

Pinter, Painter or Pointer: Society and Theatrical Form in *The Caretaker*

I have usually begun a play in quite a simple manner; found a couple of characters in a particular context, thrown them together and listened to what they said, keeping my nose to the ground. The context has always been, for me, concrete and particular, and the characters concrete also¹.

Harold Pinter made the above statement in 1962 when addressing the National Student Drama Festival in Bristol. He had already written nine plays for "different mediums"² and among them *The Caretaker* which we should like to suggest is a particularly good illustration of what he was talking about. How indeed does Pinter paint a concrete context and characters while at the same time keeping his nose to the ground, adopting an attitude of pointer, "dog that on scenting game stands rigidly, with muzzle stretched towards it and usually one foot raised"?³

The Caretaker was written and performed at the very beginning of the swinging sixties. England was between the old and the new; "about near on fifteen years ago" as Davies says, a process of what appeared to be democratisation had begun with the Second World War when the English social classes had been obliged to mix and seemingly to break down certain barriers. It was the beginning of the Welfare State and Davies has got an insurance card with four stamps on it. However, Davies is still the underdog; in winter he "wears a worn brown overcoat, shapeless trousers, a waistcoat, vest, no shirt and sandals"; he claims to have known better times and at least had a temporary job in a "caff" but the way in which he speaks of his boss as the "guvnor" has a class connotation and shows that little has changed. Or has it? The property boom is still a

way ahead, but a new monied class is already emerging. The spivs and teddy boys of the nineteen-fifties, who had often started operating in the wartime black market, are the first manifestations of the new consumer society. The stage directions describing the room in which the three acts of the play take place are in themselves a revelation of the times. It is interesting that Pinter has separated these static visual images of place from those portraying the appearance, actions and sounds of the live actors which introduce the verbal text of each act.

Place for Pinter, at the beginning of his career more particularly, often constitutes an actant, that is a force which plays an essential role in the action of the drama. For the second time within the first few months of 1960, the place actant of one of his productions is a "room", with the specific meaning of a basic space in which to lodge; it is not one room among many but *The Room*,⁴ as the first of the two plays was entitled. This latter room is almost an allegory of the inside versus the outside, a couple safeguarding their intimacy, their present and their safety in ignorance against the outside world, typified by the rest of the house with its damp basement, unknown "other" tenants, and by that other world outside the rooming house, cold and hostile, full of the predatory past and future which may at any minute invade or ruin their lives. This "room" or place of security/insecurity is the treasure which must be guarded: the remnants of the bourgeois family or home, already an ironic statement about the Englishman's castle. The title of *The Caretaker*⁵ conveys the same necessity of guarding a treasure, but first what is this treasure and who is to guard it?

As we have previously stated, the stage directions describing the room reveal the times. This room and this society are open to the elements; that a sack is placed over the broken window (although the word "broken" is not used, the connotation would have been too strong) is the first indication of a room allowing the outside to enter; the second indication is foregrounded for reader and director alike (and it is the latter's responsibility to foreground it for the spectator)

by being placed at the end of the description: "*A bucket hangs from the ceiling*". This room or society which is no longer watertight contains higgledy-piggledy layers of objects which are a witness to time passing: "*a coal bucket, a lawn-mower, a shopping trolley [...] a clothes horse, a small electric fire and a very old electric toaster*" among other things. Two objects are foregrounded in different ways; the "mound"'s contents start off ironically with "*a kitchen sink*": a sign that "kitchen sink" drama has been abandoned and recuperated by Pinter? Or simply a quirk of language meaning that the room contains not only "everything but the kitchen sink" but also the kitchen sink itself. The other object is of course the Buddha on the gas stove; what might have been a new transcendentalism introduced into this post-war society, is immediately undermined, in the eyes of the spectator, by the very place it is assigned.

The heterogeneous nature of this room with its already dated "electric" modernism cast to one side with the rest might tempt today's critic to see in it the beginnings of the post-modern except that it also reveals one of the themes pervading the play, that of the possibility of reconstruction, rebuilding and repairs. The paint buckets, the boxes containing nuts and screws, the step-ladder, the blow-lamp, the planks of wood intersperse the old and useless and are the potential building instruments that Mick would like his brother Aston to use in what for the former is essentially a money-making operation of social empowerment. Is Mick to be thought of as a latter-day Angry Young Man together with the heroes of Osborne and Wesker? Most certainly he first appears on stage "*alone*" in a bed-sitting room (literally sitting on the bed), wearing a leather jacket, but if he has several bouts of anger or violent action during the play they appear to be highly controlled or even playful; he only becomes "passionate" when he breaks the Buddha. The neo-Angry Young Man asserts his materialism and his new-found position in a lower middle-class which is at last on the move⁶ in British society.

