

Humanism and Vitality in the Plays of Harold Pinter¹

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It is a great joy and privilege to join you in this celebration of the work of Harold Pinter, and I am deeply grateful to all the organizers of the conference for the invitation. It's very humbling to talk about Harold Pinter's work because there is always something in that work that is left over when all the words are spoken. What point-of-view starting particularly with Henry James did for the novel, that is open up space to let in each reader and each reader's perception, Harold Pinter does for the stage. A Harold Pinter play is always a collaboration with each member of the audience. As great art does, a Pinter play disturbs our comfortable certainties, takes us, as it were, out of our rooms, initiates an internal dialogue, and leaves us finally not with a puzzle to be solved, for there is no single, correct version of Pinter, but with the essential mystery of our human condition. As Pete says of Shakespeare in The Dwarfs, "He laid bare, that's all."

So I am here, humbly, not to talk to you, but with you, to begin what I expect will be a dialogue that will mark the spirit of this Conference. When I began The Pinter Review in 1987, some 20 years ago now, I told Harold that all I ever hoped to do was to publish diverse voices which might build some bridges to work that essentially lives, as you all know, in the theatre. As a matter of fact, if there were, down the hall, a Pinter play beginning in 15 minutes, let us say, the greatest tribute to my talk would be that halfway through you would all get up and go to see the Pinter play.

There isn't one, by the way, so please don't leave. But we all know theatre lives anew in every performance in the collaboration between author, actors, lighting, direction,

costume and set design and the bond between all that and the audience – for that reason, I’ve always tried to stress production in the Pinter Review. Beyond that, however, the joy of a journal is that it can grow and change, building always on the insights of the past, but reflecting new social, political, scholarly, and cultural perspectives. I regard Pinter’s work as a great diamond that we constantly turn so that we may look at its many facets.

Recently, and quite correctly, the political aspect of Pinter’s work has drawn the most discussion: how he brings attention to the political nature of language, silence as dissent, the failure of most language to convey meaning. I talked about Pinter’s politics extensively last year in Turin, Italy, comparing Pinter with the Greek dramatists, most especially in their savage attacks on war-engendering myths, and the deadly blending of blindness and power in any empire, Athenian or American. Today, however, it is so obvious that Harold Pinter was right that to tell of his politics would seem, at least here in Europe, to be speaking to the already converted. Of that, let me only say that I regret that too often discussions of Pinter’s politics have been reduced to his being on the right side, whereas even his most overtly political plays require us to examine our own humanity and recognize the level at which we, too, can individually be identified with the power of the torturer and the safety of the group.

This morning, though, I should like to talk with you about one small part of why Harold Pinter will be produced and read long after this dismal war has faded into the pages of infamous history: the humanism of his plays and its relationship to the vitality of his characters, the way in which Pinter’s work, in laying “bare,” goes to one deep core of our human experience.

I know of no playwright as good as Pinter in dramatizing the extent of our self-concern. His characters are driven by raw need which often they scarcely understand themselves. They are entrapped in self-concern. Remember that Pinter himself has told us that the deeper the need or emotion, the less likely it is to be articulated. And as the raw needs

clash with the equally raw needs of another or others, we have the territorial battles that are so characteristic of his work. In his pioneering study, Austin Quigley detailed the linguistic strategies by which Pinter's characters seek to dominate or to ward off attacks, showing how well Pinter understands that not communication, but the projection or protection of our vital defining self-image is at the heart of human conversation. Pinter's distinction is not in having the characters say it, but catching it in the very rhythm of their language. Here, for example, is Harry's need to reassert his superiority over Bill in The Collection:

Bill's a slum boy, you see, he's got a slum sense of humor. [...] There's something faintly putrid about him, don't you find. Like a slug. There's nothing wrong with slugs in their place, but he's a slum slug; there's nothing wrong with slum slugs in their place, but this one won't keep his place -- he crawls all over the walls of nice houses, leaving slime, don't you, boy? He confirms stupid sordid little stories just to amuse himself, while everyone else has to run round in circles to get to the root of the matter and smooth the whole thing out. All he can do is sit and suck his bloody hand and decompose like the filthy putrid slum slug he is. What about another whiskey, Horne? (II, 154-5)

That's a poet creating language in the theatre.

