

Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*



Edited by Mary F. Brewer

HAROLD PINTER'S
THE DUMB WAITER

The title is centered between two sets of horizontal bars. Each set consists of a top black bar and a bottom black bar, with a white rectangular cutout in the middle. The top bar is slightly longer than the bottom bar.

DIALOGUE
6

Edited by
Michael J. Meyer

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THE DUMB WAITER

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General Editor's Preface

The original concept for Rodopi's new series entitled Dialogue grew out of two very personal experiences of the general editor. In 1985, having just finished my dissertation on John Steinbeck and attained my doctoral degree, I was surprised to receive an invitation from Steinbeck biographer, Jackson J. Benson, to submit an essay for a book he was working on. I was unpublished at the time and unsure and hesitant about my writing talent, but I realized that I had nothing to lose. It was truly the "opportunity of a lifetime." I revised and shortened a chapter of my dissertation on Steinbeck's *The Pearl* and sent it off to California. Two months later, I was pleasantly surprised to find out that my essay had been accepted and would appear in Duke University Press's *The Short Novels of John Steinbeck* (1990).

Surprisingly, my good fortune continued when several months after the book appeared, Tetsumaro Hayashi, a renowned Steinbeck scholar, asked me to serve as one of the three assistant editors of *The Steinbeck Quarterly*, then being published at Ball State University. Quite naïve at the time about publishing, I did not realize how fortunate I had been to have such opportunities present themselves without any struggle on my part to attain them. After finding my writing voice and editing several volumes on my own, I discovered in 2002 that despite my positive experiences, there was a real prejudice against newer "emerging" scholars when it came to inclusion in collections or acceptance in journals.

As the designated editor of a Steinbeck centenary collection, I found myself roundly questioned about the essays I had chosen for inclusion in the book. Specifically, I was asked why I had not selected several prestigious names whose recognition power would have spurred the book's success on the market. My choices of lesser known but quality essays seemed unacceptable. New voices were unwelcome; it was the tried and true that were greeted with open arms. Yet these scholars had no need for further publications and often offered few original insights into the Steinbeck canon. Sadly, the originality of the lesser-known essayists met with hostility; the doors were closed, perhaps even locked tight, against their innovative approaches. Readings that took issue with scholars whose authority

and expertise had long been unquestioned were rejected in favor of the tried and true.

Angered, I withdrew as editor of the volume and began to think of ways to rectify what I considered a serious flaw in academe. My goal was to open discussions between experienced scholars and those who were just beginning their academic careers and had not yet broken through the publication barriers. Dialogue would be fostered rather than discouraged.

Having previously served as an editor for several volumes in Rodopi's *Perspective of Modern Literature* series under the general editorship of David Bevan, I sent a proposal to Fred Van der Zee advocating a new series that would be entitled *Dialogue*, one that would examine the controversies within classic canonical texts and would emphasize an interchange between established voices and those whose ideas had never reached the academic community because their names were unknown. Happily, the press was willing to give the concept a try and gave me a wide scope in determining not only the texts to be covered but also in deciding who would edit the individual volumes.

The Dumb Waiter volume that appears here is the sixth attempt at this unique approach to criticism. It features several well-known Pinter experts and several other essayists whose reputation is not so widespread but whose keen insights skillfully inform the text. It will soon be followed by volumes on Sandra Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek* and Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*. It is my hope that as more new titles appear, the *Dialogue* series will foster not only renewed interest in the chosen works but that each volume will bring forth new ideas as well as fresh interpretations from heretofore silenced voices. In this atmosphere, a healthy interchange of criticism can develop, one that will allow even dissent and opposite viewpoints to be expressed without fear that such stances may be seen as negative or counter-productive.

My thanks to Rodopi and its editorial board for its support of this “radical” concept. May you, the reader, discover much to value in these new approaches to issues that have fascinated readers for decades and to books that have long stimulated our imaginations and our critical discourse

Michael J. Meyer
2009

Introduction:
***The Dumb Waiter* -- A different kind of theater**

Mary F. Brewer

Writing in the 1960s, the critic Eric Bentley spoke of the need for a different kind of modern theater, one of “purity:” a theater characterized by “simplicity and sincerity.” Elaborating on this concept of purity, he called for plays that “replaced the equivocations of popular prejudice with consistent and responsible attitudes” (xiii), which he found to be sadly lacking in the “unreal” realism of so much 1960s theater. It is odd, therefore, that in a book of criticism spanning the stages of Shakespeare, Samuel Beckett, Marcel Marceau, and Martha Graham that Bentley does not address the work of Harold Pinter, for Pinter’s drama encapsulates more than most the “artistic delights” married to “a theater of statements” to which Bentley would have modern playwrights aspire:

For a statement is a fine, clear, human thing,
and shines by contrast in a world of pseudo-
statement -- a world of slogans, doubletalk,
jargon, cant. (xiv)

What this volume of essays attempts is to illuminate more precisely how one of Pinter’s best known plays, *The Dumb Waiter*, rises above the world of pseudo-statements and achieves, through its unique blend of absurdity, farce, and surface realism, a profoundly moving statement about the modern human condition. Written in 1957, *The Dumb Waiter* premièred at the Hampstead Theater Club on January 21, 1960. Since then, it has enjoyed numerous professional and student revivals in the UK and across the world.

In 2007, Pinter celebrated 50 years working in the theater, as actor, director, and of course, as one of the most innovative and influential British playwrights of the twentieth century. In commemoration of this milestone, Harry Burton launched a critically acclaimed 50th-anniversary production of *The Dumb Waiter* at

Trafalgar Studios in London (February-March 2007). While Pinter's later writing or dramas continue to produce radical and testing material both for live performance and the screen, the Trafalgar Studios' production was indicative of how his early work remains relevant; hence, it continues to generate substantial interest and critical debate among scholars as well as theater practitioners.

The Dumb Waiter has achieved also the rare distinction for a modern play of being adapted for popular TV. In 1987, ABC television produced a star-studded adaptation of *The Dumb Waiter* featuring John Travolta and Tom Conti. In addition to an early BBC television version, which appeared in 1961, the play was again featured as part of the Pinter at the BBC season in 2002. That *The Dumb Waiter* continues to inspire creative interest is evidenced by the amount of material posted to the Web featuring productions by student and amateur dramatic groups, and by innovative responses to the play such as the animated short by Daniel Grigsby, from which the cover for this volume is taken.

When awarding Pinter the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2005, the Academy explained that Pinter is an artist whose work "uncovers the precipice under everyday prattle and forces entry into oppression's closed rooms." Few individual critics have better summed up the matter at the heart of *The Dumb Waiter*; for an audience to gaze into Ben and Gus' closed basement room and overhear their "everyday prattle" is to gain insight into what Penelope Prentice calls the play's "terrifying vision of the dominant-subservient battle for power," a battle in which societies and individuals engage as a part of daily existence. Thus, by focusing on *The Dumb Waiter*, the essays in this collection engage not only with one of Pinter's most popular plays, but also with one of the most challenging, provocative, and politically engaging works in his canon.

Despite its concentrated focus, however, the book speaks to a range of significant issues current in Pinter studies and which are applicable beyond a single text. Indeed, a number of contributors use *The Dumb Waiter* as a lens through which to interpret Pinter's more recent work, while at the same time exploring how later developments in his dramatic practice reveal hitherto unrecognized or under-explored meanings in this early play. As part of the Rodopi Dialogue series, the guiding principle of the book is to match emerging scholars within studies of modern drama and literature with established experts, the aim being to re-examine a landmark text's most critical

and controversial elements. As such, the essays engage the previous history of Pinter criticism surrounding *The Dumb Waiter*, as well as evolving theoretical, cultural and political contexts for the play.

Given its place in the British dramatic canon, *The Dumb Waiter* is regularly encountered by students as a literary as well as a dramatic text. Accordingly, several of the essays included here analyze the play within a comparative disciplinary context, that is, from both a literary and theatrical perspective, making the book of equal significance to those encountering Pinter within the context of English Studies, drama, and performance. Another of the book's strengths lies in its accessibility. Pinter is not an easy dramatist in any sense of the word, yet each essay shares a commitment to exploring a host of challenging subjects in a language that is reader-friendly but never reductive. Thus, the book should prove of interest and value to a wide range of readers, from undergraduates to postgraduates and specialist researchers.

The order of the chapters follows a thematic trajectory. One of the enduring questions about the play refers to categorization. The first two essays by Naoko Yagi and Radmila Nastić explore *The Dumb Waiter* within the context of genre studies, exploring why it has been received as an example of Absurdist drama. Yagi offers a major reformulation of *The Dumb Waiter*'s relation to naturalism and realism by discussing Ben and Gus' room within the framework of the Anglo-European novel and Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope. Nastić, in contrast, emphasizes the play's metaphorical elements, analyzing the symbolic features of Ben and Gus' situation.

Another issue that has intrigued critics relates to categorization, but involves a further emphasis on periodization within Pinter's oeuvre. Employing a focus on the descriptive phrase "comedy of menace," Basil Chiasson takes on the question of what connects Pinter's many and diverse creative outputs. In contrast, David Pattie draws upon Chiasson's reconsideration of the play as a "comedy of menace," and in particular the point he makes about *The Dumb Waiter*'s visceral impact upon the spectator, in order to locate the play and its meanings within Bakhtin's concept of the Carnavalesque.

Catherine Rees and Michael Patterson address Pinter in terms of "popular" versus "high culture," using Varun Begley's recent provocative book *Pinter and the Twilight of Modernism* as a benchmark for interrogating the relation of *The Dumb Waiter* to

modernist and postmodernist impulses. Jonathan Shandell considers the question of political and personal victimization, addressing how the play constructs and interrogates the category of the “other.” Penelope Prentice picks up Shandell’s theme of “self” and “other” but broadens the discussion to an analysis of how Pinter’s biography impacts on his creative work, and she addresses *The Dumb Waiter* within the context of Pinter’s human rights activism. As someone who has known and worked closely with Pinter for many years, Prentice’s essay offers an unusual, personal insight into the beliefs and experiences that underlie Pinter’s artistic production and this play in particular.

The essays by Varun Begley and Juliet Rufford revisit the politics of *The Dumb Waiter*. Begley addresses the play within the context of critical theoretical debates among key New Left writers, as well as using Lacanian psychoanalysis to open the text. Via Giorgio Agamben’s theories of juridico-political orders, Rufford offers a compelling thesis about the politics of space, demonstrating the relevance of Agamben’s notion of “states of exception” to the politics of Pinter’s play. My contribution and that of Lance Norman re-engage the critical debate about how Pinter chooses to end the play. Norman considers the play’s ambiguities within the larger question of whether any regime of representation may signify precisely, while my analysis discusses *The Dumb Waiter* in terms of narrative and discourse theory, centering on Bakhtin’s theory of dialogics.

Finally, Marc E. Shaw and Anne Luyat analyze the idea of the *Pinteresque*, a shorthand description for Pinter’s work that often seems to say both everything and nothing much about a play. Shaw and Luyat evaluate in depth some of the ideas that critics have in mind when they use this term to describe a play, either by Pinter or others. Luyat’s essay illuminates how qualities deemed *Pinteresque* have a literary history that pre-dates Pinter, with elements of the *Pinteresque* found in the work of writers as diverse as T.S. Eliot and Ernest Hemingway. Shaw takes the debate in another direction by demonstrating the range of Pinter’s influence, revealing elements of the *Pinteresque* in the work of contemporary playwrights such as Patrick Marber and Mark Ravenhill.

Shaw’s essay is particularly apposite at the present time, as shortly before the publication of this book, Pinter died on December 24, 2008, and his continued “absent presence” in contemporary theater by virtue of his influence upon current and future playwrights may

gain increasing importance in how we understand Pinter's own plays. As *The Times*' obituary stated, Pinter, "arguably the most important and original playwright" of the twentieth century, holds a unique place among contemporary dramatists, for "[f]ew, if any, have so lastingly and profoundly influenced fellow playwrights -- not just in Britain but also beyond (1, 2).

The essays in this collection offer a small tribute to Pinter's dramatic legacy. As the person who has been privileged to facilitate the rich dialogue among the contributors featured here, what I hope will emerge from this book is a flow of fresh insights into and questions about one of the seminal texts of modern British theater, and that the dialogue here engendered will spur future revivals of *The Dumb Waiter*.

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Notes

¹ For a history of its production, see <http://www.haroldpinter.org/home/index.shtml>.

² <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/arts/4338082.stm>. (Consulted 18 August 2008).

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A Realist-Naturalist Pinter Revisited

Naoko Yagi

1. Introduction

In an interview in 1966, when Harold Pinter described himself as “not a very inventive writer;” he had Brechtian “technical devices” in mind, stating, “I can’t use the stage the way he [Brecht] does.” Moreover, Pinter admitted in a rather self-deprecating manner that such “devices” hardly featured in his work since he lacked “that kind of imagination” (1966, 20). We might put it differently today: the power of Pinter’s imagination lay, as it still does, in what we would call the “room.” While imagination of *this* kind cannot but be obvious to any readers of Pinter’s plays from *The Room* to *Celebration*, it often seems, in Pinter criticism, that discussion of a Pinteresque room stops short of going beyond the confines of *mise en scène*, by which I mean here simply the room as being specified in a play-text and/or as a three-dimensional structure on the stage. If we choose to put Pinter’s “room” in a larger context of Anglo-European literature, what we find is a striking parallel between the manner in which Pinter takes advantage of the vast potential of a “room” on stage and how the concept of “room” is defined, developed, and manipulated in the realist and naturalist novel. In this respect, *The Dumb Waiter* proves one of the most pertinent of all Pinter’s plays, in whose stage directions “rooms” are specified fairly clearly, including words describing furniture and props.

Mainly for its hard-to-ignore spookiness and untidiness, the room in *The Dumb Waiter* is visibly “naturalistic;” on the other hand, it retains a kind of “realist” temperance, or even elegance, which comes primarily from the quasi-symmetrical arrangement of the beds and the doors with the “dumb waiter” as a centerpiece. Visual aspects, of course, are only part of the story; more importantly, the room in *The Dumb Waiter* functions so that it allows the characters Ben and Gus to talk and behave as if they are, albeit in a rather contrived sense of the term, descended from characters of the realist and naturalist novel. This essay examines ways in which Ben and Gus may be regarded as

such figures. The discussion will center on Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of "chronotope," which has much to do with his theory of literary genre, and the way chronotope explains the "room" as we see it in Pinter's *Dumb Waiter*. Granted that chronotope, according to Bakhtin, is essentially a means of our reading and analyzing novels,¹ the argument that follows will draw upon such comments on his theory as Sue Vice's contention that the term "[chronotope] can be used to analyse local effects in a text, such as the asylum in *Jane Eyre*; it can be used to discuss a whole genre, such as film noir" (207-08). If chronotope helps a film scholar in her/his critique of a cinematic genre, it should be just as viable for us to turn to chronotope as we read a Pinter play and consider its generic underpinning.

Since *The Dumb Waiter* premiered in 1960, a quick look at the Theater of the Absurd may be in order. Critics and scholars in the 1960s writing about the then newly-minted plays by Pinter referred to the Theater of the Absurd "with great frequency" (King 247), which nevertheless was far from a cut-and-dried phase in the critical trend. Virtually in competition for the best variation on the theme by Martin Esslin, every critic and scholar concerned had her or his own version of the Absurd in mind. Moreover, already during the 1960s, Esslin started revising his initial definition of the Theater of the Absurd, which Pinter critics and scholars promptly took up for yet further analysis.² By the late 1960s, the discussion had become as much about how Pinter's plays questioned the validity of critics/scholars' desire to define the Absurd as about how his plays epitomized whatever a critic/scholar believed was the Absurd.

Despite Arnold P. Hinchliffe's recognition, as early as 1967, that for Pinter "the plays are their own justification" (37), many critics and scholars eagerly measured their analyses of Pinter's plays against what someone had already called the Absurd, and this certainly pushed Pinter criticism forward. Of particular relevance to the discussion of *The Dumb Waiter* is a passage in Katherine H. Burkman's comprehensive review of Esslin and the Theater of the Absurd:

The point is that Pinter's characters lead him continually to the very rhythmic structures which have informed great dramatic works since drama's origin in primitive ritual. Rather than focusing on lack of communication, Pinter concerns himself with the way people fail to avoid that communication from which they wish to run. While other absurdist writers often allow their characters to succeed in avoiding communication, Pinter's

dramatic world is one of action in the old Aristotelian sense of the word. (8)

If Burkman's conclusion still holds, then a closer analysis of her premise is required, an examination which will affirm that Aristotelian "action" is intrinsic to a Pinter play like *The Dumb Waiter*.

2. Birmingham

"In the literary artistic chronotope," writes Bakhtin, "spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole" (1981, 84). We might attempt an analysis of *The Dumb Waiter* not by plunging into the "room" first and then starting to think about it, but by gradually zooming in for a more *careful* look at the function of the "room." As Michael Billington puts it, *The Dumb Waiter* is "a kind of *Godot* in Birmingham" (89). If, for the sake of argument, we simply take the Pinter play as a post-*Waiting for Godot* piece, what indeed makes it possible that Ben and Gus find themselves in Birmingham, a city which, in the strongly London-oriented geography of the Pinter canon, would easily be regarded as an anomaly and therefore some kind of marker?

Before trying to answer the question, we should remember that the place-name Birmingham does not always appear in the same mode in published texts of the play. The Samuel French edition of *The Dumb Waiter*, for example, refers to Birmingham in the stage directions (1), whereas in the Faber edition of the play, it is not until Ben utters the place-name in one of his lines that we are informed of his and Gus's "room" being located in Birmingham (121). In the latter version, we can either trust what the characters say at face value or interpret their mentioning the place-name as yet another of the factors that contribute to the here-and-nowhere ambience that permeates the play; our speculation is doubly "enhanced" by Gus's reaction to Ben revealing their alleged whereabouts:

GUS. What town are we in? I've forgotten.

BEN. I've told you. Birmingham.

GUS. Go on!

He looks with interest about the room.

That's in the Midlands. The second biggest city in Great Britain.

I'd never have guessed. (121)

While we may or may not be ready to take the place-name as part of the “Absurdist” aspect of *The Dumb Waiter*, the fact remains that, so long as it is mentioned by the characters, “Birmingham” persists in one way or another in our interpretation of the play.

Then, why does it have to be Birmingham? In “[t]he petty-bourgeois provincial town with its stagnant life,” which proves “a very widespread setting for nineteenth-century novels (both before and after Flaubert),” everything comes in what Bakhtin calls “cyclical” patterns (1981, 247); time in the provincial town, being “viscous and sticky” and only “drag[ging] itself slowly through space,” will not “serve as the primary time of the novel” (1981, 248). When we start paying attention to “Birmingham” in *The Dumb Waiter*, what the city of Birmingham was like in the real world of the late 1950s is not much of an issue; rather, it is the stereotypical image of a city “in the Midlands,” as quickly pointed out by Gus, that does the trick for the play. We take it that Ben and Gus are in Birmingham only temporarily; still, the kind of routine that the characters are stuck with and the place-name Birmingham seem to complement each other.³ Put differently, while “Birmingham” in *The Dumb Waiter* may indeed emanate what Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson call “a certain chronotopic aura” (374), it would be more precise for us to say that the aura of Birmingham is highly conspicuous by its very absence from the play:

A particular sort of event, or a particular sort of place that usually serves as the locale for such an event, acquires a certain chronotopic aura, which is in fact the “echo of the generic whole” in which the given event typically appears. [. . .] When these events or locales are used in other genres, they may “remember” their past and carry the aura of the earlier genre into the new one; indeed, they may be incorporated for this very reason. (Morson and Emerson 374)

The paradox is crucial since it concerns what Bakhtin calls the “ancillary” (1981, 248) nature of the provincial town. Ben and Gus talk about Tottenham, where they may or may not have been, which indicates that the pull of the London area should not be ignored either by the characters themselves or by the reader/audience. In discussing Pinteresque “topography,” Peter Raby draws our attention to Pinter’s theatrical work and its “power to have resonance for other places and cultures” (63); for example, “London contains the controlling images in *The Birthday Party*” precisely because the play is set not in London

but in one of the “accessible seaside towns” (63-4). We certainly detect resonance of that kind in *The Dumb Waiter*. The difference is that the narrative structure of this particular play has less to do with any topographical “center,” in this case London, than with something that for Ben and Gus is palpably and yet inexplicably ubiquitous. The above-mentioned routine is totally and irrevocably broken at the end of the play, which, to come back to Bakhtin, we may interpret as a proof of that “something” having followed a “noncyclical temporal [sequence]” (1981, 248). “Birmingham” in the Pinter play will always have been “ancillary,” whether for the benefit or the demise of Gus and Ben.

3. The Bed-Sitting Room

Written in the same period and with only two speaking characters in it, *A Slight Ache* is often paired with *The Dumb Waiter* in Pinter criticism, which in fact betrays a curiously semiotic difference between the two plays. We might remember that *A Slight Ache* first came into being as a piece for radio, a medium which encourages the listener to exercise her or his power of imagination;⁴ the sets for the stage version of the play include a “suggested” garden of Flora and Edward’s house with an unseen gate (153), indicating subtly but unmistakably a world beyond the immediate environment that is presented to the audience. By contrast, the “basement room” (113) in *The Dumb Waiter* precludes any possibility for a view and, thus, underlines the kind of self-sufficiency which, for better or worse, a walled-in space has to offer:

GUS: [. . .] I wouldn’t mind if you had a window, you could see what it looked like outside.

BEN: What do you want a window for?

GUS: Well, I like to have a bit of a view, Ben. It whiles away the time. (117-18)

Furthermore, unlike in *A Slight Ache*, in which different parts of the house are assembled together in a single space “with a minimum of scenery and props” (153), we find that in *The Dumb Waiter* the room is simply a room: the walls are reliably solid throughout the play and so are the doors, one to the kitchen and the lavatory and the other opening onto the passage; the contrast exists in the fact that, while tables and chairs will come and go in *A Slight Ache*, the two beds in *The Dumb Waiter* are as solid as the walls and

the doors. If we regard the layout of the house in *A Slight Ache* as being overtly theatrical, its counterpart in *The Dumb Waiter* can be described as being quaintly novelistic for its detailed and life-scale specifications. The play even goes so far as to have Gus mention a meter for the gas, when in fact the meter is invisible to the audience; in a similar vein, Gus spots a photograph of a cricket team on one of the walls, which, in a production, will possibly be too small for the audience to see and recognize.

As he describes the “space of parlors and salons (in the broad sense of the word)” in the works of novelists such as Stendhal and Balzac, Bakhtin states that “[f]rom a narrative and compositional point of view, this is the place where encounters occur (no longer emphasizing their specifically random nature as did meetings ‘on the road’ or ‘in an alien world’)” (1981, 246). For characters created by those novelists, rooms shall either be a challenge or a protection, or both. Gina’s extraordinary “encounter” with the Prince in *The Charterhouse of Parma*, for example, would hardly have left such an indelible mark on the reader if the characters had taken less advantage of the rooms in question:

A thunderbolt falling in that salon would not have produced as much astonishment. In the twinkling of an eye, and as the Prince advanced, a silence of amazement fell in these gay and noisy rooms; all eyes, fixed upon the Prince, opened excessively wide. The courtiers seemed disconcerted; only the Duchess showed no surprise. [. . .]
[. . .]

As she returned through her salons, everyone supposed her at the height of royal favor, and she had just ventured what in the memory of man no one had dared in all of Parma. She made a sign to the Count, who left his whist table and followed her into a little salon that was lighted but empty.

“You have done a very bold thing,” he told her [. . .]. (Stendhal 122-23)

The introduction, at this point, of the “little salon” is no less crucial: Gina and Mosca need a moment to themselves.

How does all this relate to the room in *The Dumb Waiter*? Gus and Ben are thrown into spatiotemporal circumstances that allow no leeway for any space *behind the scene* where the two characters could have a sojourn, and this contrasts with the characters and their situations in other Pinter plays from roughly the same period, for

example, *The Collection* and *The Lover*. In other words, Gus and Ben's room adds a new meaning to the "full significance" (1981, 246) of the parlor/salon for the very fact that the two characters are not supposed to leave the room unattended: as Gus puts it, "[. . .] we've got to be on tap though, haven't we? You can't move out of the house in case a call comes" (118). Since the call does not come until towards the end of the play, it is inevitable that the room becomes precisely the "place where the major spatial and temporal sequences of the novel [in this case, the play] intersect" (1981, 246).

True, one of the doors will take the characters to the kitchen and the lavatory, but it is highly indicative that those off-the-scene spaces do not mean anything other than for the characters to tend to specific businesses, as it were, for a brief moment at a time. Radmila Nastić in "*The Dumb Waiter: Realism and Metaphor*" points to Gus's penultimate exit through that door, and not his final exit, as the turning point in the whole play; nevertheless, it may be asserted that Gus's penultimate exit, a trip to the lavatory, has a much more practical bent, that it initiates one of the most strategic sound effects in *The Dumb Waiter*: the lavatory does not flush instantly, but it certainly will much later, or, to be more precise, after Gus's final exit through the door in question and before his re-entrance through the other door. In short, while "[t]he anxieties of the visible room are heightened by the intimation of barbarity beyond the door" (Begley 92), we might say also that the effect of the barbarity/lavatory amounts, at best, to what Varun Begley calls "peripheral humor of an absurdist variety" (92). *The Dumb Waiter* is structured so as to make the room on stage the only space where, if we turn to Bakhtin again, "dialogues happen" [emphasis omitted (1981, 246)].

At the same time, considering that "dialogues" here refer to what "reveal[s] the character, 'ideas' and 'passions' of the heroes" (1981, 246), a further twist to the Bakhtinian parlor/salon is evident in *The Dumb Waiter*. Whatever their ideas or passions may be, Gus and Ben are, after all, typically Pinteresque characters: the lines they utter are never descriptive enough for the reader/audience to grasp exactly what they are talking about. Gus, for example, goes through a soul-searching moment over the "girl," which does not mean that the actual lines he utters give anything away in terms of precisely why the girl in question ended up in the state that he keeps calling a "mess:"

GUS. I was just thinking about that girl, that's all. [. . .] She wasn't much to look at, I know, but still. It was a mess though, wasn't it? What a mess. Honest, I can't remember a mess like that

one. They don't seem to hold together like men, women. A looser texture, like. Didn't she spread, eh? She didn't half spread. Kaw! [...]. (130-31)

Judging from his other lines in the play, it is more likely that Gus himself had no background knowledge about the girl. If, as far as Bakhtin is concerned, the gist of the space of parlors/salons should be found in the “weaving of historical and socio-public events together with the personal and even deeply private side of life” (1981, 247), we might assert that in *The Dumb Waiter* neither “events” nor the equivalents of the “secrets of the boudoir” (1981, 247) will ever produce the kind of lucidity which we would certainly expect from parlors/salons in a Stendhal novel. Lucidity in Pinter is of a different nature; “secrets” are presented explicitly on stage, while it is just as clear that they shall remain indecipherable even to the characters themselves till the very end of the play.

However, in *Dostoyevsky after Bakhtin*, Malcolm V. Jones reminds us: “the association of the chronotope of the salon with the novel of manners does not entail that every scene set in a salon is a pure example of this type” (118). The Bakhtinian parlor/salon shows a rich variation for good reason, which I will explore further in my examination of the Pinter-Dostoyevsky connection.

4. The Threshold

While being a Bakhtinian parlor/salon, Gus and Ben's room in *The Dumb Waiter* also stands out among other Pinter “rooms,” for example, those in *The Caretaker* and *The Homecoming*, in that it embodies what Bakhtin calls the “chronotope of threshold” [emphasis omitted] (1981, 248). According to Bakhtin, it is the kind of chronotope that we find in Dostoyevsky's work but not in Tolstoy's (1981, 249-50). Crucially, Bakhtin uses the term “threshold” so that it refers to what is “always metaphorical and symbolic” (1981, 248); he elaborates on this distinction in the following passage:

The interior spaces of a house or of rooms, spaces distant from the boundaries, that is from the threshold, are almost never used by Dostoevsky, except of course for scenes of scandals and decrownings, when interior space (the drawing room or the hall) becomes a substitute for the public square. Dostoevsky “leaps over” all that is comfortably habitable, well-arranged and stable,

all that is far from the threshold, because the life that he portrays does not take place in that sort of place. (1984, 169)

For a blatant example of Bakhtin's definition of "threshold," we may turn to chapter 7 in part 1 of *Crime and Punishment*, in which there is a paragraph that describes Raskolnikov making his escape from the scene of the crimes; here, the staircase in its entirety becomes a "threshold:"

He listened for a long time. Somewhere far away, down at the foot of the stairs, probably somewhere in the entrance-way, two voices were shouting loudly and shrilly, arguing and exchanging abuse. "What's up with them? ..." Patiently, he waited. At last the hubbub stopped without warning, as though cut short; they had gone their separate ways. He was on the point of making his exit when suddenly a door opened with a noise on the floor below, and someone began to go downstairs humming some tune or other. "What a noise they're all making!" was the thought that flashed across his mind. He closed the door again, and waited. At last all sounds had died away, there was not a soul about. He was just about to put his foot on the staircase when he suddenly heard more footsteps, someone else's this time. (Dostoyevsky 100)

In *The Dumb Waiter*, the two doors that we see on the stage function quite differently from each other; while one looks innocuously domestic, the other connects the room to what we might call the Great Unknown. It is, of course, through/under this other door that someone pushes the mysterious envelope. The layout of the stage-set is such that, apart from the door itself, no buffer, not even a tiny entrance hall, should be allowed between the characters' room and the Great Unknown; this, in effect, turns Gus and Ben's space, the bed-sitting room, into a room-cum-threshold. Moreover, the intrusiveness of the serving hatch not only enhances the "threshold" effect, but also adds a highly idiosyncratic and even magical flourish to it; since neither Gus nor Ben is aware of the existence of the serving hatch until, halfway through the play, it cuts abruptly into the characters' space with a noisy fanfare, which is frightening enough for Gus and Ben to "*grab their revolvers*" (131). Indeed, that is precisely the moment when the three-dimensional space on the stage starts looking more like a threshold than the characters' bed-sitting room. The balance between the two, in other words, is lost forever.

A Slight Ache, as already demonstrated, is a play which calls for a visually “theatrical” stage; nonetheless, if we concentrate on the temporal aspects of *A Slight Ache* and *The Dumb Waiter*, it turns out that the visually novelistic *Dumb Waiter* is, to borrow Martin S. Regal’s expression, temporally the “more purely theatrical” (30) of the two. As Regal reminds us, “[o]ther than knowing that the action of *The Dumb Waiter* takes place on a Friday, we have no other specific references to the time of day” (30), while, “[i]n *A Slight Ache*, we know a good deal more” (30). Curiously enough, the paucity of temporal information in *The Dumb Waiter* comes hand in hand with what almost seems like a compulsive repetition of the very word “time” in Gus’s and Ben’s lines, the most indicative of such lines being Ben’s “Time’s getting on,” which we hear at the beginning and also towards the end of the play (115, 142).

Among others, Galin Tihanov draws our attention to the fact that, despite what it implies terminologically, Bakhtin’s notion of chronotope puts more emphasis on time than on space (156). To Bakhtin, time in the world of the “threshold” can never be straitjacketed in such a way that “people live a biographical life” (1984,169). If typical Tolstoy characters, who more likely than not will reside away from the “threshold” anyway, are “born, [. . .] pass through childhood and youth, [. . .] marry, give birth to children, [and] die,” what we find in the works of Dostoyevsky are “threshold”-oriented characters for whom “the only time possible is *crisis time*” (1984, 169). In other words, as Morson puts it, “Dostoevsky tended to see occasional critical moments allowing for major turning points” (157), whereas “Tolstoy envisaged each ordinary moment as having a small measure of freedom” (157). When it comes to the temporal structure of *The Dumb Waiter*, in what sense is it distinctively modeled on Dostoyevsky’s novels rather than on Tolstoy’s?

According to Bakhtin, “time [for a Dostoyevskian character] is essentially instantaneous; it is as if it has no duration and falls out of the normal course of biographical time” (1981, 248). *The Dumb Waiter*, while laden with “crisis events” (1981, 248), certainly hints at what Bakhtin calls the “normal” course of time; whenever Gus looks back upon some aspects of the routine, which he could have taken for granted, or as part of his and Ben’s job, it looks as though Gus is on the verge of revealing a fragment of his and Ben’s “biographical life;” for example:

GUS. Why did you stop the car this morning, in the middle of that road?

BEN. (*lowering the paper*). I thought you were asleep.

GUS. I was, but I woke up when you stopped. You did stop, didn't you?

Pause.

In the middle of that road. It was still dark, don't you remember? I looked out. It was all misty. I thought perhaps you wanted to kip, but you were sitting up dead straight, like you were waiting for something.

BEN. I wasn't waiting for anything. (119-20)

The trouble is that Ben reacts promptly in a highly dismissive manner every time Gus starts uttering lines of this kind. Overall, Ben is responsible for negating his and Gus ever living a reasonably "normal" biographical time, which goes to show that, with or without any particular "event," the Bakhtinian "crisis time" runs through *The Dumb Waiter* like an undercurrent.

If we find the "events" in the play hilarious and stupefying, it should be noted that anything less acute or less aggressive would hardly have the chance of making a mark as a "crisis event." The most demonstrative, as it were, of all the necessarily over-the-top "events" is the sequence involving the serving hatch with orders for food. Here, time could not be more "instantaneous" for the two characters; significantly, doubts that Gus harbors about the authenticity of the "café" are quickly brushed aside by Ben and the characters almost voluntarily put themselves in a position which is as crisis-oriented as it is ludicrous: Ben and Gus try to comply with each written order on the spot, that is, by giving up the food in their possession.

Nastic suggests that plays like *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Birthday Party* would fall under the general heading of what she calls the Theater of the Threshold, a bold but well-founded twist to the Theater of the Absurd. Therefore, the Theater of the Threshold might be seen in a much simpler manner, that is, without overtly and strongly anthropological connotations on which Nastic's nomenclature mainly rests. In so far as the Bakhtinian "threshold" proves to be part and parcel of *The Dumb Waiter*, I would regard the play as one of the finest of all the would-be examples of the Theater of the Threshold.

5. Gus's Re-entrance

If Ben and Gus's "room," in what at least according to Ben is Birmingham, indeed qualifies as a Bakhtinian parlor/salon while

serving as its “threshold,” at the same time, we find that the dynamic of the chronotope is geared up to a distortedly “high” level in the final two pages of the play-text. What triggers the ultimate surprise, however, is not the “call” itself. The two characters have been waiting for the instructions since the beginning of the play, as have the reader/audience; Ben may look ridiculous with the speaking tube in his hand, but his receiving the call is a logical consequence of the narrative. It is, then, only *after* Ben “*hangs the tube up*” (148) that we start sensing the hidden side of the chronotope in *The Dumb Waiter*: Ben apparently expects Gus to join him shortly, and Gus, who is supposed to be in the kitchen, fails to reappear (148).

This prompts us, for the first time since the play began, to have a better, if still innocent, look at the door that leads to the kitchen and the lavatory. In other words, our attention is inadvertently drawn to the invisible area that cannot but be domestic and banal, or so we have been led to believe in the course of the play. A couple of other cues follow immediately. First, with the sound of the lavatory flushing, we might say that our ears are also tuned to what may be happening beyond the door. Second, and more importantly, Ben, whom we would think is getting impatient, makes a distinctive move towards the invisible area: as the stage directions put it, he “*goes quickly to the door, left*” (148). The “singular” nature of Ben and Gus’s bed-sitting room notwithstanding, it looks as though the characters, Gus first and then Ben, have rediscovered, for what it is worth, the hitherto-neglected *de facto* “little salon.”

Ben, nevertheless, stops short of going into the “little salon;” before he has the chance of doing so, Gus re-enters the bed-sitting room. Had Ben entered the “little salon,” this would have allowed the reader/audience to put their chronotopic perspective back in order, by which I mean the characters’ bed-sitting room would once again have assumed the unique status of a room-cum-threshold. In fact, the peculiar nature of Gus’s reappearance, that he comes in through the *other* door on stage right (149), begs the question: Is the “little salon” somehow connected to the Great Unknown, bypassing the bed-sitting room? Otherwise, how did Gus manage to “transport” himself from the one to the other so that he would make his re-entrance through the very door which, we might remember, has a lot to answer for regarding the “mysterious envelope” incident?⁵ Are we to conclude that Gus is the Great Unknown made manifest, even though he was in the bed-sitting room with Ben until shortly before the “call” came? As the two characters “*stare at each other*” (149), the chronotope in *The Dumb Waiter* nearly reaches the breaking point: having *acted out* its

due, Gus and Ben's "room" finally begins to show the bare bones of what it inevitably amounts to, namely, a three-dimensional structure on the stage. Put differently, this particular "room" will not decidedly come to fruition in the way parlors/salons and thresholds are perfected in the realist and naturalist novel.

"[Pinter's] characters," writes Bert O. States, "behave like little authors, or inventors of fiction, in their own rite (or game)" (117); the "pun" rite-right, brings to our attention the kind of "reality on Pinter's stage" that "seems so often to be an uncanny extension of the ritual of performance itself" (117). Nastić, in a similar vein, discerns "traces of dislocated myths" in Pinter's plays, myths which are "several times removed from the originals." I find it crucial that, unlike, for example, *The Lover* and *The Collection*, in which characters *knowingly* "perform" through every single line they utter, *The Dumb Waiter* becomes a game's game only when Gus fails to come out of the kitchen. Drawing a parallel between the characters' "room" in *The Dumb Waiter* and some of the typical rooms in the realist and naturalist novel leads us to the assertion that, if they are to start "behaving like little authors," Gus and Ben have no choice but to test and feel the limits of the very chronotope of which they have been part. This accounts for Gus making his final entrance through the other door -- a chronotopic improbability. What, then, completes Ben and Gus's "room?"

In order to determine an answer, the interview that Pinter gave in 1966 is most relevant, for it reveals an early Pinter with a penchant for using the "curtain" in a production: "I *am* a very traditional playwright -- for instance I insist on having a curtain in all my plays. I write curtain lines for that reason! And even when directors like Peter Hall or Claude Régy in Paris want to do away with them, I insist they stay" (36-7). *The Dumb Waiter* may be regarded as an acutely curtain-oriented play. In a sense, Gus and Ben start *acting* like two actors on the stage floor the moment Gus re-enters the bed-sitting room, which is to say that, facing each other, the characters begin to look more like performers who are ready for the curtain and waiting for it to drop. This is more than a mere "self-conscious" tableau. The curtain duly comes down, saving Ben and Gus from ever having to explain, either in deeds or words, the chronotopic improbability that the reader/audience have just witnessed.

Naoko Yagi, Waseda University

Notes

¹ For Bakhtin's ambivalent attitude to drama, see his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 33-4 and Tihanov, 54.

² For Esslin's emendations, see, for example, Hinchliffe, 30-31 and Hollis, 4.

³ Birmingham in the real world of the 2000s is a far cry from the mid-twentieth-century stereotype. Gus's comments on the city would bring an additional edge to any new production of the play.

⁴ I thank Mary Brewer for reminding me of the difference in origin between *A Slight Ache* and *The Dumb Waiter*.

⁵ We never witness Ben and Gus moving into the room; while the characters could not possibly have entered the room in the first place without using the door on stage right, the fact remains that the curtain goes up to show Gus and Ben already stuck in the parlor/salon. In this way, the mystery beyond that particular door is kept unspoilt until Gus's re-entrance.

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The Dumb Waiter: Realism and Metaphor

Radmila Nastić

Naoko Yagi's interpretation of Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* as a realist-naturalist play comparable to the masterpieces of European realist fiction is a very interesting approach resulting in a subtle analysis of one aspect of Pinter's art. However, I would like to argue that from the undoubted realism of the setting springs a metaphoric quality in the play comparable to Pinter's other plays of the same period, as well as to some of the more recent productions of his work. Realistic presentation, writes Martin Esslin, awakens the sense of the mysterious (1982, 10), and this, I will add, gives rise to diverse metaphoric meanings. Though it may seem contradictory, the metaphoric quality of the play's setting contributes to the portrayal of the realistic context of the play, especially regarding "the job" the two characters perform. This view is common to many Pinter scholars; for example, Michael Billington in his biography of Pinter points out that "the play has a metaphorical openness," (89) while Bill Naismith is among those interpreters of Pinter who think that the author's almost photographic realism of the setting in the early plays has a larger significance (4-5). He also points out that Pinter's persistent obsession with the image of the room could not be accidental, and, in this essay, I will try to define the metaphoric potential of this chronotope in addition to its realistic significance.

By focusing on the chronotope of the room, Yagi draws a parallel between Pinter's play and Bakhtin's consideration of European novels with provincial settings where sitting-rooms and salons correspond to Pinter's rooms, both being chronotopes used to analyze local effects in a text. For example, the room in Dostoevsky's novels relates to the threshold leading to the outside world, represented by the door, the staircase, and the hall, and this threshold points towards drama and crisis. In *The Dumb Waiter*, Yagi identifies the existence of "the room-cum-threshold" in Birmingham, a

stereotypical city in the Midlands, and identifies it as the structuring element of the realistic basis of the play.

I wish to focus on the symbolism of the threshold first presented in Van Gennep's *Rites of Passage* (1909), developed by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), and applied to theater in Victor Turner's essay "Are There Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual, and Drama?" (1980). All three authors point to the social significance of theater that dramatizes the changed social status of the character. The notion of the threshold appears in the triad called by Campbell *departure-initiation-return*, or by Turner *separation-passage-reunion*, Turner's threshold being represented in dramatic terms. Turner underlines the fact that theater has developed from ritual and is still inherent in socio-cultural life itself, while society in moments of crisis becomes highly dramatic: some of its rituals and ceremonies (maskers, clowns, gender reversals...) contain within themselves a liminal phase, which provides a stage for unique structures of experience detached from everyday life and characterized by the presence of "ambiguous ideas, monstrous images, sacred symbols, ordeals, humiliations, esoteric and paradoxical instructions" (65). This limen, or threshold, dramatized in such rituals is "a no-man's land betwixt-and-between the structural past and the structural future," often containing symbols expressive of ambiguous identity, combinations of elements drawn from nature and culture, some of them representing "both birth and death, womb and tomb, such as caverns or camps, secluded from everyday eyes" (Ibid. 65).

2. Theater of the Threshold

Pinter's rooms are not far from Turner's description: the room in *The Dumb Waiter* is the "womb and the tomb," the setting of a concise drama enacting human life which, in Campbell's definition, is a movement "from the tomb of the womb, to the womb of the tomb" (20). Turner's argument is that social experience is frequently the source of stage drama in which group experiences are "replicated, dismembered, refashioned, and...made meaningful," even when "in declining cultures, the meaning is that there is no meaning as in some Existential Theater" (66). The link that I find between the Existential Theater and Pinter's early plays including *The Dumb Waiter* is contained in the discrepancy between the apparently realistic setting and dialogue, and the sudden emergence of the bizarre and the

grotesque that deconstruct its realism: for instance, the weird orders coming down the dumb waiter have a puzzling effect on Gus who is in the stage of threshold crossing, while for his partner they are merely normal coded messages with business instructions.

Turner's elaboration of ritualized threshold further illuminates Campbell's theory of ritual initiation, especially his description of the stage of threshold crossing, or the passage. In the stage of passage, writes Campbell, the subject of initiation crosses the threshold of experience, entering into temporal and spatial ambiguity, a stage equivalent to Turner's no-man's-land of dreamlike experience with a healing or "redressive" effect. Reunion represents return to the new, favourable position in society. The passage usually concerns a change of setting, but it can be a simple door opening, or ritual threshold crossing. Campbell's and Turner's explanations of the notions of departure, threshold, initiation and return throw more light on Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* and on some of his other early plays, especially in relation to the nature of the social setting, Ben and Gus's "job" as hit-men, and the invisible HE who gives orders, this time in Birmingham.

The mythical "departure," according to Campbell, is initiated by a crisis in life and is in essence "the call to adventure" (a herald summons the character either to live or to die). This summons marks "the awakening of the self" (53). The mythical significance has its analogy in psychoanalytic terms: in Freud's interpretation all moments of anxiety reproduce the painful feelings of the subject's first separation from the mother, and reflects the crisis of birth. Conversely, all moments of separation and birth produce anxiety. The "herald or announcer" of the adventure is therefore often ugly and terrifying. The call to adventure may be refused, and the subject then loses the power of significant action, becoming a victim who needs to be saved (Ibid. 58). This is the case of Pinter's Stanley in *The Birthday Party*, who fails to leave as he originally suggested or to become anything; instead he becomes a scapegoat. But his refusal to depart could also be interpreted as a kind of resistance, for the metaphor of threshold is always charged with multiple meanings. In Stanley's case, the threshold is not crossed and the passage is arrested as *The Birthday Party* presents a mock rite of passage that is an implicit commentary on the modern age. In *The Dumb Waiter*, however, Gus becomes awakened, and he dares to ask questions.

The Birthday Party and *The Dumb Waiter* belong to the group of plays most closely associated with the European Existential Theater

or the Theater of the Absurd, which Turner considers to be “liminal,” or, we may say The Theater of the Threshold. The liminality of Pinter’s play is demonstrated through Gus’s repetitively questioning Ben about the job they have to carry out:

I want to ask you something (114)
 Oh, I wanted to ask you something (115)
 Well, I was going to ask you something (116)
 Eh, I’ve been meaning to ask you (119)
 Eh I’ve be meaning to ask you something (127).

Finally, Ben retorts:

What’s the matter with you? You’re always asking me questions.
 What’s the matter with you? You never used to ask me so many
 damn questions. What’s come over you? (127)

From this, we can conclude that, though Gus has always been inquisitive, he has never before asked so many questions in one day; thus, he now has suddenly reached a kind of awareness of the nature of the life he lives, in which things are “going down the drain.” (120) Even more dangerous is Gus’s wondering “Who it’ll be tonight” (127), repeated in the question “I thought perhaps you -- I mean -- have you got any idea -- who it’s going to be tonight?”(128) He has obviously been thinking about “the last one,” “that girl” (130). The previous girl’s murder started him thinking, and he wants to know “What do we do if it’s a girl?” (144). After Ben’s reply, “We do exactly the same,” “*Gus rises, and shivers*” (144). His exit through the door is not a physical crossing of the threshold, but rather a mental awakening which, to all appearances, will lead to his death. This exit or passage is more important than his final exit, for when he returns, he is “*deep in thought*,” “*He is troubled*,” “*He stands, thinking*” (166).

I wish here to make a case for a genre -- Theater of the Threshold -- that has a much longer history than is currently taken to be the case by most critics, including Yagi, few of whom have made connections between Pinter and pre-WWII drama, or indeed post-War theater of this type. To this end, I will introduce comparisons between Pinter’s *The Dumb Waiter* and plays by Eugene O’Neill, David Mamet and David Rabe.

Gus can be compared to O’Neill’s protagonist Yank in the 1922 play *The Hairy Ape*. In one scene, Yank “thinks,” and the author

mockingly compares him with Rodin's sculpture. Yank awakens to his humanity after a shock encounter with Mildred, who views him as a strange animal, not a human. This awakening is a starting point for his search for identity, the beginning of his dream of belonging that will be finally defeated in the zoo, where Yank has come to test his belonging to the world of nature and is crushed by a gorilla, and it becomes obvious that he belongs neither to nature nor to culture. Christopher Bigsby considers Yank's dreams "evidence of a resistant self" (51), which can be understood as an element of initiation. The play is an expression of O'Neill's poetics of stasis and of his concern "with society caught in a moment of transition" (Ibid. 50). This definition can be applied similarly to Pinter's plays.

In *The Hairy Ape*, asserts Bigsby, O'Neill dramatizes an individual alienated from himself and thus from his job -- "man as a machine." Once Yank comes to understand his position, he suffers. Yank is in effect an absurdist figure in Bigsby's interpretation, stranded in a world to which he cannot relate. For O'Neill's hero, as later for many of Samuel Beckett's characters, the "only moment of consonance is the moment of death" (Ibid. 62-3), and the same can be said of Pinter's Gus.¹

Before examining the connections to Mamet and Rabe, it is necessary to revisit Campbell's interpretation of the mythical passage (which is almost identical to Turner's description of ritualized threshold as a no-man's-land) in order to fully explain the central metaphor of the "threshold" in *The Dumb Waiter*. Crossing the first threshold leads the subject to regions of the unknown, which are but fields of the unconscious. As a matter of fact, instead of passing outwards, the subject goes inwards to be born again, which sometimes means physical death, as we can suppose will befall Gus as the outcome of his audacity. In one sense, we might say that the death resulting from refusal to further participate in crime is another form of existence. With the story of Buddha, Campbell illustrates one possible form of initiation -- illumination that dispels delusions and results in Nirvana, a case that may be applied to Aston in *The Caretaker*, who identifies himself with the figure of Buddha. Pinter's text, however, is ironic because Aston's peace of mind has been achieved by electric shocks.

The meaning of Campbell's mythical threshold-crossing, passage and initiation becomes fully evident upon the completion of the cycle with the final stage of "return," which is another threshold-

crossing. The unrealistic world of consciousness and imagination that propelled the subject on his quest (a world that in mythology is often called the “divine”) and the human world are actually one. The unreal world is the forgotten dimension of the world we know, but “from the standpoint of the waking consciousness,” it appears to be ineffective, and the outcome is the “divorce of opportunism from virtue and the resultant degeneration of human existence” (Campbell 188). This last, life-affirmative threshold is most difficult to accept as real. Why bring this world into the plane of reality when it seems easier to be practical? The potential mental traveler in modern times is frequently incapable of implementing the attained awareness to dismal reality, choosing physical death instead, as most probably is the case with the heroes in *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter*. The ending of *The Dumb Waiter*, with Gus facing Ben’s gun without physical resistance, implies that, although he has realized the criminal nature of his job, he will do nothing to persuade, stop, or fight Ben, and will rather die.

This last point in Campbell’s interpretation leads us to the nature of the “job” the characters are supposed to carry out and their different attitudes to the “job” (“reliable” and “slack”), as the central point of the plot. “The outlines of myths and tales are subject to damage and obscurity,” writes Campbell, who continues that “imported materials are revised to fit local landscapes, custom, or belief, and always suffer in the process” (213). We may say that in the plays of Pinter and the playwrights of his and younger generations there are traces of dislocated myths, several times removed from the originals, and therefore subjected to subsequent rationalizations. When Francis Gillen writes that modern society is able to “victimize the individual by fracturing the job and individual gain, separating them from any larger meaning” (146), his interpretation is not far from Campbell’s, and is well illustrated in *The Dumb Waiter*, but also in *The Birthday Party*, *The Caretaker* and *The Homecoming*. Martin Esslin, too, finds mythical elements in Pinter’s work and characterizes them as secularized myths -- “taken from the general, metaphorical, and ultimately poetic plane to a level of the specific and particular, from the contemplative detached embodiment of general truths to short-term calls for action on a practical, almost immediately topical level” (1993, 35).

Both the realistic and metaphorical qualities of *The Dumb Waiter* bring the play into relation with Pinter’s more recent dramas,

discovering its overt political nature, especially in developing the external context of the room. For example, those “upstairs” that give orders and are invisible in *The Dumb Waiter* can be seen in *Party Time*; the women who can be characterized as “looser texture” are present also in *Party Time*, *Ashes to Ashes*, *Mountain Language*, *One for the Road*, while executioners are more explicitly presented in *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language*.

A further connection to genre of the Theater of the Threshold can be seen also by comparing *The Dumb Waiter* with more recent theatrical examples, David Mamet’s *American Buffalo* and David Rabe’s *Those the River Keeps*, both of which demonstrate distorted rites of passage similar to those in Pinter’s plays. In Mamet’s play, two characters, Don and Teach, are in an over-stuffed junk-shop resembling the setting of Pinter’s *The Caretaker*. They plan to rob the flat of the coin dealer who has paid \$95 for a buffalo-head coin, steal the coin and sell it again for a higher price, believing that the man cheated them and that the nickel is worth much more. They treat this small crime as business, but never carry it out. There is an outburst of Teach’s hysterical violence instead, in which he smashes the shop and hurts the boy Bobby. Mamet explains that “The play is about the American ethic of business...About how we excuse all sorts of great and small betrayals and ethical compromises called business” (qtd in Bigsby 268). While trying to justify their crime under the guise of business, the characters refer to American values and myths -- the freedom of the individual “to embark on Any Fucking Course that he sees fit...In order to secure his honest chance to make a profit” (35). Bigsby comments that this is relevant to American political life

in which the Mafia had appropriated the American iconography of the family, the brutalities of Vietnam were defended in terms of recognizable American virtues and in the language whose deep ironies were apparently lost in those who uttered them, and the American President deployed the language of statesman, team leader and patriot to justify his abrogation of the oath of office and his disregard for the law. (263)

Bigsby further observes that Teach, the violent character, carries a gun as “deterrent,” similar to the justification of his country’s possession of weapons of mass destruction. The other character, Don, finally rejects Teach’s methods and gives preference to human solidarity in assisting the injured Bobby, but this gesture is too weak to neutralize

the preceding brutality, and cannot be considered as threshold-crossing. Bigsby draws a parallel between Mamet's play and Beckett in depicting what Yagi calls the chronotope of room, which is both naturalistic and metaphoric.

