Harold Pinter and Dramatization of Interpretative Issues: A Reading of Pinter's Late Drama

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Thesis Abstract (English)

Austin Quigley's *The Pinter Problem* (1975) remains one of the most powerful interventions in Pinter criticism to this day. In this work, Quigley assesses that Pinter criticism has failed to meaningful progress due to its commitment to spurious interpretative methods, namely: the divisions, critics establish, between the surface of Pinter's work and deeper layers of meaning, and the concurrent logical error of abstracting to these inaccessible, or hidden, realms of meaning to interpret his drama. This study first identifies that insights within the contemporary discipline of surface reading, including critiques of its validity as a literary methodology, clarify both the persistence and dominance of interpretative problems in Pinter criticism. After examining both the flaws, yet inextricable appeal, of the methodologies Quigley describes, this project begins formulating an approach to reading Pinter's drama by emphasizing Pinter scholarship's unique engagement in reflexive discourse on the mechanisms and validity of literary studies. However, rather than ignoring this development, or taking it as a testament to the absurdity of Pinter's theatre, this study instead proposes that the nature of Pinter's theatre is fundamental to its criticism's recurring preoccupations in this reflexive discourse. As such, taking as an operative objective the achievement of readings that avoid the errors Quigley outlines, this thesis argues that, in his later work, Pinter dramatizes issues of interpretation. Analyzing *Betrayal* (1978), I contend that the negative critical opinions that *Betrayal* is a work of melodrama, and that it offers a radically skeptical vision, are a by-product of the fact that, in the play, Pinter challenges the value and abilities of interpretative acts. In examining *A Kind of Alaska* (1982), I argue that the play dramatizes the efforts and according consequences of unfounded interpretative acts. Lastly, I argue that in *Party Time* (1991) Pinter exposes abstraction as a strategy for cancelling the possibility of stable interpretative practices.

Thèse Abstraite (Version Française):

The Pinter Problem de Austin Quigley (1975) demeure jusqu'à ce jour l'une des interventions les plus fortes dans la critique de l'œuvre de Pinter. Dans ses écrits, Quigley estime que la critique de Pinter n'est pas arrivée à progresser en raison de son attachement à des méthodes interprétatives faussées, notamment: la séparation que les critiques constatent, entre la surface de l'œuvre de Pinter et les couches plus profondes de compréhension, et l'erreur logique concomitante qui est de pénétrer dans ces domaines de compréhension inaccessibles ou cachés pour interpréter son théâtre. Cette étude détermine tout d'abord qu'une vue générale de la discipline contemporaine de lecture en surface, y compris les critiques de son bien-fondé en tant que méthodologie littéraire, jette la lumière à la fois sur la persistance et sur la prédominance des problèmes interprétatifs au sein des critiques de Pinter. Après avoir examiné à la fois les faiblesses mais aussi le dédale inextricable de l'attrait des méthodologies décrites par Quigley, ce projet commence par formuler une approche de la lecture du théâtre de Pinter en soulignant l'engagement unique de l'érudition de Pinter à un discours réflexif sur les mécanismes et la validité des études littéraires. Cependant, plutôt que d'ignorer ce développement, ou de le considérer comme un testament de l'absurdité du théâtre de Pinter, cette étude présente un argument qui stipule que la nature du théâtre de Pinter est essentielle aux préoccupations récurrentes de ses critiques au sein de ce discours réflexif. En tant que tel, en prenant comme objectif principal les mérites des interprétations qui évitent les erreurs que Quigley souligne, cette thèse soutient que, dans son travail ultérieur, Pinter dramatise les questions relatives à l'interprétation. Dans mon analyse de *Betrayal* (1978) je soutiens que les opinions critiques négatives qui disent que *Betrayal* est un mélodrame et qu'il offre une vision radicalement sceptique, que ces opinions, donc, sont un dérivé du fait que, dans la pièce de théâtre, Pinter conteste la valeur et les capacités d'actes interprétatifs. Dans mon analyse de *A Kind of Alaska* (1982), je soutiens que la pièce dramatise les efforts et les conséquences correspondantes d'actes interprétatifs sans fondement. Enfin, je soutiens que dans *Party Time* (1991) Pinter démasque l'abstraction comme étant une stratégie servant à supprimer la possibilité de pratiques interprétatives stables.

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Introduction

"What all this means, only Mr. Pinter knows, for his characters speak in non-sequiturs, half-gibberish, and lunatic ravings, they are unable to explains their actions, thoughts, or feelings" (*The Manchester Guardian,* 19 May 1958).

In Harold Pinter's play *A Kind of Alaska* (1982)*,* Deborah, having just awoken from a cruel bout of sleeping sickness (*encephalitis lethargica),* tragically summarizes over fifty years of her life, stating, "Nothing has happened to me. I've been nowhere" (Pinter, 166).[1] More than forty years on from Austin Quigley's condemnation that the field of Pinter criticism was "proliferating but not progressing", it is worth considering whether this stagnation has persisted (Quigley, 8). In his ground-breaking work *The Pinter Problem* (1975), Quigley claims that Pinter criticism has failed to substantively progress due to the popularity of spurious interpretative methods.[2] His critique of Pinter scholarship relies, centrally, on his argument that to explain the non-apparent, or hidden, meaning of Pinter's drama, critics create various divisions between a play's language (textual data) and that language's true meaning. He explains, "A dichotomy between the surface of the plays and some deeper level of meaning is widely accepted in Pinter criticism" (13). For Quigley, these divisions have been erected, partly, to help account for the bizarre or curious elements of Pinter's overall drama (13). More importantly, however, he argues that, in their endeavour to access or uncover "some deeper level of meaning", Pinter critics resort to abstractions from textual data (via metaphor, for instance) to "solve the plays" (13, 19). This exercise, he demonstrates, is deeply flawed: "It is a logical error to set up a contrast between textual data and an abstraction from that data. The notion of subtext loses all utility if what it deals with cannot be spoken as a product of the linguistic data" (14). Tellingly, Quigley's

[1] All page references to text from Pinter's plays, for the entirety of this thesis, will indicate *Harold Pinter: Plays Four* (Faber and Faber, 2nd Edition, 2005).

[2] In my fourth chapter, on *A Kind of Alaska,* I will briefly explore how Deborah uses questionable interpretative strategies to try and make sense of her past-life.

articulation of the logical flaws that underpin these contrasts remains one of the most powerful interventions in Pinter studies to this day.

Due to the continued presence of the problems Quigley describes in Pinter scholarship, the overriding objective of my thesis is to establish an approach to his work that avoids the problems he articulates. Accordingly, my project (in general terms) is divided into two sections: the first focuses on the formulation of my approach (Chapter's One and Two), while the second concerns the application of this approach in the form of three close readings of Pinter's later drama (Chapter's Three, Four, and Five). Drawing from insights and critical debates within the field of surface reading, my examination of Pinter's drama will seek to show how his later work dramatizes interpretative issues.[3]

One could say this approach is tantamount to the following assessment: Pinter dramatizes the very issues that confront the critics who examine his work. Although this may be true in broad terms, since I am claiming Pinter stages problems that his readers and spectators indeed face, the differences between my project and this incomplete synopsis helps to illustrate the nuances of my approach. First, I am not suggesting any affiliation between Pinter's art and criticism, i.e. I am not arguing that Pinter is responding to, or is being influenced by, scholarship on his work. However, second, I will say the affinity between them is a natural one. By operating under the premise that Pinter stages interpretative issues, the problems of interpretation associated with studying Pinter's drama may be understood as not only emerging from the perspective of his audiences, or critics who are unable to establish the meaning of a given play, but rather may be viewed as imbedded in the fiction of Pinter's drama. Accordingly, an objective

[3] In large part, I will examine issues surrounding the division of, and concordant attempts to construe, meaning that, on the one hand, may be found on the "surface" or is clearly accessible, and meaning that is "deep" or is, for the most part, inaccessible.

of my discussion is to demonstrate that Pinter dramatizes highly nuanced, narratively consequential, interpretative issues. Indeed, I argue he does so to the extent that it is worthwhile to compare how critical attempts to solve literary interpretative problems, surface reading in particular, relate to those strategies and problems dramatized in Pinter's work. In this respect, Pinter's aforementioned play, *A Kind of Alaska,* is a powerful example. Due to her illness, Deborah's biographical data (what may be construed as this character's 'depth') is literally inaccessible because of her former ailment, sleeping sickness. In many ways, the play revolves around her attempts to divine meaning from her past, one that is truly out of reach. And yet, reminiscent of the critical exercise Quigley laments, Deborah, claiming a privileged access to unverifiable information, purports to uncover truths from both her own, and her sister's, life.[4] In turning to this play, I argue that the problems with this endeavour are dramatized.

I formulate my approach to reading Pinter by first attending to Austin Quigley's analysis of the most substantial problems within Pinter scholarship, namely: critical efforts to create divisions between the surface of Pinter's work and deeper layers of meaning, and the concurrent logical error of abstracting to these inaccessible, or hidden, realms of meaning to interpret his drama. My endeavour to formulate an approach that circumvents these errors begins by examining the literary methodology of surface reading that is, predominantly, a response to the very same strategies of interpretation Quigley contests. However, rather than simply suggesting a surface reading of Pinter's drama, I argue that in his later work, the playwright dramatizes issues of interpretation that are analogous to those problems faced by his early critics.

[4] Moreover, these issues prove to have a clear metatheatrical purchase since the audience's restricted access to Deborah's biographical information is akin to her own ignorance of her past life. Hornby's opening question, "Do you know me?", foregrounds this problem since it signals, simultaneously, both Deborah and the audience's unfamiliarity with Hornby's character.

In more precise terms, in my first chapter I examine both surface reading and the interpretative issues, particularly those introduced by Austin Quigley, that confront critics of Pinter's work. Here, I demonstrate how insights within the field of surface reading, including critiques of its validity as a literary methodology, clarifies both the persistence and dominance of interpretative problems in Pinter criticism. My second chapter first critiques methods for reading Pinter's drama uncommitted to symptomatic/symbolic reading (again, drawing from insights in surface reading) and, second, renders an explicit justification for my own approach to reading Pinter's drama.[5]After this series of introductory chapters, the remainder of my project offers three readings of Pinter's late drama. In my third chapter, I examine *Betrayal* (1978). Here, I survey negative critical opinions of the play, and specifically examine the arguments that *Betrayal* is a work of melodrama, and that it offers a skeptical vision. By contrast, I argue these assessments are a by-product of the fact that, in *Betrayal,* Pinter issues a challenge to the value and abilities of interpretative acts. In my fourth chapter, I analyze *A Kind of Alaska* (1982)*,* and argue that the play dramatizes the efforts and according consequences of unfounded interpretative acts. In my fifth and final chapter, I turn my attention to Pinter's political drama *Party Time* (1991). After exploring longstanding critical debates on the nature of Pinter's political theatre, and on the difference between his early and late drama, I argue that in *Party Time* Pinter exposes abstraction as a strategy for cancelling the possibility of stable interpretative practices.

[5] My discussion of surface reading serves two more important purposes. First, by rendering and making use of critiques of surface reading's validity, I prove surface reading's unsuitability for reading Pinter and for interpreting literature, in general. Second, I will additionally pull from my examination of surface reading to evidence the nuance of Pinter's dramatization (of interpretative problems) through comparisons and contrasts to this literary methodology later in my project.

Beyond their suitably, i.e. what I believe each of these plays contributes to my study, I have three other reasons for examining Pinter's late drama. First, by contrast to his early work, such as: *The Room* (1957), *The Birthday Party* (1957), *The Caretaker* (1959), and *The Lover* (1962), Pinter's late drama has been understudied. In his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter* (2009), Peter Raby takes note of this imbalance in critical attention (Raby, 13). Second, I contend that Pinter's late drama may be seen to feature more explicit political subject matter, what many of his early critics detected as only undercurrents in his earlier work. This contributes to my contention that Pinter's drama is not merely self-referential. Rather, I contend Pinter stages interpretative issues that are relevant, not just in the realm of literary criticism, but also in social contexts. Third, a good deal of Pinter's late drama has been poorly received. In Robert Gordon's recent work *Harold Pinter: The Theatre of Power* (2012), he notes, Pinter's "death in December 2008 prompted obituaries that were predictable in their celebration of his originality and significance … but which tended to treat his later plays, by contrast with his early masterpieces, as disappointingly didactic political propaganda" (Gordon, 1). After surveying Pinter's obituaries myself, I find Gordon's analysis to be accurate. However, it is also worth noting that the, seemingly collective, judgment that Pinter's late drama disappoints took hold well before his death. After Harold Pinter's famously political 2005 Nobel Lecture, a series of articles that covered Pinter's political commitment appeared in the British media. Of particular note, Pinter's friend and biographer Michael Billington (who frequently writes about Pinter for *The Guardian*) penned a defense of Pinter's political views entitled "A gulf in appreciation". In this article, Billington recognizes the decline in appreciation for Pinter's late work:

> We still revive Pinter's earlier work like *The Caretaker* and *The Homecoming*. We also periodically stage mid-period plays, such as *Old Times* and *No Man's Land*, dealing with the subjectivity of memory and the uncertainty of existence. But Pinter's later, overtly political work, such as *One For The Road*, *Mountain Language*, *Party Time* and *Ashes to Ashes*, has fallen into a strange limbo. And Pinter's espousal of political causes … is seen by many as an unfortunate aberration. (*The Guardian,* London, 14 October 2005)

Billington speculates that the reason for the "gulf of appreciation" between Pinter's renowned status abroad as a "as a great writer and champion of the oppressed", yet ritual description as a "angry old man" at home, stems from the British public's opinion that "writers should keep out of politics" (14 October 2005).[6] A trenchant if somewhat extreme example of such a view may be found in an article published later that same week (October 2005), entitled "When it comes to politics, can we have a Pinteresque silence?".[7] Here, columnist Sandy Starr argues, "Pinter has used his political ire to compensate for the exhaustion of his earlier *modus operandi.* While the later work has its merits, and Pinter's dialogue still packs a punch, his clear agenda - to depict and decry political injustice - works against the ambiguity that his classic work relied upon" ("Spiked Magazine", 18 October 2005). Through my readings of readings of Pinter's drama, I strive to challenge this oversimplified view, and those like it.

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[6] Peter Raby makes a similar point in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter* (2009). He states, "Pinter also seems to exist, in England at any rate, as a separate phenomenon, a special construct labelled 'Pinter'. This may be just a particular example of English anti-intellectualism, in which journalists practise the time-honoured sport of putting the boot in to anyone who is too successful, but especially anyone who is successful in the 'high' arts of the theatre, or literature. This practice is far less prevalent in the United States, or the rest of Europe. It may also reflect another English trait, a distrust of anyone who is not a politician or a political commentator yet who takes politics seriously, and is prepared to shoot from the hip. Pinter has never shrunk from taking up causes, and from acting, and speaking, publicly for what he believes to be right" (Raby, 3).

[7] I say: "extreme example" since the publication in which the article appears, "Spiked Magazine", is noted to hold predominantly right-wing political views (in contrast to Pinter's known left-wing sympathies).

Of considerable importance to the overall validity of this project is the examination of Austin's Quigley *The Pinter Problem,* a text now four decades old, as one of the foundations of my thesis. To prove that Pinter scholarship is still "proliferating but not progressing", as Quigley assessed in 1975, would be quite difficult (Quigley, 4). Firstly, it is impossible to make this sort of generalization today. Quigley's statement was made when Pinter's career was only two decades old (it would span well over half a century), and when, accordingly, the field of Pinter criticism was only nearly a decade old. Thus, whereas Quigley could make such a claim about a relatively homogenous field, the soundness of this contention in a contemporary context would surely be substantially challenged by the mere existence of a diverse and complex field of critical inquiry. However, it remains possible to demonstrate that various works of Pinter criticism continues to err in the way Quigley defines and critiques. This too remains an incredibly difficult claim to prove. With full knowledge of such obstacles, throughout this study I reference and examine several recent works on Pinter, revealing the persistence of the errors Quigley describes.[8]

Finally, I wish to clarify that my readings of Pinter's drama will conceive of his plays primarily as texts. Without staking this project upon the debate between the relevant advantages and disadvantages to studying Pinter's drama either through the lens of performance studies (or similar approaches, such as that employed by Robert Gordon known as the "phenomenological method") or by conceiving his plays as texts, I favour the latter approach for a number of salient reasons (Gordon, 9). In 1975, Austin Quigley's *The Pinter Problem* was written before the onset, or indeed even much of the development, of performance based methodologies in Theatre Studies. Accordingly, Quigley's critique is levelled against scholarship that conceive of Pinter's

[8] Furthermore, I will critique the methodology Quigley himself puts forward.

drama as texts. Since a great deal of my project is predicated on what I assess to be the continued relevance of Quigley's work, what I believe to be its shortcomings, and whether the longstanding problems of interpreting Pinter's drama (as texts) can be solved, I choose to discuss Pinter's plays primarily as texts.

Chapter One: **Pinter Criticism and Surface Reading**

The origins of this project are rooted in my identification of several notable similarities between the underlying premises of surface reading, a recently developed literary methodology, and discourses within the field of Pinter criticism stemming from Austin Quigley's work *The Pinter Problem.* Broadly conceived, surface reading abandons or postpones long-dominant practices that seek to articulate a text's political unconscious, ideology, or *non-dit* in favour of interpretative strategies that attempt to grasp and construct meaning out of textual surfaces, givens, or denotations (Schmitt, *How to Read Literally*). Likewise, Quigley's critique of Pinter scholarship begins with a comparable suspicion of interpretative strategies that aim to uncover the latent or hidden meaning believed to rest underneath the surface level of his drama. The more nuanced and, indeed, significant similarities between these two projects will be further elaborated upon shortly. However, the more specific theoretical parallels between surface reading and Quigley's work are not what first alerted me to the resemblances, and potential value, a comparison between these two fields could offer. Rather, it was the recurrence, in both camps, of discussion regarding the value of literary scholarship that initially drew my attention to their more precise and profound similarities.

For a literary methodology that classifies itself as a response to what it recognizes to be standard interpretative practices, surface reading's discourse on the value of literary criticism is perhaps no surprise. In their seminal article on the field, "Surface Reading: An Introduction" (Fall 2009), Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus acknowledge:

> We find ourselves the heirs of Michel Foucault, skeptical about the very possibility of radical freedom and dubious that literature or its criticism can explain our oppression or provide the keys to our liberation. Where it had become common for literary scholars to

> equate their work with political activism, the disasters and triumphs of the last decade have shown that literary criticism alone is not sufficient to effect change. This in turn raises the question of why literary criticism matters if it is not political activism by another name … (Best and Marcus, 2).

It is no great anomaly to find Pinter critics writing in a similar manner. Indeed, questions regarding the political importance of literature and its criticism are especially germane to these scholars given Pinter's own, highly publicized, political commitments. Throughout his life, Pinter was a fervent critic of American foreign policy and an influential civil rights campaigner (Esslin, 24). Indeed, Pinter's 2005 Nobel Lecture, entitled "Art, Truth & Politics", is more of an outright excoriation of the Bush/Blair anti-terror policies and the Iraq War, than an exploration of his career as a playwright (that afforded him the Prize). And yet, Pinter's engagement with politics through the vehicle of art (in both his drama and poetry) decidedly lacks the explicit historical/external references that renders his public discourse so effective. As early as 1970, Martin Esslin noted that Pinter's drama was "at variance with the then prevailing strongly [sic] political trend in theatre exemplified by other young dramatists … His work gave the impression of being wholly unconcerned with political ideology or preoccupations. He himself, at the time, contributed to this impression" (24). Despite the interesting opposition between Pinter's art and activism, Esslin's statement raises a crucial, and popularly recognized, feature of Pinter's drama: its inexplicitness.[9] Beyond upsetting the neat categorization of Pinter's plays as political allegories, this assessment additionally generates problems for critics who employ standard critical practices to interpret his drama.

[9] See Quigley's *The Pinter Problem* (page 11) for commentary on the critical use of the term "inexplicit" to describe Pinter's drama.

Indeed, the weight of these problems account for why Pinter critics, like the proponents of surface reading, reflect so often on the value of their profession.[10] Moreover, these features additionally help to articulate that the stakes of this discussion extend well beyond the confines of a critical discourse on one playwright. It must be stressed that Pinter scholarship is unique in its tendency to engage in discourse that questions the very methodologies of literary criticism.

At this juncture, I trust that my forthcoming comparison between Quigley's criticism and surface reading appears intuitive. Surface reading, at its core, is a literary methodology that centers upon its opposition to traditional interpretative practices. Thus, the field's advocates consistently seek to justify its employment. Those justifications lead to wide-ranging discussions on the fundamental principles and rationales underpinning literary studies. Accordingly, in this chapter, I will explore significant similarities between Quigley's ground-breaking criticism and surface reading. Secondly, I will show how developments in surface reading help to better explain some of the longstanding issues in Pinter studies that Quigley articulates.

