Violence in Post-War Drama Osborne, Pinter and Bond

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Part I

Framework

Christopher Innes, begins his 'Theatre after two World Wars', by asserting that the correlation between society and theatre had never been as comprehensive as in the post-war periods. Beginning from the aftermath of the First World War, this trend in play-people dynamics have become the norm. He says that even during the French Revolution or the Napoleonic times, such a connection was not present.

Cultural traditions had largely survived intact through previous conflicts, which were relatively limited in scope.¹

This may sound curious as we have seen drama being influenced by all kinds of socio-cultural events. From Elizabethan history and history-oriented plays to Restoration Comedy of Manners, history of literature has not really been independent of other kinds of history. But the change lies in a different mode altogether. Whereas these earlier drama has mainly been reflective – something quite clear in case of Restoration Comedy of Manners – the new idea is one of complete involvement, that of a non-choric kind of attempt at influence and manipulation of audience through commitment to a set of ideas. The other factor, of course, is that the impact of the two great wars on drama was not merely philosophical or

theoretical, particularly so since the wars were no longer distant affairs in which only soldiers died. These wars had invaded homes, brought direct death and destruction to civilian life. Violence, not only of the social kind, but of the greater political kind was now quite familiar. During the 1920s the slogan 'Theatre is a Weapon' had come into being.² By this time manipulation of the theatrical arts for propaganda purposes had become a global practice. In England, the USA and even in defeated Germany, a lot of money went into constructing and reconstructing theatre venues. As a matter of fact this is the time when plenty of drama departments – quite a few non-theoretical – came into being. The training for entertainers was a social requirement; with entire cities destroyed, morale-boosting was a major concern. Of course, these theatres rarely experimented with antiestablishment material, and being state-sponsored, were more conventional and 'classical' looking for age-old concepts of identity and social catharsis. Having said that, one must clarify, in Russia and Germany, due to the new and renovative regimes respectively, newer forms with new dominant ideologies did evolve. In England the form and content of drama remained unadventurous because of both the traditional English complacency and the pride of victory.³

Even in the countries where there were a lot of experimentation with theatrical forms and content, the commercial interests remained as significant as ever. Morale boosting through entertainment required the older, perhaps slightly more stringently selected, texts to reappear. And reappear they did with handsome box-office success.⁴ There was no question of any new shape of audience participation. The manipulation of reception followed the age old trends. Even under apparent normal situations mainstream drama demanded a very traditional response. Politics of the time remained very subtle or too loud, and the avant-garde remained less popular than the brazenly commercial. The Theatre of Cruelty, for instance, indulged in bloodshed and suffering and the point that Antonin Artaud made was that it was "rigour, an implacable determination to confront and experience the dark creative principle at the heart of being" that he was aiming to present. He wrote,

Violent, concentrated action is like lyricism; it calls forth supernatural imagery, a bloodshed of images, a bloody spirit of images inside the poet's head as well as in the audience's.

Whatever conflicts may obsess the mentality of the times, I defy any spectator

infused with the blood of violent scenes, who has felt higher action pass through him, who has seen the rare, fundamental motions of his thought illuminated in extraordinary events – violence and bloodshed having been placed at the service of violence in thought – once outside the theatre, I defy him to indulge in thoughts of war, riot or motiveless murder.⁶

Artaud admits that this may seem 'puerile', but his faith is unyielding. Similar experimentation earlier was the Theatre of the Grotesque⁷, or thirty years later we find Theatre of Panic.⁸ According to Innes,

Though short-lived in their intensity, and generating opposition rather than imitation because of their extremism, it is the expressionist, dadaist, futurist, and surrealist movements, the theatres of the grotesque or cruelty, cabaret or agitprop, that become representative of 'modern' theatre.⁹

This, of course, is a completely academic perception. But as far as popular conception and worldview is concerned, the traditional and the safe also have a major role to play.

