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‘I am not alone’:

Pinter, State Torture, and *One for the Road*

On multiple occasions across several decades, Nobel Prize winning playwright Harold Pinter identified his play *One for the Road* as having been initially motivated by anger. The general impetus for its composition was an encounter at a party: Pinter met several beautiful Turkish women, but was horrified and enraged by their indifference to the torture being practiced in their country against enemies conveniently denounced as communist. In 1985, a year after premiering the play, in an interview with Nichols Hern, Pinter recalled this moment: ‘Whereupon instead of strangling them, I came back immediately, sat down and, it’s true, out of rage started to write *One for the Road*. It was a very immediate thing, yes.’ (Pinter 1985: 14) He recalled that moment again almost twenty years later, in conversation with Mark Taylor-Batty, in 2004: ‘I have written one play out of anger, as I think you might know – *One for the Road*. That was really written out of anger.’ (Taylor-Batty 2005: 82)

One for the Road is one of Pinter’s most explicitly political plays, and one that has attracted much critical attention because of both the lucidity of its political protest, and the general artistic merit of the work. That it is intended as an explicitly political drama is widely accepted. This paper, however, seeks to examine the play from the perhaps slightly unusual viewpoint of state power and state sovereignty, particularly as embodied by the state’s representative, Nicholas. It pursues this approach because the play seems to examine – in the microcosmic, interpersonal level – the much larger question of states arrogating to themselves the rights to detain individuals, beat them, dictate the terms and conditions of what they may say or may not say and, ultimately, to kill them. Although *One for the Road* is commonly read as a conflict between torturer and tortured, this paper proposes to read the play as examining the role of individuals with their state, and its representatives. The torture, rape and murder in the play are not random violence; they are specifically targeted state violence.

One for the Road premiered in March of 1984, in Hammersmith. The play is constructed with elegant simplicity: it shows us, in four short vignettes, the various examinations – or interrogations – conducted by a man named Nicholas. The stage setting is his office. He interrogates first a person who may or may not be a dissident, named Victor. After Victor’s interrogation, we see the interrogation by Nicholas of Victor’s seven year-old son Nicky. Following that interrogation, we see the interrogation by Nicholas of Victor’s wife (and Nicky’s mother) Gila. The final scene is of an interrogation by Nicholas again of Victor, in which we learn that the child, Nicky, has been killed.

Two of the characters (Victor and Gila) have clearly been beaten; the stage directions for each are notably similar: 'His clothes are torn. He is bruised'; 'Her clothes are torn. She is bruised.' (Pinter 2005: 223, 237) Yet Pinter never shows us the actual torture. It is implied, or suggested, or threatened, but the audience does not see actual state violence. It is an intriguing dramatic decision, but one that is supportable by association with the real political world: just as we do not see the worst actions of people acting on behalf of the state in real life, so too do we not see those worst actions on the stage. In *One for the Road* there is implied torture, rape is mentioned almost casually as something that both has happened and is still to come, and it ends in the offstage murder of a child. Had Pinter merely wanted to shock us with degradations, in the manner of the *Grand Guignol*, he had ample opportunity to do it. Yet, this paper argues, part of what *One for the Road* seeks to explore are the psychological effects on agents of the state of having this power to negate the dignity or humanity of others.

