

**UNHAPPY EVER AFTER:
“TAN TRISTE COMO ELLA”
AND THE DISCONSOLATE
HEROINE(S) OF MARÍA
LUISA BOMBAL**

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The hawthorn hedge puts forth its buds,
And my heart puts forth its pain

Rupert Brooke (1887-1915), *All Suddenly the Spring Comes Soft*

Introduction

Comparisons have been already made between specific works by Juan Carlos Onetti and María Luisa Bombal (Perier-Jones 1971; Murray 1983), and two particular aspects of their writing have been the focus of a number of critical studies, namely alienation, and the psychoanalytical dimension. (Adams 1975; Vidal 1976; Millington 1985, 1991, 1993). Nevertheless, certain areas of coincidence remain to be explored. My reasons

for pursuing this particular comparison derive from human as well as academic interest. Could Onetti and Bombal have met? And if they did, would they have found themselves diametrically opposed, both in terms of personality, literary preoccupation and subject matter? No such encounter has been suggested in any of the biographical works I have consulted, and this absence of contact has recently been confirmed by Gilio and Domínguez (1993):

Lamentablemente, desconozco si Onetti y Bombal se conocieron en Buenos Aires. Durante la investigación y las entrevistas realizadas para el libro, ni María Esther Gilio ni yo hallamos referencias a María Luisa Bombal. Tampoco me consta que hayan conocido sus respectivos libros, aunque efectivamente, algunos amigos fueron comunes y podrían haber intercambiado información sobre uno y otro. (Domínguez 1997)

Yet Onetti and Bombal certainly coincided in space and time. There is barely a year between the dates of their birth, Onetti in 1909, Bombal in 1910. Both spent lengthy periods in Buenos Aires. Onetti was there at various times between 1930 and 1934 and 1940-1954; Bombal lived and worked in Buenos Aires from 1933-1941. Furthermore, they wrote at the same time, within the same literary genres, and, presumably, for the same readership. Bombal was in close contact with Neruda and the *Sur* group (See King 1986: 83-84). Among her friends and mentors were Victoria Ocampo, Alfonsina Storni and Jorge Luis Borges, who wrote the preface for the English translation of her short stories, *New Islands and Other Stories*, published in 1982, although he had earlier criticised in *Sur* the narrative perspective adopted by Bombal in *La amortajada* (Borges 1938: 80-81). A number of her short stories appeared in the same magazine: “Las islas nuevas” and “El árbol” in 1939; “Washington, ciudad de las ardillas” in 1943.

Onetti published regularly in Buenos Aires from 1933 onwards, in *Crítica* and *La Nación*, while “El álbum” appeared in *Sur* in 1953, *Los adioses* in 1954. Among his circle of friends were Norah Lange and Oliverio Girondo, to whom Bombal dedicated *La última niebla*. Onetti did have some contact with Borges, but as Omar Prego explains, their first encounter was not, by any means, a meeting of true minds (Prego 1986: 56-57).

Bombal’s first published work, *La última niebla*, first appeared in Buenos Aires in 1935. Its English translation, made by Richard and Lucia Cunningham, *The Final Mist*, was published in New York in 1982. However, Bombal herself produced a retextualisation of *La última niebla* in 1947, under the title of *House of Mist*. The reworked version of her novel shows the influence of years she spent writing film scripts for Sonofilm in Argentina (1937-40), producing film reviews, and doing Spanish dubbing for American films, even supplying the voice for Judy Garland’s character in *The Clock*. The atmosphere of *House of Mist* is strongly reminiscent of such 1940s ‘Gothic’ classics as Hitchcock’s *Rebecca*, and *House of Mist* is to all intents and purposes a different work from *The Final Mist*. Onetti, too, was interested in film, and published film criticism. Bombal sold the film rights of *House of*

Mist to Hal Wallis for 125,000\$, though it was never filmed. *El astillero* should have been filmed in Mexico in 1972, but the project was never completed.

