

Combating Language: Monologue use in the theatre of Yasmina Reza

by

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Abstract

In 1977, Roland Barthes presented a theory during a lecture at Collège de France: language is fascist. Language obliges us to speak rather than enables us to speak. Language houses power, and it is the duty of the intellectual to challenge the powers that be. Barthes posited that literature, for various reasons, including its constant shifting and transformation, allows for a writer to challenge the system of language within the written word.

In 1987, Yasmina Reza's first play premiered in Paris. In this analysis, I examine Reza's theatre canon, which includes eight plays to date, looking particularly at her use of monologue, within the context of Barthes' theory. Monologue is often a significant moment in theatre, however Reza employs monologue in seemingly nonsensical ways. In this analysis, I examine how Reza's use of monologue challenges the system of language, both within her texts and within the sphere of performance.

Keywords: Barthes; language; theatre; monologue; Reza, Yasmina; power

For John.

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Chapter 1.

Introduction

In order to understand my study of contemporary French playwright, Yasmina Reza, and her use of monologue throughout her plays, I must take you back to 1977, prior to the publishing, performing, and even, in all likelihood, the writing of her first play.

Roland Barthes had just been elected Chair of Literary Semiology at the Collège de France and delivered an inaugural lecture, which was published as *Leçon* in 1978. All Barthes citations are taken from the English translation by Richard Howard entitled “Inaugural Lecture, Collège de France” published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc. In this lecture, Barthes presents a theory regarding language and literature, namely his view of language as fascist and his view of literature as a strategy by which to subvert said fascism.

Fascism is defined here as a political ideology marked by authoritarianism, which is characterized by absolute or blind obedience to an authority. It is often associated with militaristic nationalism (an individual must be loyal to their nation-state over their own interests), and the idea of innate social hierarchy¹. For Barthes, language is an authoritarian dictator, demanding that we submit to its codes and constraints, unyielding in its rigid structure.

He begins his lecture with an interrogation of the definition of power as a single thing: some have it and some do not. “And yet, what if power were plural, like demons?” he demands (459), presenting an idea of “powers” as everywhere and on all sides, existing even in the most minute levels of social exchange. As such, power does not rest

¹ “authoritarianism” and “fascism” from *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

solely in the hands of those we consider powerful, such as political leaders or dominant groups, but in the hands of the masses as well. In its plurality, power is omnipresent: each one of us participates in exchanges of power, no matter our place in the social hierarchy.

“For if [power] is plural in social space, power is, symmetrically, perpetual in historical time,” (459/460) says Barthes, explaining that, throughout man’s history, power, defeated in one place, reappears in another. It is at this point that Barthes arrives at language: “The object in which power is inscribed, for all of human eternity, is language, or to be more precise, its necessary expression: the language we speak and write” (460). Language houses power – it perpetuates dominant ideologies, it gives voice to dominant opinions; its structure, in and of itself, dominates communication, demanding that we operate within its bounds. Stereotypes are imbedded in language, taken as meaning.

Thus, power is innate in the code of language. Barthes reminds us that the oppressive nature of speech often goes unnoticed, even though, as a classification, speech *is* oppressive. “All classifications are oppressive,” (460) he explains, referencing Roman Jakobson² who defined a speech-system not by what it allows one to say, but by what it obliges one to say. He hammers home this point with a brief analysis of the demands of the French language:

I am obliged to posit myself first as subject before stating the action which will henceforth be no more than my attribute: what I do is merely a consequence and consecution of what I am [...] I must always choose between the masculine and feminine, for the neuter and the dual are forbidden me. Further, I must indicate my relation to the other person by resorting to either *tu* or *vous*; social or affective suspension is denied me. (460)

According to Barthes, as soon as it is spoken, speech is in the service of power; he expounds, describing the two categories of speech: “the authority of assertion” and “the gregariousness of repetition” (461). Speech is assertive: any expressions of doubt or negation or uncertainty require particular mechanisms. Speech is also only

² Russian-American linguist and literary theorist (1896-1982).

understood insofar as its signs are recognized or repeated. This means that, in speech, the speaker is both assertive and passive, both *maître* and *esclave*: “I assert *tellingly* what I repeat” (461).

If the forces of power and servility are simultaneously at work in speech, how then can one ever be free, asks Barthes? Freedom is defined here as “not only the capacity to escape power but also and especially the capacity to subjugate no one,” (461) therefore, freedom can only exist outside of language. But, of course, there is no exterior to human language; it has no exit³.

It is at this point in the lecture that Barthes throws a lifeline to his auditors and readers, undoubtedly despairing over their inevitable participation in the fascist code of language; he presents a workaround in the form of literature, that is “the practice of writing.” It is through literature, explains Barthes, that we are able to cheat speech. “This salutary trickery, this evasion, this grand imposture which allows us to understand speech *outside the bounds of power*, in the splendor of a permanent revolution of language, I for one call *literature*” (462).

Here, I must interject briefly. Barthes focuses on spoken language and writing as a strategy for escaping from the inescapable, however, in my analysis of Reza’s plays, I will also examine the realm of performance as a viable “exit”. Reza writes words that are meant to be spoken, to be interpreted and imbued with meaning outside of the words themselves: consider intonation, pauses, volume, breathing, gender reversal, gesture etc. Performance adds nonverbal aspects to a written text, presenting the writer with new opportunities to subvert the rules of language: not only can she play with structure, syntax, grammar and the general presentation of her words, she can also subvert language on another level, on the stage.

Returning to Barthes, he presents literature as having “forces of freedom”: these are unrelated to a writer’s politics, individual person, or even the content of his work, but are related rather to the act of displacing language itself.

³ Barthes was speaking in a post-structuralist moment (1970-1990), however, today, it is acknowledged that there are human experiences that exist outside of language and literature.

According to Barthes, literature is vital as it houses all other disciplines, including science. He says, "Science is crude, life is subtle, and it is for the correction of this disparity that literature matters to us" (463). However, he admits that the knowledge marshalled by literature is always incomplete: "Literature does not say that it knows something, but that it knows *of* something, or better, that it knows *about* something – that it knows about men" (463). It is through the staging of language, rather than the simple use of language, that literature allows knowledge to continuously reflect upon knowledge. The reflexive nature of written text enables the continuous interrogation of language.

Literature is always yearning to be representative, attempting to capture the real, which is impossible, Barthes informs us, as the real is not representable through language⁴. Yet, writers continue to pursue this impossible goal, and it is through this persistence that literature "is led to shift ground," (468) as power will grasp at anything that persists. Barthes explains, "For power seizes upon the pleasure of writing as it seizes upon all pleasure, to manipulate it and to make of it a product that is gregarious, nonperverse [...]" (468).

And so, in the face of this seizure, writers turn, twist, and go to unexpected places. It is in pursuit of an impossible goal that literature finds its subversive power; it is continuous, it is perpetual, because it can never reach the summit of real. Literature must always create and recreate, innovate and borrow, constantly transforming itself, constantly trying new tricks, and it is through this continuous reformation that it battles against language.

Finally, Barthes explores literature as it interacts with semiology, the study of signs. He traces the origins of semiology back to 1954, to Sartre, Brecht, and Saussure, and the desire to "stimulate social criticism," and understand and describe "how a society produces stereotypes [...] which it then consumes as innate meanings" (471). For Barthes, literature and semiology go hand in hand, one needed to correct the other.

⁴ Language cannot capture the real, but this obstacle alludes to the existence of something (the real) exterior to language. If language and literature attempt to express reality and continuously fail, the essence of reality is something outside the realm of language.

He sees the written word as an “index of *nonpower*” in its ability to avoid “gregarious speech,” and in its nature to postpone “toward an unclassified, atopic site [...] far from the topoi of politicized culture” (472).

Written text is, in light of the aforementioned characteristics, the battleground upon which one can combat language and all of its oppressions, rules and constraints. This is the theory put forth by Roland Barthes, and it is a theory that seems to hold true when examining Reza’s works. Her manipulation of language, her representation of the real in an exaggerated form, all through writing – “the most complex of signifying practices” (472) according to Barthes – affirms many of the latter’s ideas.

Yasmina Reza was born on May 1, 1959 in Paris, France, the daughter of a Hungarian violinist and a Persian Jew (who was also an amateur pianist) – her parents’ musicality seems to have greatly influenced Reza’s work, as her plays tend to have a very lyrical quality, a possible subversive device to be discussed in more detail later. Reza attended the University of Paris X in Nanterre where she studied sociology and theatre, after which she trained to become an actress at the Jacques Lecocq International Drama School in Paris. When she couldn’t find work as a performer, however, Reza began to write.

Produced in 1987 in France, Reza’s first play *Conversations après un enterrement* (*Conversations After a Burial*) garnered her a Molière award – the national theatre award in France – for Best Playwright. Her second, *La Traversée de l’hiver* (*The Winter Crossing*) was produced in 1989/90; this production was also recognized with a Molière, though this time it was for an actor, not the playwright.

Reza’s third play, “*Art*” catapulted her career to new heights; it was first produced in Paris in 1994, London’s West End in 1996, and Broadway in 1998. Christopher Hampton did the English translation. Not only did “*Art*” achieve recognition in France, winning three Molière awards in 1995 (two for Reza herself), but it also won a Tony Award in 1998 for Best Play, as well as the Olivier Award for Best New Comedy. “*Art*” saw over 2,000 performances in London and 600 in New York and has been produced in countries all over the world. In 1995, Reza’s fourth play *L’Homme du hasard* (*The Unexpected Man*) was staged in Paris and later in London and New York, but was

almost completely overlooked in the wake of “Art”. This is somewhat ironic, as Reza herself described *L’Homme* as one of her favourite plays, as one of the written works with which she was happiest⁵.

The year 2000 saw Reza’s *Trois versions de la vie (Life x 3)*, which was produced in Paris, London and New York, and in 2004, *Une pièce espagnole* premiered in Paris, and later saw the stage in New York. All three of her plays following “Art” flew relatively under the radar but in 2008, *Le Dieu du carnage (God of Carnage)*, Reza’s seventh play, made a splash on both English and American stages; again, Christopher Hampton was responsible for the English translation. Reza received relatively small acclaim in France (the play only walked away with one Molière award for Best Supporting Actress), but in London, the play received the Olivier Award for Best New Comedy, and in the United States, at the 2009 Tony Awards, *God of Carnage* won Best Play, Best Direction of a Play, and Best Leading Actress in a Play (though all four actors were nominated). In 2011, *Carnage* premiered, a film based on Reza’s play and directed by Roman Polanski, starring Kate Winslet, Christoph Waltz, Jodie Foster and John C. Reilly. Reza and Polanski wrote the screenplay together. Reza’s most recent play, *Comment vous racontez la partie* first appeared in print in 2011 and was financed by the Austrian National Theater, the Burgtheater in Vienna⁶.

I was first exposed to Reza’s work during my undergraduate years at the University of Michigan; it was my final year, and I went to see a student production of a play called “Art”. The plot was fairly simple: it revolved around three friends, one of whom spends a great deal of money on a prestigious painting, a painting that, for all points and purposes, appears to be nothing more than a white canvas. Chaos ensues as each character reacts to this piece of “art.”

I remember the almost empty stage and the white canvas displayed in the centre of everything, highlighted by a spotlight. The whole production was extremely minimalist:

⁵ Hellerstein, N. p. 947.

⁶ Jaccomard, H. p. 229

the lighting and set were stark and bare, the dialogue was fast and witty, the actors' delivery was dry, often leading to outbursts of laughter.

And yet, the moment that struck me, that has stuck with me for all these years, occurred when Yvan, arguably the weakest of the three characters, bursts into the room at the height of confrontation between the other two, Serge, the purchaser of the painting, and Marc, who sees said purchase as utterly ridiculous. The back-and-forth had become intense and dark, and then, in tumbled Yvan, out of breath and talking. Talking, talking, talking. Yvan interrupts one of the play's most climactic scenes with a pages-long monologue. It is a monologue about a most trivial woe, a monologue about, in the context of the play and its plot, nothing.

It was such an odd moment – Yvan kept talking and talking, both Marc and Serge staring at him in surprise, the audience staring at him too, trying to divine some sort of hidden meaning behind the nonsense. The words tumbled forth, and I thought, why are we listening to this? What does this have to do with anything?

Later, when I read “*Art*” in its original French, I began to think about Reza's peculiar use of language, especially her use of monologue; I began to explore her other works – there was something in her style that intrigued me.

Sometimes Reza seems to operate within recognizable theatre constraints, for instance, monologue as prologue as in *Conversations après un enterrement*: in this play, one character opens the first scene with a soliloquy, he is the only character on stage and is speaking to no one or to the audience, seemingly in order to provide some sort of exposition for the narrative to follow. However, in this case, the character is reading a journal excerpt – the written words of his deceased father. Reza has taken a standard theatre trope and altered it slightly, filtered it through one more layer of written text. It is not the character's own words, thoughts, or feelings that are being shared, but those of a third party.

Yvan's monologue in “*Art*”, however, is almost nonsensical. “*Art*” is littered with aside monologues, wherein one of the three characters will break the fourth wall and address the audience in a sort of explanatory way. Yvan's monologue, however, breaks

completely with this pattern – it is a part of the action, addressed to the other two characters and occurs at a pivotal moment in the play. And yet, for pages, the other characters and the audience are treated to a tirade about the tiniest hiccup in Yvan’s wedding plans. The monologue does nothing to move the plot forward and, instead, seems to stall the action completely. Why? For poor Yvan, the more he speaks, the more ridiculous he seems, and the less able he is to communicate. In this moment, Reza explores the failure of language to enable us to communicate, as well as its oppressive nature, which demands that we attempt to communicate with words on top of words on top of words, even as we dig ourselves further into isolation and alienation.

When one examines Reza’s plays in the context of Barthes’ theories on language, one can begin to theorize that Reza is fighting her own battle against the codes of language and thus, the codes of society. Barthes presents literature, the written word, as a solution to the oppressive rule of language, however Reza operates in the realm of theatre. A play participates in the world of literature and can be made part of the literary canon (see Aristotle, Shakespeare, Molière), but it also plays on another level, on a performative level. Reza, therefore, is poised to do battle with language both in the text of her plays and in the bringing of them to life.

Here it becomes necessary to define “performance,” yet as Marvin Carlson writes in his book *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, it is a difficult term to define. From the theatre to daily life, to scholastic and athletic performance, the concept is fluid, yet Carlson lands on a central aspect of “performance”: “[...] the sense of an action carried out *for* someone, an action involved in the peculiar doubling that comes with consciousness and with the elusive other that performance is not but which it constantly struggles in vain to embody” (5). Reza’s theatrical literature is written to be performed – the words spoken by her characters are acknowledged by both reader and audience as performance, as apart from the real, that “elusive other”. Performance exists outside of the theatre, as well, inserting itself into our everyday lives; Carlson explains, “The recognition that our lives are structured according to repeated and socially sanctioned modes of behavior raises the possibility that all human activity could potentially be considered as performance, or at least all activity carried out with a consciousness of itself” (4). Throughout her plays, Reza nods at this idea, that much of human behaviour

is performance, particularly human speech (this idea comes to a head in her seventh play *Le Dieu du carnage*). Reza utilizes the theatre, a recognizable realm of performance, to highlight the performance that colours day-to-day life, that colours the words that we speak aloud.

In this analysis, I focus on Reza's use of monologue as the *joyau de la couronne* in her theatrical texts – the crown jewel(s) in each of her pieces. Monologue suggests a privileged moment in the theatre, a significant moment; in Reza's canon, monologues provide an ideal space apart from dialogue, a space of otherness wherein she can push and prod language.

In *Postmodern Theatric(k)s: Monologue in contemporary American Drama*, Deborah Geis describes monologue as “the quintessential instrument for demonstrating the virtuosity of both the performer and the playwright, the litmus test of an actor's or writer's ability to seize the imagination and attention of the audience” (1). She distinguishes monologue from dialogue in three ways: the “lack of a responding other”; a “refusal to relinquish the floor”; and an “implicit ‘deviance’ from interpersonal discourse” (2). Finally, Geis simply examines the origins of the word – *monologos* meaning “solitary speech” – stating that, “monologue is a speech for one or a dialogue with oneself” (7).

Before delving into Reza's oeuvre, in which monologue is reinvented time and again, let us look at three recognisable types of monologue as described by Geis, as a jumping off point. The first is a “speech that a character makes to one or more other characters, particularly a speech that recounts some type of internal story” (Geis, 8). The second is a “formal, ‘presentational’ device for providing narration or exposition in a play, especially through a ‘narrator’ figure who addresses the audience at structured intervals” (Geis, 8). And the third is soliloquy, during which “the speaker addresses him- or herself or the audience but not another character” (Geis, 8). The soliloquy alludes to introspection and often includes a “revelation or decision that may not be ordinarily rendered in speech outside of a theatrical framework but which is enacted aloud for the benefit of the audience” (Geis, 9).

While Reza's works showcase each of these types of monologue, they also tend to blur the distinction between monologue and dialogue, as well as deviate slightly from

the above monologic frameworks. For instance, Anne Ubersfeld refers to “quasi-monologue” in Reza’s plays: a particular type of soliloquy that includes a sort of question addressed to a silent listener⁷. In the following chapters, I will present examples of previously defined types of monologue, as well as types of monologue that do not necessarily match with anything outlined above – this innovation and variation embodies Barthes’ theory of literature as a battleground.

In my opening chapter, titled “Au Début” I examine Reza’s first plays: *Conversations après un enterrement* and *La Traversée de l’hiver* – within these early pieces, Reza’s use of monologue highlights the cruelty of language and its failure to facilitate human connection. The following chapter “Grande Renommée” focuses entirely on Reza’s smash hit “*Art*”. In this play, Reza’s use of monologue evolves; she employs more traditional forms of monologue, however she plays with structure and context, exposing the two-faced nature of language. In the chapter titled “Après ‘Art’”, I investigate Reza’s three plays that followed “*Art*”: *L’Homme du hasard*, *Trois versions de la vie*, and *Une pièce espagnole*. These plays demonstrate Reza’s experimentation with structure and monologue, as each toys with ideas of perspective and (versions of) reality. Finally, in “Carnage”, I explore *Le Dieu du carnage*, Reza’s seventh play and her most successful since “*Art*” – in this play, Reza abandons traditional monologue in favour of dialogue and extended response; I look at how this piece reflects the evolution of Reza’s relationship with language. *Comment vous racontez la partie* is Reza’s most recent play; there is little scholarship to lean upon when doing an analysis, therefore my examination of this piece functions as a part of my conclusion. This final play seems to be Reza’s most autobiographic, coming very close to the writer’s own personal experience with her profession and creation. Reza’s use of monologue develops and evolves throughout her eight plays; in her earlier works, Reza uses monologue to point to the weaknesses in the language system, yet as her canon progresses, her relationship with language changes as she attempts to solve the problem of language as humanity’s most important connective device.

⁷ Ubersfeld, A. p. 88

Chapter 2.

Au début

In this chapter, I explore the texts of Yasmina Reza's first two plays, *Conversations après un enterrement* and *La Traversée de l'hiver*. I look specifically at Reza's use of monologue within these two texts, and how this usage reflects (or doesn't reflect) the idea of a battle being waged against the code of language. I will also look at each play through a performative lens, examining stage directions, notes, punctuation and other aspects that might influence how each monologue is performed and received by an audience. Outside of the text itself, does Reza battle with language in the physical world via each staged play? All citations from *Conversations après un enterrement* and *La Traversée de l'hiver* are taken from *Yasmina Reza: Théâtre* published in 1998 by Albin Michel.

I have grouped these two plays together because their structures greatly resemble one another: casts of six characters (most of whom are older), very little action, dominated by dialogue, etc. Amanda Giguere, in her book *The Plays of Yasmina Reza on the English and American Stage*, also grouped these two pieces together, calling them "the most Chekhovian of [Reza's] canon" (14) in that they are highly mood-driven as opposed to plot-driven. Denis Guénoun also examines these two plays simultaneously in his book *Avez-vous lu Reza?* For Guénoun, both plays are prime examples of Reza's fascination with time and the general 'afterness' that characterizes the present⁸.

Conversations après un enterrement premiered in 1987 at Théâtre Paris-Villette in Paris, France. *Conversations* was Yasmina Reza's first play and was greeted warmly

⁸ Guénoun, D. p. 36

by French audiences; it even took home a Molière award – one of France’s most prestigious theatre awards – that year for Best Author. The cast of six characters includes three siblings, Nathan, the eldest, Édith, the middle sister, and Alex, the youngest, their uncle Pierre (their mother’s brother) and his wife, Julienne, and finally, Élisabeth, the play’s youngest character at 35 and Alex’s ex-lover.

The group is gathered at the family’s property in Loiret in the Loire Valley, after – as the title would suggest – the death and burial of the three siblings’ father, Simon Weinberg. The plot is quite simple and revolves mainly around a conflict between the two brothers involving Élisabeth; she ended her relationship with Alex three years earlier, but is secretly in love with Nathan, setting up a neat little love triangle. Nathan is a lawyer and, it would seem, the favourite son, while Alex, a failed writer turned literary critic, spends much of the play complaining and causing trouble. Poor Édith is a spinster at 45, a lonely woman, and Uncle Pierre is arguably the most jovial of the characters, taking it upon himself to cheer up each of the children. Julienne is Pierre’s wife of just two years and is meeting the entire family for the first time at Simon’s funeral, and Élisabeth is only present at the funeral because she developed a late friendship with the late Simon; she is later trapped on the property due to car trouble. The plot is driven purely by the interactions between these characters – very little actually happens on stage.

