is happening around the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams*—at the threshold of the twentieth century—the prophetic character of Freud's work might be found precisely here

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(even if Freud was partially too afraid to wake up to it): the decline of the symbolic father and the return of the obscene one. As the Oedipal father loses symbolic footing, the promised progressivist freedoms of bourgeois modernity do not materialize; instead, new, hyper-visible father-figures emerge whose authority rests not on symbolic legitimacy but on the display of unrestrained enjoyment. These are the perverse fathers, figures who "enjoy too much."

What *Interpretation of Dreams* registers—perhaps without Freud fully realizing it—is the beginning of this structural shift. The symbolic Father recedes; in his place rises the obscene father, whose jouissance becomes the organizing principle of power. And this diagnosis remains pertinent today. There are fewer "symbolic" Fathers, and in their stead, we see obscene fathers proliferating everywhere: Trump, Putin, Netanyahu… These are fathers who themselves start fires, forcing everyone else into perpetual urgency, we wake up all the time to go on sleeping. Their crises demand constant reaction, a continuous running-about to extinguish flames—and in this way, they enable us to "go on sleeping in this entirely sleeping world." That is, they allow society to avoid confronting a more unbearable Real: not merely the collapse of paternal authority but the need for a radical structural transformation of capitalism itself. It is like this predictability of what the problem is, a "structural change to capitalism" is itself unbearable *because* it is predictable. We know what we should do, but it becomes more and more impossible to do it – and therefore one runs from one concrete fire to the next. The concrete fires we are constantly made to put out function as a *screen* that shields us from this Real. My point is not that we must remain within this father-child constellation and simply go back to the classic Name-of-the-Father against superego fathers. Instead, I try by the end of the essay to outline what a different constellation could look like. But first, I want to look at what I think resonates in Freud's choice of this dream as an example.

### 3. GOETHE'S FEVER CHILD

The particular words of the child—his appeal for help in "Father, don't you see…"—must, Freud says, have been heard before. They are exceptionally moving, though he cannot say why, and I believe, this is not just because he does not have the particular dreamer as a patient (because the words failed not to move the patient that re-dreamt the dream, nor Freud himself). It is striking how closely they echo a literary reference Freud must have known: another fever-stricken child

whose words, I suggest, can be read as an eruption of *jouissance*. I have in mind Goethe's famous folk ballad *Erlkönig* (1782). Here, too, we encounter a child burning with *jouissance* and a father powerless to protect him. What confronts us is again the father and his superegoic supplement: the symbolic father of the law on one side, and his obscene counterpart on the other. In my reading the Erl is the other side of the Father-function, not a remnant of the past, but a prophetic figure of what accompanies enlightenment as its own trouble with jouissance.

Before I go to the poem, a bit of context: Goethe encountered the legend through Johann Gottfried Herder, who introduced him to the Danish ballad about Prince Oluf. In Herder's version, Oluf is seduced by the daughters of the Elf-King on the eve of his wedding; it is a love story with a fatal end. Goethe transforms the structure entirely and this is very important in terms of reading the poem's efficacy: he cuts the love story between a man, his fiancée and the elves, and replaces it with a drama between *two fathers* and a fever-stricken son. The poem becomes rather a story of what happens in the wake of the decline of paternal function, not a love-story between Oluf and his fiancée. Here is the full poem (English translation in footnotes):

Wer reitet so spät durch Nacht und Wind?
Es ist der Vater mit seinem Kind;
Er hat den Knaben wohl in dem Arm,
Er faßt ihn sicher, er hält ihn warm.

Mein Sohn, was birgst du so bang dein Gesicht?
Siehst, Vater, du den Erlkönig nicht?
Den Erlenkönig mit Kron‘ und Schweif?
Mein Sohn, es ist ein Nebelstreif.

“Du liebes Kind, komm, geh mit mir!
Gar schöne Spiele spiel‘ ich mit dir;
Manch‘ bunte Blumen sind an dem Strand,
Meine Mutter hat manch gülden Gewand.”

Mein Vater, mein Vater, und hörest du nicht,
Was Erlenkönig mir leise verspricht?
Sei ruhig, bleibe ruhig, mein Kind;
In dürren Blättern säuselt der Wind.

