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History as a Single Act: Pinter's *Ashes to Ashes**

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In Harold Pinter's latest play *Ashes to Ashes* all human history, personal and social, is one act, one essential conflict, which echoes and reverberates in different forms throughout time: dominance and submission, victims and victimizers, and the discovery through imagination and empathy of our power not to be victims. *Ashes to Ashes* places two people in conflict, Rebecca and her would-be dominator, Devlin. In the play we enter history at a particular place — a country house in England — at a particular time — the present — but we are at the same time in Buchenwald, the mass graves in Bosnia, anywhere in time or place where police sirens are heard, authority worshiped as a substitute for self-responsibility, a lover adored at the price of selfhood, blind masses follow leaders to destruction, gross certainty is mistaken for purity of conviction, social hierarchy is taken for natural order, and innocence and helplessness are regarded as legitimate prey. For Devlin, history is simply fact external to himself, something to be dredged up, forced from Rebecca if necessary so that he can dominate every part of her. Rebecca, however, becomes history, lives it through imaginative identification and through such empathy discovers her own power not to be bound by the factuality of the past, but rather to reshape herself as non-victim. And we, as audience participating in the living ritual of theatre, to the extent that the play echoes in us and we identify imaginatively with Rebecca while recognizing our potential for being Devlin, discover with Rebecca that power in ourselves.

Talking to Michael Billington, Pinter told of the genesis of the play. During a winter holiday in Barbados, he read Gita Sereny's biography of Albert Speer:

[...] I was very struck by the fact that Speer organised and was responsible for the slavelabour factories in Nazi Germany [...]. Reading the book also triggered lots of other associations: I've always been haunted by the image of Nazis picking up babies on bayonet-spikes and throwing them out of windows. All cruelty is monstrous but that seems particularly vile since a little baby is as near to innocence as you can get. I wasn't actually sitting on holiday thinking I must write a play about all this but, when I got back home, something instantly happened. I started writing, as usual, on a yellow pad with two characters called A (a man) and B (a woman) and the first line originally was him asking her 'what kind of things'?¹

As that original first line might indicate, *Ashes to Ashes* opens much in the vein of *Old Times* with Devlin probing Rebecca's past as she tells him of a former lover who would put one hand on her neck, draw her head toward him and tell her to kiss his fist. Her response had been, as she kissed his fist, to ask him to place his hand around her throat. Thereafter, under Devlin's continuing questioning, she affirms her belief that that lover had adored her, such adoration being demonstrated only by the lightness of the pressure he applied to her throat as he bent her backwards and her legs opened.

At this moment in the play we hear echoes of *The Lover* and *Old Times*, assuming that this is yet another struggle of a bored, upper class English couple to open the past in order to regain lost sexual excitement with tinges of sado-masochism and jealousy in order to reignite from its ashes some sparks of a dying affair. And as usual, in such Pinter matches, Devlin attempts to take control of Rebecca's past while remaining steadfastly nonplused about her revelation of an earlier lover. He demands:

DEVLIN [...] Can't you give him a shape for me, a concrete shape? I want a concrete image of him, you see ... an image I can carry about with me. I mean, all

* I wish to thank the Dana Foundation for its support in the writing of this essay.

¹ I quote here from the pre-publication proofs of Michael Billington's singularly important new book, *The Life and Works of Harold Pinter*, now published by Faber and Faber.

you can talk of are his hands, one hand over your face, the other on the back of your neck, then the first one on your throat. There must be more to him than hands. What about eyes? Did he have any eyes?

Pause

REBECCA What colour?

Pause

DEVLIN That's precisely the question I'm asking you... my darling.

REBECCA How odd to be called darling. No one has ever called me darling. Apart from my lover.²

Then, as above, the conversation goes on battling over the word "lover" which Rebecca has introduced to reassert her control. Into it, however, the word "baby" is introduced as Devlin changes Rebecca's "I'm nobody's darling" to the line from the song (echoes of *Old Times*) "I'm nobody's baby now."

Rebecca claims that she can't tell details like eyes because her lover left years ago, taken away by a job in an agency, a travel agency. Her strategy of shifting the frame of reference as a means of refusing to play on Devlin's territory suddenly, however, takes her into another memory, actually experienced or created perhaps, as Pinter's, from something she read or from something someone she knew had experienced, a recollection of "that place" where her lover had taken her.

