Balancing the Power Relations between Dyads and Triads Depending on the Use of Objects

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Abstract: *Harold Pinter cunningly understood the significance of relevant details. In some of his plays (The Homecoming, Tea Party, The Basement, Landscape, Silence, Night, That's Your Trouble) he highlighted the conflictual nature of relationships by focusing on rooms, furniture, silence, and disrupted, absurd dialogue. In his book, The Contradictory Reason, Jean-Jacques Wunenburger dwelt upon the importance of the three-sided connections as opposed to the two-sided ones. In a triangle we have a more complex dialectics, with an executioner and an escaping goat. Meaningfully, Michael Billington, in his massive study dedicated to Harold Pinter's works, underlined the terroristic approach of some characters when it comes to their relatives or friends. A cup of tea, a sandwich or a vase can overthrow the balance of power in a couple or a family. Pinter's world is an incessantly boiling war of lies and treachery.*

Key words*: scapegoat, silence, absurd, domination, treachery, objects.*

INTRODUCTION

There are two ways of staging Harold Pinter's plays: either a humorous, paradoxical one, or a gloomy, speechless and menacing one. Before becoming a playwright, Pinter had acted in many plays. Thus, although he despised theory, he understood the suggestive power of body language, moments of silence and objects on stage. The epithet *'Pinteresque'*, already included in *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, surprises exactly these qualities. Probably his new approach to the dramatic action, besides the important influence of Samuel Beckett's literature, was generated by the dramatist's multicultural origins.

The Pinters had roots between the polish Jews, then in Odessa, and, in this way, they grouped easier with Ashkenazic rather than Sephardic Jews. Owing to this, some of the recurrent themes in his plays are evacuation, loneliness, separation and violence. He even admits to a guiding line borrowed from William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, where civilization yields in front of instinctual impulse. Michael Billington, Pinter's biographer, noticed the will to power which pervades his plays: "Pinter's vision of human relationships as a quest for dominance and control in which the power balance is capable of reversal" (56). Most often than not, a woman will arbitrate the relation between two men. Gender power, which is above sexual power, originates in the predominance of the verb "to have" over the verb "to be". What matters is not love or, at least, physical attraction, but the acquisition of a new supporter in the strife to obtain a space and break a will.

THE MARK OF DOMINANCE: THE PARALLAX

This double opening of Pinter's plays results from his peculiar understanding of the absurd. Unlike Samuel Beckett, he doesn't dehumanize his characters by transforming them into some automata. The characters in the absurdist theatre are constantly waiting for a saviour, for a meaning-producer. With Beckett, for instance, the unfulfilled expectation creates, in turn, a desperate or a prostrated state of mind. While waiting for Godot: "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful" (Beckett 41). In the absence of a spiritual guide, people become robots emptied of human cerebrality. Abolishing rationality and imagination, *Molloy* sucks pebbles which are transferred from one pocket into another. Time is felt like an oppressor, life is nothing else than an exhausted loitering. Waiting is a persistent *activity* in Pinter's plays. To fill the temporal gap, the characters focus on objects, even fight over them. In *The Homecoming* the dialogue is assembled from prolonged monologues due to the fact that the brothers living under the same roof are fed up with each other. Maybe the most important phenomenon in many of his plays is the *parallax* an "apparent change in an object's position due to a change in the observer's position" (*Collins English Dictionary*). For instance, In *The*

Caretaker, Aston, who had been checked into a mental hospital and given electric shock therapy, before leaving in the search of his persecutor wants to finish a shed in the garden. The shed would repair his pride and bring back his strength. A glass of water in *The Homecoming* is a perfect pretext for sexual invitation. Sometimes objects are used as signifiers without a signified. They only act as bumpers which are to absorb the implicit clashes between protagonists. That is why the apparently inoffensive, even dull dialogues, are tense:

> *Max: There's an advertisement in the paper about flannel vests cut price. Navy surplus. I could do with a few of them.*
> *Pause*
> *I think I'll have a fag. Give me a fag.*
> *Pause*
> *I just asked you to give me a cigarette.*
> *Pause*
> *Look what I'm lumbered with.*
>
> [Pinter, 1997: 16]

CATEGORIES OF SILENCE AND DESPONDENCY

Although a Beckettian way of dealing with words is conspicuous, the British dramatist relies on the suspense obtained with the help of silent moments. In the *Postmodern Turn* Ihab Hassan described the literature emerging in the 1950s as a literature of silence (6). There are different types of silence. In Beckett's plays there is a lot of talk, most of which is gibberish. It is like a hurly-burly coming from a hurdy-gurdy. Some of his plays, taken as a whole, leave the impression of a talkative silence. The chatty mood and the exasperated waiting for something or somebody have the paradoxical effect of suggesting a chronic crisis.

