

Ambiguity in *Flores de Papel*

DANIEL LÓPEZ

Ambiguity is by no means new to the Latin American stage. Its origins may be traced back to the theatrical renovation which was already apparent in Xavier Villaurrutia's 1933 drama *Parece mentira*. The repercussions are still discernible in more recent works such as Carlos Solórzano's *Cruce de vías* (1958) and Emilio Carballido's *Yo también hablo de la rosa* (1966).¹ If, however, the subtitle "Enigma en un acto" aptly designates the nature of the early Villaurrutia play, it could be applied equally as well to Egon Wolff's 1968 *Flores de papel*. In this drama the use of ambiguity reaches a peak as it synthesizes elements found in the preceding plays, and at the same time surpasses them in its more careful attention to language and characterization.

Prior to *Flores de papel*, Wolff had already demonstrated his technique in *Los invasores* (1962), in which ambiguity is integral to several of the play's characters, and above all to the play's very structure.² In *Flores de papel*, on the other hand, all ambiguity is concentrated in and around its antagonist El Merluza. The dramatist, aware of the greater efficacy of the indirect statement over the direct, imbues the language, character, behavior, and motivations of El Merluza with ambiguity in order to involve the spectator/reader in the proceedings, compelling him to supply his own interpretation of people and events as he is confronted with very few facts. Besides fulfilling this external function, ambiguity is wielded consciously within the play by El Merluza himself in his psychological assault on the protagonist, Eva. He makes ambiguity of language his principal weapon in this assault, manipulating his language as knowingly as he manipulates his victim. Ambiguity enables El Merluza to exploit the fears and weaknesses of his self-chosen adversary who, devoid of similar counter-offensive arms, succumbs in the face of his relentless linguistic onslaught.

In accordance with the sustained principle of reversal operative in *Flores de papel*,³ El Merluza is initially taciturn whereas Eva is inquisitive and talkative. As his ascendancy over her increases, however, he becomes more loquacious as

she retreats into silence. He then resorts to conceptual, loaded language⁴—at first of a meaningful nature, but gradually assuming an absurd, illogical coloration, remote from normal communicative patterns—that is inappropriate to his appearance and the social position the language implies.

El Merluza, unlike Eva, almost never asks questions; he seems to know all he wishes to know in her regard.⁵ Furthermore, when responding to her queries, he resorts to devices that obviate a direct, truthful answer. It is, for instance, characteristic of El Merluza to provide multiple explanations for his behavior, any or none of which may be true. He explains his reluctance to leave Eva's apartment in the opening scene, first because buying himself a cup of tea with the money she offers him would not be the same as having one there in her company, and secondly because Miguel and Pajarito are waiting outside to kill him. If his first explanation is intended to flatter Eva, the second is designed to appeal to her compassion. Only when he compounds his flattery by recalling precise details about Eva (he had seen her the previous year in the Botanical Gardens) does she relent before this adroit psychological maneuvering, allowing him to remain.

The encounter then between El Merluza and Eva at the supermarket appears not to have been a chance one. The question immediately arises: why has he singled Eva out, and what exactly does he want with her? When Eva presses him for a reason for his presence in the Gardens, once more he offers her a choice of three explanations that are increasingly fantastic. Yet none of the explanations satisfies Eva, and she rejects all three.

A further ruse employed by El Merluza to avoid answering Eva directly is to resort to a deliberate vagueness that discloses nothing except his aptitude for non-committal replies. When Eva inquires where he acquired his skill in dressing wounds, he responds only with "Por ahí"; and when she asks if he had been in the hospital because of illness, his answer "algo así como eso" is once again imprecise and evasive. Nor is his verbal resourcefulness limited to vagueness. When Eva again tries to probe his past life, he evades her question by speaking in French, thereby diverting her attention momentarily. There can be no doubt, moreover, that El Merluza's linguistic ambivalence is anything other than intentional, as his next speech theoretically states what is his practice throughout *Flores de papel*:

Sí. Es de la mayor importancia, de primerísima importancia elegir las palabras apropiadas para decir lo que uno quiere decir. Hay en ello todo un proceso de selección cuidadosamente prearreglado por el espíritu. [. . .] Lo importante, entonces, es decir lo que uno quiere decir sin decirlo, para que los demás aporten todo el peso de su propio . . . engaño. Sólo así podrá uno ser feliz. (p. 173)

El Merluza is being characteristically candid in pointing out to Eva what is, in fact, his major weapon of attack against her.