But the popular imagination soon came under the arc of a new breed of drama. In 1919/1920 Leopold Jessner staged Friedrich von Schiller's Wilhelm Tell. Jessner identified the villain with the old regime of the dethroned Kaiser and his play was full of anti-Semitic feeling – a result perhaps of the support from the new socialist establishment. A shouting match ensued between the actors and the audience¹⁰ and this perhaps paved the way for the new idea of antagonism between the stage and the audience, in which the audience refuses to be a mere bystander. This was an idea that was picked up by Bertolt Brecht. In the Agitprop form drama came to the barest minimum. With themes such as contemporary 'villains' facing mock trials, news report performances, the intent was forthright propaganda, and this worked for all sides of morality and politics.¹¹ But the distance between the audience and the stage was minimized, and audience-baiting was something that the (mostly) travelling troupes were aiming for. Brecht in his Epic Theatre was looking for an objective audience who would rationally navigate the plays and will not respond emotionally, the audience would remain conscious of itself – the lights in the auditorium would remain on 12 - and of the unreality of the stage and would participate in a completely intellectual manner. There is no requirement for any willing suspension of disbelief, because the stage will not demand any such. George

Brandt writes,

Brecht introduced the so-called ALIENATION effect and would employ a number of distancing devices, some borrowed from oriental theatre, such as direct address to the audience; stylized speech, including rhyming, free and blank verse; the insertion of songs in sharp contrast to the surrounding dialogue; a narrator or a chorus; miming and masks. He would expose stage lighting and illuminate the action with bright, untinted light, openly show the source of (live or recorded) music, identify scenes by means of dropped-in or projected captions and use half-tabs (curtains) that only partially concealed scene changes, thus reminding the audience that they were in a theatre.¹³

Brecht continued from Erwin Piscator's concept of epic drama from the 1920s – a form which concentrated on social dimension responding to contemporary political movements. On the other hand, Lorca's plays while representing struggles of resistance and alienation depends on spectacles of terror and distress. Lorca aimed to free Spanish drama from traditionalist ideas. He experimented formally, using elements of classical tragedy along with forms like puppet play. He even subtitled *Yerma* 'A Tragic Poem in Three Acts and Six Scenes'. The awareness that the audience must correctly know what is being said demands the removal of all possibilities of mystification – of any kind. Lorca was looking for the perfect audience. His aim was tragedy, but he was looking for more than the traditional catharsis. Summing up the various experimentations with reception, Susan Bennett writes,

The different and disparate experiments of such key figures have brought about a devaluation of theatre as well as a continuing attempt to establish new products in new venues for new audiences. As a result, at the end of the twentieth century there was a multiplicity of theatre practices which sought out the theatre audience as co-creator of performance.¹⁷

This variety of experimentation with audience reception remained largely inconsequential in case of English drama. Perhaps because of a major state presence, with a percentage of local taxes allotted for entertainment, the traditionality remained intact. The Arts Council subsidized regional plays and made new plays economically viable. Even when we come to *Look Back in Anger*, the play is conventional in its inception. It is with Pinter and Bond and their compatriots

that we move towards a new idiom – English yet vocal in its anti-establishment stance. In these two playwrights we see two different types of exploitation of audience response. The political topicality and the political agenda become subtly interwoven in case of Pinter, and explode through visual exempla of violence in case of Bond.

Part II

Plays and Playwrights

...cultural processes must not be assumed to be merely adaptive, extensive, and incorporative. Authentic breaks within and beyond it, in specific social conditions which can vary from the extreme isolation to pre-revolutionary breakdowns and actual revolutionary activity, have often in fact occurred. And we are better able to see this, alongside more general recognition of the insistent pressures and limits of the hegemonic, if we develop modes of analysis which instead of reducing works to be finished products, and activities to fixed positions, are capable of discerning, in good faith, the finite but significant openness of actual initiatives and contributions.

