Pinter's Poetry: Cognitive Poetics and Other Approaches

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Abstract Nobel prize winner Harold Pinter is justly celebrated for his prolific dramatic achievements.Yet his poetic output has been neglected. His first love was poetry which he wrote throughout his life.This paper examines his poetic writing throughout his career culminating in his late poems focusing on mortality, the loss of his father,the diagnosis of Pinter's own terminal illness from cancer of the throat and other subjects. A brief comparison is suggested between Pinter's poetry and that of contemporaries such as Larkin and W S Graham. Cognitive and other approaches are utilized to illuminate Pinter's diverse and powerful poetry.
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Very little, if any, critical attention has been paid to the poetry of Harold Pinter (1930-2008), the Nobel Prize winner chiefly noted as a dramatist. His drama contains fine sustained poetic passages such as paeans to the bus routes of his native city London the setting of his plays, flights of fantasy, dreams, largely of a sexual nature of his characters, their memories real or imagined. These passages, too, have not merited the attention they deserve. However, my focus is not his dramatic texts but his poetry.

Poetry is a form Pinter was always interested in and practiced. His first publication was the poem "Dawn," which appeared while he was at school in his

school magazine, the *Hackney Downs School Magazine* in the spring of 1947 (Baker and Ross 127). For more than over sixty years, he produced in addition to his plays, film scripts and other well-known examples of his creative output, innumerable poems including nearly a hundred that were published.

In the present paper, I will select a few of the elements of cognitive poetics by Reuven Tsur (for instance) in his many articles and books and apply them to a late Pinter poem. Amongst other elements, I shall focus on "meaning, affect, perceived qualities, and versification" and the difference between traditional scansion of metre (although as it will become evident I have tried to avoid this), sound and rhythm, and different modes of hearing speech sounds depending upon who is doing the hearing and the reading. The poem chosen was written in the last years of the poet's life. Its focus is on "emotive content" (Tsur and Sovran 272) and is an expression of basic archetypes: death, love, war. It also marks a personal turning point.

The poem has a single-word title, "Death," and is dated following its final line "1997." Following the title, there are five words and a date surrounded by parentheses: (Births and Deaths Registration Act, 1953). This poem was initially published in the *Times Literary Supplement* (11). In her "Foreword" to *Poems*, Pinter's widow, Antonia Fraser, explains that the poem "was written just after the registration of his father's death at Hove Town Hall"(5). Such a bureaucratic formality is confirmed by the statement beneath the title of the poem reading(Births and Death Registration Act, 1953).

Verse form and content interweave most powerfully in what is a poem of personal lamentation for a dead father. The poem should be read slowly to convey its verbal sound effect of lament, liturgy, or even dirge. In fact, I cannot see that reading it quickly would have much impact. It is not a political poem in terms of being a lament for the consequences of a military conflict, or for someone who has died in battle. These were interpretations I heard from its French translator, Jean Pavans, during a private conversation at a conference on Pinter held at the Jean Moulin University in Lyons France in March 2007. Such interpretation was probably encouraged by the inclusion of "Death" as the final poem in Pinter's selection of prose and poetry published by Faber and Faber in 2003 under the title *War*. In fact, in this collection, the poem was published without the detail of the "Births and Deaths Registration Act 1953." This was omitted following the title as was the "1997" dating at the foot of the poem (21). These factual details are also missing from the text of the poem in Pinter's *Various Voices: Prose, Poetry, Politics 1948-2005* (2005). There, the poem can be found on p. 262, placed as the final text

in the selection.

Now, if this account were focused on biographical interpretation rather than adapting some of the tools used in cognitive poetics — especially by Reuven Tsur, one of its leading exponents — then the poem from the biographical perspective may be regarded in terms of Pinter's attitude: a complex one to his late father with whom he argued vociferously, especially over religious practice and politics. To put it mildly, they disagreed (Baker 4-5). His father had a formal religious burial; Pinter chose not to. In the reasonably strict Eastern European Jewish religious tradition to which his father basically adhered, there are religious ritual practices to be followed for burial. An important one is the washing of the dead body. From this perspective, the line "did you wash the dead body" might well be read as Pinter's father addressing and questioning his son or those preparing the body for burial.

The poem using a biographical reading has many strands of personal meaning related to the death of somebody with whom the poet had a love-hate relationship and to the poet's increasing awareness of his own mortality. Pinter was born in 1930; the poem is dated 1997, and by then, some of his closest friends had died. The year 1997 is also just before his life-threatening throat cancer was diagnosed. Very few survive this, and its diagnosis led to a series of operations that plagued Pinter's remaining years. He died in 2008. The obsession with mortality and mutability in the poem are, of course, found throughout his output. The archetypes are present: love, death, mortality, the passing of time, the transitory nature of existence, conflict, and war. "War" in this context means, I think, conflict with the self or the person being addressed rather than military engagement. It need hardly be said that archetypal patterns are important to cognitive poetics (Tsur, *Toward a Theory* 355-84).

