

The Language of Cruelty: Dialogue Strategies and the Spectator in Gambaro's *El desatino* and Pinter's *The Birthday Party*¹

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Several studies of the works of Argentine playwright Griselda Gambaro have examined the relationship between her plays and Antonin Artaud's appeals for a new, concrete theatre language. Tamara Holzapfel, for example, notes that Gambaro's dramas carry out the revolutionary vision of Artaud's *The Theater and Its Double* "by using non-rhetorical language integrated with gestures and all kinds of sound, by incorporating psychological cruelty and physical violence, and by assigning primary importance to the *mise-en-scène*" (5-6). In a similar vein, Sandra Messinger Cypess considers Gambaro's plays in light of Artaud's "theories on the importance of physical imagery on stage," concluding that it is primarily through violent physical images, rather than dialogue, that Gambaro's plays communicate their own, cruel vision of existence ("Physical Imagery" 357).² This, she contends, is in keeping with Artaud's demand for the devaluation of verbal language in favor of a physical, stage language which bypasses words and addresses itself directly to the spectator's senses.

But while her plays are indeed highly theatrical, fully exploiting the non-verbal elements of dramatic performance, Gambaro's dramatic texts explore and expand the functions of verbal language as well. Often a peculiar interaction between the plays' verbal and non-verbal elements works to highlight the fundamental relationship between speech and action on the stage. Her dialogue's excessive stylization, the speakers' questionable sincerity, and the characters' attempts to dominate one another by linguistic means also testify to Gambaro's interest in the powers of the spoken word. Commenting on the connections between speech and action in drama, the Polish theorist Roman Ingarden notes, "The spoken word can be a form of *acting on* whomever it is directed to, and sometimes on those who are merely witnesses to what is said" (388). To a certain extent this has always been true of dramatic language; yet this gestural aspect appears in a most extreme form

in many recent plays, “where language is used almost physically, as a kind of bludgeon or blunt instrument, where in fact the border-line between word and gesture is almost erased . . .” (Coe 41).³ In a talk she gave in 1969, Gambaro herself appealed to her Argentine colleagues to utilize this potential of dramatic language:

Quizás lo que debemos aprender, sobre todo los autores argentinos que hemos usado siempre el lenguaje como intermediario de vivencias, es a usar el lenguaje como elemento teatral, palabra-acción, signo articulado que se ofrezca desnudo en acción teatral. (328-29)

While many have seen in Artaud’s manifestos a powerful bias against the use of verbal language, the linguistic maneuvering characteristic of Gambaro’s plays does not necessarily undermine the connection between her work and Artaud’s theories. Rather, a basic cruelty underlies the very words of Gambaro’s characters and this in turn brings us back to Artaud’s demand for “extreme action, pushed beyond all limits,” and to his notion of a Theatre of Cruelty, a theatre rigorous and direct in its presentation of man’s precarious situation in a world where “we are not free. And the sky can still fall on our heads” (85, 79). Like many of her contemporaries, Gambaro not only exploits the powerful effects of scenic images but also employs “a *dialogue* of cruelty to shock us into an awareness of ourselves, paring away our habits and defenses” (Cohn 84).

In these aggressive manipulations of language, however, Gambaro’s dramatic works not only reflect Artaud’s theories but also bear a striking resemblance to the plays of Harold Pinter, and especially to Pinter’s early “comedies of menace.” As many commentators have pointed out, Pinter is one of the contemporary playwrights most conscious of “the strategic powers of dialogue” and his plays are particularly notable for combining verbal skirmishes with a banal and yet strangely threatening atmosphere (Almansi and Henderson 18). Although Pinter, in contrast with Gambaro, is not generally seen as an Artaudian playwright, the power struggles basic to plays like *The Caretaker*, *The Dumb Waiter*, and *The Room*—like those of Gambaro’s *Los Siameses* or *El campo*—often involve cruelty to both the characters within the plays’ represented worlds and the spectators who witness their verbal battles. For both Pinter and Gambaro, words become weapons in a very real sense, performing what Austin E. Quigley calls an “interrelational function,” which is “grounded in the power available in language to promote the responses that a speaker requires and hence the relationship that is desired” (52-55). In particular, Gambaro’s *El desatino* (1965) and Pinter’s *The Birthday Party* (1959) utilize a remarkably similar language of cruelty—both on the stage and in their relationships with their audiences.⁴ It is on these two plays, which also share several significant aspects of plot and dramatic action, that the following pages are focussed.

