

POLITICAL PINTER: *MOUNTAIN LANGUAGE* IN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT: This article looks at Pinter's latest play *Mountain Language* and places it in the context of his earlier work. After a brief plot summary, the connection Pinter and some critics seem to see between *Mountain Language* and some of his early plays is examined, and it is pointed out that many of the features which had come to be regarded as basic foundations of his work (especially the use of language) actually fall to pieces in *Mountain Language*. A sample from *The Birthday Party* is presented to show how the use of language serves altogether different purposes in each play. Finally, the close relationship between *Mountain Language* and Pinter's 1984 play *One For the Road* is explored, and the playwright's awareness of the dangers of writing political plays is commented on.

MOUNTAIN LANGUAGE, Harold Pinter's first play since 1984¹, was first performed at the National Theatre (Lyttelton), London, on 20 October 1988, directed by Pinter himself². The play, which is only about 20 to 25 minutes long³, consists of four short scenes dealing basically with the theme of oppression. It is an openly political play, which has been described as "... an anguished outcry against dictatorships and torture in a totalitarian society"⁴ and as a "Cry of Outrage"⁵.

1.- *One for the Road* was first performed at the Lyric Theatre Studio, Hammersmith, on 13 March 1984.

2.- Published text: *Mountain Language* (London: Faber & Faber, 1988). The play was also printed in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 7-13 October 1988, pp. 1110-11. All references from now on will be to the Faber & Faber edition and will be included in my text.

3.- "Enter Stage Left: Harold Pinter's Radical Departures", interview with Anna Ford, *The Listener*, 27 October 1988, p. 4. See also M. Esslin, "Martin Esslin at *Mountain Language*", *Plays International*, 4, 5/6 (December 1988-January 1989), p. 54.

4.- Esslin, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

5.- I. Wardle, "Cry of Outrage", *Times*, 21 October 1988.

Mountain Language is set in an unnamed country where the use of a minority language, the language of the mountain people, has been forbidden. A group of women, among whom a young one and an old one are singled out, have been waiting outside a prison wall, wanting to be admitted to see their sons and husbands. One of the guards' Dobermann pinschers has bitten the old woman's hand. When the young woman informs the officer of this fact, his reaction is to enquire what the dog's name was:

OFFICER: What was his name?

Pause

What was his *name*?

Pause

Every dog has a name! They answer to their name. They are given a name by their parents and that is their name, that is their *name*! Before they bite, they state their name. It's a formal procedure. They state their name and then they bite. What was his name? If you tell me one of our dogs bit this woman without giving his name I will have that dog shot! (p. 17)

The officer also informs the two women of the crucial fact that the mountain language has been forbidden:

OFFICER: Now hear this. You are the mountain people. You hear me?

Your language is dead. It is forbidden. It is not permitted to speak your 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 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? (p. 21)

The officer's highly repetitive speech has a hammering effect that gradually rises to the pitch, "Your language no longer exists", which is immediately followed by the bathetic "Any questions?". In reply to this, the young woman denies speaking the mountain language and, having had a look at her papers,

the officer concludes: "He doesn't come from the mountains. He's in the wrong batch" (p. 25) ('He' referring to the young woman's husband), without any steps being taken to remedy the situation.

In the second scene the prisoner and the old woman, his mother, confront each other in the prison's visitors room. They both speak with a strong rural accent (the 'mountain language'), and the guard keeps jabbing the woman with a stick and telling her that she should speak the language of the capital. She does not understand him, and in any case she can only speak the mountain language. The guard says that that is not his fault, and he adds:

GUARD: 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. (p. 31)

The guard, unable to accept any similarities between himself and the prisoner, reports the prisoner to the sergeant as a "joker". At this point the play makes use of a novel feature for Pinter, namely, dimming of lights accompanied by voice-overs of the prisoner's and the old woman's thoughts, telling each other what they have not been allowed to say in reality. The lights go up suddenly at the sergeant's abrupt arrival.

In scene three, entitled 'Voice in the Darkness', the sergeant and a guard are holding up a hooded man (presumably the young woman's husband), and the young woman is informed that she has been sent through the wrong door. Then, once again, the lights are dimmed, the figures are still. The hooded man's and the young woman's voices are heard, reminiscing about a happy past (p. 39). The lights go up suddenly, the young man collapses and is dragged off by the guard.

