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Of Men and Ghosts: Delmore Schwartz's Re-visitation of the Greek Chorus

Abstract

Among the many elements of interest we encounter in Delmore Schwartz's literary production, the re–visitation of the Greek chorus is particularly relevant. Its innovatory appeal, in fact, never ignores the call of tradition, and is rooted on the main issues of American culture, from immigration and problematic assimilation to the rise of consumer society and mass media. Through the presence of various versions of the chorus, which is alternatively composed of men, ghosts, angels, or even mere voices, and shifting from drama to poetry and vice versa, the contemporary reader can get an extraordinary focus on the literary, psychological, and social background of the period spanning from the 1930s to the 1950s, while reconsidering the meaning of the chorus from different perspectives in the light of Schwartz's prophetic insight into the deep changes the new millennium was going to bring about in such fields as communication, consciousness, identity, and collectivity.

— 1 — Introduction

Delmore Schwartz (1913-1966) is too often wrongly considered a minor representative of twentieth century Anglo-American literature; and when we happen to come across him in anthologies, it is either his poems (usually either "The Heavy Bear Who Goes With Me" or "In the Naked Bed, in Plato's Cave") or one single short story (always "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities"). On the contrary, Schwartz was one of the most brilliant, erudite, prolific, and forward-looking minds of his generation, his literary, cultural, and political insight being so deep that when reading his works today we find it hard to believe that they were written so many years ago and in such a problematic

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period as the age spanning from the Marxist decade to the tranquillized Fifties. Moreover, not only did he write poems and short stories, but he was also editor of the mythical *Partisan Review*, wrote dramas and essays, and anticipated in many ways the later interest – and involvement – of intellectuals in the mass media, popular arts, and consumer society. His name has been linked to Walter Benjamin's for his deep understanding and critique of mass culture and for exploring the "sometimes galvanizing but more often corrosive influence of mass forms on language" (New 1985: 431). Yet, his name is now almost forgotten, with due exceptions (e.g. Ford 2005; Runchman 2014) and only a few seem to remember – let alone appreciate – his extraordinary contribution to American literature.

The case of Delmore Schwartz as an author of theatre is extremely fascinating, but also difficult to handle in that he escapes canonical taxonomy. First, "his mode is inclusion": Deutsch uses the term "appetite technique" to define the writer's strategy of "projecting his endless hunger on to the universe in terms of the universe's inexhaustibility" (1996: 917-18). Throughout his whole life Schwartz experimented with many different genres, mixing verse and prose, and shifting easily from one to another, in a constant cross-contamination of styles and forms. Second, he has been lacking recognition from critics as a worthwhile author in the history of US theatre, since he was more interested in writing plays than in having them performed and for this reason he is usually considered a poet and is hardly ever mentioned in theatrical anthologies and surveys. Third, he was far more interested in (and influenced by) European playwrights, from Shakespeare to Auden, than American ones (with the exception of Eliot), and even his contemporaries – such as Thornton Wilder – seem to be ages away from him.

Although Wilder's *The Long Christmas Dinner* (1931) and *Our Town* (1938) do have elements in common with Schwartz's theatre, both thematically (e.g. the family) and formally (e.g. the reduction to the essential), Schwartz was closer to the Yiddish theatre, which had exported to America the themes and forms we find in all Jewish American writers (e.g. Saul Bellow, Philip Roth) and film directors (e.g. Woody Allen and the Cohen Brothers), such as perpetual moving, the necessity to continually re-draw the boundaries, the confrontation with diversity, the dialogue with spirituality, the importance of dialectics, as well as the presence of dreams and hallucinations, the figure of the wise fool, the transcription of episodes from the Bible, music, folklore, orality, and the exaltation of the individual (Calanchi 2008). To all this, the emergence of new media and mass culture must be added: as Schwartz (who never travelled outside the US) once wrote to a friend of his, "international consciousness ... keeps growing bigger all the time in the world – in such strange plants as the radio and the newspaper" (Schwartz 1984: 101). It has been rightly observed

that this conception draws upon Eliot's historical sense, which involves "a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence" (Runchman 2013: 38-39), but differs in that, in Schwartz, the international is perceived by, and in relation to, the individual. While Eliot determined to leave personality out of poetry, Schwartz thought that any attempt to escape personality meant to falsify experience (ibid.).

It easily follows that Schwartz was not so interested in representing the bourgeoisie nor in subverting the rules of acting as he was in trying to come to terms with the role of the alienated, self-exiled individual in relation to a changing community within the modern multicultural, hyperconscious, and hyperconnected society marked by growing internationalization and faster rhythms of life. A Jew (and a son of immigrants), an intellectual, and a radical, Schwartz might have had something in common with Clifford Odets and the Group Theatre, whose experiments in the 1930s included essential language and fusion between actors and audience, or with the avant-garde (Marxist) Russian playwright Erwin Piscator, who in January 1939 moved to New York and founded the Dramatic Workshop, where he used the new technologies to break the Aristotelian unities of time, place and action. Tennessee Williams was one of his students.

