

Pinter as a Poetic Dramatist: Notes towards an Exploration of Poetic Drama in Pinter's Plays

I am a poet. I am interested in where
I am eternally present and active.
(SPOONER in *No Man's Land*, Act I¹)

All the time I was acting I was writing. Not plays. Hundreds of poems – about a dozen are worth republishing – and short prose pieces.

Thus, Harold Pinter in "Writing for Myself" (1961).² Ten years later, in conversation with Mel Gussow, the playwright re-emphasised his love of poetry, mentioning his recent rediscovery of Pope, his having lines by Donne and Hopkins always in his mind, and his interest in "Modern poetry. Philip Larkin. Yeats and Eliot."³ Prompted by Gussow, Pinter agreed there was a link with the more "lyrical" element in his plays of that period, especially *Silence* (1969), but saw it was "dangerous territory", something Samuel Beckett had warned him about by suggesting a cut in the playtext because it was "over the top in lyricism".⁴ It is this "dangerous territory" in the work of a writer who admits that the life of a poet would have appealed to him more than that of a playwright,⁵ that I shall tentatively explore in my essay.

Perhaps because of a transfer of this vicarious appeal by a man who defines himself as an "occasional poet", poet characters play a major role in some of Pinter's theatre works, notably in *No Man's Land* (1975), where Hirst, a supposedly distinguished man of letters and an alcoholic, has invited into his home a shabby-genteel poet calling himself Spooner. In the course of the play are evoked

poetry readings in a pub, poetic form (terza rima) and the romantic myths that poets are forever young and eternally awaiting inspiration. The play also contains parodistic references to T. S. Eliot. In *Betrayal* (1978), the poet referred to is Yeats, and the two male protagonists are a publisher and a literary agent who both edited a poetry magazine while at University. Martin Esslin⁶ even sees the two brothers in *The Caretaker* as forming a pair, with Aston as poet and Mick as actor.

Significantly, Peter Hall, who has directed so many of the plays, views poetry as one of Pinter's major contributions to the stage:

I think he has brought poetic drama back into the theatre. I think he has made words – the scrutiny of words – serious again in the theatre, which for too long had thought of poetic drama as a sort of fancy hat you put on.⁷

"I actually believe", states Hall earlier in the same interview (p. 21-22)

that Beckett and Pinter are poetic dramatists, in the proper sense of the word; they have a linear structure and a formal structure which you'd better just observe – don't learn it wrong, don't speak it wrong, you can't, you mustn't. But there are various things you can exercise. One of the greatest influences on Pinter, obviously, is the early Eliot – particularly in the repeated phrase, the catching up of a phrase and repeating it over three sentences, keeping it up in the air like a ball. Now, that is often written in three separate sentences; but it has to make a unit...

Martin Esslin similarly insists on the poetic nature of the repetitive process in *The Caretaker*,⁸ quoting the following dialogue from Act II (*Plays Two*, p. 37-38):

DAVIES. Who was that feller?

ASTON. He's my brother.

DAVIES. Is he? He's a bit of a joker, en'he?

ASTON. Uh.

DAVIES. Yes... he's a real joker.

ASTON. He's got a sense of humour;

DAVIES. Yes, I noticed.

Pause.

He's a real joker, that lad, you can see that.

Pause.

ASTON. Yes, he tends... he tends to see the funny side of things.

DAVIES. Well, he's got a sense of humour, en'he?

ASTON. Yes.

DAVIES. Yes, you could tell that.

Pause.

Thus, not only does Pinter consider himself to be a poet, expressing his fascination with the very subject through some of his characters, but also he is seen by a major critic and, more importantly, by a major director intimate with his plays, as a poetic dramatist. In the main body of this essay, I wish to explore first the ways Pinter relates to T. S. Eliot as evoked by Peter Hall, then the link between Pinter's works and Eliot's thoughts on poetic drama (insisting on the dramatic nature of some of Pinter's poems) and finally – after a parenthesis examining parallels between the dramatic monologue techniques of Pinter and Browning – I shall turn my attention to Pinter's similarity of preoccupation, as exemplified in *The Caretaker*, with the post-Waste Land, post-modernist “‘grot’ school” of poetry.

