

Fracturing the Critical Conversation on Pinter's Language: A Response to Maurice Charney*

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Maurice Charney's "Pinter's Fractured Discourse in *The Homecoming*" sets out to examine what is probably one of the central, most fascinating questions in Pinter criticism, namely, the playwright's use of language in his plays. Arguably, the article's main limitation is that it coins a term, "fractured," for Pinter's use of language in *The Homecoming* that rehearses well-worn arguments about "text" and "subtext" (244-45) and about conversations being "fractured in the sense that [they] are full of disconnected hints and subterranean suggestions that do not appear in the words of the dialogue" (246). These arguments can barely hold their ground in the light of the critical and theoretical turns that have taken place within Pinter criticism since the mid-1970s, much less provide fresh insights or signal a novel contribution to the ongoing critical dialogue.

The publication in 1975 of Austin E. Quigley's seminal *The Pinter Problem* was instrumental in re-framing the discussion of the playwright's relation to language in his plays. As is well known, Quigley began by examining in detail previous criticism of Pinter's use of language, which led him to diagnose a mismatch between the critics' often perceptive, accurate observations of its dynamics and an inaccurate theorization of those observations (see Quigley 32). In other words, Quigley identified a recurring, problematic pattern in Pinter criticism: "A widespread agreement that Pinter's language [was]

*Reference: Maurice Charney, "Pinter's Fractured Discourse in *The Homecoming*," *Connotations* 21.2-3 (2011/2012): 241-55. For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debcharney02123.htm>>.

doing something new" (33) that coexisted with "a misleading attitude towards the ways in which language functions" (45). Specifically, Quigley questioned earlier critics' (unacknowledged) reliance on "the reference theory of meaning" (27), where language is conceptualized as a tool that serves the purpose of referring to things or concepts. He argued that "this function is not [...] the central function of language, and neither is it the one upon which meaning is centrally based" (40)—nor may it significantly illuminate the way in which language functions in Pinter's plays. Instead, Quigley articulated a theoretical paradigm based on Wittgensteinian linguistics, where meaning is a product of how language is used, rather than lying somewhere "beyond" or "beneath" the words used. This led him to posit what he called the "interrelational function" (53) of language as central to Pinter's plays:

The language of a Pinter play functions primarily as a means of dictating and reinforcing relationships. This use of language is not, of course, exclusive to a Pinter play and is a common component [...] in all language; but, in giving this use such extensive scope, Pinter has [...] made his work unavailable to any critical analysis based on implicit appeals to the reference theory of meaning. (52)

Or, as he put it elsewhere: "The point to be grasped about verbal activity in a Pinter play is that language is not so much a means to referring to structure in personal relationships as a means of creating it" (66)—a change of paradigm that enabled Quigley to turn Pinter criticism into a new direction. Moving away from the arguably fuzzy notion of a "subtext" wherein meaning supposedly "hides" beneath the surface of the text (14-15)—a notion that had been espoused by Martin Esslin in *The Peopled Wound: The Plays of Harold Pinter* (1970) and its subsequent (retitled) editions—Quigley pinpointed the nature of the engagement Pinter's use of language requires of spectators and produced highly suggestive readings of *The Room* (1957), *The Caretaker* (1960), *Landscape* (1968) and—yes—*The Homecoming*.

Building on Quigley's insight, Marc Silverstein in his 1993 study *Harold Pinter and the Language of Cultural Power* pointed out that the

