

**“THE HEARTACHES AND THE THOUSAND NATURAL SHOCKS  
THAT FLESH IS HEIR TO”:  
THE BODY POLITICS OF TRAUMA IN PINTER’S *THE DWARFS*,  
*THE ROOM*, *A SLIGHT ACHE*, AND *THE HOMECOMING*.**

by

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## ABSTRACT

Critics are too often inclined to overlook the important role that Pinter's only novel, *The Dwarfs*, plays in the Pinter canon. My thesis is an attempt to correct this oversight. In this thesis I will argue that *The Dwarfs* is a required foundation for a fuller and more complete understanding of one of Pinter's major thematic preoccupations in his early drama: male trauma and the culturally inspired and mediated program of masculine self-denial and forgetfulness that serves as a strategy for dealing with it. Simply stated, male trauma in *The Dwarfs*, *The Room*, *A Slight Ache*, and *The Homecoming* takes the form of death anxiety. In this context, the site of the male wound is the human body on which Pinter males read the signs of human weakness, human limitation, and human mortality writ large. By undertaking a close reading of the cause, the effect, and the consequence of Len and Pete's crisis in *The Dwarfs*, I will argue that the Pinter males' heightened state of vigilance and arousal in this novel and in the three plays in question is the result of their need to defend against the return of traumatic memories. It is in this context that I intend to speak of the post-traumatic manner in which Pinter males conduct their lives. In this respect, Len and Pete, I will argue, are prototypes for the males we encounter in the plays. Moreover, to the extent that Pete's relationship with Virginia in the novel is regulated in accordance with his distorted post-traumatic view of the human body, his and hers, I intend to argue that their relationship is the prototype for the one that men share with women in the plays.

In the introduction I provide a background to trauma theory and existential psychology. I also briefly examine Pinter's Kullus trilogy, *Kullus*, "The Task," and *The Examination*, by way of providing a bridge for my later application of trauma theory and existential psychology to *The Dwarfs*. In the first chapter I examine the nature of Len's trauma and discuss his masculine strategy for dealing with it. In the second chapter I examine the nature of Pete's trauma, its effect, and the implications it has for understanding his relationship with Virginia. I also explore the link between Pete and Virginia and *The Room*'s Rose and Bert, and Clarissa and Toddy. In the third chapter I

analyze Edward's masculine crisis in *A Slight Ache*, and the role that Flora plays in helping her husband to deal with it. Finally, in the fourth chapter I examine masculinity under siege in *The Homecoming*.

For my dearest soulmate,  
"Mistress Ploppy"

**I have completed the construction of my burrow and it seems to be successful.**

**Franz Kafka, *The Burrow*.**

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## INTRODUCTION

In its general definition, trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, or other repetitive phenomena. Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness. The repetitions of the traumatic event- which remain unavailable to consciousness but intrude repeatedly on sight- thus suggest a larger relation to the event that extends beyond what can simply be seen or what can be known, and is inextricably tied up with the belatedness and incomprehensibility that remain at the heart of this repetitive seeing.

- Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*

Psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming forces ... Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they rarely occur, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary adaptations to life.

- Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*

In his essay "Between Fluidity and Fixity: Harold Pinter's Novel *The Dwarfs*," Francis Gillen, commenting on the centrality in Pinter's work of the themes developed in *The Dwarfs*, concludes that,

Though in technique and scope Pinter's plays go far beyond the suggestions of them in the novel, it is nevertheless enlightening to observe the continuity of the motifs found there. Many of the characters who people Pinter's works are either lost in experience, preserving no distance from what they smell, or so distant that they have lost human contact in their effort to stop the flux of sensation which Len is

constantly experiencing. Absolute distance is name and number, the disassociation from “this cycle of love and despair” (*The Dwarfs* 179). On the personal level there is comfort in abstraction, on the social an assurance that goes with being part of an organization or a group. Moving from such abstraction is difficult because the character who does so never knows when there will be some rest from all the fluidity of unverifiable perceptions. Such lack of distance, this inability to abstract from experience, results in a loss of control, in being swept along by what is constantly changing. (56)

Gillen’s comments provide a suitable context for my thesis for two reasons. First, Gillen is one of the few critics to recognize the importance of *The Dwarfs*, Pinter’s first and only novel, as a template, of sorts, for Pinter’s early theatre. I believe that one of the best ways to enrich and advance our understanding of Pinter’s drama is to return to consider his plays within the context of his early prose. My intention, then, is to use his novel, *The Dwarfs*, as a lens through which to revisit and reinterpret his early plays: *The Room*, *A Slight Ache*, and *The Homecoming*.

Second, Gillen’s observation that there is a tension operating in the lives of Pinter’s males between experience (immersion) and abstraction is most astute, and provides me with a foundation upon which to build my own interpretation of the dialectical forces at work within Pinter’s early prose and his early dramas. While Gillen tries to define this tension in terms of the imposition of abstract patterns on experience, I am more inclined to understand it in terms of the tendency of Pinter males to seek refuge from trauma through the medium of a culturally defined code of masculinity. According to Judith Herman,

Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim’s faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis ... Traumatic events destroy the individual’s fundamental assumptions about the safety of the world, the positive value of the self, and the meaningful order of creation. (51)

Trauma and its effects can best be summarized in terms of events, physical and/or psychological wounds, and recurrent symptoms. In the words of Kirby Farrell,

Clinically, trauma is an acute injury. The term comes from the Greek word for a wound, and the analogy to a physical wound has influenced thinking about psychological trauma. Clinical definitions posit overwhelmed psychic defenses and a destabilized nervous system ... Traumatic stress overwhelms the body's autonomic fight-or-flight response. Theories usually construe the result as a shock or freeze that leaves the stress unassimilated and induces changes in the central nervous system. In effect, the short circuit imprints the triggering event, leaving the victim in a state of neurological hyperarousal and vulnerable to distress that might emerge long after the crisis is past. This is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). (6)

Finally, in their book *The Trauma Response*, Diana and Louis Everstine suggest that,

By looking away from the pathological aspects of a symptom or set of symptoms, we can see that trauma is by no means a "disorder" in the way that the term is used to refer to the breakdown of the personality. By contrast, the *symptom* can be viewed as an element of a response pattern whose purpose is not to prolong or exaggerate or destroy, but rather to heal. Instead of seeing the person's reaction to a traumatic event as abnormality revealing itself, one can consider it an outward sign that a homeostatic process has begun. The process is intended to restore equilibrium to the person's emotional life ... In [this] context ... we can see a trauma symptom like hypervigilance as a process by which the mind reminds itself to avoid any new, potentially traumatic event. (11-12)

Overwhelmed by trauma, hypervigilant Pinter males patrol the perimeters of their post-traumatic worlds in an attempt to heal their wounds. In this context, then, Pinter males suffer from dissociation, a classic defense against trauma. According to Laurie Vickroy, dissociation is one "means of living with painful events, [that] can lead to a provisional identity rather than a fully feeling and functional one." (202). Dissociation in Pinterland promotes detachment, and culminates in the splitting of mind and body (emotions) and the objectification of others. The source of male trauma, and dissociation as a defense against it, in Pinter's work is death anxiety. In *Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker, following the lead of Norman O. Brown's reinterpretation of basic Freudian psychoanalytical ideas,

provides a meaningful framework within which to understand the traumatic dimensions of death anxiety. In what follows I will briefly consider Becker's revised version of the meaning of anality and the Oedipus complex as a way of providing a background for my thesis that the site of the male wound in Pinter's work is the male body.

According to Becker, human beings suffer from what he calls "the condition of individuality within finitude" (26). Becker refers here to the existential paradox that human beings are simultaneously, to borrow from Hamlet, the paragon of animals and the quintessence of dust (*Hamlet* II scene 2 lines 307-8). In Becker's opinion, "the problem of anality is that it reflects the dualism of man's condition - his self and his body. Anality and its problems arise in childhood because it is then that the child already makes the alarming discovery that his body is strange and fallible and has a definite ascendancy over him by its demands" (30). Becker goes on to say that,

At first the child is amused by his anus and feces, and gaily inserts his finger into the orifice, smelling it, smearing feces on the walls, playing games of touching objects with his anus ... This is a universal form of play that does the serious work of all play: it reflects the discovery and the exercise of natural bodily functions; it masters an area of strangeness; it establishes power over the deterministic laws of the natural world; and it does all this with symbols and fancy. With anal play the child is already becoming a philosopher of the human condition. But like all philosophers he is still bound by it, and his main task in life becomes the denial of what the anus represents: the fact that he is nothing *but* body as far as nature is concerned. Nature's values are bodily values, human values are mental values, and though they take the loftiest flights they are built upon excrement, impossible without it, always brought back to it ... The anus and its incomprehensible, repulsive product represents not only physical determinism and boundedness, but the fate as well of all that is physical: decay and death. (31)

In Becker's opinion, "what psychoanalysts have termed "anality" or anal character traits are really forms of the universal protest against accident and death" (31-2). Thus, "To say that someone is anal means that someone is trying extra-hard to protect himself against the accidents of life and danger of death, trying to use the symbols of culture as a sure means to triumph over natural mystery, trying to pass himself off as anything but animal"

(32). It is in light of this conclusion that Becker, borrowing from Norman O. Brown, suggests that,

the Oedipus complex is not the narrowly sexual problem of lust and competitiveness that Freud made out in his early work. Rather, the Oedipus complex is the Oedipal *project*, a project that sums up the basic problem of the child's life: whether he will be a passive object of fate, an appendage of others, a plaything of the world or whether he will be an active center within himself - whether he will control his own destiny with his own powers or not. (35-5)

As Brown puts it:

The Oedipal project is not, as Freud's early formulations suggest, a natural love of the mother, but as his later writings recognize, a product of the conflict of ambivalence and an attempt to overcome that conflict by narcissistic inflation. The essence of the Oedipal complex is the project of becoming God - in Spinoza's formula, *causa sui* ... By the same token, it plainly exhibits infantile narcissism perverted by the flight from death.... (28)

Caught in the jaws of their traumatic awareness of death as the final arbiter of life, Pinter males seek to numb and forget the emotional shock of their own mortality through the adoption of a masculine persona and by strictly following a socially/culturally sanctified and sanctioned code of masculine responses and behaviors. Threatened by loss, paralyzed by fear, Pinter males stage a meticulously choreographed, well-rehearsed, and hypervigilant retreat from others and from the world in their bid to become men. Fueled as they are by fear and by feelings of deep loss and betrayal, male characters withdraw into a room - a highly complex symbolic expression of their need to wall up the memory of their wound in order to regain purpose and meaning in their lives. Possessing and defending a room signals the end of a male character's emotional investment in and engagement with others. Intimacy with others is now perceived in terms of personal weakness and vulnerability. Mind is separated from body. Indeed, the soft and yielding pliability of the flesh is associated metaphorically with the threat of re-experiencing the initial traumatic moment. Thus, emotional dis-ease is coded and communicated by the character as physical disease. Moreover, the spatial and the temporal dimensions of his experience become something of a private obsession. In their post-traumatic world,

Pinter's male characters express their personal rage for emotional order and control in terms of a need for ritualized living. The illusion of permanence and continuity, and the sense of life as rationally ordered and predictable that it grants, are preserved in time through clocks, bus schedules, teas and breakfasts, and in space through the functional and symbolic use of walls, rooms, houses and gardens. Masculine life, then, becomes a distantly rational and mechanical process. Everything, and everyone, is fixed, defined, differentiated (gendered, for example), and carved into binaries: subject/object, here/there, then/now, clean/dirty, healthy/well, mind/body.

In this thesis I intend to argue that when we enter the world of Pinter's plays we enter a post-traumatic masculine world. More precisely, we enter the lives of male characters at the moment when the hard-won security of their cultural defense system is giving way under a siege of traces and echoes of the people they were before they donned their masculine disguises. This I take to be the cause of the so-called menace in Pinter's drama: the sudden and painful re-opening of old feelings of weakness and vulnerability in the face of existential truths about the human condition. These feelings threaten the stability and permanence provided by the architectonics of the re-worked masculine self. This threat/menace is typically manifested in the form of other people whose unexpected arrival, or anticipated homecoming, triggers in a male character a powerful and traumatic memory of the paradoxical nature of the human condition. Thus, in *The Room*, Bert's masculine posture is severely compromised by the emergence of Riley from the basement; in *A Slight Ache*, Edward's masculine mask begins to slip, and then to fall off completely, in the presence of Barnabas (the Matchseller); finally, in *The Homecoming*, the sudden arrival of Teddy and Ruth from America sets in motion the possibility of bringing to an end the post-traumatic masculine posturing that Max and Lenny and Sam have adopted in order to deal with, and heal, their psychic wounds.

It is my contention that this interpretation of *The Room*, *A Slight Ache*, and *The Homecoming* is fully supported, indeed, made possible, by the presence of a similar theme in Pinter's earlier works, namely, in *Kullus*, "The Task," *The Examination*, and, most notably *The Dwarfs*, his first and only novel. While I will undertake a brief study of the Kullus trilogy in this introduction, my primary goal is to undertake a close reading of

*The Dwarfs* in conjunction with a close reading of Pinter's early drama. In the opinion of Pinter biographer, Peter Billington,

The novel is as close to actual characters and events as Pinter has ever written. Its setting is primarily Hackney with frequent references to Clapton Pond, the Swan Café, the railway bridge, the bus routes, even the lilac arch that was a feature of the Pinter garden. And the four characters who dominate the story all have their prototypes in real life. Mark Gilbert, a slightly cocky young actor allegedly of Portuguese descent and just back from a stint in Huddersfield Rep (where Pinter played in November 1954) is a by no means uncritical portrait. Peter Cox, arrogantly intelligent and now working for a firm in the City, is closely based on Ron Percival, the most demonic member of the Hackney gang and someone, in Henry Wolf's phrase, who "had a pride which made Lucifer look modest and shabby." Len Weinstein, working as a porter at Euston Station and haunted in his imagination by hallucinatory dwarfs whom he finally banishes, is a variant on the music-loving Michael Goldstein. The three young men - close friends who debate art, religion, and philosophy while veering from room to room - are all making a bumpy entry into the world of adult experience. (58)

With respect to the novel, which I analyze in the first and the second chapter, I wish to demonstrate that Pete and Len are traumatized by death anxiety and to show how they attempt to forge masculine identities in response to their crisis as part of their post-traumatic survival strategy. In this connection, I will argue that Len and Pete are prototypical Pinter males. What we witness in *The Dwarfs* is the traumatized male's attempt to repress his experience with the help of a culturally inspired escape into manhood. In the opinion of Norman O. Brown,

The later Freud ... in his doctrine of anxiety is moving toward the position that man is the animal which represses himself and which creates culture or society in order to repress himself.... For if society imposes repression, and repression causes the universal neurosis of mankind, it follows that there is an intrinsic connection between social organization and neurosis. Man the social animal is by the same token the neurotic animal. Or, as Freud puts it, man's superiority over the other animals is his capacity for neurosis, and his capacity for neurosis is merely the obverse of his capacity for cultural development." (9-10)

In addition, I will examine Pete's relationship with Virginia and put forward the thesis that it is a prototype for male and female interactions in the three plays under review in subsequent chapters. I believe that the sexual politics between men and women in Pinter's work has often been misunderstood and therefore misrepresented by Pinter critics. Critics like Elizabeth Sakellaridou, for example, are inclined to see Pinter's female characters, especially in his early work, as disenfranchised and powerless, banished from the inner sanctum of masculine authority and control. I believe, on the contrary, that Pinter's female characters are highly empowered, and that their power is centered in the degree to which, unlike male characters, they are at ease in their bodies living amongst the physical facts of life. In other words, Pinter's women do not suffer from the same type of crisis/trauma that Pinter's males seem to. Male fear of women, then, stems from the sheer physicality of women. Therefore the labels and the stereotypes that traumatized Pinter males are quickly prone to attach to women are the result of a masculine system of pollution and taboo that strives to contain and control a woman's interest in and celebration of her own body. In this context, Pinter males are often engaged in the course of their post-traumatic lives with the task of refashioning women in accordance with their masculine needs and masculine self-image.

What seems to happen, more often than not, however, is that Pinter women either do not submit to the thought of their own re-packaging, or, if they initially do, undergo a process by which they eventually manage to return to themselves. In this connection, while Virginia initially gives in to Pete's demands in *The Dwarfs* that she engage in a process of self-alienation along with him, she eventually refuses to do so. Similarly, Rose, Flora, and Ruth each manage to gain release from their masculine prisons by re-immersing themselves in a sensual and sexual embrace with life. It should also be noted that in the case of *The Homecoming*'s Joey and *A Slight Ache*'s Edward, their potential escape from behind the walls of their masculine prisons is aided and abetted by two women, Ruth and Flora. An important part of this thesis will be concerned with exploring the dialectic that exists between men and women in Pinter's early work.

Sandor Ferenczi has made the observation that, "Character is from the point of view of the psychoanalyst a sort of abnormality, a kind of mechanization of a particular way of reaction, rather similar to an obsessional symptom" (quoted in Becker 66). To the



extent that masculine character in Pinterland is an attempt to flee from and conceal some home truths about the human condition, the Pinter male's pursuit of a masculine identity can be read as "an obsessional symptom" of male trauma. Thus, in his work Pinter questions the health of masculine culture by exposing the psychological disorder that underlines and underlies masculine performance. Pinter's study of masculine culture begins with the *Kullus* trilogy. Due to the constraint of space, I do not intend to discuss the *Kullus* trilogy in the body of my thesis. I would, however, like to take the time in this introduction to consider how the two prose pieces, *Kullus* and *The Examination*, and the poem, "The Task," serve to provide a fuller understanding of *The Dwarfs* as: (a) an important evolution in Pinter's thinking on the subject of male trauma; and (b) as a highly significant transitional work that enables us to bridge the gap between his early fiction/poetry and his later drama.

The mysteriously enigmatic figure of Kullus haunts Pinter's imagination between 1949-1955. Kullus appears first in 1949 in the dialogue-piece named after him, and then continues to be featured prominently in two subsequent works, in the poem "The Task" (1954), and in the Kafkaesque short story *The Examination* (1955). Despite the obvious presence of Kullus in each piece, and despite the fact that stylistically and thematically they seem to be connected to Pinter's novel, *The Dwarfs*, these shorter works have been neglected and are therefore poorly integrated into the Pinter canon. One gets the sense, in fact, that while critics feel impelled to recognize and say something about them, they are uncomfortable with them, perhaps even not quite sure what to make of them. The usual way Pinter critics deal with these works is to avoid a close reading of them by simply pointing out that Pinter's use of the room in them is an important motif in his drama, or emphasizing that the contest for control over space evidenced in them is an archetypal Pinter situation. A typical case in point is Peter Billington's consideration of them in *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter*. Billington begins his discussion by drawing our attention to the fact that the "obsessive, mysterious figure of Kullus" (56) is the common denominator in these works, and then quickly makes *The Examination* the central focus of his attention. In Billington's view, the theme of *The Examination* - the archetypal struggle for dominance and subservience - invests the text with "extraordinary political resonance" and provides "an invisible thread linking Kullus' mutinous taciturnity with

the subversive silence with which the prisoners in both *One For the Road* and *Mountain Language* challenge and even unnerve their interrogators” (57).

Billington’s assessment, however, is, I feel, not only an overstatement of the obvious but it also completely misses the subtleties of the narrator’s situation and strategy in *The Examination*, subtleties that are only decipherable when we take the time to explore its relationship with the two other works that precede it. To consider *The Examination* in isolation from *Kullus* and “The Task” is to misrepresent it by taking it out of its thematic context. It is to overlook the fact that the major source of conflict in *Kullus* stems from Kullus’ involvement with a woman, a development that threatens the dynamic of the male friendship between Kullus and the narrator - Virginia poses the same threat to Len, Pete, and Mark in *The Dwarfs*. It is also to miss the fact that “The Task” is a chronicle of Kullus and the narrator’s subsequent history together in the wake of this crisis, and to overlook how *The Examination* provides a close-up view of the narrator’s strategy - his attempt to wear a masculine mask and to perfect a masculine performance in the presence of Kullus - for dealing with it.

Adolescence is a time for situations of all kinds to menace boys who are on the verge of adulthood. With sexual orientation and personal identity still in the early stages of their formation, young men closely bonded together seemingly forever in tightly knit, insular all-male communities are ripe for emotional trauma. This is what Pinter knows, and this is what he explores in the *Kullus* series. This series chronicles the steady deterioration of a close friendship between two young men when one of them, Kullus, begins a relationship with a girl and subsequently attempts to enable his close friend, the narrator, to understand and to accept the fundamental change that has taken place in their relationship because of this. The *Kullus* trilogy, then, is told from the point of view of a first-person narrator whose womb-like world is turned upside down by the sudden and unexpected intrusion of an outsider - in this instance, a girl.

Prior to this time the narrator of the *Kullus* trilogy had developed a comfortable certainty about both himself and his world within the matrix of his friendship with Kullus. They shared a history of mutual compatibility with each other. Together they formed an all-male team with a unique outlook and style; together they shared and celebrated a way of being in and responding to the world. From the narrator’s

perspective, at least, their friendship has been, up until this time, the fixed point in a constantly turning adolescent universe. Now, suddenly and shockingly, the narrator finds himself, at least from his perspective, anyway, set adrift from his friend and cast upon the shore of a land of emotional (and intellectual) confusion where he feels a mixture of anger, loss, and fear. Thus, and this point is absolutely crucial to an understanding of male and female interactions in *The Dwarfs*, *The Room*, *A Slight Ache*, and *The Homecoming*, underneath the narrator's surface reaction to the girl's intrusion into his life lies his reaction to a much deeper epistemological-existential crisis that her presence has served to set off. Kullus' betrayal awakens in him a frightening metaphysical realization: that nothing is forever, everything is relative and arbitrary; that order and meaning are human constructs and therefore contingent; that the body - in this instance, a woman's body, summed up in the narrator's depiction of Kullus and the girl leaping into his bed to make love in front of him - is figuratively and literally the gateway to the grave; and that everything, and everyone, himself included, is subject to these fundamental facts of life. Menaced now by feelings of uncertainty and helplessness, weakness and vulnerability, death-haunted, the narrator shakily prescribes, like so many other Pinter males after him, a masculine cure for his psychic crisis: dissociation.

The three works in this series take the reader through the various stages of the narrator's traumatic and post-traumatic experience. *Kullus*, the first work in the series, is vintage Pinter. The reader arrives in the middle of an unidentified crisis and is denied the security of expositional mediation. Moreover, the male characters speak in a rather cryptic manner in a language that is invested with subjective references unique to them and the relationship they share with each other. Their speech is clipped and oblique. Although they speak of ordinary objects - chairs, windows, doors, grates - these objects are infused with highly personal meanings. The mood is symbolic, dreamlike. In this work, Pinter explores the source of the narrator's trauma, a crisis in his friendship with Kullus, and the role played by a female in this crisis. Stylistically speaking, Pinter strives to capture the alteration in the narrator's consciousness in response to his trauma. For the narrator the familiar is suddenly and irrevocably rendered in his consciousness as alien and unreal. In this respect, according to Judith Herman,

When a person is completely powerless, and any form of resistance is futile, [he] may go into a state of surrender. The system of self-defense shuts down completely. The helpless person escapes from [his] situation not by action in the real world but rather by altering [his] state of consciousness ... Perceptions may be numbed or distorted, with partial anesthesia or the loss of particular sensations. Time sense may be altered, often with a sense of slow motion, and the experience may lose its quality of ordinary reality. The person may feel as though the event is not happening to [him], as though [he] is observing from outside [his] body, or as though the experience is a bad dream from which [he] will shortly awaken. These perceptual changes combine with a feeling of indifference, emotional detachment, and profound passivity in which the person relinquishes all initiative and struggle.  
(42-3)

Herman's account is an apt description of the traumatized nature of the narrator of *Kullus*. It is also a good description of Len and Pete's mood in *The Dwarfs*. Moreover, it accurately describes the dreamlike mood of the lives of Pinter males in *The Room*, *A Slight Ache*, and *The Homecoming*.