1.1 Martin Esslin's *The Peopled Wound* (1970) and Surface Reading

In several respects, Quigley's *The Pinter Problem* is largely a response to Martin Esslin's *The Peopled Wound: The Plays of Harold Pinter.* Published in 1970, Esslin's work has remained

[10] Moreover, the matter further corresponds with a noteworthy trend in the titles of work of Pinter criticism. Traditionally, in Pinter scholarship, the titles of the various books and articles dedicated to Pinter's drama are as concise as the language Pinter's characters often employ. Amongst many of these titles, however, there is a telling commonality. Commencing, in popular respects, with Martin Esslin's *The Peopled Wound: The Plays of Harold Pinter* (1970), Pinter scholarship has continually centred upon various "problems" seen to derive from Pinter's drama. Perhaps the most significant work that follows the trend, however, is Quigley's *The Pinter Problem (*1975). This influential title inspired a host of articles and works that borrowed both Quigley's use of the term "problem" and his concern for foregoing (pre-1975) interpretative strategies for reading Pinter. Amongst the many articles that follow this pattern is Marc Silverstein's "The Pinter Problem Re-Problematized" (1993). Ironically, this pattern may itself be construed as problematic. As Quigley observes, Pinter criticism has a history of repetition with only minor revision, and a predilection for clichés ("failure of communication", "power plays") (Quigley, 4). The recurrence of the term "problem" in so many titles and articles strikes me as risking the possibility that casual readers will understand that there are "problems" in Pinter's drama rather that its criticism.

in print through seven editions (the most recent being published in 2002) that include minor revisions and updated commentary to cover Pinter's most recent work.[11] On the opening page of Quigley's study, he observes that Esslin's work is undermined by, ironically, the very praise it received in one of its early reviews in *Time* magazine: "*The Peopled Wound* is valuable not because it makes some intuitive new leap of insight but because it gathers in one convenient place most of what has been said and thought about Pinter" (Quigley, 3). Accordingly, Quigley confirms that original insight is missing from Esslin's book and declares that it has similarly evaded all other Pinter scholars (3). To establish an "intuitive new leap" of his own, Quigley first criticizes what he identifies as the dominant critical trends in Pinter scholarship and, in this way, makes considerable use of Esslin's efforts to assemble almost two decades of critical opinion.

However, in his opening chapter, "Background and Basic Premises", Esslin additionally provides an extremely useful collection of Pinter's own commentary on his plays. What is apparent from this introduction, and the various quotes therein, is that Pinter maintains a suspicion of hermeneutical approaches to literature that is highly comparable to surface reading's opposition to these modes. Pinter states, "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 his characters, who explain themselves to the audience" (Esslin, 30). Here, Esslin characterizes Pinter as revolting against the "cocksureness of the playwrights (their claims to be in a position to know all about their characters and what makes them tick) which Pinter, with his radical and uncompromising attitude of total sincerity, not only rejects but regards as a form of intolerable arrogance on the part of the writers concerned" (Esslin, 31). Pinter's admonishing of the authorial tendency to presume either their own or the reader/audience's ability to "know all

[11] Theses editions also appear under unique titles such as: *Pinter - The Playwright* (1970) and *Pinter - Study of his Plays* (1971).

about … characters and what makes them tick" is simply one example of his disapproval for claims to information, in a given work of literature, that is not obviously apprehensible. As Esslin stresses, Pinter articulates a creative process that reflects this opinion. Pinter explains, "My characters tell me so much and no more, with reference to their experience, their aspirations, their motives, their history" (31). It is safe to say that a good deal of what Pinter's characters "tell" him ends up onstage. Tellingly, however this information is manifested (be it through a character's language or lack thereof), the audience member or critic's knowledge of a character is, markedly, commensurate with Pinter's own.[12]

Whereas Pinter contests presumptive claims to knowledge from a creative standpoint, surface reading issues a similar challenge from a critical perspective. In "Surface Reading: An Introduction", Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus proclaim the dominance of symptomatic reading in literary criticism. They define this form of reading as "a mode of interpretation that assumes that a text's truest meaning lies in what it does not say, describes textual surfaces as superfluous, and seeks to unmask hidden meanings" (Best and Marcus, 1). Just as symptomatic reading assumes the most interesting and meaningful aspects of a text are those that are not clearly articulated, visible, or that it represses, Pinter recognizes that if faced with a hypothetical scenario of an unknown person entering a room, "We'd love to know who it is, we'd love to know exactly what he has on his mind and why he comes in" (Esslin, 30). Surface reading, as a field, is concerned precisely with this desire to know, the symptomatic interpretative strategies carried out toward this end, and all this exercise entails. Indeed, Best and Marcus testify to the unique power symptomatic reading proffers, "We were trained in symptomatic reading, became attached to the power it gave to the act of interpreting, and find it hard to let go of the belief that

[12] This discussion will have important implications for my upcoming discussion on realism in Chapter Two.

texts and their readers have an unconscious" (Best and Marcus, 1).[13] To summarize, Pinter challenges the capacity to attain knowledge about a character (or more broadly, a situation) that is not obviously apprehensible. In similar respects, surface reading, centrally, opposes symptomatic reading: a literary methodology committed to uncovering meaning that is concealed or repressed. Moreover, surface reading contests symptomatic reading's underlying premise that valuable information can only be found in what is not explicitly stated. Thus, beyond Pinter's more general statement (for instance) that language "is a highly ambiguous business", the commonalities between Esslin's compilation of Pinter's commentary on presumptive knowledge and surface reading attest to the unique obstacles that confronts the symptomatic reader of Pinter's drama (*Various Voices,* 32).

1.2 Austin Quigley's *The Pinter Problem* (1975) and Surface Reading

Despite these challenges, as Austin Quigley's exhibits in *The Pinter Problem,* symptomatic reading is an immensely popular, and often the customary, approach for interpreting Pinter's work. In his critique of Pinter scholarship, Quigley targets critics who argue that, by their method, the underlying meaning behind the language in Pinter's drama can be known.[14] He breaks the "problems" with Pinter studies into four interrelated camps.

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[13] The "power" that derives from the exercise of interpretive acts will be a focus of mine in exploring characters in Pinter's drama who may be said to read other characters or situations symptomatically.

[14] Many critics that discuss Quigley's work often gloss his full argument that he articulates in his opening two chapters regarding Pinter studies. Instead, they favour recapitulating and focusing primarily on his assessment of how critics have analyzed language in Pinter's drama. For instance, Marc Silverstein's direct response to Quigley's critique in his "The Pinter Problem Re-Problematized" only dedicates a paragraph to summarize his arguments regarding language (found on page 22, in his larger work *Harold Pinter and the Language of Cultural Power)*. This is understandable pattern since this aspect of his argument forms the core of Quigley's critique. Parting company with this trend, however, I aim to review each of Quigley's contentions (as concisely as possible) in his first chapter. This is because, as I will show, there are significant commonalities between each stage of his critique and surface reading.

(1) The first issue Quigley outlines is not complex: the pre-eminence of symbolic interpretations in Pinter studies. He notes that accusations of triviality have been levelled against Pinter's drama "based on the 'commonplace' quality of characters" who engage in ordinary speech (Quigley, 7). In response, Quigley contends that critics undertook symbolic interpretations as, in part, a measure to dispel these generalizations since "Clearly there is some quality in these characters which raises them above the commonplace" (8). However, he reveals that Pinter vitiates such readings himself, by stressing that "he never writes with any abstract ideas in mind, that the symbols discovered in his work are news to him" (8). Notably, Quigley claims that Pinter overstates his case by rejecting all symbolic interpretation (8). Specifically, he argues that his complete denunciation of symbolic interpretation motivates critics "who would turn his insistence on the particularity of his plays against him" by asserting that his plays "have no generalizable significance at all" (9, 10). Poignantly, this position equally draws Pinter's ire, he states in a radio interview, "If I write something in which two people are facing each other over a table . . . I'm talking about two people living socially, and if what takes place between them is a meaningful and accurate examination of them, then it's going to be relevant to you and to society. This relationship will be an image of other relationships, of social living, of living together" (10). Thus, Quigley calls, not for the wholesale abandonment of symbolic interpretation, but of those that are "inaccurate", "simplistic" and which "instead of explaining the function of the commonplace in the plays … simply ignore it" (9, 10).

(2) Quigley prefaces the "second major issue in Pinter criticism: the seeming lack of explicitness in his work" by stating this issue engenders the first (symbolic interpretation) (11). He contends that two major trends emerge out of this feature of Pinter's drama, "one directed towards the obscure elements and one directed away from them" (12). The former trend operates

on the notion that Pinter employs language that describes the "failure of communication" (or some variant thereof) (12). Quigley explains that the critical bankruptcy of this trend is well documented, particularly by Ionesco who points out that if Pinter "truly believed in incommunicability, the profession of writer would be a curious choice" (13).[15] The latter trend, directed away from the obscure elements in the play, is typified by the creation of textual divisions.[16] In brief, the method relies on the creation of one conceptual category that registers the inexplicit/obscure nature of the dramatic language, and another that acknowledges language's ability to possess meaning, not immediately apprehensible, but open to divination upon inquiry. Quigley notes that, in each of these cases, critics appeal to the latter category, or subtext, as a means of explaining the ambiguous language in Pinter's drama (13). Indeed, such appeals possess a convenience, or logical economy, since "critics, in general, have found it a great deal easier to perceive 'hidden meanings'", by finding that meaning in a sub-textual category, "than to explain how the 'hidden' is, or becomes, visible" (15). Most significantly, however, Quigley outlines the logical errors underpinning this strategy. He contends that the danger of the appeal to meaning that lies "behind" or "underneath" language is that it deflects an "intended contrast between two levels of the language into a contrast *between the language and something else"* [Quigley's emphasis] (14). Crucially, he posits, "Control of the 'something else' is then lost by contrasting it with everything that is available as evidence" (14). Quigley's fourth point best

[15] Moreover, Silverstein stresses that key premises underwrite the critical suggestions, argued by J.R. Hollis, Adrian Brine and Martin Esslin, that Pinter's language testifies to its own inability to (fully) carry information effectively (Silverstein, 13). Namely, he argues, with particular respect to Hollis, that such arguments yearn for a language "that could directly express the human essence now precariously situated in 'the space between words' but also to his Platonic belief in an ideal, i.e., expressive, language, of which the 'failed' language we employ in the phenomenal world provides at best a dim copy, at worst a perversion" (14).

[16] Common to each of these divisions is the creation and corresponding separation of the linguistic and extra-linguistic category (Silverstein, 16). The following examples of such divisions illustrate the prevalence of this approach: Uninformative vs. Informative (Martin Esslin), Words vs. Subtext (J.R. Brown), Said vs. Unsaid (James R. Hollis), The Meaning of Words vs. The Meaning of Language (F. J. Bernhard).

exemplifies this logical issue. Here, Quigley rests to assert that these divisions establish a dichotomy between "the surface of the plays and some deeper level of meaning" (13).

(3) Quigley determines that the third major issue in Pinter criticism is the attempt to comprehend the "abstractions of structure and technique" in his plays since "they do not manifest the same principles of structure as a well-made play" (16). Here, Quigley proceeds to bemoan the use of traditional dramatic concepts, and analogies to other works and classifications of theatre, to describe the "technical brilliance" of Pinter's work (19). He judges that whatever the appeal is toward, "the final position leads inexorably to a loss of contact between observable detail and reported response" (23).

(4) Lastly, Quigley states conclusively that "the last and most important issue in Pinter criticism" is that "something that has not yet been fully understood is going on in the language of the plays" (23). However, he remarks that Esslin arrives at the same conclusion (in *The Peopled Wound)* and accordingly notes that he proposes a "complete rethinking of our approach to Pinter's language" (24). Central to his approach is Esslin's distinction, citing Chekhov, between "what is being said and what lies behind it" (25).[17] Quigley explains that the spurious nature of such a division has already been established (see point 2), however, he contends that "Esslin's efforts to extend it [the distinction] are even more revealing" (25). The larger problem with Esslin's thought, that Quigley reports to uncover, stems from his comment that Pinter's language reveals "the complete contradiction between the words that are spoken and the emotional and psychological action that underlies them" (25). Quigley details that Esslin's position entails the

[17] Believing Esslin's analysis of Pinter's language to be spurious, Quigley does not produce an impartial representation of his thought. In short, Esslin notices an affinity between Pinter's nuanced used of the oblique relationship between what people literally state and the "situational context" of their speech and Anton Chekhov's use of the "subtext" of manifested thought and feeling which "underscores (and may in fact contradict) what is directly spoken by characters" (Gordon, 7).

complete bankruptcy of language's rhetorical and informative capacities (25). Moreover, he explains that it is "obvious" that "if Esslin can perceive the 'emotional and psychological action' underlying the words, then the language is very informative" (25-26). Quigley does not further expand on this point, but the thrust of his critique is clear:

a) Esslin claims to discern a "contradiction" between the words spoken and the "emotional and psychological action" underlying them (25).

b) The capacity to discern such a contradiction relies upon, or entails, his knowledge of said "emotional and psychological action" (25).

c) This capacity, and according knowledge, is denied by his initial distinction of Pinter's language between "what is being said and what lies behind it" (26). In short, for Esslin's statement (regarding the contraction) to be true, Pinter's language must be expressive.

For Quigley, the "crucial point", one that is "crucial for Pinter criticism in general", is that Esslin is driven to this conclusion by his commitment to his original distinction (25).[18] And thus, Quigley suggests that Esslin impels his own position to *reductio ad absurdum.* However, more significantly, Quigley's last and overarching point is that Esslin's original distinction, and all distinctions of this kind, is grounded in what he terms, "the reference theory of meaning" (27). He states, "The theory encourages a distinction in literary language between the observable but trivial and the hidden but profound; it reinforces the assumption that language carries information in only one way; it sets a standard for explicitness that is single and arbitrary; and it encourages dualistic distinctions in an area in which pluralistic distinctions are essential" (27). Indeed, Quigley further remarks that the limitations of the theory need not be elaborated, since

[18] Quigley continues, "Just as Brown was led to a dichotomy between the words and the subtext, and Bernhard to an attempted separation of the meaning of the words from the meaning of the language, and Hollis to a belief that the most important things were not being said, so Esslin arrives at a distinction between informative and noninformative language" (25).

the problems that plague it “are precisely those that have characterized Pinter criticism” (27).

Now that a more thoroughgoing summary of Quigley’s critique has been presented, I will compare his arguments with surface reading. I argue this comparison will allow for a more insightful understanding of the relation between Pinter’s drama and criticism.

Quigley’s most cogent articulation of the problems he finds with Pinter studies may be found in his following statement: “It is a logical error to set up a contrast between textual data and an abstraction from that data … The notion of subtext loses all utility if what it deals with cannot be spoken of as a product of the linguistic data" (14). Although I believe Quigley’s assertion is correct, his use of word “utility” (and its invariable evocation of the term’s diverse meanings) is of interest. Here, I contend (that it is clear) that Quigley’s means “utility” in a local sense: i.e. with reference to the fact that subtext loses its capacity to be spoken of both soundly, and therefore productively, if it possesses no logical relationship with what is purported to evidence its existence – namely, linguistic data. And yet, my initial misreading of his statement – by reading “utility” in its more general, or public, sense – is nevertheless thought-provoking. In the event that Quigley’s *did* intend for utility to convey the general good of something being useful, profitable, or beneficial, his statement would no longer hold true. Markedly, it would no longer be true for the precise reasons that he outlines himself throughout the course of his larger argument. Quigley demonstrates that by using the method he decries, i.e. establishing dichotomies in Pinter’s language, critics have been able to produce striking readings of Pinter’s work. It is the result of what Quigley’s views as problematic that affords critics the flexibility and control to formulate diverse and wide-ranging interpretations. Namely, the tenuous relationship between what are considered to be the apparent or surface aspects of Pinter’s language, on one side of the dichotomy, and what is claimed to deep, or concealed, meaning that

this surface language is purported to evidence, on the other, that specifically engenders these abilities. Indeed, on numerous occasions, Quigley comments on the ease and convenience that this method offers (4, 15). I will add that such methods, far from depreciating the (notion of) subtext's utility (with utility defined as measure of something's usefulness, or benefit) in fact enhance it.[19]

Of course, this sense of (what I deem) the dichotomy method's utility is troubled by Quigley's critique, and those like it. However, the bare existence of these counter-arguments does little to explain the original presence of such methods and their continued use in Pinter scholarship. I contend that discourses within the field of surface reading, on the other hand, do account for these developments. Conceptually, surface reading does well to avoid the problem Quigley identifies by favouring a careful exploration of textual data over a text's deep, latent, or hidden meaning. However, unlike Quigley, the field of literal reading is continually aware of an important barrier to its success as a literary methodology. Best and Marcus note that literal reading must always be prepared to justify itself (Best and Marcus, 14). By exercising "surface fidelity", literal reading jeopardizes offering mere tautology, notation, or political quietism (16). In short, it risks not saying anything of interest at all (16). Accordingly, I argue that the risk of quietism, tautology, and dullness accounts both for why Pinter scholars continue to err in the way Quigley describes and why his critique cuts across all forms of Pinter criticism.

Furthermore, I argue that surface reading, when compared to Quigley's specific contentions, further elucidates the persistence of the dichotomy method (and reveals significant factors regarding the structure of Quigley's critique).

[19] Here, it is important that Quigley references the "*notion of* subtext" and, accordingly, so do I [My emphasis] (14).

With respect to what Quigley contends is the first problem in Pinter studies, the pre-eminence of symbolic interpretations, I note the strong commonality between symbolic interpretation and what surface reading recognizes as symptomatic reading. Since symptomatic reading is by far the broader concept, i.e. it names an entire literary methodology, I claim that symbolic reading, comfortably, fits under its heading.[20] As such, Quigley's opening critique of the popularity of symbolic interpretations in Pinter studies possesses a substantive connection to surface reading. Acknowledging Fredric Jameson's seminal contributions in *The Political Unconscious* for classifying this approach, Best and Marcus explain that symptomatic readers operate by focusing "on elements present in the text" and construing them as "symbolic of something latent or concealed" (3). In this way, "symptomatic reading often conflates three pairs of oppositions: present/absent, manifest/latent, and surface/depth" (3-4). Here, Best and Marcus underline the important connotations these pairs of oppositions share: "The surface is associated with the superficial and deceptive, with what can be perceived without close examination and, implicitly, would turn out to be false upon closer scrutiny. The manifest has more positive connotations, as what is truthful, obvious, and clearly revealed" (4). As a measure to, in part, dispel these connotations, surface reading's response involves, first, reading such details as not purely symptomatic of hidden meaning. Rather, surface readers presume the presence of "textual givens" and promote the possibility of "taking texts as face value" (12). To cast doubt on the tradition that casts the surface as deceptive, Best and Marcus allude to Edgar Allan Poe's story 'The Purloined Letter'. They state the tale "continues to teach us, what lies in plain sight is

[20] Symptomatic reading is defined by Best and Marcus as, "a mode of interpretation that assumes that a text's truest meaning lies in what it does not say, describes textual surfaces as superfluous, and seeks to unmask hidden meanings" (Best and Marcus, 1). Thus, symbolic reading is a particular form of symptomatic reading that finds textual surfaces symbolic (rather than merely, or more generally, symptomatic) of hidden meaning.

worthy of attention but often eludes observation—especially by deeply suspicious detectives who look past the surface in order to root out what is underneath it" (18). As Cannon Schmitt points out in his article "Tidal Conrad (Literally)", the allusion positions symptomatic readers as the inept detectives mining for symbolic clues, while surface readers are likened to story's wise protagonist (C. Auguste Dupin) who possesses the wherewithal to consider evidence hiding in plain sight (Schmitt, 13).[21]

Notably, Quigley frames his opposition to symbolic reading in a manner that is similar to surface reading's disapproval of symptomatic reading's tendency to forget or ignore the surface details of a literary work. With respect to symbolic reading he remarks, "instead of explaining the function of the commonplace in the plays they simply ignore it" (Quigley, 10). Here, it is worthwhile to parse the meaning of term "commonplace". Citing F. J. Bernard's assessment that Pinter's characters engage in what appears to be "a meticulously accurate transcription of ordinary speech", Quigley notes that those characters have accordingly been accused of seeming "commonplace" (7).[22] In the context of this charge, the working-class or "ordinary" dialogue of Pinter's characters appears so in relative contrast to the predominantly aristocratic speech that has traditionally dominated the British stage. And yet, in the development of Quigley's argument, the meaning of "commonplace" does not remain stable. This evolution is first signalled by syntactic commonalities in the following two statements, the first is from the opening of Quigley's argument, the second is from its conclusion:

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[21] To further articulate a justification for Sharon Marcus form of surface reading known as "just reading", Best and Marcus cite Foucault. They explain: These understandings of what one can learn from surfaces resonate with a rarely cited statement Foucault made about his relationship to archives: rather than dig for 'relations that are secret, hidden, more silent or deeper than . . . consciousness,' he described himself as seeking 'to define the relations on the very surface of discourse' and 'to make visible what is invisible only because it's too much on the surface of things' Just reading sees ghosts as presences, not absences, and lets ghosts be ghosts, instead of saying what they are ghosts of" (Best and Marcus, 13).

