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HAROLD PINTER AND THE POLITICS OF THE ABSURD*

Abstract

The paper is a contribution to the current debate concerning the politics of Harold Pinter's drama. The controversy arose due to the overtly political character of Pinter's plays since the late eighties, and revolves round the question of whether these late plays and sketches embody a fresh departure, as opposed to his earlier, more metaphorical explorations of the human condition, or whether, on the contrary, Pinter's entire dramatic oeuvre has been political through and through from the very start. The latter view is supported in the paper, the author arguing that, whether metaphysical or historical in origin, the meaninglessness of life dramatized in the Theater of the Absurd, where Pinter's early work was placed by Martin Esslin, need not imply the playwright's own consent to it, nor preclude a political interpretation.

Key words: the absurd, drama, Pinter, politics, resistance

On October 17, 2005, responding to the news of the Nobel Prize for Literature being awarded to Harold Pinter, the Culture and Arts section of the Serbian daily *Politika* provided a brief account of the playwright's work, concluding with the following statement: 'Pinter's drama reveals an abyss hidden beneath the surface of everyday communication and *forces us to seek refuge in the depression behind the closed doors of*

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our rooms' (italics added). Uninformed, and badly styled as it is, the remark nevertheless is a distant echo of a certain long established tendency in Pinter's criticism to depoliticize his plays, which, though contested in the interpretations based on Pinter's recent work (whose overt political message, as indeed his lifelong political activism, are incommensurate with any alleged defeatism of his dramatic vision), still persists and against which I am going to argue in this paper.[1]

This apolitical view originated in Martin Esslin's pioneering study *The Theatre of the Absurd*, the name he gave to the revolution in European drama that took place in the 1940's and 50's. The term, borrowed from Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus,* stuck although it soon turned out to have been less than accurate, demanding repeated clarifications and redefinitions. For one thing, in Esslin's use it misleadingly evoked some deep despair on the part of the author suddenly confronting the meaninglessness of life, while leaving in doubt whether this meaninglessness was a social and historical phenomenon or a timeless and immanent feature of human existence. Esslin (1987, 263) seemed to lean toward the latter explanation, claiming, in a chapter on Harold Pinter, that even if social reforms eliminated all the social ills, the absurdity of the human condition would still persist, resulting from 'loneliness, the impenetrable mystery of the universe, death'.

A decade later Esslin modified his view, but his kind of depoliticised absurdist reading of Pinter survived in the new philosophical and linguistic interpretations of his early plays stemming from critical attempts to separate the literature of postmodernism from its modernist predecessors. Indeed, the literary paradigm shift called postmodernism is sometimes represented as including, or overlapping with, the Theatre of

[1] Of course, for one to argue meaningfully for or against the political nature of Pinter's, or any other art, a preliminary agreement is necessary about the definition of the political. This is hardly the case in the ongoing controversy. For one thing, the postmodern deconstruction of the personal/political opposition is disabling rather than helpful. It does not help us decide in what sense Pinter's plays can be said to be political, except for the simple reason that *everything* is political. My own understanding of the term political is not the result of such radical relativism, but it does not necessarily involve direct reference to any political events or programs either. Political theatre is better understood, I think, in Pinter's own words, as exploring relations of power, that is, as dealing 'with the real world', and not with 'the manufactured or fantasy world'. By the political, I understand also a certain attitude to that reality which assumes it to be, to a considerable extent, historical in origin and hence knowable and resistible. Lukacs' name for this worldview is 'developmental' as opposed to the 'static', or a-historical view: in the latter, Heideggerian ideology, reality is not the product of social processes, but is raised to the status of the eternal human condition, inexplicable in its origin and goal, and incapable of improvement. While I find this general definition of the (a)political correct and useful, I would contest Lukacs' wholesale description of the literature of modernism as static, and therefore hopeless. (See Lukacs 1972, 474-489)

the Absurd, and is discussed in similar defining terms. Thus certain philosophical assumptions are seen to underlie both the drama of the absurd and postmodern literature. Though associated with different moods and ethical responses (the postmodern celebration as opposed to the absurdist indifference and despair), postmodernism is seen to be rooted in the radical epistemological skepticism made from the same ingredients as the drama of the absurd: the inaccessibility of objective truth, the collapse of meaning and the breakdown of identity, as well as seen to have the same effect of alienating the individual from his life, of separating language from reality.

