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FROM MENACE TO TORTURE: THE DEVELOPMENT
OF HAROLD PINTER'S POLITICAL DRAMA

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ABSTRACT

There is a degree of continuity between Pinter's "comedies of menace" and his overtly political plays. The chief difference between the two types of plays is one of focus: in the "comedies of menace" Pinter emphasises social pressures exerted on the nonconforming individual, whereas in the overtly political plays he focusses explicitly on State oppression of the dissident.

Pinter's passionate concern with politics has adversely affected his art, though there are signs of a return to form in his latest play, Party Time.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Pinter's seemingly abrupt switch to explicitly political drama in One for the Road took many of his critics by surprise. A sample of reviews reveals that the majority certainly saw the play as a distinct change in direction, but reactions to the "new" type of play were mixed. Elizabeth Sakellaridou was unmistakably enthusiastic. She rhapsodised, "A new Pinter emerges from the piece, a Pinter who has suddenly activated his political awareness, a Pinter 'agonistes' rising from the hopeless apathy of his more recent plays.... Is this new bent in Pinter's career a true metamorphosis of the dramatist into a committed writer and of his unclassified art into art militant?"¹ Michael Billington, reviewing One for the Road for The Guardian, also discerned "a decisive shift for Pinter from mysterious obliquity to political rage", but he expressed the opinion that "the generalised indictment of the steam-rollering State machine...makes for thinnish drama".²

Christopher Hudson, in The Standard, was likewise disparaging about One for the Road when it premiered in a double bill with a revival of "Victoria Station". He praised the latter for "the mood-changes, the laconic shuttle of dialogue, the sense that things of terrible significance are waiting to be said", and concluded with the accolade, "All this is vintage Pinter, and highly enjoyable". But his review of One for the Road commenced with the unequivocal, and I think damning, comparison, "One for the Road is not suggestive: it is declamatory".³ He suggested that the play "is a piece best suited to something like an Amnesty benefit". These comments, and his remark that the play's portrait of the civilised torturer is handled by a Pinter "full of righteous indignation", indicate his conviction that Pinter has abandoned artistic objectivity - a fatal deviation from "vintage Pinter", in Hudson's view.

Christopher Edwards, reviewing One for the Road a year later, was still reluctant to believe that Pinter had become "very political". He wrote scathingly, "It would be strange indeed to find Pinter in the company of the agit-prop crew of explicit denunciators, banner-wavers and cause-mongers". He continued, "Perhaps if pressed, [Pinter] would state a firm commitment for or against somebody, but [One for the Road] doesn't carry the question of [who he is getting at] much further".⁴

One of the few critics who expressed little surprise at the new, explicitly political play was Michael Coveney, writing for the Financial Times. As he explained in his column, "Pinter himself has acknowledged that it becomes increasingly impossible not to contemplate the political ugliness of the world".⁵ Coveney, however, did detect that "for the first time in a play of [Pinter]...the State, the regime or whatever, is a factor [in marking out] the distance between people". Taking my cue from Coveney, I argue in this thesis that it is only this precise focus on the political agencies of terror that is new in the Pinter of the 1980's.

But how understandable is it that, in 1984, so many critics reacted with surprise, disbelief and sometimes even with a sense of betrayal, to the first explicitly political play written by Pinter?⁶ Of course they would have been aware of Pinter's stated attitude to political drama when he was interviewed by Harry Thompson for the New Theatre Magazine in January, 1961. Thompson made the comment, "Among playwrights, Arnold Wesker has made the problem of political conscience very much his own". He then asked Pinter directly, "Do politics interest you?". Pinter replied:

I find most political thinking and terminology suspect, deficient. It seems to me a dramatist is entitled to portray the political confusion in a play if his characters naturally act in a political context, that is, if the political influences operating on them are more significant than any other consideration. But I object to the stage being used as a substitute for the soap box, where the author desires to make a direct statement at all costs, and forces his characters into

fixed and artificial postures in order to achieve this...I don't care for the didactic or moralistic theatre. In England I find this theatre, on the whole, sentimental and unconvincing.⁷

A month later, in an interview with Richard Findlater, Pinter affirmed, "No, 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".⁸ Six years later, in an interview with Lawrence Bensky, Pinter re-affirmed his apolitical stance. He stated categorically, "[P]olitically there's no question of my getting involved because the issues are by no means simple - to be a politician you have to be able to present a simple picture even if you don't see things that way".⁹ After an emphatic denial that it had ever occurred to him to express political opinions through his characters, he added, "Ultimately, politics do bore me... I distrust ideological statements of any kind".

But these professions of indifference to politics have not been substantiated in later years. In fact, Pinter's first unmistakably political statement was made publicly by the playwright in 1948, when at the age of 18 years he refused to do military service, even with the threat of a prison sentence hanging over him. Fifteen years later, Pinter was one of 48 playwrights who signed a public declaration that they would not permit their works to be performed in any South African theatre which discriminated against coloured people. (Wesker, of course, was another of the signatories). As a statement accompanying the declaration issued by the Anti-Apartheid movement in Britain pointed out:

A public stand taken on a matter of principle by a large number of significant individuals who are prepared to accept loss of contract with financial loss and non-performance which must be a serious frustration for a playwright...can never be regarded as a sterile gesture. It is an avowal of personal philosophy.¹⁰

In 1971, Pinter again revealed his political concern when he made the following (slightly incoherent) comments during an interview with Mel Gussow:

I'm very conscious of what's happening in the world. I'm not by any means blind or deaf to the world around me...No, no. Politicians just don't understand me. What, if you like, interests me, is the suffering for which they are responsible. It doesn't interest me - it horrifies me! (Pause) I mean, Jesus Christ. Well, you know, there's so much. What can one say? It's all so evident."¹¹

As we shall see, such committed statements become more and more frequent during the 1970's and 1980's. His post-1983 plays show a corresponding intensity of concentration on political concerns. In the early plays, however, we can now see (with hindsight) that there were hints of a political dimension, but so well camouflaged that often we missed them.

The principal aim of this study is to establish a degree of continuity between the early and recent plays. The second objective is to determine whether Pinter's passionate concern with political issues has adversely affected his art.

CHAPTER TWO

SOCIETY VERSUS THE NONCONFORMING INDIVIDUAL:The "Comedies of Menace"

Most of Pinter's plays can be sorted into three clearly-defined categories - the "comedies of menace" written in 1957-1959,¹ the sexual or love triangle plays written between 1959 and 1978, and the overtly political plays dating from 1983 to the present day. This study will not touch on the second category, though anyone considering these plays from a feminist perspective would no doubt claim that, since "the personal is political", all gender conflict is politically based. What may not be so apparent is the political orientation of the earliest plays, the "comedies of menace". These plays do not feature gross physical abuse or outright torture, nor is overt reference made to any character's political activities or affiliation. Nevertheless even a cursory comparison of the "comedies of menace" with the overtly political plays shows that the ill-treatment of various individuals by more powerful people is a prominent feature of both. It is probably the less extreme violence portrayed in the former which has hindered our realisation that the theme of the "comedies of menace" is the same as that of the explicitly political plays, i.e., oppression of the non-conforming individual.

There are, of course, differences in the way the theme is handled by Pinter, the most obvious being the contrast between the brilliant mixture of humour and menace in the "comedies of menace", and the concentration on unalleviated menace in the overtly political plays. Another clear distinction is that in the explicitly political plays the oppressors unmistakably are military personnel or other Government-appointed officials, and their victims are subversives,² whereas the bullies in the "comedies of menace" do not seem to have links with the Government, and they appear to lack credible motives for their ill-treatment of the ostensibly innocent victims.

Numerous critics have tried to reconstruct guilty pasts for the victims, reasoning that the afflicted characters must have committed crimes or foolish indiscretions to deserve the punishment. The identities of the various avengers have also challenged the imaginations of critics and audiences. But no interpretation about either group commands universal or even general consent.

The mystery surrounding both sets of characters (victims and avengers) can be explained by the hypothesis that in the "comedies of menace" Pinter is concerned with the abstract or general issue of conformity to social pressures. Unlike the specific, concrete representatives of the State who terrorise the individual in the overtly political plays, oppressors in the "comedies of menace" are vague, ill-defined embodiments of Society, the powerful, monolithic institution from which no individual can escape. As for the victims' various hypothetical crimes over which many of us have mentally agonised, these turn out to be one and the same offence, that of refusing to accept Society's dictates unquestioningly.

To test this theory we must closely analyse the "comedies of menace". David Campton coined this term in 1957, and in 1958 Irving Wardle applied it to describe a certain type of play written by a number of writers including Campton himself, N. F. Simpson, Nigel Dennis, and, predominantly, Pinter. When Wardle wrote his article on comic menace he chiefly confined his attention to The Birthday Party, as at that time his knowledge of "The Room" and "The Dumb Waiter" extended only to reports about the productions. He did not detect any specific political elements in The Birthday Party, though he acknowledged the presence of "violence approaching anarchy".³ Instead he felt that when Pinter's characters encounter menace in its various forms, they are actually confronting their destinies - and meeting them with the wry humour befitting absurd human existence:⁴

[Pinter] is a writer dogged by one image - the womb. His main characters tend first to appear entrenched in a secure retreat from which they are eventually torn by

some agent of external malignancy. Mr Pinter acknowledges three literary influences - Beckett, Kafka and American gangster films; and The Birthday Party exemplifies the type of comic menace which gave rise to this article. For in this play, menace, itself a meretricious and easily manufactured fictional device, stands for something more substantial: destiny. Comedy enables the committed agents and victims of destruction to come on and off duty; to joke about the situation while oiling a revolver; to display absurd or endearing features behind their masks of implacable resolution; to meet, as Mr Pinter allows them to do, in paper hats for a game of blind man's buff.

Destiny handled in this way - not as an austere exercise in classicism, but as an incurable disease which one forgets about most of the time and whose lethal reminders may take the form of a joke - is an apt dramatic motif for an age of conditioned behaviour in which orthodox man is a willing collaborator in his own destruction.

Walter Kerr offers an expanded analysis of comic menace which is more cogent than Wardle's. His book, Harold Pinter, concentrates on the existentialist nature of Pinter's drama.⁵

Mr Pinter exploits a contemporary form of terror. It would be easy to say that the author's unusual ability to create and maintain suspense in the absence of any defined threat was simply due to his possession of a narrative "gift".... Yet the particular suspense he achieves is made of something more than a story-teller's lucky ability to make a listener say, "And then?", or an actor's instinct for taking center stage and holding it by hook or crook.

A considerable portion of Mr Pinter's suspense derives from the way that, in pursuing an existentialist method, he sets his plays in motion on a track that runs directly parallel to - or perhaps coincides entirely with - the track on which twentieth century man feels himself running. It is a track quite different, in its tensions and apprehensions, from any most previous societies have found themselves pressed along.

All societies have found themselves driven by guilt. We find ourselves much more driven by what has been called angst.... Anxiety...rises from no single guilty act and fears no clearly spelled out retribution. It is a general state of mind, a diffused sensation of spiritual and psychological unease which may have its roots in one or twenty of a thousand possible causes, but which has no root in any one cause we can name.... [A] man in a state of anxiety is anxious about everything - his dread is not confined to responsibility for an act but is distributed throughout his environment and becomes his

environment.

Pinter earns his special suspense by constructing his plays in such a way that we are forced to enter this state of mind in the theater.... Even during the recent years of our mounting and thoroughly recognised angst we have not been accustomed to experiencing in the theater what we have experienced on the streets... [Certain] plays look for blame and find it, though the blame may not be confined to a single individual and may indeed attach to an entire social system; wherever it is lodged, the blame can be located. We stand outside the pattern, and know what to expect of it.

The act of unpatterning is therefore of great importance in the working out of any Pinter scenario. Whatever action is taking place must have no clear beginning, which is to say it must not have originated in a guilty act.... Similarly, whatever action is taking place must have no foreseeable future, which is to say that there are no logical, deducible consequences coming from an earlier crime or event. The earlier crime or event has not been specified, and therefore cannot have preordained consequences.... It is only the altogether unreasonable...that is altogether terrifying....

But how is this faceless menace to be sustained as an effect in the theater when it acquires an actual face, when it is clearly and physically embodied in a character who walks in at the door to confront another, quickly quailing, character?

Kerr's answer to his own question is that "Pinter maintains his mystery, even when his menacing forces are perfectly visible and in head-on confrontation, by carefully denying them psychological access to one another. They are face to face and still impenetrable. They have not yet acquired essences that can be detected".⁶

Or else their apparent essences turn out to be grossly misleading - a circumstance which explains the comic element in Pinter's drama of menace:

Though there is a degree of violence, or of sensed menace, in every Pinter play, the plays are not straightforward melodrama. Comedy is the constant companion of threat, and sometimes the threat itself contains an elusive comic edge. The messages from the dumb-waiter make the gunmen who are receiving them apprehensive; they also make us laugh, sometimes openly, sometimes nervously.

Being terrified of a threatening situation, and finding we had every reason to feel fear, is strangely reassuring. The self-fulfilling prophecy enables us to feel that perhaps there is some logic at work in the universe after all. But when the thing we feared turns out to be harmless and/or ridiculous, we are both amused and disturbed. We are reminded that life is unpredictable, and therefore threatening, even when the perceived threat has been demystified.

Comedy has always made capital of mistaken identity. When one man is taken for another, or one thing taken for another, we are invariably surprised...that the universe should turn out to be so slippery. The Comedy of Errors is a root comic design: one looks into a face and cannot say whose face it is.

Existentialist uncertainty is, of course, not so blithe in tone as a mere tumbling about of twins. Not being able to tell one twin from another has a clear logic inside it to guide and comfort us: we know the "natural" cause of our confusion and can readily respond to it without any admixture of dismay. The Pinter approach is necessarily darker than this, for we look into a face and find ourselves unable to name it without being able to explain on the spot, our bafflement. The effect is more closely related to another standard comic device: the business, say, of passing a graveyard at night, seeing an object moving among the tombstones and prickling in terror - only to have it turn out to be a cat. In The Caretaker, and in the dark, a buzzing, bright-eyed monster seems to move with seething teeth across a room: it turns out to be a vacuum-cleaner.

Mistakes of this sort always strike us as funny, not only because, in the aftermath, we are relieved to find them unmenacing; fundamentally we are amused that, in a tangible world made up of sharply defined shapes and perfectly hard surfaces, any two unlikes should be able to blend into such a momentary like. A sensation of giddiness overwhelms us: what has frightened us shouldn't have, it is absurd that we should have responded so disproportionately; we have participated in an incongruity.

The fright is not forgotten, nor should it be: it is perfectly possible to be killed by a vacuum-cleaner or, for that matter, to be clawed by a cat. We never can know when vacuum-cleaner or cat is going to turn on us. We might well be disturbed, in addition, by our awareness that we can make such mistakes. Our equipment for detecting reality is not all that it might be. Yet

there is no getting away from the laughter that follows and was inherent in the situation all the time: we have used our eyes and been made fools of.

Obviously Wardle and Kerr agree that Pinter's "comedies of menace" faithfully portray 20th Century angst, a single root cause of which it is impossible to identify. We are left with the impression that Groucho Marx's brave, witty epigram, "Life is a terminal disease", is close to the truth of the matter. Since no one can be held responsible for the disease, nor can it be cured until it has run its inevitable course, we are destined to remain in a state of constant anxiety for which there is no rational explanation.

But somehow these existential readings seem too grandiose for the intricately realised world of Pinter's plays. Wardle's and Kerr's readings are more attuned to the empty resonances of Beckett's mise en scène. Pinter, despite his obvious affinities with Beckett, is closer to realism. His plays are full of details from the real world, and accordingly we look for concrete explanations for the menace which saturates the plays. In fact, Pinter identifies Society as "the agent of external malignancy", "the faceless menace" (which acquires an actual face during the plays), which causes the characters' pervading anxiety.

"The Room"

Turning to the first "comedy of menace", "The Room", written in 1957, we find that the 20th Century angst about which Wardle and Kerr wrote is indeed a feature of this play, but it is generated by specific characters who can be seen to symbolise specific social forces. Rose, the chief protagonist, obsessively reassures herself about the safety and warmth of the room which she and Bert, presumably her husband, share, "where nobody bothers you" and "where you stand a chance". When there is a knock at the door it is obvious that she feels threatened, but her fears are allayed temporarily when the intruder at the door turns out to be Mr

Kidd, the landlord, a man known to her. Later, however, when Bert and the landlord have left the room, and Rose goes to the door to dispose of some garbage, she is again startled, this time by the ominous sight of two strangers lurking silently on the landing outside the door. Her fear escalates when the couple tell her that a man in the basement has informed them that Room No.7, the room occupied by Rose and Bert, is vacant. Mr Kidd returns to tell Rose that the mysterious man in the basement is most insistent that he see her, and the landlord persuades Rose to allow the man, a blind Negro named Riley as it turns out, to speak to her in her room. Riley's message to Rose (whom he familiarly calls "Sal" on several occasions) is that her father "wants [her] to come home".

Rose reacts strangely to Riley. At first she is insulting and antagonistic, but gradually her attitude softens. She is touching his eyes, the back of his head and his temples when Bert returns from work. Bert makes one or two curiously erotic comments to Rose about the performance of the van he has just been driving, then tips Riley out of his chair. When Riley rises from the floor and speaks to Bert for the first time, Bert calls him "Lice!", and kills him (or knocks him out). Rose suddenly goes blind.

