

ALTERNATIVE POLITICAL DISCOURSES IN  
ARIEL DORFMAN'S *DEATH AND THE MAIDEN*

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In *Death and the Maiden*, Ariel Dorfman explores the painful process a country has to undergo in its transition to democracy, after years of suffering a dictatorship. Taking as the basis of his play a woman's agonised past, the playwright moves on to more general issues in search of the truth that will explain both the personal and the political. However, when victim, alleged torturer and mediator --the three characters in the play-- confront each other, we realise, as Foucault states, that: "the achievement of 'true' discourses is one of the fundamental problems of the West. The history as true --is still virgin territory".

This paper attempts to study how the three alternative discourses are constructed and counterpointed, and to what extent, by using defamiliarising techniques, the issues they deal with involve readers and spectators alike. Furthermore, the semiotically marked progress of the woman --from hiding in a corner, to controlling the action-- will be carefully analysed in order to grasp the 'truth' in the play's pivotal discourse.

What kind of a process does a country have to undergo in its transition to democracy? How can toppled dictators co-exist with their former victims? What happens to the powerless when they get in power? What is the value of a system of justice that conspires to suppress the truth? What is our responsibility towards those who suffered most? These are some of the questions Ariel Dorfman, the Chilean playwright born in Argentina, raises in his play *Death and the Maiden* (1991). Critical consensus describes this work as a political play, as it clearly fits into the definition of the kind of drama that provides a critique of the dominant ideology. Yet, as Holderness has argued (1992), the politics of a play cannot be confined to its content; it also needs a politics of form and of function; that is, a political play not only challenges and interrogates the dominant ideology but also, and more significantly, both exposes the mechanisms of its own construction --in Brechtian terms 'lays bare the device' (Willett 1964, 143)-- and defamiliarises the conventional naturalistic relation between audience and stage, while shattering traditional expectations. As will be seen, the play in question effectively conflates a politics of content with a politics of form and function.

To begin to provide an answer to the initial questions, it is important first to look at Michael Foucault's theories on power, which I have found particularly useful in studying the three different political discourses present in the play. In the second and third sections of this essay, I discuss some of the ways such a dynamics of power, in conjunction with feminist and semiotic insight, might be applied in order to analyse both the heroine's semiotically marked progress and the final political response the play offers.

Postmodern theory and practice have put forward new notions on language which bring into question the totalizing, value-neutral discourses of positivistic theory and liberal humanism. Further, they make us aware of the fact that language can constitute that which it represents, and is, therefore, at the basis of power (Barthes 1982, 459). In addition, given the fact that language is always used in precise social, historical and political frameworks, we may conclude it constructs meaning (Williams 1977, 55) and generates ideology --which, in Eagleton's terms, could be defined as: "the ways in which what we

say and believe connects with the power-structure and power-relations of the society we live in" (1983, 14). In sum, postmodern theory foregrounds the importance of discourse and its alignments with knowledge, truth and power. In this connection, I would like to pay special attention to Michael Foucault, who has been a seminal force in conceptualizing an 'analytics of power' which establishes a complex network of relations of 'power', based on 'discourse', 'knowledge' and 'truth'.

As Foucault has postulated: "power is something that circulates" (1980, 98); some thing which "is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another"; that is, "power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (1978, 93). Foucault's is, evidently, a dynamic interpretation which rejects any reification of power. Thus, power is conceived of both as omnipresent, limitless, and constantly generated, and as a practice which is politically constructed and subsequently exerted throughout complex social networks. Foucault has further argued that the mechanics of power do not primarily work in order to possess it, but rather in order to control its terms of deployment (Foucault 1980) --that is, "power is not possessed, given, seized, captured, relinquished, or exchanged. Rather, it is exercised. It exists only in actions. It is a complex set of ever-changing relations of force" (Grosz 1988, 87). Moreover, in his historical studies, Foucault has put forward the notion that power is coextensive with knowledge (Foucault 1977). Although this connection does not imply a complete identification between both epistemic fields, it recognizes the presence of common strategic alignments. Hence, knowledge "cannot be neutral in the sense of existing outside the sphere of power" (Ransom 1993, 129). Thus, for example, power is exercised to constrain individual behaviour in order to make it knowable; the acquired knowledge in turn generates new forms of oppression in order to constrain the individual to confess. It is in this sense that Foucault first established the connection power/knowledge. The conclusion to be drawn is that there are many different knowledges and, therefore, many different powers, yet the number of 'truths' still has to be determined.

