The Transformative Linguistic Politics of Mountain Language

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Walter Benjamin acknowledges the revolutionary potentials of art, writing that, to a fascist aestheticization of politics, “Communism replies by politicizing art” (1071). Harold Pinter’s Mountain Language depicts the regulative and repressive linguistic mechanisms of a fascist bureaucracy, representing the capacity for language to authorize and to authenticate violence. In Mountain Language, anthropomorphism and offensive humor construct a dehumanizingly fascist aestheticization of language. This language justifies the state’s denial of the agency of its political subjects and its bureaucratic violence against these subjects.

Mountain Language continues Pinter’s foray into a more direct representation of political issues than the comedy of menace of his earlier plays. These more politically urgent plays received a lukewarm reception from many critics, who surmised, according to Robert Gordon, “that the playwright had abandoned the philosophical complexity and multi-layered ambiguity of his previous work to become a writer of didactic protest plays” (163). Pinter has specifically defended Mountain Language from critics asserting its singular nature. In a letter to Times Literary Supplement, he explains that Mountain Language “is not intended as a ‘parable’” (1109). Pinter’s letter implies that his play offers a more broad analysis of the political role of

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1 Italics mine.
language in state power and bureaucracy. Charles Grimes notes that this extensive treatment illuminates Pinter’s “political issues as recurrent, even continuous, throughout history” (91). The play stages a culture of bureaucratic domination reliant upon the manipulation of language. *Mountain Language* consequently demands that audiences recognize the fascist rhetoric of their own society in the interactions between the military personnel and the mountain people.  

*Mountain Language*’s resistance of didacticism does not imply its inability to achieve and inspire political activism. Pinter claims his conviction that political activism forms the potential for ameliorating society, saying, “politics… are not all over, because if they are, we are really doomed” (qtd. in Grimes 25). Thus, Pinter’s political plays either fiercely advocate some type of direct and beneficial action, or nihilistically submit audiences to witness, in Benjamin’s words, their “own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure” (1071). Although Grimes considers Pinter’s statement as a possible admission of the inexorability of late capitalism (26), this admission would certainly place Pinter’s political dramas within an aesthetic realm Benjamin considers fascistic. Instead, Pinter emphasizes in an article for *Sanity* the urgency of constructing a language of protest, writing, “Because language is discredited… the government possesses carte blanche to do what it likes” (*Various Voices* 188). Pinter argues that language constitutes both a mechanism of fascist oppression, and one of social liberation. His play displays an immense interest in the political multiplicities of language, but his argument suggests that society does not often consider language as a mechanism of liberation. This view achieves articulation in *Mountain Language*, wherein the subversive power of language appears nonexistent.  

The play’s dialogue occupies two capacities: spoken language between political subjects and the state, and voice-over conversations between family members. Interactions between political subjects and the state portray the play’s effective dominant culture of bureaucracy.
Raymond Williams explains an effective dominant culture as “the central, effective and dominant system of meanings and values, which are not merely abstract, but which are organized and lived” (38). The bureaucracy of *Mountain Language* organizes the lives of its political subjects through language, banning their native tongue and using their names to regulate political agency. Voice-over dialogue between family members imparts the liberating power of language. The metatheatrical technique of voice-over creates the type of Third Space awareness in the audience that Homi K. Bhabha characterizes as one of negotiation between two subjects: “The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy” (2370). Rather than merely representing a linguistically determined existence onstage, *Mountain Language* engages this Third Space. The community of the theatrical environment juxtaposes the brutal political reality onstage, compelling audiences to negotiate the Third Space created by the play’s voice-overs.

