

# LITERATURE

## LANGUAGE AS AN ASPECT OF THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN HAROLD PINTER'S *THE HOMECOMING*

KRYSTYNA NAPIÓRKOWSKA

*Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań*

In criticism of Pinter's work, his remarkable sensitivity to everyday speech is frequently recognized, and by implication, it is admitted that concern with language is one of the central issues of his plays. What is usually pointed out by commentators is the playwright's brilliant use of puns, his ability to disclose linguistic ambiguities and subtleties, the interaction of speech and event on the stage as well as the way in which he employs pauses and silences. However, some problems of language of a more general nature such as: the relation of language and reality, the way perception bears upon verbal expression and the role of speech in the process of cognition, seem to have attracted far less attention on the part of the critics. As the general concern of *The homecoming* seems to cluster around these issues, the play will be discussed here in terms of the above problems with special emphasis put on the role of language in the process of the search for identity.

That *The homecoming* is one of Pinter's most pronounced commentaries on the nature of language seems to be evident. To begin with, one of the major characters is a professional philosopher who, naturally, is expected to elucidate the basic problems of language. Interestingly enough, the "philosophical question" was posed by his brother, one of those who "wouldn't have the faintest idea" of what Teddy's philosophical works were about but who, contrary to the complacent philosopher, was conscious of the existence of those problems. ("You know how it is. Can't sleep. Keep waking up. (...) It's not exactly a dream. It's just that something keeps waking me up. Some kind of tick").

The question posed by Lenny is the basic one in philosophy and, generally speaking, is concerned with the nature of reality (cf. Esslin 1970:151):

Lenny: Well, for instance, take a table. Philosophically speaking. What is it?

Teddy: A table.

Lenny: (...) You mean it's nothing else but a table. Well, some people would envy your certainty (...). For instance, I've got a couple of friends of mine, we often sit around the Ritz Bar having a few liqueurs, and they're always saying things



like that (...): Take a table, take it. All right I say, take it, take a table, but once you've taken it, what you going to do with it? Once you've got hold of it, where you going to take it?

(Pinter 1965 : 52)

Lenny's "philosophical question" seems to be a good illustration of Martin Esslin's statement that "instead of proceeding logically, Pinter's dialogue follows a line of associative thinking in which sound regularly prevails over sense" (Esslin 1969:240). As can be easily observed in the above example, the principle of associative thinking is also operating within the utterance of a single character. Thus, the sentence: "Well, for instance, take a table" evokes both acoustic and contextual association in Lenny's mind ("I've got a couple of friends of mine, we often sit around the Ritz Bar (...) and they're always saying things like (...): Take a table") and it eventually assumes an entirely different sense. In other words, the initial "take a table", in the course of thinking process and surrounded by a new context, changed its meaning. Incidentally, this process can be said to exemplify Wittgenstein's notion that the meaning of a sentence can be determined by its use, that is, by the circumstances in which it is used.

Naturally enough, the alteration of the meaning of the sentence brings about a change in the nature of the question. The latter, from being general is transformed into a more specific problem and is now concerned with the name relation between a word and the object it denotes. Lenny's persistent inquiry about the relation between symbol and reality should be conceived of as an urge to impose reason upon something which, from the nature of things, is irrational (an arbitrary and irrational relation between a name and an object). Such an insistence, when pushed too far, inevitably breeds further questions which ultimately become absurd ("(...) take a table, but once you've taken it what you going to do with it? Once you've got hold of it, where you going to take it?") and the only possible solution, intuitively offered by Max and Joey is the total annihilation of the question ("You'd probably sell it. (...) Chop it for firewood").

Teddy is unconscious of hazards of associative thinking, and also he faces a second hindrance. His failure to answer the question is also due to the fact that philosophy has ceased to provide any explanation of reality and seems to be caught in a trap of its own intricacies and immanent questions; and philosophers, aiming at obscurity rather than clarity, are engaged in the speculations which produce no effect upon the object of knowledge:

Teddy: You wouldn't understand my works. You wouldn't have the faintest idea of what they were about. You wouldn't appreciate *the points of reference*.