Evasive answers and recourse to French do not by any means exhaust El Merluza's linguistic ingenuity. When Eva strives to place their relationship on a more intimate footing, commiserating with her visitor over the "mal trato" life has apportioned to him and warmly proffering her friendship, his reaction startles her:

El Merluza.—Entonces vamos a tener que cambiar los muebles que hay aquí.

Eva. (Sorprendida.)—¿Los muebles? ¿Por qué?

El Merluza.—No me gustan. (p. 168)

The very irrelevancy of this reaction serves not only to extricate him from a delicate situation but it indicates as well his conviction that he is winning the psychological warfare since his former timidity and humility have now been replaced by irritation and self-assurance. Such an abrupt, non-sequential change of thought is both deliberate and disconcerting, and it already foreshadows the complete linguistic absurdities that endorse his impenetrability in the play's final scene. By that stage all dialogue has become impossible as the language breaks down into meaningless repetitions, enunciated "con falsa fonética, vacía enteramente de contenido" (p. 192):

¡Amor con a, con m, con r, con x, con u, con lengua, con todo, con fuerza, sin fuerza! ¡Las posibilidades . . . de ser! . . . , ¡de alcanzar! . . . , ¡de huir! . . . , ¡del amor! . . . , ¡de la soledad! . . . , ¡de la muerte! . . . , ¡con lengua! . . . , ¡llegar! . . . , ¡llegar! . . . , ¡llegar! (Grita.) ¡Llegar! . . . ¡Llegar! . . . ¡Lleeeceegaaaaar! . . . (Aceza.) ¿Es eso? ¿Es ese el secreto que guarda la hielera? (p. 193)

As Eva stands mutely by, he further reduces such puzzling utterances as these to the total absurdity of nonsensical sounds, thereby suppressing any means of communication: "¡Uku! ¡Azakambá! ¡Humba! . . . ¡Tekeke! . . . ¡Takamba! . . . ¡Tumba! . . . ¡Anoche me zampé una monja blanca y tenía gusto a jabón! . . ." (p. 194). His is a primitive and private Tower of Babel constructed to safeguard his enigmatic essence.

The implications of El Merluza's language extend also to his appearance and behavior. His general mien ("treinta, zarrapastroso, sucio, despeinado, flaco, pálido") suggests poverty, perhaps even illness, and his actions, both voluntary (he stares fixedly at Eva, disconcerting her) and involuntary (his body is racked by uncontrollable trembling), command attention and arouse curiosity. Conversely, one knows almost instinctively what Eva is like, just as one can imagine the sort of life she must live. Yet in spite of the ostensible absence of all ambiguity in her, El Merluza remarks on the supply of newspapers and magazines that she has proposed he might read while she is gone: "Es como si todo hubiese estado como . . . preparado. Como . . . dispuesto. Los diarios, digo yo, y las revistas . . ." (p. 130). By implying that premeditation may account for their presence there, El Merluza attributes to Eva a behavioral pattern that is, in fact, characteristically his own. And as he does with all his linguistic stratagems, El Merluza later repeats this use of innuendo in the final scene when, adjusting Eva's wedding gown, he insinuates that she may not have been married at all as she has alleged:

Un poco apretado estaba, es cierto . . . , un poco arrugado, pero debemos concederle que nunca . . . sospechó que alguna vez le tocaría . . . "una segunda oportunidad," ¿eh? (Se aleja. Mira su obra.) ¿O fue por una primera que nunca fue? . . . ¿Mmh? (p. 190)

Whereas Eva had always appeared to be telling the truth, El Merluza now advances the possibility that she, too, may have been presenting a false front to the world. His intimations have the effect of intensifying the drama's already pervasive atmosphere of ambiguity.

