Language in/as Action in Egon Wolff's *Háblame de Laura*

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During the past decade, drama theorists have elaborated on existing speech-act theory in an effort to erase the traditional dichotomy between lexis (verbal expression) and praxis (action). Following J.L. Austin and John Searle's pioneering studies on linguistic phenomena as elements of a "rule-governed form of behavior," Keir Elam, Richard Ohmann, and others have made a convincing case for dialogue as a vital mode of dramatic action. Elam, for instance, maintains that discourse, or language in use, "figures as a dramatic-theatrical **event** at all levels" (*Shakespeare's*, 10) and that this speech event is, in its own right, "the chief form of interaction in the drama" (*Semiotics*, 157). By simply speaking to one another, the characters are in fact interacting, **doing** things with words. With regard to contemporary theatre, speech-act theories offer a new perspective on dialogue-filled plays that might otherwise be dismissed as being verbally top-heavy by foregrounding the proairetic role of discourse and by showing that language is really spoken action and not just conceptual filler in stylistic clothing.

The very title of Egon Wolff's latest play, *Háblame de Laura* (written and premiered in 1986), suggests the dual role of discourse as both activity and thematic concern in this work. Indeed, dialogue is virtually the only activity performed by the characters, and as such, the primary source of dramatic tension and interest. In a recent study of Wolff's theatre, Frank Dauster observes that *Háblame de Laura* is much like his earlier work, *Flores de papel*, in the sense that it defies "analysis and categorization" (25). The later play's apparent resistance to analysis owes to a combination of ambiguous language-games, an ambivalent relationship between the two characters, and the fact that nothing of consequence happens from beginning to end.[1] Nothing happens, that is, except language, a slippery and equivocal language that at once constitutes and undermines the "reality" of the play. Words fill the void of the characters' dreary lives while at the same time underscoring that very same existential emptiness. Language functions not only as sole activity, but

also as a substitute for tangible, significant action and as the means of conveying the characters' unfulfilled wish for a concrete change in their situation. Furthermore, although the characters use language to convince one another of the validity of their discourse, those same words subvert any possible credibility, for it is impossible for either them or the audience to distinguish fact from fiction, game from reality. With a tapestry of stories ranging from outright lies to dubious facts, *Háblame de Laura* is ultimately an exercise in frustration and futility for the reader/spectator determined to know the "truth." Speech-act theory, however, sheds light on this cryptic and complex play by revealing the role of language as both content and form, activity and object, and by suggesting what can be **done** with words alone.

Wolff portrays in *Háblame de Laura* the bizarre and unorthodox relationship that exists between Alberto, a middle-aged widower and shoe salesman, and Cata, his widowed mother and keeper. Trapped respectively within the four walls of a squalid apartment and a menial job, mother and son kill time conversing, playing verbal games, carrying out ridiculous practical jokes, and performing empty rituals such as watching television and sipping hot cocoa. All takes place in a cramped and untidy living room filled with useless and incongruous objects. A similar neglect is visible in Alberto and Cata's physical appearance. The latter, in her sixties, appears in each scene in a shabby bathrobe and bedroom slippers, with an extinguished cigarette dangling from her lips. Alberto is likewise described most unattractively as "algo gordo, blando, desaliñado" (125). On a visual level, their unkempt persons and environment suggest from the very start the same lack of accomplishment, pride, and motivation that is subsequently conveyed in their dialogue.

