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**‘Look for the truth and tell it’: Politics and Harold Pinter**

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# **‘Look for the truth and tell it’: Politics and Harold Pinter**

## **Contents**

Introduction	Politics	page 1
Chapter One	‘I told him no one. No one at all’: Gender politics in <i>Old Times</i> ’	page 9
Chapter Two	‘You Brought It Upon Yourself’: responsibility in <i>Ashes to Ashes</i>	page 27
Chapter Three	‘Art, Truth and Politics’: Pinter Today	page 40
Conclusion	Is Pinter a ‘political playwright’?	page 53
Appendices		
Bibliography		

## **Introduction: Politics**

‘I think in the early days [...] I was a political playwright of a kind’  
(Pinter, 1989, cit. Gussow, 1994: 82).

My interest in Pinter as an area of research stems from this assertion. Despite being a prominent playwright, Pinter’s celebrity in recent times has been as much acknowledged for his contribution to political debate as to his involvement with contemporary drama. *The Independent* newspaper in December 1998 described Pinter as ‘playwright and human rights activist’ (Derbyshire, 2001c: 232) and it seems that his latter role is most certainly assisted by his fame as the former. An outspoken critic of US foreign policy and British Government support for it, Harold Pinter seemed more intent on making moral pronouncements on current affairs than producing challenging theatre in the latter years of his life.<sup>1</sup> However, Pinter’s position regarding the politics in his plays has constantly changed. He claimed in 1989 that he had always been ‘a political playwright of a kind’. Yet, in 1966, he said ‘politics bore me [...] I distrust ideological statements of any kind’ (Pinter, cit. 2005a: 58). In the era of writing that spans plays such as *The Birthday Party*, *The Caretaker* and *The Homecoming*, Pinter appears to be suggesting that his work was not concerned with ‘politics’. Yet since the early 1980s, Pinter’s work seems to be more explicitly about the abuse of human rights and the ‘pattern of lies which government actually tells to its citizens’ (Gussow, 1994: 84), in plays such as *One for the Road*, *Mountain Language* and *Party Time*. It is these plays which form the phase in his writing which critics deem to be ‘political’ (see Hern, 1985a; Grimes, 2005d; Billington 2007a).

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<sup>1</sup> In the last ten years of his life, Pinter only produced one full-length play: *Celebration* in 2000 for the National Theatre.

This thesis seeks to explore the different ways Pinter explores politics in his writing. But what is meant by this word, 'politics'? Pinter uses it differently according to context, at once about the relations of power between individuals as well as the structures of power which keep us subjugated. So how am I using the term 'politics' here? I propose to look at Pinter's writing through three 'political' lenses: firstly, through the lens of gender politics, that is the personal relationships (or battles) between men and women. So here, I am referring to interpersonal politics. Of course, this battle is not just personal; it is symptomatic of the broader power struggle between men (as representatives of the patriarchy) and women that preoccupies the works of Irigaray, Kristeva and Cixous, all exponents of the theory that Woman is represented as 'Other' than Man. This suggests that the patriarchy must repress that which is 'other' to itself in order to maintain the dominant hegemony. This 'otherness' is often expressed through female sexuality, and the men in Pinter's plays often seek to repress the threat this sexuality poses to the patriarchy. Within this argument, I propose to explore how language plays a part in these types of interpersonal politics, as a way to win the 'battle' and thereby gain authority and power over another. Or as Austin Quigley puts it: 'this battle [...] is grounded in the power of language to promote the responses that a speaker requires and hence the relationship that is desired. It is here that the link between language and relationships is established [...] the language of a Pinter play functions primarily as a means of dictating and reinforcing relationships' (1975: 49). It was Foucault who drew attention to the use of language as a means of power and Marc Silverstein develops this argument to examine how language is used by male characters in Pinter's plays as a way to dominate the female characters.<sup>2</sup> In order to elucidate these arguments, I will focus on Pinter's earlier

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<sup>2</sup> See (1993e) *Harold Pinter and the Language of Cultural Power* London: Associated University Presses.

plays, primarily his 1971 play *Old Times*, with supplementary material from *The Homecoming*; two plays which focus on the dominant female within an overwhelmingly powerful patriarchy. I also propose that *Old Times*, the only play of Pinter's to focus on two women, is his way of articulating his response to the burgeoning feminist politics of the day.

My second 'political' lens is world political history; the politics of the past that Pinter has critically engaged with, and been a victim of, growing up as a Jew in East London during the Second World War. It seems here that Pinter's gender politics of his earlier plays is developed through his exploration of world politics in his 1996 play, *Ashes to Ashes*. Here Pinter's reading of the world's guilt for the part it played in the Holocaust is mapped on to the female body of Rebecca, who is at once witness to and victim of human atrocity. This portrayal of woman as victim is one that is challenged by the feminist theatre of the Womens Theatre Group, Pam Gems and Caryl Churchill (who also linked sex with violence in her early work *Objections to Sex and Violence*) and one which will be examined here. The play knits global violence and politics tightly to domestic conflict and in doing so offers me a different interpretation of Pinter's engagement with politics.

My third 'political' lens will focus on party politics and contemporary political events. This chapter will examine Pinter's writings as a political commentator: his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, his journalism and his poetry. This is where Pinter the citizen, one who is engaged in his political community, battles with himself as an artist; a man who so often has batted away interest in his writing to focus on his opinions about party politics.

It is Pinter himself who has delineated these two terms, 'artist' and 'citizen', appearing to understand them as mutually exclusive of each other: 'I understand your interest in me as a playwright. But I'm more interested in myself as a citizen' (Gussow, 1994: 71). It seems that he sees his role as an artist, as a playwright, as distinct from his role as a citizen. As an artist, Pinter has claimed that he writes with no political philosophy: 'I am sure that some writers [...] can very easily and properly sit down and write plays from a political kind of ideology. I am unable to do that' (Pinter, 1981, cit. 2001d: 133). This suggests that as a playwright, Pinter is 'outside' of politics. Yet, as a citizen, Pinter is clearly and overtly politically engaged. Is it possible that Pinter can be both 'artist' and 'citizen' if he understands them to be fundamentally different? I argue that he can not. Pinter's condemning pronouncements about political affairs have made him a figure of ridicule in the media. His relationship with a sceptical press is one that is important given Pinter's own public statements about his plays and his politics, and his constant re-fashioning in the light of his political motivations. Pinter's contemporary politics and his role as a 'citizen' is discussed and examined in his Nobel speech, which is the focus text for this third chapter.

There is a clear paradox to be faced when addressing the political nature of Pinter's work, and it is a paradox which I want to address in this thesis: his inconsistent statements relating to the politics in his plays and his increasingly political involvement with world affairs. Pinter has always refused the many labels that have been pinned to him, especially in his earliest phase of writing. The dominant critical description of Pinter's work placed him in the 'Absurd', a group of playwrights, amongst them Beckett and

Ionesco, who were categorised as such by the influential critic, Martin Esslin. Esslin claimed that Pinter's earliest works, such as *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter*, possessed certain absurdist characteristics: 'the sense of an ominous yet uncertain fate; the implication of a senseless, random universe; and the use of the stage to present striking images of the human condition' (Grimes, 2005d: 14). Certainly, Ionesco's argument that theatre should be free from external obligation<sup>3</sup> seemed to suit Pinter's insistence at this time that his work was apolitical: 'I'm not committed as a writer, in the usual sense of the term, either religiously or politically. And I'm not conscious of any particular social function. I write because I want to write' (1961, cit. 1977b: 12). This also set him apart from the other distinct camp of playwriting, the 'political' authors of the Angry Young Men movement, sparked by Osbourne, inspired by Brecht, such as Bond, Arden and Griffiths. Their plays voiced the rage against the establishment and a sense of social dislocation the post-war generation felt; their success was down to a new-breed of theatregoing public – upwardly mobile, university educated professionals who encouraged the rapid changes we see happening in the arts at this time. Pinter's reaction to such 'politics' was rather hostile, partly, I think, because he viewed institutional politics and politicians with disdain. Their tendency towards 'reductive social analysis' (Quigley, 2001f: 9) felt to him to be a fundamental untruth, a simplified position sought as a way to win widespread support rather than tackle important social problems. His refusal to engage with 'soapbox' theatre (Pinter, 1961, cit. 2005i: 45-6) is seen in his oft-quoted warning about the dangers of 'didactic and moralistic' drama (*Ibid.*): '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

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<sup>3</sup> See these arguments in more detail in Quigley, 2001f: 22-3.

place, and ensures that it can be seen in full view, a pulsating mass where his characters ought to be' (1962, cit. 1991a: xi). This attack upon political art deems it intellectually obvious, simplifying complex situations as a politician does: 'to be a politician you have to be able to present a simple picture even if you don't see things that way' (1966, cit. 2005a: 58). He felt that, as a dramatist, he should be free to explore complex situations without the necessity of clarifying and therefore reducing the complexity of social experience. It is ironic that this sort of attack, which at the time encouraged critics and audiences to see Pinter as expressly apolitical, was later levelled at his own 'political' works (see the arguments in my third chapter).

Despite being stylistically rather different from the 'Angry' or 'Absurd' generation of writers, their work forms part of the political and intellectual context in which Pinter's early plays, such as *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter*, were written. These plays are depictions of power and powerlessness, both within personal relationships and between the individual and the authority of the state. They are both apparently 'political', by the definitions being used in this argument; being at once about the politics within personal relationships (who has the power and how they try to keep it), and also about a person's relationship with an all-powerful state. In fact he wrote a play in 1957 that he discarded as it was 'heavily satirical and it was quite useless. I never began to like any of the characters, they didn't really live at all'. He rejected the play because he 'was intentionally [...] trying to make a point' (Pinter, 1966, cit. 2005a: 59). The play was *The Hothouse*, revived and first performed at the National Theatre in 1980, which suggests that Pinter was ready to produce more overtly political work at this time, work which was

very much making a political point, and that point was about the subjugation of the individual to the power of the state. It is at this point, during the 1980s, that Pinter willingly applies a concept to his writing of which he was sceptical during the 1960s. He claims now that he is, and always was, a political writer 'of a kind'; a citizen of the world with a duty to speak out: 'We still say we live in free countries, but we damn well better be able to speak freely. And it's our responsibility to say precisely what we think' (Gussow, 1994: 71-2). This is the Pinter of my third 'lens'; overtly political and critically condemning of those who have complacently accepted and perpetuated a political structure that has been debilitating to citizens of other countries.

These intermittent forays into political commentary have made it rather difficult for critics reading Pinter's works. Should we adopt Pinter's guidance that all his plays are political (he notably exempts *Landscape*, *Silence*, *Old Times* and *Betrayal* from this claim, interestingly) or, as Quigley suggests, should we be defending his plays against 'their author's belated desire to convert them into illustrations of political oppression and abuse of authority' (2001f: 8)? The key word there, it seems to me, is *belated*; what are the motives behind Pinter's sudden about-turn regarding his own political theatre? We should not ignore either of Pinter's opposing standpoints; that he was not interested in the politics of art in 1961 or that he was a political writer come 1988. As critical assertions they carry equal weight as each other. Taking Pinter's own critiques of his politics as a starting point, I argue that all the texts discussed in this thesis are manifestations of Pinter's analysis of power and all help to plot the trajectory of his political writing and

beliefs. By examining the different 'politics' Pinter appears to engage in, I aim to show how the meaning of Pinter's politics changes across his career.

