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Ashes to Ashes: Pinter's Holocaust Play

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Although the Holocaust and the Nazis are never mentioned in the play, the images evoked — the railway platform, the babies snatched from their crying mothers' arms, the winter scenes and the strange factory — all point that way. The title of the play too reinforces these associations. Rebecca, the character who remembers seeing these atrocities, is said to be in her forties in 1996, so, in fact, too young to have witnessed them. In this paper I suggest viewing her memories as acquired, rather than experienced. Her memories resonate in our own consciousness, evoking our memory of what we have heard and read about the Holocaust.
I also argue that, in the context of the play, Rebecca's name suggests that she is Jewish, and this encloses her in an inner world from which her partner Devlin is excluded. The difference between their attitudes is primarily gendered, but beyond that, there is the cultural divide between Jew and Gentile, which determines their different perceptions of the Holocaust. Pinter's well-known interest in the place of memory in consciousness intersects the contemporary preoccupation with the question of recording survivors' testimonials. He may have come across Charlotte Delbo's literary output about her years in Auschwitz, or he may have found the images and ideas in some other of his readings on the period. But I point to the images of the bundle and the walking into the sea as possibly derived from Delbo, as also the idea of the *mémoire profonde*, as distinguished from the *mémoire ordinaire*, which feeds his double exposure technique (of the then and the now) in the play.

When asked by Mel Gussow in 1993 whether he would ever write about the Holocaust, Pinter replied: "I don't know. There's something in me that wants to do something about it. It's so difficult."[1] He finally broached that subject in 1996, when he wrote *Ashes to Ashes*.[2] I shall argue that the special way he found to deal with this difficult topic was to write not about the Shoah, but about the memories of the Shoah. I shall confine myself to this aspect of the work, and not attempt here a comprehensive analysis of the play.
The story of the genesis of *Ashes to Ashes* is told by Michael Billington. Pinter seems to have been uncharacteristically informative about this play, explaining that the impetus for writing the play had come from reading Gitta Sereny's biography of Albert Speer, while on holiday.[3]

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[1] Mel Gussow, *Conversations With Pinter* (London : Nick Hern Books, 1994), p. 137.
[2] Harold Pinter, *Ashes to Ashes* (London : Faber and Faber, 1996).
[3] Michael Billington, *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter* (London : Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 374.

He had been struck by the image of Speer visiting the slave-labour factories, for which Speer was responsible. He added that,

> Reading the book also triggered lots of other associations. I've always been haunted by the image of the Nazis picking up babies on bayonet-spikes and throwing them out of windows.[4]

This image is obviously relevant to the play. Billington and others have pursued the lead offered, that links the figure of the lover with the Nazi leader Speer, Hitler's close associate.

Billington went on to suggest that Pinter based the love story on Sereny's "Postscript", which recounts Speer's love affair, towards the end of his life.[5] He was by then in his mid-seventies, and the woman was half his age. She had contacted Speer after reading his memoirs and finding that they helped her understand her own heritage.[6] Although Speer had described her as a young Englishwoman, she was in fact a German, who had settled in England and was married, with two children, to an Englishman.[7]

If we try to relate the source material to the play, we can see some of Rebecca's reminiscences as derived from what the anonymous young woman had learned from Speer. However, Rebecca recounts these stories as if she had experienced them herself, as if she had accompanied her lover on his visits to the slave-labour camps and the factories.

Rebecca's fascination, on the verge of hypnosis, with her lover's sexual violence may be Pinter's way of coming to grips with the preposterousness of the unnamed young woman's attraction to one of the central figures of the Third Reich. Rebecca yields to her lover's brutal handling, to his use of force, becoming a willing victim.

This seems to be as far as the suggested source, Sereny's book, will take us in our reading of the play. One should also remember the note of caution sounded by Martin Esslin about the use of information transmitted by the author himself, as an interpretive tool:

> Even though Billington is able to report the author's own comments on his intentions in writing his texts, these can only be partially relevant, as the "unconscious" motivations of the author are after all, by definition, outside the reach of his own conscious awareness.[8]

Perhaps we should take Esslin's critical caution a step further, and consider the possibility that Pinter's offer of "inside information" deflects our attention from the interpretive issues posed by the play — perhaps even deliberately so.

