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The Making of Artistic Reputation: Dennis Potter, Television Dramatist

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Within the context of canonization processes, the career course of the British television dramatist Dennis Potter presents a unique case. Potter's career illustrates an instance of a dramatist also acting as a multifunctional media figure, who superseded the 'typical' primary makers of reputation (e.g. critics and academics) in shaping the perceptions of his work and in promoting his dramatic standing. Potter's authoritative power was facilitated by the infancy of television reviewing and television drama in the early 1960s. Given the innovative nature of his dramas, often extremely controversial, the reputation he achieved was largely the effect of his acquired fame as a media figure and, particularly, the evaluative criteria he himself established as a pioneering television critic: an expertise he further exploited as major commentator on his own work, all of which not only conditioned the reception of his works, but also influenced their eventual critical acclaim.

The career course of Dennis Potter presents the intriguing case of a television dramatist also acting as a multifunctional media figure, masterfully exploiting the favourable circumstances of British television during the 1960s in shaping the reception, and eventual acclaim, of his innovative work.[1] Studies dealing with Potter's career and work broadly acknowledge that he used his authority as a media figure to enhance the stature of television as well as to promote his own dramatic standing. Within the broader context of canonization processes Potter's case presents a unique phenomenon. The evolving careers of various prominent playwrights show that primary makers of theatrical reputations are typically mediating figures such as critics and academics. In the case of Potter, however, the dramatist himself not only filled a constitutive role in shaping his reception, but also suppressed with his own authority other evaluating authorities in the making of his own artistic reputation.[2] It is surely significant that Potter was actually one of the pioneering critics of television, and as a dramatist is associated with the formative age of British television drama. His key role in the mediation of his work becomes apparent when considering other critics' extensive reliance on, and endorsement of, his commentaries, both as dramatist and critic, in shaping their own perceptions of his dramas throughout the course of his career – an issue that has not been specifically addressed in studies of Potter. The dramatist's authoritative power, facilitated by the infancy of television reviewing and television drama in Britain in the early 1960s, resided in his maintained visibility and growing influence as a media figure, which enabled him to establish the grounds for the evaluation of his own innovative work.

Early years in the media

In the 1950s television plays relied on the theatre, with many BBC productions simply transposed from the London's West End stages to the studio and broadcast live. The evolution of television drama was greatly influenced by the arrival of Independent Television (ITV), which began its broadcasts on 22 September 1955. The BBC, having lost its monopoly, had to compete with commercial television. One by-product of the competition and the consequent increase in demand for drama was the importing of scripts, in particular from Canadian and American broadcasting companies, which were producing a multitude of scripts on contemporary life. Sydney Newman, head of drama at the Canadian Broadcasting Commission, was the next and more significant import of the ABC (Associated Broadcasting Company – an ITV company).[3] After working with ITV from 1958 to 1963 as head of the Armchair Theatre series, Newman transferred to the BBC as head of drama. The introduction of the Wednesday Play series on BBC1, beginning on 28 October 1964, had a great influence on the development of television drama.[4] The series quickly made a name for itself. The reputation it acquired resided in part in the series' contemporary approach and in the high number of scripts written specially for television.

Potter became one of the key Wednesday Play authors. His first television drama, *The Confidence Course*, was broadcast on BBC1 on 24 February 1965. The same year three more of his dramas were broadcast as Wednesday Plays: *Alice* (13 October 1965), *Stand Up, Nigel Barton* (8 December 1965) and *Vote, Vote, Vote for Nigel Barton* (15 December 1965).[5] Although he was recognized already at this early phase of his career as a major, promising TV dramatist, it took Potter more than a decade to establish his canonicity. Significantly, however, when Potter's first television drama was transmitted, he was already a familiar name and voice.

Potter first drew public attention in August 1958, when he was interviewed as an Oxford graduate in the BBC programme 'Class in Private Life', the second in the series *Does Class Matter?*[6] Potter, a coalminer's son brought up in the Forest of Dean, was interviewed as a representative of the 'scholarship boys'.[7] He spoke about his inner conflict, the feelings of shame regarding his lower-class origin and the thrill, accompanied by guilt, concerning the future prospects entailed by his Oxford education. Potter's direct and honest confrontation with the issue generated a series of press articles.[8] In the following year he began a two-year general traineeship with the BBC.

Potter's first book, *The Glittering Coffin*, was published in 1960 by Victor Gollancz, the publishing house not only of Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (as well as of several other works by Amis), but also of Colin Wilson's first book, *The Outsider*, which together with John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* was considered to herald the Angry Young Men movement. Following the publication of his book – an angry attack on contemporary Britain – Potter was interviewed on television, and also gave talks on the radio. *The Glittering Coffin* was reviewed favourably by most critics and its first edition sold well. Inevitably, some critics drew a connection between the writer and the Angries.

