The Male Church. Pinter's male bonds.

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When I met Harold Pinter in 2005 for an interview that was to be published in my book, *About Pinter*, I asked him about his relationships with some of the twentieth-century's greatest writers. I was particularly interested to discuss with him his motivations for 'collaborating' with other writers through his film adaptations of novels (he has adapted Joseph Conrad, John Fowles, Joseph Kafka, Vladimir Nabakov, Marcel Proust and William Shakespeare for the screen) or as a director (he has directed plays by Noel Coward, Jean Giraudoux, Simon Gray, James Joyce and David Mamet). When I asked him if these acts were, for him, a form of communing with artists to whom he finds himself intellectually attracted, he agreed straightforwardly, and was keen to emphasise the value for him of working on Joyce's play, *Exiles*, in 1970:

I certainly had a wonderful relationship with James Joyce. Unfortunately it was never embodied, for obvious reasons. But I always thought that I would love to have had a drink with him. I would have loved him to have seen my production of *Exiles*. Because remember, Ezra Pound said it was unstageable and I have to say that I proved quite categorically that it was not unstageable and I would have liked Pound to have seen it also.[1]

This desire to be part of an artistic community has perhaps always motivated the artist in Pinter. It is of a piece with his vision, transmitted throughout his *oeuvre*, that we survive better if we work together, create supportive societies, and stop messing up our relationships with petty power games and betrayals. Early examples of his wish to subscribe to some notion of an artistic community can be read into the recently published letters that he sent to Henry Miller as a keen teenager in 1949 or his eager attempts to convince his friends of the value of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in 1955,

before he himself had even seen or read the play.[2] Rather than the image of the lonesome writer, typing away alone at his desk, we might best think of Pinter as most creative, most engaged as a writer, when working collaboratively in the rehearsal room or on the film set.

Pinter's earliest influence in the world of the visual media was not in the theatre, but the cinema. He was a keen film-goer from as young as 13, and sought out what today would be called the 'arts cinema' showing the works of the fringe European and American filmmakers. Pinter and his school friends developed a taste for films such as Louis Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou*, Marcel Carné's *Le jour se lève* or Robert Wiene's *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* and appreciated the openness and expressionism that was less likely to be found in home-grown filmmaking. The films of Buñuel were of particular fascination to the young Pinter, and he once stated: 'Buñuel was a phenomenon: there was no-one like him; nor will there ever be. To say I was influenced by him is to put it much too glibly. He was part of my life.'[3] It was this enthusiasm for experimental film, rather than his later training as an actor in repertory theatre, that perhaps formed the foundations of his own remarkable stage imagery and thematic interests. It is clear, for example, that Pinter's work shares some of the characteristics of Buñuel's artistic achievement; a desire to expose the discourses by which social groups define themselves and reject others, and a refusal to make, imply or encourage moral judgements.

Pinter's sustained global success as a playwright has eclipsed other aspects of his artistic activity. His career as a screenplay writer, for example, is not insignificant: few screenplay writers can boast a three volume edition of their work (though, admittedly, Pinter's position does work in his favour in that regard) and a catalogue of twenty-six screenplays (though not all filmed) is no bad portfolio on its own merit. Add to this achievement a series of original plays written specifically for television and we have a substantial body of work written by him for the small or large screen. Examining some elements of this body of work, we are able to detect certain thematic strands that reinforce and engage interestingly with the material of his playwrighting that we are more commonly drawn to examine. In particular, the community of men, and the codes of behaviour between men, is a theme that draws specific attention. It is

this fascination with companionship, community and the bonds of friendship that I wish to chart here through his work, with particular emphasis on his writing for the screen.

Pinter became a playwright almost by accident, when he agreed to see if he could write a play based upon an experience he had a party for his friend Henry Woolf. *The Room* was the result, and was first produced by Woolf in 1957 as a student production at Bristol University. Pinter followed this up with *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Birthday Party* and *The Hothouse*, all of which were written in 1958 (though *The Hothouse* was shelved by its author until 1980). He was successful in getting a run of *The Birthday Party* in London, though the play's run was halted after just eight performances in the wake of a particularly harsh critical panning. With writing for the theatre seeming, at this point, something of a commercial dead end, the impoverished author turned to other media. He wrote *A Slight Ache* for BBC radio later in 1958 and received a commission from Associated Rediffusion for a series of television plays, which he fulfilled with *Night School* (1960), *The Collection* (1961) and *The Lover* (1963). He also agreed to write *A Night Out* for the BBC in 1960. Financially, it was these commissions that kept bread on the Pinter household table in the late 1950s. If he was beginning to make a career from writing, it wasn't yet assured in the theatre.

