

DARIO CALIMANI

A CASE AGAINST FLASHBACKS
IN PINTER'S *OLD TIMES*

For over twenty years now Harold Pinter's plays have challenged the ability of audiences and critics trying to unravel the entangled skein of their meaning. Most of the time, however, this proves a useless, if thrilling, ordeal oversimplifying and shattering the total effect of the drama under analysis.

One point one cannot avoid keeping in mind is that, with Pinter, as it is true that language is a form of action, and (in spite of its frequent indirectness) probably the clearest and most effective, it is also generally true that the form, by and large, helps one to come to terms with the content and its mechanisms. This is like saying that in Pinter the form *is* an expression of the content and, therefore, often hides the meaning we are so desperately groping for.

One very interesting example to illustrate this is to be found in *Old Times* (1971). Oversimplifying, in our turn, the content of the play, we could say that it represents Anna's intrusion upon Deeley and Kate's married life. What follows is the struggle between Anna and Deeley for the affective possession of Kate, and Kate's fight to assert her own independence. Rather than on this or other meanings, however, the play focuses on the techniques and strategies by which this double fight takes place within the triangle.

The most powerful weapon in the hands of Deeley and Anna is soon revealed to be *memory*. Various attacks are made by either of them by just recalling episodes of their past which may have disparaging implications for or references to the rival. Anna, for example, tells of a man she once saw sobbing in Kate's room. After Anna had got into her bed, the man went towards her, but she « would have absolutely nothing to do with him ».¹ Whether or not this is true, it is implied of course that the man involved may have been

¹ Harold PINTER, *Plays: Four* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981), p. 28.

Deeley. This stands therefore for an actual or symbolic attempt on Deeley's part at betraying Kate. Or, if the man was not Deeley, the scene may suggest that Kat had previously had another man, thus betraying Deeley 'in advance'.

Deeley, on his part, later takes his revenge on Anna by telling of her exhibitionistic behaviour at a party, where he once was with her. Not only did she allow Deeley a "gander" up her skirt, but she also wore Kate's underwear. She used to take drugs at the time. Again, all this may or may not be true: it is a matter of no importance. No one ever denies the truthfulness of what is said by the other characters. Denying is no defence. The only way of thwarting accusations is by matching them with contrary memories or other accusations. As a consequence, memories appear as true in themselves, they can never be contradicted, for subjective reality becomes objective as soon as a character expounds it.

In *Old Times*, what disturbs the linear dimension of a traditional play is the presence of five apparent flashbacks representing moments of Kate's past. These sequences have obviously posed a problem to critics, who have often felt obliged to deny responsibility for using the word "flashback" by stating that it "seems" a flashback. As a matter of fact, as Christopher C. Hudgins has convincingly proved,² the five flashbacks are representations of Kate's memory through a filmic technique.³

At five different moments in the play we see the past merging in action with the present. This first happens at the beginning of Act One, when Deeley and Kate speak about Anna as still absent, and yet we see her at the window, turning her back to us, as a materialization of Kate's "dim memory"⁴ of her.

A second enactment of the past through Kate's memory presents Anna trying to keep Kate from going out for a walk in the park.

² Christopher C. HUDGINS, « Inside Out: Filmic Technique and the Theatrical depiction of a Consciousness in Harold Pinter's *Old Times* », *Genre* 13 (1980), pp. 355-376.

³ Gay G. Cima is inclined to interpret the sequences as attempts from Anna to lure Kate back to the past (cf. « Acting on the Cutting Edge: Pinter and the Syntax of Cinema », *Theatre Journal* 36 (March 1984), pp. 47, 49, 50). A similar view is held by Alan Hughes, « 'They Can't Take That Away from Me': Myth and Memory in Pinter's *Old Times* », *Modern Drama* 17 (1974), p. 472.

⁴ Christopher C. HUDGINS, p. 365.

The third and fourth materializations of Kate's memory follow each other very closely. In the former, we hear Kate asking Anna whether it is raining and see Anna pouring coffee; in the latter, Kate complains to Anna about the coffee being cold, then the two women start talking about inviting their male friends.

The fifth memory-flashback occurs at the end of the play, when Deeley starts sobbing, then goes to the divan where Anna is lying, but she remains still. Then Deeley goes to Kate's divan and « lies across her lap ».⁵ The scene is the re-enactment of an episode in the past as Anna had previously described it.

It is not essential for these five sequences to be considered as representations of *Kate's* memory — although this may as well be so. What is essential is that they be considered *memory-flashbacks* rather than mere flashbacks. The reason why they are better understood as the dramatization of memories is twofold. First of all, there are formal cues pointing to this reading. The five sequences, in fact, are not enclosed in and isolated from the present; on the contrary, they appear to develop while the action in the present time proceeds, although unseen and unheard by us. Moreover, the first two of these memory flashbacks start after a *silence*, but only end with a bried *pause*; the passage to the present action is quick and direct, as in the fourth sequence, where there is not even a *pause* to conclude it. Here, the two levels — the level of memory and the level of the present action — merge when Deeley, excluded from the memory-flashback, seems to be answering a question Kate has asked within the memory sequence, with not even a *pause* to separate the two levels:

Kate: Christy.

Anna: He's lovely.

Kate: He's so gentle, isn't he? And his humour. Hasn't he got a lovely sense of humour? And I think he's... so sensitive. Why don't you ask him round?

Deeley: He can't make it. He's out of town.⁶

⁵ Harold PINTER, *Plays: Four*, p. 70.