Thus Esslin, pointing to the similarities and differences between the existentialist theatre and the theatre of the absurd, states that 'the sense of the metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition, …of the senselessness of life', common to both, is no longer rendered in the form of highly lucid and logically constructed reasoning by the absurdist playwrights: instead of arguing about the absurd, as Sartre or Camus did, they enact it in radically new stage conventions, suggesting, through the logical divorce of the words, the setting and the action, the larger sense of the separation between reality and its representations, between the thought and the world. (Esslin 1987, 23-25)

In a comparable manner, postmodernist literature has been defined as a radicalization of doubt first voiced by the modernist writers. Thus, elaborating on Brian McHale's distinction, stated in his *Postmodern Fiction* (1987), that while modernism was dominated by epistemological questions, postmodernism is concerned with ontological ones, another critic, Randal Stevenson, explains: if modernism's questioning and experiments reflected uncertainty about how reality can be known or assimilated by the mind or the text, postmodernism assumes reality – if it exists at all – to be unknowable, or inaccessible through a language which grew detached from it. In postmodernism, the breach between the word and the world is no longer a matter of doubt but of assumption. Having lost contact with the recognizable world, and surrendered to the competing reality of language, the postmodern writer investigates its capacities for creating ontologically separate, autonomous worlds. In Stevenson's view, Beckett was naturally the first to respond to this autonomy of language, a quotation from *The Unnamable* serving as an illustration: 'it all boils down a question of words… all words, there is nothing else'.[2]

Likewise, in the critical work on Pinter's early drama, the interpretations which used to prevail focused on the alienation from the real, the elusiveness of truth, and the consequent obsession with tragicomic inadequacies of language as its essential themes. Pinter was consigned to

[2] Quoted in Stevenson (1992, 196)

the tradition of the English dramatists of the sixties that Kenneth Tynan (1989, 296), writing in a profile of Tom Stoppard in 1977, wittily called 'smooth' – 'cool, apolitical stylists' – who, in contrast to the 'hairy' camp of 'embattled' and 'socially committed' writers, contented themselves with endless wordplay, words being all that they had left.

This sums up the position of such Pinter scholars as Guido Almansi and Simon Henderson. They introduce their otherwise brilliant analysis of the verbal games in Pinter's early plays by warning in advance that no interpretation – political, psychological, psychoanalytical, or moral – offers a key to their enigma: 'The words of his plays are intransigent and intransitive: they cannot be transferred to other levels of meaning, be they philosophical, ideological, or allegorical'. (Almansi and Henderson 1983, 12) They are only analyzable in terms of verbal strategies the characters resort to in order to satisfy the two primitive timeless urges – fight and flight – that have replaced the desire for truth, authenticity or identity. The irony of this view, even if it were thoroughly accurate, is that it suggests what it explicitly denies: the plays' strong concern with power relations and hence with questions of politics. Yet Almansi and Henderson consistently ignore these hints preferring (which is my second objection to this valuable study on the use of language in Pinter's drama) to treat the abandonment of truth, authenticity or identity as the attitude the author shares with his characters.

Recently, as a result of the new focus on Pinter's political views and their subsequent impact on his art, there have been some revisions of the orthodox view. The speculations revolve round the question whether his late, ostensibly political plays and sketches – such as *One for the Road* (1984), *Mountain Language* (1988), *Party Time* (1991), *The New World Order* (1991), *Ashes to Ashes* (1996) or *Press Conference* (2002) – embody a fresh departure as opposed to his earlier, more metaphorical explorations of the human condition, or whether, on the contrary, his entire dramatic oeuvre has been political through and through from the very start. While among the latter we find John Pilger, Michael Billington, and Charles Grimes, whose views will be discussed forthwith, the traditional absurdist interpretation is restated, (though with tacit disapproval) by such an eminent authority on drama and a spokesman for its social and political function as Rush Rehm. In a recent paper on Pinter, Rehm (2009, 81-82) distinguishes sharply between Pinter's plays written before and since the early eighties. The former are examples of 'depoliticized speech': inhabited by characters incapable of giving any verifiable or plausible accounts of their past, these plays, in his opinion, project the author's own repudiation of history and truth, on whose assumption Rhem correctly insists any political worldview necessarily depends. Rehm writes:

> The pauses and silences that characterize Pinter's dialogue suggest psychological, rather than political, manipulation. Indeed, each character puts forth a different (even self-contradictory) version of what happened before, revealing the past as unstable and memory as unreliable. If history is mere assertion, a matter of convenience, an idiosyncratic story, based on the vagaries of personal memory, then there is no reliable check on the past. However, if the theater is to do the political work of telling the truth, exposing hypocrisy, and breaking through propaganda, then it depends on history having determined facts and at least some objective truths. For this reason alone, the plays that made Pinter a household name offer little firm ground for political insight or protest.

