

The Impact of Pinter's Work

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TO MAKE THE AUDIENCE MORE AWARE of subconscious reverberations, Pinter blurs the signs of conventional theatrical grammar. He breaks the rules to which the passive spectator is accustomed and transforms classical rational speech. Like the musicians of the serial school, he suppresses the privileged functions of certain fundamental chords. He establishes no distinction between dissonance and consonance. He creates a kind of tension which is no longer based, as in traditional musical writing, on successive starts, suspensions and pauses, but on the absence of consonant chords (the non sequiturs) and on the continual subconscious fluctuations of characters who, constantly and secretly, modify the dramatic situation. Like Anton Webern, in particular, Pinter uses silence as an element of tension (the fact that his play *Silence* was put to music isn't surprising).¹ Like cricket players, his characters (in *No Man's Land*, they are even named after four champions) watch each other and react in abrupt, unexplained, sometimes threatening ways.

A Pinter character never analyzes himself lucidly. He never interprets psychologically what he feels. He lies and evades reality. He is thus different from the characters of Pirandello or Sartre, who often explain their own repression. Like Beckett and Ionesco, Pinter renounces completely the heritage of rhetoric and perpetually underlines the ambiguity of words. Beckett encouraged him to express the human condition in its existential reality and to mock language. He showed him that a playwright shouldn't be afraid of disconcerting his audience. One finds in Pinter numerous elements which characterize Beckett's work: the absence of any real plot, the musical quality of the dialogue,

memory games, the ability to charge words and silences with maximum meaning. Yet, unlike Beckett, Pinter doesn't deal with the theme of despair hidden behind the mask. His subject is the mask. Beckett expresses a truth. Pinter presents characters who experience it. Beckett doesn't encourage a willing suspension of disbelief. Pinter, on the contrary, plays upon fascination and suspense.

Pinter's characters are also different from Ionesco's. Pinter's art isn't based, like Ionesco's, mainly on exaggeration and caricature. It is founded above all on concentration and distillation. Martin Esslin was right in underlining that the dramatists of the "Theatre of the Absurd" have invented a new language — of rupture and distillation — to which Pinter is indebted. But the truth is that Pinter doesn't belong to such a theatre. The reality of his characters is quite different. It is double and is always experienced on two levels. On the one hand, there is a surface reality that everyone is led to believe in when trying to be guided by appearances. On the other hand, there is the hidden reality of secret emotions which contradicts surface reality, alters it, and gives each character his psychological depth.

Pinter is close to those dramatists who, like Strindberg, express the inner dialogue and watch for the moment when the obstacles of the subconscious are overcome and suddenly the truth of the matter is revealed. He is convinced that every perception is subjective: one doesn't perceive reality, reality is what one perceives. And there is total contradiction between what is said and what is felt. So in order to show reality, one has to show the mask and the distorted vision. Like the French writer Nathalie Sarraute, Pinter is interested in the exploration of imperceptible palpitations. He respects the complexity and variety of human emotions. He tries to catch the slightest intonation expressing the secret impulses, all the subjacent and complicated movements which propel language.

What makes Pinter's style different, "Pinteresque," is the fact that he says nothing explicitly. He finds people and things enigmatic. His presentation of an enigma therefore remains an enigma. Any meaning in his work must be guessed, grasped intuitively, read between the lines. His hermetic writing resembles

the cabalistic style that seeks to generate an "obscure flame." Rather than explain truth directly, Pinter exposes the lies that the spectator believes to be the truth. He shows that these lies are contradictory and reveals indirectly that they *are* lies, so that the spectator can finally discover *by himself* that the characters are lying. To those who refuse the truth, Pinter shows just how contradictory the lies are that are accepted. Such an approach is a call for more lucidity. As Arthur Koestler explains: "The intention is not to obscure the message, but to make it more luminous by compelling the recipient to work it out by himself — to re-create it. Hence the message must be handed to him in implied form — and implied means 'folded in'. To make it unfold, he must fill in the gaps, complete the hint, see through the symbolic disguise."²

The emotional repercussions of a Pinter play are all the greater as the audience witnesses the development of an ambiguous situation and must rely on clues in order to understand it. Each play puts the spectator in the position of a voyeur and asks him to relive subconscious conflicts. The meaning of the dialogue can be grasped only if the public is able to add to the words, the pauses and the silences a series of echoes, connotations, and undertones.

