

# The silence of writers

In 1988, the English literary critic and novelist, D.J. Taylor wrote a seminal piece entitled 'When the Pen Sleeps'. He expanded this into a book 'A Vain Conceit', in which he wondered why the English novel so often denigrated into 'drawing room twitter' and why the great issues of the day were shunned by writers, unlike their counterparts in, say, Latin America, who felt a responsibility to take on politics: the great themes of justice and injustice, wealth and poverty, war and peace. The notion of the writer working in splendid isolation was absurd. Where, he asked, were the George Orwells, the Upton Sinclairs, the John Steinbecks of the modern age?

Twelve years on, Taylor was asking the same question: where was the English Gore Vidal and John Gregory Dunne: 'intellectual heavyweights briskly at large in the political amphitheatre, while we end up with Lord [Jeffrey] Archer...'

In the post-modern, celebrity world of writing, prizes are allotted to those who compete for the emperor's threads; the politically unsafe need not apply. John Keane, the chairman of the Orwell Prize for Political Writing, once defended the absence of great contemporary political writers among the Orwell prize-winners not by lamenting the fact and asking why, but by attacking those who referred back to 'an imaginary golden past'. He wrote that those who 'hanker' after this illusory past fail to appreciate writers making sense of 'the collapse of the old left-right divide'.

What collapse? The convergence of 'liberal' and 'conservative' parties in western democracies, like the American Democrats with the Republicans, represents a meeting of essentially like minds. Journalists work assiduously to promote a false division between the mainstream parties and to obfuscate the truth that Britain, for example, is now a single ideology state with two competing, almost identical pro-business factions. The real divisions between left and right are to be found outside Parliament and have never been greater. They reflect the

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unprecedented disparity between the poverty of the majority of humanity and the power and privilege of a corporate and militarist minority, headquartered in Washington, who seek to control the world's resources.

One of the reasons these mighty pirates have such a free reign is that the Anglo-American intelligensia, notably writers, 'the people with voice' as Lord Macaulay called them, are quiet or complicit or craven or twittering, and rich as a result. Thought-provokers pop up from time to time, but the English establishment has always been brilliant at de-fanging and absorbing them. Those who resist assimilation are mocked as eccentrics until they conform to their stereotype and its authorised views.

The exception is Harold Pinter. The other day, I sat down to compile a list of other writers remotely like him, those 'with a voice' and an understanding of their wider responsibilities as writers. I scribbled a few names, all of them now engaged in intellectual and moral contortion, or they are asleep. The page was blank save for Pinter. Only he is the unquiet one, the untwitterer, the one with guts, who speaks out. Above all, he understands the problem. Listen to this:

"We are in a terrible dip at the moment, a kind of abyss, because the assumption is that politics are all over. That's what the propaganda says. But I don't believe the propaganda. I believe that politics, our political consciousness and our political intelligence are not all over, because if they are, we are really doomed. I can't myself live like this. I've been told so often that I live in a free country, I'm damn well going to be free. By which I mean I'm going to retain my independence of mind and spirit, and I think that's what's obligatory upon all of us. Most political systems talk in such vague language, and it's our responsibility and our duty as citizens of our various countries to exercise acts of critical scrutiny upon that use of language. Of course, that means that one does tend to become rather unpopular. But to hell with that."

I first met Harold when he was supporting the popularly elected government in Nicaragua in the 1980s. I had reported from Nicaragua, and made a film about the remarkable gains of the Sandinistas despite Ronald Regan's attempts to crush them by illegally sending CIA-trained proxies across the border from Honduras to slit the throats of midwives and other anti-Americans. US foreign policy is, of course, even more rapacious under Bush: the smaller the country, the greater the threat. By that, I mean the threat of a good example to other small countries which might seek to alleviate the abject poverty of their people by rejecting American dominance. What struck me about Harold's involvement was his understanding of this truth, which is generally a taboo in the United States and

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Britain, and the eloquent ‘to hell with that’ response in everything he said and wrote.

Almost single-handedly, it seemed, he restored ‘imperialism’ to the political lexicon. Remember that no commentator used this word any more; to utter it in a public place was like shouting ‘fuck’ in a covent’. Now you can shout it everywhere and people will nod their agreement; the invasion in Iraq put paid to doubts, and Harold Pinter was one of the first to alert us. He described, correctly, the crushing of Nicaragua, the blockage against Cuba, the wholesale killing of Iraqi and Yugoslav civilians as imperialist atrocities.

In illustrating the American crime committed against Nicaragua, when the United States Government dismissed an International Court of Justice ruling that it stop breaking the law in its murderous attacks, Pinter recalled that Washington seldom respected international law; and he was right. He wrote, ‘In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson said to the Greek Ambassador to the US, “Fuck your Parliament and your constitution. American is an elephant, Cyprus is a flea. Greece is a flea. If these two fellows keep itching the elephant, they may just get whacked by the elephant’s trunk, whacked for good...” He meant that. Two years later, the Colonels took over and the Greek people spent seven years in hell. You have to hand it to Johnson. He sometimes told the truth however brutal. Regan tell lies. His celebrated description of Nicaragua as a “totalitarian dungeon” was a lie from every conceivable angle. It was an assertion unsupported by facts; it had no basis in reality. But it’s a good vivid, resonant phrase which persuaded the unthinking...’

In his play ‘Ashes to Ashes’, Pinter uses the images of Nazism and the Holocaust, while interpreting them as a warning against similar ‘repressive, cynical and indifferent acts of murder’ by the clients of arms-dealing imperialist states such as the United States and Britain. ‘The word democracy begins to stink’, he said. ‘So in Ashes to Ashes, I’m not simply talking about the Nazis; I’m talking about us, and our conception of our past and our history, and what it does to us in the present.’

Pinter is not saying the democracies are totalitarian like Nazi Germany, not at all, but that totalitarian actions are taken by impeccably polite democrats and which, in principle and effect, are little different from those taken by fascists. The only difference is distance. Half a millions people were murdered by American bombers sent secretly and illegally to skies above Cambodia by Nixon and Kissinger, igniting an Asian holocaust, which Pol Pot completed.

Critics have hated his political work, often attacking his plays mindlessly and

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patronising his outspokenness. He, in turn, has mocked their empty derision. He is a truth-teller. His understanding of political language follows Orwell's. He does not, as he would say, give a shit about the propriety of language, only its truest sense. At the end of the cold war in 1989, he wrote, '...for the last forty years, our thought has been trapped in hollow structures of language, a stale, dead but immensely successful rhetoric. This has represented, in my view, a defeat of the intelligence and of the will.'

He never accepted this, of course: 'To hell with that!' Thanks in no small measure to him, defeat is far from assured. On the contrary, while other writers have slept or twittered, he has been aware that people are never still, and indeed are stirring again: Harold Pinter has a place of honour among them.