One result of such analysis is to see and usually direct the plays in terms of such battles for control. So, for example, in The Homecoming, Ruth holds off the assaults of the purely patriarchal household to which Teddy brings her and in the final iconic moment, with Teddy's head in her lap and Max on the floor, matriarchy is ascendant. Or Kate wards off both Anna's and Deeley's version of herself in Old Times, victorious in the present because she now controls the past.

KATE

(to Anna) But I remember you. I remember you dead.

Pause

I remember you lying dead. You didn't know I was watching you. I leaned over you. Your face was dirty. You lay dead, your face scrawled with dirt, all kinds of earnest inscriptions, but unblotted, so that they had run, all over your face, down to your throat.

(Four, 67-68)

Good, as far as it goes, though I want to suggest it doesn't get yet to the heart of Pinter's humanism; indeed it almost seems at odds with a term like that. Let's examine further that deep need.

By and large, Pinter's characters want to be somebody, they want to have a significance, to know they are not nothing, that they are not worthless. They struggle to be true to themselves, yes, especially Pinter's women, but they also require "other."

In the first place, as Pinter shows especially in The Dwarfs, our impressions are so shifting and phantasmagorical, that identity itself may well depend on verification by another. Len's speech in that play is frequently quoted:

What you are, or appear to be to me, or appear to be to you, changes so quickly, so horrifyingly, I certainly can't keep up with it and I'm damn sure you can't either. [...] Where am I to look, where am I to look, what is there to locate, so as to have some surety, to have some rest from this whole bloody racket? You're the sum of so many reflections. How many reflections? Whose reflections? Is that what you consist of? What scum does the tide leave? [...] What have I seen, the scum or the essence?

(Works: Two 112)

Beyond that, however, significance depends to some extent on another, to be myself, yes, but to be myself in the eyes of another, of someone who affirms my significance. As Sebastian Moore writes in a different context, "The survival instinct, become ??? human, is the sense of personal worth. 'Here I am' means just that: here I am and you shall not ignore me." (p.7). The "you" in that sentence implies relationship. And so the paradox often is, in Pinter, that the very need to defend oneself, one's territory, at the same time

alienates those whose affirmation of ourselves we need and desire.

Thirdly, the self-preoccupation of Pinter's characters is often the product of ever changing and conflicting needs. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the character of Ruth in The Homecoming. She had been "a model of the body," and her deep need for sexual fulfillment, which her husband Teddy seems unwilling or unable to provide, is seen in her decision to stay on with her in-laws apparently, at least in their eyes, to service their needs while earning her keep as a part-time prostitute in one of Lenny's flats in Greek Street. Actually it is clear that she, not they, is dictating the terms, and many critics see her as triumphant. Then comes a line, one of my favorites, which seems to grow out of nowhere. "Don't be a stranger," she tells Teddy as he departs for America, indicating her recognition of needs for order and distance beyond the bargain she has struck. Pinter has said The Homecoming is a play about love, and it is, but as with so many needs in the plays of Pinter, we become aware of it primarily through its absence, in this case the presence of an "other" who might affirm both sides of Ruth, her capacity for both sexual and Spiritual love, eros and agape.

There is a terrible, existential loneliness, absence in Pinter's plays, which would not be there if they were only about battles for dominance, and good productions of Pinter give us both that battle and that absence, most palpable as the absences are beneath what is being said and in the silences, as a bad tooth isn't noticed except through the ache. The famous Pinter Pause is not just a strategy; it must be the felt presence on stage of what is absent. Pinter shows us humans, at our core as bundles of unresolved needs, shifting desires, often remorseless uncertainty about what or who we are, yet paradoxically, and here is one source of his humor, engaging in territorial battles to promote and defend that momentary, incomplete glimpse of what we are, and in that battle most often further alienating ourselves from the very persons we need to affirm those glimpses of self. Indeed, his seeming victors in the territorial battle are often the most broken, like Goldberg in The Birthday Party, and even Ruth, who knowingly and for self-preservation

stands in that household as the Biblical Ruth, “alone amid alien corn.”

