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'The Dead are Still Looking at Us': Harold Pinter, the Spectral Face, and Human Rights

In his essays and speeches, Harold Pinter addressed issues that are central in political and philosophical debates: national identity and the other, the ethics of responsibility, the relational nature of human rights, the politics of death. Discussing his treatment of these issues, Maria Germanou sees Pinter as a Foucauldian intellectual engaged in the politics of truth, and argues that in these texts the postmodern writer enables the political activist. Pinter subjects to scrutiny naturalized political rhetoric, discloses the affinity between meaning and power, and challenges the legitimacy of established hierarchies and their practices. His ultimate purpose is to restore ethics to politics. To this end, he places responsibility for the other at the core of his problematic in ways similar to Emmanuel Levinas, and invites western democracies to redefine 'humanity' and the 'international' community by taking into consideration accountability for those allowed to die in the name of an alleged justice. Maria Germanou is Professor in English Drama at the University of Athens. She has published in *Modern Drama*, *Comparative Drama*, *Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, *Gramma*, and elsewhere. Since 2008 she has been co-editor of *Synthesis*, an e-journal of comparative literature.

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*The dead are still looking at us, steadily,
waiting for us to acknowledge
our part in their murder.* Harold Pinter

SINCE THE 1980s, when he decided to make his political views public in a series of letters to newspapers, TV appearances, and speeches (including his Nobel Lecture in 2005), Harold Pinter had been acting as a speaker for human rights. In this regard, he argued repeatedly against the non-democratic and aggressive policies that the USA, England, and international organizations such as NATO and the IMF had adopted in addressing situations in various countries around the world. The publication by Faber and Faber of many of these essays in *Various Voices* in 1998 and of his political poems and the Turin speech in *War* in 2003 consolidated the importance that both the playwright and his publishers attribute to Pinter's political vocation in the overall appreciation of his work.

The critics responded to the importance that he seemed to ascribe to his political

views as registered in his essays, and often took them into consideration when discussing his plays, especially his overtly political plays – *One for the Road* (1984), *Mountain Language* (1988), *The New World Order* (1991), and *Party Time* (1991). Since they belong to different genres, however, plays and essays speak in different ways. The impetus of the essays is reduced when they are viewed as incidental to the plays and are used solely to confirm a play's ideas. Thus, I think the essays deserve an analysis on their own if we are to broaden our perspective on Pinter's state of mind as both an intellectual and a citizen actively concerned with important aspects of contemporary reality in troublesome times. In discussing some of Pinter's essays, I will focus on his comments regarding first the language of politicians, and second the imperative that ethics becomes a determining factor defining politics.

Profoundly aware of the power of language to construct and wear down realities, Pinter's condemnation of undemocratic

policies is carried out through a rethinking of political rhetoric he considers 'dead but immensely successful'.¹ In this respect, rather than resorting to yet another reading that prioritizes his provocative style over his politics – as was the case in many of the responses to these texts² – the focus in this article will be on Pinter's perception of the workings of language put to political use. As regards the second issue, these essays constitute an invaluable depository of the playwright's ideas regarding what I consider to be his attempt to restore ethics to politics.

Pinter is concerned with the responsibility that we – as members of the international community – should have in order to challenge notions of self-centred national identity and to commit ourselves to alleviating the suffering of members of other groups. At the core of Pinter's problematic lies his defence of life as an absolute value and an understanding of death that makes political sense. As the epigraph to this essay suggests, we are accountable to and driven by the spectral faces of our ancestors. This problematic brings together historical memory and responsibility, two important concepts in Pinter's perception of political agency, as epitomized in his non-dramatic texts.

The Writer, the Intellectual, and the Citizen

Before embarking on a discussion of political rhetoric and ethics, it would be useful to contextualize this discussion by briefly exploring what is involved in Pinter's declaration regarding his fashioning of a new self-definition to present his political views publicly. He contends that he no longer sees himself only as a playwright but also as a 'citizen of the world', by which term he means a person who feels obliged to 'find out what the truth is' and 'speak freely' in regard to issues which he considers should be of common concern.³

I see Pinter's self-definition as compatible with Michel Foucault's notion of the intellectual and his/her relationship with truth and power. Each society, Foucault has claimed, establishes its own 'regime of truth' or 'politics of truth' in accordance with its

values and culture.⁴ Rather than being transcendental, truth is produced in specific institutions (which also control its circulation), is subject to economic exigencies and political disputes, and is related to systems of power. Consequently, validity and power are conferred on discourses that have been judged to be reasonable, justifiable, and significant – and are thus legitimized to function as true – in contrast to other discourses that have been dismissed as false and illegitimate because they do not meet the current needs of the powers that be.