Finally, the works of both have been translated into other languages, are now the subject of extensive literary criticism, and have indubitably become part of the Latin American, if not international, canon. There is a clear sense that even they never actually overlapped, these two writers do seem to have enjoyed parallel careers, if not lives. Of course, this kind of deliberation is extremely speculative, and should not supplant, or even inform, an empirically grounded discussion of their respective works. In their literary production at least, both authors had in common a particularly jaundiced view of human relationships, especially relationships between men and women. Onetti was married four times. Bombal had a series of failed relationships, and achieved notoriety because she shot her former lover, Eulogio Sánchez, in 1941. Onetti is commonly held to approach the issue from ‘the man’s point of view’ if not that of an inveterate misogynist. For Judy Maloof, Onetti’s texts may be read as ‘examples of misogyny and as an exposé of the sado-masochistic mindset’ (Maloof 1995: 172), while Bombal is now held to offer a fine example of *écriture féminine*. And yet they seemingly meet on some middle ground, expressing an equally negative, pessimistic view of the possibility of any genuine communication or reciprocity between a man and a woman. Maloof suggests that ‘male subjectivity in Onetti is usually based upon the silencing of women, frequently through death’ (p.175). Bombal’s protagonists pass much of their time trapped in silence, turned in upon themselves; Ana María, enclosed in her shroud, has become the ultimate silenced woman. But Onetti’s writing is every bit as concerned with the emotions, and is equally difficult to pin down. Bombal’s prose is frequently described as ‘vaporous’, while Onetti is ‘dense and difficult’ (Millington 1991: 207). Moreover, there is no sense whatsoever that the narrator of “Tan triste como ella” derives any vicarious pleasure from his female protagonist’s anguish. Both Bombal and Onetti return time and time to the same topos, the breakdown of a marriage or a relationship, as we shall see below.

Points of convergence

One obvious point of convergence is constituted by the Faulknerian intertext that seems to condition both Onetti and Bombal’s writing. John King informs us that *Sur* published Faulkner in August 1939, and suggests:

It is likely that many Latin American writers and future writers read Faulkner for the first time in Spanish in *Sur*, or in the translation of *The Wild Palms* published by Sudamericana the following year. Borges himself translated *The Wild Palms* (though in his autobiographical essay, he claims, characteristically, that his mother did all the work. (King 1986: 77)

It has become a commonplace of Onetti criticism to label him as ‘the Faulkner of South America’. He himself did not hesitate to acknowledge his

debt in *Réquiem por Faulkner* (1975), and several Latin American critics have explored this question, though usually from the perspective of the ‘influenced’. More recently, Anglo-American scholars have begun to investigate the projection of Faulkner into Latin America, among them Helen Oakley, who uses the concept of labyrinths to explore the intertextual relationship between *As I Lay Dying* and *La amortajada* (Oakley 2002: 75-115) and the intertextuality of “A Rose for Emily” and “La novia robada” (Oakley 2002: 117-154).

In this respect, the authors’ use of recurring characters may be significant. In the case of Onetti, this trait of his narrative has been well documented, with reference to the ‘Saga de Santa María’. As Domínguez points out:

La creación de un territorio imaginario como “Santa María” es la relación primera con el condado de “Yoknapatawpha”. Ambas sagas retoman personajes propios a lo largo de cuentos y novelas. cruzan destinos y funden sus vivencias en ese espacio ilusorio con un tono realista que sin embargo, asume y declara su carácter de ficción. (Domínguez 1997)

“Tan triste como ella”, for instance, contains several references to Jeremías Petrus, whom we also find in *El astillero* (1961) and “El perro tendrá su día” (1976). In “Tan Triste” he is mentioned in connection with the beaches, the *balneario* and Villa Petrus. These allusions to Petrus are not gratuitous, but function as an intertextual pointer, designed to sound echoes in the mind of the reader and suggest a particular kind of society, or rather, social relationships.