Schwartz, however, was rather isolated. "It is a strange thing to be an American", he wrote in 1957 (Schwartz 1986b: 568), and throughout his life he suffered from the typical sense of displacement of the Jewish writers of his time (from Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud to the early Philip Roth), whose characters were "rootless, neurotic, frozen in a scatological daymare" (Schwarz 1978: 185). Since, as Aarons has observed, "estrangement, alienation, and dislocation . . . are the byproducts of both an immigrant heritage and a developing modern consciousness" (1987: 255), Schwartz's "in-between-ness" (Runchman 2014: 2) opened the path to what has been called "post-Jewish" or "post-alienated" identity (Fiedler 1991; Kremer 1993).

Schwartz's personal fight consisted in coming to terms with the cultural, psychological, and social turmoil he sensed within and around him, quite a few years before Allen Ginsberg expressed his hallucinated worries for the *best minds* of his own generation. The intellectuals he interacted with most easily were more often poets and readers of poetry (he published his early verse plays in *New Caravan*, where E.E. Cummings, William Carlos Williams had published their poems) more than playwrights. Nonetheless, even though he missed both the *lost* generation and the *beat* generation, remained an outsider to the Federal Theatre Project, and also lacked Orson Welles's charismatic approach to the radio – never participating in such experiments as the fake Martian invasion that gave everlasting fame to the Mercury Theatre on the

Air – Schwartz created a few true masterpieces still awaiting full appreciation, for which I believe it is high time.

Among the most important reasons that may account for my statement, I think Schwartz's powerful pre-McLuhan insight, together with his exceptional ability to bind the past to the present in his theatrical pieces, deserves due attention. As an American Jew, he was deeply concerned with such issues as the controversial world of the fathers, the still more controversial role of motherhood in a time when interruption of pregnancy became a social and political issue, and the problem of a new (hyphenated? postnational?) identity in the so-called land of opportunities. One of the best definitions he gave to this tormented identity is "scissor self"; it comes from his diaries and is dated 1949 (Schwartz 1986b: 345).

As a New York radical intellectual, he was torn between the scholarly past of the erudite (represented by the legacy of the classics and mythology) and the dynamic, pre-globalized vision of modern metropolitan life (symbolized by the appeal of consumerism, politicians' promises and parades, and an ambiguous fascination for popular media). As a playwright, in particular, Schwartz enacted such double involvement with the past and the present, an involvement actually rooted in his choice of *responsibility* as the guideline of his poetics (Calanchi 2008). Among other things, he felt that the writer (as well as the citizen) ought to use the past to increase their responsibility toward the present, which means they he or she has the moral (political, social) duty to incorporate them both in their art. As has been acknowledged, Schwartz was able "at once to reconcile the past to the present and at the same time to create a future in which continuity and change are not in conflict" (Aarons 1987: 279).

The way Schwartz chose to create a vital link uniting the past and present in his theatrical pieces does not consist simply, as one might think, in quoting Coriolanus, or Dido, or Shakespeare. This would be mere homage, or little more. Also, it would not account for such plays as *Shenandoah*, where no classics are called into play. No. Schwartz's idea was far more refined and complex than this, and was based on a "the sense of an overwhelming fate, rooted as much in Greek tragedy and Jewish history as in Freud" (Dickstein 2011). What links the past and the future in his works, revitalizing Greek tragedy through Jewishness and psychoanalysis, is, among other things, his absolutely original re-visitation of the Greek chorus. True, we also had a chorus in *Mourning Becomes Electra* by Eugene O'Neill (1931), the famous retelling of the *Oresteia* by Aeschylus where the action shifts to the Civil War: the chorus was made up of the townsfolk and various members appeared in different scenes. Here,

however, we meet something completely different, and truly innovative, as we shall see[1] .

— 2 — "Coriolanus and His Mother" and *Paris and Helen*

Though never appearing among the *dramatis personae*, and with many differences from the original pattern, the chorus plays a crucial role in all of Delmore Schwartz's verse plays. It appears for the first time in a long narrative poem in five acts whose title is "Coriolanus and His Mother: The Dream of One Performance". Bizarre as it may seem, the poem was included in the volume *In Dream Begin Responsibilities*, Schwartz's most famous collection of short stories, which was published in 1938, when the author was just twenty-three years old.[2] The verse poem then disappeared from later editions, only to reappear in *Selected Poems (1938-1958). Summer Knowledge*, with a slightly different subtitle ("A Dream of Knowledge"). The complex nature of the work – half-way between a poem and a play, since it tells (in verse) of a performance of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, interpreted as a sort of burlesque of Elizabethan theatre – gives the reader a foretaste of what later became Schwartz's typical literary cocktail of genres and styles.

