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*A paper dedicated to Andy Gordon*

Sørensen, Bent

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**Freudian Jokes in Pynchon's "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna"  
- a paper dedicated to Andy Gordon**

**Dr. Bent Sørensen, Aalborg**

Last year when my friend Andy's cancer had returned, I made a pledge with him. I said: "Andy, next year in Vienna!" Me not being Jewish - and he being Jewish - in all probability we could not ever agree on "next year in Jerusalem!", but this was good enough. Anyway, for Freudians Vienna is pretty close to the City of God, or City of Truth, to mention only two of Jerusalem's 70 names - and coming here had long been a goal of the PsyArt Foundation, of which Andy was the roving VicePresident and I the former President.

I made this pledge so that Andy would be motivated to beat the odds and the cancer, as he had done once before, and to further entice him to get healthy I teased him that he would have to come to the conference to find out what my paper would be about - and that I certainly wouldn't tell him in advance lest he steal the idea from me. He promised to do his best to join me, but as you all know he didn't quite make it - alive that is...

So, this is how it has to be: I'm dragging Andy along to Vienna with me, seemingly dead, yet very much alive in our memories of his voice, his laughter, his energy. I dedicate my paper to him: May his name be for a blessing...

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The reason I didn't want to share my topic with him was not really that I thought he would pinch the idea from me. If anything, my real fear was that he would come up with the same idea on his own and do a better job than I could! After all my paper was to deal with at least three of Andy's favorite things, and many presenters - Andy included - have tried to theme their PsyArt papers to tie in with the location of a given year's conference.

I wanted to write a paper about Thomas Pynchon's juvenile work, the short story "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna". The story is not really set in Vienna, as one might think from its title, but rather prosaically in Washington, DC, but nonetheless it evokes the fair, Freudian city we find ourselves in right now. I knew that Andy was interested in Pynchon - after all Andy once met the guy and smoked dope with him! He even wrote a wonderful essay about the intrigue of meeting this fellow with a "soup-strainer moustache designed to hide his bad teeth", so the anxiety was real enough for me that Andy would pick exactly this text to work on - both title and author being obvious potential triggers.

As we all know Andy had a sensational memory: He was pretty much a human jukebox - you could throw a line of lyrics from anything from show tunes to Grateful Dead songs at him, and he'd burst out singing the next line! What's more, he would do the same thing with lines from Shakespeare plays, and Pynchon's title is a direct appropriation from the Bard's play *Measure for Measure* where the Duke delegates responsibility to young Angelo to dispense justice as he sees fit:

DUKE

In our remove be thou at full ourself.  
Mortality and mercy in Vienna  
Live in thy tongue and heart. (1.1.46-48)

This was the second attractor of my topic that Andy would have felt: An opportunity to quote, nay re-enact Shakespeare plays! Many times I heard him do so in connection with papers by other conferees who wanted to add a bit of flair to their analyses. In connection with the 2011 PsyArt conference in Roskilde which my wife and I organised, we went to Elsinore Castle and Andy had a field day reciting lines from Hamlet in the great hall of the castle, much to the amusement of innocent tourists passing by. Of course, I subsequently cast him in the title role of the infamous "Skinhead Hamlet" that a select band of PsyArt rogues performed during the buffet dinner of the post-conference cruise to Oslo - we did not get banned from the restaurant, but I think we came pretty close!

As if the cocktail of Pynchon and Shakespeare wasn't enough, the third attractor lay in my choice of approach to the short story. I had the crazy notion that Pynchon must have put in innumerable puns and jokes in this story, as he does in almost everything he writes. Hence my title "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna: Pynchon's Freudian Jokes"... If there was one thing Andy couldn't resist, it was jokes. He loved telling them, he loved telling better ones than you ever could, and he loved laughing at them himself.

Now, of course, the phrase "Freudian Jokes" is a pleonasm. All jokes are after all Freudian - some might even argue that the reverse is also true: That all Freud is a joke, but let's not go down that garden path today, especially considering where we find ourselves, at the hospitality of the Sigmund Freud Privatuniversität...