A pointer to Pinter's awareness of Eliot are two parodistic references to Eliot's *Prufrock*,⁹ spoken by Spooner in *No Man's Land*:

I have known this before. The exit through the door, by way of belly and floor. (Act I, p. 98)

I have known this before. Morning. A locked door. A house of silence and strangers. (Act II, p. 121)

These linguistic echoes send us back to a poem which depends to a large extent on the repetition technique defined by Peter Hall. The formulation, “I have known”, is part of the repeated first pro-

position in a series of three verse paragraphs (Peter Hall's "units"), all concluding on a variant formulation of "how should I presume?". The technique as employed by Pinter relates to Esslin's finding "whole phrases which recur as refrains (as in ballad metre)..." and quoting Davies' repeated references to "Blacks" as an example (Esslin, p. 260). The effect is that of dramatic poetry as the refrain underlines the obsessive nature of Davies' linguistic behaviour. Hirst's photograph album speech in *No Man's Land* (Act II, p. 141), quoted and commented on in conversation with Mel Gussow (p. 98-99), is an example of the fusion of Pinter's lyrical vein (as developed after *Landscape*) and the repetition technique:

I might even show you my photograph album. You might even see a face in it which might remind you of your own, of what you once were. You might see faces of others, in shadow, or cheeks of others, turning, or jaws, or backs of necks, or eyes, dark under hats, which might remind you of others, whom once you knew, whom you thought long dead, but from whom you still receive a sidelong glance, if you can face the good ghost. They possess all that emotion... trapped. Bow to it. It will assuredly never release them, but who knows... what relief... it may give to them... who knows how they may quicken... in their chains, in their glass jars. You think it cruel... to quicken them, when they are fixed, imprisoned? No... no. Deeply, deeply, they wish to respond to your touch, to your look, and when you smile, their joy... is unbounded. And so I say to you, tender the dead, as you would yourself be tendered, now, in what you would describe as your life.

The repetitions of "might", "see", "good ghost", "quicken", "deeply", "tender(ed)" serve as linguistic markers to track the movement of an alcoholic's mind lost in its phantasy world of memory. Similar rhythmical patterning based on repeats is to be found in the first part of Eliot's *Ash Wednesday*:

Because I do not hope to turn again
Because I do not hope
Because I do not hope to turn

and:

Because I do not hope to know again
The infirm glory of the positive hour
Because I do not think
Because I know I shall not know'¹⁰

The Caretaker contains several sequences in which repetitions serve to mark out the equivalent of rhythmical units. The dialogue between Aston and Davies in which the latter is trying to elicit an offer to stay the night in the room (Act I, p. 9) revolves around repetitions of the words "wind" and "room", and a little later, when Davies is trying to establish his credentials as somebody who is clean (p. 11) he frames his speech with references to Shepherd's Bush, punctuates it with the word "soap" and indulges in tautological repetition about the "best convenience":

I got this mate at Shepherd's Bush. In the convenience. Run about the best convenience they had. (*He watches ASTON.*) Run about the best one. Always slipped me a bit of soap, any time I went in there. Very good soap. They have to have the best soap. I was never without a piece of soap, whenever I happened to be knocking about the Shepherd's Bush area.

The (dramatic) point is that Davies, playing for time in the room, tests out Aston's reactions while the latter is rummaging for a pair of shoes under the bed. In a similar way, Mick plays a waiting game ("What's the game?") with the terrorised Davies at the beginning of Act II, framing his first long speech, "You remind me of my uncle's brother..." (p. 29), with repeated questioning about which bed the tramp slept in, how he slept, and comments about how "choosy" Davies is. A little later in Act II (p. 35), upon Aston's return, the dialogue between the two brothers moves in a repetitive chain of responses, separated into units by the punctuating pauses, so that Davies (and the audience) are manipulated in a pattern of expectation and (false) surprise:

Silence.

A drip sounds in the bucket. They all look up.

Silence.

MICK. You still got that leak.

ASTON. Yes.

Pause.

It's coming from the roof;

MICK. From the roof, eh?

ASTON. Yes.

Pause.

I'll have to tar it over.

MICK. You're going to tar it over?

ASTON. Yes.

MICK. What?

ASTON. The cracks.

Pause.

MICK. You'll be tarring over the cracks on the roof.

