PETER RABY

# Introduction

Putting together a collection of essays about a living writer carries a special sense of excitement, even danger. Harold Pinter, at the age of seventy, is still extremely active, and prominent, as a playwright, as the double bill of *The Room*, his first play, and *Celebration*, his latest, at the Almeida Theatre in spring 2000, demonstrated: he also directed both plays. His acting career continues, for example with his role of Sir Thomas Bertram in *Mansfield Park*. Later in the year, *Remembrance of Things Past*, a stage version of *The Proust Screenplay*, was produced at the Royal National Theatre. Meanwhile, there is a steady stream of productions of earlier plays, written over a period of more than forty years, both in English and in translation, which ensures a continuing refreshment and reappraisal of the whole range of Pinter's work. Pinter the dramatist is protean: his writing moulds itself apparently effortlessly to the forms of radio and television, as well as to the stage, and several plays have been successful in all three media. Major plays – major, in terms of length – have been successfully adapted for film, and Pinter has had an additional career as an outstanding screenwriter, perhaps most notably in conjunction with Joseph Losey. He was a poet before he became a playwright, and has written a novel and a substantial number of essays. His career as a professional actor began in 1951, and as a director in 1959. The problem he poses is both where to begin, and where to end.

Pinter is, by purely statistical reckoning, one of the most widely performed and best-known dramatists in the contemporary world. He has also become an academic subject. There is an active Pinter Society in the United States, producing an annual *Pinter Record*. There are Pinter conferences, and an increasingly formidable body of Pinter studies. British playwrights have become more used to being part of the canon, a literary phenomenon of the later twentieth century. In the 1960s, a search for the individually published plays of Pinter and Stoppard in the main catalogue of Cambridge University Library would draw a blank; they could be tracked down to the handwritten supplementary catalogue: the clear assumption was that individual plays

were ephemeral, and certainly not material for serious enquiry. Now that drama and theatre have become recognised and valued areas of study, in spite of occasional disparaging comments about 'soft' subjects by the relentlessly philistine, Pinter is unequivocally a focus for a wide range of critical approaches. Pinter's presence on the syllabus of, for example, Advanced Level Theatre Studies has meant that generations of English sixth-formers have been introduced to his distinctive voice; and his plays are frequently and widely performed in schools and universities, ensuring that he is very far from being simply the province of older theatre-going generations. In Sir Peter Hall's recent Clark Lectures at Cambridge, on the idea of the mask, he concluded by discussing the plays of Beckett and Pinter, in a series of reference points that stretched, in terms of dramatic writing, from Aeschylus to Shakespeare and Mozart. There seemed no incongruity, only continuity.

If Pinter was embraced warmly, and relatively early by academia, he has been treated a little more erratically by theatre critics. *The Birthday Party* foxed them in 1958, with the striking exception of Harold Hobson, who had had the benefit of seeing *The Room* in Bristol. *The Birthday Party* was a new kind of theatrical writing, posing challenges for director, actors and audiences; though audiences at Cambridge and Oxford, uninfluenced by any critical lead, responded positively. Over the years, the reviewers' response has adjusted, both to 'early' Pinter, and to successive shifts and developments in his work. Even some of Pinter's most fervent admirers have been wrong-footed by specific later plays, which for different reasons have seemed uncharacteristic, or out of key. Michael Billington, for example, examines, in *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter*, why he himself was so hostile initially to *Betrayal*, and suggests that he failed to realise at a first viewing that the play is about, in Peter Hall's phrase, self-betrayal. Pinter's plays share the nature of innovative work in not necessarily revealing themselves at first sight: a dangerous trait in the ephemeral world of theatre, where first impressions often dictate success or rapid failure. Critics, reviewers and academics constructed a vocabulary to help us deal with the elusive quality in Pinter: Pinteresque, the Pinter pause, comedy of menace. Pinter went on evolving, ignoring the categories. If *Betrayal* seemed a sharp swerve of direction, the overtly political plays such as *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language* threw down another kind of gauntlet; then there is the different mode of *A Kind of Alaska*, and the shift apparent in *Ashes to Ashes*; while *Celebration* seemed to provoke bafflement in certain quarters by being so blatantly comic. Pinter is a playwright who constantly reinvents himself. That he remains so open to new forms, and voices, in theatre was demonstrated by his unequivocal support, together with Edward Bond, for Sarah Kane, when her first play *Blasted* was viciously dismissed by the London critics.