The chorus in this poem is by all means very different from those we find in Greek tragedies. There, the chorus was a homogeneous, non-individualized group of performers who commented with a collective voice on the dramatic action. It consisted of between twelve and fifty players, who were usually the same sex as the main character and offered information to help the audience

1. My analysis is not located within the tradition that since Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* has questioned and rethought the structure of tragedy. In fact, Schwartz studied and taught philosophy, but his models were others. On the contrary, I shall rely on Aristotle since – despite his maybe inadequate definition of tragedy – he is constantly referred to in Schwartz's production and even appears as a character in his dramas. As for Schwartz's connections with other playwrights of his time, he was strongly influenced by T.S. Eliot, admired Bertolt Brecht and W.H. Auden, and in some ways anticipated Samuel Beckett. Little is known, however, about the staging of his plays, which have been usually analyzed by critics from a literary rather than performative perspective; this is probably due to Schwartz's verse plays and dramas being published among poems and short stories and also to the fact that in all of Schwartz's plays much of the action takes place offstage (Phillips 1992: XIX).
2. Schwartz was probably influenced by T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which contains a passage about Coriolanus. A later reinterpretation of *Coriolanus* is *Coriolan von Shakespeare Bearbeitung* (1951-59) by Bertolt Brecht, who in turn might have been influenced by Schwartz. For example, the three "low and foolish characters" he includes in his play, and "who have the features of what the Russian scholar Mikhail Bachtin called 'carnivalesque'" (Montironi 2012: 106), have something in common with the figure of the fool in Schwartz's own rewriting.

follow the performance. They commented on various themes, expressed to the audience what the protagonist could not say, and often provided some characters with the insight they needed. They often communicated in song form, frequently speaking their lines in unison, and used techniques such as synchronization, echo, ripple; they often wore masks.

In this verse play, which reinterprets Shakespeare through "Freudian epistemology of desire" and looks at "the modern family as elementally Oedipal" (Beard 2008: 63, 65), the chorus is not introduced as such, nor is it placed on the stage: on the contrary, it is placed among the audience, in a box-seat. Moreover, it only consists of six actors who play "a motley list of guest stars" (Beard 2008: 65). These "stars" are, of course, ghosts:[3] one is unspecified (even though, according to Edward G. Lynch, it may represent the reader), while the others are gradually introduced as Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, Aristotle, and Ludwig van Beethoven. The sixth one is a boy "with muffled voice full of emotion" (Schwartz 1967: 81) who probably represents the narrator or his double. It is only at the end of Act 1 that we have this epiphany: "… myself I see / Enter between the curtains' folds, appear /As many titter and some clap hands in glee, / A sad young clown in gown of domino, / X-ray, cartoon, Picasso's freak in blue, / From the box-seat I see myself on show" (Schwartz 1967: 91). This is the way we learn that the narrating voice belongs to "the most belated Shakespearian fool" (Schwartz 1967: 131). As in the Elizabethan tragedy, the fool's monologues are actually placed between the acts; their aim is to entertain the audience, because "something must be done to occupy our minds or we become too aware of our great emptiness" (Schwartz 1967: 92).

The narrator/fool is, therefore, both in the audience and on stage; the fact that he can look at himself tells us a lot about Schwartz's existential quest in the era of the new media: "Let the observer be observed by all observers in the act of observing what there is to observe" (Schwartz 1967: 116). He certainly wants to problematize the very act of seeing and the self-referential role of the observer, as has been argued (Lynch 2002: 445); however, whereas Lynch considers Schwartz's experiment a mere homage to (and parody of) Shakespeare, as was his later "Hamlet, or There Is Something Wrong With Everyone" and "Iago, or The Lowdown of Life", both included in *Vaudeville for a Princess and Other Poems*, I believe that in "Coriolanus and His Mother" Shakespeare, though important, is only accessory in comparison with the

3. A chorus of ghosts is also to be found both in the unfinished poem *Genesis,* as we shall see, and in the lost play *Marion.* Schwartz was particularly attached to ghosts, see e.g. the poem "Socrates Ghost Must Haunt Me Now", where he tries to turn Socrates "into a kind of saving, transcendent signifier of academic tradition, a kind of literary savior, a guarantor of traditional meaning" (Beard 2008: 66).

writer's much more relevant *misprision* (sensu Bloom 1982) of the Greek chorus.

In the same way as the poetical voice coincides with the voice of the fool, the five ghosts are neither actors nor characters: they do not have a body, they are not on stage, and they do not act but simply make comments about what happens on stage. Moreover, the narrator sometimes comments on them, which is an absolutely new thing: "Marx bites his nails, resumes his revery, / Ghosts being possessed by consciousness, / Consumed by memory, and powerless" (Schwartz 1967: 85). Nonetheless, these ghosts have many things in common with a Greek chorus. It is true they often disagree among themselves: for example, Freud's views diverge from Marx's, which has been explained with the fact that the "personal" is represented by Freud and the "international" by Marx (Kirsch 2005: 203). However, all the ghosts have something in common: for example, both Marx and Freud can be considered (as Joyce and Freud are in Robert Lowell's poem "To Delmore Schwartz") "grand figures in modernism, heroic nonconformists, exiles, postreligious metathinkers" (Beard 2003: 48). The ghosts actually offer a collective summa of human knowledge and encourage the audience to have a different perspective on events; theirs, as in a chorus, is a voice of the *conscience* that belongs to a sort of collective *un*consciousness whose final recipient is the spectator. Deutsch expresses a slightly different opinion, considering the chorus of ghosts functional to the ego of the author himself (1996: 918):

> In 'Coriolanus and His Mother' another appetite technique reveals itself. It is not enough to present poetic story and commentary – both by the author – but further commentary is provided through the ghosts of Beethoven, Aristotle, Freud, and Karl Marx. What is except an attempt to absorb directly and present directly some of the profoundest cornerstones of our culture, and to have them subserve, directly, … the ego of the author, for whom they are the nutrition?

