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Psychoanalyzing and Deciphering Language Games in Pinter's *The Birthday Party*

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Order

Are you ready to order?

No there is nothing to order

No I'm unable to order

No I'm a long way from order

And while there is everything,

And nothing, to order,

Order remains a tall order

And disorder feeds on the belly of order

And order requires the blood of disorder

And 'freedom' and ordure and other disorders

Need the odour of order to sweeten their murders

Disorder a beggar in a darkened room

Order a banker in castiron womb

Disorder an infant in a frozen home

Order a soldier in a poisoned tomb (Various Voices, Harold Pinter 187)

The altruism of political fundamentalism functions as a strangulating aura within the ostracized boarding house of *The Birthday Party*. The residence has a characteristic of a dystopian possibility, subsuming characters marked by a phantasmatic approval and negation of the civilization. Capitalism, consumerism, state-politics operate as a diacritical motive on the psyche of the impassioned inhabitants and the hyperactive process of transformation is executed by the law enforcers of the economic enterprises. The industrialism and culture in the Pinter drama aim at an impossible and forcible reinscription of the government laws to generate a stasis in the upheaval against society. The state apparatus of the plot resemble the methodology of the seventeenth century *Hôpital Général*. Foucault in *The Great Confinement* refers to the counterpoise designed by the sovereign,

a quasi-absolute sovereignty, jurisdiction without appeal, a writ of execution against which nothing can prevail- the *Hôpital Général* is a strange power that the king establishes between the police and the courts, at the limits of the law: a third order of repression (Rainbow 126).

The establishment was a defense mechanism against passionate, poignant and histrionic sensibility; it was an outright rejection and non-validation of the rights of the mendicant, the unemployed, prisoners and the insane. This cryptic

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population was sublimated, subjugated and subdued inside this conformist system of obligation; Goldberg and McCann symbolize the moral police of this prohibitory injunction barring the 'impediments' of society. Stanley encapsulates the artistic sensitivity and overwrought irrationality and is hunted and quashed by the bearers of the policies.

If there is something in classical madness, something which refers elsewhere, and to other things, it is no longer because the madman comes from the world of the irrational and bears its stigmata; rather, it is because he crosses the frontiers of bourgeois order of his own accord, and alienates himself outside the sacred limits of its ethic. (136)

Stanley secludes himself from the world, where life is structured by the maintenance of safeguard and stability of society; his identity survives as a concert pianist of metaphysical accomplishment and is constantly bombarded by the memory of past grandeur. Whereas Goldberg and McCann follow instructions from the higher world order,

Goldberg: You know what? I've never lost a tooth. Not since the day I was born. Nothing's changed.... What do you think, I'm a self-made man? No! I sat where I was told to sit.... And for why? Because I'm telling you, I'm telling you, follow my line? Follow my mental? (Pinter 77)

Pinter, in an interview with Larry Bensky for the Paris Review in 1966, refers to the boarding house and the character of Meg:

I have filthy insane digs, a great bulging scrag of a woman with breasts rolling at her belly, an obscene household, cats, dogs, filth, tea strainers, mess, oh bullocks, talk, chat rubbish shit scratch dung poison, infanthility, deficient order in the upper fretwork, fucking roll on.

Michael Y. Bennett in his essay *The Pinteresque Oedipal Household: The Interrogation Scene(s) in The Birthday Party*, reads the play from the primal Oedipal setting (Meg, Petey and Stanley forming the triad) and the interrogation as the subjective/objective dialectic; 'The classically known "interrogation scene" is a mini-parable of the entire parabolic play, as Goldberg, especially, takes on the role of conman/actor whose objective speech objectifies Stanley. This is due, presumably, to the fact that Goldberg and McCann do not communicate in a subjective reality' (Bennett 55). Death as a ritual is not abhorred, but is merged with the structuration of power; population is mobilized and the body as an instrument of a superior machine is integrated, modified and optimized to function for the efficient economic system.

Goldberg: You'll be re-oriented.

McCann: You'll be rich.

Goldberg: You'll be adjusted.

McCann: You'll be our pride and joy.

Goldberg: You'll be a mensch.

McCann: You'll be a success.