## **'I told him no one. No one at all': Pinter's gender politics**

'[Pinter's] preoccupation [is] with the unverifiable nature of truth and the  
unpossessability of the female soul.'  
(Billington, 2007a: 209)

Pinter's earliest investigations into the political were in the way he explored power relations between individuals. Power is a constant preoccupation throughout the Pinter canon, as he admitted in 1988: 'I cannot say that every work I've written is political [...] but I feel the question of how power is used and how violence is used, how your terrorise somebody, how you subjugate somebody, has always been alive in my work' (Gussow, 1994: 73). He would return to this idea in plays such as *One for the Road* and *Party Time*, which explore the relationship between the all-powerful state and the individual, but in the plays of the early 1960s, Pinter seemed concerned with the battle for power between the sexes; the personal domestic politics of male-female relationships that seemed consistent with the issues of the day. In plays such as *The Collection*, *The Lover* and *The Homecoming* we are presented with female characters who battle with men for the possession of power, who threaten to break out of the domestic order from which the men derive their own sense of patriarchal authority. Pinter's female characters have been branded as iconic and intriguing; dark, threatening and enigmatic, sexual and alluring, the male characters at once desire them and detest them. Ruth in *The Homecoming* is both a symbol of sexual exchange between men and a shrewd business woman. Sarah in *The Lover* is not only a 'bloody woman' (1977a: 183) who is reviled for her capacity to be both wife and whore, but a woman with autonomous sexual fantasies and desires. The rejection of women's sexual side by the male characters exemplifies the complex attitude that men have towards women in Pinter's plays: 'they are attracted to women, yet fearful

of them; contemptuous, yet submissive' (1993b: 63). The idea that the feminine is 'dangerous' is one that is explored throughout the plays of this period; a notion constructed through language, a famously patriarchal construct. Language becomes as much an instrument of power as sex in the battle for gender domination in the plays of the early 1960s, before the rise of the Women's Liberation Movement or the riots of the radical Left. Despite Pinter's reluctance to see the two as interlinked, I argue that the power play in these earlier works is 'political'; *The Homecoming* exemplifies how women can gain power in their personal relationships with men, and acts as a forerunner to the rise of feminist independence, and to plays such as *Old Times*.

*The Collection* and *The Lover*, two plays actually written for television and often performed together, saw Pinter explore the notion of the 'dangerous female'. The first play, staged in 1962, seems to be mostly concerned with the relationship between men, which is actually facilitated by the woman, Stella, and her tale of infidelity with one of them. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests that woman is the site for exchange between men; as the men share the woman, they also engage in a sexual communion between each other, and it is this potential homosexuality that Sedgwick proposes is 'dangerous' (1985b). This 'dangerous sexuality' means that women pose a threat to the dominant heterosexual masculinity that is out of man's control – that the woman must be controlled and manipulated in order to contain the danger she inherently presents. The belief that women possess a dual nature is a way of doing this, by belittling the threat they pose and presenting them as 'Other'. *The Collection* contains the clearest example of this. In order to dissipate the danger that Stella poses to the developing 'friendship' between Bill, her

lover, and her husband James, Bill claims that every woman at one time or another has ‘an outburst of... wild sensuality’ (Pinter, 1977a: 151). Bill’s attempt at explaining Stella’s apparent misdemeanours through her uncontrollable sensuality excuses the attraction between the two men that has been facilitated by their ‘sharing’ of one woman. The assertion that women can appear to be one thing and also another is a male fear that Pinter continues to examine. *The Lover*, staged a year later in 1963, develops this notion, whereby Richard and Sarah, man and wife in the mornings and evenings, actually indulge in a secret fantasy role-play in the afternoons, where Richard becomes Max, Sarah’s lover. Richard’s insistence on distinguishing between love and sex, on seeing Sarah separately as both a wife and a ‘whore, a functionary who either pleases or displeases’ (Pinter, 1977a: 168) suggests that Pinter’s men see women as split; split between wife and whore, between respectable and illicit, between maternal and sexual, and they find it impossible to accommodate both within one woman. Going by Sedgwick’s arguments, it seems that women with such important roles as wives and mothers threaten the very core of heterosexual masculinity if they also have an independent sexuality that threatens to break out of the mould cast for them as reproducers of the dominant patriarchal ideology.

However, whilst Pinter draws Stella and Sarah as showing different sides of the female, ‘Stella is the brooding woman, Sarah is the sensual one’ (Sakellaridou, 1988b: 107), it is with Ruth that Pinter fully realises his depiction of the integrated female, one who is both sexual and maternal (although these are still roles which are defined by their relationship to others). First performed in 1964, *The Homecoming* develops this complex attitude towards women, which is evident from the start with Max’s portrayal of his wife Jessie:

‘she wasn’t such a bad woman. Even though it made me sick just to look at her rotten stinking face, she wasn’t such a bad bitch’ (Pinter, 1997: 17). Ruth arrives in the all-male family as wife to Teddy, the eldest son, who lectures at an American university. Upon her entrance, the men claim her to be a whore, perhaps, as some have claimed, recognising her for who and what she is. However, as soon as she is sanctified as a mother and wife, Ruth becomes an object of worship for the family, as a woman who embodies all of the possibilities for a female. She shatters the men’s notions of romanticised femininity by focusing on reality rather than abstraction, and by asserting her own mind and making demands of her own life: ‘Ruth speaks with authority and self-confidence. Hers is the first solid and coherent female speech which reflects the newly-formulated female ideology’ (Sakellaridou, 1988b: 109). By the end of the play, she has abandoned her role as wife to Teddy and mother to their children, choosing instead to take up the place of the dead matriarch Jessie, who is revealed to have been unfaithful to Max with his best friend MacGregor. Audiences and critics alike have criticised Ruth’s decision at the end of the play to stay with the family as their mother, wife and whore, claiming that Pinter must be misogynistic to have her choose a position that so blatantly degrades her as a woman. However, Pinter sees it differently and vehemently defends her against such censure: ‘she’s misinterpreted deliberately and used by the family. But eventually she comes back at them with a whip [...] she does not become a harlot. At the end of the play she’s in possession of a certain kind of freedom. She can do what she wants, and it is not at all certain that she will go off to Greek Street. And even if she did, she would not be a harlot in her own mind’ (cit. Sakellaridou, 1988b: 110). This passionate defence of Ruth’s behaviour is strange of a playwright who previously had refused any clarification of his

plays or characters whatsoever: 'I can sum up none of my plays [...] except to say: This is what happened. This is what they said. This is what they did' (1997: 12). It seems that Ruth's decision becomes not about a woman debasing her status as a female, but as a metaphor for personal power, raising political questions about the representation of women as those who have choice in their lives and can assert their own autonomy at their individual will. So it would seem that accusations of misogyny are misplaced; by presenting Ruth thus, Pinter's demonstrates his 'political' bias – the power Ruth has over the men, the way she gets it and how she keeps it.

This battle for power is not conducted by overt means, as in *Look Back in Anger*, for example. A character doesn't launch into a diatribe as to the inadequacies of the other character, verbally attacking them with insults and abuse. Rather, Pinter's characters proceed tenuously, speaking minimally, amid frequent pauses, as if wary of revealing a particle of information about themselves that might make them vulnerable. The language therefore is dominated by unanswered questions that lead to repeated questions, awkward pauses, stifling silences and repetitions. The characters rely on colloquialisms, jargon and convoluted word play in order to gain the advantage over others, the result of which is a dialogue that lacks coherence and has been famously coined 'Pinteresque'. Language is a key battleground for these characters, and has been the focus for many a critical debate. Quigley attempts to overcome the 'problem' of language in *The Pinter Problem*, suggesting that the plurality of meaning inherent within language means that any verbal exchange is open to negotiation; one thing is being said on the surface whilst another is meant below it. This leads to a battle between man and woman which is 'grounded in the power available in language to promote the responses that a speaker requires and hence

the relationship that is desired' (1975: 49). Silverstein develops this argument by suggesting that language serves as an 'ideological instrument for the creation of docile political subjects' (1993e: 146). He asserts that the personal power claimed by some characters in the plays, especially the man, is both an effect of and vehicle for cultural power. This means that the power given to the man in gendered relationships is the power given to the patriarchy: 'patriarchy demands that women recognise masculine authority by becoming wives so that they may become mothers, reproducing the dominant culture both physically and ideologically, transmitting the socially legitimised desires and values that will transform their children into appropriate social subjects' (1993e: 50). Lenny delineates women into appropriate subject positions that reinforce his own masculine authority; when asked by Ruth how he knew the prostitute was 'diseased', he replies 'I decided she was' (1997: 39). Silverstein proposes that by defining Ruth as 'whore', the men are making her an object of patriarchal representation, therefore making her a possession to be manipulated and controlled. However, Sakellaridou claims that it is Ruth's free admission that her 'whoredom [is] an essential part of her nature' (1988b: 109) which thwarts the men's attempts to define and therefore possess her.

The 1960s proved to be the time for a new radical theatre, one which was widely considered to have a duty to challenge the political status quo and to experiment with new forms. Despite actually having a very similar attitude to this new generation of playwrights, such as Hare, Edgar and Brenton, Pinter wrote rather differently: 'while other British dramatists were haunted first by the possibilities and then by the failures of the revolutionary dream, Pinter became increasingly preoccupied with time, memory, the indivisibility of past and present' (Billington, 2007a: 205). Having written, until this

point, plays about the 'politics of personal relationships' (Billington, 2007b: 197), *The Homecoming*, *The Collection* and *The Lover*, Pinter now turned to shorter more experimental plays, *Landscape* and *Silence*, two plays exploring the interplay between past memories and present lives. Yet when collecting the German Shakespeare Prize in Hamburg in 1970, Pinter claimed that 'at the moment I am writing nothing and can write nothing' (1997: 12). This, the year in which Labour sleepwalked into a defeat by the Tories at the polls, also saw the publication of Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*, which helped to mobilise and define the British feminist movement. In many ways, Pinter had anticipated the female yearning for self-determination that was growing throughout the 1960s in his depiction of Ruth in *The Homecoming*; a woman who, repressed by her role as wife and mother within the nuclear family, breaks free from her social constraints in a bid for personal liberation and freedom (although the way she does this might not be seen to accord with the ideal and practices of the Women's Liberation Movement). In the years before well-known feminist playwrights such as Caryl Churchill and Pam Gems emerged, it seems that Pinter, however unconsciously, was already exploring the female dichotomy; to be a wife and a mother (and be defined in relation to others), or to be neither (and define oneself).

In an interview with Mel Gussow in December 1971, Pinter asserts that he felt 'more and more that the past is not the past, that it never was past. It's present' (Gussow, 1994: 38). He was talking about his newest play, *Old Times*, which was written during 1970 and had various performances throughout 1971. This play seems the natural successor to the plays *Landscape* and *Silence*, concerned as it is about the relationship between the past and the

present, and how the past becomes a 'weapon of psychological domination' (Billington, 2007a: 206) in the battle between two people to possess a third. *Old Times* starts mid-conversation, where it quickly becomes apparent we are watching a husband, Deeley, quiz his wife, Kate, about a past that is unknowable to him, a past that threatens his security as a male. Critics have emphasised the power-play between the characters of Anna and Deeley, where the drama is driven by the desire to conquer the rival who stands between subject (Anna/Deeley) and object (Kate).<sup>4</sup> The line spoken by Anna in the play has often been used by critics to justify their notion of the past being a thing to be manipulated to suit one's own ends: 'There are some things one remembers even though they may never have happened. There are things I remember which may never have happened but as I recall them so they take place' (1997: 269-71).<sup>5</sup> However, whilst the coexistence of past and present and the infallibility of memory may confirm the Pinter maxim which claims women are unknowable enigmas, it is perhaps more interesting to note that this is a play concerned predominantly with women; both in terms of their friendship with each other and their relationships with men. Billington claims that to call *Old Times* a 'political' play would be 'stretching it' (2007a: 219), but that is precisely what I propose here. Pinter excludes the plays from his 'middle' period (*Landscape, Silence, Old Times* and *Betrayal*) from the claim that he was always 'a political playwright of a kind' (Gussow, 1994: 82) yet this seems contradictory, given that the play is, like *The Homecoming*, concerned with power battles in personal relationships.