Potter's television documentary *Between Two Rivers* (BBC, 3 June 1960), which he wrote, narrated and introduced, presented a personal report on life in the Forest of Dean; his second book, *The Changing Forest: Life in the Forest of Dean Today* (1962),

developed the themes raised in this documentary. *Between Two Rivers* did not please Potter's superiors at the BBC and *The Changing Forest* received little attention; unlike his first book, it sold poorly.

In the summer of 1960 Potter began working for the new TV programme *Bookstand*, dramatizing excerpts (directed by John McGrath) from the novels that were discussed. Although continuing to work for *Bookstand*, Potter resigned his traineeship at the BBC in September 1960, to resume an active career as a newspaper journalist. He joined the *Daily Herald* in August 1961, writing articles on different subjects, including book reviews, under the title 'As I See It'. During 1960 Potter wrote television reviews for brief periods, and in 1962, when he started to suffer from what was eventually diagnosed as psoriatic arthropathy, he was made a television reviewer, a position that allowed him to work from home. For the sixteen years that followed (excluding periods of absence), and markedly after the serial *Pennies from Heaven* was broadcast, Potter was a professional television reviewer. In the 1960s he primarily worked for the *Daily Herald* (eventually to become the *Sun*), but also wrote book reviews for *The Times*. For most of the 1970s he also wrote for the *New Statesman*, and from 1976 to 1978 he held a position with the *Sunday Times*.

A pioneering television critic

At the end of the 1950s television criticism was a new profession.[9] Unlike reviews of other media, such as theatre or visual art, at this early phase of television criticism there were no set norms, criteria or strategies, nor specific figures whose authority regarding the television medium was acknowledged in advance.[10] The post of television critic was despised and considered an inferior occupation. According to Philip Purser, writer and television critic for the *Sunday Telegraph* (1961–87), Potter defined it 'as the refuge of the sick and crippled'.[11] Potter and Purser, among a few others, were the first television critics and thus were free to develop their own style in the new profession.[12]

In 1962 Potter was also given a Saturday column in the *Herald*; he first named his column 'In My View', then renamed it 'Dennis Potter About' in 1963, and subsequently 'Dennis Potter on Television' in 1964. In his first column Potter wrote about the attention given to drama by both channels, differentiating between two approaches to the genre:

> On the one side there are those who want to be cautious and take plays and ideas direct from the theatre. On the other are the revolutionaries who want to shake things up a bit. They are eager to inject new forms, fresh techniques, bolder themes into TV plays.[13]

In 1964 Potter welcomed the intention of the BBC to change the form and content of television plays, and he mentioned two figures in particular as those responsible for the designated change – James MacTaggart, executive producer, and Roger Smith, script editor. When, under Newman's regime, MacTaggart and Smith were given the new series Wednesday Play, intended as a showcase for new writers, Potter was one of the first writers that Smith approached.

In September 1964 the *Daily Herald* changed hands and was renamed the *Sun*, making Potter its leading writer. A month later, despite his illness, Potter took a leave of

absence to stand for Parliament as a Labour candidate. He lost the campaign and never resumed his political career. He also resigned from the *Sun*, intending to concentrate on his playwriting. Although Potter wrote television reviews for the *New Statesman* for a short period in 1967, as well as book reviews for the *Times*, he did not return to journalism until January 1968. Upon his return to the *Sun* he wrote television reviews and was also given a special column, entitled 'Dennis Potter', in which he wrote on 'general matters'. In the same year Penguin Books published Potter's *Nigel Barton* plays with an introduction by the author. It is significant, however, that over the four years, until his return to journalism, Potter's visibility was maintained. In addition to the broadcast of seven of his dramas between 1965 and 1968, he appeared on television, participating in discussions of and giving interviews on his plays, preceding and/or following their transmission.

Between two roles: dramatist and TV critic

Potter's oeuvre is associated with remarkable scope and innovation as well as with frequent controversy. His role as television critic provided him with the opportunity to highlight his concerns, criteria and developing interests as a dramatist, hence preparing the ground for his own dramas. Furthermore, Potter can be seen to have used the embryonic state of television reviewing as well as his emerging authority as a critic and public figure to establish the new norms by which to judge television drama, thereby conditioning the acceptance of his own innovative works. Potter's choice of subjects and concerns, as revealed from Purser's 2000 account of the dramatist's career as a television critic, confirms this view.

