

«Escrito especialmente para ellos»: María Luisa Bombal's rethinking of «La última niebla» in «House of mist»

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ABSTRACT

María Luisa Bombal's *La última niebla*, published in 1935, was so famous in Chile that Bombal's North American husband, Rafael de Saint Phalle, urged her to translate it into English years after its publication and after Bombal had mostly given up writing. *House of Mist* consciously re-elaborates traits of Bombal's early writings to depict a picturesque, poetic, passionate and exotic portrait of South American women's life and adapts them to the genre of Victorian novel. No irony can be traced in the text, despite much of the critique implying so.

Keywords: exoticism; intertext; irony; translation; feminism.

La última niebla de María Luisa Bombal, publicado en 1935, alcanzó una fama tan grande en Chile que el marido norteamericano de la autora, Rafael de Saint Phalle, quiso que su mujer lo tradujese al inglés cuando ella casi había renunciado a la escritura. En *House of Mist*, la autora relabora varios rasgos de sus obras castellanas para adaptarlos al género de la novela victoriana. En el texto no hay ironía, aunque mucha crítica lo diga.

Palabras clave: autoexotismo; intertexto; ironía; traducción; feminismo.

The story won't tell. Not in any literal, vulgar way.
(Henry James, *Turn of the Screw*)

The circumstances and reasons for María Luisa Bombal deciding to recreate the core idea of *La última niebla* into an English Victorian novel are largely known and need not be repeated here except very briefly¹. Her husband, Fal de Saint Phalle, found for her a literary agent, who suggested adding an ending – a happy one – to the tale, and recommended setting clear boundaries between life and dreams, because “no vamos a publicar un poema en prosa” (Bombal 2005, II, 146). Farrar & Straus published it with acceptable success, which allowed Bombal to add some substance to her modest financial resources² until the end of her life. The English novel was titled *House of Mist* and from the beginning Bombal defined it a new work, connected to *La última niebla* only by its inspiration: “The strange house of mist that a young woman, very much like all other women, built for herself at the Southern end of South America” (Bombal 1947, prologue)³.

Critics have studied this text from different angles, the most common being its comparison with *La última niebla*. It is generally agreed that this novel is less innovative, and somehow inferior to its Spanish predecessor. Some scholars attribute this to the more exterior, objective nature of the English language as compared to Spanish (Pérez Firmat 2003; Byrkieland 2013); others, drawing from biographical sources, propose that the loss in poetry is due to Bombal's uneasiness with the new tongue (Gligo 1986; Martinetto 2002; Guerra 2012 and 2020); some others proceed further to imagining in Bombal some ironic detachment from her tale, thereby saving her artistic stature from the abasement that her complete adhesion to such a work could cause (Díaz 2002; Edwards 2009). None of these approaches seems to me completely satisfactory: a general unease in admitting that a talented writer like Bombal may have licensed this work with a clean conscience seems to bother deeply all researchers, to the extent that actual textual analysis is neglected, leaving to contextualization the justification for the metamorphosis of her tale. I would like to try a more textual, and intertextual approach. I am not excluding biography and self-narration from the range of factors influencing Bombal's literary creation: she is a very “present” author, and makes her voice clearly heard throughout her life, by reflecting on her works and clarifying the circumstances of their conception and creation. Yet, I believe that a literary work, whatever might be our personal aesthetic evaluation of it, belongs in the textual sphere: in these pages I shall investigate *House of Mist*, explore its

¹ For a full summary of such circumstances, see Martinetto 2002. For further detail about Bombal's life and work in the U.S., see Byrkieland 2013.

² “Recibí el cheque de Farrar, Straus que Uds. Me mandaron. Gracias. No saben cuánto lo necesitaba...”. Letter to Lucía Guerra of the August 2nd, 1979, (Bombal 2005, II,124).

³ I am reading a 2008 identical paperback reprint.

axiological structure, and position it in relation to its intertext. In addition, I shall address the question of irony, looking for signs of it within the text.

Exoticism

In one of his inspired rhetoric twists, Roberto Ignacio Díaz states that: “it is a truth universally acknowledged that authors from Spanish America often interest foreign literary markets because of the perceived exoticism of their writings” (Díaz 2002, 146). This seems to be Bombal’s feeling from the very outset, as in the prologue she defines her story as coming from “the Southern end of South America” (Bombal 1947, prologue).

While reading *House of Mist*, the reader’s attention is drawn to some unexpected details bearing a certain Southern allure. Scattered words in Spanish; the names of the characters; but, also, some recurring themes that proceed from Bombal’s Spanish production and leave a taste of foreignness, providing a somewhat appealing apparent distance between the reader and the story. Bombal manages this feeling by inserting a number of her previous works’ recurring themes within her novel. She plunders her previous production trying to accommodate in the new genre those very traits that had made her works in Spanish so innovative and feminine. I shall offer three main examples.

In Chapter Three, the poor orphan Helga is shipped to her aunt Mercedes’ home, where she is regarded as the daughter of sin, thus undeserving of affection, attention, or even basic schooling.

To compensate for all this indifference, however, I had the steady and tender love of Mamita, the good nurse in whose care I was placed when, as an orphan five years old, I was brought from the capital to this house in a far-off Southern town. (Bombal 1947, 12)

A nanny, in Spanish *nodriza*, is a character quite typical in South American post-colonial literature (Basaure 2020, 87). She tends to be a native, symbolizing a connection with the land possible only for the original population. Native *nodrizas* come by to compensate for the emotional void left by the rich, superficial families of landowners in the hearts of the small and fragile, namely children and young women not involved in the adult, male frenetic activities. In *La amortajada*, published by Bombal in 1938, Zoila gives Ana María the love her mother is incapable of bestowing.