Within this reality, the intellectual's task is 'to re-examine evidence and assumptions, to shake up habitual ways of working and thinking, to dissipate conventional familiarities, to re-evaluate rules and institutions, and starting from this re-problematization (where he occupies his specific profession as an intellectual) to participate in the formation of a political will (where he has his role as a citizen to play)'.⁵ An engaged intellectual and citizen is fashioned primarily through his/her relationship with the 'politics of truth', namely, the contests and struggles concerned with truth and its status.

Such an understanding, as I intend to illustrate, is compatible with Pinter's thrust in his non-dramatic texts: He refuses to accept and defend the familiar assertions that have been constituted as true and, as a result, have been used to justify a series of practices in support of established hierarchies. On the contrary, he destabilizes the naturalness and plausibility of such assertions in order to facilitate the production and re-emergence of dissident and censored knowledge, respectively, and thus contribute to the formation of a renewed political drive.

In his analysis of political rhetoric, Pinter participates in a 'new politics of truth', which for Foucault means 'detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time'.⁶ By subjecting naturalized and legitimized political discourse to vigorous analysis, Pinter investigates the rhetorical methods and procedures of linguistic control, discloses the affinity between meaning and power, and renders

invalid the notion of absolute truth as a political category. Thus, he undoes the attachment of power to truth as articulated in the rhetorical discourse of the political hegemony.

What is True? What is False?

Pinter chose to open his Nobel lecture with a reference to the different attitudes towards truth that his self-fashioning as a writer and a citizen require. Although as a writer he still stands by his principle that 'Truth in drama is forever elusive', as a citizen he cannot: 'As a citizen I must ask: What is true? What is false?'⁷ His acknowledgement of a referential language that addresses an undisputable reality seems to indicate a radical departure from the 'Pinteresque', the term coined to express the poetics of inexplicitness, ambiguity, and elusiveness that characterized his early- and mid-career plays.⁸ These poetics were initially explored by a referential linguistic approach, but as the field of literary criticism was affected by postmodernism, critics responded to what they understood was the playwright's challenge of the expressive association between language and reality. Subsequent investigations thus paid tribute to his notion of reality as discursive and language as both evasive and paradoxical, as well as addressing controversial notions of truth.⁹

In his Nobel lecture, Pinter's endorsement of a dichotomy so foreign to his system of thought as that which exists between falsehood and truthfulness does show how forceful the category of truth still is after several decades of postmodernist undermining. It is the only category that implies a certitude that Pinter finds politically useful to support in the contemporary political reality, which is permeated by conflicting values and debates about the effectiveness of the rationale that would best support specific political goals.

His resort to truthfulness in the service of political expediency, however, does not suggest, contrary to his earlier position, a belief in an extra-discursive reality. Regarding his non-dramatic texts – which are the concern of this essay – my contention is that Pinter

does not have to resort to objectivity or universality to enable his politics. Though it is true that he now 'question[s] the postmodernist emphasis on discursivity', I do not think that 'he draw[s] a line between discourse and reality'.¹⁰ On the contrary, it is precisely Pinter's awareness that there are various discourses through which reality can be accessed that obliges him to participate in the public struggle over whose construction of the 'real' will gain dominance:

I believe it's because of the way we use language that we have got ourselves into this terrible trap, where words like freedom, democracy, and Christian values are still used to justify barbaric and shameful policies and acts. *We are under a serious and urgent obligation to subject such terms to an intense critical scrutiny.* If we fail to do so, both our moral and political judgment will remain fatally impaired.¹¹

In his non-dramatic texts, Pinter acts politically by engaging in the practice of subjecting to scrutiny the signifieds as they are defined by the governing power, and by advancing oppositional definitions. It is not the case, then, that he renounces the multiplicity of truth in the political arena; he does, however, refuse to allow the polyphony of the signified to indulge in a perpetual game of consecutive meanings. Thus, he refuses to adopt the US label 'terrorists' to describe the 'Kurdish resistance forces in Turkey' who fight against 'genocide',¹² and he will not identify the labels 'reds' and 'commies' with 'criminal[s]', but rather with people committed to a 'certain set of ideas'.¹³