The play's structure is determined more by segments of discourse than by physical actions. In lieu of causally-related events, *Háblame de Laura* presents a fast-paced and often incongruous string of daily banalities, expressions of affection, insults, anecdotes, and non sequiturs. This verbal parade corresponds to Elam's notion that "the dramatic action appears, in its unfolding, as a story composed of a series of speech acts" (*Shakespeare's*, 7). In his view of dramatic structure as a network of direct verbal deeds, Elam identifies two basic forms of spoken action: illocutions (the performance of an act **in** saying something, such as ordering or thanking) and perlocutions (the actions that we bring about or achieve **by** saying something, such as persuading or surprising). As David Holdcroft explains, "a perlocutionary act is performed when someone's saying something (an illocutionary act) has a certain consequence, either intended or unintended" (17). While *Háblame de Laura* abounds with illocutionary acts, such as storytelling, questioning, and commanding, there is very little perlocution because the characters talk mainly just to talk, to kill time, without achieving through their discourse any real or permanent change in their situation or in their relationship. Rather than successful communication, their dialogue consists mainly of what Elam calls "talking at cross-purposes," whereupon the intended illocution fails because

the speakers "reciprocally defeat each other's attempts at conversational progress" (*Semiotics*, 164). Instead of listening to Cata's nagging or responding to her inane questions, Alberto either falls asleep in front of the television or turns up the volume to drown out her voice. Cata, in similar fashion, leaves the room when she can no longer bear the violence and perversity of Alberto's verbal bombast. If there is any perlocutionary consequence at all, it is indeed ironic and contrary to the one desired by the speaker.

Despite the complexity and multivalence of the speech act in this play, parallel segments and the repetition of certain speech acts produce a deceiving impression of simplicity. Alberto's return from work on three consecutive days signals the commencement of each scene as well as of that day's gamesplaying, which begins repeatedly in the form of a puerile practical joke. In scene I, for example, Cata serves Alberto a cup of steaming salt water after swearing up and down to her suspecting son that the cup contains hot chocolate. Alberto wages his own infantile form of vengeance at the opening of scenes II and III. In the first case, he enters disheveled and bloody after having purportedly been beaten by thugs. Only after ordering Cata to attend slavishly to his comfort does he reveal that all was a joke. Similarly, in scene III, he pushes Cata to a state of total hysteria by failing to "save" her from a fire that he himself lit in a grill outside their apartment door. While extremely childish, these pranks acquire a ritualistic character through their repetition in each scene and the characters' obvious reliance on them as not only a source of entertainment but also an integral part of their existence. Rather than contradict what occurs on the linguistic level, the jokes complement the discourse for they at once depend on language for their "success" and serve as a visual manifestation of the same search for amusement that is evident throughout the play in the discourse.

When not staging these little gags, the characters engage in banal dialogue and in an exchange of anecdotes in an attempt to pass the time and to entertain themselves and one another. Cata's first words set the trivial tone of much of the subsequent dialogue and establish the context of incommunication that envelops most of their utterances:

> ¿Llegaste? (*silencio de Alberto*) No te oí entrar. (*silencio*) ¿Qué dan? (*silencio*) ¿Cansado? (*silencio*) Hoy lavé tus camisas. Nunca sabré cómo haces para ensuciarlas tanto. (*otra pausa silenciosa*) (126)

Whereas comments of this nature are a communicative dead end and the practical jokes offer only a short-term source of laughter, storytelling is an endless resource in their quest for amusement and relief. The exchange of anecdotes is an engaging activity not only for the characters but also for the reader/spectator, who quickly becomes caught up in the impossible game of trying to separate truth from fiction, for while some of these stories are obviously fictitious, others seem at least plausible.[2] Cata, for example, narrates

