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PETER RABY
Homerton College, Cambridge



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I

AUSTIN QUIGLEY

Pinter, politics and postmodernism (I)

Pinter's plays have fascinated many people over the years for many reasons, not the least of which is their capacity to resist large-scale generalisation. The emphasis in the plays on complex and diverse local detail makes it very difficult to argue that the plays as a group exemplify the large general truths of any existing theory about the nature of society, personality, culture, spirituality, anthropology, history or anything else of similar scope. This is not to say that insights into the plays cannot be derived from all these sources. Indeed they can, as several astute Pinter critics have demonstrated. The trouble is that these various perspectives serve best as ways into the texture of the plays rather than as summations of the implications of that texture, and if excessively relied upon, they begin to obscure what they seek to clarify.

Stoppard uses an illuminating phrase to characterise the baffling experiences of the leading characters in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* when he describes them as constantly being intrigued without ever quite being enlightened.¹ That sense of being fascinated by something we do not fully understand is, as Van Laan has argued, an irreducible aspect of the experience of Pinter's plays, and we have, I think, over the years come to recognise that the role of the critic is to increase the sense of enlightenment without diminishing the sense of intrigue.² To insist on defending the intrigue against any enlightenment is, of course, to reduce all experience of a play to the first experience, to insist on each play's inviolable particularity and thus effectively to abandon the task of criticism. To insist upon full enlightenment is to erase the sense of intrigue, to allow the critical perspective to supplant the play, and thus effectively to undermine the play's capacity to function as a Pinter play. What we appear to need from criticism is the kind of enlightenment that clarifies and enhances the subtlety of the intrigue rather than the kind that, in explaining the nature of the intrigue, explains it away.

These issues are not without their significance for the work of any playwright, but there is something about Pinter plays that makes the balance between intrigue and enlightenment particularly difficult for criticism to get

right. And Pinter's intermittent forays into the realm of political commentary have served to make it even more difficult.³ Should we adopt the political guidance he sometimes offers us and announce that we have finally found the enlightening larger picture of which all the plays' complexities are simply constituent parts, or should we be defending his early plays against their author's belated desire to convert them into illustrations of political oppression and abuse of authority?

Before we surrender to the urge to reinvent phrases like 'the personal is the political', we should remember that response to such slogans in the past has included lengthy arguments about the meaning of the terms 'personal' and 'political'. But just as important is the often overlooked issue of the meaning of the word 'is'. Do we mean it in the sense that $2 + 2$ is 4, a sense of total equivalence, or do we mean it in the sense of Pinter *is* tall, i.e. he is *among other things* tall? Is all of the personal political, most of it, or just some of it? As far as Pinter's plays are concerned, it is important to note that even as he begins to argue in the 1980s that many of his earlier plays were, indeed, political, he exempts from this claim *Landscape*, *Silence*, *Old Times* and *Betrayal*.⁴ And if whole plays can be exempted from the claim that the personal is the political, it would follow that whatever the political component of the other plays, they are not necessarily only or even centrally political.

Leaving to one side Pinter's comments on these matters, it is well to remind ourselves of the way in which literary theory, in one of its rare enlightened phases, used to draw attention to the dangers of excessive explanatory claims. One discipline or mode of enquiry after another was able to make foundational claims on the basis of the argument that its material and concerns had a bearing on almost every aspect of our lives. Thus it could be claimed that everything is a matter of history, or that everything is a matter of economics, or that everything is a matter of psychology, or that everything is a matter of language and so on. The recognition that these claims can be made with equal conviction and justification by a variety of equally convinced groups should temper the enthusiasm for currently competing claims that everything is a matter of politics, or of power, or of gender, or of race, or of culture, or of the postmodern era, or of any other factor that helps constitute the multi-faceted complexity of our lives.

Though such enthusiasm should be tempered, it should not, of course, be eradicated because all of these frameworks have something to contribute – but preferably if developed in the context of what the other ones might also, in varying degrees, have to offer. Pinter's 1980s enthusiasm for the politics of art should likewise be neither overvalued nor undervalued. It simply asks to be put in the appropriate perspective, along with his 1960s efforts to distance each from the other.⁵ The trajectory of Pinter's avowed interest in political

issues seems to have become one of oscillation between undervaluing and overvaluing the political, an oscillation fortunately by no means as visible in the plays themselves, for reasons that can be abstracted from his political comments.

Pinter's initial hostility towards politics was largely a hostility towards institutional politics and politicians because of their tendency to indulge in reductive social analysis.⁶ Built into institutional politics, he felt, was the need to establish positions and programmes that could earn widespread support among large numbers of very different people. Such procedures require simplification and a search for common denominators. Politicians consequently tend to display a readiness to settle for what is currently possible rather than to register a sustained determination to deal with all the imponderables of the actual or to confront the intractability of the necessary. Pinter's early refusal to get involved in political matters was thus born not of indifference to social problems but of serious doubt that political channels, political arguments and political action could serve to ameliorate social problems rather than exacerbate them. When he warned us in 1962 to 'Beware of the writer who puts forward his concern for you to embrace, who leaves you in no doubt of his worthiness, his usefulness, his altruism, who declares that his heart is in the right place, and ensures that it can be seen in full view, a pulsating mass where his characters ought to be', he is not just indicating how to avoid writing bad plays but also suggesting how to avoid promoting the kind of inadequate social analysis characteristic, he feels, of politicians in general.⁷ 'To be a politician,' he argued, 'you have to be able to present a simple picture even if you don't see things that way.'⁸ To be a successful dramatist, by implication, you have to be free to explore complex pictures that clarify without necessarily reducing the complexity of social experience.

