

TIME AS INTERPRETANT IN HAROLD PINTER'S THE BASEMENT

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In many texts time is simply a factor of textual coherence and its apprehension by the reader does not need to go beyond the reconstruction of the fabula, i. e., the reorganization of the sujet through the signification of temporal signs.¹ Very often, however, the apprehension of time is only the basic step to an understanding of its real role in some texts, in which the distortion of temporal configurations serves a specific thematic or stylistic purpose. Moreover, time is frequently interwoven with or embedded in the very significance of the text as a whole, as is clearly the case of The Basement. The reader's analysis is then forced to leave the relative simplicity of re-ordering the sujet to enter a new reading level – that of interpretation proper – because now it is the contextually-defined symbolical/argumental properties of the temporal sign that must be dealt with and not only its indexical aspects.² The objective of the reading is here not the (re)establishment of order in a series of events but the uncovering of what significance there is in the presentation of the sujet in a specific way.

The contextual nature of literary texts forbids the outlining of a priori procedures to uncover this significance. Because each text will require a specific approach, the most that can be done is the identification of the general pattern that reading strategies seem to follow. Interpretation is a heuristic process: the reader must formulate a hypothesis and

test it by checking the data against it. If the hypothesis is able to cover all the data, then it is maintained. If the data falsify it, the reader discards it and formulates a second hypothesis, and so on. What is being called "data" here is, of course, the cluster of signs in the text. The hypothesis is a possible interpretant for these signs considered individually and as a whole and it is taken from the range of their possible interpretants at that specific moment of the reading. In other words, the reader will seek an interpretant capable of being a valid interpretant for each sign and at the same time a valid interpretant for all signs in the text in some respect, a sort of common denominator, as it were. The fact that this interpretant must be within the interpretational possibilities of a given sign, and ultimately of all signs in the text if it is to be a common denominator, is tantamount to saying that there is a limit to the openness of a literary work: its range of meaning is circumscribed by the very signs that compose it. Still, that leaves a large space for the interpretational task and often several hypotheses are formulated only to be discarded as the reader starts a new page.

The formulation of explanatory hypotheses is a logical method and is given full-fledged status as an equal of deduction and induction in the semiotic of C. S. Peirce. This is the process variously called retroduction, hypothetic inference, or, more commonly, abduction. Spinks explains that Peirce was fascinated by the logic of "discovery" and made it the core of his study of logic.³ Indeed, deductive and inductive processes of inference are more or less obvious, Spinks argues, and because of this they constitute the largest part of the logician's work. Nevertheless, human experience suggests a way of deriving or handling information that is not so well-defined as deduction and induction but is still responsible for the

discovery of what is not known. This way of deriving information is by means of hunches, intuitions, insights, and so on, and this is to say that while deduction and induction are inferences about experience, i. e., about the past, abduction is about the future, the not-yet-experienced. Furthermore, since it is "an act of insight" that "comes to us like a flash" (CP 5. 181) it has iconic aspects in that one of the properties of the icon "is that by the direct observation of it other truths concerning its object can be discovered than those which suffice to determine its construction" (CP 2.279).

As everything else in Peirce's work, abduction is described and defined variously in different places. One way of putting it is to say that hypothetical inference is "an argument which assumes that a term which necessarily involves a certain number of characters, which have been lighted upon as they occurred... may be predicated on any object which has all these characters."⁴ Moreover, a "hypothesis is a categorical assertion of something we have not experienced" (Writings, K, 267). It consists of substituting "for a complicated tangle of predicates attached to one subject, a single conception" (CP 2.643). Abduction is, in other words, a reasonably well-founded guess or, as Sebeok characterizes it, "it enables us to formulate a general prediction but with no warranty of a successful outcome."⁵ The process of induction also constitutes the formulation of a prediction but there is in abduction a certain element of insight, a certain boldness that does not exist in either deduction or induction. For this reason, it is the very first stage of scientific reasoning.

As guesses, albeit more or less well-founded ones, abductive processes are likely to incur in error but the fact that a hypothesis is subject to falsification does not mean

that abduction is a process of trial and error. Essentially, one risks a hypothesis on the basis of one's experience, by choosing a logically likely interpretant for the signs among the ones that offer themselves to observation. Having been chosen, the hypothesis must be tested by deduction – demonstration – and induction, which ascertains to what degree the consequents of the hypothesis derived by deduction agree with experience (Spinks, p. 202).

Since abduction embodies the logic of discovery and reading may be defined as the gradual discovery of the text, it is entirely logical to conclude that reading is a self-corrective process that proceeds by means of abductive leaps. Eco corroborates the idea that the reader's search for significance is abductive and may lead to error. In "Horns, Hooves, Insteps" he discusses abduction and states:

The identification of a textual topic is a case of undercoded abductive effort.

