The Destruction of Identity in Pinter's Early Plays

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WHEN Irving Wardle lightheartedly called Harold Pinter's first plays "Comedies of Menace"[1] he unwittingly created a red herring for later critics. As appropriate and evocative as the label was, it called attention to the plays' effect and away from their content, implying that their focus was on the reactions to a vaguely frightening Something Out There, and luring critics and audiences away from any analysis of just what that Something was.

I suggest that rather than merely being exercises in comic horror, Pinter's first four plays (*The Room, The Birthday Party, The Dumb Waiter* and *A Slight Ache*) present a systematic exploration and presentation of a thesis that underlies all his later plays. In each of the four a character who appears to be comfortably settled in a secure little world of his own is attacked and destroyed by a malignant force from outside. The common thread is the opening sense or illusion of security, which is defined in each play as a function of the protagonist's sense of identity, his knowing who he is. Pinter demonstrates in these plays that such security is almost *hubristic*, calling the menacing force down upon itself; the universe that Pinter describes will not permit a confident "I am who I am." All of his plays since the first four have started with the assumption that no one *can* have a secure sense of who he is and how he fits into the scheme of things, and have shown how that central uncertainty controls our lives. The comedies of menace demonstrate that every attempt at achieving a secure sense of self is destroyed, and they are thus a necessary preface to Pinter's later work.

Rose Hudd, in *The Room*, begins the play with an identity so strong that she has been able to put her imprint on the small part of the universe that she inhabits. Driven by an aversion to darkness — "I don't know why you have to go out. . . . It'll be dark in a minute as well, soon. It gets dark now"[2] — and to cold — "It's very cold out, I can tell you. It's murder" (p. 95) — she keeps her one-room flat bright and warm, a projection of herself in a world defined by an almost conscious and deliberate opposition to her — "They got it cold out," says her husband. "They got it icy out" (pp. 119-20). Rose's island is unique — a visitor later comments that it is the only bit of light to be seen indoors or out — and she feels secure in it — "If they ever ask you, Bert, I'm quite happy where I am" — even though she can't help being fascinated by the possible dangers waiting in the cold and dark, particularly by the prospect of having to live in the basement of her building:

> Did you ever see the walls? They were running. . . . Those walls would have finished you off. I don't know who lives down there now. Whoever it is, they're taking a big chance. (pp. 96-7)

Rose herself apparently never sets foot outside her room, and when she can't keep Bert from going out, she attempts to extend her influence by filling him with hot food and weak (light) tea, and bundling him up in several layers of clothes. In short, Rose's security is defined in terms of her room, and her room is an extension of her personality; she has spun a cocoon out of herself around herself, to reflect and protect her sense of self — "No this room's all right for me. I mean, you know where you are" (p. 96).

It is important to see that the menace in this play attacks exactly those qualities of light, warmth and certainty. The first intruder is the landlord, who carries with him the seeds of uncertainty. He consistently refuses to answer Rose's questions about the rest of the house, professing for example to be unsure of how many floors there

are, implying that the number may have changed since he last counted. He actually brings this uncertainty into the room, seeming to recognize a chair he hasn't seen before and unable to remember one he put there. He also raises the first questions about Rose's ownership of the room, informing her that it once was his.

This subtle threat to Rose's security becomes stronger when the apartment-hunting Mr. and Mrs. Sands carry the cold and dark right up to her threshold. They differ over whether they were going up or down the dark stairs, deny that the man who has just left is the landlord and, most frighteningly, present the first direct attack from the enemy: a disembodied voice in the cold, dark basement, they report, said that room number seven — Rose's room — was vacant.