Pinter's early dramatic technique is less one of moving from the local community context to the larger political context than of scrutinising the local context so closely that it becomes difficult to abstract simple generalisations about individual responsibility, community convictions or collective goals. His preoccupation with confined spaces, with small rooms, with constraining circumstances and brief events provides a context for exploring the complexities of local pictures, the instability and indispensability of verbal interaction, the shifting status of social realities, the precariousness of attempts to establish general agreement and the riskiness of anyone's efforts to function as leader or spokesperson for a social group. For the Pinter of these plays, the local picture in all its simplicity and complexity precedes and succeeds any large one, and national political action, if it were to make sense at all, would have to be an extension of, and not a substitute for, the daily

activity of people coping with self and others in the local spaces his characters inhabit. One of the most prominent of Pinter's early statements was the remark: 'Before you manage to adjust yourself to living alone in your room, you're not really terribly fit and equipped to go out to fight battles.'⁹ It is not yet clear that Pinter's dramatic technique has changed in this respect, in spite of his intermittent readiness to make large political statements both about his plays and about global social issues. But what he has effectively done is transfer to the realm of political situation the exploration of complex local social interaction that is characteristic of his plays as a whole.

Rather than showing that the personal is the political by dissolving the personal into the political, Pinter has, effectively, dramatised the converse: that the political is, among other things, the personal. As such, it is as complex and dangerous and as worthy of our scrupulous attention as any other sphere of social interaction; and Pinter demonstrates this in spite of the limited development of individual character in the more overtly political plays. It is, in fact, the procedures by which political imperatives can produce attempts to reduce individuality to mere enmity that a play like *One for the Road* so carefully depicts. And in the resistance of individuality to such reduction, the personal is not so much equated with the political as reinstated as a form of resistance to it. But Pinter's refusal to situate plays like *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language* in specific historical locales has led to criticism that without such specificity we do not know what to be for or against that we were not for or against before. To try to persuade a theatre audience that it should in general be against physical torture, murder and rape seems somewhat gratuitous in spite of the prevalence of all three in the modern world. What interests Pinter, however, is exploring the modes of pre-supposition and self-justification that enable such things to be done in the name of or on behalf of citizens and governments who might publicly and even sincerely condemn them. What is dramatised is not the physical torture, murder and rape so frequently referred to in critical discussion, but the processes of self-justification they promote and the differing consequences for the oppressors and the oppressed of their limited persuasiveness.

In *One for the Road*, Nicolas, the interrogator, derives some of his sense of legitimacy and authority from his conviction that he speaks for a national consensus. Citing his country's leader, he portrays himself as one acting on behalf of a unified group against a lone dissenter, and the existence of that larger unity suffices to convert the dissenter into a traitor: 'We are all patriots, we are as one, we all share a common heritage. Except you, apparently. *Pause.* I feel a link, you see, a bond. I share a commonwealth of interest. I am not alone. I am not alone!'¹⁰ The repeated phrase 'I am not alone' mobilises the claims to legitimacy of the voice and of the actions it endorses. The

social 'bond' of fellowship that strengthens Nicolas's convictions that what he is doing is justified is the same bond that excludes Victor not only from that society but also from the civil rights its members might otherwise enjoy. The voice of exclusion seeks to derive its legitimacy from the voice of inclusion.

In such a context, the 'I' in the repeated phrase 'I am not alone' is not the 'I' of bourgeois individualism, nor the 'I' that functions merely as the spokesperson for an unreflecting 'we', nor the 'I' that is the involuntary voice of a cultural or linguistic code. This is an 'I' that justifies itself in a variety of ways, but – most important – is its evident need to do so. Like the old woman who is unwilling or unable to speak in *Mountain Language*¹¹ Nicolas exists outside the codes he uses to construct, exhibit, and justify himself. Like so many Pinter characters he can be illuminated by, but not exhaustively summarised by, any description of inherited cultural codes or ideological commitments. Here at the edge of the civilised world, inhuman acts are justified by individuals who invoke general social bonds as a justification for abandoning them in the case of dissenting individuals. Indeed, part of the torture to which the victims are subjected consists of turning the psychological and emotional bonds of a family group into weapons to be used against each of them. The rape of the wife and the murder of the son invoke even as they break some of the strongest bonds that hold civilised human beings together. The personal and the political are, indeed, intertwined, but we will make little sense of these plays if we simply equate the one with the other.

Though the context in which we encounter them prevents the characters in *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language* from being developed in great detail, Pinter conveys enough of the personal in social and political contexts to make these scenes continuous with scenes in his other plays in which we feel we are encountering individual characters with, among other things, familiar social histories, rather than abstract characters representing narrow social and political agendas, or, to put it another way, individual characters whose representativeness follows upon and includes their individuality, rather than preceding and supplanting it.

These points are made at some length for two reasons. First, neither in Pinter's so-called political plays nor elsewhere do we encounter characters with an explicit ideological position to exemplify and defend. Second, after a time when literary theories of various kinds became obsessed with the death of the subject, Pinter is continuing to create characters whose irreducible idiosyncrasy makes a significant contribution to our conviction that the plays themselves retain an irreducible singularity, no matter which modes of explanation we adopt to convert intrigue into enlightenment. And it is in this context of irreducible singularity and strategic avoidance of ideological

debate that we should make the link between Pinter, politics and postmodernism.

It seems to me quite true, as Chin has argued, that ‘postmodern’ has become ‘one of those terms, like “existential” for an earlier generation, which everyone tosses around like a beanbag, while aiming at different targets’.¹² I find myself much persuaded by Lyotard’s argument that we would benefit by thinking of postmodernism as one of the recurring phases of modernism rather than as something posterior to and opposed to modernism.¹³ Indeed, if we are to make sense of the modernism/postmodernism relationship we would do well not only to acknowledge that modernism has always been many things anyway, but also to put that recognition to work in our attempts to distinguish its various kinds. I would thus be inclined to follow and extend Hassan’s argument on this issue by conceiving not just of three major kinds, but of three major voices, of modernism: avant-garde modernism, high modernism and postmodernism.¹⁴ All three voices are liable to occur in the work of any one writer or any single decade, but proportional representation of those voices has changed gradually (though not uniformly) over the decades from the prominence of avant-garde modernism, through the prominence of high modernism, to the prominence of postmodernism.