Está Zoila, que la vio nacer y a quien la entregó su madre desde ese momento para que la criara. Zoila, que le acunaba la pena en los brazos cuando su madre, lista para subir al coche, de viaje a la ciudad, desprendíase enérgicamente de las

polleras a las que ella se aferraba llorando. ¡Zoila, antigua confidente de los días malos; dulce y discreta olvidada, ¡en los de felicidad! Allí está, canosa, pero todavía enjuta y sin edad discernible, como si la gota de sangre araucana que corriera por sus venas hubiera tenido el don de petrificar su altivo perfil. (Bombal 2005, II, 21)

Zoila, *la Araucana*, is strong, ageless, selfless, childless, sweet, and stern like the land. She is the minister of life and death, of pain and consolation; she does not fear the unusual or the sinister. She is a female coyote. When Ana María suffers a natural abortion, the only one present, and the only one realizing what is happening, is Zoila, who

[...] vino a recogerme al pie de la escalera. El resto de la noche se lo pasó enjugando, muda y llorosa, el río de sangre en que se disgregaba esa carne tuya mezclada a la mía... (Bombal 2005, II, 34)

In times of despair, Zoila is the way towards God: a kinder, non-judgmental, feminine one, unlike the institutional deity one kneels in front of in church:

Hablo del Dios que me imponía la religión, porque bien pueda que exista otro: un Dios más secreto y comprensivo, el Dios que a menudo me hiciera presentir Zoila. Porque ella, mi mamá, déspota, enfermera y censora, nunca logró comunicarme su sentido práctico, pero sí todas las supersticiones de su espíritu tan fuerte como sencillo. (Bombal 2005, II, 38)

The nanny of *House of Mist* needs not be a native because, by calling herself Mamita, she already evokes the southern allure Bombal is seeking. She is dispensed with in a few words fifteen pages after her appearing, when the author needs Helga to be alone and feel lonely and unguided: some bouts of rheumatism are used to draw the nanny away. Her name appears once more, when Helga tries on dead Theresa's nightgown, now by right her own, as Mamita had advised. The character is not developed; she takes part in no action; she is given no symbolical meanings nor special insight. Mamita is drained of all her potential significance and reduced to an exotic brush stroke.

More care is dedicated to a second theme, which is the image of the Tree. The tale *El árbol*, published in 1939, is nowadays the best-known work by Bombal, and is studied in schools in Chile as the main text in the national literary canon. It is hard to summarize in a few words what this tree stands for in the Castilian tale: it is a living being, sharing the life of the human protagonists. It undergoes the changes of season and mirrors the rise in consciousness of the female protagonist Brigida.

Un oleaje bulle, bulle muy lejano, murmura como un mar de hojas. ¿Es Beethoven? No. Es el árbol pegado a la ventana del cuarto de vestir. Le bastaba entrar para que sintiese circular en ella una gran sensación bienhechora. ¡Qué calor hacía siempre en el dormitorio por las mañanas! ¡Y qué luz cruda! Aquí, en cambio, en el cuarto de vestir, hasta la vista descansaba, se refrescaba. Las cretonas desvaídas, el árbol que desenvolvía sombras como de agua agitada y fría por las paredes, los espejos que doblaban el follaje y se ahuecaban en un bosque infinito y verde. ¡Qué agradable era ese cuarto! Parecía un mundo sumido en un acuario. ¡Cómo parloteaba ese inmenso gomero! Todos los pájaros del barrio venían a refugiarse en él. Era el único árbol de aquella estrecha calle en pendiente que, desde un costado de la ciudad, se despeñaba directamente al río. (Bombal 2005, II, 84)

The rubber tree plays classical music under the rain and is shaken by the wind; it is also perfumed in spring. In the end, it is ripped out and Brigida has her modernist epiphany, finally realizing that her dreary, sterile life is unbearable.

Le habían quitado su intimidad, su secreto; se encontraba desnuda en medio de la calle, desnuda junto a un marido viejo que le volvía la espalda para dormir, que no le había dado hijos. No comprende cómo hasta entonces no había deseado tener hijos, cómo había llegado a conformarse a la idea de que iba a vivir sin hijos toda su vida. No comprende cómo pudo soportar durante un año esa risa de Luis, esa risa demasiado jovial, esa risa postiza de hombre que se ha adiestrado en la risa porque es necesario reír en determinadas ocasiones. ¡Mentira! Eran mentiras su resignación y su serenidad; quería amor, sí, amor, y viajes y locuras, y amor, amor...
—Pero, Brígida, ¿por qué te vas?, ¿por qué te quedabas? —había preguntado Luis. (Bombal 2005, II, 90)

The tree stands for endurance; self-deceit; intimacy; *insilio* (internal exile).

In *House of Mist*, the tree appears to Helga only in dreams, as a consoling premonition of ultimate happiness. Her mother is always connected with it. The tree dream first occurs when aunt Adelaida reveals to Helga the sad, but romantic, story of her parents' illicit love:

For a long time, I cried. I cried until finally I fell asleep, exhausted. Then a gentle breath of Spring came to me out of the depth of my slumber, and in my dream suddenly I found myself under a tree in bloom, laden with bees. the subtle perfume emanating from its golden branches, together with the melodious humming of the bees, started gradually to soothe my sorrow! and to fill me with an indefinable well-being, a soft deep joy such as I had never known in all my brief existence. "That is happiness!" I said ecstatically.
"Yes, and that happiness will be yours," I heard a woman's voice whispering close to me.

"Under this tree and in my dreams, perhaps, but not up there in life, for Aunt Adelaida told me so."

"Yet you will find this tree in your own life, Helga."

As I turned around to see who was talking to me, I found myself facing a frail, adorable young girl dressed all in white... (Bombal 1947, 35)

The tree dream appears again after Helga's wedding, when she is forced to kick a drunk and violent Daniel out of the marital chamber:

[...] when, completely exhausted, I finally dropped into sleep, I suddenly found myself under a big tree blossoming with golden flowers, swarming with humming bees. And the song and the fragrance that emanated from this wonderful tree filled me instantly with great contentment, deep calm, and profound joy. And marveling, I realized once more I was finding myself in the world of my dreams, under the Tree of Happiness that my mother so long ago had promised me I would find on Earth. Ebba Hansen! Smiling, frail and tender, there she was again, making the same promise to me, as the light of dawn forced me once more to return to my sad life. (Bombal 1947, 135)

The two episodes have the same structure: some upheaval takes place; Helga falls into a tears-induced sleep; she hears humming bees, smells a perfume, and sees golden flowers. The positive stimulation of her most noble senses soothes her and allows her to feel calm, then joy. Eventually, her mother appears promising a happy ending to her tribulations.

