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The Faces of the Other

Configurations of Alterity in Emmanuel Levinas and Harold Pinter

Reading Levinas has become equal to the reading of the most prominent philosophy of alterity. To assess the reasons of this prominence is not among the modest aims of the present paper. However, it seems to me that much of its 'appeal' has to do with the peculiar mode of its articulation. The implied reader of *Totality and Infinity* cannot but concede to the authoritative tone, the coercive language employed. It is a language of superiority, making the whole venture into an essay on superiority rather than exteriority.¹ It is a consistent presentation of a power structure which assigns the implied author's superiority over the reader, pretty much the same way as the Other is to gain superiority over the Same. The success of Levinasian ethics depends on the success of the Levinasian language. The language of curt, abrupt sentences registers an authoritative voice, a voice of order, regulation and dominance. The prominence of Levinasian ethics, besides the appealing political sedimentation it was likely to leave behind, is to a large extent the result of its 'not-to-be-questioned' mode of performance.

In this essay I will invoke some of the building blocks of Levinasian ethics as expounded in *Totality and Infinity* and later amended in *Otherwise than Being*,² and will address its various deficiencies and one-sidedness. Harold Pinter's works provide the context for testing the applicability, not to say tenability of these

1 All parenthesised references are to Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini: Essai sur l'extériorité* (Kluwer Academic, 1971).

2 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1981).

concepts. Drama is always instructive in such investigations, since the validity of theoretical axioms in question is tested in concrete dramatic situations. Harold Pinter's plays are also instructive, because there the careful reader finds alternative configurations of alterity Levinas could not but ignore. As I will try to show, these dramas of alterity implicitly convey a criticism of the Levinasian form of otherness. Pinter's plays disclose a plurality of alterity, the multitude of Others that cannot be made to fit into *Totality and Infinity*, they present the multifaceted Other, the other with many faces, forms of Otherness that cannot be reduced to the singular Face.

LEVINAS, ETHICS AND ALTERITY

Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* is constructed upon well-defined oppositions. The title *Totality and Infinity* itself delimits two seemingly incompatible regions, the same way as the pairs Sameness and Otherness, exteriority and interiority, isolation and the *Il y a*, egoism and goodness, ontology and ethics. It would be rather unfair to claim that Levinas fails to observe the blatant (ontological) interdependence of these terms. On the contrary, what we get is a critical diagnosis of what is lost owing to their unfortunate interpenetration in the Western tradition. Western philosophy culminating in Heidegger regrettably reinforced the dominance of the one over the other, of the Same over the Other, of ontology over ethics. However, at the same time it needs to be said that Levinas does hardly more than produce the inverse of tradition. This inverse of tradition in Levinas brings about a shift of dominance from the Same to the Other, from ontology to ethics, thereby regrettably reinforcing the definite isolation of these oppositions.

In *Totality and Infinity* the Same appears as comfortably housed in an egoistic self-preservation. The Same exists in isolation, at home (*chez soi*). The Same is a totality which preserves itself in enjoyment, and in complete ignorance of the Other (*Autrui*). This separation is tantamount to the ignorance of transcendence, the elementary, the vortex surrounding the housed existence, on which the latter paradoxically depends. The house, or interiority depends on exteriority, but for survival, for escaping the vortex it necessarily separates from it. This dependence on exteriority is the dependence on air, earth, light, etc., though on a small-scale import, since excessive intrusion of these forms of exteriority would destroy not only the enjoyment of the home but the Same itself.

If Sameness is totality, Otherness introduces infinity. When totality reduces the Other to the Same, the Other appears in its transcendence. It appears *kath auton*, as Other, as exteriority irreducible to the Same. The appearance of the Other on my doorstep questions my relation to Otherness, my ignorance of the Other, my egoistic separation from the world. It disturbs my enjoyment to provoke my seclusion, but not to cancel it. In other words, it presents an ethical demand.

The transcendent Other is different from the enjoyed Other that is the object of needs and desire. The transcendent Other defies integration to the Subject-Object relation, the manifest establishment of Husserlian phenomenology. It defies reduction to the Heideggerian Dasein, the 'being in the World.' Through this negative theology Levinas portrays a radical form of alterity that cannot be the target of any objectivation, but that is an ethical challenge to all ontologies of objectivation. The ethical demand addressed to the Same requires the opening of the door of the house. The opening of the door is also the opening up of interiority, and the valorisation of hospitality. It is only then that the Face of Levinas appears on the threshold.

