

Pinter, the political playwright

When the Swedish Academy on the 13th of October last year announced that the Nobel literature prize would be awarded to the British playwright Harold Pinter, the reactions in the press were trying to grapple with the possible motivations in the Academy's choice. On the one hand, very few commentators would argue that Pinter, who is widely considered to be one of the most important dramatists of the 20th century, did not deserve the ultimate accolade of his profession. On the other hand, they could not help but raise the question as to whether the Academy's decision had largely been based on a political agenda, as Pinter's more recent public appearances and publications have been dealing with political issues, most recently the war in Iraq. What's more, earlier last year Pinter announced that he would no longer be writing any plays, but would be devoting his time to political activism – the kind of political activism that a few months later saw him slate George W Bush as a “mass murderer” and Tony Blair as a “deluded idiot”. Had the Swedish Academy decided to mould its award into an alternative peace prize, adding a more combative edge to the kind of Iraq-focused pacifism honoured by their colleagues in Oslo, who decided to give their award to Mohamed Al Baradei and the IAEA?

This is not the first time that the Swedish Academy has been accused of politicising their award, with the Nobel literature prize in the past having gone to writers such as Pablo Neruda, Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, Boris Pasternak, and, yes, even Winston Churchill. The force of speculation surrounding the Nobel literature prize debate is compounded by the fact that the Nobel committee refuses to comment on its choice, other than through the press release on the day of the announcement. In their classic one-line summary the Academy stated that Pinter's work “uncovers the precipice under everyday prattle and forces entry into oppression's closed rooms”, and in the full statement the only allusion to politics is in the biographical summary, noting that “his political themes can be seen as a development of the early Pinter's analysing of threat and injustice”. Adding fuel to the debate, Tony Blair broke with protocol by not congratulating Pinter for his award, and Pinter's own first reaction was unambiguous: “I suspected that they must have taken my political activities into consideration since my political engagement is very much part of my work.”

The controversy surrounding the choice reached its peak when Harold Pinter's pre-recorded acceptance speech was publicised shortly before the actual ceremony. 45 minutes in length, it was little else than a grand swipe on America's foreign policy of the past 60 years. Merely the first few minutes of his speech picked up on his work as a playwright, but these were mostly ignored by the broadcasters and the press when they edited the material for publication or screening.

Many Pinter-aficionados were undoubtedly left a bit dumbfounded by it. For one, because it was a second-rate commentary that added no new slant to the debate, picking up on worn clichés of the anti-globalisation and pacifist camps; even the staunchest Pinter-fans must have cringed a little when he commented that “Tony Blair has ratified the [International Criminal Court of Justice] and is therefore available for prosecution. We can let the Court have his address if they're interested. It is Number 10, Downing Street, London.” For the other, because the bulk of the plays which brought Pinter to the status of a major playwright seem to have very little to do with this kind of political activism.

Even a less than superficial reading of the plays still places them worlds apart from his political output. On the one hand, we have the trademarks which have given us the word “Pinteresque”: small microcosms, mostly a single room, inhabited by very few humans, none of them being able to communicate with each other, acting out a situation that leads to no resolution whatsoever, because there is no one single truth to be found. His politics aim at almost the opposite: global conflicts with entire nations as players, positivist standpoints in terms of right and wrong, and, ultimately, a solution-based view of the situation. Where his plays make an almost pessimistic statement about the nature of the human condition, where the frustration at not being able to relive the memories of times lost lead to an oppression of the self and of other people, his politics focus on the present, the resolution of conflicts and a liberationist ideal.

Much to the chagrin of the Nobel committee, few attempts were made to square these antipodes in the ensuing discussions. This is a great shame, because the legitimacy of his, at times badly phrased, political views can be sought out exactly in the microscopic worlds he portrays in his plays.

Pinter himself has given some clues, both in the neglected section of his Nobel speech, as well as in speeches he held when he received previous awards.

His Nobel speech opened with the following sentences: “There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false. I believe that these assertions still make sense and do still apply to the exploration of reality through art. So as a writer I stand by them but as a citizen I cannot. As a citizen I must ask: what is true? What is false?”

The concept of truth thus takes centre stage in Pinter's discourse, and a closer analysis of the concept reveals that it would be too easy to accept a dichotomy of Pinter as a playwright and Pinter as a political activist, where one is determined by the absence of a concept of truth and the other by its presence. This understanding of his statement would imply that politics and the dramatic arts are two separate spheres which have no influence on each other; an understanding that Pinter no doubt would reject immediately. How, then, can these terms be understood in a mutually consistent way?