bizarre tales concerning the neighbors and, at Alberto's request, the oft-repeated, erotic and poetic story of her seduction as a young girl at the hands of a dashing military officer. The primary storyteller is, however, Alberto, who, as the only one who leaves the house, naturally has more anecdotal material at his disposal. Most of his tales originate in his dull and humiliating job as a shoe clerk. He tells, in rapid succession, of his fellow worker's epileptic attack, of how the store burned to the ground, of how his employer, Lozada, tried to rape him, of how the same man strangled his own daughter, and finally of how he, Alberto, raped the same daughter. When these work-related stories fail to move, convince, or even amuse Cata, Alberto becomes increasingly violent, morbid, and sadistic. He excitedly tells Cata how, after raping Lozada's daughter, he then raped the gas man, a grasshopper, and finally, a hummingbird. The theme of rape in his tales suggests not only a desperate craving for power and authority, but also an intense desire that something out of the ordinary occur in his tedious existence.[3] Significantly, Alberto commits acts of linguistic violence through the repeated image of rape, a crime of violence now recognized to stem from the frustrated desire for power and control over others. He clearly achieves a vicarious form of pleasure and sense of dominance through the narration of these heinous deeds. By the same token, the scenes of physical rape relate, on a linguistic level, to the "rape" that he commits continually against language itself by violating the norms of conversational communication.

Even more important than the content of the joke or story itself, however, is the need for the speaker to convince the other of the veracity of his or her utterances. When Alberto announces his dismissal from work, for example, Cata refuses to believe him:

> **Alberto**: ¿Te cuento el cuento de cómo al niño Alberto lo echaron hoy, de su pega?
> **Cata**: (*Se paralogiza*) ¡Oh, niño, eso, ni en broma!
> **Alberto**: Pero si es cierto. Mi problema era, cómo anunciártelo.
> **Cata**: ¡Eso, ni en broma, te digo!
> **Alberto**: Pero, si es cierto. Cierto, cierto, cierto. (148)

Their playful dialogue is replete with metadiscursive references to the validity of their utterances--"si es cierto," "es verdad," "¿No crees?" "ni en broma," "lo juro," etc. Yet the characters' continual insistence on the truthfulness of what they say yields, ironically, the opposite effect by underscoring their very unreliability as narrators. Cata's story about the aborted attempt to move a piano up to the 30th floor, for example, seems perfectly credible until Alberto says "Fue verdad?" Her emphatic reply, "Claro que fue! Verdad! Lo juro!" (135), produces a perlocutionary effect contrary to the one desired by causing Alberto and the audience as well to doubt further the veracity of her tale. As the stories become more outlandish and elaborate, the audience finds itself

increasingly unable to believe a word of them. When the final curtain falls, we cannot be certain of any of the characters' utterances, including Alberto's two seemingly grave announcements regarding his dismissal from work and his impending marriage to a certain Laura, who may or may not exist.

Alberto becomes increasingly distressed not only by Cata's refusal to believe him (i.e., play the game) but also by her inability to comprehend his anguish:

> **Alberto:** (*Exaltado, feroz, casi a gritos*) ¡Te digo que trató de violarme! ¡Me arrastró del pelo hacia el baño, y trató de meterme su destornillador! ¡Tienes que creerme! ¿Que no comprendes que, si no crees eso, no puedo seguir yendo a esa maldita ratonera? (135)

Yet his failure to communicate to her his existential needs owes not so much to any lack of cooperation on her part as to his own violation of the canons of conversational discourse. Grice, in his theory of a Cooperative Principle, suggests that adherence to the following communicative maxims ensures coherence and continuity in a conversational exchange:

> 1. quantity--the contribution should not be more informative than is required.
> 2. quality--the speaker should not say what he knows to be false and should not say that for which he lacks evidence.
> 3. relation--the speaker should be relevant.
> 4. manner--the speaker should avoid obscurity, ambiguity, and unnecessary prolixity. (Elam, *Semiotics*, 173)

Alberto's response to Cata's inquiry regarding Laura, for example, violates at once all four of these maxims:

> **Cata:** ¿Y quién es Laura?
> **Alberto:** ¿Nunca te hablé de la chiquilla nueva, que entró a la tienda?
> **Cata:** No, nunca me hablaste.
> **Alberto:** Me acuesto con ella.
> **Cata:** ¡Oh, ya estás de nuevo!
> **Alberto:** Es verdad, verdad . . . Es una muchacha muy mona, una verdadera preciosidad. Es tan fea que Lozada no sabe si meterla adentro, a embalar paquetes, donde no puedan verla los clientes, o despedirla en el acto . . . En verdad, no sé cómo se coló. Debe haber sido por la alcantarilla, el último invierno, en la crecida de las ratas. (144-45)

