the Pinter Ethic

The Erotic Aesthetic

Penelope Prentice

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THE PINTER ETHIC

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The Erotic Aesthetic

Penelope Prentice

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Dedication

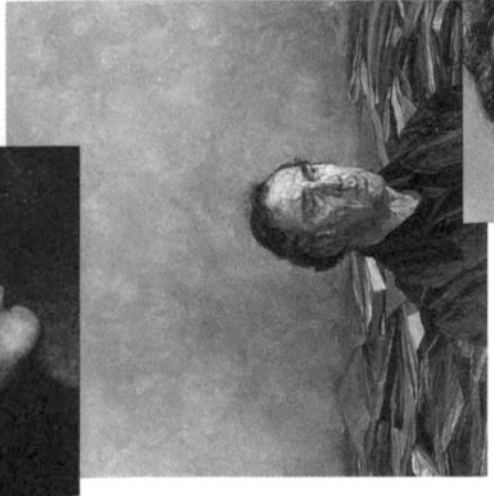
This book is dedicated to my family who have devoted the most to me and to my work:

To my parents Olga and Edwin Prentice.

To my husband James Grunebaum and to our son, Jason Grunebaum.

Ivan Kyncl

Portrait by Justin Mortimer
(National Portrait Gallery, used with permission)



Antony di Gesù

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General Editor's Note

The Pinter Ethic: The Erotic Aesthetic explores the ways in which Harold Pinter's plays revise the vision, the masternarrative by which his characters and we, as audience, live. A comprehensive analysis of his work, including his most recent play *Moonlight* and recently published early novel, *The Dwarfs,* this book is indispensable in showing how Pinter's vision illuminates the methods by which drama engages an audience and by which he redefines love and justice. The present volume not only tracks Pinter's dramatic insights into causes of human violence, suffering, and destruction but also traces the development of the ethic through the core vision that dramatizes those life-engendering attitudes, values and actions required for survival. This insightful reading of Pinter's plays and screenplays engages the reader as the author demystifies what has previously puzzled Pinter scholars and critics: the uses of mystery and the multiple ambiguities. An analysis of the mystery and surface conflicts convey the core vision and show how that vision reawakens consciousness of love's knowledge—the knowledge (of self and the work) and actions required not only to survive but to thrive: transforming the vision into an erotic ethic.

This book ultimately links private love to public and global justice. In the 1980s, responding to global brutalities—human torture and warfare—and campaigning on behalf of human freedom, Pinter asked whether any writer could change the way we see the world or act in it. In 1993 he answered that question with the delightful and disturbing *Moonlight.* By removing the hero/heroine (and destructor) from the stage/page to the audience, this play assumes and evokes greater agency, empowering the audience by dramatizing the daily life-and-death choices that we all bear. The final *Moonlight* chapter, thus, earns Penelope Prentice's closing line summarizing the play as an "act of love." The book returns us to Pinter's work with deepened appreciation of love and justice, and, equally, returns us to life with renewed appreciation of the choices

and responsibility we all possess in creating just life. As general editor I have watched

The Pinter Ethic: The Erotic Aesthetic grow from a text intended primarily for scholars, critics, audiences, theater professionals, and writers into a book intended for the general reader and observer of contemporary life.

Penelope Prentice, an award-winning poet and playwright, is also an established Pinter scholar, author of *Harold Pinter: Life, Work and Criticism,* (York Press) with Pinter criticism appearing in *Drama and Discussion,* in *Twentieth Century Literature* and *The Pinter Review.* She has had productions of over a dozen of her twenty plays in New York City, Buffalo, and elsewhere, including *Collector of Beautiful Men, Thriller,* and the off-off Broadway *Transformational Country Dances.* Recipient of a MacDowell fellowship and an Edward Albee Foundation Fellowship for playwriting, she helped head the original planning of the first International Women Playwrights' Conference and serves on the board of the International Women Playwrights' Center. A Professor of English at D'Youville College in Buffalo, New York and currently President of the New York College English Association, she gives readings and writing workshops around this country and Canada and is completing two new plays, *City of No Illusions* and *Ex.*

Her contribution to Garland's *Studies in Modern Drama* series attests to the variety and complexity of Pinter's work and is helpful as a volume that reassesses crucial aspects of his achievement.

Kimball King

Preface

The German art critic Anton Ehrenzweig said that the function of art is to delight and to disturb. How else than by delighting does a play hold an audience or continue to live? How other than by disturbing does it move an audience to confront unexamined received values or to act on them? I was stunned when I first saw *The Birthday Party* in the 1960s at the Jane Addams' Hull House Chicago premiere. I knew I had seen a play that changed the course of twentieth-century drama, and I wanted to find out why. The new physics with its fractal geometry would have to intervene to provide the metaphor that would adequately describe the remarkable structure which conveys the vision in Harold Pinter's plays. But that evening in the theatre changed my life.

When, for his 60th birthday in 1990, I received from Harold Pinter a copy of his novel *The Dwarfs,* written in his early 20s but published for the first time that year, I realized that he knew from the beginning what he was attempting aesthetically and ethically. *The Printer Ethic* aims to describe that aesthetic and ethic at the core of his work: the values and the vision in his plays.

W.H.Auden once said that among those he likes he can find no comparison, but among those he loves they all make him laugh. Not the least of my attraction to Pinter's work is that it makes me laugh—often. I had been raised in a comic tradition, hearing George Bernard Shaw at my mother's knee, and from my father, philosophy, particularly Bertrand Russell, and history—I remember best the Borgias. I read Freud beginning at ten, primarily for his emphasis on sex, and clearly the erotic undertones in Pinter's plays remain a portion of my attraction to his work.

That first night watching *The Birthday Party* I was both more delighted and deeply disturbed than I had ever remembered being in the theatre. I had seen something more real and simply funnier than anything else I had seen on stage. But I also knew my laughter was provoked by something original: fearful, more immediate, and of our time.

I blithely assumed that it was just a matter of time before the next great dramatist showed up. I had not yet dared enter that arena as a playwright and did not yet know that great playwrights don't grow on trees. When I caught on to that fact I nearly stopped going to the theatre for almost a decade because nothing else I saw measured up to Pinter's work in depth, honesty, resonance, and sheer pleasure. Immediately after Pinter had completed *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu: The Proust Screenplay,* I read Proust with a similar result—no other fiction writer offers a reader another lifetime in this one.

This task must have been inspired by my early reading of Shaw's *Quintessence of Ibsenism* and by Beckett's slender *Proust* which reads like a familiar second journey through Proust's tome, condensing that pleasure to seventy-two pages yet capturing Proust's essence. My aim is to trace a similar brief journey, to summon the heart of Pinter's work, a reading or re-reading of his plays, preserving its emotional depth charge in order to appreciate where we are moved—to what new place.

An attentive viewing or a careful reading of a Pinter play requires little or no commentary. His plays, like all drama, move the head through the heart a long distance in a remarkably short space of time, but the impact can be missed by those who respond only intellectually. My first experience teaching Pinter's work in downtown Chicago to college students from around the world, some of whom had read little and had seen less theatre, was the same as Edward Albee's when he took a young street boy to see Beckett's *Endgame*. Quite simply, the boy got it. My students understood much that many critics often failed to appreciate for the same simple reason—they responded to the play not merely intellectually but wholly: with their hearts and their heads.

Although critics who demand an explanation of his plays frequently accuse Pinter of silence or evasiveness about his work, some of the most illuminating observations remain Pinter's own. In defense of Pinter's seeming reticence, the late Alan Schneider who directed *The Dumb Waiter, The Collection,* and *One for the Road* remarked, "If you write deeply enough, of course there will be resonances, but these have to be discovered from the outside. The more profoundly a guy writes, the less he's aware of the larger implications." ("Pinterview," 69) Yet over twenty years ago after first collecting Pinter's interviews and essays, I immediately

saw how among the dozens of books and thousands of articles about his work, some of the best insights into Pinter's work remain his own. Because Pinter wishes to avoid inaccuracy and redundancy, he gives few interviews, but together with his essays they provide some of the best insights into nearly every aspect of his writing.

Pinter's early interviews disclosed to me his boyhood appreciation of T.S.Eliot and Dostoevsky, my own first real literary loves at 14 and 15; and revealed Pinter's stand as a conscientious objector, which also struck a chord. My father, a conscientious objector in World War II at a time it was not permissible for an atheist, said he did not wish to carry a gun to kill another young man with a wife and children. But because in college he had been obligated to join the Reserve Officer Training Corps, he was offered a lieutenant's rank and the opportunity to serve in Eisenhower's First Army Headquarters where, he later said, he would have been, "drinking champagne through the war." He chose instead to go to jail. He consented, however, to serve by accepting the duties of a medic and at the end of the war in the liberation force was sent to Buchenwald to tend to the living. When he came home he never spoke of his war experiences. His silence remains more powerful than anything he could have said.

I believe now that part of my continued attraction and commitment to Pinter's work is his dramatization of the unspeakable. His plays culminating in *Party Time, The New World Order,* and *Moonlight* offer some of drama's best understanding of the causes of human violence and destruction as well as an appreciation of what is necessary for a sustained peace or for any "new world order" to be achieved.

Early on I realized that no serious dramatic writer who comes after Pinter can ignore his influence. To do so would be to confine oneself to nineteenth-century forms and attitudes which have become codified, stale, dead. Donald Pleasence compares playing Davies, the tramp in *The Caretaker,* to "being in the first performance of Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* or *The Cherry Orchard."* (Sweeney, 8) Unlike any other English-speaking dramatist of this century, Harold Pinter has created an accurately realistic, rich and distinguished body of work, with a breadth that is comically tragic, large, uniquely his own, and in a special sense, complete. It is all there, the whole of life.

I wish first to thank Kimball King at the University of North Carolina for proposing this project and for his valued commentary, my parents Olga and Edwin Prentice for their careful readings of the many drafts, and Colin G.A.Brezicki of Ridley College, Canada, for his bold suggestions. I wish also to thank George Bishop at D'Youville College and to express appreciation to D'Youville College for substantially funding three research grants enabling me to meet with Harold Pinter in London, Los Angeles, and New York, and for a 1991–92 sabbatical to complete this book. I am deeply indebted to Harold Pinter for his encouragement of my writing. In 1979, during the previews of *Betrayal,* he asked to look at my first play slated for a reading and production in New York. Although he was extremely busy and anxious about his own opening, he took the time to read my work and to make very specific suggestions. I was astounded and can only hope to be guided by his extraordinary generosity.

