

Contemptuous Being in María Luisa Bombal's *La última niebla*

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*Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry,
but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?*

Professor Albus Dumbledore

J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (723)

The oneiric world depicted in María Luisa Bombal's *La última niebla* (1934) continues to captivate well into the present century.¹ Historically, critical approaches can be succinctly divided into two groups: the surrealist apologists who find in the Chilean's work paradigmatic avant-garde expressions and those who concentrate on feminist readings, by focusing on her work's intimist narrative qualities.² Contemporary interpretations continue to reinforce those invaluable qualities of Bombal's work for interested audiences. As a case in point, Celia C. Esplugas's 2013 feminist reading underscores the antagonistic female voices in several of Bombal's texts. For Esplugas, the Chilean's work narrativizes "the obstruction of women's personal development by patriarchal family relations, constricting environments, and authoritarian religions" (167).³ In 2009, Alice Edwards, while juxtaposing the substantial textual and ideological differences between the Spanish and English versions of Bombal's novel, concluded that "*La última niebla* is openly critical

¹ The 1934 edition of Bombal's novel was published by Editorial Colombo, the second in 1935 by Sur.

² The bibliography of these analytical approaches to Bombal's novels is extensive and emblematic of the era's aesthetic fingerprint. For example, the earliest critical assessments included Amado Alonso's, which highlighted the avant-garde attitudes of Bombal's *La última niebla* in his essay "Aparición de una novelista" (1936), as did Arturo Torres-Rioseco's "El nuevo estilo en la novela" (1941). "Contemporary" surrealist readings include Alberto Rábago's "Elementos surrealistas en *La última niebla*" (1981) and Adriana Méndez Rodenas's "El lenguaje de los sueños en *La última niebla*: La metáfora del Eros" (1994), to list a few.

³ Esplugas's article is a feminist comparative reading of Sherwood Anderson's texts and the Chilean's. For Esplugas, much of Bombal's work centers on questioning "the cultural forces—social mores, family relations, and religion—that impede women's self-realization and alienate them from their constricting environments, sometimes leading them to emotional disturbance" (155). The feminist readings date back to the 1970s; however, the perspective continues to dominate the readings of Bombal as evidenced by Marjorie Agosín's "Espacio y lenguaje feminocéntrico en tres obras de María Luisa Bombal" (1985) and Dolores DeLuise's "The Work of the Woman Writer: From Inside to Outside in *The Final Mist*" (1993).

of women's enclosure and isolation in the home; the lack of options for middle class women; the sick reliance on men and romance for identity" (55).

Clearly one of the determinative feminist texts of the twentieth century in Hispanic America, Bombal's work is also an underappreciated contributor to literary existentialism in the Americas. Given the narrative postures taken by Bombal's unnamed protagonist—a contradictoriness alluded to in all feminist readings of the text—and its publication date, Bombal's place in the history of existentialism seems self-evident. However, that is not the case for Bombal's work and for existentialism in Latin America in general.

Recently, the works of Eduardo Mendieta and Roberto Domingo Toledo have begun to reassess the status of Latin American existentialism. With regard to period, both historians agree to the presence of a Hispanic existentialist mode that is concurrent and precursory. Domingo Toledo's take on Latin American existentialism is unequivocal,⁴ whereas Mendieta's is more nuanced: "In order to understand how existentialism was both anticipated and variously articulated by Spanish and Latin American philosophers, we must understand how *Don Quixote* has been the central point of reference for most (if not all) of their philosophical speculation" (181). Some recent histories of philosophical existentialism in Latin America, including ones by Clara Alicia Jalif de Bertranou and Carlos Alberto Sánchez, provide extensive overviews that further substantiate the case for an anticipatory and concurrent presence of existentialist thinkers.⁵

The need for an inclusive and chronological reading of existentialism in Latin America stems from its uneven historical treatment in general. The earliest Spanish-language histories on the matter—for example, Luigi Pareyson's *El existencialismo: Espejo de la conciencia contemporánea* (1949)—are completely Eurocentric.⁶ Guillermo de Torre's 1948 work, though focusing mostly on non-Hispanic European origins, does dedicate one chapter to "Precedentes españoles" (74). Some early apologists for Hispanic American existentialism focused on Mexico, such as Luis Villoro's "Génesis y proyecto del existencialismo en México" (1949) and Francisco Larroyo's *El existencialismo: Sus fuentes y direcciones* (1951), though only the latter offers any room for literary existentialism.⁷

⁴ Domingo Toledo's understanding of existentialism in Latin America is conclusive: "Existentialism was a generative philosophical current in Latin America before the movement became influential in the United States and Europe" (215).

⁵ See Jalif de Bertranou's "La fenomenología y la filosofía existencial" (2009) and Sánchez's *Contingency and Commitment: Mexican Existentialism and the Place of Philosophy* (2016), in which he reminds us of the voids with some histories of existentialism: "Much has been written in Mexico about the Mexican existentialists (Villegas 1979; Ruanova 1982; Bartra 1987; Hurtado 2006, 2007). The same is not the case elsewhere, especially in the English-speaking world where critically lauded and excellently representative anthologies of twentieth-century existentialism would fail to mention that José Gaos, the Spanish exile and mentor to the Mexican existentialists of the 1940s, was the first to translate Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* . . . much less reference, even in the clutter of footnotes, the Sartrean-inspired works of Emilio Uranga or Ricardo Guerra" (2).

⁶ Another early Eurocentric study is Julio Fausto Fernández's *El existencialismo: Ideología de un mundo en crisis* (1950). Fernández overlooks early twentieth-century texts such as Fernando González Ochoa's *Pensamientos de un viejo* (1916), Carlos Astrada's *El juego existencial* (1933), and Francisco Romero's *Filosofía de la persona* (1935), among others.

⁷ Larroyo briefly discusses Miguel Ángel Cevallos's *Un hombre perdido en el universo* (1954): "El protagonista de la novela se llama Miguel Niebla. El punto de partida de la cosmovisión de este personaje es el

Given all of the above, my aim is to complement the work of the mentioned historians by elaborating upon the literary existentialism of Bombal's first novel by means of a close reading. Chronologically, the inclusion of *La última niebla* in the literary canon of existentialism places it at the epicenter of the existentialist boom when several canonical narratives appeared, such as Unamuno's *San Manuel Bueno, mártir* (1930), Sartre's *Nausea* (1938), and Juan Carlos Onetti's *El pozo* (1939).⁸ In what follows, I discuss Bombal's novel within the parameters of an existentialist poetics while underscoring the protagonist's confrontation with a nullifying existence as her exercise of subjectivity within a suffocating and invalidating reality.

