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THE FEAR OF CHANGE: THE ENDINGS OF PINTER'S PLAYS

There is a structural problem in Pinter's plays which – to our knowledge – has never received the attention it deserves. This is the recurring seeming contradiction between the development of the dramatic action and the stalemate situation on which the plays often close.

The peculiar quality of the endings is in fact a common feature in Pinter's plays. Three kinds of endings can be discerned:

1 when the structure of the play is guided to a full conclusion (*closed structure*);

2 when the action of the play suggests a *circular structure*;

3 when the structure is guided to an *open ending*.

This structural typology could be visualized through the following graphs:

closed structure: 

circular structure: 

open ending:

A further variation which will have to be taken into account is the pattern of the reversal of roles, which may either suggest a circular structure or lead to a full conclusion. This structural sub-typology can be illustrated by the following graphs:

reversal as circular structure: 

reversal as full conclusion: 

Closed structure

The structural pattern leading to a *full conclusion* is first presented in *The Room*, where Bert, hitting the blind negro Riley, annihilates the threatening presence of the stranger and his claims, and, symbolically, the return of the past.

Bert's action is a final one, a point of no return of a kind which is rarely to be found in Pinter's following plays. Rose's sudden blindness, too, is a final reality, one that cannot be changed. There is a slight flaw, however, in the closed structure of the play, in that the transferring of Riley's blindness to Rose suggests a circular movement, which is a break in the pattern of full conclusion. When some peculiarity of a character's passes on to some other character, one can always expect the process to go on endlessly, and this occurs quite often in Pinter's plays. Besides, as is perceptively noted by Austin F. Quigley, "Rose's inability to rest content with her choice of life with Bert brings on the collapse of that way of life. The conclusion recognizes no alternative. The curtain comes down with Rose, as at the beginning of the play, faced with a helpless awareness of the inescapable and insupportable, of the indispensable and the unavailable. Progression on one level encounters circularity on another, and what looked like a revivifying change results only in a regressive mutation" [1].

The Birthday Party has the same structure: Goldberg and McCann carry Stanley away with them, and this is also a point of no return, but this final action is counterpoised by a scene presenting Petey and Meg involved in a conversation which is very much like the play's opening scene, with Petey sitting at table, reading his paper and answering Meg's questions. Austin E. Quigley observes that "the play concludes with Meg and Petey beginning to readjust to a life without Stanley as if the events of the play had never happened. In one sense everything is changed; in another sense, everything is the same" [2]. The final parallel scene, with its sense of circularity, mars once more the sense of a closed structure in a Pinter play [3].

[1] AUSTIN E. QUIGLEY, *The Pinter Problem* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 109. WILLIAM BAKER and STEPHEN E. TABACHNICK, in *Harold Pinter* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1973), p. 29, maintain, for their part, that "the play continues in our minds".

[2] AUSTIN E. QUIGLEY, p. 227.

[3] The cyclical pattern of the play is also analyzed from a ritual perspective in KATHERINE H. BURKMAN'S, *The Dramatic World of Harold Pinter: Its Basis in Ritual* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1975), pp. 27-39. The critic concludes her

The Dwarfs ends with Len who has finally been able to get rid of the "dwarfs" and, probably, of his two friends, too. The change is so irreversible, here, that even stylistically there is a shift from the dialogic form throughout the play to Len's final soliloquy.

The very recent play *One for the Road* presents an unrestrained use of power and the powerlessness of victims. The oppressor, after pestering his victim, for no clear reason, with chatter and questions and telling him that his wife has been repeatedly raped, announces to him that he is free to go. But before the victim leaves he is told that his son has been liquidated. The play closes with the two characters confronting each other. Silence falls on the scene. Then, a blackout. The victim figure has been crushed, althrough he is still alive. With his family destroyed, he is now the mere semblance of a man.

