Pinter as Novelist, or, Cobbler, Stick to Thy Last

Silverman Zinman Toby

Pour citer cet article

Silverman Zinman Toby, « Pinter as Novelist, or, Cobbler, Stick to Thy Last », *Cycnos*, vol. 14.1 (Harold Pinter), 1997, mis en ligne en juin 2008.
http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/publication/item/540

Lien vers la notice http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/publication/item/540
Lien du document http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/cycnos/540.pdf

Cycnos, études anglophones
revue électronique éditée sur épi-Revel à Nice
ISSN 1765-3118 ISSN papier 0992-1893

AVERTISSEMENT

Les publications déposées sur la plate-forme épi-revel sont protégées par les dispositions générales du Code de la propriété intellectuelle. Conditions d'utilisation : respect du droit d'auteur et de la propriété intellectuelle.

L'accès aux références bibliographiques, au texte intégral, aux outils de recherche, au feuilletage de l'ensemble des revues est libre, cependant article, recension et autre contribution sont couvertes par le droit d'auteur et sont la propriété de leurs auteurs. Les utilisateurs doivent toujours associer à toute unité documentaire les éléments bibliographiques permettant de l'identifier correctement, notamment toujours faire mention du nom de l'auteur, du titre de l'article, de la revue et du site épi-revel. Ces mentions apparaissent sur la page de garde des documents sauvegardés ou imprimés par les utilisateurs. L'université Côte d'Azur est l'éditeur du portail épi-revel et à ce titre détient la propriété intellectuelle et les droits d'exploitation du site. L'exploitation du site à des fins commerciales ou publicitaires est interdite ainsi que toute diffusion massive du contenu ou modification des données sans l'accord des auteurs et de l'équipe d'épi-revel.

EPI-REVEL
Revues électroniques de l'Université Côte d'Azur

Pinter as Novelist, or, Cobbler, Stick to Thy Last[*]

Toby Silverman Zinman

The University of the Arts, Philadelphia, U.S.A.

Harold Pinter's only novel, called *The Dwarfs*, has had a complicated and peculiar genre history; he wrote it more than thirty-five years ago, "before," Pinter tells us, "I began writing plays." He then rewrote the novel as a radio play, also called *The Dwarfs*, which he then rewrote as a stage play, also called *The Dwarfs*, which he then revised into still another, altered stage version.[1] The novel remained unpublished until 1990, and although Pinter notes that he both cut and reshaped the original manuscript, he tells us it is "fundamentally" the same text as he wrote between 1952 and 1956 ("Author's Note"). Thus, we can, pretty easily, see the novel as a predictive catalogue of Pinter themes and stylistic obsessions: the room, the betrayal, the potential violence in any sexual relation, the "old itch" men feel to bash women occasionally, the cryptic menace of triangulated friendship, the primacy of bonds between men rather than between men and women, the puns, the pauses, and the hermeticism of the human personality, and even the more recent socio-political outrage.

That the novel exists as an anticipation of the plays is interesting and useful, particularly since the novel does not seem to me to afford much pleasure in its own right. Obviously, when a playwright writes a novel, the question of whether any talent, even one as major as Pinter's, can jump genres, is a great question. Even though the novel was written before the fact of Pinter's being called to his vocation, he did, after all, choose to publish it decades later.

The genre problem interests me, and I take Beckett's caveat to heart, "If we can't keep our genres more or less distinct, or extricate them from the confusion that has them where they are, we might as well go home and lie down."[2] The novel raises interesting questions about the constraints of genre, especially the radically different dialogic impulses at work in narrative and drama; readers and audiences are not the same creatures.

