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THE PROPHETIC VISION OF EGON WOLFF

by

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B.A., Kansas State University, 1980

A MASTER'S THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Modern Languages

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

Manhattan, Kansas

1983

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To my family, especially Jo Ann and Shari Anne.

Acknowledgement

I wish to thank the staff of the libraries of the University of Texas at El Paso and Kansas State University, and of the El Paso Public Library, for their cheerful and thorough assistance in my research, and Professor Roberto Pomo for sharing his knowledge of current trends in Latin American theater. Also, I wish to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of Ms. Sheila Boaz in typing the manuscript, and of Ms. Glenna Burckel in proof-reading. My thanks also go to Professors Thomas O'Connor and Douglas Benson for their support and helpful editorial suggestions during this project, and "un millón de gracias" to Professor Bradley Shaw, who carefully and with constant good humor supervised this work to its completion. Finally, I gratefully acknowledge the generous cooperation of Egon Wolff, both for his consideration in providing the text of Kindergarten, and for his thought-provoking insights into his work.

J.D.C.

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Introduction

From its post-colonial origins to the 1920's, Latin American theater generally confined itself to presenting strongly nationalistic themes or else was used as a showcase for cuadros de costumbres in the traditional European mode. However, the new considerations of liberty, responsibility, and justice that resulted from global involvement in two wars led naturally to new expressions among artists and thinkers everywhere.¹ Just as the literature of Europe reflected the political and social upheavals that resulted from one world war and contributed to the next, so all genres of Latin American letters began to express these new realities. In America, as in Europe, drama began to be less purely diversionary as playwrights joined with other socially committed artists to propose solutions to the dilemmas of the new age.

In Chile, in the first half of the twentieth century notes Julio Durán-Cerda, the most common dramatic leitmotiv was the possibility of personal liberation through education and culture.² But the emerging Chilean middle class was beginning to encounter new problems brought on by the increase of technology. As Durán-Cerda goes on to say, World War II resulted, in Chile as in other nations, in the emergence of "vicios y debilidades que han afectado los fundamentos de la clase media, el sector de más precaria estabilidad."³ The exposure of these "vicios y debilidades" has continued to the present, but dramatic treat-

ment of them has manifested the radical changes begun with the establishment of the "experimental theaters" in the early 1940's. In a study of the development of contemporary Chilean theater, Gabriela Mora discusses the impact that the Teatro Experimental de la Universidad de Chile (established in 1941 and reorganized in 1959 as the Instituto Teatral de Chile) and the Teatro de Ensayo de la Universidad Católica (1943) had on the creation of high-quality national drama. She observes that the staging of contemporary works and adequate physical facilities aided these and similar institutions in encouraging the endeavors of the Chilean "Generación de '57", among them Sergio Vodánovic, Gabriela Roepke, and Luis A. Heirmans.⁴

In spite of the abundance of talent demonstrated by these and other Latin American dramatists of our era, it remains a sad fact that much of their production is unknown, even unavailable, in this country. While this is due in part to the difficulties encountered by the playwrights in having their work published, it also stems from a long-standing attitude of chauvinism in North America regarding Spanish-language literature. William Oliver describes a common weakness in Latin American drama that has given some grounds for its being heretofore generally ignored by our serious critics:

Both audiences and authors seem to suffer from an irresistible weakness for the tender sentiments. I have read and seen several plays that promise to develop into hard and strong theater but that collapse, or rather, melt, in their third acts into a placid puddle of romantic sentimentality.....⁵

But Oliver points out that now "there is an increasing measure of irony and toughness in Spanish American drama" that goes beyond the sentimental penchants that weakened earlier creations.⁶

This new attitude reflects the present-day tone of social criticism on the Latin American stage which, according to Carlos Solórzano, "como en los siglos de oro, intenta convertir frecuentemente el teatro en una exposición de problemas filosóficos por medio de personajes que son como una síntesis de la vida contemporánea."⁷ Among this new theater's important voices is Egon Wolff of Chile--German by descent, chemical engineer by education, and internationally respected dramatist by virtue of his uniquely prophetic vision of human nature. Although he did not share in the formal technical apprenticeship of the other members of the "Generación de '57", Wolff's polished style and thought-provoking psychological approach to society's ills have placed him unequivocally within that select group.

Egon Raúl Wolff Grobler was born in Santiago in 1926. He was graduated from the Universidad Católica de Chile in 1950 with a degree in chemical engineering. Since 1957 he has pursued the dual career of engineer and dramatist; he is the author of at least twelve plays, with another currently in progress.⁸ From its outset, Wolff's dramatic production has shown him to be an astute observer of human psychology. He prefers to address societal problems by indicating their impact on selected individuals. This deft psychological scrutiny

quickly distinguished Wolff's theater from other realistic Latin American dramas which, according to Margaret Sayers Peden, before 1960 tended toward "the didactic and propagandistic on the one hand and costumbristic, slice-of-life recreations of distinct national realities on the other."⁹ Both his scientific training and his Germanic ancestry have contributed to the dramatist's analytical bent, according both to his critics and to Wolff himself.¹⁰

Wolff's theater has developed more or less in a direct path, concentrating fundamentally on the conflict between authenticity and inauthenticity in self-perception and in interpersonal relationships. His work fits Gabriela Mora's description of the best contemporary drama in Chile, whose authors she says wish to contribute "al conocimiento de Chile y sus problemas; pero de una manera universal, sin caer en endeble costumbrismo pintoresco."¹¹

Los invasores (1963) and Flores de papel (1968) form the turning points in Wolff's approach to dramatic conflict. Prior to Los invasores, his works show an emphasis on verisimilitude in characters and situation, as in Mansión de lechuzas (1957), Discípulos del miedo (1958), and Niñamadre (1961). However, the chimerical representation of reality in Los invasores has notably marked the style of his subsequent works; after Invasores there is a strong tendency toward hermetism, as in El signo de Caín (1969) and Flores, or toward the absurdist "non-reason" so brilliantly displayed in Kindergarten (1978).

Besides the dramas mentioned above, which are the subject of this study, Wolff has also written: Parejas de trapo (unpublished, but performed in Chile since 1961), El sobre azul, Esas 50 estrellas, Espejismos, Alamos en la azotea, and José. These last three are awaiting publication in North America; José was staged in Santiago in 1980, signalling Wolff's return to dramaturgy after a twelve-year hiatus in his production.¹² It is my sincere desire that this exposition of some of his major works will awaken in readers of this country the interest in Egon Wolff's theater that it deserves.

Notes

¹ Carlos Solórzano, El teatro latinoamericano en el siglo XX (México: Editorial Pormaca, 1964), p. 136.

² "Actuales tendencias del teatro chileno," Inter-American Review of Bibliography, 13 (1963), 161.

³ "Actuales tendencias," p. 171.

⁴ "Notas sobre el teatro chileno actual," Revista Inter-americana de Bibliografía, 18, 4 (Oct.-Dec., 1968), 415-21.

⁵ Voices of Change in the Spanish American Theater (Austin: University of Texas Press), 1971), p. xiv.

⁶ Voices of Change, p. xv.

⁷ Solórzano, p. 138.

⁸ Egon Wolff in a letter to the author dated November 6, 1982: "En Marzo estrenaremos una nueva producción mía en la que estoy trabajando con mucho ahinco...."

⁹ "The Theater of Egon Wolff," Dramatists in Revolt, eds. Leon F. Lyday and George W. Woodyard (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), pp. 190-91.

¹⁰ In Dramatists in Revolt (p. 190) Prof. Peden discusses quite fully Wolff's Latin/Teutonic background, relating it to the development of his drama. Juan Andrés Piña also mentions this aspect of Wolff's thinking in his introduction to Teatro [contains Niñamadre, Flores de papel, and Kindergarten] (Santiago: Nascimento, 1978), p. 9.

¹¹ "Notas sobre el teatro chileno," p. 417.

¹² Pedro Bravo-Elizondo, "Reflexiones de Egon Wolff en torno al estreno de José," Latin American Theater Review, 14, 1 (Spring, 1981), 65. Because the text of José has been unavailable to this writer, it is, unfortunately, not included in this study. For discussions of the play, see Bravo-Elizondo, pp. 65-70 and Juan Andrés Piña, "El retorno de Egon Wolff," pp. 61-64 of the same issue of LATR.

I

From its beginning, Egon Wolff's theater has displayed a technical ability that is consistently revealed in his mature work. Mansión de lechuzas and Discípulos del miedo, his first two plays, employ the superb characterization and strict thematic coherence that have earned Wolff his reputation as a playwright of great importance. Indicative of his already well developed talent is the fact that Mansión, his very first dramatic effort, won the first honorable mention at the 1957 competition of the Teatro Experimental de la Universidad de Chile and was staged the following year by Chile's Sociedad de Autores Teatrales. Discípulos, entered into competition at TEUC a few months later, also won honorable mention, and was first performed in 1958 in Santiago. In 1959, Discípulos del miedo was awarded the Premio Municipal de Literatura.¹

These two plays treat similar problems of family conflict although they differ greatly in their presentation. In Mansión de lechuzas the suffocating enclosure of maternal love is finally opened, offering a beneficial future to the characters. By contrast, in Discípulos, the fear and hatred of poverty that have formed a barrier between the mother and her family surround her to the very end of the drama. In Mansión, the dramatist achieves symmetry by means of the symbolic effects of the scenery and the action; in Discípulos del miedo, the

usual symmetry of Wolff's plays is most evident in his use of language. In her insightful study of the dramatist's major works, Elena Castedo-Ellerman has praised the "lyricism" of Mansión de lechuzas, while asserting that Discípulos, "por su falta de sutileza...es la obra menos interesante de Wolff."² Certainly, the ordinariness of the situation in Discípulos is far removed from the poetic imagery of its predecessor. However, I believe that this very everyday quality in the action emphasizes the author's implied message about authentic self-sacrifice presented in Discípulos del miedo.

Mansión de lechuzas (Owl Mansion) tells the story of a young widow raising her two adolescent sons in the seclusion of a decaying country estate. Marta's chief aim is to keep Andrés and Felipe, aged seventeen and sixteen, in a state of innocence, uncontaminated by what she views as a totally evil world outside. It is only at the end of the play that we learn the specific reason for the mother's overzealous vigilance: she wants to cover up the ugly reality of her married life, which she has presented to the boys as perfect in every way. When Andrés begins to experience the fullness of life--sex and love and interpersonal relationships away from the family--he learns that his father had been a sadistic brute whose common term of endearment for Marta was "puta". He confronts his mother with the double truth of his own liberating experiences outside of her control and his knowledge of her dehumanizing marriage.

However, he assures her of his genuine love and respect for her as a worthwhile human being. At the end, this loving acceptance becomes the basis for honest communication, and Marta symbolically opens the door of the house to allow the entrance of the outside world.

Wolff employs a different plot in Discípulos del miedo (Disciples of Fear) to show in another way the destructive effects of those who lack self-awareness and an ability to understand the feelings of others. Discípulos is the portrait of a family torn apart by arribismo, the determined social climbing of the emerging middle class of Chile. Matilde, motivated by her childhood memories of the miseries of poverty, has unfeelingly pushed her family into ever higher financial status until they are about to realize her dream of owning a factory. She anxiously longs for the outward signs of material wealth--a fancy house, a large yard, a car. Sourly critical of her younger son and daughter, she makes no secret of her preference for the older son Jorge, who gives the appearance of a successful businessman and who is about to marry into money. She can barely tolerate the presence of Ricardo, the younger son, whom she calls, without humor, "the black sheep".