Obviously there is little humour in the plot of "The Room", though some comic touches are to be found in the dialogue and the occasionally absurd behaviour of the characters. Nevertheless, even when Rose, in particular, provides a little "comic relief" from the predominantly menacing atmosphere in the room, she betrays an underlying anxiety. Her mindless chatter to her husband about a mundane cup of tea is a typical example. "No, it's not bad. Nice weak tea. Lovely weak tea. Here you are. Drink it down. I'll wait for mine. Anyway, I'll have it a bit stronger".⁷

As Baker and Tabachnick point out, "Under the perfectly normal absurdity of this ramble about tea, we sense a tenseness owing to the short, clipped lines".⁸ Bert's refusal to respond intensifies this effect.

A display of marital discord between Mr and Mrs Sands also provides some humour in an otherwise rather unpleasant context. Mrs Sands repeatedly asks her husband to sit down, but he refuses to do so out of sheer perversity. Some time after her last attempt to persuade him to sit, Mr Sands absent-mindedly "perches on the table". There follows a heated argument between the couple about whether "perching" is the same as "sitting down", which spills over into some nasty insinuations about "all the tripe" which Mr Sands "gets up to". During the altercation it is evident that Rose is brooding over the news that a man is living in the basement, for she resumes questioning the Sands about the basement tenant as soon as their quarrel ends.

Probably Rose's fear is justifiable on quite pragmatic grounds in the circumstances. Obviously she does not want to be turned out of the room where she has tried to build a safe existence for herself and Bert. It is clear that anyone who knocks on the door is perceived by Rose to be a potential threat. However, fear of eviction does not seem to be an adequate "objective correlative" for Rose's almost neurotic anxiety. Moreover, this explanation fails to account for the enigmatic character of Riley, who lies behind the eviction scenario.

Martin Esslin finds the reason for Rose's neurosis in her cultural background, which he suggests may be Jewish, so that she has a perfectly understandable fear of anti-Semitic persecution. He bases his political interpretation largely on what he perceives to be a close relationship between Rose and Riley. He points out that Riley appears to have known Rose in the past when she was called Sal, a name which she does not deny having, though she resents Riley's use of it. It is Esslin's theory that the name "Sal" is short for Sarah, and the Jewish woman may have changed her name to (the English) Rose to conceal her true identity and origin. Like Rose (Sal), Esslin argues, the black-skinned man with an Irish name belongs to a "despised, underprivileged group", and this shared background of persecution tends to link the two

characters.

In this scenario, Rose has a credible motive for fearing strangers. Esslin comments, "As a Jew in the world of Auschwitz she would indeed be a fugitive from death. Is this the reason why, when she finally shows her true feelings to the blind Negro, she says, several times: 'I have been here!', as though she wanted to say, here, among strangers, in an alien land?"⁹ (If the reference to Auschwitz seems a bit far-fetched in this last decade of the 20th Century, we should remind ourselves that when Pinter wrote this play it was only twelve years after the end of the Second World War).

While we may be persuaded to believe that Rose's Jewish origins account for her intensely fearful reaction to strangers, Bert's unprovoked attack on Riley does not lend itself to such a specific interpretation. Esslin writes, "Bert brutally assaults the racial outcast - and indirectly Rose as a member of his group, whatever it may be". He is obviously convinced that racial hatred is the chief motive for the attack. It could be argued with equal logic, however, that it is sexual jealousy which provokes Bert's murderous behaviour. Indeed, this interpretation is implicit in the concluding remarks of Esslin's analysis of "The Room", where he observes that Bert has transferred the focus of his sexual energy from Rose to his van because he knows that he no longer holds Rose's affection.

Simon Trussler, too, saw "The Room" as a play about racism, though of a slightly different kind. To him, the political aspects were so self-evident (albeit sixteen years after the play was written) that he marvelled that they could escape the notice of a number of reviewers when the play was first performed. He commented, "One wonders whether the critics would have responded quite so obtusely towards the character of the blind Negro if Pinter had written "The Room" ten years later. That it anticipated England's own increased racial tension was not in itself either prophetic or remarkable, however - for the attitudes it dramatises repeat themselves

in most forms of racialism, anti-semitism included".¹⁰ (I take this to mean that racism and a mild form of colour prejudice already existed in England in 1957, but these attitudes strengthened and became more visible with the large influx of immigrants in the following decade).

Trussler produced an impressive list of reasons why Riley was persecuted. "He is both black and blind - racially and physically different, yet daring to invoke the racial kinship of fatherhood and inflicting the bodily deformity of blindness.... He is a Negro, current focus for racist abuse at its most irrationally virulent (significantly, the one word of attention Bert Hudd pays him is to call him a lice [sic.]). And in so far as he might once have been a Catholic, an American Indian or a Jew, he is...representative. He might even have been, as his name implies, an Irishman".¹¹ It is hard to take some of these comments seriously more than twenty years later, especially the implication that to be an Irishman is a major handicap. (Moreover, Pinter subsequently disclaimed responsibility for Riley's colour and ethnicity. He told Bensky, "Well, it's very peculiar, when I got to that point in the play the man from the basement had to be introduced, and he just was a blind negro. I don't think there's anything radically wrong with the character in himself, but he behaves too differently from the other characters: if I were writing the play now I'd have him sit down, have a cup of tea".)¹² Doubtless in 1973, when Trussler wrote The Plays of Harold Pinter, from which his comments about "The Room" are quoted, all of the groups he mentioned were marginalised or persecuted to some degree by more powerful sections of society. But this tells us more about the critic and his times than it does about the play.

It is significant, I think, that both Esslin and Trussler refer to Pinter's personal experience of anti-semitism in their analyses of "The Room", and clearly both believe that his Jewish background had something to do with his writing of this play. Esslin quotes an extract from an interview between Pinter and Lawrence Bensky to illustrate Pinter's

unforgettable memories of his vulnerable childhood and adolescence:

Everyone encounters violence in some way or other. I did encounter it in quite an extreme form after the war, in the East End, when the Fascists were coming back to life in England. I got into quite a few fights down there. If you looked remotely like a Jew you might be in trouble. Also, I went to a Jewish club, by an old railway arch, and there were quite a lot of people often waiting with broken milk bottles in a particular alley we used to walk through... We were often taken for Communists...especially if you had books under your arms."¹³

In view of these experiences it would be strange if Pinter's early works were not influenced by his Jewish background. I understand that Pinter's parents were not practising Jews¹⁴ and it appears that Pinter has followed in their footsteps. Nevertheless, with the Nazi atrocities still comparatively fresh in his mind, it is not unreasonable to surmise that one of Pinter's reasons for writing "The Room" was to provide an artistic outlet for his political anger. Yet it is doubtful whether either Esslin or Trussler would have detected a political focus in the play had they not known that Pinter was Jewish. After all, there are no specific references to war, enemies, or racial tension. In fact, the only reference to Jews is made by Mr Kidd when he tells Rose that his old mum was a Jewess. In short, the play's Jewishness is subconscious rather than conscious, implicit rather than explicit.

If we conclude that there is no valid reason for an overtly political interpretation of the play, we are no closer to finding the answer to Rose's seemingly irrational fear. Bernard Dukore believes that "The Room" and Pinter's other early plays belong to the Theatre of the Absurd, and it is futile to try to find a specific cause for universal fear:

Because events and actions are unexplained, and apparently illogical or unmotivated, the world seems capricious or malevolent. One can rely upon nothing. What is apparently secure is not secure. A haven does not protect... Linguistic absurdity may suggest the absurdity of the human condition. Fear of a menace may suggest the universal trauma of man in the universe.¹⁵

Between these two interpretations - the specifically political (Trussler and Esslin) and the generally existential (Dukore) - lies a middle ground, defined thus with stunning succinctness by Arnold Hinchcliffe:16

Pinter's plays are simply about people bothering people who want to keep to themselves -

in other words, the pressure of society on the individual.

Pinter's "comedies of menace" are predicated upon the natural desire to avoid revealing our nakedness:17

There are two silences. One when no word is spoken, the other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed. This speech is speaking of a language locked beneath it. That is its continual reference. The speech we hear is an indication of that which we don't hear. It is a necessary avoidance, a violent, sly, anguished or mocking smoke screen which keeps the other in its place. When true silence falls we are still left with echo but are nearer nakedness. One way of looking at speech is to say that it is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness.

We have heard many times that tired, grimy phrase: "Failure of communication"...and this phrase has been fixed to my work quite consistently. I believe the contrary. I think that we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid, and that what takes place is a continual evasion, desperate rearguard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves. Communication is too alarming. To enter into someone else's life is too frightening. To disclose to others the poverty within us is too fearsome a possibility.

The central characters of these plays habitually seek out safe, quiet, womb-like shelters, from whence society's representatives - in this case, Mr Kidd and the Sands - seek to dislodge them, presumably so that they, too, can enjoy a security in which they do not have to reveal "nakedness". Every so often Pinter adds to this mix of refugee(s) and persecutor(s) a character - Riley in "The Room", Aston in The Caretaker, the matchseller in "A Slight Ache" - who stands outside society, and seems to symbolise the quietness,

solitude and safety sought by the central character(s). Though a kind of existential angst underlies this, Pinter's focus is on its social implication.

The Birthday Party

The Birthday Party, also written in 1957, has some fairly obvious affinities with "The Room". The action takes place in an almost empty seaside boarding house where a rather simple woman, Meg, her husband, Petey, and a long-term lodger named Stanley reside. Like Rose in "The Room", Stanley is reluctant to leave the shelter of his lodgings, and he reacts with alarm to the news that two strangers are coming to the boarding house. He persistently denies that they will arrive, but the report obviously disturbs him. For some reason he feels compelled to talk to his landlady about his past piano-playing career which was wrecked by some unidentified people:

They carved me up. Carved me up. It was all arranged, it was all worked out. My next concert.... I went down there to play. Then when I got there, the hall was closed, the place was shuttered up, not even a caretaker. They'd locked it up. A fast one. They pulled a fast one. I'd like to know who was responsible for that. (Bitterly) All right, Jack, I can take a tip. They want me to crawl down on my bended knees.¹⁸

When the dreaded visitors, a Jew named Goldberg and an Irishman called McCann, arrive, Stanley slips out the back door. The two strangers question Meg about Stanley, then exit to arrange a "birthday party" for him. An apprehensive Stanley returns at the end of Act One to question Meg about the identities of the two men.

In Act Two, before the party is due to start, the visitors set about reducing Stanley to a nervous wreck. After a preliminary verbal skirmish, what Baker and Tabachnick term "the mundane epic battle of the chairs" is staged.¹⁹ McCann's and Goldberg's attempts to force Stanley to sit down before them are strenuously countered by a defiant Stanley. Like the Sands in "The Room", both parties have an implicit

understanding that the person who is made to sit down against his will has lost the psychological advantage. Stanley tricks McCann into sitting down first, but when Goldberg menacingly approaches him and orders him (quietly) to sit, Stanley is too frightened to disobey. He quits his show of bravado - and sits.

He is then mercilessly interrogated about his past, real or imaginary, by Goldberg and McCann. An amazing variety of illogical, contradictory, and inconsequential questions and accusations are fired at him in quick succession:

McCann. Why did you leave the organisation?
 Goldberg. What would your old mum say, Webber?
 McCann. Why did you betray us?
 Goldberg. You hurt me, Webber. You're playing a dirty game.
 McCann. That's a Black and Tan fact.
 Goldberg. Who does he think he is?
 McCann. Who do you think you are?
 Stanley. You're on the wrong horse.
 Goldberg. When did you come to this place?
 Stanley. Last year.
 Goldberg. Where did you come from?
 Stanley. Somewhere else.
 Goldberg. Why did you come here?
 Stanley. My feet hurt!
 Goldberg. Why did you stay?
 Stanley. I had a headache.
 Goldberg. Did you take something for it?
 Stanley. Yes.
 Goldberg. What?
 Stanley. Fruit salts!
 Goldberg. Enos or Andrews?
 Stanley. En - An -
 Goldberg. Did you stir properly? Did they fizz?
 Stanley. Now, now, wait, you -
 Goldberg. Did they fizz? Did they fizz or didn't they fizz?
 McCann. He doesn't know!
 Goldberg. You don't know. When did you last have a bath?
 Stanley. I have one every -
 Goldberg. Don't lie.
 McCann. You betrayed the organization. I know him!20

As the barrage of questions and comments continues, Stanley becomes confused, frightened and eventually incoherent. The long interrogation is halted when Meg and Lulu, Stanley's girlfriend, enter the kitchen, and the party gets under way. When it is Stanley's turn to be blindfolded for blind man's

buff, McCann deliberately breaks Stanley's glasses and places a toy drum, Meg's birthday present to her lodger, directly in front of him. Stanley falls, rises, then begins to strangle Meg. The room is plunged into darkness as Stanley is wrested from Meg. During the confusion which follows, McCann shines a torch on Stanley, who is seen bending over Lulu spread-eagled on the table. Stanley giggles uncontrollably as Goldberg and McCann converge upon him at the end of the Act.

In Act Three, the following morning, Stanley's persecutors go upstairs to fetch Stanley. They tell Petey that his lodger has had a sudden nervous breakdown, so they are going to "take him to Monty" for "special treatment". Stanley is ushered downstairs, clean-shaven and dressed in a dark, well cut suit and white collar. He is unable to speak. When Petey orders Goldberg and McCann to leave Stanley alone, Goldberg menacingly invites him to accompany them. Petey, who is dimly aware of what has been happening, brokenly pleads, "Stan, don't let them tell you what to do!", as his lodger is led away.²¹

Interpretations of The Birthday Party vary widely. Trussler's view is narrowly political:

[A]t an allegorical level, Goldberg and McCann can be seen as instruments of a racial vengeance.... Two exploited and spat-upon races turn the tables upon their persecutor, terrorising him out of his funk-hole.²²

When Stanley is found flattening himself against the wall with the torch shining on him, Trussler states that we are witnessing "the reversal of the racial stereotype - the Aryan prisoner cowering in the concentration-camp spotlight, his Jewish warder [later in the play] ravishing the other's intended sexual partner", (a reference to Goldberg and Lulu who seem to have had a sexual encounter some time during the night, though somehow it is difficult to visualise Goldberg as a "ravisher" when we learn that he came to Lulu's bedroom "with a briefcase").

McCann's part in the psychological torture is deemed to be provoked by Stanley's "nationalistic betrayal". Trussler does not make it clear which nation is betrayed by the Englishman. Presumably it is Ireland, and Trussler pursues an unconvincing line about "the Negro, the Jew and the Irishman" being the chief victims of "the twentieth century's unfunny story". (Where was Trussler when "the Englishman/Irishman/Scotsman" jokes were bandied round? I have yet to hear a(n) (un)funny story about "the Negro, the Jew and the Irishman").

Though it is hard to follow the logic of some of Trussler's argument, the powerful concentration-camp scene which he evokes does not seem to be too far-fetched when one reads Peter Thomson's review of a London performance that he attended. He states:

The finest production I have seen was directed by George Roman, a Hungarian Jew who was a boy in Budapest during the Nazi occupation and a young revolutionary in 1956. The sinister stranger and the knock at the door were visceral images for him, and he understood that a Jew and an Irishman might delight in destroying an English bully... Precisely because [the interrogation] lacks a context, because its malignity is motiveless, it stands for all persecutions... The Birthday Party, it seems to me now, is a brilliantly appropriate theatrical statement of a social nervousness whose subtext was the enigmatic Cold War.²³

In an interview with John Sherwood in 1960, Pinter's comments indicate that he wrote his play from a recognisably political stance:

This man is hidden away in a seaside boarding house...then two people arrive out of nowhere, and I don't consider this an unnatural happening. I don't think it is all that surrealistic and curious because surely this thing, of people arriving at the door, has been happening in Europe in the last twenty years. Not only the last twenty years, the last two to three hundred.²⁴

In a recent interview with Paul Allen on B.B.C.,²⁵ Pinter reaffirmed the political significance of The Birthday Party:

I saw it quite distinctly as an oppression by the State, and I wasn't saying it just because the play actually does take place in a seaside boarding house on the south coast of England. It doesn't necessarily mean that it's not about other states of affairs in other countries, you know. After all, we know all about the knocking on the door, the arrival of strangers, from the horror of The War, and throughout the thirties and forties it was certainly deeply imbedded in my blood and my system, and I would imagine in many other people's.

The most interesting thing to emerge from this interview is that only minutes before his assertion that the play was "quite distinctly" about "oppression by the State", he told Allen that the play was about "authoritarian figures representing the family, religion, and so on".

If these views appear to be contradictory, it is clear that the confusion exists in other people's minds, not Pinter's. As Esslin reports, when one unfortunate woman dared to ask Pinter the "meaning" of his play, his answer was devastatingly crushing. "Dear Madam, I would be obliged if you would kindly explain to me the meaning of your letter", etc., etc.²⁶

Esslin's own search for the meaning of The Birthday Party was more rewarding. He offers a number of scenarios, the most convincing of which is that Society, whose agents are Goldberg and McCann, has stripped an artist of his creative ability in order to make him like everyone else.²⁷ It is doubtful, though, that Stanley was much of an artist. It is impossible to establish the veracity of any of Pinter's characters, and Stanley's version of his past is typically confusing. Stanley talks about his father's "nearly" coming down to Lower Edmonton to hear him play, then admits that he had lost his father's address so he could not let him know about the concert, and it seems odd that he "played the piano all over the world" yet gave only one concert - in internationally unacclaimed Lower Edmonton. It is more likely that Stanley - if he was ever a pianist at all - was merely an adequate one who aspired to make a living from his talent before he took fright over something and sought sanctuary in an unpretentious seaside lodging.

