

Joyce and Pinter: *Exiles* and *Betrayal*

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Abstract

This essay assesses the relationship of James Joyce to Harold Pinter generally, and the respective plays of the two authors, *Exiles* and *Betrayal*, in particular. In life and in art it is shown that friendship and betrayal is central to both. The influence of Joyce on the young Pinter is well-known, but the significance of *Exiles*, which Pinter directed in a major revival, as a shaping source for *Betrayal* has not been recognized. *Exiles* is like a palimpsest beneath Pinter's play which in effect provides a commentary on the otherwise inscrutable psychology of his characters.

The recent study by Michael Billington has revealed that a considerable amount of the action of Pinter's *Betrayal* derives from a lengthy affair he had with a well-known television journalist in the 1960s (1996, 264-7). But it will be shown here that this is only a partial contribution to something much more complex than biographical influence: namely, the unique aesthetic genesis of the relationship between *Betrayal* and James Joyce's *Exiles*.

In 1970 Harold Pinter's direction of *Exiles* at the Mermaid Theatre, London, was received with widespread acclaim, and the acknowledgement that at last Joyce's play of 1915 had been accorded due critical recognition. Though the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of the work in 1971 at the Aldwych was criticized for some recasting, nevertheless Pinter's staging of *Exiles* is regarded as outstanding in the record of the play's stage history (MacNicholas 1981).

Immediately after the opening of *Exiles* in November Pinter began writing *Old Times*, as he specifically recorded in an interview of December 1971, "I wrote it last winter" (Gussow 1994, 26). Pinter added that, characteristically, the first words of *Old Times* were the seeds from which the play grew (Gussow 1994, 26-7). "Dark" is the first word, describing an awaited female, Anna (1971, 7), and we find that Beatrice in *Exiles* is described as "a ... dark young woman" (1962, 11). Both characters meet old friends from the past. At that time Katherine J. Worth's study *Revolutions in Modern English Drama* must have been well underway since it was published in 1972. Nevertheless, a timely addition to her general consideration of Pinter in that study is found in a further chapter, "Joyce via Pinter", which is exclusively devoted to the relationship between *Exiles* and *Old Times*. Worth indicates the appropriateness of Pinter's pause/silence technique to *Exiles* and specifically to some of Joyce's stage directions. The Bertha-Beatrice association is compared with that of Kate and Anna in *Old Times* and, in addition, the pairing of Richard and Robert is considered as a gender reversal of the same couple. In terms of style the combination of inquisitorial and confessional elements in *Exiles* is illustrated extensively in Pinter's play. This characteristic is anticipated by Ibsen, in Worth's view, and she also suggests another line of development for *Old Times* from

Exiles, by way of T. S. Eliot's *The Family Reunion*.

Some years later, in 1988, the topic was taken up by David G. Wright in an article that included a few more points in addition to Worth's argument. Curiously, neither actually quote either of the two references to "old times" in *Exiles*. In the first act Robert addresses Bertha, claiming "I have the right to call you by your name. From old times—nine years ago" (1962, 35). Later in the same act Robert appeals to Richard, to "old times again", recalling their "wild nights long ago—talks by the hour, plans, carouses, revelry" (1962, 47). To a certain extent, minus the Bacchanalian element, this is echoed in Anna's recollection of when she and Kate "sat up half the night reading Yeats" (Pinter 1971, 22). In the very slightly altered screenplay for a television production of *Old Times* in 1991, a visual addition added to the allusions to *Exiles* (Knowles 1991, 67-8). Opening up the play, an exterior shot included Deeley trudging alone along the strand, which seems to realize Richard Rowan's wandering "out there, on the strand" (1962, 116) in the third act, confronting the "demons" (1962, 128) within, as well as without. The influence of Joyce's *Exiles* is evident, but there is a greater influence, both particular and general, that goes beyond *Old Times*.

This essay will argue that the influence of *Exiles* remained with Pinter and reappeared even more emphatically in *Betrayal* of 1978. In addition I wish to show that the question of Joyce's influence is much more ramified, in fact involving Pinter's whole life and work. In brief, Pinter absorbed all of Joyce in adolescence and as a consequence he derived an aesthetic, subsequently adapted to drama, that draws on *Stephen Hero* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. To a point, Joyce and Stephen Daedalus became a model for up-dated social and artistic self-fashioning. Secondly, one of the reasons Joyce was so attractive for the young Londoner was that, apart from different kinds of linguistic exactitude, both shared a preoccupation with friendship and betrayal in life and art.

