

Naoko Yagi
Waseda University, Tokyo

COLLECTIONS, PRESS CONFERENCE, AND PINTER¹

Challenging the traditional genre distinctions of play, prose, and poetry, *Death etc.*, a collection of shorter pieces by Harold Pinter, epitomises the work of a “political” author at the time of his being awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. My essay discusses *Press Conference*, one of Pinter’s sketches for the stage, in the context of that particular collection. While showing the ways in which a dramatic piece like *Press Conference* turns into a piece of “writing,” or something which does not necessarily presuppose a stage production, I attempt to find out to what extent *Press Conference* is an expression of Pinter as a political writer.

Key words: Harold Pinter, Genre, Play, Politics

I

Some of the non-dramatic works by Harold Pinter are clearly marked, for better or worse, as writings on “politics.” Simply put, we as readers of any particular piece of Pinter’s prose do not have to wonder if the work should be considered a political piece; all we need to do is to turn to the current edition of the latest collection of Pinter’s non-dramatic works, *Various Voices: Prose, Poetry, Politics 1948-2005*, and we will find that the pieces of prose are conveniently categorised according to the headings “prose,” “prose fiction,” and “politics” (1, 75, 181). The categorisation itself looks illogical; this nonetheless may precisely be the point. We are led to believe that some of the non-dramatic pieces written by Pinter no longer sit comfortably upon the genre “prose,” which, traditionally, we have paired and contrasted with the genre “poetry,” as indeed can be seen in a previous collection of Pinter’s non-dramatic works, *Collected Poems and Prose*. It seems that the pieces which appear under the head-

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ing “politics” in *Various Voices* have severed ties with the tradition, while still unmistakably being works of non-poetry.²

What we find in *Various Voices* is the beginning of a new tradition, namely, the creation of a new genre, in this case, “politics,” which will be put side by side with more familiar genres that Pinter’s non-poetic writings seem to have outgrown. As for Pinter’s poems, they had simply been put together under the heading “poetry” until the first edition of *Various Voices* came out in 1998; since then, Pinter’s poetry has also outgrown the genre: in the current edition of *Various Voices*, which was published in 2005, Pinter’s poems are divided into two categories, “poetry” and “war” (111, 249). We can easily see that the category “war” is closely associated with the category “politics” in the same book; a poem called “American Football” (260), for example, appears in the chapter “War” while also being cited and described by the author in one of his pieces, “Blowing up the Media” (201-05), which appears in the chapter “Politics.”

It should be noted that, as long as books are considered commercial commodities, publishers’ or editors’ strategies for selling them will inevitably play an important part in the creation of the kind of categorisation which we just touched upon; if we insisted on finding a definitive reason for what looks like an innovative manner in which the pieces are categorised in the current edition of *Various Voices*, it would lead us nowhere. On the other hand, Pinter being alive and still writing, the chances are that the new tradition which was kicked off with the 1998 edition of *Various Voices* will continue to “grow” and possibly call for further emendations. In a sense, it has already shown a sign of further growth: along with some of his politically-charged poems and pieces of prose, five of Pinter’s plays appear in an American edition of a collection of his works, *Death etc.*, which was published in 2005. This means that at least some of the works in the chapters “Politics” and “War” in *Various Voices* are now officially associated with some of the plays by Pinter. What we have called the new tradition above no longer draws a line between a poem, a piece of prose, and a play. In other words, Pinter has outgrown the professional title “playwright”; he has become a “writer,” and a political one, if necessary.

My discussion in this essay will centre around one of the five plays in the collection *Death etc.* More precisely a sketch written for the stage rather than a full-length play, *Press Conference*, which premiered in London in 2002, shows first and foremost Pinter’s technical acumen in

2 In a previous essay I discussed the problem of genre classification in *Collected Poems and Prose* and the 1998 edition of *Various Voices*; see Naoko Yagi, “Paratexts of Non-Dramatic Pinter: A Derridean Approach,” *English Literature* 89 (2005): 129-40.

writing short and astute theatrical pieces, for which he was well known in the earlier decades of his half-a-century-long career as a playwright. Still, the crux of *Press Conference* is not necessarily to be found in theatrical efficiency or effectiveness per se. Once we put *Press Conference* in the context of *Death etc.*, it is quite apparent that the sketch, which in the book is immediately preceded by a poem called “The Old Days” (57-58) and immediately followed by a piece of prose entitled “An Open Letter to the Prime Minister” (67-69), might even be read and interpreted as a kind of dramatic poetry;³ indeed, *Death etc.* as a book being “borderless” in terms of what we might call the poetry/prose/play distinction, it does not seem to matter anymore if the text of *Press Conference* ceases to function as a blueprint for a production on stage. The purpose of my essay is twofold: first, I shall try and see to what extent *Press Conference* is an expression of Pinter as a political writer; second, I shall try to find out how a Pinter play like *Press Conference* turns into a piece of “writing,” which we may “read” in a variety of manners, not always with performers or a stage in mind.

