

THE POLITICS OF HAROLD PINTER'S PLAYS

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One of the 2005 Nobel Laureate Harold Pinter's recent plays, *The New World Order*, from 1993, offers a self-glorifying exchange between two torturists:

Lionel: I feel so pure.

Des: Well, you're right. You're right to feel pure. You know why?

Lionel: Why?

Des: Because you're keeping the world clean for democracies.¹

The ironic equivocation in the last sentence plays on, as does the title, the deployment of torture in the defence of democracy, a dehumanising act that in its very execution undermines the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity – the unassailable values upon which the concept of democracy has traditionally been founded. Obviously, the excerpt also parodies individual self-righteousness and political idealism at the present time when the menace to human rights and the established form of government in most of the western world appears, perhaps, to loom larger within the realms of democracy than in any alternative world order, at least according to Pinter. *The New World Order* is only one of several shorter plays from the latter period of his career that hardly leave anybody in doubt about their meaning and message – a rather clear-cut contrast to the thought-provoking ambiguities and polysemy of his plays of the 1950s and -60s, which made such an impact on the stage of its day. Readers and audiences of Pinter's plays who are perplexed about the reorientations of his career and the status of his art appear justified. The protean changes of Pinter's art raise a series of questions about aesthetic autonomy and political commitment. Where do you draw the lines between artistic integrity and political propaganda, and for what reasons? Has the restive rebel committed a salt mortale, or did his plays always possess political power? Do any of Pinter's later plays succeed in walking the

¹ Harold Pinter, *The New World Order*, New York: Grove Press, 1993, 60.

tight line between these counterpoints? Is there any connection between Pinter's amplification of vociferous politics and the recent award of the Nobel Prize?

Freedom, democracy, and liberation. These terms, as enunciated by Bush and Blair, essentially mean death, destruction, and chaos.... The invasion of Iraq was an act of state terrorism. So it is Bush and Blair who are in fact the terrorists. I believe they must be arraigned at the International Criminal Court of Justice and tried as war criminals.²

Pinter's lethal invective against the ideological machinery of war and the invasion in Iraq reveals the radical stance that has characterised his artistic temperament and political involvement over the last three decades, and which, at least before the Nobel award, has, possibly, made him more famous in England than his literature ever did. His list of engagement is long. He condemned the role of the U.S.A. in Pinochet's military coup in Chile in 1973, perhaps the event that initiated his political activism. In 1985, while Vaclav Havel was still imprisoned before the velvet revolution, he upbraided his own country for being "as much a satellite of America as Czechoslovakia is of Russia."³ By referring to expansive poverty, capital punishment, international cut-throat capitalism, the war in Iraq and the Guantanamo detainment, Pinter disavows the U.S.A. as a democracy.⁴ During the latter half of the 1980s he spearheaded the 20 June Group, a band of artists and intellectuals who opposed Thatcherism. Over the last ten years he has consistently branded Tony Blair as a totalitarian tyrant and the prettiest poodle of US imperialism because he took England to war against the consensus of (almost) all Europeans, against the opinion of his own people and against the majority vote of his own party.⁵ During a time when some heads of state and some intellectual

² Harold Pinter, "Iraq Debate, Imperial War Museum," *Death etc.*, New York: Grove Press, 2005, 79, 81.

³ Harold Pinter in interview with Nicholas Hern, "A Play and its Politics," *One for the Road*, New York: Grove Press, 1985, 22.

⁴ Pinter, "The US Elephant Must Be Stopped," "Oh, Superman," "The US and El Salvador," "Caribbean Cold War" and "It Never Happened," *Various Voices*, London: Faber, 171-2, 175-83, 1987-90, 191-4, 197-200.