In terms of the characteristics critical commentary usually associates with these concepts,¹⁵ the avant-garde modernist voice would be the one rejecting the *status quo* and demanding that it be totally replaced. This is the voice insisting on a sense of crisis, of generational conflict, of the complicity of art with the existing order and of the need for radical artistic and social reform.

The high modern voice would be the one more concerned with providing the new than with rejecting the old. This is the modernism associated with establishing the aesthetic domain as the alternative to the religious and political domains, whether or not it can claim equivalent scope.¹⁶ It is the modernism of art as aesthetic object, as cultural artefact, as difficult, abstract, reflexive, ironic, distanced, autonomous, an art for the *élite* and for the initiated, and strongly opposed to the popular, the easily accommodated or the easily reproduced.

The postmodern voice would then be the one that pursues the new without the avant-garde gesture of radical opposition or the high modern gesture of radical affirmation. It is a voice of eclectic mingling, including the mingling of art with everything else, a voice refusing to claim legitimacy on the basis of radical change, cheerfully mixing high art and pop art, the interests of elite culture and those of mass culture, a voice questioning exclusionary canons and insisting upon the value of diversity, otherness, difference and discontinuity, a voice that opposes less than the avant-garde modernist

and affirms less than the high modernist, a voice that is content to explore variety rather than indulge in premature judgments of its novelty, nature and value.¹⁷

Instead of the avant-garde modernist's concern with opposing something monolithic, instead of high modernist concern with affirming something of monolithic value if not quite monolithic scope, like the redemption of social life through the restructuring of culture, the postmodern concern is with the local and with the irreducible multiplicity of things local. And just as important is the re-emergence, in these concerns for the local, of that most local of elements of social analysis, the individual, who is not readily dismissible as a pawn in an ideological system, nor susceptible to being dismantled into a variety of social codes, but an agent who functions at the site at which different forms of cultural and multicultural conflicts converge and require accommodation. In these terms, postmodernism deals as much with emergent as with residual forms of social and cultural practice and renews concern for personal responsibility, individual creativity and social engagement, but it does so primarily in local social contexts. A key challenge that is thus constantly latent in postmodernism's focus upon the local and heterogeneous is how to make of the local something large enough, so that an acceptance of irreducible multiplicity does not degenerate into the passive acquiescence of radical relativism. The need is for something larger that can establish and sustain social bonds without aspiring to attain universality or threatening to become intolerant, exclusionary or oppressive.

These are, of course, schematic contrasts drawn from much of the literature on these issues, but their pertinence to our understanding of Pinter and even of politics will probably already be clear. We can hear alternately in his public utterances the voice of Pinter the avant-garde modernist railing against the political *status quo*, and the voice of Pinter the aesthetic high modernist insisting that his plays do not have to be about anything, for anything, or against anything outside themselves. But it is in his plays that we encounter most strongly the voice of Pinter the postmodernist depicting characters struggling to come to terms with social complexity and striving not so much to eliminate it as to manoeuvre to advantage their future relationship to it. Unwilling or unable to attribute their individual problems to large abstract forces of social, psychological, political or economic origin and unwilling or unable to pursue solutions on a similar scale, they play out the local hand that has been dealt, and they play with differing degrees of imagination, enthusiasm, determination and flair. Their collective recognition of irreducible difference does not precipitate a resigned indifference¹⁸ but a commitment to making something work in some way for a while. Even Spooner, in *No Man's Land*, who announces with pride his rejection of

expectation, deploys the announcement strategically to promote hopes he is prepared to acknowledge neither to himself nor to others.¹⁹

In this respect Pinter's plays lean towards Lyotard rather than Habermas in one of the key debates about postmodernism. For Habermas, as Lyotard reads him, the continuing goal of a democratic society is the Enlightenment pursuit of social and political consensus; for Lyotard, the great danger of the pursuit of consensus is that if too many people agree on too many things, disagreement becomes a sign of social abnormality, dissent becomes unpatriotic and difference becomes intolerable²⁰ – precisely the scenario implied by Nicolas's attempt to invoke social consensus in *One for the Road*. But if the pursuit of consensus and shared values is not to be the goal of our social interaction or the basis for our social bonds, what is? Lyotard's alternative is a revision of the notion of social contract, once so dear to political thinkers of the eighteenth century.²¹ But such social contracts in a postmodern world of irreducible multiplicity are themselves multiple rather than single, local rather than global and often implicit rather than explicit. Emerging from social interaction they guide rather than govern social interaction and are constantly open to reconsideration, renegotiation, extension or rejection. And it is in this reconfiguration of the nature of social contracts that the commitment to the local, so often encountered in discussion of postmodernism and Pinter, can make contact with something larger, including larger political contexts.

Pinter's early insistence that he found most political thinking and terminology suspect and deficient, that he disliked didactic and moralistic plays, and that he wrote not only without religious or political commitments but also without any consciousness that his work had any general social function at all was an insistence that led to charges that his plays had no implications beyond their own particularity and idiosyncrasy, that they could appeal only to aesthetes, and that they were socially and politically irrelevant.²² When an argument like this was put directly to Pinter in the 1960s, he acknowledged that he had no political arguments to make but that there was a distinction to be drawn between the political and the social.

If I write something in which two people are facing each other over a table . . . I'm talking about two people living socially, and if what takes place between them is a meaningful and accurate examination of them, then it's going to be relevant to you and to society. This relationship will be an image of other relationships, of social living, of living together . . .²³

To think of the plays providing images of social living is to recognise the way in which the local can achieve a degree of largeness without becoming symptomatic of a preceding or succeeding form of ideological consensus. As images

of social living, the plays acquire a generality of implication that follows from rather than precedes their local complexity. And it is in this sense that we can think of Pinter's work and Pinter's politics in postmodern terms.