The final scene takes place once again in the visitors room. The guard, the prisoner and his mother are present, and the prisoner, who has obviously been beaten, is informed that "They've changed the rules" (p. 43), and that the old woman can now speak her own language. The prisoner tries to tell his mother the news, but she remains silent, unable to utter a single word. The prisoner then falls from his chair and begins to gasp and shake violently. The sergeant comes in and utters a grim punch line:

SERGEANT: Look at this. You go out of your way to give them a helping hand and they fuck it up.

Blackout (p. 47)

In view of this brief plot summary, it is rather obvious that *Mountain Language* is written in the same vein as Pinter's 1984 play, *One for the*

*Road*⁶. What might not be so immediately obvious, and yet may prove more illuminating, is the connection that Pinter seems to see between *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language* on the one hand and some of his early plays on the other. In an interview with Nicholas Hern, published with the text of *One for the Road*⁷, Pinter describes three of his early plays (i.e., *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Birthday Party* and *The Hothouse*⁸) as being about authority and the abuses of authority. However, he sees them as metaphors, whereas, he says, "... in *One for the Road* the deed is much more specific and direct" (p. 8). Interestingly, Pinter goes on to repeat the same idea in his 1988 interview with Anna Ford: "... I think that the plays like *The Birthday Party*, *The Dumb Waiter*, and *The Hothouse* are metaphors, really. When you look at them, they're much closer to an extremely critical look at authoritarian postures..."⁹. Pinter is not alone in detecting similarities between his recent political plays *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language* and some of his early plays. According to Esslin, for instance, in his early plays Pinter showed a preoccupation with violence and torture, both verbal and physical:

Novel and unexpected though this new political vein might appear in Pinter, the connection to the earlier Pinter is also fairly clear: after all, torture and the manipulation of one person by another has been an essential element in Pinter from the very beginning...¹⁰

In order to grasp exactly to what extent Pinter's latest two plays can be compared to some of his early ones (beyond saying that the latter were metaphors) it is necessary, to begin with, to have a closer look at *Mountain*

6.- The connection between these two plays will be explored further in due course.

7.- *One for the Road* (London: Methuen, 1985). All further references will be to this edition and will be included in my text.

8.- Pinter says he wrote *The Hothouse* in the winter of 1958, but made no attempt to have it produced then. It was first presented at the Hampstead Theatre, London, on 24 April 1980. In the context of this article, it is interesting to note on what terms Pinter initially discarded *The Hothouse*: "It was heavily satirical and it was quite useless. (...) I was intentionally -for the only time, I think- trying to make a point, an explicit point, that these were nasty people and I disapproved of them. And therefore they didn't begin to live" ("Harold Pinter: An Interview" (with L.M. Bensky) (1967); quoted in R. Knowles, "The Hothouse and the Epiphany of Harold Pinter", *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 10 (1985), p. 134). The fact that Pinter finally decided to have *The Hothouse* produced in 1980 may be seen as a further proof of his new political interests.

9.- A. Ford, op. cit., pp. 5-6

10.- Esslin, op. cit., p. 54. Apart from *The Birthday Party*, *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Hothouse*, Esslin also mentions *No Man's Land* and *A Slight Ache*. See also J. Peter, "Caught in the Language Trap", *Sunday Times*, 23 Octobre 1988: "... if to want, to have, to use or to abuse power over others is the essence of politics, then Pinter has been writing political plays from day one".

Language, which, being Pinter's latest play, will be taken as representative of his new political vein. Secondly, a comparison will be established between *Mountain Language* and *The Birthday Party*, Pinter's first full-length play, which will be taken as representative of his early plays.

Even a plot summary of *Mountain Language*, such as the one provided above, immediately brings out some of the rather obvious differences between *Mountain Language* and some of Pinter's earlier plays. Indeed, the fact that the plot can be neatly summarised, without any loose ends; the fact that we know which characters are on what may be called the 'good' side and which are on the 'bad' one; the very fact that there are two sharply distinct sides and that we are left in no doubt as to which should be taken as the 'good' one and which as the 'bad' one and why; all these features are so unlike what audiences and readers had become used to expecting from a Pinter play, that they draw attention to themselves by their rare explicitness. In effect, the meaning of *Mountain Language* is unidimensional, all elements of indeterminacy are gone¹¹.