While at first glance *El desatino* and *The Birthday Party* seem more notable for their contrasts than their similarities, closer inspection reveals them to be surprisingly alike. As the curtain rises on *El desatino*, we find the protagonist, Alfonso, contemplating a bulky metal object that has somehow become attached to his foot. His first word, “¡Condenido!” immediately invites a

symbolic, perhaps existential interpretation of his predicament, a view of Alfonso as a character doomed to endure a situation of passivity and frustration. His subsequent inability to stop the ringing alarm clock, which, Alfonso says, "¡Suena cuando se le ocurre!" (12) underlines his abject helplessness.⁵ In contrast, the opening moments of Pinter's *Birthday Party* establish a situation that can only be described as banal. Morning paper in hand, Petey Boles enters the living room of the seaside boarding house he runs with his wife, Meg, and seats himself at the breakfast table. Beginning, "Is that you, Petey? . . . What? Are you back?" Meg proceeds to state the obvious, engaging Petey in a series of trivial exchanges about his cornflakes, the weather, and their late-rising boarder, Stanley Webber (9-11).

Yet the stereotyped housewife's complaint that introduces Alfonso's mother in *El desatino* echoes this apparent banality while establishing an equally familiar domestic situation. "¡La limpieza!" she shrieks ill-humorably. "¡Todos los días la limpieza! ¡Apenas una aprende a caminar, le ponen un plumero en la mano!" (12). Like Alfonso's, her opening remarks indicate a certain helplessness as she chafes against her domestic and maternal roles. But we soon see that she uses such comments on her supposed hardships as a weapon against her son. Many of her early remarks demonstrate her aggressiveness and exaggerated attempts to make Alfonso accept his dependence on her. In reply to his request that she bring him the tools with which to try and free his foot, for example, she attacks him as inconsiderate, turning his request into an expression of his culpability: "Cuando te tuve, se me movió un disco de la columna. Así estoy ahora, por ti, completamente dura" (14). Throughout the first scene she exerts her control over even his language, misinterpreting his words as well as his actions and continually turning them against him. Even his conciliatory use of the word "sí" is criticized as she says, "¡No estoy loca para que me digas que sí! Por lo menos alguna vez puedes decir 'cómo no.' Varía un poco, ¿eh?" (18). For apparently minor reasons, she also continues to refuse her sons's requests: she cannot call to get help from Alfonso's friend, Luis, because the telephone is out of order and besides, Luis is ugly (19). Alfonso's mother is apparently more interested in her own influence and in the behavior appropriate for "la gente fina" (20) than in showing compassion for her helpless son. As the opening scene ends she advises him, "¡Basta, Alfonso! Los apuros los guardas en el bolsillo" (21) and he thus remains painfully caught in his iron trap.

This manipulative element is equally apparent in *The Birthday Party's* opening scene, although Pinter's Meg seems primarily interested in asserting her rights to the maternal role that Gambaro's mother-figure so confidently uses to her own advantage. Meg's impatient remarks about Stanley's failure to appear for his breakfast already suggest an attempt to manipulate him and her report of having "made him" drink his early morning cup of tea, her order that he "eat up those cornflakes like a good boy" (14), and her refusal to give him the second course of his breakfast until he has finished the first (15) appear to be aimed at establishing a dependency that closely parallels Alfonso's reliance on his mother. Though less cruel than the mother's refusals to help Alfonso, Meg's behavior is no less surprising when one considers the fact that Stanley is described in the stage directions as "a man in his late

thirties" (8). And through Meg's announcement of the "two gentlemen" who are coming to stay at the boarding house as well as her bizarre argument with Stanley about whether or not the "house is on the list" (17, 20), these initial exchanges establish an atmosphere of aggression comparable to that evoked in Alfonso's opening conversation with his mother.

