

In this article, "Anti-Ritual" Critical Domestication and Representational Precision in Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*," Lance Norman argues that the critical tendency to "complete" Pinter's play is actually encouraged by *The Dumb Waiter*'s structure and action: on a meta-theatrical level, the play foregrounds and critiques the way we read dramatic narratives. Norman's essay is in part a response to Thomas Van Laan's assertion that critics of the play have frequently engaged in a process of "filling in what the dramatist has neglected to record" (494–95). Further, the way in which Bakhtin locates the subject within cultural systems of interpretive practices affords an opening into the politics of the play's inter-subjective relations; that is, it foregrounds the precise nature of the play's intervention in the ethical dimensions of subject relations and acts of interpretation. Hayden White's perspective on the cultural value attached to narrativity in representation illuminates how such efforts to re-narrate *The Dumb Waiter* stem from the wish to have the events depicted in the play exhibit the "coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary" (23). Further, as David Robey states, to re-make an unconventional narrative into a conventional form of expression that conveys conventional meanings reinforces a politically conservative view of the world, which traditional art affirms. While Pinter endows Gus and Ben with just this kind of desire for coherency, what transpires in their basement room also constantly frustrates it: as the program from the play's 1960 production at the Royal Court states, our "desire for verification is understandable but cannot always be satisfied" (reproduced in Dobrez 311–12). It signifies "direct, face-to-face, vocalized verbal communication between persons, but also verbal communication of any type whatsoever" (95), including books (verbal performances in print), and one can add to this plays -- verbal performances of texts in real time. Dialogism illuminates how *The Dumb Waiter*'s tendency to pull the reader/spectator toward "filling in" reflects a basic human socio-linguistic practice, which is always political, and within the context of the play, potentially radically so. Although many of Bakhtin's writings focus on the novel, his ideas have been taken up widely by scholars across the Humanities and Social Sciences, and numerous critical studies have demonstrated how his socio-linguistic theory is relevant beyond literary studies that take as their focus the novel as a text type. To the contrary, the way Pinter draws his reader toward "filling in" meaning may be understood as a key element of its dramatic force. The openness of Pinter's dramatic narrative extends the story of *The Dumb Waiter* beyond the endpoint of the action displayed on stage.² Robert Scholes recognizes that narrative is never just a sequencing -- narrative is always a sequencing of something for somebody (205). In *The Dumb Waiter*, the dialectical relationship between the character/actor as deliverer of the narrative sequence and the reader/spectator as its intended recipient compels the recipient to further imaginings about what they have been told or witnessed. I would argue that the problem with the critical tendency to "finish" the play is not the practice of expanding the act of interpretation beyond the final image that the playwright provides; rather, the problem lies in assuming that such critical readings occupy a position of exteriority. Further, as Susan Hollis Merritt asserts in her seminal study of Pinter, some critics who make claims to "register a certainty in the rightness of their methods and findings" ironically end up "at odds with some of their own interpretive principles and hermeneutic pronouncements regarding Pinter's work" (69–70), a facet of Buck's and Van Laan's arguments that Norman identifies as well. The critical tendency toward certainty about what the end of the play means

begins with Martin Esslin, who, in his influential assessment of the play in 1962, states unequivocally, "It is Gus who is the next victim (209). Building upon Van Laan, R.A. Buck identifies how traditionalist critical discussions of the 'The Dumb Waiter fail to emphasize the power of the linguistic ambiguity in the last lines of the play' (45), thereby distorting its meaning. Norman, in contrast, suggests that there is something built into the structure of Pinter's dramatic narrative that necessitates an engagement with the ambiguity of language; that is, *The Dumb Waiter* compels the reader/spectator to reflect critically on the ambiguous nature of language and communication, which, in a sense, disallows the "neglect" of which Buck speaks. The discussions of *The Dumb Waiter* highlighted by Van Laan and Buck as problematic tend to assume that the reader/spectator can occupy a privileged, almost omniscient position, one that enables the critic to appropriately re-configure the play's textual and theatrical signifiers in order to finally solve the mystery of the play -- ignoring how the system of language itself hinders this practice. What I find intriguing about Norman's essay is how it reveals the play as being partly about what narrative discourse is and gestures toward the psycho-social processes by which meanings are created through inter-subjective dialogue.

190 Mary Brewer My reading of the play, like Norman's, refutes the idea that analyzing it beyond the end of the on-stage action deforms its meaning. Because the drama's literary and ideological meanings are equally entangled with those of the reader/spectator, it serves to alienate the recipient from his/her conventional relation to and understanding of language -- language as something with a stable form and content that allows meaning to be pinned down with certainty. I contend that an emphasis on dialogism enables a deeper exploration of how the play instantiates a process whereby the reader/viewer is provoked into reflecting on the mode of reception of textual and theatrical signifiers, and language itself. Nonetheless, Bakhtin has been applied in limited ways in studies of Pinter, and mainly with an emphasis on the Carnavalesque. The program acknowledges the play's denial of traditional ideas concerning how reality operates and the subject's capability of knowing anything with surety, ideas which are tied to a politically conservative agenda (xi). In this essay, I want to amplify Norman's argument that "filling in" is intrinsic to representation by reading the play through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. The Dumb Waiter's ending, particularly, reveals the linguistic mechanisms through which the play challenges the conservative drives of conventional wish-fulfillment narratives. The Dumb Waiter's open quality makes the reader's/spectator's response into an act of interpretation and an act of writing at the same time, in which a final meaning is continually foreclosed. refers to verbal communication, but not merely in the sense of direct verbal interaction between individuals. Dialogue, as described in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*,?