The reviewers — both the admiring and the contemptuous — have been quick to observe that, "Intermittent novelistic attempts to get behind the talk and into the character's [*sic*] mentalities invariably flop. But, as soon as people open their mouths, Pinter's talent leaps out and The Dwarfs [*sic*] reveals itself as what it is: a novel that represents an outstandingly promising debut for a playwright."[3] Less tolerant is this: "Maybe it struck him that if you were composing novels made up of segments of dialogue separated every once in a while by indications that a character sits in a chair or lights a cigarette, it wouldn't take much effort to put those interruptions between parentheses and, presto, a play."[4]

The distinction strikes me as rather less cavalier and more demanding, resting not so much on form but on the fundamental weight a writer places on interiority. The novel is, of course, an interiorizing genre; our relation to the printed page is intimate and exclusive; the characters speak with silent versions of our own voice, so that even dialogue in fiction is a variation on the experience of narrative as we read it silently to ourselves. Anyone who has ever read a passage from a novel aloud to a class to illustrate a point knows the slight puzzlement and fraudulence one feels as that private voice is embodied and projected publically.

---

[*] I presented a shorter version of this essay at the Pinter Festival at The Ohio State University, an international meeting in honor of Pinter's sixtieth birthday held in April, 1991.

[1] See Scott Giantvalley's "Toying with *The Dwarfs*: The Textual Problems with Pinter's 'Corrections'," in *Harold Pinter: Critical Approaches,* ed. by Steven H. Gale (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1986) for a remarkably thorough and interesting account of the play's checkered past.

[2] Samuel Beckett quoted by Clas Zilliacus in *Beckett and Broadcasting* (Abo [Finland]: Abo Akedemi, 1976), p. 3, quoted in turn by Jonathon Kalb in *Beckett in performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 118.

[3] Peter Kemp, "Pinter's longest pause," *The [London] Sunday Times*, 8, 4 (30 September, 1990).

[4] David Finkle, review in *Village Voice Literary Supplement* (February 1991).

As I listened to the inner voices created by Pinter's novel, not only by the dialogue, but those created by the stream of consciousness passages and the narrative intervals as well, I was increasingly irked by a sense of familiarity, the inkling that I had heard these voices inside my head before. Listen:

> Blowing bubbles I am the only so the only son. Belay there to stern. Rind no yes ammonia. My throat his only rubbished son. Black all to iron. So this rust. Rust and one. Yes now you're done and made the onedead one. Split knifestalks yellow under green the nightblades crust and silk. At the canal turn. Bitch gone black. Steel and bland. Forge I hammer I blood to forge that ice […]. Alone to be alone […]. Blindabout only existing son. No barter. Closed shop at the metal crack. Yes and I know it to that. That's all. Am I your nightwatchman? All aboard. So to see. A breather. Screw this hinge. That's it. Cobblers on. Air so. Keep the change. Compliments of. Air now. Now tread now back. Can move. Shall move. (109)

I kept trying to identify it; I recognized the rhythms of the distorted, highly personalized syntax, conveying, particularly, the rhythms of thought while walking, the images of water, birds, death, choking, violently visceral responses to landscape, the tormented and arrogant identification of self with Christ, the angst-wrenched vocabulary.

Finally I got it: Stephen Dedalus, a character whose voice I knew very well indeed, seemed to have transmigrated into Pinter's novel, although he had not endured the metempsychosis all that well. He was sounding pale and derivative — and not quite so brilliant, certainly not so erudite. Once I'd found the key, with the enormous relief not unlike the stopping of a toothache, I began to hear Joyce everywhere in this novel.[5] This passage leaped out:

> Sweating all over. Someone arranged that. Must keep my eyes open. Wouldn't have seen me on the other side. Shady. Oh yes he would. They all do. Should wear a hat. Grow a moustache. Get a wheelchair. False nose can work wonders. That was a close one. Where's that piece of paper. Uh. Down the drain. (62)

And this:

> Valparaiso Bank. Must be Valparaiso Bank. Building without bricks. Geometric. Brickless. An act of faith. Straight as a dye. Up to the top and back. Geometric conversations with the sun. A slant on the holy rood. The sun's angled, made into commerce. Taken down in shorthand. Don't be deceived by deceptive reflections. Pneumonic irrelevances. There's a glut on the market. Worse than a periphrastic conjunction. But the sun all shapes and sizes. Making mischief. Doubletalk on the roofs. Signlanguage. What's that? A dihedron? Or who spat on the polygon? Throw me the mathematical ball. (59)

And this:

> Near siesta time. Flat out on the roofgarden. Lemontea and a canopy. In the shade of the old appletree. Out of the draught. Turn the globe and pick your teeth. (60)

These passages are almostbloom (although a Bloom without any convincing sense of *dolce far niente*), just as the earlier quotation is almoststephen. The images here of commerce, of speculative wonder about the modern urban world, the responses to the natural world — especially sunlight, the hat, the scrap of paper — all suggest Bloom, just as the reference to geometry does. (Like Gerty MacDowell, I will catch this mathematical ball a bit later when I return to the mathematical analogy).

