

Pinter's Fractured Discourse in *The Homecoming**

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Pinter liked to play the role of deist dramatist, who set his characters out on stage and let them pursue their autonomous destinies.¹ As he wrote to Peter Wood, the director of *The Birthday Party*, in 1958: "The play exists now apart from me, you or anybody. [...] Everything to do with the play is in the play" (*Various Voices* 9).² Pinter strongly objected to providing any narrative justification, or verification, for what happens, and refused, on principle, to explain what his plays were about (although he said quite a good deal about them in interviews). Like Pirandello's, his characters seem autonomous. He claimed not to have any superior knowledge about why his characters moved in the ways that they did, and he was dismayed by naturalistic and causative explanations, especially among reviewers but also by established literary critics.

In October 1958 he wrote eloquently to the editor of *The Play's the Thing*:

The desire for verification is understandable but cannot always be satisfied. 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. The assumption that to verify what has happened and what is happening presents few problems I take to be inaccurate. A character on the stage who can present no convincing argument or information as to his past experience, his present behaviour 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 of these things. The more acute the experience the less articulate its expression. (VV 18)

*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debcharney02123.htm>>.

Pinter's preference for non-verifiable experience is crucial to his dramatic method, and it is significant how skeptical he is of articulate expression, as in the well-made play. Pinter thought of his dialogue as naturalistic speech, but not completely so. It also has to express truths that lie behind and beneath language.

Stylistically, Pinter belongs with the elliptical writers, although he is also sometimes redundant, as in the long, interpolated narratives of Lenny in *The Homecoming* that might at first sight seem pointless. In my title, I have called this style "fractured" because the logical breaks in it seem so deliberate. In other words, the characters do not seem to act from obvious, plot-oriented motives. They are illogical and we cannot take their explanations (or lack of explanations) at face value. That is why Pinter's plays seem, to John Russell Brown, all exposition ("Mr Pinter's Shakespeare" 251), without the development and the resolution of the well-made play. The characters do not seem to understand their own motives, nor does the author—at least the author does not tell us what we are aching to know, and the author pretends not to know himself. Pinter's experience as an actor, director, and screen-writer shows him how to make the characters consistent only as a texture of possibilities, not as a collection of understandable motives. The play seems to move on its own momentum.

Pinter engages in what is sometimes called "non-poetic poetry," as in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, when Lear exclaims so movingly at the end: "Pray you, undo this button" (5.3.309). We expect a big, eloquent speech at this very climactic moment. Is Shakespeare throwing away an important occasion for eloquence? Or what constitutes eloquence anyway? I argue that the eloquence arises from the emotional pressures of the dramatic context. It doesn't seem to matter an awful lot what the characters say.³

There is a striking example in *The Homecoming* when Ruth is dominating (and infantilizing) Lenny, as she also does with Joey and Max. Lenny has just been engaging in some pseudo-philosophical, pseudo-Socratic speculations about the nature of a table as a material object: "Well, for instance, take a table. Philosophically speaking,

What is it?" (52). And further: "All right, I say, *take it, take* a table, but once you've taken it, what you going to do with it? Once you've got hold of it, where you going to take it?" (52). Lenny is making fun of his brother Teddy, the professional academic philosopher who has just arrived: he "*looks at him and laughs*" (52).

Ruth picks up the discourse and overwhelms both Lenny and Teddy with her fractured, highly sexual observations:

Don't be too sure though. You've forgotten something. Look at me. I ... move my leg. That's all it is. But I wear ... underwear ... which moves with me ...it... captures your attention. Perhaps you misinterpret. The action is simple. It's a leg ... moving. My lips move. Why don't you restrict ... your observations to that? Perhaps the fact that they move is more significant ... than the words which come through them. You must bear that ... possibility ... in mind. (52-53)

Ruth's pauses (indicated by three dots) are extremely important in Pinter's play and they are accompanied by gestures that are highly sexualized. This is part of the essential fabric of the non-verbal play. There is a silence (longer than a pause), and then Ruth suddenly blurts out: "I was born quite near here" (53). This announces that the play is also about Ruth's homecoming.