Dukore's interpretation of The Birthday Party is not too distant from Esslin's.²⁸ He writes:

The passages that describe Stanley as a pianist convey the impression that he is an artist, an artist-manqué, or a parody of an artist. By contrast, partly because an artist is often regarded as one who does not conform to customary social roles and partly because Goldberg's conventional appearance contrasts with that of the unkempt Stanley, Goldberg suggests social conformity (he even carries a briefcase). His speeches sometimes seem to parody jargon, at other times overflow with the clichés of middle-class conformity. In large measure he and McCann convey an ambience of conformity (family, state and church) and appear as representatives of society who press Stanley into a mould. As if in summary they promise Stanley he will be adjusted. Appropriately they represent the two traditionalist religions of European civilisation, Judaism and Catholicism. For Protestants to make Stanley conform would be inappropriate.

In a letter written in 1958 to Peter Wood, director of The Birthday Party, Pinter clearly stated who was to blame for the persecution of Stanley:

[T]he hierarchy, the Establishment, the arbiters, the socio-religious monsters [who] arrive to effect alteration and censure upon a member of the club who has discarded responsibility towards himself and others.... [H]e collapses under the weight of their accusation - an accusation compounded of the shitstained strictures of centuries of "tradition".²⁹

In the 1991 interview with Allen referred to earlier, in which apparently contradictory remarks were made by Pinter, he restated the culpability of Society for the persecution of Stanley. When asked by Allen, "In what sense is The Birthday Party a political play, Pinter had this to say:

It seems to me very, very clear, very obvious, what it is. You have in Goldberg and McCann two highly authoritarian figures representing the family, religion and so on, who have come to get a nonconformist fellow who simply won't conform, and finally they press him into service. In other words, by cutting out his tongue, if you like, and taking him away, whereupon he will always from that moment conform, and I think that's what the play's doing among other things.³⁰

It is clear from this that Pinter regarded Society, organised as it is into families, churches and other institutions, as the greatest possible threat to the individual because of its demand for conformity. Obviously the ruling government of the day, especially a totalitarian one, has enormous power over the individual, and since 1984 the overtly political plays draw attention to this aspect, but in this and other early plays Pinter's emphasis is on the crushing weight of non-governmental, societal institutions.

It is pointless to try to work out specifically how Stanley refused to confirm to society's demands, especially as he does not impress as a true artist. As many critics have pointed out, his predicament is similar to that of Joseph K. in Kafka's The Trial.

"The Dumb Waiter"

"The Dumb Waiter", the third play written by Pinter in 1957, again portrays a nervous character who is harassed by forces from the outside world. Two hired assassins (Ben and Gus) chat to each other and read a newspaper in the basement of a seemingly deserted building while they wait for their intended victim to arrive. The junior partner, Gus, exhibits unmistakable signs of dissatisfaction and a certain squeamishness about the killing business. At first many of his complaints about the working conditions are ridiculously trivial. He complains about the time the tank in the basement lavatory takes to fill, about the lack of windows in the room in which they are to carry out their assignment, and about the "pong" of the sheets on the bed which has been provided for his use during the day.

As time goes on, however, Gus's irritable mood changes to apprehension as mysterious messages start appearing in the basement. An envelope containing a dozen matches slides under the door into the room where the hitmen are lounging, followed by a number of written food orders which descend from above

in a dumb waiter. The orders progress from humble steak and chips, sago pudding, tea with sugar, etc., to the more exotic Macaroni Pastitsio and Ormitha Macarounada. Because the two men do not know who is sending the messages, and the demands clearly are unreasonable, especially considering that the cooking facilities in the disused basement kitchen consist of one three-ring gas stove, with insufficient money in the gas meter to supply gas for even a cup of tea, the orders take on a menacing quality. In desperation the anxious-to-please men turn out Gus's bag, and pile all the food it contains, viz. biscuits, a bar of chocolate, half a pint of milk, a packet of tea, one Eccles cake and a packet of crisps, into the dumb waiter. More orders arrive, and when Ben deferentially speaks into the tube to explain that they have no food left, he is told by the unseen person at the top that the food they have provided is unsatisfactory.

Under the pressure of the disguised threats, Gus loses his nerve. Naturally assuming that Wilson, the man who issues their instructions for despatching victims, is responsible for the food orders, he angrily questions Wilson's right to "play games" with them, since they have both "been through [their] tests" and proved themselves for years. When another note, this time an order for Scampi, arrives at the bottom of the shaft, Gus yells desperately up the speaking tube to the unseen persecutor, "WE'VE GOT NOTHING LEFT: NOTHING! DO YOU UNDERSTAND?",³¹ then lapses into a dull apathy. No more messages are received in Gus's presence after his open display of defiance, but when Gus leaves the room (through the door on the left, as usual) to get a glass of water, the final instructions for the extermination of the victim are issued to Ben down the speaking tube. The play ends as Gus stumbles back into the room, through the door on the right, stripped of his jacket, waistcoat, tie, holster and revolver - while Ben stands pointing his gun at his partner.

In less gifted hands, this focus on unrelenting psychological pressure could have resulted in a bleak, lacklustre play, but "The Dumb Waiter" is anything but grim. Pinter brilliantly

blends humour and menace to explore his theme of the hounded individual. The hitmen's vehement argument over the linguistic accuracy of the expression "lighting the kettle" as opposed to "lighting the gas" - a typical example of absurd Pinteresque dialogue, which leads to an instance (rare in the "comedies of menace") of actual physical violence by one character on another - is both humorous and threatening:

Ben. Go and light it.
 Gus. Light what?
 Ben. The kettle.
 Gus. You mean the gas.
 Ben. Who does?
 Gus. You do.
 Ben (his eyes narrowing). What do you mean, I mean the gas?
 Gus. Well, that's what you mean, don't you? The gas.
 Ben (powerfully). If I say go and light the kettle I mean go and light the kettle.
 Gus. How can you light a kettle?
 Ben. It's a figure of speech! Light the kettle.
 Gus. It's a figure of speech!
 Gus. I've never heard it.
 Ben. Light the kettle! It's common usage!
 Gus. I think you've got it wrong.
 Ben (menacingly). What do you mean?
 Gus. They say put on the kettle.
 Ben (taut). Who says?
 They stare at each other, breathing hard.
 (Deliberately). I have never in all my life heard anyone say put on the kettle.
 Gus. I bet my mother used to say it.
 Ben. Your mother? When did you last see your mother?
 Gus. I don't know, about -
 Ben. Well, what are you talking about your mother for?
 They stare.
 Gus, I'm not trying to be unreasonable. I'm just trying to point out something to you.
 Gus. Yes, but -
 Ben. I'm only looking after your interests, Gus. You've got to learn, mate.
 Gus. Yes, but I've never heard -
 Ben (vehemently). Nobody says light the gas. What ~~does~~ the gas light?
 Gus. What does the gas - ?
 Ben (grabbing him with two hands by the throat, at arm's length). THE KETTLE, YOU FOOL!32

Similarly, when the rather likeable and ingenuous Gus, after examining the ammunition in his revolver, expresses the hope

that "the next bloke" he has to kill will not "get excited", since he, Gus, is "feeling a bit off [because of] a splitting headache",³³ the outrageous juxtaposition arouses both amusement and tense anticipation in the audience.

Typically, the precise nature of the organisation which hires killers and carries out purges to rid itself of unsatisfactory or disloyal operators, like Gus, is not spelt out by Pinter. A number of critics, such as Dukore and Esslin, attribute the testing and terrorising to supernatural forces. Dukore says about the frenzied attempts by Ben and Gus to supply the food that is ordered:

Underlying the comedy one sees a man emptying all he has in order to appease an unseen master and failing to do so... In this play the gods may not kill men for sport but they torment men and might make one kill the other.³⁴

Esslin's similar view is that "again and again the two men try to convince the supernatural power bombarding them with impossible demands that they have nothing to send".³⁵

Pinter's own comments, made years after "The Dumb Waiter" was first performed, make it clear that the supernatural world is not implicated. In 1984, in an interview with Nicholas Hern, Pinter stated:

The chap who is upstairs and is never seen is a figure of authority. Gus questions this authority and rebels against it and therefore is squashed at the end, or is about to be squashed. The political metaphor was very clear to the actors and directors of the first production in 1960. It was not, however, clear to the critics of the time.³⁶

He reiterated the political aspect in 1987 when he told Stephen Farber, "I always considered it a political play, though it's not overt. But it is a play about dissidence. It's about questioning and criticising powers that remain complaisant and sure of themselves and somewhere upstairs".³⁷

Although Pinter uses the word "political" here, he does not provide a specific definition of the "powers" in question; the "authority" of "the chap...upstairs" remains vague, and the "squashing" of Gus cannot be narrowly defined as the oppression of a political dissident, a theme which is pursued rigorously in the later plays. In "The Dumb Waiter" the victimisation is carried out by an agent of an organisation which is not political (in the narrow sense of the word). In both "The Dumb Waiter" and The Birthday Party there are frequent references to "the organisation" to which the characters belong (and may have betrayed). This organisation is best seen as Society. Gus is dissatisfied with the (social) role that he has been assigned, as his persistent questions and complaints testify. His defiance cannot be tolerated by the vast network which maintains control over its members by demanding unquestioning loyalty and conformity.

The Hothouse

In 1958 Pinter wrote The Hothouse, a play intended for radio but discarded at once because "it was heavily satirical and...quite useless". In 1979, however, he read the play again, "as a stranger", and as he told John Barber in an interview,³⁸ "Nothing about it seemed to be 22 years old. I could have written it yesterday so far as I could see". He added that it was more pertinent in 1980 than in 1958 -

when we didn't know anything about the Russian psychiatric hospitals, did we? Now we do. But then, it might have been dismissed as fantasy. No, I certainly had no special knowledge of such things. Of course I knew Koestler's Darkness At Noon³⁹ and so on, but in 1958 I don't think there was general knowledge that these things were being refined as they are to this day.

As Hinchcliffe points out, Pinter's comment about not having special knowledge of the practices in use in psychiatric institutions must be qualified by the following comment in the 27 March to 2 April, 1982 issue of the Radio Times: "Way back in the 50's, Pinter became a guinea-pig in a psychiatric

intermittently by irrational questions from Miss Cutts and Gibbs, the two staff members in Room 1A administering the shocks. The very personal nature of many of the questions put to Lamb, and the subsequent conversation between Miss Cutts and Gibbs, reveal that the tests are organised primarily as a sexual turn-on for the lovers:

Cutts. Are you virgo intacta?
 Lamb. What?
 Cutts. Are you virgo intacta?
 Lamb. Oh, I say, that's rather embarrassing. I mean, in front of a lady -
 Cutts. Are you virgo intacta?
 Lamb. Yes, I am, actually. I'll make no secret of it.
 Cutts. Have you always been virgo intacta?
 Lamb. Oh yes, always. Always.
 Cutts. From the word go?
 Lamb. Go? Oh yes. From the word go.
 Cutts. What is the law of the Wolf Cub Pack?
 Lamb. The cub gives in to the Old Wolf, the cub does not give in to himself.
 Cutts. When you were a boy scout were you most proficient at somersault, knots, leap frog, hopping, skipping, balancing, cleanliness, recitation or ball games?
 Lamb. Well, actually, I never became a boy scout proper. I was a wolf cub, of course, but I never became a boy scout. I don't know why, actually. I've forgotten...to be frank. But I was a cub.
 Cutts. Do women frighten you?
 Gibbs. Their clothes?
 Cutts. Their shoes?
 Gibbs. Their voices?
 Cutts. Their laughter?
 Gibbs. Their stares?
 Cutts. Their way of walking?
 Gibbs. Their way of sitting?
 Cutts. Their way of smiling?
 Gibbs. Their way of talking?
 Cutts. Their mouths?
 Gibbs. Their hands?
 Cutts. Their legs?
 Gibbs. Their toes?
 Cutts. Their thighs?
 Gibbs. Their knees?
 Cutts. Their eyes?41

The following morning Cutts tells Gibbs, "It's such fun in Room 1A. I think that's my favourite room in the whole place. It's such an intimate room. You can ask the questions and be so intimate. I love your questions. They're so intimate

themselves. That's what makes it so exciting. The intimacy becomes unbearable".⁴²

In the Second and final Act, Roote vigorously fends off bids for his job from other members of the staff. He repeatedly kicks Lush in the stomach when Lush questions his authority, and when he accuses Gibbs of wanting to murder him in order to secure the top job, all three of them - Roote, Lush and Gibbs - suddenly produce knives they have been hiding from each other. The frightening sounds of keening, sighing and laughter, which have been drifting mysteriously around the institution throughout the play, again waft into Roote's office, bringing the violent argument to an abrupt end. Shortly afterwards Roote delivers his Christmas address to the patients and staff through the intercom, a speech overflowing with clichés about the "inextricable" interrelationship between the staff, the understaff and the patients.

In the meantime, poor Lamb is in a catatonic state as a result of the ordeal he has undergone (and there is reason to suspect that the mysterious disappearance of his predecessor is linked to similar mind-shattering experiments). The neglected and abused patients, taking advantage of Lamb's absence to creep out of their cells, wreak revenge on the corrupt head and most of the principal staff members by killing them (offstage). Gibbs, who had been the second-in-command, then takes charge, and it is a foregone conclusion that the evil system will be perpetuated under the control of its new leader.

In his article "'Nowhere to Go': Society and the Individual in Harold Pinter's THE HOTHOUSE", Francis Gillen convincingly expresses his view that the institution in The Hothouse is society. Because the social order is threatened by individuals who attempt to break away from its rigid structure, it appoints emissaries "to bring the individual home to that accepted structure or to eliminate him. Whether they use brain-shock therapy or force, the goal is always the same; to destroy the individual's belief in himself and his own vision of life, to make him doubt himself by placing

impossible demands upon him, and thus to reduce him to an automaton".⁴³ Gillen goes on to say that when the "submerged voices" (the confined patients' eery sighs and laughs which waft around the over-heated institution) are ignored and repressed, "the hothouse occasionally explodes into real violence as the heat builds up and finally ignites". When order is restored, "the organization continues of its own momentum; only the individual is destroyed".

The harsh treatment of the Ministry employee, Lamb, an exceedingly compliant victim, is not fully explained by Gillen. He makes a case for the necessity of sacrificing an innocent Lamb (as the name suggests) as a scapegoat for the institution's inhumane treatment of the inmates. Rudolf Stamm, on the other hand, argues that while "[w]e could almost accept him as a sympathetic figure,...he, too, is tainted because he is ambitious and dreams of promotion.... His deference and desire to make himself agreeable and useful to Gibbs and Cutts are such" that he allows himself to be subjected to appalling treatment by the two sadists. Stamm continues:

[H]is readiness to continue playing his part in the disgusting game prove[s] his inability or unwillingness to recognize malignity when it is the malignity of his superiors, from whom he expects promotion, and to recognize their torturing as torture although he is himself subjected to it. When he is finally left in the chair, speechless and motionless, we are reminded of Stanley in The Birthday Party after Goldberg and McCann have done with him. Unlike Stanley, Lamb is a willing victim. The scene is a fearful theatrical symbol, in which a prolonged process of deterioration, caused by social and psychological mechanisms, is concentrated. At its end Lamb will probably have developed into another potential successor of the Roote of the future".⁴⁴

This seems unlikely; for one thing, Lamb is obviously a gentle, polite, well-meaning employee who desperately wants to feel useful, and besides, his mental state at the end of the ordeal deems it most improbable that he will ever be able to function as a normal person again. It is more likely that Lamb's role as a voluntary victim is to highlight the

extraordinary ability of powerful, cruel authoritarian figures to incite the admiration of normally decent people, a phenomenon which Pinter has always found most disturbing.

This interest in the masochism of "normally decent people" is especially marked in the recent political plays. And in many ways, The Hothouse is more akin to these than to the "comedies of menace", with their vaguer focus on society. In 1967, in an interview with Lawrence Bensusan, Pinter gave vent to a rare (in those days) display of political anger. After declaring that he did not feel himself threatened by any political body or activity, he told Bensusan what he thought about politicians:

The other night I watched some politicians on television talking about Vietnam. I wanted very much to burst through the screen with a flame-thrower and burn their eyes out and their balls off and then inquire from them how they would assess this action from a political point of view.⁴⁵

When asked if he would ever use this anger in a politically-oriented play, Pinter's response was to describe the action of The Hothouse:

[The play] was about an institution in which patients were kept: all that was presented was the hierarchy, the people who ran the institution; one never knew what happened to the patients or what they were there for or who they were. It was heavily satirical and it was quite useless. I never began to like any of the characters, they really didn't live at all....The characters were so purely cardboard. I was intentionally - for the only time, I think - trying to make a point, an explicit point, that these were nasty people and I disapproved of them. And therefore they didn't begin to live. Whereas in other plays of mine every single character, even a bastard like Goldberg in The Birthday Party, I care for.

The Hothouse can be considered to be a watershed in Pinter's journey into political writing. His focus is still on social coercion to punish nonconforming individuals, but his disclosure to Bensusan that for the first time he had allowed his political anger to motivate his writing reveals that back

in 1958 he had already taken his first tentative step out of the political closet.