Let us take, for instance, the first quotation given above, that is, the officer's speech about the dog's name. Is this a characteristic instance of Pinter's preoccupation with names and naming as weapons for power and domination (so that, very often, the knowledge and use of a name "... is a kind of articulated power"¹²), and his preoccupation with assumed names or nicknames as symbolic of a dichotomy between two levels of existence (the classic example being the tramp in *The Caretaker*: is his name Jenkins or Davies?)? The answer seems to be negative. The officer's speech is a rather straightforward image of the degree of absurdity inherent in any totalitarian state, where even dogs have to follow certain "formal procedures"¹³. The officer's emphatically saying that "'Before they bite, they state their name'" and that he will have the dog shot if he bit the woman without stating his name confirms this interpretation of the incident.

The second speech made by the officer, also quoted above, can be contrasted with Pinter's previous work through a similar transformation. Again, we may wonder whether this is a characteristic example of Pinter's preoccupation with the uses and abuses of language, his concern about language used as a "smoke screen"¹⁴ in the battles for dominance between his

11.- That is probably the reason for Wardle's remark that "Unlike Pinter's other work, [*Mountain Language*] fully exhausts itself on one viewing". Wardle, loc. cit.

12.- R. Knowles, "Names and Naming in the Plays of Harold Pinter", in A. Bold (ed.), *Harold Pinter: You Never Heard Such Silence* (London: Vision Press, 1985), p. 116.

13.- P. Taylor sees the incident as one of the grim practical jokes that totalitarian states play on their victims in order to deprive them of their dignity. "Swine but Too Few Pigs", *Independent*, 20 October 1988.

14.- H. Pinter, "Writing for the Theatre" (speech made at the National Student Drama Festival in Bristol in 1962). Reprinted in *Plays: One* (London: Methuen, 1976), p. 14.

characters, his conviction of the ambiguity of language¹⁵ and his exploitation of this ambiguity by creating a theatre language where "... under what is said, another thing is being said"¹⁶. And once again, the answer is negative. The officer is saying, very precisely and very directly, exactly what he means, so that we are left in no doubt that language in this play is both "... the agent of liberty and the instrument for those who misuse it as a form of aggression"¹⁷. There is, in other words, no indirection and, hence, no ambiguity at all in what the officer says. Since the question of language is a crucial one in *Mountain Language*, as indeed it is in the whole of Pinter's career, it is necessary to look at it more closely.

In the second scene of *Mountain Language*, as has been said, the old woman is prevented from talking to her son because she cannot speak the language of the city. They then hold an imaginary conversation in the half-light until the lights go up abruptly at the sergeant's irruption into the room (p. 35). Scene four shows the old woman unable to speak, although she is now allowed to use her own language. In other words, she has been rendered speechless through seeing her tortured son¹⁸. Now, the old woman in *Mountain Language* is not the first Pinter character who loses his/her power of articulation through some sort of external pressure: Stanley, in *The Birthday Party*, is finally reduced to a babbling idiot by Goldberg and MacCann; Lamb is also tortured by Miss Cutts and Gibbs in *The Hothouse* and the final image in the play is of him sitting still, "... staring, as in a catatonic trance"¹⁹; even Davies in *The Caretaker* is rendered partly speechless by Mick's overpowering manipulation of language. However, in none of these plays is a direct statement made by any of the characters that they are out to crush Stanley, or Lamb, or Davies, as may be the case, by undermining their respective capacities for articulated speech. Everything is worked out at an implicit level. On the other hand, *Mountain Language* shows precisely this: a direct statement of aims by the officer and a calculated, cruel putting into effect of those aims so that when the old woman

15.- Ibid., p. 13.

16.- Ibid., p. 14.

17.- H. Herbert, "Dumb Waiter Strikes Out", *Guardian*, 22 October 1988.