(italics mine) (Pinter 1965 : 61)

In the very same way Teddy rejects Ruth's suggestion concerning the importance of sensual perception, since he is quite confident that his cool reason

can comprehend more by maintaining an "intellectual equilibrium". He claims to be the only one who is capable of perceiving reality ("I'm the only one who can see") thus drawing a demarcation line between himself and the rest of the characters ("You're just objects. You just... move about. I can observe it"). Moreover, comprehension, for him, means the ability to verbalize, to formulate concepts ("That's why I can write my critical works") which, in turn, he considers the ultimate goal of intellectual activity.

As noted above, Ruth represents a contrary standpoint. She emphasizes the significance of action and the senses, that is, those factors which are totally neglected by "conceptualistic" and "rational" Teddy (cf. Kerr 1967: 38).

Ruth: The action is simple. It's a leg... moving. My lips move. Why don't you restrict... your observation to that? Perhaps the fact that they move is more significant... than the words which come through them. You must bear that... possibility... in mind.

(Pinter 1965 : 51 - 52)

The reiteration of the verb *move* indicates her view of life as being changeable and process-like, as opposed to her husband's urge to conceive of reality in terms of fixed categories (cf. Kerr 1967: 33).

This idea of flux, conceived of by Ruth as movements of human body, is reinforced by Lenny who, in order to point out the protean nature of human experience, and, consequently, the relativity of cognition, adduces the image of a ticking clock. This image serves a twofold purpose. On the one hand, obviously enough, its ticking symbolizes the passage of time and, what is more important, man's awareness of it. On the other hand, the fact that ticking is particularly annoying at night and less so during the day, signifies the changeable nature of a perceiving subject. The conspicuousness of an object "in the night" can be blurred "in the day" and, in the similar way, essential assertions become "just commonplaces". Thus the realization of the changeable nature of the perceiving subject helps one to understand why a true hypothesis can be easily transformed into a false one.

Another aspect of Ruth's lecture, far more important for the present discussion of the play, is a juxtaposition of language and the reality it is supposed to depict. Since word and event have lost their one-to-one correspondence, it is actions, Ruth seems to indicate, that should be returned their former significance (cf. Killinger 1971: 93).

The discrepancy between language and fact, or the dissociation of *signifiant* and *signifié*, can be traced in the play on several occasions. For example, before Ruth was introduced to her father-in-law, he had already classified her as a "smelly scrubber", a "stinking pox-ridden slut", a "tart". Although the incidents in the play develop in such a way that the point of equation between Max's preconceived idea of his daughter-in-law and reality is almost attained (Ruth's "initiation" into the family through her sexual intercourse with her



brother-in-law), then, all of a sudden, he begins to refer to her as a "lovely girl", a "beautiful woman" and a "mother". Thus the incongruity of language and reality is not only maintained but even reinforced.

On the surface, Max's categorization of Ruth stems from man's tendency to view other people in terms of stereotypes but it also can be accounted for on a somewhat deeper level. John Lahr has suggested that in *The homecoming* "words become labels which simplify and control alien experience" (Lahr 1971: 135). In other words, by means of speech man establishes a dominance over reality and, as has been pointed out by John Killinger, such was a primordial function of language:

Speech, among primitive peoples, was considered an important aspect of man's power over nature. If he knew the name of a god or a tree or an animal, he had at least in some measure attained a dominance over it. Thus in the biblical account of Creation, significance is attached to the first man's naming of the creatures (Killinger 1971: 91).

Thus, Max's proneness to assign Ruth to a definite category, in this case either as a mother or a whore — two ways in which a woman is traditionally stereotyped, is initially a consequence of his endeavour to suppress the fear of the alien (biblical connotations of the Ruth story are evoked here) and to subjugate the unknown (their first encounter); and, later, as Ruth's sexual power becomes more and more threatening, it is simply an attempt to tame the dangerous. The process of subordinating Ruth reaches its climax during the naming scene when Max, Lenny and Joey argue over a new name for her, the name which would suit her new role best (Dolores, Cynthia, Gillian, Spanish Jacky). It is interesting to note that it is after the naming that the alien Ruth becomes kith and kin.