In "The Task" and *The Examination*, Pinter goes on to explore the reaction of the narrator in response to the frightening disempowerment he has experienced due to his trauma. These works introduce the image, or symbol, of the room as an extension of the narrator's mind. Through this image he expresses his need to deal with the emotional fallout from his traumatic experience. His goal in taking a room is to withdraw from the pain of the wound he has suffered in order to get his emotional house in order. In this respect, the taking, or, in keeping with the imagery of "The Task," the "tailormaking" (26) of a room is linked in the narrator's mind with his ability to ice over his heart, to withdraw his emotional investment in *Kullus* and to disconnect himself from a world that can change so suddenly, unpredictably, and frighteningly. In other words, the room becomes, in his mind's eye, the outward expression of his inner need to reacquire psychic (and emotional) peace, security and safety, in the wake of his traumatic experience. According to Judith Herman, "After traumatic experience, the human system of self-preservation seems to go onto permanent alert, as if the danger might return at any moment" (35). Thus, the post-traumatic mood of both "The Task" and *The Examination* stems from the narrator's desperate attempt to regain some type of balance - balance that

will guarantee his ability to function again - in the face of an overwhelming shock. Existential fear has given way to physical and emotional panic and paralysis; initial panic and paralysis, in turn, have given way to the desperate need to search for a remedy; the remedy is provided by culture, which prescribes a heavy regimen of masculine repression that is symbolically represented in the image of possessing and occupying a room.

In *The Examination*, then, the narrator believes that he has successfully transformed himself into a masculine subject. Safely ensconced, he thinks, within the parameters of his room, he summons Kullus to appear before him. Of importance here is the narrator's attempt to control his level of emotional and physical engagement when confronted with his friend. This is demonstrated by his decision to adopt an official stance in the presence of Kullus by borrowing linguistic and procedural standards from the world of the law. Indeed, the narrator's decision to turn their encounter into an examination, with himself sitting in judgment and occupying a position of quasi-legal authority over Kullus, suggests the extent to which he has attempted to repair himself by turning what happened between them into a criminal matter. Therefore, his role as examiner is a posture, a masculine persona chosen from a gallery of cultural possibilities, through which he intends to keep himself detached from the proceedings that he has initiated.

The Kullus trilogy provides a ringside seat from which to witness and interpret what it is that ails Pinter's male characters: emotional trauma. It also provides insight into their strategy for dealing with it: a culturally mediated program of masculine escape and denial. In his novel *The Dwarfs*, Pinter continues with his exploration of the link between trauma and the formation of masculine identity in the crucible of male terror. We are afforded the opportunity to see clearly into the nature of trauma and to witness its effect on the lives of three young men. Moreover, it is through this novel that we are granted the most exclusive insight into the lives of male characters in *The Room*, *A Slight Ache*, and *The Homecoming*. They, too, know the heartaches and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to (*Hamlet* III scene I 62-3) and they also make their best attempt to renounce their inheritance. Safe within their rooms/tombs, they touch no one, in the hope that they will remain untouched themselves. The illusion of permanent security and certainty is their reward. And yet no matter how far they retreat, no matter how

garrisoned and well provisioned they make their fortifications, their emotional wounds - the source of their crisis and retreat from others and from the world - lie waiting for the chance to come home from the peripheral regions of their consciousness to which they have been exiled.

Trauma translates as wound, and the core experience of trauma is violence. How does a culture mourn its losses and its lost? Moreover, how does a culture built up upon the foundation of forgetfulness even remember its own wounding? How does a man brought up in this culture recall his own? One answer to these questions is that men and cultures do so through the courage of their artists, who bring that which has been forgotten and/or hidden out from the psychic basement where it has been banished out of fear. Pinter is one such artist. I believe that Pinter would agree with Pascal's assessment that 'Men are so necessarily mad that not to be mad would amount to another form of madness' (quoted in Becker 27). Ernest Becker goes on to provide the following brief commentary on Pascal's observation:

*Necessarily*, because the existential dualism makes an impossible situation, an excruciating dilemma. *Mad* because ... everything that man does is an attempt to deny and overcome his grotesque fate. He literally drives himself into a blind obliviousness with social games, psychological tricks, personal preoccupations so far removed from the reality of his situation that they are forms of madness - agreed madness, shared madness, disguised and dignified madness, but madness all the same. (27)

I believe that Pinter is well aware of this particular brand of madness and that his aim is to expose it in all of its sordidness and ugliness.

In his "A Note on Shakespeare," which he wrote at the age of nineteen, Pinter comments, "Shakespeare writes of the open wound and, through him, we know it open and we know it closed. We tell when it ceases to beat and tell it at its highest peak ... All [human postures] are contained in the wound which Shakespeare does not attempt to sew up or re-shape, whose pain he does not attempt to eradicate ... The fabric never breaks. The wound is open. The wound is peopled" (*Various Voices* 5-7). Pinter's conclusions about Shakespeare's work constitute a powerful commentary on his own. Like Shakespeare, Pinter makes no attempt "to sew up or reshape" or alleviate in any way the

pain of the existential wound of death that his male characters suffer from. Instead, he reveals what happens to the humanity of men who strive to sew it up with the aid of cultural assistance. The post-traumatic world of Pinter males has much in common with our own. The measure of discomfort I feel each time I enter it is the sum of my own competing reactions. On the one hand, suddenly immersed in it, I feel alienated by what I see and hear. Who are these men? Where do they come from? What does this mean? On the other hand, the longer I stay in it, and remain open to it, the more I begin to see in the hyper-masculine world of Pinter's males the tragic traces of the world in which I live: a world in which the physical and emotional range of male lives continues to be sacrificed on the altar of fear and denial in accordance with recipes for male membership in a masculine community. Pinter males inhabit a cultural world that I recognize and know. It is a cultural world that can only be described as post-traumatic: a world of men who are unable, or unwilling, to engage fully and completely in the process of their own healing; a world that strives to repress (and to suppress where and when necessary) any memory of its losses and any recall of its own crippled (and crippling) illusions. When we examine Pinter's work carefully we find that his males are victimized, and victimize others in turn, through a culturally fashioned and conditioned defenses against death anxiety that form the ground of their manly personality. In my view, masculinity is in crisis in Pinter's drama because its status as a social construct is exposed for what it is: a lie. The Pinter male is twice traumatized: the first time when he experiences trauma and runs to the anodyne of culture to escape from it - and from himself. In this way he turns from the hurt of his initial wound in order to numb it. As a consequence, he abandons himself and his experience and becomes a culturally sanctified man. This is the world of *The Dwarfs*. He is traumatized a second time when he is shocked to learn of his own status as a cultural artifact. He remembers the first trauma in the wake of the second one; he experiences, or re-experiences a terrifying (but freeing and cleansing) awareness of his existential lot; and he re-enters (if he accepts the challenge) his life and his body. This is the world of Pinter's plays.

## CHAPTER 1

If only I could close my eyes and live with the suggestions of life. I can't live comfortably when the world begins to bang ... I change. I don't die. I change again. I am not happy. I change. Nor unhappy. But when a big storm takes place I do not change. I become someone else, which means I change out of all recognition. I am transformed from the world in which I suffer the changes I suffer, I retreat utterly from the standpoint where I am subject to change, then with my iron mask on ... I wait for the storm to pass.

- Len, *The Dwarfs*

My starting point in this chapter is the assertion that Len's masculine enterprise in *The Dwarfs* is similar to the masculine projects of males in Pinter's early drama. In Pinter's portrait of Len we get to see what we rarely ever get to see directly in the plays: a prolonged look at the background and circumstances of the traumatized Pinter male, his desperation, and the codes and strategies by which he attempts to establish an abstract distance from life. Moreover, we also witness the role played by culture in the formulation of these post-traumatic strategies for trauma reduction. Len's pursuit of a grown up masculine disguise - his "iron mask" - is a post-traumatic symptom. It is a desperate reaching after character - a social identity summed up in the image of taking and holding on to a room, a masculine pose - at the expense of his more instinctual physical and emotional life. It is a trauma disorder that he shares with other Pinter males, as will be graphically illustrated in the dysfunctional lives of the males in the early plays. In his bid to reach the safe shore of post-traumatic recovery, Len strives to cultivate in his own life the same state of self-denial and self-forgetfulness that the male characters in Pinter's early plays find themselves struggling to hang on to. That they find themselves in the midst of such a struggle is due to the onset of traumatic memories stirred by the eternal return of the repressed. At the end of *The Dwarfs* we see Len temporarily land on that same shore of post-traumatic forgetfulness that the males in the plays are exiled to. Whereas Len's situation at the end of the novel announces the prospect of post-traumatic resolution and settlement - with its accompanying leap towards abstraction and physical and emotional detachment - the situations in which Pinter males find themselves at the beginning of *The Room*, *A Slight Ache*, and *The Homecoming* are due to their increasing



inability to keep a distance between themselves and others. In all three cases, the disintegration of their masculine worlds is heralded by the return of memories centered in the male body that push the males in these plays out of their post-traumatic seclusions. Therefore, I believe that it is by examining both the nature of Len's crisis and his way of dealing with it that we can come to a new understanding of what it is that ails Pinter's men in the plays. In this connection, I believe that prior to the plays Len is perhaps the most fully formed manifestation of Pinter's theme that the male wound, and the formation of masculine identity as a balm for it, is rooted in the body as the site of existential awakening and crisis.

Pinter is not one to give away secrets. He is often wily and elusive about his work. When he does comment, there is a need to take notice. When Pinter came to direct the stage version of his novel in 1960, he explained the function of the dwarfs to the actors: 'They have emerged out of Len's imagination as the truth about his relationship between himself, Pete and Mark. He sees a savage, predatory and disgusting world which is his truth ...' (quoted in Billington 61). In his biography of Pinter, Peter Billington, seizing on the playwright's comment, goes on to suggest: "...but what gives the novel its final glimmer of hope is that the burden of the dwarfs is lifted from Len: the severance of the friendship between Mark and Pete leaves him somehow cleansed, purified, stronger." Billington's positive assessment of the state of things at the end of the novel might seem at first glance to be quite reasonable. After all, the novel ends with Len's vision of the transformed garden. Whereas before he saw his yard - which he uses metaphorically as an index of the health of his relationship with others and with the world - as a "squealing" and "squelching" cesspool or compost heap, he now sees something completely different: "All is clean. All is scrubbed. There is a lawn. There is a shrub. There is a flower" (183). However, reasonableness aside, I believe that Billington's assessment of Len's situation at the end of the novel is contradicted by evidence in the text that suggests a much more negative interpretation of the price exacted for Len's relief. Far from being an escape into health and sanity, Len's new vision of the well-groomed garden actually represents the hope of a post-traumatic withdrawal from the site of his wound. Having barely survived the onslaught of Pete and Mark, and having done his best to discipline himself in a masculine fashion in their company, he must continue to work on his ability to physically

and emotionally disengage himself from life. Part of the problem with Billington's view is that he automatically equates the "truth" mentioned by Pinter in his two statements. Doing so raises the importance of the theme of friendship over every other theme in the novel. In this reading, then, Len sees the extent to which he has been betrayed by his friends, and feels great relief when he intuits the end of the friendship in the closing pages of the novel. Thus, according to this view, the novel's major thematic concern is betrayal in the world of friendship. Billington goes to great pains to establish an autobiographical context for this work, and perhaps this accounts for his view of it: that in it Pinter, perhaps, is working out some adolescent demons.

I believe, however, that Pinter is referring to two different truths: the truth about the world Len shares with his friends and the truth about the nature of the human condition that his friendship with Mark and Pete serves to reinforce. Thus, there is Len's truth of the existential lot of humans as helpless and vulnerable in a "savage, predatory and disgusting" universe - and then there is his truth of the sado-masochistic relationship that he shares with his friends that confirms the worst that he has intuited about the nature of the universe. In my reading, a reading I will show is borne out in the novel, Len's relationship with his friends is only important to the degree that it serves repeatedly to reinforce for him the absurdity of human effort and enterprise in the face of the dwarfish appetites of life. Such a reading, I believe, does more justice to the philosophical integrity and psychological depth of *The Dwarfs* by serving to establish a seminal thematic link between it and the plays that follow it.

In what follows, I will attempt to accomplish a number of tasks. First, I will redefine connotatively the nature and the meaning of betrayal as it applies to Len's predicament in the novel. In keeping with this task, I intend to establish and substantiate my assertion that Len's predicament, his crisis, is epistemological; that is, his masculine project is in response to his traumatic awakening to what Becker calls the paradox of the human condition. His project is designed to counteract the paralysis that he has felt - what he seriocomically refers to as "the nothing" (33) - in the wake of his metaphysical understanding of the heartaches and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to in "a savage, brutal and disgusting world." One key to understanding the epistemological ground of his sense of betrayal is found in chapter one in Len's allusion to Shakespeare's

character, Hamlet. Pinter has written about the open wound in Shakespeare, and nowhere is this wound more obviously open than in Hamlet. Therefore, I intend to spend time exploring the significance of Len's allusion, especially in light of Len and Hamlet's use of the garden as a metaphorical image.

Second, Len has been working on himself for some time prior to Mark's return. Therefore, I want to show how Len centers his project on his ability to immunize himself against the impact that his friends have had on him in the past, and are likely to have on him again now that Mark is back in town. In other words, Len regards the homecoming of Mark as offering him the opportunity to see how well he has internalized his cultural lessons and thereby to determine how well he has matured as a man. Finally, I will read the five dwarf episodes in the novel as the chronicle of the ups and downs of his masculine project.

One key to understanding Len's crisis, and the manner in which Pete and Mark serve to exacerbate it, is found in his allusion to himself as Hamlet in the opening chapter. When we meet him, Len is brandishing a recorder in his hands, and is prattling on about how it does not work, and that it has been a year since he last played it (in all likelihood the exact amount of time that Mark has been away). Len's visual and verbal antics with the recorder are a performance designed by him to echo Hamlet's challenge to his friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, in the aftermath of Hamlet's discovery that they have sold him out in their bid to curry favor with Claudius and Gertrude. Eager to "pluck" out Hamlet's "mystery" (*Hamlet* III scene III lines 356-7), the King and Queen have asked his friends to see what they can find out about the source of his unusual behavior. Immediately following his successful staging of the inset play, *The Mousetrap*, fully aware of his uncle's and his friends' duplicity, Hamlet offers them the recorder he holds in his hands and asks them to play it. Having patiently endured their protestations that they cannot, Hamlet launches into a speech in which he reveals that he is wise to their games,

Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me.  
You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops  
... you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my  
compass ... 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on  
than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you

fret me, you cannot play upon me. (*Hamlet* III scene III lines 354-63)

Len's use of the recorder, then, makes a similar announcement: like Hamlet, he employs it metaphorically to reveal that he knows the degree to which Pete and Mark have betrayed him in the past in the name of their mutual, and individual, self-interest. Moreover, he declares that he is no longer willing to play the role of court jester cutting capers in the court of Pete and Mark for their pleasure. As an adult, and as a man, he announces that he is intent on moving beyond the reach of the human pain and suffering that they inflict on him.

Len's identification with Hamlet, however, extends well beyond his realization that, like Shakespeare's prince, he, too, has uncovered the poisonous nature of a long-standing male friendship and wishes to expose it. He also realizes, again like Hamlet, that his friends' betrayal of the friendship is not, per se, the primary source of his trauma. Rather, it is one more confirmation of the frightening, paralyzing awareness that he has that human beings fatten themselves to fatten worms. That is, Len sees his affinity with Hamlet in terms of their mutual realization that the value and the meaning of human existence are seriously compromised by the human paradox: the paragon of animals is also the quintessence of dust.

Hamlet's crisis is precipitated when he realizes - due to the death of his father and the ensuing actions/reactions of his mother and uncle - the true nature of his inheritance as prince of Denmark. The veil suddenly parts: the paragon of animals becomes the disease called man. Underneath the beautiful majesty of Denmark he glimpses the shocking signs of another reality: chaotic, bestial, predatory, foul and diseased. In the wake of his discovery, the epistemological foundations of his cultural world collapse; the meaning and the value of all human accomplishment are called into question. Hamlet loses a kingdom,

O that this too too sullied flesh would melt,  
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,  
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd  
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. O God! God!  
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable  
Seem to me the uses of this world!  
Fie on't, ah fie, 'tis an unweeded garden

That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature  
Possess it merely. (*Hamlet* I scene II lines 129-37)

Hamlet's articulation of his existential shock takes shape in his metaphor of the rankly and grossly unweeded garden. In it, he expresses his mental and emotional revulsion to the grotesque realities of a life lived in accordance with the demands of primitive needs and rapacious bodily desires. Suddenly, nothing is what it was or what it appears to be; nothing stands still; nothing is sacred or permanent. Under the deceptively well-manicured lawn lies something ugly and deformed (gross), rotten and foul (rank). This repulsive something is summed up in Hamlet's consciousness as his disgust with the human body, which he now sees as the source of human weakness, limitation, and corruption. The flesh is diseased, contaminated, and the signs of its pestilential presence are everywhere: "O most wicked speed! / To post with such dexterity to incestuous sheets!" (*Hamlet* I scene II lines 156-7). This image of his mother and uncle's sweaty, semen-soiled sheets concludes his soliloquy, and serves as a metaphor for human corporeality and the manner in which it betrays the greatest human aspirations and intentions. Primitive impulses and instincts lie in wait below the surface of the finest clothes and the most cultivated smiles. Hamlet's horror is the result of the suddenness with which he is exposed to this awareness of his own bestial (read physical) nature and to the shockingly grotesque materiality of life, through which he must now make his way without the aid of cultural illusions.

Whereas Hamlet has lost a kingdom, based on the evidence, Len has never truly had one. Whereas Hamlet once upon a time lived safely ensconced within the matrix of culture, Len has never nestled easefully inside a cultural womb. Len's obsession with the image of his room, and the walls of his room, can be best understood in this connection:

The rooms we live in ... They change their shape at will ... I would have no quarrel, I wouldn't grumble, you see, if these rooms would remain the same, would keep to some consistency. But they don't. And I can't see the boundaries, the limits, which I've been led to believe are natural. (11-12)

The room is Len's chosen metaphor for the security and certainty afforded by a recognizable social identity in a meaningful and purposeful world. It suggests his desire

to forge in the smithy of culture a masculine identity as the means to exercise control over his life. The room defines the architectonics of his masculine project:

This room moves. This room is moving. It has moved. It has reached - a dead halt. There is no ambush. There is no enemy. There is no web. All's clear and abundant, not closed, not closing, not moved, not moving, having no stealth, possessing no guile. The time would be dark where there are gardens.  
(29)

Len's reference to gardens is particularly telling. Speaking once again in metaphors, Len equates the possession of a garden with masculine self-possession. As yet, he has not achieved this state: "The time would be dark *where* there are gardens" (my emphasis). His choice, and use, of the garden metaphor obliquely alludes to the affinity that he sees between himself and Hamlet. The difference between their individual circumstances notwithstanding, Len sees a connection between the source of Hamlet's trauma and his own. Len's wound, like Hamlet's, is the consequence of his realization that there is a shocking gulf separating the human mind and its fanciful constructions from the grosser and more prehistoric reality of the human body that serves to expose and expel these very same cultural fictions. Len records the nature of his trauma metaphorically in his own version of Hamlet's "unweeded garden":

The yard as I know it is littered with scraps of catsmeat, pigbollocks, tincans, birdbrains, spare parts of all little animals, a squelching squealing carpet, all the dwarfs' leavings spittled in the muck, worms stuck in the poisoned shitheaps, the alleys a whirlpool of piss, slime, blood and fruitjuice. (183)

The hideousness of what he sees lurking beneath the well-tended gardens of the quotidian world that he was led to believe he had a right to enter and own horrifies and transfixes him. This is his view of things, his crisis at the beginning of the novel. It is this view of things that his project is designed to correct. The yard (the world) is alive with hideous visuals of dismemberment and death, excrement and urine, filth and corruption. Moreover, these visuals are reinforced by the grotesque sounds of the inarticulate suffering ("squealing") of tortured and mutilated flesh (animal flesh, in this instance). Here there are no distinctions; here there is no degree or hierarchy: unchecked appetite prevails in a world of eaters and eaten. Here there are no false distinctions, decomposing

flesh lies carelessly and indiscriminately tossed beside rusting cans. Here life is afforded no worth or meaning, and death is accorded no ceremony. Finally, here, the pathetic weakness and vulnerability of the flesh in such a savagely carnivorous landscape turns the experience of life into a gigantic graveyard for human hopes and aspirations. Life is rendered meaningless and incomprehensible; birth is transformed into a cruel and absurd joke. This worldview is the source and the meaning of betrayal in the novel.

Like Hamlet, Len directs the resultant fear and loathing that he feels, against what is for him its source: the human body. At one point in the novel, Len sees his betrayal at the hands of his friends, and his own susceptibilities that help to foster it, as metaphorically associated with his body: “... I have my allies, I have my objects, I have my cat, I have my carpet, I have my land, this is my kingdom, there is no betrayal ... they make no hole in my side. They make a hole in my side” (29-31). Len’s allusion here is to the crucifixion of Christ (“They make a hole in my side”). His identification with Christ reinforces the extent to which he is perpetually torn between his post-traumatic need to rise above his earthly limitations (his version of the divine kingdom) and the terrestrial circumstances and associations that pierce and torment him and that serve to keep him earthbound. “They” here refers to Mark and Pete, who remind him constantly of the consequences of his own soft, yielding nature: confusion, crisis, and chaos. Len’s metaphorical grasp of the nature of his existential crisis as emanating from his body is reflected elsewhere in the novel. At one point he exclaims to Mark, “You must excuse me. I’m at the center of a holy plague” (90). It is also evidenced in other statements in which he employs negative body imagery: “I’m in a musty old clothescupboard. I stink of old clothes” (70); “Sniff this room. Sniff it. This room has changed since I’ve been in it. I’ve permeated it. It’s all acrid now” (71); “Do you know what I am? I’m the ragamuffin who vomits in the palace. There’s a dryrot in me. Rot everywhere” (71); “You know what you’ve got in this room? A sack of old bones” (72).

Len encapsulates his perception of the human body in crisis in the relationship that he shares with the deformed, stunted, and prehistoric dwarfs, whose “leavings” lie “spittled in the muck” of the yard. His image of the yard, and the creatures that create it, works on two levels. First, metaphysically it represents the fear of his status as a flesh and blood creature in a savage and cruel world. Essentially, the image that he presents of his

fate at the hands of the dwarfs in the yard stands for the fear he feels in the face of his own creaturely status in a hostile and relentlessly predatory world. It embodies his shocking realization of the randomness and arbitrariness of life and the inevitability and incomprehensibility of his own death. The more he is held hostage by this image of self and world, the less he is able to control the emotional terror that comes with it that renders him paralyzed: "My nothing ... licks its paws while I shrink. It's a true nothing, a paralysis. There's no conflict, no battle. I am it. I am my own nothing" (33). In other words, to the extent that he feels himself to be trapped in his own body and at the mercy of the voracious appetite of life (the dwarfs), he loses the will and the power to act.

While on one level his relationship with the dwarfs represents the metaphysical nature of his traumatic sickness, it also represents the symptoms of this sickness as manifested in his day-to-day relations with others. Thus, to the extent that Pete and Mark possess the ability to consume him - to physically exhaust and emotionally deplete him - they accentuate his awareness of his physical and emotional inadequacies and re-open his metaphysical wound: 'You're too big for me,' he murmured. 'You and Pete, you're too big. You leave me dry. You eat me out of house and home, whether you damnwell know it or not. I sometimes feel I'm the ball you're both playing with' (92). Once again, the end result is traumatic paralysis, and a corresponding loss of control over the conduct of his life. Therefore, on a microcosmic level, Len sees the macrocosmic nature of his original wound reflected back to him in the dwarf-like natures of his two friends. Len is simultaneously fascinated and horrified by the dark side of the human personality that he sees as an active, operating principle within his friends: its capacity for violence and cruelty; its total pursuit of self-interest; and its relentless need to satisfy its appetite at the expense of everything and everyone outside itself. Thus, the force he sees at work in the universe is also at work in his friends.

Strangely enough, life with his friends is both a curse and a blessing. It is a curse in that his contact with them occasionally collapses the distance he strives to establish between himself and the world. Speaking to Mark about the effect that his homecoming continues to have on him, Len declares:

You've made a deeper hole in my side than I thought at first.  
Yes. I suppose there's a lot to be said for feeling the world at  
a distance. I have known it. But mostly the world is sitting on



top of me ... If only I could close my eyes and live alone with the suggestions of life. I can't live comfortably when the world begins to bang. (92)

Literally and figuratively, physically and metaphysically, Mark and Pete relentlessly bring the world with them to Len's door each time they visit him. Rather ironically, however, Len sees their visits as a blessing in disguise, which accounts for the fact that he still continues to open his door to them. While contact with Mark and Pete serves to re-traumatize him, it also gives him a tangible, concrete way to treat and cure his own condition. In other words, he regards his time in the presence of Mark and Pete as a test of his ability to de-sensitize himself to the vagaries of life as they manifest themselves in the relationship he shares with his friends. If he cannot change the nature of the universe, he can at least change how he responds to the daily threat of its presence in the form of Mark and Pete. If he cannot exchange his status as a member of the family of Man, he can, however, exchange his status as a powerless child for that of a powerful man. Moreover, by striving to cultivate a permanent pose of masculine calm and control in the presence of his friends, Len hopes to cure his metaphysical anguish by shutting down his physical and emotional awareness of the world and his embodiment of it. Len perceives his time with his friends as an essentially rigorous part of his re-fashioning of himself as a self-disciplined and detached masculine subject. Through his engagement with them he hopes to prove the efficacy of his project by confirming his membership in a masculine society that heals him and grants him post-traumatic immunity from his anguish.

