Chapter - V

POLITICAL PLAYS

Harold Pinter, after a three-year period of ‘creative blankness in the early 1980s’ following his marriage to Lady Antonia Fraser and the death of Vivien Merchant, turned himself to writing plays dealing with the theme of power and politics. The plays that appeared during his final phase tended to become shorter and more overtly political, serving as critiques of oppression, torture, and other abuses of human rights, linked by the apparent invulnerability of power.¹

*Ashes to Ashes* (1996) and *Celebration* (2000) are the two plays that have political resonances and other tonal devices like power and dominance.

*Ashes to Ashes*² is the latest work of Harold Pinter in the political canon. It is a half-hour of cryptic hints about marital cruelty and political oppression, exchanged in and around an easy chair in a living room by a bland man and a woman who is possibly his abused wife.³

There is no trace of humour. During thirty minutes of banal, incredibly tedious chat they pause a lot, squirm, glare, breathe hard, and get up and sit down once or twice; at last the lights go down.

*Ashes to Ashes* is set in a house in the country during an early evening summer. It opens with Devlin and Rebecca described as ‘both in their forties,’ talking in what appears to be a home living room on an early summer evening. As the play develops it becomes clear that Devlin and Rebecca are probably married, although their relationship to each other is not defined explicitly. The play seems to
centre around only these two characters and the stage directions suggest that the action exists solely around them. But this proves to be false as the conversation centres around a mysterious man who seems to turn an innocent conversation into something much more sinister. Initially, Devlin seems Rebecca's husband or lover, her therapist, and potentially her murderer. Some critics like Merritt "have described their discussion as more between a therapist and his patient than between two lovers or between a husband and a wife."4

Devlin questions Rebecca in forceful ways, and she reveals personal information and dream-like sequences to him. In their first exchange, Rebecca tells of a man who appears to be sexually abusing her and threatening to strangle her. She tells Devlin that she told the killer, "put your hand round my throat" (3), an act which Devlin acts directly towards the play. This erotic action of Rebecca with her companion seems to be dangerous and disturbing. There are lots of questions between Rebecca and Devlin which have the effect of almost searching for something but returning unanswered when the question is repeated. As Devlin desires to have his questions answered, wants to know more information, Rebecca forgets the questions and takes up irrelevant answers. She in fact tells about the job which her lover has lost. Rebecca becomes more vague and she deliberately drifts away from reality. She says, 'this perfectly innocent pen, a pen has no parents.' The point is that Rebecca makes less sense and Devlin's questions seem more laced with menace. Devlin mimics the threatening and alarming behaviour of her lover, thereby creating shock and disgust for the audience. Rebecca continues her conversation with an echo, either herself or perhaps Devlin echoing her words. During this absurd monologue Rebecca deteriorates into conclusion and fearfulness. The audience are left with more questions, about a mysterious baby, a lover, and the
character of Devlin. Thus, the play initially runs like an absurd play. But a deep study of the play reveals that there is an embedded political thought in it.

Devlin asks Rebecca to “speak. Say it. Say put your hand round my throat” (75). The first exchange is followed immediately by Devlin asking “do you feel you are being hypnotized?” “Who by?” asks Rebecca. “By me,” answers Devlin, adding “What do you think?” to which Rebecca retorts, “I think you are a fuckpig” (7-9).

In response to Devlin’s further enquiries about her lover, Rebecca relates several dream-like sequences involving the man who she has quoted initially. She tells Devlin that this lover worked as a guide for travel agency. She goes on to ask, “Did I ever tell you about that place … about the time he took me to that place?” This place turns out to be “a kind of factory, I suppose” peopled by his “workpeople respected his … purity, his … conviction” (21-25). But then she tells Devlin, “he used to go to the local railway station and walk down the platform and tear all the babies from the arms of their screaming mothers” (27).

After a silence, Rebecca changes the subject abruptly with: “by the way, I am terribly upset” (27). She complains that a police siren which she has just heard has disappeared into the distance. Devlin replies that the police are always busy, and thus another siren will start up at any time and “you can take comfort in that, at least. Can’t you? You’ll never be lonely again. You’ll never be without a police siren. I promise you” (29-30). Rebecca says that while the sound of siren is fading away, she knew it was becoming louder and louder for somebody else. And while its doing so made her feel insecure. Terribly insecure, she hates the sirens “fading away; I hate it echoing away” (31). At the end of the play, an “Echo” of her words occurs.
Rebecca tells Devlin that she had been writing a note and that when she put the pen she was using down, it rolled off the table:

REBECCA

It rolled right off, on to the carpet. In front of my eyes.

DEVLIN

Good God.

REBECCA

This pen, this perfectly innocent pen.

DEVLIN

You can't know it was innocent.

REBECCA

Why not?

DEVLIN

Because you don't when it had been. You don't know how many other hands have held it, how many other hands have written with it, what other people have been doing with it. You know nothing of its history.

REBECCA

A pen has no parents. (35-36)

As the play advances in a monologue, Rebecca describes herself looking out the window of a summer house and seeing a crowd of people being lead by guides towards the ocean, which they disappear into lemmings. That leads to her description of a condition that she calls "mental elephantiasis" (49), in which "when you spill an ounce of gravy, for example, it immediately expands and becomes a
vast sea of gravy,” Rebecca says that “you are not the victim of it, you are the cause of it” (51). Referring both to the pen and anticipating the references to the bundle later in the play, she explains, “Because it was you who split the gravy in the first place, it was you who handed over the bundle” (51).

After an exchange about family matters relating to Kim and kids – Rebecca’s sister, Kim, Kim’s children and Kim’s estranged husband (55-63), in which Rebecca may be conveying her own attitude toward Devlin in commenting on Kim’s attitude toward her own husband – “She’ll never have him back. Never. She says she’ll never share a bed with him again. Never. Ever” (61) – there is another silence. Devlin says, “Now look, let us start again” (65). Rebecca tells Devlin, “I don’t think we can start again. We started … a long time ago. We started. You can’t start again. We can end again” (67). “But we’ve never ended,” Devlin protests (67). Rebecca responds, “Oh, we have. Again and again and again. And we can end again. And again and again. And again” (67). That exchange and Rebecca’s reference to him earlier as a fuckpig demonstrate strong hostility toward Devlin.

After another silence Rebecca’s and Devlin’s singing refrain from the song alluded to in the play’s title “Ashes to Ashes – And dust to dust – If the women don’t get you – The liquor must” (69). After a pause, Devlin says “I always knew you loved me … Because we like the same tunes,” followed by another silence” (69).

Later Devlin asks Rebecca why she has never told him about “this lover of yours” and says how he has “a right to be very angry” that she did not, “do you understand that” (70). After another silence, instead of responding, Rebecca describes another sequence where she is standing at the top of a building and sees a
man, a boy, and a woman with her child in her arms in a snowy street below (71-73). In her monologue she shifts suddenly from the third person 'she' to the first person 'I' and Rebecca (not the woman) is held in Rebecca's own arms: "I held her to me" and she listens to its heart beating (73).

At that point Devlin approaches Rebecca and begins to enact the scene described by Rebecca at the beginning of the play, directing her to "Ask me to put my hand around your throat" as she has earlier described her lover as doing (73-75).