I wish to extend special and deep thanks to John Mulryan, editor of *Cithara,* Francis Gillen, editor of *The Pinter Review,* William McBrien, editor of *Twentieth Century Literature,* and Saad Elkhadem at York Press for their careful reading and insights and for permission to reprint portions of published material. I wish to cite my advisor, the late Stanley Clayes, editor *of Drama and Discussion,* the Prentice-Hall anthology of drama, for first soliciting my commentary on Pinter for the volume, and to thank Prentice-Hall for permission to reprint "The Ironic Con Game." I also wish to acknowledge Carl Dennis, Leslie Fiedler, Anthony Hunt, and Marcia and David Lamb for their reading of the *Moonlight* chapter, and to express my appreciation to Lynnette McClive and the late Sr. Virginia Carley for their support and reading of early drafts of this book, and Robert L.Nielson for his research. I would like to thank Evelyn Wolf for her meticulous reading and Jamie Milliron for her reading and commentary. I offer special thanks to Michael Basinski and Robert Bertholf at the Poetry/Rare Books Collection at the State University of New York at Buffalo, to Leon D.Shkolnik and Charlene Mirabella at the D'Youville Library, and express my appreciation to the many other librarians who assisted in this work at Loyola University of Chicago, Northwestern University, The University of Chicago, Newberry Library, SUNY Buffalo. The Library of Congress, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and especially the librarians in charge of maintaining the clipping files at the New York Library of the

Performing Arts at Lincoln Center. I also wish to thank Mary Jean Irion at the Chautauqua Institute for supplementing a playwright-in-residence invitation with an opportunity to deliver "The Pinter Ethic," a paper seminal to this book.

Finally I offer my deepest gratitude to my husband James Grunebaum who made an extraordinary sacrifice early in his career as a philosophy professor so that I could remain in Chicago to finish my dissertation on Harold Pinter's plays. At a time when academic positions were already scarce or nonexistent, he turned down permanent positions to accept a one-year appointment at Northwestern so that I could remain in Chicago to complete my work immediately after my advisor, on leave in Italy for a year, returned. Without that year, almost wholly devoted to research and writing, I would not have been able to finish this book. I remain grateful to my husband and to our son Jason for their participation in all my work all these many years.

The Pinter Ethic: Overview

With Heisenberg's uncertainty early in the twentieth century and the dropping of the bomb at the end of World War II came an end to nineteenth-century form and the belief in happily-ever-after predictable symmetries. Other forms and ideas challenge the earlier century's already deteriorating belief in man's power to be master of his fate, captain of his soul. One defining stance of postmodernism is individual impotence in the face of global wars, pollution, disease which could destroy all.

The resultant paralysis that can occur when any animal feels threatened with loss of control over self and surroundings has led some writers to reflect the human as a doomed creature on a doomed planet. Already breaking with traditional form well before Pinter's work, Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* seems set in the aftermath of nuclear holocaust—the only hopeful sign, the life form sighted outside paralleling the minimally hopeful leafing of the tree in *Waiting for Godot.* More recently, both American playwright Sam Shepard and British playwright David Hare return to fairly traditional forms to convey an apocalyptic vision: Shepard with a mythical resonance from *Curse of the Starving Class* onward reflects the death of the American dream, while David Hare's plays, culminating in *The Secret Rapture,* diminish or destroy all dreams.[1] In works such as these love and justice, which might empower human life, are generally absent or lost, and nothing in the work points to how balance might be realized or restored.

In contrast, Harold Pinter's plays combine a focus on love and justice that presents an ethic expressed in new forms which challenge those currently received reflections of human powerlessness. Through that focus and form, his plays convey a vision both darker and more delightful which suggests that, on the contrary, a human being's attitudes and actions at the private level may have profound implications for action on the public and even global levels of life.

Harold Pinter's work from the beginning has concerned itself with love in the Western tradition as an erotically charged attraction between two people which reaches or fails to achieve fulfillment. That tradition of romantic love has become so internalized for contemporary audiences that it is only necessary to place a woman and man on the same page or stage and the reader/audience automatically wants them to get together. The love evoked in Pinter's work, sometimes expressed as the bond of friendship or familial love, is frequently love remembered between a man and woman, the greatest good, but often already past. Yet throughout, love functions powerfully in the present as the wellspring that drives all else. It is the desire for love and respect that ignites and fuels the struggle for power *over* others, a conflict waged to gain a position which seemingly might win another's esteem.

That struggle for power unleashes an equally powerful concern with justice. Pinter's most recent work dramatizes that love without justice is not love, nor is justice, without love, justice. The position is not revolutionary. Aristotle in his *Ethics* already reflects that connection which runs through Western values. (V–VI) Justice in Pinter's work operates both in that general, overarching sense of the just as the fair, and in its more specific forms of retributive, and recently, distributive justice. The connection between love and justice becomes most explicit in later plays such as *Mountain Language* where love displays a selfless, unconditional generosity rare in the early work. That love transforms into a power which sustains human bonds through extreme adversity and the worst injustice—torture. Love's connection with justice in Pinter's work dramatizes an enlarged definition of love.

The Pinter Ethic places primary emphasis on the major full-length plays. Divided into three parts, the book traces the development and variations in the expression of the ethic through the Pinter canon, touching on his screenplays, novels, poetry, essays, Pinter's own salient commentary and some neglected interviews which further an appreciation for the aesthetics and ethics of his work.

The brief biography summarizes major events which shaped the values the plays dramatize and examines Pinter's adolescent work and novel *The Dwarfs* as remarkably early expressions of the aesthetics and ethics formative to his plays. The introduction situates the discussion within the context of Pinter's achievement and

examines *The Dumb Waiter's* portrayal of Pinter's dominant/subservient conflict as seminal to any larger appreciation of his values. Part One opens with a discussion of *The Birthday Party* which offers a paradigmatic portrayal of the values and actions which define the ethic in Pinter's plays. Part One also tracks the variations in the dramatization of the ethic in the other early plays. Parts Two and Three trace that development in the middle and recent plays.

The development of Pinter's ethic played out through the power struggle in the dominant/subservient conflict falls into roughly three phases, each separated by the locus of the threat of violence: the outside source (s) of destruction. That axis shifts, evolving first from focus on the private, then the communal and finally the global levels.[2] Pinter's dramatization of the dominant/subservient conflict primarily as a private battle between individuals within the confines of hermetically sealed rooms in his early work opens out in the middle work to the communal level and in the later work to a focus on global power sources. His most recent plays go further still, fusing a triple focus on power, love and justice at all three levels: the private, public, and global.

As in any highly organic artistic development, there can be no absolute demarcation between the phases of Pinter's plays. The latest plays continue to exhibit elements primarily associated with the earliest, and the earliest seminally contain his later global concerns. Where the early plays *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Birthday Party* already poise the conflict toward a larger organization or power in the world, his latest work, focused on global powerplays, remains a battle fought between individuals. In addition to the focus shift from private to global concerns, what also shifts is both the intensity of the conflict and its implications for the audience, obliquely addressed as a responsible witness.

Awareness of the locus of threat as it evolves in Pinter's plays enhances appreciation for his considerable achievement in the development of the ethic: the innovation and integrity in that progression toward a focus on global justice.

In Pinter's earliest work, from *The Room, The Birthday Party, The Dumb Waiter, The Caretaker,* through *The Homecoming,* even when the initial threat of violence may appear to come, as in *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter,* from a larger organization distant and unseen, the overriding primary focus in the early plays

remains on the private level of conflict; individuals, often living at the margins of society, jockey for position over one another myopically until the all-consuming struggle escalates into a deadly battle for power and survival. What it means to be a good person is tested in that battle, but any question of justice abides almost exclusively in the private hands of private individuals.

The early phase, focusing primarily, sometimes exclusively, on the private level, ends with *The Homecoming,* a pivotal play, and Pinter's first major work where a woman gains dominance and something positive—her freedom.

Pinter's middle plays occupy a liminal position where attention to the private level subtly moves toward but not fully into the public sphere in the three full-length plays of that period: characters in *Old Times, No Man's Land,* and *Betrayal* all assume positions of responsibility in the larger community where what happens privately may have public repercussions. But the reverse seldom obtains. However successful the characters are publicly, who they are and what they do in that larger world—producer, poet, publisher—can provide no protection for the character's private self in the struggle for love or power. Moreover, being publicly acclaimed as good within one's profession, as a successful poet or publisher, may neither link to being good privately nor serve as an index of the quality of one's public work. The successful, offstage writer Spinks in *Betrayal* is deemed over the hill by his publisher, and his private life, despite Emma's romantic interest in him, may be in shambles. Pinter explores the many levels at which a character may or may not be a good person evidenced dramatically in action.

The full-length plays among the middle work, frequently referred to as memory plays, also retain the drive and impetus of the earlier dominant/subservient struggle but introduce as equally important the force of memory, the past's ability to encroach upon the present with an attendant role in the future. What is remembered often threatens to engulf and overtake what is currently happening, and indeed, as in *Landscape* and *Silence,* it does. *Old Times, No Man's Land* and *Betrayal* all focus on loves past and present, where when memory threatens to invalidate past well-being it may destroy present happiness. By questioning what characters believe they remember, the conflict dismantles the illusions which sustain characters' lives no less nakedly than in the early plays. All three full-length plays of the period also explore the more elusive aspects

of the powerplays among private levels of the comfortable, publicly visible middle class, where any hidden threat from a larger organization or society is almost entirely internalized, even seemingly absent, and where the conflict for power turns on who remembers what correctly—a conflict which is, however, no less deadly.

Although the conflict may not actually threaten characters' lives or even public position in the outer world, almost all, once stripped of illusion, lose some portion of the self that makes life worth living. Moreover, when the conflict, now couched in the subtlety of middle-class courtesy, re-emerges in the full-length liminal plays, it does so with a fierce vengence as unrelenting as in the early plays.

Finally, Pinter's latest work shifts focus away from the individual and communal level of struggle to target agents of national and international forces empowered to institute murder, torture or nuclear war.

For the past decade Pinter's work for the stage has taken a generally more somber tone, finding expression for his political and global concerns in eight one-acts plus two sketches. *Family Voices, Victoria Station,* and *A Kind of Alaska* return primary focus to the private level but do so with added dimension and implication in the larger world. *Precisely,* a sketch in which two men argue the kill power of a nuclear war, confronts that global issue head on. *One for the Road,* dramatizing the brutal torture of a man and his wife culminating in the murder of their child, represents Pinter's first major explicit break with his earlier contempt for agit prop, political drama, yet Pinter also reminds us of that play's connection to very early work such as *The Dumb Waiter* in dramatizing the abuse of authority. *One for the Road* remains his most horrifyingly violent portrayal of that abuse in a hierarchical system until *Mountain Language,* which, inspired by the suffering of the Kurds, details the brutal torturing to death of several victims for speaking their native, mountain language.

