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Abstract
This paper uses the concept of autopoiesis to describe Harold Pinter's approach to dramatic composition. The playwright strikes a first note and allows the play to emerge from the resonances and feedback patterns of that note. This autopoietical aesthetic, I argue, began with Samuel Beckett and flows forward through an important lineage of postwar drama. Because of its compression and its self-referential qualities, Pinter's *Ashes to Ashes* shows how Pinter's process relates both to the enactivist model of cognition, and to important strains of poststructuralist thought. In *Ashes to Ashes*, for example, the playwright deploys the fundamental form-generating characteristics of the theatre space itself in this contest against the totalizing schemata of neoliberalism.

Keywords: Pinter, autopoiesis, enactivism, aporia, tragic irony, Beckett, neoliberalism, paradox.

1. A Fissured Duet

Whereas the action of a representational or realist play is typically the product of careful dramatic construction involving motivations and conflict, Harold Pinter's late play *Ashes to Ashes* (1996) assembles itself out of pure *aporia* and not knowing. The first lines of the play, for example, combine anxious questioning with slowly emergent knowledge about an event in the past:

> REBECCA: Well…for example…he would stand over me and clench his fist. And then he'd put his other hand on my neck and grip it and bring my head towards him. His fist…grazed my mouth. And he'd say, "Kiss my fist."
>
> DEVLIN: And did you?
>
> REBECCA: Oh yes. I kissed his fist. The knuckles. And then he'd open his hand and give me the palm of his hand…to kiss…which I kissed.
> (*Pause*)
>
> And then I would speak.
>
> (*Pause*)

> DEVLIN: What did you say? You said what? What did you say?
>
> (*Pause*)
>
> REBECCA: I said, "Put your hand round my throat." I murmured it through his hand, as I was kissing it, but he heard my voice, he heard it through his hand, he felt my voice in his hand, he heard it there. (*Silence*.)
>
> DEVLIN: And did he? Did he put his hand round your throat?
>
> REBECCA: Oh yes. He did. He did. And he held it there, very gently, very gently, so gently. He adored me you see.
>
> DEVLIN: He adored you? (*Pause*) What do you mean, he adored you? What do you mean? (4)

Within Pinter's body of work, this air of menacing uncertainty is hardly a feature of *Ashes to Ashes* alone. In his public statements, Pinter is explicit about the central role uncertainty and paradox play in his writing process *per se*. "I don't know what kind of characters my plays will have," he told the *Paris Review* in 1966, "until they . . . well, until they *are*." And, again, over forty years later in 2008, to Anna-Marie Cusak of the *Guardian*: "I think it is not fanciful or silly to say that the characters do start to possess their own life" and that, "the great excitement is to see what happens if you let the whole thing go." And, as Pinter put it in his remarkable 2005 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, "A thing is not necessarily true or false; it can be true and false…Truth in drama is forever elusive. You never quite find it but the search for it is compulsive. The search is what drives the endeavor. The search is your task" ("Art, Truth & Politics").

In all his plays from *The Birthday Party* (1957) forward, Pinter embraced the kind of "follow as you lead" mode of composition he describes above, enacting the text of the play through the *process* of writing. Fleeting images take root and evolve genealogically as the playwright composes the text, moving toward closure. "Most of my plays are engendered by a line, a word or an image," he writes ("Art, Truth & Politics"). Rather than engaging a conscious intention and executing a planned composition, Pinter embraces the fertile emptiness of the unknown. He lets the play arise out of his own unconscious processes, all of their social encodings very much part of the mix. Enacting Beckett's dictum that "the end is in the beginning" (*Endgame* 69), the first word or line of a Pinter play provides the *initial conditions* that govern the development of the text as a kind of complex literary-performative system. *Ashes to Ashes* exemplifies this self-generating quality.

In this paper, I argue that Pinter's statements about his compositional practice have been under-explored by contemporary theatre criticism. I use the term *autopoiesis* to describe this approach to dramatic composition, in which a playwright strikes a first note and then allows the play to emerge from the resonances and feedback patterns of that note as they

transform the "material" unique to the stage.[1] *Ashes to Ashes* showcases the effects Pinter is able to tap via this autopoietic approach, and suggests his kinship with other playwrights working in the same mode. I track this autopoietical impulse back to Beckett's *Endgame*, and forward through an important branch of postwar drama, including the work of, in Great Britain, Caryl Churchill and Sarah Kane, and in the U.S., Sam Shepard, Maria Irene Fornés, Murray Mednick, John Steppling and Suzan-Lori Parks.[2] Because of its compression and its self-referential qualities, *Ashes to Ashes* shows how these playwrights have engaged with the generative aspect of the open stage, delivering a postmodern form of tragic irony. Taking theatre as a distinct mode of affect/thought that can't be reduced to any particular conceptual schema, I compare this autopoietic approach to dramatic composition and performance to the new philosophy of enactivism (Varela; Thompson; Noë). An enactivist perspective sheds new light on the spatial dynamics of theatre, I argue, and how the three distinct spaces of the offstage, the stage and the audience are intensively coupled to each other in a way that draws un-recognized features of the cultural milieu into the light. I look in turn at how *Ashes to Ashes* inhabits these three spaces, beginning with a close reading of the play, moving then to an examination of the play's offstage and coming finally to look at the implications of the work on the world of the play's initial audience as defined especially by late phase capitalism or neoliberalism. The centrality of aporia to the autopoietic approach, I maintain, suggests a fertile alignment between Pinter's aesthetic and the apophatic strain of poststructuralist critique and its link to some surprising forms of negative theology. As Pinter himself articulates in his Nobel speech, this embrace of aporia is central to the *political* impact of *Ashes to Ashes*, shedding light on the link between neoliberal economics and fascistic aspects of contemporary power.

