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ELOQUENT SILENCE IN HAROLD PINTER'S MOUNTAIN LANGUAGE

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Abstract:

Harold Pinter's dramatic technique is renowned for its emphasis on silence in dialogue; the pause has become a signature of Pinter's play. Pinter reveals character through a precisely plotted evasion of speech and his characters engage in subterfuge through their spoken and unspoken language, doing battle with other characters, themselves and the audience. Nevertheless, the silence of Pinter's characters has a very rich sound. The Elderly Woman's silence, in *Mountain Language,* explicitly contributes to the development catastrophic theater in post-war British drama. Thus, this paper attempts to show how Pinter employs silence as a dramatic technique in *Mountain language* by addressing the following questions: What is the role of language and its connection to silence in Pinter's plays? What is the function of silence in *Mountain Language*, and how does Pinter relates it to torture? Accordingly, this paper sheds light on Pinter's effort to show how the reigning power provides no space for the marginalized to express themselves in words or action. The conclusion summarizes how *Mountain Language* seriously presents a prevailing image of the suffering imposed by authoritarian regimes, and how it depicts the victimization of people through the suppression of language and individuality.

Keywords:

Mountain Language, silence, torture, voice-over, catastrophic theater.

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Introduction

The writing of silence in any medium of expression in general but particularly in literature can generate many levels of paradox. How is silence written? How does silence construct and/or interrupt the text? How does silence construct and/or interrupt the discourse? What are some of the expressions and assumptions of silence within a written text? What does silence do to the written text or, conversely, what does the text, which contains this paradox within itself, do to the notion of silence commonly understood as the absence of sound or speech? These theoretical questions are indispensable to be asked in the works that utilize silence as a literary technique. Pinter's *Mountain Language* is a perfect choice to investigate the silence penetrates its texture. It remains one of Pinter's most devastating plays. Though it is short, the brevity of *Mountain Language* is matched by its aphoristic quality, as it distills the political conflict it depicts into four highly charged scenes.

Harold Pinter's dramatic technique is renowned for its emphasis on silence in dialogue; the pause has become a signature of his plays. Pinter reveals characters through a precisely plotted evasion of speech and his characters engage in subterfuge through their spoken and unspoken language, doing battle with other characters, themselves and the audience. Hence, the silence of Pinter's characters has a very rich sound. For example, the Elderly Woman's silence, in *Mountain Language,* explicitly contributes to the development catastrophic theater in post-war British drama. Accordingly, this paper attempts to show how Pinter employs silence as a dramatic technique in *Mountain language* by addressing the following questions: What is the role of language and its connection to silence in Pinter's plays? What is the function of silence in *Mountain Language*, and how does Pinter relates it to torture? Accordingly, this paper sheds light on Pinter's effort to show how the reigning power provides no space for the marginalized to express themselves in words or action. Moreover, it makes obvious how the characters resort to an alarming silence that makes much noise. The conclusion summarizes how *Mountain Language* seriously presents a prevailing image of the suffering imposed by authoritarian regimes, and how it depicts the victimization of people through the suppression of language and individuality.

The Theory of Silence

"The word silence is still a sound," writes Georges Bataille in *Inner Experience*, thus epitomizing the body of meanings, paradoxes, and possibilities that silence encompasses (13). Reading Bataille, Jacques Derrida writes:

> [I]f the word silence 'among all words' is 'the most perverse and the most poetic,' it is because in pretending to silence meaning it says nonmeaning, it slides and it erases itself, does not maintain itself, silences itself, not as silence, but as

> speech. This sliding simultaneously betrays discourse and non-discourse. (*Writing and Difference* 332)

Regarding the possibility of silence within a literary text, Derrida writes that "silence plays the irreducible role of that which bears and haunts language, outside and against which alone language can emerge … silence is the work's meaning and profound resource" (*Writing and Difference* 66). That is, silence has the potential to evade the discourse while simultaneously being produced by it.

In *Silence*, John Cage perceives silence as that which does not truly exist. He writes:

> There is no such thing as empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot. For certain engineering purposes, it is desirable to have as silent a situation as possible … a room without echoes. I entered one … and heard two sounds, one high and one low … the high one was my nervous system in operation and the low one my blood in circulation. Until I die there will be sounds. And they will continue following my death. One need not fear about the future of music. (8)

Cage explored the possibility for complete silence and then, based on his personal experience, abolished this possibility. His perspective is important though controversial, because there is nevertheless a substance, an idea called "silence". Silence indeed exists; it might not be a scientific fact but it is, indeed, a culturally constructed concept (like other concepts which are culturally constructed: friendship, femininity, masculinity, successes, etc…). The concept of silence is largely associated with negativity: lack, impossibility or failure.

