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## Dreamscapes: Harold Pinter's *The Room* and Franz Kafka's "Auf der Galerie"

**Abstract:** The kinship between Pinter and Kafka is patently obvious and has been pointed out by numerous critics, the dreamlike quality of the texts of these two masters of menace and mystery being one of the aspects of their work on which there is a critical consensus. Therefore Freud's trail-blazing early work *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) provides tools for shedding light on some of the obscurities of the two writers. This essay picks out Pinter's first play *The Room* (1957) and Kafka's short story "Auf der Galerie" (1917) to demonstrate that the basic dream mechanisms of displacement and condensation are the creative principles underlying these two surrealist texts. The Lacanian angle of these two concepts is taken into account, but the reading stops short of Lacan's radical conclusions about the 'free-floating signifier' and 'impassable primordial difference.' The other extreme avoided here is the neat Freudian pigeon-holing indulged in by some early psychoanalytical critics. Freudian concepts do contribute to an understanding of this kind of text, but there is always a residue of ambiguity.

Comparisons between Franz Kafka and Harold Pinter, the two great masters of omnipresent menace and inscrutable metaphysical mystery in their respective languages, have become standard fare in literary criticism. In fact, the two adjectives 'Kafkaesque' and 'Pinteresque' are used synonymously in German and English, and a number of critics have pointed out the deep impact of Kafka's work on Pinter's mind (cf. Esslin, 36; Billington, 18, 127).

The specific issue I want to address in this essay is the crucial importance of another giant figure of 20th-century culture for the two authors: Sigmund Freud, especially his landmark work *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). I shall compare two texts by Pinter and Kafka, *The Room* (1957) and "Auf der Galerie" [Up in the Gallery] (1917) in the light of the psychoanalytic methodology of interpreting dreams, basically in its 'prelapsarian' shape before it fell into Jaques Lacan's deconstructionist hands. However, the poststructuralist angle will not be totally 'repressed.' Since both Pinter and Kafka present a world dominated by an often unaccountable anxiety and rationally inexplicable behaviour patterns, their work can be seen as the fictional equivalent of Freud's scientific attempts to chart the deep waters of the human unconscious. Indeed, hosts of critics have used Freud's insights to shed some light on the dreamlike semiconscious landscapes depicted by Pinter and Kafka.

In Kafka criticism, psychoanalytical readings of the stories as dreams abound (cf. Foulkes, 59-71, Sokel, Krusche, 84-87). In the little commented story, "Auf der Galerie," the last sentence likens the protagonist's consciousness to a dream state: "[...] da dies so ist, legt der Galeriebesucher das Gesicht auf die Brüstung, und im Schlussmarsch wie in einem schweren Traum versinkend, weint er, ohne es zu wissen" [since this is how things are, the visitor to the gallery puts his face on the railing and, sinking into the final march as if into a difficult dream, weeps, without realizing it].<sup>1</sup> The application of Freudian tools from *The Interpretation of Dreams* is actually called for by the text itself. In Pinter's case, Gabbard (1976) shows that Freudian dream analysis yields a great deal of insight into Pinter's most surrealist, unwieldy first dramatic efforts, namely *The Room*, *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Birthday Party*. I shall show how the basic dream mechanisms of displacement and condensation are the unconscious creative principles underlying all these intractable, surrealist texts.

A word of caution may avoid deconstructionist quibbles about an overly naive belief in a univocal reading of a text: as highlighted by Lacan, "the dream-work follows the law of the signifier" (quoted in Leitch, 11), so the Freudian view of the dream bears in it the seeds of deconstruction:

Dreams frequently seem to have more than one meaning. Not only may they include several wish fulfillments one alongside the other, by a succession of meanings the wish fulfillments may be superimposed on another, the bottom one being the fulfillment of a wish dating from earliest childhood. (Freud, 1953, 4:219)

Gabbard points out that this kind of ambiguity is overdetermination, the keyword of her psychoanalytical reading of Pinter's plays as dreams. Doubtless this is the equivalent of the deconstructionists' notion of undecidability or indeterminacy, Lacan's 'floating signifier' and 'sliding signified' being the most obvious progeny of the Freudian father-text. However, in line with Freud, I stop short of Lacan's celebration of "primordial difference as impassable": as V.B. Leitch puts it, "the Lacanian signifier need not signify at all, it may float free" (Leitch, 12).

