The Problem of Identity in Harold Pinter's No Man's Land

Eric W. Paff
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Harold Pinter's plays have been characterized by one critic as being "largely plotless"; when they are considered in comparison with the work of many other dramatists, such as Miller or Shaw, this judgment may be seen as reasonably accurate in some respects. Pinter does not concentrate on complex intrigues or dramatic action, but works with portrayals of individuals trying to communicate with each other. The central theme of his works is the failure of these attempts at communication, and of major importance is the fact that this failure does not result from any determinable failure within the characters themselves. It results, rather, from the basic epistemological uncertainty that Pinter sees in all of life. For example, Stella, in *The Collection*, may or may not be telling the truth about her "rape" by Bill; the point is never decided, and there is "an abundance of possible motivations for each possible version of her story." Similarly, in the radio play *A Slight Ache*, the audience never knows whether the Matchseller is a real character or "a projection of the two other character's fears."

The resolution of these questions is not the central point of these plays, however; their central point is that the answers to these questions cannot be known. Pinter asserts frequently that, given as many facts as anyone can have, one answer is every bit as good as another, and that nothing can be established as an unquestionable truth. This denial of certainty extends beyond the reporting of events to the case of individual identity, as in *The Caretaker*, in which it is never made certain whether the caretaker's name is Aston or Davies. Pinter's most recent play is *No Man's Land*, and it
is perhaps his clearest statement of the impossibility of establishing a single identity for any character or of finding a "correct" interpretation of events. Its central characters, Spooner and Hirst, are different things to each other, and to the other characters, as the play progresses, and they are finally left in complete isolation from one another.

As the play begins, Hirst is pouring a drink for Spooner. He asks "As it is?," and Spooner replies "As it is, yes please, absolutely as it is." This short exchange may be seen as establishing a paradoxical central metaphor for the play itself. We, the audience, are to see the events of this evening and the next morning absolutely as they are, with no embellishment or extra details, performed in what is essentially a vacuum. However, we eventually realize that nothing we see can be taken "absolutely as it is," for each character's identity and relationships to those around him shift often and confusingly, and that what had seemed a definable set of conditions is consistently contradicted.

The initial relationship between Spooner and Hirst is a simple one. It seems that Hirst has been on a ramble through Hampstead Heath and met Spooner at a pub called The Bull's Head. He has invited Spooner back to his home, and the two men behave as strangers engaging in the normal rituals of social drinking. Spooner soon begins to speak at length on the subject of personal strength, claiming to be a man who is able to see through pretensions to strength, "to stick a needle through that posture and discern the essential flabbiness of the stance" (p. 16). His own position is one of weakness, however, for although he speaks easily three times as much as Hirst, it is the speech of a man who feels ill at ease unless he is constantly talking. Spooner here tries rather to fill voids in conversation than to let it run its course. Hirst, sitting relatively quietly in his armchair, is actually the man in control of the situation, for he is not afraid of silence. He
occasionally seems to mock Spooner, as when he repeats Spooner's "Oh, absolutely as it comes" (p. 22), or when he plays with Spooner's own words:

SPOONER

I refer to a midsummer night, when I shared a drink with a Hungarian émigré, lately retired from Paris.

HIRST

The same drink?

Although some of Hirst's interruptions and odd questions may well be the result of the quantity of alcohol he has consumed, his dialogue here indicates that he is a man used to being in a position of power. Spooner's attempts to dominate the conversation are futile, despite the great volume of his speech and his efforts to make himself the central figure in every discussion, as when he asks "will I wonder at you tomorrow, I wonder, as I still wonder at him today?" (p. 26). Already, then, we find an example of a breakdown in communication between two people that is the result of the individual's thoroughly subjective viewpoint. Spooner is his own world, and all that he does or says is filtered and distilled through himself until it can have little or no meaning to anyone else. It is ironic that Spooner presents himself as a friend of the arts, especially of poetry, who is dedicated to "the sustenance and preservation of art, and through art to virtue" (p. 28), for in this statement he seems to presume that art can have a universal virtuous significance, but his own conversation is proof that objectivity is impossible.

Spooners comments about his former custom of having tea on the lawn provoke in Hirst a reverie about things in his own past. When he stops his remembrances, Spooner attempts to continue them for him, building an identity for Hirst. He provides him with a wife and asks personal questions about their life together; when answers are not forthcoming he attacks Hirst's veracity for not having the recollections that he ought. Spooner charges
I begin to wonder whether you do in fact truly remember her, whether you truly did love her . . . I have seriously questioned these propositions and find them threadbare (p. 31), and is annoyed that Hirst will not accept the memories created for him. He goes on to accuse Hirst of lacking the essential quality of manliness, which is to put your money where your mouth is (pp. 32-3), in short, of refusing to make a definite assertion of an objective fact. Then, in the middle of some more of Spooner's prattle, Hirst makes a statement that is both honest and ominous, perhaps the only statement in the play that operates on more than a purely subjective level; he says that

No man's land . . . does not move . . . or change . . . or grow old . . . remains . . . forever . . . icy . . . silent (p. 34).