Len shares his membership in this society with the men of Pinter's early plays. Bert's silence and his remote detachment from Rose and Kidd at the beginning of *The Room* are part of his masculine identity, as is his legendary status as a negotiator of icy roads and human obstacles. Indeed, Bert's ability as a driver is echoed in one of Len's oblique references to the transformation he is bent on effecting, perfecting, in his own life:

But you can see. Can't you see that I must put up my own fares and travel in the front seat so that I won't have to ride in my own luggageboot? I can't see from there, and I must keep my eye on the driving. There'll be plenty of room for me because hardly anyone else can afford the price. In that case I can keep to my own route and avoid traffic jams. (36)

Similarly, Len's need to withdraw his previous physical and emotional investment from the bank of the world is re-echoed in Edward's and Teddy's masculine withdrawal from the decomposing and discomposing facts of life as lived in the body. In *A Slight Ache*, confronted by the rankness and grossness of Barnabas in the confines of his study, Edward launches nostalgically into an account of his own legendary masculine detachment from the world:

I was polished ... I could stand on the hill and look through the telescope at the sea. And follow the path of the three-masted schooner, feeling fit, well aware of my sinews, their suppleness, my arms lifted holding the telescope, steady, easily, no trembling, my aim was perfect, I could pour hot water down the spoon-hole, yes, easily, no difficulty, my grasp firm, my command established, my life accounted for ... (195)

Teddy expresses the same sentiment in *The Homecoming*. In his bid to show off the herculean quality of his own masculine self-discipline and restraint he declares:

There's no point in my sending you my works. You'd be lost. It's nothing to do with the question of intelligence. It's a way of being able to look at the world. It's a question of how far you can operate on things and not in things. I mean it's a question of your capacity to ally the two, to relate the two, to balance the two. To see, to be able to *see*! I'm the one who can see. (78)

Teddy's emphasis on the powerful clarity of his sight is linked with Bert's emphasis on the sure-sightedness with which he drives the roads and with Edward's skill at observing life clearly at a great distance through the agency of his telescope. Their mutual preoccupation with sight, the distance and the distancing sense, in turn connects them with Len's synecdochic fusion of the eye and the I. Len's use of this metaphor serves as his way of monitoring the ups and downs of his masculine project. When he senses the return of traumatic symptoms, like Edward, he describes the onset of these symptoms in terms of eye problems. For example, in response to Pete's observation that he (Len) needs "to cut out this terror and pity lark" (49), Len declares that he simply cannot at this moment: "There is a different sky each time I look. The clouds run about in my eyes." (49) Revising his worldview might be his primary goal, but it is not an easy task for him

at times. Having seen what he regards as the metaphysical (dwarfish) facts of life, Len has difficulty looking away from what he has seen. Towards the end of the novel, exasperated by his friends, and exhausted by the demands of the regimen of masculine self-control he has set for himself in their company, Len reveals to Mark the truth of his situation:

What you are, or appear to be to me, or appear to be to you, at any given time, changes so quickly, so horrifyingly, I certainly can't keep up with it and I'm damn sure you can't either. But who you are, I can't even begin to recognize, and sometimes I recognize it so wholly, so forcibly, I can't look, and how can I be certain of what I see? You have no number. What is there to locate, so as to be certain, to have some surety, to have some rest from this whole bloody racket? You're the sum of so many reflections. How many reflections? Whose reflections? Is that what you consist of? What scum does the tide leave? What happens to the scum? When does it happen? I've seen what happens. But I can't speak when I see it. I can only point a finger. I can't even do that. The scum is broken and sucked back. I don't see where it goes. What have I seen? What have I seen, the scum or the essence? (151-2)

Len's rant, which begins as an assault on Mark's carefully crafted mask of masculine aloofness and inscrutability, suddenly shifts its focus. In the process, we are taken by Len from one of the symptoms of his crisis - the disturbing impact that Mark has on him - to the source of his trauma: his crucifixion at the hands of his two competing visions of self and world that he codes as the dialectic between the "essence" and the "scum." The former world is the world he would like to see: permanent, stable, meaningful, and knowable. In this world, personal identity is fixed and the worth and value of human effort celebrated, immortalized. This is the civilized world, the world of the city, defined in terms of work and characterized by good health, clean living, physical and emotional detachment and distance from human pain and suffering. The latter world is the world he sees all too frequently in the wake of his traumatic experience: temporary, shifting, meaningless, and incomprehensible. In this world, personal identity is shattered and human enterprise is mocked. This is the barbaric world, the world beyond the pale of civilized living, defined in terms of paralysis and inactivity and characterized by sickness defilement, physical and emotional immersion in the vagaries of human experience.

Accessing “essence” would give him knowledge, purpose, direction, and an abiding sense of his own masculine invulnerability and power. Conversely, wallowing in the “scum” renders him confused and directionless, and gives him an abiding sense of his own vulnerability and impotence. This is the vision of the world that he is striving to correct when we first meet him. It is in this light that we can now understand his waxing on to Pete in the first chapter about the benefits of his glasses:

You see, there’s always a point of light in the center of the lens, in the center of your sight. You can’t go wrong. You can’t miss your step. There’s always even in the darkest night, a pinch, a fragment of light, poised in front of you ... What this point of light does, it indicates the angle of your orbit ... It gives you a sense of direction, even if you never move from one spot. (6-7)

Len conceptualizes his masculine project in the image of the relationship he wants to share with the dwarfs in the novel. His efforts to dominate and direct their primitive energies represent his attempt to grapple in a masculine fashion with the helplessness he feels in the face of what they represent: the voracious maw of the world that literally and metaphorically threatens to consume him. In mastering the dwarfs, then, he strives to master his own physiological and psychological sensitivity to his creaturely status in a remorseless, treacherous, devouring universe. In other words, in managing the dwarfs, he strives to discipline his reaction to his own traumatic experience and the memories that follow him in its wake. Far from being the ramblings of a deranged or diseased mind, the dwarf episodes represent Pinter’s portrait of a post-traumatic masculine subject’s sojourn as a young man. As such, these narrative interludes serve as Len’s commentary on the formation and the progress of his growth as a masculine subject. When properly understood, these narrative windows open out onto the playing fields of male characters in *The Room*, *A Slight Ache*, and *The Homecoming*.

To understand these narratives we must start with a look at the roles that sublimation and projection play in trauma. According to Norman O. Brown,

Sublimation inhibits pain by keeping experience at a distance and interposing a veil between consciousness and life. We project, says Freud, only those things about which we do not know and do not want to know, so that we can know without knowing at all. [To quote] Freud: “To be thus able not only

to recognize, but at the same time to rid himself, of reality is of great value to the individual, and he would wish to be equipped with a similar weapon against the often merciless claims of his instincts. That is why he takes such pains to project, ie. to transfer outwards, all that becomes troublesome to him from within ... A particular way is adopted of dealing with any internal excitations which produce too great an increase of unpleasure: there is a tendency to treat them as though they were acting, not from the inside, but from the outside, so that it may be possible to bring the shield against stimuli into operation as a means of defence against them. This is the origin of projection, which is destined to play such a large part in the causation of pathological processes." (172)

Brown continues,

The basic mechanism for producing this desexualization of life, this holding of life at a distance, is ... negation; sublimation is life entering consciousness on condition that it is denied. The negative moment in sublimation is plain in the inseparable connection between symbolism ... and abstraction. Abstraction, as Whitehead has taught us, is a denial of the living organ of experience, the living body as a whole ... The dialectic of negation and alienation appears in the history of the sublimating consciousness as a law of ever increasing abstraction ... Abstraction, as a mode of keeping life at a distance, is supported by negation of the 'lower' infantile sexual organizations which effects a general displacement from below upwards of organ eroticism to the head, especially the eyes ... As life restricted to the seen, and by hallucinatory projection seen at a distance, and veiled by negation and distorted by symbolism, sublimation perpetuates and elaborates the infantile solution, the dream. (172-3)

Len's dwarfs are projections of his fear of death and of the body as the agent of death. His desire to tame them and to control their behavior - to watch them while he watches with them - represents his attempt to master his fear through the power of his own sublimating consciousness. The key to Len's masculine project, then, is his ability to interpose a wall between his body and his mind in order to keep life at a distance. His dream is to become a man, an active handler of the fears that otherwise render him passive and paralyzed. In Len's mind, his sanity depends on his cultivation of a masculine ability, in the words of Freud, to manage his "internal excitations" so as "to bring the shield against stimuli into operation as a defence against them." Thus, in his

fantasy of disciplining the dwarfs, he expresses his desire and need to discipline himself, a project that he sums up in the motif of work.

Work is pivotal to the post-traumatic world of Pinter's males; it defines the socio-economics of the masculine personality. In *The Room*, for example, Bert's manhood is registered solely in terms of his status as a provider. When his status is threatened by illness, the security of his masculine identity is compromised. The possible outcome of Bert's crisis is reinforced in the play by the impotent, frail figure of Kidd, a man who seems to have lost the ability and the capacity for work, who foreshadows the demise of Bert's masculinity and heralds the impending loss of the room in which it is housed. Similarly, Edward's difficulty in *A Slight Ache* is linked to the threat posed to his masculine identity by his waning industriousness and falling productivity. In this respect, what he beholds in the mirror of Barnabas, the feckless Matchseller, who can neither market nor sell his product, is the fear of his own deterioration as a masculine subject. Lastly, the battle within the all-male clan in *The Homecoming* is pitched in terms of one's prowess as a worker. Max's status as a legendary worker (butcher) and provider - a status that links him with Bert (legendary driver) and with Edward (legendary writer and cartographer) - is seriously compromised by his current wifely/motherly role in the house, and undermined by Lenny (legendary pimp) and Sam (legendary chauffeur), who work outside the home.

Their preoccupation with work is echoed in the contrast that Len sees between his past and his present. Early in the novel, he sums up his identity crisis in terms of his previous inability to,

Come to a working arrangement and stick to it. But look at it.  
I've been a farmhand, a builder's mate, a packer, a stagehand,  
a shipping clerk, I've dug turf, I've been a hop picker, a  
salesman, a postman, I'm a railway porter ... It's ludicrous.  
I've never been able to look in the mirror and say, this is me.  
(14)

Len speaks of the distance between his previous failure as a worker and his current drive to establish himself as a recognizable member of the working (read masculine) community in the language of commerce. Speaking of the "job" that he shares with the dwarfs, he says,

And it is essential that I keep a close watch on the rate of exchange, on the rise and fall of the market. Probably neither Pete nor Mark is aware of the effect the state of his exchange has upon my market. But it is so ... And so I shall keep the dwarfs company and watch with them. They miss very little. With due warning from them I shall be able to clear my stocks, should there be a landslide. (53)

He also employs the motif of work in connection with how he now sees the dwarfs.

The dwarfs are back on the job, Len said. They're keeping an eye on proceedings. They clock in very early, scenting the event. They are like kites in a city disguise; they only work in cities. However, they are certainly skilled labourers and their trade is not without risk. They wait for the smoke signal and unpack their kit. They are on the spot with no time wasted and circle the danger area. There, they take up positions, which they are able to change at a moment's notice, if necessary. But they don't stop work until the job in hand is ended, one way or another. (53)

The dwarfs' industriousness and productivity are symbolically suggestive of Len's need to work on himself. In other words, in his vision of their harnessed energies, he sees his own strenuous commitment to the task of re-inventing himself as a post-traumatic masculine subject. By taming and civilizing the dwarfs in this manner in his mind's eye, Len announces his primary task: to renounce his status as helpless hostage to his incapacitating, immobilizing fear. In this way, he hopes to supplant his view of world and self as "scum" with an adopted worldview and self-image that provides the illusion of a stable and permanent masculine "essence." The task, of course, the job, is not without risk, for the dwarfs must "circle the danger area" (the wound) and he along with them. That is, the only way that he can test the efficacy of how well he has mastered the skill of sublimating his own emotional energy is to stand face-to-face with his fear. If he does not flinch, then the job has been successfully completed. If, on the other hand, he does, then he runs the serious risk of falling prey once again to the existential fear that threatens to consume him. This accounts for the evident tension in the first dwarf narrative, for the mounting sense of menace and crisis in the third narrative, and for the breakdown of everything in the fourth, before the restoration of order and control in the fifth.

The dialectic in Len's opening dwarf monologue is between the primitive and the civilized. The dwarfs are a strange mix of the prehistoric and the proper. Len's attempt to celebrate the workmanlike qualities of the dwarfs is undercut by the sense that work is not their life. On the one hand, they are described as "skilled labourers." They are experienced tradesmen: eager ("They clock in very early"); fearless ("Their trade is not without risk"); time conscious ("They are on the spot with no time wasted"); versatile ("they take up positions, which they are able to change at a moment's notice, if necessary"); and dependable ("they don't stop work until the job at hand is ended") (57). On the other hand, "they only work in cities" (57), which suggests that they are, and do, something else beyond the pale of city walls. Moreover, "They are like kites in a city disguise" (57). Their association with kites brings with it the immediate association of animalistic predation, and therefore a sense of primitiveness and wildness that seems to belie the image of the dwarfs as industrious (and civilized) craftsmen given elsewhere in the passage. Indeed, this dialectic marks the tenuousness of Len's project, which hinges exclusively on his ability to discipline and tame the physical and emotional state of crisis that he customarily feels in the presence of Pete and Mark. In other words, at any given moment, his iron man pose is subject to attack and defeat, and the carnivorous appetite of the dwarfs, free from his attempts to sublimate it is unleashed upon him again.

Indeed, while the second dwarf episode suggests that Len's project is proceeding according to plan, there is evidence in it to suggest that the figurative city walls that keep it in place are beginning to buckle under the pressure. Before looking at the evidence on behalf of this statement, it is necessary to comment on another feature of the post-traumatic masculine world: the room. Len's entrance into this world depends on his ability to meaningfully find a place for himself within the cultural tradition, a tradition that valorizes both work and property. Indeed, literally and figuratively, hard work is the guarantor of a man's acquisition and permanent possession of property (read personal identity). In the post-traumatic landscape of Pinter's plays, the room is seen as the stable and permanent extension of masculine power over self and world in space and time. Thus, a room's solidity and stability represent a man's complete inner self-mastery in the face of life and in the presence of others. It is on the foundation of his self-discipline and self-control that Len intends to build and occupy a room of his own:



Here are the paths on my walls, dead at their destinations. A meetingplace for all sundries, all within harness. ... I have my cell. I have my compartment. All is ordered, in its place, no error has been made. I am wedged. ... There is no ambush, only this posture, between two strangers, here is my fixture, here is my arrangement, when I am at home ... (29)

Not surprisingly, then, the dwarf episodes take place within what Len calls his “premises.” Within these premises, which he owns, he undertakes to clean-up the “yard” - his metaphor for the state of things in the wake of his trauma. It is these “premises” that he sublets to the dwarfs and to their human representatives, Mark and Pete. The dwarfs gather dutifully and punctually at the backstep: “Spruced and preened, in time for the tuck. Time is kept to the T” (75); “Pete is in the cabin. He cannot hear the backchat of bone from the yard, the crosstalk of bristled skin. He is listening to himself.” (75); “... Mark sings the song of Mark to the cocked glass [mirror]. He does not see the market outside the window. He sees himself and smiles” (75). All seems well; Len seems to be in control of his response to the situation in which he has placed himself; and yet, there are palpable signs of trouble:

What are the dwarfs doing in their journeys to the streetcorners? They stumble in the gutters and produce their stopwatches. One with a face of chalk chucks the dregs of the day into a bin and seats himself on the lid. He is beginning to chew though he has not eaten. (75)

The interrogative mood in which the second dwarf narrative begins suggests that Len is not unaffected by his contact with his friends, and therefore is not fully in control of his emotional reaction to them. This is suggested by the fact that he is unable to keep the dwarfs squarely within the range of his vision; they have a life of their own beyond the premises that he cannot regulate. Out of sight and out of bounds, they have been up to something that impairs their mobility and that threatens to make them tardy: they “stumble” while glancing at “their stopwatches.” In other words, the tight discipline that he has enforced on them, and by association on his emotional reaction to what they represent, seems to be compromised. This is further reinforced by the disturbing image of one dwarf chewing “though he has not eaten,” with its menacing hint of unregulated appetite.

This indication of difficulty, and the hint of menace that accompanies it, reaches crisis proportions in the third dwarf narrative. In this narrative Len's ability to regulate the actions of the dwarfs is seriously shown to be deteriorating. Instead of sticking to the job at hand, the dwarfs have gone on a picnic: "They've time for picnics" (106). Moreover, when they do return home, they create nothing but havoc and confusion, and remain indifferent to his plaintive attempts to call them back to order:

The longer they stay the greater the mess. Nobody lifts a finger. Nobody gets rid of a damn thing. All their leavings pile up, pile mixing with pile. When they return from their picnics I tell them I've had a clearance, that I've been hard at it since their departure. They nod, they yawn, they gobble, they spew. They don't know the difference. (106)

Len's attempt to hold on to his masculine determination to keep an emotional distance between himself and Mark and Pete is beginning to erode, and with its erosion his image of the congenial landscape of the yard is replaced in his mind's eye with his remembrance of an earlier image of the yard characterized by filth and confusion. In other words, in his third narrative, Len records the experience of being re-traumatized due to his growing inability to maintain distance between himself and his friends. He sums up this effect in his image of the dwarfs as hunters that are driven by an insatiable and incomprehensible appetite, and in his image of himself as what it is that they hunt in order to consume:

I tell them I've slaved like a martyr, I've skivvied till I was black in the face, what about a tip, what about a promise of a bonus, what about a little something? They yawn, they show the blood stuck between their teeth, they play their scratching game, they tongue their chops, they bring in their nets, their webs, their traps, they make monsters of their innocent catch, they gorge. (106)

His perception of his own monstrousness here is linked to his original trauma; in it, he once again beholds himself as a helpless creature of flesh and blood caught in the net of a world that will consume him.

By the opening of the fourth dwarf episode Len's sense of his own nothingness in the face of the human condition is full blown. Despite his best efforts to patrol vigilantly and defend the perimeters of his personality, his friends have broken through, rendering

him physically and emotionally exhausted. He stands transfixed, paralyzed on the edge of his own “premises” as the unleashed dwarfs run riot through the yard:

I stand wafted in the shadows. From time to time a lick of flame screws up their nostrils. They yowl, they scutter to the sandpit, pinch, dribble, chew, whimper, gouge, they soothe each other’s orifices with a local ointment, and, then, all gone, all forgotten, they lark about, each with his buddy, get out the nose spray, the scented syringe, settle down for the night with ginger beer and a doughnut. (120)

Wafted by the all-pervading stink of his creaturely existence, and the weakness and the uselessness he feels because of it, Len surrenders to the rankness and grossness, the incomprehensibility and the contradictoriness, of the scene he sees before him: “Easy come easy go. They are not bothered, these dwarfs. As it should be” (120).

Len is subsequently hospitalized, ostensibly for a physical ailment. It is during his convalescence in the hospital, after a visit from his two male friends, that he intuits the end of Mark and Pete’s friendship. Len remains unaware of the cause of the rupture between Mark and Pete - Pete has found out that Mark has slept with his ex-girlfriend, Virginia; and through his liaison with Virginia, Mark has discovered, much to his shock, that Pete thinks him a fool. What Len is fully aware of, however, is the effect his intuition has on him, an effect he symbolically represents as the impending departure of the dwarfs in his final dwarf narrative:

They’ve stopped eating. It’ll be a quick get out when the whistle blows. All their belongings are stacked in piles. But I’ve heard nothing. What is the cause for alarm? Why is everything packed? Why are they ready for the off? But they say nothing. They’ve cut me off without a penny. ... They sit chockfull. But I smell a rat. They seem to be anticipating a rarer dish, a choicer spread. (183)

Len’s image of his own suspicion that the dwarfs are not vacating his premises permanently, that they will be back, seriously challenges Peter Billington’s assessment that Len’s life is purified and saved by the collapse of the friendship that he shares with Mark and Pete. For one thing, as I have attempted to demonstrate in this chapter, Len’s difficulties with Mark and Pete are the symptoms but not the source of his original disease (dis-ease). To the extent that he was unable to immunize himself against them, he

realizes in his defeat a certain home truth. Namely, he realizes that he is still “sick”, that he has not, as yet, found a permanent masculine cure for what ails him. The “scrubbed” and “clean” premises that he now beholds, the lawn, with its single “shrub” and solitary “flower” that covers over the squelching, squealing carpet of the yard, are not yet his to hold, and to behold, permanently in perpetuity. The dwarfs - his projected fear of his own body and the fact that he is born to die - can always return. Therefore, as a masculine subject he still has plenty of work ahead of him.

In the next chapter I will focus on Len’s friend, Peter Cox, a young man who is also trapped in his own post-traumatic masculine world. I will also examine the nature of the relationship that Pete shares with his girlfriend, Virginia, and extend my findings to a consideration of Rose and Bert’s post-traumatic relationship in *The Room*.

## CHAPTER 2

Sandwich girls. Legshow for the city gent. Wall perchers. Waiting for the catch. Birds of prey. What's it like to be a woman, Maisie? I wouldn't know. Nothing to get in your way. No hang and jut. Smooth and wet. Fingers in the paper. Tissuepapers for all purposes. Lipstick and cucumber. Eyes. No, I'm not coming your way. And never's the word. Some of them like it sweaty. Animal labour. Putrefied mechanics. Barebacked with a squelch. In God's image. Costs nothing. Not good enough. Sluttery to neat excellence opposed. Sweat and spit and nothing to show. The act of mercy. Eachway bet. Money or your life. Something for nothing. The general levelling. Not like that. Not like that.

- Pete, *The Dwarfs*

Like Len, Pete can be seen as a masculine prototype for male characters in Pinter's early drama. He, too, is engaged in the task of waging war against the flesh in a bid to forge his masculine identity: "If I were steel. All problems solved. Ready for action" (63). Moreover, Pete's liaison with Virginia in the novel can be seen as the prototype for the traumatized male's troubled relationship with women in *The Room*, *A Slight Ache*, and *The Homecoming*. In this respect, Pete's attempt to handle Virginia in accordance with his own masculine needs is mirrored in Bert's control over Rose, Edward's hold over Flora, and Teddy's, and his family's, attempted domination of Ruth. Moreover, Virginia's struggle with the demands of Pete's pursuit of masculine identity in *The Dwarfs* establishes her as the forerunner of Pinter's later female characters, Rose, Flora and Ruth. In all cases, the masculine pursuit of "neat excellence" is pitted against what it fears the most: the feminine celebration of the body ("sluttery") and the physical facts of life ("the general levelling").

