



BEING BORN TO DEMOCRACY: READING HAROLD PINTER'S *THE BIRTHDAY PARTY* AS A RADICAL CRITIQUE OF CONVENTIONAL DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRACT

In this essay I read Harold Pinter's play, *The Birthday Party*, not simply as an existentialist absurd drama but rather as a deeply political play that offers a radical critique of the conventional liberal democracy within a structurally and stylistically "absurdist" framework. I argue that this play shows a radical politicization of the absurdist theatre by Pinter and that we, in the globalized unipolar universe, need to read it in the light of the critique of the hegemony of the capitalist democratic model of the USA that Pinter articulates in his famous Nobel Lecture. Thus, my essay is also a plea for a radical reading of an essentially radical writer like Pinter who, like Sartre, though not following the latter's methods, radically politicizes existentialism.

Key words: politicization of existentialism, subjectivity as subjection, critique of democracy, incommunicability of language, normalization, manufacture of consent

There's no escape. The big pricks are out. They'll fuck everything in sight. Watch your back. --- **Harold Pinter, "Democracy"(2003)**

Harold Pinter's "absurd drama", *The Birthday Party*, has almost always been read as a critique of the oppression of the sort one finds in any "authoritarian" system. This reading, one may argue, symptomatizes the post-Second-World-War capitalist approaches to democracy that valorize democracy as the only tolerable political system in a world shrinking under the shadow of Fascism. In other words, by using Fascism as the rhetorically useful, frightening other of the only tolerable system of the world, namely "democracy", the politicians of all democratic regimes, especially those of the USA, have cannily legitimized all forms of atrocities that can be performed under the holy umbrella of democracy. Democracy is the goddess the victorious party in the Second World War has fashioned out of

its skull, often obfuscating the fact that the bombing of Hiroshima was not a "democratic" act. In the humanities departments, Harold Pinter, one of the most potent political writers of the latter half of the twentieth century, is used as a defender of "individual freedom", which is implicitly equated with "democracy", and thus the basic epistemic status quo regarding "democracy" is propped up in the literature classes by manipulating the art of a writer who can, paradoxically, provide us with the most powerful critique of the smug acceptance of "democracy" as our political panacea. I would like to read *The Birthday Party* in the light of the critique of the American democracy that Pinter articulated in his famous Nobel Lecture and show how Pinter radically undermines the mythic co extensiveness of "freedom of thought" and "democracy".

Our politics of reading is often obscured by our pedagogic methods. If a teacher says in the class that Pinter protested against authoritarian "systems" he or she obfuscates the ways in which democracy itself may appear to be authoritarian to

an individual. Stanley Webber, I would argue, is a "common man" born to democracy through violent normalization (à la Michel Foucault). It is this birth that is celebrated in the "party", a birth of the democratic "subject" that is coterminous with the death of the free-thinking individual. As Marc Silverstein argues by drawing on Althusser's theory of ideology, 'Pinter's vision of cultural power implicitly equates subjectivity with subjection.' (26) This is exactly what lends force to the formation of the democratic subject. While democracy creates its own subject who would be able to defend the basic structural status quo, the democratic subject is happy to think that s/he partakes of power by participating in the democratic process. Every individual, within democracy, is subjected to a cloying illusion of being powerful, and that is what keeps the democratic system smoothly operational. Pinter, in his Nobel Lecture, unravels the inner strategies of deluding and misleading people that mark the USA "democracy". In the name of maintaining democratic order, the USA has persistently indulged in the blossoming of authoritarianisms all the world over, and in this process, it has propped up its internal political status quo by indoctrinating "the American people" through dazzling speeches and hollow rhetorical flourish. As the USA is the most effective global power in the unipolar universe, it can manipulate its professed commitment to democracy to legitimize all its evils. Democracy, in this way, becomes an apologia for all forms of totalitarianism. Pinter's political programme is very complex in that he does not merely criticize all forms of authoritarianism in a conventional way, but rather focuses on the secret stratagems of power through which all the apparently democratic systems, all the benevolent modes of power, actually operate in a totalitarian way. Michael Billington opines that injustices and lies of all sorts are the target of Pinter's sharp political critique, and the dramatist is engaged in an unending struggle against political lies. Billington reminds us of Pinter's "own injunction to Avraham Oz: 'Let's keep fighting.'" (744) The real nature of this fight can be understood when we closely read his Nobel Lecture, but we need to read his plays, whether earlier or later, in that light too. The humanities pedagogy has a role to play in the

formation of critical consciousness in the young minds, which cannot be accomplished if the pedagogical performers themselves become status quoists.