Matilde's obsessive materialism is quietly opposed by her husband Juan, who is driven into dealing with loan sharks to raise the remaining capital for his wife's scheme. When Juan suffers a fatal heart attack, Matilde finds that her lack of

concern for her children's true needs has cost her their love. Jorge and Sara desert her, and she is forced to live in poverty with Ricardo and his bride. The play ends with an epilogue in which we see Matilde bitterly demanding all the material goods she has dreamed of owning, and confessing: "¡Tengo miedo! ¡Tengo miedo!"³

As we have observed earlier, most dramatists throughout Latin America are socially committed, including Egon Wolff. His plays all contain a prophetic warning for his society; however, as Pedro Bravo-Elizondo has noted, in Wolff's theater the message is always subordinate to the basic artistic expression of the play itself. As the critic explains:

Egon Wolff participa del compromiso del autor para con la sociedad. Lo fundamental para él es trabajar con el hombre, desde dentro del hombre. De esta manera el mensaje se da implícito. Si lo que surge es interesante social o políticamente, perfecto. Pero el hombre es el centro de este universo.⁴

Therefore, although Mansión de lechuzas and Discípulos del miedo are "thesis plays", they conform to Wolff's recognized pattern of revealing societal flaws through close psychological scrutiny of his characters. It is not surprising, then, that we consistently find strongly drawn characters in Wolff's work. The mother figures in Mansión and Discípulos are reminiscent of the powerful, mythic women of Lorca in their obsessive wielding of maternal control. At the same time, they are carefully portrayed individuals engaged in realistic conflicts with those around them.

Marta's overly scrupulous desire to be seen as a good mother leads her to nurture her sons' infantile emotional state by making herself indispensable to them. Felipe, the younger boy, seems content with this unnatural state of affairs, but Andrés recognizes that he must break away in order to survive as an individual. When he realizes that his years of living a sheltered existence have given him no preparation for a job or other adult responsibilities, he bitterly gives his own interpretation of the flowers that his family grows, flowers that symbolize romantic perfection for his mother and brother:

ANDRES. (Toma de un brazo a Felipe y lo arrastra con violencia hacia el patio.)
 --¡Ven! ¡Ven a ver! (Haciéndolo mirar hacia afuera.) ¿Ves? ¿Llenas de flores, ¿no? Repletas de flores raquílicas y perfumadas. (Vuelve hacia Marta.)
 ¿Tú sabes por qué?... Porque se están muriendo...

... Se están muriendo y se defienden de la muerte, exhalando con toda su fuerza el resto de la vida que les queda... (pausa), como nosotros. Camelias que se mueren en perfume, detrás de una reja oxidada.⁵

The stunted emotional growth of the Owl Mansion's inhabitants is pointedly contrasted with the expansive joviality of Móttola, the Italian living in the adjacent house with his young wife and her sister. Móttola's frank enjoyment of all of life's pleasures makes an effective contrast to Marta's exaggerated propriety. Wolff perhaps consciously intended for this character to fulfill a role that he does very well, that of the gracioso of Golden Age theater: through their reactions

to Móttola's presence, the other characters' own traits are revealed. But Móttola is also a well-developed individual in his own right. Juan Andrés Piña aptly classifies the ebullient Italian as "un personaje perfectamente logrado y clásico ya en la dramaturgia de Wolff."⁶ The following excerpt illustrates his rich character. Móttola has come to apologize to Marta for his wife's picking flowers from the mansion garden, and he innocently recounts to the scandalized widow:

MOTTOLA. --...¿Sabe lo que me ha hecho el otro día?... (Ríe). Io venía saliendo de la ducha... (Muestra su cuerpo), tutto nudo, ¿entiende?... (Entre turbado y jocoso.) Y ella se ha molestado, ¿Y sabe per que? ... Porque las mías nalgas... (se golpea las asentaderas) porque siendo un hombre grande io tengo las nalgas de un bambino ... (Ríe de todo corazón, ajeno de la reacción que producen sus palabras.) ¡Ah! ¡ah!... Culo de bambino, me grita, golpeándome las nalgas con un colgador de ropa... ¡Qué donna! ¡Culo de bambino!

(p. 176)

Discussing Mansión de lechuzas in an early study of Wolff's theater, Margaret Sayers Peden characterizes its conflict as "an abstraction which has been given characters to work out."⁷ Given the pervasive symbolism of both the setting and the action, this is an accurate statement. Everything about the play is designed to reflect an ideological conflict between the vitality of self-awareness and the spiritual death of false idealization. As Professor Peden goes on to say about Mansión:

The balance between the old and the new is perfectly maintained, the elements of the conflict are equal. The disintegration of the gardening equipment necessary for economic survival, the decaying condition of the old house, is paralleled in the stultification and suspension of life within the house; the encroachment of lower middle class houses upon what were once spacious formal grounds is paralleled in the menace that the outside world poses to the isolation that Marta... is trying to conserve as a shelter for her two sons.

Dead flowers, references to owls (signifying both knowledge and an augury of death), the close atmosphere of the symbolically attendant greenhouse--all emphasize the moribund spirit of the mansion's alienated inhabitants. Outside, there are the voices of children playing, the warm glow of a late spring evening, all evoking vitality and freshness. In a powerful irony of plot, the mystery of sex, condemned earlier in the play as leading to spiritual death, becomes for Andrés the opening to self-knowledge that leads him into honest communication with his mother.

In addition to the essential character of Marta, who exercises an unhealthy control over her sons' lives, there are other specific elements in Mansión de lechuzas that recall the imagery of Lorca. Castedo-Ellerman mentions the evocative lighting, pointing always to outside vitality as we have indicated.⁹ The scene of the family at prayer, as Marta contemplates the painful secret of her past, brings to mind the closing scene of Bodas de sangre with the women praying for purity of spirit.

And although he provides a denouement that is a total anti-thesis to Lorca's tragedies, in Mansión Wolff reflects a theme common to the trilogy of the Spanish master--the conflict between stultifying, enclosed family life and powerful outside forces.

By contrast with the lyrical, almost allegorical tone of Wolff's first play, its successor, Discípulos del miedo, is the straightforward representation of a family in turmoil, its individual members affected by the self-centered arribismo of Matilde, the mother. With the exception of one split scene to point up the difference in outlook between the two pairs of lovers in the play, Wolff employs little physical symbolism here. In Discípulos most of the symbols are conceptual, ideas referred to by the characters without ever being represented on the stage. The factory that Matilde wants for her financial security; the visible trappings of wealth that she longs for; the father's pet rabbits and canaries, never appear on the scene but are symbolic reference points that reflect the characters' separate aspirations.

The characters of Discípulos del miedo gradually reveal their disparate attitudes about life's important values when Jorge brings his fiancée Cora to meet his family. The parents are pleased by their son's choice, but for significantly different reasons. Both Juan and Matilde respond to Cora out of their own personal vision of life. Matilde, impressed because

Cora's family enjoys the material possessions that she herself has always wanted, tells Jorge: "Me gusta tu novia, hijo. Muy callada, pero inteligente; se ve en los ojos..." (p. 121). Juan, on the other hand, flattered by Cora's unsolicited interest in his pet rabbits, responds with an ironically similar compliment: "Me gusta tu novia, Jorge. Es una muchacha de sentimientos. Se le ve en los ojos y eso es algo que no engaña" (p. 127).

Juan's assessment of the girl proves to be more accurate: Cora manifests a depth of emotion that is totally unlike Jorge's self-centered cynicism. In a key scene, while we see Ricardo and his sweetheart meeting in the park and exchanging tenderly humorous greetings, Jorge is being surly and secretive with Cora. As Ricardo and Ester make honest plans for their future together, the older son displays the emotional sterility that Matilde's cold-hearted commercialism has instilled in him. Since his mother has clearly indicated that the only worthwhile thing in life is to make a profit, Jorge declares bitterly: "...juré no caer más en sentimentalismos y me mantengo en mi línea " (p. 119). Cora, recognizing the alienating effect of such an attitude, answers with a remark that is a prophetic statement of the result this lack of feeling will later have for Matilde: "Es la primera vez que te veo tal como eres, Jorge... Soy ajena a ti, como te es ajeno todo lo que te rodea. No podría darte nada..." (p. 119). Matilde has provided the model for such a lack of personal sentiment; in the play's final moments we see that she still

places no value on her younger son's offer of filial love, even when that is the only thing that her family can give her. Just as she has been alone in her determination to raise her visible social status, so Matilde remains alone in her prison of fear, isolated from the relationships that surround her.

This hopeless alienation is the result of an attitude that embodies what Frank Dauster sees as the portrayal of "una clase media indiferente a "...lo que no sea el miedo a la pobreza."¹⁰ Matilde's fear of poverty has caused her to disrupt potentially happy family situations. She has pressured her husband into leaving the intellectual stimulus of his post as a university professor because the job was ill-paid. She has discouraged her daughter's preferred suitor in favor of a richer man. Matilde feels personally insulted by Ricardo's enthusiasm for his work as an automobile mechanic, not even allowing him to sit at breakfast with the family in his work clothes. Affronted by his lack of worldly ambition, she eventually forces him to leave the household. Even Jorge, who is most like her in his social-climbing tendencies, Matilde has exploited as an unpaid employee. Finally, when she learns that her husband is dying, having been swindled out of the funds for buying the factory, Matilde mourns only her material loss. At the end of the second act we see her, symbolically, alone on the stage:

SARA: (En la escala.) ¡Mamá! ¡Mamá! ¡ven!
 ¡Papa está muy mal! ¡Dice que quiere verte!
 ¡Apúrate!

Desaparece. JORGE la sigue apresuradamente.
MATILDE se queda sola. Esta de pie, con
las manos empuñadas.

MATILDE: Todo... Todo perdido...
 (p. 159)

It is clear that by the time he wrote Discípulos del miedo Wolff had moved well toward the closely "interior" vision of his characters that comprises the workings of his plays. Although Discípulos has little of the outwardly allegorical tone of Mansión de lechuzas, nevertheless it is a powerfully moving drama. Its simple but revealing language gives it an impact whose importance, especially for Latin American audiences, is well expressed by Julio Durán-Cerda. He notes that in this play Wolff:

...toca el nervio más sensible, el elemento sociológico que condiciona, en última instancia, el pensamiento y el comportamiento de nuestra sufriente clase media: el temor permanente a la pobreza, en cuyas fronteras se debate silenciosa y alerta.¹¹

In its skillful presentation of ordinary life, Discípulos also clearly expresses the playwright's fundamental artistic conviction as stated in Wolff's personal introduction to Mansión de lechuzas:

...Lo que importa es tomar esa emoción común, esa queja, esa rebeldía que palpita en la multitud de individuales que va al teatro, y darle cuerpo en un conflicto real, de modo que, de pronto--la magia--, en una frase, una situación, el espectador salte promovido por un chispazo de luz que le haga decir: "eso es", "eso es lo que yo he pensado y no he podido decir", "eso interpreta mi queja", "eso describe mi vida"....

(p. 164)

Egon Wolff's theater most often reveals the humanity of individuals faced with two options. Either they can open themselves to the spiritual vitality of personal honesty and authentic love of neighbor, or they can continue to make spiritually destructive choices out of an unwillingness to accept the truth about themselves and others. The characters of Mansión de lechuzas embody the salutary effects of the first choice. However, in Discípulos del miedo, in spite of the efforts of Juan, Cora, Ricardo and Ester to influence the others by their love, Matilde and Jorge remain "disciples of fear", never learning the values that give a larger meaning to life. Matilde's anguished "Tengo miedo" at the end of Discípulos is a forerunner of the uncomprehending admissions of guilt which torment Lucas Meyer in Los invasores, and her lack of sentiment is as destructive as Eva's capitulation to cruelty in Flores de papel. Mansión de lechuzas and Discípulos del miedo both stress the primary necessity of one's conscious self-perception in making moral choices, the first by focusing upon the beneficial effects of such awareness, and the second by exposing the myriad ill-effects of refusing to deal honestly with life's problems.

Notes

¹ Margaret S. Peden, "Three Plays of Egon Wolff," Latin American Theatre Review, 3, 1 (Fall, 1969), 29.