The transcendence of the Other is the transcendence of the Face (*visage*). Infinity appears as Face, a power superior to me, a power that mesmerises me. It addresses me in language, in speech, which invalidates my silent withdrawal. The relation of the Same to the Other becomes a relation between interlocutors, in which the Other questions me and demands response. Providing response becomes my ethical obligation to the Other. This obligation is simultaneous with and consequent upon the dominance of the Other over me, the irresistibility of the infinity of the Face, "il se présente comme me dominant" (83). Nevertheless, this dominance does not restrict my freedom, Levinas says elsewhere, but justifies it, "l'Autre, absolument autre – Autrui – ne limite pas la liberté du Même. En l'appelant à la responsabilité, il l'instaure et la justifie" (214–215). Nevertheless, the word dominance keeps echoing throughout the whole of *Totality and Infinity*, and therefore seems to be irresistible even for Levinas himself, "Autrui qui me domine dans sa transcendence est aussi l'étranger, la veuve et l'orphelin envers qui je suis obligé" (237).

For Levinas the Face is singular, it belongs to the stranger, the widower and the orphan alike, that is, to the Other in need, and not to (the object of) my needs. In other words, it is through the Face that the Other gains superiority over me, and demands my submittance and responsibility. It is through the Face that God, sublimity discloses itself.

This brief account, needless to say, cannot present a full (total) recovery of the Levinasian formulation of alterity with all its details and consequences. However, it may help to isolate some of the underlying problems that keep haunting the alert reader throughout. The language of Levinas is a language that defines without explanation. Such a series of definitions inevitably collides into contradictions we find for instance in the dominance the Other has over me, and the simultaneous non-restriction and instauration of freedom. There is further, an unrelenting superior position both on the part of the Other with its ethical demand, and on the part of the Author with 'its' coercive language. The question 'how can we read Levinas' becomes the task 'how should we read Levinas.' The implied reader of *Totality and Infinity* is subordinated, dominated by its Other, its (implied) Author.

But let us return to the contradictory relation between Same and Other. The relation of the Same to the Other in *Totality and Infinity* is defined as ignorance, as seclusion, as withdrawal. At the same time, the relation of the Other to the Same is virtually the opposite: that of demand, obligation and dominance. Levinas tells us that this dominance derives from the Face, its infinity, its transcendence. It is an infinity that demands infinite responsibility, "wild responsibility," to speak with Tengelyi and Waldenfels, a *responsabilité sauvage*,³ that cannot be reduced to any institutionalised moral obligation. Here the face-to-face relation with the Other necessitates a responsivity which is a limitless responsibility.⁴ However, the appearance of the Third, *le tiers*, restricts this responsibility, due to the inevitable conflict of demands. As Simon Critchley observes, the move to the Third, with which Levinas seems to be more concerned in *Otherwise than Being*, is a move towards limitation, towards question and justice which is to say: to politics.⁵ The third introduces others, a community, a system, and questions the anarchy of the Same-Other relation.

It follows that the appearance of the third disturbs the face-to-face relation. The intrusion of community at the same time leads to an impasse in the question of alterity: where is the Other outside community? Can ethics detach itself from politics? Or is politics the necessary accommodating totality of infinity? The symmetry and equality of justice and politics violates the infinitely asymmetric

3 László Tengelyi, *Élettörténet és sorsesemény* (Budapest: Atlantisz, 1998), p. 237.

4 This is for Levinas the uniquely distinctive nature of the face-to-face relation in contrast to Husserl's intersubjectivity.

5 Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), pp. 230–232, cf. Tengelyi, p. 239.

ethical relation, though, as Critchley argues, it is a “creative antagonism” (233). These questions are addressed by Jacques Derrida in ‘Le mot d’accueil,’ where the already overwhelming presence of the third party is accentuated. For Derrida the primordial there-ness of the third brings contamination and protection at the same time.⁶ It is a contamination, because, to speak with Geoffrey Bennington, it “contaminates the purity of the ethical relation.”⁷ It is protective, since through the advent of justice it abates the anarchy, the ethical violence of the face-to-face.