The central focus of my essay is, obviously, the interrogation scene in the second act of *The Birthday Party* which culminates in the symbolic killing of the individual called Stanley. The play is an allegory of subject formation as subjection, making the individual be born to democracy through a death of his/her individuality. It seems to me that unlike the radical postmodernists who think that all selves are artificially articulated through the inscriptions of power, Pinter puts some faith in the possibility of an unmediated self, an individuality, *before* the inscription of the individual into the symbolic order of culture and politics. Of course, that self does not embody a self-contained subjectivity - and Stanley, even before the arrival of Goldberg and McCann, does not emblemize a *sovereign* self. However, the fact remains that the play projects a sinister rite of passage into democratic subjecthood, which is symbolized as a death. Without a forced death of one's individual existence and freedom of thought, one can't be reinscribed into the "democratic" order of self-deluding smugness. Goldberg and McCann, during the interrogation, keep oppressing Stanley violently, and it is the authoritarian nature of this violence which has induced many to read it as a metaphoric presentation of the Fascist machinery of torture, like the concentration camp and the gas chamber. However, it is wrong to think that Pinter was speaking *only* of Fascist torture in a time when the classical Fascism of Hitler and Mussolini was already a dead thing of the past. The triumphant democracies that pretended to offer a political panacea, the newly rising *democratic authoritarianism* of the USA, all these elements of a hidden authoritarianism within democracy itself were the concerns of the creative thinkers of Pinter's generation. The absurdity of communication, the breakdown of language as a means of human communion, which Pinter depicts in his plays, betrays a different and more sinister situation than the *conspicuous* suffering of the victims of the Second World War and of European Fascisms. If there emerges a Fascist regime, one can

fight it in the name of democracy, but if democracy itself becomes Fascist and, by nominally juxtaposing its own democratic status against Fascism, legitimizes its democratic Fascism, then the language of struggle itself faces a forced closure, a rhetorical aporia. It is this communicative aporia that Pinter captures in his plays. The much dwelt-on violence in the interrogation scene can be read as the inner reality of our apparently non-violent democracies. Just under the surface of democracy there are bubbles of violence. Elfriede Jelinek, in her Nobel Lecture, "Sideline", dwells on how language becomes ineffectual when speaking and listening lose their rhythmic interaction. This is, metaphorically speaking, the problem of the late twentieth century big democracies too – speaking and listening are unrelated, and hence speeches are meaningless, and the listeners of the political speeches, the "common people", are aware of the fact that listening is not reciprocal, the powerful will not listen to the powerless, that listening is the business of the weak. Speech, thus, in the democratic Fascisms of the contemporary world order, is essentially a phallogocentric violence, it is an inscription on to a forced silence - and listening is equated with the passive experience of being penetrated. I think that it is this which is the secret of the phallic violence that Pinter metaphorizes in the poem, "Democracy".

The whole interrogation scene is full of absurdities, but these absurdities are symptomatic of what Hannah Arendt identifies as the "banality of evil". (Bergen ix-xvi) This banal evil is not only a matter of Nazism, it is also, and more frighteningly, a marker of modern democracies. In *The Democratic Paradox*, Chantal Mouffe argues that it is only the political epistemology of "difference" that can help us to build a substantial pluralist democracy, as opposed to the homogenizing force of conventional democracies that tries to negate interpersonal, inter-collective differences in order to turn the individuals into masses. (19) One can argue that in the interrogation scene difference is being violently exorcized to usher in homogeneity, and to "manufacture consent", to borrow the expression of Walter Lippmann (cited in Herman and Chomsky xi). These two figures of violence, the interrogators, can be seen as figures for intellectual rather than

physical violence, and thus they can be equated with the mass media which operates as one of the most significant pillars of postmodern democracy. Goldberg tells Stanley, 'You are dead. You can't live, you can't think, you can't love. You're dead. You're a plague gone bad. There's no juice in you. You're nothing but an odour!' (Pinter, *Birthday Party* 52) This is the ultimate tragedy of the democratic subject: he/she becomes an insubstantial odour, a non-existent existent who has to take part in the politics of presence. In the third act of the play, the two interrogators of Stanley enumerate the opportunities democracy offers:

'GOLDBERG. We'll watch over you.
MCCANN. Advise you.
GOLDBERG. Give you proper care and treatment.
.....
GOLDBERG. We'll make a man of you.
MCCANN. And a woman.
GOLDBERG. You'll be re-orientated.
MCCANN. You'll be rich.
GOLDBERG. You'll be adjusted.
MCCANN. You'll be our pride and joy.
GOLDBERG. You'll be a mensch.
MCCANN. You'll be a success.
GOLDBERG. You'll be integrated.
MCCANN. You'll give orders.
GOLDBERG. You'll make decisions.
MCCANN. You'll be a magnate.
GOLDBERG. A statesman.
MCCANN. You'll own yachts.
GOLDBERG. Animals.
MCCANN. Animals.' (82-84)

