

READING THE BODY IN THE NARRATIVES OF MARIA LUISA BOMBAL

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Romance Languages (Spanish).

Chapel Hill
2009

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To my parents, Sharon and Mike, my brother Jason, and my sister Rachel

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to dedicate a few lines to thank everyone who has helped to make this thesis a reality. First and foremost, I would like to thank my director, Dr. Rosa Perelmuter, whose patience and insight made this work possible.

I would also like to thank Dr. Glynis Cowell and Dr. Oswaldo Estrada for serving as dedicated members of my committee.

Thanks to my Mom and Dad and brother and sister for their endless support and encouragement. You helped me to keep my head up and a smile on my face.

I would also like to thank all of my Chapel Hill friends, especially Jonathan O'Conner, who made me laugh as much as they made me work.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“ [O]ne must consider this skill of reading the body as an intimate system that the narrator uses to establish a sort of mute dialogue, not necessarily abstracted but rather more tangible, as if it were an incarnation of the mind/body dichotomy. The narrator reveals her physical experiences by means of her body, its reactions, its gestures, and its emotions.” Tina Pereda, “Sniffing the Body Politic in Emilia Pardo Bazán’s *Insolación*” (27)

María Luisa Bombal (Viña del Mar, 1910-1980) was one of the few Latin American female writers of the 1930s and 1940s whose works received international acclaim. Her works of fiction include *House of Mist* (1947), *La Última Niebla* (1935), *El Árbol* (1939), *La Historia de María Griselda* (1946), *La Amortajada* (1938), and *Las Islas Nuevas* (1939). Since literary production in Latin America in the first half of the twentieth century was decidedly headlined by male authors, readers were often limited by masculine portrayals of female characters. By focusing on Bombal’s female characters this thesis helps to provide some insights into another way of portraying female literary constructions in the 1930s and 40s. Bombal manages to convey through her female characters’ postures, actions, and expressions that which would not otherwise be visible or even allowed of these women who mirrored the set notion of women in her time. Their true thoughts, feelings, and emotions are relayed through Bombal’s depiction of her protagonists’ bodies in response to their surrounding circumstances, and it is to this aspect of characterization that I will devote my project.

Marjorie Agosín says of Latin American women of the 1930s that their anatomy resigned them to their destiny (“Aproximaciones” 190), meaning that they were expected to procreate and maintain the home. María Luisa Bombal’s work has been referred to as a mirror of the Latin American woman’s social situation in the 1930s, and the expected completion of their duties is made obvious by the treatment of her female protagonists by the male characters. However, the female characters’ thoughts and dreams make them stand out and express some things that might not be expected of a Latin American housewife of the 1930s. Berta López Morales says this is a “condition which is seen within her female heroines, whose lack of conformism becomes manifest in daydreams that satisfy her lack on one level, but simultaneously hinder the prevailing social and moral norms” (127).

Bombal’s heroines eventually find themselves as outsiders, because when they finally emerge from their fantasy worlds into reality, they realize that they cannot fit into the expected roles and be happy. The idea of pursuing happiness eventually loses strength as one of their goals. In fact, Bombal says that Brígida of *El Árbol* knows “que la verdadera felicidad está en la convicción que se ha perdido irremediablemente la felicidad” (*Corazón* 55). The protagonist of *La Última Niebla* seems to resign herself as well, after a failed suicide attempt, to the fact that her life is “acaso ya el comienzo de la muerte.”¹ She realizes that the remainder of her life will be the completion of a duty, “para llorar por costumbre y sonreír por deber” (*OC* 95).

Lucía Guerra-Cunningham aptly states that “La obra de María Luisa Bombal . . . toda su problematicidad conflictiva tiene su origen en la inadecuación del ser femenino con respecto a los valores masculinos predominantes en la sociedad” (185). That is to say, the

¹ Obras Completas (OC), 94. The subsequent quotations to Bombal’s works, except for *House of Mist*, refer to this edition and the page numbers will be given in parenthesis in the text. For *House of Mist* I will refer to the University of Texas Press edition.

fact that the women of Bombal's works have so much conflict in their lives is the result of the social norms set by the surrounding patriarchal society. However, these women do not exactly conform to the roles expected of them. They have fantasies and dreams because of their loneliness and isolation from their husbands. "The protagonists in Bombal's works follow a general pattern: unloved are Helga, the unnamed protagonist of *La Última Niebla*, Ana María, and Brígida. These characters seek solace through a person, real or imaginary, or a personified thing" (Campbell 415). Helga of *House of Mist* dares to fantasize and have an affair with a stranger (albeit in a dream), as does the unnamed protagonist of *La Última Niebla*. Ana María of *La Amortajada* and *La Historia de María Griselda* looks back on her life and how, though she conformed to the expected role of wife and mother, she had a love affair before marriage and dared to defy her husband's wishes during their marriage. Brígida, tired of her meaningless domestic life in *El Árbol*, decides to leave her husband and empty marriage after her protective gum tree is cut down, despite society's expectation that she stay and endure the hardships of her duty as a woman and wife. Yolanda, restricted by her physical deformation, turns down potential suitors in favor of a life of spinsterhood in *Las Islas Nuevas*.

Many critics have commented on Bombal's works of fiction, including Ángel Flores, Gloria Gálvez Lira, and Susana Münnich. These critics have observed Bombal's treatment of her women characters. Flores comments that *La Última Niebla* is "a powerful statement about the social predicament of Latin American women in a world dominated by masculine values" (114). Gálvez Lira also values the information one can garner from Bombal's heroines: "Aunque la época en que María Luisa Bombal escribió ha pasado, el valor intrínseco de su obra perdura, porque ella refleja un problema discutido y de interés vital en

su tiempo y en nuestro tiempo: la situación de la mujer en su época y su relación con el sexo opuesto” (95). The unifying element among all the female protagonists of Bombal’s works is that, as Susana Münnich says in her book *Casa de hacienda / Carpa de circo*, “todos los personajes femeninos tienen como centro de sus vidas el amor romántico” (50).

Specifically, the treatment of the body in María Luisa Bombal’s fictional works has been alluded to, but not in detail, by critics such as Linda Gould Levine, Stephen Hart, Berta López Morales and M. Ian Adams. Levine discusses Bombal’s works from a feminist perspective, and addresses the characters’ awareness of their physical selves, in addition to the importance that Bombal places on physical beauty. Hart talks about how Bombal’s female protagonists use silence to oppose patriarchy, and also touches on women’s sexuality. López Morales has the most insightful analysis of the body in Bombal’s texts—though she limits her comments to only one novel—saying that the “explicit nature of the woman’s body in *La Última Niebla* breaks the self-censorship of the subject” (125). Adams also only speaks of *La Última Niebla*, and centers his analysis on alienation of the self and the feeling of disembodiment that the protagonist has as a result of her interaction with male characters.

I have divided my analysis of the body in all the fictional texts by Bombal into two main sections: “Body Parts” (Chapter II) and “States of the Body” (Chapter III). Chapter two will address the salient parts of the body described in Bombal’s texts: hair and hands, which are the only two elements that are consistently addressed in her novels. Bombal takes special care to always mention the style and color of the female characters’ hair, as she sees them as reflective both of their personalities and their social conditions. For example, in *House of Mist*, Teresa’s beauty and freedom are shown through the description of her beautiful long, blond, flowing tresses. This provides a stark contrast to Helga, who is initially portrayed as

ugly and controlled, with her brown hair pulled back tightly into a braided bun. Hands are also important to Bombal, most often used as a means for leading or pulling characters, but sometimes also to show their fragility. As Bombal ascribes particular significance to both of these body parts, we gain a deeper understanding of her characters by focusing on them.

Chapter three addresses how the positioning of the body and its aspect is a significant feature that offers a window into our understanding of the characters' psyche. In this chapter, which includes subsections labeled "The Body at Rest," "The Absent Body," "The Incarcerated Body," "The Body Possessed," and "Reflections of the Body," I describe the various ways in which Bombal's characters, consciously or not, act through their bodies in a number of interesting ways. Marjorie Agosín notes that "It is worth directing our attention to . . . the emerging and diverse interests on the feminine body, which as of late has been revealed to act as a site for discourse, resistance, and insurrection in women's writings" ("Introduction" i). This is indeed the purpose of my thesis and what I hope is a useful and original way to approach Bombal's works.

CHAPTER II

BODY PARTS

María Luisa Bombal's body of work gives voice to the Latin American woman of the 1930s. In a text and a time where women did not have a voice, the description of a woman's body and its parts was of utmost importance in conveying to the reader the female character's thoughts and perceptions. The two specific parts I discuss here are the characters' hair and hands, the parts most commonly referred to by Bombal in her works. The hair holds significance because it is an extension of the body that, although not living, can tell us a lot about its owner by its length, style, and color. The hands are important because they are the means by which women connect to their surrounding environment non-verbally. Implications of the body and its parts have been remarked on by many critics, especially feminist critics.