Alberto's reply is not only unnecessarily prolix and elaborate, but also ambiguous ("muy mona"/ "tan fea") and in large part irrelevant ("me acuesto con ella") to the question of ***who*** she is. Alberto's failure to communicate in this particular case is corroborated by Cata's stupefied rejoinder, "¿Existe esa muchacha?" (145). The lack of coherence and logic present in this exchange characterizes the majority of their dialogue and explains in large measure their inability to communicate anything but platitudes.

When the conversational rules are flouted, as Elam explains, it is the audience's obligation to "read between the lines" in order to decode the play's meaning. This process, whereby the audience implicates the unspoken meaning, is referred to by Grice as "conversational implicature." In a lucid explanation of this concept, Pratt states that "what a speaker implicates on a given occasion is distinguishable from what he says, that is, from the literal and conventional meaning of the words he uses; what is said and what is implicated together form the meaning of the utterance in the context" (154). The reader or audience, accustomed to and perhaps even expecting irony and other modes of flouting the maxims, easily implicates in the above exchange Alberto's sadistic desire to confuse and shock Cata. She, on the other hand, as the direct recipient of his discourse, is incapable of reading between the lines and, therefore, also of grasping the unspoken significance. Indeed, she laments repeatedly her own inability to comprehend her son--"No te entiendo, hijo. ¿Qué te perturba?" (142).

What Cata fails to understand is that these wild stories are a panacea for her tormented son. Through language, Alberto is attempting to create a new reality for himself. Cata unwittingly frustrates these efforts by refusing to believe, and at times even to listen to, his outlandish tales. Only by re-creating himself and his world through fiction can Alberto tolerate his daily existence. He is, in this sense, the quintessential existential antihero, whom Robert Brustein describes as "disadvantaged, humiliated, perverse, and thoroughly incapable of significant action" (29), or as Dauster characterized him, "a tortured being unable to do anything, that is, but prevaricate. Caught in the tedium and repetitiousness of his daily existence and in a menial and boring job, Alberto depends entirely on these jokes and stories as a source of liberation and vicarious pleasure. "The ludic world," explains Nicole Dufresne, "is ruled by the pleasure principle, and adult play is an attempt to reorder the quotidian world in one's own imagination so that it conforms with one's desires" (5). For Alberto, these language-games afford him the opportunity to re-order and re-create his own dull existence as well as an escape from the usual routine, which includes not only working, but also coming home to his frumpy mother and the television: "¿Vamos a estar toda la tarde, así, viendo la tele? [. . .] Ayer hicimos lo mismo, y antes de ayer y anteayer" (9). Language allows him to elude, albeit momentarily, the confines of his shabby physical surroundings as well as those of his daily regimen and offers him a temporary sense of power. As Pratt explains, "more than nearly any other

speech act, narratives, once begun, are immune to control by other participants in a conversation" (104). By bombarding Cata with a non-stop string of tales, Alberto literally turns his mother into a captive audience. She may at times leave the room but she is unable to control either the flow of his discourse or his mounting excitement:

> **Alberto:** Hoy, Lozada me condecoró con una escoba, mamá . . .
> (*Ella pretende taparle la boca, pero él se desprende suavemente.*)
> **Alberto:** Vendí catorce pares de la hermosa línea italiana, y vino, y trémulo, trastornado de frenética felicidad, me condecoró con una escoba . . . (*Silencio.*)
> **Alberto:** Hoy, maté un jaguar, madre . . . Hoy, se cayó un payaso de un décimo piso . . . Hoy, Siberia se hunde en el mar . . . (164)