² "Variantes de Egon Wolff: Fórmulas dramática y social," Hispanamérica, 5, 15 (dic. de 1976), 15.

³ Egon Wolff, Discípulos del miedo (published with El signo de Caín) (Santiago: Ediciones Valores Literarios, 1971), p. 165. All textual references are to this edition.

⁴ "Reflexiones de Egon Wolff en torno al estreno de José," Latin American Theatre Review, 14, 1 (Spring, 1981), 66.

⁵ Egon Wolff, Mansión de lechuzas in Teatro chileno actual (Santiago: Zig-Zag, 1966), p. 198. All textual references are to this edition.

⁶ Wolff, Teatro [contains Niñamadre, Flores de papel, and Kindergarten], ed. Juan Andrés Piña (Santiago: Nascimento, 1978), p. 13.

⁷ "Three Plays of Egon Wolff," p. 30.

⁸ "Three Plays," p. 32.

⁹ "Variantes de Egon Wolff," p. 16.

¹⁰ Historia del teatro hispanoamericano: Siglos XIX y XX (México: Andrea, 1973), p. 119.

¹¹ "Actuales tendencias del teatro chileno," Inter-American Review of Bibliography, 13 (1963), 171.

II

Fue en su tiempo, a comienzos de siglo, una buena propiedad de un promisorio barrio de arrabal residencia (sic). Los antojos urbanísticos desviaron, sin embargo, el cauce del crecimiento de la ciudad y lo que prometió ser el refugio de una pudiente burguesía, es hoy tan sólo un rincón de adobe que resiste difícilmente el abandono de la civilización....

(Niñamadre, p. 35)

Thus Egon Wolff begins, with characteristically descriptive stage directions, the play that is the most purely costumbrista of all his works, Niñamadre (Child-Mother). This play had the distinction of being the first work of a Chilean dramatist to be performed at Yale University. In 1961, with the English title A Touch of Blue, it was staged by the Yale School of Drama under the direction of Rafael Benavente Pinochet, then a visiting fellow at that university. Pinochet, in his introduction to Niñamadre,¹ relates how the play came to be known in this country. He had been favorably impressed by the Santiago presentation of Discípulos del miedo, in which, he says, " me había llamado particularmente la atención, la justeza con que Egon empleaba el diálogo y la profunda observación que había tras cada uno de sus personajes..." (p. 5). Therefore he read with growing interest the four plays that Wolff had submitted for a Yale showing, finally choosing Niñamadre because, in his words:

...La obra muestra un Santiago de la calle Cueto, un Santiago que tiene algo de provinciano y por eso quizá me pareció más válida como expresión de lo chileno. Sus personajes pertenecen a la clase media, en diferentes matices es cierto, pero con todo el poder que significa construir la masa realmente significativa de un país.
(p. 6)

However, it was not only the manifestation of the essence of Chilean character that made the work important to Pinochet. He goes on to note the double aspect of implicit social criticism and universal application of its basic theme, which is one of the successful features of Wolff's theater:

Los problemas que muestra si bien son chilenos están expresados en tal forma que dramáticamente tienen contexto universal. Por otra parte, es evidente que Egon como dramaturgo tiene una clara posición crítica, pero--y lo que a mi juicio le da más valor--sin panfleto.
(p. 6)

Thus, Niñamadre is a recognizable continuation of Wolff's dramatic trajectory, expressing the human condition in terms of richly individual human beings. Even for a non-Chilean public, the essentially Chilean characters are moving creations because of their recognizable humanity. As with the rather stilted plot of Mansión de lechuzas, this story of a child-like prostitute trying to establish communication with a lover motivated by egocentric machismo could easily have resulted in unconvincing melodrama were it not for the author's careful attention to important psychological and structural details in

the play's development.

María del Carmen de los Dolores, called "la Polla", lives with her lover Pablo in a flimsy apartment added to the house of Paulina, a spinster who derives income from renting rooms in her once-fashionable suburban home. The unmarried pair are a lower-class intrusion into the pretentious respectability of the middle-class values of the other two occupants of the building: Aníbal Crespo and Paulina's companion, Ana. Through the effects of a split stage we see the simultaneous development of Polla's relationship with Pablo, or "Negro", and the revealing reaction of the other renters to the lovers' growing rift.

Pablo feels trapped by Polla's announcement that she is pregnant with his child. Afraid to show weakness by admitting his love and concern, he attempts to intimidate Polla into breaking off the affair. However, in her simple and child-like faith, his mistress is convinced that the birth of their baby will bring them together. She continues in her slavish attentions to Pablo, going to poignantly ridiculous lengths to arouse his love. Finally, through the intervention of the sweet-natured Paulina, Polla learns her own worth as a person. Through Paulina and the concern of one of his friends, Pablo likewise realizes the extent and value of Polla's love. The scene of the pair's final reconciliation has a parallel development when, at the end of the play, the neighbors who had previously avoided contact with one another come together for a friendly hand of poker.

As a group, the occupants of the house comprise a realistic cross-section of Chilean society, but their problems go beyond a particular cultural situation. Although Wolff himself relates the unbridled machismo that separates Polla and Pablo chiefly to the lower classes of Latin America,² all of the characters in Niñamadre share in a societal flaw that is universally known--alienation and loneliness. Ana's dour propriety and the fastidious sensibilities of the second-rate painter, Aníbal Crespo, echo the alienating self-deception of Marta in Mansión de lechuzas. These two characters embody here the worst extreme of the Spanish notion of pundonor, a self-centered attitude that effectively blocks any true understanding of others. Both are, in fact, imprisoned by a loneliness whose barriers will eventually be penetrated only by the straightforward, constant love displayed by Polla, and by the openly accepting attitude of Paulina and Hans Potte. In a revealing speech early in the play, Crespo shows that he views his aloofness as a mark of social superiority; however, his words reveal a defensive cynicism similar to Jorge's in Discípulos del miedo: "Soy un hombre muy solo y sensible.... Provengo de los Crespo de Talca. Me enseñaron a no andar con melindres, ni simular sentimientos que a nadie engañan" (pp. 21-22).

As in Mansión de lechuzas, the restrictive force of exaggerated social convention is contrasted with the spiritual freedom of those who accept themselves and others as they are. Here, the role played by Móttola in Wolff's first play is

undertaken by Hans Potte, the robust German poultry salesman. It is interesting to note that this gracioso figure, like his predecessor in Mansión, is a foreigner; perhaps this is symbolic emphasis on his being unbound by narrow cultural codes. He fulfills the same structural function as Móttola, being the perfect foil for Ana's and Crespo's straitlaced attitudes.

Potte is also a vehicle for the presentation of one of the most interesting ideas that arises from this play. Hans has formed a romantic attachment to Paulina that grows quietly throughout the drama. In a sense, their romance is a structural complement to Polla and Pablo's, since it is equally suspect in the prim view of Ana and Crespo. But their love becomes an important motif in another way. Besides providing some truly funny scenes, such as the older couple's childishly bashful announcement that Hans is about to be baptized, the relationship of these two reveals a positive attitude about the validity of formal religion that is rare in contemporary Latin American literature. Whereas most current writers tend to view the profession of Christianity as a mere facade for hypocrisy, in this play Wolff portrays Paulina's orthodox Catholic faith as the motivation behind her truly kind nature and her genuine concern for the welfare of others.

Elena Castedo-Ellerman discusses the revitalizing power of authentic love and self-respect as it is portrayed in Niñamadre, focusing upon Polla for the development of this idea. It is her opinion that in the character of Polla: "Wolff

encarna la salvación a través de la ingenuidad y la pureza interior."³ Identifying Paulina as "la voz del autor", Castedo-Ellerman agrees that it is this character who: "Discurre, analiza y da una solución al conflicto de cada personaje"; however, the critic fails to mention Paulina's explicitly stated religious attitude in explaining her actions.⁴ Without a definite statement from the playwright about his religious views, it is difficult to assess completely the significance of Paulina's adherence to the Gospel. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to call the reader's attention to the way in which her words and actions together reflect a sincere expression of Christian faith. Whatever else this may mean here, it seems a clear indication that Wolff acknowledges the social benefits of genuinely acting upon one's Christian beliefs.

Paulina is not a "cardboard saint". She is aware of her human failings, but at the same time she is firm in her belief that everyone's life is lived in God's loving presence. For instance, she displays a profound understanding of Aníbal Crespo's feelings of loneliness, but she refutes his empty cynicism with the conviction of her faith:

ANIBAL C. Le he hecho una pregunta inteligente, porque quiero una respuesta inteligente, señorita... ¡No meta a Dios en eso!... Me refiero a Ud. ... Sus huesos... su carne... lo que palpa... ¡Su pulso! El pulso que repugna a veces... ¡Eliminarlo! ¡Borrarlo!... ¿No lo ha pensado nunca?

find the self-esteem she needs to be free from Pablo's selfish domineering. When Polla admits to Paulina that she has been "de otros hombres", the older woman reinforces the younger one's fundamental innocence in spite of the outward evidence of worldly experience:

PAULINA (Le toma la cabeza entre las manos y la mira a los ojos) Niña, ¿echas de menos el placer que te dieron esos hombres?... (Polla niega con sucesivas sacudidas de cabeza) ¿Sólo lo deseas a él?...

POLLA Sólo a él...

PAULINA ¿Cómo si fuera la primera vez?...

POLLA Nací el día en que me miró...

PAULINA Entonces, eres pura, Polla... Estás intacta... Tienes que demostrárselo....
(pp. 139-40)

Because she is the only one of the neighbors who will visit with Polla, Paulina discovers that the beautiful woman whom Pablo has said is his mother is really a foreign actress whose photograph has inspired him to reconstruct a fictitious family life. Without passing judgment on his deception, Paulina simply confronts Pablo with the truth while he is recovering from a crippling accident, pointing out to him that the love of his mistress is more real than his evasive fantasies of a perfect childhood. In the face of his neighbor's quiet understanding, and aware that Polla is determined to have and care for their baby, with or without him, Pablo finally allows himself to admit the tender feelings for her that he had previously denied.

Even the abrasive Ana benefits from Paulina's unwillingness to judge others. She has been secretly in love with a young man named Victor, whom she pretends is her visiting nephew. When Victor, tired of the older woman's coy deceptions, exposes the truth of their relationship in an ugly scene before Paulina, Ana retreats into shamed isolation. Later, in an episode that is a structural counterpart to Pablo's growing awareness of his need for Polla, Paulina explains to Hans the deep loneliness that makes Ana so dependent upon her:

HANS ¿Y por qué tiene que hacer Ud. ese sacrificio?...

PAULINA Porque le doy su única oportunidad de amar, que es cuando descubre que no puede odiar tanto como quiera....
(p. 159)

Through Paulina, Ana's isolation is pierced at the same moment in the play as Pablo and Polla's. To Hans, Paulina suggests: "Sea cariñoso con Ana... Agradece tanto cuando siente que no la rechazan... Vaya a convidarla a jugar una mano de póker, ¿quiere?... Le hará feliz" (p. 160). To Pablo, she unveils the depths of Polla's feeling for him:

PAULINA ... Esta pobre mujer lo está arriesgando todo, incluso perderlo a Ud., por tener a esa criatura...

PABLO ¿Por qué me mintió la Polla?... ¿Por qué me fue a mentir así?...

PAULINA Por miedo de perderlo... ¿perder qué? ... Ud., tal como es, no puede ser el padre de nadie....

(p. 164)

As the lovers embrace in a final reconciliation, Ana joyfully gives Paulina the news that Hans has included her in that evening's card game, an invitation that has softened her self-protective misanthropy. Like the newly-acquired consideration displayed by Pablo, Ana's attitude is a welcome change, causing her to confide: "¿Será que le estoy cayendo simpática? ¿No tengo la dureza de antes, no crees?..." (p. 165). At the end, the stiffness and alienation that have protected the various characters from each other have been replaced by warmth and friendliness, the by-product of the steadfast love and kindness of Polla and Paulina, two women who have consistently risked openness in their relationships with others.

