A "Slip" and a Pastime: James Salter Meets Freud

For being as sexually unambiguous and transparent as it is, James Salter's 1967 novel *A Sport and a Pastime* received relatively little attention or controversy upon its release. Published amidst the cultural revolution of late-1960s America–the era of peace and free love, radical civil rights reforms, and an explosion of anti-establishment art across all mediums–Salter wouldn't find himself in the hot water that pioneers the likes of Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs courageously fought to stay out of during a myriad of obscenity trials earlier in the decade. Those Beats ultimately succeeded in keeping censorship at bay, laying the groundwork for honest, sexually-charged works such as *Sport* to find readership amongst a generation of young open-minded readers unconcerned with the social taboos of their elders. Its rich, multi-layered, and beautifully written prose is filled to the brim with the brightly burning, quickly fleeting, hot-to-the-touch affair of American Ivy League-dropout Phillip Dean and a young femme française by the name of Anne-Marie, during an impromptu vacation in the French countryside. A semi-autobiographical work based on Salter's own experience as a married Air Force pilot stationed in Chaumont, *Sport* explores the Freudian themes of unconscious desire, nostalgia, and wish-fulfillment, all through the ingenious use of an enigmatic narrator as a character within the story. A uniquely transgressive work of American literature, it is an enigma that *Sport* isn't nearly as lauded as its contemporaries.

While Sigmund Freud is known for his work in psychoanalysis, his literary analysis is just as, if not more fascinating, particularly today. In a short essay published in 1908 titled "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming," Freud explores the relationship between childhood

daydreaming, works of fiction, and the unconscious adult mind. Freud argues that creative writers tap into their unconscious desires and, through certain degrees of obfuscation, transform them into creative/literary works. Daydreaming and creative writing, according to Freud, are one and the same, as both involve one's imagination to create alternate realities. To Freud, the process of creative writing is an extension of childhood daydreaming and fantasy. Growing up, young children often find themselves in imaginary scenarios. He elaborates: "Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own . . . rearrang[ing] things of his world in a new way which pleases him? He takes his play very seriously . . . " (Freud 437). Even as adults, one often imagines themselves in a scenario they might deeply desire but cannot truly experience. These innermost "phantasies," as Freud calls them, can be something one is "ashamed of . . . hid[ing] them from other people. He cherishes his phantasies as his most intimate possessions" (436). Too unscrupulous to share with others, many creatives use fiction as a translation of wish-fulfillment, to express their deepest desires and fantasies through their works.

What better example of the adult daydreamer, than that of the novel's unnamed narrator? Hidden in plain sight, he daydreams about the intimate details of Phillip and Anne-Marie's relationship, down to the emotions, dialogue, and frustrations of their most private, carnal moments. Freud in his essay finds two motivating wishes within the fantasies of daydreaming: wishes of ambition, which "serve to elevate the subject's personality" or more frankly, ego, and more relevant to our case here, erotic wishes (439). As Jeffery Meyers writes in "The Sexual Novel: James Salter's A Sport and a Pastime," the narrator is "an unusual feature of the novel . . . he fervently imagines their sexual scenes. [He], in fact, cannot possibly know everything he describes and reminds us [of this] throughout" (567). The narrator himself says as much nearly

halfway into the text, stating that "I am not telling the truth about [Phillip] Dean, I am inventing him. I am creating him out of my inadequacies, you must always remember that" (Salter 85). Surprisingly, the narrator is blatantly honest about the fiction he is presenting. Salter's double entendre with this narrator acts as a kind of meta-commentary on an erotic level, and being that the narrator is quite voyeuristic, it is Salter's way of inserting his unconscious dreams and desires into a mysterious character. While the narrator admits it all to be a fabrication (or daydreaming), there is nevertheless a level of objectivity to the narration that a first-person perspective likely would not have been able to provide. Meyers finds that the narrator "distances the erotic scenes while making them more vivid" (568). If done in first-person, it would certainly be biased in nature.

Freud specifically brings this literary dilemma into light; in the section on creative writers, he states that "the psychological novel . . . owes its special nature to the inclination of the modern writer to split up his ego, by self-observation, into many part-egos, and, in consequence, to personify the conflicting currents of his own mental life in several heroes" (426). Through *Sport*, we have three parts of Salter exposed to readers: main character Phillip Dean, *Sport's* narrator, and more broadly, Salter himself as the author. The narrator, sandwiched between the writer Salter and the fictionalized Salter through Dean, acts as a kind of intermediary between the text and the reader (Meyers 568). Salter, in a 2006 interview, stayed tight-lipped about much of the novel, but had this to say when asked about his use of third-person voice: "As for *Sport and a Pastime*, well, the narrator's essential" (Kahn et al. 86). In its essence, the narrator is what elevates what would be crude, boastful first-person viewpoints of intercourse into something far more artful and aesthetically pleasing. Throughout the work, Salter is curiously doing precisely what Freud considers to be more of what a daydreamer does, rather than an "imaginative writer,"

in his words. Going by Freud's analysis, Salter's daydreaming through the narrator is a manifestation ". . . [with] which the ego contents itself [to be] the role of the spectator" (Freud 441-442). Ironically, what Freud describes with "imaginative writers" would also apply to Salter. He states that, "the writer softens the character of his egoistic day-dreams by altering and disguising it, and he bribes us by the purely formal-that is, aesthetic-yield of pleasure which he offers us in the presentation of his phantasies" (Freud 443). Within *Sport*, Salter as an author is pulling off the dual role of both the daydreamer and the creative writer, proving they are in fact identical in nature.

