

Jadwiga Uchman

HAROLD PINTER – “THE POET OF LONDON TRANSPORT”

Harold Pinter is undoubtedly an outstanding figure of British cultural and political life: a poet, playwright, film-script writer, actor, director, defender of dissidents and political justice. Finally, the Nobel Prize winner in Literature in 2005. His prolific writing has resulted in a great variety of criticism: both in the form of books and articles as well as the Pinter Archive and a special web side. His specific and unique way of writing and characteristic use of language have resulted in the coining of adjectives derived from his name such as “Pinterese”, “Pinterish” and “Pinteresque” (Esslin 207 and Hayman 1). Furthermore, *Brewer’s Theatre. A Phrase and Fable Dictionary* provides not only the entry for “pinteresque” but also one for “Pinter’s pause” (1994, 357).

The aim of the present article is to investigate the role of different kinds of means of transport in reference to the city landscape and human relationships in selected plays of the dramatist. In his article entitled “Tales of the city: some places and voices in Pinter’s plays,” Peter Raby (2001) draws our attention to the fact that numerous references to concrete districts and places are intrinsically bound with the position in life of the given characters and a way of differentiating them and showing the conflicts existing between them. Another critic, John Stokes, also stresses the importance of the city landscape in Pinter’s dramas:

When Irving Wardle in 1958 described Pinter as “the poet of London transport,”¹ he recognized him, rightly, as someone on the move. But the routes are not equally available (getting to Sidcup takes a good deal of thought and preparation) and there are barriers to be crossed. Pinter’s London is zoned and it is only permeable for those who have the right qualifications. To move around with ease and confidence requires documents, intellectual or academic credibility, cash. Not until Teddy in *The Homecoming* is there much in the way of upward mobility – and little good it does

¹ I. Wardle, “Comedy of Menace,” *Encore*. March–April 1959, 6.

him. Yet like the indifferent sound of London traffic that can be heard in the background throughout the TV production of *The Collection*, the city is always there. From the early *The Black and White* monologue, where even crossing Waterloo Bridge is an adventure, to *Old Times*, where cultural London is the landscape of memory, the city is a place of journeys to be measured not by distance but by difficulty, by territorial hurdles and unexpected visitations. (34)

Moving around the city is referred to already in the first play of Harold Pinter, that is in *The Room*. At the end of the drama, when Bert enters, he does not even notice the presence of Riley and utters his first words in the play, those referring to his experiences in the streets:

BERT. I got back all right.

Pause.

ROSE. Is it late?

BERT. I had a good bowl down there.

Pause.

I drove her down, hard. They got it dark out.

ROSE. Yes.

BERT. Then I drove her back, hard. They got it very icy out.

ROSE. Yes.

BERT. But I drove her.

Pause.

I sped her.

Pause.

I caned her along. She was good. Then I got back. I could see the road all right. There was no cars. One there was. He wouldn't move. I bumped him. I got my road. I had all my way. There again and back. They shoved out of it. I kept on the straight. There was no mixing it. Not with her. She was good. She went with me. She don't mix it with me. I use my hand. Like that. I got hold of her. I go where I go. She took me there. She brought me back.

Pause.

I got back all right. (109-110)

This scene is interesting in a number of ways. Not only is it a reversal of the opening stage image when Bert was silently eating his breakfast, hidden behind a newspaper, the reading of which was a justification of his not reacting to Rose's long monologue. It also seems to imply his prowess and command over the situation which he proves a few moments later when he beats up Riley. Martin Esslin argues: "Bert's account of his trip in his van clearly shows that his sexual energy is no longer focussed on Rose, the van has ousted her from his affections. The journey into the winter night becomes an act of intercourse with its triumphant orgasm. No wonder Rose is totally annihilated as the play ends" (66). While writing about "an act of intercourse" seems to be an exaggeration, it is undoubtedly true that Bert has warmer feelings towards his van than towards his wife. This argument is also supported by what D. Keith Peacock argues:

In realistic terms his monologue has the features evident in the speech of a young child or a slow learner: it consists of direct statements couched in simple grammatical structures and is repetitious and largely monosyllabic. Its rhythm, choice of words, and sentence construction, however, convey, in a poetic way, more than the surface meaning. Bert refers to his van as a woman whom he can dominate in a way he is apparently unable to dominate Rose. The content and rhythm of the speech work in unison to reveal precisely his frustration and suppressed aggression. (48)

And, then, the aggression surfaces and he beats up Riley. Perhaps one way of interpreting the ending of the play is provided by the husband's unusual use of personal pronouns in the above passage. At the beginning of the dialogue, he presents himself as the one responsible for the driving and the pronoun “I” dominates. So it does initially in the long speech, which, interestingly, begins with his statement “I caned her.” The street was empty and he got rid of the only car which appeared – here the use of the “he” form is worth paying attention to. Then, however, at the very end, it seems that he is not quite certain who was in command – he or the van. After two sentences indicating his own importance “I get hold of her. I go where I go,” the car seems to get the upper hand, becoming the agent of the happy return: “She took me there. She brought me back.” Then, as if realizing having become subordinated, he refers to his return only and not to the agent any more: “I got back all right.” The situation in the room is highly reminiscent of that in the street. Bert's insistence on being in absolute command of the car seems to imply that he would like to be the master of the house as well. The changes of the agent reveal his subconscious fears that he is not. The bumping of the car in the street and getting his road are equivalent to his attack on Riley. Does Bert get the control over the household, however? Riley's motionlessness and stillness seem to provide a positive answer (the intruder has been defeated and is harmless), Rose's final blindness, however, seems to imply the opposite.

Another play of Pinter in which sex and a car are connected is *The Homecoming*. Sam is the man who boasts to be the best driver in the firm: “Yes, he thought I was the best he'd ever had. They all say that, you know. They won't have anyone else, they only ask for me. They say I'm the best chauffeur in the firm” (21) and “You go and ask my customers! I'm the only one they ever ask for” (55). Just like Bert, Sam not only boasts of being a good driver but also seems to treat his taxi in a specific way which is characterised by great respect.

SAM. After all I'm experienced. I was driving a dustcart at the age of nineteen. Then I was in long distance haulage. I had ten years as a taxi driver and I've had five as a private chauffeur.

MAX. It's funny you never got married, isn't it? A man with all your gifts.

Pause.

SAM. There's still time.

MAX. Is there?

Pause.

SAM. You'd be surprised.

MAX. What you been doing, banging away at your lady customers, have you?

SAM. Not me.

MAX. In the back of the Snipe? Been having a few crafty reefs in a layby, have you?

SAM. Not me.

MAX. On the back seat? What about the armrest, was it up or down?

SAM. I've never done that kind of thing in my car.

MAX. Above all that kind of thing, are you, Sam?

SAM. Too true.

MAX. Above having a good bang on the back seat, are you?

SAM. Yes, I leave that to others.

MAX. You leave it to others? What others? You paralysed prat!

SAM. I don't mess my car! Or my ... my boss's car! Like other people.

MAX. Other people? What other people?

Pause.

What other people?

Pause.

MAX. Other people. (22-23)

Sam has never "banged away at [his] customers," yet he has some pleasant memories connected with his taxi and Max' late wife, Jessie. A few moments later, the dialogue continues:

SAM. Never get a bride like you had, anyway. Nothing like your bride ... going about these days. Like Jessie.

Pause.

After all I escorted her once or twice, didn't I? Drove her round once or twice in my cab. She was a charming woman.

Pause.

All the same, she was your wife. But still ... they were the most delightful evenings I've ever had. Used just to drive her about. It was my pleasure.

MAX. (*Softly, closing his eyes.*) Christ.