Goldberg: You'll be integrated. (Pinter 83)

The new forces of production, organization and filiation situate and specify the individuals in a condition of lack, to pull them down to a level of finitude in order to facilitate participation in the historical formation of the state. According to Julia Kristeva's *Psychoanalysis and the Polis*, the political organizations develop a (non) meaning out of the interpretation of the utopian desires of the social group. The mass leading a labyrinthine existence will never arrive at a united truth, for the regulation of the ideology which governs them is based on the renunciation of the subject's phantasms arising out of the phallic *jouissance* (obtained by seizing the archaic mother). Such an analysis will always revolve around a void. However, the goal of the political ideology (according to Marx) is to transform the world to liberate its own desires and needs. Des and Lionel in Pinter's *The New World Order* fight in the name of 'democracy' - the term which has unknowingly dissolved into dictatorship in the text; the blindfolded man is a symbolic representation of their own blindness. The play signifies the friction between aesthetic autonomy and political control, linguistic codes of society and righteousness, physical and spiritual transformation. The language that they employ to shatter the 'illusions' of the blindfolded man trespass the erected standards of society;

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Lionel: Who is this cunt anyway? ...

Des: He is a lecturer in fucking peasant theology. (Pinter 273)

Penelo Prentice in his book *The Pinter Ethic* mentions Pinter's letter to Peter Wood about Stanley's crisis with self-knowledge:

Stanley *cannot* perceive his own valid justification-which is he is what he is-therefore he certainly can never be articulate about it. He knows only to attempt to justify himself by dream, by pretence and by bluff, through fright. If he had cottoned on to the fact that he need only admit to himself what he is and is not-then Goldberg and McCann would not have paid their visit, or if they had, the same course of events would have been by no means assured. (31)

The interrogation chamber in *One for the Road* is a vague representation of the rape, torture and debasement. Pinter, through this drama condemns totalitarian and centralized control of power over all aspects of human life. The semantics based threat of Nicolas on Victor provides a passing glimpse of the horror of dominant civilization, "Death. Death. Death. Death....it is beautiful. The purest, most harmonious thing there is. Sexual intercourse is nothing compared to it" (Pinter 229). The officer assigns the position of God to himself and the authority, "I run the place. God speaks through me. I'm referring to the Old Testament God" (Pinter 225). The linguistic articulation of Stanley anticipates the innocent mountain language of the Elderly Woman in Pinter's *Mountain Language*. The play's centre is the implementation of power against the socio-political prisoners; the mother of the victim is degenerated into silence for her failure to speak the language of absolutism. The psychological disjunction of Stanley and the elderly woman is performed by the penetration of the social barrier within the fervent of humanity;

Officer: You are mountain people. You hear me? Your language is dead. It is forbidden (Pinter 255)

Sergeant: She looks like a fucking intellectual to me (Pinter 257)

Prisoner: Mother can you hear me? I am speaking to you in our own language....Do you hear me?It's our language....Mother? (Pinter 266).

Similarly, Goldberg and McCann use systematized and channelized language of denunciation to dehumanize Stan into a non-existent individual,

McCann: You contaminate womankind.

Goldberg: Why don't you pay the rent?

McCann: Mother defiler!

Goldberg: Why do you pick your nose?

McCann: I demand justice!

Goldberg: What's your trade?

McCann: What about Ireland?

Goldberg: What's your trade?

Stanley: I play the piano.

Goldberg: How many fingers do you use?

Stanley: No hands!

Goldberg: No society would touch you. Not even a building society.

McCann: You're a traitor to the cloth.

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Goldberg: What do you use for pyjamas?

Stanley: Nothing. (Pinter 51)

Goldberg and McCann exhibit signs of consanguinity and implement a transbiological essence in the confiscation of Stanley's space. They are part of the organization which is bent upon crushing all autonomous institutions and liberated individuals. Martin Esslin in his *The Theatre of the Absurd*, reads the existential remains of Stanley laid out in the play as the "allegory of death-man snatched away from the home he has built himself, from the warmth of love embodied by Meg's mixture of motherliness and sexuality, by the dark angels of nothingness, who pose to him the question of which came first, the chicken or the egg" (241). True liberalism is enslaved in the recollections of Stan's 'piano concert' and Meg's 'pink carpet' and 'pink curtains'. At the end of the drama all the socially truncated characters bear the stigmata of the discourse of absolutism. Goldberg represents the sycophancy of the bourgeois culture and McCann's doubt about the legal validity of the assignment is silenced by the overwhelming personality of Goldberg,

McCann: This job-no, listen-this job, is it going to be like anything we've ever done before?

Goldberg: Tch, tch, tch....