George Steiner's *Language and Silence* addresses, among other ideas, the idea of the failure of language in philosophical discourse. He asks whether "we are passing out of an historical era of verbal primacy […] into a phase of decayed language, of 'post linguistic' forms, and perhaps of partial silence" (VII)? This post-structuralist notion helps Steiner read literature after trauma and in historicizing the sense of retreat from language, occurring mainly after World War II. However, haunted by the failure of the word, he addresses only in passing the (structural or poetic) possibility of silence within literature and does not consider silence in prose but rather focuses on the practice of language, and especially in poetry.

In "The Aesthetics of Silence" Susan Sontag addresses the idea of silence in art in a similar vein. She highlights "as the prestige of language falls that of silence arises" (35). Sontag's essay is a rigorous theoretical piece concerning a large array of artistic silences. Sontag values silence in art as well as silent artists (artists who do not overuse words and explicit

actions, appreciating the possibility of silence), and aims at historicizing her contemporary ambivalence toward language. When explaining the position of silence within the artistic work, Sontag writes:

> Just as there can't be "up" without "down" or "left" without "right", so one must acknowledge a surrounding environment of sound or language in order to recognize silence. Not only does silence exist in a world full of speech and other sounds, but any given silence takes its identity as a stretch of time being performed by sound [...] If only because the art-work exists in a world furnished with many other things, the artist who creates silence must produce something dialectical: a full void, an enriching emptiness, a resonating or eloquent silence. (11)

Eloquent silence- a term that appears in several works concerning silence- is understood by Sontag as a dialectical product, which by definition consists of oppositions defined by their relativity.

The notion of an eloquent silence can aid in the understanding of silence as a stylistic feature. In her attempt to expand Roman Jakobson's communicative model to include silence as well, the linguist Michal Ephratt defines eloquent silence in this way: eloquent silence is "a means chosen by the speaker for significant verbal communication alongside speech; it is neither the listener's silence nor the silencing of the speaker", but rather "[e]loquent silence alone (not stillness, pauses or silencing), is an active means chosen by the speaker to communicate his or her message" (40). In addition, Ephratt's definition seems to overlook the dialectical and thereby the inevitably dialogical nature of eloquent silence, which is actually the nature of silence in general. Sontag explains: "Silence remains, inescapably, a form in speech ... and an element in a dialogue" (11).

The notion of silence has scarcely been addressed from a literary perspective. I found only two theoretical-literary large-scale accounts addressing this topic. Lisa Block de Behar's *A Rhetoric of Silence* is a comprehensive, theoretical study of silence in literature, emphasizing the reader, the silent process of reading, and silence in literature as depending on the receivers and their interpretations. Block de Behar examines different representations of silence in French, Spanish and South American literatures. However, her study does not address political writing, ideological silences, and the complex connection of silence with silencing and being silenced. Moreover, Ulf Olsson's *Silence and Subject in Modern Literature*: *Spoken Violence*¸ focuses on silent characters in novels and plays, from the perspective of subjectification in literature. Olsson asserts that:

> [I]n this process of exploring the implications of silence, literature also shows us how the subject is recognized only if speaking. The one that remains silent will interrupt the

> distribution or circulation of speech, which is a fundamental aspect of subject formation, or of subjectification, and must therefore be brought to speech, enticed or forced to speak its mind. In representing the silent figure literature must represent and perhaps itself even perform a linguistic violence directed at the same figure in order to make it speak. (2)

While learning from Olsson's study and valuing his ethical approach towards literary characters as such, my approach is different, as I see the characters in Harold Pinter's *Mountain Language* as reflecting upon the larger context of political and social matters. Accordingly, violence committed against them should be understood within the larger context.

The political advantages and complexities of silence were theorized by Wendy Brown in "Freedom's Silence" in which Brown both breaks the binary opposition of silence and speech and locates silence in a complex power dynamic. She writes:

> The belief that silence and speech are opposites is a conceit underlying most contemporary discourse about censorship and silencing. This conceit enables both the assumption that censorship converts the truth of speech to the lie of silence and the assumption that when an enforced silence is broken, what emerges is a truth borne by the vessel of authenticity of experience. Calling these assumptions into question means not only thinking about the relation between silence and speech differently but rethinking the powers and potentials of silence … Silence and speech are not only constitutive of one another but modalities of each other. They are different kinds of articulation that produce as well as negate one another … Silence, both constituted and broken by particular speech, is neither more nor less truthful than speech is, and neither more nor less regulatory. (313)

Thus, according to Brown, silence is regulated by discourse, but simultaneously it "may also function as that which discourse has not penetrated, as a scene of practices that escape the regulatory functions of discourse" (317). In her reading of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, Brown argues that the dynamics of silence and power is complex and ambiguous, as silence is oppositional neither to power nor to speech. Silence she writes "is identical neither with secrecy nor with not speaking. Rather, it signifies a particular relation to regulatory discourses, as well as a possible niche for the practice of freedom *within* those discourses" (316).