II

We might argue that, as far as Pinter’s plays for the stage are concerned, “politics” cannot be but a relative term in the first place. The difference between plays by Arnold Wesker and those by Pinter, for example, may be much smaller, if not negligible, than we are accustomed to thinking, that is, depending on the kind of theatrical work against which we would discuss pieces by the two playwrights. Derek Paget reminds us in his overview of post-war British theatre that both Pinter and Wesker came on to the theatrical scene in the country at the time when Joan Littlewood and her group, Theatre Workshop, looked towards “radical European theatre practice” (211) in their attempt to set up a “real ‘alternative’ to the mainstream [British theatre]” (212). Against such a backdrop, goes Paget’s argument, we will not find it difficult to see a play by Wesker or Pinter or Samuel Beckett and call it a work of “late naturalism” (211). If on the other hand we look at Pinter’s plays from the 1980s onwards, what Pinter has called “politics” in his non-dramatic pieces is raised as a question in at least some of the plays in such a manner that it seemingly overshadows any other aspect of the plays which we would otherwise be discussing; nevertheless, the fact remains that the question of “politics”

3 For an example of dramatic poetry, we may even go as far back in literary history as the earlier decades of the nineteenth century, when works such as Lord Byron’s “Manfred: A Dramatic Poem” were published. “Manfred” was meant to be read, although it was also put on the stage (Wolfson and Manning 804-05).

in those plays still draws upon the line of “late naturalism.” This, among other things, explains the distance between Pinter’s post-1980 plays and some of the recent pieces for the stage by David Hare and Michael Frayn. If the latter trace their roots back to the works of Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, and other playwrights who “revived” the comedy of manners at the turn of the twentieth century, we might point out that the post-1980 plays by Pinter hardly fit the mould, the Wildean and possibly also Shavian influence on Pinter’s language notwithstanding.

In short, since the very beginning Pinter’s plays have somewhat deceptively and yet quite remarkably been *consistent* in dealing with “politics” as nothing but a relative issue; this in turn brings to the fore the complex problem of how exactly one would define “politics” in a Pinter play. Can “politics” ever be a viable term or category to be applied to any group of Pinter’s plays, when, as Penelope Prentice puts it, “[w]hat sets Pinter’s work apart from that of almost any other twentieth-century dramatist is that at the center his ethic is wedded to his aesthetic” (8)?

Christopher Murray compares *Translations*, a play written by Brian Friel, with Pinter’s *Mountain Language*, which is another of the five plays included in the collection *Death etc.*, and he draws our attention to a kind of all-or-nothing attitude that is discernible in some of Pinter’s post-1980 plays:

Pinter’s [*Mountain Language*, premiered in 1988] is melodrama of a far cruder kind. Friel, while not denying the imperialist content of the educational and mapping projects of the 1830s, does not fall into the artistic trap of opposing villains and heroes [. . .]. *Translations* ends with a trio on stage. (212)

Might we say, then, that what is regarded as being “crude” by readers of *Mountain Language* has in fact much to do with Pinter’s “aesthetic,” which, if we follow Prentice’s argument, at the same time should imply the crudeness of Pinter’s “ethic”? Curiously enough, in his Nobel lecture Pinter does indeed give his definition of “political theatre,” referring to *Mountain Language* as an example; he claims to the effect that *Mountain Language* could not possibly be the kind of play in which an author would pursue the concept of what we may call after Murray the “trio on stage”:

[T]he search for the truth can never stop. It cannot be adjourned, it cannot be postponed. It has to be faced, right there, on the spot. Political theatre presents an entirely different set of problems. Sermonising has to be avoided at all cost. Objectivity is essential. [. . .] This does not always work. And political satire, of course, adheres to none of these precepts, in fact does precisely the opposite, which is its proper function.

