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The Paranoid Pseudo Community
In Pinter’s The Birthday Party

There are several reasons why yet another study of Harold Pinter’s The Birthday Party may prove of value. Analyses of the play in terms of sociology or socio-psychology are inappropriate.\(^1\) Studies which reduce it to an allegory, a rite of passage, a metaphor of birth or of death are simplistic.\(^2\) Observations on the play’s theatricality, rather than its content, are less than helpful.\(^3\) These methods or applied viewpoints represent inadequate, fundamentally irrelevant ways of thinking and talking about the play or about Pinter’s work in general.

The Birthday Party shows us in great detail the onset and phenomena of a paranoid state. The primary frame of reference for its analysis must be studies in psychopathology. For the characteristics of the paranoid state I draw upon Norman Cameron’s definitive survey and upon other studies in Arieti’s American Handbook of Psychiatry,\(^4\) upon Karl Jasper’s General Psychopathology,\(^5\) upon the work of Ludwig Binswanger\(^6\)


\(^2\) These include the following: Katherine H. Burkman, The Dramatic World of Harold Pinter: Its Basis in Ritual (Columbus, Ohio, 1971); Martin Esslin, The Peopled Wound: The Work of Harold Pinter (Garden City, N.Y., 1970).

\(^3\) These include the following: Bernard F. Dukore, Where The Laughter Stops: Pinter’s Tragicomedy (Columbia, Missouri, 1976); Ronald Hayman, Harold Pinter (New York, 1968); James R. Hollis, Harold Pinter: The Poetics of Silence (Carbondale, Illinois, 1970); Simon Trussler, The Plays of Harold Pinter: An Assessment (London, 1974).


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and Eugene Minkowski.7 The use of these sources is particularly appropriate since they represent the achievements of phenomenological psychology, a field that bears meaningful comparisons with the work of Pinter.

As a model for a phenomenological study of *The Birthday Party*, let us first consider a case history presented by Cameron. It deals with an unmarried man living in conditions much like those of Stanley, in a cheap hotel, idly, on a small income. He would place a few bets each day on horse races, but then had a violent quarrel with some bookies over payment on a winning horse he believed he had bet on. This led to an acute paranoid attack. As he sat brooding in the hotel lobby, he suddenly "realized" that bookies have gangster protection, that he was in danger of his life, that they would "get him." "He noticed a number of rough-looking strangers hanging around the hotel lobby. They seemed to be watching him closely and waving signals to one another. The patient himself became watchful and apprehensive. At one time during that morning he saw an automobile filled with men stop in front of the hotel entrance. He was immediately convinced that these were gangsters coming to kidnap him, to torture and kill him."8

This same image, of course, is fundamental to *The Birthday Party*. Many critics are convinced, as was the patient in this case, that the men with the car have sinister motives which they then carry out. Stanley is kidnapped, tortured, and/or taken away in a car thought of as carrying a hearse. He "becomes the victim of a ritual murder," as the note on the cover of the Grove Press edition puts it, a summary of sociological interpretations of the play.9

The similarities with the case study continue. In panic, after a sleepless night, the man left secretly for the house of a relative a thousand miles away. "As he fled across country from his persecutors, it became more and more obvious to the patient that escape was impossible. This was true, of course, but not for the reasons he believed. A number of trivial incidents and casual comments by strangers made him 'realize' that he was caught in a great net which was closing around him." In one city a policeman looking at his auto license meant that "the organization of enemies now included all the police." A shoe shine man who "eyed him narrowly as he worked" meant "the grapevine was catching up." All the while he expected to be tortured when captured by his persecutors. He was hospitalized but there was no remission of the paranoia and he did not recover.

In this case we see "a man who quickly organized a provisional pseudo community of murderous persecutors out of his projected hostility and infantile fears."10 "The paranoid pseudo community is an imaginary organization, composed of real and imagined persons, whom the patient represents as united for the purpose of carrying

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8 Arieti, 521.
9 *The Birthday Party and The Room: Two Plays by Harold Pinter* (New York, 1961). All subsequent references are to this edition and will be given in the text as page numbers in parentheses.
10 Arieti, p. 521.
out some action upon him.”

*The Birthday Party* presents in considerable detail the psychodynamics of the paranoid consciousness in its formation of such an organization.

When Stanley is told that two men are coming to the boarding house, he at first shows agitation and suspicion suggestive of paranoia. Then, strangely, he is positive they are not coming. “Why didn’t they come last night if they were coming? . . . Forget all about it. It’s a false alarm. A false alarm” (pp. 20–21). This can only be understood within his own frame of reference. Like the patient cited, he had lain awake all “last night,” daydreaming as he says, which we can take to mean participating in a paranoid fantasy. There was apparently no “reference” to the men in his fantasy, so it is only “a false alarm.”

