

LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

Here is Harold Pinter

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You wouldn't understand my works. You wouldn't have the faintest idea what they were about. You wouldn't appreciate the points of reference. You're way behind. All of you. There's no point in sending you my works. You'd be lost. It's nothing to do with the question of intelligence. It's a way of being able to look at the world. It's a question of how far you can operate on things and not in things. I mean it's a question of your capacity to ally the two, to relate the two, to balance the two. To see, to be able to see.

—Teddy in *The Homecoming*, Faber & Faber, Great Britain, 1991, pp. 61-62.

The Nobel Prize in literature is avowedly given to a writer who enriches us with a piercing yet humane vision of mankind. Harold Pinter has become a Nobel Laureate for his plays deal with this all-important aspect of 'seeing'. His plays are turned into themselves, solipsistic and endlessly interrogating the nature of the 'horror' which stares us in the face. Nietzsche had lost his mind over it; Sartre could not but make Antoine Roquentin vomit at the banality of his world which never ends in a bang but only in a whisper; Wittgenstein was appalled at our linguistic inabilities to meaningfully articulate anything at all of any lasting importance. Prufrock gave up trying to be Prince Hamlet, Kurtz could only shudder at the horror, Didi and Gogo can only go on ritually reenacting their stale lives. This same emptying horror was 'seen' by the Buddha and he had declared to the world in joy 'Nibbana, nibbana'; it is all in the 'seeing', the representation. The world of the Buddha has passed away forever and we can no longer look into the heart of things for there remains no heart to look into, only the

menace remains. This is the world of Pinter. This is Postmodernism, a discourse beyond and over the clichéd Theatre of the Absurd. This is the now famous Pinteresque (a rare tribute to a living playwright to have his name passing into dramatic parlance) universe of silences articulating the damning forces quietly gnawing at us. Pinter's oeuvre is the apotheosis of the existentialists' efforts to articulate their perceptions meaningfully. The meaning is not in what they write but rather in what they cannot or simply miss out. Pinter's plays are not plays about action, speech and ideas. They are about silences, the narratives of keeping quiet, of blank ideological, political, social and theological spaces. They are indeed about nothing that we know of. They cannot be 'understood'; we can only let the silence sink in.

I can sum up none of my plays. I can describe none of them, except to say: That is what happened. That is what they said. That is what they did.¹

Harold Pinter was born in Hackney, London, on 10 October 1930. He was

educated at Hackney Downs Grammar School and trained at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and Central School of Speech and Drama. His plays include *The Room* (1957), *The Birthday Party* (1958), *The Dumb Waiter* (1959), *The Caretaker* (1960), *The Lover* (1962), *The Homecoming* (1965), *No Man's Land* (1975), *Mountain Language* (1988), *Moonlight* (1993), *Ashes to Ashes* (1996) and *Celebration* (2000), first performed with *The Room* at the Almeida Theatre in London. His adaptation of Marcel Proust's novel *Remembrance of Things Past* was performed at the National Theatre in London in 2000. He has adapted many of his stage plays for radio and television and he has written the screenplays of a number of films including *The Servant* (1963), *The Quiller Memorandum* (1965), *The Go-Between* (1970), *The Last Tycoon* (1974) and *The Comfort of Strangers* (1989), adapted from Ian McEwan's novel. He has directed many productions of his own plays as well as plays by other writers, including James Joyce, Noel Coward, Tennessee Williams, David Mamet and Simon Gray, and has acted on stage, and in film, television and radio. He is an accomplished poet too. He was awarded a CBE in 1966, the German Shakespeare Prize in 1970, the Austrian State Prize for European Literature in 1973 and the David Cohen British Literature Prize in 1995, and holds honorary degrees from the Universities of Reading, Glasgow, East Anglia and Bristol, among others. In 2001 he was awarded the S. T. Dupont Golden PEN Award by the English Centre of International PEN.