It is more than obvious that these differences in understanding also produce different effects: whoever finally gains control over meaning will also gain the power to make relevant political judgements and engender diverse practices that may lead to the degradation or salvation of human lives. Pinter's postmodern problematic thus helped him understand that there are interests that support the production of certain narratives, that reality is mediated rather than eliminated, and that truth has a political as well as a philosophical aspect.¹⁴ In this respect, the postmodern writer enabled the individual to play the roles of intellectual/citizen, and

allowed the two categories to be compatible rather than contrasting. Pinter's language in his non-dramatic texts may be explicit, but it is not transparent. It is spoken from an acknowledged, situated position which aims to ease the lives of the oppressed and exploited, and which is opposed to the alleged objectivity of the claims uttered by the ruling authorities.

The Rhetoric of the 'Language of Freedom'

Subjecting hegemonic political rhetoric to inspection, Pinter was able to identify a type of language which functions as a normalizing agent in the sense that it aims to achieve acquiescence to the dominant perceptual frame that supports the interests of the governing authorities. This system of rhetoric attempts to establish a link between speaker and listener which relies on what has been established as always-already culturally known to be possible and credible. Such a naturalized knowledge has to be resisted by what Pinter called the 'Language of Freedom'.¹⁵ Pinter's reading of the US justification for the invasion in Iraq illustrates the function of dominant rhetoric:

As every single person here knows, the justification for the invasion of Iraq was that Saddam Hussein possessed a highly dangerous body of weapons of mass destruction, some of which could be fired in 45 minutes, bringing about appalling devastation. We were assured that was true. It was not true. We were told that Iraq had a relationship with Al Qaeda and shared responsibility for the atrocity in New York of September 11th 2001. We were assured that this was true. It was not true. We were told that Iraq threatened the security of the world. We were assured it was true. It was not true. The truth is something entirely different.

The truth is to do with how the United States understands its role in the world and how it chooses to embody it.¹⁶

Engaged in the struggle for truth, Pinter describes the familiar rhetoric used by the governing power to present significations that secure its own benefits, legitimize its interests, and justify the implementation of violence. In the above extract, the aggressor claims it acts in the name of a collectivity –

the world – in defence of an unquestionable value – international security – against the danger embedded in the other. The text is permeated by a series of unexamined assumptions with a twofold function: first, to address basic human fears, which the political rhetoric activates as a strategy of control, and then to placate them by resorting to a body of conciliatory and shared values, i.e., security; and second, to justify the use of violence by presenting the aggressor's own interests as pertaining to those of the global community.

In Paul Ricoeur's study of rhetoric, threat and deception are 'forms of violence' whose effectiveness is grounded 'on knowledge of the factors that help to effect persuasion'. Those that acquire this knowledge have 'the power to manipulate words apart from things, and to manipulate men by manipulating words'.¹⁷ The obligation to persuade by recourse to evidence has been nullified by verbal articulations embodying universal beliefs and unquestionable truths in order to gain the listener's consent.

This type of language, Pinter contends, is one that is 'employed to keep thought at bay', to provide you with 'a voluptuous cushion of reassurance' which is 'suffocating your intelligence and your critical faculties'.¹⁸ Its success, then, is the consequence of our own willing suspension of disbelief before what has been established as 'obviously true', a practice which neutralizes our ability to question. In the attempt to produce deluding and satisfying accounts of the real, the constructedness of appeasing familiar certainties has remained unexplored, while there seem to be no neutral criteria to decide on factual reliability. Pinter's approach challenges the totalizing technology of modern disciplinary power which uses the rule of universality and truthfulness as a strategy of neutralization. What has been formulated by those who wield power to be pertinent to the global, Pinter presents as nationalistic; he sees it in the context of dominant American government politics serving its own validity.

