Quine's Field Linguist and Pinter's Dialogue

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Explorations of the peculiar qualities of language in Pinter's plays are as much a commonplace of the criticism as, say, discussions among Shepard critics of American mythologies, popular culture, and postmodernism. Susan Hollis Merritt, in her recent survey of the field of Pinter criticism, devotes an entire chapter to linguistic studies.[1] Moreover, the critics have been engaged in relatively philosophical considerations, as if Pinter's practices somehow compelled a reexamination of comfortable assumptions about the way language works.

What has disturbed, perhaps, is the Pinteresque conjunction between an apparently simple surface — words are often repeated, vocabulary sometimes noticeably limited, assertions succinct and mundane — and complex effects on both the characters conversing and the audience. In previous stages of Pinter criticism, there was a tendency to respond to this curious disjunction in terms which suggested either that something had gone awry with meaning in his plays or that their meaning was of an ineffable sort somehow not in the language of the dialogue but beneath it or behind it. Austin Quigley, some time ago, corrected these mystifying tendencies, re-directing our attention to language *use* rather than *meaning*, and focusing upon the function of the dialogue in establishing relations between the characters.[2] It may be time, however, to remind ourselves of the distinction between language meaning and use that contemporary philosophers such as Quine, Davidson, Taylor, and Rorty have made because it seems to me the notion that Pinter's language means in a peculiar way has begun to re-emerge under a new guise. Critics such as Almansi, Henderson, and Diamond[3] recently have stressed the absence of reliable reference in Pinter's dialogue, and asserted that Pinter places unverifiability at the centre of our experience of his plays. Although such critics of course emphasize that Pinter is simply conscientious about advertising an unreliability of language common to all, they do suggest that Pinter to an unusual degree confronts us with an absence of meaning.

What I want to argue — with the help of Quine's famous philosophical fable of the field linguist, and the commentary that has surrounded it — is that Pinter's meanings are very plain; but that what *is* complex is the richness of effect that he achieves with a remarkable economy of means.[4] Indeed, it may be misleading to claim that the audience is continually brought up short by an absent or unreliable "meaning." If we understand that word in a non-essentialist sense, then we note that the meaning of assertions in Pinter's scripts is for the most part easily understood; and what startles is the contrast between this plainness — there is

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[1]Susan Hollis Merritt, *Pinter in Play* (Duke University Press, 1990).

[2]Austin Quigley, *The Pinter Problem* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

[3]See, for example, Guido Almansi and Simon Henderson, *Harold Pinter* (London: Methuen, 1983) and Elin Diamond, *Pinter's Comic Play* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1985).

[4]For the fable of the field linguist, see Willard V. Quine, "Meaning and Translation," in *On Translation*, ed. by Reuben A. Brower (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), pp. 148–172. Other essays by Quine relevant to this topic: "Speaking of Objects" (1957), and "Ontological Relativity" (1968), both reprinted in his *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), pp. 125 and 26–68; and also "Things and Their Place in Theories," in *Theories and Things* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 1–23. Some of the response to Quine may be found in Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," (1974) in *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 183–198; Richard Rorty, "Inquiry as Recontextualization" and "Pragmatism, Davidson, and truth" in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 93–110 and 126–150; and Charles Taylor, "Theories of Meaning," in *Philosophical Paper*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 248–292.

nothing duller than Pinter dialogue, Almansi and Henderson assert — and the subtle and sophisticated use that we detect and respond to.

I

In this brief paper I shall juxtapose the philosopher W. V. Quine's discussions of the impossibility of translation with an exploration of some characteristic examples of language use drawn from Pinter's plays. The aim is not to demonstrate that Pinter argues, through dramatic means, a particular philosophical position on language nor that Quine reveals himself to be an acute critic of literature. Pinter's plays are — as Anne Ubersfeld reminds us all drama must be — laboratories of language; and Quine's analyses will, I hope, illuminate not only some of the kinds of linguistic behaviour Pinter imitates but also (and this is my chief interest) the nature of the audience's encounter with his language and its use.

Quine sketches a scenario in which a linguist visits a previously unknown jungle people and attempts to produce a bilingual dictionary by means of pointing out what he considers objects, naming them, and observing the people's assent or dissent. Through his fable, he demonstrates that no matter how detailed the comparison, testing, and observation in which the field linguist may engage, he can never be absolutely certain that when he points at a passing rabbit, and the native whom he is observing says in response, "gavagai," that they are both referring to exactly the same thing. (The native, Quine points out, might mean "rabbit stage," rather than "rabbit.") The problem for speakers of a common language is, he suggests, identical. Richard Rorty, taking into account the commentaries on this fable made by Davidson and Taylor, draws out its most radical implications: that there is no such thing as meaning in the essentialist sense of ultimately knowable reference. But what we have instead is meaning in a non-essentialist sense. Quine's field linguist, in other words, could with sufficient work compile an acceptable translation manual. So long as all of the assertions that he could make about the "gavagai" were also agreed to as true by the native speaker of the language, then linguist and native should properly be said to understand one another's meaning — not with absolute certainty of an essential grounding of language in reference, but in the only way that is available to human beings.

