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# Whispering Together in the Dark

Rereading Samuel Beckett's Homosociality  
through Harold Pinter

Aaron Botwick CUNY

## ABSTRACT

In a 1960 letter to a friend, Harold Pinter wrote of Samuel Beckett, "I'll buy his goods hook, line, and sinker, because he leaves no stone unturned and no maggot lonely. He brings forth a body of beauty; his work is beautiful." What do we learn if we take the word "beautiful" seriously? Rereading *Waiting for Godot* backward through *Betrayal*, this article argues that Beckett's landscape, typically read as a realization of postwar angst, is in fact one released of the pressures of contemporary living and for Pinter a homosocial Eden. Jerry's joke upon discovering the adultery—"Maybe I should have had an affair with him myself"—expresses his yearning for space where intellectual love can exist outside of heterosocial norms. It is in *Waiting for Godot* that Pinter finds this space.

## KEYWORDS

Harold Pinter, Samuel Beckett, *Betrayal*, *Waiting for Godot*, homosociality

We were, fair Queen,  
Two lads that thought there was no more behind  
But such a day tomorrow as today,  
And to be boy eternal.  
—SHAKESPEARE, *THE WINTER'S TALE*, I.II.63–66

In a 1960 letter to a friend, Harold Pinter wrote of Samuel Beckett, "I'll buy his goods hook, line, and sinker, because he leaves no stone unturned and no maggot lonely. He brings forth a body of beauty; his work is beautiful" (2001, 55). Now, at this time Pinter's familiarity with Beckett was limited, but he had already gotten hold of a French edition of *Waiting for Godot* and translated it into English (Billington 2007, 51). Yet the play has long been held as an emblem of modernist, existential angst, a depiction of the inevitable wasteland that

follows mechanized warfare. What could Pinter possibly find beautiful here? By pairing *Godot* with *Betrayal*, I believe I can tease out a tension that has been only partially explored in both authors: their construction of homosocial spaces. Though Beckett would go on to write more single-gender plays—*Act Without Words II*, *Rough for Theatre I and II*, *Come and Go*, *Footfalls*, *Rockaby*, *Ohio Impromptu*, *What Where*—*Godot* takes primacy here because it had a formative influence on Pinter; and while Pinter would also write single-gender plays—*The Dumb Waiter*, *The Caretaker*, *No Man's Land*, *Victoria Station*, *The New World Order*—*Betrayal* offers a vision of both homosocial and heterosocial space, allowing for comparison between the two. In what follows, then, I will argue that the key to Beckett's beauty for Pinter is his ability to create such a space, where the pleasures of male interaction remain absent of female intervention.

Pinter's biographer, Michael Billington, observes that in grammar school his subject "formed an almost sacerdotal belief in the power of male friendship" (2007, 11), and among his friends, "loyalty to the group supposedly superseded individual sexual relationships" (16). As an adult, Pinter told *Radio 4's Kaleidoscope* that after he cuckolded one friend, two others "walked me in silence into the middle of the [Victoria] park, turned and left me there. I saw them walk away and I felt absolutely desolated. . . . I had betrayed the whole group of people . . . not only one friend, but the idea of friendship and that was not going to be tolerated by them. I don't think I've recovered since" (60). And indeed, in discussing *Betrayal*, Pinter described the play as being "about a nine-year relationship between two men who are best friends," deliberately leaving Emma out of the equation (quoted in Burkman 1982, 508). In fact, there are only two scenes in which all three members of this love triangle appear, and in the second they are only briefly together, when Robert walks in on the opening moments of Jerry and Emma's affair. In the first, Jerry stops by for a drink at Robert and Emma's home. Robert mentions that he and Jerry haven't played squash together in a while, and after the two make a "date" (68), Emma asks, "Can I watch?" (69), spurring Robert's extended lecture on men, squash, and lunch:

Well, to be brutally honest, we wouldn't actually want a woman around, would we, Jerry? I mean a game of squash isn't simply a game of squash, it's rather more than that. You see, first there's the game. And then there's the shower. And then there's the pint. And then there's the lunch. After all, you've been at it. You've had your battle. What you want is your pint and your lunch. You really don't want a woman buying you lunch. You really don't want a woman within a mile of the place, any of the places, really. You don't want her in the squash court, you don't want her in the shower, or the pub,

or the restaurant. You see, at lunch you want to talk about squash, or cricket, or books, or even women, with your friend, and be able to warm to your subject without fear of improper interruption. That's what it's all about. (69–70)