When Pinter speaks of the 'Language of Freedom', I think he is defending criticism as an absolute value and the most essential

constituent of democracy.¹⁹ As a Foucauldian intellectual, he questions unexamined assumptions, thereby inviting us to activate a critical thinking process commonly invalidated by habitual thought patterns. Such a practice, as seen in his comments on the Iraq war, initiates a struggle relating to the validity of truth-claims, a struggle which in a democratic regime should not be silenced by an enforced, undifferentiated unity of thought. Released, then, from ossified meanings, language will be able to use its rejuvenating power to redefine the world, or in George Steiner's words, to "'un-say" the world, to image and speak it otherwise'.²⁰

National Identity and the Other

Central to Pinter's critical analysis of naturalized political rhetoric is the received way in which (national) identity is defined and constructed, an analysis that places the other at the core of his problematic. For him, the US has established itself as 'an imperial power' supported by the economic policies of the IMF and the World Bank.²¹ In its subsequent imperialistic expeditions, the US is no different from any colonial power which had existed in the past as regards the invention of the evil other against which it defines itself. Initially, the US constructed itself in opposition to

Soviet aggression. It justified everything. . . . It was part of the American way of life. You had an enemy and you loved him. . . . You needed him. . . . You could go all over the world and help your friends torture and kill other people . . . because these people, you said, were part of *them*. They were inspired by *them*, they were corrupted by *them*. And by forever talking about *them*, you conserved and tightened your power.²²

The representation of identity depends on a dichotomy between *us* and *them*, a familiar dichotomy whose pivotal position in American culture helps to identify the US with moral goodness and to understand the Soviets (and by extension all states hostile to the US) as aggressive, totalitarian, atheist, and murderous. This binary opposition – whose poles are interdependent – reinforced and solidified ways of seeing and under-

standing that contributed to the exercise and maintenance of power. Thus, the US identity as a humanitarian force is attributed to its ability to invent hideous and immoral identities for others.

This opposition is crucial to national self-identity and its empowerment, and is repeatedly reproduced in circumstances where the other has to be demonized in favour of the same. Thus, Pinter contrasts US ally and former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair's description of the nail-bombing of a bar in Old Compton Street as 'barbaric' with his defence of the use of cluster bombs in the former Yugoslavia as 'civilization against barbarism'.²³ Pinter deconstructs the logocentric address to civilization as a foundation of language and identity, a concept whose meaning and value are – unlike other concepts – supposedly incontestable.

The dissolution of such bipolar opposition allows the emergence of the 'brute within', and so permits the crossing of the boundary between the self and the other and deposes the alleged humanitarian civilization from its privileged position. Pinter has repeatedly pointed out that the US accuses its enemies of actions that it is itself actually guilty of, such as the possession of weapons of mass destruction, or the refusal to allow access to facilities that produce illegal weapons.²⁴ It seems that the US projects on to its enemies its own publicly unacknowledged acts, which then appear as having been done exclusively by others.

When President Bush claims that the US 'will not allow the world's worst weapons to remain in the hands of the world's worst leader', Pinter advises him to 'Look in the mirror' at himself.²⁵ As we know from Lacanian psychoanalysis, however, the mirror can only provide us with an imaginary self, one which is supposedly solid, ideal, unified, and in control. Thus, contrary to Pinter's expectations, Bush's reflection in the mirror would be a distorted image, concealing fractures, oppositions, and divisions – an image of an ideal ego that is autonomous, powerful, and self-sufficient. This imaginary unified self, whose maintenance demands the erasure of the other, nourishes narcis-

sistic self-love, which is a determining factor in the way the US perceives its own identity.

Others Without and Within

Claims to a national, unified self against the evil other produces egocentrism and dispenses with the notion of responsibility to the other which is at the core of ethics, as will be demonstrated in the next section. 'Self-love' is the most common and successful 'commodity' of the US, Pinter contends. He illustrates his view by inventing a text that parodies presidential addresses to the people: "I say to the American People it is time to pray and to defend the rights of the American People and I ask the American People to trust their president in the action he is about to take on behalf of the American People." A nation weeps . . .²⁶ The American self, both subject and object of prayer and defence, lives under the auspices of the paternal president, who is trusted never to betray his children.

The paternal metaphor in relation to the American president is a recurrent trope in Pinter's texts, in which the former appears as the 'world's "Dad"', its 'moral centre'.²⁷ Seeing 'Dad' as an agent of normalizing technologies of power which aim at producing conformity to dominant morality and legitimate meanings, Pinter's concern is to show that the act of self-love is realized through violent actions against the other, which also includes the American other (the 'other within').

