

The Nobel Prize in Literature 2005



Photo: Martin Rosenbaum

On 13 October 2005, the Swedish Academy announced that the 2005 Nobel Prize in Literature was to be awarded to the English writer Harold Pinter. Pinter is best known for his 29 plays, written between 1957 and 2000, but he is also a screen-writer, theatre director, actor, poet and political activist. Five days earlier, enjoying a long weekend in Dublin, I had had the good fortune to attend a reading, by a particularly glittering cast, of Pinter's short play *Celebration* as part of the Gate Theatre's own celebration of Pinter's 75th birthday. The play was funny and disturbing in equal measure, perfectly expressing the 'comedy of menace' that now defines the Pinteresque. Pinter himself was in the audience and, during a

standing ovation, embraced each member of the cast and it was clear that he is held in enormous affection by his actors.

Making the announcement of the Nobel Prize, Horace Engdahl, the Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy, described Pinter as a writer 'who in his plays uncovers the precipice under everyday prattle and forces entry into oppression's closed rooms'. During recent years, Pinter has become increasingly outspoken on political issues drawing explicit attention to the abuse of state power around the world, most recently by the US and Britain in Iraq. A recent letter written to the *Guardian* expressed the view that Pinter should give up politics because his political views had none of the depth and subtlety of his plays. However, for me, the politics arise inevitably from the plays. All his plays are about the struggle for power, usually within close relationships and often inarticulate, and about the extent to which the abuse of power is dependent on the deliberate manipulation and perversion of memory and on the systematic silencing of victims. Just the same issues pervade contemporary politics and he has both the courage and the integrity to make the connections.

Yet, despite my admiration for Harold Pinter, I must confess to regret that once again another writer, also in his mid-70s,

has been passed over. Tomas Tranströmer is a Swedish poet, translator and professional psychologist, whose work has been translated into 50 languages, most recently into Arabic. Ironically, Tranströmer has been criticised in Sweden for being insufficiently political, but his writing has a painstaking precision and a refusal to simplify that is the antithesis of the crude exercise of power so ably explored by Pinter. Tranströmer's problem is that the Swedish Academy is particularly sensitive to the accusation of having awarded the Prize to relatively undeserving Swedish writers in the past. However, he is a year younger than Pinter. Perhaps in 2006 his undoubted stature will finally tell. I hope so.

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