Hélène Jaccomard, in her analysis of Reza’s canon entitled *Les Fruits de la Passion: Le Théâtre de Yasmina Reza*, points out that “le titre [...] avait de toute façon annoncé que ce qui comptait, c’était la parole (*Conversation*), la parole en situation d’interlocution qui plus est” (58). Before Reza’s reader or audience have even begun to delve into *Conversations*, the play’s title announces the importance of language, of conversation, of spoken word. Words are the driving force behind the action within this, Reza’s first piece.

* * *

The play begins with Nathan. He stands in front of his fellow mourners and reads:

NATHAN. 'Lorsque ma mère est morte, j'avais six ans. Elle montait l'escalier avec sa valise et je me souviens de la valise qui dérape sur les dalles de pierre. Lorsque mon père a disparu, j'avais onze ans et c'était la guerre... Je me trouvais seul au monde, si seul et si soudain éveillé que le Diable me visita... Je l'accueillis comme un renfort stratégique, un rempart de château fort où je m'éclipsais à l'abri des meurtrières. De ce jour, et pour l'éternité, je sortis en vie, de la tête aux pieds bordé d'épines, impeccable et glacé. À mon fils imaginaire, j'ai donné pour nom Nathan. Pour toi Nathan, mon prodigieux éclat, fasse le ciel que je ne meure pas trop tôt. Simon Weinberg, 1928.' Papa avait 20 ans. (45)

Amanda Giguere refers to this beginning as confusing, explaining that though the play opens with Nathan, his physical body and voice, the words aren't his own. The words belong to the deceased. For Giguere, this reflects Reza's preoccupation with time, with death. "Time, which is generally perceived in mainstream theater as chronological, here appears as a flurry of past, present and future" (Giguere, 23). Three generations are united in this opening speech, Simon's parents, Simon and his children – the dead live on through their works (in this case, a written journal entry) and through their offspring⁹.

In my introduction, I theorized that Reza's use of monologue might be demonstrative of Barthes' theory of literature as a weapon against dictatorial language – I will now veer from previous scholarship that touches on this opening monologue, on its themes and the messages it conveys, toward my own analysis of the text as a reflection of language as a cage and literature as the key to freedom. I will focus, for the moment, solely on what is written.

⁹ Giguere, A. p. 23.

The reader is provided some exposition to the monologue in the form of italicized stage directions. These words are non-existent for an audience in a theatre – rather, a director, or actor incorporates them into a final production. But for a reader, these words set an imaginary scene, situating the text that follows within a moment in time. The reader is told where the speaker is, setting the setting: near his father’s coffin; they are told that the three siblings stand, motionless and that the uncle and his wife stand further off, and that even further in the background, Éliisa stands. “*Nathan sort un papier de sa poche, et lit à haute voix*” (45).

In the stage directions themselves, we are treated to a subtle snub against the code of language. When a person sits down to read a play, it is the dialogue that they are reading, it is the dialogue that *is* the play. And yet we overlook the stage directions, the words that frame the play. They are often relegated to the beginnings and the ends of scenes, though minute stage directions can figure throughout a piece. These words function on a level apart from the written dialogue; they rest underneath the dialogue, even in its written form. They are always italicized, suggesting their otherness, suggesting the fact that they are to be read, but not really read. The brain is meant to skim over these words, absorbing them as subtext. And a written subtext is arguably a battle against spoken language.

In real life, in the world of spoken words, there is no subtext that is clearly presented to us, that clearly enables us to place within a framework the words that are spoken. To be fair, one could argue that this subtext is available to us in the physical world through our own observations: I can surmise where the speaker is standing because I can see where the speaker is standing. However, differing perspectives mean that, in the physical world, a subtext is fluid, changing depending on the observer, while within the text, Reza is able to present one, uniform framework, to present her play, her text, within the boundaries set by this secondary text, this italicized text. She is giving her readers the gift of clarity. This clarity, ironically, can be seen as flying in the face of language, whose coded structure, while rigid, often leads to a lack of clarity – the inability of language to truly represent reality leads to misinterpretation, misunderstanding and an inability to communicate accurately. Written stage directions treat each reader to one, clear set-up.

As for the opening monologue itself, the reader knows from the beginning that the words are not Nathan's due to the opening quotation mark – he is clearly reading someone else's words. This filtering of one man's words through another man's voice is one tactic utilized by Reza that might allude to the impossibility of language. Nathan is speaking at his father's funeral, yet instead of eulogizing with his own words, his own accolades or memories, he reads. This extra layer seems to indicate that spoken words are inferior to written words, that Nathan's own ability to speak, to attempt to give voice to his thoughts, is inadequate; only the recitation of his father's words, written down, surviving through the years, revealing of a rather dark interior mind, is sufficient in this moment.

Monologue figures throughout *Conversations*. Four of nine scenes begin with a monologue: two by Nathan (scenes one and seven), one by Alex (scene four) and one by Uncle Pierre (scene nine). The women in *Conversations* speak far less often than the men and for shorter periods of time; Édith has one punctuated, rather mournful monologue in the middle of scene five and Julienne's brief speeches are almost comedic and rarely constitute veritable monologues. Giguere points out Reza's "tendency to displace her own experiences to the male protagonists of her plays" (20), which might explain why the women in *Conversations* contribute relatively little to the overarching conversation. Before labelling Reza an anti-feminist, however, let us look more closely at her treatment of each character as they speak.

Scene four opens with Alex's monologue, a tirade of sorts directed at his dead father, delivered to the earth covering his father. The stage directions indicate that Alex holds three dry "tiges" in one hand and a "sécateur" (53) or pruning scissors in the other – these props reflect the tone of his speech: despairing and almost violent. Anne Ubersfeld dubs this monologue a "quasi-monologue" in her analysis of Reza and Bernard-Marie Koltès; she defines "quasi-monologue" as "une forme particulière de soliloque, celle qui contient une *demande*, explicite ou non, adressée à un interlocuteur muet" (88). Because this monologue is directed at the deceased Simon, he cannot possibly respond. And yet, Alex is imploring, demanding that his father listen to him for once. He begins "Écoute-moi papa. Tu es obligé de m'écouter, t'as les narines pleines de terre, tu peux pas gueuler" (53). Reza treats the audience to a speech that is

ultimately doomed. Ubersfeld calls it “un vrai soliloque” as opposed to a “pur monologue” (96) that, according to her, is a meditation or address to the audience; in this moment, Alex is conversing with nothing, with dust (as powerful a symbolic image of nothingness as anything in Western literature).

In this instance, Reza places one of her main characters in a position wherein his spoken words fall flat – the impossibility of their reception seems to highlight Reza’s own distrust of speech. Alex is confessing to his father, revealing and confronting hurts for the first time, but it’s too late. Simon is dirt and dirt has no ears. Alex is in an impossible situation. He speaks and speaks, recounting a moment from his childhood when Simon smacked him at the dinner table in front of the whole family for eating a chicken thigh with one hand. He reveals that, when older brother Nathan came to comfort him, saying “Il est comme ça parce que maman est morte”, he responded with “Fous-moi la paix, il n’a qu’à crever lui aussi...” (54). That statement, that wish for his now-dead father’s death, is that last thing Alex is able to say before Pierre appears. The confession is incomplete, interrupted, indicated by one of Reza’s preferred devices: the ellipsis. Alex is not permitted to finish his revelation, cementing the impossibility of communication previously alluded to within the monologue’s own impossible structure. The cruelty of this half-monologue renders Alex’s spoken words useless, as there is no one to hear them.

However, as a written and performed text, Reza presents spoken word to a reader in written format, as well as an audience in a performed format; Alex’s sentiments of rage and injustice are received by third parties in each case. This monologue can be said to demonstrate Barthes’ theories of literature combatting language in that it is a speech with no “interlocuteur” but is provided one in the form of the reader and/or spectator. As a playwright, Reza is able to combat language on a completely new plane: through live performance. Filtered through written text, Reza provides Alex with an actual interlocuteur, one that hears, sees, laughs, cries, and receives his spoken words. The audience can react to Alex in real life, in real time, where his dead father cannot.

In both of the previous examples of monologue from *Conversations*, the speeches are sombre in tone; I would like now to examine Uncle Pierre’s monologue,

delivered at the beginning of scene nine (the play's final scene). The story has just taken a rather surprising turn at a climactic moment: Édith confronts her brother Nathan regarding his indiscretion with Éliisa (the two made love on Simon's grave), to which Nathan responds by revealing that their father was having an affair with a pedicurist named Madame Natti. Denis Guénoun explains that moments such as this disrupt the play's seemingly tragic structure: "Nouvelle typiquement anti-tragique: la situation relatée, la figure de Madame Natti, son métier et jusqu'à son nom excluent toute gravité" (Guénoun, 48). Reza, in this earliest work, demonstrates a tendency to break with overarching structural expectations. And so, it makes sense that, at this moment, at the beginning of the end, she chooses to give the spotlight to Pierre.

Pierre tells a story to Éliisa and Julienne, which is meant as a funny anecdote. He was a young man with a wealthy, married mistress who, one year, found herself alone at Christmastime. She asked him to go away with her, gave him money to buy tickets, reserve a hotel, secure transportation, etc., all of which he did. As he was leaving the ticketing agency, he ran into a school buddy and, at that moment, decided to abscond with his friend on this pre-paid vacation, abandoning his lover. This story is the first monologue in *Conversations* that seems purely anecdotal. It reveals very little about the emotional state of any character, it does nothing to move the plot forward, and it doesn't lend anything to the overarching conflict between the two brothers. Reza manipulates our preconceived notions of monologue as being a vehicle for some type of extraordinary discourse¹⁰ with a moment that is purely ordinary: an uncle recounting a story, hoping to make his small audience laugh. There is no real build in this monologue, no moment of remorse or guilt – as a theatrical device, this speech is somewhat useless. So why write it? Perhaps this is an example of Reza laughing at language, at the failure of this restricted code to really communicate anything. It's almost as if she intentionally wastes our time, the reader's time and the spectator's time. Surely, in performance, this moment garners laughter from the audience, but it doesn't challenge in any way, it doesn't demand anything from listeners. It is, essentially, a speech simply for speaking's sake, which may be a commentary on the uselessness of speaking in general.

¹⁰ Geis, D. p. 10

Conversations après un enterrement ends with two back to back monologues, the first is delivered by Nathan after he attempts to drop Élisabeth off at the train station, only to return with her to Loiret, and the second is delivered by Alex as a sort of response. Most scholarship revolving around this play pauses to appreciate these two final monologues, as Reza thrusts her readers and her audience into a dream world, into something a bit supernatural, abandoning the play's general banality in a rather abrupt manner.

Nathan's monologue is a punctuated account of his journey with Élisabeth. He describes the two of them getting into the car in silence, emotionless, where they sit for about a minute, when suddenly, the train station in Gien appears at the foot of the drive. The clock at the station reads 7:00, they have an hour to kill – at this point, the stage directions indicate that Nathan paces, walks to the window and turns back. He continues, describing the station, the shadows of people, his and Élisabeth's decision to go to a café to pass the time. And then, it's time for her to depart, they run to the ticket window, she gets on the train, he watches her roll away, she watches him roll away, and then the station itself rolls away and they find themselves back in the drive. "J'ai fermé le contact, éteint les lumières, et nous avons fait le chemin en sens inverse, en courant..." (111).

Amanda Giguere describes the content of this post-monologue (*sic*) as antithetic to the "tragic model of fate" in that the characters see their future and realize their own capacity to choose an entirely different path, which they do. She also explains the effect that this moment has on an audience: "By leading her audience toward one presumed conclusion (Élisabeth's departure), but suddenly redirecting the storyline toward an unexpected conclusion (the supernatural sequence), Reza seems to unsettle her audience in the final moments of the play" (Giguere, 25). Later, Giguere writes that Reza seems to focus more on *destabilizing* her audience than on the story's resolution.

Reza's penchant for destabilization figures well into Barthes' combat against the regime of language. Within the text of her plays, Reza may be fighting a battle to destabilize that very code; Nathan's monologue, for instance, includes over 25 ellipses. That is to say, Reza has incorporated over 25 planned breaks, pauses, silences, trailings

off, into one page-long speech. Nathan is recounting a fantasy as if it were reality, in fact, for himself and Élisabeth, it may very well be a reality. Yet, Reza guides this fantasy; she has decreed how it is to be delivered to a very specific degree. These ellipses, much like the stage directions discussed at the beginning of this chapter, provide a framework for this jaunt into a dream world. Language often betrays its speaker due to its limited capacity to capture the reality of a situation, yet, within her writing, Reza manages to provide Nathan's speech with a backbone, to guide it, emphasizing certain moments, adding another level of structure in order to combat the structure of language, which so often falls short, so often leaves its speaker adrift, unable to capture meaningfulness. The text in the hands of an actor becomes an entirely different beast, of course, which is simply another level at which Reza is able to create a battlefield. An actor may add his own emphasis, change emphasis, erase and add pauses and breaks, pace before the stage directions indicate that it is time. An actor acts as another filter, presenting a whole new plane on which to innovate, to mould words and silences, giving them new meaning.

Alex responds to Nathan with his own version of reality. He describes being in the backseat of the car as Nathan drives Élisabeth, the three of them listening to Schubert, Élisabeth's asking him if the music is too loud, Nathan's contented expression, and his own sense of emptiness, of well-being. He then breaks with this thought to muse about writing. "C'est exactement ça écrire, aller quelque part où on ne va pas... Et quoi qu'on fasse déjà, sur la page vide déjà, il y a le retour et la fin de l'aventure..." (111). He continues, describing his big dreams at 20 years old, the volumes he planned to write full of monstrous, brilliant creatures, describing how these dreams gave way to the small, the everyday, the useless, "le labyrinthe des chemins inutiles..." (112).

This monologue works in tandem with Nathan's monologue. Their structures resemble each other, and one flows into the next. And yet, for all the dream-like wondering, Alex finishes with the mundane, with Édith's *pot-au-feu*. This final statement is one of the strongest to end any monologue in *Conversations*, punctuated by an exclamation point. Alex transitions from musing about useless paths and his own sensitivity, to something solid, something small and mundane: stew. "Et le suprême pot-au-feu, qu'Édith nous a préparé, et que je vais saupoudrer de tous les aromates vivants

de la cuisine!” (112). And so, Reza returns us to the banality of reality, and it is a relief. The audience and the reader are treated to philosophic pondering and dreamy wandering for two long monologues, only to be plopped back down in a living room, looking forward to a hearty, practical meal. The content of the monologues becomes almost moot – the extraordinary is replaced with something altogether ordinary, reflecting Reza’s own supposed mocking of monologic structure – which often privileges the extraordinary over the ordinary in a theatrical text – and structure in general, including that of language.

* * *

Yasmina Reza’s second play, *La Traversée de l’hiver* premiered on October 6, 1989 at the Théâtre d’Orléans in Orléans, Loiret. Like *Conversations*, *Traversée* features a cast of six characters: Fifty-seven-year old Avner Milstein and his 60-year-old sister Emma, Emma’s friend Suzanne (55) and her daughter Ariane (30), and two “outsiders” (as Éliisa and Julienne were outsiders¹¹) 35-year-old Balint and 60-year-old Kurt Blensk. The play takes place on a mountain in Switzerland, at a hotel in Stratten; we are introduced to these six characters during the final days of their summer vacation. Each scene takes place on the veranda of the hotel, overlooking a garden; a grand view is suggested in the play’s dialogue. Amanda Giguere points out that, like *Conversations*, *Traversée* “contains very little action...mov[ing] from one conversation to the next” (33). Whereas a love triangle is the driving force behind the action in *Conversations*, Hélène Jaccopard explains that it is a “carré amoureux” (69) that governs the plot in *Traversée*: Balint loves Ariane, who falls for Avner, who seems to admire Suzanne (and she seems to admire him reciprocally)¹². Nature and the great outdoors play a large part in this play; wideness, openness, and air itself shape *Traversée*. For Denis Guénoun, the openness in this piece suggests Reza’s refusal of any particular destination, be it optimistic or nihilistic. He writes “L’odeur de l’herbe après la pluie n’obéit à aucune règle, aucun réquisit dramatique. C’est l’air qui entre sur la scène. À certains égards, prévaut ici un anti-théâtre: au moins au regard du théâtre dramatique et de ses prescriptions logico-

¹¹ Giguere, A. p. 33

¹² Jaccopard, H. p. 73

normatives. Mais Reza, comme tous les inventeurs, fait du théâtre *malgré le théâtre*, comme Bacon peint malgré la peinture, et Monk joue malgré la musique” (76).

According to Guénoun, Reza breaks with theatrical codes in favour of her own creation; does the same hold true for her treatment of language throughout *Traversée*? Before delving into specific examples of monologue, I would like to point out that the characters in *Traversée* tend toward longer speeches in general than those in *Conversations*; even within the dialogue of the play, characters respond to each other in a long-winded fashion. Amanda Giguere refers to many of the speeches in *Traversée* as “caught between poetry and realistic dialogue,” explaining that one character may be literally talking to another, but they are actually completely caught up in their own memories, figuratively talking to themselves¹³. The little action in this play truly takes a backseat to conversation – Reza’s focus is 100 per cent on the words.

Like Julienne and, to some degree, Uncle Pierre in *Conversations*, Kurt Blensk functions as a rather comedic, sometimes ridiculous character. Unlike in *Conversations*, however, Reza shines a spotlight on Blensk many times throughout the play; that is to say, Blensk has several long speeches, during which the reader and spectator are treated to a deluge of seemingly useless words. If, as Barthes asserts, language houses power and perpetuates stereotypes and dominant ideologies, and writers must go to unexpected places in order to subvert this power, then perhaps Blensk’s ballyhoo is more than what it seems.

We are introduced to Kurt Blensk before he ever appears on stage: Emma and Suzanne gossip on the veranda, Suzanne recounting her experience playing scrabble against the Blensks, about to lose terribly to Kurt who played a seven-letter word beginning with ‘x’, when suddenly “au moment où la chance nous souriait à nouveau, téléphone pour eux, cousine de Vevey décédée. Vous [Emma] savez, ces gens qui ont une très grande famille, il y a toujours un mort!” (120). It is clear that the death of this cousin means less than nothing to these two ladies. And yet, when Blensk does enter the scene, interrupting their conference, he babbles on about the death of this ‘dear’

¹³ Giguere, A. p. 36

cousin, his wife's departure, his wife's being pleased that the cousin will be buried in a tomb at *Chatel-Saint-Denis*...all details in which neither Emma nor Suzanne are the least bit interested. Blensk then comments on Emma's distaste for music, to which she responds defensively; he leaves in a fairly flustered state.

In the second scene, Blensk is alone with Balint and launches into a speech about an article he read that afternoon about "les marmottes" and the manner in which they construct their little holes – Balint smiles politely, but does not engage. In the third scene, Blensk treats the group to another tirade, this time regarding the modern lack of knowhow in the production of chocolate. Kurt Blensk has three monologues, one in each of the play's opening scenes, each regarding a subject of no importance and little interest to the group and, arguably, to the reader and spectator. Again, as with Uncle Pierre, Reza highlights speeches that seem to serve no purpose. One could argue that these tangents are necessary to establish the character and tendencies of Blensk, but why include a character like Blensk at all? What purpose does he serve?

Reza is commenting on the general cruelty of language. Barthes claimed that the sheer existence of language is fascist, in that it obliges us to speak, to attempt to communicate within a limited system. Blensk is a man who finds himself alone, widowed for all points and purposes, trying to connect to the other human beings around him – his only tool for connection is speech. Reza provides her reader and spectator with a personification of impossible communication. Blensk tries again and again to communicate his own existence, his own value and worth, only to be rebuffed and mocked. Yet Reza is able to present Blensk and his seemingly pathetic speeches in written and performed format, forcing both reader and spectator to acknowledge this character's true intentions and desires, both of which revolve around connecting and belonging. Reza enables her reader and spectator to connect with Blensk because we can see him in the wider lens of the play as a whole, because he exists in literature, whereas his fellow characters only see him in their fictional present (wherein he is easily ignored, mocked and rejected). A reader and spectator are able to see Blensk's desperation, his need, and appreciate it empathetically; in providing this lens, this empathy, Reza can be seen to circumvent the cruelty of language.

In the third scene, Emma Milstein opens the action with a long monologue. This speech is interrupted by commentary from other characters, but functions as one lengthy piece, spanning over four pages. Like Pierre's monologue in *Conversations*, Emma recounts a memory, or memories; she tells the story of the Milstein family's travels during the war years. This monologue is a narrative in and of itself, and reminds me of sitting at my own grandmother's knees, listening to her tell stories of a time before my time, a lost time. This speech is one of few instances in Reza's oeuvre that allude to her Jewish roots. Emma begins with a story of her Aunt Caroline "le dernier spécimen russe de la famille" who was thrilled to be accepted at rue de Varize, a home for refugee Russian Jews, only to call Emma later, lamenting the fact that Emma allowed her to go into a home "où il n'y a que des malheureux, des pauvres juifs, misérables" (143/144). Emma laughs good-naturedly at the memory, then, noticing the fog and the sea beyond, begins to tell Suzanne of the sea as she remembers it on the boat from Constanta to Istanbul.

The Milsteins fled Romania in 1940 and proceeded to travel the world during the war. Emma and Avner's father had put plenty of money away before the war began, and the family lived in luxury in hotels in Turkey, in Jerusalem, in Australia. They traveled in Calcutta, Bassora, Bombay, Darjeeling, Rangoon, and Singapore, finally returning to Europe, to Paris in 1946.