In *Mountain Language*, the state’s use of anthropomorphic language ascribes dogs and technology humanlike agency. Empowered by the state, this agency legitimizes violence against the mountain people. While waiting in line to visit her husband in prison, Sara Johnson complains that one of the state’s dogs bit another woman, and the Officer demands to know the dog’s name, declaring, “Before they bite, they *state* their name. It’s a formal procedure…. If you tell me one of our dogs bit this woman without giving his name I will have that dog shot!” (17). Appealing to the dog’s name as an expression of its authority to attack, the Officer humanizes the violent bureaucratic mechanisms that ratify the state’s domination over its political subjects. The dog’s name establishes its political agency, a reward for its complicity with the state’s oppression. For Gordon, this incident implies that the mountain people occupy a political
position beneath dogs: “The insane obsession with bureaucratic correctness that pertains even to dogs illustrates the inhumanity of a system that exists to maintain its authority rather than to protect its citizens” (169-70). Sara complains only after the Officer asks to hear complaints, initiating another bureaucratic process. Their interaction exposes a linguistic manipulation that displaces responsibility from human agents to inhumane mechanisms. This displacement offers the state a scapegoat for the violence enacted against the mountain people; the malfunction of bureaucracy creates violence, not bureaucracy itself.

Because the effective dominant bureaucracy in *Mountain Language* uses names to regulate political authority, names form a resource for the state’s oppression of the mountain people’s agency. The play begins with the Sergeant’s request for Sara to state her name, and when she replies, “We’ve given our names,” (11) he merely repeats his inquiry. By refusing to accept their names, the Sergeant not only denies the political agency of the mountain people, but halts the bureaucratic process that admits them to see their families. The agency of names and the strength of familial community threaten the state’s political ascendency.

The state’s computer system forms another bureaucratic mechanism that becomes endowed with a humanlike agency. After Sara sees her husband approaching his execution, the Sergeant explains, “you’ve come in the wrong door. It must be the computer. The computer’s got a double hernia” (41). He anthropomorphizes the computer system in a manner that imparts its susceptibility to mistakes as similar to the susceptibility of the human body to physical injury. The Sergeant indirectly reminds Sara of the vulnerability of her body to the torture the state initiates against the mountain people. The Sergeant’s levity in anthropomorphizing the computer system reveals the state’s total complacency regarding bureaucratic malfunction. The Sergeant appears unconcerned because the computer system has not actually malfunctioned; it
consistently enforces the state’s agenda of political oppression. Bureaucracy is inherently violent in *Mountain Language*, forming an effective dominant culture that aestheticizes language to justify and conceal state violence.

The Sergeant displays an awareness of his transparent manipulation of language and its potential exposure of the state’s violent political oppression. To further conceal his nonchalant rhetoric, he advises Sara, “if you want any information on any aspect of life in this place we’ve got a bloke comes into the office every Tuesday, except when it rains” (41). Rather than humanizing the violent mechanisms of bureaucracy, the Sergeant emphasizes that Sara may actually interact with another human. Yet, the Sergeant cannot avoid revealing the bureaucracy that regulates even the process of acquiring information about the state’s treatment of political prisoners. Joseph Dokes maintains the luxury of appearing for his work only once a week, and only under the proper weather conditions. By permitting these slack standards of attendance for the bureaucrat who divulges information about the prison, the fascist state of *Mountain Language* prevents knowledge of the full extent of its oppression from anyone not directly affiliated with its agenda. Information becomes the privilege of the state’s agents.

Sara acknowledges the paradox of the Sergeant’s offer. When Sara asks “Can I fuck [Dokes]? If I fuck him, will everything be all right,” (41) she astutely infers that the Sergeant’s advice does not promise her the opportunity for engaging Dokes as an empowered political subject seeking information. She maintains the political position of an object susceptible to any violence the state desires to enact on her body. Although, as Gordon notes, Sara “linguistically assumes the active role,” she nonetheless concedes this power by deferring to the Sergeant, asking his permission to “fuck” Dokes (172). The Sergeant’s offer for Sara to speak with Dokes reduces her to an object of sexual gratification. This objectification forces her to use language
that superficially implies not just consent, but active pleasure in her subjugation.

The play’s offensive humor further diminishes Sara’s political agency. Gordon discerns humor in Sara’s request to help her husband by having intercourse with Dokes, writing, “The exchange is grimly humorous yet also profoundly unsettling in its revelation of the way even the most intelligent resistance gives way to the complete control of bodies and minds that defines a totalitarian regime” (172). The military personnel notice Sara’s intellect in the play’s first scene, when she produces papers confirming that she is not part of the mountain people’s community. They agree that Sara and her husband are in the wrong section of the prison. Sara’s intelligence in producing documentation to support her claims of injustice nonetheless submits her to another bureaucratic process of attempting to locate her husband. When she does, she becomes subjected to another bureaucratic process resulting in her objectification. Bureaucracy begets bureaucracy in *Mountain Language*, constructing a ceaselessly violent process.