Though seemingly worlds apart in time and place, in fact Joyce and Pinter have much in common. Joyce's writings eventually made a formative contribution to modernism. Pinter's drama has made a major contribution to theatre in the second half of the twentieth century. As an early gesture of artistic and moral affinity, Joyce read his "Drama and Life" paper in praise of Ibsen before the Literary and Historical Society of University College, Dublin. Aged sixteen, Pinter published a brief, precocious essay "James Joyce" in his school magazine (*Hackney Downs School Magazine* 1946, 32-3). As Joyce felt that he had to reject the Catholicism of his family and country, so the young Pinter as an avowed secularist, after his Bar Mitzvah, could not follow the Judaism of his family and East End London Jewish community. Joyce's marrying 'beneath' him socially and intellectually is reflected in *Exiles*. Many have claimed that Teddy's returning to his family with his wife in *The Homecoming* reflects on Pinter's marrying 'out', to a non-Jewish girl, the actress Vivien Merchant. Joyce famously underwent "silence, exile, and cunning". In 1968, recalling his wartime evacuation-exile in Cornwall, Pinter repeatedly juxtaposed the peculiarly Joycean vocabulary of "silence" and "cunning" (1994, 8-13). Later, Pinter was to experience internal 'exile' wandering around London, having opted out of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. In his early twenties, as surviving

photographs show, Pinter travelled round Ireland, like a vagabond-actor of old, with Anew McMaster's repertory troupe (Gordon 1990, 223-42). Lastly, to the young Stephen Hero and the young Pinter the aesthetic of the 'epiphany' was primary, and will be examined shortly.

Pinter has always regarded Samuel Beckett as one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century, but his familiarity with, and love of Joyce's work was established some six or seven years before he discovered an extract from *Watt* in the magazine *Irish Writing* while on tour with McMaster in 1951. Returning from evacuation in 1944, the year in which *Stephen Hero* was published for the first time, Pinter settled in at Hackney Downs School, East London, and informally began a process of self-education at Hackney public library. It was here that Pinter discovered such figures as Joyce, Lawrence, Dostoevsky, Hemingway, Virginia Woolf, Rimbaud and W.B. Yeats. Pinter's parents presented him with Shakespeare's works after his successful performance, aged sixteen, as Macbeth in the school play. Pinter rewarded himself with a copy of *Ulysses* which he placed alongside the Shakespeare in the family living room. However, Pinter's father "told me to take it off the shelf. He said he wouldn't have a book like that in the room where my mother served dinner" (*Times* 1995, 18). The young Pinter eventually absorbed many influential writers—Kafka, Henry Miller, William Burroughs—but Joyce was always grouped amongst the greats, most commonly T. S. Eliot, Beckett and Dostoevsky. In an interview on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday, reflecting on his year's work on the *Proust Screenplay* (1978b), Pinter compared the Frenchman and Joyce:

The thing about Proust is, finally, the weight of the whole damn thing and its unnerving accuracy—it moves one deeply. In a way that Joyce, for instance, doesn't, although Joyce has always been my boy, from the word go. But Joyce is really much more of a comic writer, in my view. (*The Sunday Observer* 1980, 25)

Joyce as part of the fabric of Pinter's life was made evident in an interview with Mel Gussow when he recorded that:

I certainly believe I'm part of a tradition which undoubtedly includes Joyce and Eliot. You know, I read *Ulysses* every night when I go to bed. If I'm going to read for a couple of minutes, I have *Ulysses* by my side. It gives me great joy. (1994, 118)

The most overwhelming evidence for the direct artistic influence of Joyce became apparent when Pinter finally agreed to the publication in 1990 of his novel of the early 1950s, *The Dwarfs*. Pinter was originally dissatisfied with the mixed styles of the fiction and at the time did not offer it to a publisher. Instead, he reworked the materials for his 1960 play of the same title. The dialogue of the play completely obliterated the Joycean prose of parts of the novel, particularly chapters nine and seventeen. Here is the opening

of the latter with its peculiar indentations:

Pete walked along the east bank of the river. Under the
woodyard wall he stopped, peering.

Cow's skull. Taken to root. No. A
boulder. Dead lump of brass,
battered.

Battlements of white wood jawed over the
wall,
clamped in frames of iron.

Palms of iron, upturned, manacled.
Deathmask of ironwood struck shadowed
across
the water.

A penny for the old guy.
He winked at the one star.
Only one this shift. Rest given up the
ghost.