Why do I say that all jokes are Freudian? Well, joking is one of several ways for us to talk about that which is repressed and therefore must return. Jokes are a pathway for the anal and the inappropriately genital to enter into our speech and become 'kosher', as it were - purified by the laughter the joke evokes. That is, unless we are the butt of the joke, for there is always someone whom the joke targets and wounds.

Andy's favorite inappropriate joke was just such a one: "What is the difference between a phallus and a penis? After explaining this multiple times to the young female intern, and failing to make her understand, the famous psychoanalyst takes her into his cabinet to demonstrate the difference in the flesh, as it were. After a short while the intern returns from the couch, and announces happily that she now knows exactly the relationship of the Phallus to the penis. It is of course very nearly the same thing - only the Phallus is much, much shorter!"

This is an example of a meta-Freudian joke of course. While on the surface, it describes a terrible #metoo breach of psychoanalytical protocol and common decency, it neatly turns the tables on the powerful authority figure and makes him the butt of the joke. Now, not all jokes are created equal - some are mere puns, quips, witticisms and not suited for retelling, because they only work situationally. Nonetheless, I'll try.

I first met Andy at the Cordoba PsyArt conference in 2005, where my wife and I first attended one of these dysfunctional family reunions. I knew no-one at the conference, but Andy was a master at making folks welcome, and he worked the room like no-one I have ever met, greeting newbies and veterans alike and introducing them to just the ones they would most likely enjoy socialising with. After the welcome reception, however, Andy would not always recognise you as someone he had just had a conversation with, and you could tell by his glance - affixed at something behind you, at a distance of a thousand yards or more that he was distracted. I later understood - when I organised the Roskilde conference the pressures of socialising with 70+ people and how one's hard-disc simply overflows at some point - why Andy sometimes simply went a little blank.

Mind you, this was a conference where the first paper was about the places in America where Freud peed his pants. I kid you not, although there are soo many Freudian jokes one could tell based around that wonderful topic. The paper was given by an eminent psychoanalytical critic, Peter Rudnytsky. I'll never forget the first question from the floor, posed by none other than Solange Leibovici: "Peter, why should we care where Freud peed his pants and why? What has that got to do with literature?" I looked at Camelia, my wife, and I could see she

was also seriously re-considering whether we should have come to this conference. Peter Rudnytsky didn't answer this or any other question, but simply beamed, showing all of his teeth. I concluded that one had to be a little touched to attend a PsyArt conference. Of course, I ended up attending 13 of them consecutively and become the Foundation's President...

The conference hotel was called the Maimonides, located in the Jewish quarter of Cordoba. It was named after the 12th century philosopher Maimonides whom my wife as probably the only conferee had read extensively. I had not. I didn't like Maimonides, and nor did I like The Maimonides Hotel. Its air conditioning was unstable and its elevators were excessively slow. My Lutheran sensibilities were doubly offended. After a long day of conferencing I wanted nothing more than to get to our fifth floor rooms and chill. I saw an elevator door opening, and quickly ran to catch this rare opportunity of getting up there without waiting 10 minutes. Once successfully inside the elevator with my wife I turned back to make sure no-one else was waiting to get in. What did I see but Andy hustling towards the open, but now rapidly closing door?

This was truly a "Sliding Doors" moment. In one scenario, I would let the doors close right before Andy's considerable nose, presumably effectively preventing any further cordial interaction between him and me forever. In the other scenario, I would run the risk of him getting in the elevator and not recognising me and Camelia - which would also potentially be awkward. My Lutheran upbringing got the better of me - I held the door and let Andy get on. Out of sheer nervousness, I then made a Freudian joke...