Peter Hall, who directed *The Homecoming* (with the help of Pinter) in London in 1965, writes eloquently about these various kinds of pauses:

There is a difference in Pinter between a pause and a silence and three dots. A pause is really a bridge where the audience think that you're this side of the river, then when you speak again, you're the other side. That's a pause. And it's alarming often. It's a gap, which retrospectively gets filled in. It's not a dead stop—that's a silence, where the confrontation has become so extreme, there is nothing to be said until either the temperature has gone down, or the temperature has gone up, and then something quite new happens. Three dots is a very tiny hesitation, but it's there, and it's different from a semi-colon, which Pinter almost never uses, and it's different from a comma. (Itzin and Trussler 144)

Hall even had pause, silence, and three-dot rehearsals, which the actors found very helpful.

“I wear ... underwear” (53) is hardly poetic—it sounds comic out of context—but in the play it is tremendously powerful. We have to remember that it occurs at a certain crucial moment, when Ruth’s domination of Lenny is almost complete. Not only as a writer but also as an actor, Pinter was particularly interested in the non-verbal language beneath the words. Sometimes the words are only a smokescreen for meanings that are implicit.

Pinter speaks eloquently about this subterranean language or subtext in “Writing for the Theatre” (1962):

Language, under these conditions, is a highly ambiguous business. So often, below the word spoken, 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. Between my lack of biographical data about them and the ambiguity of what they say lies a territory which is not only worthy of exploration but which it is compulsory to explore. You and I, the characters which grow on a page, most of the time we’re inexpressive, giving little away, unreliable, elusive, evasive, obstructive, 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. (VV 19)

This continues Pinter’s idea of dramatic characters separate from their author, but Pinter would even deny the intentionality of the words. That beneath the ostensible words of the play “another thing is being said” is a crucial statement of the characters’ autonomy of expression, hidden even from the author—especially from the author.

John Russell Brown writes well about Pinter’s use of subtext, which is Stanislavski’s term in *Building a Character*: “The spoken word, the text of a play is not valuable in and of itself, but is made so by the inner content of the subtext and what is contained in it. [...] Without it the words have no excuse for being presented on the stage” (*Theatre Language* 27). Andrew Kennedy also defines subtext from this same book by Stanislavski: “*the inwardly felt expression* of a human being in a part, which flows uninterruptedly *beneath the words of the text*, giving them life and a basis for existing. The subtext is a web of innumerable, varied patterns inside a play” (Kennedy 20). Pinter claimed to have no independent knowledge of Stanislavski, nor does he have much use

for theoretical speculations. But we cannot deal with ellipsis in a play by Pinter without connecting it with context and subtext; in drama they form an inseparable entity.

Ruth dominates *The Homecoming*. She plays mind games and language games with Lenny, Joey, Max, and Teddy and subdues all of them to her will. Most important is Ruth's conflict with Lenny, which serves as a model for all of her other conflicts with Lenny's brothers and with Max. When she returns from her walk, she greets Lenny and they introduce themselves to each other. Despite all appearances to the contrary, Lenny immediately tries to impress her with his pretended sophistication and refinement: "Would you like something? Refreshment of some kind? An aperitif, anything like that?" (28). Ruth politely refuses, and Lenny continues his discourse in a parody of genteel, upper-class conversation: "I'm glad you said that. We haven't got a drink in the house. Mind you, I'd soon get some in, if we had a party or something like that. Some kind of celebration ... you know" (28). The three-dot break is followed by a full pause. Then Lenny says: "You must be connected with my brother in some way. The one who's been abroad" (28). He is obviously trying to reach out to Ruth and to make a strong first impression with his exaggerated and mysterious high style, full of unanticipated gaps. Ruth answers matter of factly: "I'm his wife" (28).

