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The Use of Language and the Problem of Communication
in Harold Pinter's Selected Plays.

As a representative of the generation of angry young men, i.e. one of those who gave the beginning to the mid-twentieth century revolution in British drama, Pinter struck both the critics and the audience with the new or unusual elements he introduced to the theatrical world. In 1958 Pinter, as well as his first full-length play: The Birthday Party, met with a very cool reception both on the part of the critics and the public. The play's first experience was of a disaster. It lasted at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, for less than a week, with box-office takings of only 2260. It received extremely bad notices, except for the one by Harold Hobson who wrote in his article in the Sunday Times /25 May 1958/:

I am willing to risk whatever reputation I have as a judge of plays by saying that The Birthday Party is not a fourth, not even a second, but the first, and that Mr Pinter, on the evidence of this work, possesses the most original, disturbing and arresting talent in theatrical London.

It was not long before Pinter's talent made an enormous impact on the theatre in London and all over the world. Today his plays can be safely considered as modern classics.

Pinter's dramatic output, till 1978, quite clearly can be divided into three parts. The atmosphere of oppressive nightmarish fear and horror experienced by man while he faces the hostile and incomprehended world prevails in his comedies of menace. His early plays, like The Room, The Dumb Waiter, and The Birthday Party belong to this group. These first three plays are often

called the room plays. There is the same classic situation in all of them: a room - the small safe area - with a few characters living there, one of whom is preparing to go out, and a stranger, rather mysterious, who enters the place and introduces some sort of threat and apparently reneges the secure, peaceful existence of those inside. The actions of the above mentioned plays are set in rooms where the characters are "closed". These are the principal constituents of Pinter's comedy of menace. Afterwards he "widens out" his room. First slightly, letting the people of A Slight Ache look out of the window; then, more positively, introducing new themes and depriving the people, who come in and go out, of the considerable menace they used to bring with themselves. He has now moved towards a more realistic theatre presented in plays like The Caretaker or The Homecoming, strengthening at the same time the psychological aspect of his writing. Psychological studies of his characters become deeper when he explores thoroughly the psyche of Davies, Aston or Ruth. Pinter's two short plays Landscape and Silence mark the beginning of the most experimental and difficult phase in his artistic development. All his later plays are about nostalgia for the old times. Memory, which has become his greatest concern, proves to be unreliable and useless as his characters often cannot decide what is real and what is fantasy. Separated from the past by all those long years that have gone by, they sometimes consider the events that did happen as impossible and unreal, while what has never happened seems true as "there are things one remembers even though they may never have happened"^{1/}. Pinter's existential fear of the icy and silent world "which never changes, which never grows older, but which remains forever"^{2/}, is once again reflected in No Man's Land. His latest full-length play - as yet - is Betrayal, a play somewhat different from all the previous ones in that it is much simpler and more down-to-earth both as far as the theme /the eternal triangle/ and the construction of the dramatic action are concerned.

Undoubtedly, Harold Pinter has two main concerns. The first of them is his deeply rooted image of frightened people confined inside their own rooms, or in other words, their private lives. It derives from Pinter's specific kind of existential philosophy. The second is the problem of inter-human communication. Pinter deliberately turned his attention to the sheer chaos and incoherence of ordinary everyday speech. These two matters account for

a unique modification of realism which is the most outstanding and important element of his originality.

The starting point of Pinter's plays is always a perfectly real situation with the language used by the characters so realistic as to get to the point of absurdity. Nevertheless it does not remain so throughout. His realism almost unnoticedly fades away and the overall effect is one of mystery, uncertainty and poetic ambiguity. The paradoxical nature of Pinter's artistic personality makes him the most real and, at the same time, the least realistic playwright. What is distinctive about his realism is that he does not stay on its surface but tries to get an insight into a deep "sense of guilt and unease that pervades most people's lives"^{3/}. Pinter's specific realism develops while he is trying to get to a deeper level of reality. He has moved from the black comedy of menace to a more realistic drama in The Caretaker and The Homecoming /plays which still have elements of the comedy of menace/ and, finally, to what may be termed psychological realism in his works concerning time and memory. Yet, Pinter's existential realism is there all the time, in every play. The questions about Stanley, Jenkins or Ruth that cannot be answered, the ambiguity of many events, heighten the dramatic tension. It is all introduced because life itself consists of an endless succession of problems that cannot be solved. Under these conditions, language - the simplest and at the same time the most sophisticated medium through which people communicate - becomes a "highly ambiguous commerce"^{4/}. Pinter says:

My characters tell me so much and no more, with the reference to their experience, their aspirations, their motives, their history. Between my lack of biographical data about them and the ambiguity of what they say there lies a territory which is not only worthy of exploration but which it is compulsory to explore. You and I, the characters which grow on page, most of the time we're inexpressive, giving little away, unreliable, elusive, evasive, obstructive, unwilling. But it is out of these attributes that language arises. A language "5/ where, under what is said, another thing is being said."