With this monologue, Reza creates something beautiful. Barthes discusses the importance of literature, in that it houses all of the other sciences; that is to say, if literature were to perish, knowledge would also perish. In this sense, literature is greatly superior to spoken language. History, for example, would certainly perish without the written word. Reza, however, is not an historian nor is she a novelist – in this instance, she is a playwright and, as such, she is able to capture a personal history and preserve it, not only in text, but as it was originally meant to exist: as an oral tradition, as presented in sonority by a human voice. It is not the history of the Jewish people and the Holocaust that Reza hopes to preserve, but the history of one fictional woman, representing one very plausible perspective and experience, and a positive experience at that. Reza is able to circumvent the fleeting, momentary nature of spoken language, freezing this ficto-historical moment in a monologue, a textual format that not only

records and preserves said moment, but allows for that moment to be brought to life once again, and for all time. Emma's voice will continue to resound, in different forms, with different intonations, brought to life in future historical moments, and that is an immortality more powerful than both the spoken word and the written word. While Barthes warns us that power seizes on anything and everything (including the written word), he explains that it is the writer's duty to continue to innovate and evade power's grasp. The performative plane allows Reza to expand the space for innovation beyond the written text – many individuals interpret a text before it is performed, while it is performed, and after it is performed; its words are imbued with new meaning over and over again. Its fluid and ever-changing nature makes performance a force to be reckoned with when it comes to evading the grasp of power.

Later in the play, Reza returns to this memory of flight mingled with excitement and adventure, this time from the perspective of Emma's brother, Avner. His monologue, which opens the sixth scene, begins as a sort of soliloquy – Ariane follows him onto the balcony, but he doesn't turn to look at her, rather, he speaks out, to the vastness of nature and to the audience. Avner's memory is triggered by a smell, the same smell that Emma mentions at the very beginning of the play, linking the two siblings inextricably. He begins, "Tu sens cette odeur? Nous avons une maison à la montagne, en Roumanie, après chaque orage mon père nous obligeait à sortir pour respirer cet air" (160). Avner turns to Ariane, congratulating her on a good hike earlier that day, and after a beat of silence, recalls his family's journey. Unlike Emma, however, Avner doesn't mention the war, he doesn't recall the details; he remembers, instead, "l'envie et l'idée d'ailleurs" (161), sentiments awoken in him during the journey. He explains his love for the mountain, because "l'œil y rêve" (161) and wonders aloud, traversing far off places. He cuts himself off, addressing Ariane, but loses himself again as he talks of their hike, about the heights they reached and the sight of the sky. And he wonders and wanders, traversing far off places once again in his own mind.

This monologue exemplifies the failure of language to truly capture human sentiment. Avner wonders aloud, cuts himself off, addresses Ariane, cuts himself off, wonders aloud, trails off. Again, Reza employs punctuation, such as ellipses and em-dashes, to indicate Avner's inability to complete a thought. The expanse of his mind, of

his dreaming, cannot be translated into words; his own interrupting of himself seems to reveal his own awareness of the lacking in his words. In presenting us with a monologue such as this, an intentionally fragmented speech, a somewhat weak speech, Reza is able to highlight the general weakness of the spoken word.

Balint, one of *Traversée*'s 'outsiders' is a melancholy man. He is a 35-year-old writer, working on a book about the first Iron Age – he is on the mountain seeking solace and quietness in which to do his work. As Alex was a failed writer in *Conversations*, Balint is a struggling writer in *Traversée*, who cannot seem to make any forward progress. In scene seven, Balint and Ariane have what I like to call battling monologues; Balint speaks first, confessing his affection for Ariane, and Ariane responds, describing the man she loves. Neither monologue is extremely passionate; in fact, each is characterized by a certain weight, a certain heaviness. Balint begins, explaining that since meeting Ariane, he has looked for her where she isn't: "Tu es introuvable," (170) he says. He goes on to describe the man he would have to be in order to win Ariane; each point is the antithesis of himself. "Il sait qu'on n'écrit pas un livre sur le premier âge du fer, et lorsqu'il me voit, immobile, visage sérieux penché sur la table, il danse, lui, léger comme l'air [...]" (170). Balint is resigned to his lack, to his sadness – and yet, he describes his desire, his walks, the fresh air that inspires him to hope that maybe, Ariane might see "derrière l'apparence contraire l'être gracieux, le danseur..." (171). He trails off, launching into a tangent about Saturdays, his love for them as a child, his love for Saturday childhood games. He trails off again and the stage directions read: *Il n'arrive pas à poursuivre. Silence.* Ariane asks about his game, they chat for a moment, she tries to touch him, he pushes her off and says, "Je me sens toujours un enfant, je ne sais pas avoir mon âge...J'ai disparu un jour, et je ne sais pas où je suis passé..." (171).

There is a long moment of silence before Ariane responds with her own monologue. Do you hear the wind, she asks Balint? She describes her wish to be a stalk pulled from the earth – she trails off and finds her voice again: "Il y a un homme...un homme que j'attends, qui doit venir et me pulvériser..." (172). Her description of the man is ambiguous; he seems to be a shadow in her own mind, until she transitions into talking about her walk with Avner. He marched ahead of her and all she could do was follow. "Être là, simplement avec cet homme, je ne veux rien d'autre..." (172). She

describes Avner's interaction with a man in Lenzsee, neither could understand the other and yet they both thought each other *formidable*. In the present tense, Ariane describes the night, making herself beautiful for the evening, her own gaiety, going to Avner's room. She trails off, saying, "Demain il sera à Buenos Aires..." (173).

These two monologues are almost painful. Reza presents two characters, both desiring something out of reach, both existing in quiet longing, both of whom, if only they could connect with each other, might find happiness. Silence, breaks, pauses, each play a large role in this monologic sequence. Neither character is able to grasp a thought long enough to communicate it to the other; or, perhaps, neither character is able to find words adequate enough to explain their feelings – they both attempt to share, only to trail off, only to move on to another thought or make another attempt with new words. It's as if, if only there was another way to bridge the gap, if speech weren't their only tool, they might be able to find each other. There is a tangible loneliness in this exchange and the failure of language is palpable and disappointing. The words are too heavy; it is clear that both Balint and Ariane desire lightness, to be borne on the wind, rootless, but they are mired, obliged to attempt to connect within a lacking system, obliged to speak and therefore remain disconnected. This sequence leaves the reader and spectator with a sense of incompleteness, much as the characters themselves can only manage incomplete thoughts. Perhaps, Reza, herself a writer (though not at all a failed one), presents this portrayal in order to highlight the power of literature as a connective force. Where words fail, written words might succeed, or at the very least, endure, demanding analysis and thought, demanding connection from a third party (you and I).

Like *Conversations*, *Traversée* ends with a false departure followed by a monologue; Avner Milstein leaves for Buenos Aires, only to miss his flight and land right back on the veranda of that hotel in Stratten. Of this monologue, Amanda Giguere writes:

[Avner] turns to the audience and delivers a long, poetic monologue about his inability to stay put in life, and compares life to a long and difficult passage through a cold and infinite winter... This post-monologue gives voice to the inner thoughts of the main character, and changes the very nature of the play. Throughout the play there is a sense of deep poetry, an elegant mingling of trivial details with profound sorrow, and the text suggests that larger ideas are stirring beneath Reza's minimalist

language. In this post-monologue, the latent poetry is finally brought to light. (33)

Avner flows from one thought to the next, from hours spent in front of an atlas, to the smells of the forest, to Buenos Aires, to lost memories that are no longer lost, to the sadness that seems inescapable. He concludes with a memory from which the play gets its title: he remembers an image in a childhood book depicting high planes and a single cabin entitled *Passage d'hiver dans les monts Kingane*, he remembers feeling cold, feeling as if he was the rider traversing winter infinitely.

It is a wandering soliloquy, delivered half to Blensk, half to himself. He glides in and out of each memory, each sentiment, unable to land on any – it's as if the image of traversing winter exists in Avner's speech itself. He trudges through his ideas, unable to completely shake off the former before moving onto the latter, like snow clinging to big boots. Is language the infinite winter? Is it words, spoken, scattered like fallen snow, which weigh us down, through which we must forever march? What recourse do we have? For Reza, perhaps the only recourse is to write the hopelessness of language, to highlight its failures by exposing it. In her privileged position as a playwright, she is able to take the battle even further, breathing life back into her written words, allowing her text to be performed, allowing an audience to play the part of interlocuteur, allowing us to connect through something greater than language.

* * *

Conversations après un enterrement and *La Traversée de l'hiver* are the earliest pieces in Yasmina Reza's oeuvre; as a young playwright, Reza attempted to find and define her own personal style, a style in which monologue figures prominently. She came out of the gates swinging; from the beginning, Reza fought theatrical norms. *Conversations* sets the reader and spectator up for tragedy, only to veer toward a fairly optimistic outcome in the end – Reza abandons traditional theatrical structure in favour of her own innovation. Within both *Conversations* and *Traversée*, Reza uses stage directions and punctuation to combat language, both of which influence our reading of each text as well as our interpretation of each performance. She uses 'useless'

monologues to highlight both the weakness and cruelty of the spoken word, as well as the superiority of literature.

Reza also uses monologue to highlight the weakness of language as a connective force, a theme that reappears throughout the rest of her theatrical canon. In *Conversations*, Alex cannot reach his deceased father; in *Traversée*, Balint and Ariane cannot find each other¹⁴ and Blensk cannot seem to connect to anyone. Reza's characters remain isolated in spite of (perhaps because of) their attempts to communicate. For Barthes, communication is possible, it does occur, it is simply a communication governed by a fascist code (language). It's an incomplete communication: we communicate only that which language allows us to communicate. Reza's early works, however, seem coloured by an *incommunicabilité*, an inability to communicate at all – her characters can't situate themselves, can't understand themselves, and can't express themselves – at least not through language. They cannot communicate and therefore cannot connect. During their monologues, Reza's characters search for words, but more often than not, there are none. They resort to pauses, to silences, to pondering, withdrawing further from each other. Is it the dictatorial nature of language that renders communication, and connection by association, impossible, or is it the incommunicability of the human experience that renders language useless? Is it in combatting language through literature that we will find the solution, as Barthes suggests, or is there a more subtle road to take, one that leads to a reformation of language in general? Throughout her works, Reza wrestles with these questions, attempting to bend language to her will.

¹⁴ "Tu es introuvable," says Balint to Ariane on page 170.

Chapter 3.

Grande Renommée

“*Art*” premiered in Paris in the fall of 1994 and marked a sweeping stylistic shift from Reza’s earlier two works. Some scholarly research suggests that Reza wrote her fourth play, *L’Homme du hasard* before “*Art*”, however, this study examines her oeuvre in the order in which each play was produced. It had been about five years since the public had seen a play from Yasmina Reza when “*Art*” hit the private commercial theatre of Comédie des Champs-Élysées; in that time, Reza became a mother and lost her father. Amanda Giguere writes, “Whether or not these life changes inspired Reza to adjust her playwriting style, the plays that appeared after these events were markedly different from [her] earlier works” (42). “*Art*” was conceived at the bequest of two actors and friends of Reza’s, Pierre Vaneck, who played Avner in *La Traversée de l’hiver*, and Pierre Arditi, who had worked with Reza on the 1985 film *Jusqu’à la nuit*; Fabrice Luchini, a French actor and long-time friend of Reza’s would round out the cast¹⁵. As with *Conversations* and *Traversée*, all citations from “*Art*” in this analysis are taken from *Yasmina Reza: Théâtre*.

“*Art*” is, without a doubt, Yasmina Reza’s most successful play: it has garnered many awards, including multiple Molière awards, and a Tony award; it has been translated into several languages and performed in Germany, the United States, the United Kingdom and more, grossing over \$300 million globally in 15 years¹⁶, it has also been incorporated into French education and republished a dozen times¹⁷. Hélène Jaccocard points out that, of any piece in Reza’s canon, “*Art*” has inspired the most

¹⁵ Giguere, A. p. 60; Jaccocard, H. p. 107

¹⁶ Alter (2009) cited by Jaccocard, H. p.103

¹⁷ Jaccocard, H. p. 103

scholarly research, with scholars dedicating entire books to this one play, not to mention the plethora of articles that have been written with “*Art*” as their subject¹⁸. Many of these scholars focus on the relationship of humans to art, as well as human relationships in general, as the play touches upon both¹⁹. “*Art*” is also Reza’s only play to have been captured on film, that is to say, the original production, with its original cast, direction and design, was filmed and is available on Youtube²⁰ – I will incorporate this video later in the chapter, utilizing it as a specific example when I delve further into the language and devices employed in “*Art*” and their relationship to performance.

There are only three characters in “*Art*”, three presumably middle-aged men named Marc, Serge and Yvan, all of whom have been friends for many years; unlike the characters in Reza’s previous two plays, the characters in “*Art*” are not assigned a specific age within the text. While the play suggests movement from Serge’s apartment, to Marc’s apartment, to Yvan’s apartment, the actual setting on stage doesn’t change, aside from the artwork featured on each wall; the three actors are situated within a closed room, as pared-down and neutral as possible²¹. The plot is driven by Serge’s purchase of a painting – referred to throughout the play as L’Antrios (the painter’s name) – for 200,000 francs, and his friends’, Marc and Yvan, reactions to this purchase. The painting is described in the stage directions as “*une toile blanche, avec de fins liserés blancs transversaux*” (195).

Where *Conversations* and *Traversée* are sprawling pieces, wherein very little occurs, Giguere claims that “*Art*” is a highly focused piece, describing the action as “remarkably confined” (44). She goes on to write, “Both plays in Reza’s experimental period [“*Art*” and *L’Homme du hasard*] drive obsessively toward one major action: in ‘*Art*’,

¹⁸ Jaccomard, H. p. 106

¹⁹ Several examples include: Carroll, Noel. “Friendship and Yasmina Reza’s Art.” (relationship of art to friendship); Jaccomard, Helène. “Art’: l’amitié et l’amour de l’art” (the abstract nature of art and human relationships); Burtin, Tatiana. “Interartialité et remédiation scénique de la peinture.” (integration of art into other forms of art – theatre)

²⁰ Dupain, Yannick. (2013, May 12). “*Art*” de Yasmina Reza – Pierre Arditi, Fabrice Luchini, Pierre Vaneck [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BClyBbD0QwA>

²¹ See Yasmina Reza’s stage directions that open the play: *Le salon d’un appartement. Un seul décor. Le plus dépouillé, le plus neutre possible. Les scènes se déroulent successivement chez Serge, Yvan et Marc. Rien ne change, sauf l’œuvre de peinture exposé.*

a character defaces a painting...” (Giguere, 44). Denis Guénoun points out that in “*Art*”, Reza seems to have abandoned all references to ordinary life; the food, clothing, natural surroundings, air, etc. referred to in *Conversations* and *Traversée* don’t seem to figure into “*Art*”. He also comments on the absence of music in this piece²². In “*Art*” the focus is almost completely on character interaction – the trivialities of the day-to-day, such as the making of *pot-au-feu* and the attending of concerts, often used to add realistic context to a piece, interfere very little. The characters (as well as the reader and the audience) are in a sort of stripped down vacuum.

In this pared-down setting, and within this pared-down text, Reza employs monologue in wholly new ways (in relation to her first plays): firstly, interior monologues, during which a character reveals their own inner thoughts to the audience; and secondly, asides, during which a character breaks the ‘fourth wall’ in the middle of the action and addresses the audience directly, in spite of another character’s presence. Jacomard writes, “Du fait de l’insertion de nombreux apartés, technique classique rarement utilisée dans le théâtre moderne [...] le public est le dépositaire de pensées intimes, les autres personnages sur scène étant devenus, par convention, sourds et figés” (111). This utilization of such a traditional theatre trope seems out of place for Reza, but as we look closer at the structure of “*Art*”, it becomes clear that Reza’s subversion, while perhaps more subtle, is still at work. Throughout this chapter, as in the previous chapter, I examine Reza’s use of monologue through the lens of Barthes at both the textual level, and the performative level, citing specific examples from the film of the original production. Though Reza’s use of monologue has changed, it still serves a combative function against language. Her strategies have developed and transformed, yet – as Barthes suggests – this movement allows Reza to expose language as two-faced, as well as to continue to highlight language as a disconnective force. In examining the film of the original production, I will also look at how Reza’s strategies for combatting language are enhanced, undermined or completely transformed in the hands of the actor.

* * *

²² Guénoun, D. p. 116-117

The play opens with Marc, alone. He delivers a very simple soliloquy – right off the bat, it is clear that the tone of this play is different; the poetry and lyricism we are used to hearing in Reza’s monologues is markedly absent. Marc’s sentences are complete and direct rather than wandering. He doesn’t trail off and there is no fluidity to his speech. He delivers simple, declarative statements.

MARC. Mon ami Serge a acheté un tableau.
C’est une toile d’environ un mètre soixante sur un mètre vingt, peinte en blanc. Le fond est blanc et si on cligne des yeux, on peut apercevoir de fins liserés blancs transversaux.
Mon ami Serge est un ami depuis longtemps.
C’est un garçon qui a bien réussi, il est médecin dermatologue et il aime l’art.
Lundi, je suis allé voir le tableau que Serge avait acquis samedi mais qu’il convoitait depuis plusieurs mois.
Un tableau blanc, avec des liserés blancs. (195)

The textual structure of this opening monologue indicates a change, in and of itself. Where Reza employed ellipses to indicate pauses or breaks, here, she utilizes line breaks. She produces a staccato monologue, wherein each thought is completed and punctuated. She has eliminated the weakness innate to many of the monologues in *Conversations* and *Traversée*. This monologue is also a pure soliloquy; Marc is alone onstage, he can be addressing no one but himself or the audience, and he provides a fairly clear exposition for the play. Amanda Giguere labels this opening an “inner monologue” and writes that the spectator functions, here, as Marc’s confidante: “The play is framed from the start through Marc’s eyes [...] the audience is asked to see the painting (and the scene) from his skeptical perspective” (Giguere, 52). Reza seems to have established the play’s narrator in Marc. However, there is something missing in Giguere’s assumption that this opening is a cut and dry inner monologue.

Deborah Geis provides a comprehensive definition of soliloquy: “[...] a soliloquy is a kind of monologue that generally suggests introspection [...] A soliloquy usually involves the verbalization of the speaker’s interior feelings or thoughts and often entails a revelation or decision that may not be ordinarily rendered in speech outside of a

theatrical framework but which is enacted aloud for the benefit of the audience (e.g. Hamlet's soliloquies)" (8/9). Looking at Marc's monologue in the context of this standard definition, labels such as 'inner monologue' and 'soliloquy' become somewhat limited. This monologue does not reveal anything intentionally. It is tinged with sarcasm, seen in the repetition of "un tableau blanc avec des liserés blancs" hinting at Marc's scepticism, but the reader and the spectator are not treated to any kind of confession or true revelation of Marc's feelings. Sarcasm is a tactic most often employed to subtly (or not so subtly) communicate one's feelings of disdain or contempt – it is a tactic employed when one person speaks to another, generally *in place of* a straightforward admission. Sarcasm is something I would expect to see in the dialogue of "Art" (and is something we do see often throughout the piece) but not in a supposed inner monologue. An inner monologue should provide insight *into* a character's mind, whereas this monologue simply hints at Marc's true feelings.

For Barthes, it is constant innovation that allows the writer to continue to fight with language indefinitely. In her first plays, Reza used monologue to expose and highlight the cruelty and failures of language, but here, we see a different tactic. Here, the audience is fooled into thinking that they are the confidante; the soliloquy setup convinces the reader and the audience that they are privy to something secret, something behind the scenes, something honest. Reza presents a level that doesn't exist in the world of spoken language, as Geis explains, something "not ordinarily rendered in speech outside of a theatrical framework" (9) – she hints at the idea that we are being provided with deeper understanding. And yet, she reveals almost nothing. It is as if she is mocking tradition, toying with our expectations and our desire to see behind the curtain. In this way, Reza points to the limits of codes and structures; for all points and purposes, the setup of Marc's opening monologue indicates that we are reading or hearing something that we wouldn't be privy to in the real world. It would seem, however, that we are being tricked – Reza frames the monologue one way, but the content doesn't exactly match. The text hints at Marc's character, but doesn't expose him in any way; it aligns us with his perspective, only to betray us later, when Reza interrupts the action with an aside from Serge. This general instability is lodged within Reza's written-to-be-performed text, within the words, alluding to the innate instability within the code of language.

In the original production, Marc delivers this monologue in the almost dark. This lighting choice is not indicated within the stage directions and works to distinguish the monologue from the rest of the scene. Pierre Vaneck pauses in accord with some line breaks (the first and the last, for instance) and adds his own emphasis elsewhere, particularly on the already emphasized line “et il aime l’*art*”. His tone and facial expressions extol his sarcasm. Vaneck’s delivery pulls the audience into his joke; it’s Marc and the audience who share this mocking moment. Rather than revealing the character’s own internal thoughts and feelings, the performed monologue functions as one half of a conversation, the such that two party-goers might have in a dark corner, pointing and laughing at another party-goer’s faux pas – it’s a shared inside joke rather than a confession. The performed monologue incriminates the audience even more than the text, drawing them into Marc’s perspective, making, as Giguere points out, the interruption by Serge later in the scene with his own internal thoughts perhaps even more disconcerting. Reza uses this opening monologue almost as a weapon against the audience – it’s a bit of a Trojan horse; they are led to believe that Marc’s is the dominant perspective, and that they might sit at ease, watching the action unfold, unchallenged. Yet, this is not the case as the play’s perspective jumps from one character to another. This betrayal embedded within Marc’s soliloquy reflects the betraying nature of language, in general. Language often lulls us into a false sense of understanding; it attempts to communicate ‘truth’ to us, yet, so many times, its limitations leave us in a gray area, unsure of the reality of our situation. In playing this game, Reza demands more from her reader and her audience – she demands that we question the honesty of what is being said.