"Willst, feiner Knabe, du mit mir gehn?
Meine Töchter sollen dich warten schön;
Meine Töchter führen den nächtlichen Reihn,
Und wiegen und tanzen und singen dich ein."

Mein Vater, mein Vater, und siehst du nicht dort
Erlkönigs Töchter am düstern Ort?
Mein Sohn, mein Sohn, ich seh' es genau:
Es scheinen die alten Weiden so grau.

"Ich liebe dich, mich reizt deine schöne Gestalt;
Und bist du nicht willig, so brauch' ich Gewalt."
Mein Vater, mein Vater, jetzt faßt er mich an!
Erlkönig hat mir ein Leids getan!

Dem Vater grauset's; er reitet geschwind,
Er hält in den Armen das ächzende Kind,
Erreicht den Hof mit Mühe und Not;
In seinen Armen, das Kind war tot.[vi]

The poem gives us four voices: the narrator, the son, the father, and the Erl-king. What is particularly striking in this context is the near-identical formula of the child's appeal to the father in Freud's dream of the burning child. The son repeatedly says: *"Father, don't you see…?"* The voice becomes a refrain, a testimony to something that can appear

vi Who rides so late through night and wind?/It is the father with his child./He holds the boy tight in his arms,/He holds him safe, he keeps him warm.//»My son, why hide your face in fear?»/»Father, do you not see him near?/The Erl-King with his crown and train?»/»My son, it's but a streak of rain.»//»Sweet child, come, go with me so fair,/Such lovely games I'll play with you there;/So many bright flowers along the shore,/My mother has many gold garments in store.»//»O father, O father, and can you not hear/What the Erl-King whispers so close to my ear?»/»Be calm, my child, it's the wind that you hear/Rustling dry leaves in the thickets near.»//»Come, lovely boy, won't you come with me?/My daughters shall wait on you prettily;/My daughters lead nightly their dancing and song,/And they'll cradle you tenderly all night long.»//»O father, O father, and do you not see/Erl-King's daughters there under the tree?»/»My son, my son, I see it aright—/It's only the old willows looking so white.»//»I love you, your beauty I desire,/If you're not willing, I'll take you by fire!»/»O father, he's grabbed me, his hand's like flame!/Erl-King has hurt me, I'm not the same!»//The father shudders, he rides like the wind,/He clasps in his arms the moaning child./He reaches the courtyard, full of dread—/But in his arms, the child is dead. (tr. Edgar Alfred Bowring)

only as a phantasmic apparition—a jouissance that cannot be directly represented, or is unplaceable vis-a-vis the father's knowledge. This repetition stages the father's helplessness again and again: the son's question is almost perverse in the structural sense, for it splits the subject-position of the father, much like the child in Freud's dream, "Father, don't you see".

The father responds as the model figure of Enlightenment rationality. He is, while a father, also a transition to the university discourse. He offers explanations for the child's "fevered" perceptions based on what can be confirmed by empirical reality: the rustling of leaves, drifting mist, shifting shadows—these are merely ordinary atmospheric effects. His role becomes that of the rational educator, offering the child a kind of panic-stricken Kantian injunction: *sapere aude*—dare to know. Know, that there is no Erl-king at all, what you see are merely your own self-induced immaturity. A mature, rational adult can see there is nothing there. [vii]

While the theme of the poem is certainly very relevant, I would like to point out some of the formal aspects of the folk-ballad, a form that Goethe and Herder were both interested in rejuvenating. The text is composed in rhyming couplets (AABB) and metrical stress of a folk-ballad.

Wer reitet so spät durch Nacht und Wind?
Es ist der Vater mit seinem Kind.

The ballad's rhythm mirrors the gallop of the horse, propelling the poem forward with a driving, breathless compulsion. The poem's rhyming couplets and alternating metrical patterns create a continuous sense of motion. Crucially, this propulsive rhythm is somewhat

vii Goethe's Erlkönig traces its origins to a misunderstanding. Johann Gottfried Herder had translated a Danish folk ballad as Erlkönigs Tochter ("Erlking's Daughter"), misreading the Danish word ellerkonge—meaning "Elf King"—as related to the Low German Eller, meaning "alder tree." This etymological confusion likely shaped Goethe's poetic imagery, as shown in his 1780 poem Gesang der Elfen, where elves are said to dance among the alders. The alder tree thus becomes a particularly charged figure, a "tree between two deaths." Paul Celan takes up the theme in a different, "feverish" constellation in a late poem: "*Im Zeitwinkel schwört / die entschleierte Erle / still vor sich hin"* ("In the time-angle the unveiled alder / quietly swears to itself"). Here, it is *the alder tree* that assumes the role of witness, for both the father and the child are gone; there are no longer any human witnesses to the unburied dead—an image that can be read as a commentary on the unburied victims of the Holocaust.

at odds with the father's calm, rational reassurances. While he repeatedly insists on rational and naturalistic explanations, the form itself mirrors a "gallop", therefore underlines the "hectic" side of things.