David Rabe wrote his play *Hurlyburly* in 1984, and then in 1995 he wrote *Those the River Keeps* to explain the character of Phil, an ex-hitman, who kills himself in the former play. In the preface to the latter play, Rabe writes how he found himself continuing to think about the characters after the production of *Hurlyburly* on Broadway. “[S]omething in the character of Phil,” writes Rabe, “refused to accept that his story had been told” (vii). The description of the setting of *Hurlyburly* brings us back to “the room:” “A somewhat spacious living room leading into an open kitchen makes up the entire first floor of the house” (165). Two men, Eddie and Mickey, share the apartment, which is sporadically visited by other characters, who are depressed and lost in varying degrees, and who are also would-be artists and drug-addicts “testing the parameters of the American Dream of oblivion” (275), as Eddie puts it.

One occasional visitor is Phil, a completely psychologically disturbed and violent man, with whose suicide and funeral the play ends. For a change, this play has female characters, the “looser texture,” to complicate the situation. They are generally not afraid to go out and come back, and most of them try to force the men into adult relationships leading to procreation and continuation of life. Phil comes out as particularly unsympathetic, but Rabe then went on to write *Those the River Keeps* to explain his character traits: Phil was married to a young woman who wanted to have a baby, but Phil tried desperately to dissuade her from bringing a child “into a terrible world” (63). The visit of his former partner, Sal, makes clear why: they used to be hired killers for the Mafia, and their last task together was to kill a young couple, rip their stomachs, and throw them into the river. Completely shaken, Phil leaves the job, spends some time in prison and is separated from his first wife and three children, certain that they hate him. The social context of the room in which the characters are stuck is described in *Hurlyburly* in much more detail than in the plays of Beckett, Pinter and Mamet. Donna, a girl who in the end joins the men in the room, expresses her delight to get off the streets, for “the desperation out there is paranormal” (*Hurlyburly* 360). Eddie has earlier in the play described the country they live in as a materialistic world without God, ruled by bureaucrats:

...the Ancients might have had some consolation from a view of the heavens as inhabited by this thoughtful, you know, meditative, maybe a trifle unpredictable and wrathful, but nevertheless UP THERE -- this divine onlooker -- we have bureaucrats who are devoted to the accumulation of incomprehensible data -- we have connoisseurs of graft and the three-martini lunch for whom we vote on the basis of their media consultants. The air's bad, the ozone's fucked, the water's poison, and into whose eyes do we find ourselves staring when we look for providence?... We have emptied out heavens and put oblivion in the hands of a bunch of aging insurance salesmen whose jobs are insecure. (306)

Not that he himself contributes anything to make the world better; on the contrary, in the words of Bonnie, one of three female characters, "it's no reason to be mean to your friends" (307). The still wider context is a world with a looming bomb: their own country is in possession of a "pure bomb," the neutron bomb that destroys people but leaves things intact. As a reflection, many other countries have bombs so that "not only are we headed for nuclear devastation if not by the Russians then by some goddamn primitive bunch of Middle Eastern mother fuckers" (183). As a consequence, Eddie is depressed and does not leave the room. Ultimately, the one who leaves it commits suicide.

3. Theater as Threshold Crossing

Ben and Gus are one pair among Pinter's many doubles that represent two sides of the same coin. In *The Dumb Waiter*, Pinter describes the beginning of their dissociation, which Francesca Coppa discusses through her analysis of humor in the play, especially what she calls "the grave, solemn, and sacred joke" (46). Into this category fall the stories Ben chooses to read aloud, all of which are to illustrate the stupidity or cruelty of his fellow beings, and thus absolve him of his crimes: the stories of the old man who crawled under a lorry and an eight-year old girl who killed a cat introduce potential victims who deserve what befalls them. As Coppa argues:

you might need to believe that if you are going to kill effectively: yours is not to question why. Someone else has selected your victim, and presumably for good reason. People are stupid and cruel: they deserve whatever comes to them. (47)

Gus's reactions are wrong from the start. This is evident because he has ceased laughing with Ben and thus siding with him, and his questions begin to undermine the legitimacy of their entire enterprise as hitmen. Gus, says Coppa, has failed the test that the joke structure creates; he is failing to bond with Ben at the expense of another, and thus finds himself "on the wrong end of Ben's gun"(49). Therefore, the ending of the play is a conventional moment of recognition and acceptance of the consequences of one's choice: there is a long silence, while Ben and Gus stare at each other. Ben's gun is pointed at Gus, and it appears that Gus is not surprised or frightened, as if he had expected it. (However, one must acknowledge that the scene could be given various interpretations in production).

Pinter's ending of the play brings us back to the realism of the implied social context of the play, and the nature of the "job" Ben and Gus are engaged in: in the world of the play, the job of a hired killer is taken to be an ordinary business affair in the modern world, but one of the killers refuses to go on with it. In this sense, Pinter's realism in *The Dumb Waiter* can be compared with Bakhtin's view of the 19th century novels of Stendhal, Balzac and Flaubert: their realism depicted the breaking up of the idyllic world view unfit for the new, capitalist world. On the other hand, the works of these authors did not idealize the capitalist world either, but revealed its inhumanity and the degradation of human relationships -- of love, family, friendship, creative work -- in a money-oriented society (Bakhtin 362). This realistic aspect of *The Dumb Waiter* is wonderfully illuminated in Yagi's essay.

In a way similar to the manner of the great 19th century realists, Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* (and his other plays) disrupts the idyllic world of an English comedy of manners (the artistic expression of the middle-class) within whose structure it is inscribed, and whose "tea and biscuit" manners it parodies in the scenes of Ben and Gus's bizarre attempts to light the kettle, make the tea, and provide a refreshing snack. In addition, there is a travesty of service symbolized by the bizarre hatch -- the dumb waiter (as dumb as the waiter-killer who receives its orders); there are, moreover, frequent references to "tea and biscuits" in the exchanges between Ben and Gus, but we learn finally that there is not going to be any tea, because this is a place with no tea and no biscuits, and without tea-time -- it is not benign at all. On the contrary, as the play draws to its close, we become increasingly aware of the malign nature of the HE who orders

murders, and who might stand for the driving force of society. Ben has known this all along, which Pinter signals through the different code systems the pair uses, especially evident in the scenes with the tube: Ben's response to the demands coming through the tube implies that he might have read the orders coming through the hatch in a different way from Gus, especially since his replies and reactions to the demands that Gus finds confusing appear to be cool and rational -- as something he has all along expected.

It would be wrong to confuse the realistic and the metaphoric planes of meaning as does Billington who, after characterizing Ben as the contract killer and a "good bourgeois citizen," concludes that "Gus is the man who questions the agreed system and who is ultimately destroyed by the quest for meaning" (92). I think that Esslin is closer to the truth when he cites correspondence between Pinter and Heidegger, "in whose philosophy the Cartesian definition of being -- *I think therefore I am* -- is replaced by *I fear nonbeing -- therefore I am* [emphasis mine] 35). Gus's, as indeed Yank's, Don's and Phil's refusal to proceed with criminal careers, are signs of their rejection of nonbeing and meaninglessness. I would like to repeat and underline my previous statement that Gus's comparative calm at the end of the play, when Ben's gun is pointed at him, signifies that he has refused to further partake in meaningless actions, albeit at the cost of his life.

The analogies drawn here between *The Dumb Waiter* and the work of modern and contemporary playwrights, such as O'Neill, Rabe, and Mamet, demonstrate the significance of Pinter's play combining both realistic and metaphoric elements. In particular, comparing the metaphors of the threshold in Pinter's play and in the other works discussed supports Turner's view that the very notion of experimental theater rests on performing crisis, which, I would add, in itself is a threshold-crossing. If we consider that for Turner experimental theater referred to the work of Grotowski, Beck, Malina, Chaikin, Schechner, and Brook, it becomes clear how Pinter's play lies half-way between traditional and experimental theaters. Further, because the word experimental derives from "experience," [its hypothetical Indo-European root being "*per*" (to dare, to try) while the related Latin "*experientia*" means an attempt, a trial], we can see how

The Dumb Waiter, like modern theater itself, represents a threshold-crossing in which *Homo Ludus* (playing man) is guided by liminality.

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Notes

¹ In O'Neill's *Beyond the Horizon*, we find a story resembling Pinter's plot in *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Caretaker* - a story of two brothers, representing two "warring instincts," one drawn to the practical world of the fact, the other to the world of imagination.

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(Re)Thinking Harold Pinter's Comedy of Menace

Basil Chiasson

1. Introduction

This essay argues for a re-thinking of the descriptive phrase “comedy of menace” as it relates to Harold Pinter’s work and that critical uses of the phrase and understandings of its dramatic articulations need to be expanded. By revisiting and clarifying first menace and then comedy, sundering the two terms only for purposes of review and interrogation, I hope to demonstrate how comedy and menace are necessarily bound up, and are thus mutually empowering.

The general sentiment is that Pinter’s earliest plays can be characterized as comedies of menace and, moreover, his later and more precisely political plays break with that aesthetic or tradition. To the contrary, in this essay, I argue that the comedy of menace aesthetic is dramatically crucial to the later political plays as well, albeit they have undergone a transmutation in the way of content, form, and effect. Despite and in fact because of such a transmutation, certain family resemblances between Pinter’s earliest and more recent plays come forth, inviting a re-imagining of Pinter’s “original” comedy of menace, and suggesting that this term can be stretched over the playwright’s entire oeuvre.

To utter the phrase comedy of menace is, for many, tantamount to saying Harold Pinter’s name. However, one of the several ways in which the conflation of Pinter’s name and comedy of menace can appear as ironic is that Pinter did not coin the phrase, nor was he the first playwright with whom it was associated.¹ The phrase and its corresponding dramatic aesthetic derives from David Campton’s 1958 play *The Lunatic View*, whose subtitle characterized the play as *A Comedy of Menace*. Yet, despite comedy of menace being Campton’s “birthright,” it was theater reviewer Irving Wardle who linked the phrase to Pinter in his glowing appraisal of the author’s 1958 play *The Birthday Party*.

From the article, itself entitled “Comedy of Menace,” here is Wardle’s most quoted description of Pinter’s aesthetic formulation:

Destiny handled in this way -- not as an austere exercise in classicism, but as an incurable disease which one forgets about most of the time and whose lethal reminders may take the form of a joke --is an apt dramatic motif for an age of conditioned behavior in which orthodox man is a willing collaborator in his own destruction. (33)

In portraying not Campton but Pinter as the bellwether of this emergent theatrical aesthetic, Wardle began to fashion Campton’s subtitle into a concept and a critical tool, which represents one of the more significant contributions to Pinter scholarship. It would seem, however, that Wardle’s assertion that Pinter delivers all things menacing in joke form gives short shrift to Pinter’s aestheticization of comedy. Wardle inspired a way of speaking about Pinter’s work that would have lasting consequences. For it was he who set the stage for Pinter criticism to routinely attend more to the menace than to the comedy, often discussing the two as if they were wholly separable. Walter Kerr suggested as much when nine years later he insisted that “‘Menacing’ is the adjective most often used to describe the events in a Pinter play” (14).

2. On Menace

Pinter himself once insisted that “Menace is everywhere. There is plenty of menace in this very room, at this very moment, you know. You can’t avoid it; you can’t get away from it” (qtd in Sakellaridou 1999, 97). Culling from myriad descriptions of what constitutes “menace,” I offer the following modest overview of how it figures in Pinter’s work. What is often referred to as “the infamous Pinter pause” (Batty 19) is the obvious and indeed best point of departure for any discussion of the elements commonly thought to represent, engender, or perpetrate menace in Pinter’s plays. Although its function throughout the playwright’s oeuvre is by no means uniform, the Pinter pause is typically analyzed on the basis of its dramatic virtues, which is to say that as a device it orients us to the performative character of speech more so than to the characters’ (and the author’s) desire or capacity to convey information.² The Pinter pause’s lack of lexical content is precisely what makes the device inextricable from and

instrumental to a great deal of the speech that issues forth from Pinter's characters. A principal weapon or tool in the arsenal of every Pinter character, the pause can function to either empower or dismantle statements and entire conversations, rendering speech suggestive, ironic, suspect, and so on. Facilitating the performative character of language, the pause only underscores how in Pinter's world "it is impossible to detach what is said from the way in which it is said" (Wardle 30) and, moreover, how language does not solely signify and thus "mean"-- it resonates deep within the body, in and across its many folds and thresholds.

On the one hand, "The alternation of language and pause in Pinter can define the nature of the communication" (Randisi 63).³ This is to say that the aesthetic structure of the pause and spoken words (affecting what might be thought of as a rhythm) can invite qualifications as to the kind of relationship that is shaping up between characters. On the other hand, it can appear that "The pause is the pause because of what has just happened in the minds and guts of the characters" (Gale 273) and that "intense [yet indiscernible] thought processes are continuing" (Esslin 220). This is exemplified by the following early exchange between Ben and Gus in *The Dumb Waiter*:

BEN: You know what you're trouble is?
GUS: What?
BEN: You haven't got any interests.
GUS: I've got interests.
BEN: What? Tell me one of you're interests.
Pause.
GUS: I've got interests. (118)

Even though the pause is devoid of linguistic meaning proper, it effectively produces another form of "meaning," which Alice N. Benston gestures towards in her assertion that "Throughout his work, Pinter has used pauses to make the point that the command of language is a question of power" (123).

Perhaps nearly as infamous as the Pinter pause is his strategic use of silence, which in the plays can function as yet another potent theatrical device, an equal if not heightened means to intersperse and thus punctuate the cascades of speech that Pinter's characters use as everyday weapons on each other. Consider, for example, how even before the first sounds and words issue forth in *The Dumb Waiter*, the play's stage directions posit *three* uses of silence, no doubt as a means

to generate a specific dramatic atmosphere (113). Although the silence's and the pause's respective duration and dramatic application are contingent to dramatic context⁴, both devices converge in so far as they can be implicated in producing identifiable dramatic "meaning" of the type Benston observes (the circulation or exchange of power as a theme), and also of the nature that pertains to creating specific kinds of experiences for audience members.

While Pinter's characters, furthermore, perform varying degrees of reticence or even silence, the impact of such linguistic "absences" can often derive much of its power from a forceful, even overwhelming loquacity. In conjunction with all else contributing to the tension mounting in the Birmingham basement flat in *The Dumb Waiter*, Gus's unrelenting questions and banter, for example, significantly provoke not only Ben but also the audience. The problem, however, is that the overly talkative characters present their interlocutors, and us, the audience, with a form of speech that is quite shy of truth claims. We are exposed to statements and actions/behavior that are contradictory as well as private anecdotes that are dragged up from the past, a semiology that forms a cryptic language whose many claims cannot be corroborated and judged for truth values. The dramatic irony that other theatrical experiences might offer audiences is, at best, fractured, and, at worst, wholly denied, replaced with something like that which Elin Diamond calls a "thickening atmosphere" (102).

Different, moreover, but not unrelated to both pause and silence is Pinter's absenting of character motivation as a means to create ambiguity. Particularly in his early comedies of menace, Pinter writes characters such that their inner lives and thought processes are obfuscated or even elided, which leaves the audience to speculate on and imagine what lies beneath and at least partially motivates the characters' highly performative and, thus, potentially meaningful demeanor and speech. This aesthetic feature has led critics such as Robert Conklin to characterize the structural composition of Pinter's plays and the experience of interfacing with them as akin to taking a Rorschach test (20).

Pinter's aestheticization of menace in his earlier plays involves, but is not limited to, other devices and mechanisms such as: the staging of situations of intrusion, intermingling aggression or even violence with verbal and physical comedy, speech that is riddled with non-sequiturs; characters who incessantly pose questions (on this

point, one curiously finds the appearance of no less than twenty-eight questions by the time Ben and Gus begin to quarrel over the basement toilet's deficient ballcock); characters who refuse to answer other characters' questions, or, similarly, characters who suffer auditory lapses. While this particular "disability" is perhaps most evident in *The Room's* landlord Mr. Kidd, it is arguable that the dumb waiter apparatus itself suffers from a similar affliction, its inexorable demands and general inattentiveness to the characters' protestations suggesting as much.

Menace in Pinter is also developed through a tenuous causal physics whereby onstage causes are either vaguely linked to or effectively sundered from effects,⁵ through characters that produce haphazard or continually faltering "narratives;" by a form of temporal mapping: characters whose vague histories infect their identities and relationships in the present, or those whose interactions in the present plunge them into the mental landscape of their pasts and, thus, foment social breakdown. Menace can also derive from characters having to negotiate the threat of change or, conversely, the threat of stasis (Klein 195); from problems of miscommunication that become menacing in their "circular effect" (Gale 20); from the creation of specific and overall regimes of body movement onstage (Counsell 155), which at various levels can signify and/or produce menace; and lastly, but certainly not exhaustively, menace can be engineered through allusions to Pinter's own work and to the work of others.

Consider how Ben and Gus are like shadowy cousins to Goldberg and McCann in *The Birthday Party*, and that both pair of intruders "allude to the threatening 'hit men' of the gangster film" and "to the comedy cross-talk acts of popular theater, film, and radio" (Peacock 65).⁶ More than a celebratory nod to his influences, Pinter's use of allusion can be said to function dramatically, doing so on the terms of a clichés' original context. In this way, Goldberg and McCann and Gus and Ben perform the same functions as the gangster film and music hall figures with which they are in dialogue: they represent comic and sinister characters, perhaps making us laugh or feel slightly nervous. Yet, Pinter's treatment of cliché goes somewhat further.

According to Gilles Deleuze, exceptional art only begins with "the catastrophic disruption of the actual or the clichéd" (2003, 100). That is, when cliché is invoked or re-instated -- only to be done some sort of aesthetic violence -- the audience can find itself confronted

with “the emergence of another world -- a non-representative, non-narrative, non-figurative world.”⁷ As spectators we might find a certain delight in being bombarded with questions, but the relative lack of control over what we observe (a control that music hall and much comedy affords or even depends upon) edges us from the realm of figuration (a realm that presents coherent and thus “readable” signs) ever-closer to the realm of figurality, where cognition and interpretation is troubled, often stymied.

In *The Dumb Waiter*, the hired killers’ banter appears stilted and illogical as it takes up, but never lingers on, varied topics ranging from morbid news tidbits, the deficient or degenerate state of their temporary accommodation, to how “these places” “change hands overnight” (132), and the possibility that their taskmaster “Wilson” has “probably only rented it” (129) -- yet these comic flourishes dissolve, without ever striving towards any identifiable goal such as a punch line or a conclusion. Rather, the play’s allusions to familiar types from popular film, theater, and radio create a space for the gradual production of anxiety and its emotional derivatives. Remarking on the use of cliché to solicit an investment that becomes variously difficult, Alice Rayner opines that “Pinter has a remarkable capacity to make his plays resist any attempts to re-form the dislocations of his plotting into a story. Yet he maintains a sufficient number of a story’s features to invite such reformations” (483). If anything, Ben’s demand to know “What’s going on here?” and Gus’s reply (preceded by a pause) “What do you mean?” (135) invite us to ask the very questions these characters advance, only on a number of levels that range from Pinter’s various dramatic revitalizations to the play’s production of certain interpretive and physiological-emotional consequences, specifically on the part of spectators.

Bert O. States once claimed that “in the theater, as in any art, there is always the need to defamiliarize all of the old familiar defamiliarizations” (43), and what takes place in the comedies of menace is a process of aesthetic inversion; in this process, Pinter’s characters borrow from comic and thriller genres only to deploy various tactics (for example, stichomythia and/or interrogation) to an effect that typically gets qualified as menacing. Another way in which Pinter’s comedies of menace revitalize theater by re-imagining familiar clichés involves the interdependency of verbal and physical regimes, the way the actor’s demeanor and body language in any given staging can, and indeed should, operate in league with what is

spoken and implied, either elucidating or troubling it. Take, for example, the moment after the mysterious speaking tube voice (a voice that signifies menace in that spectators cannot hear and thus confirm it as "actual") articulates that all the food products were unsatisfactory, and Ben "*glares at Gus*" (140).⁸ Here, in the characters' gazes, we find an aesthetic site that is crucial to the production of menace in *The Dumb Waiter*. As Rayner says, "Pinter manifests the power of an absolute in moments of non-verbal gaze between characters, moments that mark the instance of danger and fascination when one is captured and overpowered while gazing" (496-7). Similarly, Joseph Hines observes how menace may "be present in the dialogue or the physical arrangement -- as in *The Dumb Waiter*" (5).

Yet, perhaps Hines verges on constructing too rigid a binary between speech and body movement. Consider how any given speech act and gesture can be either synchronous or temporally staggered and still betray a mutual dramatic dependency and/or reciprocal empowerment. I would suggest further that most speech acts and bodily gestures are bound up with *all others* in the production of dramatic effect such that what is said and done at the beginning of *The Dumb Waiter*, for example, can profoundly intersect with what is said and performed at other, distant junctures in the play. Thus, Gus's exit to the lavatory and re-entry while Ben reclines on the bed with a newspaper in the play's first moments foreshadows *The Dumb Waiter's* shocking conclusion. The fact that the physical arrangement of the play's final moment is, in its earlier incarnation, bounded by dialogue, and, in the last instance, by silence marks the trajectory of Ben's and Gus's relationship. Their relationship alters from that of putative colleagues to predator and quarry, while all interceding moments of petty conflict throughout the play strive towards and bolster this final scene.

Although Ben and Gus effectively stage and perform menacing scenarios and then putatively experience menace at the level of the stage, in the process they also produce something involved in menace that registers within the audience and is, therefore, operative at a physiological level: the level of the spectator's material body. This recognition requires that we look beyond how Pinter's aesthetic of menace may be regarded as a mimesis of menace, and approached predominantly with a view to what menace *means* in the context of the stage space and the characters, that is, how menace is *represented*

there. To acknowledge that the aestheticization of menace is also a physiological issue is to direct our attention away from the spectator's gaze, and thus away from what might be called the politics of representation, to a concern with how "the visual experience of the [theatrical] encounter impinges upon the materiality of the viewer"(Barbara Kennedy 16).⁹

Hence, in order to edge away from a strict discussion of the mimesis of menace and ever-towards menace's physiological character and possibility, I offer Batty's more general remarks on "seeing" a play:

A theatrical experience [...] is seldom one that can readily be "made sense" of. Its communicative power is the kind that is felt and recognized at a less than conscious level, and one that often belies articulation [...] What a play might be "about" is more often than not only one part of a formula that might make that play a significant piece of theater. The dramatic manipulation of that "subject matter" is the more relevant part of the formula. This, after all, is *the element that works upon our feelings and nerves* when watching any performance. (2, my emphasis)

These remarks are informed by the way in which characters such as Gus and Ben solicit both intellectual and emotional responses from the audience, only to do and say things that repeatedly trouble spectators' intellectual-emotional processes and paths. Whether, for example, Gus and Ben's apparent showdown in *The Dumb Waiter's* final tableau solicits alarm, horror, or, as Penelope Prentice understands, "audience sympathy for [both] characters" (19), or, whether it invites derisive laughter, and thus our judgment and condescension, the characters are constant in the various and unpredictable ways in which they initiate audience interest only as a means to frustrate it. While Ben and Gus themselves effectively stage and perform menacing scenarios at the level of the stage, in the process, they also produce a menace that circulates throughout the audience. As Hines observes: "Pinter makes us uneasy [...] because he gets us in the guts, where he implies we live" (13).

3. On Comedy

Despite critics' tendency to focus on menace in Pinter's work, there are indeed some notable exceptions. As examples consider Lois G. Gordon, who asserts that "The comic element in Pinter predominates"

(6); Elin Diamond, who has thus far produced the only monograph to take up Pinter's aestheticization of comedy; and Bernard Dukore, who observes that "From *The Room* to *No Man's Land*, a span of almost twenty years, all but a very few of Pinter's plays are tragicomedies" and as such are "Associated initially and primarily with comedy" (72). However much these and other critics' characterizations of Pinter's comic play differ, one finds that irony and parody are central. For example, in reference to the crop of music hall-inspired exchanges in *The Dumb Waiter*, not least of which is Ben and Gus's rumpus over an acceptable signifier with which to refer to boiling water for tea, Gordon identifies how Pinter "lampoons the banal clichéd banter revered in the word-games played in the lives of the educated and uneducated, as well as those of the rich and poor [and] brings to life the everyday silliness of Everyman and in so doing is uncannily funny" (6).¹⁰

In reading *The Dumb Waiter*, Gordon looks specifically to the staging of that which is intended to be or is in fact funny, attending to the meaning of the signifiers that generate irony and parody. Like many critics, she constructs herself vis-à-vis art as a subject observing an object of study (the play) from a distance, watching and interpreting Ben and Gus's every move and speech act in an attempt to interpret and ultimately explain the play's various meanings, or perhaps even its entire representational economy. The tendency to understand how comedy is and should be interpreted effectively privileges language's locutionary capacity -- truly a demonstration of how we often think of language predominantly "as a vehicle for messages among speakers" (Colebrook 109). As a compliment to this manner of proceeding critically, I propose a consideration of laughter's visceral quality. The immediate and forceful reality of laughter's healing and its painful effects alike emphasizes the fact that the theatrical experience is about more than intellection. From State's claim that humor in the theater is "incomplete without the audience" (173), I suggest that we might glean not simply the obvious, that humor and a play needs an audience, but more specifically that there are experiential contingencies beyond our simply understanding and appreciating Pinter's dramatic "jokes."

The critical consequence of looking beyond a hermeneutics of meaning is to engage with or even work through how Pinter's comedy can operate *on* us by resonating within us, doing so by evoking audience responses, some of these being within descriptive reach,

while others remain beyond articulation and thus have no subjective (verbal or imagistic) content. If we reflect upon how the plays can perform on us to specific ends -- how they might play upon our nervous systems so as to invite, evoke, and provoke responses as well as foment changes in us such that we turn from the text or leave the theater in states remarkably other than how we arrived -- it becomes apparent how deeply related to the menace are the quite varied comic tendencies and the various responses of laughter they stand to evoke.

Accommodating the theater audience, Andrew Kennedy insists that we must respond to Pinter's "violent parody" (182), while Arnold Hinchliffe observes more pointedly that in Pinter "We find a comedy that frightens and causes pain" (38). These remarks, moreover, speak to Dukore's metaphor and understanding that comedy in Pinter's plays can effectively serve as a weapon. Citing *The Caretaker*, Dukore posits that comedy can at times be "savagely, for the characters -- sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly -- taunt each other;" the crux, however, is to be found in his second premise which, like the others, speaks to the issue of audience response: "While [the characters'] mocking amuses the spectator, its underlying destructiveness also shocks him" (43). Just as comedy can in one regard function as a weapon characters wield on stage -- sometimes even literally as when James throws the *butter knife* at Bill in *The Collection* -- it can, in constituting another function or order of "meaning," be fashioned by the playwright as a weapon to be used on the audience. I suggest that we might thus extrapolate from Dukore's observation of any spectator's potential journey, from amusement to revulsion or shock, a process that centers on his or her own complicity in the contentious stage events.

It would seem, then, that through instrumentalizing laughter and menace, [0]Pinter is seeking to foster in us an awareness of the degree to which we subscribe to certain ideological positions. It is in being staged and then evoked -- for is not our "approval" captured in our laughter? -- that these ideological positions or viewpoints are being obliquely critiqued. And of course, this staging marks a process of alerting us to how ideologies operate *through* us, how we articulate ideology/ies we might otherwise reject. Hence Francesca Coppa's interest in laughter's affective potentialities, specifically those that can inform and manipulate cognition. Rather than seeing a back and forth between comedy and menace, and thus to a certain extent defining the terms as a conceptual binary, Coppa sees comedy as in league with

menace and asserts that the establishment of “complex personal identifications and motivations” ultimately denies spectators the “easy divisions and easy laughter” that “traditional comedy” typically offers them (55). Characterizing Pinter’s humor as a complexly subversive “Freudian joke triangle,” Coppa insists that “the important jokes” in Pinter “are generally the ones which make the audience *stop* laughing, which make the audiences [sic] question their own alliance with the aggressive joke-tellers” (55).¹¹ In acknowledging, at one level, Pinter’s subversion of “traditional comedy” and, at another level, the potentially subversive consequences of a spectator’s emotional, psychological, intellectual, and indeed ideological investments, Coppa gestures towards Deleuze’s assertion that the manipulation of cliché can introduce spectators to other realities, those whose economies are extra-discursive, and which involve relations of force, intensities, and blocs of sensation.

In line with arguments for laughter’s visceral character and its collusion with menace -- yet even more attuned to the forces at work on both stage characters and spectators -- Batty argues that *The Dumb Waiter* “is no straightforward comedy. Forces beyond these men’s [Ben and Gus’s] comprehension and control are operating *upon them*, and their responses take on both farcical and tragic *resonances*” (16, my emphasis). This observation gestures towards how *The Dumb Waiter* does not always vacillate between comic and menacing moments but rather imbricates either element such that comedy and menace appear and function as necessary to one another. The observation, however, is most valuable to this discussion for its attention to the physiological contract into which Pinter’s play invites audiences to enter. In effect, the play’s aestheticization of comedy and menace invites intellectual responses and physiological-emotional reactions that are most often rendered thoroughly ambivalent, yet nonetheless experientially intense, and it does so precisely through a process that solicits spectator interest and investment, only to displace and do violence to both.

This is perhaps most apparent in the penultimate scene when Ben reads out the final order to be sent up the dumb waiter -- “Scampi!,” a scene whose comic flourish does not fade but rather becomes mired in Ben and Gus’s sudden eruption into physical violence, a violence that we are frequently made to anticipate in Pinter’s plays but which so rarely manifests as it does here:

He [Ben] crumples the note, picks up the tube, takes out the whistle, blows and speaks.

WE'VE GOT NOTHING LEFT! NOTHING! DO YOU UNDERSTAND?

Ben seizes the tube and flings Gus away. He follows Gus and slaps him hard, back-handed across the chest.

BEN: Stop it! You maniac!

GUS: But you heard!

BEN: (*savagely*). That's enough! I'm warning you!

Silence (146).

This scene demonstrates how Pinter's aesthetic does not involve clearly defined transitions from humorous moments to those that are menacing, but instead a vista in which the possibility and indeed the "reality" of both elements is most often simultaneously in play.

Dukore is quite right in observing that "The disparity between the demands for unusual food and Gus's inadequate substitutes provides a source of comedy, but the sight of Gus emptying all he has in order to satisfy an unseen master [...] undercuts the humor" (19-20). However, while some may see the humor expressed in the dumb waiter's demand for "Scampi!" as overwhelmed by the ever-intensifying submerged violence^[0] that erupts into an actual physical confrontation, others might find the humor and menace sustained or even perpetuated in equal measure^[0], the complex of both elements due in large part to the indelible and ridiculous image of a dumb waiter apparatus that is hungry for "pretty high class" dishes such as Macaroni Pastitsio and Ormitha Macarounada having to settle for the likes of Smith's crisps, McVitie treats, a stale Eccles cake, and so on. We must consider that those with a more morbid sense of humor, and who are thus forever niggled by the fact that it was, after all, an inanimate object (the dumb waiter) and "Scampi!" that helped bring about Ben's savage physical outburst, might see the humor as lingering, perhaps even intensifying. Bringing to mind the old ambivalent expression "not knowing whether to laugh or to cry," this scene's collapse of the boundary between that which is ostensibly funny and that which is not instantiates Pinter's own claim in the speech "Writing for Myself" that "The old categories of comedy and tragedy and farce are irrelevant" (1996, xi).¹²

Regardless of the "Scampi!" scene's representational implications, its intermingling of humor, menace, and actual physical violence stands to provoke a complex set of reactions in spectators. Consider how this scene's dramatic developments shuttle spectators

from a potential laugh born of ridiculous circumstances that draw on music hall and farce, to an aura of violence, to an infrequently realized physical violence, and finally to a forceful silence. All the while, the entire journey retains the residue of laughter; it was, after all, "Scampi!" that set things in motion and that is implicated in the violence that erupts. With Pinter there is no laughter that does not strive to justify its existence on the basis of menace. Perhaps, then, Gus's tentative assertion to Ben that "that's a bit funny isn't it?" can be read as a rhetorical assertion of comedy's dramatic need of menace, and vice versa (132); it represents an assertion whose silence suggests that nothing in this play is unequivocally funny, or tragic for that matter.

In negotiating an effective staging of *The Dumb Waiter*, the spectator's journey is such that he or she is subject to, with great frequency if not at every moment, a complex of physio-sensory shifts brought on by the play's wholly unpredictable redistributions of comic and menacing tendencies and bursts of actual physical violence. It is only later (post-event) that stimuli in the form of comedy and menace and reactions to it can be qualified as such: in terms of a verbal description of emotional responses. Any descriptive language that derives from our being made to laugh and from our being menaced is preceded by, and entirely contingent to, galvanic bodily activity that begins in visceral registers. What we have here is the production of pre- and non-verbal activity (pre-ideological) as a means to stimulate the sort of cognitive activity that can be called higher-order thinking. In short, we feel Pinter's plays, at stages ranging from the unconscious to the conscious, then we describe and label the remembered experience, doing so with varying degrees of articulacy. The play's impact can therefore be defined Page: 43 [0]both by that primary series of responses (and the impact of one response on subsequent ones) and that subsequent attempt to categorize the experience. That the former exists necessarily outside the security of linguistic appropriation that the latter offers, and that the latter represents only an *aporia* of capture of the former, contributes to any measure of menace within that impact.¹³

In view of an audience's visceral, sensory-cognitive, and emotional relationship to scenes such as Gus reading to Ben from his newspaper a litany of harrowing events, the remarkable linguistic *agon* over whether the kettle or the gas gets lit, the functional vicissitudes of a mysterious and fickle off-stage toilet, and the

eponymous dumb waiter's intervention, consider how the play's variegated sign systems possess an extra-linguistic "other side" beyond representation. I suggest, then, that the complex of menace (in the physiological capacity of anxiety) and comedy (in the equally physiological capacity of laughter) are the affective intensities that Pinter's comedies of menace (as art) may produce. Simon O'Sullivan tells us that affects, as extra-discursive and extra-textual phenomena, can be described as "moments of *intensity*," produced by a virtual "collision" of the spectator's faculties and senses and the work of art in a decidedly physiological space, as a virtual-material event (2001, 125). As such, the sensations we experience (as given by the play) "are not images perceived by us "outside" of our body, but rather affections localized within the body" (Barbara Kennedy 119). If we conceive of *The Dumb Waiter* as not so much an object that we look upon as spectators and more so as "a reaction in/on the body at the level of matter," the play therefore being "immanent to matter" (O'Sullivan 2001, 125), then I suggest that Pinter's comedy of menace begins to trouble traditional notions of spectatorship and indeed humanist understandings of subjectivity.

Given the difficulty, if not impossibility, of articulating the sensible moment and delineating, furthermore, the correspondence between the semiotic complex on stage and its various resonances on the spectator's nervous system -- best termed an "affective capture" (O'Sullivan 2001, 125) -- such phenomena eludes sufficient verbal qualification. Hence, descriptives along the lines of "I felt anxiety or menaced during scene, moment, or event X in *The Dumb Waiter*" can appear as a form of question begging. What can be suggested, however, is that the physiological aspect of art with which O'Sullivan is concerned "might still be understood as a sign of sorts," just not "merely [as] a signifying one" (2006, 163).

4. The Politics of Affect

I would suggest that Pinter's various political plays provide a forum to examine just what we mean by the non-significatory aspects of dramatic signs. *One for the Road* (1984), *Mountain Language* (1988), *The New World Order* (1991), *Party Time* (1991), *Ashes to Ashes* (1996), *Moonlight* (1993), and *Celebration* (2000) respectively stage images of harassment and interrogation, whose force and effect not only appears to be the plight of onstage characters, but also intends to

act upon and arrest the audience. In soliciting viewers to endure, to enter into this physical forum, these plays underline Deleuze and Guattari's assertion that "aesthetic composition is the work of sensation" (1991, 192). It might seem that the power struggles and the often repellent stage images in these more recent plays are a long way from the power plays taking place between Pinter's ambivalently comic and, dare it even be said, likable characters in the comedies of menace. Emphasizing this apparent disparity, Richard Dutton insists that plays such as "*One for the Road* represent an even greater break with Pinter's artistic past, with an emphasis on political and human rights issues that would have been out of place in his tragicomedies" (5).

However, in the words of that play's antagonist Nicolas, I suggest that there is more of a link or a bond between Pinter's artistic past and his recent plays than one might at first suspect. Although we may not, and are as a rule not intended to laugh at theatrical victims whose plight is to endure psychological and physical torture, rape, and the torments of all manner of politicking, the games and the jokes are unmistakably present. Consider Nicolas's apparent delight at tormenting Victor with questions regarding whether his wife Gila "fucks," or, moreover, how the game of posing logically unanswerable questions is the lynchpin of Nicolas's interrogation of all three of the play's victims. In the first instance, the games and jokes are instrumental to the victimizer in his or her project of breaking victims down.¹⁴ However, in the second instance -- an instance which involves our being broken down, as it were -- humor functions to solicit complex emotional reactions from the audience; some of these reactions can be identified and qualified with language, while others evade description due to their resonance at unconscious levels beginning at the viscera and across and within other proprioceptive (stimuli within the organism) regions. Certainly one of the more potent examples of this can be found in the various quips Nicolas makes regarding the execrable realities for which he is responsible, the dramatic function of such quips being to darken and magnetize the audience's prostration and revulsion. To Gila he says:

You're of no interest to me. I might even let you out of here in due course. But I should think you might entertain us all a little more before you go. *Blackout* (*One for the Road* 244).

Consider, furthermore, how the painful immediacy of Jimmy's physical presence and euphoric monologue at the close of *Party Time* in itself provokes an unmediated anxiety in spectators, yet the image is charged by and thus necessarily bound up with a number of snapshots of jovial cocktail banter that precede it: snapshots such as Liz's preoccupation with "the nymphomaniac slut" and "bigtitted tart" that "raped" her love interest (290); Terry and Dusty's verbal tête-à-tête that ironically conflates the torture and murder of dissidents with married couples (301-02); and Melissa's overly melodramatic and thus comical toast to the "unshakable, rigorous, fundamental" and "constant" "moral foundation" of "*our club*" (311). Even though the comedy in these plays is more for certain characters to enjoy, and thus less on offer for spectators (if only tentatively so), the comic element remains operative and in the service of promoting what might be thought of as a new form of menace, where the reactions it stands to produce are arguably much starker.

A further example presents itself in the final scene in *Mountain Language*. In this context, the humor of the remark is specifically intended for the Sergeant and the Guard's enjoyment; however, the harrowing fact remains that in the play's final scene the Sergeant's assertion regarding the Prisoner who is collapsed and "*shaking on the floor*" is in fact a joke: "Look at this. You go out of your way to give them a helping hand and they fuck it up" (267).¹⁵ Pinter uses comedy here to facilitate the emotional violence that the Sergeant's curtain line attempts to perform on us. And the Sergeant's remark, according to Batty, "has all the force of a punchline, too -- reinforced by the blackout. We have a near Pavlovian response to such structured punchlines -- a self-administered expectation of pleasure from neat surprise -- and here that response is at odds with our ethical faculties. It's not that we find it funny, but that we recognize that we have been invited to join in a laugh that we simultaneously and instantaneously don't recognize as funny"[0] (27). Pinter's most odious characters create tension in the audience by broadcasting familiar conventions through a deeply contentious lens, as they punctuate their dastardly remarks and admissions with wry smiles, ironic quips, and even laughs.

Gesturing toward this aesthetics of force, Elizabeth Sakellaridou speaks of a "subterranean effect" that operates in spectators at a cognitive-emotive level, an effect performed on the audience that is bound up with the content of Pinter's later plays and

contributing significantly to the political work they do: "If [the political plays'] appeal is emotional because of lack of historical specificity, distancing of audience, narrative and debate, the selection and presentation of images is based on an unmistakable cognitive process which restores the balance and channels the ideological direction of the play" (1989, 45). Sakellaridou's simultaneous attention to the works' selection and presentation of images and to their specific ideological direction demonstrates her interest in sighting a politics in the affective potential of the later plays.

Following Sakellaridou, I suggest that in seeking to merge content and form, and thus emulate a subject matter dealing with the (ab)use of power and the infliction of psychological torment and physical pain, the form in the political plays must necessarily be made "violent" and thus menace spectators' psychological, emotional, and physical well-being. A distinctly violent subject matter will require a formal violence that is appropriately matched. While the characters' performance of speech acts and postures functions as a critique of the very behavior being staged, performed, and fabricated, the by-product that is the audience's plight is no less a part of the politics. In the words of a playwright most unlike Pinter, yet nonetheless illustrative for the way he seeks to wed ideology and physiology, Howard Barker insists that "Anxiety must be the condition of witnessing drama that takes moral *speculation*, not social *imitation*, as its unfaltering objective" (111).

As much as we have come to rely on words such as anxiety and menace, the articulation (and reconciliation) of language (signifiers) and of physical experience remains an intellectual quandary. Finding this quandary nonetheless inviting and poignant, Deleuze argues, according to O'Sullivan, that a work of art should be examined with a view to its capacity to generate and deploy forces of intensity, thus operating in the capacity of a machine that acts upon a spectator's neural-sensory network. Accordingly, art is about experiencing sensations as much as it is about intellection and gleaning meaning(s) (2006, 58). Relationships between spectators and art works can become most notable for the way the forces of any work "act upon the force(s) of our subjectivity" (Ibid. 58) -- this very phenomenon itself constituting a significant form of meaning. If it does not seem too far a stretch to understand both Pinter's earlier comedies of menace and his more precisely political plays in these terms, in terms of their affective potential that is, then the audience-

play relationship necessarily presents itself as a matter of relations of force: the play acting upon the spectators, and even spectators acting upon the play, the ideological positions and subjectivities of both audience members and the stage actors “vibrating” under the strain of the work.¹⁶

Take the eruptions of “actual” violence in plays such as *The Room*, *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Birthday Party*, and *The Homecoming*, along with the comic episodes that bookend and thus embellish them, and then hold them up for consideration alongside the kind of violence the political plays can engineer both on stage and in the audience. It would seem that both eras of Pinter’s work involve the engagement of a similar visceral register -- even despite the different value judgments we might place on the effects of laughter and of anxiety, and however variously we might qualify our physiological and emotional responses to plays from either era. Consider the potential resonance between moments such as when Gus backhands Ben or when Max “hits JOEY in the stomach with all his might” (*The Homecoming* 42) and when the Sergeant suggests that “Intellectual arses wobble the best” (*Mountain Language* 257), or when Nicolas uses the past tense at the end of *One for the Road* to inform Victor that his son “was a little prick” and is thus likely now dead (247). The type of humor (either more accessible to the audience, as in the earlier plays, or egregious such that it remains for the most part hermetically sealed off at the proscenium, as in the political plays) and our engagement with it (either via attitudes and/or feelings of ephemeral delight, ambivalence, or disgust) will differ significantly across Pinter’s oeuvre. However, it is noteworthy that all these plays speak a predominantly visceral language that impacts the audience’s emotions, evoking laughter and anxiety and all their experiential derivatives in such a way as to edge spectators beyond cliché and familiar experience.¹⁷

If we consider how Pinter’s earlier comedies of menace manipulate either element in the dramatic aesthetic so as to engender various affects in spectators, it seems impossible to identify where the comedy and the menace respectively begin and end; the effort to process comedy and menace as distinct and separate units of experience remains problematic. That the intensification of both character-audience identification and of laughter is wholly contingent upon the production of menace leads Pinter’s childhood friend Henry Woolf to heartily quip that “Pinter doesn’t work as a menacing playwright unless he’s funny... It’s only really menacing if it’s *really*

funny” (Hollis Merritt 126). Woolf’s statement requires adjustment when turning to Pinter’s political plays. In such a context, perhaps Woolf’s remark might then be re-formulated as such: It’s only *really* menacing if the sociopaths, ideologues, perpetrators of evil, and the morally bankrupt think it is funny. While I fully realize the intellectual peril of suggesting that Pinter’s political plays are comedies of menace, I stand by the aesthetic fact that they possess and exude tendencies of the comedy of menace and can be tentatively wedded by sighting family resemblances in the way that games, jokes, and at times the characters’ own amusement or laughter function. My more general aim in troubling the will to periodization and thus dialoguing Pinter’s “distant” aesthetic past with his more recent past is to suggest how a definition and a concept such as comedy of menace need not be seen as monolithic and static. It is, rather, ever-expandable and open, and can thus be continually developed as a critical tool for engaging with Pinter’s oeuvre.

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Notes

¹ One other possible irony is the fact that Pinter himself has variously expressed scepticism of categories and labels. And it is arguable that this very scepticism is indirectly realized in the many dynamic and resilient characters featured in the plays, who find themselves confined in and oppressed by various places, individuals, and structures.

² For a thorough investigation of the Pinter pause’s performative characteristics and functions, and of Pinter’s dramatic language more generally, see Quigley’s *The Pinter Problem*.

³ Although I have lifted this appraisal from its specific context and reference to Pinter’s screenplay *The Quiller Memorandum* (1965), I suggest that it nonetheless applies to the plays.

⁴ In the context of his own drama, Howard Barker observes: “There is silence and silence. Like the colour black, there are colours within silence” (17). I understand this observation to hold for the dramatic pause, especially as Pinter employs it.

⁵ This aesthetic in particular is by no means the rule, as Alice Rayner’s reading of Pinter’s *Betrayal* indicates: “The obvious temporal reversal of events in *Betrayal* lifts the play out of the imitation of real time and places it in a fictional chronology in which imagination, memory, and art turn moments of time into form and deliver an artefact that can be examined from all sides. *Pinter’s device is a means of bringing cause and effect into the same room*, as it were, but confounds temporal sequence: it underlines the constructed nature of any recapitulation of ‘original’ events” [emphasis mine (484)].

⁶ In a cross-medium analysis of Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* and Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, Alan Brody illustrates how "The outer shell of *The Birthday Party* is identical to a Hitchcock thriller" (163), and while doing so observes how Goldberg and McCann "are 'reconstituted' types from the old Music Hall stage" (172).

⁷ In quoting Deleuze, I am lifting him from another context in which he engages with Francis Bacon's painting, its manipulation of cliché, and its aesthetic of asignification. Cf. Modern painting, which, according to Deleuze, embraces "counter-representation as its guiding ambition. Modern painting simply pushes the refusal of representation to its limit. It dismantles the order of cliché, and with it the creatural (organic, narrative, figurative...) order as a whole" (*Francis Bacon* 111). Also, as an aesthetic development of *The Dumb Waiter*, consider how *The Homecoming's* invocation and then effective manipulation of cliché is an effective illustration of the catastrophic disruption of the clichéd of which Deleuze speaks. On this matter, see Andrew Kennedy who speaks of Pinter's "determination to avoid cliché and self-repetition" (173), often by means of establishing "patterns of ceremony," "ritualized language" and "sentimental clichés" (185) -- only to violate them through "counter-images" and "elaborately patterned, and comically violent, speech" (186). See also Kennedy's discussion of Pinter's "mannerism," "various exploitations," "paracritical" aesthetic moves (172-173), and "infoling of language" (190-191).

⁸ On this point, consider how *The Caretaker* and a number of other plays begin with openings where audiences are introduced to empty or peopled stages that *are silent*, and thus loom large until a comic gesture of some sort finally interrupts and then punctuates the imposing and at times unbearable atmospheres they inhabit. Motions to laughter can in fact be regarded as surreptitious provocations of audience emotion, used to intensify a spectator's vulnerability to menacing moments. Of *The Caretaker*, Arnold Dukore curiously suggests that "In a silent, prologue-like scene that opens the play, Mick, alone, slowly surveying a room filled with junk, observes each object in it, then sits still. Upon hearing the muffled voices of his brother and Davies, he quickly departs. Anticipatory, the scene is neither comic nor noncomic" (25). Against this, I would suggest that there is scarcely a moment in any Pinter play that is "neither comic nor noncomic," and thus devoid of signifiers that invite at least some sort of audience response.

⁹ I am here borrowing Barbara Kennedy's language, from her discussions in the context of cinema, and doing so without, I am confident, introducing alterations that might be problematic in moving from one medium to another. Of the cinematic experience, Kennedy states: "what emerged was an interesting development away from the politics of representation, to a concern with how the visual experience of the cinematic encounter impinges upon the materiality of the viewer, and how affect and sensation are part of that material engagement. By materiality I mean the biological, molecular and material nature of the body and the perceptions within the brain/mind of that body. The concept materiality is *not* here used in the Marxist sense of the term. The term 'body' is also differently conceived to mean more than just the flesh and blood corporeal body" (16).

¹⁰ Cf. Andrew Kennedy: "Not only is the dialogue 'idiomatic,' it is saturated with idioms 'played' to show up their idiocy" (167).

¹¹ Cf. Diamond, who states that "Comic action and character are Pinter's means of structuring his plays and of controlling audience response to them" (12-13); "Yoking metaphysical terror to comic character and action, Pinter affords us access to his plays

-- even as he revises the conventional uses of comedy" (11); "If Harold Pinter's comedy springs from traditional roots, he undercuts our laughter even as he invites it" (12); and, most relevant to Coppa's position, "Pinter's audiences leave the theater haunted by their own laughter. As problematic as the unexplained anxieties of Pinter's characters is the comic response such anxiety provokes" (11).

¹² To be clear, I am not suggesting that Pinter's plays demonstrate criteria sufficient to the "old" category of comedy in particular, for, in addition to other elements that make for classical-based comedy, they do not provide us with comfortable endings, those in which all problems are reconciled by the time the curtain falls. The case is quite the opposite in fact. As I hope has been evident, I am focussing on the production of humor.

¹³ I am most grateful to Mark Taylor-Batty for offering, in conversation, this last thought, which is clearly a poignant development of my argument.

¹⁴ I am employing both pronouns so as to account for interpretations of the play that cast a female actor in the role of Nicolas.

¹⁵ For those in doubt as to the play's comedic aspects or, moreover, the importance of humor in it, consider the following: "New York director Carey Perloff would report to the conference participants that Pinter did not consider American productions of his plays funny enough, and she shared her own discovery that juxtaposing *The Birthday Party* with *Mountain Language* brought out an unexpected humor in the latter, certainly one of Pinter's harshest plays" (Garner 53).

¹⁶ The spectators' potential as a force acting upon what transpires on stage is an important aspect of this discussion which, for lack of space, I am admittedly passing over. However, for discussions that follow this line, particularly concerning audience "impact" on actors, see Bert O. States's *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms*.

¹⁷ Although I am not addressing it here, I suggest that when performed, a play such as *Ashes to Ashes* can elicit more audience laughter than one might expect at first glance, laughter which, according to my argument for comedy and menace's existential relationship, is instrumental to the play's overall engenderment of affect. Consider also *Celebration*, which, I have discovered, has even been referred to as a comedy of menace: "I had had the good fortune to attend a reading, by a particularly glittering cast, of Pinter's short play *Celebration* as part of the Gate Theatre's own celebration of Pinter's 75th birthday. The play was funny and disturbing in equal measure, perfectly expressing the 'comedy of menace' that now defines the Pinteresque;" See Heath.

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Feeding Power: Pinter, Bakhtin, and Inverted Carnival

David Pattie

1. The Dumb Waiters

It is difficult to watch a production of *The Dumb Waiter* without having, at some point, the uncanny sense that there are three characters on stage. Gus and Ben, engaged in their own, tense battle for power and information, have periodically to tear themselves away from the job in hand to satisfy an inanimate object that displays the kind of insistent, unreasonably rapacious appetite that one normally associates with a young child. As Basil Chiasson argues, the dumb waiter's ambiguous actions seem motivated, even if we are unsure of the nature of that motivation:

...[While] some may see the humor expressed in the dumb waiter's demand for "Scampi!" as overwhelmed by the ever-intensifying submerged violence that erupts into a "real" physical confrontation, others might find the humor and menace sustained or even perpetuated in equal measure, the complex of both elements due in large part to the indelible and ridiculous image of a dumb waiter apparatus that is hungry for "pretty high class" dishes such as Macaroni Pastitsio and Ormitha Macarounada having to settle for the likes of Smith's crisps, McVitties treats, a stale Eccles cake, and so on.

It makes sense, performatively, to think of the dumb waiter as an active participant; not only does it noisily demand attention on its first entrance, but it is also furnished with the power of speech (via a speaking tube that Gus discovers). Although we never hear the other end of the exchanges, by the end of the play we have realized just how important the dumb waiter has become: it has succeeded in bringing the tensions between Gus and Ben to the point of outright violence, and it delivers the orders that will lead, we might assume, to Gus' death immediately after the end of the show.

The dumb waiter, then, takes on the attributes of a character; and, as the play progresses, it also does something else. We have heard, in the early dialogue exchanges, of the existence of a shadowy organization for whom Ben and Gus work. However, at the play's beginning, the members of this organization seem very distant from the action. Ben and Gus, the organization's representatives, are on their own. The first moment that shakes that perception is the appearance, under the door of the room, of an envelope that contains matches for the kettle -- an oddly mundane detail, rendered unsettling because its appearance has not been anticipated or prepared for.