The appeal to a unified national identity founded on a shared history and culture may sound reassuring, but its homogeneity is enforced at the expense of numerous Americans without rights, i.e., social groups that find themselves in an underprivileged position or 'about to be gassed or injected or electrocuted in the thirty-eight out of fifty states which carry the death penalty', as Pinter points out.²⁸ The 'other within' disturbs the imaginary unity of the American people, while the 'other without' is constructed as threatening it, as was earlier shown. Thus, they both have to become the target of attacks. This imaginary national unity, then,

is unthinkable without aggression – 'the action about to be taken on its behalf' – and so is narcissistic self-love.

The threat that alterities pose to the unified national ego and self-love necessitates their extinction. And when self-preservation calls for violence, in order for its use to be accepted, has to be morally justified by resorting to indisputable values. Speaking two months before the war on Iraq broke out, Pinter sees the inconsistency of the whole expedition, which he understands as a violation of human rights carried out in the name of democracy:

The planned war can only bring about the collapse of what remains of the Iraqi infrastructure, widespread death, mutilation, and disease, an estimated one million refugees and escalation of violence throughout the world, but it will still masquerade as a 'moral crusade', a 'just war', a war waged by 'freedom loving democracies', to bring 'democracy' to Iraq. . . . This is in reality a simple tale of invasion of sovereign territory, military occupation, and control of oil. We have a clear obligation, which is to resist.²⁹

So common in the second half of the twentieth century, the notorious phrase 'just war' brings together two terms whose co-existence is troubling: the criteria according to which the resort to war could be justified are unstable and debatable. Pinter problematizes the justness of the cause in the specific case by identifying several issues: a violation of the right to self-government and defence of homeland, concealed motives of self-interest related to US power acquisition, and the devastation done to civilians along with the encroachment upon their rights.

The governing power seems to be the only one that deserves to have and enjoy rights, a privilege to be secured against the rights of the other. This narcissistic reasoning silences the 'relational' nature of human rights and sees them as an absolute prerogative, without regard to the violations it inflicts on the rights of others.³⁰ The understanding of justice, then, that relies exclusively on the right of the dominant American self develops at the expense of the other, whose presence and claims disturb the self-enclosed circle of narcissism. Its dissolution would constitute

an act that annuls self-love and sees the other neither assimilated by the same, nor attacked as threatening.³¹

For Pinter, former UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's infamous belief that 'There is no such thing as society' means that 'we have no obligation or responsibility to anyone else other than ourselves'.³² The playwright attributes to this statement the emergence of a corrupt use of power in England, legitimized by a series of bills passed by Parliament to protect the capitalist economy and 'law and order'. In stark opposition to Thatcher, Pinter sees life only as shared, and favours obligation and responsibility as values that should bind people together. For him, the obligation to alleviate the suffering of the other constitutes an ethical act that would permeate politics.

Responsibility and the Spectral Face

It is in the treatment of the dead that the disregard for the other is best illustrated. The ultimate truism and the one most urgent to be scrutinized is the axiom of the American diplomat, 'In war, innocent people always suffer.'³³ The inevitability of suffering underlines yet another naturalization that effaces the thoughtfulness and concern the international community should show in the context of a worldwide humanity.

Pinter repeatedly refers to the victims in Afghanistan, Iraq, Nicaragua, Palestine, and other countries, claiming that 'these people are of no moment. Their deaths don't exist. They are blank. They are not even recorded as being dead.'³⁴ I think Pinter set out to render these deaths noticeable by making use of his own visibility as a public figure. But what is even more important to note is that he renders the dead perceptible by considering them to be halfway between death and life. Like the Derridean spectres, they defy categorizations: as they are 'neither soul nor body, and both one and the other', the dead linger in a twilight zone between being and non-being.³⁵ They seem to share the same reality with the living – they 'are still looking at us, steadily' – yet they are not with us.³⁶ However, those still alive are not to

be left at peace; they are to be haunted by the dead, not being allowed to indulge in a state of complacency. The victims of past violence will trouble and hopefully activate the living, since the loss of their life challenges the justice assumed to be served by aggression.

The particular treatment that Americans have reserved for their own dead, however, demonstrates that the potential of the latter to trouble the living has to be avoided at all costs. The bodies of the dead Americans that return from the wars are 'an embarrassment': 'They are transported to their graves in the dark. Funerals are unobtrusive, out of harm's way. The mutilated rot in their beds . . . both rot, in different kind of graves.'³⁷ The forgetfulness of casualties which occurred abroad reproduces the idea of the undefeatable, unified nation and encourages further activity. Only once did the Americans lay emphasis on their own dead, but this time it concerned victims in their own land: the three thousand victims of the 9/11 New York World Trade Center attack.