From the outset, Potter's voice as a critic was distinctive. He explicitly presented his personal views and preferences: for example, his critique of class snobbery and conservatism and his objection to censorship, his belief in working-class British life and his interest in popular music, particularly the music he had grown up with.[14] Purser traces significant 'clues' regarding Potter's developing conception of the desirable form of television drama, as displayed in his reviews of it. Clearly bored by everyday naturalism, which had held sway on television since the 1950s, Potter introduced welcome changes, as illustrated in a laudatory review of *The Road* by Nigel Kneale, in which he referred in particular to the piece's stimulating approach to 'the conventions of fear and the unknown' and to the irrationality of 'obscure terrors'.[15] In another review (1964), Potter explicitly expressed his belief in interior drama: 'plays that prowl around inside the head can be even more exciting than those that deal only with external actions and physical dangers'.[16]

Potter's criticism also reflects his shifting concerns as a dramatist through the years. Upon his 1968 return to the *Sun* as television critic, after seven of his dramas had already been broadcast, Potter was largely concerned with the practical means and techniques of TV plays.[17] Potter's use of 'we', when addressing issues occupying him as dramatist, is another distinctive phenomenon during this phase. For example, in his 1968 review of *Monsieur Barnett*, by Jean Anouilh, Potter writes,

> memory is always a great problem for the dramatist. We carry it around with us as a raw, insistent, perpetually challenging burden. But to translate it into dramatic terms on the television screen, one needs more than an off-screen voice, a dissonant chord of music or a dip in the lighting.[18]

Indeed, as Purser points out, Potter's next plays, in particular *Moonlight on the Highway* (1969), reflected the dramatist's exploration of 'flashback' devices.

Purser also comments on Potter's witty yet direct manoeuvres between his roles as a dramatist and a critic, noting Potter's occasional references to his own hospital experiences and treatment as well as to his own television dramas.[19] Purser reveals how the consistent processing and 'moulding' of particular issues, aspects and dramatic forms that Potter would pursue in his own work to come was integrated into his singular mode of television criticism. This very processing, I argue, had another by-product: in turn it gradually shaped the critics' perceptions of his work.

Potter's authority as a critic correlated with his growing reputation as a television dramatist. In 1976 he began writing weekly essays for the *Sunday Times*, in which he could elaborate on subjects of his own choice.[20] In his columns Potter freely referred to his own work, reported encounters he had had as dramatist and critic, and explicitly promoted his developing interests.[21]

The *Sunday Times* was closed down in November 1978, following a conflict with the trade unions. Potter announced his resignation in his last column, expressing his critique of and rage at the management. Although he continued to write occasional television reviews for two more years, his resignation put an end to his regular reviewing. It does not appear to have been a coincidence that Potter resigned shortly after the broadcast of his serial, *Pennies from Heaven*, which was recognized by the critics as sealing his reputation. This proximity suggests his belief that he had fulfilled his necessary share as a critic in the shaping of his own dramatic career.

Significantly, Potter had developed a highly distinctive mode as a critic. Adhering to a personal and direct mode when addressing his readers, he shared with them his frustrations and difficulties, which ranged from his own illness and periodic hospitalizations, his critique of television's policy in general, to the professional problems encountered by TV dramatists in view of the limited repertoire of devices.[22]

Critical reception/perception: under the Potter spell

If Potter's personal mode as a critic had contributed to his growing popularity and influence among readers and viewers, his commentaries regarding his own work and experience as a dramatist had, in their turn, gradually filtered and shaped the critics' perceptions of his dramas. Potter's continuous contribution to the mediating of his drama had been visible and present from the beginning of his dramatic career.[23] The pattern he seems to have established from the outset was maintained throughout his career: his appearances on one or more of the media channels that would precede and/or follow his latest drama; his introductions to printed editions of his works; his conduct as an interviewee, disclosing bits of biographical data that provided only partial answers while provoking further curiosity; and his simultaneously direct, communicative, enigmatic

and calculating personality. The gradually accumulating effect of both his visible and behind-the-scenes involvement is revealed in the critics' responses to his dramas in the late 1960s, becoming even more apparent by the end of the 1970s.