Investigating the antecedents of Pinter we find that much has been made of his indebtedness to other Absurd / Existentialist writers, playwrights and philosophers. Without denying those influences, it would do us well to search for his predecessors in the

now neglected world of pure literature. Though the meaning of the purity of literature can be debated and whether such a thing is any longer possible to find, yet we must for a few moments see Pinter as a practitioner of the craft of literature than of anything else. What does he add to our understanding of literature? And we are not looking for postmodern-jargon-filled critiques which more often than not serve only to befuddle the senses and pander to the intellectual elite far removed from the joys (jouissance!) of seeing a drama as a drama. It was his fellow-countryman Thomas Hardy who first interiorized in his novels the idea of a malevolent though mechanistic force dampening all man's efforts. Hardy's Immanent Will is then the true literary antecedent to Pinter's unnameable machinations which intrude to destroy his characters. Baudelaire's poetry, Proust's sense of timeless time in his novels, and Camus's *The Outsider*—all influenced Pinter. His characters are memorably outside the realms of civilization. In *The Birthday Party*, the truculent hero, Stanley, has hidden away in dingy seaside digs from which he is forcibly removed by two visitors, Goldberg and McCann, who represent an unnamed organization. In Stanley's recollections of his days as a concert pianist, you hear the characteristic Pinter note: a yearning for some lost Eden as a refuge from the uncertain present. But the play is also clearly a political metaphor for the oppression of the individual by the state; and it's no accident that Pinter had himself earlier risked imprisonment for conscientious objection. In this play, Pinter shows us Stanley's insecurity and immaturity followed by chaos, loss and abduction. We are prevented by Pinter's deliberate arrangement of events from holding to traditional moral values: even those characters who are faithful and hardworking come to

catastrophic ends. Such a manipulation of destiny implies a fixed set of attitudes on the part of the playwright. In *The Room* no explanation is offered for the evil that enters Bert Hudd other than that he provides a suitably hollow receptacle for it, so that we are led to consider the nature of evil in the universe rather than the psychology or circumstances peculiar to one man.

The Caretaker was first produced in London in 1960 and was Harold Pinter's first major success as a dramatist. It has three characters, the brothers Aston and Mick and the tramp Davies. Aston, who it is revealed has suffered from mental illness and undergone electric shock treatment, invites Davies into his house after rescuing him when he's about to be beaten up. Mick, a builder and sadistic type, who has difficulty communicating with his brother, appears to resent this intrusion and virtually terrorizes Davies. However, Davies is eventually invited to take up the position of the caretaker, but his selfish and inconsiderate behaviour towards Aston leads to his being told by him to go. An attempt to gain the support of Mick fails and the play ends with Davies appealing to Aston to be allowed to stay, an appeal that looks doomed to fail. The play resembles other Pinter dramas in which conflict is created by outsider figures—for example, Teddy in *The Homecoming* and Spooner in *No Man's Land*—gaining entry into another's home, trying to establish themselves, but eventually being forced to leave.

This is a play that destabilizes such fundamental elements of dramatic structure as plot, character and the conventions governing the use of language, but it does not do so in as radical a way as Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Whereas Beckett's drama virtually discards conventional dramatic forms and theatrical devices, Pinter, in

The Caretaker at least, does not completely reject them. There is something that resembles a plot, though one might find it puzzling, and there are characters who have some connexion with reality even though it might be difficult to understand their actions and motivations.

Pinter's major dramatic innovation was in his use of language. A standard response to his drama has been to say it is about 'the breakdown in communication'. However, in conventional drama, what is striking is how amazingly effective language is as a means of communication. In contrast to this, Pinter's characters often speak in broken sentences, utter non sequiturs, repeat themselves, pause for no apparent reason, don't listen to what is said to them or appear to understand it. It could be argued this is a break with the artificiality of conventional dramatic language in favour of realism. Yet realism is insufficient as an explanation of Pinter's language. At certain points the language becomes highly stylized. The play may expose the artificiality of speech and plot in conventional drama but it's doubtful that it does so in the interests of dramatic realism as such.

