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Desperation in Harold Pinter's *Celebration*

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Harold Pinter's 2000 drama, *Celebration*, is a cautionary play for the new millennium which anatomizes the empty lives of three couples dining at an elegant restaurant in London. At one table, two sisters, Julie and Prue, married to brothers, Lambert and Matt, are ostensibly celebrating the anniversary of one of the couples, but they seem neither to care about each other nor to know what play, opera, or concert they have just attended. Suki and Russell, sitting at another table, are only a variation on the other couples, all of which is revealed in a very comic fashion as the three couples interact with a Hostess, a Maitre d' and a Waiter. Incest is added to ignorance, not only suggested by the sisters married to brothers, but also by the women's hostile suggestions that their husbands are all bound up with their mothers. The misogyny of the men is clearly matched by the misandry of the women as all struggle for power, and the men's positions as strategy consultants and a banker are comically ominous, recalling Pinter's more overtly political plays. The memories of Lambert of a lost love, who turns out to be Suki, enhance the sense of desperation that is the subtext of this celebration, and the Waiter's comic fantasies about his grandfather, which he "introjects" from time to time, suggest a lost culture and lost values that he longs to recapture. The play finally goes beyond satire to end in a sense of mystery about life and death which the Waiter seems to feel deeply and on some level to accept.

The "lives of quiet desperation" that Emerson claimed for us become somewhat noisy in British playwright Harold Pinter's 2000 drama, *Celebration*. Produced in March of 2000 in a double bill with the playwright's first drama, *The Room*, at London's Almeida Theatre and published in an edition with the early play in 2000 by Faber and Faber, Pinter wrote the drama as he approached 70 (the playwright turned 70 on October 10, 2000) and as we all approached the millennium. In June, 2000, Pinter read all of the drama's nine parts at an international meeting in London of Pinter scholars who had come to celebrate his birthday in advance. There was a kind of double irony as a play about desperation was a major focus of this Pinter celebration, a play whose title was itself ironical. However, as the play anatomizes the empty lives of its celebrants, it does so with such a combination of fury, humor, compassion, and hope that one can indeed celebrate it as a cautionary play for the new millennium on which we have embarked.

In the play, two couples, Lambert and Julie and Matt and Prue are at a restaurant, ostensibly celebrating the anniversary of Lambert and Julie. Lambert, however, has to be reminded that this is his anniversary. His general ignorance is suggested by the opening lines of the play:

WAITER	Who's	having	the	duck?
LAMBERT	The	duck's	for	me.
JULIE	No it isn't. (p. 3)			

The duck, it seems, is for Julie, who doesn't care, she says, what her husband has ordered. Lambert's lack of knowledge and childlike demands strike the tone of desperation that underlies all the bravado of his behavior throughout the play. "And for me," he insists, "I mean what about me? What did I order? I haven't the faintest idea? What did I order?" (p. 4). When Prue tells him that he has ordered Osso Buco, he has no idea what it is. The subtext of this banal discussion of food, with its seemingly light banter, is a loveless marriage and a general angst suffered by both couples.

That the couples consist of sisters (Julie and Prue) married to brothers (Lambert and Matt) gives one the surreal impression of a disastrous sameness in emptiness. This sameness is compounded as the scene proceeds to shift back and forth between the two couples at their table and another couple, Suki and Russell, having dinner at a neighboring table of the restaurant, a couple who provide only a variation on the noisy desperation of the sister/brother couples. What ties them together, other than a general vacuity, anger, lostness, and a link in the past, is their ignorance about where they have been and what they have seen and heard. When Richard, the manager or Maitre d', approaches Table One, he asks if they have been to the theatre. Matt says they have been to the ballet, but when Richard asks what they have seen, he is greeted by the following responses.

LAMBERT That's a fucking good question.