Goldberg: The main issue is a singular issue and quite distinct from your previous work.... All is dependent on the attitude of our subject. At all events, McCann, I can assure you that the assignment will be carried out and the mission accomplished with no excessive aggravation to you or myself. Satisfied?

McCann: Sure. Thank you, Nat. (Pinter 30)

Goldberg's enunciation carries a vague justification of a distant dream and the linguistic structure used by Goldberg and McCann elicits the ensnaring commands of the superegoic structure. The acquisition of the libidinal desires is articulated by pressurizing the ego with the moral codes of society- the aesthetic enjoyment of the self is forcibly enmeshed with the duties to the state. The outside world of *The Birthday Party* is founded upon the theory of totalitarianism and suppression of political and cultural expressions, where the concept of permissiveness is based on the promise of blurred liberation. Slavoj Žižek refers to the modern totalitarian masters (who have abolished their roles as the proper symbolic father) as the Freudian Un-Father figure. The job entrusted upon the automatons is to spread the idea of war without casualties, among the masses; a virtualized warfare-society fails to realize the schism falling between the virtual state with artificial guns and dead bodies and the real battlefield with face-to-face combat. This condition is what Žižek calls the superegoic deadlock which has the power of completely shattering an individual. And to demolish this social antagonism and psychic impasse Žižek suggests the authentic act of redefining and reorganizing one's identity- a complete transformation, a symbolic suicide and a new birth. Stan's sacrifice of the harmony of piano and his deliberate withdrawal from society is an attempt to attain an individualist stance and to re-modify his 'self', but the forced 'birth' day destroys the productive moments of his subjectivity. For Žižek, the act of moderation cannot be achieved within deterministic materialism; it is something that arises ex nihilo. Kafka's Josef K. in *The Trial* functions with the prior knowledge of accusation and Stanley on the other hand escapes the accusations, creating a world of fantasy around him; both seem invalid in the face of subconscious absurdity. K. is arrested for an unspecified crime and the court becomes the structure of the superego questioning his right to question existence; "My innocence doesn't simplify the matter....What matters are the many subtleties in which the court gets lost. But in the end it produces great guilt from some point where originally there was nothing at all" (117). The arrest becomes a mental deadlock and K.'s resignation in the end arises out of the realization that he is powerless against this inertia in society.

Stavrakaki's conceptualization regarding the transformation of the real democracy into a balancing act between the utopian egalitarian state and the passionate totalitarian regime is prevalent in the manifestations of Goldberg and McCann. Žižek comments in his *Against the Politics of Jouissance*, that Stavrakaki's transcendental dream is a negotiation between the lack in the guarantee of an idealized state and the excess pointing towards the enjoyment in a political democracy. Modern society is structured by the lack of the realization of *jouissance* (in libidinal terms). The invalidation of this lack in society occurs through the three processes; the utopian (totalitarianism and fundamentalism negates this lack by proposing an ultimate utopia), democratic (democracy traverses the fantasy through political antagonisms) and post-democratic (individuals pursuing their consumerist fantasies). Stavrakaki realizes the idiosyncrasy of a developed

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democracy through the partial enjoyment of *jouissance*, “neither the phallic enjoyment of Power nor the utopia of the incestuous full enjoyment, but a non-phallic (non-all) partial enjoyment. . . . ‘a *jouissance* beyond accumulation, domination and fantasy, an enjoyment of the not-all or not-whole’” (•i•ek). Goldberg echoes Stavrakaki’s proposition in spreading a society without the *objet petit a* (the cause for sustaining the fantasy and inflating it to monstrous proportions) by reducing it the status of commonality,

McCann: Help you kneel on kneeling days.

Goldberg: Give you a free pass.

McCann: Take you for constitutionals.

Goldberg: Give you hot tips.

McCann: We’ll provide the skipping rope.

Goldberg: The vest and pants.

McCann: The ointment.

Goldberg: The hot poultice.

McCann: The fingerstall.

Goldberg: The abdomen belt. (Pinter 83).

Goldberg and McCann formulate the constituted anxiety which hunts and encompasses Stanley; Goldberg’s participation in separating Stanley from Meg also negates the “breast-value” assigned to the partial objects by Laclau. What Stavrakaki rejects is the “too-much-ness” of striving round the hole for the attainment of the pleasure beyond life and death and deriving surplus *jouissance* out of it. Stanley upholds Lacan’s opinion which states, that to overcome this fantasy (which structures our reality) one needs to identify completely with the fantasies which resist our absolute participation in the mundane realities; the frustrated Stan, to transgress this symbolic lack, accommodates himself in the secluded boarding house of the Boles,

Meg: Two gentlemen asked Petey if they could come and stay for a couple of nights. I’m expecting them....