The last scene of the play recalls the cultural representations of Nazi soldiers selecting women and children at railway stations en route to concentration camps. She begins by narrating the events in the third person. "She stood still. She kissed her baby. The baby was a girl" (73). But she switches from the third person to the first person in continuing her narrative. As this narration develops an echo repeats some of Rebecca's words as she recounts the experience of a woman who has walked on to a train platform with a baby wrapped up in a bundle, beginning with "they took us to the trains (ECHO: The trains)," and "They were taking the babies away" (ECHO: The babies away), and then Rebecca shifts from using the third person 'she' to using the first person 'I'. "I took my baby and wrapped it in my shawl" (77). Finally, Rebecca (or the woman or women with whom she has identified from such past historical events) is forced to give her baby wrapped in the bundle (the bundle being a synecdoche for the baby wrapped up in a shawl) to one of the men. As if Rebecca were such a woman, she recalls getting on the train, describing how "we arrived at this place – thus recalling the other place about which she asks Devlin early in the play, the factory." "Did I ever tell you about the place … about the time he (her purported lover) took me to that place" (21).
In the final lines of the play, as if the woman’s experience were her own Rebecca’s shifts again significantly from the third person ‘she’ used earlier relating to the woman to the first person ‘I’ while denying that she ever had or ever knew of any baby.

**REBECCA**

And I said what baby.

**ECHO**

what baby.

**REBECCA**

I don’t have a baby.

**ECHO**

A baby.

**REBECCA**

I don’t know of any baby.

**ECHO**

of any baby.

*Pause.*

**REBECCA**

I don’t know of any baby

*Long silence.*

**BLOCK OUT. (83-84)**

A word about the influence on *Ashes to Ashes*. Gitta Sereny’s biography of Albert Speer was responsible source for this play. Speer was horrified when he visited factories where slave labourers were camping. Pinter was haunted by the
image of the Nazis picking up babies on bayonet-spikes and throwing them out of windows. So taking a cue from this Pinter wrote the play. Though it has drawn inspiration from Sereny’s book *His Battle with Truth* we notice many underlying themes in the play. First there is the male desire to excavate and possess a woman’s past, secondly the equivocal relationship between interrogator and victim. Thirdly there is haunting tone in which the real and the dream-like, the concrete and the phantasmagoric, effortlessly merge. The play also

Conclusively proves that for Pinter the ‘personal’ and the ‘political’ are not separate, vacuum-sealed categories: it operates both as a twisted, perverted love story and as an evocation of the arbitrariness and cruelty of state power.5

With its shocking opening image which has its reverberant echo later on and defines much of the place territory: a world of brutality, power and domination, but also one of anxiety, insecurity and reckless curiosity. It is also a play in which nothing is ever quite what it seems. Even this graphic opening sequence implies a mixture of sexual enforcement and willing submission and throughout Devlin and Rebecca shift disquietingly between different roles. And although it is a play of minimal physical movement, by the end there has been a decisive and important change in the balance of power.

In the first movement of the play, Devlin plies Rebecca with the endless obsessive questions about this other man she has intimately known – his height, his breadth, his depth – before suddenly addressing her as my darling. ‘No one,’ she responds, ‘has ever called me darling. Apart from my lover.’ We seem to be in an English country house witnessing a jealous middle-aged man’s fevered enquiries
about his life in partner’s erotic past. That past acquires a more sinister edge when Rebecca describes how her former lover took her to “a kind of factory” (23). Devlin presses her for more details. “They were all wearing caps … the workpeople … soft caps … and they took them off when he came in, leading me when he lead me down the alleys between the rows of work people” (23). The image, inspired by the Speer book, is of a cowed workforce and autocratic controller. “They had total faith in him,” (25) explains Rebecca. “They respected his … purity, his … conviction. They would follow him over a cliff and into the sea, if he asked them, he said. And sing in a chorus as long as he led them. They were in fact very musical, he said” (25) the locale is not particularized: we could be in any oppressive state. But Pinter clearly draws on his memory of the book about Speer when Rebecca says “I wanted to go to the bathroom. But I simply couldn’t find it. I looked everywhere. I am sure they had one. But I never found out where it was” (27).

Pinter is not writing specifically about the Nazis, but about the umbilical connection between the kind of sexual Fascism so graphically described in the opening scene and its political counterpart: about a world of brute masculine power and naked submission. The point becomes startlingly and dramatically clear when Rebecca, having told Devlin earlier that her lover worked for a travel agency, suddenly reveals: “He was a guide. He used to go to the local railway station and walk down the platform and tear all the babies from the arms of their screaming mothers” (27). Soon this drawing room comedy like play opens into European history.

The playwright interweaves an obsessive personal inquisition with an insidious revelation of a world of systematized cruelty. The two things interact and
cross fertilize. They are not contained in separate compartments. Rebecca attempts to side track Devlin’s nagging enquiries by talking about the echoing sound of a police siren: as it fades away in her ears, so it becomes louder in someone else’s. She loses possession of what she naively calls this beautiful sound. Devlin responds, “don’t worry there’ll always be another one. There is one on its way to you now. Believe me. You’ll hear it soon again. Any minute” (31). When Rebecca describes the way a perfectly innocent pen rolled off the coffee table while she was writing a laundry list, Devlin warns her that, whether or not, she lives in this house, she can’t say things like that. ‘Like what?’ enquires Rebecca. “That that pen was innocent,” replies Devlin. ‘You think it was guilty?” (37-39) responds Rebecca. Devlin is not simply engaging in semantic knit picking. He reconstructs reality through language.

Rebecca’s diversionary tactics make Devlin realize he is losing the initiative in this psychological cat and mouse game. He feels he is in a quicksand. “Like God,” (39) Rebecca replies sharply. Devlin seizes on this in an attempt to regain lost ground to attack Rebecca’s truly disgusting perception, and to invoke the vacancy and horror of a world without God: “It’ll be like England playing Brazil at Wembley and not a soul in the stadium. Can you imagine? Playing both halves to a totally empty house” (39). The speech is both funny and chilling. There is something wildly inappropriate about Devlin’s comparison of a Godless universe to an empty soccer stadium. At the same time, the word ‘stadium’ evokes memories of those South American detention centres for the disappeared. The mind also harps back to Nicolas in One for the Road self-righteously claiming that ‘God speaks through me’ and when Devlin invokes the, to him, horrifying picture of absence, stalemate, paralysis, and “a world without a winner” (41), it is a reminder of a
society polarized, like the capitalist world, between triumphalist victors and hopeless losers. In Pinter’s play Devlin not only seeks to possess Rebecca’s body and soul, he also appropriates her perceptions as well as her past experience. She has talked off babies, mothers, and platforms. He asks: “What authority do you think you yourself possess which would give you the right to discuss such an atrocity” (41). Rebecca replies “Nothing has ever happened to me. Nothing has ever happened to any of my friends. I have never suffered. Nor have my friends” (41).

All the power seems to reside in Devlin. Yet authority breeds insecurity and bullying assertiveness is a sign of weakness rather than strength. In a revealing speech Devlin harps on about Rebecca’s assumed lover, wishes that she has confided in him (Devlin) about the affair, assumes another worldly superiority (when you lead a life of scholarship you cannot be bothered with humourous realities, you know, tits, that kind of thing) talks longingly of a wife and ends with an extraordinary outcry: “When you have a wife you let thought, ideas and reflection take their course. Which means you never let the best man win. Fuck the best man, that’s always been my motto. It’s the man who ducks his head and moves on through no matter what wind or weather who gets there in the end. A man with a guts and application. Pause. A man who doesn’t give a shit. A man with a rigid sense of duty. Pause. There is no contradiction between these last two statements. Believe me. Pause. Do you follow the drift of my argument?” (47) This speech marks a decisive turning point in the action. From now on the emotional initiative passes from the prying, inquisitive Devlin to the apparently submissive Rebecca. Ignoring his riddling contradictions – his worship of winners combined with a belief in strategic survival – she describes a vision of looking out of the window of a house in Dorset and of seeing guides ushering a crowd of people into the sea: “The tied
covered them slowly. Their bags bobbed about in the waves" (49). Obviously this is an echo of the oppressed workers in her lover’s factory who, he assured her, “would follow him over cliff and into the sea” (25). It also subliminally reminds us that England has its potential for submission to despotic authority.