However, since the author is sitting in the audience, like any other spectator (something similar happens in the short story "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities", where the narrator is sitting in the cinema where the action takes place), the difference may go unnoticed. What matters is that Schwartz's is not a mere parodist re-visitation of the past, insomuch as it responds to the social (Marx), psychological (Freud), artistic (Beethoven), and philosophical (Aristotle) necessity of having somebody (the fifth ghost? the boy? the poetic voice? the reader?) understand and decode what happens in the contemporary world and be able to mediate between the stage and the audience as well as between the self and the outer world.

These famous men from the past, plus "The small anonymous fifth whose face is hidden / By a white mask un-understood by all" (Schwartz 1967: 99), do not deliver any pompous speech nor express futile opinions but, through their

whispers, participate in a choral ritual of mutual (un)recognition, where the Self falls apart – “dark Id rules all” (Schwartz 1967: 110) – and/or multiplies – “Myself divided in identity” (Schwartz 1967: 107) – while the individual longs for a (maybe lost) phylogenetic connection to the community. This virtual sharing of an existential ‘being there’ which exceeds time and space is at the core of Schwartz’s poetics and might foreshadow the social networks euphoria of the third millennium.

We find another chorus of men – though, in this case, unidentified – in *Paris and Helen. An Entertainment* (1941, included in *Shenandoah and Other Verse Plays*) The play is inspired by the love triangle between Helen, Paris, and Menelaus in the *Iliad*, and the action takes place in ancient times, but the link with the present is evident – Homeric Troy is called “the very early morning of Western culture” (Schwartz 1992b: 37). Here we have a chorus of Old Men commenting on the never-ending war of Troy. Their bitterness and concern, however, mixes with the typical expectation before and during an important sport match:

1st Old Man	Today is going to be a big day –
2nd Old Man	Perhaps the war will be ended –
3rd Old Man	No, do not deceive yourself. It will not be ended today, tomorrow or the next day
	…
1sr Old Man	… What time was the contest supposed to begin?
2nd Old Man	They never begin on time anymore!
	…
3rd Old Man	This war will never end it seems. (Schwartz 1992b: 40-9)

Schwartz is extraordinarily able to single out the idiosyncrasies of contemporaneity: the old men, though representing the past, also embody the present time’s more futile concerns linked to consumerism and society of the spectacle. Love itself becomes the object of *voyeurism* and copulation is called “wrestling” (Schwartz 1992b: 60). All this becomes more ominous and prophetic when we think that the play was published in the same year as the Pearl Harbor attack, shortly before the US entered World War II.

— 3 — *Choosing Company*

But how was Schwartz able to achieve such a prophetic insight? The answer lies in his deep interest in the media technology of his own time, mainly the radio, the cinema, and the telephone. Fully aware as he was of the way politicians,

publishers, and corporations used mass media to shape and control public opinion – as we can see in such works as "Screeno", "Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer", or *Kilroy's Carnival: A Poetic Prologue for TV* – he also assigned to these new media an artistic status, including them in his own problematic confrontation with his age. In particular, the technological evolution in the field of mass media and the resulting invention of speaking "boxes" allowed him to experiment with new versions of the chorus.

A voice from the audience – though belonging to Marx's, Freud's, or even Aristotle's ghost – could not fully satisfy Schwartz's obsessive research for *another* kind of epiphany – and a really extreme one: one which could disclose existence out of the body, one which could even 'dispose' of the body more definitely than a ghost. The great innovation in the artist's personal reinterpretation of the chorus lies, therefore, in the genial recourse to those disembodied sounds which came out of the radio, the telephone, the cinema and later the TV screen. The power of these media has been fully acknowledged by another great Jewish American writer, Cynthia Ozick, who has written of the "relentlessly gradual return of aural culture, beginning with the telephone … , the radio, the motion picture, and the phonograph" (Ozick 1991: 164); and their relation to the ghost chorus is implicit in Runchman's statement that "the phone, the movie, the victrola, and the radio all have the *ghostly* effect of making those who are not physically there seem to be present" (Runchman 2014: 80, my italics).

The position of the individual at the dawn of this renewed aural age has much in common with the condition of an embryo, surrounded by sounds it cannot decipher: it is not by chance that the word "foetusdom" appears in Schwartz's play, the hard core of which lies in the dark theatre appearing "like a womb" (Ford 2005: 1) and in the "womb's authority" (Schwartz 1967: 99, 98) that is also the basis of the Oedipal relations existing between Coriolanus and his mother in the homonymous play, as we have seen.

