



## *Raiding the Inarticulate: Pinter and the politics of silence*

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# EPI-REVEL

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## Raiding the Inarticulate : Pinter and the politics of silence

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At		that		incision		sound
The	lout		is	at	the	throat
And		the		dislocated		word
Becomes						articulate.

(Pinter, "The Anaesthetist's Pin")<sup>1</sup>

In 1697, roughly 260 years before Harold Pinter's first play, Louis XIV expelled the Italian Players from Paris for their indiscretion in mocking his mistress, a decree that he eventually revoked in allowing them to perform on the Left Bank only on the condition that they not speak.<sup>2</sup> It was under conditions of edict and prohibition, in other words, that pantomime, the modern art of silence, was born. This episode suggests how deeply, through the centuries, stage language and silence have been implicated in the political; and that silence itself, traditionally approached as a mere absence of vocality, is in fact rooted in utterance both allowed and disallowed. As the example of the Italian Players makes clear, silence represents a curiously unstable, or ambiguous form of political utterance as it is assumed by theatrical performer and dramatic character. On one hand, it represents an imposed exclusion from spoken discourse: to "silence" someone is to strip that person of language's ability to articulate and thereby situate subjectivity within its performative fields; it is to objectify that person within the fixity of linguistic exclusion. But on the other hand, this silence also constitutes a defiance, within a field of resistance which asserts its own performative power. The very logic by which silence strips the embodied subject of linguistic recourse makes possible a counter-assertion, a flight from speech into the autonomy of physical and psychical enclosure. "From this time forth I never will speak word," says Shakespeare's Iago before retreating into a silence that we sense not even "torments" will violate (*Othello*, 5.2.304, 306).<sup>3</sup> The physical nature of these torments is telling: since language is intimately bound up with the subject's corporeal presence, the politics of silence is inescapably also a politics of the body.

Few contemporary dramatists have explored the political dynamics of silence as deeply and as consistently as Pinter — a playwright whose theater, like that of Beckett, is situated at the interface of language and silence.<sup>4</sup> Pinter invests speech with formidable power as a political instrument, thus sharing an interest in the coercive potentials of language with a number of his contemporaries: Havel, Bond, Weiss, the Beckett of *Catastrophe* and *What Where*. But though Pinter will set the contest of language within explicitly political locales in the interrogation room and prison of *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language*, its political dimension is clear in the conversational interchanges of the earlier plays. We are familiar with this linguistic dynamic, and the many ploys and stratagems by which characters seek to establish linguistic dominance: the verbal barrages inflicted by Goldberg and McCann on Stanley, by Lenny on Ruth, by Nicolas on Victor; the control of discursive subcategories which effect often subtle gestures of inclusion and exclusion (such as Mick's intimate discussion with Davies in *The Caretaker* about "afromosia teak veneer" [60])<sup>5</sup>; the verbal contest of memory that characterizes Pinter's plays of the late 60's and 70's; the deployment

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Pinter, *Poems and Prose, 1949-1977* (New York: Grove, 1978), 63.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Leabhart, *Modern and Post-Modern Mime* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 4-5.

<sup>3</sup> G. Blakemore Evans, textual editor, *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), 1239.

<sup>4</sup> On the linguistic dynamics of Pinter's drama, see Austin E. Quigley, *The Pinter Problem* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

<sup>5</sup> Harold Pinter, *The Caretaker and The Dumb Waiter* (New York: Grove, 1961), 60.

of a formidable arsenal of names, allusions, responses, non-sequiturs, and questions. In a strict reversal of conversational etiquette, Pinter's characters often use the rules and devices of language to render conversation impossible, to effect the impossibility of response and provoke silence — from Spooner's request to Hirst ("Tell me about your wife." "What wife?") to Nicolas' grotesquely similar request of Nicolas : "Does she... fuck? [...] What does she like? I'm talking about your wife. Your wife." The paradigmatic instance of this subversion, of language deployed in order to deny reciprocity, is the closing scene of *Mountain Language*, in which the Guard announces to the Prisoner : "Tell her she can speak in her own language. New rules. Until further notice." "Mother?" "*She does not respond. She sits still.*"<sup>6</sup>