ASTON. Yes.

Pause.

MICK. Think that'll do it?

ASTON. It'll do it, for the time being.

MICK. Uh.

Pause.

DAVIES (abruptly) What do you do – ?

They both look at him.

What do you do... when the bucket's full?

Pause.

ASTON. Empty it.

Patterning of repeats, as detailed above, controls the micro-structures of *The Caretaker*. At the same time these repeats form part of the large-scale structuring of the play, an organic leitmotif development of words, phrases and references to objects. Poetry supports and informs dramatic effect. And this is precisely T. S. Eliot's assumption about dramatic poetry in his 1951 essay "Poetry and Drama",¹¹ in which he insists on "strict dramatic utility":

[...] I start with the assumption that if poetry is merely a decoration, an added embellishment, if it merely gives people of literary tastes the pleasure of listening to poetry at the same time that they are witnessing a play, then it is superfluous. It must justify itself dramatically, and not merely be fine poetry shaped into dramatic form. From this it follows that no play should be written in verse for which prose is *dramatically* adequate. (p. 232)

Especially relevant to Pinter, whose plays are overtly in “prose”, is Eliot’s notion that: “Whether we use prose or verse on the stage, they are both but means to an end. The difference, from one point of view, is not so great as we might think.” (p. 232) The implication of Eliot’s definition is to make it actually cover prose. If verse and prose are both subordinated to dramatic functioning, then prose form is as much dramatic poetry as verse in a play. It is especially necessary to make our definition cover prose form for a playwright writing at a time when actual verse (in the sense of stressed and/or rhyming form is – with the exception of theatre poets such as Tony Harrison – no longer what a poet necessarily limits himself to. (Indeed, T. S. Eliot himself was trying to incorporate within his verse line “a rhythm close to contemporary speech” (p. 141) and lessons learnt from the rigorous use of “vers libre”). A Pinter play such as *Landscape* (1969), with two contrasting levels of discourse (Duff’s coarse vernacular and Beth’s ‘poetic’ lyricism) functions as poetic drama on both levels.

Harold Pinter’s own published poems rarely employ regular verse forms in the traditional sense, but display sometimes imagistic rigour and brevity. Among the post-*Caretaker* pieces, many set up a dramatic situation; and over the whole corpus one can note an inter-reaction between poems and theatre plays. An early poem, “Daylight” (1956):

I have thrown a handful of petals on your breasts.
Scarred by this daylight you lie petalstruck.
So your skin imitates the flush, your head
Turning all ways, bearing a havoc of flowers over you.

Now I bring you from dark into daytime,
Laying petal on petal.¹²

is a preview of some of the lyrical sequences in *Landscape*, such as:

All it is, you see... I said... is the lightness of your look, my neck,
your eyes, the silence, that is my meaning, the loveliness of my
flowers, my hands touching my flowers, that is my meaning.¹³

The power of the above, however, springs from the specificity
of lyrical utterance to the dramatic situation, in which Beth is
immuring herself in her phantasy memory of an ideal love.

The poem, "It Is Here (for A)"¹⁴ is simultaneously lyrical
utterance and dramatic situation:

What sound was that?

I turn away, into the shaking room.

What was that sound that came in on the dark?

What is this maze of light it leaves us in?

What is this stance we take,

To turn away and then turn back?

What did we hear?

It was the breath we took when we first met.

Listen. It is here.

The speaking voice supposes the presence of another
character. A poem can set up a dramatic situation within itself, as in
"Message" (1977):¹⁵

Jill. Fred phoned. He can't make it tonight.

He said he'd call again. As soon as poss.

I said (on your behalf) OK, no sweat.

He said to tell you he was fine,

Only the crap, he said, you know, it sticks.

The crap you have to fight.
You're sometimes nothing but a walking shithouse.

I was well acquainted with the pong myself,
I told him, and I counselled calm.
Don't let the fuckers get you down,
Take the lid off the kettle a couple of minutes,
Go on the town, burn someone to death,
Find another tart, give her some hammer,
Live while you're young, until it palls,
Kick the first blind man you meet in the balls.

Anyway he'll call again.
I'll be back in time for tea.

Your loving mother.

