

## PINTER'S POLITICS OF VIOLENCE

*Ewald Mengel*

In *The Hothouse*, *One for the Road*, and *Mountain Language*, the English dramatist Harold Pinter employs "closed" organizations or institutions as models to analyze the manner in which the interactions of people in face-to-face encounters become distorted under the influence of violence. The plays are written in a non-didactic, seemingly impartial style, which forms a remarkable contrast to Pinter's concern with the victims of violence, but which is an important element of his dramaturgy. Pinter takes the side of the oppressed individual and denounces as violent what masquerades as law and order. He also shows a tendency to be subversive, in that he questions public authority and reveals the strategies by which authority is preserved. In so far as he exposes the various shapes which violence can take, his plays are manifestations of his politics of violence.



For English dramatists of the seventies and eighties, the phenomenon of violence has become more and more important. This is especially true as far as Harold Pinter is concerned. An analysis of violence in Pinter's plays yields important insights both into his dramaturgy and into Pinter as a political playwright.

Violence in Pinter's plays is never a merely private or individual affair. It has a public or political dimension, in so far as the relationship of the individual to society is concerned. In the eyes of the playwright, this relationship is increasingly characterized by violence in various shapes.

One form of violence becomes especially important in this connection, one which I have analyzed elsewhere under the heading of "structural violence."<sup>1</sup> The term was introduced into the discussion of violence and related phenomena by the Norwegian Johan Galtung, a specialist in peace research, in order to describe a non-personal, indirect or hidden form of violence which, in his opinion, may be traced in the moral values or norms, the laws, the role structure and the institutions, that is, in the culture of a given society in general. The term denounces as "violent" that which claims to be "normal": as such, it has political implications, for it connotes a standpoint from which society is considered "closed" rather than open, or even

“totalitarian” rather than “democratic.” This is an idea which Pinter shares with many other contemporary writers for the theatre.<sup>2</sup> It seems, therefore, that Harold Pinter, who once held a singular and aloof position within the English theatre of the present, has drawn closer to dramatists such as Howard Brenton, David Hare, or Howard Barker, although it would of course be wrong to call him a socialist.

In plays like *The Hothouse*, *One For the Road* and *Mountain Language*, Pinter has created models of hierarchically structured, “closed” societies, in which the relationship between the individual and society is characterized by various forms of violence and oppression. He is less interested in identifying and locating these societies, but uses “closed organizations” or “institutions” as models to analyze from a micro-sociological perspective the manner in which the interactions of people in face-to-face encounters become distorted under the influence of violence. He shows himself fascinated by the physical and psychological strategies and mechanics of power application, the subtle manoeuvres of torture and oppression, and the psychological disposition of the torturer. He also reveals himself to be concerned about the victims of this violence, and the influence of torture upon their psyches. In so far as his plays expose the various shapes which violence can take, they are manifestations of Pinter’s politics of violence. They take the side of the oppressed individual and denounce as violent what masquerades as law and order. They also show a tendency to be subversive, in that they question public authority and reveal the strategies by which authority is preserved. This is done in a non-didactic, seemingly impartial way, something which forms a remarkable contrast to Pinter’s concern with the victims of violence, but which is an important element of his dramaturgy.

I should like to begin my discussion with two quotations, one from Martin Esslin’s review of the production of *Mountain Language* at the Lyttleton in London on 20 October 1988, and the other from an interview with Harold Pinter in February 1985, recorded by Nicholas Hern and published in Hern’s edition of *One For the Road*.

In his review, Esslin, who obviously has some reservations about a play like *Mountain Language*, asks: “There remains the question: what can be the objective of dramatizing torture and pain in this fashion? Does anyone need persuading that such political procedures are wrong and obscene?” (77) At the end of his review, he comes up with the following answer:

Let us hope that everywhere it is produced *Mountain Language* will serve to arouse public opinion against the countries where these methods are still practiced — and, indeed, that it will help to shame those regimes, wherever they may be, into mending their ways. (78)

The implication here is that, wherever “the countries where these methods are still practiced” may be found on the map, one would hardly claim that England or the United States are among their number. In consequence, Esslin deals with the violence characteristic of *Mountain Language* as if it were a “foreign affair,”

which, although unpleasant, has nothing to do with the political reality of Britain.