Importantly, I am not suggesting Harold Pinter—or any of the other playwrights I've mentioned—ever encountered or deployed the concepts of autopoiesis or enactivism in any explicit formulation. My point is only that his work cannot be adequately understood without reference to these theories of embodied cognition and systemic relationality, which are implied by both the play's content and its form. To suggest that an important lineage of postwar dramatic writing embodied enactivist principles *avant la lettre*, and even presaged its formal articulation by Varela and his colleagues in the 1990s, is not to reduce the paradigmatic and the ontological implications of enactivism to an aesthetic approach. While all theatre creation may, in some more or less trivial way, embody enactivism, the lineage I describe, in a much more important sense, truly *exemplifies* enactivism.

2. *Ashes to Ashes* and the Concept of Autopoiesis

First performed in 1996 toward the close of Pinter's career, *Ashes to Ashes* is a single long scene involving a man and a woman. A duet or binary coupling, this single scene begins in what appears to be an erotically charged marital exchange. Devlin, a man in his forties, is questioning Rebecca, whom we assume to be his wife. We are in Britain, in the country, and there is a garden outside. The couple, we sense, are middle class or better. We open *in medias res* in the passage about the fist quoted above. Already, a lot is in play. The feminine is being interrogated by the masculine. Knowing here is feminine; lack (of knowing) is masculine. Rebecca is seated, Devlin standing, mobile, a visitor. Regardless of who owns the house, this is her space—a space, in other words, of knowing. Iago resides in Devlin's odd, vacant silences, those moments when he seems to have gone into a kind of trance; Othello lives in his self-wounding curiosity, the need for information certain to trigger his undoing, his self-unwinding, his de-emergence or collapse. Devlin is pure, intensive logocentricity, a potent agent of lack nursing, perhaps, his one originary wound—the Lacanian wound from which he fled into selfhood. Power, here, wants to "know" about love; separation wants to absorb or possess connection, but without being transformed in the process.

The play moves backwards and forwards in time simultaneously as the action unfolds. Devlin's interrogation about the mysterious man with the fist gives way here and there to quotidian exchanges about visits to family (55), and to ominous and absurd digressions on points of logic (39), only to then return to the original line of questioning with increased vigor. Devlin ferrets out and tracks down odd inconsistencies in Rebecca's account. The man was a travel agent, Rebecca says, only to recount a short time later a visit she took to a factory where rows upon rows of workers perform obediently for the increasingly authoritarian mystery man. Suddenly a shocking revelation pops out:

> DEVLIN: I thought you said he worked for a travel agency?
>
> REBECCA: And there was one other thing. I wanted to go to the bathroom. But I simply couldn't find it. I looked everywhere. I'm sure they had one. But I never found out where it was. (*Pause*.) He did work for a travel agency. He was a guide. He used to go to the local railway station and walk down the platform and tear all the babies from the arms of their screaming mothers. (*Pause.*)
>
> DEVLIN: Did he? (*Silence.*)
>
> REBECCA: By the way, I'm terribly upset.
>
> DEVLIN: Are you? Why?
>
> REBECCA: Well, it's about that police siren we heard a couple of minutes ago. (29)

The man Rebecca is being interrogated about is now revealed to have been, in fact, something quite different than a lover. He was, instead, a man in uniform who "ripped the babies from the arms of their screaming mothers." The distortions in Rebecca's account register as the result of trauma—Stockholm syndrome writ large. And Devlin's chilling response to the revelation about the babies being ripped from the arms of the mothers—"Did he?"—leads the play deeper into these shadow-lands of not-knowing, and the operational closure of autopoiesis.

A bit later in the text, we reach a third phase-shift in *Ashes to Ashes's* unfolding. It is Devlin, now, who is revealed to be someone quite different from whom we might have imagined, and yet at the same time, in uncanny fashion, this new persona has, quite literally, been on stage all along.

> REBECCA: Did I tell you the street was icy? It was icy. So she had to tread very carefully. Over the bumps. The stars were out. She followed the man and the boy until they turned the corner and were gone. (*Pause.*) She stood still. She kissed the baby. The baby was a girl. (*Pause.*) She kissed her. (*Pause.*) She listened to the baby's heartbeat. The baby's heart was beating.
> (*The light in the room has darkened. The lamps are very bright. Rebecca sits very still.*)
> The baby was breathing. (*Pause.*) I held her to me. She was breathing. Her heart was beating. (73)

So here we have it: riding a sequence of revelations, we cascade toward the heart of a terror we could have arrived at by no other means. Rebecca recounts looking out her window and, on the icy street below, seeing a boy and his father shuffling along with a suitcase. A woman is following the boy and his father. She has a baby in her arms. Rebecca is the woman. The boy, his father, and Rebecca with her baby arrive at a train station where men in uniform are ripping the babies from the arms of their mothers. Rebecca conceals her baby, but her baby cries out and Rebecca is detected. The baby girl is now ripped from her arms by a man in uniform and that man is Devlin. Stunned, ruined, Rebecca boards the train along with the others. Alone now with her loss, Rebecca meets a friend and denies ever having had a baby. Leaping forward through time she finds herself in a room with Devlin. In the present once again, Devlin walks up to Rebecca and tells her to kiss his fist. Lights slowly fade as *Ashes to Ashes* circles back to its beginning and comes to a close.

Had we known this is where *Ashes to Ashes* would take us, we never would have come along for the ride. More importantly, neither would Pinter; had he known his characters would arrive at this terrifying destination, they never would have arrived here. The blank page and the empty stage have been surprised into revealing to themselves (and to us) their own morphogenetic or "form giving" mechanisms—which also govern

the social relations the play depicts. By a self-entailing process, the dark impulses undergirding the sociocultural system in which playwright is embedded have been delivered onto the stage by the implications of the initial exchange about the fist. The hidden dynamics governing the social milieu that shapes Pinter's own sensibility have autopoietically come forth. To put this another way: all things on Pinter's stage have been revealed to be dynamically linked to the sociocultural milieu in which it is embedded.