Frequently one does not know whether the topic one has discovered is the "good one" or not, and the activity of textual interpretation can end at different and conflicting semantic actualizations. This proves that every text-interpreter makes abductions among many possible readings of a text.⁶

Furthermore, as both Eco and Sebeok point out, there is a definite link between the reading of a text and the detective's work.⁷ Thus, it is not as though the perpetrator of a murder is discovered by means of wild, random guesses on the part of the detective. The hypothesis leading to the detection is formed through an abductive effort based on the available clues. The reader's reading is done in the same way. An initial

interpretive hypothesis is said to be correct when the interpretants of all signs cohere in the respect in which the text is being analyzed, i. e., when everything "falls into place." The interpretant arrived at in this way is a sign of the whole text as it is the interpretant of the text-as-sign, and it has within itself all the interpretants of the individual signs in the text, as Peirce suggests in CP 2.230.

The contention that interpretive processes are heuristic and proceed by means of abductive leaps will be illustrated by the analysis of The Basement, a theatrical play in which time is a factor of subversion, more than one of cohesion, because it escapes its traditional linearity to fuse itself with the never-ending circularity of the characters' lives by presenting itself as entirely rhematic.⁸ Time is, therefore, inextricably tied with the significance of the text and for this reason an analysis of its import has to reckon with non-temporal signs as well. The Basement, one of Pinter's television pieces, is a short, highly symbolic one-act play, first presented by BBC in 1967. As many critics are quick to acknowledge, it reads as one of Pinter's most complex works.⁹ As a rule, temporal shifts in it are marked by the alternation of summer and winter, day and night, while another temporal marker is slowly introduced, namely the changes in the furniture of the basement apartment. It will be seen that these markers are responsible for temporal ambiguity and also reflect the different aspects of the characters' changing relationships, ultimately pointing to a timelessness stemming from the circuitousness and indeterminacy created by the apparent succession of winter, summer, day, and night. Only three characters interact in the play: two males — Stott and Law — are involved in a power struggle over control of their territory (the basement flat) and the sexual rights to the female character, Jane. Most of the action takes place in

the flat, which may be interpreted as having an allegorical psychological meaning not readily grasped by the unwary reader, although the fact that the play is so obviously non-realistic does point to hidden meanings.

The first scene, nevertheless, is realistic enough, almost traditional. The side-text indicates camera shots from different angles, alternating the exterior and the interior of the apartment. It is a winter night and it is raining. The first exterior shot shows Stott as seen from behind, wearing a raincoat. The camera is then told to focus on Stott's face and now Jane can be seen behind him, also wearing a raincoat and a hat. Both are standing close to the wall. Next, the interior is shown: Law is sitting by the fireside, reading an illustrated Persian love manual. The doorbell is heard, Law opens the door and sees Stott but the girl is out of his angle of vision. Law is surprised but happy to see Stott and immediately tells him to come in, takes his coat and hangs it, not without looking inside it, reading the label, and smiling. Law then says something that is apparently quite common in such circumstances:

You haven't changed at all. You haven't changed... at all. You've got a new raincoat, though. (p. 153)

This line sounds straightforward but there is something odd about it, although at this time there is nothing on which to base this feeling of strangeness. It is only after the next exchange that the reader begins to realize in a more concrete way that the reference to the raincoat seems out of place. After offering Stott a towel, Law emphatically comments on how long he has not seen Stott ("For years," p. 154). When the reader realizes that they have not (supposedly) seen each other for such a long time, then the reference to the new raincoat

must be there as a sign, but there is no way of telling of what it is a sign as yet. The reader will thus have to put this aside for the moment as a loose piece in the puzzle. The reader, of course, is still not aware that this is a puzzle, unless he/she is acquainted with Pinter's previous work and does not expect a well-made play to begin with.

Law asks Stott if he was not living at his old address and Stott replies that he is looking for a new place, which prompts Law to offer to put him up until he can find a place. This exchange of pleasantries, accompanied by drinks, seems quite proper for two friends who apparently have not seen each other for years. Here, however, the first real element of strangeness appears. Stott tells Law that there is a girl outside. She is still there, forgotten. This is, of course, a clear sign, an index of Jane's actual position vis-a-vis Stott. Law opens the door to her and offers her a towel, which she refuses. Stott gives her his own and she takes it. It will be understood later - retrospectively - that this is the first round of a series of combats between Stott and Law, and Stott seems to have won it.

The scene proceeds. Stott finds the room too bright and turns a lamp off, asking Law post factum if he minds. Jane undresses and gets into Law's bed, naked. Law stands still. Now it is Stott's turn to take his clothes off and to get into the bed. Previously, when Law offered Stott his hospitality, he referred to a second bed (a camp bed) where Stott could sleep. Stott disregards this and occupies Law's bed together with Jane. Seeing this, Law gives a long, repetitious speech:

I was feeling quite lonely... Mind you, I'm very happy here... I bought this flat cash down. It's mine.

(p. 156)

As becomes clear from the way the discussion is being done thus far, the reader is still in the data-gathering phase. Now, however, there are sufficient elements for the formulation of an initial hypothesis, the first abductive leap, however vague this hypothesis may be at the moment: there seems to be in the play a link between sexuality and ownership. There appears to be enough evidence to support it, as the following summary will reveal:

- Law reads a book about sex, sitting alone in his apartment.
- Stott comes in and the fact that Jane is left outside shows that she is submissive to him.
- The towel episode adds an element of authority or dominance to the relationship between Jane and Stott.
- Jane knows what is expected of her, i. e., sex.
- Law is aware that his space is being invaded in two ways: the couple's blatant sexuality and their behaving as if they owned the place (the turning off of the lamp, the occupation of the bed). Law's speech is an index of this.