Reza’s employs soliloquy and aside throughout the early scenes of “*Art*”. It’s only a page and a half in the text after Marc’s opening that we hear from Serge. Marc has just referred to the painting as “cette merde” and there is a break, indicated by an asterisk in the text. The stage directions read: *Serge, comme seul* (197). He speaks, beginning, “Mon ami Marc” just as Marc began his monologue “Mon ami Serge” In this refrain, Reza establishes a new rhythm – she revives the musicality that characterized her previous pieces, it’s simply the song that has changed. Serge launches into his own analysis of Marc’s character. As Marc introduced Serge’s profession, Serge’s tastes, and their long-time friendship, so Serge references Marc’s intelligence, his high esteem of Marc

“depuis longtemps”, and introduces Marc’s profession as an aeronautics engineer. Where Marc was sarcastic about Serge’s love of art, Serge is judgemental of Marc as a new intellectual. “[Marc] fait partie de ces intellectuels, nouveaux, qui, non contents d’être ennemis de la modernité en tirent une vanité incompréhensible. / Il y a depuis peu, chez l’adepte du bon vieux temps, une arrogance vraiment stupéfiante” (197). Marc’s feelings are suggested through emphasis and repetition, while Serge is a bit clearer – his aside aligns better with the label ‘inner monologue’ as he reveals a judgement. However, this aside is still not a straightforward presentation of Serge’s feelings; he makes a judgement on a group as a whole with which he associates Marc, rather than accusing Marc of being arrogant directly. There is restraint in both Marc’s soliloquy and Serge’s aside; both wink at the audience and both allude to the code of semantics that governs the ways in which we interact with each other via spoken language: How can I say what I mean without *actually* saying what I mean? Reza presents us with what we are accustomed to, we are inserted into the conversation, and while both Marc and Serge suggest feelings to the reader and spectator that they may not be able to communicate to one another, they still operate within the rules of good society, rules embedded in the spoken word.

Within the following two pages of text, Serge, then Marc, then Yvan each have soliloquies, one flowing into the next. For Serge and Marc, the stage directions indicate that each is alone; Yvan’s monologue begins the following scene and we find him alone in his apartment searching for something. Serge begins the sequence with a short, eight-line soliloquy; here, for the first time, the inner monologue seems to be a real, honest internal snapshot. This monologue is simple, the language is concise, one can see Serge with pursed lips, expressing his anger in words but attempting to remain physically constrained.

SERGE. Il n'aime pas le tableau.
Bon...
Aucune tendresse dans son attitude.
Aucun effort.
Aucune tendresse dans sa façon de condamner.
Un rire prétentieux, perfide.
Un rire qui sait tout mieux que tout le monde.
J'ai haï ce rire. (198)

Marc's monologue is also honest, however, where Serge was constrained, Marc seems to be unraveling. His speech is much longer, and we see the self-interruption that often characterized monologue in *Conversations* and *Traversée*. The ellipses are still absent, suggesting Marc's ability to declare his thoughts completely, but he is definitely becoming erratic. He begins, talking about the unsettling effect Serge's purchase is having on him. He exclaims that he had to take three capsules of Gelsémium 9CH to calm himself, and here, he launches into a brief tangent, recounting Paula's (his girlfriend) asking him if he prefers Gelsémium or Ignatia. He returns to himself, trying to understand how "Serge, qui est un ami, a pu acheter cette toile" (198). He then introduces Yvan, explaining (to whom?) that he must go discuss this event with the tolerant Yvan. He ends by asserting that, if Yvan can tolerate Serge's purchase, it's because Yvan cares nothing for Serge. This monologue reveals Marc's unstable state – Serge's purchase has thrown him completely off balance. The words are beginning to roll out in an uncontrollable fashion (much as thoughts escalate and build). This monologue is finally reflective of an inner monologue in that Marc is losing control, and the reader and the audience are privy to this loss.

And then we meet Yvan. The setting shifts into his apartment and the stage directions indicate that he is looking for something, when he turns "*pour se presenter*." (199) Yvan is the only character to introduce himself, suggesting his otherness.

YVAN. Je m'appelle Yvan.
Je suis un peu tendu car après avoir passé ma vie dans le textile, je viens de trouver un emploi de représentant dans une papeterie en gros.
Je suis un garçon sympathique. Ma vie professionnelle a toujours été un échec et je vais me marier dans quinze jours avec une gentille fille brillante et de bonne famille.

This monologue is strange in the context of theatrical traditions. Yvan is clearly speaking directly to the audience, with no regard for the fourth wall; this soliloquy feels more like an introduction than an internal revelation. However, his is an oddly truthful introduction. He opens with his job insecurities and calls himself a professional failure – not confessions one usually makes to strangers. In this sense, Yvan's monologue is somewhat internal. The structure of the second-last sentence is markedly odd, as he groups his professional failure with his upcoming marriage to a kind, intelligent girl from a good family. The conjunction "et" as opposed to "mais" is disconcerting, as if the two ideas exist on the same plane in his mind: his professional failure and impending marriage. This monologue doesn't really fit into any monologic mould. It's a direct address with revelatory aspects, as if Reza is toying with all of the expectations around both written (theatrical) speech and performed speech.

In the production, Pierre Vaneck finishes Marc's speech with "Si Yvan tolère que Serge ait pu acheter une merde blanche vingt briques, c'est qu'il se fout de Serge. C'est clair." He exits and the scene changes slightly. Pierre Arditi introduces himself as Yvan as he enters, as opposed to turning around while in the midst of a search (as indicated in the stage directions). In this way, he steps right into Marc's words – the flow from Marc's speech into Yvan's is somewhat seamless. Yvan is clearly distracted; he delivers his first sentence, then continues his search, then pauses again to say "Je suis un garçon sympathique" but Arditi adds a pause between "garçon" and "sympathique", as if Yvan is searching for one word to describe himself. This pause elicits a laugh from the audience and adds a level of self-doubt and ridiculousness to an already bumbling character. Arditi takes Reza's words and filters them through his own interpretation of Yvan, spinning them, adding meaning where there is none within the text. This space to play, to constantly alter, is an aspect of playwriting that makes it superior to literature in the

fight against language. Not only does Reza innovate within the text, tinkering with structure and creating new monologic forms, but the text itself, as something to be performed, breathes and allows for a third voice (apart from the writer and the character) to enter in and transform it further. The text governs language, demanding flexibility, demanding the right to twist and create; the theatre filters the text even further – as written words flow from the mouth of a performer, they are transformed, yet again. Language is at the mercy of multiple inventive forces in the theatre, specifically in Reza’s theatre.

* * *

Internal monologues, soliloquies and asides characterize the first half of “*Art*”. On page 212, the reader and audience are treated to another trio of soliloquies. Yvan has gone to see Serge’s painting and Marc interrogates him regarding his visit and his opinion that “c’est une œuvre, il y a une pensée derrière ça” (210). Marc is infuriated and demands: “Réponds-moi. Demain, tu épouses Catherine et tu reçois en cadeau de mariage ce tableau. Tu es content? / Tu es content?...” (211). This question sparks Yvan’s soliloquy about his general unhappiness. This monologue flows into Serge’s monologue: he explains that, for him, the painting isn’t white, that he sees multiple colours, but Marc can only see white, saying that Yvan can see that it isn’t just white and Marc can think what he likes. Finally, Marc speaks, interrogating himself. “Pourquoi faut-il que je sois tellement catégorique?! Qu’est-ce que ça peut me faire, au fond, que Serge se laisse berné par l’Art contemporain?” (212). He admits that it is a serious matter, but acknowledges that he didn’t have to be aggressive. He finishes with “Dorénavant, je vais lui dire gentiment les choses...” (213).

These three soliloquies are almost in conversation with one another. Yvan tries to remember a moment in his life that made him happy, which bleeds into Serge praising his painting, speaking of its intricacies lovingly – one might call him happy. And finally, Marc’s promise to behave better, to be less aggressive, seems to address Serge’s final statement of “Marc peut penser ce qu’il veut, je l’emmerde.” Reza presents a monologic sequence that seems to highlight the impossibility of dialogue. Each character is only able to respond to the other in privacy, in his own mind – each is unable to vocalize his

loves and fears to another, except when he is alone onstage. This one-sided conversation is even more potent on the stage.

In the production, Marc is onstage during Yvan's monologue. Yvan even delivers the first line of his 'soliloquy' to Marc, before walking away. Marc rests on the couch, in the dark, while Yvan speaks in the light. In this particular production, Marc's monologue comes before Serge's – the director, the producer, the actors, someone or everyone decided to change the order indicated within the text. From a blocking standpoint, it makes sense – Marc rests onstage as Yvan speaks, Yvan leaves, allowing Marc to speak, and Serge wanders onstage during his monologue, making the transition from this scene to the next simple. However, this order change alters the conversation embedded within the three monologues. Rather than ending on a conciliatory note (Marc will behave better), the conversation ends on a defiant note (Serge doesn't care what Marc thinks). Again, we see how the performative plane is another area in which one can play with the rules, another plane on which one can change the conversation. In this instance, the performance veers away from the author's original intentions – the sequence ends in conflict as opposed to promise. In shifting the written text, Reza's original message is transformed ever so slightly; new voices, new hands participate in shaping the performed text. This fluidity aligns with Barthes' strategies for escaping the dominance of language, though on an alternate level – that of performance²³. If, as Carlson says, "performance" can be defined by its struggle to embody "the elusive other" – reality – it mirrors Barthes' literature, which is also in constant pursuit of the real (a goal which, according to Barthes, remains forever out of reach). It is this chase that colours both literature and performance; it is this constant innovation in pursuit of an impossible goal that allows both to elude the forces of power within language.

On page 218, we see the last of the asides. Serge pauses the scene to directly contradict a statement that he has just made.

²³ It is worth noting that, while performance allows for further innovation, the freedom to change an author's original message also opens the door for those who might want to reinforce dominant power structures.

SERGE. [...] Tu ne m'énerves pas, pourquoi tu m'énerverais?

*

SERGE. Il m'énerve. C'est vrai.

Il m'énerve [...]

In this moment, Reza seems to wrap her commentary in humour – Serge delivers his first line to Marc, and then turns to the audience to reveal something completely different. The break and delivery elicit laughter but the humour in this moment is reflective of the deep failure of the spoken word to communicate truth; the audience (and the reader) may chuckle because this staged moment is relatable. Oftentimes we say one thing when we feel the exact opposite in obeisance to a code of conduct embedded in the code of language. Serge's vocalization of the exact opposite of his actual sentiment is a stark commentary on the inability of language to accommodate human communication. As this aside continues, Serge's frustration builds until he bursts "Je me fous de ta caution, Marc!..." (218). a line delivered to the audience but addressed to Marc. This is Serge's final aside; the direct address indicated in this final line is a transitional moment – soon these feelings must be vocalized, some way.

Marc has his own aside following that of Serge, in seeming response to Serge's question "Serait-ce l'achat de l'Antrios [...] qui aurait déclenché cette gêne entre nous?..." (218). He begins, "Serait-ce l'Antrios, l'achat de l'Antrios?... / Non – / Le mal vient de plus loin..." (218). Marc recalls the true beginning of their problem, of the disconnect between the two of them, and during this speech, he addresses himself both to Serge, to the "tu", as well as to the audience, using "il". The line is blurred here as well – is Marc talking to Serge, is he talking to the reader or spectator, is he talking to himself? Giguere notes, "These rapid asides reveal the escalating tension, and prepare the audience for the climactic scene between the three characters" (54). We, the reader and the spectator, get the sense that a shift is coming, that the sentiments that exist in the minds of each character are soon to be vocalized.

It is at this moment in the play that monologue manifests in a truly bizarre manner. Both Serge and Marc have addressed the audience, and we are returned to the two as they wait for Yvan. Marc delivers one line about Lyonnais as a dinner option

when the doorbell sounds and Serge announces, “Huit heures deuze.” In bursts Yvan and off he goes, delivering a monologue that spans over two pages in the text, by far the longest monologue in “*Art*”. Despite its length, this speech features just one period at the very beginning; the reader is left out of breath, as the whole monologue is one run-on sentence. Anne Ubersfeld dubs this monologue the only “quasi-monologue” in the piece, explaining that the other soliloquies are classic, addressed to the spectator and revealing of some exposition or psychic state. She writes, “[Ce monologue d’Yvan] est une parole devant témoin qui ne rencontre pas de réponse [...] qui attend de la compassion et n’en reçoit pas” (Ubersfeld, 96). In this moment, Reza – who has held with (almost) traditional monologic frameworks throughout “*Art*” – uses monologue to throw her reader, her audience and her other two characters completely off balance.

The play has reached a level of tension; Serge has acknowledged that Marc is, indeed, bothering him, and Marc has revealed that their friendship has been in trouble for a long while – the conflict is building. Instead of allowing the tension to build, however, Reza turns the spotlight on Yvan, who rambles on for almost four minutes without taking a breath. His subject? A family crisis, a conflict between the women in his life, regarding who will be featured on his wedding invitations. Amanda Giguere compares Yvan to the comedic characters of Julienne in *Conversations* and Blensk in *Traversée*²⁴; in this context, perhaps this monologue functions simply in developing Yvan’s comedic character, in providing the reader and audience with some comedic relief in the midst of escalation. However, given the monologue’s length, placement and intentional structure, I would venture that it has a deeper purpose.

Examining this monologue in light of Barthes’ idea that language is actually an obstacle against which we are constantly pitted, the whole speech becomes more significant. Yvan talks and talks and talks. He barely pauses (as indicated within the text itself); in fact, the words seem to tumble from his mouth, his brain barely able to keep up. He speaks truthfully, representing the situation and his own frustrations honestly and with vehemence. And, as Ubersfeld points out, he speaks, trying to elicit some sort of response, some drop of sympathy or appreciation for his plight. And yet, his words fall

²⁴ Giguere, A. p. 56

on deaf ears. Yvan's two best friends couldn't be less interested in his problem; the reader and the audience can perhaps appreciate the comedy of this monologue, but in laughing at Yvan, these third parties aren't hearing his speech either. This monologue is the first impassioned, truthful speech to be featured in the world of the play – not as soliloquy or aside – and it reaches no one. Why speak at all, Yvan? It is as if he is trapped in language quicksand. The more he speaks, the more laughable he becomes, the less serious his “problème insoluble” (219) becomes, the less likely it is that his message, his plea for help and understanding, will reach Marc, Serge or the rest of us. As with Blensk's speeches, Reza uses Yvan's monologue to highlight the failure of language, of the spoken word, as a connective tool. Unlike in *Traversée*, however, Reza gives special attention to this moment in that it is completely unique within the play. Each character has multiple soliloquies and asides, but Yvan's monologue is the only example of a truly elongated speech within a representational scene (as opposed to the presentational nature of an aside or soliloquy)²⁵. This hyper-focus reflects a desire to expose language and its faults.

After Yvan's outburst, the play continues, almost as if it never occurred. From this moment onward, Reza abandons the use of aside and soliloquy until the very end of the play. The narrative shifts that characterize the first half of “*Art*” give way to a completely presentational focus – we are reading or watching the action from behind the fourth wall, no longer privy to the internal thoughts or musings of the characters. The conflict escalates to a point where most of the rules of good society fall away; the characters no longer need asides because they deliver their true feelings to one another in the moment. Yet, as this honesty brims and spills over the surface, Reza robs her characters of their strong declarative statements one way or another. Spoken dialogue, spoken words, require that someone hear them, engage with them and respond to them; however, Reza plays with the idea that dialogue cannot truly exist because multiple people with multiple perspectives can neither wait for each other to complete a thought, nor can they receive that thought without attaching their own perspective to it, distorting the original message and making true communication impossible.

²⁵ Giguere, A. p. 54

On pages 230 to 231, Yvan begins another speech, but when he reveals that he's been speaking to his therapist, Finkelzohn, about Marc and Serge, the two interrupt him, demanding an explanation. He is unable to finish his original thought until a page later, and even then, the other two do not receive it, they brush it off. On pages 236 to 237, Serge explains his distaste for Marc's girlfriend, Paula. He cites the way in which she waves away cigarette smoke as revelatory of a cold, closed-minded, condescending nature. Yvan interrupts him twice, attempting to deflate the situation – these interruptions weaken Serge's tirade (Yvan's intention), but this intentional attack on Serge's words make it impossible for him to fully express himself: a good thing according to the rules of decent society, yet a reflection on the many weaknesses of the spoken word as a communicative device. On pages 241 through 243, Marc attempts to explain himself – he has several long responses, all of which are punctuated with ellipses. Marc is seemingly unable to find the right words, he is unable to give cohesive, concise voice to his thoughts, to his realization that his friendship with Serge is not at all what he thought it was. Marc is unable to be truly honest because his honesty will be seen as arrogant, as closed-minded, as condescending (all of which is probably true), and the rules of civilized language encourage us to adjust our words, to make them soft so as not to offend. Finally, on page 246, Yvan – who has been picked on over and over again despite his not being central to the conflict – has a final outburst. Riddled with exclamation points, question marks and ellipses, this outburst is an erratic plea. Rather than a strong chastisement of his friends' behaviour, this punctuated speech is a temper tantrum and leaves everyone feeling a bit pathetic. In varied, subtle ways, Reza detracts from each of her characters as they speak.

The play ends with three final asides/soliloquies. In the end, to prove their friendship, Serge encourages Marc to draw on his painting and Marc does – a skier going down a mountain. In the final scene, the two carefully clean L'Antrios, while Yvan speaks directly to the audience. He reveals his propensity to cry since the night when Marc drew on the painting. Afterward, at dinner, Marc and Serge discussed a "période d'essai" regarding their friendship, and Yvan began to sob. He concludes, "En réalité, je ne supporte plus aucun discours rationnel, tout ce qui a fait le monde, tout ce qui a été beau et grand dans ce monde n'est jamais né d'un discours rationnel" (250). This is one of Reza's clearest commentaries on language, delivered from the mouth of one of her

characters. The idea that nothing good has ever come from rational discourse, from rational conversation, suggests that there is something outside of rational discourse. “Discours rationnel” can be equated to Barthes’ fascist language – the authoritarian dictator, the rigid structure, the modern era. Fascism, nationalism, reason, rationalism – these characterized modernity and resulted in a post-modern rebellion against reason, in a rejection of rationality. For Barthes, language will always fail, its dictatorship is flawed – it governs our communication as human beings and yet, so often, it accomplishes nothing. For Reza, there is hope in that which exists outside of rational discourse, outside of reason. For Yvan, the conversation between the three friends at dinner leaves him distraught and uncertain, despite its rationality, despite the seeming stability imbedded in “discours rationnel”. However, his allusion to another force, a force outside of language from which “tout ce qui [est] beau et grand” comes pits reason against an absence of or alternative to reason. Rational discourse exists, but if that which is grand and beautiful is not born of rational discourse, it is born of something else, something irrational, perhaps. It is as if Reza can’t quite put her finger on this other thing, but she knows that it is; while Yvan is mired in despair, Reza hints at a light at the end of the tunnel in that an other force *must* exist.

There is a long beat before we hear from Serge. He tidies the cleaning products, then advances “*vers nous*” according to the stage directions. He recounts the cleaning of the painting with a solution recommended by Paula. He recites the conversation between himself and Marc:

SERGE. – Savais-tu que les feutres étaient lavables?
– Non, m’a répondu Marc...Non...Et toi?
– Moi non plus, ai-je dit, très vite, en mentant. (251)

Here, Reza nods to another weakness embedded in language: one can always tell a lie. However, in literature, in written text, an author can choose to expose lies through devices such as soliloquies and inner monologues. The reader and the spectator are provided the entire picture, while Marc is not. Reza’s literature, her theatrical text as a whole, supersedes the spoken language within the text, the spoken language between characters, due to its honesty, due to its ability to convey the whole truth of a message to a third party (reader or spectator). Serge questions his own

dishonest response, finally asking himself and the audience “Pourquoi faut-il que les relations soient si compliquées avec Marc?...” (251).

The play ends, as it began, with Marc. He looks at the painting and muses about his skier:

MARC. Sous les nuages blancs, la neige tombe. On ne voit ni les nuages blancs,
ni la neige. Ni la froideur et l'éclat blanc du sol.
Un homme seul, à skis, glisse.
La neige tombe.
Tombe jusqu'à ce que l'homme disparaisse et retrouve son opacité.
Mon ami Serge, qui est un ami depuis longtemps, a acheté un tableau.
C'est une toile d'environ un mètre soixante sur un mètre vingt.
Elle représente un homme qui traverse un espace et qui disparaît. (251)

Marc doesn't wonder about his friendships as the other two do – his speech is introspective, almost abstract. In this monologue, some of the poetry reminiscent of Reza's previous works reappears. Marc paints a beautiful, quiet, lonely image, an image one would expect to find in a book of poetry. Reza showcases the power of the written word, the rhythm of the written word; Marc's is a speech that communicates a loneliness deeper than a fight between friends, a loneliness of a spirit unable to find its counterpart in another. This final sentiment is moving and powerful, and is such because it is a speech written for a play – it is a speech that exists as a literary construction and, therefore, allows us to peer into Marc's mind.

While much of the scholarship around “*Art*” interrogates definitions and assumptions about friendship, perhaps it is neither friendship, nor art that Reza is truly questioning, perhaps it is language itself, the foundation upon which all relationships are built. While the three men in “*Art*” reach a détente in the end, they remain isolated, adrift and alone. Their words, both honest and dishonest, have served only in cloistering each of them: Yvan is lost in his own sensitivity, Serge has exposed his own dishonesty and uncertainty about his relationship with Marc, and Marc, like Avner, seems to have lost himself in a great, metaphorical, wintry expanse. Reza employs literary and theatrical devices in “*Art*” that we did not see in her previous works, but these new devices only

serve to solidify her observed stance against language as a deceptive, disconnective code.

Chapter 4.

