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“The Dignity of Man”: Pinter, Politics, and the Nobel Speech

Summary

The paper is an examination of Harold Pinter’s Nobel Prize lecture ‘Art, Truth & Politics’ from the political aspect. It argues that Pinter’s speech was widely misreported at the time as being most significant for its political attacks on President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair. The paper suggests instead that the lecture given by Pinter is better understood as a message congruent with his long-standing political statements; that it was not an inappropriate eruption of politics into a literary speech; and that these political positions are also relatable to the dramatic work by which he is distinguished.

Key words: Harold Pinter, Nobel Prize, politics, G.W. Bush, Tony Blair.

»Človekovo dostojanstvo«: Pinter, politika in govor ob prejemu Nobelove nagrade

Povzetek

Prispevek s političnega vidika obravnava govor Harolda Pinterja »Umetnost, Resnica & Politika«, ki ga je imel ob prejemu Nobelove nagrade. Po mnenju avtorja je bil Pinterjev govor v tedanjem času pogosto napačno predstavljen, saj je bil v njem izpostavljen predvsem politični napad na predsednika Georgea W. Busha in na ministrskega predsednika Tonyja Blaira. Pinterjevo predavanje bi morali namesto tega razumeti kot sporočilo, ki se ujema z njegovimi dolgoletnimi političnimi stališči; da ni šlo za neprimeren vdor politike v govor književnika in da se omenjena politična stališča navezujejo na dramska dela, ki so mu prinesla ugled.

Ključne besede: Harold Pinter, Nobelova nagrada, politika, G. W. Bush, Tony Blair.

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“The Dignity of Man”: Pinter, Politics, and the Nobel Speech

1. Introduction

Harold Pinter’s Nobel Prize acceptance speech is arresting theatre: a distinguished but gravely ill man, sitting in a wheelchair and apparently in pain, calmly and systematically assails two of the most powerful men on the planet: the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, and the President of the United States. Without any obvious reliance upon notes, he speaks for approximately half an hour. He is neither histrionic nor maudlin, yet his speech patterns and vocal rhetoric testify to a lifetime of theatrical training. His talk ranges widely through conceptions of art, the value of writing and honest public discourse. Yet the aspect of his speech that received the most attention – and, indeed, what it is likely always to be remembered for – is the sharp political lashing that this visibly ailing man gave to George W. Bush and Tony Blair. Whether or not one agrees with Pinter’s politics, his speech was a tribute to his courage, and to his understanding of spectacle. It is remarkable, on a dramatic level, to observe a near-invalid urging the world to arraign the American President and the British Prime Minister as mass murderers and war criminals.

The press response to the speech was strange. As Pinter’s biographer Michael Billington notes, “the most startling fact was that Pinter’s Nobel Lecture on 7 December was totally ignored by the BBC. You would have thought that a living British dramatist’s views on his art and global politics might have been of passing interest to a public service broadcaster” (Billington 2007). Yet press reaction was not entirely muted; where it was reported, the speech was almost inevitably reported for the political content of the message. Sarah Lyall, writing in *The New York Times*, described it as “a furious howl of outrage against American foreign policy” (2005). Nigel Reynolds, writing in *The Telegraph*, noted that Pinter’s “anti-Bush message is familiar in Britain, [but] it has been little heard in America and he will be hoping that his prize will carry it there more forcefully” (2005). Billington, writing in *The Guardian*, called it a “passionate and astonishing speech, which mixed moral vigor with forensic detail” (2005).

The danger of such political specificity is that it can quickly recede into the past and appear irrelevant. Pinter himself is dead; Bush and Blair have left elective office; the main combat forces of the United States and the United Kingdom have left Iraq. It might appear that, in such circumstances, Pinter’s speech is already a dated artefact. This paper argues that the speech has a continuing and strong relevance to the understanding of his work and of his thought. Specifically, “Art, Truth & Politics” (the formal title of his Nobel speech) has three ongoing claims to our attention. First, (1) it is consistent with his political expressions, and is therefore a complementary summation of many of his previously expressed political and social statements. Second, (2) it is a clear use of a specific forum for a specific message – and one that, this paper argues, is not an inappropriate combination of argument and circumstance. Third, (3) it is a useful assessment of power relations and responsibility, as this relates his political concerns directly to his authorial interests as a playwright. This paper suggests, therefore, that “Art, Truth & Politics” serves as both a strong articulation of a specific political view, and as a valuable means of interpreting Pinter’s art and aesthetic thought.

