REFERENTIALITY IN HAROLD PINTER'S PLAYS

Alina-Elena Roşca

Lecturer, PhD, „Petroleum-Gas" University of Ploiești

Abstract: *Harold Pinter's plays delineate a self-conscious aesthetic world which performs a double function, both incorporating the post-1950s reality and negating it. Although the setting entails naturalist expectations, although the characters seem to belong to conventional middle-class comedy, Harold Pinter's dramatic world departs from the growing politicization of British theatre and goes beyond the social realist drama. While still embedded in the contemporary historical and cultural context of its production, the plays disable conventional-meaning making, deconstructing hierarchical boundaries and distinctions.*

The dramatic text becomes a subversive commentary on conventional dramatic structure and on conventional cultural structures or codes. Since objects and individuals are estranged from the concrete social and historical conditions of their existence, since it is impossible to confer any meaning to things or people, the loss of referential world is traumatically felt and leads to a regressive movement into silence, into subjective memory and into a perverse, voyeuristic effort of submitting the others to a permanently objectifying and neutralizing gaze. Individuals are socially positioned and culturally encoded only in the discursive field of the Other, in a world of violent consumerism and ontological estrangement. Similarly, the conventional dramatic structure becomes inappropriate for dismantling the overdetermined cultural representations of identity and language and Harold Pinter's plays transmute and destabilize dramatic familiar tropes.

Keywords: dramatic structure, cultural representation, Otherness, aesthetic consciousness

Harold Pinter reshapes the project of realistic theatricality, since the social and political implications his plays encompass are powerfully mediated and transgressed by a specifically aesthetic modernist attitude of negating the reality principle. Thus, although the decoding of his plays depends on the structures of realism, the commitment to art and to its autonomous medium of manifestation disclaims their interpretation according to the non-aesthetic criteria and to the prevailing referential meaning.

In *The Birthday Party* (1957) Goldberg and McCann subject Stanley Webber, the recluse who has withdrawn from the society in a seaside boarding house, to terrifying interrogations and accusations, to the point of reducing him to silent conformity and to a reshaped, reassimilated identity of deterioration and deprivation. Besides the anti-authoritarian signification which can be sighted in Stanley's efforts to resist the political, religious and ideological pressures of the external world, the play performs a double act of displacement, both of the theatrical naturalistic convention and of the referential, material coordinates of the world.

Operating according to the principle of negation, individuals are refused the possibility of activating a meaningful world around them and since they are caught in the impossibility of ever connecting to social consciousness, they outweigh the loss of the world and its phenomenological pressure through an act of performance. Life is performed rather than experienced; prompted by their inner frustration and their confused sense of identity individuals create their own reality, a self-determining world and discourse, in a regressive act of attaching themselves to their own illusions and of imposing the validity and legitimacy of their own configurations and patterns.

The naturalist expectations and the play's indebtedness to realism, confirmed by the living room setting and the opening conventional picture of a middle-aged couple talking at the breakfast table, are disturbed by the nonsense and hilarity of absurd comedy inscribed in the rhythms and banal conversations of everyday life. Pinter's characters are afraid of the too alarming process of communication which presupposes responsibility for one's articulated thoughts and forces one to assume a position of vulnerability, by disclosing to others their private emotional states and intimate structures. The individuals' wilful retreat from communication and from present reality determine their use of language not as an expressive, communicative, informative process, but rather as an instrument of negotiating positions of power and of structuring relationships. Characters inhabit language desperately in order to standardise their position as subjects of representation/action and to empower their own conceptual patterns in resisting the pressure of other configurations. The characters' attachment to normality, to everyday life, to ordinary reality is just imitation, an attempt to hide their loss of reality, of significance, of identity and to preserve their comfortable and secure existence without having their norms dismissed and destabilised:

> *Meg*: Is it nice out? / *Petey:* Very nice. / *Meg:* Is Stanley up yet? / *Petey:* I don't know. Is he? / *Meg:* I don't know. I haven't seen him down yet. / *Petey:* Well, then he can't be up. / *Meg:* Haven't you seen him down? / *Petey:* I've only just come in. / *Meg:* He must be still asleep. What time did you go out this morning, Petey? / *Petey:* Same time as usual. / *Meg:* Was it dark? / *Petey:* No, it was light. / *Meg*: But you sometimes go out in the morning and it's dark. / *Petey:* That's in the winter. / *Meg:* Oh, in winter. /Petey: Yes, it gets light later in winter. / *Meg:* Oh.[1]

