



## *Pinter and the paranoid style in English theatre*

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# EPI-REVEL

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## Pinter and the paranoid style in English theatre

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The paranoid style in English theatre comes from the fight over territory, which is a struggle over the space of the stage itself. In the main, it is the legacy of the naturalist theatre and its three-walled room, but also of the dwelling within which the room is housed. One ingredient is essential to the nature of the fight — intrusion. The door to the room is the point of entry, a psychic as well as a physical threshold over which the visitor passes. Here the term ‘visitor’ is too neutral to evoke the dramatic effect. The visitor is always an intruder who makes the crossing into the dwelling-space. There is in this movement, a key moment of violation which ranges in its stage poetics from the oblique to the obvious. One thing, however, is certain. The ‘crossing over’ is an invasion of private space. Visitors are intruders and much of the suspense of the naturalistic stage thriller, in Emlyn Williams, J. B. Priestley, or Agatha Christie derives from audience anticipation of the intruding act, which the playwright glosses with unexpected variations. In Harold Pinter the fear of the unknown crystallises into the feeling of persecution and the fear of conspiracy. The struggle over territory becomes a power discourse in which language is a weapon to force the exclusion of the unwanted other. Fear of exclusion is the paranoid fear of being unwanted, fear of inclusion the paranoid fear of the recluse who suspects conspiracy. More than any other modern dramatist, Pinter twists, juxtaposes, and merges the two forms in symbiotic suspense. All the world is not a stage because the beyond threatens from just the other side of the visible boundary, the imaginary chalk-line of the naturalistic set.

Paranoia has its roots in the world of the English canon, it is the consequence of the detective story gone wrong, where absolute knowledge gives way to provisional doubt. Franco Moretti has pointed out in *Signs Taken for Wonders* that in the Conan Doyle mysteries of Sherlock Holmes and the detective story the sole investigator finds the solitary victim of a solitary killer in a secluded room. The logic of Holmes’s detection is based on uniqueness and mystery. Only one person could have committed the murder, and the victim is often an innocent without qualities waiting to be killed. Agatha Christie later reverses the paradigm. The criminal can be anybody, the most moral or the most wicked, the most likely or the least likely, the known criminal or the investigating detective while the victim is often a social transgressor. Suspense consists in narrowing the choice among an all-inclusive field of suspects. The logic of detection masquerades as inexorable but is in fact arbitrary, and for the reader or spectator, the thrill is the experience of the unambiguous result as the roulette wheel stops spinning.

Three plays in particular foreshadow the disruptive poetics of paranoia in the work of Pinter, Tom Stoppard and Joe Orton which are the key to English theatre in the sixties and the early seventies. These are *Night Must Fall* (1935), *An Inspector Calls* (1946) and *The Mousetrap* (1952). In the first, set in an isolated bungalow on the edge of an Essex forest, dramatic suspense employs a Trojan Horse metaphor. The young murderer is already employed in a household whose unsuspecting dwellers fear intrusion from the outside and cannot see what is already in their midst. Instead of forced entry as contiguous with the murderous act, Dan, the Welsh servant has earlier charmed his way into the household and been taken up by the disabled Mrs. Bramson as a prodigal son. In this quasi-Oedipal relationship, Mrs. Bramson fears more for Dan as the murderer’s next target than she does for herself, thus setting up the audience for a twist in the final Act where Dan is revealed as the murderer and Mrs. Bramson as his helpless victim. Here innocuous exit precedes deadly entry. At the end of the working week, Dan ‘leaves’ with the other household servants only to return alone as his employer explodes into the panic of loneliness. The reassurance of his re-appearance is the calm before

the storm, prelude to a brutal murder by the manic killer in his other persona. The saviour has become persecutor.