This chapter began with an example of the lengthy stage directions that are an identifying feature of Egon Wolff's work. The author reveals much of the Chilean essence in these impressionistic descriptions of his characters and their environments. As though writing a screenplay or a novel, Wolff evokes the sights, sounds, even smells that should arouse the public's sensory awareness of the situation before the dramatic conflict ever begins. Of course, the external physical attributes of the setting are readily apparent as soon as the curtain goes up, but the reader of one of Wolff's plays has a psychological advantage that the viewer does not possess. As this further excerpt from Niñamadre illustrates, in the preamble to his plays, Wolff provides his personal interpretation of how cultural immediacy combines with common human experience to produce a larger context:

...A las seis de la tarde abren las puertas de las fábricas de bomboneras plásticas y persianas de aluminio que hay por ahí cerca y una muchedumbre de obreros y obreras invaden el ámbito. Es la voz de la discorola automática de las risas y gritos intermitientes de los grupos que deambulan. Chirrean frenos; suenan claxones. Hasta los gatos lacios de sueño, se encamaron sobre los techos para ver que (sic) pasa.

Nuestra casa no puede evitar ni ignorar nada de eso, está escrito en el espacio del tiempo.

Ese es el espíritu que debe reinar en esta representación; ese aire que refleja la intrusión violenta de lo moderno....

(p. 10)

Through this subjective vision of the potential meaning of a particular time and place, Wolff suggests that the conflicts which will involve the house's occupants go beyond the bare confrontation between the cultural tension of male dominance and female submission. As with all his plays, the basic question of Niñamadre is, ultimately, the individual choice between adhering complacently to the status quo, and the liberating acceptance of an authentic self-awareness. In Wolff's theater, this self-knowledge that leads to personal freedom is inseparably linked with love; the action of Niñamadre leaves no question about love's validity as the basis for nurturing interrelationship. The viewer or reader can share equally in Paulina's prophetic observation to Polla: "Eres vulnerable como una flor... Tu fuerza está sin embargo, en la obstinación con que buscas ternura..." (p. 140). These words point explicitly to the possibility of finding, through love, life's deepest meaning.

Notes

¹ Egon Wolff, Niñamadre (Santiago: Instituto Chileno-Norteamericano de Cultura, 1961), pp. 5-6. All textual references are to this edition.

² Margaret Sayers Peden, "The Theater of Egon Wolff" in Dramatists in Revolt, eds. Leon F. Lyday and George W. Woodyard (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), p. 192.

³ "Variantes de Egon Wolff: Fórmulas dramática y social," Hispanamérica, 5, 15 (dic. de 1976), 24.

⁴ "Variantes de Egon Wolff," p. 25.

III

In 1963, only five years after his initial dramatic efforts had become a significant part of the Latin American theater scene, Egon Wolff reached a level of artistic imagination which Julio Durán-Cerda describes as the playwright's "plenitud...la prueba de un dominio técnico cabal y de un vuelo poético espléndido."¹ The work which elicited the critic's high praise and which continues to impress the public is Los invasores (The Invaders), a drama that breaks definitively with Wolff's earlier realistic patterns of expression, and one which gave a new stamp to the Chilean theater of social message. This masterpiece has an almost perfectly attained coherence, developing a powerful social statement by means of a synthesis of "normal" reality and the other "reality" of our dreams. Juan Guerrero Zamora gives an apt description of the play as "un impar exponente de tratamiento alucinado de la semántica social."²

The dream reality of Los invasores presents the tortured thoughts of the magnate Lucas Meyer, a man who for years has grown rich on the misfortunes of others. In his nightmare, a band of indigents invades the world of the rich and powerful in order to reclaim the social and human rights lost to them by years of oppression. Referring to this sociological tone, Myron L. Lichtblau suggests that the industrialist's dream is a warning call to conversion "en pro del obrero y de las masas oprimidos y subyugados económicamente."³

Most other critics have also focused on the socio-political ideology expounded in Los invasores; Leon F. Lyday has well documented the most obvious examples of socio-political referents in the play.⁴ He mentions the significant name of "China", leader of the invaders, and that of the Anglo-German industrialist, Lucas Meyer. He also notes the fusion of the beginning of the Cuban Revolution (July 26) and of the revolution of the People's Republic of China (1948) into a significant date in the play: July 26, 1948, is recalled as the day on which the "obrero joven" dared to lift his hand against Meyer in his factory. Lyday goes on to discuss the communist or socialist nature of the new egalitarian system imposed by the invaders on the bourgeoisie. But Los invasores is not merely didactic, thanks to the careful craftsmanship of its author. As Lyday points out in his article:

Primary in importance is the manner in which the dramatist structures the play around a surrealistic dream reality, and the skill with which he blends the principal themes--guilt and fear--into it. The thesis or message is carefully encased within structure or theme, and deftly projected through them.⁵

The importance of this dream reality, as well as its own logical structure, makes it difficult to appreciate the play solely for its social or political message. If China and his followers were merely the incarnation of revolutionary rhetoric, then the "vuelo poético espléndido" of its language would be a distracting excess of the baroque. Therefore, I prefer the psychological interpretation advanced by Lyday, or those of

Joseph Chrzanowski and Hernán Vidal, both of whom have found a basis in moral theology to explain the drama's fundamental meaning.⁶

As the play begins we see Lucas Meyer and his wife Pietá returning from an elegant party. The woman vacillates between giddy paens of the joys of being rich and sudden, inexplicable doubts about their easy way of life. Her first speeches contain unwitting allusions to the fear and guilt that will later shape her husband's nightmare. For example, she worries about the possibility of divine retribution against the accustomed social order: "Creo en la Justicia divina... tal vez sea una primitiva, pero no todo les puede resultar siempre bien a los mismos..."⁷ Later Pietá betrays her moral qualms about their right to a privileged economic position when she says: "Flota un espanto fácil, como el de los culpables. No somos culpables de nada, ¿no es cierto?... Tu fábrica... esta casa, no las hemos robado, ¿no es verdad?" (p. 139). Meyer assures his wife that all that they own "fue ganado en libre competencia" and he maintains: "Nadie puede perturbar el orden establecido, porque todos están interesados en mantenerlo... Es el premio de los más capaces" (p. 139). But Meyer is deceiving himself. By refusing to recognize and acknowledge his own part in adding to the miseries of the world, he sets the stage for the eruption of his repressed feelings of culpability into a prophetic nightmare.

It is in relation to this suppressed guilt that Joseph Chrzanowski calls attention to the irony of Pietá's name, and to the introspective attitude that she demonstrates at the beginning of the play, but not later. Chrzanowski's very plausible argument, which is in accord with Lyday's theory that we see Meyer's dream already in progress when the curtain goes up, is that Pietá, acting at first as the voice of Meyer's conscience, is thus also a figure in his dream.⁸ The other figures as well lend themselves logically to this oneiric interpretation of their symbolic value for Meyer and, by extension, for the public. "China", for instance, never refers to himself by any other name, maintaining that he is simply "uno de entre miles", and yet Meyer comes to identify him with the vengeance-seeking brother of his murdered business partner, Esteban Mirelis. From a strictly realistic perspective, it is obvious that China is sufficiently informed of the details of Mirelis's death to be the dead man's brother. However, according to the "play within a dream" motif, the indigent, knowing as much about the affair as does Meyer himself, can be seen as another version of the "espanto fácil" mentioned by Pietá in the opening scene-- a manifestation of Meyer's guilty conscience. Thus, the figure of China/Mirelis becomes a symbol of culpability that is at once personal and social, resulting from indifference toward the suffering of others.

In a similar fashion, the identities of the other members of the invading band change during the course of the action.

Toletole, China's girlfriend, is realistically portrayed at first as a pathetic waif, totally human in her relationship to him. She, too, undergoes various transformations, brought on by the growing turbulence of Meyer's subconscious. From her initial appearance as a poverty-ravaged young woman, Toletole changes into one of the "espectros del hambre" that torment Meyer's daughter Marcela; later, she appears as the widow whom the industrialist ruined by buying her house at an unjustly low price. "Alí Babá" and "El Cojo", two other invaders, are seen at the beginning as flesh and blood cutthroats who are eager to exact a cruel vengeance against their wealthy victims, contrary to the wishes of their more philosophical leader. But these two thugs also appear in the ghostly masque of hunger that only Marcela can see, and they metamorphose into other characters in the tortured dream. El Cojo is seen later, changed into a figure from Meyer's criminal past--the old valve operator who had died on the job because of his boss's neglect. Alí Babá drives Meyer to the brink of insanity when, near the end of the drama, he first takes on the identity of the "obrero joven" who had once challenged the industrialist's authority, and, finally, appears as the dead Esteban Mirelis.

These mirage-like effects extend to various events in the play and underscore its circular development. Early in the action, Meyer recounts to Pietá a previous visit to his office of some Sisters of Charity, describing their appearance in oneiric terms: "Simplemente se colaron en mi oficina como salidas

del muro y se plantaron ante mí con las manos extendidas..." (p. 137). In the course of the play this scene will be repeated in a variety of ways with China's group: the horde of beggars reach out their hands to catch the bills that Meyer tosses out to them; the specters of hunger materialize "out of the walls"; finally, the nuns themselves reappear, changed into the "pequeñas obreras feas" that Meyer had expelled from his factory for their lack of allure.

Even the ideas expressed by the characters acquire a surrealistic concretization in the dream. For example, at the beginning of the play China ironically defends the bourgeois point of view, explaining to Meyer that "El Mariscal", who hates the rich, does not understand that "la riqueza es una especie de...martirio" (p. 152). Later the invasion will result in a bizarre punishment of the wealthy that gives a literal meaning to this statement. El Cojo talks of seeing the rich, "clavados con chuzos a las puertas de sus casas" or others, "atados a las aspas de la turbina...entregando luz a la ciudad..." (p. 187). A final example of recurring images in Los invasores, based on Lyday's study, illustrates the economy of theme that distinguishes this play. In the final scenes, a little girl tells to her playmate "The Story of the Trees": "Todos los árboles tenían tanto miedo de los hormigos, que cuando los vieron venir, se quedaron parados...tiesecitos, esperando que les caminaran encima..." (p. 200). As Lyday points out, this parable stems directly from the repeated use of the image of

ants to describe the invading horde of indigents, and Meyer's own reference to his oaklike strength when he defies China, saying: "Firme como un roble, así es como voy a resistirte...".⁹

By looking at the plot of Los invasores as the development of a dream experience that reveals ever more of a psychological reality, the fusion of ideas and action gives evidence of its fundamentally prophetic meaning. One by one the members of Meyer's family desert him, won over by the invaders. Marcela and Bobby, the "hijos perfectos de una vida perfecta", become part of the new social order imposed by China and his group. The two young people have been presented as stereotypes, almost a caricature of bourgeois life, with their furs and tennis equipment and their display of only the most superficial understanding of the problems of the poor. As with Pietá's changing attitudes, their new-found motivation can also be seen as a facet of Meyer's subconscious--the desire to maintain an easy mode of life that is increasingly challenged by his growing sense of culpability.