The relationships between Pinter's male and female characters are among the most controversial aspects of his plays. I believe that this controversy exists, in part, because critics all too often overlook the important role played by *The Dwarfs* in Pinter's thematic exploration of sexual politics. As a result, critics are too often nonplussed, or disturbed, by his representations of female characters and prone to become apologists for Pinter the man, and Pinter the playwright. A typical example of this practice is Elizabeth Sakellaridou's attempt to reconcile the man with the writer in her study *Pinter's Female*

*Portraits: A Study of Female Characters in the Plays of Harold Pinter.* Writing from a feminist perspective, Sakellaridou asserts a change in Pinter's portrayal of women that suggests an evolution in his handling of female characters, and, by association, Pinter's relationship with women:

His insistence on stressing his distance as a creative writer from both mother and wives might suggest a continuous struggle to shake off a deeply felt feminine influence. It is remarkable that a similar attitude is often manifested in the behaviour of his men characters to their women. As a result the delineation of his female characters as *dramatis personae* and their role as theatrical functionaries are dictated by prevailing masculine discourse, which produces collective - archetypal or stereotypic - female figures in the models set by patriarchal society. This initial biased sexual attitude follows a steady, though often uneven, evolution, until it eventually crystallizes into a gentler, totally androgynous vision ... Pinter seems to have realized the limitations of a totally masculine standpoint and to have set out to forge a new image of woman. (11)

With respect to Pinter's representation of Virginia in *The Dwarfs*, while Sakellaridou grants that Virginia "is conceded a fully grown personality and she functions intellectually as competently as the three men" (17), she goes on to argue that

Virginia's disgraceful transformation, imposed by the dominant world of males, reflects the similar disparagement of many Pinterian heroines. A strong male interference into the lives of these women results in a gross distortion of the feminine personality, silencing of the woman's opinion and her isolation from a male-dominated society. (19)

Leaving aside Sakellaridou's questionable attempt to equate Pinter's perspective on women with the "prevailing masculine discourse" established and defended by his male characters, the fact is, that a close reading of Pinter's novel suggests that he is already, at the outset of his career, not only well aware of the "limitations of a totally masculine standpoint" but also interested in speculating on the reason(s) for it. Moreover, it also suggests that Pinter's "image of woman" has been, throughout the years, very much the same and much less ambiguous than critics like Sakellaridou would otherwise have us believe. What links Virginia with Flora and Ruth is their mutual celebration of their bodies and their comfort with the human condition. Indeed, there is an intimate

connection between Virginia's retreat to Soho, where, according to Pete, she'll end up "flogging her whatsit to pisshounds" (80); Flora's passive acquiescence in the face of Edward's claim that she is a "lying slut" (193); and Ruth's seemingly calm acceptance of the males' proposition that she should go on the game for them. The key to unlocking this connection is to understand how most Pinter females view and react to the metaphorically twisted landscape of the post-traumatic male mind. In this landscape, men see themselves, or are desperate to see themselves, as bodiless, sexless, and emotionless overlords. In keeping with this geography of the male mind, women who also are willing to divest themselves of their bodies, their emotions, and their sex are allowed to live within the pale of the masculine community, where they take up their feudal positions in the post-traumatic hierarchy. Domestic and domesticated, these women - Rose, for example, until she reaches out to touch Riley at the end of *The Room* - pose no threat to the stability and security of post-traumatic male culture; they are therefore deemed by men to be clean and safe, respectable.

Conversely, women who steadfastly remain unwilling to surrender (read sublimate) their bodily and emotional energies to the post-traumatic cause are condemned to live their lives beyond the pale of the masculine community. Potentially wild and unpredictable, these women - Virginia, Flora, and Ruth, for example - represent the threat of contingency and risk that threatens to undermine the foundations of masculine post-traumatic culture; they are therefore deemed by men to be dirty and dangerous, sluts and whores. Thus, there is some truth to Sakellaridou's contention that Pinter males strive to banish Pinter women, or at least this is true in the case of women who do not conform to the masculine status quo. What I must take issue with here, however, is her assertion that Virginia's banishment in *The Dwarfs* disenfranchises her, and that Virginia assumes her outcast state sadly and unwillingly - that she is imprisoned by male forces and goes to her fate passively and pathetically. Indeed, the evidence suggests that she departs from the male community willingly and very clear in her mind as to why she has chosen to leave. Moreover, she in no way accepts Pete's assessment of what her leaving signifies about her worth as a person and character as a woman. In this respect, she resembles Flora, who remains impervious to her husband's attempt to cast her out of the realm of respectability, in keeping with his masculine needs and thinking, and Ruth, who, in accepting a

masculine proposition that she go on the game, in no way embraces the chauvinistic foundation upon which it is built. With respect to Ruth in particular, Pinter has quite clearly spelled out her situation at the end of *The Homecoming*,

If this had been a happy marriage it wouldn't have happened. But [Ruth] didn't want to go back to America with her husband, so what the hell's she going to do? She's misinterpreted deliberately and used by this family. But eventually she comes back at them with a whip. She says, 'If you want to play this game I can play it as well as you.' She does not become a harlot. At the end of the play she's in possession of a certain kind of freedom. She can do what she wants, and it is not at all certain she will go off to Greek Street [a 'red-light' district]. But even if she did, she would not be a harlot in her own mind. (quoted in Billington 169)

Indeed, all three female characters reject the stock associations on which their outcast status is based because they realize that it is the men who are the real outcasts, living a spectral half-existence in the shadow of their own traumatic fears about their bodies and their status in the world. Women see the world and their status in it very differently. Where men see loss, they see gain; where men see weakness, they see strength; and where men see the stain of the human condition writ large on their bodies, they see their bodies and the flesh and blood facts of the world, not as curse but as blessing, and as the key to independence and salvation. Whereas men read their bodies as the site of pain and death (the body as a literal and figurative dead-end), women, on the other hand, read their bodies as the site of pleasure and possibility (the body as a literal and figurative thoroughfare between their own energies and life). Thus, while the male characters seek to neutralize Virginia, Flora, and Ruth by branding them as sluts and whores, these female characters adopt an almost Blakean attitude to these designations. In their minds, the clean, orderly, holy world of the males symbolizes for them what threatens to limit and confine their powers of physical and emotional self-expression. Therefore, they embrace what men reject as the dirty, the disorderly, and the profane facts of life. They do so because they see in these facts a continued commitment to celebrating their physical and emotional independence and freedom from a male world that threatens to turn them into bloodless zombies.



While Rose's situation at the beginning of *The Room* places her well within the masculine pale of the living dead, she undergoes a physical and an emotional resurrection at the end of the play. In this respect, then, she becomes a member of the female tribe that includes the likes of Virginia, Flora, and Ruth. The evidence suggests that Rose has been entombed in a masculine world for years, where she has performed, and continues to perform at the outset of the play, the role of the clean and respectable wife. Her growing preoccupation with the basement, however, a dark, damp, dirty and dispossessed space, is symbolically associated with the re-awakening of her physical (sexual) and emotional potential, a potential she has forsaken and forgotten in the domesticated surrender of herself to Bert. In this respect, in reaching out to touch the wounded, crippled figure of Riley, she regains the ability to see the world through her own eyes. Her blindness symbolizes her rejection of the eyes of her husband through which she has seen the world for many years. Very significantly, Virginia also expresses her rejection of Pete's masculine worldview through the metaphor of blindness. Like Virginia, who refuses to exchange a life of comfortable numbness with Pete for the one she is intent on living, Rose's full-bloodied, sensual resurrection announces her outcast status from the frozen reaches of Bert's masculine world.

In his discussion of *A Slight Ache*, Peter Billington gets close to the heart of the difference between Pinter men and Pinter women when he declares that, in stark contrast to her husband, Edward,

Flora – like so many Pinter women – has an instinctual warmth and sexual ardour that transcends the masculine preoccupation with status and power. As his old Hackney girlfriend Jennifer Mortimer says, “The wonderful thing about Harold is that he sees women as much stronger than they are. He gives them a power and a generosity that most of them don't have. He may romanticize them. But I think there is a childlike joy in him that has never vanished. Women are included in it - there are no bad thoughts about them.” (98)

Sensual and sexual, warm and ardent, the power of Pinter females corresponds directly with the ease with which they inhabit their bodies. I will return to this important consideration later on in this chapter. For now, however, I would like to explore the way

in which Bert's masculine identity in *The Room* is foreshadowed in the character of Pete in *The Dwarfs*.

Speaking to Mark about Pete, Len employs the same image to describe Pete's existential crisis, which he uses to describe his own: "But I'll tell you something about him ... Pete's nothing eats away, it's voracious, it's a malignant growth. But can't you see, he fights back, he grapples to the death with it. He's a fighter" (33). Pete cloaks his anguish in talk about his need to realize his own potential. Speaking to Virginia he comments,

His potentialities were wearing thin, becoming stagnant, out of nothing but disaffection at continually remaining potential. Beyond his own resources, he would be frank, he had little. The time was to do. He was, however, condemned to a course, of that let there be no doubt. He must work his disease to the bone and so cure it. (57)

As in Len's case, Pete employs body imagery ("disease") to describe his situation and uses the motif of work ("He must work his disease to the bone") to diagnose his condition and to prescribe a remedy for it. Once again, like Len, the source of Pete's anguish is twofold. On the level of the day-to-day, Pete is emotionally unsettled by a number of recent changes in his life: the sudden death of his father; his new relationship with Virginia; and the return of Mark, a long-time friend with whom he shares a highly competitive past. But it is not these immediate issues that are at the core of his crisis. Beneath them lurks his more primal and menacing fear of death. It is while intoxicated at a party that Pete, half jokingly, but also half seriously, reveals the metaphysical roots of his crisis:

The biggest shock I ever had was when a skeleton collapsed on top of me and nearly bit my ear off. I had a curious sensation at that moment. I thought I was a skeleton and he was my longlost uncle come to kiss me goodnight. When my mate hauled me out I felt like Lazarus raised from the dead. Ever felt that? No, well of course you've never been inside a grave. You should try it. I recommend it, honest, I mean if you want to taste everything life has to offer. (124)

Pete codes his death phobia, and the suddenness of its onset, in the image of a skeleton falling on top of him, and then attempting to take a bite out of him. Here he reveals how

his existential awareness of death descended on him voraciously and out of the blue. His awareness of death as a random and uncontrollable fact of life outside of himself suddenly morphs into an awareness of the presence of death inside himself (“I thought I was a skeleton”), lurking, waiting like a “longlost uncle” to arrange a family reunion “inside a grave.” In order “to taste everything life has to offer” he has, rather ironically, had to taste death; and this taste has left the trace of bitter ashes in his mouth. His reference to Lazarus suggests that his awareness of the death sentence imposed on people by virtue of their status as creatures of flesh and blood killed his ambitions, hopes, drives. As an archetypal tale of personal (read internal) resurrection, however, Pete also uses Lazarus’ story to signify his fight to return from the dead - the nothing.

The key to his personal resurrection is to cultivate in the face of all situations, and in the presence of all people, a masculine distance and detachment. Lecturing Virginia on the difference between himself and Mark, which he sums up for her in terms of their respective obligations as males “to come to some sort of working arrangement with their form in the flesh” (54), Pete comments,

It seemed that Mark was quite content to conform to the body’s disposition. He was satisfied to accept a worship on these grounds alone. But he surely had more to offer than his profile and his abilities as a sexual mechanic. He was letting his potentialities slip. Acting in such complacent liaisons with his body’s whims, he could not hope to preserve any objective or critical point of view, either in relation to himself or others. For a distance had always to be kept between what was smelt and your ability to weigh in the balance the located matter or event. (54)

It is highly significant that Pete focuses so heavily on the image of the body in his dealings with Virginia. Virginia is very much at ease within her own body; she takes pride in it, and she takes great sensual and sexual pleasure from it. Pete’s emphasis on the body operates on two levels. On the physical level, Pete is genuinely concerned about the implications of Mark’s return home, now that he is involved with Virginia. Mark’s love them and leave them philosophy, his good looks, and the history of one-upmanship they have shared with each other, places Pete in a highly vulnerable position, given Virginia’s interest in her body and Mark’s reputation as a sexual mechanic. Simply stated, he fears that Mark might seduce her, and that he might not be able to withstand the emotional

fallout from Mark and Virginia's act of betrayal. On the metaphysical level, however, the fear that he harbors that Mark and Virginia might physically betray him is fueled by his fear of the flesh, his own and everyone else's, as weak, infirm, the absolute sign of human participation in what he calls "the cycle of love and despair" (179) that he sees as the crippled, and crippling lot of ordinary people. Underneath his vision of the grunting, sweating bodies of Mark and Virginia he sees the weakness and the frailty of the human body preparing to betray him with its promise of death and with it the destruction of the best laid plans of human beings. Like Len, Pete sees Mark and Virginia's potential to betray him as being symptomatic of his much more deeply buried, and crippling, metaphysical alarm.

Pete's solution to the problem is to work on Virginia, that is, to re-measure and re-tailor her identity and her life so as to re-invent her as a suitable and dutiful and respectable partner for his masculine self-image. As he designs her clothes, so he proceeds to re-design, with her help, the relationship that she shares with her body and her inner emotional core. Addressing her shortly after the return of Mark, Pete comments,

... you don't need to clutter yourself up with ornaments of provocation, that kind of stuff. They're beside the point. Your provocation is of another sort, it's of a purer sort. Your loveliness is of another sort. ... It exists in spite of yourself and everyone else. You don't have to go in for titillation, like the rest of them. That's not your vocation. Your vocation is to be a disciple of the Gods. Do you follow me? (41)

To the extent that Pete chooses to see himself as one of these Gods - well above and beyond the taint of human mortality - he offers Virginia the chance to leave her home in her body and in the world to take up residence with him in a kind of post-traumatic afterlife. Although Pete has high hopes for the success of his project, he is well aware that glitches are likely to happen along the way, and especially now with Mark in the picture.

Pete expresses his high hopes and his preparedness for complications in his boat dream. In this dream he and Virginia are traveling "down a river" on a "motor boat" (21) steered by himself. Here we have another image of the capable male driver, fully in command of the situation, moving in a purposeful manner, and heading in a predetermined direction. The way is known, and the means to get there are proficiently maneuvered, and they are on the verge of getting to their destination: "We turned a bend,

and there, in front of us, about a hundred yards downstream, was the calmest patch of water you've ever seen" (21). This calm patch of water represents the safety and security of a place (state of being) well beyond the turbulent suggestions of life. Their reaching it depends on how well Virginia is willing to imbibe his lessons on the art of divesting herself of her need to engage physically and emotionally with others and with the world. Then, as if on cue, "the engine conked out" and Pete, once again the competent, rational male driver, skillfully directs the boat "into a little nook." Safe and secure in this almost pastoral setting, they prepare to visit a local police station "standing on the bank." As they are getting ready to go, that is, as they are about to leave the seclusion of their life together on the gentle water to rejoin the human community, something rather interesting happens:

Then I turned to Virginia, and I said, wait a minute, before we go, we'd better have a look at your corpses. We went up to a little ledge, and lying there were two steel midgets, about a foot long, wrapped up in the firm's notepaper. Dead. We took a quick look at them and put them back. (21)

The corpses, the fleshless midgets, represent the parts of Virginia's personality - her body and her emotions - that Pete fantasizes he will help her to control. In other words, with these qualities "dead" in her, she will no longer be a threat to herself or to him. Her contact with the outside world will be automatic, lifeless. What is also of interest in this dream is Pete's descent into the hatch to collect the oil cans, where he meets, "two Negro midgets, same size, made of steel, looking at me, staring alive. I stared at them for a couple of minutes, then I said, don't think you've given me a surprise. I knew you were there. I've had you taped from the kickoff" (21-2). These midgets, of course, suggest the softer human parts within himself that he must kill. Here they are alive, but under control. The fact that they are alive still suggests his nervousness; he is still a work in progress, and his progress depends on Virginia's willingness and ability to play her part in the reconstruction of his own personality.

Pete's midgets - which share something in common with Len's flesh eating dwarfs - are significant for other reasons that go beyond their presence and function in the novel. The fact that they are described as "Negro midgets" and that they inhabit a space below the deck of the boat, underground, as it were, links them with *The Room's*

Riley, who is black and who also inhabits a dark chthonic place below Bert's masculine room. Pete's attempt to keep them under wraps, and concealed from view, suggests his need to repress the soft, yielding parts of his personality that revive his traumatic memory of his human weaknesses and vulnerabilities. As I will go on to argue in my discussion of *The Room*, the figure of Riley symbolizes the depths to which Bert has had to bury his body and emotions in order to achieve his status as a driver of roads and a handler of his wife, Rose. Thus, the disenfranchised black midgets in the novel serve as the prototype for the equally disenfranchised black man with the name of an outcast Irishman in Pinter's first play.

Moreover, the motif of up here versus down there that takes on such significance in the play seems to be an extension of Pete's description of the contrast between his masculine consciousness and rationality (the deck of the motorboat) and the forces that lie below its surface and that threaten to engulf it (below deck in the hatch). Thus, Pete's struggle for masculine identity, and Virginia's willingness to play along with his resurrection as a man, links him with *The Room's* Bert. Indeed, one way to read the play in light of the novel is to see in Bert and Rose's situation what might have been Virginia's fate if she had decided to surrender herself fully and completely to Pete's masculine project. To the extent that Pete and Bert fear to witness human longings translated into flesh - indeed, must read such longings as weak and craven - they are paid up members of Pinter's masculine community of post-traumatic men.

The fact is, of course, that Pete's attempt to consume Virginia in order to preserve his symbolic self fails. She announces her determination to leave Pete in an interior monologue that suggests the depths of her highly complex character:

Look. The moon and the black leaves. I am smelling it out.  
 The bright day is done. My slow dying dead, my dead dying  
 slow, so long in its tooth ... I have taken the hint. Shame on  
 all things. I am a bat. He wasn't free with his booze. That did  
 it. I shall throw my hand in. Chuck it all in. Scrub round it.  
 Under stealth I lived, under stealth I'll leave. A new order.  
 The fires. The land is black. There's a blackness on my lids. I  
 am blind. (130)

The complexity of Virginia's character is expressed in the shifts in tone and mood that occur throughout her monologue. These shifts are defined in terms of the dialectic

between sophistication and commonness that appears in her use of language. On the one hand, her language is highly abstract, cerebral, and poetic: “My slow dying dead, and my dead dying slow, so long in the tooth”; “There’s a blackness on my lids”; “I am cold with the years of you.” On the other hand, however, there are times when her language is more down to earth, concrete, the language of the streets: “I’m smelling it out”; “He wasn’t free with his booze”; “Chuck it all in. Scrub round it.” Virginia emerges in this monologue as both a well-educated and highly intelligent woman and as someone who, despite her sophistication, and her ability to abstract herself from her situation, remains deeply rooted in the physical facts of life. This is the part of her that Pete set out to discipline and tame, and this is the part of her that she refuses to relinquish and that motivates her decision to leave him. What is significant in its own right within the context of the novel, and in terms of Virginia’s connection with *The Room*’s Rose, is Virginia’s emphasis on sight and seeing. Rather ironically, she has to go blind in order to see things clearly through her own eyes again. As long as she was with Pete his goal was to get her to see the world and herself through his eyes. A self-confessed creature of the night, a bat, she has not fared well in “the bright day” - her metaphor for Pete’s Apollonian vision of self and world. She needs to escape Pete’s worldview - his land of light - and return home to her natural element, the darkness. She records the process of her own homecoming metaphorically in a three-stage descent into blackness and blindness. First, the land (Pete’s masculine landscape) goes black. Second, the blackness falls on her lids. Finally, she is safely blind, safely back within her own mind and body.

Virginia’s awakening in *The Dwarfs* is echoed in Rose’s transformation in Pinter’s play, *The Room*. Shifting now to consider Bert and Rose’s post-traumatic relationship in *The Room*, the first thing to notice is the degree to which the motif of sight dominates the play. At the end of the play, Rose will no longer be able to see her relationship with her husband through the cold, hard logic of his masculine eyes. The motif of seeing/being takes shape in many forms in the play. One of the ways in which it is represented is through Rose’s connection with the room’s window and with the curtain that acts as a veil between her and the outside world. Symbolically, the window and its curtain represent her masculine influenced view of the world. The picture that it frames is bleak and inhospitable - a world characterized by cold and wind and ice. It is a world

from which nothing good can be expected, and from which nothing can be gained. Contact with it is dangerous and potentially lethal; it is a world where men engage in vehicular combat on treacherous highways on behalf of their wives in order, to use Kidd's phrase, to "make ends meet" (*Complete Works: One* 109). Such, at least, is the version of the world that men present to women and expect them to respect as gospel. Indeed, a woman's respectability depends on her willingness to take the male at his word, and to observe the territorial limits of the room that he has acquired for their mutual protection. Women who venture beyond the confines of the room - who dare to lift the curtain, leave the room, and who wander "round the corner" (106) - run the risk of losing their reputations. In response to Kidd's plaintive insistence that she likely knew the man in the basement "in another district," Rose responds to his double entendre with a sense of moral outrage: "Mr. Kidd, do you think I go around knowing men in one district after another? What do you think I am?" (121).

Our attention is drawn to the window with its curtains on three separate occasions in the play. The first time this happens we are alerted to the fact that Rose's position at the window has something to do with her seeing things out of the corner of her eye that, according to her husband, are not there:

*She rises, goes to the window, and looks out.*

**ROSE.** It's quiet. Be coming on for dark. There's no one about.

*She stands, looking.*

Wait a minute.

*Pause.*

I wonder who that is.

*Pause.*

No. I thought I saw someone.

*Pause.*

No.

*She drops the curtain. (104)*

This scene is a pivotal one. We already know that something is not quite right in this household. Rose's earlier preoccupation with the basement and, in this instance, with what is going on beyond her window suggests a type of emotional disturbance more than it suggests the smallness of her mind or the meanness of her conversation. Each preoccupation suggests a generalized anxiety that is manifesting itself in the form of hazy



recollections about the basement and in her belief that she is seeing things beyond her window in the outside world. The key to what it is that has disturbed the balance of the room is what Rose tells us about her and Bert's recent illness. Bert has been laid up, preventing him from engaging in his usual manly way with the outside world. The man of stone has suffered a wound at the hands of his own body. His manly pretensions notwithstanding, his sickness has had a profound effect on the stability of the room and the life that he shares with Rose in it. Far from immortal, indeed, now looking very mortal, the distance that Bert tries to put between himself and Rose at breakfast is a smokescreen designed to catch any emotional fallout - either his or hers - that might result from what has just happened to him. His strategy is to bury any and all consciousness of the event by getting back on the road, back on the job. His strategy is not entirely successful, however, as evidenced by the fact that she has caught a fleeting glimpse of someone out of the corner of her eye behind the veil of the curtain that covers her window. The identity of this someone is never disclosed; indeed, Rose is quick to discount the solidity of what she has seen.

However, the meaning of her sighting is very clear in terms of what happens in the rest of the play. On one level, this someone is her husband, or more correctly the man she first met; a man who changed his face many years ago to fit the masculine mask he was obligated to wear as a member of the masculine community. Although she does not fully comprehend it at the time, she has seen the face of this other man reappear during the time of her husband's illness. What she has witnessed - and what she will fully embrace at the end of the play - is Bert's fear and confusion that has struggled to the surface in the wake of his recent confrontation with the physical limitations of his body and the prospect of aging and death. At the end of the play, she will finally reach out physically and emotionally to touch her wounded husband, in the guise of the blind and crippled Riley, only to have Bert try to kill off her awareness of his weakness and vulnerability with a ferocious vengeance. On another level, this someone is also herself, or, more correctly, the woman she was before she was required, and subsequently agreed, to change her face to fit the mask that masculine society had given her to wear as the wife of a post-traumatic male. After all, she is clearly the one who has made a decision to live in the room and not the basement: "This is a good room. You've got a chance in a place

like this. I look after you, don't I Bert? Like when they offered us the basement here I said no straight off. I knew that'd be no good" (105). Like Flora and Ruth, Rose has been for many years complicit in her own captivity. Finally, this mysterious figure outside the window prepares us for the arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Sands, who function dramatically and thematically in the play as younger versions of Bert and Rose, captured at a time when their passage from people to gendered beings was still very much in a state of transition.

Indeed, the second time the window is brought to our attention in the play is right after the departure of Rose's husband and just before the sudden arrival of the Sands at the door of her room:

*He fixes his muffler, goes to the door and exits. She stands, watching the door, then turns slowly to the table, picks up the magazine, and puts it down. She stands and listens, goes to the fire, bends, lights the fire and warms her hands. She stands and looks about the room. She looks at the window and listens, goes quickly to the window, stops and straightens the curtain. She comes to the centre of the room, and looks towards the door. She goes to the bed, puts on a shawl, goes to the sink, takes a bin from under the sink, goes to the door and opens it. (110)*

This stage direction is a study in character contrast. Bert's departure leaves Rose alone with her thoughts and feelings. Part of her continues to live in accordance with the icy conclusions of her husband's masculine worldview. In this mode, she strives to engage herself in her own version of work, housekeeping. She picks up Bert's magazine, and she prepares herself warmly to confront the cold (her shawl) that she knows she 'must' encounter, as a matter of course, on her way to take out the garbage. In contrast to her diligent attention to domestic details, however, Rose exhibits symptoms of a greater distraction that her domestic activities are designed to curb and cure. For no apparent reason "She stands and listens" and then "looks" at the window and "listens" again. Next, she crosses "quickly to the window," apparently with the intention of raising the curtain and peering outside again, only to check her undisciplined impulse by straightening "the curtain" (111). Then, she moves back "to the center of the room" and "looks at the door." Here the window and the door of the room are combined in a highly symbolic manner that foreshadows her figurative escape from the perceptual room/tomb of her life with Bert. Her means of rescuing herself and Bert from the grips of the post-traumatic culture

that holds them each hostage resides figuratively in her ability to strip the curtain from the window and to open the door to the possibility of a new level of emotional and physical intimacy between them. And part of the process of cultivating her ability to do this rests with her capacity to go deeper inside herself. In the architectural imagery of the play, it depends on her willingness to resurrect what lies repressed and forgotten in the basement. The start of her metaphorical descent into the basement begins with the arrival of the Sands, which in turn paves the way for the arrival, and her acceptance, of Riley.