A. HAIR

Berta Lopez Morales asserts that "Since women's discourse is built upon the dominant masculine model, it reflects and repeats the male world view created by the hegemonic literary codes. In this sense, the language of woman's body shows in its own textuality the patterns established by male codes, focusing for example, upon some parts of the body and ignoring others" (123). Especially because they were not given the chance to earn respect in other ways, women were often judged by men on their beauty. It was deemed the woman's job to please her man through her appearance and actions. This appearance-

and behavior-centered viewpoint even seeps into women's writing. For example, in Bombal's fiction, the focus of her description of women is on their hair and their general beauty.

Hair is not just a superfluous extension of the human body, it is a source of power, a commodity, and a symbol, among other things. Rose Weitz states that "our hair is one of the primary ways we tell others who we are and by which others evaluate us, for it implicitly conveys messages about our gender, age, politics, social class, and more" (xii). In the works of María Luisa Bombal, hair has varied special meanings and functions. It is often portrayed as a symbol of beauty and power as well as a valuable commodity; it can be caressed or possessed, and control can often be exerted by touching or pulling the female character's hair. It graces, limits, punishes, and binds. As we will see, the hair's color, cut, or style can also give us insight into the woman's mental state and personality, in addition to her feelings. Also, the use of decorations in the hair is common, to make the hair seem more of a treasure. In *House of Mist*, there are a couple of descriptions that include adornment of the hair: "the gold crown that pressed her rich dark tresses seemed made of stars" (22) and "tresses interlaced with pearls" (63).

According to Cirlot's *A Dictionary of Symbols*, hair symbolizes spiritual forces and the concept of spiritualized energy. A head full of hair represents *élan vital* and *joie de vivre*, linked with the will to succeed (134). Silke Andrea Schuemmer observes that "Hair is the site of mythical or divine powers because it is an indistinct physical boundary. It belongs entirely to one person, but is not actually a body part. It does not feel anything, but conveys a great many emotions to the body. It is simultaneously inside and outside the body, alive and dead, body and material" (Koelbl 166). The famed photographer Herlinde Koelbl says

that “Hair is a part of us that we take so much for granted that we are hardly aware of its function and aura, yet it is a component of our identity . . . hair [serves] as a sign of belonging or being different, as a means of seduction, as the expression of the animalistic or the intimate, the difference or the ambivalence between male and female, of beauty and ugliness; it conceals our fragility and is our protection” (7). Rose Weitz comments on the sense of individuality one has as a result of one’s hair: “The symbolic meaning of hair is heightened by its uniquely personal quality. Growing directly out of our bodies, our hair often seems magically emblematic of ourselves” (xiv). She also says that “Controlling our hair helps us control our lives, and loss of control over our hair can make us feel we’ve lost control over our lives” (xvii). This applies without a doubt to the narrator of *La Última Niebla* and Helga of *House of Mist*, who are controlled by their husbands through an imposed hairstyle. Marie-Louise Von Franz believes that hair evokes the idea of something primitive, instinctive, and animal-like, and that hair on the head carries a projection of the unconscious involuntary thoughts and fantasies. Likewise, she thinks that the cutting of hair is the equivalent to psychological castration (75). Even fairy tales state and enforce culture’s sentences, as is obvious in tales like Rapunzel, Snow White, and Cinderella, to name a few (Gilbert and Gubar 36).

In Bombal’s works, tightly restricted hair often completes her portrayal of a shy, suppressed woman. Loose locks often represent a mysterious, wilder, more open countenance. Half-undone hair can be associated with emotion and vulnerability. When the nape of the neck is exposed, the characters find themselves in situations where they feel exposed, transformed, or weak. For example, Ebba Hansen, a character in *House of Mist* who has been associated numerous times with frailty and weakness, is portrayed as having

“her heavy locks falling half-undone on the frail nape of her neck” (149). Helga, in the same novel, after an intimate encounter with her lover, says she “rearranged [her] half-undone tresses on the nape of [her] neck” (74). She has been transformed by her first meaningful sexual experience, which left her with her hair partially undone. Again, when Helga receives a makeover from her husband’s sister Mariana, it left her appearing graceful and somewhat frail: “A knot of black tresses . . . rested on the nape of her neck, bringing out a dainty swanlike effect” (63). When Regina and her lover are caught by the narrator in an embrace in *La Última Niebla*, Regina is described as having “la cabellera medio desatada” (OC 60). This description allows the reader to understand immediately Regina’s predicament, that she has been caught unkempt and with her neck exposed while in a vulnerable and compromised position. Another situation involving Regina’s hair is described after her suicide attempt, when we are told that she is left with “mechones muy lacios . . . [que] le cuelgan hasta la mitad del cuello” (OC 92). Her weakness is reflected in her disheveled, lifeless hair (“lacios,” “cuelgan”). Lastly, in *House of Mist*, we are shown the broken-down image of Teresa after her unwanted wedding to Daniel, and her heightened emotion and sensitivity are shown through “her beautiful hair entwined with orange blossoms half-undone on the pillow, Teresa . . . was sobbing violently” (109). The beauty of the hair and the orange blossoms contrast with the dismantling of her hairdo and her spirits.

Bombal herself has said that “Mis personajes femeninos poseen una larga cabellera porque el cabello, como las enredaderas, las une a la naturaleza. He decidido que en mis libros no haya jamás una heroína que tenga el pelo corto” (*Corazón* 40). There are instances in which, long, undone locks can be a sign of mystery, innocence/childishness, or wildness. The description of Brígida in *El Árbol* as a young woman of eighteen makes her appear to be

a small child, surrounded by her long hair. “Sus dieciocho años . . . sus trenzas . . . desatadas le llegaban hasta los tobillos” (OC 208). In *La Amortajada*, Ana María’s hair is tossed about by the wind, lending her a wild appearance and attitude: “El viento. Mis trenzas aleteaban deshechas” (OC 107). Ana María, lying in her coffin, comments on the mysterious nature of her own hair splayed upon the pillow, that “una cabellera desplegada presta a toda mujer . . . un ceño de misterio, un . . . encanto” (OC 98). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar comment that hair serves for “symbolizing the indomitable earthliness that no woman, however angelic, could entirely renounce . . . [it] leaps like a metaphor for monstrous female sexual energies . . . [is] terrifyingly physical and fiercely supernatural” (27). There are references to Teresa’s braids in *House of Mist* that make them sound less than appealing—almost evil: “two long braids . . . they are heavy and slippery, like two beautiful snakes” (16). Hair can also incite or be the recipient of desire. When the narrator has her first meaningful sexual experience with her lover, the first thing he does is take down her hair: “casi sin tocarme, me desata los cabellos” (OC 68). He does this even before he undresses her, showing that hair is an intimate part of a woman’s sexuality.

Hair, not always a lovely frame for a woman’s face or a source of pleasure for her, can also be a burden. The narrator of *La Última Niebla* complains that she is late “a causa de sus largos cabellos” (OC 153), which she must put in a bun at her husband’s request. In *La Amortajada*, Ana María complains of her string of daily monotonous activities: “tener que peinarse, que hablar, ordenar y sonreír” (OC 153). The description of Ana María lying in her shroud conveys the burden of her hair during her life: “ya no le incomoda bajo la nuca esa espesa mata de pelo . . . más pesada” (OC 97). Looking back on her life, she complains that her hair was always done for her, leaving her helpless when alone with her husband: “¿Por

qué no le habría enseñado a apretar su pesada cabellera?” (OC 147). Both characters, then, betray a certain resentment about not knowing how to deal with their hair, something that acquires relative centrality in their lives.

The hair drawn back can be seen as comparable to a shaved or veiled head, which in many cultures is a power play enforced by a patriarchal society (Koelbl 169). This sign of oppression by men can be seen in the case of the narrator of *La Última Niebla*: “Mi marido me ha obligado después a recoger mis extravagantes cabellos; porque en todo debo esforzarme en imitar a su primera mujer, a su primera mujer que, según él, era una mujer perfecta” (OC 60). In *House of Mist*, when Mariana gives Helga a makeover for the ball, she tells her to “pull down this dreadful lump of hair” (60), suggesting that Helga’s hair must be displayed in order for her to be beautiful. As Mariana pulls Helga’s hair loose, she is in effect loosening her husband Daniel’s control over Helga, who with this act defies Daniel’s wishes. M. Ian Adams believes that the narrator has allowed her body to be destroyed and to become an imitation, which alienates her from herself, physically and emotionally, which leads to a loss of self. In effect, Daniel has tried to force the narrator to physically resemble his dead wife through her hairstyle. At first it seems there is a connection between Daniel and Helga when “Daniel closed his eyes and started to caress [her] flowing hair . . . tears rolling down his cheeks” (42). Unfortunately, it is obvious that he is thinking of the beautiful flowing hair of his former wife.