REBECCA Oh, it was a kind of factory, I suppose.

DEVLIN What do you mean, a kind of factory? Was it a factory or wasn't it? And if it was a factory, what kind of factory was it?

REBECCA Well they were making things — just like any other factory. But it wasn't the usual kind of factory.

Rebecca goes on to describe how all the workers in this factory were wearing caps which they doffed to her lover as he walked between their rows. This, he had explained to her, was out of respect for him, for

[...] his... purity, his... conviction. They would follow him over a cliff and into the sea, if he asked them, he said. And sing in a chorus, as long as he led them. They were in fact, very musical, he said.

Obviously, we are no longer in England but in one of the slave labour camps in Nazi Germany about which Pinter had read, and the word "baby" first introduced as a strategy for control now returns in the horrific context of the extermination of those unfit to work: children.

He did work for a travel agency. He was a guide. He used to go to the local railway station and walk down the platform and tear all the babies from the arms of their screaming mothers.

Such order, purity and undeviating clarity of vision clearly have their price. They exclude everything that cannot serve the vision, as babies too young to work for the Reich, or everything outside the vision. Here too are echoes of Pinter's often overlooked *Party Time* in which persons at an elegant party demand military control of any outside disorder which might threaten their own vision of what constitutes the good life. Indeed, as Gita Sereny's biography of Speer is clearly the source of the factory images, so *Party Time* may be, beyond the obvious Fascist symbol, one proximate source of the image of the clenched fist:

DOUGLAS We want peace and we're going to get it. But we want that peace to be cast iron. No leaks. No draughts. Cast iron. Tight as a drum. That's the kind of peace we want and that's the kind of peace we're going to get. A cast iron peace.

He clenches his fist

Like this.

FRED You know, I really admire people like you.

DOUGLAS So do I. (17)

² Quotations from *Ashes to Ashes* are from the manuscript which Harold Pinter kindly sent me prior to production.

Just as in *Party Time* there is police action outside the flat where the party is taking place, Rebecca now recalls her upset at the police sirens she had heard minutes ago. Those police sirens had triggered perhaps the memory of her fascist-like lover, then of the death camps, so now those memories in turn allow her to reach out imaginatively to all who are being so oppressed anywhere. The police sirens become a universal symbol.

REBECCA [...] It just hit me so hard. You see... as the siren faded away in my ears I knew it was becoming louder and louder for someone else.

DEVLIN You mean that it's always being heard by somebody, somewhere? Is that what you're saying?

REBECCA Yes. Always. Forever.

The differing reactions of Devlin and Rebecca to such a siren and all it stands for define their different perspectives. For Devlin the sound means security, order. Rebecca, however, wants to take onto herself the insecurity the siren implies, and she expresses her fear of losing it. Menacingly Devlin assures her there will “always be another one,” even one on its way to her now.

Rebecca's imaginative identification with suffering in any one place or time flows outward to embrace all. Perhaps that is what is most humanly daunting about an act of genuine empathy, its boundlessness. Devlin tells her:

[...] You'll never be lonely again. You'll never be without a police siren. I promise you.

Then, instead of allowing the outward flow, Devlin calls for “focus,” for getting the discussion back to his point, the “lover” seen solely as rival. Obliquely, though, through reference to a fountain pen rolling off the table, Rebecca refuses his attempt at control and brings the subject back to the suffering of the innocent.

REBECCA This pen, this perfectly innocent pen.

DEVLIN You can't know it was innocent.

Steadfastly Devlin tries to hold to his limited subject. The pen may not be innocent because, as Rebecca with her newly disclosed “lover,” you don't know whose hands have touched it, by implication, Rebecca. The suffering of the innocent in turn leads to a discussion of God in such a world, a subject which has increasingly touched Pinter's imagination since he wrote the screenplay for Kafka's *The Trial*.³ For Devlin a world without a hierarchical God would be like a soccer game played before no fans: “Absence. Stalemate. Paralysis. A world without a winner.” And if there were no external authority, and if Rebecca were referring to some atrocity with her talk of babies and platforms, what authority does she have to name atrocity? At first Rebecca confesses to no such actual authority, for neither she nor presumably her well-off friends have suffered.⁴ Sensing that her admission has given him the upper hand, Devlin returns to the substitute for transcendent authority that was suggested in the opening image of the “lover's” hands about Rebecca's neck, placing oneself in the hands of another person. The discussion begins comically with the example of Rebecca's hairdresser having her entire trust: “It's not just your head which is in his hands, is it, it's your life, it's your spiritual... welfare.” Then he maneuvers the conversation toward an invitation to allow him to be in that position of hairdresser or God — with her life in *his* hands.