Pinter's work mirrors anguished confusion and belongs to a specific period — the era of suspicion. It calls upon a forewarned audience capable of distinguishing a play's oneiric elements. It brings a new awareness to spectators who are in connivance with the dramatist, who don't take words literally and who mistrust characters. Such work can't please an audience that requires entertaining "well-made" plays, that seeks only an amusing, conventional, and reassuring social game. On the contrary, Pinter's work is shocking and provocative. It has the power to disturb. This is why the spectator's reaction is often resistance, embarrassment, and fear. He refuses a secret reality which refers to something that he has experienced but also repressed.

By dealing with the subconscious, Pinter touches directly upon something essential and generates deep-seated emotions. His dialogue seems to be based on conventional phrases and innocuous non sequiturs. But as soon as the cues are exchanged in a

given situation, the spectator guesses what happens behind the masks. A latent content contradicts appearances and preconceived ideas about what should and what shouldn't be revealed. In the name of morality, prudence, and modesty, members of the audience may condemn the illumination of the innermost recesses of the psyche. Sensing that the behaviour of Pinter's characters secretly alludes to their own repression, they fear the flashes of lucidity in which they might see themselves naked. Incapable of accepting the truth objectively, they resort to defence mechanisms which allow them to avoid the uneasiness generated by the dialogue and particularly by the silences.

An audience which, unexpectedly and abruptly, discovers the repression process immediately divides itself. Spontaneously, it chooses between humour (which consists in including oneself among the accused) and incriminating irony, mockery, or indignation. Humour allows acceptance, while irony is a form of impotence. It is guilt transformed into intellectual vanity in order to allow oneself to laugh at others and thus be excluded from the situation.

We can distinguish three types of psychological reactions. First there is *adapted behaviour*. It is based on a lucid perception of the global reality expressed in the play, including what is revealed without being explicit: the spectator controls his emotions while grasping the meaning of the work. Then there is *blind behaviour*, based on repression: the spectator's perception is distorted by lack of empathy, by prejudice. Truth is denied, suppressed, because it is too unpleasant to be acknowledged. Finally, there is *uncontrolled behaviour*, based on panic: the spectator's perception is distorted by excessive emotional involvement. He reacts excitedly, angrily.

To meet with incomprehension and indignation is inevitable when certain conventional beliefs are threatened. *The Homecoming* is particularly disturbing because the family is pre-eminently the experience from which all feelings of love and hatred originate. As he shows all the ugliness of an embittered family, Pinter incites strong opposition. The spectator is embarrassed, nay frightened, as he would be, for instance, should a mentally unbalanced traveller make an exhibition of himself in

the tube. Without taking into consideration the spectator's feelings, the dramatist confronts him with a painful truth. Therefore a self-protection mechanism is at work. Touched subconsciously, attacked, the spectator feels repulsion and protests against someone who shows him images that shake his innermost defences.

Blind behaviour is also linked to the deep-seated belief that it is always possible to perceive one's motives clearly. It is in the name of such conviction that Pinter is often taken to task for his obscurity. The spectator who admires only order, harmony, and beauty will reject anything diseased or adulterated because he will feel that it debases his taste. He will insist on being entertained and charmed and will refuse any sudden awareness of reality.

He will also be put off by Pinter's comedy as it is a comedy of deception that raises a grim laughter. Pinter is interested in tragicomic situations, in situations which are both funny and painful because they are experienced in a state of anxiety. His characters are tragic but their suffering is caused by their own vanity. They encounter laughable obstacles (a disconnected gas-cooker, a wasp) and, making mountains out of molehills, they become ridiculous. Pinter shows how tragic it is always to be forced to put on an act in order to save appearances. His comedy is not a comedy of situation but *the comedy of exposed repression*. Such comedy is aggressive and embarrassing because it reveals the characters' subconscious distress.

Pinter's comedy corresponds to Jewish humour, a desperate humour that often helps make bearable the unbearable. When Spooner, in *No Man's Land*, embarks on a long monologue to blow his own trumpet in the hope that Hirst will hire him as private secretary, the situation is tragicomic because it is hopeless. Lost in his frozen world, Hirst doesn't listen. Spooner resembles K... who, in Kafka's *The Trial*, tries to impress the assistant-manager by reading him a report while he is only interested in dismantling the balustrade of his desk.