This monologue is rich with the pain Robert feels at Jerry's betrayal with Emma. His emphasis on the shower—combined with Jerry's use of the word "date"—implies some sort of sexual exchange, but in fact this is the reverse of a traditional (and, for Pinter, heterosexual) date, which would be a meal, followed by drinks, followed by nudity and physical activity. Here the lunch is a kind of pillow talk, a mellowed discussion of cerebral subjects that can only occur once the "battle" is over. Later, when Jerry *does* go out with Robert, Emma asks, "What is the subject or point of your lunch? . . . You often do meet, or have lunch, to discuss a particular writer or a particular book, don't you? So it those meetings, or lunches, there is a point or subject" (95, 96); she cannot comprehend what Pinter imagines as a blissfully meaningless exchange between men. Appropriately, in the first stage direction of the play, Jerry meets Emma in a bar, carrying a pint of bitter for himself and a glass of wine for her. They "toast each other silently" and their limp conversation does not touch on any of these subjects: squash, cricket, books, or women (11). As Emma prefers wine, they cannot share a pint in the manner of two men, and during the height of their affair, they drink wine together, suggesting an entirely different, heterosocial interaction.

Earlier in the scene, before Emma enters, Robert observes that boy babies cry more than girl babies. When Jerry agrees, they engage in a mock intellectual argument—"Why do you assert . . . ?/Have I made such an assertion?/You went on to make a further assertion . . ."—in which they lamely conclude that it all has something to do with the difference between the sexes, and furthermore that boy babies are more anxious about leaving the womb than girl babies (64). However, Robert's two-year-old son Ned has long left the womb, and it is obvious that they are really speaking about themselves, about their own anxiety in relation to Emma's femininity. Though Robert already knows about the affair, the two are able to have a brief pint here, as it were, and this conversation is likely what he is referring to when he says they may warm to the subject of women in the pub: they are detached, analytical, and informed entirely by an abstract sense of manhood and womanhood, one that cannot be corrupted by the jarring and refuting presence of an actual woman. When the affair finally breaks up—partially because Jerry and Emma never make time for each other anymore—she says, "We can meet for lunch," a harsh if unknowing intrusion on Robert's shared territory with Jerry (52).

We only witness one of these lunches, and this is right after Robert's discovery of the affair. He is petulant, angrier that he has been betrayed by Jerry than by Emma. He drinks Corvo Bianco heavily, for him a blatant, symbolic

denial of their friendship—Jerry in turn drinks whiskey to stave off the bug that is preventing them from playing squash. Thus, the usual order of their date is disturbed, the site of the “battle” moved from court to table and the chummy pint replaced with stronger alcohol. Robert confesses that he read Yeats on Torcello: “Highpoint, actually, of the whole trip . . . alone, I was happy, I wanted to stay there forever” (113, 117). Though I would hardly describe happiness as the feeling evoked by, say, “The Second Coming,” Yeats’s worldview does bear a similar relationship to post-World War I Europe that *Godot* bears to Europe after World War II; are Gogo and Didi not sitting on their own island as “mere anarchy is loosed upon the world”? Yeats, of course, was probably guilty of infidelity himself, and if his wife George knew of it, she did nothing, writing in a letter to him, “When you are dead, people will talk about your love affairs, but I shall say nothing, for I will remember how proud you were” (Brown 2001, 347). This portrait of marriage enduring nonetheless is discordant with the one we see onstage, and their drunken lunch demonstrates that after discovery, Emma has “disrupt[ed] the delicate homosocial relationship between Robert and Jerry” (Hall 1993, 80). Later (though chronologically earlier), Jerry gives in to a similar instinct and says to Emma of his walk through the park, “Beautiful. Empty. A slight mist. I sat down for a bit, under a tree. It was very quiet. I just looked at the Serpentine” (122). Both feel a need for solitary reflection but are unable to be alone *together* like their Beckettian counterparts.