Looking at the prose of the work, Salter paints us an intimate picture in this example through an interesting combination of foul language and beautiful vistas of the untamed countryside: "In that blue Delage with doors that open backwards . . . The villages are fading, the rivers turning dark. She undoes his clothing and brings forth his prick, erect, pale as a heron in the dusk, both of them looking ahead at the road like any couple" (109). The narrator here presents a sort of vicarious omnipresence to both the proclivities and mundanities of life, both the erotic and the typical, treated with equal importance. The scene continues, and the ensuing sex act in the Kerouac-inspired sports car takes on the same written importance as adjusting the rear-view mirror, or noting how "[the car's] headlights [are] faded" (109). These dichotomies are presented by the narrator quite nondescript, in a very matter-of-fact way. In a piece on Salter's oeuvre, titled "A Final Glory," William Dowie describes *Sport* and its narrator. He writes, "[The narrator tells] the story on the practical level and as an audience surrogate on the imaginative level, [seeing] ourselves in our various distances from the magical figure of Dean, carefree, natural, and as acceptable as the elements themselves" (Dowie 82). The narrator very smoothly

moves from moments of mundanity to moments of pleasure, mimicking Phillip's macho attitude, his relaxed candor.

The night before the couple drives down the gentle hills of the French countryside, in the prior scene, they enjoy each other's company in a hotel room. The narrator describes this moment: "In the room, she tries on her new [clothes] . . . she poses for him, laughs, and falls onto the bed. They lie together in the calm darkness . . . They need only glance at each other to start laughing again" (Salter 107). The narrator might yearn for simple moments of romantic bliss, but he clearly has more of an interest in exploring the romance of others than cultivating one himself. Salter as an author is also able to revisit what is a pivotal moment in his life, the glory days of his youth. These are precisely the emotions that motivate one to fantasize. According to Freud, moments of nostalgia, and the fantasies of daydreams are, to many, "the fulfillment of a wish, a correlation of unsatisfying reality" (Freud 439). Once time passes one cannot go backwards; all that exists of the past is one's memory.

There comes a point in the narrative, where once Phillip begins to fear the growing possibility of long-term commitment with Anne-Marie, he desperately tries to find a way out. The narrator, in fact, lends Phillip money for a flight back to the States. Not long afterward, the narrator receives word that Phillip had died in an automobile accident. Instead of lamenting his death, the narrator immortalizes him: "[Phillip] never died–his existence is superior to such accidents. One must have heroes, which is to say, one must create them . . . It is we who give them their majesty, their power, which we ourselves could never possess" (Salter 191). Freud describes this in "Creative Writing" where wish-fulfillment, through daydreams and desires, correlates directly with the multitude of stories in fiction that include infallible heroes, he goes on to say that "one feature above all cannot fail to strike us about the creations of these

story-writers, each of them has a hero who is the centre of interest, for whom the writer tries to win our sympathy by every possible means" (Freud 425). Every possible means would certainly include this elusive narrator. He is not solely a first-person character; he also acts in the third-person, with no qualms or shame of his biases and affections towards the lovers, with a particular admiration for Phillip.

Close to a quarter-century later, Salter explained some of the phenomenon behind the narrator, and the narrator's reliability as one himself. In response to a question during an interview for *The Paris Review* in 1993, specifically of how much of the narrator's retelling was true in *Sport*, Salter replies that "very little, in my opinion [is invented or imagined]. I am impressed by his powers of observation and tend to trust his description of scenes." Salter's evasive attitude suggests that his intent as the author is not for the narrator to have any absolute omniscient power regarding the young lovers' lives. In his view, the narrator is just curiously observant. The role of the narrator continues to both confound and impress, simultaneously, and going by the author's words, that is in no way serendipitous by any stretch of the imagination.

Salter's unorthodox approach to narrative in *A Sport and a Pastime* is ultimately the work's masterstroke. Freud, giving his talk on "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" over a century ago, would not have seen this approach to fiction coming. Within *Sport*, Salter freely expresses the ego and bravado of his younger self while simultaneously putting it within a much larger, more analytic context. When the narrator admits to his infatuation with the young couple, and the fallacy of his narration, the book ceases to become simply erotic. *Sport* becomes a deeply engrossing character study on the psychology of daydreaming, of envy, and of sexual desire. Overshadowed and unappreciated in an era full of canonical, groundbreaking works, *Sport*

nonetheless stands as a premiere work of Freudian literature, one that should be celebrated along with the greats of mid-20th century American texts.

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