3. Autopoiesis and Modernism

A term originally coined by biologists Francisco Varela and Humberto Maturana in 1972, autopoiesis describes a system that "continuously generates and specifies its own components" (*Autopoiesis* 79). Autopoiesis speaks to the self-generative dynamic by which life differentiates itself from the environment or milieu out of which it arises, drawing from that milieu the materials it requires to sustain its autonomy and agency. While, strictly speaking, autopoiesis pertains to cellular life, Varela views the "operational closure" of autopoietic cells as common to all living systems at every scale, human beings and human cultural systems very much included (Protevi 7). Fleshing out the implications of operational closure in terms of consciousness, the enactivist school of philosophy (Rosch; Thompson; Noë), charts a new "middle way" between a representational view of mind on the one hand, and solipsistic idealism on the other. Our conceptions about the world, from this point of view, are neither interpretations of sensory inputs arriving from an external world as it *really* is, nor purely ideal forms. Our experience of the world is constructed in a very particular way, says autopoiesis—through a complex, ever-shifting and dynamic interaction between an actively engaged organism and its environment.

In literature, Claire Colebrook traces the arrival of an explicitly autopoietic impulse—one in which recognizably autopoietical concepts are actually the subject of the work—to Proust. Colebrook's analysis places autopoiesis at the heart of

> a more complex ethics of modernism that is neither purely formal, such that the work of art is always about nothing more than the tracing out of relations, nor purely affective, such that art goes beyond all cognition and becomes simply visceral. (23)

Using Badiou and Deleuze, Colebrook views the famous Madeleine moment in *Swann's Way* as the beginning of a process of downward causation in which the Narrator is able to experience time as "an intensity in its emergence as a quantity, as a potentiality for becoming," providing us with a glimpse of the "pure past" (25). From Proust, Colebrook traces the

autopoietic impulse to Beckett, who wrote his dissertation on Proust, and in whose later work on the stage this enactivist modernism finds a full expression. Viewing Beckett as an enactivist *avant la lettre* helps to explain his shift from the page to the stage, where a zero-degree textual aporia can be sustained and extended through an intensive coupling with the performative body. Through the act of waiting (*Godot*) or through stasis (*Endgame*), a powerful "I-can't-go-on-I'll-go-on" catalytic engine drives Beckett's plays toward closure.

Endgame takes its own boundary constraints as its subject, its Hamm-Clov dyad providing a new paradigm of how a strictly narrative, cognitive entity (Hamm and his endless "chronicle") exists in a mode of dynamic stability with the purely embodied entity of Clov. The facticity of the performing body obviates a longed-for caesura called for by the text: the *being* doesn't end when the voice decides to quit. Stated in broad terms, Beckett's innovation with *Endgame* is a way to reconcile in stage space the opposition between the linear causality of narrative (Hamm) and the repetitive formalist routines of pure action (Clov). In *Endgame,* representationalism and solipsism are brought under the sign of a postmodern form of tragic irony that set the autopoietic course that the enactivist lineage in dramatic writing would travel. Hamm and Clov here personify opposing boundary constraints, maintaining the operational closure of the literary / performative system called *Endgame*.[3]

The spatial-temporal minuet in *Ashes to Ashes* can be viewed as a gender-coded homologue of the ironic Hamm-Clov binary—narrative temporality in dynamic opposition to embodied action. Colebrook, in fact, suggests this binary always had a gendered aspect to it, bringing us to:

> …a simple quantity—the two of love—who are not two of any kind, whose sexual difference is purely formal, and who do not maintain themselves through time but become nothing more than a relation to nothing: the immobile man who faces the void but encounters the mobile woman, and the woman who does not resist the duality. (23)

Intriguingly, Colebrook's description presents almost a mirror image of the basic setup in *Ashes to Ashes*, where the man is the mobile element and the woman seated, fixed and facing the void. As I will show, this positional shift in Pinter points toward developments within the political economy during the postwar era. More specifically, the play illuminates some of the dynamics at work that Wendy Brown has called the "stealth revolution" of neoliberalism, in which the connective market (gender-coded female) is valorized as a pre-political, natural system even while the economy is being restructured toward the anti-market hierarchies of monopoly (gender-coded male).

4. Neurophenomenology, Enactivism and Tragic Irony

Differentiating themselves out of "materials" they themselves have produced, autopoietical texts emerge into the affective structures and patterns of exchange that compose pieces of theatre. *Ashes to Ashes* is an exemplary text to illustrate how these looping dynamics manifest in theatre because it is so compressed and, perhaps more interestingly, because it is itself "about" the "middle way" aspect of autopoietic emergence. When we see an autopoietic play like *Ashes to Ashes* we are not simply watching a dramatic scenario being represented for us on stage; rather we are participating in the process by which a dramatic scenario *enacts* itself. Replacing Cartesian dualism with a tri-partite schema in which consciousness arises from body, mind and the environment, enactivist theorists describe cognition as having four defining characteristics (the "4-Es"): it is enacted, embodied, embedded and extended. Each of these pertains to a theatre practice in the autopoietic mode exemplified by Pinter.

Rooted in phenomenological biology, enaction provided a counterargument to the computational ideas of consciousness that were dominant at that time (exemplified perhaps by Richard Dawkins's *The Selfish Gene*). In her work on systems thinking as it relates to contemporary thought, Katherine Hayles places this issue in a specific cultural frame:

> Like many postwar systems, including Foucault's epistemes and Lacan's psycholinguistics, autopoiesis is profoundly subversive of individual agency. It therefore makes an interesting comparison with Richard Dawkins' idea of the 'selfish gene,' another theory that locates the essence of life in a conscious processes rather than conscious subjectivity…The social and economic formations associated with rampant individualism, especially capitalism, are as vigorous as ever in Dawkins's rhetoric and narratives. (94)

In contrast to the incipient neoliberalism of the representational theory of mind, mind here is not strictly computational, but rather embodied and enactive.[4] Enactivism thus cuts across and complicates (or perhaps liberates) Western modes of reasoning, and this is because some roots of enactivism lie in a non-Western tradition of thought—Mahayana Buddhism and specifically in the concept of the "middle way." Varela, along with several of the other leading neurophenomenologists—Evan Thompson, for example—was a practicing Buddhist who wrote extensively about the relevance of Mahayana doctrines to his work as a scientist, as I examine below.[5]

Significant objections to Varela by Hayles and Cary Wolfe take issue with his Buddhist reading, equating Buddhism with tranquility rather than viewing it as a *techne* for the radical deconstruction of the systemic self (Wolfe 63). In Devlin's epistemic assault on Rebecca, we see how

power seeks to master *causality*, and, again, this goal is both destructive and self-defeating. As Hayles points out, issues of causality and intention lie at the center of autopoietic epistemology, and are also part of "the world of domination and control" (76). Given autopoietic closure, Hayles writes, "events can trigger actions, but they cannot cause them because the nature and form of a system's actions are self-determined by its organization."[6] Autopoietic systems operate adaptively, in other words, precisely by suppressing any causal relation with the environment on the level of organization.