Raymond Williams, Keywords¹⁸

It is not before the 1960s and 1970s that we find a considerable change in attitude in English drama. As J.L. Styan points out,

A dozen young playwrights ransacked the 'imaginary museum' of past styles and techniques of stage presentation, and added touches of their own culled from the circus and the comic strip. They mixed realism and symbolism in a happy disregard for academic proprieties and artistic restraint.¹⁹

Howard Brenton's *Christie in Love* and *Hitler Dances* or Snoo Wilson's *Vampire* show different aspects of violation and different faces of violence. None of these texts are canonical in any global sense and they are mostly unknown. One may say that their impact was barely more than temporary. But if we move back slightly and look at the 50s, then the dominant play will seem somewhat different. What we find in John Osborne is a controlled expression of anger and contained violence. This is the classic 'acceptable' English response to any societal problem. It does not indulge in the illegal, it does not encourage any form of violation which is more than domestic, and it certainly does not represent any majority of reality. As G.J.V. Prasad points out,

True, Raymond Williams and the others of the New Left did renounce these playwrights for showing no knowledge of the life of the working class but, ironically, these playwrights have often been identified with the same New Left.²⁰

Someshwar Sati comments,

The aspirations associated with rebellion must unconditionally and necessarily be firmly entrenched in the ideals of committed political engagement that feverishly advocate the possibility of staging a desired social transformation through concrete and concerted action. *Look Back in Anger* stands in polar opposition to such a postulate. The pervasive sense of powerlessness, the ceaselessly recurring gestures of negation, and the overwhelming atmosphere of disillusionment that pervades Osborne's powerful dramatic evocation of Jimmy's impotent rage seem to generate a general condition of passivity and apathy that becomes a pretext for a conformist retreat from active social and political engagement.²¹

The frustration of Jimmy Porter, finely expressed, was and remained attractive because it never asked for action, but in a safety valve kind of way, begged the authorities to take notice. Of course, as Osborne had commented in an article in 1957 called 'They Call it Cricket':

I want to make people feel, to give them lessons in feeling.²²

He was not aiming for violation or violence, but something that is quite abstract, and therefore very acceptable.

Coming to Harold Pinter we have a playwright who had been always fascinated by violence of all sorts, particularly the one which threatens the individual's rights and chosen way to live. Pinter had commented,

I wrote a short story a long time ago called "The Examination," and my ideas of violence carried on from there. That short story dealt very explicitly with two people in one room having a battle of an unspecified nature, in which the question was one of who was dominant at what point and how they were going to be dominant and what tools they would use to achieve dominance and how they would try to undermine the other person's dominance. A threat is constantly there: it's got to do with this question of being in the uppermost

position, or attempting to be.23

Pinter does not believe in overt exposition. He keeps his characters and their actions strictly in the present, and the past is at most hinted at. This helps in keeping the focus on the immediate, and by decontextualising the actions, he manages to portray the occurrences as complete in themselves, not coloured by any mystifying notion. *The Birthday Party* shows how oppressive society can be. Two men, without uniforms, badges or weapons, simply come and take a person away almost without protest. This play was a commercial failure when it was performed for the first time. It was successful only when it obtained a kind of cult status. The interrogation scene is haunting and terrifying. It is one of the best examples of how verbally one can be assaulted and psychological harm can be caused through apparently simple words.

The Caretaker, on the other hand, was Pinter's first success because it portrays the victory of some form of establishment, however dysfunctional that may be. Pinter had commented,

As far as I am concerned *The Caretaker* is funny up to a point. Beyond that point, it ceases to be funny and it is because of that point that I wrote it.²⁴

One of the most significant components that we find in this play is the attack scene in which Mick actually lays violent hand on Davies.

Mick slides across the room.

DAVIES half turns, Mick seizes his arm and forces it up his back. DAVIES screams.

Uuuuuuuhhh! Uuuuuuuhhh! What! What! What! Uuuuuuhhh!

MICK swiftly forces him on the floor, with DAVIES struggling, grimacing, whimpering and staring.

MICK holds his arms, puts his other hand to his lips, then puts his hand to DAVIES' lips. DAVIES quietens. MICK lets him go. DAVIES writhes. MICK holds out a warning finger. He then squats down to regard DAVIES. He regards him, then stands looking down on him. DAVIES massages his arm, watching MICK. MICK turns slowly to look at the room. He goes to DAVIES' bed and uncovers it. He turns, goes to the clothes horse and picks up

DAVIES' trousers. DAVIES starts to rise. MICK presses him down with his foot and stands over him. Finally he removes his foot. He examines the trousers and throws them back. DAVIES remains on the floor, crouched. MICK slowly goes to the chair, sits, and watches DAVIES, expressionless.

