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“All Them Aliens Had It”: Pinter’s Cosmopolitanism

Summary

Throughout his life Pinter always showed, both as artist and as social being, a profound respect for the rights of the individual and human dignity. His dramatic output as well as his overt political activity demonstrate his unbroken adherence to the ideology and behaviour of a *citizen of the world*. My endeavour in this paper will be to argue about what I shall call Pinter’s *visceral cosmopolitanism*. This approach, on the one hand, reads his political actions through the highly politicized agenda of the *contemporary cosmopolitan discourse* and, on the other hand, it adopts a more retrospective point of view, which seeks to find a fundamental correspondence between the Pinteresque uncertainty, fear and ambiguity and Immanuel Kant’s rather more *ethical understanding of cosmopolitanism*, especially his novel idea of *hospitality*.

Key words: Harold Pinter, cosmopolitanism, Immanuel Kant

»Vsi oni tujci so ga imeli«: Pinterjevo svetovljanstvo

Povzetek

Pinter je vse življenje kot umetnik in kot posameznik izkazoval globoko spoštovanje do pravic posameznika in do človeškega dostojanstva. Tako njegove drame kot politično udejstvovanje kažeta njegovo neomajno zvestobo ideologiji in obnašanju *državljana sveta*. V prispevku bom poskusila utemeljiti nekaj, kar imenujem *svetovljanstvo do obisti* (visceral cosmopolitanism). Omenjeni pristop bere njegova politična dejanja po eni strani skozi prizmo *sodobnega svetovljanskega diskurza*, po drugi pa zavzame retrospektivnejše stališče, ki poskuša najti temeljno ujemanje med pinterjansko negotovostjo, strahom in dvoumnostjo ter Kantovim bolj *etičnim razumevanjem svetovljanstva*, še posebej njegovim pojmovanjem *gostoljubnosti*.

Ključne besede: Harold Pinter, svetovljanstvo, Immanuel Kant

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1. Introduction

When Harold Pinter visited Aristotle University in the critical year 2000, he repeated emphatically the same categorical statement about his art as he had given at the very beginning of his writing career:

I don’t write plays from a theoretical position. I don’t have a concept at all. The play takes me with it, you know. So I don’t really know what is happening until I find out through the writing of the play. You are in a very different position. You are an academic and you see things very conceptually, from an intellectual point of view. I do not. My writing is a natural process and I don’t think in the way you do. (Pinter 2000, 94)

In this recent revisioning of his long-standing artistic credo, Pinter drew a clearer dividing line between the experiential nature of his creativity and the intellectual approach characterising the majority of his critical reception. Indeed, how can one reach the very core of Pinter’s work if not viscerally? In retrospect, I find that my own initiation into his work *was visceral*. It was several decades ago when a slightly older English colleague of mine gave me *The Caretaker* to read. It was this particular Pinter play that undid all my preconceptions about life and theatre and left me in a chaotic state of mind, which eventually determined the direction of my scholarly career in the domain of theatre art. *The Caretaker* proved for me a true apocalypse about our instinctual and emotive perception of the world, all given in a nutshell: desire for intrusion, possession and success, fear of expulsion, dispossession and failure. Many years later, at a revival of *The Caretaker* at the Haymarket Theatre in 1991, I witnessed – with mingled surprise and satisfaction – the same kind of vibrant psychic metamorphosis in the spectator sitting next to me: a rather rough, middle-aged British expatriate, who seemed to have long lost touch with the current developments of British culture.

Having tried different approaches to solving the enigma of Pinter’s dramatic world – from gender and politics to phenomenology and the new technologies – it was to the issue of emotions that I eventually turned in order to tackle the question of the *global* appeal of his work: a distinctive feature that also constituted the major reason for his Nobel Prize nomination in 2005. Using as my analytical tool the theory of affects,¹ I attempted a preliminary exploration of the field which yielded an interesting partial answer to the issue I had raised. My purpose in the present essay, therefore, will be to revisit the issue of Pinter’s *globality* but view it this time through a different lens and read it in the context of contemporary political and cultural theory.

