

**PINTER'S ANGRY SHOUT:
AN ANALYSIS OF *THE HOTHOUSE*
AND *ONE FOR THE ROAD***

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Harold Pinter is considered by the critics as the master of hidden menace, dark mystery, lethal aggressiveness, the unreliable statement, the surrealistic touch, the emptiness of ordinary language. His world is that of dream, nightmare, wish-fulfilment. Completely alone, his characters face, the oppressing plight of 'being'. Hence his detractors reproach him for dealing only with metaphors, and forgetting the issues that really concern modern man, especially politics.

Given this situation, Pinter's first play to be produced in the eighties — *The Hothouse* (1958)— and his latest piece of work — *One for the Road* (1984)— come as a surprise. Here, Pinter has rejected —partly, in the first play, and completely in the latter— the veiled accusation, the mysterious hint, the cryptic statement, the obscure remark, to overtly point an accusing finger at totalitarianism, the abuse of power and torture. Pinter's archetypal 'quiet shouts' and 'noisy silences' have now become a full, forthright cry against man's destruction of other human beings because of different political beliefs. The indictment, as will be seen, resounds with powerful and true force in both the resurrected play and the new one.

To the published text of *The Hothouse* (1958) Harold Pinter added the following note:

"I wrote *The Hothouse* in the winter of 1958. I put it aside for further deliberation and made no attempt to have it produced at the time. I then went to write *The Caretaker*. In 1979 I re-read *The Hothouse* and decided it was worth presenting on the stage. I made a few cuts but no changes."¹

This is the reason why in spite of the fact that it belongs to an earlier period it was only performed for the first time on 1 May 1980, at the Hampstead Theatre Club. Pinter himself directed the play, thus breaking the promise he had made in 1964 —after an unsatisfactory production of *The Birthday Party*—, when he stated: "I am not going to direct any of my plays again."²

One might wonder why Pinter first completely discarded *The Hothouse*, and why, twelve years later, he thought it was worth resurrecting. We cannot give a definitive answer about the latter issue, but, in order to understand his unwillingness to produce it in 1958 we could recall the opinion expressed in an interview with Lawrence M. Bensky:

"I have occasionally out of irritation thought about writing a play with a satirical point. I once did actually, a play that no one knows about. A full-length play written after *The Caretaker*.³ Wrote the whole damn thing in three drafts. It was called *The Hothouse* and was about an institution in which patients were kept. [...] 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. So I discarded the play at once. The characters were purely cardboard. I was intentionally —for the one 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 Golderg in *The Birthday Party*, I care for."⁴

Even if accepting to a certain extent Bernard Dukore's negative comment about this unwise change of mind —"Unfortunately younger Pinter's critical appraisal of the play seems more valid than that of older Pinter"⁵— I would rather agree with Ned Chaillet —"It is not I confess, first rate Pinter, but it is lively, intriguing and brilliantly staged"⁶ and with B.A. Young— "It seems to me mostly doodling, even though it is doodling of high quality"⁷, as I was genuinely interested and surprised when I saw the first production of *The Hothouse*. The interest was due to the fact that the play meant a new encounter with Pinter's most representative features, in an early mould, and thus it provided an excellent gauge to measure the development of the writer; the surprise sprung from the fact that the satirical and surrealist elements in it worked so well that, at times, it became an astonishingly farcical and incongruously comic piece.

The setting engulfs us at once within Pinter's uneasy world. The hothouse of the title is a governmental institution part rest home, part mental hospital, and part prison in which patients are kept locked up following strict rules. The first striking feature in this microcosm is the realization of its being clearly divided according to rank and worth. Roote, the director —always addressed as 'sir', according to his wishes, and 'Colonel', against his explicit command— is an autocratic figure who controls his organization with a firm hand. However, we soon realize that he, like Hirst in *No Man's Land*, "maintains his authority only precariously; he tyrannizes, worries about failing strength, [...] and is paranoid that the patients do not like him and that the staff are 'taking the piss'"⁸ The real boss in the institution, as becomes obvious only after a few exchanges, is Roote's second in command: Gibbs.

