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A VISIT TO THREE NEW/OLD PINTERESQUE 'OTHER PLACES'

Pilar Zozaya Ariztia

A young man's mind, a room in a hospital, a black ominous space inhabited by two human beings, these are the three 'other places', Pinter has taken us to in the plays *Family Voices* (1981), *A Kind of Alaska* (1982), and *Victoria Station* (1982). Even though they were originally conceived as independent plays —*Family Voices* was written, broadcast, staged and published a year before the other two—, on 14 October 1982 they were produced as a triple-bill in the Cottesloe auditorium of the National Theatre, and, subsequently, were published together under the general title, also given to the production: *Other Places* [1].

These three one-act pieces have many elements in common, and are also closely related to the author's previous work. They deal with a young man who 'writes' to his mother, informing her about his new, free life away from home, while 'listening' to her familiar voice; a middle-aged woman who has come back to life after spending nearly thirty years in 'a kind of Alaska'; a bizarre taxi-driver who does not want, nor knows how, to get to Victoria Station; and in all these instances, as in most of his plays, the playwright concentrates on the private, secluded microcosm of a human mind, while analising how it relates to the world outside.

Here we find Pinter's archetypal concern with memory, and the impossibility of ascertaining the past; his particular rendering of reality and wish-fulfilment, whose boundaries are seldom clearly established; his ambiguous use of language, which never clarifies or explains, but confuses and puzzles; his skilful handling of theatrical metaphors, that make his works a compact, poetic, meaningful whole. The plays in *Other Places* are three very short pieces, but the intensity of emotion

[1] It should be noted that, when the plays were staged again on 7 March 1985 at the Duchess Theatre, there had been an important change: the triple-bill included *One for the Road,* Pinter's latest play, instead of *Family Voices.* I cannot account for this change, but I must say I definitely consider the previous arrangement more appropriate, as the tone, subject and general atmosphere in this latest play are completely disassociated from those in the original trilogy.

and the interest contained in the subject-matter —besides many other particular characteristics to be analized in the following pages— make them three Pinteresque gems.

If, in *The Hothouse* —the play Pinter produced the previous year—, he adopted an unusually blatant theatrical image to create an atmosphere of menace and horror, in the case of *Family Voices* the author has returned to his old ways of only hinting at the evil lurking in the dark, and leaving the rest to the listener's mind.

I have purposely stated 'listener' because these family voices were firstly broadcast by BBC Radio 3 on 22nd January 1981, they were only staged in 'a platform performance' a month later by the National Theatre (13 February 1981), and, to my mind, they are essentially a radio play. Therefore nothing is gained by having two figures in silhouette [2], never fully lit, who sit without scarcely moving, and expressing verbally their thoughts but not accomplishing any communication between them. As in the case of many plays by Beckett, *Family Voices* may take place in someone's mind —in this instance the young man's— and therefore it should speak directly to the listener's intellect without the interference of a visual image on the stage.

The play records the alternating voices of a son and his mother who address each other, in a succession of never written, or never received, or never read, or never answered letters. In his first letter, the son begins by reassuring his mother of his keeping well «I am having a very nice time» [3]. And ends with a warm: «And so I shall end this letter to you, my dear mother, with my love» (p. 69). However when the mother's answer starts we realize that no communication has been established: «Darling. Where are you? The flowers are wonderful here. The blooms. You so loved them. Why do you never write?» (p. 67). And this will be the main theme in the play.