18.- In this connection, it is interesting to note that this may be based on an actual experience Harold Pinter had during his 1985 visit to Turkey with Arthur Miller: "For example, one trade union leader I met in Istanbul... had been very badly tortured. He was out of prison, and very shaky indeed, but his wife was actually mute; she's lost her power of speech altogether. I think she saw him in prison and hasn't spoken a word since". Interview with Anna Ford, op. cit., p. 4. The connections between both *Mountain Language* and *One for the Road* and Pinter's Turkish experiences are discussed at length below.

19.- *Plays: One* (London: Methuen, 1976), p. 227. All further references to the text of Pinter's plays will be to this edition and will be included in my text.

is told that she can speak her own language by her tortured son, it comes as no surprise that she should have become dumb. There are no fading lights in scene four, no imaginary conversations as in scenes two and three²⁰. All is stark and final.

Other elements which had come to be regarded as basic foundations of Pinter's work also fall to pieces in *Mountain Language*:

Apart from any other consideration, we are faced with the immense difficulty, if not the impossibility, of verifying the past. (...) If one can speak of the difficulty of knowing what in fact took place yesterday, one can I think treat the present in the same way.²¹

This declaration of principles by Pinter, one of the basic tenets of his dramatic work, is repeatedly undermined in *Mountain Language*. This is most obvious in the case of the young woman. Unlike, for instance, Rose in *The Room*, whose knowledge of the external world can at most be termed fragmentary²², the young woman's speech is never hesitant. Unlike the old woman, she can challenge the soldiers' statements because she shares their language. Her answers to the officer's and the sergeant's questions are always straightforward and objective; she is in no doubt at all as to what has happened or what is happening:

YOUNG WOMAN: We were told to be here at nine o'clock this morning.

SERGEANT: Right. Quite right. Nine o'clock this morning. Absolutely right. What's your complaint?

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. (p. 19)

Similarly, when the officer tries to bully her again with the issue of the dog's name (p. 19), she cuts him short by answering that she does not know his name. She is thus challenging the officer, as she challenges him when she

20.- For other examples of Pinter's skillful use of lighting effects, see P.C. Thornton, "Blindness and the Confrontation with Death: *Three Plays* by Harold Pinter", *Die neueren Sprachen*, 17 (1968), pp. 213-23.

21.- "Writing for the Theatre", op. cit., p. 11.

22.- E.g., "I've never seen who it is. Who is it? Who lives down there? (...) But whoever it is, it can't be too cosy". *Plays: One*, p. 102. This is Rose talking about the mysterious inhabitant of the basement.

says, "I do not speak the mountain language" (p. 23). In response to this, the sergeant in turn threatens her by putting his hand on her bottom. But she is not to be intimidated. She moves away from the sergeant and says: "My name is Sara Johnson. I have come to see my husband. It is my right. Where is he?" (p. 25). Both in this speech and in the one quoted above, her sentences are short, precise, objective, leaving no room for doubt. It is significant in the context of Pinter's work, for instance, that the young woman should state her name clearly and unambiguously. However, she does not normally get a straight answer²³: on the first occasion, as we have seen, the officer brings up the issue of the dog's name. In the second case, the officer asks to see her papers, and she hands him a piece of paper (p. 25): once again, we have travelled a long way from the tramp Davies in *The Caretaker*, whose papers are being kept somewhere in Sidcup and whose identity remains blurred. There is, in conclusion, no impossibility of verifying the past or the present at all in *Mountain Language* – or, rather, this has ceased to be a central concern for Pinter.

Pinter himself points out yet another difference between his early plays and, in this case, *One for the Road*, but I believe his remarks are equally applicable to *Mountain Language*. In his interview with Nicholas Hern, he admits that his early plays had a sense of fun about them, whereas he does not consider humour

... to be appropriate to this subject [torture in *One for the Road*]. The facts that *One for the Road* refers to are facts that I wish the audience to know about, to recognize. Whereas I didn't have the same objective at all in the early days. (p. 11).

In fact, this ties in with Pinter's warning in "Writing for the Theatre" against playwrights who indulge in what he terms "prophecy": "Beware of the writer who puts forward his concern for you to embrace..."²⁴. With *One for the*

23.- The only occasion when Sara does get a straightforward answer is on p. 41:

YOUNG WOMAN: Can I fuck him? If I fuck him, will everything be all right?