Evidently, this hypothesis is a partial one. It has to do with one of the dicents that make up the argument, not necessarily the one that is the interpretant of the others. So far, nothing has been said about time and the hypothesis concerns strictly the relationships among the characters. The subtler aspects will follow this analysis and only after each dicent sign in the argument has been established will the reading proceed (by induction) to a generalization, the conclusion or the interpretant dicent that will follow from the premises.

The signs the reader is dealing with now are clear. The illustrated sex manual is evidently an icon inasmuch as it resembles that which it is about, i. e., its object. At the same time, it is an index to Law's loneliness if it is contrasted with the couple's display of sexuality and especially if it is noted that indices are defined by contiguity and Law's speech on loneliness follows the couple's getting into bed. Furthermore, the fact that the manual is in a context in which two people look as though they are about to make love turns it into a symbol as well. In that specific context, it becomes the symbol of Law's vicarious experience. In other words, at this initial stage Law has the book, Stott has Jane. But Law also has the apartment ("It's mine"), which, as is becoming clear, seems to be taken gradual possession of by Stott. Thus, Law is in a defensive position, as his speech indexically reveals, and Stott is the aggressor. Jane seems to be an object that will become the center of the dispute between Law and Stott, although nothing in the text indicates this as yet.

The provisional hypothesis that sex and ownership are kin concepts in the play must be substantiated by means of the verification of whether future data will conform to it. The verification procedure will either confirm it and add new information to it or disallow it completely, in which case another hypothesis will have to be sought. The end of the first scene seems to confirm it, at least partially. There is no dialogue and the action is given by the side-text: Law unbuttons his cardigan and shades the one remaining lamp with it; the spotlight focuses on Law's still hands; a gasp from Jane is heard; light on Law's motionless hands and on his legs; he puts on his glasses, reaches for the love manual, and reads it; a long sigh from Jane is heard (pp. 156-57). A complex of signs emerges that has already been anticipated. Law hears

Jane's gasp and sigh as indices of the sexual act being performed in his bed. The incidence of light on his motionless hands and legs is, inasmuch as it is indexical of his inactivity, a symbolic sign of Law's separation from the couple making love, his loneliness, and his lack. Hence, the icon performs its usual function of replacing the real object of desire. Law reads Stott and Jane; that is, if he cannot have the object, then he has the sign of it. By the same token, the book is also symbolic of Law's feelings and in this respect its function is the same as that of the light. Although sexual envy is clear, the aspect of ownership is still diffuse and there does not appear to be enough substantiation for it. So far, the only inkling is that Stott has Jane, Law does not. It is, however, too early to discard the hypothesis and more signs will have to be observed before any conclusion is reached.

In the second scene there is a time shift and it is now a summer day. Stott is standing on a cliff top overlooking the sea while Law and Jane are down below on the beach and Jane is building a sandcastle. Law is telling Jane how rich, aristocratic, refined, and intelligent Stott is and, here again, this is something that can be understood only retrospectively. What is clear, though, is that Stott's standing on the cliff top reveals symbolically his superiority in relation to the other two. Jane's act of building a sandcastle is understood better after a conversation between the two men in which Law asks whether Stott does not "find she is lacking in maturity" (p. 160). There is an array of indices throughout the play pointing to the fact that Jane is little more than an object: she is often shown in the kitchen, cooking, or serving the two men or, of course, in bed. Maturity is, then, not to be construed so much as that stage in life at which the person has reached his/her full potential but as

something like 'depth' or 'real humanity.' Jane seems to be a shallow character, whose function in the play is that of a catalyst, the object over which the two men are fighting.

The scene changes. It is night (presumably still summer) and Law is lying on the floor, eyes closed, as if sleeping. Stott and Jane are in bed, Jane gasps, Law opens his eyes, and Jane smiles at him. A new element appears here. The smile seems to be another index, made evident as a sign because it is underscored in the side-text and "The female lure" seems to be its object: "Jane smiles at Law. He looks at her. She smiles" (p. 158). The smile is connected with what happens on the following day: Stott removes all the paintings from the walls. He is now beginning to change the apartment in a concrete way, symbolically taking possession of it. A shot of Jane cooking and humming in the kitchen (as if oblivious to what was going on) follows the removal of the paintings. The situation is becoming increasingly more well-defined, notwithstanding the fact that it is still one of a slight imbalance in favor of Stott because he has Jane and is taking over the apartment. Law still has the apartment and is losing it but does not have Jane. The fluid status quo is likely to change: Jane's smile to Law is also an indexical symbol inasmuch as it leads to the prediction that she may move completely into Law's sphere while Stott becomes the owner of the apartment. At this time, however, this is just a conjecture, another abductive leap based on still scant evidence given by the interpretants of the occurring signs. Nevertheless, the cluster of interpretants is now such that the evidence can be searched for in a more organized fashion. One way to do it is by breaking up the characters' relationship into dyads instead of looking at it as a triad. Thus, the reader may analyze the relationship between Jane and Stott, Jane and Law, and Law and Stott, and subsequently join

the conclusions into a unifying generalization.