Existentialism(s)

Emmanuel Mounier's well-known *arbre existentialiste* demarcates the roots of existentialism, which date back to antiquity before passing through French philosophers Pascal and Maine de Biran in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, respectively (10). Other histories of existentialism—that is, Larroyo 1951 and Kevin Aho 2014—begin in the nineteenth century, primarily with the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche and the novels of Fyodor Dostoyevsky.⁹ Not until the twentieth century did existentialism collate into the cultural phenomenon that continues to intrigue various sorts of creators, especially writers, academia, and filmmakers.¹⁰

Yet, the minimal scholarship on the existential poetics of Bombal's text is limited to name only. For example, Carolina Suárez Hernán briefly alludes to that underdeveloped facet of Bombal while underscoring, once again, the Chilean's feminist importance: "La obra de María Luisa Bombal explora las inquietudes que agobian al ser humano en el siglo XX desde una perspectiva femenina y examina la conflictividad interior de la mujer hispanoamericana. La autora está cerca de la narrativa existencial por su reflexión sobre el desamparo, la angustia y la gratuidad de la vida" (333).¹¹

hecho acuciante de encontrarse desorientado y perdido en el mundo, mundo que a su vez es un rincón o perspectiva del Universo entero" (213).

⁸ In Latin America, several texts should be mentioned from the 1930s: Enrique Labrador Ruiz's *El laberinto de sí mismo* (1933), Roberto Arlt's *El jorobadito* (1933), and Eduardo Mallea's *La ciudad junto al río inmóvil* (1936). In the region, the 1940s were equally productive, as evidenced by Mallea's *Todo verdor perecerá* (1941), Clemente Airó's *Yugo de niebla* (1948), and Ernesto Sábato's *El túnel* (1948).

⁹ Also see William Barrett's *Irrational Man* (1958). The most cited texts for the forerunners of existentialism are Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844) and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* (1846) and Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* (1882), *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883), *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887), and *Twilight of the Idols* (1888). Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864) and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) are novels in relation to which all other twentieth- and twenty-first-century existentialist narratives are assessed.

¹⁰ Aho explains that the term *existentialism* is a twentieth-century expression attributable to Gabriel Marcel in the mid-1940s; indeed, "nineteenth-century pioneers like Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche had never heard of it" (ix). Existentialist themes are found in films such as Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957) and *Wild Strawberries* (1957), José Henrique Fonseca's *O homem do ano* (2003), and Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977), *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989), and *Irrational Man* (2015).

¹¹ Cases in point are Lucía Guerra-Cunningham's *La narrativa de María Luisa Bombal: Una visión de la existencia femenina* (1980) and Dolores Rangel's "El perfil anímico y existencial de la mujer en la obra de María Luisa Bombal" (2001). Although they allude to existence, they are nevertheless feminist interpretations of Bombal's work. For example, Rangel explains that "Bombal crea personajes femeninos ávidos de

From an explicitly existentialist perspective, Bombal's unnamed protagonist not only reflects on her seemingly purposeless being but also confronts and willfully pursues other means of fulfillment. Mentioned earlier, Mendieta provides an overall poetics of existentialism that guides my reading of Bombal's text:

At the center of all existentialist thinking is the inescapably free subject who must make herself in a world bereft of meaning. Yet the obduracy of this world is determined by the limits of a circumstance that is traced by the freedom of others. I am thrown into the world, condemned to freedom, and what I encounter are always other freedoms. God is useless, for my freedom is never breached by a sovereignty that reigns by granting absolute freedom. I am born unfinished and have nothing but a vacuum at the core of my being. I become what I make of myself. I have nothing but what I make. I am nothing but become my own story. I am a project. History sets the terms because it is what I, we, have made, but it does not determine the outcome. I am and must become, but I can do so only with others, or against others. Freedom, indeterminacy, self-making, others, meaning to be made, not discovered—these are the key themes, notions, insights of existentialist thinking. (180)

Mendieta's composite of existentialist thinking is also applicable to thought as manifest in literature—indeed, in every novel from the 1930s and 1940s previously noted as well as in Bombal's.

In *La última niebla*, the unnamed protagonist condemned to “the freedom of others,” as Mendieta has put it, chooses to counteract the bourgeoisie determinism that she has married into. The protagonist's ennui and obstinacy are symptoms of her will to freedom. Spurred on by a sense of insufficiency, the narrative voice resorts to the liberation of her libidinal drive to create a more authentic being in the world. In the end, the protagonist's most favourable moments are those in which her “quehacer,” to use José Ortega y Gasset's term (13), prioritizes her while disregarding the supercilious gaze of others, namely of her sadistic husband and the social class that he symbolizes.¹²

A Nameless Shrug

La última niebla chronicles the tension between an unnamed woman confronted by the prospects of an inconsequential life. More importantly, Bombal's novel recounts the protagonist's efforts to counteract the malaise brought on by a loveless marriage and the expectations of the bourgeoisie she marries into. Bombal's protagonist is an existential anti-heroine, for she lacks the traditional romantic qualities of heroism, selflessness and self-righteousness. In fact, she indirectly resists those essentialist ideals in favor of her own desires, all with a mindful effort to prioritize herself. She is further emblematic of the

experimentar la sexualidad como un deseo genuino y de gran intensidad, que llega a los terrenos de lo existencial” (36). Afterward, however, she never returns to the topic of existentialism.

¹² It is worth recalling that the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset described the significance of choice in humanity's being in *Historia como sistema* (1935), a canonical text of Peninsular existentialism. As the Spaniard problematizes the constitutive qualities of the individual, he explains the evolutionary significance of life projects and humanity's freedom: “La vida es quehacer. Y lo más grave de estos quehaceres es que la vida consiste no es que sea preciso hacerlos, sino, en cierto modo, lo contrario —quiero decir, que nos encontramos siempre forzados a hacer algo, pero no nos encontramos nunca estrictamente forzados a hacer algo determinado, que no nos es impuesto este o el otro quehacer, como le es impuesta al astro su trayectoria o a la piedra su gravitación” (13).

existential in that she is cognizant of the contradictory quality of the societal duties imposed on her and thus chooses to resist by way of sensual projects inclined toward what Albert Camus called absurdism. That is, she engages in a personal revolt.

Although discussing existence in general, Camus's understanding of absurd revolt describes the attitude of Bombal's protagonist. Therefore when Camus explains that an absurd revolt constitutes the "absence of hope (which has nothing to do with despair), a continual rejection (which must not be confused with renunciation), and a conscious dissatisfaction (which must not be compared to immature unrest)" (23) with the status quo, the French philosopher perfectly styles the attitude Bombal's unnamed protagonist takes throughout the novel.¹³

In her reading, Guerra-Cunningham has taken *La última niebla* to be the fictionalization of "la dualidad indisoluble de los anhelos interiores de la protagonista y las normas convencionales de la sociedad que previenen la satisfacción de dichos anhelos" (*La narrativa* 47). Agosín explains that, within her loveless marriage, the protagonist engages in "una especie de aventura romántica imaginaria en busca del amor perfecto" (28). That "imagined" adventure is the culmination of the emotional torment experienced by the protagonist at the hands of her sadistic husband, Daniel, who paradoxically catalyzes her existential inwardness. Such reflexivity, a purposeful resistance against her insufficient existence, cannot be dismissed as melodramatic. In fact, it is such moments of self-reliance that most embody authentic being within an otherwise obligatory social milieu for the unnamed protagonist. Guerra-Cunningham has also called attention to how in Bombal's novels "se pone énfasis en la interioridad de la protagonista en una situación alienada de lo social" (*La narrativa* 39). The ensuing vignettes overtly represent the protagonist's nascent existential sensitivity and her contempt for the inauthenticity of her bourgeoisie being. Paradoxically, but possibly not given Bombal's propensity for transgressing narrative expectations, Daniel's misogyny functions as a generative force, the first in a string of signifying inversions palpable in Bombal's novel.