The problem here is not merely that Pinter seems to be blatantly imitating Joyce, "one of Pinter's literary idols and models" as Martin Esslin tells us[6] but that because both these passages belong to the same character, Pete, the very nature of Joycean fiction has been mistaken. These characters are never characterized *narratively* because their voices are not distinct. We do not feel, as we must, the intimacy we were promised by the fictive contract. This conflation is further complicated by another character, Len, sounding a lot like Stephen from time to time. For example,

---

[5] I discovered confirmation of this intuition much later in Francis Gillen's essay, "Between Fluidity and Fixity: Harold Pinter's Novel: *The Dwarfs*," in which he writes: "Although strongly influenced, as Pinter himself told me, by James Joyce, especially in the use of interior monologues, it is essentially a post-modern novel…"(in *The Pinter Review, Annual Essays, 1990,* ed. by Gillen and Gale, University of Tampa, p. 50). Gillen does not pursue this Joyce connection.

[6] "Work for Radio," in *Harold Pinter: Critical Approaches,* ed. by Stephen Gale (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1986), p. 56.

> It's no use your saying you know who you are just because you tell me you can fit your particular key into a particular slot which will only receive your particular key because that's not foolproof and certainly not conclusive. Just because you're inclined to make these statements of faith has nothing to do with me. It's none of my business […]. Occasionally, as I say, I believe I perceive a little of what you are, but that's pure accident. Pure accident on both our parts. The perceived and the perceiver. It must be accident. We depend on such accidents to continue, and when we accidently perceive, or appear to do so, it's not important then that that might also be hallucination. (151)

and the third male character, Mark, taking the Bloom role from time to time. This is additionally textured by the fact that both Len and Mark are identified as Jews, semitism being, of course, an informing fact of *Ulysses*, while Pete is not.

The fourth major character in *The Dwarfs* is Virginia, who is as sexy as Molly, but not nearly so interesting or so funny. She, too, sounds like Stephen now and then in her subjective narrative: "A grip of red flaked the skyrim. This then was the world altering. Lightly she touched the treestalks and shivering, clasped her arms, the red fading, and the light" (118). It is intriguing to think about why Pinter left her out of all the versions of the play;[7] I suspect, given both the triangulation of relationships and the socio-political chit-chat the foursome occasionally engages in, that if Pinter had included her in the dramatic versions, he would have found he had written *Look Back in Anger*.

The debt to *Ulysses* strikes me as disablingly huge, so that despite the Pinteresque qualities of *The Dwarfs*, it is obvious that he is working in a borrowed medium. Not only is there a cocoa-making scene, clearly lifted from the "Ithaca" chapter of *Ulysses*, as well as a cat which goes in and out the kitchen door (as the cat famously does in "Calypso"), and not only is there much talk of doorkeys (a central symbol in *Ulysses*), not only does Pete have an interview with his boss which nearly replicates Stephen's with Mr. Deasy, but the central conversational topic is *Hamlet*. Remember that *Ulysses* begins with Buck Mulligan's promising Haines that Stephen will prove "by algebra that Hamlet's grandson is Shakespeare's grandfather and that he himself is the ghost of his own father."[8] Almost all of "Scylla and Charybdis" takes place in the Dublin Library and gives us the interpretive debate about *Hamlet*. In *The Dwarfs*, chapter 12 centers on a group discussion of Hamlet in the Swan cafe, and in fact contains the event which precipitates the only aspect of the novel which could be called 'plot.'