In fact, reading the play as an offshoot of Sereny's book on Speer, although it explains some aspects of the play, seems alarmingly at odds with others. Rebecca's compassion for, and even identification with, the victims is incommensurate with the anonymous young woman's infatuation with the former Nazi chief. In other words, despite the obvious relevance of Sereny's account, the emotional and intellectual contents of the play seem to point in another direction.

Furthermore, Rebecca's name would hardly suggest a German origin. The names "Rebecca" and "Devlin" seem to encode an ethnic and cultural divergence. While "Devlin" is obviously an Irish name, "Rebecca," in this context, evokes Jewish associations. The names thus form a binary opposition. Both characters are part of present day British society, but, in Pinter's play,

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[4] Billington, pp. 374–375.

[5] Billington, p. 384.

[6] See also: D. Keith Peacock, *Harold Pinter and the New British Theatre* (Westport, Conn. : Greenwood Press, 1997), pp. 159–160.

[7] Gitta Sereny, *Albert Speer: His Battle With Truth* (New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), pp. 712–713.

[8] Martin Esslin, Review of Michael Billington, "The Life and Work of Harold Pinter", in *The Pinter Review: Collected essays 1997 and 1998*, ed. by Francis Gillen and Steven H. Gale (Tampa, Florida : University of Tampa Press, 1999), p. 143.

they differ radically in their perception of the Holocaust, of the Jewish Shoah. It is this perceptual gulf that separates them from each other.[9]

The gap between the two is also attributable to the gendered characterization of the sensitive woman and her insensitive partner. This is reminiscent of Pinter's treatment of the gap between the man and the woman in his earlier piece *Landscape*. As in that play, here too Pinter is interested in the internal, rather than the external, reality. Despite their physical proximity, Rebecca and Devlin inhabit totally disparate inner worlds.

In the brief note on the characters of the play, both are said to be in their forties. This minimal description. together with the direction "Time: Now", i.e. 1996, seems to preclude the idea that Rebecca could have any memories of the Second World War. However, she seems to be referring to it constantly.[10]

At first, this is done almost unobtrusively, in her response to Devlin's inquiries about her former lover's job:

> I think it had something to do with a travel agency. I think he was some kind of courier. No. No, he wasn't. That was only a part-time job. I mean that was only part of the job in the agency. He was quite high up, you see. He had a lot of responsibilities. (p. 19)

Rebecca's evasiveness serves to arouse our suspicion about her motivation for such circumspection: "I think… something to do with… I think… some kind of… No. No… I mean… you see…" Our unease is exacerbated by Devlin's continued interrogation of Rebecca about the nature of the lover's work and her continued reluctance to provide straight answers. Her difficulty in formulating the job definition in relation to the travel agency seems very puzzling.

Despite their opaqueness, Rebecca's words yield more information than her evasive manner would suggest. When pressed by Devlin about the travel agency, she states that, "He was a guide, you see. A guide," as though this would explain it all. The puzzled Devlin then asks her: "A tourist guide?", a question she leaves unanswered, changing instead the topic of the conversation.

In German, a guide, including a tourist guide, is a "Führer". This word not only served as Hitler's title, but also formed part of rank-definitions such as "Sturmbannführer" in the S.A., or "Obergruppenführer" in the S.S. When he was appointed Minister for Armaments and Munitions, Albert Speer himself was granted the rank of Oberstgruppenführer. Among his ministerial charges, he was responsible for transport, especially the railway system. Hence the travel-agency, the responsibilities and the high-up position in Rebecca's job description. The repeated insistence on the role of the guide — the tourist guide, the guide connected with the travel agency and, later in the play, the guides that ushered the people into the sea — points to the special significance of the word, without, however, divulging its secret. But because Rebecca hedges her answers, skirting unseen obstacles, her words become weighted with meaning.

If this reading seems at first far-fetched, it can no longer be avoided once Rebecca implicates the guide in what we immediately recognize as one of the Nazi atrocities: "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" (p. 27). This is the first instance in the play of the Nazi image of tearing a baby from its mother's arms, and it

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[9] I can see no grounds for Katherine H. Burkman's claims that, "Rebecca as well as Devlin play[ing] out aspects of Speer's character," or that, "the play sometimes feels more like a monologue than a dialogue." In my own view, the two represent totally different perspectives and neither is based on Speer's personality. See, Burkman, "Harold Pinter's *Ashes to Ashes*: Rebecca and Devlin as Albert Speer", *The Pinter Review: Collected Essays 1997 and 1998*, p. 91.