Hair, conversely, can also be symbolic of power and helplessness. As in the case of Samson and Delilah, one’s power can rest in one’s hair, and possession gives power over the person whose hair it once was (Koelbl 161,167). As can be seen with young Daniel’s obsession with Teresa’s braids, women’s hair has great sexual power (Weitz 29) and can be

viewed as a type of treasure. When Daniel and Helga were children, Daniel desired to have Teresa's braids for himself, so he asked his neighbor to "Bring them to me. Then I'll be able to touch them and hold them and it will be as if Teresa is with me always, everywhere . . . one is enough for me!" (16). Helga follows his directive, to her great detriment. This desire to own a piece of Teresa (her braid) will prove to recreate synecdochically his future desire to possess her through marriage. It is said that shorn hair represented "the entire body, it stood pars pro toto" (Koelbl 167). This idea of the part (hair) standing for the whole (Teresa) is further shown by Helga's response when Daniel asks her to cut off Teresa's braids: "Cut off Teresa's braids! I exclaimed, horrified, in the same tone as I might have said: Cut off Teresa's head!" (16). Helplessness is seen in the instance of Regina's suicide attempt, when "en las manos del amante . . . dos trenzas que un tijeretazo han desprendido, empapadas de sangre" (OC 93). According to Cirlot's *A Dictionary of Symbols*, to lose one's hair signifies failure (135). Regina's failure at her extra-marital affair is shown by her hair being shorn. Regina's loss of hair shows her loss of any normal semblance of life. If she lives, she cannot go back to her husband, and the world now knows about her lover. The loss of her hair can also imply punishment and humiliation. It is not stated who cut Regina's braids, so the reader is left with the ambiguous image of Regina, without her husband, lover, or her hair, alone in a hospital bed. Because she shot herself in the head, it is possible that her hair was cut by the hospital staff in order to have access to the wound, but neither the culprit nor the reason is overtly stated.

Hair can also provide a connection between men and women, as in the case of Regina and her lover in *La Última Niebla*. The narrator comments, upon catching them in an embrace, that "la cabellera medio desatada de Regina queda prendida a los botones de . . . un

desconocido” (OC 60), linking the two of them together when they would not otherwise be touching. This connection by hair between men and women which here is a result of a loving embrace, in *La Amortajada* acquires a negative connotation. Ana María is grabbed by Antonio, “aferrado a sus trenzas como para retenerla” (OC 150).

As far as color is concerned, there is much to say about that. Cirlot’s *A Dictionary of Symbols* says that brown and black hair reinforce the symbol of hair in general—dark, terrestrial energy. Golden hair represents the sun’s rays, and copper represents Venusian or demoniacal characteristics (135). In the case of *House of Mist*, Daniel has a preference for his idolized dead wife’s blond hair (61). Mariana’s wildness is described in several instances in connection to her hair, which is said to have “tawny shades” (59) and her reddish-brown eyes are described as “eyes full of mischief . . . her reddish-brown curls fluttering” (52). The same can be said of Regina, Daniel’s sister in *La Última Niebla*, as we are told that she has curly red hair and an equally unruly attitude.

Even the eyelashes are sometimes informed with meaning. Beautiful María Griselda in *La Historia de María Griselda* has eyelashes so full and lush that the narrator says they grow violently, a word that prefigures the violent acts that will surround this beautiful woman: “¡Las pestañas! ¿En qué sangre generosa y pura debían hundir sus raíces para crecer con tanta violencia?” (OC 58). The description of eyelashes growing with violence surely lends them an aura of wildness and mystery.

B. HANDS

In many cases, communication using the hands can be as eloquent and clear as spoken language. Like many other parts of the body, hands can speak by way of movement

or even lack thereof. According to Cirlot's *A Dictionary of Symbols*, the hand is the "corporeal manifestation of the inner state of the human being," one that "expresses an attitude of mind in terms other than the acoustic" (137). The hands are used in many ways in Bombal's works to express urgency, restriction, comfort, self-protection, and weakness, among other things.

The hand is the part of the body by which someone can be led, pulled, or held back. In *La Amortajada*, Ana María is led back through her life and, finally to her ultimate rest by an unknown force holding her hand. There are many instances in which it is said that "alguien, algo, la toma de la mano, la obliga a alzarse" (OC 118). In *La Última Niebla*, Daniel's hands save the narrator's life as she is about to step in front of a car: "Dos manos que me parecen brutales me atraen vigorosamente hacia atrás" (OC 94). It is interesting that the hands that save her life are described as being brutal, and are the same hands who have rarely touched her in their relationship. In *House of Mist*, Helga is continuously dominated by hands, expressed in terms of taking, drawing, and being held against her will. Of her imaginary lover, Landa, she says, "and then, taking my hand again, he drew me at last inside the house" (73) and "Landa was at my side, taking my hand, kissing it" (73). Landa's attentions to Helga are emphasized by the focus on the consideration he pays to her hands. Elsewhere, addressing her husband Daniel, she implores "let go my hand . . . you're hurting me" (49). Helga's passivity is often reflected in her hands, which follow almost without willpower: "Taking hold of my wrists, he compelled me to look at him" (92). Helga even comments that she uses her hands without her control: "But before he had a chance to speak, something in me, a kind of desperate force, took control of my hands and compelled them to join together and to reach out to my husband in a passionate gesture of prayer" (64). When

she does use her hands of her own volition, it is with some hesitation. Of her new house in the mist, she says “I stretched out my hand and tenderly felt its heavy door studded with iron nails” (40). When Helga is pursued by Landa’s hunting dogs, she says “timidly, I started to stretch out my hand to caress them” (54). Since the hand can be seen as the corporeal manifestation of the inner state of the human being, it is also a very intimate part of the person. This explains Daniel’s outrage when he finds out that Landa has touched Helga’s hand: “I cannot even bear the thought that he spoke to her or touched her hand!” (139). For Daniel, the fact that Landa has touched his wife’s hand is as significant as his having addressed her. He is outraged by Landa’s contamination of his wife; his touch and his voice have penetrated her and he seems protective of her purity.

The hand can also be used as a comfort to oneself or another, or as a mode of self-protection. In *La Amortajada*, Ana María is aware of Fernando’s long goodbye, as she notes: “Y tu mano se aferraba a la mía en una despedida interminable” (OC 130). In *La Última Niebla*, the ever-present mist lends a surreal nature to everything around the narrator, making her unsure of what is real and what is not. The narrator uses her hand to convince herself that the trees that she can barely discern through the mist are actually real: “de pronto alargó la mano para convencerme que existen realmente” (OC 59). Brígida in *El Árbol* uses her hands as protection as the light rushes into her boudoir after the gum tree is cut down: “Encandilada se ha llevado las manos a los ojos” (OC 219). She raises her hands to protect herself not only from the harsh light, but from the harsh realities that she will soon have to face after leaving her husband. In *House of Mist*, when Helga and Daniel finally fall in love, it is their hands that tell us the story, as they walk hand in hand and become truly joined (115). The opposite can be seen in *La Amortajada* during the encounter between Ana María and the man she

loves but who does not return her affection. She describes their time together in the following way: “seguías poseyendo mi carne humillada, acariciándola con tus manos ausentes” (OC 110). Her lover’s absent hands are a clear example of her disillusionment and regret in discovering belatedly his true feelings for her.

Hands can also be a sign of weakness or fragility. Ana María of *La Amortajada* says of herself: “tenía las manos yertas” (OC 115) as she is sitting in front of her angry father, left vulnerable to his wrath after she is continuously late to family dinners. She again describes her hands as always cold (“mis dedos siempre helados”) (OC 105), which the reader realizes is an allusion to her cold state in death. Also we can see fragility through the state of Ana María’s hands when, speaking of her corpse, the narrator tells us that “sus manos . . . han adquirido la delicadeza frívola de dos palomas sosegadas” (OC 97). She is described in her coffin “con las manos sobre el pecho, como algo muy frágil, muy querido” (OC 165), almost as if she were protecting herself with her hands crossed over her chest. There is a certain delicacy about death, the way that the skin is pale and the body is still and fragile. In *House of Mist*, when Helga is describing her dead mother, Ebba Hansen, she refers to “her pale little hand, for so many years motionless and cold” (150). Whenever she is mentioned, Ebba is described as being small and frail, so the mention of her hands as pale, motionless and cold is a description that can be projected onto her tiny, weak body as well.

The study of both hands and hair can inform the reader about the characters’ personalities, lifestyles, and sentiments. Hair, though dead and unfeeling, enhances a woman’s beauty, and can betray personality traits or signs of oppression. We have seen the vast difference in the circumstances surrounding long, free-flowing hair versus tightly restricted hair, and how each style affects the female character, as with Helga in *House of*

Mist, whose tightly pulled-back hair shows her husband's domination over her. We have also found the hands to be an intimate part of the body by which the female protagonists can be led or manipulated according to the man's desires. In some cases, touch can hold more significance than verbal communication, as evidenced by Daniel's anger at Landa having touched Helga's hand.