Lenny then suddenly launches into an irrelevant, pseudo-philosophical discourse about his clock and its annoying tick:

Eh listen, I wonder if you can advise me. I've been having a bit of a rough time with this clock. The tick's been keeping me up. The trouble is I'm not all that convinced it was the clock. I mean there are lots of things which tick in the night, don't you find that? All sorts of objects, which, in the day, you wouldn't call anything else but commonplace. They give you no trouble. But in the night any given one of a number of them is liable to start letting out a bit of a tick. Whereas you look at these objects in the day and they're just commonplace. They're as quiet as mice during the daytime. So ... all things being equal ... this question of me saying it was the clock that woke me up, well, that could very easily prove something of a false hypothesis. (28)

Lenny adopts a confidential, even intimate tone with a woman he has never seen before. His questions are all rhetorical without any thought of an answer. Ruth is being asked for her opinion about a matter that remains essentially mystifying. In Lenny's mock-philosophical scheme, it is not just a question but an hypothesis.

He pours Ruth a glass of water and takes one for himself. He watches her drink and asks a number of pointless but erotically tinged questions: "Isn't it funny? I've got my pyjamas on and you're fully dressed" (29). I think these observations are designed to get the upper hand of Ruth or at least to show her who is in charge. The point is that this is not the conversation of a well-made play. It is fractured in the sense that it is full of disconnected hints and subterranean suggestions that do not appear in the words of the dialogue. Lenny deliberately chooses to play obtuse: "What, you sort of live with him [Teddy] over there [in America], do you?" (29). Ruth gives the obvious answer: "We're married" (29). When Lenny says: "Well, the old man'll be pleased to see you, I can tell you" (29), Ruth answers straightforwardly "Good," but why does Lenny then ask: "What did you say?" and Ruth answers "Good" again (all 29). It's a very small point, but why does Lenny insist that Ruth repeat herself? Surely he has heard her the first time. There is some sort of language game afoot that piques our curiosity.

When Lenny learns that Ruth and Teddy have been visiting Venice, he embarks on a much-repeated but puzzling fantasy-discourse about Venice:

Not dear old Venice? Eh? That's funny. You know, I've always had a feeling that if I'd been a soldier in the last war—say in the Italian campaign—I'd probably have found myself in Venice. I've always had that feeling. The trouble was I was too young to serve, you see. I was only a child, I was too small, otherwise I've got a pretty shrewd idea I'd probably have gone through Venice. Yes, I'd almost certainly have gone through it with my battalion. (30)

What is Ruth to think of these wild suppositions, except that Lenny is trying to impress her with his worldliness?

But then, as a sudden bombshell, he asks: "Do you mind if I hold your hand?" (30). This is not really a *non sequitur* because it follows from the unstated sexual theme. Ruth is not shocked (nor even impressed), but only asks "Why?" (30). Lenny tries to keep it light by saying, "Just a touch," "Just a tickle" (30), but Ruth again asks "Why?" Lenny's answer is a long, tedious, seemingly irrelevant non-explanation:

One night, not too long ago, one night down by the docks, I was standing alone under an arch, watching all the men jibbing the boom, out in the harbor, and playing with the yardarm, when a certain lady came up to me and made me a certain proposal. [...] Well, this proposal wasn't entirely out of order and normally I would have subscribed to it. I mean I would have subscribed to it in the normal course of events. The only trouble was she was falling apart with the pox. So I turned it down. Well, this lady was very insistent and started taking liberties with me down under the arch, liberties which by any criterion I couldn't be expected to tolerate, the facts being what they were, so I clumped her one. It was on my mind at the time to do away with her, you know, to kill her, and the fact is that as killings go, it would have been a simple matter, nothing to it. (30-31)

Lenny obviously wants to impress Ruth with his macho insouciance, but Ruth asks only: "How did you know she was diseased?" (31) to which Lenny replies: "I decided she was" (31).