Stanley: I don’t believe it.

Meg: It’s true.

Stanley (moving to her): You’re saying it on purpose....

Stanley: Who are they?

Meg: I don’t know....

Stanley: But who are they?

Meg: You’ll see they come.

Stanley (decisively): They won’t come. (Pinter 20)

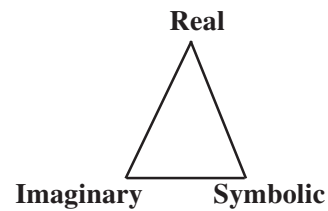
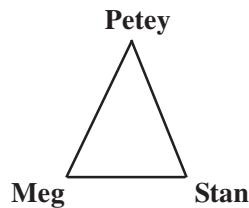
Society itself represents the *objet petit a* (the object of desire) and instead of providing Stanley the *jouissance* (obtained by the subject by dancing around the object), it consumes the protagonist. Stan’s piano concert symbolically transforms into Lacan’s lamella (a partial, surreal object which is irrepressible, indestructible and immortal). The piano ceremony accomplishes an inhuman stature of the Real with the undead urge to unite with the subject and thus the compulsion to repeat the death drive (the painful past experiences); the past becomes a wound, a primeval abyss making the subject undead. Stan even fails to reconstruct his past with absolute certainty,

Stanley: I had a unique touch.... They came up to me and said they were grateful..... My father nearly came down to hear me.... But I don’t think he could make it. No, I- I lost the address....Lower Edmonton.... My next concert. Then, when I got there, the hall was closed. (22-23)

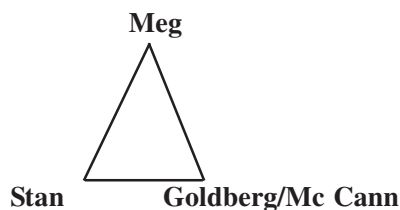
In the *Seminar on “The Purloined Letter”* (1970), Lacan delves into the unconscious (structured like a language) of the characters to decipher the movement of the pure signifier without the dependence on the signified; the signifier becomes characterized only by an absence. The cryptic letter modulates and modifies the intersubjective power relations. In Pinter’s *The Birthday Party*, the letter fuses into the symbol of the power placed by the society on the individual and the role of the King, Queen, Minister, Prefect, Dupin and the psychoanalyst keep shifting within the structure of the play. The disintegration of the paper into five neatly cut strips illustrate the absence of harmony for the five principal characters.

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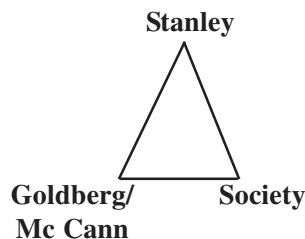
The role of the 'blind' personage, who is unaware of the situation (the symbolic relation between Meg and Stan), is played by Petey (also the Law of the Father), the obsessed 'seer' held by the symbolic law is the character of Meg for whom the 'letter' is Stanley (an individual from the outside symbolic world), and the 'robber' 'capable of anything' (having the power of looking into Meg's unconscious) is played out by Stanley.



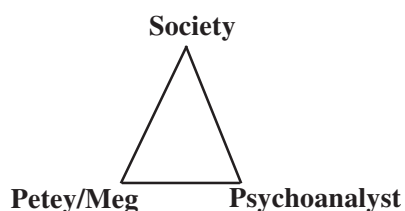
In the second scene, after the entry of the intruders Goldberg and McCann, the position of the 'blind' prefect is taken by Meg for she fails to understand the motive of their arrival, Stanley assumes the role of Meg presupposing that no one can possibly penetrate his phantasmal world (a symbolic castration occurs and at the end of the play Stan is linguistically severed), Goldberg and McCann are the astute 'robbers' stripping naked Stanley's repressed conscience.



In the third scene Stanley acquires the 'blind' spot, after being pushed to the periphery through accusations; Goldberg and McCann with their past wishes and doubts about the organization allot themselves (unconsciously) the status of the delusional 'seer' and the position of the all-knowing and all-pervasive 'robber' is taken by the Society (the signifier/letter in the symbolic circuit).



