

## Facing Evil: Terror on Today's Stage

Slav N. Gratchev

*Purdue University*

This study will explore the underlying sub-text that, I argue, may be the most important and emotionally arduous aspect of the play *Blood* written by Sergi Belbel, the relatively young Catalan playwright who in the mid-80's rapidly became one of the most valued and highly acclaimed authors in today's Spain.

The extreme intensity of the play is gradually created throughout the text by the sub-text, the meaning and significance of which I would like to explore here. What makes this play even more emotionally and psychologically intense, almost unbearable at times, is that the play, in my opinion, after taking the spectator through a terrible ordeal, the play does not end on a consoling note. I would even argue that *Blood* does not end on a note of hope at all. Although a positive interpretation of the final scene would be the most appealing to readers and spectators alike, and would assuage the tremendous ferocity of the play's closing scene, nonetheless, the ending should be read as a warning sign against the incipient disease of modern society, the disease that is called "terrorism."

Needless to say, plays dealing with torture are not that uncommon in today's literature. In this regard we can recall *Death*

*and the Maiden* by Ariel Dorfman. Similar in one way—both deal with torture—still they are strikingly different in all other aspects: pain and torture which Sergi Belbel tries to deal with in *Blood* are the physical pain and torture that are happening *today*. And not only that: it is happening in front of us. These violent acts are being performed at this particular moment, in front of our eyes, and not in retrospect: “My whole body hurts. – You’ll get over it soon. – I can not move. They have tied me so tightly” (Belbel 1).

The author does not just limit himself to making long philosophical passages directed towards the past; instead, he chooses to describe the infliction of pain and torture. And, he has to use the language that is at times so graphic in its descriptive power that would hardly be considered appropriate at all: “My ass is covered with shit. If it bothers you, do not look. I’ll wait until the shit dries on me. Then I’ll get it off with my hands” (Belbel 6).

As the drama unfolds, the description of the event becomes even more intense, more viscous, and almost painful for the reader: “Inside there is a foot severed above the ankle. HE picks it up. HE turns pale . . . still holding the foot, which he places on his lap” (Belbel 38).

In Dorfman’s *Death and the Maiden* we hear voices of the past. The words and events also are shockingly descriptive at times:

What that twat, little lady, do not tell you haven’t got someone to fuck you, huh? . . . Nothing like good fresh water, eh, Doctor? Beats drinking your own piss. (Dorfman 30-31).

But these events are being recounted by Paulina, and the reality, however hard it might be for her, for the spectators is still a mere duplication of that reality. It is Paulina’s reality, and we, readers, have never witnessed it, and for us it cannot be as shocking and disturbing as the reality that we are witnessing in *Blood*.

More striking, however, is that whether the torturers are real figures as in *Blood*, or are conceived by the imagination of Paulina, the mentally disturbed woman in *Death and the Maiden*, both insist that they personally have never known their accusers: “No, we don’t

know each other at all. It's the first time we've ever seen each other" (Belbel 2).

The man from *Blood* is surprisingly reminiscent of another one, Roberto Miranda, protagonist in Dorfman's play: "I do not know you, madam. I have never seen you before in my life" (Dorfman 32). Both torturers decisively refuse to acknowledge their previous acquaintance with their victims, but the motives for this denial are drastically different: Miranda is negating his past out of fear for his own life, while the MAN is simply afraid of being recognized as the former student of the person whom he will shortly put to death. I believe that at this particular moment of refusal of his past the MAN is in effect trying to negate his own existence, exactly as Miranda does when he tries to prove that he was not even in the country during the time of dictatorship.