⁵ Harold Pinter, "An Open Letter to the Prime Minister" and "House of Common Speech," *Death etc.*, 67-9 and 71-3.

ideologues, most notably Samuel P. Huntington,⁶ fear for the continuance of the Western World order, Pinter directs his artistic arsenal and rhetorical barrage against the alleged citadels and front runners of democracy. His conviction, as the citation illustrates, is implacable.⁷

Pinter's later plays often appear as reprints from his political register, and nobody who has paid any attention to Pinter's plays over the last years can be in any doubt about their overt political commitment. Themes of torture and totalitarian suppression in defence of the realm were first dramatised in explicit fashion in *One for the Road* (1984). Despite the fact that the play displays no graphic violence, the interrogation chamber piece discloses astonishing horror in its indirect presentation of abuse, rape and murder. The torturist socialises with "the man who runs this country" and considers his mission sanctioned by divine powers: "I run the place. God Speaks through me."⁸ The symbolic name of the victim, Victor, heralds vociferously his indomitable integrity and the just cause. This minimalist four-scene drama could be criticised for not stating the nature of the internee's alleged offence, but this semantic lacunae contributes to the play's power. Any causal analysis would have invited questions of possible legitimacy; as it is, the critique of power abuse remains unconditional. The play condemns all totalitarian regimes and attacks all forms of abuse of human rights. *One for the Road* functions as show case for Amnesty International.

Mountain Language (1988) also demonstrates power abuse against socio-political prisoners. In this short piece the mother of a prisoner is suppressed into silence by guards and officers because she does not speak the standard language. As the title indicates, this miniature drama offers a more defined setting and concrete issue than the global absolutism of *One for the Road*. Although the drama maintains a metaphorical topicality for processes of censorship, centralisation, standardi-

⁶ Samuel P. Huntington explores the reconfigurations of global hostility after the Cold War in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York: Touchstone, 1996.

⁷ For Pinter's protests against the military campaigns of the U. S. A., see also his foreword to Philip Hammond and Edward S. Herman (eds.), *Degraded Capability: The Media and the Kosovo Crisis*, London: Pluto Press, 2000, vii-x; "The NATO Action in Serbia," Ali, Tariq (ed.), *Masters of the Universe*. London: Verso, 2000, 327-37.

⁸ Harold Pinter, *One for the Road*, New York: Grove Press, 1985, 47, 36.

sation and normalisation in any state, the play appears almost translucent in its setting in an underdeveloped democracy, for example, the imprisonment of Kurds and writers in Turkey. In many ways, the play manifests the charter of PEN International.

Party Time (1992) moves the political fronts closer to home in its juxtaposition of the narcissist idiocy of the governing classes in unbridled prance at a champagne ball with the militant execution of law and order during a demonstration on the streets outside the party venue. The exposure of the mindlessness, antipathy and irresponsibility of the authorities is magic. With British titles and names, the location seems to be European, perhaps even English, although it was first written and performed after the downfall of Margaret Thatcher. Chillingly prophetic, at the time, of the brutal round-ups of ATTAC demonstrations at the neo-liberal summits of WTO, IMF, EU, G8 in major American and European cities at the turn of the millennium, this play tends to portray authoritarian abuse in democracies as much as violation of rights in dictatorships. Nevertheless, the irreverent ridicule and the distinct social bifurcation appear simplistic and are prone to distribute delight or disgust in close proximity to the colours of the political spectrum, and the play's initial prophetic power has since been diminished by media images and news reports.

Precisely (1984) performs a pastiche of the bureaucratisation of the nuclear arms race and appears as a blast from the cold past, which, nevertheless, has acquired new topicality recently with the continuous work of the International Atomic Energy Agency and the release of Mordechai Vanunu in 2004. Again, it is basically not possible to disagree with the imperative of the chosen theme, but to reveal the menace and absurdities in such a short piece, by way of a snicker or two, does not appear to present a radical new work of art.

However provocative and righteous the unabashed condemnation in Pinter's later plays may be in political terms, it is unlikely to be of equal merit to aesthetic evaluation. Indubitably, these plays elicit anger and engagement. Much of their power lies in their restriction of hermeneutic possibilities. For political purposes, techniques of simplification, confrontation and moralisation have always proved more effective than interpretational multiplicity, hesitation and ethical quandary. In this perspective, these plays are extremely powerful: they propagate reassurance with conviction. But even in terms of

rhetoric – the art of persuasion - their effect seems less successful. The plays pander to political comrades and are likely to affront, more than affiliate, adversaries. Even if most people react to the state-authorised abuse of human rights, a number will certainly recoil from the clamorous tub-thumping.⁹

Despite their dramaturgic intensity and linguistic assurance, Pinter's avowed political plays do not reveal great profundity and creativity. They are all unusually short and allow no room to explore thematic concerns or develop individual characters – we are left with sacks of slogans and stacks of stereotypes. Their length was often determined by the occasion for which they were commissioned: practical considerations restricted compositional liberty. Whereas Pinter's earliest plays engendered uncertainty and hermeneutic resistance, his later dramas appear definable and accessible. They yield easily to dominant socio-political contexts. In opposition, these protest plays are very politically correct.

