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Ariel Dorfman: The Residue of Hope after Public Personae Construction

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Ariel Dorfman has repeatedly stated that his literature is eminently political and closely related to the recent history of Chile—the failed attempt by the Salvador Allende government (1970–1973) to move the country towards socialism, and the severe violations of human rights during the ensuing military dictatorship (1973–1990). If so, what is his conception of history, of politics, of human rights? To my knowledge this question has not been fully addressed and I doubt that his fiction can provide an answer since it is highly allegorical and open to multiple and contradictory interpretations. In this essay I approach this question exploring Ariel Dorfman’s professional public persona construction. Among contemporary Latin American writers, Dorfman is a master of public relations.

Successful professional persona construction is defined as an individual’s ability to manage impressions to gain acceptance by power groups and enjoy the benefits thereof (Roberts). For this purpose, individuals must develop strategies and tactics to align the images by which they are perceived and the significations of their own internal images. An optimal alignment requires fairly good knowledge of the norms and stereotypes prevailing in a power field. These norms categorize, interpret, and pass judgment on the behavior, value, or demerits of individuals of various ethnic backgrounds. Aware of how they are perceived, individuals must carefully monitor and repair gaps, discrepancies, and inconsistencies between the evaluation images held by power and their own idiosyncrasy and origin. Interviews done by intellectuals of notoriety are in many respects an encounter with power where gaps may occur that may destabilize the identity elaboration in progress. In the background of their awareness, individuals must always consider themselves as on a theater stage, with cameras rolling, meticulous in posture, voice, gesture, costume, and script.

This play-acting is not static. The persona being built is fictional to some degree, an image never totally achieved; desire does not always coincide with reality. Information about actual or possible changes in national, and world events and public opinion is never sufficient. This is especially relevant in intellectuals who stake their career on political commitment. Public personae are in constant processes of destabilization and reconstruction. Historiography will always bring new insights into events of great social importance, and any extant interpretation will be inevitably de-centered. In terms of literary and cultural studies, tracing these gaps and discrepancies can only enrich the interpretation of the works of a major author like Ariel Dorfman.

I will describe in sequence the two public personae Dorfman has projected through interviews in English and in his autobiography, *Heading South, Looking North*.¹ I call them *The Shaman* and *The Lacan Metaphor*. These two identities are metaphorical systems that overlap but do not coincide. Finally, under the item *Optimistic Fatalist*, a sentence taken from his memoir, in an attempt at a firmer grasp of Dorfman's notion of politics, I contrast these personae with a Machiavellian reflection on recent Chilean history close to the paradigms of human rights in internal armed conflicts.

The Shaman

Here Dorfman emphasizes that history is governed by hidden, fateful powers whose interventions human beings come to understand later rather than sooner:

We live in a universe where everything has a hidden meaning. It's almost as if every object is a sign for something else. And especially experience. There's a reason why certain experiences happen to you, and if you can discover the meaning of that—such as, why was there a coup in Chile? We understand the socio-economic and political reasons why there was a coup. But what is the meaning of it in human terms?
(Berman)

Throughout his life, Dorfman has been aware of these powers. The events of the military coup in Chile of 1973 only exacerbated these intuitions. He feels he should have been killed in the coup as were most of those captured by the military at La Moneda, the government palace. For Dorfman Chile became a hierophany, the special place where those secret powers most intensely showed their capacity to perpetrate massive deaths. Ever since, he became obsessed by death and the notion he was spared for a special mission: "Chile has been and always will be a source of inspiration for me. It forms the

backbone, the inspiration and the challenge of everything I write” (Berman). In his literature Dorfman feels he has been channeling the voices of those killed by the military, “those who cannot speak: the dead, the missing, those whose lives are interrupted by history” (Berman); “If you can’t make the dead speak, then how do you speak to the future when you will be dead?” (Berman).

The issue of free will is rather garbled in Dorfman’s statements. At one moment he says “that has to do with that tragic sense of life I feel. You choose your fate” (Berman) yet immediately adds, “I’ve always felt we control so little of our lives,” then ending the sentence narrowing again the margin of human choice: “But we do control how we react to that destiny, to what is chosen for us. So I’m always focusing on people in very extreme situations who react in very extreme ways.” What emerges clearly, though, is how central for Dorfman are very raw emotions as literary material in periods of suspension of the rule of law.

Dorfman fuses his conception of human fate, the collective destiny of Chile, and the revolutionary national project that so traumatically failed. For Dorfman there is only one Chile, the revolutionary Chile that existed for only a fleeting moment, immediately followed by the military neoliberal revolution:

We had dared to think of a world that was free, that was equal, a world that did not have the terrible injustices that characterize most of humanity. Because of that, we were condemned either to death or to flee in order to stay alive, but to die in the sense of having our country killed for us. That of course has enhanced my sense of death. (Berman)

Dorfman projects the fate of Chile under the military as the destiny of all contemporary Third World civilizations “in the sense that, though specifically Chilean, these are the dilemmas that could happen in Brazil, in Argentina, in South Africa, in Thailand, in South Korea” (McClennen). The reasons are “the fundamental questions of the accelerated globalization or modernization of society and the tensions that it creates” (McClennen). In this respect he says he “took a step toward a certain universality of my experience and Chile’s experience” (Berman). Contemporary “universality” in fact means the economic, social, and cultural dislocations of modernization. Dorfman explains his literature appeals on a universal level to diasporic communities who, in fact, are communities of the dead:

To go into exile is to go into the country of the dead. It is to lose everything that made your life meaningful. It is to be cut off. And in fact there are many tribes that consider when a person is banished from a tribe, that they die in some way, and to return is a resurrection. I believe that I have had that experience of death, I lost those things that gave

meaning to my life” (Berman); “I have a sense of unreality constantly around me. I’m a very sensual person, very optimistic, very vital. And yet, at the same time, I have the very strange certainty of not being quite here. Of already being dead” (Berman); “In fact, I fluctuate between two conditions all the time. I’m exiled and at the same time I’m obsessed with my country. I feel very much alive, while at the same time I’m a ghost [. . .] Fortunately, I’m a writer. Otherwise, I’d probably be in an asylum. (Berman)

Modernization—either capitalist or socialist—demands a coordination of revolutionary forces on an epic scale which is inevitably undermined by the evil in human nature—being born means the fall from purity, from immaculateness, “[we] betray the pure cause and therefore decide to live even if living is a kind of betrayal. You cannot be pure. There is no such thing as purity” (McClennen). We must expect that “a revolutionary movement [. . .] might be willing to betray one of its own, which is a terrible thing to conceive for somebody like myself who has participated in a revolution and who would never have thought that possible in the Allende years. It seems almost inconceivable, in spite of the whole sorry story of socialism and human rights” (McClennen).

Betrayal is inherent in all modernizing revolutionary movements and makes them delusions in which loyalty to causes and human beings cannot survive: “those transitions to modernity demand a delusion of who those people think they are, which is a comic thing, a picaresque thing this idea of human beings caught in a delusionary universe resonates because the transition itself is in great measure delusionary” (McClennen). In this context betrayal and delusion permeate even the most intimate relations, “what every character is also doing at the family level, at the level of maternity, at the level of paternity, at the level of making love, at the level of your rival in love, at the level of selling the country, in every level you find this structure” (McClennen); “how do a man and a woman get together and create something beautiful, something enduring, in the midst of all this destruction—the destruction of the moral, the destruction of the aesthetic, the destruction of the physical” (McClennen). Dorfman intimates he himself could give testimony to political betrayal. He militated in a very small leftist party—the MAPU Obrero Campesino (MOC)—sundered by deep discrepancies between the leadership in the underground in Chile and the external apparatus in Europe to which Dorfman belonged (Torrejón):

In 1975 I would not have been able to go into the ambiguity of the politics. Pinochet was in power and we were fighting very hard but also immaculately [meaning, strictly according to the ideological line imposed by the leadership]. It was very difficult for us [. . .] to critique our resistance leaders [in Chile], the people who were able and capable

of betraying us at a certain moment. I wouldn't have dared to have asked the questions [. . .] These were very painful ones. (Berman)

Rather than preserving the memory of State terrorism, in this version of his public persona the core of Dorfman's poetics is the memory of political betrayal, "I do feel my life has been filled with a sense of loss [. . .] a very strong critique of political utopias in our time" (Berman) Since betrayal and delusion permeate all levels of everyday life, Dorfman wants to explore intimacy, "a very cavernous space. An intimate cavern of reality" (Berman). This is what he calls "a forbidden zone, where it is better not to venture" (Berman), where the truth about the ethics of individuals and societies resides. The "truth" is not a particular set of formulations but a field of ambiguities, "a question of how do I trust one other person in the world, and with that one person create a community with which to confront the horrors of our time [. . .] How do I know if the story they are telling is the truth? How do I know if their mask is not hiding something terrible?" (Berman); "Is it possible to love and be loyal in times such as ours [. . .] how can we believe somebody else, how do we know who that somebody else is? When all [ideological] constructs have failed us, how do we continue to dream?" (Berman).

Betrayal and State terrorism result in "silence in captivity, silence in exile, silence in death" (Berman). At this juncture Dorfman introduces a Kantian moral imperative which dictates the need for some kind of salvation against all odds: "I'm trying to rescue, as I have during the whole period of exile, those forms of hope that I think are essential for us to continue living [. . .] my major struggle is to get through this mistrust, this distancing of the world, this very careful dissection of truth and the idea that there are certain truths that we have to believe in. It is an enormous act of faith and of love" (Berman). This moral imperative surmounts the fatalism of being born in a failed world: "Because the only way in which you can change the world is if you are born, if you engage the world as it is" (Berman). This is the only wisp of hope I found in the personae constructed in his interviews.