CHAPTER III

STATES OF THE BODY

“Bodies have all the explanatory power of minds” Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* (vii)

“The body requires of the reader that she explores it as a text; in fact, as a text that stands as a symbol of that which itself cannot or should not be articulated with clarity. It is the reader’s task to extract the unspoken states of anxiety, emptiness, frustration, desire, whose open and direct articulation would not be acceptable in a literary society that represses the female” Tina Pereda , “Sniffing the Body Politic in Emilia Pardo Bazán’s *Insolación*” (26)

María Luisa Bombal’s characters are often restricted by their society, invariably patriarchal and thus oppressive, and cannot often express their thoughts or feelings verbally. As a result, the reader is drawn to non-verbal cues to figure out what the protagonists want to say but are not saying. In her study of Hispanic women’s literature, Tina Pereda observes that “The protagonist’s body is an effective catalyst by which the reader enters and interprets the text, the narration” (“Sniffing” 34). In the case of Bombal’s female protagonists, the characters often express themselves through their bodies. The movements, appearances, and actions of these women’s bodies speak for them. Women’s bodies, Elizabeth Grosz tells us, are “commonly considered a signifying medium, a vehicle of expression, a mode of rendering public and communicable what is essentially private (ideas, thoughts, beliefs, feelings, affects)” (9). One of the questions that I would like to address, and that has been raised by E. Jane Burns in *Bodytalk*, is what can happen when the “typically objectified and

properly silent woman's body speaks" (2). How does it get across its meaning? Grosz states that "all the effects of subjectivity, all the significant facets and complexities of subjects, can be as adequately explained using the subject's corporeality as a framework as it would be using consciousness or the unconscious" (vii). Through an analysis of the female characters' bodies in Bombal's texts we can understand what is often repressed, hear what is often silenced, and get a fuller picture of the characters' representation.

A. THE BODY AT REST

Bombal's bodies can be unfeeling, dead, rendered silent in sexual situations, relaxed, sedentary, frozen in fear, or left helpless due to weakness or sickness. In her fiction, the reader cannot fail to notice her many silent and unmoving protagonists. In *La Última Niebla*, the protagonist suddenly finds herself in a sexual situation that she obviously desires, but she is rendered silent and unmoving on the edge of the bed, probably due to fear and anticipation: "una vez desnuda, permanezco sentada al borde de la cama" (OC 68). She has never experienced true passion before, and she knows that it is about to change. Her body speaks of anticipation, she is not only on the edge of the bed, but on the edge of something entirely unknown and new to her. What Rosario Castellanos observes about the condition of the woman in the 1970s could well apply to this character: "through the male mediator, woman finds out about her body and its functions, about her person and her obligations" (*Reader* 241). This is our narrator's sexual awakening, where she claims to know "true love" for one night. Her male "friend" initiates the encounter, and leads the way through territories unknown to her. He teaches her about her body and knowing pleasure. The opposite is portrayed in *El Árbol* when the disillusioned Brígida is described as a suffering body: "noche

a noche dormitaba junto a su marido, sufriendo” (OC 217). Helga of *House of Mist* experiences the same emotions and silent recumbent position in bed with her husband, saying that she was “lying close to Daniel . . . motionless, shattered, indifferent” (43) after yet another sexual experience in which he imagines her to be his dead wife. Helga goes on to say later that she was “lying close to him, tired, cold, destitute of all desire” (50). She is experiencing at this moment with Daniel the opposite experience of her counterpart in *La Última Niebla*. The narrator of *La Última Niebla* is warmly embraced and enjoys her sexual experience while Helga is left cold and “indifferent” to hers. Brígida, in *El Árbol*, is shown to seek the comfort of her husband’s shoulder, while he unconsciously pulls away from her. She is lying relaxed with the man she thinks she might love, and “inconscientemente él se apartaba de ella para dormir, y ella perseguía el hombro” (OC 211).

Some body states can show a weakness or flaw in a character. In *Las Islas Nuevas*, Yolanda is restricted to certain positions of rest because of her wing. She must lie on her left shoulder because of the small atrophied limb on her right side: “Yolanda duerme caída sobre su hombro izquierdo” (OC 197). Falling into a faint is not an uncommon occurrence with Bombal’s characters. They are often described as fragile and portray the traditional idea of how a woman should be—docile, demure, and physically unstable. In the following situations we can see what Elizabeth Grosz has described as “facets of patriarchal thought that have in the past served to oppress women, most notably the patriarchal rationalization of male domination in terms of the fragility, unreliability, or biological closeness to nature attributed to the female body” (xiv).

In *La Amortajada*, María Griselda reacts to Sylvia’s suicide by falling into a dead faint. “¡María Griselda se ha desmayado y no la puedo hacer volver!” (OC 57). Yolanda

faints in *Las Islas Nuevas* when Juan Manuel compares her to a seagull (OC 191). Her greatest fear seems to be that of her physical anomaly being discovered, and this makes her prone to physical weakness. The narrator of *La Última Niebla* also has a tendency toward physical weakness, as we can see when she says “Escalofríos me empuñan de golpe...tengo la sensación de vivir estremecida” (OC 84). She then goes on to say that she wishes she could become ill, “¡Si pudiera enfermarme de verdad! . . . anheló algún dolor muy fuerte” (OC 84). Living atremble, this woman wishes sickness upon herself. Then the question arises, why would she wish herself to become ill? Taking into context the events that have transpired in the novel so far, we may safely draw the conclusion that she wants to forget the doubts she has about whether or not she actually had an affair. The character would rather be deathly ill or dead than have to think about the reality of it, because she wants so much for it to have happened. The fantasies that have helped her to deal with reality would all melt away if she were to discover that the affair was not real. These are characters who would indeed prefer “fragility, unreliability or biological closeness to nature” rather than face the reality of their situations.

B. THE ABSENT BODY

A situation common to many of the female characters in Bombal’s texts is that they flee their circumstances either physically by running away or mentally by fantasizing. In all cases, the answer to stressful situations is to remove themselves. In *La Última Niebla*, the narrator is constantly running away from something. Her timidity and fear are obvious in her actions, making words unnecessary and perhaps impossible. Some examples of this fear demonstrated silently are “Sin un grito, me pongo de pie y corro” (OC 90), “Me voy, huyo”

(OC 92), and “Salgo al jardín, huyo” (OC 61). In *House of Mist*, Helga says, “And I was running away, I was running through the woods, panic-stricken, breathless, wanting to scream, wanting to stop, but unable to overcome the senseless terror that was forcing me to this mad flight” (54). Not only is she running away, but it almost seems as if she were doing it against her will; it is the terror that drives her reaction. She then goes on to say “I managed to jump out and disappear as light as a deer” (54). Even her everyday actions are laced with fear, making reference to her “little hurried nervous steps as [she] walked towards the house” (89). Helga’s fear of the crowd and of being singled out can easily be seen in her exit from the dance floor at Mariana’s house: “I fled holding with one hand the train of my dress and pushing away with the other an excited, joyous crowd which was delaying my escape towards the staircase” (69). In *El Árbol*, when she thinks that she has had enough of life with Luis, Brígida says to herself: “me voy, me voy esta misma noche!” (OC 214). We find that she has not quite gathered the courage to leave her husband, but her intentions of fleeing are there. Words like “fleeing” and “escaping” are common, as can be seen also in Yolanda’s character in *Las Islas Nuevas*, when she is placed in a situation where she must talk to a man who loves her: “Y ella se echa a temblar, y huye, huye siempre” (OC 186) and “se desprende y escapa” (OC 190).

While the body is commonly seen as being absent or fleeing from situations, it can also be absent to itself by not acknowledging itself, by not seeing certain qualities that it has, ignoring its own sexuality and appearance. The narrator of *La Última Niebla* is not aware of her own beauty or nakedness until her bath in the lagoon. The answer to this tendency might well be explained by Rosario Castellanos’ observation that “The courage to enquire about herself, the need to become aware of the meaning of her own bodily existence . . . is harshly

repressed and punished by the social system” (*Reader* 240). In *La Última Niebla* the narrator had never really explored that part of herself before, and her curiosity about herself and her body is awakened after she sees Regina and her lover together. In other situations, the woman tries to be mentally absent, by fantasizing and dreaming. This is the one weapon they all seem to have, the ability to remove themselves, physically or mentally, in order to defy men and patriarchal expectations. In *House of Mist*, *La Última Niebla*, and *Las Islas Nuevas*, the characters defy authority by daydreaming, denying men, and following their own desires, albeit often in their minds. A final attempt by Helga in *House of Mist* and her counterpart in *La Última Niebla* to commit suicide is thwarted by their spouses, whose intervention prevents them from taking that final step.

Jane Gallop states that in the ideology of our culture women are objects described, not speaking subjects (71). This helps to explain the silence of the female character and why it is so important that her body speaks. When women are forced into silence, as was Philomena in ancient Greek myth, they find a way to express their thoughts (and complaints) through their actions. In Philomena’s case, she wove a tapestry to show her sister Progne what had befallen her in life since she was unable to talk. “Philomena and Progne redefine female speech as bodily gesture, each emphasizes the importance of the body in defining female identity” (Burns 247). Gallop has also noted that “women became the silent sex, by dint of not being heard” (71). Conversely, silence can also be seen as a mode of wielding power, which, as Stephen Hart noted, is “employed consistently by Bombal’s heroines as a means of combating patriarchy” (39). Gallop and Hart describe two different silences. The first is a silence that is not really a silence, it is speech that is ignored. An example of this is Silvia’s barrage of sad complaints in *La Historia de María Griselda*, where she laments that

her husband does not think she is as beautiful as María Griselda. Nobody pays her any attention, and her husband does not reassure her that she is indeed as beautiful as María Griselda. The result is that Silvia kills herself, because she was not heard. Nobody listens to her, and she shoots herself. The second silence is one that speaks volumes. Here we can see examples of the ability of these characters to make known their sentiments without words.