Pinter's plays generate two kinds of laughter: *a liberating laughter*, i.e., a lucid laughter conscious of the pain which is constantly mixed with the foolishness, and *a sneering laughter*, i.e., a blind laughter which considers the characters not as per-

sons but rather as caricatures. It is a defensive laughter that Pinter defines thus: "... where the comic and the tragic (for want of a better word) are closely interwoven, certain members of an audience will always give emphasis to the comic as opposed to the other, for by so doing they rationalise the other out of existence. . . . This indiscriminate mirth . . . represents a cheerful patronage of the characters on the part of the merry-makers, and thus participation is avoided. This laughter is in fact a mode of precaution, a smokescreen, a refusal to accept what is happening as recognisable (which I think it is)"³

In so far as the spectator guesses, recognizes, and accepts the masks that the characters wear, he laughs because the absurdity of their self-justifications is suddenly exposed. He laughs at self-delusion. Tragicomedy derives from the distance between the character as he really is and the false image he tries to make other people believe. The greater that distance, the more it reveals the character's vanity, the more he looks ridiculous. On the contrary, the shorter the distance between his real self and what he believes he is, the more he shows his guilt and pain, the more he looks pitiful. Then laughter stops short. The spectator intuitively senses the character's suffering and the scene becomes tragic. Laughter stops whenever anguish appears. It stops in front of any tormented character seeking help and showing his subconscious open wound.

One rarely finds in Pinter the dramatic irony which allows the spectator to know more than the characters. Sometimes he even knows less than they do. He is confronted with characters who never display any true sense of humour, who never accept smilingly other people's limitations as well as their own. So when a character is unmasked, the spectator inevitably becomes conscious of the repression process. He can't avoid the subconscious depths. A Pinter play will never be a pleasant game as it invites the spectator to laugh at repression and denounces both the ridiculous and tragic aspects of vanity. Comedy is always closely linked to the intuitive knowledge that repression is mixed with pain.

Such is Pinter's relation with his audience. He refers the spectator to his innermost repressed feelings. If the spectator is too

weak to tolerate that confrontation, he is petrified. If, on the contrary, he is able to acknowledge his own weaknesses, he will laugh at the revelation of what is behind the mask. He will be pleased with the breaking of the tacit pact of repression. He won't find it indiscrete or inopportune. The revelation of the subconscious will generate a liberating laughter.

Pinter's audience is finally divided in three groups: those who laugh lucidly, those who laugh blindly and those who are embarrassed, who do not laugh, who even sometimes can't stand other people's laughter. The performance of a Pinter play involves an exchange between two subconscious minds. At such a hidden level, depending on our own individual degree of maturity, on our ability to understand and recognize our own obscure thoughts and feelings, Pinter's work can be interpreted as either a series of painful and ironical grimaces or a series of intelligible images of reality. Each understanding is personal and unique. Some spectators immediately reject a Pinter play. It is a matter of self-protection. In order to preserve a precarious balance, they refuse to hear what transpires throughout the play. They shut themselves off from any experience liable to awaken their own guilt. Often, they counter-attack by blaming Pinter. A dramatist, they say, shouldn't be wily, intent on showing "sick" people and, at the same time, refuse to pass judgement on them. Indeed, Pinter explores his characters' subconscious (without realizing that he is projecting his own guilt) but never clearly commits himself morally. He expresses what he sees and feels without any profession of faith.

Pinter's work is often rejected or misunderstood not only by the public but also by the actors and directors themselves. Any spectator feels the fundamental need to be able to penetrate the secret of the characters. As this need is never fully satisfied in Pinter's plays, the temptation for the director and actors to fill that "void" is strong. Unfortunately, whenever they yield to it, it is always at the expense of the central truth of the play.

The actor is often wrongly convinced that he has to *speak* the text, that he must help "clarify" it. Yet Pinter's writing is never accidental. As a dramatist, he carefully orchestrates words and silences so that his plays may shape an image as complex as his

own experience of reality. Therefore, should such an image receive the slightest alteration, the result is a betrayal of Pinter's vision. The performance then becomes extravagant and contradictory. Any effort in order to show beyond the text, by means of mimic or intonation, a character's motivation, is thus an error. Pinter's dense and concise writing demands that the direction of his plays correspond to his approach as a writer. His vision of reality is inseparable from the manner in which he expresses that reality. The director and the actors must respect his refusal to clarify things and to solve the contradictions which, to him, are precisely the stuff of reality.

Each director has of course his own personal way of interpreting the specific climate of a play and must often, during rehearsal, compromise with his actors. The production of a play is based on a collective effort. Nevertheless, when a play, as is the case with every Pinter play, expresses a vision of reality where contradictions are kept intact, where there are no "explanations," where everything occurs on a double level (that of appearances and that of hidden reactions), an *inner* rehearsal is indispensable.