The unprepared entrance of the dumb waiter, in performance, expands on this initial intrusion. It manifests itself as something approaching a character -- muscling its way into the dialogue; but it also and increasingly acts as the conduit between the two protagonists and another character or set of characters, who are positioned elsewhere in the world of the play. Somewhere, above the heads of Gus and Ben, at least one representative of the organization that controls their actions uses the dumb waiter to connect with, to instruct, and to torture them.

The ultimate authority exercised through the mechanism of the dumb waiter, exercised without warning on the play's protagonists, bears a striking similarity to that exercised by Goldberg and McCann in *The Birthday Party*. Like the authority figures in Pinter's first full-length play, the power wielded by *The Dumb Waiter's* authorities cannot be turned aside. It is backed up by an organization whose scope is unimaginably great. And it is felt most keenly by those who are apostates -- who flee, like Stanley, or who begin to question its operation, like Gus. Pinter drew a sometimes tense exchange of messages about *The Birthday Party's* meaning with Peter Wood, the play's first director, to a close with the following: "We've agreed: the hierarchy, the Establishment, the arbiters, the socio-religious monsters arrive to affect censure and alteration upon a member of the club who has discarded responsibility (that word again) toward himself and others... (qtd in Billington 78). This point can also be made in relation to *The Dumb Waiter*: in this case, it could be said that Gus has discarded his responsibility to the arbiters (whoever they are) by struggling against his appropriate role -- that of a dumb waiter, someone who simply performs when asked without question.

However, there is another connection between the two texts; one which links them to discourse on the nature of power and

powerlessness that stretches the length of Pinter's career. Goldberg and McCann do not simply march in to the boarding house and destroy Stanley; like the arresting officers in Kafka's *The Trial*, they avail themselves of the various comforts the home provides. Not only this: but Goldberg ingratiates himself to the household further through a matched pair of speeches in which nostalgia, correct behavior, and moral rectitude are linked inextricably to the consumption of food. Goldberg's rewards for being an irreproachable, respectful suitor, and a loving husband are, respectively, "*the nicest piece of gefilte fish*" and "*the nicest piece of rollmop and pickled cucumber*" that such an exemplary citizen could wish to find on a plate (53, 69). In both *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter*, those in power are those who feel entitled to consume the best dishes that are offered.

This brings me back to the point Chiasson makes about the nature of laughter in Pinter's theater. He is surely correct to suggest that the peculiarly unsettling atmosphere of much of Pinter's work is tied to the sheer viscerality of the responses it provokes: as he notes, "In negotiating an effective staging of *The Dumb Waiter*, the spectator's journey is such that he or she is subject to, with great frequency if not at every moment, a complex of physio-sensory shifts brought on by the play's wholly unpredictable redistributions of comic and menacing tendencies and bursts of actual physical violence." Here, I think, Chiasson identifies one of the most striking features of *The Dumb Waiter* in performance. As the play proceeds, the operations of the powerful forces that surround Ben and Gus become more and more all-pervasive; by the play's end, even the apparent sanctuary of the basement room has been breached. It could be said, though, that there is another redistribution at work in the play; a redistribution of the meager goods that Ben and Gus bring with them. While Goldberg and McCann might help themselves to anything the boarding house has to offer, Ben and Gus, in their turn, are forced into the role of providers -- even though they have no way of fulfilling the demands the waiter makes. These demands evoke laughter, but they are also profoundly destabilizing; as Chiasson notes, the long-established description of Pinter's early work as "comedies of menace" stems from moments like these. There is, though, another type of comedy at work in *The Dumb Waiter*. This we might term a grotesque black comedy of consumption and liberation, in which the operation of power is displaced on to food, and to the needs of the

body. In other words (and in terms I will define below) a Carnival: but a Carnival of a peculiarly unsettling kind.

2. Carnival and the Body

A useful place to begin an examination of the visceral in *The Dumb Waiter* is with the work of one of the key theorists of the grotesque body. In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin locates Rabelais' work in a long-standing tradition of popular performance: the myriad inversions and parodies that comprised the practice of Carnival in the middle ages. The various practices grouped together in Carnival (the parody of coronations and wedding ceremonies, mock fights where food substitutes for weapons, elaborate mock rituals in which the power of religion is mocked) share, for Bakhtin, a common dynamic. They all invert the normal hierarchical structures of society; those who normally rule are dethroned, and those who are ruled are given power -- at least for the duration of the carnival.

This inversion, for Bakhtin, is closely tied to the idea of physical over-indulgence. Carnival's great enemy is Lent: a season which emphasizes the denial of the body's appetites, and the mortification of desire. In contrast, Carnival is the season when those appetites are celebrated, and when, as the quote above indicates, the denatured asceticism of Lent is countered by what Bakhtin terms the "grotesque body," which is "[...] a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed: it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world [...] (317)." It is the peculiar triumph of Carnival that it places this version of the body above all others. The religion of the time regarded the body as the disposable envelope that housed the soul; in Carnival, the body is liberated, to indulge itself in those simple basic needs that are denied to it (or, at least, frowned upon) for the rest of the year.

For Bakhtin, this liberation can be thought of as a levelling down:

...[D]ebasement is the fundamental artistic principle of grotesque realism; all that is sacred and exalted is rethought on the level of the material bodily stratum or else combined and mixed with its images. We spoke of the grotesque swing, which brings together heaven and

earth. But the accent is placed not on the upward movement but on the descent. (370-1)

During Carnival, then, heaven is brought down to the level of the earth; the spiritual is subordinated to the physical. The social implications are clear. For most of the year, the poor are supposed to practice self-denial as a religious duty. The indulgences of Carnival are a way not only of indulging in a small period of socially-sanctioned license. They are also a way of destroying, if only symbolically, an oppressive social order, of denying the power of the socio-religious monsters (in Pinter's phrase) whose power is otherwise incontestable.

Bakhtin's theories of Carnival and the grotesque have been contested, even by those otherwise supportive of his work.¹ These critiques are, it has to be admitted, fair; Bakhtin does give too much weight in his work on Rabelais to the purely liberating aspects of the Carnavalesque, and he does not pay enough attention to the fact that Carnival is a transitory, licensed phenomenon, granting freedoms that can be revoked at the end of the festival. However, these arguments rather miss the point; they ignore the fact that Bakhtin's theories of the Carnavalesque were, at least in part, a coded intervention in the political debates of his time. Bakhtin was arrested and imprisoned by the Communist authorities; for him, the idea of freedoms that could be revoked had a painful relevance, as Pechey points out: "[...] It doesn't require much perspicacity to read the supersession of carnivalesque counterculture in a new official culture described in *Rabelais and His World* as an allegory of the betrayal of the revolution [...] (20). Behind the liberation promised by Carnival, therefore, there is its opposite: the re-imposition of Lenten control over the minds, the bodies, the appetites and the desires of the people. Carnival, in *Rabelais and his World*, is presented in its most utopian aspect, because, in Russia at the time, the victory of the forces of Lent (manifested, in official ideology at least, as self-denial and Stakhanovite physical endeavor in the service of the Revolution)² was so complete.

However, judging by the evidence of *The Dumb Waiter*, the last thing that can be said of the person, or people, at the other end of the waiter, is that they are in any way self-denying: if anything, quite the opposite. The food requests go from the relatively quotidian [two braised steak and chips; two sago puddings; two teas without

sugar”(131) to the exotic (macaroni pastitio, ormitha macarounada, bamboo shoots, water chestnuts and chicken, Char Siu and bean sprouts (136, 138)]. As noted above, these demands soon exhaust the meager resources of the two hit-men, but even when they communicate this to the unseen diners upstairs, the demands do not stop. In fact, not only is more food requested, but the food that has been sent is dismissed as sub-standard:

BEN: (*[...] grabs the tube and puts it in his mouth:*
(Speaking with great deference.) Good evening. I'm sorry to -- bother you, but we just thought we'd better let you know that we haven't got anything left. We sent up all we had. There's no more food down here. *(He brings the tube slowly to his ear.)*
 What?...No, all we had we sent up...Oh, I'm very sorry to hear that...The Eccles cake was stale...The chocolate was melted...The milk was sour.
 GUS: What about the crisps?
 BEN: (*listening*) The biscuits were mouldy...(139-40)

I have quoted this section at length because, for me, it is one of the key moments of the play. Those placed above Ben and Gus consume every scrap of nourishment they can provide; then, at the play's end, they order the hit-men to consume each other -- beginning with Gus, the substandard offering.

Something Carnavalesque is undoubtedly happening. The requests for food obey the kind of hyperbolic, excessive logic that Bakhtin ascribes to Carnival practices and structures; Gus and Ben are unwillingly dragged into a parodic representation of an everyday activity, and there is no sense that the controlling organizations within the world of the play have any interest in the spiritual, rather than the physical. What we seem to have, in this play, is an inverted Carnival, in which the key indicators of the carnivalesque are still in place, but all the real and implied benefits of Carnival flow up, rather than down. The answer to the question this raises -- to whom do these benefits flow -- is implied in *The Dumb Waiter*; the same mechanism which conveys impossible demands to the hit men also delivers the final instructions which lead to Gus' death. It is, however, answered -- and answered fully -- in the plays that Pinter comes to write in the 80s and 90s, plays in which the Carnavalesque operations of the powerful are memorably anatomized.³

3. Running the Party

At the end of *The Dumb Waiter*, Gus stumbles in, "...stripped of his jacket, waistcoat, tie, holster, and revolver" (149). This is a crucial stage direction; Gus is not only revealed as the target that they have been sent to kill, but also is delivered to his killer in a state that strongly suggests that he has been processed, and that what is left is simply the residue, passed to Ben, for final disposal. It is a strikingly shocking moment, not only because (on a first viewing at least) it is entirely unexpected. It is shocking also because it suggests that the building is peopled -- and has been peopled for the duration of the play -- by powerful, malicious, or at the best, amoral assailants who can deal, quickly and effectively, with one of their own when the need arises.

Later in Pinter's writing career, we revisit these assailants -- or at least their close associates. Gus' entrance at *The Dumb Waiter's* end is echoed, some thirty-four years later, at the end of the 1991 play *Party Time*. In this later text, a party is held at an expensively furnished London flat: the guests are the rich and the powerful [or those who can provide necessary services to the powerful, and can therefore be declared an 'honorary member (284) of their class]. As the play progresses, we hear about the activities taking place in the streets outside. We never hear precisely what is going on: however, we are left in little doubt that it is violent, that it is oppressive, and that it is taking place at the behest of the people at the party:

CHARLOTTE: There's something going on in the street.

FRED: What?

CHARLOTTE: I think there's something going on in the street.

FRED: Leave the street to us.

CHARLOTTE: Who's us?

FRED: Oh, just us... you know. (307)

A *leitmotif* running through the play is provided by Dusty (who is married to Terry -- a man who serves the other characters as an enforcer and trouble shooter; a man who is in much the same position as Ben in *The Dumb Waiter*). Dusty troubles the other guests by asking repeatedly about her brother, Jimmy, who has disappeared (or, more correctly, who has been disappeared).

Jimmy's disappearance, and the disturbances outside, are unsettling; equally unsettling is a lighting effect which, like the dumb

waiter, increasingly imposes itself on the world of the play. The main lights dim, and a light ‘*burns into the room*’ (*Party Time* 298) from behind a half-opened door. The final moments of the play bring these three elements together: after the final, celebratory speeches, the other characters freeze, the light from the door intensifies, and Jimmy enters, “*thinly dressed*” (313) as the stage directions have it, and speaks-

JIMMY: ...What am I?

Sometimes a door bangs, I hear voices, then it stops. Everything stops. It all stops. It all closes. It closes down. It shuts. It all shuts. It shuts down. It shuts. I see nothing at any time any more. I sit sucking the dark.

It's what I have. The dark is in my mouth and I suck it. It's the only thing I have, It's mine. It's my own. I suck it. (314)

The processes might be different, but Jimmy and Gus finish their respective plays in much the same state: all but used up, stripped of nearly everything, and empty, both psychically and physically. Jimmy sits in his cell, “*sucking the dark.*” Gus, at the play’s end, shouts despairingly into the tube “*WE’VE GOT NOTHING LEFT! NOTHING! DO YOU UNDERSTAND?*” (146); when Ben tries to re-engage him in conversation, he answers ‘*dully*’ (147), as though drained of the ability to respond. Both characters’ fates are inextricably linked to apertures that seem to open on to another ambiguously disturbing world, beyond the rooms in which the action is set. These worlds, it could be said, are the polar opposites of the worlds we see on stage; the rooms above in *The Dumb Waiter* are occupied by the authorities, not their servants, and the door in the set of *Party Time* opens on to the regime’s torture cells. The dumb waiter is a disregarded hatch, until it jerks into life half-way through the play. In *Party Time*, the door through which Jimmy enters stands half-open throughout, but is never used. And, finally, both Jimmy and Gus are linked to the authority structures that eventually destroy them; Gus has partnered Ben on an unspecified number of such jobs, and Jimmy is closely related to two of the partygoers.

There is, however, another, more pervasive link between the texts, one which explains the treatment meted out to Gus and to Jimmy, and which places that treatment in a wider context. As in *The Dumb Waiter*, what we have is the image of power as inherently carnivalesque. In *The Dumb Waiter*, the Carnavalesque exercise of

power manifests itself in the increasingly bizarre, increasingly intrusive requests for food that travel down it. These requests strongly suggest authorities who are used to indulgence, to satisfying the body first and foremost. In the more overtly political plays of the 80s and 90s, those characters who exercise authority do not do so in the service of any particular ideology. They pay lip service to religion (as Nicholas does in *One for the Road*), to the nation (as the soldiers do in *Mountain Language*), or to modes of correct behavior (in *Party Time*). But when they operate, they do so in a manner that links the exercise of power for its own sake with the idea of indulgence and excess: whether it is Nicholas in *One for the Road*, drinking whisky after whisky; Gavin, rhapsodizing over the hot towels on offer at the club in *Party Time*; the soldiers, sizing up the arses of the female prisoners in *Mountain Language*; the dinner guests in *Celebration*; or Devlin, conflating sexuality and torture in *Ashes to Ashes*.

Furthermore, when these characters talk about power, they do so in terms and images which are drawn, in Bakhtin's phrase, from the "material bodily stratum (370)." Nicholas in *One for the Road*:

[...]I hear you have a lovely house. Lots of books. Someone told me my boys kicked it around a bit. Pissed on the rugs, that sort of thing. I wish they wouldn't do that [...] But you know what it's like -- they have such responsibilities -- and they feel them -- they are constantly present -- day and night [...] and so, sometimes, they piss on a few rugs [...]. (228)

Des in *The New World Order*:

You called him a cunt last time. Now you call him a prick. How many times do I have to tell you? You've got to learn to define your terms and stick to them. You can't call him a cunt with one breath and a prick in the next. The terms are mutually contradictory [...]. (275)

Terry in *Party Time*:

[...]You're getting real catering. You've got catering on all levels. You've not only got very good catering in itself -- you know, food, that kind of thing -- and napkins -- you know, all that, wonderful, first rate -- but you've also got artistic catering -- you actually have an atmosphere -- in this club -- which is catering artistically for its clientele. I'm referring to the kind of light, the kind of paint, the kind of music, the club offers. I'm talking about a truly warm and harmonious environment. You won't find voices raised in our club. People don't do vulgar and sordid and offensive things. And if they do

we kick them in the balls and chuck them down the stairs with no trouble at all. (310)

Devlin in *Ashes to Ashes*:

[...] When you have a wife you let thought, ideas and reflection take their course. Which means you never let the best man win. Fuck the best man, that's always been my motto. It's the man who ducks his head and moves on through no matter what wind or weather who gets there in the end. A man with guts and application. (*pause*) A man who doesn't give a shit. A man with a rigid sense of duty. (*pause*) There is no contradiction between these last two statements. Believe me. (415)

And, indeed, for Devlin and for the characters like him, there is no contradiction. The man who wins is the man who favors his guts and his genitals over his mind and spirit. The man who wields power does so in order to slake his appetites. The man who exercises power does so by countenancing physical assault and degradation. We might say that the exercise of power in these plays is entirely visceral, entirely bound up in the operations of the body. Therefore, power can only be described as sensual excess; and the enforcing of power can only be talked of in terms that are overtly, grossly scatological and sexual. In Bakhtinian carnival, such language is a sign of freedom and of the breaking of bonds that hold the lower classes in place. In Pinter's work, such language is also a sign of freedom, but the freedom of the rulers, not the freedom of the ruled.

In *The Dumb Waiter*, both Ben and Gus display a similar fascination with the operation of power on the body. For example, the stories read out by Ben at the play's beginning are stories of violent death: in both cases, the question of who is responsible -- who had the power of life and death, in each case -- is uppermost in both their minds. Even their memories of going to a football match together revolve around a disputed penalty; Ben, convinced that the penalty was awarded correctly, describes the foul with some relish ("Didn't touch him! What are you talking about? He laid him out flat!") (121). Characters like Devlin, Des and Nicholas talk about power from the perspective of the rulers, happy to describe the operations of power as a graphic assault on the powerless. Located as they are at a different point in the hierarchy, Gus and Ben are, understandably, rather more concerned about who does what to whom; determining exactly where the threat of violence is coming from is, for obvious reasons, of

pressing concern for the two of them. Moreover violence, when it occurs, is discussed in terms of secretions and waste. Granted, the conventions of the time (and the pressure of theater censorship) militated against strong language; but when Gus wishes to register his disquiet about the type of work he does, he focuses on the physical harm done to the victim -- and he does so in terms which are graphic enough:

GUS: I was just thinking about that girl, that's all...She wasn't much to look at, I know, but still. It was a mess, though. Honest, I can't remember a mess like that one. They don't seem to hold together like men, women. A looser texture, like. Didn't she spread, eh? She didn't half spread... (130-31)

Similarly, their complaints and comments about their immediate location tend to be about the level of comfort (or otherwise) that it provides: about the time the cistern takes to fill, the state of the crockery, the lack of comfort provided by the beds. It is also worth noting that perhaps the most memorable argument that they have is not about the nature of their work, but concerns the correct way to talk about putting the kettle on.

In their concern for comfort, their awareness of the damage done by those in power to the human body and the fact that their conversation always circles back to food (or the lack of it), Ben and Gus are recognizably part of the same universe as the characters in Pinter's later work. They are, however, positioned, literally, at the opposite end of the supply chain. As they note, the place where they wait "probably used to be a café," (132), and they are most likely located in what used to be the kitchen. They are therefore in the correct physical position to provide sustenance for those higher up the food chain. However, they are in no position to do so in reality, and Gus in particular has the suspicion that those placing the order are already well supplied:

[...]Who knows what he's got upstairs? He's probably got a salad bowl. They must have something up there. They won't get much from down here. You notice they didn't ask for any salads? They've probably got a salad bowl up there. Cold meat, radishes, cucumbers. Watercress. Roll mops. *(pause)* Hardboiled eggs. *(pause)* The lot. They've probably got a crate of beer too. Probably eating my crisps with a pint of beer now [...]. (141-42)

The process of stripping Gus of everything he has, it seems, is already well underway before the end of the play: those at the other end of the dumb waiter have already begun the process of consumption that will lead to his eventual death. This process is, moreover, dramatized through what we might call an inversion, a parody, of the “*grotesque swing*” Bakhtin finds in carnival (371). The process of debasement in these plays is associated with an upward movement, from the disused kitchens inhabited by the likes of Ben and Gus, to the well-stocked, well-appointed rooms inhabited by the characters in *Party Time*. In these rooms, as Terry reminds us, there is catering at all levels -- except the lowest levels, the ones occupied by Gus and Jimmy, the levels at which you have nothing and where you sit, sucking the dark.

4. Conclusion

Pinter, interviewed in 1996, was keen to point out the similarities between his early plays and his later work:

My plays are not political discussions. They are living things. They are certainly not debates. They are violent. Violence has always been in my plays, from the very beginning. *The Room* ends with a sudden, totally gratuitous act of violence on the part of a man who kicks a negro to death. I was quite young at the time, but looking back it doesn't seem to me to be a wild or bizarre thing. We are brought up every day of our lives in a world of violence. (qtd in Smith 93)

It is the sudden eruption of violence into the world of Pinter's plays that is largely responsible for their unsettling, visceral impact. As Chiasson notes, the atmosphere that this generates is, once again, remarkably consistent -- not in every play that Pinter wrote, but in a number of works across the span of his career. The term “Comedy of Menace,” as Chiasson argues, deserves a wider application than it is normally given:

My more general aim in troubling the will to periodization and thus dialoguing Pinter's “distant” aesthetic past with his more recent past is to suggest how a definition and a concept such as comedy of menace need not be seen as monolithic and static; it is, rather, ever-expandable and open, and can thus be continually developed as a critical tool for engaging with Pinter's oeuvre.

My argument, effectively, runs parallel to Chiasson's. The violence, and the menacing comedy, of Pinter's earlier and later work are rendered even more powerfully unsettling in performance, because of the light they cast on the nature of the violent world that we inhabit. Such unpredictable texts cannot be viewed in a spirit of intellectual curiosity; they demand a response from the gut.

I would argue, though, that in relation to *The Dumb Waiter*, the idea of the visceral is linked not only to the profoundly unsettling shifts between comedy and violence Chiasson identifies. The workings of the gut, it could be argued, also dominate the world of Pinter's play. *The Dumb Waiter* relies, for much of its unsettling impact, on what might be termed a metaphorical inversion of the viscera. If we think of the waiter itself as a mouth, then the channel that it opens onto becomes, by extension, a throat, and the ultimate destination of Ben and Gus' offerings is a stomach. It is bound up with the idea of appetite, with consumption (and particularly with over-consumption, and its opposite -- want and starvation). It is given a memorable physical incarnation in the dumb waiter itself -- a maw, placed center-stage, swallowing all the meager rations that Ben and Gus have.

As with the Carnival practices that Bakhtin describes, the operation of power in the play manifests itself in excessive consumption; but, unlike the revelers in the medieval marketplace, the act of consumption is not a sign of the heavens brought down to Earth. The direction of travel has been reversed: food is pushed into the gaping mouth of the dumb waiter, and then it ascends. Bakhtin imagines the ever-hungry stomach (a crucial part of the Carnival body) as rooted to the ground; ironically, what we have here is a simple reversal of that image -- the mouth on stage, the stomach suspended somewhere over the heads of Ben and Gus. And it is this image of power-- as consumption, as Carnival excess gone wrong -- that provides Pinter with an abiding image of the relation between rulers and ruled, an image which resonates along the length of Pinter's writing career.

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Notes

¹ See for example Gardiner 1992, Holquist 2002, Pechey 2007.

² Alexei Stakhanov was a miner in Stalin's Russia, whose reputed capacity to work hard was mythologized by the regime; 'Stakhanovites' were workers who, according to communist propaganda, were committed to working unselfishly in the service of the Revolution.

³ For a related discussion of the links between Bakhtin and Pinter's work, see Griffith; for a separate but related discussion of the political links between Pinter's early and late work, see Luckhurst .

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Return of the Referent

Varun Begley

History, then, certainly “enters” the text [...]; but it enters it precisely *as ideology*, as a presence determined and distorted by its measurable absences.

Terry Eagleton (1996, 303)

[...] all contemporary works of art [...] have as their underlying impulse -- albeit in what is often distorted and repressed unconscious form -- our deepest fantasies about the nature of social life, both as we live it now, and as we feel in our bones it ought rather to be lived.

Fredric Jameson (2000, 146)

If we imagine that social desire is the raw material of all art, the question of “political art” is reoriented in salutary ways. Indeed, the phrase itself may connote an unfortunate mimetic bias

-- social desire is assumed to be visibly present in some artworks, absent in others. Yet cultural theory teaches nothing if not the inescapability of *mediation*; exposed to such theory, most would probably concede that artworks do not directly reflect social realities or yield historical knowledge in unmediated forms. At most, they exhibit patterns of sense-making and signification; models of subjectivity; ways of seeing and constructing reality; symbolic regimes of power and desire; fantasies of sociality -- in a word, ideologies -- that are themselves complex and variable historical productions.

The artwork is then the “*production of a production*,” in Terry Eagleton’s phrase (1996, 299); the work’s immediate relation is not to History but to Ideology, which, displaced from its practical or “natural” modes of transmission in the social world, is put in play aesthetically. In these terms, political art itself (like realism or modernism) would need to be historicized and considered as an ideology, as an historical outcome or symptom. This shift in emphasis has the advantage of freeing us from certain preconceptions about

political content and instead focusing attention on more general patterns of signification and social fantasy, if we are to assess the political -- i.e. social and ideological -- significance of a given work.

The early plays of Harold Pinter would seem to warrant this sort of approach, particularly in contrast to his more evidently politicized works of the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, it is clear that what is being offered in a play like *The Dumb Waiter* is not a commentary on some graspable set of social issues, but a dramatization of an alienated relationship to reality itself. In assessing the politics of this 1960 play, I want to argue that *The Dumb Waiter* partakes of a broader crisis in the ideology of realism, one that cuts across various areas of artistic, intellectual, and social practice. In this, Pinter's work participates in the ethos of much literary and cultural theory during the 1960s and 1970s -- a set of discourses that point to a crisis of the sign, as we might put it, in which the "natural" or binding relationship between representation and reality was being questioned from a variety of perspectives.

What I have in mind is a reading of *The Dumb Waiter* that argues that the play anticipates the crisis of the referent described by later theory. This reading will suggest that the play works as a reproduction of contemporaneous ideologies concerning labor and sociality; that it organizes a space for utopian desire; that it works -- aesthetically and politically -- by negating realism; and that it dramatizes the predicament of the social/psychological subject when confronted by the inaccessible but determining horizon of the Real.

This reading assumes a certain perspective on the social function of art and the relationship between aesthetic production and other areas of social reality. Faced with the retreat of the referent, various left-wing critics sought to shore up the basic perception that literary works are first and foremost *social* texts. Inheriting the skepticism of critical theory, however, it was necessary to argue that literary works do not yield reality directly, but instead signal the Real through modes of disorder that disrupt the text's dominant patterns and ideologies. The Real is thus an aesthetic category as much as a social one; the term is not identical with "reality," but instead an expression of the idea that reality exceeds representation. For politically minded critics, this category allows some positive reevaluation of the social function of art. If the conservative function of art is to "manage" social anxieties and desires -- by transforming and resolving them at an imaginary level -- it is also true that artworks are

scarred by gaps, omissions, and inconsistencies. These lacunae make us aware of the non-identity of representation and reality, and the imaginary character of textual “reality.” History resists and belies ideological resolution, and the Real might be described as textual evidence of this resistance.

I am drawing here from works by three critics writing out of the crisis-ridden milieu of the 1970s: Fredric Jameson, Richard Dyer, and Terry Eagleton (the latter indebted to Pierre Macherey). In various ways, these critics enlist critical theory in the service of political critique. A work can be considered a dynamic system in which ideologies are put in play -- and to some degree put at risk. Following Eagleton, it is crucial to emphasize that a work is a *production* of ideology (his analogy is the partly determined, partly variable theatrical production of a script); the work is thus a trans-coding between two symbolic systems, a process rather than a static reflection. Part of the interest of this process lies in the stratagems, displacements, and ruses of the trans-coding, and the extent to which artworks simultaneously reproduce and expose, transmit and disfigure, the ideologies that provide their raw material.

Ideology seeks imaginary unification of social contradiction, and, as Macherey’s work suggests, we should be alert to textual dissonances, gaps, and silences that remind us of the suppressed contradictoriness of the ideologies being reproduced. In the wake of Jameson’s influential work, one could say that artworks incorporate at least two registers of ideological contradiction: utopia and the Real. Jameson, Dyer, and others have persuasively shown how the management of utopian desire is a central vocation of ideology; consequently, the Real is best conceived as a text’s method of internally limiting its ideological imagination, its way of marking the horizon that delimits utopian fantasy and ideological machination alike. History, one might say, is aesthetically present only as a necessary limit or absence. Jameson defines the textual Real as “that which resists desire, that bedrock against which the desiring subject knows the breakup of hope and can finally measure everything that refuses its fulfillment [...] [an] absent cause, which is fundamentally unrepresentable and non-narrative, and detectable only in its effects” (1981, 184).

Rejecting realism and presupposing a crisis of the referent, this model requires a subtle account of ideological mediation as a

precondition of political criticism. In his seminal 1976 essay "Towards a Science of the Text," Eagleton argues:

Rather than 'imaginatively transposing' the real, the literary work is the production of certain produced representations of the real into an imaginary object. If it distantiates history, it is not because it transmutes it to fantasy, shifting from one ontological gear to another, but because the significations it works into fiction are already representations of reality rather than reality itself. The text is a tissue of meanings, perceptions and responses which inhere in the first place in that imaginary production of the real which is ideology. (305)

Turning now to the play, I want to test Eagleton's "tissue" hypothesis via the ideology of the gangster in *The Dumb Waiter*. To say that the play is "about" gangsters is at one level inarguable, but at the same time it also shortchanges those other formal and tonal determinants -- from vaudeville to Beckett -- that already seem to have worked over and estranged the "original" raw material. Gus and Ben are ideological ciphers, and I would suggest that the gangster code camouflages another sort of fantasy material, and that part of the interest of the play is how thoroughly it entwines symbolisms of crime with symbolisms of labor, exposing contradictions in the ideologies surrounding both.

Consider the fact that we are dealing with a special kind of gangster, namely the professional killer. The killer is a creature of the division of labor, of specialization and hierarchies, of the decisive split between mental and physical work. The figure of the killer encapsulates a particular kind of cognitive violence inflicted on the specialized laborer, whose efficiency is presumably magnified in proportion to his or her disconnection from, and ignorance of, the whole. As Ben tells Gus, who worries about the cleanup of bodies: "Do you think we're the only branch of the organization? [...] They got departments for everything" (130). The specter of the "organization" alerts us to a key ideological substratum of gangsters in popular culture -- the extent to which preoccupation with gangsters is preoccupation with crime *as business*, and thus indirectly with *business as crime*.

"What is robbing a bank compared to founding a bank?" asks Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*, and the conjuncture of criminality and business allows us to argue that *The Dumb Waiter* is to a large

degree about labor and its discontents. This perspective enables us to link two of the play's key symbolic registers -- the theme of the disgruntled employee and the problem of waiting/temporality. The theme of disgruntlement is conveyed via sporadic remarks that constitute a tonal pattern in the play; a few examples may suffice:

GUS: Well, I like to have a bit of a view, Ben. It whiles away the time. [...] I mean, you come into a place when it's still dark, you come into a room you've never seen before, you sleep all day, you do your job, and then you go away in the night again. *Pause*. I like to get a look at the scenery. You never get the chance in this job.

BEN: You get your holidays, don't you?

GUS: Only a fortnight. (118)

GUS: Well, we have done in the past, haven't we? Stayed over and watched a game, haven't we? For a bit of relaxation.

BEN: Things have tightened up, mate. They've tightened up. (121)

GUS: Half the time he doesn't even bother to put in an appearance, Wilson.

BEN: Why should he? He's a busy man. (129)

GUS: How can this be a café?

BEN: It used to be a café.

GUS: Have you seen the gas stove?

BEN: What about it?

GUS: It's only got three rings.

BEN: So what?

GUS: Well, you couldn't cook much on three rings, not for a busy place like this.

BEN (*irritably*): That's why the service is slow! (135)

All these pieces of workplace grumbling ask that we consider the professional killers as somehow ideologically exemplary of workers in general. The killer is a complex figure in this regard -- itinerant manual labor, urbanized and denatured, far removed from authority and decision-making, perpetually on call, waiting -- a working life "redeemed" only by intermittent episodes of violence.

The question of waiting/temporality is then central, though again overdetermined. Given that Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* appeared in English in 1954, we can stipulate the cultural familiarity of waiting as existential metaphor, but given the specificity of the other frames of reference in *The Dumb Waiter*, I would want to

consider waiting -- or better, tedium -- as a modern structure of feeling, an outcome of the labor process and accompanying forms of standardization and reification that operate across public and private spaces, in work and leisure as well. Anyone who has worked in an office knows the heartrending gap between the temporality of private fantasy and the official time of business, between the variable rhythms, contours, and modalities of internal experience and the crushing metronome of the social order.

Under modern conditions of production, the qualitative variability of time becomes increasingly a purely private, subjective concern, experienced in hope, memory, daydreaming, and fantasy. Falling asleep in an office, say, or the low-level guilt that flows from "wasting" an afternoon at work -- these are trace evidence of the incommensurability of internal and external time, and how assiduously the latter works to stamp the former with its imprint. Time is the medium through which the social order leaves its mark on subjectivity; tedium is the residue of time emptied by external pressure, colored by dim awareness of the fact that the subject no longer knows how to fill it. Tedium is ennui as protest.

The two characters take different attitudes towards time and, in doing so, encapsulate different characterological types. Gus is a semi-idealistic junior partner, alternately bored and passionate, while Ben is a capitulated company man, an authoritarian personality menaced by a punishing superego, whose obeisance to the father-figure/boss is matched by suppressed resentment that erupts in fits of guilt and misplaced hostility. Ben's mix of extreme aggressiveness and extreme servility testifies to the incoherence of a patriarchal order that combines a murder bureaucracy with the bourgeois normality of newspapers and football games. Ben suffers from obeying dubious and inconsistent fathers. As a crypto-proletarian, Gus is at least able to complain of having to be perpetually "on tap," while Ben responds that Gus's problem is not having "interests." "I've got my woodwork," Ben says, "I've got my model boats. Have you ever seen me idle?" (118). This is reminiscent of Max Horkheimer and T.W. Adorno's observation in the 1940s that work and leisure are increasingly interchangeable (137), and of Adorno's assault on popular music in the same decade, which rests on the idea that such music works as "social cement" (220), enforcing obedience through rhythm and standardization, and serving as a palliative extension of

the workday by providing the deadened worker with relief from “boredom and effort simultaneously” (219).

Gus, by contrast, refuses to fill time in the approved ways, and instead experiences idleness as a sort of fundamental dissonance between subject and world. For example, he says of the toilet, “Have you noticed the time that tank takes to fill?” (117). This deceptively banal remark leads one to wonder about all the innumerable, irrecoverable moments we spend as hostages to the temporality of apparatuses -- waiting for toilets and telephones, cold car engines, stoplights, dryers, stoves. There is a peculiar quality to such dead time, a crypto-masochistic pleasure in the inverted hierarchy of significance, which seems subtly to proclaim something about the commodity-world that we knew to be true all along. There is perhaps small relief in not having to *do* anything, and having as an alibi the mechanized temporality that structures our bouts of “busy”ness as well.

The distinction between empty and filled time is crystallized in the odd vignette about Ben stopping the car in the middle of the road, as Gus sleeps. “I woke up when you stopped,” Gus says, and goes on

It was still dark, don't you remember? I looked out. It was all misty. I thought perhaps you wanted to kip, but you were sitting up dead straight, like you were waiting for something. (119)

Here, through the imagery of nature and sleep, we seem to perceive an un-colonized temporal lacuna from which some less alienated subjective experience might emerge. Idleness presupposes busyness, while this pause in the middle of the road promises the sort of authentic subjective respite for which sleep is the ultimate paradigm. The punch-line, however, is that Ben stopped the car because they were “too early” (120), affirming the ironic fact that the pastoral interlude was intended only to assure complete punctuality.

This reading of the play via ideologies of labor and time has a final surprise, one that serves as a reminder of the complexity of the relation between text and ideology (and the even more complex relation between text and history). Overlaid on the symbolic architecture of crime/business is the unexpected activation of the dumb waiter and the consequent stereoscopic shift in which our two killers are transformed into restaurant workers. As bizarre as this

development undoubtedly is, it extends the movement from crime-genre connotations towards a broader symbolism of labor, as Gus and Ben now appear to be cryptograms of the proletariat in some broad and puzzlingly inter-textual sense.

But the restaurant orders and the characters' inadequate responses to them entwine the ideology of labor with a different sort of production of the ideology of realism. Here I do not mean Jameson's notion of the Real as absence or negation, but rather realism as a style based on the illusion of *presence*, on a representational fullness that blinds us to the fact that claims to the real -- premised on notions such as truth, transparency, or nature -- are invariably ideological. Indeed, one of the great contributions of literary/cultural theory in the period was the exposure of the real as something coded and produced by signifying operations -- as an effect, rather than a given, of the text. A key figure here is Roland Barthes, and it is pleasant to be able to turn to a 1968 Barthes essay on realism to clarify a problem in *The Dumb Waiter*, one that I find in much of Pinter's other work as well.

My sense is that the politics of Pinter's early plays needs to be understood in terms of a broader opposition between realist and modernist impulses. By the former I mean those occasional instances that scream "social reference!" (racism in *The Caretaker*, for example), together with general formal adherence to the conventions of dramatic realism. This realist impulse I take as expressive of historical/political desire (which finds a different sort of fulfillment in the 1980s and 1990s plays), a desire to map experience socially and historically according to more-or-less stable coordinates, to establish some full and transparent relation to the referent. Opposed to this, however, is a modernist impulse that assumes the radical inaccessibility of the referent. Through this prism, realist desire is doomed to discover merely more signifiers and codes (the interrogations in *The Birthday Party*, for example); History, as such, remains out of reach.

The dumb waiter activates this opposition in a manner reminiscent of the interrogations in *The Birthday Party*. The play begins to speak in a food idiom marked by insistent *specificity*, in contrast to the more generic activities and references in the play (tea, lorries, highways, children, cats, toilets, newspapers, matches, etc.). Again, however, the ideology of labor and class is entwined with the problem of realism, since the food references have quite different

cultural connotations. On the one hand, we have the dumb waiter's demands for braised steak and chips, teas without sugar, soup of the day, liver and onions, jam tart, macaroni pastitsio, ormitha macarounada, bamboo shoots, water chestnuts and chicken, and char siu and bean sprouts. These elaborate demands are set against Gus and Ben's paltry offerings of McVitie and Price, Lyons Red Label, Smith's Crisps, Eccles cake, and Cadbury's Fruit and Nut.

The two codes certainly could be taken as a class allegory, with the localized authenticity of ethnic cuisine set against the brand names of mass-produced junk food. In the larger context of the play, however, both codes display dismaying mimetic innocence, a confident "pointing" toward known frames of reference. We begin to perceive the outlines of a referential code that runs intermittently through much of Pinter. In contrast to the use of referential detail in naturalism/realism, however, the specificity here feels gratuitous and unearned. The transcribed details of naturalism/realism presuppose a sense of organic totality, an interconnected, metonymic world with binding, meaningful relations between characters and their environments, in which one might perceive something fundamental of a person's identity from a pocket-watch or piece of furniture.

Of course, totality and interconnection are ideological effects rather than facts of nature, and Pinter's use of the referential code lays bare some of the political implications of the realist enterprise. It is a commonplace that bourgeois realism is a "closed" style, one that works to naturalize a particular hegemonic version of reality. Moreover, realism's reliance on illusionism is generally understood to disguise the fact that every representation, however ostensibly neutral, smuggles in an ideological perspective, a way of seeing. This closet authoritarianism is further detectable in realism's preoccupation with "truth" and disclosure, its distrust of ambiguity and alternative possibilities, and the teleological subordination of subject-matter to the end of narrative closure.

Realism partly enacts such formal coercion through a particular way of using details. In his essay "The Reality Effect," Barthes argues that in realistic fiction there exists a species of otherwise gratuitous details whose function is to say no more and no less than "we are the real" (234). Paradoxically, such details are able to fulfill this function in direct proportion to their narrative irrelevance. A detail must conspicuously be shorn of any sense of motivation, of having a meaningful function, if it is to assume its other

“meaning,” which is to signify the utter contingency, the brute factuality of reality itself. (His example is a barometer on a piano in Flaubert’s “A Simple Heart.”) Such details signify, in other words, but in an unusual way. The ambition of the reality effect is to transform the tripartite structure of the sign -- signifier/signified/referent -- such that the signified is suppressed and the signifier is felt to be purely co-extensive with the referent.

Hence, one standard function of referential specificity is to produce reality-effects that tacitly proclaim the existence of reality, making the world appear mythic, natural, and immutable, rather than historical and susceptible to change. Considered in this way, the referential code typically constitutes a sort of glue that binds the depicted social order into an unalterable monolith. One thing exists, so everything else does as well, and it is pointless to contest the society for which the detail is a token. Moreover, realism would have us believe that details are fundamentally interchangeable. What realism wants is a sense of a “very specific real situation” without the unruliness that is part and parcel of what specificity means. Realism does not want specificity, but *specificity-ness*.

At one level, the bizarre and apparently gratuitous food references in *The Dumb Waiter* would seem to create the aura of dense, unchangeable factuality for which realism strives. At the same time, these references are like a gazetteer without the map; missing are the images of totality, the holistic systems, the ideological edifices that realism builds on the ground of specificity. As Gus pithily puts it: “What town are we in? I’ve forgotten.” When Ben says Birmingham, Gus responds with the enthusiasm of a schoolboy:

That’s in the Midlands. Second biggest city in Great Britain. I’d never have guessed (121).

Typically, geographic facts function like reality-effects; their microscopic incontestability serves to naturalize the world order. But in *The Dumb Waiter*, local facts refuse to serve their ideological function -- if crisps must answer for bamboo shoots, how sure can we be about Birmingham?

In *The Dumb Waiter*, the background awakens and moves to the center, as the types of details that realism asks to be compliant and quiescent -- crockery, toilet, burner, bed sheets, matches, dumb waiter -- become sites of consternation and alarm. Realism entails symbolic

violence against reality; it guarantees the authenticity of the elements it holds out as exemplary by coercing peripheral reality into meaningless background silence, or at most the low obedient murmur of “we are the real.” In Pinter’s work, the referent returns as a categorical problem, which appears in symbolic recalcitrance and unknowability. These symbolisms are reminders of the non-identity of sign and world, of the gap between ideological systems and the realities they encode and conceal.

Utopia, then, is less a wish for a better reality than a wish for any stable reality at all. From writers like Barthes, Jameson, and Dyer, we know that the typical function of ideology in popular culture is not to silence social contradictions, but rather to speak about them, albeit in ways that naturalize existing realities, redirect radical energies, and otherwise benefit the social order. From the standpoint of the social order, however, this process may entail “playing with fire,” in Dyer’s phrase (279). In order to manage discontent, discontent must first be aroused, and, since the symbolization of social problems incarnates a wish that such problems could be resolved, it becomes imperative that such imaginary solutions accord with the existing order; that is, the social order must be seen as capable of resolving the very problems it creates. In Jameson’s words, this model of aesthetic production “allows us to think repression and wish-fulfillment together within the unity of a single mechanism,” one that “strategically arouses fantasy content within careful symbolic containment structures which defuse it” (2000, 138).

In *The Dumb Waiter*, football initially might seem to accord with Dyer’s well-known categorization of utopian problem-solving (277-8). Against the dreariness, tedium, and exhaustion of labor, football provides energetic, intense experience: “Talk about drama,” as Gus says of a remembered Villa match (121). In a world of unseen manipulation and paranoia, football offers stark, legible conflict and unambiguous resolution -- in a word, transparency. And perhaps most significantly, in a society of fragmentation and atomization, football affords temporary membership in a passionate collective and, thus, an experience of community. (Note that these imaginary solutions flow from the leisure-branch of the same society that created the problems, and depend on prettified forms of aggressiveness, integration, and ego-dissolution.)

In a different sort of play, Gus and Ben might affectionately recall a shared football experience, and football might conform to the

utopian model previously described. Here, however, utopia is overwritten by referential crisis, such that Gus and Ben cannot agree whether they were at the same cup tie; whether the match was settled by a “disputed penalty;” whether the penalty was correct or involved “acting;” whether the Villa play an aggressive style; and who the Villa were playing (21). Gus persists in his desire to see another football match as utopian compensation for the upcoming job -- asserting “I’ve always been an ardent football fan” (122) -- but the two cannot settle on a field where the home team is actually playing, leading to Ben’s melancholy summation: “Away. They’re all playing away” (123).

Via the vanishing referent, utopia and the Real begin to merge. The Real is always elsewhere, and utopia is the unrealizable desire to be present at events that are always “playing away.” There is, however, another utopian pathway that I want briefly to consider, one that will lead us back to the problem of the Real from the inside-out, as it were, from the standpoint of subjectivity. Brecht once remarked that the “smallest social unit is not the single person but two people” (197), and I would suggest that amid the ideologies of labor and alienation, a certain utopianism survives in the rudimentary impulse toward social relation. In this context, we can think about the two-character form of *The Dumb Waiter* as providing a bare-bones schematic rendering of sociality itself.

Indeed, one need not look beyond the opening and closing tableaux to sense a fixation on the basic patterns and parameters of social life, and it is useful in this context to turn to another Jameson essay, “Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan” (1977), in which he endeavors to rethink Lacanian psychoanalysis in Marxist terms. The framing structure of the play is the social dyad, a pattern whose psychoanalytic foundation is the mother-child relation. The problem of self and other dates from the highly charged first experiences in which the child begins to take itself as an object -- Lacan’s mirror stage -- and to understand the parental body as an “other,” a period in which the boundaries between self and other are still relatively fluid but where a dyadic/binary logic (inside/outside, etc.) predominates. This Imaginary order, in Lacan’s terminology, inaugurates an experience of the other simultaneously marked by aggression and desire/identification -- “a kind of situational experience of otherness as pure relationship, as struggle, violence, and antagonism, in which the child can occupy either term indifferently, or indeed, as in transitivity, both at once” (Jameson 1982, 356).

Tellingly, as the play opens, Ben is immersed in a newspaper - an axis of separation but also desire -- and Gus rather desperately (and childishly) wants to disrupt Ben's "adult" (i.e., privatized and individualistic) immersion. The newspaper thus marks the emergence of the Lacanian Symbolic order: the order of language and Law, society and reality, authority, deferral, and punishment. The Symbolic is the regime of the Other (as distinct from the dyadic other), a regime initiated by the Father -- a figure more important as a symbol or representation than as an actual person. The basic pattern of relation is henceforth triadic or triangular -- the Oedipal model -- rather than dyadic, but the triangularity of the Other is not limited to actual "third" persons, but rather flows from the compulsory deferrals, mediations, and absences that separate desire from its dyadic object and whose fundamental mode is simply language itself.

Within this situation of alienation and deferral, the Imaginary register retains considerable power for the subject, wishing away as it does the estrangements of the Symbolic and returning the dilemma of the other to more manageable, dyadic terms. In this context, in his famous essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1971), Louis Althusser suggests that ideology is a representation of an "imaginary relationship" of the subject to his or her real conditions (155); that is, the social order is the more effectively able to produce and integrate the subject if the subject experiences that order as a binary other -- an interlocutor or intimate -- rather than an abstract Symbolic network. One function of ideology is to soften or personalize the social order, to convey to the subject an imaginary (false) sense of a relation between like-minded entities, in which one's anxieties and grievances are assuaged by a society that appears as "a 'subject' which 'addresses' me personally" (Eagleton 1983, 172). Through a variety of institutions, practices, and representations, the subject is endlessly invited to take his or her place, as if at a cozy dinner party where one is always "expected" (see Althusser 163).

Utopia, then, is a register of this sort of ideological operation, in which one's alienation is compensated by an imaginary, generally regressive return to situations of comparative fullness and plenitude. In these terms, I would say that the fundamental utopian drive in *The Dumb Waiter* resides in the relationship between Gus and Ben. Across moments of comradeship, impatience, resentment, and aggression, Gus and Ben display the immediacy of "pure relationship," in which the borders of self and other are fluid and permeable. Against the

menacing abstractness of the dumb waiter's imperatives, Gus and Ben engage in a comparatively free flow of libidinal energies, and this, I would suggest, constitutes a powerful fantasy of sociality, a partial utopian (i.e., ideological) solution to the condition of alienated labor discussed above.

Fittingly, the "actual" Authority/Father never appears in the play, but the sense of a social world governed by Law progressively permeates and infects the Gus/Ben dyad, beginning with their disagreements over the newspaper, which functions as a token and instrument of the social order. Here we should recall that the Lacanian model is tripartite -- Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real. For Lacan, the Real seems to mean an arena outside signification, an order of pure immediacy known perhaps only in infancy, but an order that in some way continues to determine and orient experience, even though it can only be apprehended in mediated forms. For the subject, the Real persists as a promise or unreachable horizon, an end or destination outside language and desire, in which the compulsory deferrals of the Symbolic might finally be made good.

With characteristic bravado, Jameson concludes that the Lacanian Real "is simply History itself" (1982, 384), which suggests a convergence between the textual model outlined above and the psychoanalytic model outlined here. The function of the work of art is the ideological (Imaginary) management of anxieties about the social (Symbolic) order, and symbolization/management of the subject's radical disconnection from those global processes of time and historical change (the Real), which are textually unrepresentable and can be figured only as limitation, absence, or negation.

History, one might say, is always elsewhere, and, if we look for its signs in *The Dumb Waiter*, we might begin by thinking of the unfulfilled desire implicit in Ben's remark about the newspaper, "It's down here in black and white" (114). Black-and-whiteness is an Imaginary, ideological overlay on the vanishing Real; it symbolizes a desire that the newspaper make good its promise of unifying reality, of providing a stable frame of reference that could somehow meaningfully correlate the old man run over by the lorry and the cat killed outside the toolshed.

Yet actual History is intimated only indirectly, through ciphers and lacunae, and in this light, the play points us toward the opaque incongruousness of the dumb waiter itself. Given its anachronistic overtones, and its comparative meaninglessness in the

social world of 1960s, I think the dumb waiter marks a limit of historical desire, that is, desire to narrate the status of one's work and activity in relation to a larger community and in relation to historical time. The dumb waiter, however, is something like historicism minus the human activity that gives substance to history: it is history as pure abstraction, as reification. It marks a historical desire that can realize itself only in terms of a relic of bygone class structure; yet here historical imagination can no longer "fill" the structure with human content, but can only envisage history as pure apparatus, as emblem or signifier.

One can see how the crisis of the referent, with which we began, becomes an urgent political matter for the left-wing critics I have been discussing. Taken in a certain direction, the theoretical discourse of this crisis can be conjoined with political quietism; Eagleton links post-structuralism in particular with the melancholy aftermath of 1968: "Unable to break the structures of state power, post-structuralism found it possible instead to subvert the structures of language" (1983, 142). Against this tendency, the theoretical models outlined here are attempts to foreground social desire as the raw material of aesthetic production, and to show the complex ideological stratagems that enforce alienation from history, as well as testify to the persistence of historical desire. Against this backdrop, I want to end by opening a new question, one that has to do with the medium of theater. The various literary models discussed here necessarily bypass the theater's special way of symbolizing and deploying the Real -- namely by physical bodies and objects. As we see in the newspaper, foodstuffs, and the dumb waiter itself, Pinter's play lends the problem of the referent a particular urgency through its fixation on objects.

It is telling, in this regard, that so many of the key items -- toilet, kettle, burner, lorry, cat, etc. -- remain offstage, while onstage items, such as the newspaper and the dumb waiter, are in various ways signs of the inaccessibility or retreat of the historical Real. At the same time, Bert O. States has suggested that the theater physically displays the object-world in an estranging manner, by removing objects from the utilitarian sphere and entering them into an aesthetic arena. States argues that one of the social functions of drama is to "digest" a rapidly changing objective world by allowing audiences to re-perceive it in the theater's intentional aesthetic space. He writes: "theater ingests the world of objects and signs only to bring images to

life. In the image, a defamiliarized and desymbolized object is ‘uplifted to the view’” (37).

In these terms, a key visible token of the Real is Ben’s revolver, which plays such an important role in the closing tableau. I think that one final ideology put in play by *The Dumb Waiter* is simply the ideology of ending, of closure, which is central to the ideological project of realism discussed earlier. Prop though it certainly is, Ben’s revolver is a reminder that History, however cognitively remote, is accessible to all of us as aging, disease, hunger, deprivation, violence, and pain. It is of course a task of ideology to manage anxieties about the body as a site where History impresses itself in direct ways, and the iconography of gangsters and killers -- as part of the cultural ideology of violence -- has its own functions in this regard. Such forms typically, indeed obsessively, deploy the Real of bodily violence, but manage anxieties about such violence via aesthetic strategies such as spectacle, eroticization, and closure. At a minimum, *The Dumb Waiter* refuses such conventional resolution, and leaves the referent -- the bullet, say -- suspended as a broken promise, an open problem. This is a long distance from the evident politics of later Pinter works such as *One for the Road* or *Mountain Language*, but as an ideological production, *The Dumb Waiter* has much to say about the political and aesthetic crises of its period.

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“Disorder... in a Darkened Room:”
the Juridico-Political Space of *The Dumb Waiter*

Juliet Rufford

Franz Kafka, from “Before the Law:”

Before the Law stands a doorkeeper. To this doorkeeper there comes a man from the country and prays for admittance to the Law. But the doorkeeper says that he cannot grant admittance at the moment...

Harold Pinter, from “Order”

...And disorder feeds on the belly of order
And order requires the blood of disorder
And “freedom” and ordure and other disordures
Need the odour of order to sweeten their murders...