The Nobel Prize ceremonial presentation in Stockholm, given by Per Wästberg, highlighted the “*international and inter-human impact*” of Pinter’s work, adding that “the *good* and the *humane* find a way to seep out through the bureaucratic cage of ingrained reflexes” (Wästberg 2008, 4, my emphasis). Pinter’s own address at the ceremony (projected on video wall because of his illness), after a relatively short reference to his dramatic work, focused mainly on the idea of *world citizenship, moral obligation and international law and justice*. All these are terms and

¹ Pinter and Emotions: Affective (Dis)charges in Space. *The Pinter Review* (2011).

ideas that belong to the domain of political philosophy and are most expediently explicated through the current *discourse of cosmopolitanism*, a recently revived earlier discipline, whose main ramifications today can be categorised for the sake of the present study in the following way: *moral cosmopolitanism*, *cosmopolitan governance* and *cultural cosmopolitanism* (Rumford 207, 23).

The international dissemination of Pinter's theatre became the thematic focus of a recent international conference "Pinter Abroad" (in Maribor, Slovenia, September 2011). In tune with the global scope of that conference, my paper will try to place Pinter's vision of the world (as manifested both in his plays and in his various other writings, interviews and addresses) within the legacy of contemporary cosmopolitan thought. It is a specific artistic stance that I would like to call Pinter's "visceral cosmopolitanism."

2. Towards Cosmopolitanism

Cosmopolitanism – a term usually associated with modernism – fell into disgrace for several decades after the emergence of postcolonial theory in the mid-1970s. The newly coined terms "globalization" and "transnationalism" eclipsed cosmopolitanism's claims to a universal and borderless vision of the world, accusing it of being a limited, Eurocentric product of modernist thought. However, as these two apparently more dynamic and potentially more liberating neologisms gradually showed their true face – a new economic, political and even military imperialism of the West – cosmopolitanism crept back into the contemporary theoretical field with new force and a new, broader spectrum of meanings.

First appearing as a concept in ancient Greek culture and philosophy and having found a more systematic form – for modern European thought – in Immanuel Kant's political philosophy, cosmopolitanism has recently been redressed for a more positive political use, trying to overcome all the tensions, paradoxes and ambiguities that were left open in the complexity of Kantian philosophy. The vicissitudes of political theory – any political theory – and political practice are almost a commonplace now, and I do not intend to involve myself in trite and fruitless debates. My own cursory search in the relevant bibliography has yielded an unending string of revisionist critiques, attacks and counterattacks concerning the efficiency or inefficiency of this or that theoretical perspective and reflecting the instability of theoretical positions. Pinter himself is a good example of a personality torn between the drive of the artist, on the one hand, and the pragmatism of a citizen of the world, on the other, always treading on this risky but exciting dichotomy and antinomy – always walking across the rift rather than trying to bridge it.

While taking into account the specific political applications that the term cosmopolitanism often fulfills today – which interestingly correspond to Pinter's accurate documentation through names, numbers and jargon when referring to current international politics, atrocities and interventions² – I shall adopt a more retrospective point of view, which seeks to find a fundamental correspondence between the celebrated Pinteresque uncertainty, fear and ambiguity and the basic Kantian understanding of cosmopolitanism and particularly the German philosopher's novel idea of *hospitality*.

² His Nobel Prize speech reflects in full the precision of his political language in many previous media statements and interviews.

In the third article of his seminal essay *Perpetual Peace* (1795), eloquently entitled “The Law of World Citizenship Shall be Limited to Conditions of Universal Hospitality,” Kant introduced the term “cosmopolitan right” with specific reference to the “duty of hospitality” (Benhabib 2008, 21). Kant made it clear that this latter concept is not a case of philanthropy but a right; it is a claim on the side of the “stranger” for temporary residency on our land, our territory (2008, 22). This dictum forms the core of the Kantian doctrine of cosmopolitan right, which is neither legal positivism nor natural law but sits uncomfortably – as Seyla Benhabib convincingly contends – “at the boundaries of the polity” (2008, 22), neither denying nor enforcing universal moral law. The question remains: is the right of asylum/refuge seeking a “reciprocal moral obligation” or an “enforceable norm of behaviour” (2008, 22) and in whose name? The ambiguity of Kant’s position at this particular point of his theory has been subtly summarised in the contemporary critique of cosmopolitanism as “creating quasi-legally binding obligations through voluntary commitments” (2008, 23) – an acute observation that underscores further the Kantian uncertainty and perplexity.

