

## Pinter and Foucault: Duologues as Discourse

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An absolute reality does not play a part in Pinter's plays. There is not a reality to be found under the words and actions of the characters after these words have been stripped away (as there is presumed to be in a play like Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*). As Pinter explained in a programme note to a 1960 performance of *The Room* and *The Dumb Waiter*:

The desire for verification is understandable but cannot always be satisfied. There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. The thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false. The assumption that to verify what has happened and what is happening presents few problems I take to be inaccurate.<sup>1</sup>

The language of a Pinter play functions rather in terms of a discourse, as described by Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Discourses, according to Foucault, are largely self-determining, the prevailing discourse developing from the previous discourse and that discourse from the one before it and so on. The acceptance or otherwise of statements is determined by the discursive formation itself and the laws which govern it.<sup>2</sup> This article attempts an analysis of the Pinter duologues<sup>3</sup> in terms of a Foucauldian discourse.

- 1 Cited by A. Sykes, *Harold Pinter* (University of Queensland Press, 1970), p.29.
- 2 See M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Pantheon Books, 1972), p.116.
- 3 'Duologue' is the term introduced by Quigley in *The Pinter Problem* (Princeton University Press, 1975) to denote two people speaking in a Pinter play in a manner distinct from dialogue, which connotes interaction based on rational logic.

*The Birthday Party* begins with Meg asking: 'Is that you Petey?'<sup>4</sup> This question is barely reasonable the first time she asks it, but when she continues asking variations of this question to Petey's responses, we are shown the question is not proffered to gain information. The primary function of language in this play is something else. Meg wishes to establish a discourse of warm, cordial mothering. She reinforces this with the use of a childish-sounding name 'Petey', and the requirement that Petey account for himself by asking 'are you back?', even though the contrary cannot be given. (He cannot say: 'I do not exist'.)

Meg's discourse is similar to Foucault's description of the discourses of disciplines in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. The significance of the parts (the 'statements') of Meg's discourse is derived from the context in which they are spoken. Meg's discourse is not dependant on any inherent characteristics of reality; it is self-determining, and it creates the reality of the play (the 'object' in archaeological analysis). Meg continues this discourse with minimal initial help from Petey. Like Rose in *The Room* she could continue without any input from the other individual there. Petey does eventually become involved in Meg's discourse, and this becomes the reality of the situation. Thus one character has brought about a particular relationship through the use of discourse.

The duologue is striking for the vacuousness of the subjects broached and its mixing of referents: 'I haven't seen him down yet/Well then he can't be up' (p.20). With the exception of an Oedipal comment by Meg and the passing mention of two strangers, no information exists in their dialogue. Its only significance is in the relationship between Meg and Petey it outlines. Pinter is illustrating that the referents mentioned in a dialogue are not (referentially) important. (The contrast in the reactions of Petey to Stanley, compared to his reactions to Meg, suggests that Petey is able

4 Pinter, *Plays: One* (Eyre Methuen, London, 1976), p.19. Subsequent references to *The Birthday Party* are incorporated in the text.

to be polite and accommodating, but to some degree resents or is dominated by Meg's discourse.)

Meg's discourse cannot be denied by Stanley, as it cannot be denied by Petey. Stanley attacks it at every turn. The cornflakes are horrible. 'The milk's off.' (p.25) However this only makes him a petulant child. This is the only level at which Stanley can interact with Meg and become part of the discourse, and he does. Pinter emphasizes the nature of the discourse with the evidence of hypocrisy in the question: 'What are the cornflakes like Stan?' (p.24). Meg is incensed that Stanley answers her question. The words used are only to be part of the discourse.

Meg begins to flirt with an uninterested Stanley, refusing him food, in a one-sided playing around. Initially Stanley attempts to give her the reassurance she seems to want, saying he desires the product of her mothering, and yet Meg wants more. He then threatens to go elsewhere. While this appears to be a step outside the discourse, with Stanley threatening to participate no longer, it is actually part of the discourse. To be outside the discourse Stanley would, for example, have to declare that discourse was irrelevant, that the discourse was not the issue. While the question of who prepares his food is important, Stanley is taking part in Meg's discourse. Always the 'dialogue' is part of the discourse: they are talking about food and a providing/receiving relationship. The manifestation of whatever else might be going on is in the discourse.