The impending crisis is not Pinter's hallmark. Pinter is not fond of realism and finds repugnant whatever kind of orthodoxy. He praises ambiguity without favourising metaphysical drives. It is true what Ronald Knowles remarked about this kind of choral theatre – "we are drawn into the endless permutations of possibility" [in Raby, 2009: 79]; but these permutations never suppose the reification of man. The same author considers that "in *The Homecoming* all cultural values are deconstructed by the visceral, atavistic animality revealed by the reaction to Ruth" (Ibidem). What he misses is the fact that if in the beginning femininity is degraded by approaching it as an object that must be possessed, tamed, in the end Ruth has all the machos in the family kneeled at her feet. The context indeed is aggressive and filthy, but Max, the father, scolds one of his sons in the first act with a prophetic replica: "Go and find yourself a mother" [Pinter, 1997: 24]. This line will prove to be illuminating for the whole apparently despicable action. A son returns home after many years. In the meantime, he has become a doctor in philosophy. His father and brothers belong to the blue-collar classes, with all the incumbent mentalities and behaviours. For example, the father explains about his sons and stepsons: "Look what I'm lumbered with. One cast-iron bunch of crap after another. One flow of stinking pus after another." [Pinter, 1997: 27]. The confrontation between the new-comers and the owners of the house will not be an open one from the start. Only later on the blue-collars will try to defile the woman by treating her as a prostitute. A prostitute, in the end, is a lendable object destined to provoke physical pleasure. Besides, in this family, woman beating is a boasting opportunity. To make things more bizarre, Ruth, who admits having been "a photographic model for the body" [Pinter, 1997: 65], stirs the sexual impulses of her husband's brothers. She leaves the impression of surrendering to their instincts but, eventually, turns the table on them and from the status of a sexual object suddenly she evolves to the rank of a mother-queen. An implacable queen, because at the end of the play the in-laws are reduced to the role of her toys and subjects. This is not a really *deus*

ex machina ending. A possible explanation is that she only simulated submission, objectification. Lenny, one of the seduced brothers, complains to her strongly complacent husband: "What do you think of that, Ted? Your wife turns out to be a tease" [Pinter, 1997:74]. Ruth knows that, in order to manipulate people, one has to foster their illusions. The ridiculous team of men envisage a profitable future for them as a result of sexually exploiting their temptress. They even decide for the husband to be his own wife's pimp and attract professors from The United States back to his family's brothel. This "diseased imagination" [Pinter, 1997: 86], as Max unconsciously calls it, is broken when they get subjugated by Ruth's authority: "She'll use us, she'll make use of us, I can tell you! I can smell it!" [Pinter, 1997: 89]. As a matter of fact, the characters in Pinter's plays don't wait for a saviour, but for a victim who, finally, proves to be an executioner. The one waited for gets to be waited upon! As Michael Billington put it with a biographical hint, "Pinter's own secret planet turned out to be a cratered paradise destroyed by the serpent of sexuality and the desire for domination." [Billington, 2007: 26].

BLINDNESS AS SELF-DELUSION

In a certain way, with Pinter happens as with Mircea Nedelciu, who disputed the natural, not to say basic functionality of the objects in his novel *The Field Raspberry*: "the unmatched beauty acquired by an object originally deprived of whatever aesthetic qualities, but that knows now to stay within its functional frontiers whatever may intervene around it"[1] (translation mine) [Nedelciu,1999:13]. In *Tea Party*, for instance, the walls of the setting are papered with Japanese silk. The interior, thus, creates a cosy and exotic atmosphere. Several lines below, we understand that the lavishly decorated walls belong to an office suite. All of a sudden their beauty becomes sheer queerness. The office looks more like an alcove where the boss can indulge in complementing his newly-employed secretary. Pinter's irony, highlighted by the objects placed on the stage, is explosive. Disson, the courting boss, is described, on the occasion of his marriage, like living in conformity with "austere standards of integrity" [Pinter, 1997: 100]. This fame helps the manager to take himself for a strong, efficient man. He pretends to be free of the need to be loved. Like with the teacher in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, he relies only on facts. But his utilitarianism is a fake. Everything around him must reassure his manly attributes. The above-mentioned austerity is compensated for by the carefully dusting of a tiny yacht placed on a mantelpiece. Disson craves for power, money and pleasure. When his second wife – who brings up his two boys from a previous marriage – discovers him kneeled on the floor of his office with a scarf tied over his eyes and waiting for his secretary to give him a massage, he cuts short any explanation: "How dare you speak to me like that? I'll knock your teeth out!" [Pinter, 1997: 119]. Next time when they resume the office-game, he will find out that the chiffon stinks. This could be said about all his life. The chiffon blinds him objectively. In time, blindness becomes voluntary. Although Disson doesn't recognize, his fits of blindness protect him from the dissipated milieu of his family. He is not sure anymore whether his brother-in-law is the real brother of his wife, he cannot rely on his secretary's faithfulness to him.