The Chilean's novel is divided into two sections.¹⁴ The first half is subdivided into five scenes and opens with the arrival of the anonymous narrator and Daniel to the latter's *hacienda*. The inauspicious setting, chock-full of ominous weather symbolism, is further aggravated by Daniel's hostility. At such instance, the reader immediately becomes aware of the marital misfortune that has cast the narrator as the unwanted proxy spouse for Daniel:

Hacía apenas un año efectuaba el mismo trayecto con su primera mujer; aquella muchacha huraña y flaca a quien adoraba, y que debiera morir tan inesperadamente tres meses después. Pero ahora, ahora hay algo como de recelo en la mirada con que me envuelve de pies a cabeza. Es la mirada hostil con la que de costumbre acoge siempre a todo extranjero.
(9)

¹³ For Camus, living absurdly allows the individual to live life to its fullest in a constant situation of unrest: "But I know that in order to keep alive, the absurd cannot be settled. It escapes suicide to the extent that it is simultaneously awareness and rejection of death. . . . That revolt gives life its value" (40).

¹⁴ See Agosín's chapter on *La última niebla*, particularly pages 25-27, in her book *Las desterradas del paraíso* (1983), in which she discusses the novel's structure with reference to the work of René Jara and Fernando Moreno in their book *Anatomía de la novela* (1972).

Daniel, the *hacienda*, and the loveless marriage are all examples of the obdurate world previously described by Mendieta as “determined by the limits of a circumstance that is traced by the freedom of others” (180). The scene captures not only the animosity that affects the narrator but also the resentment that pushes the protagonist to seek refuge in her own being: a space where she will “become” her own story. Such an antagonistic relationship synthesizes the antipathy between husband and wife. Moreover, as the author explained to Agosín in a 1977 interview, the antagonism between the couple provided the narrative tension necessary to allow her to give utmost importance to not only “la mera narrativa de los hechos sino a la íntima, secreta historia de las inquietudes y motivos que los provocaran ser o les impidieran ser” (“Entrevista” 5).

A clear example of the alienation between the newlyweds is Daniel’s focalization on her as “extranjero.” Such othering is predicated upon the uncanny repulsion felt toward her, as evidenced when Daniel tells his new bride “Te miro y pienso que te conozco demasiado...” (9). Mariana Sandez, reading that distancing performed by Daniel through a Freudian lens, has explained that Daniel’s attitude toward his wife causes a “desdoblamiento,” which has led critics to “abordar el tema de la mujer alienada, la mujer neurótica o esquizofrénica, y el sentimiento de extranjerismo o extrañamiento en la obra de María Luisa Bombal” (22). Daniel’s sociopathic projection of his misery, the “recelo” with which he views the protagonist, is the displacement of the pain felt for his first wife. The wariness, distrust, and all-around disdain for her are aggravated by the mere presence of the protagonist and function as representations of a world into which the unnamed protagonist has been thrust and which she will confront. Regrettably, some critics have read Bombal’s character as powerless, as emblematic of “women who do not control their lives and whose existences are firmly tied to that of their husbands who, allied with society, become the external alienating force” (Urza 96). By contrast, I find in *La última niebla*’s protagonist a personality that exercises her sexual freedom in spite of the societal prescriptions expected of her.

The protagonist’s encounter with and use of her sexuality entrusts a degree of authority to what has been read as a defenseless neurotic character. Thomas O. Bente has gone so far as to judge the entirety of Bombal’s female personalities as “shallow, frivolous, and fatuous, characters incapable of self-realization and fulfillment—which they are, almost without exception” (103). I disagree. A careful observation of the narrator’s actions, her willful pursuit of another outcome, and her indifference of Daniel’s misogynistic othering, all of which would eliminate her completely, is made evident early in the novel. The disdainful shrug she gives during an exchange with Daniel is the necessary indifference that will establish her own pursuit of authentic being:

—¿Te hubiera gustado ser una solterona arrugada, que teje para los pobres de la hacienda?

Me encojo de hombros.

—Ese es el porvenir que aguarda a tus hermanas... (10)

Although her husband attempts to cast himself as a redeemer, the protagonist confesses that she is aware of his charade. Her own words are clear:

Permanezco muda. No me hacen ya el menor efecto las frases cáusticas con que me turbaba no hace aún quince días.

... [C]ompruebo con sorpresa que sus sarcasmos no hacen sino revolverse contra él mismo. Está lívido y parece sufrir. ...

Le miro extrañada. Tardo un segundo en comprender que está llorando.

Me aparto de él, tratando de persuadirme de que la actitud más discreta está en fingir una absoluta ignorancia de su dolor. Pero en mi fuero interno algo me dice que ésta es también la actitud más cómoda. (11)

Here, *La última niebla's* narrator redefines passivity. Revealing her grasp of Daniel's torment and of the fallacy of his antagonistic behavior, the nameless voice also reveals her own private indifference and disdain toward him. That transformation in her attitude toward Daniel has been immediate. His grief elicits a self-preserving drive in her, not a nurturing mechanism. In fact, she has now estranged Daniel and establishes a distance with him via her feigned obtuseness and her silence. The scene has gone neglected by critics who have failed to see her as an imperative agent. The narrator's internal superego, her "fuero interno," compels her decision of indifference. Furthermore, the protagonist later refers to her behavior as "egoísmo" (11). In tandem, both her awareness of Daniel's pain and her decision to behave in a manner that best safeguards her are manifestations of the narrator's existential egoism and, as importantly, her refusal to yield to matrimonial expectations. The contemptuous shrug encompasses her growing apathy for Daniel and recasts the protagonist positively from an existentialist perspective. She confronts his misogyny with insouciance. Although critics such as Bente have read that moment as signifying her "infantile, shallow, narcissistic, and pococurante" (106) behavior, I am compelled to reconsider her gesture as symbolizing both her self-preoccupation and her understanding of Daniel's insincerity.

Death Becomes Her

The second scene of *La última niebla* brings the protagonist face to face with death, the first *mementō morī* for the narrator. A young girl's wake, which the narrator attends, produces an ontological crisis that Guerra-Cunningham interprets as a return to a primordial state: "... la muerte produce en la protagonista una sensación de terror que la induce a internarse en el bosque, símbolo de la naturaleza vital" (*La narrativa* 54). For the protagonist, the dead girl appears imprisoned within the coffin. The novel's narrative fragmentation affords the reader no prefacing information about the dead girl or the circumstances that have prompted her death or the narrator's place at the wake. However, what the dead girl comes to denote and foretell is the meaningless existence that awaits the narrator. As the protagonist describes the scene at the wake, the young girl is entombed behind a glass window, from which the narrator contemplates the deceased's expressionless face and her own reflection. As the girl and the protagonist become one, the experience elicits one solitary word: "silencio" (12).