"Applicant" and "Interview"

During February and March 1964 the B.B.C. Third Programme broadcast nine short sketches by Pinter, some of which had already been staged in revue, while others had remained unperformed. Pinter's second piece of writing involving shock treatment, "Applicant", written in 1959, was one of them. In this short sketch a man named Lamb undertakes tests involving the use of electrodes, high pitched "buzz-humming" noises, and a battery of intimate questions about his reactions to women "to determine his psychological suitability" for an unspecified job. As all of the questions fired at Lamb have been lifted from The Hothouse, and the woman who oversees the tests appears to do so for her own sexual titillation, we can conclude that Pinter wrote this tiny "comedy of menace" chiefly to pillage the radio play he had discarded, not realising that it would re-surface many years later. At the end of the sketch the hopeful applicant falls to the floor, his face upwards, silent. Miss Piffs tells the apparently lifeless body lying on the floor, "Thank you very much, Mr Lamb. We'll let you know".⁴⁶

In another amusing sketch entitled "Interview", Pinter resurrects memories of his clashes with the Mosleyites who used to lurk in alleys holding broken bottles, waiting for Jewish youths to appear. As he told Bensky, "We [Jews] were often taken for Communists...especially if you had books under your arms". In "Interview", a bookseller who specialises in pornographic literature tells his interviewer that he (and the Security Police) keep dossiers on all of his customers, "[e]very single dirty-minded individual that passes through [his] door". He exults that the day is coming when he will hold a special exhibition, to which all of the customers will come. "And then we'll have them all revealed for what they are". When the interviewer asks, "What ...are they?", he is

told by the excitable bookseller, "They're all the same, every single one of them. COMMUNISTS".⁴⁷

This specific political reference is unprecedented in the "comedies of menace" which Pinter was writing at the time. The tone of the sketch, however, is decidedly comic.

The Caretaker

Later in 1959 Pinter wrote another full length "comedy of menace" entitled The Caretaker. In the First Act, Davies, a truculent, elderly Welshman, is rescued from "a Scotch git" who "has a go at" him when Davies refuses to carry out a menial task at the workplace. It is very evident that he has a severe racial hang-up. He complains to his rescuer about "All them Greeks...Poles, Greeks, Blacks, the lot of them, all them aliens" who treated him "like dirt" before he got the sack.⁴⁸ When Aston, his protector, offers the old man a bed for the night in a condemned, old house, Davies is disgusted to learn that Aston lives next door to an Indian family, with whom he shares the lavatory. The next morning, when Aston mildly complains about Davies groaning and "jabbering" in his sleep, the bigoted Davies accuses "them Blacks" of making the noises.

While it is evident that Davies is a rather unpleasant character, it quickly becomes clear that he is also very insecure. He is nervous about the gas stove in Aston's room, even though Aston assures him that it is not connected to the gas, and for some obscure reason he is reluctant to disclose his real identity. When asked if he is a Welshman, Davies will only reply that he has "been around, you know", and he evades Aston's question about his birthplace with the excuse that he "[lost] a bit of track, like".

Davies' introduction to Mick, Aston's brother, at the end of Act One, is marked by violence. While Davies rummages around Aston's belongings, the leather-coated Mick creeps up behind

him and brutally forces him on to the floor. He holds him down with his foot for a while, then sits down, watching Davies crouching on the floor. He asks him menacingly, "What's the game?"

Act Two opens with Mick verbally assaulting the old man with a barrage of insults and threatening insinuations:

Mick. You know, you remind me of a bloke I bumped into once, just the other side of the Guildford by-pass.

Davies. I was brought here!

Pause

Mick. Pardon?

Davies. I was brought here! I was brought here!

Mick. Brought here? Who brought you here?

Davies. Man who lives here...he...

Pause

Mick. Fibber.

Davies. I was brought here, last night...met him in a caff...I was working...I got the bullet...I was working there...bloke saved me from a punch up, brought me here, brought me right here.

Pause

Mick. I'm afraid you're a born fibber, en't you? You're speaking to the owner. This is my room. You're standing in my house.

Davies. It's his...he seen me all right...he...

Mick (pointing to Davies' bed). That's my bed.

Davies. What about that, then?

Mick. That's my mother's bed.

Davies. Well she wasn't in it last night!

Mick (moving to him). Now don't get perky, son, don't get perky. Keep your hands off my old mum.

Davies. I ain't...I haven't...

Mick. Don't get out of your depth, friend, don't start taking liberties with my old mother, let's have a bit of respect.

Davies. I got respect, you won't find anyone with more respect.

Mick. Well, stop telling me all these fibs.

Davies. Now listen to me, I never seen you before, have I?

Mick. Never seen my mother before either, I suppose?

Pause

I think I'm coming to the conclusion that you're an old rogue. You're nothing but an old scoundrel.

Davies. Now wait...

Mick. Listen, son. Listen, sonny. You stink.

Davies. You ain't got no right to -

Mick. You're stinking the place out....49

Aston's reappearance stems Mick's verbal torrent, and the menacing atmosphere is lightened with some comic relief in the form of passing Davies' bag back and forth amongst the three men; Mick tries to prevent Davies from reclaiming the bag, while the more compassionate Aston persists in handing the bag back to the anxious owner. The game, redolent of the absurd hat-swapping routine in Waiting for Godot, ends when Mick hands the bag to Davies, and exits. Later, Davies is again terrorised, this time by a noisy vacuum cleaner guided by Mick in the dark room. Davies responds to the unknown terror with typical defensiveness by flattening himself against the wall, grasping his knife.

Immediately afterwards, however, the relationship between Davies and Mick improves to the point where Mick offers Davies a job as caretaker of the apartment. Conversely, Davies' relationship with Aston deteriorates rapidly after Aston speaks about his past experiences in a mental hospital, at the end of Act Two. In Davies' eyes, a person who has had psychiatric treatment is to be treated with contempt; he isn't "normal"; he is "different". The crafty old reprobate, realising that Mick is the real landlord, turns his back on the man who had rescued him from "the Scotch git" and transfers his tenuous, rather grudging gratitude, to Mick. Foolishly ignoring Mick's warning to not "overstep the mark", the insensitive Davies tells Mick that his brother is "nutty", "half way gone". His failure to recognise the bond of affection between the brothers costs him his only friend, a home, a job, and possibly survival itself.

While Davies' prejudice against all outsiders is emphasised throughout the play, it turns out not to be a major issue. His outrageous xenophobia is, in fact, a source of considerable amusement to theatre goers, and since no black or "foreign" person makes an appearance in the play, the audience is spared the discomfort of feeling guilty about laughing at Davies' disgraceful bigotry. Ironically, by the

end of the play there is even considerable sympathy for the tramp, despite glaring evidence of his gross ingratitude and opportunism.

In fact, this play - like the other "comedies of menace" - is not directed at any specific political issue, but at "the terror of the loneliness of the human situation". In The Caretaker Davies epitomises the lonely, fearful, homeless individual who is "actually fighting a battle for his life".⁵⁰ All foreigners, bureaucrats (especially those who have the right to demand to see "his papers"), other pilfering tramps, even unconnected gas appliances, are potential threats in the human jungle. As Alrene Sykes comments, "There is both irony and sound psychology in the fact that Davies, the menacing and graspingly hungry invader of the room, is himself the most insecure of the characters [in The Caretaker]"⁵¹

Besides xenophobia, there is one other specific issue which obtrudes in the play: the predicament of Aston, the former mental patient who has had E.C.T. violently administered to him in the hospital. To quote Sykes again, "Aston's account of his experiences in the asylum...comes into the category of [Pinter's] deliberate attack on the softer sentiments of the audience".⁵² When Aston quietly and hesitantly relates his experiences in a long monologue, his speech is received in breathless silence by a deeply sympathetic and horrified audience. It appears that Aston, who had been diagnosed unfit to mix in society because he saw things more clearly than the "normal" person, was committed to a psychiatric institution in order to cure him of his "hallucinations". The consequent psychological treatment he received at the hands of the hospital authorities to make him "normal" clearly is an appalling abuse of power if the former patient's version of the manner in which the E.C.T. was applied is to be believed. According to Aston, the shock treatment was administered to him against his will, and while he was standing.

John Arden asks in a review of The Caretaker,⁵³ "The elder brother's account of his brain-operation is highly detailed

and circumstantial. But is it true? If it is true, why isn't Mr Pinter writing a serious social play to denounce the cruelty prevalent in mental hospitals?" (Ironically, The Hothouse had already been written). "And if it isn't true", continues Arden, "why does it take the crucial place in the text, the climax of Act Two?"

Pinter is singularly unhelpful about establishing the truth of Aston's harrowing experience. When, in an interview with Bensky, he was asked if he had "some purpose in mind in writing the speech where the older brother describes his troubles in a mental hospital",⁵⁴ Pinter deliberately downplayed the significance of Aston's monologue, and he cast suspicion on the veracity of his character.

Well, I had a purpose in the sense that Aston suddenly opened his mouth. My purpose was to let him go on talking until he was finished and then...bring the curtain down. I had no axe to grind there. And the one thing that people have missed is that it isn't necessary to conclude that everything Aston says about his experiences in the mental hospital is true.

In a letter to the editor of The Sunday Times on 14 August, 1960, however, Pinter stated, "As far as I am concerned, The Caretaker is funny, up to a point. Beyond that point it ceases to be funny, and it was because of that point that I wrote it".⁵⁵ Opinions will differ as to the point at which The Caretaker ceases to be funny. Pinter could have been referring with equal justification either to the disreputable tramp, fighting for survival in an alien environment, or to the other outcast of society.

Rather than investigate the case of Aston in great detail, it seems safer to conclude that both Davies and Aston are victims of a society which will not tolerate members who are "different" or nonconforming. As we have seen in other plays, Society tries to "cure" maladjusted (i.e. nonconforming) individuals by applying psychological pressure, or eliminating them.

No Man's Land

After writing The Caretaker, Pinter concentrated on the love triangle plays for the next 15 years. Then in 1974 he wrote No Man's Land.

There can be no doubt that this play was influenced by the short novel, The Servant, written by Robin Maugham in 1948. In 1962 Pinter wrote a brilliant screen play based on the novel, in which a demobbed Cambridge-educated man gradually undergoes a moral and physical deterioration as a result of drink and his dependence on his manservant for company and soft living. The unscrupulous servant even procures his own girlfriend for his master's sexual gratification.⁵⁶

Similarly, in No Man's Land, Hirst, a lonely, wealthy, well-educated writer is complete dependent on his manservants for company and home comforts. Though it is not explicitly stated, the somewhat effeminate Foster appears to have been "procured" for Hirst by Briggs, the other servant, for any duties which the employer might demand. Hirst's dependence on his servants, combined with his heavy drinking, results in the servants "taking over" their master and his house.

When the play opens, a visitor named Spooner seeks to ingratiate himself with his host by claiming to share the same intellectual and artistic interests, and pretending to come from a similar pampered background. They drink a great deal as they reminisce about the gracious living they both apparently enjoyed in the past, and Hirst falls on to the floor a number of times, presumably intoxicated. He then crawls out of the room. When the servants enter, they fairly quickly deduce Spooner's inferior social class and poverty, and realise that he is hoping to be invited to live in Hirst's house.

Foster warns Spooner:

Listen. Keep it tidy. You follow? You've just laid your hands on a rich and powerful man. It's not what

you're used to, scout. How can I make it clear? This is another class. It's another realm of operation. It's a world of silk. It's a world of organdie. It's a world of flower arrangements. It's a world of eighteenth century cookery books. It's nothing to do with toffeeapples and a packet of crisps. It's milk in the bath. It's the cloth bellpull. It's organisation.⁵⁷

The next morning, in Act Two, Hirst and Spooner have another long, confusing conversation. It is difficult to assess how much is truth, how much is fantasy, especially as Hirst is drinking heavily again. When he confuses Spooner with an old Oxford friend of the past, Spooner plays along, realising that Hirst is more likely to accept him if he thinks that they belong to the same social class. Briggs and Foster, unwilling to let the interloper into the household, try to discredit Spooner when he offers Hirst his services as a secretary.

The play ends ambiguously. Hirst talks of a constantly recurring dream of his - a body in the water - but he realises now that "there is nothing there". Spooner is apparently resigned to the fact that he will not be accepted into the household. He tells Hirst:

You are in no man's land. Which never moves, which never changes, which never grows older, but which remains forever, icy and silent.⁵⁸

It is widely accepted that this is a difficult play, and every critic seems to have a different interpretation. John Gielgud's comments about audience reaction to No Man's Land (in which he took the part of Spooner) reveal that the critics are not the only ones who are baffled:

In No Man's Land lots of people came round after every performance, both in London and America, complaining that they did not understand the play. "What does it mean?" they would ask. Why should the play "mean" anything if the audience was held the whole time and was never bored? That is surely the important thing. I do not think No Man's Land has any deep significance. Pinter is a marvellous writer of character and suspense and, although people tried to make out that the play was about God, the decline of England or any number of symbolic things, it was enough for me that the audience

was fascinated and mystified.⁵⁹

Needless to say it is not enough for the critics. Esslin postulates that No Man's Land "projects and explores fear of old age",⁶⁰ while Albert E Kalson argues plausibly that Spooner, Hirst, Foster and Briggs "are, in effect, four aspects of their author - any author, any artist".⁶¹ He claims that the emblem of the play is "the artist as con man".

Kristin Morrison writes from a feminist perspective.⁶² Her contention is that women characters, even though none appears on stage, are central to the meaning and action of the play. Her view of the ending of No Man's Land is that Hirst (probably a homosexual) "goes voluntarily into a kind of death, a stasis both physical and emotional, in order to avoid the thing in the water, the body of woman which had so horrified and intimidated him in the past. And Spooner, who shares Hirst's fear and hostility, becomes an accomplice and chief attendant in this ritual of perpetual death".

My own view is that the play portrays society as a kind of prison which has a rigid, hierarchical structure. Affluent, upper-crust individuals are placed in pleasant cells, while commoner inmates are allocated less salubrious accommodation. The privileged inmates are on the whole reluctant to admit the less fortunate inmates into the classier area. Briggs and Foster, however, have managed to scale the social barrier because of their master's dependence on them. Having secured comfortable positions in the structure they are in a sense locked into the system and feel it is in their interests to keep out any future social aspirants. The shabbily-dressed Spooner, clearly a reasonably well-educated man who has dropped out of the Establishment system, finds he is unable to reascend the rigid, hierarchical steps to an upper floor because of social pressures exerted by the servants.

The play also looks at the rigid structure of society from another angle. Hirst, obviously an upper class gentleman who is entitled - no! obliged - to live in the social dress

circle, is still disadvantaged by the system. It is clear that he would welcome the stimulating company of people who have similar intellectual and artistic interests, but as a result of his effete condition caused by a prolonged period of soft living and the total domination of his servants, he hasn't the required strength or will to fight the powerful institution.

There are sufficient clues provided in the text to back up the theory that all of the inhabitants of Hirst's household, including the visitor, Spooner, are imprisoned in the social structure. In Act One Spooner boasts that he is "a free man",⁶³ but when he wakes the following morning he finds that he has been locked in the bedroom all night. In fact, he reveals an intuitive awareness of the confining atmosphere of the house even before he retires for the night by asking Hirst if his wife is "cowering in a locked room".⁶⁴ Hirst, an intelligent, self-aware artist, has no illusions about his own imprisonment. He responds to Spooner's boast about being a free man with the ironic retort, "It's a long time since we had a free man in this house",⁶⁵ and when Foster turns down the offer of a drink in Act Two, Hirst's significant comment gives us a strong lead to the "meaning" of the play. He says, "Oh come on, be sociable. Be sociable. Consort with the society to which you're attached. To which you're attached as if by bonds of steel".⁶⁶

In an interview with John Sherwood on 3 March, 1960, Pinter commented, "I'm afraid society is a pattern which does kill and crab and confine".⁶⁷ The problem for every individual is that each depends heavily on other members of society to meet his or her needs, and the price for such services is loss of freedom. Lamb, in The Hothouse, is an example of a man who loses his mind and possibly his life to experience the feelings of being needed by, and important to, the other members of the institution. "Voluntary victimage" is the term which Pinter would use to describe this phenomenon (though, as we shall see, he made this comment with specific reference to The Comfort of Strangers and not to The Hothouse or No

Man's Land). Hirst's reliance on his servants for company, physical comforts, and possibly sexual satisfaction puts him in the position of having to tolerate rudeness, insubordination and loss of personal freedom. His frequent dreams of a peaceful, relaxed, civilised existence outside the present constricting society will never be realised. (Possibly the body in the water, which Hirst is positive is not his own body, symbolises the end of the good life he had hoped to resuscitate. He finally realises that the dream has disappeared. In no man's land, nothing moves or changes.)

The servants, on the other hand, like Davies in The Caretaker, need a job and a home in order to survive. To be sure, a warning by Hirst that refusal to obey his commands "can lead to dismissal" is ignored by Briggs, who knows that his "master" is helpless without his and Foster's services, but it is clear that both are ultimately dependent on Hirst for their livelihood. (If The Servant is anything to go by, they do not have much to worry about on that score).

Like The Hothouse, No Man's Land does not fit too neatly into any category. It is not normally regarded as a "comedy of menace", yet the frequent touches of (chiefly whisky-induced) humour, a long Birthday Party-like interrogation of Spooner by Briggs and Foster, and the menacing quality of the servants' iron control over Hirst, suggest that it has all the essential ingredients of one.

Foster. Who are you, by the way? What are you drinking?

Spooner. I'm a friend of his.

Foster. You're not typical.

Briggs comes into the room, stops....

Briggs. Who's this?

Foster. His name's Friend. This is Mr Briggs. Mr Friend - Mr Briggs. I'm Mr Foster. Old English stock. John Foster. Jack. Jack Foster. Old English name. Foster. John Foster. Jack Foster. Foster. This man's name is Briggs.

Pause

Briggs. I've seen Mr Friend before.

Foster. Seen him before?

Briggs. I know him.

Foster. Do you really?