At the beginning of the play Mick examines the heterogeneous articles in turn: the junk his brother has accumulated. He then stares at the bucket hanging from the ceiling. He then looks out front. This framing strategy of the gazer/gazed at will be repeated with even greater emphasis at the beginning of *Old Times*⁷ about which Marc Silverstein observes:⁸ "The reciprocal scopic exchange Pinter establishes between spectator and spectacle [means] we can no longer claim the unassailability of a privileged scopic position, but must acknowledge the futility of any attempt to ground power in the illusory promise of perceptual mastery." In fact, at the outset of *The Caretaker* Mick by this device establishes a power relationship with the two other characters who are at first absent from the scene and consequently from the "scopic exchange" strategy with the spectator. The significance of what Mick looks at on stage is intensified; the spectator, however, does not realise until later that this initial gaze is Mick sitting in judgment on the "collection" of junk which his brother regularly adds to and that the bucket he gazes at also represents his brother's failure to repair the roof. After Mick's departure, the entrance of brother Aston and Davies the tramp is also framed by "looking" used as a means of empowerment. When Aston puts the keys in his pocket and closes the door thus establishing the power of ownership, Davies repeats the "looking about the room" gesture of Mick and when Aston asks him to sit down, renews this gaze indicating a lack of anywhere to sit. From the negative, judgmental "looking" of Mick and Davies, we pass to the positive "looking about" of Aston for a chair which he finds and can offer to Davies.

The three characters, brothers Mick and Aston, and Davies the interloper, can be seen throughout the play to be engaged in a power struggle between themselves. Language, as Quigley⁹ first pointed out, is used by Pinter with an interrelational function meaning that through the fourteen different duologues which constitute the play each character attempts to establish or maintain his place through a series of verbal strategies tending to construct himself as subject in

relation to the "other". The jockeying for position within this "band of brothers" can be seen as an iconic representation of the social situation in post-war Britain. The state as a conservative (both in the literal and political sense) patriarchy had received several blows, notably with the introduction of free education and welfare and the overwhelming majority obtained by Labour in the 1945 elections signifying the establishment of the rule of the people. In *The Caretaker* both mother¹⁰ and father figures are noticeably absent and only distant allusions are made to female figures in general. Can the new rising classes, through the figures of Mick, Aston and Davies, collaborate, work together, form a new family?

For Mick the "room" or society needs order and rebuilding; he is already acquainted with the legal niceties of making money, has already lower-middle class suburban dreams of interior decorating, feels strong enough to go it alone or find new allies (the Margaret Thatchers or John Majors of the new Tory Party?) but is prepared to wait for his brother to reject the unstable, time-warped underdogs who can only profit from but not contribute to a new society. Aston is anxious to take in Davies, to find him a place in the room, in society; he finds him shoes to enable him to live a normal life, tries to retrieve the baggage of his past and to fit him into a job. He himself has suffered as a social misfit and was made to conform through electric shock treatment (which incidentally Pinter makes sound like torture in a concentration camp). Obsessed with keeping and retrieving layers of the past which include the "useless" Davies, he is not as his brother concerned at first with "repairs" to the room, but rather with building from scratch a shed out at the back which might signify a new departure, a questioning of the patriarchal values embodied in the room. His fascination with the enigmatic Buddha cannot, however, propel him into action: the electro-shocks he received have once and for all welded him into the "room". There are continual reminders of his status as an "object" of electricity or modernism; unlike his brother, Aston cannot use electricity or make connections with the modern world (whose physical changes he

rejects, to the incomprehension of Davies, as drinking Guinness "from a thick mug"). Aston keeps trying unsuccessfully to fix an electric plug with a screw-driver but it is Mick who uses the electric vacuum cleaner (highlighted by being called an Electrolux where one might have expected Hoover) plugged into the ceiling socket which not only "cleans" the room but also puts Davies symbolically into the dark. The play ends with the brothers moving towards each other: they are sons of the same father and by the third act Aston has even found the will to tar over the crack in the ceiling and will finally ignore the broken Buddha in favour of solidarity with his brother and reject Davies.