This moral imperative re-introduces the issue that the emotional reaction to severe violations of human rights is more important than the events themselves: "My whole work is infused with the notion that what happens to somebody is very often less important than the way in which the person reacts in his or her imagination" (Berman). The role of literature is introduced here. Dorfman's poetics demands the recovery of traumatic truth when sanity requires oblivion. Forgetting and eventually condoning illegal political murder to secure national cohabitation with a modicum of peace is not an option. Dorfman condemns national reconciliation grounded on bad conscience:

From my point of view and my sense of what literature and living are about, my general tendency is toward peace and reconciliation, living harmoniously with one another. However, you cannot do this based upon lies, based upon the suppression of feelings, the suppression of experiences of a part of the population, or a part of your personality [. . .] So before we focus on reconciliation we need to face the issue of truth. The problem is, there is precious little justice in the world [. . .] There are damages done to people and to countries that can never be dealt with totally [. . .] there's a part of us that cannot entirely heal. (Berman)

Dorfman also intimates that the bad conscience surrounding the re-democratization process initiated in 1990 was the reason he decided not to live in Chile. With the 1991 premiere of *Death and the Maiden* (*La muerte y la doncella*) in Santiago, Dorfman expected to contribute to a general discussion of the situation of human rights that perhaps would eventually lead to a national catharsis. But the majority of his party comrades, members of the new democratic political elite, not only ignored the premiere, but were trying to smother collective discussion of human rights supposedly to protect the new democracy at a moment when the armed forces seemed to retain a great measure of veto power. Comrades severely reproached Dorfman for staging the play in Santiago. Authoritarianism continued under the guise of democracy, Chile, therefore, lacked “stability,” an “anchor,” “wholeness,” a “desire for integrity” (Berman).

Chile seemed a schizoid personality that could not be trusted: “there is this ghost sense of the world, which has to do with the fluctuation of the personality [. . .] It is as if we were inhabited by a narrative voice that we don't find entirely reliable” (Berman). Channeling the voices suppressed by an authoritarian bad conscience is what makes Dorfman's literature deeply political: “In all my work there is a certain masculine figure who manipulates the characters, who tries to tell their story in his words, who tries to possess them, to appropriate them” (Berman). Persistent authoritarianism makes Chile an incomplete country in need of the “possibility of an alternative future, an alternative of the narrative, which is what I explore” (Berman); “The experience of inventing that country—in a way that makes sense to myself in exile—has been very central to everything I've done” (Berman); “In some way I am always writing for that imagined community of my fellow countrymen. I'm always asking questions about how the nation can be healed, retold, or modified—how it can be explored—as if this nation were incomplete until writers had found the way of best imagining it, of really challenging it with their literature [. . .] At the same time, I am constantly trying to go beyond the provincial interests of that community” (Berman); “There is a way of telling the story differently, only if we can find it” (Berman); “I believe strongly that if there is salvation,

if such a word exists or has a meaning, it's in that capacity to create an imaginary world which gives an alternative meaning to the fate that has been imposed upon us" (Berman); "And I am always asking how you can join the visionary and the practical, the person who lives history without great fantasy and the person who's shut up in the fantastic world and is creating these images" (Berman).

The Lacan Metaphor

In his 1998 memoir, *Heading South, Looking North*, Dorfman shares with the reader psychological issues he carried since early childhood and into his experience of the stunted socialist revolution in Chile. The gravitation of these issues is important for two reasons: it helps to delve deeper into the theme suggested in the shamanic persona—the mystery of emotional reactions in contexts of suspension of the rule of law and violations of human rights is more important than the events framed and ruled by supernatural powers. This points to a romantic aesthetic core that needs to be explored. In a writer so decidedly political, going public on such private matters strongly suggests that in this exposure Dorfman is offering consciously or unwittingly clues about his conception of history, politics and human rights. I will pursue this matter in the last part of this essay.

At the end of his memoir, Dorfman, a mature person of fifty-four sets himself on a theater stage commanding the attention of a vast audience: "look at me"; "look at me"; "look at me"; "look at me", he repeats (276). On stage he addresses two other characters: "that child I had been"; "what had been left of that child inside" (275), but especially "that young man" Dorfman had been when he committed himself to the revolution in Chile. He admonishes that "young man" with a litany: "I will tell him"; "I will tell him"; "I will tell him"; "I will tell him"; "I will not tell him" (259–60). Admonition comes from the lessons he learned from the major failure of the Allende revolution—failing to unite progressive Chileans of different political persuasions in a peaceful transition to socialism:

[failing to] resolve the contradictions of our misdeveloped society and modernize Chile without using force and establish social harmony without hurting anyone and purge the country of its past, so it would allow me painlessly to change into someone new, liberate me from all the quandaries that had plagued me [. . .] If my identification of my own person with the revolution, my belief that what I imagined was real or could become so, *might in retrospect be judged as a sign that I had gone slightly mad and was unable to distinguish between what was and*

was not possible, it was out of the same madness, my incapacity to detach my imagination from reality. (246–47, italics added)

In the end, the mature Dorfman sees himself as going through a ritual of transfiguration into the archetypes of the eternal wanderer—the two myths of the creation of civilization told “since the beginning of history”:

there is a place, one place, where you truly belong, a place that is often but always the place where you were born, and that place is akin to paradise [. . .] To lose that paradise is like dying, and to return is to be redeemed [. . .] to create a new society, to give a real start to anything worthwhile, one must leave the place of one’s birth [. . .] In this myth salvation can only be attained by wandering. (275–76)

Read from the beginning, the memoir is the chronicle of a dissociative fugue (American Psychiatric Association) traced back to the three-year-old “child inside.” In 1945 he was interned and isolated in a New York hospital with acute pneumonia. The child feels abandoned, betrayed, left to die. At the mercy of all-powerful beings who speak English, protect, feed, and cure him, in retaliation against his parents the child refuses to ever again speak or understand Spanish. He rejects his birth name, Vladimiro. He keeps up this pretense well into his teenage years in Chile, where he adopts the name Edward. Challenging himself intellectually, at the end of high school the child has mastered Spanish to the extent that he receives a school award in the language.