The third and last appearance of the tree occurs when the promise is fulfilled. The dream comes true, and there is a loving Daniel now taking the place of her mother in a soothing role.

And as I walked towards the door, on my way to him, a breath of perfume and a sort of musical humming came forth to meet me.

"Look, Helga, isn't this the tree of your dreams?"

I raised my eyes and remained speechless, overwhelmed.

For, oh miracle! it was my tree! this gigantic mimosa, standing there in the midst of crumbling walls, still shedding its perfume on this spring day in Ebba Hansen's patio!

Yes, it was the Tree of Happiness... (Bombal 1947, 245)

Again, it is the noble senses driving Helga towards the tree: the music of humming bees and the perfume of the golden flowers, which we are now told are mimosas, the flowers of women and motherly love. The tree stands in the patio of Helga's mother's home, which Daniel has bought to give a home to his faithful and unfortunate young wife whom he finally realizes he loves.

None of the meanings of the tree in the Castilian tale is preserved. Nonetheless, this new tree does maintain some transcendence and has structural relevance for the novel overall, since Bombal uses it as a clue to solve the mystery of the fate awaiting her protagonist, as well as an objective correlative for true love. True love may be or may not be sanctioned by a marital, legitimate bond. It stands by itself and lives its independent life. This message, even if different, and simpler than the one conveyed by *El árbol*, can still be considered a strong enough point to make in a novel such as *House of Mist*.

Bombal pushes further this re-enactment mechanism with a third, and most appealing, theme coming from her Castilian works: female hair, in particular, braids. Bombal's novels are among the earliest in South American literature using female hair as a metaphor for women's sensuality and its potential power of disrupting male dominance and capitalist culture thanks to its marvelous, magic, sometimes sinister connection to Nature. The theme is clearly visible in all Bombal's works, but her most articulate artistic reflection on the topic is *Trenzas*, a sort of episodic, poetic tale published in 1940.

Porque día a día los orgullosos humanos que ahora somos, tendemos a desprendernos de nuestro limbo inicial, es que las mujeres no cuidan ni aprecian ya de sus trenzas. Positivas, ignoran que al desprenderse de éstas, ponen atajo a las mágicas corrientes que brotan del corazón mismo de la tierra. [...] las mujeres de ahora al desprenderse de sus trenzas han perdido su fuerza divina y no tienen premoniciones, ni goces absurdos, ni poder magnético. Y sus sueños no son ahora sino una triste marea que trae y retrae imágenes cansadas o alguna que otra doméstica pesadilla. (Bombal 2005, 221, 228)

I have quoted the first and last paragraph of the novella. The body of it runs across several traditional and literary female characters and re-formulates their stories as if they had maintained the consciousness of their braids, which means their magical connection to Nature. In some cases, the braids would have saved their lives; in others, they would have granted their dreams of love. In *House of Mist*, braids do maintain some symbolic value although not as articulated, mysterious, or "feminine" as in the Castilian works:

Daniel, do you know that last night Teresa let me help her brush her hair again? If you could only see her hair when it's undone! Oh Daniel, it's like a golden shower! And soft, soft to the touch as if it were made of silk!" "Really!" Daniel whispered. "Besides, you know when it has been carefully brushed, it's made up into two long braids. And they and they are heavy and slippery, like two beautiful snakes. I am sure that if they were cut off, they would still keep alive by themselves." "That's it!" Daniel cried so unexpectedly that it startled me. "Helga," he added, and he took hold of my wrist, "Helga, tell me, do you love me?" (Bombal 1947, 19-20)

Child Helga describes to teenager Daniel a moment of intimacy she shared with his beloved Theresa, which is also one of the few occasions she is given to bond with a member of her own family. A touch of the fantastical is given when Helga suggests the braids might have their own life. Consequently, Daniel is taken by the desire to own those braids, to trap that life. To reach his goal, he traps Helga as well, in moral blackmail. If she loves him, she will be willing to cut off those precious braids and give them to him as a token. Needless to say, Helga tries to comply, gets caught in the act, does not betray the instigator, and gets sent away to yet another dreary household (Aunt Adelaida's).

At that moment I lost my head. Wildly I made up my mind to complete the job all at once and throwing myself on Teresa I began to cut as best I could while she, now fully awake, started to scream loudly enough to awaken an entire city. (Bombal 1947, 22)

The braids, once a symbol of the eternal feminine, now furnish an excuse for male violence, both moral and physical, corrupting women in their body and in their soul. Curiously enough, when Theresa and Daniel become engaged, his long-past act of lust is looked upon with amusement, and Helga the executioner is once more allowed to take care of Theresa's cherished mane. The original violence is sealed with a remedial marriage, as in the oldest European tradition. Here are the words of Aunt Mercedes:

Oh Helga! Why didn't you tell us five years ago the reason you tried to cut off your cousin's braids? She might have then cast on Daniel that same little glance she gave him only two weeks ago, and for four years now I would have been a grandmother! (Bombal 1947, 43)

This limited selection of symbols that Bombal "pilfers" from her Castilian production to re-use in *House of Mist* suffice to illustrate one of the main techniques she adopts to make her tale acceptable and appealing to her new public, or at least to her idea of her new public. She gives it a southern allure, an exotic turn, a taste of foreignness, as Humboldt would put it. But it's a soft scent, a faint echo. Sometimes even a different song altogether.

