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## On the Threshold: Time and the Speaking Subject in Harold Pinter's *Silence*

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Alongside Samuel Beckett and John Osborne, the Nobel prize winner Harold Pinter is one of the most studied playwrights of contemporary British drama. With his dreamlike rooms and settings, his enigmatic plots and powerful characters, the author can claim a place among the best dramatists in the world. His plays have been chronologically categorized as “Comedies of Menace” (1957-1968), “Memory Plays” (1968-1982), “Political Plays and Sketches” (1980-2000). His “Memory Play” *Silence* is one of the most difficult and obscure and also one of the least studied.

In this article, I investigate the relationship between the speaking subjects in *Silence* and their discourses. Their speech is the presentation, the materialization, of their inner *linguistic chora* (cf. Kristeva 1986, 90-136) and through their words the characters construct their own time, space, and memories. By doing a close reading of the text, I argue that, though written in 1969, this play can be considered post-dramatic ahead of its time as “the phonetic materiality, the temporal course, the dispersion in space, the loss of teleology and self-identity” (Lehmann, 2006, 148) dominate the drama.

In particular, I will refer to the subject as an entity under construction, in perpetual transformation; as Karoline Gritzner states: “the theatre provides an imaginary space for subjects-in-process (Kristeva) – speaking and moving subjects (characters, performers, spectators) whose experiences of *becoming* are linked to the theatrical negotiations of alterity” (2008, 331). On the other hand, the critic of postmodernism Fredric Jameson, in his essay “Postmodernism and consumer society”, has talked about the “death of the subject”, understood as the old “individual subject” of the bourgeoisie. In the age of

capitalism this old subject is dead and maybe has never even existed. By contrast, I argue here that the subject is not dead, the self just shows itself now as multifaceted and deconstructed, the subject has no borders any more.

The poetic, fragmented, disjointed structure of the play recalls the concept of platonic chora mentioned by Lehmann who considers it as a “space and speech/discourse without telos, hierarchy and causality, without fixable meaning and unity” (2006, 146). In addition, Julia Kristeva, in her theory of the “subject in process”, had already claimed that the process of creation of the subject and of language derives from two modalities, namely the semiotic and the symbolic functions. The heterogeneous flux that is the semiotic chora is where the subject is generated. In *Silence* we recognize characters as trying to position themselves, therefore moving from the semiotic to the symbolic realm of the signifying process. The play itself is a sort of reiterated thetic phase or second-degree thetic, that is “a resumption of the functioning characteristic of the semiotic chora within the signifying device of language. This is precisely what artistic practices, and notably poetic language, demonstrate.” (Kristeva 1986 (1974), 103). In particular:

In the case, for example, of a signifying practice such as ‘poetic language’, the semiotic disposition will be the various deviations from the grammatical rules of the language: articulatory effects which shift the phonemative system back towards its articulatory, phonetic base and consequently towards the drive-governed bases of sound-production; the overdetermination of a lexeme by multiple meanings which it does not carry in ordinary usage but which accrue to it as a result of its occurrence in other texts; syntactic irregularities such as ellipses, non-recoverable deletions, indefinite embeddings, etc. ; the replacement of the relationship between the protagonists of any enunciation as they function in a locutory act – see here the work of J. L. Austin and John Searle – by a system of relations based on fantasy; and so forth. (Kristeva 1986 (1973), 28-29)

Indeed, poetic language substitutes movement and body action almost completely in the play. Nevertheless, the function of the spoken word is not a communicative one, and its power lies not only in the substitution of movement but also, and most importantly, in the depicting and structuring of time and place shifts. As Stanton Garner brilliantly points out,

time is spatialized by memory and localized as it is staged in the linguistically conditioned scene of remembrance. For their part, the “places” brought forward through conversation remain situated within the problematic field of temporality bound to a past unreliable in outline and detail. To contest the field of time and

memory, in other words, is to contest space in its verbally conditioned modes, whereas to evoke the offstage is often, in the plays, to disclose its temporal contours. (1994, 147)

