RE-ENACTING THE PAST IN HAROLD PINTER'S "ASHES TO ASHES"[1]

Abstract*: The paper aims at exploring the way in which the process of re-enacting a past of suffering and loss ensures its translation into a narrative of presence, as a gesture of total commitment and responsibility. By bringing together the private and the political, the personal and the collective, the past simultaneously pervades and addresses the present and the future. The memory of the past reclaims authority and demands to be imprinted in the present. In Harold Pinter's* "Ashes to Ashes"*, Rebecca's gesture of assimilating and imprinting the past into her present allows her, as an agent of the past, to resist and to cancel repressive representations, while her female resistance acquires an authority able to cancel the traditionally male one.*

Keywords*: memory, presence, consciousness, collective, manipulation, resistance.*

The Narrative of the Past: Making the Past Present

The actual essence of the past or of time itself is something impossible to be defined, an out-of-reach goal for all human beings. According to Heidegger's vision, time is clearly a product of consciousness, resulting from the mental articulation and, therefore, subjective appropriation of the movement of time and of the events. The present is 'attuned to' both the past and the future; it is a complex network of threads encompassing the never-ending regressive and progressive shifts towards the past and the future. However, the fundamental attributes of the past and future consist in their not possessing a definite, concrete and substantial existence as such; being known as anteriority, the past is no longer valid, it does not exist anymore; the future, seen from the point of view of posteriority, still awaits its becoming, it does not exist yet. Both gain meaning and acquire legitimacy in the present, they exist only as "presence in the present" (Heidegger, 1972: 66). This is why it is through their constant revitalisation and resurrection in the present that we manage to define our sense of being. This double movement in time, backwards and forwards, allows us to approach the experiences 'before and after' us, the lived moments of our life and those to be lived; in appropriating what has taken place in the anteriority of *now* and what will happen in the posteriority of *now*, we experience the way in which *absence* - of both the past and the future - becomes *presence.* Absence is not to be understood as non-existence or as void, but as latent meaning awaiting to be brought to the surface so as to achieve its status; or in Heidegger's words:

> Past and future are a *me on ti:* something which is not, though not an absolute nullity, but rather something present which lacks something. This lack is named with the 'no longer now' and the 'not yet now.'[...] What has-been which, by refusing the present, lets that become present which is no longer present; and the coming toward us of what is to come which, by withholding the present, lets that be present which is not yet present-both made manifest the manner of an extending opening up which gives all presencing into the open. (Heidegger, 1972: 11)

In the light of these theoretical notions, we can uphold that Harold Pinter's play *Ashes to Ashes* dramatises the way in which the act of one's identification with the past and commitment to it - specifically here a past of trauma, suffering and loss - can be so engaging and demanding that escape is certainly no option for the one voicing the narrative of the past. Rebecca obsessively refers to the abhorrent acts of a perverted

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lover from her past, lover whose horrifying and domineering gestures she seems to be irrationally attracted to. All these violent actions, part of a 'real' or imaginary experience, which many critics have considered to be alluding to the Holocaust and to the Nazi concentration camps, transform themselves into a memory of pain and horror, which furthermore allows Rebecca to distance herself from her interlocutor, that is her husband, and thus to dismantle the fallacy of a present disconnected from the past:

> Well ... he would stand over me and clench his fist. And then he'd put his other hand on my neck and grip it and bring my head towards him. His fist...grazed my mouth. And he'd say, 'Kist my fist'. [...] I kissed his fist. The knuckles. And then he'd open his hand and give me the palm of his hand ... to kiss ... which I kissed. [...] He put... a little pressure ... on my throat, yes. So that my head started to go back, gently, but truly (Pinter, 1993, *Ashes to Ashes*: 395-396).

All the atrocities Rebecca permanently re-enacts, as if entrapped by their hypnotising power, are part of her existence and of her present identity, so that they cannot be left unvoiced or removed from her memory. Denying the impact of these memories, lessening their importance or simply letting them fade away, for the sole purpose of sparing oneself from pain or absolving oneself of responsibility would mean - for her as well - inhabiting a false *now*, a present of yielding to the comfortable and secure fabrications of everyday life.