In my play *The Birthday Party* I think I allow a whole range of options to operate in a dense forest of possibility before finally focussing on an act of subjugation.

Mountain Language pretends to no such range of operation. It remains brutal, short and ugly. (*Art, Truth and Politics: The Nobel Lecture* 8)

As far as the author of *Mountain Language* is concerned, crudeness has proven to be the only “option”; any attempt to resist taking that option would have defied the very reason for his writing the play. Pinter’s ethic and aesthetic are not only “wedded to” each other in *Mountain Language* but, taken together, they are overtly exclusive as well. There seems to have been no justification on the part of the author of *Mountain Language* for introducing the kind of character who would have given the play an additional dimension and completed the set, by which we mean the “trio on stage”; any character of that kind would irrevocably have diluted the “focus” which, unlike in *The Birthday Party*, the author apparently felt he had to keep tight in *Mountain Language* from start to finish.

Mountain Language does not have what *The Birthday Party* has, or vice versa. If we choose only to look at Pinter’s post-1980 plays, a parallel of a similar nature can be drawn between *Press Conference*, which, as we shall see, is even cruder than *Mountain Language*, and a play like *Party Time* or *Celebration*. We might note that neither *Party Time*, premiered in 1991, nor *Celebration*, premiered in 2000, is included in the collection *Death etc.* In what respect, for example, is *Celebration* much less crude compared to *Press Conference*?

In his essay on how he has directed Pinter’s plays over the years, Peter Hall points out that Pinteresque “ambiguity” (146) can be meaningful only when those who direct and act in a Pinter play “know very clearly *what they are hiding*” (146) [original emphasis]. An actor cannot afford to float between “options”; she or he must *act* while members of the audience may indulge in whatever “options” they think they see in what is happening on stage. How, then, would anyone manage to “act” in a play like *Celebration*? Actor Indira Varma in an interview talks about the acting technique which she adopted while playing the character Sonia in *Celebration* (Varma 146-47); no actor in the production had anything to consult as she or he tried to build his or her character (147),⁴ and Varma reveals that she “probably imposed an understanding on [her role]” (147) by devising a “narrative” (147):

4 Some actors in the production asked Pinter for information which might help them build their characters; rather typically, Pinter “did not give exposition” (Varma 147).

I invented a narrative for myself about why [Sonia] said things in a certain way in order to be able to remember how to deliver the line the next time; sometimes you'd find that the narrative would lose its value for you and you'd have to alter something slightly to keep fresh—it could either improve the moment or you'd feel you'd missed the mark. (147)

To us, the issue is not so much that Varma “invented a narrative” with the purpose of easing her way through the world of *Celebration* as that she, if necessary, would “alter” the narrative which she had constructed. An actor playing a role in *Celebration* may only choose one “option” at a time, and yet she or he has the freedom to try different “options” at different times.

It is clear that *Press Conference* calls for another kind of interpretative approach. While the paucity of background information should not surprise any reader of the play, it turns out that *Press Conference* cuts a pattern of eerie and yet strangely comical predictability, which is unusual for a Pinter piece. There are no pivotal turns in *Press Conference*. “Options,” in other words, are not available since the pattern, in the sense mentioned above, is all that the play has. Unlike in *Celebration*, none of the characters in *Press Conference* has a name: in the play-text the characters are only referred to by their professions, “Press” on the one hand and “Minister” on the other. Whereas characters without names are not uncommon in Pinter’s sketches, two of the most hilarious examples being “Controller” and “Driver” in *Victoria Station*, we might point out that “Minister” and “Press” in *Press Conference* are distinctive in their *not* taking over each other’s position at any moment in the play and thus defying one of the vital tricks of the trade which we find in many of Pinter’s sketches and full-length plays. If the characters collectively labelled as “Press” are merely functional in their roles throughout *Press Conference*, the character “Minister” never flinches or shows any slack in running *his*⁵ show, namely, a deludingly benign “press conference.” We might even say that, instead of being a purely theatrical “individual,” a character in *Press Conference* is quite unabashedly a “type,” a ghost of some figure from the world beyond the here-and-now on stage. The only problem is that each ghost speaks Pinteresque English; for example, it seems as if some of the lines which “Minister” utters have sprung from the lines given to Mick in *The Caretaker*:

MINISTER. [. . .] We need critical dissent because it keeps us on our toes.
[. . .] We are happy for it to remain at home, which means we can pop in at any time and read what is kept under the bed, discuss it with the writer, pat him on the head, shake him by his hand, give him perhaps a minor kick up

5 Pinter played “Minister” when the work was first performed (*Press Conference* 61).

the arse or in the balls, and set fire to the whole shebang. (*Press Conference, Death etc.* 64-65)

We can never identify any of the ghosts.⁶ An ultimate crudeness that makes up *Press Conference* has pushed the question of “politics” in Pinter’s plays further than ever towards what in his non-dramatic writings Pinter calls “politics”; at the same time, “politics” in *Press Conference* remains the cohesion of Pinter’s ethic and aesthetic.

