

No Man's Land: a Variation on Harold Pinter's Theme of "Menace"

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Abstract—Though being one of the representative works in the second phase of Pinter's writing in the 1970s, *No Man's Land* is more an extension of than a departure from his early comedies of menace. To a certain degree, the central motif of the play is still a variation on the theme of territory fight explored in such plays as *The Caretaker*. What makes his play unique is that the major conflict is no longer a fight for the "room" in the sense of existential significance, but for a much more private "territory" of the innermost soul embodied by the past and memory.

Index Terms—*No Man's Land*, memory, intrusion, territory fight

I. INTRODUCTION

Among Harold Pinter's plays, *No Man's Land* (1975) has a special position. It is one of the representative works in the second period of Pinter's dramatic writing in the 1970s—it may be said to mark the end of this phase. After *No Man's Land*, Pinter's creative efforts began to shift to screenplays and plays on the political motifs. Although some critics have studied *No Man's Land* by focusing on its language, its use of symbolism, its exploration of the themes of identity and that of the "dark inevitability of the future...of death in life," this play still impresses many audiences as a riddle-like work that "resists satisfactory interpretation."¹ Almost all critics have noticed Pinter's fascination with the motif of memory in this stage of writing. But as to the question of what specific role memory plays in *No Man's Land*, it still invites further explorations. So, in *Harold Pinter and the New British Theatre*, Keith Peacock, after stating tentatively that this play "could be about death or about the onset of artistic impotence," concludes that *No Man's Land* "is mannered, capriciously structured, confusing, and thematically as static as the no-man's-land of its title."²

The fact is that *No Man's Land* is almost as clear as Pinter's first masterpiece *The Caretaker* in plot. There are only four characters in this work: the reserved house owner, Hirst (a poet and a literary critic), the tramp, Spooner, and two servants, Foster (who also claims himself as a poet) and Briggs. Spooner is clearly another Davies³-like figure, who suffers much of the bitterness of snares in life and is desperate to find a peaceful shelter of "room". Hirst, a successful poet like Pinter, is trapped in his "no man's land" of art. Significantly, simple as it seems to be in plot structure, *No Man's Land* is one of the most difficult plays written by Pinter because of its profundity and ambiguity in meaning caused by his special use of memory.

Due to Pinter's special employment of memory, many critics found in this play a dramatic change of styles in Pinter's writing. In fact, if we put the smoky dramaturgy of memory aside, *No Man's Land* is more an extension of than a departure from early plays of menace. For all its difference from Pinter's early works, this play is but a variation on the same theme of intrusion explored in such plays as *The Caretaker* for the most important thing here is still about menace and a resistance to it. What makes *No Man's Land* difficult and unique is but the role played by the memory of the past in the action of the present, and the change it brings to what the characters fight for. Differing from early works, the major conflict in this play is no longer a fight for the "room" in the sense of existential significance, but for a much more private "territory" of the innermost soul embodied by the past. What "no man's land" refers to in the title is a person's most vulnerable, truthful, and mysterious world of alienated soul, a realm of sanctuary that forbids any external intrusion.

II. MEMORY WORLD AS ANOTHER KIND OF TERRITORY

In the course of Pinter's career, the 1970s was a period of frustration and restlessness. The turbulence in his domestic life as well as his suffering from suppression of political emotion in the previous decade made him feel so struck that he fell into temporary blocks now and then in writing. About this, Peacock once made such a record:

¹ Keith Peacock (1997), *Harold Pinter and the New British Theatre*. Westport: Greenwood Press. p.115.

² Ibid.

³ Davies is a famous character in Pinter's first acclaimed work *The Caretaker*. The whole play is built on what happens among two brothers, Aston and Mick, and Davies, the tramp that Aston brings to the flat. *The Caretaker* is traditionally seen as a comedy of menace in which characters fight for their territory and tensions arise with the arrival of an intruding figure from outside. The moment Davies is brought to the room, he begins to covet it as a source of security. In this play, the image of the old tramp fighting desperately for the "bed" and "room" shows vividly the hardship of a man ensnared in permanent sense of insecurity in life.