*Mountain Language* accordingly emphasizes the power of language to subvert this process through the characters’ voice-overs. The play introduces voice-over dialogue between family members to ensure that audiences perceive the complex political capacities of language, which, as Austin Quigley notes, “is a means of… altering the status quo” (23). The Prisoner and his mother reveal their sincere love for one another, which the state cannot repress. Their dialogue fundamentally alters the audience’s perception of the linguistic state of affairs represented in the play. The Elderly Woman tells her son, “The baby is waiting for you,” and continues, “When you come home there will be such a welcome for you. Everyone is waiting for you” (33). She focuses on his connection to love, his family, and his community. He responds with the concern that “They have bitten my mother’s hand” (33). Audiences are captivated by not only the sudden absence of violence and its replacement with loving community, but the
seeming impossibility of the characters to engage in such dialogue. Although the characters cannot openly speak to one another, their voice-over dialogue confronts the audience with the unique ability for language to give expression to the characters’ love, just as easily as it ratifies their oppression. The sparse, factually descriptive voice-overs juxtapose the aestheticized linguistic violence of the fascist state. Quigley explains that Pinter’s plays emphasize linguistic community, because speaking allows characters “to engage in a process of community reinforcement, community contestation and community reorganization” (23). Despite their repressive surroundings, the Prisoner and the Elderly Woman reinforce their love for one another, contesting the state’s capacity to wholly determine their lives. Language focusing on community provides the characters the possibility to reorganize the violent manner in which the state organizes their lives. Much like Bhabha’s Third Space of negotiation, the variable political capacities of language in Pinter’s play promote the exchange and hybridization of these ideas. The language of community constitutes a politicized force resisting violent fascist regulation.

Mountain Language reveals the communal space of the theatrical environment and the potential for the audience’s using that sense of community to transport the politicized art of the theater into their own political reality. When Marc Silverstein claims that the play “does not (indeed, cannot) represent an oppositional set of political practices,” (152) he does so at the grave expense of missing Pinter’s interest in the complexity of language, which may subvert as well as repress. Similarly, when Jacques Derrida explains, “There is nothing outside of the text,” (1692) readers should not interpret this assertion as one that emphasizes only the oppressive aspects of language. Such an interpretation ratifies the beliefs of fascist dictators, such as Benito Mussolini, who would likely revel in the notion that language completely circumscribes individuals within state power. Because individuals cannot escape language, they must find a
way to transform this mechanism of their oppression into one of their liberation.

While *Mountain Language* cannot simply teach audiences what political actions to take, the play provides useful suggestions for audiences to initiate effective political action. For Mireia Aragay, Pinter depicts “a social, shared sense of subjectivity, arguably the necessary condition for the emergence of a truly transformative kind of agency that will bypass the individualism underlying both the liberal humanist and the postmodern subjects” (252). Voice-over dialogue in *Mountain Language* emphasizes linguistic community as the means for transgressing fascist oppression. The theatrical environment establishes a communal center capable of creating politicized dialogue amongst its patrons. Bhabha illuminates to his readers that, by negotiating the Third Space, “we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves” (2372). In a social reality presenting fascist tendencies, achieving political action founded on community is no easy task, but *Mountain Language* proposes that it constructs a powerful political mechanism. Theatrical community permits audiences to transform the individual subjectivity that divides and dominates their consciousness, emerging as the hybrid political agents Bhabha and Aragay describe. Audiences and critics such as Silverstein cannot reasonably expect Pinter to elaborate an easy and infallible means of political opposition in a one act play. They should, nonetheless, admire his play’s significant contribution concerning the importance of language and community for combatting the fascist belief in a docile populace reproduced by a linguistic power they cannot escape.
Works Cited and Consulted