MATT It's unanswerable. (p. 19)

Lest one think this general ignorance a quality shared only by the men, Julie chimes in with "What ballet?", to which Matt responds, "None of them could reach the top notes. Could they?" (p. 20). Opera, ballet, theatre? Nobody seems to know. The effect would border on the Kafkaesque were it not that the characters' lack of knowledge seems less existential than absentminded; they are vacuous about anything cultural — or for that matter about anything. If there were not such desperation in the play's subtext, one might expect these characters to turn into Ionesco's rhinoceroses at any moment.

Parallel to this exchange about what the two couples have been doing, which has apparently not registered with them, is the exchange between the hostess, Sonia, and Suki and Russell. It seems that like those at Table One, the occupants of Table Two have not been to the theatre — although they claim to have been to the opera rather than the ballet. When asked what the opera was by Sonia, Suki responds, "Well... there was a lot going on. A lot of singing. A great deal, as a matter of fact. They never stopped. Did they?" (p. 28). The ostentatiousness of the three couples' ignorance, as it echoes musically from table to table, has a surreal effect, its noisy and flamboyant quality suggesting the desperation under the interchanges.

If one adds incest to ignorance, the desperation grows slightly deeper, and there is certainly a suggestion of such incest, not only in the sisters married to brothers, but also in conversations at both tables about the oedipal situation the three women claim is present. Prue, who has been complaining about her husband's mother, finds a sympathetic ear in Julie whose diagnosis is that mothers-in-law all wish to sleep with their own sons.

JULIE All mothers-in-law are like that. They love their sons. They love their boys. They don't want their sons to be fucked by other girls. Isn't that right?

PRUE Absolutely. All mothers want their sons to be fucked by themselves.

After some further discussion about the desires of mothers, Lambert wants to know how old you have to be "to be fucked by your mother" (p. 17), to which Matt responds, "Any age, mate. Any age" (p. 17).

The incest theme is immediately picked up at Table Two where Russell tells Suki about his mother's bread-and-butter pudding. "It was like drowning in an ocean of richness" (p. 29), he explains. When Suki praises his expressiveness as poetic and learns that Russell's father disapproved of his poetic bent, her diagnosis reflects the banter at Table One.

SUKI He was jealous of you, that's all. He saw you as a threat. He thought you wanted to steal his wife.

RUSSEL His wife?
 SUKI Well, you know what they say.
 RUSSEL What?

SUKI Oh, you know what they say. (p. 30)

It is difficult in this play, and perhaps in life as well, to know whether the misogyny of the men calls forth the misandry of the women or vice versa.¹ While the efforts of the women to emasculate the men remain somewhat subtextual in the exchanges about the Oedipus complex, the hostility often bubbles to the surface. Julie, for example, refuses to be impressed by the food when Lambert asks her how she enjoyed it (p. 18), both a way of offending her husband, who is trying to please her, and Richard, who is so proud of his restaurant. When Richard comes to see how they are doing, Prue not only tells him that Julie didn't like the food, but she also regales him with the story of how she and her sister used to listen to her "mummy beating the shit out of daddy" (p. 21). She then ends her diatribe with as much crudeness as she can summon up: "That's how my little sister and I were brought up and she could make a better sauce than yours if she pissed into it" (p. 22). Despite Lambert and Matt's efforts to gloss over these remarks by telling Richard how "lovely" it is to be there, the women pursue their hostility by standing and offering to kiss him, indeed, insisting that they will do so. Richard exits before what seems uncomfortably like a rape can go any further.

Lambert and Julie's mutual hostility continues to unfold in terms of an interweaving of memories and desire. Lambert recalls a girl whom he loved and who, surprising to him, loved him in return. When Julie asks if she was that girl, he denies it, but she ignores this rejection and recounts her first meeting with Lambert in counterpoint to his memories of his lost love. Prue focuses in on Julie's tale:

PRUE I'll never forget what you said [after meeting Lambert]. You sat on my bed.
 Didn't you? Do you remember?

LAMBERT This girl was in love with me — I'm trying to tell you.