Rebecca goes on to describe a condition of mental elephantiasis in which if you spill an ounce of gravy which becomes a vast sea of gravy, you are the cause rather than the victim of the accident. And in a phrase which makes sense only retrospectively, she guiltily and cryptically observes ‘It was you who handed over the bundle’ (51). Invoking the strange half-world between dream and reality, she also outlines an image of a frozen city in which she arrived at a railway station. ‘And my best friend’ (53), she continues, ‘the man I had given my heart to, the man I knew was the man for me the moment we met, my dear, my most precious companion, I watched him walk down the platform and tear all the babies from the arms of their screaming mothers.’

The whole play is built round the swiftness of the transitions from diurnal reality to profiting dream. Devlin tries to shift the discussion back to the hard world of fact where he can exert some control: to Rebecca’s visit to her sister Kim and the kids, and to the kids early attempts to talk. But even as she recalls going to tea with her sister or a subsequent visit to a cinema, Rebecca’s world acquires the lineaments of a dream. The film she describes sounds like a peculiarly surreal comedy, switching one moment from a New York restaurant to an expedition to the desert, and the man sitting in front of her in the cinema never laughed once but ‘sat like a corpse’ (65). Devlin flounders and tries to drag her back to concrete reality. ‘Now look,’ he cries ‘let us start again. We live here. You don’t live in Dorset... or
anywhere else. You live here with me. This is our house. You have a very nice sister. She lives close to you. She has two lovely kids. You are their aunt. You like that.’ But the more Devlin tries to pin Rebecca down, the more slippery and elusive she becomes. ‘We can’t start *again*’ she insists. ‘We can end again’ (67). Devlin strongly maintains that it is a misuse of language: you can only end something ones. ‘No,’ she replies. ‘You can end once and then you can end again’ (67). Not only is Rebecca asserting that in any relationship there is no fixed terminal point. It is she who is claiming control of the situation through language. The power roles have been subtly reversed.

The play enters its final movement. Devlin is still naggingly questioning Rebecca about her former lover: she has moved on to a different plane of recollection. She describes being in a room at the top of a tall building. In the street below she saw an old man and a little boy walking together dragging suitcases. ‘Anyway I was about to close the curtains but then I suddenly saw a woman following them, carrying a baby in her arms’ (71). The woman follows the man and the boy until they turn a corner and are gone. She kisses the baby girl. She listens to its heart beat. But Rebecca’s objective description turns into subjective identification as she becomes, in her imagination, that woman carrying a baby. ‘I held her to me,’ Rebecca says of the child. ‘She was breathing. Her heart was beating’ (73).

Rebecca becomes through her imaginative transference a woman evocative of refugees the world over. Devlin also becomes the sadistic lover who has haunted him throughout the play. With the circularity of a dream, he repeats exactly the gestures Rebecca has described earlier, gripping her neck with his left hand,
clenching his fist and urging her to kiss it. She neither speaks nor moves, rejecting both his bunched fist and the palm of his hand. Where she had formerly asked her lover to put his hand round her throat, her mute resistance now obliges Devlin to use force.

Devlin, who throughout has questioned, cajoled, pleaded with and even bullied his female partner, has finally turned into the Facistic lover whose identity he secretly craved. In turn, Rebecca, at first sexually compliant and politically submissive, has learned both the need for resistance and imaginative empathy with the bereft and the persecuted. That much is clear from the final incredibly moving movements in which an accompanying verbal echo, she describes being taken to a situation, wrapping her baby in a shawled bundle so that it would escape detection, being called back when the baby cried out, being separated from the child and placed on a train. On her arrival at this place, she met a woman she knew.

REBECCA
And she said what happened to your baby.

ECHO
Your baby

REBECCA
Where is your baby?

ECHO
Your baby

REBECCA
And I said what baby.
Thus, the play does not lend itself to total explication. It appeals to one instinctually and emotionally rather than purely cerebrally. Much of its power stems from its command of theatrical atmosphere viz. the two figures, the spacious room, the garden beyond, the light outside darkening while that inside brightens.

The play operates on a multiplicity of levels one can pin down certain specific themes. Power and the notion that in any given situation strong and weak are relative terms, and that the balance can quickly shift from one to the other. It also deals with language and the attempt, on the part of both characters, to reconstruct reality through words. Devlin at first, seeks to control Rebecca partly through semantic definition only to find the tables being turned. And like much of
Pinter's work, it shows that women have a flexibility, freedom, an imaginative sympathy frequently denied to men who are locked into unyielding power structures. Just as the lover is admired by his workers for his purity and conviction, so Devlin aspires to a rigid sense of duty. But what is most remarkable about this play is its effortless ability to unite the domestic and the political, the English and the global.

On the domestic level it is not just about the terminal stages of a fractured relationship, but is haunted by images of babies, children, and childlessness. Devlin invokes a song title 'I am nobody’s baby now' which Rebecca punctiliously corrects to “You’re nobody’s baby now” (17). Devlin is fascinated by Kim’s children and their imitative baby talk. Kim’s husband, who has deserted her for another woman, desperately warns to come back because he misses the kids. Rebecca sees a woman in the street who follows a man and boy until they turn the corner and are gone. And the abiding, recurrent image is of babies snatched from their mother’s arms leading finally to the detection of Rebecca’s bundle. Through the use of an echo the word ‘baby’ chimes through the final section like a poetic refrain. It is as if babies and children are both the symbol of innocence and hope and an emblem of the capacity of the cruelty of the authoritarian State.

While the personal and the political have always closely allied, in this play they are more deeply enmeshed than ever. The unseen lovers’ sexual power games provide a microcosmic image of his own fascist and capitalist instincts. What makes him even more dangerous is that, initially he is adored by Rebecca and respected by the cowed workers. Devlin, by his envious identification with the lover and his relentless interrogation of Rebecca, becomes complicit in society’s cruelty. Again, what makes him so dramatically disturbing is his recognizable jealousy and lack of
demonic otherness. And Rebecca by her imaginative transformation into a dispossessed mother, is translated from her own affectless innocence into a world of universal suffering. The play gets under one’s skin precisely because it is not dealing with the some alien or distant world: it acknowledges the potential for oppression and resistance that lies within all of us.

Even physically the play seems to exist in several dimensions at once. The characters’ names, Devlin and Rebecca are neutral, but the immediate reference points are English: Wembley and Dorset specifically. Even the country house with its garden beyond implies we could be in England. But beyond that exists a world of frozen, mud-caked cities of derelict station platforms of cross border check points, of children arbitrarily snatched from their mother’s arms. We seem to be in English shires and yet in Auschwitz, Bosnia or any one of a score of places where atrocities became, are indeed still a part of the landscape. That is the larger point made by this poetic play which, for Pinter, seemed to be compelled rather than chosen: that, as he often says, there is no ‘them’ and ‘us,’ and that the Fascist instinct is universal and compatible with regard for the external forms of civilization. It is a play which forces men to examine their own sexual coerciveness and women their own guilty compliance. But beyond that it implies that we all have within us the capacity for resistance and for imaginative identification with the sufferings of others. Therein lies the only hope for change. It is, at one end the same time, one of his most profoundly personal plays and one of his most deeply political plays.