The encircling stillness does not pacify but rather exasperates the narrator. The permanent silence of the dead girl in conjunction with the unnerving quiet of the forest, in which the narrator has sought refuge, combine to agitate the protagonist's already troubled existence. All of those narrative elements, as well as the omnipresent mist that has shrouded her, awaken her to a "peligro oculto" (12). The same elements also affect the narrator's consciousness of her own mortality and of empty being, and in turn, she responds with an interjection:

¡Yo existo, yo existo —digo en voz alta— y soy bella y feliz! Sí, ¡feliz!, la felicidad no es más que tener un cuerpo joven y esbelto y ágil.

No obstante, desde hace mucho, flota en mí una turbia inquietud. Cierta noche, mientras dormía, vislumbre algo, algo que era tal vez su causa. Una vez despierta, traté en vano de recordarlo. Noche a noche he tratado, también en vano, de volver a encontrar el mismo sueño. (12)

The passage represents the protagonist's first existential affirmation vis-à-vis death. The episode should also be understood as her rejection of death in life, a reaction against the silence, the "turbia inquietud," personified by the young dead girl. The episode is likewise one of the initial moments in which a dream sequence becomes a space for reflection and presence. Interestingly antagonistic is the use of dream as contestation for her discontent. Furthermore, it is within the dream that the narrator intuits the "cause" of unhappiness, which at once becomes elusive. The point that needs underscoring is that the protagonist discerns the incongruity between herself and her surroundings. The narrator has not yet pinpointed the root causes of her malaise but has discerned its presence. Carmelo Urza has associated such surrealist moments with the protagonist's "greatest alienation and irreality" (97). By extension, I would add that the distillation of reality galvanizes her self-understanding, meaning that the oneiric episodes are also moments of existential recognition.

In *La última niebla*, the narrator finds in dreams and the paranormal mist a palliative and generative mechanism to reach beyond her repressed self. The previous interjection underscores the narrator's active discontent with her present state and her willingness to contend with the suppression of authentic being. In other words, the protagonist's refocusing on her youthful beauty is a contestation to the living death she sees reflected in the dead girl and on the coffin's glass. To that end, the anonymous woman looks inward to reaffirm her purpose, by surrendering herself sexually, first to the "estanque" and, later, to the joyful participation in an affair with a lover who remains stubbornly ambiguous. Interestingly, some critics have called attention to the palliative quality of the protagonist's mind. For Elisa Mayorga, the narrator's imagination is an "*instrumento reparador de esa realidad adversa*" (15),¹⁵ whereas Urza has highlighted how the mist and her surrealist love affair function "to isolate the women protagonists from a distorted external reality" (92). Additionally, I contend that the surrealistic imagery operates as a triple instrument of self-preservation, sensual realization, and active resistance against her discontent, in a dynamic willful act of counterbalancing engagement.

Immediately following the narrator's first *mementō morī*, she and her adulterous sister-in-law, Regina, cross paths. Regina is a kindred spirit and a potential doppelgänger of the nameless narrator because of the "violencia interior" (13), which drives her rejoicing in her romantic liaisons. It is worth mentioning that an analogous vivacity is characteristic of the nameless narrator, whose reddish mane is described as "seda fulgurante" and as simultaneously radiating a "guerrero" aura (13). Moreover, Regina symbolizes the potential of the narrator. The encounter with Regina and her lover transfigures the narrator. As Sandez has noted, it is "Regina quien promueve, sin querer y sin saber, en la narradora, el cambio que va de la pasividad a la actividad" (25). Her awareness of Regina's affair

¹⁵ All italics within quotations are attributed to the cited author.

becomes the final necessary catalytic moment that compels the protagonist to definitively confront her own inauthentic life. She takes refuge in the libidinal. As Regina and her lover exchange complicit glances, the unnamed narrator again escapes, both literally and symbolically, from home, understood as the representation of the asphyxiating environment she exists in:

Parece que me hubieran vertido fuego dentro de las venas. Salgo al jardín, huyo. Me interno en la bruma y de pronto un rayo de sol se enciende al través, prestando una dorada claridad de gruta al bosque en que me encuentro. . . .

Entonces me quito las ropas, todas, hasta que mi carne se tiñe del mismo resplandor que flota entre los árboles. Y así, desnuda y dorada, me sumerjo en el estanque. (14)

This first act of explicit insubordination establishes the egocentric escapism that sustains the protagonist's existence and provides her with the only moments of fulfillment available to her. It is within the confines of the pond that the protagonist displaces her anguish. Metaphorically, the pond scene is cathartic, both cleansing the narrator of her putrefaction and facilitating the cathecting of her libidinal energy. Urza has sustained that the narrator "does not develop her individual potential through conflictive action, but rather evades this option through fantasy, thus accentuating her alienation" (93), I counter that this form of escapism is a projection of the narrator's will to engage life, to revel in the pleasure of her body through a therapeutic immersion of the senses. In other words, it is a refocusing on the self, inspired by Regina's own self-centeredness. Furthermore, as represented in the scene, the libidinal is material, meaning that the sensations produced in the "estanque" are real. They elicit a psychosomatic sexual nirvana that both affirms her being and transgresses her joyless marriage.

The Enigmatic Friend

By the fifth scene, which closes the first half of *La última niebla*, the protagonist has arrived at an unnamed city. At that point, her sense of emptiness poses negative psychosomatic consequences—insomnia, anemia, and shortness of breath—or, as the protagonist explains within the confines of the mother-in-law's home, "Me ahogo" (17). Her only recourse, again, is to physically escape the home, a repeat manifestation of the protagonist's unwillingness to fully surrender her well-being. In other words, her third escape from the repressive home continues to signify her indisposition to suffer in silence, and she literally seeks out an antidote, for what follows is the climatic encounter with the enigmatic lover. The extent of the protagonist's suffering and the meaningless milieu she resists are highlighted when she prophesizes the circular nature of her existence, in which she too wholly capitulates. In that aspect, the unnamed narrator's portrayal of the drudgery of her daily routines recalls the doldrums described by other canonized existential personas, namely Dostoyevsky's Underground Man and Onetti's Eladio Linacero.¹⁶ Bombal's heroine is unapologetic in her vision:

¹⁶ Dostoyevsky's Underground Man paints the bleakness that surrounds him by focusing on angst: "I had a sickly dread, too, of being ridiculous, and so had a slavish passion for the conventional in everything external. I loved to fall into the common rut, and had a wholehearted terror of any kind of eccentricity in myself. But how could I live up to it? I was morbidly sensitive as a man of our age should be. They were all