Much clearer parallels between the two plays emerge, however, in comparing Stanley's subsequent encounter with the announced visitors to Alfonso's interactions with his friend, Luis. Like Alfonso's mother, Luis in *El desatino* refuses to help Alfonso but his motives seem even more farfetched while his attempts to dominate Alfonso become increasingly sinister. As Cypess notes, "Although his mother harms him in a passive way, Luis actively threatens Alfonso with physical injury," virtually torturing him with his lighted cigarette and then with his scarf ("The Plays of Griselda Gambaro" 99). Verbally, though, Luis attempts to offer valid and even positive motives for these aggressive actions. Moving the cigarette closer and closer to Alfonso's eyes he urges, "Sé hombre, Alfonso," speaks of "proofs"—presumably of Alfonso's manhood—and insists that Alfonso would not have been burned if he had only been able to sit still (31). His act with the scarf is even more shocking given the clash between the violence of his supposed game and the language he uses to describe it. Tying the scarf around Alfonso's neck with purportedly amicable concern he asserts, "Juguemos a otra cosa, quiero distraerte. . . . Te abrigo, te abrigo Alfonso" (32). But then, as they play at the strangler and his victim, Alfonso is nearly choked; unable even to beg Luis to stop, he can only babble incoherently. Fortunately for Alfonso, his mother reappears at this very moment, interrupting the game and thereby preventing her son's destruction at the hands of Luis. This scene, however, prefigures the final moments of the play, where Alfonso, presumably so debilitated by the burden of the metal object and of the others' cruel neglect, "has lost his articulate speech, stuttering horribly whenever he attempts to say a word" (Holzapfel 6).

Both the supposedly harmless games Luis proposes and Alfonso's subsequent loss of speech recall the similar predicament of Pinter's Stanley, who is likewise reduced to speechlessness by the mysterious visitors, Goldberg and McCann. In *The Birthday Party* this is first accomplished by a dazzling verbal assault. After some elaborate maneuvering to get Stanley to sit down, Goldberg and McCann interrogate him, accusing him of a totally impossible mixture of crimes ranging from "wasting everybody's time" to betraying "the organization," picking his nose, and being "a traitor to the cloth" (47-52). In Martin Esslin's words, Stanley here is thrown "into a whirlpool of language, which batters him into insensitivity" (51); his own powers of speech having been reduced to mere stammering, a scream, and a choked "Uuuuuhhhh," Stanley can only respond by cowering before Goldberg and McCann, protecting himself with a chair (51-52). At this point in the play, he, like Gambaro's Alfonso, narrowly escapes annihilation through the carefully timed entrance of the maternal character. A little later, however, Stanley, too, is drawn into a supposedly innocent game, in this case a part of the entertainment at his birthday party. Once again, a seemingly harmless diversion takes a violent turn when McCann, after blindfolding Stanley with a

scarf, breaks his glasses and trips him with a toy drum. The game ends with Goldberg and McCann converging on the hysterically giggling protagonist. But the juxtaposition of the aggressors' avowedly noble motives and soothing words with their destructive consequences comes clearest in the play's final act as Goldberg and McCann begin to win over the by this time utterly inarticulate Stanley. In an attempt to justify their assaults on him, they promise him everything from hot poultices and a crash helmet to yachts and success (82-84). Stanley's grotesque sounds, the only reply he is able to make, indicate that he has suffered a collapse comparable to that of Alfonso near the end of *El desatino*. In each play, then, both physical and verbal attacks result in the complete subjugation of the central character, whose loss of power is reflected in his loss of speech. And the absurd and incongruous explanations offered by the protagonists' attackers make these assaults particularly disturbing, not only for the characters involved but also for the spectators witnessing them.