This very brief play, which presents three characters in three different areas, is really compelling for the reader/spectator who has to piece together the fragmented past recollected by the three characters. Ellen is a young woman in her twenties, Rumsey a man of forty, and Bates is in his thirties. Time and space are not specified. We do not know where and in what period of their lives the characters are. We can even argue that they are not in the same place and are not sharing their space-time, hence the three different areas to which they are relegated. There are almost no stage directions about the actors' movements apart from a movement by Bates towards Ellen, and two movements by Ellen towards Rumsey, who, by contrast, remains still for the whole drama. These moments introduced by the movement of a character towards another always end in silence. Since they stand aside from the rest of the text they might be viewed as sort of flashbacks to several past levels.

As reported in Harold Hobson's review of the première in *The Sunday Times*, which is worth mentioning since it takes into account the audience response, "The audience has to piece together into some sort of shifting coherence the fragmented details of the partly recollected past, and in each case what is important is not the past, but the continuing influence that this past exercises on the present which is before our eyes on the stage" (1969). Along with the hardly moving, separate bodies of the actors, language thus shapes the space-time dimension which moulds identities.

The action does not happen today, yesterday or tomorrow, but simultaneously at all the three levels of time, which, as Merleau-Ponty alleges, are all implied in the present time as retrospection and projection. The characters' words thus literally materialize past, present and future events and identities. The place recalled is a rural one, in the countryside. There are several references to a river, fields and hills, animals such as dogs, cows, horses, and birds; the weather is always cloudy and windy. Although movement is almost absent in the play, it is evoked by words: "walk" is repeated 25 times and the author uses other movement-related words such as "turn", "wheel", "glide", "slip", and "float".

After Rumsey has opened the play describing his girl, who always wears grey clothes for him, it is Ellen's turn to remember two men:

ELLEN There are two. One who is with me sometimes, and another. He listens to me. I tell him what I know. We walk by the dogs.

Sometimes the wind is so high that he does not hear me. I lead him to a tree, clasp closely to him and whisper to him, wind going, dogs stop, and he hears me.

But the other hears me. (Pinter 1997, 191-92)

We can now focus on “but”: the adversative conjunction following the statement that one managed to hear what she was saying presupposes that the other could not, or that he could “as well”, or “too”. The adversative conjunction here confuses the reader because it is not actually consistent with the text. And yet, we should notice that the last adversative sentence is separated from the rest of the paragraph, which means that it could be a lonely monad of memory detached from the previous one. It seems that both men share the same event, the same place and time recalled, but Ellen’s line can refer to two different memories or representations. In this play Pinter actually makes brilliant use of perceptions and points of view, of contrasting memories which all claim their veracity. The task of collecting pieces to create a cohesive unified story is almost impossible for the reader and unattainable for the spectators who find themselves in the relentless *hic et nunc* of the performance.

Bates then talks about a pub in town run by a cousin of his. He claims to have brought Ellen there, but later Ellen denies it. At this point it is Rumsey who talks about Ellen and recollects a moment which is crucial for this analysis: “She walks from the door to the window to see the way she has come, to confirm that the house which grew nearer is the same one she stands in, that the path and the bushes are the same, that the gate is the same. When I stand beside her and smile at her, she looks at me and smiles” (192). The use of the verb “to walk” to denote the woman’s movement towards the window lays emphasis on the repositioning of the point of view: in order to ensure the identity of the path, the spatial coordinates and the house, the woman needs to redirect her gaze. Moreover, the movement does not merely signify a change in position, but also a shift of perspective, since what Ellen seeks is a view from a height<sup>1</sup>. It seems that she needs to be above the path she has followed in order to confirm the place, or to be able to remember something, as we shall see later.

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<sup>1</sup> Merleau-Ponty has also studied the relationship between subject and space, and about an object perceived he pointed out that “Its being as an object is, therefore, not a being-for-the-thinking subject, but a being-for-the-gaze which meets it at a certain angle, and otherwise fails to recognize it.” (1962, 253).