Nicholas is somewhat tenebrous as a character, which is perhaps unexpected, as he is the central figure of the play. All the play's interactions revolve around him. He intrudes into the family depicted (Victor, Gila, and Nicky), becoming their only point of contact with the other family members – Nicholas asks each person being interrogated about the other two. The audience establishes that Nicholas works for the state, but his precise title or level of authority is unclear. He has the power to dispatch soldiers to investigate and arrest citizens, and seems to be a figure of genuine command within his system. He claims to be on a friendly basis with the leader of the country. (It is chilling to note that he is also the one actor who never leaves the stage; the implication Pinter may be suggesting is that these hidden policemen are always active, and are always at work.) Yet we learn nothing of Nicholas' personal life, private concerns, family or lack thereof, or indeed much of anything save the impression that he is given to drinking too much whiskey. We may also establish that he is aggressively crude. Nicholas makes vulgar jokes to Victor about Gila's sexual habits, then later rebukes her as a 'turd' and 'fuckpig.' (Pinter 2005: 240) It is perhaps worth noting that 'fuckpig' is not a common term in English, and seems to indicate not merely the verbal cruelty and crudity of Nicholas, but also the almost incoherent bellicosity and grossness of Nicholas in that moment. Because we as an audience see this undisguised anger and vulgarity, we begin to perceive how terrible it would be to be under the complete control of an individual such as this. Were we to understand Nicholas as a private individual, this might seem a dramatically unsound decision. Yet this paper proposes that Nicholas is not to be seen as a self-actualized individual, but instead as someone volitionally subordinated to the state, to such a degree that he fails to perceive any distinction between his private life and public functions.

The play depends entirely upon Nicholas; he is the motive force behind the abuse and torture of the three people who are brought before him. The play's basic structure is predicated upon an exploration of a relationship between a figure of state power and a victim. Pinter specified 'I had an image in my mind of a man with a victim, an interrogator with a victim. And I was simply investigating what might take place. Given a certain state

of affairs, what would the attitude of the interrogator to his victims be?' (Pinter 1985:14). It is worth noting that both in conception and in the final version of the play, Nicholas is an 'interrogator,' but not a torturer; that work is apparently done by others. Even he does not have to do the dirty work of physical torture. That can be left to the system he serves. It is also notable that what Pinter was interested to explore was not torture itself, but 'the attitude of the interrogator to his victims.' As Pinter's biographer Michael Billington notes, 'What might have been a simple play about police-state brutality becomes a psychologically complex work about the tortured nature of the torturer' (Billington 2007: 296).

Nicholas does not just possess power, he seems to perceive no difference between himself and his society. His authority derives exclusively from his embodiment of the state. Pinter specified this: 'He has all power within those walls. He knows this is the case, he believes that it is right, for him, to possess this power, because, as far as he's concerned, he's acting for his country legitimately and properly. When he refers to the country's values, those are his values. And because of those values, he will kill, allow rape, everything he can think of. And torture. In order to protect the realm, anything is justified' (Pinter 1985: 16-17). Thus, as Pinter notes, Nicholas' ability to justify his conduct stems from an identification with the state. In his own corrupted sense of honor, he may even believe that he acts selflessly. His values are those of his country, and they may expand endlessly to killing, rape, and torture, in order to defend the nation. For this reason, this paper disagrees with Merve Aydogdu's assertion that 'Nicholas regards himself as a figure of authority, an autonomous individual free to do whatever he wants though his condition is mere illusion because he can be free so long as he conforms to ideology or he can feel free only if he obeys the command of ideology' (Aydogdu 2014:5). This suggests a much more active personal life than the play reveals; there is no indication that he feels that he 'conforms' or 'obeys' and, indeed, it seems more likely that he relishes having no distinction between himself, his actions, and the state he represents. Obedience and disobedience are questions for civilians. To suggest that 'he can feel free only if he obeys the command of ideology' is not inherently wrong, but it misunderstands the logic behind Nicholas. Freedom does derive so much from obedience as it does in completely eliminating any difference between one's own desires and reality and those necessary to the state. Nicholas has power precisely because he cannot conceive of himself being different from his state. He is voluntarily engulfed by the state he serves.

As an individual, he does not evince any personal qualities of note. He shows no uncommon intelligence or craft, and he gives little evidence of personal beliefs or religious conviction – except to proclaim that 'God speaks through me' (Pinter 2005: 227). This suggests both a touch of megalomania and a lack of serious theological understanding. But in more practical terms, his actions in relation to Victor and Gil serve both to diminish the humanity of these perceived enemies, as well as to demonstrate his own unrestrained freedom of action when serving the state. This is perhaps most pointedly seen in Nicholas' particular habit of placing his fingers directly before the eyes of those under his power and saying,

What do you think this is? It's my finger. And this is my little finger. This is my big finger and this is my little finger. I wave my big finger in front of your eyes. Like this. And now I do the same with my little finger. I can also use both...at the same time. Like this. I can do absolutely anything I like (Pinter 2005: 223).