widespread reliance among Pinter critics on the reference theory of language—or on what Silverstein, focusing on subjectivity, terms the “expressive view” of language (13)—implies the metaphysical assumption that Pinter’s plays seem at pains to steer clear of, namely, a “belief in an extra-linguistic realm [reality and the subject him/herself] that enjoys the status of transcendental signified” (16). In Pinter, instead, “truth and reality [are] negotiable concepts” (Quigley 70), and subjectivity, rather than being “given in advance” (Quigley 53), “becomes the effect of signifying practices, produced through a perpetual inscription and reinscription within language” (Silverstein 18).¹ At this point, however, Silverstein moved away from Quigley by appealing to the Saussurean distinction between *langue* and *parole*. In his attempt to conceptualize both the subject and reality as an “effect of language” (Silverstein 18), Quigley focused almost exclusively on *parole* (the individual speech-act), thus failing to consider “how the system of language [*langue*] both allows for *and* places certain constraints upon individual utterance” (Silverstein 18; emphasis original). Therefore, Silverstein argued that Quigley tended to “resituate the subject outside of the language to which he remains superior” as an “absolute or free agent” (Silverstein 18), to assume “an unproblematic intentionality” and to neglect “the category of history” (Silverstein 19). In other words, from Quigley’s perspective the power struggles encoded in Pinter’s interrelational dialogues seemed to take place in a vacuum. Silverstein, in contrast, proposed to extend Quigley’s argument about language in Pinter’s plays “to include *langue* as well as *parole*” (21), that is, the Other—by which he refers not only to the symbolic order in a Lacanian sense but also, more generally, to the cultural codes or discourses that inform the subject positions we inhabit—as well as two (or more) individual speakers. As he further explicated in a passage worth quoting at some length:

I propose to re-problematize “the Pinter problem,” to rethink the question of how Pinter utilizes language by broadening the scope of Quigley’s “interrelational function” to examine how the various battles for power enacted in these plays are fought on the terrain of the Other’s discursive field with

weapons consisting of the codes that speak the various forms of cultural power. In Pinter's works, the process of negotiating relationships is inseparable from the process through which the subject attempts to anchor himself firmly within the symbolic order [...]. To argue, as I shall, that questions of cultural power and the subject's relationship to that power are of central importance to these plays is to claim that Pinter's work explores some fundamental political questions of [...] marginalization, sexuality and gender, the ideological status of the family, the relation of violence to the coercive power of language [...] (Silverstein 22-23)

On this basis, he embarked on extended analyses of *The Birthday Party* (1958), *The Collection* (1961), *Old Times* (1971) and—again—*The Homecoming* from the perspective of “contemporary theory” (25), mainly Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Luce Irigaray, and Jacques Lacan.

No matter how one positions oneself in relation to them, Quigley's and Silverstein's are unignorable contributions to the field of Pinter studies, particularly as regards any discussion of the way language operates in his plays. However, Charney's article appears to be entirely oblivious to this twofold paradigm shift. It references some Pinter critics of the early- to mid-1970s whose work was arguably superseded by Quigley and Silverstein, but does not mention such a key contribution as Esslin's *The Peopled Wound*, whose arguments both Quigley and, to a lesser extent, Silverstein, engage with. In contrast, Susan Hollis Merritt's *Pinter in Play: Critical Strategies and the Plays of Harold Pinter* (1990) contains a comprehensive survey of the reception of *The Pinter Problem*, including a sensitive account of the debate between Esslin and Quigley about Pinter's language (see Merritt 137-64). Her nuanced discussion of Esslin's relentlessly negative, aggressive review of *The Pinter Problem*—which she sees as deriving in equal measure from Esslin's view of Quigley as “an opponent trying to wrest power away from himself” (147) and from Quigley's having perhaps failed “to practice what he preaches theoretically: what people say to one another has an effect on their relationships” (149) in his (somewhat blunt) dismissal of earlier critics—highlights the indispensable cooperation that must exist between critics, even when

they disagree, if “investigative progress” is to be made and “a more potent *community* of knowledge” is to emerge (Merritt 147-48; emphasis original). But for this to take place, the essential prerequisite is for critics to engage with the work of their predecessors in the first place, that is, to enter the critical dialogue in meaningful ways.