At the end, Meyer is facing China alone, hysterically confessing the murder of Mirelis, but still without a genuine awareness of his guilty abdication of societal responsibilities. It is at this moment that we see Pietá enter the bedroom to calm her husband, thus revealing that the terrifying invasion has been merely a dream. However, the play rapidly ends with a chilling twist of events. Meyer is standing before his family, telling them of his nightmare, and he mentions one of the episodes

that he remembers: how the janitor at the boy's school had made a bonfire of the students' coats to warm his frozen hands. Meyer is about to dismiss the whole thing as a foolish notion when Bobby interjects:

Eso sucedió ayer... Eso fue cierto... Gran Jefe Blanco... Ayer... Cuando salíamos de clases ... Estaba en el patio de la Universidad, calientándose las manos artríticas sobre una pira hecha de la ropa de mis compañeros... Su mirada era tan desafiante que nadie se movió... Rector, profesores, nadie... ¿Fue eso lo que soñaste?... Eso fue cierto....
(p. 200)

Immediately after this, there is a repetition of the action that originally had heralded the imagined invasion of Meyer's world. The stage directions describe what takes place, linking the reality of the dream to the reality of conscious existence: "Los cuatro están ahí, en medio de la habitación, mirándose, cuando al fondo, en la ventana que da al jardín, cae un vidrio ... y una mano penetra, abriendo el picaporte. Telón" (p. 200).

The consummate skill of the playwright in portraying psychological realities here results in the successful presentation of a hypothesis of social responsibility that is at once individual and collective. According to Guerrero Zamora, this synthesis is effected through the structure of the play, in which Meyer's culpability, "en vez de cancelarse con el despertar, se insinúa entonces como una amenaza cuya realización comienza, cerrándose el texto, circular, del mismo modo que se abriera."¹⁰

The underlying message of Los invasores is markedly similar to that of its philosophical antecedent, La vida es sueño by Calderón. In a treatment akin to the Golden Age author's, Egon Wolff uses the richly symbolic language of the dream play to comment on the social need for a love of neighbor based on one's own rational self-awareness. While Wolff's protagonist, unlike Calderón's Segismundo, gives no evidence of being changed by his dream, the warning for the public is clear. Wolff presents the clash between society's privileged few and its justly discontented masses as an imminent certainty. Los invasores is an artist's prophetic vision of the result of personal abdication of social responsibility and a call to individual moral choice, a call to conversion.

In 1968, five years after Los invasores, Wolff returned to the basic theme of a clash between the bourgeoisie and the oppressed poor as the starting point for Flores de papel (Paper Flowers), a work that can be considered a distillation of the plot of Invasores. Nevertheless, in spite of its similarities to the other play, including high artistic achievement, Flores never received in Chile the acclaim it earned in Europe and North America. By Wolff's own admission the work was considered too hermetic by its Chilean audiences.¹¹ Rather than exposing the individual flaws of various characters in order to give a logical reason for the development of their problems or the possible solutions to their conflicts, this play seems rather to expound a spiritual pessimism that reflects the Absurdist's

"non-reason". The hopeless absurdity of life forms the basis for one of Wolff's most recent works, Kindergarten, but never in his theater is a nihilistic tone so apparent as in Flores de papel. The play's seeming lack of thematic rationality comes from the absence of an obvious motive for its action, the total destruction of a middle-class world by a menacing subculture. In Flores, as in Los invasores, there is a violent intrusion into bourgeois life from "the other side of the river", but here the violence appears to be wholly gratuitous, with none of the moral justification implied in Invasores. This invasion is the personal attack that Lucas Meyer had feared, visited upon an innocent victim.

The plot of Flores de papel develops from the apparently chance encounter of Eva, an ordinary, single woman of the upper middle class and "El Merluza", the importunate, sickly tramp who carries some packages home from the market for her. Because of his insistence that there are people outside waiting to kill him, Eva concedes the tramp temporary shelter. Later, out of loneliness and her growing interest in him, she offers her affection. Her guest takes advantage of this situation to systematically destroy all that Eva is or that she represents.

The chief structural motif of Flores is the principle of reversals, as Margaret Sayers Peden notes in her study comparing this play with Mansión de lechuzas and Los invasores.¹² The transformation of Eva's personality and appearance is accom-

panied by an inverse change in the character of the vagabond. At first Eva is resolute, talkative, vivacious, in charge of her life. El Merluza, on the other hand, is timid, taciturn, weak from drinking and illness, painfully aware of his inferior social position. The tramp originally displays a reticent gratitude for Eva's kindness to him: "Es bastante... consideración la suya de convidarme con esto, para que tome la confianza de sentarme junto a usted... donde no me corresponde... No está bien abusar de la confianza..."¹³ However, by the fourth scene he is sufficiently in control of Eva to reply to the woman's romantic overtures with the brusque opinion: "Entonces vamos a tener que cambiar los muebles... no me gustan" (p. 184).

The psychological transformation hinted at above is reflected in the changes that the intruder brings to Eva's environment. However, as Professor Peden points out:

"El Merluza" does not raise himself to the comfortable middle class position available to him through Eva, but instead drags her down to the complete social and personal disorganization of his own situation... This is the most terrifying element of Flores de papel....¹⁴

In each scene, the original "medida elegancia" of the bourgeois apartment is increasingly replaced by the grotesque ornaments that El Merluza has put together from sheets of newspapers, torn pieces of clothing, and the remains of Eva's dismembered furniture. At first the paper figures are clever and graceful, but they become more and more carelessly made as the tramp's violent

personality asserts itself. Ultimately, as Peden notes, they represent the cancellation of Eva herself--the last we can see of her is her figure, dressed in the tattered remnant of her wedding gown, her face totally obliterated by an enormous, crude paper flower thrust into the neckline of the dress.¹⁵ When she leaves with the triumphant Merluza, nothing remains of her former way of life. All its grace and security have been transformed into a chaotic, senseless rubbish heap.

The enigmatic reasons for this destruction are effectively concealed by the ambiguity that surrounds its perpetrator. From the outset it is obvious that El Merluza is something other than what he appears to be, but Eva is never able to determine who or what he really is. Even his name carries a double sense that points to his sinister character. "Merluza" is a slang term for a heavy drinker, an apt designation for the sickly tramp, but its original meaning is "hake", a fish noted for its aggressiveness. At first Merluza is so timid that he will not even enter Eva's apartment to leave the packages he has carried for her. However, once inside, he demonstrates his ability to use language to manipulate her weaknesses in order to mold her psychological state to his own ends. He worms his way into her hospitality by appealing first to her sense of compassion: "Abajo me están esperando... Van a matarme", and then to her vanity, telling Eva that he remembers seeing her "el año pasado, pintando en el Jardín Botánico" (pp. 132-33). This flattering recollection takes on overtones of deliberate

planning when Merluza describes in detail the costume that Eva was wearing then. She begins to suspect vaguely that this day's meeting has not been as casual as it first appeared; she vacillates, then gives in: "De modo que su oferta de llevarme los paquetes... (Turbada). ¿Qué me dijo que quería?... Tengo una sopa de anoche. ¿Se la caliento?" (p. 134). This capitulation sets in motion the events that will result in Eva's total domination by the intruder. It is an outcome that the reader or viewer sees as inevitable, but whose motivation is disquietingly obscured by the characters themselves.

El Merluza constantly uses linguistic ambiguity to frustrate Eva's attempts to know and understand him. In his excellent article "Ambiguity in Flores de papel", Daniel López comments on the structural importance of the tramp's verbal detours.¹⁶ Neither Eva nor the public is able to learn anything definite about Merluza, in spite of the woman's direct questions about his life. Furthermore, his vague replies in response to Eva's good-natured curiosity, coupled with his apparent familiarity with her habits, give a sinister tone to the intruder's self-concealment. In their first conversations Eva fills the embarrassed silences with aimless chatter. Also, she displays a spontaneous curiosity about her guest that is the antithesis of Merluza's lack of inquisitiveness about her. The tramp, on the other hand, appears to know quite well what Eva is like; at least, he has observed her often enough before to judge her character: "Yo sabía. Las mil veces que la he visto, yo sabía

que usted era lo que dicen sus ojos que es" (p. 146). In the course of the action, El Merluza's speeches grow gradually longer, losing their sense until they become raving monologues that replace intelligent conversation. These tirades contrast sharply with Eva's corresponding inability to express herself, manifesting a total psychological inversion of the two characters. After the tramp's final explosion of irrationality, in which he rages about the sexual initiation of virgin brides, Eva is unable to speak at all: "Yo... Yo sólo... Yo sólo... (Trata. No puede. Desiste.)" (pp. 240-41).

Merluza manifests an odd assortment of knowledge and experiences, but responds with a noncommittal "Por ahí" or "Algo así como eso" whenever Eva tries to learn the origins of his various talents. Many times, he responds with a list of ever more implausible explanations to her queries. For example, when he serves Eva breakfast after the first night he spends in her apartment, he does so with the polish and aplomb of an experienced headwaiter. He acquired the skill, he says, working as a thief in a first-class hotel. He explains that he learned the French he knows when he painted incubators in San Andrés with a Yugoslavian.

Such confusing replies to Eva's questions effectively obscure whatever the intruder's private motives may be for the deliberate affliction of his innocent victim. It is true that Merluza bitterly disparages his demeaning way of life, describing his world to her in a frenetic outburst:

...Es un mundillo así, pequeño, el que uno ve, y dentro de ese mundo pequeñísimo uno mismo es más chico aún. ¡Ni siquiera a la altura de un sapo! Se adquiere una naturaleza ... subalterna. Sub, de algo, al menos es. (Sonríe nuevamente con su sonrisa hueca radiante, sin sentido). Una naturaleza "sub". ¡Subdesarrollada... Subordinada... Subyugada... Sublevada!

(p. 175)

Also, many of his tirades concern bourgeois attitudes, or the complacency of women, indicating an underlying antisocialism or misogyny. Nevertheless, there is no direct evidence that El Merluza is acting out a personal desire for social retribution, as was the case in Los invasores. The same ambiguity that obscures El Merluza's identity makes it difficult to explain satisfactorily his destructive actions.

Perhaps his own words give as good a clue as any for his reasons for the destruction of a graceful environment and the reduction of an inoffensive middle class woman to an inert cipher. Immediately before he takes Eva into her dangerous new life in the shanty town on the banks of the river, El Merluza assumes the menacing guise of "Ukelele, el guerrero simba", and he observes to his acquiescent "bride":

...Usted sólo quería quererme y que yo la quisiera. ¿Es eso? (Eva asiente débilmente). Sí, pero es tarde para eso. "Ukelele" tiene sus tripas en las manos y ya no sabe qué hacer con ellas... Como ve, es de la mayor importancia haber entendido el juego. Creer uno en el otro. Confiar mutuamente, renunciar a su propia identidad en beneficio de la identidad del prójimo....

(p. 202)

The irony of these words is that apparently Eva had believed, until it was indeed too late, that she was following the rules of the game. She had trusted El Merluza, believed in him, and sacrificed her own personality on his behalf. However, the intruder has inverted the essence of his parody of the Gospel message "to love one's neighbor as oneself." He has placed himself in a position of total domination by playing upon all of Eva's weaknesses. Eva, for her part, by not making any concrete decisions in her relationship with El Merluza, has become thereby a passive participant in her own annihilation.

In spite of the readily noticeable tendency of Wolff's theater toward social commitment, his dramas are consistently perceptive representations of the inward struggles of his characters. Even though in Los invasores and Flores de papel Wolff breaks with the strictly realistic approach typical of his earlier works, the characters in these plays evince an innate humanness that makes them credible, within their dramatic context, on two levels. On the one hand, they can be seen as recognizable social types, even mythic symbols: the blindly egotistical pragmatist (Lucas Meyer), the philosophical revolutionary (China), the violent iconoclast (El Merluza), the fatally ingenuous victim of aggression (Eva). However, because of Wolff's careful scrutiny of the elements that comprise unique personalities, these artistic creations, like his others, manifest a convincing individuality. They also reflect a basic principle in Wolff's theater--the fundamental importance of personal election in facing moral issues.

Notes

¹ Teatro chileno contemporáneo, ed. Julio Durán-Cerda (México: Aguilar, 1970), p. 38.

² Historia del teatro contemporáneo, IV (Barcelona: Juan Flors, 1967), p. 557.

³ "La conciencia de Latinoamérica en tres obras contemporáneas," Humanitas [Monterrey, México], 9 (1968), 257.