Pinter is at once postmodern and at the same time infinitely transcendental. Perhaps the key to having some grasp of how *The Caretaker* works is to focus on the relation between language, meaning and psychology. Here we have to use Freud, Jung, Lacan and Baudrillard, to say nothing of Derrida to successfully interpret him. In Pinter's drama meaning is not necessarily revealed in the words a character uses. It is thus not enough to say 'what do these words mean?' Rather one should ask questions like: 'why does this character say this at this time?' or 'what is the character's motive for saying this?' or 'what are the underlying interests that govern this speech or exchange?' This severs

the conventional relationship between language and meaning. For example, there is a particularly fractured exchange between Davies and Aston in the scene in the second act after Aston suggests to Davies that he might be a caretaker. Looking at the language in conventional semantic terms might lead to the conclusion that it exemplifies only bumbling inarticulacy. Yet if one looks beyond the semantics of language in orthodox linguistic terms in order to consider the question of possible motivation, the exchange is open to interpretation: Davies does not want to commit himself to taking the job of caretaker that Aston apparently offers him; he's playing for time; he can't understand why anyone should want to do him a good turn; if he says yes he's worried he may fall into a trap. In this play, therefore, the language the characters use does not necessarily have any direct relationship to what they might mean. Also, in Pinter's drama, the use of language cannot be easily separated from the question of power as virtually all relationships are depicted as power struggles of one sort or another. Thus, we can view Pinter's plays as exercises or manifestations of Michel Foucault's theses of the politics of power; the micro politics and macro politics of power. Pinter's plays often become transformed into discourses on the nature of the urge to dominate. This urge is expressed as negotiations of incoherent speech and the various narratives of silence.

If one takes an absurdist view of Pinter's plays, associating him with such dramatists as Beckett and Ionesco, then there may be no explanation for such happenings. Alternatively, the audience is being challenged to interpret events in the same way that it is being challenged to interpret language. One cannot be sure one's interpretation is the right one, but at least the action

is open to interpretations, unlike most absurdist drama. In *The Caretaker*, does Mick's leaving before Aston enters *The Room* indicate something about the nature of their relationship? Though Aston and Mick are brothers they do not seem capable of communicating. Could this be connected with why Aston invites Davies to be the caretaker? The possibility that there might be answers to such questions is a factor in keeping the audience involved in the action of the play and this, no doubt, contributed to the play's appeal to a wider audience and thus to its success on both sides of the Atlantic despite its dramatic innovations. The French dramatist Artaud, the so-called leader of the School of Cruelty drama, is more aligned to Pinter than many other dramatists. Pinter's universe is cruel, lonely and silently but slowly grinding all man's sound and fury to nothing. To Pinter, the difference between appearance and reality is that the former represents man's false view of the world as benevolent, such a view being born of and sustained by human weakness: sympathy, imagination, and intellection. Thus man fabricates an unreal world of appearances and is trapped within that world by his own illusions and pretences, whereas in reality there is no benevolent force operating in the real world. In Pinter's works, love, friendship, happiness, pleasure, success, are all illusions man has constructed to mask the ugly reality of existence. The ending of *The Room* and *The Birthday Party* shows that there is no salvation, no redemption, no perfectibility, no real progress, but only surcease into death. Against the evil forces of the universe man has few weapons, and these are only defensive. Isolation is one, and others are escape, pretence and hiding. Man has the best chance of survival in this hostile world, but his is a triumph of ignorance. For man,

who must always be on his guard, the outside is at best indifferent but more often actively malevolent. As such, the universe is the principal instrument of evil against mankind. This is Thomas Hardy revisited, this is Luigi Pirandello revisited, this is the world of Artaud and T. S. Eliot's *Prufrock*.

In spite of Pinter's bleak vision of the human condition, we find that his own pacifist efforts and vocalizations against war atrocities are acknowledgements that yet all is not lost for mankind. His vision when analysed is truly redemptive. The pessimism is what we experience as a species for we have allowed ourselves to become through violence who we are, but the truth is we can become contented and happy if we give peace a real chance. According to Pinter, when we engage with the world meaningfully, we are transformed. In a different context one of his characters in *Old Times*, Deeley, says:

My work concerns itself with life all over, you see, in every part of the globe. With people all over the globe. I use the word globe because the world world possesses emotional political sociological and psychological pretensions and resonances which I prefer as a matter of choice to do without, or shall I say to steer clear of, or if you like to reject. . . .

—Faber & Faber, Great Britain, pp. 40-41.

This can be taken as the credo of Pinter; his life's work is with life itself and not mere abstract models of life or impressions of life. His is a mimetic art: life is shown to us as it is. Life is indeed incoherent, filled with gaps and yet startlingly beautiful. His dramas are at one level deeply insightful and at other levels they elude any pinning down to particular categorizations.