The most profound humanism, I believe, shows us persons at our worst, with all our warts and failures, yet leaves us not without hope. A few months ago when my colleague Steve Gale came to our university, someone asked me at dinner why I considered Pinter not an absurdist playwright, and I responded that in Pinter, unlike, let us say, Ionesco, there is a sense that things do not have to be that way. Of course even in absurdity there is Camus’s declaration, as in “The Myth of Sisyphus,” that, in the very act of recognizing absurdity, often in art, we transcend it. That is so also with Pinter, but I believe he goes farther than that. Let me turn then to that balancing glimmer of hope and affirmation in the world of Pinter’s characters.

First of all, from the novel The Dwarfs on, Pinter recognizes the possibility that we can and sometimes do affirm another’s identity. That, in practice, is why, as Michael Billington points out so cogently in his biography, friendship is so important to Pinter and betrayal so despicable. In the novel, the three young men, based loosely on Pinter himself and two of his closest and lifelong friends, have in the past at least provided a context in which, despite rivalry and different personalities, each can affirm himself and in turn have his worth affirmed by the others. Pete calls it a church.

“They were hardly one in dogma or direction, but there was a common ground and there was a framework. At their best they formed a unit and a unit which in his terms was entitled to be called a church, an alliance of the three of them for the common good, and a faith in that alliance” (The Dwarfs, p.60). [Pete] calls a friend “an ambassador to yourself from yourself, a go-between. Then he’s a man of your soul.” (p.177)

In the plays, that framework is usually more noticeable by its absence, but it is present in Ruth’s remark to Teddy, which I quoted, suggesting there is a framework larger than what her remaining behind would seem to be, in the wordless look the two brothers, Mick

and Astin, give each other at the end of The Caretaker, and, I believe, in the grace suggested by the presence of Bridget in Moonlight.

Thirdly, and this is most important for our understanding of Pinter, many of his characters are “in process.” It has become axiomatic that we know nothing of Pinter’s characters before they come on stage and nothing about them after they leave. Because the human person in Pinter’s work is limited to partial and incomplete glimpses of what we are and what others are, there is, at any given moment, an incompleteness, along with, I would suggest, a drive toward completeness that is present in his vital characters, and substituted for or sublimated in his less vital characters. We saw that impulse toward completeness in Ruth’s line to Teddy, “Don’t be a stranger.” In Pinter, though, such movement is not toward Aristotle’s classical golden mean, a balance between extremes, but a movement from one state to another. In the memoir of his early life, “The Queen of All the Faeries,” composed when he was 21, Pinter decries those “always remaining within the limits of one world, one plane.” In a 1993 interview with Michael Billington, he commented on how difficult it is “to sustain and maintain an equilibrium.” Pinter said, “There is a kind of blandness which I simply don’t understand. A resignation perhaps to certain states of affairs which I personally find infinitely painful and, to one degree or another, intolerable.”

When Harold Pinter published his youthful novel The Dwarfs in 1990, he cut out five of the chapters which, he wrote in a prefatory “Author’s Note”, “seemed to me redundant.” Pinter had let me read the original novel in 1984 and so my memory of the novel included that of a remarkable twenty-eighth chapter in which Pinter describes quite directly the growth impulse in many of his works. From a novel-like perspective Pinter was quite correct in removing the chapter, for it does nothing to advance the movement of the work. From a critical perspective, the chapter can be useful in helping us appreciate a part of the creative impulse in Pinter’s drama.

Chapter 28 of the original novel describes a journey undertaken just as the narrator is leaving one stage of his life. Suddenly the route is wholly different from his expectation, although there is “in certain features of the landscape, an approximation to something I had once known,” even though his experiences to that time have had “a character quite foreign to such appearances.” He describes himself often as “static” or supine, while another force, “a great star,” seems “implacable in its power.” This new state, which seems to oppose his old, is simply present without apparent or logical cause. It cannot be fit into any known concepts or language:

whether by anything, or out of anything, or by anything, I cannot say; with what intentions, with what precautions, with what precise implications; whether by design or by accident or in ignorance; with what bias, with what defects, with what faculties; by what lured, by what summoned, by what betrayed: of these factors I remain in ignorance. The one ended, and the other, with only a brief lapse of time, began.