It has already been pointed out that, initially, Jane is submissive to Stott. At a second moment, after she makes love with Stott, she rolls on her side away from him and smiles at Law. Her moving away from Stott while still in bed with him is, like the smile, an index of separation from Stott. This becomes more intense later: Jane is sitting at a table in the backyard and when Stott tries to touch her breast, she moves away from him (p. 165). While this is going on with Stott, she approaches Law in an active way:

Law and Jane lying in the sand. Jane caressing him.

JANE (whispering). Yes, yes, yes, oh you are, oh you are, oh you are...

LAW. We can be seen.

JANE. Why do you resist? How can you resist?

LAW. We can be seen! Damn you! (p. 160)

This short scene is indexical of the separation from Stott and is, thus, a reinforcement of the smile. Taken as a whole, it is a sign different from the smile as a sign but having the same interpretant: temptation, the lure. Law still resists her. One of the possible dynamic interpretants of his resistance could be his loyalty to Stott, but it could also be fear, or even the acting out of the role assigned to the character by his own name. Several scenes later, there is an ambiguous conversation between Law and Jane in which she says to him:

Why don't you tell him to go? We had such a lovely home... Tell him to go. Then we could be happy again... like we used to. (p. 165)

The two last sentences are repeated several times. Leaving alone the puzzling temporal (and symbolic) implications of her words for the time being, let us concentrate on their significance in terms of the relationship of the characters: she is actively telling Law that she wants him or that she does not want Stott. The text confirms this by showing later that she succeeds in overcoming Law's scruples. The side-text reads that it is night and Law and Jane are in a corner of the room, "snuffling each other like animals" (p. 167). The simile helps the reader identify the object of this index, since snuffling is a common ritual that precedes mating. The index can, of course, be seen as symbolic of the transfer, as now she belongs to Law. This is reinforced in a strange later scene depicting a dangerous indoor game of cricket played with large marbles by Law and Stott. Law successfully hits one of the marbles with his flute and Jane openly applauds him.

This change of lovers by Jane is interwoven with the gradual disfigurement of the apartment by Stott. As already mentioned, he begins by occupying Law's bed and removing the paintings from the walls. After the scene in which Jane is caressing Law on the beach and he resists her, the two return to the apartment to find the room unrecognizable with its new Scandinavian look. The furniture and the decoration are subsequently changed one more time. This is revealed by Pinter in the side-text preceding the indoor cricket game. The decoration is now lavish: tapestries, marble tiles and pillars, everything makes the room look like a setting for a Hollywood production about an ancient empire. The impression is reinforced by Jane's entrance with a bowl of fruit in her hands, from which Stott takes a grape to bite into. He subsequently tosses the bowl of fruit across the room. Also significant is the fact that Law is playing a flute: it both reinforces the general impression of

wealthy decadence and is reminiscent of a satyr or a faun playing its pipe. The latter interpretant is arrived at indexically from the preceding scene in which the reader witnesses Law's animalization from the sexual point of view (the snuffling). The leap from the snuffling to the satyr via the flute is thus a natural one. It is also worth noting that there seems to be an indexical relation of contiguity in the text between the scenes in which Jane approaches Law and the changes of furniture; that is, one has either the female or the territory, but not both.

Stage props are necessarily icons and their representation by resemblance makes them essential in the theatre. Inasmuch as indices are pointers, they are also essential. Every play, however, creates its own sets of conventions on the use of icons and indices and these conventions introduce symbolicity, without which much of the significance of the text is lost.¹⁰ It is not different with The Basement. It is clear that the various types of decoration (icons) correspond not only to Stott's occupation of Law's space (in an indexical way), but also to the fact that their increasing richness symbolically reflects the mounting tension between the two male characters. Indeed, Law's attitude towards Stott goes through several stages. Initially, it is one of open friendship, soon tainted by envy. This does not prevent him from trying to remain loyal to Stott and only thus can his telling Jane about Stott's accomplishments be understood. His resistance to Jane's advances at the beach must be construed in a like manner. Notwithstanding his efforts to keep her at a distance, he is gradually overcome by her sexual appeal. He keeps fighting it, though, albeit in a different manner. He is aware that he cannot win when he is with her, hence he talks to Stott:

LAW. Listen... I must speak frankly... Don't you think it's a bit crowded in that flat for us?

STOTT. No, no. Not at all.

LAW. ... I can assure you that the... Town Council would feel it incumbent upon itself to register the strongest possible objections. And so would the Church.

STOTT. Not at all. Not at all. (p. 164)

And later:

LAW. She betrays you. She has no loyalty... This beautiful Scandinavian furniture. She dirties it. (p. 166)

This is all to no avail. It is immediately after this line that the scene changes and Law and Jane are seen snuffling each other. In the quotations above, Stott's position is an indexical dicent and it is clear that its interpretant is the fact that he has the upper hand in the situation. Law's position, on the contrary, is rhematic. It is uncertain at this stage of the reading whether he wants both Stott and Jane to leave (so that the situation may return to its former equilibrium) or whether he wants only Stott to leave (so that he may have Jane for himself). One point is clear: a comparison of the two quotations reveals an increase in the intensity of feeling from the first to the second, as if Law were growing more desperate.