[22] Here, the claim Quigley references is from Bernard's article "Beyond Realism: The Plays of Harold Pinter".

(1) After discussing well-known symbolic readings of *The Homecoming* as a variant of the prodigal son parable, Quigley argues, "Such interpretations are always vulnerable to charges of extreme selectivity of evidence and *do little to account for the element of the commonplace in the work*" [My emphasis] (8).

(2) While concluding he stresses, "What is to be avoided, then, is not the use of symbols in making general statements about Pinter's work, but the tendency (certainly rife in Pinter criticism) to move too readily toward simplistic symbolic interpretations, *which account for too little of the detail of the text"* [My emphasis] (10).

Quigley's substitution of "detail" for "commonplace" is, at a glance, curious. However, I argue that this evolution is explained by the fact that Quigley comes to use the terms to mean the same thing. In addition, I contend this development may be further clarified by a comparison to a reflexive discourse within the field of surface reading. Regarding surface reading's justification for focusing on what symptomatic reading (allegedly) forgets, Cannon Schmitt asserts, "surface reading can never simply read what's on the surface" because "the value and necessity of seeing what lies in plain sight is given force by the assertion that what lies in plain sight has been overlooked or cannot easily be seen—has been obscured by habits of mind fostered by a certain critical approach and cannot be perceived without the aid of another, countervailing approach" (Schmitt, 13). Carrying over the framework of Schmitt's contention to this context, I contend that Quigley's original relative definition of "commonplace", as that which stands in contrast to aristocratic diction, or features, normal to the British stage, is superseded by the relative definition of "commonplace" as representing those details that are ignored or overlooked by symbolic readings. Therefore, I contend Quigley's more specific claim that symbolic reading ignores the commonplaces aspects of a play may be elucidated. If, in this claim, Quigley intends

for “commonplace” to convey working-class diction and behaviour, his argument would be difficult to apprehend. Since a large proportion of Pinter’s characters are working-class, how could all symbolic readers ignore them? Moreover, if their intention is only to interpret content that is not “commonplace”, what would they have left to interpret? I argue that Quigley, rather, intends to use this term relatively, and therefore that “commonplace” may be defined as those details which are either ignored or forgotten by symbolic readers.

Schmitt’s line of reasoning additionally sheds light on the remainder of Quigley’s critique (claims 2-4). Specifically, I argue that a further comparison between surface reading and the rest of Quigley’s claims will further clarify the relation between Pinter’s drama and criticism. First, I note that Quigley and surface reading (Best and Marcus) align most strongly in their critique of dichotomizing practices. Quigley remarks, “These distinctions have two widespread characteristics: they are dualistic distinctions, and they separate the aspect of the text to be discussed and elaborated on from those elements of the text that are available to controlled and verifiable discussion” (Quigley, 26). On the other hand, surface readings contests, “the widespread practice of reading that conceives of texts as split between presences and absences, manifest and latent meanings, and above all surfaces and depths—the second term in every pair (absence, latency, depth) being privileged, and the concomitantly privileged work of the critic” (Best and Marcus, 12). These extracts help to illustrate the nuanced relationship between Quigley’s criticism and surface reading. The nature of the divisions, that are respectively criticized, differ: with Quigley focusing his arguments against the division critics have made regarding Pinter’s language, while surface reading names the practice of dividing more abstract concepts, such as: surface and depth. However, the true weight of both Quigley and surface reading’s critique falls most squarely, not against the mere fact a division is created, but the fact

that one divided part is favoured heavily over the other. Respectively, both Quigley and surface reading articulate the consequences of this exercise. For Quigley, one of the most detrimental effects of this practice is the unique logical issues it engenders, since, "Such distinctions are either not logically contrastive or they contrast all that is available as evidence with 'something else', which is not available for inspection, analysis, or demonstration" (Quigley, 34). Whereas surface reading, on the other hand, concentrates on how the privileged status of divided part translates into the privileged status of the critic as one who is exclusively able to divine hidden meaning.

Despite these similarities, I note that the critiques levelled against the dichotomy method by surface readers are highly reflexive. Here, it is worthwhile to expand on my earlier comment that surface readers must constantly justify their approach since their practice constantly runs the risk of quietism. As Cannon Schmitt points out, one of the most popular strategies surface readers employ to circumvent this risk is to purport, as a justification for exploring textual givens, that they aim to reveal the meaning of what figurative reading has forgotten (Schmitt, 13). Accordingly, Schmitt further contends that surface reading "names a kind of marvelous impossibility" because "the reasons for doing it so closely resemble the reasons for deep or symptomatic reading" (14). He frames the problem in this way: the rationale for different forms of surface reading, particularly Sharon Marcus' "just reading", relies on uncovering descriptive or literal features of a text that figurative critical approaches have overlooked (13). In other words, scholars do not analyze "surfaces" for no reason. Rather, as part of the justification for exploring textual givens, scholars, particularly Marcus, purport to highlight the meaning of what figurative reading has forgotten. In this way, even the notion of what counts as a "surface" is dependent on the caprice of figurative analysis. Moreover, Schmitt underlines that surface

reading, in this respect, additionally makes the same promises as the symptomatic mode of reading it opposes: insofar as its works to unveil that which was previously unnoticed. In short, for Schmitt surface reading is impossible because the surface is impossible. He states, "surface readings are not about surfaces at all, cannot be about surfaces until they have been reconstructed as hidden from view or, alternatively, possessed of their own peculiar recesses" (14). And thus, this problem may be more accurately characterized as one of describing the activity of surface reading. Indeed, Schmitt remarks, "the surface is the new depth—which is to say not only that surface reading asks us to relocate our interpretive activity from the depth to the surface but also and more significantly that surface reading understands the surface as promising what depths used to promise: the surprise attendant on an unveiling" (15).

Once again, the framework of Schmitt's contention may be carried over to Quigley's critique to illuminate further the structure of his argument. Quigley identifies the second major issue in Pinter criticism as "the seeming lack of inexplicitness in his work" (Quigley, 12). He further emphasizes "Clearly the inexplicit plays a considerable role in Pinter's work" (12). Though he notes, "but equally clearly that role remains unspecified… again the field shows little sign of resolving an issue that had been discussed for as long as Pinter's work has been discussed" (12). Despite his emphasis on the centrality of this problem to Pinter studies, I contend that Quigley does not fully resolve this issue. As I demonstrate in my summary of his argument, Quigley contends the issue of inexplicitness is the original motivating force behind the most problematic critical exercise in Pinter studies, the dichotomy method (13). In more general terms, the inexplicit nature of Pinter's drama encourages symptomatic/symbolic reading. At this stage, Quigley's argument appears intuitive since he argues that which is deemed to be obscure is found to promote readings that do not assess such content to be merely inexplicit, but rather

construe it as representative of a larger meaning. However, the evaluation of content as inexplicit or obscure is not an objective decision. As Quigley recognizes, "Inexplicitness is a relative, not an absolute, term. What seems explicit in one situation may well seem inexplicit in another" (16). Here, Quigley's comments entail two significant assertions. First, critics (of the kind *The Pinter Problem* is directed against) make subjective assessments regarding what they consider to be inexplicit/obscure content in Pinter's drama. Second, the presence what is deemed inexplicit/obscure content motivates the symptomatic/symbolic reading, along with the dichotomy method that is carried out to accomplish these readings.

The issue of inexplicitness, thus, lies at the root of the problem. I, however, argue that the initial critical exercise of dividing Pinter's language between inexplicit and explicit language, or an assessment that all of Pinter's language is inexplicit, is a practice of the dichotomy method that Quigley would lament, but does not acknowledge. This is because the subjective assessment of what content counts as inexplicit entails a division. Such a division is not unlike those both Quigley and surface reading contest. What is considered inexplicit is simultaneously considered to be metaphorical and thus in need of elucidation, while that content deemed explicit is, by extension, ignored. My intention for highlighting this critical choice is not, simply, for the bare purposes of pointing out the existence of a more deeply rooted division. Rather, it is, more precisely, to articulate that the problem Quigley identifies as occurring at the level of language, is preceded by a division created by the mere choice critics make as to what they interpret, rather than how they interpret. It is within this arena that the discourse of surface reading exists, and where, accordingly, it has made considerable advancements that prove significant for Pinter studies. Namely, that, as Cannon Schmitt argues, such distinctions are unnecessary since they are both subjective and merely rhetorical; however, and perhaps more importantly, that such

divisions are inescapable. Despite Pinter's stated admonishments of symbolic reading, critics continue to read his drama as possessing disguised meaning. Accordingly, Schmitt's critique of the field centers upon the notion that surface reading cannot escape justifying itself by incorporating the exact same rationale of the interpretative strategy (symptomatic reading) it opposes: namely, the promise to unveil that which is hidden. The fact this promise is made by surface readers despite their unique suspicion of the similar guarantees expressed by symptomatic readers, and their best efforts to formulate an interpretive strategy that opposes symptomatic reading, underlines that this promise may be unavoidable for literary scholars (particularly Pinter critics).

Chapter Two: Obstacles and Formulation of Approach

Aside from a small degree of competition from Esslin's *The Peopled Wound*, there is little doubt that Quigley's *The Pinter Problem* is the most influential work of Pinter criticism ever written.[23] The foregoing chapter details significant commonalities between Quigley's book and various conversations within the field of surface reading. Plainly defined, surface reading is a strategy for interpreting literature. Yet, from a conceptual perspective, it is simultaneously a reflexive discourse on the mechanisms and validity of literary studies. Notably, surface reading's engagement in these, second-order, conversations forms its strongest ties to Quigley's work. And so, I emphasize that the most popular work of Pinter studies is, at its core, a work of meta-criticism. It is a work so dedicated to such a critique that it may be compared both substantially and effectively to a surface reading discourse almost entirely comprised of such reflexive discussions on literary criticism. Thus, not unlike my earlier statement that simply the bare features of Pinter's drama, combined with his comments regarding his distaste for symbolic readings, pose momentous challenges for critics, I contend that Pinter's drama engenders this fact. And this, perhaps, is one of the most elemental, but necessary things that may be said about Pinter: that his drama leads us to reflect on the veracity and value of literary criticism and its most fundamental procedures. Concurrently, I maintain that questions of whether Pinter's drama stages the cynicism of post-modern politics (as Varun argues in *Harold Pinter and the Twilight of Modernism*), or if his plays blur the conventional distinctions between representations of the subjectivity of perception and the "objective" reality of behaviour (as Robert Gordon argues in *Harold Pinter: The Theatre of Power*) (to garner two modern examples) are overshadowed by

[23] To evidence this point, I highlight two contemporary examples that concur with this assessment. In his book, *Harold Pinter and the Twilight of Modernism* (2005), Varun Begley refers to Quigley's work as "seminal" and states, "*The Pinter Problem* is monolithic in both topic and argument" (Begley, 10). Robert Gordon refers to this same work as "ground-breaking" (Gordon, 202).

this more rudimentary fact. And this fact should not be postponed or, worse-still, overlooked. For this reason, this study seeks to account for the continued and significant problems Pinter's drama causes for literary criticism and its standard practices.

To further carry out this endeavour, it is first important to review (or take stock of) core developments and contentions from the previous chapter:

(1) Surface readers argue, most notably Best and Marcus, that symptomatic/symbolic reading is flawed. Austin Quigley argues that symptomatic/symbolic reading is both flawed and is a particularly unsuited literary methodology for reading Pinter's drama.

(2) Despite these issues, and the stated opposition of Pinter to symbolic readings, symptomatic/symbolic interpretations are an immensely popular strategy for reading Pinter's plays.

(3) The continued popularity of this method may be explained, in large part, by its promise to unveil the hidden meaning of literary texts.[24] Reading Pinter's drama in this fashion then guarantees, at the minimum, interesting criticism. And thus, symptomatic/symbolic reading may be construed as possessing an interpretative "utility" or – at the very least, a convenience that by far outweighs alternative methodologies.

Although it is, perhaps, an overreaching or clichéd stance, the question: 'where do we go from here' appears to be appropriate in this context. In consideration of these, seemingly irreconcilable, developments, this chapter aims to formulate an approach to reading Pinter's drama. Before doing so, however, this study will examine critical strategies for interpreting Pinter's plays that, by seemingly avoiding the problems Quigley articulates, potentially resolve these matters. Accordingly, this chapter will be broken down into three sections. The first two

[24] Here, uncovering "hidden meaning" may also be considered the objective of surface readers since they aim to locate meaning that has been previously overlooked, unidentified, or "hidden in plain sight" (Schmitt, 13).

consider methods for reading Pinter's drama uncommitted to symptomatic/symbolic reading, while the last section focuses on the formulation of my own approach to reading Pinter's drama.

2.1 Harold Pinter and Realism

In his essay "Writing for Myself" (1961), Pinter states, "If you press me for a definition, I'd say that what goes on in my plays is realistic, but what I'm doing is not realism" (*Various Voices,* 12). Few comments, by either the playwright himself or other critics, have proved so significant for Pinter studies. The impression that Pinter's drama stands in opposition to traditional dramatic realism is a longstanding one. In her work "The Experimental Plays of Harold Pinter", Hannah Scolnicov posits that Pinter's relationship with realism may be best understood by comparison to Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) (Scolnicov, 19). Indeed, in his speech "Writing for the Theatre" (1962), Pinter invites this contrast. He remarks that Ibsen's plays present the possibility for the audience to securely apprehend information that is initially concealed (*Complete Works: One,* 12). This information, moreover, is always narratively consequential, and thus the spectator is positioned in the role of "a detective whose task is to piece together the released information to arrive at an understanding of the truth, which is always grounded in the past" (Scolnicov, 19). Scolnicov notes, that "This for Pinter is a falsification of experience, imposing an artificial order on the chaotic nature of life" (19). Thus, the imposition of organization and the concurrent polish and structure that dramatic "life" acquires onstage is precisely what renders Ibsen's theatre unreal for Pinter. Scolnicov explains that Nineteenth-century realism, a tradition of which Ibsen was apart, "aimed not so much at giving an impression of reality as at being constructed around the inner mechanism of reality. It demanded total clarity, causality, and absolute motivation. Realist drama was to be engineered so that there

was a reason for each and every action" (19). Although Scolnicov's summation of Nineteenth-century realism is somewhat of an over-generalization, it is effective counterpoint in the context of her greater contention that Pinter's drama is a response to this sense of realism.

To define Pinter's unique relationship with realism, Scolnicov elects to use the term hyperrealism. She clarifies that hyperrealism is an established term in art criticism used to describe paintings that exhibit the "external appearance of reality faithfully, but do not attempt to impose on it a signifying structure" (7). Art that adheres to hyperrealism refrains from "imposing on reality any rationale, any casual connections or coherent structure, limiting itself to the representation of the outer shell or external appearances of events" (13). Therefore, hyperrealism may be characterized as accepting of the limitations to information, structure, and coherence that realism seeks to curtail.

There are two, noteworthy, problems with Scolnicov's analysis. First, Scolnicov styles her use of the term hyperrealism to describe Pinter's drama as an upgrade from Esslin's use of the term hypernaturalism. She faults Esslin's term as merely an extension of naturalism. She posits, "Naturalism assumes an underlying social and psychological mechanism beneath the accuracy of detail, accounting for the course of the plot and the behaviour of the characters … But there is nothing in Pinter to support such a psychological presupposition" (7). However, several other terms have been created and employed by Pinter critics to achieve a similar purpose. First, and most notably, is John Lahr's creation of the term "supra-realism" in his essay "Pinter and Chekhov: The Bond of Naturalism" that appeared in *Drama Review* in 1968. Thus, the fact Scolnicov does not reference or cite Lahr is surprising.[25]

[25] Scolnicov contends that her employment of the "art historical term" hyperrealism "becomes useful for elucidating Pinter's own theatrical style" (7). Nonetheless, it remains unclear throughout the course of her readings how this particular artistic term lends further insight to Pinter's drama that similar terms cannot achieve.

Second, and by far the larger topic, Scolnicov's assessment does not offer a method of reading Pinter's drama but, merely, indirectly re-articulates pre-existing issues in Pinter studies. To validate her view, she praises hyperrealism's neutrality in distinction to realism's ambition to uncover meaning. In this respect, there are revealing similarities between both the relationship of Pinter's drama to realism and its relationship with criticism. Scolnicov notes that Pinter is *not* a realist *because* the unapparent motivations of his character, and underlying meaning of his dramatic situations, cannot be known (20). She contends, "Pinter replaced the positivism of realist theatre with the impenetrability of hyperrealism" (21). Thus, Scolnicov's contentions regarding realism here, at once, pose a problem – or at the very least a highly significant insight – for criticism. This is because it stands to reason that if the meaning behind Pinter's plays cannot be known, they should not be interpreted as if it can indeed be uncovered.

Consequently, such a discussion, regarding the realist or hyperrealist credentials of Pinter's drama, raises the same question articulated by critics, like Esslin and Quigley, who are explicitly concerned with strategies of interpretation, namely: how should Pinter's plays be interpreted? Whereas this problem is directly articulated by critics like Quigley, the same issue may be seen to surface indirectly for critics, like Scolnicov, focused on the realism of Pinter's drama. Notably, however, this question must be of equal importance for these latter critics. If Pinter's drama is truly hyperrealist, and therefore "impenetrable", then the issue of how exactly his drama should be interpreted is not only a highly apparent question but, if left unanswered, cancels the possibility of succeeding insights. Therefore, discussions over the realism of Pinter's drama does not advance us past, nor circumvent, the most pressing (pre-existing) problems facing critics. Rather, the arrival of the realist discourse to the same elemental question –of how

Pinter's drama should be interpreted– testifies to the deeply-routed, inescapable, nature of this issue.

However, I argue that the realist discourse's (in Pinter studies) arrival at this problem is nevertheless significant. The importance of the realist conversation for meta-criticism (or those who deal explicitly with the issue of how Pinter should be interpreted) is also signalled by Scolnicov's view that Pinter challenges "the prevalent logical positivism of the 1950s" first formulated by A. J. Ayer in his book *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936) (20). She contrasts Ayer's principle of verifiability, "namely that all empirical statements must be verifiable as either true or false", with Pinter's proclamation in his infamous programme note for a double-billing of *The Room* and *The Dumb Waiter* that "there are no hard distinctions between what is real and unreal, nor between what is true and false; it can be both true and false" (Scolnicov, 20). To cast Pinter as an anti-positivist, Scolnicov presents both quotes because of their shared use of the distinction "true or false". She stresses that Pinter's articulation that "it can be both true and false" confirms his disagreement with the positivist doctrine (20). However, Scolnicov restricts her commentary to solely focus on Pinter's latter distinction (between "true and false"). However, by positioning the two pairs of opposites "real and unreal" and "true and false" under the same deceleration that "there are no hard distinctions", Pinter elicits a juxtaposition between them. Although, Pinter's view that both distinctions are equally indistinct is clear, the notion of whether they are mutually exclusive is notably unclear.

For my part, I do not intend to resolve this ambiguity, however I note the issues of verifiability and realism have a longstanding relationship in Pinter studies, even if their affiliation is rendered only indirectly. This relationship may be illustrated by the examination of

two similar comments, made by separate Pinter critics, close to forty years apart. In *Pinter the Playwright* (1970), Esslin argues:

> … there is more to Pinter's use of language than merely accurate observation. In fact, what sounds like tape-recorded speech is highly stylized, even artificial. It is his ability to combine the appearance of total reality with complete control of rhythm and nuance of meaning which is the measure of Pinter's stature as a poet. Pinter's dialogue is tightly – perhaps *more* tightly – controlled than verse. Every syllable, every inflection, the succession of long and short sounds, words and sentences are calculated to a nicety. And it is precisely the repetitiousness, the discontinuity, the circularity of ordinary vernacular speech which are here used as formal elements with which the ingredients from which he takes the recurring patterns and artfully broken rhythms [sic] *are* fragments of a brilliant observed, and often hitherto overlooked, *reality,* he succeeds in creating the illusion of complete naturalness, of naturalism. [Esslin's emphases] (Esslin, 39-40)

Although highly complex, Esslin's statement is worth parsing. First, it is important to note that Esslin maintains that Pinter's theatre only gives the "appearance of total reality" (40). That appearance, however, gives the impression of "total reality" and "complete naturalness" precisely because the features of Pinter's language that seem entirely uncontrived (repetitiousness, discontinuity, and circularity of ordinary vernacular speech) are, in fact, the most highly stylized or artificial elements of his theatre. Similarly, in Robert Gordon's *Harold Pinter: The Theatre of Power* (2012), he contends:

> The aesthetics of his [Pinter's] theatre is founded on a minimalist redaction of naturalistic conventions; its animation of complex games of scenic and histrionic deconstruction renders every stage object, every tic of behaviour and every word spoken, strange or

> problematic. No utterance can be taken be taken at face value, just as no detail of an actor's gesture or movement and no item of scenography can be seen to represent reality unequivocally - and the status of the reality being represented is itself uncertain. (Gordon, 8)

Like Esslin, Gordon calls attention to the artifice of Pinter's style. Notably, however, he stresses that every aspect is therefore rendered "strange or problematic" (8). Here, the structure of Gordon's statement is of importance. Illustrating the "strange and problematic" aspects of Pinter's theatre, Gordon first singles out language, claiming, "No utterance can be taken at face value" (8). Second, he argues that no other aspect of Pinter's drama "can be seen to represent reality unequivocally" (8). The special qualification Gordon affords language, by not simply grouping it along with the rest of those items that he claims cannot represent reality unambiguously, is meaningful. Language is distinct insofar as, unlike the other elements of Pinter's drama ("detail of an actor's gesture", "movement", "item of scenography"), it may be popularly considered duplicitous or artificial in everyday life, offstage. Furthermore, utterances in Pinter's drama, unlike an actor's gesture or stage props, may be seen to make truth claims, rather than solely claims to represent reality. The phrase "face-value" establishes that a surface/depth dichotomy is at play. In this way, just because a given utterance cannot be taken at face-value does not strictly entail that the statement misrepresents the underlying, or intended, meaning of the speaker or playwright. As Pinter might say, it can either be true or false. However, and as Gordon points out, the state of indeterminacy, with respect to a given statement's verity in Pinter's drama, is not temporary but permanent. Simply put, the possibility of achieving such conformation (of a statement's verity) is unattainable. Gordon likens this inability ("just as no detail…") to his subsequent claim that nothing else in Pinter's theatre can

represent reality unequivocally (8). This recalls Pinter's suggestive positioning of the two pairs, "true and false" and "real and unreal", under the same deceleration that "there are not hard distinctions" between them (Scolnicov, 20). And, in effect, Gordon makes this same point: that nothing in Pinter's drama may be proven or said, conclusively, to be either true or false, or real or unreal.