The second quotation is taken from the interview with Nicholas Hern. Harold Pinter refers to an article in *The Guardian* of 22 August 1984:

“Work has started on the new war headquarters for the Americans at Dawes Hill, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, the Ministry of Defence confirmed yesterday. And the three-storey underground bunker, which was first constructed in the nineteen fifties as the American nuclear strike command, is being refurbished at a cost of nearly fifty million dollars to the Americans. It will replace the American peacetime headquarters at Stuttgart, Germany, in the event of war.” And what do you think is on top of that? Great Hampden. Underneath Great Hampden cricket pitch is the centre of nuclear operations in Europe. And underneath, when we play our cricket match, when every Sunday people play cricket out there, etc. etc., in the Chilterns, underneath them are thousands of people underground, and there will be more of them. And this is going to be the centre of nuclear operations in Europe. It already was a nuclear base. But it now is going to be *the* centre. So you have thousands of Americans, when you come down to it, walking about under the Chilterns, while we're playing cricket on top.

That's the story.

(Hern 21f)

In this interview, Pinter is not talking in a vague and abstract way about some distant totalitarian regimes, but is referring to *our* countries, that is, to Britain, Germany, and the United States.

Pinter's statement, as quoted above, seems to me important not only because it illustrates his preoccupation with contemporary political affairs, but also because it allows us to draw some conclusions with regard to his intentions as a political playwright.

First, the image of people playing cricket in the Chilterns while an army of other people are preparing for nuclear war below the surface of the earth evokes the uncanny idea of an ambivalent, deceptive reality. Second, Pinter's imagery implies that something seriously disturbing and potentially destructive is in progress while people are innocently engaged in playing games. Third, Pinter makes it clear that we may be deceiving ourselves about what is actually going on, and that there is more to political reality than our everyday experience suggests. All in all, this means that although Pinter refers to a concrete political situation, he is not content with talking politics, but turns this situation into a paradigm of “our world,” the world in which we live, of which England, Germany and the USA form a part.

For Pinter the political playwright, “dis-covering” and exposing what is hidden or “covered” becomes a task of the utmost importance. His main objective is to detect the cruelty behind the smile, the face of violence behind the mask of order. This can be done in a straightforward way in an interview like the one quoted above. As a playwright, however, Pinter is no party politician, and although he involves himself in the political affairs of today, politics enter his plays only in an abstract and “mediated” form, although many indirect parallels and allusions to actually existing political conditions

and circumstances can be established. Pinter's focus as an artist is on the general mechanics and manoeuvres of face-to-face encounters, rather than on the political situation of a specific country at a specific time. Plays such as *The Hothouse*, *One for the Road*, and *Mountain Language* take their aesthetic effect from their suggestiveness, which, in turn, is produced by their intentional "vagueness" or, to put it in Wolfgang Iser's terms, by the "Unbestimmtheit" (indeterminacy) by which they are characterized. Pinter's audience is requested to fill in the blanks, thereby actively creating the plays' meaning. Various totalitarian regimes, movements, or sects may come to mind simultaneously. If Pinter refuses to pin down names and stipulate identities, then this means that he wants to preserve their "openness." This "openness," on the other hand, guarantees that the plays do not become dated, and that future generations may also recognize their relevance. *The Hothouse*, for example, which belongs to Pinter's earliest dramatic attempts and which had its first performance more than 20 years after it was written, appears much more authentic on the English stage of the eighties than on that of the fifties, when, as Pinter pointed out in an interview, the world did not know anything as yet about the Russian psychiatric hospitals.<sup>3</sup> The power of a play like *The Hothouse* therefore lies in the fact, not that it imitates reality, but that reality seems to imitate the play. If history has paradoxically confirmed the truth and authenticity of Pinter's art, this has been achieved by the abstract form of Pinter's politics.

