



## Dying children do not see an Erbkönig

A brief literary history of sexual abuse.

from Christian Milz

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*"And if you are not willing, then I need violence" is the line in Goethe's ballad "Der Erbkönig. A clear reference to the rape of a defenseless child. Nevertheless, the famous poem is rarely "read" in this way. There are other traces of the crime in German literature, for example in Gerhard Hauptmann's "Bahnwärter Thiel" and Georg Büchner's "Woyzeck". It is interesting to ask why the obvious is not recognized in these works. It is the same mechanisms of repression and denial that characterize society's treatment of sexual abuse in reality.*

# Ten Years After

**On March 6, 2010, the journalist Jörg Schindler made under the**

title: "Bullied, beaten, raped" in the Frankfurter Rundschau publicized the decades-long sexual abuse of students at the Odenwald School in Heppenheim (southern Hesse). However, this was not the first time. A decade earlier, Schindler ("Der Lack ist ab") had already denounced the scandal in the same newspaper. At that time without any response. Now a storm of indignation has swept over the flagship reform school, ultimately costing it its existence and leading to insolvency. The wind had already changed when the rector of Canisius College, Father Klaus Mertes, informed some 600 students in January 2010 about possible cases of abuse in past decades and apologized for the fact that teachers at the college had looked the other way.

The BBC also looked the other way to an almost outsized extent in the case of Jimmy Savile. Journalists had been on his trail since 1990 because of numerous cases of sexual abuse. But the prominent showmaster was a friend of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, "unofficial marriage counselor" to Prince Charles and Lady Diana, ennobled since 1990 for his commitment to charitable organizations and awarded a papal order in the same year. After his death in 2011, he was laid out in a golden coffin and buried with great public interest. The BBC television station had obstructed the inquest in its own house and prevented the broadcast of a critical obituary. It was not until February 2016 that the inquiry report by an independent commission into practices at BBC appeared, according to which those responsible had systematically looked the other way. The Scotland Yard report from early 2013 was a shock to British society. People were stunned by the

extent of the offenses committed by the popular TV entertainer, who for decades had exploited his celebrity status to select his victims, mostly among 13- to 16-year-olds.

**"In 14 hospitals and children's homes alone, to which he had unsupervised access because of his TV ubiquity as a popular entertainer and fundraiser, he committed 50 crimes, including in one case against a girl in a terminal hospital. Savile also committed offences on BBC premises, in studios or in sets after popular youth shows ... No one stopped the man, not the police, not the BBC, his employer, or other institutions, including several hospitals, where Savile chose his victims at will," said Thomas Kielinger in PANORAMA.**

A decade is a long time in terms of education and the removal of taboos from sexual assault in the media, and of course far too long for the victims. And yet we have not even reached the point where public discourse begins. Awareness of the problem persists at the superficial level of headline and oblivion. Apparently, there is a mechanism that automatically deletes events after they have come to light. Who remembers Jimmy Savile in the days of Jeffrey Epstein? And the headline-grabbing swimming coach of an Olympic team is replaced by some one in another sport. Recent studies, according to the Independent Commissioner for Child Sexual Abuse Johannes-Wilhelm Rörig, pointed out that "about one in seven people in Germany was affected by sexual violence in childhood or adolescence." Rörig sees the policy in the obligation. Short-term hopping from scandal to scandal is not enough. The commissioner calls for long-term investment in prevention, counseling and assistance, as well as in research and reappraisal.

The very fact of this demand is both scandalous and remarkable. Instead of being a natural consequence of the removal of taboos, consequences have to be demanded through the mouth of a lobbyist, as if in the service of a special interest group. We are not even at the beginning of a learning process. The mills of consciousness apparently grind very slowly. The emergence of a discourse may take not decades, but centuries. However, a powerful impetus came as early as 1782 with Goethe's world-famous ballad *Erlkönig*. Others followed, such as Büchner's *Woyzeck* (1879) and Hauptmann's *Bahnwärter Thiel* (1887). In terms of a corresponding discourse, however, in vain. We read literary treatments of experiences of abuse through the eyes of the perpetrators.