Potter's first television dramas, *The Confidence Course* and *Alice* (1965), elicited a mixture of curiosity and reserved reactions. In their reviews of the third play *Stand Up, Nigel Barton*, however, most critics urged the viewers not to miss its sequel, *Vote, Vote, Vote for Nigel Barton* – for example, 'its sequel next Wednesday, should be worth your while'; 'And if it is half as good as last night's curtain-raiser, you'd be a fool to miss it.'[24] Significantly, in the reviews of *Stand Up, Nigel Barton* the critics pointed out the dramatist's use of autobiographical components. It is also noticeable that several reviewers drew on the thematic similarities between the play and Kingsley Amis's novel *Lucky Jim* (1954), on the one hand, and John Brain's novel *Room at the Top* (1957), on the other.[25] Both the references to the dramatist's biography and the comparisons most probably relied on the reviewers' familiarity with Potter's early media exposures, which had contributed to his association with the Angries. A few reviewers commented on the unfamiliar offering: 'it ploughed through the old ground as if it had never been worked before . . . turned what could have been a thumping portentous piece of social realism into more than fair entertainment'.[26] Given the infancy of both television drama and its criticism at the time, it seems that the reviewers chose to draw on the familiar and accessible, tending on the whole to adopt a literary approach to the audiovisual medium. The significance of those early critical responses to Potter's drama lies primarily in their revealing the borderless territory that he himself would largely define and eventually rule as dramatist, critic and commentator of his own work in the years to come.

Assessments of the dramatist's career published in the press in the 1980s suggest that the reception of Potter's drama underwent a turn at the end of the 1960s, and subsequently another turn at the end of the 1970s.[27]

If Potter's dramas had been celebrated mostly from the end of the 1960s, the dramatist's own role in the growing appreciation of his work cannot be disregarded. In their reviews of *Moonlight on the Highway* (1969),[28] in which Potter first made use of popular songs, the critics tended to emphasize the dramatist's innovative exploration of human memory and interior drama, both of which issues seem to have occupied Potter and were explicitly discussed in his own reviews of television drama. Purser, for instance, commented that the action in *Moonlight on the Highway* was 'punctuated by fleeting visual references to past experiences. Later there was a more sustained flashback to events of only the previous evening, though without any huffing and puffing and wobbly effects to signal the fact'.[29] William Marshall, in his review titled 'Expedition into a Man's Mind', wrote, 'Dennis Potter's play *Moonlight* held me close all the way to the end of this often hilarious expedition into the mind of an odd young man.'[30]

Potter's *Son of Man* (BBC1, 20 April 1969), a portrayal of Christ as human, elicited much controversy and became a 'news event'. The play is considered by many critics (Purser and John Wyver included) to constitute a significant turning point in Potter's career. This perception adheres to the dramatist's own view that this play marked the end of his apprenticeship. In an interview with Purser, published in the *Daily Telegraph Magazine*, preceding the broadcast of *Son of Man*, Potter commented,

> Everything I've done till now I see as an apprenticeship. Every time I've seen one of my plays I've felt twinges of shame. With this I think the apprenticeship is over. I begin to say something which I really feel, without awful barriers and the cheats and the deceits and the deceptions. The feeling that you've done something at last gives you a sense of emancipation. Actually, it somehow got me out of the hospital.[31]

In his review of *Son of Man*, N. Shervin wrote, 'Potter is perhaps the most steadily developing television writer . . . He considers *Son of Man* the only play with which he has been completely satisfied.'[32] It is also noteworthy that Potter participated in a panel discussion on *Son of Man* on BBC1 (20 April 1969), and was interviewed about the play on the programme *Heroes and Hero Worship* (BBC South and West for BBC1 on 1 March 1970).[33] In a later assessment of the play, published in the *Independent*, Stephen Gilbert commented, '*Son of Man* was Dennis Potter's 12th play for television and the end of his apprenticeship as a dramatist. "It's the first play I am pleased with," Potter told *Radio Times* at the time.'[34]

Potter's own views further filtered into the critics' perceptions of his work in the late 1970s. One example is Sean Day-Lewis's report of the banning of *Brimstone and Treacle* (originally scheduled for 7 April 1976). The play depicts the rape of a mentally handicapped girl by a stranger (perhaps the Devil?) – a guest in her parents' house – that brings her out of her coma. It was banned by the BBC's director of programmes, Alasdair Milne, on grounds of 'taste'. This decision provoked a huge public row. Discussing the ban, Day-Lewis frequently integrated into his report the dramatist's own spelled-out agendas and beliefs, expressed in the latter's critical columns, various talks or interviews. At times Day-Lewis referred directly to Potter's writings; at other times he tended to use the dramatist's phrasing rather than his own. In his depiction of Potter's development as a dramatist, he commented,

> Potter has genuinely moved from the 'respectful agnosticism' from which he wrote *Son of Man*. He 'cannot bend the knee to any formal creed' but he does believe in the concept of 'a world created by a loving God' and in the patterns that follow from this.[35]