1. The Image of the Room

Since the earliest days of Pinter criticism, the image of the room has been key to readings of the plays that range from the Freudian to the Foucauldian. It was Pinter himself who first identified the status and function of the room as paramount to his dramatic situations, describing a recurring vision he had of two people in a room, who are revealed as the curtain goes up on the stage and about whom we sense an imminent danger (qtd in Tennyson). In what fast became an axiom of Pinter studies, the room was used to ground existentialist interpretations of the plays that made of architecture a “refuge from a certain ontological insecurity” (Chaudhuri 93-4). Martin Esslin -- then head of drama at the BBC -- produced the first critical analysis of this type in *The Theater of the Absurd* (1962) and extended his discussion of the significance of Pinter’s rooms in one of the first full-length studies of the playwright’s work: *The Peopled Wound* (1970). It

hardly needs saying, then, that the image at the center of this analysis of *The Dumb Waiter* is not a new one. However, it is used to provoke fresh argument about the politics of Pinter's early work.

The enduring popularity of Esslin's work on Pinter has meant that other approaches have sometimes been overshadowed. Whilst restating the significance of space in Pinter's work, I want to take issue with some of Esslin's pronouncements and draw attention to an alternative body of Pinter criticism, including arguments as diverse as the rediscovered voices of the New Left and some politicized strains of postmodernism. Together, these approaches reveal the political as a space of contestation and constant re-definition. They also posit spatiality as central to understandings of the political. Before offering a close reading of *The Dumb Waiter*, I shall also sketch out the curiously spatial thought of Giorgio Agamben informing my interpretation. This preamble will allow us to reassess the play's historical and critical contexts and consider the productive tensions, points of rupture and continuity that exist between the Britain of Pinter's early career and that of recent years.

Throughout successive editions of his monograph on Pinter, Esslin stood by his initial view of the dramatist as an existentialist in the Heideggerian mode, noting the correspondence of Pinter's dramatic starting point: "man's confrontation with himself and the nature of his own being" to Heidegger's conception of anxiety as the fundamental condition of Being-towards-death (1970, 35).¹ But it was French philosophy and not German that was informing the creative and intellectual life of 1950s Britain as John Stokes has pointed out (30). In particular, the ways in which Jean-Paul Sartre was reworking Heidegger's ideas may account for the co-existence of "outer" and "inner," social struggle and psychological turmoil in Pinter's work of this period, and Stokes provides evidence of Pinter's familiarity with Sartre in written projects dating from his work on the novel *The Dwarfs* in the fifties to the plays of the following decade (42).

Sartre's conviction that literature and drama provide real insight into social conditions (and, perhaps, the tools to assist in their passing) was what enabled the *Encore* critics to see more in Pinter's work than the sub-Beckettian Absurdism hurled at him by his detractors. For them, Pinter's insistence that "there are two things (individuals and society) both exist and the one makes the other" (Billington 89-90) echoed Sartre's belief that besides the subjective

aspect of existence there is also the subject's relationship to social structures (Sartre 220). While Kenneth Tynan used the minutely-focused inner lives of Pinter's characters as ammunition against a playwright antipathetic to the bold political strokes of Osborne, Arden and Wesker, challenging Pinter to say why his characters never seemed interested in "politics or general ideas" (1960), it was the Marxist Raymond Williams who called for a broader understanding of political art (10-12). Williams' claim for the political value of art that was "committed" in the Sartrean sense of the term was that it might trouble the correlation between characters located, like Pinter's, at the extreme edge of their existence and notions of selfhood that severed personal anguish from the social frameworks that could, in part, explain such difficulty (7). The cluster of plays Pinter wrote between 1957 and 1958 shares with the theater of Samuel Beckett a focus on interiority, and yet, each one off-sets the individual's quest for existential adjustment against the non-transcendent, material grounding of reality in a complex network of power relationships.

Esslin, too, distinguished Pinter's world-view from the more quietist strains of existentialism influencing Beckett and Ionesco by arguing that in Pinter's plays fear is "never just a philosophical abstraction" but is traceable to the playwright's experience of anti-Semitism in London's post-war East End and to his awareness of real, historical phenomena

-- notably, World War Two and the Holocaust (1970, 35). But Esslin's disinclination to expand on the question of Pinter's politics results in a skewed perspective on the early plays. By side-stepping Sartre, in which there is an impressive, if ultimately flawed, attempt to reconcile existentialism and Marxism, Esslin avoided having to sustain a debate about the convergences between existentialism and politics in the work of a man whose refusal of party politics stems from a deep distrust of politicians and not a shying away from the issues. Despite eventually conceding the *engagé* quality of Pinter's "post-Holocaust, postnuclear" work, Esslin's impression of the room as predominantly a metaphysical rather than geo- or even bio-political space remained unchanged (1993, 29).

Critics who were keen to probe the plays' intensely private surfaces for their hidden political aspect often did so by looking at the spatial codes involved. John Russell Taylor's *Anger and After* (1962)

grouped Pinter's first few plays with other works of social realism instantly recognizable by their "kitchen sink" settings. In the early 1970s, Kurt Tetzeli von Rosador argued that:

the room itself denotes the nature and the reason for the conflict... It is not only the circumscribed acting area, providing the aesthetic rules, not only the correlative of who is dominant but also, as the scene is shifted from one person's habitation to the other's, the externalization of the ironic reversal of parts (195-96).

Similarly, Irving Wardle found that Pinter had to be understood "in territorial terms or not at all" (40). Esslin's analysis is also at its best when it addresses questions of space and the threat to personal security. Especially pertinent is his observation that the room-door-suspense pattern in *The Dumb Waiter* is a clever variation of the situation in *The Room*, in which Rose, "looking at *her* door, was clearly a victim-to-be" (1970, 70).

Notwithstanding the recent drive to tackle the question of Pinter's politics head on -- an endeavor that has come about in response to the overtly political plays of the 1980s and the playwright's involvement in political activism -- there is little consensus about the degree to which the early plays might be considered political or about what sort of politics might be said to be at work within them. Susan Hollis Merritt's "The Outsider in Pinter and Havel" uses Hans Mayer's attempt to draw a historical passage leading "from the intentional to the existential outsider" as a means to clarify and expound on Pinter's political insights (65). Her essay traces structures of feeling encompassing self-alienation and global social alienation from the work of the 1950s to that of the early 1990s. By contrast, Austin Quigley's "Pinter, Politics and Postmodernism (I)" argues that Pinter's early dramatic technique is one of "scrutinising the local context" at such close range that any useful generalization about socio-political values is difficult to abstract (9). Quigley, therefore, prefers to locate the political in the fluid sets of family bonds and social contracts that are found in the plays' micro-contexts.

Varun Begley's essay (printed elsewhere in this volume) and my own also have very different frames of reference. Amongst other things, Begley is interested in the plurality of perceptions, "formal and

tonal determinants," that challenge the hegemony of *mimēsis* and the supposed "straight-forward" relationship of representation to reality. And, although I accept his point about the unruliness of the play's object-world and of "factual" detail that, in a more conventionally realist play, would function as "reality effects," I tend to see more direct social reference and a greater expression of "historical/political desire" in *The Dumb Waiter* than he does. What our two arguments share, I think, is a wider focus on sites of crisis and control, whether these are understood as the processes of standardization and reification that Begley addresses in relation to ideologies of labor and sociality -- or, indeed, in relation to his theme of modernism versus realism -- or whether they are seen as part of the biopolitical paradigm that has become the "hidden matrix and *nomos* of the political space in which we live" (Agamben 2000, 37).

2. The Architecture of Disorder

Reading *The Dumb Waiter* as the dramatic embodiment of Michel Foucault's ideas on disciplinary power and governmentality, Charles Grimes assigns political weight to the play by highlighting the architecture of its *mise-en-scène* (which includes its own panopticon in the form of the mechanical dumbwaiter) and by considering its action as analogous to the operations of surveillance, regulation and self-regulation within a carceral society (50). Grimes uses Foucault's theorization of how totalizing structures manage criminal and non-criminal populations to propose an interpretation in which Gus and Ben are subjected to the punitive measures of the prison. Begley notes how the symbolism of criminality in *The Dumb Waiter* is invariably connected to some aspect or institution of the legitimate world. But, whereas in Begley's scheme, symbolisms of crime and symbolisms of labor meet to expose "contradictions in the ideologies of both," Grimes' exploration of discipline in *The Dumb Waiter* reveals how criminal and non-criminal populations alike are part of a system of power built on the "replaceability" of its subjects (56). Against the grain of Pinter scholarship, Grimes does not distinguish the two assassins from law-abiding members of society -- presumably because the logic of Foucault's theory of discipline would render such a distinction useless.

There is no firm evidence in the play-text that the men are part of some criminal subculture, and much is gained from leaving questions of legitimacy and criminality open. I wish to retain Grimes' perception that there is a wider societal significance to Gus and Ben's position and build on this to re-consider the juridico-political space of the play. By looking at *The Dumb Waiter's* peculiar emphasis on machinery/the machinery of power alongside Agamben's writings on sovereign power and "bare life" in the state of exception, I shall ask how *The Dumb Waiter* might reverberate for us today.²

Agamben's work on biopolitics and juridico-political theory -- a philosophical project he describes as the completion or correction of the Foucauldian thesis (1998, 9) -- seeks to expose the consequences of removing legal restraints to the operation of power that would normally apply in democratic states. Originally declared in response to a factual situation like danger to public safety, the state of exception -- by which the law is suspended and the sovereign is free to rule without checks to its power -- is now simply "willed" and the emergency produced as a consequence of the sovereign decision (Agamben 1998, 170). Agamben sees generalization of the state of exception as the dominant form of government in contemporary politics and, paradoxically, one of the normal practices of democratic states. In his view, it is this (and not the totalization of structures of modern power) that has turned the political body into Foucault's virtual criminal body, because continual suspension of the law transforms a population of legal subjects into legal "objects," non-citizens that exist at the mercy of a pure *de facto* rule (2005, 3).

If the mundane spaces of the everyday -- whether public or private -- act as safe-havens for the self-conception of the individual and as the loci of social values, this terrain can quite suddenly become a "vast and extraordinary space of exception, in which the norm and its transgression are decided in the moment" (Minca 387).³ Certainly, the most domestic of Pinter's rooms is potentially a place of abuse and suffering; hence, a perfectly ordinary space like the basement kitchen in *The Dumb Waiter* is a useful image with which to think through the political relevance of his early work. *The Dumb Waiter* shares with *The Room*, *The Birthday Party* and *The Hothouse* a stress on the architecture of disorder that Pinter would link directly to instances of state torture and repression in his later work.

In *The Dumb Waiter*, as in the “darkened room” of Pinter’s 1996 poem “Order” (from which the epigraph above is taken), a seemingly innocuous space is transformed into a zone of undecidability in which anything is possible. The linguistic slippage that Pinter creates between the words “order,” “odour,” “ordure” and “disorder” mimics the unfolding and enfolding of the violent totalitarian impulse within what is clearly a democratic context (1998, 162). Given that democracy is incompatible with systematic suspension of the law, the “freedom-loving” state that calls a permanent state of exception is transformed into an anomic space similar to that of Pinter’s poem, in which what is at stake is a “force of law without law” (Agamben 2005, 39).

Turning to Kafka for help in describing the juridico-political aporia of the present, and claiming that Kafka’s “most proper gesture consists not... in having maintained a law that no longer has any meaning, but in having shown that it ceases to be law and blurs at all points with life,” Agamben argues that the new world order is based not on law but on orders that carry the “force-of-law” (2005, 63). For Pinter, too, Kafka was a writer imbued with a rare sense of the dynamic between violence and the law. The picture Pinter gives us in “Order,” of a space of abandonment in which any one of us can be subjected to the murderous whims of the law, is the logical next step to Kafka’s image of the separation of the law’s applicability from its formal essence in the parable “Before the Law” (also quoted above).⁴ The following interpretation of *The Dumb Waiter* is of a play that exists in similar relationship to Kafka’s tales and anticipates much of Pinter’s later poetry and plays.

3. From Secret State to State of Exception

From the start, there was much in the political climate of post-war Britain to justify a reading of *The Dumb Waiter* in terms of suspension of the law and politically or racially motivated killing. Pinter’s interest in the secret state and the capture of life by sovereign power would surely have come to light in 1958 had *The Hothouse* been produced at the time of its composition.⁵ These were formative years for a man whose concerns have long been recognized as the dehumanizing processes of total power, the hypocrisy of democratic rule and the

potentially murderous capabilities of powerful bodies. While the major liberal democracies of Britain and America pointed at the abuses of Stalinist Russia, Pinter's own brush with despotism had come in the form of the British military tribunal that trapped him in a "Kafkaesque cycle" of trial, imprisonment and compulsory re-attendance of the army medical examination that was the preliminary to conscription (Billington 24).

In addition to Britain's growing reliance on managerial rule, the Cold War period saw the deepening and extension of an official network comprising permanent government and the secret state (Dorril & Ramsay x-xi), including private vigilante operations masterminded by the Inner Policy Club, which were used to provide deniability for the security services and the Ministry of Defence (Murray 112-113). Colin Challen and Mike Hughes uncover the ways in which Britain was developing "robust" security methods, bribery, propaganda and covert operations that went as far as the occasional assassination (34-5). Although the means by which the authorities deal with dissidents has been the subject of Pinter's theatrical output from *The Birthday Party* to *Party Time*, Esslin is not the only critic to have expressed bewilderment over Pinter's dramatic settings. In his opinion, it was difficult to reconcile Pinter's use of idiomatic English and English place names with the thought that "no such round-ups, disappearances or tortures and quick deaths are likely in this milieu" (2000, 213).

It is worth hanging onto a sense of dirty politics in *The Dumb Waiter*'s real-life backdrop although the use of illegal techniques, for which governments can be held accountable, is less urgent an issue than the legalization without question of extreme measures. It is in this context that I want to consider the name Wilson for the play's enigmatic, absent boss and to begin to tease out the model of power that I see at work in *The Dumb Waiter*. It is widely known that American president Woodrow Wilson's name became a by-word for hypocrisy.⁶ Pinter parodies Wilson's rhetoric of morally-sanctioned regime change in his 1991 sketch *The New World Order*, in which a duo of professional torturers -- modeled partly on Gus and Ben -- boast that they are "keeping the world clean for democracy" (1993, 423). But it is the precise political means by which Wilson took personal control over US internal affairs and asserted the superiority of American principles abroad that is of greatest interest.⁷ In

persuading Congress to grant him supreme authority over the nation at any time that he considered there to be a threat to security, Wilson practised a form of politics first defined by the German legal theorist Carl Schmitt, in 1921, as power over sovereign decision (Agamben 2005, 32). This form of governance, which Agamben believes to have reached its maximum worldwide deployment in today’s states of exception, sees the decline of rule by law and a concomitant triumph of the administration of the absence of order (2005, 87).

4. The Spatial Ontology of the State of Exception

Like Foucault, Agamben sees modernity as characterized by a radical tendency to gain control over life, although he grants biopolitics a much longer genealogy. Reworking as “bare life” the first term in the *zoē / bios* opposition, by which Aristotle distinguished biological existence (*zoē*) from the qualified life of citizens living within the political realm (*bios*), Agamben revivifies a figure from ancient Roman culture known as the *homo sacer* (Agamben 1998, 8). This is the figure of the outcast or exception, who has been stripped of juridical protection and political rights and whose “bare life” is expendable because it is merely the remainder to the destroyed political *bios*. In another movement away from Foucault, Agamben tells us that the state of exception actually produces this figure and that, together with the process by which the exception has become the norm, the realm of politically unqualified life (which was originally situated at the margins of the political order) has started to merge with the political realm. In this new space, “bare life” becomes the inner, hidden norm of the political and is distributed throughout it as the “inassimilable remnant” (Płonowska Ziarek 90).

State of Exception takes as its starting point the Schmittian statement that the sovereign is “the one to whom the juridical order grants the power of proclaiming a state of exception and, therefore, of suspending the order’s own validity” in order to probe the relationship between sovereignty and life introduced in *Homo Sacer* (Agamben 2005, 1). Agamben pays particular attention to the implicit topology of the paradox of sovereignty, that is, to the mechanism by which sovereign power, possessing the legal means to suspend the juridical order, places itself (legally) outside of the law. Using Schmitt’s insight

that “normal” juridico-political order is senseless without territorial grounding (and without the meaning granted by such grounding), Agamben alternates the terms “state” of exception with “space” or “zone” of exception and reaffirms the occupation of territory as a foundational gesture, involving not only the taking of land but above all the capture of a space in which the juridico-political order can validate itself (2005, 35). Indeed, it is important to think of the state of exception as simultaneously a space and a performance (Gregory 407): the ground on which sovereign power constitutes and extends itself and a dividing practice that affects a passage between law and violence (Dillon 56).

Although the state of exception is “essentially unlocalizable,” definite spatio-temporal limits can be assigned to it from time to time (Agamben 1998, 19). Taking that most notorious example of a prolonged state of exception -- Hitler’s continual suspension of the Weimar constitution to rule over Nazi Germany -- Agamben theorizes the camp as the space opened up when the state of exception begins to become the rule and gains a permanent spatial form (1998, 20; 168-69). The philosopher cites a football stadium in Bari, used by Italian police to detain illegal Albanian immigrants in 1991, and the *zones d’attentes* inside French international airports as instances of an expanded definition of the camp, explaining that we are “virtually in the presence of a camp every time such a structure is created, independent of the kinds of crime that are committed there and whatever its denomination and specific topography” (1998, 174). As a kind of legal no man’s land in which “public law” blurs with “political fact” (Agamben 2005, 1), the camp gives rise to new forms of domination and provides the opportunity for politics to become biopolitics. In this optic, the state or zone of exception is a void or blank in which a vexed relationship between law and lawlessness allows order to mutate into disorder.

5. Before the Law: the Legal No Man’s Land of *The Dumb Waiter*

The action of *The Dumb Waiter* takes place in just such a legal no man’s land. The play is characterized by confusion about localization (or illocalization) and about performative categorizations such as criminal/non-criminal -- philosophical problems that the theater is

ideally equipped to demonstrate on account of the complexity and fluidity of its various actual and fictional spaces. The basement kitchen -- neither fully operational nor entirely defunct -- is a zone of undecidability that plays host to extraordinary, arbitrary, decisional power. The scenario of the two assassins, who lie in wait for a victim to enter a trap and who answer to an authority whose workings are (quite literally) above their heads, defines spatiality and the implicit topology of power as vital to the play's meaning.

This image of an anomic space, of a room that is going to prove exceptional, is strengthened by Pinter's creation of a dramatic object-world that does not behave according to the received conventions of realist theater, even though the play can be described as realist to the extent that it takes a "critical look at... state power... power used to undermine, if not destroy the individual, or the questioning voice" (Knowles 25). Begley's essay observes how the "background awakens and moves to the center, as the sorts of details that realism asks to be compliant and quiescent -- crockery, toilet, burner, bed sheets, matches, dumb waiter -- become sites of consternation and alarm." In *The Dumb Waiter*, as in the early non-dramatic works *Kullus* and "The Examination," architectural space is portrayed as quasi-animate and aggressive and the characters' distress is suggested chiefly as an effect that the building and its contents (toilet, gas meter, cooker) have on them. Certainly, the perennial question in Pinter's plays of dominance and subservience is thrown into relief by the conceit of a mechanized dumbwaiter that enslaves the humans it was built to serve.

Stranded at the interstices of sovereign and disciplinary power, the men are forced to remain in a condition similar to house arrest until they receive the next order. Whereas the play's various off-stage locations vacillate between secret places dimly remembered and the kind of glaring geographical specificity noted in Begley's "Return of the Referent," Gus and Ben's world is always narrowly confined. As the play unfolds, we learn that the hired hit-men spend their time detained in a series of non-places and that, even in their own homes, they are constantly "on tap... you can't move out of the house in case a call comes" (1996, 7). According to Gus, the two barely see daylight: "I mean, you come into a place when it's still dark, you

come into a room you've never seen before, you sleep all day, you do your job, and then you go away in the night again" (1996, 118).

Within the acting area, a certain siege mentality is explainable in terms of architecture's function of containment and of the tension created by the door -- the threshold between interior and exterior, unknowable space. However, to a great extent, the horror of the situation in the basement room is that the machinery of the dumbwaiter becomes a law unto itself. When it clatters into action mid-way through the play, it places impossible demands on the hitmen for dishes that range from "Soup of the Day" and "Jam Tarts" to "Macaroni Pastitsio" and "Char Sui and Beansprouts." Eventually, it will send down the order that the target, who has "arrived and will be coming in straight away," should be exterminated using the "normal method" (1996, 148). Thus, to the phenomenological idea of the room as the experienced space through which we think all space, our basic mental unit of architecture, Pinter adds the projection of our fears about the transformation of the room into a deadly trap, casting the putative safety of built space into grave doubt.⁸

By exploiting the theater's emphasis on object-hood, Pinter shows how structural and spatial mechanisms can facilitate power's thanato-political drive, the unmediated subjection of life to death that Agamben sees as inscribed into Western politics. Reading Pinter's treatment of space and place retroactively as the dramatization of a "geography of exception," we might even say that *The Dumb Waiter* maps the co-ordinates of the new biopolitical order. Gus' only crime is that he has begun to question aspects of his job. What his transformation into intended victim points to is a regime so ruthless in its treatment of opposition that it can only be described as totalitarian, although the play's topographical specificity, its Birmingham setting and its reference to the London- and midlands-based football teams Tottenham Hotspur and Aston Villa, can leave us in little doubt that it takes place in Britain.

Most alarmingly, Gus and Ben's work involves arriving at designated sites of execution to assassinate anonymous individuals for reasons unknown. Pinter has reminded us in his work as a campaigner for human rights as well as in later plays that the overwhelming majority of citizens subjected to state atrocities in numerous countries around the world have committed no crime but "their very existence is an offence, since that existence in some way or another poses critical

questions or is understood to do so" (1985, 16). Through the specific circumstances of *The Dumb Waiter*, it is already possible to see a diagram immanent to the wider social field. I see the predicament of the comic stooges as suggestive of how sections of civil society find themselves languishing inexplicably before a law that has been reduced to the zero degree of its significance, but is nevertheless still in force. In the latter part of the twentieth century, this has been played out by modern states that can eliminate "whole categories of the population that resist being integrated into the political system" through the voluntary creation of emergency situations (Agamben 2005, 2).

This reading of the labyrinthine power structure and its abandoned execution rooms as state-sanctioned is all the more persuasive in light of *The Hothouse*, in which the "Ministry" uses a secure hospital to conduct biopolitical experiments on a group of numbered inmates. Both plays are remarkable for representing the almost militaristic operations of power and, once we accept that the levels of bureaucracy alluded to throughout *The Dumb Waiter* gesture not towards criminality but towards officialdom, we can readily appreciate how the tactics of the secret state and governance by exception might be implicated in the play's gangster codes. The men are members of a network large enough to have "departments for everything," to take on "senior partners," to put new staff through rigorous "tests" and to be bound by statutory rights such as holiday time (1996, 131; 118; 146). For this reason, I find Esslin's explanation of the two characters as terrorists constructed along the lines of the IRA unlikely (1993, 30). His identification of Gus and Ben as the first in a long line of professional executioners and/or torturers that stand at the heart of Pinter's work and that include both "terrorist cells" and the "Kafkaesque secret police organizations of the totalitarian world" is doubtless right but few would argue that Pinter's principle concern is with illegal organizations (1993, 30).

In fact, it is Kafka's insistence that the most sinister abuses of power are official and not criminal that gives Pinter's work its peculiar edge; that uneasy knowledge that we share with the playwright that even his funniest play is only "funny up to a point" (qtd in Tennyson). Gus' reference to being driven through the night to reach the basement flat somewhere in Birmingham recalls the

dénouement of Kafka's *The Trial*, in which Joseph K. is taken through the night-time streets to visit the place of his execution. Both episodes have a dreaminess that belies the seriousness of the situation. Kafka writes of how the "moon shone down on everything with that simplicity and serenity which no other light possesses" (1992, 249) Pinter has Gus say: "It was still dark, don't you remember? I looked out. It was all misty" (1996, 119). Cut off from the rest of their society in basement 'camps,' dumbly waiting, Gus and Ben are subjected to the same disjunctive fusions of "law" and "rule," "right" and "order" that Kafka (in Agamben's reading) presents as part of the machinery of power that is able to draw a performative boundary between those to whom it is prepared to extend certain (provisional) privileges and the "life that does not deserve to live" (Agamben 1998, 136-43).

Closely linked to this situation, in which an escalation of orders and instructions is matched by increasing lawlessness, are the questions of responsibility and the construction of criminality. In *Harold Pinter and the Twilight of Modernism*, Begley argues convincingly that one of the main purposes of the two newspaper articles that Ben reads aloud at the beginning of the play is to call into question the "black-and-whiteness" of the world (89). Taking up his theme, I want to highlight the killers' (and our) uncertainty about the position and precision of juridical, political and ethical boundaries in this play. On such a shifting terrain, transgression and culpability are hard to pin down. The anecdote of the eighty-seven year-old man who was killed when he crawled underneath a lorry, and the story about the little girl involved in the cat-killing incident, contain hints that the real power of decision-making may have been located elsewhere: in the first story, with some unknown adviser; in the second, with the child's older brother, who is ghoulishly supposed to have watched the whole thing from a nearby toolshed. As Gus and Ben struggle to supply an acceptable causality that would justify each lurid "effect" in Ben's paper, the sub-text hints at the anomy and disorder that Agamben sees as the salient features of the contemporary political scene. In this juridically derelict space, the killers' anxiety about protocol, precedent and right is signalled in almost every one of their exchanges. When Gus hears what happened to the old man, his language takes on legal overtones: "who advised him to do a thing like that?" (1996, 114). But, if his words invoke legality, their effect on the audience is to

heighten perception of the gap between “public law” and “political fact” or the facts of life-as-it-is-lived (Agamben 2005, 1).

Pinter opposes contrasting conceptions of order (as coercive rule, as justice or right and as natural order) throughout *The Dumb Waiter*. Subversions of protocol and the natural order may be “enough to make you want to puke,” but use of the joke format together with the sheer outlandishness of the events that Ben describes are genuinely funny (1996, 114). Gus’ challenge to the hierarchical order between himself and Ben -- as demonstrated in the “light the kettle” sequence, when Ben unthinkingly concedes linguistic victory to his subordinate -- combines humor with an unnerving sense that the men’s roles are interchangeable. Also blackly amusing is Gus’ mention of a football game they once saw, which elicits an initial denial of having been there from Ben, but ends with Ben’s vigorous correction of Gus’ memory of play. “Dispute” and “foul play” are repeated motifs of the men’s conversation (1996, 121). Later, in a phrase he shares with Goldberg, the more bullying partner from *The Birthday Party*, Ben will accuse Gus of “playing a dirty game” (1996, 134).

Whereas most critics have shown less interest in Ben than in Gus, I want to insist that Pinter’s theme of dis/order is most effectively explored through the pairing of both. What makes Ben such a good character is that he convinces us of how power co-opts certain individuals, forcing them to act as its agents. Like the Jewish guard in the concentration camp, whose survival was predicated on his willingness to assist in expediting and organizing the Nazi terror, Ben is simultaneously perpetrator and victim. His supposed allegiance to the authority in *The Dumb Waiter* is made apparent in the *great deference* with which he speaks through the tube (1996, 139), and his refusal to empathize with his partner:

What do you want a window for? ... What are you complaining about? ... (1996, 118)

Moreover, his tendency to rationalize aspects of the situation unnerves Gus. He even goes as far as to suggest that Gus’ disquiet stems from the absence of diverting hobbies in his life. But, in truth, Ben’s position could hardly be more precarious. After all, power feels no obligation to those whose service it has extracted from them. It simply

moves on, as do Ben's imagined restaurateurs, who move because they "don't find it a going concern" (1996, 132).

6. When the Exception Becomes the Rule

For Agamben, as we have seen, the consequence of the emergency situation or exception becoming the rule is a political system that "transforms into an apparatus of death" (2005, 86). Consequently, we need to grasp that it is not Gus alone but both partners who are implicated in the judgment against Gus. The men have previously meted out summary punishment to others in a manner more machine-like than human, and the irony is complete when we see Gus pushed roughly into the room, stripped of his waistcoat, holster and gun and condemned, as it were, by the machine. The stand-off that finishes the stage business may be theatrically crude and melodramatic, but it affords us a politically pregnant moment. In Gus' and Ben's silence can be heard the echoes of the killers' last assignment, and Gus' macabre fascination over a girl he describes in terms of biological matter:

What a mess. Honest, I can't remember a mess like that one. They don't seem to hold together like men, women. A looser texture, like. Didn't she spread, eh? She didn't half spread. Kaw! (1996, 130-31)

Now Gus is to become a human-animal, delivered over to a law that applies to him in no longer applying. Any real sense of his (or Ben's) uniqueness is eliminated, a fact that is underlined by his being simultaneously an assassin and the target.

Since norm and transgression occupy a "mobile confine that we, as citizens, are not consented to know, but that requires us *to be ready to die to save ourselves*" (Minca 387), any citizen of a regime of exception could be singled out for "liquidation." It is as an exception - literally "that which is taken outside" -- in that Gus is forced to walk through the door at the end of *The Dumb Waiter*. His re-entry from the street restates the inside/outside problematic and marks this space as a kind of camp, a zone in which the way-things-should-be (juridical protection) has become completely confused with the ways-things-are (political fact). This area of indistinction between outside and inside,

exception and rule -- towards which the newspaper incidents repeatedly gesture -- is the threshold on which the very concepts of subjective right and juridical protection have become a mockery (Agamben 1998, 170). This is the essence of the dislocating localization of space in Pinter's rooms and of the sense of disorder that pervades *The Dumb Waiter*.

Juliet Rufford

Notes

¹ Esslin uses the Sartrean term "bad faith" in his introduction; he even quotes Pinter's quotation of Sartre's "nausea," and yet, he does not mention Sartre by name.

² Agamben's work from 1995 onwards is concerned with these questions. Particularly relevant are *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* and *State of Exception*. Agamben builds on aspects of the political thought of Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault but departs from each in significant ways. For Agamben's critique of Foucault, see Heller-Roazen's introduction to *Homo Sacer*. For more information on the overlaps and discontinuities between Arendt, Foucault and Agamben, see Alison Ross' "Introduction" in *The Agamben Effect*.

³ Minca's example of such a space is the London Underground, which was suddenly transformed into a zone of exception in July 2005, when Brazilian electrician Jean Charles de Menezes -- wrongly suspected of being a terrorist -- was killed by members of the Metropolitan Police Force without murder having been committed.

⁴ Agamben's interpretation of "Before the Law" is more fully expounded in *Homo Sacer*, 49-58

⁵ As it was, *The Hothouse* was not performed or published until 1980.

⁶ Circumstances surrounding two other men named Wilson could suggest either one of them as a possible source for the name. In 1954, the Labour Party's Harold Wilson was a member of the "First Eleven" of Bevanites, whose clandestine meetings were halted when the National Executive Committee began a small-scale but protracted witch-hunt that resulted in the expulsion of several Trotskyist figures from the group's "Second Eleven" (Brockway 164-65). It may have been the secrecy of the Bevanite group and the acrimonious manner in which its members were investigated that Pinter wanted to suggest in Gus' mention of a photograph of "The First Eleven," which puzzles him because the men in the picture "all look a bit old" (1996, 5). Colin Wilson is another possible source. Wilson had used his novel *The Outsider* (1956) as a call to conservative writers to join him in founding a political party based on his conviction that effective political power ought to be in the hands of the five per cent minority equipped to use it. Pinter singles Colin Wilson out for attack in a letter to his former English teacher dated October 1957 (BL deposit: 10393).

⁷ Woodrow Wilson's success in forcing the League of Nations to recognise the Monroe Doctrine in its Article 21 was an important step on the road to US global hegemony. The Monroe Doctrine, which he used to assert US imperialist power

over Latin America, paved the way for the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928, which took away the League of Nations' power to make the crucial decisions about world peace. The Truman Doctrine extended America's imperialist pretensions (as set out in the Monroe Doctrine) from South America to the rest of the world.

- ⁸ In Pinter, the image of the room contains implicit critique of Gaston Bachelard's nostalgic and idealistic view of felicitous space as expressed in the seminal phenomenological text: *The Poetics of Space*. In this respect, Pinter follows the thought expressed in Kafka's "The Burrow," in which a place of safety and retreat becomes a trap.

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**High Art or Popular Culture:
Traumatic conflicts of representation and
postmodernism in Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter***

Catherine Rees

1. Introduction to *The Dumb Waiter* and postmodernity

Pinter's complex, enigmatic and ambiguous plays are not often described as "low art" or as products of popular culture. Indeed, his work seems to reject easy interpretation and discussion, deliberately forestalling hermeneutic urges and deferring action and resolution. *The Dumb Waiter* displays this problem quite overtly, refusing a conclusion or explanation to the action when "a long silence" (149) gives way to inaction and the curtain falls on Ben failing to either shoot Gus or to lower his gun. This ending (or non-ending) denies the audience any closure of action and narrative and refuses to imply or suggest any conclusion of plot or storyline. Indeed, any attempt to ascribe "story" onto *The Dumb Waiter* seems doomed to failure, as critics seem incapable of agreeing the correct way to read this play -- do we attempt to seek "meaning" in the roles of the two gunmen, or do we accept the seeming absurdity on its own terms, and enjoy the inconclusive action?¹

Despite the difficulty in providing adequate explanations for this play, Varun Begley has argued that Pinter's work can be seen to "traverse the Great Divide² [...] between modernism and its historical "others:" popular entertainment, politically committed art, technological mass culture" (4). Furthermore, Begley asserts that *The Dumb Waiter* is "his lightest play" (22) and that it is largely constructed of stereotypical, mass culture figures, such as that of the gangster or private detective, popular in Hollywood iconography. He goes on to suggest that the ending of the play is reminiscent of the "cliff-hanger" endings of popular culture, mass entertainment films and television serials: "compulsory deferral designed to stimulate

further consumption.... In this sense, *The Dumb Waiter* works as a distorted mirror image, reflecting in its final tableau a basic premise of Hollywood entertainment” (96). This chapter will address these claims, and explore those elements of the play that can be seen as postmodern, both in style and content. It will ask whether Pinter and *The Dumb Waiter* can usefully or realistically be described in these terms. Additionally, it will address questions of popular culture and ask whether Pinter’s theater reflects or is a product of “high” or “low” art.

As Michael Patterson points out in “Negotiating the boundary between high and low culture,” it is easy to see at least the premise of *The Dumb Waiter* reflected in contemporary popular culture. The example of the BBC’s *The Apprentice* is mirrored in Channel 4’s long running “reality” TV show *Big Brother*,³ in which contestants are constantly watched, recorded and given bizarre and unusual challenges, often without knowing why they are being asked to perform certain tasks and without any idea when the challenge will end. Clearly, questions of power are implicit in this show; the contestants willingly surrender autonomy and submit to the faceless “Big Brother,” who directs when they may eat, sleep or perform basic human activities, such as washing or cleaning. Furthermore, “Big Brother” communicates with the housemates through a diary room, where they are spoken to and frequently given orders, but they do not see an image of the personality behind the camera, only a disembodied voice who demands obedience from the individuals in the house. Comparisons with *The Dumb Waiter* seem too numerous to list: the disembodied voice, the helpless contestants/hit men, the impotence and total surrender of power to an unseen voice. Moreover, the behavior of the contestants/hit men is served up for the viewing pleasure of the television audience or the theater audience, who witness and presumably are supposed to enjoy, the efforts of the protagonists.

It would, of course, be an historical impossibility to suggest that *The Dumb Waiter* resembles *Big Brother* in any deliberate way. It would also be fairly unlikely to suppose that the television show takes any influence from the play;⁴ however, both share certain postmodern elements that make them interesting for this study. Jonathan Bignell describes how “reality” TV could be interpreted as “represent[ing] a new kind of access to, and interest in, ordinary people on television

that can air important issues about identity and community” (4). Pinter’s concern with the “ordinary-ness” of the characters in *The Dumb Waiter* is also evident; the gunmen are examples of everyday men, interested in food, newspapers and football. Furthermore, the potential for global success in reality television (see Bignell 2005) implies a mass audience appeal suggested by many critics as a characteristic of postmodernity. For example, “the most significant trends within postmodernity have challenged modernism’s relentless hostility to mass culture” (Huyssen 16), and Tim Woods argues that a “constant blur[ring of] the boundaries of high and low art [...] emphasizes the postmodern contention that there is no unmediated access to the real, and that it is only through representations that we know the world” (145-6). The question is now whether or not *The Dumb Waiter* incorporates some elements of postmodernity, including the tendency to blur distinctions between high and low art, as a critical aspect of the play.

Firstly, Pinter’s refusal to offer narrative closure at the end of *The Dumb Waiter*, or to give any explanation throughout the play that might account for the reason the hit men are being bombarded with unusual and exotic requests, suggests a deferral of meaning -- a différance constantly forestalling explanation or signification.⁵ The deconstruction of meaning in this play suggests a frustration with traditional realism and naturalism and its emphasis on explanation, psychologically realistic characters and deterministic action. Such deferral of meaning is often associated with a postmodern rejection or problematization of narrative closure, but absurdist theater also foregrounds the same problems. Esslin’s categorization of Pinter as an absurdist in *The Theater of the Absurd* (1962) is presumably based on such a refusal of traditional characterization and plot. Furthermore, denial of such elements is broadly in keeping with high Modernist art,⁶ and so can hardly be considered postmodern, low art or popular culture. While focus on the fracturing of meaning is frequently discussed in postmodern discourse, we must not mistake this for true popular appeal; it would be somewhat implausible to suggest that Derrida and Lyotard *et al* are widely discussed and enjoyed in contemporary popular culture.

2. Crisis in Representation

Perhaps Begley's argument of the postmodernity of Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* can be explained in other terms. While Modernism seemed preoccupied with the impossibility of realistic plot, character and action, there is a crisis of representation explored more fully in postmodern discourse. Begley suggests that the fractured and "distilled" (43) speech of Pinter's dialogue "betrays a [...] crisis in naturalistic representation" (43), again suggesting a move away from theatrical realism. Jean-François Lyotard's explanation of the postmodern incorporates that which "invokes the unrepresentable in presentation itself, that which refuses the consolation of correct forms... and enquires into new presentations -- not to take pleasure in them, but to better produce the feeling that there is something unrepresentable" (1988, 15). Pinter's "unrepresentable" in *The Dumb Waiter* is the ending -- the closure suggested by Ben's gun is never realized. There is, perhaps, also something postmodern in the refusal to submit to the representation of act and narrative.

Begley argues that "*The Dumb Waiter* concludes with a static tableau, deferring the resolution promised by Ben's pointed gun. The tension of this unspent bullet reverberates across Pinter's dramatic universe. Physical cruelty is typically consigned to anticipation, memory, or offstage space" (164). Thus, "his plays organize responses to violence by deferring its final representation" (Begley 167). The focus of the representation of violence is critical here. Lyotard's explanation of the postmodern as producing feelings of the unrepresentable perhaps hints (or could be read as a gesture towards) the impossibility of representing trauma or violence. Furthermore, narratives of trauma suggest that the traumatic event is felt in a moment that lies between life and death. Cathy Caruth proposes that trauma "far from telling of an escape from reality -- the escape from a death, or from its referential force -- rather attests to its endless impact on life... Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it?" (7). What is so interesting about Caruth's question is the liminality suggested by the "inbetween-ness" of trauma and the paradox of experiencing death within life. The bullet which is not fired but rather implied or threatened with no means of closure at the curtain of *The Dumb Waiter* also attests to the

liminal space between life and death, or rather death within life, as experienced with trauma.

Clearly the suggestion rather than a literal depiction of violence has a number of dramatic potentialities. For example, the commandeering of Stanley at the end of *The Birthday Party*, the implied interrogation of Jimmy in *Party Time* and the torture never physically realized on stage in *One for the Road*, all include acts of barbarity that occur in the off-stage space or involve implied threats rather than literal aggression. The refusal to incorporate this violence into the stage action frequently serves to create menace (of which Pinter is frequently described as a master), yet it also hints at a problem in the realization of violence in a more philosophical sense. As Begley suggests, “inarticulate suffering [...] cannot, or should not, be mimetically represented” (164). Attempts to encapsulate or encompass suffering and trauma frequently cannot be finalized since, as Begley points out, some violence does not adhere to standardized forms or models of understanding or explanation. As such, these images resist representation and fracture the naturalistic form, rendering modes of structure redundant or inadequate. Of course, most usually this dislocation of meaning is associated with Holocaust experience, as recognized by Lyotard.

Lyotard’s focus on Holocaust denial in *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (1988) may seem a strange starting point, but his interest in the possibility of proving the existence of gas chambers leads him to conclude that historical evidence of such an event can never be produced because “the documents needed for the validation were themselves destroyed... But the silence imposed on knowledge does not impose the silence of forgetting, it imposes a feeling... Suppose that an earthquake destroys not only lives, buildings, and objects but also the instruments used to measure earthquakes” (56). Thus, Lyotard unearths the “silence that the crime of Auschwitz imposes upon the historian” (56) -- as “the sign that something remains to be phrased which is not” (57). Therefore, a sense of history that remains “normal” cannot be understood in this way after Auschwitz, as such an event fractures the standardized forms of historical narrative and cannot be recorded or represented through conventional means. This recalls Lyotard’s earlier description of the postmodern as that which remains unrepresentable, and suggests the impossibility of encountering trauma thorough narrative.

Begley goes further and suggests that the images of horror in Pinter's work, for example, the images of political barbarity and violence described by Rebecca in *Ashes to Ashes*, are symptoms of popular culture's recycling and obsession with terror and shock. He writes, "Whether Rebecca has 'really' experienced what she describes or whether, as a kind of psychic sponge, she has absorbed it from films, television, history books, and other forms of cultural representation -- this calculated ambiguity is a key part of the play's point" (184). In addition, attempts to harness the power of violence in popular culture leads him to conclude that "cultural representations of violence [...] are ways of countenancing the real violence of power -- political power, economic power, cultural power -- whose invisibility is guaranteed by the ecstatic visibility of so much graphic violence" (184).

Here we are faced with a paradox, which Begley does not seem to resolve. Lyotard's postmodern theory argues that traditional forms of history cannot contain extreme terror and thus it must remain unrepresented, yet Begley seems to imply an actual infiltration of such images into popular culture, which then can become assumed into people's existences, almost as part of their own experiences and memories. These two impulses within postmodernism seem to refer to a Baudrillardian excess of images,⁷ reproduced through mass media consumption, as opposed to a more Lyotardian recognition that representation remains unresolved and unrepresented. While this difference may be accounted for in the explanation that postmodernity frequently remains contradictory and ambiguous, it is perhaps more interesting to consider these two approaches with reference to *The Dumb Waiter*. The Lyotardian approach of accepting the impossibility of certain representations opens up new ways of looking at experience and perhaps also suggests a more ethical approach to history. The impossibility of bearing witness to trauma and the questioning of the inadequacy of past forms tries to open up new spaces of inquiry and contemplation, perhaps denied by a more pessimistic and dystopian vision implied in the recycling of images in popular culture. While Begley is at pains to suggest that these images have influenced Pinter, it seems more in keeping with his position as a political playwright to argue that he would be more interested in an ethical approach to postmodernity. As Simon Malpas insists, Lyotard's analysis of Auschwitz as an end to traditional historical discourse calls for "an

ethical obligation addressed to the future that calls for analysis, discussion and justice” (2003, 73). Thus, the recognition of the impossibility for representation opens up new and hopefully ethical ways of viewing history.

Begley also argues that the gap between presentation and representation is played out within *The Dumb Waiter* in a specifically theatrical manner. He argues, “Presentation is privileged above representation, and the works appear better suited to engagement than reflection” (12). Begley’s reference here is to the “hermeneutic impulse” (46), which Pinter frequently forestalls, but he also re-visits the argument in an exploration of Pinter’s frequent preoccupation with “social detritus and bric-a-brac” (59), for example, the newspaper in *The Dumb Waiter*. Begley goes on, “This prediction might lead us to revisit the peculiar ontological debates about theater in general -- whether a newspaper on stage (for example) is presented or represented, existent or performed, displayed in an unmediated fashion or ‘used’ as an exemplar of ‘newspaperness’” (59). Put simply, Begley wonders whether the everyday object is simply present on stage as a prop or piece of scenery, or whether the object is mediated in some sense, and becomes representative of something else, and the playwright is referring on some level to the performed nature of the thing: is the newspaper in *The Dumb Waiter* merely a prop, or is Pinter drawing the audience’s attention to “cynicism about the media... touched by the newspaper’s history as an emblem of early mass culture” (89).

The newspaper’s place within culture is also explored by Benedict Anderson in his investigation into the shaping forces of nationality. He argues that the stories in a random newspaper have no actual connection; rather they are “happen[ing] independently, without the actors being aware of each other or of what the others are up to. The arbitrariness of their inclusion and juxtaposition [...] shows that linkage between them is imagined” (33). This imagined connection is then elaborated upon by Anderson to explain a sense of connection between people of the same nation -- an “imagined community.” Thus, the newspaper stories in *The Dumb Waiter* appear to be arbitrary, but cannot be conceived of as such, as they are, very simply, literary constructions and not representative of a “real” newspaper. For example, the stories seem to reflect specific incidents of death: for example the old man who walks under the lorry (114) and child of eight who murders her cat (116). Yet, perhaps Pinter’s creation of

these events within the narrative of the play is perhaps indicative of an artistic impulse to add to levels of menace or intrigue, suggesting a rather straightforward dramatic explanation. This argument further maintains that the newspaper is not a newspaper that has any “realistic” characteristics, like the one identified by Anderson, but a mediated and constructed newspaper designed to communicate to the audience a degree of sinister intrigue and mystery from the outset of the play.

However, the use of the newspaper also suggests, as Begley has pointed out, a fascination within the play for the minutiae of the everyday. Pinter’s insistence on specifying the “Eccles cake,” “McVitie and Price,” “Lyons Red Label, Smith’s Crisps” and “Fruit and Nut” is indicative of a reliance on the mass cultural appeal of these items, and in their ability to be immediately recognizable to the audience (at least to a British audience). As such, these items are aspects of popular culture, and the use of their names in the play could be evidence of a postmodern approach to consumerism and consumption. Begley points out that the dumb waiter as an object within the play “entails consumer demands and transactions anchored to commodities [and] symbolizes cultural and class conflicts through the culinary opposition between gourmet dishes and proletarian snacks... After all, modern culture works to create, maintain, and satisfy a spectrum of consumer desire that ranges from haute cuisine to pre-packaged food” (93). Indeed, are we to believe that “watching a Pinter play [is] roughly the equivalent of drinking a can of Coca-Cola?” (Begley 116)

The fact that Pinter uses popular images of consumption in *The Dumb Waiter* raises questions about its appeal to a wider audience and its place within popular culture. Does the play represent a cross over from the “high” art of modernism to the “low,” popular art experience and enjoyed by wider culture? Certainly Ben and Gus are “recognizable types” as Patterson points out, and they are without doubt more “everyday” than creations such as Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, but as Patterson rightly suggests, they are not fully rounded characters -- we know nothing about their past, future, nor are we offered any explanation as to their existence in the basement at the beginning of the play. Certainly, Pinter demonstrates a “willingness to embrace low culture and incorporate it in his work” (Patterson). It can be argued that this

willingness indicates a rejection of the “high” art of modernism, and an interest in the images of popular appeal associated with postmodernism. However, Pinter’s position as a political playwright significantly complicates the relationship between modernism and postmodernism laid out by Begley, whereby he suggests that Pinter bridges a gap between the old and new and incorporates images of popular culture within his plays at the expense of “high” modernist art. Political theater certainly is not modernist theater, which tends to reject the everydayness of the political and its mass appeal, but it is not strictly postmodern either, as postmodern discourses problematize any concept of an unmediated reality, and the possibility of knowing or experiencing the world directly or singularly. It would be implausible to suggest that Pinter does not wish us to understand and appreciate the real and knowable context for his plays, particularly ones underpinned by specific political events or situations.

3. Political explanations

Pinter is not particularly well known for providing explanations for his plays, as demonstrated by the exchange between the playwright and an anonymous audience member quoted by Patterson, in which Pinter exposes the absurdity of providing full explanations for his characters by asking the letter writer for her own full biographical details before issuing a reply or explanation. Indeed, the idea that there is an explanation to give undermines the tone of his work, which, as I have argued, frequently resists the tendency to seek interpretation or offer narrative closure. However, it seems wrong to suggest that Pinter had no intention behind his work, and, in some cases, we know he certainly did provide political contextualisation for his work.

For example, Pinter’s conversations with Mel Gussow, which span several decades, provide pointers as to his personal concerns and interests. He is particularly vocal about human rights abuses, often talking at length about his work with Amnesty International and PEN in, amongst other places, Turkey and Nicaragua.⁸ His experiences in Turkey are directly related to *One for the Road* (1984) and *Mountain Language* (1988), both set in unnamed police states, in which prisoners are either forced to communicate in a language not their own or terrorized and tortured by an interrogator who uses language to assert his greater power. They are, as Gussow states, “brief works about political persecution and incarceration” (65). Pinter himself is

also direct about the extent to which these plays are grounded within specific contexts; “It [*Mountain Language*] was inspired by my visit to Turkey” (68). Pinter further confirms his earlier play *The Birthday Party* (1958), often aligned with the theater of the absurd tradition, as Esslin claims, is also in fact politically influenced. When Gussow suggests, “It could be said that you’ve always written political plays, starting with *The Birthday Party*” Pinter replies, “I think that’s true” (69). He later confirms, “Between you and me, the play showed how the bastards... how religious forces ruin our lives” (71).

While *The Dumb Waiter* does not make reference in the text to any particular political context, nevertheless, Pinter has indicated that he saw it as a “political play” more broadly. When Gussow suggests he has always written political plays, starting with *The Birthday Party*, Pinter replies, “I think that’s true. *The Dumb Waiter* too” (69). Later, in 1993, he confirms that “I knew perfectly well that [...] *The Dumb Waiter* [was] to do with states of affairs which could certainly be termed political, without any question” (113). Although Pinter’s politics are not specifically stated in this play, it has been widely accepted that the dumb waiter, or Wilson’s supposed or possible operation of it, represents a malevolent social or political organization. Ben makes specific reference to “this organization” (131), referring to his and Gus’s position within an assumed network operating beyond the world of the play. Charles Grimes indicates that *The Dumb Waiter* is not political *per se*, but rather that it is “political in the sense that [it] might be called meta-political -- that is, [it] concern[s] the conditions under which what is called political perception and (perhaps) action come about” (20). Thus, although *The Dumb Waiter* does not draw on specific political oppression in the way that *Mountain Language* or *One for the Road* do, it is nevertheless involved in expressing some political dimension by suggesting that the characters within the play are subjected to the dominance of the unnamed organization and into behaving as though they were under surveillance.

Pinter’s apparent happiness to confirm specific political contexts and motivations for his plays is again underscored in his 2005 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, in which he highlights the difference between truth in life and truth in art. Quoting himself, he begins the speech by asking:

In 1958 I wrote the following: There are no hard distinctions

between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false. I believe that these assertions still make sense and do still apply to the exploration of reality through art. So as a writer I stand by them but as a citizen I cannot. As a citizen I must ask: What is true? What is false?

That Pinter has used specific political contexts is without doubt, as demonstrated by his conversations with Gussow, but also through the comparisons between *Mountain Language* and Abu Ghraib that he draws in the Nobel speech:

Mountain Language [...] remains brutal, short and ugly. But the soldiers in the play do get some fun out of it. One sometimes forgets that torturers become easily bored. They need a bit of a laugh to keep their spirits up. This has been confirmed of course by the events at Abu Ghraib in Baghdad. *Mountain Language* lasts only 20 minutes, but it could go on for hour after hour, on and on and on, the same pattern repeated over and over again, on and on, hour after hour.

Pinter's suggestion that what he can accept as an artist and what he cannot accept as a citizen is particularly interesting for this study. His assertion that he cannot provide definite answers to metaphysical questions in the context of playwrighting is, by his own admission, complicated by the comparisons he draws between his plays and their "real" political others. Once Pinter expresses the relationship between the world of the play and the reality of a political context, be it Abu Ghraib, the Kurds in Turkey or the more ambiguous "religious forces" he claims *The Birthday Party* makes reference to, we can no longer see the plays in a postmodern context which rejects narrative interpretation, contextualization or suggestion of explanation and understanding. If the postmodern hints at "the unrepresentable in presentation" (Lyotard 1992, 15), we cannot reconcile postmodern discourses with political theater.

Conclusions

The question of whether or not *The Dumb Waiter* truly bridges a gap between "high" and "low" art, or indeed is truly postmodern, remains a difficult one to answer. As Patterson rightly points out, it would be difficult to conclude that theater ever really can be classed as popular

culture, especially a relatively unknown play such as *The Dumb Waiter*. Had it been widely televised⁹ it may be a different matter, as the critics discussing reality television at the beginning of this paper make clear, but theater, even plays that include working class characters and references to crisps and biscuits, are not truly part of popular culture, as they will never truly be viewed by enough people to infiltrate or influence their lives in any meaningful way. Furthermore, “popular” culture can not reliably be read as “low” culture, as this issue is certainly controversial and challenging; who is to decide what is “low” and what is “high?” Surely any such divisions are highly ambivalent and at risk of being underpinned by essentialist judgements of class and background. Postmodern discourse has frequently attempted to suggest that these distinctions are meaningless and unhelpful and that we should consider “low” and “high” art as one and the same and mutually dependent. However, as Malpas points out, “finding [...] a simple, uncontroversial meaning for the term ‘postmodern’ is all but impossible. In fact... clear and concise process[es] of identification and definition [are] one of the key elements of rationality that the postmodern sets out to challenge” (2005, 4). Indeed, whilst Huyssen argues that postmodernism enjoys an engagement with ‘low’ art and popular culture, Lyotard focuses on ‘high’ and avant-garde art, problematizing categorization itself yet further.