Let me first demonstrate how this prelapsarian psychoanalytical approach helps unearth the various determinations in Pinter's plays. I single out *The Room*, his first play, because it illustrates the unconscious mechanisms which are operative most clearly. In the course of his artistic development Pinter moved towards realism: *The Caretaker*, for example, can be read on a purely realistic level. None of the actions or characters needs to be accounted for by recourse to the murky world of the unconscious mind. However, if we look at the subconscious motivation of the characters, a whole new dimension opens up: the cracks in the roof Aston wants to tar over, as well as the shed he intends to put up, stand for his search for a cure for his mental scars and a new sane mind, while the cluttered place he inhabits represents his present mental state after his electroshock treatment. Davies' unwillingness to find shoes that fit and his inability to get down to

<sup>1</sup> Franz Kafka, "Auf der Galerie," *Das Urteil* (f.p. 1935; Frankfurt: Fischer, 1952) 80. All subsequent quotations from Kafka refer to this edition and this page. "Up in the Gallery" trans. by Ian Johnston [<http://www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/kafka/uninthegallery.htm>].

Sidcup in order to get hold of his papers have the quality of symbolic dream images for his lack of a secure foothold in life and his loss of identity. This shows that even Pinter's most realistic play stands to gain a great deal from a psychoanalytic decoding of its images. The dim unconscious world of dreams constantly intrudes into Pinter's dramatic universe, up to his latest efforts *Moonlight* and *Ashes to Ashes*: the third area of the stage in *Moonlight* reserved for the appearance of Bridget, the dead daughter, the echolalia of the cries for the lost baby at the end of *Ashes to Ashes*, are both ample evidence of this. However, the unrealistic, surreal elements are most prominent in Pinter's earliest plays, especially in *The Room*. Many central questions defy purely rational analysis: who is Riley, why does Rose turn blind at the end, why does Bert kill Riley? Answers can come only from decoding the images and actions of the play as dream images and actions.

The psychoanalytic critic's temptation is to bundle the characters' unconscious motives into the neat Freudian categories of oral, anal and oedipal wishes and anxieties. Gabbard's reading of the *The Room* is a typical example: she sees the "oral content of the play" (26) as "Rose and Bert together hid[ing] in the womb" (26). Rose's fear of the outside, her dread of intruders are typical of the "separation anxiety and oral fantasy that pervades this play" (26). The obvious struggle for dominance is assigned to the anal period (cf. 27), while Bert's aggressiveness (evidenced by bumping other cars on the road and killing Riley) is the sadistic part connected with the infant's "pinching off of the feces" (27). The characters' fear of punishment for oedipal wishes can be perceived in the sense of menace which haunts the play: "Rose has apparently repressed her erotic feelings for her father" (29). In the scene with Riley "she reveals affection when her initial insults well into tender touching of [Riley's] head and face," (29) which shows that she projects her oedipal wishes onto him, regardless of whether he is only a messenger of the father or the father himself.

This is a highly fruitful approach to the play. It does account indeed for the strange figure of Riley and for Rose's sudden blindness. To corroborate her view, Gabbard quotes Norman Holland, who states that "amputations, mutilations, blindings, and the like symbolize this earliest fear of punishment [for oedipal wishes]: castration" (Gabbard, 29). Rose is scared of her sexual feelings, which are repressed to the highly symbolic location of the basement, the id, from where they rise in the form of the displaced father figure. When confronted with her own desires, her superego punishes her by symbolic castration, i.e. blindness. In the same vein she turns her husband Bert into an impotent baby by constantly mothering and thus infantilizing him, which is another mode of symbolic castration. His erotic desires are displaced onto the van. Bert's account of driving "her" is replete with sexual overtones.