For Pinter, silence plays a momentous role in his plays. In *Mountain Language*, in particular, silence is undeniably powerful and eloquent enough to represent a dystopian life full of terror and torture. Generally speaking,

silence in most of Pinter's plays indicates that language has reached a limit beyond which it cannot pass. Silence is inseparable from language; nevertheless, it is a language in its own.

Pinter's Language and Silence

Pinter has consistently lead scholars and critics to investigate the uniqueness of his plays' language which inaugurates something unique and unprecedented in British theater. Taking stock of the initial critical discourse surrounding Pinter's early work, Austin Quigley's *The Pinter Problem* elaborates that for many of Pinter's first critics, the uniqueness of his plays pertains to the manner in which language functions in them (34). Quigley specifically references Martin Esslin's early study on Pinter, entitled *The Peopled Wound*, in which Esslin argues that the language of Pinter's first plays is unique as it expresses the inexpressible (34; Esslin 252). In addition, Quigley cites Robert Brustein, who suggests that the language of Pinter's early plays is intended to undermine communication (29). Quigley demonstrates that Esslin and Brustein's interpretations represented the first scholarly reaction to the language of Pinter's work (34-36). For Quigley, however, Brustein and Esslin's interpretations of Pinter represent two sides of the same coin, as they attempt "to describe what is new in Pinter's language by means of an appeal to some norm in language that Pinter either transcends or ignores" (36). In response to his contemporaries' reaction to Pinter's early plays, Quigley observes that the majority of critical attention given to them assumes that language functions referentially (40). Hence, those who theorize the significance of Pinter's language seem to take as their starting point the "problems" that his language causes a particular conceptualization of language, namely, one that assumes that words intentionally refer or ought to refer to a stable and identifiable object, action, or quality in the world (40, 41).

In response to his critique of Pinter scholarship, and furthermore influenced by the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Quigley develops an entirely different method to read Pinter: not predicated on metaphysical assumptions about language in general, Quigley analyzes Pinter's work by addressing how language concretely functions in the plays themselves, and concludes by arguing that the signifying efficacy of language in Pinter's work is constructed and produced by interdependent relationships among characters (52, 66). Consequently, language becomes the means used by characters to create, and maneuver in, relationships (54). By following the function of language in Pinter's plays, Quigley concludes that they are structured as complex language games in which reality itself becomes a negotiable concept that is at stake for Pinter's characters (72). Elaborating on Quigley's intervention, Marc Silverstein has traced a connection between Pinter's early plays and his later and more overtly political ones. Like the early plays, the political plays often use language as the means that characters use to negotiate, sometimes forcefully and violently, the reality in

which they find themselves. For Silverstein, Quigley's critical engagement with the antiquated theories of language first used to interpret Pinter is of notable interest (18, 19).

However, despite the wealth of commentary regarding the importance of language in his plays, Harold Pinter himself went to great lengths to articulate his relationship and attitude toward language. Specifically, in his 1962 speech at the National Student Drama Festival in Bristol, Pinter addressed the fact that critics and scholars had found so much interest in the language of his early work. Despite his ambivalence toward language, Pinter nevertheless commented that "[y]ou and I, the characters which grow on the page, most of the time are inexpressive, giving little away, unreliable, elusive, evasive, obtrusive, unwilling. But it's out of these attributes that a language arises. A language, I repeat, where under what is said, another thing is being said" ("Writing" 13, 14). As the address proceeds, Pinter continues to reflect on language and its connection to silence, eventually distinguishing between two silences: the silence that he hears within the speech of his characters, and the silence that occurs when his characters are no longer able to speak:

> There are two silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed. This speech is speaking of a language locked beneath it. That is its continual reference. The speech we hear is an indication of that which we don't hear. It is a necessary avoidance, a violent, sly, anguished or mocking smoke screen which keeps the other in its place. When true silence falls we are still left with echo but are nearer nakedness. One way of looking at speech is to say that it is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness. ("Writing" 15)

Silence, therefore, is not without some sort of linguistic importance, as language may be employed to keep silent some fact or acknowledgement, and, to be sure, this strategy is often employed in the dialogue of Pinter's plays.