I said, looking Andy firmly in the eye, testing for signs of recognition: "Welcome in Schindler's lift!" Andy was baffled, and unsure that he had heard right. He mumbled, "Uh, I don't actually like that movie very much..." At this point in time I didn't know that Andy was a Spielberg expert, that he was writing a book on Spielberg's science fiction movies - nor that Andy absolutely hated Spielberg's holocaust movie *Schindler's List!* And yet, my subconscious must have known - hence the Freudian non-slip I performed. "No," I said - "Not Schindler's List - we are literally in Schindler's lift!" - pointing to the inspection sign posted on almost every European lift, stating the manufacturer's name, Schindler. As you Americans have Otis, we have our Schindler. This Otis may regret that it's unable to lift today, but Schindlers are usually dependable. Andy blinked twice. I thought of a myriad scenarios in most of which my silly pun would be construed as somehow anti-semitic, and then to my relief Andy let out his trademark donkey's bray of a laughter. I knew he would recognise me from then on, and I knew we would be friends and fellow punsters for life.

As you can tell, my actual paper will be fairly short today. I wanted to talk about my dead friend Andy, more than I wanted to talk about Pynchon. For a while I thought it was sad that Andy wouldn't be here in Vienna with us because of an insignificant detail such as too much mortality and too little mercy, but in the writing of this I realised that that was a complete fallacy. Of course, Andy is here in Vienna with us today - and he will be with us for as long as we remember his Freudian jokes, his laughter, his gaze and his kindness. Next year in Montreal, he'll be there, too - and whither thou goest PsyArt, Andy will be there in our memories.

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Now for the scholarly part of my presentation. Thomas Pynchon apparently wrote the short story "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna" instead of going to an exam and writing a tedious paper - a very good choice!. He finished it in one sitting, and eventually published in the Cornell University magazine *Epoch* in the spring of 1959.

It is a strange story in which a young Jewish man, Siegel (he name means 'seal' or 'sigil') comes to a party in in Washington, DC in a house he has never visited before, hosted by a man he has never met before. He knows none of the guests that will attend the party either. He is greeted by the man supposedly hosting the party, a Romanian by the name of Lupescu (which literally means 'son of a wolf' - ergo perhaps a pun on Freud's Wolf Man), who looks and dresses remarkably like Siegel. They are, the story insists, each others' "Doppelgänger" (evoking one of the salient features of Freud's "The Uncanny", the impossible/improbable double). Within minutes Lupescu has left the building, permanently, and left young Siegel to seal the deal of hosting the upcoming party. Siegel being a bit of a wishy-washy sort of person acquiesces to this strange turn of events and starts greeting the guests as they begin to pour in.

Siegel is in fact a lot like other nondescript Pynchon characters, for instance Stencil in his 1963 debut novel *V.*, and the guests are a variation over "The Whole Sick Crew" that populates this novel as well. Siegel has been in the diplomacy, perhaps even a spy of sorts, although there is no evidence that he has ever spent any time in Vienna, unlike the characters in Graham Greene's *The Third Man*. He has had some experience with international intrigue, alcohol and sex, however. One of the first Freudian jokes told about him concerns his friend from college Grossman (the Fat Man, or literally "gross man"), whose clean-cut antithesis Siegel is. His first name, you see, is Cleanth (an obvious pun on the eminent Southern new critic Cleanth Brooks, author of *The Well-Wrought Urn*, a treatise in clean, genteel new critical formalism). The story is

littered with these sophomoric jokes and puns, catering to the college audience Pynchon must have envisioned as the readers of *Epoch*.

Another example is Lupescu quoting T.S. Eliot, quoting Baudelaire's *Fleur du Mal*, "*Mon semblable, mon frère*" - indicating again that the two of them resemble each other as Doppelgängers and dissemble together in pretending to be one or the other, as lying twin brothers might do.

Lupescu utters this quotation, as he thumbtacks a pig foetus to the wall over one of the doors of the apartment, evoking "a Dada exhibit in Paris on Christmas Eve, 1919". "Symbol. God, what a symbol" he continues. The pig standing in for the newborn Baby Jesus on Christmas Eve 1919 is a joke in particularly poor taste, but also serves the purpose within the story of foreshadowing the violence that will erupt in the apartment a few hours later - something Lupescu uncannily seems to have foreknowledge of: "Freedom. Deliverance. Genie. Bottle." So, Siegel as Lupescu's Freudian Double is destined to witness or effectuate the uncorking of the Genie's bottle letting loose violence on the jaded Washingtonians who are blissfully unaware of what awaits them.