It is, among other questionable assumptions, this tendency, already detected in Almansi and Hederson's study, to attribute the meaninglessness dramatized on the stage to the intellectual and ethical nihilism of the writer, that makes the standard accounts not only of Pinter's early plays but also of the best product of what is confusingly called Theatre of the Absurd less than satisfactory. It is true that in the work of Camus and Beckett there are elements that seem to support the hopeless alienation attributed to them, as any but the very last passages from the *Myth of Sisyphus* would prove decisively, and, even more so, numerous Beckett quotations, steeped in the despair of a secularized Calvinist, who, having faced a world stripped of reassuring certainties is compelled to project, in incessant wordplay, tragic or ludicrous or both at once, his own desperate attempt and failure to make sense of things. Similarly, Pinter's own early statements of artistic principles did involve an explicit repudiation of ideological, political and moral definitions or solutions. Yet, even if it stems from the author's personally experienced crisis, as in Camus and Beckett it undeniably does, the denial of meaning or certitude is not necessarily defeatist or hopeless for the primary and simple reason that the act of writing a major play, however meaningless and despairing as it may sound, is in itself a negation of meaninglessness and despair. And secondly, the problematization of truth on the stage may be seen as a means to an end, a dramatic technique employed to reveal a deeper truth, a less visible reality than that yielded by traditional realistic conventions; so that the separation between language and reality that figures in so many ontological definitions of postmodern literature or absurdist drama, need not refer to any inherent incapacity of language to capture the real, but may be a grotesque reflection of the way it is deliberately used, both on social and political level, to mask or falsify facts[3]; just as the undermin-

[3] Cf. Pinter's own formulation of, and implicit answer to, the dilemma in his 1990 Channel Four talk: 'Does reality essentially remain outside language, separate, obdurate, alien, not susceptible to description? Is an accurate and vital correspondence between what *is* and our perception of it impossible? Or is it that we are obliged to use language only in order to obscure and distort reality – to distort what *is* – to distort

ing of moral and intellectual certitudes may spring from the perception of the way they are connected with oppression. These are strategies, in other words, whose purpose can only be understood within the playwright's entire oeuvre, itself more broadly contextualized within twentieth century drama as a continually modified response to the changing cultural and social background[4].

An example of such broad and flexible understanding is to be found in the introduction to the Penguin edition of Camus' plays, whose few pages offer a sharper insight into the ethical and political implications of Camus' philosophy of the absurd (and thus indirectly a more useful perspective on Pinter) than Esslin's massive book. Quoting, like Esslin, the crucial passages from *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the author, John Cruickshank (1984, 14), immediately notes that the discovery of the absurd – of a life rendered suddenly meaningless, 'through experiences that defy rational explanations or seem to confound and controvert our sense of fair play, or desire for happiness, our need for pattern and purpose in human existence' – is merely a starting point, an initial insight forcing the discoverer to face moral dilemmas and practical choices which must be considered in any valid account of his particular kind of 'absurdism'. It was a challenge for Camus, too, and while his own immediate response was tragic stoicism, the first literary embodiment of the absurd were *Caligula* and *The Outsider*: the cruelty and instinctual hedonism of the two respective protagonists being both versions of one, more or less negative, attitude: they are both 'forms of consent, or that form of consent called indifference'. But Camus soon moved beyond consent and indifference, his own deep instinctive humanity inspiring his lifelong efforts to replace them with rebellion and refusal. This involved a shift of focus in his understanding of the absurd, the significant absurd no longer residing in the unalterable human condition, 'with its inexorable, mathematical certainty of death', or 'arbitrary suffering caused by flood or earthquake', but resulting from a socially engineered, deliberate waste of human potential. 'Do you know', Cruickshank quotes Camus' dismayed question in *Actuelle II* , 'that over a period of twenty-five years, between 1922 and 1947, 70 million Europeans – men, women and children – have been up-

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what *happens* – because we fear it? We can't face the dead. But we must face the dead, because they die in our name.' (Quoted in Billington 2007, 323)