Language serves as such a powerful instrument of manipulation because of the peculiar investments that characterize it in Pinter's drama : the fact that words "stand in" for reality (to use Bruce Wilshire's expression),<sup>7</sup> indeed often modify or constitute this reality through the power of linguistic surrogates. The ability to control the words in common currency represents, in Pinter's theater, an uncanny power over the referents they designate. This verbal dimension is heightened in the memory plays of the mid-1970s — where to "recall" something is literally, in Anna's words (in *Old Times*), to make it "take place."<sup>8</sup> But throughout Pinter's drama, language asserts control over the world to which it refers — foregrounding, exposing, configuring its elements within a palpably real linguistic mise-en-scène, marking this world in discursive terms. For a dramatist who stages the physical body with remarkable restraint and physical concealment, Pinter's dramatic speech is dense with corporeal predicates, with references to the body, its functions, and its interactions with other bodies. At its most invasive — as in Mick's reference to Davies' smell, Lenny's stories to Ruth of violence against women, Nicolas' discussion (to Victor) of his wife's menstruation — language penetrates the body's most private reaches and interiors. Pinter's is a highly embodied language, but this is merely the corollary of a bodily experience which is itself deeply implicated in the linguistic, always vulnerable to exposure and manipulation within language's objectifying field. When Nicolas speaks of "the cut and thrust of debate" (45), he captures the invasive power of language generally in Pinter's drama, its abilities to penetrate and recast within its own terms the domain even of the inarticulate.

*The Homecoming* reveals with particular clarity the power of linguistic control in Pinter's early drama. A play organized in terms of scenic territoriality, its interrelational struggle is effected, in part, through the actual contest of bodies : a gestural dialogue that seeks, through touch, the physical negotiation of bodily relationship. Max punches Joey, Lenny and Teddy do not touch when greeting each other, Joey lies on top of Ruth. Both open and covert, the play's threat of violence establishes a general tenor of bodily risk, and characters draw upon this charged threat to redirect the weight of physicality ; Max to Lenny : "I'll chop your spine off, you talk to me like that!" (9). But as this line makes clear, language plays a crucial role in the struggle over space and corporeal embodiment ; indeed, it often constitutes a key determinant of the territoriality that structures this play. Far from being disembodied, the words of Pinter's drama are charged with physical reference, and this quality endows the linguistic with a powerful materializing role, within a sphere that is both surrogate and perceptually actual. As we have long known, to say something in Pinter's world is to make it

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<sup>6</sup> Harold Pinter, *No Man's Land* (New York: Grove, 1975), 30; *One for the Road*, 46; *Mountain Language* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988 ), 47. It is striking how often silence in Pinter's plays is produced through references to women.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce Wilshire, *Role Playing and Identity: The Limits of Theatre as Metaphor* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

<sup>8</sup> Harold Pinter, *Old Times* (New York: Grove, 1971), 31-32.

happen, with a force that threatens to overwhelm and supplant the immediate.<sup>9</sup> For Lenny to refer to his parents *at it* during his conception is to situate Max within the intimate scene, while his monologues to Ruth embody her within a field of male violence, a brutal use of the “other places” that will increasingly emerge as a tool of scenic negotiation in later Pinter.<sup>10</sup> Conversely, for Sam to speak to Lenny without acknowledging Max’s presence in the play’s opening scene is to assert a spatiality exclusive of his presence, and we feel the physical register of this invisibility in Max’s urgent insistence: “I’m here, too, you know. [...] I said I’m here, too. I’m sitting here” (12). Max’s description of the attack and defense that form the boxer’s skill reflects the physical assault deployed through language itself.