The play has been very powerful on the stage and new levels of meaning appear. It acquires emotional intensity easily. Pinter also directed the actors so that
every movement and gesture was freighted with meaning. At first the actors talked as if in the midst of an on-going domestic conversation: by the end they had recreated into the depth of the arm-chairs, seemingly locked into their separate worlds. Rea’s Devlin, much gentler than the character one hand imagined from the printed page, had the dogged persistent quality of a man for whom truth lay in semantic definition: Duncan, clad in a simple print dress, exuded both an English-rose innocence and a strange solipsistic solitude that opened up to admit universal suffering. The tone was cool, quiet, controlled, which gave seismic force to the occasional change of register: when Rebecca suddenly said, of her lover, ‘he used to go to the local railway station and walk down the platform and tear all the babies from the arms of their screaming mothers,’ it was as if a thunder-bolt had been unleashed.

On stage, the play both made literal sense and acquired endless metaphorical possibilities. Billington is of the view that the element of sexual magnetism about men pervades this play. He quotes a few lines from Sylvia Plath,

It is the paradox explored by Sylvia Plath when, in a poem addressed to an imagined father, she wrote “Every woman adores a fascist, / the boot in the face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you.” But equally Pinter’s play asks how men with fascist tendencies can function simultaneously as adoring lovers.6

The play on stage made realistic sense. But it also posed large questions about the unresolvable contradictions of human nature, about the gulf between male and female attitudes, about our ungovernable responsibility for the society in which we live. Alastair Macaulay wrote in The Financial Times that while we search for
meaning, 'it may be more important to say that not understanding is a very great pleasure. To feel the elusiveness of his meaning is in fact, to come very close to its essence. People, he keeps saying, are inexplicable. And the poetic beauty of his art lies, of course, in the way he says this and shows it.' But it is also significant that when Macaulay in a private letter to Pinter, suggested that the play was implying that 'No man is an island,' Pinter leapt enthusiastically on the phrase and endorsed it.

It was precisely this point about the invisible chain of suffering and our connection to one to another that seemed to baffle or annoy many literal-minded critics: in particular, the use of specific English place names in a work that embraced European tragedy. Using the Holocaust as a reference point Charles Spencer asked in *The Daily Telegraph*, ‘Does Pinter really believe that such horrors are likely to happen in Britain? Does he think they are happening already?’ Paul Taylor made similar point in *The Independent*: “as for the suggestion that all of this could easily happen in Britain – Rebecca tells of the vision she had while looking out of a window in Dorset and of guides shepherding crowds of people to their deaths in the sea – I found myself worrying how these mooted comparabilities might strike someone actually living in a totalitarian regime or, indeed, a Holocaust survivor.”

In the immediate dramatic context, Rebecca’s vision is instantly denied by Devlin: ‘When was that? When did you live in Dorset? I have never lived in Dorset.’ And Pinter is not equating modern Britain with Nazi Germany or saying that we live in a totalitarian society. He seems to say that those who live in societies that proclaim themselves free and democratic should be alert to any attempt to curb or deny that freedom. In 1790 John Philpot Curran said ‘the condition upon which
God hath given liberty to man is eternal vigilance’ Pinter’s play asks us to be eternally vigilant.

In this powerful play Pinter exhibits his views on contemporary political scenario. When asked whether the play was about Nazism, he seemed to have replied that it is about the images of Nazi Germany. He continued that the Holocaust is probably the worst thing that ever happened because it was so calculated, deliberate and precise and so fully documented by the people who actually did it. In his own words:

It is not simply the Nazis that I am talking about in my play because it would be a dereliction on my part to simply concentrate on the Nazis and leave it at that.8

Pinter in fact, becomes critical of democratic countries like the United States, Great Britain, France, Germany, and Spain which subscribe to repressive cynical and indifferent acts of murder by selling arms to brutal regimes. He also is not happy with the United States where death penalty is retained in thirty-eight states out of fifty. Even in Britain the current political philosophy is to punish and to attribute blame and guilt to innocent victim. In his own words,

I don’t call that particularly democratic. The word ‘democracy’ begins to stink. These things, as you can see are on my mind. So in Ashes and Ashes I am not simply talking about the Nazis. And I am talking about us and our conception of our past and our history and what it does to us in the present.9

Pinter is not drawing a direct parallel between the modern Western democracies and Nazi Germany. He simply says that the power of the state
constantly encroaches on individual liberties and that the word ‘democracy’ loses all meaning when one helps foreign governments to murder their own citizens. But one cannot detach oneself from the world’s cruelties and one must be eternally vigilant. On 8th January 1997, he wrote a letter to The Times, about the Police Bill, then passing through parliament with no discernible opposition from Her Majesty’s Opposition, that would legalize the bugging of private party by the police. Pinter envisaged a scenario in which a private citizen who discovered his or her home was being bugged could be placed under arrest for obstructing a police officer in the course of his duty. He asked the home secretary to confirm or deny this scenario. Michael Howard promptly gave a reply where he justified the need for intrusive surveillance whilst waffling on about the provision of effective safeguards for ordinary citizens. But there were also letters from the liberal democrats who pointed out that the fundamental rights were being sacrificed with barely a whimper from the Labour Party. The right to silence had been lost under the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, the burden of proof had shifted to the defendant under the Criminal Procedure and the Investments Act 1996, and the Police Bill would enable the authorities to bug the solicitors’ office or barristers’ chambers of the defendant. Pinter undeniably helped to open up the debate on the Police Bill: and it is no accident that two weeks later the House of Lords through the Bill into chaos by rejecting its provision for the bugging of telephones and adopting amendments from the liberal democrats and the newly aroused Labour Party. Pinter had stepped in where many labour MPs, even followers of Engels, feared to tread.

The play proceeds from the particular to the universal. In fact we enter history at a particular place and proceed to any place in the world. Rebecca, according to Francis Gillen,
becomes history, lives it through imaginative identification and through such empathy discovers her own power not to be bound by the factuality of the past, but rather to reshape herself as non-victim. And we, as audience participating in the living ritual of the theatre, to the extent that the play echoes in us and we identify imaginatively with Rebecca while recognizing our potential for being Devlin, discover with Rebecca that power in ourselves.\textsuperscript{10}

In this powerful play we notice the struggle of a bored, upper-class English couple to open the past in order to regain lost sexual excitement with tinges of sadomasochism and jealousy in order to reignite from its ashes some sparks of a dying affair. Here Devlin attempts to take control of Rebecca’s past while remaining steadfastly nonplussed about her revelation of an earlier lover. He demands:

\textbf{DEVLIN}

Can’t you give a shape for me, a concrete shape? I want a concrete image of him, you see ... an image I can carry about with me. ...

\textbf{REBECCA}

What colour?

\textit{Pause.}

\textbf{DEVLIN}

That’s precisely the question I am asking you? ... My darling.

\textbf{REBECCA}

How odd to be called darling. No one has ever called me darling. Apart from my lover. (13)
The conversation goes on battling over the word ‘lover’ which Rebecca has introduced to reassert her control. Into it, the word ‘baby’ is introduced as Devlin changes Rebecca’s I am nobody’s darling to the line from the song. “I am nobody’s baby now” (17).

Rebecca claims that she can’t tell details like ice because her lover left years ago taken away by a job in an agency, a travel agency. Her strategy of shifting the frame of reference as a means of refusing to play on Devlin’s territory takes her into another memory, actually experienced or created perhaps from something she read or from something someone she knew had experienced, a recollection of that place where her lover had taken her.

REBECCA

Oh, it was a kind of factory I suppose.

DEVLIN

What do you mean, a kind of factory? Was it a factory or wasn’t it?
And if it was a factory, what kind of factory was it?

REBECCA

Well they were making things – just like any other factory. But it was not the usual kind of factory. (23)

Rebecca goes on to describe all the workers in this factory were wearing caps which they doffed to her lover as he walked between their rows. This, he had explained to her, was out of respect for him, for “his ... purity, his ... conviction. They would follow him over a cliff and into the sea, if he asked them, he said. And sing in a chorus as long as he lead them. They were in fact very musical he said” (25). Here obviously we are not in England but in one of the slave labour camps in
Nazi Germany about which Pinter had read, and the word 'baby' first introduced as a strategy for control now returns in the horrific context of the extermination of those unfit to work: children. "He did work for a travel agency. He was a guide. He used to go to the local railway station and walked down the platform and tear all the babies from the arms of their screaming mothers" (27).