He then attempts to impose conditions, and these conditions accept the otherness of the dead:

And the conditions I imposed upon the one dead were that if, from its secure place, it were by necessity called upon to participate or to act, it was by no means to be deferential, or to consider sympathy as an attribute, or diplomacy as a method, or charity as a virtue. Neither was it to persuade or enlighten, nor concern itself with conclusion or verification, nor keep a balance or a liberality in its strategy, nor to judge or to comment, nor suffer sorrow or repentance, or in any way employ understanding, but to suffocate and reject all inclination towards it.

Eventually, however, there comes a time when he is obliged to refer to this dead:

And on the long journey I held them to these conditions, and long afterwards, later, a long time later, reached the point where I was obliged to refer to my dead, and bring it from its secure place, and call it into action, and as it was manifested join it in observation, while continuing to live

with my other and conform to its policy, a traitor in my own midst. Until later, a long time after I had set forth, later a long time, when the great star had moved, when I was no longer still, when disruption had set in, I contemplated the situation broaden and lengthen and take depth from its alteration.

Between this birth and this death. Think of it. Think of how clearly the phrase describes the life-affirming movement in many of Pinter's characters. It is most obvious in the cyclical plays of displacement: A Slight Ache, The Basement, as it is more abstractly in the prose short stories "Kullus" and "The Examination." Katherine H. Burkman has related A Slight Ache to the myth of death and rebirth in the myth of Demeter and Persephone.

The more frequent pattern, however, is the arrival of someone or something, external or internal, which threatens the status quo, the compromises and evasions we have made in the name of self. Pinter's rooms are more frequently internal than external, and even when the threat seems to come from outside, the external threats are mirror images of some unarticulated need or fear inside the individual. Elsewhere I have explored this in terms of the psychologist Jung's concept of the shadow. In The Dumb Waiter, for example, Gus's equilibrium is disturbed by his memory of the woman who splattered, and the escalating demands for more and more exotic food are brilliant images of Gus's growing but unarticulated discomfort with what is demanded of him in his role as assassin, culminating in an anguished cry approaching a form of death.

"We've got nothing left! Nothing! Do you understand?" What an example of a Pinter line that makes perfect sense in the gangster play, and yet carries an incredible weight of emotional and symbolic significance.

To take just a few other examples of the status being challenged: the presence of Anna in Old Times representing perhaps a more lively, sexual Kate which Deeley finds lacking, the revelation in Betrayal that Emma had long ago told Robert of the affair with Jerry;

Stella's story of an affair in The Collection; Spooner's ability to enter into and thus challenge Hirst's memories of what he had thought was a set and self-affirming past, even though it comes and goes in his inebriated states.

There are costs for such vitality. Think of the terrible existential separation of Kate at the end of Old Times, visualized so adeptly by Pinter in the separated divans; or as we have said, of Ruth in The Homecoming, of Stanley, and yes Petey in The Birthday Party, of Bel at the conclusion of Moonlight, of Rebecca in Ashes to Ashes standing on the uncharted boundary between empathy and madness.

There are linguistic and cultural implications as well. Because need comes from something so deep within, from unexplored but felt subconscious regions, it is essentially private and has no ready-made language and certainly no social conventions. In the still patriarchal 1960's Western culture in which The Homecoming was written, there was neither language nor custom to unite the two sides of Ruth; in Old Times both culture and language affirm the Anna side of woman, and the lack of language to describe what Rebecca feels and knows about the link in Ashes to Ashes, leads her lover husband to assume a form of madness from which she must be rescued.

And that brings us back to the place from which we began, the political. When we understand the terrible existential separation and loneliness of what I've termed Pinter's vital characters, those able on some level to accept our human lives as a journey between separate and incomplete states of being, we understand better the counter-attraction of the certainties that complete allegiance to a party, a club, a country, a group can give. There we don't have to create language because it is there for us – pre-packaged, all the code words we need to be members of the group or culture – Groups large – God save the Queen, God bless America, Support our troops, nothing but victory is an option; smaller groups, sides with their own culturally coded words and culturally reprehensible ones, even down to groups of critics who view how to view Harold Pinter one way or another.