The rising networked culture is something that happens outside the body, like real life for a foetus (or the real world outside the cave, as in the poem "In the Naked Bed, in Plato's Cave"), so that one has to figure out new strategies to manage solitude, alienation, and displacement. Schwartz's multiple reasons for suffering are to be found in his being both "hyperconscious of his Jewishness" (Klingenstein 1998: 65) and a "modern intellectual hero" (Atlas 2000: X), two conditions which meant cultural prejudice and even the suspicion of un-Americanism. A son of immigrants, he considered himself a sort of exile and felt an "almost unbearable sense of disconnection" (Dickstein 1974: 41), so that the act of writing became for him "an almost safe way to connect with others" (Cantor 1989: 81). But that was also the time of the popular media, which seemed to promise and grant unprecedentedly easy connections, and

Schwartz was eager to include them in his poems and writing. Phonographs, radios, telephones, and later on television seduced him with a wide range of voices, so that even such old strategies as the monologue (*Kilroy's Carnival*) or ventriloquism (*Venus in the Back Room*) were revisited from this new media perspective in his works. However, such voices soon revealed their potentially dangerous nature, since they risked turning into spokesmen of the establishment and instruments of manipulation (Calanchi 2007).

While the cinema is more frequently perceived as an arena for private memories and/or associated to dream (such as in the stories "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities" and "Screeno", or in the poem "Metro-Goldwin-Mayer"), the radio provides the fit medium for "personal dissociation and American materialism" (Phillips 1992: XV) and also represents "an appropriate chorus" (Valenti 1974: 211) in *Choosing Company* (1936, included in *Shenandoah and Other Verse Plays*), an even earlier comedy of Schwartz's which he provocatively called "oratorio" and wrote in blank verse to dramatize conversational speech (Schwartz 1992c: 63). The subject was suggested to Schwartz by a scandal he had read about in the papers in the summer of 1933, a young girl's death provoked by illegal abortion. The main characters are the girl (Anne), her boyfriend (Jacob), and a young doctor.

The radio (written RADIO in capital letters in the script) has a mechanical voice that is neither male nor female, and when it does not speak it plays jazz. Its mysterious voice combines a spiritual halo ("oratorio" is a large musical composition for orchestra, choir, and soloists, but in the past it was also a place where a community of believers used to pray, from the Italian word *orazione* which means prayer) with the social dimension of broadcasting. What matters is that it is a disembodied voice which takes on the role of the chorus and provides a link between the past and the present, the individual and society, the stage and the audience – but also male and female, the doctor and the patient, the production system and the customer. As Marshall Mc Luhan would announce many years later, the medium is the message: a slogan which, after all, would have functioned well also in the Greek chorus, since a message conveyed by the chorus has a very different meaning than any other message. The radio in *Choosing Company*, and later in the poem "Some present things are causes of true fear" (included in *Vaudeville for a Princess*) where it appears together with television, represents the medium through which the citizen is being turned into a commodity: in the society of Coca-Cola and soap operas, "the radio is poet laureate / to Heinz, Palmolive, Swift, and Chevrolet" (Schwartz 1950: 57).

In this context, the fact that the author of the play speaks through the radio is particularly meaningful because in this way he comes closer to the chorus (or, in reverse, the chorus is invested with authority and authorship).

As a matter of fact, the author – like the chorus – is speaking from a marginal position (he is in a building outside the theatre, while the radio is placed in an usual position in front of the lime-lights) and "is not part of the action" (Schwartz 1992c: 65). Like a Greek chorus, also, he knows "what will happen" because he watches the players (i.e. the people) and knows "how they spend their freedom" and "their choices" (ibid. 66):

> RADIO Choosing Company.
> I am the author. I watch from a fifth-floor window.
> Mind and do not mind my speech. It is not part of the action.
> But my mind regarding cast a material shadow
> From my pure balcony, on every warm thing and connection.
> You must see that shadow. It is the mind beholding
> Inside and outside, meaning, money and building.
> They walk in that shadow, and I, high up, watching.
> (ibid. 65)

The author/chorus chooses the radio in order to speak the same language as the listeners/consumers and give them due admonition. Through the radio, which he calls "the mask of the age" (Schwartz 1992c: 66), he is actually determined to *unmask* the medium and use it for a different purpose, which is not broadcasting music, advertisements, and news, but making his fellow citizens realize they risk being led into voluntary slavery by the political/economical system. The writer's sense of alienation, which is expressed by the chorus-like radio – and throughout his poetic work by the frequent use of the terms *mask* and *masquerade* – is caused by America's growing materialism: "It was not his fault, he implied through the Radio's voice, that he was lonely and self-conscious; it was the fault of American society" (Atlas 2000: 86).

That the radio can be considered a chorus to all effects also depends on other factors. Like a chorus, it can be silent, or speak, or sing. Like a chorus, it is made of many voices, since it speaks alternately in a six-year-old child's voice, in Jacob's voice, and in dead Anne's voice, plus the voice of the author at the beginning of the play. Like a chorus, finally, it does not take an active part in the action.