What this whole cryptic piece of conversation upholds is the series of the lures of democracy. Democracy is all about owning and becoming animals. It is a political system that produces second order animals, animals that are not natural but cultural, the animals born to democratic cultures. That is the absurdity ingrained in the most assuring of political systems: DEMOCRACY. At the end of the play, Stanley has indeed become an animal, and he will probably own animals too, unleash dictatorial oppression on other human beings, in turn turning them into animals and dehumanizing them in the same way as that

whereby he himself has been dehumanized. Democracy is seen by Pinter as a chain of dehumanizations. And as Mouffe argues, without appreciating the value of difference, without pluralizing the fundamental episteme of democracy, democracy will never succeed in ushering in pluralism at the structural-operational level. Pluralism poses challenges every moment, and a democracy that tries to bypass these challenges with political cunning is not democratic at all. That is the greatest democratic paradox.

At the end Petey tells Stanley, 'Stan, don't let them tell you what to do!' (Pinter, *Birthday Party* 86) What does this imply? Does it imply something like the principle of "Let's keep fighting" that is so close to Pinter's heart? Or does it imply a feeble protest against homogenizing democracy, the ossificatory violence of democratic systems, which will ultimately be washed away in the aggressive flow of non-listening speech that marks democracy today and that makes the writer perennially *sidelined*, to use the evocative term of Jelinek?

In *Time Warps*, Ashis Nandy writes that in the twentieth century 'human destructiveness reached its creative pinnacle.' (212) He thinks that in this century creativity itself has been reconceptualized from the perspective of this destructiveness, in turn making artistic creation into a mode of atonement for our innate destructiveness. (215-16) This destructiveness finds a place in the modern democratic systems too. Destroying difference, destroying the human capacity for free thought, implies a destruction that is no less dangerous than the Fascist and colonialist destruction of living beings and cultures. Pinter's atonement, however, finds its creative release through protest. He knows that no substantial atonement is to be effected through the masochistic pleasures of passive self-critique, true atonement is possible only through the active protests against the powers that be, and against power in general. This is his artistic and political credo, and it is this credo which has enabled him to protest again and again against all forms of social and political injustice throughout the world. Like Wislawa Szymborska, the Nobel Laureate Polish poet, Pinter too knows that our epoch is political and we are all the children of a political epoch. (Szymborska 14-15) Pinter's theatre

of the absurd deals with the existential predicaments, but he knows that these predicaments are framed within political milieus. One can confront these existential predicaments not by dwindling into the myth of an apolitical art, but by embracing politics. Like Sartre, but in a radically different way, Pinter politicizes existentialism. Absurd drama, in this way, becomes both an aporia of meaning and a *poros* of political significance. Language is political, and hence, the problems of language in Pinter's plays are also essentially political problems. Creation and destruction both happen in the political sphere, and to eschew the frightening banality of evil, one has to restore the political voice of the artist. However, Pinter did not operate as a political ideologue, at least not in the earlier plays like *The Birthday Party*. But, his voice became more and more overtly political in his later plays. Earlier, Pinter had declared clearly that he was not the kind of "committed" writer Sartre had valorized (qtd in Moi 32). However, as Ruben Moi argues, in Pinter's early plays, there is a "political directness" which the critics have often ignored. (35) For Moi, Pinter's absurd drama is not the typical existentialist absurd drama that has gained much critical attention over the years. It is a more intensely political drama that nevertheless structurally, stylistically and also philosophically operates within the absurdist tradition. Moi writes, 'Pinter's plays were always already political.' (38) As Moi reminds us, Pinter is a great and perceptive critic of democracy as it is practised in the era of global capitalism. (27) Pinter, thus, reminds us that to defend freedom of speech and thought does not merely mean a defence of democracy as such, but something more complex and more difficult. Like Adorno and Horkheimer, Pinter too is acutely conscious of the banalization of evil indulged in by the postmodern culture industry, the "enlightenment as mass deception". (Adorno and Horkheimer 120-167)

When Francis Fukuyama announced the end of history with his theoretical valorization of "liberal democracy", he perhaps did not show any sensitiveness towards the creative thinkers like Pinter who had been persistently exposing the flaws of liberal democracy since the end of the Second World War. (Chaouachi 3-9) Pinter makes us realize

that if democracy is taken to be the end of history, we will impose an unhappy closure on our political imagination. The threats of this closure must be resisted at any cost. And a way of resisting it would be to emotionally respond to the radical texts like *The Birthday Party* without succumbing to the pedagogical lures of status quoism. We, the children of a political epoch, must remember that we are trapped in a strange situation, where, as the Swedish poet, Tomas Tranströmer puts it, 'It is still beautiful to hear the heart beat but often the shadow seems more real than the body.'

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