(Pinter 1990, 107)

The "Proteus" section of *Ulysses* is probably the *fons et origo* of much modernist experimental prose, as this passage shows, and was possibly the source for Pinter's title—the scavenging dwarfs. On the strand of Dublin bay, in the alembic of his mind, Stephen recalls the famine of 1331: "A school of turlhide whales stranded in hot noon, spouting, hobbling in the shallows. Then from the starving cagework city a horde of jerkined dwarfs, my people, with flayer's knives, running, scaling, hacking in green blubbery whalemeat. Famine, plague and slaughters. Their blood is in me, their lusts my waves" (Joyce 1969, 56).

Allusions can be oblique and tenuous, and they can also appear positive and direct: alarmingly, they are sometimes both at once. Consider the following example. In the act one, scene one exchanges between Bertha and Robert in *Exiles*, Bertha surmises that all men, including Robert, are flattered by the admiration of women and respond with appropriate love language. Somewhat resentful, Robert asks, with Richard in mind, "All then—without exception? Or with one exception?" (1962, 36). In Pinter's *Landscape*, written in 1967, Beth's reverie, in a context of love and betrayal, includes memories, true or fabricated, of attentive lovers: "If they touched the back of my neck, or my hand, it was done so lightly. Without exception. With one exception" (1968, 12). Perhaps Pinter had been reading *Exiles* at that time, perhaps it was something from Joyce embedded in his unconscious from the distant past, perhaps it is pure coincidence? However, the more one studies the literary imagination and the psychology of creation, the more question-begging that word 'coincidence' becomes. Reporting on the London production of *Landscape* and *Silence*, Clive Barnes identified time, memory and allusiveness in these plays with the

work of Joyce (1969, 34). The question of influence, however, has a further dimension more profound than that of early reading or allusion—the Joycean and Pinteresque ‘epiphany’.

Stephen Hero catches a particular fragment of dialogue as he wanders round Dublin which initiates a kind of aesthetic program: “This triviality made him think of collecting many such moments together in a book of epiphanies. By an epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself” (Joyce 1944, 210-11). In assembling these early epiphanies Robert Scholes and Richard M. Kain follow Stephen’s division into two kinds, “narrative” (or “lyric”) and “dramatic”. The narrative epiphanies “present for the most part ‘memorable phases’ of Joyce’s mind—as he observes, reminisces or dreams. The epiphanies of the second kind ... dispense with the narrator and focus more on ‘vulgarity of speech or gesture’” (1965, 3-4). These roughly correspond to the subjective and objective worlds, the mind of Stephen Hero and his environment. Put another way, there is an implicit distinction here between the spiritual and the existential which has a correlation in the aesthetic and the material.

The evidence of Pinter’s early sketches, particularly “Last To Go”, “All That” and “The Black and White”, indicates that in that early period, after leaving the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, he wandered around London, like Joyce and Stephen round Dublin, absorbing the epiphanic moment; “I used to ... spend quite a lot of time wandering round the deserted town at night waiting for the all-night buses back home” (*Times* 1959, 4). Pinter’s early revue sketches are existential epiphanies which reveal the phenomenological matrix of his early dramatic writing. Just as Joyce incorporated his epiphanies into his larger work, as Vicki Mahaffey shows (1990, 190-3), so Pinter saw the radical possibilities of developing from sketch materials, as I have argued in greater detail elsewhere (Knowles 1985). With the exception of *The Lover* (1963) every Pinter play begins with the “triviality” of “vulgarity of speech or gesture”, the quotidian repetitiveness which makes the fabric of most lives, inescapably, or “life with a small I” as Pinter put it (1976, 12-13). The radical minimalism of much of Pinter’s dramatic writing, often associated with Beckett’s theatre, takes its origin from the Joycean epiphany and the urban experience it is rooted in. Such minimalism in *Betrayal* shocked the critics since almost the whole play is composed of brief exchanges comparable to those of *Old Times*, but no critic has recognized that it is in this play that Joyce’s *Exiles* in particular has a pervasive influence.

Correspondences between *Exiles* and *Betrayal* run from the smallest detail to large-scale dramatic situation, from the occasional verbal echo and circumstantial parallel to the central conflict between friendship and betrayal particularly in the male characters. The following discussion will work from the former to the latter, a procedure which will bring out the overwhelming influence of *Exiles* on *Betrayal*.