The Sands represent Bert and Rose at a much earlier time in their life, when Bert was attempting to cultivate a masculine identity, and when Rose was attempting to re-define her identity to suit the socially prescribed needs of her husband. Harkening back to *The Dwarfs*, Toddy and Clarissa represent what Pete and Virginia might have become had it not been for Virginia's refusal to comply with Pete's insistence that she accept his version of the world and her place in it. Their arrival at the house and their ensuing search for the landlord opens up the symbolic dimensions of Rose and Bert's situation in the play. Arriving at the house at night, Clarissa and Toddy begin to explore it in search of the landlord. In the context of the post-traumatic world depicted in the play, the house represents post-traumatic culture's attempt to orchestrate space and time in a symbolic manner. Spatially, the room defines the territorial (perceptual) limitations imposed on a man and a woman by virtue of their decision to accept her role as keeper of the hearth and his role as provider and defender. She will stay at home (Rose never goes out); he does battle with the roads and the weather in his van. Therefore, we have a feudal arrangement here, with the man as head of the house and lord of the land, and the woman as his tireless and forever thankful provider of teacups and tea biscuits. Thus, there are two spheres of influence here: the woman remains snug and appreciative and industrious in the room provided for by her man; the man, in exchange for her services, provides and defends the sanctity of their domestic relationship against the dark forces lying in wait just beyond the safety and security of the room.

Temporally, the room compliments its emphasis on here with its equally heavy emphasis on now. To the extent that the safety and the security of the house and its room depend on a man and a woman's willingness to be re-invented as gendered beings, they must also be willing to forget their pasts, and any struggles they might have endured, or

any reservations they might have experienced, along the route of their rite of passage. In this context, the man, as guardian of the room, holds the key that locks them up together, physically and emotionally, in a room of self-denial and forgetfulness. Somewhat lost and confused, the Sands wander throughout the house, finally stumbling into the basement, where in the darkness and the damp, they suddenly hear the voice of a mysterious, unseen stranger who informs them that, “the landlord would be upstairs” (117).

Although the Sands do not possess a room, their visit to this district, to this house, and their arrival at Rose’s door in search of the absent landlord all signify their intention to do so. Importantly, then, there are ways in which Clarissa and Toddy seem on the way to becoming Rose and Bert. For example, there is the fact that Clarissa and Rose are inclined to share a similar view of the outside world. At the beginning of the play, Rose comments, “It’s very cold out, I can tell you. It’s murder” (101). Later on in the play, Mrs. Sands, echoing Rose, comments, “It’s murder out. Have you been out?” (111). What is important to understand about their mutual agreement here is the extent to which their perception of the outside world is shaped by males. For example, when Bert finally speaks at the end of the play, he is striving to bring Rose back to her senses, and her attention back to him. Quite tellingly, he attempts to do this by soliciting a conditioned (gendered) reaction from Rose in response to his account of his heroism on the roads. In order to return safely he had, he tells her, to combat extreme conditions - “They got it dark out” (125); “They got it very icy out” (126). Moreover, he also had to overcome threatening adversaries - “One there was. He wouldn’t move. I bumped him. I got my road. I had all my way” (126). Bert’s status as a man, expressed here in terms of his abilities as a road warrior, depends on Rose’s acceptance of his version of what the outside world is like. For it is only on the basis of her belief in the existence of such a world that she can continue to hail him as her masculine hero and master.

Similarly, Mr. Sands strives to achieve the same kind of control over his wife’s perceptual freedom. His aim is twofold. First, having imbibed lessons in manliness from his culture, he dons his husbandly mask and struts and frets his steely toughness and resilience before her. Second, in keeping with Bert’s premise that a man must become a legend in more than his own mind, he attempts to create in Clarissa’s mind’s eye his version of a world from which she must withdraw to the safety of the room, and into

which he must valiantly go as her natural lord, masculine provider and protector. His attempt to cut a manly figure before Clarissa is first evidenced by his reaction to Rose's suggestion that he might like to sit down by the fire:

**ROSE.** Come over by the fire, Mr Sands.

**MR SANDS.** No, it's all right. I'll just stretch my legs.

**MRS SANDS.** Why? You haven't been sitting down.

**MR SANDS.** What about it?

**MRS SANDS.** Well, why don't you sit down?

**MR SANDS.** Why should I?

**MRS SANDS.** You must be cold.

**MR SANDS.** I'm not.

**MRS SANDS.** You must be. Bring over a chair and sit down.

**MR SANDS.** I'm all right standing up, thanks.

**MRS SANDS.** You don't look one thing or the other standing up. (112)

In typical fashion, for Pinter males, Mr. Sands quickly turns the debate with his wife over whether or not he should sit down into an issue of manhood. Whereas his wife and Rose might feel the need to get warm by the fire, living as they do in accordance with the dictates of their bodies, he, on the other hand, is determined to show how impervious he is to the chilly conditions outside the room. Moreover, his decision not to sit, not to give in to his body, but rather to stand apart, to distinguish himself from those who do, is connected with Bert's need to stand apart in the eyes of his wife by getting back to work in the wake of his illness. In his bid to put on a manly performance in front of the women, Mr. Sands begins to shape the contours of his face to fit the masculine mask that he will wear later in life as Bert. His imperviousness to the cold suggests the kind of character he possesses that qualifies him for participation in and success in a dark and icy world where to feel, either physically or emotionally, is to lose and die.

Mrs. Sands' remark, however, that he looks "neither one thing or the other" from where she sits, suggests that his masculine performance is not having its intended effect. Indeed, the tone of her exchange with her husband in this part of the play indicates that she is both bemused and amused by the sight and the sound of her husband's attempt to disguise his inexperience and youthfulness under the mask and posture of the would-be man of the world. In addition, it suggests that while she agrees to some extent with her husband's take on things, she is, in contrast to Rose, who is fully indoctrinated into Bert's

way of seeing and being in the world, willing to challenge him on the basis of the strength of her own convictions.

The conflict between their respective ways of seeing and being in the world is particularly evident in their attempt to name and to locate “The man who runs the house” (111):

**MR SANDS.** That’s it. You’re the wife of the bloke you mentioned then?

**MRS SANDS.** No, she isn’t. That was Mr Kidd.

**MR SANDS.** Was it? I thought it was Hudd. Wasn’t it, Mrs Hudd?

**ROSE.** That’s right. The landlord.

**MRS SANDS.** No, not the landlord. The other man.

**ROSE.** Well, that’s his name. He’s the landlord.

**MRS SANDS.** Who?

**ROSE.** Mr. Kidd.

*Pause*

**MR SANDS.** Is he?

**MRS SANDS.** Maybe there are two landlords.

*Pause*

**MR SANDS.** That’ll be the day.

**MRS SANDS.** What did you say?

**MR SANDS.** I said that’ll be the day.

*Pause.* (112-113)

As discussed earlier, the house represents the post-traumatic masculine empire built over the ground of being. In symbolic terms, its solidity and permanence depend on the vitality and strength of the man who helps to run it and to keep it in order. The relative success or failure of a man’s ability to perform his allotted task is summed up in the image of the hyper-vigilant landlord. Thus, the patriarchal house with its masculine room in the play represents the male need to take charge of the situation in order for a man to feel at home in the world. In this context, then, the term “landlord” is designed to reflect the mastery with which each man keeps his own mental and emotional house in order. It also suggests the feudal nature of the domestic arrangement that he shares with his wife. In mastering his wife, in getting her to see the world through his eyes, and in accordance with his need to deny his physical and emotional engagement with others, the man becomes the lord of the land. Focused and self-directed, he becomes what he otherwise fears he is not,

powerful and potent. Here is the male wound that the house was designed to insulate against, conceal.

In the world of the play the house has fallen into a state of disrepair. The trouble with the house is represented in a number of ways. The women refer to its present state of deterioration and disrepair: Rose, speaking to Mrs Sands, comments, "... I wouldn't mind betting there's a lot wrong with this house" (115); and Mrs. Sands, speaking to Rose, says, "There's not much light in this place, is there, Mrs Hudd?" (111). Moreover, the upstairs, according to Kidd, is leaking: "The rain comes in" (108). The upstairs is leaking, the basement is damp, and the masculine room sits tenuously poised between that which threatens to cave in above it (the derelict and vacant upstairs) and that which threatens to engulf it from below (the dark and wet downstairs). The source of the problem is traceable to Kidd, the house's landlord, who according to Rose is "A poor, weak old man, who lets a respectable house" (123). Rose's opinion of Kidd is reinforced by his own testimony that he is no longer quite up to the demands of the job:

I used to keep track of everything in this house. I had a lot to keep my eye on then. I was able for it too. That was when my sister was alive. But I've lost track a bit, after she died. She's been dead some time now, my sister. It was a good house then. (109)

Here Kidd connects his impaired ability to keep an eye on things directly with death. Moreover, when taken together, his weakness, his age, his preoccupation with death, and his growing inability to perform his function as a landlord link him to Mr. Sands, the landlord in training, and with Bert, the long-term landlord whose status has recently been placed in jeopardy. Kidd is the embodiment of the fate that all young men like Mr. Sands must eventually and inevitably embrace: old age and death. Similarly, Kidd is the fate that Bert now feels himself beginning to embody as a result of his recent illness. And this is the point that Clarissa seems intent on making in her suggestion that "Maybe there are two landlords" - the man who wears his masculine disguise like a suit of armor against the slings and arrows of his outrageous fortune (*Hamlet* III scene I line 58) to convince himself of his invincibility, and the wounded man, tentative and unsure, hiding from his own sense of powerlessness and paralysis in the face of his flesh and blood susceptibilities and weaknesses.

It is important to realize that Clarissa's reaction to her husband is the consequence of the intimacy that she still shares with the world as seen through her own eyes. While Toddy strives to paint a picture of the world outside as pitch dark and coldly inhospitable, she strives to resist his interpretation with a perception of her own:

**MRS SANDS.** Now I come to think of it, I saw a star.

**MR SANDS.** You saw what?

**MRS SANDS.** Well, I think I did.

**MR SANDS.** You think you saw what?

**MRS SANDS.** A star.

**MR SANDS.** Where?

**MRS SANDS.** In the sky.

**MR SANDS.** When?

**MRS SANDS.** As we were coming along.

**MR SANDS.** Go home.

**MRS SANDS.** What do you mean?

**MR SANDS.** You didn't see a star.

**MRS SANDS.** Why not?

**MR SANDS.** Because I'm telling you. I'm telling you you didn't see a star.

*Pause*

**ROSE.** I hope it's not too dark out. I hope it's not too icy out.

(114)

Interestingly enough, Clarissa's possible sighting of a star in the dark sky, which suggests a source of light and illumination beyond the doom and gloom she is being led by her husband to see, gives birth in Rose to the "hope" that the night is not as dark and the roads are not as icy as she might at first have imagined. The fact that each of these female characters possesses the ability to see beyond the masculine horizons of their respective husband's worldviews links them with *The Dwarfs'* Virginia, who refuses to accept Pete's. Moreover, the fact that Toddy and Bert strive to impose their masculine versions of reality on Clarissa and Rose links them with *The Dwarfs'* traumatized male, Pete. Of singular importance here is that Rose's capacity at the end of the play to see and accept the wounded man beneath the mask that Bert customarily wears is linked to her ability to perceive once again her husband and the world through the eyes of her younger self, represented in the play by Clarissa.

Prior to Bert's illness Rose had lost the ability to remember the woman she used to be and to recall the man that she married. She saw only the man that Bert had taught



her to see: omnipotent and invulnerable. Her sudden encounter with her younger double, Clarissa, and with Bert's younger alter-ego, Toddy - ghostly visitors from the play's site of remembrance, the basement - alerts her to the presence of another man. Her consciousness of this other man is heightened by the sudden appearance of Kidd, who promptly tells her that "The man. He's been waiting to see you. He wants to see you. I can't get rid of him ... You've got to see him" (120). The link between this man and Bert is strongly suggested by Kidd's response to Rose's curiosity about who the man is:

How do I know who he is? All I know is he won't say a word, he won't indulge in any conversation, just - has he gone? That and nothing else. He wouldn't even play a game of chess. All right, I said, the other night, while we're waiting I'll play you a game of chess. You play chess, don't you? I tell you, Mrs Hudd, I don't know if he even heard what I was saying. He just lies there. It's not good for me. He just lies there, that's all, waiting. (120)

Kidd's description of the man in the basement is significant for a number of reasons. First, the fact that he will not speak connects him with the wordless Bert at the beginning of the play. Second, the fact that "He just lies there," either unable or unwilling to participate in a game of chess, indeed, in any kind of manly activity, suggests a type of paralysis. In this context, the stranger's apparent incapacitation alludes to Rose's concern for Bert's health at the outset of the play: "I don't know whether you ought to go out. I mean, you shouldn't, straight after you've been laid up" (102). Rose eventually relents in the face of Kidd's insistence that the man will not "go away without seeing you" (121), and the blind Negro, Riley, enters. Rose's initial reaction to the sight of this handicapped man is to reject him. Her socialization at the hands of Bert has taught her to disdain physical and emotional weakness - in herself and in others - and to revile the absence of masculinity in men. Her response to Riley's physical impairment is at first cold, heartless, and mocking:

**RILEY.** This is a large room.

**ROSE.** Never mind the room. What do you know about this room? You know nothing about it. And you won't be staying in it long either. My luck, I get these creeps come in, smelling up my room. What do you want?

**RILEY.** I want to see you.

**ROSE.** Well you can't see me, can you? You're a blind man. An old, poor blind man. Aren't you? Can't see a dickeybird.

*Pause*

They say I know you. That's an insult, for a start. Because I can tell you, I wouldn't know you to spit on, not from a mile off. (123)

Here she attacks what she regards as Riley's impotence and vulnerability. Interestingly enough, her choice of imagery - "I get these creeps come in smelling up my room" - is particularly masculine, in that it equates physical weakness and infirmity with the scent of unwashed, smelly bodies. In her eyes Riley's deficiencies as a man make him not only useless but also dirty and polluted, a threat to cleanliness and health. Her resistance to him, however, eventually gives way, as she finally begins to see Riley not with Bert's eyes but with her own. Significantly, her transfiguration in the presence of this wounded and needy man, who asks nothing more of her other than to come home to herself, occurs through the reunion she experiences within herself between her body and her emotions. Deeply moved by the sight and the plight of the wounded Riley, "*She touches his eyes, the back of his head and his temples with her hands*" (125). It is at this point in the play that Bert reappears, and the human face of Riley is suddenly forced back behind the severe masculine mask. What follows is a heart-rending blend of pathos and tragedy.

The final movement in the play begins with the third and last reference to the room's window. Bert "*stops at the door, then goes to the window and draws the curtains. It is dark. He comes to the center of the room and regards the woman*" (125). Threatened by Rose's open display of compassion and understanding in the presence of Riley - the wounded man behind the masculine persona - and fearful of her highly sensual invitation to him to reveal himself fully and completely in her presence, Bert, the man, violently and fatally, destroys the vestigial traces of Bert, the suffering person:

*He regards the Negro for some moments. Then with his foot he lifts the armchair up. The Negro falls on to the floor. He rises slowly.*

**RILEY.** Mr Hudd, your wife -

**BERT.** Lice!

*He strikes the NEGRO, knocking him down, and then kicks his head against the gas stove several times. The NEGRO lies still. Bert walks away.*

*Silence.*

*Rose stands clutching her eyes.*

**ROSE.** Can't see. I can't see. I can't see.

*Blackout.*

*Curtain.* (126)

Rose's blindness suggests two things. First, it suggests that the death of Riley kills any chance that she thought she might have of reaching out to touch her husband and to be touched by him in turn. Second, it announces the end of their relationship. Given what she has seen, given how she now feels in the wake of returning home physically and emotionally to herself, living with her husband is no longer possible. Like *The Dwarfs'* Virginia, for Rose, blind now to the man that Bert announces he must continue to be, the unwritten next line must of necessity be "I shall leave you" (*The Dwarfs* 130).

In *The Dwarfs* and *The Room*, then, the traumatized male's dysfunctional fear of his body destroys his relationship with women. In my next chapter I will examine how Pinter's continued exploration of the relationship between women and traumatized men in *A Slight Ache* reveals the pivotal role played by a female character, Flora, in the process of her husband's recovery and healing.

### Chapter 3

Is man no more than this?

- *King Lear*

The answer to Lear's metaphysical question, at least from the perspective of Pinter's male characters, is a resounding, no. Ironically, while Pinter males are poorly equipped to deal with the traumatic fallout from this answer - they receive it as a death sentence - they nevertheless seem to be peculiarly predisposed to ask it. Instead of accepting the relative shortness of life and its contingent nature and making the very best of it, Pinter males are traumatized by their awareness of death, and consequently are at war with their own bodies. The method by which they choose to wage this war is a process of self-alienation that renders them psychologically crippled and sensually/sexually impaired. Whether or not Pinter women experience a similar type of existential encounter with the limits of human ability and possibility is unclear. What is clear, however, is that they do not react in the same fashion as Pinter males do to their status as creatures of flesh and blood. Consequently, they do not regard their bodies as an existential death sentence. Virginia, for example, is clearly aware of the existential nature of Pete's crisis, and she rejects his suggestion that she must abandon her bodily energies so that she may ease his pain. She seems perfectly comfortable with her creaturely status in the world and chooses to seize the day in accordance with her own sensual and sexual needs and desires.

There is also evidence that she perceives that Pete's form of neurosis is not exclusive to him but endemic to the male community. She clearly sees the wounded nature of Len, and she seems to intuit that Mark's apparent ease in his body disguises (that is, is an overcompensation for) his underlying doubts and insecurities and his need to be regarded as a masculine equal by Pete. Indeed, the evidence suggests that when she finally tells Mark that Pete thinks he is a fool, she does so, in part, to cut into the sensitive flesh beneath both Pete's and Mark's masculine exteriors, knowing full well that her revelation will set off a row between them.

Virginia's situation in *The Dwarfs*, then, is important because of its thematic connection with *The Room*'s Rose, *A Slight Ache*'s Flora and *The Homecoming*'s Ruth. In each of these later characterizations, the Pinter female possesses the power and the ability to negotiate between what can only be described as the divided male personality (psyche). Rose comes to understand her husband's fear of growing old and dying and actively promotes the return of her wounded man by encouraging the exile of Bert, the manly exterior. Similarly, Ruth possesses the power and the ability to expose, and to help heal, the wound that keeps the psyches of the male members of Teddy's family divided. Finally, in *A Slight Ache* it is Flora who enables the return of Barnabas, the wounded male hidden behind the masculine mask of Edward. In all four cases, females are quickly able to diagnose and offer a remedy for the nature of post-traumatic male society. Virginia, Rose, Ruth, and Flora, then, strive in their own unique ways to restore men, and by association, the masculine community, back to health. Each character perceives that the key to male recovery is the restoration of the status of the male body and with it the resurrection of male faith in the possibilities of human endeavor in a world where a man is no more than his body allows him to be.

*A Slight Ache* is yet another demonstration of how the fear of their bodies rules the lives of Pinter's male characters. In this play the battle between the masculine mask (Edward) and the man behind it (Barnabas) is evident once again. This time, however, the outcome is very different. Unlike Bert, Barnabas is able to directly confront the site of his trauma - his (now aging) body - and to own up, in the presence of his wife, Flora, to the doubts and fears that besiege him. Flora herself plays an absolutely pivotal role in her husband's ability to arrange his release from a masculine prison. Indeed, far from being a mere facilitator of his release, she is an active participant in the process. During one of the play's most moving and poignant scenes, Flora, recognizing that she needs to take the initiative, reveals the extent to which she has suffered, and has had to deny aspects of herself, in the name of her husband's masculine self-interest. She also shares with him her haunted sense of her own complicity in the creation of the lie of their lives that has held both of them captive to their gendered identities for so long. In other words, she confesses her deep regret for the part that she has played in the distortion of her own personality on his behalf. It is shortly after Flora's confession that the final encounter

between Barnabas (the wounded man) and Edward (the masculine persona) takes place. Fueled by his wife's stark honesty, and assured now of her acceptance of him, no matter what, Flora's husband stages a confrontation between the two sides of his personality, that culminates in the resurrection of the man and the exile of the culturally fashioned persona that has usurped his rightful place for years. It is at this moment that Barnabas returns home. It is at this moment that he returns to his body and to the possibility of a full-blooded engagement with both his wife and with life. Like Rose before her, Flora reaches out to the man under the mask to set him free. In this respect, again like Rose, she acts as a mediator between the two halves of the struggling male personality she married and still loves.

The crisis in Edward and Flora's household coincides with the arrival of Barnabas (the aged and decrepit Matchseller), who for a period of two months has taken up residence by the back gate of their property. Throughout the play Barnabas serves as Edward's alter ego. On the one hand, then, there is Edward, Flora's husband's culturally fashioned masculine exterior. Like *The Homecoming's* Teddy, whose name he shares, Edward is a well-respected man, an academic and theorist with a penchant for bombast and a particular interest in the dimensionality of space and time (*Complete Works: One* 177). A self-professed writer of "theological and philosophical essays" (183), Edward studies life as opposed to living it. Hard and inflexible, sensually and sexually inaccessible, Edward inhabits, literally and figuratively, the heights of his study at the top of his stairs. Metaphorically speaking, Edward's study is the castle keep of his masculine personality, a conditioned psychological place within himself wherein mind prevails over matter (body). His relationship with the world, and with his wife, is cold and detached. His ability to keep everything and everyone at a safe antiseptic distance from himself has guaranteed, up until the arrival of Barnabas, his sense of masculine control and invulnerability.

On the other hand, there is Barnabas, the soft and yielding human interior. Whereas Edward sits aloof from the world in the permanent safety and comfort of his study, Barnabas is on intimate terms with the earth. His clothes are caked with mud and he stands exposed to the elements that cause Edward so much consternation and from which he seeks shelter. Moreover, unlike Edward, he has no fixed address. He is a

rootless wanderer, a sure sign in Pinterland that he has yet to fully and completely rise above the gross and rank facts of his human origins. Whereas Edward's body is numb, deadened, Barnabas is steeped in the signs and the smells of the human body. As Barnabas stands poised "*on the threshold of the study*" (182), in response to Edward's invitation, the primitive scent of the human body, unclean and impure, begins to assail the consciousness - permeate the house - of the masculine Edward:

**FLORA:** He's here.

**EDWARD:** I know.

**FLORA:** He's in the hall.

**EDWARD:** I know he's here. I can smell him.

**FLORA:** Smell him?

**EDWARD:** I smelt him when he came under my window.  
Can't you smell the house now? (181)

Edward's statement "Can't you smell the house now?" is reminiscent of Len's suggestion to Mark in *The Dwarfs* that the smell of his (Len's) body has permeated Mark's house. Immediately after saying this Edward fixates on another image that reinforces his paradoxical fascination and fear with the human body. Agreeing to speak to Barnabas, Edward responds to Flora's suggestion that the stranger is "an old man" who ought to be treated accordingly in the following manner:

**EDWARD:** If he's so old, why doesn't he seek shelter ...  
from the storm?

**FLORA:** But there's no storm. It's summer, the longest day.

**EDWARD:** There was a storm, last week. A summer storm.  
He stood without moving, while it raged about him. (181)

The significance of this exchange between husband and wife can be understood in terms of the symbolic associations that setting has for the couple in the play. To the extent that the stability and safety of Edward's home and garden are associated with his masculine need for a sense of permanence and meaning in his life, he reads the outside world, that which lies beyond the scope of his immediate attention and control, as irrational and threatening. This accounts for the difference between his version of the weather and Flora's. Whereas he perceives the violence of the storm, and the susceptibility of an old man's body to it, Flora, who in no way shares his fear of the body in the world, sees only warmth and sunshine. This perceptual difference between them,

an echo of the perceptual distance between Clarissa and Toddy in *The Room*, defines the conflict at the heart of their relationship in the play.