— 4 — *Dr Bergen's Belief* and *Venus in the Back Room*

A Victrola phonograph and some photographs offer another version of the chorus in *Dr Bergen's Belief* (1937 or 1938, included in *Shenandoah and Other Verse Plays*). This dramatic short play, often considered little more than an intellectual exercise on modern Gnosticism and Bergsonian philosophy (Ford 2005), tells the story of a man's inquiry into his daughter's suicide. The young

woman is evoked throughout her father's visit to her home. This visit becomes a sort of painful pilgrimage, in the course of which he looks at his daughter's pictures and listens to her voice recorded in a Victrola phonograph:

> [*There is a victrola on the terrace, unseen by the audience ... The voice which issues from it is distant, low, husky yet feminine; and in a way, oracular and dramatic. It actually comes from a victrola record, and is not an off-stage voice.*]
> ...
>
> Was that her voice? that was her voice indeed.
> Who can distinguish now between the ghost
> And the actual, the living and the immortal?
> (Schwartz 1992d: 110-11)

The photos and the phonograph have many elements in common with the classic chorus. Though they are the leftovers of a dead woman, they acquire a life of their own and although they fail to reveal all about her real self, her aspirations, character, dreams, and anxieties, they provide a sort of comment to her life and to her father's action on stage. In functioning as a link between father and daughter, stage and audience, they become something more than mere objects, or pictures, or pure sound in the air, or colour on the paper. Ultimately, these objects and these vibratory waves all express what the characters cannot say: they have a collective voice, are gendered, communicate in song form, and give information to the audience and deep insight to the main character.

The already mentioned *Venus in the Back Room* (1937, included in *Shenandoah and Other Verse Plays*) takes all this to its extremes, since there are eight characters, four of whom are mere voices (*Stimme* meaning "voice" in German):

From *Venus in the Back Room*

Waitress	Davidson
Noah	1st Male voice
May (a voice)	2nd Male voice
Jones	Stimme

(Schwartz 1992e: 125)

In this "incredibly bad verse play" (Atlas 2000: 109) a man enters a cafeteria, where he meets some strange fellows and hears a melodious female voice coming from the rear. The owner of the place says it is his daughter, and the man falls almost instantaneously in love with her. At the end it turns out that the owner is a homosexual ventriloquist and no daughter exists.

Here Schwartz shows an extraordinarily precocious insight in what media philosophers have only quite recently called the "progressive dematerialization of culture" in the twentieth century in the face of its "inescapable materiality"

(Taylor and Saarinen 1994: 4, 3). Like the photograph in *Dr Bergen's Belief*, showing "a fading face, / fading and flickering in memory's cinema" (Schwartz 1992d: 96), and the phonograph, making it possible for the father to listen to the real voice of his daughter reading a poem, in *Venus in the Back Room* Schwartz questions and problematizes the very nature of reality at least half a century before one could start speaking of virtual reality. He asks the reader (and himself): are voices and images real? And are voices and pictures to be considered elements of a chorus? Also, are all voices of the same nature? The answer to the latter question is obviously no; consequently, Schwartz raises some doubts as far as the first and second question are concerned. The major idea that is expressed in these two plays is therefore that in a networked culture corporeality itself might become an illusion: "[y]our body is perhaps only your necessary dream … How do you know that the girl is there?" (Schwartz 1992e: 148). It follows that the stuff a chorus is made of, to put it in Shakespearian terms, is likely to change consequently.

— 5 — *Shenandoah* and *Genesis. Book One*

On this matter, it is interesting that in *Shenandoah* (1941, included in *Shenandoah and Other Verse Plays*) we move from the radio and phonograph to the telephone. An American Jewish family is deciding which name to give their son, whether a traditionally Jewish one or a typically American one. The discussion goes on for a while, till Father decides to consult a friend of his, a non-Jewish lawyer, by calling him on the telephone. The telephone call on stage, with laughter in the background and the unavoidable absence of the other speaker, creates a deep uneasiness in the audience as well as in the readership. Such uneasiness is increased by the fact that the (obvious) absence of the lawyer is counterbalanced by the (impossible) double presence of the protagonist of the play, who appears on stage both as a new born baby and as an adult man.

Shenandoah, despite his conspicuous presence both on the stage (in the play) and in the saga which bears his name,[4] curiously fails to be considered the hero by Zucker, who prefers to assign him the role of the chorus, on the basis of "the rather stiff yet Wordsworthian solemnity of the bemused and anguished one-man chorus"; he also defines him "poet-chorus" (Zucker 1990:

4. The so-called *Shenandoah Fish quartet* is composed of the play *Shenandoah* (written in 1935 but published in 1941) and the three short stories "A Bitter Farce", "New Year's Eve" and "America! America!" (all of which are included in *The World Is a Wedding*, 1948). "New Year's Eve" and "America! America" are also included in *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities* (1937 and 1978).