It would be easy to view this middle way as involving some kind of conceptual compromise or middle ground, but this would certainly not be the case. Rather, this mode of thinking entails holding both poles of a binary opposition in mind at the same time, not resolving the contradictions of doing so, but rather *in spite* of them. The proper way to view this aspect of Buddhist thought is therefore through the idea of paradox, the embrace of an apparent contradiction revealing an underlying truth that cannot be pointed to directly. As I explore below, misreading this deconstructive aspect of Mahayana thought as a form of quietude, in other words, obscures how Varela's ideas can be applied to cultural objects such as *Ashes to Ashes*. While certainly no Mahayana Buddhist, Pinter opened his Nobel speech with a statement that would have been at home in a text by Nagarjuna: "There is no hard distinction between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false." The statement quite clearly identifies Pinter as someone well suited to a vocation in the art form of the illusory real, also known as theatre.

The attempt to live with some measure of contradiction can be seen in Varela's anti-reductionist response to what is called "the hard problem" in consciousness studies—how to reconcile the apparent gap between the phenomenal and the physical:

> [I]nstead of finding extra ingredients to account for how consciousness emerges from matter and brain, my proposal reframes the question to that of finding meaningful bridges between two irreducible phenomenal [sic] domains. ("Neurophenomenology" 340)

What is germane about the "hard problem," in other words, is merely its existence as *a problem*. Unresolved, and perhaps unresolvable paradoxes reside at the roots of ontology and epistemology in this middle way, out of reach of totalizing conceptual frameworks and, indeed, of language itself. Enactivism is an attempt to move ahead in a pragmatic way, theorizing about consciousness without any final resolution (and among the things we can still definitively say about consciousness is that it is embedded, extended, embodied and enacted.) In this mode of paradox, enactivism bridges the apparent contradiction between phenomenological and

material accounts of consciousness, and the tension of this bridging can be felt everywhere in attempts by theorists in the humanities to deploy enactivism to understand cultural systems and entities.

Linked to cybernetics, information theory and complex adaptive systems, enactivism also draws on the specific elements of Dynamic Systems Theory (DST) to provide a powerful set of tools with which to analyze what happens spatially in the performance of a dramatic text. In *Ashes to Ashes*, for example, Pinter surveys the deceptively placid *mise-en-scene* of neoliberal domesticity in order to bring to life its underlying social violence and coercion, not by directly representing it, but by allowing its influence as an *attractor*—a DST term defined as a stable pathway of development within a substance, substrate or material—to invisibly shape the emergence of the dramatic action.

It is no surprise, then, that each of the four elements common to Dynamic Systems—boundary conditions, attractors, perturbation, and phase shifts—are also present, generally, in the autopoietic play, and in Pinter's *Ashes to Ashes* in particular.[7] The boundary constraints are the basic tri-part division of audience, stage and offstage, together with the narrative facts—who these people are, where they are situated, what their relationship is—as Pinter "follows where he leads." Illuminating the fascistic and neoliberal "attractors"—i.e., stable pathways of development—impinging on the action is what Pinter is most interested in. The play passes through a series of pronounced phase shifts when Pinter, together with his characters, happens upon a moment of "new learning"—when the baby enters the discussion, for example (27), or when Rebecca suddenly *becomes* the woman she is describing walking down the frozen street (73). The perturbations arrive in the sudden shifts in perspective—when Devlin is revealed to be the officer who tore the babies out of the arms of their mothers, for example. And yet while each of these elements open fertile avenues for further exploration, it is on the deeper level of *intentional action* that the enactivist dimension of the autopoietic play really begins to come into the light.

The implications of systems thinking for literature and culture have been explored by thinkers such as Hayles and Wolfe, who focus on the crucial boundary between the inside and outside of any system. Applied to theatre, this focus on boundaries draws into view the issue of how the stage space relates to the exterior—i.e., the offstage. We begin to see how the world Pinter creates via dramatic aporia depends not just on the inherent differentiality of the stage space, but, crucially, on the intensive difference of the offstage. The offstage is the purely virtual zone that energizes the potentiality of the stage space, but this zone can never be experienced or represented directly.[8] In enactivist terms, the offstage is

simply the outside of what Hayles calls the cut, "…an area that from the viewpoint of systems theory can be seen only as a mass of undifferenti-ated world tissue" (72). Hence, if Rebecca's forgetting links to trauma, Devlin's forgetting seems wrapped up in epistemological commitments: he has forgotten because he is trapped within a structure of knowledge that is self-eclipted. As Hayles emphasizes, this kind of restricted know-ing—the product of the "cut" between the system and the environment out of which it emerges—is a defining feature of autopoietic systems (72). It is Rebecca's less constricted form of knowing that Devlin wants to pos-sess, and yet with this new shift we now sense that her *mode of knowing* is antithetical to his *mode of being*. Devlin has her here, pinned to the stage, and through her he is attempting to drag on stage what is incommensu-rable, as the torturer wants the secret *qua* secret—the secret that will cease to be a secret as soon as it is known. With paternalistic menace, Devlin aims to reduce the stage to a non-generative space, a space like any other, to reject enaction for a set of simpler, reductive norms. But his perpetual "no," which is the no of the Lacanian name-of-the-father, is inherently undermined, made ridiculous, within the no-space of the stage, and so the archetypal battle continues: identity (Devlin) and difference (Rebecca) estranged on the stage, in conflict with each other.