The reason why the closed structure is represented in the diagram by a falling arrow is easily explained. In all the above cases the development of the action shows the fall of a character. Rose, Stanley, the victim in *One for the Road* (ironically called Victor) are all losers, underdogs. Even Len is somehow a loser, in that he remains alone, with only the company of his fanciful, neurotic words.

To put it euphemistically, one could say that the closed structure always leads to a conclusion in which someone is left with a bitter taste in his mouth, and the audience is left with the picture of a confrontation which dooms one character or the other to defeat.

Circular structure

The pattern of circular structure typifies most of Pinter's plays. The model is set by an early short story of Pinter's, *The Examination*, where an anonymous narrator tells, in the first person, of his dialectic fight with Kullus. The fight between the two results in the domination of the room they inhabit. At the start Kullus is master of the room, but the narrator soon takes over. Then after a fight by words and silences, the structure comes full circle, with Kullus once again as the owner of the room and master of the situation. Circularity is here attained through a reversal of the characters' roles – of which more will be said below.

analysis noticing that "On one level occur the daily rituals – the paper, the tea, the cornflakes; on another, the birth and death of Stanley, the sacrifice and the resurrection, the initiation into Monty's world. On yet another level exist the questioning of the resurrection as valid, the denial of the validity of the cycle, the expectation and the awaiting of the new god. But in the meantime the wheel has turned".

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As has already been noted, *The Birthday Party* has some kind of circularity in its structure. But the next play fully sharing this pattern is *A Night Out*, where Albert tries to run away from his mother's suffocating possessiveness and seeks refuge first in the company of friends, then in the company of a prostitute. But the failure of both attempts compels Albert to go back to his mother's morbid attentions.

Night School revisits the same thematic structure as *The Examination*. The action shows Walter, on his return from prison, trying to take new possession of his room by expelling Sally from it. By achieving his purpose, Walter re-establishes the primitive situation, although – the structure here being that of a *late-point-of-attack* play – Walter's former owning of the room is told rather than presented on the stage, diegetic rather than mimetic.

The circular nature of *The Collection* is cognitive, and its action dialectic. The play appears to develop towards a clarification of reality, showing, as it does, Jame's effort to find out whether or not his wife Stella has betrayed him with Bill. The action sets out with James in the dark, trying to get in touch with Bill, whom he has never met and whose personality is still a mystery to him. For the rest of the play James is seen groping for reality, while the true aspect of events seems little by little to be unfolding before him. First his wife makes him believe that she slept with Bill, then Bill, pressed by James, only admits to kissing Stella by the lift, while the rest, he says, was pure fantasy. Then Stella, muddling the audience who is disentangling the skein of reality along with James, says that the story was all made up by her husband. Bill, changing once more his version, now admits that he never really met Stella. But before the play ends, Bill, assuring James that he is telling the truth, claims that he did meet Stella and was in the lounge of the hotel with her, talking about what they would do if they got to her room. By recanting all previous versions, Bill prevents James – and the audience – from verifying what really happened between him and Stella. The result of it all is that James – and the audience with him – finds himself once again in the dark. The course he has followed, instead of deepening his knowledge of things, has led him from ignorance to assumed knowledge and back to ignorance, through a dialectic action. The only positive thing he may have attained by the end of the play is a sense of the deceptive nature of reality.

Also circular is the structure of *The Lover*, with its unending game of exchanging roles, by which man and wife seem to be trying to relieve the monotony of their married life. We expect Richard to go on pretending to be Max – Sarah's lover and a figment of their

imagination –, while Sarah will go on pretending to be, alternately and respectively, wife and mistress to Richard and Max.

Another example of linguistic circularity can be found in *Landscape* where, too, the action is fully dialectic, although the two monologues spoken by Duff and Beth apparently never cross. But the play, which started with Beth's memory of the sea and the shore, after proceeding through intersecting digressions, finally closes with Beth going back to her *love memory* by the sea.