Quine's fable is helpful to the Pinter critic because the position of the audience seems so closely analogous to that of the field linguist: we observe language use, check verbal assertions against nonverbal behaviour, and try to decipher what is going on. (We attempt, in a sense, to translate.) Moreover, Quine's fable deals directly with the question of essentialist referential meaning that has seemed such an irritant to Pinter critics, and tempted them to treat Pinter's meaning as if it were a special case — as an especially noticeable example of the absence of essentialist meaning in all language. Quine may help us to avoid such a focus upon meaning, a focus which (as Quigley has pointed out) runs the risk of reducing all of Pinter's plays to the same play. Let us grant, then, that meaning is either trivially absent or, in its non-essential sense — the sense that I much prefer —perfectly plain in Pinter.

A focus on the uses of Pinter's language in conjunction with reflections upon the Quinean fable has the benefit of drawing our attention to the collaborative element of linguistic behaviour. And this, it seems to me, is a useful corrective to the tendency in Pinter studies that emphasizes the combative, both between characters engaged in dialogue and, by extension, between the audience and the language of the play which is figuratively construed as refusing or rejecting the kind of essentialist meaning that we may misguidedly seek.

In the following section of the paper I will explore three characteristic features of Pinter's dialogue that combine simply understood meaning with sophisticated effect: the use of cliché, contradictory statement, and change of subject. Though I will advert to the linguistic behaviour of characters, my chief interest will be the effects upon the field linguist-cum-

audience-member since it is here, it seems to me, that many of the supposed difficulties with meaning have accrued.

II

One of the ways in which Pinter's language typically creates a complex effect by means of extremely simple assertion is through the use of cliché. The opening of *The Birthday Party*, for example, repeats over and over again the words "nice," "good," "up," and "down," using such a limited vocabulary that one might wonder how anything at all gets said. Yet, of course, we acknowledge that we understand what Meg means when she says Petey read her some "nice bits yesterday" from the newspaper and what she means when she asks "Is it nice out?" and we also know that "nice" doesn't mean quite the same thing in the two speeches. Interestingly enough, it would probably take some several sentences to explain precisely how these two meanings of "nice" differ. We understand such nuances because these are clichéd words and phrases: and cliché is precisely the language with which we have the most experience. On the one hand the meanings of the assertions and questions are very simple; and on the other hand, the clichéd language by its very familiarity reminds the audience of a vast realm of trivial, commonplace experience that has established the meanings of the words used by Meg. The effect, then, may be far from simple as the repetition draws attention to the dreary history of past usage that these words bring with them, the mundane assumptions that we share with the users of such language.

Commentary by Taylor and Rorty has modified the Quine fable by reminding us that the image of the detached field observer is misleading; that in order to learn a foreign language one must enter into an exchange with the language's users and, more, that one must assume a large amount of shared belief and understanding with the users in order even to begin to acquire their tongue. If we the audience are in some respects like Quine's field linguist, then what Pinter does at the beginning of *The Birthday Party* and in many other instances is to employ deftly the words and phrases that we will surely share with his fictive speakers in every tired nuance. This technique is comparable, on the level of the individual word, with the strategy of parody Elin Diamond has analyzed on the larger scale — Pinter's playful employment of the familiar patterns of soap opera, melodrama, suspense thriller, and so forth.[5] Through cliché, then, Pinter can create a dialogic exchange apparently barren and reduced close to inarticulacy and yet for his audience evocative of a large area of shared assumption and linguistic experience. Meaning is plain (in both senses of the word) since our grasp of meaning depends not on perception of some essentialist reference but on training in the way in which language is used; and effect is rich.

The clichéd or familiar phrase is particularly useful to Pinter in creating subtle effects of social context. In *No Man's Land*, for example, "the malt that wounds" and "As it is?" (asking how whiskey will be taken) establish emotional tone and social register and serve something of the same purpose as poetic allusion in earlier drama. They remind one of the social rituals that have developed around class and drinking, they suggest a long acquaintance with liquor and the somewhat debilitated wit it fosters. But perhaps the most complexly effective cliché is the title of the play, a phrase repeated by both Hirst and Spooner in the course of the dialogue. At the close, Spooner tells Hirst "You are in no man's land" — an assertion with a very simple literal meaning, but with a rich use in part because other sources of information tell us that he is, on the contrary, in his own house: there is an effect of contradiction here, which I will explore shortly. The familiarity of the phrase "no man's land" contributes the initial layers of complication, however.

