

## *Flores de papel* as Criticism: The Artist and the Tradition

Jennifer Boyd

Chilean dramatist Egon Wolff's frequent theme of the oppressive human condition--of economic, social, and sexual domination--is most often examined in analyses of *Flores de papel* (1970), a play in six scenes and with only two characters. On one level the play is the classic tale of guest becoming master. Eva, a middle-aged, middle-class widow, offers the vagrant El Merluza money for carrying her groceries to her apartment. Instead, El Merluza asks for a cup of tea and, after telling Eva that he will be killed if she throws him out, spends the night and then moves in permanently. El Merluza initially attempts to rise to her middle-class standards, but, after establishing himself in her life, he becomes demanding and systematically destroys her fine furnishings and obliterates both her lifestyle and her psyche. Eva is finally El Merluza's slave, rendered totally incapable of challenging his control.

The plot is clearly a study of domination, but by no means limited to this more obvious theme. *Flores de papel* can also be read, hermeneutically and epistemologically, as Wolff's offering to literary criticism. This theme is evident in the dramatist's focus on the power of language, in his archetypal rendering of Eva, and particularly in his characterizing both Eva and El Merluza as artists. Not only does Wolff establish that to control linguistically is to control absolutely, he also offers a portrait of the artist's compulsion both to assimilate and, finally, to destroy and remake the tradition.

El Merluza's control of Eva is reflected in his linguistic control, in his ability to manipulate language as is reinforced in his ability to manipulate newspaper into flowers. In the play's opening scene Eva is linguistically dominant. She speaks in paragraphs; Merluza, for the most part, speaks in short phrases. She asks him questions; he provides brief answers. However, he suddenly becomes linguistically aggressive, as the stage directions indicate: "El Merluza' explota súbitamente en un bortoteo agitado, atropellado de palabras . . ." (158).<sup>1</sup> Eva's control of the situation linguistically is short-lived. In scene two El Merluza shows Eva how he makes paper flowers and Wolff

more explicitly tells the audience the significance of Merluza's flowers. The newspaper flowers are not, he tells Eva, of ordinary paper:

Y no es una hoja de papel corriente, como usted verá. Se toma una cara de la hoja que tenga mucho impreso en letras, o una gran fotografía, o gran cantidad de fotografías sin letra alguna. . . . Para que la flor tenga algún sentido . . . Para algunos, el papel de diarios es simplemente eso. Una tira de papel despreciable que sólo sirve para envolver carne, tapar agujeros o taponar maletas. Pero no es eso. Los que piensan así, claro está, están marcados y uno los reconoce por otras superficialidades . . . El papel de diarios tiene un mundo de cosas que decir. Toma las formas que usted quiere darles. Se pliega sumisamente. . . . (169 - 170)

After he excitedly tells Eva what he can make of paper and then complains that no one wants things of paper--"Ni nadie quiere ensuciarse las sienes ensartándose sucias flores de sucio papel!"--he concludes his long speech with, "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). The bourgeoisie, represented by Eva, control linguistically. However, it is El Merluza who makes the newspaper flowers and who ultimately controls. In the final scene, El Merluza and Eva prepare to leave Eva's apartment and move into Merluza's world in shantytown. Eva's total subjugation to Merluza is linguistically reinforced. In a futile attempt to assert some sense of self, Eva can utter only "Yo solo. . . ." Eva is verbless, totally incapable of action, and finally El Merluza fixes a big paper flower in the bodice of her dress, completely covering her face and her identity.

The question then is why Eva is victimized, why Wolff displaces the typical pattern of the middle-class victimizing the poor. The answers--because no one single answer will suffice--lie in Wolff's well documented anger at the middleclass and belief that middle-class complacency will ultimately result in both revolution and anarchy, in appreciating the complexity of El Merluza's identity, and in Eva being representatively female in a patriarchal society. To stop with these explanations, however, is to ignore the critical theme of the play. Eva is as much symbol of traditional artistic values as she is a complacent middle-class widow and El Merluza is as recognizable as an artist as is Joyce's Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. El Merluza's moving into Eva's apartment and systematically destroying what he there encounters is recognizable as another case of Harold Bloom's anxiety of influence, of the new artist's need to kill the father (here mother). Bloom's view that influence inescapably involves a drastic distortion of the work of a predecessor is realized in El Merluza's destroying and refashioning Eva's artist world.<sup>2</sup>

If sexual, social, and psychological domination was Wolff's only message in *Flores de papel*, Eva and El Merluza need not be portrayed as artists. El Merluza's art, or anti-art as it has been labeled, is pitted against Eva's Aristotelian aesthetics. El Merluza is the artist as a young man; Eva is the status quo, the tradition in which the artist must define himself. The play can be read as the *Kunstlerroman* of theater of cruelty. This is not to suggest that Wolff is merely a precursor of Bloom or reworking a well known genre; rather, Wolff offers a complex portrait of the artist first coming to the tradition, assimilating the tradition, destroying the traditional values, and finally, in perhaps the most anti-Bloom element of the play, wedding the now powerless tradition.