Despite the common treatment of the pairs "true and false" and "real and unreal" as equally indistinct in the realm of Pinter's drama, their separation is provocative. Again, I do not claim to solve the ambiguity between these pairs. However, the issue is germane to my critique of Scolnicov's use and application of the term hyperrealism. Throughout her opening chapter on hyperrealism, Scolnicov differs from the above sentiments, expressed more so by Esslin than Gordon, that the uniquely ambiguous aspects of Pinter's drama signal its artifice. Rather, in arguing that the Pinter's drama cannot possibly be regarded as realistic because of the "absence of motivation" in his work, she further contends, "… the particular hyperrealist style … and their hyperrealist aesthetic, which alone allows us to see the absence of motivation not as a shortcoming but as a deliberate manifestation of fidelity to everyday experience, as, paradoxically, *more realistic than realism*" (My emphasis) (10). This comment does not stand alone in Scolnicov's work. Indeed, she praises hyperrealism on three separate occasions, in a similar manner:

1) "Unlike surrealism, which transcends everyday reality by attempting to penetrate the depths of the psyche, hyperrealism remains on the outside, faithfully representing the surface of things" (12-13).

2) "Hyperrealism may seem to be nothing more than realism taken to an extreme, reproducing with the utmost fidelity the external details … Hyperrealism represents a totally different

philosophical conception of the nature of art and its relation to the world. Liberated from the necessity to make sense of the appearance of things, its surface realism can go much further. Through contemporary technical means, it achieves a more accurate kind of realism, creating an effect very different from that of realistic art" (16).

3) "Hyperrealism reaches beyond realism in its precise, photographic rendering of the objects, but holds back from endowing them with meaning. It aims at a surface fidelity of detail and does not attempt to present the viewer with *a comprehensible* view of reality" (My emphasis) (16).

4) "Pinter rejects realism and introduces a new way of looking at reality. He renounces the positivist doctrine of a causally constructed plot because it falsifies our experience of reality … Positivist certainty gives way to hyperrealist enigma" (20).

Scolnicov's acclaim for the hyperrealist technique is problematic for several reasons. Her view that Pinter's drama "faithfully represents the surface of things" recalls surface reading's endeavour to focus on the surface elements of literary texts. Accordingly, a critique of surface reading may be levelled against Scolnicov's claims effectively. In her recent work *The Victorian Novel Dreams of the Real: Conventions and Ideology* (2016), Audrey Jaffe contends that the rhetoric of clear sightedness featured in Best and Marcus' introduction to surface reading ("Surface Reading: An Introduction) echoes Mathew Arnold's ideal of objectivity (Jaffe, 141). She explains that Best and Marcus parallel Arnold's claims to see things "best" and "as they really are" (141). Pivotally, she notes that these claims, "require the evocation of some alternative, necessarily occluded form of vision … one said to be clouded by emotionality (as the use of the terms "suspicion" and "symptom" suggest) and marked by an absence of self-restraint" (141).

By comparison, Scolnicov repeatedly contends that hyperrealism is a superior form of realism. What constitutes this superiority? For Scolnicov, by contrast to both surrealism and, the logically positivist oriented, realism (see points 1 and 4), hyperrealism refuses to offer a (necessarily) meaningful or comprehensible fiction, but rather strives to faithfully represent the surface of things. By advancing the notion that hyperrealism "achieves a more accurate kind of realism" Scolnicov transgresses Pinter's own statement that "there are no hard distinctions between what is real and unreal" (Scolnicov, 16, 20). More problematically still, Scolnicov argues that what comprises this, more accurate, mode of representing reality is hyperrealism's refusal to endow meaning. By contrast, she argues, surrealism and realism offer meaning through their encouragement for the audience/reader to interpret symbolically. In other words, instead of engendering a surface/depth dichotomy, whereby the unapparent (depth) meaning of the play awaits divination, hyperrealism, by contrast, is restricted to only represent "the surface of things" (13). Although Scolnicov acknowledges that meaning may not necessarily be located or found on the surface, she nevertheless places value on hyperrealism's fidelity to the surface. And this value (per Jaffe's critique) derives from hyperrealism's divergence from surrealism and realism, specifically their encouragement for the reader/audience to interpret figuratively, and therefore locate meaning underneath the surface. Moreover, like the resemblance between surface reading's promise to unveil hidden meaning that lies in plain sight and symptomatic/symbolic reading's promise to unveil concealed meaning, the value and importance hyperrealism places on the surface is not unlike the reverence figurative reading may have for a text's depth.

Hyperrealism's ostensible contrast to realism and surrealism is also further articulated by Scolnicov predilection for phrases such as: "faithfully representing the surface of things" to describe hyperrealism's activity (13). Again, what comprises this notion of hyperrealism's

faithfulness or honesty is its refusal to endow meaning. However, this is simply another way to describe or account for the inexplicit/obscure elements of Pinter's theatre. As I have shown, these features are precisely what both Esslin and Gordon argue signal the artifice of Pinter's drama. And thus, what Scolnicov maintains makes Pinter's theatre the most faithful to reality, namely it's obscure/inexplicit elements, is equally argued by Esslin and Gordon to in fact indicate the fictional status of Pinter's drama.

This disagreement may appear as a mere difference of opinion, and the matter, therefore, arbitrary. And indeed, in another context this difference would have little importance. However, consider that Scolnicov, like Best and Marcus, and like Matthew Arnold, peppers her argument with rhetoric of clear vision. Thus, in this way, Scolnicov's sense of hyperrealism merely reproduces, as Jaffe defines it, "realism's claim to transparency, defining itself as free of conventions, values, and agendas" (Jaffe, 143). Moreover, the idea of clear vision, "of seeing things accurately", is always ideologically saturated (143). Critiquing surface reading, Jaffe contends:

> … the rhetoric of depth versus surface is a diversion from the visual metaphor that in fact structures this discussion: the idea that it is possible to see clearly and hence, truly, to rid vision of frameworks and contexts … the rhetoric of clear vision – the idea of seeing things as they really are, of laying claim to the real … is always and inescapably an assertion of power … Reading for what is called "surface" is no less a gesture of mastery that the idea of reading for depth. [My ellipses] (143)

Jaffe's contentions, here, equally challenges both Scolnicov's notion of hyperrealism and surface reading. Moreover, I believe, this critique further clarifies the nature of Scolnicov's argument. In an often-quoted interview Pinter gave to the *Daily Mail* in 1964, he disavowed the playwright

who "assumes that we have a great deal of information about all his characters, who explain themselves to the audience. In fact, what they are doing most of the time is conforming to the author's own ideology" (Esslin, 30). By striving to classify Pinter's drama as hyperrealist, Scolnicov appears to translate Pinter's ostensible desire for ideology-free theatre into reality. I disagree with Scolnicov's classification, and by extension disagree with the notion that Pinter creates such an ideal form of theatre. Rather, in my later readings, I argue Pinter dramatizes issues concerning claims to perfectly clear, objective, vision, specifically in relation to the past life experiences and political events.

My final critique of this realist discourse in Pinter's studies rests with the fact that it does not prescribe or advance any meaningful method for reading Pinter's drama. Although I have concentrated my critique on Scolnicov, I wish to extend it past the confines of merely her work. I elected to examine Scolnicov's book, in part, because it is the most recent example (since it was published 2012) of a multitude of criticism on Pinter's relationship with realism. However, as I have argued, Scolnicov is not the first critic to use a term such as hyperrealism, and claim that Pinter's drama should be classified as a superior form of realism. In this way, I contend that both aspects of my critique, the realist discourse's inability to offer a profitable method for reading Pinter's plays and the issues revolving its claims to clear sightedness, may be carried over to the larger realist critical tradition of reading Pinter's plays.

2.2 A Critique of Austin Quigley's "Interrelation Method" and Marc Silverstein's Proposed Alternative

By contradistinction to Scolnicov, in *The Pinter Problem*, Quigley proposes an explicit approach to reading Pinter's drama. This approach is, rather intuitively, born out of his foregoing

critique of Pinter studies. However, Quigley emphasizes that he wishes to formulate a way to interpret Pinter's drama that avoids any commitments to the "reference theory of meaning" (that he additionally refers to as the "single function problem") (46, 31). Quigley formulates this theory himself. Although this concept stands at the core of his critique, his definition is rather vague. Nevertheless, Quigley clearly articulates both his view that a large proportion of Pinter criticism is dependent on this theory, and the consequences of these commitments. On several occasions, he explains that the "theory encourages a distinction in literary language between the observable but trivial and the hidden but profound" and that it thereby "reinforces the assumption that language carries information in only one way" (Quigley, 27). In his second chapter, "The Language Problem", he further clarifies this position. Underpinning his contention that the theory promotes "the assumption that language carries information in only one way", Quigley notes that "belief in something fixed and constant … is at the heart of the reference theory of meaning" (27, 36-37). Having already surveyed numerous approaches to Pinter's language in his first chapter, Quigley builds upon his previous findings. However, on this occasion, he highlights the influence of the reference theory of meaning. To further criticize the creation of dualistic distinctions in Pinter's language, Quigley identifies a pattern whereby critics, on the one hand, appeal to the "normal" language of surface meaning (36). Crucially, he explains that this initial appeal to "ordinary" language force about a series of second (contrastive) terms, "variously described as language that transcends or abandons the expressible, language that conveys things without expressing them, language that conveys things other than what is expresses, and despite what it expresses" (36). From here, Quigley further expands on what he identifies as the erroneous distinctions that are made in Pinter's language, that I deem the dichotomy method. Quigley argues that the attempts to "re-relate this non-language", that is the second (contrastive)

terms, to normal language, “gives rise to such chimerical contrasts as surface meaning versus deeper meaning” (39). Lastly, he reasons, “The basic error running throughout these approaches is the attempt to base useful dualistic distinctions upon first terms that erroneously assume something central in normal language. As this frequently includes everything available as evidence, one critic after another has been forced to select a contrastive second term that effectively abandons control of the data” (40). In contrast to such attempts, Quigley aims to devise an approach that, rather than abstracts from Pinter’s language, explores it in its immediate dramatic context.

Accordingly, Quigley articulates an approach that he maintains “shake[s] of all, not simply some, of the implications of the reference theory” (45). It begins, rather conservatively, with the aim of pursuing language in Pinter’s drama “in terms of its appropriateness to the situation in which it is used” (27). Quigley finds the answer to this pursuit by focusing on how characters employ language to negotiate positions of power within their relationships (Silverstein, 17). He describes this (linguistic) activity as the “interrelational function of language” (Quigley, 54). The use of the neutral term “interrelational” derives from Quigley’s wish to avoid the assumption (as the term “interpersonal” would suggest) that “the identities of those participating [in the relationships between Pinter’s characters] are given in advance” (53). Rather, he posits that such relationships are “battlegrounds” where “characters attempt to negotiate a mutual reality” (54). Moreover, he contends that, accordingly, characters “have to cope with a compromise between the ways in which they wish to be regarded and the ways in which their companions are willing to regard them … the ‘personality’ of a particular character, the kind of identity with which he can operate, is a function of a compromise negotiated in a

particular relationship" (54). According to Quigley, of utmost importance in these negotiations is language's fundamental influence. He declares:

> This battle [the struggle for position in a relationship], in the Pinter's world, is grounded in the power available in language to promote the responses that a speaker requires and hence the relationship that is desired. It is here that the link between language and relationships is established, and it is here that we must concentrate our attention. The language of a Pinter play functions primarily as a means of dictating and reinforcing relationships. This use of language is … a common component in all drama and in all language; but, in giving this use such extensive scope, Pinter has simultaneously achieved his own individual form of stage dialogue and made his work unavailable to any critical analysis based on implicit appeals to the reference theory of meaning. (52)

Although Quigley articulates many strong readings using this method, the overall logic of his approach is questionable.[26]

The best critique of Quigley's method that I have encountered is Marc Silverstein's "The Pinter Problem: Re-Problematized", from his book *The Language of Cultural Power* (1993). Silverstein contends that, although Quigley's attention to the interrelational function of language is valid, it is limited by its sole focus on what Saussure calls *parole* (the individual speech act) without sufficient attention to *langue* (language as a codified system) and its relation to *parole* (Silverstein, 18). For Silverstein, this critique disrupts, most centrally, Quigley's aim to "conceptualize the subject as an effect of language …. Rather than an entity 'given in advance'

[26] Quigley gives an example of this type of analysis by examining a conversation between Len and Mark on God in Pinter's play *The Dwarfs* (1966). He contends, "Though the preceding conversation between Len and Mark reveals little about their belief in God, it does reveal a considerable amount of information about their attitudes toward each other. What is left inexplicit on the one hand is matched by something quite explicit on the other. What is left incomplete in the conversation is matched by information that is complete enough to force Len into a subsequent lengthy and desperate plea to Mark for a change in his attitude" (53).

that language merely re-presents" (18). Therefore, he asserts that Quigley's "failure to consider how the system of language [*langue*] both allows for *and* places certain constraints upon individual utterances tends to resituate the subject outside of the language to which it remains superior" [Silverstein's emphasis] (18). To prove this position, Silverstein advances a nuanced argument that is worth presenting in point-form:

(1) He holds that Quigley conceptualizes the subject as an effect of language, rather than an entity that pre-exists which language re-presents (18).[27]

(2) Wittgenstein's often-quoted statement: "Look at the sentence as an instrument, and its sense as employment" is the foundation of Quigley's view (17). Here, Wittgenstein theorizes that the meaning of language is a product of language, generated by – "not the inherent property of words, but an effect of how those words are used" (17).

(3) While Silverstein agrees that when a sentence is spoken, it is radically unique occurrence, since the act of articulation ("intonation, rhythm, gesture, and facial expression") is fully inimitable, he contests that this notion of radical uniqueness (that an utterance is "inalienably and eternally" the speaker's own) holds only if the category of history is neglected.

(4) By employing the phrase "category of history" Silverstein invokes the *langue.* He notes that one does not need to subscribe to the reference theory of meaning to know that words accrue semiotic baggage (19). Moreover, he asserts that we are born into a world *and* language confronts us with the "always-already-said", and that "we cannot ignore the traces of other voices" (19).

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[27] Silverstein explains that Quigley holds a semiotic understanding of Pinter's language (18). He further clarifies Quigley's position by stating, ""If 'self-concepts' develop through relationships that are themselves developed and negotiated through language, then subjectivity, rather than given in advances, becomes the effect of signifying practices, produced through a perpetual inscription and re-inscription within language" (18).

(5) Silverstein, accordingly, calls for an examination of Pinter's language that, "Rather than rejecting Quigley's sense of how language operates in these plays … extends the range of his definition to include *langue* as well as *parole,* the Other as well as the subject and an other" (21).

To clarify, Silverstein justifies his inclusion of the concept "Other" by posing: "how can we as speaking beings fashion our subjectivity through a language marked by otherness that comes to locate itself within that subjectivity?" (19). To this question he responds, quoting Michael Bakhtin's *Dialogical Principle*, that no speaking being can "ever find the words in language that are neutral, exempt from the … evaluations of the other … he receives the word by the other's voice and it remains filled with that voice. He intervenes in his own context from another context … find[ing] a word already lived in (Silverstein, 19-20). Hence, he concludes that in addition to *langue* and *parole* a "third term" (that possesses various qualifications) must be introduced: "the speaking subject, an other (or others), and *the* Other, i.e. the symbolic order, the language as a system encoding the dominant cultural values" (20). Therefore, all things considered, Silverstein concurs with the core logic of Quigley's argument, but extends the range of the interrelation function in Pinter's plays to account for the unavoidable importance of dominant cultural/historical influences.

My rebuttal to Silverstein's proposed improvement to Quigley's approach is twofold. First, I wish to stress that the efficacy of Silverstein's critique is generated by his concurrence with Quigley's entire approach save for his neglect of *langue* and the Other. Although Silverstein persuasively articulates the benefits of this reformulation, the overall validity of his approach remains, nonetheless, grounded in the (original and continued) validity of Quigley's inceptive method. I argue, however, that Silverstein's approach transgresses against both the spirit and

logic of Quigley's arguments, thereby exposing his own contentions to the fallacy of self-refutation.

From the outset, the overarching design of Quigley's approach is well-defined. Namely, by contrast to critical endeavours that assume the meaning of Pinter's drama lies below the "surface" level of his drama, Quigley strives to articulate the meaning of his plays without abstracting beyond their immediate, or contextual, features. This intention is expressed in the opening gesture of Quigley's method. Here, he describes his objective as pursuing the language in Pinter's drama "in terms of its appropriateness to the situation in which it is used" (Quigley, 31). One of the most obvious, yet important, aspects of this strategy is that it is a logical next step from his critique. Rather than attempting to somehow create a new procedure for divining unapparent meaning, Quigley's strives to explore the significance of Pinter's language with reference to the immediate dramatic situation. However, although Silverstein's method shares the same basic structures and premises as Quigley's approach, I argue that is fundamentally detracts from Quigley's stated goal.

Silverstein's reference to Saussure's concepts of *parole* and *langue* is an original analysis, i.e., Quigley does not first present this connection. However, while Silverstein's assessment that Quigley's approach focuses on *parole* is accurate, his subsequent contention that the method does not afford "sufficient attention" to *langue* is the first marker of the tension, rather than extension, between Silverstein's argument and Quigley's own (Silverstein, 18). Quigley maintains that one of the most detrimental outcomes of the dualistic distinctions critics make in Pinter's language is that they "separate the aspect of the text to be discussed and elaborated on from those elements of the text that are available to controlled and verifiable discussion" (Quigley, 27). *Parole,* simply by virtue of its definition as "the individual speech-act" is "available to controlled and verifiable

discussion" since that act is manifested in theatre (27). The same cannot be said for *langue,* however.[28] Silverstein does not try to disguise this fact, rather he emphasizes it by further defining *langue* as "language as a codified system" and noting that its presence and influence is not easily detectable (19). This, of course, is to say nothing of the Other – a further concept Silverstein expands his approach to encapsulate. Silverstein is convincingly able to demonstrate that just as *langue* imposes limits on the *parole*, and thereby should be included to the interrelational function, the Other influences *langue* with equal weight (20). However, the concept's position outside the realm of "controlled and verifiable discussion", like *parole,* is evident. And thus, given Silverstein's maneuver to "extend the range of his [Quigley's] definition to include *langue*" and "the Other as well", his approach, at once, trespasses against the spirit and logic of Quigley's approach.

The second, and more systemic, issue with Silverstein's approach stems from the fact that his appeal to the importance of the latent influences of *langue* and the Other, opens the door to an infinite regress, or appeals, to further layers of context. Silverstein himself admits that his invocation of *langue* and the Other follows from his abiding interest in the topic of subjectivity (21). He states, "When I invoke the names of Irigaray, Lacan, et cetera, in these pages, then, I do so not instrumentally, but because I see Pinter's dramatic practice, like their investigations, aiding us in articulation and thinking through complex questions about the relation of language to subjectivity" (25). While this enterprise is unquestionably valid, there is nothing to prevent other critics, with unique interests of their own, from arguing that the range of Quigley's interrelational function should be extended to account for their fascinations. Moreover, in this light, it is also

[28] One could argue, however, that *langue* arises from the audience's act of semiotic engagement. Thus, *parole* is on stage, *langue* is in the audience.

therefore difficult to see how Silverstein's method, or any critic who also extends the scope of Quigley's approach, differs substantively from a host of other critics who have identified Pinter's language as conveying or implying cultural power structures (for instance, John Lahr's work on *The Homecoming* and the importance of the patriarchal structure of authority in this play).