The US believes that these 'are the only deaths that count, the only deaths that matter. They are American deaths. Other deaths are unreal, abstract, of no consequence,' says Pinter in his Turin speech.³⁸ Against the common belief that at least before death we are all equal, here we have an understanding of death whose value depends on the nationality of both the victim and the victimizer. Bush's statement, 'You're either with us or against us,' means, according to Pinter, that 'to criticize our [American] conduct . . . constitutes an unfriendly act'.³⁹ In consequence, people with anti-American views are not endowed with rights and deserve to die, especially if their life can be identified with a threat to the unquestionable values of democracy and world security.

Seeing the 'atrocities in New York' as 'an act of retaliation against constant and systematic manifestations of state terrorism on the part of the United States over many years', Pinter considers the planned war on Iraq as 'a course that can only lead to an escalation of violence'.⁴⁰ These American deaths were then also used to justify the intensification of an aggressive retaliation and serve the image

of the undefeatable nation once more in the self-indulgent role of the 'just' aggressor. Perhaps Pinter would not disagree with Judith Butler that the Americans tend to conceal their own vulnerability and base their continuous aggression on this act of denial.⁴¹

The scarce reference to and disregard of the dead constitutes for Pinter 'a misjudgement of the present' and 'a misreading of history'.⁴² The imperative of the present is to save past suffering from forgetfulness and allow history to proceed despite – or rather, through – failure and loss. If the dead are restored to memory, the recollection of ignominious past events will result in the reconstruction of history and bring forth the demand for justice.

As Pinter implies in his poem 'Death', the dead body is not just an object to be discarded and forgotten. The poem consists exclusively of a series of unanswered questions addressed to the reader about the identity of the deceased, the circumstances of his/her death, and the treatment of the dead body. The poem constructs the deceased as a unique person that has a specific family, a name, a past, and a nationality like everyone else, but it fails. Our ignorance and unconcern – as implied in the inability to answer the questions posed by the poem – turn the deceased into a 'no-body', whose death is not seen as a loss. Our lack of interest reaches its climax in the last stanza, which focuses on the respect with which the dead body should had been treated according to the rituals we reserve for a beloved person:

Did you wash the dead body
Did you close both its eyes
Did you bury the body
Did you leave it abandoned
Did you kiss the dead body⁴³

The questions, in effect, attempt to disrupt the complacency of our ego and ask us to recognize the other in its alterity, i.e., to accept it irrespective of race, gender, and religion, to acknowledge its difference, and to respond to its plea. In this respect, Pinter's concerns are compatible with those of Emmanuel Levinas, who places the encounter with the other at the core of ethics:

To address someone expresses the ethical disturbance produced in me, in the tranquillity of the perseverance of my being, in my egotism. . . . In the relation to the other, the other appears to me as one to whom I owe something, toward whom I have a responsibility.⁴⁴

In these terms, the encounter with alterity becomes the moment the notion of our self as a free, self-centred entity is destabilized; the other, which has been rendered visible, asks us to come into being as selves obliged to respond to the request for care and concern addressed to us by the anonymous victim. Detached from any idea of self-sacrifice or charity, responsibility consists of a fundamental presupposition of the self in a shared life. On the other hand, the openness of the poem's questions allows for a different response, since we may refuse this encounter: we may turn our eyes away from the dead who are 'still looking at us', deprive them of visibility, and restrict ourselves to the egocentric state of indifference.

Thus, in his Nobel lecture, Pinter wonders what happened to our 'moral sensibility' and to the now rarely used word 'conscience', which for him has to do 'not only with our own acts but . . . with our shared responsibility in the acts of others'. Going on to describe the shameful state at Guantanamo Bay, he adds: 'This totally illegitimate structure is maintained in defiance of the Geneva Convention. It is not only tolerated, but hardly thought about by what's called the "international community". . . . Do we think about the inhabitants of Guantanamo Bay?'⁴⁵

As Levinas has put it, letting the other die would turn us into an 'accomplice',⁴⁶ an idea registered in Pinter's avowal of the imperative to 'acknowledge our part in their murder'.⁴⁷ This statement does not concern only individuals and states, but also international organizations which have been founded to protect global security but are deficient in the safeguarding and implementation of their stated intentions. The meaning of security has to be reconsidered, since what has been naturalized and accepted as 'protection' has not been collective; instead, it is concerned with the interests of specific states at the expense of others, whose

citizens' lives and rights seem valueless.⁴⁸ Thus, it is no wonder that Pinter claims the US has legitimized its own disregard of international law.