In spite of the credit one has to give to Gabbard's skilful application of the psychoanalytical apparatus to the play, one is left with a sense of unease: there is too much emphasis on pigeonholing the characters' actions into neat Freudian bundles in her reading. Occasionally she lapses into exaggerated Freudian sym-

bol-hunting, for instance when interpreting the Sands' argument about sitting down as harking back to "the young boy's learning to stand up to urinate and the young girl's concomitant sense of penis envy" (27). This is the type of thing which has given psychoanalytical criticism a bad name. I want to focus my reading of *The Room* on the fact that, in contradistinction to realistic plays, many of the characters' actions need explanations derived from the realm of the unconscious and that the succession of images in the play has a crucial element in common with the stream of images in dreams: they are all results of condensation, (or in Lacanian parlance, metaphor), i.e. they have more than one meaning, they are overdetermined. Gabbard's interpretation of the title image shows this convincingly:

A room, a vagina, a womb, a tomb, a conscious mind – all are open spaces that can house what enters, even if it is only thoughts, as it is in the case of mind. The contradictions and differences – such as between birth and death, body and mind – are glossed over and ignored. Each becomes a determination condensed under the one symbol. No one meaning is any more accurate than the other. The ambiguity of the symbol provides its depth and its wonder. (Gabbard, 22)

This aspect of Freudian theory is the main reason why poststructuralists quote him as one of their patron saints (cf. Leitch, 30, 271; Derrida). The other mechanism of the dreamwork which is also operative in the play is displacement: blinding is displaced castration, which itself is displaced from the oedipal father figure onto Rose and Riley; Bert displaces his sexual feelings onto his van. Using the same tools when reading the play as when interpreting a dream, one can discern meaning in what previously seemed just a loose end. Gabbard's summing up reveals the fruit of such (psycho-)analytical labour:

These dream images of the play reinforce the intellectual meaning already determined. In each of these interpretations, Rose, or the central consciousness, fears the outside while she nurtures the violence within her own room. Even though she refuses to see it, it is there, as silent as Bert, waiting to erupt at some subrational signal. At this point, however, we also have some feasible explanations for the mysteries of Riley's identity and the reasons for Bert's killing him. Riley is a repressed father image come to reclaim Rose or dispossess and punish Bert. Bert kills him to protect his room or to fulfill the oedipal wish. (Gabbard, 35-36)

But again, despite of being a woman, Gabbard falls victim to Freud's patriarchal view of the Oedipus story. Taking up Elizabeth Bronfen's insight that blinding, i.e. self-mutilation, can also be the displaced desire for the killing of one's mother to elide intimations of mortality (cf. Bronfen, 116), I should argue that, on another level, Riley is also a figure of death, the messenger of the death-drive rising from the id, which Bert tries to fight off through violence. What is to be imposed on him and his wife is metonymically displaced onto the harbinger. In this reading the room/tomb association acquires more meaning. Rose's first words "It's very cold out [...] It's murder" (Pinter, 85) point to her fear of death. However, symbolically the death-threat is firmly ensconced in her own unconscious.

Let me now turn to Kafka's "short prose fiction" (Hanson, 7) "Auf der Galerie." Again, the text seems to defy rational explication. Most critics have

tried to find solutions clinging to the level of discursive logic, a lead given by the fact that the text consists of only two complex, longwinded sentences whose logical coherence is signposted by syllogistic devices such as the conditional conjunction 'wenn' in the first sentence. The extraordinary length of the two meaning sentences (excessive even by the standards of the German language) calls for a strict hierarchical ranking of the various clauses in terms of hypotactical subordination. But instead of this clear logical structuring we get an almost endless stream of paratactic clauses, one followed by the other. As a result, the reader loses track of the logical "wenn ... dann ... da aber" [if ... then ... but since] structure on which the whole construct hinges. So even syntactically the reader is led to lose clear rational vision and drift into a bewildering world of lateral thinking or fantasy. The hypothetical rescue of the suffering artist in the first sentence is left dangling in mid-air in the realm of mere possibility: "vielleicht eilte dann ..." [perhaps then ... might rush]. The subjunctive mood strongly suggests an unreal world of hallucination rather than the conscious world of clear perception and hard fact. This impression of vagueness is reinforced by the epithet "*irgendeine* Kunstreiterin," [*some* lady circus rider] (my emphasis) which runs counter to the presentation of a specific, clear, conscious reality.