Structural violence in Pinter's later plays takes various forms. In *The Hothouse*, it turns up in the form of the image of the "leader," Roote's "predecessor," which has various implications: his "golden forelock" (38) points to the Aryan race and a Nazi-like fascism; however, there are also lines which seem to allude to a socialistic or communistic regime, such as the cartload of typewriters mentioned by Roote (82); last but not least, the cult and worship surrounding the "predecessor of us all" (38) and founder of the first "institution," and the crowd of listeners who seem to hang fascinatedly upon the speaker's lips, are reminiscent of a religious sect. From the point of view of the audience, Hitler, Stalin, and Baghwan may simultaneously come to mind. If the name of Saddam Hussein can now be added here, this once again underlines the openness of Pinter's representation of reality.

The topic of the dictator's discourse is "order, for God's sake," or "order, for the love of Mike!" (38) Significantly, he is talking in the imperative: his language is one of absolute power and command. In a "closed" society, "order" is identical with complete submission and the surrender of one's personal identity.

One of Pinter's main concerns in *The Hothouse* is the analysis of the relationship between language and reality, and of the indirect and subtle way in which language may serve as a tool of violence. The whole country is covered with "rest homes, nursing homes, convalescent homes, sanatoria" (38). Their function is to fill "people in need of help" (21), who have been "specially recommended by the Ministry" (21), with new "confidence in

themselves" (21). The terms I have quoted reflect the official use of language by which reality is defined. Pinter leaves no doubt that terms like "rest home" or "convalescent home" are euphemistic circumscriptions used for prison-like "closed institutions," the actual task of which consists in forcing obstreperous individuals by means of brain-washing and torture back into conformity with the roles and norms defined by the "organization."

*One for the Road* is an equally fascinating study of power and powerlessness, and of the subtle ways in which violence can be applied through language alone. The most important point to make about this play is perhaps that violence here does not look like violence at all, but comes in the disguise of polite manners and friendly conversation. The torturer's discourse is characterized by an uncanny mixture of friendliness, veiled or indirect threats, and straightforward lunacy. The kinder his tone seems to get, the more cynical, brutal and, therefore, violent he becomes in reality. He reveals himself as a sadistic psychopath, fascinated by the idea of absolute power. The monosyllabic answers of his victims are clear indications of their helplessness and their impotent refusal to subscribe to his view of reality.

The title of Pinter's play *One for the Road* is meant to focus our attention on the gap that opens up between language and reality, and on the ideological function of language in a "closed" society. The phrase is commonly used to give a socially acceptable explanation for having another drink.

In the play, Nicholas uses the phrase for the first time when he pours himself his third whisky within a couple of minutes. He uses it a second (10) and a third time (12) during the first scene, although, of course, he has no intention of taking to the road. When Nicholas finally makes Victor drink a glass of whiskey, the phrase "one for the road" acquires an ironic meaning. Since somebody has obviously tortured the helpless victim by cutting out his tongue, and he still seems to feel the pain, the sharp alcoholic beverage burns in his mouth, and the incident amounts to another act of torture: "one for the road," for Nicholas has announced his release. The words are thus detached from their original meaning, their semantic logic and their denotative content. Although phrase and reality no longer match, Nicholas continues to use it. This is exactly the way in which ideologies function. It is the structure of ideological discourse, then, which seems to be important for Harold Pinter, and which is one of his main concerns in *One for the Road*.

Pinter's *Mountain Language* is a play about the situation of a cultural minority in a "closed," totalitarian society. Once again, we have a government with the power to define reality by decree. Ordering a whole people not to speak their own language amounts to an attack on their cultural identity. When, at the end of the play, the rules are changed, and speaking the "mountain language" is legalized ("until further notice," 47), it is the silence of the old woman which becomes the pivotal point of the play's meaning. Speaking the "mountain language" under these conditions would mean complying with the new "rules;" in this context, the silence of the old woman amounts to an act of passive resistance. Since the government of the state is



in complete control of reality, what looks like giving the mountain people a “helping hand” (47) is just another instance of oppression. Whereas one could claim in *One for the Road* that Nicholas’s behavior only *seemed* to be based on friendliness, so that it was easy to distinguish between appearance and reality, this is no longer the case in *Mountain Language*. Here, the “helping hand” is identical with the hand of the oppressor, and granting something means denying it. The process of redefining reality is now complete, because it cannot be carried any further: “structural violence” has become “total” and all-inclusive.