PRUE Do you remember what you said? (p. 36–37)

Julie does not answer the question and the scene ends. Although Lambert and Julie may appear to be unable to communicate, the way each insists on a different line of memory is a total communication of their lack of connection.²

Lest the competition between the men and women for power be lost in subtext, it is firmly stated toward the end of the play in an exchange of clichés about the celebration at hand.

Richard has brought over a bottle of champagne, which Matt calls "the best of the best," a remark which is greeted by Lambert with what appears to be a *non sequitur*; "And may the best man win!" (p. 62). Julie then notes that "The woman always wins," and is backed up by Prue. Amusingly enough Suki says, "That's really good news" (p. 63). The apparent *non sequitur* is no such thing as Pinter merely puts on the table in a tragicomic moment the mutual hostility between the sexes that informs the entire play.

Suki, who makes a greater attempt to hide her contempt for her husband than Julie and Prue do, belittles Russell even while she seemingly plies him with compliments. When he tries to excuse a recent affair with a secretary by denigrating secretaries, Suki insists that she was just such a secretary. She then details her own sexual adventures as a secretary, refusing Russell's desire to categorize her as "different." Russell says of his recent conquest: "She was a scrubber. A scrubber. They're all the same, these secretaries, these scrubbers. They're like politicians. They love power [...]" (p. 7). Insisting, however, that *she* was just such a power-

¹ Karen Uretsky pointed out in conversation (August 13, 2000) that the misogyny of the men is always matched by the emasculating efforts of the women in *Celebration*.

² The effect is much like that in Pinter's *Landscape*, in which the members of a couple on stage talk by each other, but the drama of their estranged relationship emerges from their overlapping memories. Early on Pinter disagreed with those critics of his work who found them to be about the inability to communicate. "I think that we communicate only too well," he noted, "in our silence, in what is unsaid, and that what takes place is continual evasion, desperate rearguard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves..." Quoted by Manville, p. 114.

hungry person, Suki describes her behavior : “I could hardly walk from one filing cabinet to another I was so exited [...] men simply couldn’t keep their hands off me, their demands were outrageous, but coming back to more important things, they’re right to believe in you, why shouldn’t they believe in you?” (p. 9). Has not Suki just told him why!

The introjections of Richard and Sonia as Maitre d’ and Hostess only serve to enhance the emptiness of the restaurant experience, adding to the sense of sameness. Richard has recreated his childhood in the restaurant, he tells Russell. After describing a pub that his father took him to when he was a child, he confides, “I believe the concept of the restaurant rests in that public house of my childhood” (p. 41). Richard’s major achievement, which he points out to the couple, is that he provides “complimentary gherkins as soon as you take your seat,” just as they did in the pub he recalls. When Sonia seems to be introducing difference by talking about the diverse people who frequent the restaurant, in a very comical speech she manages to reduce all this difference, once more, to sameness. It seems that all these “different” people enjoy the restaurant’s food and that one doesn’t have to be English to enjoy either food or sex. “ I’ve known one or two Belgian people for example,” she confides, “who love sex and they don’t speak a word of English” (p. 46).

Difference, however, finally makes an appearance with the Waiter, whose introjections are of another nature and are announced. With each “introjection,” the Waiter says he has heard the couple talking about some cultural or historical event and has something to add. Since the couples never do talk about cultural events, the atmosphere of dream continues, and the Waiter’s reminiscences of his grandfather, which are what he “introjects,” remain rooted in fantasy. “It’s just that I heard you talking about T. S. Eliot a little bit earlier this evening” (p. 31), he begins at Suki and Russell’s table, or “It’s just a little bit earlier I heard you saying something about the Hollywood studio system in the thirties” (p. 49), he tells the sisters and brothers. When the three couples are gathered at the end at Table One, and the Waiter once more “introjects,” Richard questions his behavior: “Well, it’s just that I heard all these people talking about the Austro-Hungarian Empire a while ago and I wondered if they’d ever heard about my grandfather” (p. 65), the Waiter explains.

