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SYMBOLISM OF CELEBRATION IN PINTER'S *BIRTHDAY PARTY*, *PARTY TIME*, *COUNTERBLAST* AND *CELEBRATION*¹

The paper brings together Harold Pinter's 'celebration' plays *The Birthday Party*, *Party Time*, and *Celebration*, and his political activism directed against the mock celebratory actions by NATO military alliance dramatized in his TV documentary *Counterblast* and expressed in his numerous speeches and addresses.

Key words: Pinter, celebration, mock ritual, bombing, crime

In several of his plays Pinter introduces variations of the theme of celebration highlighting the significance of its double meaning for the celebrators, malignant wielders of power, and their victims. Celebrations in Pinter's plays are never what they seem to be, they are charged with irony and cynicism, and are among Pinter's central political metaphors. Apart from exploring the plays in question, the paper will focus on the celebration in the documentary *Counterblast*, made during the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, timed to be a birthday present for the 50th anniversary of this military alliance. In this documentary, situations from Pinter's *The Birthday Party* seem to have come true. The play's protagonist Stanley has the double meaning of a scapegoat: he is a persecuted rebel against the imposed division between the Necessary and the Possible who has tried to escape persecution, but also a professional and human failure with a guilty conscience. The cynicism of the punishment is that Stanley is ultimately forced to accept his 'birthday celebration', the initiation into a 'new life', after he has been completely broken by interrogation and possible torture. Similarly, in the later *Party Time* there is only one person, Jimmy, who disrupts the consensus - harmony of the 'cast iron' peace in the country, and who is consequently eliminated.

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In his *Counterblast* Harold Pinter stood in front of the NATO symbol, reminding his audience that this organization is celebrating its 50th birthday. This time Pinter presented a whole nation as a scapegoat. During the 1996 political protests NATO countries glorified the people of Belgrade and Serbia but just on that one occasion, to be after that systematically recast into the European monster. In the 1999 war it was ultimately the people who received punishment for their leaders' refusal to accept NATO's peaceful occupation of the country.

Developments since 1999 have been the extension of the Pinteresque situation: the rebel country has been broken and tamed, made to accept NATO's justice and offered membership as a special gift. In the 2000 play *Celebration*, Pinter seems to show what comes after the desolation called peace, to paraphrase Tacitus' description of Pax Romana: strategic consulting without guns, keeping peace worldwide by insensitive and implicitly dangerous celebrators. Harold Pinter's plays thus sometimes anticipate life as does *The Birthday Party* with the ominous atmosphere surrounding the supposed "birthday celebration". The dramatized victimization presented in the TV documentary *Counterblast* resembles the victimization shown in the early play.

The very origin of the words "birthday" and "celebration" indicate life-enhancing festivity, while their cynical versions stress cruelty and death. The word *celebration* derived from the Latin *celebrere* means 'to go in great numbers, to commemorate an anniversary or holiday with festivity, to perform a religious ceremony' (Webster, 1977:290). The earliest ritual, informs James Frazer, was an art, the sympathetic magic aimed at preserving life, not destroying it (Frazer, 1993:11-48). Stanley's treatment by Goldberg and MacCann resembles distorted initiatory rites which Frazer described as the ritual of death and resurrection, which young boys underwent in puberty. It consisted of pretence of killing the young man and bringing him to life again, sometimes by throwing him into a death-like trance (Frazer: 691-701).

Rites, wrote Joseph Campbell, served 'to translate the individual's life-crises and life-deeds into classic, impersonal forms'. All members of a society participated in the ceremonial, the whole society thus becoming visible to itself as an imperishable living unit.' (Campbell, 1975:324) Today, however, when the social unit is not a carrier of religious content, but an economic-political organization, ritual, morality and art are in full decay, according to this author. (Frazer: 328)

The mock ritualistic tone of *The Birthday Party* is signaled by supposedly primal manifestations of the protagonist Stanley who is seen at the end of Act One frenziedly beating his drum, and in the end of

Act Two following his instincts by attacking the female, Lulu. However, at the end of Act Three Stanley is shown silenced and inarticulate after the treatment carried out by the two persecutors. According to Goldberg's comment, "The birthday celebration was too much for him." (Pinter, 1976:81)

Harold Pinter's *Counterblast* showed rudiments of a similar ritual to be performed on the country Yugoslavia, subsequently – Serbia, one of many such cases in recent wars. Dumb executioners and eloquent spokesmen conduct stick-and-carrot procedure analogous to Goldberg's and MacCann's, in which the hero-victim is both wooed and threatened. In the language of *The Birthday Party*, and in the name of principles and values, the people is offered 'a new pair of glasses' in order to 'see straight', after being 'cockeyed for years'. It is promised/threatened with 'a long convalescence' 'somewhere over the rainbow', 'where angels fear to tread', (92) to be 'reoriented', 'adjusted', 'integrated' and to become executioner's 'pride and joy', 'a success' in the world. (93-4) Having no more real tongue of its own, it mumbles and mutters its consents or dissents like Stanley in the last act.