The first casting of Pinter’s Robert and Jerry in *Betrayal* was identical to the stage directions for Richard and Robert in *Exiles*. Joyce’s Richard is “a tall athletic young man” (1962, 13) just like the wiry Daniel Massey as Robert: in contrast Joyce’s

Robert is “rather stout” (1962, 24), just like Michael Gambon as Jerry. Joyce’s Richard and Robert complement each other as writer and journalist: Pinter’s Robert and Jerry complement each other as publisher and writer’s agent. The son of Robert and Bertha, Archie, figures in *Exiles* as a paradoxical symbol, given illegitimacy, of guilt and innocence. Reference to children and the incident of Jerry playfully throwing Charlotte, Emma and Robert’s child, in the air, is a repeated image of betrayal of trust in *Betrayal* (1978a, 19-20, 100-1).

Richard’s ongoing book, which includes a fictionalized portrayal of Beatrice, is paralleled by “Casey’s” book about “Betrayal” (1978a, 78). Joyce takes advantage of a standard ‘well-made play’ device in the use of Robert’s letter: similarly, Pinter has dramatic recourse to Jerry’s letter at the American Express office in Venice which forces Emma to admit her affair to Robert. Joyce’s Robert and Pinter’s Jerry both go in for heightened romantic language in their love overtures. Richard and Bertha return to Dublin and meet Robert and Beatrice once again, after nine years. Emma admits to Jerry her confession of adultery to Robert nine years after the affair began (1968-77 as signalled by the backwards movement in all productions). Robert facetiously refers to himself as “best man” (1962, 44) on the occasion of Bertha’s running away with Richard. Jerry was literally “best man” at Robert and Emma’s wedding (1978a, 135, 139). In act three Bertha expostulates with Richard “You are a stranger ... A stranger! I am living with a stranger!” (1962, 136). In the longest speech of *Betrayal* Robert plays on relationship, title and names, and the idea of being a “stranger”: “We could be, and in fact are more vastly likely to be, total strangers ... being a total stranger ... I could very easily be a total stranger” (1978a, 80). At an early stage Robert appeals to Richard “for the sake of ... our friendship, our lifelong friendship” (1962, 45). “Your husband is my oldest friend” (1978a, 52), Jerry tactlessly reminds Emma. In the last lines of the play he drunkenly reminds Robert twice, “As you are my best and oldest friend”, “I speak as your oldest friend” (1978a, 137, 138).

The subjects of adultery, betrayal and subterfuge are as old as dramatic comedy itself and these *topoi* provided countless plots for the hugely influential French boulevard theatre of the nineteenth century and its development of the ‘well-made play’. But in *Exiles* and *Betrayal* there is a profound psychological dimension which derives directly in Joyce’s case from Ibsen and indirectly through Ibsen’s general influence on twentieth century theatre and on Pinter.

Towards the end of act one of *Exiles*, following the love overtures of Robert, Bertha is interrogated by her husband and reveals all that took place in the flirtation. In scene one of *Betrayal* the ex-lovers Jerry and Emma meet up in a pub and Emma reveals that not only are she and her husband, Robert, about to separate, but that she revealed to him “last night” (1978a, 29) her affair with his oldest friend. In act two of *Exiles* Richard makes his way to Robert Hand’s cottage at Ranelagh and confronts him with the betrayal: “I know everything. I have known for some time ... Since it began between your and her” (1962, 73-4). Robert assumes that Richard was told “This afternoon”, but Richard has to disabuse him, “No. Time after time, as it happened” (1962, 74). In scene two of

Betrayal, at Jerry's request Robert has arrived at his house where he has to reveal that Emma "didn't tell me about you and her last night. She told me about you and her four years ago" (1978a, 37). In *Exiles* we have a flirtation or "wooing" (1962, 74) as Richard describes it, in *Betrayal* a longstanding affair, but in both cases each is conducted for some time with the betrayed husband's awareness.

Robert expostulates with Richard, "And you never spoke! You only had to speak a word" (1962, 75). Jerry expostulates with Robert, "Why didn't you tell me?" (1978a, 40). Both appeal to friendship, in spite of the betrayal: Robert, "It is happening—to us" (1962, 75); Jerry, "I was your best friend" (1978, 39). Richard leaves Robert with Bertha after the confrontation in act two. Eventually Robert hesitatingly asks "Did you tell him—everything?" "Everything" (1962, 97-8) Bertha replies. Correspondingly, in scene one of *Betrayal* it eventually occurs to Jerry to ask "You didn't tell Robert about me last night, did you?" "He told me everything. I told him everything", Emma answers. Staggered, Jerry asks twice "You told him everything?" (1978a, 29).