Stanley's interrogations prove that there is no stable frame of reference and activate the same crisis in representation, as Goldberg and McCann attack their victim for betraying the socially accepted order, the Catholic morality and Irish nationalism. The representations shift from the personal to the socio-political sphere with the final purpose of curing and adjusting Stanley, reducing him to a ruined state whereby he can internalize and incorporate the clichés and conventional gestures of appropriating the world:

> *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. / *Mc Cann:* You'll be a success. / *Goldberg:* You'll be integrated. […] / *Goldberg:* Well, Stanley boy, what do you say, eh? *They watch. He concentrates. His head lowers, his chin draws into his chest, he crouches. / Stanley:* Ug-gughh……uh-gughhh.[2]

Furthermore, individuals feel the strangeness and the intractability of things in their world, as objects represent a menacing presence entering their privacy and threatening to annihilate their subject position, the position of the one objectifying, categorizing the world according to his/her system of beliefs. The phenomenological alarm, discomfort resides in the objects being estranged from their ordinary, conventional manipulation and function which outlines a deeply uncertain relationship to the world where one can never arrive at a total meaning and essence of the thing in itself. The subject, too, avoids asserting and acting according to his/her real identity, as this would bring to the fore his/her intimate fears and abnormalities. The subject abandons and distances himself/herself from his/her identity,

[1] Harold Pinter, *Plays*, vol.1. London: Faber and Faber, 1993, p.4
[2] Ibid., pp.77-79

adopting an alternative individuation facet which allows him/her to change registers and representations, so as to preserve one's integrity and inviolability.

In the troubled social, cultural and political space of *The Dumb Waiter* (1960) Gus and Ben ambiguously relate to the referential world by means of the would-be factuality of some newspaper stories whose traumatic and disturbing events signal an alarming and perverse world:

> *Ben:* Kaw! *He picks up the paper.* What about this? Listen to this! He refers to the paper. A man of eighty-seven wanted to cross the road. But there was a lot of traffic, see? He couldn't see how he was going to squeeze through. So he crawled under a lorry. / *Gus*: He what? / *Ben:* He crawled under a lorry. A stationary lorry. */ Gus:* No? / *Ben:* The lorry started and ran over him. / *Gus:* Go on! / *Ben:* That's what it says here. / *Gus:* Get away. */Ben:* It's enough to make you want to puke, him to do a thing like that? [....] *Ben (slamming his paper down):* Kaw! / *Gus*: What's that? / *Ben*: A child of eight killed a cat! / *Gus*: Get away! *Ben*: It's a fact. What about that, eh? A child of eight killing a cat! / *Gus:* How did he do it? / *Ben:* It was a girl. / *Gus:* How did she do it? / *Ben:* She- He picks up the paper and studies it. It doesn't say. / *Gus:* Why not? / *Ben:* Wait a minute. It just says –Her brother, aged eleven, viewed the incident from the toolshed. / *Gus:* Go on! / *Ben:* That's bloody ridiculous.[3]

Instead of mapping out a familiar, conventional scenario of everyday life or of naturalising an ideological worldview, the stories render a dehumanised civilisation of existential restlessness and alienation. The newspaper acts as a totalizing, signifying narrative of mass culture reducing the diversity of the world to schematic, conventional configurations circumscribed in an abstract reorganisation of the represented world. The violence and terror of the world are inscribed within the cultural formulations and patterns of society.

In choosing to explore these pre-existing clichés and pre-determined encoding principles from within, Harold Pinter does not adopt a parodic attitude of textual displacement and subversion, as he is more concerned with mirroring the tension between reality and interpretation, between the concrete and the abstract. Characters dispose of a difficult relation to reality, to language and its power of representation and being overshadowed by the disjuncture between language and reality they live mainly through discursive, narrative, predefined cultural codes.

The stereotypes and conventional signifiers evinced through the over-coding register of the popular detective and gangster narratives are appropriated in order to expose the prescribed existence of the individuals, an artificial construct dislocating them both from their own identity and from understanding and representing the world around them. The extreme crisis in representation is deepened by the multiple displacements and dislocations in the *mise en scene*, by the phenomenological aggression of the material world. In their threatening and ungraspable manifestation, the objects belong to a distinct realm and refuse to be decoded or mastered. The characters' response is to evade, escape and retreat from the world, disguising their incapacity of acting upon and in the world through reducing and simplifying the world to the logic of pre-given facts and systems. Identification becomes subjection and experimentation becomes simulation. Subjectivity is a product of previously codified systems, of culturally enforced representations, all in all a cultural construction subject to the Other, insofar as our language and actions are filled with pre-existing cultural codes determining us to speak with the Other's voice:

[3] Ibid., pp.114-116

> … language serves as the medium in which the Other materially embeds its desire: the language models that allow us to identify ourselves, to say I am who I am, create us in the image of the Other, thus ensuring that we will desire not only what the Other desires but as the Other desires. (…) it is through these clichés that the Other fashions the subject positions we inhabit and that we are able to say I am who I am, whether we define this I in ontological terms (the I as self) or in social terms (the I as a gendered ethnic, class-bound entity). Through his plays Pinter explores the necessarily contingent status of this I, the subjectivity that can only establish itself at the price of remaining subject to the Other, perpetually reinscribing this subjectivity/subjection within that utterance that marks us as with the brand of the Other.[4]

In *The Dumb Waiter* the objects exert a tense and edgy influence on characters, refusing to be submitted to generalised interpretations, causing impatience and bewilderment due to their faulty, irritating or incomprehensible system of operation. The defective, long-running toilet inflicts tension and terror offstage as an extension of the anxieties dominating the onstage visible room. The mechanical apparatus of the dumb waiter enacts the same trauma and aggression of the material space, as by virtue of its brutal and inexplicable requests, of its mysterious pulley system and speaking tube it resists realist interpretation. They both function as an element of regression towards the primitive, organic life of the body bullied by the perversity and brutality of a society whose rational assumptions are not properly working. Although individuals are trying to reach completion and consensus over an ever shifting reality, their narrative and discursive efforts do not progress towards connecting them to the world, reversing them instead to stasis and stillness, where there is disconnection not only from action, but also from memory, origins and history. This withdrawal from the world operates as negation of the principle of reality, emphasizing the cultural tensions of the overdetermined representations, as it is clearly shown in the debate where Gus and Ben can not agree on the precise terminology for making tea:

> *Ben:* Go and light it./ *Gus:* Light what?/ *Ben:* The kettle. / *Gus*: You mean the gas./*Ben:* Who does?/ *Gus:* You do./ *Ben* (*his eyes narrowing*): What do you mean, I mean the gas?/ *Gus*: Well that's what you mean, don't you? The gas?/ *Ben (powerfully)*: If I say go and light the kettle I mean go and light the kettle. /*Gus:* How can you light a kettle?/ *Ben*: It's a figure of speech! Light the kettle. It's a figure of speech! /*Gus*: I've never heard it ./*Ben:* Light the kettle! It's common usage! / *Gus*: I think you've got it wrong. / *Ben (menacing*): What do you mean? / *Gus*: They say put on the kettle/ *Ben (taut):* Who says? *They stare at each other, breathing hard. (Deliberately)* I never in my life heard anyone say put on the kettle. *Gus:* I bet my mother used to say it. / Ben: You mother? When did you last see your mother? / *Gus:* I don't know, about-/*Ben:* Well, what are you talking about your mother for? *They stare.*[5]

Harold Pinter's plays negate the stability of the conventional dramatic forms of social realism and of classical comedy by drawing their energy not from the representational function of art, but from the substance of their own theatrical representations which compose a self-sufficient world, recreated out of all the stage signifiers. Pinter dismisses thus the idea

[4] Marc Silverstein, *Harold Pinter and the Language of Cultural Power*, Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1993, pp.20-22
[5] Harold Pinter, *Plays*, vol.1. London: Faber and Faber, 1993, pp.125-126

of activating pre-existing meanings and constructs. Each theatrical sign is an empty, blank image that doesn't represent something in advance, carrying with it the presence of something to be performed *here and now*. The stage or acting space is a void to be filled with meaning, it is there for the audience to act in: "In the theatre one can taste the absolute reality of the extraordinary presence of emptiness, as compared with the poverty-stricken jumble in a head crammed with thinking."[6] According to the phenomenological approach the stage objects are self-given, as there are no previous meanings preceding them and determining their contextualisation, as their significative power mainly resides in their concrete presence: "... theatre ingests the world of objects and signs only to bring images to life. In the image, a defamiliarised and desymbolised object is uplifted to the view where we see it as being phenomenally heavy with itself."[7] In the world of Pinter's plays objects lose their familiar attributes and realistic paradigms, serving as the elements that engage the characters' body in the stage world, focusing our attention to the way the characters relate to their material world, as they totally plunge in the space around them. The stage scenery is no longer a construct of language with a simple decorative function, but it becomes an event participating in and representing the action, inhabiting the manifestations or emotional attitudes of characters and their manner of connecting to the others and to their territory.