Rebecca recalls her upset at the police sirens she had heard a minute ago. Those police sirens had triggered perhaps the memory of her fascist like lover, then of the death camps, so now those memories in turn allow her to reach out imaginatively to all who are being so oppressed anywhere. The police sirens become a universal symbol. One notices different reactions of people to a siren. For Devlin, the sound means security and order. Rebecca wants to take on to herself the insecurity the siren implies, and she expresses her fear of losing it. Menaciously Devlin assures her there will be always be another one, even one on its way to her now. Rebecca’s imaginative identification with suffering in any one place or time flows outward to embrace all. Perhaps that is what is most humanly daunting about an act of genuine empathy, its boundlessness. Devlin tells her “You will never be lonely again. You will never be without a police siren. I promise you” (33). Then, instead of allowing the outward flow, Devlin calls for focus, for getting the discussion back to his point, the lover is seen solely as rival. Obliquely, though, through reference to a fountain pen rolling off the table, Rebecca refuses his attempt at control and brings subject back to the suffering of the innocent.

REBECCA

This pen, this perfectly innocent pen.
Steadfastly Devlin tries to hold to his limited subject. The pen may not be innocent because as Rebecca says with her newly discoursed lover, 'you don't know whose hands have touched it.' This suffering of the innocent in turn leads to a discussion of God in such a world. For Devlin a world without hierarchical God would be like a soccer game played before no fans. "Absence. Stalemate. Paralysis. A world without a winner" (41). And if there were no external authority, and if Rebecca were referring to some atrocity with her talk of babies and platforms, what authority does she have to name atrocity. At first Rebecca confesses to know such actual authority, for neither she nor presumably her well off friends have suffered. Sensing that her admission has given him the upper hand, Devlin returns to the substitute for transcendent authority that was suggested in the opening image of the lover's hands about Rebecca's neck, placing oneself in the hands of another person.

Rebecca offers a startling image of individual responsibility, a condition known as mental elephantiasis.

REBECCA

This mental elephantiasis means that when you spill an ounce of gravy, for example, it immediately expands and becomes a vast sea of gravy. It becomes a sea of gravy which surrounds you on all sides and you suffocate in a voluminous sea of gravy. It is terrible. But it is all your own fault. You brought it upon yourself. You are not the victim of it, you are the cause of it. Because it was you who spilt the gravy in the first place, it was you who handed over the bundle. (51)
Here reference to the bundle leads to a nightmare vision of a frozen city of ice and bumpy snow where she watched her lover, 'my dear, my most precious companion, tear babies from their screaming mothers.'

Devlin again discusses the particular and tries to localize and focus the conversation and asks Devlin if she had gone to see her sister Kim and her children. Kim’s husband, who has left her for another woman, wants to come back because he misses the children, but Kim won’t have him back. But this talk of normal life is broken again by Rebecca’s story of a film she had seen after tea with Kim. It was a comedy other members of the audience laughed at about a woman who had never lived in a desert before being taken there by a man. And the man sitting in front of Rebecca never laughed either, but just sat like a corpse.

Devlin starts again complimenting Rebecca and reminds her of the beauty and serenity of her present life, of her life with him. But for Rebecca, Devlin is now linked with her former lover, the man who had met the trains and torn the children from their mothers. “We started … a long time ago. We started. We can’t start again. We can end again” (67). Then, as they argue over the semantic possibilities of end, Rebecca begins to sing softly “Ashes to Ashes” (69). She returns to her vision of the icy landscape, now with an old man and a boy, probably refugees, dragging suitcases over the treacherous terrain, followed by a woman carrying a baby in her arms. As she tells how the stars go out and the woman kisses the boy and listens to her heart, the light in the room on stage darkens and the one single act, i.e., sadly, our own history commences. No longer separated by any distance, Rebecca is the woman giving up her child. “I held her to me. She was breathing. Her heart was beating” (73). And Devlin is both himself and the killer of children.
Making a fist he demands she kiss it. No longer simply victim, though, Rebecca refuses. From this point on in the play, all Rebecca’s words are echoed as if repeated and reverberating through all time and place. On her way to the train, she took her baby, wrapped it in a shawl, a bundle in order to hide it, but the baby cried out, the man called her back, and she gave him the bundle, and then got on the train. There a woman asked her what had happened to her baby.

REBECCA

I don’t have a baby.

ECHO

I don’t know of any baby.

ECHO

Of any baby

Pause.

I don’t know of any baby

Long silence.

BLACKOUT. (83-85)

Thus, the play “contains all the elements familiar from Pinter’s previous work: the struggle for dominance; the opening of the past as the locus of that battle precisely because of its indeterminency; the use of story to recreate a pose; the revelation of the violence beneath domesticity; the link between domestic and political violence and the sadomasochistic nature of power.”

The play is intensified by the poetic association of images. There are recurring images like fist, child, eyes, sweet heart, platform, dark, stars, desert, and guides. These images echo back and forth from specific context to universal
meaning and experience. In the theatrically shared human experience of suffering, victimhood and the possibility of its transcendence, these images will continue to haunt and echo the true meaning of the text.

This political play clearly illustrates modern politicians’ interest in power and the maintenance of it. 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. The playwright would like to describe low intensity conflict. As he rightly observes in his Nobel Lecture,

Low intensity conflict means that thousands of people die but slower than if you dropped bomb on them in fell swoop. It means that you infect the heart of the country, that you establish a malignant growth and watch the gangrene bloom. When the populous had been subdued – or beaten to death – the same thing – and your own friends, the military and the great corporations sit comfortably in power, you before the camera and say that democracy has prevailed.12

In this sense Ashes to Ashes is a political play as the woman, a last figure in a drowning landscape, is unable to escape the doom that seemed to belong to others. Ultimately it is Devlin who establishes his power and low intensity conflict. In this sense, this is a political play connoting Pinter’s strong views regarding modern politicians. This is overtly stated in the same Nobel Lecture thus:

The United States no longer bothers about low intensity conflict. It no longer sees any point in being reticent or even devious. It puts its
cards on the table without fear or favour. It quite simply doesn’t give a damn about the United Nations, international law or critical descent, which it regards as impotent and irrelevant. It also has its own bleating little lamb tagging behind it on a lead, the pathetic and supine Great Britain.\textsuperscript{13}

Thus, the political views of Pinter intensely pervade in the play \textit{Ashes to Ashes}. Similar strong views appear in his next and last play \textit{Celebration}.

In 2000, Harold Pinter directed a double bill of his own work at the Almedia Theatre, Islington in London. The show opened with a revival of his first play, \textit{The Room}, written in 1958 and the last play \textit{Celebration}, written in 2000. The play \textit{Celebration} is dedicated to his second wife, Antonia Fraser. One way of seeing Pinter’s life is, a journey from \textit{The Room} to \textit{Celebration}, a departure from the lowly to the grand, from impoverished to the affluent and from the periphery to the centre, and it is a journey about which he has offered a trenchant commentary in the plays that have reflected and documented his progress. He pleads politically that centre must accept moral responsibility for the suffering of those at the periphery.