2. Consistency and Complementarity

The political engagement of Pinter's mid-to-late career drama is evident and need not be examined in detail here; it is sufficient to note that a viewer or reader who experiences works such as *Mountain Language*, *One for the Road*, or *The New World Order* without perceiving political implications is inattentive or asleep. However, it is perhaps well to remind ourselves that Pinter was always political. Even early in his career, when he was most famous as the author of claustrophobic plays of interpersonal conflict in small rooms, he discussed his impressions of politicians in rather unrestrained language: "I'll tell you what I really think about politicians. The other night I watched some politicians on television talking about Vietnam. I wanted very much to burst through the screen with a flame-thrower and burn their eyes out and their balls off and then inquire from them how they would assess this action from a political point of view" (Plimpton 1967).

This phraseology is intriguing for several reasons and makes this quotation usefully illustrative of several larger points. We note first an appealing irreverence. Instead of believing that these people on television might have insights, or might merit respect, Pinter instead wishes to 'burn their eyes out and their balls off.' When Pinter gave his Nobel speech, his attacks on the President and the Prime Minister were fierce; yet nowhere did he threaten to incinerate the genitalia of Mr. Bush or Mr. Blair. However, the point should not be lost that Pinter, in both 1967 and 2005, rejected the deference with which leaders and politicians are commonly addressed.

We observe further that in this remark he makes no mention whatever about which country these politicians represent, or even which side of the Vietnam War they supported. Although it is highly likely that the politicians of whom he speaks were Americans, he does not specify, and it may not matter. What is of interest to him is not the justification they may make for their conflict, or their appeals to patriotism or sacrifice. Instead, what is of interest to Pinter is the absurd dichotomy of people in clean clothing and safe rooms offering opinions about and justifications for horrific, avoidable suffering, such as the burning of eyeballs or testicles by the ignited gasoline compounds of a flamethrower. Please notice that what Pinter requests, in this dream-assault, is not his victims' assent or resistance, but merely their assessment of this action from a political point of view. This is significant, as his point seems to be that there is a casual obscenity in allowing calm professional people to offer justifications and abstract reasoning that provide support for burning the skin and flesh of other human beings. That politicians are removed from the reality of what they discuss is implied in Pinter's urge to turn the flamethrower on them; it is more difficult to justify violence or death when the victim will be oneself or one's own family. (Pinter later dramatised this phenomenon of nonchalant atrocity in his short work *Precisely*, a play in which the actors placidly discuss the widespread nuclear obliteration of millions of human beings).

Of course, one should not place too much interpretive weight upon one remark made in an interview. Yet the statement above stands for several larger observations that are useful in assessing Pinter's political engagement. Even in the period when his works largely confined their action to interpersonal struggles in cheap rooms, he retained an interest in politics and spoke publicly about his conclusions. He felt, from early on, a significant objection to the falsity of politicians' analyses and justifications of the pain their policies inflict. He had no interest in feigning respect for those whose work was destructive and brutal, whatever their formal position or social prestige.

(The themes here enumerated are common throughout Pinter's political statements. It would be vain and wasteful to catalog here their recurrence through fifty years of his essays and proclamations. For those readers interested, many of these can be found collected in the selection of his writings *Various Voices*. His website, www.haroldpinter.org, also assembles several of his major public statements.)

We should further note that many of the political points that Pinter makes in "Art, Truth & Politics" were considerations he had already made publicly. Although the forum of the Nobel lecture gave him a larger, and perhaps more international, audience than he had previously enjoyed for his statements, almost nothing that he said in the lecture itself is wholly new. Let us briefly examine one of these points, to serve as an instance of the larger phenomenon. One of his major arguments in "Art, Truth & Politics" is that the United States hypocritically inflicts pain and anguish whilst claiming to be the world's leading force for freedom and democracy. Whether or not one agrees with Pinter, one must concede that he was remarkably consistent in making this argument. This is important, as it indicates that his Nobel remarks were not motivated by personal animus against Mr. Bush or Mr. Blair. Indeed, Pinter made the same points in 1996 – before either Mr. Bush or Mr. Blair took office – when receiving an honorary degree from the University of Hull.