The fantasy was probably that which is then presented, the obvious lie about the “world tour” at a “fabulous salary” that Stanley would like to believe in. Delusions of grandeur are not infrequent in paranoid states, but “however inflated the patient’s self-evaluation may seem, it is always defensive and compensatory.”

These factors are clearly apparent in Stanley’s case.

Meg then threatens this egotistic defense by asking about his previous experience as a piano player. He is brought to allude metaphorically to a paranoid episode that occurred about a year before. It had caused him to flee, to return to this remote boarding house to escape the “they” in an organized plot by the tormentors, both real and unreal, of a paranoid pseudo community. “They carved me up. . . . It was all arranged, it was all worked out . . . when I got there, the hall was closed, the place was shuttered up. . . . They’d locked it up. A fast one. They pulled a fast one. I’d like to know who was responsible for that” (p. 23). At this stage of the pathology there is the lack of a specific danger in the delusional reconstruction. “If the patient has spoken of persecution, he has been able to say only that ‘they’ or the ‘people’ are doing things or planning things, without being able to specify who the ‘people’ are and exactly what the plan is.”

He has “taken the tip” and fled from the situation, just as the patient did in the case cited. “But the paranoid person is already caught in the web of his own projections.” Hence we have the name “Webber” for Stanley.

There is evidence that the onset of a psychotic state can be related to the “anniversary” of a previous trauma. It is this fact which has suggested the title of the play. But like the onset of psychosis, which comes as a “surprise” to the victim, this “birthday” as “anniversary” comes earlier than expected. Meg says Stanley has “been here about a year now,” (p. 31) and Stanley says his birthday is “not till next month” (p. 41). This “anniversary” as mental breakdown will now be an ironic inversion of Goldberg’s eulogy: “What a thing to celebrate—birth! Like getting up in the morning. Marvellous!” (p. 45). Stanley’s birth will be an entrapment in a darkness symptomatic of the psychotic mind.

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11 Ibid., p. 518.
12 Ibid., p. 516.
13 Ibid., p. 518.
14 Ibid.
Meg then attempts to comfort Stanley after he tells what "they" did to him. This is a threat because it represents the infantile defense mechanisms which are the basis of his relationship with Meg, and which are now breaking down. He undertakes another defense, a particularly aggressive one. He tells Meg that "they" are coming for her with a wheelbarrow brought in a van. She recoils in horror from the "recognition" that this could be so. What Stanley has done is make use of the paranoid's "selective hyper-sensitivity to unconscious processes in others." Noting signs of paranoia, he speaks directly to these unconscious processes in a vicious way as a defense. His "selective hypersensitivity" has noted, for example, that she has "recognized" the erotic aspect of the word "succulent" from its sound rather than its meaning and then applied it to herself, coyly chiding Stanley for "calling me that," when indeed he had not done so. This is clear evidence of the "ideas of reference" that are fundamental in the formation of paranoid states. He has intuited that she will recognize and respond to the image, the men from the van with a wheelbarrow, a projection of his own "fear-full" state, much as it will be realized in the play.

Stanley's paranoid breakdown is precipitated, of course, by the gift of a boy's drum. This refers to his childish defense mechanism. The giving is also clearly a gesture which could be "recognized" by the paranoid as a veiled insult, a more or less secret "understanding" of his lack of musical ability. The very incongruity of the gesture suggests the "strangeness" and the "puzzle" which appears with the onset of psychosis.

This onset is represented from the beginning of Act Two, which opens with the scene in which Stanley comes upon McCann tearing a sheet of newspaper into five equal strips (pp. 37-42). Obviously, this action has some "special meaning" for McCann, and is evidence of a ritualistic compulsion. It is used to show how a person (Stanley) at the onset of psychosis begins to notice strangeness in "the little things that people say or do." He begins to feel "sure that something is wrong; something is going on that eludes him," and he begins to suspect some "hidden significance," which the strips of paper here surely suggest. Thus the victim at this stage of the psychotic process is "vigilant and uneasy." He "searches for hidden meanings ['sharply. Why do you call me sir?'], asks leading questions ['Ever been anywhere near Maidenhead?'], pondering over the answers like a detective ['quickly. Why are you down here?'], and listens attentively for clues in others' conversations to help him understand."16

To find out if McCann knows about his previous psychotic episode, Stanley begins to allude to it. "I mean, you wouldn't think, to look at me, really . . . I mean, not really, that I was the sort of bloke to—to cause any trouble, would you? (McCann-looks at him.) Do you know what I mean?" McCann replies. "No" (p. 40). What Stanley is talking about is as incomprehensible, as "closed" a system to McCann, as the tearing of the paper was to Stanley. But Stanley is also asking for help. "Nearly all paranoid patients try more than once to communicate their misgivings to another person, to get help in understanding what is going on or in defending against it."17

15 Ibid., p. 517.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., p. 518.
He tries again a little later:

STANLEY: Listen. You knew what I was talking about before, didn’t you?