Levinas also tells us that the Face of the Other addresses the Same in speech, and establishes the relation between interlocutors. Levinas carefully evades the problem of interpretation by claiming that meaning is given to me through the presence of the Other. The face is presence, self-disclosure. The face manifests itself, expresses itself (*s’exprime*), “le visage parle. La manifestation du visage est déjà discours” (61). The relation inevitably becomes a dialogical relation. I am to listen to the Other’s vocative and fulfil the ethical demand: respond.⁸ The question then is the following: how can I, or rather, how should I receive the speech of the Face, the Face itself? Can the Face precede interpretation? Can I interpret transcendence?

For Levinas, it is the speech, *discours*, that instaurates meaning, *signification*, according to a later chapter in *Totality and Infinity* (224–229). As the argument goes, meaning questions the constituting freedom itself. Consequently, it is not through the mediation of the sign that meaning is created, but vice versa, it is the meaning as such that makes the mediatory role of the sign possible (meaningful). The meaning is the infinity, the Other itself (227). It seems then, that the Other’s speech and its meaning is given to me already in the Other’s presence, it is given both in and by this presence. The Other’s dominance here is made to be a dominance of signification, one may say, the Other interprets itself for me. Together with the instauration of freedom, this self-interpretation, this disclosure challenging the closure of the Same is also a limitation of freedom in the unconditional obligation and surrender to the Other. The prototype of the

6 Jacques Derrida, “Le mot d’accueil,” in *Adieu: à Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Galilée, 1997), pp. 111–112.

7 Geoffrey Bennington, “Deconstruction and Ethics,” As Bennington points out, this “contaminability aims to account both for the possibility of any purity whatsoever and for the a priori impossibility of the (even ideal) achievement of any such purity,” in: *Deconstructions: A User’s Guide*, ed. Nicholas Royle (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2000) 64–82, p. 70.

8 Not responding is also a form of response according to B. Waldenfels’s *Antwortregister*, cf. Tengelyi, p. 236.

Levinasian notion of the Other is this tyrant, this God whose voice compels, whose will imposes itself upon me.

To conclude I would like to stress three cardinal points in the Levinasian ethics of alterity that in my reading constitute its weaknesses: (1) The difference between ethics and politics is as evasive as the presence of the third. (2) The 'wild responsibility' that characterises my face-to-face relation with the Other is inevitably, necessarily restricted when the third (non-chronologically) appears with an alternative demand. (3) Finally, what if the Other is a menace, what if the infinity of the Face is nothing but a stronger form of totality that seeks to engulf, endanger me? To speak with Critchley, "ethically I cannot demand that the Other be good," but "at the level of politics and justice, at which I am a citizen of a community, I *am* entitled to judge, to call the Other to account" (232). These reservations to the ethics of alterity expounded in *Totality and Infinity* lead us to the questioning of 'radical alterity' as such. The primordial infiltration of community necessarily abates radicality, and seems to reduce it at least to the relation it is made to establish with its other: with egalitarianism. Radical difference can be maintained only outside community, in a no-place, a *non-lieu* (utopia), whereas both members of a community the Other becomes equal to the Same in facing justice. It is in the political sphere that the face-to-face relation between interlocutors falls back into an intersubjective relation the whole Levinasian project sought to side-step.

These, and similar questions are, I believe, in the forefront of Pinter's plays. Almost any work by Pinter could serve to demonstrate the complex relations between Sameness and the Otherness, and the dramatic fluctuations of these relations with the non-chronological appearance of the third or community. The following recourse to drama may also enhance further problematisations of the Levinasian opposition of Sameness and Otherness itself, an opposition that is in the centre of the plays discussed below. Samples from the Pinter corpus here serve to challenge the basic presuppositions of Levinasian ethics.

SAMENESS AND OTHERNESS IN PINTER

Pinter's rooms at first glance seem to share many characteristics with Levinas's houses. There we witness comfortably housed totalities secluded from the outside world, introvert and committed to the everyday routine of self-preservation. The room is a claustrophobic interiority which condenses the *Lebensraum*, the living-

space of human beings, and thereby looks at human relations as if through the magnifying glass. In each case, however, this psychological laboratory is invaded by others. In Pinter the walls of the room delimit the sphere of interiority, but there are important openings and leaks testifying to the vulnerability of secluded existence. To speak with Levinas, the *Il y a*, the elementary surrounding the house is a constant threat. Pinter shows not only how this threat or danger appears as something ineluctable, but also how the inhabitants of the room face it.