Here we see Pinter's mastery; he shows the sheer power and authority of Nicholas not by touching his victim, but by *not* touching him—yet, as Nicholas affirms (and as we have no reason to doubt), 'I can do absolutely anything I like.' This is not because Nicholas is particularly strong or capable. His almost complete violent autonomy derives from his position within a system of state power. He is somehow a figure who is part of a state mechanism of repression, including soldiers who arrest citizens in their own country; systems of incarceration or detention into which people can apparently disappear without anyone defending them; rape rooms; and eventually the killing of a child, evidently either to coerce his parents, or through sheer gratuitous violence.

At this juncture it is important to note that *One for the Road* depicts a system in which the military or police forces are part of the state apparatus and are abusing their own citizens. They are emphatically not external occupiers. Nicholas clarifies this point exactly, in a conversational exchange with young Nicky:

Nicholas: [...] You like soldiers. Good. But you spat at my soldiers and you kicked them. You attacked them.

Nicky: Were they your soldiers?

Nicholas: They were your country's soldiers.

Nicky: I didn't like those soldiers.

Nicholas: They don't like you either, my darling (Pinter 2005: 236-237).

These are the forces of the state. The point Pinter insists upon is that these people are being repressed by their own security apparatuses. It is their state doing this to them, not some outside force or otherwise unaccountable power. This is what states, left to themselves and unobserved by a critical populace (within or outside their borders), may choose to do. Human rights are troublesome to observe, and allocating all power to the state and to its agents makes life vastly more convenient for the judges, soldiers, and politicians who have the opportunity to use that power. Nicholas is such a man, and this paper has already examined his essential immersion of self into the state. He exists to serve, and to embody, state power, without notably having a personality that may be distinguished from the cause he personifies.

There is one confrontation in the play that appears to engage Nicholas on a human level, and it deserves attention precisely because of his exaggeratedly emotional response. His discussion with Gila is unlike his discussions with Victor or Nicky, in that Nicholas seems actually to be conducting a logical interrogation of Gila. Nicky's interrogation is threatening because it involves a child, but is not notably focused on specific details. Similarly, in both of Nicholas' interrogations of Victor, he asks no questions that relate usefully to any investigation he might pursue. But with Gila, he follows a clear line of questioning, one apparently designed to elicit an answer about how she and Victor met (and about

which she gives two apparently contradictory answers). He again plays his game with fingers near eyes, and asks her relentlessly how often she has been raped by his soldiers; she does not know, so common has the experience become. Yet when she makes reference to her father, Nicholas explodes in a powerful tirade of abuse far more emotional than his whiskey-sodden banter with Victor. It is a centerpiece section of the play, and is worth quoting in full (stage directions for pauses are omitted):

Your father was a wonderful man. His country is proud of him. He's dead. He was a man of honour. He's dead. Are you prepared to insult the memory of your father? Are you prepared to defame, to debase, the memory of your father? Your father fought for his country. I knew him. I revered him. Everyone did. He believed in God. He didn't think, like you shitbags. He lived. He lived. He was iron and gold. He would die, he would die, he would die, for his country, for his God. And he did die, he died, he died, for his God. You turd. To spawn such a daughter. What a fate. Oh, poor, perturbed spirit, to be haunted forever by such scum and spittle. How do you dare speak of your father to me? I loved him, as if he were my own father (Pinter 2005: 240-241).

This passage gives us more personal information about Gila and Nicholas than we otherwise receive in the play. Clearly Gila's father was in some way a person of consequence in the state, and seems to have been a patriot in the manner that Nicholas could respect. What is notable, however, is the sheer outrage that Nicholas demonstrates at Gila's 'insult' to her father. This provokes a greater personal outburst from Nicholas than any other objection. Whilst it remains unclear how exactly Nicholas knew Gila's father, it is evident that he is usurping her position as the father's rightful heir ('I loved him, as if he were my own father'). In a sense, it seems that what enrages and outrages Nicholas is the unfilial rejection he perceives in Gila's dissent in society and her father's willingness to live and die for his country. This reinforces the impression the audience has of Nicholas believing that one must completely immerse oneself in patriotism and service in order to assist the state and the goals of the country. He has done himself what she apparently refuses to do, and to him this is disobedience to both one's own father as well as to the state.