In an interview with Mel Gussow in 1971, he [Pinter] admitted that his inability to write for the stage was becoming ever more depressing. He had declared after *The Homecoming* that he could no longer "stay in the room with this bunch of people who opened doors and came in and went out" and that his writing must take a new course...he explained that "I'm not at all interested in 'threatening behavior' anymore...."⁴

Just like what Stephen H. Gale says, one key to understand Pinter is the realization of the fact that the content and styles of his drama have undergone a constant evolution and developments.⁴ But as Pinter expresses here, it is a hard work to start a totally "new course" or explore a new territory: "you're always stuck. You're stuck as a writer. I am stuck in my own tracks, whatever they are—for so long."⁵ What happens in *No Man's Land* suggests that Pinter is indeed "struck" to a certain degree in his tracks—he feels bound by his former "idiosyncratic dramatic style" that has become "a cliché"⁶ in him. Although "memory, time and the nature of reality intermix to become the focal point of his [Pinter's] interest"⁷ in this stage of his writing, Pinter's dramatic framework in *No Man's Land* is not wholly out of the former track of intrusion and menace. What makes the play unique is that the intruder's action is diversified into two types: the former Davies-type of intrusion that audience are familiar with; and the subtler yet more dangerous memory-type as what happens between Spooner and Hirst.

According to Guido Almansi, *No Man's Land* is a "backward step in the direction of the early two people in a room' plays."⁸ To some extent, he is justified in this conclusion because one line of the play—what happens between Spooner and the two menservants, Foster and Briggs—runs indeed as a repetition of Davies' story. When the play begins, Spooner, like what happens to Davies in *The Caretaker*, is brought into the house by Hirst, the house owner. Only one minute later, Spooner has been looking about the "room," secretly taking it as an attractive territory to enter. Since then, entering that room and obtaining the post of secretary have become his aim, while on the other side, maintaining their power in the household and ordering Spooner's hands off "the home of a man of means"⁹ become the purpose of the two servants.

In this conflict between Spooner and the post-holders, the fighting strategy in language featured with the early plays can still be seen here, in which characters try to overpower each other orally. But even in this old battlefield, new weapon is used. The former pattern of discourse like "Sit down" in *Caretaker* is replaced by long monologues of tales about their "past" through which all the characters intend to defeat their rivals by creating a powerful identity for themselves.

But as the title of the play *No Man's Land* suggests, the game between Spooner and the menservants is not the ultimate concern of the work. The real focus lies in Spooner's intrusion into Hirst's private sanctuary of his "no man's land." It is his bold intrusion in this world that makes Spooner a dangerous and repellent figure in the eyes of the poet-host and eventually has himself kicked out.

Maybe the most difficult problem that audience meets in watching the play is the characters' willful twisting of the traditional factual conception of the past and reminiscences. As Guido Almansi says, in the play, "it is just as impossible to distinguish between genuine reminiscences, memories modified by the process of time, and recollections stultified for strategic purposes."¹⁰ As early as in 1962, Pinter had stated his unique understanding of time, expressing a new definition of the past and the present. As he says,

...we are faced with the immense difficulty, if not the impossibility, of verifying the past. I don't mean merely years ago, but yesterday, this morning. What took place, what was the nature of what took place, what happened?...What's happening now?...we won't know then, we'll have forgotten, or our imagination will have attributed quite false characteristics to today. A moment is sucked away and distorted, often even at the time of its birth.¹¹

When Pinter puts this idea of time into his plays, the result is disastrous to many traditional viewers whose accustomed firm ground of time is made sandy and gets challenged and collapsed. But it is just in this uncertain and shifting realm of the past that Pinter finds a new world to explore his characters. It is truthful that the characters' tales of the past may not necessarily be what really happens in their memory. Nevertheless, the key point is that a lot about their present are expressed through their dialogues of their past and memory.