To continue with some additional thoughts and ideas: the use of repetition with variation, a device common to many of Pinter's poems, is a time process. This raises questions related to time and history in relation to this particular poem and other poems such as will they last, will they mean anything in the future, and do they mean anything now? The application of cognitive poetic tools may allow for an affirmative answer to each of these questions. Regarding the speech-driven nature of the poem and the manner in which speech gives writing a direction, it gives a time as well as an embodied spacio/temporal situation. Pinter's drama is noted for its pauses that emphasize the arbitrary relationship between the written text and the duration or the non-use of the voice by characters re-creating the written pauses. The question marks found in the poem create pauses. As a dramatist, Pinter's interest in language would be speech (language) as much as

"written" language or at least the relationships between them (an observation I owe to Ian Davidson of the University of Bangor, Wales: private communication).

I will deliberately refrain from a metrical explication of this free verse poem, the reason being that to do so would be difficult and controversial and dependent upon performance. If undertaken the following are *unstressed words and lines*: the word "was" in the opening line; "when" in the third line; "was" in the last line of the opening verse; "was" in the second verse. Unstressed in the third verse: the opening line "was"; and the six occurrences of "or" in the third verse. In the fourth verse, both occurrences of "the"; and in its last line, "it" is unstressed. In the fifth single line verse, "the," "or," and "a" are unstressed. In the penultimate verse, in the first line, the words "made" and "the"; in the second line "the"; also in the third line and in the last line the word "was." Unstressed in the final verse: "the" in the opening line; "its" in the next; "the" in the third; "it" in the fourth. The rhythmic pattern depends upon the repetition of words, of sounds, of beats, of monosyllables, of questions, and a cumulative pronoun effect.

The poem contains characteristic Pinter hallmarks: repetition of words, letters, syllables, the language of interrogation through incessant repetitive questions, powerful echoing pronoun usage. Only the opening two lines of the third verse and the five lines of the final verse are run-on lines and do not contain questions. There are seven verses; of these, the first, third, and fourth have three lines. The second and the fifth verses are a single line containing a question: in the first instance, "Who was the dead body?" and in the other, "Was the dead body naked or dressed for a journey?" The sixth verse has four lines, each of which is a question that is either a direct question that expects a response from an understated presence or is rhetorical (as is the case in many of Pinter's plays).

Particularly effective also is the use of anaphora: "the deliberate repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of each one of a sequence of sentences, paragraphs, lines of verse or stanzas" (Abrams 279). Anaphora reverberates throughout the poem. There is also in the poem in the first two lines of the fourth verse the use of epistrophe: the reversal of anaphora; in other words, the repeating of words at the end of rather than at the beginning of poetic units. Both anaphora and epistrophe may well serve as an important structuring element in free verse (Tsur and Sovran 523 and Tsur, *Toward a Theory* 471-72), as is the case in this particular poem. The word "was" appears as the opening word of the first two lines of the fourth verse and the word "abandoned" followed by a question mark is the final word of each of the three lines of this verse.

The final, seventh verse is the only one to have five lines without a question

mark at the conclusion of each of its poetic lines. The final verse is a variation from the pattern of the other verses. The first verse has four lines. The second verse one line. The third and fourth verses three lines each. The fifth verse is a single line. The sixth and penultimate verse has four lines, each concluding with a question mark in common with the proceeding lines in the poem with the exception of the opening two lines of the third verse. Each of the five lines of the final verse begins with the words "Did you" followed by a verb of action: to wash, to close, to bury, to leave and to kiss. These imply a question or questions but they are not followed by a question mark at the conclusion of the line.

The first line and second lines of the third verse are run-on lines. So are each of the lines of the final verse with the punctuation omitted even at the end of the last line of the poem: "Did you kiss the dead body." The vocabulary of this concluding verse is worthy of attention, too. There are five instances of the words "Did," with each instance being at the beginning of the line and the word capitalized, and the possessive pronoun "you" with each instance placed as the second word in each line. There are three instances in the verse of the definite pronoun "the": it is placed in the first, third and final line. The pronoun refers to another word used three times in this final verse, "body" also in the same lines as "the," in each case as the final word of the line. Where the pronoun is absent in the second and fourth lines, there is instead the word "it" and "its" placed as the penultimate word of the line.