A recurrent use of metaphor in the play suggests that El Merluza's weakened external appearance may not, in effect, mirror his true nature. In explaining to Eva his art of making paper flowers, he is seemingly unconcerned that the self-image he projects is an uncomplimentary one. The sheets of newspaper are to be cut in such a way that "no parezca más que un gran pedazo de papel hecho tiras. . . . Como si un perro hubiera hecho presa de él. . . . ¡O un cernícalo! . . . ¡O cualquier animal rabioso! . . ." (p. 144).⁶ His use of animal imagery is sustained by the stage directions in describing the devastated apartment that appears "como si un ave de rapiña hubiese hecho presa de todo" (p. 175); and when Eva emerges from her bedroom the following morning, she too comments in similar terms on El Merluza's frenzy of activity: "Te oí trabajar toda la noche. Como si un gran ratón se hubiera colado en mi departamento" (pp. 175-76). In the play's final scene, after El Merluza has cavorted noisily around the silent Eva in imitation of Ukelele, the Simba warrior, metaphor is replaced by simile as the stage directions again align him with the animal world: "(La mira como un orangután curioso podría mirar a su presa, con curiosidad simiesca. . .)" (p. 194). It is not then surprising that his intercalated allegory (Scene 5) should be drawn from that same world, and in view of his own ambivalence, it is no less surprising that this allegory should be likewise of an abstruse nature. El Merluza describes a caged male monkey whose efforts at reaching its nearby mate result only in slow self-destruction, but unless he is reversing the roles within his parable, any correspondence with his and Eva's situation is non-existent. Normal use of allegory tells a story while making clear that it means something else; there should be only one 'real' meaning, lightly veiled by the details of the devised account. If only because little he does or says can be regarded as normal, the moral of his allegory—presuming, perhaps unwisely, that it has one—proves as ambivalent as all the other linguistic ploys of its perpetrator.

At other times it is the sheer unexpectedness of what El Merluza says that gives rise to inauspicious ambiguity. While engaged in the innocuous pastime of showing Eva how to project with her hands the silhouettes of animals onto the wall, he abruptly inquires if she has an axe, saw, and hammer in the apartment. At another moment in the play's action, he again perturbs her by employing a pun which her now inflamed imagination prompts her to interpret in the grisly manner he had intended. As El Merluza concentrates on putting together his facsimiles of chairs, Eva distractedly turns off the radio, an action that is contrary to his wishes as he switches it on again immediately with an explanation that becomes openly menacing as she continues to oppose his will:

El Merluza.—Cuando estoy trabajando me gusta hacerlo acompañado de buena música. (Eva va a ir nuevamente sobre la radio cuando la detiene en seco la voz contenida, amenazante, frenética de "El Merluza.") ¡No la corte! ¡Le aconsejo que no lo haga! (Eva sigue.) ¡No lo haga le digo!

Eva. (Desafiante.)—Y si lo hago, ¿qué?

El Merluza.—La corto en pedazos y reparto los trozos por la pieza. (Reanuda su trabajo en la silla. Eva lo mira con horror. De pronto, la expresión de “El Merluza” se relaja. Vuelve su antigua sonrisa.) Córtele si quiere. Después de todo, ésta es “su” casa, ¿no? No debe tomar todo lo que le digo al pie de la letra. (p. 179)

Judging by Eva's horrified reaction, it is evident that she has understood the “La” to refer to herself and not to the radio, the “corto” to mean now “cut up.” El Merluza then changes expression and tone again, using the verb and pronoun unequivocally to refer to the radio, exhorting her complacently not to interpret everything he says literally. He is, of course, aware of the ambiguity inherent in his pun, and intentionally exploits it.⁷

What is disclosed of the background and character of the invader in *Flores de papel* is no less perplexing than the language he uses. For his own mother he was not one person but three, named variously Roberto, Beto, and “cabrón.” For the gang of which he is a member he is known instead by another nickname, “El Merluza,” with all that it implies, and at the end he calls himself Ukelele, “el guerrero simba.” He is in hiding from this same gang, he maintains, because he beat them (fairly) at cards. El Merluza uses his stay in a military hospital as justification for his expertise at dressing wounds; however, he does not specify in what capacity he was there. If it was in this hospital that he was not permitted to have scissors, he must have been a patient of a very particular kind. El Merluza states with equal obscurity that he learned how to make paper objects from a man who worked with wicker—but who knew only how to make chairs. And besides the job in the sawmill, he declares he has worked also in a hotel, first as a dishwasher, then as a thief. He explains his knowledge of French by the fact of his having worked for “un tipo en San Andrés,” painting his incubators; the man was not French, however, but Yugoslav. . . . Just how much of this abbreviated autobiography may be believed? El Merluza has lied at least twice with the utmost facility: the first time when he tells Eva that he has put her straw figures in a kitchen cupboard; the second time when he leads her to believe the canary has flown away. Only El Merluza's ability to equivocate about his past appears unquestionable.