A decade later, in her review of the discussion program *Did You See It?*, which followed the eventual broadcast of *Brimstone and Treacle* (25 August 1987 on BBC1), Minette Marrin wrote,

> the most illuminating things were said by Dennis Potter, talking about the play as a religious fable, as a meeting of good and evil. Our society is perhaps too secular to recognize this tradition of religious writing. Instead, the implication was we prefer treacle.[36]

Many of the reviews of Potter's *Double Dare* (one of the two plays preceding *Brimstone and Treacle*, 1976) were unfavourable; the critics found the play too packed, overly complex and puzzling. However, the dramatist's 'other' presence and influence, as TV critic and commentator of his work, is reflected not only in the critics' citations of Potter, but also in their direct references to his other 'hat' and the controversies he had elicited. Martin Amis, for example, commented,

> Potter is one of our funniest and most wayward TV playwrights – just as he is the best equipped of its critics; and he has, in addition, got himself in an intriguing tangle with the BBC over his new trilogy, whose first part, *Brimstone and Treacle*, was due to be shown this week.[37]

Peter Knight, in his laudatory review of *Double Dare*, commented on Potter's choice of 'mixing fact with fantasy', suggesting that 'above-all it was an intensely personal statement on some of the problems he faces with his work. Certainly there was a strong link between Potter and the writer in the play'.[38] One cannot help recalling Potter's choice as TV critic to share with his readers the difficulties he encountered as a dramatist.

The reception of *Pennies from Heaven* marked yet another significant phase in the critics' recognition of Potter's innovation and prominence. *Pennies from Heaven*, produced by Kenith Trodd, was broadcast in March and April 1978. In the serial Potter used popular songs from the 1930s and the technique of lip-synching (miming to other people's voices), with the characters breaking into song and dance. In his preview of the serial, John Wyver wrote, 'it is almost superfluous to remark that *Pennies from Heaven* are brilliant plays with the writing of a quality unlikely to be bettered on television until Potter's next drama'. He further commented, 'Potter continually confronts the important questions and taboos as he pushes against the overwhelming naturalism of the medium . . . Every play exhibits an acute awareness of the possibilities and limitations of television, a quality also evident in his *Sunday Times* criticism.' Potter, cited by Wyver, clarified that the plays of the serial differ from his other plays 'in their apparent structure and texture'. 'But', Potter stressed, 'I think the plays do explore some of the same territory, or try to. In particular, what actually goes in your head when you perceive your desires through the filter of what is general culture'.[39] Ray Connolly, interviewing Potter during the weeks of the serial's transmission, commented on the critical reception of the serial: 'Although there have been a couple of detractors the consensus of opinion about *Pennies from Heaven* is that it is the most creatively innovative and ambitious attempt at changing the conventions of TV drama ever attempted.'[40] In view of the critical responses to *Pennies from Heaven*, exemplified above, the awards bestowed on the dramatist and the serial (for example the 1979 awards of the British Academy of Film and Television, BAFTA) seemed a natural development. Peter Stead, assessing Potter's career, claims,

> *Pennies from Heaven* had been the turning point. 'Dennis Potter' had erstwhile been a name, certainly one that was looked out for with keen anticipation and one that guaranteed challenging and conversation-provoking material, but just a name nonetheless . . . Now all was changed and soon he was looming large in the national culture.[41]

Many critics reviewing *Blue Remembered Hills* (BBC1, January 1979), in which adults acted the roles of children, pointed out the striking difference between Potter's new drama and his other works, particularly his preceding serial.[42] The critics' perception of the play as extremely innovative, even in the light of Potter's achievements to date, is mirrored in the titles of their reviews: 'Another Surprise from Potter's Pen', 'Striking Originality in Childhood Play', 'A Daring Trip to the Cruel Land of Childhood'. It is also apparent

that many reviews cited the dramatist's own comments about the play, in particular his motivation to have adults play seven-year-olds and his notion of childhood and its memories. Although the reviewers expressed their appreciation of Potter's devices, they nevertheless chose to present the dramatist's own explanation and views rather than offering their own. The reviewers' preference can be attributed, partly, to their perception of the play as rooted in the dramatist's own childhood memories (wartime in the Forest of Dean), but it also reflects their recognition of the dramatist's authority as commentator on his dramas. In 1980 the BAFTA award (for *Blue Remembered Hills*) and the Potter season followed.