In his Hull speech, he addresses this point. He notes that the United States often justifies "the torture chambers in El Salvador, Chile, Guatemala etc. – which last regimes are supported by the United States. I remind you of that simply because the USA is the head of the democratic world, and considers itself to be the defender of Christian civilization" (Pinter 1996). He revisits these examples in the Nobel speech. Here are his remarks, a decade later, on the same theme: "The United States supported and in many cases engendered every right-wing military dictatorship in the world after the end of the Second World War. I refer to Indonesia, Greece, Uruguay, Brazil, Portugal, Haiti, Turkey, the Philippines, Guatemala, El Salvador, and, of course, Chile … You have to hand it to America. It has exercised a quite clinical manipulation of power worldwide while masquerading as a force for universal good" (Pinter 2006). The point here remains consistent – the United States causes misery around the world and supports intolerable dictatorships, while portraying itself as a champion of liberty.

As noted above, this theme is employed here only to note Pinter's remarkable consistency in making the arguments he later made in the Nobel speech. Indeed, he sometimes used almost the identical phraseology that he had employed earlier. In 2005, his Nobel speech contains the statement "[America's] official declared policy is now defined as 'full-spectrum dominance.' This is not my term, it is theirs. 'Full-spectrum dominance' means control of land, sea, air and space and all attendant resources. The United States now occupies 702 military installations throughout the world in 132 countries" (Pinter 2006). This is very similar to remarks he made a year earlier, at the Imperial War Museum: "America's foreign policy now aims at 'Full Spectrum

Dominance' – that is the US Administration's term, not mine. Full spectrum dominance means control of air, sea, land, and space. It also of course means control of the world's resources. The United States has over 700 military installations in 132 countries" (Pinter 2004). This is not merely a one-off borrowing. Here he makes one of the most powerful of his arguments in the Nobel speech: "We have brought torture, cluster bombs, depleted uranium, innumerable acts of random murder, misery, degradation and death to the Iraqi people and call it 'bringing freedom and democracy to the Middle East'" (Pinter 2006). He made the same point, in almost exactly the same words, in his Wilfred Owen speech: "We have brought torture, cluster bombs, depleted uranium, innumerable acts of random murder, misery, and degradation to the Iraqi people and call it 'bringing freedom and democracy to the Middle East'" (Pinter 2005).

As mentioned above, one does not need to agree with Pinter's arguments or positions to acknowledge the continuity of his thought. It is, however, important to make that acknowledgement of his intellectual consistency. When he gave his Nobel speech, it was these political arguments that received the most coverage. This is, perhaps, natural, since it was an acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in literature – yet we may admit that Pinter had been saying these things for years, and it was perhaps only the increased attention given to a Nobel speech that attracted attention to his politics.

3. A Specific Forum for a Specific Message

If journalists were surprised to hear the Nobel laureate for literature speaking with force and depth about contemporary political troubles, they misjudged the man. As previously noted, he routinely took what occasions his health and his awards permitted to address his political concerns in public. Moreover, he seems to have understood immediately the forum for political commentary that the Nobel Prize provided. We have it on good authority – that of Pinter's wife, Lady Antonia Fraser – that he relished the opportunity the Nobel award offered to air his political views to a global audience: "Equally dear to his heart was the fact that he would now have a political forum in his Nobel Speech" (Fraser 2011). Pinter seized the opportunity to speak, and did so with impressive force; yet it is perhaps worth contemplating briefly whether or not it was inappropriate for Pinter to discuss politics in an acceptance speech for an artistic award.