It also helps to define the meaning of the play's title. Edward's slight ache in the eyes is directly connected to the way in which his masculine perception of the world is undergoing a change since the arrival of Barnabas. More specifically, his ache, like the painful pleasure of a waking limb, announces the return of blood and circulation to his numbed body. It is right after this exchange with Flora that Edward insists that he meet with Barnabas. In what follows, the face of the man trapped behind the masculine visage begins tentatively and slowly to reappear. In stark contrast to Edward's loquaciousness, Barnabas remains enigmatically silent throughout this scene, indeed, throughout the play. Instead of using words, he communicates through the forbidden, long forgotten language of the male body. Edward's language becomes something of a smokescreen designed to keep the presence of Barnabas contained and at bay. Edward will not go easily without a struggle, but his constant flow of words notwithstanding, his focus remains on the sheer physicality of Barnabas, a physicality that seems paradoxically to frighten and to entice him. During this first exchange between them, the past and the present, fear and fascination, mind and body struggle in a bid for ascendancy over each other. Edward's focus shifts and meanders in keeping with his simultaneous need to recognize (remember) and to dismiss (forget) the figure that stands before him. On the one hand, he strives to keep a safe distance between himself and the stranger. He strives, for example, to establish his masculine worthiness and eminence in a number of ways. First, he goes to some length to establish his (imagined?) status and reputation in the community: "I entertain the villagers annually, as a matter of fact. I'm not the squire, but they look upon me with some regard" (182). Second, he strives to establish his comprehensive knowledge of places: "Do you by chance know the Membunza Mountains? Great range south of Katambaloo. French equatorial Africa, if my memory serves me right. Most extraordinary diversity of flora and fauna. Especially fauna" (182); and things: "Now look, what will you have to drink? A glass of ale? Curacao Fockink Orange? Ginger beer? Tia Maria? ... Or what do you say to a straightforward Piesporter Goldtropsfschen Feine Auslese Reichsgraf von Kesselstaff? (185). Third, he announces his possession of territory (property) and refers to his very precise work schedule: "I haven't been out yet,



today, though I shall probably spend the whole afternoon working, in the garden, under my canopy, at my table, by the pool” (184). Edward’s use of possessive pronouns here is reminiscent of Len’s own need in *The Dwarfs* to establish his masculine identity in terms of space: “ ... I have my objects, I have my cat, I have my carpet, I have my land, this is a kingdom ...” (29). Finally, Edward declares his success at taking and shaping a wife: “Oh, I think I understand you met my *wife*? Charming woman, don’t you think? Plenty of grit there, too. Stood by me through thick and thin, that woman” (184).

At the same time, however, Edward’s preoccupation with Barnabas’ physical appearance and condition comes at the expense of his own masculine resolve. Despite himself, Edward is increasingly drawn into a greater intimacy with the old and dirty and homeless stranger. Significantly, his initiation begins with a sudden tactile reconnection with the world of physical things. In a bid to convince Barnabas to take his ease, Edward moves towards him in order to inspect his tray of matches. What happens next takes Edward completely by surprise:

*The tray falls, and the matchboxes.*

**EDWARD:** Good God, what ...?

[*Pause*]

You’ve dropped your tray.

*Pause. He picks the matches up.*

[*Grunts.*] Eh, these boxes are all wet. You’ve no right to sell wet matches, you know. Uuuuuugggh. This feels suspiciously like fungus. You won’t go far in this trade if you don’t take care of your goods. [*Grunts, rising.*] Well, here you are.

[*Pause.*]

Here’s your tray.

*He puts the tray into the Matchseller’s hands, and sits. Pause.*

(185-6)

Edward’s tactile contact with and subsequent handing back of the tray to Barnabas, his alter ego, functions on two levels. On one level, his effort to return the tray to Barnabas reflects his decision in the wake of his visceral disgust to put a reasonable distance between himself and the stranger in his study. By refusing to accept any suggestion that the wet, fungus-ridden tray belongs to him, Edward seeks to hail the return of his masculine identity and the composure that comes with it. In this way, he rejects any association with the decaying facts of material life.

On another level, Edward's tactile contact with the physical realities of an embodied worldly existence foreshadows his exile at the end of the play when Flora returns the tray to him, in the wake of Barnabas' acceptance of and willingness to embrace his status as a creature that is born to die. Indeed, his attempt to restore a masculine distance between himself and Barnabas in the wake of his contact with the latter's tray is hampered by Edward's subsequent response to changes in the old man's body. First, he notices that Barnabas is sweating:

**EDWARD:** You're sweating. The sweat's pouring out of you. Take off that balaclava.

[*Pause.*]

Go into the corner then. Into the corner. Go on. Get into the shade in the corner. Back. Backward.

[*Pause.*]

Get back!

[*Pause.*] (186)

There are inner reaches to Edward's attempt to reclaim outer space in his study. In his attempt to push Barnabas back "into the shade of the corner," where he will cool off, Edward, in keeping with his masculine directive, strives to repress a physical and emotional uprising within his masculine core. Despite his best attempt to convince himself that he is back in control of the situation, it is not long before his shaky masculine poise is troubled once again by his reaction to Barnabas' body:

**EDWARD:** What is it, damn you. You're shivering. You're sagging. Come here, come here ... mind your tray! [*Edward rises and moves behind a chair.*] Come, quick, quick. There. Sit. Sit ... sit in this.

*The Matchseller stumbles and sits. Pause.*

Aaaah! You're sat. At last. What a relief. You must be tired. [*Slight pause.*] Chair comfortable? I bought it in a sale. I bought all the furniture in this house in a sale. The same sale. When I was a young man. You too, perhaps. You too, perhaps.

[*Pause.*]

At the same time, perhaps!

[*Pause.*]

[*Muttering.*] I must get some air. I must get a breath of air.

*He goes to the door.* (187)

Of considerable importance here is the change in position that occurs just prior to Edward's departure from the room. Whereas before he sat in a position of authority while Barnabas stood, their positions are now reversed. Moreover, the "shivering" and the "sagging" that Edward noticed in Barnabas is now very much a part of his condition as the air begins to close in around him. The closeness of the identification between him and Barnabas at this moment in the play is also reinforced by what happens next. As Edward heads for the door he calls out to his wife "*with great weariness*" (188) to escort him into the garden. The tiredness that he had just ascribed to the old man is now suddenly his own. While in the garden, and feeling slightly revived, Edward obliquely reveals one of the reasons for his reluctance to continue his encounter with Barnabas. In response to Flora's symbolically loaded question, "How are you getting on with your old man?" (188), Edward immediately resorts to a display of masculine bravado through which he hopes to redeem what he believes is his loss of masculinity in the eyes of his wife. Once again, as he did with Barnabas moments before, he strives to establish an essential difference between the weak and befuddled old man and himself: "He's a little ... reticent. Somewhat withdrawn. It's understandable. I should be the same, perhaps, in his place. Though, of course, I could not possibly find myself in his place" (188). Moreover, he goes on to assure her that he is still the master of the house and in full control of the situation in which he finds himself: "As yet, I haven't discovered the reason for his arrival here. I shall in due course ... by nightfall" (188). This sudden attempt to revive the masculine Edward speaks directly to the embarrassment and vulnerability her husband feels in the presence of Flora. After years of manly distance, he fears the consequences of exposing so nakedly and so finally the frightened, quiet man who has cowered behind such a ridiculously strident masculine pose. In this respect, at this moment in the play, his predicament looks back on Pete's need in *The Dwarfs* to conceal his humanity under a masculine disguise of arrogance in the presence of his friends and Virginia. It also looks back toward a very similar conflict between Riley (the man) and Bert (the persona) in the presence of Rose at the end of *The Room*.

Flora's role in the drama is interesting in its own right and important for what it tells us about the unique position female characters occupy in Pinter's imagination, and the powerful status they possess in his work. While they are often caught in the masculine

traps that men set for them, they are, nevertheless, more often than not, survivors who hold the key to their own recovery and to the recovery of post-traumatic males with whom they are in contact. In this context, it is Flora who shows her willingness and who has the ability to move her husband further forward in the direction she knows he wishes to go.

Flora quickly sees through her husband's masculine ruse in the garden. She knows that his attempt to revive the masculine Edward is motivated by fear. Deliberately, yet carefully, she pushes him closer to the source of his fear, his aging body and his waning ability to keep up such a masculine pretence in front of her:

**FLORA:** You're not still frightened of him?

**EDWARD:** Frightened of him? Of *him*? Have you seen him?

[*Pause.*]

He's like jelly. A great bullockfat of jelly. He can't see straight. I think as a matter of fact he wears a glass eye. He's almost stone deaf ... almost ... not quite. He's very nearly dead on his feet. Why should he frighten me? No, you're a woman, you know nothing. [*Slight pause.*] (189)

Edward, of course, protests too much. Indeed, beneath all of Edward's bluster and blather directed at the sadly impaired and deteriorating physical condition of Barnabas, resides her husband's traumatic awareness of his own mortality and with it his fear of Flora's rejection of him as a failed man. Simply stated, he fears that when he finally stands before his wife spent and finished as a masculine subject, as must inevitably happen, that she will respond to his weakness and vulnerability with palpable loathing. This is the exile he seeks to avoid: his wife's rejection of him and his subsequent banishment from the masculine world he has forged for them to live in. Thus, Edward's condemnation of women - "No, you're a woman, you know nothing" - is a defensive reaction in keeping with his socially imbibed stereotypical understanding of what women want and expect from men and how they will react when men cease to behave according to their needs and expectations. Herein lies one of the important sources of conflict between men and women in Pinter's work.

Flora's subsequent suggestion that she intervene with Barnabas on behalf of her husband is born of her understanding that he is unlikely to step out from behind his gendered persona as long as he continues to see her in terms of his own stereotyped

perception of women. Thus, the interview between Flora and Barnabas is a highly symbolic gesture on her part that is designed to reveal to her husband the person that lives behind the socially sanctioned mask of wife that he has obliged her to wear in response to his own. By fully and completely exposing herself, she hopes to encourage the man behind the mask to step out nakedly once and for all into the light of day. This is the meaning of her statement, “You’ll see - he won’t bargain for me. I’ll surprise him. He’ll admit everything” (189).

Flora immediately begins her encounter with Barnabas with a reference to time and to landscape:

**FLORA:** I can remember Christmas and that dreadful frost. And the floods! I hope you weren’t here in the floods. We were out of danger up here, of course, but in the valleys whole families I remember drifted away on the current. The country was a lake. Everything stopped. We lived on our own preserves, drank elderberry wine, studied other cultures. (190)

Flora’s reference to the flood - one of a number of Biblical allusions in the play - takes her and Barnabas back to the beginnings of the life that she and Edward have now shared for some time. It is the efficacy of this life that they have shared together that is now critically in question since the arrival of Barnabas. The dialectic between up here (the home and garden she shares with Edward) and down there (“in the valleys”) that appears in her description announces, in geographic terms, the conflict that is, and in all likelihood has for some time been ongoing, inside of her. The valley with all of its imminent risks and dangers (“frost” and “floods”) is her version of life lived in the body and amongst the changing and unpredictable physical and emotional realities of the human condition. This was her world before she married. In contrast, her current home on the heights above the valley, safe and secure from the valley’s manifold shifts and irregularities, represents her life with Edward as it has been, far from the madding crowd of human beings below. Here stability has given birth to sterility. Here the physical and the emotional warmth of the closeness of other human bodies has given way to loneliness and isolation in the grasp of a grim and proper and pretentious intellectualism (“We lived on our own preserves, drank elderberry wine, studied other cultures”). In what follows, Flora moves Barnabas even further back in their mutual remembrance to a time “Long

before the flood. You were much younger. Between ourselves, were you ever a poacher?" (190-1). Her question is purely rhetorical and quickly gives way to her declaration that "I had an encounter with a poacher once" (190):

**FLORA:** It was a ghastly rape, the brute. High up on a hillside cattle track. Early spring. I was out riding on my pony. And there on the verge a man lay – ostensibly injured, lying on his front, I remember, possibly the victim of a murderous assault, how was I to know? I dismounted, I went to him, he rose, I fell, my pony took off, down to the valley. I saw the sky through the trees, blue. Up to my ears in mud. It was a desperate battle.

[*Pause.*]

I lost.

[*Pause.*] (191)

In this monologue, Flora's deliberate use of the word "rape" and her identification of her rapist as a poacher are designed to shock. Her goal is to elicit an emotional and physical response from the man behind the mask that sits before her. Her assailant, according to her, was a man well practiced in the art of trespass and thievery, deception and disguise, and her innocence - "Of course, life was perilous in those days. It was my first canter unchaperoned" (191) - blinded her to the potential danger of her situation. He was a man who was "lying on his front" in both senses; he was a man who appeared to be one thing and then over time suddenly became another. Her aim in this monologue, then, is to give vent to her sense of having been violated and betrayed at the hands of the man she loved and continues, despite her hurt, to love. In it, she alerts her husband to the painful truth that he is simultaneously two men: the younger man whom she fell in love with, Barnabas, the person who led her to believe in the promise of a full-blooded union together in and amongst the mud and the battles of life; and the man this young man suddenly and shockingly became, Edward, who obliged her to exchange her place in the valley below (body) for life with him on the lofty top of a distant and lonely masculine hillside (mind).

Rather than laying all the blame on her husband's doorstep, however, she is quick to point out her own complicity in the making of her present situation:

**FLORA:** Years later, when I was Justice of the Peace for the county, I had him in front of the bench. He was there for poaching. That's how I knew he was a poacher. The evidence

though was sparse, inadmissible, I acquitted him, letting him off with a caution. (191)

Flora's description of herself as Justice of the Peace is her metaphor for the role that she has played in her own self-alienation and submission. By acquitting her husband of wrongdoing, she kept her peace, said nothing, and thereby kept the peace of the sexless, bodiless compromise that she found that they had silently reached together. The nature of this compromise, and of her complicity in forging and maintaining it, is dramatically represented at the beginning of the play in the wasp episode. As Edward and Flora take their ceremonial morning tea together in the garden, their ritual is suddenly disturbed by the sudden appearance of a wasp at the table. What is often overlooked by critics, especially critics like Ronald Hayman, who argues that he sees no dramatic purpose for this scene (48), is the allusive significance of Edward and Flora's disagreement about whether wasps bite or sting. Both agree that the wasp should be killed:

**EDWARD:** Well, let's kill it, for goodness sake.

**FLORA:** Yes, let's. But how?

**EDWARD:** Bring it out on the spoon and squash it on a plate.

**FLORA:** It'll fly away. It'll bite.

**EDWARD:** If you don't stop saying that word I shall leave this table.

**FLORA:** But wasps do bite.

**EDWARD:** They don't bite. They sting. It's snakes ... that bite. (172-3)

Edward's slight hesitation after mentioning "snakes" draws attention to his discomfort with this image. His discomfort here has nothing to do with reptiles, per se. Rather, it has to do with the awakening in him of a powerful cultural (masculine) archetype: the serpent in the Garden of Eden and the sentence of death imposed on Adam and Eve after they fall prey to its temptation. To place this archetype in an appropriate context, I would briefly like to defer to Ernest Becker's observations about Kierkegaard's view of humankind. According to Becker,

The foundation stone for Kierkegaard's view of man is the myth of the Fall, the ejection of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. In this myth is contained ... the basic insight of psychology for all time: that man is the union of opposites, of self-consciousness and the physical body. Man emerged

from the instinctive thoughtless action of the lower animals and came to reflect on his condition. He was given a consciousness of his individuality, and his part-divinity in creation ... At the same time he was given the consciousness of the terror of the world and of his own death and decay ... The fall into self-consciousness, the emergence from comfortable ignorance in nature, had one great penalty for man: it gave him dread, or anxiety. But the real focus of dread is not the ambiguity itself, it is the result of *the judgment* on man: that if Adam eats of the fruit of the tree of knowledge God tells him "Thou shalt die." In other words, the final terror of self-consciousness is the knowledge of one's own death, which is the peculiar sentence on man alone in the animal kingdom. This is the meaning of the Garden of Eden myth and the rediscovery of modern psychology: that death is man's peculiar and greatest anxiety. (69-70)

Edward's garden, for it is very much his garden at the beginning of the play, much like Len's in *The Dwarfs*, is an externalized (symbolic) version of his inner need to banish death (the body) from his consciousness. In a sense, it constitutes his post-traumatic attempt to escape into a world (Eden) in which all deadly traces of human mortality have been expunged from his memory. To the extent that his wife has chosen to be a part of this world with him, and to the extent that, in Edward's (The New Adam's) patriarchal imagination, she bears responsibility, as Eve's counterpart, for bringing death (the body) into the world, Flora (The New Eve) must play her part in his re-creation of a sexless, bodiless, deathless world. Flora has consented to this peace between them; as a result, she has allowed her body to be buried in Edward's masculine garden. Significantly, Edward has forgotten the identities of the various flowers and shrubs that serve to decorate his garden, flowers and shrubs that bear strikingly sexual names (convolvulus equals vulva; clematis equals clitoris). Indeed, in this garden, sexual and emotional energies have been reduced to the status of lawn decorations and gardening accessories:

**EDWARD:** Did you say-that the convolvulus was in flower?

**FLORA:** Yes.

**EDWARD:** But good God, you just denied there was any.

**FLORA:** I was talking about the honeysuckle.

**EDWARD:** About the what?

**FLORA:** [*calmly*]: Edward-you know that shrub outside the tool shed ...



**EDWARD:** Yes, yes.  
**FLORA:** That's convolvulus.  
**EDWARD:** That?  
**FLORA:** Yes.  
**EDWARD:** Oh.  
 [*Pause.*] (170)

In this garden her “shrub” (vulva/vagina) sits placidly and dutifully dwarfed in its appropriate place outside of his “toolshed” (sublimated penis). Thus, the unexpected arrival of the wasp, a small-scale uprising of sexual and emotional energy from beyond the pale of the garden, provokes a brief skirmish between Edward and Flora that, in keeping with their marital compromise, must of necessity culminate in their mutual decision to kill it.

In the wake of Flora's confession, she is now free to slip even more fully and completely out from under her role as self-alienated wife. The self that emerges is sexually bold and sensually alive. By the end of the play Barnabas and Flora will walk out hand in hand into a very different garden. This garden is her garden, more correctly hers and his, in full bloom bursting with sexual and emotional energy.

Once Flora has finished her confession she begins to re-initiate Barnabas into the mysteries of physical (sexual) and emotional (sensual) experience:

**FLORA:** Sex, I suppose, means nothing to you. Does it ever occur to you that that sex is a very vital experience for other people? ... [*Seductively.*] Tell me all about love. Speak to me of love ... Do you know when I was a girl I loved ... I loved ... I simply adored ... [*She rises and goes over to him.*] And what have you got on under your jersey? Let's see. [*Slight pause.*] I'm tickling you, am I? No. Good ... Lord, is this a vest? That's quite original. Quite original. [*She sits on the arm of his chair.*] Hmmmmn, you're quite a solid old boy, I must say. Not at all like jelly. All you need is a bath. A lovely lathery bath. And a good scrub.  
 A lovely lathery scrub. [*Pause.*] (192)

The sexual nature of Flora's seduction is, of course, quite obvious. Perhaps what is not so obvious is her careful attention to sensual (tactile) detail and her skilled juxtaposition of paradoxical images. Her phrase “A lovely lathery bath,” for example, made into a soft and soothing possibility by her concentrated use of alliteration, gives way immediately to a somewhat harsher and more painful possibility: “And a good scrub.” This latter image,

however, is subsequently transformed into a softer and more pleasurable experience: “A lovely lathery scrub.” In these three sentences Flora takes Barnabas imaginatively through the gamut of human experience, from pleasure, to pain, and back to pleasure again, and intimates that it is time for him to be ritualistically bathed by her hands in preparation for his return to it. Having re-introduced to him the idea of life as a vale of soul-making (in the valley below), she proceeds to the next inevitable step, getting her husband to mourn and accept his death as a necessary and inevitable part of the cycle of his life. She mentions death three times in her monologue: “till death do us part”; “On your deathbed”; “Shouldn’t you die happy?” (193). Moreover, she fuses childhood and old age together for him in her image of “And little toys to play with.” Her question at the end of the monologue - “Shouldn’t you die happy?” - constitutes her open invitation to her husband to “play” with her in an exuberant celebration of the mortal time that they have left to them. Her question is the beating heart of *A Slight Ache*’s *carpe diem* theme.

With this mention of death, a shout from the hall announces the return of Edward, who makes one last attempt to keep the mortal man below his surface forever in check. Flora leaves, and Edward takes her place in the study. Edward’s attempt to survive is short-lived, however, as Barnabas, the inner man, in response to his wife’s confessional openness, begins to offer up a life-saving confession of his own. His transformation into Edward, he reveals, was the result of his traumatic awakening one day to the inevitability of his own death, and, in the wake of this discovery, his determination to put himself above and beyond the mortal facts of his own existence:

... it was not so much a deficiency in my sight as the airs between me and my object ... the change of air, the currents obtaining, in the space between me and my object, the shades they make, the shapes they take, the quivering, the eternal quivering ... nothing to do with heat haze. Sometimes, I would take shelter, shelter. Yes, I would seek a tree, a cranny of bushes, erect my canopy and so make shelter. And rest. And then I no longer heard the wind or saw the sun. Nothing entered, nothing left my nook. (198)

It was in the safety of his “nook” that Barnabas forged his masculine identity, Edward, in response to his need to eliminate “the shades,” “the shapes,” “the quivering, the eternal quivering” that he periodically saw before his eyes. He remembers the initial success of

his project in terms of his masculine ability to withdraw himself completely from any hint of his possible emotional and physical engagement with life:

**EDWARD:** I was polished. [*Nostalgic.*] I could stand on the hill and look through my telescope at the sea. And follow the path of the three-masted schooner, feeling fit, well aware of my sinews, their suppleness, my arms lifted holding the telescope, steady, easily, no trembling, my aim was perfect ... my grasp firm, my command established, my life was accounted for, I was ready for my excursions to the cliff, down the path to the back gate, through the long grass, no need to watch for the nettles, my progress was fluent, after my long struggling against all kinds of usurpers, disreputables, literally lists of people anxious to do me down, and my reputation down, my command was established, all summer I would breakfast, survey my landscape, take my telescope, examine the overhanging of my hedges, pursue the narrow lane past the monastery, climb the hill, adjust the lens [*he mimes a telescope*], watch the progress of the three-masted schooner, my progress was as sure, as fluent ...

*Pause. He drops his arms.* (195-6)

In this monologue Barnabas/Edward reveals the extent to which the fluency of his “progress,” his capacity to function in the world, has been dependent for so long on his “command” over his body: “my arms ... steady ... no trembling”; “my aim ... perfect”; “my grasp firm.” Significantly, then, the stage direction – “*He drops his arms*” - reveals that he has lost, or is losing, his ability to command.

The presence of Barnabas - a figure steeped in the odor of the human body - is coincidental with his masculine persona’s loss of potency and power. Indeed, his sudden appearance at Edward’s back gate months before announced the inevitable return of Barnabas’ body, and with it the scent of death that heralds the necessary demise of his masculine project and the initiation of a time of mourning for its passing:

**EDWARD:** Admitted that sometimes I viewed you through dark glasses, yes, and sometimes through light glasses, and on other occasions bare eyed, and on other occasions through the bars of the scullery window, or from the roof, the roof, yes, in driving snow, or from the bottom of the drive in thick fog, or from the roof again in blinding sun, so blinding, so hot, that I had to skip and jump and bounce in order to remain in one place. Ah, that’s good for a guffaw, is it? That’s good for a

belly laugh? Go on, then. Let it out. Let yourself go, for God's ...*[He catches his breath.]* You're crying...

*[Pause.]*

*[Moved.]* You haven't been laughing. You're crying.

*[Pause.]*

You're weeping. You're shaking with grief. For me. I can't believe it. For my plight. I've been wrong.

*[Pause.]*

*[Briskly.]* Come, come, stop it. Be a man. Blow your nose for goodness sake. Pull yourself together.

*He sneezes.*

Ah.

*He rises. Sneeze.*

Ah. Fever. Excuse me.

*He blows his nose.*

I've caught a cold. A germ. In my eyes. It was this morning.

In my eyes. My eyes.

*Pause. He falls to the floor. (197-8)*

Despite a last ditch attempt to drive the weeping man underground with his remonstrance "To be a man ... Pull yourself together," Edward, the masculine mask, "falls to the floor" in the wake of Barnabas' intense grieving for the loss of his innocence in the face of his knowledge that he, and all things human, must die as a matter of course. The "cold," the "germ" in his eye is born of the return to his range of vision of the "the quivering, the eternal quivering" that serves to define the ephemeral nature of the human experience: "But then, the time came. I saw the wind, swirling, and the dust at my back gate, lifting, and the long grass, scything together" (199). Barnabas' acceptance of this image of death, the Grim Reaper of human lives, finally transports him from a deep state of sadness (*weeping*) to a state of great joyfulness (*laughing*):

**EDWARD:** *[Slowly, in horror.]* You are laughing. You're laughing. Your face. Your Body. *[Overwhelming nausea and horror.]* Rocking ... gasping ... rocking ... shaking ... rocking ... heaving ... rocking ... You're laughing at me! Aaaaahhhh!