Both positivistic theory and humanistic thinking claim to possess fixed, timeless, transcendental truths that conform the essence of the ahistorical human being; yet Foucault's pluralism problematises this notion by contending truth is something produced. It exists only within a given context. It is historically specific. It is a "situated response to a particular political and epistemic situation" (Rouse 1994, 112). The historian and the philosopher have, therefore, to avow their incapacity to identify truth, as there is no external point from which to fix it. In this respect, Foucault has questioned: "what historical knowledge is possible of a history which itself produces the true/false distinction on which such knowledge depends?" (1991, 92). This notion stresses my initial statement about the importance of discourse, which I conceive of as the site of conjunction/construction of power, knowledge and truth. Drawing on Foucault and following postmodern theoretical perspectives on 'discourse analysis', it is my contention that it is only because of the importance of discursive practices in the construction of ideology that one can claim knowledge and truth and, subsequently, exercise the deployment of power. It is hoped that these assumptions will be of some help so as to throw light on the way discourses are constructed, and with what purpose, in *Death and the Maiden*.

Dorfman's play centres on the three different discourses of its three characters: a woman (Paulina Salas), her husband (Gerardo Escobar) and a doctor (Roberto Miranda). The play starts off with Gerardo being given a lift by a stranger whom Paulina identifies as the doctor who systematically raped and tortured her fifteen years before, and it soon becomes a deadly confrontation between victim, mediator and alleged torturer. In his capacity as newly appointed President of the Commission created to investigate the crimes of the past, Gerardo Escobar is the recipient of institutionalized discourse. With cool effi-

ciency, the lawyer articulates the official version that has to pass off as the truth; that is, the discursive practice the nation has to believe. In Foucauldian terms, Escobar's discourse establishes a "regime of truth" (1980, 131) adapted to the new political conditions in his country. In order to keep and exert power, he constructs the new government's interpretation of the past. As Foucault has put it, "[he] fictions a history starting from a political reality that renders it true, [he] fictions a politics that does not as yet exist starting from a historical truth" (1979, 75). In addition, Escobar attempts to control any subversive discourse by extolling moderation and equanimity. His official status enables him to promise that human rights' violations that ended in death or the presumption of death will be objectively investigated, that albeit not every criminal will be punished, there will always be some sort of moral sanction, and that conclusions will be officially published. In sum, the President of the new Investigating Commission sets up the country's "general politics of truth" in order to determine "the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true" (Foucault 1980, 130). In this particular instance, the country has to abide by a discursive practice that fosters forgiveness and compromise in order to enable the new regime to start a period of peace and prosperity and so, as Escobar states, "our country will never again live through those excesses..." (Dorfman 1991, 7).

In contrast, the victim's discourse argues back, questioning the final purpose of so much empty efficiency which only aims at compromise and negotiation. In Foucauldian terms, we may say that Paulina denounces that 'knowledge cannot be neutral', thus implying that the country needs something more than mere discursive formations. Furthermore, she exposes the manipulative stratagem devised by the former government granting themselves amnesty and the final exoneration of the past regime. The victim bitterly concludes: "There's freedom to say anything you want as long as you don't say everything you want" (Dorfman 1992, 32). As becomes evident, the text deftly dramatises the country's present political state; yet, by the end of scene iii, the main issue becomes not justice on a national scale, but revenge on a personal level. Transcoded into theatrical terms, the audience will witness the process by which power is generated and exercised. Significantly, the new system of power is established by Paulina, a woman.