Before they are forced to submit, however, both Stanley and Alfonso rebel and attempt to assert their own influence over those who are potentially their allies. In each instance, moreover, the battle centers on the speaker's particular use of language. This happens early in *The Birthday Party* as Stanley taunts Meg with the description of her fried bread as "succulent"—a word which she naively sees as having sexual overtones (17)—and childishly turns her demand for an apology against her:

MEG—Say sorry first.

STANLEY—Sorry first.

MEG—No. Just sorry.

STANLEY—Just sorry! (17-18)

In *El desatino* Alfonso similarly asserts his intellectual superiority over the Boy who comes to his aid, incorporating words like "necrofilia" and "higienizarme" into a speech on cleanliness and marital relationships which he concludes "*con una corta risa de superioridad*" (69). These displays of verbal prowess themselves serve as acts of aggression, playing on the way listeners' "personal inadequacy expresses itself in an inadequacy to cope with and use language" (Esslin 46) while displaying the speakers' own linguistic superiority.

In both plays, these assaults are coupled with challenges based on appeals to standards of socially correct behavior. Stanley criticizes Meg's poor cooking and housekeeping, accusing her of being "a bad wife" (16), while Alfonso draws on the work ethic to upbraid the Boy for being absent from his job (67). Such confrontations illustrate cruel rejections of characters who are apparently the attackers' friends. And, like those of the even more aggressive Mother and Luis, or Goldberg and McCann, such actions by Alfonso and Stanley respond to Artaud's call for the revelation of "a depth of latent cruelty by means of which all the perverse possibilities of the mind . . . are localized" (30). It seems that few characters in either play are exempt from the violence of this verbal maneuvering.

The two plays' closing scenes illustrate a final aspect of the language of cruelty characterizing both Gambaro's and Pinter's works. At the end of *El*

desatino Alfonso, whose foot has finally been freed of the metal object, is pushed back onto the bed by his totally intoxicated mother. The Boy weeps and calls Alfonso's name, while the mother, Luis, and the assembled neighbors merely gape at him drunkenly, shouting "¡A ver! ¡A ver!" (104). All but the Boy appear completely indifferent to, perhaps even pleased by, Alfonso's apparent demise. The final exchanges of *The Birthday Party* are equally poignant and disturbing as we witness Meg's seeming obliviousness to the absence of the character previously described as "her Stanley." In a bitter parody of the moment of tragic illumination, Meg appears wrapped up in her own kind of intoxication, asserting not that Stanley is gone but that she herself was "the belle of the ball" at the fateful birthday party (87). In each instance, a passive cruelty reasserts itself in the form of complete insensitivity to the protagonist's plight.

In their explorations of both aggression and indifference, then, these two plays reveal multiple facets of a dramatic language of cruelty. Serving as the "medium through which a contest of wills is fought out" (Esslin 50), the characters' words frequently embody their cruel behavior toward one another. At the same time, the victims' loss of speech, as well as the other characters' lack of concern about each hero's apparent demise, reflect the varying impact of that behavior within the plays' represented worlds. But these exchanges and effects also add up to an assault on the spectator, who not only witnesses the characters' violence toward one another but also becomes involved in searching for the causes of the protagonists' bizarre predicaments or the motivations underlying these acts of cruelty—motivations which are either unstated or contradictory. A basic indeterminacy pervades both *El desatino* and *The Birthday Party*, at the level of gaps or clashes between the characters' words and actions or between their actions and our expectations about their behavior. This indeterminacy works to engage the spectator in supplying the missing information, in building up the plays' mysterious and often threatening worlds, and perhaps even in experiencing for him or herself the frustration, fear, and cruelty resulting from this verbal violence.⁶

In an early article on Pinter, Richard Schechner notes the "sparse, fragmented" nature of the "conceptual world" out of which Pinter's plays emerge and states his belief that "the essential characteristic of Pinter's work is its conceptual incompleteness" (177). This comment signals a first level of indeterminacy in plays like *El desatino* and *The Birthday Party*. These works do not divulge why Goldberg and McCann have come to get Stanley or why Luis engages in his cruel tortures of Alfonso, nor is it particularly clear why the metal object is so firmly attached to Alfonso's foot or why Stanley has taken refuge in the Boles's boarding house in the first place. Instead of supplying this basic information, the plays stimulate audience members to fill in the gaps in the text with their own projections, a process which often results in frustration since these hypotheses are rarely (if ever) confirmed by the text.⁷

