



## ‘You can only end once’: Time in *Ashes to Ashes*

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### Pour citer cet article

Regal Martin S., « ‘You can only end once’: Time in *Ashes to Ashes* », *Cycnos*, vol. 14.1 (Harold Pinter), 1997, mis en ligne en juin 2008.

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### *Cycnos, études anglophones*

*revue électronique éditée sur épi-Revel à Nice*

ISSN 1765-3118      ISSN papier 0992-1893

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# EPI-REVEL

Revue électronique de l'Université Côte d'Azur

'You can only end once': Time in *Ashes to Ashes*

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Harold Pinter's latest play, *Ashes to Ashes*,<sup>1</sup> is a two-character work that lasts one hour in performance. Both the programme and the published play state that the action is taking place in the present, yet there are various temporal disturbances inside the work itself that suggest otherwise. While the male character, Devlin, appears to be reasonably grounded in the here and now, the female character, Rebecca, enters a number of time frames that seem to be outside her own personal experience. Among these is her story about having a baby 'torn' from her arms at a railway station by a man who was once her lover. Her account has multiple resonances, but its central image is strongly reminiscent of various holocaust stories from the last war. According to the stage directions, Rebecca is in her forties, and therefore could not even have been a small child during that historical period. No suggestion is being made here that Pinter either ought to clarify the situation or that he desires us to believe that such moments as these need any naturalistic justification within the play itself. However, since this image of a child being taken away from its mother is undeniably the most important in the play, and the one with which it ends, it seems worthwhile to examine more closely.

*Ashes to Ashes* is a lyrical rather than dramatic work, and while it makes extreme demands on our concentration it hardly presents itself as a chunk of reality. Like several other shorter plays by Pinter, it features a man and a woman who present conflicting views, experiences and memories, and who are occasionally actually out of synch with one another.<sup>2</sup> If we are used to the manner in which Pinter sets these characters against one another, and we know that the female characters especially tend to employ a more poetic mode of expression, then we will not attempt to make *Ashes to Ashes* conform to any naturalistic pattern. Thus, we neither need to know how these characters arrived at where they are, nor where they might be going after the action is over. What we cannot help doing during the course of the action, however, is trying to understand the temporal patterning of the play, which is the key to its structure. Moreover, if Rebecca is using her memory in a battle of wits with Devlin, then we must know *how* even if we do not *why* she is doing so. Like Devlin, we will almost certainly wonder about the 'authority' that gives her 'the right to discuss such an atrocity,' but I believe that the play eventually answers that question fully enough. At the close there is little doubt that she is authentically reliving a memory whether it is her own or not.

We are perhaps less sure about other accounts in the play. Rebecca's opening lines may well be intended to taunt Devlin or to suggest to him that a previous relationship still affects her in some way, while her description of the old man and the little boy dragging suitcases is obviously dream-like and seems hardly directed at him at all. Her use of a modal habitual at the beginning of the play ("he would stand over me [...] then he'd put his other hand on my neck [...] and he'd say [...]") has the effect of distancing her account and rendering it more visual rather than undermining its veracity, but we could just as easily assume that it is a ploy of some kind intended to provoke a specific response from Devlin.

Part of the explanation for Rebecca's excursions into the past may come from possible influences on the play. Arthur Miller's *Broken Glass* centres on an American woman whose empathy with her fellow Jews at the beginning of the Nazi régime in Germany is so strong that she becomes paralysed, while the opening lines of *Ashes to Ashes* are strongly reminiscent of the situation presented in Ariel Dorfman's *Death and the Maiden*, and Pinter, as we know, has been closely associated with both these writers. Conversely, almost all of

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<sup>1</sup> All references to *Ashes to Ashes* pertain to the Faber and Faber edition of the play, published in 1996.

<sup>2</sup> As in *Silence* or *Family Voices*.

