Conclusion

"I desire a mysterious art, always reminding and half reminding those who understand it of dearly loved things, doing its work by suggestion, not by direct statement, a complexity of rhythm, colour, gesture, not space pervading like the intellect but a memory and a prophecy."¹

Even though Pinter, contrary to Yeats, does not desire a "mysterious art," he has, nevertheless, achieved it. The mysterious and prophetic quality of his drama results, though, from an almost scientific attempt at dispassionate observation. When asked it he tried to make Barrett a sympathetic character in his film version of The Servant, Pinter did not consider such a task his concern. He said, "I am just concerned with what people are, with accuracy."²

Pinter’s preoccupation with accuracy is related to his desire for precision and economy. The precise gesture, the precise sound, the precise word are all part of his poetic technique, in which a word too many may destroy the desired effect. Despite the intuitive nature of his work, Pinter chisels away at his creations like a Greek sculptor until they
have the simplicity and accuracy of line that will make his statement exact. When discussing the difference in writing for the cinema and the stage, Pinter agreed that they were different media that made different demands; but he found the same need for discipline and economy in both. Speaking of the cinema, he says:

I know that you can get around a hell of a lot more—there's no comparison there—but the disciplines are similar, for a writer, in that although you need, let's say, less words on the screen than you do on the stage, nevertheless—although I don't really believe this to be true—say that you needed twenty words for a particular scene on the stage, you can do with six for a similar scene on the screen. The point is, that if you write eight for the screen, two words too many, you're overloading the thing, and you're breaking your discipline; precisely the same discipline, the same economy, whatever the medium you're writing for.

Pinter's own experiences as an actor and director with radio, television, stage, and screen have doubtless contributed to his understanding of the economy necessary for each medium and for his unusual mastery of such a variety of forms. Despite his achievements, however, in the various entertainment media of our time, Pinter finds the theater "ultimately the most important medium," and he has suggested that he reserves his most important ideas for the stage. He finds writing for the theater the most difficult, the most restricted, "the most naked kind" of writing because "you're just there, stuck—there are your characters stuck on the stage, you've got to live with them and deal with them." All of Pinter's dramatic world exhibits something of this quality of dealing with life accurately and revealing it in its naked truth.

In dealing with his characters so accurately, Pinter has looked far beneath the surface of life, not only to the psychological depths of his characters' existence, but to their primitive archetypal nature. His characters and the actions
of his plays remain mysterious, not because he withholds psychological explanation, but because he has sensed a deeper strand of reality than the particular psychology of a character. This other reality is of a ritual nature, the characters grouping to enact those ancient rites that imitate nature and insure and celebrate life’s persistence and renewal.

Ritual functions in Pinter’s dramatic world much as Jane Ellen Harrison suggests it functions in religion to keep the individual fenced-in soul open—“to other souls, other separate lives, and to the apprehension of other forms of life.” The daily rituals that protect man from such openness and awareness are constantly undermined in Pinter’s dramas by those sacrificial rites that impinge upon them and force contact. Goldberg and McCann disturb the breakfast rituals of *The Birthday Party* to conduct their own ritual party at which Stanley is sacrificed; and Petey can no longer hide behind his paper when the strips of it which McCann has torn during the party fall out to remind him of Stanley’s victimization. In *The Room* Rose can no longer hide behind her ritual breakfasts with her husband when Riley appears from the basement and involves her in his fate as *pharmakos*. As much as his characters evade communication, Pinter involves them in an eventual confrontation. The structure is Aristotelian, the imitation of an action, and the impact of the characters upon one another, even in their silent exchanges, is as final and irrevocable as the impact of character on character in Greek tragedy.

The Golden Bough kings have served in this exploration of Pinter’s dramatic world as a metaphorical clue to the ritual patterns that form the basis of it. The contests for dominance which are at the center of the dramatic action of each play invariably have been fought with the tenacity of those priests who defended the Golden Bough with their lives. The battles have also taken on the symbolic significance of seasonal change and renewal attached to the
Golden Bough ritual by Frazer and the Cambridge school of anthropology. In the seasonal ritual the old king-priest-god invariably must suffer death or banishment (Davies, Teddy, Edward—all must be sacrificed), either to be reborn as the new spirit of spring and life (Edward becomes the matchseller, Stanley becomes the new creation of Monty and Co.) or to be replaced by a new god (Teddy is replaced by Lenny and Joey, Law is replaced by Stott, Davies loses the battle to the young gods already in possession, Mick and Aston). The role played by Pinter's women is also clearer if their place as fertility goddess in the ritual is understood: Flora's welcome of the matchseller as her new mate and Ruth's adoption of her new household both make ritual sense of what on the surface seem sluttish and irrational choices. The new god must receive a welcome and be joined with mother earth if life is to continue.