MCCANN: I don’t know what you’re at all.

STANLEY: It’s a mistake! Do you understand!

MCCANN: You’re in a bad state, man.

[p. 42]

As Arieti observes about his case study, “his attitudes and interpretations are not and cannot be shared by the other individuals within the social field, since these others do not and cannot share his delusional reconstruction.”

Stanley employs another characteristic defense mechanism in this scene, one in which “there are occasional outbursts of hostility or accusation, which make others avoid too close contact and serve to isolate the patient.” He insults McCann twice (“I’d say that was plain stupid” [p. 38], and “. . . you don’t know what you’re doing” [p. 41]), twice incurs a warning by picking up a strip of McCann’s torn paper, and finally drives McCann to retaliate (“savagely, hitting his arm”) by refusing to relinquish his grip on McCann’s arm (p. 42). Insofar as the mechanism provokes retaliation rather than the desired isolation, it leads directly to that technique by which the paranoid makes others the aggressors, conveyors of his own “victimization.”

By the time we arrive at the famous interrogation scene (pp. 47–53), Goldberg and McCann have completely taken on the characteristics of the delusory or hallucinatory paranoid pseudo community. “What has been denied and projected seems now to return in external reality as an organized plot to ridicule, defame, or attack the patient, to subdue and exploit him, or perhaps to torture and kill him.”

(“Stick a needle in his eye.” “We can sterilize you.”) They allow reflection no freedom. They command (“Answer.” “Get in that seat.”), make him look ridiculous (“Why do you pick your nose?”), do things to test his intelligence (“Is the number 846 necessary or possible?”), and confuse him (“Why did the chicken cross the road? . . . which came first?”). They mock (“He doesn’t know!”), deride (“You’re a washout.”), express contempt for him (“You verminate the sheet of your birth.”), and criticize (“We’re right and you’re wrong, Webber, all along the line.”). They attack the realm of the moral (“You betrayed our land.”), and of the aesthetic (“When did you last take a bath?”). They curse (“Mother defiler!”), accuse (“Why did you kill your wife?”), comment on the patient’s actions (“He’s sweating!”), bring him to judgement (“You’ll pay for this!” “I demand justice!”), and present the dictum (“You stink of sin.” “You’re a plague.”).

These voices of the paranoid pseudo community emanate from the “bad conscience” of the victim. They may have some basis in fact (“Why are you driving that old lady

18 Ibid., p. 520.
19 Ibid., p. 519.
20 Ibid.
21 Cf. Arieti, p. 518; Binswanger, p. 167; Jaspers, p. 73.
off her conk?" or they may totally lack any such basis ("Why do you force that old man out to play chess?"). In the latter case, Petey is clearly doing precisely what he wants to do, so we must assume that Stanley incorrectly believes that Petey has somehow been driven out. Many of the other "accusations" seem even less credible. This clearly poses problems for interpretation. One might list whom and what Stanley has "betrayed" or "defiled," from his "wife" and "mother" to "the organization," to "our land" and "our breed." What we have is a structure which represents a fundamental ontological insecurity. Reference to "the organization" here is not to "the Establishment" or any other socio-political reality, as so many critics suggest, but to the paranoid pseudo community. This community is "extended" by Goldberg's multiple first names, by the reference to "Monty," and by the presence during the night of another character, Dermot, who does not appear, though this may only be McCann's first name.

To examine the mechanism of projection further, let us consider how the "odor" emanating from Stanley represents the projection of ontological guilt. First, it could be an actual but comparatively insignificant aspect of Stanley's self neglect. Lulu suggests that he could "do with" some rain and asks "Why don't you have a wash?" (pp. 25, 26). Goldberg has a speech about the odor of some people who don't like getting up in the morning, a general statement about a category of persons. But it also may be interpreted as an allusion to Stanley: "The palms of your hands are full of sweat, your nose is clogged up, your feet stink . . ." (p. 45). The ambiguity between the general and the personal shows how the paranoid can experience delusory ideas of reference, taking the comments of others personally when such may not actually be the case. The "odor" is defined further in the "inquisition" scene: "You're playing a dirty game," "When did you last have a bath?" "You stink of sin." "I can smell it." "You're a plague, Webber. 'You're an overthrow.' "You're dead. You're a plague gone bad. . . . You're nothing but an odour!" The effect of the odor as plague is to "contaminate womankind" and "verminate the sheet of [his] birth."