Like modernism in general, postmodernism is, of course, constituted by its own variants, variants which we can heuristically characterise but not exclusively define. What is at issue here is not whether Pinter to be postmodern must invoke pop art and deploy multi-media nor whether he is prepared to abandon the dramatic text in favour of a performance art of scenic imagery and ritualistic gesture, but the contribution he might make to our understanding of postmodernism and of the kind of political play that could be consistent with it. In Pinter's plays the political, when it becomes overt, is always one component of situations of larger social complexity, and as the political problems emerge from no clearly defined institutional base, their resolution or evasion depends upon no particular political programme. Political thinking for Pinter audiences involves not so much questions about occupying the right or left on the political spectrum or commitments to one political party or another, but a requirement to explore the complexities of local social exchange in terms of local social contracts, both those invoked by the characters and those emerging from their interaction.

It is noteworthy, in this respect, to see how often the relationship between characters becomes explicitly contractual, as personal, family and professional concerns so often intermingle and collide. Sarah, in *The Lover*, resists Richard's attempts to introduce afternoon games into their evening life by insisting, unsuccessfully, upon their formal status: 'You've no right to question me . . . It was our arrangement. No questions of this kind.'²⁴ Disson's psychological equilibrium, in *Tea Party*, is disrupted in spite of his attempts to relate separately to Wendy with a secretarial contract, to Willy with a partnership contract and to Diana with a marriage contract, because each fails to control the evolving complexities of the interacting relationships. Ruth, in *The Homecoming*, adjusting to the challenges of her proffered role with Teddy's family, likewise demands that 'All aspects of the agreement and conditions of employment would have to be clarified to our mutual satisfaction before we finalized the contract' – a contract which would, of course, require 'signatures in the presence of witnesses'.²⁵ Len, in *The Dwarfs*, describes in contractual terms his relationship with the dwarfs: 'They don't stop work until the job in hand is finished, one way or another. They never run out on a job. Oh no. They're true professionals. Real professionals.'²⁶ The whole action of *A Dumb Waiter* is about the personal interaction of two characters who are contracted to kill the next person coming in through the door; the decline of Edward's relationship with his wife in *A Slight Ache* culminates in his being given the Matchseller's tray and the job that goes

with it; Max, in *The Homecoming*, tries to defend his status in the family on the basis of his professional expertise as trainer and butcher; and the personal interaction between Duff and Beth in *Landscape* is one much affected by its occurring in the home of the man who hired them as housekeeper and chauffeur: as Duff puts it, 'Mr Sykes took to us from the very first interview, didn't he? *Pause*. He said I've got the feeling you'll make a very good team. Do you remember? And that's what we proved to be. No question.'²⁷

In similar terms the relationship between Aston, Davies and Mick in *The Caretaker* focuses upon Davies's rights and responsibilities as caretaker, Aston's as decorator and Mick and Aston's both as brothers and as putative owners, while Davies repeatedly tries to shore up his position with appeals to official papers left in Sidcup and to employees' rights asserted in conversations with previous employers: 'I got my rights . . . I might have been on the road but nobody's got more rights than I have. Let's have a bit of fair play.'²⁸ This appeal for fair play invokes, however, a level of contractual generality that subsumes all business contracts and social commitments and consequently rings immediately hollow. But the recurring links in this and other plays between personal and occupational rights and responsibilities serve to highlight both the contractual basis of social concerns and the constantly re-emerging conflict between the limited status of such contracts and the character's less limited needs, hopes and expectations. Similar enabling and constraining contractual concerns emerge in other plays, whether it is the blind intruder reminding Rose of former responsibilities in a former home in *The Room*; Spooner, in *No Man's Land*, trying to convert his invitation to Hirst's home into a long-term working arrangement; Emma, Jerry, and Robert, in *Betrayal*, trying to evaluate their rights and responsibilities in the context of competing bonds as spouses, friends, colleagues and lovers; and, illuminatingly for this line of enquiry, James, in *The Collection*, trying to clarify his spousal claims on Stella in the light of Bill's strategic invocation of a stereotype that implies that there is more to her than any contract could ever regulate or encompass: 'Every woman is bound to have an outburst of . . . wild sensuality at one time or another. That's the way I look at it, anyway. It's part of their nature.'²⁹ And all of this helps us understand Pinter's retroactive political claim that Petey's 'don't let them tell you what to do [Stan]' in *The Birthday Party* is one of the most important lines he has ever written.³⁰ In a world of local and contingent social contracts persisting negotiation takes precedence over presumed authority, every contract that emerges from social interaction involves rights as well as responsibilities that may or may not hold for the duration of the contract and even those not directly involved in the negotiation have a stake, as Petey does, in the principles and procedures that emerge in the process.

As social contracts emerge from social interaction they are, unlike business contracts, rarely explicit or exhaustive and consequently require frequent checking and renegotiation. And what Pinter plays depict is that process in action, with *The Lover* exemplifying it in intricate detail.³¹ Overall the plays deal not with the comparative simplicities of larger social governance that lead directly to political policies but with the proliferating complexities of local community organisation and reorganisation. What is at issue is what binds us together in micro-contexts not what we establish at the level of the macro-context to determine the abstract relationship between the governing and the governed. The source of appeal against the behaviour of brutal government agents in plays like *One for the Road*, *Mountain Language* and *Party Time* is not to one ideology or another, to one brand of political conviction or another, but to the local relationships that individuals contract with each other, particularly in small social and family contexts, and to the rights and responsibilities thereby invoked.³² It is here that the personal becomes the source of appeal against anything political that loses touch with the personal.