*The Matchseller rises. [Silence.]*

You look younger. You look extraordinarily ... youthful.

*[Pause.] (199)*

Fully and completely alive for the first time in many years, Barnabas emerges firmly and powerfully from behind the shell of the masculine Edward, takes Flora's hand, and together they wend their way out of their post-traumatic Eden.

As much as *A Slight Ache* looks backward to *The Room* it also looks forward to *The Homecoming*. In this later play the embattled male psyche continues to struggle with its simultaneous need to surrender to and to escape from the finiteness of human experience. In *The Homecoming*, as is the case in *The Room* and *A Slight Ache*, Pinter suggests that the willingness of men to resolve the dialectic at the heart of their post-traumatic lives depends on their having enough integrity not to fear death. According to Judith Herman, "Integrity is the capacity to affirm the value of life in the face of death, to be reconciled with the finite limits of one's own life and the tragic limitations of the human condition, and to accept these realities without despair" (154). In my final chapter I will consider Pinter's community of men in *The Homecoming*, a community whose members are torn between beginning a process of healing that would restore integrity to their lives or remaining sick and wounded masculine subjects.

## CHAPTER 4

Listen, live in the present, what are you worrying about? I mean, don't forget that the earth's about five thousand million years old, at least. Who can afford to live in the past?

- Max, *The Homecoming*

According to Marc Silverstein, *The Homecoming*

... quite clearly focuses on a crisis within patriarchy that Pinter locates at the level of the family. To regard Ruth's initial entrance as heralding the invasive appearance of a disruptive force that threatens the totality of social relations on which the patriarchal family depends is to ignore the radical instability of the family that manifests itself from the play's opening scene, an instability through which Pinter explores the cracks and fissures developing in the structure of the patriarchal family. (80)

Silverstein goes on to suggest that "... the family constitutes a site of ideological production in *The Homecoming*, a site for producing appropriate gendered subjects, ready to assume their place in the system of social relations that supports the perpetuation of the patriarchy" (81). The reigning patriarch in the play is Max, and the evidence suggests that he was shaped from birth to assume his position as a gendered male. His early remembrance of his father attests to the traumatic nature of his initiation into the mysteries of manhood:

Our father! I remember him. Don't worry. You kid yourself. He used to come over to me and look down at me. My old man did. He'd bend right over me, then he'd pick me up. I was only that big. Then he'd dandle me. Give me the bottle. Wipe me clean. Give me a smile. Pat me on the bum. Pass me around, pass me from hand to hand. Toss me up in the air. Catch me coming down. I remember my father. (*The Homecoming* 35)

What Max stresses in his reminiscence is how his relationship with his father was little more than a constant exercise in life's lessons and schooling in the art of becoming a masculine subject. The lesson in this particular instance is based on the masculine assumption that dependency of any kind, but most acutely bodily dependency, is

associated with helplessness and vulnerability and a loss of control. Thus, in Max's remembrance of his father, we find his trauma coded in his narrative in terms of a series of contrasts: the contrast between the size of the man and the size of the child ("I was only that big"); between the purposeful activity of the man and the passivity of the boy ("He'd bend right over me, then he'd pick me up"); and between the man's status as a masculine subject and the child's status as the object of his attentions/intentions ("He used to come over to me and look down at me").

Most significantly, however, we find the contrast between the father's apparent gentle affection for his son and what seems to be his callous indifference to his son's security and safety. One moment, his father showers his child with attention and affection: "Then he'd dandle me. Give me the bottle. Wipe me clean. Give me a smile. Pat me on the bum." In the next instant, however, the young Max finds himself helplessly and powerlessly passed around from "hand to hand" and then unceremoniously tossed into the air and then caught at the last possible moment. Thus, his childish comfort in knowing that his father is there to handle his physical and emotional needs is suddenly challenged by the realization that his neediness and dependency leaves him at the mercy of people and circumstances. Comfort in the body gives way to a fear of its implications, a lesson born out rather terrifyingly by his inability to do anything to help himself in the face of other peoples' ability to overpower him physically. Thus, like other Pinter males, the site of Max's wound is his body, because in it he reads his own contingency and futility. Here he recalls his victimization at the hands of his father and how powerless he felt as a young child trapped in the infirmity of his own skin, so helpless and dependent, when handled in such a forceful and frightening way.

Max never forgot this experience and the understanding it gave him about his need to rise above a childlike state of physical and emotional dependency, a fact that is evident in his association with the family business which dealt, symbolically enough, with the butchering of dead animals. Critics have often commented on *The Homecoming's* animal imagery. According to Margaret Croyden, "The family's continual reference to animals confirms their primitive world view, and primitive self-image" (46). Croyden goes on to suggest that: "The homecoming [the event in the play] is a gathering

of the clan to settle old differences, and that the male community is analogous “to the ancient tribe - symbol of rejuvenated animality” (49). Bernard Dukore suggests that:

While *The Homecoming* dramatizes a struggle for power and for sexual mastery in what might be called a “civilized jungle,” the adjective “civilized” does not wholly modify the noun’s implication of primitive and elemental urges-urges that underlie the characters’ behavior. The “natural” state, as opposed to the “civilized” state, is emphasized by references to animals. (109)

What these critics have overlooked, however, is the link between these animal images, Max’s chosen profession, and the male characters’ fear of the body in the play and their corresponding need to rise above their own animal (read physical) natures. Max makes two pertinent references to his occupation as a butcher. The first occurs in the first act when he is engaged in the task of berating his brother Sam’s ineffectualness as a man in order to showcase the difference that serves to separate them:

What kind of a son were you, you wet wick? You spent half your time doing crossword puzzles! We took you into the butcher shop, you couldn’t even sweep the dust off the floor. Well, I’ll tell you one thing. I respected my father not only as a man but as a number one butcher! And to prove it I followed him into the shop. I learned to carve the carcass at his knee. I commemorated his name in blood. (39-40)

Max alludes a second time to his career as a butcher in the second act. Significantly, his decision to raise this subject is again a response to his need to denigrate his brother’s manhood, this time in front of Ruth, and corresponds with his need to celebrate the legendary nature of his own: “I worked as a butcher all my life, using the chopper and the slab, the slab, you know what I mean, the chopper and the slab” (47).

Max’s decision to seek out a career as a butcher is a symbolic extension of his masculine project. It represents his commitment to rise above his physical and emotional dependencies. In the first reference, he records with reverence entering behind his father (number one butcher cum high priest of the sacrificial rites of masculinity) as an initiate into his father’s butcher shop (temple). Here young Max learned how to “carve the carcass at his knee.” In the symbolic schema of this masculine rite of passage the “carcass” represents at once the dead animal before him and the animal (human) side of



himself that he was learning at the time to kill and carve up in response to his new calling. In the second reference, Max's masculine triumph over death is more violently represented in his image of "the chopper" which possesses the ability to cut through the flesh and bone before it on "the slab." In this instance, the combination of the chopper (an image of masculine power) with the slab (an image of death) alludes to the manner in which all who did not live up to his standards of masculinity were figuratively slaughtered and then cut up into pieces by him through the agency of his own masculine power. In other words, those who retained their humanity and who happened to get in his way were disposed of with the same cool detachment and efficiency with which he carved up their animal counterparts in the butcher shop.

The two previous examples, the first, in which Max learned the art of immunizing himself emotionally and physically against the world, and the second, in which he describes how he learned his lessons and put them into practice, are summed up rather nicely in Max's remembrance of MacGregor at the beginning of the play:

**MAX:** I used to knock about with a man called MacGregor. I called him Mac. You remember Mac? Eh?

*Pause.*

Huhh! We were two of the most hated men in the West End of London, I tell you, I still got the scars. We'd walk into a place, the whole room'd stand up, they'd make way to let you pass. You never heard such silence. (8)

As fully pledged members of the masculine community, Mac and Max drank and fought their way to demi-god status in the outside world as men who knew their turf and whose turf was well known and never trespassed on by lesser men. Together they accepted and brandished their scars as testaments to their fearlessness and invincibility: that is, as signs of their ability to rise above the heartaches and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to.

As evidenced in Pete's relationship with Virginia, Bert's with Rose, and Edward's with Flora, every masculine subject must have his suitably adjusted and adapted woman/wife; and it was in keeping with this dictum that Max found and married Jessie, who gave him three sons, Teddy, Lenny, Joey. As just evidenced, a number of Max's narratives are concerned with chronicling the formation and the history of his masculine self. A number of additional narratives are devoted to re-presenting the story of his life

with Jessie. There is one such narrative that is worthy of further comment. The narrative in question appears at the beginning of the second act. Having just completed a paean to his dead wife, a woman who he claims possessed “a will of iron, a heart of gold, and a mind” (46), Max immediately launches into an account of his “negotiations with a top-class group of butchers with continental connections”:

**MAX:** I was going into association with them. I remember the night I came home, I kept quiet. First of all I gave Lenny a bath, then Teddy a bath, then Joey a bath. What fun we used to have in the bath, eh, boys? Then I came downstairs and I made Jessie put her feet up on the pouffe - what happened to that pouffe, I haven't seen it for years - she put her feet up on the pouffe and I said to her, Jessie, I think our ship is going to come home, I'm going to treat you to a couple of items, I'm going to buy you a dress in pale corded blue silk, heavily encrusted in pearls, and for casual wear, a pair of pantaloons in lilac flowered taffeta. Then I gave her a drop of cherry brandy. I remember the boys came down, in their pyjamas, all their hair shining, their faces pink, it was before they started shaving, and they knelt down at our feet, Jessie's and mine.  
(46)

Whether or not any part of this account of the past is true - the level of idealization in it strongly suggests that it is not - is unimportant. What is of particular importance, however, is the light that Max's masculine fantasy sheds on his socially acquired ideology of the home as the bastion of masculine certainty and security. Similar to the relationship shared by Bert and Rose in *The Room*, Max was the one given the responsibility to make his way in the world, a task that he seems very able for, as suggested by his rubbing shoulders “with a top-class group of butchers” with whom he planned to go “into association.” Max's freedom of movement, his ability to travel all over the country, is contrasted with Jessie's lack of mobility within the parameters of Max's house, which, significantly enough, was also his father's house before him. As I have attempted to show elsewhere in this thesis, houses, and the rooms within them, are coded masculine. In short, they represent in architectural terms the masculine rage for order and permanence writ large inside (psyche) and outside (society) the male mind in defiance of the physical facts of life and death. In this respect, Max's image of his wife's permanent positioning within the precincts of his house is intimately connected with the

way in which he sees his wife and his children reinforcing his vision of how he wants the world to be. Thus, Jessie and the three kids in his narrative are little more than mirrors for him, in which he can see himself safely and comfortably in accordance with his image of the magically powerful and invulnerable man he wants to be.

In his narrative, then, we come into direct contact with Max's chronicle of himself as a masculine subject. From the moment he arrives home, he is in charge of things. His first task is to bathe his sons, baptizing them once again in the name of their father. Next, he proceeds downstairs, where he makes his wife "put her feet up on a pouffe." While the image seems generous and even caring - an acknowledgment that she is worked off her feet in her domestic setting - it also smacks of staging, as he settles her in, at his direction, to a front row seat for his command performance. In what follows he announces that, thanks to him, their "ship is going to come home" and then, as if borne aloft on a wave of generosity and joy, describes the clothing that he will buy her to celebrate their good fortune. Again, while this gesture might seem on the surface harmless enough, it brings back to mind a similar gesture by Pete in *The Dwarfs*. In the novel, Pete is in the habit of making clothes for Virginia to wear, a fact that coincides rather uncomfortably with his need to make her over in accordance with his masculine self-image. Thus, instead of making Jessie and Virginia, masculine attempts to clothe each of them are designed to eliminate their identities by dressing them up in accordance with socially inspired (male) fantasies of womanhood. Therefore, behind the soft imagery in the narrative, and its deceptively cooing tone, Max reveals the extent to which his ability to feel at home in the world was predicated on a woman/wife's willingness to allow her husband to define the spatial parameters (physical and psychological) of her experiential reach and personal identity. The narrative ends with a significant tableau: after their bath, and their father's attempt to reaffirm the domestic situation between himself and his wife, the children, as if on cue, come downstairs "in their pyjamas, all their hair shining, their faces pink ... and they knelt down at our feet, Jessie's and mine." The domestic arrangement is now full and complete, the house is once again in order, with Max as the king, Jessie as his queen, and the children as his adoring subjects, thankful for the bounty and the security and the peace that Max has brought home with him.

But something went terribly wrong for Max and his sons, something so traumatic that it threatened to collapse the very foundations upon which their home was built and to destroy the insular safety of their family life. Although the nature of this something is not fully revealed until the end of the play when Sam, Max's brother, comes forward to declare, "MacGregor had Jessie in the back of my cab as I drove them along" (78), the atmosphere of the play is poisoned by insinuations and allegations to this effect, that skirt but never disclose the source of the trauma. Indeed, before the arrival of Ruth, the lives of the male characters in *The Homecoming* might best be summed up as a post-traumatic cycle of unhappy returns. In a bizarrely paradoxical fashion, the male members of this household play a game of hide-and-seek with the past. On the one hand they are inclined continually to draw themselves closer and closer to what *The Dwarfs'* Len calls "the danger area," the site of their male wound. Given that Jessie's trespass against the safety and the sanctity of the home (their world) was sexual in nature, the site of their wound is the human body. Thus, in their minds, it was Jessie's body - her inability to control her sexual urges - that brought the loss of (patriarchal) Eden and all their psychic woe. On the other hand, they are equally inclined to withdraw themselves farther and farther away from the source of their wound. In these instances they practice the art of masculine detachment by denying what happened and by striving to hide their wounded natures from themselves and from others.

The study of trauma provides us with a framework within which to better understand the shattered and dysfunctional lives of *The Homecoming's* men. According to Judith Herman, "... traumatized people find themselves reenacting some aspect of the trauma scene in disguised form ..." (40). Herman goes on to say that:

Most theorists ... speculate that the repetitive reliving of the traumatic experience must represent a spontaneous, unsuccessful attempt at healing. Janet spoke of the person's need to "assimilate" and "liquidate" traumatic experience ... In his use of language, Janet implicitly recognized that helplessness constitutes the essential insult of trauma, and that restitution requires the restoration of a sense of efficacy and power. The traumatized person, he believed, "remains confronted by a difficult situation, one in which he has not been able to play a satisfactory part, one to which his adaptation has been imperfect, so he continues to make efforts at adaptation."

More recent theorists also conceptualize intrusion phenomenon, including reenactments, as spontaneous attempts to integrate the traumatic event. The psychiatrist Mardi Horowitz ... suggests that unassimilated traumatic experiences are stored in a special kind of “active memory,” which has an “intrinsic tendency to repeat the representation of contents.” The trauma is resolved only when the survivor develops a new mental “schema” for understanding what has happened. (41)

Jessie’s rejection of the character role that Max had assigned to her in the narrative of himself resulted in his being displaced from his masculine subject position. Moreover, from the perspective of Max’s sons, who had learned to see their place in the narrative in terms of the respective character positions of their mother and father, Jessie’s decision to erase her character altogether from it caused “a disruption in the (imaginary) equivalence between the members of the family and the ideological subject positions that shape the experience of paternity and maternity within patriarchal culture” (Silverstein 81). The end result of this dislocation and “disruption” was traumatic shock, feelings of helplessness and paralysis, and a corresponding drive to adapt and to restore, in Herman’s words, “a sense of efficacy and power” (41).

The father’s, the uncle’s, and the sons’ drive to adapt to what happened and to overcome their feelings of powerlessness and helplessness are represented in the play by the renovations they have made to the house. When Teddy arrives home with Ruth after an absence of six years, he briefly alludes to the nature of the changes:

**TEDDY:** What do you think of this room? Big, isn’t it? It’s a big house. I mean, it’s a fine room, don’t you think? Actually, there was a wall across there ... with a door. We knocked it down ... years ago ... to make an open living area. The structure wasn’t affected, you see. My mother was dead. (21)

Teddy’s very literal and casual account of the physical alterations that his family made to the home after the death of Jessie belies the deeper metaphorical (psychological) meaning of these changes. To the extent that the house can be read as a symbol for patriarchal authority and masculine identity, an authority and identity that was threatened with collapse after Jessie’s infidelity, the renovations are the spatial equivalent of the mental and emotional adjustments that Max and his sons underwent in response to what had

happened, in order to keep their house standing. In other words, feeling useless and paralyzed and threatened, and unable to deal with the implications of what took place and why it happened, Max and his sons reacted by striving to overcome their feelings of uselessness and weakness by denying the event and its effect on them and by seeming to get on with their lives. In the words of Judith Herman, they were either unwilling or unable “to process new information in order to bring up to date the inner schemata of the self and the world” (41). Thus, again according to Herman, as survivors of trauma they were rendered incapable of developing “a new mental schema for understanding what has happened” (41). In demolishing old walls they were effectively attempting to demolish their individual and collective memory of the event. Similarly, in moving into a new living area, they were enacting physically what they wanted to enact mentally, that is, to start their lives over again as if nothing had ever happened to them in a new part of the house. These renovations, then, are little more than an exercise in mental gymnastics through which they attempted to heal their psychic health and to cure their emotional imbalance. As such, they are an architectural extension of their need to adapt their lives in the aftermath of trauma.

While a strategy of denial and avoidance might be one form of adaptation, it is at best a rather dysfunctional one, a fact that is borne out in the lives of *The Homecoming*'s males throughout the course of the play. Their house remains haunted by the ghost of Jessie, and their room has become a post-traumatic survival zone in which Max, Sam, Lenny, Joey, and Teddy continue to revisit the past as the site of their collective trauma. In psychological terms, in this house and in this room the male members of this family are trapped in a cycle of reenacting the past. This adds a certain (metaphorical) irony to Teddy's claim, just shortly after he arrives back home and looks about the room, that “Nothing's changed. Still the same” (22). The only way for meaningful change to happen here, change that would enable them to move on, would be for them to dig more deeply into the nature of what happened. To dig in this manner, however, would threaten to expose the weakness of the foundations of the house itself and what it represents - its role as a social/cultural anodyne for death anxiety. It would also expose their complicity in the distortion of their own personalities - and the personalities of others, like Jessie - in the name of fostering its illusions. Their inability to mourn this loss and to move on with

their lives, then, stems from a failure to transcend their thinking about the nature and the function of the family as a social institution. In other words, they have no way, it seems, of rising above years of social conditioning that have narrowed their potential and distorted their perceptions. These are men bound and blinded by the social discourse of patriarchal culture. These are men so lost in the social drama of their lives that they have misplaced the capacity to think about what happened all those years ago, except in the heavily scripted terms of blame, shame, and guilt. In other words, they lack the awareness and understanding of the extent to which their identity as men, the identity of women, and the function of the family in the maintenance of these identities, is socially engineered.

Reenactments come in a variety of shapes and sizes in *The Homecoming*. That said, however, the dialectic that informs them never seems to vary. On the one hand, the men of this house exhibit the constant need to establish themselves as masculine subjects. In this context, they are quick to point out their absolute mastery over their chosen field of endeavor. Max, as I have demonstrated earlier in this chapter, celebrates his ability as a first-class butcher. Similarly, Lenny extols his knowledge of the streets and his knowledge of women in keeping with his chosen line of work, pimping; Sam applauds his worthiness and worth as a chauffeur; Joey celebrates his toughness in the ring (as a boxer) and in his choice of occupation, a demolition worker; and Teddy honors his ability as an intellectual, a philosopher. In all of these instances, work is linked to manhood and manhood is conceived in terms of personal efficacy and power as expressed in one's ability to be physically and emotionally prepared for any and all situations and eventualities. In this respect, Max, Lenny, Teddy, and Joey inhabit the same post-traumatic masculine world as Len and Pete (*The Dwarfs*), Bert (*The Room*), and Edward (*A Slight Ache*).

On the other hand, as much as the men of this house strive to build themselves up, they are as prone to pull themselves down. In this context, they often seem to intentionally subvert their own authority in order to showcase their ineffectualness as the managers of their own physical and emotional lives. Their tendency to do this suggests an awareness of their own incapacitation and paralysis in the face of what life has to throw at them. In the scheme of the play, this contrary impulse is linked to the

helplessness and powerlessness that they felt when they were first traumatized by the potential collapse of the patriarchal universe. It confirms that the nature of the trauma was, in Janet's words, '... one in which [the victim] has not been able to play a satisfactory part, one to which his adaptation has been imperfect, so that he continues to make efforts at adaptation' (quoted in Herman 41).

Max's tendency is to shift between his need to proclaim his status as a man and to punish himself for failing to live up to his own manly standards. Therefore, his speech alternates uneasily between a celebration of his greatest masculine triumphs and his greatest masculine failure, his inability to keep Jessie in her gendered place. In keeping with his masculine persona, he holds and grips, points and employs his walking stick as a weapon. Through it he still continues to wage war on the body, for there is no place in the masculine economy of this house for any sign of fleshly weakness. His message is clear: avoid the skin, avoid the stick, and avoid the pain. Max's stick, then, is a vestigial sign of his masculine authority that he exhibits and brandishes as his chosen method of intimidation. That he uses it to intimidate his grown sons into following the straight and narrow with respect to the lessons he taught them years before is suggested by Lenny's derisive reaction to his father's attempt to threaten him:

**LENNY.** You'll go before me, Dad, if you talk to me in that tone of voice.

**MAX.** Will I, you bitch?

*MAX grips his stick.*

**LENNY.** Oh, Daddy, you're not going to use that stick on me, are you? Eh? Don't use your stick on me Daddy. No, please. It wasn't my fault, it was one of the others. I haven't done anything wrong, Dad, honest. Don't clout me with that stick, Dad.

*Silence.*

*MAX sits hunched. (11)*

The final stage direction here serves as a good segue into the second way in which Max's stick resonates in the play. Max's attempt to discipline and punish Lenny for his insubordination culminates in his subsequent disempowerment as a man and as a father.

On another level, then, Max's current situation in the home is an archetypal one. In a sense, he is the wounded Fisher-King of medieval romance, the head of his people who has sustained a wound in his groin that has brought the shadow of death into his



kingdom. Jessie's adultery wounded his masculine status in the eyes of his brother and sons, and rendered him metaphorically impotent and infertile. Now, caught in the twilight years of his masculine discontent, trapped in a body that has long since started to deteriorate, he feels his physical infirmity even more heavily. Long gone are the days when he could wield his mighty chopper literally above the slab and figuratively above the heads of other people. Indeed, he has long since traded in his chopper for a walking stick, a visible sign that he can no longer fully support his own weight. As he admits to Lenny at the beginning of the play, "I'm getting old, my word of honour" (8). What is important to realize here is that his physical deterioration now puts him increasingly at the mercy of his body and the inevitability of his death. This in turn takes him back in time to when he felt the knife of life, in the form of Jessie's sexual indiscretion, slip unnoticed under his masculine armor and cut his skin, creating a wound that has never healed because he has never been able to admit to it. Therefore, as much as his possession of the stick is designed to convince himself and the other members of the house of his masculine strength and invincibility and his fitness to continue to rule his kingdom, it also serves as a pneumatic prop in the dramatic reenactment of his trauma.