In this way, the ballad's form places the reader on the side of the child, not the father. The galloping rhythm exposes what the father cannot "dare to know": that beneath his Enlightenment explanations that would reduce everything to reality, there is still the Real, something where the signifier stumbles, where the materiality of jouissance erupts.

The rhythm of the poem rather subverts the father's words: nothing is calm. The more the father tries to reassure the child, the more insistently the verse presses forward (one might make a pun on the *verses* hectic inclination towards the Erlkönig as per-*vers*ion). The gallop suggests urgency and speed. Form undermines calm paternal authority by revealing his impotence. Up to this point in the poem, content is divided between two visions: the father's sober perception and the child's fevered one. The horse gallops because the father must outrun the threat. In other words, the poem's form and its diegetic reality mutually reinforce one another: danger outside corresponds to acceleration inside. But *Erlkönig* is not merely a metrical illustration of galloping. The poem does something *more* with its rhythm in the final two lines, the poem seems to say, with Lacan's classic pun "encore"(with the wordplay on en corps, in the body and en core, one more time, still, *more*). There is something more that is both a surplus of form over content, and the surplus of materiality of body.

We see this, in that the mirroring of external threat and metrical propulsion holds only until the penultimate line (l. 31), where the horse stops.

"*Erreicht den Hof mit Mühe und Not."*
*In seinen Armen, das Kind war tot." (l. 31-32)*

Although the gallop within the diegesis ceases at line 31, the metric gallop does *not* stop. The rhythm persists after its narrative motivation has ended. It is as if the gallop no longer belongs to the horse at all but has become an integral part of the poem's form. The poem gallops by itself. Form continues "for its own sake," taking on a spectral life. We can see, that while the Erl-king has disappeared from external reality (he is no longer present), it is like he has moved inside the form of the poem itself, the form itself sounds "hollow" in the last line. The

spectral life that he was throughout the poem has disappeared, but he has instead moved inside the poem, haunting it from *within*.

Line 31 seems like the natural ending; narratively speaking, it *should* be the end. But the penultimate line demands a rhyme. It demands continuation. Form insists. Something has not stopped with the regained safety of the courtyard.

If there is something *unheimlich* in the poem does not lie solely in the content, in the father holding the dead child. The uncanniness emerges from a subtle reversibility: form becomes its own content, a life on its own, much like the spectral figure of the Erlking has been so far. The spectral momentum of the rhythm takes on the status of an apparition, while content itself fractures, producing a material surplus—a body too much. The dead child appears as a waste object, falling out of the signifying dialectic, the excess that the rhythmic closure both demands and reveals. The uncanny thus arises from the peculiar sensation that the poem is compelled to continue—not because the story requires it. The narrative has already reached its conclusion: the courtyard is reached, the horse stands still, the danger is past. Yet the poem presses on. The form demands completion. Without the gallop—the rhythmic urgency that also functions, paradoxically, like a lull or hypnotic repetition—the poem could not execute the shock of its final rupture.

The content could have ended one line earlier, with safety regained. But the poem insists on one more line, as if its form has acquired a *spectral* momentum independent of narrative logic. And on the other side of this spectral persistence, we find a surplus body: the corpse of the child—pure material excess, without life, the point where the symbolic, ordinary reality, fails and the Real intrudes. My reading suggest that both of these aspects produce what Žižek calls a *parallax*: two incompatible "realities" that appear simultaneously within the same scene.[9] On the one hand, the gallop has ended in the court yard. On the other hand, the poem continues to move; the gallop persists in the form itself, and, if you will, in the reader's ear.