Moreover, he also mentions another form of silence, a silence that may arrest or end speech, but which does not necessarily stand opposed to language. In this later case, silence does not mark an end to language so much as it allows what has been said to reverberate as an echo; and it is with the second silence- a silence that brings forth an echo- that he hears this "proximity to nakedness", a nakedness that speech is unable to avoid. With the echo that appears near the end of his address, Pinter sets in place a dynamic through which what one hears in silence is the return of one's own speech. However, this return appears alienating as the speaker must confront the nakedness or vulnerability that provokes his or her speech. Therefore, while the speech of his characters will always be important, the eloquence

of that speech may also be engaged by listening to the moments in which characters can no longer speak because they are overwhelmed and held in proximity to their absolute vulnerability.

What is so fascinating about Pinter's remarks regarding language and silence in the Bristol address is the fact that they act as a sort of dramaturgical wellspring throughout his career. Following Pinter's observations, Leslie Kane in *The Language of Silence*, argues that Pinter employs silence in the dialogue of his early and middle work in order to signify his character's isolation. Moreover, as Kane notes, Pinter often uses silence in order to end plays, thereby underscoring the irresolvable social impositions that trouble his characters (146, 147). Nevertheless, as Kane even appears to anticipate, Pinter's continued interest in fragmentation and incoherence suggests that the silences that occur in his later plays cannot be so easily understood to signify specific functions. In other words, while Kane is able to read the silences that appear in Pinter's earlier plays as though they were legible, Pinter's later plays- while at times often confirming Kane's insights- complicate the legibility of these silences as though they could divulge some secret or truth that would make the plays an object of knowledge. Silence in Pinter's later plays, as Derrida defines, is the work's meaning and profound resource. It creates a bursting emptiness and an enriching barrenness. Specifically, Pinter's eloquent and resonating silence in *Mountain Language* is a case in point.

Mountain Language and the Language of Silence

Taking place around and within an unidentified military prison, *Mountain Language* concerns the practice of torture against political prisoners, and it depicts a conflict between a national military and an ostracized ethnic group who live in the mountains. Moreover, the national military does not limit its aggression to the mountain people, but is perfectly willing to imprison and torture anyone. Though the play bears some resemblance to the content of Pinter's comments regarding his visit to Turkey with Arthur Miller on behalf of International PEN[1], Pinter himself was quick to point out that, while inspired by the conflict in Turkey, *Mountain Language* was not a parable for the violence and oppression that he witnessed during his trip ("A Play and Its Politics" 24). Though the play does not directly refer to or represent any single military conflict, it does address an antagonism between those who speak the "language of the capital" and those who speak the "mountain language." Such conflict, furthermore, may be read to be at the heart of the political oppression against which Pinter so often fought.

In the opening scene, entitled "A Prison Wall", *Mountain Language* establishes the problem of politically motivated violence with a conflict between military personnel and an injured Elderly Woman who, in the company of several other women, waits to hear news regarding her son's imprisonment. The scene opens as the Sergeant asks the women for their

names, despite the fact that his language is foreign to many of the women to whom he speaks. Unable to give her name to the Sergeant, the Elderly Woman is aided by the Young Woman, who repeatedly tells the Sergeant that she and the Elderly Woman have already given their names. As the exchange between the two women and the Sergeant progresses, the Young Woman attempts to seek help for the Elderly Woman, who has been bitten by one of the soldier's dogs.

Paralleling the request that the women give their names, the Officer asks the Elderly Woman for the name of the dog who bit her, but the Elderly Woman remains silent, only lifting her hand to expose her bloody wound to him. Unwilling to help the Elderly Woman and give the Young Woman information as to the status of the imprisoned men, the Sergeant responds to them by declaring that "your husbands, your sons, your fathers, these men you have been waiting to see, are shithouses" (Pinter, *ML* 8). The women's attempt to acquire information about the men yields a response that strips each man of his name- an act that is juxtaposed to the military's need to identify and name the women who have come for these men- and replaces each name with the term, "shithouse." The discursive antagonism between the military and the women is made even more obvious by the Officer, who, immediately after the Sergeant's declaration, addresses the mountain women and proclaims that their language is dead:

> OFFICER: Now hear this. You are mountain people. You hear me? Your language is dead. It is forbidden. It is not permitted to speak your mountain language in this place. You cannot speak your language to your men. It is not permitted. Do you understand? You may not speak it. It is outlawed. You may only speak the language of the capital. That is the only language permitted in this place. You will be badly punished if you attempt to speak in your mountain language in this place. This is a military decree. It is the law. Your language is forbidden. It is dead. No one is allowed to speak your language. Your language no longer exists. Any questions? (8, 9)

The Officer's declaration seems to trouble the emphasis on language games that Quigley brought to the reading of Pinter's plays.