It turns out that the Waiter’s grandfather had more than a “nodding acquaintance” with Eliot, that he drank with a whole crew from D. H. Lawrence to “Thomas Hardy in his dotage” (p. 31), that he was “one of the very few native-born Englishmen to have had it off with Hedy Lamarr” (p. 49), and that he offered help to cripples in much the same spirit as Jesus Christ (p. 66). His first ramblings at Table Two are greeted by veiled threats from Russell, who wants to know how long he has been working at the restaurant: “Are you suggesting that I’m about to get the boot?” (p. 32), the Waiter inquires, fully understanding the threat.³ It seems the restaurant is “like a womb” to him, which he much prefers to “being born” (p. 33).

Issues of birth and death abound in *Celebration*, just as they have in other Pinter plays that revolve around celebrations. In *The Birthday Party*, Stanley hides out from life at a seaside boarding house but encounters destruction as Goldberg and McCann insist on celebrating his birthday; in *A Kind of Alaska*, the recently comatose Deborah is told of her upcoming birthday celebration, but she fears she will not be able to keep her presents herself. In *The Homecoming*, in which Ruth is told by her husband’s family that they will have liquor if there is something to celebrate, the men produce that liquor mysteriously when the homecoming turns out to be hers, in this case a kind of birth or rebirth, one which her husband, who rejects his family, is too fearful to embrace. In each play, as in *Celebration*, there is a pre-oedipal desire to return to the womb or to hide out from life, as well as a terrible fear of death, which is as fearful as life.

³ Pinter apparently told Mel Gussow that as a young man of 21 working as a busboy in a private club, he was fired on the spot when he made an introjection about Kafka to some customers who were talking about the author (Gussow, “The Playwright’s Other Pursuit” E 5).

In his book, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, Peter Brooks offers some Freudian insights about plotting that may help clarify this anxiety of some of Pinter's characters about celebration as well as the desperation that the characters in *Celebration* feel about their lives as they play their power games and "hide" in the womb-like restaurant. Following other theorists, such as Roland Barthes, Brooks discusses the desire for an ending as paramount to plot's structure, but he makes his own contribution by using Freud's 1920 postulation of a death wish in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Freud suggests that a yearning for death is a yearning for what once was, an inorganic state with no tension whatsoever. Brooks applies this idea to plotting, suggesting that "plot itself stands as a kind of divergence or deviance, a postponement in the discharge which leads back to the inanimate" (p. 103). Noting that Freud describes this desire for an ending in mythical terms, as a yearning for a lost primal unity (p. 106), Brooks clears the way for one to see how closely the yearning for an ending or a death is also a yearning for union with the mother, a pre-oedipal desire for that which precedes difference. Speaking about narcissism and "all infantile, regressive tendencies, narcissism included," John Irwin suggests that there is "an attempt to return to a state in which subject and object did not yet exist, to a time before that division occurred out of which the ego sprang — in short to return to the womb, to re-enter the waters of birth," a reentry which he characterizes as incestuous (p. 43).

We have seen in *Celebration* that in a borderline incestuous fashion, brothers have married sisters, and that those sisters see their husbands' further incestuous connection with their mother. We have also seen how anxious and unhappy they all are with each other. The restaurant's appeal to all of the play's characters seems to lie in its removal from both life and death. Even though the Waiter stands out from the rest of the characters in his wistfulness about a heritage he imagines he has received from his grandfather, his moving monologue at play's end speaks on some level for all of them: in it, he tells of his grandfather's gift to him of a telescope through which he could watch life on a boat on the sea. "My grandfather," he says, "introduced me to the mystery of life and I'm still in the middle of it. I can't find the door to get out" (p. 72). Here is a blatant statement of a desire for death, for an ending. He admires his grandfather, he suggests, because he found that door. As John Lahr has noted, "In this perfectly pitched moment of fatigue and fury, the sense of both wanting an end and fearing it coalesces powerfully" (p. 97).