The absence of accountability holds true for national systems of security services that had 'always been above the law but this is now being given sanctity in law, so to speak'. Referring to laws as 'brutal and cynical', alien to 'democratic aspirations', and supporting the 'intensification and consolidation of state power',⁴⁹ Pinter implies that we should rethink the relationship between justice and laws in cases where the latter accede to their own annulment. Such a situation amounts to legitimizing abuses of authority, from which we are left unprotected.

Pinter pursues these issues in terms of democracy, justice, and ethics. He is aware that democracy is negated when politics are decided by financial organizations, the needs of world markets, and nationalistic interests. He ironically comments that western societies that 'have subscribed to . . . repressive, cynical, and indifferent acts of murder . . . still pat themselves on the back and call themselves a democracy'.⁵⁰ Democracy, he adds, cannot be exhausted in the process of election that the US holds every four years, while at the same time financing wars abroad and allowing poverty and social discrimination to thrive among its own people. Democracy concerns a different kind of organization and is unthinkable without recourse to human rights on a global scale.

If 'international community' is to lose the ironic quotation marks, it has to be rethought – in both Pinter's and Levinas's terms – as a community that defends the rights to freedom, equality, and justice, acknowledges difference, and sees responsibility to the other as a requirement of being human. In other words, the concern for the other is not to be from a privileged position within the context of a humanitarian liberalism as an act of respect or generosity. On the contrary, responsibility is the ultimate precondition for justified claims to humanity and international community.⁵¹ To this end, it is an imperative for Pinter to move the centre of our gravity from the self to the other, and to

undertake responsibility both for the destitute condition and alleviation of suffering where ever it exists.

In these essays, Pinter interrogates political rhetoric and attempts to invalidate and disempower narratives produced by the dominant 'regime of truth'. Truth-claims cannot go on being repeated without being re-examined if habitual and inflexible thought patterns are to be undermined – in this respect, Pinter's stand alike towards both theatre and politics. He had objected to the early critics' 'tired, grimy phrase: "failure of communication"', a phrase coined to accommodate his unfamiliar language use. Pinter instead saw his work as revealing how unwilling people are to communicate, seeing such a possibility as 'alarming' and 'frightening'.⁵² Mundane language and mainstream thinking coalesced to produce a fixed approach carried out at the expense of the variety and originality of his theatre.

Working by necessity from within the constraints imposed by a commonly shared language both in the field of dramatic criticism and playwriting, Pinter set out to deterritorialize linguistic formulations and drained phrases, to release language from solidified meanings, and to place it in unforeseen uses so as to invigorate it. As a writer, Pinter had defended his theatre against critical approaches that tended to eradicate the uniqueness of the 'Pinteresque' in their attempt to characterize it as the commonplace conception of 'failure of communication'. In a similar way, as a citizen of the world he withstood the prevailing discourse of naturalization and did not misrecognize himself in the image of the same. Instead, he sees himself in a relation of accountability to the vulnerable other and comes to his/her defence, aware that the term 'humanity' does not exclusively apply to western democracies, thereby rendering other lives dispensable.

Many of the issues Pinter has touched upon are currently the object of heated political, philosophical, and legal debates. His views have undoubtedly left a lot of unanswered questions. The importance of his texts, though, remains intact. It lies in the urgency

with which they defend life and human rights as absolute values in the midst of the increased global violence and undemocratic procedures that undermine them. He remains firm in his belief that only if 'our political vision' is saturated by the 'unflinching, unswerving, fierce intellectual determination . . . to define the *real* truth of our lives', will the 'dignity of man', 'so nearly lost to us', be restored.⁵³