This condition of perpetual stasis must affect more than a single person, for it encompasses all who come near it. It produces mental and emotional paralysis and results from a complete breakdown of communication between individuals—such a breakdown as that toward which Spooner and Hirst are already moving.

Hirst shortly crawls out of the room on his hands and knees, drunk. Spooner is not left alone for long; he has time to do no more than survey the room before Foster enters. Although he has never seen Spooner before, Foster begins to carry out the rituals of polite conversation; his first words are "What are you drinking?" (p. 35). From this he moves to a series of questions about Spooner and statements about himself, and in the latter we see again an attempt to establish an identity. Foster appears as a sort of lower-middle-class hood who travels incognito and without a gun in London. He claims that Hirst is his father and, as is the case with practically every other claim in the play, this is never proven or disproven; in fact, it is never mentioned again.
Foster seems more than any other character in the play to be preoccupied with the establishment of identities. Upon Briggs' entrance he goes into an elaborate speech of introductions, asserting Briggs' name twice and his own seven times. He assigns to Spooner the name "Mr. Friend," and he and Briggs spend a good amount of time establishing Mr. Friend's identity. Briggs claims to know him as a mug-collector at the Bull's Head pub, and Spooner explains that he is a friend of the landlord and that he helps out from time to time with the menial chores. Briggs challenges this, Spooner reasserts it, and it is again made clear that Spooner does indeed collect mugs. Foster says that he too is a friend of the landlord, and Hirst is mentioned as the friend of everyone in the room, establishing a web of relationships that are and shall remain forever untested and unproven. The only point made in this conversation that seems even reasonably certain is Briggs' statement that Foster is "a very long way from being Siamese" (p. 39); although Spooner says that he has been to Amsterdam, we cannot assume that this is at all correct.

Whether Spooner actually has been to Amsterdam or not, his description of a painting that he says was suggested by a scene there establishes another metaphor for the play; indeed, for life. The painting would depict a canal, a laughing girl, two kissing lovers, a fisherman lifting his catch from the water, and a man sitting in shadow at a café table. Its title would be "The Whistler," which seems quite unrelated to anything in the painting, but Spooner explains that the man in the shadows had been whistling under his breath. This title, therefore, could have meaning only to the artist: this is another example of the complete subjectivity in all of art and, by extension, all of life. Foster says that he might appreciate or even be grateful for the painting, but we realize that he, as one outside the individual artist's creative process, could never fully understand the significance of the
title—it is based on one man's perception at one time. The painting would be seen by its viewers absolutely as it was, and its title, which supposedly should explain the painting, would make no sense.

Another example of subjectivity is found in Foster's relation of his experience "out East" (p. 42), where he encountered a tramp who tricked him out of a coin, seemingly by means of magic. Spooner comments on this illusion, saying that Foster "would be wise to grant the event no integrity whatsoever" (p. 42). He never explains the method by which the trick was performed, but this is not important. What is important is that an illusion has been performed, demonstrating that what is seen cannot always be trusted. Pinter might be said to see life as a succession of magic tricks, everything that takes place having little or no explanation and not necessarily making any sense at all.

Hirst's reentrance into the room adds another note of uncertainty. He does not know what time it is, what day it is, or what time he went to bed. He is thoroughly disoriented, remembering times of utter aloneness when he laughed by himself in an empty room. These memories are painful, and he retreats into a world of whisky and photograph albums. His album contains his past happinesses as he wishes to remember them. He has already forgotten Spooner, and has to ask "Who is this man? Do I know him?" (p. 45). He denies the value of the present by asserting that

My true friends look out at me from my album. I had my world.

I have it. Don't think that now it's gone I'll choose to ... wonder if it properly existed (p. 45).

A moment afterward, he denies even the past; he says

It's gone. Did it exist? It's gone. It never existed. It remains (p. 46).

He seems to telescope time into one instant, refusing to acknowledge past or present or future, and accepts only that he is "sitting here forever" (p. 46). He has reached complete subjectivity here, speaking only about himself and
his immediate condition. Since he is not at the moment experiencing the past or the future, the present is indeed "forever."