Had Dorfman chosen to organize his memoir as a dissociative fugue, the narrative would have had scant dramatic power. These escapes from reality entail psychotic identity changes related to traumatic space displacements, accompanied by depression, shame, ambiguity, guilt, grief, stress, aggressiveness, histrionics. Usually they are short-term disruptions, lasting only months. Individuals eventually come back to the routines of their original identity. Strangely, Dorfman does not indicate having received psychological treatment. His parents play along with this identity and language ploy, and actually seem to enjoy it as a family joke coming from a gifted son that behaves as if he were an only child. Under the label “dissociative fugue,” Dorfman’s anguished predicament of being bilingual would have been a rather functional matter—the plight of an individual unsure of his ethnic identity, endowed with an enormous sense of humor and intellectual resources, who could have easily adapted to any environment, secure for him and his new family with Angelica a decent living, and manners and connections to become socially successful.

Although Dorfman does not explore the matter intensively, other traumas may have increased features associated with dissociative fugue. These other traumas point to a highly unstable and violent home

atmosphere—he again felt abandoned by his mother when she was interned with a severe depression; when he was eight, at the height of McCarthyism in the United States, he threatened to expose his father as a communist; the family fear caused by the trial and execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg; the deportation of the family from the United States in 1951. On the way to Europe, after the family left the United States, on board the ship *Des Grasse* Dorfman has a psychotic illumination of the meaning of literature—writing is equivalent to out-of-body experiences: “If I was to leave the United States [in] that diary, for the first time, I created an imaginary space and self outside the body and, perhaps as fundamentally, beyond geography, a dialogue with language which could be deepened regardless of where that body happened to be, what contingent geography surrounded me” (85). Another hospitalization confirms for Dorfman the association of his literature with altered states of mind and a capacity to talk to the dead: “When I was fifteen, my writing abruptly matured. Again a sickness intervened, a dangerous strain of hepatitis. I consulted my old friend Thomas Mann, who believed in the symbiosis of illness and creativity, death and internal exploration, internal decomposition and the external order we impose on the page” (130–31). Here might be the origin of a recurrent narrative matrix that mimics psychosis—narrators, characters, spaces, events whose identities and time dimensions are hard to determine, responding to secret, esoteric clues that turn the narrative into some kind of religious allegory.

Dorfman prefers to pour his biographical material into the matrix of Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalysis (*Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*), weaving into a very dramatic helix the three themes emerging from the trauma experienced in 1945—betrayal, abandonment, fear of death. The helix-like narrative is designed to show there is a special teleology in Dorfman’s life. Throughout we find expressions that turn the narrative into a labyrinth presided by “mysterious symmetries,” “premonitions,” “schizophrenic, personality splits,” “doubles,” “duplicity,” “doppelgänger,” shattered and unshattered mirrors, similar, he says, to his literature. Dorfman warns us that literature “might well be called the biggest con game ever invented by humanity [. . .] The game I am still engaged in right now, the reader believing in the truth of my perishable, sliding words, lending faith to them without a shred of proof that I am not making everything up, inventing a self in this book as I invented (or so I say) a name for my future on that vessel” (81). Dorfman is indicating segments of the memoir cannot be differentiated from fiction.

The theatrical audience Dorfman addresses stand for the Symbolic, the Master Signifiers, the Other, the Law of the Father, the Phallus, the tribunal that will judge the truth of what is said on the stage according to collective ethical norms. “That child,” and “that young man” Dorfman puts on the stage are the Lacanian Fundamental Fantasy, the core of metaphors

individuals take from the vastness of the Symbolic and appropriate for themselves to give account of identities that evolve in the midst of desires and traumas.

In Lacan's terminology, Dorfman's language/identity ploy is a psychotic refusal to accede or to be drawn into the Symbolic order of social intercourse bound by the Law, the Name of the Father. Language stabilizes the Fundamental Fantasy of individuals when they mimic the all-encompassing influences of particular collective desires. In one aspect, therefore, Language is associated with Life, community, care, protection and personal power. Dorfman's ploy is a piece of gigantic fiction and histrionics in that he acts out a radical rebellion against the language of the first empire imposed by the Spaniards on the Americas while being conscious that in his choice of the English language he is mimicking in sequence the power of the fading British empire at the Grange school, and the emerging American empire filtering into Latin America with its popular culture and consumption lifestyles. I wonder why Dorfman eventually designates the language of the Spanish empire as the language of the downtrodden.

In this omnipotent rebellion Dorfman acts as if he were an only child, ignoring his siblings; he controls the family decisions regarding education when they return to Chile; he studiously differentiates himself from the Spanish-speaking Chileans he despises. Finally accepting the Spanish-speaking environment, Dorfman uses his English to be popular among affluent Chilean middle class teenagers who crave for American pop music and movies. He leads a double life, keeping secret his literary writings in English, the American records, books, magazines and candies he receives through the diplomatic purse, his father being a United Nations representative in Chile.

