Harold Pinter’s artistic achievement

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When playwright Harold Pinter was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in October 2005, it produced anxiety within government circles in Britain. Pinter’s determined opposition to US and British foreign policy, and his resistance to the renewed imperialist carve-up of the globe centring on the war against Iraq, have brought attacks on him from many quarters. His fellow playwright David Hare noted that not a single party leader in Britain had congratulated Pinter on the award. This was hardly surprising, given the support the major parties in Britain gave to the US-led invasion of Iraq.

The Swedish Academy’s citation noted Pinter’s position as “the foremost representative of British drama in the second half of the 20th century,” and recognised that his opposition to imperialist war and his dedication to freedom of speech and democratic rights “can be seen as a development of the early Pinter’s analyzing of threat and injustice.”

At the time of his acceptance lecture, the *World Socialist Web Site* commented that even certain sections of the media that had supported the war against Iraq, like the *New York Times,* were forced to acknowledge Pinter’s fiercely critical comments. But there was nevertheless a widespread effort to ignore Pinter. David Hare also noted that the lecture was neither broadcast by the BBC, nor even reported on their terrestrial news programmes.

There were those who went further, seeking to discredit Pinter. The most brazen piece, by Johann Hari in the *Independent*, ran under the title “Pinter does not deserve the Nobel Prize.” Writing before Pinter’s acceptance speech was broadcast by Channel 4, Hari asked whether anyone doubted that it would be “a rant.” Unless there was a new prize for “rage-induced incoherence,” wrote Hari, Pinter’s “ravings” should not be broadcast.

Hari explicitly attacked Pinter for his record of political opposition to the escalation of imperialist carnage in the Middle East and the Balkans. He criticised Pinter’s opposition to the imperialist show-trial of Slobodan Milosevic, for example, seeing it as impermissible to attack US and British imperialist intervention in the region. Pinter’s argument that Milosevic should be released until he is joined in war crimes trials by former US President Bill Clinton and British Prime Minister Tony Blair was derided by Hari, who lines up with those “decent people” who called for the arming of the Kosovo Liberation Army, without acknowledging the role played by inter-imperialist rivalries in deliberately whipping up ethno-chauvinist conflicts and dividing the region. Accordingly, Hari is scathing about Pinter’s factually impeccable appraisal of the KLA as “a bandit organisation.”

The main thrust of Hari’s attack was against Pinter’s politics. In the last 15 years, particularly, Pinter has been a vocal and trenchant critic of militarism and war and the erosion of democratic rights. Pinter has remained defiantly “off-message,” championing critical independence from government propaganda. For Hari, this is unforgivable, accusing the playwright of taking “a desirable political value—hatred of war, or distrust for his own government” and “absolutising” it.

As the Swedish Academy noted, Pinter’s hostility to oppression, militarism and war were intimately connected with his artistry. The same rage at injustice and oppression has fuelled his polemics against wars in the Gulf and the Balkans, his antiwar poetry, and his 29 plays. For Hari, therefore, the easiest way of attacking the politics was to belittle the art. Pinter, he wrote, has only “one literary accomplishment: he imported the surrealism of Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and Luis Buñuel into the staid English theatre.”

There is a lot to be said about this. For one thing, only Buñuel among these writers was ever formally a surrealist. Beckett was influenced by surrealism; Ionesco’s absurdism was antithetical to surrealism. (Early in his career, Pinter denied that he wrote symbolically, partly because critics tried to associate him with absurdism.) Hari’s intention becomes clear when he compares Pinter to Beckett. Beckett’s work is underpinned by “an elaborate existentialist philosophy,” whereas with Pinter, according to Hari, “if you turn on the light and switch off the atmospherics, you find...nothing, except a few commonplace insights.”

To supposedly illustrate this, he points to what Pinter has called “the most important line I’ve ever written.”

In *The Birthday Party*, when Stan is being taken away, Petey cries out, “Stan, don’t let them tell you what to do.” Pinter has said that he has lived that line “all my damn life. Never more than now.”