The threat to leave raises an important question: What is the cause of Stanley's 'decision' to remain where he is, and hence conform to the relationship he has with Meg? He takes part in the discourse 'of his own volition'.<sup>5</sup> It cannot be said that he is driven to it: too much of his part in the discourse seems personally driven and he initiates a number of new

5 Such terms as 'decision' and 'volition' are used 'under erasure' in the Derridean sense: the character cannot exercise his will except by dealing with the existing discourse. Such 'subjectivity' as is established in the text is conditioned in the same way.

statements within the discourse. Yet in a way comparable to the effect of rhetoric in a text, the discourse does make resistance impotent. Stanley's neurotic behaviour suggests he has a desire to leave, and he suffers from insomnia and pain (obscurely) because of his situation. Yet the discourse has made Stanley a child and so he cannot act, as is illustrated by his proposal to Lulu, where he subverts his own desire to leave (p.36). This is produced by the discourse which has produced his reality, just by overlaying a description of his relationship to the others on to the situation. Later McCann and Goldberg break Stanley down with a discourse that interrogates and persecutes him as a criminal. In each case he must respond within the discourse set up – the truth system within which reality's significance is created. What makes McCann and Goldberg so effective is that the weight of their accusations gives Stanley no position but that of criminal, which he eventually adopts.

Looking at how Meg and Stanley interact, we see that the dominant characteristic is the acceptance of the discourse: a majority of the topics centre on Meg's mothering role. Ostensibly Stanley is more manipulative and self-serving, aiming to control Meg. Stanley attacks Meg according to the criteria of the discourse: that is, by claiming she fails in her roles as wife, provider, proprietor of the 'hotel' and respectable woman. He seems unable to say that Meg's attentions are inappropriate, which would be effective in rejecting Meg's advances as he seems to want to do. Yet at other times he flatters and encourages her (or at the very least, leaves room for his words to be interpreted as encouragement), calling her 'succulent'. From this we can see that the discourse is only the means by which characters have to struggle to fulfil their respective purposes, although as it is also the perceived reality, they may be transformed by it.

Examining Stanley's motivation and purposes, there are indicators he is fighting to maintain a critical independent identity, and yet he wishes to maintain the discourse as long as he can control it. (He cannot in any case dismiss it.) He will admit a mother-son relationship with Meg but he wishes

to dictate its consequences. The discourse with its consequent relationships does a damage to things as a construction,<sup>6</sup> but Stanley's efforts – his attacks – are not aimed at righting the situation. The unifying factor in his speech is its attempt to gain power over Meg. It is not so obvious that the same is true of Meg, since she follows a formula of behaviour, a conventional role, that of mother, in trying to gain her ends. One attempt to gain power is seen in this exchange:

*Stanley:* Come here.

*Meg:* What do you mean?

*Stanley:* Come over here.

*Meg:* No. (p.31)

The naked nature of Stanley's commands stands in stark contrast to previous manoeuvring. If he had said 'Please come here', the sense would have been completely different, it would have shown a desire for her to approach. As it is, it is an attempt to demonstrate power.

This passage shows something else as well: that Meg is playing the same game for domination. She will not be dominated even though she would like to be near Stanley. She wishes to initiate the actions. In fact his obviously manipulative speech can be seen as an attempt to compensate for a disadvantaged position with respect to power. If we look at Stanley's situation, we see he does not go out, he plays the role of child to be provided for and he suffers from its unsuitability. He wants to leave but is so dominated that he cannot. The discourse gives Meg the role of mother and hence the dominant position, despite appearances. Stanley's admission, 'I always stand on the table when she sweeps the floor' (p.36), parallels Foucault's descriptions of how power uses techniques of organization to manipulate the body. If Stanley completely submitted to his role as a child, losing his identity, he would be rendered completely impotent and controlled. Generally playing the role of mother gives Meg enough scope for dominating Stanley. The power struggle involves Stanley attacking Meg in various ways just to

6 See Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p.229.

maintain any independence at all.