In *Silence* circularity is again linguistic. Throughout the play is registered the attempt on the part of the characters to approach or avoid each other. Bates pursues Ellen, who dodges him, while Ellen pursues Rumsey, who shuns here. Both persuers and runaways seem doomed to fail in their intent. The play develops through the alternation of parallel monologues and sequences in dialogic form which are probably meant as memory flashbacks. Memory, which in this short play is a major theme, sets its mark on the structure through the medium of language. The finished sentences and thoughts of the start revive towards the end of the play, but are resumed in broken form. They now appear as splinters of memory which only attempt to rejoin the present to the past by means of exorcising sounds. Word by word, phrase by phrase, one is made to go right back to the beginning. The characters, as Rüdiger Imhof says, "are bound to repeat forever the same phrases to themselves, to think the same thoughts over and over again" [4].

The brief dramatic sketch *Night* presents yet another kind of repetitiveness evincing the pattern of circularity. Man and wife are trying to call to mind the first time they met, but they do not seem to remember very much about it, and disagree, in any case, about quite a few details. They come little by little to a compromise about their memories which is not convincing at all. Their talk, however, sounds very much like a recurring ritual in their married life. As Thomas P. Adler remarks, four different time schemes can be discerned in the play: "the time when Man and Woman are doing the remembering, and the time remembered", with the addition of a third time in the present "when they remember doing the remembering" and of a fourth time, "the limitless future that is also an eternal present when they will remember the time when they remembered remembering" [5].

[4] Rüdiger Imhof, "Pinter's *Silence*: The Impossibility of Communication", *Modern Drama* 17 (1974), p. 459.

[5] Thomas P. Adler, "Pinter's *Night*: A Stroll Down Memory Lane", *Modern Drama* 17 (1974), p. 464.

Old Times is, in a way, a circular reconnection of past and present through the medium of memory. The final scene, showing the three characters taking different postures in the room, may very well be a re-enactment of a past scene, or, as is more likely, a memory flashback. In either case, however, the play closes on a scene of no progression, as if the past were to be endlessly relived, although through quick glimpses of memory.

Betrayal is another of the plays in which the pattern of circular structure can be discerned. The sense of circularity is achieved here through the device of reverse structure, a structure of regression by "analepsis", in Genette's terms. The play goes back in time through a series of flashbacks, thus relinking the present to the past. When one watches the last scene unfolding in front of one's eyes, one has the sense that everything is going to start all over again. Life, as one already knows it, is about to start a new cycle, identical to the previous one. The movement from *innocence* to *experience*, moreover, which is present in *Betrayal*, reminds one of the cyclical structure of the romance.

This return to the womb of the past corresponds with an attempt to stop time, as if the characters (or the author) regretted the passing of time or, rather, the way time was employed in action. It is, in the last analysis, a way of regretting the development of the *fable*.

The pattern of reverse structure involves a tension between the two antinomic principles of development and stasis. Considering the play from the point of view of the fable, we witness the development of a love affaire from beginning through decline and final break. On the other hand, the dramatic structure seems to pursue an opposite course, contradicting and contrasting the direction of the fable. The backward structure tends towards regression, and regression is a patente device to check experience in a situation of stasis.

This is even more true with regard to the pattern of circular structure, which is also a return to the past, to the primitive stage of progress. Whereas the reverse structure achieves stasis by a single journey backwards, the cyclical structure achieves stasis *through progress*, by repeating the same movement pattern over and over again, which finally gives the sense of an immutable order of things. In *Betrayal*, for example, by the time the *fable* ends, we have come to know that the game of betrayal is not over, for Emma is going to start it again, with another man.

When the structure is cyclical, the end corresponds to a new beginning. It might be argued, therefore, that there is no real conclusion, for the movement is continuous, without a break: the conclusion is also, and always, the starting point of a new, identical cycle

which, by *ending*, will never really end, but always begin again.