[10] Martin Regal, " 'You can only end once': Time in *Ashes to Ashes*", in *Cycnos*, 14, 1 (1997), p. 99–104, develops this line of argument convincingly.

erupts quite unexpectedly from the renewed discussion of the lover's occupation. The image is sketched lightly, a mere generalized outline, but its effect is shattering, evoking the endless stories of the train transports of Jews arriving at the extermination camps. Without so much as mentioning them, the reality of the camps suddenly invades the here and now, the English room in 1996, exploding its tranquility and serenity.

The two separate realities are juxtaposed in Rebecca's recollection of what she saw one day through the garden window in Dorset: in an extraordinary monologue, she describes how she stood by the window, on a sunny summer day in Dorset, and watched a crowd of people who seemed very cold and wore coats walking towards the sea and into the water. Picking up the guide motif, she mentions twice the guides that ushered the people across the beach (p. 49).

Pinter creates an artful surrealistic picture, in which the window of the English house, looking southward, towards the sea and the continent, opens onto a nightmare vision of the Holocaust. The people walk into the sea carrying all their bags like the children of Israel into the Red Sea, except that no miracle occurs and they are drowned.

The gap between Rebecca's vivid recollection of the Nazi atrocities and the everyday calm of her English surroundings poses the central hermeneutic problem of the play, for how can she remember what she never saw, what happened before she was even born?[11] Rebecca herself alludes to this problem in what amounts to the key speech of the play: "Nothing has ever happened to me. Nothing has ever happened to any of my friends. I have never suffered. Nor have my friends" (p. 41). In this disclaimer, she seems to distance herself from any direct contact with the Holocaust experiences she herself describes.

Despite their hallucinatory nature, and although she could not have possibly experienced the atrocities herself, Rebecca's harrowing memories are none the less authentic.[12] Clearly, what she has read and heard from survivors' reports has become part of her own consciousness. As a sensitive person, she identifies with the suffering, in contrast to Devlin, who remains impervious to it. That is why she specifically excludes him from her account of her Dorset experience, insisting he was not there: "Oh no, you weren't there. I don't think anyone else was there. No, I was all by myself. I was alone" (p. 49).

The difference between their attitudes is primarily gendered, with Pinter obviously siding with the woman's compassion. But beyond that, there is the cultural divide between Jew and Gentile, which determines their different responses to the Holocaust. Rebecca's insistence on having been alone in the house, emphasizes the loneliness of her experience, her sense of being a stranger, of perceiving things differently from the people around her. As a Jew himself, Pinter knows how the inner perception of the Shoah distinguishes even the most assimilated of Jews from the society that surrounds him.

Rebecca and Devlin may share an English house, but Devlin has no share in Rebecca's inner world. As is customary in Pinter's plays, this inner world is of infinitely greater significance than the external reality, and it is made up of Rebecca's memories. Those spectators and readers who have grown up in the shadow of the Shoah recognize in these reveries the essential features common to countless stories they have heard: the railways, the snatched babies, the factories, the heavy winter, people in coats carrying bags on endless marches through the woods and, above all, the ashes. When Rebecca sings "Ashes to ashes" and Devlin carries on the song with "Dust to dust" (p. 69), they underline the funerary associations of the title. But "ashes" in this play has a more precise denotation: the ashes of the Jews cremated in the death camps. All that remains of these people are memories, and Rebecca's memories evoke our own.

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[11] Marc Silverstein too notes these problems, but does not pursue the paradoxes of place and time in the play. See his: " 'Talking about some kind of atrocity': *Ashes to Ashes* in Barcelona", *The Pinter Review: Collected Essays 1997 and 1998*, p. 76.

[12] See Regal's discussion of this point, p. 100.

The place of memory in our consciousness is one of the major themes of Pinter's plays. In *Ashes to Ashes* he succeeds in relating his own curiosity about the workings of memory to the question of how to deal with the trauma of the Holocaust in the theatre. The present surge of interest in recording and preserving the memory of the Holocaust has occasioned frantic, last minute attempts to record the testimonials of survivors still alive. Pinter takes this material at second remove. He deals not with the memories of survivors but with their effect on people, especially Jews, who have not been directly touched by the horrors, but are sensitive enough to be scarred by them for life.