Both plays are invested with the elements that make Pinter’s work unique: the disturbingly familiar dialogue, subtle characterization, and abrupt mood and power shifts among characters, which can be by turns terrifying, moving, and wildly funny.\textsuperscript{14}

\textit{Celebration} is a cautionary play for the new millennium which anatomizes the empty lives of the people of modern times with fewer political resonances. It ostensibly satirizes the moral coarseness of the super-rich, crude materialism of a group of posh diners. It was inspired by the playwright’s early days as an
unemployed actor, when he took a job as a busboy at the National Liberal Club. Because he dared to intrude on a conversation among several diners, he was fired. It opens with three successful couples dining in the most expensive and an ultra-trendy restaurant in London. It is

set in ‘the best and most expensive restaurant in the whole of Europe,’ in which boorish nouveau-riche arms dealers exchange pleasantries and crudities over haute cuisine and fine wine.\textsuperscript{15}

The couples turn at each other toasting their success in business besides jockeying for the upperhand. At one table sat two brothers, Lambert and Matt, and two sisters, Prue and Julie. Lambert and Julie are married, as are Matt and Prue. They celebrate Lambert and Julie’s wedding anniversary.

The couple whose wedding anniversary is being celebrated are locked in a continuing battle, excoriating each other while displaying conventional postures of married harmony.\textsuperscript{16}

At the next table is a younger couple, Russell and Suki, who later join the other party of diners. Suki turns out to have some shadowy bond with old Lambert. Russell is a banker, while Matt and Lambert have the classically Pinteresque professions of ‘strategy consultants,’ which means, as one of them says, “we don’t carry guns” (56). The diners’ conversations are interjected by the existential ponderings of Richard, the restaurateur (a character based on the London restaurateur Jeremy Kind), Sonia, the Maitresse d’hotel, and an unnamed Waiter who don’t even flinch at their customers’ combination of scurrilousness, lewdness, and sentimentality. The dialogue begins as an apparently ordinary celebratory meal
for the diners developing into a complex weaving of more sinister themes, including undercurrents of love/hate relationships and incest. The subjects which they discuss, on some level, are almost invariably sex and power. The play ends with a mysterious and incomplete speech from the Waiter which hints at a possible way to escape the pain of everyday life.

*Celebration* is a play that reiterates the motif of a protected zone of power excluding a social other. Here, Pinter specifically aims at the nouveau riche, whose vulgar ways are not obscured by their copious wealth. The characters are perhaps depthless and superficial.

The characters are exemplars of 1990s greed – one woman is dressed and coiffed like Ivana Trump. They are ruthless in their pursuit of their individual pleasures and in their disregard for others.17

Julie and Prue, married to brothers, Lambert and Matt, are ostensibly celebrating the anniversary of one of the couples. But they seem neither to care about each other nor to know what play, opera or concert they have just attended. Even they can’t remember what they ordered. Lambert’s general ignorance is suggested by the opening lines of the play:

WAITER

Who’s having the duck?

LAMBERT

The duck’s for me.

JULIE

No it isn’t. (5)
The duck, it seems, is for Julie, who doesn’t care, she says, what her husband has ordered. Lambert’s lack of knowledge and childlike demands strike the tone of desperation that underlies all the bravado of his behaviour throughout the play. “And for me,” he insists, “I mean, what about me? What did I order? I haven’t the faintest idea? What did I order?” When Prue tells him that he has ordered Osso buco (an old Italian dish), he says that osso is Italian but he doesn’t know anything about bucco. The sub text of this banal discussion of food, with its seemingly light banter, is a loveless marriage and a general angst suffered by both couples.

The couples consist of sisters (Julie and Prue) married to brothers (Lambert and Matt) give one of the surreal impressions of a disastrous sameness in emptiness. What ties them together, is their ignorance about where they have been and what they have seen and heard. These two women are degraded in this play as pieces of flesh to adorn the successful male. Parallel to this exchange between two couples, is the exchange between Suki and Russel, sitting at another table, are only a variation on the other couples, all of which is revealed to a very comic fashion as the three couples interact with a hostess Sonia, the manager and a Waiter. Charles Grimes remarks thus:

The role of the unwanted interlocutor in Celebration is taken by the Waiter, whose attempts to converse with the diners emphasize his social powerlessness. He eavesdrops on the clients’ conversations and uses them as a starting-point for his own fantasies about his grandfather. His memories of grandfather evoke a world of familial closeness and natural beauty that is totally alien to the sex-obsessed diners.
The occupants of the Table Two have not been to the theatre but they claim to have been to the opera. When asked by Sonia what the opera was, Suki responds that "there was a lot going on. A lot of singing. A great deal, as a matter of fact. They never stopped" (27). The ostentatiousness of the three couples' ignorance has a surreal effect. It's noisy and flamboyant quality indicates the desperation under the interchanges.

There is a sense, however, that in the world of Celebration power relations have inverted, with women as well as men capable of exercising power and using force. "The woman always wins," (58) says Julie. Prue recalls how "when we were babies ... we used to lie in the nursery and hear mummy beating the shit out of daddy" (22). In another inversion of customary power relationships, Russell complains of being manipulated by his secretary: "They're all the same, these secretaries, these scrubbers. They're like politicians. They love power. They've got a bit of power, they use it. They go home, they get on the phone, they tell their girlfriends, they have a good laugh" (9). Here, Pinter shows how empowered elites see themselves: not as secure but as constantly imperiled by those below them. Not only do these people want to control the world but also they want us to pity them for their difficult tasks. These inversions of power suggest a mobility within social hierarchy – middleclass members have attained the power of the rich while women have inherited the power of men. The men even apologize for some of their cruel, insensitive, stereotypically male behaviour.

Furthermore, in spite of the power assumed by women at local levels of social interaction, there is an overarching form of male whose existence suggests that power has been redistributed only superficially. If the rulers have sometimes
ceased to rule the slaves are still slaves. Hierarchy endures. This is still a male-dominated society in which coercive power persists and is controlled by men. Money remains in the service of entrenched power, and the brothers in the play are 'strategy consultants' whose jobs involve force and violence. In *Celebration* the protection of freedom and democracy is articulated by the crudely spoken characters of Matt and Lambert who, as 'strategy consultants,' are involved worldwide in 'keeping the peace,' and have clearly made a good deal of money out of it.\textsuperscript{19}

It is tempting but "inaccurate to equate the comic power inversions of the social behaviour in *Celebration* with lasting change in larger political structures."\textsuperscript{20}

Beyond such witty reversals of power, the comic dynamic of *Celebration* includes the social pretensions of the major characters, our laughter at the woman characters, Prue and Julie, who are overdressed floozies, and, especially, our bemusement at the Waiter's implausible stories about his grandfather. The Waiter delivers three monologues, which he calls 'interjections,' in the play. These speeches revolve around his grandfather's improbable connections to luminaries of modern art and politics. It is the Waiter who is fated for expulsion from this privileged zone, left forlornly alone at the end of the play as the diners return to the world they dominate. His treatment suggests that he is the sacrifice and this celebration requires.