In *The Caretaker*⁹ the roof is leaking, and there is a bucket fixed to the ceiling to collect the drops of water. The dripping has a symbolic function besides the disturbing sound effect: it accompanies the entrance of the menacing other. The disturbing sound is the disturbing leaking of the other into the room, the peace and comfort of which thereby is, again, disturbed. There are two contrasting representatives of Sameness in the play: Aston and Mick, who respond differently to the entering other, to Davies. Aston invites Davies with an unconditional attestation of hospitality, and opens up his whole world to him. Here egoistic withdrawal is surrendered in response to the ethical demand. By contrast, Mick's treatment of Davies is a xenophobic questioning, a constant calling to account of an intruder "rummaging" in Aston's papers in the latter's absence. The entrance of Mick, the third party, thus brings judgement into the Same-Other relation between Aston and Davies. Davies ceases to be merely an Other in need and becomes an intruder, a menace threatening the peace and equilibrium of the room existence. As the dynamics of hospitality¹⁰-abuse-xenophobia evolve the bucket is finally full of rainwater and has to be emptied. It is the point of Davies' necessary departure, who has to leave the premises to restore the harmonious relation between the brothers. The stranger received thus becomes an emotional caretaker, who is expelled when this 'job' is fulfilled. The other as stranger has, it seems, at least two faces.

In *The Birthday Party* the invasion of menacing Otherness receives probably the most powerful representation within the Pinter corpus. There we find two alternative entrances of Otherness. Lulu enters after knocking, Goldberg and

9 All parenthesised references to Harold Pinter's works are to *Complete Works* (New York: Grove Press, 1977).

10 Hospitality is in the foreground of both *The Caretaker* and *Totality and Infinity*, cf. Derrida's description of the Levinas's work as an essay on hospitality (Derrida, p. 32).

McCann without knocking.¹¹ The one is a domesticated Other, the other a menacing form of Otherness, which eventually humiliates and destroys the tenant of the room, Stanley Webber. Goldberg also has two faces, one with which he wins Meg for his purpose to organise the birthday party, the other reserved for Stanley, which puts forward the unintelligible demand: the demand to answer for an obscure past behaviour. Both plays in my view present totalities threatened by other totalities *ad infinitum*.

There are recurring forms of activity that qualify the hospitality of the Same and also the Other's superiority and menacing presence within the total household: sitting and drinking. I will now first look at the importance of sitting in the Same-Other relation in *The Caretaker*, and then consider sitting and drinking in *The Birthday Party*.

Offering a seat is the manifestation of unconditional hospitality in *The Caretaker*. The play begins with Aston's offer, "Sit down," and the placing of the chair for Davies who is evidently the Other in need, "I haven't had a good sit down [...] I haven't had a proper sit down." The offer is repeated a few lines later, "Take a seat" (17). We are told that Aston rescued the stranger from a brawl, and seeks to appease and comfort him. The offering of the seat is merely the beginning of a whole series of altruistic human responsibility. After the seat Aston will offer him tobacco, shoes, laces, a bed, money (five shillings), a smoking-jacket, a white caretaking overall. It may be argued that such an extreme form of hospitality verges on madness – it is indeed a "wild responsibility" – and that it is largely due to the electric shock therapy Aston received in the past. Davies abuses this unconditional, unequal treatment as soon as he finds himself comfortably housed in this haven where his past injuries are temporarily redressed. It is only because of this abuse of hospitality that he will eventually be expelled, and thereby the emotional-ethical climate of the room purged.