This missed encounter, the parallax, appears again in the relation between father and son. When they share the same time, they do not share the same space. When they speak to each other through the poem, they do not really inhabit the same space, they see "different things", they live in separate spaces. But when they finally appear in the same space (in the final line), they do no longer live in the same time – the child is already a thing of the past, and this is also the only

use of past tense in the poem. What does this mean? It means that a father and a child, can never live in the same world in so far as the father is never simply this or that (wellmeaning) father of flesh and blood, but represents the paternal function. I was reminded of the, for me at least, equally moving words of Freud's famous Rat-man (or Ernst Lanser) who at one point in the case says quite touchingly to Freud, that one can be the best of friends with one's father, only the fact that he is the father... Freud reports about the patient:

> He then proceeded, somewhat disconnectedly as it seemed, to say that he had been his father's best friend, and that his father had been his. Except on a few subjects, upon which fathers and sons usually hold aloof from one another—(What could he mean by that?)—there had been a greater intimacy between them than there now was between him and his best friend.

Freud's short comment of course tells us everything—*"What could he mean by that?"*—it points to impossibility that structures father–son relations. Empirically, one might be "best friends" with one's father; symbolically, however, the Father is precisely what prevents an "honest conversation." (what would that conversation entail?)[viii]. The father must not know of jouissance, the son can only enjoy in the father's ignorance of enjoyment, yet Ernst's problem is that he already knows too much about it. Certain things—above all, jouissance—must be left out of any "honest conversation". Psychoanalysis should reconcile these split perspectives; rather it should produce the perspective as a split, that is as a parallax.

Every day reality is organized around precisely such missed encounters. The father insists on rational explanation; the child perceives the obscene father or father-as-perversion. The father sees fog; the child sees the Erl-king. And if the benevolent, well-meaning father cannot see the Erl-king, it is not because the Erl-king belongs to some archaic past, too distant to perceive; it is because he is *too*

viii Žižek says this precisely in his reading of the burning child: «which is why the famous Freudian dream of a son who appears to this father and reproaches him with *«Father, can't you see that I am burning?»* could be simply translated into «*Father, can't you see that I am enjoying?*» – can't you see that I'm alive, burning with enjoyment? Father cannot see it since he is dead, whereby the possibility is open to me to enjoy not only outside his knowledge i.e. unbeknownst to him, but also in his very ignorance.» Žižek 2001: 143

*close*—the father's own obscene, superegoic underside. Their relation is structured by a missed encounter—in waking life we miss the missed encounter itself. But in Freud's dream of the burning child, or in Goethe's poem, the missed encounter emerges as missed, as something impossible, as a crack in the "waking", or social reality. The poem, like the dream of the burning child, stages this missed encounter *as missed.* Waking reality, by contrast, presents itself as full and continuous; a missed encounter is simply not registered. In the dream and the poem, the rift appears—an interruption in the order of being where the Real momentarily shows itself.

### 4. CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE FEVER CHILD

So far, I have approached the fever child through Freud's dream of the burning child and through Goethe's burning, jouissance-stricken son. But what if we were to ask about our current predicament? Who are the "burning children" of today—or, perhaps, tomorrow? The "fever children" of the future?

We might imagine those future children who are, in a sense, already burning from our fossil emissions. As if they were tugging at our sleeves, saying: *"Can't you see that we're burning?"* Here too, the structure is one of disjunction, a missed encounter. Unlike other forms of intergenerational responsibility, these children are not yet alive. With a variation of Lacan's formulation, we might say they are "beings between two births"—strange, spectral figures, that cannot even be born properly, because the reality of climate change is a rupture to the linear open-ended future. It means that the future is closed.

If we continue on our current path—waking up again and again into new states of emergency while remaining, in Lacan's sense, in an "entirely sleeping world"—these children will never come into being. We thus confront a new kind of trauma: a prosopopoeia of fevered children from the future, figures whose very impossibility undermines the notion that history unfolds linearly toward an open horizon. The future appears increasingly closed off. These voices cannot be part of positive reality, of course, they must be fictionalized—given form in poetry, narrative, or theory as *firebrand words* spoken from a future already sealed off. This is why I suggested the literary figure of prosopopeia. Like the fiction can give voice to the past trauma, so also fiction can give voice to that strange trauma that comes from the future.