In summary, Begley’s suggestion that Pinter’s plays reject the principles of high modernist art is indeed interesting, and Pinter’s use of everyday characters and recognisable situations certainly is not reminiscent of, for example, Beckett’s unconventional setting and characterization. Indeed, we may be able to point to Pinter’s refusal to provide narrative closure and to resist conventional representation and conclude that his work displays elements of the postmodern. However, to conclude that just because a play is not modernist it must be postmodernist is certainly misleading, as Pinter’s commitment to plays that have political messages suggests. Furthermore, even if a play is postmodern, it is not necessarily part of popular culture, as postmodern plays cannot truly be classified as popular or “low” art as their appeal is simply not widespread enough. Ultimately, it becomes impossible to argue that *The Dumb Waiter* is either postmodern or a reflection of popular culture because these categories are so indefinite and incomplete; as Malpas has pointed out, postmodernity rejects the

process of categorization and identification itself. Perhaps the impossibility of categorization in the case of *The Dumb Waiter*, with its references to popular culture and the crisis of representation, as well as external “realities” implicated in political theater, is the most postmodern aspect of all.

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Notes

¹ See Charles A. Carpenter writing in 1973; Austin E. Quigley in 1975 and Thomas F. Van Laan’s 1981 discussion of *The Dumb Waiter* in *Modern Drama*.

² The reference here is to Andreas Huyssen’s *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism* (1986).

³ *Big Brother*, a conscious reference to Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty Four*, has been a hit on British television since its introduction in 2000. The TV show involves about a dozen housemates living together whilst under constant surveillance by hidden cameras. The contestants compete to win a cash prize by surviving public eviction votes, and to help prevent too much boredom, an unseen “Big Brother” voice sets them regular tasks that they are rewarded for passing. Big Brother is now a famous concept through out the globe, and has been successful, although controversial, in America, where there have been violent incidents and accusations of racism.

⁴ That said, it is not impossible that *The Dumb Waiter* could have been influenced by the origin of the “Big Brother” concept. Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty Four* was published in 1949, and *The Dumb Waiter* was first performed in 1960.

⁵ “Différance” is a term coined by Jacques Derrida which makes use of two words: “differer” meaning to postpone and “different,” suggesting that words can only seek to be defined through reference to other words, even though they are not the same. It is an ambiguous term, used to suggest that meaning is constantly deferred within a web of words, each denying any final signification.

⁶ In this context, I am referring to the Modernist view that human subjectivity and consciousness was a complex experience, resistant to formed and complete characterization. In the theater, playwrights such as Samuel Beckett often rejected traditional or realistic methods of structuring characters, preferring to leave them open-ended or contradictory and absurd.

⁷ Baudrillard’s concept of postmodernity involves the idea that images become “more real than the real” (Woods 26), leading to a disintegration of difference between reality and simulation. Baudrillard tends to focus on brash, excessive and mass culture aspects of postmodernity, such as the constant replication of images within the mass media.

⁸ For details of PEN, see <http://www.englishpen.org/aboutenglishpen/>.

⁹ *The Dumb Waiter* was televised on 10 August 1961 as part of the *ITV Television Playhouse* series and by ABC in 1987 (featuring John Travolta and Tom Conti); however, I think it is fair to conclude that this is not widely known or viewed, and certainly does not constitute a contribution to “popular culture.”

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Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*: Negotiating the boundary between "high" and "low" culture

Michael Patterson

A number of young people are kept isolated in a house, awaiting the call from a distant figure, "a man famously hard to please." When the call comes, they are given a task to fulfill. The task always involves co-operation while at the same time putting pressure on all of them to prove themselves superior to their colleagues. Indeed, they frequently denounce each other and contribute to the downfall of their fellows. They do what they can to impress the man in charge, but each time one who fails to do so is rejected.

This scenario might in many respects sound similar to that of *The Dumb Waiter*, but this is not the description of some early Pinter draft; instead it is a television program watched by millions: *The Apprentice* has been aired for several weeks during each of the last three years and, as a measure of its success, has now been moved from BBC 2 to the prime time slot of 9 p.m. on BBC 1 and is repeated the following week. It also enjoys a follow-up analysis on BBC 2 and has been awarded the ultimate accolade of being parodied on *Dead Ringers*, a satirical program also broadcast by the BBC.¹

In her excellent contribution to this "dialogue," "High art or popular culture: Traumatic conflicts of representation and postmodernism in Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*," Catherine Rees also points out similarities with the even more popular series *Big Brother*, which, ironically, regularly attracts more votes from the British populace than elections to the European parliament. The obvious parallels between popular television series and one of Pinter's most accomplished early plays are but one indicator that Pinter is perhaps not as "highbrow" as many people would assert. I have had personal experience of the tendency to place Pinter on the pedestal of "high art." When I proposed a Pinter double-bill to my local drama society, a group of literate middle-class individuals, I was told firmly

that their audience would not tolerate anything quite so demanding and insisted that any Pinter one-act would have to be staged alongside a farce taken from the Samuel French catalogue. Yet their production of *The Lover* eventually went on to take second place in the All-England Theater Festival before an audience formed from a wide cross-section of the British public.

Here one must introduce a caveat. While I shall argue, with Varun Begley in his *Harold Pinter and the Twilight of Modernism*, that Pinter blurs the line between “high” and “low” culture, one has to acknowledge that today in most developed nations theater-going remains a minority interest. Only a small percentage of the British public ever sets foot in a theater and then usually to see a musical or, around Christmas, a pantomime or children’s show. Similarly, in the United States, away from Broadway one could hardly claim that theater-going was a regular activity of the American public. Unless their plays have been more widely distributed in television or film versions, most contemporary playwrights will be unknown to the wider public, and few writers if any will claim that they create material that is consumed by the “common masses.” *The Dumb Waiter* has been seen only once on British television (ITV Television Playhouse, 10 August 1961), and once in the States on ABC in 1987, although the play’s single location and opportunity for close-ups make it well suited for the small screen. It would, therefore, be absurd to argue that this play could ever be thought to be part of mass culture. The most one may claim is that, compared with the high-priests of modernism like Samuel Beckett, Pinter is closer to “low” culture. He acknowledges its influence and embraces it in his writing; he also potentially (and perhaps in certain contexts, actually) exerts popular appeal in his work. I shall deal in turn with these questions of influence, of content and form, and of reception.

1. Popular influence

While he acknowledges a debt in his writing to Franz Kafka and Beckett, hardly the everyday reading of the general populace, Pinter also admits to the influence of Hollywood gangster movies. Carol Reed’s *Odd Man Out* (1947) is named in *Old Times* as the occasion on which Deeley allegedly first met Kate. Here two gun men betray the “Organization” and nervously await reprisal, a plot that adumbrates Gus’s role. Alfred Hitchcock’s film *Rope* (1948) was based on Patrick

Hamilton's stage play, in which the young Pinter himself performed and which Pinter considered "a work of genius" (Billington 43). In this two students, one calm and dominant, the other nervous and submissive (again like Ben and Gus), have murdered a fellow student and deliberately court discovery by hiding the body in a chest in the room to which they invite guests. Another parallel is evident in Fritz Lang's film, *Ministry of Fear* (1945), where a man is released from a mental asylum (like Aston in *The Caretaker*) and wins a cake at a village fete. The cake contains vital information on microfilm, which forces the man to go into hiding. He is then betrayed by the man who offers him shelter and has to go on the run again. These are but three of the thrillers that Pinter would probably have seen as a youth,² and their plots all have similarities with *The Dumb Waiter*. Even the somewhat absurd use of food to conceal supposedly important information is echoed by Pinter.

But the difference is that, while in Lang's film we do not know the specifics of the microfilm, we accept that it is significant enough for lives to be threatened. In *The Dumb Waiter*, however, the meaning of the increasingly exotic food orders remains unexplained. The same enigma hangs over the ending: will Ben shoot Gus? The curtain falls before we find out the answer. As the critic Alan Brien remarked of *The Birthday Party*, it is like a Hitchcock movie with the last reel missing (qtd in Billington 48).

While the characters of Ben and Gus owe an obvious debt to gangster films, their relationship, as particularly Elin Diamond has pointed out in *Pinter's Comic Play*, is very reminiscent of that popular duo, Laurel and Hardy. Like Hardy, Ben always assumes a superior knowledge of the situation, even if his own understanding is rather limited. Whether regarding items read from the newspaper, the fairness of a soccer penalty, the usage of "light the kettle," how to cook an Ormitha Macarounada, and, above all, the job that they have to fulfill, Ben claims to know better. Meanwhile, Gus, like Laurel, is curious, nervous, and repeatedly seems to get things wrong, to the constant irritation of Ben. As Michael Billington observes: "Hackney Empire cross-fertilizes with Hemingway's *The Killers*" (90).³

Many Laurel and Hardy gags are based on establishing dominance, especially in the "custard-pie" sequences, where they slowly and deliberately pours various liquids over each other. While there are not the same physical attacks as in Laurel and Hardy, the

rapid exchanges of Ben and Gus, trivial but threatening, echo the repetitive repartee of their Hollywood forebears:

BEN: Go and light it.
 GUS: Light what?
 BEN: The kettle.
 GUS: You mean the gas.
 BEN: Who does?
 GUS: You do.
 BEN: (*his eyes narrowing*). What do you mean, I mean the gas?
 GUS: Well, that's what you mean, don't you? The gas.
 BEN: (*powerfully*). If I say go and light the kettle I mean go and light the kettle.
 GUS: How can you light a kettle?
 BEN: It's a figure of speech! Light the kettle. It's a figure of speech!
 GUS: I've never heard it.
 BEN: Light the kettle! It's common usage!
 GUS: I think you've got it wrong.
 BEN: (*menacing*). What do you mean?
 GUS: They say put on the kettle.
 BEN: (*taut*). Who says?

They stare at each other, breathing hard.

(*Deliberately.*) I have never in all my life heard anyone say put on the kettle. (125-26)

2. Establishing dominance as an “everyday thing”

Not only is the comic sparring between Ben and Gus, like that of Laurel and Hardy or Abbott and Costello, potentially appealing to the common man and woman, but the theme of establishing dominance is an all too familiar one. In an interview published in the *Paris Review* of 1966, Pinter said of his short-story “The Examination:”

That short story dealt very explicitly with two people in one room having a battle of an unspecified nature, in which the question was one of who was dominant at what point and how they were going to be dominant and what tools they would use to achieve dominance [. . .] it's got to do with this question of being in the uppermost position, or attempting to be, [. . .] it's a very common, everyday thing. (qtd in Bensky 105-6)

As with *The Apprentice* or *Big Brother*, the audience of *The Dumb Waiter* watches with interest an exercise in establishing

dominance while the two contestants simultaneously face the unquestioned dominance of the off-stage figure who issues the orders. As Billington remarks: “It’s a near-perfect play about the testiness of a collapsing partnership and the divide-and rule tactics of authority” (92). The superiority that Ben asserts over Gus is all too recognizable as “a very common everyday thing,” something to which anyone in a relationship, whether a friendship, a romance, or a long-standing marriage, will find it easy to relate. In the same interview, Pinter refers to the battle for dominance in *The Servant* (1962), a work for which he wrote the screenplay. The film, disturbing and enigmatic, was widely seen and enjoyed -- further proof that Pinter was not writing for an intellectual elite but could actually appeal to a much wider audience with his insights. This was borne out further by the success of several other films for which he wrote screenplays (e.g. *The Quiller Memorandum*, 1966; *Accident*, 1966; *The Go-Between*, 1971; *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, 1981; *Sleuth*, 2007.)

3. Enigmatic characters and their effect on Pinter’s popularity

Pinter’s characters are much more “common” and “everyday” than, say, Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. Ben and Gus are recognizable types. Indeed, their very ordinariness stands in often comic juxtaposition with their role as hit-men. They share stories from the newspaper, argue about football and have disputes about linguistic usage. Ben has his hobbies, and Gus notices the design of the crockery. And yet they are not fully rounded characters in the traditional sense. We are offered few clues about their past nor told exactly what they are doing in the present, indeed why they have been sent to this basement in Birmingham. Pinter has frequently pointed out that such omniscience by the dramatist is actually a fraud: “the explicit form which is so often taken in twentieth century drama is

[. . .] cheating. The playwright assumes that we have a great deal of information about all his characters, who explain themselves to the audience” (qtd in Pugh).

Confronted by Pinter’s enigmatic characters, early audiences generally reacted with the kind of bewilderment with which *Waiting for Godot* had been met. Possibly the bafflement was even greater since Beckett’s play proclaims itself as an abstract avant-garde piece.

Pinter, on the other hand, presents recognizably realistic characters in recognizably realistic locations. Admittedly their linguistic exchanges, while using everyday language, may alienate because of the patently structured dialogue, but the conventional theater audience also expects to be given more information about Ben and Gus and their mission than Pinter is willing to reveal. Pinter prepared his defense in the program note for the 1960 premiere of *The Dumb Waiter*:

A character on stage who can present no convincing argument or information as to his past experience, his present behavior or his aspirations, nor give a comprehensive analysis of his motives is as legitimate and as worthy of attention as one who, alarmingly, can do all these things. The more acute the experience the less articulate the expression.

This may be true, but one may reasonably ask how acute the experience of Ben and Gus actually is. Gus may have been unsettled by the fact that their last victim was a woman, and they are both alarmed by the unreasonable demands of the messages sent down in the dumb waiter. But on a scale of intensity of emotion even Gus would not score very highly. Indeed, a large part of the interest of the piece lies in the very nonchalance of their approach to the disturbing requirement to kill a fellow human being and in the casual way in which they respond to the deaths reported in the newspaper.

It is at this point that I have some difficulty with the way in which Rees makes the concept of “trauma” central to her argument. It is true that, as Begley, quoted by Rees, says, “Physical cruelty is typically consigned to anticipation, memory, or offstage space” (164). But to deduce from this that Pinter necessarily has problems with representing violence and may, therefore, be seen to be a forerunner of postmodernism seems to me a *non-sequitur*. Does this make Greek tragedy postmodernist? Pinter’s failure to depict violence does not proceed from difficulties of representation so much as from a deliberate decision to depict contract killers as ordinary men casually carrying out a job -- potentially more disturbing than demonizing them. Most of the guards at Auschwitz were not villains: they were just *carrying out orders*.

The two hit-men of *The Dumb Waiter* do not celebrate violence and hardly touch on past murders. The only actual killing referred to is their last job, the shooting of a girl:

She wasn't much to look at, I know, but still. It was a mess though, wasn't it? What a mess. Honest, I can't remember a mess like that one. They don't seem to hold together like men, women. A looser texture, like. Didn't she spread, eh? She didn't half spread. Kaw! (130-31)

While this experience has clearly disturbed Gus and perhaps is the reason why he has begun to ask "so many damn questions" (127), the horror of this moment is touched on only briefly. Gus, relieved to learn that someone comes in to clean up after them, actually seems more distressed about the thought of sleeping in someone else's sheets.

Similarly, the two reported deaths read from the newspapers are, in my experience, usually met with laughter in the theater rather than, as Rees suggests, "being indicative of an artistic impulse to add to levels of menace or intrigue." On the contrary, the approach to death and killing is portrayed in *The Dumb Waiter* as playful rather than as the exploration of a trauma. Indeed, I would assert that the ending offers astonishment rather than shock -- and like most surprises is likely to be met by an audience with laughter rather than horror. It is only in his later, more overtly political plays, that Pinter communicates a sense of genuine trauma.

Denied clarity about motivation, denied also the visceral experience of intense emotion, *The Dumb Waiter* arguably presents us with a more real experience than that afforded by conventional Naturalism. The fourth wall is more genuinely removed, and we are confronted with two individuals who make no effort to explain themselves to the audience.

When the curtain goes up on one of my plays, you are faced with a situation, a particular situation, two people sitting in a room, which hasn't happened before, and is just happening at this moment, and we know no more about them than I know about you. (Pinter qtd in Pugh)

One might assume that Pinter's reluctance to persist in the "cheating" of the "explicit" form might, by in fact offering a more real theatrical experience, help to cross the boundary to "low" culture. It is clear, however, that there was considerable early resistance to Pinter's plays because audiences felt cheated of the information they felt necessary to understand the plot, thus making the dramas seem less

accessible than they might otherwise be. Pinter once received the following letter:

Dear Sir,

I would be obliged if you would kindly explain to me the meaning of your play *The Birthday Party*. These are the points which I do not understand: 1. Who are the two men? 2. Where did Stanley come from? 3. Were they all supposed to be normal? You will appreciate that without the answers to my questions I cannot fully understand your play.

Pinter allegedly replied with the following letter:

Dear Madam,

I would be obliged if you kindly explain to me the meaning of your letter. These are the points which I do not understand: 1. Who are you? 2. Where do you come from? 3. Are you supposed to be normal? You will appreciate that without the answers to your questions I cannot fully understand your letter (qtd in Esslin 1973, 37-8).

It is a clever and funny response, and one that undoubtedly convinced the correspondent that Pinter was definitely not normal. However, in the context of theater at the start of the second half of the twentieth century, Pinter's reply is actually facetious and unhelpful. Half a century further on, we may have little difficulty with the enigmatic characters and unresolved ending of *The Dumb Waiter*. At the time of writing, however, what was a more real theater experience than that offered by the mainstream fare of the West End appeared to the majority of the theatergoers as simply alienating.

4. Complications provided by critics

Moreover, it was not only the frustration of conventional expectations of the 1960 audience that relegated Pinter to some avant-garde corner, thus effectively thwarting his crossover to more popular culture, but also his treatment at the hands of the critics. Initially, as with *The Birthday Party*, the response of critics was generally dismissive. This caused the show to close after a week in the West End, despite having been quite successful in the provincial try-outs that preceded it.

Once, however, Pinter was quite mistakenly coerced into the pantheon of new absurdist writers alongside Beckett and Eugène

Ionesco, largely thanks to Martin Esslin’s book, *The Theater of the Absurd* (1962), critics began to search for symbolic meanings in his plays. Thus Stanley in *The Birthday Party* became an alienated artist-figure (Hoefer 402), the plug that Aston in *The Caretaker* is constantly fiddling with was interpreted as a symbol of a failure to connect (Dukore 50), and Mark in *The Dwarfs* was seen as representing the Pope, because his origins are Portuguese, therefore of Latin background, he owns a key and gambles on the treble chance in the football pools (Wellwarth 208). It is an easy game to play: I once had fun while lecturing on *The Birthday Party* spending some time arguing that Stan could be read as St. Anne, who, like Stanley, spent many years of isolation and disillusion. Eventually St Anne gave birth to a daughter who was to become the Virgin Mary (the promise of Stan’s renewed creativity!). Fortunately, some of the brighter students realized that I was talking rubbish, and I hope that eventually the whole class recognized that such “hunting the symbol” is largely futile.

Varun Begley appears to have a healthy commonsense approach when he writes: “One might ask ... why Pinter’s newspaper must conform to present-tense cynicism about the media before being seen as simply a newspaper in the world of the play” (89). But then his analysis, while challenging, becomes so complex that he runs the risk of joining with many other critics by mystifying rather than clarifying Pinter’s text. For example, with regard to the toilet that Gus has such difficulty in flushing, Begley expounds:

The toilet is a fetish of modernity, hiding trauma, enacting on a daily basis the foundational modern encounter of technology and organic life. At the most literal level, the toilet situates and privatizes the body, converting the common human experience of excretory processes into a ritualized, hygienic erasure performed alone. Some of the psychosocial energies diverted and contained by this process, including feelings of shame, curiosity, and aggression, are resurrected in the desperate, understated tone of Gus’s phenomenological questions: ‘Have you noticed the time that tank takes to fill?’; ‘What do you think’s the matter with it?’ (92)

In her paper, Rees has introduced a pertinent and thoughtful discussion of “representation” and persuasively shows how aspects of Pinter’s practice relate to postmodernism. Being one of those who happily admit to having difficulty in understanding just what

postmodernism is, (a problem, according to Rees, that I share with Malpas), I unashamedly delve back into past semiotic theory to clarify how a playwright “represents” objects on stage. C. S. Peirce’s tripartite analysis of signs, distinguishing between the iconic, the indexical and the symbolic (247-9) is still useful despite critiques, notably by Umberto Eco in his *Theory of Semiotics*. The off-stage toilet is “iconic” in the sense that there is no actual toilet there, merely sound-effects. It is also “indexical” in that Gus’s frequent need to use it points to his nervousness, and the length of time the tank needs to fill is a further indication of how run-down the place is. More practically, the slow-filling tank delays the flush, thus intensifying the surprise ending of the play. The sound of the toilet in the final moments flushing off-stage left tricks us into believing that Gus will soon re-enter from that side instead of stumbling in from the right. But can one honestly, especially in the flow of performance, expect to extract “symbolic” meaning from the toilet in the way that Begley does? By making the representation of the toilet so complex, Begley contributes to the consensus that Pinter is a “difficult” writer and therefore not accessible to a wider audience.

The only potentially symbolic feature of the play is the object of the title, the dumb waiter itself. It is tempting to see it as a malicious and teasing god, and perhaps to regard its presence as a shabby urban version of Godot. However, it is surely enough to know that it represents the authority of Ben and Gus’s boss without elevating it to some divine force.

Pinter claimed: “I wouldn’t know a symbol if I saw one” (1961, 174), and the plays are intriguing enough in themselves without turning them into metaphysical exercises. By setting Pinter on a pedestal of deeper meaning that only a priesthood of critics can interpret means that he is quite unfairly made into a “highbrow” writer out of reach of the masses.

Pinter insists: “I *am* a very traditional playwright” (Bensky 109), and one must not forget that one of the first people to recognize Pinter’s genius was not some guru of the avant-garde but Noel Coward, “the leading representative” of “English high-comedy” (Esslin 1973, 49). Each of Pinter’s early plays takes place in a single domestic setting, each has a strong sense of narrative and of the traditional effect of someone entering through a door into a room, and each scene ends on a strong curtain line (or in the case of *The Dumb Waiter*, a strong tableau)

I insist on having a curtain in all my plays. I write curtain lines for that reason! [. . .] For me everything has to do with shape, structure, and over-all unity. (Pinter qtd in Bensky 109)

5. Pinter’s relationship to modernism and postmodernism

This preceding quotation is hardly the manifesto of a modernist. While the enigmatic quality of Pinter’s writing may suggest that he sits squarely within the modernist camp, indeed might even be acknowledged as a forerunner of postmodernism, in fact his concern with the conventional shaping of a theater piece is quite contrary to the fragmentary nature of avant-garde texts of the last fifty years. The only characteristic Pinter shares with postmodernism is his willingness to embrace low culture and incorporate it in his work. This runs counter to the practice of modernism. As Andreas Huyssen points out in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism*: “Modernism constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture” (vii).

Even writers like Brecht, who purported to be writing for the masses, in fact usually maintained a distance from mass culture and its influence. As John Peter persuasively argues in *Vladimir’s Carrot*, Brecht does not create a real world in his plays. Instead

The make-believe settings often undermine Brecht’s intentions, precisely because his plays have such a powerful social and political drive [. . .] *The Good Person of Setzuan* is weakened by its lack of a sense of community [. . .] The population is no more than a backdrop. (308)

It is provocative but reasonable to contend that Pinter is in fact a more populist playwright than Brecht, the Marxist. One may comfortably assert that there is never any sense of Pinter living in fear of “contamination” from mass culture. Quite the contrary: his locations are realistic, and his characters, as we have argued, are possibly more real in their enigmatic quality than so-called realistic characters of conventional drama with their perfectly rounded personas and clearly motivated behavior. His language may not be the casual prose of soap opera drama; yet it is not overtly poetic. In addition, the objects in his plays, like the matches curiously slid under

the door in *The Dumb Waiter*, may not seem wholly real, yet they do not carry heavy symbolic significance. Finally, the situations he places his characters in may not seem part of everyday experience, yet they do not point to some metaphysical meaning; rather they reveal exercises in dominance to which we can all relate. Beside his status as Nobel Prize Winner and arguably Britain's most important living playwright, Pinter is also steeped in popular culture. As the German director Peter Zadek observed of *Moonlight*, it is "a mixture of Beckett and Agatha Christie" (qtd in Billington 49-50).

6. Pinter's reception as a popular writer

But to what extent does Pinter in fact reach out to the wider public, even to most of the minority theater-going public? However potentially atypical of modernist "exclusion," does Pinter in fact cross the boundary between "high" and "low" culture?

I recall as a student in 1960 seeing *The Birthday Party* on television at a time when there were still only two channels broadcasting for a few hours each day. The following morning I found myself in the canteen of the factory where I was doing a vacation job, discussing Pinter's play with the workers. Admittedly, their response was hardly unequivocally positive, but they were intrigued by the piece, and most had not reached for the "off" switch. Even if the play had seemed somewhat alien to this group of factory workers, many found that it struck a chord in its depiction of oppression and pressure to conform. As Billington reported about the same broadcast:

A play that had originally left Tynan, Shulman, Darlington and others bemused became a bus-stop talking-point the next day. It was the first of many occasions on which one of Pinter's plays, by tapping deep-seated fears, bypassed critical analysis to speak directly to the collective unconscious. (110)

Clearly, the fact that a Pinter play had been watched with some interest by the "masses" was almost entirely to do with the medium of television, and at a time when there was minimal choice about which programs to watch. Yet it was clear that the play, while promoted by the medium, was inherently of some interest to a wider public than those who normally attend the theater.

If Pinter has failed actually to cross over from "high" to "low" culture in a way that Alan Ayckbourn or Mike Leigh have achieved

more successfully, this is arguably more due to a lack of exposure to the masses than to any inherent intellectual obscurity. That Pinter is sometimes “difficult” is undeniable, especially in his later plays, but this is perhaps more to do with critical perception than with Pinter’s actual writing. As John Berger once noted:

It is claimed that the style of naturalism [called realism] is the most accessible to the masses because it is nearest to natural appearances. This claim ignores most of what we know about the process of perception, but even more obviously it is belied by child art, folk art, and by the ease with which a mass adult urban population learns to read highly formalized cartoons, caricatures, posters, etc. (51)

To this list one might now add popular music videos and television commercials, very popular forms that depend on quite a high level of sophistication in order to be read.

Clearly, except when he has benefited from the wider exposure offered by the mass media, Pinter, despite the many ways in which he embraces popular culture, cannot be said to have crossed “the great divide” from “high” to “low” culture in Western Europe or the USA. If, on the other hand, *The Dumb Waiter* were to have been performed in Czechoslovakia before the collapse of the USSR or if *Mountain Language* were staged in Kosovo today, I guarantee that Pinter’s work would be understood and appreciated by the ordinary populace in the way that famously *Waiting for Godot* was well understood by the prisoners of St Quentin penitentiary (Esslin 1980, 19-21).⁴

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Notes

¹ *Dead Ringers* has been broadcast regularly over the past few years and lampoons politicians, celebrities and television shows by enacting fictional episodes using the skills of a team of impressionists to impersonate such public figures.

² We know that he saw *Odd Man Out* (Gussow 133).

³ Hackney Empire was the home of music hall (vaudeville) and popular entertainment.

⁴ Esslin observed that Beckett’s play, which had baffled middle-class audiences and critics, presented no difficulties to the prisoners of St Quentin penitentiary when it

was performed there, since the inmates were all too well used to the frustrations of seemingly hopeless waiting.

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‘The Ironic Con Game’ Revisited: Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*, a Key to Courage

Penelope Prentice

1. The silence of the “good people”

The Dumb Waiter continues to offer a brief, paradigmatic introduction to appreciating all Harold Pinter's work at depth -- the terrifying vision of the dominant-subservient battle for power delivered with delightful comic wit. Revisiting the play in the light of his Nobel Lecture, recent interviews, screenplay and plays, *Celebration*, *Sleuth* and *Apart from That*, offers insights that can heighten appreciation of the profound source of his courageous commitment to justice globally. To appreciate how his work awakens consciousness to give voice to the voiceless everywhere is to be inspired to claim one's own courage.

Locating sources of that inspiration in this play in context of Pinter's comments on power and happiness, even in the glare of ongoing destruction in the world, is to appreciate Pinter's own courageous choices. Even battling cancer and its aftermath, when he described himself “gravely ill,” after he twice died, was twice revived, and was recently near death again,¹ his own life remains poised against the question: How can Ben and Gus, two hit-men holed up in a basement awaiting orders to kill, offer inspiring insight into courage, happiness and a good life?

What a dramatist leaves out, by design or accident, can offer the greatest insight. Missing from Ben and Gus, and necessarily from the lives of all engaged in dominant-subservient relationships, are friendship, love, courage, happiness -- the possibility of the good life: what it means to be a good person, to do and to enjoy doing what is ethical to enhance and distribute those goods to others. Above all, Ben and Gus are not even conscious of such desires, nor of their own self-destructiveness.

Pinter sets up the first act's explosive conflict between the

two men in the silence of pantomime, even before the first word is spoken. Gus's acquiescence establishes Ben as the senior partner, and their goofy vaudeville shoes-and-matches shenanigans elicits laughs while heightening tension. The two begin on a verbal note of mutual accord, otherwise the actors would have nowhere to go. When Ben defuses the tension by reporting newspaper news, Gus begins asking the first of his many questions. In almost every instance, Gus either sidetracks himself, failing to follow his own desire for knowledge, or he is derailed by Ben, who, when all else fails, pulls rank, deflating without defusing the situation's explosiveness.

In the firestorm of fear following 9/11, Dr. Martin Luther King's "Letter from A Birmingham Jail," that emerged from the 1960s US civil rights/desegregation battles, reverberates nicely with *The Dumb Waiter*, from the play's title and silent opening to its silent closure: "We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people" (92). If inspiring courage is necessary to accomplish the harder tasks of peace, the silence of the good people remains so deafening that most seem struck dumb, unable to claim their own courage to act. Insights into the source of that silence and the attendant failure to act are what this early play by Pinter illuminates.

Now, a half century later, *The Dumb Waiter*, written in the wake of freshly visible World War II bombings, still speaks to that silence, revealing its source through these two silent men who, at curtain rise, dumbly wait -- unquestioningly unconscious and without protest -- to obey silent, written orders, impossible to fill, delivered via a dumb waiter. If, as Dr. King maintained that injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere," we are all culpable. Yet, even if we claim courage, how can the justly courageous seize power? And what good can come from claiming courage without seizing power? In a new century, dragging in the devastation of illegally begun wars from the last, we are still in diapers in learning ways to create and sustain peace. Most urgently needed is an awakened consciousness that inspires courage: to bring the inner- and outer-self in concord for good will among families, communities, states and nations.

If courage, defined as brave action in service of what is good, proceeds etymologically from the heart and springs from love, *The Dumb Waiter* dramatizes the consciousness and heart these men lack to claim courage -- to act, even to save themselves. Courage, which

proceeds from love, requires vigilance, traits lacking in both Ben and Gus, as well as Pinter's most recent film characters, Andrew, the betrayed husband, and Milo, his wife's lover, in *Sleuth*.

Like *The Dumb Waiter*, *Sleuth* dramatizes the consequences of the failure to claim courage. Both Milo and Andrew act not *for* love, though they claim to, but primarily to inflate and preserve the Self. Andrew, a mystery writer, welcomes Milo, a hairdresser, only to humiliate his wife's lover, a woman Andrew enjoys possessing in the same way that he enjoys the two-million dollar necklace he puts Milo up to steal, purportedly to pay him for taking his wife off his hands. Their game, a model of Pinter power plays, sees Andrew and Milo alternately seize power with the intent to humiliate and destroy the other, with Andrew finally shooting Milo.

However, we discover that the detective, who comes to investigate the murder, is Milo in disguise, aiming to prove his own superiority and to seek retribution from Andrew for having "shot" Milo, scaring him nearly to death. Milo turns the gun on Andrew, makes him dress in women's clothes, thereby reducing him to a "lowly" woman, donned in the same necklace and earrings Andrew had conned Milo into stealing. Thus, outside of Pinter's screenplay of *The Servant*, Milo is the first subservient Pinter character to seize the upper hand.

His ascendancy, however, is brief. Milo is obsessed with Andrew's perceived power, saying it turns him on. Milo, the actor/hairdresser, half mockingly, half eagerly asks Andrew, a man of undoubted self-made wealth and some fame, if he knows Kissinger, Cheney, Madonna, and could he introduce Milo. Totally swept away by the erotic thrill of Andrew's imagined power, and seduced by his own moment of power, Milo fails to remain vigilant, being more interested in how he appears in the eyes of the other man. Hence, like Gus, he is disarmed in the end. However, unlike Gus, Milo disarms himself. Inadvertently puffed up with overconfidence, he removes his gun and holster to Andrew's bed behind him (ever in sight of the camera), believing his own con that he has won Andrew's respect and is now his equal. In an impotent attempt to prove himself to an adversary, he reveals his bravery to be bravado and seals his own doom.

2. How do we claim courage?

Ben and Gus, who have been through their organization's tests, indeed face danger, but what brave action can they take? No one could argue that they are acting in the service of what is good, and what also makes it impossible to claim courage is their lack of heart. Gus quickly loses heart to pursue his own desires that proceed from his observations and relentless questions, while Ben seems entirely heartless. His only heart is the sentimentalist's, shedding crocodile tears over a dead cat, while at the end of the play he cold-bloodedly takes aim to murder his partner.

Gus's and Ben's heartlessness, coupled with lack of consciousness, including self-consciousness in both its positive and negative aspects, (i.e. self-awareness, perhaps of the many selves we are), produces only a negative self-consciousness -- that sometimes shy, even crippling, self-consciousness few entirely escape in the upheavals of adolescence: seeing the Self primarily through the imagined eyes of "others" can freeze the Self like a jack-lit deer, immobilizing thought and action and thwarting change or growth. But far more insidious than fleeting or even habitual "cat's got your tongue" moments of self-conscious shyness in the face of real or perceived overpowering threat or force is Gus's and Ben's habitual checking the Self in the mirror of an "other's" eye, requiring the "other's" approval for self-validation. The few questions that he himself does not halt are intercepted by Ben at every turn, in displays of dominance he believes is required to validate his position. Both remain unconsciously at the mercy of negative survival emotions, anxiety and fear, rather than actively attempting conscious thought that might lead to positive emotions and productive action.²

In contrast, like a great actress bravely exposing a cowardly face or a beautiful woman unafraid to be charming to the ugly and maimed, Pinter recognizes that we all carry both qualities within. As a man of courage, he fearlessly exposes the brutal faces of cowardice and the corrosive power of fear to dramatize the power of love. The question most dramatic production poses, *How are you living your life?* becomes in *The Dumb Waiter*, more urgently in our time, *How do we claim courage?*

In Pinter's most recent brief play, *Apart from That*, it is what is deliberately omitted when Gene and Lake meet that bespeaks their courage. "How are you?" Gene asks. "Very well," Lake responds,

"And you? Are you well?" The second "well" turns the topic to health. When Gene insists, "I'm terribly well. How about you?" (5), the oxymoronic, double entendre "terribly well" (modified throughout, by "Apart from . . . You know . . .") belies Gene's insistence.

In the end, Gene's "I'm wonderfully well, to be honest," answered by Lake's "I'm really glad," spirals back to Lake's "But apart from that?" which is again left hanging in the play's second *Silence*;" this silence concludes with Lake's final, twice spoken, "Apart from that, how are you really? Apart from that?" (9) The curtain line "*really*" reveals that no part of the Self stands apart from the unspoken -- which colors their whole life.

The unspoken, unspeakable "apart from that" that Gene and Lake share with each other suggests a mortal wound of the "gravely ill," and echoes the classic acting exercise where two actors get up before a class, decide who and where they are (e.g. a boy and girl at a bar), and, while each harboring a secret, they alternatively speak the following lines:

Hello.
Hello.
How are you?
Very well, thank you. How are you.
I'm fine, thanks. Just fine.

The exercise demonstrates how the same five lines can transmit a unique world of different people, places and conflicts, while divulging secrets no one except the individual knows, but which are often easily guessed in performance. Pinter, skillful wizard that he is, leaves less play for actors, but creates greater challenges for audiences, directed toward a fresh end in *Apart from That*: both Gene and Lake may be dying. But bravely.

While at first glance this sketch might puzzle, (a response that reflects a similar reaction by some critics to *The Dumb Waiter*), Pinter's radical departure here throws light on previous work. This is the first of his plays aside from *Landscape* and *Silence* (multiple-character monologues) that does not depend upon dominant-subservient characters to battle or thwart one another, or require a Ben and Gus, their precursors, engaged in conflict-centered power plays that will arrest and move an audience. Instead, the audience is held by sympathy -- by our desire to know what is wrong and the character's

sympathy for one another. Though Lake insists, "I'm really well," Gene's reply, "I'm so glad," elicits Lake's near confession, "Apart from . . . Oh you know . . ." Gene's, "I know" is a rare, perhaps first expression of sympathy in Pinter's work that conveys how these characters choose to conceal what is wrong not merely out of civil politeness, cowardice or reticence to reveal embarrassing health problems, but rather to keep counsel by exhibiting that stoic courage of two veteran soldiers who have survived deadly battles.

More fully appreciating *The Dumb Waiter* allows us to see how Pinter's plays provoke the courage necessary to confront and address pressing battles for survival in our time. If drama's function is to awaken consciousness that inspires courage to act with a love that is just, *The Dumb Waiter* does so by dramatizing such a consciousness by negation: by what it is not. Revealing *why* Ben and Gus fail even to desire to seek consciousness reveals that the failure to do so becomes a source of paralyzing fear, and prevents one from claiming courage or productive action.

Literature and drama's universality comes in its appeal to commonality of fear, pity and a full range of emotions that can provoke thinking and transform action in ways Ben and Gus know nothing about. While it is easy to dismiss them as men of a certain class bound by simple, under-educated ignorance, their lack of consciousness can speak at depth to anyone. These men, so amply devoid of consciousness of the Self, one another, or the world beyond, unconsciously embrace feudal, hierarchical relationships that prevent them from taking any action that would fulfill a primal, survival instinct for respect, friendship or love. Because such relationships are fear-based, driven necessarily either by a desire to dominate or a willingness to submit to another to maintain that relationship, the elegantly symmetrical tragic irony in dominant-subservient relationships reveals that the very relationship prevents friendship or courage. Unconsciously submerged in a fear-based relationship, Ben and Gus embody their habits till, reflexively overwhelmed by feeling - - fear engulfs them entirely. Habitually stunned by fear, they cannot claim courage or do what is good.

This is not to say that Pinter denies the existence of evil in his work, that is, people can possess the urge to dominate for reasons other than fear. When I asked Pinter if he met truly evil people, *evil* defined as deliberate malice (during a time my son was threading his way between terrorists and torture-masters as an interpreter and

Protection Delegate for the International Committee of the Red Cross in the prisons of Kashmir, Kosovo and East Timor), he paused, and said "Yes." Certainly, in his visit to Turkish prisons, he met men who deliberately, irrevocably destroyed lives.³

Nevertheless, Gus's blurting out questions, like Ben's explosive angry outbursts, are defensive rather than brave challenges to a dominant malice. Unaware from the beginning even of a choice to embrace a relationship as equals, they seem to have stepped unquestioningly into a swiftly surging river, clutching one another till every act only tightens their bondage to each other, as they remain at the whim of a mercilessly destructive system that ever threatens to destroy them. Their choice moments, those moments of choice that lead to obvious dramatic turning-points, are not clearly delineated, but revealed simply as unconscious habit. They claim no larger aim to be accomplished other than an assigned task. Thus, Gus reflexively retreats in fearful subservient aversion to challenging Ben. Since neither can contribute to productive ends, both inevitably usher in their own destruction and demise, both equally culpable. Here, as in *The Birthday Party*, we see the underdog we might usually cheer for presented as equally responsible for his own destruction.

Each seemingly minuscule choice they make leads them into hotter, finally boiling water. But they remain unaware of the danger till it is too late. In the see-saw conflict of Ben's assuming the dominant partner's role with all its attendant characteristics, while Gus is easily slapped into subservience, the corrosive accretion of their unconscious choices proceed to a tipping point. They reflexively engage in any argument. Swept into the forward momentum, battle becomes the primary force and, simultaneously, strangely serves also as their strongest bond, however destructive. It may be that Gus and Ben are closest physically in the heat of battle. But that heat threatens Ben's authority, undermines the see-saw balance that requires keeping the dominant character on top and eventually destroys the relationship. Ben, even if he shoots, will not graduate on the next job to a castle out of this slum basement. Yet amazingly, Pinter creates enough sympathetic interest for these men so that we feel fear for both when the matches arrive under the door.

Letting us know nothing else about these two men than what we see on stage, Pinter has so fully realized them that we see they may indeed be the two lost souls who are closest to one another on

earth. To destroy one creates a loss that not only destroys their fragile relationship, but also threatens to annihilate the other. Similarly, *Sleuth* dramatizes this point with its amazing symmetry of ending. Where Ben at the end holds a gun on the disarmed Gus he may or may not shoot and when Andrew pulls the trigger on the similarly disarmed Milo with Milo's own gun, we know they all lose. Whether or not Andrew's wife comes back to him and together they cover up the murder, his life as he knows it is over, as Pinter's script directions make clear: "*His face is ashen. Then dead*"(91). One does not kill without dying, at least a little.

What contributes to the enduring greatness of Pinter's work is that he admits to caring for all his characters: "Even a bastard like Goldberg [*The Birthday Party*], I care for" (qtd in Knowles). How else could we care for ourselves or for others in ways necessary for human accord and peace? While Pinter has insisted, "I'm just another bastard human being,"⁴ he has lived his own life largely by quite opposite lights, transforming the easy equation of bad guys and good, revealing, except in cases of torture, *both* dominant and subservient characters partially responsible for their own destruction.

3. Who is upstairs?

"Who is it upstairs?" Gus repeatedly asks (145). We are. Although Pinter never directly proposes this, and would likely contend that the "facts" seem to contradict such an assertion, yet *The Dumb Waiter*, dramatizing choices that contrast with Pinter's decision to seize power in his own life, seems to indicate the opposite: that is, we all have power, but only a relative few choose to claim or exercise it.

The enemy within in *The Dumb Waiter* proceeds both from a failure to claim power and to develop the "other" in the self. Clues to understanding Ben and Gus proceed from Pinter's own staunch refusal to grovel as the men in *The Dumb Waiter* do and his insistence on never taking *No* for an answer. For example, when Harold's own father slapped his face for showing disrespect to his boss when the boy delivered his lunch, this slap was heard round the world in dramatic insights into such action in his plays and his refusal to accept public humiliation. Unlike Ben and Gus, Pinter leads his life by his own lights and persistence. At the London production of one of his plays, he described wanting desperately, early in his career, to get the attention of a certain agent to represent him, but said he could never

get an appointment. At last he waited outside her office before it opened and when she arrived he slipped in behind her. She sat at her desk, looked up at him, her only words: "No. No. No." Obviously, Pinter did not take *No* from the world. More recently, in an attempt to get a script to a director he had it hand delivered as the director waited to board a plane so he would be forced to read it en route.⁵

Unlike Pinter, Ben and Gus seem unable to seize any control over their own lives nor to direct the lives of others to better ends, because they possess almost no sense of what they might attain if their own lives had better direction. However much Gus fleetingly wishes for a bit of a view, he quickly abandons that desire. Instead, both men remain content to hold on to, even shore up, the parameters set by others in blind obedience to a *status quo* grown out of the old world feudal system. We see in the *Dumb Waiter's* two, underground outsiders, free men not far in their evolution from serfs.

In Pinter's work, the desire to participate in the larger, public sphere comes into play in his first full-length plays, *Homecoming* and *The Birthday Party*. In the latter, Stanley's thwarted (perhaps self-thwarted) aspiration, is one shared with every artist: to reach the widest possible audience even as the one-time piano player proclaims what we know to be false: "They were all there" (16). Gus, too, wishes for a window on the world while Ben remains content with second-hand newspaper reports. For the ancient Greeks, the term "idiot" referred to someone who did not participate in the polis. Similarly, Ben and Gus's knowledge of the larger world is restricted to human interest and sports on the public playing fields, events that are viewed in retrospect in their claustrophobic work place. In *The Dumb Waiter*, lack of self-awareness results in failure to take command of the self "upstairs:" literally they refuse to think, which allows an unseen person upstairs to command their lives. Harold, in contrast, Pygmalioned himself into the Pinter we know, launching a star high school student-actor-athlete-writer into a man of the world, encouraging multitudes in countless plays, political speeches, papers, letters, protests, and, as a Noble Laureate, addressing world leaders on the great conflicts threatening the world at large. Sadly, Ben and Gus remain consigned to a purgatory of the unconscious out of a failure of simple desire. Granting Pinter his greater gifts, his desires to be better, to know more of the world, which requires knowing one's self, we can acknowledge the obvious contrasts with Gus and Ben who

desire neither of these goals.⁶

Insights in *The Dumb Waiter*, as in any of Pinter's plays, appear in those choice moments -- those often seemingly small, inconsequential moments where irrevocable choices lead with apparent inexorable inevitability toward or away from that courage without which there can be no love or justice in life, potentially one of life's most prized possessions. Ben follows orders no matter what to "prove" himself, and, like ordinary citizens during the Holocaust who claimed they "didn't know," or were "only following orders," Gus follows the order Ben receives and follows from above.

As a child in World War II, Harold witnessed the terror of bombings in his own backyard, and consequently developed an abiding compassion for those people whose homes and streets were bombed, a sympathy he extends to civilians and children of war around the world. Even during a recent life-threatening setback, he scrupulously continued to oversee, albeit at arms' length, major productions of his work in the world that daily require his attention. In a *New York Times*' interview, he admits it is action and close attention to work that keeps him from sinking into despair. Similar to soldiers' bonds with one another (a quality which Gus and Ben lack), a caring for one's mates that facilitates warfare bravery, Pinter developed compassion for torture victims he met visiting Turkish prisons with Arthur Miller on behalf of PEN.⁶ Meeting men whose lives were irrevocably destroyed by seemingly irrational conflict, awakened him to public political engagement with the larger world.

In contrast, Ben and Gus, scarcely caring for themselves or one another, let alone anyone else, remain ruled by fear, above all for the tenuous self. When fear rules all else, an organism has no positive reason to go on living. In *The Dumb Waiter*, the need to belong to an organization they both value and reflexively fear allows apprehension to make dumb waiters of the men in all senses -- *dumb* as in ignorant and silent, *waiters* as in those who wait, no less than *waiters/servants*, deferring equally to the demands of customer, manager and owner.

The Dumb Waiter's second act complications begin when Gus observes that the toilet is faulty. Ben reflexively counters that it is a faulty ballcock (116-17). Gus's evidence mounts as he uncovers more signs that their status is slipping: "this place:"

It's worse than the last one. Remember that last place we were in?
... At least there was a wireless there. No, honest. He doesn't

seem to bother much about our comfort these days (119).

By glibly dismissing Gus's observations, Ben quells his own anxiety and distracts himself by burying his head in the newspaper. Despite their comic actions, however, we realize that our laughter is evoked at a flash point of insight illuminating their path toward dissolution. The awaited "orders" arrive in the envelope, but the situation, fraught with tension becomes terrifying when what is revealed are not orders, but, inexplicably matches (123).

First, Ben and Gus act equally in concord as they try to make sense of the matches. But Ben can agree with Gus only when Ben is not anxious. "Well, they'll come in handy" (124). Yet, again, they remain equally dumb: both wait rather than act. Ben as, top dog, and Gus as follower, are bonded by a symbiotic need to retain the "other's" approval, but they do so from differing perceived vantage points with regard to who is upstairs. Wilson, who is assumed to be more powerful, may not be much more so than the unseen Wizard of Oz, revealed as a smoke-and-mirrors power. Still Ben and Gus fight most tenaciously not for something better but to maintain what little they have, and, though the kill order is momentarily suspended in their flurry of activity to fill impossible food orders, they choose to follow orders blindly, never allowing the question of evil and subsequent destruction to surface.

Asking why they do not jump ship is like asking why the recluse Stanley in *The Birthday Party* does not simply leave. Pinter's question remains laser focused on real, complex core characteristics on both sides of seemingly opposite temperaments, as he represents two opposite personalities with different signature characteristics, polar strengths and weakness that cover the spectrum of the human question: *Why do people fail to act in their own best interest?* The terms "foreigners" or "them blacks" uttered by other Pinter characters in *The Room* or *The Caretaker*, which refer to perceived lesser beings apart from one's own sphere, remain resonate also in *The Dumb Waiter*, as Ben and Gus have as few choices and freedoms as these other outsiders.

4. Retrospections

With the privilege of viewing *The Dumb Waiter* retrospectively

through the lens of *Celebration*, we hear the recluse Waiter describe all who attain international celebrity or power as in bed together: from movie stars and moguls, world leaders, Mussolini and Churchill through the ordinary citizen -- a perspective obtained on the authority of his grandfather whom the young man claims knew them all. This Waiter, neither silent nor dumb, comes full circle with *The Dumb Waiter's* male characters. His riffs on the powerful and famous put in perspective the invisible power of the celebrants -- delivery boys for the guns, drugs, and money, ruling the world -- a noisy, salacious bunch of loveless destructors revealed, nevertheless, as a species of dumb waiters -- enjoying a more comfortable level of privilege than the boys in the basement..

Celebration's nameless Waiter cannot be silenced while enumerating his grandfather's personal acquaintance with major Western leaders and dictators. How different is the Waiter's reported acquaintance with the world's famous once removed from ours in fantasy or through media news? How different is his vicarious brush with power from Ben and Gus's identification with well-known sports teams while waiting dumbly in *The Dumb Waiter's* basement without the ability to seize individual power or possibly even to survive?

From *The Room* through *Celebration* and *Apart from That*, Pinter's work holds little truck with Milton's "They also serve who only stand and wait." The young Waiter, so paralyzed into inaction he cannot leave the restaurant's premises, is no different from Ben and Gus ordered to remain in a basement, or from fearful Rose in *The Room*, or the recluse Stanley in *The Birthday Party*, imprisoned in a hovel, and paralyzed by fear of the world beyond. Ironically, no one in Pinter's work, who merely waits, can also serve any good purpose. Yet *The Dumb Waiter*, within the context of Pinter's life, explodes the notion that humans, like dogs, are mere herding animals with a pecking order that places Alpha males at the top for survival of the herd and allows for no change. Where a top dog's endowments are partially honored (as in a hierarchical military model) for the protection he offers the pack in terms of strength, experience and wisdom, Pinter's dominant characters display no protection for the survival of the partnership or pack; instead they value only defense of the self's position and organization, both of which are threatened by the very power structure that sustains it. Unlike the good commander, good teacher, writer, parent or actor, who out of care, concern and love wishes to develop others placed in her charge rather than to

destroy those best qualities, Pinter's dominant characters such as Ben and Goldberg squelch those subservient to them out of fear that they might attempt to transform themselves or may transcend a given status that might be regarded as a threat to their position.

Those so-called qualities of "other" in the self, where other is taken to be the undeveloped, discarded, and shunned, is embraced by Pinter's successor to the Nobel Prize, Orhan Pamuk in his novel *Snow*, through what he terms his non-judgmental narrator Ka, a poet journalist like the author himself. Pamuk feels proud of Ka's assiduous refusal to take a stance on the head-scarf issue (Ka has come to Kars to investigate young women committing suicide because they are *not* permitted to wear them). Pamuk believes that his non-judgmental character Ka allows a reader to come into contact with his own "other" and the lives of many "others." Through the novel, readers may come to admit certain qualities as part of the self, qualities which they may not admire, and in acknowledging and embodying those differences grow in consciousness toward peace.

There are similarities between Pamuk's characters' and Ben and Gus. Ka, for example, whose inaction lands him in the same camp as Pinter's ineffectual subservient characters, investigates little and concludes less; thus, in the end, he commands neither himself nor others, but instead is led around by the "loveliest eyes." When asked what he himself thinks about the veil issue, Pamuk readily admits that the head-scarf is a male issue imposed upon women. Nevertheless, Pamuk sees taking any position as a step toward being part of the problem, and claims the best way to handle the issue is to ignore it.⁸

In contrast to Pamuk's ideas, Pinter, by inhabiting what halls of power that it took him and his characters a lifetime to enter, sustains an abiding quest to understand, dramatize and enlighten. His work illuminates the dilemma of the spectator's fear and cowardice, exposing the audience to sources of courage, rendered in terms of a gift that we can keep only by giving away, by seizing power and taking action for good. Precisely the opposite happens in *The Dumb Waiter's* grand finale, which allows only for destruction. Yet again, Pinter's own choices contrast to Ben and Gus's and offer insight into their subtle failure to see and seize choices, without which *The Dumb Waiter* might be reduced to fatalistic, melodramatic naturalism.

Ben, who scarcely questions anything, can do or agree with nothing except what ratifies the organization and his position in it.