The dramatic thread of Williams's thriller weaves its way through two early plays of Pinter, to produce different but related patterns. In *The Birthday Party* (1958), Stanley's relationship with Meg, his landlady, comically echoes the mothering quest of Mrs. Bramson to ensnare Dan, while Dan, the fiery Celt and outsider on the Essex landscape also reappears in doubled form as Goldberg and McCann, the Jewish-Irish music hall duo, intruders come to abduct the petrified Stanley from his seaside hiding-place. In *The Dumb Waiter* (1960) Pinter produces a different form of doubling and reversal of the intrusion motif. Ben and Gus are gangsters on a murder assignment in a basement room, awaiting their final orders from Wilson who never appears while constant café orders from a dumb waiter enslave them to a different authority. Maddened by the demands of the dumb waiter Gus exits for a glass of water and in his absence, Ben receives orders to kill their target who is about to enter the basement room. As the door opens it is Gus who stumbles back, stripped of his gun, tie and jacket, to face the revolver which Ben is pointing at him. Like *Night Must Fall*, the re-entry is the prelude to dramatic climax. But this time it is the victim, not the murderer who re-enters and, unlike the earlier play, there is no resolution of the action. The lights go down with the two men staring at each other in silence. In *The Homecoming* (1965) a more powerful form of re-entry asserts itself as when Pinter's married couple, Ruth and Teddy, return from America to visit the husband's family but are perceived as intruders who need to prove themselves to gain acceptance.

*The Inspector Calls*, successfully revived last year in Expressionist style at London's Royal Court Theatre, sets up a different twist to the detective story. It is the inspector who is the play's figure of mystery, who cannot finally be known. It is not a murder he investigates but a suicide, acting less as a detective and more as an embodiment of the conscience collective by chastising the upper-class Birling family who have all, he claims, driven Eva Smith, an ex-employee in their firm to take her own life. Yet the 'inspector' who inspects their guilty consciences is not a police officer at all, and may have forced the family to confess their guilt at the 'death' of someone who is not yet dead, but who he himself then goes on to murder. Priestley here sets up a model for the mystery of identity to undermine the conventional mysteries of detection and motive, a model which Pinter pursues and develops in *The Collection*, *The Homecoming* and *Old Times* (1971). While the guilt-psychology of the Birling family is naturalistically stereotyped, a banal imitation of Ibsen, Inspector Goole (ghoul?) is a figure of genuine mystery and finally disappears like a ghost, a man without origin or trace. Pinter polarises this enigma more radically. His stereotypes become comic, pushing through naturalism into the absurdity of language as such — its failure to signify. While identity appears to be shrouded in mystery, it is now revealed as existing in a vacuum.

Absurd speech and evacuated identity then complement each other. To nail down the nature of the self and the nature of the other means saying the unsayable. Pinteresque language, as many critics point out, becomes evasion, a tactic of concealment where the audience has no omniscience. But it is also a source of power, an aggressive weapon used in a game of domination and submission. Priestley provides Pinter with more. His completely unconventional ending to a largely conventional play suggests a further avenue of exploration — the onset of paranoia in the modern psyche. The Hurling family becomes bemused when trying in retrospect to pin down the menace and ingenuity of the fake inspector. In their own eyes, they have become the victims of an elaborate game, a grand design for tacit persecution which they cannot understand or name. Through Goole's tactics of divide-and-rule, turning the family members against one another in accusation and counter-accusation over Eva Smith's 'suicide', there seems to run a grand conspiratorial design whose success depends on creating the psychological disarray which comes to pass.

Priestley's play is a parable of upper-class indifference towards the suffering it creates for class others, written at the end of the Second World War and set on the eve of the First. In the Cold War period, having responded to the more oblique despair of Kafka and Beckett, Pinter then universalises this parable of indifference and suffering as the predicament of humanity as such. Yet paradoxically, his powers of social observation are more powerful and precise than those of Priestley. For at the same time, he takes on the viewpoint of the excluded. It is a double exclusion, social and political. Just as the family or social network in the country house drama have a complacent confidence in their own powers as an extension of the power of class, Pinter's inhabitants of secluded rooms are often no better than underclass inmates dumped out of public sight. Meg's boarding house in *The Birthday Party*, the basement of Ben and Gus in *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Room* (1960) of Bert Hudd, the junk-filled living-space of the two brothers in *The Caretaker* (1960), the open-space double-room of Teddy's criminal family in *The Homecoming*, all bear the same imprint. They evoke the stark choice between subterranean power or no power at all.