The Waiter obsessively points to a realm of cultural achievement in stark contrast to the present:
He knew them all in fact, Ezra Pound, W.H. Auden, C.D. Lewis, Louis MacNeice, Stephen Spender, George Barker, Dylan Thomas and if you go back a few years he was a bit of a ... companion of D.H. Lawrence, Joseph Conrad, Ford Maddox Ford, W.B. Yeats, Aldous Huxley, Virginia Woolf and Thomas Hardy in his dotage... He used to knock about with Clark Gable and Elisha Cook Jr and he was one of the very few native-born Englishmen to have had it off with Hedy Lamarr. (30-46)

The Waiter comically mistakes varieties of social difference, describing his grandfather’s connection with Hollywood’s ‘Irish mafia’: “Al Capone and Victor Mature for example. They were both Irish. Then there was John Dillinger the celebrated gangster and Gary Cooper the celebrated film star. They were Jewish” (47). All instances of outsiderdom are apparently equivalent. Later, the grandfather’s acquaintances extend to major figures of twentieth-century political history:

Well it’s just that I heard all these people talking about the Austro-Hungarian Empire a little while ago and I wondered if they’d ever heard about my grandfather. He was an incredibly close friend of the Archduke himself and he once had a cup of tea with Benito Mussolini. They all played poker together, Winston Churchill included. (61)

Here Pinter uses the comic figure of the Waiter to invoke the bloody history of our war-ravaged century, cleverly linking World Wars I and II, thus suggesting war as the persistent, characterizing fact of the twentieth century.
If the Waiter’s speeches bring all of twentieth century history into play, the relationship between the Waiter and his customers bespeaks a highly contemporary form of oppression. The restaurant as workplace embodies a capitalist oppression legible in psychological terms as sadomasochism. Workers who need their job for survival are made ‘excessively and symbolically dependent’ upon their employers in a way that parallels the dependence of a masochist upon his or her sadist partner. Though such feelings are the norm for many labourers, they are nevertheless quite extreme and debilitating: workers live in a state of ‘endemic insecurity’ poised above ‘a chasm of fear that gapes beneath the surface’ of their consciousness. They know that if they rock the boat or show displeasure they can be thrown out into the utter state of helplessness. If the diners, in this era of post-modern egalitarianism, seem to accept the Waiter’s interjections – he even sits down with Russell and Suki once, in Pinter’s direction of the play – this does not mean that these consumers want actual subversion of their position, but only a simulacrum of it. When the Waiter truly transgresses, the diners ignore and abandon him. The Waiter appears to personify the masochistic feelings of dependency and fear created within capitalist hierarchy. He even describes how he is symbiotically tied to the restaurant. When Russell not so obliquely threatens to get the Waiter fired, he reacts with fear:

> Are you suggesting that I’m about to get the boot? … To be brutally honest, I don’t think I’d recover if they did a thing like that. This place is like a womb to me. I prefer to stay in my womb. I strongly prefer that to being born. (31-32)

The Waiter’s final speech converts such mordant comedy into something much darker. Although the Waiter is not thrown out into the cold, he is nevertheless
sharply excluded from the world controlled by the diners. As they go out into that real world, the restaurant’s doors clang shut several times as if in an echo, sonically underlining the Waiter’s isolation. Then we see the defeat of the Waiter’s attempts to engage in the act of articulation. The Waiter’s confusion and sadness illustrate what Hegel saw as the poignant tragedy of social dominance: the subordinated are left to their own devices to make sense of what power is. He tries and fails to continue speaking: “And I’d like to make one further interjection. He stands still. Slow fade” (67). Even given that the limits of the Waiter’s language seem both imposed from without and accepted from within, his final silence poignantly illustrate his ultimate dispossession.

The Waiter’s own ending, which is also the play’s ending, is instead an attempt to go on: “And I’d like to make one further introjection” (67). As in Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot, which ends with the decision of the tramps to leave, combined with their inability to move, the Waiter “stands still” as the lights slowly fade (67). The play’s plot, then, ends with a riddle, with a mystery unsolved, with an inability or a refusal to end. Its general tone of anxious desperation (a tone shared, of course, by Beckett’s tramps throughout his classic play) is replaced here with a tone of acceptance of life’s mystery. Like the tramps, the Waiter will wait. It is this acceptance of his role as Waiter that gives an otherwise wildly comic play a tragic moment, which casts its light back on the comedy, inviting us to rethink what we have seen.

This rethinking takes us back to the plot of the play. It is subtle. It’s action is more than a satire on empty nasty people behaving in a desperate but empty and nasty way. It is a play about a bunch of shifts and a Waiter. At the end of the play
Lambert had taken Suki for walks by the river takes on a peculiar significance in this drama. Just as the Waiter's "grandfather had introduced him to the mysteries of life" (66) when observing the sea with the boy, so perhaps Suki introduced Lambert to those mysteries by the water, mysteries here associated with reciprocal love; in both cases there is the suggestion of a possible journey from womb to life. Pinter has repeatedly used water imagery to suggest a struggle with birth or rebirth, and this play is no exception.

The Waiter's penultimate speech links the world of the diners to the brutal realities of worldwide torture. These are the words that finally provoke the diners to silence the Waiter:

He (the grandfather) loved the society of his fellows, W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, Igor Stravinsky, Picasso, Ezra Pound, Bertolt Brecht, Don Bradman, the Beverley Sisters, the Inkspots, Franz Kafka and the Three Stooges. He knew these people where they were isolated, where they were alone, where they fought against pitiless and savage odds, where they suffered vast wounds to their bodies, their bellies, their legs, their trunks, their eyes, their throats, their breasts, their balls— (61)

The wounds that Waiter enumerates evoke the effects of torture. One of the fundamental facts about torture is how easy it is to produce crippling pain in a body under one's control, a fact that the Waiter's anatomical precision brings home to the diners and the audience. The diners interrupt this unpleasant reminder of political pain. Pinter is playing a double game in this passage, equating torture victims with cultural icons. The Waiter mentions not victims of political oppression, but artists,
whose 'isolation' was more a matter of iconoclastic unpopularity or modernist alienation than material oppression (excepting perhaps Brecht, who spent long periods in exile). Not only does Pinter remind the audience of expulsion and torture but also imagistically merges the suffering, marginalized artist with the suffering, marginalized victim of political violence.

The allusion to political violence in the Waiter’s speech here is made even more obvious in Pinter’s early drafts. During his process of revising his drafts into the final published version, Pinter effaces a number of precise political references that, despite their ultimate absence from the finished play, indicate how Pinter conceived of the character’s contribution to the play. The draft reveals the author’s emotional inspiration:

He knew, these people where they were isolated, where they were utterly alone, people like Sacco and Vanzetti, Paul Robeson, Tom Joad, Oscar Romero, Ernesto Cardenal, he knew these people when they fought against pitiless, savage odds, people like Augusto Sandino who said, “No, I will not surrender, A free country or death,” Pablo Neruda, Che Guevara, Salvador Allende, Nazim Hikmer, Jorge Ellacuria, he knew them all where they suffered vast wounds in their bodies, their bellies, their legs, their trunks, (their eyes, their throats), their balls, their breasts and where they said No no no no no Fuck you.21

The list of names is wildly various, mixing the fictional with the real, and artists with politicians. But the concentration on victims of political struggles, and their bodily suffering, is unmistakable and vivid. So too has the explicit sympathy
for those who actively resist the gigantic power of the status quo. The reasons that Pinter effaced these specific details – including matters such as Central America that he has spoken publicly about with great passion – can only be speculated upon. One factor might be the playwright’s persistent concern for not letting his characters speak more than they know. Or perhaps Pinter came to feel that being so specific would demean the intelligence and interpretive ability of his audience, making the play similar to those unsubtle political plays he disliked in the 1960s. His audience could and should be trusted to link the Waiter’s references to the widely available facts or torture as practised across the globe.

The dramatic impact of Celebration depends on the contrast between the Waiter and the guests. In the first instance, the Waiter is a classic example of a familiar Pinter figure: the intruder who unnerves people by occupying their clearly-defined space. But he is not simply a space-invader. For one thing, he himself refers to the restaurant as ‘my womb’ and says that he prefers to stay inside it rather than be born; so, in a curious way, he takes on a dual Pinter role of both invasive intruder and immured victim.