In his detailed analysis of the overall logical structure of the text Jörgen Kobs points out the lack of a clear causal structure in the second sentence:

Man wird diesen Übergang zwischen den beiden parallelen Kausalsätzen als wenig organisch, als hart empfinden. Es wäre zu erwarten, dass die Konjunktion "da" nochmals aufgenommen würde, zumal nach einem Semikolon, das doch einen deutlichen Einschnitt markiert. Aber diese Befestigung bleibt aus. *Diskontinuierlich* setzen die Einzelbeobachtungen ein, lösen sich von dem Rahmen des kausalen Gefüges ab und streben danach, Eigenwert zu gewinnen. (83, my emphasis)

[This transition between the two parallel causal clauses feels inorganic, hard. One would expect the conjunction "da" to be taken up once more, especially after a semicolon marking a clear break. But this corroboration is not given. The individual observations begin in a *discontinuous* fashion, breaking away from the framework of the causal construction, thus aiming for an independent status. (my translation)]

The fact that the eleven finite verbs of the second sentence all depend on a subject ("Herr Direktor") which occurs only once, increases the impression of "jene Schwebende, jenes In-der-Luft-Hängen der Einzelbeobachtungen" [this floating, this dangling in mid-air of the individual observations] (Kobs, 84), another element going against the grain of the clear conscious logic of rational, wide-awake life. The feeling of a vicious circular motion is suggested by the woman artist being mercilessly driven round in a circle, the way obsessive fantasies go in circles through an anxiety-driven mind. The linear logical structure of "wenn ... dann ... da aber" vanishes into the background under the onslaught of obsessive anxiety. Freud's concept of repetition compulsion comes to mind, or as Lacan shrewdly observed, "Freud derives any accession to the object by the dialectic of return [...] on that other stage of which he speaks as the dream place" (98). Freud has recourse to a "Deus ex machina only less derisory for the fact that the machine directs the director" (Leitch, 98). Lacan's metaphor for the realm of the

unconscious surfacing in dreams is an apt description of the principle underlying “Auf der Galerie” (and, even to a larger degree, “Die Strafkolonie” [“The Penal Colony”]). In the first part, the observer/dreamer fantasizes about himself being in the role of the *deus ex machina* flying to the rescue of the suffering artist. In point of fact he is driven by the machine of his own unconscious desires, the suffering woman artist being the substitute for his primary object.

Another typical feature of dreams paramount in the story is the heavy use of paradox. As Kobs noted, the liveried lackeys display a cold, proud attitude towards the young beautiful artist of the second sentence, a superciliousness quite unbecoming to their humble station in life. The director, the representative of power, on the other hand, fawns on her “in Tierhaltung” [behaving like an animal]. In Pinteresque fashion (in fact highly reminiscent of Pinter’s *The Servant*) the master-servant relationship is inverted: “Die Verhältnisse von Herrschaft und Knechtschaft, so können wir sagen, sind hier vertauscht, der Diener zu stolzer Unnahbarkeit emporgehoben, der Herr zum Tier herabgestossen” (Kobs, 90) [We can state that the relationship between master and servant has been inverted, the servant is raised to proud inaccessibility, the master reduced to animal status].

To my mind the upshot of Kobs’ painstaking analysis is that the text is not construed according to the principle of waking life, the “reflektierende Bewusstsein” [reflecting consciousness] (Kobs, 90). He states that the text leads to the “Nichts” [nothingness] (88). However, he fails to recognize the key to the fathoming of this illogical abyss of the *nihil*, the deconstructionist *abîme*, adducing the specious argument that the last line reads “wie in einem Traum” [as in a dream]. Kobs dismisses this textual pointer as a mere simile, which for him is “nicht mehr als eine Analogie” [no more than an analogy] (93). A critic with an awareness of the main currents of literary theory of the last twenty years cannot but find fault with this rather naive conclusion, since the distinction between figure and ground, the figurative and the literal level of a text, can no longer be ascertained with confidence. It seems to me that this simile provides the very key for a reading of the entire text: all the elements listed above belong to the wilful illogicality of the unconscious world of dreams. Any attempt at finding a determinate, pervasive logical structure is doomed to failure. But if we apply the two fundamental mechanisms of the dreamwork to the text, meanings flash up.