By remaining circumscribed within an earlier critical paradigm, Charney’s article runs into revealing *cul-de-sacs* and contradictions. Thus, after stating that “the characters do not seem to act from obvious, plot-oriented motives” and that “[i]t doesn’t seem to matter an awful lot what the characters say” (242), he goes on to discuss several episodes in the play—Ruth’s interruption of the pseudo-philosophical discussion about a table between Teddy and Lenny (242-43), the first meeting between Lenny and Ruth (245-50), the ending of the play (250-51), and various moments involving Teddy (251-53)—in precisely the terms he has denied, namely the characters’ motives and the importance of what they say. This brings to mind the comment by Quigley on Esslin’s claim that Pinter’s language “has almost totally lost its [...] informative element” (*Pinter: The Playwright* 238). As Quigley points out, if Esslin can, as he surely can, “perceive the ‘emotional and psychological action’ underlying the words, then the language is very informative” (*Pinter Problem* 25-26)—which it no doubt is in ways that reveal the inherent power structures of both *langue* and *parole*, as Quigley and Silverstein, among others, have thrown abundant light on. The key point here is that Charney’s article does not contribute to advancing the critical conversation because it does not join it at the relevant point. It would have been an entirely different matter if his article had acknowledged Quigley’s and Silverstein’s—as well as other post-*Pinter Problem*—contributions and gone on to dispute them on the basis of reasoned argumentation, or else extend them in a fresh direction.

A couple of examples should suffice to further illustrate the points made so far. After having established that “the play is also Ruth’s homecoming” (243), that she “plays mind games and language games with Lenny, Joey, Max, and Teddy” (245), and that her main conflict is

with Lenny, whom she “dominat[es] (and infantiliz[es])” (242)—surely descriptions of the emotional and psychological motivations of Ruth’s (linguistic) behaviour in the play, albeit hardly novel ones—Charney homes in on the crucial first meeting between Ruth and Lenny (*Plays: Three* 43-51). Here, as is well known, Lenny eventually launches into telling Ruth two stories about violence inflicted by him on women, a young one who “one night down by the docks [...] came up to [him] and made [him] a certain proposal” (*Plays: Three* 46) and an old lady who “asked [him] if [he] would give her a hand with her iron mangle” (*Plays: Three* 48). While Charney describes both stories as “irrelevant” (247), he nevertheless places them in the context of the ongoing conflict between Lenny and Ruth and discusses them in terms of their respective motivations: “Lenny obviously wants to impress Ruth with his macho insouciance” but finds himself “blocked at every turn” by Ruth’s flat answers, while Ruth herself “refuses Lenny’s sexual gambits” repeatedly and successfully (247). Now, in order to gain some sense of what is being glossed over, it is well worth placing these (hardly fresh) insights into the Ruth-Lenny power dynamics alongside Deborah A. Sarbin’s and Silverstein’s respective discussions of the same scene.

Reading *The Homecoming* in the light of French feminist theory, Sarbin sees the play as “revealing the way in which normally unanalyzed assumptions about the roles of women in society are actually constructed and created through language” (34). In her view, Ruth performs a series of disruptive acts that “call into question the representation of women in language dominated by men” (36). A key moment in this respect is Ruth’s response to Lenny’s story about the young woman who made him “a certain proposal” which he would “normally [...] have subscribed to”, except “she was falling apart with the pox” (*Plays: Three* 46). Ruth simply asks: “How did you know she was diseased?,” which prompts Lenny’s, “How did I know? (*Pause.*) I decided she was” (*Plays: Three* 47). In other words, Sarbin points out, Ruth forces Lenny to admit “that any representation in language must be arbitrary” and subversively calls attention to his “attempt to pass

off the arbitrary as fact" (37). Read in this way, the scene is no longer merely a personal confrontation between the "macho" Lenny and the sexually tantalizing Ruth, but rather it opens out onto key critical issues having to do with gender, language, culture and representation.

Along similar lines, Silverstein argues that "Lenny's dependence upon narrative [...] suggests the central role played by representational practices in the production of masculine power" (95), adding that the two stories he tells Ruth not only "detail acts of violence that allow [him] to dominate women who attempt to transgress the boundaries defining the marginal space patriarchy assigns them" (95), but are also themselves "act[s] of violence against Ruth" (95), who "resists [Lenny's] sadism [...] by challenging his ability to exercise narrative power" (95) through her question, "How did you know she was diseased?" (*Plays: Three* 47). Lenny's answer, "I decided she was" (*Plays: Three* 47), amounts to an "equation of narrative power and epistemological mastery" (Silverstein 95-96) that, in highlighting the "arbitrary bond between signifier and signified" (Silverstein 96), ultimately reveals that language cannot "create the kind of extralinguistic power that transforms words into the Word, utterance into law, and representation into reality" (Silverstein 96-97). Lacking in a "material" basis for power, when Ruth "begins to mimic the image of woman he produces in his narrative" (Silverstein 96) and threatens to "take" him (*Plays: Three* 50), "Lenny inevitably [...] fails to declare his mastery through a saving act of nomination"—"What was that supposed to be? Some kind of proposal?" is all he can impotently ask as Ruth leaves the room having quenched her thirst (*Plays: Three* 51).