Audiences, readers, theatre critics, academics – overlapping categories – have particular reasons for responding to and appreciating Pinter's work, and the man who writes, directs and performs it. There is no doubting the recognition that Pinter attracts: international awards and honorary degrees form part of that recognition; and you only need to be present at a Pinter reading, for example at the second Pinter Festival in Dublin in 1997, to be aware of the immediacy of response for a young audience. But Pinter also seems to exist, in England at any rate, as a separate phenomenon, a special construct labelled 'Pinter'. This may be just a particular example of English anti-intellectualism, in which journalists practise the time-honoured sport of putting the boot in to anyone who is too successful, but especially anyone who is successful in the 'high' arts of the theatre, or literature. This practice is far less prevalent in the United States, or the rest of Europe. It may also reflect another English trait, a distrust of anyone who is not a politician or a political commentator yet who takes politics seriously, and is prepared to shoot from the hip. Pinter has never shrunk from taking up causes, and from acting, and speaking, publicly for what he believes to be right. His unequivocal stance in recent years has ensured not just a high profile, but intermittent sniper fire.

This collection of essays does not attempt to be exhaustive. A much larger book would be necessary. A number of considerations informed the choice of topics and authors. It centres on Pinter's writing for the theatre, the most enduring and accessible form of his writing, and also, by its nature, the most open to reinterpretation. There are some inevitable gaps, for example in Pinter's writing specifically for radio or television, and this is partly deliberate, since the performance aspect of those events is difficult to recapture, unlike the relative accessibility of film. The writers include both academics and theatre professionals (in any event not mutually exclusive categories), and in many of the essays there is a strong explicit or implicit sense of the performance dimension. The collection acknowledges the worldwide interest in Pinter, with chapters on Pinter in specifically Russian and Irish contexts, and by the inclusion of authors from the United States, Spain and Israel, as well as from Ireland and the United Kingdom. Some of the essayists have been writing on Pinter for many years, and attended the first productions of the early plays; some have come to respond to his work comparatively recently. We share a common enthusiasm, but not, I hope, an undiscriminating one. One factor struck me, as editor: even where topics were quite tightly defined, the writers tended to move, at some point, towards an overview, suggesting that Pinter's dramatic writing has, collectively, a strong coherence, a sense of continuity and evolution, and forms a body of work that invites constant re-evaluation. This collection seeks to offer one such set of perspectives.

## Note on the second edition

For this revised second edition of the *Companion*, three new chapters have been added, by Mary Luckhurst, John Stokes and Steve Waters, each of which responds in different ways to the writer, to his work, to his influence and to his own powerful presence on both theatre and public stages. Other chapters have been extended, most notably those by Charles Evans on 'Pinter in Russia', Anthony Roche on 'Pinter and Ireland' and Harry Derbyshire on 'Pinter as Celebrity'. The public perception of Pinter has shifted significantly in the last seven years, in response to his illness and to his winning of the Nobel Prize for Literature, the most conspicuous of a steady stream of national and international awards and distinctions. His contributions as actor, film-writer and poet have been extensively recognised and celebrated, as the citation for the Nobel Prize demonstrated. There have been radio and television programmes devoted to him, and many new productions of his plays, including striking revisitings of much of his early work. The integrity, prescience and fierce consistency of his political statements seem all the more striking in the context of the twenty-first century than they did at the close of the twentieth. Pinter's voices are various, entirely distinctive and compelling.

The contributions to this volume were all completed before Harold Pinter's death on Christmas Eve, 2008, and it was thought best to leave them unaltered. The immediate tributes, showing an unusual degree of unanimity, acknowledged Pinter's stature as Britain's greatest living dramatist, and the extent of his significance in the context of British and world culture. They also provided moving evidence of his loyalty and generosity. 'Allow the love of the good ghost. They possess all that emotion trapped.' (*No Man's Land*)

I

# Text and Context

# 1

AUSTIN QUIGLEY

# Pinter, politics and postmodernism (1)

Pinter's plays have fascinated many people over the years for many reasons, not the least of which is their capacity to resist large-scale generalisation. The emphasis in the plays on complex and diverse local detail makes it very difficult to argue that the plays as a group exemplify the large general truths of any existing theory about the nature of society, personality, culture, spirituality, anthropology, history or anything else of similar scope. This is not to say that insights into the plays cannot be derived from all these sources. Indeed they can, as several astute Pinter critics have demonstrated. The trouble is that these various perspectives serve best as ways into the texture of the plays rather than as summations of the implications of that texture, and if excessively relied upon, they begin to obscure what they seek to clarify.

Stoppard uses an illuminating phrase to characterise the baffling experiences of the leading characters in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* when he describes them as constantly being intrigued without ever quite being enlightened.[1] That sense of being fascinated by something we do not fully understand is, as Van Laan has argued, an irreducible aspect of the experience of Pinter's plays, and we have, I think, over the years come to recognise that the role of the critic is to increase the sense of enlightenment without diminishing the sense of intrigue.[2] To insist on defending the intrigue against any enlightenment is, of course, to reduce all experience of a play to the first experience, to insist on each play's inviolable particularity and thus effectively to abandon the task of criticism. To insist upon full enlightenment is to erase the sense of intrigue, to allow the critical perspective to supplant the play, and thus effectively to undermine the play's capacity to function as a Pinter play. What we appear to need from criticism is the kind of enlightenment that clarifies and enhances the subtlety of the intrigue rather than the kind that, in explaining the nature of the intrigue, explains it away.