What has struck most critics as a salient feature of the text is the focus on the observer in the gallery, which is highlighted by the title (cf. Petr 137). However, the reason why he starts to cry at the end, after witnessing the triumphant “schöne Dame” [beautiful lady], remains hidden. Only specious arguments can lead to Pavel Petr’s conclusion that this is one of Kafka’s “heitere Abschiede” [merry goodbyes]. But if one reads the two women artists as displaced anxieties and wishes of the observer/dreamer, which surface from his own unconscious, one gets much closer to a possible latent meaning: it is not overly biographical to suggest the observer’s kinship with Kafka the consumptive failed artist, who found relationships with women tantalizingly difficult and life-threatening. The first displacement is the projection of the male observer/artist’s anxiety of being

mercilessly hounded to death by his environment onto a suffering female figure. The second part represents a repressed wish, whose unfulfillment in real life is anticipated by the dreamer's unconscious weeping. On top of the displacement from observer to agent there is the additional shift from the male to the female sex: the observer/artist's wish for artistic success is coupled with the *male* observer's wish for the favour of women, or his own *feminine* side. In the second part of the dream, the male master is subservient to a female mistress: at one level this represents in displaced, inverted form the male dreamer's wish for the subservience of the unreachable, all-powerful women to his weak male ego. In a pun characteristic of dreams, the director (the subservient father-figure) puts the beautiful lady "vorsorglich" on the white horse. As Kobs rightly points out (cf. 90), the adjective warranted by the context of paternal care is "fürsorglich," a nuance which is difficult to render in English, since 'providently' covers both German words. "Vorsorglich" points to the father-figure's awareness of imminent disaster. But to avoid the "Salto mortale" [the great jump] he should not lift her onto the horse at all, since this desire-driven ride exposes the dainty granddaughter-like creature to potential havoc. Bearing in mind the fundamental displacement of the sexes, we realize that the latent meaning of the dream points to the observer/artist's fear of being driven, of being taken for a ride by his urges for the admiration of the world and the favours of beautiful women, which is perfectly in keeping with Freud's notorious dictum on the nature of the artist: "Der Künstler ist im Ansatz auch ein Introvertierter, der es nicht weit zur Neurose hat. Er wird von überstarken Triebbedürfnissen gedrängt, möchte Ehre, Macht, Reichtum, Ruhm und die Liebe der Frauen erwerben" (296) [The artist is basically an introvert close to neurosis. He is driven by excessive libidinal needs, he would like to acquire honour, power, fame and the love of women (my translation)].

As opposed to the second part, the first sentence contains only one role reversal in the manifest dream: the battered artist (whose suffering condition is highlighted by the simile "Hände, die eigentlich Dampfhammer sind" [hands which were really steam hammers]) is cast in the female sex.<sup>2</sup> The whole text is a condensed dream image allowing or rather calling for a number of readings, the woman artist being a similarly multilayered image as the room in Pinter's play: she represents both the anxiety and the wishes of the observer/artist; she is also an ambivalent symbol of the male observer's desperate struggle with women. There are other ambiguous symbolic elements in this dreamscape: the indefatig-

<sup>2</sup> The comment from Kafka's diary on the genesis of "Auf der Galerie" bears out what the dream imagery suggests: "Unberührt aber von diesem spielerischen Glauben, der sich wahrscheinlich nur von einer schon ungesunden Sexualität nährte, blieb die Überzeugung, dass ich die übrige Welt durch die Offenbarung einer unerhörten Unfähigkeit mit einem Male überraschen werde." [Untouched by this playful belief which was presumably nurtured solely by an already unhealthy sexuality, the conviction remained that I would surprise the world once more by this incredible ineptitude (my translation)]. (Quoted from Petr 138) However, the recourse to "external evidence" (Wimsatt/Beardsley, 339) is not necessary for my approach; it simply corroborates what is inherent in the text itself.

