HAROLD PINTER'S *NO MAN'S LAND*: COMMUNICATION IN THE MAKING

Krystyna Napiórkowska

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

In reading critical commentaries on Harold Pinter's work, one cannot escape the observation that his critics are unanimous in their praise of the playwright's apt rendition of everyday language and situation. Yet, although on the surface his plays seem to conform to the norms of the veristic mode of presentation, they can be hardly defined as "well-made" plays. What distinguishes Pinter's dramatic technique from that of an illusionistic dramatist is, first of all, his total neglect of exposition, that is the off-stage events, the backgrounds of the characters as well as the motives underlying their behaviour (cf. Hayman 1969:8, Esslin 1970:30—36). The only reality we are confronted with is that which is presented on the stage, and total knowledge concerning the characters is by no means claimed by the author. It is perhaps for this reason that Pinter's role in his dramas has been described as "that of dispassionate observer" who writes his plays "as if he were eavesdropping on his characters and recording their often pointless stream of consciousness" (Wellwarth 1971:225). Evidently, the critic acknowledges the novelty of Pinter's technique with reference to drama and indirectly associates it with the experiments in the novel but, at the same time, by referring to it as a "pointless" stream of consciousness, he fails to recognize the deliberate attempt of the playwright to exploit new possibilities in dramatic technique. Coincidental as it may seem, however, Wellwarth's use of the term "stream of consciousness" does not seem groundless.

Looking back to the theoretical beginnings of the stream of consciousness technique, its affinities with drama in general and dialogue in particular cannot be overlooked. As was pointed out by Mukařovský (1970) in his illuminating essay on the nature of dialogue and monologue, it was Edouard Dujardin,

the first theoretician and practitioner of the stream of consciousness technique, who related interior monologue to the tradition of drama (cf. Mukařovský 1970:209).

Before attempting to demonstrate the relationship between dialogue in drama and stream of consciousness, it seems necessary to refer to Mukařovský's views concerning the nature of monologue and dialogue. Apart from the unity of topic without which dialogue cannot exist, its other important aspect consists of the alteration and mutual permeation of at least two contexts. What is meant by context here is the meaning imposed upon the topic by the speaker. In consequence of such alterations, abrupt inversions of meaning occur when two utterances are brought into contact. Linguistically, such inversions of meaning, not infrequently of associative origin, are equivalent to lexical juxtaposition of an evaluative nature (e. g. good vs. evil); on a subtler level, they are language games which often make use of ambiguity, paradox and the like. Phonologically, the differences in meaning can be rendered through various intonations, which, for instance, may take form of ironic repetitions.

In his discussion of the different aspects and types of dialogue Mukařovský holds the view that the monologue and dialogue cannot be considered separately since, struggling all the time for dominance during the course of the speech event, they are simultaneously present in the mind of the speaker. Every speech event assumes the participation of two subjects: a speaker and a listener; in the case of a monologue one of the subjects is active whereas the other one remains passive; in the case of dialogue, naturally, the roles of the subjects constantly alternate. Although it might seem obvious that the idea of the subject is synonymous with an individual human being, this is not necessarily so. As the case may be, an individual consciousness can be split into two speaking subjects and examples of such dissociation may be found, for instance, in the medieval debate between the body and soul. In a like manner, the continuous interaction of consciousness and subconsciousness can be viewed in terms of two speaking subjects.

It is generally acknowledged that the aim of the stream of consciousness is to register psychological reality, to express mental process, or, as Northrop Frye phrased it, "to present thought as process". In order to depict the mental process, a writer presents a continuous stream of fortuitous impressions, thoughts and feelings without apparent logical order, and those disconnected impressions are joined together by the principle of association. The fortuity of particular sequences, associated in the mind of the speaker, results in continuous inversions of meaning which, as has been pointed out above, can be paralleled with those caused by alternating contexts in dialogue. That is why Dujardin, relating interior monologue to monologue in drama, i.e. that variant of dialogue where one of the participants is silent, could have conceived of mental

processes, as they are rendered through interior monologue, in terms of virtual dialogue.

Assuming after Mukařovský that alterations of contexts, which consequently bring about inversions of meaning, are the basic aspect of dialogue, and that monologue is inherently present in dialogue, it follows that the role of different alternating contexts within a monologue is performed by associations.