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<sup>4</sup> See Cahn (1993b: 103-117) and Savran (1982b)

<sup>5</sup> All references to the play hereafter are from this edition and will be given parenthetically in the form of page numbers.

Therefore, I will argue that *Old Times* is also a 'political' play, and I will consider the role social context has in how we read the two female characters, Anna and Kate.

From the outset, we get the sense that the relationship between Deeley and Kate is on rocky terrain: Deeley's incessant questioning of his wife's relationship with the enigmatic Anna, all the time in half darkness upstage, suggests a fretful insecurity that is fed by Kate's deliberate vagueness. She denies the 'best-ness' of her friendship with Anna although admits to her being her 'one and only' friend (247). Despite her deceptive passivity, Kate is clearly in control of this conversation, being the one with the answers to Deeley's questions, and the one who suggests that he ask Anna some of his many enquiries. When he resists, Kate asks 'do you want me to ask your questions for you?' (251), effectively asserting her dominance within a relationship where she appears emotionally detached. Her silence upon Anna's entrance into the conversation denotes strength and control, a trait also shared with other Pinter women such as Stella, Ruth and Rebecca, in *Ashes to Ashes*, who remains silent at the end of her tragic reminiscences of loss. Deeley and Anna's evocation of Kate's dreaming and elusiveness is again testament to her 'otherness'; her desire to travel to the East lends her an exoticness which both eroticises her and detaches her as unknowable.

Yet despite the expectation of an archetypal kinship between the two women, the parallels between Deeley and Anna are quickly drawn. Both of their identities are dependent upon the history they share with Kate; both wish to dominate her, to possess her past and to claim that 'I found her' (307). As the conversation between the pair

develops, we observe how the language and speech of one mirrors the other; as Deeley comments on taking Kate's face in his hands and looking at it, Anna remembers a few minutes later times when she used to 'look at her face, [although] she was quite unaware of my gaze' (264). Whilst Deeley draws attention to Anna's use of words such as 'lest' and 'gaze' we see him appropriate this speech in Act Two: 'you didn't object, you found my gaze perfectly acceptable' (289). The song lyrics are perhaps the most useful way of noting the similarities between these two characters. As Deeley reminisces about songs they used to know, the pair sing snatches of old song lines, seemingly in a bid to woo Kate, who still sits silent and demure. The suggestiveness of these song lyrics is clear: Deeley sings 'when all the things you are, are mine!' (265) and Anna claims 'they can't take that away from me' (296). As they attempt to claim ownership over all the things that are Kate, her smile, her song, and the way she had changed their lives, the audience perceives the oppressive resemblances between the two, who manipulate and re-create the memory of Kate in an attempt to 'win' over the other. As Silverstein posits, the male characters seek to represent the female through language, which is inherently patriarchal. Therefore all women are objects of patriarchal representation; even Anna, Silverstein argues, becomes a mouthpiece 'articulating [the] cultural power that constitutes [her]' (1993e: 143). In this way, Anna and Deeley become as one, and it is only Kate who, in her silence, destabilises their power and is 'transform[ed...] from an object of patriarchal representation into a subject of self representation' (Silverstein, 1993e: 75).

If we assume that both Deeley and Anna merge as both oppressors and possessors, it is perhaps clear why Kate must throw them off at the end of the play. However, the

argument exists which suggests it is actually Kate and Anna who are one, different parts of the same woman, and that the play is ‘happening in the mind of Kate-Anna’ (Sakellaridou, 1988b: 164). Certainly at times it seems that Deeley is not even present, the women talk over the top of him in a ritualised flashback to the past when ‘it was as if he had never been’ (271). This would seem to suggest that Pinter was interested in the female point of view exclusively, and whilst that would support the argument that this play is, despite Pinter claiming writer’s block, necessarily influenced by the burgeoning feminist politics of the day, I do not believe it to be a convincing argument for the play’s action. It is true that the two women appear to represent two opposite aspects of the female principle: ‘Kate as remote priestess-like and highly respected female figure (she is a parson’s daughter Anna says) and Anna as the seductress, a sex object’ (Sakellaridou, 1988b: 165). This is confirmed by the differing ways in which Deeley describes sex with the two women; with Kate poetically, lyrically: ‘our naked bodies met, hers cool, warm, highly agreeable [...] as I touched her profoundly all over’ (269); with Anna a sordid lecherousness as he describes gazing up her skirt at her black stockings and ‘thighs which kissed’ (289). But by claiming seduction of them both, Deeley destroys the triangle existing between them so that instead of being two complimentary sides of the archetypal female, the women actually merge, their identities becoming fluid so that he is unsure who is who: ‘she thought she was you, said little, so little. Maybe she was you. Maybe it was you, having coffee with me, saying little, so little’ (307). This exchange of roles continues when Kate starts to ask questions of Deeley’s relationship with Anna, ‘what do you think attracted her to you?’ (308), whilst Anna remains silent. Yet in these questions, Kate is both speaking as herself *and* as Anna, as she describes the process by which they

fell in love with him: 'you were so unlike the others. We knew men who were brutish, crass.' (309). But whilst the blurring of the two women is anticipated throughout the play, the final rebuttal of both 'oppressors' by Kate is not.

At the end of the play, we witness a 'coldness of mind and emotion' (Cahn, 1993b: 117) in Kate which has hitherto been hidden by silent vacancy. This silence is shattered when she rejects both Anna and Deeley and any sense of shared history with either of them in a monologue which is actually the most Kate actually speaks in the entire play. It is significant that this monologue acts as 'the last word'; it is Kate's version of events which is left unquestioned and unchallenged by the other characters, therefore the audience assume it is in fact the 'truth' of what happened between them:

I remember you lying dead. You didn't know I was watching you. I leaned over you. Your face was dirty. You lay dead, your face scrawled with dirt [...]. When you woke my eyes were above you, staring down at you. You tried to do my little trick, one of my tricks you had borrowed, my little slow smile, my little slow shy smile, my bend of the head, my half closing of the eyes, that we knew so well, but it didn't work, the grin only split the dirt at the sides of your mouth and stuck [...]. It was time for my bath. I had quite a lengthy bath, got out, walked about the room, glistening, drew up a chair, sat naked beside you and watched you.

*Pause*

When I brought him into the room your body of course had gone. What a relief it was to have a different body in my room, a male body behaving quite differently [...]. We had a choice of two beds. Your bed or my bed. To lie in, or on. To grind noses together, in or on. He liked your bed, and thought he was different in it because he was a man. But one night I said let me do something, a little thing, a little trick. He lay there in your bed. He looked up at me with great expectation. He was gratified. He thought I had profited from his teaching. He thought I was going to be sexually forthcoming, that I was about to take a long promised initiative. I dug about in the windowbox [...] and plastered his face with dirt. He was bemused, aghast, resisted, resisted with force. He would not let me dirty his face, or

smudge it, he wouldn't let me. He suggested a wedding instead, and a change of environment.

*Slight pause*

Neither mattered.

*Pause*

He asked me once, at about that time, who had slept in that bed before him. I told him no one. No one at all.

*Long silence*

(309-11)

The repetition of 'dead' suggests Kate's view of the female friendship as being over, and throughout the play Kate certainly demonstrates a lack of warmth towards her 'only' friend. Anna does all the reminiscing, trying to draw her friend into a past that, on the strength of this last monologue, leaves Kate cold and indifferent. In this final speech, Kate reveals her disgust at Anna's appropriation of herself and her 'smile'; her perception of Anna's 'dirty' face as well as her own preoccupation with bathing throughout the play reveals a desire to be cleansed of Anna, her past and indeed the sexual side of herself that she abandons when she agrees to marry Deeley. The images of disgust and dirt emphasise the fusion in Kate's mind of her two 'oppressors'. It was only Deeley's resistance to being 'dirtied', and his implicit strength, that allowed Kate to become his wife, and the vulnerability that encouraged Anna to see herself as an extension of Kate that led to her demise. However, whilst this monologue is addressed to Anna, Kate also attacks Deeley, reducing his poetic memories of their sexual relationship to 'grinding noses', treating his 'teaching' with scorn and derision and cruelly mocking his earnestness and 'expectation'. Her final denial of Anna's existence, 'I told him no one. No one at all' demolishes any triangle that existed between them as well as the possibility of any desirable future

relationship with her husband. Deeley's despair is caught in the final tableau that re-enacts Anna's memory of earlier: Deeley caught between two women on different beds, undecided whom to choose. He finally decides on Kate, laying his head in her lap in a final plea for maternal comfort. He is rebuffed as she does not respond, and all three are left isolated and lonely, locked in 'a permanent frozen solitude' (Billington, 1993a). Kate denies the life Anna and Deeley would have through possession of her, and in a play whose major theme is about the characters' preoccupation with conquest, and winning, it seems the real winner here is Kate.

So Kate emerges as victorious. But what does victory mean, in this context? What does it mean to 'win'? In a review for *The Observer* on *Old Times*' first performance in London, Ronald Bryden claims 'the winner will be the one who can impose his or her version of the past' (1971a). Given the silence at the end of the play, it seems that Kate is successful in imposing her version of events; she is the one who 'knows' the 'truth'. Her status as the object of desire of both Anna and Deeley gives her a power and strength that was always going to leave the others exposed to her will. But what exactly does she 'win'? Control over the other characters? Independence from them? If this is the case, it is hard to imagine a positive future for a woman like Kate. Perhaps Caryl Churchill, writing from the early 1970s, shrewdly foresaw the future for Kate in her depiction of Marlene in *Top Girls*. Marlene is a hard-nosed career woman who sacrifices her family and exploits other women in favour of individual financial rewards. It critiques the rise of women such as Margaret Thatcher, but also a society which can only imagine women as either having a successful career *or* a thriving family life, never both.

Whilst I do not propose Pinter to be making such a political statement as Churchill is making here in 1982, it seems credible to draw parallels between Kate's 'win' and the rise of feminism throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s. Kate is a woman who remains silent throughout much of the play; she is vague when asked any direct questions, posing a threat to Deeley's domestic security with the unknowable-ness of her past, as so many Pinter women have done before her, and since (see the arguments in my next chapter on *Ashes to Ashes*). She is drawn in the same fashion as Pinter's earlier enigmatic female figures: Stella, Sarah and Ruth. However, there seems a fundamental difference with Kate. Whilst Stella, Sarah and Ruth are all women who hold the threat of a dangerous sexuality, a sexuality that threatens to capsize the dominant patriarchal order and introduce anarchy into the male-dominated domestic order, it is Anna who introduces this element into *Old Times*, as she tells tales of borrowing Kate's underwear and the things that happen to her whilst wearing it. Anna is the sexy one, the dark and alluring one, with 'thighs that kissed' as Deeley gazed up her skirt. She is the one who simultaneously fascinates and repels Deeley, the epitome of the Pinter woman, like her Pinter sister, Ruth. Kate is 'quiet and cat-like, so blank and vacant that she becomes a blurred vision, a hologram net between Deeley and Anna' (Barker, 1995). And, like a cat, Kate has nine lives, lives that are secret to everyone but her, and she reveals them as her trump card, so that she becomes the 'winner', the one who rejects the woman of dangerous sexuality and effectively kills her off – Pinter never again creates a woman quite like Anna, or Stella or Ruth. Instead we see a new kind of female character being forged; Rebecca, in *Ashes to Ashes*, who fuses elements of both Anna's enigmatic

sexuality and Kate's cool resistance to male representation. Yet despite this resistance, Kate is still the woman the man 'chooses'; it is her bed that Deeley decides to approach in Anna's memory, the memory re-enacted in silence at the end of the play. It is Kate who 'wins' the man. Despite a sense that to 'win' the man is hardly a win to be celebrated (in feminists' books), the idea that a character triumphs over another is not a new one in the Pinter canon. It is this triumph that gives a character power over others, and it is significant for my argument that the triumph here belongs to a woman.