able audience whose ambivalent homage has the quality of the steam hammers of an engine; the janus-faced figure of the merciless boss of Part One who literally has the whiplash; the subservient, animal-like director of part two, whose breathing “in Tierhaltung” suggests serfdom and possibly also sexual expectation rather than the “Vorsorge” of a grandfather for his granddaughter; the supercilious liveried lackeys who clearly rise above their preordained station in life; the “Salto mortale,” the fatal jump, from which the caring director/grandfather wants to prevent his charge, whom he warns “mit englischen Ausrufen.” “Englisch” is associatively connected with ‘Engel,’ a metonymic displacement typical of the way language appears in dreams, the adjective being displaced from the object of care to the language of the carer. All these symbols contain the element of paradox, making an univocal reading of the latent meaning of the manifest dream impossible. Deconstructionists like Hillis Miller argue that any text is “alogical,” “undecidable” (Miller, 285) due to the very nature of language. I would suggest that this potential of language manifests itself most obviously in texts which are organized according to the subconscious mechanism of dreams, which, as Freud stated long before his deconstructionist epigones (or “parasites” in Hillis Miller’s sense [cf. Miller, 278-81]), is “das Reich der Unlogik” (*Abriss*, 27) [the realm of the illogical], where “jedes Element auch sein Gegenteil bedeuten kann” (27) [every element can also mean its opposite], which is also a feature of the oldest languages and even partly of Latin (cf. *Abriss*, 27-28).

In conclusion, allow me to rehearse some methodological arguments to distinguish my particular brand of psychoanalytical approach to Kafka from previous attempts with a similar bent. In contradistinction to Kate Flores’ notorious psychoanalytical reading of “Das Urteil” I am not trying to give a determinate, univocal reading of my text. Admittedly, limited recourse is made to Kafka’s biography; the observer/dreamer’s identification with the “lungensüchtige Kunstreiterin” [tubercular lady circus rider] is partly suggested by the biographical background. But Dietrich Krusche’s deconstructionist caveat against using biographical material to arrive at a univocal reading along psycho-analytical lines is heeded in my analysis:

So führt die Deutung, die ihre einzige Aufgabe darin sieht, den Text in der Kausalität seines Zustandekommens, hier in der Kausalität der Mechanismen des Unterbewusstseins des Autors, zu erhellen, zu einer Destruktion des Textes als eines literarisch-fiktionalen: der Text wird in seinen Möglichkeiten des Erscheinens vor dem Leser nicht gefördert, sondern beengt. (87)

[Thus the interpretation which sees its only task in illuminating the genesis of the text, in this case the causality of the mechanisms of the author’s unconscious, leads to the destruction of the text as literary fiction: the text’s range of possible readings is not enhanced, but reduced.]

As Gabbard convincingly demonstrated in her reading of Pinter’s early plays, a psychoanalytically correct application of the Freudian tools from *The Interpretation of Dreams* reveals the overdetermination of dream symbols. Krusche’s objection to Flores’ reading of “Das Urteil” cannot be levelled at my way of apply-



ing the mechanisms of dreamwork to the text. Furthermore I do not fall victim to the biographical fallacy of equating the "monadisch Ich" [monadic I] (Krusche, 78) with Kafka the man. Following Seymour Chatman's lead, I only go as far as to suggest the proximity between the "implied author" and the narrator, thus excluding the possibility of an unreliable narrator, i.e. an ironic distance between the implied author and the narrator. This seems to be implied in Pavel Petr's categorization of "Auf der Galerie" as one of Kafka's "heitere Abschiede," a view which seems to me totally untenable if one applies narratological principles accurately to the text.

Both Pinter's and Kafka's texts are in Walter Sokel's words fictions which "resemble ... a dream in that [they] compel interpretation, but, again like a dream, [they] seem to resist interpretative effort" (Quoted in Foulkes, 59). If the interpretative effort is made the results are inevitably ambiguous, multilayered, indeterminate.

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