⁶ Harold PINTER, *Plays: Four*, p. 59.

Deeley's intrusion here seems to justify those critics who provide naturalistic explanations for the five sequences.⁷ Namely, Anna and Kate are seen to enact in the present their past shared life in London.

It seems in fact as if Kate has recalled the past in a loud voice so that Deeley has heard and is then able to give a mocking reply. Of course, Deeley's cue might also be referred to some other discussion which may have been going on during Kate's memory-flashback, a discussion the audience has not heard.

A similar melding of levels occurs when, in the second memory flashback, Anna asks Kate if she is hungry and, after Kate has answered she is not, Deeley takes up the cue adding: « Hungry After that casserole? ».⁸ This seems to suggest that part of the discussion takes place before the meal (memory level) and part after the meal (present action level/Deeley's cue).⁹

As has been noted, these formal reasons, and others as well, certainly corroborate an interpretation of the five sequences as enactments of memory. But a stronger reason seems *not to allow* viewing the representation of flashbacks in any Pinter play. A flashback in fact is generally the objective representation of reality in the past. In narrative technique, a flashback is the omniscient author's choice for an explanatory, or somehow significant, leap back in the past. Only in the case of a narrator as distinguished from the author can a flashback be the *subjective* representation of the past through the narrator's memory.

A flashback in a Pinter play might mislead the audience toward a naturalistic interpretation of reality, a search for truth. It would be a touchstone for us to ascertain which of the characters lie and which tell the truth. This would be a sort of objective test by which to find out the *true meaning* of the play.

The second memory sequence, for example, with Anna keeping

⁷ See for example Bernard F. Dukore, *Harold Pinter* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982), p. 94.

⁸ Harold PINTER, *Plays: Four*, p. 40.

⁹ Ronald Hayman writes that Anna and Kate are « talking to each other as if they had been transported back to the time when they were living together. But it is not a flashback because Deeley is able to interrupt and his line [...] implies, on the contrary, a flash-forward to the time after dinner » (*Harold Pinter* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1973), p. 142).

Kate from going for a walk across the park, contradicts Anna's previous narration of the exciting and dynamic life they used to lead at the time they lived in London together. If this sequence were to be interpreted as a flashback, it would be like juxtaposing two opposite versions of reality, a subjective and an objective one, so that one could be able to decide for oneself that the former is false and the latter is true.

Enabling the audience to tell truth from falsehood, the real from the unreal, however, is obviously as far as possible from Pinter's aims as a playwright and would disrupt the whole sense of his theatre. Contradictions in fact are just to be taken note of, rather than to be verified and settled. The impossibility of pinpointing reality and truth is one of the constant features of Pinter's plays, the implication of which is often more technical than existential, for the employment of subjective reality works as an offensive or defensive weapon. Memory, in Pinter, is the shape under which subjective reality is frequently hidden.

The memory-flashbacks, too, are to be considered in this view, as subjective representations of past reality. Only in so doing can we leave the ambiguity of Pinter's play intact and its meaning a mere question of perspective.

One cannot forget that the clue to grasping the subjective nature of memories is clearly given in the play, when Anna affirms:

There are things one remembers even though they may never have happened. There are things I remember which may never have happened but as I recall them they take place.¹⁰

The reality of the memory-flashbacks in *Old Times* is therefore as subjective as that of the memories in the monologues of Beth and Duff in *Landscape*. Memory is, in the last analysis, the only refuge man is left to withdraw to from crude experience, the only way to hold one's vision as valid as any other vision. It is the triumph of the mind over the iron rules of objective reality.

Through the second memory sequence, Kate escapes the fight and confrontation going on between Deeley and Anna, but also silently opposes a plan of Anna's: « I think I must come and keep

¹⁰ Harold PINTER, *Plays: Four*, pp. 27-28.

you company when he's away ».¹¹ Kate's only answer is a visual recollection of how possessive and exclusive Anna can be.

Through the third and fourth memory sequences, Kate exposes Anna's overidyllic vision of life in London where, as Anna says, you can have « a nice hot drink ».¹² But Kate's consciousness dramatizes an episode in the past when she complained about a « cold »¹³ coffee.

The memory-flashback is a structural device by which a character not only shuns the conversation in progress in a kind of « rearguard attempt »,¹⁴ as Pinter would say, but it is also his weapon to mould reality to his own liking.

As has been affirmed in beginning these pages, the form in *Old Times* is so devised as to determine and reinforce the sense of the content. Through her memory-sequences Kate imposes a change in scene, time and topic on the audience, she smothers the other characters' voices and annihilates the subject of their conversation. Finally, her memories, by being presented through mimesis rather than through diegesis, by being dramatized thoughts rather than narrations of past events, emphasize the fight strategy of these characters as an indirect one. Anna and Deeley resort to oblique strategies to fight each other, but they apply their strategies *directly* in conversation. Kate, on the other hand, does not even feel it necessary to talk to prevail — escaping conversation is asserting one's independence.

Kate's victory is an inner one, and is achieved by just disregarding the level of present action and the fight taking place in front of her. It is a victory achieved by contradicting on the level of consciousness and memory all that could jeopardize her freedom and warp her sense of the past.

¹¹ Harold PINTER, *Plays: Four*, p. 35.

¹² Harold PINTER, *Plays: Four*, p. 55.

¹³ Harold PINTER, *Plays: Four*, p. 57.

¹⁴ Harold PINTER, « Writing for the Theatre », in *Plays: One* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1976), p. 15.