It is interesting to note the events of *Old Times* given the context in which the play was written. At a time when women's traditional roles in society were being questioned, when Margaret Thatcher, as Education Secretary in the Conservative Cabinet of 1970, was climbing quickly up the political ladder and Greer's *The Female Eunuch* encouraged women to view their lives as reflections of sexist power structures, I maintain that it must be a political statement *of a kind* to present two defiantly independent women on the British stage. It is also interesting to observe that despite Pinter's very conscious politics later in his career, and his arguments exempting *Old Times* from his claim that he was always a 'political playwright of a kind', I argue that this statement is indeed applicable here. His presentation of two women who are both fighting with each other for survival and 'hostile to the idea of reconciliation with the world of men' (Sakellaridou, 1988b: 172) cannot be anything other than a political act, however unconscious. And compared to *Ashes to Ashes*, a more overtly political play, and indeed Pinter's earlier plays such as *The Homecoming* and *The Collection*, we see a symmetry in the presentation of women here. All the women end the play in silence, a silence that is maintained despite male

insistence to the contrary. But in *Old Times*, we also have women remembering, and this is itself a very powerful political act. In *Ashes to Ashes*, the act of remembering enables Rebecca to have an empathetic response to victims from the past, but Kate and Anna's remembrances are not designed to provoke empathy, or to forge any kind of connection between people whatsoever. It is used as an instrument of leverage, a way to gain power over another and thereby possess them, or dispossess them of their subjectivity. Just like language, it becomes a political tool.

Ann C Hall argues that any focus on gender relations is inherently political; that art and politics are inseparable, 'the personal is political' (1993c: 55). I argue here that the 'political', amongst other things, is 'personal'. Whilst the original understanding of the phrase sought to define the relationship between a woman's personal life and the state, I argue that Pinter's plays of this period explore and attempt to define the connection between power and personal relationships, relationships that are gendered. In *Old Times*, we witness a battle between a man and a woman, a battle for supremacy within the relationship, as well as supremacy over another individual, an individual who is a woman: Kate. However, when Kate finally asserts herself she does so in a manner that effectively 'kills off' the two battling over her. The fact that this culling involves both a man and a woman, a woman who represents a side of herself which is unsatisfactory, makes this an issue about gender. As a result of this, Kate becomes independent and 'free'; this at a time when this is apparently what women in society wanted. So here the two areas intersect; the personal becomes the political in a way that is beyond the ways that feminists used the phrase in the 1970s.

Donne famously wrote in *Meditation XVII*: ‘No man is an island [...] Any man’s death diminishes me because I am involved in Mankind’. He suggests that we all exist in a network of human relationships that demands we love and respect one another, so that the death of any one person will affect the whole network. This assertion does not ring true of *Old Times*; a play which bleakly establishes the self-sufficiency of the individual. As Mrs Thatcher would go on to claim, ‘there is no such thing as society’, meaning that ‘we have no obligation or responsibility to anyone else other than ourselves’ (Pinter, 1998b: 67). Kate appears to live by this maxim, although Rebecca, in *Ashes to Ashes*, clearly does not; in this play, Pinter fuses the personal with the political again through a highly symbolic exploration of world politics.

## **‘You brought it upon yourself’: responsibility in *Ashes to Ashes***

‘The dead are still looking at us, steadily, waiting for us to acknowledge our part in their murder.’  
(Pinter, 1998b: 199)

After writing *Old Times* and *Betrayal* (1978), Pinter’s writing entered a different phase. *One for the Road* (1984), *Mountain Language* (1988) and *Party Time* (1991) were all dramas directly confronting the audience with oppressive and authoritarian operations of state power. They were greeted by reviewers and critics alike as signalling a shift in Pinter’s writings from what Esslin terms ‘the highly private world of his [earlier] plays’ (1982a: 36) to a concern with the more public terrain of politics. This is the politics Pinter has become most well-known for, and what I term here as the ‘world politics’ of my second lens. Yet this politicisation, Pinter has claimed, is one that was always present in his earliest plays, which were focused on the ‘mechanisms of domination and marginalisation, the social construction of gender and sexuality, and the ideological status of such “state apparatus” as the family – a focus [...] on fundamentally political issues’ (Silverstein, 1991b: 422). There is nothing startlingly new here: Burkman, Esslin, Gabbard, Quigley and Silverstein are all critics who have directed attention to the battles for power that form the centre of Pinter’s dramatic action. But why does Pinter suddenly claim himself, that he had always been a ‘political playwright’? Grimes suggests that Pinter must assume that there is ‘virtue in consistency’ (2005d: 21), that perhaps Pinter’s later politicisation would seem stronger and more credible if this element of his writing could be traced back to his early career.

I have already argued that the power play within the relationships of his early characters is political in the way it presents a battle between the genders. In these plays, he writes female characters especially strongly; but in the plays he writes expressly from a 'political' ideology, such as the ones mentioned above, convincing depictions of women are distinctly absent. He chooses instead to stack the power odds so heavily against the female characters that women such as Gila in *One for the Road*, Young Woman in *Mountain Language* and Dusty in *Party Time* inevitably become incomplete fragments of women, unconvincing representations of the female. It is not until 1996 and Pinter's last 'political' play of the period, *Ashes to Ashes*, that we see another woman similar to that of Ruth and Kate. *Ashes to Ashes* amalgamates Pinter's earlier exploration of domestic gender politics of my first lens with his later overt engagement with world politics of my second lens. Hence here is a play that is a more morally focused response to world political history.

In 2005, by now an ardent campaigner for human rights, Pinter implicitly suggested that citizens of democratic countries like Great Britain are in some part responsible for the 'murder, misery, degradation and death' of innocent civilians in other countries through their support of the governments that carry out these acts in their name (2007c). This guilt is something that we carry on our shoulders, the act of looking the other way makes us all responsible to those civilians, and all the innocent people throughout history who have been killed in this way. This theme of bourgeois complicity with state-sponsored violence is developed in the play *Party Time*, where the middle-class dinner party idly discuss their sports clubs while the 'round-up' of dissidents occurs outside. Pinter implies in *Ashes to Ashes* that failing to articulate any ethical response to events in history must

force us to ‘acknowledge’ our part in these events; we are implicated in all the crimes against humanity committed in the past since they are still being committed today. Through this play, he forces us to recognise how the ‘past [is] present in our lives’ (Hollis Merritt, 2000a: 79).

So how can we take responsibility for events over which we have little or no control? *Ashes to Ashes* addresses this precise question; Pinter suggests that as citizens of the world we are responsible for knowing what is happening in it, challenging us to confront the trauma of existing in a world that has seen such atrocities as the Holocaust and Bosnian ethnic cleansing. In the months leading up to the writing of the play, Pinter admits to having read Gitta Sereny’s biography of Albert Speer, one of Hitler’s commanders and his Minister for Armaments and Munitions during much of the Second World War. Whilst Pinter denied the play is about Nazism, he does claim that he is talking about ‘us’, and ‘our conception of our past and our history, and what it does to us in the present’ (Pinter, 1998b: 66). In contrast to plays such as *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language*, which are set in prisons and detention centres, *Ashes to Ashes* gives the impression of bourgeois comfort and security; a house in the country with armchairs and a garden beyond the living room. As in *Old Times*, here we have two characters, Devlin and Rebecca, apparently husband and wife, within a domestic space, ‘an impenetrable haven from the ravages of the public, historical and political realms’ (Silverstein, 1998c: 75), recounting memories of times past. The setting creates an opposition between the private relationship and the public events described that is gradually eroded by the play’s actions. Eventually the private becomes the public as the

lighting gradually dims from a well-defined space to an ‘amorphous and permeable’ (*Ibid.*) space which is penetrated by the images Rebecca imagines and retells.

From the start, we could be watching a play from Pinter’s earlier period; two characters in the midst of a seemingly innocent conversation but actually engaged in a battle for domestic power. The two characters, Rebecca and Devlin, are engaged in an exchange whereby Rebecca, in response to Devlin’s questions, suggests she has achieved sexual fulfilment from a masochistic ritual she played with a lover. It is an opening image that implies ‘a mixture of sexual enforcement and willing submission’ (Billington, 2007a: 376) and establishes the reality of the play: a world of brutality, power and domination but also, with Devlin’s incessant questions, one of anxiety and insecurity. However, through Devlin’s insistent request for a ‘concrete image’ (1998a: 400),<sup>6</sup> we see that the sexual authoritarianism of Rebecca’s lover appears to be an extension of his public role, as Rebecca describes visiting a factory where, despite suggestions of appalling living and working conditions – she mentions the dampness, their inadequate working attire and the lack of a bathroom – the workers doffed their caps out of the ‘great respect [...for] his.... purity [and] conviction’ (405). This ‘naked submission’ (Billington, 2007a: 377) in the face of brute masculine power links directly to Rebecca’s retelling of her Fascist sexual ritual, and seems reminiscent of earlier Pinter – the use of language to obtain power. It is ‘purity’ and ‘conviction’ that have proved ‘ideologically indispensable to the political rhetoric’ (Silverstein, 1998c: 78) of Fascist governments; regimes who simultaneously don’t ‘give a shit’ yet have a ‘rigid sense of duty’ (415). As Devlin puts it, ‘there’s no

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<sup>6</sup> All references to the play hereafter are from this edition and will be given parenthetically in the form of page numbers.

contradiction between those last two statements'. The 'sense of duty' that Nazism, Communism, empire, ethnic purity and even democracy have invoked has allowed for countless acts of brutal repression throughout history. It is this powerfully hypnotic language that has enabled us to ignore their consequences. The authoritarianism that Rebecca admires, and Devlin comes to envy, becomes dramatically clear with Rebecca's sudden statement: 'He was a guide. He used to go to the local railway station and walk down the platform and tear all the babies from the arms of their screaming mothers' (407).

It is with Rebecca's fragments of reminiscences that *Ashes to Ashes* departs from our first understanding of the 'political' as interpersonal gender relations and develops into a symbolic engagement with world political history. As the play dissolves into echoes, dreams and memories, whereby Rebecca remembers seeing 'guides... ushering all these people across the beach [...and] into the sea' (416), the audience begins to understand the wider context within which Pinter is exploring the political significance of Rebecca's tragedy. Devlin, a character who both epitomises masculine authority, and, to some extent, state power, attempts to bring the conversation around to the 'concrete', where he can exert some control – Rebecca's visit to her sister Kim and her children. However, even this recollection takes on the traits of a dream as she describes a visit to the cinema and moving away from a man who 'sat like a corpse'. Devlin's attempts to 'start again' are met with Rebecca's assertion that you can't start again, but 'end again'. Despite Devlin's dogged insistence at her misuse of language, Rebecca claims control of the situation through her manipulation of language. This exchange recalls elements of *The*

*Homecoming*, and the discussion between Lenny and Ruth over the woman whom he ‘decided’ was diseased. Devlin accuses Rebecca through the ‘chill echoes of officialdom’ (Billington, 2007a: 378) of attempting to represent truth through manipulating language ‘you’re not entitled to sit in that chair [...] and say things like that’ (411). However, whereas Lenny seeks to control language for the purposes of domestic power, Devlin seeks to obtain official control similar to Rebecca’s lover – someone he simultaneously envies and desires to become. Despite Devlin’s efforts we see the power shift, as Rebecca, like earlier Pinter women, is never ‘pathetically victimised’ (Silverstein, 1998c: 80) maintaining her ‘poise and self-possession’ (*Ibid.*) in the face of patriarchal will.