There are cases in Pinter, however, when this paradox of stasis in a dramatic structure is even more emphasized. Some plays present a traditional conclusion, although they appear somehow to point to a circular structure. This is so in *A Slight Ache*, where Flora manages to throw her husband out of the house and lets the matchseller in. Although this is certainly the final goal of the dramatic movement, this is not all, for what really takes place in the play is a reversal of roles between the two men. The matchseller becomes Flora's lover, whereas Flora's husband becomes a matchseller; the matchseller now looks more youthful than before, the husband feels older. The mythical pattern of the new order replacing the old order is there, and with it the sense of a cyclical structure [6].

This pattern of the reversal of roles recurs whenever the theme of struggle for power occurs. It was first applied to *The Examination*, and it returns in *The Hothouse*. Here, too, the conclusion seems final, with Roote, the former boss, eliminated, and Gibbs as the new man in power. But the rules of power are so unbending that we expect Gibbs to end up in the same way as Roote, replaced by a new, younger *king*. Again, the change is only apparent, for it concerns the destiny of individual men, rather than the situation at large, which appears to be unchangeable and archetypal, as in *A Slight Ache*.

Similarly, *Tea Party* shows Disson, the boss, losing his power while Willy takes over. Disson, like an old god, becomes physically weaker and weaker, while everybody seems to abandon him and see in Willy the new king. The action closes, and changes, at a personal level, but at a situational level it is the mere repetition of an old, unchanging pattern. The restoration of order, whose lack Arnold P. Hinchliffe laments [7], is implied in Willy's initiation which prepares him for succession.

Even *The Homecoming* presents a similar antithetical structure. The play's conclusion is Teddy's departure from his parents' house and Ruth's decision to stay. This is in itself a reversal of roles in that Ruth takes Teddy's place in the affections, so to speak, of his family. Teddy is a stranger now, whereas Ruth is one of the family. This is also a reversal of the opening situation, in that Ruth had been greeted by the head of the family as a prostitute disrupting the unity

[6] The ritual cycle recognizable in *A Slight Ache* is dealt with by K.H. BURKMAN, pp. 47-64.

[7] Cfr. ARNOLD P. HINCHLIFFE, *Harold Pinter* (New York: Twayne, 1967), p. 143.

and disturbing the peacefulness of his home. But there is more to this, and Lucina P. Gabbard discusses it at length [8]. There are various signs in the play of events repeating themselves: Teddy is leaving now as he left six years ago; Ruth feels now the old feelings she had repressed and returns to be the loose woman she probably was before her marriage; her presence as a prostitute replaces the mother-figure of her dead mother-in-law, who was a "bitch", too; by staying in London, Ruth abandons her children as her mother-in-law used to abandon hers. There are other parallels and repetitions; enough to say that this play, too, offers the usual view of an unchanging cyclical pattern.

Also *The Basement* follows the pattern of circular structure through the reversal of roles already pointed out in *The Examination*, *A Slight Ache*, *The Hothouse*, *Tea Party*, *The Homecoming*. The play starts with Law inside the room and Stott outside. Stott enters the room with a girl, Jane, and little by little he takes over. After a "game-as-battle" development [9], the final scene shows Stott inside the room and Law outside with Jane; this time, it is Stott who welcomes Law in, and the cycle starts all over again.

In the diagrams at the beginning of this study two types of reversal have been distinguished: one as movement towards a circular structure, the other as movement towards a full conclusion. But, as has been observed so far, the latter type is just a slight variation of the former, for the reversal suggests once more a circular structure.

Considering all the plays presenting a pattern of circular structure, it can be noted that, on the level of surface dramatic structure, they show a developing action; on the other hand, on the level of deep dramatic structure [10] they show a tendency towards stasis, which will be given further treatment.

Open ending

The third structural pattern to be considered is that leading to an open ending. At first sight, this ending pattern seems to entail an opposite meaning to the pattern of closed structure, and certainly

[8] LUCINA P. GABBARD, *The Dream Structure of Pinter's Plays. A Psychoanalytic Approach* (Rutherford: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1976), pp. 198-200.

