Language and Modern Man: Harold Pinter's Drama (A Philosophical Approach)

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Pinter's plays came almost after the Angry Theatre had fully settled on the English stage. The 'Angries' were angry with what the theatre was doing rather than focus on life around them. Whereas the Theatre of the Absurd had already been a reality in France, it was still adjusting itself to public assimilation in Great-Britain. The new era on the British stage did not in fact come with the 'Angries' but with Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, presented in London in 1956, and which Martin Esslin called the Theatre of the Absurd.

The Theatre of the Absurd is double-fold: language and absurd action. Pinter joins the Absurdists, as it were, in the perception of the absurdity of man's existence. Like Ionesco, he wages a battle between language and thought, and Sartre's *Nausea* seems to be a remarkable account of this malaise. One may even make a link between Sartre's *Nausea* and Pinter's nausea of words. Indeed, he comes very close to Sartre in *The Dwarfs* where the similarity with Sartre's Roquentin is striking , while *The Caretaker* reminds us of both Sartre's *Huis-clos* and Beckett's tramps in *Waiting for Godot*. Yet, in the works of Beckett and Ionesco for instance, the poetry is not in the deliberately flat language but in the action.

In addition to being static, the action is absurd. On the contrary, Pinter's theatrical poetry lies in the language itself.

Unlike Sartre's and Beckett's characters, Pinter's have precise social contexts. However, his plots like those of the Absurd Theatre are often static: the action is no longer part of a plot but resides in the gradual disclosure of a strange poetic image; strange because it lacks clarity, and seems to be *abnormal*, that is strongly unusual for the audience. Nevertheless, it represents the loss of a clear system of beliefs and values. Moden man is faced with a dreadful and irrational world in which the best means of communication, language, is suspicious too. Pinter responds to that situation with the humour, not of nonsense, but of despair and almost, resignation. Still, some of his plays, *The Room* (1957) and *The Caretaker* (1960), do not have a static plot.

In *The Caretaker* for instance, there is an unexpected developing plot. Davies, the tramp, is being ejected out of the room at the end of the play, while in *The Room*, a blind negro emerges from the basement, almost out of nowhere. Pinter's plays are basically images, almost allegories, of human condition. He uses everyday language, a natural language, in naturalistic situations. He builds up a sort of self-sufficient world out of fragments of ordinary life, and introduces a new theatrical poetry based on *particular speech patterns*. His audience is made to feel the natural human need for security, recognition, domination and frustration, on the one hand, and the utter absurd, nonsensical situations we often face in so-called *conversations* on the other,

through carefully selected situations and a closely observed language.

His theatre is basically a theatre of language, and like Beckett's and Ionesco's, it relies heavily on words. All of them deal with the impossibility of verifying the past, the dangers of human communication and the impossibility of a definite statement whatsoever. Indeed, Harold Pinter, seems to be obsessed by the idea of isolation, retreat and privacy; the room is the only place for refuge. Pinter's great merit is to have shown all these aspects of human existence through language on the British stage. While action is scarce, language becomes the battleground between the characters: in itself *language is the spectacle.*

Pinter breaks with the long established and instituted might and wisdom of language and shatters faith in language as an expressive means of communication by revealing the irrationalities of the speakers. He is, indeed, credited for his keen ear, his «eavesdropping» concerning the *social and psychological* workings of language. What his characters often do is largely uttering random talks into the void as most of us frequently do. We can promptly realise that Pinter is mesmerised by language in ordinary discourse. His plays reveal him as a true master of the craft of dialogue. Pinter actually reveals language less as being a secure means of communication than as being a set of dialogues peppered and overloaded by tautologies, repetitions, non-sequiturs, and truisms. The dethronement of language is absolute in Pinters' *The Room*, or *The Caretaker*. Through it, he experiments the deadening effects of repetitions and the opium of habit. Pinter in fact, does nothing but casts light on the original

speaker and on language in its ordinary human intercourse, as M. Esslin writes:

Pinter undoubtedly has an uncannily accurate ear for the linguistic solecisms of English vernacular spoken by ordinary people…[He is] confronted with accurately observed examples of linguistic nonsense (p. 210).