2.3 Formulation of Approach

As I stated in my introduction, my examination of Pinter's drama will reveal that Pinter's later work dramatizes issues surrounding the division of, and concordant attempts to construe, meaning that, on the one hand, may be found on the "surface" or is clearly accessible, and meaning that is "deep" or is, for the most part, inaccessible. More broadly put, I aim to show that Pinter's late drama stages issues of interpretation.

In all the Pinter scholarship that I have examined thus far, each critic that I have confronted is quick, if not eager, to establish their cognisance of the pre-existing issues and longstanding interpretative problems that comprise this field. Indeed, this degree of critical awareness appears to be a pre-requisite to a committed study of Pinter's theatre. However, I do not, simply, attribute this phenomenon to a sort of mass dilettantism. Rather, I note that this critical trend exists for good reason, which is: issues and interpretative problems do not merely linger in Pinter studies – they recur. Austin Quigley's appetite and ability to expose this issue, and his exposure of it in *The Pinter Problem*, should, at this point, be well-known. Though, Marc Silverstein has been able to characterize this issue will equal acuity. Describing the problem, at large, as the "eternal return of the same that haunts Pinter criticism", Silverstein explains, "Reading through the not inconsiderable amount of commentary devoted to Pinter's use of language one cannot help experiencing an overwhelming feeling of *deja vu*; in the introduction

to *The Pinter Problem*, Quigley notes the impasse Pinter criticism has reached, and little has changed in the intervening years" (Silverstein, 24). For my part, I argue that Silverstein falls victim to the very "eternal return" he describes. And this, if anything, should articulate the inextricable obstacles that face a Pinter critic aiming to contribute something fresh to the discourse.

My approach, therefore, is not to claim that I can circumvent all these issues. However, and as a starting point, I acknowledge the recurrence of these problems as substantive issues that still, unfortunately, plague Pinter studies to this day. And yet, I also contend that it is of perhaps even greater importance to notice and take registration of the bare fact of this cessation and repetition. Again, as I note in my introduction, while the symmetry between Pinter's drama and criticism should not be considered a relation of influence, that symmetry should not be ignored. Pinter studies is unique amongst literary disciplines/topics in its persistent wrestling with the same, fundamental, problems. What I argue may help to resolve this issue is therefore a self-awareness that, while cognisant of pre-existing critical setbacks, closely examines interpretative issues that arise in fiction of Pinter's plays.

Chapter Three: *Betrayal* (1978)

3.1 *Betrayal* and the Critics

Pinter's *Betrayal* (1978) has been poorly received by many critics. Although the play is a commercial success, culminating in an excellent film version directed by David Jones in 1983, its literary merit has frequently been called into question. Here, I instance only two, though formidable, criticisms – one old (derived from the play's first production), and one more recent. Traditionally a great admirer of Pinter's work, in opening-night review of the National Theatre's production of *Betrayal* in 1978, Michael Billington states:

> What distresses me is the pitifully thin strip of human experience it explores and its obsession with the tiny ripples on the stagnant pond of bourgeois-affluent life … Harold Pinter has betrayed his immense talent by serving up this kind of high-class soap opera (laced with suitable cultural-brand names like Venice, Torcello, and Yeats) instead of a real play … in works like *The Homecoming, Old Times*, and *No Man's Land* he has wittily explored the racking tenacity of desire, the hazy subjectivity of memory, the use of language to disguise, instead of reveal, true feeling. But here, since nothing much seems at stake, he dwindles into mannerism. (*The Guardian*, 15 July 1978)[29]

In his work *Harold Pinter and the Twilight of Modernism* (2005), Varun Begley notes:

> In contrast to the uncertainty in many of Pinter's other works, *Betrayal* appears restrictive and over-determined. The naturalistic settings, historically specified characters and locations, overabundant plot, and familiar erotic triangle saturate the play's temporal,

[29] To characterize his assessment more thoroughly, it should be noted, first, that in his review Billington concedes that the play is "technically original". Second, after learning of the autobiographical basis of the play, based on Pinter's affair with journalist and broadcaster Joan Bakewell, Billington's second review of a production in 1996 is much less corrosive (Begley, 119).

> spatial, and thematic dimensions. Strategies of enclosure rigidly structure audience response and effectively foreclose the possibility of outside associations … To anyone expecting conventional entertainment the play must initially appear either sordid or overly abstract (or both). In what feels like overkill, the labyrinth of deceit seems both degraded and contrived. *Betrayal* imposes a formal self-consciousness that renders its tepid subject-matter implausible. (Begley, 119, 121)

Although many detractors have found redeeming qualities in this work, a considerable number of critical complaints have relegated *Betrayal* to its pervasive status as a "problem play" (Gordon, 127).[30] Since my study is highly concerned with especially controversial areas of Pinter studies, this play (and its critical discourse) is a fertile territory for my line of inquiry. Indeed, the backlash this play has received evidences my (earlier) contention that there was a significant critical turn against Pinter's late drama (post-1975). However, within the impressive array of both positive and negative commentary that this play has drawn, an important point has yet to be made. Visible in many of this play's critiques, and certainly in Billington and Begley's statements rendered above, is a strong lament for *Betrayal's* break with Pinter's previous drama. This is a curious development since, if a generalizable assessment of Pinter's earlier work can be made at all, it may be said that almost all his initial plays caused a great deal of trouble for critics. In this sense, what these stances appear to indirectly articulate is: that what makes Pinter's drama most difficult to resolve critically, simultaneously constitutes its literary value. Accordingly, the fact this play permits more straightforward interpretive possibilities, like

[30] In his aforementioned book, Varun Begley provides a brilliant analysis (that I will reference occasionally) on *Betrayal's* problematic standing in relation to its cultural hybridity as "neither a commentary on nor and example of popular culture" but "somehow both" (Begley, 114). Overall, he argues the play represents a "nearly nihilistic" critique of conventional aesthetic pleasure (114).

Katherine Burkman's fascinating Oedipal reading of the play in her article "Harold Pinter's 'Betrayal': Life before Death: And After" (1982), is more worried-over than celebrated by Pinter's critics. Here, what is at least obvious about this development is the notion that the evaluation that Pinter's drama is critically problematic is seemingly unavoidable. His early, more ambiguous, drama remains elusive to conclusive interpretation, while his later work, although clearer, loses the (ambiguity-forming) components that comprise his plays literary value and their subsequent critical attention. And thus, this play, and its rather unique relationship with critics, is an ideal place for my first reading of Pinter's drama in this study. Drawing from my stated approach, my objective will not be to resolve these longstanding issues, but to instead re-order the importance of interpretative problems associated with *Betrayal* by focusing, expressly, on issues of interpretation that manifest in the actual play. However, I will argue that my examination of these problems will help to defend this play against popular accusations of gimmickry and triviality.

Betrayal tells the story of a rather pedestrian love affair, approaching even cliché, between Jerry and Emma. Notably, Jerry is best-friends and business partners with Emma's husband Robert. Jerry's involvement in the affair thus serves as a betrayal to both his wife, Judith, and closest friend. Jerry and Emma's relationship lasts for seven years. Indeed, it is so "well-established" (as Robert eventually describes it) that they use a rented flat to share afternoons together (Pinter, 71). Before a family vacation to Torcello, Robert uncovers the affair, but stays with Emma for another two years, before finally deciding on a divorce. This summary is a simple outline of the story, but not of the plot, since the play proceeds in reverse chronology from 1977 to 1968 (with only two exceptions).[31]

[31] A more thorough summary is available after the conclusion of this chapter.

In two, very elemental, respects, interpretation is at the heart of the play. The works very title, *Betrayal,* combined with the mere knowledge that the plot concerns extra-marital affairs, is enough to know that sustained deceit – and therefore the promotion and discouragement of given interpretations – will be core features of the drama. Moreover, the play's most prominent formal element, namely that it ensues in reverse chronology, is interwoven, rather substantively, with interpretation. On this matter, David Wheeler, who directed one of the first productions of *Betrayal* in 1978 at the Boston Playhouse, is worth quoting at some length, he argues:

> By looking backwards … I think Pinter warns us, demonstrates for us, that our lives are always passing beyond us and … we don't so much *act them as interpret them.* The best we can do is look back and interpret … because the choices, when we're there, are not revealed to us. We think we're making decisions based on the information that is there. But actually, a lot of it we don't have. A lot of the context of the situation is foreign to us and therefore we bumble through. Later on, we say 'ah' and it seems to me that's happened with all these people [sic]. And you get a lens that distinguishes this very clearly by proceeding backwards. [My emphasis] (David Wheeler, Elliot Norton [Television] Reviews, 1978)

On a structural scale, therefore, the backwards progression of this play renders it more comprehensible. Elin Diamond has compared *Betrayal* to Hogarth's "Rake's Progress" (in *Pinter's Comic Play*), and the comparison is apt since, although all narratives are conceptually predetermined, the play's backwards movement certainly heightens its sense of determinism (Diamond, 210). This innovative feature is therefore, at once, of great metatheatrical importance – and not, solely for the reason that backwards movement may improve the audience's predictive capacities or understanding of the drama. In his work "Cinematic Fidelity and the Forms of

Pinter's Betrayal" Enoch Brater notes, "it is the arrangement of the scenes that makes ironies accumulate and the drama as a whole possible. It is not so much what we know but when we know it that is responsible for the real tension that bristles so ferociously beneath the contained surface of this work … *Betrayal* makes us concerned with the unities and disunities of time, with deception and self-deception, with the past in the present and the present in the past" (Brater, 111). Just as Wheeler contends that the play's backwards progression calls to mind a, very lifelike, epistemological state of affairs ("We think we're making decisions based on the information that is there. But actually, a lot of it we don't have"), Brater similarly proposes that the play causes us to reflect on the intransigent nature of time. Moreover, both Wheeler and Brater underline that this reflection, and our concurrent registration of our epistemological limitations, is engendered by, perhaps more pressing, existential concerns. Namely, that our reflection on the past is often grounded in a simultaneous desire to change it, yet the parallel knowledge that it is unchangeable, strange, and elusive. How the past formulates and constitutes our present life is unclear. Nevertheless, as Wheeler clarifies, the past inherently acquires a degree of comprehensibly. Here, Kierkegaard's well-known axiom that life must be understood backwards, but lived forwards, is called to mind (Kierkegaard, Journals IV, A-164 [1843]). Thus, the strong commonalities of Pinter's use of reverse chronology, and the more general exercise of reflection, testify to the strength (or at least naturalistic qualities) of reverse chronology as a narrative device.

However, although reverse chronology may indeed enhance the audience's ability to comprehend the story, exactly what they are meant to understand is unclear, and is of longstanding critical dispute. Varun Begley notes, "Logically speaking … the characters cannot learn these [the play's] lessons (not in reverse), so the play is emphatically 'for us' insofar as its

ironies do not arise from identification with a character's *anagnorisis* (recognition), as is typical in both realism and tragedy. *Betrayal* short-circuits the causal energy that fuels conventional Aristotelian drama (in Brecht's sense), and its episodic structure embodies the narrative laxity of which Aristotle famously disapproved (Begley, 127-128). Whereas, Begley contends that the character's reflection within the fictive universe of the play is fruitless, I note that the audience's capacity to reflect is not. Paradoxically, this ability, for the audience 'to learn' or detect the plays many ironies, is dependent on their ability to recollect that which has already occurred, in future narrative time. Indeed, *Betrayal* confronts both its reader and audience with the possibility of stable interpretation. Robert Gordon observes, "For once Pinter incontrovertibly exposes the lies that obfuscate truth and create the equivocal appearances so disturbing to both characters and audiences in his other plays. The successive movements of plot backward in time unambiguously reveal the truth beneath each pretense" (Gordon, 129). Yet, the truth behind such pretenses have been considered highly problematic by critics, especially in ethical terms. Gordon further contends, "Its [*Betrayal's*] scenic scheme is designed to expose the ways in which Emma's marriage, Jerry and Robert's friendship, and Jerry and Emma's love affair become increasingly corrupted by the necessity of lying" (126). Hannah Scolnicov, puts *Betrayal's* alleged absence of moral character in even stronger terms. She argues, "In the world of the play, betrayal has obviously lost its theological and moral edge … Nobody in the plays seems to get particularly upset about what used to be considered immoral behaviour. The idea of betrayal, the word itself, has been drained of its affective power. Reduced to an abstracted pattern … Rather than being shocked by the conduct of its gracefully cool characters, the uninvolved spectator is drawn to admire the formal qualities of the play, its complex symmetry, the perfection of its structure, and the smoothness of its texture" (Scolnicov, 112). These assertions combine to articulate that if

there is, in fact, a moral lesson to be gleaned from *Betrayal,* it derives not from any character's self-conscious realization of their errors (*anagnorisis*), but rather from audience's appreciation (or bearing witness to) the play's formal elements that both expose and censure the character's deceitful behaviour.

I aim to steer my reading away from these over-simplified positions regarding the play's morality. Before doing so, I will summarize the present issue at-hand: first, since (as Begley notes) *Betrayal's* characters cannot learn any lessons given the play's reverse chronology, the play is emphatically 'for us'; second, unlike Pinter's other drama, portions of the character's history, relevant motivations, and truths are revealed; third, the audience's ability to know these truths, given the play's reverse chronology, only serves to highlight the characters' immorality. More concisely yet, it may be said that *Betrayal* possesses some of the formal characteristics of Nineteenth-Century melodrama or an Ibsenian realist tragedy, but is notably missing the redemptive arc, qualities, or ethical message these plays often present. As Begley remarks, "The pathos of melodrama rests of the recognition that outcomes might have been otherwise. Melodrama is presumably a redemptive (if ideological) enterprise, while *Betrayal* depicts an emotional wasteland in which inner life has been voided and social rituals have become parodies of connection" (Begley, 124). Here, Begley underlines two noteworthy features in *Betrayal's* relationship with melodrama. First, that by contradistinction to melodrama, *Betrayal* is a deterministic story. Second, that it presents an "emotional wasteland", a phrase that connotes a radically skeptical vision, as opposed to the tragic state of affairs that may ultimately be considered educational. Common to each of these assessments regarding the play's ethical character (by Begley, Gordon and Scolnicov), is the overriding sense that the confluence between *Betrayal* and melodrama, and their clear differences, engenders several issues. These

problems may be summarized by the following questions: Why does Pinter depart from his earlier style to create such a confluence? Does the play offer a merely nihilistic or skeptical vision? If not, what vision does play offer? Of course, these inquiries can never be squarely resolved, but I find they underwrite a considerable proportion of the criticism that finds this play unsatisfying.

I argue, for the remainder of this reading, that the interpretative issues that emerge throughout the play are able to partially answer these questions and by extension, therefore, contest critical opinions that *Betrayal* fails to live up to Pinter's dramatic standards. As such, my argument will proceed in two stages in correspondence with these questions. The first section discusses issues of metatheatre and melodrama, while the second section focused on the current of skepticism that runs throughout the play by examining its final scene.

3.2 Metatheatre and Melodrama

The issue of the play's title, its backwards progression, and metatheatre all find their intersection in Scene 5. Here, Robert thematically prefaces his forthcoming interrogation of Emma regarding her affair, by referencing both Jerry and the notion of betrayal. With respect to the book Emma is reading (authored by Spinks), Robert informs her that Jerry desired to first have it published, but that he refused. In Scene 7, we learn that Robert's refusal is predicated on his dislike for Spinks' writing, and modern novels in general (Pinter, 97). And Emma, perhaps in anticipation of this answer, or out of genuine curiosity, is left puzzled, posing:

EMMA: Why?

ROBERT: Oh… not much more to say on that subject, really, is there?

EMMA: What do you consider the subject to be?

ROBERT: Betrayal

EMMA: No, it isn't. (63)

Robert's answer, "Betrayal", is the culmination of two layers of misinterpretation. First, by his response, he shifts Emma's question regarding the subject of his dispute with Jerry, and refusal to publish Spinks' work, to an inquiry over the subject of the book. Second, however, Emma reveals that Robert's evaluation of the book's subject incorrect, plainly stating that it is not about betrayal. Nevertheless, Robert is able to speak the word. And thus, he sets the stage for the remainder of a scene that will proceed in notable similarity to *Hamlet's* play-within-a-play, *The Mousetrap*, as Jerry will perform a willfully ignorant, almost maniacal, character to expose his wife's infidelity.

Yet, before this, there is great metatheatrical weight to simply his utterance of the play's title. Such a blatantly self-conscious gesture is certainly rare, if not entirely unique, in Pinter's drama. Begley deems betrayal a "lofty – indeed, hyperbolic – abstraction" (Begley, 118). This definition, combined with the fact the term is an abstract noun, by contradistinction to Pinter's other titles that include either a definite or indefinite article (The Room, A Slight Ache, etc.), is perhaps why "Betrayal" makes its way into utterance in the play. Betrayal's suggestion, as Begley puts it, of "the idiom of melodrama", along with the reflexive utterance of the play's title during a revelatory moment in the play, constitutes a melodramatic gesture that has traditionally puzzled critics for its seemingly over-determined, contrived, deployment (118).[32]

[32] Begley continues his reflection on this Scene with a very astute, though unsympathetic, metatheatrical analysis: "Towards the end of the exchange, it seems as if Pinter is speaking directly to the audience. We immediately question whether the subject of the play is betrayal, what Pinter 'considers the subject to be', … The entire enterprise quickly acquires a shopworn, defeated air. We feel as if there were 'not much more to say on that subject', yet the play perversely prolongs the motions" (Begley, 118).

However, since, as Emma informs us, Spinks' book is not about betrayal, it is clear that Robert purposefully misinterprets the text so that he may say the word. Moreover, it is also possible that, since Spinks' literary talents were discovered by Jerry but opposed by Robert (he notes earlier, "Spinks is his [Jerry's] boy. He discovered him"), the book represents to Robert a fissure in his relationship with Jerry (Pinter, 63). The book has been published and is therefore a by-product of Jerry's dismal of Robert's opinion. Now in the hands of his unfaithful wife, the object may now signify, for Robert, the even greater discord in their relationship. In any event, the underlying subject of the book is forgotten, and Robert's willful misinterpretation takes over. Here, Robert's tactic may be compared to established opinions on melodrama's limitations as a genre. Begley observes that melodrama possesses a longing for full emotional disclosure and transparency (Begley, 118). And *Betrayal's* alignment with melodrama, and this particular fault, formulates much of the critical opposition to this play (this is considered in the opening of this chapter). In this longing for full emotional disclosure and transparency, scholars have argued that something is left out. Namely, they argue that the achievement of this transparency is merely an appearance, one that inextricably forgets vast swaths of human experience. As Robert Gordon contends, *Betrayal* may have been inspired by Samuel Beckett's *Come and Go* (1966), "a haunting eight-minute 'dramaticule', that Gordon sees a possible parody of melodrama. He explains, "the play [*Come and Go*] reduces a whole lifetime of human friendships to a pattern of betrayals" (Gordon, 128). By merely depicting nine fragments – some drama, some banal – in the lives of Robert, Jerry, and Emma, there is little doubt we do not receive the full picture. In this respect, like the way in which Robert's strategy ignores the actual subject matter of Emma's book, many critics have argued that *Betrayal* (specifically its melodramatic features) forgets vital aspects of the human experience.

However, *Betrayal* consistently reminds its audience of their limited perspective. Once an audience member learns that the play is proceeding in reverse chronology, they may expect that the particular memories characters articulate will manifest onstage in a forthcoming scene. After all, they could argue, it is clear that these memories are important to the characters that recount them – and therefore it is likely they are, by extension, important to the story.[33] Here, I instance two salient examples. In Scene 6, Jerry recalls, "Listen, do you remember, when was it a few years ago, we were all in your kitchen, … all the kids were running about and I suddenly I picked Charlotte up and lifted her high up, high up, and then down and up. Do you remember how she laughed? … And there was your husband and my wife and all the kids, all standing and laughing in your kitchen. I can't get rid of it" (Pinter, 84).[34] This memory's meaning is ambiguous. Perhaps it is apart of the value Jerry attaches to their ability to conceal the affair, per his assertion in Scene 1, "We were brilliant. Nobody knew" (16). Whatever the specific meaning the memory holds for Jerry, it is clear he finds it highly significant. Similarly, Robert recounts in Scene 7, "I can't bear being back in London. I was happy, … on Torcello, when I walked about Torcello in the early morning, alone, I was happy, I wanted to stay there for ever" (99). Neither of these moments are shown in the play. Yet, Pinter's characters have clearly interpreted these memories, and many others like them, as highly meaningful to their lives. During the penultimate scene of the play, Emma asks Jerry, "Tell me … have you ever thought … of

[33] The fact these references are repeated several times establishes their importance for the characters that articulate them. Jerry recounts his memory of playing with Charlotte twice. He does so in Scene 1, and here again in Scene 6. On both occasions when Jerry's voice this recollection, it is a non-sequitur, he recounts it at the conclusion of a scene, and makes the mistake of stating that the event happened in his kitchen only to be corrected (on both occasions) by Emma.