In spite of his valuable contribution to a conceptualization of the dynamics of power, Foucault has often been charged with neglecting the fact that "power inscribes male and female bodies in quite different ways, with different goals and consequences", as "the body is not a sexually neutral or indifferent, pliable flesh; it is a body that is sexually concrete" (Grosz 1990, 107; see also Bartky 1988, 63-64; Hartsock 1990, 157-175; Ransom 1993, 123-125; Sawicki 1991, 95-109; Woodhull 1988, 167-170). In order to solve this omission, and given the fact that the text's pivotal discourse is a woman's, I will have recourse to other methodological practices which acknowledge sexual difference --namely, feminist and semiotic theories, which I consider extremely valuable so as to chart the woman's semiotically marked progress from victim to sole generator of knowledge, truth and power.

In the evidently naturalistic terms of a bourgeois text, the extra-dialogic stage directions opening the play establish character identification, physical definition, design and technical elements; yet I would argue that one has to consider also the spatial codes, that is, kinesics and proxemics (Elam 1980, 56-78; Aston and Savona 1991, 111-122), encoded in these introductory lines as they convey crucial information. Let us consider an extract:

PAULINA SALAS is seated in a chair on the terrace, as if she were drinking in the light of the moon. The sound of a faraway car can be heard. She hurriedly stands up, goes to the other room, looks out the window, crouches, and as the headlights of the car sweep the living-room, she can be seen rolled into a foetus-like position. (Dorfman 1991, 1)

Her foetus-like position clearly indicates her having been reduced to a state of both submission and self-preservation. She occupies a recognizably feminine enclosed and marginal spaciality, thus heightening the constricted posture culturally assigned to women by patriarchal ideology. Further, her restricted motility and her bodily language of subordination, which persist all through the scene, mark a contrast with her alert, sharp actions of scene ii, as she watches her husband and her alleged torturer, and build to a climax in scene iii, when, with extremely deft and precise movements, she overpowers Dr Miranda. Once again, extra-dialogic stage directions help us to decode the visual image:

PAULINA leaves the house. We hear the sound of ROBERTO's car. When the car's headlights are turned on, they sweep the scene and that stark brutal shot of light clearly reveals ROBERTO MIRANDA tied with ropes to one of the chairs, totally unconscious, and with his mouth gagged. (Dorfman 1991, 16)

Paulina's newly acquired higher status is marked by the fact that, as from now, she will occupy the centre of the stage.

The stage image, therefore, reverses the patriarchal ideology of gender; that is, instead of reproducing "the proxemics of the social order" (Case 1988, 117-118), which assign a subordinate position to women, the text heightens her physically and metaphorically central position. Further, she will assume sexually bold postures (it should be noted, for example, that she has gagged Dr Miranda by stuffing her own pants into his mouth), and discard the typically feminine economy of touching. In this respect, Paulina's 'handling' of her alleged torturer violates the prevailing standards of social acceptability --arguably, the most significant deed takes place when she accompanies Roberto to the bathroom (Dorfman 1991, 27-28); in my view, the scene demystifies, in Winifred Woodhull's graphic expression, the alleged rapist's "built-in weapon" (1988, 171). In addition, her semiotically charged action of tying Dr Miranda to a chair is a metaphorical specular reproduction of an allegedly past scene enacted both by Paulina and the doctor. The only fundamental difference lies in the fact that --in perfect mirroring focalisation-- their roles have been reversed. As might be expected, such a drastic power control shift has dramatically changed Paulina's discursive practice.