As the letters written in sounds are spoken to the air, an ominous and mysterious situation takes shape in our mind's eye. The son, so he tells us, has left his family in search of his own self, 'the enormous city' has taken him into her arms, as has Mrs Withers, his landlady, and he feels the self-exhilaration of the young man who, after having left the tight circle of his family, experiences the freedom a new and promising environment can offer when being for the first time on one's own. However, as always in Pinter, optimism and enthusiasm cannot be experienced without being tinged with a certain darkness. Probably when the young man boasts «At the moment I am dead drunk» (p. 67), he is only trying to reassert his manliness and his complete freedom —«I had five pints [...] followed by three double scotches.» (p. 67) —and this is why only a few lines later he dutifully corrects himself —«I was of course making a joke [...] You know I never touch alcohol» (p. 68), but we wonder how the mother will react to his

[2] In the production staged in Barcelona by Victor Batallé —23-28 April 1985— they also had the third Voice (i.e. the father's) sitting on the stage all the play through.

[3] Harold Pinter, *Family Voices*, in *Other Places: Three Plays* (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 67. All further page references will be cited in my text.

exaggerated praising of his landlady, and we cannot help noticing in what way he links both 'dangerous' components, (i.e. drink and Mrs Withers) in the final section of his letter: «She tells me I am her solace. I have a drink with her at lunchtime and another one at teatime and then take her for a couple in the evening» (p. 69).

The letters succeed one another without ever connecting. They tell us of similar hopes (Voice 1: «I expect to make friends» - Voice 2: «Have you made friends with anyone?»), they ask the same questions («Do you ever think of me?», «Do you miss me?»), and they both express the love —and also, is it hatred?— mother and son feel for each other. But these voices, and in particular the one in whose mind they are created (i.e. the son's) do not listen. Like Mouth in *Not I,* they are only bubbling organs that veil their fears by embodying them in sounds, and cannot stop their torrent of words because that would imply tha danger of hearing the cries for help uttered by the others.

Significantly Pinter has combined the voices in such a way that the three most poignant one-line letters sent by the mother —«I am ill» ... «Come to me» ... «I wait for you»— frame the son's long and detailed recounting of his climatic encounters with the different members of his new family. A new perspective is added then by means of the harrowing third voice (i.e. the father's), who, like Hamlet's father's ghost, from beyond his 'glassy' grave, talks to his son in the most ambiguous, contradictory and startling terms: «I know your mother has written to you to tell you that I am dead. I am not dead». [...] «I am dead. As dead as a doornail.» and «I have heard your prayers. They ring in my ears. Prayers yearning for my death.» [...] «Why am I taking the trouble? Because of you, [...] you were such a loving son. [...] Lots of love, son. Keep up the good work». (pp. 80-81). And the letter ends with another touching cry; the father, like the mother before, suffers from utter isolation and he expresses it in a haunting image: the vast, absolute, endless silence which surrounds him is only broken by «a dog barking. I hear this dog. Oh, it frightens me.» (p. 81).

The ominous solitudes that engulfs his father mirrors that which surrounds his mother, but the son remains deaf to their pleas for help, to him both his progenitors 'are' dead. How he has been born into a new family —who has even signalled his rebirth by christening him with a new name: Bobo—, and his old relatives have just become silent voices that cry in a vacuum. Therefore the son's repeated final promise —«I'm coming back to you, mother, to hold you in my arms.»...«I'm coming also to clasp my father's shoulder.»...«I am on my way back to you.» (pp. 82-83)— comes as a surprise to us, but, as always in Pinter, it is too late to amend past errors.

From the very beginning, the dark and unhealthy atmosphere in the new household has tainted every exhilarating cry of freedom and sense of fulfilment on the part of the young man. The innocent descriptions of his rapport with the different members of the Withers family acquire a sombre and threatening tinge due to the bewildering quality of their mystifying verbal exchanges. Nothing is overtly manifested, but a whole world oozing sexual perversities, mysterious and secret connections, dangerous relationships, stealthily takes shape in our minds.

The boy, we might conclude, has become old Mrs Withers' object of desire, Mr Riley's prey to be devoured, Lady Withers' tool to cover her sexual commerce, Jane's toy. Feeling himself to be the centre of his small world, he shouts exhilarated: «Oh mother, I have found my home, my family. Little did I ever dream I could know such happiness» (p. 77), but the disturbing truth, no matter how skilfully he tries to disguise it, creeps into his words: «... if you find me bewildered, anxious, confused, uncertain and afraid, you also find me content.» (p. 80).