Together with omnipotence, Language also brings unpredictable interventions and unforeseen consequences that threaten identity, making individuals paranoid, vulnerable, besieged by aggression and death. In Lacan's terminology, the metaphorical perimeter provided by the Fundamental Fantasy only affords knowledge permeated by degrees of paranoia, fear, trepidation, dread, uncertainty, doubt, ambiguity, hesitation, insecurity, anxiety. In denying Spanish, Dorfman cuts off ties with his Jewish lineage, that branch of the family that settled in Argentina and the United States after exile from Russia. In fact, then, Dorfman has no identity, except the Americanness he forged for himself in the cult of American pop culture and in resentment against his parents. For Dorfman exile communities are instances of death, yet he remains fascinated by the linguistic choices his relatives had to make—abandoning Yiddish, replacing it with Spanish, striving to preserve Russian, struggling to acquire English. Contrary to his parents and other relatives who see Language shifting as a source of grief, Dorfman's dalliance between English and Spanish provides him with a sense of enormous empowerment and adventure. Nevertheless,

the sentiment of foreboding remains throughout Dorfman's memoir. The title of each chapter is a counterpoint between Language simultaneously meaning Life and Death.

In the memoir, Language assumes the role of fate at a par with historical teleology: "It promised, my Spanish, that it would take care of me [. . .] And for a while it delivered its promise [. . .] It did not tell me that at the very moment it was promising the world to me, that world was being disputed by others, by men in shadows who had other plans for me, new banishments planned for me" (13); "English had used America as its secret weapon. Now it was time for Spanish to use Chile, to draw me into its net" (113); "I realized that Spanish was beginning to speak me" (114); "I would discover the subterranean, contaminated influence of English persisting, flooding my consciousness, judging every word as if it were remote and foreign" (221); "my two languages [. . .] raging for my throat" (270). He speaks of his "colonized personality" (131) as some kind of satanic possession.

In Lacan's terminology, the metaphorical security perimeter provided by the Fundamental Fantasy and the threats against it posit that parallel to the need to know there is the need not to know and ignore the evidence of real menaces (Mills). As indicated, the title of each chapter in the memoir is a counterpoint between Language simultaneously meaning Life and Death, replacing historical teleology. Dorfman telescopes incidents so that this existential contrast will be enhanced.

Dorfman recycled his identity game in 1960 when he began literary studies at the University of Chile. The British high school he attended had been a foreign culture bubble where his height, whiteness, and his accented Spanish were not remarkable features. At the time, literary studies at the University of Chile were part of the high school teachers' training curriculum. The majority of the students were *mestizos* from the lower middle classes aspiring to a career in the State educational system. They were curious about him. In the midst of a *mestizo* student body, Dorfman was an alien. Asked about his nationality, Dorfman feels confused: "I should have answered: I don't have a country, I don't have a community, I don't have a cause [. . .] I'm alone in this planet and I don't know where I belong [. . .] Instead, quite simply, I said: *Soy de Argentina*. I'm Argentinian" (153).

This initiates another pretense cycle. By 1964 he was stating he was Chilean and changed his first name from Edward to Ariel. He was pressured once more by the Other's desire—his fellow students ignited by the Cuban revolution, the guerrilla warfare movement throughout Latin America, and his romance with Angélica, a student of English, eventually his wife. Dorfman conflates the socialist aspirations among intellectuals at the time, his desire to make a national identity for himself, and his love for Angélica,

“her lithe *moreno* [dark] body” (178), imagining her body as a mystical vessel:

How much I identified with the exotic Chile, the exotic Latin America that I had been secretly and transgressively hungering for all these many years, is anybody’s guess. I experienced love through the metaphors available to males in Latin America—and elsewhere—at the time, no matter how suspect and gendered I may consider then now, more than thirty years later: the woman as the earth, the earth goddess to be excavated, a territory to be explored by a pioneer, a land in which you root your manhood like a tree. (178)

Dorfman chooses to make an analogy of this personality change to the tectonic shifts of the great earthquake of 1960, which was followed by a devastating tsunami. Dorfman has a similar cosmic experience in the midst of a huge crowd while listening to the victory speech of president Salvador Allende on November 4, 1970. A member of the social elite, he felt another out-of-body experience, his individuality melted and fused into the destiny of the dispossessed masses: “an experience which I hesitate to call mystical but which was as near to a religious epiphany as I have had in my life” (243):

and then it was as if I stepped out of that space and inhabited some other zone where I could watch myself and the multitude as well, suddenly all the voices went silent and in the silence I felt reality crack open, literally, under my feet, as if a real, physical crack had opened in the very architecture of the universe, and that was when, peering into the crack that my own life had become, immensely vulnerable and open, I felt life quicken and accelerate, I felt the giddiness of those few great moments in your existence when you know that everything is possible, that anything is possible. I felt as if I were the first man in earth and this was the first day in history and the world was about to begin in all its beauty and that all it would take to give birth to that beauty which was just within our reach was to dare to invent it, dare to name it, and I believed for one transparent moment that I could merge with *el pueblo*, I believed that their story could be told simultaneously, I believed that a time would come when no distance would separate us, when our stories would be the same story. (244–45)