These issues are not without their significance for the work of any playwright, but there is something about Pinter plays that makes the balance between intrigue and enlightenment particularly difficult for criticism to get

right. And Pinter's intermittent forays into the realm of political commentary have served to make it even more difficult.[3] Should we adopt the political guidance he sometimes offers us and announce that we have finally found the enlightening larger picture of which all the plays' complexities are simply constituent parts, or should we be defending his early plays against their author's belated desire to convert them into illustrations of political oppression and abuse of authority?

Before we surrender to the urge to reinvent phrases like 'the personal is the political', we should remember that response to such slogans in the past has included lengthy arguments about the meaning of the terms 'personal' and 'political'. But just as important is the often overlooked issue of the meaning of the word 'is'. Do we mean it in the sense that 2 + 2 *is* 4, a sense of total equivalence, or do we mean it in the sense of Pinter *is* tall, i.e. he is *among other things* tall? Is all of the personal political, most of it, or just some of it? As far as Pinter's plays are concerned, it is important to note that even as he begins to argue in the 1980s that many of his earlier plays were, indeed, political, he exempts from this claim *Landscape*, *Silence*, *Old Times* and *Betrayal*.[4] And if whole plays can be exempted from the claim that the personal is the political, it would follow that whatever the political component of the other plays, they are not necessarily only or even centrally political.

Leaving to one side Pinter's comments on these matters, it is well to remind ourselves of the way in which literary theory, in one of its rare enlightened phases, used to draw attention to the dangers of excessive explanatory claims. One discipline or mode of enquiry after another was able to make foundational claims on the basis of the argument that its material and concerns had a bearing on almost every aspect of our lives. Thus it could be claimed that everything is a matter of history, or that everything is a matter of economics, or that everything is a matter of psychology, or that everything is a matter of language and so on. The recognition that these claims can be made with equal conviction and justification by a variety of equally convinced groups should temper the enthusiasm for currently competing claims that everything is a matter of politics, or of power, or of gender, or of race, or of culture, or of the postmodern era, or of any other factor that helps constitute the multifaceted complexity of our lives.

Though such enthusiasm should be tempered, it should not, of course, be eradicated because all of these frameworks have something to contribute – but preferably if developed in the context of what the other ones might also, in varying degrees, have to offer. Pinter's 1980s enthusiasm for the politics of art should likewise be neither overvalued nor undervalued. It simply asks to be put in the appropriate perspective, along with his 1960s efforts to distance each from the other.[5] The trajectory of Pinter's avowed interest in political

issues seems to have become one of oscillation between undervaluing and overvaluing the political, an oscillation fortunately by no means as visible in the plays themselves, for reasons that can be abstracted from his political comments.

Pinter's initial hostility towards politics was largely a hostility towards institutional politics and politicians because of their tendency to indulge in reductive social analysis.[6] Built into institutional politics, he felt, was the need to establish positions and programmes that could earn widespread support among large numbers of very different people. Such procedures require simplification and a search for common denominators. Politicians consequently tend to display a readiness to settle for what is currently possible rather than to register a sustained determination to deal with all the imponderables of the actual or to confront the intractability of the necessary. Pinter's early refusal to get involved in political matters was thus born not of indifference to social problems but of serious doubt that political channels, political arguments and political action could serve to ameliorate social problems rather than exacerbate them. When he warned us in 1962 to 'Beware of the writer who puts forward his concern for you to embrace, who leaves you in no doubt of his worthiness, his usefulness, his altruism, who declares that his heart is in the right place, and ensures that it can be seen in full view, a pulsating mass where his characters ought to be', he is not just indicating how to avoid writing bad plays but also suggesting how to avoid promoting the kind of inadequate social analysis characteristic, he feels, of politicians in general.[7] 'To be a politician,' he argued, 'you have to be able to present a simple picture even if you don't see things that way.'[8] To be a successful dramatist, by implication, you have to be free to explore complex pictures that clarify without necessarily reducing the complexity of social experience.