Silence.

MICK. What's the game?25

But this scene, being partially comic and perhaps even enjoyable as established society always plays pranks victimising the *other*, shows how casually cruel positions of power can be. To a certain extent one may sympathise with Davies – even though he tries to shift allegiance, his identity is uncertain, tries to put one brother against another, and is often fairly irritating – for one can understand his position. He comes from a complete dislocation and finding this shelter wants to ascertain his situation by the only means that society has taught him. He has experienced violence, something from which he was rescued at the very beginning of the play and that has turned him into what he is. Bill Naismith comments,

The process of daily survival, as a solitary figure, has over many years caused Davies to confuse details of his past. It is possible that he had a wife and left her and that he was once in the services 'over there' (presumably before the Second World War).²⁶

Not only identity, but his self vis-à-vis society, has been affected. Mick is the only figure who dominates, though Aston has his moments, but Aston also comes with the baggage of a fractured past.

Mountain Language is one of the most powerful political plays by Pinter. This 'story' of linguistic dominance involving the centre and the marginalized territories contains many scenes of suggested and reported violence. We see here hooded men being tortured, women bitten by dogs.

The WOMAN slowly lifts her hand. He peers at it.

Who did this? Who bit you?

YOUNG WOMAN

A Doberman pinscher.

OFFICER

Which one? Pause. Which one? Pause. Sergeant! SERGEANT steps forward. **SERGEANT** Sir! **OFFICER** Look at this woman's hand. I think the thumb is going to come off. (To ELDERLY WOMAN) Who did this? She stares at him. Who did this? YOUNG WOMAN A big dog. **OFFICER** What was his name? Pause.

What was his name?

Pause.

Every dog has a *name*! They answer to their name. They are given a name by their parents and that is their name, that is their *name*! Before they bite, the *state* their name. It's a formal procedure. They state their name and then they bite. What was his name? If you tell me one of our dogs bit this woman without giving his name I will have that dog shot!

Silence.27

And in section 3,

A HOODED MAN held up by the GUARD and the SERGEANT. The YOUNG WOMAN at a distance from them, staring at them.

SERGEANT

What is this, a reception for Lady Duck Muck? Where's the bloody Babychum? Who's got the bloody Babychum for Lady Duck Muck?

He goes to the YOUNG WOMAN.

Hello, Miss. Sorry. A bit of breakdown in administration, I'm afraid. They've sent you through the wrong door. Unbelievable. Someone'll be done for this. Anyway, in the meantime, what can I do for you, dear lady, as they used to say in the movies.²⁸

Such powerful images serve to disturb and to question various certainties that dominate the world.

Edward Bond's experimentations with violence are one of the major turning points in English drama. He had began his Author's Preface to *Lear* saying,

I write about violence as naturally as Jane Austen wrote about manners. Violence shapes and obsesses our society, and if we do not stop being violent we have no future. People who do not want writers to write about violence want to stop them writing about us and our time. It would be immoral not to write about violence.²⁹

Comparing human beings to animals and asserting that the latter's violence is so designed as not to endanger their species, Bond defines human aggression:

There is no evidence of an aggressive *need*, as there is of sexual and feeding *needs*. We respond aggressively when we are constantly deprived of our physical and emotional needs, or when we are threatened with this; and if we are constantly deprived and threatened in this way – as human being are now – we live in a constant state of aggression.³⁰

Bond goes into the commercial nature of the origin of aggression,

We can see that most men are spending their lives doing things for which they are not biologically designed. We are not designed for our production lines, housing blocks, even cars; and these things are not designed for us. They are designed, basically, to make profit. And because we do not even need most of the things we waste our lives in producing, we have to be surrounded by commercial propaganda to make us buy them. This life is so unnatural for us that, for straightforward biological reasons, we become tense, nervous and aggressive, and these characteristics are fed back into our young. Tension and aggression are becoming the markings of our species.³¹

While rounding up his argument he says,

It is so easy to subordinate justice to power, but when this happens power takes on the dynamics and dialectics of aggression, and then nothing is really changed. Marx did not know about this problem and Lenin discovered it when it was too late.³²

The faith that man is not intrinsically ferocious is something that redeems much of Bond's ultra-violent presentations.