Pinter's plays abound with resonances that one cannot quite identify while, at the same time, feeling that they are strangely familiar. Moreover, on those few occasions where their sources can be found, they usually provide no better understanding of the play.<sup>3</sup> What seems more important than tracing possible literary influences is arriving at some understanding of the structural significance of distorted memory and temporal disturbance within the play itself. This is not to say that the wider political, cultural or emotional aspects of *Ashes to Ashes* are less worthy of our attention. Quite the reverse. Yet, accounting for the temporal arrangements in the play is more likely to provide us with some way of articulating what we already sense — that Rebecca's tales of moments that she may not have experienced personally bring us just as close to those moments as they would if we were certain that they had actually occurred in her life.<sup>4</sup>

I have demonstrated elsewhere that Pinter's approach to time has been strongly influenced by his involvement with the works of Beckett and Proust, writers whose attitudes to temporality owe in their turn a good deal to the foremost philosopher of time in this century, Henri Bergson.<sup>5</sup> Bergsonian theories of duration suggest that the separation of memory into discrete units, which then appear discontinuous, is caused by certain lapses in our span of attention. By this process, says Bergson, we falsely tend to see certain individual events as representing stages in the development of our minds and therefore identify them as changes. Much as Proust borrowed from Bergson, he could not accept this central tenet of *durée réelle* since his own moments of 'lost time' were what mattered to him most, and he was naturally unwilling to devalue them in any way. The slow incremental changes in Beckett's plays are more Bergsonian, yet he too tends to privilege certain moments in the past even if he sees that they are effectively irretrievable. Pinter's approach to time and duration is in some ways closer to Bergson's in that he sees the danger of privileging such personal memories while clearly understanding that we all have a tendency to want to regard them as important.

One of the most common pastimes among people who know each other well is the frequent repetition of groups of memories, and it is usually conducted in such a way as to eradicate any disparities. In this way everyone ultimately believes that he or she remembers the same things in the same order. Pinter, however, never allows his characters to do this, unless the process is being parodied (as it is in *The Homecoming* or *No Man's Land*). Whenever a character in a Pinter play attempts to create a common past, another character will intentionally disrupt the process. This also applies to memories that are disturbing, suspect or plainly false, but whatever the situation the disruption is often effected by calling the time frame itself into question. Thus, after Rebecca has described how her lover used to hold her round the throat etc., Devlin suddenly shifts the time frame:

DEVLIN     Do you feel you're being hypnotised?  
REBECCA    When?  
DEVLIN     Now?  
REBECCA    No.

Although Devlin's question about her being hypnotised is quite clearly in the present tense, Rebecca appears not to be sure whether he is referring to the present or the past. A similar disruption takes place a little further on when Devlin asks, absurdly, whether the man she is speaking of had any eyes. Here, Rebecca's reply is "What colour?" Strategically speaking, Rebecca's shifts from past to present or present to past seem intended to throw Devlin off balance — a tactic common enough in any Pinter play — but in *Ashes to Ashes*, we are clearly

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<sup>3</sup> For example, while many critics have pointed out the allusions to T. S. Eliot's work in *No Man's Land*, one's understanding of the play is hardly enriched by close comparison. *Victoria Station* occasionally echoes the Scorsese film, *Taxi Driver*, but those echoes are hardly informative.

<sup>4</sup> I do not equate this with what Anna is doing in *Old Times*, whose comment on memory creating something that may never have taken place is primarily aimed at Deeley.

<sup>5</sup> Martin S. Regal, *A Question of Timing* (London: Macmillan, 1995).

witnessing something other than a personal battle, and one in which Rebecca's tales and memories are meant to tell us more than the status of her power struggle with Devlin.

Throughout the length of the play it becomes more and more apparent that Devlin knows less and less about Rebecca's past. He can account neither for her apparent absences nor her whereabouts at times when he believed they were together. What he demands (apart from her making some sense) is concrete details of time and place, while her responses are made up of dream-like tales that clearly do not include him. Only on one occasion does she succumb to being brought back to the present moment, and that is when he asks her about her sister, Kim — though even here, she is dismissive of his inquiries and seems to be merely playing along. One could invent a series of pre-play plots that might account for her behaviour, but what I believe we are witnessing here is Rebecca's deliberate entry into someone else's memory, and one that is intended to send a chill running down our spines.

