

Harold Pinter, Edward Dorn, Celebrity and Me

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“Not to know me argues yourself unknown.”
– Satan in Paradise Lost

One day in the lobby of London’s National Theatre I saw Harold Pinter. He wasn’t identifiable right away. I just stopped walking for a moment, chanced to notice the man sitting in a chair over by a column, and suddenly realized, “my God, it’s Harold Pinter!” He appeared at once owlsh and menacing behind big black-rimmed glasses. I looked away once he began to regard me staring at him.

Ideally, we see celebrities but they never see us. This is why it’s important not to linger in their presence, whether we want to or not. Once I was with a woman in Hollywood. It was early evening. We had just parked the car and were walking up to Sunset Boulevard. A man passed. A moment later, my friend exclaimed, “Did you see who that was? It was Jack Palance!” I shrugged. To me, he had passed too close.

I might have been tempted to ask Jack if he remembered a film set at RKO Studios nearly twenty years before. I saw him on the set, fighting with the star, Robert Mitchum, in a cable car that had been constructed over a big rubber mattress. Jack Palance looked just like a villain was supposed to look. I was thirteen years old. It never occurred to me that Jack Palance was just a man playing a role or that this man could in fact be seen strolling outside on the streets.

Today such ignorance is harder to maintain. There are more magazines, more television stations, and even more movies to expand the notion of celebrity and to bring it closer to our own lives. In fact, our own lives can be transformed into celebrity through sudden media attention of some kind. (What is YouTube but a church to enable such a miracle?) Celebrity is no longer Us vs Them, which is one reason why it’s important to treasure the moments in life when genuine Celebrities nonetheless still appear—sudden, irrefutable, radiant.

When They do, you don’t have to argue the difference between, say, Harold Pinter and Jack Palance. Not even the difference between Barbara Rush and Glenn Ford. Once I kissed Barbara Rush’s daughter in the back seat of a car and another time I drank a couple of beers on a beach with Glenn Ford’s son. Growing up in Hollywood, I even went to school for respective periods of time with both Bob Hope’s and Loretta Young’s sons. But the offspring never felt like celebrities. They were too familiar, just kids like me.

Familiarity spoils celebrity more than having to define it. My mother was a manicurist in Beverly Hills. Once when I came to pick her up after work, she was just finishing Ann Margaret. Ann Margaret! I wanted to – what? Fall prostrate before her? Instead, I walked her to the car, as my mother asked. Ann Margaret was very nice. Maybe, since it was dark, she couldn’t see how I was blushing every second until she got into the car.

I didn’t want to talk to Ann Margaret. I wanted to talk to others about her, in hopes that something of the movie star’s celebrity would be conferred upon me. Except this makes no sense. Having somehow been in her presence scarcely constituted an achievement on my part. Just so, though, why did merely having been in some movies constitute some sort of achievement on Ann

Margaret's part? Finally, what precise sense does celebrity make in the first place?

It may not thrive on familiarity. It is absolutely dependent upon recognition. Once I was in a crowded pizzeria in Rio de Janeiro when an excited rustle crackled through the customers. It seemed a famous television star had appeared. I looked. The young man seemed no different than anybody else in the restaurant. You couldn't see his allure without recognizing him first, and you couldn't recognize him without first having been a Brazilian television viewer. And yet, just because allure is utterly dependent upon visibility does not mean that the one is quite reducible to the other.

What is celebrity? Something we construct, as a function of it already having been constructed for us? Once I saw Warren Christopher waiting for a plane, like me, at Charles de Gaulle airport. It was not as thrilling as it would have been if I had glimpsed his President. It was not as ecstatic as it would have been had I beheld, oh, Britney Spears—not the “real” Britney Spears, who hadn't even been born yet but the Brittany Spears of some twenty-five years ago. Whoever she was, she was already in place for me to regard with a mixture of surprise, delight, awe, and perhaps all three in an instant, before they each dissolved during another few instants.

One of the most venerable clichés about celebrity is that it's fickle and ephemeral. Hence, almost every one of the examples I've mentioned might be unknown to younger readers, for whom, in turn, a whole new generation of celebrities may have arisen, each unknown to me. Some may still be movie stars. Arguably, though, the areas of music, sports, and television drive today's notions of celebrity even more. And we all now live in a “celebrity culture,” where virtually every category of cultural life – cooking, dog shows – celebrates its own stars, which is why celebrity never felt at once more arbitrary and more pervasive.