The play opens with Roote being most unpleasantly shocked by two

disturbing pieces of information —one of the patients has given birth to a baby-boy, and another one has died— he immediately asks Gibbs to find out who the new baby's father is, and punish him severely. Gibbs —“a living dead-pan” according to J. Fenton—,⁹ who surpasses Roote in cunning and devious ways, seeks Miss Cutts' help, one of his assistants and both Roote and Gibbs's lover, and together with this most disturbing character, they submit Lamb, the least important member of the staff, to an interrogation-torture session which ends with their claiming he has pleaded guilty. As might be expected, the hierarchical system operating in the hothouse, all these elements of repression —both of patients and understaff— are demolished by the victims in the final section of the play; as Gibbs —surprisingly the only survivor, together with victimised Lamb— pointedly remarks to the authorities, the whole staff were slaughtered by the patients but they did not touch the understaff.

The feeling that permeates *The Hothouse* is that of the fear engendered by this repressive system, and Pinter, as always, has increased this terror by leaving most of our questions unanswered; the mystifying quality of some of the exchanges in the play leaves us utterly baffled about the exact import of what we are being told. We wonder about the reasons why patients are locked in there, what kind of treatment they undergo, how long they have been there, what their real physical conditions are —Mr Lush's flowery, baroque, and by the end ludicrous, account to patient 6457's mother (pp. 55-57) betrays its spurious nature in its overflowing rhetoric.

However Pinter's indicators do signal at the real situation there. For the staff the patients are nothing but mere numbers. The first scene in which 'the Colonel' keeps on making mistakes about the patients' numbers, and in which the inmates have to be described to him —in contradictory terms, as could be expected in Pinter— summarizes the whole situation and also allows the author the opportunity to comment on the irrationality of a system that in spite of the fact of recognizing its ineffectiveness cannot supersede it —*Roote*: “You know damn well we can't. That was one of the rules of procedure laid down by the original constitution. The patients are to be given numbers and called by those numbers. And that's how it's got to remain.” (p. 22.)

The relations between the different members of the staff suggest a web of hatred and fear. Roote will be murdered by the patients at the end of the play, but from the very beginning Pinter has hinted at his premonition of a bloody death. “Don't stand so close to me. You're right on top of me. What's the matter with you?” (p. 17) he shouts at Gibbs, and again, towards the end: “What the bloody hell do you think you're doing, creeping up behind me like a snake! Eh? You frightened the life out of me.” (p. 129).¹⁰ In Roote's dealings with both Gibbs and Lush we notice a boastful repetition of the undeniable fact that he is the boss and, therefore, has to be respected, addressed as 'sir', and feared —“Don't think I can't squash you on a plate as easy as I look at you” (p. 84).

However his subordinates' attitude, even if externally they seem to yield to

his dictatorship, betrays the seeds of inconformity and insubordination. Gibbs's too florid, rhetorical register possesses intoxicating effects but sometimes, even through the thick clouds of sycophancy, his ambition and lust for power flash dangerously. Miss Cutts uses the 'Colonel's' sexual passion to satisfy her own, and cunningly underscores her own negative opinion about his pretended fear of "not being masculine enough" or "too feminine", while, at the same time, she comforts his ego lavishly praising his "magnetic, bold, brutal, demanding desire". Lush is beaten by Roote, when he saucily questions him —"You are a delegate, are you?... on whose authority? with what power are you entrusted? by whom were you appointed? Of 'what' are you the delegate?" (p. 132)— but his rapport with the 'Colonel' —as he insists on addressing him, in spite of his expressed dislike— is utterly disturbing. The familiarity of his remarks, relentless and reckless questioning, his contradictions, observations —even his daring to play the practical joke of the exploding cigar on him— recall the figure of the subordinate who keeps a strong hold over his master because of his knowing about the latter's weaknesses and crimes. Thus, for example, we wonder what he is really hinting at when sycophantly he asserts: "But surely you achieved results with one patient very recently. What was the number? 6459, I think? (p. 89); the fact that he is referring to the patient who conceived a baby of an unknown father, and Roote's reaction —he throws his whisky in Lush's face— indicates that maybe he knows more about his boss than he admits.