⁴ "Egon Wolff's Los invasores: A Play Within a Dream," Latin American Theatre Review, 6, 1 (Fall, 1972), 19-26.

⁵ Lyday, p. 20.

⁶ Chrzanowski, in "Theme, Characterization, and Structure in Los invasores," LATR, 11, 2 (Spring, 1968), 5-10, interprets the drama as the confrontation of Meyer's conscience with the responsibilities of his supposed Catholicism. Vidal's study, "Los invasores: Egon Wolff y la responsabilidad del artista católico," Hispanofila, 55 (n.d.), 87-97, is based on the theory of the French philosopher Jacques Maritain that all true art forms are didactic because they express the realized potential of the God-given human spirit.

⁷ Egon Wolff, Los invasores in Teatro chileno contemporáneo, p. 135. All textual references are to this edition.

⁸ Chrzanowski, p. 6.

⁹ Lyday, p. 23.

¹⁰ Guerrero Zamora, p. 558.

¹¹ Pedro Bravo-Elizondo, "Reflexiones de Egon Wolff en torno al estreno de José," LATR, 14, 1 (Spring, 1981), 65.

¹² "Three Plays of Egon Wolff," LATR, 3, 1 (Fall, 1968), 34.

¹³ Wolff, Flores de papel in Teatro, ed. Juan Andrés Piña (Santiago: Nascimento, 1978), p. 146. All textual references are to this edition.

¹⁴ "Three Plays," pp. 33-34.

¹⁵ "Three Plays, " p. 34.

¹⁶ LATR, 12, 1 (Fall, 1978), 43-50.

IV

Six years elapsed between Los invasores, the stylistic watershed of Wolff's theater, and El signo de Caín (1969), another of his intensely concentrated pieces similar in tone to Discípulos del miedo. Like Discípulos, this play relies upon conversations in true-to-life circumstances to unmask the characters' deepest thoughts. Nevertheless, in spite of the verisimilitude that Caín shares with Wolff's earlier works, its open ending is much more reminiscent of the hermetism of Flores de papel, written two years later. It is a definite example of a trend in Wolff since Invasores--the representation of societal flaws that may or may not have their solution within society.

The play's title refers to the "Mark of Cain", used here as a double symbol of the curse it represents in popular tradition and the sign of divine protection for the individual who has been ostracized from his society. According to the Biblical account,¹ the shepherd Cain murdered his farmer brother, Abel, envious of the latter's inexplicable favor in God's sight. This crime against humanity became a sin against the Creator when Cain denied the divinely established kinship between God's creatures: "Am I my brother's keeper?". God did indeed curse Cain, a reiteration of the inevitable consequences of his parents' rebellion against their Maker, but the mark on

the fratricide's forehead was intended as a sign of God's sovereign protection for this man who now had no tribal relationship to ensure his safety. Although thus protected from human vengeance, Cain became a wanderer who was cursed with the living death of isolation from the human community.

Against this Judeo-Christian understanding of the myth, "el signo de Caín" becomes in Wolff's drama an enigmatic reference to the illusory power of intellectual elitism. Portus Sanjuan, the protagonist, is visited by an old university cohort, Joaquín Icaza. In an effort to lure the reclusive Portus back into responsible society, Joaquín tries to entice him with their group's old slogans that signified for them the inherent superiority of the intellectual:

JOAQUIN: (Le toma un brazo, íntimamente) ¿Qué es Harry Haller? ¿La vida bella? ¿El ser trascendental? ¿El espíritu liberado?... ¿El signo de Caín?

PORTUS: ¿No has olvidado eh?

JOAQUIN: ¿Cómo iba a olvidar? (Declama) "Hay hombres que llevan en la frente el signo de Caín. La señal que los demás interpretan y temen como signo del mal, pero que en verdad no es más que la seña de una clara mente analítica, de un espíritu inquietante, de hombres sin miedo...."²

Both the amalgam of the play's main characters and the symbolic presence of "el signo de Caín" show a marked similarity to two novels of Hermann Hesse. Harry Haller is the protagonist in Der Steppenwolf (1927), the portrayal of a middle-class man struggling to find his true identity in the conflict between his human and his bestial natures.³ The "Mark of Cain" is a major

motif in Demian (1919); according to Theodore Ziolkowski, in Hesse it represents "the radiance of intellectual power....of moral courage."⁴ There is a point in Demian where two old friends meet after years of separation, a scene recalled in the reunion of Portus and Joaquín. In Hesse's novel the protagonist says: " 'You've changed, but you still have the mark...We used to call it the Mark of Cain, if you remember. It is our sign. You have always had it, and that is why I became your friend' " (Ziolkowski, p. 123). In Wolff's play, the mark is used in a similar way to indicate those individuals who are burdened with a sense of isolation brought on by their double nature. Whereas Hesse combines these burdens into the single, tortured soul of the "lone wolf" Harry Haller, Egon Wolff separates them in the characters of Portus and Joaquín, whose friendship is destroyed in the name of intellectual truth.

Portus, once a celebrated mathematician, is peacefully living in social obscurity with "Charito", an uncomplicated, caring woman who is the spiritual descendant of the devoted mistress in Niñamadre. The happiness of their simple life seems complete, with the presence of undemanding friends and the enjoyment of homey pleasures. Then Joaquín and Leonor de Icaza appear on the scene to restore Portus to what they consider is his rightful position of social recognition and responsibility. Portus politely declines this proffered help, maintaining that by renouncing his former glory he has kept intact his youthful ideals. He tries to effect a "live and let live" attitude in

Joaquín, but cannot make his friend understand his desire for simplicity and anonymity. The Icazas, motivated by ambition and an appetite for the conveniences of wealth, are hostile to Portus's refusal; Leonor says to him: "Pienso que si no aceptas: o un tonto o un acomplexado. Cualquiera de los dos sería igualmente triste" (p. 48).

Joaquín quickly betrays his lack of concern for the human elements of Portus and Charo's life together. By coldly implying to Charo that her attachment to Portus is what keeps him from advancing socially, Joaquín initiates the events that culminate in the alienation of the four individuals. When Portus returns from an errand and finds his mistress stifling hurt tears, he is able to guess what Joaquín's remarks to her have been, and his jovial banter changes to a vicious attack on his friend's moral integrity. Invoking the sinister implications of "el signo de Caín", he vows to avenge the wrong done to his peaceful household. In a venomous outburst, Portus now implies before Leonor that Joaquin's closest friendship during college was actually a homosexual liaison. From this point on, the two former friends are seen as mirror images of one another, as each destroys the other's illusions of psychological security.

The ugly questions raised by the suggestion that Joaquín is a homosexual drive a final wedge into the superficially happy marriage of the Icazas. In retaliation for the problems that have arisen in her relationship to her husband, Leonor offers friendship and financial aid to Charo, to lure her away from Portus.

When Leonor is sure that she has convinced Charo that she and her son will have a better life among the Icazas' wealthy friends, she visits Portus to gloat over her conquest. Just as Portus had exposed his friend's lack of idealism in opting for the vacuous life of the upper class, so now Joaquín's wife challenges Portus's own moral position. She throws back at him the same accusations of homosexuality, since he had also been close to Joaquín and his friend Aníbal; Portus counters the charge by attempting to show Leonor that her strict morality is only an outmoded system of labeling, that the bearers of the "Mark of Cain" are beyond society's ideas of good and evil:

...Nunca fui a la cama con Joaquín, si eso le sirve de desahogo. Quiero demasiado a Joaco para haber reducido lo nuestro sólo a eso. Tampoco Joaco fue a la cama con Aníbal, ni nadie fue a la cama con nadie... Eran solo (sic) dos muchachos perdidos... como estoy perdido yo... como está perdida usted... tratando de hacer contacto... Pero es lo que pasa con las almas como la suya: Creer que un pan es un pan... Un homosexual, es un homosexual... Juan es Juan... Cuando la realidad es que todo se va disipando... diluyendo... en un interminable fundirse de una cosa en otra...
(p. 94)

The play ends in a stalemate. Portus had earlier mocked Joaquín's weakness in selling his youthful idealism for social glitter: "Sí, no endosé mi vida en un cheque de cien millones" (p. 49). Now he reveals himself to be as morally weak as his friend. He admits to Leonor that he left behind his promising career, not to preserve high ideals, but rather to appease his conscience after criminal negligence on his part had caused

the death of a construction worker and the firing of one of his subordinates as a scapegoat.

Leonor had begged Portus: "Déjeme a Joaco... Se lo ruego" (p. 94), and now Portus demands: "¡Vuelva! ¡Vuelva donde su Joaco, y dígale que su amigo es un desgraciado, lo que quiera! ... No me importa... ¡Déjeme solo con mi mujer!" (p. 96).

Leonor then stuns Portus by telling him that Joaquín had known all along of his friend's true reason for fleeing society, and that he had come that first day out of a genuine sense of concern. But it is now too late to undo the damage done by the "Mark of Cain". It has proven to be the sign, not of "hombres sin miedo", but rather of the alienating effects of spiritual guilt and intellectual escapism.

There is a lengthy parable in Hermann Hesse's novel about Harry Haller that describes the agony of his dual nature. According to this "Treatise on the Steppenwolf":

...It cannot be denied that he was generally very unhappy; and he could make others unhappy also, that is, when he loved them or they him. For all who got to love him saw always only the one side of him. Many loved him as a refined and clever and interesting man, and were horrified and disappointed when they had come upon the wolf in him.

...There were those, however, who loved precisely the wolf in him...and these found it particularly disappointing and deplorable when suddenly the wild and wicked wolf was also a man....⁵

A similar dilemma has rent the lives of the characters in Wolff's drama. Each is intellectually aware of the other's duality, but is in practice unwilling truly to accept its

presence. The missing element of Portus and Joaquín's common bond of "el signo de Caín" is a sense of compassion and forgiveness for one another's human failings. After informing Portus of Joaquín's knowledge of his friend's previous guilt, Leonor tells him: "...Ni esa verdad nos es útil ya... Usted es para Joaco una imagen necesaria...." (p. 96). The implication is that Joaquín sees in the other only those aspects which he is unable to accept in himself. El signo de Caín is Wolff's disturbing indictment of such an attitude, and a bitter reminder of the danger of self-satisfied reliance upon one's personal illusions.

Egon Wolff looks again at the role of illusion in interpersonal relationships in Kindergarten (1978), a masterpiece as stylistically polished as Los invasores or Flores de papel. The play's title is deftly appropriate--two brothers and a sister, the remaining members of the once-aristocratic Sánchez-Uriarte family, coexist behind a veneer of familial solidarity, held together effectively by their mutual insults and the elaborate games of their re-created childhood. Wolff continues to make use here of the changeable identities, mercurial personae, and social facades of Invasores, Flores, and El signo de Caín. In Kindergarten however, they become literal masks, as at the end of the play the characters communicate through threatical disguises pulled from the sister's old trunk. For the has-been Sánchez-Uriartes, life is tolerable only when viewed as the complex series

of games that both defines and motivates their life together.