*

A sketch of mere three pages in length in the collection *Death etc., Press Conference* was nonetheless not a curtain raiser when it premiered in London; the piece did not have a full-length play to be paired with. Instead, it was performed along with four other sketches by Pinter (Peter 16), which altogether made up a still rather brief “45-minute show” (16). As we discuss *Press Conference*, the manner in which it was staged for the first time proves significant for two reasons: first, the fact that *Press Conference* was presented on stage as part of a collection helps us see the text of the piece more readily in the context of a collection in book form; second, since one of the other four sketches in the forty-five-minute-long “show” turned out to be “Tess” (Peter 16), which is included in the latest version of *Various Voices* not as a play but as a piece of prose fiction (*Various Voices* 108-10), we may safely assume that, intentionally or not, the play/prose distinction in Pinter’s writings was coming into question even as the “show” presented *Press Conference*. Of course, *Press Conference* later appeared among non-dramatic as well as other dramatic pieces in the book *Death etc.*⁷ In what ways, then, can we “read” a work like *Press Conference* whose potential as a piece of writing much depends not only on the kind of framework in which the piece is set, in this case a “collection,” but just as crucially on the piece’s performative⁸ aspect, something that is hardly restricted to the realm of time and space on stage?

6 In his review of the first performance of *Press Conference*, JP [John Peter] draws the reader’s attention to a possible connection between “Minister,” or, to be more precise, a “minister of culture, until recently head of the secret police” (Peter 16), and a real-life figure:

I happen to know of an Eastern European communist country where, after a shake-up in the secret police, one of its most renowned torturers was moved out: he was made drama critic of a party newspaper, and chaired an arts programme on state television. (16)

The reviewer does not forget to add, “Pinter cannot have known this story” (16).

7 *Press Conference* was first published as a volume on its own by Faber.

8 Here, “performative” is used as an adjective for “performativity.” As Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick put it, performativity “has enabled a powerful appreciation of the ways that identities are constructed iteratively through complex citational processes” (2).

The title of a collection like *Various Voices* aside, Pinter's prose, whether fiction or not, has always exerted a meticulous precision in terms of how words, phrases, and sentences would sound, by which we simply mean that the texts are fit to be read aloud. Pinter himself can be a reader of his own texts. If some of the speeches which Pinter has given in the past forty-odd years are collected in chapters "Prose" and "Politics" in *Various Voices*, he has also recorded a selection of pieces, that is, works of prose, prose fiction, and poetry, from the 1998 edition of the book.⁹ We might say that Pinter has always taken very seriously the occasion to read publicly what he has written. This has increasingly been made apparent as Pinter has become more and more "political" by his definition; in an interview in 2005, when he said that he "[had] stopped writing plays" ("People" 9), Pinter took the opportunity to make his priorities quite clear: "My energies are going in different directions, certainly into poetry. But also [. . .] over the last few years I've made a number of political speeches at various locations and ceremonies" (9). We also recall that Pinter's Nobel lecture in 2005 began with his plunging straightforwardly into a big, and obviously to the speaker the single most important, question which he put to the audience as well as himself in the form of two mirror-image-like problems: "As a citizen I must ask: What is true? What is false?" (*Art, Truth and Politics: The Nobel Lecture* 5). Then, as if to deflect the question, he went on to assert that "truth in drama is forever elusive" (*Art, Truth and Politics* 5). That Pinter refers to this particular kind of "truth" as an independent item, though without doubt an offshoot of the big question, at first glance comes, rather predictably, from his being a well-established playwright; when he says, "the real truth is that there never is any such thing as one truth to be found in dramatic art" (*Art, Truth and Politics* 5), it may not be immediately evident that Pinter no longer finds "drama" ideal as a genre according to whose conventions and traditions he has "voiced" his thoughts for decades. Nevertheless, as we have seen in the previous section of the essay, Pinter admits in the same speech that the structure of multiple truths, which to his mind is an intrinsic merit of "drama," has ceased to function as brilliantly as it probably did years ago. Pinter's plays, compared to his poetry and prose, are put in a much more precarious position in the latest Pinter canon with the author not retaining any strong inclination for making his "voice" heard through the channel called play, or "drama."