The issue is not, of course, that personal bonds or family bonds are of a single kind or of exemplary status. The strength of family bonds in *A Slight Ache*, *The Homecoming*, *Tea Party* and *The Lover*, and the strength of personal bonds in *The Collection*, *The Basement*, *Betrayal* and *No Man's Land* are not such that they exemplify the kind from which anyone would confidently seek to build a lasting civilisation. But the expectations, hopes and needs encountered in these local forms of interaction, whether satisfied or not, provide the model for understanding similar expectations, hopes and needs that shape social interaction in a political context or any other context. And if the larger political exchange is not a motivated extrapolation from the local social exchange, then a dangerous discontinuity is added at a larger scale to the social discontinuities that have to be constantly mediated at a smaller scale. And what is at issue in these implicitly regulative local contexts is not how we achieve consensus but how we accommodate competing claims for our allegiances. Pinter's characters in this respect are an unlovely lot, often self-serving, unreliable, exploitative and defensive. But we have understood little of the nature of their interaction until we have understood why, when asked about the meaning of *The Homecoming*, that apparently most vicious of family plays, Pinter replied that it was about love, and, in effect, about our search for it, our need of it, our expectation that we will find it and our hope that we can give it.³³

Love in this sense can be as romantic as the fantasies that Beth indulges in her memories of her lover on the beach in *Landscape*, as qualified as Jerry's 'I don't think we don't love each other' in *Betrayal*, or as minimal as Petey's

‘don’t let them tell you what to do’ to Stanley in *The Birthday Party*.³⁴ It can also be as challenging and bewildering and as conventional and creative as that depicted in the ever-evolving relationship between Richard and Sarah in *The Lover*.

In a world of competing values and irreducible individual differences what is at issue in *The Lover* and elsewhere is not the model of making two people into one, that sadly misleading goal for a successful marriage, but the making of a functioning group out of an aggregate of different individuals with differing allegiances and differing goals. That the group is always unstable and functions successfully only for a while is the measure not of the characters’ fickleness but of the conflicting demands different individuals make upon the same group and of the conflicting demands different groups make upon each other. The love that Pinter’s characters express for each other is that they try to accommodate the differences for as long as they can, that they manage at times, as Sarah and Richard do in *The Lover*, even to celebrate them. But in the world of postmodern contractual expectations they do not, by and large, seek the eradication of difference, the achievement of complete agreement or the conviction that there is some one right, best and enduring way of living or judging. And when characters do register such extensive hopes and expectations, they flounder helplessly, as do James in *The Collection* and Deeley in *Old Times*, or they sustain their hopes only through an intermittently indulged nostalgia for a former way of life, like Hirst, in *No Man’s Land*, who first invokes it in his album and then dismisses it with: ‘We can’t be expected to live like that.’³⁵ But the danger of some postmodern perspectives, that an acceptance of unlimited forms of difference leads ultimately to indifference, is never a danger in Pinter plays in which the demands that characters make upon each other seem not to disappear no matter how often expectations are disappointed. And it is this continuing expectation that the local might yet prove larger, more satisfying, and more durable that promotes both the social bonds that link individuals to each other and the sense of violation that indicts political programmes and initiatives that fail to accommodate it.

But the expectations themselves are situated on a continuum of variable strength and scale as the characters struggle to reconcile competing local claims on their personal allegiances. The continuum extends from Beth’s entranced ‘Oh my true love I said’ in *Landscape* at one end to Spooner’s dismissal of all expectations in *No Man’s Land* at the other, with Ruth’s memories of her modelling days in *The Homecoming*, the mother’s recollections of her son’s childhood in *Family Voices*, and Bridget’s posthumous sense of responsibility for her parents in *Moonlight*, situated somewhere in between.³⁶ But even Beth’s commitment to a moment of putative transcendence is

situated in the selectively contemplated past and tempered by her continuing, more minimal, commitment to Duff in the present. The challenge for character and audience alike is to calibrate carefully the value of competing commitments which, in characteristic postmodern style, are local in origin, scale and scope, but which, in seeking to become larger and more durable, inevitably encounter conflict with other allegiances, with the consequence that the local can only become larger as complex social circumstances and unpredictable individual convictions permit.

The incipient conflict between personal values and political values thus becomes symptomatic of the recurring clash in the plays between competing allegiances of various kinds on various scales which require of the characters constant and complex adjustment. And the recurring pursuit of greater largeness from local relationships provides the structural manifestation in Pinter's plays of the competing voices of high modernism and postmodernism. When Len, in *The Dwarfs*, exclaims, in the midst of conflict over divided loyalties between himself, Mark and Pete, that 'There must be somewhere else',³⁷ the appeal is explicitly for another place, and implicitly for another kind of place, and perhaps a more inclusive place. But whatever the urgency of the need or hope for radical social transformation, neither in explicit expectation nor in the course of subsequent events does the world of the dwarfs (whose very name signals the scale of potential gains) promise to be maximally inclusive, satisfying and liberating. This uncertainty about the scale of encountered problems, of required solutions and of appropriate expectations provides the characters with persisting difficulties in unstable and unsharable social situations, but it also provides Pinter, as a playwright, with important challenges and opportunities. For Pinter is not content to allow the role of a drama preoccupied with the postmodern local and saturated with the socially particular to limit its own exploration to the merely local. In this recurring conflict for the characters between the currently local and the potentially larger Pinter situates a drama in which current actuality, future aspiration and nostalgic recollection register the competing scales of co-existing postmodern and high modern voices. And in his later plays, the effort to extend the local to implicate expanding domains of largeness becomes increasingly sustained and increasingly intense.³⁸