In Pinter's world exclusion means that paranoiac fears are endemic. It is not only the unspoken hurt at exclusion, the awareness of social impotence, but equally fear of what lies on the outside, the power of those outside to intrude upon the territory of the unrecognised who have neither name nor place in society. Fear of exclusion matches fear of intrusion. For Joe Orton and Tom Stoppard, the paranoid style is a comic device which relies more clearly on parody and on one particular source — *The Mousetrap* (1952), the longest-running play in the history of West End theatre. In her country-house thriller, Christie combines the motifs of *Night Must Fall* and *The Inspector Calls*. The young intruding psychopath, like Dan, conceals his true nature at first, but like Priestley's inspector, he clinches the disguise by acting as a bogus police detective. He claims to be investigating the murder he has committed and then commits a further murder he predicts the murderer will try and commit. His manipulative function is ingeniously doubled as source of threat but Christie ups the paranoia stakes by a further device. Detective Sergeant 'Trotter' exploits the isolation of the visitors to the snow-bound manor by sowing the seeds of mutual suspicion amongst them as he pursues his 'investigation'. They are all links in a chain in possibilities. Trotter makes them feel guilty and persecuted at the same time. But in exposing her bogus detective as a schizophrenic murderer Christie recuperates for upper-class authority the unnerving mystery of Priestley's 'inspector'. Instead of protean identity she relies on formulaic convention. The killer must be caught and unmasked, not simply disappear as Priestley's intruder had done. Moreover, Major Metcalf, epitome of the British military tradition, unmask the murderous deceiver but also reveals himself as a real detective who has taken on the persona of Major Metcalf with the real major's consent. The theatrical absurdity of this double unmasking is often lost on conventional audiences who are easily re-assured when a 'real' detective appears in the house. But it is not lost on a future generation of English playwrights who regard Christie's formulaic characters, stilted dialogue and tortuous denouements as a vast resource for comic fun-and-games.

In *The Real Inspector Hound* (1966), Stoppard pays dubious homage to Christie by using her play but mocking its conventions through a play within-the-play where two drama critics are unwittingly forced onstage to become part of the country-house drama they are at the theatre to review. Stoppard thus uses a Pirandellian device to draw out the inherent absurdity of Christie's play, but there is a sense of overkill about his mockery of the language of investigation. The absorption of the critics into the play echoes the absorption of Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* into the 'play' of Hamlet. The play becomes a conspiratorial force overwhelming them, a web into which they are finely and unwittingly spun. If Didi and Gogo wait for Godot who never comes, then Stoppard's duo wait for the 'play' of events in the state of Denmark to engulf them. Yet Stoppard's device seems a hybrid, a halfway house

between the classical and the modern. The persecution of the courtiers — themselves conspirators in the original — is echoed by the jokey paranoia of the reviewers in *The Real Inspector Hound*. In both cases, the actors take their revenge on Stoppard's victims. It works as an in-house joke for regular theatre-goers yet Stoppard empties his models of all substance and his work seldom goes beyond the clichés which it parodies.

In contrast, Joe Orton gives the figure of the contemporary investigator more substance and more authentic humour. It takes as genuine threat the violation of authority posed by the bogus investigators of Christie and Priestley. But he also takes them out of the country-house and places them at the heart of a modern, very flakey, welfare state. He also uses the two devices of farce which work so effectively in Dario Fo, the disguise and the prior offering to his audience of facts which elude his investigators. In *Loot* (1966) Truscott is a corrupt police inspector disguised as a water board official come to investigate a bank robbery. In *What the Butler Saw* (1969) Rance is a psychiatrist investigating Prentice, another psychiatrist, and the inept private asylum he purports to be running. In the course of his persecution of the various 'inmates' he leaps to paranoid conclusions about everyone's personalities while failing to spot the variety of sexual disguises they are adopting for one tortuous reason or another. Rance and Truscott are thus paranoid investigators seeing conspiracy everywhere, jumping to false conclusions, and fitting together tenuous pieces of information as absolute truth. As a result they induce feelings of persecution in their victims which are not the classic forms of delusion Freud diagnosed, but normal responses to actual harassment. The professional experts are thus comic travesties of the protective function of the welfare state and paranoia becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy which displaces the talking cure. In *Loot* Truscott who is meant to protect citizens against crime, plants evidence, persecutes the innocent, and ends up involved in criminal conspiracy. By contrast, Rance seeks out ulterior motives in any form of pleasurable behaviour so that hedonism becomes the suspect pathology of deranged individuals whom psychiatry must cure. *What the Butler Saw* is the most hilarious of Orton's plays because Rance obsessively substitutes his own dialectic of appearance and reality for the actual one which is taking place under his nose, and which he is too stupid to recognise.