Axiological discontinuities

A second, deeper device, employed by Bombal in her rewriting of *La última niebla* is a change in the axiological structure, or stock of values, defining the possible world of the tale. The first value that needed revision was marriage and

marital fidelity. It is in *House of Mist* that the ideas of guilt, sin and temptation appear for the first time in Bombal's works. After the (imaginary?) night of passion with a stranger, the unnamed protagonist of *La última niebla* talks in the second person to her lover, confessing an odd sort of betrayal:

Yo nunca te he engañado. Es cierto que, durante todo el verano, entre Daniel y yo se ha vuelto a anudar con frecuencia ese feroz abrazo, hecho de tedio, perversidad y tristeza. Es cierto que hemos permanecido a menudo encerrados en nuestro cuarto hasta el anochecer, pero yo nunca te he engañado. Ah, si pudiera contentarte esta sola afirmación mía. Mi querido, mi torpe amante, obligándome a definir y a explicar das carácter y cuerpo de infidelidad a un breve capricho de verano.

¿Deseas que hable a pesar de todo? Obedezco. (Bombal 2005, I, 79)

She relishes the paradox of asking forgiveness to her lover for cheating on him with her husband, on the principle that fidelity is due only to true love, not to socially sanctioned bonds, and the two are not granted to coincide. By contrast, Helga is quite troubled by her ambiguous situation:

And in vain I found myself replying to that voice: "No, no, that night of love you call a wonderful memory was in fact only madness. A madness that leaves me amazed and stunned; a madness for which I want to pay with an entire life of devotion to Daniel ..." For the voice skeptically and smilingly kept answering me: "What's the use of imagining a remorse you never felt! Go on, Helga, enjoy the only moment in your life when you felt yourself loved. Enjoy it in your memory and in your dreams, and in that way you will find happiness". "Happiness! Happiness in madness and in sin! Never, never!" I protested. (Bombal 1947, 124-125)

The narrative approach is the same in both novels: a dialogue with the self, now achieved by splitting Helga in two contradictory voices. In her sin, she both rejoices and repents. Throughout the tale, guilt, already emerging here, becomes increasingly difficult to avoid. Helga, at first seduced and consoled by her extra-marital affair, comes to hate it when she realizes her husband loves her. Eventually virtue is re-established: the cheating never happened (it was only an alcohol-induced dream); true love is the husband; even the fantasy becomes a reason for embarrassment.

In *La última niebla*, the protagonist goes on telling her lover about her "ferocious" episodes of passion with her husband, and the reader is led into the marital chamber. The same had happened on the misty night of passion, where the scene of sex is described from a feminine point of view never seen before in

Chilean literature. Bombal, no feminist from a social point of view⁴, can be considered one when it comes to claiming the right of women to love and sensuality. In *House of Mist*, she decidedly downsizes the role of sex. She saw well enough that, in the new context, small hints to female infidelity and sensuality would be strong enough allowances. Pérez Firmat (2003), one of the most intelligent critics tackling *La última niebla* and *House of Mist*, observes: "Significantly, *House of Mist* not only reveals the affair to have been a dream, but it omits the description of the protagonist's night of lovemaking, the most sexually explicit scene written by a Spanish American woman novelist up to that time" (135). He speculates that there might be biographical reasons for such an omission, his main arguments for describing the changes in the novel basing upon the writer's life situation: Helga undergoes a "Bildung" process parallel to that of the author, because Bombal herself is now a mature, happily married woman, not the young girl stuck in the eternal present tense of her disruptive love for Eulogio Sánchez.

Whether prompted by delicacy for Saint-Phalle's feelings, or by her knowledge that such a scene could never be filmed, or by the impossibility of writing about pleasure in a pleasureless tongue, this deletion further disassociates Bombal from the stormy relationship with Sánchez. Reviewed from the perspective of her new life with Saint-Phalle, those episodes may well have seemed like a dream. When Helga states that the story of her life begins where others end, with a wedding, she is speaking for her creator (Pérez Firmat, 2003, 135).

Even if I agree that the life situation of Bombal does have something to do with her artistic choices in this period, I believe it does her more justice to attribute such a significant omission to the axiological change of values shown above: if adultery is a sinful act which eventually needed to be recognized as an alcohol-induced dream in order to allow a happy ending, then there would be no point in dwelling on it. Notwithstanding the radical change in values that might disappoint the

⁴ It is significant to quote here a passage from a letter to her sister Blanca, written in 1965, commenting her daughter's life choices: "Yo estoy orgullosa de lo brillante que ha salido en sus estudios. [...] Pero para ser franca yo preferiría que ella se casara bien, así como Blanca Isabel, que puede ser también colaboradora dentro de la profesión de su marido, así como femme du monde. Esto de ser una "career girl" no es mucho lo que me gusta". To be fair, we need to add that she teamed up with a son of her husband's when, because of Fal's illness, Brigitte's studies were put in doubt: "Tampoco puedo dejar a Brigitte ir y venir sin vigilar sus pasos y estar presente y velar se cumpla con ella cuando se trata de sus estudios, que de no estar yo aquí, cuando se enfermó Fal y estuvo en el hospital, ya toda la familia me la tendría trabajando en una oficina habiendo cortado sus estudios. Thibault por suerte tomó conmigo su partido. Después de todo es su hermana; pero sólo desde el año pasado empieza a tenerle cariño y apreciarla, y mucho, felizmente" (Bombal 2005: II,106).

readers of her previous works, Bombal does reason in textual terms, and in this novel, she anxiously seeks coherence. She does not look for a clash between genres to create unease, or any ironical effect. She strives to fit every theme and episode of her past works into the new frame. Ambiguous memories, such as the ones of adultery, are lived with anguish by the protagonist, who needs to solve the mystery to go on with her life (one way or another). The realistic representation pact with her reader is never betrayed. Helga's going back to her faithful love for her husband has much more to do with the Victorian novel than with the idea of femininity in Bombal's Castilian works. Helga attains her serenity when personal conduct and social norms coincide.

