



2007

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Recommended Citation

Haugland '07, Charles, "Transformations of Menace: Naomi Wallace's Multiplicity of Threat and the Legacy of Harold Pinter" (2007). *Honors Projects*. Paper 3.
http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/theatre_honproj/3

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27 April 2007

Transformations of Menace:

Naomi Wallace's multiplicity of threat and the legacy of Harold Pinter

The critical dominance of hope in Wallace scholarship

The focus of critical scholarship on contemporary American playwright Naomi Wallace has overwhelmingly been a drive toward theorizing a vision of utopia in her work, frequently finding her plays to be optimistic in resolution. The diversity of critical approaches in prior articles, though complementary, is striking. Perhaps, as Shannon Baley argues, Wallace imagines moments of a feminist "utopia" in which the barriers of "genders, class and sexuality" can be broken down (239). Using examples of non-normative sexuality present in Wallace's drama, Baley focuses on the way that the drama enacts a cultural feminist viewpoint. Perhaps alternately, Wallace paradoxically joins "death wish and life force" to suggest that positive futures are the results of the "haunting ghosts of the past," as Beth Cleary posits using a psychoanalytic critique of the culturally instilled drive toward death (10). Perhaps instead, the author "incite[s] evolution" through the use of a "malleable" "Brechtian continuum of history," as Claudia Barnett claims (166). According to this argument, Wallace is staging revolution whereby she excavates the past to create a more positive present. Though these arguments are mutually exclusive on the basis of inherent theoretical assumptions about the self, gender and sex, all clearly position Wallace as a playwright oriented toward the future with hope. To critics, characters in Wallace's plays seem to be unfailingly imbued with the potential,

capacity, and ability for change, for reinvention, for possibility, and it is not the purpose of this paper to either wholly refute these scholars or to resummairize their contributions. Rather, it is my aim to trace an alternate, less hopeful set of cultural influences that Wallace incorporates and responds to dialectically.

Previous articles have focused on the product—the implied utopia that is to result either after Wallace’s drama or be enacted provisionally. Here the focus is rather on the process by which Wallace creates these moments of utopia through a foundation of pervasive threat. Indeed, rather than staging a vision of an ideal world outright, Wallace has instead created worlds in which characters are constantly assaulted by outside forces. The threats are often far more present than the hopes as the plays reenact war, plague, and economic depression, making menace—the fear of current and further threats—a dominant mode in her theatrical oeuvre. This presence of menace would not negate the possibility of a ‘utopian performative,’ a term marking brief moments of an imagined better world that Shannon Baley borrows from Jill Dolan. Elsewhere Dolan has commented that the most compelling of these utopian moments arise out of the “most dystopian theatrical universe” (165). However, the dominance of the discourse of hope in these articles’ investigation has, *in practice*, led to a clear emphasis on the protagonist figures in criticism of Wallace—a position in her plays often accompanied by being victimized or oppressed. All of the aforementioned articles clearly align themselves with the protagonist figure of the respective plays they address as this character is frequently the figure most marked by the violence of culture. This emphasis consequently calls for a complementary close examination from the perspective of the threats that present themselves, the characters that manifest them, and the larger symbolic forces that

accompany them. Ultimately, it can be shown that Wallace deliberately includes these sources of menace in order to transform the very concept, showing that threat and menace are the direct causes of the characters' progress toward this hopeful future. This examination of menace will be directly explored not only through a reading of the content of the text where Wallace develops meaning, but also through a structural reading of how she transmits this experience to her audience. The audience experiences threat both empathetically through the action onstage and viscerally through Wallace's manipulation of the temporal—a claim shown in particular by her most recent drama of this study, *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*.

Toward a working definition of menace

To productively establish the ways in which Wallace transfigures menace, one must first look for a working definition of the concept both in its application to theatre and in its dominant cultural understanding—a search that, in this case, logically begins with the father of menace in contemporary theatre: Harold Pinter. The concept, in its application to theatre, first appeared in a review by theatrical critic Irving Wardle, which sought to clarify an important subset of British theatre in the 1950's by defining the “comedy of menace” (Peacock 77). In an examination of this landmark review, Wardle never specifies a definition for menace, but generally this menace is the traditional one: a threat or source of danger. Specifically to Pinter, Wardle conjectures that menace is a concept akin to “destiny”—a force “one forgets about most of the time...[but which has] lethal reminders” (91). Wardle thereby posits that threats are an essential part of life and therefore one can't help but be aware of a menacing presence behind existence.

Following this essay, menace becomes inextricably linked to Pinter and shows up in the

works of many critics of the dramatist, notably Martin Esslin, D. Keith Peacock, and Linda Sue Wells. As the term becomes more and more linked to Pinter, the patterns and associations become both more distinct and more specific. D. Keith Peacock later defines the archetypal menacing situation in Pinter as “territorial aggression...undertaken in dreary rooms by mysterious intruders” (79). Two features of this evolved definition are particularly noteworthy. First, though the situation is clearly still threatening, shown through the word ‘aggression’, Peacock specifies that this aggression is necessarily ‘territorial’, implying that that menace is essentially about ownership. If those that threaten can take their desired territory, be it of the land, the body, or most often in Pinter, the mind, then the menace has had the intended effect. The second notable expansion in this definition is ‘mysterious’, positioning the obscuring of motive as a central feature of the Pinterian menace. If the motive of the antagonist is clear, the threat loses potential menace because it can possibly be assuaged. Here, without clear motive, the threat is all encompassing and inexorable.

The effect of this menace in Pinter is quite clear. It destroys the individual—his or her will, sense of responsibility, and identity (Wells 189). For the purpose of this paper, two Pinter texts will be treated as representative examples, each showing a particular scale of menace. As an example of the interpersonal or micro-menace scale¹,

¹ The terms micro-menace and macro-menace will be utilized as short hand throughout the paper. Generally, micro-menace refers to the tension made manifest between characters in plays. It is both more contained in dialogue and action, and more clearly explicated for the audience. The macro-level to menace is the threat of the unseen. This type of threat is perhaps alluded to or discussed, and pervades the drama like a fog. This menace is purposefully underdramatized and ephemeral. This distinction between levels of menace is somewhat arbitrary in the context of Pinter as his dramaturgical strategy is for economy—one play is primarily indicative of interpersonal forces, the other is indicative of much larger ones. The relevance of this distinction will become apparent when looking at Wallace as she dramatizes a multiplicity of forces, showing the interrelationship of each level.