Rebecca identifies so closely with the experiences of the Shoah, that they become part of her internal landscape, images incised in her memory, from which she cannot extricate herself. Devlin has no share in her Shoah memories and he feels excluded from them. It is a mental and emotional gap that sets them apart.

Rebecca's memories have both a national-historic, communal dimension, and a personal dimension. If we understand her as being Jewish, then the Shoah is an integral part of her heritage. The Jewish conception of national history is perhaps best exemplified by the injunction of the prayer from the Haggada, read on the eve of Passover, that, in every generation, every Jew must see himself as if he himself came out of Egypt. The reason is that, if it were not for the Exodus, then we, and our children, and our children's children would still be slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. The celebration of Passover combines the national with the personal, specifying that each person must see himself as having undergone a personal liberation. This attitude is so deeply ingrained, that the Shoah too is grasped as a national tragedy, personally affecting also those Jews that did not live in Europe, or were born only after the Holocaust.

In her second vision through a window, toward the end of the play, Rebecca goes a step further in her identification with the victims of the Holocaust. She saw an old man and a little boy walking down the street, dragging big suitcases, on an icy, star-lit night. Then she noticed a woman following them, carrying a baby in her arms. The woman kissed the baby, who was a girl, then listened to its heartbeat and its breathing. Suddenly, very abruptly, Rebecca switches from talking about the woman to speaking in her own person: "I held her to me. She was breathing. Her heart was beating" (p. 73). From watching the woman through the window of her English home, Rebecca has entered the watched, hallucinatory scene, assuming the role of the mother, turning herself into the Holocaust victim. The window functions here as a kind of film-screen, on which a silent movie is being projected, and Rebecca seems to enter the film she has been watching.

Having imaginatively inserted herself into the Holocaust memory, Rebecca completely refuses to cooperate with Devlin, who is lacking in compassion and empathy, and launches into her concluding monologue, punctuated only by a haunting echo and a few pauses.

REBECCA They took us to the trains
ECHO the trains
[…]
REBECCA They were taking the babies away
ECHO the babies away
Pause.
REBECCA I took my baby and wrapped it in my shawl
ECHO My shawl
REBECCA And I made it into a bundle
ECHO a bundle
REBECCA And I held it under my left arm
ECHO my left arm
Pause.
REBECCA And I went through with my baby
ECHO my baby
Pause.

REBECCA But the baby cried out
ECHO cried out
REBECCA And the man called me back
ECHO called me back
REBECCA And he said what do you have there
ECHO have there
REBECCA He stretched out his hand for the bundle
ECHO for the bundle
REBECCA And I gave him the bundle
ECHO the bundle
REBECCA And that's the last time I held the bundle
ECHO the bundle
Silence.
REBECCA And we got on the train
ECHO the train
REBECCA And we arrived at this place
ECHO this place
REBECCA And I met a woman I knew
ECHO I knew
REBECCA And she said what happened to your baby
ECHO your baby
REBECCA Where is your baby
ECHO your baby
REBECCA And I said what baby
ECHO what 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 (pp. 75–85)

The monologue ties together the different strands from Rebecca's Holocaust memories: the train, the mother, the bundle and the snatching of the babies.

In her final words, Rebecca identifies herself so completely with the image of the mother whose baby has been snatched from her hands and murdered, that she even undergoes the heart-rending denial of ever having had a baby.

Despite their generality, Pinter's sketched Holocaust images are perhaps attributable to specific texts. I do not know if he has read the writings of the French, Gentile, Auschwitz survivor, Charlotte Delbo. Even if Delbo was not his direct source, there are any number of other, similar testimonies from the concentration camps that could have influenced Pinter's writing. But, in Delbo's fragmented stories, in her haunting images from the camps, Pinter could have found the notion of Rebecca's disjointed memories.