SERGEANT: Sure. No problem.

YOUNG WOMAN: Thank you.

Words such as 'fuck' or 'fucking' are typical of the sergeant's vocabulary (e.g., on p. 25 and p. 37). By using them herself, Sara indicates that she is beginning to understand the brutal world inhabited by the sergeant, the officer and the guards, and that she has realized that the only thing that they would understand would be for her to 'fuck' Dokes (the man they are talking about). Indeed, the fact that for the first time she gets a straightforward answer from the sergeant proves that she is actually right. Wardle makes an interesting point about the kind of language used by the sergeant: "... in the act of suppressing the 'mountain language' the State has also destroyed its own. The Sergeant ... and the other guards are confined to repetitious obscenities or dead officialese". Wardle, loc. cit.

24.- "Writing for the Theatre", *op. cit.*, p. 13.

Road and Mountain Language, Pinter has begun to do just that, as he admits in his interview with Nicholas Hern: "... I always find agit-prop insulting and objectionable. And now, of course, I'm doing exactly the same thing" (p. 18), but, he adds, he now feels it is necessary because a large number of people do not know and do not want to know what is going on in the world.

What has been said so far shows that despite Pinter's and some critics' attempts to establish a link between his early plays and his latest two plays, there are in fact more differences than similarities between them. This conclusion is reinforced by a brief look at *The Birthday Party* in the light of what has been said so far about *Mountain Language*.

*The Birthday Party*²⁵ is taken here as representative of Pinter's early plays. It conforms to a recurrent pattern: an external threat to the identity of one of the characters (in this case Stanley) leads to a crisis²⁶; surface realism of detail is matched by a subjective viewpoint²⁷, so that it becomes possible to suggest, for instance, that the room, or rather, in the case of *The Birthday Party*, the house, is a projection of Stanley's identity and that what Goldberg and McCann do by entering the house is to bring about Stanley's loss of identity. In this context, questions as to whether Stanley was ever a famous pianist, or as to who Goldberg and McCann actually are, that is to say, questions which concern verification, become irrelevant. The only thing that can be verified in *The Birthday Party* and, indeed, the only thing that matters, is that Stanley is insecure and that he is in danger of losing his identity. In other words, while in *The Birthday Party* Pinter is interested in exploring his characters and the relationships between them²⁸, in *Mountain Language* he is interested in denouncing a political situation.

It is against this framework, which it is only possible to outline briefly here, that the use of language in *The Birthday Party*, as well as in the other early plays, should be seen. For instance, in *The Birthday Party* Goldberg and McCann drive Stanley into submission by confronting him with a series of questions to which he is hardly given time to reply and which culminate in:

25.- First performed at the Arts Theatre, Cambridge, on 28 April, 1958.

26.- The same pattern may be detected in *The Room*, *The Dumb Waiter*, *A Slight Ache* and *The Dwarfs*, allowing, of course, for the differences in emphasis and approach of each particular play.

27.- L.A.C. Dobrez, *The Existential and its Exits* (London: Athlone Press, 1986), pp. 314-34.

28.- In the way he describes in "Writing for the Theatre": "My characters tell me so much and no more, with reference to their experience, their aspirations, their motives, their history. Between my lack of biographical data about them and the ambiguity of what they say lies a territory which is not only worthy of exploration but which it is compulsory to explore". Op. cit., p. 13.

GOLDBERG: No society would touch you. Not even a building society.

MCCANN: You're a traitor to the cloth.

GOLDBERG: What do you use for pyjamas?

STANLEY: Nothing.

GOLDBERG: You verminate the sheet of your birth.

MCCANN: What about the Albigensenist heresy?

GOLDBERG: Who watered the wicket in Melbourne?

MCCANN: What about the blessed Oliver Plunkett?

GOLDBERG: Speak up, Webber. Why did the chicken cross the road?

STANLEY: He wanted to -he wanted to -he wanted to....

MCCANN: He doesn't know!

GOLDBERG: Why did the chicken cross the road?

STANLEY: He wanted to -he wanted to....