As Jean-François Lyotard underscores, whenever one attempts to gain a desired outcome by denying another the opportunity to speak, then "we are in the realm of terror," and the social bond originally created by the language game is broken (*PC* 76). In fact, the progression from the Sergeant's proclamation that the men are "shithouses" to the Officer's statement that the mountain language is dead confirms this social break, signifying a division between the mountain people and those who speak the language of the capital, and violating the familial bond between the women

and the men for whom the women have come. The "realm of terror" that Lyotard describes therefore follows from this break, and is first situated according to a double-bind that plagues the Elderly Woman as well as the military Officer. In the first case, what is particularly strange about the Officer's declaration is that the women he believes to be mountain people are presumably without any knowledge that he has pronounced the death of their language. The Elderly Woman's silence seems to occur because she does not understand the Officer's decree; and yet, her silence is precisely what is called for by the outlawing of her language. Consequently, either the mountain women speak and become criminals, or they are, because of their ignorance, silent and conform to the Officer's mandate.

On the other hand, the Officer's declaration presents a conflict all its own, for while he declares that the mountain language is dead, the structure of his address to the women must first assume that the mountain language exists. It is furthermore because of this split between the life of the mountain language and the declaration of its death that the Officer must appeal to the law, which affirms the mountain language's life insofar as it justifies the future punishment of its speakers. Rather than articulate a performative utterance, which would enact the death of the mountain language, the Officer's address to those surrounding the prison wall functions as a prescription, commanding the realization of what he states, and referring to the law in order to enforce his decree.

As a result of what transpires in the first scene, it is therefore necessary to reconsider the silence of the mountain women and, in particular, the Elderly Woman. Specifically, while her silence is mandated by the Officer, it exists before the Officer's declaration that the mountain language is dead, and precedes the contradictory matrix created by his speech. More to the point, the Elderly Woman's silence neither refers to nor is the result of anything that the Officer has said. Instead, her silence, as Ephratt highlights, is an active means chosen to communicate her message. It appears connected to her bloody hand, the showing of which forms a phrase that appears unreadable to the military officials, and unable to be translated into the language of the capital (Lyotard, *TD* 29-31). The Elderly Woman's bloody hand is not just the site of an injury, but also the object around which the mountain language and language of the capital come into conflict with one another.

Hence, in the second scene, entitled "Visitor's Room," the significance of the Elderly Woman's injury is more fully realized than in its initial appearance in the first scene. Speaking in the mountain language, the Elderly Woman tells her son, simply called the Prisoner, that she has bread, but a Guard interrupts her attempt to help her son as he beats her and informs her that her language is forbidden. The second scene, therefore, begins by explicitly connecting the mountain language with the Elderly Woman's attempt to nourish her son; "I have bread" and "I have apples,"

are the only lines in the play formally accused of having been uttered in the mountain language (Pinter, *ML* 10). In other words, the second scene connects the "mountain language" to a maternal function that the Elderly Woman gives voice to through her speech. The Guard beats the Elderly Woman for speaking in the mountain language, and furthermore calls for the Prisoner to tell her that she is not allowed to speak it:

> PRISONER: She's old. She doesn't understand.
> GUARD: Whose fault is that? (*He laughs*). Not mine, I can tell you. And I'll tell you another thing. I've got a wife and three kids. And you're all a pile of shit. (*Silence*.)
> PRISONER: I've got a wife and three kids.
> GUARD: You've what? (*Silence*.) You've got what? (*Silence*.) What did you say to me? You've got what? (*Silence*.) You've got what? (*He picks up the telephone and dials one digit.)* Sergeant? I'm in the Blue Room…yes…I thought I should report, Sergeant…I think I've got a joker in here. (*Lights to half. The figures are still. Voices over.*)
> ELDERLY WOMAN'S VOICE: The baby is waiting for you.
> PRISONER'S VOICE: Your hand has been bitten.
> ELDERLY WOMAN'S VOICE: They are all waiting for you.
> PRISONER'S VOICE: They have bitten my mother's hand.
> ELDERLY WOMAN'S VOICE: When you come home there will be such welcome for you. Everyone is waiting for you. They're all waiting for you. They are all waiting to see you. (*Lights up. The Sergeant comes in*.)
> SERGEANT: What joker? (Pinter, *ML* 11)

The dimming of the lights appears to interrupt the scene's narrative, allowing for the voices of the Elderly Woman and the Prisoner to communicate even though they do not speak. However, rather than implying an explicit act of resistance to the military, Ann C. Hall suggests that the voice-overs subvert it through a sort of psychic connection that transcends "imprisonment and linguistic restrictions" (17). While Hall's analysis appropriately refers to the telepathic quality of the voiced-over conversation between the Prisoner and the Elderly Woman, there is no indication that the subversive quality of their voices provides them with the ability to "transcend" the prison and return home to speak freely in their language.