Pinter's early dramatic technique is less one of moving from the local community context to the larger political context than of scrutinising the local context so closely that it becomes difficult to abstract simple generalisations about individual responsibility, community convictions or collective goals. His preoccupation with confined spaces, with small rooms, with constraining circumstances and brief events provides a context for exploring the complexities of local pictures, the instability and indispensability of verbal interaction, the shifting status of social realities, the precariousness of attempts to establish general agreement and the riskiness of anyone's efforts to function as leader or spokesperson for a social group. For the Pinter of these plays, the local picture in all its simplicity and complexity precedes and succeeds any large one, and national political action, if it were to make sense at all, would have to be an extension of, and not a substitute for, the daily

activity of people coping with self and others in the local spaces his characters inhabit. One of the most prominent of Pinter's early statements was the remark: 'Before you manage to adjust yourself to living alone in your room, you're not really terribly fit and equipped to go out to fight battles.'[9] It is not yet clear that Pinter's dramatic technique has changed in this respect, in spite of his intermittent readiness to make large political statements both about his plays and about global social issues. But what he has effectively done is to transfer to the realm of political situation the exploration of complex local social interaction that is characteristic of his plays as a whole.

Rather than showing that the personal is the political by dissolving the personal into the political, Pinter has, effectively, dramatised the converse: that the political is, among other things, the personal. As such, it is as complex and dangerous and as worthy of our scrupulous attention as any other sphere of social interaction; and Pinter demonstrates this in spite of the limited development of individual character in the more overtly political plays. It is, in fact, the procedures by which political imperatives can produce attempts to reduce individuality to mere enmity that a play like *One for the Road* so carefully depicts. And in the resistance of individuality to such reduction, the personal is not so much equated with the political as reinstated as a form of resistance to it. But Pinter's refusal to situate plays like *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language* in specific historical locales has led to criticism that without such specificity we do not know what to be for or against that we were not for or against before. To try to persuade a theatre audience that it should in general be against physical torture, murder and rape seems somewhat gratuitous in spite of the prevalence of all three in the modern world. What interests Pinter, however, is exploring the modes of presupposition and self-justification that enable such things to be done in the name of or on behalf of citizens and governments who might publicly and even sincerely condemn them. What is dramatised is not the physical torture, murder and rape so frequently referred to in critical discussion, but the processes of self-justification they promote and the differing consequences for the oppressors and the oppressed of their limited persuasiveness.

In *One for the Road*, Nicolas, the interrogator, derives some of his sense of legitimacy and authority from his conviction that he speaks for a national consensus. Citing his country's leader, he portrays himself as one acting on behalf of a unified group against a lone dissenter, and the existence of that larger unity suffices to convert the dissenter into a traitor: 'We are all patriots, we are as one, we all share a common heritage. Except you, apparently. *Pause*. I feel a link, you see, a bond. I share a commonwealth of interest. I am not alone. I am not alone!'[10] The repeated phrase 'I am not alone' mobilises the claims to legitimacy of the voice and of the actions it endorses.

The social 'bond' of fellowship that strengthens Nicolas's convictions that what he is doing is justified is the same bond that excludes Victor not only from that society but also from the civil rights its members might otherwise enjoy. The voice of exclusion seeks to derive its legitimacy from the voice of inclusion.

In such a context, the 'I' in the repeated phrase 'I am not alone' is not the 'I' of bourgeois individualism, nor the 'I' that functions merely as the spokesperson for an unreflecting 'we', nor the 'I' that is the involuntary voice of a cultural or linguistic code. This is an 'I' that justifies itself in a variety of ways, but – most important – is its evident need to do so. Like the old woman who is unwilling or unable to speak in *Mountain Language*[11] Nicolas exists outside the codes he uses to construct, exhibit, and justify himself. Like so many Pinter characters he can be illuminated by, but not exhaustively summarised by, any description of inherited cultural codes or ideological commitments. Here at the edge of the civilised world, inhuman acts are justified by individuals who invoke general social bonds as a justification for abandoning them in the case of dissenting individuals. Indeed, part of the torture to which the victims are subjected consists of turning the psychological and emotional bonds of a family group into weapons to be used against each of them. The rape of the wife and the murder of the son invoke, even as they break, some of the strongest bonds that hold civilised human beings together. The personal and the political are, indeed, intertwined, but we will make little sense of these plays if we simply equate the one with the other.

Though the context in which we encounter them prevents the characters in *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language* from being developed in great detail, Pinter conveys enough of the personal in social and political contexts to make these scenes continuous with scenes in his other plays in which we feel we are encountering individual characters with, among other things, familiar social histories, rather than abstract characters representing narrow social and political agendas, or, to put it another way, individual characters whose representativeness follows upon and includes their individuality, rather than preceding and supplanting it.

These points are made at some length for two reasons. First, neither in Pinter's so-called political plays nor elsewhere do we encounter characters with an explicit ideological position to exemplify and defend. Second, after a time when literary theories of various kinds became obsessed with the death of the subject, Pinter is continuing to create characters whose irreducible idiosyncrasy makes a significant contribution to our conviction that the plays themselves retain an irreducible singularity, no matter which modes of explanation we adopt to convert intrigue into enlightenment. And it is in this context of irreducible singularity and strategic avoidance of