So the power games between Ruth and Lenny are now at a standstill, with Lenny blocked at every turn. Ruth refuses Lenny's sexual gambits—he is going out of his way to dominate her. Lenny then tells another totally irrelevant story about an old lady who asked him to move her mangle, but this story also falls flat, although it is longer and more detailed than the first. The conflict between Ruth and Lenny moves out of language and into the demonstrative realm of physical objects. Right after Lenny's narration, he has a new approach: "Excuse me, shall I take this ashtray out of your way?" (33). Ruth continues to resist Lenny's invitations and says only: "It's not in my way" (33). But Lenny insists, hoping to gain a distinct advantage:

It seems to be in the way of your glass. The glass was about to fall. Or the ashtray. I'm rather worried about the carpet. It's not me, it's my father. He's

obsessed with order and clarity. He doesn't like mess. So, as I don't believe you're smoking at the moment, I'm sure you won't object if I move the ashtray. (33)

There is nothing in the play to suggest that Max is worried about the carpet. Lenny is speaking redundant nonsense, but it has a purpose that has nothing to do with language—rather with the language that is beneath language.

Lenny seems now to have given up on words as a way of cowing Ruth. The action next shifts to a struggle over physical objects. He takes away the ashtray and asserts: "And now perhaps I'll relieve you of your glass" (33). Ruth protests and in the dialogue that follows we see how thoroughly Lenny is disconcerted:

RUTH. I haven't quite finished.

LENNY. You've consumed quite enough, in my opinion.

RUTH. No, I haven't.

LENNY. Quite sufficient, in my own opinion.

RUTH. Not in mine, Leonard. (33)

This is another bombshell, which disturbs Lenny the same way that Ruth's calling her husband Eddie, instead of Teddy, does at the end of the play. Pinter had a special irritant about proper names, as the number of different names for Goldberg the Jewish gangster indicates in *The Birthday Party*. But why does the name "Leonard" disturb Lenny so powerfully? We have to accept, for whatever its implications, his own explanation: "That's the name my mother gave me." This is only one among many significant links between Ruth and the extremely ambiguous figure of Jessie, Lenny's mother.

After a meaningful pause, Lenny now wants to be in control of Ruth's glass: "Just give me the glass" (34), but Ruth refuses. There is another significant pause in which the two antagonists take stock of each other (as if they were boxers in the ring):

LENNY. I'll take it then.

RUTH. If you take the glass... I'll take you. (34)

Ruth is now aggressively sexual and Lenny seems beaten down:

LENNY. How about me taking the glass without you taking me?

RUTH. Why don't I just take you. (34)

The sexual meaning is quite obvious to Lenny, but it undercuts his macho posturing. Ruth now has the upper hand.

This is not the kind of intellectual discourse one finds in Shaw, but it is both intriguing and penetrating. It is the kind of seemingly nonsensical dialogue that actors write and that one can find abundantly, for example, in David Mamet. Once she has begun so successfully to subdue Lenny, Ruth continues her domination game with the glass. The dialogue here is brilliant and shows Pinter at his best, although it has no detachable poetic meaning. Quite a good deal takes place in the non-verbal stage directions:

She picks up the glass and lifts it towards him.

RUTH. Have a sip. Go on. Have a sip from my glass.

He is still.

Sit on my lap. Take a long cool sip.

She pats her lap. Pause.

She stands, moves to him with the glass.

Put your head back and open your mouth.

LENNY. Take that glass away from me.

RUTH. Lie on the floor. Go on. I'll pour it down your throat.

LENNY. What are you doing, making me some kind of proposal?

She laughs shortly, drains the glass.

RUTH. Oh, I was thirsty. (34-35)

Ruth exits at this point, but Lenny calls after her: "What was that supposed to be? Some kind of proposal?" (35)

We know from Lenny's earlier speech about the woman down by the docks that "proposal" is a specifically sexual word. Ruth completely overpowers Lenny in this scene, not only overpowers him but

also infantilizes him. He is disconcerted and at a total loss for words. Ruth seems like Lenny's mother and calls him like she used to do—and he is completely in her power. She prevails over him sexually, although, like Joey, he doesn't go the whole hog with her or any hog at all. The eloquence is in the action and definitely not in the words.