Max is not the only wounded male, and he is not the only member of this household who vacillates between applauding his masculine merits and booing the dismalness of his own manly performance. Sam, for example, is Max's counterpart in terms of age; he is also Max's counterpart in terms of his need to confirm through verification by others that he holds the status of a man. Moreover, like Max, he exhibits the same tendency to reenact his role in the family trauma. Together, they are the keepers of the keys of the post-traumatic male kingdom in *The Homecoming*. Sam's masculine identity is directly connected to his job as a chauffeur. Driving is the means through which Sam attempts to forge a prosthetic relationship with the world. In this respect, his situation is quite akin to Bert's in *The Room*. In that play an essential part of Bert's masculine character was forged through the relationship that he shared with his van, with his ability to look after it and to drive it and himself to the absolute limit. What is of further interest in terms of Sam's connection with Bert is the extent to which Bert's driving is linked to his sexual relationship - perhaps, more correctly, his seeming lack of a sexual relationship - with his wife, Rose. In other words, one reading of Bert's

relationship with his van is to suggest that he has tried to make up for his sexual, hence bodily, inadequacies (impotence) in the art and the act of driving. Indeed, Kidd's description of Bert's masterful handling of his vehicle, "Yes, I was hearing you go off, when was it, the other morning, yes. Very smooth. I can tell a good gear change" (107), serves to reinforce this interpretation if we equate "go off" with orgasm. In much the same manner, Sam equates his masculine virility with the act of driving:

**SAM.** After all, I'm experienced. I was driving a dust cart at the age of nineteen. Then I was in long distance haulage. I had ten years as a taxi driver and I've had five years as a private chauffeur. (14)

To which Max ironically responds:

**MAX.** It's funny you never got married, isn't it? A man with all your gifts. *Pause.* Isn't it? A man like you. (14)

Max discerns that Sam's driving is linked to an urgent need to establish his entitlement to masculine status, and that the urgency of his brother's need suggests Sam's sexual impotence. Indeed, it is quite possible to read Sam's vehicle as a phallic, armor-plated extension of his weak and vulnerable body, in which he penetrates the world with control and ease and power. Thus, Sam's need to constantly announce that he is "... the best chauffeur in the firm" (13) is a sign of his need to overcompensate for his own creaturely limitations in the best tradition of Pinter males.

Ironically enough, while Sam's car is, in his mind, the site of his greatest masculine triumph, it is also the site of his greatest masculine failure: for it was in the backseat of Sam's car that he allowed, Mac, Max's best friend, to have sex with Jessie, Max's wife. Even more ironically, while Sam constantly strives to get Max to shoulder the blame for what happened, the manner in which he chooses to do so only ends up serving to remind him of his own complicity in what happened and therefore to expose his utter ineffectualness as a man. Sam's strategy is born out of the ritualistically post-traumatic nature of the relationship he shares with Max. The ritual goes like this: Max attacks Sam's masculinity; Sam, cornered and defensive, attacks back by making an oblique reference to Jessie's infidelity that is designed to mock Max's failure as a man. There is a good example of this post-traumatic cycle in the first act of the play:

**MAX.** What you been doing, banging away at your lady customers, have you?

**SAM.** Not me.

**MAX.** In the back of the Snipe? Been having a few crafty reefs in a layby, have you?

**SAM.** Not me.

**MAX.** On the backseat? What about the armrest, was it up or down?

**SAM.** I've never done that kind of thing in my car.

**MAX.** Above all that kind of thing, are you Sam?

**SAM.** Too true.

**MAX.** Above having a good bang on the backseat, are you?

**SAM.** Yes, I leave that to others.

**MAX.** You leave it to others? What others? You paralyzed prat!

**SAM.** I don't mess up my car! Or my ... my boss' car! Like other people.

**MAX.** Other people! What other people?

*Pause.*

What other people?

*Pause.*

**SAM.** Other people.

*Pause. (15)*

Sam's reference here to "other people" is, of course, a reference to Jessie and MacGregor. The "mess" he alludes to is the inevitable leakage of semen and bodily fluids after sex, a "mess" that he had to clean up in the aftermath of allowing the illicit liaison between his sister-in-law and his brother's best friend to take place. The "mess" can also refer to the traumatic fallout caused by this sin of commission by Jessie and Mac, and Sam's own sin of omission - his apparent inability or unwillingness to stop what was happening at the time. Thus, in his attempt to defend his masculinity he inadvertently subverts it by obliging himself to relive both the sights and the sounds of two people going at it, two people that he knows should never have been going at it, and then having to wipe up after them. Still haunted by what he witnessed and by his helplessness and powerlessness in the face of it, and never having dealt with it, he is forced to reenact the trauma over and over again.

Teddy and Lenny also share with their father and their uncle the impulse to revisit the site of the family trauma. They are, along with Joey, the heirs apparent to Max and Sam's post-traumatic wasteland. Cast out the matrix of their family universe in the wake

of the disruption caused by their mother's infidelity, Lenny and Teddy are traumatized males who by no fault of their own were rendered helpless and powerless by their mother's and father's and uncle's failures to live up to the patriarchal script. Too young to do anything, or to be of any help at the time, they remain hostages to how ineffectual and how lost they felt as children. They also remain prisoners to the sense they were given all those years ago as to the contingency of everyone and everything around them. Consequently, they have learned how to foster within themselves compensatory fantasies of their own masculine powers. Having never dealt with the source and the nature of their trauma, they are, like their father and their uncle, constantly obliged to reenact and to re-experience it in order to overcome the feelings of disempowerment they felt as young boys. Rather ironically, then, their attempts as adults to demonstrate a masculine mastery over self and world are in fact attempts to rewrite the past in order to erase the paralysis and the fear they experienced as children. I would first like to deal with Lenny.

The dialectic that wages within Lenny between his status as a man and his status as a wounded child is demonstrated very clearly during his initial encounter with Ruth in his first extended monologue. Lenny's narrative goes as follows: One night when he was down by the docks watching the longshoremen at work he was approached by a woman who had been looking for him for days. The woman makes him a proposition, which he admits he would normally have accepted. In this instance, however, he rejects her proposal because, in his mind, she was falling apart with the pox. The woman, however, is persistent. So, to put her in her place he punches her, and thinks for a moment about killing her, which would have been a simple matter because her chauffeur had gone off to take a drink and would not have said anything anyway because he was an old friend of Lenny's family. Instead, he punches her again and kicks her twice and leaves it at that.

The violence that Lenny directs at the woman in his narrative is, of course, directed at Ruth, a female intruder in his home, whose origins and purpose are unclear to him. Therefore, his narrative is an attempt to establish his masculine territory and to give Ruth a sense of her worth on his turf. The opening part of Lenny's narrative is resplendently phallic. He is down by the docks watching "all the men jibbing the boom, out in the harbour, and playing about with the yardarm ... " (30). His relaxed presence here suggests his inclusion in this fraternity of potently active and masterful men who

work and know the harbour, which in the scheme of his symbolism is coded feminine (passive). Like them he can always fit a bit of play - sex - into his work schedule; that is, he is willing to play about with his yardarm (penis) when the call and the mood arises. This reading of work and play is essential to decoding his next image: his assault on the woman whom he declares “was falling apart with the pox.” Traumatized Pinter males always seem to have disease and defilement on their minds. Lenny’s use of this image shows the extent to which he has imbibed his father’s version of women based on his experience with Jessie. When Max first meets Ruth the morning after her arrival he declares, “We’ve had a smelly scrubber in my house all night. We’ve had a stinking pox-ridden slut in my house all night” (41). That Max gives vent to his surprise at finding a woman in his house in this way is not altogether surprising. It stems from his fear of the body, a fear that was exacerbated when Jessie betrayed him by surrendering to her impulses and giving herself sexually to MacGregor. Thus, he reads Ruth precisely as he read Jessie, that is, in terms of the threat that her body poses as a sign of contingency and change to the male community gathered under his roof. Therefore, Lenny’s use of disease imagery and his account of how he beat up a woman that he deemed to be riddled with pox is borne of the very same fear as his father’s, and in the presence of the very same woman his father verbally assaulted, Ruth. Lenny’s description of attacking the woman is a symbolic attack on the body as an unpredictable agent of transformation. The casual and detached style of his retelling of this event is designed to reinforce for Ruth, and again for himself, how easily he is able to rise above the body and his own bodily needs.

As much as his narrative builds his masculinity up, it also tears it down, for Lenny, try as he might, is still lost and trapped in his traumatic past. The first thing to note is Lenny’s description of setting: “I was standing alone under an arch.” In fact, he makes reference to this arch a second time: “Well this lady was taking liberties with me down under this arch” (30). The image of the arch in his narrative is a displaced reference to the arch of the room that is itself a reminder of the symbolic renovations made to the house after the death of Jessie. Moreover, the woman that he imagines to be “taking liberties with [him] down under this arch” is a displaced allusion to his mother, who took certain liberties with his father, because of his father’s failure to live up to his manly responsibilities. The outcome of these “liberties” almost destroyed the family home and

culminated in Lenny's childhood trauma. In a sense, then, Lenny is endeavoring to negotiate the present - the presence of Ruth in his home - in terms that will make up for his father's, and indirectly his own, inability to deal with Jessie in the past. A second important feature of his narrative is his reference to the woman's "chauffeur." Here there is an unmistakable connection between this shadowy figure in the narrative and Lenny's uncle, Sam. The chauffeur is described "as an old friend of the family" (31) and he is also cast as negligent given the fact that he has abandoned his female employer in order to feed his appetite for alcohol. Once again, then, we have a veiled mention of Jessie's sexual indiscretion and a reference to a second senior member of Lenny's current household who failed to live up to his masculine obligations at the time. All in all, Lenny's narrative emerges as evidence of his inability to adapt in a healthy manner to his traumatic experience as a child and his recurrent need to reenact the past.

Teddy is in all likelihood the most traumatized member of this dysfunctional family circle. Ironically enough, he is the one who thinks he is the most fully recovered, and therefore the most completely masculine. In terms of the Pinter canon, Teddy's heritage as a masculine character includes the likes of *The Dwarfs*' Pete and *A Slight Ache*'s Edward. Like Pete, Teddy extols the virtues of an intellectual approach to life. Like Pete again, his goal is to convince himself and everyone else around him that he has nothing to do with, in Pete's words, "this cycle of love and despair" that he believes is everyone else's "motive and business" (179). Indeed, one could quite easily imagine him speaking the very same words that Pete spoke to Len in *The Dwarfs*:

By elastic I mean being prepared for your own deviations. You don't know where you're going to come out at the next moment. You're like a rotten old shirt. Buck your ideas up. They'll lock you away before you're much older, if you go on like this. You want to cut out this terror and pity lark. It's bullshit. Commonsense can work wonders. (49)

Compare this, for example, with Teddy's comment to his family that they should read his critical works because then they would be able to "... see how people can maintain ... intellectual equilibrium. Intellectual equilibrium" (62). Like Edward, Teddy is an academic, a philosopher, a man with a fully developed inclination and ability to abstract himself from the world in order to see the big picture clearly and precisely. Again, it is

not a hard stretch to imagine him discussing Africa with a fellow academic and saying: “I understand in the Gobi desert that you can come across some very strange sights. Never been there myself. Studied the maps though. Fascinating things, maps” (183).

The fact is, however, that Teddy has been on the run in America from his family, from himself, and from their collective trauma for six years. In the interim he has taken a career and taken a wife, raised three sons, all in a bid to put a physical and an emotional distance between the present and the past, the site of his childhood wounds. He believes that he has been highly successful in this regard. Teddy strives to emphasize the mental and emotional distance that he has traveled in America during his time there in his extended speech in the second act as the sickness that he sees at the heart of his family threatens to engulf him. Lured on provocatively by Ruth to talk about his critical works, Teddy launches into his post-traumatic masculine credo:

**TEDDY.** You wouldn't understand my works. You wouldn't have the faintest idea of what they were about. You wouldn't appreciate the points of reference. You're way behind. All of you. There's no point in sending you my works. You'd be lost. It's nothing to do with question of intelligence. It's a way of being able to look at the world. It's a question of how far you can operate on things and not in things. I mean it's a question of your capacity to ally the two, to relate the two. To *see!* I'm the one who can see. That's why I can write my critical works. Might do you good ... have a look at them ... see how certain people can view ... things ... how certain people can maintain ... intellectual equilibrium. Intellectual equilibrium. You're just objects. You just move about. I can observe it. I can see what you do. It's the same as I do. But you're lost in it. You won't get me being ... I won't be lost in it. (62)

There are two features of Teddy's speech that are worthy of note. The first is his heavy emphasis on sight, the distance sense, an emphasis that connects him with other Pinter males who are also prone to overemphasize the metaphorical association of the eye and the I. *The Dwarfs'* Len, for example, is compulsively drawn to his glasses and obsessively concerned with any alteration in his ability to see things clearly. Similarly, Edward's slight ache in his eyes causes him concern precisely because it impairs his ability to abstract himself from others and from his experience with the world. In other words, eye problems are associated with traumatic memories that effect self-perception.

In Teddy's speech "see" is used four times; "look" is used twice; and "view" and "observe" are used once. This is the voice of Teddy, the emotionally detached and physically distant Teddy. This is the voice of the man who believes that he has come to terms with and adapted to his childhood trauma. But there is another voice in this speech, and this brings up its second important feature. In it, Teddy uses the adverb "lost" on three separate occasions. The first time he uses it he is referring to how his family would get so easily lost in his works (read world). The second time he uses it, "lost" is appended to the indefinite pronoun "it." This is the voice of the child in Teddy who still remains "lost" in his trauma despite his protestations to the contrary. While Teddy remains icily in control of the first part of his speech, the heavy use of ellipsis in the second part of it seems to suggest that he is less in control of his reaction to the situation in which he finds himself. Indeed, it is possible to argue that being back home with his family, and with Ruth steadily moving beyond his ability to control her, that he is beginning to experience a particularly frightening moment of *déjà vu* - the growing similarity between his wife and Jessie - and the equally disturbing inference that he has directly contributed to the reenactment of his own traumatic memories. In fact, although he does not seem to acknowledge it, he began this reenactment six years ago when he married Ruth and headed for America, where he went in accordance with his need to reenact a more successful outcome to his father's family crisis. For this has been the length and breadth of Teddy's masculine project in America: to refashion himself as a new and improved version of his father; to refashion Ruth as a new and improved version of Jessie; and to fashion his three sons as new and improved versions of himself, Lenny, and Joey. He had in fact never left home.

If Teddy is, perhaps, the most wounded male, Joey, the youngest member of this male community, is the least. While he does exhibit the symptoms and the mannerisms of his post-traumatic upbringing, he also exhibits a certain quality throughout the play that serves to set him apart from the rest of the male herd. Indeed, it is safe to say that he inhabits a liminal position somewhere between boyhood and manhood. When we meet Joey for the first time he is a young man following in the footsteps of his father and brother, Lenny. Not surprisingly in a household in which the fear of the body is rampant, he is in training to become a boxer, a thumper and a basher of other men's bodies and a



disciplined fashioner of his own. In the ring, he has no doubt learned quickly the painful costs associated with leaving any part of his body exposed and vulnerable. Moreover, in metaphorical terms, his ability to bob and weave, jab and cross, attack and defend will serve him well in the pugilistic arena that his home has become. In this connection it is quite significant that Joey's first appearance in the play coincides with the end of a verbal sparring match between Max and Sam that has just concluded before he enters. Arriving home, he immediately announces that he is hungry because he has "been training down at the gym" (16), and inadvertently sets off another flurry of verbal sparring, this time between his father and Lenny. This exchange between Max and Lenny culminates in the threat of physical violence, with Max telling Lenny, "I'll give you a proper tuck up one of these nights, son. You mark my word" (17). Joey is the first one to speak in the heavy silence that follows Lenny's departure from the room:

**JOEY:** I've been training with Bobby Dodd.

*Pause.*

**JOEY:** And I had a good go at the bag as well.

*Pause.*

**JOEY:** I wasn't in bad trim.

*Pause. (17)*

This is one of the moments in the play when the youthfulness - or, perhaps, it might be more accurate to say, the childlike quality - of Joey is in evidence. Joey's comment about who he has been boxing and how well he has been boxing is not spoken with the confidence and certainty that might characterize, say, Lenny, if he were the one telling this tale. There is a boyish simplicity and uncertainty in Joey's account of what he has been up to that suggests that his need is to impress his father and to have his father confirm that he has done well. Given the fact that he has just witnessed the encounter (standoff) between Max and Lenny, it is likely that at this moment, alone with his father, he is trying to lay his claim to a masculine stake in this household by getting his father to compliment and applaud his commitment to the manly art of boxing. The outcome, however, is not the one Joey wants. Max proceeds to mock his son's ability as a fighter, and, by association, his status as a man at this stage in his life:

**MAX:** I'll tell you what you've got to do. What you've got to do is you've got to learn how to defend yourself, and you've got to learn how to attack. That's your only problem as a

boxer. You don't know how to defend yourself, and you don't know how to attack. (17)

Max regards his son's attempt to garner his favor as a sign of Joey's continuing weakness. His constant repetition of the phrase "you've got to" is at once suggesting that Joey is still too sensitive, too yielding and uncertain, and that he still has lots of work to do if he wants to become a full-fledged member of this masculine household and that he needs to get a move on. Joey leaves this scene like a wounded little child whose father has just embarrassed his attempt to show him what he can do.

For what it is worth, Max's diagnosis of what ails his son, its twisted logic aside, is quite accurate. Joey does not belong in this household of traumatized males. Still very much connected to his body and to his emotions, Joey is on another wavelength. This is demonstrated quite clearly in the first act. Surprised by the sudden appearance of Teddy and Ruth, Max immediately launches into a character assassination of the woman he sees standing before him:

**MAX.** I've never had a whore under this roof before. Ever since your mother died ... They come back from America, they bring the slopbucket with them. They bring the bedpan with them. (*To TEDDY.*) Take that disease away from me. Get her away from me. (42)

What follows is a scene of pandemonium, a scene that is initiated by Joey's response to his father's comment:

**JOEY.** You're an old man. (*To TEDDY.*) He's an old man.  
*LENNY walks into the room, in a dressing gown.*  
*He stops.*  
*They all look around.*  
*MAX turns his back, hits JOEY in the stomach with all his might.*  
*JOEY contorts, staggers across the stage. MAX with the exertion of the blow, begins to collapse. His knees buckle.*  
*He clutches his stick.*  
*Sam moves forward to help him.*  
*MAX hits him across the head with his stick, MAX sits, head on hands.*  
*JOEY, hands pressed to stomach, sinks down at the feet of RUTH.*  
*She looks down at him.*  
*LENNY and TEDDY are still.*

JOEY *slowly stands. He is close to RUTH. He turns from RUTH, looks round at MAX.*  
 SAM *clutches his head.*  
 MAX *breathes heavily, very slowly gets to his feet.*  
 JOEY *moves to him.*  
*They look at each other.*  
*Silence. (42-3)*

This is a particularly interesting mime. First, the disruption in the cycle of normative masculine life in this household is caused by the sudden appearance of a woman. Second, it is also caused by Joey's unwillingness or inability to react in a suitable manner, in a stimulus-response fashion, to his father's post-traumatic depiction of women. Indeed, he seems embarrassed by his father's use of imagery, a fact that sets him far apart from Lenny, and strives to offer up an apology in the form of an excuse for his father's outburst. Third, he triggers what subsequently happens by making reference to his father's infirmity. That is, he brings up the subject of the body, Max's greatest fear, in the form of his father's age: "He's a old man" (42). In other words, he says what Max must be thinking and feeling in the presence of Ruth, who reminds him of the wound he received from Jessie years before. The end result of Joey's trespass is a display of bodily suffering the like of which has not been endured by these men in this house for some years. Joey sustains a painful blow to the stomach that incapacitates him; Sam receives a painful whack on the head from Max's stick; and Max's "knees buckle" and he begins "to collapse," "breathing heavily." In the case of Max and Sam, it is as if years of sublimated pain and suffering are suddenly let lose through their bodies, as for once they twist and contort in response to feeling something. It is at this point in the play that the body is released from its captivity. Joey has inadvertently initiated the return of physical and emotional energy to the lives of the other men; Ruth will set the ceremony of life in full swing. This link between Joey and Ruth is suggested by one of the stage directions guiding this scene:

JOEY, *hands pressed to his stomach, sinks down at the feet of RUTH.*  
*She looks down at him" (43).*

This direction functions in two ways. First, it foreshadows Joey and Ruth's acceptance and embrace of each other in the play's final tableau:

JOEY *walks slowly across the room.*  
*He kneels at her chair.*  
*She touches his head lightly.*  
*He puts his head in her lap (80).*

Second, to the extent that Joey is brought to Ruth's feet in response to his physical suffering, this stage direction, in concert with Joey and Ruth's participation in the play's final tableau, suggests that the process of recovery and healing for the members of *The Homecoming's* male community begins with their acceptance of the creaturely limitations imposed on them by their bodies. Indeed, the ability to come home, to be at home, in this play depends on a character's willingness to re-immense him/herself in the physical facts of life. Therefore, at the heart of any successful homecoming, the play suggests, there must be a willingness to embrace, and love, and celebrate the human body as the site of human possibility and limitation.

Ruth is the play's leading exponent of this philosophy. Led to America by her husband, it is likely that she allowed herself to undergo a sea change under his direction and in his hands, a personal transformation so profound that she lost touch with her animal (bodily) nature. Irving Wardle sums up what might have happened to Ruth in this manner:

The clue to the Teddy-Ruth relationship is in their contrasted imagery of cleanliness and dirt. America for Teddy is a land of swimming pools, early morning sunlight, and quiet sedentary work. In London, he says, there is nowhere to bathe: "It's like a urinal. A filthy urinal!" This is the view of the cerebral creature whose change of country amounts to an amputation of the animal inheritance. For Ruth, America is a desert populated by insects; it is not an environment that supports animal life. (43)

One clue to Ruth having to give up her "animal inheritance" lies in her remembrance in the second act of the time when she was "A photographic model for the body" (57). She remembers a house, trees, and a lake: "... we walked down to the lake ... and did our modeling there" (57). She goes on to describe how, "Just before we went to America I went down there. I walked from the station to the gate and then I walked up to the drive. There were lights on ... I stood in the drive ... the house was very light" (57-8). In this sequence Ruth has come down to the house and to the lake, a scene filled with sensual

and, perhaps, sexual memories for her, to say goodbye to her old life and to her more primitive emotional and physical self. Thus, in her choice to leave for America she had made a decision to leave an important part of herself behind. Therefore, her decision to leave Teddy and to stay with his family at the end of the play suggests that she has come home to claim the disenfranchised part of herself that she left behind six years before. Indeed, in rejecting Teddy she is exchanging the dry hard landscape of a life (lie) of the mind with him for the soft, moist, and fertile delta of her own body.

Ruth's bid to recover her ancestral roots - to stay true to herself - is similar to Jessie's before her. Like Jessie, Ruth refuses to continue to subject herself to a course of life as defined by men. In particular, she rejects the male need to control the relationship she shares with her own body:

Look at me. I ... move my leg. That's all it is. But I wear ... underwear ... which moves with me ... it ... captures your attention. Perhaps you misinterpret. The action is simple. It's a leg ... moving. My lips move. Why don't you restrict your observations to that? Perhaps the fact that they move is more significant ... than the words which come through them. You must bear that ... possibility in mind. (53)

According to Marc Silverstein,

Ruth's comments foreground the female body's capacity to escape the (masculine) systems of representation that attempt to produce an appropriate - ie., unthreatening - femininity. ... When Ruth suggests that men "misinterpret" the female body, she emphasizes that the representational fashioning and coding of the body remains quite distinct from the body's actual existence, even as the author(izer)s of such codings attempt to deny the distinction by forcing the body to live out its representation in a socially palpable form. (94)

Ruth's homecoming, then, to the extent that it suggests her rejection of masculine control over her body, takes us back full circle to Virginia's decision in *The Dwarfs* not to sacrifice herself on the altar of Pete's masculine needs. Moreover, in Ruth's decision at the end of the play to celebrate her physicality by remaining with Teddy's family - a decision that promises to unravel the threads of the fabric of Max, Lenny, and Joey's post-traumatic life together - we hear an echo of Virginia's decision to sleep with Mark in order to shake up the post-traumatic alliance between him, Len, and Pete. In this context,

one aspect of the power that women possess in Pinter's works is their ability to help men leave the symbolic houses and rooms they inhabit out of their fear of the metaphysical implications of their bodies. The nature and the scope of this power is summed up rather nicely in the following description of Virginia in *The Dwarfs*:

Virginia lay crouched on the sofa. The room was still. A shaft of sunlight fell across the carpet. There was no sound.

She stood up. The posture of the room changed. The sunlight jolted. The room settled. The sunlight reformed. But, she thought, I stand upright and the balance is disturbed. I have thrown a spanner in the works. I have done violence to normally imperturbable forces. I have inflicted a reverse. (23)

Significantly, Virginia's ability to overcome the supposedly "imperturbable forces" of the post-traumatic masculine mind by inflicting "a reverse" is expressed here as her effect on a room - the premier symbol of post-traumatic masculinity in Pinterland. At the end of *The Homecoming*, as Joey goes to Ruth, kneels beside her, and puts his head in her lap, the ice of post-traumatic culture in this all-male house begins to thaw and the emotional climate begins to change. Ruth has broken the spell that has kept these men so entranced for many years. Like Virginia, she too has overcome "imperturbable forces" and "inflicted a reverse." In the process she has laid the ghost of Jessie to rest and offered the youngest son of this all-male family the chance to escape the curse of masculinity that has plagued his house for generations.

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