Après “Art”

In this chapter, I look at Reza’s three subsequent theatrical works after “Art”: *L’Homme du hasard*, *Trois versions de la vie* and *Une pièce espagnole* – the first was written and produced around the same time as “Art” in the mid-nineties, while the latter two were produced in 2000 and 2004 respectively. While previous scholars have not analyzed these three pieces together, I have grouped them, as their experimental structures (albeit different types of experimentation) knit the three. In *L’Homme*, we see the beginning of Reza’s varied presentations of reality: this play is told from two alternating perspectives and driven by internal monologue, and seems to be literary-leaning, that is to say, it seems meant more for the page than the stage; in *Trois versions*, Reza actually presents her reader and spectator with three different versions of reality; and in *Une pièce espagnole*, Reza experiments with *mise en abyme*, presenting a layered reality. These three plays also seem to share in their general lack of commercial success relative to “Art” – that isn’t to say that any of the three was reviled or failed (in fact each was greeted fairly warmly by French audiences) but simply that none were able to match the commercial splash that was “Art”.

In “Art”, Reza employs monologue in a traditional sense with asides, inner monologues and soliloquies, challenging language in pitting these monologues against the spoken dialogue within the world of the play. In her next three plays, however, Reza abandons traditional uses of monologue in favour of experimentation. In *L’Homme*, she presents a play almost entirely in interior monologue. She underlines the inability of language to enable connection by actually preventing her characters from speaking to one another – they are confined to their own minds. In *Trois versions*, Reza weaves monologue into three versions of reality, providing her characters with three opportunities to speak, attempting to allow her characters to connect through trial and

error. And in *Une pièce espagnole*, she sprinkles monologues throughout a layered reality, demanding that her reader and spectator examine the performed nature of language in ‘real’ life. In each of these plays, Reza seems not to battle language so much as try to work around language, to work through language.

* * *

L’Homme du hasard premiered on September 19, 1995 at the Théâtre Hébertot in Paris. According to Amanda Giguere, this play was “dwarfed” by the success of “*Art*”²⁶ however, for the playwright herself, *L’Homme* was the preferred piece. In 1999, she told Nina Hellerstein, “J’aime beaucoup *L’Homme du hasard*, c’est une de mes œuvres préférées. [...] C’est à dire que c’est une des choses que j’ai écrites avec le plus de réussite pour moi” (947). This 80-minute play takes place in a compartment on a train from Paris to Frankfurt; a man and a woman, both unnamed at the outset, are seated across from each other, musing, one about the other. The man is an author, the woman, unbeknownst to him, is a fan who is reading his most recent book, *L’Homme du hasard*. Giguere writes that *L’Homme* is based on a personal experience of Reza’s: a great admirer of the Romanian philosopher Emil Cioran, Reza passed him in the street one day, but couldn’t muster the courage to speak to him²⁷ – a failed encounter that resulted in one of her most autobiographical plays. There is some debate around the order in which Reza wrote “*Art*” and *L’Homme du hasard*; in her analysis, Hélène Jaccomard examines *L’Homme* first, asserting that it was written after *Traversée*, in 1994. However, here, I examine *L’Homme* after “*Art*”, as it premiered and was published after the huge success of Reza’s third play. Jaccomard explains that the play’s unconventional structure made it difficult to produce: “C’est un texte que Reza a eu du mal à écrire – court, il lui a pourtant fallu six mois pour l’achever – et qu’elle a eu du mal à faire publier, tant il brave les conventions théâtrales. Il n’aura sa chance qu’après la consécration de l’auteur par ‘*Art*’ (81). All citations from *L’Homme du hasard* are taken from *Yasmina Reza: Théâtre*.

²⁶ Giguere, A. p. 7

²⁷ Giguere, A. p. 73

The structure of this piece is truly experimental, with the majority of the play written as interior monologue. The opening stage directions read as follows: *Un compartiment de train. Un homme et une femme. Chacun en soi-même.* (7) Denis Guénoun explains the effect of these words: “Cette indication instaure le pacte de lecture: les monologues exprimeront la vie intérieure des personnages (chacun *en soi-même*), leur pensée – discours de l’âme rentrée, conversant avec soi” (126). Right off the bat, the reader knows that they are privy to the inner thoughts of the man (and subsequently, the woman); in performance, there are many different ways to suggest internality, from lighting to staging. Jaccomard explains that, in theory, the two characters should remain seated for the duration of the play – the audience neither sees them enter nor exit the train. The stage directions indicate very simple, reduced movements: furtive glances and slight movements, such as removing a book from a bag²⁸. “Un certain nombre de chroniqueurs ont estimé que *L’Homme du hasard* n’avait pas assez de théâtralité pour le mettre en scène,” explains Jaccomard (85), echoing Guénoun’s assessment that *L’Homme*, given its composition and intimate structure, “se montre hanté, habité par le désir du roman [...]” (Guénoun, 89). However, Reza wrote *L’Homme* as a play, not as a novel, novella or short story; while some critics might argue that Reza’s skills as a writer limit her to the theatre, in presenting *L’Homme* as a text destined to be performed, Reza is able to critique language in a meaningful way.

The play opens with the man, and within the first several lines – had Reza’s stage directions not situated us within his mind – it becomes clear that we are in the man’s head. He opens with his own bitterness, the bitterness of time and the uselessness of things. Then suddenly, we find ourselves listening to him gripe about his friend Youri and his Japanese lover: “Lui a soixante-huit ans, une prostate qui pèse 95 grammes, elle en a quarante, plate. Tout est amer. Amère la nuit. La nuit. Pas d’amour, pas de collage, sommeil plus ou moins là...” (9). Moments later, the man is talking openly about his tendency to wake up at five o’clock in the morning to shit, thanks to the introduction of All Bran into his diet. The monologue continues, flowing from one thought to the next, reflecting perhaps the textual stream-of-consciousness coined by James Joyce (though slightly more palatable, as Reza employs some transitions, inviting her

²⁸ Jaccomard, H. p. 84

reader and spectator to follow each thought a bit more closely). The man is consumed by his own plight, the plight of time, of aging, of watching life lose all of its flavour. And he is brutally honest about his situation *because* he is not speaking out loud in the world of the play (though he is speaking aloud to the audience); we are privy to a completely internal monologue. This opening speech spans over three pages and is both very funny and very sad. He muses on the plight of the writer, a revelatory moment during which we may be able to glimpse a bit of Reza herself – rather than confirm Barthes’ theory, this moment, at first glance, seems to undermine the authority of the writer:

THE MAN. Écrire ce que j’ai voulu. Non, jamais.
J’ai écrit ce que j’ai pu écrire et non pas ce que j’ai voulu.
On ne fait jamais que ce qu’on peut.
Est-ce que l’œuvre, cette addition au monde – entre parenthèses, toutes les grandes lois sont soustractives – est-ce que l’œuvre est autre chose qu’un conglomérat d’à-peu-près, de limites qu’on laisse voguer? (10)

However, Barthes writes that within literature, a writer does battle with language. He does not accredit this to any one writer’s personal agenda, but to the nature of literature itself. And, while Reza’s *homme* seems to see a writer’s works as a collection of approximations and shifting boundaries²⁹ in a negative sense, this is perhaps an exact representation of Barthes’ literature – a constantly changing form, driven by a desire to be original, driven to shift and blur boundaries, existing as a vague and ambiguous ever-changing thing. The man chastises his fellow writers “qui contemplant leur addition au monde avec leurs sourcils froncés [...] qui vont parler dans les émissions littéraires” (10) but turns on himself in a sort of internal dialogue, asking himself if he is so different, concluding that “le sourcil froncé, tu l’as en ce moment” (11). Reza presents a writer’s doubt, a writer’s questioning of his own self-worth and his existence as an original force – and it is this self-reflexive nature, the self-reflexive nature of literature that is heralded by Barthes as a driving force in the constant questioning and reforming of language.

²⁹ See Christopher Hampton’s English translation: *The Unexpected Man* (1995) in *Yasmina Reza: Plays One*. London: Faber and Faber. (2005) p. 78

The woman is the reader. She opens her first monologue contemplating the image associated with the man's book *L'Homme du hasard*, the book she is currently reading. One man looks out of a train window, another man on the tracks looks at the train passing by – one could assume that each man is looking at the other, however, the woman explains that they are unaware of each other, they are aware only of the passage of time. Reza, again, touches on one of her favourite themes: the inability of humans to connect. Later, the woman ponders whether or not to take her book out of her bag and begin reading, knowing that the man is the author. However, she envisions the inevitable disappointment of their connection, the inevitable disappointment of speech: “Il me saluera poliment avec un petit sourire. / Tout échange sera clos, car on ne peut pas parler plus bêtement” (13). Language, words spoken to this man whom she admires, would, of course, fail her.

“J’ai passé ma vie avec vous monsieur Parsky³⁰ [...] Je vous parle en secret. En secret, je vous dis tout ce que je ne vous dirai pas. / Comment vous aborder, vous au soir de votre vie, moi de la mienne, avec les mots qui conviennent à notre âge?” (15/16). As the woman ponders a course of action, she reveals that she is already deeply connected to the man; she explains that she has spent the last few years of her life in his company, speaking to him in secret, telling him all of the things that she will never tell him – a most intimate relationship. However, her distrust of language is clear as she questions rather or not there even exist words appropriate for this situation. While spoken words will most likely betray her, disappoint her, the written word has connected with her and she with it, providing a conduit to the man. But, how to proceed?

As the play progresses, Reza makes both her reader and audience long for communication between the two characters. The man and the woman expose themselves to us (reader and spectator) in new ways, yet they do not utter their confessions out loud to one another. The man is self-absorbed and doesn't notice the woman for a long time – his confessions are made to himself, his confrontations take place in the phantom realm of his own mind. He recalls discussing his newest book with a columnist named Elie and his frustration is clear as he rants about the obsession with

³⁰ The woman names the man “monsieur Parsky” on page 13.

novelty as opposed to originality. In this moment, the man reveals his own self-doubt; while he berates Elie for desiring newness, he exposes himself and his own fears of being irrelevant. Is there anyone out there who can still understand him, who can still appreciate his writing? He seems exhausted, almost like a wearied soldier. He questions himself, asking if he has become bitter, responding with no. If, on the one side, we have the failure of language, then, on the other side, we see the struggle of the writer to provide an adequate opponent for language.

The woman 'tells' the man the story of her friend Georges; she addresses him in her head, creating the illusion of an actual interlocuteur. The story boiled down, is about the destructive force of words. The woman, who was married, had a flirtation with Georges, a somewhat inappropriate connection with this man who was "légèrement amoureux" with her. However, he met a woman and the woman explains to the man that she became Georges' confidante, she had to listen to his happiness. Georges married the woman and had a son, Eric. One day, Georges looked at the woman and confessed that, when he walks by people with Eric in his stroller, he feels sorry for those who don't smile at the child. "Un homme que j'avais connu scandaleux, insolent, réduit en miettes, dissous par la paternité. / Et qui, sans mémoire ni de lui ni de moi, me vantait sa dissolution" (19). Georges' words betrayed him, or rather, they betrayed the woman – his fatherly joy, when given a voice, was utterly repugnant to her.

The man is preoccupied with himself, with his digestion and his daughter's impending marriage to an old man; the woman is preoccupied with the man. She recalls an interview during which the man said he had no opinions, that ideas about the world had no value in the realm of literature. "Quelle hypocrisie. / Dans tout ce que vous avez écrit, je n'ai rien trouvé qui ne soit singulièrement votre pensée sur le monde" (21). The woman sees beyond what the man says or has said, she sees him through the lens of his literature, and therefore, she believes she sees his true form.

The woman becomes more and more occupied with speaking to the man – she attempts different approaches in her own mind, she argues with herself about the shortness of life, but the fear of disappointment keeps her silent. Jaccomard writes, "Il n'y a donc pas de réponse au discours du personnage: cette absence même

d'interlocution crée une tension dramatique, et une attente un peu naïve de dialogue entre les deux personnages [...] les deux personnages ne communiquent pas: 'ils s'expriment'" (86). An actual dialogue, an actual interaction, seems to be the probable conclusion to which this play is leading, however, we – reader, spectator, man, woman – are afraid of words. In this bubble of non-dialogue created by Reza, the man and the woman are able to express themselves freely, without fear or shame; there is a great possibility that, as with Georges, spoken words will ruin that freedom.

After this internal battle, the man finally begins to notice the woman: he wonders what sort of woman doesn't read during a long trip. Later, after musing about his piano playing and desire to play the music of Schumann, the man concludes a monologue wondering about his compartment partner: "Si j'étais peintre, je dessinerais le visage de cette femme. / Un visage troublant. Une froideur...non, une indifférence troublante. / Une femme qui se prête à l'invention" (26). He imagines her indifferent – he imagines her as someone about whom one imagines. In either case, he is able to imagine about her because she hasn't spoken, because he hasn't spoken. There is magic in what remains unspoken, magic in the possibility of what is unsaid. The desire to communicate overwhelms the two, however. Language is a failed system, according to Barthes, but it is one within which human beings must operate. The man, after pondering the woman's nationality, decides that he must know: he asks if he can open the window, and she responds, of course, it's hot. The woman cannot seem to make up her mind about whether or not to pursue a conversation. "Pourquoi prendre le risque, si par malheur vous ne me plaissez pas, de ne plus rien aimer de vous? / On me répète que l'œuvre et l'homme ne sont pas intimement liés. / Comment est-ce possible?" (29). The book, the man's written work, is the bridge – the woman knows that at some point, she must speak, because she is so enamoured of the man, *because* of his literature.

THE WOMAN. C'est moi. Moi qui vous ai aimé, qui vous ai colorié à ma guise, moi qui ai contemplé chaque chose sous votre houlette incessante, je vous effacerai, je vous emporterai dans ma fin et rien ne restera de vous et de rien. (32)

The relationship that the woman has with the man is complex – his writing has shaped her, and by extension, he has shaped her. Theirs is a relationship that exists in

spite of language, that exists because of the absence of language, founded completely in the written word. And yet, in the end, the woman pulls out her copy of *L'Homme du hasard* and the two break their silence. At first, the man questions her about the book as a third party, but eventually, it becomes clear that she knows his identity. The play ends on an optimistic note, an open note, wherein the woman, Martha, reveals that she does in fact understand the man. She recites details from his books, moments that touched her, moments of tenderness with which she connected. She speaks to him, a long speech, telling him that he has no right to be bitter, telling him that in another life, she would've been happy to go adventuring with him. The play ends with his laugh; Reza leaves this moment open-ended, as a laugh can be interpreted in many ways. Some might interpret this laugh as mocking, or as pessimistic and dry (in performance, it would depend on how the laugh is played). As I reader, I interpreted this laugh as jovial, as connective; in my head, I heard the man laugh from his belly, almost in relief.

This moment in Reza's oeuvre seems to contradict the theory of language as fascist, as something against which we are constantly pitted. In this moment, the woman is able to speak to the man, to reach him in some way as evidenced by his laughter – she does not lose her voice as she speaks. However, the dialogue between Reza's man and woman is only made possible because of the man's writing. His books, published, circulated, available for purchase by the masses, touched the woman on a personal note. It is the literature that drew the woman in, it is the literature through which the man expresses himself, through which he touches and reaches out. The ending seems to suggest another level to Barthes' theorizing: language, when bolstered by literature, may indeed be successful.

* * *

After *L'Homme du hasard*, Reza took a break from the theatre, turning her attention and skill to the world of novels, for a time. Amanda Giguere explains that *L'Homme*, which “had already blurred the line between theater and literature, and had revealed Reza's burgeoning interest in novels,” (87) seemed to announce this turn toward literature. In 1997, Reza published *Hammerklavier*, a novel about her late father's death, and in 1999, she published *Desolation*, which was written from the point of view

of an old and bitter man. “*Desolation* was written in the form of a long soliloquy, and was reminiscent of Parsky’s lengthy monologues in *The Unexpected Man*,” writes Giguere (87). Written prior to *Hammerklavier*, *Le pique-nique de Lulu Kretz* was originally a written dialogue, transformed for film in 2000³¹ – Hélène Jaccomard writes that *Lulu Kretz* has been ignored by certain previous scholars because it was not written for the stage, citing this as a failure³², yet for the purposes of this analysis – looking at Reza’s treatment of language both on the page and in performance – I will do as Amanda Giguere did, focusing solely on Reza’s eight (to date) plays written for the stage. The structures of these three intermediary works make evident the fact that Reza never fully abandoned her theatrical tendencies, and on November 7, 2000, *Trois versions de la vie* premiered at Théâtre Antoine in Paris. The play opened in Vienna, Athens and London around the same time, and made its way to the stage in New York three years later. The Paris production was directed by Patrice Kerbrat, who had worked on Reza’s first three plays, and saw Reza herself step onto the stage in the roll of Inès. All citations from *Trois versions de la vie* are taken from the Albin Michel edition published in 2000.

The play follows the unraveling of a fairly mundane situation – banality appears to be where Reza is most comfortable – as two couples, Henri and Sonia and Hubert and Inès Finidori, meet for a dinner party. The ‘conflict’ or conflicts arise due to the fact that Hubert and Inès arrive at Henri and Sonia’s home a day early; the latter two are wholly unprepared: Sonia is in her bathrobe and they only have snacks to offer their guests. Henri and Hubert are both scientists, with Hubert certainly being the more successful man, while Henri is struggling to publish his first paper in three years. Both couples are thrown off balance by the date mix up, as well as the offstage presence of Henri and Sonia’s child, and Reza simply follows her characters as they interact on shaky ground. Or so it would seem at first glance. As the play’s title suggests, Reza brings a new level of experimentation to *Trois versions de la vie* – she actually presents the same situation three times, she presents her reader and audience with three alternate realities: the banal and the extraordinary intertwined. In each version, there are

³¹ Jaccomard, H. p. 135-136.

³² “Les critiques littéraires comme El Gharbi et Giguere n’incluent pas *Le pique-nique de Lulu Kretz* dans l’œuvre théâtrale de Reza car ils limitent leur recherche aux textes représentés sur scène. Pourtant, *Le pique-nique de Lulu Kretz* mérite d’être étudié...” (Jaccomard, 136).

slight variations in the characters' personalities and comportments; it is left to the reader and spectator to decide which, if any, is the truest or best version of reality. The transitions from one version to the next are abrupt in that they take place without any ado, reminiscent of Harold Ramis' 90's film, *Groundhog Day*, in which Bill Murray is trapped in one day, which restarts again and again.

In *Trois versions de la vie*, Reza does away with the asides, soliloquies and internal monologues that characterised "*Art*" and *L'Homme du hasard* – she no longer offers her audience a window into the minds of her characters, rather, she utilizes monologue in a conversational setting, as a speech from one character to another. With *L'Homme*, Reza experimented structurally, sliding from one internal perspective to another, telling a story from two points of view – in *Trois versions*, she takes things further, presenting three realities, distancing herself from traditional theatrical presentation; Reza's presentation of language exists within this extraordinary framework. Barthes explained that literature always yearns to represent the real, and always fails, yet it is this goal, this drive to achieve the impossible, which causes literature to "shift ground"³³. Literature must constantly innovate and transform itself in an attempt to reach the summit of reality – in *Trois versions*, Reza resists the theatrical tendency (like the literary tendency) to capture reality, by presenting three realities and thereby defying the race toward realism. It is, perhaps, precisely this type of innovation of which Barthes speaks as battling against the forces of power innate in the system of language – innovation that seems to fly in the face of its own goal. Hélène Jaccomard writes, "[...] la forme de *Trois versions de la vie* implique une contestation du réalisme au théâtre, ou plus précisément, un nouveau réalisme à la lumière de la théorie des quanta" (161). In opening the parameters of the universe, in allowing for alternate realities, Reza creates her own reality; within this reality, it's as if language loses its power, as her characters are given three chances to speak, to represent themselves – the fluidity of reality means that words once uttered are not absolute, and missed opportunities for speech are not necessarily missed at all.

³³ Barthes, trans. by Richard Howard. p. 468.

In version one, Henri is a fairly weak, cowardly, grovelling individual, and his wife Sonia is the more dominating presence. This dynamic is evidenced by the couple's opening interactions with their son, who wants a cookie at bedtime: Henri's instinct is to appease, while Sonia's is to say no – this disagreement escalates into an actual physical altercation, throwing domestic peace out the window as Hubert and Inès arrive. Hubert is self-assured and superior, while his partner Inès is “la force faible des quatre personnages” (Jacomard, 165) preoccupied with a run in her pantyhose as she and Hubert approach Henri and Sonia's residence.