The poem works in the manner of a dramatic monologue by Browning. A first-person narrator sets up a dramatic situation in which the presence of two silent interlocutors (Jill and Fred) is established. Similarly, the speaking voice in a Browning dramatic monologue creates a silent presence upon which the locutor focuses, for example, Lucrezia in "Andrea del Sarto" and the members of the watch in "Fra Lippo Lippi". (This functions as a double focus if one takes into account the reader or listener who doubles with the interlocutor in the poem.) "Message" is in this respect like some of the monologues in Pinter's plays; Aston's long monologue at the end of Act II of *The Caretaker* is spoken in the silent presence of the unresponsive Davies. It creates negative interlocutor focus in as much as Aston is looking for a sympathetic listener he does not find in Davies. (This dramatic monologue pattern is brilliantly inverted by Pinter in Act III, when Aston's, at first unnoticed, disappearance from the scene turns Davies' monologue into unfocused discourse:

He turns and looks about the room.
Christ! That bastard, he ain't even listening to me! (p. 64)

Aston's monologue has a similar function to "Message", with a long narrative passage devoted to his experience of ECT followed by a short "kick in the tail" constituted by the last sentence:

I want to build that shed out in the garden. (p. 55)

A "bravura" monologue like Mick's Act III description of a dream palace transformation of the house is also akin to the same form of dramatic monologue: it is time for him to test his silent interlocutor, Davies, with his dream.

A Pinter play is often partly made up of such monologues to the extent that it appears to be constructed through juxtaposition of dramatic voices. T. S. Eliot in "Poetry and Drama" (p. 138) says that the problem for the poet in the theatre is the transition from one's own individual voice (i.e. a Pinter lyric) to writing for other voices. Dramatic interlocking of voices is to be found in *The Waste Land*, with a technical problem of the same order as the juxtaposition of short imagistic fragments within a coherent total structure.

This links with the final section of my essay, Pinter's connection with the scrapheap landscape of post-modernist poetry as exemplified by Peter Reading in *Perduta gente*¹⁶ and its imagery of social junk:

PVC / newspapers / rags
insulate ranks of expendables, eyesores,
winos, unworthies,
one of which (stiff in its cardboard Electrolux
box...

This is the poetry of death in the cityscape; or survival, as in Ken Smith's "Fox Running":

Twice round the Circle Line.
At Waterloo the last train north
to Camden, scattered roads of bottles,
VP and cider empties, upturned crates.

Holed up with Baudelaire and Lorca;
On Sundays picking up exotic fruit
along the market side, selling
half a dozen ties he's nicked.¹⁷

These fragments, leftovers and “objets volés” (as opposed to “objets trouvés”) form part of the universe of Hanif Kureishi, screenwriter, film maker and novelist friend of Harold Pinter. The hyper-real, contemporary “waste land” in *Sammy and Rosie get laid*¹⁸ shows a shared post-modernist concept of society and poetry. The use of *Waste Land* quotations and references by Kureishi in his film implies that the seminal Modernist English-language poem of the twentieth century is the work by which post-modernist poetry is defined. “These fragments I have shored against my ruins,” says one of the voices at the end of Part V of *The Waste Land*. Modernist poetry as practised by Eliot here can be viewed as an attempt to reassemble fragmented images into a coherent general structure. How is this object-orientated imagery realised in Pinter’s plays?

We have seen that Pinter proceeds from short poems and texts to full-scale theatre works. The framing device is dramatic structure and coherence, the better to exploit a sense of incoherence and fragmentation. Thus his work is post-modern in that it attempts to show fragmentation, rather than to react against it. The room in *The Caretaker* is the dramatic space for a conglomeration of objects: “You’ve got a good bit of stuff here,” remarks Davies (p. 9) who, stepping into the room, becomes another, this time human, object there, like Peter Reading’s dead homeless person. Pinter’s Act II (Beckettian?!) stage directions before Mick offers Davies a sandwich are: “DAVIES joins MICK in junk.” (p. 45)