In his squash lecture, Robert’s use of the phrase “brutally honest” is a reference to the author Roger Casey, whom Jerry discovered and Robert publishes. Casey will end up having an affair with Emma himself, but at this moment in time he is Robert’s ersatz Jerry, a “brutally honest squash player” (68) whose writing Emma finds “bloody dishonest” (66). Thus, the repetition of “brutally honest” is an attack on both Jerry and Emma for their disloyalty to Robert. Indeed, Casey’s last book is about a man “writing a novel about a man who leaves his wife and three children and goes to live alone on the other side of London to write a novel about a man who leaves his wife and three children,” the one before that about “the man who lived in a big house in Hampstead with his wife and three children and is writing a novel” (66). Though his next book may well be about a man who has an affair with his publisher’s wife, Robert is defending Casey because the projected version of his life corresponds to the private one; Casey’s wife may experience humiliation but not betrayal. Furthermore, no innocent men have been injured by the breakup of his marriage.

Writing, obviously, is paramount for both Robert and Jerry, and Ann C. Hall points out that the sting of infidelity is sharper since “it is a letter that brings the affair to Robert’s attention” (1993, 80). The scene in which Robert confronts Emma takes place in a hotel room in Venice and begins with Emma asking, “It’s Torcello tomorrow, isn’t it?” (75). The two, who have lived on emotional islands

for years, escape to another island only to leave for yet another. Emma is reading in bed—a book by “This man Spinks,” who is *himself* a kind of island, living alone, “unfussed,” in a furnished room (76, 97). Delaying the reveal, Robert mentions that he was in American Express and that they offered a letter for her to him, only asking “in their laughing Mediterranean way” if the two were related: “I mean, just because my name is Downs and your name is Downs doesn’t mean that we’re the Mr and Mrs Downs that they . . . assume we are. We could be, and are vastly more likely to be, total strangers” (80). The use of the old English surname “Downs” implies a long history, and yet Robert and Emma really are total strangers to each other. He blames it on “Venetian *je m’en foutisme*” (80), a slang French phrase that roughly translates as “don’t-give-a-damn attitude,” echoing Robert’s earlier line to Jerry, “You don’t seem to understand that I don’t give a shit about any of this” (41).

Robert then waxes poetic about Jerry: “He used to write me at one time. Long letters about Ford Madox Ford. I use to write him too, come to think of it. Long letters about . . . oh, W.B. Yeats, I suppose. That was the time when we were both editors of poetry magazines. . . . Did you know that? We were bright young men. And close friends” (82–83). The reference to Ford is clearly to his narratives of betrayal, especially *The Good Soldier*, in which the protagonist, John Dowell (the name is faintly familiar to “Downs”), falls in love with the eponymous Edward Ashburnham, who has an affair with his wife, Florence. In the final paragraph of the novel, as Ashburnham leaves Dowell with a note for his wife Leonora, indicating that he is about to commit suicide, Dowell reflects, “I didn’t know what to say. I wanted to say, ‘God bless you,’ for I also am a sentimentalist. But I thought that perhaps that would not be quite English good form, so I trotted off with the telegram to Leonora. She was quite pleased with it” (169). This, in turn, is Robert’s way of saying “God bless you” in English good form, by confessing that their friendship is in a sense older and more powerful than the Downs line. But Emma’s intrusion into their love—made real by this evidence—has interrupted not only their lunches but their primary means of communication: the written word.

Emma finally confesses, “We’re lovers,” admitting that it’s been going on for five years (222). “Ned is one year old,” Robert replies, panicked (86). When assured he is the father, he asks, “Was he happy to know I was to be a father? I’ve always liked Jerry. To be honest, I’ve always liked him rather more than I’ve liked you. Maybe I should have an affair with him myself” (87). This joke, which ends the scene, is telling, and Robert’s interest in Jerry’s reaction suggests a universe in which the two of them could have conceived a boy themselves. Indeed, like Schrödinger’s cat, for a moment, either one could be the father. This is naturally impossible, and Jerry’s reaction when Emma gives him the news, which she does not share with Robert, is to say, “I’m very happy for *you*” (130, emphasis added). The idea of confused fatherhood persists when they discuss their waiter

at lunch: “Is he the one who’s always been here or is it his son?/You mean has his son always been here? No, is *he* his son? I mean, is he the son of the one who’s always been here?” (109). Furthermore, Robert fails to mention that he already has a child—an older daughter, Charlotte—indicating that fatherhood is only meaningful to him once he has a boy.