For Hari, this is “depressingly revealing”; the line is an “unobjectionable platitude” and Pinter’s point is “banal.” This comes from a man who believes it impermissible to denounce the British and US governments for their actions in the Balkans and Iraq. For a man who makes a living from parroting precisely the sort of propaganda Pinter has resisted to describe this comment as banal is merely impudent.

Hari notes that since Pinter’s formative years he has been a “relentlessly contrarian.” He acknowledges that some of Pinter’s targets have “really deserved it.” But no more. For Hari, supporting the Sandinistas against US-backed forces was heroic, but resisting the arming of the KLA was not. In particular, Hari is unable to reconcile Pinter’s early resistance to fascists in London with his subsequent critical independence.

Pinter was born in 1930 in Hackney, in northeast London, the son of a Jewish immigrant tailor. Throughout the 1930s, the area was a recruiting ground for fascists, and there was fierce resistance from migrant workers, leading often to violence. Pinter has often talked of the lasting impact his experiences of anti-Semitism at this time had on him. It also informed the work of actor Henry Woolf, the school friend from Hackney Downs School who produced Pinter’s earliest plays. Pinter was later fined for his refusal to do compulsory National Service in the army in 1949. For Hari, this opposition to militarism is another sin. Writing of an event that occurred four years after the end of World War II, he pontificates: “It is good to hate war, but to take this so far that you won’t resist Hitler and Stalin...is absurd.”

What is clear both from the Nobel citation and from Hari’s attack is the extent to which Pinter’s political thinking and his art are interlinked. Although he has written constantly throughout his career, he has never forced his work. It is surprising how few of his 29 plays are full-length pieces. He once said that “you write because there’s something you *want* to write, *have* to write.” From this vision of the necessity of artistic expression flows his confidence that you can “take a chance on the audience.” This is an increasingly rare trait and demonstrates a remarkable

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artistic independence in the present period. That he has been able to maintain this critical independence throughout a 50-year career marks him as quite extraordinary.

Pinter experimented with several writing forms before he turned to plays. And he has expressed a sense of self-criticism, saying he had written short prose pieces and "Hundreds of poems—about a dozen [of which] are worth republishing." This self-criticism, with which his opponents do not credit him, was also apparent in his appraisal of a partly autobiographical novel, *The Dwarfs*, which had become "rather a hotchpotch."

Through the 1950s, while he was writing many of these pieces, Pinter was working as an actor in repertory theatre. He has continued to act alongside his writing, appearing both in stage revivals of his own plays and also in films. He is a highly impressive actor: Donald Pleasence described him as "by far the most frightening" Mick he worked with when performing Pinter's play, *The Caretaker*.

He was inspired by Donald Wolfit, one of the last grand actor-managers, and spent a season with his company at Hammersmith. Using his repertory training as a yardstick, he said he had acquired a "feeling for construction...and for speakable dialogue" while working in the theatre. Grounded in the theatre, it became the natural medium for his writing. He said he wrote his first play, *The Room* (1957), because he had an image of two people in a room, and he felt that the only way he could express the image was dramatically.

For *The Room,* Pinter had, he said, "started off with this picture of the two people and let them carry on from there." He did not write from any "abstract idea." His play was not realistic in the way that John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* was realistic, but it used a new kind of realistic dialogue. Here was dialogue that sounded the way people spoke in real life, with hidden meanings and unspoken texts. Hidden pasts lurked in characters' silences, and the world outside the closed room was always threatening to burst in.

Inspired by Samuel Beckett's prose, Pinter articulated a new reality in his writing. This was the post-war world, threatened and on the brink of disaster, and Pinter dissolved this in small domestic scenes. He has said that what he liked about Beckett was the way he created his own world, but one which "had so many references to the world we actually share."

The Room sets out, in prototype form, many of the themes that dominate his best work. A housebound wife and her silent husband find their home mysteriously threatened by a domineering landlord, a pushy couple, and a blind man. There is an unspoken sense of threat, of impending catastrophe. The air is thick with sexual violence, and the greatest threat is to the certainties of their home.

Pinter's world is one where homes are constantly under threat from outsiders. In *The Caretaker* (1960), Davies, the manipulative tramp, attempts to inveigle his way into the slow-witted Aston's flat. In *No Man's Land* (1974), it is the shabby poet Spooner, invited up to an expensive house after a night in the pub. These become explorations of a sinister intrusion, shattering already thwarted and violent lives.