Interestingly, it is Inès who has two monologues in version one: the first opens the interaction between the two couples, and the second is delivered after this interaction has disintegrated almost completely. The first speech is clearly made in an attempt to establish common ground between the two couples – Inès discusses the importance of bedtime rituals in her house, having the kids in bed with brushed teeth by 8:30 (no food at all allowed afterward). She also refers to Hubert's tendency to get the kids riled up at night, despite agreeing with her parenting guidelines. This moment is somewhat uncomfortable, as if Inès has revealed a bit too much, as if she's clumsily shown her hand and already embarrassed herself and her husband. “Hubert c'est curieux, il est d'accord avec les repères éducatifs, mais d'un autre côté il va les exciter en entamant une partie de foot avec eux, dans la chambre, à huit heures du soir” (26). Here, language betrays Inès; in her attempt to connect through words, she makes herself vulnerable to attack from her husband and to judgement from her companions. Hubert's frustration is made clear when he responds “Une fois. Une fois, j'ai joué au foot!” Her second monologue comes after things between the two couples, and within the two couples, have escalated: the alcohol has been flowing, Hubert tells Henri that Mexican scientists have just published a paper on the same topic as the paper he is hoping to publish, and in the midst of it all, the child has continued to interrupt the evening, inciting tension between Sonia and Henri, as well as Inès, as she attempts to dole out parenting advice. In this second monologue, Inès has lost her handle on the rules of good behaviour – the words simply spill out of her. Hubert has betrayed her in pointing out the run in her pantyhose and she falls apart, revealing that she opted to ignore the run, as Sonia was embarrassed at having to receive Hubert and herself a day early:

INÈS. [...] j'ai opté pour faire comme si de rien n'était, une attitude aristocratique qui m'a coûté car vous ne le savez naturellement pas mais je suis une femme plutôt maniaque et mon mari au lieu de me soutenir dans cette voie, au lieu de prendre soin de ma dignité, ne trouve rien de mieux à faire que de m'agresser en pleine conversation, de me dire que ce collant filé est impossible et que je lui gâche sa soirée... (47/48)

After exposing herself and her husband, Hubert makes a crack about her over-consumption of the Sancerre, effectively reducing her words to the foolish ramblings of a drunkard. Inès' honesty betrays her – her outburst defies the rules of good society, exposing her level of intoxication. Despite their probable truthfulness, her words fall empty. The first version ends with the flustered departure of Hubert and Inès, the former tells Henri that he lacks a certain size, the latter exclaims that this is the worst evening she has ever spent. Henri and Sonia are left alone. Language seems to defeat both couples in this first version, but Reza provides her characters with two more opportunities to attempt to communicate.

In version two, Sonia and Henri argue about whether or not their son can have a cookie after brushing his teeth, but the argument is calmer, more of a discussion, in fact; when the Finidoris arrive, it is Henri who tells Sonia she doesn't have time to change out of her bathrobe (as opposed to Sonia refusing to change in version one). Jaccopard describes this technique of Reza's "qui consiste à faire dire la même chose à des personnages différents, pour différentes raisons, avec des conséquences différentes" (166). Reza plays a game with language throughout *Trois versions*, changing the source from which words come, testing their effect. In this way, she disrupts language within her reality, inserting fluidity into a rigid system, challenging audience expectations.

Inès again opens the couples' interactions with a speech – this time, it's gossip. The subject of her monologue is completely different, and yet the effect is somewhat similar; she gossips about a mutual friend, Serge, and his drunken clown of a wife, but, due to the previous version, the audience and reader cannot help but mentally associate Inès with this poor lush of a woman. Language exposes her in this reality as superficial, but in the context of the previous reality, it exposes her as lacking awareness, and as

something of a hypocrite as well. In version two, Henri has more backbone, and after Hubert tells him about the competing paper, he demands a change of subject. Hubert then begins his own speech, musing about a conference he attended in Finland where he brushed shoulders with great minds and listened to awesome theories, saying that the only thing that left an imprint on him was a walk along the grey sea. He attempts to soothe Henri in discussing the relative significance (or insignificance) of things, but there is something superior in the act, something off-putting, for Henri at least.

What follows a few pages later is a back and forth of rather long dialogic responses, beginning with Henri's self-exposure and subsequent attack of Hubert – he addresses the 'Finidorian tone' explaining that this submissive tone of voice is one he used to use with Hubert, when he thought that Hubert was in a position to help him, before he arrived at Henri's house with destructive news and proceeded to boast about the futility of success. Hubert responds in kind, accusing Henri of putting him in a position of powerlessness, of feigning friendship. Henri attacks Hubert's fashion choices, mocking his formidableness in the face of his own insignificance. Each of these attacks feels childish – each man seems to lose himself to the situation, saying much and saying little, getting worked up and lashing out with words, accomplishing nothing.

It is at this moment that Inès chimes in, exposing herself as intoxicated, exposing her wreckage of a marriage, and revealing her thoughts on man and his place in the universe.

INÈS. Que serait l'univers sans nous? Un endroit d'un morne, d'un noir, sans un gramme de poésie. C'est nous qui l'avons nommé, c'est nous, les hommes, qui avons mis dans ce dédale, des trous, des lumières mortes, l'infini, l'éternité, des choses que personne ne voit, c'est nous qui l'avons rendu vertigineux. Nous ne sommes pas peu de chose, notre temps est insignifiant mais nous nous ne sommes pas peu de chose..." (81/82)

There is optimism in the midst of conflict; there is purpose in Inès words and substance behind them. And yet, after a brief silence, they are lost, as Sonia returns the conversation "to earth," to the current conflict. The second version ends with the departure of Hubert and Inès, the latter fearful of what will take place in the car – Henri

curses the two of them and Hubert (who asked Sonia to lunch earlier in the scene) tells her that he'll see her Monday. Henri and Sonia are left alone. Language as a force of disconnection seems to have won round two as well, leaving both couples exposed and in shambles.

Version three opens with both couples together already – Sonia is wearing her bathrobe and it is Hubert who monologues. His speech could be said to tie directly into Barthes' theory, as he is discussing the "théorie de tout": "Comment saisir le monde *tel qu'il est*? Comment abolir l'écart entre réel et représentation, l'écart entre objet et mot [...] comment, en gros, penser le monde sans être là pour penser?" (89/90). Language presents a similar problem: how does one critique and fix a system when one must operate within that system to do so? How does one conceptualize and challenge systems of power when the tool with which one must challenge power actually houses power? For Barthes, as well as for Reza, the answer exists in the text.

In this version, Sonia and Henri are much more relaxed about their child, and the affair between Hubert and Sonia is presented without any subtlety – when Inès and Henri go to the child's room, Hubert paws at Sonia, praises her, and reveals his own admiration for Henri's calmness in the face of the news he brought (of the competing paper). In this version, each character seems more open, more relaxed. In the middle of this scene, Henri receives a call from a fellow researcher (presumably one of the authors of the competing paper). During this one-sided conversation, it becomes clear that the subject of Henri's paper differs substantially from the subject of the competing paper – a jovial moment. And yet, melancholy descends on the dinner party, despite the good news.

Inès delivers a short monologue mourning the lack of permanence in life, pondering the vastness of things. This monologue is punctuated by ellipses as she tries to find the right words to capture her own incomprehension, her own feelings of insignificance. Yet, as with the *théorie de tout*, words do not provide solace for Inès, because they are inadequate – she is obliged to attempt to communicate her thoughts on the incomprehensibility of the universe in an inadequate system. In the end, she trails off, turning to Henri: "[...] Faites-moi rêver vous qui vivez haut..." (103). The melancholy

mood persists amongst the guests, prompting Sonia to sum up her husband's misery in an articulate speech. She explains that Henri wants everything and nothing, that he slides from euphoria to melancholy and then back to euphoria³⁴ finally saying, "[...] les gens sont plus ou moins bien préparés à la vie..." (105). In this instance, instead of searching for words like Inès, Sonia speaks confidently, however, her words throw into stark clarity the fact that the system of language cannot adequately capture the reason behind Henri's ennui. Sonia uses juxtaposition to describe her husband – he is both this and this thing's opposite – but this juxtaposition effectively nullifies itself. We understand her because we must, because this system is the only one that we know. Reza presents us with both of these monologues – one grasping for words, one full-voiced yet insufficient, both of which leave us dissatisfied – in order to showcase, yet again, the emptiness of language. Reza undermines language in rendering it incommunicable, she shines a light on its flaws and its inability to connect her characters. The third version ends with a polite departure, no hullabaloo. Again, Sonia and Henri find themselves alone. Sonia asks if the child is asleep, Henri responds that he believes so. And that is that.

Three versions of life, three opportunities for speech, for connection, three realities functioning as one new reality – this is what Yasmina Reza presents to us in *Trois versions de la vie*. While Reza's innovation provides her four characters with multiple chances to find their own voices, language still consistently presents itself as a problem for each. It is possible that Reza intentionally highlights language as an obstacle for her characters in order to expose the system of language as flawed, in order to draw the public's attention to its inadequacies. It is also possible, however, that Reza is attempting to work around language, to evolve from simply combatting language to creating new pathways by which language can function. In writing a play with three realities, Reza tries to provide her characters with an opportunity to find the right words, to connect. Her characters cannot manage the task, but perhaps this is because Reza, herself, cannot manage the task quite yet.

³⁴ See Christopher Hampton's English translation: *Life x 3* (2000) in *Yasmina Reza: Plays One*. London: Faber and Faber. (2005) p. 267.

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At the request of Luc Bondy, the Swiss director who worked on the Vienna production of *Trois versions de la vie*, Reza wrote *Une pièce espagnole*, which premiered at Théâtre de la Madeleine in Paris in 2004. This play, written in three months, is comprised of 28 scenes, and its structure is arguably the most complicated in Reza's oeuvre. In *Trois versions de la vie*, Reza presents her reader and audience with three alternate versions of reality, however, in *Une pièce espagnole*, she presents a layered reality, playing with *mise en abyme* in triplicate. The audience is watching a play within a play within a play; in her article "L'art de la comédie à l'âge post-dramatique: Le théâtre de Yasmina Reza", Andrea Grewe compares the play's architecture to the manner in which Russian dolls fit one inside the other (23/24). On one level, Reza presents a Spanish play (from which the piece gets its title), a Chekhovian family drama featuring five characters: Pilar, the mother and her new lover Fernan, her daughters Nuria and Aurelia and the latter's husband, Mariano. Reza adds a second level, however, wherein the five actors who play the characters in the Spanish play speak to varying invisible listeners in imaginary interviews or confessions in "un acte de distanciation qui détruit l'illusion mimétique" (Grewe, 24). The actors break out regularly, commenting on their characters, on being actors, on the play's director, on the theatre in general, etc. – these breaks disrupt the theatrical illusion. Reza does not seem satisfied with two levels of reality, however, so she adds a third layer: Aurelia is a struggling actress in the Spanish play, and three times, we see her reading lines for a "pièce bulgare" with her husband. The *pièce bulgare* is about a piano teacher and her older male student, whom she loves.

Scholars have stated that the structure of *Une pièce espagnole* may have made it difficult for audiences to comprehend and follow, but it seems as if this was Reza's intention. "*Les passages entre la pièce espagnole et les apartés des acteurs doivent se faire sans rupture; il faut jouer 'legato' comme on dit en musique,*" indicates Reza in the opening stage directions. When American playwright, David Ives, was translating *Une pièce espagnole* into English, he wanted to clarify the characters' identities in an opening

speech, however, Reza refused³⁵. “With Reza [...] much of her style is characterized by a willingness to challenge audiences [...] Reza seems to want to give her plays room to breathe, and to avoid crowding them with facts” (Giguere, 108/109). And so, the three realities bleed together, demanding that reader and audience member alike focus on each transition in order to place themselves within one layer of reality or another.

As for the play’s subject matter – a sort of in-depth look at the plight of the actor – Hélène Jaccomard cites an unenthused David Finkle (2007), who ponders why on earth playwrights and actors believe that anyone else would be interested in “the process of putting on a play” (172). To Mr. Finkle, I would say that Reza’s goal with *Une pièce espagnole* was not to ruminate solely on the theatre, but rather to highlight the role of performance in life, in general. Grewe explains that the actor monologues undermine the traditional action of the play (the family drama), which would normally be considered ‘reality’, relegating it to “pur jeu” and elevating the actor monologues to “la seule ‘vraie réalité’.” “Il en résulte que la ‘condition de l’acteur’, l’être acteur’ s’impose comme la condition humaine même. La ‘vie’ devient ‘du théâtre’ ou, autrement dit, le théâtre est la vie” (Grewe, 26). As with *Trois versions*, Reza seems to abandon the theatrical pursuit for reality in favour of her own splintered creation.

As aforementioned, *Une pièce espagnole* features 28 scenes. Scenes one, three, five, seven, nine, 11, 12, 14, 16, 19, 22, 25 and 27 (13 of 28) are actor monologues, confessions, or interviews. Scenes two, four, six, eight, 13, 15, 17, 18, 21, 23, 24 and 26 (12 of 28) follow the Spanish play. And, finally, scenes 10, 20 and 28 feature the Bulgarian play – technically, these scenes exist within the Spanish play, yet the Bulgarian play is the focal point. Every actor-focused scene, every scene featuring the Bulgarian play, and most scenes within the Spanish play utilize monologue – as there is so much to analyse, I will look at the monologic patterns in their entirety as they relate to Barthes’ theories, rather than at the individual speeches as I have done with Reza’s other works.

³⁵ Giguere, A. p. 108

The trifocal lens provided by Reza in this play is perhaps the most significant influencer on how to examine her use of language. Because the 'reality' of the play is underlined as fiction, the audience is forced to acknowledge the fact of performance; the spoken words within the Spanish play are therefore highlighted as performed speech. Within the Spanish play, Aurelia and Mariano have a rather awful marriage – he is a “mou et sans moralité” (25) and she is unhappy with her lack of professional success. Nuria is a successful film star, yet she is plagued by self-doubt, particularly surrounding which dress to wear to an upcoming awards show; the sibling rivalry between Nuria and Aurelia is ever-present, fuelled by jealousy. Pilar and Fernan have recently found each other, but Pilar is deeply saddened by her daughters' lack of consideration for her, and their lack of appreciation for tradition, family and community. Grewe writes that, as the play progresses, “les conventions et les règles qui régissent normalement la vie en société – la politesse, le respect, l'autorité – tout est alors envahi par le torrent des émotions incontrôlables [...]” (28). The emotional outbursts are reflected in monologue throughout the play: Aurelia's tirade about her sisters in scene four and her attack on Nuria's dresses in scene 15, Nuria's desperate quandary about her looks in scene 18, Pilar's lament that her daughters don't consider her in scene 21, Mariano's monologue in scene 23 explaining his need for alcohol, Nuria's monologue in scene 24 describing her family's inability to gather together and Fernan's response in the same scene, Aurelia's monologue about her desperate personal plight and the inevitability of time in scene 24, and Pilar's monologue in the 26th scene, despairing over her daughters' dismissal of tradition. This family drama reflects real life – most can relate to sibling rivalry, failing marriages and ungrateful children, *and yet* it is clearly a performed version of life. Each speech is a performed speech, which begs the question, what speech isn't performed speech? If, as Reza seems to suggest, all speech is performance, how can it ever be effective – how can we ever have veritable communication?

The actor monologues, which function in *Une pièce espagnole* as the closest thing to 'reality', are delivered directly to the audience. In the text, some are designated as *interview(s) imaginaire(s)* or *confession(s) imaginaire(s)* or *dialogue(s) imaginaire(s)* or *monologue*. Aside from Mariano's monologue in scene 27, which is the only actor monologue categorized as monologue, these monologues implicate an invisible listener: the interviewer, the receiver of the confession and the counterpart in dialogue. These

moments are fairly stark and straight-forward, however, the actors reveal very little about themselves or their own desires, rather they focus on the technicalities of the theatre: their characters, their costumes, their relationships with the director. Several times, different actors reveal their beliefs that real life, their reality, is inferior to art, colouring it as sad, dark, and uneventful³⁶. The actors are preoccupied with the story; more often than not, their speeches revolve around the fiction of the Spanish play, revealing nothing about themselves, rendering their speaking almost completely ineffective. The yearning for life in unreality undermines their individual identities, which undermines their words – in fact, the actors are never named, but identified only by the characters they play.

ACTRICE [qui joue Nuria]. [...] Je n'aime pas les interviews.
J'en donnais des milliers, autrefois, devant personne,
quand je rêvais d'être quelqu'un.
Je n'aime plus les vrais.
D'ailleurs le vrai est moins intéressant, d'une manière
générale. (29)

Reza emphasizes the Spanish play within *Une pièce espagnole* while simultaneously satirizing it through the same actor monologues that idolize it. In this topsy turvy world, one must question language in every instance: it's inauthenticity in the Spanish play, and it's insignificance in the actor monologues. In pointing a finger at the performance of language in what should be seen as 'life' (the Spanish play) and at the *desire* to perform language (the monologues), Reza demands that her reader and her audience question the reality of language itself.

The play's structure also provides a commentary on language, if one looks closely. Within the Spanish play, chaos reigns, as order gives way to emotion. However, Reza has structured *Une pièce espagnole* in an almost mathematical way: the Spanish play follows a traditional three-tiered pattern of "exposition, nœud et dénouement" (Grewe, 25) with scenes one through 10 as expositional, scenes 11 through 24 as nœud and the final scenes as denouement. Interspersed equally with the first expositional scenes are actor monologues – the first reading of the pièce bulgare occurs in scene 10,

³⁶ Giguere, A. p. 109

wrapping up the exposition. The second Bulgarian play reading is smack dab in the middle of the noeud, scene 20, and the final scene incorporating the pièce bulgare is the final scene of the play (scene 28). It is clear that there is a framework to this piece. This textual rigidity is contrasted with the lack of structure in life, portrayed in the Spanish play, and lamented by the actors themselves. The actress who plays Pilar delivers a confession in scene 16 about the fact that her director doesn't want her to ask questions such as "je fais quoi à ce moment-là?" She says, "[...] dans la vie aussi on ne sait pas toujours comment il faut vivre, / où il faut se mettre, / s'il faut regarder bien en face, / ou se tenir de façon provisoire et incertaine, / dans la vie aussi il n'est pas facile de laisser les choses venir à soi, / sans se défendre, / par avance, / d'un faux pas" (70/71). Within the text of *Une pièce espagnole*, Reza's characters find respite from the uncertainty of life, from the self-doubt imbedded in speaking – they are provided with a framework, boundaries which guide their speech, constrain their speech and give their words purpose. In providing a structure outside of the unforgiving structure of language – a rigid system that constrains speech, yet doesn't guide speech, that obliges speech even when one doesn't know what to say – Reza is able to surmount the failures of language. She is able to manipulate language within the written text; she creates her own rules, her own guidelines with which her characters' words must comply.

Music in *Une pièce espagnole*, particularly its representation in the pièce bulgare, is another factor that challenges the overarching system of language. Reza seems to present music as the purest form of communication, as an alternative to language and as superior to language. In the midst of the chaos of 'life' dominated by emotions, communicated through words, and life dominated by yearning for fiction, communicated through words, Reza presents a play about music. In this play, music is what brings two lovers together, it is portrayed as the most powerful conduit of meaning. Aurelia, as her character in the pièce bulgare speaks to her student in scene 20 about how he should approach a piece of music by Mendelssohn.

AURELIA. Rien de sentimental, monsieur Kis. Jamais. Ne rien laisser traîner de sentimental dans le jeu et dans la sonorité [...] La passion va de pair avec la pureté et la retenue [...] Jouez sans créer d'événements autres que la musique. Exactitude et authenticité. (82)

Music is the most legitimate, the most pure; it needs no additional emotion because the emotion, the passion is in the restraint.

In keeping with the rest of her canon, *Une pièce espagnole* plays with language, in this case by presenting language within a layered reality, and demanding that the reader and spectator question the validity and effectiveness of words. Speech is performed in a story that is recognizable, but outside commentary removes us from the story, requiring that we interrogate the words within the Spanish play. Reza, however, emphasizes the superiority of art to 'reality', undermining language in real life, and finally, she presents music as a superior alternative to the spoken word.

In *L'Homme*, *Trois versions*, and *Une pièce espagnole*, Reza employs monologue within experimental structures; she leaves behind the more traditional theatricality that characterized her first three plays (the Chekhovian-style of *Conversations* and *Traversée* and the asides, inner monologues and soliloquies of "Art") choosing new tactics instead. This experimentation suggests a development in Reza's interrogation of language – in her first three plays, she highlighted the disconnective force of language, yet in her following three plays, she attempts to circumvent this disconnection. In *L'Homme*, she provides a connective conduit for her characters in the man's literature; in *Trois versions*, she provides her characters with three alternate realities, allowing them to try to connect through language under varied circumstances; and in *Une pièce espagnole*, Reza shines a spotlight on the performance of all language, attempting to rethink the entire system. In highlighting the play(s) within her play and exposing 'reality' as performance, she asks us to examine the constructed nature of language both inside and outside of the theatre. The prevalence of performance begs the question, what exists beyond the constructed realm of language, of "discours rationnel"? With her next play, Reza attempts to unearth the beauty (or chaos) that lies beyond.

Chapter 5.

Carnage

In 2005, Reza began writing a new play, however, it wasn't until German director Jürgen Gosch reached out to her, expressing his interest in directing one of her plays, that she was able to finish *Le Dieu du carnage*. The play premiered in 2006 in German, in Zurich, under Gosch's direction, as *Der Gott des Gemetzels*; Reza was quite pleased with the production³⁷, which went on to win the Nestoy Theater Prize for best German-language production³⁸. The play was widely popular with German audiences, but it wasn't until 2008 that the *Le Dieu du carnage* was finally performed in its original French in Paris at Théâtre Antoine, under Reza's own direction. It was the London production a few months later in 2008, however, that propelled the play to "Art"-level heights – the cast featured several British stars, namely Ralph Fiennes, a notable production and design team under the direction of Matthew Warchus, and a translation by Reza's preferred translator, Christopher Hampton. *Le Dieu du carnage* (*The God of carnage*) made its Broadway debut in the spring of 2009 with an all-star cast including James Gandolfini, Marcia Gay Harden, Hope Davis and Jeff Daniels – all film and television stars – under Warchus' direction once again. In the midst of an economic downturn, *God of carnage* held strong, bringing in \$1 million weekly on a consistent basis, and the *New York Times* named Reza a "Face to Watch" in their Spring Theater Special³⁹. The play was nominated for six Tony awards: Best Play, Best Director (Matthew Warchus), along with nominations for each actor – it won three of the six, taking Best Play, Best Director and Best Leading Actress in a Play (Marcia Gay Harden). Reza was, once again, a household name.

³⁷ Leclère, Marie-Françoise. "Une dimanche avec Yasmina Reza" *Le Point*. 11 January 2007. Web. 14 April 2015.