Mañana volveremos al campo. Pasado mañana iré a oír misa al pueblo, con mi suegra. Luego, durante el almuerzo, Daniel nos hablará de los trabajos de la hacienda. En seguida visitaré el invernáculo, la pajarera, el huerto. Antes de cenar, dormiré junto a la chimenea o leeré los periódicos locales. Después de comer me divertiré en provocar pequeñas catástrofes dentro del fuego, removiendo desatinadamente las brasas. A mi alrededor, un silencio indicará muy pronto que se ha agotado todo tema de conversación y Daniel ajustará ruidosamente las barras contra las puertas. Luego nos iremos a dormir. Y pasado mañana será lo mismo, y dentro de un año, y dentro de diez; y será lo mismo hasta que la vejez me arrebathe todo derecho a amar y a desear, y hasta que mi cuerpo se marchite y mi cara se aje y tenga vergüenza de mostrarme sin artificios a la luz del sol. (18)

As the above passage makes clear, Bombal's protagonist is fully cognizant of the life that awaits her if she surrenders to it.¹⁷ The redundancy described by the protagonist creates an eternally recurrent torment wherein days transform into years of habits and pointless endeavors. Moreover, she understands the monotony is devoid of substance, given that such enactments comply more with social conformity and not her own willfulness. That unabashed assessment of what awaits, significant because it again points to her ability to criticize her surroundings and behavior, becomes another insightful moment of galvanization. In other words, the protagonist neither distorts nor justifies her inauthentic existence, she uses this malcontent as an impetus for doing.

In the same confrontational direction, the episode with the "enigmático amigo" (21) takes on added ethical importance, because the narrator again demonstrates the extent to which she understands the vacuity of her surroundings and decides to confront her malaise. The narrator's foray into an adulterous encounter with the stranger, although cloaked in the novel's paradigmatic narrative ambiguity, nevertheless constitutes an adventure into life. Furthermore, while Guerra-Cunningham has read the scene as passive escapism, because "le resultaba difícil modificar su situación a través de acciones concretas y tangibles" (*La narrativa* 30), I interpret the episode as a generative relenting of her passions. Insofar as the protagonist's imagination becomes a dynamic act of wish fulfillment, such engagement becomes for the anonymous woman her moment of existential respite. The encounter emphasizes the visceral and accentuates the material:

Una vez desnuda, permanezco sentada al borde de la cama. Él se aparta y me contempla. Bajo su atenta mirada, echo la cabeza hacia atrás y este ademán me llena de íntimo bienestar.

stupid, and as like one another as so many sheep" (50). Likewise, Onetti's protagonist expresses a dissatisfaction that echoes Bombal's narrator: "Pero ahora siento que mi vida no es más que el paso de fracciones de tiempo, una y otra, como el ruido de un reloj, el agua que corre, moneda que se cuenta. Estoy tirado y el tiempo pasa. . . . Yo estoy tirado y el tiempo se arrastra, indiferente, a mi derecha y a mi izquierda. Esta es la noche, quien no pudo sentirla así no la conoce. Todo en la vida es mierda y ahora estamos ciegos en la noche, atentos y sin comprender" (39-40).

¹⁷ It is worth recalling that other existential protagonists, including Neruda's *Habitante* and *Groundhog Day*'s Phil Connors depict similarly inescapable malaise. In fact, the premise of Harold Ramis's 1993 film is exactly that; Connors is condemned to repeat the same day until he takes on a purposeful life. Neruda's protagonist, similar to the aforementioned characters, depicts his ennui in the following manner: "Y luego existen esos días que se arrastran desgraciadamente, que pasan dando vueltas sin traerse algo, sin llevarse nada; sin llevarse ni traerse nada, el tiempo que corre a nuestro lado, ciclista sin apuro y vestido de gris. . . . Muchos días llevo paseando de largo a largo el piso de mi cuarto, y mucho ha de ser el tiempo cuando aún la congoja no se cae de mis hombros; mucho ha de ser el tiempo" (230).

Anudo mis brazos tras la nuca, trenzo y destrenzo las piernas y cada gesto me trae consigo un placer intenso y completo, como si, por fin, tuvieran una razón de ser mis brazos y mi cuello y mis piernas. ¡Aunque este goce fuera la única finalidad del amor, me sentiría ya bien recompensada! (20)

Most critics have concluded that the encounter with the lover never transpires. In fact, Bente has interpreted it as behavior that is “clearly schizophrenic, nearly bordering on the hysterical” (107).¹⁸ Nevertheless unquestionable are the pleasurable psychosomatic effects on the protagonist. In a similar vein, Guerra-Cunningham has interpreted this episode positively, focusing on this adulterous encounter and its “valor transgresivo en el plano vivencial” (*Mujer* n. pag.). As with the first act of sexual reaffirmation in the “estanque,” the narrative voice conveys a sense of realization and gratification, a momentary well-being (“íntimo bienestar”) that nevertheless sustains her for years to come.

It bears emphasizing that the narrator takes the initiative. It is she who engages him. Such audacity on her part reveals her as the initiator of the encounter via the symbolic act of her roping in the stranger: “Le echo los brazos al cuello y él entonces me besa . . .” (19).¹⁹ Her choosing to actively interact with the stranger challenges her characterization as a passive agent; the narrative action places the onus on her as an instigator of the episode, recalling that she acknowledged waiting on him and had determined, beforehand that “le voy a seguir como sea, donde sea” (19). Such commitment to allow the affair to play out until its final consequences is emblematic of the narrator’s dynamic pursuit of her sexuality. This much commented episode functions as an effort to renegotiate the limits of reality while accentuating the intoxicatingly reinvigorating effects of living dangerously. In this scene, the central issues are the narrator’s acceding to her inner voice. Her proactive attitude jeopardizes Guerra-Cunningham’s assertion that “[r]estringida al espacio cerrado del hogar y sin poseer el impulso necesario para romper los límites físicos y existenciales que la sociedad de la época asignaba a la mujer, la heroína opta por la pasividad” (*La narrativa* 51). The conflation of her yielding to her desires and the fact that she chooses to realize herself removed from the normative space of marriage constitutes the phases of the narrator’s momentary encounter with her authentic self. With that liaison, the first half of the novel ends.

Years Later

The will toward fulfillment, as an existentialist project and as exemplified by the narrator’s affair, cannot be undervalued with regard to Bombal’s protagonist. Even if that drive seems insurmountable, as a motivating factor, a character’s attitude toward that challenge, for many existentialist thinkers, supersedes the end result. Take into

¹⁸ Other interpretations also assert the fictitious quality of the love affair, which brings into question the protagonist’s mental wellbeing. Suárez Hernán states that the narrator “Lleva a cabo una transgresión imaginaria en la que la locura es su única posibilidad para reconstruir su subjetividad” (334). Esplugas explains that “To escape her painful reality and find the much-desired love, Bombal’s protagonist creates a fantasy that affords her some relief but ironically brings her to the brink of madness” (161-62).