The Birthday Party will be treated as a representative text for Pinter's delineation². In *The Birthday Party*, Stanley, the threat-receiving protagonist, indeed receives a mysterious visit to the boarding house where he lives. The two visitors, Goldberg and McCann, threaten Stanley on behalf of a hazily defined larger organization which feels that Stanley has committed a slight against the group. Goldberg and McCann begin to terrorize Stanley, sometimes directly through language, sometimes indirectly through games such as Blind Man's Bluff, an especially tense sort of Hide and Seek in the dark. In the face of this menace, Stanley inarguably tends towards inaction. Rather than defining himself against this threatening intrusion, he remains paralyzed in the face of terror. For example, when first told by the housekeeper Meg that the two men have arrived, Stanley is prodded by Meg to give her some sort of reply. She asks,

"MEG. Do you know them?

(STANLEY *does not answer.*)

Stan, they won't wake you up, I promise. I'll tell them they must be quiet.

(STANLEY *sits still.*)

They won't be here long, Stan. I'll still bring you up your early morning tea." (30)

Pinter clearly emphasizes Stanley's inaction in the face of potential threat. From this moment on in *The Birthday Party*, there is a definitive shift in Stanley's character whereby he no longer controls his actions. He rarely speaks unless directly questioned,

² *The Birthday Party* is also the central Wardle text, though he draws a different conclusion about the effects. Wells uses *The Birthday Party* to show a regression to the primitive, but even Stanley's most brutish behavior, when he bangs the drum or strangles another character, is largely ineffectual and indeed quickly forgotten. Peacock uses *The Birthday Party* as an example of brainwashing, which is a decisively different slant on inhibition.

particularly in the party which follows his castigation by Goldberg and McCann in Act II. Finally, in the third act, the two menacers tell Stanley they are to take him away, making him comic promises of protection which have of course been undercut by their frequently aggressive tactics. Again, Pinter specifically notes “STANLEY *shows no reaction. He remains, with no movement where he sits*” (76). Stanley is unable to react to menace once more later in the scene where he attempts to speak but is only able to make sounds, gurgling “Uh-gug...uh-gug...eeehhh-gag” (78). Stanley is ultimately escorted out by the two men, never having made any substantive resistance or attempt at a solution. This example is defined as interpersonal as there is never any substantive proof that the Company that McCann and Goldberg represent exists outside of the two men, and Martin Esslin has argued, as McCann is just as easily read as “that power itself,” that the Company doesn’t (Esslin 80). If the threat then is solely discerned from the interrelationship between the two men, then Pinter is dramatizing how human beings use power to threaten each other. In *The Birthday Party*, Pinter dramatizes how these threatening relationships between individuals can ultimately dehumanize the receiver—in this case making him incapable of action and speech.

The second level of menace in Pinter occurs at a macro-level, dramatizing larger and more impersonal forces, shown in the second representative text *Mountain Language*. A short play depicting the oppression of citizens under a totalitarian regime, this second text represents a major shift in Pinter’s career. Whereas in his early career he is frequently referred to as an apolitical playwright, this shift between public and private makes Pinter a more socially oriented voice—a fact that both he and his critics have acknowledged. Ivan Dilek has specifically characterized the shift as the process of

“Pinter transfer[ring] menace from private relationships to expressively political ones”

(42). In *Mountain Language*, Pinter invites politics, and their intersection with inhibiting menace, to take primary importance. Set in an unnamed country, but one that is decidedly non-British, *Mountain Language* follows the encounters of an anonymous ‘Old Woman’ and her daughter ‘Young Woman’ with an oppressive totalitarian regime. Menace is established immediately through the Young Woman’s protests that her mother has been mauled by one of the guards’ Doberman Pinschers. Her pleas for help fall on deaf ears, however, as she is quickly informed that unless the dog has told her its name as it should have done before it bit her, that she has no recourse. Without presenting his name, this dog will have deviated from “formal procedure” (342). This deviation is presented as disrupting the entire process of complaint. The ludicrous nature of their objections establishes the central menace of this particular work: the government will not protect its citizens even from its own agents, here epitomized by the Dobermans. This threat of further and unavoidable violence leads the Old Woman to renounce speaking her native tongue, *Mountain Language*, in order to avoid the government’s rage. By the final scene, she has been rendered utterly silent, as Pinter tells “*she is still*” (349). Reminiscent of Stanley’s response to the Company³, her actions are another disturbing manifestation of the pernicious and paralyzing nature of threat. A fellow prisoner who speaks the same mountain dialect pleads with her to speak with him as the curtain falls, but is unable to solicit any response from the Old Woman. Without any hope for the future, Pinter has dramatized how a web of forces that are not divested to any individual

³ I have not drawn this claim from any particular critic, but this is a common conclusion to draw, showing up in both Susan Hollis Merritt’s “Pinter and Politics” and Marc Silverstein’s “*One for the Road, Mountain Language, and the Impasse of Politics.*” These articles were published nearly simultaneously and do not cite any scholar as being principally responsible for this connection.

in particular can work in a similar way to the interpersonal, linking the forces of menace and government in a deliberate manner that the early Pinter was certain to avoid.

Pinter's view of menace on both scales is quite clear. It inhibits. Menace prevents characters from asserting themselves, as threats to the individual dehumanize him or her.⁴ Characters experience a loss of language, agency and individual sovereignty that is often internalized by the conclusion of the drama to the point where the outside force is no longer necessary. For Pinter, menace is arresting, an assumption that Wallace will be seen to revise and re-envision.