## Dying children do not see an Erlkönig

Who does not know Goethe's verse in which the Erlkönig threatens the boy after he has tried in vain to seduce him

**"I love thee, I am tempted by thy fair form; And if thou wilt not, I shall need violence." "My father, my father, now he touches me! Erlkönig has done me harm!"**

The ballad confronts the child who feels threatened with a father who tries to appease the son. Does the father believe that the child is hallucinating? If so, why doesn't he ask about the source of these horrible images? After all, the son does not come up with such ideas without a cause. Or does the father in principle assume the possibility of such a danger, but does not consider it to exist here? Because *he does not see it?*

Students usually learn to take the perspective of the father in German lessons. Against the background of the events at the Canisius College and the Odenwald School, this seems quite understandable. Wikipedia accordingly states: "Most interpretations of the poem assume the non-existence of what the boy perceives. They see (like the father) the Erlkönig as a mere spawn of fear and fever dreams and as an expression of the boy's illness, which kills him at the end of the ballad."

Generally, the title of a poem designates its subject. Here, it is not the fog, etc., but the Erlkönig. Therefore, if we follow the usual interpretation of the ballad, we must explain the Erlkönig. There is no other possibility than to relate it to death. Erlkönig = death: but this equation is wrong. Firstly, dying children do not see the Erlkönig, this is known from death research. Secondly, the infant mortality rate in Goethe's time was around 25%. Even Goethe could not knit world literature from this. Thirdly, and this is a proof that cannot be ignored, Goethe glorifies suicide in his epistolary novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774 and 1787) in view of a reunion in the hereafter. Goethe's poetic business was not to incite fear of death, but that is precisely what we read into the ballad. The aesthetic quality of the ballad lies in the poetic unity of threat and repression, but not of death, but of certain areas of life. Father and son act in different dimensions, which stimulate manifold thoughts and interpretations. What must be excluded, however, is the one-sidedness of the common interpretation; it is objectively wrong in every respect. *Werther* and *Erlkönig* speak of an unconscious, sensual power that threatens or seizes us in life if necessary, not in death. The father closes his eyes to it, the son becomes its victim. Jimmy Savile and Co. were or are not the Erlkönig, but the latter, whatever may be understood by it, controls them, there is no doubt about that. It is hard to imagine that the

aforementioned conditions at Canisius College or the Odenwald School would have survived such an analysis of the *Erlkönig*. But hardly two and a half centuries have passed since its publication.

## Annunciation

Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck* fragment also tells of the seduction of a child. In the fairy tale parable of the abused child, a poor, lonely child sets out for the light. That of the moon, the sun and the stars. The light turns out to be a deception, the stars to be little golden, impaled dead mosquitoes. In Büchner's revolutionary drama, mosquitoes are already symbols of animalistic sexuality; they "do it to your hands". The golden color is part of the cipher, it reflects the sun, it too belongs to the aforementioned canon of symbols. In *Danton's Death*, the sun incubates fornication. This unusual metaphorization of light in terms of its heat aspect is already found in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Polonius is warned by the Dane prince not to let his daughter go into the sun, there is a danger of conception. The sun incubates maggots in dead dogs, it is a deity that kisses carrion. In Büchner's revolutionary drama, a mother warms herself in the sun while sending her daughter out on the prostitute to feed the family. The mother insinuates that the daughter derives sensual pleasure from her work and takes the supposed right to partake of it. As a result, the father calls for a knife to stab the mother.

This is exactly what *Woyzeck* does, namely stab, immediately after the grandmother has read out the aforementioned fairy tale parable. Was *Woyzeck* listening without us being told? Was he there the whole time?

How does the grandmother suddenly enter the scene? Why the ritual preparation of the fairy tale lesson and the subsequent execution by singing children?