Pinter's dialogues cover up a "subconversation," minute inner moves. Words carry the weight of a whole underground world. They must be considered as nets through which the meanings may slip and get lost each time a useless gesture or intonation blurs the form that the dramatist has carefully chiselled. The underground world over which Pinter's words are fixed like boards is the characters' secret motivation. It can be detected only by studying the mood of the scene. If one refuses to make the effort of discovering and respecting it, one distorts the underlying meaning of the lines, the confrontation behind the words. What is important is not so much what is being said as the way it has to be said. Above all, it is *the right rhythm* which has to be found, a rhythm which fits the characters' secret emotions.

The director of a Pinter play has to solve a double problem: there is the problem of the rhythm of the word and, at the same time, the problem of the mask that each character wears. The intentionality hidden under the characters' words is revealed by the subtle way in which those words are spoken, *without removing the mask*. When rehearsing the play it is necessary not only

to determine the secret motivation of each character but also to demand from the actors a great economy of movement. The accent has to be put on fixity, muscular control, and on the absence of any unnecessary gestures. The actors must play the part underneath spontaneity and respect meticulously the dramatist's indications, as if they were musicians reading a score. A silence in Pinter's language is indeed comparable to a musical pause.

The actor must keep the spectators on their toes, in a state of uncertainty, attentive to the slightest clue that may reveal subconscious reactions. He mustn't, by superfluous initiatives, glide over the fleeting looks and the subtle confrontations. The opaque clue offered by silence is particularly significant. Pinter asks the spectators to supplement his dialogue with an immediate meaning, grasped intuitively. He asks them to decipher what is implicit in the words and to do it according to their individual reactions to those words. A recognizable current of intentionality circulates through and between the words. Each spectator vaguely identifies it since he also carries it within himself. Pinter's work is intelligible only because of the fugitive introspection we all constantly undertake, more or less unconsciously.

In order to avoid betraying the truth expressed in a Pinter play, one therefore needs to bear in mind two things: on the one hand, the "obscurity" of the play mustn't be dispelled. One must not attempt to clarify or soften the image of reality which is presented to the audience. On the other hand, although the characters' imposture has to be elucidated by the actors during rehearsal, their mask (which is the mask of truth) must never be removed during a performance. It is the mask of self-justification and serves to expose trickery, to demystify motives, to underline the gap which exists between words and deeds.

Pinter isn't committed to any particular political struggle. The image of society that he gives is favourable neither to the established ideology nor to one class as opposed to another. The complexity of life, in Pinter's opinion, can't fit into a political theory. His commitment is expressed through his work on language, the different levels of which he recreates to the point of parody. The slyness of characters such as Goldberg, Edward,

Harry, Willy, Spooner, Hirst, and Robert is, in his eyes, a form of violence, a masquerade, which effectively denounces the mystifications of abstract language and the use of labels and stereotypes in order to devalue people and exclude them.

In Pinter's plays, language is more often than not a means to an end which is domination. Instead of communicating, language subjugates. Evasion and deceit lie hidden under the disguise of logical discourse. Conscious of the incantatory, "Hitlerite" power of words, Pinter shows how they can become instruments of cruelty or be replaced significantly by drum beats, nervous giggles, or inarticulate sounds.

Pinter's writing thus has an indirect yet subversive power. Osborne's or Wesker's characters may favour the cohesion of a hierarchical social system by implying that such a system is liberal, since it authorizes their revolutionary tirades. Pinter's characters, on the contrary, generate bottled-up anxiety. A character who accumulates indictments and value judgements is much less dangerous than someone who disintegrates before our very eyes, according to psychological laws that most of us still refuse to elucidate.

Pinter doesn't show political or social conflicts. But he does allude to the secret motives which engender inhibition and aggressiveness. He doesn't divide society into guilty oppressors and innocent victims. But he does divide it into individuals, couples, families, whose behaviour constitutes society. In his work, only individuals and their reactions, their friction, provocation, resentment and fury, exist. Pinter believes that social violence is due to resentment. So when showing the mask, the game of conventional repression, he is showing a diseased society where angry accusations unleash social conflict, revolution, and war in the same way as they devastate individual lives. And society grants him leave to speak just as princes and kings allowed their jesters to amuse them in the past.