The body, its postures and positions, reflect an individual's point of view upon the world and thus it confers him/her a particular subject orientation and disposition towards the world at which he directs his aims. The fact is that we ă in a world of already-spoken patterns, of ready-made meanings and representations which transforms the body into a central concern, as it is through the body that I become involved in the spectacle of world, that I understand the others, that I perceive things and formulate my own codes of living. Through the concrete movements and gestures emanating from the body the individual superimposes on the world given as such, the world according to his perceptions and structures of organization. In *The Homecoming* (1965) Ruth asserts the capacity of the female body to escape the masculine systems of representations which attempt to reduce her to an accessible, unthreatening maternity, feminity and sexuality. She constantly draws attention to her physical presence, to each crossing and uncrossing of her legs and having accomplished her maternal and sexual role, she takes command of the male characters, annihilating their power positions and their manipulative efforts:

> Look at me. I .... move my leg. That's all it is.… But I wear....underwear…which moves with me…it captures your attention. Perhaps you misinterpret. The action is simple. It's a leg …moving. My lips move. Why don't you restrict…your observations to that? Perhaps the fact that they move is more significant …than the words which come through them. You must bear that...possibility...in mind.[8]

Refusing to recognise the men around her as possessors of the phallic power and to accept the restrictions placed on her mobility, Ruth annihilates and inverts the codes of patriarchy. She manages to subjugate men by exploring their desires, their emotional and physical needs and from her dual/ambivalent position, as mother and prostitute, she escapes the traditional responses to women, the limited constructions of feminine identity. The master codes of patriarchal representation are inverted and subverted through a woman who comes to embody the subject position of Lacan's symbolic father, exercising the specific attributes of the phallic power. Even though at the end of the play, Ruth accepts her position as the

[6] Varun Begley, *Harold Pinter and the Twilight of Modernism*, London: University of Toronto Press, 2005, p.22
[7] Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms. On the Phenomenology of Theater*, London: University of California Press, 1985, p.37
[8] Harold Pinter, *Plays*, vol.1. London: Faber and Faber, 1993, pp.60-61

prostitute of the family, she mimics the deliberate appropriation of the acceptable role of commodity to be exchanged and exploited by men only to transform her apparent confinement into empowerment. During the final contractual scene of the play, Ruth manipulates the legal and economic terms of the discourse and, adopting the authoritative posture of patriarchal enunciation, she imposes her own terms of the exchange. The commodity is no longer voiceless and as subject of exchange, she prescribes the conditions of her exploitation:

> Ruth mimics and inverts patriarchal systems so as to create a space for her feminine difference and desire…. The play does not create a pristine feminist space above and beyond the patriarchal fray, nor does it objectify a woman within such a system. (….) With the arrival of Ruth, the play relentlessly exposes the illusions the men foster in this male wasteland. Ruth does not simply take control, but she shatters the glass of female objectification …. She functions as a 'tick in the night', causing trouble in the commonplace phallic economy.[9]

In the end, Ruth takes centre-stage in Max's chair, the seat of domestic power, while Joey is kneeling at her feet, Lenny is watching her from behind and Max is moving toward her on bended knees. She is the nucleus around which men move and the embodiment of men's erotic fantasies.

The body uses certain patterns for appropriating the objects around, endowing them with a specific significance according to the authority of one's modulations and coordinates. The manipulation of objects is a way of stating the position I occupy in the world and the manner in which I assimilate the objects and the structures of the world. Pinter's characters arrange around them a world which speaks of themselves and of their thoughts, since we project ourselves against the objects we act upon and assign meaning to. There occurs a clash of opposing wills and desires/ fantasies, each of them operating in a specific world which is constructed through discourse: the struggle is to impose a certain textual reality/ identity or narrative as the valid normality. Power relations determine the manipulation of bodies, objects, individualities inhabiting the space where the discourse is organized and different patterns of knowledge collide. We are confronted with an architectural configuration/ manipulation of both space and objects.

In Pinter's plays the power structures operate both through discourse as defining the subject positions and through specific configurations of space or orchestration of objects as reflecting the contradictory representations of the world.