Bombal also follows these procedures to some extent. For example, certain of the characters of *La amortajada* reappear and are developed in *La historia de María Griselda* (1946). Bombal’s own translation, *The Shrouded Woman*, published in 1948, integrates *La amortajada* and *La historia de María Griselda*. Bombal, arguably, always has the same female protagonist. As I have suggested elsewhere, ‘it is almost as if each successive piece of writing offers a new facet of the same woman’ (Odber de Baubeta 1994: 76-78). At the same time, we find the recurring figure of the indifferent, undemonstrative or unfaithful husband or lover: Daniel in *La última niebla*, Ricardo and Antonio in *The Shrouded Woman*, Luis in the much anthologised short story “El árbol”. All of her male characters are comparable to the husband of “Tan Triste”, cold, distant, unable to bridge the psychological and emotional abyss that has opened up between themselves and their wives. What all of the fictional husbands have in common is that they belittle the female protagonists, treat them with indifference or contempt almost as if they were children, keeping them, as Murray suggests, ‘in a state of dependent infantilism imposed upon them by the seemingly male-dominated social order’ (Murray 1983:74). Thus when Brígida asks Luis: ‘¿Por qué te has casado conmigo?’, he responds: ‘Porque tienes ojos de venadito asustado’ (“El árbol”, p.112). And again, in answer to the question, ‘¿Por qué se había casado con ella?’ (p.115), the reasons she herself puts forward are not ‘romantic’, none

of them has anything to do with her as a woman: ‘Para continuar una costumbre, tal vez para estrechar la vieja relación de amistad con su padre’ (p.115).

The same question is posed by Daniel in *La última niebla*, as a clear attempt to hurt and humiliate his wife:

¿Para qué nos casamos?
– Por casarnos – respondo.
Daniel deja escapar una pequeña risa.
¿Sabes que has tenido una gran suerte al casarte conmigo?
– Sí. Lo sé – replico, cayéndome de sueño.
¿Te hubiera gustado ser una solterona arrugada, que teje para los pobres de la hacienda?
Me encojo de hombros.
– Ése es el porvenir que aguarda a tus hermanas... (p.40)

This aggression is diminished, if not lost, in *House of Mist*, in what I perceive as a clear attempt to make the ‘hero’ more attractive, possibly written with some Hollywood actor in mind:

“Excuse me, Señora,” Daniel interposed, “it is true that I do not love Helga, but I will give her a home where she won’t have to sew. And I ...I won’t be alone there at the hacienda, in all that mist...Helga,” he repeated, taking me forcefully in his arms, “Helga, will you marry me?”
As my only answer, I let my head drop on his heart, as I had so often done in my dreams. (p.53)

The scene is focused quite differently from the original text. Daniel is more heroic, coming to the rescue of the now named protagonist. In formal terms, although both ‘versions’ are first person narratives, the Spanish is written in the present tense, while the English is in the past.

By coincidence, the same question is posed in “Tan triste como ella”, this time a third-person narrative with an omniscient narrator:

Estaba de espaldas cuando dijo:
– ¿Por qué te casaste conmigo? (p.140)

The man tries to evade the question, observing that he did not marry her for money, but the woman insists on a response. When it comes, he effectively confirms the impossibility, the death of their relationship:

Te quería, estaba enamorado. Era el amor.
–Y se fue – afirmó ella desde la cama, casi gritando. Pero, inevitablemente, también preguntaba. (p.141)

A preliminary reading of Onetti’s short story and Bombal’s prose fiction reveals a commonality of preoccupation, how love and marriages wither and die. A closer examination will determine whether the parallels are manifested more explicitly, in themes, symbols, or in particular uses of language or cultural reference.

Nature, trees and gardens

Yvette Perier-Jones has pointed out that “El árbol” ‘is strikingly similar in plot and technique to Onetti’s short novel *Tan triste como ella*’ (Perier-Jones 1971:16-17). In fact, trees and forests are crucial elements in Bombal’s landscape, both physical and psychological, contributing to much of the pathetic fallacy of her narratives. Brígida draws strength and comfort from the enormous rubber tree that protects her dressing room, her private sanctuary. The protagonist of *La última niebla* makes love with Ricardo in the forest, Ana María, the shrouded woman, takes refuge in the forest, where she almost commits suicide, but turns the gun on a tree at the last minute. María Griselda’s few happy moments occur when she is walking - taking refuge - in the forest, accompanied by the wild creatures whom she loves, and who love her. The young widow of “Trenzas” dies in the forest where she lives because she has cut off her hair, renouncing love and thus life.