Interestingly, this is precisely the murky ground that Harold Pinter has repeatedly chosen to explore in a number of his works which focus on some aspect of hospitality, starting with the very early story *The Examination* (1955) and expanding more in such characteristic plays as *The Caretaker* (1959) and *The Basement* (1966) but also – in different, subtler ways – in *Old Times* (1970) and *No Man’s Land* (1974), to mention but a few. In *The Caretaker* Davies’s ambiguous civic condition sets the question most succinctly: On the one hand, he poses as a bragging citizen of a sovereign state, claiming his superior rights over “all them aliens” (Pinter 1977, 17), who seem to have set foot in and to have obtained rights of hospitality in his own country:

All them Blacks had it, Blacks, Greeks, Poles, the lot of them, that’s what, doing me out of a seat, treating me like dirt. When he come at me tonight I told him.

— — —

Who was this git to come up and give me orders? We got the same standing. He’s not my boss. He’s nothing superior to me.

— — —

Look here I said to him, I got my rights. I told him that. I might have been on the road but nobody’s got more rights than I have. Let’s have a bit of fair play, I said. (Pinter 1977, 17-9)

On the other hand, Davies himself becomes the victim of hostile reception and is actually evicted from his “asylum” – Aston’s room – when the exertion of his hospitality right goes over the limit. Pinter’s imagination has cleverly invented two contrasting characters to act as Davies’s hosts, the siblings Aston and Mick, who clearly represent the two polar attitudes to the right to hospitality: Aston is the soft guy, more inclined to kindness, generosity and even altruism (Benhabib 22), while his brother Mick is the ruthless pragmatist, a stern guardian of civic law. In-between hovers the destitute Davies, a man of no identity, no place, no possessions: a migrant character, an asylum seeker proper. Davies’s closing monologue is the best illustration of this opposite end of his state, a state of extreme destitution and utter loss of human dignity:

But ... but ... look ... listen ... listen here ... I mean ...

ASTON *turns back to the window.*

What am I going to do?

Pause.

What shall I do?

Pause.

Where am I going to go?

Pause.

If you want me to go ... I'll go. You just say the word.

Pause.

I'll tell you what though ... them shoes ... them shoes you give me ... they're working out all right ... they're all right. Maybe I could ... get down. ...

ASTON *remains still, his back to him, at the window.*

Listen ... if I ... got down ... if I was to ... get my papers ... would you ... would you let ... would you ... if I got down ... and got my. ...

Long silence. (Pinter 1977, 86-7)

The contemporary cosmopolitan discourse, informed by postcolonial theory, has initiated a deeper enquiry into the idea of citizenship, looking for analogies and also differences between the category of “second-class citizens” (defined as such by race, class or gender) within the boundaries of a sovereign state and the “aliens” and “foreigners,” who are admitted as residents in the country but do not have full citizenship rights (Benhabib 2008, 34). Pinter’s cosmopolitan vision of the world highlights precisely this sociopolitical paradox faced by contemporary democratic states, where cosmopolitan ideals, in theory, seem to enjoy wider acceptance and, hopefully, higher application than in the past. In reality, however, sovereign boundaries still hold even in today’s global environment. As a consequence, claims of hospitality are not yet reciprocal (as Kant would ideally have it) but are still negotiated from the side of the territorial possessor.

Pinter’s *The Caretaker* presents a series of such complex civic tensions; not only those highlighted between Davies and the two owners of the room but, additionally, other secondary tensions anticipated between Davies and “all them aliens” (identified as Blacks, Greeks, Poles and Scots), collectively seen as a distinct, socially oppressed group which, however, remains – by authorial choice – in the margins of the play. Nevertheless, their albeit peripheral coexistence in Pinter’s contemporary (even prophetic) text reflects the wider aspirations of his political problematic and confirms retrospectively the analogous utopian nature of Kant’s initial vision of a boundless

“cosmopolitan republican order” (Rumford 2007, 21) as he conceived it in his earlier work on the concept of cosmopolitanism, entitled *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose* (1784). Realising himself the inapplicability of his early political aspiration, Kant made a later, more concessive suggestion in *Perpetual Peace* that what was possible, at least, in the 18th-century political condition was a “cosmopolitan law,” which would limit the actions of nation states.³ This prophetic proposition found partial realisation, in the second half of the 20th century, through the foundation of the United Nations, the declaration of human rights and the recognition of crimes against humanity. All these are humanitarian institutions which have evolved today into the establishment of *international law* and the recognition of legally binding *cosmopolitan norms*.