It is about washing, that is, a purification ceremony. The name King Herod is mentioned, a synonym for the mass murder of children. Earlier in the play, in a satirical fairground scene, there is talk of little canail birds, favorites of all crowned heads. This should be understood sarcastically, as Büchner means it. Incidentally, the female protagonist is still called Margreth here, analogous to the child murderess in Goethe's *Faust I*. In the later drafts, the author expands the pedophile allusions. Love "comes" to the captain when he sees girls' stockings, and stunned, he hears a precarious allusion in Woyzeck's "lasset die Kindlein zu mir kommen." The doctor watches the aphids mating; in the later version he sticks his nose into the sun to sneeze: see above. On his sleeping child, Woyzeck discovers drops on his forehead and comments, "All work under the sun, even sweat in sleep." Only at the end of this manuscript draft comes the exact explanation for the image already familiar from the revolutionary drama and mentioned above. After the voice from the ground asks Woyzeck to stab the child's mother and he finally buys a knife, a devastated, desperate Marie, praying for forgiveness, exclaims, "The child gives me a stab in the heart." With that, everything is said. Aristotle called this anagnorisis (recognition) and peripetia (plot reversal). It is true that the exclamation *also refers to the* present little son, he presses himself against the mother. But it becomes a problem only because someone is making preparations (buying a knife) to stab her physically in the heart. If this someone is her son, then the common child becomes a serious breach of taboo.

In the following scene, a Woyzeck, possessed by said voice and equally broken inside, speaks of "Mariae Verkündigung" - meaning Marie's anagnorisis. So far, no one but me has taken note of this. The proof that Marie identifies Woyzeck as her child occurs immediately when Woyzeck now speaks - literally - of his mother. Who else but Marie should he think of now? He identifies her as his mother. In both scenes, the main characters find themselves only through their inner destruction - and in the realization of a fatal merging that extends into the murder scene of the earlier draft stage. The ultimate blending through incest continues in the sexually tinged ultimate liberation through the destruction of the victim. The physical annihilation. What remains is madness.

The Erlkönig in Goethe's ballad corresponds functionally in the Woyzeck fragment to the voice from the ground and its physical manifestation, the fool. The latter imperatively steers Marie's "the child gives me a stab in the heart" through his immediately following "tomorrow" in the direction of anticipation, which continues through the equation Woyzeck = blood sausage, child Christian = liver sausage: "Tomorrow I'll get the queen her child. Blood sausage says, come liver sausage," says the Fool. In fact, there is this scene, Woyzeck strives in vain for his child after the murder, it goes away with the fool. The reception of Büchner does not know what to do with these ciphers. Worse, they are taboo.

As the author of the book "Georg Büchner. Poet, Mocker, Enigmatic. Decryptions", I was not only not allowed to speak at the Büchner conference of the Protestant Academy on Büchner's 200th birthday in Frankfurt am Main, I was also not admitted as a passive listener and was excluded under threat of violence.



Instead of searching for meaningful - albeit precarious - connections in the Woyzeck texts, students are misled with references to the historical case and materialistic approaches to interpretation. Woyzeck's madness has a cause that can be found in the drama plot itself. We want to feel it, but not to know it. Woyzeck does not kill in the heat of the moment; he listens carefully to what the voice from the ground has to say. It calls the name that Woyzeck has to eliminate and that only falls in this scene and from this source. A classic contract killing. It is for a mother, *his* mother, whose *little* child is "scalding in the sun." She is the sun, the sun in Shakespeare's and Büchner's meaning. A motherly sun at which one scalds oneself and in which one becomes insane. Goethe's ballad also knows a mother with a "golden robe". It is that of the Erbkönig.

## **Abuse at the level crossing**

Like the father in Goethe's "Erbkönig," the railroad guard Thiel holds his dying son in his arms toward the end of the novella. The "Erbkönig" here is a railroad, which the author Gerhart Hauptmann links to the stepmother Lene, Thiel's second wife, by means of a literary trick, namely the thing symbol.