In *Counterblast* Pinter warned of the alarming language of propaganda used to justify the actions of April and May 1999 in Yugoslavia that mostly affected civilians not the military, going against the UN Charter and the Geneva Convention. In the night between April 22 and 23, for instance, the building of the Radio-Television of Serbia in Belgrade, located in the very city centre was bombed and sixteen people killed. There was no excuse as everybody knew there would be people working there, while the NATO spokesman had even given assurance to the president of the international association of journalists they would not bomb the TV building. The real reason was that this TV station broadcast some unpleasant truths about the entire NATO action.

Before that on April 15th NATO bombed Albanian refugees in Kosovo. Pinter warned against the use of refugees to mobilize public opinion for the ground intervention, and of the acquiescence of many western journalists whose task was to report not to help NATO. "We are being manipulated that this is a new holocaust", said Pinter in the documentary. Against the NATO leaders' claims that they had the right to intervene, Harold Pinter claimed that to have a right you must have a moral authority, while he saw the only moral authority of NATO in power and arms.

Pinter's documentary showed the pictures of Belgrade being bombed at night, including the night of Easter. Incidentally, Belgrade has already undergone severe Easter bombings twice before (out of altogether five

bombings in the 20th century): In 1941 German Luftwaffe bombed the city on April 6 (Palm Sunday) without a declaration of war, continuing bombing until April 10 - 17.500 civilians were killed. One of the targets hit was the National Library whose 300.000 books and many precious medieval manuscripts perished. On Easter 1944 (April 16 and 17, and several more times during 1944), Anglo-American forces carpet bombed Belgrade, killing 1,160 civilians and 18 German military personnel.

In the 1999 NATO bombing, among the first targets to be hit and destroyed were the three huge Danube bridges in Novi Sad together with the city's other public facilities, including oil refineries, and residential areas, that would subsequently leave the country polluted and 300.000 people jobless throughout Yugoslavia. There was no logic that could justify these actions including deliberate targeting of civilians: the Northern Province was not a military route and did not contain army command and control structures. Moreover it prided itself on being ruled by the local 'democratic opposition', which claimed to be against the 'regime' in Belgrade, but was obviously not any dearer to NATO.

NATO was then actually marking the way for the future regime change, further break – up of Serbia and transition into capitalism: all the industrial infrastructure was destroyed and then sold to foreign corporations for a pittance. Novi Sad has since developed the strongest pro-NATO and pro-western opposition demanding the secession of Vojvodina. Similar eagerness to please will be manifested in Belgrade by burning and looting the Parliament and the TV building during the October 2000 'revolution', attempted lynching of the Director of Radio-Television as the culprit for the deaths of 16 journalists in April 1999 (later sentenced to ten years of imprisonment, but no NATO leader has been charged), followed by the arrest of the former President and his transportation to the Hague. No NATO leader was charged for any crime. Thus the true aim of the NATO intervention became clearer: to refashion Serbia into one more client and a willing accomplice in future NATO interventions.

In *Counterblast* Pinter asserted that the war was not justified from the humanitarian point of view – Kosovo was made a waste land, ethnically cleansed from the Serbs and other minorities, as had formerly been the democratic Slovenia and Croatia. Several communities are still living in Serbia, economically and ecologically devastated, with hundreds of thousands of refugees, high rate of unemployment and a high degree of anxiety about the future especially among the young: the final tragic consequence of the break-up of Yugoslavia.

Harold Pinter concluded his *Counterblast* with the claim that the war was fought to recover the NATO credibility on its 50th birthday, and that it used a lot of rhetoric to avoid humiliation, for it had no credibility beyond sheer power of bullying, and by no definition could this war be called a just war.²

In the speech given on 25th June 1999 to the Confederation of Analytical Psychologists, Harold Pinter called the NATO action in Serbia ‘another blatant and brutal assertion of US power.’ He also stressed that ‘The bombing was not only an action taken in defiance of international law and in contempt of the United Nations, it was also totally unnecessary.’ It was not true that the Rambouillet negotiations had been exhausted. The Serbs had agreed to grant Kosovo a large measure of autonomy, but not occupation of Serbia by NATO as the international peacekeeping force (Batty, 2005: 148). It was as if the objectives of US and NATO countries were set in advance, and the victim was only to be forced into compliance as Stanley was. Kosovo is being made a NATO colony with formal independence, as to a large extent is Serbia.