The loss in translation of sex and sensuality is also the topic of a 2009 article by Alice Edwards, who accurately analyzes it on a symbolic level, starting from Helga's cutting off Theresa's braids: "free female desire – represented by a woman's long hair in Bombal's work – is cut off by the younger girl, just as it is cut out of the story in *House of Mist*" (Edwards 2009, 53). She then underlines the connection between female sensuality and nature in a broad sense: "The erotic is further silenced by the elimination of nature as subversive space". Nature as the feminine space where males feel lost disappears. The friendly pond where the protagonist of *La última niebla* found her solitary sensual fulfilment is now dangerous because that is where Theresa drowned and where her ghost now lingers. The symbolism of the pond is indeed quite relevant, and quite different, in both novels, but more reflection is needed. It is true that, in *La última niebla*, the pond offers the protagonist the chance to discover her sensuality and physical identity, and that this articulated connection between water, femininity, life and death is lost in translation. Yet, that very pond had swallowed little Andrés' innocent life in *La última niebla* as well; monstrosity hides right beside the protagonists of *Las islas nuevas*; suicide tempts the blessed in *La historia de María Griselda*: nature was already wild and dangerous in Bombal's Castilian world.

Intertextuality

A further look Bombal's Spanish *corpus* may clarify that she already had a good competence on English literature before her American years, but those worlds hid behind the poetry and refinement of her creative process. Once plunged in the Victorian novel genre, her deep sources of inspiration raised to the surface and became easily recognizable.

In *Las Islas Nuevas*, Nature pulses according to the moods of the female protagonist Yolanda, making new islands surge from waters when she conceives the possibility of love. It also shares Yolanda's hidden monstrosity: she hides an atrophied third arm, hanging from her right shoulder, which prevents her from

seeking male companionship. When Juan Manuel, in the traditional context of the uninvited man spying on a woman's intimacy from an unseen gap, sees it, he compares it to the wing of a seagull, just like the one that had hit him on the chest when he had ventured, equally uninvited, to the new islands:

Pausa breve, y luego avanzan pisando, atónitos, hierbas viscosas y una tierra caliente y movediza. Avanzan tambaleándose entre espirales de gaviotas que suben y bajan graznando. Azotado en el pecho por el filo de un ala, Juan Manuel vacila. Sus compañeros lo sostienen por los brazos y lo arrastran detrás de ellos. (Bombal 2005, I, 188)

Both encounters terrify him and force him to flee.

En su hombro derecho crece y se descuelga un poco hacia la espalda algo liviano y blando. Un ala. O más bien un comienzo de ala. O mejor dicho un muñón de ala. Un pequeño miembro atrofiado que ahora ella palpa cuidadosamente, como con recelo. (Bombal 2005, I, 200)

The seagull as an objective-correlative of Nature and its mysterious, ambiguous, dangerous forces, is a long-consolidated image in the English canon, dating from Coleridge's *Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner*, where the man guilty of shooting an albatross is condemned to wearing its corpse on his chest for eternity.

House of Mist blends the streams coming from *La última niebla* and the English Victorian novel in its depiction of the pond. It is dangerous: Theresa drowns there and her ghost hunts the place, attracting the morbid curiosity of every character, until Andrés dies there while looking for her ring. Similar lakes can be found in many nineteenth-century Gothic novels, starting from *Jane Eyre*. However, it is with Henry James' lake in *Turn of the Screw* (1899) that Bombal's pond shows deeper affinity: around the lake at Bly appear the ghosts of Miss Jessen and Peter Quint, ghosts either in the sick imagination of the protagonist or in an undefined actual supernatural event. It is there that the protagonist finds the dead boy Miles in her arms, possibly suffocated to death by her own spasms of panic. Such impressions – phantoms, a dead boy – could very well have contributed to the conception of *La última niebla* but rise to the surface in Bombal's attempt to integrate the tale into the new literary system.

Henry James seems, indeed, to have already been peeking out through the pages of *La última niebla*, when the protagonist, while bathing in the pond, hears – or imagines – a carriage approaching:

El carruaje avanzó lentamente, hasta arrimarse a la orilla opuesta del estanque. Una vez allí, los caballos agacharon el cuello y bebieron, sin abrir un solo círculo

en la tersa superficie. Algo muy grande para mí iba a suceder. Mi corazón y mis nervios lo presentían. (Bombal 2005, I, 74)

Her premonition does not lead to any concrete fact, because the only character who may confirm her vision is Andrés, who will be dead by the time she wishes to interrogate him. She remains waiting – for confirmations, for something to happen – for years, until disillusionment overcomes her. John Marcher from *The Beast in the Jungle* was under the same spell when he confessed to May Bertram something that would make her remember him for many years:

You said you had had from your earliest time, as the deepest thing within you, the sense of being kept for something rare and strange, possibly prodigious and terrible, that was sooner or later to happen to you, that you had in your bones the foreboding and the conviction of, and that would perhaps overwhelm you. (James 1915, 18)

Both heroes have their epiphany when death brushes their cheek by taking away a dear one: the very May Bertram in James, and Regina, the adulterous sister-in-law, in *La última niebla*. Only then does John Marcher discover that the beast has jumped, and only then does the protagonist accept that her life is doomed to unhappiness and boredom.

Critics did not ignore completely the English intertext of *House of Mist*. For instance, Roberto Ignacio Díaz notes that the motif of the second wife rushed into marriage finding a mysterious house haunted by the first wife of her shadowy husband may come from Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), but also directly from its source, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). Yet Henry James' *The Awkward Age* (1899) seems to be in the air too. An important section of its plot has to do with Gus Vanderbank's lovemaking to Mrs Brookenham and her daughter Fernanda, and his plan to have them both is foiled only by the daughter's virtuous intelligence. David Landa approaches Helga because of her resemblance to her mother, with whom he used to be in love as a teenager:

"To the sadness, to the poetry, to the frailty of your beauty I drink, Ebba Hansen", he said, looking straight into my eyes. "Ebba Hansen, but that was the name of my mother!" I exclaimed. "And you, you are her living image!" - "Did you ever know her?" I asked, deeply affected. "I saw her once at this very place where you are now. She was standing with her back to the fireplace exactly as you are this moment". As I looked at him with amazement, he explained: "You see, this house, which has been completely done over by your sister-in-law, was the home of doña Angélica Portal, an adorable old lady who up to the time of her death was a very faithful friend of your parents. And as doña Angélica happens to be my godmother, I used to come every Saturday to have lunch with her. It was many

years ago and I was only about fourteen. The first time I saw your mother I fell madly in love with her - like all the rest of an entire generation. Her life to us stood for the most beautiful love legend of the time". (Bombal 1947, 105)

Panic and remorse after Helga's dreamt adultery serve as a parallel to Nanda's virtuous resolutions. This courting takes place in the house of Mariana, a noble and vivacious version of Regina, Daniel's sister and thus Helga's sister-in-law. All of Mariana's family has something in common with the awkward entourage of the Brookenhams, and it is not surprising that it is not Helga who commits adultery with Landa, but Mariana herself. Bombal further thickens the plot by making this *donjuanesque* Landa the true love of Daniel's first wife, Teresa.