Brígida in *El Árbol* uses silence to show her husband how upset and angry she is. This accidental manipulation works to an extent, making him worry and become concerned about her for seemingly the first time in their marriage—she comes into existence through her silence. She rejects Luis when he calls her: “Pero ella había rehusado salir al teléfono, esgrimiendo rabiosamente el arma aquella que había encontrado sin pensarlo: el silencio” (OC 214). Brígida happened upon this weapon accidentally, and she eagerly overuses it, eventually enraging her husband and isolating herself from him. Helga speaks without words in *House of Mist*, with her sister-in-law Mariana’s help. She lets her hair down, contrary to her husband’s wishes. Her silent action lets him know that she is capable of defying his wishes. Teresa in *House of Mist* secretly and silently carves her lover’s name, David, on the inside of the wedding band that unites her with Daniel: “David! That was the name Teresa had inscribed inside the ring which [Daniel] was to place on her finger in front of the altar! That was the name she carried in her heart when she married him . . . the name she must have had on her lips when she killed herself” (107). Teresa silently defies Daniel by writing David’s name on the inside of her ring, and since nobody ever looked at it, her cry for help was not heard, and she killed herself.

C. THE INCARCERATED BODY

In addition to the individual body states mentioned above, there are also instances in which the body is incarcerated, or controlled by others. This includes situations of dominance on the part of the male characters and passivity in the case of the female ones, possession, encircling and limiting (oftentimes through sex), spaces of enclosure, inside versus outside, and the female body as a possession of man. Beatriz Pastor Bodmer observes of Western patriarchal dominance over the centuries that “La identidad femenina . . . sus opciones de desarrollo se definen entre dos extremos: ser objeto de posesión o ser objeto de subyugación” (204). Referring to *La Última Niebla*, Susana Münnich states that man is typically associated with “voluntad” and woman with “pasividad” (*Dulce* 48). In Bombal’s novels marriage is often portrayed as incarceration. For example, in *House of Mist*, Daniel proposes to “save” Helga from a life of sewing or a life in a convent, but she becomes a prisoner of his house in the mist, where she ends up subject to her husband’s whims and constant absences, and is left alone—and we could say trapped—in the house. Bombal’s female characters are seldom seen outside their homes. They do not often leave the house, and are very isolated from the rest of the world. They know only servants, their husbands, and their husbands’ friends. They occupy what have been seen as typically “female” spaces, specifically the kitchen. Daniel seems to want only to give Helga “a home where she won’t have to sew. And I . . . won’t be alone any more there at the hacienda” (36). She is his spouse, but is treated as chattel and kept isolated, and one could argue that she was better off before leaving to go with Daniel. Helga in many ways becomes the house. As Gilbert and Gubar observe, “Women themselves have often . . . been described or imagined as houses” (88), making them objects in the eyes of men. Conversely, men are associated with the

outside, and with free space. Helga is almost always portrayed inside the house, and when she is outside, she always appears to be lost in the mist, or afraid. Pastor echoes these sentiments in her discussion on the physical and symbolic space of men and women in the discovery and conquest of America, observing that “el espacio propio de la mujer es el privado y el público le pertenece al hombre, tal como sucedía en el Viejo Mundo” (191). And yet, the women characters often manage to escape the confines imposed on them by daydreaming and fantasizing, especially in *La Última Niebla* and *House of Mist*.

Another instance of the controlled body is the description of the narrator’s body in *La Última Niebla* during a sexual encounter with her lover. As E. Jane Burns observes in *Bodytalk*, there is a “crucial link between the sexual subjugation of women and female silence, positing them as necessary partners in the creation of male pleasure” (2). She seems to be under her lover’s spell when she says “Lo sigo, me siento en su dominio, entregada a su voluntad” and “me hace retroceder, lentamente, hacia el lecho” (OC 67). He continues to dominate her: “Entonces él se inclina sobre mí y rodamos enlazados al hueco del lecho” (OC 69). The woman loses herself and cedes all power to the man. Although pleasurable to her, she is in fact possessed by this man, saying: “Su cuerpo me cubre como una grande ola hirviente . . . me penetra, me envuelve” (OC 69). Her body is no longer her own, it is his possession; he is covering her, penetrating her, wrapping himself around her. She sees her body in reference to his and what he is doing, and we are not given a description of her own actions and body, except in how they relate to his.

Bombal’s women not only lose but also find themselves in the men in their lives. The narrator of *La Última Niebla* literally and figuratively finds herself through her husband: “me descubrí, entre los brazos de mi marido” (OC 77). Later she will find that she cannot

look at herself in the mirror because her own body does nothing more than reflect her sexual encounter with her lover: “Y no podía mirarme al espejo, porque mi cuerpo me recordaba sus caricias” (*OC* 85).

Bombal’s heroines find it hard to declare themselves beautiful, and only seem to discover their own beauty through the eyes of a man. The relationship between the narrator of *La Última Niebla* and her fantasized lover, as M. Ian Adams has pointed out, show her that she is desired as a woman, for herself and for her body (17). Rosario Castellanos’ words remind us that the construction of women through men’s eyes is a debilitating force: “Let us not forget that beauty is an ideal composed and imposed by men, which by strange coincidence corresponds to a series of qualifications that when fulfilled transform the woman who possesses them into a handicapped person; that is, without exaggerating, we might more accurately state, into a thing” (*Reader* 237). Man’s definition of a woman’s beauty objectifies her, and in effect, imprisons her as the ideal woman. This can be seen in *La Historia de María Griselda*, when Silvia refuses to rely on her own instincts about herself and requires reassurance from her husband about her appearance. She desperately exclaims: “¡María Griselda! Dicen que es la mujer más linda que se haya visto jamás. Yo quiero que Fred me diga mentira, mentira, Silvia es la más linda” (*OC* 237). Silvia ends her life because she thinks she is not as beautiful as María Griselda. This is just one example of the woman’s need for the male gaze, which results in the objectification of women by masculinist ideologies (Hoeveler and Schuster xi). Silvia both relies on her husband’s opinion for her self-worth and punishes herself because of it.

Possession of one’s body by another does not always have a negative meaning for the protagonist, as evidenced in *La Amortajada*, when Ana María is riding on a horse with

Ricardo. She says, “Pero yo solo estaba atenta a ese abrazo tuyo que me aprisionaba sin desmayo . . . no habría tenido miedo mientras me sostuviera ese abrazo” (OC 107). So, while she is being “imprisoned,” as she puts it, she feels “safe.” The same thing happens in *House of Mist* when Helga falls and Landa takes her back to the house on his horse. She says, “The arm of the stranger was holding me tightly at the waist . . . a strange well-being was gradually taking possession of me, and with it a desire to remain forever nestled on this breast, forever held in those arms which could hold without hurting . . . I understood this well-being was called happiness” (56). Helga feels protected and perhaps loved in Landa’s embrace, and it is a much more intimate description than any interaction that she has had with her husband thus far.

Nature can also be a source of intimacy in *La Última Niebla*. When the narrator is bathing in the lagoon, she has a sexual awakening, and nature penetrates her body suggestively. She says of her experience: “tibias corrientes me acarician y penetran . . . me enlazan el torso con sus largas raíces” (OC 62). The character’s reaction is both favorable and cautious, as the roots embrace her threateningly. The mist in *House of Mist* has a similar ominous projection and Helga observes this restrictive presence on her body: “I could feel its sly pressure encircling me . . . smothering me” (48). Later in the novel, the mist acquires a more positive, protective aspect for Helga, and she mentions that she went walking “enfolded, isolated, and protected by the mist now no longer my enemy but my silent accomplice” (82). She is glad for the mist because it keeps her from being seen in her daydreaming episodes, but it still seems ominous to the reader, however, because of its isolating nature.

There are instances in which the female character expresses, though inwardly, strong feelings of rejection toward the figurative and literal weight of the man's body on her own. Ana María tells us in *La Amortajada* about her loathing of her husband, whose heavy head is resting in the place that her children had sweetly inhabited during pregnancy. She is repulsed by her husband's invasion of her body space: "Ella siente con repugnancia pesar sobre su cadera esa cabeza aborrecida, pesar allí donde habían crecido y tan dulcemente pesado sus hijos" (OC 158). The horror of unwanted possession or of the transgressive act of a male toward a female is also seen in *La Última Niebla*, when Daniel goes hunting with his friends and they come back, and one of them throws a dead bird into the narrator's lap. Her disgust at this symbolic act of possession is shown as she describes his actions: "el cazador se obstina en mantener, contra mi voluntad, aquel trofeo en mi regazo" (OC 64). He has ignored her wishes and imposed his will by keeping his spoils on a very intimate part of her body.

In *Las Islas Nuevas*, Yolanda's experiences with men are just as negative as the narrator's in *La Última Niebla*. Even though she is not in a relationship where she would be at risk of exposing her wing, she is possessed by this aspect of herself, and it does not allow her to live a normal life. Everything that she does revolves around her wing's presence: the way she sleeps, behaves with men, and sees herself. She cannot remove or easily hide her wing. Thus, the wing limits and possesses her to the extent that she is in a way incarcerated by her own body. Her interactions with men, specifically Juan Manuel, are short-lived and sometimes violent. When Juan Manuel invades Yolanda's bedroom at night, they have an altercation in which he dominates her physically, and the situation is intensified by both of them becoming entangled in her long hair: "El lucha enredándose entre los largos cabellos

perfumados y ásperos. Lucha hasta que logra asirla por la nuca y tumbarla brutalmente hacia atrás” (OC 198). We can see that, in addition to her wing, she is also limited and restricted by her hair.

