

## Meaning and Metaphor in *Flores de papel*

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Fairly early in Egon Wolff's *Flores de papel*,<sup>1</sup> it becomes apparent that the canary plays a key role in the understanding of the main idea of the play. And as we draw a general parallel between, on the one hand, El Merluza's attitude toward and treatment of the bird and, on the other, his gradual destruction of Eva, we associate the canary with Eva, as does Leon F. Lyday in his essay on the topic. Undoubtedly, as Lyday points out, "[Merluza's] killing of the bird and destruction of the cage midway throughout the play also constitutes an unmistakable foreshadowing of his psychological assassination of Eva and his destruction of her apartment" (24).

It is my contention, however, that Wolff equates the canary not only with Eva, shedding light on her plight and trajectory throughout the play, but also with El Merluza, who before the start of the play was similarly victimized and who is now in danger of being entrapped by Eva. If this is true, the play is even more complex than previously thought, as well as extremely original: rarely is a metaphor made up of a single vehicle and two diametrically opposed tenors. By creating precisely such a metaphor, Wolff signals us that the two tenors, in spite of being pitted against each other and contrasted starkly, are on some level not actually so different: both can be symbolized by an engaged songbird.

What Eva and El Merluza have in common appears to me to be the following: they are both imprisoned by their respective social classes, and having both "learned" entrapment as a way of life, each wants to entrap the other: Eva in order to satisfy her hunger for companionship, El Merluza, in order to avenge himself of wrongs done to him by the stratified society in which they live. The main difference between them lies in their respective attitudes toward the captivity in which they have always been kept. Eva has acceded without question and striven to comply with the tacit rules of her captors; indeed, she has unthinkingly entered into complicity with them and become captor as well, which is apparent in several of her prejudicial comments to El Merluza and symbolized by her keeping a captive canary. She

is dull, repetitive, flighty and superficial. As Mr. Wolff pointed out in San Francisco last year,<sup>2</sup> the absurd act of encaging a beautiful bird for one's own enjoyment seems absolutely appropriate for bourgeois women such as Eva.

El Merluza, on the other hand, has been anything but complacent with regard to his lot in life. We do not in fact know how he came to belong to "el hampa," though Eva is convinced he was not born into poverty ("Yo sé que no eres lo que pareces o lo que pretendes parecer. Algún desliz, alguna resbalada por la pendiente de la vida te llevó . . . donde te hallas ahora, pero yo sé que no eres lo que pareces . . . o no pareces lo que eres") (193). But that he is a man of the streets is the only concrete information he gives us about himself; all other allusions to his background are vague and he refuses to elaborate on any of them. It seems, though, that he has tried to go beyond the limits society placed upon him and that because of this confrontational attitude toward life he has become embittered yet lucid, poetic, sensitive and, most importantly, *powerful* in a way Eva's class has not yet perceived. While Eva's reaction to her social imprisonment has made her dull and weak, then, El Merluza's has made him sharp of mind and strong. Outwardly, of course, as the play begins it appears that Eva, stylishly dressed and living in her "bonito departamento de la plaza de España," is more powerful than El Merluza, who is dressed in rags and trembling from what Eva assumes to be an alcohol addiction. But the action of the play will prove that exactly the opposite is true.

The canary metaphor is mainly confined to two of the six scenes that make up the play. In Scene I, El Merluza contemplates the canary and talks to it while waiting for Eva to come out of the bathroom. During this speech, El Merluza's voice progresses from a conversational tone to "un tono de dureza" to "una voz herida," foreshadowing the numerous abrupt changes in attitude he will use to break down Eva's grasp of reality. He repeats several phrases of Eva's from their earlier conversation, two of which establish the parallel "canary=Eva" and two of which establish "canary=Merluza." He asks the bird if it likes to eat strawberries while sitting in the shade of trees, an activity described by Eva as one of her childhood favorites. He also refers to the bird as "corsario," which was the role Eva played in her childhood game with her brother, who played the "capitán." It is curious, though, that while Eva had called herself the "malvado corsario" and her brother the "glorioso capitán," El Merluza calls the bird "glorioso corsario," inverting the adjectives originally used by Eva. We can only speculate why: perhaps he is feeling sympathy for the bird as he identifies it with Eva and thinks of the plan he has devised for her. In any case it already reflects the fusion of the two tenors and a possible breakdown between the distinction captor-captive.