The last sentence of the passage quoted above explains much about the use of language by Pinter's characters. They apparently en-

counter great difficulties in getting through to each other. The question arises why this is so. Are they able to communicate or not? Could they understand each other if they wanted to?

Pinter is viewed by some of the critics of contemporary drama as a representative of the theatre of non-communication. They maintain that his characters are not able to communicate amongst themselves. This is certainly not the case with Pinter's plays. His exploration suggests strongly that even if his dramatic persons fail to communicate, it is due to their unwillingness to do so. Suffering from Pinteresque existential fear, his people do not use language to show that it does not work. They use it as a cover for their dread and loneliness. This is the result of a great desire, on the part of all the people, to hide the truth about themselves. Pinter explained this himself, saying:

I feel that instead of any inability to communicate, there is a deliberate evasion of communication. Communication itself between people is so frightening that rather than do that, there is a continual talking about other things, rather than what is at the root of their relationship. 6/

That is clearly the reason why in The Birthday Party Goldberg and McCann question Stanley on the problem of which came first: chicken or egg. For the same reasons Ben and Gus /the characters of The Dumb Waiter/ take up a linguistic debate on lighting the kettle or the gas:

Ben: Go and light it.
Gus: Light what?
Ben: The kettle.
Gus: You mean the gas.
Ben: What do you mean, I mean the gas?
Gus: Well, that's what you mean, don't you? The gas.
Ben: If I say go and light the kettle I mean go and light the kettle.
Gus: How can you light the kettle?
Ben: It's a figure of speech! Light the kettle. 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: What do you mean?
Gus: They say put on the kettle.
Ben: Who says?

They stare at each other, breathing hard.

I have never in my life heard anyone say put on the kettle.

/.../

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! 7/

In the quoted passage Pinter uses language as a device that helps him to express accurately the psychological shape of the characters and the atmosphere of a given scene. The shocking value of this passage lies in the fact that the characters stop ignoring each other. Normally - in Pinter's plays - people do not question what others say. At that moment Gus suddenly starts really listening to what Ben says and because of that he reacts as he does. Mick, one of the two brothers from The Caretaker, is clearly an example of someone who uses language not to communicate but to manipulate. In one of his last speeches Mick says what he thinks about Davies:

Mick: What a strange man you are. Aren't you? You're really strange. Ever since you came into this house there's been nothing but trouble. Honest. I can take nothing you say at face value. Every word you speak is open to any number of different interpretations. Most of what you say is lies. You are violent, you're erratic, you're just completely unpredictable. You're nothing else but a wild animal, when you come down to it. You're a barbarian. /.../ You come here recommending yourself as an interior decorator, whereupon I take you on, and what happens? You make a long speech about all the references you've got down at Sidcup, and what happens? I haven't noticed you go down to Sidcup to obtain them. It's all most regrettable but it looks as though I'm compelled to pay you off for your care-taking work. Here's half a dollar. 8/

Mick's style of talking is more direct than that of Goldberg, for example. Nevertheless, in the same speech we see Mick manipulating the truth, or, in other words, lying. Davies never said he was an interior decorator and Mick could never have possibly imagined that this pathetic regged tramp was one, or that he really had references in Sidcup. Mick keeps playing games with Davies all the time. He also takes delight in telling others his rather involved stories about his "uncle's brother", who married a Chinese man and emigrated to Jamaica, which are absurd and tell us nothing substantial about his background. On one occasion he delivers a totally absurd surrealistic saga about buses which not only has no relevance to the action of the play but is simply an instance of talking for the sake of talking:

Mick: All the buses passed right by the door. She could get a 38, 581, 30 or 38A, take her down the Essex Road to Dulston Junction in next to no time. Well, of course, if she got the 30'd take her up Upper Street, round by Highbury Corner and down to St. Paul's Church, but she'd get to Dulston Junction just the same in the end.^{9/}

As usual, Pinter's dialogue is highly realistic and everyday, punctuated with many clichés. Even Davies, who is capable of doing nothing, uses clichés. For example, his response to Mick's offer of taking up the job of the caretaker is: "I am a capable sort of man. I mean to say, I've had plenty of offers in my time, you know, there is no getting away from that".^{10/} Rather pathetically many of Davies's clichés are in response to things he does not understand. For instance, when Aston tells him what a jig-saw is, he answers: "Ah, that's right. They are very handy".^{11/} All the characters mentioned above do not want to reveal what lies "at the root of their relationship"; so they talk about other things.