At least two of Delbo's striking images show up also in Pinter's play. The first is the image of the bundle. The woman with the bundle appears in Delbo's "Voices." She stands out against a background of rows of faceless Jewish and Gypsy women, waiting in the freezing cold for roll call. This Gypsy woman holds a bundle of rags, "in the crook of her arm, the way a baby is held, the baby's head against its mother's breast." The woman shifts the baby's position "to help it breathe perhaps," shelters its face and hugs it. But "the infant's head is lolling, bluish, almost black." The following day, the woman is clubbed to death by a female guard who is trying to pull the dead baby away from her, and the bundle of rags, her dead baby, is thrown into the garbage heap.[13] Pinter, if he indeed used this passage as an artistic source, preserved

[13] Charlotte Delbo, "Voices", tr. by Rosette Lamont, in *Art from the Ashes: A Holocaust anthology*, ed. by Lawrence L. Langer (New York : Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 83–84.

the shawl, in which the Gypsy woman had wrapped the baby, as well as the image of "the bundle" held under the arm and the gesture of checking the baby's breathing. He pared down what was already a stark story, so as to reveal the core image of the Holocaust mother. The realization that he could equally have gleaned these materials from any other number of sources only strengthens the totally abstracted image he has formed.

However, the image of people walking into the sea, found in Delbo's "None of us will return," would seem to suggest Pinter's familiarity with her writing:

> Before us the plain sparkles: the sea. We follow. The ranks cross the road, walk straight toward the sea. In silence. Slowly. Onward into the sparkling plain. Into the congealed light […] The columns sink into the sea, farther and farther into icy light.[14]

The sea here is clearly a mirage created by the endless field of snow. In Rebecca's nightmare vision of the people heading for the water, Pinter has captured the haunting image of the ordered walking into the sea, as well as the intense cold and the dazzling light of Delbo's powerful description.[15]

Moreover, Delbo's special narrative solution to the presentation of her Auschwitz memories may have paved the way for Pinter's double exposure, in the present, of the English room and the view of the Holocaust through the window. In a piece titled "One day", Delbo shifts from the past to the present tense, thus creating an unbearable tension in the reader waiting anxiously to find out how the situation will be resolved. But while the terrifying visions are reenacted in front of our eyes, another present moment suddenly breaks through the memories, disclosing that, in fact, "I am writing this story in a café — it is turning into a story", and "I am sitting in a café, writing this text."[16] The writer is simultaneously sitting in the Parisian café and standing for hours at roll call, benumbed and freezing in the snow, watching the crazed and the dying. There can be little doubt about which of the two presents possesses a greater reality. As Delbo "sees" Auschwitz in Paris, so Rebecca sees visions of the Holocaust in Dorset.

Delbo was well aware of the double exposure technique she was using, and even developed the critical terminology for it. She distinguished between two kinds of memory: *mémoire ordinaire* and *mémoire profonde*.[17] The first views the past from the perspective of the present, as something that took place then, but is now over. The second re-enacts the past *in* the present, as Delbo does in "One day." Rebecca's surrealist Holocaust visions through the window demonstrate that, for her, the accounts of the atrocities have become profound memories, which cannot be put aside and laid to rest. In *Ashes to Ashes*, Pinter shows that, for us too, they have become profound memories, and that we too can never lay them to rest: "I'm talking about us and our conception of our past and our history, and what it does to us in the present."[18]

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[14] Charlotte Delbo, "None of us will return", in *Auschwitz and After*, tr. by Rosette Lamont (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1995), p. 31.

[15] Francis Gillen, "History as a single act: *Ashes to Ashes*", *Cycnos*, 14, 1 (1997), p. 96, speaks of "follow[ing] power with blind faith into the sea," offering a symbolist interpretation for what is a direct, harrowing Holocaust image. Similarly, he asks "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'" (*ibid.*), failing to react to the concrete, un-metaphoric reference of "ashes" in the context of the Holocaust. Although he refers to Pinter's use of the book on Albert Speer, Gillen does not attempt to read the play in the light of this information, speaking of watching "our fellow humans walking on the treacherous ice" (p. 97), without realizing the specificity of this reference. To call Pinter's play about the ashes of the Holocaust "a play about play," and to find in it transcendence through suffering (p. 97), is to remain on the side of Devlin, not of Rebecca.

[16] Delbo, "None of us will return", pp. 26, 29.

[17] Lawrence Langer, "Introduction" to Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, p. xi.

[18] "Writing, politics and *Ashes to Ashes*", Interview with Mireia Aragay and Ramon Simò, in Harold Pinter, *Various Voices: Prose, poetry, politics 1948–1998* (London : Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 66.