[4] This coincides with Raymond Williams' view (1968) of the twentieth century successive theatrical revolutions, from naturalism to expressionism (his own, much more precise, term for the Theatre of the Absurd), to social expressionism, to a new wave of naturalism, as a search for ever new sets of dramatic conventions to embody a changing structure of feeling: the latter, in all its major dramatic modes, Williams identifies with a single, continuing passion for truth. See especially the Introduction (Williams 1968, 1-14) and Conclusion (Williams 1968, 381-401) in his *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*.

rooted, deported and killed?'[5] It was, in fact, in the concrete reality of the Nazi rise to power that Camus realized 'that to establish the absurdity of life cannot be an end in itself, but only a beginning' – the first recognition that human beings are victims of an existential dilemma. He perceived too, in the particular context of the Nazi Occupation, that nihilism might be the common philosophical premise for him *and* the Nazi ideology. But while he shared, in an abstract way, certain German thinkers' skepticism of moral absolutes, he found 'their resolve to escape the apparent senselessness of life by means of force, hardness, cunning, national aggrandizement' to be emotionally untenable. If the nihilistic logic lead the Nazis to the Final Solution, for Camus the dilemma required the very opposite – to join the French Resistance Movement.

Thus what John Cruickshank's introduction to Camus' plays demonstrates is that even a fundamentally non-political, metaphysical and trans-historical understanding of the absurd need not preclude moral choice, or political action, it may actually make it indispensable. 'We have not risen above our human condition', Cruickshank quotes from one of Camus' essays, 'but… we must refuse to accept it and do what is necessary to eradicate it. Our task as men, is to find some formulas to pacify the great anguish of human kind… make justice a possibility in an obviously unjust world, render happiness meaningful to peoples poisoned by the sufferings of our age.'[6]

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Pinter's life and work are another magnificent example of refusal and rebellion, not, as I will argue, against the inherent absurdity of the human condition, but against the historical and social forces that degrade and render it meaningless: his use of the 'absurd' demonstrating not so much the absence of absolute truths, as the way traditional sacred 'truths' of the West have become interwoven into the tapestries of lies to cover injustice, crime, cruelty, and hence requiring to be deconstructed and rejected.[7] The exhaustive list of Pinter's public denunciations of the leading

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[5] Quoted in Cruickshank (1984, 15)

[6] Ibid.

[7] In this sense Pinter continues the tradition of such uncompromising critics of European colonialism as Aimé Césaire. His *Discourse on Colonialism* is an eloquent, explicit and passionate exposure of the way European Christian priests, philosophers of pseudo-Humanism and Enlightenment and art historians managed to represent racial exploitation, slavery and genocide as fulfilling their highest philanthropic principles. With its 'very distinguished, very humanistic, very Christian bourgeois of the twentieth century, that without being aware of it, has a Hitler inside him', and only rails against him because in the end 'what he cannot forgive Hitler is not the crime in itself, but the crime against white man' – Europe at present time [1972, when the book was

western powers – for their arrogance, brutality and above all their hypocrisy in appealing to democratic and/or Christian principles for an alibi – would be too long to reproduce here. But a reminder seems to be necessary that his political dissent did not, as is often believed, start in his mid-career, but was from the very beginning of his adult life the very mode of his being. From his first act of resistance, in 1949, when at the age of 18, as part of his opposition to the Cold War, he declined to comply with the National Service program, over the following decades, when he raised his voice against the murder of the democratically elected President Allende and 20 000 other innocent Chileans, and continued, in the eighties, to support liberation movements such as the Nicaraguan Sandinistas, to his very last years when he raised his voice against the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, the US war in Afghanistan and the invasion of Iraq, blaming, at the same time, during a 2003 public reading, 'millions of totally deluded American people for not staging a mass revolt,'[8] and repeatedly exhorting his European audiences to 'resist the power of the United States'[9] – Pinter, according to John Pilger (2005) was not only one of the very few among the literati who have spoken out, but was also exceptional in his accurate understanding of the real motives underlying contemporary political realities and of the false rhetoric used to misrepresent them.

> Almost single-handedly, [Pilger writes] he restored 'imperialism' to the political lexicon. Remember that no commentator used this word any more; to utter it in a public place was like shouting 'fuck' in a convent. Now you can shout it everywhere and people will nod their agreement; …He described correctly the crushing of Nicaragua, the blockage against Cuba, the wholesale killing of Iraqi and Yugoslav civilians as imperialist atrocities.

It is, above all, this understanding that the wider responsibilities of writers are identical with those of ordinary citizens, and include an obligation to exercise acts of critical scrutiny upon the language used in political propaganda, that lead Pilger to sum up Pinter's merits in a single phrase – 'truth-teller'.