It was not until the success of *The Caretaker* in 1960 that Pinter's merits as a playwright became universally recognised, and that the theatre began to be the medium that paid the bills. Nonetheless, the success of *A Night Out* cannot be ruled out in terms of the impact it had in making Harold Pinter something of a household name. It was first presented on radio (The BBC Third Programme on 1 March 1960) but was actually written as a TV drama, and was broadcast as such on the 24 April 1960, reaching a staggering audience of 16 million people as part of ABC TV's 'Armchair Theatre'. A conventional theatre would need to be filled every night for thirty years to achieve an equivalent audience. This incredible popular success was broadcast exactly one week before the curtain raised for the first time on *The Caretaker* in London and played no small part, perhaps, in attracting initial audiences to that show. Furthermore, it is commonly forgotten that the plays that Pinter wrote

between his two successful stage plays *The Caretaker* (1960) and *The Homecoming* (1966) were all written, originally, for media other than the theatre. These television plays, then, alongside the screenplays he was writing, are crucial to his artistic formation.

The film maker Joseph Losey saw *A Night Out* on television and wrote to Pinter to express his admiration, and with that correspondence there began one of Pinter's most satisfying artistic collaborations, matching that which was to enjoyed with Peter Hall in the theatre. Pinter was to write four screenplays for Losey: *The Servant* (1963), *Accident* (1967), *The Go-Between* (1971) and *The Proust Screenplay* (1972). The first of these, *The Servant* was based on a short story by Sir Robert Maugham and contained a significant amount of original material by Pinter. He was particularly attracted to the relationship between the two men in the novella, and with this film script he was able to examine the theme of the bond between men. Rather than a narrated story, as in the novella, with a two-dimensionally evil servant, Barrett (who exists in the prose through being referred to by other characters), Pinter demonstrates, scene by scene, the development of a relationship between two men, and the consequences of the self-centred pursuit of desire that they both indulge. The novella develops as something of a morality story, with characters representing sins of sloth, lust, gluttony and so on, and this was very far from Pinter's own artistic interests. Instead, in Pinter's version, we are invited to watch the slow destruction of the central character of Tony, wincing at its inevitability. Barrett not only brings about Tony's degeneration, but succumbs to it himself through his upwardly-mobile ambition. We see the failure of potential between people, the human inclination towards comfort in contact, infested by a lazy indulgence in personal gain, untempered by any sensible investment in one's individual potential. All of this is demonstrated through relationship between men in the film, with the female characters acting as periphery victims or ready collaborators.

Pinter's other work for the screen at this time (the television plays *A Night Out*, *The Lover*, *The Collection* and *Night School*) all dealt with straightforward issues of male/female relationships. Each demonstrated the pitfalls of masculine urges to categorize women stereotypically as either mothers (protecting, domineering), wives

(pure, submissive) or whores (sexually promiscuous, degraded). As such little can be offered in their defense against accusations of misogyny, at least when read from our contemporary perspective. Pinter's interest, though, lay in the power shifts and negotiations that these archetypal structures facilitated for drama, and in the very human contradictions to which male emotional needs were exposed when confronted by such easily reducible models of femininity.