Transferring the memory of the past into the present - no matter how brutal or disconcerting this past may be - being haunted by its still vivid images, Rebecca performs what Heidegger calls the backwards movement towards the past; the past becomes *present*, a present of something prior to *now*, of something which existed before. The past, as remembered and transformed into a narrative construct of disturbing emotions and desires, cannot be objectively 'verified', being a mere product of imaginary experience, if not of 'speculation' altogether, as Rebecca herself bluntly admits in an aside comment: "Nothing has ever happened to me. Nothing has ever happened to any of my friends. I have never suffered. Nor have my friends." (Pinter, 1993, Ibidem: 412)

Because of its precedence, the past obliges Rebecca to submit to its demands, and summons her to continue articulating its agonies and tortures, even though Devlin, her husband and listener, is constantly trying to undermine the validity of her experiences, and consequently the authority of her narrative:

> Now let me say this. A little while ago you made ... shall we say ... you made a somewhat oblique reference to your bloke ... your lover? ... and babies and mothers, et cetera. And platforms. I inferred from this that you were talking about some kind of atrocity. Now let me ask you this. What authority do you think you yourself possess which would give you the right to discuss such an atrocity? (Pinter, Ibidem: 413)

Because of its Holocaust resonances, the play intermingles Rebecca's personal memories of her former lover with the collective memories of an atrocity inscribed in the cultural history of the world. By bringing together these two dimensions, the private and the political, the personal and the collective, the past simultaneously pervades and addresses the present and the future.

It is indeed appropriate to consider how Rebecca manages to strongly baffle Devlin by confronting him with contradictory versions of this mysterious figure from her past: the man is misrepresented first as a man who truly loved and adored her, as a man of an 'honourable' profession - of a travel agent -; but behind all this tender and maudlin description, he appears as a man taking pleasure from perpetrating suffering, a

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labour-camp controller, whose convictions and purity were to such a great extent idolised by his workers, that they would march over a cliff if he asked them to. Furthermore, Rebecca avoids providing straight answers to Devlin's inquiries, as her narrative is clearly guided by the stream of her own enchanted thoughts and desires, stud - every now and then - with diversions which add a great sense of puzzlement to the entire structure of her past.

But it is primarily the fact that Rebecca plunges into a past which Devlin has no access to that torments him, and places him in a position of vulnerability. As an outsider/ non-participant to those past events, he can only listen to the incidents presented, being at the narrator's mercy and disposition, without standing any chance of either modifying or influencing the course of actions. He occupies the helpless and the passive position of the interrogator. Devlin desperately tries to contest a past he is excluded from and thus to eradicate it, so as to overcome his and Rebecca's isolation - and disjunction - , by restoring his wife to the normality (better said his normality) of their present life together: "Now look, let's start again. We live here. You don't live…in Dorset…or *anywhere* else. You live here with me. This is our house. You have a very nice sister. She lives close to you. She has two lovely kids. You're their aunt. You like that….Let's start again." (Pinter, Ibidem: 424) Rebecca succeeds in resisting his manipulation, and thus she plays down his constraint, his terrifying views, precisely by operating according to the memory of the past, a memory of loss, pain and suffering, which prevents her from repeating the same mistakes in the present. She has already 'learnt her lesson' including the terrible consequences of submitting one's individual needs and desires to a totally annihilating force which leaves one self-effaced and emptied

As an agent of the 'eternally blissful' present, Devlin pleads for the notion of getting disconnected from a past full of 'sinful, murderous and terrific' acts. Such a gesture would finally lead to cutting the roots/origins of one's identity. He performs actions in the name of a detached and self-imposed oblivion, which allows him to continue living unperturbed, while re-enacting a perpetual loss - the loss of past, identity and history.

Rebecca is haunted by past sensations and images, which translate themselves into both fascinating and disgusting impressions, allowing for the past to get projected into a narrative of *presence* that forges the private and public aspects of life. Her process of remembering the past causes a far-seeing understanding of torture, violence, repression and of relationships in general. The past becomes a guide, 'conducting' the postures of both the present and of the future. Moreover, the act of remembering the past is an individual act of permanent re-evaluation and reconfiguration, of judging past things from different perspectives, constantly filling in the blanks with newer and newer sensations, emotions and attitudes. It is the gesture of a person in search of gaining self-awareness, by confronting the past, introjecting its actions, horrors and atrocities, and assuming responsibility for them:

> We now know that the measurement of time owes nothing to that of external motion. In addition we have found in the mind itself the fixed element that allows us to compare long periods of time with short periods of time. With the impression-image, the important verb is no longer "to pass" *(tran-sire)* but "to remain" *(manet)*. In this sense the two enigmas—that of being/ nonbeing and that of measuring what has no extension—are resolved together. On the one hand, we have returned within ourselves, in our own mind, then, […] that I measure things. And how is this? Inasmuch as, after they have passed, the impression *(affectio)* made on the mind by things as they pass remains there: for

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> everything which happens leaves an impression on it, and this impression remains [manet] after the thing itself has ceased to be. It is the impression that I measure, since it is present, not the thing itself, which makes the impression as it passes. (Ricoeur, 1984: 17-18)

If one gives credit to a 'visionary' memory that does not confine itself to *now*, but rather encompasses the presence of the past and consequently of the future, one can realise that Rebecca's narrative cannot be accessed by Devlin. As long as he immerses in the deceptive illusion of a present capable of operating by itself and of acting on its own strength and command, Devlin is not to be allowed 'inside'.

The past gets engraved into the consciousness of each individual as well as into the destiny of the community, of the generation one belongs to. Devlin invalidates the connections of the private to the public, and their mutual effects, by his trying to reinstate the supremacy of the former, thus avoiding the responsibility of the latter. It's much easier to manipulate intimate, personal things:

> Shall we talk more intimately? Let's talk about more intimate things, let's talk about something more personal, about something within your own immediate experience. I mean, for example, when the hairdresser takes your head in his hands and starts to wash your hair very gently and to massage your scalp, when he does that, when your eyes are closed and he does that, he has your entire trust, doesn't he? It's not just your head which is in his hands, is it, it's your life, it's your spiritual ... welfare. So you see what I wanted to know was this ... when your lover had his hand on your throat , did he remind you of your hairdresser? (Pinter, Ibidem: 414)

The Narrative of the Past: Annihilating Boundaries

Rebecca succeeds in reshuffling the politics of sexual power/differences, by reversing the archetypal and historical norm according to which man has been considered to be the initiator of narratives, the active agent establishing the core representations and values of culture. Man has been considered to be the only one able to transgress boundaries, to integrate the individual and the collectivity, and to 'produce', through his authoritative judgement, the framework of sexual differences and gender constructs. According to this line of thought, women occupy a passive, submissive position, as objects to be signified by the male spectator and to face prohibitions in their movements and gestures:

> If the female position in narrative is fixed by the mythical mechanism in a certain portion of the plot-space, which the hero crosses or crosses to, a quite similar effect is produced in narrative cinema by the apparatus of looks converging on the female figure. The woman is framed by the look of the camera as icon, or object of the gaze: an image made to be looked at by the spectator, whose look is relayed by the look of the male character(s). The latter not only controls the events and narrative action but is "the bearer" of the look of the spectator. The male protagonist is thus "a figure in a landscape" free to command the stage . . . of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action. (Onega, Garcia Landa, 1996: 267)

Occupying the role of the narrator, in total control of the facts narrated, facts which remain inaccessible to her male interlocutor, because the events are the product of the inner and hidden mechanisms of her mind, Rebecca resists her interrogator's attempt to manipulate her. Devlin's isolation and degraded position is furthermore stressed by his incapacity to share Rebecca's ample understanding of private and political matters: "You can't sit there and say things like that. […] I'm saying that

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you're not entitled to sit in that chair or in or on any other chair and say things like that." (Pinter, Ibidem: 411) Rebecca's vision can neither be explored nor penetrated by an individual who turns his back to the past in the effort of validating only the present and of imposing his own 'rotten' conceptions of a purified and ordered world.

Through the memory of her former monstrous lover, Rebecca becomes aware of the authoritarian and commanding archetypal male figure, equally inscribed in the collective unconscious. Although this father-like figure from the past haunts her, demanding her to submit unquestionably to 'its' will, yet she manages to escape the manipulation and imprisonment of the past, still without rejecting it. It is the very act of remembering the abhorrent deeds of the past and of imprinting them in the present that enables Rebecca to set herself free from prejudiced beliefs so as to discover her identity beyond the confines traced out by the male system of representations. When Devlin tries to re-play the sadistic love scene, and, clenching his fist, he asks Rebecca to kiss his fist, she remains inert and silent. Devlin fails to take the place of the man narrated, imagined or desired by Rebecca; he fails to occupy the archetypal place of the male torturer and dominator. Rebecca's narration has succeeded in rendering void all presupposed ideas about sexual differences.

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