In drawing parallels between two men—two torturers—both of whom vigorously repudiate their involvement in what had happened in the past or what is happening now, we take note of some seemingly inconspicuous details about their previous personalities. These details that they would prefer not to reveal to anyone are likely to help us shed some light on those figures:

I accepted for humanitarian reasons . . . they still have the right to some form of medical attention. But afterwards . . . the mask of virtue fell off . . . By the time Paulina Salas was brought in it was already too late. (Dorfman 59)

Miranda was not a psychotic maniac at the time when he was brought into the pandemonium that was taking place in Argentina in 1975-1986. By contrast, the MAN's personality already was in a process of deformation well before the possibility to torture someone was given to him: "your question took me by surprise. 'What are the limits of a common morality,' how funny . . . You always wore black. Four years, or was it three?" (Belbel 6).

Perhaps, during all those four years the MAN had already become, or was well on the way to become a torturer. His conscience was almost free of doubts, and the only question that remained unresolved and unanswered was: *what are the limits of a common*

*morality*? He was seemingly disturbed by this unresolved issue, and was looking for an answer even in the university classroom, but that uneasiness could not stop him committing himself to a murder right now.

Compared to the MAN's steady inclination to the diabolic, the metamorphosis that takes place in Miranda's mind is astonishing and makes us shudder: "During all these years . . . that same voice, next to me, next to my ear: 'Give her a bit more. This bitch can take a bit more. Give it to her. . . . She is not even near fainting.'" (Dorfman 23).

We may recall, from Miranda's own words that he was not looking for *limits of the common morality*, and was starting from the "angelic" position of someone seeking to help—"I accepted for humanitarian reasons." That is why Miranda leaves us completely disillusioned. On the contrary, some beam of hope still scintillates through the MAN's distorted personality: "The MAN squats down in front of her and gently takes her leg. He feels it . . . 'There's nothing broken'" (Belbel 3).

Even though the MAN has been looking for those *limits* thereby hoping to justify what he has already decided to do, at the moment under discussion he seems to still preserve some human traits in his personality, while doctor Miranda, who was given exactly the same power and was entitled to do what he wanted, loses any restraint and gradually converts into a sadist:

A kind of—brutalization took over my life, I began to really like what I was doing. . . . My curiosity was partly morbid, partly scientific. How much can this woman take? How is her sex? Does her sex dry up when you put the current through her? . . . She is entirely in your power, you can carry out your fantasies, you can do what you want with her. (Dorfman 59)

To be able to draw the proper conclusions, I believe, it is important to realize that neither of those two men came to the position of torturer as a result of their insatiable revenge for something that had been done to them personally in their childhood or youth. For the MAN, it

is just a job; he is merely serving someone who is intentionally unnamed in the play: “Maybe you are not the leader. Are you the leader? Are you hungry? Are you the one who has to kill me? Thirsty? Do you want something to drink?” (Belbel 3).

Although the MAN is still repellent as he is he, at least, he takes no personal pleasure in nor advantage of the situation, as Miranda does fully. The MAN just “carries out orders. That is all” (Belbel 46). And for precisely this reason he becomes a non-entity even to his victim. “You are nobody. You just said: ‘I am myself,’ and it is a lie. You have no self” (Belbel 46).

The MAN is perceived this way by his own victim who is hardly far from the truth. Doctor Miranda, by contrast, is certainly another kind of man: he was in command; he was the one who gave orders: “I took part in the interrogation of ninety-four prisoners, including Paulina Salas” (Dorfman 60).

Perhaps, Doctor Miranda had never gone to his medical class seeking to learn where the limits of a common morality were; neither was he repentant about what he had done. His reasons were obviously not political ones. On the other hand, those reasons were not philosophical either. Earlier I used the term “psychotic maniac” referring to Doctor Miranda, and I believe that this term explains practically all the motives that moved him to do what he did.

In the case of *Blood* we have a different issue. Here Sergi Belbel is dealing with a situation that is much more convoluted and complex, as well as more obscure. First, there is no real motivation to the ferocity with which he treats the woman hostage. Second, it is not even clear enough if there is anyone behind the scenes who is in charge of all these abhorrent deeds. Lastly, we do not even know who would benefit from such an atrocity: “You’ll have a visitor. The ‘brain’ of your group? We do not have a brain” (Belbel 4).