The phrase evokes the ruined unclaimed territory between the trenches in World War I and, reverberating with Spooner and Hirst's talk of the World War II, begins to suggest the military

[5]Elin Diamond, "Parody Play in Pinter." *Modern Drama*, 25, 4 (December, 1982), pp. 477–488.

contexts in which the term was subsequently reused, and the familiar applications of the phrase to situations involving contention or absence of rule. One thinks of the various struggles to direct household matters in the Hirst establishment; no man's land as unowned land evokes, as well, the common — Hampstead Heath — where Spooner reportedly met Hirst and peeped at sexual encounters. A no man's land is a place without an owner — a place of unregulated behaviour, perhaps sexual? There are none but men on the stage, and in this context the phrase hints at homosexuality, an absence perhaps of men conforming to heterosexual norms and rules. No man's land in its military associations is very masculine territory, like the pubs so often mentioned in the dialogue (and pubs, too, are public houses open to all, not to one man alone). To be sure, no *man's* land might be the realm of women: women do appear in the dialogue associated with property and land (country cottages in particular) and, further, are described by the male speakers as territory of doubtful ownership ("That summer she was mine, while you imagined her to be solely yours.") This list of possible evocations is of course by no means complete; the familiarity of the phrase encourages the audience member to draw upon a large store of experience and information that surrounds its past history of use and to consider this whole range of associations in relation to the context of the present statement made by Spooner to Hirst, "You are in no man's land."

I mentioned earlier that this assertion is in effect contradicted by the stage set and by the behaviour of the characters who treat Hirst, if not always respectfully, certainly as the acknowledged owner of the house. In Pinter's plays one encounters not only this sort of contradicted assertion (which we might call a metaphor) but often two characters make statements that are mutually contradictory; typically, the play offers no additional information that would allow the audience to prefer one statement to the other. In such cases, one could say that the play as a whole asserts a contradiction; contradiction of both sorts is another of the characteristic ways in which Pinter's plainness elicits a various and subtly modulated response.

The effect of such contradictions may be tentatively explained in terms of the philosopher Davidson's analysis of the workings of metaphor.[6] Davidson is concerned to demonstrate that metaphor offers no exception to the rules of linguistic meaning and use: no special, mystical meaning and no peculiar want of meaning either. Metaphors are simply assertions with a literal meaning that is either false (my love is a rose) or so patently true as to be unnecessary (no man is an island). The false or unnecessary character of such statements, Davidson argues, draws the attention and incites complex meditation: on likeness, unlikeness, the qualities of both halves of the (falsely) asserted identity, and so on. Pinter's dialogue, I suggest, achieves some of its richer effects in similar fashion. Thus, many and contradictory things are asserted about Spooner in *No Man's Land*: he claims to be a friend of the landlord of a pub, where he is welcome to hold literary society meetings in an upper room; Briggs asserts that he is a mere potboy who collects the beer mugs. Spooner pretends to some degree of social standing, education, literary accomplishment; Hirst at first appears to confirm all this, then denies Spooner such an identity: "Who are you? […] You are clearly a lout. The Charles Wetherby I knew was a gentleman."

It seems to me that we in fact read such contradictions much as Davidson suggests we read metaphor: the meaning of contradictory assertions is simply understood, and at the same time a complex, meditative effect is generated. Our attention is drawn to a myriad possible conjunctions and contrasts of venality, high culture, grubbiness, scholarship, poverty, impracticality, the ingratiations and enviousness of critics, and so on. We envision Spooner as amanuensis and/or potboy to literature. Once again, Pinter's meaning is straightforward, his language and assertions simple, and his effects rich with possibility.

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[6]Donald Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean," in *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation* (1978), pp. 245–264.

The final use of dialogue I want to touch on — very briefly — is the effect created by changing the subject. Abrupt shifts in the topic of conversation are usually discussed by Pinter critics in terms of verbal combat between two characters; they may also be adduced as evidence of the peculiarly unreliable character of reference in Pinter's dialogue which, it is presumed, disturbs the audience's complacent sense of absolutely verifiable meaning. An example from *The Lover*, however, may serve to remind us of the collaborative nature of the act of changing the subject in a conversation. In the closing passages of this script for two players, Richard switches from accusing his wife of infidelity to asking a light for his cigarette from an unknown woman in a sexually aggressive fashion; and Sarah follows each shift, replying as defiantly adulterous spouse and then as frightened stranger. Here, of course, the changes of conversational subject (and of speaking subjects) are also moves in a stimulating sexual game; but in any dialogue, there must be understanding and cooperation for the topic of conversation to change and the dialogue to be sustained in its new direction. Likewise, the audience follows the meaning in such dialogic shifts perfectly well; one would not know that the topic had been changed if the successive utterances in which the shift is evident were not, in fact, understood.

The varied effects of such shifts are more than a paper of this length can attempt to describe. I can only suggest that they function, like the patterns of contradiction, as a means of drawing attention to an area for imaginative exploration, a stimulus to entertaining comparisons and varied possibilities. Thus, at the end of *The Lover* we hold in imaginative solution, equally, all of the male/female interactions discussed in the shifting conversation: Sarah can be thought of as faithful spouse, adulterous wife, mistress, whore, respectable woman accosted by a frightening stranger, easy pickup looking for excitement. Finally, these shifts can also serve as a means of heightening the audience's awareness of the peculiar texture and structure of theatrical dialogue. In the last act of *No Man's Land*, for instance, Hirst announces that he is changing the subject for the last time; when he is finally made to understand what it is that he has just done, and "drink[s] to that" in acquiescence, the play ends. The last subject change, from the theatrical laboratory of language to the unending field work of daily linguistic practice, is the cue for curtain.