Yet at the conclusion of the deadly “light the kettle/light the gas” battle, Ben misremembers which side he first took (because it does not matter), and, in the end, he elaborately opts to defend Gus’s earlier assertion that the correct term is “light the kettle.” Without consciousness, fear can overwhelm all else, as Ben and Gus demonstrate each time they allow minutia to overwhelm what matters (semantics versus survival), and together they fail to arrive at obvious conclusions based on observation and evidence that certainly would lead to productive action or even to basic survival. What remains are equally wounded egos. Yet, Ben’s unwavering loyalty never questions the organization while Gus’s almost unstoppable questions remain unanswered because he, too, falls habitually in line with system -- Ben and the organization.

Pinter depicts such destructive acquiescing as on a par with bullying intimidation. He, like his American counterpart Edward Albee, remains an exemplar of challenging destructive authority. But Pinter also dramatizes how unbridled fear summons what one most shuns. In Ben and Gus’s unchecked anxiety, their fear to challenge authority may cost them their lives. Like Stanley’s obvious tragic choice to sit rather than to leave in defiance of his attackers he himself provokes, Ben and Gus ironically allow a fear-driven bravado to lead to the possibility of both being *taken* out. If *The Dumb Waiter* reveals consciousness as a beginning source of courage, then the worst is not cowardice or even despair, but cowardice masquerading at courage. That is what Ben’s bullying dramatizes in the guise of doing things for Gus’s own good.

One great beauty of Pinter’s work is that his insights that apply to the individual also apply to the state. While *The Dumb Waiter* reveals a writer trying to make sense of Hitler’s Germany holding Europe hostage with the horrifying holocaust still as freshly in mind as the bombs in the author’s childhood back yard, the play dramatizes the origins of such violence at the individual level. Pinter brings Ben and Gus to the precipice, where, with a single misstep, they are next in line. In a sense to destroy themselves is to destroy the organization they serve, and, on a larger level, perhaps the state. It is no wonder that Pinter currently expresses outrage against America, a democratic country that presently seems to be rescinding fundamental tenants of democracy, and worse, seems to be attempting to institute a return to old world hierarchy in the name of democracy. In the guise of security -- requiring for its safety a fearful citizenry with a lack of

consciousness and its attendant consequences writ large -- ironically we see the state sowing the seeds of its own destruction unless it changes course. In his Nobel Lecture, he accused the United States of "systematic, constant, vicious, remorseless" crimes: cowardice assuming the guise of courage. Pinter says: "You have to hand it to America. It has exercised a quite clinical manipulation of power worldwide while masquerading as a force for universal good" (15). Just as characters from *The Dumb Waiter* through *Celebration* and *Sleuth* dramatize, here Pinter describes those who are unaware that they are driven reflexively by ignorance and fear: paralyzed even to see choices, wish for better, or to act to save their own or others' lives.

If, as I have argued, courage that proceeds from the heart is a just love, and those who inspire love inspire courage, the questions and answers provoked by Ben and Gus already in this early play bear fruit with enormous consequences in *Apart from That*, where for the first time two men who have faced the worst find unspoken sympathy eliciting the best and bravest in one another. The action they choose is a mutual silence.⁹ Unlike the dumb waiters before them beset by unnamable, unrecognized fears expressed in niggling conflict, the characters in *Apart from That* are fully conscious of the unspeakable they face. In deciding to keep good cheer by giving it to the other, they stand as exemplars of courage, helping to acquaint us with our own.

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Notes

¹ Author in conversation with Pinter, London, January 2006; his most recent brush with death reported most recently May 30, 2008, in telephone conversation on his delight with *The Birthday Party*'s fiftieth anniversary production.

² While some could legitimately argue that Gus does not want to know the answer to the questions that point to his demise, whether or not we are a herding animal, easily herded by the dictates of this season's current shade of beige with which fashion designers and politicians wish to color our bodies, few of us as teenagers, the height of our self-consciousness, have been entirely able to escape falling in with what is trendy.

³ The Turkish playwright Bilgesu Erenus asked me to describe to the International Women Playwrights Conference in Athens how when Pinter and Miller came to Istanbul they gathered all the prominent Turkish writers in a room, and began by asking how many had been imprisoned for what they wrote. She said that they

expected a handful to stand. The whole room stood. Bilgesu Erenus herself had been imprisoned on several occasions for her writing, as have at least two or three other women playwrights at every International Women Playwrights Conference, reminding writers in free countries how fortunate we are.

⁴ Author's personal reminiscence.

⁵ Author's personal reminiscence.

⁶ For details of PEN, see <http://www.englishpen.org/aboutenglishpen/>.

⁷ Pinter is not immune to opinions of his public, friends, audiences and critics, nor to that stunned, terrified fear in the face of possible threatening failure. Until the opening night of previews for the American premiere of *Betrayal*, I had never before seen a human being tremble from head to foot. "Well," he laughed, "this is New York, Folks." I was suddenly glad it was not my play. But he faced fear with a courage born of a generosity of spirit -- a comic laugh. After taking time during rehearsals to read my first play slated for a New York production, he set an appointment to discuss it, and a few days later offered professional direction commenting on act, scene, page and characters. He, like Lake and Gene facing the worst in *Apart from That*, or like soldiers commended for bravery, can admit to fear yet find ways to continue forward.

⁸ Orhan Pamuk in a talk after a public reading at Hallwalls from his novel *Snow* (Buffalo, New York, November 8, 2007).

⁹ What at first seems the usual embarrassment about talking of death, like the Gurlentes' searingly brushing off Swan when he mentions he's dying in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, here, Pinter brilliantly first discloses one then the other revealing himself as not well, till in their sympathy with one another, one becomes the other in that unspoken sympathy.

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The “Other” Within Us: the Rubin’s Vase of Class in *The Dumb Waiter*

Jonathan Shandell

GUS: I was just thinking about that girl, that’s all.

GUS *sits on his bed.*

She wasn’t much to look at, I know, but still. It was a mess though, wasn’t it? What a mess. Honest, I can’t remember a mess like that one. They don’t seem to hold together like men, women. A looser texture, like. Didn’t she spread, eh? (130-31)

1. Class Other-ness

Here the world of violent machismo created by Harold Pinter in *The Dumb Waiter* explicitly takes on the extra baggage of sexism. With this speech, Gus marginalizes women as objects for the male gaze, and disdains that “looser” feminine corporeality that demands extra “cleaners and all” (1131) ordered by the organization that these men serve. In the social order that Ben and Gus inhabit, an unattractive woman marked for extermination suffers triple marginalization; being female, ugly and a target is decidedly worse than simply being a target. As this is the only woman and the only of Ben and Gus’ past victims to which direct reference is made, in essence Pinter equates disempowerment and victimization with femininity within the social order of the play. When Gus later comes into Ben’s crosshairs, he stands emasculated before his partner and the audience -- with his skin exposed and his revolver (a phallic instrument of power) forcibly removed, awaiting extermination from a ruthless and mostly invisible patriarchy.

A feminist critic could make much more of *The Dumb Waiter*. The entire drama rests upon carefully constructed codes of male-perpetuated aggression. Pinter offers no alternative to, nor any explicit criticism against, a socio-political system of values as driven by testosterone as any that David Mamet or Neal LaBute could have devised. Beyond the grotesque invocation of the one victim

referenced above, there are no female characters to be found on stage or off. The comic tension of the play centers on a pair of professional goons and their struggles to fulfill their stereotypically feminized task of mastering a kitchen, to cater to the appetites of demanding and powerful men. Still, it is only at this one specific moment that the play's otherwise subtextual gender politics rise to the level of text. At no other moment in the drama are women explicitly defined as the "other" -- using Lawrence Cahoone's definition of "constitutive otherness" as a means through which social identities

are maintained in their apparent unity only through an active process of exclusion, opposition, and hierarchization. Other phenomena or units must be represented as foreign or 'other' through representing a hierarchical dualism in which the unit is 'privileged' or favored, and the other is devalued in some way. (119)

In contrast to other early Pinter dramas, race, ethnicity and national origin are even less present as standards of identity differentiation in *The Dumb Waiter*. For example, in *The Room*, the "blind Negro" Riley suffers Ruth's insults and Bert's brutal kicks; Davies rails directly against "Poles, Greeks, Blacks, the lot of them, all aliens" in *The Caretaker* (6). Such invocations of identity otherness based on skin color or nationality are nowhere to be found in *The Dumb Waiter*. Instead, the play's most urgent variable of identity is class.

As Penelope Prentice notes in this volume, Pinter creates clear "dominant-subservient relationships" and "feudal, hierarchical" stratifications of material, social and political power. These differences work against the formation of bonds or the performance of actions that are based on "friendship, love, courage, happiness." Prentice argues:

Unaware from the beginning even of a choice to embrace a relationship as equals, they seem to have stepped unquestioningly into a swiftly surging river, clutching one another till every act only tightens their bondage to each other, as they remain at the whim of a mercilessly destructive system that ever threatens to destroy them.

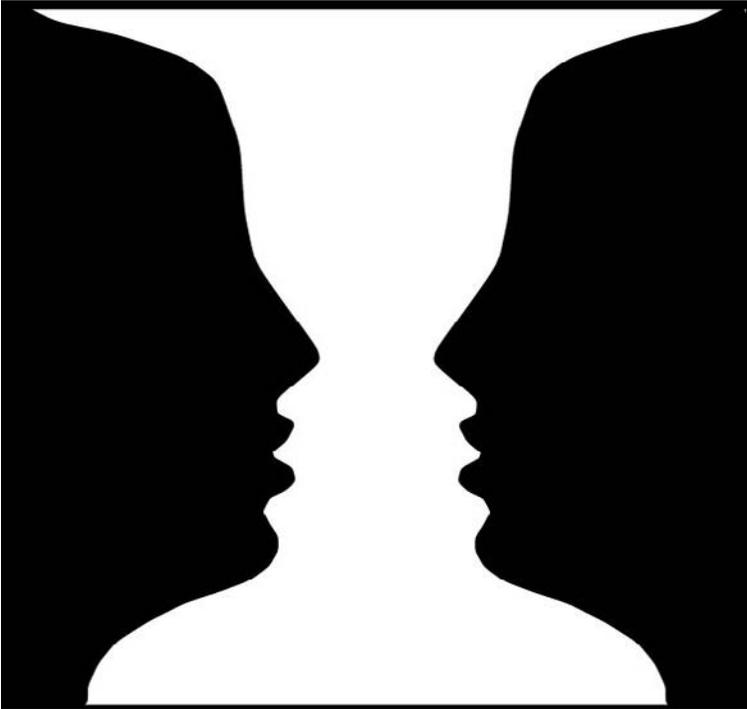
There can be no disputing the mercilessness of the current that propels Ben and Gus toward their final confrontation. The play's closing

tableau, with these two partners sharing a "long silence" and piercing stare, is loaded with the brutality and heartlessness of these men's kill-or-be-killed existence. Gus' execution is imminent -- a harsh and irreversible corrective to his impulse toward the all-too-human necessity of asking questions. Although Ben's short-term prospects are not as dire, his hesitation in pulling the trigger suggests a serious contemplation of what Gus' appearance in his crosshairs might portend for his own future. Henceforth, Ben will live with total subservience or violent eradication as his only professional prospects. Were he to reject his role as dutiful in-house exterminator for the organization's emerging malcontents (like Gus), he too will gaze upon the barrel of a company revolver.

Even so, my view of the play departs somewhat from that of my colleague in this volume in holding that Ben and Gus do actively consider the option of identifying with one another as peers. I see the social dynamic between the two protagonists not as consistently oppressive, but as unstable and changeable -- a fluctuation between the attraction of fellow-feeling and the repulsion of hierarchical inequality. Even if we assume the inevitability of Gus' death from Ben's bullet in the moments that follow the final blackout (a reasonable conjecture, but still not an absolute certainty, by Pinter's express design), such an outcome does not depend upon a stable dominant-subservient relationship between shooter and victim. Nor does it preclude flickers of awareness along the way "of a choice to embrace a relationship as equals," no matter how naïve or ineffectual such a choice might ultimately be for men of their position. Even as both characters acquiesce -- without serious or meaningful challenge - - to acting out their roles as antagonists and contestants for limited autonomy, Ben and Gus experiment at times with the possibility of seeing one another as colleagues confronting the same professional uncertainties, as peers linked by common sufferings. Selda Öndül's analysis of other Pinter works applies perfectly to *The Dumb Waiter* as well. Given that "the main problem in Pinter's plays is 'victimisation of the other,'" Pinter's characters deal with this problem by alternating between pursuing opportunities as victimizers, and seeking strategies "to get hold of a space, of a person or both [so as] to escape the victimisation of the other" (Öndül).

To elaborate on Öndül's construction further, I contend that Pinter's dramatization of class structure and other-ness in *The Dumb Waiter* can best be understood as a theatrical equivalent of "Rubin's

vase” -- the renowned optical illusion developed by Danish psychologist Edgar Rubin that presents complementary pictures of a vase and two silhouetted faces in profile.¹



The Rubin's vase plays upon the human brain's instinct to organize things we see into foreground and background by offering simultaneous possibilities of equal validity. No matter the viewer's efforts to focus on only one picture, once made aware of the other possibility, vision will inevitably oscillate between the two rival designs. Similarly, *The Dumb Waiter* establishes two equally viable hierarchies of class that compete with one another for the foreground of audience perception. One picture unites Ben and Gus as class compatriots in a tripartite structure. The competing picture is one of binary division that divides these two men from one another and pits them as antagonists. The mysterious power of the play springs (as does the visual impact of Rubin's vase) in large part from the impossibility of seeing only one picture to the total exclusion of the

other. This essay will illustrate how Pinter creates and sustains this shifting sense of class "otherness" in *The Dumb Waiter* -- particularly through his carefully controlled use of pronouns within the dialogue.

2. "You" versus "I" versus "We"

From the outset of the play, Pinter encourages the audience to consider Ben and Gus as peers. "*Both are dressed in shirts, trousers and braces*" (113). They fill the initial moments of silence in the same manner by manipulating everyday objects -- playing with a matchbox, rattling a newspaper, tying a shoelace. It soon becomes apparent through the dialect, subjects and rhythms of their conversation that these are "working-class Cockneys" (Esslin 60) of a cultural and socio-economic background that is familiar to Pinter from his own Hackney upbringing. They are from the same world, one easily identifiable to Pinter and his English audiences (Ben's declaration of senior partner status notwithstanding). Reinforcing a sense of equivalence between Ben and Gus is a vaudevillian repartee that evokes Samuel Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* -- another symbiotic pair of characters distinct in personality yet equal to one another in their lack of autonomy over the conditions of their waiting. Suggesting that the play can be read as "a kind of *Godot* in Birmingham -- about two men passing time in a universe without meaning or purpose," Michael Billington speaks to a prevailing sense of existential kinship that links these partners, mirroring the visible socio-economic similarities that Pinter imbues in them (89).

This sense of social equivalence between Ben and Gus builds as the men call upon first-person plural constructions to discuss their professional situation. "How often do we do a job? Once a week?" (118), Ben asks Gus, an early clue that these two men self-identify, at least rhetorically, as peers. Gus echoes this perspective in his complaints regarding the accommodations made for this assignment. "He doesn't seem to bother much about our comfort these days" (119), he points out to his partner. In Pinter's stripped-down linguistic milieu, the pronouns "we," "us" and "our" carry significant weight in articulating a perspective on the situation that these two men share. They speak to a sense of kinship between Ben and Gus, one which can be tracked throughout the entire play and which never completely

disappears, whatever hostility or competitiveness will come to pass between them.

This sense of kinship becomes even more marked as Pinter demarcates other social strata within the world of the play. Hovering above Ben and Gus (both literally and figuratively) are the unseen members of a powerful executive class. These mysterious organizational overlords issue baffling commands that, no matter how outlandish, must be acted upon without delay. The more illogical their demands, the more frantic become the efforts at fulfillment; thus, as the power of these demands increases, the thicker the air of Ben and Gus' basement purgatory becomes. As the two partners gather provisions, Gus imagines his commanders wallowing on high in a situation of material comfort appropriate to their elite status:

GUS sits on his bed

... You notice they didn't ask for any salads? They've probably got a salad bowl up there. Cold meat, radishes, cucumbers. Watercress. Roll mops.

Pause.

Hardboiled eggs.

Pause.

The lot. They've probably got a crate of beer too. (141-42)

These aristocrats appear in the dialogue almost exclusively through third-person pronouns: "he" and "him," "they" and "them." Only once, in a rare moment of relative concreteness, does Pinter offer "Wilson" as a specific name to associate with these puppet-masters on whose strings Ben and Gus dangle and dance. Conversely, there is a group of citizens who stand below Ben and Gus on the social spectrum: a fatally oppressed underclass of victims who have suffered from or will suffer brutal assassination. Gus wonders in an off-handed way "who it's going to be tonight" (128), and pauses to think about the logistics of cleaning up the mess. But the reasons for any victim's status as revolver-fodder and total disempowerment remain unexplored and undisputed.

Thus, however strongly their mannerisms and speech might evoke the familiar culture of "working-class Cockneys," within the particular political economy of the drama, Ben and Gus stand in the middle stratum of a three-tiered social system. As such, they enjoy certain comforts and assurances, but they also must resign themselves to

meager accommodations and a fragmentary understanding of their situation. Their efforts to execute the directives that emanate from on high reaffirm both their disempowerment with respect to those superiors, as well as their autonomy over those whom they kill. As they wrestle with the ambiguities of their situation, this pair repeatedly calls upon that sense of mutual empathy encapsulated in the pronoun "we." "We've never let him down, have we? ... We're reliable, aren't we?" Gus asks his companion as his uncertainty mounts (137). Ben's apology into the speaking tube articulates a clear bond of partnership and shared labor: "I'm sorry to -- bother you, but we just thought we'd better let you know that we haven't got anything left. We sent up all we had" (139). For both men -- particularly for Gus, the more anxious and inquisitive of the pair -- the invocation of "we" or "us" becomes a survival technique, a rhetorical strategy that reinforces a sense of fellowship as the whims of this world's powerful class grow more incomprehensible, and as the victims over which the men might buttress their self-image remain absent.

Yet there are clear moments when this rhetorical strategy cannot be used and first-person plural constructions no longer serve as a palliative. "Why did you stop the car this morning, in the middle of the road?" (119), Gus asks early in the play. The choice of pronoun here is revelatory.² The question "Why did we stop..." is a non-starter, since the stopping was passive for Gus, but active and deliberate for Ben. The ensuing exchange shows Gus struggling, despite his awareness of an imbalance of information separating him from his companion, to hold on to his sense of "we" as a context for his relationship with his partner:

GUS: ... I thought perhaps you wanted to kip, but you were sitting up dead straight, like you were waiting for something.

BEN: I wasn't waiting for anything.

GUS: I must have fallen asleep again. What was all that about then? Why did you stop?

BEN: (*picking up the paper*). We were too early.

GUS: Early? (*He rises.*) What do you mean? We got the call, didn't we, saying we were to start right away. We did. We shoved out on the dot. So how could we be too early?

BEN: Who took the call, me or you?

GUS: You.

BEN: We were too early.

GUS: Too early for what? (119-20)

The differential of knowledge that divides Gus from Ben demands the pronouns “I” and “you” rather than “we.” A discomfiting hint of “otherness” arises between the two men, one that competes with the carefully delineated sense of sameness that links them together. Ben’s explanation that “We were too early” fails to satisfy Gus, since the context for understanding “Too early” is not something the two men share. Ben’s use of “We” in this instance becomes empty, and Gus responds by repeatedly invoking that same pronoun, in fruitless attempts to reassert its utility and reify his equivalence to his companion. Thus, a new picture starts to emerge -- the other way to see the Rubin’s vase, a world in which Ben and Gus exist as “you” and “me” -- that will compete with but never replace the bond of “we.”

As Ben and Gus make increasingly desperate attempts to fulfill the ever more irrational instructions conveyed through the dumb waiter, the comfort of “we” continues to abrade against the anxiety of “you” and “I” in Gus’ speech:

We send him up all we’ve got and he’s not satisfied. No, honest, it’s enough to make the cat laugh. Why did you send him up all that stuff? (*Thoughtfully.*) Why did I send it up? (141)

This is the most vivid instance that Pinter affords of how the strain of the situation forces the first-person plural to exist alongside its two constituent singular subjects. Here Gus disassociates his own individual agency from that of his presumed partner, and confronts the terrifying notion that he is accountable not as part of an alliance but as an independent actor, and that his own acquiescence might serve a different purpose than that of another who performs the same actions. To squelch this dangerous line of critical thinking, Ben too must abandon “we” in favor of “you” and “me:”

BEN: What’s the matter with you? You’re always asking me questions. ...

GUS: Nothing

BEN: You never used to ask me so many damn questions. What’s come over you?” (127)

Whether Ben delivers this outburst to protect Gus or to shield the “organization” Pinter deliberately refuses to specify.

The weight carried by specific pronouns accumulates as the two executioners march through the "instructions" for their imminent hit job. In one sense, the back-and-forth exchange of directives is a ritualized affirmation of partnership, a trope that works to synchronize expectations and heighten a sense of collaboration between Ben and Gus. But as each call by Ben evokes a response by Gus in which "I" must be substituted for "you" (or vice versa), a dangerous space opens in the dramatic situation. Ben's (possibly deliberate) omission of the instruction for Gus to draw his gun makes that danger clear. Ben might have instructed Gus, "We draw our guns," but, as soon becomes evident, "we" and "our" are inoperable for this instance. One man will draw a weapon; the other will no longer have one in his possession. One man will join the underclass of victims, while the other will be forced to renounce all feelings of professional fellowship for the sake of allegiance to a brutal regime within which his partner no longer has a place. At this moment, the simultaneity of two different class systems (like the visual co-presence of one vase and two faces) reaches its most pronounced state.

Gus' last and most desperate attempt to invoke and cling to the comforts of "we" soon follows. He appeals to Ben out of a sense of shared history: "We got right through our tests, years ago, didn't we? We took them together, don't you remember, didn't we?" (146) He screams frantically to the listeners upstairs, "WE'VE GOT NOTHING LEFT! NOTHING! DO YOU UNDERSTAND?" (146) His desperation provokes Ben into an outburst in which the necessity for "I" and "you" is reinforced with physical violence: "*He follows GUS and slaps him hard, back-handed, across the chest.*"

BEN: Stop it! You maniac! ...

GUS: But you heard.

BEN: (*savagely.*) That's enough! I'm warning you!" (146)

When the directive to act comes through the speaking tube, Ben offers an assurance that "Sure we're ready" (148). Though he returns to "we" at this portentous moment, the pronoun is now empty. Gus is nowhere to be found. As Gus reenters the space -- stripped of the visual uniformity with Ben that defines the opening moments of the play -- for the first time these men gaze upon one another as "the Other." The world of *The Dumb Waiter* now appears as one bifurcated into two distinct groups: victims and victimizers. Despite repeated and

calculated evocations of “we” and “us,” the competing picture has forced itself into view.

Even so, the *coup de grace* of the play’s final moment is that while it might seem to draw an indelible line of separation between Ben and Gus (one picture within the Rubin’s vase, so to speak), it simultaneously creates a new kind of peership and commonality that unites them. As Katherine H. Burkman observes, “The ritual sacrifice at the center of *The Dumb Waiter* is similar to that in *The Birthday Party* Pinter again on one level shows victim and victor as one and on another level portrays both victim and victor as victims” (39). With Gus metamorphosing so quickly before his partner’s eyes from hit-man to target, Ben watches his own victimization at the hands of the “organization” take shape. If Ben, too, grows (in Gus’ words) “a bit fed up” with his life of subservience, the same end of a revolver awaits him. Otherwise, he will continue as an automaton executioner, killing strangers and partners alike, giving over all of his humanity to his job. Either way, the eradication of Ben’s autonomy as a free-thinking individual by those in power is assured.

Thus, the moment when Pinter’s two characters are most divided is in fact when these partners, though forced into a violent playing out of “you” versus “I,” also become “we” again. As Ben stares and takes aim, he remains frozen in contemplation of a figure who is simultaneously both “the Other” and a mirror of the self. Like psychologist and optical illusionist Rubin, Pinter has constructed this final stage picture to force both visions into coexistence.

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Notes

¹ Edgar Rubin first published a drawing of what is now known as “Rubin’s Vase” in his study *Synsoplevede Figurer* (1915). This rendering of the image is from Braun’s “Computational Neuroscience: Intimate Attention.”

² The distinction between first-person and second-person pronouns that I am drawing in this essay deserves one qualification, given that Pinter sometimes has his characters using second-person pronouns in impersonal and far less precise constructions. For example, Gus complains to Ben about the conditions of the room by saying, “I mean, you come into a place when it’s still dark, you come into a room you’ve never seen before, you sleep all day, you do your job, and then you go away in the night again” (118). Here the impersonal “you” connotes the general situation that Ben and Gus share, rather than a condition particular to one man or the other. In such cases, the sense of the impersonal “you” is actually closer in connotation to “we,” which might

be substituted as the subject of these clauses without any change in meaning. My concern in this essay is with the more specific and personal uses of the second-person subject as a means for emphasizing differences that separate Ben and Gus.

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Anti-Ritual, Critical Domestication and Representational Precision in Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*

Lance Norman

*The door right opens sharply. Ben turns, his
revolver leveled at the door. Gus stumbles in.
He is stripped of his jacket, waistcoat, tie, holster and
revolver. He stops, body stooping, his arms at his sides.
He raises his head and looks at Ben. A long silence.
They stare at each other. (149)*

1. How Does the End Mean?: Critical Conflict and *The Dumb Waiter*

As we approach the 50th anniversary of the debut of *The Dumb Waiter* (1960) the ending of Harold Pinter's play continues to elicit debate. Critics are still trying to comprehend the "long silence" that concludes Pinter's play. Action rises to the level of ambiguity in *The Dumb Waiter*. Is Gus the victim for whom the hitmen were waiting? Should Ben's leveling his gun at the door be understood as the prelude to murder? Or, does Gus walking through the door and Ben leveling his gun simply mean that Gus has walked through the door, and Ben has leveled his gun?

Perhaps ambiguity is not even the right way to characterize Pinter's ending. The critical canon seems to suggest that, if anything, the play (or at least its critics) are ambiguous about its ambiguity. The perpetuation of opposing views over what the ending of the play means suggests that such seemingly irresolvable critical debates may be encouraged by *The Dumb Waiter's* structure and meaning. A critical assessment of the play's final tableau must come to grips with what it means when Gus stumbles into the room and comes face to

face with his partner, Ben, and how is meaning created by *The Dumb Waiter's* indeterminate conclusion.

Two major critical discourses have developed around *The Dumb Waiter's* concluding tableau. One strand conceptualizes the end of the play signifying beyond the play in both form and content. Content wise, Ben pointing his gun at Gus represents the murder that is to follow. Formally, Pinter's play signifies something beyond itself, and the play is a clear example of the myth and ritual structures from which drama derives.

The second strand emphasizes that the play is the sum total of its actions. Since the play does not end in a murder, any interpretation must understand the play as what happens, and not what an audience may think will happen next. In essence, since the play has ended, any consideration of what will come next disregards the play in favor of a narrative that derives from the viewer or reader's imagination. A striking element of those who understand the tableau as a self-contained action is the tendency to completely reject the understanding of the play (and those critics who understand the play) as a representation beyond itself. From this perspective, critics who move from present to future by focusing on what will happen in addition to what does happen misunderstand and deform the play.

In light of this overt confrontation over the structure and action of *The Dumb Waiter* -- over how *The Dumb Waiter* means -- I wish to take another look at the critical discourse surrounding the play to integrate these seemingly intractable critiques. A macrocosmic view of *The Dumb Waiter's* critical conflicts suggests that the very struggle over how the play's concluding moments represent is an inevitable extension and performance of the play's structure and action.

This conflict over how the concluding tableau represents is in some sense a question over whether the play is one example of a general phenomena, or is a unique and specific entity that must be understood on its own terms. A general approach to *The Dumb Waiter* such as that proposed by ritual critics reveals how the play resonates beyond the sum of its parts. Such a frame categorizes the play as part of an archetypal pattern similar to that outlined by Sir James Frazer in his influential modernist anthropological study *The Golden Bough*. Frazer begins his book with the narrative of the Arician sacred grove. He explains that the grove was a sanctuary

guarded by a priest and murderer who must stand watch until he in his turn was murdered, and his murderer would become priest in his stead (1). Ritually, the priest -- the king -- the god must die so the priest / king / god can be reborn and society can prosper.

In *The Dramatic World of Harold Pinter*, Katherine Burkman suggests that Pinter's drama is steeped in ritual, and replicates the "cyclical theory of culture which Frazer's book propounds," and on which drama is based (16). Such a gloss gives Burkman insight into the ritual connotations of what for her are far from ambiguous concluding moments of *The Dumb Waiter*; ending the play prior to Ben shooting Gus does not make the play any less ritualized or inevitable:

The absence of a shot clarifies for the audience the nature of that silent moment of recognition for Ben. Ben too has been unable to satisfy the demands of the dumb waiter. Surely his turn will come. The killer must be killed. Victim and victor are one. (44)

Placed in its ritual context, *The Dumb Waiter* is part of an archetypal pattern. Seemingly, Ben and Gus are types who each fulfill a role in the system that the play enacts. In Burkman's terms, Gus and Ben are victim and victor -- antagonists inextricably joined to create the complete tapestry of the play.

The virtue of a play that ends previous to Ben's murder of Gus is that the ending tableau offers a clear visual demonstration of the play as an interactive multi-faceted ritual. Ben the victor inside the room -- inside the system -- needs instructions from god(s) represented by Wilson and the dumb waiter (powerful forces existing outside the system, but influencing it) to necessitate and to give meaning to the sacrifice of Gus the victim. To bring the cycle to its conclusion -- to have Ben pull the trigger -- gives Ben an illusory agency and omnipotence.

If Gus's death was represented, the play would become less ritualized, and Ben would be given an apparent independence. His connection to Gus would fracture. As victor, he could go on to his next job rather than be perpetually locked in the room, in the conflict, and in the unfulfilled service with which the play concludes. Ben could leave the room and move on to what is next rather than maintain an irresolvable status quo.

Ending the play with the two protagonists trapped in roles that never change emphasizes the transcendent nature of rituals. Ben may play the role of victor in this ritual, but ritual perpetuates beyond any specific example with the only change deriving from who plays what role. Some day Ben will play the role of victim.¹ So, to appropriately emphasize that Ben is as much a puppet to exterior forces as Gus, Ben must not bring the ritual to a conclusion by pulling the trigger.

Burkman's ritual-based reading of *The Dumb Waiter* suggests that Pinter's narrative includes enough clues to the play's mythological cycle that an audience can see beyond the drama to the ritual form underneath, thereby beginning to understand that the play belongs to something larger and more universal. Ending the play prior to the culmination of the ritual cycle highlights the play's determinate nature. The long silence is merely the prelude to the sacrifice of Gus, and Ben's eventual transformation from victor to victim.

Burkman's extension of *The Dumb Waiter's* action beyond the long silence to encapsulate the violence that seems destined to ensue is hardly unique. In "Mind-less Men: Pinter's Dumb Waiters," Robert Gordon's analysis demonstrates that it is not necessary to place Pinter's play in a ritual context to see that it represents actions exterior to its performance. Gordon asserts that "Ben knows that Gus will die" despite the fact that Gus is alive at the play's conclusion, and it being less than clear what Ben knows (210).

In a clear example of the opposing thread of criticism on *The Dumb Waiter*, Thomas Van Laan finds that generalizations and extensions by Pinter commentators obscures our understanding of the play rather than revealing its structure and meaning.² In "*The Dumb Waiter*: Pinter's Play with the Audience," Van Laan begins his essay by focusing on Pinter critics:

Published commentary on *The Dumb Waiter* is for the most part rather unsatisfactory. Instead of analyzing the play as Pinter wrote it, most commentators rely on distortions and fabrications -- or, at best, conclusions based on guesswork -- to concoct a new play of their own making. The discrepancy is most apparent in the commentators' accounts of how the play ends. (117)

For Van Laan, critics need to understand the play "as Pinter wrote it." Pinter's play is explicitly defined as a text. The written text offers a clear interpretation for how the play should end. Regardless

of audience expectations, Ben's gun never goes off. If a critic assumes Gus gets murdered just because Ben is pointing his gun at him, and Gus is disheveled and no longer carries his own gun, then the critic is no longer referencing Pinter's play as written, but instead analyzing a text that does not exist. Pinter's play does not end with a prelude to a future action, but the tableau which concludes the play is the culmination.

By emphasizing the exactitude of the written word, and how any extension of the dramatic text creates an imaginary drama very different from Pinter's (a process Van Laan names "filling in"), Van Laan rhetorically equates Pinter's play to text. Critics such as R. A. Buck have been quick to embrace Van Laan's vision of the play as well as his terminology:

Not finding a rationally patterned sequence of events that lead up to some sense of understood closure at the end of the play, readers accustomed to finding those elements in traditional drama resort, in Pinter's play, to "filling in" what the dramatist has supposedly neglected to record" (495). As Van Laan points out, this is an expected part of the interpretive process; however, by "filling in" an absurdist play, we risk losing sight of the *precise language of the text* and thus its performing function. Indeed, that has happened to such an extent in Pinter criticism that discussions of the ending of *The Dumb Waiter* have neglected to emphasize the power of the linguistic ambiguity in the last lines of the play. (45, emphasis added)

Like Van Laan, Buck finds the allure of understanding a play as a textual representation seductive. Such a conception embraces an antiquated vision of text that represents felicitously and precisely. "[T]he play as Pinter wrote it" and the "precise language of the text" offers a transparent and absolute meaning of a play that has not been filled in.

The problem is that the written word is not as transparent as Van Laan or Buck would like to believe. Van Laan's analysis seems to suggest that the written narratives of other critics create a less precise version of the precise text that is *The Dumb Waiter's* concluding tableau. Van Laan's response is to point to Pinter's text and emphasize the unassailable meaning of the collection of written words that is *The Dumb Waiter*. Yet understanding narrative as a clear representation with a precise meaning requires the exactitude of the written word.

2. Transparent Dramatic Representation

I am sympathetic to Van Laan's overall point that the play Pinter gives us is all that can be interpreted, and dramatic analysis needs to be restricted to the text, and not what a critic assumes will happen. However, when Van Laan goes on to argue "that with one hand Pinter beckons us to speculate while with the other he disciplines us for so doing" (122), I cannot help but be a little uncomfortable with such a rigid interpretation to a playful drama. Like his characterization of Pinter, Van Laan becomes the disciplinarian by framing the Burkman and Gordon strand of *Dumb Waiter* criticism, which engages in speculation, as more akin to distortion than critical analysis. Ironically, it is here that Van Laan seems to approach an analytical strategy close to the one he critiques (see also Merritt).

From my perspective, one of the virtues of emphasizing the compulsion to "fill in" Pinter's play is that it clarifies the core indeterminacy at the heart of *The Dumb Waiter's* closing tableau. Almost paradoxically, the concluding tableau of *The Dumb Waiter* only becomes indeterminate by refusing to understand the play as an indeterminate representation. The words on the page which are the concluding stage directions must represent clearly and precisely to foreclose the play from an audience who wants to read it as a very unambiguous murder. If, as Van Laan suggests, ritual critics and those who refer to Gus as dead are deformers of the play, and are disciplined by the play through Ben and Gus's parodying such a compulsion to speculate, then the play has a clear and rigid structure. To understand the conclusion as clearly indeterminate is to understand the play as clearly determinate.

In essence, the Van Laan and the Burkman approaches to *The Dumb Waiter* differ over the representational content of the play, but agree on representation as process. Both critics understand the play as transparent dramatic representation. For Burkman, this transparency allows the audience to see the inevitable ritual, and for Van Laan this transparency creates indeterminacy by disciplining a speculating audience.

However, the mere presence of both views -- not as isolated approaches - but as trends in critical analysis of the play suggest that *The Dumb Waiter* does not transparently represent. Rather than indicting those who "fill in" as deformers of the play, perhaps the time

has come to accept that *The Dumb Waiter* encourages audiences to both “fill in,” and to accept the conclusion as a self-contained performative act. Perhaps filling in is not something the play disciplines against, but is as intrinsic to representation as the self-contained performative act. To accept both sides as essential to the play’s dramatic representation may sacrifice some of the indeterminacy that is the representational content of *The Dumb Waiter*’s final tableau, but understanding the play as a double representational process emphasizes that it is indeterminate and not just a rigid representation of indeterminism.³

If we imagine that Pinter’s play encourages speculation as a prelude to disciplining the speculators, we surround Pinter with an almost Shavian didactic legitimacy. Pinter as disciplinarian evokes a Pinterian drama that establishes a correct interpretation and a mistaken one. The mistaken interpretation works akin to a trick question leading an audience down the wrong path of speculation before revealing the true meaning of the play.

Van Laan focuses on the scenes where Ben reads the newspaper to Gus as examples of how Pinter becomes a dominatrix (my term not Van Laan’s). I will discuss the newspaper scenes below in order to question these moments as a critique of audience speculation, but for now it is enough to emphasize that I read these scenes as more of a critique of the nature of textual representation than the critique of a speculating audience. It is not so much that an audience misunderstands the play, but that texts cannot be read precisely. Attempts to read precisely emphasize the errors intrinsic to such an effort. *The Dumb Waiter* has multiple meanings that cannot be reduced to a single idea or message.

Despite the desire to determine an absolute meaning from a text (whether the text in question is Ben’s newspapers, or *The Dumb Waiter* as a dramatic text), texts resist being interpreted so precisely. Texts always seem to evade determinate foreclosure. Read metatheatrically, *The Dumb Waiter* critiques the way we understand dramatic texts, and perhaps in a wider context the way we understand narrative and performance. It emphasizes the way readers and audience members alike foreclose narrative. This foreclosure may be used in the service of either an ambiguous or rigid interpretation. The point is both interpretations require a precise relationship to narrative. The narrative must provide an impossibly exact interpretation.

In terms of *The Dumb Waiter*, recognizing the compulsion to “fill in” becomes a means to stake out Pinter’s place in modern drama. Van Laan sees filling in as a relatively new phenomena: “commentators are engaging in a process that has become widespread in the discussion of drama since the advent of Beckett” (118), and he goes on to argue that Pinter’s play “deviates so strikingly from the traditional [dramatic] model that his relationship to us becomes a central element of the drama” (122).

This recognition of the divergence between Pinter’s drama and traditional drama revolves around the audience’s trust in the playwright. In traditional drama, the audience trusts the playwright, and, thus the play unfolds without the audience being forced to take the playwright into the equation. Rhetorically, when Van Laan needs to understand Pinter in terms of exactitude -- or, more precisely, when he wants to emphasize the exactitude of the play’s ambiguous ending -- the play is understood as a text. When he outlines the insubstantial relationship between Pinter’s play and the audience, then the play is described in terms of performance by using such terms as “spectator response” (122). Van Laan outlines an idealized dramatic dichotomy to *The Dumb Waiter*: text is exact and fosters meaning, while the performative utterance perpetuates a self-referential ambiguity.

It would be one thing if the compulsion to “fill in” was restricted to Pinter and other so-called absurdist playwrights, but Van Laan’s claims are far too modest. This is a phenomena that stretches at least as far back as modern drama itself.⁴ In his exuberance for *The Dumb Waiter*, Van Laan sees Pinter’s play as too much of a radical departure from its dramatic antecedents.

For example, in just one well known and decidedly non-absurdist example of “filling in,” G. B. Shaw includes a prose epilogue to the published form of *Pygmalion*:⁵ This sequel to the play describes what will happen next to the characters. Shaw decides to “fill in” his own play because he has become alarmed at how the audience and theatrical productions themselves have “filled in” the drama.

In a clear example of disciplining those who “fill in,” Shaw describes as “unbearable” the way that “people in all directions have assumed, for no other reason than that she [Eliza Doolittle] became the heroine of a romance, that she must have married the hero of it” (282). Shaw believes he has written a play -- he has created a text --

that represents an exact and precise meaning. In the aftermath of the play's performance, Shaw sees how audiences have filled in the play by imagining a marriage between Eliza and Higgins. Shaw returns to the text since the audience has deformed the play. He must create a postscript as paratext in an effort to make the imprecise text more exact. Much like Van Laan, Shaw tries to imagine a text so precise its meaning becomes transparent -- a text protected from interpretive ambiguity.⁶

With this being said, I agree that critical efforts to "fill in" associated with *The Dumb Waiter* are different from Shaw's recognition of and attempt to protect his play from an audience's imaginative construction. As Van Laan notes, Pinter's play certainly seems self-aware and perhaps even encourages filling in, as the compulsion to do so enters the play's content. However, Pinter leaves the disciplining to Shaw. *The Dumb Waiter* does not reach its almost violent tableau because Ben and Gus "fill in," but on the contrary, the tableau emerges as the culmination of a quite opposite effect.

The play concludes with Ben and Gus exhibiting a Shavian compulsion to read texts precisely. Like Shaw's efforts to give *Pygmalion* a precise meaning, Ben and Gus wish to believe that texts have one exact meaning. In addition to parodying "filling in," the hitmen and *The Dumb Waiter* as a play confront the inherent difficulty in understanding texts determinately.

3. Grappling with Imprecision

In *The Dumb Waiter*, newspapers provide evidence of an exterior world beyond the confines of the room where Ben and Gus languish, and elucidate the interpersonal connections which dictate the rules of such a world. Or, at least this is the role newspapers should serve. However, more often than not, all Ben's paper reveals to Ben and Gus is the mysteriousness of the world. Without a complete explanation for why a man crawled under a lorry, the story of the man getting run-over, which begins the play, becomes "unbelievable" and "incredible" if not incomprehensible to the two hitmen. Yet, if anything is incomprehensible to the theatrical audience, it is the very fact that the seemingly fact-based newspaper story is incomprehensible to Ben and Gus.⁷

After moving to another story, Ben and Gus find textual representation even more unsatisfactory. Just because words are printed on a page does not mean the printed words represent an authentic action that has occurred exterior to the room. The newspaper does not represent transparently. Rather than revealing absolute truths and representing an objective unmediated view of the world, the newspaper's textual signifiers require human mediation.

Ben and Gus must grapple with and interpret the text to be satisfied with how and what the text represents:

BEN: It's a fact. What about that, eh? A child of eight killing a cat!

GUS: How did he do it?

BEN: It was a girl.

GUS: How did she do it?

BEN: She –

He picks up paper and studies it.

It doesn't say.

GUS: Why not?

BEN: Wait a minute. It just says -- Her brother, aged eleven, viewed the incident from the toolshed.

GUS: Go on!

BEN: That's bloody ridiculous.

Pause.

GUS: I bet he did it.

BEN: Who?

GUS: The brother.

BEN: I think you're right.

Pause.

(Slamming down the paper.) What about that, eh? A kid of eleven killing a cat and blaming it on his little sister of eight!

(116)

For Ben and Gus, both stories have intrinsic gaps -- questions that remain unanswered. These gaps in textual representation suggest that no matter how precise a text, there is always room for more precision. It is not enough to know that an old man crawls under a lorry and is run over, it must be known "who advised him to do a thing like that" (114)? It is not enough to know that a child of eight killed a cat, it must be known how she killed it. Ben and Gus's discussion highlights the text for what it fails to represent instead of what it successfully represents. Since there are questions that must remain frustratingly unanswered, textual representation is ultimately

understood by the characters as incomplete and unsatisfying. The stories Ben reads Gus are evidence of a distance between the acts that occur in the exterior world and the text that narrates such acts.

These gaps are textual signs that the newspaper can never represent fully, but they also provide opportunities for interpretation. Ben and Gus's interpretive scheme equates their remaining questions as evidence of a textual mis-representation. Not knowing who advises crawling under the lorry or the "how" of cat murder covers the entire text with an air of inauthenticity. Gaps corrupt the entire text and make the facts "incredible," and "ridiculous." Since representational gaps make the legitimacy of the text suspect, Ben and Gus feel justified in correcting the text by substituting information that will allow a satisfying degree of narrative closure. If the gap is big enough, Ben and Gus can interpret the world to mirror their own understanding of it. Such a mental exercise allows the hitmen's interpretation of the textual representation of exterior actions to become synonymous with the actions themselves.

Gus assumes it is a boy who kills the cat. Upon hearing the newspaper account that it was in fact a girl who committed the violent act, the newspaper story no longer matches Gus's understanding of the world. However, the newspaper contains a plethora of signifying possibilities. As part of its unappealing representational economy, the newspaper gives an indeterminate gap where Gus can reinterpret the story.

The newspaper offers both a seemingly clear and complete representation of events: the girl killed the cat and her brother witnessed the event, and provides Gus the opportunity to forge an alternate representation that disrupts the printed and privileged narrative: her brother witnesses the event, so he may be more perpetrator than witness. The newspaper may be wrong, but in its mis-representation there is a trace of the authentic. As textual detective, Gus can separate the mis-representation from the presumed authentic representation, and use such information to better understand the world.

Clearly, Gus wants to believe the murderer is a boy. Even before he finds out who kills the cat, he uses a masculine pronoun to refer to the perpetrator. Since Gus wants the killer to be male, he envisions a scenario that matches his desire. For Van Laan, such an

interpretation of the newspaper story is a deformation akin to the way critics interpret Pinter's play:

Pinter is using Ben and Gus to mirror his audience. In this episode he creates a burlesque version of the commentators, a built-in before-the-fact put-down of their similar act of "filling in" in order to make a presented situation conform to the sense of reality the viewer has brought to it. (120)

Gus is not the only one "filling in" the facts of the scene or giving the scene a sense of completion in order to confirm his own expectations. It is also "filling in" when we assume that the textual representation outlined in a newspaper is unassailable evidence of what occurs in the world. A newspaper is a sign system, and not a referent. The newspaper is not a presented situation, but, in the logic of the play, the newspaper is a representation of a presented situation.

While the newspaper's characterization of the cat's death may seem to be a more likely scenario than Gus's gender bias, to label Gus's position false is to continue "filling in." Just because Gus is biased and a newspaper that is never proven to be inaccurate is traditionally understood to be true does not mean Gus is wrong. Since the event that both Gus and the newspaper try to explain is kept firmly out of the audience's view, both interpretations are just representations of an exterior action. Either is a possible explanation for the dead cat. The play offers interpretations, not authentic answers.

Ben and Gus are given the choice of recognizing that the text possesses an independent veracity that represents obscurely and fails to lead to satisfaction, or engage in the satisfying act of interpretation, molding the text till it fits their desires. Unsurprisingly, they choose the latter. By privileging their own satisfaction, Ben and Gus take authenticity out of the equation (or perhaps they become the personal arbitrators of authenticity), and in so doing demonstrate that the newspaper scene is a conflict of representational systems. The signs are accepted on their own merit without regard to the likelihood of signifier bonding to referent.

I would like to think that I am not so totally humorless and logicless as not to recognize the silliness of Ben and Gus privileging their "filling in" over the "filling in" of the newspaper, and that Van Laan's insight that this "filling in" parodies a strand of criticism that would develop around the play is an apt one. However, if we read the

newspaper scene as a parody of critical “filling in,” there is another critical strand that is parodied later in the play. As the dumb waiter delivers its written food orders to Ben and Gus, the hitmen must confront the impossibility of fulfilling the desire for textual exactitude. Their “real world” actions are doomed to perpetually fall short of the requests outlined in the notes delivered via the dumb waiter. There is a great world of difference between the “Macaroni Pastitsio” and “Ormitha Macarounada” the note demands and the material “Three McVitie and Price! One Lyons Red Label! One Smith’s Crisps! One Eccles Cake! [and] One Fruit and Nut!” that Ben and Gus send in response.

Certainly, this is also a moment of “filling in” as Ben and Gus try to deform precise textual representations by substituting alternative objects in place of those that were requested. However, it also a moment of recognition when their understanding of “filling in” has changed. Anything less than exactly fulfilling the dictates of the textual orders becomes inappropriate as Ben finally suggest that “We’d better tell them. [. . .] That we can’t do it, we haven’t got it” (138). The precise dictates of textual representation cannot be performed and “filling in” cannot disguise this fact. Efforts to “fill in” merely outline the unacceptable nature of “filling in,” and establish the very concept of textual representational exactitude as illusory.⁸

Since Ben and Gus have been unable to understand precise textual representation as anything but illusory -- since they must “fill in” perceived gaps in the papers, and since the written requests of the dumb waiter must remain hopelessly out of reach, the hitmen turn to the vocal utterance. There is the hope that speech will provide the exactitude that the text lacks. First, Ben and Gus try to speak with whoever is running the dumb waiter. Seemingly they want to believe that speech will bridge the gap between what the notes demand and what they can provide. Second, when Ben offers Gus instructions, Ben does not give the instructions the same as he always had. Ben forgets to ask Gus to take his gun out. Some critics in support of “filling in” suggest that this is the moment where Ben reveals Gus is the victim. However, such an interpretation is again forced to confront language that fails to represent precisely, for even if Gus does not have his gun, Ben’s instructions outline that Gus is behind the door and that a “bloke comes in” (143).

Understanding the concluding tableau precisely seems to require the understanding that so much of the language that leads up to the tableau fails to represent precisely. So, while Ben and Gus's "filling in" of the papers is a parody of a critical strand, Ben and Gus's hopeless desire to have language represent precisely is a parody of the opposing critical strand. Ben and Gus's need to fulfill orders exactly, and the way such a compulsion leads them further and further down a dangerous path, is analogous to the critical compulsion to focus on the exact manner the concluding tableau represents.

If *The Dumb Waiter* parodies textual exactitude as well as "filling in," where does that leave criticism of Pinter's play as we approach a half-century since its stage debut? Ben and Gus take turns embracing both critical activities, and believing that both offer meaning and satisfaction. I am not insisting that every critic must engage in both activities since such a balance would be difficult if not impossible to maintain. Reflecting on his efforts to fulfill the textual representations delivered by the dumb waiter, Gus wonders: "Why did you send him up all that stuff? (*Thoughtfully.*) Why did I send it up?" (141).

Perhaps the "I" and the "you" of dramatic criticism and the plethora of interpretive possibilities that are evoked have much to say about how a play means. There cannot be a uniform meaning for Pinter's play any more than there can be a homogenous audience. *The Dumb Waiter's* self-conscious and contradictory parodies of narrative representation and interpretive method may be capable of forcing an audience to acknowledge the impossibility of an unitary interpretive schematic. This self-awareness equips Pinter's play to call attention to the "filling in" / exactitude fulcrum over which so much drama seems to balance. Perhaps *The Dumb Waiter*, and the critical conflicts which surround it, can help illustrate how neither alternative adequately illustrates Pinter's play and its proliferating meanings.

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Notes

¹ Viewed in its ritual context some contemporary drama has overcome this difficulty by ending the play with it beginning again. See Eugène Ionesco's *The Lesson* (1958) and Arrabal's *The Architect and Emperor of Assyria* (1969) for representative

examples. Arrabal's play successfully emphasizes the ephemeral nature of ritual roles as the play begins again (concludes?) with the Architect having become the Emperor, and the Emperor the Architect.

² Susan Hollis Merritt addresses Van Laan's critical strategy, and provides in-depth analysis of the debate between Van Laan, Austin Quigley, and Charles Carpenter in *Modern Drama*, on what she calls "critically 'inescapable' certainties" (see chapter 4 of *Pinter in Play*).

³ In his insightful *Fields of Play in Modern Drama*, Thomas R. Whitaker recognizes the paradox that dramatic performance frequently enacts the antithesis to its content. In his discussion of Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days* Whitaker asserts that, despite Winnie's isolation, the play is ultimately a communal act: "*Happy Days* invites us to share the void that Winnie must endure, her head full of cries, to share our morally dubious relation to the void and the cries, and to share the plenitude we find in the dramatic medium itself. And finally it invites us to celebrate the strange fact that we can do so" (22). While this seems intuitively true to my understanding of Beckett and drama itself, the dual strands of criticism for *The Dumb Waiter* caution against a universal spectating "us."

⁴ I believe that "filling in" stretches back much farther, but for the purpose of this essay, I restrict my discussion to modern drama.

⁵ While a late-Victorian audience would fail to look at Shavian drama as traditional, next to the drama of Pinter, Shaw reads as decidedly traditional.

⁶ The postscript was not Shaw's last attempt to protect *Pygmalion* from filling in. In 1941, he would return to the play itself and rewrite the ending. I would suggest that this has everything to do with the desire for textual exactitude.

⁷ This statement requires an understanding of a universal spectating affect of the very kind I try to deconstruct above. It suggests that the very fact some critics understand the play as a murder and some critics do not precludes any unitary interpretation as legitimate. Such a statement also reinforces an Absurdist / traditional drama dialectic similar to the one Van Laan's vision of "filling in" constructs. Of course Ibsen's Dr. Stockmann and Rosmer [from *Enemy of the People* (1882) and *Rosmersholm* (1886) respectively] learned not to believe what you read in the papers, and Ionesco's Mr. and Mrs. Smith's debate over whether when the doorbell rings it means there is always someone at the door or never anyone at the door in *The Bald Soprano* (1950), an example that humorously demonstrates the slippery nature of evidence. Perhaps audience members familiar with any of these plays might not find Ben and Gus's suspicion of what is "down here in black and white" mystifying (130).

⁸ Of course, part of what Ben and Gus are forced to come to grips with is the essence of theatricality. The hitmen are forced to recognize the gap between textual signifiers and phenomenological objects.