Experience a play like Party Time – what it means to be and stay in the club.

At the party, words or phrases like “pure comfort,” “real class,” “first class,” define the insulated, in-bred assumption of right, of knowing “what God intended for the human race” of the party-goers. As Liz says: “I mean to be part of the society of beautifully dressed people? Oh God I don’t know, elegance, style, grace...”

The party is only slightly disturbed by some protest going on outside, and Dusty’s worry about her brother who is there. The price of the party? Willful blindness to what’s outside - As Terry, Dusty’s husband tells her: “You don’t have to believe anything. You just have to shut up and mind your own business....You came to a lovely party like this, all you have to do is shut up and enjoy the hospitality and mind your own fucking business....You keep hearing all these things. You keep hearing all these things spread by pricks about pricks. What’s it got to do with you?” (8).

Fred and Douglas are the protectors of this blind serenity. Acknowledging and holding up the clenched fascistic fist, Douglas declares: “We want peace and we’re going to get it. But we want that peace to be cast iron. No leaks. No draughts. Cast iron. Right as a drum. That’s the kind of peace we want and that’s the kind of peace we’re going to get. A cast iron peace” (14).

What is present at the party is entropy, rather than vitality, a clinging to the “status quo” with all the privilege that implies, and the willingness to use force, cast-iron force, disguised as the determination to preserve “values.” As the torturers and purveyors of force in Pinter’s overtly political plays state, there’s a “purity” in that.

Finally, let me very briefly illustrate this entire process in one of Pinter’s plays, Ashes to Ashes. First, the set – Country house, garden behind. Furnishings suggest comfortable slightly upper middle class. On stage two ordinary middle class people called Devlin and

Rebecca, forties, in the script, but otherwise not named in the performances. The lighting - Light outside at the opening of the play. Pretty much the same degree inside.

As the couple talk, it becomes clear that something has disturbed Rebecca. What triggered the play for Pinter was his reading of Gitta Sereny's biography of Albert Speer, Hitler's architect who designed the slave labor factories in Nazi Germany, and then was horrified by what he saw when he visited them, but the audience doesn't know that. Something, however, has disturbed whatever former equilibrium existed between the two. In the drafts in the Pinter Archive in the British Library, it is clear that they are husband and wife. In the final version Pinter has typically removed that specific. Rebecca is talking about a man she refers to as her lover and the way he would command her to kiss his clenched fist, and then put his hands around her neck.

REBECCA: Well...for example...he would stand over me and clench his fist. And then he'd put his other hand on my neck and grip it and bring my head towards him. His fist...grazed my mouth. And he'd say, 'Kiss my fist.'

DEVLIN: And did you?

REBECCA: Oh, yes. I kissed his fist. The knuckles. And then he'd open his hand and give me the palm of his hand...to kiss...which I kissed.

(Pause)

And then I would speak.

DEVLIN: What did you say? You said what? What did you say?

(Pause)

REBECCA: I said, 'Put your hand round my throat.' I murmured it through his hand, as I was kissing it, but he heard my voice, he heard it through his hand, he felt my voice in his hand, he felt my voice in his hand, he heard it there.

(Silence.)

DEVLIN: And did he? Did he put his hand round your throat?

REBECCA: Oh, yes. He did. He did. And he held it there, very gently, very gently, so gently. He adored me, you see.

DEVLIN: He adored you?

(Pause)

What do you mean, he adored you? What do you mean?

(Pause)

Are you saying he put no pressure on your throat? Is that what you're saying?

REBECCA: No.

DEVLIN: What then? What are you saying?

REBECCA: He put a little...pressure...on my throat, yes. So that my head started to go back, gently but truly.

DEVLIN: And your body? Where did your body go?

REBECCA: My body went back, slowly but truly.

DEVLIN: So your legs were opening?

REBECCA: Yes

(Pause)

DEVLIN: Your legs were opening?