There were just as many ‘moral’ and ‘humanitarian’ reasons to intervene, for example, in Turkey. ‘The Turkish government’, claimed Pinter, ‘had been waging a relentless war against the Kurdish people since 1984’, claiming 30,000 lives. NATO’s bombings of civilians in Serbia were not accidents but deliberate attempt to terrorize the population (Batty:149). NATO’s McCann declared they would systematically and progressively attack, disorganize, ruin, devastate and finally destroy Milosevic’s forces. ‘Milosevic’s forces, as we now know’, suggested Harold Pinter, and included television stations, schools, hospitals, theatres, old people’s homes.’ Since the Geneva Convention states that no civilian can be targeted unless taking a direct part in the hostilities, these civilian deaths were acts of murder (Batty:150). Explosives dropped on Serbia caused substantial damage to irreplaceable treasures of Byzantine religious art, precious mosaics and frescoes. Why cluster bombs to kill civilians, why depleted uranium to poison air, earth and water for many years to come? The accusation of a NATO country prime minister that Milosevic had devastated his own country is analogous to Goldberg and McCann’s accusations of Stanley that he had brought his own destruction upon himself (Prentice, 2000:25).

What followed after the war was the type of peace-keeping in Kosovo that was imposed and continues in Bosnia: an enormous machinery of civil and military personnel with earnings sometimes exceeding 50 times that of local people: in effect much of the so called international

2 Counterblast, BBC Community Programme Unit, 1999.

aid goes to keeping the peace-keepers, the Lamberts and Matts, who live and behave in accordance with their real status: masters to the slaves whom they now have to protect from each other. Michael Billington accurately described Harold Pinter's *Celebration* as 'very much a play for today'. The diners represent the vulgar materialism that breeds moral vacancy, direct product of Thatcher's Britain of 1980s, which Pinter had dramatized before in his *Party Time* (Pinter, 1991). In both plays the male fascistic instinct is expressed through sexual cruelty and violence. And in both the sexual bullying is equated with the men's professions of high state officials and arms dealing in politically correct jargon called 'strategic consulting' (Billington, 2001:282).

Now it is the 8th anniversary of the NATO bombing of Serbia: it lasted for 78 days from 24th March to June 10. My friends and I who had stayed in Belgrade during the bombardment (some of us participants of all former anti-war and anti-chauvinistic protests) remember with gratitude what Harold Pinter's voice of protest and support had meant to us. I had known and appreciated Pinter before as an artist: In 1996 I had finished my doctoral dissertation on his and Edward Albee's plays. For your invaluable contribution to the art of drama, as well as your intellectual honesty and courage THANK YOU HAROLD PINTER once again.

In his essay on *Hamlet* Harold Bloom said that the world must be true to Shakespeare if it is to survive. (Bloom, 1998:431). I would like to paraphrase this by saying that the world must be true to Harold Pinter if it is to survive.

What has become of the rituals and celebrations as performed by the leaders of the Great Powers replicated in numerous instances of their allies and enemies is described by Joseph Campbell as quite contrary to their former religious significance, a mock-heroic but dangerous travesty:

The national idea, with the flag as totem, is today an aggrandizer of the nursery ego, not the annihilator of an infantile situation.

Its parody-rituals of the parade ground serve the ends of ... the tyrant dragon, not the God in whom self-interest is annihilate.

And the numerous saints of this anticult – namely the patriots whose ubiquitous photographs, draped with flags, serve as official icons – are precisely the local threshold guardians (...) whom it is the first problem of the hero to surpass. (Campbell: 328).

This tremendous cultural shift has been compellingly illustrated in Harold Pinter's plays, and especially in *Counterblast's* account of NATO's 50th birthday celebration.

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**СИМБОЛИКА ПРОСЛАВЕ У ПИНТЕРОВИМ ДРАМАМА
РОЂЕНДАН, ВРЕМЕ ЗАБАВЕ, ПРОСЛАВА И У
ДОКУМЕНТАРЦУ ПРОТИВУДАР**

Резиме

У неколико својих драма Пинтер уводи варијације на тему прославе и њеног двоструког значења за организаторе прослава, малигне моћнике, и њихове жртве. У Пинтеровим драмама прославе никада нису оно што на први поглед изгледају, заоденуте су иронијом и цинизмом. Прослава је централна политичка метафора у многим Пинтеровим драмама. Осим што истражује нове приступе предметним драмама, рад се посебно фокусира на прославу у мало познатом документарцу *Противудар*, урађеном током НАТО бомбардовања Југославије 1999. године, срачунаог да буде рођендански поклон поводом педесетогодишњице ове војне алијансе. Овај документарца сачињен је у најбољој традицији енглеског документарног филма, а садржи и елементе Пинтеровог драмског језика.