Whether Bergson agrees or not, while most memory is intensely private, certain events occur in human history that are indelibly written into the minds of not only those who have witnessed them but all who have heard about them. They become part of our common memory, not in any quasi-Jungian sense of a collective unconscious but in a very real and actual sense. Rebecca, in remembering someone else's past, illustrates that certain atrocities haunt all our minds and that she needs no 'authority' to be the mouthpiece of the present moment. Part of the pain she is clearly suffering results from not being able to reconcile her former lover's attentions with his subsequent inhuman behaviour. In this sense, whether or not she personally experienced the horror of having her baby torn from her arms is less material than the indisputable fact that some women have actually gone through this terrible experience, and her 'remembering' the event makes it happen again.

The idea of multiple endings in a Pinter play is not peculiar to *Ashes to Ashes*. *The Basement*, *The Lover* and *Old Times* for example, all have a circular shape that suggests that they might be 'replayed' with variations. In this instance, however, the multiplicity of endings is almost the point of the play. When Rebecca claims that she and Devlin can end "again and again and again," she may be referring not only to their relationship but to something much more profound. It is she who starts singing the tune from which the play takes its title, possibly implying that each time a death is remembered it brings a new ending. This claim of hers is, of course, structurally, thematically and visually reproduced and reinforced by Devlin's putting his hands around her throat (in precisely the same manner as in her account at the beginning of the play) and, even more significantly, by the echo of her account at the end. In some cases, it seems, time does not heal — it cuts even deeper wounds.

Some of the allusions to time in this play are on an ostensibly less serious note. The possible absence (or departure) of God is compared by Devlin to "England playing Brazil at Wembley and not a soul in the stadium," with the corresponding though illogical conclusion that this would lead to "no score for extra time after extra time after extra time." Yet while it seems that this projection into a permanent temporal deadlock is overshadowed by Devlin's more immediate concerns about Rebecca's past, the idea of a continuously empty and repetitive present colours the whole play. One of the reasons why Proust and T. S. Eliot ultimately rejected Bergson's ideas of duration is that they carry existential and ontological preoccupations with no teleological counterpart. If nothing in the past can be singled out as discretely significant, then nothing in the future can be either; there is no end to perpetual emergence.

Altering Bergson's idea of a continuous present, Rebecca is conscious not of permanent and ultimate stasis or of infinitesimal change but of constantly recurring endings. While the physically static images of the play appear as what Sir Peter Hall has described as "emblem[s]

in silence,”<sup>6</sup> the memories produce a slow motion effect in their retelling and are tightly interrelated to one another. Thus the pen that rolled off the coffee table leads directly into Devlin losing his grip (or slipping into a ‘quick sand’), while the song title, “You’re nobody’s baby now” prefigures or, more properly ‘pre-echoes,’ the end of the play where the baby is taken from its mother. The “workpeople” in the factory who “would follow him [i.e. her lover] over a cliff and into the sea, if he asked them” appear again in Dorset, where they actually do “walk into the sea.” All these images suggest endings that are final enough, but all reoccur in one form or another before the play is over.

The impression one receives from this play is that all Devlin’s attempts to establish a concrete past or a concrete present are being undermined by Rebecca who, at one and the same time, can claim that “nothing has ever happened to [her]” and that “[she] has never suffered” and then recount a tale of human misery so intimately that we are forced to believe that she knows what it feels like from first-hand experience. The result is that Rebecca’s stories, whether they be fictions or projections into other people’s pasts, affect us more deeply than Devlin’s preoccupation with verification. Her confusion of past and present, dream and actual experience indicate that her mind will not be confined to the pettiness of her existence with Devlin, one in which there is no possibility of starting again.