The spectator here faces what Yuri Lotman calls "minus functions," a technique "used to summon up in the mind of the reader exactly those procedures which the text avoids using"—in this case, the technique of exposition (Iser, "Indeterminacy" 30). As Schechner notes, "Since Ibsen we have been accustomed to knowing all, sooner or later. Given a realistic indoor

setting, characters who seem 'rounded out,' we expect to discover what it's all about." His observation that "Pinter intentionally disappoints this expectation and leaves his audience anxiously confused" (176) is apt for both *The Birthday Party* and *El desatino*. Steven H. Gale suggests that Pinter's "withholding of information" approximates "the way we live. . . . We do not expect everyone to constantly fill us in on the antecedents in their dialogue . . . or their motivations, just as we do not explain ourselves to a casual passerby" (33n). Nevertheless, accustomed as we are to the conventions of dramatic exposition, this "super-realistic theatre" baffles the spectator while at the same time stimulating his or her mental activity.

A second type of indeterminacy emerges from the clash between the characters' words and their gestures or underlying attitudes—between, for example, the Mother's refusals to help Alfonso and her kisses and declarations of her love for him (58-59). Such contradictions further stimulate the spectator's ideational activity as we are impelled to discover and weigh the discrepancy between the soothing promises of Goldberg and McCann and the breakdown these characters have already caused, or to reconcile Luis's act of strangling Alfonso with his avowedly benevolent motives. The structured "blanks" between these various textual segments thus orient our mental projections, forcing us to affirm for ourselves the violence or cruelty that the plays' central characters often seem to ignore.

The play's evocation and subsequent negation of familiar character relationships and roles also shapes our recognition of this cruelty. For example, the insensitivity of Alfonso's mother, who not only refuses to comply with her son's requests but even makes excuses for taking food out of his hands and giving it to Luis (63) is all the more shocking when seen against the background of her maternal role. The same can be said of Meg's blindness to the apparently evil motives of Goldberg and McCann while, in the play's opening scene, Meg's attempts to mother Stanley are themselves disorienting given Stanley's age and her own position as his landlady. A similar strategy is at work in the presentation of both protagonists' supposed friends or helpers. Meg introduces Goldberg and McCann as "two gentlemen" (18) and they eventually promise to "save" Stanley, to give him "proper care and treatment" (82). Yet their verbal and physical battles with him are hardly gentlemanly, nor do their promises seem very convincing in light of the state to which Stanley has been reduced by the time these promises are made. Likewise, Alfonso's description of Luis as his friend (20) is hardly borne out by the latter's cruelty toward Alfonso and his preference for the lewd attentions of Alfonso's mother. Everyday notions of motherhood, friendship, and gentlemanly behavior seem to have lost their validity in the worlds of Pinter's and Gambaro's plays, just as supposedly innocent games and parties become sources of torture and humiliation. The characters' cruel or aggressive behavior itself becomes a kind of theme for the spectator's own reflections as familiar or expected actions take surprisingly sinister turns.

Through the continual undermining of these ordinarily benign activities and roles, "the assembled meaning of the text runs counter to the [spectator's] familiar mode or orientation" (Iser, *The Act of Reading* 221). Instead of being able to rely on familiar relationships and standards of behavior, the spectator

is continually forced to adjust or modify his or her expectations in accordance with the topsy-turvy worlds presented in Gambaro's and Pinter's plays. In this way, the frustration, insecurity, and anxiety thematic in *El desatino* and *The Birthday Party* become a part of the spectator's own experience.