This state of mind too is only temporary, however, for Hirst soon lapses into confused stream-of-consciousness reveries about a past love and a recent dream of a man drowning. Spooner claims that he himself must have been the drowning man, and that the fear Hirst felt is due to the fact that he is Hirst's true friend; he thus creates a new identity for himself as the true friend of a man he had not met before that evening. This is clearly a contradiction of his own earlier statement that

My only security, you see, my true comfort and solace, rests in the confirmation that I elicit from people of all kinds a common and constant indifference . . . To show interest in me or, good gracious, anything tending towards a positive liking of me, would cause in me a condition of the acutest alarm (p. 17).

Spooner's solicitousness towards Hirst results in his being abused by Foster and Briggs, who suddenly become menacing guardians of the status quo in Hirst's home. Foster accuses Spooner of trying to "drive a wedge into a happy household . . . and of trying to make a nonsense out of family life" (p. 50), and then bemoans the difficulties that he faces in trying to guess what kind of eggs Hirst's financial adviser will want for breakfast. This conversational incongruity reinforces the atmosphere of confusion in the play, as does Hirst's statement about Spooner as Briggs leads him out of the room; he says "I know that man" (p. 52). Foster concludes the evening by relating an experience he had in the Australian desert (although we do not know, of course, that he was ever really there): he saw a man carrying two umbrellas, but did not ask the man for an explanation because "I decided he must be some kind of lunatic. I thought he would only confuse me" (p. 53). He has spoken more of the truth than he realizes, for he has unknowingly acknowledged the futility of seeking
answers or explanations for what goes on in the world. His fear that the lunatic world confuse him results from a desire to know reasons and causes, and reflects a probably subconscious fear that answers frequently cannot be given. The first act of the play ends on this note; nothing more can be said, and when Foster suddenly turns out the light we are left with a blackout of meaning as well as of the stage.

The second act of the play takes place on the following morning. Spooner has spent the night locked in the room, and he tries to create for himself a sense of familiarity with his situation by saying

I have known this before. Morning. A locked door. A house of silence and strangers (p. 59).

Throughout the beginning of this act he repeats several times that he has "known this before," and we cannot be sure whether he actually has or whether he is merely attempting to establish a niche for himself in this situation.

Briggs enters the room and tells Spooner that Hirst's financial adviser has cancelled his breakfast order, and that Spooner may have the food that was prepared for him. Their dialogue here is of the most cursory kind; Spooner receives only the briefest answers to any of his questions. Briggs volunteers no information until Spooner begins to eat, but then he launches into a lengthy account of his first meeting with Foster. He prefaces this account with a statement that is highly characteristic of the entire play; he says that "He'll deny this account. His story will be different" (p. 62). This warning applies not only to his story of their meeting, but also to everything else that is said. A central theme of No Man's Land, as of many of Pinter's other plays, is the incredible number of possible explanations and motives for, and accounts of, any given event. Briggs' narrative is long and complicated, and at the end of it he again warns that Foster's story will be different. We are never given Foster's story, and so we are left
with a single account and no way to confirm or disprove it.

Spooner's statement that he is a poet is another example of an unprovable assertion, for Briggs and we have no means of knowing whether he is or not. Briggs responds by saying that Foster is also a poet, and this claim, like Spooner's, cannot be verified. Briggs' further assertion, that Hirst is a poet and man of letters, seems at least as likely as the two preceding claims. Spooner's expression of surprise upon hearing it could indicate that he actually has never met Hirst before; however, it could as well indicate that Briggs is lying, or that Hirst has lied to Briggs about his own occupation.

When Hirst enters the room, a new set of relationships and identities is established. He address the man whom we have previously known as Briggs as "Denson," and Briggs responds in a perfectly natural manner. Hirst begins to play a game of recognition with Spooner, pretending to remember him—or perhaps actually remembering him—as a classmate at Oxford. Before Spooner can speak, Hirst provides him with a college, a chronology, and a set of friends, and "confesses" his own seduction of Spooner's wife. He speaks lovingly of the wife, and recounts incidents in their long-standing affair; he also mildly attacks Spooner as having been "preoccupied with his physical . . . condition" (p. 70). As in the case of Briggs' account of his first meeting with Foster, the truth or falsehood of Hirst's "reminiscences" is not important. What matters is that a step has been taken towards defining an identity and a set of relationships for each of the two men. After a series of brief questions and responses, Spooner enters the game as well, establishing in his turn a set of friends and lovers and a history for Hirst. Quiet, rambling memories soon give way, though, to accusations and counter-accusations of having seduced the other man's wife or lover, and faltering "recollections" of names grow into repetition, statements of rivalry, and angry denouncement of each other's claims upon a relationship.
Both men, for example, seem to have been strongly attached to Miss Arabella Hinscott, and Hirst is enraged by Spooner's confession that he had "a form of an affair" with her (p. 76). Spooner retaliates by attacking Hirst for a number of past affairs and betrayals, alluding to Hirst's affair with Spooner's wife, the "insane and corrosive sexual absolutism "that he practiced upon Muriel Blackwood and Doreen Busby, and his "friendship with and corruption of Geoffrey Ramsden at Oxford" (p. 76). It seems that Hirst is not willing to play the game under this sort of pressure, finally, and he drops his end of the dialogue after making a last assertion that Spooner is not the Charles Wetherby he used to be. Perhaps he is and perhaps he isn't; all we can know is that we have watched the preceding conversation take place absolutely as it is, and that we cannot possibly have any reference to facts in this matter.