Now it would be very strange if such a committed truth-teller, political dissenter and moral rebel should make the demonstration of the absence of truth or the impossibility of verification an ultimate purpose of his drama, unless we assumed a schizoid inner division, his art cultivating

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written] 'has reached an incredibly high level of barbarism, surpassed only by the barbarism of the United States.' (Césaire 1972, 36-47)

[8] Pinter, quoted in Chrisafis and Imogen (2003)

[9] In the Europe Theatre Prize Acceptance Speech in Turin, in 2006. He said on that occasion that he would 'like to see Europe echo the example of Latin America in withstanding the economic and political intimidation of the United States. This is a serious responsibility for Europe and all its citizens'. Quoted in Michael Billington (2007, 428)

philosophical and moral versions of consent and indifference so eloquently disparaged in his public pronouncements and activities. John Pilger refuses to draw this dividing line. When in the text already quoted above he refers to Pinter's play *Ashes to Ashes,* it is not in terms of the unverifiable status (the primary concern of critics of postmodernist orientation) of Rebecca's confession to Devlin of a love affair with a sexual sadist whose work as a 'guide' involved walking down a platform and tearing all the babies from the arms of their screaming mothers – a personal memory, a confabulation, something that happened to a friend? – but as an example of Pinter's use of 'images of Nazism and the Holocaust', to warn against similar 'repressive, cynical and indifferent acts of murder by the clients of arms-dealing imperialist states such as the United States and Britain.' (Pilger 2005)

The reluctance, which I share with Pilger, to separate Pinter the citizen's and Pinter the dramatist's views of truth or reality may sound like a perverse disregard of the author's own explicit insistence on such a separation in his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech. I am referring to his important qualification of the former views, stated in the Letter to the Editor of *The Play's the Thing* in October 1958[10], concerning the underlying principles of his drama. This is how Pinter opened his 2005 Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech:

> In 1958 I wrote the following:
> There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false.
> I believe that these assertions still make sense and do still apply to the exploration of reality through art. So as a writer I stand by them but as a citizen I cannot. As a citizen I must ask: What is true? What is false?

This correction should be understood primarily as a welcome warning against the misuse, by the reactionary political right, of the postmodern intellectuals' radical relativism, and an urge perhaps, to detach himself from their increasingly evident alliance. Yet, laconic as it is, the statement is in danger of being misunderstood as confirming the gap dividing the artistic from political commitments, the artist's from the citizen's kinds of truth. I believe though that rather than positing two completely different goals, Pinter is merely insisting on different means used in pursuit of the same end – which is the accurate perception of reality. For if, as he immediately proceeds to point out, 'truth in drama is elusive', but 'the search for it is… compulsive', it is 'clearly what drives the endeavour' – then his drama may very well be said, in a paraphrase of J. C. Ransom's definition of poetry (2004, 107), to initiate an intense, as

[10] Reproduced under the title 'On *The Birthday Party* II' (Pinter 1999, 15-18)

yet inarticulate experience which may conclude in an articulation of a truth leading to political action.[11] This, in fact, is very close to the comment Michael Billington offers of his own selection from Pinter's 1958 letter, much longer than the two sentences Pinter quoted and left only partially explained in his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech. It is a condensed passage, containing in a nutshell Pinter's early dramatic credo; to appreciate fully the acuteness of Billington's response to it, analogous to Cruickshank's interpretation of Camus' philosophy of the absurd, I reproduce it in its entirety.

> There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false. The assumption that to verify what has happened or what is happening presents few problems I take to be inaccurate. A character on the stage who can present no convincing argument or information as to his past experience, his present behaviour or his aspirations nor give a comprehensive analysis of his motives is as legitimate and worthy of attention as one who can alarmingly do all these things. The more acute the experience, the less articulate the expression…To supply an explicit moral tag to an evolving and compulsive dramatic image seems to me facile, impertinent and dishonest. When this takes place it is not theatre but a crossword puzzle. The audience holds the paper. The play fills in the blanks. Everyone's happy. There has been no conflict between audience and play, no participation, nothing has been exposed. We walk out as we went in[12].