Nevertheless, the principal flaw of these histrionic agitations remains in their aesthetic self-cancellation. Political agendas and argumentative polemics constitute the primary premises. Radicality is reduced to utmost recognisability. In their conventional form and public currency, these damp squibs contribute to the coagulation of the ideological and social formations they so insistently seek to overcome. One might wonder what attention and assessment these mini-acts might have received, if the author had not already achieved such indisputable status. However, Pinter's agitprop might have done more to engage the public in political issues than any of his celebrated radical texts. The stereotyping of characters, the terminological definiteness, the distinctive dichotomy of moral preference, - in short, the recognisability of the settings, characters, themes and ideas of Pinter's later drama - play straight into the hands of standardised politics, organised activism and the idiom of the media. Consequently, these plays concede too willingly to caricature, cliché and correctness, the criteria dominant in the world of media and politics, which art – whether defined along criteria of human insight, novelty, autonomy or

⁹ In his interview with Nicholas Hern, Pinter admits that “a goodly percentage of people left the theatre” during one of the first performances in New York. *One for the Road*, 18.

polysemy – needs to confront and distinguish itself from in order to salvage its own *raison d'être*.

Apparently, Pinter's political position over the last three decades contrasts strongly with the dispositions that informed his pivotal drama, which at present has secured his place in literary history. "What I write has no obligation to anything other than itself,"¹⁰ he proclaimed in 1962, at a time when he also warned against the programmed polemics he now purports:

No, I'm not committed as a writer, in the usual sense of the term, either religiously or politically. And I'm not conscious of any particular social confusion. I write because I want to write. I don't see any placards on myself, and I don't carry any banners. Ultimately, I distrust definitive labels.¹¹

Not only does Pinter declare his own artistic independence, he also issues caveats of prevalent artistic intentions:

If I were to state any moral precept it might be: beware of the writer who puts forward his concern for you to embrace, who leaves you in no doubt of his worthiness, his usefulness, his altruism, who declares that his heart is in the right place, and ensures that it can be seen in full view, a pulsating mass where his characters ought to be. What is presented, so much of the time, as a body of active and positive thought is in fact a body lost in a prison of empty definition and cliché.¹²

His intransigent refutation of social pressures and personal engagement extends – unsurprisingly, considering the nature of his art - to existential prevarications:

Meaning begins in the words, in the action, continues in your head and ends nowhere. Meaning which is resolved,

¹⁰ Harold Pinter, "Writing for the Theatre" (1962), *Complete Works I*, New York: Grove Press, 1976, 10.

¹¹ Harold Pinter, "Writing for Myself" (1961), *Complete Works 2*, New York, Grove Press, 1977, 12.

¹² Harold Pinter, "Writing for the Theatre," 13.

parcelled, labelled and ready for export is dead, impertinent – and meaningless.¹³

The young, rebellious playwright succeeded in his anti-establishment *animus*, eschewal of personal identifications and deracination of ontological certitude. “It will be best enjoyed by those who believe that obscurity is its own reward,” Milton Shulman commented upon *The Birthday Party*.¹⁴ Other reviewers follow suit. “The first act sounds an offbeat note of madness; in the second the note has risen to a sort of delirium; and the third act studiously refrains from the slightest hint of what the other two may have been about,” stated the reporter of *The Times*.¹⁵ The theatre critic of *The Manchester Guardian* kept up the note of bewilderment: “What all this means, only Mr. Pinter knows, for as his characters speak in non-sequiturs, half-gibberish and lunatic ravings, they are unable to explain their actions, thoughts, or feelings.”¹⁶ Harold Hobson was the lone voice to defend Pinter’s achievement and complexities. Staking his honour on Pinter’s novelty, he praised the playwright for possessing “the most original, disturbing and arresting talent in theatrical London,” and counteracted the critical demands for comprehensibility and verification: “It is exactly in this vagueness that its spine-chilling quality lies.”¹⁷ If Hobson’s acclaim stemmed the tide of hostility, Noël Coward’s critical accolade of *The Caretaker* contributed substantially to its turning: “There is only one ‘New Movement’ straight play playing to good business in a London theatre – *The Caretaker* by Harold Pinter. ...it is written with an original and unmistakable sense of theatre and is impeccably acted and directed.”¹⁸