³⁸ Giguere, A. p. 131

³⁹ Giguere, A. p. 143

Le Dieu du carnage resembles *Trois versions de la vie* at the outset: the reader and audience find themselves confined to a household, observing two couples as they munch on clafoutis (a French desert) and drink coffee (and eventually rum); Reza abandons the multiple versions of reality that characterized *Trois versions*, however, utilizing a linear structure in *Dieu du carnage*. The two couples, Véronique and Michel Houllié and Annette and Alain Reille, come together to discuss a conflict between their two 11-year-old sons, Ferdinand Reille and Bruno Houllié. The former hit the latter in the face with a stick in the park, knocking out two teeth. Reza told *Le Point* that she got the idea for the story from her son: “Un de ses copains en avait frappé un autre avec un bâton et lui avait cassé une dent. Moi, j'en ai mis deux, c'est la seule modification! Sur le coup, cela ne m'avait pas inspirée, mais peu de temps après j'ai croisé par hasard la mère de la victime, qui m'a dit : « Vous vous rendez compte, les parents ne m'ont pas appelée ! » Là, j'ai pensé qu'il y avait une matière formidable”⁴⁰. The couples meet with good intentions, hoping to resolve the situation between their boys in a calm and polite manner, but the situation escalates to a point of preposterousness, as politesse is abandoned for savagery.

Amanda Giguere defines several terms in her analysis of *Le Dieu du carnage*, including civilization, language and savage – she posits that language, the foundation of civilization, crumbles in *Carnage*.

“*The God of Carnage* is constructed as a collapse of *civilization*. [...] Civilization is the complex system(s) through which humans achieve positive change. It is composed of several systems [...] but the most crucial aspect of civilization is *language*. Language, a system of verbal communication, is a fixed set of rules through which humans make knowledge claims, and eventually, make political progress. [...] *savagery* appears throughout *Carnage* in opposition to civilization. [...] A savage [...] does not use language to achieve positive change, but as a weapon, and in self-defense.” (118/119)

Giguere writes that language fails in *Dieu du carnage*, citing examples such as the deterioration of the characters' vocabulary, the use of words as weapons, and

⁴⁰ Leclère, M-F

replacement of speech with silence⁴¹ – she explains that, as the play begins, the two couples hope to remedy the violent, savage act which took place between their two sons with words, with language. For Giguere, the failure of language is *introduced* in *Carnage*: “Reza has turned on her very building blocks – the words she uses to construct her plays – and what appears in *Carnage* is a breach of language” (121). My analysis, however, has focused on the inadequacy of language as demonstrated throughout Reza’s canon; Giguere highlights the collapse of language as opposed to the innate weakness of language as a broken tool, a broken system. Instead, Reza demonstrates the failure of language in *Carnage* in tandem with the rest of her canon. Barthes suggests that because language exists, humanity must operate within it – in this context, the two couples have no choice but to come together and attempt to operate within this dictatorial system. As the play progresses, Reza smashes this system to bits, abandoning the more subtle methods of subversion seen in her previous plays – it is this blatant destruction of language that Giguere notices. If, in *Une pièce espagnole*, Reza begins to dismantle the construction of language (as always being performed), in *Le Dieu du carnage*, she goes after that which lies outside – beautiful or otherwise – with a vehemence not seen in her previous works. With this play, Reza digs into the nitty gritty, she gets her hands dirty in pursuit of the irrational, of the great and terrible.

Reza uses ‘monologue’ in a much subtler way in *Carnage*, in fact, she doesn’t utilize traditional monologue at all: the asides, soliloquies and inner monologues seen throughout her earlier pieces are nowhere to be found in this play. Rather, Reza inserts longer speeches or longer responses into her dialogue. These monologic moments expose the characters in *Dieu du carnage* – they reveal themselves and their true savage natures as they speak; language within these ‘monologues’ works as an isolating force (as we have seen in Reza’s previous works) rather than as a connective, positive force. As Giguere mentioned, Reza also employs silence in this play in an extremely intentional way; silence can be said to directly contrast monologue, yet, as Reza’s monologues often expose language as a flawed system, silence also exposes language for all that it is unable to say. The cellphone plays a role in monologic moments throughout *Dieu du carnage* – Alain spends a great deal of time speaking to colleagues,

⁴¹ Giguere, A. p. 119

yet the reader and audience are only privy to his side of the conversation, creating a sort of dialogic monologue. Throughout this chapter, I will examine a number of ‘monologues’ from *Le Dieu du carnage* and attempt to show Reza’s intentional dismantling of language as undermining the overarching system of language. As the play progresses, the characters regress to a child-like, almost animal-like state – their words tear down rather than build and they resort to physical acts of violence and destruction. While the theme of disconnection is still present – the characters cannot seem to reach one another, they cannot understand each other – Reza exposes the entirety of language as a farce, as inadequate on every level.

* * *

VÉRONIQUE. Donc notre déclaration...Vous ferez la vôtre de votre côté... « Le 3 novembre, à dix-sept heures trente, au square de l’Aspirant-Dunant, à la suite d’une altercation verbale, Ferdinand Reille, onze ans, armé d’un bâton, a frappé au visage notre fils Bruno Houillé. Les conséquences de cet acte sont, outre la tuméfaction de la lèvre supérieure, une brisure des deux incisives, avec atteinte du nerf de l’incisive droite. »

ALAIN. Armé ? (9/10)

The play begins with the above speech from Véronique: she reads a statement to the Reilles, prepared by herself (and presumably her husband) regarding the incident. The couples are seated across from each other in the Houillé’s living room. This monologue is filtered through a sheet of paper – it is not a speech off the cuff, rather it suggests the formality of a written document, and is worded as such. This written document, delivered to Reza’s reader and audience as a speech, functions on many levels: it exists within Reza’s written text, as a part of the play in its entirety; therefore, it is a text within a text, as Véronique is the presumed author of the speech within Reza’s play-world; it is also a text performed as speech in the sense that Véronique reads it aloud to her husband and the Reilles, attempting to disguise her own bias with objective language; this performance exists within the overarching performance of the play, as the actress playing Véronique performs her character as her character reads (and performs)

the text; finally, the words reflect legal language, imitating – performing – a text meant for the objective, fact-based world of the courtroom; Véronique’s speech attempts to recall the credibility of a court. Barthes’ idea of ‘literature’ is expanded here, as Reza incorporates onion-like layers into the idea of a written document; Véronique’s opening speech is a written text, within a written text and a performance within a performance. Reza opens *Dieu du carnage* with a character who attempts to control language in utilizing a written document, however, as the text becomes a speech, spoken aloud, its performative elements are exposed. The phrases are articulate and concise, detailing the facts of the incident; the Houillés are attempting to objectively state the details of what happened. Véronique tries to circumvent the instability of language, however, her text is a façade, a performance (she is not a lawyer and she is not unbiased) and as she speaks, she exposes herself. There are several holes in this ‘objective’ statement. Firstly, the phrasing of the last sentence seems to pile on the physical consequences of the act, rather than simply list them. Véronique might’ve said “Les conséquences de cet acte incluent la tuméfaction...une brisure...avec atteinte...” but instead, she seems to imply that, on top of the physical damage to the boy’s face, there is *even* more damage. Less subtle is the use of the word “armé” when describing Ferdinand – Alain cannot stomach the use of this word regarding his 11-year-old son and immediately questions its necessity. Giguere writes, “In this moment, Reza inserts a tiny rupture in the fabric of the play – words are unreliable from the start, and the audience is subtly asked to reevaluate the relationship between language and truth” (125). Reza seems to demand that her reader and audience look at each word closely from the get-go – the simple question, “Armé?” highlights the stereotypes and bias embedded within language, which often slip by unnoticed, yet influence the ways in which we experience things. Later, as each character begins to lose control, Véronique returns to the word, saying, “Le mot ‘armé’ ne convenait pas, nous l’avons changé. Cependant, si on s’en tient à la stricte définition du mot, son usage n’est pas abusif” (69). And herein lies an astronomical flaw in the system of language: a word can be utilized correctly, adhering strictly to its own definition, and yet, because of the power housed within language⁴², the word becomes

⁴² Barthes stated, “We do not see the power which is in speech because we forget that all speech is a classification, and that all classifications are oppressive.” (*A Barthes Reader*, 460) The word “armé” classifies the boy’s action, asserting its own power of definition.

something outside of itself, something more or less. While Véronique defends the word “armé” the connotation behind the word causes a knee-jerk reaction in Alain – he can feel the word and its effect. As of the very first page, the very first two lines, Reza begins to interrogate language and its capacity to truly communicate.

As Véronique’s opening speech is filtered through a written statement, the play’s second ‘monologue’ is filtered through a cellphone: we hear one side of a conversation between Alain and a man named Maurice. This is the first of many intrusions made by Alain’s cellphone into the conversation between the two couples; it abruptly yanks focus from the situation at hand, drawing attention to a conflict outside of the Houillé’s living room. Alain is a lawyer – we discover in the wake of this phone call – representing a pharmaceutical company called Verenz-Pharma. He is dealing with a crisis, as a study detailing the negative effects of a Verenz-Pharma drug called Antril was published and picked up by several media outlets. During this call, Alain, who hasn’t spoken much up until this point, reveals himself as rather unfeeling and somewhat rude – he doesn’t hesitate at all in answering his phone and makes no attempt to hide the fact that his main concern is not with the drug’s effects, but with the company’s upcoming General Assembly meeting. Suddenly, both the audience and the characters are asked to see Alain’s truer self and the portrait is not a very pretty one; this one-sided conversation exposes him and his words, while not directed at anyone in the room, affect everyone in the room, influencing how he is seen and subsequently understood.

A page later, Michel has his own elongated speech, the first true speech to the other characters. This monologue is fundamentally disturbing, though told anecdotally, almost flippantly. Véronique mentions that Michel got rid of the children’s hamster in the middle of the night and, after Annette inquires, Michel explains:

MICHEL. Oui. Ce hamster fait un bruit épouvantable la nuit. Ce sont des êtres qui dorment le jour. Bruno souffrait, il était exaspéré par le bruit du hamster. Moi, pour dire la vérité, ça faisait longtemps que j'avais envie de m'en débarrasser, je me suis dit ça suffit, je l'ai pris, je l'ai mis dans la rue. Je croyais que ces animaux aimaient les caniveaux, les égouts, pas du tout, il était pétrifié sur le trottoir. En fait, ce sont ni des animaux domestiques, ni des animaux sauvages, je ne sais pas où est leur milieu naturel. Fous-les dans une clairière, ils sont malheureux aussi. Je ne sais pas où on peut les mettre. (17/18)

Annette asks Michel if he left the hamster in the street, and Véronique responds that he did, that he lied to their daughter that morning about it having run away. Alain asks if the hamster was gone this morning and Michel replies, "Disparu." The conversation then moves on.

There is something truly sinister behind this speech. Giguere explains that the hamster functions as a metaphor: just as the small animal is caught between the domestic and the savage, so the characters, while they attempt to be civilized, cannot seem to contain their own internal savagery⁴³. Apart from Giguere's metaphor, which I agree is valid, the language of this monologue seems to betray Michel. Up to this point in the text, Michel has functioned in tandem with Véronique, detailing the damage done to his son's tooth, explaining his son's reluctance to talk, discussing his and his wife's professions, etc. – this monologue is his first truly individual moment, and its setup hints at the division that exists between himself and Véronique. Michel begins his explanation by accusing the animal – it's so horribly noisy during the night. Next, he cites the effect the hamster was having on his son, attempting to build some sort of paternal credibility, attempting to pawn the decision off on his son. But then he admits to his own personal stake in the hamster's disappearance, explaining that he couldn't take it any longer, so he dumped the animal in the street. At this point, the explanation is sufficient: Michel has detailed the hamster's flaws, his son's frustrations and his own frustrations – he could've simply stopped talking. Instead, he continues, revealing the fact that, once in the street,

⁴³ Giguere, A. p. 126

the poor animal was terrified. The rest of the monologue seems to be Michel pondering aloud, partly asking the others, partly asking himself, what he should've done, where the animal actually belongs; he ends on a note of uncertainty. As with Alain's comportment during his phone call, Michel's monologue makes an impression on the others, and though the conversation moves on, the hamster reappears throughout the length of the play. Michel's words have given him away, perhaps exposing him as callous in tandem with Alain's callousness – his first priority is himself and his own comfort. Reza's characters are already showing their cracks, and it is their words that are most illuminating. Giguere talks of the breakdown of language as leading to the breakdown of civilization, but this breakdown is inevitable, as the code of language, like the code of civilization, like all codes, cannot account for humanity at its deepest level.

During the interactions that follow the story of the hamster, it becomes clear that Véronique would like Ferdinand to apologize to Bruno, sincerely, however Alain is sceptical of the whole situation, saying “[Ferdinand] se rend compte de son geste. Il n'en connaissait pas la portée. Il a onze ans” (19). This comment flusters Véronique's, but Michel interjects, asking if his guests would like some coffee or tea or a slice of clafoutis. This seems to diffuse the situation for a moment, as Véronique leaves the room to gather the drinks and the desert – the topic of Michel's job as a hardware salesman comes up, as well as a few follow up questions about the hamster. The next monologic sequence occurs in the form of two back-to-back phone calls, one received and one made by Alain, interrupting the conversation, just as it has begun to get tense again:

ALAIN. Pain d'épice, délicieux...Au moins ça nous permet de découvrir une recette.

VÉRONIQUE. J'aurais préféré que mon fils ne perde pas deux dents à cette occasion.

ALAIN. Bien sûr, c'est ce que je voulais dire!

ANNETTE. Tu l'exprimes curieusement.

ALAIN. Pas du tout, je...(le portable vibre, il regarde l'écran) (23)

Alain receives a second phone call from Maurice and, whereas during the first phone call, the stage directions indicate that he moves away from the group, he seems

to make no move to excuse himself. These phone calls reveal Alain as even more calculating than originally alluded to: during the first, he again speaks with Maurice, advising him not to make a statement, interrogating him about the drug's effects (ataxia), asking how long they've known about these effects and why they didn't take the drug off the market, he asks about the drug in relation to revenue and then, after a pause, says, "Ah oui. Je comprends..." (24) Ignoring a plea from Annette to be "un peu avec nous" (24) Alain immediately makes another call, this time to his colleague, Serge. Alain's dismissal of Annette's request emphasizes the lack of connection between the characters, even the married couples, as Annette's words do nothing to move her husband. Though Annette's desire is clear, her words are soft, hesitant even, and they do not touch Alain in the slightest. The situation gets even darker during this second phone call, as Alain explains that Verenz-Pharma has known about these adverse effects for two years and done nothing. He then says that there is no formal record of the negative effects and that the company has taken zero precautions regarding Antril. And then, in a moment of true piggishness, Alain describes the ataxia to Serge, saying "en gros, tu a l'air bourré en permanence..." (24) after which he laughs. He then tells Serge the numbers, \$150 million in revenue. As the call ends, Alain transitions seamlessly into an explanation for his rapid consumption of the clafoutis, explaining that he didn't have time for lunch. The conversation resumes with the recipe for the clafoutis. Alain's words, delivered carelessly in front of his wife and the Houillés, who are practically strangers, expose him as both cold and arrogant – he doesn't care at all about what this couple thinks of him, he thinks himself above them. His words colour him as somewhat heartless, yet, for Alain, this exposure is not a betrayal. He is the most 'savage' character from the start, irritated by the meeting and the general niceties from the beginning, unapologetic for his rudeness, unyielding in his opinions. In this sense, while his words do expose him, they do not seem to trap him – it's as if Alain already knows the true nature of language as a betrayer and therefore does not try to hide, but rather leans into his savagery.

Interactions between the two couples turn sour over the course of the next 20 pages – the Reilles actually attempt to leave at one point, Alain exclaiming that he must return to the office, Annette saying she'll return later with Ferdinand so that he can apologize, and Véronique concerned about the authenticity of Ferdinand's impending

apology, but Michel pulls them all back to the living room for more coffee. Alain and Véronique are arguing semantics (again) when his phone rings (again) – it's Maurice. Alain is trying to convince a panicked Maurice not to pull the drug, as this course of action would admit guilt, he urges him to think of the victims after the General Assembly; he tells Maurice to sit tight for the time being. He hangs up and calls Serge, saying that Maurice is frantic:

ALAIN. [...] tu fais préparer un communiqué qui ne soit pas du tout un truc défensif, au contraire, vous y allez au canon, vous insistez sur le fait que Verenz-Pharma est victime d'une tentative de déstabilisation à quinze jours de son assemblée générale, d'où vient cette étude, pourquoi elle tombe du ciel maintenant, etc. Pas un mot sur le problème de santé, une seule question: qui est derrière l'étude? (44/45)

As with Véronique's opening, 'formal' speech, Reza presents the written word in a peripheral way, within her own written words. While Véronique imitated a judiciary text with her statement-turned-speech, Alain discusses a press release within his one-sided dialogue – neither of these documents can be categorized as literary works, but they are both relevant forms of the written word, used to guide language. While Barthes refers to literature as Reza's *Le Dieu du carnage* is literature, Reza, within *Carnage* presents alternative forms of writing, interrogating how these written texts fit into the battle against language. Alain's conversation points to the power of the written word to subvert language – albeit in a negative way. Alain is talking to his colleague about how to control the news of the study; his solution is a press release aimed at attacking the study itself. Alain wants to change the conversation, so his plan is to release a formal, written document, interrogating the validity of the conversation in the first place. A written document is not a dialogue, but a statement, crafted and constructed to supersede the conversation. In this instance, Reza may be acknowledging the power of the written word, as well as critiquing it as a force that is vulnerable to the forces of power – in this case, a large pharmaceutical company after profit at any cost. Barthes explained that literature, as with everything else, is not immune to the forces of power, but that consistent innovation enables it to slip through power's grasp. Reza, by alluding to the written word in the service of power, within her own literature, is able to turn the lens on forces of power, in general. Rather than allow power to sink in and become an innate

force, to hide below the surface, Reza shines a bright light on the system; she shines a light on the process of power seizing upon the written word.

After this phone call, Michel cannot stay silent – these interruptions seem to have greatly influenced his view of Alain, and he responds: “Ils sont terribles ces labos. Profit, profit” (45). The two men go after each other, almost through barred teeth, as Alain begins to question Michel about his own profession. The words seem civil, but only just below the surface lurk condescension, disdain and contempt. Annette announces that she feels ill, Alain takes another phone call, inciting her to a fury, inciting her to exclaim that Alain leaves all of the domestic concerns to her, as they are “mortel” to which Michel says that perhaps Ferdinand picks up on Annette’s disinterest.

ANNETTE. Quel désintérêt?!

MICHEL. Vous le dites vous-même... (53)

Before he can finish, however, Annette vomits violently all over the coffee table, Véronique’s beloved art books, the floor, and her husband’s pants. This moment is so unlooked for, so violent, so disgusting, that all conversation takes a backseat as chaos ensues. Language, and as Giguere claims, civilization⁴⁴ give way to something truly visceral, 100 per cent physical, 100 per cent animal – Annette literally can’t swallow Michel’s words. The spoken word becomes such a burden, the necessity to operate within a constrained code, within a set of rules, becomes too much; Annette’s physical body reacts, rejecting words completely.

* * *

As both couples attempt to clean up – Michel and Véronique in the living room, Alain and Annette offstage in the bathroom – the Houillés begin to mock the Reilles, particularly the pet name that Alain has for Annette: toutou. It’s as if the two have regressed to kids on a playground (much like their two sons), pointing and laughing at the other kids. Amanda Giguere writes that Christopher Hampton translated toutou to

⁴⁴ Giguere, A. p. 127

woof-woof for the London production – she explains that under Warchus’ direction, this moment was utilized to highlight the beasts underneath the surface: “Véronique and Michel began to giggle at the name Woof-woof, repeating it to each other. Then they started to quietly bark at each other, and growl, as if they were becoming wild dogs. Their laughter grew into a bestial bark-off [...]” (Giguere, 140). Not only do Véronique and Michel return to a state of childhood, they regress even further, to a state of bestiality, to a state wherein there is no language. While this might suggest the failure of language, it might also suggest an intentional rejection of language in favour of something more basic. For Giguere, language is a pinnacle of civilization, but for Barthes, it is a force of power and control – perhaps in rejecting language, these characters are rejecting a failed system of expression. This was a directorial choice, not necessarily made by Reza, but her text and the themes explored in her text allowed for Warchus to make this choice – he was able to interpret the words of Reza’s play and replace them with animal sounds, an element of innovation perhaps unforeseen by the playwright. Once again, we see space for further innovation, for further interrogation of language, in the realm of performance, enabled by Reza’s writing.

Alain returns from the bathroom as the Houillés are laughing (or barking): “Oui, je l’appelle toutou,” (61) he says. Michel and Véronique attempt to recover themselves, exclaiming that their own pet names are probably much worse, reaching for politesse that is all but lost. Annette finally returns from the bathroom and, after answering a few courtesy questions about her well-being, she refocuses the conversation. She brings up the fact that verbal insults and name-calling are also forms of aggression – until this point, the Reilles have acknowledged that their son was in the wrong, however, Annette’s comment marks a move away from this conciliatory stance.

From this moment onward, the situation spirals out of control. Both couples begin to unravel, turning on each other. After the hamster has been brought up yet again (the violence of abandoning the animal compared with the violence enacted by Ferdinand), Michel tears off his theoretical social mask, announcing his own base nature, in an elongated response.