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“Mixed feelings about words:” Language, politics and the ethics of inter-subjectivity in *The Dumb Waiter*

Mary F. Brewer

*To be means to communicate dialogically. When the dialogue is finished, all is finished. Therefore, the dialogue, in essence, cannot and must not come to an end.*¹

M.M. Bakhtin

1. Introduction

In his article, “Anti-Ritual, Critical Domestication and Representational Precision in Pinter’s *The Dumb Waiter*,” Lance Norman argues that the critical tendency to “complete” Pinter’s play is actually encouraged by *The Dumb Waiter*’s structure and action: on a meta-theatrical level, the play foregrounds and critiques the way we read dramatic narratives. Norman’s essay is in part a response to Thomas Van Laan’s assertion that critics of the play have frequently engaged in a process of “filling in what the dramatist has neglected to record” (494-95).

Building upon Van Laan, R.A. Buck identifies how traditionalist critical discussions of the “*The Dumb Waiter* fail to emphasize the power of the linguistic ambiguity in the last lines of the play” (45), thereby distorting its meaning. Norman, in contrast, suggests that there is something built into the structure of Pinter’s dramatic narrative that necessitates an engagement with the ambiguity of language; that is, *The Dumb Waiter* compels the reader/spectator to reflect critically on the ambiguous nature of language and communication, which, in a sense, disallows the “neglect” of which Buck speaks. What I find intriguing about Norman’s essay is how it reveals the play as being partly about what narrative discourse is and gestures toward the psycho-social processes by which meanings are created through inter-subjective dialogue.

My reading of the play, like Norman's, refutes the idea that analyzing it beyond the end of the on-stage action deforms its meaning. To the contrary, the way Pinter draws his reader toward "filling in" meaning may be understood as a key element of its dramatic force. The openness of Pinter's dramatic narrative extends the story of *The Dumb Waiter* beyond the endpoint of the action displayed on stage.²

Robert Scholes recognizes that narrative is never just a sequencing -- narrative is always a sequencing of something for somebody (205). In *The Dumb Waiter*, the dialectical relationship between the character/actor as deliverer of the narrative sequence and the reader/spectator as its intended recipient compels the recipient to further imaginings about what they have been told or witnessed. I would argue that the problem with the critical tendency to "finish" the play is not the practice of expanding the act of interpretation beyond the final image that the playwright provides; rather, the problem lies in assuming that such critical readings occupy a position of exteriority.

The discussions of *The Dumb Waiter* highlighted by Van Laan and Buck as problematic tend to assume that the reader/spectator can occupy a privileged, almost omniscient position, one that enables the critic to appropriately re-configure the play's textual and theatrical signifiers in order to finally solve the mystery of the play -- ignoring how the system of language itself hinders this practice. Further, as Susan Hollis Merritt asserts in her seminal study of Pinter, some critics who make claims to "register a certainty in the rightness of their methods and findings" ironically end up "at odds with some of their own interpretive principles and hermeneutic pronouncements regarding Pinter's work" (69-70), a facet of Buck's and Van Laan's arguments that Norman identifies as well.

The critical tendency toward certainty about what the end of the play means begins with Martin Esslin, who, in his influential assessment of the play in 1962, states unequivocally, "It is Gus who is the next victim (209). Hayden White's perspective on the cultural value attached to narrativity in representation illuminates how such efforts to re-narrate *The Dumb Waiter* stem from the wish to have the events depicted in the play exhibit the "coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary" (23). Further, as David Robey states, to re-make an unconventional narrative into a conventional form of expression that conveys

conventional meanings reinforces a politically conservative view of the world, which traditional art affirms.

While Pinter endows Gus and Ben with just this kind of desire for coherency, what transpires in their basement room also constantly frustrates it: as the program from the play’s 1960 production at the Royal Court states, our “desire for verification is understandable but cannot always be satisfied” (reproduced in Dobrez 311-12). The program acknowledges the play’s denial of traditional ideas concerning how reality operates and the subject’s capability of knowing anything with surety, ideas which are tied to a politically conservative agenda (xi).

The Dumb Waiter’s open quality makes the reader’s/spectator’s response into an act of interpretation and an act of writing at the same time, in which a final meaning is continually foreclosed. Because the drama’s literary and ideological meanings are equally entangled with those of the reader/spectator, it serves to alienate the recipient from his/her conventional relation to and understanding of language -- language as something with a stable form and content that allows meaning to be pinned down with certainty. In this essay, I want to amplify Norman’s argument that “filling in” is intrinsic to representation by reading the play through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism. Dialogue, as described in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*,³ refers to verbal communication, but not merely in the sense of direct verbal interaction between individuals. It signifies “direct, face-to-face, vocalized verbal communication between persons, but also verbal communication of any type whatsoever” (95), including books (verbal performances in print), and one can add to this plays -- verbal performances of texts in real time.

Dialogism illuminates how *The Dumb Waiter’s* tendency to pull the reader/spectator toward “filling in” reflects a basic human socio-linguistic practice, which is always political, and within the context of the play, potentially radically so. Although many of Bakhtin’s writings focus on the novel, his ideas have been taken up widely by scholars across the Humanities and Social Sciences, and numerous critical studies have demonstrated how his socio-linguistic theory is relevant beyond literary studies that take as their focus the novel as a text type. Nonetheless, Bakhtin has been applied in limited ways in studies of Pinter, and mainly with an emphasis on the Carnavalesque.⁴

I contend that an emphasis on dialogism enables a deeper exploration of how the play instantiates a process whereby the reader/viewer is provoked into reflecting on the mode of reception of textual and theatrical signifiers, and language itself. *The Dumb Waiter's* ending, particularly, reveals the linguistic mechanisms through which the play challenges the conservative drives of conventional wish-fulfillment narratives. Further, the way in which Bakhtin locates the subject within cultural systems of interpretive practices affords an opening into the politics of the play's inter-subjective relations; that is, it foregrounds the precise nature of the play's intervention in the ethical dimensions of subject relations and acts of interpretation.

2. Language, Truth and Dialogics

In *The Dumb Waiter*, Pinter leaves the audience with an image of Ben pointing a revolver at a disheveled and bewildered Gus. A long silence, as the two men stare at each other, precedes the curtain. As many critics have pointed out, in this final moment of in-action, the play refuses narrative closure, in the sense that the audience is not told explicitly whether Gus is the intended next victim and will be shot by Ben. Barbara Herrnstein Smith identifies the relation between structure and closure as a matter not only of how a work terminates, but also of how and whether it is organized throughout: "the openness of Pinter is not a quality of his endings only but of the audience's entire experience of such work" (242-43).⁵ Similarly, for Bakhtin, a productive individual element in a work of art can be understood only within the terms of the genre to which the work belongs (1994, 175).

One way of classifying different dramatic forms relates to types of finalization. For instance, most realist texts offer a clear, logical resolution, while absurdist works (the category into which many critics place *The Dumb Waiter*) leave out evident explanations. The blend of realist and absurdist elements in *The Dumb Waiter* provides an interesting window on language and representation. While absurdist texts foreground dislocations in language and dialogue, the play demonstrates how realist texts too can have moments of dislocation, with the potential to move the narrative away from resolution.

Writing of the impulse in modern art toward the absence of closure, Smith attributes it to a post-structuralist suspicion of

language: the belief that language is always making us mean more or less than what we want to mean. For that matter, Pinter has admitted that he too harbors a distrust of language. In an early speech that is contemporaneous with *The Dumb Waiter*, “Writing for the Theater,” Pinter responds to the criticism that the meaning of his work is obscure. He warns his audience to beware of the writer who puts forward explicit concerns to be embraced, for this “kind of writer clearly trusts words absolutely. *I have mixed feelings about words myself,*” he states [italics mine (23)].

Continuing his comments, he relates his “mixed feelings” to the language that is always locked beneath language:

Language, under these conditions, is a highly ambiguous business. So often, below the spoken word, is the thing known and unspoken. My characters tell me so much and no more, with reference to their experience, their aspirations, their motives, their history. . . . You and I, the characters which grow on a page, most of the time we're inexpressive, giving little away, unreliable, elusive, evasive, obstructed, unwilling. But it's out of these attributes that a language arises. A language, I repeat, where under what is said, another thing is being said. (23-4)

Pinter's comments acknowledge that language has a structure of double meaning. However, the particular sense of linguistic double-ness expressed in this remark perceives language as structured by a binary relation in which the sign is layered over the referent, with the “truth” of an utterance contained within the bowels of the interior layer. In other words, the temporal and spatial hierarchies of inside and outside are assumed to be stable. In turn, this allows for the “real” meaning of what someone says to be theoretically recoverable despite instances of evasion or obstruction.

Steven Gale posits that the “entire conversation of *The Dumb Waiter* (or any Pinter play, for that matter) is an example of Pinter's concept of language in practice. . . .” (63). However, if language conveys meaning in the manner suggested by Pinter's early speech, it would be possible for someone to tell something with undiluted or absolute meaning-fullness or expressiveness, and Pinter's use of attitudinal adjectives such as “evasive” and “unwilling” to describe the speaking subject -- “you and I or the characters that grow on a page” -- implies that the subject can consciously *will to mean* or *will not to mean*. Arnold Hinchcliffe exemplifies how much early criticism of *The Dumb Waiter* is underpinned by a belief in the *will to*

mean, when he argues that Pinter's plays are about the "failure or unwillingness to communicate" (64).⁶

Bakhtin's theory of language demonstrates, in contrast, how language is not "a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intention; it is populated -- overpopulated -- with the intentions of others" (1981, 294). Writing about Pinter's early plays, David Ian Rabey argues that the "characters' speech -- and by implication many social bids for linguistic communion -- seek not dialogue but confirmation" (53). By applying Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, it becomes clear that confirmation, where possible in *The Dumb Waiter*, could be achieved only through dialogue.

As Clive Thomson rightly points out, though, dialogism is not a description of actual speech, but an idea-system or a philosophy of language; whereas linguistics studies language, Bakhtin's Translinguistics studies communication from the perspective of social theory (374). Gary Saul Morson offers a complementary explanation, referring to language in Bakhtin's system of thought as the product of a complex social situation. In this system, "real or potential audiences, earlier and possible later utterances, habits and 'genres' of speech and writing, and a variety of other complex social factors shape all utterances from the outset" (83).

This is not to say that Bakhtin pays no heed to the significance of actual speech, for the inter-subjective nature of language means that we realize language as something that someone else says to us. Bakhtin explains the dialogism of the "word" as follows: "every word is directed toward an *answer* and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates. Forming itself in an atmosphere of the already spoken, the word is at the same time determined by that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word. Such is the situation in any living dialogue," (1981, 280) and such is the situation we witness in Ben and Gus' basement room.

As I discuss in more depth below, for Bakhtin, and for Pinter's Ben and Gus, the speaking subject is constituted in the time and space of the "other," through the activity of the word. As Michael Holquist's reading of Bakhtin shows, "we cannot choose *not* to be" in dialogue not only with other human beings, but also with the natural and cultural configurations we understand as 'the world.' The world addresses us and we are alive and human to the degree that we are

answerable. i.e. to the degree that we can respond to addressivity" (30). This means that our social inter-dependability is constituted within language and displayed in its usage, and both personal and social inter-dependability are fundamental to narrative and character function in *The Dumb Waiter*.

3. Communication and Inter-subjective Relations

Critical readings that seek to "end" the play by explaining that Ben does or does not shoot Gus are underpinned often by an unconscious assumption of a natural relation between art and the real, despite observations of the play's absurdist elements. One can detect a wish in such readings for a "better crafted play," one that has something unequivocal *to say* about the real world, which requires that characters be read, or more precisely re-written, as potential seats of certain knowledge. This leads Charles Carpenter to suggest that critics such as Martin Esslin and Katherine Burkman may have misunderstood the play by bringing to it "preconceptions of profundity" (280).

Pinter's characters are not exemplars of conventional understandings of "you and I," and Bakhtinian theory provides a means for avoiding essentialist notions of the subject, thereby allowing for a sharper focus on the text's systemic structures and concerns. In an essay on comedy and politics in Pinter, Francesca Coppa argues that by the "end of the play, Pinter has trained us to see that the content of Ben and Gus' joke exchanges is meaningless: what is important is the structure, and the alliances and antagonisms it reveals" (48). I would extend this observation to include all exchanges between Ben and Gus, as well as those they share with Wilson, the meanings of which lie in the inter-textual relation between different worldviews; for in Bakhtinian terms, language is ideologically saturated (1981, 271).

John Bull, in assessing the influence of Pinter's early plays, aptly recognizes that their impact "derived from the deployment of a variety of proletarian accents no longer with the comfortable -- and comforting -- intention of comic patronage, but with the conscious aim of posing a direct threat to the possessors of the language most usually heard from those people on stage and seated in the theater" (41). Theatrically and meta-theatrically, *The Dumb Waiter* reveals how language is not composed of equal subjects engaged in equal acts of linguistic exchange. The exchanges between Ben and Gus and

between Ben and Gus and the voice that emanates from the dumb waiter exemplify how utterances are uneven because they are endowed with varying degrees and kinds of authority. This makes language a site of significant anxiety as well as ambiguity, a notion underscored by the deference with which Ben speaks to those upstairs.

Given that linguistic structures are neither even nor homogenous, Ken Hirschkop notes, subjects must place signs in one of the alternative codes or languages available -- and interpret what this choice means (1999, 19). The play stages this scenario repeatedly as Ben reads aloud a series of newspaper stories, to which Gus responds. Consider, for instance, the story about the child killing the cat. Gus responds to Ben's exclamation, "What about that, eh? A child of eight killing a cat!" with his own question: "How did he do it?" (116). Here, Gus fills in the child's gender to which Ben has not alluded, but, in fact, Gus' application of a masculinist code to the narrative contradicts the child culprit's feminine gender as reported in the story.

Still, Ben and Gus are uncomfortable with the idea that a girl would kill a cat; therefore, they refashion the narrative, substituting the brother as the cat-killer, while positioning the girl as the unfairly accused:

GUS: I bet he did it.
 BEN: Who?
 GUS: The brother.
 BEN: I think you're right. (116)

Ben neatly concludes the episode by reiterating: "What about that, eh? A kid of eleven killing a cat and blaming it on his little sister of eight!" (116)

The question arises as to why the two men, who are themselves killers, should care about who killed a cat. Kristin Morrison suggests that those moments that threaten to disturb the men's order of things as they understand it or would like it to be, which occur perhaps most poignantly when Gus recalls their acts of murder, demonstrate that Ben and Gus can deal effectively only with surfaces. Scenes where ugly incidents are related or recalled cannot be allowed to become terrifying or even ponderous, the narrative brakes being applied through the introduction of a "splendid parody of meaninglessness," Morrison argues, which provides images of the

"silly side of the principles which govern Ben and Gus' deadly profession" (146).

While I would agree that both men are fearful of scratching beneath the surface of the code governing their professional activities, I think Morrison's reading misses the psychological and political impetus underlying their desire, indeed, need to narrativize their world, as well as the linguistic mechanisms they employ to do so. As Norman points out, Ben and Gus are faced with two choices. Either they recognize "that the text possesses an independent veracity that represents obscurely and fails to lead to satisfaction, or [they must] engage in the satisfying act of interpretation, molding the text till it fits their desires. Unsurprisingly, they choose the latter."

Ben and Gus try to rework the newspaper stories into more conventional narrative forms, forms that attempt a semblance of unity by representing language as always coherent and reality as a sum total structure. That Ben and Gus choose to engage in conventional acts of interpretation, as explained by Norman, points to a desire to partake of instances of satisfactory narrative production and consumption. More generally, though, what these scenes reveal is how acts of communication are built into the deep structure of human psychology. I refer to the subject's unconscious desire for psychic plenitude or wholeness. In the case of Gus, his desire for completeness keeps erupting into consciousness as he becomes aware that the pale mimicry of self-control and wholeness that Ben finds through his total assimilation into Wilson's organization holds little promise of genuine fulfillment.

Although the characters' attempts to re-narrate events in order to make them complete and lucid is thwarted constantly, rather than presenting a "parody of meaninglessness," the stories Ben and Gus repeat to each other and to the audience stage a political or ethical event, one related to how the "self" is created through others in language. The stories speak to what Caryl Emerson identifies as the "absolute aesthetic need of one person for another, for the seeing, remembering, gathering, and unifying activity of the 'other,' which alone can create [one's] externally complete personality" (70). While still conveying a sense of linguistic control that is antithetical to poststructuralist thought, Pinter acknowledges the fundamental role that the "other" plays in the creation of the "self" through language. In an article written for *The Sunday Times* (1962), he states that the

“speech we hear ... is a necessary avoidance, a violent, shy, anguished or mocking smokescreen which keeps the other in its place” (25).

Hayden White’s perspective on the function of narrative provides further insight into the politics and ethics of Ben’s and Gus’ speech activities. White asks whether the “social world ever really comes to us as already narrative, already speaking itself from beyond the horizon of our capacity to make sense of it? Or is the fiction of such a world, a world capable of speaking itself and of displaying itself as a form of the story, necessary for the establishment of that moral authority without which the notion of a specifically social reality would be unthinkable?” If, as White suggests, it is impossible to narrativize without also moralizing (23), even Pinter’s fragmented, absurdist narrative forms become endowed with an ethical imperative.

The world of the play offers the characters nothing solid to embrace in a conventional sense of social order or ethics. This is in keeping with how Pinter’s text refuses to put forward a unitary message, thus thwarting the desire for the dramatic experience to mimic the attributes of conventional narratives and, in the end, to tell a straightforward moral tale. At the same time, if we consider ethics in a Bakhtinian sense, that is, where ethics inhere in language as a system, then introducing the subject of moral narrativizing as part of the play’s structure does not strike a false note.

Ethics in Bakhtinian terms does not refer to a moral code *per se*, although these kinds of ethico-political utterances are not ruled out. Instead, Bakhtin highlights the fundamental human inclination to establish inter-subjective relations, and these involve necessarily engaging in patterns of communication that entail ethical points of connection, accomplished by means of linguistic exchanges or dialogue. Michael Eskin explains how, for Bakhtin, the “self” and “other” is written in ethical terms: “The other depends on me, and, I, conversely depend on the other as someone who is solely capable of bestowing a distinct shape on my life, of gathering me into a whole by supplying those moments which are by definition inaccessible to me from within my singular place and time”(81-2).

To understand how this relates to *The Dumb Waiter*, it is necessary to consider first the relation of literature generally to subjectivity, to the production of culture, and to cultural codes, including ethics. According to Charles Altieri, the relationship between literature and ethics, particularly contemporary experimental art forms that are wary of making explicit moral claims for an

audience to embrace, is based on how writers deal with the issue of contingency (113). For example, he identifies a tendency to render “universal prescriptions impossible” and “judgment problematic” in contemporary poetry. To compensate for the suspicion of universal truths and linguistic certainties, Altieri contends, writers put forward a grammatical vision of interdependency (114): this, I suggest, is evident in non-naturalist dramatic forms such as *The Dumb Waiter* as much as in modern poetic forms.

The episode that most clearly illustrates how inter-subjectivity is grammatically framed occurs as Ben issues Gus instructions on how to carry out the next murder. After the victim enters the room, it will be Gus’ job to close the door behind him without being seen. Motivated by the same will to clarity that characterizes his relay of the news stories, Ben plots the victim’s likely actions for Gus.

BEN: He’ll see me and come towards me.
GUS: He’ll see you and come towards you.
BEN: He won’t see you.
GUS: (*absently*). Eh?
BEN: He won’t see you.
GUS: He won’t see me.
BEN: But he’ll see me.
GUS: He’ll see you.
BEN: He won’t know you’re there.
GUS: He won’t know you’re there.
BEN: He won’t know *you’re* there.
GUS: He won’t know I’m there.
BEN: I take out my gun.
GUS: You take out your gun.
BEN: He stops in his tracks.
GUS: He stops in his tracks.
BEN: If he turns round –
GUS: If he turns round –
BEN: You’re there.
GUS: I’m here. (142-43)

This episode, which continues in the same vein until Gus leaves the room, tests the interpretive powers of the reader/spectator. It requires very detailed attention to the relations between the different parts of the verbal exchange, especially regarding the use of personal pronouns and adverbs of place. For example, it is not entirely clear, even upon re-reading, who is proposing to be where at the end of this exchange, because Gus replaces Ben’s adverb of place “there” with its

opposite “here.” Because the normal logics of space preclude being both “here” and “there,” this seems contradictory on the surface.

However, read dialogically, it may be understood as another reference to the dyadic or bivocal nature of the “self” in language. Gus’ repetitive appropriation of Ben’s words highlight how the origin of an utterance -- any act of communication -- resides just as much in the source to which it is directed as it does in the consciousness of the speaking subject. It is not a case of the subject being either “here” or “there:” the subject can be, in fact must be, both “here” and “there” if productive communication is to take place. As Bakhtin states:

in the makeup of almost every utterance spoken by a social person from a brief response in a casual dialogue to major verbal ideological works -- a significant number of words can be identified that are implicitly or explicitly admitted as someone else’s and that are transmitted by a variety of different means. (1981, 354)

Moreover, the episode refers to how the meaning of an utterance and its potential impact in the world is connected intimately to how it is interpreted by someone else. In *Speech Genres and other Essays*, Bakhtin argues: “Understanding is impossible without evaluation: they are simultaneous and constitute a unified integral act” (142). The triangle of pronouns employed in the above scene -- I, you, he -- reflects among other things how our subject positions, and the social differences and struggles between social groups, are marked in language; Ben and Gus’ verbal duels illustrate how the subject struggles to achieve a syntactic position within language.

Quoting Bakhtin again: “Within the arena of almost every utterance an intense interaction and struggle between one’s own and another’s word is being waged, a process in which they oppose or dialogically interanimate each other. The utterance so conceived is a considerably more complex and dynamic organism than it appears when construed simply as a thing that articulates the intention of the person uttering it, which is to see the utterance as a direct, single-voiced vehicle for expression” (1981, 355). Therefore, the agency of the speaking subject to make meaning, and thereby to have a social impact, is contingent on the addressee -- something reinforced by the fact that the end of the play does not pan out as Ben imagines in the dialogue above.

Consequently, Pinter's play helps us see how language as a system represents a matrix of cultural forces (political, economic, and so on). Bakhtin stresses that the individual is ethically implicated in these forces. Hirschkop's analysis of Bakhtin is crucial to this point. He considers the fact that Bakhtin's theory does not attempt to describe language and culture in the supposed objective terms of science, or the neutral terms of the social sciences. What dialogics describes is an activity with political and ethical objectives and ends (1989, 3). Bakhtin and his followers were concerned with democracy and the kind of linguistic and cultural life it implies. In his system of thought, language does not represent an indifferent medium of social exchange, but one susceptible to political and moral evaluation like any other form of social exchange (Hirschkop 1989, 5).⁷

4. Ethics and Dialogue

For Bakhtin, to be alive as a human being necessarily includes the subject's continuous participation in a series of dialogic events, which involve establishing ethical or ideological markers through the exchange of language. Bakhtin phrases his position this way: when language is present to the "self" only from inside, it cannot be transformed into something that "can be perceived, reflected upon, related to" (1981, 86). Thus, to be human is to mean, and to mean is to occupy a position of response in relation to the "other" that has ethical or ideological implications and responsibilities.

Hirschkop contends that these ethical responsibilities entail acknowledging one's own position and the need to act which flows from it, so communication ... involves not abstractly entertaining the ideas of others but reacting to them with agreement or otherwise, doubt or confirmation of ironic detachment -- with passion or revulsion. He asserts that Bakhtin's notion of language dismisses the idea of a theoretical understanding that postpones action till later. To the contrary, understanding itself entails action and commitment, while responsibility is something assumed in the very act of comprehension (1999, 84). Glossing Bakhtin's conclusions about authoritarian discourse, which he defines as "dogmatic, and conservative," and sealed off from the influence of social dialects, (1981, 287), Hirschkop concludes that to "act as an individual is to disembody language by approaching it only from inside" (1999, 91). The ethical dilemma for Ben and Gus involves their entrapment inside

what Bakhtin describes as “the experience of I-for-myself.” To exist in this state is to disable oneself from taking part in the dialogue of inter-subjectivity, which is to remove oneself effectively from the category of the human.

Through the life experiences of two men whose day jobs involve the destruction of human life, *The Dumb Waiter* ironically presents the deep structural need for the subject to mean ethically within an economy of violence. Although the play’s narrative creates tension and uncertainty, nevertheless, Gus, and Ben to a lesser degree, persistently attempt dialogue. Ben defies the conventions of reading the newspaper as a solitary activity, choosing instead to read aloud to Gus. Gus’ constant questioning of both superficial and profound matters again is grounded in a search for answers, yes, but even more so, in the desire to avoid the deadened state of authoritarian, or what Bakhtin terms, monologic discourse.

Throughout the play, monologic discourse is destabilized. This is best illustrated by the argument between Ben and Gus over the correctness of saying “light the kettle” as opposed to “light the gas.” Gus puzzles over how one might literally light a kettle, and Ben responds by pointing out this is merely a figure of speech.

BEN: Light the kettle! It’s common usage!

GUS: I think you’ve got it wrong.

BEN: (*menacing*) What do you mean?

GUS: They say put on the kettle.

BEN: (*taut*): Who says? (125)

Here, both men, though quintessential social outsiders, display concern over the social conventions of meaning. On the one hand, Gus is skeptical of the value of figures of speech -- common usage may lead paradoxically to miscommunication. On the other hand, he desires to find common-speak trustworthy, wishing to follow along with what “They say.” An allegiance to convention is in keeping with Ben’s character, which is an incarnation of the ideal corporate man. At the same time, this exchange foregrounds Gus’ tendency to vacillate between respect for the rules of the “organization” and almost a compulsion to question its ideology.

The parenthetical markers of Ben’s intensified emotional responses to Gus’ on-going query lead to an assertion of authority on Ben’s part, culminating in its physical enactment.

BEN: Who’s the senior partner here, me or you?
GUS: You.
BEN: I’m only looking after your interests, Gus. You’ve got to learn, mate.
GUS: Yes, but I’ve heard –
BEN: (*vehemently*) Nobody says light the gas! What does the gas light?
GUS: What does the gas - ?
BEN: (*grabbing him with two hands by the throat, at arm’s length*): THE KETTLE, YOU FOOL! (126)

When Ben cannot convince Gus of the authority of his understanding, he resorts to violence. This moment of physical violence is analogous to the epistemic violence that Bakhtin recognizes as characteristic of authoritative or monological discourse. The authoritative word, he writes, demands that we acknowledge it. Authoritative discourses may embody generally acknowledged truths, the official line, and other similar authorities (1981, 344). In *The Dumb Waiter*, this equates to Ben’s “common usage;” and Wilson’s dictates, such as “the normal method to be employed” when carrying out a contract killing (148).

Bakhtin asserts that the subject must either totally affirm or reject authoritative discourse. “It is indissolubly fused with authority - - with political power, an institution, a person -- and it stands and falls together with that authority” (1981, 342-43). As far as Ben is concerned, authorativity cannot be sustained. Accordingly, the end of his dispute with Gus ironically entails him copying Gus’ phraseology: “Put on the bloody kettle, for Christ’s sake,” while stage directions inform us:

Ben goes to his bed, but, realizing what he has said, stops and half turns. They look at each other. Gus slowly exits, left. Ben slams his paper down on the bed and sits on it, head in hands.
(127)

This brief exchange of looks between Ben and Gus provides a visual metaphor in which momentarily they are cast on the threshold between “self” and “other,” just as they will be located in the play’s final tableau. As I state above, the “self” in Bakhtinian theory is expressed discursively and not as a unitary entity. Because it is made in and through dialogue, the “self” is a relational site or event between “self” and “other:” language is a “living, socio-ideological concrete

thing,” which exists for the individual consciousness on the borderline between oneself and another -- “the word in language is half someone else’s” (1981, 294). Or, as Don Bialostosky phrases it, when we take turns speaking and listening, representing others and being represented by them, we learn not just who these others are but who we ourselves may be. “Whether the purview of such a conversation is a discipline, a culture, or a world of diverse cultures, . . . the dialogic participants will both make it what it is and be made by it, conferring identities on their fellows and their communities, even as they receive identities from them” (792).

It follows from this that the subject cannot be the undiluted origin of his/her address to the world. Rather than language being a *highly ambiguous business* because something lies beneath the word, unspoken but perhaps known, the play exemplifies that language is ambiguous because “the word exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions” (Bakhtin 1981, 294). In dialogical terms, an utterance must be understood always as an answer. As Holquist contends, an utterance is preceded by the system of language that is “always-already-there” (28).

Even the language of Wilson, whom many critics identify as the voice of authority in the play and as the source of the orders that come up through the dumb waiter, is shown as never in itself originary. Wilson is an interesting character in Bakhtinian terms because we never see him or hear him speak. His role is that of a completely disembodied narrative, and he exists for the reader/spectator only through the reportage of Ben and Gus.

Ben and Gus respond frantically to the orders that come up through the dumb waiter (liver and onions, Macaroni Pastitsio, and Ormitha Macarounada) with the hopelessly mismatched contents of Gus’ bag (biscuits, a chocolate, milk, tea, and cake). The discrepancy between the orders and Ben and Gus’ material rejoinders reflects the distorted inter-subjective relations of authoritarian discourse -- the ideality of that discourse in which the “self” attempts to make meaning in isolation from the “other.”

The restaurant scene stages Bakhtin’s point about authoritarian language: while it can be acknowledged, it cannot generate social meaning because it cannot be responded to or developed. Thus, what we witness as Ben and Gus attempt to fill the orders is what Holquist refers to as “meaning without voices.” In other words, the scene stages the loss of the inter-subjective

significance of language (88) -- language with no socio-ethical markers. In addition, Norman refers to the possibility of reading Wilson as a god-like figure, god being defined as “powerful forces existing outside the system, but influencing it.” If we accept that the play contains allusions to sacred rituals watched over by a suprā-force, then the episode during which Ben and Gus try to meet the written and spoken demands of the person or persons upstairs marks an attempt to subvert the claim that monological discourse makes to being “timeless, authorless, sacred and natural” (Hirschkop 76).

Bakhtin’s discourse of ethics conceives language as representing a struggle among different social groups -- as he phrases it in *Discourse in the Novel*, the nature of language is a struggle among “socio-linguistic points of view” (273).⁸ In Pinter’s dramas, and particularly in *The Dumb Waiter*, narrative functions to foreground and modify the linguistic, and therefore, the social and political relations that exist between social groups. Hence, it is in terms of its dialogic qualities that the play initiates a discourse of ethical and political import, and it is in this sense that the play addresses the reader/spectator with the demand that s/he respond to the potential of a more ethical social and political order.

By avoiding the kind of finality that many critics have attempted to impose on it, *The Dumb Waiter* provokes questions of personal and social responsibility, freedom of thought and choice, without which there is no possibility of true democracy. Ultimately, *The Dumb Waiter* interpellates the reader/spectator to attempt not a final understanding of what happens or why something occurs in the world of its characters, but rather Pinter’s brief masterpiece draws us into a social nexus of communication in which our own position within the reigning political system, and our own ethics, are unavoidable issues.

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Notes

¹ From *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 213.

² I allude to Umberto Eco's classification of the open text, which proposes a dialectic between a text and its interpreter.

³ The authorship of this text remains in dispute among scholars, with some attributing it entirely to Bakhtin, some giving sole credit to Volosinov, while others argue it is a collaborative work. As the work is a product of the "Bakhtin Circle" in the 1920s, in this paper, I follow the idea that it is at least in part the work of Bakhtin.

⁴ For example, see Griffith's "Bakhtin, Foucault, Beckett, Pinter."

⁵ June Schlueter's discussion of the ambiguities, omissions, and pauses in Pinter makes a similar point about contextual design.

⁶ A schematics of language where the misunderstandings that punctuate *The Dumb Waiter* bear the intent of the characters to mis-communicate has informed other critical discussions; for example, Burkman and Esslin speculate that Ben has a reason for being furtive in his conversations with Gus, namely, he knows that Gus is the intended victim.

⁷ Hirschkop offers a further interesting exploration of the relation between dialogics and contemporary Western concepts of democracy in "Is Dialogism for Real?"

⁸ Benedict Anderson's discussion of language communities provides a useful aid to understanding what Bakhtin means by socio-linguistic groups. These groups are not connected by individual acts of literally speaking together, but they refer to people who occupy similar social locations in a multi-faceted and hierarchically divided society. He writes: "...all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact ... are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished . . . by the style in which they are imagined," and not underpinned by connections between people who have necessarily seen each other (6).

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Unpacking the *Pinteresque* in *The Dumb Waiter* and Beyond

Marc E. Shaw

"Lady, if I have to tell you, you'll never know."
-- Louis Armstrong, when a reporter asked him to define jazz.¹

During an interview with Lawrence Bensky in 1966, Harold Pinter heard the word *Pinteresque*: "That word!" Pinter exclaimed, "These damn words and that word *Pinteresque* particularly -- I don't know what they're bloody well talking about! I think it's a great burden for me to carry, and for other writers to carry" (34).

A term weighed down with years of baggage deserves to be critically unpacked, and *Pinteresque* is no exception. The word itself appeared within a few years of Pinter's rise to prominence in the early 1960s, as reviewers attempted to name and explain what Pinter does in his early "room plays:" *The Room* (1959), *The Birthday Party* (1959), *The Dumb Waiter* (1960), and *The Caretaker* (1960).² One review in *The Daily Telegraph* in 1963 was headlined "Pinter at his most Pinteresque." Describing the lesser-known *The Dwarfs* (1962), the review humorously emphasized the unique character of a Pinter evening: "*pintation* at its most *pinticular*," and "directed *pinteresquely* by the author" (qtd in Zarhy-Levo 36).

But such morphological license did not put everyone in good humor. For example, in 1971, Herman T. Schroll surveyed the first ten years of Pinter reviews and criticism, declaring the playwright "trapped" by "facets of the Pinter fashion" -- the tendency to pigeonhole Pinter by introducing reductive terms. Schroll charts the main labels in that initial trajectory: "from menace to realism and absurd, to hyper-realism, and finally to *Pinterism*." However, according to Schroll, "'development' in the criticism could be no more than an illusion since each term represented an attempt to define categorically something impossible to define" (76-7).

As “impossible” or weighty as *Pinteresque* may or may not be, not all critics agree that the word itself constitutes a burden for Pinter or other writers. On the contrary, Yael Zarhy-Levo sees *Pinteresque* as a boost for Pinter, as part of the positive marketing strategy utilized by theater reviewers in Britain and then the United States in the early and mid-1960s. Once the reviewers allowed Pinter in to their favor, moving him from transgressive to *en vogue*, they needed to explain his stylistic originality:

Its usage [*Pinteresque*] marks Pinter’s acceptance, because it reflects the reviewers’ assumption that hereafter Pinter’s plays can be “sold” by a “Pinter” label, detached from the association with Beckett. This label seems to function as a substitute for clarification of incoherent elements, thus, familiarizing Pinter’s unique style, the unfamiliarity of which led to his rejection in the first place. (Zarhy-Levo 31)

The initial reviewers performed Pinter a service by preparing his audience for a new experience. However, there still remains a risk of over-simplification, reducing to a lone signifier everything that reverberates in every Pinter room.

For now, it is not worth second-guessing if the burden of *Pinteresque* indeed “trapped” Pinter; or, was it actually a blessing, providing resistance that spurred Pinter into new territory. With hindsight, we know that Pinter’s career is long and varied, punctuated by milestones that mark shifts in his theatrical journey: *The Homecoming* (1965), *Silence and Landscape* (1968), *Betrayal* (1978), *A Kind of Alaska* (1983), and *One for the Road* (1984). What is worth second-guessing is possibility within *Pinteresque* -- not the *Pinteresque*-as-trap and finite, but rather, understanding the foundational concepts of the word, then discovering its inherent theatrical possibilities in the present in revivals of Pinter and in new productions by Pinter’s “inheritors.” I have purposely not listed any specific attributes of the *Pinteresque* until now because I wanted to complicate that defining act with everything that has preceded it.

Pinter’s early room plays capture the *Pinteresque*, so *The Dumb Waiter* is an ideal work to begin to query the word. After surveying early reviewers’ usage of *Pinteresque*, Zarhy-Levo clarifies its typical characterizations as: (1) “Pinter’s atmospheric gift,” consisting of an atmosphere of menace; (2) Pinter’s “mastery of rhythmic powerful dialogue,” including “timing” and “use of pauses;”

and, (3) Pinter's "authority to make an audience accept unexplained actions" (37). Although any act of categorizing poses trouble, Zarhy-Levo's summary identifies many of the exciting ideas that early Pinter offered. I would add a fourth element to *Pinteresque*, one that has solidified itself in the 1980s and 90s as Pinter more openly discussed the political nature of his earliest plays: (4) the potential destruction of an individual who contends with authority.

As I will show, this addition allows for further exploration of *Pinteresque* beyond Pinter's early work, showing a direct connection between those first plays and many of his later "political" works. Another reason for this addition is to fully emphasize the audience's cerebral process of discovery as the plot unfolds. The potential destruction of an individual who contends with authority might normally be construed as a result of the atmosphere of menace, Zarhy-Levo's primary characterization of *Pinteresque*. Yet, there is a distinction between the two. During performance, menace is a feeling, an atmosphere, that fills the theater; alternately, an individual's potential destruction arrives as a thought deducted from the texts (spoken lines, visual elements of acting) provided by Pinter and the actors.

The critical act of unpacking *Pinteresque* components in *The Dumb Waiter* both simplifies and complicates Pinter's work. On one hand, we can tease out different moments of the *Pinteresque* and understand how *The Dumb Waiter* unfolds as a theatrical work; on the other hand, critical explication reminds us of the almost unlimited interpretative possibilities in performance. Unlike the structured list derived from Zarhy-Levo, in performance, *Pinteresque* characteristics do not function independently. The *Pinteresque* is a mix and flow of moments wherein its components inform each other, heightening the others simultaneously. For example, drawing from that list above and applying them to *The Dumb Waiter*, the eventual pauses would not feel as pregnant without the dialogic rhythms that intensify back-and-forth between Ben and Gus. Furthermore, without those same pauses and how the actors flesh them out, the atmosphere of menace could not be sustained as thoroughly. Without that same sustained atmosphere of menace, the unexplained actions might lose their sinister edge, merely appearing absurd or comic. Finally, without Ben's unexplained actions, or the inexplicable and seemingly random

intrusions of the dumb waiter, we might not realize the possibility that Gus is next on the hit list.

As Susan Hollis Merritt states about a performance of *The Dumb Waiter* that she attended, “Though to some it might appear arbitrary or improper, a theatrical production reproduces a play so as to recreate (for an audience) a so-called meaningful experience, just as any reading of any play [...] attempts to do” (80). Indeed, the stronger the choices, and the better the theatrical execution, the more effective the theatrical interpretation. It is my belief that as an actor, director, and all-around man of the theater, Pinter always writes with the audience in mind; we must see the *Pinteresque* as a live, electrical entity moving between the actors and audience in the same room.

While the atmosphere of menace, the rhythms, the pauses, and the timing all lend themselves to a structure of *feeling*, other aspects of the *Pinteresque* are cerebral in nature. Questioning and accepting unexplained actions or details is a cerebral act, as is becoming conscious of an individual’s impending destruction. Varun Begley defines *Pinteresque* as both an implied “unique, artistic voice, deserving of its own adjectives” and, simultaneously, a “manufactured feeling-tone [that] one associates with lowbrow cultural forms (melodrama, thrillers, slapstick comedies, etc.), reducible to a set of techniques or tricks that can be readily imitated” (24). While Begley’s first supposition is true, his second assertion is worth questioning. The *Pinteresque* as I have defined it here functions as a “feeling-tone,” but it is more than sensation aimed at the body, as Begley implies. Begley’s insistence on the *Pinteresque* “feeling-tone” as a “lowbrow” shortcut also possibly demonstrates an anti-theatrical bias. While moments of staging Pinter might mimic melodrama, slapstick, or a thriller, the plays and their characters are more than melodramatic or farcical stock characters [or, as Begley implies, actors in pornography or horror films (23)].

Each of Pinter’s foundational works is a tragicomedy that requires a high level of artistry and rehearsal to perform well. Pinter is most interesting and theatrically effecting when actors flesh out and embody the opposing forces of tragedy and comedy. Such artistry from the actors includes complex characterization built from moment to moment, appropriate vocal work and movement, and suitable comic tone, among other textual interpretive skills. Pinter’s memorable characters, in order to remain memorable, are not, “readily imitated” or actable with “tricks” (Begley 24). Perhaps *bad* Pinter can be

performed or “manufactured” in that context, but not the Pinter performance that, as Samuel Beckett said about *Betrayal*, “wrings the heart” (qtd in Regal 110).³ In the essay also contained in this collection, “The First Last Look in the Shadows: Pinter and the *Pinteresque*,” Anne Luyat emphasizes the “probing exploration of the human condition” that Pinter’s audiences witness onstage, filled with tragicomic moments that require gifted actors to stage. Most certainly, a playwright might attempt to copy *The Dumb Waiter* or *The Caretaker*, but the result would ring hollow theatrically. There is evidence of successful and less successful Pinter-influenced (*Pinterfluenced?*) works later in the chapter.

2. Exploration of the Pinteresque in *The Dumb Waiter*

Because of the intertwined or melded nature of these strands of the *Pinteresque*, it is necessary to isolate three moments in the play and tease out the different components, while still focusing on their interrelation. Again, very briefly in skeleton form, the *Pinteresque* includes an atmosphere of menace, dialogic rhythms, the withholding of information, and the potential destruction of an individual. With that in mind, an excerpt from the beginning of *The Dumb Waiter* shows the rhythm in Ben’s and Gus’s dialogue, highlighting the banal but comic subject matter. Whereas traditionally a playwright might spend the opening introducing us to the characters and their lives, here such details are apparently postponed or may never materialize. Banalities, such as reading unimportant findings from the daily news, frustrate the full explanation of action or plot advancement:

BEN: What about this? Listen to this!

He refers to the paper.

A man of eighty-seven wanted to cross the road. but there was a lot of traffic, see? He couldn’t see how he was going to squeeze through. So he crawled under a lorry.

GUS: He what?

BEN: He crawled under a lorry. A stationary lorry.

GUS: No?

BEN: The lorry started and ran over him.

GUS: Go on!

BEN: That’s what it says here.

GUS: Get away.

BEN: It’s enough to make you want to puke, isn’t it?

GUS: Who advised him to do a thing like that?

BEN: A man of eighty-seven crawling under a lorry!

GUS: It's unbelievable.

BEN: It's down here in black and white.

GUS: Incredible. (114)

Like a newspaper, there are facts in this opening sequence written in “black and white,” but their accumulation does not warrant much more than face value. The quick rhythms of this initial exchange are typical of the *Pinteresque* and the entire play. Ben, the informer, gives us facts from his newspaper, and Gus receives the information and responds. Potentially, a hierarchy or pecking order has already developed in their informer/receiver binary. But perhaps not: the exchange itself provides plenty for the actors to subtextualize in performance, and one important choice in Gus's dialogic responses is his level of sincerity and the tone he exudes. If he is sincere, and his rhythm and pace match Ben's, we sense they are a united team or, at least, that Gus is loyal. If Gus delays the rhythm of the exchange, or even if Ben reads more to himself than to Gus, a rift might be implied. Ben might even be bothered by Gus' questions. Those cracks, felt as a hint of menace in the audience, could soon become the realization that the pair are coming apart, foreshadowing the definitive fissure in the play's final tableau.

Another exchange highlights this increasing divide by revealing selective details about Ben and Gus's employment. While working as hired killers already provides a menacing aura, what is increasingly alarming in the following exchange is just how little Gus knows about his own existence. We sympathize with Gus because he, like us, wants more details. The repetition of his seemingly reasonable questions creates a rhythm of doubt that functions as the scene's underscore and pushes the pair further apart. We might view Ben as less trustworthy or more sinister, because he thwarts Gus' (and our) desire for verification. We remain ignorant on the whole, yet still fully engaged throughout, and we might increasingly note that Gus is pushing up against an authority figure:

GUS: Eh, I've been meaning to ask you.

BEN: What the hell is it now?

GUS: Why did you stop the car this morning in the middle of that road?

BEN: (*lowering the paper*) I thought you were asleep.

GUS: I was, but I woke up when you stopped. You did stop, didn't you?

Pause.

In the middle of that road. It was still dark, don't you remember? I looked out. It was all misty. I thought perhaps you wanted to kip, but you were sitting up dead straight, like you were waiting for something.

BEN: I wasn't waiting for anything.

GUS: I must have fallen asleep again. What was all that about then? Why did you stop?

BEN: (*picking up the paper*) We were too early.

GUS: Early? (*He rises.*) What do you mean? We got the call, didn't we, saying we were to start right away. We did. We shoved out on the dot. So how could we be too early?

BEN: (*quietly*) Who took the call? Me or you?

GUS: You.

BEN: We were too early.

GUS: Too early for what?

Pause.

You mean someone had to get out before we got in?

He examines the bedclothes.

I thought these sheets didn't look too bright. (119-20)

The Pinteresque builds by way of the dialogic rhythm of the questions; the unexplained details that will remain so (as those questions go unanswered), and the increasing sense that Gus now contends with authority, or at the very least, with the authority of Ben. Furthermore, alongside the lack of detail, the banal prop -- Ben's newspaper -- frustrates Gus and us because it is utilized as a shield, deflecting questions. To increase the tension in performance, the first pause might be filled with Ben's surprise that Gus would ask that question, or at least a silence that makes us want to know even more.

By the second silence, Ben fully communicates that he will *not* communicate. Gus's second question only makes him more pathetic, and discussing sheets after yet another pause proves Gus's downward -- although possibly still slightly comic -- spiral. His non-sequitur proves his absurd state. While Gus doubts, Ben apparently does not, or, at the least, Ben tries not to show it. He knows he is a cog in a larger machine with all its departments, and that is all the information he needs. Gus has yet to understand his place, and this weakness is what builds tension in the play.

As the *Pinteresque* components accumulate, the dramatic question resounds, "Who is on the other end of the dumb waiter, and how will their menacing presence affect the characters onstage?" Ben

attempts to answer Gus's queries (and our concerns) about the dumb waiter, but once Gus erupts, signified by the first "all capitals" exclamation of the play, Ben lets the moment pass:

BEN: (*quickly*) No. It's not funny. It probably used to be a café here, that's all. Upstairs. These places change hands very quickly.

GUS: A café?

BEN: Yes.

GUS: What, you mean this was the kitchen, down here?

BEN: Yes, they change hands overnight, these places. Go into liquidation. The people who run it, you know, they don't find it a going concern, they move out.

GUS: You mean the people who ran this place didn't find it a going concern and moved out?

BEN: Sure.

GUS: WELL, WHO'S GOT IT NOW?

Silence.

BEN: What do you mean, who's got it now?

GUS: Who's got it now? If they moved out, who moved in?
The box descends with a clatter and bang. Ben levels his revolver. (132)

The rhythmic repetition of "who's got it now?" is one of the key lines of the entire play because it translates to "who's got *us* now?" Who or what controls the room where Ben and Gus, and we, the audience, now reside? The "*clatter and bang*" of the dumb waiter's descent is a noisy, jarring reminder that some other force exists outside the immediate room. For the audience, this force is an addition not listed on the cast list in the program. Ben quickly "levels his revolver" because he seems nervous about what comes next. This image is a foreshadowing of *The Dumb Waiter's* closing moment, where Ben stands with gun drawn, and Gus "*stumbles in*" (121). And, still, in that final tableau, we are left to question what happens next.

3. Up Against Authority

Like Gus in *The Dumb Waiter*, there is a populous gallery of Pinter characters whose distress stems from a run-in with authority. That gallery bridges Pinter's career, from the characters in his later political works -- Gila and Victor (*One for the Road*, 1985), various prisoners (*Mountain Language*, 1988), a nameless blindfolded man (*New World Order*, 1991) -- and, back to his earliest plays, Rose and Bert in *The*

Room, and Stanley in *The Birthday Party* (1959), among many others. The potential destruction of each character magnifies the *Pinteresque* in any given work.

For a long time, Pinter avoided making too much of a political connection to his works. However, increasingly in usage, the *Pinteresque* takes on a political edge, making a more inclusive approach seem consistent with Pinter's claim that:

My earlier plays are much more political than they seem on the face of it. [...] [P]lays like *The Birthday Party*, *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Hothouse* are metaphors, really. When you look at them, they're much closer to an extremely critical look at authoritarian postures -- state power, family power, religious power, power used to undermine, if not destroy, the individual, or the questioning voice, or the voice which simply went away from the mainstream. (qtd in Ford 85)

One cannot help but think of Gus's questioning voice and the metaphorical implications such questioning implies in any rigid apparatus of power. The same can be said for Bert and Rose in *The Room* or Stanley in *The Birthday Party*. Adding a political edge to the *Pinteresque* creates common ground with later more overtly political Pinter. In the early *Pinteresque*-filled "room plays," and in the later more political plays, there is great concern regarding the abuse of authority and the environment that cultivates that abuse. *One for the Road* (1984), *Mountain Language* (1988), *New World Order* (1991), *Party Time* (1991) and *Ashes to Ashes* (1996) present political regimes where torture is never far under the surface of supposed civility.

But Pinter's statement that his early works are "more political than they seem," and that they are "critical look[s]" at authority and the undermining of the "questioning voice," gives context to characters like Gus and Stanley years earlier. For example, as a questioning voice, *Party Time*'s (1991) Jimmy deserves comparison to early Pinter. In the play's closing moment, Jimmy explains his punishment for opposing the presiding political power. His speech is eerily similar to Stanley's removal from the world of the play in *The Birthday Party*. With *Party Time* and *The Birthday Party*, Pinter recycles the word "party" in the title. As Charles Grimes notes, one can see *The Birthday Party*'s Stanley reconceptualized and resurrected as Jimmy in *Party Time* more than thirty years later (112). Though both of these Pinter "Party" pieces present literal celebrations, "party"

holds a dual meaning in both titles. The playwright puns on the term for the unnamed factions, or parties, that assert control, first, over the boarding house where Goldberg and McCann interrogate and extricate Stanley, and, second, in the flat in *Party Time* where the ruling elite celebrate their political status, deliberately avoiding the outside reality of roadblocks and their disappeared opponents, like Jimmy. Both Stanley and Jimmy -- and Gus in *The Dumb Waiter* -- are silenced and set apart from the parties because of their vocal opposition to authority.

4. *Pinteresque* Influence

Adding that political edge to *Pinteresque* increases the possibilities of the word and better represents the word's use by critics in London and beyond. To further examine this proposition, we can look at some recent plays performed in London. There is little doubt that Harold Pinter is the most influential British playwright of the past fifty years. In 1977, Steven H. Gale proclaimed, "Pinter is by consensus without question the major force in the contemporary English-speaking theater" (278).

More recently in 2000, British artistic director Dominic Dromgoole, who cultivated new theater writing in London in the 1980s and 90s, asserted that Pinter is "still the biggest ship in the fleet. Still the aircraft carrier from which many planes take off on shorter, less majestic trips" (8). No one is "more respected by the younger generation [of playwrights]" than Harold Pinter (225). In 2000, for example, Dromgoole could look over the past decade in British theater, with its "in-yer-face" generation or New Brutalism, and see playwrights like Sarah Kane, Anthony Neilson, Patrick Marber and Mark Ravenhill, all notably influenced by the 2005 Nobel Prize Laureate, Pinter.

Granted, identifying influence is a subjective act, a value judgment based on an individual's interpretation and experience. Mary Orr asserts that instead of influence's "influx" or "flow" arriving down from the hierarchical stars in a Harold-Bloomian-"Anxiety-of-Influence"-sense, influence can be imagined as a tributary merging with another to create a wider river. "*Influence for*," as Orr points out,

[r]everse[s] hierarchies or understand[s] influence as complex and plural...multiple, dialogic or reciprocal [...] More radically, a

truly influential work may be one that knows its own increase by being central to others subsequently. Power is in having given to, not usurping from (83-4).

If *The Dumb Waiter* is an influential work, and the *Pinteresque* still reverberates as a theatrical idea, how is that power manifest? The quality of a work might be measured by how long we receive satisfaction from it, or how long it gives new inspiration. Orr calls it “power,” but we might say “quality” is added to Pinter’s works when we see his influence in new and unexpected ways. Conversely, simply repeating Pinter, or mimicking the *Pinteresque*, adds nothing to Pinter or our notions of *Pinteresque*. This would be the trap that Begley mentions when he presents the *Pinteresque* as merely a manufactured phenomenon in performance (24).

Recent theatrical productions in London show the influence of the Pinteresque, clarify its political edge, and illuminate how the word is perceived by current critics. First, performed at the Royal Court in 1994, Anthony Neilson’s *Penetrator*, was one of the first plays of the wave characterized as *in-yer-face* theater. In *Penetrator*, Neilson mirrors the room play motif of early Pinter plays like *The Dumb Waiter*. However, Neilson refashions Pinter’s model to create a room that changes from dystopian horror to a hopeful final conclusion. *Penetrator*’s resolution is a clearing that we arrive to *after* experiencing components of the *Pinteresque*: the ambiguities, the menace, the terror, and threats from authority, all drift away like fog. Neilson’s play details the arrival of Tadge, a Gulf War I veteran who has his share of mental issues, to the flat of an old friend Max. Tadge’s odd actions build to a tense climax that brings up issues of the friends’ past. But without the *Pinteresque* components that Neilson works into *Penetrator*, none of what follows after the climax would have the same value; because of the tension in the room, we are prepared for the peaceful post-*Pinteresque* resolution. Neilson does not end his play with uncertainty or even the grimness with which Pinter ends his. While describing the original production of Neilson’s play, Aleks Sierz, author of *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, briefly connects *Penetrator* to the abuses of early and later Pinter. Quoting Tadge’s description of the “penetrators,” Sierz asserts that, “Tadge’s paranoid fantasies occur in a ‘black room.’ His idea of the tormentors is reminiscent of Pinter’s vision of torture” (80). In *Penetrator*, in the early room plays, and in the later more political Pinter plays, there is

great concern regarding the abuse of authority and the environment that cultivates that abuse.