As the play progresses and his stories become more detailed, hurried, and outrageous, Alberto, like El Merluza of *Flores de papel*, increasingly dominates the dialogue, thereby implicating to the reader/spectator his own desperate desire for control and authority. As Catherine Larson has suggested in her study of speech-acts in Usigli's *El gesticulador*, "words are the media for illustrating the tension between power and authority in discourse" (27). In Alberto's case, he clearly has the power and the means to speak but lacks the authority to be believed. While his discourse may provide temporary relief from boredom and frustration, it lacks credibility. As he himself recognizes, his speech is powerless and meaningless if there is no one there to listen to and/or believe him--"¿Que no comprendes que, si no crees eso, no puedo seguir yendo a esa maldita ratonera?" (135). Due to Cata's refusal to believe him, however, his frenzied discourse merely exacerbates the sense of inadequacy and impotence from which he already suffers.

Although Alberto repeatedly begs Cata to believe him, he does so only to gain a sense of authority and not out of any sense of moral obligation. In fact, he treats the concept of truth in a ludic manner and even calls attention to the fictitiousness of his own discourse by prefacing the majority of his tales with a metafictional frame: "¿Te cuento el cuento del cuento de cómo el triste niño Alberto salió con la triste niña Laura?" (147). His embedding of the story within a story within yet another story, coupled with the third-person reference to himself as a character, leaves little doubt as to the fictitious nature of the narrative and thereby subverts his own request. Rather than worry about the conceptual distinction between "truth" and "lie," he treats them as arbitrary, interchangeable terms and as just another part of their language games:

> **Alberto:** Lo sacaron de la tienda entre cuatro; casi le quebró un brazo a la enfermera . . . Lozada le pidió la renuncia.
> **Cata:** (*con desconfianza*) Estás inventando todo esto, ¿no es cierto?
> **Alberto:** No, pero da un no sé qué, el oírlo, ¿no es cierto?

Cata: Lo que me da, es pena por el pobre hombre.
Alberto: Pero no está mal para una tarde sin asunto, ¿no crees? ¿Quieres que te siga contando?
Cata: Siempre que sea verdad.
Alberto: ¿Qué crees tú?
Cata: Que es mentira.
Alberto: Bueno, entonces, es mentira, y todos contentos. (*Pausa*) ¿Para qué quieres la verdad? . . . La verdad es lata. Sólo la mentira es excitante y entretenida. (134)

In an unchanging and unchangeable existence, lies offer Alberto an amusing respite, an escape, and an opportunity to create. As Pratt explains, "The question of veracity simply doesn't seem to matter that much when the point of the utterance is understood to be pleasure" (97). For this same reason, the status of Alberto's utterances as truth or lie matters only to Cata, who is unable to comprehend either Alberto's need to lie or the satisfaction that he gains from doing so.

Two of Alberto's favorite language games are, in fact, ones in which he consciously creates with words: "el juego a las jubilaciones" and "el juego del hubiera." The first consists of imagining with sadistic pleasure what he will do upon retiring from his job. At one point in the play, he plots with vengeful enthusiasm his first activity as a retiree:

Alberto: ¡[. . .] juguemos el juego de las jubilaciones! ¡Hace tiempo que no jugamos! ¿Qué hará el niño Alberto cuando lo jubilen? [. . .] ¿Sabes qué sueño cruza por mi mente con más frecuencia, para el día en que me condenen a la jubilación? A ver, ¡deduce! [. . .] Ir a mearle el tarro de la basura a Lozada, en una ceremonia, así, casi religiosa . . . prolija, meticulosamente . . . hasta la última gota, y después volverme a casa, a leer el diario, como si nada hubiera pasado . . . ¿Te imaginas algo más gozoso? (154)

While this game concerns the future and the unknown, the second game, "el juego del hubiera," consists of imagining what **might** have happened under different circumstances. Only through language, either in the future tense or in the subjunctive, can the characters experience a reality different from their own. In this regard, language plays an essential role as a substitute for the authentic action that Alberto is unable to take due to his sense of failure, frustration, and powerlessness.