This mystical experience and the restlessness of his attention deficit disorder propel Dorfman into the frenetic activity that made him an important advisor in the cultural project of the Allende government—exposing and neutralizing the subliminal domination ideologies disseminated in Chile by the foreign controlled media. *How to Read Donald Duck* belongs in this

period. For the first time Dorfman feels all the contradictions and equivocations of his life fall into a clear pattern:

Throughout the sixties, I had been ashamed of my previous infatuation with America, I had tried to hide it, make believe it never existed. And now, all of a sudden, that liaison had become valuable, indispensable to free the *patria* in its hour of need. It had a meaning, it all fit into place: that is why I had gone to the States, that is why I had fallen in love with America. So that many years later I could discern and dissect the risks of that love affair, warn my new compatriots not to follow my path. So that they could reject now what I had been unable to reject back then as a child. (253)

As of then, Dorfman carves for himself the archetypal role of community storyteller—keeper and narrator of the collective memory. This role takes commanding force with the military coup of September 11, 1973. In a most dramatic scene Dorfman accepts the party directive to go to exile—Abel, the underground party contact whispers in his ear “*Vive por nosotros*” (147) (Live for us all). This directive reinforces Dorfman’s sense of a transcendental mission. This is why his life was spared the day of the military coup. He feels he should have died the day of the coup and feels guilty for having been spared. That day most government officials at La Moneda, the seat of government, were executed. Dorfman had asked a friend to replace him in his shift. The minister for whom he worked excluded Dorfman from the list of personnel who should have reported to La Moneda in the case of a coup.

As a refugee at the Argentinian embassy he does not only soak up testimonials of military brutality from other refugees. The transcendental power of his English intervenes to rescue him when the wife of the ambassador—an American—hears him speak and then intervenes so that Dorfman be promptly flown to Buenos Aires and reunited with his family and parents. Unknown forces are protecting him so that he will accomplish his archetypal mission: “Remaining loyal to the past would prove an almost impossible task, a task that continues to challenge me more than twenty years later, which I am still grappling with here, on the other side of the hemisphere” (256).

Optimistic Fatalist

Dorfman’s mystical conception of politics and history resemble the basic myths of Gnosticism (Jonas). Gnostics believe the universe was created by a failed, mediocre god—the Demiurge—who imitated the true god, the One,

using his ideal Forms, but turning them into degraded material copies. The world is presided by the Archones, authorities that govern according to the degraded nature of the Demiurge. The Archones' task is to preserve the world as a dungeon where all processes and relationships are marked by cruelty, fear, pain, suffering, and death, yet they mask their deeds as work for the good and redemption of humanity. Humans are fallen creatures who, nevertheless, contain a spark of the true god that yearns to return to the purity of origin. Some humans have an intuition of this residue of the divine in themselves and strive for spiritual discipline to expand their awareness, and the yearning for purity. They form cells to support and instruct each other. They live the ambiguity of being in this world without being of this world. They try to move about undetected; their language strives for ambiguity and contradictory allegories to communicate their visions at a subliminal level. Dorfman says his literature is that of "a liar who tells the truth." At the outset of his memoirs (chapters 2 and 3) he sets these Gnostic similarities by telescoping the moment of his birth and the perils he survived with the disaster of the Allende government:

I was falling [. . .] Strange and foreboding that for all the many words attending the scattered chaos and delirium of my birth, the only shrapnels of sense my mother snatched from extinction and later froze into family legend should have been that warning" (11–12); "I was falling, like every child that was ever born, I was falling into solitude and nothingness [. . .] Maybe that was my first exile: I had not asked to be born" (12); When oblivion breathes down your neck, takes you for a ride to the outskirts of emptiness and then yanks you back to the shores of reality trembling and intact, you need to find a reason, you need to find a meaning. (30)

Did Dorfman purposefully explore Gnostic myths? I do not think it matters. The point is to describe the sensibility arising from the failure of the political utopias of Modernity. The recycling of Gnostic matrices—be it consciously or unconsciously—should not be surprising.

This sensibility is close to that of the human rights movement—with brutal realism the movement recognizes that severe violations of human rights have occurred from time immemorial, are occurring right now, and will continue to occur indefinitely into the future. Any of us, under the right circumstances, could commit abject atrocities. Yet at the core of this nihilism there is a spark of hope that has propelled the formation of a world civil society represented by thousands of non-governmental organizations and coalitions of NGOs that tackle violations of human rights in a concerted way beyond national boundaries. A sensibility like Dorfman's and the human rights movement share a Kantian core of ethical values. Their aesthetic origin is different, though. Personae construction shows that

Dorfman's sensibility emerges from a romantic nihilism in which unreason leaps over and against the teleology of history and politics as apprehended by reasons of State. The human rights movement—the last utopia surviving Modernity—stems from a realist tradition, the Machiavellian tradition that understands political action rationally strategized as in warfare. It attempts to understand the rational teleology of armed conflict in order to intervene and ameliorate unnecessary death and destruction, and restore channels for peaceful political negotiation.