There are two major themes in the passage, and Billington addresses both. The first, and less significant in his view, regarding the relativity of experience, Billington immediately relates to the philosophy underlying absurdist drama, but only to notice how Pirandello evolved from it a defeatist metaphysics that eventually lead him towards the nostalgia of Fascism, in stark contrast to Pinter's use of the impossibility of verification '…to assert the need for active resistance of social orthodoxy.' (Billington 2007, 94)

This is an extremely helpful insight, yet it is the latter part of Pinter's statement about the conflict *between* the audience and the play that Billington finds most revealing. To unsettle and disturb the audience has been the job of all great dramatists, from Ibsen to Brecht, he notes, but Pinter 'is radically different in his belief that the meaning of the play should evolve from an image, and that the dramatist should leave some of the clues in the crossword puzzle open.' This does not preclude the dramatist having strong political convictions, though. Rather than signi-

[11] The relation I suggest between dramatic experience and (political) truth in Pinter's plays may be said to parallel the relation Ransom establishes between poetic perception and the statement of (scientific) idea: 'For scientific predication concludes an act of attention but miraculism [metaphor] initiates one.'

[12] Pinter, 1958 letter to Peter Wood, quoted in Billington (2007, 94).

fying Pinter's own radical skepticism, the banishment of the omniscient author, along with biographical specifics, consequential speech and fixed conclusions – are all, according to Billington (2007, 95), new, revolutionary strategies for transferring moral responsibility to the audience.

It would be possible to find in Pinter's subsequent commentaries and interviews a much more unequivocal confirmation, than in the passage examined by Billington, of the political aspects of his early plays, particularly *The Birthday Party*. But before I reach for the author's own statement of intention – not always a reliable witness, as we all know well – I would like to produce intrinsic evidence, by examining some of the clues from the play itself.

The *Birthday Party* has by now earned the status of a Pinter classic, sharing with most of his early plays the obsessive exploration of what has become known as a Pinteresque situation, constituting, as he claimed in the fifties, the archetypal origin of all drama – that of two people in a room and a knock on the door (See, for example, Pinter 1999, 16). It introduces emissaries of some mysterious, menacing force, who wreak havoc upon the life of the protagonists, but remain undefined to the end of the play. Thus the two sinister strangers from *The Birthday Party*, Goldberg and McCann, possess no past, no identity or clearly stated motives, nor does their victim, the shabby, sordid, indolent recluse Stanley, whose one virtue may have been be his stubborn refusal to give up his seedy privacy, and enter the larger world. The pair subject him to a grotesquely nonsensical interrogation, and possibly torture in the course of the birthday party they insist they organize for him despite his claims that it is not his birthday, until in Act III he emerges reduced to an uncomprehending, speechless, catatonic wreck and is taken to an unspecified institution to be remodeled into what Althusser would call a 'good subject'.

Who Goldberg and McCann are is not really such an insoluble enigma as it appeared to its first audiences, either brought up to expect Shavian explanations, or anxious to detach themselves from the disturbing experience Pinter asked them to live through – which is precisely the reason he gave, in the already quoted letter (Pinter 1999, 17) for choosing to ignore their appeals for clarification.[13] Critics kept guessing, most of them missing the point. For Martin Esslin, writing in 1981, the play was 'a metaphor for the inexplicable uncertainties and mysteries of the human condition itself, with its transitions from one stage of existence to another, youth to age, life to death.'[14] The agents of this remorseless abstract doom, Goldberg and McCann, are never associated, despite their strikingly similar methods of interrogation, with the Gestapo hearings, in 1958 still not far back in the past. Instead, Esslin describes them quite implau-

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[13] Pinter writes: 'When a character cannot be comfortably defined or understood in terms of the familiar, the tendency is to perch him on a symbolic shelf, out of harm's way. Once there, he can be talked about, but need not be lived with'.

[14] '*Note* by Martin Esslin, editor of the *Kanyon Review'*, quoted in Pinter (1999, 13)

sibly as 'the archetypal Jewish swindler' and the 'equally archetypal Irish terrorist.' It seems though that in reducing them to timeless archetypes, or rather stereotypes, it is Esslin himself who is being guilty of reactionary political stereotyping. For Goldberg and McCann are clearly the new dramatic incarnations of Ben and Gus, two paid killers from *The Dumb Waiter,* and along with them should more plausibly be seen as a powerful dramatic example of the divide-and-rule tactics whereby the dispossessed or exploited marginal groups are pacified by being offered a chance to exercise power on a victim even more helpless than themselves. Thus Gus, the less completely adjusted to the agreed system, ends up the target his partner finds himself aiming at in the final tableau before the curtain falls. McCann also displays too many traces of nonconformity himself to be able to perform the job of curing Stanley from the same flaw with an unruffled conscience. Hence the senior partner's exhortation to 'Play up, play up, and play the game' is addressed to him though, of course, it extends to the chief spoilsport Stanley.