Climate change intensifies this problem because its temporality resists the narrative forms we normally employ. It is not the sudden

catastrophe for which our "cognitive mapping" is culturally trained, as Fred Jameson calls it. Our "cognitive mapping" is saturated with apocalyptic imagery—Hollywood visions of zombies, plagues, explosions, planetary collapse. Its easier to imagine the end of the world, than the end to capitalism, as Jameson also puts it. Meaning of course, that the only way to imagine a different social order is through a natural catastrophe. But of course, they are no longer perceived as separate realms. The way to imagine the end is usually through some spectacular catastrophe. It is not so much society of the spectacle as Guy Debord imagined it, as the *end* of society that is a spectacle. The end of the world can itself function as a screen, much like the perverse father.

Even post-apocalyptic scenarios—such as the vagabond father-and-son survivalism of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*—presuppose that the disaster has already happened and is now "over," leaving only the aftermath.[10] The novel takes place in the post-catastrophic world. But as such there is something strangely alleviating about it, as though the worst is actually over, because it has already happened. In *The Road*, the father and child can still "do something," and they are not confronting with what Tim Morton calls a hyperobject. In this way, even the post-apocalyptic image can screen the more unbearable temporality of gradual, structure-altering decline. It is also strange, how the call for fiction to "help", to provide a form of new imaginary, seems to echo the classical Marxist discussion about the use of "realism" versus the more avantgarde aesthetics preferred by Bloch and Benjamin, as though it is the function of fiction to "resemble" or "reflect" reality.

My point, however, is not so much about going in this direction. It is rather to complicate the ethics of the good that sustains much of the discussions around climate change. Much of the work done relies on an aristotelean ethics of balance. The problem, as seen there, is that we treat those foreign children as strangers (because we cannot conceive of deep time, we cannot get "close enough" to them). We therefore need new conceptual models, that would involve us to imagine them as much closer, preferably as family members. It is strange how this involves, a return to pre-Freudian ethics and presumptions about what a family is. The problem, rather, is precisely that for psychoanalysis, the family is already pretty strange. Freud's fundamental insight is, not only that the human animal is certainly not trying to optimize its own comfort and happiness, but rather invested in its own suffering, but also that this is actual the most "ethical" thing about it,

because this involves an ethics, that does rely on conforming to the reality principle (which is always ideologically given). Secondly, the family is not some safe haven, in Freud's work, but rather deterritorialized from within. Freud is neither a defender of bourgeois family values nor an advocate of abolishing the family in the Deleuzo–Guattarian sense (indeed, *Anti-Oedipus* still requires the Oedipal family as its point of departure). Rather, Freud shows that the family is already deterritorialized from within and the ethics of the good, of balance, is subverted by jouissance.[11]

We may therefore need a different ethical formula—one that breaks, provocatively, with the assumptions of well-being and the ethics of the good[12] that remain the predominant framework of much climate discourse. These frameworks seems to me to often end up in various new versions of the One. We are enjoined to act as responsible parents toward future generations; our failure is framed as a failure of care, as a lapse in optimizing the pleasure principle on their behalf. But are there alternatives?

A different ethical orientation is perhaps possible, but it requires a decisive cut from the figure of the Father—not only from the Oedipal father of law and benevolence, but even more urgently from the obscene father whose figures proliferate today. The obscene father is no longer the hidden underside of the symbolic function; he now appears openly, even triumphantly, celebrated as the figure who "dares to enjoy" without limit. How, then, can we break out of this vicious dialectic—this closed circuit between the symbolic father and his obscene double, between *père* and *pire*, the Father and "something worse"?

### 5. Plato's fever child

My final fever child comes a recent short film by director Alice Rohrwacher, made in collaboration with street artist JR: *An Urban Allegory* (2024). This to me is not the fever child and the father, but the fever child and Plato. This proposal may seem almost scandalously naïve—something, one might say, that only a fever-stricken child could propose. My aim here is not to provide a detailed analysis of the film; the remarks that follow are meant as providing a points that I take from the film in regard to what a different constellation could look like.