153). As a matter of fact, he is invisible to others and speaks directly to the audience, commenting on the action (and on the telephone itself) yet incapable of influencing events:

> SHEN. For this did Alexander Graham Bell
> Rack his poor wits? For this? Was it for this
> The matchless English language was evolved
> To signify the inexhaustible world?
> (Schwartz 1992a: 27)

Being quite intrigued, though not fully satisfied with this albeit fascinating view, I decided to find out if any other more sustainable chorus existed in the whole saga, given Schwartz's tendency to mix genres. I first focused on the telephone, which, though being a mere channel, or medium, is undoubtedly the most interesting object – if not *persona* – in the play. What I discovered is that, despite his personal reluctance to talk on the telephone (Atlas 2000: 125), Schwartz well understood the oracular potentiality of this new medium and did not hesitate in giving it a primary role. As he acknowledges in his short essay "On the Telephone", included in *The Ego Is Always at the Wheel* : "The hubbub about television, of late, has been such, I think, as to conceal the fact that one of the most important things in life is the telephone" (Schwartz 1986a: 11).

Here the telephone is regarded as an oracle: it is the medium, and not the family friend, which is actually questioned and therefore "it is the intervention of technology that decides, though the disembodied entity of the invisible speaker on the other side of the line" (Calanchi 2007: 213). However, the telephone does not think nor talk but only lets the information (questions, answers, silences) be transmitted: therefore, I wonder if it might be considered a chorus. So I re-read the stories and reflected on the fact that Schwartz was particularly fond of this character, who embodied "the irreconcilable duality of being an American Jew" (Saposnik 1982: 151). In one story in particular, however, Shenandoah is grown up and "accepts his hyphenated identity as naturally, and yet as mysteriously as 'the radio's unseen voices'. His unseen voices are the voices of the generations dead" (Saposnik 1982: 154). The story is "America! America!". It is these voices, then, that form a chorus from the past, which means from that ever haunting world of the Fathers that can revive – or be cancelled forever – thanks to the new technology: "And now he felt for the first time how closely bound he was to these people. His separation was actual enough, but there existed also an unbearable unity. As the air was full of the radio's unseen voices, so the life he breathed in was full of these lives and the age in which they had acted and suffered" (Schwartz 1978a: 32).

The world of the fathers also reappears in *Genesis* (1943), one of the most controversial and least appreciated among Schwartz's works. Not only is

it unfinished (only Book One was published), but when it came out after many years of hard work it resulted prolix, boring, and too recognizably autobiographical. It should have been epic, but was mock-biblical. Nonetheless this work has some elements of interest, among which the presence of a chorus which surrounds the protagonist, Hershey Green. It is, again, a chorus of ghosts who comment on each episode (as in a Greek Chorus) in blank verse (an English heritage), a contamination that provides a fertile ground "to accommodate the ruminative contributions of the ghosts" (Runchman 2014: 71). As it was argued in an early review, "what the chorus of presences say would avail nothing without the story, just as the story would have no direction and no final meaning without the activating powers of the chorus … the final significance transpires exactly in what the presences of the dead bring from the story into voice" (Blackmur 1943: 469). Also the most recent readings agree that, though the ghosts are "far from omniscience, … it is their universalizing perspectives that make it possible to accept the story as containing 'some truth about all human beings' (*G*, ix)" (Runchman 2014: 69).

The ghosts' function is in fact explained in the note "To the Reader" which opens the book:

> … above all, the use of chorus of commentators ought to be seen as the same kind of thing as the chorus in Greek drama. Some authors are fortunate. They live in an age when their beliefs and values are embodied in great institutions and in the way of life of many human beings. These authors do not have to bring in these beliefs and values from the outside … I cannot think of any author who has had this advantage and good fortune to the utmost … For even Dante … required a commentator to explain to him throughout the significance of what he saw. (Schwartz 1943: VII)

This task is, as anticipated, accomplished by ghosts. They speak blank-verse passages and are similar to those in "Coriolanus and His Mother", but unidentified: they are just "nostalgic old men given to soliloquizing" (Atlas 2000: 231), even though they "through various hints give the impression that they constitute Hershey Green's cultural forebears ranging from Socrates to Mozart to Santa Claus" (Deutsch 1996: 920). Among other themes, they touch upon literature, religion, history, popular culture, and philosophy. Their "long-winded speeches" often interrupt the plot, alternating eloquence with vaudeville, in a sort of journey "from ignorance to awareness" (Atlas 2000: 232).

According to some critics, what is best in *Genesis. Book One* is that it "contains the ghosts who function as a chorus … old men who symbolize various tendencies of reflection and conscience overseeing the poet's life" (Zucker 1990: 155). The reader can "make one guess at possible identities – is this Rousseau? Freud? Augustine? Or is it just a Delmorean version of all three?" (ibid.: 157), and they can even be recognized "as psychoanalysts of

a kind, pointing out to Hershey truths about himself of which he was only partially conscious and helping him to become more aware of his relation to the world at large – that is to say, more internationally conscious" (Runchman 2010). Runchman offers some very nice images to describe this chorus, such as the metaphor "of the thought and speech bubbles in a cartoon that help to clarify a story whose main action is told through pictures", or the ghosts' resembling "an audience talking over a film or theatrical production" (ibid.). This is precisely the quality of Schwartz's project – its being all inclusive as regards performative arts. Nevertheless, the ambiguity remains and the reader can form their own ideas.

