

A Partial Interpretation Of The Count Thun Dream

by Andrew Stein

Introduction: rewriting a repetition

The Count Thun dream appears in Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in a section devoted to the infantile sources of dreams. I will only have time to scratch its surface here. One can never say everything — or even the most important things — about this dream. I will therefore only highlight one of its knots.

The standard interpretation of the dream, suggested by Freud himself, is that its revolutionary themes are evocations of his own ambitions.¹ Ambitions enflamed, he says, by the recent death of his father. One of the chief being his ambition to prove wrong a voice: '*aus den buben wird nichts:*' '*this boy will come to nothing.*' A voice tied to a traumatic memory of urinating in his parent's bedroom as a small child. The voice is that of his father's.

This traumatic scene, writes Freud, reappeared often in his dreams; and it appears in his associations to the Count Thun dream; specifically, to the section of the dream when he aids an 'old, blind, incontinent man' by collecting his piss in a bottle while both are standing before the *banhof* at Vienna. Is Freud, then, saying that the Count Thun dream is repeating an old enjoyment? Not at all, because what this dream shows is not the repetition of old pleasures, but the old pleasure transformed. Transformed how? Transformed so that what was unsaid in it — what is the 'beyond of the dream'— the f(x) unconsciously sustaining its desire and its significations — can appear. And what is that if not a dream where the desire to repeat an old pleasure has given way to the desire of the analyst?

¹Besides 1848, the dream recalls Freud's insurrectional feelings towards a young Adler (the future Socialist leader), a student insurrection led by an aristocratic fellow student named the 'giraffe' against an Ubuesque German teacher, Freud humming a revolutionary aria from *The Marriage of Figaro* on his way to the *banhof*, etc.

The Form of the Dream

By my counting, there are five interlocking parts to the dream—five interwoven signifying chains knotted together and separated during the dream work that displaces, condenses, and alters their meaning by gaps, reversals, contradictions, and a sudden awareness that: 'something became indistinct.' You may see other ways to break up the dream. But I see five: 1. The *prologue at the beginning of the dream* and the *associations* at the end of the dream. 2. The *first speech* where Freud is a student attending a lecture by 'Thun-Taak'² that: 'fires up! Freud.'³ 3. The *Aula* or university hall scene. 4. The *first train station scene* where Freud arrives *Graz* rather than where he wants to go. 5. The second scene in front of the train station where Freud encounters '*the old blind man*' and the urinal bottle.

The Prologue: Count Do Nothing

Arriving early to the train station where he is off on vacation and to meet up with his family who have gone ahead, Freud sees Count Thun pushing his way past the ticket agent to board his private train taking him to an audience with the Emperor. In the prologue, Freud makes an association to Thun that is not very nice to himself. Count Thun's nickname, he writes, is 'Count *Nichtsthun*' — 'Count Do Nothing.' But this, he says, really applies to himself: "He was on his

² The condensation 'Thun-Taak' interests us. The repetition T-T and the vowels, etc. And Taak and Thun are linked historically as two ambitious political men representing the Conservative and the Liberal order.

³ And, of course, this functionally is a repetition: Freud's father being 'fired up' when the boy pees in the parental bedroom; something which must also have fired up! the boy and been a motor of his ambition. The dream and its associations spill over in these being fired ups! Including the scene where Freud feels fired up! by Thun's arrogance, by the Thun-Taak speech, by Adler's criticism of his youthful romanticism, by the uprising he and the Giraffe stage against their German professor, the aria from Figaro, etc.

way to a difficult audience with the Emperor, while *I was the real Count Do-Nothing*—just off on my holidays.”⁴

But, at the level of the statement —s(A) in Lacan’s graph—, Freud is fooling himself and us a little by making a false equivalence. For if ‘this child will come to nothing!’ sounds pretty comparable to Count Do Nothing, things are not as simple as they seem. Because, as we shall see, unlike Thun who continues on in the same way as before and as everyone else, Freud no longer repeats his ambitions (codified in the responses to ‘this boy will come to nothing!’) in the same way, and so the enjoyment he takes from it is not the same either. Something has happened that the dream is registering. In this respect, a similarity hides a difference.