The final section in the play discloses each voice's secret. The mother denounces —both to the police and the audience— her son's involment «with underworld figures», and his being a promiscuous person «even as a nipper». The son now shouts his determination to go back home, to his 'old' family, to his mother's arms, and to listen to what his father has to tell him. The final shock comes in the father's answer: «What I have to say to you will never be said.» (p. 83). We do not know what makes the young man change his mind, what prompts him to go back to the past he has already buried, but, as his father's voice reminds him, you cannot resurrect your family once you have 'killed' them.

The play then deals not only «with the fragile joy of being alive» [4], or the experience many persons have had «that at some stage families, friends, lovers are phantoms in some dream» [5], but also with most themes that constitute Pinter's hallmark: lack of communication, loneliness, fear, menace, aggressiveness, threatening sexuality, unreliability of memory, distortion of truth to suit one's aims. Throughout *Family Voices* we find echoes [6] from previous pieces, and the meaning of this short play is enhanced by calling to mind past works. Here the son, like Rose in *The Room,* Stanley in *The Birthday Party* and Davies in *The Caretaker,* has left his past in search of a new place where he can find safety, warmth and build himself a new future, but if Rose was thwarted in her aim by Riley [7], if Stanley was defeated by Goldberg and McCann, and Davies was sent away from his haven by Aston, the son has also to leave his new home. However in *Family Voices* unlike in other earlier plays, the threat that destroys the precarious new arragement, is not even clearly stated.

Here, as so often in Pinter, reality has at least two different levels; we are not completely sure whether the father is dead or not, whether he hated his son or loved him, whether the mother suffers only because her son has left her or because he meant something else for her, whether he is as innocent as he sounds or a young pervert, whether he feels really happy or fakes his exhilaration. As none of these questions are fully answered in the play, and the clues are enmeshed in the complex consciousness of the young man but never emerge to the surface, we do not know to what extent his final decision, of going back home, is due

[4] John Barber, *The Daily Telegraph,* 15.10.82.

[5] Michael Billington, *Guardian,* (15.10.82).

[6] For a detailed and complete list of all these echoes see Hersh Zeifman's most interesting article: «Ghost Trio: Pinter's *Family Voices*», *Modern Drama,* Vol. 27, Nº 4, (December 1984), pp. 386-493.

[7] I do not think it is mere coincidence that there is also a Riley in the son's new family.

—as in previous plays— to an external agent[8], or to his own personal choice. In an atmosphere teeming with sexual passions —in which the bun-eating at the tea-party scene is its climatic expression[9]—, polluted with the most dangerous lies, menace, aggressiveness, the end may explode without any articulated reason, as is the case here.

In sharp contrast to the eery quality of *Family Voices, A Kind of Alaska* (1982) —the second play in the triple-bill *Other Places*— moves its audiences by the total realism of its gripping and disturbing theme. As the author himself explains in the prologue to his play, «*A Kind of Alaska* was inspired by *Awakenings* by Oliver Sacks M.D., first published in 1973»[10]. In this book Dr. Sacks gives a detailed account of the arousal, after years of catatonic lethargy, of patients who in the winter of 1916-17 had fallen victim to an epidemic illness that spread all over Europe.

The sickness was called *encephalitis lethargica* and its effects where many and varied: «delirium, trances, coma, sleep, insomnia, restlessness, and states of Parkinsonism.» (p. 3). For ten years the epidemic ravaged the continent, attacking almost five million people, of which more than a third died. The rest, either overcame it, without any side-effects, or became ageing bodies in hospital wards, conscious of the world around them, but unable to communicate with it. They had to wait for fifty years, till the wonder drug L-Dopa was discovered, and then, finally, they were brought back to life. This poignant moment is described by the playwright in the piece in question.