In *Exiles* Beatrice observes that "It is hard to know anyone but oneself" (1962, 16), yet within the course of the play the motives of the characters, however complex, find a voice. On the other hand, almost a principle of Pinter's dramatic writing has been a denial of even Beatrice's statement. Thus inferences may be drawn, surmises made, hypotheses put, by audience and critics, but Pinter's characters rarely ever rise to a trustworthy confessional bait. How can Jerry harbour the illusion of friendship while betraying his best friend over many years? Why does Pinter's Robert remain silent over the four years that he has known of the affair? One answer may be posited by a gendered reading of the play as a study in the primacy of male bonding over the values of heterosexual faithfulness (Knowles 1995, 141-47). Beatrice admits to Richard that she once saw "a pale reflection" (1962, 19) of Robert in him. Sedulously placed detail within *Betrayal* shows that Jerry's life has been virtually a mirror image of that of Robert. The homoerotic element beneath evident adulation, imitation and emulation is more than hinted at in Robert's mockingly revealing remarks to Emma: "I've always liked Jerry. To be honest, I've always liked him rather more than I've liked you. Maybe I should have had an affair with him myself" (1978a, 87). With Pinter, as with Chekhov, we are so often left with a gnawing, oblique subtext. But this manifest relationship between Joyce and Pinter's plays provides an opportunity for a unique kind of structuralist criticism.

Acts one and two of *Exiles* provide a kind of archaeological foundation for the structure of scenes one and two of *Betrayal*. The opening of *Betrayal* is set in 1977 before the backward movement begins, taking us to 1968 in the play, but also back to 1970 in Pinter's career, and his direction of *Exiles*. By way of this literary tunnelling we can discover the psychological depths of Pinter's Jerry and Robert.

In the confrontation between Richard and Robert, Robert says "You are so strong that you attract me even through her" (1962, 78). Given the situation it sounds more like an opportunist rationalization than a genuine admission: in fact a form of flattery for what he knows is the greater sensitivity, and egoism, of Richard. Yet it reads as a revelation when taken as a possible gloss on Jerry in *Betrayal*. Though it is inchoate and beyond his

intellectual or moral understanding, for Jerry sexual betrayal becomes the closest possible last step he can take, excluding homosexuality, to be close to his oldest friend. It is difficult to think of a more ironic paradox.

Joyce's Robert rapturously envisages a Nietzschean triumph of passion over the "spectres" (1962, 88) of friendship and fidelity, but possibly more out of hope that Richard will offer up Bertha on the altar of free love than out of philosophical conviction. Richard, on the other hand, painfully goes beyond the recognition of "brotherhood" (1962, 87) and acknowledges a kind of sexual self-mortification—"I longed to be betrayed by you and by her" (1962, 87)—albeit to renew the soul by way of shame and, now, by his confession to Robert. Joyce's notes, though having a Jesuitical turn, ponder the psychoanalytical implications of flesh and spirit.

The bodily possession of Bertha by Robert, repeated often, would certainly bring into almost carnal contact the two men. Do they desire this? To be united, that is carnally through the person and body of Bertha as they cannot, without dissatisfaction and degradation—be united carnally man to man as man to woman? (1962, 157)

Joyce's questions provide a suggestive context for the implicit relationship of Jerry and Robert. Pinter has generally evaded any explication of his plays, merely redirecting the enquirer back to the text. What lies behind Robert's tight-lipped pragmatism can never be known. But this in itself tends to signal rejection of love and friendship in the tacit refusal to be engaged on these terms. Once again, perhaps *Exiles* provides a comment when, in conclusion, Richard acknowledges "a deep wound of doubt which can never be healed" (1962, 148). In an unpublished "A Note on Shakespeare", well before his career as playwright had begun, but after his encounter with Joyce's work, Pinter noted cryptically, "The wound is open. The wound is contained. The wound is peopled" (Esslin 1978, 55). Whatever "wound" Pinter's Robert carries is "contained", Richard's is "open".

Friendship and betrayal in *Exiles* is part of the larger context of all of Joyce's writing as Morton P. Levitt has shown (1968). And the embracing context of Joyce's work is the history of Ireland with an aetiology of betrayal that reaches back at least to Judas. Thus when Richard alludes to Christ's betrayer and Robert, it is not merely histrionic but part of an enveloping allusive web in Joyce's works including such figures as Parnell, Oscar Wilde and Hamlet's father. Friendship and betrayal as a preoccupation of all of Pinter's work has gone generally unrecognised (Knowles 1984), largely because Pinter criticism had mostly revolved around a number of dominant paradigms. For Pinter the direction of *Exiles* brought into focus his life-long concerns, and those of the great Irishman, for whom he has had a life-long admiration.

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