REBECCA: Yes

(Silence)

Devlin, on his part, after assuring her that she'll never be without a police siren again, attempts to refocus the conversation so that he can "get it into focus" (19). She instead counters with a story of a pen that has fallen off a table and eventually of people following "gurd" – a word she had used before to describe the man with his hand about her neck – into the sea. Devlin meanwhile responds with the logical concept of authority – first God's, and then her own lack of authority to speak about suffering because she herself has never experienced it... He attempts to distract her with the banal and the ordinary: town, a movie, family, her sister's children, but her stories now lead her on to the question of responsibility for evil, and most importantly, to her moving away from a man in a movie house.

REBECCA: But there was a man sitting in front of me, to my right. He was absolutely still throughout the whole film. He never moved, he was rigid, like a body with rigor mortis, he never laughed once, he just sat like a corpse....

Clearly death and stasis have been linked in Rebecca's perception and she begins to move away from Devlin as she did from the man in the movie house. He attempts to begin again by stating in short, factual sentences what he takes to be the facts of her life. She responds in words that recall that 28th chapter.

REBECCA: I don't think we can start again. We started...a long time ago. We started. We can't start again. We can end again.

Freed now from Devlin's present, Rebecca is now free to embrace her own private and communal shadow which culminates in her confession of guilt. The story begins, as is common with the shadow, as that of another woman, third person, she, who turned over a child to the fascist authorities and concludes with the "I." "I held her to me. She was breathing. Her heart was beating" (45). Devlin identifies with the lover and orders her to kiss his fist, but he is speaking to the old Rebecca and his commands are deflated by her silence. Then she is her guilt, an echoed guilt, as she tells of giving up and denying her child.

REBECCA: I don't have a baby.

ECHO: a baby

REBECCA: I don't know of any baby

ECHO: of any baby

Logically the play progresses obliquely, but that is its point. The personal and communal unconscious can be expressed only through story and symbol for they alone can express a horror which, as Pinter himself said, horrifies because it was so logically thought out. Each story takes Rebecca closer to that shadow, just as each appeal to logic and order - and finally to force - takes Devlin away from his.

During the last part of the play the light dims outside until it is gone and intensifies

inside. Clearly we are more and more inside the mind of Rebecca, or of anyone haunted by the memory of atrocity - with its nightmarish images of people being led over cliffs, ice filled streets and babies torn from their mother's arms.

Rebecca is often written of as heroic, Devlin as villain. Actually Pinter's play makes us see ourselves in both. The possibility of empathy, the identification with the suffering and the oppressed, with the victims. But also the attraction, finally, of force. Having used every argument and strategy – appeals to logic, to God, to family, even to Rebecca's unworthiness because she herself has never suffered – and having failed to restore her to “the ordinary and acceptable” – he falls back on force. How very human. I think of Arthur Miller's insistence in After the Fall that we will never understand atrocity until we see in ourselves both potential victim and perpetrator. The dramatic difference is that Miller has his character say it. Pinter dramatizes the choice.

I even think he uses the physical structure of theatre here. As we leave the theatre to go back to our very ordinary lives, out for a few after-theatre drinks or dinner, we too, the audience, can identify today with the babies ripped from their mother's arms in Darfur, but we are much more likely to do so if, as for Rebecca, the “they” becomes I, and we recognize the sadomasochistic tendencies in ourselves. Pinter doesn't preach that at us. He doesn't say it. He embodies it in dramatic action and confronts us with choice.

And that is one example of Pinter's humanism. To show the worst in us as humans, but to insist on our freedom to choose, however tormented and frightening that journey into our inner selves, our shadow, may be. Or to accept the comfort and shared power of pre-packaged language, authority, group-think and knee-jerk reaction to the movement of the herd, even if that, as it has in Iraq, takes us all over cliffs.

And that in turn brings me back to a word with which I opened – humility. The proper critical humility before great works of art. I have not explained Pinter; I have merely

shared with you some reflections on some of Pinter's work that have occurred to me in seeing and reading them over 35 years. If what I've said excites you to see one more Pinter play than you would otherwise have, or better yet to produce one more, and maybe to have some new insight into one or two things that are already there in the work of a master, then I have succeeded beyond my fondest expectation. And for that opportunity, I humbly thank you.

¹ O texto aqui transcrito traduz, na íntegra, a versão apresentada oralmente ao Colóquio.