The two brothers, in spite of Mick's interior decorator's dream, his parody of property transactions and what has been called his music-hall patter, and Aston's long digression into his past in a mental hospital, remain enigmas for Davies and in part for the audience. We should like to suggest that this very enigmatic quality is an anthropological observation on the part of Pinter as regards "Englishness". The unwillingness to "connect" (shades of E. M. Forster's "Only connect") is usually associated with the British upper-classes. Here we can see in the way it has filtered down to the new emerging classes that, in spite of a superficial empowerment of the working class at this time, the English patriarchal model is still very much in place. A blank wall faced by the class intruder Davies is a wall of silence and disinterest on the part of Aston whose attitude may be seen as that of a high moral ground coupled with a highly-developed sense of self-preservation: the Welfare State is to be implemented but on condition that those giving the hand-outs are not inconvenienced with the smell and noise of the lower classes. The wall Mick presents is rather that of imperialistic playful pragmatism, hypocritically assuming equality, then turning to force when the lower orders require it.

Davies has been taken in apparently to share the treasure of the room but he (or his social class) have also been subjected to centuries of conditioning. His is another and complementary aspect

of anthropological Englishness which might be summed up as fear of the "other". The innate superiority of the upper-classes has given a working-class, "knowing their place" in the scheme of things. Davies no longer has a "place" and fifteen years after he left his papers at Sidcup (one critic has suggested this might be the Army Pay Office and it certainly corresponds to the period of fifteen years after the war) he is frantic with the fear of not saying or doing the right thing, being looked down upon by his superiors or being put down by his inferiors. This fear appears to be at the root of all Davies's actions and seems to be the crack through which he as a character escapes Pinter who can only keep his "nose to the ground" and listen. Davies should be defending his living space, his place in the new society when Aston invites him into the room, but Davies's very aggressive "Englishness" rises to the surface almost certainly as a bodily reaction when he thinks of sitting down or taking a seat: "All them Greeks had it, Poles, Greeks, Blacks, the lot of them, all them aliens had it." His agitation is such that he informs Aston that before taking a seat in the room he must "loosen [himself] up". He makes a poor display of doing this no doubt also due to English inhibitions about making an exhibition of oneself.¹¹

From this beginning to the end of the play, fear will dictate Davies's reactions which oscillate between trying to add value to his image in the eyes of the "other" and whining subjection to his "superiors". First in his duologues with Aston he tries to establish a bond of Englishness as far as values are concerned, inferring that they are both above the Greeks, Poles and Blacks; trapped by Aston into going further, Davies also complains of the "Scotch git[s] and Irish Hooligan[s]". This line of empowerment will be blocked by Aston's question: "Welsh, are you?" Davies is particularly obsessed by and fantasizes about Blacks who turn out to be Indians (although the period of Indian and Pakistani immigration – which will give rise to the English pastime of Paki-bashing – has barely begun). The black neighbours live behind "heavy curtains pulled across" and his fear of the unknown will lead Davies to the wild imaginings of

"Blacks coming up from next door, and using the lavatory. I told him, it was all dirty in there, all the banisters were dirty, they were black, all the lavatory was black."¹² With Mick, Davies is rapidly encouraged to disparage "work-shy", nutty Aston and led to believe that he and Mick are to band together against Aston. He thinks he understands Mick's pragmatic materialism better than Aston's inexplicable generosity. The great irony of the Davies/Mick relationship is when Davies tries to explain why he prefers Mick to his brother: when words fail him Mick suggests it is because he himself is more "straightforward". Davies is so far from understanding the nature of Mick's cunning in waiting for Aston's realisation of the hopelessness of trying to help him that at the end of the play he accepts Mick's dismissal of him: "It's all most regrettable but it looks as though I'm compelled to pay you off for your caretaking work. Here's half a dollar", and still contemplates regaining Aston's support.