Contrary to Shakespearean shepherds surprisingly producing rhetorical utterances and discourses that are certainly detached from both reality and ordinary speech behaviour, Pinter strives to grasp the essence of language with its linguistic absurdities and cripples, trying to bridge the gulf between dramatic language and ordinary language.

It is known that traditional stage dialogue assumes that people have the right expression always ready to suit the occasion. What Pinter does is debilitating the assumption that logic vehicles the use of language. The belief that language has a purely informative and communicative function and that words are clear, direct, to the purpose, well proportioned and easily assimilated is almost chimerical. Let us examine the following passage:

Rose: How many rooms have you got now?
Mr Kidd: Well, to tell the truth, I don't count them now.
Rose **:** oh !
Mr Kidd : No, not now
Rose : It must be a bit of a job
Mr Kidd: Oh, I used to count them, once…That was when my sister was alive. But I lost track a bit, after she died. She's been dead some time now, my sister. It was a

good house then. She was a capable woman. Yes. Fine size of a woman too. I think she took after my mum. Yes, I think she took after my mum…She didn't have many babies.
Rose : What about your sister, Mr Kidd ?
Mr Kidd : What about her ?
Rose : Did she have any babies ?
Mr Kidd : Yes, she had a resemblance to my old mum, I think. Taller, of course.
Rose : When did she die, then, your sister ?
Mr Kidd : Yes, that's right, it was after she died that I must have stopped counting…
Rose : What did she die of ?
Mr Kidd : Who ?
Rose : Your sister
Pause
Mr Kidd : I've made ends meet.

It would be indeed preposterous to claim that Mr Kidd and Rose are carrying a proper dialogue, so that when Rose asks him whether his sister did have any babies, he replies that she resembled his mother, and when asked about the cause of his sister's death, he replies: "who?". Such linguistic handicap is very pervasive in our daily practice. From this passage, we can realise that little verbal communication is transmitted between characters. Pinter merely draws our attention to the fact that in life human beings scarcely make use of language for communicative purposes. Speech is more often than not inarticulate and incoherent.
Suspicion about the authentic function or functionality of language therefore grows. As we proceed with reading

the play, we become vividly aware of language ambiguities and non-sequiturs, tautologies and double-entendres with concomitant increases in unintelligibility and incomprehensibility. This assumption, in fact, fits very much all the characters of the play, whether it is Mr Kidd's and Rose's exchange, Mr and Mrs Sands talking to Rose or Bert's account of his trip on the van. On the other hand, the one-sidedness of Rose's dialogue with Bert is lucidly demonstrated through the length of Rose's conversational turn. Yet, his speechlessness comes to its end with his erotic overtones of his impassioned outburst about his beloved van.

Bert: I caned her. She was good. They got it icy out. There was no cars. One there was. I bumped him. I had all my way. She went with me. She took me there. And she brought me back. I go where I go. She don't mix it with me. I use my hand. Like that...

Repetitions are traditionally condemned as inelegant or at least redundant in literary texts. Yet, they are so frequent in Pinter's plays just as they are in real conversation. In real life, it is almost impossible for people to deliver *logical*, well-thought-out speeches. Instead, they tend to mix various strands of thoughts which intermingle without any constant intersection and adopt labyrinthine routes to comprehension. The disintegration and breakdown of communication is typified through several passages. Evidence to corroborate this argument can be again drawn from *The Room*:

Mr Kidd : I came straight in.