If the majority of Pinter’s dramatic works subscribe to a more aspiratory Kantian cosmopolitan ethic, his political declarations and speeches (but also his later, more overtly political plays, including the early *The Hothouse*) prove him to adhere to this more recent side of cosmopolitanism, gradually cemented in an international legal system, which is visible and systematic, if still precarious in its actual application in the ruthless terrain of world politics and power struggles. Certainly, Pinter, the political activist, by naming the specific atrocities committed especially by the USA, as the superpower of global authoritarianism at the turn of the century, aligns himself with the *political dimension of cosmopolitanism*, which is systemic and legalistic and has as its specific agenda to stop or minimize oppression and to impose legal sanctions to cases of severe infringement of international law. The speech he gave while receiving an Honorary Degree from Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in April 2000, part of which was interestingly incorporated into the Stockholm speech of 2005, is a clear example of this new, judicial style of his political language:

I contend that the bombing of Serbia had nothing whatsoever to do with “humanitarian intervention.” It was a blatant assertion of US power. That and the continuing bombing of Iraq are *illegal*, immoral, *illegitimate* acts, against all understood criteria of international law, holding both *international law* and the *United Nations* in contempt. (Pinter 2000, 103, my emphasis)

It is here that *clarity* and *truth* enter his vocabulary. However, his polemical political style is always tempered by another judicious eye, the filtering eye/I of the artist, who knows where to draw the line; who reserves for his art the riches of his imagination. From the artistic perspective, the other side of Kantian cosmopolitanism, as an ethical and philosophical mode of “*imagining* the world”,⁴ is more akin to the dramatic world of Pinter’s characters, since it focuses more on the rights of the individual rather than on organized civic society, the collective “polis.” What is more, in this subjectivist context, neither Kant, the 18th-century philosopher, nor Pinter, the 20th-century theatre artist, sacrifices the value of the particular for the sake of the global – a practice for which several branches of contemporary cosmopolitan discourse have been criticised for following.⁵

³ A concise but clear description of the development of Kant’s political thought on the particular issue of cosmopolitanism is given in *Cosmopolitanism and Europe* (ed. Chris Rumford 2007, 20-1).

⁴ In the introduction to his edited volume, *Cosmopolitanism and Europe*, Chris Rumford gives a dynamic contemporary elasticity to the Kantian tradition of cosmopolitanism, viewing the term as a “kaleidoscope” of interpretations, of “models for imagining the world” and forging new, “fluid and evolving ... relationships between the individual, the community and the world” (2007, 2).

⁵ Vivienne Boon and Gerard Delanty argue convincingly about the dangers of a completely universalistic perspective on cosmopolitanism, which suppresses altogether its individual experiential origins (Rumford 2007, 24).

Certainly, Pinter manages to keep both the parochial and the global afloat. In *The Caretaker*, behind the self-inflicted misery of the citizen-cum-underdog Davies, one can also hear the echo of another social substratum, that of the non-citizens, the “aliens,” whose misery is rather muffled in the play. If one listens carefully, however, this play actually resonates with the dreams, desires and frustrations of many more than the three on-stage individual characters: not only the ones who are allowed a name, a voice and a presence on stage but also the scenically invisible and mute ones, whose existence is relegated to the fading backdrop of British society in the 1960s, when immigration was for many a threatening new phenomenon.

