

## *Life in the Foreground: Dramatic Method in “The Homecoming”*

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*Teddy.* 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. . . . [my ellipsis] Might do you good . . . [my ellipsis] [to] see how certain people can view . . . things . . . how certain people can maintain . . . intellectual equilibrium. . . . [my ellipsis] You're just objects. You just . . . move about. I can observe it. I can see what you do. It's the same as I do. But you're lost in it. You won't get me being . . . I won't be lost in it.<sup>1</sup>

**T**EDDY IS SPEAKING to his father, Max, and his two brothers, Lenny and Joey, after his wife, Ruth, has danced suggestively with Lenny and “necked” with Joey on the couch. What Teddy means is that his father and brothers do not have a perspective on their lives, as he has on those same lives; they cannot see themselves, look at themselves from afar. They cannot do so partly because each has had an occupation on the outside that, in its own way, has been as violent as his life inside the home. Max owned a butcher shop, Lenny is a brutal pimp, and Joey is a demolitions worker by day and an aspiring boxer by night. The three will soon ask Ruth to remain with them as their mother-whore instead of returning to America with Teddy. They will compete for her affections, ask her to sell her body to others, and continue the pattern of insulting and threatening one another. For all his perspective on events — perhaps because of it — Teddy has been unable or unwilling to deter Ruth, his brothers, or his father. They engage in life, however distasteful one might find their kind of engagement; he remains at a distance, disengaged and ineffectual.

At least three images in *The Homecoming*, one spatial and two verbal, reinforce this idea of life lived without perspective, lived

in the foreground as it were, without a background, or lived in a foreground and a background that are virtually synonymous. When they arrive at the family home in North London, Teddy says to Ruth,

What do you think of the room? Big, isn't it? It's a big house. . . . [my ellipsis] Actually there was a wall, across there . . . with a door. We knocked it down . . . years ago . . . to make an open living area. (21)

The suggestion is that, in knocking the wall down, the family created a larger foreground — ironically called an open living area — in which to play out their violent lives. They have removed from their home a background area, a back room, from which they could have taken one view of their lives. At a certain point Max says, “I hate this room. (*Pause.*) It's the kitchen I like. It's nice in there. It's cosy” (37). He hates the “open living area” but cannot find refuge in the only other room open to him on the first floor. His brother, Sam, is “always washing up in there, scraping plates, driving me out of the kitchen” (37). Not accidentally, Sam is the only other character besides Teddy who is not “lost in it,” who can draw back from the family life and form some judgement on it. But Sam's ability to form judgements, his perspective, does him as little good in the end as Teddy's does him, since he does not act on those judgements. Indeed, Sam has continued to live with his brother and nephews, whereas Teddy had at least left the family for America six years before. It is significant that when Sam does take an action of sorts by blurting out that “MacGregor had Jessie [Max's wife] in the back of my cab as I drove them along” (78), he “croaks and collapses.” He makes this statement just after Ruth and Lenny have come to an agreement about her new living and working arrangements; Sam's words seem to be his comment both on this transaction and the family's past life, and his attempt to injure Max for past wrongs.

Shortly after Lenny meets Ruth, he tells her this story:

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 harbour, and playing about with the yardarm, when a certain lady came up to me and made me a certain proposal. . . . [my ellipsis] Well, this proposal wasn't entirely out of

order and normally I would have subscribed to it. . . . [my ellipsis] 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 this arch, . . . [my ellipsis] 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. . . . [my ellipsis] just . . . [my ellipsis] this lady and myself, you see, alone, standing underneath this arch, watching all the steamers steaming up, no one about, all quiet on the Western Front, and there she was up against this wall — well, just sliding down the wall, following the blow I'd given her. Well, to sum up, everything was in my favour, for a killing. . . . [my ellipsis] But . . . in the end I thought . . . Aaah, why go to all the bother . . . you know, getting rid of the corpse and all that, getting yourself into a state of tension. So I just gave her another belt in the nose and a couple of turns of the boot and sort of left it at that.