The ambivalence of Law's position is also conveyed by the contrast between his talks to Stott about Jane and the open competitiveness on his part as indicated by the various confrontations he and Stott engage in. Their antagonism escalates sequentially from a most civil conversation to a

dialogue about sports, then to physical competition in sports, and lastly to an actual fight. That the movement here is from the verbal to the physical is interesting and can be compared iconically (in terms of form) and symbolically (in terms of meaning) to Law's relation with Jane: first vicariously (the sex manual) and then physically.

The very fist confrontation is the already mentioned towel episode at the beginning of the play. At that moment of the reading this was still very cryptic or simply not made much of because its presentation was done in the guise of a solicitous and entirely appropriate offer by Law. The second confrontation appears in the form of a polite verbal duel between Law and Stott in which their prowess at sports is debated:

STOTT. You were pretty hot stuff at squash.

LAW. You were unbeatable.

STOTT. Your style was deceptive.

LAW. It still is.

STOTT. Not any longer. (p. 162)

That the two are at odds is now apparent and a comparison with the first confrontation shows an intensification of hostility. Stott also demonstrates his awareness that an underlying conflict exists. This dialogue is transitional between the purely formal hostility to an actually existing one, the physical competition. As transition and thus mediation, the dialogue can also be seen as an interpretant sign.

The third and fourth displays of antagonism are in the form of games. The first game-like competition was a race. As is customary in the theatre of the absurd, no overt preparation for this (apparent) non-sequitur is given the reader, which makes the scene all the more significant. Jane is a hundred yards

away from Law and Stott, holding a scarf. Law tells her that he is going to give her the signal to drop the scarf, at which moment he and Stott will start running towards her. Stott asks him if he really wants to do this and Law answers that he is sure he wants to. Jane drops the scarf, Law runs, but Stott does not. Before he reaches Jane, Law looks back at Stott, stumbles, and falls. Lying on the ground, he asks Stott: "Why didn't you run?" (p. 163). This scene is obviously very significant. The indexical aspect of the race is, of course, competition, and Jane's position downfield is symbolic of the woman as a goal. This is confirmed by Stott's not running: he does not have to reach her because he already has. By the same token, Law's fall is also a symbol meaning that he cannot have her yet. The scene as a whole is an iconic symbol whose iconic properties have to do with the fact that it has the same object as the Persian love manual and performs the same function. This iconicity can even be extended further: inasmuch as reading about sex is indexical of a knowledge about sex, the physical activity of the race is indexical of prowess, and physical prowess is thus made symbolic of a knowledge of sex. In other words, the running towards Jane is the physical counterpart of the mentalization involved in reading a love manual in the circumstances in which it was being read. In this respect it is clear that both actions are sublimations and they are not only iconic of each other but also indexical of Law's desire.

Violence escalates while the furniture undergoes change. The next "game" is the improvised indoor cricket match. Contrary to what happened in the race, here Stott plays actively and it is he who produces the index of violence by tossing the bowl of fruit across the room. The show of truculence by Stott is due to the fact that the two men are on an equal footing now: Stott controls the territory but Law has

taken the woman. During the "game" Stott throws a marble at Law and Law drops to the floor as he is hit on the head (p. 169). It becomes apparent that the fact that each one has now what he did not have previously is still not sufficient to guarantee an equilibrium because each man wants both the woman and the territory.

Based on the propositions inferred from the interpretants thus far observed (dicents, therefore), the reader can now both predict (by abduction) that the situation will get worse and induce that what is at stake here is not so much sexuality and ownership (translated in terms of territoriality) in themselves, but sexuality and ownership as two dicents in a larger argument: the idea of control or dominance or, in other words, power as conveyed by the general idea of desire. This is an interpretant that reveals the fact that signs of physical power, sexuality, and control over a territory — all birds of a feather — are intermingled and presented alternatively in the text. The initial hypothesis has thus been re-defined. Although the dynamic interpretants chosen for the signs that presented themselves to the reader at that time of the reading are not wholly incorrect — after all, they are part of the immediate interpretant at that time and they do exist in the text — they are not totally correct, either, in terms of the long-run process of semiosis because a further interpretant was derived comprising them.

The power stalemate in which Law and Stott find themselves must be resolved. As a result, the escalation of violence is still expected. Indeed, in one of the last scenes, Law and Stott are in the room (now completely bare, with no trace of furniture), both barefooted and both holding broken milk bottles that are evidently weapons, and vicious ones at that. The side-text alternates camera shots of the men with shots of

Jane in the kitchen, going through the ritual of making coffee. No words are spoken, which is a corroborating sign that the movement from the verbal to the physical — or from the peripheral to the essential — has reached its final destination. The scene unfolds as follows:

JANE pouring sugar from a packet into the bowl.

LAW pointing his bottle before him, his arm taut.

STOTT pointing his bottle before him, his arm taut.