Ana María in *La Amortajada* is literally imprisoned within a shroud. As Stephen Hart has noted, “The shroud is a metaphor for the imprisonment of women within the prison of patriarchy” (39). The shroud here and other equally powerful metaphors of repression in Bombal’s works, such as restricted hairstyles and the woman’s presence in the house demonstrate that the female characters are kept within male-constructed boundaries. The shroud surrounding Ana María’s corpse is a perfect example of limitations that prevent women’s bodies from moving even in death. Stephen Hart likens Ana María’s situation with men to the Perseus-Andromeda myth. “Perseus saves Andromeda, then keeps her for sexual and dynastic purposes; obligated to her rescuer, she can neither rescue herself nor refuse his offer of marriage. We find a similar presentation of women in Bombal’s work” (37). This is true of Ana María, Brígida in *El Árbol*, and Helga in *House of Mist*. They are all seemingly “rescued” by male characters, and then find themselves weakened when they want to assert themselves. They feel indebted to the strong men in their lives who “saved” them. As Angel Flores says of the narrator of *La Última Niebla*, “Social values forced her into a marriage with a man she does not love in order to escape the stigma of spinsterhood in a society which made marriage women’s only goal in life (114). Linda Gould Levine says that “all these protagonists share one basic quality: they are all dependent upon men” (148).

Bombal presents her protagonists, as Marjorie Agosín mentions, as the feminine model of passivity and restriction (“Aproximaciones” 194). Whether this is due to dominance by another entity, a physical imprisonment, or a self-imposed mental restriction,

the woman is held back and controlled by something. Words and phrases like “me hace” and “sobre mí” and “me cubre” all point to the woman being dominated by another being, sexually or not. Nature can also take a similar possession of the woman’s body, when it “penetrates” and “envelops” her. Women can even limit themselves, as we see with Yolanda in *Las Islas Nuevas* with her wing and long hair, with Silvia in *La Historia de María Griselda* and her obsession with her husband’s image of her, and with Brígida, who enters willingly into a loveless marriage.

D. THE BODY POSSESSED

The body can be not only possessed physically, as has been discussed above, but can also be possessed mentally, often resulting in madness and dreamlike behavior. Talk of fantasies, dreams, spells, magic and ghosts are all indicators of a body possessed. For instance, Helga says of her imagined affair in *House of Mist* that she “suddenly reawakened from the spell that had kept me helpless in the arms of that man” (69). She seems to be almost defending her actions by saying that she was under a spell and therefore had no control. Helga is also clearly aware of her husband’s attachment to (the ghost of) his dead wife, and feels “torture as [she] felt him embracing [her] through the ghost of a dead woman” (42). The narrator of *La Última Niebla*, after having been sexually possessed by her imaginary lover, is now seemingly mentally possessed by him, because she says to him (in her mind) “desde ese día soy tuya” (OC 71). Both Helga and the narrator’s invention of their lovers is an example of madness, perhaps driven by desperation and loneliness. In *House of Mist*, Daniel says to Helga, after catching her daydreaming, that “only an imaginary being

could respond to the love of a girl as skinny and silly as you are” (83). This existence of Helga’s imaginary lover is accidentally reaffirmed by Daniel’s comment.

In *House of Mist*, when Helga is around Daniel’s sister Mariana, she describes her as having magical qualities that liken her to a witch. Mariana’s bewitching nature causes Helga to begin to forget about Daniel and her restricted life. As Mariana tenderly combs Helga’s hair and speaks to her, she seems to fall into a trance-like state where her cares and the reality of her life disappear: “she was talking in that caressing tone, [and] I could feel my memory slipping away” (62). Helga often talks to herself, re-imagining the instance in which she first met Landa in the woods. She constantly reaffirms to herself that her lover was real, and cannot help thinking of him often. She says “the voice of temptation would speak to me with the greatest persuasiveness. And I could not help listening to it and following it in all its crazy elaborations” (82). This shows how easily Helga is influenced by the thoughts and actions of others, and even how her mind is overtaken by fantasy.

The loss of mental control can also be seen as a type of possession. When Helga resigns herself to death and begins to walk into the water to drown herself, the suggestion is that she has lost control of her own body and is possessed by thoughts of suicide. She says: “I was letting myself go under the water” (102). The word “letting” denotes apathy with regard to what happens to her, and leads the reader to believe that she is being pulled by some other force. Perhaps Helga’s madness can be explained by what Jean Paul Sartre refers to as a “limit situation,” which involves placing oneself before others. Helga’s love for Daniel has reached its limit, and she no longer cares about living for him. By placing herself before him, she seems to, as Sartre says about women who confront suicide, “have reached vitally, emotionally, or reflectively what is called a ‘limit situation’—a situation that due to

its intensity, its dramaticism, or its raw metaphysical density is a point of ultimate desperation” (Castellanos *Reader* 243). Helga’s mind has made the decision that Daniel is not worth living for, and she surrenders herself to her clouded mind’s control of her body’s actions.

Helga of *House of Mist*, Brígida of *El Árbol*, the narrator of *La Última Niebla*, Ana María of *La Amortajada* and Yolanda of *Las Islas Nuevas* all at some point seem to be living in a dreamlike state or an alternate reality. They all lose the ability to think rationally at one time or another. One might argue that since their minds wander to such irrational levels, it is this that makes them less prone to object against interference from others. The narrator of *La Última Niebla* lets herself be led by her imaginary lover: “Ando, pero ahora un desconocido me guía” (OC 67). She has to put the physical effort into walking, but allows someone else, someone of her own confection, to assume the responsibility of guiding her. The narrator’s lack of control is apparent when she no longer feels capable of fleeing a situation, but she can envision dying to escape it. “No me siento capaz de huir. De morir, sí, me siento capaz” (OC 66). She is going to do what she wants in the end, despite the repression that she has suffered. Her suicidal actions could definitely be construed as madness, as being possessed by irrational thoughts and tendencies. Silvia kills herself in *La Historia de María Griselda* due to her jealousy of María Griselda’s beauty. Her madness stems from jealousy and dependence on her husband’s opinions. Once he tells her that something changed in him the first time he saw María Griselda, she comes to believe he prefers María Griselda over her and that her life might as well be over.

Whether the protagonists’ behavior is actually madness or a determination to free themselves from their husbands’ control is debatable. The fantasies that they use as a

weapon to combat boredom, lovesickness, and oppression—are they self-preservation or mental illness? Beatriz Pastor Bodmer, describing Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, comments that “Entre las paredes de su celda las posibilidades de control y expresión de la mujer se multiplicaban” (195). This reference to Sor Juana within the confines of her cloister definitely could apply to Bombal’s protagonists, who are imprisoned within their houses, especially Helga of *House of Mist* and the narrator of *La Última Niebla*. Women of the early twentieth century, repressed and restricted, find ways to express themselves and alleviate the control of man. Referring to *La Última Niebla*, M. Ian Adams says, “starting from an unhappy marriage, the protagonist moves away from the real world into herself, through a process of increasing fantasy, and then is forced to retreat from this created world to face the realities of aging and emotional barrenness” (16). Bombal’s female characters in general feel helpless over the components of their real lives, but are much more comfortable with their fantasies, whether unconsciously or consciously. The reader does not know for most of the novel whether the particular protagonist is truly mad, or if the events that she describes actually transpired. Jane Gallop explains of the unreliability of narrators’ accounts of their dreams that “Memories, dreams, and fantasies cannot be known outside the subject’s accounts of them; they are not available for objective verification” (6).

These fantasies can lead to the destruction and disillusionment of the characters’ lives. M. Ian Adams states that “The achievement of extramarital love in Bombal’s world involves the destruction of self, either physically, in the case of Regina, or mentally through escape into fantasy, as in the case of the narrator in *La Última Niebla*” (18). But the women’s actions, whether fantasies or not, come at a price. For Regina, it was the loss of her pride, her self-respect, her husband, and almost her life. For the narrator of *La Última*

Niebla, it was the realization that her lover was not real, and her ultimate disappointment and resignation to a life with a man who does not love her.

Susana Münnich asserts that “La incurada mal amada es la esencia de la mujer bombaliana” (*Casa* 51). This is true in the case of Brígida of *El Árbol*, Ana María of *La Amortajada*, Silvia of *La Historia de María Griselda*, Helga of *House of Mist*, Yolanda of *Las Islas Nuevas*, and the narrator of *La Última Niebla*. All these women are not loved in the way that they want to be loved. In the case of Bombal’s characters, the body possessed (by madness) can be seen as a result of their frustration with their relationships with the men in their lives. Men are seen as agents of choice, while women are not. The female characters are left helpless and with very few options for control over their lives (Adams 17). Helga Druxes points out that “Unless . . . a protagonist can enter into nonexploitative relationships with others who do not treat her as a passive voiceless commodity, she will not be able to translate consciousness into social engagement” (12), meaning, as happens with Bombal’s female protagonists, that she will not be able to discern between what is real and what is not. This explains the presence of constant dreams and fantasies. Bombal’s writing makes it very difficult even for the reader to tell the difference between what is real and what is not: “Bombal conceives reality as a mysterious and polyfaceted conglomerate in which there are no distinguishable limits between factual events and dreams” (Flores 113). Bombal’s negotiable concept of reality seems to seep into her female characters’ personalities and actions.