[34] This memory bears a striking resemblance to one Max's memory of this father in The Homecoming, when he reminisces at the conclusion of the play's first scene, "Our father! I remember him. … He used to come over to me and look down at me. My old mam did. He'd bend right over me, then he'd pick me up. I was only that big. Then he'd dandle me. Give me the bottle. Wipe me clean. Give me a smile. Pat me on the bum. Pass me around, pass me from hand to hand. Toss me up in the air. Catch me coming down. I remember my father" (Pinter, 38).

changing your life?", to which he responds, "It's impossible" (108).[35] Jerry's reply is a very stark, but honest, assessment. And it is made all the more powerful by the fact that we, in part, learn what these characters value most, and the changes they so long for. Emma and Jerry express, at varying times, their desire to end the pretense of their affair, and to live happily together. Robert aspires to live on Torcello "for ever" and read Yeats (99).[36] The simple fact these desires never come to fruition, combined with Jerry's registration of the impossibility of change, formulates a strong counter-argument to an assessment that *Betrayal* is melodramatic. Yet, more importantly, far from ignoring vital aspects of human experience, *Betrayal* is able to frame crucial questions about our experience of time. In a sense, the story's development – as a whole – recalls Mary Tyrone's infamous speech on the burden and structure of time in Eugene's O'Neill's masterpiece *Long Days Journey into Night.* To her husband Tyrone's plea to forget the past, she replies, "Why? How can I? The past is the present, isn't it? It's the future, too. We all try to lie out of that but life won't let us" (O'Neill, 2.2.103).

I argue that the many occasions in this play, when a character references another character who never appears onstage (there are total of twenty-two references to either Casey or Spinks, and yet they never appear onstage), recalls a memory, or meditates on their past decisions and the burden of time, are not merely realist gestures on Pinter's behalf to momentarily trick his audience to believing his characters enjoy lives that stretch beyond the confines of the play. These gestures are neither simply metatheatrical solely for their evocation of dramatic irony: the possibility these characters, instances, and decision, may be later

[35] The play's backward progression explores the notion of what is perceived to be impossible. In Scene 3, Emma remarks to Jerry concerning their past affair, "You see, in the past, … we were inventive, we were determined, it was … it seemed impossible to meet … impossible … and yet we did" (Pinter, 41).
[36] It has been cleverly suggested by David Wheeler that Robert's affinity for Yeats is thematically important since both Jerry and Years experience the feeling of the woman they love being involved with another man (Elliot Norton Reviews, 1978).

manifested or prove consequential; nor are they simply contrived, reflexive, signs – engineered by Pinter for literary credit. Rather, these instances are interpretative acts, whereby characters interpret the moments in their life that afforded them either joy or pain, and anticipate the characteristics of a future that would secure their happiness. I contend that these interpretive acts therefore help counter the criticism that *Betrayal* is a work of melodrama. As I examined earlier in this chapter, *Betrayal* is considered melodramatic because of its subject matter (multiple love-affairs, triangular relationships, deceit, revelations), its supposed admonishment of the character's behaviour, and due to the alleged possibility that character's motivations and truths may be securely apprehended. The metatheatrical character of these interpretative acts challenges both these notions. In examining interpretative acts within the play, I first contend Pinter self-consciously parodies his own title, and the simplistic assessment that a collection of lives can be simply regarded under one heading, or notion of moral failure. Secondly, I argue that it emerges that the principal characters themselves are unsure of their own motivations, actions, and the meaning of their past – thus challenging the notion these aspects may be clearly apprehended.

3.3 *Betrayal* and Radical Skepticism

In addition, to the critical charge that *Betrayal* is melodramatic, several critics (including Begley) have also argued it offers a skeptical vision. Although I partially agree with this reading, I want to explore why this is, and how an exploration of interpretation in this play encourages or discourages this assessment.

Issues of interpretation are at the centre of the play's closing. Chronologically the earliest moments of *Betrayal,* the final Scene (9) commences with Jerry "*sitting in the shadows"* in Robert and Emma's bedroom during a party in 1968 (Pinter, 112). Once Emma enters the room

to comb her hair, Jerry launches into several drunken speeches, in a fumbling attempt to woo her. After Jerry directly confesses his love, Emma warns him, “My husband is at the other side of that door” (115). And at this moment, having learned the danger Robert may discover them alone, he asserts: “Everyone knows. The world knows. It knows. But they’ll never know, they’re in a different world” (115-116). The equivocation that arises from Robert’s mutually held positions, that both “Everyone knows” yet “they’ll never know” is of note. Throughout much of the play, who knows what, and the concealment and management of knowledge, appears incredibly important. Jerry and Emma discuss the nuances of hiding their affair on several occasions. In Scene 8 (1971), Emma asks Jerry whether he thinks his wife, Judith, is aware of his infidelity, and he responds:

> JERRY: … She doesn’t go in for … speculation.
>
> EMMA: But what about clues? Isn’t she interested … to follow clues?
>
> JERRY: What clues?
>
> EMMA: Well, there must be some … available to her … to pick up.
>
> JERRY: There are none … available to her. (107)

Here, Jerry rather naively asserts that Judith does not have the capacity, interest, or evidence to accuse him. And yet, two years later in 1971 (Scene 6), Jerry tells Emma he has been in a “terrible panic”, fearing that he misplaced one of Emma’s letters, an obvious clue. Moreover, he relays that one of his alibis for seeing Emma, a drink with the elusive Spinks, was proved false (84). On this occasion, Jerry explains that he was able to escape further suspicion by telling yet another lie to mask his initial pretense. This development is representative of the nature of deception in the play, as single lies prove to compound into a multitude of falsehoods. As a result, none of the primary characters go undeceived. In Scene 1, Emma informs Jerry that

Robert "betrayed" her, by having "other women for years" (18). The moral ambiguity that stems from mutual infidelity is captured by Jerry's response (and Emma's rebuttal):

> JERRY: No? Good Lord. *Pause.* But we betrayed him for years.
>
> EMMA: And he betrayed me for years. (18)

However, Jerry's greatest concern focuses, not upon the ethics of Robert's actions, but the fact he was unable to detect his friend's secret. In consideration of Jerry's earlier comments about his wife's faulty interpretative capacities, it is possible to see why this realization is so biting. He states:

> What a funny thing. We were such close friends, … but through all those years, all the drinks, all the lunches … we had together, I never gleaned …. I never suspected … that there was anyone else … in his life but you. Never. For example, when you're with a fellow in a pub … from time to time he pops out for a piss, you see, who doesn't, but what I mean is if he's making a crafty telephone call, you can sort of sense it, you see, you can sense the pip pip pips. Well, I never did that with Robert … the funny thing is that it was me who made the pip pip calls – to you, … That's the funny thing. [My ellipses] (19)

Curiously, in place of Emma – who has just learned she has been deceived by her husband for years, it is Jerry who launches into a speech about Robert's dishonesty. What Jerry does not know, however, is that he has also just been deceived. Emma informs Jerry that she only revealed the affair to her husband the night previous, and that he, in turn, confessed his own. However, in the following scene (2), Robert tells Jerry that he actually learned of the affair "four years ago" (29). Consequently, Jerry is outraged, but Robert remains calm throughout the exchange. Silvio Gaggi remarks, "Jerry, the betrayer of his best friend, turns out to be the most

betrayed since he is, on one level at least, the most in the dark regarding the entire situation. Robert, on the other hand, betrayed by his wife and friend, is in this sense least betrayed because, as becomes increasingly clear, he is most aware and least deceived" (Gaggi, 506). Indeed, Robert appears able to discern the source of his friend's injury, insulting him by stating, "you didn't know very much about anything really" (Pinter, 33). This is a rather telling role reversal that emphasizes the primacy of information in this play, since the man who has just confessed to an affair with his best-friend's wife emerges as, paradoxically, more offended than his best-friend.

Of further importance is the language characters use when discussing the disclosure or revelation of knowledge. Repeatedly, characters express their own or a counterpart's relation to knowledge in absolute, or totalizing, terms. Robert accuses Jerry (the following italics are my own emphases) of not knowing "very much about *anything*" (33). In a self-congratulatory manner, Jerry (ironically just before learning his affair has not been a secret for years), asserts, "We we're brilliant. *Nobody* knew" (16). Emma explains that her disclosure of the affair to Robert has been unmitigated, "I told him *everything*" (22). Accordingly, Jerry employs similar language during his speech in Scene 9, he asserts that both "*Everyone* knows" but that "they'll never know" and that "they're in a different world" (115, 116). In certain respects, the distinction Jerry draws between knowing and unknowing may illustrate the difference between a surface/depth understanding of his affection for Emma. Namely, that while "everyone knows" or may know of their infidelity, they cannot know (in their place in "a different world") the depth of his affection for her. However, Jerry's language –particularly that it conveys two beliefs that cannot be held, with veracity, at the same time (i.e. everyone knowing, and not being able to know)– also articulates the notion that it does not matter whether people know or do not know. This ethic, of course, runs contrary to the value placed on the capacity to uncover or possess

knowledge throughout much of the play that was just now examined. Yet, it perfectly matches what critics have identified as a skeptical vision that runs throughout the play.

In this respect, a great deal of attention is placed upon Robert. Indeed, Robert's behaviour in Scene 2, is of significance far beyond the notion that his nonchalance regarding his wife's infidelity is a fascinating counterpoint to Jerry's rage. While Jerry struggles to come to grips with the fact his friend knew of the affair for so long, yet did nothing, Robert declares, "You don't seem to understand. You don't seem to understand that I don't give a shit about any of this. It's true I've hit Emma once or twice. But that wasn't to defend a principle. I wasn't inspired to do it from any moral standpoint. I just felt like giving her a good bashing. The old itch … you understand (33).[37] The stated absence of principle behind his abhorrent actions appears to pervade throughout the play, and helps to explain his rash, often antithetical, behaviour towards Emma. A short while later in this same scene, Robert tells Jerry, in a statement laden with innuendo, "I hope she [Emma] looked after you all right" (34). His statement maybe a masochistic front, yet it appears that, on the whole, there is little Robert cares for, and no principle by which he abides. And indeed, many of the bare, constituent, details of his life appear rather tragic. He is man who detests his profession since he is a publisher who "hates books" (97). He is a man betrayed by his wife and best friend, who in turn betrays his wife by taking lovers. Concurrently, he misleads his best-friend by never revealing his knowledge of the affair, and deceives his wife by never admitting to an affair of his own. Markedly, we never see Robert free from the knowledge (learned in Scene 5, 1973) of his wife's affair, save for his brief appearance in Scene 9, in 1968. As such, the paradox that is Robert's behaviour throughout the

[37] Robert's attitude and expression is highly reminiscent of Lenny in *The Homecoming* (1964). Specifically, his description of beating a prostitute during his first encounter with Ruth in Act One that closes with Ruth posing, "How did you know she was diseased?" to which Lenny replies: "I decided she was" (Pinter, *The Homecoming,* 31).

play has often been described by critics as either highly skeptical, nihilistic, or generally pessimistic.

Although I believe this characterization to be valid, it is of considerable significance that the first chronological expression of what could be construed as nihilism, namely a skepticism that anything in the world has any real existence or meaning, is first articulated by Jerry (OED 1, 2a).[38] In his speech in Scene 9, that I referenced earlier, he states: "I can't believe that what anyone is [,] at this moment [,] saying [,] has ever happened [,] has ever happened. Nothing has ever happened. Nothing. This is the only thing that has ever happened. Your eyes kill me. I'm lost" (116). By claiming that "nothing has ever happened", Jerry questions traditional notions of reality with particular reference to time (116). The sentiment is noticeably dismissive of the past, and its role in shaping the present. Therefore, it is extremely enigmatic that this belief is expressed at the end of a play that, by its backward trajectory, causally traces the importance of the character's former actions. Yet, this conviction is nevertheless able to explain Robert's (what we know of them) future actions. That his continued participation in an affair, that holds such blatantly obvious consequences, is explained by a belief that rejects the importance of the past and is therefore fundamentally indifferent to consequences is rather intuitive.[39] Moreover, if we re-examine Jerry's statements earlier in the same speech that both "Everyone knows" but that "they'll never know", and its nihilistic resonances that knowledge is insignificant, a substantial connection may be found to one Pinter's most popular philosophies. Both in his Nobel Prize address and the infamous programme notes for *The Room* and *The Dumb Waiter,* Pinter claims

[38] OED definitions of nihilism: 1. Total rejection of prevailing religious beliefs, moral principles, laws, etc., 2.a. *Philos.* The belief or theory that the world has no real existence; the rejection of all notions of reality.
[39] The sentiment may also be considered metatheatrical since is also possesses anti-deterministic undertones. At this point, the audience is aware that a great deal of things will happen as a result of Jerry's affection for Emma. And yet, the audience must also be aware that Jerry is unaware of these outcomes.

"there are no hard distinctions between what is real and unreal, nor between what is true and false; it can be both true and false" (Scolnicov, 20). From Pinter's statement, their follows a challenge to the importance of knowledge. As for Jerry, here, knowledge is considered irrelevant. As I have argued, this position runs contrary to the importance characters place on knowledge in this play. However, I further argue it additionally issues a challenge to the value of interpretation. In this sense, everything this play has seemingly been about (the primacy of information, and the promotion and discouragement of certain interpretations of events), not only for the play's characters but its audience and critics too, is thrown into question by the beliefs Jerry expresses in this speech.

This challenge is highly relevant in the closing moments of the play. After Jerry and Emma share a kiss, Robert enters the room. Obviously, this is highly interpretative moment for him. Emma has just broken away from Jerry, and therefore the pair stand awkwardly apart. Jerry then tells Robert the fumbling half-lie, "I decided to take this opportunity to tell your wife how beautiful she was" (116). After Robert responds, "quite right", Jerry professes total honesty, "It is quite right, to … to face up to the facts … and to offer a token, without blush, a token of one's unalloyed appreciation, no hold barred" (117). The play concludes moments later, with Robert exiting, while Jerry and Emma "*stand still looking at each other"* (117). Accordingly, whether or not Robert suspects his wife infidelity is left totally ambiguous. Silvio Gaggi argues that this final interaction is a *coup du théâtre* that promotes a revaluation of the entire play up to that point (Gaggi, 514).[40] In a play where critics (like Gordon) have argued that all truths are revealed, I posit that the fact the play poses this question, yet holds back from providing an answer, is a significant return to a typically Pinteresque state of ambiguity. It is of further

[40] Gaggi contends, "It is difficult to believe that Robert leaves the room, rejoins the party, and doesn't notice the amount of time which Emma and Jerry must inevitably have spent together" (Gaggi, 514).

importance, moreover, that just prior to this interpretative event, Jerry questions the value and capabilities of interpretation itself.

3.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, a considerable amount of *Betrayal's* critical reception has centred upon the play's possession of both some of the form and content of melodrama along with a skeptical vision. Indeed, the clash between these two characteristics has been central to many critical debates. To contribute towards a resolution of this issue, in my reading I have proposed examining issues of interpretation that arise within the play. In doing so, I found that interpretative acts, the promotion, and discouragement of particular interpretations, were revealed to collapse repeatedly. Therefore, I argue that in *Betrayal* Pinter issues a challenge to the value and abilities of interpretative acts, in general. And moreover, that traditional readings of this play that claim to uncover a nihilistic or skeptical vision are a consequence of this challenge.

3.5 Summary of the Play

Since *Betrayal* is a narratively complex play (by contradiction to *A King of Alaska* and *Party Time,* I offer the following summary of the play. Scene 1 (penultimate in chronological terms) occurs in 1977, with Emma and her former-lover Jerry meeting at a pub. We learn that Jerry is best-friends and business partners with Emma's husband, Robert. Emma informs Jerry that she and Robert have decided on a divorce, and that she confessed to the affair the previous night. However, Jerry soon discovers Emma has lied. Scene 2 takes place only hours later, with Robert meeting Jerry at his house. Here, the audience is tricked into believing the play will proceed in a forward chronology. In this scene, Jerry is distraught and eager to explain himself, but Robert clarifies that, despite what Emma has just told him, he has known about the affair for four years. Scene 3, takes place in 1975 at a flat Jerry and Emma use to conceal their relationship. Here, the affair draws to a close, with Emma noting, "we've made absolutely the right decision" (Pinter, 47). By Scene 4, occurring in 1974 with Jerry paying a visit to Robert and Emma's home, it is clear that Robert actively conceals his knowledge of his wife's affair from Jerry. Scenes 5 through 7 occur in 1973, and move forward chronologically. In Scene 5 while on vacation in Italy, Robert uncovers the affair and, after a long interrogation, Emma concedes, "We're lovers" (69). Thereafter, in Scene 6, Emma and Jerry reunite after Emma's lengthy vacation. Since Roberts now knows of the affair, Emma is unsettled to learn he and Jerry have lunch plans. And yet, in the following Scene (7) that depicts this lunch, Robert never explicitly challenges Jerry with his knowledge of his betrayal. Instead, in a manner similar to his deft suggestions and provocations that engineers Emma's confession of infidelity two scenes earlier, Robert obliquely references Emma and Jerry's shared literary taste. Tellingly, the scene concludes with Robert prying, "You must come and have a drink sometime. She'd love to see you" (100). And indeed, Jerry and Emma do meet in the following scene (8). However, surprisingly, the encounter takes place two years earlier in 1971, at the outset of Emma and Jerry's affair. Emma tells Jerry that she has become pregnant by her husband, while Jerry was away in America. The banal practicalities of a secretive adult relationship colour this otherwise enthralling encounter. Emma is concerned over the flat's unhomely, sterile, aesthetic, while Jerry worries over his wife Judith's potential affair of her own. The play's final scene (9) is chronologically the earliest. It takes place in 1968 during a party at Robert and Emma's home. Jerry corners Emma and confesses his love for her. They kiss, but Emma rebuffs his advances just as Robert enters. The play then concludes ambiguously, with Jerry confessing to only informing Emma of her beauty, with Robert departing, and Jerry and Emma standing still "looking at each other" (117).

Chapter Four: *Kind of Alaska* (1981)

If, as Robert Gordon argues, *Betrayal* (1978) represents a turn in Pinter's career, whereby "For once Pinter … incontrovertibly exposes the lies that obfuscate truth" and "unambiguously reveal[s] the truth beneath each pretense", then *A Kind of Alaska* (1981), Pinter's next full-length play, may signal a sharp return to "the typically Pinterian epistemological drama that depicts the impossibility of attaining true knowledge" (Gordon, 128). In my reading of *Betrayal* however, I contest such critical opinions of the play, namely that it offers stable interpretative possibilities, and instead argue that the play's overriding metatheatrical character challenges this idea. Likewise, in my reading of *Alaska,* by again focusing on metatheatre, I will also question traditional critical attitudes that classify this play as merely staging the impossibility of attaining true knowledge. Overall, I argue that in *Alaska* Pinter expands on his challenge to playwrights and critics who assume, or attempt to uncover, a character's full history and psychology. I maintain he does so by exposing Hornby and Pauline's failed interpretative strategies. To this end, my forthcoming analysis will be broken into two sections. In the first, I will introduce and explore the play's dominant themes by comparing it to *Betrayal* and Pinter's creative process. In the second, I will argue that, rather than staging interpretative issues, *Alaska's* extremely prominent metatheatricality confronts its audience with the character Hornby's failed interpretative strategies and their consequences.

4.1 Comparisons

Alaska, is a brief one act play, inspired by Oliver Sacks' ground-breaking study *Awakenings* (1973). It tells the story of Deborah, a middle-aged woman who awakens from a comatose-like state after nearly thirty years. She has suffered from *encephalitis lethargica* – or

the sleeping sickness, an "extraordinary epidemic illness" where "the worst affected sank into singular states of 'sleep' – conscious of their surroundings but motionless, speechless, and without hope or will" (Pinter, 151). However, Deborah has been revived by an injection "of the remarkable drug L-DOPA" by her doctor, and brother-in-law, Hornby (151). Upon her awakening, she is convinced that she has only been asleep for a short-while. As the play proceeds, Hornby and Deborah's sister, Pauline, question her on the nature of her present experience and past memories as she struggles to comprehend her awakening.