Hall's emphasis on the telepathic form of communication that occurs during the blackout should, however, serve as a reminder of Pinter's 1962 address at Bristol, for it is through the silence of the characters that their voices are able to communicate with one another. The partial blackout aesthetically realizes Pinter's reflection on the relationship between silence

and speech, since the voices are audible only when the Prisoner and the Elderly Woman are silent, and exposes what Pinter had called the "nakedness" of his characters. For example, the Elderly Woman's voice attempts to breed hope for the Prisoner as she mentions that his family is waiting for him, and that there will be an enthusiastic welcome for him when he returns home. However, given the fact that the Elderly Woman left her home in order to be with the Prisoner, and because the Guard responds to the Prisoner by calling him and his people a "pile of shit," the consolation the Elderly Woman gives to him is also marked by the distress and agony that brought her to the prison wall. In other words, the Elderly Woman's words do not just refer to the family that waits for him, but also articulate her own longing to return him to his family. On the other hand, though attentive to her injury, the Prisoner mentions his inability to help his mother. The interlude, therefore, does not simply give the characters the opportunity to speak, but it also provides the play with the ability to present concretely what appears to be impossible for either the Prisoner or the Elderly Woman, namely, the inability to heal each other's wounds and return to their domestic spaces. Specifically, it is through his silence that the play gives voice to this corporeal touch between a mother and child, a touch that exceeds the law and which can only be heard in the play through silence and telepathically confirmed by their bodies when their wounds touch.

The play concludes by once again affirming the ostensibly arbitrary manner in which the military exercises power, for the Guard addresses the Prisoner and tells him that he and his mother can speak in their own language. Nevertheless, the officer's decree is but a red herring for a much more serious issue that is at stake in the scene, and in fact, the play as a whole:

> PRISONER: Mother, you can speak. (*Pause*.) Mother, I'm speaking to you. You see? We can speak. You can speak to me in our own language. (*She is still*.) You can speak. (*Pause*.) Mother. Can you hear me? I am speaking to you in our own language. (*Pause*.) Do you hear me? (*Pause*.) It's our own language. (*Pause*.) Can't you hear me? Do you hear me? (She does not respond.) Mother?
> GUARD: Tell her she can speak in her own language. New rules. Until further notice.
> PRISONER: Mother? (*She does not respond. She sits still. The Prisoner's trembling grows. He falls from his chair on to his knees, begins to gasp and shake violently*.)
> *(The Sergeant walks into the room and studies the Prisoner shaking on the floor.)*
> SERGEANT: (*To Guard*) Look at this. You go out of your way to give them a helping hand and they fuck it up. (Pinter, ML 14)

The final silence of the play is enigmatic. The woman may be exercising a choice not to speak since to speak in her own language would be to follow the rules of, and thus to succumb to, the regime of the city. "The power of remaining silent is always highly valued," writes Elias Canetti in *Crowds and Power* (294). "The secret concealed in silence should never be forgotten. Its possessor is respected for not surrendering it, even though it grows in him and burns him more and more fiercely" (Canetti 294). The political meaning of this choice is, however, uncertain, since it gives the old woman only the negative power of withdrawal. A simpler reading of the cause of her silence is also possible; that is to envision the old woman as defeated, beaten down and therefore silent. This is probably the interpretation that comes quickest to mind given the relentless display of the regime's power in the play. "Silence is an extreme form of defense, whose advantages and disadvantages are almost equally balanced" argues Canetti, who adds: "[N]o one can remain silent forever ... Silence isolates ... Silence inhibits self-transformation" (286, 294). Silence is passive, therefore powerless, by definition, even if it is actively chosen. Thus what Pinter ultimately shows in *Mountain Language* is how reigning power provides no space for the marginalized to express themselves in words or action.

The Elderly Woman's silence, therefore, recalls the previously mentioned Pinter Bristol address. For Pinter, silence such as the Elderly Woman's indicates that language has reached a limit beyond which it cannot pass. In other words, one is interrupted by that which he or she cannot properly signify, and as a result, one is left disposed to one's nakedness and radical vulnerability. Though *Mountain Language* contains similar silences, specifically in the second and third scene, each of these silences produced voice-over dialogue that took place during partial blackouts. However, the fourth scene does not contain a blackout, during which it may have been possible for a reader or audience member to hear the voice that articulates the vulnerability signaled by the Elderly Woman and the Prisoner. As Elissa Marder observes, "[t]he desire to speak recalls an impossible desire for the mother; a desire that she bear the burden of our birth by remaining the silent witness to a time we can only imagine but never know, a time before we needed to speak our alienation from her" ("Mother Tongue" 60). Yet, to suggest that the mother be made the "silent witness to a time we can only imagine but never know" may also be read in the context of death, for, at least in *Mountain Language*, the Elderly Woman ultimately becomes a silent witness to the death of her son. In other words, death, like birth, gives name to that which can only be imagined and never known, and therefore while the mother may "bear the burden of our birth," she also bears the burden of our death.