Another interesting intertextual hint comes from observing that Mariana resembles one of the characters in a novel by popular writer Georgette Heyer, *The Reluctant Widow*, that had just been published when Bombal was working on *House of Mist*. Textual correspondences are so close we may imagine Heyer's novel lying on Bombal's bedside table.

Once she has settled down in the *hacienda*, Helga's monotonous life is interrupted by the arrival of Mariana, who is married to a French Duke, and who Daniel insists on calling "María", to his sister's great distaste, since she does not identify with Christ's mother in any way. The relationship between brother and sister is uneasy, so on her first arrival she is sent away to her own estate, which lies a few miles ahead, and Helga can have a glimpse of her from a balcony, in a teichoscopy scene:

I could then distinctly see her *eyes full of mischief*, her *pretty, turned-up nose* and her *reddish-brown curls* fluttering under a black velvet three-horned hat. And then I heard *a laugh*, a laugh that seemed to scatter little jingle bells in the air as she disappeared in the mist, closely followed by her mad, joyous retinue. (Bombal 1947, 80 italics mine)

Later, the two women meet beside the haunted pond, in a hunting scene where the protagonist, a new Procris, is mistaken for a deer by her lover-to-be (Landa). She is chased by his hunting dogs, falls in the mud, is found by Landa and, a moment later, Mariana appears: "I'm not a deer. My name is Helga and I happen to be the wife of your brother'. Still another silence, then all of a sudden came a great cry of *joyous surprise*, and there was Mariana *on the ground by my side*". (Bombal 1947, 85 italics mine).

The scene in itself is quite commonplace and serves to announce a special bond between prey and hunter. But it also serves to connect the two women with promises of friendship.

In Heyer's novel, young widow Mrs. Cheviot is introduced to the pretty, vivacious, and noble sister of Lord Carlyon, the grumpy nobleman she is slowly falling for. The charming creature has characteristics very similar to Mariana's:

The lady, who came in Carlyon's arm, was decidedly younger than Elinor. She was *extremely pretty*, with such *golden ringlets* and such sparkling blue eyes that it did not need Nicky's shout of "Georgy!" or Carlyon's quiet introduction to "My sister, Lady Flint", to inform Elinor of her identity. She rose at once, blushing, and curtsying, and found her hand seized between two warm little ones, and heard herself addressed in a sweet, *mischievous voice*.

"Mrs. Cheviot! My new cousin! Oh, you are such a heroine! *I made Carlyon bring me to see you!* This is Flint, my husband, you know!" (Heyer 1946, 198. Italics mine)

Both sisters of the grumpy noblemen are very noble (a Lady and a Countess: in Mariana's case she is even nobler than her brother); they are pretty; have curly hair; are somewhat mischievous; are joyous and warm; married and loved (not necessarily by the same man); have a nickname (Mariana for Maria, Georgy for Georgia); they both end up being the helper of the protagonist in ensuring her happiness.

These characteristics are quite common in Victorian literature and have their archetype in Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). Jane Austen herself, when going back to her novel, had judged it "too light, bright, and sparkling; it wants shade"; yet characters like Elizabeth Bennet had become very popular, and had very probably reached Bombal's ear together with shadowy ones like Jane Eyre. It is possible that Bombal created Mariana drawing from the archetype independently from Heyer's novel, but another textual correspondence with *The Reluctant Widow* seems to confirm our hypothesis. The novel begins with a scared solitary woman advancing in fog at the mercy of an unsteady, horse-powered coach, heading towards a haunted mansion:

It was dusk when the London to Little Hampton stagecoach lurched into the village of Billingshurst, and a cold mist was beginning to creep knee-high over the dimly seen countryside. The coach drew up at an inn, and the steps were let down to enable a passenger to alight. A lady, soberly dressed in a drab-coloured pelisse and a round bonnet without a feather, descended on the road. (Heyer 1946, 1)

As her fast grip on the latest hit in British literature demonstrates, Bombal was very familiar with European literature in English, a knowledge dating back to the years of her education and production in Spanish. She decides to give this intertext more weight in her composition process when writing in English. The results of this process may be questioned; nevertheless, her efforts at adapting the

original tale into the new context are clear both in their foundation and in their intention.

An appendix on irony

Some reflections should now be dedicated to irony. Although it is one of the main characteristics of the English intertext we have outlined for *House of Mist*, irony does not seem to have affected Bombal's creative process. Two of the most important scholars studying Bombal have attributed to her an ironic intention throughout the novel. Lucía Guerra, in her preface to the Spanish translation of *House of Mist*, says:

Más aún, al leer *Casa de niebla*, se nos hace obvio el hecho de que María Luisa Bombal está recurriendo a una mímica donde se imita la historia de amor en el cine y la literatura masiva, desde una posición irónica que socava lo imitado. Al ubicar *Casa de niebla* a principios del siglo XX, la autora establece una distancia temporal que le permite, a través de su heroína sentimental, hacer implícitamente una crítica a esa ideología patriarcal que reforzaba el rol de la mujer como madre y esposa por medio de un imaginario y una retórica que hacían de ella "puro corazón". La mímica se hace explícita hacia el final de *Casa de niebla* cuando la narradora define su texto como "una historia de amor ya anticuada", poniendo de manifiesto un lugar de enunciación en el cual las mujeres ya empezaban a obtener el derecho a voto y a una participación activa en el devenir histórico. (2012, 4-5)

Roberto Ignacio Díaz goes further: he believes that *House of Mist* must be read while bearing in mind *La última niebla* and the author's biography. Only a reader with this knowledge can unmask the irony in the text.