The only possibility of a real and more permanent change in his present existential paralysis arises in the story of Laura, whose name is first mentioned, casually, in scene II:

Cata: (*De pronto, con rabia*) ¡Te hubieras destacado en lo que hubieras querido, caramba . . . y tú lo sabes! ¡El problema es que siempre has sido un apocado, y eso es! (*Pausa*) Ya sabes lo que pienso.
(*Pausa. Rumían un rato, ambos, en silencio. Luego . . .*)
Alberto: Laura piensa lo mismo.
Cata: ¿Y quién es Laura?
Alberto: ¿Nunca te hablé de la chiquilla nueva que entró a la tienda?
Cata: No, nunca me hablaste.
Alberto: Me acuesto con ella. (144)

The imperative "Háblame de Laura" of the title, subsequently uttered by Cata, underscores the important role of this particular speech act in the play. Like all of Alberto's stories, this one starts out sounding at least plausible, but steadily acquires a morbid and perverse nature. At Cata's request, Alberto launches into the story of their strolls through the cemetery, where "las lagartijas andan entre los mausoleos. Pequeños saurios que acechan desde los ojos de las calaveras" (147).[4] Laura's existence and the entailing possibility of a better future for Alberto are recurrent topics in the play, yet as he continues to embellish the basic romance with gruesome and sadistic details this story, like all the others, loses credibility.

Despite the improbability of there being any truth at all in Alberto's tale of Laura, Cata is nonetheless terrified at the thought of living alone and smitten with jealousy. "Qué tiene esa puta que yo no pueda darte?" (162). This sexually loaded question is just one of the many hints throughout the play of an extremely unorthodox relationship between mother and son. Along with a continuous shower of *piropos*, Alberto is forever kissing, tickling, and carrying Cata off to the sofa, where they cuddle more like lovers than mother and son. Given the high degree of ludism present in this play, these verbal and physical displays of affection might be considered just one more part of their daily games. Nevertheless, their frequency and the importance that Cata in particular seems to attach to their unusual relationship suggest that it is more than just a part of the "game."

In fact, their ambivalent and double-edged relationship is the only thing that ever changes in an otherwise stagnant situation. The rare moments during which the characters actually do seem to communicate consist primarily of what Elam refers to as "illocutionary squabbling" (8), a verbal give-and-take that combines expressions of affection and dependence with derogatory remarks regarding Cata's unappealing physical appearance and Alberto's inability to take significant action. For instance, rather than console her tormented son, Cata rubs salt in his wounds by referring repeatedly to better days and by nagging him to ask for a raise in a job from which he may or may not have been fired. Their relationship continuously mutates as Cata fluctuates

between mother and seductress and Alberto between grown son and infant. Cata is the pillar of stability here, predictable and as complacent and optimistic as one could be given the circumstances, while Alberto, unable either to accept the situation or to do anything concrete to change it, concocts wild tales and antics in an effort to make his existence more tolerable.

Superficially, or initially at least, the dramatic conflict seems to exist between Cata and Alberto and to manifest itself in their continual verbal squabbling. What finally emerges, however, is a relationship of absolute mutual dependency, to which both ultimately confess. Only by considering language as a form of action can we understand that the true conflict lies not between mother and son, but in Alberto's vain struggle to change his depressing reality:

> **Alberto**: ¡Sabes que hoy, al volver a casa por el mismo camino de siempre, me vino un mareo! Años, viviendo en este mismo departamento, y nunca, jamás, me he vuelto a casa por otro camino . . .
> **Cata**: (*Siempre acariciando su cabeza*) ¿Y qué hay con eso? Es el rodeo más corto, ¿no?
> **Alberto**: ¿Sabes que entre la lavandería del chino Lin Fu y la panadería de los gallegos ladrones, hay exactamente doscientos trece pasos? Ni uno más, ni uno menos . . . Es mareador . . . [. . .] A veces oigo como hablan los muros de la ciudad: "Ahí viene, otra vez, ese estúpido vendedor de calzados," dicen, cuando me ven venir por la calzada . . . [. . .] ¿Sabes que a veces, hasta he corrido, para ver si corriendo puedo romper con la predestinación, y algún día, talvés, algún día, vieja . . . la lavandería no está ahí? . . . pero siempre está. (141-42)