In the early plays, the people and pressures offstage alluded to by the characters and exemplified in their behaviour onstage seem quite continuous in scale and scope with the local experience of the characters onstage. In spite of Pinter's retroactive references to the Gestapo,³⁹ Monty in *The Birthday Party* who, like Wilson in *The Dumb Waiter*, never appears onstage, holds out no more promise for providing access to something radically discontinuous or potentially transcendent than the Matchseller or Riley or Max who

do show up in *A Slight Ache*, *The Room* and *The Lover*, or than the variety of intruders who disrupt the flow and extend somewhat the range of established experience in a number of rooms and relationships. But in Pinter's more recent plays, the effort to implicate disparate experience offstage, with which characters will somehow have to come to terms onstage, is much more extensive, involving issues even more remote and even less readily accessible than Stella's putative encounters with Bill in *Leeds* or Davies's with unrecoverable papers in *Sidcup*. Though the difference is one of degree, the later plays seek more often to normalise the initially abnormal than to make increasingly mysterious the less radical discontinuities confronted in the earlier plays. Whatever is offstage in terms of political forces in *One for the Road*, *Mountain Language* and *Party Time*, it is invoked as larger, more homogenous and more radically indifferent to individual suffering than the forces invoked offstage in most of the earlier plays. Indeed, the strength of what is offstage in the early plays seems to grow in inverse proportion to the weaknesses of the characters onstage, whereas the relationship between the strengths of victors and victims in the later plays is not so symmetrically proportioned. But what makes Pinter's plays less reducible to the truisms, political and otherwise, of the 1990s, is that he is less prepared to reduce relationships to mere battles for power and more prepared to explore the variety of ways in which competing claims can be made upon the characters' allegiances and interests, as their efforts to link the irremediably local to something larger reach across more and more challenging terrain.

If the claims upon Disson in *Tea Party* can justly be summarised in the competing allegiances he feels to his parents, his wife, his sons, his friends and his employees, the scale of continuity of these discontinuous claims is rarely challenged in the play by some other scale, although the aesthetic claims of floodlit basins and bidets register most strongly the possibility of another scale of consideration for not fully circumscribed aspirations in search of an appropriate object or ally.⁴⁰ But Deborah's twenty-nine years of almost inaccessible experience in *A Kind of Alaska* provide a radically extended dimension of dramatised discontinuity. Along with the peculiarly situated speaking voice of the dead father in *Family Voices*, the depiction of the dead sister Bridget moving and speaking onstage in *Moonlight* and the domestic invocations of genocide in *Ashes to Ashes*, these explorations of discontinuous experience collectively register an increasingly ambitious effort to reach not only beyond the boundaries of the local but also beyond the boundaries, however variously defined, of everyday human experience.⁴¹ And the recurring effort is to link apparently normative human experience to what would initially be perceived as lying outside that normative range.

In effect, Pinter moves beyond the challenge for politics and politicians of linking persuasively the socially local to the nationally and internationally large by challenging himself as a dramatist to link persuasively the socially local to even larger contexts – those that reach beyond the normative boundaries of human experience itself. For Pinter's remarkably inventive reconciliation of the large scope of high modernism's concerns with the smaller scale of postmodernism's particularity manages to extend radically the scope of postmodernist exploration even while writing plays whose scale of presentation remains determinedly local. Whatever the success of the attempt in *Ashes to Ashes* to link, in a short play, two characters' domestic experience of love, hatred and violence in a middle-class marriage with the catastrophic experience, for millions of global victims of genocide, of related emotions and actions, the combination of small scale and large scope is the recurring theatrical strategy of the later Pinter. His various claims, at different points in his career, that his local situations are to be only locally interpreted, that his theatrical creations are not of larger than theatrical consequence, that the local relationship may serve as an emblem of other social relationships, that many of his plays are not only of local and personal consequence but also of social and political consequence, are claims none of which do full justice to the range of his efforts to reconcile a local scale of presentation with an ever increasing scope of implication.

But we would have missed everything of importance about this means of expanding the implicative scope of the small-scale presentation if we viewed the reaching for further scope in terms of avant-garde modernism or high modernism's aspirations of extensive inclusiveness. The scope is extended not by seeking the synthesising perspective, the 'new world order' so ironically invoked in his play of that title, but by imaginatively orchestrating the interaction of competing local perspectives, contrasting local values and complex local claims upon character allegiances. The experiential divisions that are bridged in these plays nevertheless remain divisions, as Bridget's evocative name and *Moonlight's* split staging so clearly confirm. Pinter is pursuing not a renewed notion of worldwide human solidarity, but, as in *Family Voices*, *A Kind of Alaska* and *Ashes to Ashes*, a complex means of connecting the disparate dimensions of human experience that will help us recognise and understand collective human strengths and weaknesses. For characters and audience alike the plays raise troubling questions, not susceptible to single or final resolution, of the priority of competing personal, family, social, professional, political and otherwise human claims that we make on each other and that others make on us. These claims rarely line up in a single direction, their spheres of influence overlap without being co-extensive and within the scope of their competing appeals and pressures the

larger aspirations and fears of the characters engage with their local exhilarations, satisfactions, disappointments and disasters.

As I have argued elsewhere, the insistence on these competing demands gives Pinter plots a multi-linear rather than a linear structure, with elements of progress, regress and circularity constantly leading towards and beyond moments of insight, agreement, harmony and union, that, no matter how fondly anticipated or remembered, refuse to stay firmly in place.⁴² Though limited in scale or duration, these moments provide the basis for expectations that keep many of the characters together no matter how disappointing and abrasive the forms of interaction that threaten constantly to drive them apart. Pinter's use of multi-linear plots provides a structural basis for his depiction of irreducibly different characters with competing goals, needs, wishes, aspirations and expectations. These individual requirements emerge from and are negotiated within contractually oriented social interaction, and Pinter's interwoven narratives are consequently able to offer disconcerting models of the complex nature of social exchange in realms of varying scope and complexity. The multi-linear plots of the various plays serve not simply to reinforce the image of the characters' multi-linear experiences but to give them in different cases different shapes, shapes that characterise the unexpected possibilities and unusual dimensions of emergent social contracts. Because they are emergent, these social contracts are often surprising, but because they emerge from what we can readily recognise, they also provide apt and disturbing frameworks for considering the processes by which human beings form and break bonds, adopt and reject responsibilities and receive, test and transmit values.

Whenever Pinter's work is challenged for its lack of ideological fervour, it is helpful to remember Ionesco's rejoinder to Kenneth Tynan, who challenged his work on the same assumption: that social engagement can only be achieved through political and ideological advocacy, rather than through complex local exploration.