Ultimately, Jerry and Emma—and Jerry and Robert—are never able to create the idyllic space they all yearn for. Though Emma buys a Venetian tablecloth for their apartment, though she cooks stews and plays the domestic partner by wearing an apron, it is ultimately a flat “for fucking” (55), a flat that “needs Hoovering” (94). “[I]t could never . . . actually be a home,” Jerry says, “You have a home. I have a home. With curtains, etcetera. And children. Two children in two homes. There are no children here, so it’s not the same kind of home” (54). But are the other two homes anything more than the flat? The children never appear in *Betrayal*, and are rhetorically linked with the “etcetera” here; by Jerry’s definition, a home is only the sum of its contents. Appropriately, he doesn’t remember buying the bed with her, and yet years later he recalls that Robert read Yeats on Torcello without ever finding out that that was a direct response to his discovery of their affair. An unwitnessed scene of Robert engaged in reflection is more important to him than the symbolic consummation of his love for Emma, the affirmation that their affair is important enough to purchase a home’s most essential item. Additionally, he twice misremembers throwing up their daughter Charlotte, thinking it was in Robert’s house when it was actually in his own. This not only indicates a fluidity of ownership—he possesses Emma and her sexuality as realized in Charlotte as much as Robert does—but an impossibility of these happy memories corresponding to reality. “It’s quite well established, then, your . . . uh . . . affair?” Robert asks after Emma’s confession, quite unknowingly nailing it on the head with a word that has business-like and organizational connotations (85). When they meet years later, Emma asks Jerry about his son Sam, and he corrects her: “You mean Judith. . . . You remember the form. I ask about your husband, you ask about my wife” (15). They are nearly aware that they are acting in a play, with correct and incorrect lines; they are playing at an Eden that they can never achieve. Can Beckett?

*Waiting for Godot* opens with the entrance of the tramps Vladimir (Didi) and Estragon (Gogo), whose metronomic dialogue resembles the rhythms of vaudeville and Yiddish theater. When Gogo removes his boot, Didi chides him: “Boots must be taken off every day, I’m tired telling you that. Why don’t you listen to me?” He asks, “It hurts?” and Gogo replies, “Hurts! He wants to know if it hurts!” with Didi quick to snap, “No one ever suffers but you. I don’t count. I’d like to hear what you’d say if you had what I have” (12). Taken out of context, this reads very much like the bickering of an old Jewish couple—echoing Henry

Youngman, one of them might easily say, "Take my life—please!" Peter Boxall rightly emphasizes that the play "has an all-male cast, and centers around two protagonists who appear to have shared each others' lives for decades . . . they might be thought of as a married couple." It's possible, too, that "there might be an erotic dimension to their quasi-marital relationship," though, like many married couples, any sexual charge to their relationship has eroded over time (110). Didi, when speaking of his erection, says, "Sometimes I feel it coming all the same. Then I go all queer" (12). But the word in the original French is "drôle" (9), which means "funny" or "peculiar" and does not have the sexual connotations of the English "queer." Granted, in translating the play himself, Beckett may have introduced this new meaning, but Didi goes "all queer" when he *loses* his erection. For the time being, at least, their relationship is functionally platonic.