[9] GUIDO' ALMANSI and SIMON HENDERSON, *Harold Pinter* (London and New York: Methuen, 1983), p. 31.

[10] "Surface dramatic structure" and "deep dramatic structure" are here referred to as adaptations of Greimas's definitions "surface narrative structure" and "deep narrative structure".

contrary to that of circular structure. Whereas a closed structure presents a full conclusion, and a circular structure offers at least a conclusion coinciding and reconnecting with its beginning – although it never really comes to an end –, an open-ended structure is like a matter pending. The play usually reaches a point of no return, but that point is never passed beyond.

Pinter's first and best example of this kind of play is *The Dumb Waiter*. The final scene of the play shows Ben with his revolver levelled at Gus, who has just come into the room. They are staring at each other, in silence. Ben, as we know, has just been ordered to do away with the man who is going to enter the room, but could not imagine that man would be Gus. Of course, there may be *objective* reasons why Gus deserves punishment: he is undergoing an identity crisis, he has asked too many questions about his job; his thorough loyalty to the system is no more to be trusted. Ben, who has never asked questions and has always acted in blind obedience to the orders of mysterious powers, is now facing his accomplice not as a friend, but as an enemy. The unexpected conclusion to which the action has come – although hints foreshadowing this development mark the beat throughout the play – creates a problem to both Ben and Gus. Gus, being the one in the worse position and the more bewildered of the two, might want to react by force or, perhaps, beat a retreat behind the door. Ben, on the other hand, is directly involved in action for he has been ordered to shoot, and has now to decide whether or not he should kill his partner. Considering the sort of man Ben is, we do not expect him to fall victim to a sudden crisis, but this, unlikely as it is, might even happen. Why shouldn't *he* start wondering, now, about the reason why he should carry out that order? This would be a reversal of roles pointing to a circular structure, but Pinter decided not to give us any clue to such a reading of the conclusion. The play as it is, however, allows for all interpretations, according to each receiver's emotional response.

If Pinter's suspended conclusion may have aimed at achieving this very effect, it is equally true, on the other hand, that a suspended conclusion is, paradoxically, the best and only conclusion for both Ben and Gus who, as characters, have thus no need to make up their minds about their next move.

What has been said about *The Dumb Waiter* holds good for *The Caretaker*, too. For the whole length of the play Davies has tried to establish himself inside the room, while Mick, through surreptitious, indirect actions, has done all his best to get rid of him. Aston has kept a middle course, first by helping Davies and bringing him home, then by providing him with shoes and shirts which might

enable him to leave. Davies grapples with the problem of relying on either the one or the other of the brothers. He is torn, moreover, between installing himself in the house and going to recover the papers which could supply documentary evidence of his identity. In a state of crisis with himself and continually attacked by Mick, Davies tries to drive a wedge between Mick and Aston. This very attempt turns out to be a snare laid for him and a mark of his defeat. The final scene of the play shows Davies pronouncing inarticulate words, after learning that he is to leave the house, while Aston turns his back on him. As in *The Dumb Waiter*, the final action is not performed; after a *long silence* the curtain drops, leaving the two characters in immobility.

A question of choice is once more involved. Even though the dramatic movement points quite clearly to the solution of the play, stasis stands for a choice *not to choose*. Davies's fate is sealed, and Aston's immobility, silence and turned back convey unmistakably the sense of his refusal to go back on his decision. Davies's silence and immobility, however, are a way of deferring exit, as if to stop time and avoid expulsion.

Silence, as suggested above, is circular in language. It develops towards a fragmentary speech, made up of broken phrases which only try – unsuccessfully – to reproduce the full meaning of what has already been said. But circularity is here only partial, for no real connection with the beginning occurs. The dramatic movement progresses towards a disintegration of speech, a regression towards a condition of aphasia which does not reach any full conclusion. The long silence closing the play is once more the mark of a suspension which deprives all hope of change or choice.