It is one thing to offer seat and drink, and quite another thing to demand these activities. The demand for sitting and drinking is the manifestation of the Other's abuse of hospitality. The imperatives of 'Sit' and 'Drink' weave the text of *The Birthday Party* through and through. The play begins with the usual breakfast ritual, where the cosy, homely sitting and drinking will soon be interrupted by

11 Appearances of Others include the discovery of their presence on the threshold. In *The Room* Mr. and Mrs. Sands are disclosed on the landing by Rose. Their presence is menacing not only because they give no signs of their being there (like knocking), but because they give contradictory explanations of how they actually got there.

the intrusion of Goldberg and McCann. It is once again the intervention of an Other that ruins the established peace and tranquillity of secluded existence. For Stanley, the room soon turns from haven to torture chamber. As I mentioned above it is decisive in Pinter how the Other(s) enter(s). Goldberg and McCann enter without knocking, what is more, Goldberg immediately takes an unoffered seat at the table. He displays self-confidence, purposefulness and a headstrong determination, which is menacing in itself, since he is all what the others are not. The organisation of the birthday party will be his orchestration, a scheme to enhance the project of Stanley's ultimate humiliation and annihilation. Goldberg takes over the orchestration of the birthday party as soon as Meg mentions it, "we're going to remind him. We're going to give him a party [...] we'll bring him out of himself" (27). What all this amounts to is the unquestionable dominance of Goldberg established prior to an actual encounter with Stanley himself. Stanley seems hardly to have any word in the development of his fate: he will be given the party willy-nilly. It is the sign of Stanley's vain resistance to this dominance that he exclaims, "it isn't my birthday Meg" (30, and repeated to McCann, 35). Stanley has to be broken to accept this dominance, he will be forced to sit and obey orders. The lengthy debate about who is to sit at whose command is the finalisation of the question of hierarchy and dominance. Goldberg first asks Stanley to sit, then asks McCann to ask him to sit, then Stanley asks McCann to sit, upon which McCann informs Goldberg that Stanley would not sit, Goldberg asks McCann to ask Stanley again, which he does but Stanley refuses once more, then they offer to sit together, then all rise almost at once, then finally both Goldberg and McCann turn against Stanley and make him sit (40-41). It is only after this imposition of authority that the insane cross-questioning of Stanley and the obscure accusation "you betrayed the organization" (42) can take place. At the end of this verbal violence Stanley is to "pour the toast," that is, to drink his health in the company. He pours out the drinks, and though all stand to drink to him, while he "must sit down" as Goldberg commands and McCann echoes (49). What is more, Goldberg has so definitively taken over that Stanley cannot but obey his commands even in treating Lulu with a drink, for instance. Stanley's humiliation reaches its climax when his glasses are snatched away, and later he is beaten and reduced to a babbling child, cross-examined and carried away.

THE OTHER AS INSIDER: INTERNAL ALTERITY

The menacing Other does not necessarily intrude from outside. Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* and *A Slight Ache* present insider forms of otherness, where the categories Sameness and Otherness penetrate each other and cease to be distinct entities.

In *The Dumb Waiter* Ben and Gus find themselves confined in a windowless basement room. Their situation is characterised by a tense expectation which is probably stronger than in any other Pinter play. Like in *The Birthday Party* there is mention of an obscure organisation (131) in the background of a mysterious employment, and this organisation is held responsible for the prolonged tension of the present situation. Communication takes place through two diverse channels. The conversation between Ben and Gus takes up most of the play, there is no third party, at least not in the physical sense. Ben appears to be more authoritative, more aggressive to the point of repeated violence, but at the same time he is the more patient, more passive and resigned to except whatever comes. Amidst Gus's unrelenting inquiry into the mystery of the situation Ben continues sitting or lying in his bed and reading his paper. Gus's agitation slowly but steadily increases in the course of their discussions, and at various points Ben will resort to violence to evade his questions. Ben's authority over Gus is clear from the beginning, he treats Gus as his servant, addressing him with repeated orders.¹²

However, there is another channel of communication in *The Dumb Waiter*, if we can call that communication. The dumb waiter and the speaking-tube discovered attached to the wall of the room provide means to contact the external world. It is a possibility which is hardly ever realised. The five menus that are lowered in the dumb waiter present a one-sided communication. They are absurd

¹² The trivial debates between them, especially the quarrel about which is normally lit the gas or the kettle, all serve to diminish one's authority over the other. By correcting Ben and catching him in error, Gus seeks to abate Ben's authority over him (141), cf. Austin E. Quigley, *The Pinter Problem* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 62. Quigley points to the cardinal function of language use in the play. Mutual certainty about language is also certainty about a shared reality, he argues, consequently, when words are void of clear referentiality, this shared reality is likewise questioned. This linguistic phenomenon is a source of comedy in *The Birthday Party*, in the dialogue between Meg and Petey, while it is rather stressful and subversive for Ben and Gus pursuing an important status-confirming conversation (62).