Driven by a fierce sense of territoriality, Pinter's characters struggle to claim and maintain their personal space, the territory of their own needs, values and illusions. Objects overwhelm the linguistic and theatrical space, but, in their uselessness and non-functionality, they point to an environment where characters struggle to find a place for themselves, to take control of objects/spaces that do not belong to them, to gain mastery through alienation. Thus, they attempt to hide their vulnerability and instability, an alternative facet which allows one to interrelate safely with strangers and to change easily registers and representations:

> Once knowledge can be analysed in terms of regions, domains, implantation, displacements, transposition, one is able to capture the process by which knowledge functions as a form of power . . . [one can] . . . decipher discourse through the use of spatial, strategic metaphors [that] enables one to grasp precisely the points at which discourses are transformed in, through and

[9] Ann C. Hall, *A Kind of Alaska: Women in the Plays of O'Neill, Pinter, and Shepard*, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993, pp. 62-66

> on the basis of relations of power.(…)The individual, with his identity and characteristics, is the product of a relation of power exercised over bodies, multiplicities, movements, desires, forces. (…)[10]

In such a world where objects lose their meaning, their functional purposes and threaten the self, each person becomes an object under the gaze of another, an object to be manipulated and thrown as useless. In such a violent context, dominated by hazardous and obtrusive materiality, characters can validate their identity and confer meaning to their existence only by appropriating and manipulating foreign objects:

> (…) characters struggle to claim space within the boxed-off rooms that serve to demarcate otherwise indeterminate locales and that attest to Pinter's profound architectural sense. Within such boundaries and amid the objects that serve to articulate their spatial fields, characters move in visually underscored relation to each other, drawing attention to their own bodies and to the physical and perceptual contours of their environment.(…) Like Shepard and like Beckett of Happy Days, Pinter effects a heightening of objectival inertness and the intrusiveness of materiality, deconstructing the stability of conventional setting through a stage thick with random clutter.(…) On stage and in words, objects overwhelm, pressing background to the fore as they take over linguistic and theatrical space.[11]

In *The Caretaker* (1960) the tramp's aggression, his fierce pride and selfishness pervade his attempt to connect with other human beings, ensuring his position as an outsider, as an outcast. His initial subservience gradually transforms itself into an act of asserting command over the objects of his benefactor's territory. Power operates at every level and in the power-playing games the scenic objects are degraded/reconfigured/decontextualised by constant pressure to impose one's domination: the plug Aston holds in his hand, in a continually useless effort to repair it, transforms him into a potential victim of the old tramp's aggressions; the vacuum cleaner Mick manipulates to terrify Davies in the dark performs a power-reversal, consolidating Mick's territorial claims and confirming Davies' inferior position, that of an intruder forced to observe the rules of the house he was invited in.

The objects of the territory Davies tries to control remain inaccessible to him, failing to fit his psychological exigencies: the air from the window is cold, the bedcovers are dusty, the shoes do not fit him, tools are always in his way, needing to be moved:

> Decontextualised in this way, the objects comprising *The Caretaker's* scenic field point to subjects they once accommodated, functions they once assumed, relationships of property and use in which they once participated – but these subjects, positions and relationships vanish behind the materiality of the present, arranged with self-cancelling haphazardness.[12]

In order to compensate for their loss of self and meaning, characters try to impose their mastery over objects, but their attempt is futile as is Aston's effort to fix the defective plug of the electric toaster. The object-world refuses the characters the possibility to fulfil their meaning-making position and consequently throws them in the falsity of their configurations. The fragmentary objects that populate the world of *The Caretaker* isolate the

[10] Michel Foucault, *Power/ Knowledge – Selected Interviews and Other Writings (1972–1977)*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1980, p.74
[11] B. Stanton and J. Garner, *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama*, Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1994, p.198
[12] Ibid., p.200

characters one from another, outlining the inaccessibility of their private universe: Mick's references to the penthouse or Aston's jigsaw form a strange sphere of knowledge for Davies, the tramp.

Characters, devoid of a stable identity, fiercely fight to maintain and satisfy their needs and desires, to protect their illusory, self-constructed self. In trying to defend their constructed self and their private world, characters react violently and turn their back to each other, as they are not ready to make compromises. The play articulates "the inevitable destruction that occurs when self-knowledge is absent, consciousness unawakened and characters are driven by a need to supplant any inner identity with an exterior label constructed of illusion." [13]

Harold Pinter's plays inhabit the reassuring architecture and atmosphere of conventional realist narrative or conventional family drama/melodrama only to perform a subversive and demystifying function. Rather than working in the direction of naturalising or consolidating dominant ideological structures or constructions of reality, Harold Pinter's texts question and alter the familiar arrangements. Characters attempt to domesticate the suffocating material world by submitting it to their classifications and abstractions and thus their lack of commitment or connection leads to collapse, deconstructing the stability of their fantasies and of the dramatic code itself.

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[13] Penelope Prentice, *The Pinter Ethic. The Erotic Aesthetic*, New York & London: Garland Publishing, 2000, p.153