As far as the antagonist's character is concerned, the facts are no more indisputable than those pertaining to his past life. Eva intuits his complexity of character while failing to perceive the magnitude of this complexity or the particular direction it takes. There is no doubt in her mind that the inner reality of El Merluza is other than that implied by his external appearance:

Eva.—Yo sé que no eres lo que pareces o lo que pretendes parecer. Algún desliz, alguna resbalada “por la pendiente de la vida. . . .” (Hace un gesto, como divertida de su propio cliché.) Te llevo [sic] donde te hallas ahora, pero yo sé que no eres lo que pareces . . . o no pareces lo que eres. . . . (p. 165)

She concedes his ambivalence, the fact that he is not what he seems, creating at the same time her own image of him as a spoiled child (“niño regalón,” “niño consentido,” “tontito”), sensitive and proud. Eva's assessment of El Merluza

is necessarily erroneous as he is rarely spontaneous and natural with her, weighing instead almost all his words and actions when in her company. El Merluza, predictably enough, is not even prepared to grant this much about himself. Ever proficient at manipulating language, he juggles the terms of Eva's antithesis, inverting what she has said about his appearance versus his reality:

Eva.—¿Y qué es lo que sé?

El Merluza.—Que yo no soy lo que parezco o no parezco lo que soy. En cambio, yo sólo sé que soy lo que parezco y no que soy lo que no parezco. En otras palabras, usted tiene su fantasía y yo sólo mi realidad. . . . (p. 167)

His is an adept Pirandellian play on words intended to preserve an ambiguity which intrigues Eva and at the same time eludes her completely.⁸

If El Merluza's language and character both lend themselves to various interpretations, then his behavior and motivations for it do not deviate from this pattern. Initially he is timid with Eva, reluctant to sit down, as doing so might imply an equality and familiarity that he would have her believe he does not feel—a reluctance aggravated by his fear of soiling her furniture. Furthermore, he displays apparent concern over her eating habits, her carelessness with sharp objects, and her tendency to tire herself unnecessarily. The change in his behavior is then all the more striking for being so unexpected and inconsistent with his previous attitude. In his soliloquy addressed to the canary at the end of the first scene he uses aggressive, obscene language and his tone of voice is harsh and menacing. El Merluza becomes the "malvado capitán," the bird the "glorioso corsario" of Eva's autobiographical recollection whose atmosphere of youthful, adventurous fun he now converts into something dire and destructive. He concludes his vehement outburst by mimicking Eva's words about the need to lock him in the apartment as she does not know him. Indeed she does not know him, for it is precisely such incongruencies as these that make him unknowable.

Through his irrational behavior El Merluza exposes all that is dark and evil in human nature. Yet it is also possible that he, too, has been a victim of these same malign impulses proper to others, for he speaks of orderlies in the hospital pouring iodine on a back—his own?—shredded by a whip. While El Merluza manipulates and dominates Eva, he himself is prey both to outside forces beyond his control (indicated by his trembling spasms) and to his fear of other shadowy figures (Miguel, Pajarito, and above all Mario) more powerful or cruel than himself. The authority that the gang obviously exercises over El Merluza makes the spectator/reader wonder whether his subjugation of Eva may not, in fact, have been ordained by them. Does he not admit to having spoken to Mario about her?:

El Merluza.—Se lo dije al Mario. . . . Le dije: estos ricos se entregan pronto. A la primera contrariedad, eluden el bulto. . . . (Rie.) Se escabullen en una buena sinfonía o en una procesión del Carmen. . . . "No"—me dijo—"Esta no, porque es una solterona." . . . (Eva lo mira espantada.) Y ahora veo que no tenía razón.

Eva.—¿Que tú le hablaste a alguien de mí? (p. 186)

Eva begins at last to realize that there was nothing casual about their encounter, that it all seems to have been premeditated. Earlier she had professed to having heard voices in the corridor during the night, voices that were discussing something heatedly, and then she thought she heard a door slam. Did El Merluza entertain nocturnal visitors, and if so, were they members of the gang, the same people perhaps who arrive at the apartment once the campaign is over to escort Eva and El Merluza back to the river? If, however, the methodical destruction that takes place in the apartment was executed by El Merluza without his having devised it, then this would merely shift the responsibility from him to someone else. It would still not provide any tenable reasons for that destruction.