Such an approach, when applied in the analysis of a Pinter play, seems to have far-reaching implications, the most important being that his dialogue is not governed by "logic" but by the principle of association. Hence the linear, that is, cause and effect line of the development cannot be possibly traced in his plays.

The aim of the present article is two-fold: to analyse *No man's land* (Pinter 1975) in view of the complex nature of the monologue and dialogue, the mutual dependence of which has been pointed out above, and also to examine the multifarious functions of language in the play under discussion. Before attempting a detailed analysis of Pinter's latest play, some general remarks concerning his language should be made.

In his recent study on Pinter, A. Quigley (1975) has brought to light some limitations of the previous interpretations of Pinter's plays, and also explained the reasons for this impasse in the first decade of Pinter's criticism. By and large, this crisis has been caused by the persistence of the critics in analysing the language of Pinter's plays solely in terms of the referential theory of meaning, thus admitting the central role of the referential function of language. In other words, language functions other than referential had been neglected, and such a limited approach to Pinter's work resulted in interpretations which very frequently concluded in pointing to some mystical qualities in Pinter's language. What could not be explained in terms of the referential theory of meaning, naturally enough, was classified as "mystical", "inexpressible" "unsayable", etc. Quigley's book is an attempt to elucidate the meaning of Pinter's plays by reconsidering the role of language functions. First of all, the author argues, one should reject the assumption concerning the centrality of the referential function of language along with the notion of the pivotal role of any function (cf. Quigley 1975: 42).

Thus having eliminated the pitfalls of the ideational theory of meaning approach, the author proceeds to analyse the language of Pinter's plays. The close examination of a few samples from the playwright's dramas reveals that the dialogue, in fact, is not meant to refer to the outer reality but its function is to establish certain relationships among the characters.[1] Basing

[1] "The kinds of topic discussed and the kinds of explicitness with which they are discussed are derived *not* from a need to establish some kind of *objective truth* but from the

his arguments upon Wittgenstein's notion of inseparability of meaning and use Quigley concludes that: "The language of a Pinter play functions primarily as a means of dictating and reinforcing relationships". This particular function of language Quigley terms "interrelational" (Quigley 1975: 54).

In order to bring to light in some detail the nuances characterizing the relations between the characters in *No man's land*, Quigley's term will be split into emotive, conative and phatic, since, as it were, "interrelational" seems to cover the three well-known Jakobsonian notions (cf. Jakobson 1968: 354—355).

When viewed in a traditional fashion, that is, solely in the light of the referential theory of meaning and when linear dialogue is sought for, *No man's land* is, to say the least, a very enigmatic play. The action of the drama consists of loose episodes which, at the first glance, fail to form a coherent whole. Neither are we provided with the background of the characters or their identities, that is, those factors which would allow us to understand their reactions, their attitudes and their intentions.[2] For example, Spooner, one of the two main characters in the play, first introduces himself as a poet and a connoisseur of art; later on, is identified by Briggs as a mug collector in a pub and, finally, is referred to by Hirst as Charles, a one-time chap from Oxford. In short, not only is the information concerning the characters scant but, quite frequently, it is contradictory. It follows, therefore, that if the play is looked upon as an attempt to establish "objective truth" about the characters with reference to outer reality, inevitably, such an endeavour is bound to end up in an interpretation which is either misleading or incomplete. But once it is assumed that language also serves some other purposes, the meaning of the play begins to emerge. The following quotation provides evidence supporting the notion that the priority of the cognitive function of language is very often replaced by, to use Quigley's term, that of the interrelational, that is by that aspect of language whose primary role is to shape a relationship or to exert some kind of influence on another individual:

shifting demands of individual characters attempting *to give a desired shape and coherence to a relationship*" (Quigley 1975:53, my emphasis).

[2] Pinter's concern with the question of identity, motivation and verification is a recurrent issue of his work and its importance was duly acknowledged by numerous commentators (e.g. cf. Hayman 1969:8, Esslin 1970:30—36). Also Pinter's own comment is relevant here: "A character on the stage who can present no convincing argument or information as to his past experience, his present behaviour or his aspirations, nor give a comprehensive analysis of his motives is as legitimate and as worthy of attention as one who, alarmingly, can do all these things" (quoted after Esslin 1970:34). Esslin also indicates that in rejecting the traditional exposition lies Pinter's main departure from the conventions of the illusionistic play, and the playwright's formal achievements in the field of drama can be paralleled to those of the *nouveau roman* writers.