It was inevitable that the Nixon administration would unleash a covert war in Chile in the event Salvador Allende came to power in 1970. The Soviet leadership warned leaders of the Popular Unity (PU) that they could not expect long term economic support and advised them to avoid coming to power; that they should support Radomiro Tomic, the Christian Democratic candidate whose political platform in many aspects was similar to the Left's (Leonov; Politzer). Eduardo Frei Montalva, the Christian Democratic ex-President (1964–1970), a politician well connected with American and European power circles, tried to impress in Allende the catastrophic consequences the triumph of the PU would have. Besides the armed forces conspiracy, in the 1970–1973 period politico-military entities hierarchically organized and operated in Chile—the Movimiento de la Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR) (Revolutionary Left Movement), with scant representation in the working class, and the right wing Patria y Libertad. The ELENOS (Ejército de Liberación Nacional [National Liberation Army]), a sector of the Socialist Party, advocated armed conflict in the conquest of political power. As some kind of juvenile prank, in his memoir Dorfman refers to the incipient military preparations of his party, the MOC, for guerrilla warfare. In 1978 the MIR began infiltrating into Chile military cadre trained in Cuba (Vidal 1995); as of 1980 the Communist Party (PCCH) also infiltrated military cadre trained in Cuba, the Soviet Union, and the German Democratic Republic who had had a decisive participation in the Nicaraguan revolution (Vidal 1999). In 1983 a section of these communist cadre entered the politico-military arena under the name Frente Patriótico Manuel Rodríguez (FPMR); the PCCH disavowed any connection with the FPMR, a move with no credibility. During the dictatorship the MOC also sent cadre to the Soviet bloc for military training.

After the military coup of 1973 the underground party organization of the Left was easily neutralized by the military security agencies; by 1986 the military apparatus of the MIR and the FPMR had been defeated. Democracy returned to Chile in a grand pact brokered by the second Reagan administration, pope John Paul II, and the European Socialist International (Vidal 2005). In 1990 the anti-military opposition came to power committing itself to the pact, generally accepting the constitution and the neoliberal economic policies imposed by the dictatorship; the majority of the old Left parties abandoned Marxist-Leninist revolutionary ideologies. The

MOC and the MIR disappeared as political entities; the PCCH became a marginal party with very limited national representation. Breaking international human rights law (Fitzpatrick), the new democratic governments purposefully neglected to indict armed forces personnel involved in atrocities. Dorfman's comrades in government privately and publicly stated that bringing them to justice was politically unrealistic, undesirable and inconvenient. The governments of presidents Patricio Aylwin and Eduardo Frei Ruiz-Tagle unsuccessfully tried to pass laws that would have given human rights violators virtual immunity. Indictments only began in 1998 after the arrest of Augusto Pinochet in London, only because of international activism by human rights organizations (Caucoto; Reyna).

This context explains why in 1991 the new democratic elite boycotted the premiere of *Death and the Maiden*. In retrospect the play was prescient in showing the bad conscience of the democratic governments in handling the issue of human rights. I understand this clash weighed on Dorfman's decision not to return to Chile.

Realism demands that the Allende period and the dictatorship be considered within the broader issue of armed conflict. This requirement destabilizes Dorfman's public personae construction. Through the years, in his political activism and journalistic writing he simplified and narrowed the issue of human rights violations in Chile to the toppling of the legitimate Allende government in 1973, and the illegal repression unleashed by the military regime against the opposition. Traumatic, life-endangering episodes foster such mental freezing. This is where the psychosis Dorfman shared with his readers assumes iconic, hermeneutical importance.

Issues of armed conflict must be discussed according to broader thematic parameters—the preparations made for warfare by belligerent parties, the strategies and tactics developed, the competence or incompetence of the political elites and the military high commands involved, the discipline of field soldiers, for example. Armed conflicts generate fields of legal-ideological disputes channeled through the concepts of *jus ad bellum*—the justification to wage warfare according to international law—and *jus in bello*, the adherence of belligerent parties to the norms of the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols in order to minimize unnecessary suffering, deaths and destruction.² In discussing Dorfman's personae construction and conception of history and politics, *jus ad bellum* takes precedence.

Jus ad bellum is associated with the notion of “just war” in the Catholic Church tradition (*Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*)—initiating warfare is just if it possesses a right intention; if it is declared by a proper authority; if these authorities fully assume the ethical and moral responsibility for the suffering, death, and destruction inevitably brought about by warfare; if the social order emerging after war will be reasonably better than that prior to

the conflict; if armed conflict is the last political resort; if it has a reasonable chance of success. These guidelines are, obviously, open to lawyerly debate. The Allende government was predictably doomed to failure considering the background of the Cuban revolution, the Cold War and its official ideology, the Doctrine of National Security, the military coup of 1964 in Brazil, the American intervention of 1965 in the Dominican Republic, and the military coup of 1966 in Argentina. Not only the external environment was forbidding. The Popular Unity (PU) came to power in 1970 blinded by the myth of national exceptionality—supposedly, democratic habits and tendencies ingrained in the population set Chile apart from the chaotic politics of most Latin American countries; as constitutionally mandated, the armed forces would be obedient to civilian governments (Joxe). The PU was a very fragile coalition of parties, with contradictory factions and ideologies, all vying to carve for themselves a quota of power while in government. As the American covert intervention proceeded and the government political economy gradually failed, party fractures intensified; Allende lost control of the coalition; most of the parties turned against him (Bitar). Street confrontations and violence increased; the oligarchies and the middle classes were enticing the military to stage a coup. By the middle of 1973 the rule of law had ceased in Chile.