5. Autopoiesis and Tragic Irony

In enactivist philosophy, reductive Cartesian accounts of human action as rooted in beliefs and desires have been replaced by the idea that action arises from embodied experience with a strong pre-conscious dimension.[9] This is consistent with the basic scenario of *Ashes to Ashes*: a domestic exchange rooted in prescribed banalities that mask darker imperatives of domination. Intentional action here precedes and condi-tions conscious thought, but is also embedded within, and shaped by, the influence of the symbolic systems comprising the cultural milieu. Despite being rooted in the human, these symbolic systems—language and money, for example—achieve a disturbing degree of autonomy. And yet this also means that poststructuralists such as Derrida and Lacan, while over-totalizing the semiotic as constituent of the subject, are not at odds with enactivism, which by no means precludes taking the symbolic into account as part of the extended milieu impinging on the subject.

We note in passing here that enactivist theoretical principles arise strongly in Deleuze's embrace of scientific realism, which, like enactivism, are rooted in dynamic systems thinking. While enactivism arose within a phenomenological tradition linked to Merleau-Ponty, Protevi and others have shown how its main tenets are compatible with Deleuzian realism

as well. Protevi's work on Varela also helps to reconcile these two traditions of thought, both of which attempt to span the science-humanities divide. Viewing *Ashes to Ashes* more explicitly through a Deleuzian lens, a lens that has been shaped by thermodynamics, systems-thinking and the biological, provides additional some clarity regarding the political implications of Pinter's aesthetic. Doing so would address those theorists who oppose enactivism to the Lockean, blank-slate perspective of many constructivists in the poststructuralist tradition.[10] And yet those thinkers in the poststructuralist tradition who accepted a Kantian divide between thought and the material world do still table insights useful to an understanding of the autopoietic aesthetic that includes Pinter's *Ashes to Ashes*. The concepts of Derridian differance and Lacanian extimacy, for example, supply useful ways to grasp how enactivism complicates common sense understandings of causality, which are, of course, central to dramatic form.

The over-totalizing tendency noted above is why the autopoietic playwright seeks to suspend or neutralize the typical set of authorial intentions involved in composing a dramatic scenario. The conscious intention to write a "good" play is put on hold so that the preconscious cultural conditioning located in the playwright's own psyche can be teased into the light. This is no vanity project—Pinter's indictment in *Ashes to Ashes* of Western male logocentrism is earned the hard way, through a willingness to use the autopoietic topology of the stage setup to reveal unappealing aspects of his own psyche. Starting with a single line—"Well…for example…he would stand over me and clench his fist"—Pinter has sutured his subconscious to the stage space and is unspooling his mind under the public eye, dragging it bleeding and screaming out from the offstage.

The issue of topology raises crucial questions about how Pinter's mode of composition activates the three zones of offstage world, space on stage, and the audience. What is on stage—the *pas de deux* between Rebecca and Devlin—knows itself to be a *representation*, and hence inherently illusory and false. Pinter has invoked the banalities of bourgeois domesticity precisely in order to illuminate the darker dynamics that underlie the institution of marriage in the modern West. Pinter's play is a long cross-fade between this performance of a normalizing story and a far darker reality that slowly actualizes out of the virtual world of the offstage. The key here is the dynamics of this process, how the *intensive differences* (to use Deleuzian terminology) between the stage and the offstage draws powerfully on the attentional energy of the audience, which is situated in a third partition of the spatial assemblage we call the stage.

Through an *intensive process* driven by the attentional energy of the audience, the autopoietical play emerges into being. This final, actual

truth is an *enacted* one in which the audience is fully complicit, and this degrades our typical, commonsense notions of being safely separated from the world of the stage.

The effect, which Pinter achieves by embracing in his mode of composition a blank slate similar to that of an audience as the lights rise on a new play, is akin to vertigo. Its timeliness in our current cultural context has to do with the atomized separation on which neoliberalism runs, a mode of alienation justified since the days of Reagan and Thatcher by a narrative of fulfillment located in a future that remains always just out of reach. Terror conceals itself by telling us this kind of story, painting a picture, camouflaging itself in homespun kitsch, or what the Greeks called *doxa*. The autopoietic play, by contrast, is a machine to drag onto the stage the structures that shape and constrain the actualization of our common social world out of the expansive capacities of the virtual/offstage. We see the structures that insure we will enact—from among the broad range of possibly human worlds—the immiserating and extractive structures of late phase capitalism. The autopoietic play is therefore continuously calling into question our commitment to certainty, solidity, and the metaphysics of common sense.

It is crucial to note at this point in my argument that there is a Western performance/theatre tradition that draws in similar way on paradox and contradiction, and it is called tragic drama. Christoph Menke, for example, argues forcefully for this reading of Attic tragedy. *Oedipus Rex*, to Menke, is an intricately crafted device designed to frustrate our desire to locate a reductive causal account of the suffering of its protagonist (viiii).[11] JP Vernant also locates paradox at the foundations Classical tragic drama, which in his view is designed to underscore the symmetry of Heraclitus's dictum—"man's character is his fate":

> All that the hero feels, says and does springs from his character, his *ethos*…But at the same time these feelings, pronouncements, and actions also appear as the expression of a religious power, a *daimon* operating through them. (37)

If character (*ethos*) shapes fate, Vernant points out, fate (*daimon*) equally shapes character. And, he writes,

> …the logic of tragedy consists in 'operating on both planes,' in shifting from one meaning to the other, always—to be sure—conscious of the opposition between them but never rejecting either. (37)

A major implication of this paper is how the autopoietical or enactivist play, deploying elements of both performance-based or "postdramatic" theatre, and realistic drama in a contradictory fashion, delivers a postmodern form of tragic irony.