He had already developed these themes in *The Birthday Party* (1958). Set in a seaside boarding house run by a childless couple, a lodger (Stanley) is confronted by two outsiders (Goldberg and McCann). They terrorise him, interrogate him and eventually take him away. It is never stated who or what they represent.

The play has been described as a repertory thriller written by someone who had read Kafka. Stated like this, it seems unlikely that the play could survive beyond being a period piece of paranoia. What happens in the play, though, is clear and unambiguous, but not explained. The dialogue is taut and pared down. In a world of political anxieties, Pinter's play represents a confused world in the clearest possible way.

This is directly linked with his knowledge of earlier dramatists. In an early essay on Shakespeare, he wrote that he "amputates, deadens, aggravates at will, within the limits of a particular piece, but he will not pronounce judgement or cure." It is this same quality that makes Pinter's plays so understandable, and thus so terrifying. In his later plays, he has become more lyrical, but he is wary that lyricism can create problems in expressing "what is actually happening to people."

They are also very funny. In perhaps his greatest play, *The Homecoming* (1965), the upwardly mobile son Teddy arrives home from North America with his wife Ruth. Her presence creates a sexual tension that undermines the position of the Jewish patriarch Max by implicating the other sons. By the final scene, one son, Lenny, has pimped Ruth to the other, Joey, and they and Max are persuading Teddy that Ruth should stay with them as a sexual consort and money-earning prostitute. That scene gains much of its awful impact from the cumulative outrage that Joey should have spent so long upstairs with Ruth without achieving climax.

To understand the connection between Pinter's art and his political statements, and the continuity identified by the Swedish Academy, it is worth comparing the interrogation of Stanley in *The Birthday Party* with the conversation between the political torturers in the short piece *The New World Order* nearly 40 years later.

In *The New World Order*, Pinter explains explicitly how such interrogations work:

"Des: ...Before he came in here he was a big shot, he never stopped shooting his mouth off, he never stopped questioning received ideas. Now—because he's apprehensive about what's about to happen to him—he's stopped all that, he's got nothing more to say, he's more or less called it a day. I mean once—not too long ago—this man was a man of conviction, wasn't he, a man of principle. Now, he's just a prick."

Or, as Goldberg tells Stanley in *The Birthday Party*, "You're dead. You can't live, you can't think, you can't love. You're dead. You're a plague gone bad. There's no juice in you. You're nothing but an odour!"

Describing the events within his plays as realistic, whilst saying he was not a realistic writer, Pinter wrote that he thought what happened in his plays could happen "anywhere, at any time, in any place."

In 1961, he said that he did not write with an explicit message in mind, but that he wrote because there was something he *had* to write. Over the last 15 years, this has become more pronounced. Suffering occasional ill health, Pinter has responded furiously to the drive towards the imperialist re-division of the world. Already involved with campaigns against torture and in defence of artistic freedom, Pinter has published much more of his occasional and political poetry since the 1991 Gulf War. Indeed, for Hari, one of the greatest crimes committed by the Swedish Academy is to award the Nobel Prize to a man who wrote these lines about the Gulf War:

We blew the shit right back up their own ass
And out their fucking ears.
It works.
We blew the shit out of them,
They suffocated in their own shit!
We blew them into fucking shit.
They are eating it.
Now I want you to come over here and kiss me on the mouth.

Hari sees nothing here beyond the scatology. He certainly cannot acknowledge Pinter's searing anger and rage at the barbaric crimes committed by US and British imperialism, because that would involve having a critical attitude towards those crimes.

Pinter has taken the analytical and oppositional qualities that informed his full-length plays and continues to apply them to every aspect of his work. Such steadfast critical thought and artistic independence are rare enough. It is rarer still to find them continuing throughout a successful 50-year career. Most of Pinter's early contemporaries made their peace with the establishment long ago. As Hari has demonstrated, many younger hacks have never had a disagreement with it. Pinter's resolute commitment to his art and its independence provides a valuable model for

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anyone serious about the development and defence of artistic expression.

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