SAM. I used to pull at a stall and buy her a cup of coffee. She was a very nice companion to be with. (23-24)

The above dialogues evoke a number of questions: Why does Sam insist that he never had a bang in his car? Why is the phrase "other people" repeated five times? Why does Max utter the word "Christ?" The answers are never easy in the case of most of Pinter's plays and there is always a possibility of varied interpretations. It could be argued, however, that a possibility of arriving at the meaning of these dialogues is provided by a scene towards the end of the play. When it has been decided that Ruth is staying with the family and will be providing for them, working as a prostitute, "Keep[ing] everyone company," Sam comes forward and "(*in one*

breath)” says: “Mac Gregor had Jessie in the back of my cab as I drove them along” (86). After that, he collapses never to say a single word again. Teddy leaves, Joey puts his head on Ruth’s lap, Max “*falls on his knees by the side of her chair,*” groaning, arguing he is not an old man and asking for a kiss, while Lenny stands still, watching them (89–90).

It seems possible to argue that Sam is different from the other men in the family. He is the only one capable of treating women in an honest and gentlemanly way. His outburst and breakdown at the end of the play are a reaction to the plans concerning Ruth. Most probably Jessie was not treated properly by the family members, maybe justifiable. He, however, idealised her, never even thinking of having a romance with her, not to mention sex. When he witnessed the scene between her and Mac Gregor, it was a double shock for him. Firstly, the woman, whom he respected and adored, was having sex with Max’s friend in his presence. Secondly, this was happening in his car (his boss’s car, as he corrects himself). Thus, then, it was a double sacrilege, a profanation both of the woman he admired and the car which he treated as his own. What still needs stressing here is that it is the brother in law who is greatly shocked with Jessie’s betrayal. Max may have suspected something, a proof of which might be detected in his repeatedly asking about “the other people.” It was Sam, however, who was badly wounded. Now, seeing the collapse of the marriage of Ruth and Teddy, he cannot keep the secret any longer.

In *Betrayal* moving around the city is strictly connected with the extramarital love affair of the main characters. When Emma and Jerry meet in 1977, when their affair has been over for two years, Emma wonders “if everyone knew, all the time” and is calmed down by Jerry who says: “Don’t be silly. We were brilliant. Nobody knew. Whoever went to Kilburn in those days? Just you and me” (16). He assumes that their having rented a flat to meet in, far away from their homes, was a sufficient remedy for their affair not to be revealed. He does not know, however, that during their stay in Venice in 1973, Emma confessed to her husband that she was having an affair with Jerry. In this context, her wondering if anyone knew seems rather strange – she knows Robert knew. While in Venice, Robert and Emma are planning to go to Torcello. When, however, Robert learns about his wife’s unfaithfulness, he goes there alone. On returning to London, being asked by Jerry whether she went to Torcello, Emma answers she did not because “The speedboats were on strike, or something” (76). Slightly later on, Robert and Jerry meet to have a lunch together. When, in the previous scene, Jerry tells Emma about their plans to meet, she inquires why he wants to meet Robert, “What is the subject or point of [their] lunch,” to which he answers “No subject or point. We’ve just been doing it for years” (78–79). It is quite clear that Emma would prefer the two men

not to meet after her confession in Venice. While having lunch, Robert does not reveal to Jerry that he knows about the love affair. The atmosphere of the meeting, however, is quite tense, with pauses marking the stress under which Robert is. And then Robert mentions his visit to Torcello:

ROBERT

I went for a trip to Torcello.

JERRY

Oh, really? Lovely place.

ROBERT

Incredible day. I got up very early and – whoomp – right across the lagoon – to Torcello. Not a soul stirring.

JERRY

What's the 'whoomp'?

ROBERT

Speedboat.

JERRY

Ah, I thought –

ROBERT

What?

JERRY

It's so long ago, I'm obviously wrong. I thought one went to Torcello by gondola. (93–94)

Jerry obviously does not realize that his moment of hesitation, when he does not finish the sentence "Ah, I thought –" is a proof to Robert that he has met Emma after her return from Italy. That is why Robert has to give vent to his anger a few minutes later, when he speaks about being a bad publisher and hating books.