Regarding the narrator of *La Última Niebla*, M. Ian Adams says that her experience with love “did not help her to establish contact with herself” and become a strong woman, but instead allowed her to “create a false self,” and constructing a world around this self, she

isolates herself from everyone else (28). Both she, Helga of *House of Mist*, and Ana María of *La Amortajada* fall prey to the illicit appeal of the physical (sexual) world and think that they have found true love, though the narrator and Helga are carrying on a relationship with an imaginary being. This applies to what Elizabeth Grosz observes in *Volatile Bodies*: “The body is a betrayal of and a prison for the soul, reason, or mind . . . and has been regarded as a source of interference in, and a danger to, the operations of reason” (5). Helga and the narrator of *La Última Niebla* lose their sense of reason because their physical side dominates and forces their minds to believe that the events they imagined actually transpired. As Marjorie Agosín states of the protagonists of *La Última Niebla* and *La Amortajada*, they are “Motivadas por placeres, deseos sensuales, se encierran cada vez más dentro de sí mismas ya que los alrededores que las circundan poseen otros valores diferentes” (“Aproximaciones” 190). This statement can be applied to Helga of *House of Mist* as well. In *La Última Niebla*, the woman dares to dream, and to be, although she is alone in her own obsessive fantasy (“Aproximaciones” 197). The narrator of *La Última Niebla* makes an effort to overtake illusion with reality and suppress her wild imagination, as shown by her statement “Empecé entonces a forzarme a vivir muy despacio, concentrando mi imaginación y mi espíritu en los menesteres de cada segundo” (OC 84). Eventually, both she and Helga admit to themselves that their lovers are not real, and succumb to very different destinies. The narrator resigns herself to a life of duty as a wife, and Helga becomes close with her husband, eventually forming a loving relationship. Lucía Guerra-Cunningham states that “un aspecto clave en la narrativa de María Luisa Bombal es la visión de la mujer como un ser que aprehende la realidad a partir de un modo intuitivo, inconsciente e irracional que corresponde a la esencia misma de lo femenino concebido, a su vez, como parte integrante de un cosmos misterioso y

trascendental” (184). The woman in Bombal’s texts sees reality through different eyes than man, and her reality and dream worlds sometimes collide to form a confusing other-world.

In her discussion on feminism and the body, Elizabeth Grosz points out that “Misogynist thought has commonly found a convenient self-justification for women’s secondary social positions by containing them within bodies that are represented, even constructed, as frail, imperfect, unruly, and unreliable, subject to various intrusions which are not under conscious control” (13). This can easily be seen in the female characters in Bombal’s works. They not only show many signs of physical weakness, but mental weakness as well. Helga and the narrator of *La Última Niebla* both have wild imaginations and Brígida of *El Árbol* is swayed by the opinions of her father and her husband. In *La Amortajada*, Ana María’s life revolves around men. Yolanda of *Las Islas Nuevas* suffers from a physical malformation that makes her weak and prone to fainting spells. All these characters are definitely examples of why misogynist thought has been able to keep women in inferior positions, and why it might have driven women to madness in many cases. They are left with few other options, being possessed by their thoughts of men but often unable to act on them, which causes them to often border on madness. These women are frail, their awareness of their reality is often unreliable, and they are definitely prone to follow the opinions and thoughts of others.

E. REFLECTIONS OF THE BODY

Rosario Castellanos explains that “Cuando una mujer latinoamericana toma entre sus manos la literatura lo hace con el mismo gesto y con la misma intención con la que toma un espejo: para contemplar su imagen. Aparece primero el rostro . . . luego, el cuerpo” (*Latín*

144). This idea of literature as a reflection of the image of a woman can be taken literally, as we have seen with the above description of hair, hands, and various body states, which betray the protagonists' thoughts, feelings, and behavior. The women in Bombal's works seem unaware of their bodies until they are somehow affected by men—either judged, touched, or inhabited by them. It seems that the importance of the woman's self is based on the interaction with the male characters. Once she is validated by a man, however, she can become somewhat obsessed with her image. Elizabeth Grosz states that "The body image is a map or representation of the degree of narcissistic investment of the subject in its own body and body parts" (83). In *La Última Niebla*, the narrator's initial ignorance of her body's appearance is supported by Rosario Castellanos's statement of the Latin American woman of the 1930s that "when a married woman bathes, she keeps her body covered" (*Reader* 240). The narrator of *La Última Niebla* only becomes aware of her nakedness and beauty in the lagoon after seeing Regina and her lover interact physically. At that point, admiringly she says "no me sabía tan blanca y tan hermosa" (*OC* 62), and then she is penetrated and enveloped by the plants in the water. Linda Gould Levine believes that "This passage is divided into two paragraphs for the obvious motive of establishing the evolution of the protagonist's reactions. In the first paragraph she exults in herself as a woman and she esteems her body . . . this is negated when she allows herself to become the subject of the water and the plants. Thus, she initiates a creative pattern, which will culminate in her willing transformation into the object of the male" (150). Other women can also serve as an impetus for the female character's exploration of her body. Levine also states that it is "through other women that Bombal's characters realize the lack and deprivations of their own lives and receive the stimulus necessary to change their realities" (149). Not only does

the narrator of *La Última Niebla* become more aware of her body after seeing Regina and her lover together, but she also questions the fulfillment of her own relationship with Daniel, and eventually dares to fantasize about another man.

Susana Münnich says that after discovering her beauty, the resulting narcissism (*Casa* 56) makes various appearances in *La Última Niebla*, but only after the narrator has been seen or validated by a man's gaze. She eventually loses her interest in her looks—"Me miro al espejo y me veo . . . pero ¡qué importa! . . . que mi cuerpo se marchite, si conoció el amor!" (*OC* 70)—because she has once been admired for her beauty, and that is enough for her. After being validated by her lover's adoring gaze and having been seen as beautiful, she no longer cares about her appearance. In *House of Mist*, Helga has a similar experience after she has been remade by Mariana. Mariana teasingly advises her to "keep that entranced look . . . [for] the mirror when I have you dressed" (60). She feels exulted when Daniel sees her: "as he entered the room and caught sight of me, he stopped abruptly and stood there, as if petrified. I realized at that moment that the amazing transformation in my appearance . . . had now struck him, and thrown him into a stupor" (64). The idea of being validated by a man's gaze is prevalent in Bombal's narratives. Speaking especially of the narrator of *La Última Niebla*, Linda Gould Levine states that "She is clearly a victim of her cultural milieu, where her own identity, both emotional and physical, is derived from the way she is perceived by men" (151). Levine goes on to say of the narrator that she "realizes that it is not enough to possess beauty; this beauty must be appreciated and desired by others" (148). In *La Última Niebla*, Daniel vacillates between admiring and ridiculing his wife. The "desired gaze, the gaze of mutual confirmation, is contrasted throughout the novel with the phallic gaze of power which the protagonist repeatedly encounters" (Tolliver 106). The narrator of

La Última Niebla, Helga of *House of Mist*, Ana María of *La Amortajada*, Brígida of *El Árbol*, Silvia of *La Historia de María Griselda* and Yolanda of *Las Islas Nuevas* all judge themselves through men's eyes. The harsh opinions of the men in their lives cause these women enough pain to attempt suicide, withdraw from society, or leave their husbands.

Actual reflection in the mirror occurs several more times in Bombal's narratives, in addition to the ones we observed in the above paragraph. Helen Paloge says in her book *Silent Echo* that the mirror "reflects someone who is not-us, a reflection of our performing selves" (100). This is true of Bombal's characters. They are all trying to be someone that they think would please the man in their lives, and this is encouraged by the men. Hair is often linked to the characters' reflections in the mirror. Antonio says to Ana María in *La Amortajada*, "Es un espejo, un espejo grande para que desde el balcón te peines las trenzas" (OC 145). The narrator of *La Última Niebla* laments having to wear her hair up because it has lost its beautiful color as a result: "me miro al espejo atentamente . . . mis cabellos han perdido ese rojo" (OC 60). She also notes from her reflection that she is aging, and aging represents the constant anxiety that the opportunity for love is receding beyond reach (Flores 114). Upon arriving to Daniel's house for the first time, Helga of *House of Mist* encounters her own reflection in the mirror and describes it as if she were seeing someone other than herself. "[In] the reflection of the lamp [was] a young girl with large dark eyes and rumpled hair" (41). Castellanos stresses the importance of maintaining the self while observing one's reflection in the mirror; "The feat of becoming what one is . . . demands . . . the rejection of those false images the false mirror offers the woman in the enclosed gallery where her life takes place" (Reader 244). It is interesting that she should see herself and not recognize her own image. Perhaps she is still waiting for Daniel to define what she should look like by

telling her to pull her hair back. Maybe she had never felt the need to rely on a mirror to know herself before marrying Daniel. Silvia, in *La Historia de María Griselda*, is driven mad by the beauty of María Griselda and is obsessed with her own reflection in the mirror; “tan abstraída se encontraba en la contemplación de su propia imagen . . . mirándose al espejo” (OC 47). At the end of *Las Islas Nuevas*, Juan Manuel witnesses Yolanda observing her body curiously in the mirror: “Yolanda está desnuda y de pie en el baño, absorta en la contemplación de su hombro derecho” (OC 200). Juan Manuel and the reader are shocked with the description that follows: “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 muñon de ala. Un pequeño miembro atrofiado que ahora ella palpa cuidadosamente, como con recelo” (OC 200). The image of Yolanda’s wing is indeed shocking and she is obsessed with its reflection. Juan Manuel is unable or unwilling to come to terms with what he has seen and deems it “una alucinación” (OC 201). This means that the woman must look beyond how man sees her, and realize that there is more to her than this particular image. The reader can perceive Yolanda’s fear and nervousness of having her wing discovered by a man because she is afraid of his reaction, which would likely be one of disbelief and rejection, as we saw in Juan Manuel’s reaction. The flaw of Bombal’s characters is that they do not view themselves in a context beyond what the men in their lives think of them.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