Speculating through the lenses of *jus ad bellum* questions arise about the responsibility of the intellectual elite of the Popular Unity in leading the country toward a revolution that unflinchingly would result in an armed conflict (Politzer; Tironi). In striving for a more just socialist order they claimed right intention but they could not claim proper authority because they barely controlled the Executive apparatus; the Legislative and Judicial powers were in the hands of the opposition. The PU made no effective preparations for the conflict; their intelligence on the armed forces was extremely poor. When the final crisis came, they hoped armed forces vertical discipline would break and factions would defend the Allende government. This would have precipitated a civil war (Prats). In retrospect, it was hard for the PU to claim a reasonable chance of success.

There is a core of tragedy in these events. Allende and the Popular Unity came to power with a very small plurality of the vote (36.3 percent) in a field of three presidential candidates; Arturo Alessandri, the right wing coalition candidate, received 34.9 percent. Was it strategically wise for the Popular Unity to propel revolutionary social reforms with such narrow a base? But, on the other hand, could the leadership of the PU parties simply abandon the possibility of governing, betraying the very long tradition that spawned the parties of the Left and the working class organizations?

In terms of *jus ad bellum*, according to international law the military government could not claim legitimacy in that the social order they established was not designed to preserve democracy (Fitzpatrick), but to terminate it. In terms of *jus in bello*, severe military violations of Article 3

common to the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols are well known. To my knowledge, there has been no research on human rights violations by military organizations of the Left parties.

After the return of democracy in 1990 the Catholic Church failed in their proposal of a national, open, cathartic, forgiving discussion of what led to the end of the democratic regime in 1970, and the violations of human rights during the military dictatorship. The Church proposed retrieving information from all agencies and individuals involved in forced disappearances, and a national search for their remains. The main reason for the failure was that the armed forces had a strong veto power over the new democracy. To preserve it, the political elites of all persuasions declared a moratorium on the debate of these matters. The term used to refer to this truce was “the politics of consensus,” extant to this day. It is hard not to label it “bad conscience.” Here is where the issue of psychosis proposed by Dorfman can be entered.

War psychologists show these repressed traumas remain in the psyche like subliminal cysts, persistently pressuring consciousness (CODEPU; Martín-Baró). Periodically, they invade conscience to distort immediate, everyday life social relations. In the long run, in the flow of the generations, they distort the understanding of the national history and identity, and the institutional system. The system is exposed as unable to provide neither justice nor explanations of its most critical historical processes (Vidal 2009). This is severe, psychotic narrowing of social awareness and collective memory. In his role as shaman of Chilean culture there is a coincidence in Dorfman’s inability to recognize, pose and assume responsibility for armed conflict in Chile, and the bad conscience of democratic governments to silence it. *Death and the maiden* suggests the difference lies in the psychosis and histrionics Dorfman knew since childhood. Experienced in the ploys of bad conscience, he could see through that of the new democratic governments, but not his own. If we accept this as the political core of Dorfman’s literature, we can say that he was burdening himself with a superhuman load. In my experience, no one who has delved in matters of human rights in such depth fails to pay a grievous price. There is great generosity in this act.

Notes

1. I composed this profile from a great number of interviews given by Ariel Dorfman, especially taking into account the most comprehensive or most revealing—Berman, Croggon, and McClennen. I also received opinions and insights from political, theater, and human rights personalities in Chile who chose to remain anonymous. I used their views as background.
2. This quote from *Basic Rules of the Geneva Conventions and Their Additional Protocols* (Geneva: International Committee of the Red Cross, 1983) may help to understand the main issues entailed in *jus in bello*:

CHAPTER V
PROTECTION OF VICTIMS OF
NON-INTERNATIONAL ARMED CONFLICTS
ARTICLE 3 COMMON TO THE FOUR CONVENTIONS AND ADDITIONAL
PROTOCOL II

The general rules relating to non-international armed conflicts refer to the two following cases:

- a) *any situation where, within a State's territory, clear and unmistakable hostilities break out between the armed forces and organized armed groups [. . .];*
- b) *any situation where dissident forces are organized under the leadership of a responsible command and exercise such control over a part of the territory as to enable them to conduct sustained and concerted military operations (intensive fighting [. . .])*

SECTION I

Article 3 common to the four Conventions applies to all armed conflicts of a non-international character and occurring in the territory of one of the Powers parties to the Convention. In such a case, persons not taking active part in the hostilities, including members of armed forces who have laid down their arms and those who are *hors de combat* for any other reason will in all circumstances be treated humanely without any adverse distinction.

The common article 3 [. . .] states what constitutes a minimum of humane treatment. The following acts, committed against the persons mentioned above, *are and must remain prohibited at all times and in all places*:

- a) *violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture;*
- b) *taking of hostages;*
- c) *outrages upon personal dignity, in particular, humiliating and degrading treatment: the passing of sentences and carrying out executions without previous judgment pronounced by a regularly constituted court, affording all the judicial guarantees which are recognized as indispensable by civilized people.*

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