JANE pouring milk from a bottle into a jug.

STOTT slowly advancing along bare boards.

LAW slowly advancing.

.....

The broken milk bottles fencing, not touching.

JANE stirring milk, sugar, and coffee in the cups.

The broken milk bottles, in a sudden thrust, smashing together.

Record turning on a turntable. Sudden music.

Debussy's *Girl With The Flaxen Hair.*' (p. 171)

Once again the environment reflects the relationship between Law and Stott as they reach the breaking point. The bareness of the room is an index of the characters' giving up of all civility, the kind of civility that was preserved to some extent during the game phase and that was gradually lost as violence increased. The coincidence of the game phase with the various furnishings of the apartment is, retrospectively, a further sign of this. Now that their real motivation is laid bare — as bare as the room — there is no need for superficial, outward shows of refinement, sportsmanship, and even language, which the play obviously depicts as the veneer that covers an uglier core of animal-like motivations stemming from desire

(both sexual and for power). Desire is, of course, one of the interpretants of Debussy's piece. As a symbolic sign, the bare room has the collapse of the situation as its interpretant. The utter improbability of the scene, its nightmarish tone, and its non-mimetic quality are given primarily by Jane's calm performance of household duties while such a fight is going on. This contrast has another semiotic responsibility, which is that of pointing again to Jane's role in the triad so as to clarify it. Her complete obliviousness and lack of concern for what is going on in the room next to the kitchen cannot be taken as her being faithful to her role as an object. If it is lack of concern at all, it cannot be because she has no humanity or is a shallow character. Jane's aloof attitude is deliberate. Now the reader has read enough to conclude that Jane is capable of passion and even of action! Her smile at Law, her moving away from Stott when he tried to touch her, her applause of Law, and her words to him are indices of that. Furthermore, the fact that Jane is always cooking does not necessarily have to point only to her being used as an object, but it could be interpreted as meaning that her role is that of a nurturer. In this fight scene, while she pours milk from a bottle the two men fight with broken milk bottles. There is a powerful sign here that is associated with milk and its iconic and symbolic aspects and which is brought to the foreground by the contrasting use of bottles of milk for feeding and fighting. The reader must, therefore, revise Jane's role but this re-evaluation will prove to be better after the analysis of temporal relations. It is the crucial role of time in The Basement that will help to clarify the characters' roles. It will also lead to the induction of a general idea that constitutes the significance of the play because it will add a decisive dicent to the argument.

As is remembered, the first scene takes place on a rainy

winter night and the action proceeds linearly from Stott's entrance to its end. This is to say that the logic of the action is linear with respect to the reader's experience of the world. The time shift from winter to summer in the second scene is also within the limits of the expected due to the fact that this moment has winter as a reference point and is made a *dicent* relative to it. This means that, thus far, time seems to be performing its usual function of linking actions along an axis. Summer is understood as posterior to winter not only semantically but also semiotically, both because the directions say nothing to the contrary and because Stott and Jane arrived in the winter, so that this summer cannot be a flashback. Night is then indicated (Jane's smile) and again the reader assumes that it follows the day. The next shift is to daytime (presumably still summer) and Jane is shown cooking.

From here on the ambiguity of temporal markers is established in the play. The place is now the background and it is winter. Nothing is said to the effect that this winter precedes the summer, so the assumption is that it follows it. Nevertheless, the dialogue is slightly ambiguous in this respect. Law asks Stott if he does not think Jane is immature after Stott tells him that she comes from "a rather splendid family" and plays the harp. There are three possible dynamic interpretants for this conversation: (1) although no reference to time exists in the dialogue, the fact that two old friends meet and then wait for one year in order to say such apparently trivial things about the girl makes the reader suspect that this winter is the same as that one in which Jane and Stott appeared; (2) the suspicion could be wrong because a few scenes before Jane is seen building a sandcastle and it can be inferred that Law saw in this an index of her immaturity, in which case this winter is after the summer after the first

winter; (3) the ambiguity is to be understood as an ambiguity, i. e., it does not have to be solved. Possibility (3) seems to be the most promising course of investigation, given that the play does not even pretend to be mimetic of reality.

Indeed, when the first change of furniture comes about, it is summer and the side-text emphasizes that there is a new hi-fi cabinet but the bed is the same (p. 161). On the same page there is a time shift. The directions read "Winter (second furnishing)" and Stott calls out to Law: "Let's hear your stereo" (emphasis mine). The contradiction is obvious and cannot be resolved. On the one hand, the second furnishing is functioning as a temporal index pointing to the summer. On the other hand, the stereo in the dialogue points to the first furnishing because of the possessive adjective that modifies it; that is, it points to the first winter.