Outlining the Wallace terrain

The investigation of menace in Wallace for this paper will be confined to her trilogy of five-character plays, which consists chronologically of *In the Heart of America*, *One Flea Spare*, and *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*. Though not expressly intended by Wallace as a trilogy and despite the absence of any literal overlap in characters, the plays are naturally examined together due to their clear use of similar archetypes and their consistent interest in the action of larger forces on the individual. All of her five-character plays have child-like protagonists, epitomized by Morse, the twelve-year old center of *One Flea Spare* and Dalton, the fifteen-year old at the core of *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*, but also echoed by Craver, the immature soldier of *In the Heart of America*. Other clear Wallace archetypes can be seen such as the searching female (Fairouz, Darcy, and Gin) or the sex-less father (Snelgrave and Dray), but the most pervasive and consistent archetypal figure is the dark menace. In addition, setting her

⁴ Though I have treated *The Birthday Party* and *Mountain Language* as representative texts for Pinter, certainly similar arguments have been made about *The Room*, *The Dumbwaiter*, *The Caretaker*, and *One for the Road* among others. Though the circumstances differ quite a bit from play to play, the lack of reaction in the face of menace is generally consistent.

plays at particularly fraught historical moments, Wallace chooses to dramatize the ways in which larger forces, here war, plague and the past, act on her characters. The interplay between these two levels is striking as the audience's understanding of each is in relation to the other. Wallace, by depicting both levels simultaneously, puts multiple levels of threat into dialogue, showing the complex of forces in contemporary life.

The micro-menace

The menacing figure in Wallace is an archetypal presence typically introduced in each of her plays as guard or other figure of the state that serves to imprison or threaten the characters. Drawing on Boxler, the drill instructor and vessel for the soul of Lt. William Calley, in *In the Heart of America*, Kabe, the exploitive guard, in *One Flea Spare*, and Chaz, the town jailer, in *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*⁵, this section will trace these interpersonal sources of menace who serve on behalf of a larger organization of power and, at least initially, act to inhibit the characters from action. In addition, Wallace, in the particular context of *One Flea Spare*, may choose to compound the menacer with an additional character, such as Snelgrave.

Boxler is an obvious, and perhaps the most concentrated, figure of evil in Wallace's plays, as he represents the literal soul of Lieutenant William Calley, the American soldier prominently associated with the My Lai massacre. However, he doesn't exert the force of control that later Wallace menacers will wield due to his presence as a mentor rather than an antagonist. Depicting Calley as an agent of the United States Government, *In the Heart of America* imagines Calley's soul as a transient that moves through each successive American conflict, as war, Calley says through

⁵ This trilogy is especially noteworthy as, outside of these three plays, menace does not inhabit a literal character as an archetype in Wallace's other plays, even in those of a similar period such as *Slaughter City*, *The War Boys*, or *The Inland Sea*.

Boxler, is “the only place that feels like home” (132). Boxler, therefore, plays a dual role in the drama. He is being pursued by Lue Ming, the ghost of a woman he killed in the Vietnam War, and he is training Remzi and Craver, a pair of soldiers. To these other characters, Boxler presents frequent threats. In the first act, he recurrently hits, kicks or otherwise physically intimidates Remzi and Craver during his time as their drill instructor. In one such scene, Boxler “*punches Remzi in the stomach,*” causing him to “*collapse*” (99). Later, in a more horrific scene, he attempts to force Lue Ming to perform oral sex on Craver (121). Though he doesn’t have the direct control that a literal guard figure like Kabe and Chas might exert, Boxler’s use of physical violence, compounded with his literal status and authority as a Lieutenant, places him in a position to command the other characters.

In addition, he is frequently referred to as a symbol or representative of the American national government. Wallace has Lue Ming articulate this theme clearly when she establishes on several separate occasions how Calley has become an icon. In the first scene of the second act, Ming refers to the album “Battle Hymn of Lieutenant Calley,” which was released as a folk record after the My Lai massacre and sold “over two hundred thousand copies” (118). She expands to dub him “a pop star,” singing his lyrics as “My name is Rusty Calley / I’m a soldier of this land.” As a soldier representing the ‘land’ of America, Boxler becomes an agent and figure of the national government. Boxler himself compounds this idea of Calley as national symbol when he references the “T-shirts, buttons, mugs” that appeared during his trial (125). Since this fame is entirely due to his role in the My Lai massacre, a link is developed between the government he represents and the crimes of hate that may be perpetrated by American soldiers. Just

preceeding Boxler's enumeration of his fame, Lue Ming and Boxler describe the details of the My Lai massacre, pointing to the "rape, sodomy...unimaginable mutilations" that took place. Calley is established as the agent of an American structure of power whereby crimes of hate become legitimated.

As *In the Heart of America* is the earliest play in this menace trilogy, audiences see a set-up for menace as an inhibiting force rather than a clear depiction of it due to Boxler's role as mentor to Craver and Remzi, the two soldiers who train under him in the Gulf. He attempts to teach them how to utilize threat and force to their advantage—in essence to become menacers themselves. Though the two frequently respond to Boxler's directions, such as to hit a prisoner, with inhibition and fear, Boxler attempts to force them to act so that they may be recreated in his image. In a world controlled by fear, Boxler's actions tacitly argue that those who are able to continue to act are those who use force, threat, and menace to their own advantage.

In *One Flea Spare*, presented by Wallace one year later, audiences are shown a depiction of menace more reminiscent of Pinter. In this case, Wallace chooses to compound this image by including not only an archetypal figure of menace in Kabe, but also a less expected figure in the case of Snelgrave, the wealthy aristocrat. Kabe, the guard in *One Flea Spare*, is the most Pinteresque figure on the micro-level of the interpersonal. As a guard ordered to quarantine the citizens and enforce martial law, like the *Mountain Language* agents, he acts as a literal representative of the State. Indeed, the first image of the play, in which Morse "*repeats the words her interrogator might have used,*" shows the state as just the sort of inhibiting force that we expect from Pinter. As the guard-voice demands answers and enacts physical violence, slapping Morse

repeatedly, Wallace specifies that "*Morse remains still and does not react*" (7). This prologue establishes menace as a force which may inhibit action; however, unlike in Pinter's works, this lack of response is not a constant throughout the play. If the reader sees guards or police initially as this sort of menacing inhibitor, Kabe is implicated and indeed his actions frequently present threats to the characters. In the first scene, he uses his position as outside observer to terrorize Darcy for her disfiguring burns, taunting "Won't you show us your pretty white hands?", while he "*shrieks with laughter.*" (12). This ridicule perhaps implies a threat that he will humiliate Darcy. His actions here and elsewhere are certainly in the interests of the state, as his threats keep the prisoners in check, but also function for his own more hazily defined reasons. Kabe makes explicit sexual overtures to Morse, the young child, tempting her with small presents for quasi-sexual favors, ultimately sucking her toes (23). The scene certainly presents the threat that he will rape the child. Clearly, Kabe is established as a source of threats—threats, furthermore, which are designed to inhibit action.