There are strong similarities in the language featured in *Betrayal* and *Alaska*. Towards the end of *Betrayal,* Jerry maintains, "Nothing has ever happened. Nothing. This is the only thing that has ever happened" (116). Two statements in *Alaska* resonate with Jerry's assertion. The first is the opening line of the play, spoken by Deborah, she states, "Something is happening" (153). The initial contrast between Jerry's closing speech and Deborah's inaugural claim is both sharp and clear. Jerry denies the possibility of past action: the prospect that past events have ever occurred, while Deborah (rather) emphasizes that "something" is occurring at present. However, this distinction is not so severe if Jerry's following sentiment is examined. He notes, "This is the only thing that has ever happened" (116). His emphasis on the present moment, a gesture that is notably similar to Deborah's own, clarifies that Jerry's preceding denial of the past is likely a strategy to accentuate his absorption in the present. Conversely then, it is rather Deborah's emphasis on the present that appears unfounded or, at least, strange. This is pronounced by the fact that Deborah's knowledge of her own history is tenuous. In this respect, Jerry's statement, "nothing has ever happened", is seemingly the more appropriate conviction for Deborah to possess. And indeed, a short time later in the play Deborah confesses, "Nothing has happened to me. I've been nowhere" (166). This avowal constitutes the second statement that echoes Jerry's

closing speech in *Betrayal,* and it is highly similar in purely syntactic terms. However, to return to Deborah's enigmatic opening line, her pre-occupation with the present, though very curious, may also be considered appropriate, particularly her use of the present-tense. That something *happened* (rather than happening) is, merely, one of the most obvious statements Deborah can make. For this reason, such a statement would be barely more revealing than the other two past-tense statements that I have just explored (in *Betrayal* and *Alaska*), that instead employ the pronoun "nothing". But the notion that "something is happening", although equally uninformative and elemental, is much more compelling – and indeed suitable. It implies the realization, the *Cogito,* that something is indeed occurring and is thus highly appropriate for the awakening of a sleeping sickness victim since it signals a capacity for dynamic, second-order, cognition (Sacks, 15).

In this regard, it is evident from the preliminary moments of *Alaska* that Pinter continues his abiding interest in covering a deeply existential territory; and so too is his commitment to exploring skeptical attitudes on the nature of being and time. Yet, as many critics have noted, *Alaska* is a radically unique play in Pinter's oeuvre. In her essay "Pinter and the Critics" rendered in the second edition of the *Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter* (2009), Yael Zarhy-Levo argues that in *Alaska* Pinter ventured to liberate himself from the confinement of the critic and reviewer's construct of his artistic identity (Zarhy-Levo, 255). In partial relation to Zahry-Levo's point, I contend that in *Alaska* Pinter formulates a dramatic scenario that allows his characters to make direct assertions that align with his stated artistic beliefs, specifically as they relate to his creative process.

In some of his earliest comments as an established playwright, Pinter issued well-known challenges to both playwrights and audience members who assumed, and indeed sought-after,

unmitigated access to a character's history and psychology (Esslin, 30) Accordingly, Pinter defied the idea that a character's motivations and inner truths could be easily accessible or revealed (30). In *Alaska,* Deborah's psychology is undetermined because her cognitive capacities have only recently been restored. Moreover, her history is literally inaccessible since her memory of the twenty-nine years she was ill is extremely unclear. This is true not only for the audience, but also to her newly awakened mind. Crucially, moreover, this fact is not merely hinted-at, nor is it histrionically revealed at a dramatic moment in the story. Rather, throughout the play, Hornby consistently asks Deborah questions about her past and sense-of-self that she either continually ignores, or responds to incoherently. In this respect, Hornby may be thought of as occupying the position of the playgoer, critic, or playwright Pinter opposes. Namely, one who operates under the premise that a character's biographical information is fully open to discovery, and who is eager to confirm or uncover as much undisclosed detail as possible. This, however, is not to say that Hornby's inquiries appear out-of-place, or forced. Indeed, there is a very comprehensible medical and personal basis for the examination of his sister-in-law. Nonetheless, it is still worthwhile to highlight that Hornby, in certain respects, manifests the desire for verification located in the highly inquisitive audience member, or critic conducting a character study, that Pinter openly challenges. Thus, in my reading, I aim to explore the possibility that within *Alaska* Pinter advances his operative position (for his own creative process) that challenges the realist exercise, so prominent in early twentieth-century drama, whereby characters over-explain their motivations and history to the audience (30).

4.2 *Alaska's* Metatheatricality

In his essay "Henry V's Character Conflict" James Wells contends, "Henry's concern with self-authenticity is appropriate for how the play is recreating on stage the experience of the audience. Because Harry is a fiction, his legitimacy can never be more than an illusion … By worrying over his own legitimacy, Harry is merely staging a more political form of the experience the audience is already having with him" (Wells, 233). Wells' metatheatrical insight is uniquely suited to, in this case, the Henriad but also (Shakespeare's) historical drama in general. In these plays, characters adopt, question, and challenge tangible roles (usually monarchial) that carry with them a host of ideological imperatives and responsibilities that often subsume a character's identity. Although Wells' assertion is not necessarily intended to be so mobile, I want to try applying it to the case at-hand. In the context of *Henry V,* Harry agonizes over his legitimacy as king. Although Deborah hardly shares such a dramatic or political problem or role, she, and her two family members, possess a similar concern for self-authenticity. This feature, disregarding the mere fact that both Harry and Deborah are fiction (though Henry V is enshrined in the historical imaginary), is a modest, though notable, similarity between these two characters. If Wells maintains that Harry's self-reflection "stages a more political form of the experience the audience is already have with him", what then, do Deborah's similar concerns do for the audience (233)? To begin formulating an answer to this question, I note that I erect such an unobvious contrast between Harry and Deborah because it serves to emphasize, first, that Deborah does not hold, or plan to subsume, any role whatsoever. In fact, even if Deborah were to find herself a member of the royal family awaiting to assume the throne, unlike Harry her occupation of a role, political or otherwise, would not provoke an identity crisis since she barely has an identity. The underlying facts that often help inform an individual's sense

of selfhood are in flux, "I am twelve. No. I am sixteen. I am seven. *Pause.* I don't know. Yes. I know. I am fourteen. I am fifteen. I'm lovely fifteen" Deborah guesses early in the play (Pinter, 158).[41] In this way, the play scrutinizes the most elemental notions of selfhood. Deborah does not have a role to constitute a new identity, or to subsume an old one, nor access to the standard pieces of information (age, history, past relationships) that are traditionally considered imperative to one's sense of self. Nevertheless, the examination of Deborah's identity (both her own, and with Hornby's aid) in this play is appropriate (to borrow from Wells) for how the play is recreating on stage the experience of audience that is equally unaware of her identity.[42]

This line of inquiry is an excellent inlet for thinking about the function and importance of metatheatre in *Alaska.* In the context of *Henry V,* Harry is worried about both his legitimacy and authenticity – specifically, in relation to kingship. Whereas in *Alaska,* Deborah's concerns are much more existential. Therefore, if *Alaska* recreates the experience the audience is already having in relation to Deborah, then that experience must be more rudimentary than any concern for a character's political legitimacy. Indeed, upon closer examination, the audience's experience of Deborah is, markedly, not unlike Hornby's fictional one. Obviously, the idea that Hornby (in his capacity as her caretaker and brother-in-law) is more aware of Deborah's fictional history is a given. However, as his very basic questions reveal, Hornby is *as* unware of Deborah's self-identity as the audience. His questions are metatheatrical, therefore, simply because they indirectly reveal that Hornby's ignorance of Deborah's character is commensurate with the audience's unfamiliarity. Furthermore, it is worth emphasizing that the audience's restricted

[41] In fact, she was sixteen when the sleeping sickness suddenly struck her. And indeed, at many times her language and demeanour reflect her underdevelopment. Hornby explains to her, "You have been asleep for a very long time. You are older, although you do not know that. You are still young, but older" (155). This issue additionally foregrounds Deborah's sense of disbelief at the sight of her own, developed, breasts later in the play.
[42] Moreover, Deborah's unformed identity indirectly articulates her vulnerability.

access to Deborah's biographical information is akin to even her own ignorance of her past. And yet, such a reflection of the audience's position of ignorance to a character's history and motivations is not only restricted to Deborah. Rather, Pinter achieves a pervasive sense of metatheatre that runs throughout this play simply through the, rather economical, means of creating one character who is unaware of her history and is uncertain of her identity. Hornby's opening question, "Do you know me?", foregrounds this problem since it signals, simultaneously, both Deborah and the audience's unfamiliarity with Hornby's character.

Likewise, Pauline's anxiety before speaking to Deborah for the first time (in twenty-nine years) upholds the idea that the audience is accordingly unaware of the 'truth' as it pertains to the characters shared history in this story. She asks Hornby, "Shall I tell her lies or the truth?" (177). Over the course of Pauline's explanations that follow, the audience, just like Deborah, cannot identify the veracity of these statements with any degree of certainty. In this way, *Alaska's* pervasive metatheatrical character is predicated on an epistemological, or interpretative issue: the inability for both characters and audience members to access or verify information. My objective, here, is neither to wholly resolve this issue, nor will it be, however, to ignore it. Rather, I will examine Hornby's strategies to circumvent this interpretive problem through his examination of Deborah.

In the opening moments of the play, Hornby asks Deborah a series of questions, "Do you know me? *Silence.* Do you recognize me? *Silence.* Can you hear me? … Do you know who I am? *Pause.* Who am I" (153-154). His strategy is rather simple, but it fails in two respects. Concerning the first, Hornby aims to better understand Deborah's reawakened cognitive state by

determining whether or not she is able identify him.[43] Yet, in response to his questions, Deborah states, "You are no one" (155). This is a blow to Hornby's tactic. Its logic depends on the idea that Deborah's ability or inability to identify him will reveal something about her own identity, namely the extent of her memory. Through her response, however, Deborah not only denies Hornby's identity, but fails to imply anything meaningful about her own (other than that she possibly cannot remember him). Hornby's strategy also does not succeed because it fails to account for the importance of Deborah's inability to recall any intelligible memories during the time of her illness. At this point, a meaningful distinction can be made between the two types of recollections Deborah has in this play. The first kind may be deemed pre-illness memories. Although obscured by time, Deborah recalls several memories before the onset of the sleeping sickness. The second kind may be classified as sleeping sickness memories, i.e. memories that derive from sometime over the duration of her illness. These recollections are vague and uncertain. And Deborah's inability to recognize Hornby (combined with his later statement that he has cared for her "all this time") is one of the first indications she is unable to remember this time.

Unfortunately, this inability has substantial implications. Most significantly, Deborah's inadequate memory of the years she was ill affords both Hornby and Pauline exclusive authorial control over the nature of events during this time, and I argue they take advantage of this fact. Towards the conclusion of this play, both Hornby and Pauline try and convey to Deborah that they have suffered greatly because of her illness. These efforts appear, at worst, petty, and, at the least, pointless. Shortly after her entrance into the play, Pauline explains that Deborah's sudden

[43] Though unassuming, Hornby's questions are quite useful to a reader or audience member. If answered affirmatively or negatively, they will inform us, at the very least, whether Hornby and Deborah are associates or strangers.

illness was extremely traumatic for her. Hornby then helps confirm this sentiment, "She has been coming to see you regularly … for a long time. She has suffered for you. She has never forsaken you. Nor have I" (183). Accordingly, he attempts to convey the details of his own sacrifice, "I have been your doctor for many years … It was I who took the vase from your hands. I lifted you onto this bed, like a corpse. Some wanted to bury you. I forbade it. I have nourished you, watched over you, for all this time … I have never let you go" (184). Despite their best efforts, the importance of these speeches are lost on Deborah. Indeed, she barely reacts after Hornby's explanation, merely stating, "I want to go home. *Pause.* I am cold", before changing the subject entirely by asking, "Is it my birthday soon?" (185). Although Deborah is unable to fully comprehend their sacrifice, Hornby and Pauline's attempt to convey it is understandable.[44] Certainly, their care for her has come at a substantial cost. Hornby suggests that, because his care for her has been so time consuming, Pauline (his wife) is now a widow (185). The sheer extent of their support for her has then annulled their former, co-dependent, identities as husband and wife, and in its wake – their sense of the past and their identity is tied to their roles as Deborah's caretaker.

Curiously however, during his articulation of their sacrifice, Hornby, not for the first time, implies that much of Deborah's life has been a waste. He states, "You see, you have been nowhere, absent, indifferent" (184). Since Hornby's examination of Deborah comprises the majority of this play, it is worth asking: Why does this interrogation take place? What makes him think he is entitled to answers? What gives him the authority to interrogate at all? Although the answers to these questions can never be decidedly known, it is of importance that Hornby largely

[44] And yet, the spirit of his explanation seems to run contrary to his earlier efforts to assuage any guild Deborah may be feeling. For instance, after Deborah posits, "I've obviously committed a criminal offence and am now in prison … I can't imagine what offence it could be. I mean one that would bring … such a terrible sentence", Hornby responds, "This is not a prison. You have committed no offense" (166).

ignores Deborah's answers to his questions. Unquestionably, his efforts may be considered simply an extension of the care he has provided. To attempt to re-integrate Deborah's awakened mind slowly and carefully back into reality no doubt serves an important medical purpose. And yet, given the lengthy and determined nature of his description of the personal cost of Deborah's care, and his failure to pay close attention to her responses, the question of Hornby's motives and means of interrogation acquire significance. Again, I do not intend to proffer the meaning or motivation of Hornby's questions. Rather, I note that, as the play progresses, the audience becomes aware that Deborah's ability to recall her history, and sense of identity, is highly unstable. In this way, I contend that the play, eventually, refracts the audience's natural curiosity over Deborah psychology and identity to a, more pressing, attempt to discern Hornby's motivations and strategies of interpretation.

Here, it is worthwhile to mention that Deborah's detailed account of the pain of sleeping sickness outweighs Hornby's grievances. After what appears to be a relapse into her sickness, and a more detailed description of her agony, she explains, "I'll tell you what it is. It's a vast series of halls. With enormous interior windows masquerading as walls. The windows are mirrors, you see. And glass reflects glass. For ever and ever" (189). One need not possess Hornby or Pauline's investment of time, emotion, or effort to find this account compelling. Notably, like almost every instance in which Deborah describes her memories of the illness, her language is highly metaphorical. More importantly, however, these descriptions are ignored. Early in the play, Deborah's first depiction of her illness is quite literal and clear. She states, "People have been looking at me. They have been touching me. I spoke, but I don't think they heard what I said" (156). This recollection also recalls only the third line in the play, delivered in the present-tense, suggesting that Deborah cannot yet determine she has awoken, "No one hears

what I say. No one is listening to me" (154). And yet, this present-tense declaration may also be considered highly appropriate. Twice, Hornby accuses Deborah of not listening to him. First, at the outset of the play, he asks, "I would like you to listen to me" (155). Second, towards the end of the play, he pleads, "Deborah. Listen. You're not listening" (182). Ironically, however, Hornby delivers these charges immediately after ignoring her.

Moreover, at the end the play, Deborah proves that, unlike her counterparts, she has indeed been listening by summarizing the key details of Hornby's explanations, "You say I have been asleep. You say I am now awake. You say I have not awoken from the dead. You say I was not dreaming then and am not dreaming now. You say I have always been alive and am alive now. You say I am a woman" (190). The terse, successive, delivery of these lines suggests that Deborah is not fully confident in Hornby's explanations. At the very least, her repetition of the qualification "You say" emphasizes that she must take everything Hornby and Pauline has told her on faith. To that end, in the final lines of the play that follow, Deborah rehearses explanations given to her by Pauline that are highly suspect, "*She looks at* Pauline, *then back at* Hornby. She is a widow … Mummy and Daddy and Estelle are on a world cruise. They've stopped off in Bangkok. It'll be my birthday soon. I think I have the matter in proportion" (190). Although, as I have noted, Pauline may claim to be a widow to illustrate her sacrifice, it nonetheless contradicts Hornby's earlier assertion they were married when she was twenty. More problematically still, Hornby informs Deborah positively, "Your mother is dead", only moments after Pauline has told her the family is a "world cruise" (184, 177). By holding these sentiments, it is apparent that Deborah does not, in fact, "have the matter in proportion" (190).

3.0 Conclusion

Deborah's illusion at the end of the play, that seems to recognize Hornby and Pauline's stories as coherent, has important metatheatrical implications. Whereas Deborah may be unable to detect these contradictions, the audience certainly can. Thus, by confronting his audience with such blatant contradictions, I argue that Pinter, at-large, promotes the judgment of, not simply Deborah's various answers in this play, but the nature and strategy behind Hornby's questions.[45] Straying from any attempt to uncover Hornby's motives, I instead focus on the fact that the emerging importance of Hornby's questions signals a turn in the audience's curiosity from, what turns out to be, Deborah's inaccessible depth – to the motives and strategies of Hornby's interrogation. In this way, I contend, overall, that in *Alaska* Pinter expands on his challenge to playwrights and critics who assume, or attempt to uncover, a character's full history and psychology. Here, Pinter does so by exposing not only the failure of Hornby and Pauline's interpretative strategies, but by emphasizing how these interpretative strategies are highly motivated.

[45] This issue helps explain what may be considered an interesting reversal in *Alaska,* as it is Hornby, the questioner, rather than Deborah, who appears evasive, reticent, and untrustworthy.

Chapter Five: *Party Time* (1991)

5.1 Pinter's Politics

When asked about his view on the value and nature of political theatre, in a 1985 interview with Benedict Nightingale, Pinter responded by reading a comment from Peter Hagelstein – a leading nuclear physicist[46]:

> 'My view of weapons has changed. Until 1980 or so, I did not want anything to do with nuclear anything. Back in those days, I thought there was something fundamentally evil about weapons. Now, I see it as an interesting physics problem' Now, look, this man is really there. He is at the hilt. At the top of his profession. And what he is doing, and what he is encouraged to do … is to look at things as abstractions. That's how I understand his assertion. And that is what I think we are all encouraged to do. ("Harold Pinter with Benedict Nightingale" Writers Talk Series, 1985)

Pinter's focus on the concept of abstraction is quite remarkable. He posits that it is the desired end of, ostensibly, the state to press its citizens to think abstractly. And his specific example here, namely thinking of a nuclear bomb not as a weapon but as a science problem, illustrates the sheer dissonance between an entity or concept's real characteristics and its promoted abstraction.

Prior to this response, Nightingale suggests that Pinter's most recent work (at the time), *One for the Road* (1985), is more *directly* political than any of his previous drama (Nightingale, 1985). Indeed, Nightingale's comment may be considered prophetic since *One for the Road*

[46] Peter Hagelstein is a compelling figure. In 1986, The Washington Post reported that Hagelstein, a "brilliant but ethically troubled young scientist" had quit weapons research. As young man of only twenty, Hagelstein was recruited by the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, one of two nuclear weapons research centres in the United States (at the time). There, "Hagelstein invented a form of X-ray laser that is powered by a hydrogen bomb explosion and showed promise as a space weapon that could destroy Soviet nuclear missiles in flight" (Washington Post, September 11, 1986, "Troubled Laser Scientist Quitting Weapons Work").

initiated a series of more overtly political works, such as: *Mountain Language* (1988), *Party Time* (1991), *The New World Order* (1991) and *Ashes to Ashes* (1996) (Gordon, 163). Although each of these plays, undoubtedly, deal with political themes (torture, authoritarianism, proto-fascism), the assessment that Pinter's late theatre is more overtly or directly political is complicated by two factors. First, Pinter has consistently repudiated the idea that his work has any social or political intent (Begley, 18). In his essay, "Writing for Myself", he maintains, "No, I'm not committed as a writer, in the usual sense of the term, either religiously or politically. And I'm not conscious of any particular social function … I don't carry any banners" (Scolnicov, 117). The second factor is encapsulated by Mireia Aragay in her essay "Pinter, politics and postmodernism" (rendered in *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*). She states that Pinter's late drama has "led critics of Pinter's work to speculate as to whether they embody a fresh departure by which the playwright's oeuvre has become openly, ostensibly political as opposed to his earlier, more metaphorical explorations of power games, or whether, on the contrary, it has been political through and through from the very start" (Aragay, 283). Underwriting Aragay's statement is the notion that Pinter's late drama is *seemingly* overtly political, whereas his earlier work is not. Thus, her comment may be accurately summarized as wondering whether critics have classified Pinter's late drama as distinct from his early work, without having clearly articulated any difference between them. Further complicating matters is the fact that the burden of proof for articulating this distinction rests on the shoulders of critics who have only managed to argue that Pinter's late work is different by employing such vague terms as "explicit", "overt" and "direct". In his interview with Nightingale, Pinter acknowledges that *One for the Road* engages with political subject matter. But when urged by Nightingale to elaborate on this point, Pinter merely responded by expressing his creative process, noting, "My

experience, over twenty-five years, has always been to let the thing happen. To not know exactly what is going to happen … I do work out a structure, but I've always let the thing happen" (Nightingale, 1985). The enterprise of letting "the thing happen" appears to run contrary to the engineered, committed, engagement with politics so visible in the British realist or New Wave dramatists (of the late 1950s/early 1960s) and the agit-prop theatre of the 1970s. And therefore, by this response, Pinter merely re-emphasizes the current question at-hand: namely, what indeed (if any) is the difference between his early and late work? I believe a closer examination of the notion of abstraction, and how this concept is incorporated in Pinter's drama, may shed light on this matter.

5.2 *Party Time* (1991)

In *Party Time,* I argue that Pinter exposes the use of abstract language as a political strategy to cancel the possibility of stable interpretation, and to encourage passivity.

