

## Art and Anti-Art in Egon Wolff's *Flores de papel*

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Although commentators on Egon Wolff's *Flores de papel* may not agree on much, they join ranks to agree on the difficulty of interpreting its protagonist's motivations. Margaret S. Peden puts it succinctly when she says "What happens in *Flores de papel* is extremely simple at first view. What is not simple is *why*. . . ." Daniel López seconds her observation, saying that because "no credible reasons are offered for El Merluza's behavior with regard to Eva. . . . The spectator/reader is left ultimately to decide why."<sup>2</sup> Other commentators offer possible interpretations of El Merluza's apparent compulsion to destroy the play's female character, Eva. Orlando Rodríguez-Sardiñas and Carlos Miguel Suárez Radillo, for example, suggest that El Merluza's gradual decimation of Eva's world represents the poor wreaking vengeance on the bourgeoisie.<sup>3</sup> The conflict has been regarded as a veiled elaboration of the war between the sexes, with the man unconsciously determined to deny the woman's right to her own identity.<sup>4</sup>

The difficulties in interpretation, it seems to me, find resolution when we recognize that El Merluza is, in fact, a mad protagonist and that his particular kind of madness symbolizes the fusion of creative and destructive tendencies. The play's central conflict (from which the ensuing levels of social conflict arise) vitally reflects the confrontation between the affirmation and negation of artistic creation. El Merluza attacks Eva, not because she is a woman, not because she is bourgeois, but rather because she is an artist. He first notices her in the botanical gardens. She paints; he pulls feathers from the parrots' tails. The incident is emblematic of their basic difference. Although El Merluza wants to create, he can actually do little more than reshape, remake, and ultimately destroy what someone else has made. He likes to think of himself as an artist, destroying Eva's artistic endeavors to recreate them in higher form, but his frustrated attempts at creation provoke his violence and rage. Although Eva politely praises his talents with newspaper (as she later "admires" his furniture), he ferociously shreds his paper flowers because newsprint proves of inferior artistic quality. Nobody wants something made of "sucio papel de diario."<sup>5</sup>

El Merluza tries to justify his destructiveness by posing as a liberated artist confronting bourgeois art: “Al menos, es lo que dicen los burgueses . . . que son los árbitros de la moda . . . en todo . . . incluso en la manera de trabajar . . . el papel . . . de diarios . . .” (170).<sup>6</sup> However, El Merluza’s attack on the bourgeoisie and bourgeois art actually serves as a screen to hide a far deeper destructiveness. He feels threatened by all forms of creativity, by anything that does not derive from himself. Eva’s artistic attempts, no matter how conventional and trivial, emphasize his own inability to create, and trigger his destructiveness, his “anti-art.” Her wicker animals, her painting, her furniture, her apartment, anything made by her or associated with her, including her own person, must be annihilated and remade by him. He finds her furniture unacceptable because she chose it. “Se necesita ser poeta para elegir un mueble . . .” (196) he claims. “Hay que poner en ello la vida . . . si fuera necesario . . .” (197). Then, he systematically destroys her furniture in what seems an attempt to remodel it. El Merluza tells Eva what his friend Mario, as much a social outcast as he, says about his creative talents: “Dice que soy bueno para desarmar cosas . . . romperlas; pero que para hacer carpintería . . . Hacerla verdaderamente . . . ¿Me comprende usted . . . ? . . . Dice que no sirvo. ‘Eres un vándalo,’ me dice” (204). Thus, even El Merluza’s peers recognize his destructiveness, not as a direct social statement, but as vandalism, lacking purpose and direction.

El Merluza’s destructiveness, the frenzy with which he “attacks” his artistic enterprises, points back to Dionysus, god of both destruction and creation. The difference between the artist and what Otto Rank calls the thwarted artist or the “*artiste manqué*” consists in that the latter “does not get beyond the destructive preliminary work and is therefore unable to detach the whole creative process from his own person. . . .”<sup>7</sup> Psychologists like Freud and Laing also underline the relationship between insanity and art by viewing madness as a failed creation.<sup>8</sup> The play provides ample evidence of El Merluza’s insanity—the reference to the hospital, the forbidden scissors, the guilt-ridden friend—not to mention his own manic behavior. He calls himself a “*loco maniático*” (209) and his fragmented identity “*despierta toda una fantasía mitológica*” (199). Who is this man of many names, this “El Merluza,” alias Roberto, alias Beto, sometimes also known as “*cabrón?*” (171). Where does he come from, this creature with “*dos madres*” (171) whose unspeakable past seems to terrify even himself?

El Merluza’s madness manifests itself through his “art,” his need for dominance over his material which proves antithetical to the truly creative urge. Unlike the productive artist who creates viable new worlds, granting his works autonomous form, El Merluza uses his anti-art to attack *this* world, to negate autonomous form. He tries to exert control over everything that he makes, everything that he touches. His attraction to newsprint as an artistic medium clearly demonstrates his tactics. Newspaper (like the wicker animals and the furniture) is already a product, not only of someone else’s labor, but of our collective labor as a society. Moreover, he loves its formlessness, its pliability: “Toma las formas que usted quiere darles. Se pliega sumisamente. Se deja manejar sin resistencias . . .” (170). His “*flores de papel*” speak, not

of creation, but of destruction, of undifferentiated rage. They exist solely to fill the void left by his annihilation of his surroundings.