However, in Wallace's key move, these threats, instead of inhibiting action, propel the characters forward to react. Darcy ultimately does remove her gloves in order to be more intimate with Bunce, an action that takes place offstage and is conveyed retrospectively by Morse. Her embarrassment becomes a vehicle for change, and this early threat to her sovereignty of self increases the significance of her later action. This sense of threat as an impetus for change, rather than a source of paralysis, is visible in Morse as well. She later begins to use power that is based on more tangible sources, such as in the scene in which she dresses in Snelgrave's clothing. Kabe's menace is clearly not perpetually an inhibitor, but ultimately a source of transformation. Indeed, Kabe

himself is transformed from a source of threat to a source of empowerment, as he implores in Act II that death is not “what’s terrible...[what’s terrible is] life that has nothing left but still won’t give itself up” (52). In this later moment, he instead defines the need for action and change as the fundamental indicator of life.

This transformation by Kabe is incremental, however, in that he does not entirely release his control over the confined. In one of the final scenes of the play, Bunce, fearful that he will be hanged for Snelgrave’s death, begs Kabe to pay him off in order to escape. Kabe accepts payment but tells Bunce to wait for the rounds done at night by “dumb Samuel” (65). Kabe will not literally release Bunce from control, but simply give him the information needed to succeed. Kabe’s transformation, then is perhaps modest in scope, but remains a meaningful transformation of the Pinterian definition.

One Flea Spare is exceptional, however, in that another character also presents himself as a menacing inhibitor in Mr. Snelgrave. Snelgrave also differs crucially from the Pinterian definition in two ways: he emerges only gradually as a threat, and he doesn’t function as an agent of a *literal* larger organization of power, operating instead on behalf of the cultural status quo, a diffuse, dispersed structure of power. Initially, a viewer may take Snelgrave as a benign or even positive force. Although Snelgrave certainly could resent Bunce due to his break-in that keeps Snelgrave in quarantine, in scene three, he feeds Bunce. Offering him an apple and nuts, Snelgrave makes positive conversation about Bunce’s sailing experiences, showing kindness to Bunce (14-17). Snelgrave, nevertheless, quickly begins to define himself against the other three fellow prisoners through the use of violent threats. After believing, quite rightly, that Morse has been stealing from his house, he “brandishes a cane” to the girl, a physical threat of

violence. Morse attempts to alleviate his anger towards her by pointing towards the growing intimacy between Bunce and Darcy, and so Snelgrave attempts to humiliate them both by forcing them to look at Darcy's scarred hands. Revealingly this scene is the source of the only literal invocation of the word "menace" by Wallace, when she tells that when Snelgrave questions Bunce he "*whispers, with menace*" (35). Interestingly, he asks Bunce, not to commit any literal action, but instead tells him that "I want you to stand there. Right here. Yes. Nothing else. Just stand." Attempting to arrest the potential relationship between Bunce and Darcy, he attempts to paralyze Bunce. Clearly, Snelgrave has shifted from a benevolent force that balances the house to a menacing presence that attempts to inhibit action. However, unlike Kabe, who ultimately becomes a force for transformation and is included in the final scene, Snelgrave dies in the course of the drama, suggesting that his force must be excluded rather than transformed, due in no small part to his presence as the representative of the status quo. Although he is not a literal representative in the way that Kabe represents the interests of the State, Snelgrave certainly acts on behalf of the wealthy in maintaining structures of power. In one of the core scenes of the play, he invites Bunce to try on his shoes made of "real gentleman's leather" but emphasizes to Bunce that this action is "just a little game" or "an illusion because [Snelgrave] can't change the fact that [Bunce]'ll never wear fine shoes" (26). Snelgrave, as a member of the upper class, has a vested interest in using his power to perpetuate his position, and indeed in the later scene where he tries to humiliate Bunce for his overtures to Darcy, the subtext can certainly be read that he takes more offense at the fact that Bunce is reaching above his means than he does that his wife may have committed infidelity. The structure of power which he represents as a member of the

ruling class seems incapable of transformation and, therefore, necessitates the exclusion of his threat to the other three confined characters. Wallace chooses for Snelgrave to die in order to continue her characters progression toward transformation.

With *One Flea Spare*, Wallace is establishing a need to either incorporate or exclude menace in order to move forward. Kabe and Snelgrave do not disappear from stage for the final scene, but rather Snelgrave's dead body attests to his exclusion, while Kabe sings quite prominently a song of farewell that "*fills the space*" (74) Their residual presence in the final scene is striking and exceptional, as Wallace dramatically points to their differing character arcs.

Wallace expands on the concept of a transforming menacer through the final archetype of her trilogy with Chas in *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*. In *Trestle*, Chas acts as the guard of the county jail where Dalton, the ostensible protagonist, is being held for the murder of Pace Cregan. Chas initially evokes a menacing archetype by virtue of the chilling impersonations and impressions he performs. His first is of another prisoner who behaved like a stag beetle, which he narrates as having "huge" imaginary "claws" and tells that he "used his arms like pincers. Opening and closing them" (289). The fear that this description evokes is subconscious and primal but intentionally links Chas to a sense of threat, and these intimidating impressions are a continued motif of his character. Later in the script, Chas imitates 'Dalton's soul' as he "*gets down on all fours and acts out something contorted and disturbing*" (320). Chas instills fear by taking the unseen and making it manifest in ways that are disturbing and inhibiting, as these imitations frequently provoke Dalton to become quiet and withdrawn. Wallace tells that "*Dalton is turned away from Chas*" or that "*Chas gets no response*" from him (290, 296). Chas

instills a sense of fear in Dalton that prevents him from asserting himself, particularly regarding the truth about Pace Cregan's death

In addition, as a classic menacing inhibitor, Chas functions as a representative of the civic government that would try and execute Dalton for Pace's murder. In an early scene in the play, Chas taunts and threatens Dalton by describing what it will feel like to be hanged. Chas points to the sound Dalton will hear when his "own neck break[s]. And if [he has] a thick neck bone...then it takes a while to break clean through...and all the while [he's] dying hearing it snappin'" (290). By confronting Dalton with images of his own death at the hands of the government that Chas represents, Chas is terrorizing Dalton with a judicial process of which he is an agent.