⁹ In the essay mentioned in note 1, I touched upon Pinter's recording of his pieces from *Various Voices*.

This brings us to the collection *Death etc.*, in which *Press Conference* is set. What if, in the context of that particular book, we stop reading *Press Conference* as a “play” and, for want of a better term, call it a “dramatic poem”¹⁰ instead? The idea is certainly not preposterous when we remember that one sometimes hesitates to consider a certain piece of writing a “poem”; Lance St. John Butler explains the phenomenon in a somewhat casual manner: “The first and most important feature of poetic register is the announcement that the text is being presented as poetry. [. . .] if we accept that offer, then we have already entered into the register game of poetry willy-nilly” (192-93). After all, as long as we abide by a general assumption that “all poetry foregrounds to some extent the sound values of words” (Noland 111), it should not be difficult for us to turn the text of *Press Conference*, either theoretically or practically, into a kind of poetry. By the same token, we might also decide to put all the other “plays” that are found in *Death etc.*, namely, *Mountain Language*, *The New World Order*, *One for the Road*, and *Ashes to Ashes*, in the category which we came up with in our attempt to describe *Press Conference*; this means that there are five “dramatic poems” in the book which otherwise contains three texts of speeches, a letter originally published in a newspaper, and eleven non-dramatic poems. That makes the five “dramatic poems” the only pieces of fiction in the entire collection, the criterion which, we might quickly add, is in no manner pronounced in the format of the book. The twenty pieces in *Death etc.* appear in an order which may or may not be random; they are certainly not arranged according to the original chronology of publication nor are they divided into any categories that would make up chapters or sections in the book. The implications, with which I wish to conclude, are both simple and curiously subtle.

“Like any master,” writes Prentice, “[Pinter] trusts his audiences to understand his text and subtext without road signs” (3). Now that Pinter the writer is as “crude” as ever, we wonder if his “trust” in the audience/readers can still be regarded as being secure; we might even venture to ask if indeed what Prentice calls “trust” is felt, recognised, and relished by the audience/readers as they see or listen to or read Pinter’s later plays. After all, can a person lose confidence in writing plays and yet continue to embrace theatre audience? If “road signs” in the play-text of *Press Conference* are bright and clear, we would say that those in the collection *Death etc.* are even clearer as well as brighter: all non-dramatic poems in *Death etc.* except one will be found in the chapter “War” in the 2005 edition of *Various Voices*; likewise, all pieces of prose in *Death etc.* appear in

¹⁰ See note 3.

the chapter "Politics" in the above-mentioned edition of *Various Voices*; as for what we have called dramatic poems, both *The New World Order* and *One for the Road* are nearly as "crude" as *Mountain Language*, while the palpably ominous lyricism in *Ashes to Ashes* clearly entails "Death," the last of all the poems that are collected in *Death etc.* The seemingly random arrangement of the pieces and the apparent abolition of the poetry/prose/play distinction in *Death etc.* only highlight the fact that road signs are abundant however one would care to have a crack at "reading" this particular collection. As a post-playwright and a "political" writer, Pinter seems increasingly reluctant to leave anything he has written to a "chance" interpretation.

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Naoko Yagi

ЗБИРКЕ, КОНФЕРЕНЦИЈА ЗА НОВИНАРЕ И ПИНТЕР

Резиме

Преиспитивањем традиционалних жанровских дистинкција између драме, прозе и поезије, збирка краћих дела Харолда Пинтера *Смрти, итд*, укратко представља дело и рад „политички“ оријентисаног аутора у време када му је додељена Нобелова награда. У раду се разматра *Конференција за новинаре*, један од Пинтерових нацрта за позоришну представу, а у контексту поменуте доделе. Указивањем на чињеницу да једно драмско дело попут *Конференције за новинаре* може постати и „књижевно“ дело, или пак нешто што не подразумева искључиво позоришну продукцију, настојим да одредим у којој мери *Конференција за новинаре* представља Пинтера као политички оријентисаног аутора.