The seasonal nature of the ritual is most clearly exhibited in the one-act drama *A Slight Ache* in which Edward's sacrifice is viewed in the context of a garden. As the dying god of winter, Edward has lost touch with his garden and with his wife, Flora, whose name and character reveal her close connection with the garden. The beautiful summer weather is frightening to Edward, who is happy for a moment only when he kills "the first wasp of summer." This sacrificial act is a prelude to his own sacrifice, however, as the new god, the matchseller who haunts his home, replaces him in it. Flora recognizes the matchseller as Barnabas, the god of summer, and embraces him as the new god in her role as fertility goddess.

In the ritual patterning of the plays, Pinter envisions his characters, like the priests of Nemi, as victors as well as victims. In his early plays his victim-victors are menaced by an outside force, messengers of Monty in *The Birthday Party* or a voice that speaks for Wilson in *The Dumb Waiter*; and whatever brief victories their lives afford, the
impression of the plays is mainly one of man as victim. Beginning with *A Slight Ache*, however, the menace is internalized, and man is seen rather as the victim of forces within himself (the matchseller is another part of Edward) than as victim of some larger exterior power. As the plays gain in complexity, the role of the victim-victor is complicated until Ruth in *The Homecoming* is seen as both the suffering sacrificial victim and the ruling fertility goddess, victim and victor at one and the same time. Pinter conceives of life as a battleground on which there is no clear-cut victory or defeat, always victory and defeat; a battleground on which the enemy, who often seems distant and distinct, is often but another aspect of the self.

The battleground becomes as significant as the battle for dominance in much of Pinter's dramatic world and gains the symbolic value of the tree bearing the Golden Bough so rigorously guarded by its priests. We see Len in *The Dwarfs* trying to integrate the elements of his room and himself, to rid his "kingdom" of the dwarfs who inhabit it; Davies in *The Caretaker* trying to wrest the haven from Aston that his benefactor would share with him; Stott and Law in *The Basement* alternately possessing the basement apartment for which they vie; and Barrett in the film *The Servant* imposing his personality on the house as well as its master. Place is a haven in which Rose and Stanley hide in *The Room* and *The Birthday Party*; it is the focus of the dreams and aspirations of Aston, Mick, and Davies in *The Caretaker*; and it is haven, prison, and castle for Ruth in *The Homecoming*. The self is at stake in Pinter's dramatic portrayal of his victim-victors battling for a place that is identified with that self and that must be guarded, defended, or taken rather than shared.

The struggle in the dramas is very often conceived of in Oedipal terms. Father-and-son competition is evident in Pinter's three major plays with the mother-wife the focus of the battle in *The Homecoming*. The sexual relationship
is ritualized, however, so that the focus is not on neurotic relationships or Oedipus complexes so much as it is on the archetypal relationships of man and woman faced with the universal dilemma of Oedipal conflicts. Woman is often seen in these conflicts as mother, wife and whore—the overpossessive mother of *A Night Out*, for example, whom Albert identifies with a whore he picks up on the street. In *Tea Party* women are initially divided as wife and secretary (whore), but by the end of the play the dying Disson sees them both as one and the same, whores catering to his usurping brother-in-law.

In *The Lover*, *The Collection*, and *The Homecoming*—plays that make a similar identification of the woman—Pinter is highly sympathetic with them. This sympathetic treatment seems to stem partly from a perception of the woman’s ritual role in the transfer of power from the dying god to the new god. Woman is not allowed the role of faithful wife if she is to preside at the ritual renewal of life and embrace and welcome the new god when he arrives. Ruth, the most complex of these divided women, is portrayed as the suffering victim of the power struggle that she loses and wins, the fertility goddess who says “yes” to life on whatever harsh terms it is offered.

The dramas move, then, beyond the particular psychological attributes of the battling characters to their archetypal roles in the ritual patterns in which they move. Pinter once remarked in an interview that a sameness of behavior “is rife in the world. As someone said ‘we’re all the same upside down.’” In a sense his dramatic world stresses that sameness as well as the patterns in which we all appear to move.

One might conclude, then, that despite the different disguises of the menace in each Pinter play, the same weasel is always hiding under the cocktail cabinet. Such a conclusion must be qualified, however, because there is much more to a Pinter play than its ritual pattern. Pinter's
close and exact look at modern man, and particular English men, is what opens out into his intuitive grasp of the basic and primitive rhythms that have always moved men. The ritual counterpoint, the interweaving of the daily secular rituals of modern life with the sacrificial rites at the plays' centers, is what creates the texture of Pinter's dramatic world rather than the sacrificial rites alone. Ruth serves the family tea before she gives herself. And the giving of herself has its particular tragi-comic power because the primitive action takes place in a living room, in the understated tones of a modern business deal amidst cups and saucers rather than in a primitive or heroic setting. The weasels are many as well as one, and the way they work, the particular illusive forms they take, contributes to the particular meaning of each play.