With the recent torture plays, the one-act *Party Time* and the sketch *The New World Order,* Pinter's plays recursively cycle, or more correctly spiral to another plane, which allows the audience to maintain a triple focus on the private, public and global causes, implications and consequences of violence resulting from dominant/ subservient power struggles.

In Pinter's *Party Time,* where power brokers party while they squelch an insurrection outside, and in *The New World Order,* where two torturers hint at the brutalities they are about to inflict upon a blindfolded, seated man, Pinter links love and justice in surprisingly fresh ways. These later plays infuse a reminder of love into this bleakest of all human landscapes—the torture of one human being by another. Through the portrayal of love, the plays become a call for a redefinition of love as it is generally communicated through the received values of Western romance and friendship. The ethic in Pinter's plays distills most simply to a dramatization of love and justice; through the delineation of power and the abuse of authority the plays end in awakening an enlarged view of love as they provoke a demand for action to bring about justice.

Moonlight, Pinter's most recent full-length play, depicts Andy, a dying man, who served the state as a civil servant, Bel, his wife, their daughter Bridget, and their two estranged sons, Jake and Fred, who serve the state by preserving the status quo through covert violence. The grown children, who never address their parents, further cement the connection between private love and public justice. Bridget appears alone on stage to open and close the play, addressing the audience with her memories and images from her unconscious, to frame both the play and the questions with which the play leaves the audience. Through Bridget, a voice from the nether of the dead, the play articulates a fresh vision, conveyed through her directly to the audience, and that vision addresses and speaks more directly to the audience at conscious and subconscious levels, offering us the clearest insights into Pinter's ethic and aesthetic through the dramatization of love. Though the sons no longer speak to their father, their separation from family also speaks to the audience by raising questions that dramatize how choices made by an ordinary citizen at home fuel decisions and actions of global powers.

The title and subtitle, *The Pinter Ethic: The Erotic Aesthetic,* would seem to make large claims for Pinter's work. *Moonlight* offers and requires a fresh vision, a fresh way of seeing both Pinter's plays and life. The title, *The Pinter Ethic,* might seem to suggest that there is something unique about the ethic which Pinter presents when in fact, as argued throughout this book, the ethic in Harold Pinter's work rests on traditional Western virtues as they promote, rather

than destroy life. The characters in his work, often struggling to preserve identity and, by extension, to survive, engage in a conflict that becomes a life-and-death battle. What Pinter's plays dramatize as destructive and inimical to survival, however, is the vision which informs almost all characters' action.

The core vision, expressed through the surface dominant/subservient conflict, is revealed as unconsciously driven by an impulse to survive, which, paradoxically, destroys. Paradox is, however, only *apparent* contradiction. The vision which Pinter's characters live by—to do good, and to destroy what is not good—would seem noble enough. Even his torturers (especially his torturers) torture the innocent not out of sadistic malice but from what they perceive as divinely inspired cleansing. Characters act in ignorance of the destructive nature of the received vision they live by which informs all destructive action at all levels of human relationship—from friendship, marriage, family, and community to the institutions of torture and destruction and the states invested with the right of protecting its citizenry.

Pinter's characters act from a vision which situates what is not good only in others. His plays dramatize how failing to acknowledge what is not good in the self (but instead viewing and promoting the self as superior to others, often in the name of love and justice) can only destroy relationship and the self. Moreover, the characters reveal that through misguided vision their perceived love is not only limited but destructive. Though they perceive themselves benignant creatures impelled by love, they are driven by a very limited love, in a text where love is dramatized as the generative force of connection to others and community. That limited love, balanced almost equally by a lack of love, becomes a destructive force resulting in estrangement from the self, others, and, thus, is destructive of relationship and community. What Pinter's work calls for is a revision of that destructive vision: a re-seeing the vision which the characters and we in the audience live by.

To see the destructive vision clearly is both to revise the vision and to see what vision is necessary to promote survival rather than destruction. The clearest and fullest expression of the destructive vision comes in *Moonlight.* Andy, who says he is "good" and has lead a life which "harmed no-one," dramatizes how a life lived blind to the destructive us-versus-them vision that informs his action,

severs his relationship with almost everyone he has loved. More horrifying, that destroying vision becomes the primary legacy he leaves his children and larger community. The ethic in Pinter's work, thus, goes beyond what Virgina Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway* called the "atheist's religion" of doing good for the sake of good. In Pinter's ethic, doing good is dramatized as urgently required for survival.

To survive requires a revised vision which informs action that enlarges our concept of love and, as Pinter's later work dramatizes, links love to justice.

The centrality of love in Pinter's ethic throughout his work suggested the subtitle, *The Erotic Aesthetic*. Love as Eros, a life-promoting force, appears in Pinter's plays in all its guises—from the passionately ecstatic to familial love and friendship—all connected at root in the desire for survival. Through the appreciation of love and of Pinter's portrayal of love, which is enlarged to link with justice, this study of Pinter's ethic is, finally, no less about the aesthetic, the beauty in Pinter's plays. As the subtitle is intended to imply, the ethic and the aesthetic are wedded through the erotic. That recognition carries the further concomitant appreciation of love's connection to death and destruction.

Understanding that connection can begin here in the acknowledgement that the subtitle of this book was inspired by Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty's considerable scholarly achievement in *Siva: The Erotic Ascetic*.[3] Her book, a compilation and analyses of myriad, seemingly endless, variants of the Hindu Siva myth, cites the many contradictory (even fabricated and spurious stories!) which, as she points out, all can contribute to a deeper understanding of Siva's mysteries. Similarly, *The Pinter Ethic* examines the many conflicting and contradictory statements of Pinter's character which evoke larger truths.

Nearly all self-referential statements that the characters make, such as Andy's claim that he "harmed no-one," almost always summon recognition of the opposite truth. That recognition serves as a cautionary reminder to any viewer, reader, or critic to examine any seemingly definitive conclusions about Pinter's work, which may contain opposite truths.

O'Flaherty's subtitle, *The Erotic Ascetic,* also evokes appreciation of the wholeness contained in what at first appears seeming contradictory opposites in her study of Siva: the erotic and ascetic. That understanding leads to the larger appreciation of how

Siva, Lord of the Universe and creator of life, can also be the destroyer. Reconciliation of those seeming opposites, at the center of all religion, also informs the core vision of Pinter's *Moonlight.* Where religion posits responsibility for creation and death with divinity, Pinter's plays reveal other mysteries: hidden human responsibility for destruction and death as well as for the reverse: for survival. The source of that destruction is the received vision which informs all action. That vision is destructive but unconscious. So long as it remains hidden from consciousness, it cannot promote survival or creation. By revealing the received vision and making it manifest in consciousness, as Bridget does in *Moonlight,* and delivering it directly to the audience, Pinter's work summons a fresh vision, one which requires another view of love, productive of generation rather than destruction. In doing so, as this work later argues, *Moonlight* becomes an act of love.

Naming a thing an act of love, even in poetry, becomes a statement that has to be earned and can only be hard won. To make such a statement in a scholarly work of criticism might seem extravagant. But Pinter's work, viewed and read with the pleasure it can engender and the disturbing vision that can provoke change in the audience, becomes an act. Revising our vision revises our action, and thus *Moonlight* assumes the agency of a lover, enlarging the lives of the other(s), whose agency is similarly empowered. How *Moonlight* delivers its fresh vision can be understood by attending to the images we see and hear.

Moonlight frontally addresses our own desires and loves through all the characters' many professions of love and love's ecstasy and through the play's genius, Bridget. She opens and closes the play speaking from Psyche's interior realm of memories, dream and unconscious vision. Bridget, as genius, an engendering catalyst, is guardian of a place (her home), of intuition, and of the unconscious and the play's vision. She guards the play's vision by *not waking* her parents (by analogy, to any other vision). She also consciously preserves the received vision by remembering. She is a voice from the past; though she would be a grown woman during the time of much of the play's action, when she appears to us alone on stage, she is 16. She is also a voice of the past who addresses us in the present with the horror she believes she escaped: recalling her parents' love and her nightmare vision of a journey through a warscape of "skeletons in ditches" and "burning." Though

consciously she says she does not wish to wake her parents, trapped in the past, ironically it is her vision (delivered as we shall more fully see later as a question and through mystery) that wakes us, as audience, to a fresh vision to inspire our action.

She stands before us at the end not like a magic genii of ancient fairy tale, who performs tasks impossible for us or who can grant three wishes, but as one who summons our wishes into consciousness—our desires for love, friendship, fellowship and for survival within community and among all our neighboring communities, which, these days, is the world.

Bridget, unconsciously, performs the greatest revision of all in Pinter's work. In giving us her vision, she brings the destructive vision into our consciousness by provoking us at the end with unanswered questions only we can answer. In doing so, Bridget transfers heroic agency from the stage to the audience.

The fresh vision summons us to acknowledge choices where we assumed we have none. Assuming that we have "nowhere to go," like Stanley in *The Birthday Party,* is to exile ourselves from agency in the mistaken belief that we have no choices. Bridget's vision will at first seem mysterious. Confronting that mystery, and all the many mysteries in the play, leads to the larger mystery that delivers the core vision. Thus the vision is conveyed as a question.

Both the question and answer return us to the riddle of the sphinx with a slight shift in emphasis.[4] The answer is not "man," but "we, as man and woman." In our own time, the riddle for a free society is posed not for some extraordinary hero to answer in order to deliver our community from pestilence and destruction; it is posed for each of us to acknowledge and assume our own responsibility and agency in all actions which destroy. That knowledge leads to the vision necessary for survival. The knowledge required begins in self-knowledge. The lifting of ignorance requires all knowledge, from knowledge of self to knowledge of the larger world. Ignorance of the received vision is the form that malice assumes in Pinter's work. Failing to know ourselves in time and falling into Stanley's misguided belief that "there's nowhere to go," we may be forced to assume Oedipus's own ironically self-proclaimed sentence. Putting out our eyes, when, too late we see the terrible truth, we exile ourselves. The image is comic. The whole world cannot go into exile; there is nowhere else at the moment to go to off the planet Earth.

Bridget's message is merely a description of what she sees as safe—a retreat from the world where she has no agency or even expressed desire. Thus she offers no didactic message in the form of a finger pointing out what is wrong at the surface in our actions, then wagging that finger at us to beckon us to mend our ways and change. Instead, awakening consciousness of the received, destructive vision reveals its own reverse constructive side and at a much deeper level. Knowing ourselves, knowing the world and seeing the vision that informs all our action, transforms into love's knowledge: the vision that can reverse destructive action.