The part of this short monologue which indicates that El Merluza is identifying his own plight with that of the bird is: "¡Tendré que encerrarte aquí, porque no te conozco, pájaro hijo de puta. ¡Tendré que ponerte candado!" (160). These words were uttered earlier by Eva when she was

explaining to El Merluza that since she didn't know him she could only leave him in the apartment alone if she locked him in from the outside. At the end of this scene, Eva leaves and the noise of the padlock being secured is heard. Merluza shakes the cage as if he were shaking the apartment in which he is held captive; here, then, he is the canary. The numerous times, here and in Scene IV, when El Merluza calls the bird "pájaro maricón" also equate the bird to him rather than to Eva, since the action of the play reveals that El Merluza's lucidity about his social situation has rendered him impotent (indeed, one surmises that this is high on his list of reasons for which he must destroy Eva, whose sexuality is still very much alive).

In Scene III the canary is mentioned in a very brief exchange between the two characters:

**El Merluza:** . . . Al canario le puse alpiste. ¿Está bien así?

**Eva:** (Va hacia la jaula; juguetea con el canario.) Sí, imuy bien!

**El Merluza:** Le iba a poner pan remojado, pero me recordé que es un pajarito de dormitorio. ¡La costumbre de alimentar los gorriones! (178)

El Merluza is like the "gorriones"--birds which inhabit the streets and eat "pan remojado"--whereas Eva is like her own "pajarito de dormitorio" (canary=Eva). This exchange recalls the previous scene, in which Eva had brought salami and cheese for dinner, thinking (not thinking, that is) that such delicacies would please her guest. But, just as the "gorriones" are unaccustomed to "alpiste," El Merluza's stomach cannot tolerate Eva's choice foods: "Debe ser donde mi estómago no está acostumbrado. Donde uno le da sólo sopas de arroz y cosas así, se pone melindre." (166)

As Scene IV opens we read that the door to the cage is open and it is empty. Then we are offered two versions of the canary's disappearance. The first is given spontaneously by El Merluza, since Eva, distracted and bustling around the apartment, has not noticed the empty cage. My reading of this passage sees El Merluza as the captive and Eva as the captor:

Fue cuando abrí la puerta para darle alpiste, que se largó. Voló un rato por la pieza, se metió al dormitorio, a la cocina y volvió a pasar por encima de mi cabeza. Traté de agarrarlo con una toalla. Pesqué una toalla del baño y traté de agarrarlo. Por un momento creí que lo tenía agarrado. Fue cuando se paró sobre el marco de ese cuadro. Me paré frente a él, esperando el momento de tirarle encima la toalla, pero fue ahí cuando me di cuenta que no quería que lo agarrara . . . (191)

The character whose attitude at this point is that of not wanting to be caught is El Merluza, not Eva. Initially she wanted him to leave her apartment immediately upon putting down her groceries. But his manipulation of her has been so successful that now she goes to great pains to insure he will remain with her for an indefinite period of time. His acts of gentle dominance and destruction are generally met with "¿Y por qué me iba a molestar?" or, as in this case when he asks if he should leave, "¿Y por qué voy a querer que se vaya?" (192). Furthermore, at this point we already suspect that if one of the two is to escape from the other, it will be El Merluza and not Eva.

El Merluza's next speech further develops this idea and seems to warn Eva that if she does not allow him to leave, the consequences will be disastrous. This speech shows clearly how the two tenors are represented by the single vehicle:

Desde el primer día observé que siempre me miraba de reajo, como con recelo . . . Debe ser que él, antes que yo, se dio cuenta que los dos no cabíamos en una misma habitación . . . Los animalitos tienen una tremenda perspicacia para estas cosas . . . Es una suerte que él partió primero, porque, si no, a lo mejor, me toca a mí . . . (192)

At first, both El Merluza and Eva seemed to look with mistrust at each other. El Merluza is the one, though, who knows that the two do not fit in the same room. Eva, on the contrary, suggests that they fit very well and that Merluza should begin to get used to the idea of spending "all the days that he wants" with her in the apartment: "¿No te das cuenta, tontito, que a contar de hoy estarás aquí mañana y todos los días que quieras?" (198). Here again, then, the canary's plight reminds us of El Merluza's.