The film centres on a young mother, a ballet dancer in Paris, who is preparing for an audition. On the day of the event, her plans begin to unravel: her child, a boy of 6 years or so, falls ill with a fever, she must extract him from school, and in the midst of heavy traffic she

tries to reach the child's father. This is the very beginning of the film, and the father is only a distant, impotent voice. Thus the film already stages the fever child not in relation to the father. It is as if Rohrwacher wanted to say: enough with the father (and his obscene doubles) – why don't we think of what to do next? The paternal decline is already a fait accompli for her, and there is no need for the reactionary superego tendencies. Rohrwacher's film thus suggests, without melodrama and almost in passing, that the father is no longer a viable political or symbolic option. The film does not lament this absence; rather, it treats it as its point of departure. In this sense, the film begins precisely where the constellation of Freud and Goethe ends. The mother runs through the streets of Paris with the child in one hand, trying to reach her audition in time. The ballet for which she is auditioning is a staging of Plato's Cave. Already at this level, the film introduces a striking shift: it supplements Lacan's formulation *le père ou pire*—"the Father or worse"—with a third term. Beyond the opposition between the symbolic father and his obscene jouisseur counterpart, a third possibility appears. One might formulate continue Lacan's wordplay and continue it thus: *père...ou pire… ou Platon* ("the Father, the worse… or Plato").

This Platonic supplement marks the opening of a new, almost utopian space, one that falls outside the paternal dialectic. It is a space Lacan himself perhaps did not fully explore, given the often conservative inflection of his political views. Yet this should not lead us to conclude that psychoanalytic politics are bound to the alternatives of paternal law and its obscene underside—or to the market's law as the sole horizon of social reality.[ix] What the film suggests, and what psychoanalysis can be seen to support, is the emergence of a fourth perspective, irreducible to the Father and his perverse double.

The mother hurries through the streets of Paris with her feverish child in her arms. Within this urban environment, the child appears almost as a waste object, a surplus element that interrupts the city's carefully choreographed flow. Cars honk, pedestrians curse; the child's

ix Dolar writes: «psychoanalysis is not simply apolitical; rather, its circumscribing the site of the political is something that calls for politics, for an engagement in that site, for a step too far, although one can only do it at the price of entering into another logic than the one that sustains psychoanalysis. The circumscription of the site is no neutral description; it requires a step, although it itself doesn't prescribe what this step should be.» (2008: 28).

fever makes him all the more troublesome, a moving impediment to the smooth functioning of social space. He clings to a cardboard kaleidoscope—presumably made at school—which breaks as they bump into passersby, further delaying the mother as she tries to console him. This detail is crucial. The child's presence reveals that the "smooth" order of the city depends on a privatized and hyper-individualized public sphere, in which everyone rushes from one demand to the next, *urgently ineffective*, waking again and again into emergency while remaining, in Lacan's sense, in an "entirely sleeping world", a sleepiness that often takes the form of "conscious waking up", rushing into inefficiency, being busy all the time.

The mother reaches the audition too late. The assistant director informs her that it is impossible for her to be seen. In front of them stretches a long line of dancers, each absorbed in an isolated bubble of self-preparation—scrolling on their phones, rehearsing fragments of movement, caught in strange "psychosis" (each in their own bubble of jouissance). Rohrwacher suggests here, in my reading, a diagnosis of contemporary subjectivity: the line of ballet dancers functions as an updated version of the Fordist assembly line, but now oriented toward the self-as-enterprise. Each dancer strives to transform herself into a "work of art," alone in a marketplace of precarious opportunities. They share the social space only as competitors. The film situates this diagnosis just before a pretty important rupture. Upon hearing the word "impossible," the child begins to cough. The sound instantly breaks the dancers' self-enclosed bubbles; they recoil, stepping back as a group, fearful of infection—a virus they cannot afford to contract. The public intrudes upon their private shells only in the form of the child's cough, a viral hazard to their fragile livelihood. Yet this very recoil opens a path for the mother: the line parts, and she seizes the moment, moving toward the audition room.