Such a mixed structure, where circularity only hides suspension, is shared by *Old Times*. As in *The Dumb Waiter* and in *The Caretaker*, *Old Times* closes without offering a proper conclusion. All is left to interpretation, and is therefore highly subjective. Anna's presence has been opposed by Deeley since her physical, or spiritual, entry into the house. At the end of the play she appears as the loser, but she is not seen to go out; she just walks to the door, turning her back to Kate and Deeley [11]. Her posture parallels her first appearance on stage when, at rise of curtain, she is standing at the window, turning her back to the audience, and to Kate and Deeley. The

[11] After this, another sequence follows which should be read as a memory flashback rather than as part of the present action (cf. C.C. HUDGINS, "Inside Out: Filmic Technique and the Theatrical Depiction of a Consciousness in Harold Pinter's *Old Times*", *Genre* 13 (1980), pp. 368, 372).

movement is then circular, despite her being now in front of the door. But, actually, she *is* in front of the door, as if she were doomed to leave. The long silence and inaction which separate this scene from the final memory-flashback sequence conveys Anna's refusal to accept her own defeat.

The structure of *Monologue* is one of stasis, development and suspension at the same time. The only character on stage is a sitting man speaking to an empty chair in front of him. The sense of stasis is first communicated visually through the character's physical immobility. In contrast with the stillness of the scene, development is seemingly found in the man's mental process when, at the end of the short play, we hear him shaping his own reality by means of language:

> ... your *could have had* two black kids. / *Pause* / *I'd have been* their uncle. / *Pause* / I *am* their uncle. / *Pause* / I'*m* your children's uncle. / *Pause* / *I'll take* them out, *tell* them jokes. / *Pause* / I *love* your children [12].

The change in tenses, from a perfect conditional tense of unfulfillment to the present tense, and subsequently to the future tense, creates, besides a temporal movement, a movement in the reality of the imagination and in the character's inner reality. This brings about a paradigm of contrast not only between what is being said and the static nature of the scene, between language and situation, but also between language and that paralysis of the mind which is caused by the irresistible intrusion of the past upon the present.

The real nature of stasis is, therefore, intellectual rather than physical, for even the imaginative action produces no change in either the outer or the inner reality of the character. Still, the conflict between the man's paralysis – as a captive to memory and the past – and his will to keep his mind moving and change reality appears as an endless fight, to which only death will allow a truce.

No Man's Land follows the model of the open-ended structure brought out above in *The Caretaker*. *No Man's Land*, however, like *Monologue*, shows a structural pattern of movement and counter-movement. Considering Spooner as the subject of movement, the play is found to develop a structural pattern of INTRUSION-OPPOSITION-REJECTION, exactly like *The Caretaker*. To this structural movement developing dynamically another is opposed which develops towards stasis and has Hirst as its subject. This parallel structural

[12] HAROLD PINTER, *Plays: Four* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981), pp. 276-277. Italics of verbs are mine.

countermovement develops the following circular pattern: IGNORANCE-RECOGNITION-IGNORANCE. Hirst introduces Spooner as a stranger into his home, then, in Act Two, he appears to have known him before; they were friends, and knew and loved the same people. But towards the end of the play Hirst withdraws into his Limbo, showing no sign of recognition of his guest. Hirst passes from OBLIVION TO REMEMBRANCE TO OBLIVION again, or, as already suggested, from IGNORANCE TO RECOGNITION TO IGNORANCE, or, again, from EXTRANEOUSNESS TO INTIMACY TO EXTRANEOUSNESS. While Spooner's parabolical movement is physical, Hirst's circular movement is gnosiological and tends towards that stasis which characterizes the condition of his existence [13].

As soon as Hirst withdraws into his world of non-recognition, Spooner remains defenseless in a hostile environment. It seems he has no choice but to leave, but, like Davies in *The Caretaker* and Anna in *Old Times*, he is still there when the curtain drops.