El Merluza's "anti-art" reduces external reality to his own inner emptiness. The void he creates around him reflects the nothingness of his protean personality "con esa mirada muy propia de él, que no dice nada" (166). El Merluza, like an actor, strikes poses. He delights in personal transformations, dressing up and role playing, acting the part of the vagabond, the housewife, the waiter, the tennis player, the gigolo, the "guerrero simba" named "Ukelele." "¡Usted es múltiple!," Eva recognizes, "¡Realmente múltiple!" (180). Unlike the actor/artist, his poses lack purpose, other than defending himself from other people. In Scene V, after Eva declares her love for him, El Merluza answers: "Todavía no me ha dicho como me queda la tenida de tenis" (211). The narcissistic and shallow dimension of El Merluza's "art" negates the possibility of constructive change and positive creation.

The formal decomposition of the play mirrors the disintegration of the mad protagonist. *Flores de papel* begins as a "well-made play" and dissolves into a demented monologue. In Scene III, El Merluza parodies the patterns of action established by Eva in Scene I and II by taking over the breakfast preparations, darting in and out of the kitchen, asking the questions as she had previously done. In Scenes IV and V he gains control of her territory, and in Scene VI she too becomes malleable material in his hands. By Scene VI, the shortest by far of all the scenes, he shatters the established patterns of action without creating new ones. He frantically grasps at things to do and say to fill the vacuum of the time and space he has so violently conquered. But once again his creativity fails him. He, the *artiste manqué*, claims originality by stringing together the shreds of what he has destroyed.

El Merluza's role as the *artiste manqué* both invites and repels attempts to fit *Flores de papel* into traditional genres. His single-minded desire to reshape Eva's environment, to be the ultimate creator, seems to endow him with the force of one kind of traditional tragic hero. He propels the action forward, giving it a relentless linear progression reminiscent of tragedies of overreaching desire, like *Tamburlaine* or *Macbeth*, though on a radically diminished scale. He breaks anything that will not surrender into his hands, from inanimate objects to living creatures. He kills the bird for defying him: "¡Quise cazarlo, pero él no me dejó que lo cazara!" (201). At the end, Eva stands, passive as a wax figurine, ready to be moulded. But though his will shoves aside all obstacles, El Merluza lacks the consciousness of a tragic hero. He lacks the sense of purpose necessary to make a coherent statement directly pertinent to either the war of the classes or sexes. Rather his madness represents a deeper fragmentation which manifests itself as personal, social and historic alienation. His anarchistic rage places him alongside a host of other mad protagonists. As in Camus' *Caligula*, madness in *Flores de papel* is equated with the obsessive need to control. And whatever degree of control El Merluza achieves cannot hide his own emptiness. As in Pirandello's *Henry IV*, El Merluza's blank face is "no longer a mask, but madness, madness personified." Having conquered Eva at the end of the play, he experiences the complete frustration of the artistic have-not: "'Ukelele' (El Guerrero Simba)

tiene sus tripas en sus manos y ya no sabe que hacer con ellas . . ." (220). El Merluza can kill, but he cannot create.

El Merluza's "art" then, is "anti-art," an art of resistance rather than recreation. It lacks all purpose other than defying and destroying the purpose of others. Creation, as Aristotle points out, stems from the mimetic process. But in order to imitate, one must first admire. The object of admiration—occupying a privileged, elevated position—inspires emulation in the positive personality and destruction and rage in the negative. El Merluza, like Iago, must destroy because he admires and cannot emulate. Even Eva, in her own small way, has (to paraphrase Iago) a daily beauty in her life that makes him ugly.<sup>9</sup> She constantly endeavors to create beauty, harmony and love around her. She is Eve, the essential woman, by definition a creator, mother of mankind, and as such she arouses El Merluza's horror of inadequacy. After shattering Eva's world he remains stymied, madly juggling the fragments with an empty smile.

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## Notes

1. Margaret S. Peden, "The Theater of Egon Wolff," *Dramatists in Revolt: The New Latin American Theater*, ed. Lyday and Woodyard (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), 197.

2. Daniel López, "Ambiguity in *Flores de papel*," *Latin American Theatre Review* 12/1 (Fall 1978), 49.

3. Orlando Rodríguez-Sardiñas, Carlos Miguel Suárez Radillo, ed. *Teatro selecto contemporáneo hispanoamericano* (Madrid, 1971), I, 113.

4. Peden, "Three Plays by Egon Wolff," *Latin American Theatre Review* 3/1 (Fall 1969), 34.

5. All references in the text to *Flores de papel* are based on the following edition: *9 dramaturgos hispanoamericanos*, ed. Dauster, Lyday and Woodyard (Ottawa: Girol Books, Inc., 1979), Tomo II.

6. Suspension marks in this article correspond to those in the text and do not indicate omissions.

7. Otto Rank, *Art and Artist* (New York: Agathon Press, 1975), 41.

8. Freud, in *Civilization and its Discontents* writes: ". . . one can try to recreate the world, to build up in its stead another world in which its most unbearable features are eliminated and replaced by others that are in conformity with one's own wishes. But whoever, in desperate defiance, sets out upon this path to happiness will as a rule attain nothing. Reality is too strong for him. He becomes a madman." (translated by James Strachey, W.W. Norton & Company, N.Y. 1961), 30. R.D. Laing in *The Politics of Experience* defines schizophrenia as "a special strategy that a person *invents* in order to live in an unlivable situation." (Penguin Books, 1967), 95.

9. Shakespeare, *Othello*, V.i.