Briggs. I've seen you before.
 Spooner. Possibly, possibly.
 Briggs. Yes. You collect the beermugs from the tables in a pub in Chalk Farm.
 Spooner. The landlord's a friend of mine. When he's shorthanded, I give him a helping hand.
 Briggs. Who says the landlord's a friend of yours?
 Foster. He does.
 Briggs. I'm talking about The Bull's Head in Chalk Farm.
 Spooner. Yes, yes. So am I.
 Foster. I know The Bull's Head. The landlord's a friend of mine.
 Briggs. He collects the mugs.
 Foster. A firstclass pub. I've known the landlord for years.
 Briggs. He says he's a friend of the landlord.
 Foster. He says he's a friend of our friend too.
 Briggs. What friend?
 Foster. Our host.
 Briggs. He's a bloody friend of everyone then.⁶⁸

Perhaps the play's real divergence from those generally accepted as "comedies of menace" is its focus on the individual after he has succumbed to social pressure to conform. Hirst, imprisoned in his allotted place, leads a pitiful life, surrounded by wealth and ease. Spooner, eager to rejoin the Establishment, is punished with rejection for his earlier "dropping out". Either way, Society is exposed as an enemy - whether of the person who "bucks the system" or of him who chafes at the restrictions which bind him.

"Victoria Station"

In October, 1982 a triptych of new Pinter plays - "Family Voices", "Victoria Station", and "A Kind of Alaska" - was performed in London. "Victoria Station" should probably be regarded as another brief "comedy of menace" since it contains the familiar blend of comedy and menace, and a certain pathos. One character attempts to control another through verbal bludgeoning and threats; the threatened character desperately counters with lies and evasions; there is an ongoing battle for dominance; the fate of the badgered individual is left in the balance at the end.

A taxi driver, known only as 274, apparently gets lost in London while on duty, and the controller of the taxi company, sitting at a microphone, tries unsuccessfully to persuade the driver to continue his duties. At first the driver pretends to be "cruising around" London, but when he receives a direct order from the controller to go to Victoria Station he makes a number of vague responses which indicate that he has no intention of obeying the order. In the face of this refusal the controller loses his temper, threatening to stick a jack "right up [the cab driver's] arse" if he will not obey orders. After an interrogation by the controller the driver claims that he does not know where Victoria Station is, a confession which the controller, and audience, find hard to believe.

The controller changes tactics. After warning 274 that he will be punished for his intransigence the following morning, he calls for driver 135. At this juncture driver 274 panics and beseeches the controller, "Don't leave me".⁶⁹ He assures the controller that he is "his man", the only driver he can trust, but he follows up this assertion by claiming that he is parked outside the Crystal Palace (which was destroyed in 1936). Shortly after this the balance of power gradually tips in favour of the driver. After verbally abusing and threatening 274, and receiving transparent lies in return, the controller himself begins to panic. "135? Where are you? Where the fuck is 135? 246? 178? 101? Will somebody help me? Where's everyone gone?... Can anyone hear me?"⁷⁰ Only 274 responds to the cry for help, giving as his excuse for not pursuing the Victoria Station job the existence of a passenger on board. Finally the frustrated controller, in a friendly manner (which Pinter devotees realise usually conceals a hidden threat), tells the driver to stay where he is: the controller is going to "pop down to see [him]".⁷¹

As E. Mengel has said, "In many respects it is a very funny play, but its underlying theme is also the isolation, anonymity and loneliness of man in modern mass society. The two characters of the play...are not introduced by their names. Man is reduced to his role, his function, or

number".⁷² The setting of the play emphasises the isolation of the anonymous characters. On one side of the stage the driver sits, alone (despite what he sometimes says to the contrary); on the other side the controller sits alone in his office. Any communication they have with each other is via a machine.

Although the play is not predicated explicitly on Marxist philosophy, it does lend itself to such an interpretation. Marx holds that capitalism has a devastating effect on the physical and mental state of the individual, a condition which he calls "alienation". Two of the main types of alienation which he identifies are relevant to the study of this play. The first is the individual's alienation from other individuals. As Richard Schacht writes:

[T]he alienation from other men of which Marx speaks is to be understood as involving a complete absence of fellow feeling, an estimation of others as of no more positive significance than that of means to personal ends, and an antagonism based on a feeling of rivalry and the anticipation of attempted counter-exploitation.⁷³

The second form of alienation is self-alienation:

A man is self-alienated for Marx if his true "human nature" is something alien to him - if his life fails to manifest the characteristics of a truly human life.⁷⁴

It becomes clear that both types of alienation are exemplified in "Victoria Station". Without doubt the controller and the driver are alienated from each other. The controller's concept of the driver is that of an automated worker, whose job it is to carry out orders at the push of a button. He does not think of him as a fellow human being of intrinsic worth. And we can deduce from the driver's confused behaviour that he feels cut off from himself, as well as from everything around him. He cries for recognition of himself as an individual, and as a valued member of the firm. It is not only the driver who is self-alienated, however. To quote Mengel again:

The driver's refusal to obey is only a random event that triggers off [the controller's verbal bellicosity]. The real cause of this frustration has something to do with his job. The controller's work is characteristic of modern mass society. Although communication with others is part of his task, he leads an isolated life in the anonymity of his office. The role he has to fill is relatively undemanding, so that he cannot realise himself or find fulfillment [sic.] in his job. It becomes clear that it is not only the driver...but also the controller who is suffering from alienation. In this way Pinter shows that it is not the position of the individual within the social system, but rather the system as such which is to be held responsible for the alienation of people from each other and from themselves.⁷⁵

The controller's decision to leave the seat of command to try to find the disoriented driver can be seen from varying perspectives. Mutual dependence is one possibility. The controller may have realised belatedly that he needs the driver's services as much as the driver needs his. On the other hand, the controller may be another Goldberg, aiming to track down a rebellious subordinate in order to bully him into submission. Either way, the play emphasises that the individual in Pinter's concept of modern society is lonely and scared, divided from himself and from others.⁷⁶

CHAPTER THREE

THE STATE VERSUS THE DISSIDENT INDIVIDUAL:The Overtly Political Plays

The last play of Pinter's to be almost unanimously recognised as a "comedy of menace" was The Caretaker, written in 1959. The sketches, "Interview" and "Applicant", the full length play, No Man's Land, and the one act play, "Victoria Station", I have placed in the same category, as clearly they have closer ties with "the comedies of menace" than with the love triangle plays, of which there was a steady stream in the 1960's and 1970's.

But something was happening in Pinter's personal life during those decades which later gave rise to the third category of plays, the overtly political. He was becoming increasingly concerned with political issues. He spoke out against America's involvement in Vietnam, and U.S. support of the overthrow of the Marxist Allende government in Chile in 1973. He became an active C.N.D. member. He campaigned on behalf of prisoners of conscience. In 1974 he wrote to The Times¹ demanding the release of Vladimir Bukovsky, a man imprisoned "effectively for criticising the Soviet Government's use of psychiatric hospitals for political prisoners" (obviously a practice which had disturbed him as far back as 1958 when the then unsubstantiated rumours of this abuse had been one of the factors which influenced his writing of The Hothouse).²

In the early 1980's Pinter's political activities continued. He spoke out publicly on behalf of Vaclav Havel, a fellow playwright and leader of the Czechoslovak democratic opposition in the 1970's and 80's who was imprisoned three times for subversion. In 1980 he donated the proceeds of a performance of Landscape during his fiftieth birthday celebrations at the National Theatre to Havel's family. (Havel was in jail at the time).

He was still not quite ready to allow his political concern to obtrude into his writing, however, as his comments after delivering a lecture at the University of East Anglia in 1981 show:

I think it must be very much easier for other people... writers who write from a very political point of view and are able to incorporate their politics in one way or another into their work. I do happen to have strong political views but they simply do not come into my work as far as I can see.

When asked whether this avoidance of politics as a subject in his plays was deliberate, he replied:

I am myself a convinced nuclear unilateralist but I don't see there is any - there is no way I can write a play about it. It's simply something that would never occur to me, I suppose, any of these considerations... I am sure that some writers do - can very easily and properly sit down and write plays from a political kind of ideology. I am unable to do that.³

His commitment to political issues in the public arena continued, however, and in the summer of 1982 he and Lady Antonia, his second wife, organised an international PEN event for imprisoned writers, described as "a charity occasion to benefit the all-too-many writers of the world who are now in prison".⁴

"Precisely"

Then in 1983, Pinter wrote his first overtly political work, a short dramatic sketch entitled "Precisely",⁵ generally regarded as a satire on nuclear bureaucracy. It was first performed in London the same year. Its next public exposure appears to have been in America in December, 1984, when Pinter read "Precisely" to an audience assembled at New York University after receiving a literary award.⁶

Briefly, though not much briefer than the sketch itself, "Precisely" presents two public servants, Stephen and Roger,

seated at a table with drinks, holding a highly ambiguous conversation about "precisely" twenty million people. Both are indignant that some (unidentified) "bastards", apparently not happy with the figure of twenty million, are talking about "thirty....forty....fifty....sixty....seventy" million. Stephen maintains that these people are "actively and wilfully deceiving the public" by talking in this way. He tells Roger that he is "going to recommend that they be hung, drawn, and quartered"; he wants to "see the color of their entrails". (Roger, obliquely echoing "Interview", responds, "Same color as the Red Flag, old boy".) Then Roger, who does not appear to have the same authority or moral scruples as Stephen, asks Stephen for "another two million... Another two for another drink". Obviously taken aback, Stephen refuses to accede to this modest proposal, even though the price of his refusal is the loss of a free drink from his colleague. He is determined to stick with the original target of "Twenty million, dead, precisely".

The chief satirical point of the sketch is clear. Political bureaucrats dispassionately discuss military plans, entirely ignoring the fact that they are dealing with human flesh and blood. The repetitive use of the words "quite, "exactly" and "precisely" (eleven times in total) in the one-page sketch emphasises the bureaucrats' single-minded dedication to accuracy, regardless of the consequences of their computer-based calculations. "Twenty million, dead, precisely" is, however, an oxymoron, in that "twenty million" is clearly a round - not a precise - number.

What is not so clear is the manner in which the twenty million (or seventy million) people are going to die, and the identity of the "bastards" who are deliberately trying to "subvert and undermine" the country's security by "distorting the facts". After countless, frustrating readings of this confusing text, I have been led to the conclusion that the two public servants are discussing a policy of nuclear deterrence which deems the loss of 20 million (or in Roger's case, 22 million) compatriots an acceptable sacrifice. This interpretation

seems to be bolstered by a remark by Pinter to Bryan Appleyard in the course of an interview reported in The Times on 16 March, 1984: "He remembers sitting at a dinner party next to a high-ranking civil servant who said it was perfectly possible - the Russians would bomb Glasgow and we would eliminate Vladivostok. 'Have you told the people of Glasgow', asked Pinter, 'that we are right behind them?'" In this passage, as in "Precisely", Pinter plays on two meanings of "Glasgow" - an abstract entity which "a high-ranking civil servant" can plan to "eliminate", and a collection of individuals, whom Pinter as a human being feels bound to support. Elsewhere in the same interview he announced his determination to "make us see as plainly as possible the human truth behind...statistics".⁷

In 1984 and 1985 Pinter's commitment to political issues reached its zenith. The reading public became well aware of his political views through his letters to The Times and various newspaper features. On 24 January, 1984 he wrote to the editor of The Times castigating the leader of the 21 January issue in which peace movement activists were accused of "agree[ing] substantially with the principles of communism, however much they admit its errors in Russian practice". Pinter, who identified himself as a member of the said "peace movement", accused the editor of using "the classic smear technique", and denied the "assertion [which was] unsupported by facts".⁸

Then in March, 1984, in the interview with Appleyard already referred to, he spoke of the hypocrisy of the West, especially that of the United States:

What we are encouraged to think in the West is that we have a moral advantage, that we inhabit a superior moral position. But the United States brought down the Chilean regime and they're doing the same in Nicaragua. They are supporting the most fiendishly appalling system in El Salvador. If you shake hands with murderers, you have no moral position.⁹

Pinter also spoke of his outrage when two "attractive, intelligent Turkish girls" expressed to him their complete lack of concern over the torture of Turkish prisoners. He told Appleyard his anger was so overpowering that he rushed home, and in three days he wrote a 45-minute play called One for the Road.

One For the Road

This play - "a harrowing anatomy of the psychology of torture" - opened in March, 1984, at the Lyric Studio in Hammersmith for a series of lunchtime performances. It came as a shock to many Pinter enthusiasts, particularly to those who had not really believed that Pinter, the political activist in real life, would ever become Pinter, the political playwright.

The play is divided into four short scenes; in each of them a "conversation" is held between Nicolas, an immaculately-dressed, suave but sadistic interrogator, and one or other of the three members of what is presumably a family of political dissidents. In the first scene it is Victor who is brought into the interrogation room for questioning. It is obvious from his bruised and battered appearance that he has been tortured. After a friendly greeting, Nicolas makes it clear that he has absolute power:

What do you think this is? It's my finger. And this is my little finger. I wave my big finger in front of your eyes. Like this. And now I do the same with my little finger. I can also use both...at the same time. Like this. I can do absolutely anything I like.¹⁰

He constantly drinks whisky as he asks Victor sinister-sounding questions about his young son, Nicky, utters gross remarks about his wife, and makes thinly disguised threats of castration, interspersed with a flow of observations about God, death and patriotism. A frightening aspect of Nicolas is his swift, chameleon-like changes of mood during the interrogation; he is in turn genial, threatening, philosophical and fanatical.

Even more disturbing is his apparently sincere conviction that it is his duty to God and his country to torture the prisoners. He tells Victor, "God speaks through me", and later "confesses":

I have never been more moved, in the whole of my life, as when - only the other day, last Friday, I believe - the man who runs this country announced to the country: We are all patriots, we are as one, we all share a common heritage. Except you, apparently.

Pause.

I feel a link, you see, a bond. I share a commonwealth of interest. I am not alone. I am not alone.¹¹

Victor begs his tormentor, "Kill me".

In the second scene, Nicolas talks briefly to Nicky. After questioning him about his interests, and pressing him to explain why he likes his parents, Nicolas accuses the child of attacking his soldiers. When Nicky replies that he did not like the soldiers, Nicolas tells him, menacingly, "They don't like you either, my darling". The scene is blacked out at this juncture.

In the third scene it is Gila's turn to be interrogated. She is brutally subjected to a barrage of senseless questions:

Nicolas. When did you meet your husband?

Gila. When I was eighteen.

Nicolas. Why?

Gila. Why?

Nicolas. Why?

Gila. I just met him.

Nicolas. Why?

Gila. I didn't plan it.

Nicolas. Why not?

Gila. I didn't know him.

Nicolas. Why not?

Pause

Why not?

Gila. I met him.

Nicolas. When?

Gila. When I was eighteen.

And so the relentless grilling continues. Before long Gila is reduced to screaming. When she reveals that she first met Victor in her father's room, Nicolas savagely insults her:

Your father? What's your father got to do with it?

Pause.

Your father? How dare you? Fuckpig.12

He then reviles her for debasing the memory of her father, a man "who fought for his country", who "believed in God", who would have died "for his country...for his God". Various comments by Nicolas reveal that Gila has been repeatedly raped by the soldiers. When the interrogation ends she is told that she must "entertain us all a little more" before she goes.

Victor, whose tongue has been amputated or severely damaged, is returned to the interrogation room for a final session, in the last scene. After several teasing remarks, Nicolas forces Victor to have a drink - "one for the road" - before he is allowed to leave. When Victor painfully asks about his son he receives the chilling reply: "Your son? Oh, don't worry about him. He was a little prick".

Predictably, the new play caused a good deal of comment in theatrical circles. In Giles Gordon's view, "It is the most terrible play, at times nearly unbearable to sit through. Unlike so much of the work of Edward Bond, which just disgusts, it floods the mind with despair, the eyes with tears, the stomach with sickness, the heart with dread.13 He saw it "as necessary and inevitable a 20th-century work as Koestler's Darkness at Noon". He identified Nicolas as the "head of the secret - or maybe not so secret - police in a country that could be, and probably is, anywhere; which is not to say nowhere, but everywhere".

Milton Shulman also saw a connection between Darkness at Noon and the new play. Reviewing for The Standard, he wrote: "Presumably it is Pinter's aim to show us that torture and inhumanity can be inflicted by the civilised fanatics of a Right-wing society as readily as by the servants of a

Communist state.... It tells us nothing we had not already learned from Arthur Koestler's Darkness at Noon".¹⁴

A sample of drama reviews reveals that most critics were anxious to identify the country in which the torture takes place. Eric Shorter, writing for The Daily Telegraph, guessed the play was set "on this side of the Iron Curtain";¹⁵ Francis King wrote in The Sunday Telegraph, "This might equally be an episode from the Inquisition, from Stalin's Russia or from Videla's Argentina";¹⁶ Christopher Edwards, in his Spectator column, pinpointed the location "in the here and now of some repressive and recognisably modern political system which cows its citizens through the agency of the secret police";¹⁷ Benedict Nightingale praised Colin Blakeley's "horribly plausible" acting "as a highly-placed sadist in some British police state of the future", in his New Statesman review.¹⁸

It is easy to see why Nightingale came to this conclusion - Nicolas calls Victor "old fruit" and "old chap", and he uses a number of familiar English expressions such as, "Let's not beat about the bush", "I'm terribly pleased to meet you", "Honesty is the best policy", "You're on a losing wicket" and "I can hold my booze". In an interview with Nicholas Hern, printed at the beginning of the 1985 edition of One For the Road, Pinter revealed that the play should be seen in a wider context. As we know, the immediate stimulus for One For the Road was Pinter's conversation with two Turkish girls who were quite indifferent to the torture of Turkish prisoners. But in his interview with Hern, Pinter also makes reference to political prisoners in Chile and Czechoslovakia:

[T]hese people, generally speaking - in any country, whether it's Czechoslovakia or whether it's Chile - ninety per cent of them have committed no offence. There's no such thing as an offence, apart from the fact that everything is - their very life is an offence, as far as the authorities go.... [I]n Chile or Czechoslovakia you're in trouble.¹⁹

Other comments make it clear that his condemnation of political torture was not restricted to the two countries -

three, including Turkey - which he specifically named; hence the "multinational" names he gave his characters.