The last scene has the Society (the lacking Other) in the blind position consuming Goldberg, McCann and Stanley within its domain; "...according to the very formulation of the intersubjective communication...the sender receives from the receiver his own message in an inverted form" (*Fink* 30). Petey and Meg become the 'seer', forever inactive and choked within the symbolic circuit (Meg participates in the destruction of Stanley by beating his birthday drum during his predicament and Petey, by failing to stop Goldberg and lying to Meg about Stanley's disappearance) and the psychoanalyst becomes the 'robber' being able to locate the roles of these characters and waiting to be subsumed by the symbolic circuit.



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The respective positions shift from the imaginary circuit to the symbolic stature through 'repetition compulsion.' Through the automatism of repetition, the signifier displaces and determines the political positions of the players. The blind personage belongs to the domain of the non-symbolized and impenetrable real, the 'seer' to the imaginary world of images and self-absorption, and the 'robber' to the power of the symbolic.

Stanley represents the melancholic subject for whom the object (the society) has lost its efficiency to be desired by the subject; the object of melancholy becomes an autonomous organ with the emanating sounds and desires of its own (thus Stanley is devoid of any speech in the end). Eluding symbolization, Stanley's boarding house itself belongs to the imaginary state, as he rejects the idea of the house being on the list. Society, like the Fascist anti-Semites, elevate the likes of Stanley to the position of the Jews (•iek's third factor in a binarized discourse) looking at them as a considerable threat to the social harmony and obliterating them for maintaining an imaginary 'social order'.

In the fantastical seaside town, Meg, as the mother, with her tickling playfulness and sensual strokes provides Stanley an eroticized fear of being cornered and neglected by the m/other, 'I'm coming to get you!....(...shouts from Stanley, wild laughter from Meg....)...(She is panting and arranges her hair.).... (sensual, stroking his arm)' (Pinter 14-19). Stanley, as the child, inheres the mother as part of his self and with the penetration of intruders, reacts violently due to the fear of losing the m/other,

Stanley: Let me-just make this clear. You don't bother me. To me, you're nothing but a dirty joke. But I have a responsibility towards the people in this house....There's nothing here for you, from any angle, any angle. So why don't you just go, without any fuss? (Pinter 45)

The 'birth'day becomes a symbol of a new birth, a re-entry into the symbolic order, and the boy's drum replacing the piano is a substitution gift from Meg for not having the breast to nourish, '(tenderly). It's because you haven't got a piano' (36); the drum provides nourishment to the self through (dis)harmony. The broken drum produces the failed rhythm of Stanley's life and a distorted and deranged vision of reality. The artificial torch light used for shining Stanley's face transforms into the game of 'blind man's buff' giving way to the interplay of the repressed desires in the darkness of the unconscious; Stanley attempts to strangle Meg (a sado-masochistic desire to achieve pleasure) and to rape Lulu after losing the mother figure amidst Goldberg and McCann. Stanley tries to enact the sexual transgression in front of the m/other as a sort of inverted revenge, but executes the act in darkness. In this play, the repressed desires play a pivotal role, which are in constant resilience to break free the repression barrier to project its components on the consciousness; the resistance offered by the consciousness on the one hand and the repressions on the other leads to deformations and displacements. Lulu suffers from a father fixation- 'Do you think you knew me when I was a little girl....I've always liked older men. They can soothe you....You're the dead image of the first man I ever loved' (61), 'What would my father say, if he knew?' (79); Goldberg temporarily loses himself in the mother fixation, 'A mother in a million....I'd leave her with a little kiss on her cheek-I never took liberties.... 'Simey!' my old mum used to shout....And there on the table what would I see? The nicest piece of gefilte fish you could wish to find on a plate' (43), 'I had a wife. What a wife....And there on the table what would I see? The nicest piece of...you could wish to find on a plate' (59). The guilt gets suppressed and internalized in the delirious Goldberg and the declaration of the meaninglessness of world is evident not through his subjective language but through the changing facial expression during the accusations hinted at the society,

Goldberg: And don't go too near the water.
And you'll find-that what I say is true.
Because I believe that the world... (Vacant)....
Because I believe that the world... (Desperate)....
BECAUSE I BELIEVE THAT THE WORLD... (Lost).... (78)

The assemblage of Stanley into a dumb spectator clogs the functioning of the Symbolic chain, placing him in permanent stabilization. 'Uh-gug...uh-gug...eeehhh-gag... (On the breath.) Caahh...caahh....' (84), the confiscation of Stanley's subjectivity through the apparent liberalization voids the linguistic operation and reduces him to the hyperactive utterance of utter 'gibberish,' or pure sound of noise.

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