In contrast to the ceremonial and performative dimension of fully "postdramatic" work (e.g., Robert Wilson or Romeo Castalucci), the en-activist play still requires a footing in representation, defined to include both the absurdism of Ionesco and the normative realism of, say, Arthur Miller.[12] Unlike strictly representational theatre, however, this auto-poietic tradition resists the certain, stable and comprehensible offstage frame required by verisimilitude, thereby drawing the audience into a subtle act of co-creation. Using aporia to hold representational realism and the solipsistic present of the postdramatic in dynamic opposition, the autopoietical play engages the audience in codependent emergence, producing the *event* of the play. The spatial dynamics of offstage, stage and audience are drawn into a single assemblage devoted to a cognitive reorganization of the audience. In this aesthetic, aporia and contradiction replace conflict as the primary source of dramatic tension, making paradox into a enacted spatial fact.

6. The Autopoietic Aesthetic and Neoliberalism

As he does elsewhere, in *Ashes to Ashes* Pinter draws on the *negative potential* of the stage space for the energy required to create his uneasy world. Interestingly, this negative quality rests in the play upon something else—the connective, knowing, "positive" quality embodied by Rebecca. At the outset, let's recall, only the most basic choices had been made: a man, a woman, evening falling, a garden outside. This is the edge of rep-resentation, an aporetic mid-zone, and in that place of fertile tension the value of the word "love" is called into question in a fashion that draws with it all the other values in the world of the play. In *Ashes to Ashes*, the personification of the generative and connective stage space—i.e., Re-becca—is on the hot seat. To all appearances a master of the social code, Devlin's demand for information requires Rebecca to "kiss the fist" by abandoning a non-unitary state of heterogeneous being and embracing instead an atomized specificity.[13] The surreal image of a speaking hand that is simultaneously a captured voice, meanwhile, invokes the complex ways sex, love and power have been sutured together in modern life.

Devlin wants to know more, and because the event he wants to know more about happened some time ago, it is clear that Devlin will *never* know enough. *Ashes to Ashes* is about exactly this anguish of not-knowing that which one most desperately wants to know, and how tyrannical domina-tion is linked to a refusal to accept such limits. The representational quality of the play suggests that our questions about what actually happened to Rebecca will, in time, be answered, but the past is as inaccessible to these characters as it is to us. It is this alignment, having to do with what can be

known (i.e., aporia), that begins to dissolve our own separation from the stage event in alarming ways. Rebecca and Devlin's relationship to the past is defined by the same air of menace we experience as *Ashes to Ashes* follows its alarming course. This undercurrent of menace Pinter achieves by embracing this autopoietic mode of composition, which, in interviews, he repeatedly links to not-knowing or aporia: "I am often asked how my plays come about. I cannot say" (811).

Our position as the audience in this process is complex. The scenario is separate from us, but our presence as observers is also crucial. We know only what Pinter tells us via his characters, and Pinter himself does not know what the next line will be until it arrives. It is not just that the characters in *Ashes to Ashes* are uncertain about each other and about themselves, in other words—the *play* is also uncertain about itself. The play, moreover, emerges autopoietically from the *self-organizing disorganization* of this uncertainty. What reads in Pinter as abrupt and jarring disjunctures in a character's mode of speech and relationship are aspects of his autopoietic approach. In the opening exchange of *Ashes to Ashes* quoted above, Pinter adroitly sustains a balancing act between conventional realism on the one side, and self-enclosed postdramatic formalism on the other, conjuring in the mode of enactivism a world ex-nihilo. *Ashes to Ashes* begins in the middle of a representational act that never completes itself.

The world of *Ashes to Ashes* has been perturbed by the confession about the fist, and in reaction to this perturbation, the play will pass through a series of phase shifts revealing as it does so the hidden structures of power that constrain what can and what cannot happen. We in the audience are not witnessing the operations of a sealed off or solipsistic world—this is not a case where there is no story, or where the causal structures of mimetic narrative are in abeyance. The story in *Ashes to Ashes* is embodied rather than strictly textual, and it centers around something that happened in the past—memory is central here. And yet this story is unknowable in any complete or final way because, while it seems to be taking place in the past, it is actually unfolding right now in a way that implicates us, the listeners, in where it goes next. *Ashes to Ashes* does not allow us to settle on a secure understanding of even the most basic facts, and this insecurity links us to the sinister Devlin; like him, we are dying to hear what really happened with this man making Rebecca kiss his fist. In the end the play delivers the truth—we come to know what it is we want to know—but it is *how* it delivers truth that links *Ashes to Ashes* to enactivism in a non-trivial way. The playwright has drawn us into the process by which a creative writer fashions a narrative—trusting, with intuitions trained by a lifetime of work on dramatic texts—that this *techne,*

or process, itself contains all the artistic charge required to reward our attention.

It is precisely the reductive intentionality of standard dramaturgy that autopoietic playwrights rebel against. Rather than positing conscious intentionality, beginning in the brain and then controlling the movement of the speaking body, the enactivist playwright embraces the fertile empti-ness of the stage space. There is no "real" here that we can reach toward but not attain via phenomenology; the only "real" is in this form of im-manent actualization out of a virtual offstage of pure expressive capacity. The playwright is explicitly interested in the kind of continual feedback loop involving the body, brain, and environment that guides such action in the writing of a play. The intention is to find out what is there, some-thing known below all conscious awareness. This startling, ironic quality emerges through a new mode of engagement with the intensively charged material dramatists must fashion plays out of.[14]

In *Ashes to Ashes*, the mundane exchanges keep allowing unset-tling and chilly draughts to blow in from the wings. In the major phase shift when Rebecca remembers babies being ripped from the arms of their mothers, we witness a monster emerging from the text itself solely through the capacity of the play's images to generate new dramatic and narrative forms without dislodging the narrative frame. That frame has also deepened now; motherhood has entered the picture—the generative/connective deity is on the scene. Pinter is amplifying intensive contrasts toward the archetypal; Eros and Thanatos now hover in the wings. Then, in the exchange about the baby, we cross a boundary that turns out to be a phase-shift of enclosure—autopoiesis in action. A purely private scenario has just acquired a public and explicitly political dimension. In spatial terms, this arena of politics has to do with the nature of the world that extends out from the staid living room represented on the stage of *Ashes to Ashes*. It has to do, in other words, with both the offstage (as described above), and how the ambiguity and uncertainty generating the autopoietic play relate to the reductive positivism of neoliberal political economy governing the world that the audience enters from and departs into.