Eva as representing the tradition in relation to which El Merluza must define himself and his art is suggested in Wolff's archetypal characterization. Eva's name, her placement in the Botanical Garden where she is first seen by El Merluza, the very snake in her garden who tempts her with an end to her loneliness, suggest Wolff's intending her characterization as both symbolic and literal. Wolff specifies Eva's position as not some all-encompassing Tradition, but as more distinctly the "father"--here "mother"--who must, as Bloom terms it, be killed. She is middle-aged and seemingly of the generation preceding El Merluza. As an artist El Merluza must come to this tradition and it is hardly accidental that he carries Eva's groceries home. He has sought her, and she, after her initial discomfort, embraces El Merluza as bringing youth and excitement into her barren life. When she leaves him in her apartment at the end of the first scene, Eva turns on the radio, itself a symbol of controlled and mechanical communication, and tells El Merluza "Le dejaré esto. Si quiere, cambia" (160). Eva as the tradition--the face El Merluza says he has seen a thousand times (*Las mil veces que la he visto*)--invites alteration. She is akin to the Spanish American literary tradition the Boom writers, including Wolff, deviated from so vigorously.

As representing the tradition to which El Merluza comes, Eva is defined through her art. She is herself an artist, but hers is Aristotelian art. She is painting flowers in the garden, appropriately imitating nature. Eva's flowers are displaced by El Merluza's paper flowers, many times removed from nature and essentially made from trash. Eva mentions that others also paint in the Garden and recalls "ese viejo del viejo del sombrero de diablo fuerte azul." The old man suggests the progression of influence and the necessary pattern of rebelling and of redefining the tradition. The old man, representing the generation--the father--from which Eva must define herself, gets angry with her "por la forma como uso los tonos verdes . . ." (157); he yells at her because her painting is not academic and walks around her shaking his cane, nearly knocking over her easel. Given Wolff's use of archetypal symbols in the first scene of *Flores de papel*, it is significant that the color at issue is green, the color archetypally associated with life and vitality. Eva is a life-force for El Merluza; she, not the old man, controls the green tones. This is reinforced

in El Merluza's recalling her wearing "un sombrero de paja clara, con una cinta verde . . . Y un pañuelo con unas vistas de Venecia" (153) when he saw her painting in the Garden. Eva is thus linked with classical European art (the scenes of Venice) and with vitality (the green ribbon). El Merluza as the young artist obliterates her aesthetic and replaces it with his own: art which comes not from a European tradition but rather from his environment and which has, because it is made of newspapers, the utilitarian function of communication.

A symbol of Eva's art is her canary, again controlled nature, harmonious and nonconfrontational. El Merluza must destroy Pepe and replace him with his own creation. Similarly the traditional furniture, arrangement, and decoration must all be destroyed and remade by El Merluza. Diana Taylor approaches Wolff's characterization of El Merluza as an artist in her 1984 article in *Latin American Theatre Review*, "Art and Anti-Art in Egon Wolff's *Flores de papel*." She notes that El Merluza attacks Eva not because she is bourgeois and not because she is a woman, but because she is an artist: "Although El Merluza wants to create, he can actually do little more than reshape, remake, and ultimately destroy what someone else has made."<sup>3</sup> El Merluza's frustration is that of any aspiring artist; his art involves a drastic distortion of the work of a predecessor, the act Bloom views influence as inescapably involving. El Merluza consistently replaces what he has destroyed with his own creations, and while his art may be negatively considered "anti-art," it is also both anti-idealistic and anti-elitist.

As an artist, El Merluza's relationship to Eva develops throughout the play. He is first humble and subservient, entering her domain "con tímida curiosidad" and "sin dejar de mirar los objetos" (151). By scene two he has established himself in Eva's life, she has acknowledged him as an artist ("Es todo un artista . . . "[163]), and he is creating within her environment. Within this scene Eva states "soy una máquina" (169); this mechanical certainty is juxtaposed with El Merluza's ambiguous identity, his indefinite past and his multiple names. The third scene signals a distinct transition: El Merluza dons one of Eva's bathrobes (which is too short and tight) and symbolically becomes Eva; the artist totally assimilates the tradition. He goes on to comment on repetition: "Curioso cómo uno se repite continuamente . . . Curiosas las muletillas . . . Parecen sin sentido a veces" (176 - 177). Similarly, Eva, having heard voices in the night, tells of some noisy Italians who forget the proper demeanor of the apartment building where people are, El Merluza interjects, "Recatada." He would educate the bourgeoisie: "Gente que no sabe vivir. Yo siempre lo digo! Deberían ir a vivir junto al río, para aprender cómo *no* hay que hacerlo" (179). El Merluza brings the knowledge of life by the river, the life that breeds sub-something ("Subdesarrollada . . . Subordinada . . . Subyacente . . . Sublevada! [186]), into Eva's traditional environment. But if El Merluza is initially victim and subordinate, his "death" at the beginning of scene four is the death of the artist humble before the tradition and even, as