Harold Pinter, in all his speeches, likes to emphasise the way he writes, or, more specifically, the way he doesn't write. “I have often been asked how my plays come about. I cannot say. ... Most of the plays are engendered by a line, a word or an image. The given word is often shortly followed by an image. ... I always start a play by calling the characters A, B and C. ... It's a strange moment, the moment of creating characters who up to that moment have had no existence. What follows is fitful, uncertain, even hallucinatory, although sometimes it can be an unstoppable avalanche” (Nobel speech). Pinter, in other words, would make no qualms about admitting to using an intuitive or inspirational approach to writing his plays. 43 years earlier, when he held a speech at the National Student Drama Festival in Bristol, he stated that “I have usually begun a play in quite a simple manner; found a couple of characters in a particular context, thrown them together

and listened to what they said, keeping my nose to the ground". Pinter is thus making a Copernican revolution on the approach engendered by the formalistic schools of creative writing and literary studies: he does not create his characters, they create themselves; he does not employ a formal structure to his plays, he lets the characters take the play where they're taking it, and that's that. In a conversation with Richard Findlater in 1961 he insisted that "I certainly don't write from any kind of abstract idea. And I wouldn't know a symbol if I saw one."

Dramatic truth, then, for Pinter, is one where the author closes himself out of the process of creation, where he does not come into the writing process determined to "start a play from any kind of abstract idea or theory" and to "envisage the characters as messengers of death, doom, heaven or the milky way or, in other words, as allegorical representations of any particular force, whatever that may mean." Dramatic truth, then, must negate categorical statements, the positive postulations of consciousness and the aim at identifying a definite meaning and an absolute truth in the work of a play. Pinter not only insisted on this approach in his writings, but also in his work as a director and an actor, which he felt was crucial to the overall understanding of this process. Well-known anecdotes about Pinter have come from his work as an actor, where he has variously answered directors who were directing him in his own plays and were inquiring what a certain scene or situation was about with "the weasel under the cocktail cabinet" or, simply, "I don't know".

The result of this approach has been more than 40 years of consistency in his dramatic writings, and a strong sense of one individual's identity behind them. His characters, much like his playwright persona, are inaccessible, indefinable and fraught with inconsistencies. They are submerged in a world of introversion, where memories haunt them and the inability to relive them plagues them. They are engaged in an internal dialogue that leaves them with no fast conclusions, and when faced with other people, any sense of reliable verbal communication collapses completely. Like the figures in a Giacometti statue, they are all walking towards each other, but not facing each other. The result is frustration, tension, and fear.

The dialogue, which uses Shakespearean precision, ends up being equally disjointed and inconsistent. Above all, in Pinter's plays language ends up being used as a means to quell the characters' fear and to ward off projected threats. His plays are peppered with coarse language and expletives, which are employed as a means of signalling readiness for violence, as a substitute for violence, as a sign of frustration or the inability to reason coherently. But, more important and crucial for Pinter's work, is not the language employed, but the language that is not employed. One of Pinter's trademarks is the so-called "Pinter pause", often marked in the script as an ellipsis (...), a dash (-), *silence*, or, most frequently, *pause*. As much as Pinter hates the term "Pinteresque", he undoubtedly does not think too highly of the concept of his pauses being a trademark. For him, the pauses are only one half of the story: "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... 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."

Language thus becomes only but a small sphere of communication, enhanced by what is engendered in what is left unexpressed. Pinter is thus, in a way, much more optimistic about the possibilities of communication than the playwrights of the Absurd, to which he is often attributed. If Samuel Beckett's characters don't say much to each other because they don't have anything to say to each other, because they don't have anything to say to or about themselves, Pinter's characters are much more revealing in their non-communication. Pinter abhorred the "failure to communicate" interpretation so often attributed to his plays, insisting 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." Communication exists, it is alarming, and when the nature of what is unexpressed becomes too revealing, language is deployed to set up a safeguard.

In many ways, Harold Pinter has pursued an avenue of twentieth century thought employed by philosophers like Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein, the former emphasising that "language is not only and not primarily an audible and written expression of what is to be communicated", and the latter concluding his "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus", a heavily technical book trying to postulate everything about truth and logic that could possibly be postulated, with an individual chapter that simply reads: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent."

Truth, then, for Pinter, is a truth to be found in Silence. And this silence expands all the way from the microcosmic individual to global-scale politics, where language is meted out as the ultimate form of concealment of truth. A crucial sentence in the political section of his Nobel speech was: "Language is actually deployed to keep thought at bay". He even went as far as writing a little generic speech for George Bush which he could employ in any situation: "We are a great nation. I am not a dictator. He is. I am not a barbarian. He is. And he is. They all are. I possess moral authority. You see this fist? This is my moral authority. *And don't you forget it.*" The last, italicised, sentence is used in his last play, *The Celebration*. A restaurant is filled with a number of diners, some of them strangers to each other, some of them family. All of them are desperate to leave their mark in a place that they ultimately know does not belong to them.

Andrew Blackwell