revelations of an inscrutable force, of an absconding authority.¹³ The speaking-tube is apparently more responsive. Ben speaks and listens to the tube, and seems to answer a remote voice only heard by him. We may guess what the voice says through Ben's reactions. Ben's discourse with the tube becomes menacing in the absence of Gus. At this climactic point Ben's words betray an obedient registration of an inaudible order, "straight away," "right," "sure we're ready" (148). Gus re-enters the room only to find himself levelled at with a revolver. This time no words are spoken, but a silent mutual stare confirms that the situation – the mystery of which they strove to penetrate in so many words – has finally been established: the assassin is to be assassinated. Gus becomes the target of Ben and the organisation, to be assassinated for no apparent reason. Ben and Gus are a strange pair. Their strangeness is not in their complementarity, their interdependence, their exposure to inscrutable forces, to hidden powers dealing their destinies. As such they are preceded by Beckett's pairs, Didi and Gogo, Ham and Clov, Winnie and Willie and Stoppard's Ros and Guil. Ben and Gus disrupt the traditional continuity of these pairs. What makes them unique is precisely this turning against each other to the point of violence and (anticipated) murder.

The dynamics of sameness and alterity unfolds in the play in a characteristically Pinterian way: first, it is the obscure organisation that appears to be the menacing other. Second, throughout the conversations it is Ben who, establishing his unquestionable authority, becomes the menace to Gus. Finally, in the end it is Gus who is nonsensically excommunicated, betrayed and eliminated. These dramatic fluctuations of otherness disclose a multifaceted or faceless alterity that defies the Levinasian reduction. They present ways in which these categories cease to be clear-cut and definable. As soon as an external overruling reference point, or *logos* is denied, these divisions fail to be meaningful and become contingent by-products of constantly shifting situations. If in Levinas we observed the subordination of situation to the preconceived *logos* of superior alterity, in Pinter we find the reverse: there all superior *logoi* are subordinated to the concrete quintessential human situation. To an ordinary, that is, a faceless situation.

In another complex play, *A Slight Ache*, internal otherness presents itself in a slightly different way. There the problem arises within the confines of marriage, a

13 The *deus absconditus* is a mystery, a potential source of menace also to Steven H. Gale, who goes as far as stressing the godlike actions of a machine that initiates action, demands food sacrifices and manifests its power over life, *Butter's Going Up: A Critical Analysis of Harold Pinter's Work* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1977), p. 59.

favourite field for Pinter. Edward is evidently bored by his wife Flora, and lives a withdrawn egocentric life in his study. Their breakfast communication betrays indifference, boredom and lack of understanding. Though Flora tries her best to regain Edward and elicit some response and understanding, Edward seems eternally lost in his own world of reading and writing. He is especially concerned with the philosophical analysis of space and time and not with the Belgian Congo as Flora thinks (161). There is no obvious reason given for the 'slight ache' Edward has in his eyes, consequently Flora's caring remarks cannot but miss the mark. The 'slight ache' turns out to be concomitant with the appearance of a matchseller standing outside in the garden. The noname, faceless stranger becomes a menacing riddle for Edward who finds it strange that though no matches are sold for weeks, the matchseller should stick to that deserted place.

Outside it is bright, inside it is dark (162). The slight ache corresponds to the extreme contrast between brightness and darkness. Edward is unwilling to leave his claustrophobic introvert life of darkness to meet the challenge of the matchseller, the challenge of brightness. His complaint of the slight ache is simultaneous with his intention to talk to the man, to invite him into the house. The stranger disturbs his sight, and also the site disclosed by the garden, with his far too visible presence. He embodies a riddle which Edward feels he has to solve in order to be cured of the pain in his eyes. Impaired eyesight or blindness is central to Pinter's plays, as in *The Birthday Party* where Stanley's glasses are snatched and broken when he is blindfolded to play blind-man's-buff, or in *The Room*, where Rose goes blind in the final scene of released aggression.