All three characters have lost their bearings, they no longer have any orientation, or direction and this lack of spatial – and temporal – references characterizes their speech, their broken syntax and sentences, their silences. The few movements they perform and those they recall represent an attempt to localize time and locate memories.

Now, in relation to broken syntax and disconnected discourse, Jameson alleges that schizophrenic experience, for instance, is characterized by the impossibility to construct a “coherent sequence” of signifiers, and therefore is a “language disorder”, as Lacan considered it: “The experience of temporality, human time, past, present, memory, the persistence of personal identity over months and years – this existential or experiential feeling of time itself – is also an effect of language” (Jameson 1985, 119). By contrast, whenever time is perceived as a simultaneity of past, present and future, language goes adrift, it loses its linearity and cohesion, which is precisely what happens in the play. According to Kristeva in fact, “All poetic ‘distortions’ of the signifying chain and the structure of signification may be considered in this light: they yield under the attack of the ‘residues of the first symbolizations’ (Lacan), in other words, those drives that the thetic phase was not able to sublate by linking them into signifier and signified” (1986 (1974), 103). Therefore, the fragmented discourse in *Silence* shows the characters’ movements along the binary *semiotic-symbolic* rather than their “schizophrenic” inability to make use of language, so that their being is always “in between”.

Language in particular dictates the flow – or throwback – of time thanks to its evocative power. The characters’ age, for instance, is never the same: when the two men talk about their past, it seems that they are in their mid-life. Bates, who is supposed to be in his thirties, says “someone called me Granddad” and Ellen also talks about herself as an old woman. She even says: “She asks me about my early life, when I was young, never departing from her chosen subject, but I have nothing to tell her about the sexual part of my youth. I’m old, I tell her, my youth was somewhere else, anyway I don’t remember” (194). What is absolutely fascinating is the spatialization of a time in life which becomes something that “moves” and goes “somewhere else”, youth is objectified and “forgotten” as it is estranged by the woman. We see characters at a certain age but their discourses reveal that they may well be older than that, which suggests that what we see may not be the present time. Bates, Rumsey and Ellen might inhabit the past with their bodies and speak in the present with their voices. Conversely, their bodies might live in the present while their speaking voices might be ‘projected’ towards the future. Hence

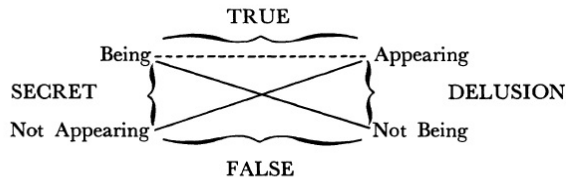
Ellen's question on her own age later in the play: "I seem to be old. Am I old now?" (201). Therefore, it could be helpful to consider what Merleau-Ponty said about the relationship between the subject and time:

We are saying that time is someone, or that temporal dimensions, in so far as they perpetually overlap, bear each other out and ever confine themselves to making explicit what was implied in each, being collectively expressive of that one single explosion or thrust which is subjectivity itself. We must understand time as the subject and the subject as time. (1962, 422)

Pinter thus succeeds in putting on stage the split between both past and present, and body and speech, but at the same time he keeps them together so that we see the "textuality of the remembered self" (Begley 2005, 137).

Greimas and Courtés' study on the enunciation and a *narrative semiotics* might help us retrace the discursive complexity of *Silence* both in terms of enunciation – an act conveying meaning – and of the resulting utterance. What is central is the concept of enunciation which is "an instance where transformation takes place, transformation that goes from the (available) system, of a paradigmatic type (e. g. on the phonological level, all the phonemes of a natural language), to an utterance or to a syntactically actualized discourse" (1976, 434), while the utterance is considered as the *evental* representation (436). Furthermore, the two scholars identify two different subjects, the *cognitive subject* and the *subject of doing*. While the former is the logical arranger of the narrative endowed with total knowledge of events, the latter has only a partial knowledge and is considered an *actant of narration*, instead of communication. In light of the opposition between *being* and *appearing*, Greimas and Courtés point to four *cognitive positions* in the knowledge of events (440):

- true (= being + appearing)
- false (= not being + not appearing)
- secret (= being + not appearing)
- delusion or lie (= not being + appearing).