As Rebecca continues to narrate the ‘atrocities’ that Devlin does not wish to hear, her monologue shifts in focus as she begins to position herself within the experience as a witness to the events, describing them from her point of view, as she ironically accedes to Devlin’s request that she talk only of what falls ‘within your own experience’. Rebecca’s role as witness is an important one here; to witness and then to recall what one witnessed can have a powerful emotional effect on an individual, as well as the listener. It is utilised in this context for both political and emotional effect, having powerful resonances of the witness statements given during the Nazi war crimes trials in Nuremberg in 1946. Its political significance is one that recognises the subject position of the victim, something Pinter explores as Rebecca’s observing morphs into being. Silverstein states that ‘vision, in the mode of witnessing, absorbs political and historical atrocity into the subject’s “immediate experience”’ (1998c: 82). Instead of recounting events through the third person, Rebecca becomes involved beyond herself and speaks *for* the other by speaking

as the other, engaging in an empathetic projection of the horror experienced by these people: ‘suddenly I saw a woman following [...], carrying a baby in her arms [...] She stood still. She kissed her baby. The baby was a girl [...] she listened to the baby’s heartbeat [...] the baby was breathing. (*Pause*) I held her to me. She was breathing. Her heart was beating.’ (427-8). This recitation of her witnessing through identification rejects outright Devlin’s claims that she lives ‘here’ with him. The ‘here’ Devlin tries to describe and insist upon Rebecca, merges with the ‘here’ of the past, and the play’s boundaries of past and present combine, so that they become indistinguishable, as in *Old Times*.

Devlin, in a final bid for control, takes on the identity of the authoritarian male lover described in the opening anecdote, attempting to force Rebecca to enact the gestures she described. However, by this point, she has disengaged from Devlin and is lost to history; she does not respond to him or comply with his wishes, and instead is haunted by echoes of loss as she speaks as the woman with the baby:

REBECCA: They took us to the trains

ECHO: the trains

*[Devlin] takes his hand from her throat*

REBECCA: They were taking the babies away

ECHO: the babies away

*Pause*

REBECCA: I took my baby and wrapped it in my shawl

ECHO: my shawl

REBECCA: And I made it into a bundle

ECHO: a bundle

REBECCA: And I held it under my left arm

ECHO: my left arm

*Pause*

REBECCA: And I went through with my baby

ECHO: my baby

*Pause*

REBECCA: But the baby cried out

ECHO: cried out

REBECCA: And the man called me back

ECHO: called me back

REBECCA: And he said what do you have there

ECHO: have there

REBECCA: He stretched out his hand for the bundle

ECHO: for the bundle

REBECCA: And I gave him the bundle

ECHO: the bundle

[...]

REBECCA: And I met a woman I knew

ECHO: I knew

REBECCA: And she said what happened to your baby

ECHO: your baby

REBECCA: Where is your baby

ECHO: your baby

REBECCA: And I said what baby

ECHO: what baby

REBECCA: I don't have a baby

ECHO: a baby

REBECCA: I don't know of any baby

ECHO: of any baby

REBECCA: I don't know of any baby

*Long silence*

*Blackout*

(429-33)

These remembrances of a woman's experience of the Holocaust, and the depth of the denial of it, reverberate around Rebecca's mind, and the mind of the audience. By the end of the play, Rebecca's identity combines with the identity of all the victims she describes; she empathetically identifies with the 'Other' and thus becomes 'other', through her experience as both 'innocent victim and guilty survivor' (Hollis Merritt, 2000a: 82). The guilt Rebecca feels is the kind of ethical response Pinter suggests is lacking in citizens of democracy, and is criticised in the play: 'Nothing has ever happened to me. Nothing has ever happened to any of my friends. I have never suffered' (413). Billington asserts that Rebecca's response 'implies that we all have within us the capacity for resistance and for imaginative identification with the suffering of others. Therein [...] lies the only hope for change' (2007a: 383). However, perhaps it is not guilt that Rebecca claims, but responsibility. Her description of 'mental elephantiasis' obliquely sees her take responsibility for an event over which she has no control:

...when you spill an ounce of gravy [...] it immediately expands and becomes a vast sea of gravy [...] which surrounds you on all sides and you suffocate in a voluminous sea of gravy [...] it's all your own fault. You brought it upon yourself. You are not the victim of it, you are the cause of it. Because it was you who spilt the gravy in the first place, it was you who handed over the bundle.

(417).

Devlin tends to view history as external to himself, occupying a ‘blinkered, empirical, male mind-set’ (Grimes, 2005d: 203) that perceives atrocities as ‘never happening’.<sup>7</sup> His view of the individual as separated and segregated from others encourages an emotional distance between home and the world. However, Rebecca’s acknowledgement that it was ‘you who handed over the bundle’ suggests that, despite not having actually experienced any atrocities herself, she recognises that history is not random but a result of human agency, and for that we must take responsibility. Her refusal to evade responsibility embodies Pinter’s suggestion that it is only by taking on the implications of a ‘shared, social sense of subjectivity, that any kind of effective resistance may be envisaged’ (Aragay, 2001a: 255). We cannot ‘move away’ from that corpse in the cinema, or ‘start again’; we as human beings must face the dead and the horrors we have collectively inflicted, and claim responsibility for them.

*Ashes to Ashes* is a poetic and moving political play. Except here the political encompasses more than an ‘evocation of the [...] cruelty of state power’ (Billington, 2007a: 375) that we see in *One for the Road* or *Party Time* but a wider sense of the accumulation of history’s wrongs on our consciences. *Ashes to Ashes* contains echoes of his previous work; combining personal relationships with an engagement with world affairs, but also with regards to the ambiguity of language, the recalling of memories as truths, the persecution of innocent victims, power relations between the genders and the male desire to possess a woman’s past. In all of Pinter’s plays, women are ‘othered’; they are made outsiders to an all-male club. Lenny tells Teddy of the ‘empty chair standing in the circle, which is in fact yours’ (Pinter, 1997: 73), of the eternal place he holds within

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<sup>7</sup> See Pinter’s article ‘It Never Happened’ (1998b: 197) as discussed in the previous chapter.

the family exclusive of Ruth. Max suggests he meet with Richard to ‘have a word with him [...] after all, he’s a man, like me. We’re both men. You’re just a bloody woman’ (Pinter, 1977a: 182-3). Yet in this play, woman is not just ‘Other’ to the domestic patriarchy, but to the perpetrators of humanity’s atrocities. Michael Billington claims that ‘women have a flexibility, a freedom, an imaginative sympathy frequently denied to men who are locked into unyielding power-structures’ (2007a: 381). This suggests that women are more empathetically ‘in-tune’ with the suffering of others, which is why perhaps, certainly Pinter’s later female characters, are more sympathetically drawn as his plays have become more overtly political: ‘God was in much better trim when He created women. Which doesn’t mean to say I sentimentalise women. I think women are very tough [...] in my plays women have always come out in one way or another as the people I feel something towards which I don’t feel towards men’ (Pinter, 1998b: 61). This view of the ‘feminine’ as being carers and nurturers is certainly a stereotypical one, but it may explain why Pinter chooses to have a woman as the centre to this play’s action, as a bodily carrier of world history, atoning for the man’s sins.

However, this is a simplistic justification for a rather complex dramaturgical decision. It feels a banal explanation for having a woman as the crux of political history when women have played such a crucial and ambiguous part in so many of his plays to this point. Despite Pinter’s insistence, *Ashes to Ashes* appears in many ways to chart the history of female sacrifice; of male domination and female submission. The play is haunted by images of babies, children and childlessness. Devlin incorrectly sings the lyric ‘I’m nobody’s baby now’ which Rebecca corrects: ‘You’re nobody’s baby now’ (402). Devlin

is intrigued to hear the words used by Kim's husband, who has left her for another woman, and wants to return because he 'misses the kids'. Tales of the woman carrying the baby in the street, the recurrent image of babies being torn from mothers' arms and Rebecca's loss of her own bundle climaxes with the repeated echo of 'baby' at the end of the play, a poetic refrain of maternal loss and grief. This echo contains a kind of evocative beauty for an audience; it powerfully conjures the voices of the women who have gone before her, and continue to suffer today. Yet it also surrounds Rebecca with a vacuum, cutting her off from communication with another because of her sacrifice, which she ultimately denies. It is this denial, Prinz implies, that leads to Rebecca's fate as a victim of atrocity. According to my trio of political lenses, Pinter, in this play, is engaging with the history of world politics through his depiction of this male-female relationship. My evaluation here, however, suggests that it is Rebecca's vulnerability as a woman, as a mother, which leaves her open to the victimisation of history. In this play, the two political lenses merge; at once being about gender politics and world political history.

The critics above have suggested that Rebecca, as a woman, *becomes* history; imaginatively identifying with the victims of it, and through this empathy discovers her power to break from the past and emerge as a 'non-victim' (cit. Prinz, 2002b: 97). The ability to identify with the victim of atrocity redeems her as a guilty perpetrator. However, Prinz argues the opposite: she suggests that Rebecca's development throughout the play, as first outside the atrocity, then witness to the atrocity means she inevitably becomes victim of the atrocity. Citing the oft-quoted poetic prose of Martin Niemöller,

‘First they came....’, Prinz asserts that Rebecca is ‘both victim and cause, who brings suffering forth through her indifference and apathy’ (2002b: 103). Because she does nothing to stop the atrocity, Rebecca becomes a victim of it, ending the play totally alone and abandoned, as she abandoned her baby. Could the blame for atrocity actually be levelled at Rebecca, as both representative of humankind and as a woman? Prentice implies that Rebecca is as much to blame for perpetuating suffering through her love for the man who tears ‘all the babies from the arms of their screaming mothers’ (2000b: 377). This seems to me a weak argument for having woman as so central here, as an active subject compared to Pinter’s earlier plays where woman is an object of dangerous sexuality. I believe that there is a distinct relationship in *Ashes to Ashes* between the gender politics of Pinter’s earlier works and the overt political engagement with world affairs that we see from the 1980s. I proposed in chapter one, that the ‘political’ is ‘personal’. Here, I argue the opposite. The personal, amongst other things, is political, as one woman dreamily narrates her part in world history. It is upon her body which the history of the twentieth century is inscribed. The combination of interpersonal relationships between man and woman acts as a symbolic exploration of global politics, albeit an exploration that holds no answers for us, given Rebecca’s silence at the end of the play.

## **‘Art, Truth and Politics’: Pinter Today**

‘I believe that [...] as citizens, to define the *real* truth of our lives and our societies is a crucial obligation which devolves upon us all. It is in fact mandatory.’

(Pinter, 2007c: 442)

The Pinter I will discuss here is the Pinter of my third ‘political’ lens: the political commentator and self-defined ‘citizen’, one who engages with contemporary politics in a very public manner. Having not written an expressly ‘political’ play (by the terms I have used so far) since 1996, the texts I shall focus on to elucidate my third understanding of the ‘political’ will be Pinter’s poetry, his journalism and his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, delivered in December 2005.