In 1981 Purser wrote the first overview of Potter's oeuvre.[43] Assessing the dramatist's work, Purser commented that although many of his television dramas

> reveal recurring obsessions, and some of them even share a circumstance in the plot, to try and classify the single plays alone would require one of those complicated patterns of eccentric and partially overlapping circles – however recognizable the tone and voice may be. The nearest thing to a common factor is that most of the time Potter is dealing in what he has himself defined as 'interior drama'.[44]

Purser, undoubtedly an authority on Potter's dramas, had apparently opted to rely on the dramatist's own definition.

The six-part serial *The Singing Detective* (BBC1, 16 November–21 December 1986), extensively publicized prior to transmission, took viewers and critics by storm.[45] Most critics pointed out the resemblance between the background (Forest of Dean), writing profession and disease (mixture of psoriasis and arthritis) of Marlow (the serial's protagonist) and Potter's own biography, and some critics devoted large sections of their reviews to the quasi-autobiographical nature of *The Singing Detective*. Many critics found the serial to be the culmination of Potter's themes, devices and techniques. They consequently made use of the emerging 'Potter' repertoire, constructed of his past dramatic works, biographical components and conceptions as a dramatist, and other critical views of his previous dramas, in order to describe and evaluate the new serial. The *Arena* program (BBC2, 30 January 1987), centring on Potter, and the retrospective of his works to date (BBC1, July and August 1987), and subsequently the international retrospective of Potter's work in New York (1992), celebrated the dramatist's achieved standing.

A gifted–calculating interviewee

Potter was frequently asked about and continuously commented on his dramatic work, giving numerous interviews through different media channels, from the end of the 1950s until his famous – and last – interview in 1994. It is clear that an interview provided Potter with the most natural platform from which to elaborate on his personal experience and conceptions. Significantly, Potter the critic employed his distinctive–personal mode when writing about various television programmes, while Potter the interviewee devised a personal–calculative mode where his own dramas were concerned. The unique style he developed as an interviewee became inseparable from his singular dramatic style.

The most renowned interview with Potter, *Without Walls Special* (Channel 4 Television, 5 April 1994), was broadcast two months after he had been diagnosed with terminal cancer and two months before his death (7 June 1994). This last interview, now legendary, conducted by Melvin Bragg, masterfully combined the public disclosure of a most intimate matter – Potter's confrontation with his impending death – with the dramatist's calculated moves. Especially striking was Potter's seeming attempt to lay bare the 'I' device: 'I've always deliberately, as a device, used the equivalent of a novelist's first-person narrative. You know when the novelist says I, he does not mean I, and yet you want him to mean I'.[46] The dramatist, referring to his first television plays in 1965, further commented, 'I reinvented myself, quite consciously, as an act.'[47] Potter's reference to the 'I' device clearly demonstrates not only his awareness of a key issue associated with his poetics (the integration of autobiographical components into his dramas), but also his calculated evasion of the question of whether his dramas indeed portray his own life experiences.

While Potter's last words on television were broadcast in April, his last will and testament as a dramatist, which he announced in the interview – two four-part serials, *Karaoke* and *Cold Lazarus*, completed shortly before his death – were shown posthumously by both the BBC and Channel 4 (April–June, 1996). Potter's celebrated departing note – his last interview and the unique joint venture of BBC and Channel 4 – testifies to the complexity and inseparability of the different aspects of his persona.

Potter's impact as an interviewee, which cultivated his public persona and enhanced his reputation as a dramatist throughout his career, undoubtedly helped to establish him as the 'key' mediator of his own work. Indeed, apart from a number of essays and a single scholarly study of Potter's overall work to date by Peter Stead (1993), most studies have been published after his death.[48] Two other books on Potter, published in 1993 and in 1994, consist of interviews conducted with the dramatist.[49] This curious lack of studies during Potter's lifetime can possibly be explained by his own masterly domination of the stage.

From the onset of his career Potter has controlled the territory that he himself defined. If it was his pioneering position and his involvement with his medium as both 'insider' and 'outsider' that provided him with the preliminary grounds, it is the influence he subsequently acquired as a media figure, interviewee and commentator on his own work that eventually made him the lead player in the shaping of his own artistic reputation.

NOTES

1 About Potter's achieved reputation 'as the first "great" television writer', critically acclaimed in the 1980s, see Rosalind Coward, 'Dennis Potter and the Question of the Television Author', *Critical Quarterly*, 29, 4 (1987), pp. 79–87, here p. 83.