By reversing the vision which informs our action and inspiring the desire and courage to act differently, *Moonlight* revises the way we see and receive drama, beginning with the pleasure we take away from drama, defined in Aristotle's notion of drama's tragedy.

> The tragic pleasure is that of pity and fear…. (1453)

Moonlight adds another dimension to tragedy's fear and pity: hope. While it is argued later that Oedipus, in blinding himself acknowledges his responsibility and thus dignifies human responsibility, as our surrogate, *Moonlight* offers and requires not reflected agency, assumed by a hero, but our own actual agency. Pinter's work throughout dramatizes what is finally the greatest human tragedy—one human being destroying another, blindly believing such destruction is undertaken in love or by what some of the characters in *Moonlight* believe is rooted in human "nature," which in this play assumes the force of fate. Recognizing human destruction as rooted in an unconscious, destructive vision allows us a vision of choices we did not know we had.

Seeing choices we were not conscious we had restores trust in our own agency. How? The fearful and destructive vision, once seen clearly, contains its opposite, revealing how almost all actions, from the most private within the family to the largest choices made in governing public policy, are choices between life and death.

The received vision is not didactically delivered to us as a chastening admonition nor an apocalyptic warning that can stun an already overwhelmed human creature into paralysis. But the fresh vision, which the play trusts us to see and claim, comes as a gift that empowers by admitting hope; seeing and confronting clearly the truth, however disturbing, liberates. Seeing the core vision that engenders destructive actions can promote actions which promote survival.

The Pinter Ethic: The Erotic Aesthetic can be read in many ways and begun almost anywhere, but the Introduction with its appreciation of Pinter's achievements seem to be indispensable in any reading as does the final chapter on *Moonlight* and the Conclusion. The chapters on *The Dumb Waiter, The Birthday Party, The Homecoming, One for the Road* and *Party Time* are key to appreciating the central conflict and the vision of power, love and justice. The aim in this book is to engender the provocative disturbing delight of seeing or reading Pinter's work. More importantly, it is intended to return the reader to his work with greater appreciation and understanding. The *Moonlight* chapter acknowledges Pinter's work within the long tradition beginning with *Oedipus,* through *Everyman* and *Hamlet,* and shows how this work has effected a global shift in the way we view, read, and write plays.

If as Toni Cade Bambara said (as will be later noted to a different end), we are all writing the same play, then access to Pinter's ethic and aesthetic contained in *Moonlight's* vision, revises the way we view and appreciate much current drama and film and will surely continue to inspire other writers. The book is intended not only for the audience, critic, actor, director and for other writers but for anyone reading contemporary literature and, in that fuller sense, reading contemporary life and death played out on the private, public and world stage. Finally, it serves that far greater function: recognition that Pinter's work returns us all to life different, more deeply appreciative of our own possibilities.

NOTES

1. In Shepard's plays, from *Curse of the Starving Class* onward, food which might nourish the body is trashed on stage, and the home, as a family dwelling which might sustain and develop both body and spirit, may literally explode. Hare's work, culminating in *The Secret Rapture,* unleashes a predatory Margaret Thatcher clone, Marion French, whose administration and the mega-business her government represents bulldoze over those who may be well-intentioned environmentalists or small business people but are powerless to act. Such is Marion's gentle sister Isobel, whose death is related to and

indirectly results from her sister's myopic greed. Marion's turning to her husband with erotic desire in the wake of her sister's funeral cuts whatever disturbance and recognition Marion feels confronting Isobel's "ghost" with irony.

2. While it might be interesting to compare the development of Pinter's work with Foucault's three stages of authority and punishment described in *Discipline and Punish,* it is the differences which are most informative. Where Foucault identifies the third and present stage of the development of authority and punishment as amorphous and ubiquitous and concludes by looking into a cynical black hole without hope for change, Pinter continues to examine specific acts and specific causes for abuses of authority (and punishment), situating responsibility within both the individual as well as a global worldview which promotes misguided destruction.

3. I am indebted to Jason Grunebaum for recommending the book to me.

4. The riddle of the Sphinx is, "What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon and three legs at night?" The answer is "man."

Harold Pinter: Biography

1930–1940: "Every Time We Evacuated I Took My Cricket Bat with Me."

As a young man Harold Pinter appears to have performed a Cinderella transformation without a fairy godmother or Pygmalion to sculpt or script him. Born in Hackney 10 October 1930, Harold Pinter grew up at 19 Thistlewaite Road on a street of identical, orange-brick row houses in the bustling, working-class East London of small shops near a foul-smelling soap factory, but by the age of thirty was acknowledged by some as England's foremost playwright, made a Commander of the Order of the British Empire, and by his forties and fifties acclaimed as one of the world's leading dramatists. In a real sense, however, the values and vision of the man who would alter the course of the aesthetics and ethics of drama in the twentieth century were already in evidence in nascent form even in his grammar school juvenilia, and astonishingly well developed in his one novel *The Dwarfs,* begun when he was twenty.

Born to Hyman "Jack" and Frances (née Moskowitz) Pinter, a Jewish family who emigrated to Britain via Eastern Europe, possibly Hungary or Poland in the early twentieth century, Harold Pinter honors his childhood in the East End as spent in a "living community" with "a living language." (Sherwood, n.p.) His late father worked twelve hours a day as a ladies' tailor, lost his business, then went to work for someone else, and served as an air raid warden during the war. His late mother, whom he describes as a good cook and "the very opposite of a Jewish Matriarch," kept a lovely backyard garden, one happy site of his earliest boyhood imaginings. (Gussow, "Conversation [Pause] with Harold Pinter," 43) There in the back garden at the age of six or seven, Harold began to make up stories with imaginary characters and "to have long dramatic interludes" and "a very real relationship with them." (Sherwood, n.p.)

While there is nothing remarkable about imaginary friends in the childhood of any writer, Harold's experience with violence was early, immediate, and indelible. Before his first decade was out, at the age of nine during World War II, he was evacuated to a castle in Cornwall without his parents. He recalls the "marvelous grounds" on the sea looking out on the English Channel with twenty-four other boys. He says "it wasn't quite so idyllic as it sounds, because I was quite a morose little boy," and it was also terrifying. ("Two People in a Room," 35) From the ages of nine to fourteen, when he was evacuated to Cornwall and elsewhere, his parents visited him whenever they could, at great expense at a time they had no money.

In 1944 a the age of fourteen he returned home to see his first flying bomb in the street: "It looked like a tiny airplane. It was an innocent-looking thing. It just chugged along. And then I saw it come down." (35) At other times he opened the back door to find the garden in flames.

1940–1950: "I Was Aware of the Suffering and the Horror of War, and by No Means Was I Going to Subscribe to Keeping It Going."

As a child, Harold found the whole experience of being evacuated and returning home to London during the bombing "very disturbing" and "frightening." (35) Yet he did not eschew or shun violence but confronted it. From about the age of fourteen, whenever he was in London he began frequenting the cinema and especially enjoyed American gangster movies. His early war experience, coupled with his early confrontation and exploration of violence in literature and film, provided the nexus of aesthetic and ethical concerns that later developed in his plays.

If Harold acquired unforgettable contacts with violence in his early years, he also developed a life-long passion for cricket, a sport he would share with Samuel Beckett and, later, Tom Stoppard. "Every time we evacuated, I took my cricket bat with me." (36) That love of sport has continued in Ping Pong, squash, and, more recently, tennis. At thirteen he had his first love affair.

In his early youth Harold also formed a closely bonded friendship, a "remarkably enjoyable association with five other boys." (Kathleen Tynan, 9) He describes it as "a great relief, I remember, that they knew what I was on about." But the friendship also included, "[r]uthless mutual confrontations," and, as he says of his autobiographical play *The Dwarfs,* derived from his novel by the same name, betrayal. (9) Yet of that group, two who emigrated to Canada remained his closest friends: Henry Woolf, who went on to teach at the University of Saskatchewan, and Morris Wernick, who taught in Sault Sainte Marie and later in Burlington, Ontario.

During those years the neighborhood Hackney Downs Grammar School which Harold attended on scholarship became the locus of his intellectual and artistic pursuits. Never merely a sensitive or shrinking artist, even in school Harold balanced academic and literary production with competitive physical activity and excelled in all areas. He played football and cricket and competed in track, setting school sprinting records. He also wrote lyric poetry and began acting. He played Macbeth and Romeo under English master Joseph Brearley, "a brilliant man…obsessed with the theatre," who recognized his talents and became Harold's acknowledged most valued source of early encouragement. ("Two People in a Room," 35) Harold also exhibited a formidable intellect and wide range of reading. His school essays already display an impassioned interest in the larger world.

Taken together Harold's poems, essays and speeches not only prefigure the scope of his mature work, ranging from the romantic and realistic to the violent, but embrace the two poles of what would become his central concerns: love and destruction. His lyric poems "Dawn" and "O Beloved Maiden" express a young man's desire and concern with love, while his essay "Blood Sports," his speeches "A United Europe Would Be the Only Means of Preventing War" and "War Is Inevitable" address violence and destruction in the world. In at least one early piece describing a cockfight, love and destruction merge, as they would to a quite different end, in his most recent work:

> They are clawed to insanity. Their tongues are limp in blood…. One sinks wearily to the floor and dies. And sharper than the claws of the cock are the nails of a lady digging into the arm of a man. (Kroll, 74)

In addition to love and violent destruction, Harold's early writing also delineated a third area of interest, equally significant: aesthetics. Specifically he focused on literature and film. His school essay "James Joyce" praises Joyce's work from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* through *Finnegans Wake,* and his speeches "Realism and Post-Realism in the French Cinema" and "In View of Its Progress in the Last Decade, the Film Is More Promising in Its Future as an Art Than the Theatre" evince a range of knowledge poised toward the future of that art and his contribution to it. The only academic subjects he says he was interested in pursuing further were English language and literature, and the only universities he seriously considered were Oxford and Cambridge. But to attend university at that time it was necessary to know Latin, and he did not. He left school at sixteen.

He describes himself as "fed up and restless" and says, "I was mostly in love at the time and tied up with that." (Bensky, 354) A first turning point toward his career came when he saw Donald Wolfit in *King Lear.* So deeply impressed was he by his performance, he went back to see the actor-manager of a traveling theatre company perform Lear five more times. That profound impression determined the course of his next decade and the rest of his life.