The way the preconceived ideas shape reality and the way in which some kind of control over it is attained is even more evident in the case of Lenny. His classification of "a certain lady" as the one who "was falling apart with the pox", the assertion which was never verified by him, is a first step to repress the fear the sexually ambivalent Lenny must have felt when accosted by the stranger. Linguistic violence reinforced by actual violence are the means by which he establishes the dominance over facts, as this is the only way he can have control over them. That the mental act was prior to the real fact and that reality is eventually formed by preconception is explicitly admitted by Lenny:

Ruth: How did you know she was diseased?

Lenny: How did I know?

*Pause*

I decided she was.

(Pinter 1965:31)

Actually, what is considered a "real fact" by Lenny is an idea or an object of thought rather than the action itself and the process of man's coming to terms with reality cannot be completed unless the physical act is accompanied by reflection:

Lenny: (...) That night... you know... The night you got me (...). What was the background to it? I mean, I want to know the real facts about my background. I mean, for instance, is it a fact that you had me in mind all the time, or is it a fact that I was the last thing you had in mind?

(Pinter 1965:36)

Sometimes, however, it is as difficult to formulate that reflection as it is to grasp the mystery of man's conception.

It seems that Sam represents another case in point. His main concern throughout the play is MacGregor and Jessie's liaison. He seems to consider that the only way to come to terms with this problem is by finding an adequate verbal expression for it and, consequently, by externalizing it in articulate terms. That this is not an easy goal to achieve is illustrated by the innumerable understatements he makes with regard to MacGregor and Jessie in the course of the play ("I've never done that kind of thing in my car". (...) "I leave that to others". (...) "I don't mess up my car! Or my ... boss's car! Like other people", etc). When finally he succeeds to give a full expression to his obsession —

Sam: (*in one breath*) MacGregor had Jessie in the back of my cab as I drove them along.  
(Pinter 1965:78)

— he is able to get rid of it. He passes out but this is not the very act of fainting that releases him from the obsession, as the real exoneration is accomplished at the moment of verbalization of his psychological ailment. It is interesting to note that at this moment Sam is excluded from the family and joins the previously rejected Teddy. (The spiritual affinity between those two was hinted at earlier in the play by Sam: "You know, you were always my favourite, of the lads. Always"). At the fall of the curtain Max is on the verge of being rejected as he insists on "linguistic clarity" (Lahr 1971: 134). Thus, finally, only those who accept mystical and unexplainable qualities in human experience are left within the circle of the family.

It follows that all the characters in the play, in one way or another, are involved in the process of self-definition and, viewed from this angle, can be divided into three groups. Ruth and Teddy seem to represent two polarities since, as has been pointed out, they embody two contrary ways of viewing reality. Intuitive and sensual Ruth in her search for self succeeds in embracing the totality of experience unlike her husband, whose tendency to rationalize and intellectualize results in fragmentary vision of reality and whose psychological development, consequently, seems to be arrested. It is in this sense that he

becomes an alien and is ultimately rejected by the family. One might add at this point that Jocy is the character who, in many ways, is closest to Ruth and those two seem to arrive at a full communication which is by no means a linguistic one. The three remaining characters, Max, Lenny and Sam, oscillate between those two extremes. Ruth's emphasis upon the importance of the action rather than the verbal rendering of it, which seems to indicate her awareness of the existence of the experience which is beyond verbal expression on the one hand, and Teddy's insistence on rationalizing and conceptual thinking, on the other, form a kind of framework within which Max, Lenny and Sam present the process of translating the intuitive and mysterious into the conceptual and, therefore, the familiar.

It is generally acknowledged that, contrary to naturalistic drama, the Theatre of the Absurd does not aim at depicting external reality but is mainly concerned with psychological or inner reality. *The homecoming* is one of the works of literature whose supreme purpose is "the exploration of the reality of the mind" (Esslin 1969:355). The whole play seems to be a projection of the mind, an externalization of the process of the transition from the unconscious to the conscious in the form of dialogues and patterns of images. It is also an illustration of the idea "that conceptual and discursive thought impoverishes the ineffable fullness of the perceived image" (Esslin 1969: 356). It expresses the playwright's belief that there is a region of the unsayable in a human mind. Pinter's own statement that "the more acute the experience the less articulate its expression" (Esslin 1969:240) best testifies to the validity of this idea.

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