It should be noted, of course, that whatever crime is attributed to Victor and/or Gila is never specified. Nicky apparently spat at soldiers, which may be unwise, but is hardly criminal. Victor is noted as having 'lots of books' (Pinter 2005: 228). perhaps at a stretch suggesting some manner of dissident pamphleteering. Gila's changing story about how she met Victor is intriguing although not notably culpable. Yet it is apparent that their alleged crime is of no real concern to anybody. The logic of the system is that those who fall foul of the soldiers must therefore have done something to deserve punishment. They need to be punished because they have fallen into the punitive system. As Pinter commented, about the real world, but in terms that apply equally to Gila and Victor, 'there is no such thing as an offence, apart from the fact that *everything* is – their very life is an offence, as far as the authorities go. Their very existence in some way or another poses critical questions or is understood to do so.' (Pinter 1985: 16) Although this bizarre calculus of guilt is dreadfully recognizable as a real phenomenon, it is worthwhile to note also that it is the

precise conclusion to which Nicholas' logic tends. In other words, one must associate decency, right, and power with the state, and therefore that which is against the state must be wrong. Nicholas never seriously indicates that he considers it possible that this family is innocent; perhaps more importantly, none of the three victims proclaims, or even attempts to proclaim, his or her innocence. It is simply an irrelevancy, once one has entered into the punitive system.

Mark Taylor-Batty has proposed what might be termed as a feminist reading of the play, focusing particularly on the role of Gila in the drama, particularly as uniting the other two victims. This is a plausible reading, and this paper agrees with the general outlines of Taylor-Batty's hypotheses, yet it must disagree with one of his main contentions. In Taylor-Batty's words, '...*One for the Road* highlights the absurdities of political oppression. Nothing makes sense. [Gila] can never win. No matter what they ask of her, she is always in the wrong' (Taylor-Batty 2014: 238). This is not incorrect, but is misapplied: the whole point of the political oppression is that it places the victim in the wrong. It is not absurd, it is rather intentional. The system does not entertain the possibility of innocence, and therefore it becomes impossible to prove. The victim is 'always in the wrong' because having fallen foul of the system is proof that one is already in the wrong. By extension, we may suppose that Nicholas does not question his power for the simple reason that, by the logic of oppression, anyone who appears before him deserves to be examined closely – with all that implies – by the duly appointed representative of state power. In Pinter's conception, the terror of Nicholas' world is not the absurdity of political oppression, but rather the logic by which it converts the accused into the guilty.

Yet for all of his assertions and boasting, Nicholas reveals what truly excites him about his country. In what he himself terms a 'confession,' Nicholas relates the story of hearing the leader of the country make a statement. As Nicholas states, 'I have never been more moved, in the whole of my life, as when – only the other day, last Friday, I believe – the man who runs this country announced to the country: We are all patriots, we are as one, we all share a common heritage. Except you, apparently. I feel a link, you see, a bond. I share a commonwealth of interest. I am not alone. I am not alone!' (Pinter 2005: 232). Nicholas represents, in himself, the collectivity of the state. His actions are not his own; they belong to, and are justified by, the state. He represents far more people than he himself may know. But, as the leader of the country has assured him, and all of the other citizens, 'I share a commonwealth of interest.' To act against that state is to act against the other constituent members of the commonwealth of interest. Thus one finds one's purpose as an individual in the collectivity of the state: 'I am not alone. I am not alone!'