7. The Unknowable Offstage and Negative Theology

The world enacted by the audience of Pinter's plays has only gotten darker over the course of his career, more fully in the grip of the forces personified in the characters McCann and Goldberg in *The Birthday Party* (1957), the connective feminine even more of a fugitive since Ruth's return from America in *The Homecoming* (1964). The question of how Pinter's archetypal oppositions relate to the rise of neoliberalism—the

economic doctrine of radical individualism rising to dominance in the Anglo-American world at around this same time in the form of "Reagan-omics" and "Thatcherism"—now begins to come into focus. Rebecca's poise itself registers as an unsettling question—how does her unshakable equanimity relate to the knowledge-power mappings of Devlin's world? Far from being delimited as simply a separate style, how does this work act to exceed the limits of Western logocentrisms, and the social logics of separateness itself? How is Pinter's play coupled structurally to its cultural environment? These questions point toward an intriguing set of associations, the connective marketplace linking to Rebecca as she is held in thrall by a totalizing anti-market form of monopoly capitalism in the form of Devlin and his deadly brand of "adoration." Despite the desultory marital exchanges, the domestic arrangement here is a grotesque sham, a performance—in actuality, the relationship between Devlin and Rebecca is one of pure domination. Likewise, the *laissez faire* rhetoric of neoliberalism distracts us from the monopolistic dynamics that subvert the basic premises of a "free" market.

At issue here is an opposition between the metaphysics of common-sense governing neoliberal culture, and Pinter's aesthetic of contradiction and paradox. This opposition, and the need to avoid quietism on the one hand and solipsism on the other points toward the limits of knowing, and connect the aporia at work in Pinter's plays to the tradition of negative theology or apophaticism. Autopoietic plays can be said to look at what they cannot know in a mode of operational irony, navigating the generative aspect of the open stage. The stage, that magic line inscribed on the ground across which everything is possible, is a place of *difference* first and foremost. This includes the negative or apophatic quality of difference, that which stands *behind* the sign, in the sense that saying "this-is-that" involves also saying "this is *not* everything else." We in the audience accept that whatever definition a specific performance gives the stage space, it is at best a temporary encoding of an underlying groundlessness. As a result, everything on stage has a sign of uncertainty hanging from it, and this uncertainty is inherently full of dramatic tension—an autopoietic playwright takes pains to preserve and amplify this tension rather than drain it away. To one degree or another, the plays of Churchill, Mednick, Wallace Shawn, Suzan-Lori Parks or any of the other playwrights embracing Beckett's middle-way aesthetic draw on this tension to hold the attention of the audience. In *Ashes to Ashes*, Pinter has taken the next step and *embodied* this underlying uncertainty in the character Rebecca.

All this talk of the "middle way" points again toward the many resonances between enactivism and the apophaticism of Mahayana Buddhist thought. Many of the leading enactivist philosophers identified themselves

as Buddhist practitioners. Despite the fact that none the playwrights I am identifying in this aesthetic share the affiliation, the Mahayana concept of the middle way is directly applicable to their theatrical practice. The way these playwrights engage with the generative aspect of the open stage enables a middle way between dramatic realism on the one hand, and the solipsism of the postdramatic on the other, echoing the embrace of paradox characterizing Mayahana Buddhist thought, and its deconstruction of self-other boundaries.

Devlin's agitation in particular relates to issues of boundaries that are central to autopoiesis and that point toward apophaticism. Toby Foshay, in the Introduction to his 1992 volume, *Derrida and Negative Theology* (co-edited with Howard Coward), writes that, once we are freed from a

> …transcendentally determined world structure, our autonomy is most characteristically expressed in its capacity to exceed all centrally defined and anticipatable limits and boundaries. Naturally, we could say, negation in all its forms would haunt modern attempts at (self)-definition. (1)

The negation Foshay cites defines Devlin's relationship to Rebecca, its charade of domestic normalcy expressing how power makes use of commonsense appearances to maintain domination and control. In the same anthology, meanwhile, David Loy explicitly compares Mahayana Buddhism to Derrida's deconstructive project, locating within the Buddhist tradition a struggle between "deconstructive delimitation and metaphysical re-appropriation." This is a struggle, Loy writes, "between a message that undermines all security by undermining the sense-of-self that seeks security, and a countervailing tendency to dogmatize and institutionalize that challenge" (227). Loy goes on to underscore that Mahayana Buddhism can be viewed as an effort to root out and deconstruct what might be called the *logocentricity of common sense*. This, in turn, leads toward a "self-consciousness about those aporias of negative theology," and particularly hyper-essentiality or, in Derrida's terms, "the secret society's secret that there is no secret" (228). This, I argue, is Pinter's project also. In both cases, the form of practice or art does not seek a grounded state, but rather celebrates the self-constructed, autopoietical nature of stage pieces *per se*.

We see here why Pinter has begun *Ashes to Ashes* in the mode of an everyday bourgeois domesticity that suddenly finds itself under the pressure of a question and a demand, aporia already seeping from the shadows. The metaphysics of common sense is the main culprit of the attempt to deconstruct, according to Loy: "'everydayness' and 'common sense' are not alternatives to metaphysical speculation but a disguised—because automatized and unconscious—version of it" (248). Devlin's world at the start is almost perfect, and yet he can't resist tugging the single errant thread that will unravel everything. By drawing the offstage in from the

wings through a kind of prolepsis of the unknowable, the invaginating pull of the stage is corrosive, ultimately, to the logocentrism of Western thought and its hegemonic claims of power.[15] Hence, what Devlin loses control of is precisely the offstage, which, in fact, contains everything. Loy writes: "If the dualism between inside and outside is a construct, the result of an 'invagination' of the outside (which is therefore not an outside), it raises the possibility of a 'devagination'" (253) that creates something very much like the autopoietic loop.