Inside, the stage is set. At its centre sits the director, elderly, seemingly exhausted, almost inert, as though drained of inspiration. He appears unable to see what is directly in front of him. Without raising his head, he asks, in a tone that mixes resignation with cultivated snobbishness, whether the mother knows Plato's Cave. His weariness suggests a view of art as something ostensibly autonomous from commercial pressures, but at the price of a near-paralysis—an aesthetic sphere permitted to exist only insofar as it remains withdrawn, inert. The mother blushes, apologizes, and admits she has never heard of it. She promises to study it if necessary for the job. Her earnestness

stands in stark contrast to the director's detachment. Then the child coughs again. One is reminded of Lacan's remark of the importance of the hiccoughs in Plato's *Symposium*. To put it a bit provocatively: one cannot understand Plato if one cannot understand the hiccough.[13] Here, we could say, one can only understand Plato if one can understand the role of the child's cough. The sound slices through the theater. At once the director wakes up from his private musings. He calls the child over and whispers something into his ear. Immediately a *voice-over* begins—not the director's voice, but the child's—delivering a brief, striking retelling of Plato's cave:

> "Thought is like a rolling stone. Once set in motion down the slope, it can no longer stop. The myth of the cave tells us that the images of reality are an illusion. But the chained men are unable to perceive it. Their eyes are devoured by the images. The myth raises a question: What would happen if one of the prisoners managed to free himself from his chains, to turn around, to perceive the exit of the cave?"

At that moment, the film cuts to the child running from the theatre. He wanders through the streets until he discovers his shattered kaleidoscope in a trash bin. Something about this broken object alters his mode of seeing. He approaches the façades of buildings with tentative curiosity and discovers he can peel them away: what remains are mere stages, flat surfaces masquerading as solid structures. The interiors vanish. The façades stand exposed as façades. The child then enters these hollow surfaces, walking not *into* buildings but *within* the emptied planes of their appearance.

This moment marks the film's crucial use of Plato—not in the familiar metaphysical sense of escaping appearance to reach a higher, supersensible world of Ideas, but in revealing a rift, a limit, a missed encounter between social reality and the limit of the symbolic. What is unveiled is not a transcendent realm beyond the façade (the classical reading of Plato), but the façade as such, much closer to what Deleuze calls the surface-Event. The child steps out of these surfaces and gestures to the openings he has created; only then do the passers-by grow curious. In this gesture, the film point made Žižek in his reading of Plato: the "conclusion Plato avoids is implied in his own line of thought: *the supersensible Idea* does not dwell *beyond* appearances in, a separate ontological sphere of fully constituted Being; it is *appearance*

*as appearance*."[14] The film thus stages a Platonic insight beyond Plato himself: the revelatory moment is not an ascent beyond illusion but an encounter with the formal surface itself, where the Real flickers through the rupture.

At this turning point, the film's color palette shifts into shades of gray—what Hegel famously calls "painting gray on gray,"[x] the chromatic signature of the Event. It is the same gray that constituted the child's two-dimensional existence inside the façades. This chromatic shift registers a transformation: not an ascent from illusion to substantial Truth (the classical Platonic reading), but a reconfiguration of the very coordinates of the visible. The city becomes newly inhabitable. Ballet dancers and passersby begin to enter the public streets as a shared space rather than a set of individualized circuits. It is like the impossible has happened.

In short, the film stages a social transformation at the level of structure. What it suggests—at least in my reading—is that confronting the problems of our time (capitalism, climate catastrophe, and the future "burning children") requires a resurrection of Plato, of the "eternal Idea". Yet Plato alone is not sufficient. This is where, in my reading, the Freudian–Lacanian supplement becomes essential: one must pass through the figure of the fever child. This dimension is precisely what is missing from Badiou's contemporary resurrection of the alliance between youth and Plato[15]: his account lacks any concept of jouissance as distinct from a merely morbid drive toward self-destruction. Without this Freudian–Lacanian differentiation, Badiou's figure of the "youth faithful to the Idea" risks losing the very surplus, the troubling excess, that makes the political subject possible in the first place. To put it differently: only through the child's "feverish" perspective, can the Platonic Idea enter into social reality, which otherwise presents itself as seamless and unchangeable. The Idea is not located "beyond" social reality; it occurs within reality, at the crack where reality encounters its limit, a moment of eternity in time.

This is also the function of the child's kaleidoscope, a small object that at first appears superfluous. During the film, the child often carries it awkwardly; it breaks during his mother's frantic running; and just before he enters the building façades, he finds its broken remains in a trash bin. The point of this detail is precisely to show that, through the child, a kaleidoscopic shift of perspective becomes possible. Against

x Brian Benjamin Hansen pointed out this point to me.

the traditional Platonic schema of reality versus supersensible Idea, the film presents something else: reality and the Real, where the Real is nothing other than the crack within our ordinary sense of reality. This does not amount to perspectival relativism or passivity. As the film demonstrates, certain privileged perspectives—here, that of the fever child—can function as operators of universality and the eternal Idea. It is true that this insight does not translate easily into a political program—and the film may share this uncertainty. But formally, the film attempts to generate precisely such a perspectival shift, arguing for the necessity of being guided by an Idea in the Platonic sense. This requires attending to the film as aesthetic form, not merely as narrative.