After this overt denial of Rose's very existence, the pace quickens. Another brief visit from the landlord prepares for Rose's climactic encounter with a blind Negro from the basement, the very personification of the blackness, coldness and uncertainty that are her opposites. He directly threatens her identity, calling her by a different name and insisting that she "come home" to some other place (the basement? — Rose's earlier description betrayed a familiarity with it, and she had speculated that there was room for two down there). At the end of the play Bert returns and attacks the intruder, but the Negro's job has been done: Rose has implicitly accepted the new identity he imposed on her, is no longer able to take comfort from her room — "The day is a hump. I never go out" (p. 119) —and has suddenly gone blind, definitively losing the sight that was so precious to her. She has been vanquished by her opposite, and deprived of everything by which she had defined herself.

If anything, *The Birthday Party* makes this same point more explicitly and universally. Rose could be taken as an extraordinary case, with her ability to create a reality around herself, but Stanley Webber has merely taken ad-

vantage of a ready-made environment that seems to provide support for his sense of self. As a boarder in a rundown seaside guest house, Stanley can escape from the shocks and threats of the outside world and maintain a definition of himself (as a talented and demanding musician) that awes his dimwitted landlady and gives him the confidence to use his sense of identity to bully and confuse her:

> STANLEY. (*quietly*). Who do you think you're talking to?
> MEG (*uncertainly*). What? . . .
> STANLEY. I want to ask you something. (MEG *figets nervously. She does not go to him.*) Come on. (*Pause.*) All right. I can ask it from here just as well. (*Deliberately.*) Tell me, Mrs. Boles, when you address yourself to me, do you ever ask yourself who exactly you are talking to? Eh?[3] (p. 22)

The play is full of clues that the central issue is individuality, from the opening line, "Is that you?", through the ironic celebration of Stanley's birthday, to his final appearance in the British equivalent of the grey flannel suit. Stanley's first impulse on encountering the invading Goldberg and McCann is to insist that he is *not* who he appears to be, as if that would make him immune to their attack:

> You know what? To look at me, I bet you wouldn't think I'd led such a quiet life. The lines on my face, eh? . . . but what I mean is, the way some people look at me you'd think I was a different person. (p. 43)

Like the Negro in *The Room*, Goldberg and McCann appear as their victim's opposite, neat and businesslike where he is lazy and self-indulgent, unctuously polite and outgoing where he is surly and withdrawn. Minor functionaries in some shadowy organization, they are apt to lapse into the jargon of the faceless bureaucrat; and in fact each of them, along with Goldberg's son, seems to travel under at least two first names, and even they have trouble keeping track of them. In effect they are the identityless, here to neutralize Stanley and cancel him out.

At the centre of the play is their interrogation of Stanley, six pages of rapid-fire questions that range so

widely that the only possible "crime" to which they can all apply is Stanley's entire life. There is a central theme to the questioning, though:

GOLDBERG. Webber, what were you doing yesterday? . . . And the day before. What did you do the day before that? . . . Who does he think he is?
MCCANN. Who do you think you are? . . .
GOLDBERG. Webber, you're a fake. . . . Why did you change your name?
STANLEY. I forgot the other one.
GOLDBERG. What's your name now?
STANLEY. Joe Soap. . . .
GOLDBERG. We're right and you're wrong, Webber, all along the line. . . .
MCCANN. Who are you, Webber?
GOLDBERG. What makes you think you exist? (pp. 50-5)

His name forgotten, reduced to Joe Soap, and faced with the ultimate question, Stanley has no answer, and thus no more assurance that he does exist. After one brief line a moment later, Stanley doesn't speak again in the entire play; though the birthday party and his departure are yet to come, he — that is, his sense of who he is, or even *that* he is — has been destroyed.