Rose : Mr Kidd ! I was just going to find you. I've got to speak to you.
Mr Kidd : Look here, Mrs Hudd, I've got to speak to you. I came up especially.
Rose : There were two people in here just now. They said this room was going vacant. What were they talking about ?
Mr Kidd : As soon as I heard the van go I got ready to come and see you. I'm knocked out.
Rose : What was it all about ? Did you see these people ? How can this room be going ? It's occupied. Did they get hold of you, Mr Kidd ?
Mr Kidd : Get hold of me ? Who ?
Rose : I told you. Two people. They were looking for the landlord.
Mr Kidd : I'm just telling you. I've been getting ready to come and see you, as soon as I heard the van go.
Rose : Well then, who were they ?
Mr Kidd : That's why I came up before. But he hadn't gone yet. I've been waiting for him to go the whole week-end.
Rose : Mr Kidd, what did they mean about this room ?
Mr Kidd : What room ?
Rose : Is this room vacant ?
Mr Kidd : Vacant ?
Rose : They were looking for the landlord.
Mr Kidd : Who were ?
Rose : Listen, Mr Kidd, you are the landlord, aren't you ? There isn't any other landlord ?
Mr Kidd : What ? What's that got to do with it ? I don't know what you're talking about. I've got to tell you, that's all. I've got to tell you….

Notwithstanding the fact that they strive to transcend the boundaries of language, these characters find themselves in a sort of *linguistic paralysis*. In Pinter's plays, we can also see the characters' desperate struggles to find the correct expression or word, or to put it differently, to search for language. In Pinter's work, language becomes the medium through which the contest of wills is fought, sometimes overtly as in the scène de ménage triggered off by the Sands:

Mrs Sands: You're sitting down!
Mr Sands: Don't be silly, I perched!
Mrs Sands: I saw you sit down.

This fact shows the extent to which language is elusive. It also rules out any room for the idea that language is always a social consensus. Rather, language and its nuances are the bone of contention between men. Pinter's philosophical perspective is well seen in the impetus and emphasis he puts on language. *The Room* imparts Pinter's tremendous preoccupation with language, its subtleties, its beauty and its wide gaps which are still unbridged. In this connection, Wittgenstein, Paul Gee, and others proclaim that meaning is the most hotly debated term in philosophy, linguistics, literary theory, and social sciences.

Pinter's approach to language is very germane to the philosophers' outlook of language, notably Heidegger and Wittgenstein, two of the most influential philosophers of the century. For them speech as the tool whereby we carry out projects is problematic. Language

for Heidegger is not a mere instrument for communication: it is the very dimension which brings the world to be in the first place. *Only where there is language is there a world*. Heidegger does not think of language essentially in terms of what we might say. On the contrary, it has an autonomous existence and human beings participate to it. Man, then, comes to be human solely by such participation. *Language is always prior to the individual subject*. In this respect, Heidegger wrote:

The subject is just the medium where the truth of the world speaks itself (in Eagleton, Literary Theory).

Heidegger put forward the idea of objects in the world as tools, that is, as the means whereby man accomplishes his projects in life. These objects have the quality of existence which Heidegger calls "being ready to hand". His next move is to conceive speech as one of these objects. Modern man, he claims, must be capable of being superior to the established routines of the socially approved patterns of conduct. Modern man understands that it is by his use of speech that he can bring intelligibility to his existence and fulfil his being. Still, such belief becomes, in the end, illusory. There is then, an extreme need for updating language for it turns out to be a bundle of *porte-manteau* words, distanced in a large measure from what one genuinely thinks of and feels. In short, Heidegger concludes, language is exhausted and worn out.

Admittedly, language as an inconsistent means of speaking can on no account be downplayed merely because it is the *sole means whereby man speaks being*.

Thought, on the other hand, is elusive. Meaning, thus, can be comprehended neither by the hearer nor faithfully transmitted by the speaker. Words do not mirror ideas. Instead, they distort them. Heidegger takes as his starting-point in man's confrontation with himself and the nature of his being the world of the word, the world of *logos*. For the absurdists and following Heidegger's footsteps, the words are man's sole means to apprehend both his internal and external worlds. In his view of language as such, Heidegger does not stand alone.

Wittgenstein, for instance, claims that language itself determines our view of reality because we see things happening inside us and outside of us through language and only through language, reversing the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. In his work *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein beholds language as the mirror of the world, whereas Aristotle for example, believed that language represents the order of thought.

Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's philosophical investigations would provide an explanation to the fact that Pinter's characters try more often than not to come to terms with thought, that is language in the first place, to manifest their being. Man has always displayed his being or presence through speech. The latter, Derrida writes, functions as the obeying thought of man's voice. The fact that language in some of the Absurdists' work comes to the fore derives also, therefore, from Derrida's conviction that the *logos* (expression/discourse) of being has always been placed in the spoken word. The subject, Derrida argues, only *exists* thanks to language. If writing is seen as a game within language, we can also safely say that speech is a game within Being, or as Heidegger claims,

that language (language as spoken, as a sign of presence) is in fact, the *House of Being*. That is why, then, why some playwrights put the whole emphasis on the spoken word at the expense of action.

Pinter's philosophy on the stage - the fact of beholding language as a spectacle itself - can be explained through contemporary linguistic philosophy. The latter considers spoken language as object. Indeed, in Harold Pinter's plays, language is this very object. The stage, then, becomes the realm of the *phoné*, itself source of the phonos, that is the stage of orality, the artistic world of utterance. And this very sound-thought (Saussure's pensée-son) is the stuff of drama. It follows that what Pinter does on the stage is to reproduce this long history of *logocentrism*. It is the *logos* that will make manisfest a certain metaphysics of Being, Being as presence, that Pinter, amongst many other absurdists, strives to express.

Another outstanding feature of Pinter's use of language on the stage is the breakdown of communication and the devaluation of language. The latter is in tune with the philosophical thought of the time. Indeed, the prevailing trends in contemporary philosophy are the relativisation, devaluation, and criticism of language. Wittgenstein's philosophy, in its later stages, best examplifies this concern. He claims that the logic of our language has been misunderstood, for the rules of grammar have been mistaken for the rules of logic. Therefore, the attempt to disentangle thought from the conventions of grammar is indispensable. His philosophy is a strict critical diagnosis of language. His aim is nothing other than to apprehend the structure and the limits of language. His doctrine hinges entirely on the conviction that language has limits

imposed by its internal structure, for language submits to the conventional and arbitrary rules of grammar. On his account, it is this language itself which determines our view of reality, because we see things through it. To deduce the structure and the limits of language, Wittgenstein does not rest on an abstract logical theory, instead he tries to discover them through empirical facts. And that is exactly what Pinter does in his plays; i.e. examining language in its authentic setting with all its complexities and subtleties. For the Austrian philosopher, the limits of language can be understood only by those who felt the urge to pass over them, had made the attempt and had been forced back. This is altogether true of Pinter's characters who strive to cross the limits of language, but find themselves more often than not faced up with their unwillingness of expressing their thoughts and making themselves understood. Here, the limits of language are brought to the surface. To unravel them, Pinter approaches reality in a language which is frequently in a state of breakdown .

But language, this necessary and inevitable means of communication, proved masterless, for man developed a thoughtless habit of using words as he pleases. The characters' language in Pinter's drama, for instance, is cliché-ridden, full of tautologies, grammatical mistakes, misunderstandings, double-entendres, etc. By so doing, Pinter views language with a doubtful eye. Hence thought is often "unseizable": meaning can be captured neither by the hearer nor transmitted faithfully by the speaker. Mick sums it up in *The Caretaker*:

Mick: What a strange man you are. Aren't you? You are really strange…Honest. I can take nothing you say at face value. Every word you speak is open to any number of different interpretations. Most of what you say is lies…You are erratic, you are just completely unpredictable.

In his work, Pinter tries to come to terms with this inadequacy by punctuating his characters' dialogues with hesitations, repetitions, and even pauses, which reveal the difficulties the characters meet in their struggle to communicate or express their thought, as though language fell utterly short of translating Being. Heidegger postulates the absolute primacy of language:

Language is the House of Being. Man dwells in this House. Those who think and those who create poetry are the custodians of the dwelling .