Ultimately, such devices as this deformation of familiar roles through the characters' verbal and physical violence, the strange substitution of speechlessness for other signs of weakness, and even the suppression of conventional exposition, draw attention to the "unformulated cause" of these deformities and invite us to work out for ourselves the conditions which have given rise to them.⁸ As Gambaro herself points out, "El espectador nunca es pasivo, nunca nos miramos la cara pasivamente en un espejo" ("Teatro de vanguardia" 317). But, she argues, in witnessing the characters' interactions and in experiencing their aggression, the spectator is drawn to participate at the level of a profound recognition: "el espectador siempre participa en un espectáculo cuando ese espectáculo le aporta, le renueva o le remueve datos esenciales sobre su condición humana" (318). In experiencing the worlds of plays like *El desatino* and *The Birthday Party*, we are thus led, for example, to recognize that "everything that acts is a cruelty" (Artaud 85). Depending on our own particular experiences and orientation, we might see the behavior of Pinter's and Gambaro's characters against the background of society itself as a "destructive force" (Gale 20), as representative of "the universal trauma of man in the universe" (Dukore 25), or perhaps as illustrating "the problem of man's victimization" (Cypess, "The Plays of Griselda Gambaro" 98).

In formulating such explanations for the plays' events and actions, in recognizing such data, we ourselves, like the characters, are enveloped in an atmosphere of menace, mystery, even horror. Indeed, we are all the more affected by this atmosphere since it is largely a product of our own imaginative activities. By inviting such a high degree of audience participation as well as by presenting the spectator with cruel or even shocking revelations about the characters and their worlds, both Gambaro and Pinter appear to have taken Henry James's advice: "Only make the reader's general vision of evil intense enough . . . and his own experience, his own imagination, his own sympathy . . . and horror . . . will supply him quite sufficiently with all the particulars. Make him *think* the evil, make him think it for himself . . ." (xxi).⁹ This, then, is perhaps the greatest cruelty of both Pinter's and Gambaro's dramatic works and the most significant effect of their dramatic language.

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Notes

1. This essay is a revised version of a paper presented at the South Atlantic Modern Language Association convention in Atlanta, Georgia in the fall of 1983.

2. Rosalea Postma also makes brief references to Artaud's theories and Gambaro's use of spatial relationships in her study of Gambaro's *Información para extranjeros* (40, 43-44).

3. Coe makes this remark in connection with certain early plays of Ionesco but his description is equally appropriate for the works of both Pinter and Gambaro.

4. While it is not my intention to argue for the direct influence of *The Birthday Party* on Gambaro's writing of *El desatino*, Gambaro's familiarity with the works of many modern European playwrights and her apparent fascination with Pinter's plays are worth noting. In the

opening paragraph of the talk cited above, she lists Pinter (along with Jean Genet and Alberto Adellach) as examples of vanguard playwrights whose work she would be delighted to see performed by the university group she was addressing. Later on in the same paper, she makes specific and favorable references to recent Argentine productions of *The Caretaker* and *The Dwarfs*, the latter by Jorge Petraglia, who, in the same year, also staged *El desatino*.

5. Cypess' discussion of Gambaro's physical imagery emphasizes the importance of the metal object and the clock in establishing Alfonso's "helplessness" and "subordinate position" ("Physical Imagery," 358-359).

6. Wolfgang Iser spells out the role of indeterminacy in engaging and guiding reader participation in *The Act of Reading* and "The Indeterminacy of the Text: A Critical Reply." Much of the argument which follows is based on Iser's theories.

7. Almansi and Henderson comment on the lure of this filling-in process in Pinter's plays, describing the critic as "the motive-monger who tries to join the dots and complete the picture, filling the gaps in the overall view, adding motivations to the characters' actions . . ." (17). Similarly, David William Foster notes Gambaro's use of "strategies for the disorientation of the audience in the sense of withholding familiar trappings of experience . . . so as to engage uneasy and quizzical attention" (58).

8. See Iser on the role of negativity in *The Act of Reading*, (225-31) and "The Indeterminacy of the Text" (35-36).

9. Parts of this passage from the preface to James's *The Turn of the Screw* are cited in Schechner (177).

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