Harold won a grant to RADA, the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, but did not study seriously. In that "terrible atmosphere of affectation and unreality, ankle bands and golden hair," he skipped class to watch cricket trials; after three months he faked a nervous breakdown and dropped out for months without informing either his parents or those funding him. ("*Caretaker's* Caretaker," 76) He later attended the Central School of Dramatic Arts and again dropped out. But his considerable reading had already taken hold.

When Pinter was asked if the drama schools were of any use he replied, "None whatsoever. It was just living," but he quickly added, "I was reading, for years, a great deal of modern literature, mostly novels." Early in his career he lists Dostoevsky, Joyce, Hemingway, and Henry Miller "at a very early age, and Kafka." (Bensky, 354) Elsewhere he cites the early influence of Dylan Thomas, Dos Passos, George Barker, Yeats, Eliot and Proust. He also mentions William Burroughs, Raymond Chandler and the poets Gerard Manley Hopkins, Philip Larkin, Pope, and Donne. *One Hundred Poems by One Hundred Poets,* Pinter's collection of poetry which he selected and edited, indicates some preferences among

traditional poets. He enjoys reading poetry aloud. Later, during the Broadway production of *The Homecoming,* Pinter brought with him fourteen books, indicating omnivorous reading preferences: Joyce's *Letters;* Alain Robbe-Grillet's *La Maison de Rendez-vous;* Jane Bowles' *Plain Pleasures;* Edna O'Brien's *Casualties of Peace;* Edward Albee's *A Delicate Balance; The Story of O;* Robert Shaw's *The Man in the Glass Booth; The New Poetry,* edited by A.Alvarez; *The Poems of John Donne; Love Poems* by Thomas Hardy; *The Less Deceived* and *The Whitsun Weddings* by Philip Larkin and *The Selected Letters of Dylan Thomas.* ("Two People in a Room," 34) While he denied an early influence of Ionesco or Brecht, claiming he did not know Ionesco's plays or Beckett's, he already knew and deeply admired Beckett's prose. He has expressed admiration for playwrights Edward Albee, Edward Bond, Joe Orton, John Mortimer, N.F. Simpson, Peter Weiss, Heathcote Williams, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, David Storey, Simon Gray, David Mercer, and Ionesco. His deepest admiration was for the late Samuel Beckett with whom he formed a long and close friendship, calling Beckett, in the festschrift *Beckett at Sixty,* "the finest writer now writing." (86) Pinter's more recent reading reflects the ethical concerns that have become the core of his activity and later plays. His list of book recommendations contributed to *The Observer* included: *Night* by Eli Wiesel, *In Dark Time* edited by Nicholas Humphrey and Robert Jay Lifton, *Nunca Mas,* the Argentinean Nation Commission report, *Semites and Anti Semites* by Bernard Lewis and *The Drowned and the Saved* by Primo Levi. He has consistently endorsed *Requiem for a Woman's Soul* by Omar Rivabella. (Knowles 1989, 26) His other loves in art and music include a passion for the art of Francis Bacon and an appreciation of the music of Boulez and Webern, of American Jazz, Miles Davis, Thelonius Monk and of a number of contemporary composers and performers, including the Beatles and Peter Gabriel. He puts Bach at the head of the list. But no biography can trace the artistic influences nor catalogue the prodigious reading of a man who says, "I read all the time." (Bensky, 354) Perhaps most telling are that the only sketches hanging in his study are one of Joyce and one of Beckett. He says that if he had one of Yeats it would hang there, too.

As a reader and writer, he was accorded automatic esteem and the privacy to write in the homes of friends he visited. "Jewish families had a great respect for education," he says and he recalls

writing from about the age of twelve. He remembers once visiting his friend Henry Woolf who was out when he arrived, so the family gave him tea and cakes while he waited, and when he asked for paper, saying, "Something's just come across my mind," he says, "They supplied me with paper and I wrote away. We sat in absolute silence for about forty-five minutes with them smiling and nodding because a good Jewish boy was writing something." (Kroll, 78)

As a Jew, often carrying books and therefore taken for a communist, Harold's confrontation with violence continued after the war during the fascists' return to power. He witnessed elderly Jews attacked on the street. On his way to attend a Jewish club, he encountered gangs carrying broken milk bottles waiting under a railway arch or gathering in the Ridley Road Market near Dalston Junction. *"We* didn't have any milk bottles," he says. (Bensky, 363) He frequently talked his way past the gangs. Sometimes he fought.

After the war when he was called up to do National Service, he refused. He found "the idea of rearming was preposterous" and said, "I was aware of the suffering and of the horror of war, and by no means was I going to subscribe to keeping it going." ("Two People in a Room," 25) His parents who were "wonderfully encouraging" when he became an actor were, however, "worried" when he became a conscientious objector. (Kroll, 76) He had two tribunals, two trials, and was released both times with fines which his father, who respected his position, paid. At his second tribunal, while others brought ministers to speak on their behalf, because Pinter had no religious beliefs by that time, he took his close friend Morris Wernick, and he recalls the "immortal speech" he made to secure his freedom. That intense bond of youthful friendship informs work from the early novel *The Dwarfs* and the plays *The Basement* through *Monologue, Old Times* and *Betrayal* The bond sometimes ends in disillusionment or, as in *Reunion,* in healing. Hans, a young Jewish boy during World War II, now an old man seeking knowledge of his boyhood friend Konradin, a German aristocrat, fears he had become a Nazi. In the end Hans discovers that Konradin had not betrayed their childhood friendship or ideals but was executed as a result of his participation in an attempted death plot against Hitler.

1950–1960: "At That Time Acting Was the Only Way I Could Conceive of Earning Any Money."

For the next decade under the stage name David Baron, Harold Pinter toured England and Ireland, acting in over ninety plays. In response to an advertisement after he left the Central School of Speech and Drama, Pinter joined Anew McMaster's Shakespeare touring company in Ireland, playing Horatio, Bassanio, Edgar, Edmund, Macduff, lago, Cassio, Creon in *Oedipus,* Sir Robert Chiltern *in An Ideal Husband,* Lord Windermere in *Lady Windermere's Fan* and John Worthing in *The Importance of Being Earnest.* In *Mac,* Pinter's tribute to Anew McMaster written after McMaster's death in 1962, Pinter details with characteristic raw honesty the exuberant man with the love Pinter bore his early mentor at a "time acting was the only way I could conceive of earning any money." He says, "I never imagined that writing would gradually take over." (Dean, 312)

Harold Pinter took the name Pinta and da Pinta, possibly his original family name, for his earliest published poetry. *Kullus,* a dialogue, appeared in 1949 in *Poems,* and his first published poems "New Year in the Midlands," "Chandeliers and Shadows," "Rural Idyll" and "European Revels," appeared in *Poetry London,* and "The Second Visit," in *The Window* in 1950. That year he began his novel, *The Dwarfs.*

While he was touring with Anew McMaster, Pinter chanced upon Beckett's writing, beginning what would ten years later become a close friendship:

> I was one of the very first people, believe it or not, in England who came across Beckett. I was in Ireland at the time with Mac and I picked up a copy of *Irish Writing,* a little magazine—the editor was there before me, I must admit. And there was a piece of Beckett's, a fragment from *Watt,* and I'd never heard of him. It really rang in my head. (Bakewell, 631)

Pinter's amazement was immediate:

> I looked at this and went cross-eyed and really saw double and I was amazed…How do we put it? The top ten and all that.

> He's the boy all right. He can write everyone else under the table. But what can I say, Beckett was an absolute knockout for me. It wasn't a matter of saying I see. This is something quite new. This is something I must attend to. It was the most…terrible chord struck in me at the time. I was about nineteen I think. It was terrible, terrible business to read that fragment but I went on to read Beckett a great deal. (Kitchen and Mayersberg, n.p.)

When he returned to London no one had heard of Beckett, and no library possessed a copy of his work. When he finally found a copy of *Murphy* in the Battersea Public Reserve Library in 1949, last signed out in 1939, he took it. "I still have that particular copy. No one missed it." (631)

Later in Paris during the run of *The Caretaker* Roger Blin introduced Pinter to Beckett. Pinter says he had written to Beckett in 1959 "and got an extremely nice letter back. So then I was in a position of meeting him. The longshot of it is I came into his hotel and he was very vigorous and chatty and extremely affable and extremely friendly and we spent the whole *night* together. And that was really…very good. And since then, we've really seen quite a lot of one another." (Gussow, "A Conversation…," 218) During plans to collaborate on a film with Beckett and Ionesco, Pinter said: "He's a wonderful writer, but a very generous man too. Splendid chap. I'm privileged to be working with him on a film." (Kitchen and Mayersberg, n.p.) Beginning with *The Homecoming,* Pinter began to send his work to Beckett, who occasionally made suggestions. Like Beckett, one of the rare playwrights who made few or no changes after writing or during rehearsal, Pinter says he cut only one speech in *Silence*—at Beckett's suggestion but not until he himself heard it in rehearsal.

In 1953, after touring Ireland for almost two years, Pinter joined Donald Wolfit's company where he first met the actress Vivien Merchant, born Ada Brand Thomson.[1] She took Vivien as her stage name out of her admiration for actress Vivien Leigh and took Merchant after her brother, a Merchant Marine. Pinter later joined other repertory companies touring in provincial theatres in England throughout the fifties. Originally hired as a juvenile, Pinter confesses he was "quite good at being sinister in a smiling way." (Kroll, 78) When asked what influence his acting had on his plays Pinter

replied, "I think I certainly developed some feeling for construction, which believe it or not, is important for me, and for speakable dialogue," adding, "I had a pretty good notion in my earlier plays of what would shut an audience up; not so much what would make them laugh; that I had no idea about." ("Writing for Myself," 173)

Commenting on Pinter's comedy, the late Joseph Losey, who directed several of Pinter's screenplays, pointed out that Pinter's humor is often overlooked. One of Pinter's closest friends, the late Robert Shaw, called Pinter himself "a mixture of Groucho Marx and T.S.Eliot." (Kroll, 81) Pinter, at that time, named Jack Benny as the comedian he most admired: "I saw Benny thirty years ago at the Palladium. And I've never forgotten it—his timing, his pauses, his silences." (81) But when asked if he aims for laugh lines when he writes, Pinter says he does not. Asked if he ever laughs while working on a play, he confesses sometimes, when he is writing.

Clearly he appreciates his own humor and wishes others to do so. His decision to produce *The Hothouse,* which had remained unproduced for thirty years, was based on the play's laughter-producing comedy. He found when he reread the play "as a stranger" that he "laughed quite a lot," and he says, "in consequence I thought of bringing it out." (Gussow, "Harold Pinter: I Started with Two People in a Room," IV, 7) He had a similar reaction to seeing *A Night Out,* a play he had earlier deemed not very successful, but more recently when he saw it again, he laughed a lot.