Similarly, *Ashes to Ashes* (1996) is and is not about the grand historical narrative of the Holocaust, since its protagonist Rebecca, who has all the recognisable features of a contemporary British female citizen, also stands at the boundary between her closed personal history and the recent traumatic European past stamped by the Nazis’ unspeakable atrocities. This dual, ambiguous existence of the female protagonist is also playfully and murkily doubled in Pinter’s text by the uncanny image of the “guilty pen,” whose material, utilitarian function in the play carries simultaneously a cosmic (rather than a metaphysical) dimension.⁶

3. Conclusion

As theorist B. J. Barber has recently observed, “our attachments start parochially and only then grow outward” (quoted by Boon and Delanty in Rumford 2007, 24). Imagining his characters (and often his stage objects) in a similar phenomenological vein, Pinter makes sure not to “run the risk of bypassing [the] more parochial identifications” (Boon and Delanty in Rumford 2007, 24) that give flesh to his theatre. As he has repeatedly stated, he cares for all his characters; he listens to what they have to say, and this is what makes his plays so immediate and irresistible. When he recently talked about the sinister characters of his last play *Celebration* (2000), he echoed his early manifesto of 1961:

In *Celebration*, although most of the characters are pretty vicious and brutal, nevertheless, I get a lot of fun out of them, I enjoy their *zest for life* really. So I am not making any kind of moral judgment. (Pinter interview 1999-2000, 93, my emphasis)

It is the human impulse and vitality, this “zest for life,” in very individual and not collective manifestations, that throb in his writing, that burst out on the stage – any stage – and come across to the audience – any audience – in the world. This is what I want to call Pinter’s *visceral cosmopolitanism*, a basically ethical and affective type of world vision, which – to borrow again from the agenda of contemporary cosmopolitan theory –

- “explore[s] the relationship of cosmopolitanism to questions of ‘otherness’ and antiracism” (as, for instance, with the unexpected scene of the Negro’s murder in *The Room*; or Stanley’s torturing in *The Birthday Party*; or the torture scenes in *The Hothouse*, *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language*);
- “look[s] at its relationship to the changing situation of women” (as in the memorable portrayals of his women characters from Meg, Stella and Ruth to Emma and Rebecca);

⁶ For a more extensive phenomenological reading of this incident, see Sakellaridou 2002.

- see[s] it “as an empathetic and inclusive set of identifications,” as a structure of *feeling* (as in *Monologue, Night, Landscape and Silence*)⁷.

The wording of this last aspect of cosmopolitanism makes it especially applicable to all Pinter’s plays: it underscores the dramatist’s primary working principle, which safeguards his works (even his most overtly political ones) from turning into a “distinct political project” (Rumford 2007, 23). In his Nobel Prize speech Pinter clearly articulated his artistic credo when he stated that in theatre “sermonizing has to be avoided at all cost” and that “the characters must be allowed to breathe their own air” (Pinter 2008, 7).

In an interesting cultural critique of what he calls “novel cosmopolitanism” (Brennan 1997, 1), Timothy Brennan expresses his specific reservations about the cosmopolitan rhetoric applied in the case of some recent Nobel Prize laureates, especially those from the domain of third-world literature. Referring specifically to the case of Derek Walcott and Toni Morrison, Brennan argues that

[t]he cosmopolitan script is largely written afterward, and then superimposed on work whose tempos and tortured uncertainties are subsequently blurred. Everything painful and slow and suspicious in them is converted to a *set of moral maxims*. (Brennan 1997, 199, my emphasis)

If there was a similar suspicion of “*containment*” and “*sublimation*” – to use Brennan’s accusatory terms (1997, 200) – in the Nobel ceremonial rhetoric in the case of Harold Pinter, I think that the writer himself took good care to disperse the danger by carefully ordering the content and crafting the style of his acceptance speech. His *visceral cosmopolitanism* shone again as forcefully and authentically as it was first manifested in his youth, when he stood up against the State as a conscientious objector.⁸ That was a remarkable early gesture of civil disobedience, a strong act of civic resistance that was soon to be recorded artistically in Petey’s memorable dramatic appeal to the protagonist Stanley in the closing lines of *The Birthday Party*: “Stan, don’t let them tell you what to do!” (Pinter 1976, 96).

As a citizen and an artist, Pinter addressed the world equally vociferously, with a cane and a pen in either hand, and he used them both *viscerally*.

⁷ I am adopting the term from the title of Mica Nava’s book *Visceral Cosmopolitanism: Gender, Culture and the Normalisation of Difference* (2007). The proposed schema for Pinter’s cosmopolitan vision is also an eclectic adaptation from Nava’s introduction (2007, 3).

⁸ Pinter was proud to refer to this early political action in his life once again in his interview on Greek State Television (ET 3) in April 2000 (Pinter 2000, 102).

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