Her new kind of discourse might be defined, in Robin Lakoff's words, as "male language" (1975); yet Paulina proves language has more to do with exerting power and, thus, setting the social norms, than with sex. Her scatological remarks, her sexual innuendoes and strong expletives, which her husband significantly feels have to be apologized for to Dr Miranda (Dorfman 1991, 21), are the effect of her empowered situation. In opposition to the official discourse of compromise and forgiveness, the former victim articulates a discursive practice based on physical punishment and personal revenge. As Paulina's firm directives, effectively backed by her gun, are obeyed by both her husband and her alleged torturer, we may affirm that subversive discourse gradually overpowers the official law of moderation and control. Now, she is the one who claims to have 'knowledge', to possess the 'truth' and, therefore, the one who exerts power. Paulina proves that "discourse, then, is both an instrument and an effect of power" (Hutcheon 1988, 185). Further, the fact that a marginal discourse has succeeded in occupying such a central position shows, in Foucauldian terms, the possibility of 'resistance'; that is, despite the coextensiveness between discourses and movements of power, the socially and historically constructed subject has not been utterly disempowered but rather endowed with the capacity for resistance, for generating effective political action and, hence, with the possibility of bringing about change. As Janet Ransom has pointed out, "it is because, and not in spite of, our embeddedness in discursive practices that political action is possible" (1993, 135).

Finally, it should be stressed that Paulina's sexually and scatologically remarks 'recreate' the sexually and scatologically morbid atmosphere of the torture room.

The third discursive practice present in *Death and the Maiden* is that of the alleged torturer. In the play's first scenes, Dr Miranda articulates a discourse of strong approval and marked sycophantic deference towards Escobar's new political appointment. "Male bonding" (Sedgwick 1985) is strongly established, as both men cement their relationship by concluding the female soul is "utterly unpredictable" (Dorfman 1991, 12). Yet from the moment Dr Miranda is hit, tied to a chair, gagged and threatened with a gun, he drops his unctuous words to adopt a combative discursive practice. Dr Miranda starts by steadfastly denying all crimes and deftly trying to disempower Paulina's dominant discourse. Very much in keeping with his profession, he 'diagnoses' the woman's madness denying, therefore, her claims to knowledge and truth, and, hence, to her exerting power. Feminist theory has often pointed out that patriarchy aims to exclude women from the production of speech and the generation of meaning. Women's social role is reduced to that of mirroring men's central and authoritative image. Consequently, when a woman does not conform with her socially defined role of dependency and submission, she risks being defined as mad. By having Paulina articulate the most powerful discourse in these scenes, the text significantly problematises the cultural dichotomies Man/Woman, Reason/Madness, Speech/Silence, Truth/Lies which the doctor's discourse evokes. Unable to disempower his opponent, Dr Miranda changes his discursive strategy once more. Thus, following his mediator's advice, and so as to indulge the madwoman's orders, he reluctantly agrees to fake a confession. Now, a new discourse begins to gather shape. Humanitarian reasons are first invoked. The desire to help the person being tortured is stated. However, Dr Miranda soon 'confesses' to a certain curiosity "partly morbid, partly scientific" (Dorfman 1991, 47). Finally, the torturer's voice emerges. The coercive possibilities of what Foucault has described as the "mechanics of power" (1977, 138) are revealed, as the torturer gloats over his absolute power which is exerted with total impunity. In the doctor's description of Paulina's torture, the audience not only 'witnesses' the violence inflicted to her body and mind, but also the fact that she was made to play "the role of merchandise" (Rubin 1975, 157-210) in the world of her male torturers' exchange. When the doctor explains why he finally raped Paulina, the text offers another example of male bonding. Even if the issue is not further developed, we are told the soldiers who raped and tortured Paulina offered her to the doctor as a sexual gift (Dorfman 1991, 48); thus the woman became "a mere conduit in a male relationship" (Rubin 1975, 161) not a partner in the transaction. At this moment in the play, we should recall Shoshana Felman's words, when writing about a similar issue:

The three men in the story [i.e. Balzac's *Adieu*] in fact symbolically represent -by virtue of their professions: magistrate, doctor, soldier- the power to act *upon* others' reason, in the name of the law, of health or of force. (1989, 145)

In Dr Miranda's 'confession', the overwhelming and all-powerful torturer's discourse strongly looms up. However, it should be noticed that the text never construes Dr Miranda as either innocent or guilty. On the contrary, the play fosters uncertainty and ambiguity and prevents the audience from setting up any fixed conclusions about it. This is achieved by the use of defamiliarisation at the outset of the doctor's confession.