Family Voices presents stasis by means of a peculiar kind of technique – epistolary style. Characters seem to be writing to each other, although they never appear to have read each other's letters. The son tells the mother of his extraordinary, and rather incredible, life in his new environment, while the mother complains about the son's absence and long silence. The father has probably reached the stillness of death, and yet writes about his lying in a "glassy grave". Still, the tension underlying this exchange of letters never turns into an open conflict, for either the letters have never been read or they have never arrived or they were never written. As a result, this radio play draws the picture of a situation showing the relationship between a son and his mother and father. No development is implied. Even when, towards the end of the play, the son promises he is on his way back home, we perceive that his words will never be turned into action, and the family will never be reunited. Nevertheless, the son's words are there as a promise to act, and, in a way, we are not allowed to distrust them. But, while the son seems to have been moving back towards family affections, the mother seems to have

[13] One can only partially agree with JOHN B. JONES when he affirms that "stasis is indeed the controlling metaphor of [...] *No Man's Land*" or that "Spooner affects *no change*" ("Stasis as Structure in Pinter's *No Man's Land*", *Modern Drama* 19 (1976), pp. 296-297). As has been said above, the structure of *No Man's Land* is not stasis, but *tends towards* stasis. The person Hirst sees "drowning" in his dream, rather than a "metaphor for the condition of stasis" as John B. Jones says, is a metaphor for the whole structure of the play and the dramatic progress of the characters which *tend towards* stasis. The play, as already suggested, shows change through a structural pattern of movement and countermovement.

irretrievably drawn away from him. The ending is once more left suspended, as with a question mark.

Movement towards statis

Pinter's latest works show the unequivocal movement of action towards a static condition. *A Kind of Alaska* presents the gradual return of a woman to memory. The movement is then from oblivion to MEMORY and RECOGNITION, but the reacquisition of memory is only partial, in that she does not want to acknowledge the damage time has done to her family. She thus seems to take refuge in a kind of utopian world between past and present, where time has stopped and change has been banished.

Victoria Station, brief as it is, reinforces the sense of immobility. The taxi-driver, who refuses to obey the controller's orders and carry out his task, only aims at remaining inside his car for the rest of his life, with the woman he has apparently fallen in love with. He does not want to move. His enthusiasm about fixity and immutability finally allures also his controller, who wants to go and celebrate the wedding.

This is a celebration of stasis which even Pinter's most recent play shares. *One for the Road* develops, as has been pointed out, a dynamic action within a closed structure; on the other hand, the play can be viewed as suspended in a condition of stasis. As in *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Caretaker*, *Old Times*, *No Man's Land*, the final action does not take place on stage. Victor, dismayed and annihilated, is sitting on his chair, confronted by his persecutor and by the dismal reality of his family's destruction. A silence and a blackout put an end to his despair. But that image persists, imprinted in our memory, as a message of frustration, helplessness and paralysis.

Reconsidering the structural patterns discussed so far, one cannot but notice that they all converge on paralysis.

With the possible exception of *The Dwarfs*, the plays described as having a *closed structure* (*The Room*, *The Birthday Party*) have been recognized as presenting some sort of circular movement, through either reversal or iteration. *One for the Road*, on the other hand, falls partly under another type of structural pattern – the pattern of stasis.

The pattern of *circular structure*, which is peculiar to most of Pinter's plays, is in itself a pattern of stasis. The circular structure, which as such implies movement and change, is nothing but the

repetition of a cycle which recurs as the mere image of itself. Reality remains the same, while the only thing that changes is the time in which it is expected to take place. The cyclical pattern leads, in the last analysis, to a situation of *no change* and frustration [14].

The same is true, of course, about the few plays whose movement, although not cyclical, has been described as *tending towards* stasis. The point here is self-evident and does not seem to need further illustration.

Finally, the *open-ended structure* may be read as an acceptance of defeat, but also as a refusal to leave the scene. Frustration and helplessness prevent the character from moving, block him in a state of paralysis; it is equally true, however, that paralysis is a kind of passive resistance, the character's only defense from the necessity of disappearing from the scene; it is the only way the underdog can oppose his destiny.