Asked to comment upon the observation that he had invented the comedy of menace or the comedy of dread, he denied the whole question of invention: "Anything one writes can't be new," yet while he assents, "You've just got your individual way of saying it, what has been said and must have been said for centuries;" he adds, "There is comedy in life and there is menace in life, and I think the two things certainly go together—to a certain extent." Importantly, he cautions, "But there comes a point where things cease to be funny." (Tynan, n.p.)

Pinter acknowledges that his comedy, informed by terror, links the comic and tragic through the horror and absurdity beneath:

> I think what I try to do in my plays is get to this recognisable reality of the absurdity of what we do and how we behave and how we speak. The point is people laugh at absurdity, because it is recognisable and secondly it verges on the unknown. We

> don't quite know where this absurdity is fixed. Of course it isn't fixed anywhere. The fact that it's verging on the unknown leads us to the next step which seems to occur in my plays; there's a kind of horror about it and I think that this horror and absurdity go together. (Wildman, n.p.)

He believes his work is "funnier than is generally acknowledged," by critics and wishes audiences might "have been encouraged to enjoy themselves." (Nightingale, n.p.)

Meanwhile as a young actor in the early 1950s, Pinter continued writing hundreds of poems, short prose pieces including "The Examination," getting about a dozen pieces published in literary magazines. Between morning rehearsals and evening performances, he says he was able "to get down with considerable enjoyment in the afternoon to writing." (Tynan, n.p.)

Pinter gained much else besides "an ear for speakable dialogue" and "a sense of construction" from his time as an actor. In his praise for his mentor Anew McMaster, he reveals some of the many values that accrued to him as an actor: from respect for Mac's business acumen and admiration for his art of acting, to some of the deepest values his own writing embraces. Pinter praises Mac's practicality, describing him as a man who regarded himself as "a working man," as Pinter would later describe himself. Like Pinter who continues to teach his audiences and to stretch the form at nearly every turn, Mac "respected his occupation and never stopped learning about it, from himself and from others." He adds:

> He was not any kind of dreamer. He was remote from the Celtic Twilight. He kept a close eye on the box-office receipts. (*Mac,* 17; cf., Pete's argument in the novel *The Dwarfs* with Mark's saying, "I've got nothing but contempt for the till." [79])

Pinter was deeply impressed with the precision, the accuracy, the artistry of both McMaster and Wolfit. He recalls McMaster's Othello as "the finest Othello I have seen." Though "his age was always a mystery," he thinks he was in his sixties:

> But on stage in *Othello* he stood well over six foot, naked to the waist, his gestures complete, final, nothing jagged, his movement of the utmost fluidity and yet of the utmost precision: stood there, dead in the center of the role, and the great

> sweeping symphonic playing would begin, the rare tension and release within him, the arrest, the swoop, the savagery, the majesty and repose. His voice was unique: in my experience of an unequaled range. (*Mac,* 84)

Of Wolfit's Oedipus at Colonus Pinter speaks of the same kind of "precision" that "impressed" him in a gesture Wolfit made with a cloak: "He waited for *the* moment, which was always the same moment, nevertheless the tension waiting for it each night was always pronounced. What got me was the accuracy of these people in what they were doing, their instinct for the moment when things were to happen." (Bakewell, 82) That regard for accuracy, precision, and "the moment when things would happen" translated directly into his own writing.

But Pinter idealizes, sentimentalizes, and romanticizes no one, neither his mentors, his characters, nor himself. He has referred to himself as a "Bastard. A bastard human being." (Nightingale, n.p.) He acknowledges that Mac "was capable, of course, of many indifferent and offhand performances." (*Mac,* 12) Pinter's unfiltered honesty toward both positive and negative qualities in the living people he admired informs his greatest characters, in fact, nearly all his characters. That ability to encompass and to hold in tension those opposing qualities functions in his work like a Hegelian dialectic but without a synthesis. Mac, as Pinter recalls him, embodies extremes of ugliness and beauty. Pinter allows us to see Mac at the outset without his teeth and at his roaring worst yet enhances appreciation for the respect, admiration, and the love he had for the man, for his vitality, which all by itself is portrayed as a virtue, and for his overwhelming generosity—Mac's "true liberality of spirit." That vitality (which informs Pinter's Max and Mac in *The Homecoming)* and that generosity, traditionally regarded as the crowning virtue, together form the capstone of the ethic in Pinter's work:

> He was a realist. But he possessed a true liberality of spirit. He was humble. He was a devout anti-puritan. He was a very great pisstaker. He was a great actor and we who worked with him were the luckiest people in the world and loved him. (*Mac,* 19)

In 1956 Pinter again met Vivien Merchant, this time playing opposite as Rochester to her Jane Eyre. That year they were married. A year later he wrote his first play, *The Room*.

Pinter had earlier mentioned the play to his friend, actor Henry Woolf, then a student in the drama department of Bristol University. When Woolf solicited the play for production, Pinter said he hadn't written it yet and couldn't possibly write it in time. He wrote it in four days.

Pinter's first dramatic image came at a party in London when he was taken to a room where he saw one loquacious, literate man serving food to another man, burly and silent. Those two people became Rose and Burt in *The Room*.

Until that production, aside from his work published in literary magazines, only a few friends had ever seen what he had written, and Pinter had never seen anything of his performed. He describes the experience of sitting in the audience the first time as "remarkable," adding, "I wanted to piss very badly throughout the whole thing, and at the end I dashed out behind the bicycle shed." (Bensky, 351–2) Afterwards he says, "I was profoundly disoriented and got totally drunk." (352) His excitement, he confesses, was coupled with violence: "They found me in the lavatory attacking this actor who was twice my size. It was just the shock of the birth of one's work in a public arena." (Kroll, 78) He says, "[B]ut what I'm really talking about is the dizziness of the event to a young man. I never quite recovered from that. I realized I was a marked man." (Schiff, 303) He adds, [however], "Watching first nights, though I've seen quite a few by now, is never any better. It's a nerve-wracking experience. It's not a question of whether the play goes well or badly. It's not the audience reaction, it's *my* reaction." (Bensky, 352) The play was later produced in London at the Hampstead Theatre Club, directed by Pinter starring Vivien Merchant as Rose. But Pinter was "very encouraged by the response of that university audience," yet he admits that "no matter what the response had been I would have written *The Birthday Party,* I know that." (Bensky, 352)

In January 1958 *The Room* was entered in a festival of university drama where the late *Times* critic Harold Hobson, one of the judges, was so impressed he reviewed the play. When Michael Codron heard about it, he asked at once if Pinter had a full-length work. Pinter had just finished *The Birthday Party.* Although Pinter confesses he nearly gave up on it "because the characters were so horrible," he finished it and went on that same year to write *The Dumb Waiter,* which premiered at Frankfurt-am-Main, Germany, in

1959. (Tynan, n.p.) Like *The Room,* his plays *The Birthday Party, The Caretaker, The Homecoming,* and several early sketches also began in biographical remembrance. *The Caretaker* was informed by several tramps Pinter had met, one in particular who he says, "did most of the talking when I saw him." (Bensky, 353) *The Homecoming* began with a friend who had gone abroad to teach, then married and had three children without telling his father. "Then one day I knew he was going to come home and have to tell his father." (Bakewell, 631) But as in all his work the initial image transforms to communicate a point far beyond the simple story line and, like an umbilical cord, falls away: "When it *does* happen, the image itself—I mean the real thing—becomes dead very quickly." (631)

In 1957 Pinter wrote *The Birthday Party,* triggered on tour by filthy digs he shared with a young man who claimed to have been a concert pianist. When Pinter asked the man why he stayed, he replied, "There's nowhere to go." (Bakewell, 631) That man informed the character Stanley; their slovenly landlady became Meg. After a successful tour of Oxford and Cambridge, *The Birthday Party* produced by Michael Codron opened at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, London, to be "massacred" by the critics, with one exception: Harold Hobson.

Typical of the early reviews was the bewilderment critics felt at the mystery, anything that could not be easily categorized and explained: "Sitting through *The Birthday Party* at the Lyric, Hammersmith, is like trying to solve a crossword puzzle where every vertical clue is designed to put you off the horizontal. It will be best enjoyed by those who believe that obscurity is its own reward…Not nearly as witty as Simpson's The *Resounding Tinkle* nor nearly as chilling as Ionesco's *The Lesson*…." (Shulman, 9)

Hobson, however, recognized the mystery as the play's strength: "The fact that no one can say precisely what it is about, or give the address from which the intruding Goldberg and McCann come, or say precisely why it is that Stanley is so frightened by them is, of course, one of its greatest merits. It is exactly in this vagueness that its spine-chilling quality lies. If we knew what Miles had done, *The Turn of the Screw* would fade away. As it is Mr Pinter has learned the lesson of the Master. Henry James would recognize him as an equal." (Hobson, 11)

Yet Pinter consistently insists he has "never willfully hidden any piece of information out of whim or mischief":

> I learn about the characters from what they say. You can't force characters to say something that would be untrue to them. Then it flops. You're inventing it. It's so obviously phony. If I'm going to hide information or force a man to say something which he wouldn't say, the whole thing would drop to pieces at my feet. (Grist, 80)

The mystery in Pinter's work conveys a deeper philosophy. To establish truth, Pinter, like the twentieth-century scientist, shuns causal relationships (simplistic explanations which distort and falsify) in favor of high correlations which create mystery and ambiguity that express his more complex view of time and reality:

> The most we know for sure is that the things which have happened have happened in a certain order: any connections we think we see, or choose to make, are pure guesswork. Life is so much more mysterious than plays make it out to be. And it is this mystery which fascinates me: what happens between words and what happens when no words are spoken. (John Russell Taylor, "Accident," 184)

American playwright David Freeman praises the realistic use of mystery and asserts it is difficult to achieve:

> Whenever the apparent action becomes mysterious but still retains a realistic surface, we are drawn to it. To make a character both real and mysterious is difficult, and it makes magic on the stage. (A letter, by permission of the author)

When Hobson wrote his now-famous review of *The Birthday Party,* aware of the bad notices and not even sure the play would still be running when his review appeared, he believed Pinter's name and the play would be seen elsewhere:

> Deliberately, I am willing to risk whatever reputation I have as a judge of plays by saying that *The Birthday Party* is not a Fourth, not even a Second, but a First, and that Mr Pinter, on the evidence of this work, possesses the most original, disturbing and arresting talent in theatrical London…. (11; ellipses mine)