After writing One For the Road, Pinter continued to have a high profile in political debate outside the theatre. In August, 1984 The Times displayed a photo of Pinter, Lady Antonia and Lord Soper standing by the statue of Nurse Edith Cavell near Trafalgar Square. Under the caption, Vigil For Prisoners, the following paragraph appeared:

With several M.P.'s including Mr Michael Foot, [Pinter, Lady Antonia and Lord Soper] joined Mr Bruce Kent, General Secretary of C.N.D., in a vigil to draw attention to the plight of two peace campaigners in prison in Turkey and the Soviet Union, Dr Mahmut Dikerdem a former ambassador, and Mr Alexander Shatravka.²⁰

On 26 February, 1985, Pinter again featured in The Times, this time in connection with a protest against NATO exercises. The Times article reads:

According to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, secret plans for Wintex show that the civil authorities involved will rehearse a series of measures, under emergency powers, including the simulated arrest and internment of people opposed to moves towards war. In protest, Harold Pinter, the playwright, John Williams, the classical guitarist, and Mr Dennis Skinner, the Labour M.P. for Bolsover, will be among a group of 40 offering to give themselves up at New Scotland Yard today as "subversives".²¹

Then in March, 1985 Pinter and Arthur Miller, representing International PEN, spent five days in Turkey where they visited a number of prisons. On 23 March they held a joint conference at Istanbul, where they declared that human rights in Turkey were being widely abused. Rasit Gurdilek reported from Ankara:

Addressing the Istanbul Journalists' Association, the authors, who respectively head the London and New York chapters of the International PEN Club, said it was hard to understand why leading Turkish intellectuals had been prosecuted for signing a petition in support of democracy and human rights. Their trial is still going

on. The two playwrights produced a petition, signed by 2,330 writers, scientists and churchmen throughout the world, calling for international respect for the human rights. Mr Pinter said he and Mr Miller shared the conviction, supported by evidence, that torture was still widespread in Turkish prisons. They would report their impressions when they got home.²²

Pinter's impressions can be gleaned from the interview with Hern. Here he states categorically:

There are at least ninety countries that practise torture now quite commonly - as an accepted routine. With any imprisonment, with any arrest, torture goes with it. And on both sides of the fence, Communist and non-Communist. In fact more on what's called "our" side of the fence - I refer particularly to Central and South America - than on what's called "their" side of the fence. Certainly in terms of actual physical brutality, by which I mean murder and rape, which are the given facts in One For the Road.²³

Mountain Language

In 1988 Pinter wrote Mountain Language. This play, like One For the Road, dramatises the inhumane treatment accorded to "enemies of the State" and their closest relatives, but in Mountain Language the oppressed people have an additional humiliation imposed upon them; they are forbidden the use of their own language (known as "mountain language").

In the first scene, which takes place outside a prison wall, an elderly woman who has been waiting in the snow for eight hours to visit her imprisoned son is bitten savagely by one of the military personnel's dogs. Her daughter-in-law, who speaks "the language of the capital", reports the injury to the Officer in Charge. When the young woman is unable to state the name of the dog responsible for the attack, the officer's facetious reply suggests that the Dobermann Pinschers are accorded a higher status than the oppressed people - the dogs at least are allowed to speak:

Every dog has a name! They answer to their name. They are given a name by their parents and that is their

name, that is their name! Before they bite, they state their name. It's a formal procedure. They state their name and then they bite...24

In the second short scene, in the visitors' room, the elderly woman's attempts to speak to her son in the forbidden language, the only language she knows, are punished by the guard, who jabs her with a stick. Verbal communication between the prisoner and his mother therefore is impossible. When the guard mentions that he has "a wife and three kids", the prisoner unwittingly antagonises him by saying that he, too, has a wife and three kids. The incensed guard rings the Sergeant to complain, "I think I've got a joker in here". The lights on the stage are dimmed, and "voices over" are heard. Presumably this convention is meant to signify telepathic communication between the mother and son. The prisoner is expressing his concern for his mother's injury, and she is telling him that everyone at home is waiting for him. The scene ends when the Sergeant comes in to investigate the guard's complaint.

In the third scene, Sara, the prisoner's wife, is seen in the area of the prison where torture is normally carried out. It is not clear whether she has been admitted there accidentally, or on purpose. The Sergeant and guard are seen holding up a hooded man. Again the lights dim, and in "voices over" the prisoner and Sara reminisce affectionately about their earlier, happy life together. When the lights are turned up, the hooded man collapses. Sara screams, "Charley!" The Sergeant callously tells Sara that she has come in through the wrong door. He invites her to get in touch with Joseph Dokes, the "bloke [who] comes into the office every Tuesday week, except if it rains", to get "any information on any aspect of life" in the prison. Sara asks, "Can I fuck him? If I fuck him, will everything be all right?" She is assured that that would pose no problem. Sara thanks him.

In the last scene, again in the visitors' room, the tortured prisoner is told casually that the rules have been changed and the old woman may speak in her own language "until further

notice". The play ends with the shaking prisoner on his knees pleading (presumably in mountain language) with his mother to speak to him - but she refuses to utter a single word.

In Mountain Language, the role of language as a weapon for punishing and controlling dissidents, a familiar Pinteresque motif, is again explored. As Francis Gillen points out:

Pinter's plays almost always reflect this struggle to impose one's language on another, for to accept another's linguistic terms is already to be playing another's game by another's rules in another's room. When individuals' faith in their private language has been destroyed, they are already part of the organization, for they have nothing but the organization's terms with which to express themselves. Without a private language, there is no longer any distance between the individual and the organization.²⁵

The "voices over" which occur at strategic points during the play, however, indicate that this "distance" has not been entirely eliminated. The State may be able to silence the tongues of those it persecutes, but in their thoughts, framed in their own language, the marginalised people retain their "otherness".

This is again illustrated when the military authority flaunts its absolute power by arbitrarily revoking its former decree that the mountain language must not be spoken. Sara's mother-in-law obstinately remains silent. Now that "her" language is officially sanctioned by the oppressor, it is perceived by the mountain woman to be an act of collaboration to speak in the approved language. Her silence is an act of resistance.

It is not only when they are silent that the oppressed people subvert the official language. Sara's uncharacteristic use of the word "fuck", despite appearances to the contrary, is another expression of defiance. Obviously Sara speaks the debased language of the dictators deliberately, and it could be assumed that she does so in order to "get on side" with the authority figures. She needs their co-operation in order to ameliorate her husband's situation, and she is willing to pay

for any favours in the only currency valued by the prison establishment. It is clear that they accept her descent into coarse language as a tacit admission that she can no longer afford to hold on to her dignity and pride. As Pinter told Anna Ford, however, her obscene language can be seen in a different light:

She's not really going to [have sex with the prison officer], if you see what I mean. She's saying, "Is that the only thing that is understandable, that is comprehensible, to you - if I went through with a thing like that, would you treat my husband better?" It's a very crude, brutal world that she's entered into and I think she's having a very tough time, but she despises it so thoroughly that she's able to use that language with no trouble at all. She's also tough.²⁶

Because the play is explicitly about the harsh treatment of political prisoners, Mountain Language leaves only one unanswered question, namely the identity of the regime under which the dissidents suffer. Steve Grant's review of a performance shows that he was confused:

There's...the problem of the piece's status as "political parable", for if it isn't allegorical it is mighty vague: British army uniforms, a Central European feel to the setting, and despite being inspired by the plight of the Kurds in Turkey, peopled with men and women who hardly look or dress like mountain peasants. And given that running through the piece is the sadism of refusing people the right to speak their own language (Turkey and Ireland?) there is the slight technical problem that everyone quite inevitably speaks English, anyway.²⁷

Amanda Sebastyen writes a spirited review which reveals that she is convinced that the oppressors are British:

The reason Mountain Language is scaring is that it is set in Britain. The murderous beer-gutted Sergeant, the elderly woman in her hat and fur-collared coat who is savaged by police dogs, the bureaucracy that criminalises the supplicant simply for existing - all these are here. Now.... The mountain people of our town time and place are the black British, and the contraband language is their Caribbean patois. Another compelling reading of the play, set in the near future rather than the unrolling present, would have the prisoners Scottish. An even more obvious location is

Ireland.

But by avoiding "the obvious" Pinter sadly underestimates the stupidity of the critical establishment. The Daily Mail and Sunday Telegraph have simply insisted that the play must be set in Turkey, regardless of anything the silly old author says: "Can Pinter really compare Mrs Thatcher's Government with the regime portrayed in these grim 20 minutes?"²⁸

"The silly old author" repeatedly said that the play was not specifically about the Kurds, but it took quite a while for the message to sink in.²⁹ When the play was revived in 1991 some critics were still associating it with the Kurds, but more were inclined to the view that Britain was the oppressive regime. Michael Billington was one such critic:

It is nonsense to suggest that Pinter's recent political plays are dealing with some nebulous East European state... Mountain Language emerges as a deeply British play about the suppression of local differences in favour of a centralised culture. Peter Howitt's Officer has a clipped Sandhurst accent and Barry Foster's Sergeant is a recognisable regimental type. But...the play comes across as metaphor rather than literal truth. Pinter's point is not that we live in a police-state, but simply that we invest increasing power in an officialdom that sees any nonconformity as a threat. In four short scenes, Pinter pins down superbly the closed, uniformed mind and...banishes the consoling myth that it couldn't happen here.³⁰

Once we accept that the play is a "political metaphor", we can see it as a vehicle for Pinter's growing concern about censorship in Britain. In his interview with Anna Ford referred to earlier, he told her that in his view:

The present Government is turning a stronger and stronger vice on democratic institutions that we've taken for granted for a very long time. It's embodied in things like Clause 28 [of the Local Government Act which renders "promotion" of homosexuality an illegal act], the Official Secrets Act, police powers, and it's happening nevertheless in a very strong and purposeful way... Most people don't seem to realise that the dissenting voice and the minority are in great danger in this country.³¹

After giving a number of examples of what he regarded as the suppression of speech or thought, Pinter affirmed that he thought that Britain was "going back to a new form of censorship and repression":

I think it very often takes the form of self-censorship and...fear of not being seen as one of the boys, fear of losing your job, and so on. For example, people are fighting very hard to defend the independence of universities... If [a professor] is teaching something which the government considers to be unpopular - I'm putting it very simply here - or of which the government does not approve, funds gradually will be withdrawn.

When Ford asked him if he saw other institutions being controlled in any way, he replied:

Well, I think that television's under considerable stress, and the press, of course, is at a very interesting state because most of it is more or less owned by about two people. Those two people are on the right side, according to the government, and therefore their newspapers are pretty meaningless and so distorted and unbalanced as indeed to be worthless.

This concern with the apparent loss of freedoms by British citizens was shared by a number of well-known writers and intellectuals. On 2 December, 1988 The New Statesman and Society announced the launch of "Charter 88", "the first stage of what [was hoped] would be a transformative movement in British politics". The original 236 signatories of the Charter included Pinter, of course, and Lady Antonia Fraser; Ian McEwan (whose book, The Comfort of Strangers, was later turned into a screen play by Pinter); Salman Rushdie (in hiding following the publication of The Satanic Verses); Peter Wright (author of Spycatcher which the government of the day sought to prevent being published); Clive Ponting (a Ministry of Defence official who was tried under The Official Secrets Act for giving an M.P. details of a Government memorandum, written by Ponting himself, that questioned the official version [also written by Ponting] of the sinking of an Argentinian battleship during the Falklands War); Donald Trelford (editor of The London Observer who was summonsed to court on a number of occasions for refusing to comply with The

Treasury solicitor's demands that he promise not to publish "sensitive" information); and Duncan Campbell (an investigative journalist who was virtually put under house arrest after he did an episode for the B.B.C. television series "Secret Society" about an \$800 million spy satellite which the Thatcher government had developed without informing Parliament. The government seized film from B.B.C. offices in Glasgow and raided Campbell's North London home).

The Charter lists 88 examples of legalised censorship, sexual discrimination and other losses of civil liberties suffered by British citizens between 1889 and 1988. It is perhaps significant that only 23 of the "civil rights abuses" selected by the Chartists were perpetrated prior to 1979, the year Margaret Thatcher became Britain's Prime Minister - an indication of the perceived rapid escalation of laws against democracy during her term in office. Stuart Weir, editor of The New Statesman and Society, stated in his editorial:

Thatcherism has made the constitutional issues critical. But our aims are not narrowly anti-Thatcherite, still less those of a party political assault on the Conservatives. There has undoubtedly been a progressive and alarming erosion of liberties under the present government, one unprecedented in peacetime - indeed, citizens' rights which were never suspended in the worst days of the Second World War are today quietly removed. But the whittling away of freedom, the denial of justice, the arrogant presumption of unaccountable power, have found their expression also under Labour governments and the various coalitions which have ruled Britain for so much of this century... If totalitarianism were to come to the British Isles, it would creep over us quietly, in a very English, very reasonable way - and its architects could as well come from the political "centre" as the extremes.³²

Dissatisfaction with Thatcher may not have been the only reason for the founding of "Charter 88", but it is certain that the individuals who joined it were united in their opposition to her. On 20 June, 1988, Pinter founded another informal, "anti-Thatcher society" known as "the June 20 Group", "simply a group of serious, independent people who decided to meet privately one night to discuss the state of the country", according to Pinter. Many of the press

ridiculed the group, calling them "champagne Socialists" or "Bolinger bolsheviks" since most, if not all, the members were successful, middle or upper class individuals whom the media apparently thought had no reasons for complaining about their lot.

Even though Thatcher is no longer the Prime Minister, the June 20 Group, comprising various left-tending intellectuals including Margaret Drabble, John Mortimer, Ian McEwan and Michael Holroyd, continue to meet sporadically at the Pinters' comfortable Holland Park residence, I understand, arguing vociferously about issues like censorship, whilst sipping white wine. Pinter's latest play is set in a comfortable lounge, where elegant, well-heeled society people mingle, sipping wine while they chat about health clubs and past romantic attachments, and the irony is not lost on the critics. But before he wrote this very civilised play, Pinter wrote four full-length overtly political screen plays.

The Heat of the Day³³ - a film about a World War 11 British spy and his lover - has little relevance to this thesis, so I shall not be spending time on it. Reunion, however, another film about the Second World War, does merit brief attention.

Reunion

Reunion, adapted from Fred Uhlman's moving novella of the same name, was written by Pinter in 1989. The novella tells of the effect of the Second World War on the friendship of two boys, one a German Jew named Hans, the other, Konradin, a member of an old, distinguished German family which is sympathetic to Hitler and his identification of "the Jewish problem". The boys are close friends at school in 1932, but the friendship is strained by the antagonism of Konradin's parents. Even Konradin himself does not seem to be convinced that Hitler is as dangerous as his Jewish friend believes. They lose contact when Hans is sent to America to escape the looming holocaust.

Fifty years later Hans returns to Germany to dispose of his dead parents' belongings, and to find out what happened to his former school friend. He obtains an alphabetical list of names of old school mates who had fallen in the Second World War. At first he reads the whole list with the exception of the names beginning with "H". Then "Steeling [himself], trembling, [he] opened it at the letter 'H' and read, 'VON HOHENFELS, Konradin, implicated in the plot to kill Hitler. EXECUTED'".

Pinter's equally moving screen play portrays faithfully the essence of Uhlman's novella. Some additions have been made, such as several appearances of a female cousin of Konradin's, but the most striking deviation from the text of the novel occurs right at the end of the film. The camera focusses on a row of butchers' hooks hanging down from a rafter in a former Nazi execution room, while in "a voice over" the new headmaster of the school they had attended tells Henry (as he is now called) that Konradin had been executed during the War for his implication in the assassination plot against Hitler.³⁴

The endings of both the novella and the play are unexpected and shocking, and in essence very similar. But the introduction of the brutal butchers' hooks adds a visual dimension to the screen play which is not to be found in Uhlman's final lines. Perhaps it was Pinter's Jewishness which prompted this chilling touch. More likely it was his new-found anger at oppressive regimes of all kinds. In Reunion we find the same anger which is directed in other 1980's plays at nuclear weapons and the torture of prisoners.

The Comfort of Strangers

In his 1990 film script of Ian McEwan's The Comfort of Strangers, Pinter blatantly imposed his own political views on a story which deals essentially with two themes, the domination of women by men and the vulnerability of travellers

in a foreign land. The two quotations at the beginning of the novel make it clear that these were McEwan's preoccupations when he wrote it. The first quotation is from "Sibling Mysteries" by Adrienne Rich, the radical feminist poet:

how we dwelt in two worlds
the daughters and the mothers
in the kingdom of the sons

The second is from Cesare Pavese, poet, short story writer and novelist - and, incidentally, a self-confessed woman-hater:

Travelling is a brutality. It forces you to trust strangers and to lose sight of all that familiar comfort of home and friends. You are constantly off balance. Nothing is yours except the essential things - air, sleep, dreams, the sun, the sky - all things tending towards the eternal or what we imagine of it.

While Pinter retained these major themes in his screen play of the novel, he gratuitously inserted overt criticism of Britain under the rule of Margaret Thatcher into the play.