Lamb's relation with the rest of the staff constitutes the best gauge to measure the strict hierarchy ruling in the institution. Being the least important person in the complex organization, he is ignored by the rest of the staff, and only when he dares to address his superior Gibbs, informing him of his schemes to improve the 'hothouse', will they notice him. In *The Birthday Party* Stanley was the subject of a disturbing mental torture scene, in *The Hothouse* Lamb is the willing and co-operative victim of a cruel interrogation session. Led by his desire to please, he most readily collaborates in the experiment that will leave him baffled by the questions, in a catatonic state because of the electric discharges,¹¹ and lumbered with the accusation of being the father of patient n.^o 6459's baby. Once more the author has proved how a cunning mastery of words can reduce the opponent to a submissive state —Lamb does not-protest at the treatment, does not even recognize it as torture, and, in his numbed consciousness at the evil his superiors can inflict on him, he only sheepishly, and still eagerly, asks when being tortured: "Any more questions? I am ready for another question" (p. 77). In this instance, after the previous cataract of words, silence is the only answer.

As in all his other plays, here Pinter shows the dominance of one individual over another by a particular use of language and silence. In some instances this superiority is achieved by recurring to a convoluted and elaborate register that alienates both speakers and furnishes its user with a verbal weapon that gives him psychological power over his confused interlocutor —Gibbs is the

best exponent of this feature. In other cases the battle is won by the accumulatively disturbing effect of significant repetitions, denials, contradictions, or even by simply avoiding the main subject and talking about banalities.¹² In contrast to this torrent of words, Pinter sets his silences, pauses and hesitations pregnant with significant meaning.

After more than twenty years of listening to Pinter's silences the audience has learnt how important they are, and will try to interpret them; thus, for example, when Roote tells Gibbs about the way he reached his high position he states: "I didn't bribe anyone to get where I am. I worked my way up. When my predecessor..." —here he falters for a few crucial seconds before proceeding—"... retired..." —again a slight hesitation, to end—"I was invited to take over his position" (p. 20). We know Pinter wants us to understand these inner fights looking for the right word, bearing in mind Freud's theories on this subject and conclude accordingly. Critics have divided Pinter's silences in two different categories —not according to their final effect, which in both cases is that of disturbing and overpowering the interlocutor, or avoiding to speak about one's real concern— but by analysing their different techniques. In the first instance the silence will only be the absence of any sound, in the second it will be a flood of words. When Roote delivers his much delayed Christmas speech, the institution is submerged in his cloying rhetoric; all the clichés, commonplaces, platitudes, readymade expressions, empty sentences usually dug up at this festivity are uttered by the frightened boss, whose fears of being killed have relentlessly been growing. One has the feeling that the marked out prey is fighting with destiny, trying to cheat some more seconds of life by filling the silence of awaiting death with the nonsense of his empty words. Obviously a few moments later his premonition comes true.

The same technique is effectively used by Gibbs and Miss Cutts in the interrogation scene. Both torturers submit their willing victim —appropriately named Lamb— to an extraneous examination. To some initial character-defining questions: "Would you say you were an excitable person? [...] moody [...] sociable?" they proceed to alternatively attack him from both sides with a quick succession of stimulæ: "After your days's work, do you ever feel tired, edgy? - Fretty? - Irritable? - At a loose end? - Morose? - Frustrated? - Morbid? - Unable to concentrate? - Unable to sleep?..." (pp. 70-72), and when he finally succeeds in edging in an answer —"Well, it is difficult to say, really"— they show him, not its inadequacy, but who has all the power, by torturing him with an electric discharge. The interrogation then becomes both a grotesque and absurd game —"Are you virgo intacta?" Cutts asks him three times and, after an affirmative answer, inquires further: "Have you always been virgo intacta?"—, and a non-realistic examination— with drumbeats, cymbalbangs, a trombone chord, and a bass note drowning the second half of the question—because the point of who holds the power has already been clearly made, his answers bear no meaning. He is at their mercy. The rest is silence.