Virginia, who is usually at home washing dishes, has joined the men and brought a copy of *Hamlet* with her; she declares, "it's odd, but I suddenly can't find any virtue in the man… after all, what is he? What is he but vicious, maudlin, spiteful, and sensitive to nothing but his own headaches? I find him completely unprepossessing" (81) — a deliciously Pinteresque word. The Joycean locale for this Joycean debate is in a bar where, as we are told, "A voice was raised, from the inner room, singing in Italian" (81) just as it is in "The Sirens" when Bloom hears Simon Dedelus (and others) singing various songs from Italian operas. Pete, Virginia's lover, finds her literary criticism embarrassing, and not only refuses to see her home, but later berates her for stupidity and pretentiousness in a four-page harangue which begins, "If you could start to think, Virginia, you might be a little more use to me" (85) and ends with her weeping, promising never to do that again. This ultimately leads to the end of their relationship, and Virginia and Mark wind up together, albeit clearly temporarily.

---

[7] Martin Esslin offers several possibilities for the omission of Virginia in the plays in *Pinter the Playwright* (London: Methuen, 1982), pp. 129–130.

[8] James Joyce, *Ulysses* [The Corrected Text, ed. by Gabler] (New York: Vintage, 1986), p. 15. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear in the text.

Later in the novel, the three men continue the *Hamlet* discussion. Chapter 23 begins like this:

> Shakespeare! Pete exclaimed, placing his mug with a thump on the table, what was Shakespeare? Only a jobbing playwright. A butcher's boy with a randy eye […]. He doesn't go round with a needle and thread, Mark said, or a tenday cure. When does he attempt to sew up the wound or reshape it? (131)

It is worth noting here that Mark echoes Pinter on Shakespeare,[9] thereby substantiating my hunch that in this autobiographical novel Mark, who is a sardonic, womanizing actor, is the Pinter persona (he said, "I wasn't the central character, though I appeared in it in disguise" ["Writing for Myself" 9–10]). The final image in the passage quoted above has extended resonance. Esslin's book on Pinter, *The Peopled Wound* takes its (first) title from an early piece Pinter wrote; Esslin quotes from the manuscript which begins:

> The mistake they make, most of them, is to attempt to determine and calculate, with the finest instruments, the source of the wound. They seek out the gaps between the apparent and the void that hinges upon it, with all due tautness. They turn to the wound with deference, a lance, and a needle and thread.[10]

Their Shakespeare debate in *The Dwarfs* continues in the bar, and when Mark buys "two best bitters" we are told, "The till snapped down and rang through the smoke" (133) which is not as good as "Bronzebygold heard the hoofirons, steelyringing" (*Ulysses*, 210) but that seems to be the aural source. Mark — I think (the referents are unclear) — goes on to say of Shakespeare,

> He meets himself coming back, sinks in at the knees, he forgets the drift, he runs away with himself, he falls back on geometry, he turns down blind alleys, he stews in his own juice, and he nearly always ends up by losing all hands. But the fabric, mate, never breaks. (133)

Len, who is the character who tells us about the dwarfs — the filthy, barbaric creatures who haunt his imagination — is the character who is more mathematical and musical and less 'normal' than the others, whose hospital stay at the end of the book may be the result of a nervous breakdown or may be, as he says, the result of eating too much cheese while he was in Paris. Len seems Stephen-like, both in his obsessiveness, his Paris-ness, his womanlessness, his brilliance, his eyeglasses, and his torment. Further, it is he who speaks of "a hole in his side":

> There is no ambush, only this posture, between two strangers, here is my fixture, here is my arrangement, when I am at home, when I am alone, not needing to arrange, I have my allies, I have my objects, I have my cat, I have my carpet, I have my land, this is a kingdom, there is no betrayal, there is no trust, there is no journey, they make no hole in my side. They make a hole in my side. (29–30)

To speak of "this posture, between two strangers" and "a hole in my side" is to suggest Christ and the crucifixion fairly blatantly. But even this seems derivative, via Stephen Dedalus, and just as a hole in the side also suggests Prometheus, so, too, is Joyce's Stephen a Promethean figure.[11] Since neither the Christ imagery nor the Prometheus imagery in Pinter's novel seems productive (Len is not, as far as I can see, a redemptive force), it is all merely Joycean. The religious element in *The Dwarfs* is major (they talk about religion and the Bible often) but it is also confused, in that Mark, like Bloom, may be the Messiah (he maintains that he was born circumcised and the moil thought he was the Messiah), while Pete declares, "I am my own saviour […]. I'm as gentle as a lamb. And you look as though you'd seen a ghost" (113).