GOLDBERG: Why did the chicken cross the road?

STANLEY: He wanted....

MCCANN: He doesn't know. He doesn't know which came first!

GOLDBERG: Which came first?

MCCANN: Chicken? Egg? Which came first?

GOLBERG
and MCCANN: Which came first? Which came first? Which came first?

STANLEY *screams*. (pp. 61-62).

It would be quite absurd to try to extract from this long list of questions and accusations an indication of some real crime that Stanley has committed. The point is that all these accusations are not used because of their truth-value or referential value (that is, as statements that can be verified by contrasting them with reality), but as power-devices in Golberg's and McCann's attempts to establish their domination over Stanley and, eventually, to annul his identity. Thus, their power derives from their sheer number: the interrogation scene lasts about six pages in my edition²⁹. As has been shown, the use of language in *Mountain Language* serves altogether different purposes.

It is now time to explore the connection between *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language*. According to Pinter, both plays stem from the same

29.- Interestingly, Mis Cutts and Gibbs use the same method on Lamb in *The Hothouse*. See *Plays: One*, pp. 233-38. Mick in *The Caretaker* also uses a similar method in order to gain control over Davies.

experience. The published text of *One for the Road* includes a postscript by Pinter in which he mentions the visit Arthur Miller and himself paid to Turkey on behalf of International Pen in March 1985 (p. 24). This took place, presumably, after he had completed *One for the Road*, which, as was said above, was first performed in London on 13 March 1984. However, in his interview with Nicholas Hern, Pinter states that for a year or so before writing the play he had been investigating the Turkish situation. It was after talking to two Turkish girls, who defended the methods used by the Turkish government against 'communists', that Pinter wrote *One for the Road* "... out of rage" (p. 14).

Interestingly enough, in his interview with Anna Ford, Pinter also connects *Mountain Language* to his growing awareness of the situation in Turkey and, more specifically, to his 1985 visit to the country with Arthur Miller:

One of the things I learnt while I was there was about the real plight of the Kurds: quite simply that they're not allowed to exist at all and certainly not allowed to speak their language. (...) The springboard ... was the Kurds, but this play is not about the Turks and the Kurds. I mean, throughout history, many languages have been banned....³⁰

He then goes on to argue that, in a sense, the play is hardly political: "It's simply about a series of short, sharp brutal events in and outside a prison"³¹. It is up to the audience, Pinter adds, to decide whether the events portrayed are recognisable to them and, what is more, whether they believe they are possible "in this country"³². In the light of these comments, and of the play itself, it seems as if Pinter was trying to strike a very delicate balance between an artistic and a propagandistic purpose. In this connection, he also tells Anna Ford that he hopes "... that the play has its own life"³³. And, in relation to *One for the Road*, he told Nicholas Hern that after talking to the two Turkish girls:

... I had an image in my mind of an man and a victim, an interrogator and a victim. And I was simply investigating what might take place. Given a certain state of affairs, what would the attitude of the interrogator to his victims be? So I was simply writing the play. I wasn't thinking then of my audience. (pp. 14-5)

This sounds very similar to what Pinter said in 1962, in "Writing for the Theatre":

30.- A. Ford, op. cit., p. 4.

31.- Ibid., p. 5.

32.- Loc. cit.

33.- Loc. cit.

My responsibility is not to audiences, critics, producers, directors, actors, or to my fellow men in general, but to the play in hand, simply. (...) I have usually begun a play in quite a simple manner; found a couple of characters in a particular context, thrown them together and listened to what they said, keeping my nose to the ground. (p. 10)

The difference between 1962 and now, I would argue, seems to lie in the extent to which Pinter still thinks that he has no responsibility to his "fellow men". As he tells Nicholas Hern, he now feels "... very strongly that people should know what's going on in this world, on all levels" (p. 14). In fact, one of the main differences between the early plays and *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language* is that while the former are referable only to themselves³⁴, the latter are partly referable to the outside world. This argument, however, does not invalidate Pinter's point that neither of his latest two plays is actually about Turkey or about the Kurds: these two plays are political in the sense of being referable to the outside world at large, not in the sense of being exact depictions of what is going on in Turkey. In this respect, two things are worth commenting on: firstly, the realistic nature of both plays and, secondly, their 'non-specific' nature.