Edward's communication with the matchseller is one-sided, he addresses his guest in flat, narcissistic monologues, while the other raps himself up in silence. It is his total unbroken silence that makes critics like Esslin say he does not even exist, but is merely the projection of the couple's fears.¹⁴

The matchseller behaves like the audience, and in fact is used as such. He stands, sits, laughs, cries while listening to Edward and his self-justifying verbal output. The matchseller's wordless presence heightens the absurdity of the

14 Martin Esslin stresses that the play was designed to be a radio play, which explains the non-existence of the matchseller: Esslin, *Pinter: A Study of his Plays* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1973), p. 87. Following this line of thought he goes as far as claiming that the matchseller is nothing but simply Edward's death (88). To reclaim the matchseller's existence Steven H. Gale argues that there are several proofs against Esslin's and for that matter, Hinchcliffe's view, like the stage direction including his character, or the unignorable fact that the other characters behave as if he existed, *Butter's Going Up: A Critical Analysis of Harold Pinter's Work*, p. 80.

situation more than any communicative zeal would. Edward's whole life gradually shrinks into meaninglessness, it is reduced to a self-centred, embarrassed monologue. Embarrassment and final breakdown follows when this subversive silence cannot be further endured.

Flora takes over after the impasse of verbal diarrhoea, and with her the woman takes hospitality in her hands. She cares, pities and accepts the stranger, even names him 'Barnabas' (176).¹⁵ She is everything Edward is not. She prepares the house for accommodating him as the new tenant. Moreover, she hands his tray to Edward and exits with the matchseller. Edward becomes superfluous and has to leave the house. Alienation within the total household is so palpable that the inhabitants find themselves easily replaceable by outsiders. The ending of *A Slight Ache* suggests a jocular circularity¹⁶ in the relation between housed existence and questioning otherness. The play also shows how the totality of secluded being can nourish internal forms of otherness that are no sooner revealed than expelled.

According to Steven H. Gale *A Slight Ache* is a new development in Pinter, since the supposed threat is brought inside and it becomes clear that there is nothing to fear: the danger is internal.¹⁷ The source of menace in Gale's words is the "unfulfilled emotional needs of the man and woman," which is to say that need constitutes a source of insecurity.¹⁸ It is to be noted that sex and rape are among Flora's first thoughts as she talks to the stranger. The issue of vacancy and that of emotional exposure and dissatisfaction are nicely combined in James R. Hollis's conclusive statement, that the play explores vacancy, and the matchseller serves as an "objective correlative for the emotions of Edward and Flora."¹⁹ This

15 An apostle, son of consolation (Acts 4:36). She turns to him for consolation, and at the same time offers to put him in bed: in the Freudian bed of sex and death, "why shouldn't you die happy?" (193). Cf. Gale, p. 78.

16 This circularity in *A Slight Ache* appears to be contested by Austin E. Quigley, who suggests that the notion of circularity is a later development in Pinter's work. In plays like *The Basement*, *A Night Out*, *The Dwarfs* or *The Birthday Party* the conclusion comes as if the interim had never taken place (Quigley, p. 111).

17 Gale, p. 74. James R. Hollis also draws attention to the threat's being internal, and accentuates the fate of the wasp Edward kills by scoulding. The wasp, Hollis points out, dies in this nook surrounded by flowers, and Edward fails to realise that he is also dying while surrounded by the smothering attention of his *Flora*. On the other hand, he invites the matchseller in order to do away with him as with the wasp, *Harold Pinter: The Poetics of Silence*, (London and Amsterdam: Feffer and Simons, 1970), p. 54.

18 Gale, p. 75.

19 Hollis, p. 58.

sensitive exploration of an emotional crisis between husband and wife shows Pinter's keen insight into the psychology of marriage, and as such finds its further development later in *The Homecoming* (1964) and in *Old Times* (1970).

These brief and reductive glimpses into Pinter's plays serve one purpose. They illustrate those aspects of alterity that Levinas could not but ignore to promote successfully an ethics grounded on the unconditional superiority of the Other. The Other who appears on my threshold as a stranger, a widow or an orphan, exposes, reveals a face that is unique, obliging and unquestionable. With the Pinterian scenes above I wished to problematise the viability of the Levinasian concept of alterity, and demonstrate the way ordinary human situations resist integration into *Totality and Infinity* and its reductive dualities.