The nature of the game is clear enough, even if we miss the clue we get if we recognize the quotation from a jingoist poem *Vita Lampada*, by Sir Henry Newbolt, a distinguished English lawyer, poet and prose writer, and a champion of British Imperialism.[15] Not only the purpose but the continuity of the game is traced with acute, uncompromising historical sense in Pinter's drama from the early *Dumb Waiter, The Birthday Party* and *The Hothouse* (if *The Hothouse* had been performed at the time, with its scenes of shocking abuse at a psychiatric institution, particularly the use of electrodes in curing dissent, it would have made the politics of *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Birthday Party* more readily recognizable), to *The New World Order* and *Party Time*. For in *The New World Order* the pairs of paid killers from the early plays reappear as Des and Lionel, two contemporary torturers, this blending of characters suggesting the continuity of methods from Auschwitz to Guantanamo. Not more than a brief sketch, the play shows them savoring the gruesome job they are preparing to perform on a mute, hooded victim, until, in its climax, one of them bursts into obscene tears at the purity of his mission, which is 'to keep the world clean for democracy'. *Party Time* in its turn ushers us into the world of their hitherto invisible employers, the smug, incredibly rich bourgeoisie, their frivolous talk of exclusive new health clubs and sexual gossip drowning the signs that something sinister is taking place in the

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[15] It is in fact on the basis of this poem that its author, Sir Henry Newbolt, earned his reputation in 1897. *Vita Lampada* is about a schoolboy cricketer who grows up to fight in colonial Africa – in the poem the cause is left conveniently unspecified. There, in the panic of the battle and facing death, the boy is stirred to heroic action and self-sacrifice by schoolday memories of a critical moment in the cricket playground, when 'His captain's hand on his shoulder smote' and he urged him to 'Play up! Play up! And play the game!'" See Lena Petrović (2010, 47-8)

streets – the round ups which a high-ranking government official and his thug and admirer, Tracy, are organizing in the interest of the 'cast iron' peace they pledge, their fists closed, teeth clenched, to give to the world. The game, consisting again in keeping safely indifferent to, or at least silent about, the atrocities taking place just round the corner, is nearly spoiled by one person, Tracy's wife; but her insistent questions about her missing brother remain without an answer, and she is soon bullied into silence.[16]

So who are Goldberg and McCann? I think we can now legitimately look back to Pinter's own explanation in a letter he sent to the director of the first production of *The Birthday Party*, but agreed to have published only a quarter of a century later: 'Goldberg and McCann? Dying, rotting, scabrous, decayed spiders, the flower of our society. They know their way around. Our mentors. Our ancestry. Them. Fuck 'em.'[17] While making clear at last that they are not to be understood as avatars of some metaphysical absurd, Pinter's impatient, colloquial dismissal of Goldberg and McCann suggests also that his plays are not so much about the oppressors as, more importantly, about the need for resistance and the need to understand why, as a rule in his plays, it fails.[18] One learns a lot by focusing on Stanley's blunders in a fight with 'socio-religious monsters', as Pinter also dubbed his torturers in the same letter: among other things, that in refusing to follow the romantic pattern of the idealized hero of resistance confronting the villain society, but portraying Stanley as a 'quagmire of delusion', lacking 'any adult comprehension', using 'pretence and bluff against his persecutors' and so collapsing soon despite the nonconformist fiber he also possesses – Pinter was not writing an apolitical play, as some commentators have claimed[19], but realistically assessing and

[16] Responding to the general complaint that the play was 'so glumly and glibly predictable that you felt like screaming,' Michael Billington (2007, 330-331) noted aptly: 'What was depressing was how few critics stopped to ask whether there might be some truth in Pinter's central point that bourgeois privilege increasingly coexists with greater investment of power in the state and that our lives are more and more governed by a narcissistic materialism in which it is uncool to get het up about injustice and corruption'. The growth, he goes on to add, of this 'myopic, and self-preoccupied wealthy elite', that is 'becoming dangerously apparent in Britain' is 'one of the preconditions of Fascism'.

[17] Harold Pinter, 'On *The Birthday Party* I': Letter to Peter Wood, director of the *Birthday Party*, written just before rehearsals started for the first production of the play in April 1958, quoted in Pinter (1999, 10)

[18] The exceptions are his women – like Ruth from *The Homecoming*, Flora from *A Slight Ache*, or Rebecca from *Ashes to Ashes* – who in the end prevail over, or at least learn to withstand, their macho husbands' and lovers' power.