III. FIGHT FOR TERRITORY IN THE FORM OF MEMORY

It is in this territory of memory that a fight is started between the two protagonists in the play. If Spooner covets a material shelter in life, Hirst is seeking, like Aston in *The Caretaker*, for emotional warmth to melt the icy silence in his

⁴ Ibid., p.87.

⁴ Stephen H. Gale (1996), "Harold Pinter," *British Playwrights 1956-1995*, ed. William W. Demastes. Westport: Greenwood Press. p.316.

⁵ Harold Pinter, in his interview with Mel Gussow, seen in Keith Peacock's *Harold Pinter and the New British Theatre*. p.87.

⁶ Ibid. In the book, Peacock states that "He [Pinter] was painfully conscious that his idiosyncratic dramatic style had become something of a cliché: 'I wish I could write like someone else, be someone else.'"

⁷ Gale, p.317.

⁸ Malcolm Bradbury and Christopher Bigsby (ed.) (1983), *Harold Pinter*. London: Methuen. p.88.

⁹ Harold Pinter (1975), *No Man's Land*. London: Eyre Methuen. p.50. Subsequent documentation of quotations from this play will be in-text notes within parentheses.

¹⁰ Malcolm Bradbury and Christopher Bigsby. *Harold Pinter*. p.88.

¹¹ Harold Pinter (1998), *Various Voices Prose, Poetry, Politics*. London: Faber and Faber. p.17.

exclusive privacy. The whole play presents three rounds of Hirst's attempt to find a safe contact with Spooner, but they all fail because of the latter's unscrupulous intrusion and trample on the private sanctuary of Hirst's inner world.

To ingratiate himself into Hirst's house, Spooner takes the road of claiming himself to be a qualified and even patronizing sharer of Hirst's past and memory. The fatal mistake Spooner commits is that he not only intrudes deliberately into Hirst's most private world, but also, neglecting Hirst's protest to his intrusion, deconstructs the verification of the existence of Hirst's tale and reduces it to the naked picture of disgraceful reality. The bitter irony of this fight is that Spooner's intrusion proves to be a double-edged journey of destruction: while he dislocates and overpowers Hirst in the "past" by deconstructing Hirst's ability of playing the game of memory, Spooner also ruins his own chance to stay in the house.

Like Davies in *The Caretaker*, Spooner shows a defect of self-pride in his character. On the one hand, he covets the peace and security in the house, which he needs desperately. But on the other hand, he follows unwisely a superior attitude towards the host from the very beginning. As soon as Hirst offers him a drink in the house, Spooner assumes the role of a man of intelligence and perception who is capable of sticking a needle through any "calculated posture" (16)—a "twig-peeper" who can observe a great deal and see through twigs of the "most clumsy construction" (18). And he tries to make a virtue of every quality in him. For all his poverty, he implies that the material poverty only makes his spiritual wealth more admirable—"All we have left is the English language" (18), which, he says, makes him both a poet and a free man. Besides this, he makes a virtue of his failure to be loved: "From this I derive my strength" (26). He also declares that he is a man of knowing the virtue of decent distance between people for "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" (17). He even makes a virtue of his modesty to Hirst by identifying himself with the Hungarian émigré in the bar whose uniquely calming influence he says he admired and to whose "unmoving table" he had stumbled with his pint. By linking Hirst with the figure in his "past" whose way of sitting "has remained with me all my life" (25), Spooner almost succeeds in winning the trust of the latter who is, for a moment, willing to join him in a whisky and even to share the same experience of "Tea on the lawn" (29).

But the audience as well as Hirst soon discovers that Spooner's so-called modesty is but a smoky screen of self-pride, and a strategy to enter Hirst's past. As soon as Hirst says, "I did the same" [giving tea on the lawn], Spooner immediately jumps up to this sign of a possible kinship with Hirst. He cries to him: "What happened to our cottages? What happened to our lawns?... You've revealed something.... We share something. A memory of the bucolic life. We're both English" (29). Here Spooner's desire to claim a piece of land in Hirst's world of past is so urgent that Hirst instinctively sniffs out the smell of danger, and retreats to his highly guarded castle by shifting his topics and refusing to share any intimacy with Spooner. So, instead of following the topic of the "cottage", he begins to talk about the village church where "all who die unmarried" are honored with the white flower of a blameless life. Here Hirst's images of the village church and the white flower for the unmarried not only suggest a deliberate difference to Spooner's picture composed of the cottage, wife and young admirers, the image of the holy land of purity unblemished by any form of "marriage" also implies a firm denial of any possible connection with Spooner.