McEwan's novel unfolds a tale about an English couple, Mary and Colin, who meet a brutal sadist, Robert, and his masochistic wife, Caroline, while holidaying in Venice. Early in their acquaintance (Chapter 3) Robert divulges his admiration of his cruel, macho father, who taught him to believe that women were meant to be controlled by men. Some time later (in Chapter 6) Robert, without warning or provocation, suddenly strikes Colin a painful blow in the stomach with his fist. Mary also receives some disturbing revelations about the sinister couple. She is shocked to discover that Robert had been secretly taking photographs of Colin even before they met, and she can tell that Caroline is terrified of her husband. Even so, Caroline tells Mary that she is "prepared to let [him] kill [her], if necessary".³⁵ Both Colin and Mary believe that Caroline is a prisoner in her own home, and they suspect that Robert beats her up, though at that stage they do not know that Robert has broken his wife's back during their violent "lovemaking".

Yet inexplicably the tourists are drawn back to the apartment where the strange couple live. The only explanation which Mary can give for their second visit is, "The boat brought us round this side from the beach...so we thought we'd say hello".³⁶ Caroline drugs Mary, and through her drugged stupor she watches Robert and Caroline caress Colin's face and stomach. Colin tries to get away from the perverted couple by shoving Caroline's face out of his way and hitting Robert on the shoulder. Caroline dabs blood from her cut lip on to Colin's lips, and both she and Robert kiss his bloodied mouth. Then Robert slits the artery in Colin's wrist with a razor.

Pinter admits that he took liberties with McEwan's script in order to communicate his own dissatisfaction with the British government of the day. For instance, in Chapter 6 of McEwan's novel, Caroline asks Mary a question about her children's school in England, "which obliged Mary to talk at length about recently enacted legislation, and the collapse of a movement for reform".³⁷ Nothing more is said which might suggest either explicit or implicit criticism of British law. In the corresponding adaptation in Pinter's screen play, this verbal exchange is replaced by one in which Mary expresses vague misgivings about recent losses of freedom in England, and Robert heaps fulsome praise on the British Government for "purifying" the society from "perverts", meaning homosexuals. When Mary voices her wish to have "freedom to be free", Robert replies:

Sure I believe in [freedom]. But sometimes a few rules - you know - they're not a bad thing. First and foremost society has to be protected from perverts. Everybody knows that. My philosophical position is simple - put them all up against a wall and shoot them. What society needs to do is purify itself. The English government is going in the right direction. In Italy we could learn a lot of lessons from the English government.³⁸

Robert's solution to the problem of dealing with perverts has a familiar ring to it: Roger, in "Precisely", wants the same thing done to British "Reds", C.N.D. supporters.

In his recent B.B.C. interview with Paul Allen, Pinter explained why he gave Robert the speech in praise of Mrs Thatcher's Britain:

Well, of course it would appeal to him.... For example, Clause 28 about homosexuality in Mrs Thatcher's Britain would very much appeal to this man who regards himself as a man of strength, a man's man as it were, whom women adore, and so on... [He] despises anything that is actually perverted, whereas he is the greatest pervert of them all, of course, because he is a sadistic murderer.³⁹

Since Pinter's next remarks were about Hitler and Mussolini, fanatical, ruthless leaders whom a man like Robert would also admire, it is obvious that he saw a parallel between their style of leadership and Margaret Thatcher's:

Lots of people really thought that...the strength of the leadership of Hitler and Mussolini was something to be really admired and, in fact, envied, and that our Parliamentary system was simply a waste of time. So leaders, strong leadership, strong actions, strong structure...would be admired by a man like Robert.

Another divergence from the novel is Pinter's added emphasis on voluntary victimage. In McEwan's novel, the police investigating Colin's murder do not actually ask Mary why she and her lover returned to the weird couple's apartment when they already knew that their hosts were violent and perverted, but they imply criticism of them for doing so:

While [the police] clearly did not believe she had committed any crime, she was treated as though tainted by what the assistant commissioner himself had called (and had translated for her benefit) "those obscene excesses". Behind their questions was an assumption - or was this her imagination? - that she was the kind of person they could reasonably expect to be present at such a crime, like an arsonist at someone else's blaze.⁴⁰

While McEwan subtly shows that Mary and Colin, though they do not really understand their own motives, are obscurely ashamed of their need to revisit their unpleasant hosts, Pinter is much more explicit about the curious attraction of the

tourists to the perverted couple. In the film script the policeman persistently asks, "What did you want from these people? Why did you go back with your boyfriend to these people? Did your boyfriend like the man?" (Mary replies, "No, no, he didn't"). The questions keep coming. "So why did you go to dinner? And why did you go back? For more dinner?" Mary has no answer.

In the same interview with Allen referred to earlier, Pinter gave his analysis of McEwan's The Comfort of Strangers:

[It] was a very, very subtle work about...voluntary victimage. That, I think, is the real horror of the book, of the work and of the film. The victims really, both of them, give themselves to these sadistic maniacs and they offer themselves into the power of these people. Perhaps there is a certain political metaphor in that, though I wouldn't strain the point when it comes down to it... It actually does have a political framework of reference.

It is not necessary to strain at working out the "political metaphor", knowing, as we do, what Pinter thought of Thatcher's government. The English tourists' fascination with their evil hosts was as inexplicable as British citizens' admiration of Thatcher and her cohorts. In three successive elections, innumerable masochistic Britons recorded their votes for Mistress Thatcher, apparently eager to enjoy more bondage and discipline.

The Handmaid's Tale

Pinter's next screen play, The Handmaid's Tale, was released by Cinecom Entertainment Group in 1990. It is based on Margaret Atwood's chilling novel of the same name, which portrays U.S.A., renamed Gilead, under the repressive rule of right-wing, religious fundamentalists. Most of the population has been rendered infertile through nuclear war and environmental toxins, so healthy, fertile women are seen as the only hope for the future. These "handmaids" are kept as sexual slaves by the ruling elite for breeding purposes. The

heroine of the novel, Offred, is captured as she tries to escape from Gilead. Her daughter is taken from her, and Offred is made to serve as a handmaid to a high-ranking Commander of the regime. Secretly she takes a lover, the Commander's driver, and before long she suspects she is pregnant. At the end of the story she is taken away from the Commander's household by two men, with the encouragement of Nick, her lover. She does not know whether the men are rescuing her or arresting her, since she is unsure whether Nick is one of the rebels, or a "Private Eye" for the oppressive regime.

A brief synopsis cannot convey the nightmarish quality of the story. Non-whites are rounded up for "resettlement"; infertile women are crammed into cattle trucks to be taken to toxic wastelands where they will labour until they disintegrate; handmaids who attempt to escape have their feet and/or hands beaten to pulp; adulterers, abortionists and men guilty of "gender treachery" (homosexuality) are publicly "salvaged" (i.e. executed); an alleged rapist (whose real crime is political dissidence) is kicked and pummelled to death by hysterical women.

Pinter's screen play adheres closely to the essence of the novel. He has given the Commander one important additional speech about the necessity to "purify the nation": he tells his handmaid, "the country needed cleaning up" by getting rid of "blacks, homos, welfare people", and so on. Some more notable changes take place towards the end when Kate (as she is called in the film) slits the Commander's throat. And when the two men arrive at the Commander's house to collect her, they prove to be political rebels. Kate is taken to the relative safety of the mountains at the border of Gilead, where she awaits her rebel lover and the birth of her child. She is also determined to find her daughter who is being reared, somewhere in Gilead, as a future handmaid.

Cynthia Baughman, writing from a feminist perspective, expounds her reading of the different ending imposed by

Pinter. She maintains that Kate's pregnancy is the key motivation for her ultimate escape:

The movie tells us that the maternal instinct - not a drive for sexual autonomy or self-protection - is what motivates Kate's daring bid for freedom. Just like Gilead says: do anything for the baby. Thus the ending of The Handmaid's Tale, like Gilead, subordinates autonomy to procreation, and places Kate in pretty much the same position in which Gilead wanted her: alone in a small room, waiting for her baby, while its father fights for a new state.⁴¹

Baughman makes a legitimate point; Pinter has created a fiercely maternal Kate who is determined to find her missing daughter, and to bear a second child in a safe country. Her concern for self-preservation, which is so strong that she kills the Commander in order to escape, is inextricably tied up with the fate of the children, thus validating to some extent Baughman's claim that she subordinates self-protection to procreation. The more passive Offred of Atwood's novel, on the other hand, does not believe that she has a hope of locating her daughter, and besides, she is not absolutely certain that she is pregnant. Her own survival is paramount, therefore. In the penultimate chapter of the novel, just after she has found out that a handmaid in the resistance movement has hanged herself to avoid being "salvaged", Offred reveals her passionate desire to remain alive at all costs. She has reached the stage where she will offer herself, uncomplainingly, to be used as a mere breeding receptacle in order to achieve that aim:

Dear God, I think, I will do anything you like. Now that you've let me off, I'll obliterate myself, if that's what you really want; I'll empty myself, truly, become a chalice. I'll give up Nick, I'll forget about the others, I'll stop complaining. I'll accept my lot. I'll sacrifice. I'll repent. I'll abdicate. I'll renounce.... I want to keep on living, in any form. I resign my body freely, to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me.⁴²

There is a clear difference between Offred's and Kate's attitudes to survival. When Offred is arrested - or rescued - at the end of the novel, her thoughts are focussed entirely

on her own fate:

Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can't be helped. And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light.⁴³

Kate's last words in the film indicate that her thoughts are directed to her missing daughter and her unborn child.

In his lengthy interview with Paul Allen, which obviously ranged over a variety of subjects, Pinter talked about the way the religious fanatics in Atwood's novel misused language. He said:

[The Comfort of Strangers] was a most rewarding book, very exciting and really essentially about suffocation - about how the spirit can be suffocated and how language was used by the suffocators in other terms altogether. In other words, they don't think, "We are suffocating you". They say, "We are leading you on a life of virtue, obligation and duty, and you will therefore see good in what we do and what your role in society is", while suffocating, raping, branding the victims. That's what came from the book to me; and incidentally I would also say that the present state of the United States - many aspects of American life - seem to me to be very, very close to that kind of fundamental conformism; and language used to describe acts, which doesn't correspond at all to the reality.

(At this point in the interview, Pinter gave several examples of the United States' acts of "state terrorism").

In its investigation of the way repressive regimes manipulate language, Pinter's film script is clearly in line with his other works of the 1980's and 1990's. And his manipulation of the story's ending seems to indicate that the kind of regime he had in mind was different from Atwood's. As we saw from his treatment of The Comfort of Strangers, Pinter is not really interested in focussing attention on the oppression of women by men in a patriarchal society. His slant is always on the tyranny of society by politicians - in this case, by American politicians.

On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, things seemed to be picking up. In November, 1990 Mrs Thatcher bowed to public pressure and resigned her post as Prime Minister of Britain. But Pinter continued to write his political plays. In fact, he wrote two in 1991, as well as working on a film script of The Trial.⁴⁴

"The New World Order"

The first of the plays, "The New World Order", was first presented in a season of works by international writers at the Royal Court Theatre in July, 1991. The plot of this eight-minute sketch is a familiar one, namely the interrogation of a helpless prisoner. Two men in grey suits stalk round a silent, blindfolded, bare-footed man seated in a chair. The interrogation begins in a familiar Pinter mode, the issuing of undefined threats about what the two men are going to do with the prisoner - and later to his wife (who does not appear on stage):

Des. He hasn't got any idea at all of what we're going to do to him.
 Lionel. He hasn't, no.
 Des. He hasn't, no. No, he hasn't got any idea at all about any one of the number of things that we might do to him.
 Lionel. That we will do to him.
 Des. That we will.
 Pause
 Well, some of them. We'll do some of them.
 Lionel. Sometimes we do all of them.⁴⁵

They continue to abuse and intimidate the prisoner. Lionel asks, "Who is this cunt, anyway? What is he, some kind of peasant - or a lecturer in theology?" Des replies, "He's a lecturer in fucking peasant theology". Once again language comes explicitly to the fore. Shortly after calling the prisoner a "cunt", Lionel refers to him as a "prick". His colleague cannot allow the contradiction in terms to go uncorrected. He tells Lionel that such an illogicality would result in his losing face in any linguistic discussion group - "And you know what language means to you".

Towards the end of the inquisitional session, during which the prisoner remains silent, Lionel puts his hand over his face and sobs. He tearfully confesses that he loves his job because it makes him feel "so pure". His colleague assures him that he has a right to feel pure because he is "keeping the world clean for democracy".

The sketch ends when Des ominously remarks that the prisoner will want to shake them by the hand "in about thirty-five minutes".⁴⁶ We are reminded of Pinter's comment about "shaking hands with murderers". Does Des's statement therefore signify that the torture will result in a successful brainwash? Or does it mean that the prisoner will grasp his tormentor's hand, begging to be allowed to die? - a plea made by Victor in One For the Road when he could stand no more torture.

A number of now familiar elements can be observed in this work. The bullies' concern with meticulous linguistic accuracy, for instance, is reminiscent of the pains taken by Nicolas to find the exact word which will convey his meaning with complete accuracy, in One For the Road. After telling Victor that he is "terribly pleased to meet [him]", Nicolas corrects himself. "Well, I'm not sure that pleased is the right word. One has to be so scrupulous about language. Intrigued. I'm intrigued".⁴⁷ He is oblivious to the gross incongruity of his pedantic concern with words and the cruel treatment of his prisoner. The same lack of human concern is exhibited by the bureaucrats in "Precisely"; their surgically-precise statistics ignore the human suffering which the numbers represent. It is evident in these plays, and in "The New World Order", that the result of their actions is of little interest to them; they are obsessed with the means to achieve their ends.

Another familiar and disturbing feature of "The New World Order" is the interrogators' belief that they are acting for the best possible motives. Des's remark that they are "keeping the world clean for democracy" - a variation on

Nicolas's theme that he is "keep[ing] the world clean for God", and on the familiar U.S. determination to make the world "safe for democracy" - reveals the horrifying consequences of fanatical indoctrination. Their idealistic speeches overlay a fearsome subtext.

Reviews of "The New World Order" reveal that the critics were not altogether sure about the precise subject-matter of the sketch. Charles Spencer commented in The Daily Telegraph, "'The New World Order' was billed as a satirical response to the Gulf War, but these [interrogators] clearly aren't Saddam's men".⁴⁸ (Nor can it be assumed that they are specifically Americans, though obviously Pinter could not resist having a tilt at President Bush who used the expression "the new world order" in his pre-election speeches.)

John Gross, in an article in The Sunday Telegraph, voiced understandable dissatisfaction with the one-sided view presented by "The New World Order". He wrote: "We have been watching a parable of the West versus the Rest - though the more immediate implication is that Saddam Hussein ought to be allowed to go his ways unimpeded".⁴⁹

There is no disputing that Pinter was disgusted with the Western Alliance's part in the Gulf War, and in his recent B.B.C. interview with Allen he justified his anger:

I have been most interested to read that...when [the Americans] first went into the Mediterranean, the Gulf, they said that they were doing this because international law had been broken by Iraq invading Kuwait... Most of the world, as we know, including particularly Great Britain [which] would supinely as always follow the United States' footsteps, in my view, accepted these words as the truth. Now this may very well be the truth, but there is another truth, and that is that only a few months ago the United States invaded Panama, breaking international law. They set up detention camps, and that is entirely off the front page; they also did the same in Granada a few years ago, and perhaps even more to the point, they waged a totally illegitimate low, low intensity war against Nicaragua for about nine years, setting up mines in harbours. When they were taken to the International Court of Justice by Nicaragua, the International Court of Justice

found the United States of America guilty of all these acts. The United States simply tossed its head and dismissed the verdict, and said they didn't recognise the authority of the International Court of Justice. Now where does state terrorism begin and end? and what are we doing to language when we simply accept statements of some one person breaking an international law when we ourselves have just done exactly the same thing?50

This impassioned speech surely indicates that Pinter feels that powerful, democratic nations, especially America, are guilty of committing the same crimes as those usually perpetrated by dictatorships, and it could be deduced that he wrote "The New World Order" to condemn the U.S.A.'s latest outrage - the bombing of Iraq. But certain aspects of "The New World Order" suggest that the sketch should not be taken as a literal condemnation of the U.S.A., nor of the Western Alliance's participation in the Gulf War. None of the characters is noticeably American, and there is nothing to indicate that they have anything to do with the Gulf War. Furthermore, the torture hinted at by the heavies - unlike the United States' threats against Iraq - does not materialise.

Perhaps it is appropriate to regard this sketch as an allegory of U.S.A. domination in the new world order. More and more countries are joining the Western alliance, so there are fewer and fewer checks on U.S. behaviour. There is not much more to say about "The New World Order" - except that it is not up to Pinter's usual standard. Obviously rather derivative, and over-obvious, this sketch is best forgotten. Fortunately, a far better play soon followed.

Party Time

The second play written by Pinter in 1991, Party Time, was first performed in November of that year. When it begins there are no visible signs that this is another political play. A cocktail party is in progress in an elegant flat, and most of the characters seem oblivious to the world outside their host's lounge. The stage lights focus and intensify on

gossiping couples and small groups, intercutting as in a film. The chief topics of conversation are sex and the advantages of wealth. Terry, an ill-bred oaf, tries (unsuccessfully) to impress his older, upper-class host, Gavin, with a description of the "gold-plated service" which is supplied by the new health club which he has joined. (Gavin barely tolerates the nouveau riche upstart). Liz, a shallow woman in her thirties, gives another woman a rather risqué account of her latest male conquest. Liz's husband, Douglas, goes on about his rise in the social world, from a commercial traveller who lived in a two-bedroomed flat to a rich businessman who "takes over" an entire island every summer. Charlotte, a bitchy, sophisticated widow in her thirties, reminisces with, and lustfully ogles, Fred, a former lover.