When Bond presented *Saved* to the Lord Chamberlain's office, permission for performance was denied. The Royal Court Theatre arranged for a private production in which the audience was 'invited' thus escaping all problems. The reason behind this objection was the 'nasty' scene in which a baby is stoned to death in a pram by a group of youths. They keep playing with it not only with stones but also with lighted matches. Finally someone throws a stone at it point blank, finally killing it (scene six).³³ This scene was critically denounced by almost everyone. The correspondent to *The Times* wrote that Bond is interested in "a systematic degradation of the human animal" and that Bond,

... has written a work which will supply valuable ammunition to those who attack modern drama as half-baked, gratuitously violent, and squalid. Why on earth did the theatre accept it? . . . One can no longer take cover behind the phrase 'bad taste' in the face of such material. But one has a right to demand what purpose it fulfills.³⁴

But among its champions was Laurence Olivier who commented on *The Observer* that this is a play for "grown-ups" and they should have the courage to face such scenes.³⁵ When a list of the hundred eminent plays of the twentieth century was made by playwrights, actors, other theatre professionals and journalists,

Saved featured in number eleven.

We see in his Lear a gradual movement towards self-recognition, but this path is presented not through lyrical or symbolic representations, but through concrete scenes of violence. The play ends with this Lear being shot by one of the soldiers who is trying to defend the Wall that Lear himself had started to build. The Wall is designed to represent the idea that whichever regime may come to power, the ultimate equations remain the same just like the instinct of consolidating and preserving power. The Wall that Lear had started, he himself wants to break realizing the folly and actual impact over his realm, but the new regime, which began its rebellion protesting the wall, now, is obsessed with it. The gradual progression of power shifts is marked by one violent act after the other. We see Lear shooting a worker at the very beginning. His soldiers refuse to obey his orders so he does it himself – the power-figure becomes the executioner. When the two daughters, Bodice and Fontanelle, come to power, we have scenes in which Warrington is casually tortured by the soldiers and suffers the sadistic fantasies of the sisters (Act One, scene four), there is a carnage in the house in which Lear finds shelter (Act One, scene seven); after the revolution in prison Fontanelle is shot from behind and an autopsy done then and there and Bodice is bayoneted to death

SOLDIER N moves behind BODICE with a pistol. She sees him and fights furiously. SOLDIER M and O join in. They can't see to aim. SOLDIER O fixes a bayonet. BODICE bites SOLDIER M.

SOLDIER M. Bitch.

SOLDIER M throws her to the ground again. She writhes away and screams.

'Old'er still!

SOLDIER N kicks her. SOLDIER M and N pinion her with their boots. She writhes and screams.

'Old 'er! 'Old 'er!

SOLDIER O bayonets her three times. Slight pause. She writhes. He bayonets her once again. She gives a spasm and dies.³⁶

in the same scene Lear's eyes are removed by a device (Act Two, scene six);

FOURTH PRISONER (*produces a tool*). Here's a device I perfected on dogs for removing human eyes.

LEAR. No, no. you mustn't touch my eyes. I must have my eyes!

FOURTH PRISONER. With this device you extract the eye undamaged and then it can be put to good use. It's based on a scouting gadget I had as a boy.

SOLDIER N. Get on. It's late.

FOURTH PRISONER. Understand, this isn't an instrument of torture, but a scientific device. See how it clips the lid back to leave it unmarked.

LEAR. No - no!

FOURTH PRISONER. Nice and steady. (He removes one of Lear's eyes.)

LEAR. Aahh!