This symptomology is directly comparable with that of a case of involutional melancholia. "With increasing depression . . . there is a sense of unworthiness, of uncleanness and of wickedness. . . . He is dirty, filthy and he smells bad. . . . He has been false to god."22 Stanley, however, does not recognize the odor as emanating from his own body. His name is "Joe soap." He projects the realization onto others and onto the environment. Meg says, "I have a very nice house and I keep it clean" (p. 16), but to Stanley it is a "pigtsty" (p. 19.) His room is supposedly filthy, needing sweeping and new wallpaper, so much so that he demands a "new room" (p. 19). And to Stanley, in a sense that suggests olfactory hallucination, it is Goldberg and McCann who emit the odor. "To me, you're nothing but a dirty joke. But I have a responsibility towards the people of this house. . . . They've lost their sense of smell. I haven't" (p. 45). We can now say, unkindly perhaps but with metaphorical precision, that it is Stanley not the room that needs "disinfecting," and that the "dirty joke" is paranoia.

It is superficial and incorrect to refer to Goldberg and McCann as "intruders" into the boarding house. Obviously, they "intrude" only upon Stanley, upon his space, not upon that of the others. In phenomenological terms they intrude upon his con-

22 Arieti, p. 542.
dition of Being-In-The-World. This concept defines consciousness as "already outside," coessential with perceived reality, rather than separated from it in a subject-object relationship. Consciousness occupies and qualifies space. This is the meaning of the metaphor of the room as it is used by Pinter. Stanley will get his "new room," but it will be far darker and more confining that that which he has occupied. His "space" is already confining, limited only to the house which has no "outside," for there is "nowhere to go" with Lulu.

Mental space must also be open to the future. The breakdown will take place, as in a case studied by Minkowski, due to an essential element, "the fact that the future was blocked by the certainty of a terrifying and destructive event."23 This factor of an open future is stressed by Goldberg and McCann at the end of the play when they "interrogate" the now catatonic Stanley about his "opinion of the prospect," using the word "prospect" six times. A "prospect," of course, is not only a view or scene but a mental looking forward. But Stanley's glasses are now broken. He "can't see straight" and is "even more cockeyed" than he has been "for years" (pp. 81–82).

Spatial limitation is identified throughout with Stanley’s "blindness," his inability to see reality. The phenomenology of the psychotic state is symbolized in triplicate by the breaking of his glasses, his being blindfolded, and by the blackout during the party. These are metaphors of insanity as "entrapment" in what phenomenology terms "dark space," the psychotic state in which "there is no more 'life amplitude'; vital space is narrowed, space is desocialized, it surrounds the individual and even penetrates his body."24

At the party, Stanley is made the center of attention. This reflects the paranoia in which one "finds that everything seems somehow related to him, although he cannot understand what is happening."25 He is "on the spot" as an object of attention for the paranoid pseudo community. The flashlights beamed at his face present an image of that extreme state of psychotic optical hallucination in which "the direction of seeing is inverted, the patients are blinded, light beams are directed against them."26

In the sudden "blackout," Stanley "runs amok," attempting to strangle Meg and molest Lulu. "Amok" has been described by its victims as "a feeling of blackening of eyesight from which they tried to slash their way out."27 Here it seems certain, however, that Stanley has identified the women as members of the paranoid pseudo community. "Instead of fleeing, some patients feel driven to attack, to catch the enemy unawares and take revenge for what they have already suffered, and to foretell what they fear."28 In this sudden assault in the darkness, "the patient has found another means of discharging his extreme hostility, without having to recognize it, and with the conviction that the attack is justified."29

23 Minkowski, p. 133.
25 Arieti, p. 517.
26 May, p. 168.
27 Arieti, p. 557.
28 Ibid., p. 520.
29 Ibid.
Three critics place “nervous breakdown” in quotation marks in referring to Stanley’s condition at the end of the play, thus suggesting their disbelief that this is “really” the case. We are all familiar with the ways in which Pinter’s ambiguities can mislead one; they are as seductive to misinterpretation as is information perceived at the onset of psychosis. But Stanley’s catatonia at the end of the play represents the acute phase of the condition he has brought on himself: the eyeglasses broken, the loss of the objective world complete, the “unfreedom” of psychosis in the stupor in which one is the captive and plaything of the “alien powers” generated by one’s own mind. The Birthday Party enacts with precision a textbook case of mental breakdown. With the tools of phenomenological and existential psychology at our disposal, we are in the best position to comprehend Pinter’s play.

Carousel, a Gest Pantomime Workshop mimodrama, Wroclaw, Poland.
See Theatre in Review, p. 265.