My arguments in previous chapters suggest that Pinter’s earliest plays had predominantly focused on the politics within personal relationships, whereas his later plays used these relationships as symbolic microcosms of world politics. Yet he seemed to make a distinction between his art and his politics, his motivations as a *citizen*: ‘I understand your interest in me as a playwright. But I’m more interested in myself as a citizen’ (Gussow, 1994: 71). In an earlier interview with Mel Gussow, Pinter claims that he was ‘very conscious of what’s happening in the world’ (1994: 40) although the evidence suggests he had always been so; as well as registering as a conscientious objector in 1948, Pinter was an early member of CND and the Anti-apartheid movement. This awareness of world politics led increasingly to Pinter’s involvement with political charities such as Amnesty International. On a visit to Turkey in the early 1980s as part of International PEN, Pinter’s discovery of the plight of the political and artistic prisoners there prompted him to start an era of playwriting that would result in plays such as *One for the Road* (1984),

*Mountain Language* (1988) and *Party Time* (1991). But these plays are not what concern me here. It is Pinter's understanding of himself as a 'citizen', as one who is 'possessed of a moral obligation to participate in public debate' (Derbyshire, 2001c:231), that is under scrutiny in this chapter.

In *Artistic Citizenship*, Randy Martin suggests that the phrase 'artistic citizenship' is somewhat of an oxymoron. The artist epitomises 'individualism, an inner-directed free spirit who answers to the muse, not the state' (2006c: 1). Citizenship, by contrast, 'entails group membership' (*Ibid.*), enfranchised inhabitants who belong to a political entity. Schechner describes in detail the etymology of the word 'citizen' claiming it has origins in Greek and Sanskrit, its roots meaning 'to rouse' (as in 'excitement' and 'incite'). This seems to suggest a citizen is one who is roused, or moved, to be an active member of their political community. He attempts to define artistic citizenship using these terms: 'Is there a polity called *art* to which persons belong, owe allegiance, and derive benefits? If there is such a polity, what practices does being an artistic citizen require? [...] Forcefully speaking truth to authority even at the expense of losing public financial support and other support?' (2006e: 34). However, Martin argues, where the private realm of the individual artist ends and the public domain of the citizen begins is neither simple nor clear cut. This seems to be the dilemma facing Pinter in the later years of his career: where does his art end and his citizenship begin? Despite having portrayed his writing previously as continuous with his moral duties as a public citizen, Pinter announced in February 2005 that he planned to cease playwriting to concentrate more on his poetry and political activism (Walker, 2005j). This appears to me to be a politically motivated

decision; a conscious detachment from the individualism of his 'art' to focus wholly on his active citizenship. Indeed, his comments to Mel Gussow in 1988 (above) implicitly suggest a fundamental difference between the role of artist and of citizen, a difference that separates the function of one from the other. According to the definitions provided by Martin (above), we could understand this difference in terms of the individual and the community. Pinter, however, appears to understand this difference in terms of 'truth' and 'falsehood'. Pinter's website opens with his 1958 statement about these two models of existence: '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.' He goes on to comment: '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?' His distinction between his responsibility as a citizen and his role as an artist illustrates not so much a contradiction between Pinter then and Pinter now, but rather a privileging of his moral commitment to politics over his intellectual devotion to writing. This predicament is one that he discusses in his Nobel acceptance speech. As a writer, Pinter can explore reality through notions of truth; a truth that is elusive to his characters and often multifarious. As a citizen, however, Pinter insists this variety of truths leads to ambiguity, ambiguity which allows politicians to veil the truth in rhetoric. Truth is an ideal he strives for as a citizen, and this commitment is one which had consumed him it seems, by 2005, as he dedicated his efforts entirely to the 'obligation' of defining the 'truth' in contemporary politics.

However, Pinter's public political activism has often drawn an antagonistic reception from the British media. He himself claims that he is often misrepresented in the British press as a 'stereotype'; a parody of himself that he doesn't recognise. As early as 1971, he was making distinctions between his own perception of himself and the media's creation: 'I must admit I tend to get quite exhausted about being this Harold Pinter fellow [...] he's not me. He's someone else's creation [...] quite often when people [...] say they're pleased to meet me, I have very mixed feelings – because I'm not quite sure who it is they think they're meeting' (Gussow, 1994: 25). Pinter has at times fuelled this critical perception of himself; in retaliation to a hostile British press over his June 20<sup>th</sup> Society<sup>8</sup>, Pinter is quoted as saying 'we are going to meet again and again until they break the windows and drag us out' (Billington, 2007a: 309).

It is interesting to note that despite wanting to distinguish between Pinter the citizen and Pinter the artist, Harold Pinter appears unable to express his disgust with contemporary politics other than through art. Despite his explicit decision to 'break' from his playwriting to focus more on his politics, Pinter's poetry in recent years has increasingly become the new political instrument for him, a way of responding to world events that previously he had done through his plays. His belief in the gulf between what we are told by politicians and the actual truth was partly what prompted the writing of his poem 'American Football' (see appendix 1) which satirises the military triumphalism following the first Gulf War in 1991. Pinter's own hostility both towards the press and the American administration seems to do him a disservice here; when he tried to get it published no newspaper would print it, objecting to the strong language used. Pinter took

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<sup>8</sup> June 20<sup>th</sup> Society was formed on 20<sup>th</sup> June 1988 and consisted of a group of intellectual liberal figures who debated contemporary political issues.

exception to this argument, pointing to the hypocrisy of those who were offended by the words used rather than the actual reality of the poem: 'the poem uses obscene words to describe obscene acts and attitudes' (Pinter, 1998b: 185). His vehement language has often been seen to undermine the virtue of his position. Take for example his article 'Artists against the war', written for *The Guardian* in April 1999 (it is interesting to note here how Pinter blurs his understanding of his two roles; 'artist' and 'citizen'/political activist). On this occasion, the 'conventional language of politics was insufficient to express his anger': 'U.S. foreign policy can be defined as follows: 'Kiss my arse or I'll kick your head in' [...] Blair is one who kisses Clinton's arse fervently and dreams that he is Mrs. Thatcher' (cit. Derbyshire, 2001c: 232). His literary style was described as having a 'histrionic tone' and as a collection of 'hysterical and scatological rantings' (cit. Derbyshire, 2001c: 233). Further to this, following his appearance on an edition of BBC2's programme 'CounterBlast: Against the War' criticising NATO airstrikes on Serbia in May 1999, *Private Eye* condemned Pinter's 'familiar Americaphobic baritone soliloquy' as having 'no effect because it's so expected' (*Ibid.*). However, this view of Pinter has not only been targeted at his role as a citizen, but as an artist also.

As did his plays, Pinter's poetry attracted criticism for his particular style of expression. In his 2004 T.S. Eliot lecture, poet Don Paterson claimed that: 'to take a risk in a poem is not to write a big swearsy outburst about how crap the war in Iraq is, even if you are the world's greatest living playwright. Because anyone can do that' (Higgins, 2004). However, this caricature view of Pinter's poetry as 'scatological propaganda' (Billington, 2007a: 416) is a 'travesty of truth' (*Ibid.*) for many. In 2005, Pinter was awarded the Wilfred Owen Prize for Poetry, a significant achievement awarded as it is in the name of

the most influential war poet in English who wrote about ‘the pity of war’. Pinter’s 2003 poetry collection *War* contains such poems as ‘God Bless America’ (see appendix 3) which satirises America’s invocation of God with their military campaigns and ‘contrasts America’s missionary zeal with the mortal consequences of death’ (Billington, 2007a: 416). This same sentiment was explored in his sketch, *Then Again...* staged at the Lyric, Hammersmith in March 1997, which presented the audience with an American Salvationist recruiting in London. Billington calls it a ‘suave assault on America’s proprietorial attitude not just to religion but to the world at large’ (2007a: 387).

After the Anti-Iraq war demonstrations in 2003, it seemed Pinter’s political presence grew and grew. In the space of six months, Pinter spoke at a Lobby of Parliament regarding the Iraq war, addressed the Hyde Park anti-war demonstrations, gave a reading of his poems at City Hall for the ‘Not in Our Name’ rally and performed the poems from his publication *War* to a packed National Olivier Theatre. Moreover, he claims in his Nobel acceptance speech that the American people are sickened by their government’s actions as much as the rest of the world (2007c: 441). Although Pinter’s views were held by many, many others felt that he sounded like a broken record.<sup>9</sup> When awarded the European Theatre Prize in Turin in 2006, Pinter asserted that he will spend the rest of his life railing against the U.S.A and ‘what is being done in the name of freedom and democracy’ (Pinter, 2006d). Four years earlier, again in Turin to pick up an honorary doctorate, he called the American administration a ‘bloodthirsty wild animal’ (Pinter, 2002a). In 2001, Pinter accused *The Independent* of censoring articles and letters he had written claiming Blair was a ‘villain’ (Pinter, 2001e). Perhaps it is easy to see why the

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<sup>9</sup> In a recording for theatreVOICE, *Daily Telegraph* critic Charles Spencer claims that Pinter ‘has basically just written the same play again and again’ (2005g).

British cultural establishment have become so thoroughly tired with this ‘permanent public nuisance’ (Billington, 2007a: 386). I wonder, however, how much of the criticism that is levelled at Pinter is down to the dichotomy he has created between himself as an artist and as a citizen. Pinter appears to draw a distinction between the two, almost as if one is mutually exclusive of the other. And indeed, according to Martin, this can be true; the artist is an individual whereas the citizen is part of a community. Yet Pinter repeatedly blurs the two; he speaks as the individual (through his poetry, through his outspoken activism) yet he claims he is a citizen. He does not speak as one of the community, but rather *for* the community, and perhaps this assumption is why he has become so alienated from a cultural establishment which had been his advocate during the 1960s and 1970s.

Nevertheless it was for his literary achievements rather than his political activism that Harold Pinter was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in October 2005. ‘What took them so long?’ some said.<sup>10</sup> Pinter, having recently recovered from cancer, was unable to attend the prize-giving ceremony in Stockholm, and so therefore recorded his acceptance speech for Channel 4’s digital channel, More4. He echoed sentiments previously expressed in open letters to the Government, interviews and articles written for *The Guardian*.

In his speech, Pinter recalls his 1958 statement, drawing a distinction between truth in art and truth in life. Truth in art, he claims, is forever elusive; a thing can be both true and false. But he says, the real truth is that there are often multiple truths, which co-exist

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<sup>10</sup> See O’Brien, (2008d) for further reactions to the prize.

together and challenge each other simultaneously. The search for this truth must never cease; it is the idea that drives the dramatic action. This same search, Pinter suggests, should exist in life also. Language is 'highly ambiguous' (Pinter, 2007c: 432)<sup>11</sup> and any presentation of truth, in both art and life, must necessarily be treated with suspicion. Pinter's speech suggests that this suspicion must also be applied to the 'tapestry of lies' that politicians weave in order to maintain power and keep people in ignorance of the truth. Truth, he says, relies on the U.S.A's perception of its role in world affairs. He suggests that Western democracies have been hypnotised by the U.S.A's masquerade of 'universal good' (437) and that truth is being manipulated to suit the ends of the American government. His 1996 *Guardian* article, 'It Never Happened' also suggests that 'language is used to keep thought at bay' (Pinter, 1998b: 197), that the rhetoric of countless American politicians have built a cushion of reassurance from which the 'American people' view their world, a world where 'America remains the Land of the Brave and the Home of the Free' (1998b: 198).