The origins of this thematic strand – one that is all too evident when one considers Pinter's work for screen instead of concentrating on his stage drama – can be found in his one and only novel, *The Dwarfs*. This was written in the early 1950s but only published in 1990. In the 1960s, Pinter returned to this unpublished manuscript to recycle the material for a radio play, and then a stage play, both with the same title. In the original novel version three friends, Len, Mark and Peter, form what is referred to by one of them as a 'male church'; 'an alliance of the three of them for the common good, and a faith in that alliance'.[4] We witness the blossoming of the increased closeness of Peter and Mark, which is later shattered when Mark sleeps with the girlfriend that Peter had been seeing, Virginia. The emphasis on this growing then lost friendship is removed from the dramatic versions of the material, and Virginia plays no role in them whatsoever; her character is excised completely from those later scripts. A twelve-page chapter in the novel in which the two men argue over what they perceived of each other, and the manner in which they projected their friendship and betrayed one another, is reduced to three lines of dialogue in the play. And yet, within this interaction, the key concern of the novel is laid bare, and the manner in which inauthentic behaviour festers and destroys genuine human contact is effectively conveyed. The human dilemma that Pinter seems set on exploring at this early stage in his literary career, is how our need for consistency involves developing a trust in what others project of themselves. The dilemma is articulated most precisely by the character of Len in *The Dwarfs*:

Occasionally, as I say, I believe I perceive a little of what you are, but that's pure accident. Pure accident on both our parts. The perceived and the perceiver. It must be an accident . We depend on such to continue.[5]

The broader theme of the 'male church' is something to which Pinter returned most notably with *The Caretaker*. This play represented something of a break with his earliest dramas, *The Birthday Party*, *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Hothouse*, which had all pursued quasi-political agendas in the manner in which they all offered representations of ideology and ideological oppression. Written at a time when he was involved creatively in writing about gender battles for television, it is interesting to consider *The Caretaker* in the light of this, and as a vehicle for re-considering the syntax of the 'male church' first considered in his novel. Importantly, it was the film version of *The Caretaker* (directed by Clive Donner and released in 1963) that Pinter felt he was better able to consider and examine the male relationships:

> You can say the play has been 'opened out' in the sense that things I'd yearned to do, without knowing it, in writing for the stage, crystallized when I came to think about it as a film. Until then I didn't know that I wanted to do them because I'd accepted the limitations of the stage. For instance, there's a scene in the garden of the house, which is very silent; two silent figures with a third looking on. I think in the film one has been able to hit the relationship of the brothers more clearly than in the play.[6]

It was in such purely cinematic scenes, such as when the brothers contemplate the pond in the garden in the film of *The Caretaker*, that Pinter was able to conjure a filmic equivalent of the laden 'Pinter pause'. There are equivalent examples of his taking advantage of cinematic opportunities in *The Servant*, such as when after Vera (Barrett's girlfriend) seduces Tony, Barrett and Vera exchange knowing glances.

Whereas his earliest dramas are renowned for bringing into operation a series of power games, in *The Caretaker* film, *The Servant* and his television plays, the manoeuvres for domination play a more superficial role in what the dramas are to achieve. The power games here are masterfully conceived (one need only think of as Mick's outwitting Davies with his quick-witted talk of refurbishing his flat, or Barrett and Tony's ball game on the stairwell) but the focus instead is on the betrayal of trust, on the failure to achieve the comfort through intimacy and friendship that is plainly there. *The Caretaker* and *The Servant* chart a series of failures to invest in what is offered, and the frustration in seeing what is offered not taken fully advantage of. *The Caretaker* perhaps first grasped this theme in Pinter's canon and we might

legitimately ask who is 'taking care' of whom in the play, and who might best benefit from the friendship or 'care' offered.

If this theme is something that is played out fully in Pinter's adaptations for screen, then we might surmise that it is a theme that he is attracted to in the work of others. Certainly, *The Servant* describes an extended and painful dysfunctional friendship between two men that shows signs of much greater potential. We see that unclarified relationship between another two men Stephen and Charley (and again a woman that binds them) in *Accident* (1967), adapted from Nicholas Mosley's novel of the same name. But in this film, Pinter takes the lack of freedom to do the right thing that Mosley embedded in his work and demonstrates a human failing to be true to oneself. He exposes his own fascination – through the observation he constructs – with how we interact with the codes and rules of 'normal' social and moral behaviour, and how these are constructed and manipulated by us. The betrayals he documents in this film are ultimately not people's betrayals of one other (to have extra-marital affairs is presented as a norm, much as it is in his own play *Betrayal*) but betrayals of themselves, of their own integrity and dignity. Notably, whereas in *The Servant* or the television dramas, the female characters suffer as foils to the men, or act as narrative devices, pushing the men into their difficult corners, with *Accident* a concern for women as individuals is much more evident, and one of the most piercingly refreshing pieces of dialogue in the play is given to Stephen's wife, Rosalind, when in quite straightforward terms she dismisses Charley's infidelities with the young teenager Anna as 'pathetic', 'puerile' and 'banal',[7] releasing her contempt for her husband Stephen - who so evidently desires the same girl - as much as for Charley.