As the story goes on, Spooner gradually overpowers Hirst by deconstructing Hirst's ability of playing the game of memory (and by extension, his ability in everything), and exposing Hirst's private world nakedly. In Act I, when Hirst can not give a story of "his wife" as Spooner suggests, Spooner tells Hirst: "It is my duty to tell you you have failed to convince. I am an honest and intelligent man. You pay me less than my due.... I begin to wonder whether truly accurate and therefore essentially poetic definition means anything to you at all.... I have seriously questioned these propositions and find them threadbare" (31). Here speaking like a literary authority as he always claims himself to be, he throws doubts on the accuracy of Hirst's tale and his failure to give a satisfying narration to make his past convincing. When Spooner says that "Good lord, good lord, do I detect a touch of maudlin?" (31), audience finds that he is actually approaching the most vulnerable spot in Hirst's heart, i.e., a despairing state of failure hidden beneath the surface of success. As Hirst himself admits a minute later, "my friend... you find me in the last lap of a race... I had long forgotten to run" (32). Hirst's admittance of his Spooner's correctness in perception makes the latter even bolder in his intrusion: assuming the tone of a literary adviser and patron, Spooner first points out to Hirst his lack of the essential quality of manliness and his impotence, and then offers himself to Hirst as a boatman, a helping hand and a friend of rare quality. But his tone in addressing to the host is not so much an offer as a threat: "Think before you speak.... Remember this. You've lost your wife of hazel hue, you've lost her and what can you do, she will no more come back to you, with a tillifola tillifola tillifoladi-foladi-foloo" (33-4). By stressing ruthlessly the never returning of Hirst's "wife," a symbolic evidence of Hirst's failure in manliness, Spooner is actually taking advantage of the poor man's despairing situation of "tillifola tillifola" indecently, to prove that he is the last chance of Hirst's salvation.

Treating Hirst like this, Spooner has reduced him to one of the young "lads" that are said to rely on his guide. It is against this background that the title image of "no man's land" appears for the first time: "no man's land... does not move... or change... or grow old... remains... forever... icy... silent" (34). This is a desolate picture of decay and death where nothing changes or moves, and where one is stuck by the icy silence of loneliness. So far, Spooner's intruding needle has succeeded in sticking in the inner world of Hirst's which is hidden behind the shifting fragments of his tales of reminiscence. In this way, the first round of the fight ends in Hirst's defeat: he crawls drunkenly and disgracefully out

of the door, while Spooner lyrically tunes a Prufrockian (Prufrock is the speaker in T. S. Eliot's poem, *The Love Song of J. L. Prufrock*) line and looks at the room triumphantly like a conqueror.

In the play, Hirst appears three times, and every time he appears, he tries to give himself and Spooner a new identity through a tale of the past, in that way drawing a new starting line of campaign. When Hirst appears for the second time, the first step he takes is to obliterate the failure experience that took place a few hours ago by saying that he has forgotten everything in it—time, people and events. Instead, he replaces it with a dream in which someone has been drowning in water. Interestingly although Hirst declares the person drowning in the dream is "Not me. Someone else," he is playing again the game of hiding the truth with the false "twigs". Because he is the very person that is drowning there—he feels drowned in the total alienation of this "no man's world," in the uncertainty of the past, and in the "gap in me" caused by this uncertainty. This explains why Hirst has been drinking whisky and vodka throughout the play—drinking in order to forget his suffocating loneliness in the "no man's land" of truth. Hirst's feeling to the "no man's world" is a mixture of pain for the lonely desolation there and emotional attachment to it.