The Waiter's own ending, which is also the play's ending, is instead an attempt to go on: "And I'd like to make one further introjection" (p. 72). As in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, which ends with the decision of the tramps to leave, combined with their inability to move, the Waiter "*stands still*" as the lights slowly fade (p. 72). The play's plot, then, ends with a riddle, with a mystery unsolved, with an inability or a refusal to end. Its general tone of anxious desperation (a tone shared, of course, by Beckett's tramps throughout his classic play) is replaced here with a tone of acceptance of life's mystery. Like the tramps, the Waiter will wait. It is this acceptance of his role as waiter that gives an otherwise wildly comic play a tragic moment, which casts its light back on the comedy, inviting us to rethink what we have seen.

That rethinking takes us back to the plot of the play, and to a view of its action as more than a satire on empty and nasty people behaving in a desperate but empty and nasty way. Pinter had suggested once to Mel Gussow that an earlier play, *Party Time* (1991), was about a "bunch of shits and a victim" (*Conversations with Pinter*, p. 102). It is tempting to see *Celebration* as a play about a bunch of shits and a Waiter. There is, however, a striking difference between the two plots. In *Party Time*, a group of people enjoy themselves at a country club while political dissidents are being rounded up outside, including the brother of one of the party-goers, at the orders of the men at the party. The women are far less powerful in this dramatization of

misogyny than they are in *Celebration*, unless they fall into line with the men's political agenda, as Melissa, an older woman does.

The plot of *Celebration*, however, is somewhat more subtle than that of *Party Time*. Although Lambert and Matt have some of the same qualities as the men in the earlier drama, describing themselves to Russell as "strategy consultants" who keep the peace, and that with no need to carry guns (p. 60), something which Russell as banker finds very impressive, we find out more about their anxieties, especially Lambert's, as the plot develops. While the characters' efforts at one-upping each other (Pinter's British term for this is "taking the piss") seem random, Lambert's recognition of Suki, who in turn recognizes him, brings the plot to a climax. "You see that girl at that table? I know her. I fucked her when she was eighteen" (p. 50), Lambert confides to his companions. "What, by the banks of the river?" (p. 50), Julie snidely remarks, referring back to Lambert's insistence that there was a girl who actually loved him once, whom he took for walks by the river. Suki's recognition of Lambert seems to confirm his fantasy of lost love, and one cannot help but note that Lambert is touched by this recognition. As the three couples continue their hostile conversations, Julie states that she would not like another go around with life, but Lambert desists: "I'd like to live again," he insists. "I'm going to make it my job to live again. I'm going to come back as a better person, a more civilized person, a gentler person, a nicer person" (p. 56). Despite the ironical tone that he uses here, Lambert is at least wistful about the possibility of a different kind of life, one that might include love this time. His largess — he insists, as they all prepare to depart, on paying the entire bill, for Suki and Russell as well as his table — may reflect the new sense of life he has gained, or at least had a glimmer of, from meeting his lost love — no matter how lost we see that she too has become.⁴

That Lambert had taken Suki for walks by the river takes on a peculiar significance in this drama. Just as the Waiter's grandfather had introduced him to the mysteries of life when observing the sea with the boy (p. 72), so perhaps Suki introduced Lambert to those mysteries by the water, mysteries here associated with reciprocal love; in both cases there is the suggestion of a possible journey from womb to life. Pinter has repeatedly used water imagery in other plays (e.g., *A Kind of Alaska*, *Old Times*, *No Man's Land*, *The Homecoming*), to suggest a struggle with birth or rebirth, and this play is no exception. Just as Lenny is able to produce liquor with which to celebrate Ruth's homecoming in *The Homecoming*, Richard is able to produce champagne at the end of *Celebration* to crown the occasion.