Toño, the oldest, and his brother Mico share a monotonous existence in a dingy apartment that recalls the oppressive decay of Mansión de lechuzas. The closed circle of their life and their decrepit emotional state are graphically underscored by the physical details of the set that Wolff prescribes:

Una salita de estar, en la trastienda
de un negocio de venta de paraguas.
Puesto con la sofocante meticulosidad
con que se decoran las habitaciones cuando
sólo se cuenta para ello con recuerdos
familiares y objetos heredados, luce muebles
antiguos de variados estilos, alfombras
gastadas, vitrinas llenas de bibelots y
antiguallas, carpetitas, grandes marcos
dorados que contienen pequeños óleos
oscuros y mucho olor a hiebra vieja, a
esperma, a moho y tabaco rancio....⁶

In accord with the dramatist's close focus on the behavior of a few individuals in a limited situation, all of the action of Kindergarten is confined to the living room and the entrance to the adjacent umbrella shop. There are only two intrusions of outside events. One is the presence of the men's sister Meche, who has arrived the night before the action begins, presumably for a short visit. The other is Toño's embroilment in a badger game which is gradually revealed in clearer detail. Unlike the conflicts between intrinsic and extrinsic influences that mark Wolff's other plays, the intrusions here serve primarily to provide the occasion for new displays of this family's peculiar form of communicating through manipulative games. Meche soon proves herself to be the equal of her brothers in

histrionic role playing, and the three engage in endless rounds of calumny. At the outset the opposing personalities expressed by Mico and Toño are revealed in the slurs that they exchange. As the play begins, we see Toño complaining about his coffee and his brother's stinginess, a scene that concludes with the two men trading petulant insults:

TONO. --¡Me gusta!... ¡Me gusta, y ya está!...¡Me gusta sentarme cómodamente ante una mesa y platicar la amistad, cuando me visita una hermana!... ¡No como tú, que te acurrucas al borde de la silla, todo cargado de ansiedad, todo aterrado que te consumen tus viandas, sin darte tiempo de disfrutar nada! ... ¡Viejo tacaño!

MICO. --¡Bueno, entonces... Si te gusta tanto eso, esa azúcar está ahora en tu vejiga ... ¡Cómetela, y disfruta la vida!...
(pp. 207-08)

The structural importance of the psychological ploys used by all three is established early in the play in three separate references to playing games or acting "in character". When Mico at first ignores his brother's whining, Toño says to him: "¿Qué? ¿Nos levantamos con ganas de jugar esta mañana?" (p. 207). Moments later when Mico reprimands him for using the honey without permission, Toño again retorts: "¿Qué? ¿Nos levantamos mandones esta mañana, ¿eh? ¡Sargento Primero!" (p. 210). At one point, when both brothers are engaged in playful speculation while they listen to Meche use the electric shaver, they wonder aloud what women do for such a long time in the bathroom. Mico reacts with disgust to Toño's insinuation: "Inspeccionar sus repliegues íntimos, supongo", causing him to complain again:

"¿Por qué? ¿Qué te pasa?... Un momento, sumergido en el lodo, y de pronto, angelical, ¿eh?... ¿En qué estamos ahora?... ¿En la etapa del púlpito?" (p. 209).

Throughout the play Wolff maintains a consistent tension between the insults precipitated by genuine occurrences and those that are pure invention, based solely on what Toño describes as the "viejo ingenio mordaz de los Sánchez-Uriarte" (p. 222). Much of the dramatic impact of Kindergarten comes from the fact that one is rarely sure, until a particular episode is concluded, whether it has represented honest sentiment or whether it has been simply another round of the invective that constitutes the family's normal interaction.

The progression from truth to invention is subtle, as in Toño's admission that he is deeply in debt because of some kind of indiscretion. He initially confesses to exorbitant gambling losses, providing the ammunition for the siblings' gibes about each other's moral purity. This leads to the indication, eventually confirmed, that Toño is in fact being blackmailed for his compromising involvement with a young girl. Then, even when they realize the seriousness of their brother's trouble, Mico and Meche turn the situation into a literal game. At Meche's instigation, Mico coerces Toño into engaging in one of their childhood tests of will. Dressed in a corsair's costume that is a memento of his childhood, Mico promises, half in jest, to pay his brother's debt if he can successfully complete the game of "pirate and prisoner". When Toño, the "prisoner", wins, Mico then

proposes higher stakes--his brother must don the ridiculous monster disguise pulled from Meche's trunk. Enraged by this final affront to his dignity, Toño hurls at Mico the fatal insult: "¡Solterón!" (p. 278). Profoundly agitated, Mico collapses, apparently dead of a heart attack. Beside himself with remorse, Toño confesses desolately: "Si se muere, yo me muero, Meche... No podría vivir sin este hombre..." (p. 279). At this, the wily Mico sits up, proud of his performance and the response it has elicited.

In the midst of the endless round of recriminations, there is a definite note of comicity in this play. It is filled with humorous moments, such as the scene described above, where gravity and slapstick go hand in hand. The brothers' conversations contain a wide variety of absurd references, such as Tono's invented governmental decree banning the sale of "paraguas...y todos los otros ornamentos fálicos..." (p. 211), or his opinion of a woman who needs to shave: "¡Durante la noche, mientras dormíamos, sufrió metamorfosis! ¡Le creció un pirulí!... ¡Apuesto que se está afeitando el pecho, o algo así!" (p. 209). The dialogues contain numerous references to literary and historic figures, chosen to caricature each personality. Toño refers to his ascetic brother as "Pío XII", "Catón el Censor", or even, in an allusion to the longsuffering Penelope, "La tejedora laboriosa". Driven to desperation by his financial straits, shiftless Toño threatens to rob a bank in the guise of "el Hombre Invisible". Mico makes a wry comment on his brother's whining attitude, comparing him to Coleridge's Ancient Mariner: "Muestras

sólo el lado negativo de las cosas, para que se te cuelguen del cuello" (p. 216). The roles played in the puerile costumes from the bottom of Meche's trunk are the logical dramatic extension of this attitude of make-believe; they close the circle of game-playing that was established with Toño's first gibe at Mico: "¿nos levantamos con ganas de jugar esta mañana?"

In his review of Kindergarten's first North American showing at Simon Fraser University in 1981, Ronald C. Newton stresses its comic tone, referring to the playwright's own assessment of the work. According to Newton, Wolff states that the play "should be comic in appearance, the shell, let us say. The comic is its expression--comic to the point of pathetic... The three of them are siblings joined in an inevitable failure who possess the virtue of laughing at themselves...."⁷

Apparently, this virtue is all that remains to Toño, Mico, and Meche of their once-proud family heritage. The Sánchez-Uriarte mystique has long provided each of the three with the boundaries of his emotional security. For Toño, it means the necessity of keeping up the appearance of financial well-being; for Mico, it continues to be an oppressive pall of superficial respectability; for Meche, the family is the sole source of acceptance and shared experiences. All three are aware of the absurdity of their position--the discrepancy between aristocratic yearnings and drab reality is a constant source of tension in their existence. And yet, this angry tension provides the very link to one another that these decrepit individuals find indis-

pensable. True to life, it is a link whose maintenance is emotionally costly, as Mico reveals when Meche comments on one of her brothers' histrionic scenes:

MECHE. --¿Esto es lo que hacen todo el día? Pobre performance, diría yo.

TONO. --Tienes razón. Lo hacemos mejor, otras veces.

MECHE. --Suena penoso.

MICO. --Es penoso.

(p. 223)

Throughout the play, Mico and Tono's fundamental similarities, originally obscured by their arguing, come to light and the two become mirror images like the former friends of El signo de Caín. Mico, who at first professes a superior altruistic sensibility, shows himself to be as capable of self-pity as Tono in a key scene where he exaggeratedly mourns the opportunities for romance that he lost by caring for their sick mother. In one of the play's final scenes, the previously fastidious Mico mirrors his brother's slovenly table manners in an action that further indicates the pair's nearly identical personalities.

At the end of the first act after Meche's announcement that she has come home to enlist her brothers' aid in finding and restoring her estranged daughter, Tono exclaims: "¡Esto cierra el círculo de la locura!" (p. 238). This crazy circle is at once the source of the Sánchez-Uriartes' tensions and their common bond. It becomes increasingly clear to the public that Mico, Tono, and Meche share a family tie which they cannot ignore, although they constantly dissipate its force with their emotional manipulation.

In an ironic turn of phrase, Wolff himself has stated that he considers Kindergarten to be "una obra cordial", a simple representation of life without undue emphasis on the personal conflicts of the people involved.⁸ The conflicts of these seedy individuals are the recognizable ones of people who cannot live with or without each other. Their life together may be a painful experience whose uncomfortable reality they try to escape through their games and masks. However, unlike the characters of Caín, who suffer the irreparable alienation caused by an overriding sense of individualism, these three recognize their need to stay together, even behind their barrier of absurdity. By sharing the same experiences within their "círculo de locura", none of the Sánchez-Uriartes must face life alone.

Notes

¹ Genesis 4:1-16 (RSV). I have followed the interpretation of these events found in The New Oxford Annotated Bible With the Apocrypha: Expanded Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

² Egon Wolff, El signo de Caín/Discípulos del miedo (Santiago: Ediciones Valores Literarios, 1971), pp. 31-32. All textual references are to this edition.

³ Hermann Hesse, Steppenwolf, trans. Basil Creighton (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1929). It is beyond the scope of this study to do a detailed comparative analysis of Hesse and Wolff, but I call the reader's attention to two striking similarities in Wolff's drama and Hesse's novels: on p. 70 of Steppenwolf, Haller describes his life, which is paralleled almost exactly by Portus's experience, and in El signo de Caín, Joaquín first greets Portus as "lobo estapario", a direct Spanish rendering of the German "Steppenwolf", or "wolf of the steppes".

⁴ The Novels of Hermann Hesse (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), pp. 121-22.

⁵ Steppenwolf, p. 47.

⁶ Egon Wolff, Kindergarten in Teatro, ed. Juan Andrés Piña (Santiago: Nascimento, 1978), p. 205.

⁷ Ronald C. Newton, "Kindergarten in Vancouver," Latin American Theatre Review, 15, 1 (Spring, 1982), 84.

⁸ Pedro Bravo-Elizondo, "Reflexiones de Egon Wolff en torno al estreno de José," LATR, 14, 1 (Spring, 1981), 65.

V. Conclusions

In "Sobre mi teatro," Wolff's prefatory remarks to Mansión de lechuzas, the playwright presents his personal views on drama, stating that "new ideas" do not exist for the theater, and continuing:

Ni siquiera creo que haya ya en ningún género aquellas ideas. Decirlo es vanidad o ceguera del intelecto.

...El espectador ha sido contagiado por una idea. Todo porque alguien ha actuado de la manera como él actuaría, o no actuaría, o le gustaría actuar o no le gustaría que actuaran con él.

Prefiero todas aquellas formas que conduzcan a ese fin. No creo en aquellas obras que son como invernáculos intelectuales, en que las ideas pugnan en vano por salir a tomar aire. Entiendo el teatro como un gran ensayo de comunicación humana....
(p. 164)

Although, ironically, the greenhouse is a major motif of Mansión, Wolff's theater has consistently avoided the traps of self-serving intellectualism--the "invernáculos intelectuales" that he mentions. Through structural and thematic coherence and well-developed characters who interact within carefully limited situations, Egon Wolff reveals essential humanity in a way that touches audiences in North America and Europe as much as in his native Chile. More often than not, his plays develop in a circle, reflecting Wolff's vision of life as an endless cycle of repeated episodes. "Veo la vida," he writes, "repi-tiéndose, incansable, agotadoramente...." This remark is tempered by the hopefulness of his subsequent statement that

only "el amor, y su estela elusiva son la respuesta, porque dan sentido a la eternidad que se nos escapa en cada instante."¹

I agree that Egon Wolff's theater is not generally characterized by a cynical tone, in spite of critical interpretations to the contrary. For instance, in an early study of Mansión de lechuzas, Los invasores, and Flores de papel, Margaret Sayers Peden states that the Chilean dramatist's ideas are in accord with those of Beckett, Ionesco, and Pinter: we are living in an illogical and absurd world. She concludes that Wolff's plays warn that it may already be too late to use our freedom of choice in making decisions that can benefit others.² In her more recent discussion of his theater in Dramatists in Revolt, Professor Peden expands this opinion: "...Wolff's overall pre-occupation, as we see it in his work to date, can be stated in the simple theme of man's inhumaneness to man. His plays are an oblique plea--and a warning--for a dignified and rational consideration of our fellow human beings."³

This is a more accurate assessment of the fundamental conflicts in Wolff's theater, but it overlooks an important aspect that has not been widely addressed--namely, the playwright's own conception of authentic personal concern for others as the solution to problems of alienation. In varying degrees this idea is present throughout his drama, from an early portrayal of love as a panacea to his more recent tendency to let the public infer its importance by not including within the dramatic conflict itself the beneficial effects of such concern. I see this frequently tacit recognition of love's importance

as the logical outgrowth of the basic structural motif of Wolff's work: the confrontation of personal authenticity with inauthenticity. Juan Andrés Piña makes specific mention of this basic dichotomy of character portrayal throughout Wolff's twenty-five year career:

--Las visiones fundamentales que portan los personajes y que generalmente entran en conflicto se reducen principalmente a dos: Por un lado los personajes vitales, entusiastas, honestos consigo mismos y con sus ideales, sin prejuicios, intuitivos, sin artificios, amantes de las cosas simples y cotidianas, ...contra otros generalmente falsos, calculadores, hastiados, arribistas, ausentes de amor y vida, egoístas, suntuosos....⁴

This assessment of Wolff's usual patterns of dramatic conflict justly emphasizes, I believe, the relationship between personal integrity and the "rational and dignified concern" for others that Peden mentions in connection with Wolff's theater.