Spooner: What he said... all those years ago... is neither here nor there. *It was not what he said but possibly the way he sat which has remained with me all my life and has, I am quite sure, made me what I am.*
(Pinter 1975:5, my emphasis)

The play opens with the scene in which Hirst and Spooner, the two main characters, are celebrating the acquaintance they have, apparently, just made. The scene is an illustration of Spooner's unsuccessful effort to make contact and initiate communication. When he refers to the conversation which, probably, took place prior to the opening of the play, he is trying to establish some points of reference and, consequently, enable communication between them. Hirst's reply is evasive, clearly indicative of his indifference and lack of interest in communicating. Spooner's desperate struggle to make contact, on the other hand, is manifested in his obsessive repetitions of the word "kind" together with its various derivatives:

Spooner: (...) How very *kind* of you. How very *kind*. (...) Terribly *kind* of you. (...) May I say how very *kind* it was of you to ask me in? In fact, you are *kindness* itself, probably are always *kindness* itself (...) I speak to you because you are clearly *kindness* itself. (...) It's uncommonly *kind* of you to say so.
(Pinter 1975: 3 - 4, my emphasis)

Evidently, the phatic function of language is brought into the foreground here, that is the one which is oriented not toward the message but toward the contact (cf. Jakobson 1968: 355).

As was pointed out by Jakobson in his well-known model, it is the context, or the knowledge about reality shared by both an addresser and an addressee, that is the indispensable factor in any act of communication (cf. Jakobson 1968:353). Such a common context is what is precisely the missing element in the possible communication between Spooner and Hirst. Therefore, it is not surprising that Spooner persists in supplying this element by trying to make Hirst disclose any information concerning his life:

Spooner: (...) Tell me. You've revealed something. You've made an unequivocal reference to your past. Don't go back on it. We share something. A memory of the bucolic life. We are both English. (...) Tell me more. Tell me more about the quaint little perversions of your life and times. Tell me more, with all the authority and brilliance you can muster, about the socio-politico-economic structure of the environment in which you attained to the age of reason. Tell me more.
(Pinter 1975: 6)

Spooner is aware that although they share the same code ("We are both English") they still lack context. Hirst, however, refuses to respond and the

communication between the two of them is, again, suspended. Spooner's hysterical reiterations of the sentence "Tell me more" signify his annoyance at his inability to make contact with Hirst. In the passage quoted above, language seems to serve two purposes and, it is interesting to note, neither of them refers to outer reality. In so far as the linguistic activity in the form of imperative locutions is aimed at Hirst (here the addressee), its function is conative. But since the imperatives also reveal Spooner's, that is the addresser's, attitude (in this case his irritation) it does not seem ungrounded to consider the emotive function as equally important here. In this way, the two language functions are simultaneously at work and they are manifested by two devices: imperative and repetition, the former of a purely grammatical and the latter of a stylistic nature.

From the point of view of the referential theory of meaning, the truth value of the following brief exchange of lines between Spooner and Hirst seems to be doubtful, as evidently the two characters do not possess any common memory or outer context to which they could refer. Hirst's answers to Spooner's questions cannot, therefore, be considered as truthful or accurate:

> Spooner: (...) You will want to know what I had
>   done to provoke such hatred in my own mother.
> Hirst: You'd pissed yourself.
> Spooner: Quite right. How old do you think I was at the time?
> Hirst: Twenty eight.
> Spooner: Quite right (...)
>
> (Pinter 1975:5 - 6)

The above dialogue should not be viewed then as an actual exchange of information but, rather, as another futile attempt to establish a common context and thus to enable communication, an attempt undertaken by Spooner even at the expense of falsifying the veracity of the asserted reality.