(30-31)

Lenny starts his speech as if he were describing an idyllic situation from a conventional painting, where a person in the foreground under an arch, a kind of frame, looks out on a scene in the background. The only problem is, the background that Lenny describes, the scene he sets, of sailors busy on their ships, has nothing to do with what occurs in the foreground. Indeed, the sailors' co-operation in their work contrasts sharply with Lenny and the woman's conflict in theirs. Lenny fills in a background because he feels that one is necessary; he creates it, making it the background to a scene he ironically entitles, after Erich Maria Remarque's novel, "all quiet on the Western Front" — all is quiet in the *distance*, not on the front, in the foreground, where Lenny and the prostitute have quarreled. At one point, he even takes on the language of his creation, his harbour-picture, in order to make it more real to himself. Unable to view his and his family's life from a distance, he pretends that he views others' activities from afar. He betrays that his view is fabricated when he says that he had it at night — surely there would be little he could see of the harbour in darkness. Outside as well as in his home, where he tells this story to Ruth, Lenny is trapped in a foreground of violence over a prostitute. Significantly, when Lenny "clumps" the prostitute under the arch, she is thrown up against a wall — a wall that he has not mentioned up to now, and that has the effect in our

mind's eye of closing off the background from view. Lenny makes no further mention of the scene in the harbour after detailing his beating of the woman: he leaves the picture.

Lenny tells Ruth another story a few moments later:

An old lady approached me and asked me if I would give her a hand with her iron mangle. Her brother-in-law . . . had left it . . . in the front room. Well, naturally, she wanted it in the back room. It was a present he'd given her, you see, a mangle, to iron out the washing. . . . Well, the only trouble was when I got there I couldn't move this mangle. It must have weighed about half a ton. . . . So after a few minutes I said to her, now look here, why don't you stuff this iron mangle up your arse? . . . I had a good mind to give her a workover there and then, but . . . I just gave her a short-arm jab to the belly and jumped on a bus outside. (32-33; all ellipses mine)

The mangle is a domestic appliance, but its very name connotes violence. It occasions the violence that Lenny commits against the old lady. Like the objects that Teddy accuses his father and brothers of being, it has no recourse to a back room. Even as the mangle was a gift to the old lady from her brother-in-law, so too is Ruth a brother's "gift" to his family — or rather, Ruth is her own "gift" to her husband's family, since she makes the decision to stay with them. Like the mangle, she will become the "domestic appliance" of her new "owners" as well as their "mangler": they will fight over her, and, untrue to her name, she will ruthlessly dominate them. Like Max, Lenny, and Joey, she is an object who is "lost in it," who wants to be seen but does not want to "see" herself and does not want others to provide her with a perspective on herself. Witness her remarks to the new men in her life:

Look at me. I . . . move my leg. That's all it is. . . . [my ellipsis] 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)

Teddy says that in America Ruth was "a wonderful wife and mother [of three sons] . . . a very popular woman . . . [with] lots of friends . . . at the University [where Teddy taught philosophy] . . . [she had] a very stimulating environment" (50; all ellipses mine). With Max, Lenny, and Joey in London, she will be a

prostitute outside as well as inside the home; that is, a receptor of a kind of violence as well as its stimulus.

At the end of *The Homecoming* Ruth sits impassively in the "open living area" as Joey kneels at her chair, his head in her lap, Max cries for a kiss, and Lenny stands watching her. Teddy has left, and Sam lies unconscious on the floor.

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What Pinter has done scenically in this play, from the characters' point of view, and has reinforced through their language, is akin to what Cézanne did in his paintings from the 1880s onward. For more than 400 years before Cézanne, perspective had been one of the fundamental beliefs on which the creation of art had been based. John Russell writes that "by taking as its first premise a single point of vision, perspective had stabilized visual experience. It had bestowed order on chaos; it allowed elaborate and systematized cross-referencing, and quite soon it had become a touchstone of coherence and evenmindedness."<sup>2</sup> Renaissance and post-Renaissance practice had given art stability, had made it seem that we see a given object once and for all from a given point, and that the object has an absolute identity. By dismantling traditional perspective, Cézanne intended to show that identity is relative, and that men and objects are subject to time, movement, and change. His deepest concern during the last period of his art, in Russell's words, was with "the restructuring of the act of cognition," with the basic question, "What can a man know?" (34). Cézanne's handling of this question was, of course, to affect virtually every artist of consequence in the twentieth century. He opened the door to "chaos," so to speak, and those who followed him ushered "chaos" in.