Martin Esslin, one of the first Pinter exegetes, gives short shrift to the political potential of the first plays and regards Pinter’s drama as an enactment of existential anxiety:

¹³ Harold Pinter in a letter to Peter Wood, director of *The Birthday Party*, in April 1958. *Various Voices: Prose, Poetry, Politics 1948 – 1998*, London: Faber, 1998, 9.

¹⁴ Milton Schulman in the *Evening Standard*, 20 May 1958. Quoted in Martin Esslin, *The Peopled Wound: The Work of Harold Pinter*, New York: Anchor Books, 1970, 8.

¹⁵ Martin Esslin, *The Peopled Wound: The Work of Harold Pinter*, New York: Anchor Books, 1970, 8.

¹⁶ Martin Esslin, *The Peopled Wound*, 8-9.

¹⁷ Harold Hobson, *The Sunday Times*, 25 May 1958. Quoted in Esslin, *The Peopled Wound*, 10-11.

¹⁸ Noël Coward, *The Sunday Times*, 16 January 1961. Quoted in Esslin, *The Peopled Wound*, 15.

It is all the more significant that Pinter, like Heidegger, takes as his starting point, in man's confrontation with himself and the nature of his own being, that fundamental anxiety which is nothing less than a living being's basic awareness of the threat of non-being, of annihilation.¹⁹

Undoubtedly, Pinter's first stage provocations challenged the view of human existence as much as theatrical conventions: they retain qualities of *unheimlichkeit* even today. Partly or totally, these plays lack plot, and they evoke claustrophobic situations of menace and stillness, apparently beyond specific temporality and locality. They inhabit a Heideggerian universe of death, language and silence, and they interrogate the realities of human uncertainty. At the end of *The Room* (1957), a title and setting that reflects the definitions and demarcations of human existence, Riley is violently kicked to death by Bert, in what may function as a redemptive act. A fate of personal doom looms large over Stanley in *The Birthday Party* (1958) and Gus in *The Dumb Waiter* (1958). Davies comes from a vagrant life of depravity and anxiety and moves on to a vagrant life of depravity and anxiety in *The Caretaker* (1960), Pinter's first success. Individual characters subsist in loneliness in a godless and homosocial universe devoid of any ideals, love and compassion. They miscommunicate. Silences are pregnant. Elements of the absurd question the meaning of life. These early "comedies of menace"²⁰ impugn not only the genres of drama, they also destabilise the human condition which they so enigmatically enact. Nevertheless, such a monological focus amounts to a type of exclusivist existentialism that truncates hermeneutic plurality.

Evidently, these plays contain political power, despite the preponderant tendency to analyse them under the auspices of Heidegger's philosophy. In their refutation of Sartre's insistence on the social responsibilities of the author and the importance of committed literature, Roland Barthes and Theodore Adorno have vindicated the transformative powers of radical formalism and aesthetic autonomy

¹⁹ Martin Esslin, *The Peopled Wound*, 27-8.

²⁰ The term was first used, as a pun on comedy of manners, by David Campton in 1957 in the subtitle of his play *The Lunatic View* and was first applied to Pinter by Irving Wardle in an article which appeared in *Encore* in September 1958.

per se.²¹ In composition, setting, cast and language Pinter's early plays abound in novelties, as the critics' confession of incomprehensibility evinces. But these plays also display a more political directness that has frequently been ignored. The social setting is far more precise and significant than the existentialist purview admits. All of these plays take place in the lowest possible social stratum and are populated with drifters, unemployed, immigrants, mentally disabled and other people on the margins of society. Consequently, the plays stage individual helplessness towards authorities and overwhelming social structures and bureaucratic systems, a radical identification with those whom the machinery of progress and prosperity allows no room. Pinter's early plays perform, without didacticism or moralising, the dark and remote corners of the establishment, where the social criticism in *Look Back in Anger* and *Anger and After* of John Osborne and Andrew Wesker exhort social changes.