This dream (or nightmare) existence is not a new element in Pinter’s plays. Many of his characters are trapped, in one way or another, in lives that offer little possibility of escape. In some cases, it is not even clear whether a character is living or dead, such as in *Family Voices*, *Party Time* and *Moonlight*, all of which have an eerie quality. Yet none of these last named plays is properly described as a ghost story; instead they present time schemes that are clearly not one-directional. While never contradicting the second law of thermodynamics in which all things move towards entropy or disorder, Pinter has created a unique type of play in which time appears to be multi-dimensional. The plays throw out images and situations that are repeated backwards and forwards, spatially and verbally, so that we often experience a repetition of endings, none of which is final in itself. This gives an extra resonance to the title, *Ashes to Ashes*, which is so effectively employed within the play since the phrase is both final and recurrent, announcing the individual’s return to a state of non-being while constantly being repeated as each individual reaches the end of his or her existence. It is, in effect, an expression of a constantly recurring end.

The power of Pinter’s work issues from a number of different sources, not least of which is an ability to suggest possible scenarios, relationships or backgrounds without clearly defining them. Thus, for example, while we strongly suspect that Davies, in *The Caretaker*, has never enjoyed any part of the good life he occasionally alludes to, we cannot be certain that he was not once better off than he appears at the beginning of the play. Some critics (and audiences) have found this infuriating, seeing it as a kind of deliberate obfuscation for its own sake. However, aside from the fact that Pinter does not believe that anyone’s past can be fully accounted for or verified, the obscuring of background information allows for considerably greater freedom in constructing or reconstructing the present moment. *Ashes to Ashes* presents us with an even more opaque view of the relationship between its characters and their individual backgrounds than do many of Pinter’s more recent plays, but I doubt whether we are ever confused about the emotional effect it produces in us.

Whatever background we would like to construct for Devlin or Rebecca, all we have in front of us is a finely honed series of images that reflect and echo one another. However, these reflections and echoes are not merely evidence of Pinter’s exact craftsmanship or of a structure that it intended to be only aesthetically pleasing — they are the most effective way

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<sup>6</sup> From an interview with Sir Peter Hall, *Theatre Quarterly*, IV, 16 (1974–1975), pp. 4–17. Extracts reprinted as “On Directing Pinter” in *New Theatre Voices of the Seventies*, ed. by Simon Trussler (London: Methuen, 1981), pp. 78–79.

of holding our attention to what the words, the movement and the lighting suggest. The bright light that fills the stage at the beginning grows gradually more dim, while the lamplight gets brighter “but does not illumine the room.”<sup>7</sup> This effect, like the one produced by Foster when he turns off the lights in *No Man’s Land*, emphasises the theatricality of the work while placing it within a possible naturalistic setting (or suggest that these two can sometimes coincide). Yet it would be wrong to assume that either the theatricality or the partial concession to naturalism were the reason behind the effect. As the play narrows towards its close, the illumination of a specific point in space while the general scene darkens produces a visual metaphor for both the fading echo and the crystal clear account of the atrocity that resounds in our ears before the final silence.

The slow accretion of images within the play which forewarns us of the ending presents us at the same time with a number of smaller endings, often rounded off by a pause or a silence, and produces a sense of the inevitable repetition of human suffering. Ironically, but understandably, it is only while the police siren is sounding that Rebecca feels comfortable; when it fades she feels ‘terribly insecure’:

Rebecca        I hate it fading away. I hate it echoing away. I hate it leaving me. I hate losing it.

When danger is clearly announced, Rebecca has a foothold in the present moment; when the alarm fades or echoes away, she knows that foothold has gone.

The newspapers report new atrocities every day. Harold Pinter needs no excuse for not having written precise accounts of these atrocities set in specific locations; his attitude to human suffering is well known. *Ashes to Ashes*, like all of his most recent plays, proves that memories of that suffering need not be restricted to particular people at particular times, but that we are all capable of bringing the past back into the present. Devlin might interpret Rebecca’s account of her lover’s hand around her throat as being a cue for him to repeat the action, but the audience knows otherwise. Only we have the authority to compound the time we actually inhabit with the time we choose to inhabit.

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<sup>7</sup> See opening stage directions to *Ashes to Ashes*, p. 1.