Another instance of unresolved temporal ambiguity is on p. 164. The side-text indicates "Interior. Room. Day. Summer." Stott asks Law if he is going to play Debussy. Law looks for the record. Jane goes to the backyard, whereupon Law says that he has found the record. The side-text then changes to winter. Law has the record in his hands but the furniture is the same as in the beginning of the play. Stott and Jane climb into bed, naked, and Law picks up a poker and pokes at the fire (incidentally, this action is one more icon for love-making in the series installed by the love manual). On p. 165 it is a summer day again. Jane is sitting at a table in the yard. Law watches as Stott tries to touch Jane's breast and when she moves away, he calls to Stott that he has found the record. It would be easy to say that the winter scene is inserted as a flashback in the middle of the summer scene because the part of summer on p. 165 starts exactly where the one on p. 164 stopped. The problem with this is that the record is in the three scenes, thereby including

the winter. As a temporal index, the record contradicts summer and winter, unless the winter record is construed purely as an interpretant of the real record seen as a sign that triggered Law's memory and retrieved the icon from it, the image represented by the winter insertion. If this is the case, then the record as a temporal index is dicental. If the winter scene is not meant to be memory, then the temporal index is rhematic. No solution need be offered because, again, what is important here is not that the situation must be resolved one way or the other but that it has the possibility of going one way or the other. In other words, the temporal import is one of ambiguity and indeterminacy.

The next scene adds to the ambiguity by introducing a new element. It consists of the already quoted words of Jane to Law:

Why don't you tell him to go? We had such a lovely home... Then we could be happy again... like we used to. (p. 165)

By now the reader has abandoned all hope of explaining time along a linear axis. The crucial signs here are the word again and the phrase like we used to. Both are indexical of a past relationship between Jane and Law that has hitherto not been mentioned in the text. Part of the problem here is that, in terms of the meaning of the immediate context of the scene, these verbal signs are fully referential propositions but, seen in the larger context of the reading up to this moment, they are propositional functions with unbound variables. If the reader must observe a meaning at all, the dynamic interpretant generated by this line has to be associated with the idea of ambiguity and indeterminacy of time in the play. Only one

hypothesis can explain this: if Jane is also in Law's past, the play is the re-enactment of a situation that must have existed before. Given that at the beginning of the play she was with Stott, and now she is with Law, then at a previous occurrence of the situation that the play depicts she was with Law and Stott had the apartment. Law took the apartment away from Stott and Stott took Jane. This is why time is indeterminate: in such a recursive situation it does not really matter what happens before or after what.

The reasoning above is, of course, abductive. It will have to be confirmed by other signs and then re-inferred inductively if it is to assert itself as a conclusion. The last scene in the play is decisive in this respect. It is the repetition of the first but it switches the characters. Stott is sitting in the room, reading a book. It is winter and it is raining. More importantly, the furniture is the same as in the first scene. Law, wearing Stott's raincoat, is standing outside with Jane. The doorbell is heard. Stott opens the door, sees Law but he cannot see Jane:

STOTT (with great pleasure). Law!

LAW (smiling). Hullo, Charles!

STOTT. Good God, come in. I can't believe it. (p. 171)

The play has come full circle. It is clear now that it captures one instance of the endless repetition of the same pattern. The apparently disparate signs fall into place and now the importance of the raincoat is fully visible and the reason for the emphasis on it becomes available. The raincoat is the symbolic sign of a role, that of the one who comes from outside, the invader, and he who wears it will come to conquer the other's territory. The play does not deal with character proper, but

whit roles, patterned actions. It does not matter who is playing what role in the relationship, the pattern was, is, and will be the same. Since the very beginning the reader suspects that this text is not historical in that sense of history that presupposes linear flow and unambiguous reference. Now it is confirmed that The Basement makes no reference to facts from which a pattern may be drawn. It is, rather, a pattern that is filled in with facts. In this light the play, seen as a whole, is an icon because it is pure form or tends towards it, and because it can be said to resemble but it cannot be said to refer. Debussy's music, a sign thus far only discussed in its indexical aspects, is also here as a symbol whose interpretant is this algebraic value that the play possesses. Debussy was an unorthodox composer whose characteristic impressionism is responsible for the fluctuating rhythms and shifting tonalities of his music. His concern was centered not so much on the topical aspect of music but on the impressions that the topic aroused in him, i. e., not the content but the effect.^{ff} Nothing further need be said to ascertain the appropriateness of the symbolic use of Debussy in The Basement.

As an icon, the play is a qualisign but, more importantly, it is also a rheme in the same way that "x is y" is a rheme. Several interpretants can thus be allowed to replace the variables, as long as their internal consistence matches the argument of the play, of course. Two possible interpretations suggest themselves immediately.

One way of reading the play is to regard it as an allegory of human relationships, be they interpersonal or social. In point of fact, the play depicts a disrapture of balance and the subsequent search for a new equilibrium. The power struggle between Law and Stott is derived from the imbalance generated by Jane. In other words, Jane is used as a mediator by the social

system installed between Law and Stott. Inasmuch as she enters a coalition with Stott, she breaks the existing equilibrium.¹² She becomes a mediating object in the struggle but she is not a passive object. On the contrary, she actively causes the disruption: she smiles at Law after making love with Stott and she further encourages him by betraying Stott. Jane's impassivity is thus derived not from her being an object used by this social system - which she is - but from her awareness of her role and her self-assured performance of it, the kind of coolness that comes from knowing one's objectives and working with them in mind. Moreover, she is depicted in the role of nurturer, which is to say that by feeding the men, both literally and figuratively, she is also intensifying the conflict between them. This is the import of the sign "milk" in the play: it is the index of feeding and the symbol of nurturing (an index of which is sex), which is what the two men want and fight over. The conflict escalates in the usual fashion, i. e., exponentially, and its aim is, of course, to reestablish the stasis of the relationship. The circuitous aspect of time in the play would, in this view, be related to the universality of this pattern in human relations.