At first, the unusual fact that Pinter chose a book as the source of his play might surprise his audiences, but, once we realize the kind of material he is going to handle, we understand the appeal that such a theme had for him. The real story reverberates with some of the most characteristically Pinteresque features —the self, the passing of time, the unreliability of human memory, the nature of reality— and, evidently, these are the elements that will integrate the core of this work.

A Kind of Alaska is a perfectly compressed one-act play that powerfully presents on the stage the devastating experience of ageing thirty years in scarcely thirty minutes. Deborah, one of the victims of *encephalitis lethargica,* after 'sleeping' for more than twenty-nine years, has been brought back to life by her devoted doctor, to find her sixteen-year-old mind buried in a forty-five-year-old body; once she has escaped her icy and silent prison, now her ordeal is to thaw mind and body and come to terms with her new reality. The effect on the stage is, as John Russell Taylor has vividly expressed, like watching «one of those stop-

[8] Undoubtedly Mr Withers and Riley's cryptic and aggressive tumbling speeches remind us of the famous interrogation scenes in both *The Birthay Party* and *the Hothouse* but as they are not the most important members of a family it is very unlikely that they should send him away against the women's wishes, who according to the young man, «smiled at me».

[9] We had not 'seen' a situation in which more was hinted to by saying less, since Pinter wrote the scene in *The Homecoming* in which Ruth asks Lenny «Have a sip. Go on. Have a sip from my glass». (London: Methuen, 1965), p. 34.

[10] Harold Pinter, *A Kind of Alaska* in *Other Places* (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 3. All further page references will be cited in my text.

motion films that show the life-cycle of a plant in a few minutes.» [11], but, even if her body unfreezes rapidly, her mind takes longer, and at some points totally refuses to be woken up to a new present.

At the beginning Deborah's mind lives still fed by the memories of herself at sixteen. Her words, experiences, interests, reactions are those of a young girl, whose world is the one marked by her parents, her two sisters and her boyfriend. The real presence of her younger sister and the realization that «Ell, you've changed. A great deal. You've aged...substantially. What happened to you?» (p. 29), forces her to let the truth creep slowly into her mind: «I must be quite old. I wonder what I look like. But it's of no consequence. I certainly have no intention of looking into a mirror.» (p. 39).

The main aim in the play is to analyse the readjustments Deborah's mind has to undergo, the strategies she has to adopt not to accept those truths that might hurt her raw sensibility too deeply [12]. And, as the play focuses on Deborah's mind, there is necessarily very little action. As a matter of fact it has been reduced to the one moment when Deborah leaves what has been her hibernating tomb, and dares to walk, fall, and walk again away from it. Pointedly, when the reality that surrounds her is too overwhelming to be dealt with, she slowly retreats back to her bed. This technique of concentrating the play solely on Deborah's mind —enhanced by a particularly skilful way of telling the story from her own eyelevel— is the means of entering into that «utterly foreign» world where it was «suspended», that «kind of Alaska» in which «it took up temporary habitation», and, at the same time, to detect even the slightest change in her consciousness now that it has come back to her unknown present [13].

Deborah's efforts to recover her past, and her realization that human memory cannot be relied upon, relate this play to *Betrayal* (1978) [14], while her plight recalls that undergone by many other Pinteresque characters. She has visited, for example, Hirst's country, which Spooner described thus:

> «You are in no man's land. Which never moves, which never changes, which never grows older, but remains forever, icy and silent» [15].

Deborah is helped, in her painful task, by two people —Hornby, her doctor, and Pauline, her younger sister—, and when Hornby answers Pauline's question

[11] John Russell Taylor, *Drama,* Spring, 83, p. 28.

[12] Thus, for example she refuses point blank to accept that her mother is dead, and in her last speech she still clings to Pauline's first lie, insisting: «Mummy and Daddy and Estelle are on a world cruise». (p. 40).