An area that we have to at least gloss

over is Pinter's engagement with the ongoing Iraq crisis. We have to remember that his Nobel Prize award comes when the Western world is still engaged in the Iraq crisis. To understand him fully we need to review his stance on this war. The following is from an interview²:

Ramona Koval : . . . obviously language has been your passion, really, all your life. And then just relating the idea of war and the use of words in war—and I know that the abuse of language and meaning is something that has incensed you over the years—you and George Orwell, actually—phrases like 'humanitarian intervention' and 'civilized world'. And I wondered about the use of the term 'axis of evil' over the last year—and one that we've all just begun to hear recently, and that's 'regime change', which I heard coming out of Washington a month ago or so, and I've heard again parroted by British politicians—almost like something that has a ring of the force of nature about it—a new concept. So I wondered if you would share your thoughts about those things.

Harold Pinter : My favourite of them all is the 'freedom-loving people'. When I hear Bush say, 'on behalf of all freedom-loving people,' you know, 'we are going to continue to fight terrorists,' and so on. I wonder what a freedom-hating people looks like. I've never actually met such a people myself, or can't even conceive of it. In other words, he's talking rubbish, and that is the kind of rhetoric which you're referring to, which is commonplace, really, in what we call the 'Western World,' isn't it? It happens every day of the damn week. And our governments spout this all the time, not really considering seriously, precisely what they're talking about.

In other words, I think that when you look at a man like our Prime Minister, who I gather is a very sincere and serious Christian, he, we understand, at the moment is

considering another bombing of Iraq, which actually would be an act of murder—of pre-meditated murder. Because if you bomb Iraq, you're not just going to kill Saddam Hussein—you won't do that, anyway, he has his resources—but what you will do, is kill, as usual, thousands of totally innocent people.

And how Tony Blair can work that one out, morally, himself, as a Christian, is actually beyond me. I just wish he'd decide he was a Christian or he wasn't a Christian. If you say, 'I'm going to bomb these damn people and I don't give a shit,' then you bomb them. But that's not a Christian attitude as far as I understand. If you take a Christian posture, you cannot say that. So therefore you can't say, 'I'm going to murder thousands of innocent people,' and say, 'I remain a Christian,' because that is not a Christian stance, as I understand it. I'm not a Christian myself, so nevertheless. . . .

But I think what we're talking about there is extraordinary, fundamental hypocrisy and a misunderstanding of language altogether—or a distortion of language, or abuse of language—which is in itself extremely destructive, because language leads us, doesn't it, politically it leads us into all sorts of fields. It's the rhetoric which does that, and sometimes it works. It works in the sense that when Churchill in the War said, 'We will fight them on the . . .' you know, beaches and all that, I suppose the British public needed such a thing at the time, and it was quite useful—I suppose. I think it was.

But that's a very rare event, and what I find really dangerous and shall we say disgusting, is where the kind of language used recently—humanitarian intervention—don't forget freedom and democracy and all the rest of it—actually is justifying simply assertive acts to control power and keep power. Maintain power. And actually the question of destroying human beings while that is happening seems to be, to the powers that be, quite irrelevant. In fact it doesn't even begin to operate, or, as you know, all that happens is that the destruction of human beings—unless they're Americans—is called 'collateral damage'.

When we return to Pinter's works after reading this interview, we know why he deserves the Nobel Prize. He got it not because he is a great philosopher, not because he is a great dramatist, neither because he is adept in the restraint of language, but because he is a Christian at heart. He follows Christ. He can cry with all humanity and this great possibility in him of genuine empathy makes his works relevant to our burdened times. Pinter's works finally liberate us from all hypocrisy, all distractions. They follow the principles of *similia similibus curantur*, and they purge us in the very traditional sense of tragedy being the calm of mind, all passion spent. We can now sigh and say *om shantih, om shantih, om shantih*. The Waste Land can now hope to be transformed into the Promised Land. ■

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Harold Pinter on being awarded the German Shakespeare Prize in Hamburg 1970. <http://www.curtainup.com/pinter.html> (this site is a treasure house about all things Pinter).
- 2 See <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/arts/bwritng/stories/s1481248.htm>

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