Quibbling about the word “brain” gives the reader a small break from the emotional intensity that was constantly building up throughout the play, but then the laceration continues:

The YOUNG WOMAN subdues her and manages to tie her to the chair. . . . Tears are running from her

eyes. The YOUNG WOMAN and the CHILD watch her impassively. SHE lies very still and looks up at the YOUNG WOMAN begging for mercy. “I am obeying orders. I am sorry.” (Belbel 11)

Elain Scarry has argued that “the intense pain is world-destroying” (29). It seems to me that in *Blood* we observe not just the pain of the body but we also witness the very intense psychological pain that, in certain instances, can become more devastating than the physical. At the moment when those two pains meet and consequently achieve some kind of a consonance in acting against their common victim—the human being—the process of “unmaking the world” starts. This is the exact moment that Sergi Belbel is trying to present to us. In other words, this is what in the introduction to this study I suggested is the “sub-text” which, I believe, is the most demanding part of Belbel’s play.

In her work Elain Scarry suggests that “It is the intense pain that destroys a person’s self and the world . . . world, self and the voice are lost through the intense pain of torture” (35). It seems to me that the text of *Blood* provides us with some cogent textual evidence that substantiates this notion:

SHE opens her eyes and looks in front of her. Her face is expressionless. Absolutely blank. SHE remains that way, with a fixed gaze, lost in space. . . . For a while SHE remains completely motionless, without even blinking her eyes. (Belbel 43)

On the one hand, this passage could identify as that precise moment to which Elaine Scarry refers us—the moment of loss of self, the loss of voice and the loss of the world. On the other hand, it may not be looked at as an innovative realistic view at all. We as spectators always have to be ready for a quick, almost impetuous change of mood, change of character, change of roles even, and this change is inevitable and consequential. It is nothing less than the result of the furtive work of the so-called *sub-text* whose function in this play, as well as in many of Belbel’s plays, may be at times invisible but always persistently present.

I believe that *Blood* confronts us with a dilemma where “the moral debate is at its core” (James 40), but this debate is skillfully and somewhat unexpectedly shifted away from the torturer and re-directed toward the tortured. No matter how unsatisfying it may be for us, in *Blood* we do not see the torturer going through the moral laceration that would end in his complete desperation and contrition. No doubt we would have preferred to see some type of modern-day Raskolnikov from *Crime and Punishment* who, after committing a double murder, goes through an intense moral, religious and psychological crisis that results in a revision of Christian doctrine, and finally delivers himself into the hands of the police. Nothing similar is going to happen in *Blood*, and this is exactly what disturbs us, horrifies us.

If we are still willing to accept the above notion that here in *Blood* the focus of the moral debate has shifted from the torturer to the tortured, then this notion will also draw an another additional dividing line between the two plays that have been discussed in the the present study, *Blood* and *Death and the Maiden*.

Now, if we turn our attention to *Death and the Maiden*, there should not be much of a debate over the proposition that the whole play revolves around the notion of justice: “A vague memory of someone’s voice is not proof of anything. It is not incontrovertible” (Dorfman 23). This is said by Gerardo, the man of Law, special assistant to the President’s Commission that, supposedly, will establish the final truth. Obviously, his understanding of justice is very legalistic: if something cannot be substantiated with an original document then it does not constitute valid evidence. Remembering the voice and the smell of the person who was torturing and raping you continuously for a few months, for him it is NOT reliable evidence.

This refocusing of the moral dimension is what makes the *Blood* so drastically different from *Death and the Maiden*. I believe that in the latter play a sign of hope *is looming*. The life that Paulina so generously grants to Doctor Miranda (after everything that he has done to her!) gives us at least a measure of assurance that co-existence of the torturer and the tortured, however difficult, is still possible. Possible even though the body memory still covets revenge.

