

On Beckett's Legacy in Harold Pinter

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This article addresses the influence of Beckett's writing on the work of Harold Pinter. Both playwrights have been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature (Beckett in 1969 and Pinter in 2005) and the work of Beckett has been pointed out by a multitude of critics as one of the main influences on Pinter, especially as regards the core of the "Pinteresque" signature – the suspension points, pauses and silences.

In an interview given to Kirsty Wark for the programme *Newsnight* on 23rd of June 2006, Pinter referred to his relationship with Beckett and reiterated that "There is no one like Beckett".¹ He commented on a specific episode involving Beckett and Pinter's play *Silence*: Pinter had shown it to Beckett, as usual, and Beckett said that he had liked it very much, but he advised Pinter to review speech six, on page five. Pinter could not find anything wrong with it, until the moment they started rehearsing the play, under the direction of Peter Hall. After being away for a week, Pinter called up Hall who told him that everything had been going smoothly, apart from one speech that needed some revisions. Instantly Pinter recalled "speech 6, on page 5", leaving Hall amazed, asking: "How did you know?"

One of the reasons why Beckett is summoned whenever one tries to find Pinter's heritage concerns mostly his use of silence to convey meaning. In practical terms, Pinter is the dramatist of pauses and silences, whereas Beckett is, essentially, the dramatist of the almost purposeless wait – even

¹ *Newsnight Interview* is a programme of BBC 2 and this interview with Harold Pinter was broadcast on the 23rd June 2006.

the actual staging of the text. However, he played meticulous attention to the tiniest details involved in explanations about plays, beyond what was already in the texts themselves. Beckett, even more than Pinter, always refused to offer further

its night once more," (Beckett 1982: 89). (...) They give birth aside of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second (11). And it also reminds us of Pozzo's words in *Waiting for Godot*: "One Words are few. Dying too. Birth was the death of him," (Beckett 1982: Beckett's *A Piece of Monologue*: "Birth was the death of him. Again. From a prodder perspective, this last sentence brings to mind away and distorted, often even at the time of its birth. (Pinter 1991: ix-x) sure the experience the less articulate its expression. (...) A moment is sucked a thing is not necessarily true or false; it can be both true and false. (...) and the experience of others is understandable but cannot always be satisfied. (...) The desire for verification on the part of all of us, with regard to our own experience According to Pinter:

formulating opinions about the characters or the plots of his plays. though, Pinter, rather like Beckett, appears to have a problem in regard to the actual making of plays, and its relationship to experience, dependent on the circumstances involved in facing daily experience. With facing the mystery of life, whereas Pinter's people are much more bus numbers and street names. Thus, Beckett deals mainly with characters sometimes with precise geographical details provided by references to his characters who, in most cases, are inscribed in London surroundings, is concerned rather with attributing a name and a plausible identity to option of introducing characters through numbers and letters – Pinter to anyone, anywhere, at any time – which becomes evident in his recurrent Beckett's texts immediately). If in Beckett every character is the equivalent are Pinter's plays *Гризе и Ландскап*, which can be said to take us to with a credible identity, as regards their verisimilitude. (The exceptions starts with a room, a kitchen or a restaurant but endows his characters road, a man in a room – and then begins to deepen that void; Pinter the outcome is distinct: Beckett starts from almost nothing – a nameless Although Beckett and Pinter have almost the same starting point, when there would seem to be something beyond the scene) (a Godot, a

dismissed it, declaring: "No, not as pupil to master... I think he is the asked by Mel Gussow about a possible pupil-master relation, Pinter simplicity of means used by Beckett to convey emotions. However, when his adaptation of Kafka's *Process*. What struck Pinter the most was the opinion. According to Pinter, at the time of his death Beckett was reading *The Homecoming* – the first play he submitted to Beckett, asking for an used to show him the first draft of his plays or scripts, beginning with perfect of plays, and he mentioned that he visited Beckett regularly and literary preferences, namely Beckett. Pinter considered *Endgame* the most readers were given the opportunity to become acquainted with Pinter's through the interviews and the writings compiled in *Various Voices*.

have to, I forget, no matter. (Ibidem: xiv)