Sarbin's and Silverstein's approaches illuminate *The Homecoming* in ways that far exceed any imprecise references to the dated concept of subtext, and that have been deemed worth engaging with by numerous subsequent critics. Again, the key issue here is not whether or not—or the extent to which—one concurs with their views, much less any attempt to establish some essential "truth" about *The Homecoming* or Pinter's use of language in the plays at large, but rather the fact

that, unfortunately, Charney's article simply ignores all contributions to the post-*Pinter Problem* critical conversation. A similar point applies to his discussion of the ending of the play, which he concludes by stating that "There is *no doubt* that [...] Ruth dominates the scene" (251; emphasis added). It is, once more, a reading that harks back to earlier, pre-*Pinter Problem* ones such as Esslin's (see 159) or Anita R. Osherow's feminist account of the play (see 423), while it turns a deaf ear to other approaches that have drawn attention to the ambivalence embedded in the play's final moments. Thus, Quigley pointed out that for Ruth "the ending is of uncertain value"—she may, as Pinter himself put it, have achieved "a certain kind of freedom," but it is clearly also "a certain kind of captivity" (225). For Sarbin, Ruth's power at the end of the play is "paradoxical"; while she disrupts patriarchal language by "driv[ing] home the economic issue, refusing to treat prostitution in any other terms" (40), the play's final stage direction, "Lenny stands, watching" (*Plays: Three* 98), indicates that "Ruth is still the object of the male gaze" (41) and that the role of dominant male has passed on to Lenny (where it resided before is itself an open question). In my own discussion of the play's final moments, I suggested that "[Ruth] *both* subversively demonstrates the constructedness of the dominant sexual and gender relations and of the language which inscribes those relations *and* she is bounded by the patriarchal symbolic order, thus remaining an object in the men's homosocial traffic, 'inside' rather than 'outside'" (Aragay 288; emphasis original). In other words, there *is* ample room for doubt, from the point of view of these and other critics, as to the extent of Ruth's domination at the end of *The Homecoming*, so it hardly seems legitimate for any subsequent discussion of the play to simply state the opposite without engaging in conversation—in the form of critical dispute, if needs be—with those alternative readings.

Merritt's perceptive interrogation of the concept of progress at the start of her book-length metacritical reflection on Pinter criticism provides a fitting coda for the present metacritical commentary on Charney's "Pinter's Fractured Discourse in *The Homecoming*." In the

context of her discussion of Quigley's 1975 claim that the field of Pinter criticism was "proliferating but not progressing" (*Pinter Problem* 4), she points out that, to see change as occurring gradually and linearly, "progressing from ignorance to knowledge in unified patterns or stages can blind us to some developments in criticism [...] [and] actually hinder our progress" (Merritt 4). Change, she adds, is "an ongoing 'process'" (Merritt 7), involving "both continuities and discontinuities, similarity and difference, tradition and innovation" (Merritt 5; emphasis original), while progress "is both relative and instrumental to the aims and purposes of critics" (Merritt 10) rather than a matter of establishing "ultimate truth-value[s]" (Merritt 11). Absolutely so, of course. And yet, between a rigidly linear notion of critical "progress" and a largely reiterative proliferation of well-worn critical "truths," there lies the capacious territory of critical cooperation that Merritt advocates (47-48), where critics listen and respond to one another, agree with or (passionately) dispute each other's views—in other words, acknowledge the importance and significance of each other's contributions.

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NOTE

¹That is why Quigley had renamed M. A. K. Halliday's "interpersonal" function of language "interrelational": "Interpersonal tends to suggest that the personalities, the identities of those participating, are given in advance" (53).

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