¹⁹ The narrator’s proactive behavior is explicit: “De él se desprende un vago, pero envolvente calor. Y es rápido, violento, definitivo. Comprendo que lo esperaba y que le voy a seguir como sea, donde sea. Le echo los brazos al cuello y él entonces me besa, sin que por entre sus pestañas las pupilas luminosas cesen de mirarme” (19).

consideration Ortega y Gasset's valuation of "quehacer." For the Spanish philosopher, doing becomes the essence of being: "La nota más trivial, pero a la vez la más importante de la vida humana, es que el hombre no tiene otro remedio que estar haciendo algo para sostenerse en la existencia" to which he asserts "Pero la vida que nos es dada no nos es dada hecha, sino que necesitamos hacérsela nosotros, cada cual la suya" (13).²⁰ In that vein of thought, individual choice, agency, and engagement displace attainment, meaning that merit lies in the confrontation and engagement with a life project that conforms to the individual's will. For Bombal's protagonist, that willful project becomes the full appreciation of her libidinal drive, a "quehacer" that affords meaning to her existence for years.

The second half of the novel pushes forward in time, and the protagonist remains defiant, though her surroundings have not changed for the better. Early in the second half, years have passed, and the narrator has returned to Daniel's estate in the country. The protagonist, implicitly still dissatisfied with the hollow everyday reality as Daniel's trophy wife, explicitly conveys to the reader the substantiating importance of the affair in the city:

Pero, ¡qué importa! ¡Qué importa que mi cuerpo se marchite, si conoció el amor! Y qué importa que los años pasen, todos iguales. Yo tuve una hermosa aventura, una vez... Tan sólo con un recuerdo se puede soportar una larga vida de tedio. Y hasta repetir, día a día, sin cansancio, los mezquinos gestos cotidianos.

Hay un ser que no puedo encontrar sin temblar. Lo puedo encontrar hoy, mañana o dentro de diez años. Lo puedo encontrar aquí, al final de una alameda o en la ciudad, al doblar una esquina. Tal vez nunca lo encuentre. No importa; el mundo me parece lleno de posibilidades; en cada minuto hay para mí una espera, cada minuto tiene para mí su emoción. (22)

As the protagonist makes clear, faced with the malaise of life in Daniel's house, and with the prospect of suffering the inevitable ravages of time, she nevertheless remains disdainful. In fact, the memory of her love affair sustains her throughout the monotony of her existence. Beyond that, the possibility of reuniting with that ambiguous lover, which to her seems unlikely ("Tal vez nunca lo encuentre"), is sufficiently exhilarating.

Immediately after such self-affirmation, the protagonist undertakes another "quehacer" with constitutive qualities: she endeavors to write. The act of writing, not present in the first half of the novel, leaves a written record of the event and addresses the lover directly.²¹ With such writing, the reader can attest to the delimitations the protagonist makes between concepts of love, passion, marriage, and fulfillment. With every act of writing the reader witnesses the protagonist's lucidity, not her hysteria as some critics have explained. She differentiates the romantic from the sexual; in short, she recognizes the tryst for what it constituted, an egocentric act of self-gratification.

²⁰ Later in the same work Ortega y Gasset again highlights the importance of action for authentic being: "Esto muestra que el modo de ser de la vida ni siquiera como simple existencia es *ser ya*, puesto que lo único que nos es dado y que *hay* cuando hay vida humana es tener que hacérsela, cada cual la suya. La vida es un gerundio y no un participio: un *faciendum* y no un *factum*. La vida es quehacer. La vida, en efecto, da mucho que hacer" (47).

²¹ The protagonist writes on three different occasions. She destroys only one of the letters, the first (23). All other written testaments presumably survive, augmenting the danger for the unnamed protagonist.

As the narrator's writing indicates, her engagement is the displacement of her desire for sensual fulfillment and not a projection of her tireless search for perfect love, which critics such as Agosín and Rosa S. Turek have viewed as the centripetal force of the novel. In fact, Turek dismissively summarizes the novel as simply the voyage "de la juventud a la vejez de una mujer que busca el amor" (59). However, in exploring her stifled sexuality, the narrator relents to her existential id; she chooses her sexuality and does not conform to the normative ethical behavior expected of a monogamous wife. Such emphasis on choosing for herself obliterates the imaginary confines of marriage as the only socially acceptable space in which woman can achieve selfhood. Those moments of self-realization are directly tied to her choice, and in such instances of contentment, the "estanque" and the lover are means for the protagonist.²²

Agosín has also highlighted the constitutive and historical importance of the letters, which "representa un intento de salir del hermetismo mental en que la narradora se encuentra sometida" (44). The letters are a space for the narrator's realization and emphasize her desire and corporality:

"He conocido el perfume de tu hombro y desde ese día soy tuya. Te deseo. Me pasaría la vida tendida, esperando que vinieras a apretar contra mi cuerpo tu cuerpo fuerte y conecedor del mío, como si fuera su dueño desde siempre. Me separo de tu abrazo y todo el día me persigue el recuerdo de cuando me suspendo a tu cuello y suspiro sobre tu boca."
Escribo y rompo. (Bombal, *La última niebla* 23)

The letter to the lover stresses her satisfaction with the affair, with special attention to the physical nature of their rendezvous and her primal longing. The letter constructs her desiring subjectivity first as a mnemonic response that later becomes textual. The ambiguity of the affair does not diminish the palliative affectivity, and the point must be reiterated that she actively pursues such authenticity, as the narrator emphasizes "Te deseo," spurred on by and despite the indifference of the world around her.

Another episode that accentuates the cognizant egoism of the narrator, and one that she later transfers to written form, recounts renewed sexual encounters with Daniel. The scene provides a striking example of the narrator's agency. The episode in question showcases her transformation of Daniel into a medium and the purposefulness of those encounters, which were deliberate: "Tal vez hubo una leve premeditación de mi parte" (28). After her first re-encounter with Daniel, the protagonist, weighed down by the morality of the bourgeoisie she embodies, suffers a momentary crisis of conscience. That first crisis of bad faith is paradoxical in that her sense of guilt involves her relationship with her husband, not her affair in the city.²³ To reconcile her contrasting emotions, the narrator once again resorts to writing. In doing so, the reader is presented with the ritualistic aspect of those encounters, while focusing on the libidinous motivation of the protagonist. The letter, directed at her lover, simultaneously records Daniel's hypocrisy:

²² Previously, Andrés, the gardener's son, testified to the presence of a mysterious carriage, and afterward the narrator explains that the encounter was invigorating: "Vivo agobiada por la felicidad. Ignoro cuáles serán los proyectos de mi amigo, pero estoy segura de que respira muy cerca de mí" (26).

²³ Bad faith is a conscious attempt to ignore one's authentic being. Jean-Paul Sartre explains it as follows: "To be sure, the one who practices bad faith is hiding a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth. . . . There must be an original intention and a project of bad faith . . ." (139-40).