As stated earlier, the use in Wolff's plays of authenticity as a precondition for beneficial concern for others goes from the one extreme of oversimplification in the conclusion of Mansión de lechuzas, to a seeming denial of love's very existence as a moving force in Flores de papel and Kindergarten. This oversimplification is indeed the main structural weakness of Mansión, where, as Professor Peden explains, the destructive results of crippling sentimentality are almost instantly transformed into courageous maternal love "through the simple revelation of the truth about the father by an outside, offstage character."⁵ Niñamadre suffers from the same kind of unrealistic reliance upon love as a single and total solution to complex

problems in relationships. Nevertheless, in both cases, the development of characters who are basically honest with themselves and others such as Móttola and Andrés, or Paulina, Hans, and Polla, leads logically to their being able to feel and act out a salutary concern for their fellows. Andrés's knowledge of the truth about his father leads him into loving support of his mother; this acceptance in turn gives her the courage to risk accepting herself and others as they are. Similarly, the abrupt cementing of the various relationships in Niñamadre may be considered a major structural flaw. However, thematically it is a logical development, given the strength of the "authentic" characters, whose honest self-awareness imbues their attitudes with compassion and forgiveness.

In spite of this early simplistic treatment of love's beneficence which is artistically disappointing, Wolff is consistent in his presentation of the necessity for personal authenticity in order to establish truly sound interrelationships. Discípulos del miedo delivers its message through a veil of deliberate suggestion; the implication is clearly that perverted ideals and self-deception destroy rather than nurture loving family relationships. Here the characters who are uncomplicated and honest with themselves--Juan, Ricardo, and Ester--are a direct contrast to the artificiality of the "arribistas", Matilde and Jorge. It is the idealistically optimistic newlyweds, true to themselves and to each other, who offer love to Matilde when her selfish devotion to personal aggrandizement leaves her alone and penniless. Blinded to the end by her

materialistic dreams, Matilde cannot see that an honest recognition of this fault would bring her into relationship with caring people, and she remains prisoner and disciple of her fears.

The technique of "presentation by omission" makes Discípulos del miedo more convincing in the end than its overtly sentimental predecessor; in Discípulos Wolff begins the move toward technical excellence evident in the thought-provoking denouements of his later plays. With the exception of Niñamadre, already discussed, his theater tends more and more away from an overt emphasis on love as the solution to broken relationships, and towards portrayals of lives that remain alienated. Plays such as Los invasores, El signo de Caín, and Kindergarten present forcefully the conflict between authenticity and inauthenticity; without resorting to facile plot resolutions, they still contain within themselves the strong suggestion of the necessity for translating honest self-knowledge into active concern for others.

Los invasores represents a definitive break in Wolff's dramatic style, but not in his basic theme. It is a direct warning against man's inhumanity to man, its directness borne out in the consummation of Meyer's dream reality. For Meyer and the self-satisfied world-view he represents, the frightening reality of China's presence is that it demands a change of heart, the "conversión en pro de las masas" specified by Myron Lichtblau.⁶ It is not enough that Meyer ease his conscience by admitting

to murder--he must also look with new eyes on his ostensibly proper social attitudes. China's goal, a theoretically pure form of socialism, requires a conscious participation that is a response to honest self-evaluation. It manifests the love of neighbor that Meyer's religion ought to produce, but which is negated by the industrialist's stubborn complacency. Los invasores is, finally, a striking portrayal of the results within society at large of an individual's lack of personal integrity.

The way in which self-deception both generates and aggravates broken relationships informs the plot of El signo de Caín and of Kindergarten. These two plays share a number of structural and thematic similarities, one of the major ones being the interaction of characters who readily accuse each of other of the same faults. In Caín, Portus and Joaquín are both trying to hide guilty pasts, not unlike Lucas Meyer or the misguided mother in Mansión de lechuzas. The lack of forbearance that both Portus and his old friend display is the converse of love's action, and it stems from the deliberate masking of their true selves. Each man knows his own guilt, but rather than face it honestly, he tries to absolve himself by making the other look more guilty. The result is a climate of suspicion and recrimination that makes true understanding impossible among these individuals. The audience rightfully wonders at the end of the play, seeing Charo's bewilderment when Leonor snubs her, what would happen if either Portus or Joaquín should discard his own false

motivations in favor of forgiveness and authentic friendship.

The same kind of question is raised for the viewer or reader of Kindergarten. Here, as in Wolff's first play, familial love is not so much absent as it is distorted. The Sánchez-Uriartes recognize their need for one another, although their ability to love is flawed in direct proportion to each one's face-saving pretensions. Their destructive role-playing reflects that of the former friends of Caín or of the grasping mother and son of Discípulos. While the bitterness between the members of the Sánchez family is alleviated by the sheer comedy of their actions, this same comic tone provides the public with a penetrating view of the voids within their love-hate relationship. Mico, Toño, and Meche feel the obligation of family ties, but each one has developed an impenetrable mask that will not allow his true feelings for the others to break through. Like Matilde in Discípulos del miedo, each one is the prisoner of fears that seem less powerful when he can criticize someone else. Thus, in Discípulos, El signo de Caín, and Kindergarten, inauthenticity produces a distorted kind of self-preservation whose destructive effects are clearly exposed throughout the course of each drama. In these plays, the failure to act out of a personal concern for others stems from the deliberate imposition of facades, resulting in the attitude described earlier as indicative of being "absent from love and life."

El signo de Caín and Kindergarten, more than any of the rest of Wolff's works discussed in this study, reflect the via

negativa approach of their immediate predecessor, Flores de papel. In Flores love is conspicuous by its total absence. It becomes, therefore, the most readily apparent solution the public can find for the tragic waste of Eva and El Merluza's relationship. The two characters of this enigmatic work embody two extremes opposite to love's action. Eva is a woman who desperately needs to be loved; Merluza is a man whose lack of loving concern is expressed in vicious cruelty. The tramp is presented as someone who deliberately hides his true identity and the motivation for his actions; his character is false by virtue of being actively obscured. Eva's passivity in the face of Merluza's domination reveals another sort of failure: the woman is so out of touch with her own feelings that she does not recognize her dangerous position until it is too late to change it.

While Flores de papel does reflect the confrontation of opposing social classes in a way that is similar to Los invasores, it, too, is much more than a bare socio-political statement. Flores is a frightening portrayal, in individual terms, of the failure to live up to one's human potential by not accepting one's moral responsibility.

The portrayals in Wolff's plays of the broader implications of personal character frequently produce in them an obvious tone of social criticism. His theater reflects in an immediate way the localized problems of Chile, regardless of an indi-

vidual's economic level: arribismo; the exaggerated social priorities of machismo and pundonor; the polarity of attitudes between rich and poor. However, their dramatic value always transcends whatever socio-political content his plays have. Although never frivolous, Wolff's plays are entertaining works of art. I believe that the overall excellence of his theater comes from this very fact: as a dramatist Egon Wolff is, first and foremost, an artist. His theater displays the double-edged gift of moral perception and a craftsman's ability. Wolff brings to dramaturgy the meticulous scrutiny and analysis of the data at hand that are a prerequisite for his work as a chemical engineer, combining this talent with the creative vision of the prophet who both discerns and transmits the truths of his people.

Recalling Wolff's statement that he understands the theater to be "un gran ensayo de comunicación humana," it seems logical to point out that his dramas reflect the human race as it actually appears--sometimes honest with itself, more often hiding behind emotional masks. In plays such as Mansión de lechuzas and Niñamadre we see the possibility of discarding these masks in favor of forming authentic relationships. Even when love itself is absent, as in Flores de papel and El signo de Caín, Wolff's theater still implies the necessity for individual choice, either in favor of the inauthenticity of conventional facades, or for genuine self-awareness. Egon Wolff is a sensitive prophetic voice in contemporary theater, expressing societal shortcomings

in terms of individual flaws, and exposing the reader or viewer to the fundamental necessity of making personal moral choices in the face of universal problems.

Notes

¹ Letter from Egon Wolff to the author, dated November 6, 1982.

² "Three Plays of Egon Wolff," Latin American Theatre Review, 3, 1 (Fall, 1969), 34.

³ Eds. Leon F. Lyday and George W. Woodyard (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), p. 198.

⁴ Egon Wolff, Teatro, ed. Juan Andrés Piña (Santiago: Nascimento, 1978), p. 31.

⁵ "Three Plays," p. 32.

⁶ "La conciencia de Latinoamérica en tres obras contemporáneas," Humanitas [Monterrey, México], 9 (1968), 257.

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THE PROPHEMIC VISION OF EGON WOLFF

by

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B. A., Kansas State University, 1980

AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Modern Languages

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

Manhattan, Kansas

1983

The Prophetic Vision of Egon Wolff

In the face of the upheavals of two world wars, Latin American dramatists joined with other socially committed artists to expose the faults of modern civilization and to try to propose solutions to its problems. In Chile, aided largely by the university-related "experimental theaters" and similar institutions founded in the early 1940's, a group of visionary playwrights, the "Generación de '57", began to explore their country's ills, especially the painful problems of the emerging middle class.

Among these playwrights is Egon Wolff, who began writing for the stage in 1957. Within five years he was recognized internationally as one of the finest contemporary dramatists in Latin America. To a larger degree than his counterparts, Wolff displays an astute ability to develop the psychological aspects of societal conflicts. His theater consistently reveals a close scrutiny of human nature, portraying finely drawn and universally human characters. His plays are carefully crafted, with an outstanding thematic coherence and economy.

Wolff's early work reflects a uniformly traditional realism. Mansión de lechuzas and Discípulos del miedo, his first two plays, show the potentially destructive effects of obsessive maternal control. These were followed by other realistic dramas, among them Niñamadre in 1961. This story of male domination and female

subservience has a melodramatic bent that is alleviated by superb characterization.

Los invasores (1963) and Flores de papel (1968) mark the stylistic turning point of Wolff's theater. Invasores makes powerful use of the dream play to comment on social responsibility; in a nightmare, a wealthy industrialist sees his comfortable world violently invaded by the city's poor. The play ends at the moment the dream becomes reality, implying an imminent retribution for long-standing oppression of the masses. Using a similar theme, Flores de papel is a disquieting portrayal of violence that destroys an apparently innocent victim.

After Los invasores there is a marked tendency toward hermetism and pessimism that culminates in Flores de papel. Two plays following this drama deal with the disruptive results of creating protective facades: El signo de Caín (1969), with echoes of Hermann Hesse, and Kindergarten (1976), an absurdist treatment of family tension.

The fundamental conflicts in Wolff's theater over twenty-five years point to the social necessity of personal authenticity an honest self-knowledge that expresses itself best in genuine concern for others.