Before I account for what that turns out to be, however, I want to address Freud's literal presence in the story. Siegel's initial role in the story is to hear the guests' confessions as it were, a role he enjoys playing up to a certain point where he gets disgusted and filled with desire to kill everyone. He is not the perfect psycho-analyst, in other words. The theme of impending death is also accurately foreshadowed by Lupescu, whose parting remark to Siegel is yet another quote, this time from Conrad: "Mistah Kurtz, he dead!" You will remember that Kurtz in *The Heart of Darkness* has gone native, both in terms of ritual and sexual behaviour, but that his deepest wish vis-a-vis the Africans is scribbled in hand at the end of his report to the colonial administration: "Exterminate all the brutes!" This is exactly what will happen towards the end of the story.

But back to Freud. He is mentioned twice in the story, both in derogatory terms: Siegel listens to a lot of what he calls "crisscrossed threads of inaccurate self-analysis and Freudian fallacy" from one of the partygoers whose entangled love life quickly bores him to tears. The second mention occurs in Siegel's interior monologue where he wonders "if someday he, Siegel, might not find himself standing in front of some mirror with a pig foetus under one arm, reciting Freudian cant at himself to get the proper inflection right." Thus we have strong anxieties going on here. The Jewish protagonist who desperately wishes to be a man of action fears nothing more than becoming a stereotypical neurotic American caught in perpetual self-analysis tainted by Freudian language. Freud

is seen as appearing like a demon out of the mirror of self-reflection castrating the manhood of our wannabe spy. While entertaining, we also realise that the Freudian joke, as always, is on the one who utters it. Pynchon truly had a college friend named Siegel, and eventually emasculated him by running off with his wife...

The story ends with a bloodbath, perpetrated by a strange character named Irving Loon. There is another silly joke here on the Canadian lucky 2-dollar coin, known as a 'Loon' being Irving's last name - plus of course the fact that he is also loony! Loon is a Canadian, but also a First Nations member of the Ojibwa tribe. Siegel is aware that Ojibwa males have a tendency to suffer from a mental disorder, the so-called Windigo psychosis. He soon starts seeing Loon exhibit symptoms of this psychosis and anticipates what will happen. When Loon takes a rifle from the wall and starts loading it, Siegel cowardly slips out the back door and vanishes from the apartment as Loon massacres everyone at the party.

Just as his Wolf Man double did, Siegel chooses the path of least resistance and vanishes into the anonymity he emerged from hours earlier. He thinks of the situation in terms borrowed from Hemingway's bullfighting book, *Death in the Afternoon*: "*Espada* broken, muleta lost, horse disembowelled, picadors sick with fear. Five in the afternoon, crowd screaming." As he walks down the stairs, he whistles gaily, shrugs and muses: "What the hell, stranger things had happened in Washington..." Politics, perhaps?

Thus, everyone gets what they deserve: Those who serve up Freudian cant will soon feel the brunt of the joke being on them. Siegel is a strange confessor, indeed. He brings not forgiveness but hell-fire. Freud is not much of a saviour, rather the Native Windigo monster gets the last word. The Windigo in Native folklore is a cannibalistic monster who eats up those who are too self-aggrandising, self-indulgent and self-serving. Chippewa author Louise Erdrich has used the figure to great effect in one of her novels, *The Round House*, where the Windigo is a serial rapist desecrating the community.

Pynchon's social critique of emerging narcissism is spot-on in the story, but laying the problem at the feet of Freud's Totem and using the Windigo as a scourge, cleansing or Clea(th)ing the creative class of its burgeoning narcissism, is an immature misunderstanding. 60 years later we can see that more than ever we need Freud's analysis of Taboos to understand what can go wrong in a modern society, which latterly has brought us much worse cannibalistic monsters than Loon. The narcissistic social-character that Christopher Lasch predicted would come to dominate the Western world from



the 1980s onward was already anticipated by novelists such as Pynchon, and we need not look very far from Washington, DC to see the consequences of narcissism run wild. It is too bad that Pynchon regards Freud as 'cant' and 'fallacy' when in actual fact he was the first to identify the dangers of secondary narcissism as a personality disorder.