People's unwillingness to expose the truth about their past is also constantly shown by Pinter from the very beginning of his career. Rose - in The Room - seems to have much to be kept secret about her past. That is why she talks with the landlord and, first of all, with the blind Negro in such a mysterious way. The Negro, who had waited in the basement for a few days for Rose's husband to leave, comes with a message for her. On behalf of her father he begs her to come home. He calls her by a different name - Sal.

Rose does not object to being called Sal. She only asks the Negro: "Don't call me that". Of course, we do not know who the Negro is. He apparently knows Rose and there is a hint that he is not only sent by her father, but that he is her father:

Riley: I want you to come home.
 Rose: No.
 Riley: With me.
 Rose: I can't.
 Riley: I waited to see you.
 Rose: Yes.
 Riley: Now I see you.
 Rose: Yes.
 /.../
 Riley: Come home now, Sal.^{12/}

We do not know whether the blind Negro is Rose's father or not. In fact, we do not know who the woman is. We even cannot be sure if Rose really is her name.

In The Birthday Party Stanley and the two intruders, Goldberg and McCann, do not want to reveal the motives for their decisions. We are not allowed to learn either why Stanley escaped from the world to hide away in Neg's boarding house or why Goldberg and McCann came there to get him. Little is said about Stanley's past, except for the fact that he was a pianist at some time in his life and that he once gave a concert which was a great success /at least that is what Stanley says about himself, but we cannot be sure that it is true/. The lives of Goldberg and McCann, as well as their motives, are pure mystery. And this, as J.R. Taylor suggests, is not "because they refuse to explain themselves. On the contrary, they offer far too many irreconcilable explanations".^{13/} Talking about his past Goldberg further confuses the issue. He calls himself by a few different names and tells rather mysterious stories that have absolutely no meaning. When he attempts to state his beliefs about the world he becomes first "vacant", then "desperate", and then "lost". Goldberg produces a dogmatic speech typical of a self-made man but his philosophy is empty. All this is illogical. The longer his speeches the emptier the character becomes. Finally, he is betrayed by the clichés he has used and as a result he gets lost. Humorous on the surface and seemingly absurd is the cross-examination of Stanley over the dilemma if

the number 846 is possible or necessary. Yet, it is, in fact, shocking and frightening. Pinter's idea of speech behind speech is fully developed here. The way he uses language shows its absurdity and meaninglessness. Too many words are said and too many facts are given which disorientate us and make the reality - whatever it is - more and more difficult to define. Pinter uses long factual speeches not to build up character but to disintegrate character. In doing so he is breaking the traditional theatrical conventions in which the dramatic dialogue "must explain, anticipate and with the help of the action execute the play story"^{14/}. Speech should tell us things about the character we are listening to. It should be both characteristic and characterizing. In Pinter's plays its role is just the opposite.

In The Caretaker Davies's status of a homeless tramp is so obvious that it cannot be hidden. However, Davies creates an illusion of remaining unknown by meaningless repetitions, by using clichés, or by avoiding direct answers to the questions he is asked. We cannot be sure if anything he says about his past is true.

The total unwillingness to communicate and the desire to hide the truth led to the situations presented in Pinter's later plays, where each personality is locked within his own past with virtually no contact with others. Beth, the woman of Landscap, is bringing before her eyes the images of the beautiful past and does not even try to communicate with her interlocutor. She seems to be sunk in her personal world of dreams. Pinter successfully shows the effect of the passage of time and makes it responsible for the differences between the memories of the married couple.

Having undergone such a great change /from a romantic lover to a man who can only criticize the beer at the pub and swear/ the husband is no longer an "equal" partner for his wife. She prefers to stay in her world of dreams than to descend to reality and talk to her husband. Ramsey - in Silence - realises that even if he wanted to contact people, he would fail because they deliberately evade him. His loneliness is expressed in what he says:

Ramsey: Sometimes I see people. They walk towards me, no, not so, walk in my direction, but never reaching me, turning left, or disappearing, and then reappearing, to disappear into the wood.^{15/}

As Pinter's characters - and in his opinion all people - have

chosen to remain unrevealed, they use language in the way that grants them the desired concealment. They are preoccupied with themselves and their private reality, and do not really listen to other people or care about what they say. It should be stated once more that in all the quoted passages, as well as in all the scenes mentioned above, Pinter's characters do not use language to show people's inability to communicate or to convince us that communication between people by the use of language has become impossible. They treat language as a great device that helps them to hide their real faces and to make others confused. They have to talk in a highly absurd way to hide the truth. They adjust everyday speech to this goal and imitate it with all its clichés, repetitions and hesitations.