El Merluza is indisputably set upon psychologically destroying Eva, but the fundamental ambiguity of *Flores de papel* stems from the spectator/reader's not knowing why he wishes to do this. She is, after all, an inoffensive enough woman. Certainly unlike Pietá and Marcela in *Los invasores* she cannot be said to represent an indifferent capitalistic social class oblivious to those less fortunate than themselves. El Merluza has no socialistic aspirations of revolutionizing a materialistic society. His aim is not to reform Eva but to destroy her by reducing her to his own abysmal level of existence by the river. It is true that El Merluza makes passing reference to "los burgueses . . . , que son los árbitros de la moda . . . en todo . . . ," (p. 141) and to the restrictions imposed by poverty. Both allusions, however, are seen to be red herrings as far as his motivations are concerned since they are not sustained and expanded as they had been in *Los invasores*. In the final scene of *Flores de papel*, El Merluza makes possible Freudian interpretations for his actions, as his remarks regarding "las noviecitas" suggest not only some degree of hatred for women, but also a pronounced sexual preoccupation. Yet as with his implied "social" justification for his assault on Eva, his sexual one is no more developed or convincing. Before events have reached this final pass, Eva has remained complacent in the face of all his deprivations because, she maintains, everything has been destined to take place. Denying that destiny enters into the picture, El Merluza has explained that his presence in her apartment was strictly "por culpa de una sopa caliente," a justification which by no means takes into account his having observed her so closely in the Botanical Gardens, nor his claiming to have discussed her previously with Mario. The culminating ambivalence of *Flores de papel* arises precisely from the fact that no credible reasons are offered for El Merluza's behavior with regard to Eva. He invades her closed world, systematically destroying first it, and then Eva herself. The spectator/reader is left ultimately to decide why.

University of Toronto

Notes

1. For a discussion of the treatment of ambiguity in these and other theatrical works, see "La ambigüedad en el teatro hispanoamericano y el problema del lenguaje," in Erminio Neglia's *Aspectos del teatro moderno hispanoamericano* (Bogotá: Stella, 1975), pp. 34-38.

2. Leon F. Lyday, in his article "Egon Wolff's *Los invasores*: A Play within a Dream," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 6/1 (Fall 1972), 19-26, attempts to penetrate the structural labyrinth of *Los invasores* by reasoning the most probable boundaries between the dream world and reality of its protagonist, Meyer.

3. See Margaret S. Peden, "Three Plays of Egon Wolff," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 3/1 (1969), 29-35.

4. Interestingly enough, it is Eva who unwittingly alludes to the imminent change in the nature of the play's language by her use of the verb *tener* when she reacts in the first scene to El Merluza's request for a cup of tea in payment for his help:

Eva. (Un poco sorprendida.)—¿Té?

El Merluza.—Usted tiene, ¿no es cierto?

Eva.—Sí, tengo, pero . . . no tengo tiempo. Tengo que prepararme el almuerzo y volver a salir muy luego.

[Egon Wolff, *Flores de papel*, in *Teatro selecto contemporáneo hispanoamericano*, ed. Orlando Rodríguez-Sardiñas and Carlos Miguel Suárez Radillo (Madrid: Escelicer, 1971), I, p. 122. All subsequent references will be to this text.] The progression "tener té—tener tiempo—tener que . . ." moves from the concrete to the abstract to a statement of determination and will, precisely the way in which the drama's action is to unfold.

5. At no time, for example, does El Merluza try to learn Eva's name, and consequently it is never mentioned in the play. Any spectator not in possession of an annotated program of *Flores de papel* could scarcely realize that she does have a name, far less that it should be such a telling one. This substantiates the impression conveyed that El Merluza already knows all he wishes to about Eva even before the drama begins. He remains to the end an enigmatic character, if only because it is never learned how or why he arrived at this knowledge.

6. Not content with a single delivery of this lengthy speech, El Merluza strangely repeats it verbatim shortly afterwards at the conclusion of the scene. Such a precise repetition would be highly improbable under ordinary circumstances, and therefore suggests that situations of this kind are not new to him. If his self-applied metaphors in this speech identify him with rapacious animals, then because of his double delivery of them (and their context), he resembles an automaton in the grip himself of some greater power.

7. El Merluza's punning on *cortar* is preceded by a pun made by Eva in describing the furniture her guest is intent upon constructing from that which he has just demolished. She disagrees that it is in the style of either Louis XV or XVI, but dubs it instead "Restauración." Whereas El Merluza's pun has sinister implications, Eva's is innocent of them and marks a momentary pause before the action moves into its final, violent course.

8. If the appearance/reality antithesis inevitably brings to mind the theatre of Pirandello, then the use of masks, another of the Italian dramatist's favorite devices, is varied significantly in *Flores de papel*. The antagonist's blank expression and enigmatic laughter, together with his frequent changes of clothing, rather than demonstrating the multiplicity of the human personality in general, here serve to emphasize the duplicity of one personality in particular.