When Wallace departs from the Pinterian model for a menacing inhibitor in *Trestle*, she begins to gradually reveal Chas's motives for enacting cruelty as being the result of having lost his own son. If the Pinter model was shown to depend on the obscuring of motive, here Wallace begins to dissipate Chas's menace through revelation. Much the image of Dalton, Chas' son Brett died on the trestle that Dalton and Pace, in flashbacks, had planned to run. Though Brett is mentioned early in the script by Dalton and Pace, he is one of a list of boys who have been associated with trying to run across the trestle in an attempt to beat an oncoming train. Perhaps the audience will understand Chas to be Brett's father, but Wallace doesn't choose to make the link explicit until Scene 7 of Act II. As the audience is given the motives for the menacer's actions, the threat which he represents is dissipated, an action cycle which Wallace writes purposefully.

In the same scene, Chas is transformed from a source of menace to a source of freedom as he releases Dalton from confinement. As Dalton reveals that Pace commits

suicide during the middle of their ultimate attempt to run across the trestle, he becomes exonerated for his crimes. Again, Chas acts beyond his role as simple jailer and rather embodies the entire county judicial system. He releases Dalton from confinement as having told Chas the true story of what happened appears to have been enough.

Chas is thereby transformed from menacing inhibitor to beneficent granter of freedom. *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*, therefore, expands on the transformation of the menacing force begun in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* since, as described previously, Kabe doesn't literally release the other characters from his control. By releasing Dalton, Chas highlights the way in which Wallace has reworked menace to be the force that propels the characters forward, and it seems unclear whether Dalton would have confessed the truth of Pace Cregan's demise without Chas' involvement. To Wallace at this interpersonal level, the menacers ultimately work to transform others even as they transform themselves. Wallace dialectically invokes menace as a concept through her use of these three archetypal examples of a menacing inhibitor, in addition to the presence of a fourth source of menace in Snelgrave. These four characters create an overarching progression of menace. The audience is ultimately brought to understand menace as a positive force, due to the actions that the menacers provoke in the other characters. However, Wallace does not merely enact menace at the level of the interpersonal, as there are also accompanying thematic macro-menaces.

The macro-menace

For Wallace, like Pinter, menace does not stop at the level of the interpersonal. Larger, impersonal forces act on the characters just as often and in ways that have an even greater potential for devastation. Though the macro-menace established by Pinter

through *Mountain Language* was a social structure, that of government, the concept of a menace that is larger than the individual can be easily expanded to encompass non-social sources, and indeed, in Wallace, it must. These asocial forces are perhaps even more compelling here as motive is not only obscured, but entirely called into question. If one recognizes plague as a source of menace, the concept of motive becomes entirely opaque as the force is not recognized as sentient. This lack of determination does not mitigate the perniciousness of its effect, and therefore, the audience is shown threats that seem overwhelming and insurmountable.

With *In the Heart of America*, the macro-menace that Wallace explores is that of war. Initially, like *Boxler*, war is set up as a force that may create paralysis, shown clearly in its initial scene. The play begins with Craver seemingly in a state of shell-shock in an anonymous hotel room where Fairouz has found him. Though Fairouz is attempting to investigate what has happened to her brother Remzi, who the audience may already suspect was Craver's wartime lover, Craver is oblique and callous toward her, telling her that "people get lost. Call the army" (83). The horrors of what he has witnessed, through the menace of the war and of the American soldiers who acted on its behalf, has made Craver incapable of identifying with Fairouz.

Responsible for Craver's initial emotional paralysis, war is shown to pervade the drama in part through the emphasis on the place that the language of war held in the relationship between Remzi and Craver. The immense catalog of weapons possessed by the American government is treated as a love song or lullaby that the two read to each other. Craver narrates how Remzi "must have read that weapons manual a hundred times. All those ways to kill the human body. Lullabies. It was like...they were always

the same...Fishbeds, Floggers and Fulcrums. Stingers, Frogs, Silkworms, Vulcans, Beehives and Bouncing Bettys” (111). The language of war, then, produces a feeling of false calm and peace. The threat of the destruction of the human body again produces a feeling of paralysis.

The resulting final picture of war further proves how *In the Heart of America* as the earliest play makes only a staging ground for the possibility of transformation. War is inhuman and responsible for the literal deaths of Lue Ming and Remzi, in addition to the more spiritual deaths of Boxler and Craver. Yet, there is no mention of war, either textually or subtextually, in scene eleven. In this ultimate scene of the play, war is pushed away from the consciousness of the audience in favor of a more hopeful, but not oppositional, image. Craver tells Fairouz that the ram’s horn that her brother gave her is for her to “make a noise” (138). As Fairouz goes on, praising that the noise it will make will be “Fucking loud...Goddamn, fucking loud!,” Wallace seems to argue that, in a world where the body is assaulted by horrors and threats as deadly, pervasive and inhuman as war, the only hope for the individual is to raise his or her voice as loud as he or she can. This action of making a loud noise offers no transformation of the forces themselves that the individual is fighting against but merely an alternate action with little persisting effect. Though the impermanence of this image may be Wallace’s intention, later plays can be shown to oppose menace in ways that are more lasting.

A more fully hopeful image of transformation of macro-forces presents itself in the renegotiation of the plague in *One Flea Spare*. Without a doubt, the spectre of the plague pervades the play, both motivating the confinement of the characters and becoming a source of power for even the menacers. Kabe and Snelgrave would never

need to threaten the other three characters and each other if the respective larger forces of government and culture were in place. Moreover, even the two menacers are controlled by the plague's power in turn. Fear of the plague clearly affects agents of the state, evidenced by their need to quarantine all citizens who could potentially be infected. Even Snelgrave shows alarm at the plague's menace. In an early conversation with Bunce, he asks if Bunce fears the plague, adding that though Snelgrave believes that divine providence will keep him safe from infection, he knows that subconsciously he doubts his own safety because he uses so much vinegar in an attempt to sterilize the room (25). The plague clearly both motivates and transforms even the two impersonal menacing forces of the play.