Once we have decided that there is no inability to communicate in Pinter's plays, and that all that can be found is a deliberate evasion of communication, we can go a step further. John Kershaw, in the introduction to his book about new directions in the theatre today, states:

So communication in drama, and I suspect in life too, does not boil down to a simple question of speech, it is not just the matter of what people say, but also of how they behave, how they move and sit, how they look.^{16/}

In the light of this opinion, while looking for signals of mutual understanding between people, we should not concentrate exclusively on the language they use. Some sort of dialogue between them can be established without even a word spoken. Although Pinter's characters talk a lot, "it is in the silence that they are most evident"^{17/} to him. His dialogue does not consist merely of words. It should be both heard and seen, since gesture and movement form an important part of it. Accordingly, silence is as meaningful and as essential as words themselves. Peter Hall, who has directed most of Pinter's plays, says that when Pinter writes "pause", it means something different from "silence", and, in a similar way, his three dots are different from a full stop. His "pause" never means an empty moment in the play. It gives the audience a chance to interpret what has been said or to think the matters over. Pinter leaves so many options open that every theatre-goer or reader may interpret the play in his own way. "Silences" are used to create the special atmosphere of mystery,

uncertainty, and hostility which quite often prevails in Pinter's plays. The menace grows in Pinteresque silence. "Long silences", so frequently used by Pinter, often form the climax of his plays, being at the same time the moment of people's precise understanding of each other. The long silence at the end of *The Caretaker* establishes a mutual understanding between Aston and Davies. In that silence they get through to each other, they do communicate. Although Aston does not say a word, the tramp understands him very well. He knows what Aston's decision is, he realises that the silence means that the owner of the room did not forgive him and that he will have to go away. The last scene of *The Dumb Waiter* has a similar value. In a profound silence Gus and Ben look into each other's eyes and they do not need words to understand the situation. Gus cannot have any doubt about what will follow. He can do nothing to save his life. There is no need for Pinter to use violent shooting on stage. The curtain falls before Ben fires. Ben must decide himself whether to kill his mate or not. The audience must decide if he has done it.

There seem to be at least a few instances of wordless communication in *The Homecoming*. The second act starts with quite a long period in which the characters remain silent. While Ruth is handing coffee to all the men, they do not speak but exchange glances and smiles through which they communicate with each other. At the very end of the play Max is begging Ruth for a kiss. Although she does not react, does not say a word, Max gets her answer. He knows he has been rejected.

Beth and Duff - the characters of *Landscape* - present the final stage of the absence of communication between people. That they have in common a beautiful past is certain. Now they are separated by some invisible walls that break apart their past mutual experiences. However, although they talk about different subjects, there do seem to be points of contact between them in the sense that there are moments when Duff repeats or uses phrases used by Beth. For example, in both the characters' monologues the act of "touching" is strongly emphasized. Beth, as well as her husband, repeats a few times the motif of a man touching a woman. They clearly talk about themselves. What is more, they achieve some sort of agreement, as in both their recollections the man did not touch the woman first, but then he was in physical contact with her. At this point the subjects of which they talk seem to overlap. Their reminiscences of the past come so close to each other

that they achieve some sort of communication although their monologues seemingly have nothing in common.

It is very frequent in Pinter's plays to have people communicate ideas, impressions, and needs without verbalizing them. They do not need language to contact others. Quite often Pinter seems to conclude: "the rest is silence", leaving the audience with an irresistible desire to resolve the suspense he has created. The purely literary level of the dialogue is only the surface beneath which communication takes place. All this finds its confirmation in Pinter's words, who - negating the phrase "failure of communication" - said:

I think that we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid, and that what takes place is continual evasion, desperate rear-guard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves. Communication is too alarming. To enter someone else's life is too frightening. To disclose to others the poverty within us is too fearsome a possibility.^{18/}

It cannot be questioned that Pinter's dramas are open to a great number of different interpretations. He undoubtedly proves that "a thing is not necessarily either true or false. It can be both true and false"^{19/}. His plays, presenting the Absurd, take on an utterly different meaning to every theatre-goer or reader. Each one of us understands them in his own personal way. At the same time he gets his own lesson, he learns something from what the characters do or say. In that sense the communicative aspect of Pinter's plays widens out. His people communicate not only with each other but also with us.