The Nobel Prize in literature is unusual; although it is generally respected as recognising artistic accomplishment, it is not awarded for artistic merit alone. Strangely (but in accordance with the desires of Alfred Nobel), it is awarded "to the person who shall have produced in the field of literature the most outstanding work in an ideal direction" (Nobel 2012). This concept of ideality, or of idealism, has added an unusual and imprecise element into the selection and omission of Nobel Prize winners for literature. A serious course on twentieth-century literature could be created using only writers who were eligible for the Nobel Prize, but who did not win it: Tolstoy, Chekhov, Proust, Ibsen, Joyce, Pound, Kafka, James, Nabokov, Borges, Fitzgerald, Mandelstam, and Akhmatova are merely the most notable writers denied the award. Although the Swedish Academy does not comment upon the reasons why one writer or another did not win the prize, the omission of such titans may perhaps be due to this additional element of needing to write "in an ideal direction". For this reason, for example, the omission of Ezra Pound is perfectly justifiable; with whatever admiration one may regard his poetic accomplishments, it is impossible to deny the distressing viciousness and squalor of his public statements.

This is a point of significance: the additional factor of "an ideal direction", whatever it may mean, is a required element in the deliberations of the Swedish Academy. The beliefs and intentions – in other words, the "ideals" – of the writer are thus matters that contribute to, and are recognised by, the Nobel Prize in literature. A laureate, therefore, is not unjustified in speaking about matters outside his or her specific literary oeuvre: indeed, in a sense, those beliefs are also being recognized as contributing to the artistic productions of the winner.

The author of this essay has been unable to ascertain what – if any – restrictions are imposed on laureates for their Nobel lectures. There may be no guidelines or restrictions at all. The texts of the lectures suggest that winners are permitted a wide latitude in their subject matter, approach, and topic. Many writers merely discuss their attitudes towards writing and their estimation of literature. Some take a less common approach; J. M. Coetzee's unusual allegorical lecture of 2003 has at least the merit of an unconventional technique.

Yet many laureates for literature choose to speak about politics, conflict and war. Some of those speeches have become notable in themselves; perhaps the most significant was Alexandr Solzhenitsyn's stirring paper of 1970, in which he declared "a writer is not the detached judge of his compatriots and contemporaries, he is an accomplice to all the evil committed in his native land or by his countrymen. And if the tanks of his fatherland have flooded the asphalt of a foreign capital with blood, then the brown spots have slapped against the face of the writer forever. And if one fatal night they suffocated his sleeping, trusting friend, then the palms of the writer bear the bruises from that rope" (Solzhenitsyn 1970). Although lacking Solzhenitsyn's oracular sweep, Seamus Heaney gave an honest and painful assessment of the Irish troubles in his 1995 lecture: "The violence from below was then productive of nothing but a retaliatory violence from above, the dream of justice became subsumed into the callousness of reality, and people settled in to a quarter century of life-waste and spirit-waste" (Heaney 1995). In 1999, Günter Grass spoke not only about the horrors of his own nation's past, but also about the present sufferings of fellow writers, and the financial depredations of multinational corporations: "I come from the land of book-burning … the persecution of writers, including the threat of murder and murder itself, is on the rise throughout the world, so much so that the world has grown accustomed to the terror of it. True, the part of the world that calls itself free raises a hue and cry when, as in 1995 in Nigeria, a writer like Ken Saro-Wiwa and his supporters are sentenced to death and killed for taking a stand against the contamination of their country, but things immediately go back to normal, because ecological considerations might affect the profits of the world's number one oil colossus Shell" (Grass 1999).

These passages are not excerpted merely to offer evidence of the social and political awareness of these individual writers. They are intended to demonstrate that Pinter was by no means exceeding his forum or the example of his predecessors when he commented on contemporary politics in his Nobel speech. Indeed, he demonstrated a perhaps un-Pinteresque sense of verbal decorum; there is no word of profanity in the entire speech, despite the fact that several of his political statements and writings contain repeated uses of obscene speech (e.g., his poem "American Football" notoriously proceeds through "shit", "shit", "ass", "fucking", "shit", "shit", "fucking shit", "balls" and "fucking"). In the most general terms, it seems that his primary intention was to illuminate the connection between literature and politics, and that to do this his theme required him to discuss the political situation of the world. His reasoning is clear: "sometimes a writer has to smash the mirror – for it is on the other side of that mirror that the truth stares at us. I believe that despite the enormous odds which exist, unflinching, unswerving, fierce intellectual determination, as citizens, to define the real truth of our lives and our societies is a crucial obligation which devolves upon us all. It is in fact mandatory" (Pinter 2006).