Another version of the ghosts finally appears in the poem "Starlight Like Intuition Pierced the Twelve", included in *Vaudeville for a Princess*, a disquieting appropriation of the Christian trope of Pentecost. That the twelve Apostles (receiving the Holy Ghost) are ghost-like characters and form a chorus (Zucker 1990: 160-1) is stated by Schwartz himself, who writes that the twelve unnamed characters speak in turn, "and then the twelve in chorus" (Schwartz 1950: 49).

— 6 — *Kilroy's Carnival: A Poetic Prologue for TV*

The broadcast play *Kilroy's Carnival: A Poetic Prologue for TV* (1958, included in *Last and Lost Poems*) marks Schwartz's final shift from radio to television. However, he does not seem so interested in the visual possibilities offered by the new medium as he continues to be in the sound of the voice. The play opens with a Prologue, entitled "Night One", which is actually a long monologue spoken by disc jockey Orville: "nothing but his voice is heard: nothing is seen" (Schwartz 1989: 85). Here, too, we find a chorus: this time it is a group of angels wittily commenting on the Creation of the World.

By mixing erudite quotations (from Eurydice to Shakespeare, from Columbus to Bonaparte) with news and weather reports ("Charming news from near and far. The capitals of Europe predict there will be a cold war all summer long" (Schwartz 1989: 89), by mentioning Marlon Brando and Marilyn Monroe alongside Yom Kippur and Pocahontas, Schwartz creates a sort of talk show were many issues are slightly touched upon and soon forgotten, whose rhythm is fast and communication remains superficial. In the DJ's program entitled *News of the World*, for instance, Orville "does not give any real information but only wants to be reassuring" (Calanchi 2007: 216).

Through the blank screen and the voice of the disc jockey (which is sort of off-stage) Schwartz expressed his personal view and fears of what would become of the American Dream in a society characterized by such values

as "hamburger, Coca-Cola, and a brand new Buick" (Schwartz 1986b: 255) and of human identity at large, given the obvious project of a globalized yet increasingly fragmented world. Also, television in this period was especially meant "to entertain and isolate", as George Clooney's 2005 film *Good Night and Good Luck* reports, and Schwartz was a pioneer in understanding the enormous power of advertisements, billboards, and TV commercials: "Why not try America's super breakfast food? The panacea for every kind of melancholia and social failure", he reported in a short story called *The Track Meet* (included in *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities*), where he also inserted the slogan "LIFE IS SWELL WHEN YOU KEEP WELL" (Schwartz 1978b: 132).

In the course of the play Orville predicts events, comments on the news, reads and answers the letters from the audience, and at intervals he broadcasts entire ballads – such as the exhilarant parody of the renown folk song "Oh Susanna", which begins with "O Nirvana / don't you wait for me" (Schwartz 1989: 91), or the piece where a group of angels comment on the Creation. It is important to underline that they speak in Orville's voice ("[*He speaks as one who is rehearsing in solitude, perhaps before a small looking-glass. But again only his voice is heard: nothing is seen*]", Schwartz 1989: 92). The first three angels that speak are called "A throne", "A Power", and "A Domination", whereas all the others who speak intervene "at random, at seeming random" (ibid.). Orville embodies both the nature of the ventriloquist and the quality of the radio (or television), which despite being one single object, or medium, can broadcast a multiplicity of voices. Also, the chorus of angels provides a new version of the commentators represented by old men or ghosts. True, they do not speak in unison; on the contrary, they express totally diverging ideas and opinions. But this is precisely what Schwartz wants to demonstrate: that in contemporary society no homogeneity is innocent, and only through diversity and dialogue can a human being become a completely responsible citizen and not just a passive spectator. "Only connect, only discriminate / For Life is dual and opposite", he wrote in his journal in 1942 (Schwartz 1986: 61). This is a lesson that is a pity to ignore and can be very valuable also for our own age.

— 7 — Conclusion

Delmore Schwartz's re-visitation of the Greek chorus, as we have seen in these pages, is a recurrent item in his production and offers many interesting inputs for further research. Thanks to the technological and stylistic devices it employs, Schwartz's chorus – be it made of men, of ghosts, or other – embodies a powerful connection between the past and the present, interpreting the

author's own efforts to overcome his Jewish, intellectual, and existential sense of alienation through a deep focus on the new instruments of communication and an extraordinary insight both into their dangers and into their possibilities for the future. From this perspective one might even describe such re-visitation of a chorus as a re-semiotization, since it involves a meaning making process. Shifting from poetry to prose, drama, or burlesque, Schwartz tries in fact to represent the complexity of his own time, when the shadows on the cave wall were full of promises but could also prove very deceptive. Through the voice of the ghosts and of the old men on the one hand, and of the media on the other, Schwartz appropriates the spirit of the Greek chorus without forgetting his own (Jewish) American identity, thus creating a bridge between ages and cultures capable of curing "the long illness of time and history" (Schwartz 1992: 10).

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