Only two of Stanley's efforts are effective in countering Meg's position; both involve the description of the intervention of sinister outside forces. The first is directly linked to his expression of his own identity. His expression starts with the fullest venting of his narcissistic ego: 'I had a unique touch [for the piano]', and develops into 'Then when I got [to my next concert], the hall was closed, the place was shuttered up, not even a caretaker. They'd locked it up. ... They want me to crawl on my bended knees' (pp.32, 33). Thus Stanley's fantasy is to be a gifted musician who is persecuted by outside forces. Paranoia has been said to be the faith of the twentieth century: a hope that there is something behind the chaotic variables of modern mechanisms. Stanley hopes for something to come in and affect his present situation. (His second statement, involving a 'wheelbarrow' (p.34) invokes similar malevolent forces.) He establishes a discourse that he is persecuted and like the previous one it creates its own reality. Though from a 'realistic' point of view the actual mechanism of causality is unknown and the events are incredible, the text suggests that Stanley brings about his persecution. Of course, McCann and Goldberg were coming before Stanley's story, but as Goldberg states 'All is dependent on the attitude of our subject' (p.40) and Stanley has made himself a victim of persecution. The play works in a distinctly discursive, as opposed to a psychological, way. Development is more coincidental than causal. Stanley's discourse affects the situation, producing a new situation (by describing it) without materially causing it. No (material) causal model can be constructed between Stanley's paranoid descriptions and the arrival of McCann and Goldberg and yet the association, expressed in the dramatic medium, is quite strong.

The new discourse is not any more natural than the previous one (since any discourse is a construction – a violence done to things) and this is evidenced by the absurdity and inconsistency of the accusations. Its artificiality is macabrely emphasized by its focus being referred to as the 'birthday party', which has metonymic associations with the

function of McCann and Goldberg. Ironically Stanley gets his earlier wish of going somewhere else and leaving Meg's domain. With a clumsy violence, which puts the earlier power struggle into perspective, Stanley is indoctrinated into the system of modern society: respectable, mute and vegetable-like. Stanley's metaphoric coming of age works within discourses rather than via accepted conventional realities. In contrast to previous drama, falsity is not an issue. Reality, any reality, is not explored since it is created by the discourse. When Stanley creates a new discourse, its consequences work out to the conclusion of the play.

One critical question that arises is: what gives one discourse precedence over another? Why does one discourse establish itself, if a (fixed) external reality is not the criterion for acceptance? I would answer this question by taking a particular interpretation of Foucault's theorizing on discourse, based on the properties of Pinter's theatre. The discourse must, to gain precedence, satisfy the epistemic perceptions of the characters, which are determined by the discourse predominating at the time. Any new discourse comes into being because of the logic of the previous one. Hence by historical accident a concept is 'accepted', becomes the dominant 'reality'. Foucault shows in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* that the historical accident has nothing to justify it. A discourse does not need to fulfil any qualitative criteria to be accepted. In this way Stanley evokes fear of the outside. Creating a new discourse has the status of 'an event' in a Pinter play, but its consequences are not controllable by the originator and can have dire results.

A discourse and the relationships that brought it about and that it creates, directly and continuously affect one another. This is why each has a reconstituted nature: power relations determine discourse but discourse determines power relations. So discourse affects itself.

*The Basement, Betrayal* and *The Collection* centre on a male-male relationship and the counter-weight of sexual tension produced by a single object of desire, a female. The original relationship is by different means made to seem

tenuous and yet the discourse produced supports it artificially. *The Basement* begins with Stott outside Law's room, with Jane, Stott's girlfriend, in the background. Law recognizes Stott as an old friend and lets him into his settled comfortable room and out of the harsh external world where it is raining. Stott brings in his girlfriend and immediately begins to dominate the room. Paralleling this, Law begins to fancy and to become intimate with Jane. A battle of wills manifests itself in various ways. It starts with Stott rearranging Law's room and Jane caressing Law, and proceeds to Stott's being sick, Stott throwing marbles at Law who bats them away with a recorder and the two facing each other with broken milk bottles. At the conclusion each has gained what the other previously possessed, and the cycle is about to start again with Stott inviting Law into Stott's room. Through all of this, the discourse of their friendship remains the reality and the relationship that predominates. When other possibilities are mentioned, such as Law keeping Jane and throwing out Stott, Law will not hear of it and informs on her to Stott: 'Law (whispering very deliberately): She betrays you. She betrays you. She has no loyalty. After all you've done for her. ... She sullies this room.'<sup>7</sup>