The most renowned playwright of the *in-yer-face* generation, Sarah Kane, has also been compared to Pinter, and she admitted Pinter's influence on her work. Although Graham Saunders never uses the word *Pinteresque*, he connects Kane's controversial debut work, *Blasted* (1995), to Harold Pinter's room play form, specifically *The Dumb Waiter*. Saunders notes the small hotel room in Kane's play, the similar chaos that lurks outside in both works, the series of knocks on doors that we never fully comprehend, and finally, that Gus, Ben, and Kane's Ian all work as hired killers -- continuously and ominously checking and rechecking their guns (56-7).

While later critics have noted *Pinteresque* connections in these plays from Kane and Neilson, none of the initial reviewers labeled the plays as such. This is perhaps because Neilson's play was not a huge event or much reviewed at first, although since its premiere, it has received several exciting revivals. Much attention was given to *Blasted*, but almost all the critics' column-inches were reserved for shock and awe at the extreme acts on stage.

Often one can better understand a concept by clarifying what it is not. An explicit example of this is Patrick Marber's *Closer* (1997), one of the more celebrated convergences between Pinter's work and a younger playwright. Simply put, no critic ever labeled Marber's play *Pinteresque*, perhaps because it did not emphasize any of the characteristics that have been emphasized here as indicative of that term. Nevertheless, when Marber's exploration of love, sex and deceit premiered at the National Theater, numerous reviewers found in *Closer* reflections of Pinter's play *Betrayal* (1978). As a play from Pinter's middle period, *Betrayal* does not address the same issues of power and abuses of authority categorized in the early and later plays as the *Pinteresque*. *Betrayal* and *Closer* share the subject matter of love and deceit, as well as an episodic scene structure that often skips months and years at a time. Both transpire in realistic contemporary middle-class London living rooms, flats, restaurants and bars. Both manipulate time: *Betrayal's* scenes unfold mostly in reverse, whereas *Closer's* action occasionally overlaps in time sequences. Both plays have a limited number of characters with intertwined interests (*Betrayal* has three characters; *Closer* has four). These characters navigate the mundane while also wounding or being wounded in love.

The reviewers themselves celebrated Marber without seeing his Pinter connection as a negative factor. For example, David Benedict of *The Independent* found that from *Closer*, “British naughtiness and innuendo have been banished. Instead, there are echoes of Pinter’s *Betrayal* or a London take on Mamet’s *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*” (5). Alastair Macaulay of the *Financial Times* wrote that “one can, I think, mention *Closer* in the same breath as *Betrayal*” (1997, 8). While Charles Spencer of *The Daily Telegraph* concluded that, “Though Marber’s style and vision are his own, there are moments in this new piece which reminded me of both Pinter’s *Betrayal* and David Hare’s *Skylight*. What’s amazing is that *Closer* can stand comparison with such magnificent plays” (2008). Finally, Matt Wolf, writing in *Variety*, made an initial Pinter connection, and then focused more specifically on *Closer* “coming to a climax of sorts in a restaurant encounter that neatly distills Pinter’s *Betrayal*” (103). Since *Closer*’s opening, as the play moved from the smaller Cottesloe auditorium at the National Theater to the larger Lyttleton, and then to the West End, Broadway, and everywhere else via stage and motion picture, other prominent theater critics positively connect Marber with Pinter. *The Guardian*’s Michael Billington calls Marber one of the “younger writers” among the “numerous beneficiaries” of Pinter’s “legacy” as evidenced in Marber’s “sexually exploratory” *Closer* (2001, 2.1). *The Independent*’s Paul Taylor identifies Pinter as one of Marber’s “main writing influences” (5). But while all those critics have seen Marber as Pinter influenced, none have seen his works as *Pinteresque*.

More recently, in tactical coordination with the 2005 Nobel Prize announcement, some London theatrical premieres seem to have taken off from that influential aircraft carrier, “*HMS Pinter*.” When I interviewed *in-yer-face* playwright Mark Ravenhill just after Pinter won the Nobel Prize, the young dramatist mentioned that his next play, *The Cut* (2006),

[i]s probably the most Pinter-like play that I’ve written. It’s not the same really, but when people ask me what’s it like, and I’m trying to describe it, I say it’s a little bit like *Mountain Language* or one of those kind of plays. It’s set in a fictional country. And the process of oppression that goes on is like one of those later Pinter plays, like *One for the Road* or *Mountain Language*. (“Ravenhill interview”)

But Ravenhill utilized the Pinter parallel in a *specific situation*: “people ask me what *The Cut*’s like.” Needing to succinctly explain his work caused Ravenhill to use Pinter as accessible shorthand even though it was perhaps not altogether correct. This sort of limitation happens to some extent in all communication, but Ravenhill turns critic when he attempts to explain *The Cut*. The critical desire to classify, to sort, to provide access, is always in battle with a dangerous tendency to reduce. This same process can happen when critics overuse *Pinteresque*.

That said, a few months after Mark Ravenhill’s quick description of *The Cut*, many London theater critics identified Pinter parallels in varying degrees, including *Pinteresque* components in his play. Premiered at the Donmar Warehouse, Ravenhill’s play is about a torturer who administers “the cut” -- a quick operation for enemies of the state that makes them more agreeable. In three lengthy scenes, we see Paul, the cutter, played by Ian McKellen, go through a personal crisis of guilt; first, with a young male prisoner who wants the cut as a badge of honor; second, with his wife at home; third with his politically-minded son, who, as part of the new guard overtaking the state, considers his father evil.

Toby Young of *The Spectator* said that “To call *The Cut* Pinteresque doesn’t do justice to Ravenhill’s earnest duplication of most every trope in the Nobel Prize winner’s theatrical playbook. It is more like a fawning homage, a deferential tribute.” But Young is never completely clear on what he means by *Pinteresque* -- since the rest of the review provides no clear clues to the reasons for his assessment. He believes Ravenhill’s play is incomprehensible and boring, so perhaps he thinks the same of Pinter!

Sarah Hemming of *The Financial Times* is a little clearer in her review: “It’s a Pinteresque study of power play and moral equivocation set in a nameless state” (12). In addition, while never using the *Pinteresque* label, Jane Edwardes of *Time Out London*, lists some of the components: “The details are vague and the atmosphere tense. Ravenhill’s play owes something to Pinter not just in its power struggles, but also in the way it harks on certain words” (232). Perhaps the most humorous review came from Quentin Letts of *The Daily Mail* who simultaneously insults Pinter while adding a non-complimentary prefix to our word: “Quite well acted but pseudishly cryptic, *The Cut* is a *sub-Pinteresque affair*. Yes, even worse than old gloomy guts!” (Sec 4.8)

While never using the word *Pinteresque*, *The Daily Telegraph*'s Charles Spencer gives the most insightful comments of all the reviews:

Mark Ravenhill's new play is so up to its ears in debt to Harold Pinter that I'm not sure whether the Nobel Laureate should be merely flattered or demanding a slice of the royalties. Initially intriguing, but ultimately frustrating, the piece combines the enigma and menace of early Pinter with the political anger of late Pinter. [...] But what are we meant to read into *The Cut*? Like Pinter, Ravenhill withholds information more conventional dramatists would consider crucial. (2006, 28)

Most important to our reconsideration of *Pinteresque* here is Spencer's convergence of early and later Pinter. *The Cut* withholds information like all of Pinter's plays, but, importantly, Pinter supplements his ambiguity with precise images and clever dialogue that keep the audience intrigued -- Pinter's authority listed in Zarhy-Levo's characteristics. Ravenhill, unfortunately, falls short on the horrific or pathos-inducing details that hold our interest and tie us emotionally to the play. The conversations between torturer and tortured mirror Pinter's later works like *One for the Road* and *Ashes to Ashes*. And the bare, simple language and repetition could come from a number of Pinter's works. The three scenes allow us to see Paul the Cutter from three different angles, but their cumulative effect is not as powerful as some of Ravenhill's other works. And so, unlike *Penetrator* or even *Blasted*, to use Mary Orr's phrase, Pinter's influence is not quite "*influence for*" anything *new*.

One week after *The Cut* opened at the Donmar, Jez Butterworth's *The Winterling* premiered at the Royal Court. Butterworth's best known play is the 1995 *in-yer-face* hit, *Mojo*, which involves 1950's English gangsters and was made into a movie starring Harold Pinter. Butterworth keeps the gangsters around for *The Winterling*, and he keeps Pinter around in spirit too.

Set in a farmhouse in the countryside region of Dartmoor, the plot involves gangsters, revenge, surprises, a slightly hopeful ending, and a character who is a reincarnated Davies from *The Caretaker*. Of the thirteen reviews in the London press, twelve of them connect *The Winterling* to Pinter in various ways, including a close connection to *The Dumb Waiter* and the Pinteresque presence. Benedict Nightingale's review in *The Times* echoes that "Harold Pinter himself

hates the word Pinteresque.” But Nightingale continues the tricky process of critical comparison by saying “but if ever [*Pinteresque*] were apt it is here” (21). Helpfully, Nightingale gets more specific with a list of characteristics:

If you know Pinter’s *Dumb Waiter* you’ll have an inkling and if you know the rest of Pinter’s work you’ll find much that’s familiar in a play with more than its quota of disturbing intruders, innocent-seeming yet loaded exchanges, amorphous threats, deviousness, mystification and eccentric attempts to gain territory or dominate others. (21)

Likewise, Alastair Macaulay asserts that “Act One feels Pinterer-than-thou; Act Two, with its ambiguities of who used to be what and who will do what to whom, looks like variations on the fall-guy strangeness of Pinter’s *The Dumb Waiter*” (2006, 11). And, finally, Michael Billington of *The Guardian* saw *The Winterling*’s biggest influence as Pinter, calling his presence “ubiquitous,” and noting that “the denouement inescapably evokes *The Dumb Waiter*” (2006, 34).

As with *The Cut*, there is not much of what Orr calls a “dialogue” between the old text and the new. It is in *not* introducing anything new dramatically or worth celebrating theatrically that Butterworth and Ravenhill fall short. And because Ravenhill and Butterworth are prominent, celebrated young writers producing plays at the most prominent theaters, this falling short is worth noting. Michael Billington of *The Guardian* agrees that Pinter’s “distinctive voice is reverberating through British drama in ways that begin to worry me. [...] After seeing [*The Winterling*] and *The Cut*, I’m concerned that too many writers are imitating the master’s voice rather than discovering their own” (34). As can be seen, like it or not, *Pinteresque* is the most common term used for that imitation.

Yet, embracing the *Pinteresque*, or other aspects of Pinter’s work, does not have to be framed pejoratively. In 2004, Ben Brantley of the *New York Times* wrote an article called “Pinter Is Still Pointing the Way, With Shadows and Darkness,” a critique which posits Pinter’s influence on Michael Frayn’s *Democracy* and Conor McPherson’s *Shining City*. His criterion for the Pinteresque was that both new works acknowledge the unknowability of people in personal and public realms. Importantly, both plays offer us so much more than mere repetition of that Pinterly characteristic. Speaking subjectively,

upon reading Brantley's article and realizing the plays' intertextualities, I was pleasantly surprised, especially with respect to McPherson's play, which I had read a few times but never thought of as Pinteresque. I found *Shining City* touching, and then I realized it touched me in a similar tragicomic way to how *The Dumb Waiter* and *Betrayal* affect me, because of the ultimate impenetrability of the characters' selves and situations. This unknowability can be simultaneously comic and tragic in its irony.

As Anne Luyat quotes Pinter's Nobel Prize speech at the end of her essay in this volume, so can I: "Truth in drama is forever elusive. You never quite find it but the search for it is compulsive." In McPherson's *Shining City*, we search for the details between a man and his deceased wife who now haunts him. *Democracy*, Frayn's play about Chancellor Willy Brandt of West Germany, also reminds us that almost everyone is a contradiction, a variety of selves. As in *The Dumb Waiter*, where actions and characters go unexplained, incongruities and gaps drive each play. And again we feel the *Pinteresque* as an individual contending with authority: the individual is each of us, contending with that elusive authority, Truth.

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Notes

¹ Axelrod, 3.

² The dates I list are publication dates of the scripts, as dates of first performance vary depending on criteria of what one considers a "first" performance (whether it be a university performance, tour outside of London, radio performance, or London premiere, for example).

³ Beckett was referring to Emma and Jerry's final gaze in a draft of *Betrayal* that Pinter had sent him. However, this phrase applies to many of Pinter's works.

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The First Last Look in the Shadows: Pinter and the *Pinteresque*

Anne Luyat

I have never really understood the difference between comedy and tragedy. Because comedy is the intuition of the absurd, it seems to me to be more despairing than tragedy. Comedy offers no means of escape. (67)

Eugène Ionesco

1. Introduction

It was long thought that Harold Pinter had explained the essence of his drama and its *Pinteresque* nature. When he was asked, during an interview, “But what would you say your plays were about, Mr. Pinter?” he replied, “The weasel under the cocktail cabinet” (Taylor 105) and his answer, which was thought to refer to another critical term, the “comedy of menace,” soon became a staple of criticism and reaction to his work. However, in his acceptance speech of the 1970 Shakespeare Prize in Hamburg, West Germany, the dramatist set the record straight and explained that although his answer seemed to have acquired a profound significance over the years, the remark about the weasel under the cocktail cabinet for him meant “precisely nothing” (1987, 1). The danger of applying any label to a Pinter play, including the *Pinteresque* is more clearly seen with hindsight than with foresight.

As Pinter himself realized, the need to fall back on a word or a *beau mot* sprang from a society that placed its faith in both. It is not surprising that the word *Pinteresque* has had a long run as a critical term. The work of Marc Shaw, for example, argues for an expanded consideration of the *Pinteresque* in *The Dumb Waiter*, which would include tragic-comedy. In his essay “Unpacking the *Pinteresque* in *The Dumb Waiter* and Beyond,” Shaw explains that the term applies to modes of feeling as well as to cerebral modes and runs the risk of

“reducing to a lone signifier everything that reverberates in every Pinter room.”

On the other hand, Shaw also believes that Pinter benefited from the label the critics had coined for him and explains that: “The initial reviews performed Pinter a service by preparing his audience for a new experience.” Forewarned, play-goers were receptive to Pinter’s innovations, but the opaque nature of the word *Pinteresque*, which inadvertently gave as much prominence to the author as to the play he had written, could not have prepared them for the probing exploration of the human condition that they were to see on the stage, one which contributed a critical and ethical force to performance.

Shaw quotes Zaryl-Levo’s definition of the *Pinteresque*, which contains three main elements: Pinter’s atmospheric gift (usually an atmosphere of menace), his mastery of rhythmic, powerful dialogue and his authority to make an audience accept unexplained acts. In addition, Shaw suggests a fourth concept, the one which I found to be the most interesting because it focuses on the critical and ethical nature of Pinter’s drama: “the potential destruction of an individual who contends with authority.” I would agree with him when he says that although many comic elements, including routines that are reminiscent of vaudeville, can be found in *The Dumb Waiter*, the fate of Gus, a man who asks too many questions, is at the heart of Pinter’s interest in the play. It is not surprising that Pinter adapted characters in his plays whom he had played as an actor in repertory theater: “When I was in rep years ago, I always played the sinister parts. My favorite was an MI 5 man, immaculately dressed, with a moustache” (Pinter qtd in Gussow 23). Nor is it surprising that in Pinter criticism the term “comedies of menace” preceded the term *Pinteresque*. The critic Irving Wardle in the review *Encore* of September, 1958 was the first to speak of comedies of menace with reference to Pinter, although the term itself had already appeared a year earlier as the subtitle of a play by David Campton called *The Lunatic View*, (Hinchcliffe 73.) What is often forgotten, however, as Steven H. Gale has pointed out, is that the comedies of menace revealed “the terror and loneliness of the human situation” (qtd in Almansi and Henderson 89).

2. Conflict of comedy and tragedy

Randall Stevenson felt that Gus and Ben in *The Dumb Waiter* were very much like the hired gangsters Al and Max, whose comic routines in Ernest Hemingway's short story "The Killers" (1927) have "a patter-like vacuity," as they wait uneasily in a restaurant for the arrival of a victim they have never met but expect to murder according to instructions (Bold 30). Hemingway's short story was a subversive, ironic portrayal of violence in America during Prohibition, just as Pinter's play was an ironic portrayal of violence in post-war Britain. Yet Pinter's gunmen, Gus and Ben, are less stereotyped, more loquacious and more vulnerable than Hemingway's tight-lipped gangsters, whose identical too tight black coats and white gloves -- which they do not remove even while eating -- identify them immediately as sinister members of the underworld.

Pinter's audience does not realize at first what the business of Gus and Ben will be in *The Dumb Waiter*. Ronald Knowles remarked that "Pinter delays the revelation of Gus and Ben's lethal business until well into the play, when Gus suddenly pulls a revolver from under a pillow. Up until that point Pinter took a bizarre hint from Hemingway: "In their tight overcoats and derby hats they looked like a vaudeville team" and developed it by using the common revue sketch base of one person reading from a newspaper, together with a comic and stooge cross-talk act, anticipating Goldberg and McCann in *The Birthday Party*" (Knowles 26-7). The appreciation is interesting not only for the information that it gives about the literary antecedents of Gus and Ben, but also for the fact that the character type was to be an important one for Pinter, one which represented much more than a stereotype.

Commenting on the stylized exchanges of Gus and Ben in broad cockney, Francesca Coppa feels they are presented in *The Dumb Waiter* "with the strutting rhythm of polished comedy routines" (45). The routines of Gus and Ben include verbal duels as well as a dance at the end of the play, in which they rehearse the steps they will need in order to be in place for the killing of their designated victim. Their dance of death inevitably brings to mind the choral origins of Greek tragedy, in which participants at the religious rites honoring Dionysius both sang and danced to announce the moment of catharsis. Like their verbal routines, however, the dance routine of Gus and Ben is slightly out of rhythm and out of step. The dance is interrupted

when Gus realizes that Ben has forgotten the essential step of telling him to draw his gun for the killing:

BEN: If he turns round-

GUS: If he turns round-

BEN: You're there.

GUS: I'm here.

Ben frowns and presses his forehead.

You've missed something out.

BEN: I know. What ?

GUS: I haven't taken my gun out according to you.

BEN: You take your gun out-

GUS: After I've closed the door.

BEN: After you've closed the door.

BEN: You take your gun out

GUS: After I've closed the door.

BEN: After you've closed the door.

GUS: You've never missed that out before, you know that? (143-44)

The routine ends abruptly when it comes to the place in time when Gus and Ben will be face to face with their victim. When Ben tells Gus that nothing in their routine will change even if the next victim is a girl, like the one who shattered when they shot her, Gus excuses himself, rises shivering, and exits.

From the first lines spoken in the play the timing and the tone of the exchanges between Gus and Ben are not quite right and are not truly comic. The continual echoing of the set vaudeville pieces reveals the disarming fact that, while Gus and Ben are easily offended by the misconduct of others as gleaned from the newspapers, they are proud to be professional killers. As the play progresses, each of the new routines is a little more out of kilter than the last. Why was Pinter breaking the tempo of the polished music hall acts, a transgression which he knew his audience would recognize, for the vaudeville tempo in Hemingway's "The Killers" had satirized both the powerful Chicago mobs that produced Al and Max and the law-abiding citizens of a small Illinois town, who let themselves be humiliated by the hired guns. I believe that the seemingly pointless dialogues of Hemingway and Pinter, which both manipulate negative laughter, are actually subversive attacks on a specific society's values or lack of them.

Pinter was already a political writer when he wrote his first plays *The Room*, *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Birthday Party*.

Moreover, he was working in a recognized area of grotesque caricature in *The Dumb Waiter*, one that reached across cultures and nations. Four years earlier in 1956 at the VGK State Film Institute Studios in Moscow, Andrei Tarkovsky had chosen to direct as his first film a black and white short of Hemingway's story "The Killers" ("Ubijtsi"), which he considered to be a satire on the arbitrary nature of Russian society. Like his Russian counterpart, Harold Pinter also questioned his nation's interference in the life of its citizens, its casual acceptance of organized crime and its lack of aspirations. The lessons of history learned in World War II seemed to have dissipated into the recesses of time, leaving only a residue of its extreme cruelty on Pinter's stage.

Unlike Hemingway who enhanced the tight-lipped gangster stereotype in his short story in order to profit from the abstract, grotesque immediacy of Al and Max, Pinter made Gus and Ben very different human characters. Apart from some minor squabbling between Al and Max about Max being too talkative, Hemingway's gangsters are almost identical partners in crime, united in their mechanically orchestrated performance. Conversely, Gus and Ben are consciously at odds with one another from beginning to end and are subtly miscast for the duets they are supposed to be playing together. Pinter has them engage in question and answer games that keep them in a permanent state of irritable vigilance. A seemingly irrelevant question or an awkward one maintains the tension of the language duels, whose outcomes will reveal the final winner in a game "whose threat is ordinary on the surface but lethal in reality" (Almansi 38).

The dislocation of a society that was slowly recovering from war and propaganda campaigns is nowhere more evident than in the disbelief of Gus as he listens to Ben reading from the newspaper. The interjections of Gus ring across the stage like bullets, "No?" "Go on!", "Get away", "It's unbelievable", "Incredible"(114). While Al and Max in Hemingway's story stood together against the local "bright boys" George and Nick, belittled them, needled them and terrorized them, Gus and Ben disagree on just about everything. The tensions between them fill the stage with their corrosive overtones even as their well practiced comedy routines continue. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, "conflicting structures have a dialogical relationship so that multiple voices interact and respond to one another." He believes that: "Laughter has a deep philosophical meaning, it is one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole" (66).

The oppositional structure as seen in the dialogues between Gus and Ben invite the audience to both laugh and cry, to believe and disbelieve, thus creating a relentless dynamic of opposing forces that will soon end in violence.

Thus, the conflict of comedy and tragedy is present at the heart of the play, primarily in the linguistic exchanges of Gus and Ben, which begin in playfulness and end in clashes over who will dominate whom in petty household matters. Gus, who does not trust Ben, questions his every word and intonation. Ben, who no longer trusts Gus, whom he believes to be dangerous, refuses to answer his questions. Their mutual mistrust and the paucity of their direct communication negate the true spirit of the philosophy of Epicurus, which held that having a circle of friends you can trust is one of the most important means of securing a tranquil life (France and Allinson 43). Ironically, Pinter presents as a negative the peace of mind, which, according to Epicurus, trust in friends should produce.

3. The Hollow Men

The urban proletariat makes its resounding entrance in Pinter's first three plays, perhaps even more resoundingly in *The Dumb Waiter* than in its sister plays *The Room* and *The Birthday Party*. Although a certain kinship with the French Theater of the Absurd is often put forward as a possible model for the early plays of Pinter, he also had a model in the dramatist T.S. Eliot, whose vaudeville-like routines in the unfinished "Fragment of a Prologue to Sweeney Agonistes" are composed of seemingly pointless statements in which ordinary people take great pains to imitate bourgeois speech and attitudes.

In his well synchronized routines, Eliot makes use of a patter-like vacuity to represent a linguistic exchange that had been reduced to a series of banal clichés and, thus, rendered meaningless. The English word vacuity comes from the French "*vacant*," which can mean either empty or absent. To be absent from one's own language or to use a language emptied of meaning, so that one can no longer say what one means, is the cornerstone of modern tragedy. The empty phrases of Dusty and Doris in Eliot's "Fragment of A Prologue" reveal at the heart of being a fatal linguistic absenteeism. As it will be later for Pinter, the dialogue of Eliot's characters is impacted and turns on a single word:

DUSTY: How about Pereira
DORIS: What about Pereira?
I don't care,
DUSTY: You don't care?
Who pays the rent ?
DORIS: Yes, he pays the rent.
DUSTY: Well, some men don't and some men do,
Some men don't and you know who. (119)

Eliot captures the singsong intonations and rhythms of vaudeville exchanges, whose tensions will increase before fizzling out into an anti-climax that avoids both conclusions and closure. Even when the Tarot cards indicate the possibility of a quarrel, a separation, or death, “knock nine knocks on door,” even when the arrival at the door of dull guests with their even duller conversations create a caricature of human communication, conflict must be avoided at all costs (119). Gus and Ben are perched on the edge of a similar linguistic fault line in *The Dumb Waiter* as they seek to maintain the partnership that makes them efficient murderers. Unlike Eliot in his portrayal of Doris and Dusty, Pinter will accentuate the linguistic tensions between his characters until they can no longer be tolerated and explode into violence.

Like Hemingway and Eliot, who had adapted the vaudeville tradition before him, Pinter listened carefully to the voices of his characters. As early as 1962, in a speech made at the National Student Drama Festival at Bristol University, Harold Pinter explained (perhaps in an attempt to move away from the *Pinteresque* label that his plays had been given) the pragmatic way in which he created his characters: “I have usually begun a play in quite a simple manner, found a couple of characters, thrown them together and listened to what they said, keeping my nose to the ground. The context has always been for me complete and particular” (1988, 17).

The characters then are Pinter's because he has listened to them and understood their anguish, not because he predestined them or manipulated them to fit a prefabricated *Pinteresque* model. Thus, Pinter's use of silence and pauses is not an invented ritual but follows the language patterns he observed while listening to his characters. The unpredictable duels of Gus and Ben allow Pinter to move away from stage clichés in *The Dumb Waiter*, even though gangsters and vaudeville routines were well-worn staples of post World War II theater. The critic Bernard Dukore said of *The Dumb Waiter* that the

sense of the comic had disappeared by the end of the play: “In subject and symbol, the opening thrill-paced dialogue contains sources of comedy that, at the end of the play, prompt no laughter” (17). When Gus is revealed to be the organization’s intended victim at the end of the play, his initial disregard for the sense of foreboding hidden in the dark stories about death read to him by Ben constitute in retrospect a dramatic foreshadowing of his tragic disbelief in his own mortality.

Gus and Ben could be called hollow men in Eliot’s sense of the term in the fiction of the same title. Immobilized as they are in their roles of unquestioning obedience to authority, they are not able to express the deep emotions of fear and anguish that they experience. They have long ago stopped giving voice to their questions and personal opinions. Because they can only repeat worn phrases from newspapers and the tired clichés of common opinion, Gus and Ben speak the common language of absence first enunciated by Eliot in “The Hollow Men:”

Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass
Or rat’s feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar. (87)

With Gus and Ben, Pinter works in the hollow space between the lines, where under what is being said, another thing is being said, so that there is room for a subtext in filigree. Steven H. Gale believes that Pinter’s ability to create the subtext between the lines is a legacy of his admiration for James Joyce (35). More important, however, is the fact that the subtext exists and, under the appearance of comedy, human destiny is portrayed in a stunning comic conflict with irrational authoritarian demands.

When dealing with Pinter, the critic Stanley Eveling also dissociates comedy and the comical, feeling that high comedy is not created for the sake of laughter but is a prelude to a deeper reflection on more serious issues, a prelude that allows the author to persuade the audience to accept his dangerous premises: “Through laughter, the dangerous becomes welcomed or excluded without, as it were, giving offence (77). The imminence of unseen danger hidden in the depths of seemingly insignificant language is a hallmark of the early Pinter plays. There is a sense of living on the edge, which both actors and

spectators seem to relish, but what lies waiting for them in the shadows of the linguistic exchange?

4. Epicurean pleasures in *The Dumb Waiter*

It is generally accepted that Pinter's laughter and wordplay draw unsuspecting characters into desperate situations from which there can be no escape. *The Dumb Waiter* is no exception. The stifling atmosphere of murder as a routine business, the aggressive and resentful dialogue of the two hit men, as well as the absence of explanations for the arbitrary actions of the sinister Organization reveal a well ordered and powerful society of violence, one with which the conscientious objector Pinter was in total disaccord.

Stevenson insists not only on the importance of Hemingway for Pinter in the early plays, but also on the influence of Franz Kafka, both of whom Pinter was reading at the time he wrote *The Dumb Waiter* (29-30). Pinter was contracted later to write the screenplay for the screen version of *The Trial*, which was filmed in 1989. Kafka protested in the novel *The Trial* (1925) against the authoritarian nature of the demands made on the protagonist Joseph K by a sinister totalitarian state. The irrational orders given to Gus and Ben by Pinter's dumb waiter strangely resemble the contradictory commands to obedience given to Joseph K by the disembodied agencies of the autocracy during and after his arraignment.

The actual arrest of Joseph K constitutes a break in his well-ordered daily routine because his habitual breakfast is not served to him. When the arresting officer repeats Joseph K's request for breakfast, he is laughed down by unseen voices:

He says Anna is to bring him his breakfast. A short guffaw from the next room came in answer; one could not tell from the sound whether it was produced by several individuals or merely by one. (8)

The refusal to fill food orders is also central to *The Dumb Waiter*, as it is to the opening of Hemingway's "The Killers," when George stands firm behind his lunch counter and refuses to serve Al and Max anything from the dinner menu before dinner time. His refusal to serve what was ordered arouses the anger of Max: "Oh to hell with the clock, What have you got to eat?" (215)

The dumb waiter, with its incessant demands for food, becomes the unexpected dark source, from which tragedy springs. Just about halfway through the play, its clattering entrance center stage -- "*There is a loud clatter and racket in the thin bulge of wall between the beds of something descending*" -- (131) interrupts the grisly monologue of Gus about the girl whose body shattered when she was killed. The less than discreet arrival of the dumb waiter frightens Gus and Ben into drawing their revolvers. This action creates one of the comic moments of the play, which ends in a kind of Eliot-like anti-climax. Instead of the dangerous enemies they are ready to shoot on sight, the men find only a piece of paper in the dumb waiter's cavernous serving hatch. It is a lunch order that neither Gus nor Ben can fill: "Two braised steak and chips. Two sago puddings. Two teas without sugar" (131). The impending menace has been disarmed with laughter, for the moment.

If the dumb waiter is neither deaf nor dumb, it appears, like Gus and Ben, to be extremely hungry. The two gunmen and the dumb waiter will compete for the small stock of food, which the two men have brought to alleviate their pre-murder hunger. The dumb waiter clatters back upstairs and down and up and down again with more orders, which according to Ben, are trendy epicurean dishes of Greek origin. Without ever having tasted Macaroni Pastitsio or seen a plate of Ormitha Macarounada, Gus, who must associate the dishes with expensive vacations, remarks "That's pretty high class" (136). If we are looking for a comic moment, we have found it in the references to pleasurable dishes from Greece, the home of Epicurus, the philosopher of Ancient Greece, whose esteemed teachings in the fields of epistemology, physics, and ethics had been reduced in the minds of modern men uninitiated in the philosophy of Antiquity, to Epicureanism, an exquisite taste in fine food.

Twice when the dumb waiter makes its impossible demands for food which the men cannot produce, Gus shouts up the dark shaft to ask the dumbwaiter to modify its orders. A third time, Gus screams his protest: "The larder's bare!" (139) The first time that Gus shouts at the dumb waiter, Ben rebukes him sternly: "Don't do that!" (133) When Gus shouts up the shaft again, Ben raises the tone with: "You shouldn't shout like that...It isn't done" (136) Ben's reaction when Gus shouts his protest a third time is to slap him hard across the chest while shouting: "Stop it !You maniac !...That's enough ! I'm warning

you” (146). While the professional veneer of Hemingway’s black trench coated killers was never penetrated, Joseph K retains a stoic and impassive demeanor throughout his trial. In contrast, the disturbing presence of the dumb waiter makes the vulnerable human traits of Gus and Ben visible and their anguish palpable.

The gourmet tastes of the dumb waiter must be filled instantly and without question. Trained as they are to obey all the orders given to them, Gus and Ben feed it all of their meager provisions only to be told that the result is unsatisfactory. Yet, the two men do not agree on how the dumb waiter should be treated. Gus rebels, questions the proceedings and answers back, while Ben, who seems to fear it instinctively, tries to placate it. The appearance of the dumb waiter represents effectively a third actor entering the stage space, thereby further disrupting the shaky routines of Gus and Ben. The unsettling effect is intensified when the two men discover the dumb waiter’s speaking tube. Ben is the only one who can communicate directly with it. Gus and the audience hear only the answers that Ben gives to the machine’s inaudible orders.

The short compressed lines that ignite the tragedy are in the words of a critic of the time, “forever trembling on the edge of silence” and can be compared to the music of Carl von Webern (Esslin 12). When *The Dumb Waiter*, directed by James Roose-Evans at Hampstead Theater Club on January 22, 1960, was reviewed in *The London Times*, the reviewer later compared the play to Webern’s music. “Like Webern, he has a taste for the short, compressed and like Webern he inclines to etiolated pointilliste textures forever trembling on the edge of silence.” The atonal, flat quality of Webern’s music is based on a construct of three or four notes, in which the pauses between the notes replace the traditional melodic line, and eventually transform each note into what can best be compared to the series of small individual brush strokes of a pointilliste painter like Seurat, and would correspond very well to the dance of death as performed by Gus and Ben:

BEN: When the bloke comes in-
GUS: When the bloke comes in-
BEN: Shut the door behind him.
GUS: Shut the door behind him.
BEN: Without divulging your presence.
GUS: Without divulging my presence.
BEN: He’ll see me and come towards me.

GUS: He'll see you and come towards you. (143)

The name of Gus is linked etymologically to the words *gusto* and *gustative*, just as the name Ben comes from the Welsh word *binnen* meaning within, usually within the parlor of a two room house leading to a kitchen. Pinter's references to the theme of food and to the closed space of the basement room with its kitchen is reinforced and subtly underlined, as are all the interlocking aspects of this short play. The tensions in the room itself, however, are not unknown to the audience. As James R. Hollis states: "We do not have to answer to the name of Rose or Stanley or Gus to confess that we have been living in these rooms for some time" (51).

When Gus is thrust back into the room, he realizes for the first time what it means to be a victim, while Ben discovers what it means to murder someone who is more than a nameless assignment. The distance that Gus and Ben had from their work has suddenly been taken away from them. It is the same distance that Hemingway carefully preserved intact in his tough mobsters. With the shock of the unexpected ending, Pinter pulls the rug out from under the feet of his characters, moving in the space of a few seconds from what appears to be a human comedy to a human tragedy. The audience and the killers discover together the gap between language and reality, the difference between talking about murder and actually experiencing it as both victim and executioner. The fact that Gus does not die, but remains expectant on the stage, prolongs the moment of revelation and shock.

Like other critics of Pinter such as Dukore, Shaw believes that *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Room* and *The Birthday Party* form a trilogy of tragic-comedies. It could perhaps be added that the three plays also form a social tragedy and report a social malfunction in much the same way as Kafka's novel *The Trial* does. Neither Ben nor Gus nor Joseph K are victims of their own pride nor have they tempted fate. The tragic fault, if there is one, can be put at the feet of an authoritarian society that refuses individual liberty, punishes with impunity the expression of personal ideas, and encourages blind obedience to a reign of violence.

4. That First Last Look in the Shadows

Samuel Beckett was one of the first to understand the full extent of the tragic dimension of Harold Pinter's dramatic writing. He wrote

enthusiastically to Pinter after reading the first draft of one of Pinter's later plays, *Betrayal*: "That first last look in the shadows after all the lights to come, wrings the heart." (qtd in Fehsenfeld 124). Pinter responded in a letter to Beckett saying that he had summed up the play in a single sentence (qtd in Fehsenfeld 124). From the first plays that he writes, through word games and laughter, Pinter entices the playgoers into a time after all the lights to come have been extinguished and to a place where the human comedy finds its tragic issue.

The unexpected sense of compassion the spectators have for Gus and Ben brings them to a place which they had never expected to enter. The spectator who has not known whether to laugh or cry all throughout the play, and who has been kept at a distance by Pinter's wordplay, is suddenly drawn into the vortex of the action, where the moment of truth is experienced, and which, as Beckett saw so clearly, "wring the heart." Pinter was fully aware of the fact that the moment of recognition constituted the tragic moment of the play:

The moment of recognition is the tragic moment...there is not one truth to be found in dramatic art. There are many. These truths challenge each other, recoil from each other, reflect each other, ignore each other, teach each other, are blind to each other. Sometimes you feel you have the truth of a moment in your hand, then it slips through your fingers and is lost. (2005, 9)

The *Pinteresque*, as Shaw has shown, must be unpacked, probed and its depths sounded if the word will continue to have any meaning at all. His systematic investigation of the term in "Unpacking the *Pinteresque*" is not only an extremely valuable criticism with which to evaluate the subsequent dramas written by Pinter, but also to assess the work of the playwrights who were inspired by him.

Pinter insisted in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech that although he felt truth was elusive the search for truth was compulsive for a playwright:

Truth in drama is forever elusive. You never quite find it but the search for it is compulsive. The search is clearly what drives the endeavor... The search is your task. More often than not you stumble upon the truth in the dark, colliding with it or just glimpsing an image or a shape which seems to correspond to the truth often without realizing that you have done it (9)

The last form seen by the audience of *The Dumb Waiter* is the slack stooping shape of Gus, the yeoman protestor, with his arms hanging at his sides, pushed into the room for eternal silencing: will it be the first or the last look in the shadows that will underline the absurdity of death and wring the heart?

Anne Luyat, Université d'Avignon

Notes

¹ Translated from the French by the author: Je n'ai jamais compris, pour ma part, la différence entre comique et tragique. Le comique étant l'intuition de l'absurde, il me semble plus désespérant que le tragique. Le comique n'offre pas d'issue.

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Essay Abstracts

Varun Begley, Return of the Referent

For anyone undertaking a political assessment, the lack of social realism in Harold Pinter's early plays requires a different understanding of the relation between aesthetics and politics. This essay argues that *The Dumb Waiter* participates in an unfolding crisis in the ideology of realism itself -- a growing sense of the gap between art and history, sign and referent. Drawing on 1960s-70s theoretical works by Roland Barthes, Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton, and Richard Dyer, the essay suggests that artworks do not reproduce History, but instead Ideology, in a manner that may allow contradictions and alternatives to appear. Thus, *The Dumb Waiter* reproduces ideological contradictions concerning crime, business, and labor; organizes a space for utopian desire; and dramatizes the predicament of the social/psychological subject when confronted by the inaccessible horizon of the Real.

Mary F. Brewer, "Mixed feelings about words:" Language, politics and the ethics of inter-subjectivity

In this essay, I argue that Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism enables a deeper exploration of how *The Dumb Waiter* provokes the reader/viewer into reflecting on the mode of reception of textual and theatrical signifiers and of language itself. Its ending, particularly, reveals the linguistic mechanisms through which the play challenges the conservative drives of conventional wish-fulfillment narratives. Further, the way in which Bakhtin locates the subject within cultural systems of interpretive practices affords an opening into the politics of the play's inter-subjective relations; that is, it foregrounds the precise nature of the play's intervention in the ethical dimensions of subject relations and acts of interpretation.

Basil Chiasson, (Re)Thinking Harold Pinter's Comedy of Menace

"(Re)Thinking Harold Pinter's Comedy of Menace" makes *The Dumb Waiter* its centerpiece, as it revisits the origin and critical and aesthetic development of Pinter's "comedy of menace." In part, the essay suggests how extant uses of this much-banded phrase, and descriptions and characterizations of Pinter's aestheticization of comedy and of menace, need to be expanded rather than taken as axiomatic. The principal argument here is for a more balanced consideration of the elements of comedy and menace, which decidedly involves sighting and emphasizing the interdependent character of comedy and menace's relationship in the plays. Central to the discussion are issues of representation, the production of dramatic meaning, audience-response, and affect theory, as theorized by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. The final section briefly attends to select scenes from some of the plays to which Pinter refers as his more "precisely political" ones: *One for the Road*, *Mountain Language*, and *Party Time* serve as examples of how Pinter's "political" plays suggest

not so much a break from the comedy of menace as a sea-change in the aesthetic, a process whereby the elements of comedy and menace still exist, but they have changed in terms of character and function. Despite, and in fact because of, this transmutation, the essay argues that certain family resemblances between Pinter's earliest and more recent plays exist, resemblances which therefore invite a re-imagining of Pinter's "original" comedy of menace, such that it can be stretched over the playwright's entire oeuvre.

Anne Luyat, *The First Last Look in the Shadows: Pinter and the Pinteresque*

This essay addresses why the *Pinteresque* has had such a long run as a critical term, that is, because its opaqueness gives as much importance to the playwright as to his plays and has almost unlimited possibilities of definition. Beckett's phrase "the first last look in the shadows," describes what Pinter called in his Nobel acceptance speech the moment of recognition, or tragic moment. The reversal in *The Dumb Waiter* of the maxim of Epicurus, who held that having a circle of friends you can trust is one of the most important means of securing a tranquil life, disrupts the vaudeville-like patter of the exchanges between Gus and Ben, and it sets the play on a course toward a Bakhtinian resolution with tragedy. Pinter's ironic insistence on Epicurean pleasures in the dumb waiter's choice of gourmet dishes of Greek origin makes of the cavernous box, which is neither deaf nor dumb but extremely hungry, the unexpected source from which the tragedy springs. There is criticism of postwar British society in the negative laughter produced by Pinter's use of the gangster tradition, which looks back to Hemingway's story "The Killers." The seemingly insignificant linguistic exchanges are reminiscent also of T.S. Eliot's "Fragment of a Prologue to *Sweeney Agonistes*" and suggest in their repetitions the imminence of unseen danger. The dance of death in which Gus and Ben practice their steps, so as to be in place for the killing of their victim, recalls the choral tradition of Greek tragedy in which participants at the feast of Dionysius both danced and sang to announce the moment of catharsis.

Radmila Nastić, *The Dumb Waiter: Realism and Metaphor*

The essay deals with the metaphoric dimension of the chronotope of the room in Pinter's play, in addition to its realistic significance. Bakhtin's realistic interpretation of the threshold is coupled with the metaphoric notion of the threshold found in Victor Turner's and Joseph Campbell's interpretations of ritual passage. *The Dumb Waiter* is thus brought into relation with *The Theater of the Absurd*, and compared with plays by Eugene O'Neill, Samuel Beckett, David Mamet and David Rabe.

Lance Norman, *Anti-ritual, Critical Domestication and Representational Precision in Pinter's The Dumb Waiter*

This essay offers a reappraisal of the final tableau that concludes Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*. Since the play's debut critics have debated the appropriate way to interpret the "long silence" which concludes the play. Critics such as Katherine Burkman, who foreground the ritual pattern in Pinter's drama, understand the tableau as the prelude to Ben killing Gus. Opposing such a view of the play's ending, critics such as Thomas Van Laan emphasize that a play is a text; language must be understood precisely, and to understand *The Dumb Waiter* precisely is to read the

ending as Pinter presents it. While Ben may point his gun at Gus, the play does not end with a murder. Van Laan suggests that the critical compulsion to move beyond the final tableau is to deform the play by engaging in a process he labels “filling in.” Van Laan goes on to assert that Ben and Gus offer a parody of critics who engage in “filling in.” What Van Laan, and critics who embrace the precision of the final tableau fail to take into account, is that the very presence of opposing interpretations demonstrates that Pinter’s stage directions do not represent as precisely as some critics would like. Ben and Gus may begin the play by parodying critics who “fill in,” but as the play progresses, the two hit-men also parody the possibility of reading texts precisely. Ultimately, the indeterminacy of Pinter’s stage directions encourages multiple and perhaps contradictory interpretations.

Michael Patterson, Pinter’s *The Dumb Waiter*: Negotiating the boundary between high and low culture

Although Pinter tends to be regarded as a “highbrow” playwright, there are many ways in which he crosses the boundary between “high” and “low” culture. While it has to be accepted that live theater today cannot be considered a populist medium, Pinter embraces popular culture in ways that separate him from modernist writers like Beckett or even Brecht. He admits to the influence of gangster movies, an influence that is especially apparent in *The Dumb Waiter*, and shares many characteristics in common with popular television programs. He also reveals the influence of comic routines like those of Laurel and Hardy. These routines are exercises in dominance, “a common, everyday thing,” reflected in the verbal sparring between Ben and Gus. While the content is therefore potentially of popular appeal, it has to be admitted that Pinter’s unwillingness to provide his characters with rounded pasts and clear motivation initially alienated audiences. However, it can be argued that his depiction is actually more truthful and thus potentially of greater popular appeal than that of conventional naturalism. In addition to the difficulties experienced by audiences, critics have tended to introduce mystification rather than clarity by mistakenly seeking symbolic significance in plays like *The Dumb Waiter*, thus contributing to the commonly-held belief that Pinter is “difficult” and can only be understood by experts. While Pinter clearly has been influenced by popular culture, and writes about everyday people using everyday objects usually engaged in everyday struggles for dominance, one can hardly claim that he is a part of popular culture. However, this is due more to lack of exposure in the media than any inherent exclusiveness. One may also safely assert that in areas of political oppression Pinter’s *Dumb Waiter* would be well understood and well received by the general populace.

David Pattie, Feeding Power: Pinter, Bakhtin, and Inverted Carnival

This chapter takes as its starting point the notion of the visceral quality of laughter in Pinter’s theater. My argument is that the idea of the viscera functions both as an integral part of *The Dumb Waiter*’s staging (and of the play’s unsettling impact on the audience) and a link between it and Pinter’s later work. Watching *The Dumb Waiter*, it is hard to escape the thought that the dumb waiter itself is a gullet, operating against gravity, sucking the food upwards, and there is something profoundly, comically disturbing at the thought of this never-satisfied maw, and the ridiculous food

substitutions that Ben and Gus have to make to satisfy it. In both the actual and the imagined space of the play, there is a physical inversion of the shape of Bakhtinian carnival laughter. For Bakhtin, the essence of carnival is a surrender to an inversion of the normal physical organization of the body; but it only operates as a liberation if the demands of the stomach are imagined as coming from below, rather than from above. Here, the stomach that needs to be satisfied hangs over the heads of the characters, linked to them by something that suggests a gravity-defying alimentary canal.

This sense of spatial inversion links *The Dumb Waiter* to one of Pinter's later dramas. *Party Time* can be thought of as an inverted companion piece to *The Dumb Waiter*. In the earlier play, we are positioned below street level, with the killers and victims: in *Party Time*, we are positioned at the other end of the dumb waiter's gullet, with the cultured, the rapacious, and the powerful. It is the essence of carnival, at least as Bakhtin understands it, that the promptings of the stomach (and of all other forms of appetite) overturn the promptings of authority: in both plays, the promptings of appetite are the promptings of authority. Notably, both texts finish with a piece of waste product on the point of excretion -- what the system cannot digest, it must dispose of. In this paper, I will argue that there is a link between this and the profoundly disturbing nature of Pinter's comedy; it is linked to an unhealthy reorganization of bodily elements -- and, via Bakhtin, to a fundamentally unhealthy ordering of the state body.

Penelope Prentice, "The Ironic Con Game" Revisited: Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*, a Key to Courage

"'The Ironic Con Game' Revisited: Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*, a Key to Courage" revisits the power plays in Pinter's dominant-subservient relationships to locate keys to claiming courage at the sources: as a failure of consciousness that leads to a failure to act productively, or to maintain vigilance even to survive. *The Dumb Waiter's* characters, unaware that they are driven reflexively by emotion, primarily by fear that is seemingly scripted into their relationship, remain paralyzed even to wish for better, to see choices or to act to save their own lives or others'.

Catherine Rees: High Art or Popular Culture: Traumatic conflicts of representation and postmodernism in Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*

This chapter seeks to question *The Dumb Waiter's* place within popular culture. It asks whether Pinter's play embraces certain aspects of mass entertainment and also if the play can therefore be considered postmodern. The chapter uses Varun Begley's *Harold Pinter and the Twilight of Modernism* as a basis to explore the assertion that *The Dumb Waiter*, and other Pinter plays, bridge a gap between modernism and postmodernism. Various views and theorists of postmodernity are considered, in particular Lyotard, and the chapter also addresses aspects of trauma studies and questions of representation, particularly of pain, horror and violence. Finally, this chapter asks about the place of political theater within a postmodern context, and it argues that Pinter's insistence as to the "reality" of his plays in global political situations may compromise suggestions that his work is truly "postmodern."

Juliet Rufford, “Disorder ... in a Darkened Room:” the Juridico-Political Space of *The Dumb Waiter*

Some contemporary criticism still follows Martin Esslin’s assessment of Pinter’s early plays as enactments of existential angst, although much work has been done since the early 1980s to uncover the plays’ political dimensions. This essay exposes some of the flaws in Esslin’s interpretation whilst retaining his stress on Pinter’s central image of the room. The author re-visits the political climate of Cold War Britain and traces a body of Pinter criticism from the politically *engagé* interpretations of the 1950s to the scholarship of recent years in order to reaffirm a long history of politicized readings of *The Dumb Waiter*. She suggests that the tendency to view politics and space as powerfully linked is widespread, despite the diversity of critical approaches involved. By drawing on the juridico-political philosophy of Giorgio Agamben, Rufford introduces her own spatially-informed reading of the play’s politics -- insisting on the immediacy and relevance of the 1957 work to an understanding of some of the least palatable aspects of Western democracy today.

Jonathan Shandell, The “Other” Within Us: the Rubin’s Vase of Class in *The Dumb Waiter*

In exploring the role of “the Other” within Harold Pinter’s *The Dumb Waiter*, this essay highlights the shifting, unstable class divisions in the drama. The essay equates the play to the famous optical illusion of “Rubin’s vase” -- which the viewer will inevitably see as a picture that shifts between a vase and two silhouetted faces in profile. Similarly, Pinter constructs *The Dumb Waiter* so that perception of its characters Ben and Gus also must shift between two competing visions of them, as middle-class peers in a tripartite social hierarchy on one hand and as opponents separated by an imbalance of power on the other. Like the Rubin’s vase, the play constructs these two competing interpretations as equally viable. As Pinter brings down the final curtain, the essay argues, Ben stares at Gus and beholds both “the Other” and a mirror on the “self.”

Marc E. Shaw, Unpacking the *Pinteresque* in *The Dumb Waiter* and Beyond

This essay uses Harold Pinter’s *The Dumb Waiter* to explore what the word *Pinteresque* signified at its origin to the present day. It teases out different components of the *Pinteresque* as identified by various critics, but also adds to that definition by examining the notion of the individual contending with authority (in Pinter’s early “room plays,” his later more overtly-political works, and in the Pinter-influenced works of others). Remnants of the *Pinteresque* are explored in modern British theater as well, including the *In-Yer-Face* playwrights, Anthony Neilson, Mark Ravenhill, Sarah Kane, and Patrick Marber.

Naoko Yagi, A Realist-Naturalist Pinter Revisited

This essay considers a generic underpinning of Harold Pinter’s *The Dumb Waiter*. Drawing upon Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of “chronotope,” I look at the parallel between how the concept of “room” is defined, developed, and manipulated in the realist/naturalist novel and the manner in which Pinter takes advantage of the vast

potential of the “basement room” on stage. What Bakhtin calls “provincial town,” “parlor/salon,” and “threshold,” all falling under the general heading of “chronotope,” are of special concern to the discussion. The room occupied by Ben and Gus is shown to function so as to allow the two to talk and behave as if they are descended from characters in the realist/naturalist novel; this nonetheless has to come to terms with the chronotopically-improbable final sequence of the play, as a result of which we have a full-fledged Pinter piece.

About the Authors

Varun Begley teaches modern drama and cultural studies at the College of William and Mary. He is the author of *Harold Pinter and the Twilight of Modernism* (University of Toronto Press, 2005), and is currently working on a book about props and the problem of commodity reification.

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Lance Norman is a Visiting Assistant Professor at Michigan State University where he teaches drama and performance. He is the editor of *Dismemberment in Drama / Dismemberment of Drama* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), and has forthcoming essays on Eugene O'Neill and Michael Frayn. His current project considers the utility of a contemporary Theater of Cruelty by exploring the rupture between textual and performative representation in modern drama. He received his PhD from Michigan State University in English with a specialization in Modern Drama and Performance Studies, where he also held a postdoctoral fellowship. His research into drama and performance has been known to move from the writing desk to the stage as a member of SteinSemble -- a group dedicated to avant-garde theater and performance.

Michael Patterson studied in Berlin and Oxford, where he wrote a doctoral thesis on modern German drama. He has taught at universities in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and is now Emeritus Professor of Theater at De Montfort University in Leicester. His publications include: *German Theatre Today* (1976), *The Revolution in German Theatre 1900-1933* (1981), *The First German Theatre* (1990), *German Theatre: A Bibliography* (1996), and *Strategies of Political Theatre* (2003). He also wrote the first brief study of Pinter in German for *Englische Dichter der Moderne* (1971). His most recent publication, *The Oxford Dictionary of Plays*, has recently appeared in revised paperback as *The Oxford Guide to Plays*.

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