Why didn't you confide in me? Why didn't you confess? You would have felt so much better. Honestly. You could have treated me like a priest.

³ In a BBC4 interview about the film, published in *The Pinter Review: Annual Essays*, Pinter said: “One of the captions I would put on *The Trial* is simply: ‘What kind of game is God playing?’ That's what Josef K is really asking. And the only answer he gets is a pretty brutal one” (p. 62). Pinter's image of a soccer game played without a spectator also reminds one of the player's description in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* of a play performed without an audience.

⁴ There may be a personal sense reflected here for Pinter, since both he and his wife Lady Antonia Fraser have sometimes been referred to in a derogatory manner by the British press as “Champagne Socialists.” In that case Pinter would be responding indirectly that imaginative identification with suffering is precisely the task of writers whatever their external circumstances.

He would have had the distance and the objectivity, he taunts her mockingly, to assume such a priestly role, for after all he was (creating a past to make a point as Pinter's characters do) a scholar. Such objectivity, he claims, is of course not possible when you have commitments, like a wife. Then duty commands and you never let the best man win.

A man who doesn't give a shit. A man with a rigid sense of duty.

Pause

There's no contraction between those last two statements. Believe me.

In turn Rebecca counters his story with one of her own, of a day in Dorset when she saw people following a guide and walking toward the sea. They followed their guide into the sea and were covered by the tide. In place of surrender to any authority, transcendent or human, she offers a startling image of individual responsibility, a condition known as mental elephantiasis.

REBECCA This mental elephantiasis means that when you spill an ounce of gravy, for example, it immediately expands and becomes a vast sea of gravy. It becomes a sea of gravy which surrounds you on all sides and you suffocate in a voluminous sea of gravy. It's terrible. But it's all your own fault. You brought it upon yourself. You are not the *victim* of it, you are the *cause* of it. Because it was you who spilt the gravy in the first place, it was you who handed over the bundle.

Reference to "the bundle" in turn leads to a nightmare vision of a frozen city of ice and bumpy snow where she watched her "lover," "my dear, my most precious companion," tear babies from their screaming mothers.

Once again Devlin tries to localize and focus the conversation, asking if she had gone today to see her sister Kim and her children. Kim's husband, who has left her for another woman, wants to come back because he misses the children, but Kim won't have him back.

But this talk of "normal" life is broken again by Rebecca's story of a film she had seen after tea with Kim. It was a comedy other members of the audience laughed at about a woman who had never lived in a desert before being taken there by a man. And the man sitting in front of Rebecca never laughed either, but just sat like a corpse.

Devlin suggests starting again, complimenting Rebecca, and reminding her of the beauty and serenity of her present life, of her life with him. But for Rebecca Devlin is now linked with her former "lover," the man who had met the trains and torn the children from their mothers: "We started... a long time ago. We started. We can't start again. We can end again." Then as they argue over the semantic possibilities of "end," Rebecca begins to sing softly "Ashes to ashes." She returns to her vision of the icy landscape, now with an old man and a boy, probably refugees, dragging suitcases over the treacherous terrain, followed by a woman carrying a baby in her arms. As she tells how the stars go out and the woman kisses the boy and listens to her heart, the light in the room onstage darkens and the one single act that is, sadly, our own history, commences. No longer separated by any distance, Rebecca *is* the woman giving up her child.

I hold her to me. She was breathing. Her heart was beating.

And Devlin, too, is both himself and the killer of children. Making a fist, he demands she kiss it. No longer simply victim, though, Rebecca refuses.

From this point on in the play, all Rebecca's words are echoed as if repeated and reverberating through all time and place. On her way to the train she took her baby, wrapped it in a shawl, a bundle in order to hide it, but the baby cried out, the man called her back, and she gave him the bundle, then got on the train. There a woman asked her what had happened to her baby.

REBECCA I don't have a baby.