Why is Davies turned out of the room, sacrificed as the apparent victim? Because he smells, because he makes too much noise? Pinter in fact seems to have written a play about the new caretaker of England, a collective lower-class figure who has been "over there", i.e. taken part in the Second World War, who suddenly has the possibility of breaking away from the patriarchal model of society, who has vision and generosity, entrepreneurial skills but who, breaking loose from his appointed place in the scheme of things, has barbaric failings which must be abandoned. Thus we may see the three characters of *The Caretaker* as a complex unit, "a multiplicity of perspectives or points of view, which relativize each other's hitherto absolute values".¹³ For a generation of modernist critics, the new Utopia of British postwar socialism which is the background to Pinter's play disappeared behind the irony of what Jameson called "that radical devaluation of human experience." Pinter appeared to be suffering from the "Hegelian Unhappy Consciousness" in that he seemed to oppose, through his new subversive aesthetic, bourgeois and consumer values without adhering to a positive socialist ethic.

Jameson calls this situation "the second irony" which "allows that devaluation of personal experience and values achieved in the first form of irony to be transferred to the political situation, where it can now secure the bracketing of any fundamental personal and political commitment, while enabling the contemplative and henceforth purely aesthetic persistence of an oppositional social stance."

It is not only the arrival of postmodernism which allows us to reconsider Pinter's early work and to reject the image which often came over as a "subjective and quietistic antipolitical figure" (Jameson once more), but also the overt political commitment of his latest plays. With hindsight, the exegesis towards which Pinter seems to be pointing in *The Caretaker* is that of socialism and its reflection in the audience being controlled by the careful Mick or economic factors: the room or remains of conservative society must be patched up, or seen as it is, "a load of clobber", abandoned so that he can move on, make new profits in a new world; the second point of view is that relating to Aston who is the visionary or "seer"¹⁴ that the early socialist thinkers had been. This utopian vision has been "shocked" by the war, Aston is cured of his "hallucinations" and gradually comes to face reality, that the leaking roof must be tarred over, that he the carpenter (Jesus?) must face up to human failings. The failings or barbarism of the English working class are embodied by Davies; fecklessness, racial and religious prejudice and uncaring individualism must be sacrificed and ousted. Both Aston and Mick propose the job of caretaker to Davies but the latter, too long the underdog, cannot release himself from the clichés of master/slave relationships; self-centredness makes him suspicious of Aston's generous proposals and *a contrario* allows him to fall into the trap laid by Mick. The final alliance of Mick and Aston, of material pragmatism and intellectual vision, no doubt seemed to Pinter to point the way forward. He himself says: "I pay meticulous attention to the shape of things, from the shape of a sentence to the overall structure of the play. This shaping, to put it mildly, is of the first importance. But I think a double thing happens. You arrange

and you listen, following the clues you leave for yourself, through the characters.”¹⁵ We only hope that by trying to follow the clues, we have been able to reconstruct the shape and, most important, have not forgotten to listen.

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NOTES

- 1 Introduction “Writing for the theatre” in Harold Pinter, *Plays: One*, London: Methuen, 1976, p. ix.
- 2 *Ibid*, p. xiv.
- 3 *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, 4th ed. revised by E. McIntosh, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1952.
- 4 Harold Pinter, *Plays: One, op. cit.*, first presented on 21st January, 1960.
- 5 Harold Pinter, *The Caretaker*, London: Faber and Faber, 1991 [Eyre Methuen 1960]. All quotations are taken from this edition.
- 6 *The Caretaker, op. cit.*, see Act Three, p. 74: Mick: ... “I don’t stand still. I’m moving about, all the time. I’m moving... all the time. I’ve got to think about the future.”
- 7 In Harold Pinter, *Plays: Four*, London: Methuen, 1981.
- 8 Marc Silverstein, *Harold Pinter and the Language of Cultural Power*, London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1993, p. 115.
- 9 Austin E. Quigley, *The Pinter Problem*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975.

- 10 The Mother is very briefly mentioned both by Aston and Mick, which links them back however tenuously to patriarchal values.
- 11 *The Caretaker*, *op. cit.*, p. 25. Inhibitions about the body are even more explicit in Aston's account of the woman who tried to pick him up in a café: ... "and she said, how would you like me to have a look at your body?" He goes on to comment: "struck me as a bit odd."
- 12 *The Caretaker*, *op. cit.*, Act Three, p. 59.
- 13 Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, pp. 118, 119 for all four quotations.
- 14 *The Caretaker*, *op. cit.*, p. 55: "I used to get the feeling I could see things... very clearly" etc.
- 15 Harold Pinter, *Plays: One*, *op. cit.*, p. xiii.