The bogus investigators of Priestley and Christie, the psychotic houseboy of Williams, are thus replaced by dark and disturbing figures of fun. If the mysteries investigated here are no longer mysteries for the audience, if the villain is a casual and cynical robber, not an intense psychopath then the situation is farcical, not sinister. The audience response to inept investigation, to the deranged abuse of pompous authority, is one of open hilarity. Of course Orton, like Pinter, did shock the theatre world on his debut. But his legacy has been to extend the range of public scepticism in what is now a more highly democratic culture. Orton is the supreme exploiter of the glaring gap between aspiration and deed in professional life. *What the Butler Saw* is his most radical and most traditional play in this respect. It pushes transvestism to its limit by replacing Freudian repression with existential desire. Yet the staging in the closed institution of the asylum recalls the watertight convention of the country-house from which there is no escape. Orton's vision of mayhem in the closed system strikes a perfect balance between structure and anarchy in which the paranoia of victims is perfectly justified and the paranoia of their persecutors totally ridiculous. The ego's displacement of guilt onto the watching persecutor, the Freudian patent to paranoia, turns into pure farce.

The vital difference of genre between Orton and Pinter, who admired each other's work, is that of farce and tragicomedy. While Orton deals, like Fo, in unlikely triumph, Pinter deals, like Beckett, in comic reversal of fortune. I want here to take the three major instances of how paranoia works in Pinter as a shifting signifier of fortune's reversal, in *The Homecoming*, *Old Times* and *Betrayal* (1978). Its function overlaps with that of Orton but also differs in crucial respects. While Orton locates it within the institutional relationship, Pinter changes direction after *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter*. From *The Caretaker* onwards, he explores

paranoia as a mood of domestic intimacy. Here, he seems to seek out its nucleus, its seemingly irreducible core and each Pinteresque triangle or quartet becomes a metaphorical 'nuclear' family, whether kin or not, which in the course of the drama is fissured like the splitting of an atom. *The Caretaker* exploits a symbiotic double fear, the outsider's fear of the inside, seen in Davies, the tramp, and the insider's fear of the outsider, seen varying in the behaviour of Mick and Austen, the two brothers in the West London flat. Davies, by moving in, hopes to gain territory in becoming the dwelling's "caretaker" yet risks fear of the unknown. The power struggle between him and Mick, the younger brother is a competition over axes of power, with each positing an alliance with the 'third man', Austen, incapable of using power because his illness disables him. But the ambiguities of the power discourse deepen in the position of the third man. Is he also manipulating for advantage, pitting brother against outsider only to re-form the alliance of siblings at the expense of the tramp? Here Austen, the persecuted, institutional victim of frontal lobotomy, becomes a source of paranoia in the other two men who hate each other and fear the alliance of the hated other with 'the third man' who they wish to care for. Both wish to be 'care-takers' to ensure the exclusion of the other. Both fear the shifting of alliance.

As Pinter moves towards the milieu of middle-class life in *The Collection* (1961), *The Lover* (1963), and *Old Times*, he retains the same elements of triangular contest in more oblique and less violent form. On the other hand, *The Homecoming* tackles head on the question of class difference as a stark choice, that of moving socially upward out of family life or of 'coming home' and down, to rejoin it. Paranoia usually fuels a sense of exclusion in which the subject is deluded into a false choice — recentre yourself through staged power displays or be annihilated. One of the extraordinary features of *The Homecoming* is that it inverts our normal expectations of paranoia. Teddy, who in the second act is being excluded by losing his wife to his previous family, takes his fate calmly and leaves. The conspiratorial act of exclusion by father, uncle and the two brothers which results in the possession of Ruth, should by all logic result in the exorcising of their own class fears — the fear of the superior academic family which Teddy and Ruth have, with their own children, now become. Yet the appropriation and inclusion of Ruth, instead of curing their fear of the outside, sets up another fear. The woman at the centre of their male family with its homosexual ambience, is no longer 'the tart' she appeared to be during her 'seduction' but a figure whose role cannot be nailed down, a woman whose nature cannot be named. "She won't... be adaptable", Max blurts out on the verge of collapse. Ruth responds to his desperate plea to be kissed by watching him as he lies on the floor, not moving but continuing to caress Joey's hair. It is the end of patriarchal power. The 're-gaining' of Ruth for the life of working-class villainy is a Pyrrhic victory.