2 On the primary role of critics and academics in the careers of John Osborne, John Arden and Harold Pinter, and the positions assumed by these playwrights in the mediation of their work, see Yael Zarhy-Levo, *The Making of Theatrical Reputations: Studies from the Modern London Theatre* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2008). There are additional cases of prominent playwrights who also acted as critics and used their critical authority, albeit differently, to enhance their dramatic careers, notably George Bernard Shaw.

3 On the evolution of television drama in Britain see George Brandt, 'Introduction', in George Brandt, ed., *British Television Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 1–35.

4 In 1970, when the series broadcast day was shifted to Thursday, its title was altered to Play for Today. On the Armchair Theatre and the Wednesday Play see Irene Shubik, *Play for Today: The Evolution of Television Drama* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000; first published 1975), pp. 9–16, 41–63.

5 In 1965 Potter won the Writers Guild Award and in 1966 the Society of Film and Television Arts Award.

6 *Does Class Matter?*, programme 2 'Class in Private Life', interviewer Christopher Mayhew MP, producer Jack Ashley. Broadcast on BBC television, 25 August 1958. The interview followed his article 'Base Ingratitude?' (about 'Welfare State Oxford') published in the *New Statesman* (3 May 1958).

7 Richard Hoggart, himself a beneficiary of the scholarship granted to working-class children, discusses its implications in his key book *The Uses of Literacy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1957). Hoggart comments on the bias towards male students that is indeed reflected in the term 'scholarship boy'.

8 On Potter's views on the topic, the interview and the responses it elicited see Glen Creeber, 'The Anxious and the Uprooted: Dennis Potter and Richard Hoggart, Scholarship Boys', in Vernon W. Grass and John R. Cook, eds., *The Passion of Dennis Potter: International Collected Essays* (Houndmills: Macmillan Press, 2000), pp. 31–9, here pp. 33–4.

9 On television critics at the end of the 1950s see Michael Elliot, 'Television Drama: The Medium and the Predicament', *Encore*, 4, 13 (1959), pp. 30–7.

10 The first TV critics attributed the 'invention' of the new profession to Peter Black, writing for the *Daily Mail*.

11 See Philip Purser, 'Dennis's Other Hat', in Grass and Cook, *The Passion of Dennis Potter*, pp. 179–80.

12 On the practice of television criticism during these early days, see Purser, 'Dennis's Other Hat', p. 180.

13 Dennis Potter, *Daily Herald*, 8 September 1962.

14 For elaboration see Purser, 'Dennis's Other Hat', pp. 183.

15 Dennis Potter, review of *The Road*, *Daily Herald*, 11 April 1964.

16 Purser refers to Potter's review on 3 March 1964 in the *Daily Herald*.

17 See Purser, 'Dennis's Other Hat', p. 183.

18 See Dennis Potter, *Sun*, 25 January 1968.

19 See Purser, 'Dennis's Other Hat', p. 183.

20 According to Purser ('Dennis's Other Hat', p. 188), in the late 1970s Potter had 'less cause to preach the kind of drama he wants to supply. An audience that has grown up with his plays accepts his narrative idiom without difficulty. New writers have adopted it, at lease to some degree. It has become the language of the screen'.

21 See, for example, Purser, 'Dennis's Other Hat', p. 189.

22 See Peter Stead's comment: 'from the outset his expectations of the culture and of television had been couched in personal terms and what mattered more than anything was that he be allowed to communicate with an audience'. Peter Stead, *Dennis Potter* (Bridgend Mid-Glamorgan: Seren Books, 1993), p. 47.

23 The career of Harold Pinter offers another (although different) example of a prominent dramatist involved, directly and indirectly, in the mediation of his drama. On the case of Pinter see Zarhy-Levo, *The Making of Theatrical Reputations*, pp. 161–208.

24 For the first citation see Adrian Mitchell, 'Shouts and Murmurs', *Sunday Times*, 12 December 1965. For the second see Julian Holland, 'Unlucky Jim Finds Room at the Top', *Daily Mail*, 11 December 1965.

25 See in particular Julian Holland, 'Unlucky Jim Finds Room at the Top'. The critics' attempt to point out the thematic similarities between Potter's play and the novels exemplifies the 'comparison strategy', which is one of the major strategies employed by theatre reviewers when introducing a new dramatist. On the major strategies employed by theatre reviewers throughout the process of admitting a new playwright into the theatrical canon see Yael Zarhy-Levo, *The Theatrical Critic as Cultural Agent: Constructing Pinter, Orton and Stoppard as Absurdist Playwrights* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), pp. 95–106.

26 See Derek Malcolm, '*Stand Up, Nigel Barton* on BBC', *Guardian*, 9 December 1965. See also Maince Richardson, review of *Stand Up, Nigel Barton*, *Observer*, 12 December 1965.