The Room clearly inhabits a social reality of depravity and racism as well as allegorical aspirations, and the racial killing demonstrates the results of inadequate integration as much as it aspires tentatively to any form of transcendence. In *The Birthday Party*, Stanley can be regarded as a victim of any authoritarian institution: Goldberg and McCann function as Gestapo, state agents, officers of establishment tyranny, as much as existential avengers. "Stan, don't let them tell you what to do," is Petey's piece of advice to Stanley.²² This line appreciates individual integrity over flawed processes of democratisation, a more mundane and subtle presentation of insuperable will than the one displayed by the internees in the political plays. Likewise, Gus and Ben in *The Dumb Waiter* are pawns pushed about in a larger game by their indefinite superiors. *The Caretaker* presents a social stratum of deracinated and homeless people that appear not yet to have been

²¹ In their formalist cynosure and preference for radical novelty the theoretical expositions of Roland Barthes and Theodor Adorno target the committed stance of the French philosopher, who pays little attention to formal features. See for example Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), translated by Annette Levers and Colin Smith, New York: Noonday Press, 1988; *Image Music Text* (1977), translated by Stephen Heath, New York: Noonday Press, 1989; Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor and edited by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedeman, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997; "Commitment" (1965), *Aesthetics and Politics*, edited by Ronald Taylor, London: Verso, 1980, 177-95; Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?* (1948), translated by Bernard Frechtman. London: Methuen, 1967.

²² Harold Pinter, *The Birthday Party*, *Complete Works* 1, 96.

acknowledged by social institutions of power. *The Homecoming* includes and aggressive assault on patriarchy.

However, the political dynamite in these plays consists primarily of how the uncanny and the unconceptualised explode common communication, ordinary family patterns, standardised social formations and traditional thinking. In their enigmatic enactment of the *unheimlich*, these plays present sequestered and unacknowledged realities as much as they incite cognitive speculation. Their frightening frivolities anticipate social recognition, cognitive definition and political formation.

Among the newer plays by Pinter, *Ashes to Ashes* (1996) attracts special attention. This sombre lounge duet presents psychological anguish and existential inquiry in a framework of historical cataclysm and contemporary issues. In its layered composition, this dialogue manages to combine the claustrophobia, the psychological ambiguities and the ominous sense of threat from his first dramas with incumbent questions of engagement that avoid political reductionism. Personal intimacy, existential horror, historical catastrophe and the inhumanities of global politics coalesce in this tragedy. The lack of information, underlying tensions, pregnant pauses and linguistic problems that characterise Pinter's early plays appear domesticated and recognisable in this homely collapse. The setting has moved from the sequestered and squalid to the plush and posh, but in stead of alienating the audience, the pleasant ambience of the upper middle class living room issues invitations of inclusion – and this inclusion does not diminish the play's frightful disturbances.

Ashes to Ashes opens, literally, as a fist in a velvet glove: Rebecca, the female protagonist, catches Devlin, her male co-protagonist, off guard with a sadomasochistic memory of a fist that unfolds by a kiss. This power-erotic image conveys the fine balance of brutality and compassion in their conversation, under which uncertainty and violence lie like quagmire. Their dismal dialogue is ridden by jealousy, love, mistrust, revenge and resignation. Rebecca also takes her partner by surprise in reminiscing of women being deprived of their children by brutal officers on a train platform. Associations of Holocaust are unavoidable, but do these visions stem from her own memory? What role do they play in Rebecca and Devlin's relationship? The relations between the two protagonists remain, as do the plenitude of thematic

concerns, challenging and unresolved. What do we know of our partner's past? What happens when you realise you play second fiddle in your beloved's emotional life? Who is the molester, and who is the victim? Where do you draw the line between imagination and reality? What is the importance of collective memory to the individual mind?