Hence, Pinter continually responds to the texture of modern life as well as to the forces that have always given pattern to life. In *The Birthday Party* Goldberg is almost a caricature of the contemporary corrupted businessman whose middle-class values are a mask for the brutal forces he embodies and serves. In *The Caretaker* Davies is a more fully rounded portrait of the dispossessed vagrant of modern cities. His portrait is completed by the depiction of the equally restless Mick and the wounded Aston, whose efforts to fix a plug become symbolic of his efforts to integrate himself and offer a potent comment on the fragmented nature of city life today. And Max, the uncertain and eventually unseated patriarch of *The Homecoming*, the ex-butcher who has fathered a pimp, a demolition worker, and a professor, stands as the father of a world whose civilization is corrupt (Lenny), brutal (Joey), and effete (Teddy). *The Homecoming* depicts the struggle within the family unit for salvation, as Max, Lenny, and Joey reach out to Ruth for whatever grace she can offer, and the "intellectual" Teddy relinquishes the struggle even as he has relinquished life itself.
The struggle for salvation in our modern world is perhaps Pinter's major theme, even as it is the theme of so much of modern literature and drama. His vision a tragi-comic one, Pinter often laughs at the absurdities of the struggle, often sympathizes with the suffering that it entails. His focus ranges in his plays, settling now on the dying Edward with his growing self-knowledge in *A Slight Ache*, now on the conquering Stephen with his anguished sense of victory in *The Accident*, now on the victim-victor Ruth who comes home to serve and to rule. At one minute his satirical eye moves toward parody, as Stanley becomes almost a mock scapegoat of the malignant powers who reign; but his sense of involvement continually tips the scale with a sympathetic awareness of the suffering involved, in this case the suffering of McCann and Goldberg as well as Stanley.

Despite its accuracy, then, Pinter's dramatic world is anything but the cold and clinical creation of a scientific observer. When Hayman wrongly identifies Pinter with his own character in *The Homecoming*, Teddy, he places him with the only evil character Pinter has created, the already dead person who refuses to become involved in life because life itself is outside his province. Despite the terrible protest against society and against certain qualities of modern life that Pinter's plays contain, he never detaches himself and satirizes that life as a problem. He rather merges with his characters and shares their feeling of being menaced. Hence, we too as the audience are menaced and experience the plays with all the suspense of living through an ordeal. His plays become an initiation for us—an experiencing of the death in our culture from which we may emerge with a clearer insight and some feeling of renewal.

Pinter, in fact, not only uncovers the primitive rhythms which lie below the surface of civilization, but also explores the celebration which accompanies the most cruel rituals of life. Euripides' play *The Bacchae* serves as an excellent
clue to the nature of Pinter’s celebration: a play in which one aspect of man, the civilized, repressed side (Pentheus), is destroyed only to emerge once his dismembered body is put back together again in the epiphany as the god Dionysus, the primitive god of fertility whose power must be recognized. If Stanley’s projected reincarnation in the image of Monty in *The Birthday Party* is too brutal for celebration, the matchseller who replaces Edward in *A Slight Ache* does emerge, ironical though his appearance, as the bringer of new life; and the family to whom Ruth returns in *The Homecoming* is vitally, brutally alive in comparison with her banished husband.

And if the power of the emerging god must be recognized, that recognition comes in Pinter’s drama to the dying god figure as well as to the audience. Echoes of the rhythms of *Oedipus Rex* enter the plays as the insights of Pinter’s characters are often accompanied by a loss of sight. Stanley is robbed of his glasses and forced into a game of blind man’s bluff at his birthday party; his eyes are painfully opened to the nightmare situation of his life with which he cannot cope. Edward and Disson both suffer blindness, a retreat from their growing insights. In Pinter’s dramas, the dying god has at least an intuitive recognition of both his plight and himself.

The celebration in Pinter’s dramas, though, is tempered by the nature of his victorious figures. Like Yeats, Pinter speculates fearfully on the nature of the new gods. The passive, stinking matchseller of *A Slight Ache*, the brutal brothers of *The Homecoming*, the conniving brother-in-law of *Tea Party* do not suggest all that is most welcome in spring. In Ionesco’s dramatic world, there is no salvation; in Beckett’s, there is a seeking for salvation; and in Pinter’s, the salvation which does arrive comes in such questionable form that it is hard to accept. Pinter’s drama remains enigmatic and mysterious then, even as its ritual rhythms celebrate the continual renewal of life.
But if the heart of the mystery to Pinter is as comic as it is tragic, perhaps his laughter contains a mysterious renewal beyond the one depicted. Christopher Fry suggests that in comedy, "groaning as we may be, we move in the figure of a dance, and, so moving we trace the outline of the mystery." Pinter's dance may be macabre, but its rhythms go back to the mainstream of drama; and even if his mockery of the ritual he employs poses a haunting question for man, its rhythms suggest a kind of answer as well.