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 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. (29)

The scene is intended to emphasize the narrator's libidinous drive and to neutralize the fading memory of her enigmatic lover. The letter also represents her attempts at minimizing the impact of the renewed bond with her husband, and it exposes Daniel's motivation, his longing for the dead wife.²⁴ The protagonist's willingness to narrativize Daniel's hypocrisy underscores her ability to recognize at face value their renewed sexual life. In short, she is neither victimized nor redeemed by Daniel's attention, and fully aware of the reality of those encounters, she engages him. At the same time, in the process of expounding upon the inconsequential motivation of her revived affair with her husband, the narrator once again provides the reader with an instance wherein she has preferred to be loyal to herself. What the letter comes to signify is the protagonist's bad faith vis-à-vis her lover and her husband but not herself, for she has continued to prioritize her own desire above all, as the narrative voice explains (and writes): "Hacía meses que no me sentía envuelta en tan divina y animal felicidad" (30).²⁵

End of the Affairs

The fragmentation of the narrator's "happiness" begins shortly after her letter of bad faith to the lover. Daniel again appears at the core of her discontent, though so too does her own acceptance of doubt. His indictment of her mental state creates an ontological destabilization, one that the memory of the protagonist's lover cannot assuage. The ensuing exchange with Daniel becomes a downward turning point for the protagonist:

—¿A dónde vas?
—Me ahogo, necesito caminar... No me mires así: ¿Acaso no he salido otras veces, a esta misma hora?

To that the husband retorts, "¡Estás loca! Debes haber soñado. Nunca ha sucedido algo semejante..." (31-32). Daniel's caustic words carry peripetian consequences. From that moment forward, the quiet solitude of her lover's memory, in which the narrator found solace, is destabilized. The untimely death of Andrés, her only accomplice who had attested

²⁴ The narrator's undeceived recollection is explicit: "Mi cuerpo y mis besos no pudieron hacerlo temblar, pero lo hicieron, como antes, pensar en otro cuerpo y en otros labios. Como hace años, lo volví a ver tratando furiosamente de acariciar y desear mi carne y encontrando siempre el recuerdo de la muerta entre él y yo. Al abandonarse sobre mi pecho, su mejilla, inconscientemente, buscaba la tersura y los contornos de otro pecho. Besó mis manos, me besó toda, extrañando tibiezas, perfumes y asperezas familiares. Y lloró locamente, llamándola, gritándome al oído cosas absurdas que iban dirigidas a ella" (28-29).

²⁵ In the same letter, the protagonist describes the daily torment of life with Daniel and in the *hacienda*: "Un día ardiente nos tenía, a mi marido y a mí, enjaulados frente a frente, llorando casi de enervamiento y de ocio" (29).

to the stranger's existence, only worsens her disquietude.²⁶ To withstand the burden of instability, the narrator attempts a second bad-faith enterprise: she decides to disremember by fully integrating into the bourgeoisie world that surrounds her: "Desechando todo ensueño, rebusqué y traté de confinarme en los más humildes placeres, elegir caballo, seguir al capataz en su ronda cotidiana, recoger setas junto con mi suegra, aprender a fumar" (34). However, given the inauthenticity of the protagonist's gesture, that new facet of her existence becomes unsustainable. Ultimately, the charade becomes untenable, and the narrator, choosing to restate the constitutive imperative that the affair holds for her, concludes: "¡Oh, no! ¡Yo no puedo olvidar! . . . Mi amante es para mí más que un amor, es mi razón de ser, mi ayer, mi hoy, mi mañana" (35).

As the narrator confesses, her passion "creates" her existence, gives reason to her daily life, meaning that she is the catalyst of her realization. However, in another overt act of bad faith, the narrator questions her own existential self-sufficiency once again. The moment that opens the door to her ill-fated pursuit of "truth" presents itself with Regina's attempted suicide, which galvanizes the narrator in two ways. One, it has her reflect on her own behavior in relation to Regina's life; otherwise, it pushes her to search out definitive "proof" of her lover. In both cases, the narrator is confronted by her own subjectivity, which forces her into a decision.

Once the narrator and Daniel arrive at the hospital, her response to Regina is a combination of apathy and resentment: "Comprendo, comprendo y, sin embargo, no llego a conmoverme. ¡Egoísta, egoísta!, me digo, pero algo en mí rechaza el impropio. En realidad, no me siento culpable de no conmoverme" (37-38). The narrator's indifference to Regina's plight is symptomatic of the obvious envy of her sister-in-law's long love affair but also affords an occasion to again appreciate the protagonist's ability to understand the genuine undercurrents of those around her. The narrator not only comprehends Regina's suicidal motivation—that is, the lover's abandonment—but appropriately construes the cuckolded husband's solemnity. She accurately assesses Felipe's posturing through her lucid gaze: "Lo miro y desdeño en pensamiento sus mezquinas reacciones. Orgullo herido, sentido del decoro" (37). The Regina scene establishes once again the protagonist's insightfulness; she clearly observes the social tensions and mannerisms around her, and she offers unornamented portraits of those surroundings and her own behavior.

Leaving the hospital, the narrator immediately undertakes the task of verifying her lover's existence by locating his house. However, this quest to substantiate the affair becomes a futile pursuit of validation outside herself. For Guerra-Cunningham, the narrator's final foray into the night is the culmination of an ineffectual life: ". . . las heroínas llega[n] a un momento de anagnórisis en el cual se les hace evidente la futilidad del ensueño y el aislamiento" (*La narrativa* 40). Indeed, the episode, as read by several critics, involves the protagonist quest for certainty; however, the incident itself remains necessarily vague.

As has been the narrative norm for the second half of Bombal's novel, specifically starting with the renewed sexual encounters between Daniel and the protagonist, the narrator vacillates between expressions of certainty and doubt. It is worth recalling that

²⁶ Andrés confirms the protagonist's story. The young man's demeanor is laconic: "—¿Lo viste, Andrés, lo viste? / —Sí, señora, lo vi —asintió tranquilamente el muchacho" (26).

the narrator expresses remorse followed by indifference in her letters (29-31); subsequently, she will attempt to surrender to middle-class expectations after Daniel refutes her version of events in the city (31-32). That last instance of doubt is countered with a defiant exclamation that affirms her unwillingness to suppress the memory of the affair (35). The same narrative ambivalence is palpable with the house episode, in which the narrator first rejoices at the gates—"Contemplo, gozosa, el jardín abandonado. Me aprieto a las frías rejas para sentir las muy sólidas contra mi carne. ¡No fue un sueño, no!" (39)—and shortly after despairs "Con la vaga esperanza de haberme equivocado de calle, de casa, continuó errando por una ciudad fantasma" (41). Afterward, once again at the hospital, a similar emotive oscillation manifests in her renewed response to Regina's suicide attempt, vacillating from apathy to hatred. The sister-in-law's despair, coupled with her own crisis of doubt, induces her to contemplate the appeal of suicide. The much-maligned closing scene, when Daniel appears to unintentionally interrupt the narrator's own suicide attempt, and the narrative voice's apparent resignation, have given space for critics to declare the protagonist's final, conclusive defeat. The closing sequence reads as follows:

Lo sigo para llevar a cabo una infinidad de pequeños menesteres; para cumplir con una infinidad de frivolidades amenas; para llorar por costumbre y sonreír por deber. Lo sigo para vivir correctamente, para morir correctamente, algún día.