"There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism," Walter Benjamin argues.²³ "To write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric," Adorno claims and maintains the importance of negative aesthetics in the wake of Holocaust.²⁴ These civilisatory debates are part of the play's thematic tensions between contemporary luxury and the systematic evil in history. The title alludes to disasters of war, reveals a burnt-out relationship, which was, probably, without any spark in the first place, and presents a poetic *memento mori* in its resounding of the burial ritual. The past precipitates shock and pain upon the confined couple. Lugubrious libido and subconscious currents coalesce with historical annihilation of mankind. In the manner the erotic tug-of-war finds a parallel in historical suppression and devastation, Rebecca's images of children's destiny during the war probably reflect a personal trauma. Rebecca's explanation of "mental elephantiasis"²⁵ – the amplification of a self-incurred symptom – indicates as much. So does the remarkable resuscitation of child loss in the final scene, in which it is impossible to decide whether the suffering is Rebecca's own experience or a self-annihilating empathy with the dead in history.

Rebecca's indeterminable reminiscences extend to her passive observation of masses of people who are driven towards their own extinction in the sea. Such a poetic vision extends the references to death camps to a timeless perspective. *Time: Now*, the director's instructions command.²⁶ History always takes place in our time: Rwanda, Srebrenica, Iraq. The play corresponds with contemporary massacres, "axis of evil" and collective amnesia. Rebecca's passivity invokes the collusion of well-situatedness in today's atrocities, just as Devlin's claim - that Rebecca's previous affairs are no business of his -

²³ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (1955), translated by Harry Zohn and edited by Hannah Arendt, London: Fontana Press, 1992, 248.

²⁴ Theodore Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society" (1965), *Prisms*, Cambridge Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1986, 34.

²⁵ Harold Pinter, *Ashes to Ashes, Death etc.*, 107.

²⁶ Harold Pinter, *Ashes to Ashes*, 91.

echoes premeditated amnesia. In the final schizophrenic crescendo Rebecca's haunted mind decomposes, the relationship disintegrates and humanism at large dissolves, while Devlin fades out as a pathetic molester and helpless observer.

Ashes to Ashes brings the individual to the battle field of human forces, posits a painful reminder of the profundity of the human mind and human evil and reminds us all of our common fate: the ashes will remain the same of spouses, soldiers and statesmen. How the individual tackles the problem of evil and how the Western societies distribute their wealth in a time of global injustice and multinational wars are incumbent questions of human existence and international politics.

Pinter's plays were always already political. Their radical potential, however, appears in inverse ratio to their thematic explicitness. Despite their artistic authority and compelling concerns, the overtly political pieces only serve to confirm the status quo of ideological partition and social petrification. Conversely, the negative aesthetics of provocation, provisionality and undecidability impugn the establishment in all its varieties and contribute, not only to include the unimagined in the processes of democracy, but to contemplate and transform democratisation *per se*.

When the Swedish Academy awarded the Nobel Prize in 2005 to Harold Pinter, they praised the English playwright for both his existential explorations and his political commitment and lauded his art that "uncovers the precipice under everyday prattle and forces entry into oppression's closed rooms."²⁷ The committee delivered the greatest surprise for years: a Western, white, male with a world reputation. Undoubtedly, Pinter's political crusades have fortified his candidacy. The Swedish Academy has a long standing predilection for radical writers. The award to Dario Fo, Pinter's colleague, in 1997 is one example: he has been the watchdog of Italian politics for decades. The noble poetics of Joseph Brodsky (1987), Derek Walcott (1992), and Seamus Heaney (1995) were highly appreciated in a time of glasnost and perestroika in the former Soviet Union, multicultural liberation in the Caribbean Islands and seminal peace processes in Northern

²⁷ *Nobelprize.org*. Available from <http://nobelprize.org/literature/laureates/2005/index.html> (accessed 26 June 2006).

Ireland. The awards to Nadine Gordimer (1991) and J. M. Coetzee (2003) can hardly be isolated from the political transformation from apartheid to democracy in South Africa. The Nobel appreciation of Elfriede Jelinek's subversive plays and novels in 2004 proved provocative in Austria. By giving the award to a fatally ill Harold Pinter, the Swedish Academy have given due honours to a radical artist and committed activist. His negative aesthetics will survive his affirmative politics – also in a political perspective.