Pinter claims that this has created a culture whereby 'nothing ever happened' (437). The U.S.A. has supported many a right-wing military dictatorship since the end of the Second World War, in such countries as Chile, Turkey, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Indonesia to name only a few. It has the death penalty in 38 out of 50 states, forty million people living below the poverty line and hundreds of people detained without charge with no legal representation in Guantanamo Bay. Yet these facts seem of no interest to the Western world. It doesn't matter. What has happened to our moral sensibility? Pinter asks. Where is our conscience? Why does Great Britain follow like a 'pathetic and

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<sup>11</sup> All references to this work hereafter are from this edition and will be given parenthetically in the form of page numbers.

supine' lamb (*Ibid.*) when the so-called leader of the free world so blatantly disregards the concept of international law and demonstrates utter contempt for the lives of others? The reason for this, Pinter claims, is because the United States has said: to criticise our conduct constitutes an unfriendly act; 'you're either with us or against us'. Therefore Britain shuts up.

Pinter points out the irony of the United States' position when he satirises the speeches made by President Bush: 'I am not a dictator. He is. I am not a barbarian. He is. And he is. They all are. I possess moral authority. You see this fist? This is my moral authority.' Pinter suggests that it is with this iron fist that the United States rule the world, through the increasingly thin veneer of 'moral authority'. Pinter's sentiments have been echoed in the increasing unease with which the public view political spin, which has created a culture of suspicion that Pinter claims is critical if we are to have any hope in restoring what is rapidly becoming lost: 'the dignity of man' (2000c: 442).

It is perhaps not surprising to read how Pinter's lecture was received by the critical press. It was totally ignored by the BBC; there was no reference to the speech on the BBC TV news bulletins nor on its current affairs news programme, *Newsnight*. It seems extraordinary for a public service broadcaster to ignore such an important accolade to the country's most famous living playwright. It has been suggested that the BBC's ignoring of the speech was to do with their complicity with the government (Billington, 2006a); indeed it appears that Channel Four is increasingly taking up the mantle of 'public service' broadcasting. It is interesting to note some of the comments recorded by the public on the BBC website on their reportage of the award; some were surprised by the

emphasis put on his ‘controversial’ political agitation rather than his literary career (BBC, 2005c). Mary Riddell suggests in *The Observer* that the omission of Pinter’s achievement by the BBC is because ‘they dare not think he is more right than they are’ (2005f); that despite winning the award for his art, it is Pinter’s politics that make him so reviled by the press. *The Independent* dismissed the lecture as a ‘rant’ and Pinter as a ‘bigmouth’. *The Daily Telegraph* ironically argued that Pinter’s suggestion that the U.S.A.’s crimes are similar to the Soviet Union’s, only America’s have been ‘hushed up’, was to ‘fatally blur the distinction between truth and falsehood’ (cit. Billington, 2007a: 424-5). It seems that Pinter’s tendency to see the world in binary terms, of good and evil, of truth and lies, lends an almost childishness to his argument that allows others to satirise him, and to damn his artistic work on the basis of his politics. So as Pinter blurs the distinction between his art and his citizenship, so too do the press, between the ‘truth’ of his principles and the ‘falsehood’ of his public persona.

If Pinter’s political activism is unswerving in its dogged accusations against America’s foreign policy, his poetry still contains a beauty that reminds one of the lyricism of *Ashes to Ashes*. In the poem, ‘Death’ (see appendix 2), which he quotes in full in his Nobel lecture, he demonstrates a belief in the absolute value of human life and a disgust with the attitude that death is a necessary by-product of the war on ‘terror’: ‘death in this context is irrelevant [...] these people are of no moment. Their deaths don’t exist. They are blank. They are not even recorded as being dead’ (438-9). The poem explores the fact that the identities of the dead are stripped from them by the bureaucracy of death so that they become just another casualty of war. The insistent interrogatives and repetition ‘drains

language of meaning' (Billington, 2007a: 396) and shows how the body is 'not a numerical cipher but exists in a network of human relationships and demands reverence and love' (*Ibid.*). Written after the death of his own father in 1997, Pinter's poem illustrates how we seek to minimise the effects of death by shrouding it in 'stultifying language' or 'abstracting it from a world of feeling and thought' (*Ibid.*). The sense of love and loss inherent in death is left till the very last line of the poem, 'did you kiss the dead body', where it haunts the reader and connects us to the suffering that we have sought to detach ourselves from. This connection is reminiscent of the suffering Rebecca feels in *Ashes to Ashes*, a suffering we must all feel for others as responsible citizens of the world. Again, here one reads the politics in his art, and again it becomes increasingly clear that Pinter's art is crucial to the sentiments he expresses; it is impossible to separate the aesthetics from the point being made. His insistent writing, even though this writing no longer took the form of plays, suggests Pinter is still positive, that he is not without hope: 'I couldn't write anything at all if I didn't have quite a big streak of optimism in me. Otherwise there'd be absolutely no point. If I was a black pessimist I might as well lie down and that's it' (2006d). So unlike the characters in his plays, Pinter actually does perceive some hope in the human condition, despite the atrocities it has seen enacted throughout history. He does not remain silent. His is the voice of protest but also of optimism; despite his relationship with a sceptical press, the Nobel Prize has finally lent Pinter's voice a power and legitimacy in the British public sphere.

This then is the Pinter of today.<sup>12</sup> In 1948 he was a conscientious objector, undoubtedly a ‘political act’ (cit. Hern, 1985a: 9), and then during his early years as a playwright, he came to view politics with a ‘detached contempt’ (cit. Hern, 1985a: 12), claiming his plays were not written with an ideology in mind. In 1985, Pinter claimed he did not know what his future was as a political writer (Hollis Merritt, 2001d: 148) and today he feels that ‘as citizens, to define the *real* truth of our lives and our societies is a crucial obligation which devolves upon us all’ (442). Pinter’s political career has certainly taken a meandering trajectory and his relationship with the press has been at best ambivalent. It seems a pity that so few English public intellectuals are prepared to engage in contemporary politics, and perhaps, given Pinter’s reception, one can see why. Maybe the media was so critical of Pinter because of his association with bourgeois culture; despite his working class roots, Pinter is now synonymous with high art and culture: ‘his work is, in its inscrutability and its ambiguity, as apparently aloof and inaccessible as that culture can appear to those who are excluded from it’ (Derbyshire, 2001c: 240). Pinter’s status means his work can predominantly be found in left-wing broadsheet newspapers and in London’s West end theatre-land. Yet it is this which alienates those who Pinter is really addressing, those who can expose the ‘tapestry of lies’ and have some serious effect on British politics. Talking to Nick Hern upon the production of *One for the Road* in New York in 1985, Pinter said: ‘You have to look very carefully at your motives if you become a public figure. The danger is that you become an exhibitionist, self-important, pompous’. It appears that perhaps Pinter has become someone he warned himself about back in 1985; a figure so associated with high culture that the integrity of his message is

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<sup>12</sup> Harold Pinter died on 24<sup>th</sup> December 2008. By referring to ‘today’, I mean our understanding of Pinter the playwright and Pinter the activist in the months leading up to his death.

lost in the media's efforts to satirise him. And of course the integrity of his message is what drives his plays and his poetry: his concern with speaking truth to power; of our individual ethical responsibility to each other as citizens; of our obligation to ourselves and to our ancestors to 'define the *real* truth of our lives'.

## **Conclusion: Is Pinter a ‘political playwright’?**

Pinter would have had us believe that he was always a ‘political playwright *of a kind*’. Of a kind. It is these latter words which has driven this thesis. Pinter’s foray into explicitly ‘political’ drama, plays which addressed the abuse of human rights, the oppression of minorities and bourgeois complicity in governmental violence is what prompted the statement above. His reflection, in 1989, suggests that his plays were always concerned with ‘the relationship between the state and the individual and how the self-perpetuating concerns of the former often obscure and override the dignifying rights of the latter’ (Batty, 2001b: 91). It is this relationship which has made him recognisably ‘political’, and indeed the plays which were once coined ‘Absurd’, *The Birthday Party*, *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Caretaker*, are now featured heavily in politically themed criticism of Pinter’s work (see Grimes 2005d; Karwowski 2003a). However, I have not necessarily been interested in regurgitating arguments about these plays, and others such as *One for the Road*, *Mountain Language* and *Party Time*. Whilst Pinter claims he was ‘political’, it is what is understood by this term, ‘political’ that has interested me.

In *Strategies of Political Theatre* (2003b), Michael Patterson outlines two main types of political writer: the ‘reflectionist’ who deals more with social realism (such as Arnold Wesker and Howard Brenton), and the ‘interventionist’ who tends to follow the Brechtian model of epic theatre (such as John Arden and David Hare). Yet Pinter fits into neither of these models of political playwriting. If we take Pinter’s earliest plays, they seem distinctly apolitical compared to the radical new Left politics of Bond, Arden and

Griffiths. They do not attack the establishment or rage against class conditioning as Osbourne did in 1956. Rather, I argue, Pinter's politics at this stage were in the way he portrayed personal relationships, particularly those between men and women. And what is political about these male-female relationships was the way he apportioned power.

If we scan the critical history of Pinter's work over the past fifty years, we see that analyses of power relations play a prominent part in academic criticism of his plays. However, power seems to have shifting meanings, and there are certainly different forms of power to be found in Pinter's work. In his later plays, Pinter seems to be exploring the power of the state, a power that is invested in individuals who represent the state: Nicolas in *One for the Road* and Gavin in *Party Time*. In his earlier plays such as *The Homecoming* and *Old Times*, however, power is up for grabs and will be won in a battle to impose the 'truth'. The 'truth' about Ruth is one that is searched for in vain throughout *The Homecoming*. She is a site of conflict between the men, as they battle for ownership of her. They think that they 'know' Ruth, know her past and her future as whore, wife and mother, and because they define her as such, this gives them power over her and her body. This belief in their knowledge of her as a woman is impossible, however, for whilst their assertion at what and who she is affirms their thoughts about themselves, not as feminine men, as much of the play suggests (Max acts like a mother, Sam is virtually sexless and Lenny runs away from Ruth's advances) but masculine patriarchs, it also suggests uncertainty. The final image of the play confirms this uncertainty, destabilising this masculine conviction of their power over women, as foreseen by Max: "she'll do the dirty on us [...] she'll use us!" (Pinter, 1997: 89). As Ruth sits on her throne with the men

of the family framing her, she appears cool, calm and haughty; and yet, despite audiences' dissatisfaction at her position at the end of the play, Pinter has always claimed that she has a choice, and she makes that choice as a free and independent woman. She negotiates the terms and conditions of her contract and determines her own fate, but in doing so still accepts the patriarchy rather than challenging it. This acceptance, Pinter suggests, is Ruth's choice; in accepting it, she decides to make it her own, and turns the patriarchy into a matriarchy. It is this that Max fears at the end of the play, and what the final image seems to allude to. Now it is woman who 'knows'; and it can only be woman who 'knows', for whilst men behave as if they know the truth, their behaviour dictates that they don't. This may explain their innate fear of the female. The fact that this battle for power is between men (representative of the patriarchy) and a solitary woman, clearly points at it being a 'political' relationship.