Amongst the other characters, however, the plague has a menacing force at the beginning, but by the end has been denied power in support of individual sovereignty. When Darcy becomes infected, showing the "tokens" that are a tell-tale sign of the disease, Bunce attempts to rebuff her illness by burning the tokens off with a hot coal, taking action to combat hazard. After Darcy rejects this attempt at therapy, Bunce and Morse instead help her commit suicide, leaving the ultimate source of power in them as individuals rather than in the disease. Indeed, in a play that is purposely set in the time of the plague, an audience might expect characters to die from this source. Yet, by the conclusion, the only actual plague deaths have been relayed indirectly by Kabe, as he counts off the number dead in each sub-section of London. The real power lies in the individual who can redefine threat, reconfigure menace to increase self-possessed power.

Of course, this renegotiation of the plague is a tenuous site of victory as Darcy has still had to die in order to surmount its threat. In *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*, again

Wallace completes her cycle by imagining a menace that can become incorporated into the human being after which they remain intact. In this final play, the past serves as a source of macro-menace, which threatens to overwhelm and destroy all of the characters, but which is ultimately negotiated to become a source of individual power. Chas is diminished to the point of torturing others due to his memory of his son. Pace Cregan too cannot reach out to Dalton without ambivalence since the death of Brett Weaver. Gin is perhaps the most adjusted, but keeps holding on to a time in which her husband was not reduced to catatonia. Perhaps the most compelling example presents itself in the case of Dray, Gin's husband and Dalton's father, who has been laid off and exists in a state of near-coma at the beginning of the play. Communicating solely in hand shadows, Dray is crippled by the prospect of facing worthlessness due to his past that was based solely on material worth. Dray, in his eyes, has passed his time of usefulness as a human being. Dray is only coaxed back into action by Gin, his wife, who brings home plates that the pair toss back and forth, habitually breaking them. Gin tells that it is becoming progressively harder and harder to find them due to the number of plates that Dray has broken. The effect on Dray of breaking the plates is clear. Since we assume that, being game-like, the action onstage in the plate scene is codified between Gin and Dray, the animated and "*playful*" state that the diversion provides Dray is anticipatory of breaking the plate at the end (306). Breaking a material object is a way of confronting and opposing a past that was only based on material worth. The working man wonders how many plates he can possess; he buys them and takes care of them. The man with no work delights only in how many plates he can destroy, thereby obliterating a world in which he understands himself as valueless. This distinction is a crucial site for viewing the

evolution in Wallace's understanding of human action's opposition to threat. When Fairouz feared the annihilation of the individual from war, Remzi provided her with a way of making her voice heard, which addresses but does not ameliorate her concern. Being loud doesn't erode the possibility of war. Here Gin finds a way to help her husband battle the material worth that he feels he lacks and therefore again human action is the antithesis to fear and threat.

More centrally, Dalton is obsessed by the past in that he feels responsible for the death of Pace Cregan. He repeats the claim across the play to have killed her without explanation, but his torment and the threat that the past presents to him is evident throughout, and only assuaged by an embrace of the past. Her death, it is ultimately revealed, was a suicide after she failed to cross the trestle in time to beat the train—a failure Dalton believes was caused by his unwillingness to encourage her. Dalton tells in the final scene that he understands the events in a way that proves that the time she spent “calling” to him slowed her down too much to succeed (337). By owning the moment in which he fears he may have been responsible for her death, Dalton embraces the past which has menaced him, and is therefore released from his terror. Remembering and the process of renarrating one's own history is positioned here as far more than an ephemeral process. Dalton's owning of his past is a material action with real effects, and represents another in the string of human actions positioned against menacing threat. If Wallace used the interpersonal to show how menace could ultimately be transformed, she uses the macro-menace to show how it can be opposed.

The menace of structure

This paper has established a lens by which to more fully understand the degree of optimism or utopia that Wallace has offered the audience by highlighting the ability Wallace gives her characters to renegotiate, transform, and oppose threat and menace into sources of individual power and has done so primarily through an analysis of her development of each play in response to the framework established by Harold Pinter. However, Wallace's transformation does not end at the level of content. Wallace also uses the form and structure of her plays to highlight and manipulate the audience's own experience of menace.

Structure in Pinter is little explored, perhaps due to, as D. Keith Peacock claims, the belief that his menace-focused work uses as a model the "superficially...familiar, realistic well-made play" (64)⁶. Studies in Pinter primarily focus themselves on the material situations and machinations of his work, as the critical overview previously highlighted. *The Birthday Party*, revisited with this new gaze, contains the pieces of this well-made play. The inciting incident would be the arrival of Goldberg and McCann, quoted earlier, whereas the climax is found in the moment they usher him out the door. Dramatic question and answer are found in a linear fashion, as the audience is allowed to trace the progressive complications of the plot through literal time. The whole play takes place in less than twenty-four hours, and nothing is shown out of sequence. This structural integrity of time is germane to Pinter's intentions. In plays where Pinter wants to construct a threatening, pressure-bound world, then it is logical that he would compact the time and not disrupt its progression as breaks in the narrative might be sites in which

⁶ There are exceptions in Pinter's canon, of course, such as *Betrayal*. These plays, however, are outliers not only in this structural sense, but in deeper thematic ways as well.

menace is assuaged. This stability of time is combined with an integrity of place and location. Martin Esslin describes Pinter's drama primarily as "the suspense created the elementary ingredients of pure pre-literary theatre: a stage, two people, a door... When asked by a critic what his two people in his room are afraid of, Pinter replied, "Obviously they are afraid of what is outside the room. Outside the room there is a world bearing down on them which is frightening. I am sure it is frightening to you and me as well" (*Theatre* 199). The wholeness ascribed to the room then as the sole site of sanctuary is the spatial reflection of the unity of time.