Not always, though. It isn't surprising that in the U.S.S.R., where psychoanalysis is rejected, Pinter's plays are banned. They are officially considered as *too pessimistic*. In October 1976, an amateur performance of *The Caretaker* in Moscow was called off by the authorities at the last minute.⁴ True, Pinter is pessi-

mistic. He is a gifted, talented dramatist who only expresses the darker side of life. His work is the testimony of a truncated vision. He shows the frightening results of subconscious deformation but ignores the joy which rewards conscious elucidation. His work lacks an essential dimension: the contrast between the pain of perversion and the joy of mastered suffering.

Shakespeare's work, for example, expresses a balanced vision of life. It shows how characters suffer, but it also shows perversion for what it is — an error that can be put right, a mess that can be cleared up. There is Othello's mental aberration but there is also Desdemona's tenderness and honesty. Shakespeare shows both the disease and the wisdom. Pinter can only point at vanity without being able to fight it. Quite understandably, the reality that he recreates seems unrelenting, disappointing, and difficult to endure.

Pinter's vision of life is, indeed, pessimistic. Yet it isn't desperate. When Pinter shows that the inner life of his characters is unhealthy, he shows at the same time that it might be made healthier. A clear vision of mental illness helps to cure or at least check that illness. A writer like Pinter has no theory about his work. He follows his intuition about people and the pain they inflict on themselves and one another. He must be judged according to the degree of responsibility he displays in his understanding and expression of that pain. Pinter is pitiless because he is convinced that discretion can only prolong the pain. To him, sentimentality is only a cover-up for brutality. Everything happens as a result of reactions that are camouflaged by language. Words prove to be highly dangerous when used to dominate, to assert one's superiority, to produce theories cut off from reality, windmills working on a lot of hot air. Pinter is an intellectual answering Marguerite Yourcenar's definition: "Every intellectual is limited by his temperament and the resources of his own intellect. The image of reality he offers may be partly inaccurate or false but it is the sincerity of his effort, rather than the result, that counts."⁵

Pinter's work expresses a reality he has experienced and it meets with a powerful response. By focusing attention on subconscious mechanisms, it is both moving and thought-provoking.

It a subtle way, it helps clarify human relations and encourages the progress from intuition to analysis. By giving an embarrassing image of men, it acquires a subversive power. It contributes to the shaking of stereotypes. It generates suspicion about an alienating language. It favours a different consciousness. The images in Pinter's work are indeed oppressive but they may free from anguish those who accept and recognize them. Similar to the images in dreams, they open "inner eyes" and verify the existence of a subconscious reality. It isn't the verification of such a reality which is traumatic but the ignorance of it.

The effort of understanding required by Pinter's work also leads to a beneficial awareness of the importance of symbolic language. The misunderstanding of Pinter's plays is often based on the confusion of oneiric images and realism, on the mistake which consists in reading the text literally without translating its symbolic data, without interpreting the characters' psychopathic symptoms. A misunderstanding is inevitable if the spectator forgets that the characters' behaviour, like any human behaviour, isn't a direct reaction to a stimulus but a symbolic reaction, a transformed reaction, worked out unconsciously.

The deciphering of Pinter's work reveals the essential human problem — the fight between lucidity and blinding affectivity. Pinter's whole work deals with repressed anguish. To analyze his characters is to become conscious of the harm they do to themselves. It is to understand the psychological meaning of their symptoms. Such a diagnosis allows a better knowledge of the vicious circle of repression and helps to avoid it.

Pinter is no guide. He mirrors our subconscious. Yet his work is fuelled by a moral effort, inspired by an appeal to patience. If it has the power to move us, the merit of alerting us, it is because it expresses not only a dramatist's inner life but also the life of each one of us, recognizable by all. By obstinately revealing the truth about our secret pains, by helping us feel the immanent justice of life, Pinter's work awakens our ethical responsibility. It makes us reflect on our own errors and urges us on to fresh efforts of self-control. It represents a salutary landmark in our slow evolutionary ascent to higher levels of consciousness and lucidity.

NOTES

- ¹ WATT/5 Records, Michael Mantler, New York, 1976.
- ² Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (London: Hutchinson, 1964), pp. 337-38. Quoted by Andrew K. Kennedy, *Six Dramatists in Search of a Language* (Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 25.
- ³ Pinter answering Leonard Russel, *Sunday Times*, 14.8.1960.
- ⁴ *Daily Telegraph*, 25.10.1976.
- ⁵ In *Le Monde*, 15 November 1974.