It follows that Heidegger sees modern man as dwelling in a house of which he is neither the architect nor the owner. Man, at his best, is a mere custodian. Therefore, he is condemned to speak fragmentarily when he speaks at all, and to suffer misunderstandings and contradictions. Being nothing more than that, *man does not speak*; instead it is *language itself that speaks*. In *The Room*, the Sands have an argument about the words sit/perch.

…. He perches on the table.

Mrs Sands: You're sitting down!
Mr Sands: (jumping up). Who is?

Mrs Sands: You were.
Mr Sands: Don't be silly. I perched.
Mrs Sands: I saw you sit down.
Mr Sands: You did not see me sit down because I did not sit bloody well down. I perched!
Mrs Sands: Do you think I cannot perceive when someone's sitting down.

Speaking, supposedly "translating" one's thought to produce a univocal signification, seems to fall short of its role, as this example amply shows. When Mrs Sands says "sitting", she is in fact using this word spontaneously without thinking about its re-presentation, its image (cf. Saussure, Wittgenstein). Put plainly, she has given *one same signified to two signifiers*. On the other hand, her husband who has perched, uses the word "perching" because he has done exactly that. For him the two words refer to two different signifieds.
Whereas man thinks he is using language to translate the world around him or mysteries that lie deep in himself, it is in fact language that uses man. Let us examine another passage, this time from *The Caratаker* :

Davies: Now you don't want to say that sort of thing to me. You took me on here as caretaker…for a small wage, I never said nothing about that…you start *calling me names.*
Mick: What is *your name*?

Davies is explaining to Mick about the latter's abuse through the phrase «calling me names ». His speech concludes with this very expression. However, Mick

jumps to another subject by asking Davies what his name is. There is indeed no logical thread between the two ideas involving the same *lexeme* names and name. The first word *names*, once uttered, being now present phonetically, is part of a string of signifiers, the sum total of which has a given signification. Now and after being captured by Mick, it is going to trigger off by way of reiterating the word *names*, a new, though totally unrelated, topic. It is now clear that the word *names* has opened the path for the word *name*, Mick being so to speak the guide to the awareness of this link. Thus, the word *names* spoke, not Mick.

For man inhabits language; language does not inhabit man. Consequently, it is we, Heidegger maintains, who must by steadfast and scrupulous attendance learn what language has to tell us, what it is saying, and not what we are saying. Heidegger argues this from and through etymology. He claims that the word "philosophy" speaks Greek now, that is until now. For him, the Greek *language and concepts are the source and essence of thought*. Thought is nothing other than language, for, he adds in *Was Heist Denken ?* (1959/1954)**,** thought is unconceivable without language ; to think is to speak to oneself. Logos and *noesis* are one. Thus, and to take this instance, meaning is always already located in the very locus of the Greek word *philosophia*. Hence, it is not modern man who is using this word which belongs to the Greek lexicon. The power of the word lies inside it ; it is both *signifier and signified at once.* Consequently, whenever man thinks he is "using" language, he is mistaken. Language is always already using him.

It is interesting to note that Pinter's characters break openly with the logic which has ever since Aristotle structured man's thought and speech. Heidegger challenges the very term logic. For him, this term derives from *logos*, and even more substantially from the Greek verb *legein* (to think). For the Greeks, this does not signify a sequential, discursive saying, nor is it a matter of logical analysis; rather, it is the process of collecting, recollecting or remembering the remnants or vestiges of man's existence. Pinter's work echoes this huge dilemma. Think of his characters' non-sequentiality and erratic speech full of non-sequiturs and contradictions. Pinter discards logical thought since it conceals our authentic *Dasein* and makes, consequently, modern man false to the world. It ensues that the language Pinter maintains and reiterates throughout his work springs from the (Western) philosophical conviction that language beautified by the prestige of logic has proved inadequate to its primary purpose. And this purpose resides in *translating* man's existence. This state of affairs, Heidegger maintains, leaves only the resort to tautologies, truisms, approximations, and repetitions. That is what Pinter translates in *The Room* and *The Caretaker* amongst others.

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