In *The Language of Cultural Power*, Silverstein proposes that by defining Ruth, and naming her as 'whore', the men are using a system that is inherently patriarchal: language (1993e). Foucault argues that the individual is created through discourse, and so therefore is a social construction, enabling a multiplicity of identities rather than one 'true' self (Ramazanoğlu, 1993d: 6). This immediately subverts the Pinter male character's instinct to distinguish between the social stereotypes of wife and whore; a woman can be *both* wife and whore, as *The Lover* explores. Discourse, Foucault suggests, is the way in which power creates and defines particular bodies, as female or heterosexual, but Foucault claims that power has no particular source so therefore is *not* inherently patriarchal (*Ibid.*: 20). Feminists disagree, claiming that if discourse is constructed through language, then

power (which works through discourse) must be patriarchal. If you can be defined by discourse then you must be in the grip of power (*Ibid*: 19 – 21). Foucault's later writings suggest that this power is within our grasp as a form of resistance; he refers to this as creating a 'counter-discourse' (1984: 101). Power is productive in that it creates knowledge – as opposed to females resisting power through striving for emancipation from repression, he suggests that resistance should be the production of new discourses (i.e. homosexuality) and so creates new forms of power and new forms of the self. Only in this way can we create a new form of woman who is beyond the control of power, or the patriarchy.

Maybe this is what happens in *Old Times*. Whilst the argument that Anna and Kate pose a threat to the dominant heterosexual patriarchy through their covert lesbianism (Anna borrowing Kate's underwear contains certain homoerotic overtones), I do not consider this to be a serious 'political' threat in the same way that Kate's actions at the end of the play are. By silencing the claims of Anna and Deeley, Kate asserts her 'truth' and in so doing, takes back the power the other characters have been battling for throughout the course of the play. So does truth give power? Apparently so. And it seems the power at the end of these two plays lie with the women. These power struggles, these fraught personal relationships between men and women seem to me to be the first engagement with politics Pinter makes in his career.

I assert that Pinter was 'political' in his early plays, although Pinter's reputation as a political playwright was not affirmed until the late 1980s, when his plays *One for the*

*Road* and *Mountain Language* were received as evocations of tyranny and dictatorship. In an interview with Nick Hern in 1985, Pinter claimed that despite creating metaphors for the abuse of authority in plays such as *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter* it was his later plays where he explored the deed itself in a more 'specific and direct' way (1985a: 8). However, I do not wish to add to the already prolific criticism about Pinter's exploration of political metaphors in the plays of his overtly political period, between 1984 and 1991. Rather I skip to 1996, and a play which contains elements of both his earlier and later writing, *Ashes to Ashes*. In this play, we see the kind of relationship that he previously wrote in *Old Times*; a man struggling to verify the exact nature of his wife's past and thereby guarantee his place as the masculine patriarch. Yet the relationship between Rebecca and Devlin is more significant than those which represent the 'gender' question; it is imbued with political symbolism. This is where I find my second understanding of Pinter as a political playwright. The domestic conflict we are faced with here appears to be larger than a battle for power between individuals. This relationship is an allegory of global violence and world politics as Rebecca denies the attempted tyranny and masochism of Devlin in favour of empathetic suffering with the victims of such tyranny. Pinter is political again here, this time in an attempt to demonstrate the empathy that is necessary for us to feel remorse for a century's worth of misery and trauma, and therefore prohibit it from happening again. Grimes suggests that *Ashes to Ashes* is an investigation into the 'conditions working to prevent and suppress a compassionate awareness of political victims' (2005d: 202). Pinter forces us to confront the true nature of ourselves, as people who prefer to go to the cinema rather than face up to our responsibility as citizens of the world. Of course this empathy with suffering is

made difficult by our circumstances of comfort, and complicity is a trap into which we all fall, despite our individual protest. It is this question which haunts his later plays: how can we avoid this trap? It is questions like these in his later works that Pinter is struggling to answer, it seems. Part of what he is grappling with in his Nobel Prize speech, is the answer to what he feels is the problem of today's lack of moral sensibility. However, what faces Pinter, his fundamental problem, is that he has no answers, either as an artist or a citizen. Therefore he leaves his plays in silence; only silence holds the multiplicity of answers that plague his earliest plays and only silence is the answer to the atrocities of the twentieth century. Consequently, silence is necessarily political: it is a common feature of his female characters, as they resist bowing to their mis-representation by the patriarchy, as it is a common conclusion to his later plays, whereby the only response possible to the victimisation and torture of his characters, representative of civilians of the world, is silence: 'language [...] fails to communicate the truth of traumatic events, leaving silence [...] as the only mode of representing atrocity' (Grimes, 2005d: 212).

After *Celebration* in 2000, Pinter himself appears to fall silent. At least on the stage he does, as his now prolific poetry writing and journalism finds a voice within the growing anti-Bush-Blair feeling after 2003. He makes the case that although he will always write, the form has changed: 'I've written 29 damn plays. Isn't that enough?' (2006a). He wants to leave behind playwriting in order to focus on being a more prominent political figure who is engaged explicitly in political challenge and change. He is no longer Pinter the playwright, the 'artist'; now he is Pinter the 'citizen', as one who openly battles for the rights of the individual and fights against how politicians use language to maintain

power. Pinter's plays are littered with questions and ambiguities, which was part of Pinter's breakthrough in style; his plays offered a lack of resolution that audiences in the 1960s wanted. Tired of drama that offered narrative closure, they wanted 'the responsibility of deciding' (Billington, 2005b). When asked questions about his work, Pinter repeatedly dodged them; perhaps the most famous and oft-quoted is the letter a woman wrote to him in 1958 upon the first production of *The Birthday Party*: 'Who are the two men? [...] Where did Stanley come from? [...] Were they all supposed to be normal?'. To which Pinter replied: 'Who are you? [...] Where do you come from? [...] Are you supposed to be normal?' (cit. Cahn, 1993b: 1). And yet despite courting ambiguity in his artistic endeavours, Pinter openly damns those who use language to evade truth and is disgusted by the 'totally meaningless, hypocritical' (Gussow, 1994: 40) words used by politicians in order to retain power and keep others from knowing the 'truth'.

Truth again is a concept that recurs throughout the Pinter canon, and one that Pinter discusses in his Nobel Prize lecture. Truth, he says, is something we must demand as citizens of the world, yet in art, truth is ambiguous, something that can be manipulated to one's own ends. Truth is related to knowledge; to claim to know someone, to know the truth about them, is to claim possession of them, of who they are, who they might have been and who they will become. This gives a person power; Foucault claims that power produces knowledge, but in Pinter's world, knowledge produces power, power over an opponent (as in *Old Times*), power over a woman (as in *The Homecoming*), power over an individual dissident (as in *One for the Road* or *Party Time*). It is this oppressive

power, held by successive governments in order to protect their political interests, which Pinter addresses in his poetry, journalism and Nobel Prize speech. And it is his concern with speaking to truth to this power which has driven Pinter to become such an outspoken ‘citizen’ rather than continue to work in the metaphors his art offers. This is my third and final understanding of how Harold Pinter is ‘political’.

I have suggested that although Pinter is consistently ‘political’, he is not always a political *playwright*. Despite his statement to the contrary (see above), Pinter continued to separate his role as an artist from that of his responsibility as a citizen. In 1988, he said ‘I see myself not only as an actor and an entertainer, but... I’m also a citizen of the world in which I live, and I take responsibility for that, I really *insist* on taking responsibility and *understand* my responsibility quite precisely as *actually* trying to find out what *the truth* is. And what actually happens. And so [what] I’ve found is that we’re really at the bottom of a *blanket* of lies which unfortunately we are either too indifferent or too frightened to question’ (1988a: 2, emphasis Pinter’s own). The driving force behind Pinter’s political ‘citizenship’ over the past twenty-five years has been this obligation to expose our life in lies; that as an active member of a political community, Pinter sees it as his duty, his ‘responsibility’, to make his community wake up to their indifference. This caused him to have a rather antagonistic relationship with the national press, who painted him as a truculent non-conformist. Indeed even his *Guardian* obituary from friend and critic Michael Billington labelled him as ‘provocative’ (Billington, 2008a). I suggested in my final chapter that perhaps this antagonism came from Pinter’s presumption that he was speaking as a citizen, as a representative of the many, yet really he was speaking

from his position as an artist, an individual. Certainly his success as an artist is what gave him the ability and legitimacy to speak so frankly as a citizen. Yet despite this provocative nature, Pinter was essentially still an artist, consistently writing poetry, if not plays, until his death in 2008. Auden suggests that no lines of poetry ever saved a Jew from the gas chamber,<sup>13</sup> and many commentators on Pinter's work have suggested that as an artist he is necessarily detached from society. And this perhaps is where the inadequacies of Pinter's politics lie.

But for Pinter, this political engagement is not a choice he has consciously made, or a position that is mutually exclusive of his role as an artist. It seems almost that he discovered his citizenship through his art; it has allowed him to express his questions about world affairs, so that now his art and his citizenship have become unified as one. As early as 1988, Pinter was stalling questions in to his craft in order to discuss his role as part of the June 20th Group, a group of artists and writers critical of the Thatcher administration: 'I understand your interest in me as a playwright. But I'm more interested in myself as a citizen. We still say we live in free countries, but we damn well better be able to speak freely. And it's our responsibility to say precisely what we think' (Gussow, 1994: 71). If we compare this to his statement in 1962 to the National Student Drama Festival, 'what I write has no obligation to anything other than to itself' (1991a: viii), we can see that now Pinter very much acknowledges another obligation: 'to define the *real* truth of our lives'.

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<sup>13</sup> Auden claimed that 'poetry makes nothing happen' in his poem 'in Memory of W.B. Yeats'; Theodor Adorno also said that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is 'barbaric' (1981: 34).

Pinter's most overtly political plays, such as *One for the Road*, *Mountain Language*, *Party Time* and the later *Ashes to Ashes* are rarely performed in the UK. Pinter's own website is testament to the fact they enjoy greater success overseas, in European, Middle-Eastern and South American countries; countries where, perhaps, state tyranny is more of a reality and where the issues of torture and incarceration are most resonant and pertinent. Despite the fact that such plays domesticate these events has not increased their popularity in the UK. Indeed, Billington recognised this in his interview for the 'Reputations' radio programme (2005b), whereby he claimed that many now believed Pinter to be in a political 'cul-de-sac', and that his earliest plays are still what he is best known for.<sup>14</sup> Pinter's success on the British stage is dominated by these earlier works; his most revived plays are that of *The Caretaker* and *The Homecoming*, where the interest lies in the depiction of personal relationships. I have sought to show that such personal relationships can – and I would argue, should – be read as inherently political. Their concern with power and their encapsulation of the *Zeitgeist* suggests that Pinter was explicitly political in a different way during his earlier career than previously thought. His own political views can perhaps be seen most coherently in the character of Rebecca, who epitomises his own dilemma of living in the contemporary world. But, unlike Rebecca, Pinter chose not to be silent; his advice to those of us who feel compromised by the actions of our government was 'look for the truth and tell it' (2008e).

Drama affects the human spirit; it illuminates our conditions in a way that changes our views of ourselves, our neighbours and the world around us. Pinter's drama seeks to

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<sup>14</sup> Pinter observed to Billington, after learning of his Nobel Prize, that in his native England especially, audiences did not seem to 'like' his 'later plays' (cit. Hollis Merritt, 2008b: 143).

challenge our perceptions of ourselves as victims; as he forces his characters to resist 'kiss[ing the] fist' (1998a: 428) of authority, he presents a way out of oppression and domination for us as members of the audience and society. The truth perhaps is forever elusive. The only way forward for Pinter's characters, and for us as citizens, is to forge a new path, to resist being controlled and mis-represented, and become truly independent.

## **Appendix 1**

Harold Pinter

### **American Football (A reflection on the Gulf War)**

(London: Faber, 1991)

The full text of this poem is not available in the digital version of this thesis.

## **Appendix 2**

Harold Pinter

### **Death (Births and Deaths Registration Act 1953)**

(London: Faber, 1997)

The full text of this poem is not available in the digital version of this thesis.

## **Appendix 3**

Harold Pinter

### **God Bless America**

(London: Faber, 2003)

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