The issue of insides and outsides in Luhmann's systems-thinking resonates strongly in awareness traditions in which meditative practices can be considered technologies for reversing or remodeling operational closure of the self. Loy, for example, goes on to quote Dogen, the 13th-century Zen master: "I came to realize clearly that my mind is nothing other than rivers and mountains and trees, the sun and the moon and the stars." In this way, the illusion of separation is undone; we sense in Rebecca's poised stillness an inclusiveness of this kind. She is at peace with the enactivist puzzle that we in the West, like Devlin, have not been able to accept—that we can be separate and not separate from experience at the same time; that such logically incompatible qualities coexist at every scale.

This liminal, "middle way" capacity of the stage space figures, again, in how scholars grapple in their different ways with the implications of Varela and Luhmann. In this context, it is interesting to consider how Loy links causality to Derridian *différance*—stating that causality is "the equivalent of textual *différance* in the world of things" (247). In language that points to the heart of what is taking place on stage in *Ashes to Ashes,* Loy continues:

> It is because we see the world as a collection of discrete things that we superimpose causal relationships, to 'glue' these things together. Therefore the victory of causality is Pyrrhic, for if there is only causality, there is no causality. This self-refutation has religious consequences: Cause-and-effect is essential to our project of attempting to secure ourselves 'within' the world; its evaporation leaves behind it not chance (its binary opposite) but a sense of mystery, of being part of something that we can never grasp, since we are a manifestation of it. (247)

The interrogatory dance of Devlin and Rebecca is informed by the enactivist tensions and the air of aporia Loy describes. The lack of knowing that defines Devlin implies a lack of mastery over the mechanisms of causality.

In Devlin we thus encounter, not devotion, but a desperate bid for control, the masculine seeking to snuff out the connective and the generative feminine through a murderous bonding. The play ends with Rebecca's last lines being echoed over a public address system, a final phase shift outwards that obviates Devlin as fully as it draws the audience into the broader sociocultural and political topology of what is taking place on

stage. The echo confronts us with our own temerity in the face of the depredations of man in the era of late-phase capitalism, and the complicity that temerity entails.

Ashes to Ashes buttresses this account of an opposition between enactivism and neoliberalism. The enactive approach embraces process in order to reclaim the creative initiative from "postmodern" neoliberal capitalism.[16] In doing so, these plays direct awareness toward the sham pretensions of "Devlin's love," or neoliberalism. In *Ashes to Ashes*, the image of marital stability has been tossed over the wrenching conceptual violence at the heart of the neoliberal deception—the connective marketplace is paraded to distract the public from the anti-market, monopolistic class warfare agenda of a tiny elite.

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Notes

1. We can allow this self-generative aspect to be non-total, characterizing the process or assemblage without completely defining it. To make it total, one would have to follow Hayles and Niklas Luhmann and look at the structural couplings between theater as a system and other systems of our functionally differentiated social world: communication, economic, artistic.
2. See Maria Irene Fornés, "Order," *The Theatre of Maria Irene Fornés*, edited by Mark Robinson, Johns Hopkins UP, 1999, p. 215: "The characters: they talk. And when it talks a character starts developing itself."
3. Basing his analysis on the directorial notebooks from Beckett's 1967 Berlin production, Gatti locates in Hamm the dramatic or mimetic impulse, and in Clov the purely theatrical or ceremonial one, with Beckett's staging of the play acting to resolve the tension between them.
4. Hayles links Dawkins specifically to capitalism: "Whereas Maturana elides genetics, Dawkins foregrounds it. This difference reflects a deeper divergence in their treatments of agency. Dawkins images humans as 'lumbering robots' controlled by their genes, but agency is not missing from his scheme; it is simply displaced from the conscious mind into the genes. The social and economic formations associated with rampant individualism, especially capitalism, are as vigorous as ever in Dawkins's rhetoric and narratives" (94).
5. See Varela, Thompson and Rosch.
6. Hayles is worth quoting in full: ""Say you slap me and I become angry. In the conventional view, one would say that your slap caused me to be angry. As this inference indicates, a causal viewpoint organizes the world into subject and object, mover and moved, transmitter and receiver. The world of causality is also the world of domination and control. Maturana sought to undo this perception by positing that living systems are operationally closed with respect to information. A system acts always and only in accord with its organization. Thus, events can trigger actions, but they cannot cause them because the nature and form of a system's actions are self-determined by its organization. For example, if I am a masochist, I may be pleased rather than angry at your slap. Your slap is only the historical occasion for the self-determined processes that I engage in as a result of being structurally coupled to my environment" (76).
7. See Bruce McConachie.

8. As the L.A. playwright John Steppling pointed out in a 1996 workshop, walk up onto a stage and look into the wings, and what you will see is no longer the offstage.
9. McConachie cites the 1950s pragmatist Elizabeth Anscomb to underscore this.
10. See Bruce McConachie.
11. Menke defines the tragic as the "irony of […] an action that, although it is only ever interested in its own success, necessarily brings about its own failure, and hence leads to misfortune for the doer" (viiii).
12. Absurdist playwright such as Ionesco, Mac Wellman or Sarah Ruhl use representational effects to scramble the codes governing normative experience while remaining rooted in the use of the stage as a space apart from that of the audience—a space of representation rather than performative expression.
13. Judith Butler provides a full critique of the idea of the subject as a continuous, rational and transparent ethical being, and this critique aligns nicely with an enactivist view of mind.
14. Here, their theater enables a version of enactivism rooted in Deleuze and Simondon rather than in phenomenology. A piece of theatre presents a Deleuzian assemblage *par excellence*, the entity only manifesting through the immanent interaction of its component parts, which are defined by relations of exteriority only.
15. See especially what Irigaray calls "hysterical tropism" (*Speculum* 274).
16. Goux's essay is central to my view of the Dionysian claims of neoliberal capitalism.

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