Pinter's voice against a totalitarian institution sounds clear and definite.

His finger points accusingly at the vice, ambition, and denigration that hibernate in institutions like this one, and shows how one day an internal cause can make the corruption fester actively, till it explodes in a manifestation of violence and hatred. The lethal content of the hothouse has finally broken its glassy boundaries.

If *The Hothouse* was discarded in 1958 by its author because it made an explicit point of the fact that "these were nasty people and I disapproved of them"¹³ and in 1980, "after a few cuts but no changes", it was staged for the first time, we might conclude that between those two dates something had changed in Pinter's attitude as to presenting a play with a clear political meaning. One could presume that Pinter had finally decided to use his power of commanding a certain response to his plays, and openly attack any abuse of authority. This impression has been ratified by his latest play to date *One for the Road* (1984) in which the metaphors¹⁴ of his early plays have given way to real situations and cold facts.

One for the Road is the author's angry and powerful answer to a concrete situation which modern man has to face everyday: political torture. As Pinter himself explains in his conversation with Nicholas Hern, included in the published text of the play, this piece was prompted by the fact that "In Turkey [...] members of the Turkish Peace Association [...] were imprisoned for eight years' hard labour for being members of that Association."¹⁵ After learning more about the Turkish prisons, their physical conditions, the 'crimes' committed by the prisoners, the tortures inflicted on them, and being extremely angered by the callous response two Turkish girls gave him —"Oh, well it was probably deserved." (p. 13), Pinter wrote his accusation against torture in the world.

The play, which was staged at the Lyric Theatre Studio, Hammersmith on 13 March 1984, transmitted by BBC-TV on July 1985, and subsequently presented as part of the triple-bill *Other Places*¹⁶ at the Duchess Theatre, London, on 7 March 1985, was an immediate success. It has also been staged in many other countries such as the States (April 1984), Holland (November 1984), Japan (December 1984), Hungary (January 1985), Canada (January 1985), New Zealand (January 1985), Australia (February 1985), and South Africa (July 1985). The cause of this worldwide success is no other than the importance and current interest of its subject matter.

In *One for the Road* the threat is not an obscure and unknown danger that lurks in the dark ready to pounce on its prey, as in most of Pinter's other plays. In this instance we know that the victims are suffering for some very real and concrete reasons. We see that in their horrified eyes, in their bruised bodies, in their torn clothe. We are sure that the man has been unmercifully tortured, the woman raped again and again, and their son killed. Only one aspect, concerning Pinter's proverbial obscurity, links this new play to the previous ones: the fact that it does not state either the country or the offence the prisoners have committed. Michael Billington was one of the critics who had a reservation on

this point, but, as the author explains, he did that on purpose. According to Pinter even the names he gave his characters —Nicolas, Victor, Gila and Nicky— were chosen carefully —“multi-national names”— in order not to connect the horrors in the play to only one country in particular.¹⁷ As to the reserve, on the part of the critics, that their offence was never named, Pinter's answer was outright: “Well, I must say that I think that's bloody ridiculous, because these people, generally speaking —in any country, whether it's Czechoslovakia or whether it's Chile— ninety per cent of them have committed no offence.” (p. 16).

The play consists of four short, sharp scenes in which soft, unctuous, well-mannered Nicolas interviews in turn a man called Victor, his wife Gila, and their son Nicky; in the last scene Nicolas talks again to Victor. With great economy of means, without any superfluous elements, and in a tight, hard, but controlled way —having discarded the long bypasses of *The Hothouse*— Pinter depicts a political system in which men drag other men down into such an abyss of humiliation, suffering and horror that the victims can only plead: “Kill me” (pp. 51 and 52). The audience does not witness any of the stated facts (i.e. torture, rape and murder) but they are unmistakably evident —only the details of their actual performance are left to our imaginations. Nicolas is not the physical kind of torturer, he leaves that to others with coarser ways. He is the gentle and suave interrogator who from the very beginning states clearly “You're a civilized man. So am I.” (p. 31) and then proceeds to politely offer his victim a seat. However, we are already quite familiar with Pinter's usual arrangement in an interrogation scene, and how the torturer is free to walk around, or hover threateningly on the defenceless being in front of him.