Another possibility is to give the play a psychoanalytic reading. In this way, the characters correspond to the triad composed by the super-ego, the ego, and the id. In fact, certain signs lend themselves to such an interpretation. Law's speech to Stott concerning the opinion of the Town Council and the Church about the three of them living together as well as Law's own name are indicative of the censoring function of the super-ego. Stott's self-assuredness, his clear self-centeredness, his drive for power, and his love of luxury befit the role of the ego. Jane's "basic" drives - feeding, sexuality - are clearly the vital impulses of the id. The play, therefore, portrays the

constant battle for the supremacy of one of them taking place in the mind (the basement).¹³

Other interpretations could be presented that would fit the pattern equally well. The two possibilities above are outlined in order to underscore the rhematic character of Pinter's text, one that is open to many – but not any – interpretations. Once again, what is important about this play is that it is a pattern, a form, and not necessarily any one given meaning, much like mathematical relations, i. e., very close to pure iconicity. As with other Pinter plays, The Basement is designed in order to suggest rather than say and in this respect it can be said to be poetic, to the extent that poetry as a whole tends towards the icon – the metaphor – and towards Mathematics in its most abstract sense. This is made possible by the peculiar way in which time is used in the play. The interconnection of temporal structure and meaning lies in Pinter's manipulation of the presentation of events with a view to evading order and consequently evading specific meanings, thereby rendering the work rhematic.

The analysis has shown that the only way the reader can approach a rheme – and any work of art is a rheme because it is an interpretational possibility – is by making a guess about it on reasonably well-defined grounds and by systematically testing the hypothesis to verify whether it applies to individual signs. If it does, then a generalization ensues that confirms the guess. This process is a mirror of semiosis itself because, after all, semiosis – the process of sign-generation – is what is involved in abduction, deduction, and induction.

NOTES

1. The semiotic framework adopted here is that of Charles S. Peirce. His semiotic (he does not call it semiotics) is based on logic and his concept of the sign relation is triadic (sign, object, interpretant). Thus, it does not stand in a linguistic, Saussurean tradition. One of Peirce's well-known descriptions of the representation relation (sign) resembles a dictionary definition: a sign is "something that stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It... creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign... That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object." It is clear that an interpretant is not an interpreter but the result of an interpretation. The definition above is from Peirce's Collected Papers (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press), vol. 2, paragraph 228, henceforth referred to in the text in the standard manner of Peircean scholarship as CP, followed by volume and paragraph number. Hence, CP 2.228.

2. Signs may be icons, indices, or symbols if their relation to their objects is one of resemblance (form), deixis (actual existence, cause and effect, action and reaction), or determination (law, habit, convention), respectively. When signs are regarded in terms of their interpretants they may be rhemes, dicents, or arguments. A rheme is a sign that is ascertained to have references the referents of which are not clear. It is like a propositional function in logic, i. e., something like "x loves Mary" or "x hits y." A dicent is a sign whose references all have referents, i. e., a proposition. An argument is a complex sign composed of two or more dicents, one which is the interpretant of the others.

3. C. W. Spinks, "Peirce's Demon Abduction: Or How to Charm the Truth out of a Quark," American Journal of Semiotics, 2, 1-2 (1982), p. 197. Further references will be made in the text.

4. In Writings of Charles S. Peirce (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1982-), 11, 48. Henceforth referred to in the text as Writings.

5. Thomas A. Sebeok, "One, Two, Three Spells UBERTY," in The Sign of Three, ed. Umberto Eco and Thomas A. Sebeok (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1983), p. 8.

6. Umberto Eco, "Horns, Hooves, Insteps: Some Hypotheses on Three Types of Abduction," in The Sign of Three, p. 213.

7. Sebeok's article on the connection existing between logical methods and the type of reasoning characteristic of Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and Poe's Dupin is "You Know My Method," in The Sign of Three, pp. 11-54. Eco's is the already cited "Horns, Hooves, Insteps," in the same volume.

8. The edition used in this study is Harold Pinter, The Basement, in Complete Works (New York: Grove Press, 1978), 111, 149-72. Further references will be made in the text.

9. See, for instance, Arnold P. Hincliffe, Harold Pinter (Boston: Twayne, 1981), pp. 113 ff.

10. The point is made by Fred Clark in his "Misinterpretation and Interpretation in Nelson Rodrigues' Álbum de Família," in Semiotics 1983 (forthcoming).

11. In this respect, see the entry for Debussy in David Ewen, ed., comp., Composers since 1900 (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1969).

12. This interpretational possibility was suggested to me by Cláudia S. Neto (personal communication). A discussion of this view of social systems is in Jay Haley, Problem-Solving Therapy (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).

13. William Baker and Stephen Ely Tabachnick defend this position in their Harold Pinter (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1973), pp. 50-51.

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