[19] By Michael Karwowski (2003, 291) for example. In his 'Pinter – A political playwright?', he uses Pinter's refusal to cast Stanley in the heroic mould as a counter-argument against Billington's political interpretation of the play:

condemning (and perhaps trying to awaken) the moral awareness of the increasing majority of contemporary citizens. For it is through unflinching self-examination and repudiation of comfortable falsehoods that the larger-scale assaults suggested by the two thugs' eruption into Stanley's petty world have a chance of being ultimately withstood. If Stanley, as Pinter (1999, 10)) goes on to remark, 'had only cottoned on to the fact that he need only admit to himself what he actually is and is not – then Goldberg and McCann would not have paid their visit, or if they had, the same course of events would have by no means been assured.'

This, on the other hand, should not be interpreted as Pinter's naiveté concerning the unprecedented political and military influence of the conspiring rich. As proof to the contrary, one need only read an episode reported by Pilger (2005) in 'The Silence of the Writers':

> In March 2006, when he was presented with the European Theatre Prize in Turin, Pinter said he intended to spend the rest of his life railing against the United States. Surely, asked chair Ramona Koval (…) he was doomed to fail? 'O yes – me against the United States!' he said, laughing along with the audience at the absurdity, before adding: 'But I can't stop reacting to what is done in our name, and what is being done in the name of freedom and democracy is disgusting.'

Pinter's self-deprecating exclamation concerning his chances of success against the vast 'combine' of US power, in conjunction with his absolute conviction that resistance is imperative, also reflects the peculiar moral stance of his political drama, whether early or late. Its affinity with the kind of humanism forged out of the nihilistic premise by the great 'absurdist' authors has been noted in the first single monograph to deal with the politics of Pinter's plays, Charles Grimes' *A Silence Beyond Echo***.** While demonstrating how ultimately pessimistic Pinter's political theatre is – 'the revolutionaries are all silenced', whereas their opponents are 'articulate, ruthless, and impregnable' – Grimes (2005, 32) argues that the absence of optimistic outcomes does not prevent his plays from serving as an example for political action. He also references Beckett's famous 'I can't go on. I must go on', to claim, in an echo of John Cruickshank's interpretation of Camus' existentialist ethics, that *even though* political resistance may make no change, the alternative, to do nothing, is immoral. For, as he contends in a succinct summary of Pinter's vision, "ethics must exist without any assumption of efficacy." (Grimes 2005, 49)

"Thus, with *The Birthday Party* (1958), for instance, Mr Billington tells us that 'the power of the play resides precisely in the way Pinter takes stock ingredients of popular drama and invests them with political resonance'. …This is in spite of the fact that Pinter is…also quoted from a 1960 interview: 'In contemporary drama so often we have a villain society and the hero the individual. And a lot of people have said that about *The Birthday Party*. Well, it isn't like that ... there's no question of hero and villain.'"

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Лена Петровић, Ниш

ХАРОЛД ПИНТЕР И ПОЛИТИЧКА УПОТРЕБА АПСУРДА

Резиме

Текст представља прилог расправи о политичком значењу и тумачењу Пинтерових драма. Подстакнута политичким активизмом Харолда Пинтера и недвосмислено политичким садржајима његових дела насталих у периоду од касних осамдесетих, ова контроверза усмерена је пре свега на питање да ли ове позне драме и скечеви представљају суштински заокрет у односу на Пинтерове ране, метафоричне драматизације људске егзистенције, или је, напротив, његов целокупни опус од самог почетка прожет политиком. Аутор овог рада заступа потоњи став, настојећи да докаже да без обзира да ли му је узрок метафизички или историјски, бесмисао приказан у Позоришту апсурда, којем по мишљењу Мартина Еслина припадају и Пинтерове ране драме, не подразумева нужно прихватање апсурда од стране самог писца, већ представља почетну спознају која налаже отпор и побуну, те према томе не искључује политичко тумачење. Такво тумачење Пинтерових драма намеће се утолико пре што се у привидно мистериозној ситуацији, наизглед непрепознатљивим ликовима, и језичком бесмислу, ипак јасно може препознати репресивни сценарио по коме се одигравају историјске и личне драме нашег века, као и реторика која га маскира.

Key words: апсурд, драма, Пинтер, политика, отпор