But the above-cited speech ends with El Merluza explaining to Eva that he had given the canary the nickname "corsario," thus switching the referent of the bird from himself to her. He says ". . . es que a mí ese nombre me recuerda algo" (her speech about her childhood) and "¡Que tal vez es necesario ser muy valiente para soportar una jaula!", trying to tell her that she has not been brave enough to endure her lot: by allowing him to remain in her apartment and encouraging him to be intimate with her she has chosen to disregard the caution required by her class in order to protect itself from those who might trespass, penetrate their space, or usurp some of their privileges. He sees clearly her tragic error. Eva, of course, hardly hears his words of double significance. During the last part of the speech she has been in her bedroom changing her clothes. Now she emerges and moves on to another topic of conversation, neither reflecting on El Merluza's words nor showing disapproval for his carelessness with the bird.

Scene IV ends when Eva discovers Pepito's dead body in the kitchen and is given the second explanation of his disappearance:

¡Ya le dije! ¡Quise cazarlo, pero él no me dejó que lo cazara! ¡Desde el comienzo me tomó inquina! Desde la primera mirada, me miró de reojo. Lo seguí por toda la pieza. ¡Le rogué, le imploré que se dejara cazar, pero insistía en seguir volando! ¡No quiso oír mis ruegos! (*Pausa.*) Cuando finalmente ya no pudo seguir volando, estaba demasiado agotado para entender el sentido de mis súplicas. Expiró sin haberme dado siquiera la ocasión de darle una explicación. (*Otra pausa.*) Pude haber querido a ese pajarito . . . (*Sollozo.*) Pude haberlo querido verdaderamente . . . si sólo me hubiera dejado . . . (*Mira a Eva.*) ¡Pobre Pepito! ¡Pobre corsario maricón! (202)

Again, as the speech begins we are reminded of El Merluza and his elusiveness, his insistence on being free, his mistrust of Eva and her class. But by the end of the passage, we have associated Pepito's plight with Eva's and we sense that she will, as did the bird, "expire without receiving an explanation." When El Merluza cries "¡Pobre Pepito!" he seems to be empathizing with Eva. But the "¡Pobre corsario maricón!" which immediately follows the "pobre Pepito" can only be a reference to himself: both characters have been symbolized by the canary in this brief space and both are to be pitied.

I would like to further support my analysis of the canary metaphor by pointing out that El Merluza is like the bird in other, more general ways. In contrast with Eva, he has a "voice," can sing (metaphorically speaking, as I think of his more poetic passages); and, most of all, he identifies with the creatures of nature whose freedom has been taken from them and whose beauty has been appropriated for the pleasure of the predator: ". . . ilos peces todo el mundo los desea en bonitas peceras iluminadas! ¡Y las mariposas, todo el mundo las desea, ensartadas en cajitas de caoba!" (170). His liberation of Pepito (first version of the bird's disappearance) reflects his identification with beautiful, natural things whose freedom has been taken away.

Wolff is showing us, then, that in spite of their very marked differences, these two characters are not totally dissimilar. Both are victims of their social situations; both are capable of victimizing. Neither is totally free to act and improve his or her lot or solve his or her personal problems. Both are to be pitied and yet both are to blame. What is needed, clearly, is a structural change in the society which has produced these two alienated individuals. Thus, the bizarre ending of the play which depicts a scene neither characteristic of her world nor his and in which both characters are transformed. The unintelligible language and rituals signal that all must be razed before a new order can emerge.

## Notes

1. All references to page numbers will correspond to the edition listed below.
2. 1988 Convention of the Modern Languages Association. Session entitled "Who's Afraid of Egon Wolff?"

## Works Cited

- Lyday, Leon F., "Whence Wolff's Canary? A Conjecture on Commonality," *Latin American Theatre Review* 17/1 (Spring 1983): 23-29.
- Wolff, Egon, *Flores de papel in 9 dramaturgos hispanoamericanos*, ed. Frank Dauster, Leon Lyday and George Woodyard (Ottawa: Girol Books, Inc.) II, 151-221.