Alrededor de nosotros, la niebla presta a las cosas un carácter de inmovilidad definitiva.
(43)

Mayorga reads the famous concluding sequence in the following manner: "Muertos su recuerdo y su esperanza, sólo le resta entregarse al poder aciago, a la muerte y destrucción de la *última niebla*, la *definitiva*, aquella que la acompañará hasta el fin de sus días" (21). Esplugas states that "Bombal's protagonist dies a symbolic death when, unable to challenge social structures, she succumbs to the ravages of patriarchy" (163). Other critical assessments of *La última niebla's* final scene consistently interpret it as corresponding to the narrator's ultimate deference.²⁷ However, such a definitive interpretation for a novel governed by an esthetic of ambiguity and which, as mentioned, showcases the protagonist's increasingly vacillating being in multiple scenes leading up to the conclusion becomes imprudent from an analytical perspective. In fact, shortly after deciding upon her own suicide but immediately preceding the closing events, the protagonist again switches perspectives, as she did concerning her husband, the lover, and Regina. Reflecting on her advanced age, she expresses the pathetic futility of the act: "El suicidio de una mujer casi vieja, ¡qué cosa repugnante e inútil! ¿Mi vida no es acaso ya el comienzo de la muerte?" (42).

That final act of retraction suggests that the narrator's avowal to submit to the bourgeoisie demands of her surrounding will likewise suffer a reversal. It is worth recalling the narrator's previous failure at capitulation when she sought to detach herself from her

²⁷ Guerra-Cunningham explains that the concluding mist underscores "el desenlace trágico de una existencia femenina condenada irrevocablemente a una muerte en vida bajo un sistema social que ha aniquilado la realización de sus impulsos vitales" (*La narrativa* 67). Similarly, Sandez remarks that "La niebla representa entonces la muerte en vida de la mujer sofocada por los deseos reprimidos" (29).

lover's memory and acquiesce to a life comparable to her mother-in-law's. Yet in said attempt at acquiescence, the protagonist ultimately returns to her willfulness, for she cannot sustain the deception, and returns to an existence of derision to sustain herself: "¡Oh, no! ¡Yo no puedo olvidar!" (35). Therefore, given the narrative ambiguity that has been present from the opening sequences, as well as the protagonist's multiple approximations to justifications of bad faith, which she repeatedly finds unsustainable, the universal acceptance of the narrator's capitulation seems to counter the aesthetic principals developed throughout the novel. Furthermore, the privileging of the narrator's perspective and, just as importantly, the coupling of the protagonist's final utterances with the overtly abstruse mist as space for indeterminacy make her final words unreliable at best. In that regard, Turek reminds us that "Por esto, no sabemos si debemos creer todo lo que 'ella' nos dice. Tampoco sabemos qué piensan los otros. Todo es especulación" (60-61).

Finale

Although the epigraph I chose for this work is taken from the world of wizardry, it nevertheless sums up the constitutive value of the mind, a viewpoint that manifests explicitly in Bombal's heroine. Near the end of Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007), the martyred hero engages in an ontological dialogue with his mentor. The conversation ends when the professor responds to Harry's doubts concerning the validity of the transpiring event: "Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?" (723). Given Bombal's poetics of ambiguity, the same assertion can be made with regard to the narrator's extramarital affair (and the "estaque" scenes), since their constitutive value lies in aiding to counter the malaise the protagonist lives daily. Whether the affair happened in the material world or in her mind remains equivocal, and likewise, the verifiability of the affair misses the existential mark. The virtue of Bombal's novel is not undone by the possibility that the affair is a psychic phenomenon or by any seemingly defeatist conclusion but rather in the protagonist's contemptuous attitude toward her surroundings, as evidenced to the end.

The narrator's will toward fulfilment embodies her pursuit of an authentic being. Aho has explained that central concern for all existentialist thought in the following manner: "To say that I am authentic, then, is to say that I do not simply imitate the socially prescribed roles and values of the public world. I am genuine or true to the concerns and commitments that matter to *me* as an individual" (80). The narrative voice endeavors to commit to herself despite the "prescribed" values expected of her. Here again, the interpretive point has been missed; the existential virtue of Bombal's character is not her triumph over the facticity into which she is born, nor the facticity into which she marries, but instead the attempt to contest their restrictive value systems. A canonical proto-existentialist thinker such as Nietzsche would have rejoiced in the unnamed narrator's will to irreverence. As the Prussian philosopher counseled in the late nineteenth century, "the secret for harvesting from existence the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment is—to *live dangerously!* Build your cities on the slopes of Vesuvius! Send your ships into uncharted seas! Live at war with your peers and yourself!" (229). The closing act of *La última niebla* does not negate her derisive behavior throughout the novel; the final mist does not disavow her libidinal unleashing in the love affair or her satisfying solitude in the

“estaque.” As evidenced in several scenes of Bombal’s novel, whether psychic or material, the protagonist’s libidinal experiences are physiologically tangible, narratively speaking.

In that vein, the protagonist’s will toward herself is also reminiscent of Camus’s Sisyphus, a protagonist that smiled defiantly in the face of hopelessness.²⁸ In retrospect, the generalized negative presumption concerning the protagonist’s being, recalling Bente’s reading of all of Bombal’s characters as “incapable of self-realization and fulfillment,” for they replicate “the male-dominated, bourgeois society of Chile, and one assumes Spanish America in general, in the 1930’s [sic]” (103), is unjustifiable once we closely appreciate their postures. Just as the mentioned existentialist heroes, from Dostoyevsky’s through Onetti’s to Camus’s, the virtue of Bombal’s heroine in *La última niebla* consists in her engagement with an inescapable reality, not in the triumph over the impossible. Unquestionably a prototypical avant-garde novel with a feminist consciousness, *La última niebla* is also a case study in existential contempt. Bombal’s narrator reveals exasperation with bourgeoisie monotony and utilizes her sexuality to live dangerously, to extract from her existence “the greatest fruitfulness” (Nietzsche 229). Thus, as a nonconformist being, Bombal’s protagonist merits inclusion in any history of literary existentialism in the Americas, alongside Ramos’s Luis da Silva, Lispector’s Joana, and Sábato’s Castel.²⁹

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²⁸ Camus’s famous hero is described in the following manner: “You have already grasped that Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He is, as much through his passions as through his torture. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing. This is the price that must be paid for the passions of this earth” (89).

²⁹ All are protagonists of Latin American existentialist novels: Graciliano Ramos’s *Angústia* (1936), Clarice Lispector’s *Perto do Coração Selvagem* (1943), and Sábato’s *El túnel* (1948). Other foundational texts that merit mention go back to the nineteenth century: Machado de Assis’s *Papéis avulsos* (1882), José Asunción Silva’s *De sobremesa* (1896), and Cruz e Sousa’s *Últimos sonetos* (1898).

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