In Onetti’s short story, the destruction of the garden in “Tan triste” prefigures the woman’s death. Just as the cutting down of the *gomer* signals the death of a marriage in “El árbol”, the devastation of the garden provokes the death of Onetti’s character, principally because of what the garden signifies for her, the security and warmth of her childhood:

protegida y engañada por los arbustos caprichosos y mal criados, por el misterio -a la luz y sombra - de los viejos árboles torcidos e intactos, por el pasto inocente, alto, grosero (...) Muy niña descubrió la broma cariñosa de los arbustos, el pasto, cualquier árbol anónimo y torcido; descubrió con risas que amenazaban invadir la casa, para retroceder a los pocos meses, encogidos, satisfechos. (pp.124-125)

The untamed, undisciplined garden, ‘salvaje y enmarañado’ (p.121), with its trees and shrubs ‘los arbustos mal crecidos y salvajes’ (p.124), ‘su jardín salvaje’ (p.143), functions on several levels within the narrative. In one respect, it could recall the *locus amoenus* of medieval literature, described with manifest religious significance in some texts, and used subversively, for subversive, sinful ends in others (*La Celestina*). In fairy tale narrative, the garden may be equated with the wood: it is the threshold of another realm, one which is sacred, magic or supernatural. In the context of “Tan triste como ella”, the garden is above all a symbol, perhaps even a living part, of the woman herself. If the husband cannot dominate her, then at least he can bring some semblance of order to the garden, bring it under control, destroy its ‘magical’ power.

Once the garden has been destroyed, so too are any lingering hopes she might have had for a happy relationship. According to Maloof’s analysis, woman ‘symbolizes innocence and purity that will be lost when she gains sexual experience with men and comes into contact with a corrupt world’ (Maloof 1995: 2). This character has transgressed on three counts: she has had sexual relations with another man, given birth to his child, and given birth to a male child who cannot therefore be discounted.

To begin with, she does not understand the depth and strength of his emotions, though she does have an intuition, ‘la confirmación de la desgracia’ (p.124). Even so, she suppresses her fears:

no creyó que nadie pudiera talar los viejos árboles inútiles y enfermos, matar el pasto nunca cuidado, las flores sin nombre conocido, pálidas, fugaces, cabizbajas. (p.125)

Until now, she has believed in the possibility of some kind of reconciliation or at least an understanding: ‘no creyó posible la venganza, la destrucción del jardín y de su propia vida’ (p.126). Only when she sees what the man has done to the garden does she realise how much he wishes to punish her for her perceived transgression, and how far he will go in his quest for vengeance, consumed by his jealousy:

Ella descubrió sin asombro, sin tristeza, que desde la infancia no había tenido otra felicidad verdadera, sólida, aparte de los verdes arrebatados al jardín. Nada más que eso, esas cosas cambiantes, esos colores. Y estuvo pensando, hasta el primer llanto del niño, que él lo había intuido, que quiso privarla de lo único que le importaba en realidad. Destruir el jardín, continuar mirándola manso con los ojos claros y ojerosos, jugar su sonrisa, indirecta, ambigua. (p.131)

Once work has been undertaken, the ‘jardín salvaje’ is transformed into ‘el jardín asesinado’ (p.137). The husband has the garden cemented over, a metaphor for crushing all hope and life out of the female protagonist who indeed succumbs, and commits suicide.

Bombal’s “El árbol”, has a different, unusually optimistic dénouement. Although the death of the tree outside her dressing-room window constitutes a kind of violation: ‘Le habían quitado su intimidad, su secreto (p.127) - it comes to signify rebirth for Brígida. Shock, anger, outrage, impel her to assert herself and decide about how she wishes to live her life. In the end, she resolves to adopt a different kind of existence, without Luis:

Eran mentiras su resignación y su serenidad; quería amor, sí, amor, y viajes y locuras, y amor, amor... (pp.127-128)

The gun

For most critics, the gun in Onetti’s “Tan triste como ella”, as elsewhere in his writing, represents the archetypal phallic symbol. Yet another point of contact between Onetti’s story and Bombal’s narrative is that of death by gunshot. For her protagonists, life ends when their lovers leave them or their husbands cease to love them. This is the case in *La última niebla*, when the protagonist’s sister-in-law Regina shoots herself:

Regina supo del dolor cuya quemadura no se puede soportar; del dolor dentro del cual no se aguarda el momento infalible del olvido, porque, de pronto, no es posible mirarlo frente a frente, un día más. (p.92)

Then we have the near suicide attempt of the narrator-protagonist of *La amortajada*, when she has been abandoned by her lover; an act that

takes place in what might otherwise be an enchanted forest, but here is distinctly nightmarish:

Recuerdo el enorme revólver que hurté y que guardé oculto en mi armario, con la boca del caño hundida en un diminuto zapato de raso. Una tarde de invierno gané el bosque. La hojarasca se apretaba al suelo, podrida. El follaje colgaba mojado y muerto, como de trapo.