⁴ All of this occurs on the day Freud has the Count Thun dream. Pushy Thun is the leader of the Conservatives and the newly appointed head of the government in 1898. Taak was a key figure among the more Liberal politicians who fell from power in 1898. He was in fact the last of the failing Liberals to head the government. And there are other connections to notice. Thun comes from the same province as Freud while Taak was a defender of minority rights. The Austro-Hungarian Empire was a multi-national, multi-ethnic empire composed of many people speaking diverse languages and belonging to different ethnic communities —Jews, Slavs, Poles, Germans, Muslims, etc—living in a multi-religious mix. It was ruled by the Hapsburg Emperor in Vienna. And, in many respects, it was a stratified State and society, with the aristocracy at the top, followed by a wealthy industrial and ministerial classes, etc. The schools were mostly taught in German and dominated by Catholicism. As a Jew, Freud suffered under this system like other ethnic nationalities in the Empire; but additionally was the victim of antisemitism, something that fed his wish to prove to others that he would amount to something by overcoming opposition. But Freud was lucky in the timing of his birth (1856). Because everything began to change following the ‘bourgeois revolution’ of 1848 that figures so prominently in the dream. 1848 was both a bourgeois and a populist revolution that, while it failed to win popular franchise or gain much ethnic independence (except for the Hungarians), led to important advances in the social, cultural, and political role of the bourgeoisie in the Empire and to the growing agitation by minority ethnic communities. Yiddish, Polish, and Czech magazines, for example, began to flourish during this period, often linked to ethnic and nationalist aspirations. And politically, it was a time when a Jewish boy like Freud (born 1856) could dream of growing up and carrying ‘a ministerial portfolio,’ as more and more of his co-religionists were doing despite the overwhelmingly Catholic and German character of the Empire. But by the 1870s reaction set in. The improved conditions of minority ethnic groups like the Jews were imperiled. We see this, for example, in Freud’s frustrated desire (appearing in many of his dreams) to receive the rank of *professor extraordinarius (außerordentlicher)* at the University of Vienna, a title that amounted to little more than what we today would call an adjunct professorship, because of his Jewish heritage. In this regard, it is relevant that Freud makes a great fuss of having a first class ticket and still being pushed around by the big shots at the train station.

The Aula

For times sake, I will skip the second dream segment, except to point out one import signifier: *zimmern*— (or room). The whole Aula scene turns of Freud's escape from the Aula or public reception room— which appears in place of the parental bedroom (*elterliches Schlafzimmer*) in which Freud urinated and he heard his father pronounce his negative judgement of him. The word *zimmern* appears a number of times in the Aula section, and undergoes a transformation, a metaphoric sliding that allows more of the latent dream content under repression to appear in the dream. For example, we see the sexualization of the word *zimmern* when Freud first calls the room an: '*offenbar regierungzimmern*' (public reception room) and then introduces into it the old lady, or the: '*frauenzimmern*,' who he later refers to, switching from German to Austrian dialect, as an: '*arrarische frauenzimmern*; *ararishche* can be taken in an Oedipal sense as being a lady 'belonging to, or paid for by, the State'. Note, too, the similarity here between the signifier *Aula* and *Frau*. All of this suggests that the Aula is a place of heightened anxiety, close to the real, that the censor has Freud flee from in panic. What is he escaping from if not the Aula/ frau — the parental bedroom — where the edict that his dreams veils and repeats 'the child will come to nothing!' was pronounced?

The First train trip; Going to Graz

In the next dream segment, Freud escapes by taxi and arrives at the train station where he hopes to reach the town of Znaim. But it is not possible to go to Znaim. Something instead takes him to the town of Graz. Why? The reason given in the dream is clearly an evasion (secondary revision), the true reason being that if one takes the train to Znaim, one then can get another to a town very near Freud's childhood home — and therefore to the Freud parental bedroom. But once again things are not so simple and the unconscious finds a

way to partially evade the censor. And we have to ask: is it really safer to go to Graz than to Znaim? Since there is an Austrian expression well-known to Freud: 'Was kostet Graz': 'Hang the expense!' 'Hang the expense!' means get on with it! 'Don't stop! Pay any price! That is, go the parental bedroom.