Pinter’s plays deal with the abuse of authority and with the effects of this abuse on individuals and, more recently, on nations. Pinter’s plays, like those of Beckett, have become shorter and shorter, and also more radical in the sense indicated above. Perhaps the most important point to emphasize in this connection is the fact that his plays are about our reality, about us, and not about some obscure totalitarian regime in a remote part of the world. Doubtless, our everyday experience of reality contradicts this claim, and many of us will feel that the kind of violence which is characteristic of the plays I have analyzed has nothing to do with the society in which we live. However, if one remembers the interview with Herm which I quoted earlier, it becomes clear that this was exactly the point that Pinter wanted to make. In our everyday lives, we resemble the cricket players in the Chilterns who have no idea of what is going on below them. Pinter the political playwright has set himself the task of sketching the surface and probing the ground underneath, and, by doing so, of elucidating the “deeper” layers of reality.

When Esslin, in his review of *Mountain Language*, criticizes the “aestheticism, at least of this production” and “the beautiful way in which it is done” (78), he misses this point. What Esslin takes for Pinter’s (or the production’s) aestheticism is actually an important result of Pinter’s dramaturgy. The “cleaner” an act of torture appears, the more violent it becomes. The smooth “surface” is necessary because it is part of the mask, the disguise in which reality presents itself for perception. Pinter’s plays are about the manoeuvres and strategies of turning black into white, a lie into the truth, or, to put it differently, rendering torture as love, or declaring the annihilation of the individual a form of education.

A dramaturgy of this kind makes great demands on the active participation of the audience. Pinter’s audience must realize that another discourse is hidden behind the spoken word. This means that the basic structure underlying Pinter’s dramaturgy is ironic rather than representational. Also, it is connotative rather than denotative, for it refuses to identify and define, but represents the phenomenon of structural violence in a model-like form. Last but not least, it is provocative rather than confirmatory, because it does not take reality at face value but is bent on tearing down the mask and exposing the face of violence which tries to hide behind it.

### Notes

1. See my article "The Closed Society: Structural Violence in the English Drama of the Present," *Forum Modernes Theater* 5 (1990): 34-47.
2. Compare also with Carol Rosen, *Plays of Impasse: Contemporary Drama Set in Confining Institutions*. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983).
3. Interview with John Barber, *Daily Telegraph*, 23 June 1980, quoted by Arnold P. Hinchliffe, "After *No Man's Land*: A Progress Report," Gale 157.

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Στα έργα *The Hothouse*, *One for the Road* και *Mountain Language* ο Άγγλος δραματουργός Harold Pinter χρησιμοποιεί κλειστούς οργανισμούς ή ιδρύματα ως μοντέλα για να αναλύσει τον τρόπο με τον οποίο οι αντιδράσεις των ανθρώπων σε κατά μέτωπο συναντήσεις διαστρεβλώνονται υπό την επίδραση της βίας. Τα έργα είναι γραμμένα σε μη διδακτικό και επιφανειακά αμερόληπτο ύφος, που αποτελεί μια εντυπωσιακή αντίθεση στο ενδιαφέρον του Pinter για τα θύματα της βίας, αλλά το οποίο είναι ένα σημαντικό στοιχείο της δραματουργίας του. Ο Pinter παίρνει το μέρος του καταπιεσμένου υποκειμένου και καταγγέλλει ως βίαιο ό,τι μεταμφιέζεται σαν νόμος και τάξη. Επίσης δείχνει μια τάση να γίνεται ανατρεπτικός, αμφισβητώντας την πολιτική εξουσία και αποκαλύπτοντας τις στρατηγικές μέσω των οποίων διατηρείται η εξουσία. Στο μέτρο που εκθέτει τις διάφορες μορφές που μπορεί να πάρει η εξουσία, τα έργα του είναι εκδηλώσεις της πολιτικής του γύρω από τη βία.