Moving around the city and cars in Pinter's plays are connected not only with emotions, love and betrayal but also with menace and threat. Towards the end of Pinter's second drama, *The Birthday Party*, McCann "*ushers in STANLEY, who is dressed in a dark well cut suit and white collar. He holds his broken glasses in his hand. He is clean shaven.*" McCann states Stanley is "a new man" (75). Then Goldberg and McCann "*begin to woo him, gently and with relish ... STANLEY shows no reaction. He remains, with no movement, where he sits*" (76). After a long litany of promises, which sound like threats, uttered by Goldberg and McCann, Stanley, whose hands tremble, tries to say something but is able to utter meaningless sounds only. Then the two men start leading him out of the room and Petey tries to stop them:

PETEY. Leave him alone.

GOLDBERG (*insidiously*). Why don't you come with us, Mr Boles?

MCCANN. Yes, why don't you come with us?

GOLDBERG. Come with us to Monty. There is plenty of room in the car.

PETEY *makes no move. They pass him and reach the door. MACANN opens the door and picks up the suitcases.*

PETEY (*broken*). Stan, don't let them tell you what to do!

They exit.

Silence, PETEY stands. The front door slams. Sound of a car starting. Sound of a car going away. (79–80)

Despite his advice given to Stanley, Petey seems to be aware of the fact that Stanley will not be able to oppose his oppressors and that is why, when Meg comes in, he lies to her that Stanley is still in his room, sleeping. He does not want to reveal to her that McCann and Goldberg have taken him to his doom, Monty.

The setting of *Party Time* in the Almeida premiere (1991), in the work on which Pinter participated as a director, was both specific and general. As Michael Billington writes, the play seemed “to be happening in London” but also anywhere. The critic argues that the playwright just implies “that one of the preconditions of Fascism – a myopic and self-preoccupied wealthy elite, totally indifferent to the decisions taken in its name – is becoming dangerously apparent in Britain” (330–331).

The play presents a number of characters gathered at a party. The drama consists of a series of dialogues conducted by those present, speeches which, in most cases, are examples of irrelevant party talk. The conversations concern a number of topics: marital and extra-marital relationships between the characters, the abnormal situation out in the streets and an elitist club to which most of those present belong. Soon it appears that the host, Gavin, is one of the people responsible for what is happening outside. The roads have been blocked, the identity of individuals is checked and the sound of heavy army vehicles can be heard, all of which indicate some crisis those in power are trying to end.

When Melissa comes to the party she asks “what on earth’s going on out there? It’s like the Black Death” and then she continues “The town’s dead. There’s nobody on the streets, there’s not a soul in sight, apart from some ... soldiers. My driver had to stop at a ... you know ... what do you call it? ... a roadblock. We had to say who we were ... it really was a trifle ...” (286). The answer she gets to her enquiry is given by Gavin, the host, who says dismissively: “Oh, there’s just been a little ... you know ...” to be supported by that of Terry: “Nothing in it” (286–287). Slightly later, the following dialogue takes place:

CHARLOTTE

I think there’s something going on in the street.

FRED

What?

CHARLOTTE

I think there’s something going on in the street.

FRED

Leave the street to us.

CHARLOTTE

Who's us?

FRED

Oh, just us ... you know. (307)

In both the cases, the slightly worried and upset women are calmed down by those in power who, while being responsible for what is happening out in the streets, do not want to discuss the situation and, instead of answering the question, reply dismissively "... you know," immediately to involve themselves in the meaningless and trivial party talk, which is supposed to cover up the real problems which can be noticed outside, in the streets.

Towards the end of the drama Gavin, the host, delivers his farewell speech:

Thank you very much indeed. Now I believe one or two of our guests encountered traffic problems on their way here tonight. I apologize for that, but I would like to assure you that all such problems and all related problems will be resolved very soon. Between ourselves, we've had a bit of a round-up this evening. This round-up is coming to an end. In fact normal services will be resumed shortly. That is, after all, our aim. Normal service. We, if you like, insist on it. We will insist on it. We do. That's all we ask, that the service this country provides will run on normal, secure and legitimate paths and the ordinary citizen be allowed to pursue his labours and his leisure in peace. Thank you all so much for coming here tonight. It's been really lovely to see you, quite smashing. (312-313)

When he has finished his highly optimistic tirade, in which euphemisms are used in reference to quite obviously dangerous events which have been happening in the streets, outside the safe and full of light room in which the party is taking place:

The room lights go down.