If the definition of personal and societal truth is mandatory, as Pinter insists, then the political element of his speech perhaps becomes more clear. Although he is lucid in his discussion of artistic truth, he makes an equally plain distinction about how he as a man must react to the world around him: "As a citizen I must ask: What is true? What is false?" (Pinter 2006). The artist may seek those areas of incertitude and ambiguity for exploration, yet the citizen cannot allow those same phenomena to be used by politicians to confuse, obscure, or deceive. If the struggle against such trickery and obfuscation is the obligation of the citizen, it is part of that obligation to seek and to exploit those opportunities to expose the fraud of politicians. One may therefore argue that Pinter – far from clumsily inserting his crankish political views into an award for his artistic accomplishments – instead seized the opportunity he was given to do what he felt was morally obligatory: to use the worldwide forum of a Nobel lecture to present the case against the United States, the United Kingdom, George W. Bush, and Tony Blair.

There is one final note to make here. Pinter was unable to deliver this speech in person in Stockholm, owing to physical illness. His wife suggests that it was his intention to go to the ceremony: "Harold is inviting the whole family to Stockholm. He offers me a dress or rather dresses in which to beguile the King of Sweden and any other passing king" (Fraser 2011). Yet it became clear, as he neared the date to depart, that he was physically incapable of the trip to Sweden, and of the rigours of the formal ceremony. For this reason he recorded the speech on film in Britain, which – inadvertently, but indubitably – created a greater experiential effect for the viewers. His attack on the most powerful men in the world was issued from what looks to be a wheelchair, with a rug over his knees; his wife records that he "had one foot in a surgical sandal (ulcer is terribly painful) and one in a cut-down shoe" (Fraser 2011). Despite his clarity and force in speaking, he is obviously unwell; yet this adds, in a strange sense, to the power of his argument. He is a man weakened by illness and disappointed by his body, yet he still obeys the moral obligation to refute and expose two of the most dominant and formidable individuals in the world. This discrepancy between his moral strength, and his physical decrepitude, is stark; as Lady Antonia Frazer notes, we see "a man in much pain who goes in an ambulance from a cancer hospital to issue a clarion call to the world" (Fraser 2011).

One must be clear: in no sense does this paper argue that Pinter was attempting to use his illness for theatrical purpose. That would be morally repellent and beneath his dignity; the extremity of his distress, too, argues against any cynical manipulation. I merely wish to suggest that Pinter was never unaware of the context of the spoken word, and that some of the force of his speech comes precisely from the discontinuity between his bodily weakness and his intellectual doggedness. When he asserts, as previously noted, that citizens have a moral responsibility to separate political truth from political lies, the effort he expends in making this argument testifies to the sacrifice he believes that effort merits. In this sense, his illness adds a strange intensity to his remarks; when he notes, “I have referred to death quite a few times in this speech”, it is difficult to ignore the fact that he himself is obviously grappling with his own death. It is a powerful experience to observe someone make so great an effort, in the face of his own mortality, to persuade others.

4. Power Relations and Responsibility

Had “Art, Truth & Politics” been nothing more than an attack on Mr. Bush and Mr. Blair, it would already be forgotten. Yet Pinter makes a more specific argument that has direct relevance to his work. If one may be permitted summary, his argument is generally this: artists often create morally ambiguous characters in ethically uncertain positions, and their predicaments and actions can perhaps illuminate the existence of real humans. Yet whereas writers use these ambiguities to clarify human life, politicians conceal their actions behind confusion, uncertainty and lies. They seek to create a world in which the written and spoken word means nothing, or else is sufficiently malleable that truth becomes merely what is asserted to be true. The role of the informed citizen is to resist such obscuring of boundaries and to hold accountable those politicians who wage war and lie, who kill and destroy under the shibboleth of liberty and peace, and to bring such individuals to account, either directly through war-crimes trials, or indirectly, through public shame and the opprobrium of a disgusted public. As Pinter says, “the majority of politicians, on the evidence available to us, are interested not in truth but in power and in the maintenance of that power. To maintain that power it is essential that people remain in ignorance, that they live in ignorance of the truth, even the truth of their own lives. What surrounds us therefore is a vast tapestry of lies, upon which we feed” (Pinter 2006).