The most explicit occurrence of sexuality in *Godot* is Didi's ailment, a sexually transmitted disease that pains him while he urinates and has rendered him impotent, indicating he probably has gonorrhea, chlamydia, or herpes, though Gogo later calls him "spirochete," so he may have syphilis instead (68). This does not necessarily mean he isn't queer, but since Gogo doesn't have the disease we can at the very least conclude that they have not had intercourse in some time. Furthermore, the only reference to a nonfictional woman within the reality of the play comes when the two mishear Pozzo's name and Didi muses, "I once knew a family called Gozzo. The mother had the clap," linking sex and sexual decay with women and very possibly indicating where he caught his disease (24). When speaking about his inability to achieve an erection, he remarks that he feels "relieved and at the same time . . . appalled. AP-PALLED" (12). By dividing "appalled," Beckett creates a second word, "palled," meaning the loss of interest through familiarity. In other words, Didi, though perhaps insecure in his manhood, is nonetheless relieved to lose his sexuality after the complications its recurrence has caused him. Gogo, though he should certainly know better, proposes telling a (literal) bawdy story, but only gets two sentences in: "An Englishman having drunk a little more than usual proceeds to a brothel. The bawd asks him if he wants a fair one, a dark one or a red-haired one" (18). After Didi's scream cuts him off, he makes up for his mistake by accepting the embrace he denied Didi in the first minutes of the play: male bonding and homosocial tenderness—"Give me your hand," he coos—has replaced the anxiety and danger of female sexuality (18).

Later, the two contemplate the possibility of hanging themselves: "Hmm. It'd give us an erection. . . . With all that follows. Where it falls mandrakes grow. That's why they shriek when you pull them up" (18). Here Didi refers to masturbation through asphyxiation, and it is fitting that the only form of intercourse that appeals to him is one that requires suicide—still, he would be doing it with Gogo. He is also speaking about the myth that the mandrake plant grows only

where the semen of a hanged man has dripped on the ground (Stewart 2011, 2); has Beckett not fulfilled Robert's dream by revealing the circumstances under which two men would be able to procreate? At the end of act 2, the pair consider voluntary death once again. "There's my belt," Gogo says helpfully, and he removes his trousers but the cord is too weak. In the penultimate action of the play, Gogo pulls his trousers up in a rejection of the sexual act (88). Lucky, too, has the marks of a rope around his neck. "He's not bad looking," Didi grudgingly admits, but after he notices that Lucky is "a trifle effeminate" he dismisses him as a slobberer, a slaverer, and a cretin (26); his lack of identifiable masculinity renders him inadequate as a potential friend, partner, or father.

Is it necessary that all the characters in the play are male? Beckett claimed to have "prenatal memories of life within his mother's womb," memories he "associated with feelings of being trapped and unable to escape, imprisoned and in pain" (Knowlson 2014, 23–24). Furthermore, he "reacted adversely to a friend's marriage in more than one case," and seemed to think the distinction was important (Cronin 1997, 119): he legally challenged any company that cast women in *Godot*, going so far as to ban all productions of his plays in the Netherlands after De Haarlemse Toneelschuur, a Dutch theater company, tried to subvert his will. When asked about this necessity, he told Linda Ben-Zvi, "Women don't have prostates," referring to Didi's problems with urination. Ben-Zvi doesn't read this as exclusionary but instead argues that "the *form* such suffering takes in the play is structured upon those behavioral roles socially sanctioned for males—bantering, bullying, declaiming" (Ben-Zvi 1992, x). True, but as reread through Pinter, Beckett is creating a space where men are almost entirely out of the influence of a malicious femininity, where "bantering, bullying, [and] declaiming" offer a variation on Pinter's squash, cricket, books, or women. This is not to say that Pinter is a misogynistic writer, but he *is* one who desires a peaceful homosociality, a space that Billington called "the lost eden of Pinter's Hackney youth" (2007, 99).

Certainly, the context is still a wasteland: their lives are marked more by monotony, enervation, and entropy than by conviviality. But compared to Pinter's vision, which permits nothing of the kind, it provides hope. Their conversation is frequently lively, and despite the frustrations of the companionship there are true moments of intimacy. When Didi first sees Gogo, he rejoices: "Together again at last! We'll have to celebrate this. But how? (*He reflects.*) Get up till I embrace you" (11). When they consider hanging themselves, Gogo tries to explain that their weight difference may affect who should go first: if Didi goes second, and breaks the bough, he will be "alone"—an unthinkable possibility. "You're my only hope," Didi replies, relying both on the intelligence and the fellowship of his friend (19). Later, Lucky kicks Gogo in the knees, and Didi comes to his rescue: "I'll carry you. If necessary," he says "tenderly" (33). And while they admittedly never cease to speak about parting—and while it is suggested

that they do part each night—the play’s final tableau is of two men who remain committed to one another. In *The Good Soldier*, John Dowell fantasizes that his reader might be “a sympathetic soul opposite me” (15). That is precisely what Gogo is for Didi, Didi for Gogo. The theater, then, is both a real and an unreal actualization of a space that engenders listening, sympathetic souls. Sitting in the audience, watching *Godot*, the young Pinter, who was thirty in 1960, would have been given a window into that lost Eden, a temporary relief from the kind of life depicted in *Betrayal*.