THE LANGUAGE OF OBJECTS

A key-object in the play is the beautifully wrought mirror Disson installs in his house. He takes the object inside only when he has symptoms of transitory blindness. Thus, the mirroring effect is annihilated. Disson manages to see only what he wants; and he wants to admit only happiness and success in his life. Even the function of the mirror is twisted. Disson belies the lies in his life of a would-be model-father and irreproachable husband and employer. Pinter read Eugene Ionesco's *The New Tenant* at the beginning of his playwright career. The Romanian-French dramatist used objects to form sepulchral clusters. Basically, the new tenant hires two porters to carry an infinite range of objects. The result is a suffocation of the traffic in the whole country. If Ionesco favours hyperbole

and metamorphosis, Pinter prefers the litotes and the personification of his characters' obsessions. Leo Schneiderman noticed: "His characters engage in repetition and incantation, always with the same spare vocabulary, until the audience begins to see beyond the stage and to literally visualize the character's obsessions, which are localized in rooms, buses and other places experienced in the past" [Schneiderman, 1988: 187]. The objects are only an interface for a repressed communication. But every character knows how to look through this interface.

But, as Mircea Nedelciu cleverly noticed, we live in "this country in which objects look different, have been changing their roles, their voice and function"[2] (translation mine) [Nedelciu, 1999: 47]. In *Tea Party* the objects are sometimes only heard. In their turn, they send to a humanity who prefers to communicate through the language of inanimate existences. In addition, the language of objects works like a refrain, being resumed periodically. For instance, the sentence „soft clicks of the door opening and closing, muffled steps, an odd cough, slight rattle of teacups, whispers" [Pinter, 1997: 134] intervenes repeatedly in the otherwise dull dialogue. The sounds mingle with human voices and the result, paradoxically, is a vibrating silence. Actually, objects transmit more information than words. Beckett too resorted to this strategy from time to time; with him such a device enhanced desolation: „Beckett leaves us with a world so depleted of life that nothing short of a cataclysm can renew it; we are close to the absence of the outrage" [Hassan, 1987: 6]. For Ihab Hassan the outrage was the symbol of apocalypse. If Beckett and Pinter herald a lurching apocalypse, Eugène Ionesco simply triggers it, although his fictional world is, or seems to be, more relaxed. He does this sometimes in spite of his characters' obstinacy not to recognize the catastrophe. In *Rhinoceros* Bérenger, the Logician, and Botard reject the sheer evidence; they refuse to accept what they have just seen or simply try to belittle the weird apparition of an African or Asian animal on the streets of the city. Silence, with Pinter, functions as a respite for reorganizing and reviving communication. The result is disappointing, as the antiheroes don't admit to any mistake in the past informing their present. In these conditions, silence is only a simulacrum, pretending to shelter some important meanings. In the end, it works as a deluding calibration: „literature strives for silence by accepting chance and improvisation; its principle becomes indeterminacy." [Hassan, 1987: 10].

THE INTELLECTUALS AND THE ARCH-OBJECT

Apart from Beckett's characters, Pinter's are very often failed intellectuals. The cultural background doesn't shield them from the basic necessities. In *The Basement*, Stott and Law evoke the glorious mental feats of the past:

> *Stott: Remember those nights reading Proust? Remember them?*
> *Law (to Jane): In the original.*
> *Stott: The bouts with Laforgue? What bouts.*
>
> [Pinter, 1997: 154]

But this is not culture – it is only information. In the end, the three friends sharing a cosy home undermine each other by forming unstable and aggressive dyads. The one not summoned in the dyad will play the role of the scapegoat. The fight for supremacy consists in moving objects in the house or simply removing them. Thus, the taste is an excuse for bullying the other two protagonists.

Pinter's "settings belong to the minimalist tradition, but their effect is to evoke compelling images of loneliness, conflict, and insecurity. The basic element in Pinter's stage settings is a room that invariably suggests ominous possibilities of desolation and trauma" [Schneiderman, 1988: 186]. Thus, the room is the arch-object in his plays. The secluded space offers the protection of a mother's womb but, in the same time, when there is more than one individual inside it, it aggravates dire instincts and aggressive paranoia.