Notes and References

1. Harold Pinter, *Various Voices: Prose, Poetry, Politics 1948–1998* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 202.
2. Harry Derbyshire, 'Pinter as Celebrity', in Peter Raby, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 232–3.
3. Mel Gussow, *Conversations with Pinter* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1994), p. 85, 71–2.
4. Michel Foucault, 'Truth and Power', in Colin Gordon, ed., *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, and Kate Sober (New York: Pantheon, 1980), p. 131–3.
5. Michel Foucault, 'The Concern for Truth', in Sylvère Lotringer, ed., *Foucault: Live Interviews, 1961–1984*, trans. Lysa Hochroth and John Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996), p. 462–3.
6. Foucault, 'Truth and Power', p. 133.
7. Harold Pinter, 'Art, Truth, and Politics', Nobel Lecture, 7 December, 2005, p. 1. See <www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2005/pinter-lecture-e.pdf>, accessed 16 December 2012.
8. For the use of the label 'Pinteresque' in Pinter criticism, see Yael Zarhy-Levo, 'Pinter and the Critics', in *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*, p. 212–19, especially p. 215–19.
9. For elaborate and critical treatments of these two basic theoretical linguistic approaches to Pinter's work, see, for example, Austin Quigley, *The Pinter Problem* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), and Marc Silverstein, *Harold Pinter and the Language of Cultural Power* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1993).
10. Mireia Aragay, 'Pinter, Politics and Postmodernism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*, p. 252.
11. Pinter, *Various Voices*, p. 213 (emphasis added).
12. *Ibid.*, p. 237.
13. Pinter, interviewed by Andrew Graham-Yooll, in *South Magazine*, May 1988. See <www.haroldpinter.org/politics/politics_america.shtml>, accessed 16 December 2012.
14. My reading about postmodernism, politics, and truth has been informed by Jane Howard, 'Towards a Postmodern, Politically Committed, Historical Practice', in Francis Barker, David Hulme, and Margaret Iversen, ed., *Uses of History: Marxism, Postmodernism, and the Renaissance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), p. 101–22.
15. Pinter, *Various Voices*, p. 202–3.
16. Pinter, 'Art, Truth, and Politics', p. 3.
17. Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor. Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello (London: Routledge, 1986), p. 10–11.
18. Pinter, *Various Voices*, p. 232.
19. In this respect Pinter moves along the lines of Judith Butler who sees criticism as an essential democratic value and believes it is an imperative to be defended. See her book *Precarious Life: the Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London; New York: Verso, 2004), p. 42.
20. George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, 2nd edn (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 228.
21. Pinter, *Various Voices*, p. 205, 233–4.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 212.
23. Pinter, quoted by Audrey Gillan in *The Guardian*, 7 June 1999. See <www.haroldpinter.org/politics/politics_servia.shtml>, accessed 16 December 2012.
24. Pinter, Turin Speech, in *War* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), n.p., and *Various Voices*, p. 237.
25. Pinter, Turin Speech.
26. Pinter, *Various Voices*, p. 231–2.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 221.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 232.
29. Harold Pinter, House of Commons Speech, 21 January 2003. See <www.haroldpinter.org/politics/lobbyofparliament.html>, accessed 16 December 2012.
30. Costas Douzinas, *The End of Human Rights* (Oxford; Portland, OR: Hart Publishing, 2000), p. 343.
31. Butler, p. 138. See also Douzinas, p. 347.
32. Pinter, *Various Voices*, p. 83.
33. Pinter, 'Art, Truth, and Politics', p. 4.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
35. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York; London: Routledge Classics, 2006), p. 5.
36. Pinter, *Various Voices*, p. 234.
37. Pinter, 'Art, Truth, and Politics', p. 8.
38. Pinter, Turin Speech, in *War*, n.p.
39. Pinter, 'Art, Truth, and Politics', p. 7.
40. Pinter, Turin Speech.
41. Butler, p. 29.
42. Pinter, Turin Speech.
43. 'Death', in *War*, n.p.
44. Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (London: Athlone Press, 1999), p. 97, 101.
45. Pinter, 'Art, Truth, and Politics', p. 7.
46. Levinas, p. 24.
47. Pinter, *Various Voices*, p. 234.
48. Regarding security, international relations and organizations, see Anthony Burke, 'Humanity after Biopolitics: on the Global Politics of Human Being', *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, XVI, No. 4 (2011), p. 101–14, especially p. 102–4.
49. Pinter, *Various Voices*, p. 201, 203.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
51. For Levinas on this issue, see Burke, p. 110, and Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London; New York: Verso, 2007), p. 56–63.
52. Harold Pinter, Introduction, 'Writing for the Theatre', *Plays One*, revised edn. (London: Eyre Methuen, 1986), p. 15.
53. Pinter, 'Art, Truth, and Politics', p. 12.