Besides “Didi,” Vladimir has two other names in *Godot*. He is called “Mr. Albert” by the boy and, when Pozzo asks his name, Gogo supplies “Adam.” At the end of act 1, Gogo justifies his barefootedness by noting that Christ was the same. “You’re not going to compare yourself to Christ,” cries Didi, and Gogo replies, “All my life I’ve compared myself to him” (51). Of course, it is impossible that Didi is meant to allegorically represent the biblical Adam, as the pain between his legs is a clear indication of his fallen state. Still, by framing the action between these two figures—the first and, in a sense, the last man—Beckett creates a space that *does* seem simultaneously pre- and postlapsarian. Time does not mean much here; neither one can tell whether it is dawn or dusk, and while Didi guesses the two have spent fifty years together, Gogo claims that his friend is only eleven years old—that is, right before the age of puberty and its inevitable sexual frustration.

Furthermore, the two live in a world that has no discernable ethical order: people, who “are bloody ignorant apes,” assume that Matthew’s version of Christ’s crucifixion is correct even though it is contradicted by the three other narrators (15). Pozzo, defending his abuse of Lucky, asks them to “remark that I might just as well have been in his shoes and he in mine. If chance had not willed otherwise” (32). And Mr. Godot himself, according to his messenger, beats one of his goat-tending boys and not the other for no clear reason. But Didi and Gogo nonetheless represent an ethical urge, a desire to quantify and categorize in the face of meaninglessness. When Robert initiates his affair with Emma, he effuses, “I’ll descend, I’ll diminish, into total paralysis, my life is in your hands, that’s what you’re banishing me to, a state of catatonia, do you know the state of catatonia? do you? do you? the state of . . . where the reigning prince is the prince of emptiness, the prince of absence, the prince of desolation” (136). Coming right at the end of the play we have just read or seen, this seems ludicrous, but it describes very much what Didi and Gogo have achieved. Without women, without feminine sexuality, and with only each other, they have become the reigning princes of catatonia, two men who spend their afternoons *together* instead of with other men’s wives; two men who have collapsed the time that has passed between Adam and Christ.

“Get up till I embrace you.” “You’re my only hope.” “I’ll carry you. If necessary.” Are these heartfelt moments possible in Pinter’s world? In a world, for Pinter, that has been invaded by women? *Betrayal* has no such lines—other than Jerry’s loaded declaration that Robert is his “best man” (138). Admittedly, both Beckett’s and Pinter’s terrains are “devoid of purpose,” where man is “cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots . . . [and] all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless” (Ionesco in Esslin 2004, 23). But in *Betrayal*, man—the maggots—are alone even when they are together. In *Godot* Didi and Gogo part at nightfall but will always reunite in the morning. For Pinter, this relationship, this landscape, and the fruit of this intellectual discourse is beautiful. In 1975 he wrote a six-line poem that could easily be applied to the poet Gogo and his more rational partner Didi: “I know the place./ It is true./ Everything we do/ Corrects the space/ Between death and me/ And you” (2001, 175). The poem was actually written for his wife, Antonia Frasier, suggesting Pinter’s own attitudes do not align with those of his characters. But there is no Frasier in the Pinter canon. His men are far more likely to see women as the source of a plague: think of Lenny, in *The Homecoming*, sneering that the prostitute he attacks is diseased because “I decided she was” (31). When the actor Julian Sands dared to question Pinter about this poem—surely he meant “Connects” and not “Corrects”—he was quickly dismissed by the author (Sands 2012). For Pinter, as for Beckett, nobody can truly *connect* and the place between the individual and others and the world is unconquerable. But in the space provided by *Godot* and in the friendship of Didi and Gogo, that space can surely be corrected.

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