I shall have to speak of things which I cannot speak, but also, which is even more interesting, but also that I, which is if possible even more interesting, that I shall have to, I forget, no matter. (Ibidem: xiv)

the pointlessness of speaking without reason:

novel *The Unnamable* to conclude and emphasize his observations on In the speech cited above, Pinter used a quotation from Beckett's

mean by "that", is never explained.

exchange, saying that everything is fine "apart from that", but what is in which two men (played by Pinter and Rupert Graves) have a pointless interview: the sketch consists of a reproduction of a mobile conversation written in 2006 and read live at the already mentioned *Newsnight* Celebration (published in 1999), and his last sketch, *Apart from That* – published – is still up-to-date, if one bears in mind his last longer play – first delivered at a time when only nine of Pinter's plays had been It is relevant to note that this remark – which was part of a speech

within us is too fearsome a possibility. (Pinter 1991: xiii)

enter into someone else's life is too frightening. To disclose to others the poverty too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid (...). Communication is too alarming. To with a constant stratagem to cover nakedness. (...) I think that we communicate only with an echo but are near nakedness. One way of looking at speech is to say that it is a torrent of language is being employed. (...) When true silence falls we are still left There are two silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a

urge to communicate by different means. Again according to Pinter:

use of silence as a form of discourse. Deprivation of language creates the Another main feature that is common to both authors concerns the

most remarkable writer in the world, that's what I feel. I don't feel pupil to master, for a start, because I don't see where I relate to him at all," (Pinter and Gussow 1998: 30).

On the topic of Beckett and Kafka, Pinter also noted: "When I read them it rang a bell, that's all, within me. I thought: something is going on here which is going on in me too."⁵

For many years, critical consideration of Pinter focused on establishing parallels between the two authors. Katherine Burkman, in *The Dramatic World of Harold Pinter*, published in 1971, finds two types of rituals in Pinter's texts, and uses this insight to compare him with other writers, namely with Beckett:

As in the rest of Pinter's dramatic world, the rituals of daily life are seen at one and the same time as comic and ineffectual, and as tragic and pathetic. Their emptiness is exposed with all the intellectualism of Ionesco's kind of irony, but the effort to sustain them is explored with all the sympathy of Beckett for his two Godot clowns, desperately improvising their routines in a void. (Burkman 1971: 12)

Peter Hall, drawing on his experience of directing both Beckett's and Pinter's plays, also talks about the influences of Beckett in the "Pinteresque" text. Hall refers specifically to the staging of their plays, and he argues:

The mystery to me is that there is communication in the theatre which is beyond words, and which is actually concerned with direct feeling. (...) My vocabulary is all the time about hostility and battles and weaponry, but that's the way Pinter's characters operate, as if they were all stalking round a jungle, trying to kill each other but trying to disguise from one another the fact that they are bent on murder. (...) Finally, Pinter deals in silliness, in confrontations which are unbroken, and I believe it mandatory to do as few moves in a Pinter play as possible. (Hall 1982: 21-22)

Moreover, Hall recognises the importance of the games that the characters initiate, and the way they develop in the course of the text a game that can be summed up in Pinter's case as "social intercourse". Ruby Cohn, in her article "The Economy of Betsey", attempts to relate Beckett to Pinter with regard to issues of language and silence, and she ventures a few coherent definitions. As she points out:

⁵ Pinter interviewed by John Shepherd, BBC European Service, 3rd March 1960.

perhaps, and lived deliberately at night, and slept in the day. But what die the minute they are uttered. Bates questions: "If I changed my life, live with a sense of unfulfillment. All the expressions of desire for change Beckett's plays, only silence can reproduce the unreason of having to projects that never were; and, once again, as is the case with most of than existing in a triangle, the characters experience the failure of the general incantatory and cryptic tone are identical to Landscapes. More movement, the figurations invested in particular images, and the play's In silence the minimalist structure, the inertia that characterizes all

past events from the moment they have met.