The story of *Party Time* unfolds in one, brief, act. At "*Gavin's flat*" eight well-to-do characters enjoy an elegant cocktail party (Pinter, 279). The pleasantries are soon interrupted by Dusty, who inquires what has happened to her brother, Jimmy. However, her entreaties go ignored and are, moreover, violently discouraged by her husband Terry. Thus, an unsettling, unnamed, occurrence seems to hang over the festivities. Two key developments advance this sense of mystery. First, the audience learns that these partygoers are either apart of, or directly related to, an authoritarian political regime. Second, as a conversation between Fred and Douglas confirms, an event to ensure a "cast iron peace" is unfolding outside the party (293). This event is later described as a "bit of a roundup" by Gavin, one that has ostensibly victimized Jimmy (313). The play concludes, nevertheless, with Jimmy himself emerging on stage to deliver a haunting soliloquy.

Were it not for a several key exchanges, *Party Time* could hardly be construed as a political piece of theatre. Rather, the play's focus on the various, and palpably absurd, obsessions of its characters (members of the English upper class) would likely establish this piece as a work of parody. And this classification could hold reasonably well. In many respects, *Party Time* stages a comedic representation of the l980s and early 1990s Western cultural and political elite. Virtually every conversation features discernably hollow expressions of individuality. Far from politics, the influences of commercialism saturate and form the basis of almost every discussion. There is constant talk of an exclusive fitness club, health regimens and diets, along with narrow debates over the most select food, drink, and vacation spots.

Built into the texture of these conversations is the recurring deployment of abstract standards. On this front, the opening exchange between Terry and Gavin serves as a strong example. It is not until the tail end of the discussion that the audience learns, definitively, that Terry is speaking about a new health club. Part of what prolongs the audience's ignorance, of what exactly Terry is referencing, is his repeated and vague declarations "real class" and "its got everything" (281). Even his interlocutor, Gavin, appears confused and an absurd conversation about "hot towels" ensues (282-283). Part of his confusion stems from the fact that Terry's adjective laden description barely conveys any actual information. Towards the end of the discussion he clarifies, "I'm just talking about pure comfort, that's why I'm telling you, the place has got real class, it's got everything" (283). Ostensibly, his assertion underlines the "pure comfort" the club provides. However, for the audience who has no idea Terry is speaking about a health club, the statement, "I'm just talking about pure comfort" may be understood, ironically, as a literal statement (283). However, the partygoer's penchant for abstract language, and that

language's inability to offer any substantive information, is best encapsulated by Liz's following speech, stated as a complete non-sequitur:

> I think this is such a gorgeous party. Don't you? I mean I just think it's such a gorgeous party. Don't you? I think it's such fun. I love the fact that people are so well dressed. Casual but good. Do you know what I mean? Is it silly to say I feel proud? I mean to be part of the society of beautifully dressed people? Oh God I don't know, elegance, style, grace, taste, don't these words, these concepts, mean anything any more? I'm not alone, am I, in thinking them incredibly important? Anyway I love everything that flows. I can't tell you how happy I feel. (299)

In one sense, Liz's speech underscores the social hierarchy in this gathering. Throughout the play, the characters' deference towards Gavin and Melissa implies their governing status.[47] And here, Liz's nervous chatter suggests her placement on a lower rung. Furthermore, by calling attention to the constituent aspects of the party (aesthetic, dress, conversation), which comprise the play, Liz's speech also possesses a clear metatheatrical character. Her repeated references to the "gorgeous party", and concurrent desire for her opinions to be validated by her listeners ("Don't you?", "Do you know what I mean", "Is it silly to say I feel proud") positions her as an anxious spectator. Her over-determined descriptions are afforded, not by her comfortable placement within this community, but rather from her uncomfortable position on its borders. However, Liz's most important self-conscious remark registers the unmeaning of her own

[47] Robert Gordon breaks the party into three groups. He contends Gavin and Melissa are at the apex, "with Fred, Douglas, Charlotte and Liz below them, and Pamela, Emily, Suki, Sam, Harlow, and Smith on the lowest rung of the ladder" (Gordon, 175). Moreover, he asserts, "Terry and Dusty's comparative lack of urbanity and Terry's working-class London dialect indicate that they are apart of a class of ambitious 'servants' given privileged access to social rituals of the ruling class in order to do its dirty work" (175). For my part, I contend Terry's "servant" status account for the fact he speaks more than any other character in this play. Indeed, it seems possible that he serves as a spokesperson for the current regime.

statements, “Oh God I don’t know, elegance, style, grace, taste, don’t these words, these concepts, mean anything any more?” (299). When employed tactfully, these words may indeed be highly meaningful. Yet, Liz herself uses the adjective “gorgeous” twice in the space of three lines. In this respect, her incautious deployment of this term answers her own question, of whether the “words” or “concepts” “elegance, style, grace, taste” have retained their meaning, in the negative. Thus, Liz and other characters’ arbitrary and overwrought use of abstract (often aesthetic) standards ousts their language as, indeed, abstract and void of information or substantive meaning.

I call attention to the use of abstract language in these, seemingly innocuous conversations, not simply because these discussions comprise a great deal of the play, but more significantly to emphasize its similar employment in, ostensibly, more serious conversations on politics and morality. To this end, a significant comparison between the club Terry describes and the party itself can be made. Liz’s anxiety over her status and participation in this social gathering is well-justified. This is not simply any party, but is rather an assembly of political elites apart of an authoritarian regime. Unlike Liz, however, most of its participants are comfortable with their status, and therefore are not so eager to describe the constituent aspects of the party, nor their experience of it. Rather, a great deal can be learned about the nature of this party, its participants’ various attitudes and beliefs, and the regime to which they belong, by examining their discussion of the new club Terry praises. Conversation about this club bookends the play. In his opening exchange with Gavin, Terry stresses its exclusivity, “Mind you, there’s a waiting list as long as – I mean you’ve got to be proposed and seconded, and they’ve got to check you out, they don’t let any old spare bugger in there, why should they? … But of course it goes without saying that someone like yourself would be warmly welcome” (283, 284).

However, beyond mere common exclusivity, the association between Terry's club and the political regime is further cemented by a discussion of the club's values. Towards the end of the play, Terry states, "The thing is, it is actually real value for money. Now this is a very, very unusual thing … And what you're getting is absolutely gold-plated service … I'm talking about a truly warm and harmonious environment. You won't find voices raised in your 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" [My ellipses] (309-310). In addition to the requisite social character and personality the club demands, that must be authenticated ("you've got to be proposed and seconded") by pre-existing club members – preventing "any spare bugger" from joining, money is yet another discriminate component of this establishment's selection process. More significantly, Terry's explanation reveals a clear, and ironic, dissonance between the club's institutionalized standards of propriety and the stated repercussions should a member transgress those codes of conducts. Notably, this contradiction parallels the main action of play: namely, a group of the social and political elite conducting themselves (usually) to codified standards of behaviour at a gay social gathering while, as Gavin describes it, a "roundup" of undesirables takes place outside at the behest of the leading partygoers (313).

However, despite this contradiction, it is precisely Terry's articulation of the club's moral standards that impresses Melissa. In highly political terms, she attests, "Can I subscribe to all that has just been said? *Pause.* I would like to subscribe to all that has just been said" (310). A member of Terry's club herself, Melissa advances Terry's emphasis on the club's morality by detailing her personal experiences with similar clubs. After explaining that her "dearest friends" from the former clubs she belonged to "are all of them dead", she states (310):

> But the clubs died too and rightly so. I mean there is a distinction to be made. My friends went the way of all flesh and I don't regret their passing. They weren't my friends anyway. I couldn't stand half of them. But the clubs! The clubs died, the swimming and the tennis clubs died because they were based on ideas which had no moral foundation, no moral foundation whatsoever. But *our* club, *our* club – is a club which is activated, which is inspired by a moral sense, a moral awareness, a set of moral values which is – I have to say- unshakeable, rigorous, fundamental, constant. Thank you. *Applause.* (311)

Melissa's disavowal of her past friends and clubs, along with the stated affirmation of her current club's values gives her speech a cleansing or religious quality. Moreover, her emphasis on the club's unwavering moral values, strongly parallels Fred and Douglas' earlier conversation on the necessity for peace:

> FRED: How's it going tonight?
>
> DOUGLAS: Like clockwork. Look. Let me tell you something. We want peace. We want peace and we're going to get it.
>
> FRED: Quite right.
>
> DOUGLAS: We want peace and we're going to get it. But we want peace to be cast iron. No leaks. No draughts. Cast iron. Tight as a drum. That's the kind of peace we want and that's the kind of peace we're going to get. A cast iron peace. *He clenches his fist.* Like this. (293)

What exactly constitutes, in Melissa and Terry's case, the club's "moral sense" is rather unclear (311). Likewise, an idea what precisely comprises a "cast iron peace", in Fred and Douglas' discussion, is noticeably lacking (293). Nevertheless, the permanence of both the club's morality

and desired peace is emphasized. In both cases, moreover, gestures towards the violent means argued to be necessary for the establishment or maintenance of these ends are made.[48]

These allusions to the alleged necessary means for achieving a sustained peace or moral standard are, also, markedly indistinct. However, with respect to the regime's operation (or mysterious "roundup") occurring throughout (but outside) the party, Dusty presses for concrete information. Breaking sharply with Terry and Gavin's tiresome conversation about the club, Dusty desperately asks, "Did you know what's happened to Jimmy? What's happened to Jimmy?" (284). Yet, Terry responds, "Nothing's happened … Nobody's discussing this. Nobody's discussing this, all right, do you follow me? Nothing's happened to Jimmy. If you're not a good girl I'll spank you … Tell him [Gavin] about the new club. I've been telling him about the club, she's a member (284-285). Here, Terry first denies anything has occurred by stating "Nothing's happened" (284). As in both *Betrayal* and *A Kind of Alaska,* Pinter's use of the encompassing pronouns "everything" and "nothing" is of note. Terry's repeated emphasis "it's [the club] got everything" contrasts, conceptually, with his refusal to acknowledge any occurrence relating to Jimmy by stressing "Nothing's happened" (281, 284). Moreover, in thematic terms, Terry's boast of the club's plenitude strikes a telling contrast with the absence of resources and hope the victims of the "roundup" experience. Jimmy articulates this state of destitution in his closing soliloquy, he details, "I had a name, it was Jimmy. People called me Jimmy, that was my name … I see nothing at any time anymore" [My ellipsis] (313). Correspondingly, Terry next moves to deny even the existence of Dusty's question and personhood, declaring, "Nobody's discussing this" (285). Therefore, Dusty, by speaking out of

[48] Terry describes the violence inflicted on those who break the club's codes of conduct. Melissa attributes the death her former clubs to the absence of moral virtue. And Douglas, by clenching his fist, appears to refer to the violent operation that is unfolding "like clockwork" outside the party (293).

turn about a troublesome topic, is beginning to experience the dehumanization that her brother has clearly suffered (albeit, much more harshly). In this respect, Dusty and Jimmy not only fall victim to the same political regime, but additionally, their methods of punishment.

Finally, Terry encourages his wife to join his running, aimless, conversation about the club with Gavin, by prompting her, "Tell him [Gavin] about the new club" (285). In an immediate sense, Terry's effort to steer the conversation back towards this topic is an overt attempt to distract his wife. And yet, more generally, each discussion about this club and the partygoer's similar chit-chat about food, sex, and health are all a diversion from the seemingly very brutal events occurring just outside. By extension, the party itself, and therefore the play, may be considered a distraction from the more significant actions of the authoritarian regime's efforts to, as Douglas claims, achieve "a cast iron peace" (293). Here, a vital distinction may be drawn between those who know of the "roundup", like Terry, Gavin, Fred and Douglas, and those who do not, like Dusty, Melissa and Charlotte. Upon her entrance, Melissa asks, "What on earth's going on out there? It's like the Black Death … The Town's dead. There's nobody on the streets, there's not a soul in sight, apart from some … soldiers. My driver had to stop at a … you know … what do you call it? … a road block. We had to say who we were … it really was a trifle" (286). Unlike Dusty, Melissa holds no vested interested in the "roundup" because she is a comfortable member of the upper-class and current political establishment. For her, these events are merely "a trifle" (286). Yet, nonetheless, like Dusty her questions go unanswered, and furthermore, are soon ignored by Terry's strategic shift to small-talk.

In this way, Terry and Gavin's refusal to answer questions about, or acknowledge, the "roundup" frustrates both certain partygoers and the audience's desire to learn more about this event beyond its presented, vague, surface. After Melissa's references to the presence of soldiers

and roadblocks, Dusty acknowledges, “I keep hearing all these things, I don't know what to believe” (297). Here, Terry replies:

> “You don't have to believe anything. You just have to shut up and mind your own business. How many times do I have to tell you? You come to a lovely party like this, all you have to do is shut up, and enjoy the hospitality, and mind your own fucking business. How many more times do I have to tell you? You keep hearing all these things, you keep hearing all these things spread by pricks about pricks. What's it got to do with you? (288)

Terry, rather strikingly, attacks a core premise of Dusty’s statement, her desire to simply believe (297). Dusty’s position of ambiguity and his challenge has significant metatheatrical resonances. Specifically, Terry’s policy, encapsulated by his statement “mind your own fucking business”, tries to eliminate both the audience and Dusty’s natural curiously both over what is happening outside, and what has happened to Jimmy. Moreover, his encouragement of passivity on this matter aspires for Dusty to be relegated the position of a spectator, able to hear all that is happening but unable to take any action.

In addition to the strategies exercised, principally, by Terry for avoiding question about the “roundup” (namely, changing the conversation, ignoring the inquiry altogether, and the demand for passivity), I wish to examine one more. Near the midpoint of the play, Charlotte tells Fred, “I think there’s something going on in the street” to which he responds, “leave the street to us” (307). By his failure, and those of his compatriots (like Terry), to explain the “roundup”, the events outside are rendered just as abstract as the conversation inside. His refusal, moreover, asserts control over these events. In his book, “Harold Pinter's Politics: A Silence Beyond Echo” Charles Grimes argues that the language in *Party Time* “verges on sheer euphemism and denotation is avoided as much as possible” (Grimes, 108). However, in their effort to abstract

from the event outside, the men in this play who know of its occurrence, deploy both euphemistic and denotative language. In discussing artists and musicians, Sam, rather succinctly declares, “these kind of people, they're an infection” (300). A short while later, though still speaking in abstract terms, Terry goes into great detail regarding the possible methods for murdering undesirables, “Easy. I've got dozens of options. We could suffocate every single one of you at a given signal. Or we could shove a broomstick up each individual ass at another given signal. Or we could poison all the mother's milk in the world so that every baby would drop dead before it opened its perverted bloody mouth” (302). Terry’s highly specific, though seemingly ironic, proposal for the methodologies of genocide is telling. His abstract speech, that entertains the various ways mass killings could be conducted, although absurd, is nonetheless disturbing. Far from being constrained by his use of abstract language, that is –his failure to describe more realistic or conventional modes for mass murder, Terry is caught-up in the power of abstract speech. Dusty does not pick-up Terry on his unrealistic proposal, and this would not appear to be a wise response on her behalf. Although Terry’s suggestions are far-fetched, she does not doubt his underlying willingness to murder. And thus, Terry’s use of abstract language here is as much an expression of power, as it is a refusal to name the more realistic methodologies of genocide.

5.3 Conclusion

In a variety of ways, *Party Time* is no different from some of Pinter’s earliest work like *The Room* (1957) and *The Birthday Party* (1958). Indeed, my concentration on the notion of abstraction is not unlike the detection, by many early critics, of an overriding sense of inexplicitness in these works. Moreover, in each of these three plays, a nebulous and extremely

powerful force haunts the drama – particularly in the emergence of characters that seem to function as metonymic expressions of that force.

However, *Party Time*, unquestionably deals more directly with political subject matter. Thus, how may a superior understanding of the difference between Pinter's early drama and this late play be realized without, merely, commenting that this later work is more "direct" or "overt" in its political engagements? Here, I wish to draw a distinction between the concept of abstraction as subject-matter (specifically its deployment as a strategy to engender passivity in this play) and the simply presence of abstract rhetoric in these plays. I contend that *Party Time* is unique in Pinter's oeuvre because it lays bare the deployment of abstract rhetoric and the repercussion of this tactic. This is only made possible by Pinter's more explicit incorporation and treatment of political themes. In this way, even within Pinter's late drama (that directly cover political topics) distinctions may be drawn. In *Party Time,* the party is the play. We never witness any of the much-reported events that occur outside the party's walls which formulate the parameters of the play. We only meet a victim of these events in the form of Jimmy's, phantom-like, closing appearance. Thus, rather than exploring the site of torture, and the rhetorical strategies of power involved therein, as he does in *One for the Road,* Pinter remains here outside the consequences of a brutal, authoritarian, regime, but inside the halls of their power. Here, in the den of such nauseating, self-centered, elites, I argue Pinter is able to reveal the use of abstract language as a political strategy to cancel the possibility of interpretation and expose abstraction as a strategy for engendering quietism and passivity.

Conclusion

I wish to close my study by emphasizing, what I argue to be, my appropriate, simultaneous, treatment of both interpretative issues and Pinter's late drama. The act of interpretation possesses an innate social relevance. Fundamentally, one of the most useful and, accordingly, popular interpretative acts is the discernment of fiction or reality. The line between mere story and truth, and the according capacity to distinguish between the two, is widely recognized to be of immense political importance. Accordingly, Pinter stresses the role of language in relation to this capacity. In a broadcasted (television) speech entitled "Oh, Superman" on American foreign policy, Pinter asked:

> Does reality essentially remain outside language, separate, obdurate, alien, not susceptible to description? Is an accurate and vital correspondence between what is and our perception of it impossible? Or is it that we are obliged to use language only in order to obscure and distort reality - to distort what happens-because we fear it? We are encouraged to be cowards … We must pay attention to what is being done in our name … What all this adds up to is a disease at the very centre of language, so that language becomes a permanent masquerade, a tapestry of lies. The ruthless and cynical mutilation and degradation of human beings, both in spirit and body, the death of countless thousands -- these actions are justified by rhetorical gambits, sterile terminology and concepts of power which stink. Are we ever going to look at the language we use, I wonder? Is it within our capabilities to do so? (Pinter, "Oh, Superman," Opinion, BBC Channel 4, May 31, 1990)

Pinter does not miss the fact we, as human beings, may become absolutely committed to certain fictions. According to Pinter, these fictions are relayed to obscure and detract from uncomfortable realities. In this respect, interpretation is not an omniscient tool – able to uncover

untruth and deception in every corner where language is employed to mask harsh realities. By contrast, interpretation, through its manifestation in language, may also lead one away from reality and towards fiction.[49]

To this end, a thoroughgoing diagnosis on the nature of Pinter criticism may be made. Namely, that the type of interpretative methodologies for reading Pinter that Quigley, so skillfully, deconstructs, may be said to err, at once, not for their logical inconsistencies, but rather for the very fact they operate under the premise that the 'truth' of Pinter's drama is open to discovery. In his Nobel Lecture, Pinter stated:

> 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 endeavour. 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 realising that you have done so. But the real truth is that there never is any such thing as 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, tease 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. (Nobel Lecture, 2005)

In many respects, this project is rooted in my registration and analysis of the critical stasis in Pinter studies that Quigley describes. Specifically, the absence of a stable interpretative methodology for interpreting Pinter's drama. Indeed, it could be said that I have contributed to this stasis by critiquing interpretative methodologies (particularly, Hannah Scolnicov's notion of

[49] Nevertheless, in many cases, interpretation retains the perception it is a mechanism that uncovers reality, rather than misleads.

hyperrealism, Quigley's interrelational function, and Silverstein's extension of this method) that may be said to circumvent, or at the very least do not repeat, the errors Quigley warns against. However, rather than trying to formulate a methodology for uncovering the 'truth' behind Pinter's drama, I have argued that, in *Betrayal, A Kind of Alaska,* and *Party Time*, Pinter stages the failure and consequences of such interpretative strategies. In closing, therefore, I contend that by dramatizing interpretative problems, Pinter encourages his audience "to look at the language we use" and thereby notice "a disease at the very centre of language" (Pinter, "Oh, Superman").

At the outset of this project, I stated that in my various readings I would conceive of Pinter's plays as texts. *The Pinter Problem* was written before the onset, or indeed even much of the development, of performance based methodologies in Theatre Studies. Accordingly, Quigley's critique is levelled against scholarship that conceive of Pinter's drama as texts. Since a great deal of my project is predicated on what I assess to be the continued relevance of Quigley's work, what I believe to be its shortcomings, and whether the longstanding problems of interpreting Pinter's drama (as texts) can be solved, I have chosen to discuss Pinter's plays primarily as texts. However, I believe a performance-based study of Pinter's, understudied, late drama would be extremely valuable. Throughout this project, I consistently discussed the metatheatrical character of Pinter's work. This should come as no surprise given my interest in interpretation. Yet, the most crucial interpretative acts, in any dramatic scenario, are those carried-out by the play's spectators. And these interpretations are, undoubtedly, only realized and open to inquiry upon a play's actual performance.

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