This is not to say, however, that dialogue proper is never established in the play. The difficulty in identifying it stems from the fact that instead of proceeding logically from one part to the next, it comprises a number of *non-sequiturs*. In fact, Pinter's dialogue frequently resembles a series of seemingly disconnected monologues and it is only upon close examination of the particular utterances that the mutual interdependence between them can be discovered (cf. Quigley 1975:238). The uniqueness of Pinter's dialogue had been recognized by his critics, and, in contradistinction to the conventional dialogue of an illusionistic drama, was termed an "oblique dialogue" (cf. Esslin 1970:209, Quigley 1975:238) Thus, for example, Spooner's opening speech concerning strength (p. 4) is evoked by Hirst in the second act ("You were always preoccupied with your physical... condition..." (p. 14)); likewise, Hirst's story relating his alleged seducing of Spooner's wife (p. 13—14) can

be viewed as his response to Spooner's insinuation of Hirst's sexual impotence (p. 7). The pastoral setting of the seduction scene as it is reported by Hirst (cottage, flowers, etc.) can be traced back, in turn, to Spooner's fantasies about his family life (p. 6).

Finally, the two crucial monologues seem to be worth focusing on so that their interdependence can be pointed out:

> Spooner: (...) You need a friend. You have a long hike, my lad, up which, presently, you slog unfriended. Let me perhaps be your boatman. For if and when we talk of a river we talk of a deep and dank architecture. In other words, never disdain a helping hand, especially one of such rare quality. And it is not only the quality of my offer which is rare, it is the act itself, the offer itself-quite without precedent. I offer myself to you as a friend. Think before you speak. For this proposition, after thought, will I assure you be seen to be carte blanche, open sesame and worthy the tender, for it is an expression of a quite unique generosity and I make it knowingly.
> (Pinter 1975:7)
>
> Hirst: (...) I was dreaming of a waterfall. No, no, of a lake. I think it was ...just recently. (...) Something is depressing me. What is it? It was the dream, yes. Waterfalls. No, no, a lake. Water. Drowning. Not me. Someone else. How nice to have company. (...) In the past I knew remarkable people. I've a photograph album here. (...) I hate drinking alone. There is too much solitary shittery. (...) There is a flood running through me. (...)
> (Pinter 1975:9 - 10)

The procedure of juxtaposing the two monologues which, it should be emphasized, do not subsequently follow each other, proves that, actually, they constitute a dialogue. Not only is the inner structure of each utterance underlain by the principle of association (therefore there is a good reason to consider them as interior monologues) but it also operates outside the monologues combining them, in this way, into one unit. Numerous contrasts and similarities can be discerned, such as, for instance, the river and dank architecture of Spooner's monologue vs. waterfall, lake, water, flood, etc. in Hirst's speech. The former's statement "You need a friend" is responded by the latter's "My true friends look out at me from my album". Similarly, "presently you slog unfriended" can be contrasted with "How nice to have company", boatman with drowning, "helping hand... of such rare quality" with "In the past I knew remarkable people". In other words, indirectly and obliquely as it may seem, Spooner's proposal is replied to. No matter how insensitive to Spooner's utterances Hirst might have been, having transformed them into his own context he finally verbally responds. Needless to emphasize, his answer to Spooner's offer is negative. As was aptly observed by Quigley, Pinter employs in his later dramas "monologues intertwined so subtly that they take on a similar function to dialogue" (Quigley 1975:238).

In conclusion, it is believed that Pinter's concern in *No man's land* was not the object of communication but the complex process of communicating. Therefore, it seems that the referential role of language is the least important one. In order to make this process distinct, external action is practically removed from the play. By employing the stream of consciousness technique in his drama, the playwright succeeded in presenting the mental processes of his characters, thus contradicting the belief that such a presentation "the theatre can handle but awkwardly" (Wellek 1963:223).

REFERENCES

Esslin, M. 1970. *The peopled wound: the work of Harold Pinter.* Garden City, N. Y.: A Doubleaday Anchor Book.
Hayman, R. 1969. *Harold Pinter.* London: Heinemann Educational Books.
Jakobson, R. 1968. "Linguistics and poetics". In Sebeok, T. A. (ed.). 1968. 350—377
Mukařovský, J. 1970. "Dialog a monolog". In Mukařovský, J. 1970a. 185—222.
Mukařovský, J. 1970a. *Wśród znaków i struktur.* Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy.
Pinter, H. 1975. "No man's land". *The new review 2/13.* 3—18.
Quigley, A. E. 1975. *The Pinter problem.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Sebeok, T. A. (ed.). 1968. *Style in language.* Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.
Wellek, R. and A. Warren. 1963. *Theory of literature.* Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
Wellwarth, G. 1971. *The theater of protest and paradox.* New York: New York University Press.