I beg of you, Mr Tynan, do not attempt, by means of art or any other means, to improve the lot of mankind. Please do not do it. We have had enough of civil wars already, enough of blood and tears and trials that are a mockery, enough of 'righteous' executioners and 'ignoble' martyrs, of disappointed hopes and penal servitude. Do not improve the lot of mankind, if you really wish it well . . .

It is in our solitude that we can all be reunited. And that is why true society transcends our social machinery.⁴³

And that is also, of course, why Ionesco argues that 'Ideology is not the source of art. A work of art is the source and the raw material of ideologies

to come.⁴⁴ Tynan was certainly right to reply that art and ideology should be seen as siblings and not vie for the roles of parent and child,⁴⁵ but for Pinter, as for Ionesco, the concern for the locally emergent is as important as concern for the politically received.

In taking on a characteristic postmodern challenge of making the local into something larger and more durable Pinter helps us reconsider what we mean when we use the terms love, loyalty and commitment in the context of the conflicting allegiances that provide inescapable elements of community formation and self-construction. In doing so he also helps us reconsider what we might mean by deploying the terms personal, political and postmodern. To know something of what holds a society together, what makes a small community out of disparate individuals and a larger society out of small communities, we need to look not just at society's institutions, public forums and public debates, but at the modes of social interaction that give these institutions, forums and debates their social legitimacy and social function.

To speak in a Pinter play, to engage or refuse to engage in that most hazardous of forms of interaction, is not just to participate in a community but to engage in a process of community reinforcement, community contestation and community reorganisation in which the precarious status of the self is constantly mediated through its precarious and conflicting allegiances to others. Speaking is a means of consolidating the *status quo*, exploring the *status quo* and altering the *status quo* and it involves attempts to exert control that always put the speaker at risk of being controlled. But the local site of social exchange is the one at which the claims of the individual in a small community context can most powerfully challenge or sustain the claims, however formulated or presented, of larger collective life.

In his own life, the early Pinter as a public figure recognised the risk of moving beyond local artistic contexts to larger public forums and judged the potential losses to be greater than the potential gains. The later Pinter, determinedly addressing public forums, reverses that judgment without losing sight of the risks involved. Whether he is justified in taking such risks remains to be seen, but both early and later Pinter share the same recognition of what is at stake in speaking out directly, speaking indirectly or refusing to speak: 'You and I, the characters which grow on a page, most of the time we're inexpressive, giving little away, unreliable, elusive, evasive, obstructive, unwilling. But it's out of these attributes that a language arises.'⁴⁶ And it is through such languages that differences are mediated, contractual commitments are reconciled, individual convictions arise, communities emerge and complex societies seek politically and otherwise both to stabilise and to reconstitute themselves.

NOTES

- Earlier versions of different parts of this chapter were included in presentations made at the American Repertory Theatre for its 1991 production of *The Homecoming*, at the 1991 International Pinter Festival at Ohio State University honouring Pinter on reaching the age of sixty, at the American Repertory Theatre for its 1993 production of *The Caretaker* and at the 1997 International Pinter Symposium at Trinity College, Dublin.
- 1 Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 41.
 - 2 Thomas F. Van Laan, 'The Dumb Waiter: Pinter's Play with the Audience', *Modern Drama*, 24 (December 1981), 494–502. See also my brief response in 'The Temporality of Structure in Pinter's Plays', *The Pinter Review*, 1 (1987), 18–19.
 - 3 Susan Hollis Merritt traces the changes in Pinter's political positioning in 'Pinter and Politics', in *Harold Pinter: A Casebook*, ed. Lois Gordon (New York and London: Garland, 1990), pp. 129–60.
 - 4 Harold Pinter in *Conversations with Pinter*, ed. Mel Gussow (New York: Grove Press, 1994), p. 82.
 - 5 See, for example, his remark in 1961: 'I'm not committed as a writer, in the usual sense of the term, either religiously or politically. And I'm not conscious of any particular social function. I write because I want to write.' 'Writing for Myself', *Complete Works: Two* (New York: Grove Press, 1977), p. 12.
 - 6 See, for example, Pinter's remarks in his interview with Nicholas Hern: 'I came to view politicians and political structures and political acts with something I can best describe as detached contempt. To engage in politics seemed to me futile.' 'A Play and Its Politics', *One for the Road* (New York: Grove Press, 1986), p. 12.
 - 7 Harold Pinter, 'Writing for the Theatre', *Complete Works: One* (New York: Grove Press, 1977), p. 13.
 - 8 Harold Pinter, interview with L. M. Bensky, 'The Art of the Theatre, III', *Paris Review*, 10 (Fall 1996), 27.
 - 9 Harold Pinter, "'Funny and Moving and Frightening": Pinter' (interview with Kathleen Halton), *Vogue*, 150 (1 October 1967), 236.
 - 10 Harold Pinter, *One for the Road*, pp. 50–1.
 - 11 Harold Pinter, *Mountain Language* (New York: Grove Press, 1988), pp. 43–7.
 - 12 Daryl Chin, 'Interculturalism, Postmodernism, Pluralism', *Performing Arts Journal*, 33/34 (1989), 163–75.
 - 13 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 79–82.
 - 14 Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Towards a Postmodern Literature* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), p. 264: 'We are all, I suspect, a little Victorian, Modern, and Postmodern at once. And an author may . . . easily write both a modernist and postmodernist work.' For Hassan, the avant-garde, the modern and postmodern are 'three modes of artistic change', p. 266.
 - 15 Besides the works cited by Lyotard, Hassan and Chin, other useful commentaries include Fredric Jameson's essay 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', in

Postmodernism and Its Discontents, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London and New York: Verso, 1988), pp. 13–29; Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986); Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989); Christopher Norris, *What's Wrong with Postmodernism: Critical Theory and the Ends of Philosophy* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1989).