Hobson's analysis bears rereading as one of the most perceptive not only of the surface tension but of the deeper values and vision communicated in the subtext:

> There is only one quality that is essential to a play. It is the quality that can be found both in *Hamlet* and in *Simple Spyman*. A play must entertain; it must hold the attention; it must give pleasure. Unless it does that it is useless for stage purposes. No amount of intellect, of high moral intent, or of beautiful writing is of the slightest avail if a play is not in itself theatrically interesting. Theatrically speaking *The Birthday Party* is absorbing. It is witty. Its characters…fascinating. The play, which consists, with all kinds of verbal arabesques and echoing explorations of memory and fancy, of the springing of a trap, is first rate. The whole play has the same atmosphere of delicious, impalpable and hair-raising terror which makes *Turn of the Screw* one of the best stories in the world. (11)

Hobson recognized that at depth the characters faced the void:

> Mr Pinter has got hold of a primary fact of existence. We live on the verge of disaster. One sunny day whilst Peter May is making a century at Lords against Middlesex…and the old men are dozing in the Long Room, a hydrogen bomb may explode. This is one sort of threat. But Mr Pinter's is of a subtler sort. It breathes in the air. It cannot be seen, but it enters the room every time the door is opened. There is something in your past—it does not matter what—which will catch up with you. Though you go to the uttermost parts of the earth, and hide yourself in the most obscure lodgings in the least popular town, one day there is a possibility that two men will appear. They will be looking for you and you cannot get away. And someone will be looking for *them,* too. There is terror everywhere. (11; ellipses mine)

Hobson understood that the plight of both pursued and pursuer was identical and further appreciated not only the principal source of the play's delight, its comic wit, but the comedy's connection to the horror it makes endurable:

> Meanwhile it is best to make jokes (Mr Pinter's jokes are very good) and to play blind man's buff, and to bang on a toy drum, anything to forget the slow approach of doom. (11)

The play closed after a week. That year Pinter's son Daniel was born.

The work of that third decade of Pinter's life spanning his early to his late twenties had provided the proving ground that defined the values of the rest of his work. His novel *The Dwarfs* written in his early twenties already laid out his artistic demands aesthetically and ethically. The novel centers on the close friendship of three young men, Pete, Mark and Len, and Pete's girlfriend Virginia, whom he slowly rejects in his attempt to educate her, till Mark appropriates her, betraying Pete. Through Pete, the novel defines the self through action at three levels: in Pete's relation to himself, to friends, and, finally, to the larger world.

It is impossible to argue that the novel, as a work of fiction, articulates Pinter's aesthetic intentions. Nor does the novel offer an ethical treatise. Yet many of the subtle issues of ethics and aesthetics, later internalized and dramatized in his plays, are given expression only here in his writing. The topic, of friendship betrayed, launches the discussion that marks the beginning point defining the aesthetics and ethics, two major issues that would fuse in Pinter's later work in a single linked topic: love and justice.

When Mark betrays Pete's friendship confessing he slept with Virginia, Pete slams Mark's "morality": his "bedmanners" and "integrity." Yet Pete acknowledges that Mark's morality has no bearing on his own:

> But it's your integrity that's in question and you haven't proved that you're worth it. (181)

Pete however, considers himself as "worth it" and views his own survival as a virtue; were he killed he asks if it "might be not only an overwhelming disaster for me, but an irreplaceable lack in the sum total of human knowledge, and an irreparably lost opportunity for creating good?" (181) Pete might be voicing the aspiration of any emerging writer. While Pete possesses the insight to appreciate Mark's betrayal as resulting from "frustration and hate," he notes his own duty to survive "at all costs," and ends in linking his lost love with justice: "It was a question of overriding justice." (181)

Pete's high self-regard requires of a friend an equal. But when Pete asks Mark if he chose him as a friend, "Because you considered me your equal?" he himself answers, "Not by a long chalk." (176) Pete places high demands on friendship insisting, "The function of a friend," must be "that of an ambassador to yourself from yourself," adding, "Then he's a man of your soul." (177)

If equality is the basis for friendship, Pete cites his own admiration as a quality he brings, yet he adds to the gratitude he feels for their friendship a caveat:

> But if you get inside and eat my stomach I will always bite back—in spades. (179)

Pete moves from the topic of friendship, where ethics are played out privately, to the subjects of aesthetics and public ethics. Speaking from the aesthetic center of the novel's controversy, Pete also places rigorous demands on every element in art from the smallest to the largest:

> Every particle of a work of art should crack a nut, or help form a pressure that'll crack the final nut. (77)

Where an actual nut cracker "gives off heat and friction which is incidental," art must burn clean without excess heat or friction. But at every point Pete ties his demand for economy, image and structure to the larger idea:

> Each idea must possess stringency and economy and the image, if you like, that expresses it must stand in exact correspondence and relation to the idea. Only then can you speak of utterance and only then can you speak of achievement. (77)

Already conscious of the function of form, Pete as spokesperson for the nascent aesthetic in Pinter's work, nicely defines what is later described here by the fractal geometry, the remarkable structure of Pinter's plays where each momentary friction point reflects the conflict manifested in the work as a whole (see 4ff). The resultant resonance of that structure gives richness to the subtext and points to the larger end Pinter's economy serves. That larger end, as Pete demands, situates economy and efficiency within the context of the relationship of the play's action to a changing world.

Throughout, Pete opposes mere abstraction and argues for grounding ideas in life. One great source of the power in Pinter's plays comes from his ability to allow audience identification with the smallest to the largest emotions, intentions and actions of each character within very specific situations—not abstract theory. Pete accuses Mark of not "paying enough attention to what goes on around you." When Mark asks if he means "headlines," Pete says, "There's more to it than that." (78) He accuses Mark of "operating on life and not in it," (79) reversing Teddy's admonition to his family in *The Homecoming,* to "operate on things and not in things." (61) Although Teddy accuses them of getting lost in life, he has removed himself from life to the abstract world of theory.

If, as Chekhov says, in comedy characters overcome their weaknesses, Pinter's plays redefine both comedy and tragedy. His characters neither overcome nor even acknowledge their weaknesses, yet Pinter's expression remains comic. Beneath the deadly seriousness he recognizes his essentially comic take on life informs what he writes:

> If I write about myself or you, we're going to be funny. Everything is funny. The greatest earnestness is funny. Even tragedy is funny. The point about tragedy is that it is no longer funny. It's funny, and then it becomes no longer funny. (Wildman, n.p.)

Pinter never uses humor to distance himself or his audience from pain or suffering or from confronting the deeper and essentially tragic vision of life. Instead the comedy leads an audience directly to that inescapable point where it is necessary to confront the worst.

Not only is Pinter's comedy throughout informed by the terror it makes bearable, but as in Shakespeare's great tragedies, his plays release tragedy's special power of "transfiguring all that dread." Pinter describes that relationship between tragedy and transfiguration in *Mac* as he recalls McMaster's performances of Othello and Lear:

> [H]e understood and expressed totally the final tender clarity that is under the storm, the blindness, the anguish. For me his acting at these times embodied the idea of Yeats' line: "They know that Hamlet and Lear are gay, Gaity transfiguring all that dread." (*Mac,* 15)

Pinter concludes, "Mac entered into this tragic gaiety naturally and inevitably." (15)

Through Pete as a voice for aesthetic values, Pinter like George Bernard Shaw measured himself against Shakespeare, but unlike Shaw remained wholly grounded in life, took Shakespeare as a touchstone for some basic values, but saw that the worldview had shifted. That paradigm shift requires not merely a revision of ideas and intention but of action.

Pinter, however, also appreciated the powerful forces opposing his characters' actions from within and without. If in comedy characters overcome weaknesses, Pete, discussing Shakespeare's morality, understands that in tragedy, (as in many of Pinter's plays) characters are overcome by their strengths:

> Leave Hamlet out of it. He's another story. But the others, Othello, Macbeth and Lear, are men whose great virtues are converted by their very superfluity into faults. (132)

In *Tragedy and the Theory of Drama,* Elder Olsen similarly defines the classic tragic hero as "hoist by his own petard," destroyed not by his weaknesses but by his own strengths.

Yet in Pinter's plays, the characters' refusal to recognize their own "territorial limitations" resulting from their lack of self-knowledge also destroys them. The test of virtue, as Pete knows, can come only in action which is then evaluated "by common justice":

> And when they have to act…, they're found to be lacking. When they're called to account by common justice they're wrong. (132; ellipses mine)

Paradoxically, Pete recognizes:

> At the same time, of course, they're right. They're right according to our admiration and sympathy. But that's to look at them in no way morally. (132)

In *The Dwarfs* Pete explicitly introduces two concepts central to the ethic throughout Pinter's work: responsibility and action.

> We're sympathizing with what they are when unhampered by the responsibility of action. (132)

While the emphasis on responsibility recurs throughout Pinter's interviews and essays, it remains almost unspoken in any of Pinter's plays and appears only by negation, by its absence, its failure, in the dramatic action. But Pete also understands why in Shakespeare's plays characters' virtue tested in action fails:

> The necessity of action smothers their virtue. They cease to be morally thinking creatures. Lear, Macbeth and Othello are all forced, in one way or another, to account for what they do and they all fail to do it. (132)

Pete, like Pinter, refuses to view "good and evil as abstractions" apart from specific human circumstances of life, or to see art as a refuge, sanctuary, or an activity which sets the artist, hero, or audience apart from the world, even the mundane, practical matters basic to existence. Pete finds Mark's saying, "I've got nothing but contempt for the till," hardly admirable. Insisting that Mark's notion of morality must be grounded both in his present surroundings and in the larger community, Pete castigates Mark for his solipsism: "You can't live safely tucked up in a test tube." (77) He then deduces that same point from his observations of Shakespeare's greatest tragic characters' morality nested within the larger social system:

> All they can see is the natural process of cause and effect working in a system of which they have ceased to be a part. They fall away from this system by lack of a social virtue. By not thinking for others. (133)

The lack of "social virtue" and the failure of "thinking for others" contrasts with Pinter's own compassion, his ability so completely to enter the hearts and heads of all his characters. Pinter's own most powerful destructors, like Shakespeare's, are limited in their ability to do so:

> In each case, the initial thinking for others was superficial and unrealized, delusive. Their unique qualities gave them, if you like, the power of dispensation over others. So they thought. (133)

But Pete cautions:

> [A]s all things are qualified by relevant circumstances, so they considered they were not responsible to a code of morality which did not take them into account. (133)

While Pete insists that those in power must see themselves as a part of the rest of life rather than apart from it, he also recognizes Shakespeare's tragic characters' paradoxical inability to disassociate from the "machine"—unexamined, received morality—as a source of their own destruction:

> Where these geezers slip up is that they try to overcome the machine of which they remain, whether they like it or not, a part. The machine, if you like, is morality, the standards of the majority. It seems to me that Shakespeare justifies both the man and the machine. (133)

Pinter's work justifies neither the man nor the machine, yet in presenting with compassion both those who support and oppose the machine, his plays dramatize insights into a central cause for almost all human destruction.