We begin to see the contest of wills as an element of the expression of ego which is necessary to the friendship. The ownership of the room and the girl is not important, as illustrated by Law saying Stott 'owns three chateaux' (p.158) so he hardly needs this basement. They are just elements in a contest that feeds the friendship. In fact, Jane and the room can be seen as the alternatives of freedom and wildness, and order and stability: lifestyle choices one indulges at different points in a life. The objectifying of Jane emphasizes Stott and Law's friendship. The friendship is manifested as the important thing at the end of the play, as opposed to the more 'natural' desires of safety and a mate. Again the discourse artificially dominates any 'natural' situation.

The changes of setting that occur suggest the intense,

7 *The Basement in Plays: Three* (Methuen, London, 1986), p.166.

below the surface conflicts of desire without their becoming expressed in the discourse. It heightens the irony when the discourse is maintained and emphasizes its contrariness to the situation.

*Betrayal* centres on the friendship of Jerry and Robert, and the affair of Jerry and Emma, the chronology going backwards in years. This allows the revelations, early in the play but late in the chronology, that Robert knows of his wife's affair with Jerry, which let us view the friend's ordinary dialogue from a particular angle. These commonplace phrases and exchanges, a departure from Pinter's usual startling language, are particularly significant as they show that the discourse of friendship is unaffected by any facts under the surface. This discourse creates (or at least maintains) a cordial relationship which Robert can only justify, when confronted about his knowledge of the affair, by suggesting that their not playing squash is a difference in the friendship. The play's ending reinforces the triviality of the affair, as opposed to the discourse-created reality of their friendship, by revealing it originates when Jerry is drunk and that Robert encourages it. The passionlessness of Emma and Jerry's affair is shown in scene 6 '(1973 Later): *Emma*: Do you think we'll ever go to Venice together? *Pause* No. Probably not. *Pause*.'<sup>8</sup> The idea of having an affair seems more important than any passions that generated it. The importance of this affair seems to reside in its connection with the friendship. As in *The Basement* it seems to be an aspect of the friendship: important for the self-identity it gives Jerry and the identity it gives within the friendship. Hence the relationship elevated to reality by the discourse dominates all the activities of the characters.<sup>9</sup>

The importance of the discourse established is illustrated

8 *Betrayal in Plays: Four* (Faber and Faber, London, 1991), p.239.

9 Pinter's titles had until *Betrayal* been ironically inappropriate (*No Man's Land* perhaps the only obvious exception) being comforting when the plays where the opposite: *The Birthday Party*, *The Homecoming*, *Old Times*. This trend is followed here where betrayal does not occur.

when we look at *The Collection*, where the discourse is solely responsible for different relationships and a different reality from the same basic situation as in *The Basement* and *Betrayal*. It centres on the interactions between two men, one (Bill) having cuckolded (or at least having been seen to cuckold) the other (James), who is none the less sympathetic to the cuckold. James attempts to establish a rapport, but Bill requires a point to the conversation, threatening to throw James out. James, drawn into the discourse of having suffered adultery, reluctantly and finally acts violently but tentatively. When Bill is questioned in a way similar to the way Stanley is in *The Birthday Party*, he becomes the guilty person as described (whether he has behaved in this way or not is not the criterion). James prefers a relationship and discourse of friendship and adopts it quickly and without substantiation when Harry offers it at the end of the play. Harry obviously does not know what happened, not having been there, and so his directing of Bill's final explanation shows the new discourse's (equal) lack of grounding in what actually happened.

In *Old Times* it is ultimately shown that discourses retain their reifying quality. Discussing Anna at the beginning of the play, Kate is at pains to distance herself from Anna: 'Deeley: Are you looking forward to seeing her? / Kate: No.'<sup>10</sup> Kate derogates Anna while Deeley is curious. In answer to why Anna was her only friend Kate responds: 'I don't know. *Pause* She was a thief. She used to steal things' (p.10). At the same time she hints at her lack of interest in Deeley, saying everyone's married (p.15). Deeley continuously asks Kate questions, attempting to draw her into a 'discourse', but Kate is aloof and 'passive' (another discourse). For example:

*Deeley*: Did *she* have many friends?