These arguments are not, however, all of a piece, and there is significant and continuing disagreement over the nature of and relationship among the avant-garde, modernism and postmodernism, not the least of which is whether postmodernism should be considered a genre category or a period category.

- 16 Harvey deals illuminatingly with the tension in high modernism between the ephemeral and the eternal, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, pp. 10–38.
- 17 A writer as prolific and as inventive as Artaud regularly moves from one voice to the others and back again. See, in particular, his *The Theatre and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958).
- 18 This concern is strongly voiced in intercultural terms by Chin, 'Interculturalism, Postmodernism, Pluralism', pp. 165–6.
- 19 Harold Pinter, *No Man's Land, Complete Works: Four* (New York: Grove Press, 1981), p. 80. This tension between assertion and aspiration is central to the play and to the moments of arrested motion that recur within it. For further development of this argument see my essay 'Time for Change in *No Man's Land*', in *Harold Pinter: A Casebook*, ed. Gordon, pp. 33–59. See also the use Michael Billington makes of this argument in his book, *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter* (London: Faber, 1996), pp. 242–50.
- 20 Lyotard is responding to Jürgen Habermas's *Legitimization Crisis*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 1975).
- 21 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, pp. 10 and 66.
- 22 See, for example, Bernard Levin's review of the 1977 revival of *The Caretaker*:

The truth remains that Mr Pinter has nothing whatever to say, and that a drum makes a noise when you hit it because it is empty . . . [From *The Caretaker*] nothing emerges. There is no sense of a view, however oblique, of these characters, no disclosure of a general truth based on particular conclusions, no comment, wise or otherwise, on anything. We come out exactly the same people as we were when we entered; we have been entertained, we have admired the author's ability, we have not been bored. But we have advanced our understanding and our humanity not a whit, and every experience we have had has been of an entirely superficial nature.

'The Hollow Art of Harold Pinter', *The Sunday Times*, 30 October 1977, 38

- 23 Harold Pinter, quoted by Arlene Sykes, *Harold Pinter* (New York: Humanities Press, 1970), p. 101.
- 24 Harold Pinter, *The Lover, Complete Works: Two*, p. 193.
- 25 Harold Pinter, *The Homecoming, Complete Works: Three* (New York: Grove Press, 1978), p. 93.
- 26 Harold Pinter, *The Dwarfs, Complete Works: Two*, p. 102.
- 27 Harold Pinter, *Landscape, Complete Works: Three*, p. 188.

- 28 Harold Pinter, *The Caretaker, Complete Works: Two*, p. 19.
 29 Harold Pinter, *The Collection, Complete Works: Two*, p. 151.
 30 Harold Pinter, in *Conversations with Pinter*, ed. Gussow, p. 71. The reference is to *The Birthday Party, Complete Works: One*, p. 96.
 31 For further discussion, see my essay 'Design and Discovery in Pinter's *The Lover*', in *Harold Pinter: Critical Approaches*, ed. Steven H. Gale (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1986), pp. 82–101.
 32 As Pinter uncertainly put it in 1989,

I'm only concerned at the moment with accurate and precise images of what is the case. I can no longer write a play about a family and what happens to it, except that in *One for the Road*, I remind you, the man, woman and child are actually husband, wife and he's their child. Therefore, in a rather odd way, that play is about what happens to a family.

Conversations with Pinter, ed. Gussow, p. 92

At this point, of course, *Moonlight* was still some years ahead.

- 33 'It's about love and lack of love . . . There's no question that the family does behave very calculatingly and pretty horribly to each other and to the returning son. But they do it out of the texture of their lives and for other reasons which are not evil but slightly desperate.' Harold Pinter, quoted by Henry Hewes, 'Probing Pinter's Play', *Saturday Review* (8 April, 1967), 56.
 34 Harold Pinter, *Landscape*, pp. 197–8; *Betrayal, Complete Works: Four*, p. 197; *The Birthday Party*, p. 96.
 35 Harold Pinter, *No Man's Land*, p. 108.
 36 Harold Pinter, *Landscape*, p. 198; *No Man's Land*, p. 80; Harold Pinter, *The Homecoming*, pp. 73–4; *Family Voices*, in *Other Places* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), p. 76; *Moonlight* (New York: Grove Press, 1993), p. 1.
 37 Harold Pinter, *The Dwarfs*, p. 107.
 38 'I was always termed, what is the word, "minimalist". Maybe I am. Who knows? But I hope that to be minimalist is to be precise and focused. I feel that what I've illuminated is quite broad – and deep – shadows stretching away.' Harold Pinter, in *Conversations with Pinter*, ed. Gussow, p. 75.
 39 'I thought, what would happen if two people knocked on [Stanley's] door? . . . The idea of the knock came from my knowledge of the Gestapo . . . The war had only been over less than ten years.' Harold Pinter, in *Conversations with Pinter*, ed. Gussow, p. 71.
 40 Harold Pinter, *Tea Party, Complete Works: Three*, p. 103.
 41 The use of the title 'Other Places' both for a combined performance of *Family Voices*, *Victoria Station* and *A Kind of Alaska* and for their collective publication signals a continuing interest in Len's 'There must be somewhere else' (*The Dwarfs*, p. 107) along with a sustained further extension of the realm of exploration.
 42 'The Temporality of Structure in Pinter's Plays', pp. 7–21. See also Pinter's comment: 'I still feel there is a role somewhere for a kind of work which is not in strict terms pursuing the normal narrative procedures of drama. It's to be found, and I'm trying to find it.' *Conversations with Pinter*, ed. Gussow, p. 92.
 43 Eugène Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes: Writings on the Theatre*, trans. Donald Watson (New York: Grove Press, 1964), pp. 106–8.

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44 *Ibid.*, p. 93.

45 Kenneth Tynan, quoted in Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes*, p. 95.

46 Harold Pinter, 'Between the Lines', *The Sunday Times*, 4 March 1962, mag. sec. 25.