[13] In the original National Theatre production Deborah was played by the excellent actress Judi Dench, who according to Sheridan Morley was «what had to be the performance of even her remarkable career» in her «ability to conjure up the soul and voice of a teenager in the body of a woman nearly fifty». See Sheridan Morley, *Shooting Stars: Plays and Players 1975-1983,* (London: Quartet Books, 1983), p. 338.

[14] In *Betrayal* Pinter also explored the nature of reality, memory and time. Here this was accomplished by skilfully manipulating the chronological sequence of events.

[15] Harold Pinter, *No Man's Land,* (London: Methuen, 1975), p. 95.

—«Shall I tell her lies or the truth?»— with a definite «Both» (p. 27)—, we immediately recall to mind another scene in which a man and a woman piled up truths and lies side by side distorting another woman's past —I am, of course, referring to the argument between Deeley and Anna over Kate in *Old Times*—. Deborah, in her efforts to put together the pieces of her mental jigsaw, either embellishes them, like Stanley —in *The Birthday Party*— magnifies the cherished memory of his piano concerts, or suffers with the recollection of the horrors she has experienced, like Aston —in *The Caretaker*— aches from the mental treatment he underwent.

Probably one of the most poignant moments in the play is the terrified speech in which Deborah describes how 'the walls' are beginning to close in, threatening to imprison her mind once again [16]. Here Pinter proves once more how our present haven of peace can be destroyed at once by a danger, be it unknown or familiar, that relentlessly watches in the dark.

Another recurring component in Pinter's plays, that also lurks in the recesses of the mind, is the sexual element. In this instance it is implicit in the girl's ambiguous remarks. The sixteen-year-old girl speaking through the mouth of the forty-five-year-old woman mixes both her past repressed sexuality, with her boyfriend, with her paradoxically budding urges, embodied in her doctor, and plants in the audience's minds a most disturbing suspicion [17]. As usual the strain of remembering finds no confirmation in reality and is made to end in disappointing recognition: «Perhaps I've forgotten» (p. 11). Once more in Pinter our ontological self lies hidden in the 'profounds' of mind —that Beckett told us about in *Ohio Impromptu*—. Memory has proved to be impossible to capture, reality unascertainable, and time unstoppable, while our fears run free in the dark alleys of the mind.

Again a completely different tone is the one adopted by Pinter in the play that completes the trilogy: *Victoria Station* (1982). This short piece is like an extended sketch mixing comedy, seriousness, poetry and stark realism. Its particular atmosphere is given by Pinter's archetypal characteristic of not outlining with definite strokes the boundaries between reality and imagination, between wishfulthinking and tangible facts.

The last 'place' Pinter has taken us to in his *Other Places* is a black ominous space, inhabited by only two human beings —a minicab controller and one of his drivers—. One has the feeling that the rest of the world has been wiped out and that the only survivors are those two grotesque figures, who, unaware of their real situation, fumble over establishing a kind of communication relying on the cable that links their two radio systems.

16 In performance Judi Dench tried to stop the menacing walls, as Martin Esslin put it, «by hysterically pounding her own face, the confines of her skull in which she feels she will again be confined» Martin Esslin, *Plays and Players,* No. 351 (December 1982) p. 21.

17 *Deborah:* «You shouldn't have brought me here. What are you saying? Did I ask you to bring me here? Did I make eyes at you? Did I show desire for you? Did I let you peep up my skirt? Did I flash my teeth? Was I as bold as brass?» (p. 11).