After abandoning the game, Hirst tries once again to reach a kind of security by retreating into his photograph albums. He refers to the people in his photographs as "good ghosts" longing to be tendered and deserving of the same care and affection that the living wish to receive. Briggs denies this, and proceeds to further attack Hirst's position of strength by refusing to obey his commands and sneering at the threat of dismissal. Spooner moves into the role of a butler, bringing Hirst his bottle; the "old college chum" facade has been dropped completely. Foster enters and begins to give Hirst orders, and Briggs once again becomes Hirst's servant, addressing him as "sir." Spooner tries to maintain his new role by offering to become Hirst's secretary and explaining the great value to be derived by his employer. He suggests that he could go through the photograph album and "put names to the faces" (p. 83), but we note that he has not offered to put the right names to the faces; what he seems to be offering is the construction of a work of fiction in which both he and Hirst could find some security and contentment. His dream of a niche in the world is broken by Foster and Briggs, though,
for they assert that "those faces are nameless" (p. 84) and that "they'll always be nameless" (p. 84). Their denial of the possibility of a productive link with the past is reinforced by Hirst's own statement that

there are places in my heart . . . where no living soul . . .

has . . . or can ever . . . trespass (p. 84).

He has once again been forced to a realization of his own isolation from everything outside himself, and we may understand that this condition applies by extension to everyone else in the world. Superficial ties still exist, though, and they can be very strong; Hirst tells Foster that he must be sociable and "consort with the society to which you're attached . . . as if by bonds of steel" (p. 85).

Fragmentary attempts to recapture lost systems of identity and organization are made in the rest of the play before its climax. Briggs explains that he is influential in the household and that Foster came on his recommendation; Foster speaks of the benefits to himself of his contact with an enriching intelligence, and of the sense of dignity and pride that his work gives him. Hirst has one last try at his earlier "I knew him at Oxford" routine, and Spooner pleads to be allowed to live with Hirst and be his secretary. He goes on at length about his qualifications for the job, and offers to do literally anything for Hirst if he will only take him in. He proposes that the arrangement would have advantages for Hirst as well, for it would allow him to give poetry readings to those who would appreciate him, to be the center of "an evening to be remembered, by all who take part in her" (p. 91). Each character is making a last, desperate attempt to establish some lines of order and communication with others, and in Spooner's urgency especially we see that there may be no chance left after this one.

Finally we reach a point that might be called the beginning of the end. Since the first words, the play has been moving towards the collapse of
communication, but we come at last to the point where it is clearly inevitable. Hirst says

Let's change the subject.

Pause

For the last time.

Pause

What have I said? (p. 91).

He realizes that he has said something significant, and he is confused and frightened by it. He and the others are ultimately trapped, unable to change the subject ever again. They are frozen in time, as Hirst foresaw when he said earlier that he was "sitting here forever" (p. 46), for they can move neither forward nor backward. A single instant has become their eternity, and although they are together they can draw no consolation from this, because "nothing else will happen forever" (p. 94). Hirst tries to break out of this paralysis, but he cannot. He imagines the sound of birds, but there are none, and his dream of the drowning man is a mistake—there is nothing there.

They have failed to establish any real identities or relationships for themselves, and so they are alone together

in no man's land. Which never moves, which never changes, which never grows older, but which remains forever, icy and silent (p. 95).

In No Man's Land, Pinter presents a breakdown in communication between the four members of a group. Its basis is the total subjectivity of all perceptions and statements, which leaves no universal points of reference for the discussion or reporting of anything. We cannot be certain that what we are told is true, that what we see is what it looks like, or even that we are who we think we are. When carried to its logical end, this idea leads inevitably to the conclusion that each of us dwells in his own no man's land, cut off from everything else in the world. We are ultimately on our own,
and nothing we can do is going to help; we can only hope to endure our situation by drinking to it.
Endnotes


3. Ibid., p. 87.


All future references to the play will be taken from this source and indicated parenthetically in the text by page number.
List of Works Consulted

