Return to a Father: 
*The Homecoming*

It is once again the old fight with the old giant. True, he does not fight, only I fight, he only sprawls over me as a labourer does on the tavern table, crosses his arms on the upper part of my chest and presses his chin on his arms. Shall I be able to endure this load? (WPC 286)

In 1966, during an interview for *The Paris Review*, Harold Pinter revealed that, though he left school at sixteen, he had been an enthusiastic student of literature from an early age:

**PINTER:** The only thing that interested me at school was English language and literature, but I didn't have Latin and so couldn't go on to university. So I went to a few drama schools, not studying seriously [...]. And then I was reading, for years, a great deal of modern literature, mostly novels.

**INTERVIEWER:** No playwrights – Brecht, Pirandello . . .

**PINTER:** Oh certainly not, not for years. I read Hemingway, Dostoevski, Joyce and Henry Miller at a very early age, and Kafka. I'd read Beckett's novels, too, but I'd never heard of Ionesco until after I'd written the first few plays.¹

When asked whether any of these authors had particularly influenced his own writing, Pinter confessed:

Beckett and Kafka stayed with me the most – I think Beckett is the best prose writer living. My world is still bound up by other writers – that's one of the best things in it.²

Six years earlier, in an interview for the BBC European Service, Pinter had also acknowledged the same two writers as kindred spirits who had made the most profound and lasting impression

---

¹ R. Armstrong, *Kafka and Pinter Shadow-Boxing* © Raymond Armstrong 1999
on him and his approach to literature. He declared that when he read the work of Beckett and Kafka, 'it rang a bell' within him: 'I thought: something is going on here which is going on in me too'.

At once manifest and irrefutable, the affinity between Pinter's œuvre and that of Beckett has already generated considerable and widespread debate. Pinter himself has been remarkably forthcoming about both his admiration for and his indebtedness to the Irish writer. For example, in 1967, he contributed a staggeringly effusive eulogy to the Festschrift, Beckett at Sixty; and in December 1971, he announced to The New York Times that for some years he had actually been sending his plays in manuscript form (that is, before they appeared in performance or print) to Beckett, who would graciously respond with 'the most succinct observations' (CP 28). All the same, such statements, however laudable in their frankness and generosity, inevitably gave ammunition to Pinter's detractors, who throughout his career - from the early 'comedies of menace' to the later studies of memory - have accused his work of being overly derivative of that of his Hibernian mentor. It is somewhat ironic therefore that, as Ronald Hayman points out, the words 'Pinterish' and 'Pinteresque' should have been absorbed into the language long before the term 'Beckettian' was coined.

By total contrast, the influence of Kafka on Pinter's work has - or at least had until quite recently - received only nominal attention from the critical establishment. Even Hayman, who has published creditable monographs on both writers individually, makes virtually nothing of the connection between them. Other commentators, while taking cognizance of Pinter's avowed debt to Kafka, have tended to satisfy themselves with facile observations about a reciprocal atmosphere of nightmarish uncertainty, or with vague assumptions about a common philosophical purpose. In reality, though, Kafka's influence is much more concrete and much less woolly than such glosses would have us believe.

There are two obvious reasons why the legacy of Kafka has seemed more difficult to quantify than that of Beckett. Firstly, Kafka was not a dramatist; whereas Beckett - whose star was very much in the ascendant when Pinter first appeared on the literary scene - was celebrated as much for his plays as his prose fiction. Secondly, Kafka was not a native anglophone; and while most of Beckett's work was originally written in French, he himself translated it into his mother tongue. Nevertheless, both these 'problems' are in fact complete red herrings. Intractable only