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Another Less-Than-Noble Nobel Prize

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The Swedish Academy announced Thursday that the 2005 Nobel Prize in Literature had been awarded to British playwright Harold Pinter. The Academy released a statement explaining that “Harold Pinter is generally seen as the foremost representative of British drama in the second half of the 20th century,” adding: “That he occupies a position as a modern classic is illustrated by his name entering the language as an adjective used to describe a particular atmosphere and environment in drama: ‘Pinteresque.’”

And just what is “Pinteresque” drama? The Academy answers: “Pinter’s drama was first perceived as a variation of absurd theater, but has later more aptly been characterized as ‘comedy of menace,’ a genre where the writer allows us to eavesdrop on the play of domination and submission hidden in the most mundane of conversations.”

That’s an interesting spin on Pinter’s style, message, and worldview. In the final analysis, Pinter’s work remains within the category of the absurd. After all, Mark Steyn once described Pinter’s style as “a pause followed by a *non sequitur*.” Pinter wants to deny the possibility that truth exists, but reserves the right to invoke and demand “truth” when he chooses.

At his personal web site, Pinter remembers: *In 1958 I wrote the following: “There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false.” I believe that these assertions still make sense and do still apply to the exploration of reality through art. So as a writer I stand by them but as a citizen I cannot. As a citizen I must ask: What is true? What is false?*

Here we face the divided and inconsistent mind of the modern (or postmodern) intellectual. As a writer, Pinter insists that truth does not exist and is not a valid concept. But, as a citizen, he insists that truth matters. Can any sane mind conclude that “[a] thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false?”

As you might expect, Pinter has espoused predictably radical positions and causes. With reference to September 11, Pinter said: “The atrocity in New York was predictable and inevitable. It was an act of retaliation against constant and systematic manifestations of state terrorism on the part of the United States over many years, in all parts of the world.”

Roger Kimball gets it just right: “The Nobel Prize committee long ago demonstrated that its prizes for the arts were exercises in politically correct sermonizing. By choosing Harold Pinter, they have demonstrated that their sermons are ridiculous as well as repellent.”

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