In *The Birthday Party* Stanley, the gloomy ex-pianist is so jealous of his small room in a shabby boarding house that he doesn't tolerate any intruder. Aggression and politeness are signs of fragility in this world. Assailants like Goldberg and Stott instinctively feel the tragic flaw and snip at it. Better is to keep silent and study your adversary: „silence develops as the metaphor of a new attitude that literature has chosen to adopt towards itself. This attitude puts to question the peculiar power, the ancient excellence of literary discourse – and challenges the assumptions of our civilisation" [Hassan, 1987: 11]. Of course, the enemies of silence and cosy seclusion could be identified with the characters' subconscious fears and hopes. Especially that most of them are fragile or perverted. But these mini-dramas are imbued with "the yearning for some lost Eden as a refuge from the uncertain, miasmic present" [Billington: 2007: 82]. It results that Pinter's dramaturgy turns round two typologies: the strong and perverted on the one hand, the weak and suspicious on the other hand. The representatives of both categories are sensitive to a past golden age. This is their only similitude, but as their happy memories don't belong together, communication is impossible.

THE BLURRED MEMORY OF THE RECENT HISTORY

Pinter's plays are an analysis of the need to communicate no matter what. This irrepressible drive constituted the core of Beckett's *Happy Days*, where a woman buried up to her neck in the desert talks incessantly. The absurdist vein is conspicuous at Pinter when he assembles dialogues that function like monologues. In *Landscape* people accomplish a certain recitative without paying attention to others' words:

> Duff:
> I should have had some bread with me. I could have fed the birds.
> Beth:
> Sand on his arms.
> Duff:
> They were hopping about. Making a racket.
> Beth:
> I lay down by him, not touching.
>
> [Pinter, 1997: 169]

Famous for his musical silences and repetitions, Pinter hardly ever writes symphonic plays. The quiet intervals recharge energetically the exhausting conversations but, simultaneously, enhance the imprecise threat. Even when they keep quiet, the protagonists attack each other or get ready to strike back if necessary. Mutual understanding and confidence are illusions. Because of the high-pitched tension, nobody pays real attention to the external present-day events. The ensuing effect is an all-embracing alienation. In *Landscape* beings are taken for objects and then degraded:

> Beth: I've watched other people. I've seen them.
> Pause
>
> All the cars zooming by. Men with girls at their sides. Bouncing up and down. They're dolls. They squeak.
>
> Pause
> All the people were squeaking in the hotel bar. The girls had long hair. They were smiling.
>
> [Pinter, 1997: 182]

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

Because of this abstract-mindedness, nobody is able to master their fresh memories. It is only the remote, happy times that are embedded in their high-definition memory. In *Silence* Ellen admits that: "often it is only half things I remember, half things, beginnings of things." [Pinter, 1997: 204]. Having no common remembrances, the characters communicate in instalments. In between these instalments there is silence or daydreaming. The former is toxic most often than not, as Michael Billington perceives it: "Silence as a weapon of control" [Billington, 2007: 57]. *Silence*, staged in 1969, is a series of crossed monologues delivered by the three-person cast: Ellen, Rumsey and Bates. Such talkative "silences" are made possible with the help of "repetition and incantation" [Schneiderman, 1998: 187]. The dialogue is a failure because the characters expect nothing more from the present; they "evoke the past by recalling visual images of idealized harmony and security for regressive or compensatory reasons" [Schneiderman, 1998: 188]. This defeatist attitude is characterized by Leo Schneiderman as a "pattern of oedipal-defeat-without-a-battle" [Schneiderman, 1998: 193]. The same researcher considers that Pinter belongs "to the fraternity of Beckett and Ionesco, whose male protagonists are beyond the reach of maternal love, romantic passion, or even human charity. These antiheroes are defeated from the start" [Schneiderman, 1998: 194]. Such an utterance should be taken *cum grano salis*. At first sight, the differences between Beckett and Pinter are less conspicuous than the resemblances. However, one thing is sure: Pinter's characters are punished for whatever slippage into sentimentality. The victim can become torturer if offered the chance. Happiness is localised into an intangible past. If Beckett staged the "failure of the language to mirror 'reality' ", as Marjorie Perloff considers (in Bloom 18), Pinter staged the failure of confronting reality and the twisted functionality of objects. Stanley in *The Birthday Party* is offered a drum, although he pretends to have been a pianist. The drum is a military, harsh instrument. It commands discipline, strictness and aggression. Objects in Harold Pinter's theatre are an opportunity to transmit ideas, desires or threats. The victim is the one who fails to correctly interpret the language of objects and of details. There is an unexploited ore in terms of the theatre of violence which should be exploited in the future.

Notes:

[1] "inegalabila frumuseţe pe care o capătă un *obiect* lipsit, la origine, de orice calităţi estetice, dar care ştie să rămână în limitele lui funcţionale orice s-ar întâmpla în juru-i" (*Zmeura de câmpie*).

[2] "acest secol în care obiectele arată altfel, sunt în schimbare de rol, voce și funcție" (Nedelciu 47).

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