This model, indicative of traditional drama, is invoked by Wallace at times. *One Flea Spare* likewise takes place in a single room, begins with two characters, and primarily concerns itself with the influence of exterior pressures. Here in Wallace, this room is a place of containment during the plague in England in 1665, and her two initial characters are Bunce and Morse, who have come to this room, part of a large, boarded-up house, seeking shelter during the quarantine. The house they have broken into belongs to the Snelgraves. Finally, in lieu of a door, there is a single window to the outside. The play's predominately linear structure encourages the audience to make causal links, experiencing the play like a realist drama—a form that might not seem to encourage the sorts of transformation that Wallace enacts elsewhere⁷. The strict integrity of the room encourages the audience to think of the play as a story spun by Morse, the only character to violate this integrity as she switches back and forth between an interrogation cell and the Snelgraves' home. This modest negotiation of the temporal continuum is a gesture by

⁷ This concept of theatrical realism and realistic drama as inherently hegemonic or supportive of those already in power can be traced easily to Roland Barthes' critique of theatre practice. Though I am not employing an exhaustively Barthesian critique of realism, these ideas have passed into discourse through this source. See, for example, Timothy Scheie's article "Performing Degree Zero: Barthes, Body, Theatre" in which Scheie traces Barthes' "advocacy" for Bertolt Brecht.

Wallace that serves to bookend the story, rather than rupture it in the way that non-linear story might.

In fact, the frame story only serves to highlight the thematic linearity that Wallace is creating. If the story was conveyed chronologically, the re-incarceration of Morse would seem quite hopeless, as she moves from one period of constriction to another. Yet, Wallace splits her frame story across the drama into three discrete units. In each of these units, Morse displays a greater sense of power, commensurate with her progress in the primary story. Despite displaying the inhibition traced in the opening monologue, during the second monologue, Morse becomes more physically activated. Rather than remaining still, Morse “*flinches at the slaps*” (45). Morse’s increased control is only explicated by the narrative that she has told in-between the two sections of monologue. This modest increase is fully capitalized on for Morse’s closing monologue. In this section, Morse produces an orange from her pocket, a symbol that Shannon Baley has established as one of luxury both capital and sexual (247). Holding this orange, Morse becomes clearly incapable of being dominated by fear as she is invested with authority. Again, her possession of both the story and the experience at the Snelgraves’ home is the only substantive explanation for her ability to tell the guards to “beware” of her (74). Wallace is favoring the structure of the drama over the literal temporal reality of the story, negotiating Morse’s return to capture in terms of the power she will find in herself.

The tight structure of *One Flea Spare* is surprising in particular when evaluated in comparison to the plays on either side, which both use non-linear structures to influence the perceptions of the audience. *In the Heart of America* jumps back and forth between a period prior to when Remzi left for the Persian Gulf war, a more recent past in which

Remzi is in the Gulf with Boxler, and the present where his sister Fairouz investigates his disappearance by questioning Craver. This less linear structure, which might dispel a feeling of progression and causality, is a site of rupture from the Pinterian model. In addition, the play has a variety of settings—some of which are Esslin's 'anonymous rooms' and others of which are grander in scale. The initial scenes predominately take place in a series of interchangeable hotel rooms. Though the audience may see the establishment of the single room that will become the setting of *One Flea Spare*, the characters are far from confined. They jump across both the physical boundaries of country—crisscrossing between America and Iraq—and the metaphysical boundaries of death—at least one character, Lue Ming, is always presented as a ghost. This structure acts as a rehearsal for Wallace in the use of a non-linear structure which she will replicate in *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*.

The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek makes use of a similar use of non-linear structure, but expands upon *In the Heart of America* by consciously designing it to provoke a sense of fear in the audience, serving as its own source of menace that steps across the performer/spectator boundary. The audience is told almost immediately that Dalton has confessed to Pace's murder. Therefore, scenes in which we see the two characters together are inhibited from identification by the audience as they fear that they will be forced to witness Dalton's previously implied rape, beating, and murder of Pace. As Pace consistently and progressively transgresses Dalton's physical and psychic boundaries of comfort, such as by sucking his skin or brandishing a knife while holding him down, the audience may worry that this moment will be the one in which Dalton loses his grip. The play coalesces instead around an instance of non-normative sexuality

that is perhaps Wallace's most beneficent transformation of all. Though the structure has led the audience to fear what we will witness, as previously discussed the penultimate scene reveals that Dalton was not responsible for Pace's death, but rather only believed he was. The energy of this menace is thereby transformed into the final scene depicting Pace and Dalton's disembodied sexual encounter, a moment that is therefore marked by precisely the mixture of joy and hope that Shannon Baley has previously claimed. The moment certainly qualifies to Baley as the utopian performative she is searching for in the Wallace canon (247). However, this utopian moment is grounded not only on the sexual politics of the encounter as she suggests, but also out of the structural menace that Wallace has succeeded in creating for the audience.

Though this manipulation of a play's arrangement is a less pervasive strategy for Wallace, the menace in *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek* is evidence of a structural innovation in the Wallace canon—a tactic she has not since repeated. This architectural move compellingly establishes *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek* as the most pervasive example of Wallace's ethos for the transformation of menace.

Wallace, Pinter, and ethics

In retrospect, each playwright's views of menace seem to center around their willingness to believe in the possibility of change. One of the most optimistic of Pinter critics in recent years has been Penelope Prentice who, in her book-length study *The Pinter Ethic*, traces the concept of love through his often bleak work. Though she is able to find numerous examples, her final conclusion of *Mountain Language*, for example, is that "perhaps the simple awareness that Pinter's work evokes [is the site of justice] and with that awareness action may follow" (291). Prentice, in her own optimism, is giving

Pinter quite a bit of license, as his critique is then not expected to begin work toward a solution, but merely dramatize the problem. The tacit argument seems to be that the dramatic text is best for reinforcing or spreading the ideas already known. It is clear there are problems associated with totalitarian governments, and it is Pinter's responsibility to give the audience a face or an image to make this problem tangible to us.

The historical lack of solution is the final and most important transformation that Wallace's work accomplishes. If her work is constantly moving toward precisely those moments of 'utopia' that were so clearly established by other critics, then her ability to dramatize the transformation of threat makes this hope possible. In an interview, Wallace has reflected on her use of a hopeful ending as an indicator that she doesn't "believe that things have always been the same" or "that you've gotta accept that there are a lot of bad endings" (Julian). This Wallace ethic for transformation motivates her inclusion of threat and menace at the array of levels her work demonstrates. It has been the goal of this study to trace and introduce into Wallace discourse the pervasive nature of this menacing baseline, further supporting and exploring her own belief that it will not be until threat is both truly understood and transformed that the individual will be empowered.