In what sense may this be said to have relevance to Pinter’s artistic work? This paper argues that there is, throughout Pinter’s work, a strong sense of people trying to establish the truth and finding that language is an obstruction. The famously Pinteresque patter of his earlier plays need not be understood merely as the inarticulacy of specific individuals in urban England, but as possibly also representing the inarticulacy of people being forced to confront a world in which they have no control. As Pinter shows in his lecture, politicians in the United States and the United Kingdom routinely use language to ensure that “people remain in ignorance”; it is also notable that throughout his oeuvre he creates characters who use language to distort or control the reality of others, particularly those who are weaker, or are in a weakened, subordinate position.

Let us exemplify this tendency. In Pinter’s work, language is not used merely to express oneself but also to suppress the expressions of others. This is one of the most fascinating aspects of Pinter’s theatrical work; he repeatedly uses language to expose the manner in which language can stifle the expression of other people. Sometimes this is made relatively explicit. One might think, in this context, of the famous exchange from *The Birthday Party*:

> Goldberg: ‘What makes you think you exist?’
>
> McCann: ‘You’re dead.’
>
> Goldberg: ‘You’re dead. You can’t live, you can’t think, you can’t love. You’re dead.’ (Pinter 1960)

Here there are several themes related to our argument. We should note, first, that Stanley is given no opportunity to respond to the question; it is designed merely to provoke, but a response is unacceptable and is prevented by McCann’s immediate interjection, “You’re dead.” Secondly, we should note that all of these statements (“You’re dead. You can’t live, you can’t think, you can’t love.”) are both factually untrue and exempt from reply. These are people using words to define the reality of another – even to the extent of declaring him dead. The audience can see that Stanley is alive, yet as a character, he is not even allowed the basic control over reality that a factual protest (such as “You lie – I am alive.”) would provide.

Pinter saw a similar phenomenon occurring in politics. His quotation about language being employed to keep thought at bay has already been cited. However, the consequences of political lies are vastly more significant than those of theatrical lies. If an actor is confronted with suffering, verbal assault, and linguistic perplexity, he enacts his role and goes home for the evening. Yet when a politician uses language to deceive and obscure, people die violent and bloody deaths without their suffering even being acknowledged or discussed. Notice how this passage from Pinter’s Nobel speech insists that America uses language to deny reality in a manner strikingly reminiscent of the language tactics employed by Goldberg and McCann: “Hundreds of thousands of deaths took place throughout these countries. Did they take place? And are they in all cases attributable to U.S. foreign policy? The answer is yes they did take place and they are attributable to American foreign policy. But you wouldn’t know it. It never happened. Nothing ever happened. Even while it was happening it wasn’t happening. It didn’t matter. It was of no interest. The crimes of the United States have been systematic, constant, vicious, remorseless, but very few people have actually talked about them” (Pinter 2006). He repeats the point: “At least 100,000 Iraqis were killed by American bombs and missiles before the Iraq insurgency began. These people are of no moment. Their deaths don’t exist. They are blank. They are not even recorded as being dead” (Pinter 2006). Observe Pinter’s deduction here – being dead is bad, but there is an added injustice when language does not record one’s death.