Having followed the mother's bloody hand, it is possible to hear in the Elderly Woman's silence a catastrophic truth associated with the

maternal function as it appears in the play: on the one hand, the Elderly Woman lives her life in order to protect her son from death, and on the other hand, the act of giving birth to him not only makes his death possible, but inevitable. It is with this in mind that the Elderly Woman's silence presents what Jacques Derrida calls the "law of obsequence: "[w]hen the face without face, name without name, of the mother returns, in the end, one has what I called in Glas the logic of obsequence. The mother buries all her own. She assists whoever calls herself her mother, and follows all burials" (*TPC* 333). Despite the Sergeant's claim, there is no "helping hand" that can resolve this truth, especially given that the one whom it involves is the one, precisely, who suffers from an untended hand wound. Instead, the Elderly Woman's mute response to the call of her child bears witness to the fact that there is no language that could respond to the Prisoner's pleading, no "mother tongue" in which to answer her son. Consequently, this final silence reveals the Elderly Woman's unspeakable sorrow, for while her blood touched him and gave him life, and though it claims responsibility for his life, it is also what, despite her efforts, promised his death. Specifically, while I have argued that the relationship between the Elderly Woman and her son presents the "law of obsequence," it is not the case that I am suggesting that the Elderly Woman is somehow responsible for her son's torture. Contrarily, it is because her body has touched and given birth to that which will die that the Elderly Woman demonstrates care and responsibility. It is a clear disregard for being responsible for another's life that defines the military's position, and while they have the power to kill, this power does not open for them an ethical relation toward those whose lives are in their hands.

The Elderly Woman's silence also suggests a meta-theatrical component of *Mountain Language*, and one that explicitly contributes to the development catastrophic theater in post-war British drama. Specifically, her silence suggests the impossibility that theater could ever transform the violence that it presents into an aesthetic that recuperates and alleviates the pain caused by specific political turmoil such as, for example, the conflict between the Turkish and the Kurdish people, or between the United States and any one of the countries that it has invaded since World War II.[2] *Mountain Language*, in other words, neither offers a cathartic resolution, nor acts under the pretense that language, even poetic language, carries with it the possibility that it could alleviate the pain associated with the violence that it supposedly represents. In this regard, the Elderly Woman's silence becomes aligned with an impossibility maintained by the aesthetics of the play itself. Nevertheless, as Charles Grimes underscores, the moments of silence that pervade *Mountain Language* are difficult to transmit through the "written page," and therefore demand the medium of performance to "amplify the play's content" (98). In this regard, Grimes calls attention to a very important dynamic, namely, that the moments of silence in the text-

including the blackouts as well as the Elderly Woman's silence- allow for the greatest range of creative and performative possibilities. In this regard, text and performance are called to work together in order to accomplish the play's most challenging and, as it were, catastrophic moments. Hence, *Mountain Language*, while unable to produce any sort of reconciliatory or cathartic effect, nevertheless allows its most troubling moments to be informed by the creative intervention of theater artists, rather than dictating the means by which such moments should be performed. In this manner, scenes like the Elderly Woman's silence acquire a particular political relevance, as they give theater artists the opportunity to perform them any number of ways, instead of closing down or silencing creative possibilities. Thus, Harold Pinter's *Mountain Language* surely draws attention to Pinter's interest in silence and transferential forms of communication, exemplified by the Elderly Woman and the play's voice-overs respectively.

Conclusion

Mountain Language presents a prevailing image of the suffering imposed by authoritarian regimes; it depicts the victimization of people through the suppression of language and individuality. The domination of the victimized characters reflects the inability of these people to find their voices. Carey Perloff argues that language in *Mountain Language* becomes a tool for oppression and as a result, the voice-overs are the only means of communication. In the hostile landscape of the play, communication is forbidden, and victimization occurs with the suppression of language. Thus, silence conquers the world of *Mountain Language* and becomes the reason of its power.

The 'owners of language' in this world use words to gain power over those who have threatened them with some form of dissent. The guards threaten the women who are visiting their husbands and sons and tell them that only the language of the capital is to be spoken. The women do not know the language of the capital and when they continue to speak their own language, they are beaten. The women are coerced into silence for fear of what the guards may do to them. When a guard informs an elderly woman that she is permitted to speak her language again, she is too traumatized to speak at all, knowing that when her words are 'granted to her,' they are useless. With that realization, the elderly woman has become a repressed victim of the guards.