Ultimately, Wallace's menace is crucial, because it is only through its inclusion that Wallace rehearses and anticipates the audience's own adaptation to menace. If a character can redefine him or herself in the face of a threat, then a playwright is redefining threat itself—menace itself—and if a playwright can, then Wallace might suggest so can the spectator. Wallace's work carries this ethic of transformation through the multiplicity of levels shown here, dramatizing the confluence of forces, but also the confluence of renegotiations and revolutions. Reading Wallace next to the foundational

work of Pinter clarifies the nature of this transition, as she compounds the sites of change for character, culture, and power—transforming hazard to hope.

PRODUCTION COMPONENT

a play by Naomi Wallace



*Phoenix Theatre
April 7th and 8th
8:00 PM*







Program Note

Skipping over anachronism is a tradition of the theatre. We try to pretend that what we represent is the truth, or at least a version of it. With *One Flea Spare*, we've tried to disrupt this tendency toward pretending this was the way it really was. The script itself calls for accents and sailing knowledge that primarily developed in the 18th century for a setting that is explicitly 17th—the Great Plague of 1665. We use 21st century costumes with 20th century music.

With these inconsistencies rupturing the idea of 'that is how it was,' we hope also to question any assumption of 'this is how it will be.' Plague is thought of as being inflicted. Pain, too. Against this threat, we invite you to inhabit a 'what if'—a theatrical moment of transformation, of change, of possibility. It is Naomi Wallace's invitation to the audience in this play, but it is intentionally difficult. Theatre isn't the change itself. It is a rehearsal or practice, and like Bunce finds, it is always practice for something.

AFTERWORD

The notion of the theatre as laboratory has a long history, as it has been established by a preponderance of sources. The terminology of research shows up across the discipline. Works by directors such as Robert Wilson are christened ‘experimental.’ Jerzy Grotowski called his theatre the Polish lab theatre. In these cases, the terms ‘experimental’ and ‘laboratory’ denote a break from tradition, but all theatrical enterprise contains a spirit of inquest. Actors speak of ‘investigating’ their text. Designers base their work on ‘research.’ My experience as a director too has functioned on this model of the theatre being a place where we try things, test interpretations, and ascertain new knowledge. In this tradition, producing *One Flea Spare*, then, functioned as a literal form of embodied study, through which I manipulated variables of design and form to produce intended effects regarding alienation and by which I discovered unexpected results concerning the comedy latent in the text. As the production itself was embarked on after I had written the bulk of this study, this afterword will serve to establish the new directions by which my work on Wallace may continue and evolve.

As I establish in the longer paper, there is a substantial fear on my part that the predominately linear, temporally removed plot of *One Flea Spare* could encourage an audience to view the play as an example of excavating the past rather than examining the interplay between the past and present. Wallace’s choice to historicize the plot is probably an homage to Bertolt Brecht, one of two authors whom she quotes in the epigraph. Though this quote from *Mother Courage* concerns the ‘hope’ found in ‘corruption,’ Brecht has elsewhere written about the historicization of stories as a strategy for provoking thought. In his extended treatise “A Short Organum for the Theatre,”

Brecht suggests that this distancing effect of history is but one way to disorient the audience. When part of a pervasive set of production choices toward alienation, historicization will result in the spectator's feeling that "the circumstances under which he acts will strike him as equally odd" (190). However, productions of *One Flea Spare*, most clearly its original Off-Broadway production at the Joseph Papp Theatre, have traditionally chosen not to pervasively use a mode of alienation, but rather to mount *One Flea Spare* in sumptuous period detail. In the Papp production, the costumes are of period, the sets approach verisimilitude, and the music, composed by Michael Rothberg, seeks an authentic 17th century sound. When approached in this way, a historical setting seems not to disorient the audience, but rather encourage the audience to view passively. The audience is removed as Brecht theorizes, but also codified and undisrupted in their viewing and behavior.

I reflected in the production note: "The script itself calls for accents and sailing knowledge that primarily developed in the 18th century for a setting that is explicitly 17th—the Great Plague of 1665. We use 21st century costumes with 20th century music. With these inconsistencies rupturing the idea of 'that is how it was,' we hope also to question any assumption of 'this is how it will be.'" This pervasive move toward alienation seems both more respectful of Brecht's theory and more productive. An audience only thinks so much as they are allowed, and I found it my responsibility to provide gaps and fissures by which the audience might engage itself—a manipulation of theatre's laboratory roots I found quite successful.

Using the theatre for experimentation, however, can also produce productive, unintended results. Underappreciated in my original analysis of the script was the

inherent humor present in the text. In the sixth scene of the play, Bunce and Snelgrave engage in a game I discuss in my longer paper. I had primarily evaluated the scene in the context of the information concerning the class system encoded within it, but this analysis is in some ways insufficient. It is pleasurable to watch Snelgrave and Bunce switch roles for a moment. Bunce's disorientation to Snelgrave's 'game' works as a comedic moment, in particular his ironic question, "What if I kept the shoes?" (26). The comedy of the moment is laminated on top of the undercurrent that reminds us of the status quo. This lamination of interpretations is a new point of focus for me in understanding and appreciating Wallace's work.

In a further example of the intangibility of the theatrical experience, the production was presented for two performances and each audience took a widely divergent approach to finding humor in the situation. Though I couldn't discern any palpable difference in the performances, the first audience was far more responsive in terms of laughter. The issue of comedy is, of course, germane in respect to the comparison to Pinter as his plays are termed 'comedies' of menace. This interplay between the comedy and drama of the script was perhaps nowhere more evident than in the case of Kabe—a character who ended up markedly different in performance than I delineated in my written analysis. Though I speak of Kabe as a 'menacing inhibitor,' in performance he seems to have both this role and that of a Cockney stooge. Certainly, this sense of Kabe as heckler was partially created through the casting of Kyle Blair in the role, whose real gift tends to be toward broad comedy. The humor of his critique of high culture was never more evident in Kabe's characterization than in performance as well, another indicator of the layering of menace and comedy in Wallace's work.

Ultimately, this experience has highlighted for me the way in which, just as a hypothesis is without worth in the absence of a test, theatre cannot exist without performance. Textual study serves as a crucial process both before and after by which to distill and reflect on that which will be or has been made manifest through the theatrical embodiment of the script. Looking forward to further work on Wallace, I anticipate more rehearsal, more practice, more transformations both in my understanding of her and of myself.

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