Ruth's relations with Lenny's brother Joey more or less resemble her encounter with Lenny. With Max the father Ruth has no significant interchanges until the very end of the play, where Max is caught up in the same network of sexual sharing as his sons. *The Homecoming* ends with his long soliloquy, supported by significant stage action. He is preoccupied by his age—he is “*a man of seventy*” (5) in the list of characters. He is anxious that Ruth will not find him attractive, and also that she will be undependable in her new sexual role—to be specified in a formal contract—as a prostitute on Greek Street:

I'm too old, I suppose. She thinks I'm an old man.

Pause.

I'm not such an old man.

Pause.

(To RUTH.) You think I'm too old for you?

Pause.

Listen. You think you're just going to get that big slag all the time? You think you're just going to have him ... you're going to just have him all the time? You're going to have to work! (81)

Max's repetitions and his pauses convey his preoccupations. He keeps repeating things that he feels are slipping out of his control. Presumably Lenny, to whom all of his remarks are addressed, is “that big slag” who Max thinks is usurping his dominant male role.

For the first time in the play, Max is a pitiable figure. In the closing moments of the play he berates Lenny (ignoring Joey entirely):

You understand what I mean? Listen I've got a funny idea she'll do the dirty on us, you want to bet? She'll use us, she'll make use of us, I can tell you! I can smell it!

You want to bet?

Pause.

She won't ... be adaptable!

He falls to his knees, whimpers, begins to moan and sob.

He stops sobbing, crawls past SAM'S body round her chair, to the other side of her.

I'm not an old man.

He looks up at her.

Do you hear me?

He raises his face to her.

Kiss me.

She continues to touch JOEY'S head, lightly.

LENNY stands, watching. (82)

There is no doubt that, from "her chair," Ruth dominates the scene, but Max's intense repetitions clearly define his subservient, uncertain, pleading role.

Teddy the husband seems like an anomalous figure in this play; he doesn't fit in with the rest of his family nor with Ruth. Despite his stated optimism about his homecoming, he remains an outsider who is eager to cut short his visit. He readily consents to leave his wife behind to take up her new career as a prostitute. It is interesting that there is no erotic energy between Ruth and Teddy. Their conversation is abstract and impersonal. Teddy, for example, says to her:

You can help me with my lectures when we get back. I'd love that. I'd be so grateful for it, really. We can bathe till October. You know that. Here, there's nowhere to bathe, except the swimming bath down the road. You know what it's like? It's a urinal. A filthy urinal.

Pause.

You liked Venice, didn't you? It was lovely, wasn't it? You had a good week. I mean ... I took you there. I can speak Italian. (55)

Teddy's repetitions and pauses mark an uncertainty in his relation to his wife—he talks in totally bland clichés. What relevance does it have that he “can speak Italian”?

As a philosopher Teddy is cold and academic. He refuses to engage with his brother Lenny, even though Lenny is only pretending to tackle central issues of belief. When Lenny asks: “Do you detect a certain logical incoherence in the central affirmations of Christian theism?” (51), Teddy can fob him off with a rigid, professional answer: “That question doesn't fall within my province” (51). Later Teddy is even more assertive in separating himself from his family. To Lenny he says contemptuously:

You wouldn't understand my works. You wouldn't have the faintest idea of what they were about. You wouldn't appreciate the points of reference. You're way behind. All of you. There's no point in sending you my works. You'd be lost. It's nothing to do with the question of intelligence. It's a way of being able to look at the world. It's a question of how far you can operate on things and not in things. I mean it's a question of your capacity to ally the two, to relate the two, to balance the two. To see, to be able to *see!* I'm the one who can see. That's why I can write my critical works. (61-62)

Teddy's repetitiousness is again a marker of his uncertainty and vagueness. What is the philosophical distinction between being able to “operate on things and not in things”? I suggest that this is a typically pseudo-philosophical statement that Pinter must have enjoyed writing as a way of undercutting Teddy.