he has earlier become Eva, the death of the tradition she represents. El Merluza as artist has come to the tradition, examined it, assimilated it, and now--after he is "crucificado en el suelo"--he is reborn to be not only victimizer, but also the artist asserting himself and remolding the tradition. He explains to Eva that "Corsario" had to die because "se dio cuenta que los dos no cabíamos en una misma habitación" (192). In a speech in which El Merluza clarifies his own ambiguity (a topic well discussed in Daniel López's article "Ambiguity in *Flores de papel*"<sup>4</sup>) and demonstrates his ability to manipulate language, he tells Eva "usted tiene su fantasía y yo mi realidad. . . ." Wolff allows reality to displace the tradition of fantasy, perhaps in Spanish American literature epitomized in Borges, through El Merluza's control of Eva; however, El Merluza's art can be realized as "mucho más pobre, mucho más triste, mucho más desilusionante . . ." (195). But in his "reborn" state El Merluza can now fully arise as critic. He condemns Eva's furniture as having no class, no style, "no imaginación, ni fantasía, ni ensueño de ninguna especie" (196), and deems choosing furniture a liturgical act. There seems a distinct conflict between intention and realization when El Merluza's words are pitted against his artistic creations. Wolff offers at least a partial explanation for this conflict, however, when El Merluza states, "Lo importante, entonces, es que los demás aporten todo el peso de su propio . . . engaño. Sólo así podrá uno ser feliz" (201). It is finally within the juxtaposition of opposing forces, within the ellipses which abound in *Flores de papel*, where meaning is realized and art is centered.

Having donned Eva's clothing in scene three, El Merluza wears her husband's tennis clothes at the beginning of scene five and Eva wears her own robe again, thus establishing his position of controlling the game. The stage directions indicate that the pictures in the apartment have been replaced with pages from newspapers (*i.e.*, traditional art has been replaced with the printed word, here in its most transitory form) and carelessly made paper flowers, now made from whole pages of wadded newspaper rather than shredded paper, fill the room. El Merluza is first linguistically dominant and Eva speaks only in short, simple sentences, always agreeing with him. In a final rally, Eva pleads with El Merluza, claiming he has misunderstood her, begging him to listen to her, calling him a puppet, trying to throw him out. But Eva is now El Merluza's victim. The young artist is in control of the tradition and seemingly, in the scene's final moments as El Merluza violently hits the now empty bird cage (symbolic of Eva's aesthetic), will destroy it. However, total destruction of the tradition is not completed within the play. The fifth scene reveals the original set totally defamiliarized. But rather than leaving Eva completely victimized and stripped of her aesthetic in a room filled with the symbols of his power, flowers made of words, El Merluza will take her with him as his bride. His identity is no longer ambiguous: he is Ukelele, an instrument of folk or non-elitist art. The game is complete and El Merluza will leave the court with his trophy. Artist and tradition have merged. And although it is the artist's

identity which overwhelms that of the tradition, Eva's beautiful veil is still intact ("Sólo el velo hermoso es real en ella" [221]). El Merluza's art as "anti-art" or as a totally negative force seems contrary to Wolff's final direction before the curtain that, after El Merluza and Eva leave, "Sólo queda en ella la nueva belleza. Las toscas, enormes, desgarradas flores de papel" (221).

*Flores de papel* is then another portrait of the artist as a young man, a critical examination of the role of the artist to the tradition and a dramatization of the anxiety of influence. Wolff's use of ambiguity and contradiction suggests that no definite moral or aesthetic values are to be assumed. The concept of idealized and elitist art, of pure l'art pour l'art, is deemed unacceptable within the play. Yet, if Eva's bourgeois aesthetic is doomed in its inability to address the present reality and communicate meaningfully, El Merluza's art, unending and made of trash, seems a poor substitute. Wolff questions not only the role and power of art, but equally the very essence of art and artist. Like El Merluza's paper flowers, Wolff's art is made of words. The medium is simultaneously aesthetic and communicative. *Flores de papel* is simultaneously social, psychological, and literary criticism.

*University of Tulsa*

## Notes

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

2. Harold Bloom's theories on influence are presented in his 1973 *The Anxiety of Influence* and elaborated upon in *A Map of Misreading* (1975), *Kabbalah and Criticism* (1975), and *Poetry and Repression* (1976).

3. Diana Taylor, "Art and Anti-Art in Egon Wolff's *Flores de papel*," *Latin American Theatre Review* 18/1 (Fall 1984) 65.

4. Daniel López, "Ambiguity in *Flores de papel*," *Latin American Theatre Review* 2/2 (Fall 1969) 43-50.