Respect to the limits of common morality, the morality that holds a society together, these limits exist for Paulina:

A concert hall. An evening some months later. Gerardo and Paulina appear, elegantly dressed. . . . After a few instants, she turns slowly and looks at Roberto. Their eyes interlock for a moment. Then she turns her head and faces the stage . . . The lights go down while the music plays and plays and plays. (Dorfman 67-68)

It may sound appalling, but such hope is absent from *Blood*. The same moral limits are evidently present in our society but they are not capable of restraining someone who wants a philosophical answer to the question that he has already answered for himself. In our new and drastically changed society, which preoccupies Sergi Belbel there are MEN who would step over whatever moral limits exist, and they will do so in spite of all kinds of philosophical answers they may have received:

The YOUNG WOMAN looks at the WOMAN's body. "I love you." "I love you too." The YOUNG WOMAN goes closer and kisses him on the lips. "Finish the job first." "It's normal to feel this way. It's difficult for me too. But it's done. We can go away for a few days, just two of us. . . . Will they give us our money tonight?" "Yes." "Where can we go?" "We'll be at the beach before sunrise. I'll take you to a very romantic place." (Belbel 50-52)

In *Blood* there is another important moral debate that takes place throughout the play, along with the first one, and, to my mind, makes the play so intense and difficult and physically difficult to endure. If at the beginning of the play we see WOMAN begging for mercy, sobbing, lying on the floor motionless and "without even blinking her eyes" all of a sudden, as she nears her end, she finds the strength to confront her torturer. And not only him as a person: she confronts the whole idea that sustains him and, ultimately, the terrorism he is inflicting on her: "Does it frighten you? Does it terrify you to think that my last thought, the very last one, that perhaps I'll still have even



when you've severed of my body, will be for you and your kind?" (Belbel 45).

I believe that this is precisely the moment I have been trying to champion in the last few pages: the shift of the moral debate away from the torturer and its redirection toward the tortured.

Belbel certainly believes that the person who was condemned to death and knows this, that person still can challenge the torturer together with the "morality" that regulates his actions. It may not change anything right then, and the death will not be rescinded, but the challenge itself is capable of asserting that the "morality" which is backed up with pseudo-philosophical rhetoric is, in essence, nothing else but the lust for power embellished by the loquacious harangue. And this is what WOMAN is averring by in her last and the most powerful monolog:

You need money, you need to be on the front pages of all the newspapers, to feel yourself powerful. . . . I have not asked you why you did it to me, I have not asked you because I am not stupid; your logic and mine are on two different planes destined never to meet, like two parallel lines. . . . The universe is limited, it has no infinity, it began and it will end. (Belbel 47)

Her last words about two parallel lines that never meet, those words permit me to support the view that the play does not end on a note of hope. Neither does the play inveigle us to move into the pseudo-realistic world and relegate the matter. Rather, the play gives us a warning by describing the new, aberrant type of so-called "humans" who are capable of talking and dreaming about vacation, "the beating of the waves . . . sunrise . . . the sound of seagulls . . . the wet sand. You and me alone" (Belbel 52), while coldly connecting the electric saw to cut the body of the condemned: "His entire body and hands are blooded, and he leaves a trail of blood everywhere HE walks. . . . There is a lot of blood, I need a couple of blankets . . ." (Belbel 53)

In the beginning of this essay, I mentioned that I would explore the function of the *sub-text* that, in my opinion, acts as a powerful torque creating the unstoppable movement of the play. The

substantial textual material that I have provided in this analysis supports that notion. For the same reason some lines of connection that were deliberately drawn between *Blood* and *Death and the Maiden*. At the same time, in my opinion, I managed to contrast those plays putting them on two different sides of a significant moral and philosophical issue despite the apparent similarities between the two works.

With regards to my second point, questioning the note of hope on which presumably *Blood* ends, I think, I was able to demonstrate that the ending of the play is much more complex and can thwart any traditional interpretations of its meaning. In my opinion, there is hope in both, in *Blood* and in *Death and the Maiden*, but different kind of hope: one for reconciliation or at least non-violent acceptance of the past; the other of the profound moral standing of which even a terrified victim may be capable.

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