Following Greimas's square, then, we might argue that this play is not about *true* or *false* events. What stands out instead, is a state of *secrecy* from the point of view of characters who *are* old but *do not appear* as such, and a state of *delusion* from the spectators/readers' point of view, who perceive characters *as young* though they *are not*.

A movement triggers the first flashback when Bates moves towards Ellen and they suddenly start talking about where to go that night. Bates suggests going to the pub run by his cousin, but Ellen refuses. And yet in a former line Bates recalls taking Ellen there: "Brought her into this place, my cousin runs it. Undressed her, placed my hand." (192). Referring to this problematic excerpt the British writer and theatre critic Ronald Hayman has tentatively but convincingly suggested that: "Perhaps the sequence in which we are watching events is not the sequence in which they happened" (1969, 85). What we actually see in the play is that what happens is not aligned with memories recalled and that the characters' experience of the events narrated is often partial or self-contradictory.

"I walk in my mind. But can't get out of the walls, into a wind" (197) Bates claims, but soon after he maintains that he was talking to his "little girl" about birds resting on trees. Out of the blue, Ellen produces an amazing description of herself running "over the grass", "turning" and "wheeling", as if she were flying like a bird, and as if she were actually a bird: "When I run ... when I run ... when I run ... over the grass ... [...] I turn. I turn. I wheel. I glide. I wheel. In stunning light. The horizon moves from the sun. I am crushed by the light" (198). Unlike Bates, who only walks in his mind and "can't get out of the walls into a wind" (197), Ellen soars up in the air, as her point of view shifts from "walks" to flights. Still, since Ellen's dreamy fantasy of herself "running over the grass" also reminds one of the "little girl" Bates has just mentioned, we might surmise that Ellen's vision belongs to a very old memory of childhood, which Bates might have shared. Rumsey then oddly remarks:

RUMSEY Sometimes I see people. They walk towards me, no, not so, walk in my direction, but never reaching me, turning left, or disappearing, and then reappearing, to disappear into the wood. So many ways to lose sight of them, then to recapture sight of them. They are sharp at first sight ... then smudged ... then lost ... then glimpsed again ... then gone (198)

These cryptic lines contribute to the creation of confusion due to the people's quick and almost unnatural movements: the man conveys a way to see people

– who swing between being in and out of focus – that is comparable to the focalisation of a camera lens. Therefore, it is worth considering that what moves may also be Rumsey’s ‘memory lens’, rather than people. He might superimpose different memories when trying to describe a past event, thus showing the combinatorial nature of memory through people’s ‘movements’. Moreover, the adverb “sometimes” may suggest that he does not *always* see people, that maybe he is able to effectively *see* – which we might understand as *remember* – them only “sometimes” and “somewhere”.

Towards the end of the play Ellen makes a similar assertion saying that she is not able to capture the people she comes across during the day: “After my work each day I walk back through people but I don’t notice them.” (204). Thus, both descriptions are indicative not only of the elusiveness of perception, but also, and most importantly, of the vagueness of memory. This shows that what the characters produce is always a re-elaborated version of past events, made up of layers of memories refocused on different targets.

Another flashback follows, this time with Ellen moving towards Rumsey. They recall his home and they remember when Ellen was there last time, when she was young. It is a memory within the flashback, during which, at one point, the man suggested that Ellen looked at her reflection in the mirror, which is not consistent with Ellen’s earlier memory of what we presume to be the same event: “One time I visited his house. He put a light on, it reflected the window, it reflected in the window” (192). In fact, what Ellen remembers being reflected is not herself, but the lamplight. As she remembers, Ellen, of course, might have substituted herself with the lamplight or she might not have been interested from the start in looking for her reflection in the window. This proves how different points of view and perspectives may utterly change the way we experience the same events.