The film opens with a bird's-eye view of Paris, composed through rapid transitions between aerial shots. This perspective is essential to the film's effect, yet impossible within the diegesis. It is a formal construction, in the psychoanalytic sense: a perspective no character could occupy "in reality". The sequence establishes a contrast between Paris as a shared social space and the fragmented, "psychotic" isolation of its inhabitants. Individuals appear absorbed in their private worlds, blind to one another—suggesting a city in which social life is only a hindrance.

The camera mirrors this restlessness. It scans the city, moving quickly between people as they enter the frame, as if searching for something—or someone. A deep, pulsating sound underscores the sequence, adding unease and expectant tension. I find this somewhat similar to how Osip Mandelstamm describes the 20th century as the "Beast", it feels like inhabiting this beast (or immortal Idea) from within.[16] This searching movement continues until the decisive moment when the child enters the frame. Suddenly, the camera's wandering ceases; it becomes "stuck" on the child. The shift is immediate and affective, as if the film's formal language itself designates the child as singular—worthy of attention in a way no other figure has been.

My (immodest) interpretation is that the camera, particularly in the opening sequence, adopts a perspective that cannot be attributed to any character. It is not human vision. It is closer to what one might call the perspective of an immortal Idea. It is as if the Idea itself scans the city in search of its subject. Once the child appears—feverish, carried hurriedly by his mother—the search ends. The Idea finds its bearer, and the camera remains with the child for the rest of the film.

This is why the opening shot is indispensable: something emerges here that no paraphrase of the plot could convey.

As the mother rushes through the city—bumping into people, navigating crowds—the film never shows us the faces surrounding her. Instead, the camera *remains* at the child's eye level, emphasizing his perceptual world. It is like the child's fever is contagious to the camera. Formally, the film constructs a kind of parallax, a "kaleidoscopic" shift generated by the child's fevered state. His jouissance—understood here as a troubling surplus that exceeds ordinary pleasure—fractures the habitual coordinates of perception. Fever becomes the condition for a kaleidoscopic turn: a rupture that opens the field to a different mode of experience, no longer organized by the standard symbolic order but filtered through a symptomatic intensity. The camera's insistent "lingering" at the child's height reinforces this. In this configuration, the Platonic Idea becomes operative only through the child's specific position as troubling surplus. The film implicitly argues that this is where one must begin: with the point of rupture, with the subject who occupies the structural place of excess, through the symptom.

Psychoanalysis is often accused of producing only diagnoses, of failing to offer a "positive vision" for politics. Yet psychoanalysis is a powerful tool for political thinking, not merely at the level of critique, but as a means of generating *new modes of symbolization.* It does not confine itself to repetitions of the same One. There are moments, where a change is possible, where the possibility of new master signifier can emerge. But this always occurs only a rupture in jouissance, in the suffering entailed in the repetition of the previous One. . Freud once described psychoanalysis as a *plague*, and Lacan repeatedly invoked this phrase, frequently referring to analysis as a kind of epidemic. The fever in all the "fever children" discussed here is precisely a form of jouissance, and jouissance behaves like a virus: contagious, disruptive, destabilizing. Yet the film suggests that such an epidemic may also be what saves. It is as if an epidemic is sometimes the only thing that saves, the epidemic of surplus jouissance, that has no proper place, like a child's cough. Perhaps only such an epidemic saves, well, an epidemic – plus *Plato*.

1 Freud 1953: 509
2 Žižek 2008: 143ff
3 Lacan 2014: 61
4 Lacan 1978: 59
5 Zupančič 2024: 11
6 Lacan 2018
7 See Dolar 2023
8 See especially Santner 1996
9 Žižek 2006
10 Zupančič 2020
11 Dolar 2008
12 Lacan 1992 – especially, 186-187; see also McGowan 2025
13 Lacan 2015: 62
14 Žižek 2012: 37
15 Badiou 2017
16 See Badiou 2007: 11-25

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