Although he separates the artistic use of truth, falsity, and ambiguity from the political uses of truth, falsity, and ambiguity, in a strange sense he offers a compromise between the political and artistic worlds. The compromise lies in the fact that both art and politics can use and manipulate the truth through manipulation of language, yet the consequences of such manipulation are vastly different. When Rose, in the play *The Room*, deceives herself, she deceives only herself; not even the audience is fooled. She attempts to tell herself that all is well, and that one may sit quietly and let the world proceed: “We’re very quiet. We keep ourselves to ourselves. I never interfere. I mean, why should I? We’ve got our room. We don’t bother anyone else. That’s the way it should be” (Pinter 1960). Yet in the Nobel speech, Pinter makes clear that there are serious consequences to this quietude; as the American people sit in their “truly voluptuous cushion of reassurance" – created by political lies – their government engages in "formidable assertion of military force responsible for the death and mutilation of thousands and thousands of innocent people" (Pinter 2006).

This theme may, indeed, be the most significant aspect of Pinter's speech. Although his later plays often have obvious political application and relevance, we now see that many of the power struggles and attempts to attain supremacy – so common in the early dramas – share this similar concern for language's distortion of reality. Even in the apparently self-contained early plays (such as *The Caretaker*, *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Room*, *The Homecoming*, etc.), the contests for authority and dominance often depend upon linguistic tactics and subterfuges. The connection between that art and the world around us is the similarity of the linguistic stratagems and tricks used to dominate; what is discordant and dissimilar between reality and theatre is the consequence of those language battles. In the theatre, actors play roles; in life, bombs shred human skins and blow their bodies into pieces; lies have fewer consequences on the stage than in reality, but the tactical effectiveness of those lies is equally strong in the theatre and in life. It is perhaps a ghastly amphiboly that the English language can comfortably speak of politicians such as Mr. Bush and Mr. Blair acting on the world's stage.

5. Conclusion

It is a curious fact that the winners of the Nobel Prize in literature – people presumably distinguished by their articulacy – should generally produce Nobel lectures that are unmemorable. It is a test one may perform upon oneself; check a list of the ten most recent laureates of the Nobel Prize for literature, and then attempt to recollect what each said in his or her Nobel lecture. Few are likely to remain clearly in one's memory. Even if one disputes everything Pinter said in his own speech, at least his point was clear and his speech memorable.

It was not an absolute triumph. His political points almost certainly overshadowed his artistic observations; this was certainly the effect in the press coverage. We may note also that there are certain aspects of the speech that seem paradoxical and unclear. Pinter seems to argue that the United States is simultaneously both sneakily covert and brazenly open in its duplicity. At one point in the speech he argues that "you have to hand it to America. It has exercised a quite clinical manipulation of power worldwide while masquerading as a force for universal good. It's a brilliant, even witty, highly successful act of hypnosis" (Pinter 2006). Yet in the same speech, he suggests that "The United States no longer bothers about low-intensity conflict. It no longer sees any point to being reticent or even devious. It puts its cards on the table without fear or favour" (Pinter 2006). This seems peculiar: if the USA is "masquerading" around the world, and engaging in a "manipulation of power" that is a "highly successful act of hypnosis", this would seem to suggest that it is being devious, and is not putting its cards on the table.

However, what is possibly the aspect of his speech that received the least notice is worthy of attention. That is the conception of human dignity that Pinter articulates. Setting aside all the political statements, we perceive in "Art, Truth & Politics" a broad and generous view of human conduct. Pinter sees a world in which people can choose to tell the truth, and many do so. It is a world in which art reflects and informs our understanding of life. He outlines a world in which even the most powerful individuals on the planet can be brought to account for their actions and made to face punition. His world is one in which a body ripped by a bomb is not merely reduced from life into meat, but is a person whose death demands recognition and accountability. Pinter describes a reality in which people – even very ill people – possess the courage and the language to denounce the powerful when they act in wickedness. This is a strong and compassionate view of people and one not always associated with the battles Pinter depicts among his victims and usurpers. It is our obligation, as the audience for Pinter's speech, to observe the faith and trust in humanity that his lecture implies – and requires. In the following passage, his call for human dignity is one that goes out to people generally; it is not something bequeathed to the masses by politicians or laws but is something that humans may restore to themselves, the agents of their own ennoblement: "the search for truth can never stop. It cannot be adjourned, it cannot be postponed. It has to be faced, right there, on the spot ... if such a determination is not embodied in our political vision we have no hope of restoring what is so nearly lost to us – the dignity of man" (Pinter 2006).

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