Nicolas does not physically attack Victor, on the contrary, he chats with him most animatedly, laughs, drinks, and asks him kindly about his wife and boy.¹⁸ As always in Pinter, language has to be interpreted on two different levels, the superficial one that may sound harmless, or even friendly, and the second and deeper one in which every single word acquires its full meaning. In the case of *One for the Road* this feature is heightened with an even more elaborate technique.

The first interview between Nicolas and Victor is based on a mixture of two different modes of using language in order to exert oppression on a prisoner. Most of the time the interrogator uses the vacuous language of a demagogue, showing the listener the goodness of the system he represents —“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 owns this country announced to the country: We are all patriots, we are one, we all share a common heritage.” (p. 50); he extols the righteousness of his words, the advisability of loving and respecting him, the convenience of following his advice, and, as Ronald Hayman writes “one of the most disturbing elements in the play is Nicolas's propensity to phony patriotism and canting religiosity.”¹⁹ He laces his gentle observations with much laughter and drinking, and only now and then the smooth, velvety

voice jars with a discordant note that changes the general chatter into a personal stab, even if the tone persistently remains aloof and uncommitted. It may be a symbolic remark about who is allowed to move his fingers there, a complimentary statement about his wife —“What a good-looking woman your wife is.” (p. 37)—, a friendly enquiry —“Do you drink whisky?” (p. 41)—, a concerned question —“Is your son all right?” (p. 41)—, and the ordeal of his position, and that of his family, pierces the prisoner to the core, even if, as we have noticed, no reference has been made to any means of repression.

In the case of the interrogation of the boy, the questioner limits himself to simple, straightforward questions, the kind any child might grasp immediately, which is the case here. There is, however, one question the son cannot answer, even if Nicolas asks it twice, “why do you like your mummy and daddy?” (pp; 57 and 58), and, as always, the unspoken words are those that carry the author’s message.

The third interrogation scene concentrates on a woman who to the questioner holds no interest as an individual, but only as the wife of the man they are trying to destroy. Physically and psychologically undone by the sexual attacks to which she has been subjected —she cannot even count or recall how many times she has been raped— now she has to suffer yet another attack on her mind. Nicolas quick-fires his questions at her. A simple, straightforward inquiry— “When did you meet your husband?”— is followed by a disturbing one —“Why?”—, which, being repeated again and again, confuses her and makes her change her answers, looking frantically for the one he wants to hear at that particular moment. The stupidity and irrationality of this situation is dramatically emphasized when, after disturbing and degrading her with his questions, torturing her with the accusation of having taught her son “to spit, to strike at soldiers of honour, soldiers of God.” (p. 71), he dismisses her with the cruellest of remarks: “You’re of no interest to me. I might even let you out of here, in due course. But I should think you might entertain us all a little more before you go.” (p. 74).

The play ends with Victor being released by Nicolas. Silenced for ever — “my tongue” he mumbles— Victor is made to drink —“one for the road”—, and then set free with good parting words, and the hope of meeting again. No charges are brought against him, no sentences, no ill feelings. He is free to leave. His wife “will be joining [him] in about a week. If she feels up to it.” And when Victor asks about his son he is given a reassuring answer: “Oh, don’t worry about him. He was a little prick.” (p. 79.)²⁰

Pinter’s point has been clearly stated, the message powerfully conveyed. Without a single, soothing concession to laughter —as in the case of other plays—, and in a much subtler way than either Barker, Brenton or Bond, the bitter and disturbing truth engulfs us, filling “the mind with despair, the eyes with tears, the stomach with sickness, the heart with dread”.²¹ And at the end, when pondering about the play, we become aware of another disquieting fact the author has also pointed at: the natural sadistic qualities in some persons.

At a given moment in the play Victor is asked: "Who would you prefer to be? You or me?" (p. 50), and, as the author affirms, many among us when confronted with this question would be made to face the fearful recognition of choosing to be the interrogator "because think of the joy of having absolute power". (p. 17.)