Secretly, ironically, this is a complex story of linguistic and literary unhousedness; it is told in English, and those readers who do not repress Bombal's past in other tongue and literary tradition, with its own set of cultural and aesthetic norms, will perform it best. (Díaz 2002, 142)

Díaz believes that Bombal did not regard her North American readers with esteem, finding evidence for this in Bombal's letter to Luiz Meléndez dated the 15th November 1967, where she defines *House of Mist* and *The Shrouded Woman*: "libros que esta gente no entiende. Han de ser escritos especialmente para ellos" (Díaz 2002, 148); for their amusement she collects exotic samples, blending them with some authentic traits. This mixture of actual details with specious and superfluous ones, according to Díaz, allows her to take ironic distance from the melodramatic, high-key form of *House of Mist*. This movement from inside to outside the novel makes its apparent exoticism turn into a tale of "unhomeliness".

That all of these elements [exotic traits] are also part and parcel of the outlandish melodrama of *House of Mist* underscores the double face of Spanish American heterolingualism: even as it seems to turn its back on home, it maneuvers the foreign signs to house itself meaningfully in the literary culture of origin. As she wears the mask of local color, Bombal unmasks from time to time to let the reader glimpse her formerly patent audacious face, and to examine the mask itself, an artifact whose polysemy may not be obvious at first. (Díaz 2002, 142)

From a purely theoretical perspective, both these analyses are consistent with existing definitions of irony. Lucía Guerra finds traces of irony in the distance, both in time and in context, between the narrator and the narrated (“distancia temporal” ... “lugar de la enunciación”), that works as a “mímica” meant as “mockery” of the patriarchal society portrayed in the text. The logical shift here is contained in the word “mímica”, which may signify “mockery” in a pragmatic context where it is sustained by facial expression. However, it is not pertinent in written communication, if not metaphorically, and therefore must be sustained by textual evidence of intentional mockery. What Guerra calls “irony” might better be seen as parody of the romantic novels that Bombal is imitating, parody differing from irony in that it involves the text as a whole, instead of some rhetorically recognizable sections of it (Hutcheon 1995, quoted in Boccuti 2018). This structural intent to parody is present in Georgette Heyer's work, which also contains clear traces of irony detectable by the use of figures of speech such as antiphrasis, litotes, repetition, hyperbole, noble treatment of humble subjects and so on. Here are some lines in the opening chapter of *The Reluctant Widow*:

The coachman, finding himself to be some minutes ahead of his time-sheet, hitched up his reins, clambered down from the box, and in defiance of the regulations governing the conduct of stage-coachmen, rolled into the tap-room in search of such stimulant as would enable him to accomplish the remainder of the journey without endangering an apparently enfeebled constitution. (Heyer 1946, 1)

Roberto Ignacio Díaz bases his reasoning on a pragmatic view of irony. In this view, there is no need for textual evidence of irony if author and reader share contextual information that allows the decoding of the ironic statement, leaving irony to “the gap between the said and the unsaid” (Boccuti 2018, 50, translation mine). Such an approach seems to me exoteric, because it looks for clues only outside the text and does not clarify which context shared by the author and her ideal readers might allow the decoding of irony. In perfect alignment with their theories, neither Lucía Guerra nor Roberto Ignacio Díaz offer textual examples

from *House of Mist*. Therefore, it becomes necessary to briefly analyze the style of *House of Mist* to see if there are rhetoric traces of irony.

Victorian novels use free indirect speech as their primary tool to convey irony. Numerous examples can be found in the works of Henry James, whose main topic of reflection is the gap between the reality perceived by his characters and the reality given to them. By contrast, *House of Mist* shifts from lyrical description to direct speech with limited space for detachment between consciousness and action – a gap necessary for irony to creep in. Helga narrates in the first person: she sometimes speaks directly to the reader to announce the importance of something about to happen, or to lament her unhappy circumstances. Yet, in no case does the writing style suggest that she is deceiving herself, or overreacting, or being too naive. For instance, when narrating the episode of the ball, the narrator inserts a rupture of the fourth wall which might have allowed some ironic remark, but the device results awkward and not clear in its intention:

Here begins the account of one of the most extraordinary experiences any woman has ever lived through. Everything I have written up to now which may have seemed trivial and unimportant to the reader was nevertheless a necessary foundation for the episodes that are to follow. If the simple story I am relating now had been written as a novel, and if I had to choose a title for every one of the chapters, I would have named this one THE BALL, further trying in a subtle way to warn my reader of the importance of each one of the details, even those which in themselves seem altogether insignificant. (Bombal 1947, 102)

If irony as a figure of speech is to be found in absence, in subtraction, leaving space to the unsaid but implied in an ambiguous dialogue between reader and writer, then this is certainly not the case in *House of Mist*. Far too much is said. A brief comparison with the first ball attended by Catherine in Austen's *Northanger Abbey* may serve as a clarification:

Mrs. Allen was so long in dressing that they did not enter the ballroom till late. The season was full, the room crowded, and the two ladies squeezed in as well as they could. As for Mr. Allen, he repaired directly to the card-room, and left them to enjoy a mob by themselves. With more care for the safety of her new gown than for the comfort of her protégée, Mrs. Allen made her way through the throng of men by the door, as swiftly as the necessary caution would allow; Catherine, however, kept close at her side, and linked her arm too firmly within her friend's to be torn asunder by any common effort of a struggling assembly. (Austen 2003, 11)

The ball, for a country girl, in a novel, is expected to be “the most extraordinary experience any woman has ever lived”, a turning point in her existence, but may turn out to be nothing more than a very crowded social event.