The play opens with the controller trying to make contact with the driver: «274? Where are you?»[18], the question has to be repeated again, there is a pause, and only then, a disinterested, detached «Hullo?» comes back over the air. The skilful strategy of having the speakers in two different areas, so no physical rapport can be established, and being made to depend completely on their radio systems —that can so easily be switched off— gives the audience a feeling of uneasiness, of unrest, fearing the communication might be cut —literally and metaphorically— at any moment. This anxiety is increased when we realize that even the easiest question —the first one the controller asked «Where are you?— has to be repeated five times to be given what might be called an answer: «I'm just cruising about» (p. 47). Moreover, as in the meantime we have heard such bizarre exchanges as, for instance, the driver telling his controller: 'I'm 274. Who are you?» (p. 46) we conclude we have switched on to a very special wave-length where events do not happen following the same laws as in our rational world.

In *Victoria Station* Pinter has taken us back to the eery world, full of jokiness, created at the beginning of his career, when he wrote revue sketches for Kenneth Williams in shows like *Pieces of Eight*. We are, once more, in the surrealistic atmosphere of some of his early plays —*The Dumb Waiter*, and *The Hothouse*— where the comedy is always checked in the bud by sinister and mysterious overtones. The absurdity of the situation —with the controller begging the driver to go to Victoria Station to pick up a customer who wants to be driven to Cuckfield; and the driver doggedly ignoring this request—, enhanced by the controller's quick changes of mood —from polite pleading, to puzzled bewilderment, and angry swearing—, accounts for the humour and comedy of many of their exchanges, but the impossibility of explaining why the driver does not want to move, or of ascertaining whether he has a passenger on board or not —and whether she is asleep, as he reckons, or dead, as we fear— at once changes the smile into a nervous grimace.

However, in the last section of the play, Pinter gives an unexpected twist to the meaning. When the driver asks the controller: «Can I tell you a secret?», the confidence takes us by surprise: «I think. I've fallen in love. For the first time in my life.» (p. 60). Our bewilderment is not only due to the fact that we could never have imagined that this driver could conceive such romantic feelings, but also because we had not suspected that that stony and aloof man might be the subject of such a great passion: «[I've fallen in love] with this girl on the back seat. I think I'm going to keep her for the rest of my life. I'm going to stay in this car with her for the rest of my life. I'm going to marry her in this car. We'll die together in this car.» (p. 60).

Our perplexity increases when, to the surprise the driver has given us, is now added the bafflement the bizarre decision taken by the conscious controller produces on us. To our utter astonishment, and completely disregarding his duties, he announces: «I've been thinking. I've decided that what I'd like to do now is

[18] Harold Pinter, *Victoria Station*, in *Other Places: Three Plays* (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 45. All further page references will be cited in my text.

to come down there and shake you by the hand straightaway. I'm going to shut this little office and I'm going to jump into my old car and I'm going to pop down to see you, to shake you by the hand.» (p. 61).

We might conclude, faced with this sudden, unexpected component, that Pinter is trying to mix two different approaches, as Martin Esslin pointedly remarks: «the grotesquely surrealistic on the one hand and a metaphysical realism on the other». In spite of its brevity, the sketch poses philosophical and metaphysical questions. Our daily routine, our familiar, monotonous environment is put to the test, when at the other end of our communication system we hear the voice of a man who, after falling in love, is ready to break away with every given pattern, the generally accepted set of values, the established norm. His decision to live independently, following the whims of his imagination, is too wild, tempting, and exciting a call not to be listened to.

However, this poetic interpretation of the end, that undoubtedly affects the whole piece, is only one of the possible ways of looking at the play. One might choose —as Kenneth Ives, the director of the Duchess production, did in 1985— to emphasize the farce and grotesqueness present in the play, and make it little else than a knockabout sketch; or one could simply concentrate on its sinister and mysterious components, and make the sketch a fable about two men lost in London; one stranded probably somewhere near Crystal Palace, with —or without— a passenger on the back seat, ready to give up everything —even his family—, and determined not to move ever again; the other locked up in his empty room, in his bewildered mind, and forsaken by all the other drivers. As always, Pinter has refused to be more explicit, and has left the play open to all these, and probably many other, interpretations.