The Dumb Waiter explores a question implicit in the picture of Goldberg and McCann in *The Birthday Party*: if individuality leads to destruction, does the hope for survival lie in voluntary facelessness? Ben and Gus, gunmen in a shadowy Mafia-like organization, have sought refuge in a bureaucratic system that completely controls their lives, giving them orders and assignments, providing rooms, beds, dishes and even matches, steering their victims in their direction, and even cleaning up afterwards. All the organization demands in return is absolute, unquestioning subservience. "I like to have a bit of a view," says Gus early in the play:

I like to get a look at the scenery. You never get the chance in this job. . . .
BEN. You kill me. Anyone would think you're working every day. How often do we do a job? Once a week? What are you complaining about?
GUS. Yes, but we've got to be on tap, though, haven't we? You can't move out of the house in case a call comes.[4]

As this exchange indicates, however, even Ben and Gus retain some small remnants of individuality that clash with the demands of their jobs. Gus is a football fan, for example, disappointed at the prospect of missing a big game:

> BEN. Anyway, there's no time. We've got to get straight back.
> 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. (p. 93)

Gus is also upset at being deprived of his customary cup of tea, at the absence of a radio, and at the dirty bedsheets provided in this hideout. Ben is less vocal in his assertions of individual rights, but he too has his "interests" and tastes: model boats, football, and newspaper accounts of violence. His growing tension and edginess, even before the play's mysterious events begin, is evidence of his sense of conflict with the organization and the job.

The two men are in a basement room, beneath what was evidently once a restaurant, and the central attack on them begins with the lowering of a dumb waiter bearing mysterious orders for food. Instinctively obedient and unquestioning, they send up what few provisions they have, only to be answered with ever more complex orders: Macaroni Pastitsio, Ormitha Macarounada, Char Siu and Beansprouts. Gus realizes fearfully that this is some kind of test:

> What's he doing it for? We've been through our tests, haven't we? We got right through our tests, years ago, didn't we? We took them together, don't you remember, didn't we? We've proved ourselves before now, haven't we? We've always done our job. What's he doing all this for? (p. 118)

What is being tested, apparently, is their willingness to do *anything*, to obey orders even when the orders are impossible, and to give up all they have even when the sacrifice is unnecessary and meaningless. Inevitably they fail the test. The biscuits, milk and chocolate bar they send

up are judged unsatisfactory, driving Gus to an impotent assertion of his personal rights:

> I'm thirsty too. I'm starving. And he wants a cup of tea. That beats the band, that does. . . . I could do with a bit of sustenance myself. What about you? You look as if you could do with something too. . . . we sent 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?
> (p. 113)

The climax of the play is as shocking as the conclusions of the others, but just as inevitable. Ben is finally given the instructions they have been awaiting: tonight's victim is to be Gus. The curtain falls as Ben decides whether to pull the trigger. Gus has clearly failed his test by having the effrontery to assume that he had a right to anything, and he is to be destroyed. But Ben is not rewarded for having remained steadfast; he is merely given a harder test. The organization — the universe of Pinter's plays — demands complete abrogation of self, and no reserve of will or independence will be permitted.

A Slight Ache is the last of Pinter's room-and-invader plays, and once can understand why; it closes the few remaining loopholes in the definition of reality that Pinter has been exploring, and establishes the universality of his thesis. The protagonists in the other three plays shared the same low social class and low intelligence, and we might be tempted to see their destruction as a function of these factors. The menace in each case took the form of a strong and threatening character, and we might have interpreted the victims' fates as a simple matter of their being overpowered. But Edward in *A Slight Ache* is intelligent, verbal and socially established, and his nemesis is so passive that it might almost not be there at all. In effect, Pinter demonstrates in this play that no external menacing force is needed; a sense of individual identity is so impossible to maintain that any illusion of one will collapse under its own weight.

Like the other protagonists, Edward starts from a position of apparent security: in this case, a comfortable home, a doting and bullied wife, a self-created identity as a scholar and author. The world defined by his house fills his needs and runs according to his wishes; even a bothersome wasp is swiftly and hygienically destroyed. As in the other plays the invasion comes from outside — a matchseller who has been standing just outside the gate for two months. And as before, the victim and invader are defined as opposites: the one intellectual, fastidious, sexless and loquacious; the other physical, filthy, sexual and maddeningly silent.