But while the guests indulge in their flirtations and boast of their financial successes, there are hints that something sinister is happening outside in the streets, something which the male characters, in particular, do not want to discuss. The women clearly do not know what is happening. Dame Melissa, the latest arrival at the party, is a trifle discomposed because her driver had to present their credentials at a road block before they could continue, and she had seen some soldiers in the street. Dusty, Terry's young wife, voices concern about disturbing rumours she has heard: "I keep hearing all these things. I don't know what to believe". It is clear that she is also worried about her absent brother, Jimmy. Even brittle Charlotte takes a few seconds' break from her flirtation with Fred to mention to him that there is "something going on in the street".

Inside the room, as well as outside, there are signs of strain. Allusions to physical torture, murder and rape are casually dropped into the chitchat. Liz tells Charlotte that she would like to cut the throat of the "nymphomaniac slut" who lugged "her beloved" up the stairs "to rape him". And whenever Dusty worries aloud about her missing brother, or the strange goings-on in the street, she is threatened with appalling treatment by her husband. Using familiar

Pinteresque invective, Terry lists a number of sadistic methods which could be used to kill Dusty "and all [her] lot".

It is not clear who "Dusty's lot" is. Since Dusty and Terry have just been discussing her failure as a wife, perhaps Terry is referring to women in general. Or maybe he associates Dusty with her brother who is persona non grata at the party, and who may be mixing with other undesirables. Either way, it is obvious that they are people whom he loathes.

Unlike Mountain Language and One For the Road, where the results of torture (administered offstage) are clearly visible, Party Time keeps its violence covert until the very end of the play. We do not know, for instance, how Charlotte's husband died (though we suspect it was not a peaceful death). Similarly, when Charlotte vaguely mentions "something going on in the streets", Fred's cryptic rejoinder is, "Leave the street to us". Fred does not identify the people referred to as "us", nor does he explain how "they" are going to deal with whatever is going on in the streets, and Charlotte does not question him on the tactics "they" will use. Instead, she switches her attention to his "trim" body and asks him, "How do you do it? [i.e. keep his body trim]. What's your diet? What's your regime? What is your regime by the way?"⁵¹

The word "regime" is loaded, of course, especially as it follows Fred's assurance that the street disturbance will be dealt with by (an unidentified) "us". (Perhaps there is a pun in the title - Party Time? i.e., the men in the room belong to a political party?). By now Charlotte's last question is one which various members of the audience will be asking. Fred's confidence in the ability of these people to sort out the problem indicates that they are an organised and powerful group. It is not yet clear if most, or all, of the men at the cocktail party belong to the "regime".

About a third of the way through the play a comment by Douglas throws a little more light on the situation. He is discussing

with Fred the type of action that is needed to "make the country work". "A bit of that", says Fred, clenching his fist. "A bit of that", echoes Douglas, also clenching his fist. Then Fred asks Douglas directly, "How's it going tonight?" Douglas replies, "Like clockwork", before launching into a speech about achieving "peace". "We want peace and we're going to get it. But we want that peace to be cast iron. No leaks. No draughts. Cast iron. Tight as a drum. That's the kind of peace we want and that's the kind of peace we're going to get. A cast-iron peace".⁵² He again clenches his fist.

It is clear that Terry is in cahoots with Douglas and Fred. Transparently anxious to avoid discussing the rumours to which his wife persistently refers, he advises Dusty to "shut up...and mind [her] own fucking business". Her appeals to the assembled group for information about her brother elicit a similar response from her aggressive husband. He contemptuously points out that "What has happened to Jimmy...is not on anyone's agenda". When Dusty stubbornly replies, "It's on my agenda", she is roundly abused by Terry. Dusty's public humiliation is increased when Gavin says threateningly, "So odd, the number of men who can't control their wives".⁵³ It seems likely that the disturbance in the streets and Jimmy's absence are connected, and that both are on an agenda compiled by and for men only.

It is Gavin who eventually explains what has been happening, when he apologises to the guests who had "encountered traffic problems" on their way to his flat. The smooth-talking host assures them:

All such problems and all related problems will be resolved very soon. Between ourselves, we've had a bit of a round-up this evening. This round-up is coming to an end. In fact, normal services will be resumed shortly... That's all we ask, that the services this country provides will run on normal, secure and legitimate paths and that the ordinary citizen be allowed to pursue his labours and his leisure in peace".⁵⁴

Gavin's comment about "normal services" being resumed irresistibly conjures up Mussolini's famous claim to have got Italy's trains running on time, even if he did not achieve anything else worthy of praise. Since Pinter on a number of occasions has associated Mussolini with Thatcher, it seems that in Party Time he may be specifically attacking the extreme right wing of the British Conservative Party. The health club, which all of the well-heeled, "respectable" party guests are urged to join, may well symbolise a neo-fascist cabal. Dame Melissa - yes, it is tempting to call her Dame Margaret - is applauded warmly when she extols the virtues of the Club which embraces the rigid, unchanging values which they all profess to hold:

Our club - is a club which is activated, which is inspired by a moral sense, a moral awareness, a set of moral values which is - I have to say - unshakeable, rigorous, fundamental, constant.⁵⁵

Terry expresses the solid virtues of the Club no less enthusiastically, though with considerably less elegance:

[W]hat you're getting is absolutely gold-plated service. Gold-plated service in all departments. You've got real catering. You've got real catering on all levels.... I'm talking about a truly warm and harmonious environment. You won't find voices raised in our club. People don't do vulgar and sordid and offensive things. And if they do we kick them in the balls and chuck them down the stairs with no trouble at all.

Where Party Time differs from the earlier political plays is in the scant attention paid to the victims of this right wing cabal. In the course of the play, Pinter hints at events outside the party room by means of an uncharacteristically stylized device. One door which is never used is left half open, dimly lit. On a couple of occasions the light beyond the door gradually intensifies and burns into the room. These hints are finally developed when Gavin ends his speech about the round-up; the room lights dim, a brilliant light again shines into the room, and Jimmy, thinly clad, stands in the doorway. It appears that he has been apprehended in this or an earlier round-up, for he describes the effects of sensual

deprivation which could only be experienced in solitary confinement - or death:

Sometimes I hear things. Then everything is quiet. When everything is quiet I hear my heart. When the terrible noises come I don't hear anything. Don't hear don't breathe am blind. Then everything is quiet. I hear a heartbeat. It is probably not my heartbeat. It is probably someone else's heartbeat. What am I? Sometimes a door bangs, I hear voices, then it stops. Everything stops. It all stops. It all closes. It closes down....

He ends with the strange words, "The dark is in my mouth and I suck it. It's the only thing I have. It's mine. It's my own. I suck it".⁵⁶

In many ways this speech echoes the quiet, autistic idiom of Aston's big speech at the end of Act Two of The Caretaker. And the symbolic use of the doors (one for "realistic" exits and entrances, the other for "expressionistic" apparitions) recalls "The Dumb Waiter". In Party Time, then, Pinter's political concerns have been tailored to something more like the dramaturgy of the early "comedies of menace". His anger has been tamed in a way which augurs well for his future work.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE EFFECT OF PINTER'S POLITICAL COMMITMENT ON HIS ART

I can't help thinking that if pioneering Greeks, like Sophocles, had known that 2,000 odd years later the drama torch would be passed to the likes of Pinter, they wouldn't have bothered.¹

Kenneth Hurren is not the only critic to voice a damning view of Pinter's current standing in the theatre. In another fairly recent article entitled "Sentimental Education", Michael Levenson asked, "Why not say it bluntly? Pinter is fighting for the survival of his imaginative life".²

Statements like these about the man who for twenty or thirty years was regarded as Britain's foremost playwright reflect a commonly held view that Pinter's commitment to political issues has effectively killed his artistic genius. Various critics profess to find it ironic that Pinter should devote his time and energy to writing his unremarkable, political plays when the raison d'être of his political militancy seems to have disappeared. Graham Hassall, for instance, says in a review of a revival of Mountain Language with a first performance of Party Time, "It's not Pinter's fault that the Berlin Wall came down months later [after the premiere of Mountain Language]....but somehow history has undermined the cogency of his stark message". When Hassall gets on to Party Time he again expresses the view that recent political events have overtaken the concerns expressed in Pinter's latest plays. "But can anyone go along with this nouveau 1984 boggy since communism's crash and our own evidence of how the mighty are fallen in Mrs Thatcher's unceremonious exit?"³

In fact, the recent demise of the largest totalitarian regime does not affect the message of the post-1983 plays. Pinter has constantly reiterated that the torture depicted in the overtly political plays is world-wide, and continuing - Hassall, for one, acknowledges that "his target [in Mountain Language] was considered to be Latin America" - and as it is

now generally acknowledged that the corrupt political regimes which feature in the plays are not necessarily, or even predominantly, Communist, it is a mystery why there is a lingering impression that the collapse of the Soviet bloc somehow makes Pinter's latest plays seem already outdated. As Bernard Dukore pointed out when discussing One For the Road, "The many approving references to religion ironically exclude Communist countries",⁴ and none of the other recent political plays specifically targets the (now defunct) U.S.S.R.

The charge that the recent change of leadership in Britain has robbed Pinter's latest plays of their significance has a little more validity. Levenson wasted no time looking for profound literary or philosophical explanations for Pinter's artistic decline. He attributed it directly to Margaret Thatcher's rise to power:

Pinter's unwillingness, or inability, to write a full-length play and his public activism coincide almost exactly with the beginning of Thatcher's rule. Betrayal was performed in 1978, Thatcher was elected in 1979, and it seems right to say that Thatcher gave him political speech even as she very nearly muted his literary voice.⁵

Pinter's long-time, much-publicised, one-sided feud with Margaret Thatcher helped to persuade a number of critics that One For the Road, "Precisely", Party Time, and eventually Mountain Language portrayed Pinter's concept of Britain-of-the-near-future under the continued dictatorial leadership of Margaret Thatcher. Now that the Iron Lady has gone, it would seem that the chief focus of Pinter's anger at the policies of the 1979-1990 Conservative Government has disappeared with her. Time alone will tell whether John Major's Government will provoke the same scathing criticism.

The recent change of government in U.S.A. raises a similar question - will Pinter's hatred of Bush's administration, most evident in "The New World Order", be transferred to the new Democratic government, with Bill Clinton at the helm? It is

too early to predict what changes, if any, will be made to the United States' military policies which Pinter abhors. On this very day (18 January, 1993) United States cruise missiles are again being fired at Baghdad, and Clinton, due to officially take office in three days' time, has intimated that he supports the attack on Iraq.

Setting aside these imponderables, it cannot be denied that Pinter's artistry has declined since his passionately-held political convictions have come to the surface. What perhaps is not so obvious is that it is the literary style which Pinter has been forced to adopt, not the new subject-matter, which has damaged the quality of his work. Characterisation, in particular, has suffered from Pinter's narrow focus on the plight of political prisoners. Audiences of the "comedies of menace" found, sometimes to their surprise, that they were drawn to Pinter's tough characters - Gus, Ben, Davies, Mick, "even a bastard like Goldberg" - when they betrayed normal, human vulnerability. Sometimes it is hard to tell which are the oppressors and which are the victims, in early plays. The characters in the latest plays are not nearly as complex. Most of the guards, soldiers and interrogators are one-dimensional brutes, with no redeeming features. As for the male prisoners, their utter powerlessness has the effect of reducing them almost to mere ciphers of political victimisation, especially the prisoner in "The New World Order" whose voice is never heard, whose name is never mentioned and whose face is partially covered with a blindfold. The female characters, Gila, Sara and her mother-in-law, are slightly more complex than the male prisoners. Still, some slight depth in the women is no substitute for the complexity of the earlier characters.

As comedy is closely tied up with characterisation in Pinter's drama, humour is another unfortunate fallout from the constraints of explicitly political drama. There is the odd, coarse jest, such as "Intellectual arses wobble the best", spoken by the sergeant in Mountain Language,⁶ and one or two crude jokes from Nicolas in One For the Road, but the context

in which they are delivered pre-empts much chance of genuine amusement in an audience. Obviously the sometimes hilarious dialogue in the "comedies of menace" would be grossly out of place in a play dealing with torture.

A.E. Dyson's analysis of Pinter's use of humour in the early plays serves to isolate some of the essential ingredients which are missing from the later works. "[Pinter] is an accomplished practitioner of humour. As do great comedians, he creates a story by building audience expectations only to frustrate them or prove them to be incongruous with the characters presented". He cites Davies' story about the shoes which he had hoped to get from "them bastards at the monastery" as an example of a traditional comic device exploited by Pinter: "The incongruity of the 'bastards' and 'monastery' establishes the comic context, but the story immediately moves away from this in order to present a variety of lesser jokes which seem irrelevant to the main narrative". When Davies eventually returns to his story about the shoes, he ends off the anecdote with the comment that one of the bastard monks told him to "Piss off". As Dyson says, "The vocabulary is naturally incongruous with the figure of a monk but the real humour of the passage comes from the teller rather than from the monk's supposed reply. The joke extends beyond 'Piss off' to the delivery, length and continuation of the story by Davies. This is Pinter at his comic best - entertaining through characterisation and story-telling".⁷

In contrast, the bleak context of the overtly political plays forces Pinter to restrict his use of humour almost exclusively to the oppressors' heavy sarcastic banter at the expense of the victims. The Officer's response to Sara's complaint about the Dobermann's attack, in Mountain Language, is a typical example:

Every dog has a name! They answer to their name. They are given a name by their parents and that is their name, that is their name! Before they bite, they state their name. It's a formal procedure. They state their name and then they bite. What was his name? If you tell me one of our dogs bit this woman without giving his

name I will have that dog shot!

This is probably the closest approach to comedy that we shall find in the post-1983 plays until Party Time, where the pretentious behaviour of the social-climbing guests provides limited, ironic amusement for a slightly uncomfortable audience.

Pinter is very aware of the restrictions he has to place on his imagination in order to canvass his political concerns. In 1988 he had this to say about the conflict between his art and his social responsibility as a citizen:

The great thing about writing plays is you don't think. I'm putting it quite badly, but the fact is in order to write what's called imaginative literature, you have to let something go, you have to release the imagination. If you think too much you are simply not going to do that, you are going to inhibit imagination. There is a tension between being creative - i.e., not thinking - and living your life as a citizen in which you are obliged to think.

More recently, when asked to speak about the relationship of his political involvement and his work, Pinter admitted to his interviewer:

I find it difficult to write. It's a great release to me, by the way, when I can write a poem about love or the sea, you know, which I occasionally do, or cricket or old friends, things that are outside political considerations but it's less and less easy to write something of substance about the sun.... I believe one must absolutely stick to one's guns, both as an artist and a citizen, and I would very much like to write a further work which would embody all these considerations.⁸

"All these considerations" presumably refers to politics as well as "love...the sea....cricket....the sun". Opinions will differ, but in my view Pinter's Party Time, written a few months after the comments quoted above, goes a long way towards fulfilling this aim. Obviously the play is not literally about cricket or the sea, but love and friendship of a kind are there, and - more important - the play does

display some of the artistic merit which earned Pinter high praise before he embarked on his overtly political plays. The bitchy, social-climbing characters in Party Time are "real", they remind us all of people we have met at cocktail parties or similar social events, and even if their dialogue is conspicuously light on good-natured humour, some of the barbed comments and gross insults are so outrageous that we are forced to laugh. Even some of the sexual taunts, so obnoxious in Mountain Language and One For the Road, are funny in this latest play (possibly because they are made by women). Liz complains, "[T]hat bitch had her legs all over him.... Her skirt was right up to her neck - did you see?"⁹ Charlotte's (innocent?) reply is, "So barefaced -".

More important, Pinter gives us snatches of the contradictions, complications and irony which distinguished the dialogue of the earlier plays. For example, Douglas boasts about his happy marriage, oblivious that his wife has just been telling another guest that she is in love with another man. As for Terry, arguably the most repulsive male chauvinist in the room, he winds up his catalogue of the number of horrible deaths he envisages for his wife "and all her lot" with the comment, "Of course I love you. You're the mother of my children".¹⁰ This is very like the old Pinteresque "contradictory" style which characterised the "comedies of menace".

But perhaps the most encouraging signal that Pinter has found a way to combine his artistic talent and his political commitment is his return in Party Time to a more indirect (i.e. less didactic) method of exposing the political corruption which concerns him so greatly. Like the "comedies of menace", this latest play dramatises political oppression in a social context. Of course Party Time is set in a later era than "the comedies of menace", and the characters belong to a higher social class, but the rounding-up of dissidents is revealed to have been planned and monitored by "ordinary" members of society. Again Pinter is emphasising that abuse of political power is a problem which affects, and should

concern, every member of society.

In October, 1985, Pinter told Sylvie Drake, "I don't anticipate that I shall continue to write political plays as such",¹¹ but he would "continue to ask some very straight questions about the society in which we live, without fear or favour". We know that he did write more overtly political plays after 1985, but Party Time indicates that he may be ready to discontinue them. His renewed emphasis on society rather than politics gives hope of a return to his powerful early style.

NOTES

CHAPTER ONE

1. Elizabeth Sakellaridou, Pinter's Female Portraits: A Study of Female Characters in the Plays of Harold Pinter (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 211.
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3. Christopher Hudson, The Standard (19 March, 1984).
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7. Harry Thompson, "Harold Pinter Replies" in New Theatre Magazine Vol. 2 (11 January, 1961), p. 9.
8. Pinter, "Writing for Myself" in The Twentieth Century (February, 1961), reprinted in Harold Pinter, Plays: Two (London: Methuen, 1977), p. 12.
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CHAPTER TWO

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CHAPTER THREE

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