Obviously, it may be argued that characters like Gus (*The Dumb Waiter*), Davies (*The Caretaker*), Anna (*Old Times*), and Spooner (*No Man's Land*) are patently defeated even if they are not shown as physically expelled from the scene. And it might also be added that Harold Pinter is not concerned with the conclusion of the dramatic action – which is implied in the development of the whole dramatic movement. Pinter is only interested in presenting a situation, which is often a state of conflict, an identity crisis, or a search for survival.

What is enthralling in Pinter's plays is this tendency towards a no-change situation, an escape from development and mutability. Characters like Davies, Spooner and Victor are *shlemiels* [15], the clumsy, ill-fated figures of the Jewish literary tradition of Eastern Europe, the predestined victims of their own weakness, who cannot cope with the ruthlessness of interpersonal relationships. They are all losers whose only secure refuge will finally be silence and paralysis, terrified as they are by change and the unretractability of the spoken word. They all seem to share Len's neurosis: "What you are, or appear to be to me, or appear to be to you, changes so quickly, so horrifyingly" [16]

[14] Even reversal then, when part of a cyclical structure, is a movement leading to stasis. In this sense, PAUL M. LEVITT's assertion that reversal "promotes change by violating expectation" (*Structural Approach to the Analysis of Drama* (The Hague-Paris: Mouton, 1971), p. 68), although true in itself, would need further consideration.

[15] The figure of the *shlemiel* in Harold Pinter's work is dealt with in detail in my study *Radici sepolte. Il teatro di Harold Pinter* (Firenze: Olschki, 1985).

[16] HAROLD PINTER, *The Dwarfs*, in *Plays: Two* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1977), p. 112.

A character sometimes reaches a point of no return, as we said, which is never passed beyond, nor, it must be added, is there any possibility of the character's going back on his actions. His stalemate condition is unalterable. It is as if the character were blind on the verge of a precipice, aware that one step in any direction might make him fall.

Open endings in Pinter expand the moment of crisis, thus highlighting the dangling reality of the individual's present and the uncertainty of his future. Man is caught in a state of paralysis, while confronted with the necessity, and inability, to choose his own way. The character, at the moment of realizing the failure of his efforts to achieve fixity, identity, fulfillment, reacts against the enmity of reality in the only way he can: by refusing the reality of action and speech. Death of action finally appears as a metaphor for inner death.

This escape from ending as a structural element of the dramatic action is questioned by Robert W. Corrigan. The critic disapproves of the postmodern poetics denying the audience, after the customary beginning and the rightly expected development, the gratification of a traditional ending [17]. But the acceptance of the traditional structure of the well-made play is tantamount to the recognition of a preestablished *order*, and order does not seem to be one of the principles governing Pinter's dramatic world [18].

An ending, moreover, is always, unquestionably, a kind of response, whereas the lack of an ending is a question about the nature of reality and the condition of man. Answering that question is probably too risky an undertaking both for the playwright and for any other man. Answering that question would presuppose selfconceit, a confidence in one's understanding of reality, which is a privilege no longer granted by the quality and context of modern existence.

The character is denied both salvation and damnation. The audience is denied the liberating comfort of catharsis.

[17] Cfr. ROBERT W. CORRIGAN, "The Search for New Endings: The Theatre in Search of a Fix, Part III", *Theatre Journal* 36 (May 1984), pp. 153-163.

[18] On the related problems of "exposition", "development", "conclusion", and "plot" in Pinter's plays, cf. REID DOUGLAS, "The Failure of English Realism", *Tulane Drama Review* 7 (1962), pp. 180-183; JOHN R. BROWN, "Mr. Pinter's Shakespeare", *Critical Quarterly* 5 (1963), pp. 251-265; BERT O. STATES, "The Case for Plot in Modern Drama", *Hudson Review* 20 (Spring 1967), pp. 47-61.