Concerned with many existential problems people encounter during their way through the vale of the Earth, Pinter, a keen observer, shows the way they confine themselves within their own lives, within the walls of their privacy. His desire to remain secret makes people use a language which is akin to the disintegrated dialogue of the Absurd. Pinter's works are at the same time an excellent presentation of the extremely clichéd language of everyday life.

Pinter's name is widely and rightly associated with the Theatre of the Absurd. However, he does not represent and produce exactly the same kind of theatre-writing as Beckett or Ionesco. One of his greatest achievements is his unique and very personal

modification of the absurd. What is outstanding about his drama is that he exhibits in his plays a strong connection between the absurd and everyday reality. His works are not examples of the pure absurd. They are based on realism. On the other hand, Pinter's theatre is not merely realistic. If anything, it is the theatre of the realistic absurd. He uncovers the bitter truth about humanity which nowadays is about to "achieve" the point of absurdity. His characters do not represent an imaginary world. They come straightforward from the streets since they have something to communicate to us. What is more important and fascinating, they execute their mission perfectly.

NOTES

- 1/ H. Pinter, Old Times, Methuen edition, London 1976, pp 31-32.
- 2/ H. Pinter, No Man's Land, Methuen edition, London 1975, p.95.
- 3/ G. Salgado, English Drama. A Critical Introduction, London 1980, p.200.
- 4/ H. Pinter, "Between the Lines", The Sunday Times, 4 March 1962 p.25.
- 5/ H. Pinter, ibid.
- 6/ H. Pinter, interviewed by Kenneth Tynan, in G. Salgado, English Drama. A Critical Introduction, p.202.
- 7/ H. Pinter, The Dumb Waiter, in Pinter. Plays: one, London 1976, pp 141-142.
- 8/ H. Pinter, The Caretaker, Methuen edition, London 1976, pp 73-74.
- 9/ H. Pinter, ibid., p.32.
- 10/ H. Pinter, ibid., p.50.
- 11/ H. Pinter, ibid., p.24.
- 12/ H. Pinter, The Room, in Pinter. Plays: one, pp 124-125.
- 13/ J.R. Taylor, Harold Pinter, London 1973, p.9.
- 14/ I. Altembernd, I. L. Lewis, A Handbook for the Study of Drama, New York 1966, p.25.
- 15/ H. Pinter, Silence, Methuen edition, London 1969, p.40.
- 16/ J. Kershaw, The Present Stage, Fontana Books, London 1966, p.11.
- 17/ H. Pinter, "Between the Lines".
- 18/ H. Pinter, ibid.
- 19/ H. Pinter, "Writing for the Theatre" in Pinter. Plays: one, p.11.

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L'utilisation du texte littéraire dans l'enseignement du français - aspects méthodologiques et stratégies rédactionnelles.

Dans les travaux théoriques relevant de la didactique du français langue étrangère, nous observerons depuis quelque temps un intérêt croissant d'un côté pour ce qu'on appelle "les documents bruts" /bandes dessinées, faits divers, enregistrements des discours authentiques/, et de l'autre pour les textes littéraires dans leur double aspect de lecture/analyse et d'écriture. Notons bien que dans les deux cas il est question de discours authentiques, c'est-à-dire non produits pour les besoins didactiques d'apprentissage d'une langue étrangère.

Au niveau moins avancé, les contraintes du vocabulaire et de la syntaxe retardent, malheureusement, l'introduction des textes littéraires dans l'étude du français. Le recours à l'adaptation n'est pas toujours une bonne solution, car il fait perdre plusieurs valeurs du style de l'auteur, des significations implicites du texte, etc. Cet obstacle linguistique n'existe pratiquement pas /ou plutôt ne devrait pas exister/ chez les étudiants en philologie.

Les avantages des démarches pédagogiques sur l'écrit littéraire sont multiples: ces textes-là permettent aux étudiants de devenir sensibles à la fonction poétique /esthétique/ du langage, de connaître les règles spécifiques du fonctionnement du discours, de ses richesses, et finalement d'acquiescer un nouveau pouvoir sur la langue. Tout cela peut susciter, en dernière instance, le désir d'écrire en vue de l'expression de soi et aboutir à l'écriture créatrice /production de textes à partir de modèles formels ou thématiques/. La lecture et le commentaire de textes littéraires constituent aussi le lieu de