Just as the father in Erbkönig seems to hold his son securely in his arms, the train guard watches over his son Tobias. Or rather, he should have watched out. Lene mistreats the stepson without the father intervening. After all, Thiel is ashamed of it. Then, when the Silesian express train arrives, Tobias is run over, although the father is almost as close to him as the father is to his son in Erbkönig. Without a doubt, Gerhart

Hauptmann is paraphrasing a rape here. For it is a conspicuously strange level crossing at which the railroad guard is on duty: strangely lonely, distant from any human dwelling by at least three quarters of an hour in all four wind directions, and situated in the middle of the forest. Days go by in summer, weeks in winter, without a human foot, other than those of the guard and his colleague, passing the track. Realism looks different. Analogous to the thing symbol railroad, the level crossing is a symbol of the father's responsibility for his son.

One would hardly believe the author's description of the accident if one values realism. Thiel has been given a piece of land along the railroad embankment free of charge by his railroad foreman, on which his wife Lene digs up the soil. The field is in the immediate vicinity of the keeper's house. Thiel's son Tobias is to look after his little brother while his mother plants potatoes. When the scheduled Silesian express train is reported, Thiel goes to his post and stands at the barrier. The train approaches, whistles three times in a row, short and bright.

**"They're braking, Thiel thought, why only? And again the emergency whistles rang out, waking the echoes, this time in a long, uninterrupted series. Thiel stepped forward to survey the track. Mechanically, he pulled the red flag out of its case and held it straight out in front of him across the tracks. - Jesus Christ - had he been blind? Jesus Christ - O Jesus, Jesus, Jesus Christ! What was that? There! - There between the rails ..."**

The lyrics sound decidedly awkward: "The man has all the time in the world. The train whistles several times, it brakes. Why doesn't Thiel get

his child off the tracks?" - Because he can't do anything to his wife Lene, who is hidden behind the railroad thing symbol.

When it is too late for the son, he kills his wife and their common infant with the cleaver. He has gone mad.

The passage in which Thiel catches his wife in flagrante delicto shows how carefully one must listen when describing a sexual abuse. The station attendant has forgotten his bread on the way to work and returns home unexpectedly. Silence, a poodle in the middle of the village street and a fog crow symbolically charge the scene. Even from a distance, Thiel hears his wife screeching. Thiel creeps closer, muffling the sound of his footsteps as much as possible. He hears a hailstorm of invective, oddly enough also Tobias' whimpering. Thiel begins to tremble quietly, his gaze lingers absently on the ground, then threatens to explode. But nothing remains but languor. When he comes in the door, Lene is stunned with excitement. She resents her husband coming home at an unusual hour and overhearing her. This is the reaction of someone caught in flagrante delicto in a highly compromising situation. Lene reaches for the milk pot, from which she tries to fill a child's bottle full, but fails because of her hands trembling with excitement. At first Thiel feels a terrible affect rising in him, then suddenly the old phlegm settles over his mien, strangely enlivened by a furtive covetous flashing of the eyes. Obviously the situation induces sexuality. For seconds his gaze plays over the strong limbs of his wife, who, fiddling with her face averted, still seeks her composure. Her full half-naked breasts swell with arousal and threaten to burst the bodice, and her ruffled skirts make the wide hips appear even wider. This is followed by a symbolic intertwining of the woman with the railroad through the image of the "net of iron." Half-naked breasts, ruffled skirts, and the sexual excitement of the train guard unwind a thread that reaches far back in this scene and all the

way to being run over by the train. If you will, even further back to Büchner's *Woyzeck*, a madness and impulse for revenge with which we are already familiar.

What I present here in relation to Goethe's *Erlkönig*, Büchner's *Woyzeck*, and Hauptmann's *Bahnwärter Thiel* is, in my view, not an interpretation but an analysis: the inventory of the linguistic data.

The interpretation is based on this.

When interpretation controls reception, which it not infrequently does (though it should not with professionals), it overlooks or misunderstands linguistic data. When this happens willfully and systematically, it is ideology and manipulation. Conspiracy theorists would then see the Erlking at work. They would not be wrong.

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