SAYING GOODBYE TO HAROLD PINTER

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His loss plunged the literary scene into deep mourning on Christmas Day, when the media all over the globe spread the news, leaving no room for doubt: at the age of 78, on Christmas Eve, Harold Pinter had died in London of cancer, thus putting an end to a struggle that began in 2001. Praise for the recently deceased winner of the 2005 Nobel Prize for Literature flooded in, and his achievements as a prolific playwright, screenwriter, actor, director and poet have again been applauded. In the days following his death, Harold Pinter was hailed as "*the most influential and imitated dramatist of his generation*" (Gussow and Brantley, 2008), "*the most important British playwright of the past half-century*" (Schudel, 2008), or as "*one of the world's greatest playwrights*" (*The Independent*, 2008) greatly "*garlanded with high honours*" (*Times Online*, 2008). Indeed, in the last few years Pinter had been awarded, among others, the 2005 Nobel Prize; the Wilfred Owen Poetry Prize, 2005; the Frank Kafka Prize, 2005; the European Theatre Prize, 2006; and the Legion d'Honneur, 2007. It is no wonder that Broadway theatres dimmed their lights for one minute on December 30th in his honour.

As a playwright, he wrote around three-dozen stage plays and two-dozen screenplays, plus dramatic sketches, one novel, short fiction, essays, speeches, and poems. *The Birthday Party* (1957), *The Caretaker* (1959), *The Homecoming* (1964), *Old Times* (1970), and *Betrayal* (1978) stand out among his plays, many of which he later adapted to film. Pinter's screenplay adaptations of other writers' novels include *The Pumpkin Eater* (1963), *The Servant* (1963), *The Go-Between* (1969), *The Last Tycoon* (1974), *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1980), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1987), *The Comfort of Strangers* (1989), and *The Trial* (1989). Moreover, despite the fact that in February 2005 he publicly announced his retirement from playwriting and his focus on poetry and political activism, he continued acting until 2006, when he participated in a production of Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* for the 50th anniversary of the Royal Court Theatre.

Remarkably influenced by Beckett and Eugène Ionesco, Pinter's works are very often set in a single room, many times involve very few characters, and typically convey feelings of doubt, ambiguity, mystery, dread, menace,

despair or anxiety. Pauses and silences are a constant in the dialogues, and they become a powerful communicative strategy that helps create a pervading tension and uncertainty. As has been pointed out, Pinter possessed an indescribable ability to create in the spectator a "*certain expectation of the unexpected*" (Hare, 2000: 21). His distinctive style has even made the *Online OED* (2006) include the term "pinteresque" in its lexicon, defining it as "*Of or relating to Harold Pinter; resembling or characteristic of his plays [...] typically characterized by implications of threat and strong feeling produced through colloquial language, apparent triviality, and long pauses*". Nevertheless, Pinter himself acknowledged in a *Newsnight Review* interview in 2006 that he had no idea what the word meant: "*I can't define what it is myself [...] I have no explanation of any of that really. What I write is what I write*".



Since the age of eighteen, when he became a conscientious objector, Pinter was concerned with politics, which he often reflected in his work as a playwright. In fact, the decade of the 80s witnessed the release of overtly political plays such as *Precisely* (1983) or *One for the Road* (1984), which openly criticize abuses of power and human rights. Later, he vehemently opposed the Gulf War, NATO's bombing of Serbia, the US War in Afghanistan, and the more recent invasion of Iraq, proving to be highly critical on that occasion of both the then President of the United States, George W. Bush, and the former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Tony Blair.

Pinter's burial at a north-west London cemetery was attended by about 50 people, including his second wife Lady Antonia Fraser, and Sir Michael Gambon, who read an excerpt from Pinter's play *No Man's Land* in accordance with the Nobel Laureate's wishes. Recalling the last sentence of the chosen extract probably remains the best way to end this modest goodbye to this outstanding renewer of 20th century British drama: *"And so I say to you, tender the dead as you would yourself be tendered, now, in what you would describe as your life".*

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