The light from the door intensifies, burning into the room.

Everyone is still, in silhouette.

A man comes out of the light and stands in the doorway. He is thinly dressed.

JIMMY

Sometimes I hear things. Then it's quiet.

I had a name. It was Jimmy. People called me Jimmy. That was my name. (313)

The ending of the drama, once more stresses its binary thematic structure which interweaves the two issues discernible in the title of the piece: the meeting of, most clearly, prominent party members and supporters at a joyful social gathering and the actions undertaken by the same party in order to restore "normal services," epitomized, among others, by Jimmy and the mystery surrounding him. His use of the past tense in the above

speech suggests that he has been murdered. He thus appears to have been a dissident who has been disposed of (Cave, 123–124). Dusty’s earlier often repeated enquiries concerning her brother and the increasingly angrier answers of her husband introduced a threat which now has entered the place where the party is held. It is not only the streets outside which are menacing, the danger is also creeping into the seemingly peaceful room, filled with the joyful party atmosphere.

The juxtaposition between the safe room and the dangerous outside takes us back to Pinter’s first drama, *The Room*. Similarly to the representatives of the regime in *Party Time* who, in order to have full control of the situation, organize roadblocks and round-ups, Bert wants to have full control of the street and that is why he bumps the car which would not move. The situation in the street is in both cases a symbolic reference to what happens inside the rooms: Bert’s aggressive behaviour in the street is later followed by his cruel assault on Riley and, similarly, the party members’ domination results in oppressing not only those outside but also inside the room. In a way, usurping the control over other people’s travelling around the city is equivalent to suppressing their basic freedoms, no matter whether on the micro-scale of interpersonal feelings and emotions or on the macro-scale of state politics and power struggle.

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Harold Pinter – „poeta londyńskiego transportu”

Autorka analizuje znaczenie środków transportu w wybranych dramatach Harolda Pintera, który został określony przez Irvinga Wardle jako „poeta londyńskiego transportu”. Wprowadza on do swoich sztuk samochody, a sposób mówienia o nich często sprawia, że urastają do rangi symbolu. W pierwszej omawianej sztuce, *The Room*, długi monolog Berta na końcu utworu ukazuje jego podróż furgonetką przez zaśmiezione i śliskie ulice. Specyficzne użycie zaimków osobowych („ona” w odniesieniu do furgonetki i „on” w przypadku samochodu-intruza) sprawia, iż opis ten staje się symboliczny i jest oznaką dominacji Berta na zewnątrz pokoju, w którym nie udaje mu się osiągnąć pozycji dominującej. W *The Homecoming* nieżonaty Sam, kierowca taksówki, darzy swój samochód wielkim uczuciem i nie może pogodzić się z myślą, że Jessie zdradziła Maxa na tylnym siedzeniu jego taksówki, traktując to wydarzenie jako podwójne zbeszczeszczenie – taksówki i platonicznie kochanej kobiety. W *Betrayal* prywatne samochody umożliwiają kochankom spotkania w odległej części Londynu, a opowieści o motorówce, którą Robert pojechał na Torcello, potwierdzają, iż Jerry i Emma są kochankami. I wreszcie w *Party Time* to, co dzieje się na ulicach (blokady, identyfikacja podróżnych) to przejaw przemocy. Tak więc, w dwóch sztukach samochody w symboliczny sposób łączą się z zagadnieniami miłości i zdrady, a ostatnia z nich jest powrotem do tematyki zagrożenia i dominacji, tym razem, jednak postrzeganej w makropolitycznej skali państwa i walki o władzę.