As Frank Dauster has noted, Alberto "has perceived the crack in the firmament, the terrible truth hidden beneath the everyday routine" (25). The conflict is not between Cata and Alberto, but rather between the latter and his unchangeable circumstances. Unable to act in a concrete manner, he resorts to words to change his world and to express his fervent desire that something, **anything**, will happen.

The open-ended and cyclical structure of *Háblame de Laura* leave this conflict between Alberto and his depressing reality unresolved. Although he has generated plenty of words, he has nonetheless failed to change his circumstances. Their life, as described by Alberto, is and will be the same as it always has been: "esta pieza . . . una puerta . . . una ventana . . . una larga espera" (168). In the stage directions of the closing scene, Wolff draws a clear visual parallel between the hopeless situation of this odd couple and that of the fish who swim aimlessly in the background in their own "prisión traslúcida."

Against this upstage image of futility, Alberto and Cata embrace in front of the television and comment, as usual, on the actresses' physical attributes:

> **Cata:** Bonita la muchacha, ¿no crees?
> **Alberto:** Mh . . .
> **Cata:** Boquita de fresa . . .
> **Alberto:** Mh . . . Me gustaría . . .
> **Cata:** ¿Sí?
> **Alberto:** Me gustaría ver cómo la viola un puerco espín. (171)

While this same scene has been repeated several times before, the perverted nature of Alberto's last comment leaves the reader/spectator with a sense of impending violence. Alberto cannot help but remind the audience of *Flores de papel*'s El Merluza, whose fury and loquaciousness likewise rose in a crescendo, ending with the psychological obliteration of Eva. Like El Merluza, Alberto is a verbal virtuoso whose attempts to be creative end in images of destruction and perversion. Whereas El Merluza's artistic media include newspaper, straw, and wood, Alberto creates, and destroys, with words alone. As Pratt explains, "the insulated contexts like games, rituals, and literary works in which we act out verbal and nonverbal violence are commonly believed to serve the social function of defusing and redirecting real hostility, or of allowing people to express real hostility in a nondestructive way" (222). Accordingly, the violence and cruelty of Alberto's discourse keeps pace with his mounting sense of impotence and oppression. Although his violence seems to be limited to language, one cannot help but wonder how long it will be before the outrageous tales of rape and assassination become reality.

Within the realm of the theatre, the canons of discourse pertain not only to the dialogue that occurs among the characters but also to the "dialogue" that takes place between the characters (actors) and the audience or readers. The appropriateness conditions (Pratt's term for the conditions on which the felicity of the speech act depends) of the oral speech act are replaced by the conventions of the genre, or what one would expect to experience in the theatre. In the playful spirit that characterizes his theatre as well as much of contemporary literature, Wolff deliberately flouts these conventions and thereby forces his audience to participate in the dialogue in order to ensure successful communication. He not only hopelessly blurs the distinction between truth and falsehood, but also presents a static and irresolvable situation in which language is the only source of dynamism. It is precisely his literary deviance from the norms of dramatic communication that makes this particular play so challenging and engaging for the audience. Pratt maintains that "deviance counts as a message that 'there is something to discover'" (210). As the ultimate receiver of the characters' utterances, we are obliged to make sense of their words if we are to perceive the attitudes, desires, and emotions that lie behind them.