If Cézanne for the most part abolished depth perception for any audience of his late paintings, Pinter, in a sense, does away with such perception for the characters in *The Homecoming* as well as for its audience. The majority of the characters do not have any perspective on themselves or on one another, as I have described, and the spectators do not have a perspective on any of the characters. The spectators have been deprived by Pinter of "background" information on the persons in the play, with the

result that the former do not completely know, or don't know with any certainty, what has led to the present situation in the family home. The characters clearly intimate depth, but it is never revealed, just as depth of character is not revealed in any of Pinter's other plays. Like Cézanne, Pinter is concerned with the question, "What can a man know?" He believes that the greatest lie of bourgeois realism was (and is) to suggest that a character's motives can be fully accounted for, that life can be explained. As he declared in a 1966 interview,

I do so hate the because of drama. Who are we to say that this happens because that happened, that one thing is the consequence of another? How do we know? What reason have we to suppose that life is so neat and tidy? The most we know for sure is that the things which have happened have happened in a certain order: any connections we think we see, or choose to make, are pure guesswork. Life is much more mysterious than plays make it out to be. And it is this mystery which fascinates me.<sup>3</sup>

Pinter is obviously not the first to disbelieve in bourgeois realism, but no one before him attempted so brazenly to overturn it at the same time he adopted its surface characteristics — realistic sets, costumes, language. Chekhov, for example, while he was destroying the connections between psychology and causality, and between act and consequence, placed his characters in sentimental stories — played out, to be sure, against realistic environments. Ibsen for his part employed, not just the well-made play's surface realism, but the whole of its structure, for the purpose of triumphing over it. And Strindberg, to judge by his preface to *Miss Julie*, believed that dramatic characters should be true to life as he saw it and act out of a *multiplicity* of motives, not just a single one, as they did on the middle-class stage. For him it was truly a question of the "because" of drama, of an action, not simply the "because."

It might be a good idea to look at the outrageous action of *The Homecoming* as being as much about the way in which we see plays as it is about a family "homecoming." Its action seems designed to outrage us, not only because that action itself is outrageous, but because no reasons, no justifications are given for it. And reasons, justifications, are precisely what seem called for. We may be deprived of depth of character in, say, David

Storey's *Changing Room* (1971), but we don't demand it because the events in this play are hardly shocking, indeed, are at the farthest remove from what we think of as plot. Nothing needs to be accounted for in the "new naturalism" (of which *The Changing Room* is a prime example)—that's the point. But in Pinter's realism—and he insists that his plays are *truly* realistic—explanations seem called for and are not forthcoming. The characters' lack of any perspective on the action of *The Homecoming* mirrors our own: this is the only sense in which we are identified with them.

Actually, they seem intended to be, in addition to realistic representations of human beings, devices, exaggerated *foils* for the spectators. The characters are "lost in it," in Teddy's words, and seemingly happy to be so, as much as the audience is "lost in it," lacking perspective, and very frustrated to be so. At the end of *The Homecoming* it is the characters without perspective who have triumphed over those with it. Sam is unconscious—he may have suffered a heart attack or a stroke—and Teddy has left for America without his wife. Conventional perspective, the kind from a single point of view, has been banished from the play. The characters without perspective have also triumphed over the spectators, who have sought it in vain, seeking information and answers throughout the play. In a reversal of traditional dramatic irony, the characters know more than the audience does. Max, Lenny, Joey, and Ruth may not have a perspective on their knowledge, may not be able to reflect on it from any angle, but the audience doesn't even have that knowledge and therefore can't get a perspective on events in the play. In a sense—the pictorial or visual sense—the audience, sitting in the theatre, does have a perspective on the action framed by the proscenium arch, but this perspective tells them nothing. They may observe from a distance, like Teddy, but they don't have his knowledge. They do, however, leave the theatre in the same way Teddy leaves his family's house: without having prevented Ruth from remaining with Max, Lenny, and Joey. The audience may feel betrayed by its experience at a performance of *The Homecoming*, but Pinter would argue, I think, that at least they have not been deceived with the artistic illusion of perspective, of depth of character and elucidation of experience. This, perhaps,

is the real idea to be taken from a production of the play, along with its images—often framed by pauses or silences—of cold, brutal family life.

If Cézanne opened the door to “chaos” in art by doing away with traditional perspective, Pinter, writing over eighty years later and after the avant-garde developments in the drama of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, seems to have closed the door on dramatic “chaos” by housing it in an ostensibly realistic form, by domesticating it, if you will. In fact what he has done, in *The Homecoming* as in many of his other plays, and what the avant-garde dramatists before him did not succeed in doing, is open the door to chaos *in life* for a wide audience, reveal the disorder beneath the perspective each of us attempts to impose on existence. Pinter has seduced us with the mask of realism, then shocked us with the face of reality.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Harold Pinter, *The Homecoming* (New York: Grove, 1967) 61-62; hereafter cited by page number in the text.
- <sup>2</sup> John Russell, *The Meanings of Modern Art* (New York: Harper, 1981) 31; the next two page references in this paragraph are to this book.
- <sup>3</sup> John Russell Taylor, “Accident,” *Sight and Sound* 35.4 (1966): 184.