*The Collection* and *The Lover* extend and contract the range of the nuclear triangle. In the former, two couples interact in a series of crossover effects, which can be read as straight or gay, erotic or spiteful, real or imaginary. In the latter, the actor who plays Richard, the husband of the suburban Sarah, comes back as Max the afternoon lover only to return that night once more as the commuting husband who has doubled his marital self by posing as furtive adulterer. Richard and Sarah then struggle over the persona of the lover they have invented. For Sarah, Max is a better lover than her husband. For the husband, Max is whatever the husband decides to make of him. When Sarah threatens to absorb Richard completely into the false persona of Max, he responds by inventing his own lover, the woman who as 'slut' and 'whore' is a better lover than the wife. As Max the lover meanwhile, he tells Sarah he has told his imaginary wife at home he is having an affair with a whore. The power-discourse becomes schizoid in these games of the shared experience and two psychotic conditions, paranoid-schizophrenic, often linked in the diagnosis of mental illness are split asunder. For the ecstasy of make-believe adultery has the function of foiling the paranoia associated with actual betrayal, and thus preserving the marriage. Infidelity was a theme

Pinter developed in more complex ways in the seventies with *Old Times* and *Betrayal*, plays in which Pinter fully deconstructs his chosen title.

While his drama up to that point has been linear, and the fear of exclusion a forward movement in the plot, here we have memory plays which reverse the momentum of suspicion. *Old Times* does this through the power discourse of Rate and Deeley which attempt to reclaim the past through rival versions of its meaning. As the play moves forward to its conclusion the role of the past is slowly magnified like the gradual zoom on a film lens. In *Betrayal* the chronological movement of the play is backward. While it starts forward in the first two scenes in 1977, it moves back through the next six scenes to 1971. It begins with the end of Jerry and Emma's affair and ends with its beginning. In *Old Times* the past and its various inventions take place within the present. In *Betrayal* the present moves forward into the past. Pathological suspicion in each case is male, that of the marital cuckold, so that Deeley and Robert think backward to what has happened, not forward to what might happen. In each case, grounded suspicion is reluctant to become full-blown paranoia. The male protagonist does not want to suspect the worse and tries to stop himself by finding the past has been otherwise. His suspicions are then unfortunately vindicated. Actual knowledge of betrayal eliminates the suspicion of clinical psychosis — he is not after all, paranoid. But in a way, both Deeley and Robert would have preferred ungrounded suspicion, and hence been paranoid, to the actual discovery of betrayal.

The two memory plays come during the decade of Pinter's *Proust* screenplay, his adaptation of *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* for Joseph Losey, a film project which lacked the funding to go into production. Through this screenplay Pinter breaks with the existential frame of dramatic 'presentness' which he inherited from Beckett, where memory is unreliable and the record of the past reduced to the scratchy voice on Krapp's tape recorder. But comparing Pinter's two plays, the strategies are radically different. Before *The Proust Screenplay*, *Old Times* had turned language games into memory games, a feature also of *No Man's Land*. But after *Proust*, in *Betrayal*, reverse chronology creates a new dramatic momentum. All the scenes are on the edge of revelation, a series of instants where the affair between Emma and Jerry might be discovered by Robert, a series of instants where the affair might already be common knowledge. The paranoid style refers to the dramaturgical use of the sense of exclusion. Thus the male protagonist is not paranoid in the psychotic sense, which is the case in *Night Must Fall*, but *devoid of knowledge of the knowledge of others*, which in turn can be used against the excluded self. The delusions of persecution triggered by surveillance which often pass, according to Freud, into delusions of grandeur are not strictly present here. But the imagined act of watching by others which spurs paranoid anxieties, clearly is, as is the shared knowledge by others of the self which the self does not share. Consequently, in the oblique ambience of middle-class encounter where so much is never openly stated, suspicion blooms. Paranoia here becomes a dramatic style, an atmospheric residue, something in the air.