---

[9] Pinter, "Writing for Myself" in *Harold Pinter, Complete Works: Two* (New York: Grove Press, 1977), p. 9.

[10] Esslin, *The Peopled Wound* (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 54.

[11] Katherine Burkman sees Len as suggestive of "the dying god king who is later reborn" hearing echoes in the plays of T. S. Eliot's Prufrock and hollow man and wasteland. See The *Dramatic World of Harold Pinter: Its Basis in Ritual* (Ohio State University Press, 1971), pp. 69–70.

Well, it is possible to see this trinity of friends as the Trinity, (the Holy Ghost compounded by the ghost of Hamlet’s father) but the connections, even counting in Virginia (whose name seems both egregious as well as pointless), no matter how fastidiously followed, lead nowhere. These characters are, for the most part, dull; they lack the wit and certainly the high spirits of the “Ballad of the Joking Jesus” gang. This, it seems to me, is not a religious novel and its larding of religious images seems gratuitous, only furthering the allusive debt to Joyce. Nor is the book truly socio-political; although there is a good deal of disgust with urban blight, filthy canals, and smelly factories there is nothing that exalts the details; unlike *Ulysses*, that most urban of novels, Pinter does not seem to concern himself here with human courage in the face of human cruelty; he is *not* “talking about injustice” (273).

To return to the genre question, at last, I incur my own debt to Joyce. “Proteus,” Chapter 3 of *Ulysses* begins with Stephen’s working on the philosophical problem he famously phrases as the “Ineluctable modality of the visible,” the relation between perception and reality, between seeing and the seen. As he walks along the shore, inventorying the seen world of signifying shapes, “seaspawn and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot” (31), he refers to *Nebeneinander*, that is, “side by side,” the mode by which visual experience is apprehended, that is, in space. The “ineluctable modality of the audible” he calls *Nacheinander*, that is, “one after another,” that is, the heard world is apprehended in time. (Pete’s nonchalant version of Stephen’s philosophic wrestlings is, “Space is pure perception. And time is nothing but a formal condition” (138)). The *Nebeneinander/Nacheinander* dichotomy suggests to me the essential difference between drama and the novel: novels happen in time, plays happen in space.

The interiority of fiction, the notion with which I began this essay, is experienced in time. We *hear* as we read; although events can happen simultaneously in a novel, our apprehension of them cannot; we read, ineluctably, sequentially. On stage, the *theatron*, the ‘place for viewing’, things happen in space, before our eyes, in the absolute *now* of drama. Pinter’s drama is particularly characterized by this nowness, this riveting visibility. His dramatic creatures overwhelm us by their very lack of context, of causal biography, of history. The uncompromising parataxis of Pinter’s world is its strength; the dialogic mystery emerges from the visual arena. Mathematically speaking, drama is geometry (the spatial representation of relationships) while novels are algebra (the discovery through procedural time of the missing quantity).

During a debate about people who read poems as though they were climbing “from word to word, like steppingstones,” Len asks Mark, “What do they do when they come to a line with no words in it at all?” (97). This seems to me to be the key to the genre question: Pinter’s novel violates genre by giving us neither the protean spatiality of the stage nor the intimate temporality of the page. Pinter is the great playwright precisely because he can write lines with no words in them, and for such lines, you need a stage which can accommodate the “ineluctable modality of the visible.”

And, lest we forget (lest? Now there’s a word you haven’t heard for a long time)[12] Joyce couldn’t write plays worth a damn.

---

[12] In “Old Times,” in *Complete Works: Four* (New York: Grove, 1981) there is this exchange:

ANNA: No one who lived here would want to go far. I would not want to go far, I would be afraid of going far, lest when I returned the house would be gone.

DEELEY: Lest?

ANNA: What?

DEELEY: The word lest. Haven’t heard it for a long time. (15)