Freud Returns to the Train Station: the old blind man and Freud

Freud only recalls urinating in the parental bedroom and the father saying: 'This boy will amount to nothing!' in his associations to this section of the dream when he sees himself standing before the train station (*bahnhof*) helping an old, blind, incontinent man urinate into a bottle, while across the road the ticket agent notices nothing. In this fictional repetition of the childhood scene, the fundamental details are altered. The scene is partially overlain by a set of memories of his having to care for his old, dying father who, blind in one eye, was incontinent. In the dream, Freud collects the piss of an old man in a bottle. What is happening here? Is this role reversal simply the work of the censor or is it also something more: a means by which the unconscious partially evades the censor?

I would like to suggest that what is being evaded is what we can call an act; an act that is also a showing. But a showing of what if not a new way to enjoy the old repetition? A new way that has a name; the interpretation of dreams. That is, an analytic act.

One should get the self-deprecating joke here. The movement from the old way of repeating and enjoying to a new way is here christened in pee —the pee of the father. The pee also functioning as a passage from father to son. A Rabelaisian act! Showing that great things come from 'dirty things;' and what is the act itself but the pissing of the unconscious? Gulliver, too, puts out the fire in the queens chambers with a flow of urine. But he knew nothing about what that meant. Pissing out a fire is not the same thing as piss collecting — just the opposite — because it leaves the repetition and enjoyment the same.

But why does this scene, the pissing of the unconscious, occur across from the train station? Trains generally are connected to forbidden desire and their prohibition in Freud's dreams and symptoms in the 1880s and 1890s. In another dream in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud recalls seeing his mother's naked body on the train leaving his childhood home after the collapse of his father's business fortunes. Arriving and failing to arrive by train appears as a symptom in Freud at that time, too. He spent hours looking at train time tables planning trips. We all know the problems Freud had reaching Rome. Rome signifying the object of his desire and the parental bedroom, on the one hand, and reaction and antisemitism on the other hand. The place he could not go to until after the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

That is to say, the enjoyment was totally monopolized by the repetition of the symptom. Something obsessional lay behind it. And the dream reveals the price he must pay to alter the enjoyment of this repetition. He must, like an obsessional, wait until after the death of his father. Accept, as the dream makes explicit when the old blind man shows up in the dream, and as every obsessional knows: the dead father is not really dead in the unconscious. Perhaps this throws light on what Freud tells Fliess in a letter: that one day a statue will be erected to him in his hometown with the inscription: 'The Discover of the Meaning of Dreams.' Because he knows from Don Giovanni that a statue signifies desire returning as the dead father. Pissing bears on ambition.

The Navel of the Dream:

Like all dreams, the interpretation of this dream eventually arrives at something that cannot be interpreted. All dreams have a navel, a beyond of the dream. Freud knew this and says so in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. This navel is in another context what Lacan writes as the $f(x)$. The beyond the dream marks the place of zero where the dream is stripped of all content and appears as an empty set. A trace of the fading of the subject that remains beyond the

combinatory of signifiers and sense. Commenting on the 'Dream of Irma's Injection,' Freud writes that every dream interpretation reaches the navel that marks a territory beyond the dream:

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 unravelled 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. 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 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 a mycelium.⁵

Conclusion:

To say this about all dreams, of course, is an offense to the dream of a full enlightenment. And Freud knew it. But he also knew what the unconscious would say about that — what his unconscious has said to him in this dream — '*Was kostet Graz*': 'Hang the expense!' Pay the price and know that desire grows like a mycelium whose roots necessarily fade into an 'impossible to say'. But all this still remains Freud's private enjoyment. One that no one as of yet knows, not even the train ticket agent across the street in the dream. Only Fliess knows (unless Fliess himself is the distracted ticket agent who does not see).

Trains for Freud; ships for Gulliver. Gulliver goes to sea. Freud goes on holiday to Aussee. But only the dream Freud dreams while traveling to Aussee registers how his repetition and jouissance have changed. That is why this dream and the whole book functions as a guide book for the emergence of the desire of the analyst and answers the question why desire never comes to an end.

⁵ Sigmund Freud, S. E. vol. 4, 525.