Pinter remains neither an apologist for the machine—the morality of the majority and its representatives wherever the machine requires addressing—nor for the man who fails to see, to know his own limitations and, failing to address those limitations when he can, is destroyed.

If Shakespeare does justify both the man and the machine, Mark wonders, "How can it be said that he's a moral poet?" Mark himself answers by defending Shakespeare as nondidactic, not explicitly a moralist: "I mean, look what he does. Look at the way he behaves. He never uses a communication cord or a lifebelt, and what's more, he never suggests he's got one handy for your use or his." (133) Pinter's work offers neither a "lifebelt" nor a message. Mark further praises Shakespeare as a dramatist too complex to make moral judgments, which he terms a form of bankruptcy:

> How can moral judgments be applied when you consider how many directions he travels at once? Hasn't he got enough troubles…? [H]e turns down blind alleys, he stews in his own juice, and he nearly always ends up by losing all hands. But the

> fabric, mate, never breaks. The tightrope is never at less than an even stretch. He keeps in business, that's what, and if he started making moral judgments he'd go bankrupt like the others. (133)

But it is Pete who drives the ethical point further—that Shakespeare did not foist a prescriptive ethic, an ideal like a template upon his characters:

> [H]e didn't measure the man up against the idea and give you hot tips on the outcome. (133–4)

Pinter returns the discussion to friendship as Pete drives the question of responsibility further and at the same time opens discussion of friendship to aesthetics and ethics by articulating the way real friendship is destroyed when an ideal ("so…they can fit your requirements") is imposed:

> Where they fail to do so, contempt, by your own logic, is the only outcome. It's their epitaph. They become an academic exercise in failure. Not because they themselves have necessarily failed, but simply that in attempting to retain what is their own, they have failed you. (176)

Yet Pete does not jettison all criteria for morality, but praises Shakespeare for avoiding abstractions:

> —He laid bare, that's all. I'd defy any man who said he saw good and evil as abstractions. He didn't. (134)

Pete concedes that like Shakespeare "we must retain some standards by which to measure the whole business":

> If we had no terms of reference, the experience would be lost. (134)

That morality which undergoes its severest test only in action, Pete acknowledges, is likely to obliterate "our own moral sense."

> And if you take that obliteration as bad, you can call Shakespeare an immoral poet. (134)

Pete reverses his original position on Shakespeare as a moral poet and introduces to "responsibility" and "action" the third important term in the ethic—"choice":

> *[A]s a man of choice he's finally obliged to accept responsibility for his actions. You could say then, that in so far as he points that out, he is a moral poet.* (134; italics mine)

It is at least in that same sense—through a character's responsibility for choice and action—that Pinter is a moral poet. Like Shakespeare's characters, his are attacked on all sides as well as by forces unknown and unknowable.

When Pete next reverses position on Shakespeare as a moral poet it might be tempting for an American to take Pete's seeming contradiction and quote Whitman's: "Do I contradict myself?/Very well I contradict myself./(I am large. I contain multitudes.)" (76) But Pinter's seeming contradictions, like the seeming polar opposites of his characters, are of a different order, and again reflect, like a Hegelian dialectic, an ability to embrace and contain opposites. Yet, unlike Hegel, Pinter provides no stated synthesis, no comfortable resting position that clarifies a correct position between those two poles.

Opposing dichotomies remain unreconciled, not as implacable oppositions but as acknowledged extremes in all human intention and action that are not sanitized by an idealized, sentimental vision or fiction. Moreover, as Pete concludes, one's weaknesses do not diminish the validity of one's strengths: "Your faults don't make your virtues any less true." (136) Refusing abstraction as distortion and simplification, Pinter allows within each character both paired opposites—the strengths and weaknesses—to stand *within a specific context* allowing audiences, as an equal partner, to draw their own conclusions.

In a key observation Pete opposes mere theory untested in action as sterile:

> Well, I don't see how good and evil can be defined by contemplation of the results of particular actions. Good is a productive state of mind, if you like, as well as a social virtue. But a productive state of mind in some circumstances may become quite sterile in others. Good and evil, they're both qualified by circumstances. (132)

Like Kant, who points out that we have only three choices in life, a choice of attitude, intention and action, Pete assesses that mere attitude ("contemplation of the results of particular actions," to define good or evil) or intention ("a productive state of mind") is insufficient to define morality without action ("a social virtue") which requires social intercourse with the world. Pete concludes that good and evil can be "neither arbitrary nor static." (132)

No moral relativist, Pinter draws the distinction between the standards working within a dynamic "living moment" and that desire to fix statically or to supply an abstract moral precept (which can neither apply in difficult cases nor remain standing unqualified by circumstances). The final emphasis in Pinter's work remains on action—the living moment. Pete says: "The point is, I want living to uphold me." (136) He concludes, "Experience is the testing ground." (178)

Like Oedipus, Lear and Othello, Pinter's characters, though they may fail in their responsibility, are revealed as responsible beings through their action and, in conveying that responsibility to the audience, dignify the human position in the world.

1960–1970: "When You Can't Write, You Feel You've Been Banished from Yourself."

Pinter's emphasis on action carried over to his own life. His own choices and action during the early years of his writing career required a test no less courageous than any his characters faced at that time. But where his characters often retreat to seek static comfort and shelter in attempts to save themselves, Pinter took risks to preserve his art.

In the wake of the disastrous reception of *The Birthday Party,* the BBC's Donald McWhinnie called Pinter into his office to say he had just read *The Birthday Party* and was deeply disturbed by the play. He then offered Pinter a commission. Although Pinter wrote *A Slight Ache,* which aired in July with Vivien Merchant as Flora, and also *A Night Out,* which aired in March with Vivien Merchant as Sally and with Pinter himself as Seeley, Pinter rejected McWhinnie's offer of the full-time employment that regular writing for television

offered. In 1960, at a time when Pinter was living in a basement flat in Notting Hill Gate, writing with a baby on his knee and, when unemployed as an actor, working as a caretaker, doorman, snow shoveler, street salesman and dance-hall bouncer, he turned down an opportunity almost any other writer would jump at and risked what few would. Pinter and his wife, who had just been offered acting positions at the Alexandria Theatre in Birmingham, moved instead to Chiswick in order to remain in London for their work. Although Pinter was most grateful for McWhinnie's interest in his work, when McWhinnie offered him a secure income from television contracts, Pinter refused the offer to maintain his freedom as a writer.

The decision immediately proved correct. In 1959 his first screenplay from the Robin Maugham novel *The Servant had* opened in London, launching Pinter's film-writing career. He read his short prose fiction "The Examination" on BBC *Third Programme, The Collection,* with Vivien Merchant as Stella, opened at the Aldwych Theatre, London, and he received the Italia prize for best television play. The following year, 1960, beginning his next decade in theatre as a playwright, *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Room,* with Vivien Merchant as Rose, were produced as a double bill at Hampstead Theatre Club, which remains a staging ground for his work, and later transferred to the Royal Court Theatre. That same year *The Birthday Party* and *A Night Out* were produced on television; *The Caretaker* premiered at the Arts Theatre Club, then transferred to the West End, Duchess Theatre, and opened at Dusseldorf Schauspielhaus. That year *The Dwarfs* as a radio play was broadcast on the BBC. *Night School,* originally written for radio, was successfully broadcast on television in 1960 with Vivien Merchant as Sally but withheld by Pinter from publication in collections until 1967 when it appeared in revised form. *The Birthday Party* opened in 1960 at Actors' Workshop, San Francisco. In London, Pinter won *The Evening Standard Award* for *The Caretaker,* which opened the following year at the Theatre de Lutece, Paris, and in New York at the Lyceum Theatre, where it went on to win the Page 1 Award of the Newspaper Guild of New York.

The Caretaker's critical acclaim reversed Pinter's fortunes as a playwright. During the next five years he would continue to win prizes, write and produce short plays, and write for the screen. In 1965 the film *The Caretaker,* directed by William Friedkin, starring

Alan Bates, Robert Shaw and Donald Pleasence won the Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival, a Certificate of Merit at the Edinburgh Festival, and the next year opened in New York under the title *The Guest*. That year he read the short story "Tea Party" on the BBC *Third Programme* and also won the British Screenwriters' Guild award for *The Servant,* written originally for director Michael Anderson. Adapted from the novel by Robin Maugham, *The Servant* was directed by Joseph Losey and featured Dirk Bogarde as Barrett the servant, Sarah Miles as Vera, and playwright Alun Owen as the curate. He wrote his screenplays as he did his plays—claiming he did not know how the script would end till he finished it. From the beginning of his film career, Pinter insisted on *carte blanche,* and he used his screenplays to explore concerns expressed in his plays, often in heightened form.

But it would not be for five years after *The Caretaker,* until 1965, that his next full-length play, *The Homecoming,* was written and produced. That intervening gap between full-length plays would set a writing pattern that continues to haunt him to the present. Not a daily writer, Pinter writes intuitively, only when an image, inspiration or voice strikes. The interim periods have remained a kind of purgatory for him. Adapting novels for film and television has remained one way to continue writing throughout his career.

During that five-year period Pinter did, however, continue to write plays that have become standard one-act fare. In 1963 *The Lover,* with Vivien Merchant as Sarah, was broadcast by Associated Redifusion and won the Prix Italia for Television Drama at Naples, then opened with *The Dwarfs,* adapted from his unpublished novel, at the Arts Theatre Club, London. Nine sketches, *Last to Go, Applicant, Request Stop, That's Your Trouble, That's All, Interview, Trouble in the Works, The Black and White,* and *Dialogue for Three,* several with Vivien Merchant, were broadcast in 1964 on BBC *Third Programme*. Although Vivien Merchant performed most of the major female roles in his plays from *The Room* through *The Homecoming* and *Old Times,* when Pinter was asked whether he wrote those parts specifically for her, he said never, that she was cast just because she was a very good actress.

"Good writing excites me and makes life worth living," Pinter says, (Bensky, 364) adding, "I regard myself as nothing more than a working man." ("Speech: Hamburg," 3) He works organically, from an initial image, never plotting out in advance, but he requires that