ECHO a baby

REBECCA I don't know of any baby.

ECHO of any baby

Pause

REBECCA I don't know of any baby.

Long silence
Blackout

The dramatic impact of *Ashes to Ashes* must be enormous, as are its implications. It contains all the elements familiar from Pinter's previous work: the struggle for dominance; the opening of the past as the *locus* of that battle precisely because of its indeterminacy; the use of story to create a pose (as Lenny, for example in *The Homecoming*); the revelation of the violence beneath domesticity; this line between victim and victimizer (*One for the Road* and *Mountain Language*); the link between domestic and political violence and the sado-masochistic nature of power (*Party Time*).

In other ways, however, it goes beyond all these, as Shakespeare in *The Tempest*, to the essence of the poetic, dramatic act itself. If one looks at the philosophical implications of Pinter's early plays, issues raised as early as that seminal novel *The Dwarfs*, one might say that in the absence of any larger frame of reference, what Pinter's friend and fellow dramatist, Vaclav Havel, calls in *Letters to Olga*, horizons, the characters of the early plays are all trapped and encased within the "I." Those plays may well be described as battles which are necessarily primitively territorial because, apart from those who have surrendered the "I" to an organization and those who have some sense, however distorted, of family relationship, there is no common frame of reference upon which agreement about anything can be reached. This accounts for the intense theatrical, dramatic power of the works — they exist only within the context of that struggle while it is happening on stage — as well as their lack of resolution. In the no-man's land of his work, the struggle of self-enclosed "I" with another self-enclosed "I" has begun before the curtain goes up and will continue after it comes down. Perhaps, too, this is why betrayal is such a recurring theme.

As Pinter's works become more consciously political and more overtly concerned with human rights and their violations, the question of horizon and frame of reference becomes more important. By what authority or standard do we define genital mutilation or electric shock interrogations of prisoners as violations? If nations or cultures are simply larger versions of the self-enclosed "I[s]" of the early plays, by what authority, as Devlin puts it, do we define atrocity? If in a "world without a winner," a world without transcendental rules, the Devlins have simply translated the need for that authority into the human need to control and be controlled, to have the clenched fist kissed and to kiss it (not a contradiction, he insists) or to follow power with blind faith into the sea, one must ask if we have simply gone from the ashes of transcendent power to the ashes of burned out fascist-like human power inherent in the vision of life as the struggle of "I" against "I."

Not necessarily, the play suggests. There is still a way we can move into "other," know the suffering we have not personally suffered, get outside the confines of the "I" and into the realm of a more universal "we." Order cannot be imposed from the outside like a cast-iron fist. It begins from the inside with the imaginative identification of ourselves as potentially both victimizer and victim. Devlin is capable of the one, but, unlike Rebecca, not the other. Through the fluidity of our imagination conjoined with the artists' in the ritual that is theatre, we touch everyone and everything. As we watch from our safe windows in London or New York, Nice or Tampa or wherever *Ashes to Ashes* is performed, we become like Rebecca, our fellow humans walking on the treacherous ice, protecting and surrendering what we love. In identification with victim and victimizer we steel our will not to be either. Through imaginative identification, the "I" is transcended and universal human rights are known in the experience of the particular.

Like Shakespeare's *Tempest*, then, *Ashes to Ashes* is, besides all else, a play about play, about the ability of art to transform us into something strange, and in this case terrible, only to re-emerge more fully, universally human than before.

To write of the significance of the subject matter of *Ashes to Ashes* does not, of necessity, make it a great play in the theatre. Though unfortunately I have not yet seen it in production, I

suspect that it is. Pinter is the great poet of the modern theatre and *Ashes to Ashes* strengthens that belief. Its dramatic structure is linear and vertical in terms of the power struggle taking place between Rebecca and Devlin; horizontal and poetic in its resonances. With his usual superb craftsmanship, Pinter makes each shift of subject realistic and plausible as a strategy in the verbal battle for control. At the same time the movement of the play is propelled and intensified by the poetic association of images. Fist, child, ice, sweetheart, platform, that place, dark, stars, desert, guides: all these echo back and forth from specific context to universal meaning and experience. In the theatrically shared human experience of suffering, victimhood and the possibility of its transcendence, these images will continue to haunt, echo and re-echo long after the curtain has descended.

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