As we have seen in this study, the female body in María Luisa Bombal's texts speaks for the silent, marginalized woman. The patriarchal society of the 1930s in Latin America made it difficult—if not impossible—for a woman to totally and frankly express herself verbally, and if she did, oftentimes she was disregarded or not heard. María Luisa Bombal subverts the limitations that her female protagonists—as true reflections of the women of her time—would have experienced, by allowing their bodies to speak for them. By examining the movements, actions and arrangement of the body and its parts in Bombal's texts, the reader is given the opportunity to understand what the character is thinking and feeling. The female characters in Bombal's works are often silent as a result of the social norms of a patriarchal society in which the woman's voice is suppressed or ignored. But as my analysis shows, they express themselves in other ways.

I selected two parts of the body which were most commonly referred to in Bombal's texts: hair and hands. While some might find eyes or lips to be the important or expressive features of a woman's body, Bombal chooses instead to make multiple references to hair and hands. Hair in her texts often reflects a woman's mental state, her personality, feelings, and the extent of her freedom. For example, free-flowing long hair can represent an aura of wildness that a woman has about her, but can also show her childlike nature. Likewise, tightly restricted hair can represent the oppressed and controlled woman. The braids of a woman have power, as we saw with Daniel's obsession with them and Regina's helplessness

at the loss of her own. In addition to style, color can also betray a character's personality traits, as can be seen with the wild nature of red-headed Regina.

The second body part that is frequently featured in Bombal's texts is the hands, which are intimate connectors that can be used to lead the weak character, portray fragility, but also can be used as a mode of comfort and protection for the woman. In Bombal's narratives the characters do not often use their hands of their own will—they are pulled or led. The appearance of the hands can thus show the fragile state of the woman, depending on their placement and condition.

The body as a whole plays a role in describing the women characters of Bombal's texts. The body states that I go on to examine describe a range of situations: the body at rest, the absent body, the incarcerated body, the possessed body, and reflections of the body. Put together, these situations represent an important aspect of description in Bombal's texts and allow us to evaluate the female characters in their emotional and physical states. The body at rest reveals many different non-verbal clues to the reader. Lying down can imply involvement in a sexual situation, suffering, immobility, and even death. In *La Última Niebla*, the recumbent position of the body implies the character's docility and the fact that she is overwhelmed with anticipation. The body lying quiet and still can also imply that the character is suffering, as seen in *El Árbol* and *La Última Niebla* when the protagonists are lying next to their unloving husbands. A reclining position can also show the weakness that results from a physical flaw, as seen in *Las Islas Nuevas*. Lying prone can be the result of a fainting spell, or a character's illness, as seen in *Las Islas Nuevas* and *La Última Niebla*. Finally, a character lying down and still can represent the awareness of and reflections upon death, as we see with Ana María in *La Amortajada*.

The absent body incorporates a variety of images that reflect both a physical and a mental absence. Bombal's protagonists are apt to escape undesirable or threatening situations by physically running away. But if they cannot flee their circumstances in that way, they escape mentally by fantasizing, as we see in the daydreams in *La Última Niebla* and *House of Mist*. The body can also be absent to itself, by ignoring its physical aspects until made aware of them by an outside force, as in the narrator's sexual awakening in *La Última Niebla*. Another mode of achieving an absent state of the body is to escape through suicide, as in *La Historia de María Griselda*, *House of Mist*, and *La Última Niebla*. Also, the body can be absent to those around it simply by being silent, as shown by Brígida in *El Árbol*. These tactics allow the female characters to wield power over the male characters, escape their control or express their own.

The female incarcerated body is another manifestation of the controlled body. It can be controlled through dominance on the part of the male characters, encircling and covering during sex, domestic imprisonment, and the women's or men's idea of herself as man's possession. Marriage can be seen as a type of incarceration, as evidenced by Daniel's and the narrator's relationship in *La Última Niebla*. Most of these women characters (Helga, Brígida, the narrator of *House of Mist*) never seem to leave their homes while the men move about freely. One might say that they become prisoners in their own homes. Possession can also happen by way of sexual manipulation. Sexual situations in Bombal's texts often include descriptive words such as covering, encircling, and penetrating. These words point to male dominance. Woman can also be incarcerated by thinking of herself or being thought of as a possession of man. The male characters define the female characters' beauty, and labeled in this way the women become a possession of men—a thing to have. Woman

becomes trapped within man's definition of beauty. Possession of woman by man, however, can also provide protection, which carries a positive connotation, as we can see in *La Amortajada* and *House of Mist*, when the protagonists are encircled by the strong arms of the men they love. Nature can also invade the woman's body and incarcerate it through possession, as shown by the presence of the water, plants, and mist in *La Última Niebla*. The woman can also be the agent of limitation, contained by her own physical condition and attributes, as we see in *Las Islas Nuevas*. In *La Amortajada*, we witness the confinement of the body in death by the shroud, showing that the body can be incarcerated beyond death. The wrapping of the shroud can be construed as a metaphor for society's imprisonment of women within male-constructed boundaries.

The body is possessed primarily in Bombal's works by madness and irrational thoughts. The female character becomes mentally obsessed with her own daydreams and fantasies. She has a wild imagination that carries her away from the boredom, isolation, and neglect that she suffers in reality. This tendency to dream is what keeps the female characters settled in their less-than-desirable lives. These women suffer feelings of helplessness over their own lives, and because of their constant daydreaming, they become confused about what is real. In *La Última Niebla*, once the narrator realizes that her fantasy was just that—a dream, she tries to kill herself, because her hope and love have been taken away. Men alienate the women by their absence and their unwillingness to listen, and cause them to recede into their own isolated worlds. The misogynist thought of Bombal's narrative societies drives the protagonists to madness and delusion—they become possessed by their runaway minds.

As Bombal's female characters see themselves reflected (in others, in mirrors), they form opinions of themselves and act in a certain way, as we saw in the narrator's sexual awakening in *La Última Niebla* after she witnesses Regina and her lover in an embrace. She goes on to discover that she, too, has a beautiful body and might well be desired by a man. Society at the time did not encourage a display of the female body, as it was always to be kept covered and ignored by the woman herself. Validation by a man's gaze is often a catalyst for the woman's interest in herself. She sees herself through his eyes and suddenly becomes interested in her appearance. The mirror also serves as a literal and sometimes confusing reflection of the female character. The ignorance of the woman's real appearance is shown in *House of Mist* when Helga catches her reflection in a mirror and does not recognize the girl who gazes back at her. As the story progresses, Helga becomes more aware of her body and appearance because of the men in her life. This turns out to be an unreliable view, however, because Helga and other women characters end up seeing themselves not as they are but as the men see them, whether ugly or beautiful. The mirror often only shows the female characters what the male characters have taught them to see.

We have seen in all of María Luisa Bombal's female characters the courage to challenge everyday life and overcome the obstacles set by their husbands between them and their happiness. Helga and the narrator of *La Última Niebla* have imaginary affairs and both attempt suicide, Sylvia kills herself, Regina tries to kill herself, Yolanda rejects her many suitors, Ana María has an affair before marriage and dares to leave her husband, as does Brígida. Bombal herself says "Siempre dependemos del hombre . . . vivimos la vida que nos impone el hombre . . . La vida de casi todas las mujeres parece haber sido hecha sólo para vivir un gran amor, un solo amor, con toda su belleza y su dolor" (*Corazón* 47,42). Her

female protagonists do ache for a deep love in their lives, but when they do not find it, they react in the only ways they can: by dreaming, leaving, or resigning themselves to reality.

As we have seen in examining these characters, they do reflect Bombal's statement and the strictures of the society in which she lived. While Stephen Hart believes that "Bombal thinks that man is the axis of a woman's life; woman only achieves being through a man" (38), we have seen that Bombal's female characters do manage to express physically what they could not verbally, and behave in a way that expresses their thoughts and feelings, thus overcoming the limitations proposed by Hart. The focus on the body has allowed us to access these feelings and emotions, and I hope it will be helpful to other critics who choose to delve further into the study of the characters of María Luisa Bombal.

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