In Act III, sc. i, when Paulina begins recording her story, the extra-dialogic stage directions warn us: "*The lights begin to go down*" and later: "*The lights go down further and PAULINA's voice continues in the darkness, only the cassette-recorder lit by the light of the moon.*" After a few sentences Paulina's voice fades away and we are told: "*In the darkness, we hear ROBERTO's voice*" (Dorfman 1991, 46). This marks the beginning of

his 'confession'. Undoubtedly, the special atmosphere created by the semiotically charged use of light foregrounds our perception of the staged action, while stressing the constructedness of the doctor's statement. A second example of defamiliarisation takes place at the closing of this scene and runs through to the play's end. In my view, this is a more crucial and destabilising instance as it destroys the 'fourth-wall' naturalistic convention, violates the text's dramatic shape and problematises its conclusion.

The last exchange between victim and alleged torturer takes place in Act III, sc. i. Once Paulina has ratified her discursive practice with Dr Miranda's constructed confession, she threatens only 'the truth' will save him now. However, challenged by his subversive refusal, her dominant discourse finds difficulties in exerting its power:

Why is it always people like me who have to sacrifice, who have to concede when concessions are needed, biting my tongue, why? Well, not this time. If only to do justice in one case, just one. What do we lose? What do we lose by killing one of you? What do we lose? (Dorfman 1991, 53)

The text does not provide an answer to Paulina's questions, as the extra-dialogic stage directions that follow mark the transition from a realistic form into a non-naturalistic one; that is, on the formal level, at this precise moment, the play abandons the conventions of realism:

[PAULINA and ROBERTO] freeze in their position as the lights begin to go down slowly. We begin to hear music from the last movement of Mozart's Dissonant Quartet. PAULINA and ROBERTO are covered from view by a giant mirror which descends forcing the audience to look at themselves. For a few minutes, the Mozart quartet is heard, while the spectators watch themselves in the mirror. (Dorfman 1991, 53)

Evidently, the use of such a device obliterates the conventional naturalistic barriers set between audience and stage. Further, the use of a mirror attempts to productively engage the spectators in a critically and politically committed response. Moreover, juxtaposed to Paulina's previous remarks and, especially, to the play's closing scene, it destabilizes the audience's expectations of 'closure' in a bourgeois play (Aston and Savona 1991, 16-20; 30-31).

The last scene in the play, which takes place "*an evening some months later*" (Dorfman 1991, 54), could be defined as a 'concert-within-a-play', as Paulina and Gerardo "*sit down facing the mirror, their backs to the spectators, perhaps in two chairs or in two of the seats in the audience itself*" (Dorfman 1991, 54), thus foregrounding their identification with the audience. Yet, the most significant action takes place when --according to very precise extra-dialogic stage directions-- Dr Miranda "*enters, under a light which has a faint phantasmagoric moonlight quality. He could be real or he could be an illusion in PAULINA's head*" (Dorfman 1991, 55). Does the doctor's presence imply that after all Paulina did not assert her discourse by exercising power and shooting her gun? Or should this eerily moon-lit figure be decoded as that of a corpse? Once more, the play does not provide an answer.

First of all, this violation of the dramatic form foregrounds its constructedness, disrupts textual expectations and creates discomfort. Further, it produces an ideological effect as it problematises the question of absolutely fixed and definitive truths. And, finally, it generates a new critical capacity in the audience; that is, by using a defamiliarising technique, the text gives the spectators the necessary, distancing irony that will prevent them from emotionally (and uncritically) identifying with Paulina's discourse. It is my contention that, in keeping with a postmodernist Foucauldian stance, the text refuses to close in a realistic way, as this would mean supporting *one* of the opposing discourses

presented in the play, and, thus, providing a unique and universal truth. On the contrary, in *Death and the Maiden*, the audience is encouraged to actively discuss and assess the different options opened up for a country at the end of years of dictatorship and oppression. This pluralistic strategy ultimately establishes that there are no totalizing, universal answers, but situated responses to particular instances in precise social, historical and ideological contexts.

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