In a strange sense, *One for the Road* continues the earliest preoccupations of Pinter's stage – a few people in a room, menacing one another. As Pinter notes in conversation as early as 7 August 1960, 'Two people in a room – I am dealing a great deal of the time with this image of two people in a room. The curtain goes up on the stage, and I see it as a very potent question: What is going to happen to these two people in the room?' (quoted

in Esslin 1969: 256). This is a fine description of the ‘vignettes’ of *One for the Road*, fully twenty years before he wrote the play. Yet where Pinter’s earlier plays dealt primarily with personal conflicts, *One for the Road* explores the full power of the state to crush individuals, and examines what manner of person gives himself wholly to the service of that power. What is most striking about *One for the Road* is not the political pessimism and suspicion of state power that they suggest, but its evident faith in the act of observation and watching. By placing the audience in the position of spectators to this abuse of power and denigration of human dignity, we find ourselves in a position similar to that often claimed by citizens today; these people act in our names, secretly, but at the behest of our government, or those governments of our allies. The play is painful to watch, and suggests initially the impotence of the viewer to prevent what is being witnessed on stage. But in a sense, that is the power of the work. What Pinter enacts on the stage we cannot prevent; but, chastened and alerted, we may exert the power of witness in our own societies, and in those of our allies who need our acquiescence to violate the rights of their people or citizens. Thus, in an unusual sense, the act of watching the plays becomes an incitement to engage in critical observation and witnessing of the actions of the governments of the world, so as to prevent the types of abuse of power we behold on the stage. If the actors and actresses are proxy representatives of real people being abused, exploited, or tortured, the audience nevertheless cannot escape the obligation to keep watching these scenes and, by extension, to keep watching the governments whose actions Pinter indicts.

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ენდრიუ გუდსპიდი
(მაკედონია)

**„მე მარტო არ ვარ“: პინტერი:
„მნამებელი სახელმწიფო“ და „გზაზე დადგომისა ვთქვათ“**

რეზიუმე

საკვანძო სიტყვები: ჰაროლდ პინტერი, პოლიტიკური დრამა, სახელმწიფო და საზოგადოება.

ჰაროლდ პინტერის ნაწარმოებები, ერთსა და იმავე დროს, გამოირჩევა, როგორც დიალოგის, ასევე, დუმილის ოსტატობითა და მკვეთრი პოლიტიკური კრიტიკით. მისი ორი, ყველაზე აშკარად და წინასწარგანზრახულად პოლიტიკური დრამაა „ მთების ენა“ *Mountain Language* (1988) და *One for the Road* „გზაზე დადგომისა ვთქვათ“ (1984). სტილისტურად და დრამატურგიულად ერთმანეთისგან საკმაოდ განსხვავებული ეს ორი პიესა ფოკუსირებულია სახელმწიფო ძალაუფლების ბოროტად გამოყენებაზე ფიზიკური პირების მიმართ. კერძოდ, მათში ლაპარაკია იმაზე, რომ სახელმწიფო ითვისებს უმთავრეს უფლებას, საკუთარი სუვერენიტეტის წყალობით, უმიზეზოდ დააკავოს ადამიანები, ზიანი მიაყენოს მათ, აიძულოს გაჩუმება, უფრო მეტიც, იძალადოს მათზე და სიცოცხლესაც კი გამოასაღმოს ისინი. წინამდებარე სტატიაში შემოთავაზებულია ამ პიესების ორმაგი წაკითხვა, მათში სახელმწიფო ძალაუფლების აღწერის (და კრიტიკის) საერთო მახასიათებლების აღმოჩენის მიზნით. სტატიის მიხედვით, პინტერის კრიტიკის მთავარი აზრია ისაა, რომ ცალკეული ადამიანების დათრგუნვა ხელისუფლების ბუნებაა; ამიტომ თავისუფალ საზოგადოებებში დრამა (და მთლიანად ხელოვნება) ვალდებულია მუდმივად უწევდეს წინააღმდეგობას სახელმწიფო ძალაუფლების გამოყენებას: რაღაც, რაც პინტერის სამყაროში, ჩვეულებრივ, ზღვარგადასული და მოუნანიებელია, როგორც წესი, ლეიტალურად სრულდება.