*Kate*: Oh ... the normal amount, I suppose.

*Deeley*: Normal? What's normal? You had none.

*Kate*: One.

*Deeley*: Is that normal?

10 *Old Times* (Methuen Paperback, 1971), p.10.

*Pause*

She ... had quite a lot of friends, did she?

*Kate:* Hundreds. (p.15)

Kate here and elsewhere follows Deeley's lead even though he cannot possibly know the information himself. Kate accepts everything, a continuing feature of the other discourses. Deeley later characterizes the construction of Kate, as of a girl 'whose only claim to virtue was silence but who lacked any sense of fixedness, any sense of decisiveness [ ... ] A classic female figure, I said to myself, or is it a classic female posture' (p.36).

Anna begins her 'discourse' of intimate friendship with Kate quite clumsily with a block of unsolicited, uninterrupted words that sits poorly in its context. (Its temporary effectiveness illustrates the fact that the quality or style of a discourse does not facilitate its acceptance.) While Deeley contrasts this with his romance of Kate, one element in both discourses remains constant: that Kate is vague and an object of desire. (Kate's behaviour continues to reinforce this impression.) Anna absorbs Deeley's 'discourse', suggesting that behind his romance, Kate and she saw him as a pathetic figure. Anna's 'discourse' becomes ever more established in the face of the increasingly futile resistance of Deeley, and Kate eventually consents to some degree to it. This effectively frees Kate from any ties with Deeley.

In Act 2, Deeley suggests a compromise which is rejected by Anna under the guise of propriety, but makes something of a comeback with a 'masculine discourse'. This only results, however, in Kate rejecting Anna's discourse of intimate friendship and remaining aloof from both. In fact the dominance of Deeley's or Anna's 'discourse' is only an appearance produced by the primacy traditionally given to the speaking subject. In reality, the same discourse is maintained in different forms throughout the play. This is discernible but obscured until the end of the play. Each of Deeley and Anna's discourses stresses an affectionate relationship, but in effect it relates their desire for Kate. The revelation that resolves the play is that the 'discourses' were

not in conflict (despite the wills of Deeley and Anna), that they were part of the one discourse, in effect throughout.

Kate in their own discourses remains aloof and undesiring. This construction of Kate dominates them at the end of the play. Contrary to the dramatic appearance during the play, Kate enforces the reality herself. The only statement that contradicts the dominant discourse is

*Deeley:* I mean let's put it on the table, I have my eye on a number of pulses all around the globe, deprivations and insults, why should I waste valuable space listening to two-

[Which Kate crushes swiftly with:] If you don't like it go. (p.67)

This contrasts instructively with Deeley's earlier comment: '[I was] wondering should I bejusus saddle myself with a slip of a girl' (p.35), which Kate lets go. This statement is equally arrogant, but maintains the (final) discourse. Hence just as in previous plays the discourse has produced reality over any characteristics of the situation. Perhaps in this case the construction of the discourse coincides with the 'nature' of the characters. Even so while Kate is able to dominate the other characters, she is clearly restricted by the final discourse established, as her comment about being talked about as if dead illustrates (p.34).

While this paper has dwelt on the artificiality of discourses and their lack of any reasonable connection to the given situation, the positive nature of discourse should be recognized also. Discourse produces a reality for characters, allows them to establish relations with each other and hence an identity for themselves. Without a discourse, that is without a description that produces power relations between characters, a character cannot establish an identity, even for him/herself, or any significance in existence, any reality. Pinter's play *Silence* suggests that a relationship may be impossible to establish between two particular humans despite their desire to interact. Braunmuller has remarked that 'from a welter of perceptions, characters strive to create selves, but even their interactions (the dialogues) lack conflict and hence

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fail to provide definition.’<sup>11</sup> The discourses attempted as memory become ever more fragmented and trail off into silence, as it becomes impossible to say anything.

11 A. Braunmuller, ‘Experience Without Character’ in *Harold Pinter*, ed. S. Gale (Associated University Presses, London, New Jersey, 1976), p.122.