The similarities between *Accident* and *The Homecoming*, written very close to each other, are evident. In both there is an elusive central, powerful female, desired by a social group of men around her who find themselves bound together by her. Their coming together as a masculine group is in some way defined by her, and revolves around her. Both works even feature a professor of philosophy. It is also difficult to like any of the characters in either the play or the film. We can only slowly construct contempt for these characters, reserving pity only for the women, most desperately so in the rape of Anna presented as something of a forgone conclusion near the end of

Accident. Both works generate their dramas by examining the interaction of a set of established attitudes to women with a woman who challenges those attitudes by taking control of the factors (male physical and emotional needs) which inform them. If the necessary inclusion of a female catalyst or foil within processes of male interaction is a determinable theme in some of Pinter's writing in the 1960s, it was in many ways resolved and re-defined with *Accident* and *The Homecoming*. The characters of Emma in *Betrayal* (1978) or Anna/Sarah in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981) are clearly highly evolved versions of this new female character, in total possession of their own sexual identities, and not simply extensions of male desire.

Immediately after *The Homecoming* and *Accident*, Pinter wrote short pieces for the theatre which dealt with intimacy in long-term relationships; *Landscape* (1968), *Silence* (1969) and *Night* (1969). His fascination with the 'male church', though, was sated with his preparations for his production of James Joyce's *Exiles*. The plot of the play revolves around betrayal and infidelity. Bertha, common law wife to author Richard Rowan, is propositioned by her husband's best friend Robert Hand. Richard advocates Bertha's freedom to respond as she sees fit, causing suspicions and jealousies that wound him. In the final confrontations between Bertha and Robert, Richard wearily expresses his ingestion of the doubt that is to be his creative spur. Although the narrative development of the play focuses on Richard and Bertha's relationship and how it is affected by Bertha's meetings with Robert, it is certainly clear that the fundamental focus of the drama is the relationship between the old friends Richard and Robert. In his preparatory notes to the play, Joyce even queried the degree to which the two men share a physical attraction to one another which they defer and project through Bertha; Robert by attempting to seduce her, Richard by permitting and effectively staging that seduction. According to Joyce, Richard craves 'to feel the thrill of adultery vicariously and to possess a bound woman Bertha through the organ of his friend.'[8] It is this attempt at masculine union via a feminine intermediary and the precarious application of psychosexual impulses in resolving insurmountable desire that may have captured Pinter's attention. He himself had of course previously examined similar processes of male communion involving a

catalytic female character, as we have seen, in *The Dwarfs*, *The Servant*, *The Collection*, *The Homecoming* and *Accident*.

When, after *Exiles*, Pinter was to return to his earlier interest in homosocial behaviour and male interaction through the intermediary of a woman, it was to chart the dysfunction of that behaviour, and the betrayals to self and to other that it brought about. This is first manifested in his next directing experience, working on Simon Gray's *Butley* in the summer of 1971. Gray's play, which charts the disintegration of the eponymous academic, provided a further focus on the homosocial aspects of Joyce's play that attracted Pinter, who said of it:

It seemed to me that Butley was a man living in a kind of no man's land – between women and between men. I understood from the play that his sexual experience was with women but that he probably liked men better. In other words, I didn't see him as a homosexual […] I think quite a number of men are in this position and it makes life very difficult for them.[9]

Pinter's first piece of writing after this production was the short monologue in which he was clearly attempting to begin his own direct articulation of some of the concerns he had faced in the rehearsal rooms of *Exiles* and *Butley*. *Monologue* (1972) recalls the situation of the end of Pinter's novel *The Dwarfs*, and the dissolution of the friendship of two men following their sexual liaisons with the same woman. What is described is highly reminiscent of Bertha's cerebral attraction to Richard and sensual attraction to Robert in *Exiles*:

Now you're going to say you loved her soul and I loved her body. You're going to trot that one out. I know you were much more beautiful than me, much more *aquiline*, I know *that*, that I'll give you, more *ethereal*, more thoughtful, slyer, while I had both feet firmly planted on the deck. But I'll tell you one thing you don't know. She loved my soul. It was my soul she loved. […] I loved her body. Not that, between ourselves, it's one way or another of any importance. My spasms could have been your spasms.[10]

This sexual binary is paralleled in the man's recollection of how his friend should have been black, like the girl, in order to give an aesthetic purity to the image of him in his black motorcycle leathers and helmet. In bringing into operation these

body/soul, black/white polarities in his memories, the unnamed character of Man reveals his need for the implied potential for amalgamation that they carry, that is his own full integration into the lives of both the girl and his friend. He embodies this integration in the fantasy of the mixed-colour children that he would have loved, the fruits of the carnal/spiritual resolution he craves but so visibly lacks. This would now be the emphasis in Pinter's writing; a warning against paralysis as opposed to the simple statement of stagnation and infestation that we have at the end of *The Dwarfs, The Servant* and *Accident*.

With *Betrayal* (1978) Pinter was finally to close his personal examination of the anatomy of the fraternal bond, the 'male church', in an arrangement that most closely resembled some parallel universe to the Joyce play: The affair between Emma, wife of the publisher Robert, and his best friend, the literary agent Jerry. In the play's final scene, which in its reverse chronology is the first event, Robert's acceptance of his friend's behaviour – flattering his wife at a party in the marital bedroom – might be read as an act of condoning the liaison and potential affair in the same way Richard promoted Robert Hand's pursuit of Bertha in *Exiles*. But, taking from the germ of a failure to maintain a bond and profit on admiration and friendship, as first demonstrated in *Monologue*, the mutual desire for a single woman in *Betrayal* is no longer the psychological location of a struggle for dominance, as it was in pre-*Exiles* Pinter (and the reverse chronology of the play works in some way towards ensuring this). Instead, a sexual bond between men through the intermediary of a shared woman is accentuated as characteristic of an emotional immaturity, and there is a compensatory emphasis on the will and need of the woman in the equation, and this places in strong relief the inefficiencies of the male manifestation and articulation of need.

By applying Pinter's films as a lens through which to consider his thematic interests as a writer, it is possible to re-focus our attention on the whole of his body of work. In doing so, it is easier to move away from the well-trodden paths of Pinter criticism that focus on power games and domination. A clearer trajectory through his work is evident, one that foregrounds human relationships and the frailties of behaviour that lead us to misplace the qualities of community and togetherness that

we need to thrive emotionally. A fascination with interaction between men, and the formation of a 'male church' is a theme that permeates most of Pinter's writing, and a consequent concern, eventually, to regard the position of women in relationship with this 'church', and as agents in their own emotional well-being, is something that is seen to grow from this writer's return to this interest in community and society.

[1] Harold Pinter to Mark Batty, *About Pinter*, London, Faber and Faber, 2005, p.83
[2] Harold Pinter, 'Letters to Henry Miller' and 'Letter regarding Waiting for Godot' in Francis Gillen and Steven H. Gale (eds.), *The Pinter Review: Collected Essays 2003 and 2004*, Florida, University of Tampa Press, 2004, pp.1-6
[3] Harold Pinter, *Various Voices*, London, Faber and Faber, 2005, p.66
[4] Harold Pinter, *The Dwarfs*, London, Faber and Faber, 1990, p.56
[5] Ibidem, p.151
[6] Harold Pinter, in Mark Batty, *About Pinter*, London, Faber and Faber, 2005, p.129
[7] Harold Pinter, *Accident*, in *Collected Screenplays 1*, London, Faber and Faber, 2000, pp.420-1
[8] James Joyce, *Exiles*, London, Four Square, 1962, p.158
[9] Harold Pinter, 'Butley', *The American Film Theatre/Cinebill*, January, 1974, p.33
[10] Harold Pinter, *Monologue*, in *Plays 4*, London, Faber and Faber, 1998, p.123