MICHEL. Je vais vous dire, toutes ces délibérations à la con, j'en ai par-dessus la tête. On a voulu être sympathiques, on a acheté des tulipes, ma femme m'a déguisé en type de gauche, mais la vérité est que je n'ai aucun self-control, je suis un caractériel pur. (78)

Michel can no longer control his words, and he doesn't seem to want to control them – in this moment, he abandons reserved, polite, appeasing speech, exposing himself jubilantly. Much like Alain, who never really tried to hide behind his words, Michel's words have come to match his interior thoughts. While his confession is disturbing, Michel's disregard for the rules of polite society results in an unhampered confession; he reveals his true self without shame. Giguere might argue that language, used as a tool, is the bedrock of civilization, and that without civilization, human beings are simply animals. However, language and civilization house power, and in her search for beauty, Reza doesn't hesitate to destroy the façade, to break with the rules and the codes, to burn structure to the ground, in order that something new (and for a moment, untainted) might rise out of the ashes. It's not a pretty process to see, and this sort of confession doesn't make a character likeable by any means, but for Reza, this breakdown is a necessary evil; she works to dismantle the performance of language, to get beneath the surface. This foray into a space outside of "discours rationnel", outside of the expectations embedded in language may be in pursuit of human connection, which is hampered by the constructed nature of human language – Reza must flay her characters in order to enable their connection.

* * *

Moments later, Michel breaks out a bottle of rum, and the chaos truly begins to descend. The couples divide – Alain and Michel seem to form a bond in the wake of Michel's confession, and Véronique and Annette seem to unite in shared disdain for their husbands – though none of the characters really like one another. Véronique confesses that her husband is content with mediocrity, talking openly about their marital problems, after which Alain launches into his own monologue about the selfishness of humans, attributing Véronique's obsession with "correction" to her own desire to save herself. "Les hommes s'agitent jusqu'à ce qu'ils soient morts. [...] Vous écrivez un livre sur le

Darfur, bon, je comprends [...] On se sauve comme on peut” (88). Alain deconstructs the need to be civilized, attributing it simply to the fact of existence. His words expose civilization, and language by proxy, as a stop-gap, as things that simply fill the emptiness of human existence, as futile but necessary – he challenges the structures of civilization in announcing their status as human constructs, invented by humanity in order to ‘save’ humanity. He seems to laugh at the foundations of society, condescendingly acknowledging their importance, as if he doesn’t need them and can’t be bothered to participate in civilization – he’s an ass, but an ass with a point. Reza presents him as an alternative to the rules; Alain does not perform when he speaks, he portrays himself unapologetically (and in the end, Alain seems to keep his cool better than anyone else in the room).

Michel joins in on the fun, pointing his finger at another branch of civilization: the family. He expresses his view that the couple and family life are the worst things that God has inflicted on man. Annette replies that Michel need not express his indecent views – the ‘abuse’ of language, the utilization of words to express unpleasantness, has become too much for Annette. But Michel revels in it:

MICHEL. [...] Les enfants absorbent notre vie, et la désagrègent. Les enfants nous entraînent au désastre, c’est une loi. Quand tu vois les couples qui s’embarquent en riant dans le matrimonial, tu te dis ils ne savent pas, ils ne savent rien les pauvres, ils sont contents. On ne vous dit rien au départ. J’ai un copain de l’armée qui va avoir un enfant avec une nouvelle fille. Je lui ai dit, un enfant à nos âges, quelle folie! Les dix, quinze ans qui nous restent de bons avant le cancer ou le stroke, tu vas te faire chier avec un même? (91/92)

It’s an ugly sentiment to hear from a man with children, yet it’s in keeping with the challenge that Reza extends: she strips Michel down to the marrow demanding self-reflection from her reader, her audience and her other characters. He is cavalier with his words, bandying them about with no concern for the consequences, using them to express his darkest beliefs in front of his wife and a couple of strangers – language has most certainly ‘failed’ as a constructive tool in the context of the play. However, Reza’s representation of a man who abandons the code of conduct lurking within the system of

language challenges language as a whole. It is a flawed system, it is a system that demands that we operate within it, yet it cannot accommodate us at our most genuine moments. While Michel may mean all of the things that he says (as his wife affirms he does) his words paint him as a one-dimensional man, devoid of a loving father's heart – this is most likely not the whole truth, and yet it is the 'truth' we are left with after his speech.

The play rolls on, and the liquor flows freely. In the middle of an argument between Véronique and Alain about Africa, Michel bursts, "Ne la lancez pas là-dessus! Par pitié!" (100) to his wife, inciting Véronique to throw herself at him, hitting him repeatedly – words are replaced with a seemingly uncontrollable physical reaction (much like Annette and her vomit). A few pages later, after several more interruptions by Alain's phone, a tipsy Annette walks toward him, grabs the phone out of his hand, looks around for a moment, then drops the phone into one of the tulip vases – the men are horrified and Véronique yells "Bravo!" (105). Language has crumbled almost entirely as both women resort to physical acts to express themselves. These acts may seem irrational and savage, but they are also powerful, they garner attention – perhaps the chaos isn't such a bad thing. Annette herself seems to agree: as her husband and Michel try frantically to dry the phone, she laughs, and laughs, and delivers the longest speech in the play.

Neither graceful, nor articulate, Annette laughs at her husband, slowly looking for words as she revels in the destruction of the cell phone and describes her own views of masculinity. "On se sent tranquilles, non?...Les hommes sont tellement accrochés à leurs accessoires...Ça les diminue...Ça leur enlève toute autorité...Un homme doit être libre de ses mains...Je trouve" (108). This monologue is a rambling speech wherein Annette describes seeing a man carrying a shoulder bag – ridiculous – and explains her own "johnwaynienne" ideas of manhood: that a man should be able to be alone. She wanders back to herself and finally exclaims, "...Mais finalement...on se sent presque bien...Je trouve" (109). This monologue is riddled with ellipses; Annette is searching for words through a fog of alcohol and speaking even if she isn't able to fully articulate her ideas. She says that she feels good, but there is melancholy behind her words, there is yearning for something that doesn't exist, there is loneliness underneath her speech.

The addition of the phrase “je trouve” weakens her statements greatly, exposing her uncertainty. The pauses in between each thought also suggest uncertainty and an inability to grasp the right words for the occasion (perhaps because there are no ‘right’ words). The rules have all been broken by this point and the four characters sit in a sort of deflated, serene state for a moment, however Véronique cannot abide this absolute failure of language and civilization – two pinnacles that she holds dear – and the four go at each other once again.

In the end, the situation has crumbled completely. Annette announces that she is glad that her son beat the Houillé’s son. The final ‘monologue’ in the play is peripheral to the conflict; it is another phone call, this time between Véronique and her daughter. Her words are soothing as she tries to console her daughter regarding the hamster; she reassures, she lies, she comforts. Despite the chicken soup in Véronique’s words, Reza’s typical bleakness characterizes this one-sided dialogue; Véronique has been exposed, her words have exposed her just as the others have exposed themselves, and her cooing simply demonstrates the cyclical nature of the system of language. Humans cannot escape language, yet so often, words communicate untruths – we must lean on this failed system in order to perpetuate civilization: Véronique lies to her daughter to protect her from what her father did, to protect the family unit, but what she attempts to save doesn’t actually exist.

Le Dieu du carnage is funny, it is extreme, almost farcical at certain points, but lurking just beneath the surface is a harsh commentary on the bedrock of human civilization: the spoken word. Reza contrasts language with ‘true’ savage human nature, asking us to examine the inadequacy of the language system as it attempts to contain our savagery. She is able to critique the spoken word both subtly and blatantly within this written text and within the performative space beyond the text – after reading or watching *Le Dieu du carnage*, one must reflect on language as broken, as a performance in and of itself.

Chapter 6.

Conclusion

In 2011, *Comment vous racontez la partie*, Yasmina Reza's final play to date, premiered in Vienna. According to H el ene Jaccopard, this play touches on themes seen in a few of Reza's previous plays (*L'Homme du hasard*, *Une pi e espagnole*) as it attempts to deconstruct literary genres, examining the relationship between fiction and reality, between writers, actors and human beings⁴⁵. *Comment vous racontez la partie* features an author, a reader and a critic and deals with how a text is received: "Cette pi e est ce que nous avons de plus explicite sur la po tique de l'auteur, ou tout au moins, ses conceptions litt raires" (Jaccopard, 229). This play can perhaps be called Reza's most personal – she is no stranger to critics (many of whom have called her superficial and a purely commercial success⁴⁶). In the context of my thesis, which pits the writer against language, Reza might be seen as expressing the difficulty of her own situation as a soldier on the front lines. The self-reflective nature of this piece nods to Reza's evolution over the course of her theatrical canon – she has changed tactics repeatedly in order to combat and work with language and this piece pauses to reflect on her situation in the present moment.

As we have seen from Reza before, *Comment vous racontez la partie* has a literary lean – Jaccopard calls the play "essentiellement 'lisible'" (230) – as indicated by the many stage directions, which emphasize the d cor, silences, pauses, and character emotions⁴⁷. Reza writes entire pages of italicized set-up at times. Jaccopard muses that Reza seems to have written this play to be read rather than performed. The play follows

⁴⁵ Jaccopard, H. p. 229

⁴⁶ Jaccopard, H. p. 226-228

⁴⁷ Jaccopard, H. p. 230

Nathalie Oppenheim, author of a book entitled *Les Pays des lassitudes*, in which the main character, Gabrielle, is the author of a book called *Comment vous racontez la partie*. We've seen this type of mise en abyme from Reza before (Parsky, or *L'Homme*, was author of a book called *L'Homme du hasard* in *L'Homme du hasard*; Olmo is playwright of a Spanish play in *Une pièce espagnole*); Jaccomard writes that the play, as it portrays an author (Nathalie) being questioned about her play by a literary journalist (Rosanna), is a mise en abyme for its own reception⁴⁸. Reza's theatre has never been more self-reflective than it is in this piece.

The play is broken into 11 segments: Prologue, Arrivée, Installation, Présentation, Comment vous racontez la partie, Paul, Au carré des inconnus, Nathalie, Cocktail, Roland – these titles add to the sense that this play is meant for a reading audience rather than an actual audience. The prologue is monologic in form: Nathalie reads a (supposed) excerpt from her book, a dialogue between Gabrielle and another character, Paul. Excerpts from this book are littered throughout the play and function as one form of 'monologue' – the section entitled "Comment vous racontez la partie" features a reading by Nathalie, which spans three pages in the text; the section entitled "Au carré des inconnus" is entirely an excerpt, spanning a little over two pages in the text. "Présentation" is a speech, an introduction made by Roland, a critic and fan of Nathalie's, as he welcomes her to the program: Samedis Littéraires de Vilan-en-Volène. "Nathalie" is a two-page section, featuring only stage directions. "Cocktail" features several long monologues from the mayor – in 'conversation' with Nathalie, though her presence doesn't seem completely necessary – who is in attendance. The play ends with a poem, written by Roland (a critic and fan of Nathalie's), read aloud by Nathalie.

This play seems to mirror life in a very blatant way; it follows, then, that Reza's views on language might seep from her characters' mouths. At one point during the interview, Rosanna cites the inscription that opens Nathalie's book, a statement made by the American author Michael Herr: "Ce n'est pas tant que vous ayez gagné ou perdu, mais comment vous racontez la partie." – the citation which becomes the title for Nathalie's character's book. (54)

⁴⁸ Jaccomard, H. p. 231

- ROSANNA. Est-ce que...Vous ne revenez pas avec nous?...Est-ce que vous entendez cette citation comme une définition possible de la littérature?
- NATHALIE. De l'existence aussi.
- ROSANNA. De l'existence?
- NATHALIE. Oui. Je crois que les choses n'ont pas lieu tant qu'elles ne sont pas racontées. Le langage fonde le réel.
- ROSANNA. Et le déforme aussi?
- NATHALIE. Non. Lui donne corps. Ça commence par le nom. Quelqu'un qui n'aurait pas de nom...Quand il n'y a pas de nom sur une tombe, personne n'a existé. Le nom c'est le début de la fiction, et en même temps c'est le début du réel. (55)

Nathalie claims that language is the foundation for the real as well as for fiction, that until a thought is recorded – spoken aloud, written down, received – it doesn't exist. This idea lends credence to the system of language, or at least demonstrates the necessity of language, and is reflected in one of the mayor's speeches much later in the play. He is drinking and speaking jovially to Nathalie; he explains that he has a subject for her next endeavour. "Vous savez le problème avec la réalité? Elle est périssable. Sans une bonne stratégie narrative, la réalité "goes with the wind". Les mots sont plus grands que les choses" (106). While the mayor speaks of "mots", it seems clear that he speaks of the written word, of reality recorded in some manner (une bonne stratégie narrative). Returning to Nathalie's discussion of language, it seems as if she, too, speaks of the written word – a name engraved on a tombstone is a name written down for all eternity. One may surmise that Reza sees her own role as a writer, as a recorder of reality, as a purveyor of true reality. Rosanna's question: "Et le déforme?" also seems to interrogate the trustworthiness of words, and while Nathalie responds in the negative, the question highlights Reza's own doubts about language. Nathalie sees language as necessary, yet Reza reminds us of the power of language to deform reality – it's as though Reza is at a stalemate, aware of the importance of language in life and aware of the dangers of language in our interpretations of reality. She does not present a solution

to the problem of language in this piece, rather she presents the puzzle of her present moment.

In the middle of the play, on page 85, Nathalie's extreme distrust of the spoken word is revealed in a speech to Rosanna, explaining why she decided to say yes to this interview when she has said no to so many; one might infer that Reza's sentiments reflect those of Nathalie.

NATHALIE. [...] Je suis touchée par la lettre d'invitation, les mots me plaisent, je dis oui. Je dis oui, j'irai le samedi vingt-huit mai à Vilan-en-Volène pour parler du *Pays des lassitudes*, alors qu'il n'y a rien de plus absurde que d'aller parler du *Pays des lassitudes*, dont je ne veux jamais parler [...] et je me dis mais que vas-tu faire à Vilan-en-Volène, tu ne peux pas aller à Vilan-en-Volène, tu n'as aucune raison d'aller dans une ville inconnue parler d'un livre que tu affaiblis à chaque intervention, que tu lisses à chaque intervention, que tu vois fondre dès qu'on t'en parle et que tu en parles [...] (84/85)

Nathalie went to Vilan-en-Volène in spite of her fears, urged by the kind words of Roland's letter, but it is evident that she would've preferred to let her book speak for itself. Nathalie believes that the spoken word betrays her, that it trips her, that it achieves the opposite of what she might desire: as she speaks of her book, she sees it diminish, she sees it dissolve. But if the book was able to stand alone, if the literature remained untainted by spoken words, what might it say? It seems appropriate that this analysis should end with the idea that language is a formidable system, that language provides the foundation for what is real and what is fiction, that it possesses the power to form and deform 'reality' – yet, in spite of this, it is the written word that survives, that provides clarity in the face of the haziness of the spoken word. It is the written word that lives on, that doesn't "go with the wind."

* * *

At the beginning of this analysis of Yasmina Reza's theatrical canon, I theorized that her use of monologue, within her eight plays to date, would align with Roland

Barthes' theory that literary work is the solution to the problem of language. Barthes calls language fascist, in that it requires blind obedience to its own authority. He explains the necessary expression of language as housing all power and goes on to say that speech, as soon as it is spoken aloud, enters the service of power. He describes speech as both assertive and passive, relying on repetition and recognition, and asks how human beings can ever truly be free if their mode of necessary expression renders them simultaneously master and slave. Barthes presents literature, the written word, as the answer, asserting that it enables us to understand speech outside of the bounds of power. Literature allows knowledge to continuously reflect upon knowledge, it yearns to capture the real and is always in pursuit of this unattainable goal, therefore always reinventing itself. This constant state of transformation allows literature to evade the forces of power innate within the system of spoken language. I posited that Reza's monologic innovation within her plays "embodied Barthes' theory of language as a battlefield." Taking things a step further, I also attempted to analyze Reza's canon in the performative context: if literature works in opposition to language, how does performance figure into the equation? Is performance another space within which Reza is able to challenge language?

Throughout Reza's oeuvre, her tactics for dealing with the problem of language develop and evolve. In her first two plays, *Conversations après un enterrement* and *Traversée de l'hiver*, Reza utilizes long monologues to emphasize the inability of humans to connect through language – in fact, she demonstrates language as a disconnective force more times than not. When Alex pleads with his father's grave, Reza points to his isolation – she leaves him stranded as his words fall on unreceptive (deceased) ears; when Blensk tries desperately to connect to the people around him through monologue, he is ignored and mocked and further isolated. In the end, his connection with Avner is established through a shared experience offstage, not through the spoken word. An incommunicabilité plagues Reza's characters; they speak and yet, as indicated by ellipses and trailings off, they are often unable to gather their thoughts and articulate themselves. There is a poetry in several of these monologues (see Avner's final monologue in *Traversée*) which lends a sense of abstraction to the spoken words of her characters – it is suggested that the human experience cannot be adequately, clearly communicated through language.

“*Art*” saw the playwright experiment with forgotten forms of monologue – the aside, for example, was much more common in classical theatre than in contemporary theatre – twisting them a bit, playing with them in order to form something different. Reza’s use of monologue in “*Art*” splits the play’s perspective, providing not one, not two, but three ‘narrators’ and, therefore, demanding that the audience filter each spoken word through, at times, completely contradictory spoken words. The use of interior monologues in “*Art*” also exposes the characters’ true thoughts as often contradictory to what they are actually saying, highlighting the weakness of the spoken word as an conduit for dishonesty. Reza creates speeches that are neither fully confessional, nor in social disguise. The filmed production of “*Art*” provides a unique lens through which to examine the play’s language as performed language; there are moments in the text and in the filmed production that clearly do not align (the order change of the trio’s monologic sequence, for example) highlighting the flexibility that performance lends to a text. At this point in her oeuvre, Reza still seems to undermine language, exposing its duality (I can tell lies, I can say the opposite of what I actually mean) as well as its disconnective nature (I can speak and speak and my message will not be received because 1) it cannot be properly articulated, or 2) there is no receptive listener, leading to my further isolation).

With her subsequent three plays, Reza’s approach toward language shifted – rather than continue to point at the flaws in the language system, it is as if Reza attempts to work around language or transform the way language is conceptualized in order to work with language. The idea of an oeuvre originates from the French “*oeuvrer*” which means to work – there is activity imbedded in the word, an idea of honing, shaping, sharpening. Instead of outright combat, Reza adjusts her methods in an effort to enable language to become the connective device that humanity needs. In *L’Homme du hasard*, Reza provides a window into the minds of a man and a woman, eliminating the spoken word from the world of the play for most of the piece – she allows her characters to exist in a safe space wherein they cannot be betrayed by their words until speech becomes inevitable. Though the play’s ending is open, it hints at a possibility for connection; because Reza does not mire her characters in dialogue, because she allows them to arrive at the spoken word in their own due time (when they both long for it), there is hope for connection.

Reza toys with reality and realism in *Trois versions de la vie* and *Une pièce espagnole*; what is real, she demands, creating two worlds, one in which reality repeats and one in which reality is layered. In adjusting her representation of reality, Reza adjusts her representation of language as it functions within reality. In *Trois versions*, she diminishes the power innate to language in providing her characters with three opportunities to speak: the circumstances are, for the most part, the same in each version, and yet, in tweaking small details, she gives her characters three chances to connect through language. Though the play ends on a melancholy note, each character still somewhat isolated, this shift in strategy suggests that Reza is searching for a way to work through the problem of language. With *Une pièce espagnole*, Reza examines the roots of language as performance. Her layered presentation of reality underlines performed language in the day-to-day as well as the desire for performed language over constructed language – she interrogates the idea of language as a connective system. If we are always performing speech, how can it possibly function as a device for human connection? This question, this examination culminates in *Le Dieu du carnage*.

In pursuit of the ‘beautiful’ outside the realm of “discours rationnel”, Reza smashes the system of language to bits in her seventh play. She eliminates monologue almost altogether in *Dieu du carnage* and allows her characters to descend into chaos, stripping them of self-control and societal restraint. She unearths the darkness that lies beneath human language and exposes something ugly, but genuine. It is only after breaking down language in *Le Dieu du carnage* that Reza is able to arrive at her most recent piece, *Comment vous racontez la partie* – it is with this play that Reza pauses to self-reflect. There is a tranquility in *Comment vous racontez la partie*, an introspectiveness that suggests that Reza is no longer in combat with the system of language, but that she also has not found a solution to the problem of language. The back and forth between Nathalie and Rosanna, during which Rosanna asks if language deforms reality and Nathalie responds with “Non. Lui donne corps,” alludes to a sort of détente. Reza is acknowledging language, its power and necessity, but she is also acknowledging the fact that she, as a writer, will continue to interrogate language.

The eight plays in Yasmina Reza’s canon examined here seem to demonstrate Roland Barthes’ theory of literature as subverting language – structures are challenged

throughout her oeuvre, expectations are smashed, and words are at the forefront. As performed pieces, Reza's plays also present a problem for the system of language due to the fluidity of interpretation. If, as Barthes asserts, constant innovation equals evasion of systems of power, the theatre provides a completely unique space within which to do battle: Reza challenges language within her texts and she creates another plane, another level, in the performative sphere, which allows others to mould her words, melding their own interpretations and ideas with hers. Fascism is based in absolutes – the absolute of the nation, for instance – and fluidity of interpretation and dissemination undermines the absolute of the language system. Reza writes words, these words are read and imbued with meaning in the reader's mind, compounded with Reza's own original meaning. Perhaps the person reading Reza's words is an actor, stepping into one of her roles; this actor then translates their interpretation of Reza's words into a performance, which is influenced by a director, a producer, the writer herself. And finally, this performance is received by an audience and imbued with even more meaning based on each individual audience member's experience. Reza's words are filtered again and again, they are reformed – in this space where meaning is liquid and ever-changing, one finds oneself outside the realm of rationality, of rational discourse, on another plane where language has no absolute power because absolutes cannot exist.

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