Divergent perceptions or perspectives also emerge in the ways Rumsey and Bates recollect the past or experience the present with Ellen as the only common denominator between them:

- RUMSEY She was looking down. I couldn’t hear what she said.  
BATES I can’t hear you. Yes you can, I said.  
RUMSEY What are you saying? Look at me, she said.  
BATES I didn’t. I didn’t hear you, she said. I didn’t hear what you said.  
RUMSEY But I am looking at you. It’s your head that’s bent. SILENCE (201-202)

In either case, what the other says is beyond the reach of hearing or understanding. Ellen’s “bent” posture in Rumsey’s description matches one of



Ellen's own memories where she was sitting "on his knee" (201). And yet, it contradicts Bates's claim that "The little girl looked up at me" (201-202) as well as his talking about horses exactly as Rumsey did earlier. Moreover, this moment when the effort to hear and understand is unsuccessful could coincide with Ellen's recollection (as previously quoted) of bringing two men under a tree, and that one could not hear her, but the other could.

Once again we see Ellen moving towards Rumsey in one more flashback, after which she says enigmatically:

ELLEN I go up with the milk. The sky hits me. I walk in this wind to collide with them waiting. There are two. They halt to laugh and bellow in the yard. They dig and punch and cackle where they stand. They turn to move, look around at me to grin. I turn my eyes from one, and from the other to him. (203)

The verbs *to walk* and *to collide* used by Ellen in relation to the wind may suggest a sort of zoomorphism with flying animals once again. Moreover, other verbs such as *bellow*, *dig*, and *bark* can also refer to animals. To bellow may refer both to a human shout and to cows – which are often mentioned – and dig may refer to either animals or human beings. However, an interesting phrase is "cars barking" said by Bates at the beginning of the play. The verb can convey the harsh sound of cars, but it could also refer to "dogs barking", matching the animal kingdom – mainly represented by Ellen and Rumsey – with the urban life linked with Bates. These references to zoomorphism and urbanism are worth noticing because they depict the characters' action of combining pieces of memories once again: they show an internalisation of animals' behaviour and urban environment that characters detected and their superimposition on recollections. Rumsey's words soon after give us a clue to make out that the "up" used by Ellen might refer to the top of a hill: "On good evenings we walk through the hills to the top of the hill past the dogs the clouds racing" (204).

The fragmented syntax of the excerpts quoted so far is a case of "ellipsis or syntactic *non-completion*" which, as Kristeva suggests, "can be interpreted as the thetic break's inability to remain simply intra-syntactic – a division within a signifying homogeneity. A heterogeneous division, an irruption of the semiotic *chora*, marks each 'category' of syntactic sequence and prevents the 'other' from being posited as an identifiable syntactic term" (1986 (1974), 108).

Then the two men repeat their first lines ("RUMSEY I walk with my girl who wears – BATES Caught a bus to the town. Crowds. Lights round –", 204) while Ellen remarks that memories of people she had not taken note of at first

sight, surface back, even if partially, only later and only when she is back in her room:

ELLEN It is only later, in my room, that I remember. Yes, I remember. But I'm never sure that what I remember is of to-day or of yesterday or of a long time ago. And then often it is only half things I remember, half things, beginnings of things. (204)

Ellen's memory is bound to the "room" space – a recurrent setting in many of Pinter's works – and yet, even there, Ellen still fails to organize her memories chronologically. The vagueness and instability of individual memories are typical features of Pinter's "Memory Plays", but what we find here is something slightly different and more specific: it is a scattering of perspectives, each of which claims its own veracity, a mosaic of entropic points of view. From this point onwards, and right to the end, Pinter's characters resume their previous lines, albeit inconclusively. The only addition is the obsessive reiteration of Silence – in Pinter's stage directions, as if to mark the gap that separates each voice from the others:

ELLEN I kiss them there and say *Silence*  
RUMSEY I walk *Silence*  
BATES Caught a bus *Silence*  
ELLEN Certainly. I can remember the wedding. *Silence*  
RUMSEY I walk with my girl who wears a grey blouse  
BATES Caught a bus to the town. Crowds. Lights round the market  
*Long silence. Fade lights* (209)

The eternal return, conveyed by the resumption of lines, is one of the most frequent obsessions of Pinter's characters, though in this case the focus is not the impossibility to recollect and accept the past – like for example in *Old Times* and *Ashes to Ashes*. Silence does not mark a pause and not even a long one. It points instead to a fracture, the "threshold" that allows movement through space and time. Silence is the emptiness that separates each molecule of thought and memory differentiating them from each other: it enables characters to rearrange new 'versions' of past events, so that they can start again their recollections in an endless cycle. In fact, this circular abstruse structure of the play has been concisely summarised by Clausius in this overview:

The first part comprises thirteen movements or sections divided either by a deliberate silence or by blocking. The second part recapitulates in its entirety the

first part in the same chronology but with Ellen's interruptions. Part three begins yet another recapitulation which starts the play again from the beginning and then ends it as soon as this cycle has been established. (1995, 30)

Therefore, what the play actually puts forward is the way subjects experience time, before they arrange it in a linear succession. Hence the ongoing becoming and regressing of the self, like a flux which moves freely between the temporal axes, among past and present identities, and between the *semiotic* and the *symbolic*. There are then not just three characters but at least twice as many, since everyone shows him/herself at different points in time. The circular structure of the play, with no neat point of departure or arrival, besides being anticipatory signals of post-dramatic theatre, illustrates what Merleau-Ponty has argued about the "restarting of Time":

What does not pass in time is the passing of time itself. Time restarts itself: the rhythmic cycle and constant form of yesterday, today and tomorrow may well create the illusion that we possess it immediately, in its entirety, as the fountain creates in us a feeling of eternity. But the generality of time is no more than one of its secondary attributes and provides only an inauthentic view of it, since we cannot get as far as conceiving a cycle without drawing a distinction, in terms of time, between the point of arrival and the point of departure. (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 423)

In conclusion, what we see, hear and experience by reading or watching the play is the interaction between different perspectives and perceptions, not a fight between truth and its fabrication. What Rumsey, Bates and Ellen say is not false or illusory, it is only their "thetic" way to signify reality. As Kristeva points out, "The thetic – that crucial place on the basis of which the human being constitutes himself as signifying and/or social – is the very place textual experience aims towards. In this sense, textual experience represents one of the most daring explorations the subject can allow himself, one that delves into his constitutive process" (1986 (1974), 117). On the "threshold", in the silence that is the end of a movement but also the beginning of another, there is no specific place and time, no fixed identity, but only the reign of possibilities of Kristeva's *Subject-in-process* and the circularity of Merleau-Ponty's *Subject as time*. With this dramatic work – in the interplay between voices and silences, between broken sentences and movements – Pinter brilliantly succeeds in presenting the subject's journey across space-time, towards its own signifying process.

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## ABSTRACT

The article investigates Harold Pinter's play *Silence* from a linguistic and phenomenological point of view. *Silence* is probably one of the least studied – though one of the most difficult and compelling – of Pinter's plays. The author identifies the broken syntax and the combination of utterances and silences as indicators of time and space shifts. She claims that the patchwork which appears from the structure of the play depicts the loss of logic, and that the abandonment of chronological time in linguistic terms conveys the subjec-

tive, circular, and illogical element of the human experience of time. Characters' bodies and utterances materialize both their own past recollections and their present experiences. The present work may be useful to theatre scholars as an example of drama as a portrayal of philosophical and linguistic theories about time and discourse.