Despite Lambert's moment of awareness, however, the final feeling is more of desperation than of hope. Pinter, who spoke with compassion about the foul-mouthed family in *The Homecoming* — the characters, he said, act "pretty horribly," but always "out of the texture of their lives and for reasons which are not evil but slightly desperate" (quoted in Hewes, p. 56) — could well say the same of the characters in *Celebration*, were they not so closely related (except for the Waiter) to the celebrators in *Party Time*. In that play the cruelty of the characters makes whatever desperation they may feel seem irrelevant. Not only do *Celebration*'s "strategy consultants" remind one of the peacekeepers in *Party Time*, but they also are clearly steeped in the need for power that seems to follow from their anxieties and feelings of emptiness. Pinter also mentioned to Mel Gussow that he found a link to his play and the recent film of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, in which he had a major role, the link being that between money and power: "The quite simple assumption," he notes, "on the part of the rich that they run the world, it's true" (quoted in Gussow, "The Playwright's Other Pursuit" E5). In many of Pinter's earlier plays, in which the women, who are more sensitive and wiser than the men, dispose of their mates, from Flora, who exchanges her husband for a filthy Matchseller in *A Slight Ache*, to Emma, who leaves her manipulative husband Robert in

⁴ Ann Hall, in conversation (August 13, 2000) pointed out that Lambert's generosity at the end probably stems from his delight at being recognized by his lost love.

Betrayal, to Kate, who rejects her possessive husband Deeley in *Old Times*, and finally Ruth, who sends her withdrawn husband packing and decides to stay with his family, we sense that their choices are life-affirming ones and feel slightly sorry for the men who are consigned to their own emptiness. Here, however, the women are as empty as the men, and the most one feels is a yearning for something better.

Still, the Waiter's words have penetrated to some degree. When Suki recalls Lambert's interest in gardening, Russell asserts that his father was a gardener. "Not your grandad?" Matt inquires, and when Russell explains it was his father, Matt asks, "How about your grandad?" (pp. 54–55). Russell denies having one, but the possibility of a grandfather concerned with fertility is an image that interests Matt. Francis Gillen has very correctly pointed out that the play presents a "failed ritual," one lacking connection and "shared experience" (suggested in a letter written to me, August, 2000), yet Lambert has at least a memory of connection and Matt an interest in connecting Russell's gardening father with the Waiter's grandfather.

Since the Waiter has compared his grandfather to Jesus Christ, among others, it is almost as if he has introduced a deity into the godless world of the restaurant, however strangely he defines that god. Did not his grandfather have knowledge of culture, pop as well as high, throughout modern times and in various spaces, at least America, England, and the Austro-Hungarian empire. Here is a grandfather who is everywhere and knows everyone. However, he has disappeared, found the door, and is only a memory.

Memory, it would seem, finally only has meaning for the Waiter and possibly Lambert, who remembers Suki far more generously than she remembers him. Julie is puzzled by the absence of their children, who used to love her, she asserts, far more than they loved their father, Prue concurring that her children also preferred her to Matt. Matt, however, notes that the children have no memories, either of their parents or of themselves. "They don't remember their own life," he asserts. Surely he could be talking about all of the celebrators, suspended in the life of the restaurant, but unable to remember or claim a life. Prue has told Suki that she and Julie "run charities. We do charities" (p. 58), but there does not seem to be a charitable bone in either of their bodies. It is the Waiter's grandfather who was truly charitable, as he knew all the greats from Igor Stravinsky to the Three Stooges "where they were most isolated, where they were alone, where they fought against savage and pitiless odds[...]" (p. 66).

Pinter celebrates the new millennium with a play that reveals those savage and pitiless odds that would seem to make up the texture of our times. Like the Waiter's grandfather, he sees men and women as isolated and alone as they face those odds amidst the clamor of celebration. But even as one feels the fury of his satire and the sharpness of his humor, one also feels Pinter's understanding of the desperation that characterizes his characters' lives, and perhaps all of our lives. In *Celebration*, Pinter offers us a desperate hope in Lambert's claim of a memory of something valuable that has been lost and in the Waiter's wistful longings and sense of life's mystery.

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