To speak in Pinter’s drama, then, is to manipulate the discursive placement of others; it is to configure that scene which is both physical and linguistic, thereby co-opting — for others — the body’s self-possession through speech. To describe in Pinter — even to mention — is to seize in the very act of naming. Within this linguistic contest, silence represents the field of what has been co-opted, an enforced reversion from linguistic commerce into a fixity without linguistic recourse. Like the more horrific images of coercive silence in Edward Bond’s theater, the immobilized, silenced body in Pinter’s drama — Stanley, Davies, Anna, Robert, Hirst — stand as emblem of language’s hegemony. Whether this silence occurs in momentary fixity or in more sustained tableau, it constitutes a testimony to language’s power to ‘render silent,’ to catch the body within a loss of the word that is both confinement and exposure. Pinter’s well-known observation — “One way of looking at speech is to say it is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness”<sup>11</sup> — is revealing: the engineering of silence strips the subject of language’s clothing, leaving it bared, the body stripped of verbal cover at the same time as it stands disclosed within the terms of another’s speech. The subject is fixed as object, “[kept] . . . in its place,” a sign of language’s power to render mute.

Yet such linguistic triumph in Pinter’s drama is never complete; this rendering silent is never solely a containment. As the examples of *Iago* and the *Italian Players* make clear in very different contexts, the very demarcation of a field excluded from linguistic commerce makes possible a point of resistance. Characters may drive other characters within silence as a prisonhouse of speech, but the containment of inexpressibility is also a recourse. Despite the efforts of language to seal and penetrate its domain, silence in Pinter’s drama retains its resistance to linguistic demarcation, its subversive ability to refuse a co-opted speech and, in so doing, to assert a kind of pre-verbal sovereignty. For in its refusal of speech, silence claims a threshold arena of inaccessibility, a private field that constitutes its own competing scenic territory. This paradox of silence as counter-field, as a claim of subjectivity in the midst of its objectification, is the subject of Pinter’s 1955 prose piece “The Examination.” In this story, Kullus is subject to an unspecified examination within the confines of a room controlled by the narrator. The examination proceeds according to established rules, but the asymmetries of the power relationship are apparent; as the narrator explains: “It was my aim to avoid the appearance of subjection; a common policy, I understand, in like examinations. Yet I was naturally dominant by virtue of my owning the room; he having entered through the door I now closed.”<sup>12</sup> The narrator institutes intervals of silence for Kullus, moments that he also studies as part of this coercive examination. But these silences gradually become spaces

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<sup>9</sup> Kristin Morrison uses the term “pseudo-event” to refer to the quasi-reality created through verbal narration in Pinter’s plays; see *Canter’s and Chronicles: The Use of Narrative in the Plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 173.

<sup>10</sup> See Stanton B. Garner, Jr., “Correcting the Space: Scenic Negotiation in *No Man’s Land*,” *The Pinter Review*, 3 (1989), 1-8.

<sup>11</sup> Harold Pinter, “Writing for the Theatre,” *Evergreen Review*, 33 (August-September 1964), 80-82; rpt. in Harold Pinter, *Complete Works: One* (New York: Grove, 1976), 15.

<sup>12</sup> Pinter, *Poems and Prose*, 63.

outside the game, zones resistant to examination, and it is through these intervals that Kullus succeeds in reconfiguring the room and their relationship within it :

I can only assume that Kullus was aware, on these occasions, of the scrutiny of which he was the object, and was persuaded to resist it, and to act against it. He did so by deepening the intensity of his silence, and by taking courses I could by no means follow, so that I remained isolated, and outside his silence, and thus of negligible influence. And so I took the only course open to me, and terminated the intervals arbitrarily, cutting short the proposed durations, when I could no longer follow him, and was no longer his dominant. For where the intervals had been my imposition, they had now become his imposition. (65)