The three words "the dead body" reverberate throughout the poem. They are found four times in the opening four line verse. Once in the second single line verse: in the third verse the third line has the two words "the dead" with "body" at the end of the line separated by two words "and abandoned" from "dead". In the fourth triple line verse, the triple formulation is found again. In the fifth single line verse, the words appear once. They occur on four occasions in the sixth verse where the placement is interesting. In the first two lines, the last four words read "the dead body dead" with the word "dead" repeated. In the third line, the formulation is "the dead body," and in the fourth line, there is a variant on the pattern of the opening two lines with the insertion of the past tense first and third tense of the singular "be": "the dead body was dead." Each of these four lines is followed by a question mark. In the final verse, the triple formulation "the dead body" is found twice, placed at the end of the opening and the closing lines. The noun "body" occurs three times and in each instance at the end of a line: the first, third, and final line. In the third line, it is "the body" rather than "the dead body" as in the other two instances.

To repeat, the lines of the last verse do not finish with the question mark device. The lines of the last verse are examples of "enjambment," they run on and

do not experience a natural pause that follows in grammatical or performativity a question mark. They are not end-stopped as the other lines and verses are but convey in this final verse what Tsur refers to as a "divergent, fluid structure" (*Playing by Ear* 154). This is somewhat ironic in terms of meaning as the subject of the poem is "Death" and the poet's reaction to it, with death generally perceived, as final, as end stopped rather than run on.

Let me return to meaning and interpretation subsequently. With exceptions — for instance of the adjectival "abandoned" occurring four times in the poem, three times in the fourth verse and in the penultimate line of the poem — most of the words in the poem are monosyllabic. Other exceptions in formal terms and in performance or recitation — an area explored in Tsur's most recent work (*Playing by Ear*) — occur in the third verse with the two-syllable words "father," "daughter," "brother" — possibly "uncle" — "sister," "mother," in the fifth single line verse "naked" and "dressed" and in the penultimate verse "declare," which occurs twice. There are, to my ear, no words that could be read as more than one or two syllables in the poem, except as stated the word "abandoned." Indeed, I would be most surprised to hear a variation in the perceptions of the transmission the communication of the one and two syllabic words in the poem.

This analysis has utilized a few of the tools of cognitive poetics found especially in the work of Reuven Tsur. Attention has been paid to rhythm, to patterns of versification, to linguistic patterns, to repetition and to performance, to speech sounds, to the poetic mode of speech perception. Tsur's ideas are complex and very theoretical. They are illustrations of what cognitive critics are interested in: how the mind "understands" the poem through repetition rather than just counting or enumerating the repetitions. My intention has been to demonstrate that the application of tools used by Tsur and others illuminate "meaning, affect, perceived qualities and versification" (Tsur and Sovran 273) in Pinter's poem "Death." But Tsur and the poetics of cognition are a potentially helpful tool rather than THE tool to understand Pinter's poem.

To conclude, I have primarily been concerned with my reactions as a reader, as a critic, and as an enthusiastic admirer of Pinter's poetry, to a single poem of his. This presentation has, to repeat, used a few of the tools of analysis suggested by Tsur in his work.

Reading through the special issue ofthe journal *Style* in the fall of 2014, devoted to the subject of "Cognitive Literary Study: Second Generation Approaches," I was struck by some observations that are particularly pertinent to what has been said. In their "Introduction: What is the 'Second Generation,'"

Karin Kukkonen and Marco Caracciolo write "as second-generation approaches to [cognitive] literary study develop, they will also need to find ways to address the embodied engagements of poetry (in particular with respect to the study of rhythm and meter)" (270). I take it that Tsur's work belongs to the first generation of cognitive literary study. By "embodied," I read them to mean those patterns inherent in the poem and in the reader's minds — the second is much more complex to determine than the first. Thus, for instance, to take two instances, if a poet chooses to use a sonnet form, then the assumption is that the poet is aware of the rules of engagement (the embodied engagements, 14 lines, for instance) with the sonnet, and I suppose, by implication the reader is too or the reader will learn these rules of engagement. With free verse forms in Pinter's case, there is no necessity to have a "combination of a regular metrical pattern and a consistent line length" (Cooper 522).

Another passage that struck me occurred in the excellent review essay in the fall 2014 issue of *Style* by Shang Biwu. In his "Cognitive Literary Science: Developments and Perspectives," Biwu draws attention to the diverse nature of cognitive literary criticism. He notes in one of the collections he assesses, *Cognitive Literary Studies: Current Themes and New Directions*, the "attempt to explore the cognitive processes of the syllable counting in metrical poetry and [the suggestion] that there are connections between the mental abilities involved in language, metrical verse, and music" (414). Such observations draw attention to areas as yet insufficiently explored — the connections between language, metrical verse, music and mental "abilities." Clearly such observations have relevance to perceptions of Pinter's poem.

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