FOURTH PRISONER. Note how the eye passes into the lower chamber and is received into a soothing solution of formaldehyde crystals. One more, please. (*He removes Lear's other eye.*)³⁷

Finally Lear's death on the wall – all these occur on stage and with vivid detail. Criticism of this play was quite interesting, it was evident that the critics did not like the play – the play was not a so-called commercial success as well – but they did not want to commit, probably because of the reversals they had to suffer after the delayed critical success of *Saved*. But the best conclusion was drawn by Anthony Masters when he wrote, "the reality of the violence was the true horror."³⁸ Bond finds success in this awareness, his agenda of communicating the *actual* situation is something that the audience grasps from both these plays. The shock drives home the point. This is not the comfortably wound up reality which allows for perfect catharsis – this is a form that increases tensions and makes people aware of what is what offering no false, if any at all, solutions.

In conclusion, one may look quickly at a couple of plays that has tried to elicit similar response in recent times. Sarah Kane had written various plays which dealt with shocking use of sex and violence. Her most famous play perhaps is *Blasted* (first production 1993) which was vehemently denounced by critics but later was accepted by most. Even Michael Billington changed his hostile stance, especially after Harold Pinter had praised her work at her memorial service.³⁹ Recently we

have had plays like Stella Feehily's *Dreams of Violence* (2009) in which we see the protagonist having an activist life with her share of problems with her family, particularly with her ex-pop star mother; but this life is made unsettling by her dreams of violence.⁴⁰

With the range of choice as far as entertainment is concerned getting larger every day, the audience is learning to have greater control. Perhaps this results in a situation of selfishness in which community response will become secondary, if important at all. But response in the age of TRP must not be critically neglected. Portrayals of violence, of the more physical kind, involves an issue that concerns not only the playwright's vision, but also how the audience reacts to it. Unlike in the Elizabethan theatre, where the spectators were much more familiar with blood and gore with bear-baiting or public hangings taking place in public, the violence now represents more than mere spectacle or commercial interests. The response to violence is perhaps one of the best markers of civilization; it is also one of the best methods of criticism, unless otherwise conditioned.

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Note:

- 1. Christopher Innes, 'Theatre after the two World Wars', ed. John Russell Brown, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995, p 380.
- 2. Innes 382.
- 3. Innes 383.
- 4. Innes 385.
- 5. Marvin Carlson, 'Theatre of Cruelty', Ed. Colin Chambers, *The Continuum*

- Companion to Twentieth Century Theatre, Continuum, London, 2002, pp 766-767.
- 6. Antonin Artaud, 'No More Masterpieces', reprinted in *Modern European Drama: Background Prose Readings*, Worldview, Delhi, 2004, 41.
- 7. "A movement in Italian drama during and after the First World War involving such authors as CHIARELLI, Roso di San Secondo (1887-1956) and most prominently, PIRANDELLO. It utilized fantasy to depict contrasts between appearance and reality, faces and masks, pathetic situations and farcical humour." Marvin Carlson, Continuum 767.
- 8. Practised by French playwrights in the 1960s. "...emphasized improvisation, chance and the juxtaposition of unlikely elements within a theatrical ritual. Part revolutionary theory, part carnivalesque SATIRE, theatre of panic recalled the similar earlier experiments of JARRY and DADA." Marvin Carlson, Continuum 767.
- 9. Innes 385.
- 10. Innes 387.
- 11. Innes 395.
- 12. Innes 404.
- 13. Continuum 254.
- 14. Continuum 254.
- 15. Frederico Garcia Lorca, *Four Major Plays*, trans. John Edmunds, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Nicholas Round, Introduction, Frederico Garcia Lorca, Four Major Plays xxiiixxiv.
- 17. Susan Bennett, 'Audience', Continuum 49-50.
- 18. Lawrence and Karim 187.
- 19. J.L. Styan, *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice: Volume 2: Symbolism, surrealism and the absurd*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, 172.

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- 30. Lear Lvii-Lviii.
- 31. Lear Lxii.
- 32. Lear Lxv.
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- 34. Quoted in Modern Drama in Theory and Practice: Volume I, 161.
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- 36. Lear 61.
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