There is no disturbance of the surface realism in either of the two plays. There are no mysterious strangers (such as the blind Negro in *The Room*, Goldberg and McCann in *The Birthday Party*, the voice in *The Dumb Waiter*, the matchseller in *A Slight Ache* or the dwarfs in *The Dwarfs*), and, as has been pointed out, no double names, no difficulty in verifying the past, no indirect use of a non-referential language as a device for power. This should be linked to the second relevant characteristic present in both plays, namely, the fact that they are 'non-specific'. By 'non-specific' is meant the fact that the characters' names are either multinational names (Victor, Gila, Nicolas and Nicky in *One for the Road*) or common names (Young Woman -later Sara-, Elderly Woman, Sergeant, Officer, Guard, Prisoner, Hooded Man -later Charley- and Second Guard in *Mountain Language*), plus the fact that the locations are unnamed. This non-specificity is a crucial trait in both plays: if Pinter had made them more specific, they might easily have become pure agit-prop theatre. By preserving their non-specificity and by relying on a series of separate yet interconnected images of oppression and brutality rather than on a logical, exhaustive discourse against torture and the abuse of authority, Pinter has so far managed to maintain one of the essential qualities of his plays, which has been described as follows:

34.- Wardle describes them as "... a series of masterpieces hermetically isolated from the outside world...". Loc. cit.

[Pinter] is concerned with 'subtle experiences' but he sets out to evoke rather than exhaustively to depict or narrate them; by suggestion, hints, variations in intensity of mood, and the like, he involves the audience in an imaginative comprehension of the dramatic situation...³⁵

Nevertheless, Pinter is well aware of the dangers of trying to strike so delicate a balance. As he tells Nicholas Hern:

I can't go on writing plays about torture. I wrote one sketch about the nuclear bureaucracy, because I believe there is an enormous conspiracy to hide the truth in this country. But still, I can't go on writing that kind of play either. They're difficult to write. You can only write them if you can make it real, make it an authentic thing. But you can't do that at the drop of a hat. I don't see much of a future for me as a writer in this respect. It also makes it very difficult to write anything, however. I don't know what my future is as a writer... (pp. 18-19)³⁶

However, after *One for the Road* Pinter has given us *Mountain Language*, written in much the same vein. It is interesting to note that Esslin and Wardle also express their doubts about Pinter's future as a writer. Esslin wonders what the point of dramatizing torture is, since "... already Aristotle was aware that horror, horribly staged, nevertheless produces aesthetic pleasure and thus leads to catharsis..."³⁷. Wardle is even more explicit: "The question is, does this mark the opening of a new phase or the onset of terminal silence?"³⁸. We will now have to wait and see where Pinter's newly-acquired political urge will take him in future.³⁹

35. J.T. Boulton, "Harold Pinter: *The Caretaker* and Other Plays", *Modern Drama*, 6, 2 (1963), p. 131. Cf. also M. Esslin, who argues that Pinter expresses his preoccupations "... through *situations* rather than explicit statement or discursive argumentation...", in *Pinter the Playwright* (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 273. Pinter's plays have obviously become much more explicit, but not more discursive.

36.- The sketch Pinter is referring to is called *Precisely*. Hence the title of M. Billington's laudatory review of *Mountain Language* in the *Guardian*, 22 October 1988, "Precisely, Mr Pinter". Billington also stresses Pinter's use of theatrical images: "...Pinter also makes his points -like late Beckett- through a series of resonant images", such as that of the mother and the son confronting each other.

37.- "Martin Esslin at *Mountain Language*", op. cit., pp. 54-55.

38.- Loc. cit.

39.- In his interview with Nicholas Hern Pinter admits that at some future time he might feel the need for more direct political action. Since then he has become a founder member of the "20th June Society", which he describes as "... a group of serious, independent people who decided to meet privately one night to discuss the state of the country" (Interview with Anna Ford, op. cit., p. 6), and he has also signed the so-called "Charter 88", in which Mrs Thatcher's rule is described as an "elective dictatorship" (*El País*, 22 January 1989, p. 5).