Pinter creates a war of words which barely masks what is really going on behind the scenes. The Waiter whose far-fetched name-dropping is simultaneously laughable and sad – his grandfather was D.H. Lawrence’s drinking partner and James Joyce’s godmother – comes closest to basic self-knowledge. There is no action in the play, words is what Pinter specializes in, and Celebration is as devastating as any of his plays from the last half of the twentieth century. Nobody says what they really mean and every exchange is a power struggle, more often than not motivated by sex. The genuine isolation of the weak characters – the Waiter – is
ignored or exploited. But there are plenty of laughs. Constructed as a series of blackout sketches, Pinter's play gradually allows us to see how the lives of his characters are intertwined. These are monsters put on display for our amusement and the audience laughs steadily at them. Their foul-mouthed, grasping ways, in which sex is a pervasive element, provides constant mirth.

If one adds incest to ignorance, the desperation grows slightly deeper. In conversations at both tables about the Oedipal situation, the three women's claim is present. Prue, who has been complaining against her husband, starts complaining against her husband's mother. She finds a sympathetic ear in Julie whose diagnosis is that mothers-in-law all wish to sleep with their own sons. She says that "all mothers want their sons to be fucked by themselves" (17). The incest theme is immediately picked up at Table Two. There Russell tells Suki about his mother's bread and butter pudding. He explains, "It was like drowning in an ocean or richness" (29). Suki praises his expressiveness as poetic. It is difficult in this play, and perhaps, in life as well, to know whether the misogyny of the men is clearly matched by the misandry of the women as all struggle for power and the men's position as strategy consultants.

Lambert and Julie's mutual hostility continues to unfold in terms of an interweaving of memories and desire. Lambert recalls a girl whom he loved and who, surprising to him, loved him in return. When Julie asks if she was that girl, he denies it, but she ignores this rejection and recounts her first meeting with Lambert in counterpoint to his memories of his lost love. Prue focuses in on Julie's tale:
PRUE

I'll never forget what you said. You sat on my bed. Didn't you? Do you remember?

LAMBERT

This girl was in love with me — I'm trying to tell you.

PRUE

Do you remember what you said? (35)

Julie does not answer the question and the scene ends. Although Lambert and Julie appear to be unable to communicate, the way each insists on a different line of memory is a total communication of their lack of connection.

Lest the competition between the men and women for power be lost in subtext, it is firmly stated toward the end of the play in an exchange of clichés about the celebration at hand.

The introjections of Richard, the owner and Sonia as Maitresse d' and Hostess only serve to enhance the emptiness of the restaurant experience, adding to the sense of sameness. Richard has recreated his childhood in the restaurant. After describing a pub that his father took him to when he was a child, he confides, "I believe the concept of the restaurant rests in that public house of my childhood" (41). Richard's major achievement, which he points out to the couple, is that he provides 'complimentary gherkins as soon as you take your seat,' just as they did in the pub he recalls. When Sonia seems to be introducing difference by talking about the diverse people who frequent the restaurant, in a very comical speech she manages to reduce all this difference, once more, to sameness. It seems that all these 'different' people enjoy the restaurant's food and that one doesn't have to be English...
to enjoy either food or sex. "I've known one or two Belgian people for example," she confides, "who love sex and they don't speak a word of English" (44).

Playwrights love to watch audiences die laughing. Harold Pinter's comedy, especially in *Celebration*, kills us with laughter. We laugh helplessly at his darkly delightful celebration, at painful truths beneath the crude remarks of loveless men who traffic in crime - the guns, money, and drugs that run the world. He wages comedy against crimes of the heart, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and culminating, perhaps our worst crime born of un confronted fear: cowardice. Pinter deploys comedy as an attack weapon aimed at the destructive portions of the heroic vision we live by, which drives the conflict for survival and power in every beat and scene of his play.

On one level, *Celebration* is a comic satire on the nerdy nouveau-riche. They are coarse, greedy, loud, and raffish. Pinter in this play suggests that the materialistic individualism breeds moral vacancy and that there is an umbilical connection between male chauvinism and political brutality. 'The most expensive and fashionable restaurant in the whole of Europe' ("the best caff in town," (19) in Lambert's phrase) operates as a refuge from reality. There is also an implied equation between the ribald sexual bullying of Lambert and Matt and their profession as 'strategic consultants,' which sounds like a euphemism for arms dealers. Though *Celebration* is disgustingly vulgar, very funny and violent, in it

Pinter is not just taking the piss out of a group of walking wallets or writing a comedy of grotesquely bad manners: he is writing a quasi-political play in which wealth, greed, vanity, and sexual loutishness
symbolise both moral emptiness and hermetic isolation from the real world of pain and suffering.22

Underneath the social satire, Celebration is also clearly a work about memory. It takes place during a wedding anniversary: nominally an occasion for sentimental recollection but, in theatrical terms, more often an excuse for recrimination. It sets up a deliberate counterpoint between the fitful, spasmodic, and largely sexual memories of the diners and those of the staff themselves which are variously rose-tinted, rebarbative, fantastic, and spellbindingly real. But the restaurant itself becomes a memory chamber in which everyone present is engaged in an act of recollection. Sex is the dominating experience for the diners who all exist in a world of sensual gratification. The tone is set by Russell and Suki at Table Two. Russell is clearly atoning for an act of infidelity with his secretary: something that provokes Suki into recalling that she, too, was once a plump young secretary who existed in a state of seemingly permanent sexual arousal.

At the Table One, Lambert reminisces about a girl he loved whom he used to take for walks by the river: palpably not his wife, Julie, who recalls that Lambert fell in love with her on top of a bus. With even greater insensitivity, Lambert recalls how on his wedding day he was all ready to have sex at the altar until stopped by Matt, his fraternal best man. When he spots Suki at the adjoining table, he again recalls his memory and says that “I fucked her when she was eighteen.” Thus, memory for these characters “is largely a form of sexual twitch: a recollection of who had whom and when.”23

In Celebration, lightly, glancingly, and comically, Pinter exposes the hollowness of the marriages and the spiritual coarseness of the diners. Lambert on
his wedding anniversary invites a former sexual conquest to his table. Prue lets slip that she had a fling with her brother-in-law. And Julie, by her concluding line, reveals the depth of her contempt for her husband. Reviewing for *The Times*, Benedict Nightingale remarks thus:

> The crudeness gets so extreme, the mockery so weird that you wonder if you aren’t witnessing a waking nightmare in which emotional flashers are indecently exposing their hidden angers and anxieties about sex, power, mothers, children, everything.24

Issues of birth and death abound in *Celebration*, just as they have in other Pinter plays that revolve round celebrations. In *The Birthday Party*, Stanley hides outs from life at a seaside boarding house but encounters destruction as Goldberg and McCann insist on celebrating his birthday; in *The Homecoming*, Ruth is told by her husband’s family that they will have liquor if there is something to celebrate, the men produce that liquor mysteriously when the homecoming turns out to be hers. In *A Kind of Alaska*, Deborah is told her upcoming birthday celebration, but she fears she will not be able to keep her presents herself. Similarly in *Celebration*, there is a pre-oedipal desire to return to the womb or to hide out from life, as well as a terrible fear of death, which is as fearful as life. The characters feel about their lives as they play their power games and ‘hide’ in the womb-like restaurant. Though they are insufferably arrogant, they are basically insecure people.

The play, on a social and political level, strongly condemns the materialistic individualism that leads to a moral indifference and to a narrow focus on the gratification of personal appetites. Thus, Pinter celebrates the new millennium with
a play *Celebration* that reveals "those savage and pitiless odds that would seem to make up the texture of our times."$^{25}$

To conclude, *Ashes to Ashes* and *Celebration* are the plays from the later period of Pinter’s career that "reveal the insecurity, panic and hypocrisy that lie behind the stony masks of political authority."$^{26}$ They also reflect both personal as well as political concerns and present the literal ‘realities’ of power and its abuse – a rather clear-cut contrast to the thought-provoking ambiguities and polysemy of his plays of the 1950s and -60s, which made an impact on the stage.
Notes


21. Pinter Archives in the British Library, Box 74.