The long monologue spoken by Hirst might be the best illustration of Pinter's idea of the past. To Hirst, all his past is like the photograph album from which "My true friends look out at me," and where all his youth and love lies, but where all experience has become ghost-like shadows transformed by the changing light of time. So he says: "it never existed. It remains. I am sitting here forever...this night or the next night or the other one, the night before last" (46). It is in this world of dead silence of alienation and uncertainty of his identity that he is drowning.

As a high-skilled player of the game of memory, it is impossible for Spooner not to notice the real meaning of the dream. But instead of showing any sympathy to it, he behaves as he bragged at the beginning—"I myself can do any graph of experience you wish, to suit your taste or mine" (20). He seizes Hirst's dream as a chance and interprets it cruelly to his own advantage. So he interrupts Hirst unexpectedly and says "It was I drowning in your dream" (47)—this sentence immediately sends Hirst to a second collapse. speaking like this, Spooner is actually intruding further into Hirst's innermost world: this time, he is not merely a sharer of Hirst's past, but a dominant protagonist in his memory game. He even declares that he has the perfect qualification for this intrusion because, he says, "He [Hirst] has grandchildren. As have I. We both have fathered"(47). So when Hirst tells Spooner in his dizziness that "I know that man"(52), the audience understands that Spooner has won the second round of the fight once again: Hirst has accepted the intruder as part of his memory.

But it is in the third round of the fight that Spooner gets eventually rejected and defeated: he has overrun the propriety in his intrusion into Hirst's inner realm so deep that the latter would rather choose the insolent servants, Forster and Briggs, rather than sharing his private sanctuary of the past with Spooner.

When he re-enters in the morning in Act II, Hirst seems revived from the defeating experience of the previous night with the arriving of the daylight. This time he calls Spooner Charles, a supposed name of a former friend. And their earlier pattern of dialogue—of Spooner's long monologue and Hirst's silence in the opening scene—is also reversed here. Not giving Spooner a chance to speak, Hirst immediately imposes a new story of the past on Spooner, in which he tries to get an upper hand over Spooner with a tale of a "former" love affair with Spooner's "wife". How much Hirst's stories and Spooner's are really reliable?—this is not important. The important point is that Hirst's so-called "past" gives him a temporary identity of strength. For a moment, Spooner seems to be dazzled. But his silence only lasts a few minutes, he soon recovers his sense and launches a counter-blow to Hirst by mentioning the names of another two women, Stella and Arabella, and declaring that he is not only very fond of the two women, but also enjoys the friendship of Stella's brother's and the trust of Arabella's father's. And when Hirst tries to overpower Spooner by declaring an affair with Arabella, Spooner once again turns to virtue as his weapon: he accuses Hirst of his betrayal to the women he loved and of his sexual absolutism and scandalously corruptive relation with his former friends at Oxford. This blow of morality turns the whole world Hirst weaves for himself upside down: no wonder he cries to Spooner, "This is outrageous! Who are you? What are you doing in my house?" (78)

Here Hirst's last defense is broken under Spooner's ruthless attack on his vulnerable spots of the past: like his previous image of climbing out on his belly in Act I, he is reduced in this act to a pitifully impotent image of Prufrock in Eliot's poem. In act, the play's frequent allusions to Eliot's poem not only foretell the failure of Spooner's adventurous journey of invasion, but also imply the Prufrock-like impotent nature in Hirst's personality and his wasteland of reality. Being cornered by Spooner like this, Hirst is now like a pitiful gambler who has been deprived of everything. He tells the bullying invader that he can spare anything in the external world, the "library," "pen" and even his "photograph album," but he can't let Spooner trample insolently over his most vulnerable part of the past, i.e., "the good ghosts" there. Here the ghosts trapped in the icy desert of the album reveal a true picture of Hirst's situation. This is why throughout the play the flashing picture of the "no man's land" haunts Hirst now and then. The meaning of the "no man's land" becomes clearer when Hirst tells Briggs that "I have too many things to do. I have an essay to write. A critical essay. We'll have to check the files, find out what it is I'm supposed to be appraising. At the moment it's slipped my mind." (83) Being a famous writer, he surely always has "a critical essay" to write. But his trouble here is that "At the moment it's slipped my mind." This sentence eventually betrays his sense of helplessness and his despair to cope with his failure alone. This is what Hirst has tried to hide in all the smoking screens of the tales—a world of "no man's land" that he feels so ashamed of that he can never allow any one but himself to enter. Therefore, when Spooner offers his "nose of a ferret" to his piles of files, Hirst tells him "There are places in my heart...where no living soul...has...or can