Night, a sketch where a man and a woman deprived of name recreate silences priming with unbreakable memories. The text in fact resembles of intensities, of sun, shade and night, that convey the pauses and the for starting a family, for risking happiness. The play transmits a cadence the opportunities pass by, missing the moment for loving, the moment centered on the auguries and the regrets of having let the instants and is that Beth's and Duff's memories are not about past dreams, they are but is edually deaf to all the things she says. What appears to be relevant looks at Duff and appears not to listen to his voice; Duff talks to Beth, definite space of a lake. According to the stage directions, Beth never hand, Beth is driven by a desire of infinitude, represented by the — that serve as a metaphor of the break-up between them: on the one of memory with images of water — the sea, for Beth, a lake in Duff's case their speeches coincide on the same theme. They both activate the power focuses mainly on Beth. There are moments when, by mere coincidence, warmed by the sun, whereas Duff concentrates on trivial matters, but Beth dwells on a fantasy of a life in common, washed by the sea and dialogue, if it were not for the fact that their topics are utterly distinct. throughout the text two parallel monologues which would resemble a communication as their core theme. In Landscapes, Beth and Duff maintain Landscapes and Silence, the plays that present the absence of com- The best way to search for Beckett's voice in *Printer* is to read

usually constitute an attack and defence. (Cohn 2001: 19)

valliant strategies against the void. For *Printer*, in contrast, the short lined exchanges resemble that of Beckett is the rhythm of verbal duels (...). Beckett's duologues are function like musical notation for the actor. (...) *Printer*'s shaping most indicated in print by commas, period, three dots, pause, and silence, which can More repetitive than any verbal technique in *Printer*'s plays are his units of silence —

wrote Krabp.

by during himself in 1958, the same year that, by coincidence, Beckett
 he appeared on the screen also in a wheelchair and beginning his speech
 of his Nobel speech on December 2007, when, due to health problems,
 want them back", – followed by a silent pause, brought back the memory
 Krabp's final speech – "Perhaps my best years are gone. But I would not
 but the way he sat behind the desk in a motor wheelchair delivering
 nine, listening to his old self of thirty years before. Pinter was seventy-six.
 According to Beckett's stage directions, Krabp is a man of sixty-
 together here".³

when he acknowledged: "There's a moment of theatre history coming
 happened has been well by the director of the play, Ian Rickson,
 £25 ticket was sold on eBay for £180. One of the reasons why this
 run of ten performances sold out within about seventeen minutes and a
 in Beckett's play, for the centenary celebration, at the Royal Court. The
 In October 2006 – from the 10th to the 21st – Pinter performed Krabp
 the silence of those three interrupted lives.

explains her urgency to talk, as someone who says a prayer, to eradicate
 with the expression of the discontinuous time of her memories and
 foreign place. Thus, the fragmentary architecture of the text is consistent
 Hamm, Clov, Didi, Gogo, Winnie, Will and so many others, the past is a
 connects her memories is definitely broken. For Ellen, as for Krabp,
 the past perfect and past perfect continuous because the time line that
 recapitulates her incapacity of distinguishing between the simple past,
 The female character has lost all notion of things past, and
 told me. I need to be told things," (Ibidem: 201).

or speaking? How can I know? Can I know such things? No-one has ever
 sits the night. Such a silence. I can hear myself. (...) Is it me? Am I silent
 all through the text the first two of the following sentences: "Around me
 and on the desire to find someone who listens and talks to her, replying
 Its of no importance," (Ibidem: 203, 209). Ellen ponders on her solitude
 underlying the importance of dreaming and loving: "Sleep? Tender love?
 Throughout the text, he keeps on "singing," his refrain trying to
 1997: 194)

exactly would I do? What can be meant by living in the dark," (Pinter

³ Quoted in The Sunday Morning Herald, 24th October 2006.

in Pinter, the depiction of a room viewing another. In Beckett's case a disembodied head, alone, in the middle of the stage; present in the Nobel Diplomas given to each by the Swedish Academy; surface of a normal situation. The visual evidence of this difference is by surprise with the introduction of menace and mystery behind the start from a daily situation and then moves onwards to take the audience buried alive, or in vases, or in "no man's land" – whereas Pinter tries to from the very beginning, the awkwardness of the situation – characters Beckett is perfectly at ease in giving away nothing, in reinstating on stage, conveyed, or a torrent of words, or a simple repetition of ideas. However, for the perfect word, the one that best describes the emotion that is being with laughter and black humour. It can also be seen in the dust either use of silent discourse, as well as an intrinsic vocation to mix menace, Beckett's legacy in Harold Pinter amounts in particular to the latter's

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