“And we were now in Kullus’s room,” the story ends (66). The reversal is precise, symmetrical, and it hinges on a retreat into silence, a box within the boxes of examination and room. The power of this silence is its uncanniness, its inaccessibility to examination and pursuit. Its very status as non-discursive space is in fact its political power, for it constitutes the field, demarcated by language, by which language is itself displaced.<sup>13</sup> This paradox has profound implications for our understanding of silence as it is forced and enforced within Pinter’s drama. If silence is a trap into which characters are forced, it is also a field in which they assert agency, a defiance in the face of exclusion. Teddy’s silence during much of *The Homecoming*’s final segment, Jerry’s silences in *Betrayal*, Anna’s passivity up to *Old Times*’ closing moment — these represent a withdrawal from language, a standing apart from its coercions and its configurations. This private space, locked and inaccessible, is evident in even the most victimizing of linguistic and corporeal intrusions : we misread the interrogation dynamics of *The Birthday Party*, *One for the Road*, and *Mountain Language* if we do not understand the silences of its victims as — in part, at least — the claiming of a place, a place which — like other no man’s lands and kinds of Alaska in Pinter’s drama — represent an arena outside linguistic reach.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, to the extent that silence is tied to the body, now liberated in the midst of its exposure, this silence may assert a rival coerciveness, linked to the body’s mute presence and its power to fascinate and attract. One senses this in the Matchseller’s silence throughout *A Slight Ache*, and in Ruth’s silent presiding over the tableau that closes *The Homecoming*.<sup>15</sup>

The paradox of silence has implications for our broader understanding of the political in Harold Pinter’s plays. For it reminds us of the extent to which the indeterminacy throughout his drama is intrinsic to its political functioning. Pinter, it can be said, challenges our theoretical models of “the political” by confronting the political from a more deeply phenomenological perspective, and his primary political interests are rooted in his investigation of the body and its performance fields. The fact that our contemporary notions of political theater often derive from the Brechtian model, with its analytical biases and discursive emphasis, suggests that we may be more adept at exploring the more explicitly ideological politics of Caryl Churchill or Edward Bond than the elements in Pinter’s drama that constitute their resistance and subversion. But Pinter’s theater is ideological at a level and in ways different from that of Brecht and those dramatists influenced by his dramatic example.

“Radical” in the strict etymological sense of pursuing *roots*, his earlier drama explores the political as it manifests itself within the phenomenology of performance, and within all that this includes : the ambiguous status of the body within both subjectivity and representation,

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<sup>13</sup> “The unscrupulous present suffuses the everyday speaking world with an unspeakable and unspeaking ‘as it is’”; Alice Rayner, “Harold Pinter: Narrative and Presence,” *Theatre Journal* 40 (December 1988), 497.

<sup>14</sup> See Thomas P. Adler, “The Embrace of Silence: Pinter, Miller, and the Response to Power,” *The Pinter Review* (1991), 4.

<sup>15</sup> As Peter Hall observes, “Pinter deals in stillness”; “Directing Pinter,” interview with Catherine Itzin and Simon Trussler, *Theatre Quarterly* 4 (Nov. 1974-Dec. 1975), 7.

the variability of the individual's inherece within its material environment, the contest of relationship within fields of intersubjectivity.

The politics of silence in Pinter's drama resides in paradox and ambiguity, as an arena both constrained and free, its power of utterance inseparable from its linguistic indeterminacy. That language mounts such persistent raids upon this field of the inarticulate does not overcome the resistance that this field offers to linguistic examination, even ours. Pinter may have said of his characters that "it is in the silence that they are most evident to me"<sup>16</sup> but this knowledge is the far more difficult awareness of the unspoken, within a political field that is assertive in the very silence of its containment. Plays like *The Homecoming*, *Old Times*, or *One for the Road* challenge us to confront the unspoken and the unspeakable, recognize its frequent indeterminacy, and allow it its essential political force.

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<sup>16</sup> Pinter, "Writing for the Theatre," 14.