Besides, Teddy deliberately steals Lenny's cheese-roll, which Lenny takes as a very serious infraction of family values:

And so when you at length return to us, we do expect a bit of grace, a bit of *je ne sais quoi*, a bit of generosity of mind, a bit of liberality of spirit, to reassure us. We do expect that. But do we get it? Have we got it? Is that what you've given us? (65)

Teddy answers "Yes" (65), and that is the end of the matter. He is soon proposing to distribute cards advertising Ruth's sexual services on his American campus. When he takes his leave, why does Ruth call him "Eddie," just as she calls Lenny "Leonard"? Some sort of insult seems intended.

Many critics have raised the question of *The Homecoming* as a Jewish play. Pinter seems to have based the idea for the play on the story of his childhood friend, Moishe Wernick, who brought his Christian wife home from Canada to meet his father in England in 1964—with disastrous results. Also, in an early version of the play Max's friend, MacGregor, is called Berkowitz (and Berki for short; cf. Billington 164-66). So Pinter in revising it tried to make it a less Jewish play than in its original conception.

A number of actors in the original Royal Shakespeare Company production in 1965 still thought that the play had a very Jewish feeling, especially Paul Rogers who played Max. He comments that the play has a very North London, Hackney orientation (cf. Lahr 160). Max's speech is Jewish-English, and thus

foreign, in the way that English is foreign to a Welsh tongue. [...] In the sound of it. It's stylized and there's a suspicion of a lisp, which is very much to the point for a man of his age. [...] The Jewishness came out of the rhythm of the speeches and the way that the speeches were put together. The repetitions, the emphases upon certain aspects. The ironies, that curious, very unEnglish working of the mind. (Lahr 160)

Two Israeli authors, William Baker and Stephen Ely Tabachnick, go so far as to claim that *The Homecoming* "represents Pinter's attempt to shed the nightmare of Hackney, to exorcise it from his system by definitively commenting on its most important and powerful institution, the family" (123-24).

It's interesting that Pinter asserted that the play was "about love and lack of love. The people are harsh and cruel, to be sure. Still, they aren't acting arbitrarily but for very deep-seated reasons." They act out of "the texture of their lives." Pinter was obviously stung by opinions of reviewers about Ruth: "The woman is not a nymphomaniac as

some critics claimed. In fact she's not very sexy ... Certain facts like marriage and the family have clearly ceased to have any meaning" (Page 30). Finally, Pinter, in an interview with Mel Gussow, says definitively that "Ruth in *The Homecoming*—no one can tell her what to do. She is the nearest to a free woman that I've ever written—a free and independent mind" (Gussow 71). Pinter makes these assertions in order to counter the comments of critics and reviewers, who, to his way of thinking, badly misunderstood the play. It is significant that these opinions are from an author who never claimed to know what his plays were about or where his characters were heading, and who steadfastly refused to answer any questions about the meaning of his plays.

What does Pinter mean when he says that the play is "about love and lack of love"? The discourse about love in *The Homecoming* is certainly fractured. Yet the characters—even Lenny and Ruth (and Max and Joey, too, but not Teddy)—are pushing for something meaningful in their lives. Love and the lack of love go together because the play offers very inadequate models of what we would call love. But despite the violence, the grossly sexual speech, and the deliberate deception (and self-deception), most of the characters in the play are looking for a significant fulfillment in their lives.

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NOTES

¹This is a revised version of a paper presented at the 11th International *Connotations* Symposium "Poetic Economy: Ellipsis and Redundancy in Literature" on August 3, 2011.

²Quotations from Pinter's *Various Voices* are abbreviated in the text as *VV*.

³See my discussion in "Shakespeare's Eloquence."

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