Paradoxically, the dramatic progression of *The Caretaker* gives the objects displayed an organic function, so that, starting from apparent incongruence, they turn into congruent objects with an accretion of meanings, even if these are ambiguous in nature. For example, early in Act I, Aston is seen fiddling with an electric

toaster. At this point in the action, it can simply be seen as an innocent activity, or – more subtly – an indication of the fact that he is becoming tired of Davies' insistent references to having been ill-treated in the "caff" he is supposed to have been working in (p. 8). Aston's unscrewing the plug, crossing the room to find a replacement, then starting to fit this on, punctuates Davies' continued ranting and rambling on about the incident in the café and the loss of his belongings. It is only in the course of the play that we realise that replacing the plug is just one of the ways Aston has of trying to rebuild his shattered universe. He is the poet of objects in his own devastated mental landscape. His constant fiddling with plugs expresses his attempt to make connections between, and to connect with, objects in the room. He seems capable of mending individual objects, but incapable of fitting them into a global concept. Although he has his dream of (re)construction ("I want to build that shed out in the garden."), he goes no further than showing Davies some timber and sandpapering a piece of wood. His attempts to procure tools come to nothing: "I had a bit of bad luck with that jig saw. When I got there it had gone." (Act II, p. 37) And anyway, a jig saw is an inappropriate tool for what he has in mind.

The Buddha in Aston's room is the object central to his position in the world.¹⁹ Aston displays no more intrinsic knowledge of its significance than Davies, only knowing that he likes it. He has appropriated an object and drained it of its original significance by placing it in his room. It connects with nothing. It is the quintessential potentially symbolic object which in a Modernist poetic landscape would have been juxtaposed with other significant objects, but it is now simply there. It takes on a function when it is smashed to pieces by Mick. In a roomscape composed of fragments, it becomes the micro-fragmented object which will never be put together again to acquire a meaning, or to reveal a meaning it once had but has now lost.

"I try not to waste words," said Pinter to Mel Gussow (p. 59). Mick's gesture in smashing the Buddha is where action/acting takes over from the words of the poet: Pinter the poetic dramatist has given way to his brother, Pinter the players' playwright.

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Notes

- 1 Harold Pinter, *Plays Four*, London: Faber, 1991, p. 85. Page references in my essay are to this edition of Pinter's plays.
- 2 Reprinted as the Introduction to H. Pinter, *Plays Two*, London: Faber, 1991, p. VIII.
- 3 Mel Gussow, *Conversations with Pinter*, London: Nick Hern Books, 1994, p. 27.
- 4 Idem, p. 28.
- 5 Idem, p.58-59.
- 6 Martin Esslin, *Pinter the Playwright*, London: Methuen, 4th edition, 1984, p. 111.
- 7 "Directing Pinter" in Alan Bold, *Harold Pinter: You never heard such silence*, London: Vision Press, 1985, p.28. This piece is printed in its 1974 interview form in Michael Scott (editor), *Harold Pinter: The Birthday Party, The Caretaker and The Homecoming: A Selection of Critical Essays*, Casebook Series, London: Macmillan, 1986, p. 44-61.

- 8 Esslin, p. 243: "... various permutations in the mouth of first the one then the other character give the dialogue a definite poetic shape, a musical form of theme and variations, of strophe and anti-strophe: psychological realism and a poet's control over the formal element in language are here fused in a way highly characteristic of Pinter."
- 9 "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems: 1909-1962*, London: Faber, 1974, p. 13-17; see especially p. 14-15, the three verse paragraphs beginning "for I have known them all already, known them all".
- 10 *Collected Poems*, p. 95.
- 11 *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, edited with an introduction by Frank Kermode, London: Faber, 1975, p. 132-152.
- 12 *Poems and Prose*, London: Faber, 1991, p. 29.
- 13 *Plays Three*, London: Faber, 1991, p. 182.
- 14 *Poems and Prose*, p. 52.
- 15 Idem, p. 43.
- 16 London: Secker and Warburg, 1989 (unnumbered pages).
- 17 From *The Poet Reclining. Selected Poems: 1962-1980*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1982, p. 135.
- 18 See my article "Wastelands Redeveloped: *Sammy and Rosie get laid* as Post-Modernist Film" in CALIBAN No. XXXII, Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 1995, p. 103-108.
- 19 In this connection, see Steven H. Gale, "Art Objects as Metaphors in the Film-Scripts of Harold Pinter" in *Pinter at Sixty*, edited by Katherine H. Burkman and John L. Kundert-Gibbs, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993, especially p. 165-166.