This is Pinter's latest play to date. From now on his future as a playwright is uncertain, not only because, as he says, he is not interested in himself as a playwright,²² but because of the difficulty of writing a real, authentic play about the two themes that currently interest him: torture and the nuclear threat. This play is his indictment of the former subject, while a sketch about the nuclear bureaucracy²³ is his accusing finger at the latter, but, hopefully, other plays will be written to deal with all Pinteresque themes yet again.

Notes:

1. Harold Pinter, *The Hothouse*, (London: Methuen, 1980), introduction. All further page references will be cited in my text.
2. Peter Hall, "Directing Pinter", *Theatre Quarterly*, N.º 4 (November 1974-January 1975), p. 14.
3. In a very Pinteresque manner the author contradicts himself about the exact date of composition — 'before' *The Caretaker*, in the prefatory note, 'after' in the interview; probably the correct decision would be to accept the date stated in his careful note and place it between *The Birthday Party* (28 April 1958) and *The Caretaker* (27 April 1960); as *The Hothouse* is definitely an early piece that needs, even more, cutting and pruning to make it as rotund a play as *The Caretaker*.
4. Lawrence M. Bensky, "Harold Pinter: An Interview", *The Paris Review*, 1) (Fall 1966) pp. 13-37, later reprinted in *Pinter: A Collection of Critical Essays in Twentieth Century Essays* (New Jersey: Englewood Cliffs, 1972), pp. 19-33 - quoted by Rudolf Stamm, "*The Hothouse*: Harold Pinter's tribute to Anger", *English Studies*, Vol. 62 (1981), p. 290.

5. See Bernard Dukore, *Harold Pinter* (London: McMillan, 1982), p. 210.
6. Ned Chaillet, *Times*, 2.5.80.
7. B.A. Young - *Financial Times*, 3.5.80.
8. See Blake Morrison, *Times Literary Supplement*, 9.5.80.
9. James Fenton, *You Were Marvellous - Theatre Reviews for the Sunday Times* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1983), p. 80.
10. Both these quotes undoubtedly call to mind Hamm's words—"Don't stay there you give me the shivers"—when addressing Clov in *Endgame*. Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (London: Faber & Faber, 1958), p. 26.
11. The shock-treatment will be used again, and for the same reasons (i.e. to cure his subversive tendencies), on Aston in Pinter's next play *The Caretaker*.
12. Probably the famous first scene in *The Birthday Party*, with Meg preparing her husband's and Stanley's breakfast, is one of the best examples to illustrate this Pinteresque feature.
13. See quote No. 4.
14. I agree with the author when he insists his early plays also had a great political content often misunderstood by the critics, as in the case of Beckett. In the interview that prefaces the play, Pinter explains quite clearly his own political beliefs - we learn, for example, that in 1948 he was a conscientious objector, had two tribunals and two trials, and was under arrest—, and those subliminally present in his plays, that have been overlooked by the critics.
15. Harold Pinter, *One for the Road*, (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 12. All further pages references will be cited in my text.
16. It should be noted that in this instance the triple-bill *Other Places* included *A Kind of Alaska*, *Victoria Station* and *One for the Road*, whereas in October 1982 the plays it comprised were *Family Voices*, *A Kind of Alaska* and *Victoria Station*.
17. As Ch. Edwards states "this might equally be an episode from the Inquisition, from Stalin's Russia or from Videla's Argentina." *Spectator*, 23.3.85.
18. Alan Bates, in that first production was "alternatively jokey, scabrous, scatological and pious." Michael Billington, *Guardian*, 16.3.84.
19. Ronald Hayman, *Plays*, Vol. 2. N.º 3 (April 85), p. 28.
20. As in the plays by Beckett, I do not think that more horror could be expressed with less: just a change of tense.
21. Giles Gordon, *Spectator*, 24.3.84.
22. This is what was told John Tussaud when he was interviewed Pinter in the programme —'Saturday Review' - BBC2 - September 1985.
23. He mentions this sketch in his interview with Nicholas Hern —see the published text of *One for the Road*— but does not give any further information about it.