I begin with Pinter because for the past thirty years literature has constituted the signature category of celebrity for me. It would still be, well, exciting to see Brad Pitt. But one afternoon it was a lot more satisfying to see John Updike. Granted, Updike's appearance was scheduled and staged. So it lacked the violent eruption that would attend Pitt's, since I don't expect to see him, and, indeed, his celebrity is constructed not only on the basis of his beauty and wealth but on his remoteness from any place I might be. On the other hand, even unscheduled, Updike – like Pinter once – is not so remote.

In fact, like most writers, Updike could even pass unrecognized among us. I heard a story about another writer, Stanley Elkin. He got on a plane, sat down, and was quizzically regarded by the woman sitting next to him. “I'm supposed to know you,” she finally blurted. “Who are you?” I forget what Elkin replied. “No, you're not supposed to know me?” Brad Pitt should have it so easy! Maybe one reason Pinter began to glower at me – or seemed to – is because, to himself, he wasn't supposed to be known.

Among living writers, perhaps Thomas Pynchon is the one who simply cannot be recognized, since no picture of him has been published since his college graduation. (I pass over J.D. Salinger, who, although still alive, seems to have died decades ago.) Not even the most reclusive pop star can beat Pynchon for lack of visibility! But not, for better or worse, for celebrity. Pynchon continues to rebuke celebrity culture, which only prompts that culture to assert its claim with renewed force. A picture of Thomas Pynchon as he is today might be worth more – even in *People* magazine – than a picture of Britney Spears kissing Brad Pitt.

Let Paris Hilton be the best example of that contemporary *reducio ad absurdum*: a celebrity who is a celebrity because she is a celebrity. (At least both Spears and Pitt have done something.) Let Pynchon represent an equally absurd polar opposite: a celebrity who is a celebrity because he is not a celebrity. (Most writers in person are merely unrecognizable, unknown.) The rest of us abide in between, our heads turning this way and that, swayed by last month's scandal or the next

month's public spectacle, indifferent to the media apparatus that churns out celebrity like a material substance or else in thrall to it, commanding absolutely no wider visibility ourselves and either content about it or secretly dissatisfied. One thing for sure about celebrity: whatever it is, we are all variously comprehended by it.

Heavy emphasis on the word, "variously." It allows so many differences and distinctions (among people, categories, nations) that it seems celebrity is finally so compelling because it resists definition, long after we distinguish it from "attention," which doesn't last as long, and "fame," which lasts much longer. But why compelling? Another example. Among academics worldwide, was not Jacques Derrida the preeminent celebrity at the time of his death? Once before a lecture, I overheard a nearby woman remark, "I don't know who Derrida is but I want to be able to say I saw him."

That is, the woman acknowledged Derrida as one measure of her own self-identity. It really didn't matter who this "Derrida" was. What mattered instead is the authority he represented. Of course it had content. (Unlike a pop song.) But insofar as celebrity is concerned this content was, and is, irrelevant. What is relevant is simply the power of its agent. We lack such power for ourselves. We possess it only as a function of celebrating others who have the requisite qualities – of mind or body, of wealth or status – that we ourselves lack.

A final example. Years ago I fell in love with the poetry of Edward Dorn. He was a relatively obscure writer then. (Dead now, he's probably more obscure.) So I was surprised then to see his name on the program at a literary conference. I decided to attend largely just to see Dorn. But one problem developed: my own scholarly paper turned out to be scheduled at the same time as Dorn's poetry reading. What to do? I would have to skip the reading. I did.

The next day at one point I spotted Dorn sitting alone at a little table outside one of the conference buildings. He was the same gaunt, rumpled figure of the few photographs I had seen, only more gaunt, more rumpled, and more old. It was almost irresistible to go over and speak to the man. To me, Dorn didn't represent some impossible combination of Updike and Pynchon. And yet somehow he must have, because I kept my distance for a minute or two, and then moved away. The man never saw me.

At the time, I reasoned that I just didn't know what to say to Dorn. How well did I really know his poetry? How well, come to this, did I want to know it, much less its author? After all, we adopt all sorts of stances toward people we admire, and some of these stances are based on ignorance or fantasy. Now I feel, though, that there is something more. In order to construct these admirable others as celebrities, we not only have to keep our distance from them but acknowledge what they have as what we don't.

I don't write poetry. But I've always wished I could. I haven't enjoyed the sort of "creative" professional life – varied contacts, wayward teaching circumstances – that Dorn did. (Years later I read a biography and understood something of his life's pain as well as joy.) But I've always wished I did. Before the instant when I could have spoken to the actual man, I was vaguely aware of how Edward Dorn contrasted with me. But it was not before this moment that I realized how much power I had accorded him, and it is not until I write this final sentence that I realize how fully I had succeeded in constructing him as a celebrity.