But "invader" is the wrong word. The matchseller doesn't demand entry like the blind Negro in *The Room*, march in confidently like Goldberg and McCann, or even send messages like the man upstairs in *The Dumb Waiter*. Edward feels threatened by the simple fact of his existence outside the gate, and invites him in to confront and get rid of him. But it is Edward who is neutralized by his opposite. The confrontation turns into a compulsively self-defining and self-justifying monologue that is actually a confession that Edward's entire self-image is a sham. He speaks of being a writer of philosophical essays, but we know from an earlier scene that this is only a pipe dream. He claims to be an expert on Africa, but almost immediately admits to never having been there. There is even the distinct suggestion that he married into his money and position; a memory of the daughter of the village squire is identical to a description of his wife. With each revelation he weakens and grows more desperate, while the matchseller seems in his eyes to grow younger.

As the scene continues, the two men, so very different at the start, begin to become identified. "I was in much the same position myself then as you are now,"[5] says Edward, realizing a few moments later that they are in fact about the same age. Later, imagining the matchseller to be laughing at him, Edward tries to share the moment:

> Ha-ha-ha! Yes! You're laughing with me, I'm laughing with you, we're laughing together! . . . My oldest acquaintance. My nearest and dearest. My kith and kin. (p. 36)

The completeness of the identification is marked when the suggestion that the matchseller blow his nose causes Edward himself to sneeze and blow his nose. Clearly it is Edward's individuality that is disappearing, and finally, after a whispered "Who are you?" he sinks into silence. His wife then enters, gives him the matchseller's tray, and leads the matchseller into the house in his place; Edward has ceased to exist.

It is important to note that *A Silent Ache* was originally a radio play, and the matchseller never speaks. Even in the stage version he neither speaks nor reacts, strongly suggesting that he is not really there at all, and is merely a convenient symbol for the occasion of Edward's inevitable self-destruction. *A Slight Ache* thus extends to an absolute statement Pinter's doubts about the possibility of maintaining a sense of identity. That sense of who one is need not even be attacked, because it doesn't really exist. The most one can have is a pretense to a sense of self — the audacity to *think* he exists — and such a pretense is so fragile that an external menace is hardly necessary for its destruction. Man may or may not exist, says Pinter, but he can never have the comfort of knowing whether he does.

These four plays, written within a period of two years and clearly related in theme and form, make up the first major unit of Pinter's work, and the foundation on which the rest is built. His subsequent plays accept as basic assumptions the existence of the menace and the impossibility of finding security in a sense of who one is. *The Caretaker* and *The Dwarfs*, among others, show the desperate and doomed attempts of character without an *a priori* sense of identity to define their place in the scheme of things; another group of plays, most notably *The Homecoming*, demonstrates the great tactical advantage that

those who can function without solid definitions have over those who cannot; and his most recent plays, particularly *Old Times* and *No Man's Land*, have looked even further into the abyss and discovered that nothing — not memory, not even historical fact — is solid and consistent. More than any other writer, Pinter has taken as his special domain the basic insecurity of the mid-twentieth century, the uncertainty about who one is and where one belongs; and from his first play to his most recent he has had the courage to find the most frightening of answers.

NOTES

[1]Irving Wardle, "Comedy of Menace," *Encore*, 5 (Sept.-Oct. 1958), 28-33.

[2]Harold Pinter, *The Birthday Party and The Room* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), p. 97. For later editions, all references must be shifted four pages earlier, as a result of cuts made in the text of *The Birthday Party*.

[3]As noted, page references and in some cases the text itself will vary slightly in later editions.

[4]Harold Pinter, *The Caretaker and The Dumb Waiter* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), p. 90. Again, page references will differ in later editions, as a result of extensive cuts in *The Caretaker*.

[5]Harold Pinter, *Three Plays* (New York: Grove Press, 1962), p. 24.