Through this "dialogue" with the text, we come to understand that Cata and Alberto are more than just a bizarre pair of verbal squabblers. No matter how strange their relationship may be, they are above all two human beings trapped in a monotonous and senseless existence wherein play via language is the only possible course of action and source of amusement and meaning. We may laugh at Cata and Alberto's infantile antics and the preposterousness of their tales, but we nonetheless come to perceive through, and between, their words a serious background of stagnation and existential angst. Furthermore, by focussing on the use and mis-use of language in this play, we come to appreciate the intrinsic relationship that exists between dialogue and form, as well as language's potential as a means of re-shaping reality and as an instrument of power and authority. Alberto's use of language to generate fiction, to forge new identities for himself, to hypothesize, to pretend, is the key to his survival. In an environment wherein authentic action (a synonym for "change") is impossible, language is the only possible action, the only outlet for creative energy, repressed urges, and hopeless desires.

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Notes

1. I use the term "language-games" rather loosely to convey the ludic value of the characters' discourse, following Keir Elam's definition of the language-game as "any distinct form of language-use subject to its own rules and defined within a given behavioural context" (*Shakespeare's*, 11). Elam admits that his own concepts are based on those expounded in the forties by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*. As Elam points out, the speaking of language, like games, is an activity whose rules are flexible. In a study of the literary speech act, Mary Louise Pratt also implies a kinship between speech acts and games when she observes that "speech act theory provides a way of talking about utterances [. . .] in terms of the context in the which they are made, the intentions, attitudes, and expectations of the participants, and generally, the unspoken rules and conventions that are understood to be **in play** when an utterance is made and received" (86, emphasis mine).

2. By referring to both the reader and the spectator, I take into account the play's dual status as both dramatic script and on-stage event. In dealing with this problem, Keir Elam maintains the view that the competent reader of a dramatic text is nonetheless an audience of the dramatic speech act: "In a reading, the dialogue is perceived as a dramaturgic phenomenon, but any theatrically competent and experienced reader will at the same time create his own mental voices for the parts" (*Shakespeare's*, 33). Well aware of dramatic conventions, the competent text receiver is therefore able to formulate his/her role as "listener" to the speech act.

3. While Frank Dauster rightly notes that *Háblame de Laura* "exists in a tightly self-contained world with little or no external referent" (25), there is nonetheless a certain amount of literary borrowing, perhaps unconscious on the part of the author, from other works. Aside from the obvious parallels between Alberto and El Merluza of Wolff's own *Flores de papel*, the

frenetic generation of wild ideas, the tone of disgust, the utter boredom with the daily routine, and the images of death and perversion remind this reader/spectator of the speaker of Pablo Neruda's "Walking Around":

[. . .]
Sucede que me canso de mis pies y mis uñas
y mi pelo y mi sombra.
Sucede que me canso de ser hombre.

Sin embargo sería delicioso
asustar a un notario con un lirio cortado
o dar muerte a una monja con un golpe de oreja.
Sería bello
ir por las calles con un cuchillo verde
y dando gritos hasta morir de frío.
[. . .] (*Residencia en la tierra*)

4. Rather than convince the receiver of Laura's existence, Alberto's grotesque description of their nocturnal rendezvous in the cemetery merely underscores his relentless transformation of scenes of beauty into images of morbidity. His poetic discourse seems at times a burlesque of the lyric verses of García Lorca, in particular those of "La casada infiel":

Alberto: ¡Existe, existe! . . . ¡Nos pegamos unas noches de amor, que vieras! Cabalgatas bajo la luna, en potros de nácar. Tiene la piel toda cubierta de escamas, en que la luna se refleja en visos de plata. (145)

[. . .]
ni los cristales con luna
relumbran con ese brillo.
Sus muslos se me escapaban
como peces sorprendidos,
la mitad llenos de lumbre,
la mitad llenos de frío.
Aquella noche corrí
el mejor de los caminos,
montado en potra de nácar
sin bridas y sin estribos.
[. . .] (García Lorca)

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