27 See, for example, the lead-in paragraph in John Wyver's article 'The Long Non-revolution of Dennis Potter' (1980), which reads, 'almost alone among those working for television, Dennis Potter is widely recognized and discussed as a major artist. From the mid-60s on, when the first 'Nigel Barton' plays hit the screen, his work has always been among the most intelligent, the most searching and the most pertinent written for the medium. And mostly, from *Son of Man* [1969] to *Pennies from Heaven* [1978], to the banned *Brimstone and Treacle* and *Blue Remembered Hills* [1979], that work has been celebrated as such'. John Wyver, 'The Long Non-revolution of Dennis Potter', *Time Out*, 17 October 1980.

28 *Moonlight on the Highway* was broadcast in April 1969 by ITV (LWT London Weekend Television). The play was produced by Kenith Trodd, the dramatist's friend from his military service (1953–5) and Oxford days, and subsequently his close collaborator and the producer of his most renowned plays and serials. Trodd is considered one of the most successful British television drama producers. He also gained recognition as a producer of films, winning countless awards for many plays and films.

29 See Philip Purser, 'A Manner of Speaking', *Sunday Telegraph*, 13 April 1969.

30 William Marshall, 'Expedition into a Man's Mind', *Daily Mirror*, 14 April 1969. See also Peter Blade, review of *Moonlight on the Highway*, *Daily Mail*, 14 April 1969.

31 See Philip Purser's interview with Potter, 'A Playwright Comes of Age', *Daily Telegraph Magazine*, 2 April 1969, pp. 35–6.

32 N. Shervin, 'Son of Man', *Observer*, 20 April 1969.

33 In 1969 (1 November) another interview conducted with Potter was broadcast on television (BBC2), and in 1970 (February 20) Potter participated in another discussion, *Any Questions*, transmitted on BBC Radio 2.

34 Stephan W. Gilbert, 'And Potter Created the Son', *Independent*, 11 October 1995.

35 See Sean Day-Lewis, 'Will the Devil Get His Dues?', *Daily Telegraph*, 5 April 1976.

36 Minette Martin, review of *Did You See It?*, *Daily Telegraph*, 26 August 1987.

37 Martin Amis, 'Potter Patter', *New Statesman*, 9 April 1976.

38 Peter Knight, 'Dennis Potter at His Tantalizing Best', *Daily Telegraph*, 7 April 1976.

39 John Wyver, 'Paradise, Perhaps', *Time Out*, 3 March 1978, pp. 12–13, here p. 12.

40 Ray Connolly, 'When the Penny dropped', *Evening Standard*, 21 March 1978.

41 See Stead, *Dennis Potter*, p. 104.

42 John Wyver, for example, pointed out the play's crystal-clear plot, a rarity in Potter's television dramas. John Wyver, 'How to Turn Difficulty into Child's Play', *Guardian*, 26 January 1979. See also Patrick Stoddart, 'How One Man Re-awakens Those Golden Days of Childhood', *Evening News*, 30 January 1979, who suggested that '*Blue Remembered Hills* is the exact opposite of everything Potter achieved in the remarkable and intricate *Pennies from Heaven*'.

43 In his account on his own career as television critic, Purser amusingly remarks that he became 'the world authority on Dennis Potter', following the essay 'Dennis Potter' that he contributed to the anthology *British Television Drama*, upon the request of the editor, George Brandt. See Philip Purser, *Done Viewing* (London: Quartet Books, 1992), p. 188.

44 See Purser, 'Dennis Potter', pp. 174–5. When citing the dramatist Purser refers to an interview Paul Madden had conducted with Potter, appearing in the programme to the season of British Television Drama held at the National Film Theatre in October 1976.

45 The serial elicited protestations as well. See the *Times*, 'BBC Deny Sexy TV Storm', 2 February 1986, p. 5.

46 See Dennis Potter, 'An Interview with Melvyn Bragg, Channel 4, April 1994', in *Seeing the Blossom* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), pp. 1–29, here p. 12.

47 Ibid., p. 15.

48 See, for example, studies by John R. Cook, *Dennis Potter: A Life on Screen* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995); Stephen W. Gilbert, *Fight & Kick & Bite: The Life and Work of Dennis Potter* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995); Glen Creeber, *Dennis Potter: Between Two Worlds, A Critical Reassessment* (London: Macmillan Press, 1998); and Humphrey Carpenter, *Dennis Potter: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998).

49 Graham Fuller, ed., *Potter on Potter* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993); and Potter, 'Interview with Melvyn Bragg'.

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