Mountain Language pulls its strength from true pain and torture. Perloff suggests that this play is quite accessible: "What strikes me is not its specificity but its aching universality. Pinter seems to have exposed the question to himself: at times of extreme terror, what matters most? What allows an individual to go on? How do we endure?" (2). The young woman is physically assaulted by the Sergeant and this domination implies her inferiority in comparison to the guards. The guards' treatment of the old

woman and her son is similar to the actions of mostly all the dictators all over the world. According to Michael Billington, *Mountain Language* is a powerful play because it is an extension of the world that we inhabit:

> The hooded man in the third scene reminds us that the Security Forces in Northern Ireland used just such practices. Pinter is not offering us the consolation that we are witnessing something hopelessly alien and remote. He is saying it could happen here; maybe some of it even does. But even more importantly he implies that we cannot shove the moral responsibilities for such actions on to others. The terror is within us, not without. (312)

Billington notes that the play can be considered a commentary on the use of domination throughout history. In the opening of the play it is revealed that the dogs have more power than the women:

> YOUNG WOMAN: We were here at nine o'clock this morning. It's now five o'clock. We have been standing here for eight hours. In the snow. Your men let Dobermann Pinschers frighten us. One bit this woman's hand.
>
> OFFICER: What was the name of this dog? (9)

In this dialogue it first becomes apparent that the women have no control over the situation and that they must abide by the officers in order to see their husbands. It is also apparent that the dogs have been granted names whereas the women and the prisoners are nameless. Names equal identity, therefore, the dogs are granted an identity while the women are not.

When the women are united with their men in the visitor's room, they have to find another way to communicate. When the woman tries to tell the prisoner that she had brought bread, she is reprimanded. The elderly woman conforms to the expectations of the capitol and becomes silent. In "Pinter in Rehearsal", Perloff makes an important observation: "Communication is forbidden. Language has become the tool of the oppressor, whose torrent of words infects the atmosphere. The only true connection comes through silence" (16). Perloff's statement is represented in the voiceovers of the play; these voiceovers are the only way that the characters can communicate with each other; they are never granted a chance to say goodbye. Silverstein, in *Harold Pinter and the Language of Cultural Power*, makes an important observation regarding Pinter's shift into an overtly political style of playwriting: "Pinter's plays offer a dystopian vision of the invincibility of regnant forms of cultural and political power" (152). Hence, silence in *Mountain Language* is undeniably powerful and eloquent enough to reflect such a dystopian life full of terror and torture.

الملخص

الصمت البليغ في مسرحية هارولد بينتر "*لغة الجبل*"

أماني محمود الصاوي

تقنية "هارولد بينتر" الدرامية تشتهر بتأكيدها على الصمت في الحوار و أصبحت الوقفة علامة مميزة في مسرحياته. يكشف "بينتر" عن شخصياته المسرحية من خلال التهرب المقصود على وجه التحديد من الكلام؛ وشخصياته تشارك في الحيل الدرامية من خلال لغتهم المنطوقة وغير المعلنة وذلك بالخوض في معارك مع شخصيات أخرى، و مع أنفسهم والجمهور. ومع ذلك، فإن صمت الشخصيات في مسرح "بينتر" لديه صوت غني جدا، ثري بدلالات فائقة المعاني. فعلي سبيل المثال يسهم صمت المرأة المسنة، في مسرحية "*لغة الجبل*"، دورا صريحا في تطوير المسرح البريطاني الكارثي الذي يجسد دراما ما بعد الحرب. وهكذا، يحاول هذا البحث اظهار كيف يستخدم "بينتر" الصمت كتقنية دراماتيكية في"*لغة الجبل*" من خلال معالجة الأسئلة التالية: ما هو دور اللغة وصلتها بالصمت في مسرحيات "بينتر"؟ ما هي وظيفة الصمت في "*لغة الجبل*"، وما هي علاقته بالتعذيب في مسرح "بينتر"؟ وبناء على ذلك، تسلط هذه الورقة الضوء على جهود "بينتر" لبيان كيف أن السلطة الحاكمة لا توفر مساحة للمهمشين للتعبير عن أنفسهم بالكلمات أو بالعمل. و اخيرا توجز الخاتمة كيف تقدم "*لغة الجبل*" صورة سائدة للمعاناة التي تفرضها الأنظمة الاستبدادية، وكيف تصور إيذاء الناس من خلال قمع اللغة والذات.

[1] **International PEN**, international organizations of writers. The original PEN was founded in London in 1921 by the English novelist John Galsworthy, and it has since grown to include writers worldwide. The name PEN stands for "poets, playwrights, editors, essayists, and novelists." International PEN promotes freedom of expression for all writers regardless of their nationality, race, or religion, or of the political system under which they live. PEN is especially active in defending and supporting writers who are being harassed, persecuted, or oppressed by their government.

[2] I include these specific events because Pinter often commented on them throughout his later career.

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