With a less subtle method, Henry James places the parodic intent of his *Turn of the Screw* in the frame, showing narrators sharing scary stories around the fire at Christmas, until one of them announces:

“I quite agree - in regard to Griffin’s ghost, or whatever it was - that its appearing first to the little boy, at so tender an age, adds a particular touch. But it’s not the first occurrence of its charming kind that I know to have involved a child. If the child gives the effect another turn of the screw, what do you say to two children?”
(James 1984, 145)

Bombal offers no frame, apart from a prologue, very often quoted by scholars, that sounds like a tantalizing advertisement for a book-wishing-to-become-movie and manages to spoil the mystery that *La última niebla* had kept unsolved:

Those for whom fear has an attraction; those who are interested in *the mysterious life people live in their dreams during sleep*; those who believe that the dead are not really dead; those who are afraid of the fog and of their own hearts... they will perhaps enjoy going back to the early days of this century and entering into the strange house of mist that a young woman, very much like any other woman, built for herself at the southern end of South America (Bombal 1947, prologue. Italics mine).

The mystery is a dream. The protagonist might be you, *like any other woman*. Come on board.

Another European cohabitant of Bombal’s intertext is Cervantes, a master in irony and parody, whose *Don Quixote* is perceptible just after the disappearance of Mamita and right before the first tree dream.

But since Mamita, who was suffering from rheumatism, had to go back to her province, and I had to sleep alone in one of the wings of the enormous house, it was with the people of my fairy tales and in their world that I found shelter during the night. What a glorious achievement it would be for humanity to understand that each one of us has within himself a well into which he can descend during sleep and by means of which he can escape into infinity! (Bombal 1947, 27)

Helga, like Don Alonso Quijano, reads “de claro en claro”, all night long. But her dream is no Montesinos’ cave: it is the actual revelation of her destiny. Her tales are not leading her to smash her face upon windmills: they are leading her through suffering towards beatitude, in a happy-ending quest for the good in humanity

and God's blessing: "For was not God himself standing at the top of the holy ladder of light with angels moving up and down when Jacob reached the bottom of it during sleep?" (Bombal 1947, 132). We can already hear the soundtrack to the movie⁵:

We are Climbing
Jacob's ladder
We are Climbing
Jacob's ladder
Soldiers of the cross

Conclusions

The reception of the novel⁶ was, as I have mentioned above, decent, at least among the readers. Official criticism turned a more skeptical eye on it. The review most quoted by critics is by Richard Sullivan in the *New York Times* (13th April 1947). Sullivan only slightly appreciates the book, more for its prose-style than for its plot or characters. He describes it by using two adjectives that scholars seem to have failed to notice: "dexterous" and "amoral", descriptors which confirm our analysis of its composition process. Dexterity lies in "all the technique required by a novel" that Bombal applies to adapt her tale to its new genre. Yet, her effort at meeting the taboo on sex typical to the Victorian novel does not seem to have reached its goal: her book still sounds "amoral" to the educated male American reader. The laws of true love together with the audacity of a woman's right to express her bodily beauty, are still too much to handle. Therefore, it is not surprising that, a couple of months later, an utterly cruel review appeared in *The New Leader*, dismissing the novel altogether as the silly whim of a woman seeking modernity: "A useless little fuss of a book, which reminds us, a bit wistfully, that our wives have come out from behind their whalebone corsets and now wear flat heels, sign petitions and buy frozen foods. What Ibsen didn't know!" (5th July 1947).

The article is not signed, but the evaluation of Bombal's work is clear: her small contribution to the affirmation of a woman's right to the full recognition of her individuality needed ridiculing and minimizing on the part of some male patriot.

Several journalists dedicate their attention to tracing Bombal's Anglo-Saxon intertext. Catherine M. Brown in her review for the *Saturday Review* on the 3rd May

⁵ *We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder* is a famous spiritual hymn composed before 1825, based upon an episode in the *Book of Genesis* (28:12). It became very famous among the white Christians and has seen hundreds of versions by as many singers and ensembles along the decades.

⁶ For another evaluation of the reviews of the novel, focusing on its prose style, see Gálvez Lira 1986: 7ss.

1947, notices some kinship between *House of Mist* and *Jane Eyre*. The anonymous censor of *The New Leader* also sees the affinity. Brown adds *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier (1938). All critics seem to agree: *House of Mist* is a love story in Victorian style, a touch too high-keyed, a touch too complicated, a touch too oneiric. A touch too much of everything. Bombal somehow succeeded: she wrote a romance novel and shared the literary pages of the New York newspapers with Georgette Heyer, Jay Presson, Christine Weston, Daphne du Maurier... but she tried too hard. South American scholars seem embarrassed in admitting that Bombal, a refined writer in Castilian, when writing in English gives it all and ends up producing *House of Mist*. Nevertheless, María Luisa Bombal's effort at cultural adaptation aimed in the right direction; the writer's understanding of the context was correct: the US was not ready for her original self. Several years later, when she publishes the translation, this time more literal, of her novel *La Amortajada*⁷, all that the reviewers can see in it is some sentimentalism. In the *New York Times* of the 6th June 1948, Patricia Page observes:

If *The Shrouded Woman* were a few inches thicker, a fine film of tropic passion in Chile might be made of it. But María Luisa Bombal is experimenting with style. Her characters, a multitude of women of seduction and men of violence, are defined only by a few vaporous words. Like an overstuffed sofa, her novel both implies and conceals a wealth of unsavory matter.

If something had to be highlighted in the novel, it was the lack of respect for the sanctity of marriage:

The plot of *The Shrouded Woman* is constructed like a genealogical table of extra-marital relations. Those concerned seem to suffer from Chilean sunstroke, but they are a trifle under-exposed. Miss Bombal should give her open-stock-pattern characters and situation a chance or else leave them to the scenario writers.

The mist seems either too thick or too thin for María Luisa Bombal to really feel at home in the US. Once a widow, she went back to Argentina and, later, Chile, where she resumed her solitary life of suffering, illuminated, occasionally, by the peaceful light of a narrative dream.

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⁷ For a thorough account on the translation of *La Amortajada*, see Byrkjeland 2013.

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