Interestingly, *Betrayal* does echo one aspect of the Freudian problematic since repudiated by most psychiatrists — the link of paranoia and homosexuality. Using the celebrated case of Dr. Schreber, Freud had decided the male delusion of persecution was a projective mechanism of accusation directed against the loved one (male) to repress sexual attraction. To accuse the supposed persecutor was to admit an inadmissible desire. There are clear echoes of this in the ambiguous posture of Robert towards his betrayer. Hurt by being cuckolded, he is also hurt by being overlooked as a more worthy object of desire.

This refusal to express his hurt openly to Jerry opens up the double repression of a double betrayal. On the one hand, Robert's repression of the wound which cannot heal plus his repression of the love that dare speak its name : on the other, Jerry's betrayal of his best friend with his best friend's wife plus Robert's betrayal of his inadmissible lover (Jerry) with his lover's secret beloved (Emma) which occurs when the affair ends. Also, during the affair is

the veiled clue of Emma's throwaway remark to Jerry about his own wife. Emma has seen her in the company of another woman of whom Jerry seems ignorant. Her innuendo of lesbian betrayal squares the circle. Interestingly, *Old Times* is both similar and different here. Similar because the 'affair' of Anne and Kate as the wound which cannot heal is a homosexual passion in lesbian form, different because the female passion is a displaced, projective desire of the cuckolded male as well as the source of his hurt. Deeley envies that which he cannot be, and cannot possibly have been, the female lover of his wife, while that which he has been, the passionate husband, is now a role shattered. He is thus haunted by the passion of the two women which has come out of the past to make him, as in the title of Carol Reed's film which he has once been to see, the 'odd man out'. His persecution works through the inverted mirror image he sees of a homosexual love. He is repelled by that which attracts him, destroyed by that which secretly fascinates him. In vain, he re-invents the past to repress both the fantasy of secret attraction and the reality of a deeper love which has preceded his own.

Similarly, the paranoid feel, the familial atmospheric which ends *The Homecoming* lies, as already suggested, in the fear of the female as the unknown, of Ruth as the cannot-be-known by father, sons and uncle who may well have had carnal knowledge of one another earlier in their lives. To know her carnally as the brothers Teddy and Joey have done, and to witness that 'knowing' of the younger generation's triumph as Max and Sam have done is to capture her, they imagine, for both home and brothel. But the ending of the play shows the knowing to be false. In the upstairs bedroom, Ruth and Joey have 'not gone the whole way'. At the end Max and Joey, father and son, are both on their knees before her, Joey's head in her lap. Her protean identity has echoes in the sexuality of the polymorphous perverse which the final scene intimates. The Otherness of the woman who cannot be known becomes an abyss for the spent hoodlums of the motherless household. The audience directly experiences the sensation of that collective and deranged fear of the female unknown which the postures of the men convey. Technically, Teddy the husband is the one displaced, losing his wife and leaving the household which has taken her from him. But the shift in dramatic suspense, both dark and comic, is to switch focus swiftly from the outsider to the insiders. Teddy is being conspired against, is being insulted, is being excluded, yet his calmness exudes acceptance of this fate, summarised in the swapping of his wife for a cheese sandwich.

The paranoid style referred throughout this essay is seldom, therefore, paranoia in any clinical sense after all. It is a dramatic playing upon the paranoid, the honing of it into a theatricality of action, re-action and suspense. Here the style creates a mood which envelops the watching audience as much as it does the characters onstage. Pinter's menace taps their fear. His dark humour, however, draws them out again as they see its absurdity in others. The constant oscillation nonetheless creates an enduring uneasiness. In a post-Freudian age it is the sequel to the detective suspense drama. The plotting of clues has been replaced by a mapping of the absences of knowledge, the vast hiatus between suspicion and certainty which for Pinter is the human condition in the modern world.

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