ever...trespass" (84). In *No Man's Land*, Hirst safeguards this privacy of his inner world as Pinter's other characters do to their "rooms" in the previous plays.

To a certain degree, Hirst's room in this play stands also as an embodiment of his private world of the past. In the play, for several times, Hirst draws the curtains aside, looks out briefly, and then lets the curtains fall. When for the last time he gives order to close the curtains, he says: "The light...out there...is gloomy...hardly daylight at all. It is falling, rapidly. Distasteful. Let us close the curtains. Put the lamps on" (86). This scene of closing the curtains shows vividly Hirst's determination of locking his private world of self in the flux of memories because it gives him a feeling of safety and relief. So at the end of the play, Hirst chooses the social insolence of the two servants in daily life rather than the ferret-like Spooner. In the middle part of Act I, Foster once pictures an image of a man walking in the desert carrying two umbrellas. Obviously the two umbrellas symbolize the menservants: although they are burdensome to Hirst with their demanding dominance in the daily life of the house, at least they promise Hirst the safety of a shadow world under the "umbrellas," and never bother themselves with the "names" of the faces in their host's albums. So it is to them that Hirst eventually turns and claims a bond of steel.

IV. CONCLUSION

To Pinter, everyone has a private world belonging to no one else but himself, which is the core of one's experience. Maybe to the dramatist, writing itself is just like this. He said in 1970 that :

I have a particular relationship with the words I put down on paper and the characters which emerge from them which no one else can share with me. And perhaps that's why I remain bewildered by praise and really quite indifferent to insult. Praise and insult refer to someone called Pinter. I don't know the man they're talking about. I know the plays, but in a totally different way, in a quite private way.¹²

The playwright's feeling toward the words he writes is quite like Hirst's feeling toward his tales of the past in the sense of privacy and sanctity. Their difference lies in that Hirst's past is a world that he can neither share nor will share with anyone else, while the playwright's writing is a world that he is willing to share with others but few people can share with him.

To a certain degree, the dramatist's writing world might also be said to be a "no man's land." In his 1970 speech "On Being Awarded the German Shakespeare Prize in Hamburg," Pinter made such an answer to the question of "What am I writing about?": "I was writing nothing and can write nothing. I don't know why. It's a very bad feeling, but I must say I want more than anything else to fill up a blank page again, and to feel that strange thing happen, birth through fingertips. When you can't write you feel you've been banished from yourself."¹³ This feeling of the dramatist's—"I was writing nothing...but...When you can't write you feel you've been banished from yourself"—can be found in Hirst's emotions towards his reminiscence of the past. That is to say, anyone who wants to find a shaped idea there will be disappointed—because the words weaving that world are so unreliable, so elusive, and so evasive that no one else but the memory-teller can really understand them. But just beneath the surface of the "nothingness", something essentially and exclusively belonging to Hirst alone lies there.

In a similar relationship may the dramatist stands to his plays: all of Pinter's original impulses to write his plays lie hidden among the flux of words and haunts the lines invincibly like Hirst's nameless ghosts in the album—only the dramatist alone knows what is in it, and in as highly private way. Any attempted interpretation to his works with such labeling words as "Pinteresque" will be a barbarous and futile intrusion to the sanctuary of his dramatic experience. This is why Pinter states that there is "nothing" in his writing (i.e., nothing of what they think in it), yet he will feel exiled from himself if he does not write.

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¹² Ibid. p.31.

¹³ Ibid., p. 34.



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