Muy lejos de las casas me detuve, al fin; saqué el arma de la manga de mi abrigo, la palpé, recelosa, como a una pequeña bestia aturdida que puede retorcerse y morder.

Con infinitas precauciones me la apoyé contra la sien, contra el corazón.

Luego, bruscamente, disparé contra un árbol. (p.30)

In *La historia de María Griselda*, the sequel to *La amortajada*, Ana María's daughter-in-law, Silvia, is driven by jealousy of her sister-in-law Griselda to shoot herself:

Apoderándose rápidamente del revólver que Alberto tirara descuidadamente momentos antes sobre la mesa, se había abocado el caño contra la sien y sin cerrar tan siquiera los ojos, valientemente, como lo hacen los hombres, había apretado la gatilla. (p.64)

In an incident that recalls an episode from Bombal's own life, one of the sisters in the English version of the short story "Trenzas" shoots her adulterous husband:

By contrast, the younger sister had become a widow voluntarily - having shot her adulterous husband out of wounded pride. (p.71)

One could argue that the outcome is preordained from early in "Tan Triste", perhaps at the moment when the man nails a tin can to an Araucaria tree and uses it to test a handgun, supposedly for her safety, or perhaps even before the action of the narrated story begins:

Hasta que, en mitad del verano, llegó la tarde prevista mucho tiempo antes, cuando tenía su jardín salvaje y no habían llegado poceros a deshacerlo. (p.143)

Having followed the story through to its conclusion, the reader wonders whether the husband deliberately set out to drive his wife to suicide. Precisely what drives her to shoot herself when she does, is not clear. One reason might be the news that her former lover, Mendel, father of her son, has been arrested for some kind of fraud, or it may be due to the softening of the hedge of thorns, on which she can no longer punish herself.

We should ask whether the gun carries the same meanings in Bombal's narrative as in Onetti's. On one level, the answer is almost certainly yes, since all of the women characters are without exception the victims of an oppressive, patriarchal society. In a sad irony, Bombal's women take a traditionally 'male' weapon, but turn it against themselves. In Onetti, there is an added dimension. She takes the phallic gun into her mouth in the grotesque simulation of a sexual act, having first warmed it on her child's hot water bottle, and when the revolver finally fires:

creyó que volvía a tener derramado en su garganta el sabor del hombre, tan parecido al pasto fresco, a la felicidad y al verano. (p.144)

By making this choice, she might seem to empower herself, albeit in a negative way but since she is fully aware of 'la farsa que estaba cumpliendo' (p.144), it is more likely that she has been manipulated into this action. Without the comfort of her garden, and with no hope of a tolerably happy marriage, through suicide she may at least achieve freedom from torment, tranquility.

Fairy tale motifs in Bombal

The final area of convergence to be explored is these writers' manipulation of fairy tale motifs. Scholars have recently begun to pay more attention to the use or distortion of fairy tale motifs in Latin American prose fiction (Hart 1993; Odber de Baubeta 1994: 19-39), and María Luisa Bombal is a notable practitioner of this trend. Agosín explains how Bombal was read the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen as a child:

These characters were to play a very significant role in Bombal's novels; the women she imagined in her books were always searching for Prince Charming, like the anonymous woman in *La última niebla*. (Agosín 1990: 27)

Looking first at Bombal's short stories, we note that Brígida, the protagonist of "El árbol", as a child, used to spend hours in the kitchen listening to 'cuentos de ánimas' (p.134). There is no suggestion that recounting and listening to fairy tales is a way in which women's wisdom is passed down from one generation to the next, as Marina Warner (1994) would suggest in her study of fairy tales and their transmission. "Las islas nuevas" is discussed by Verity Smith in relation to the Germanic fairy tale tradition, particularly *The Six Swans*, collected by the Brothers Grimm (Smith 1991: 137-149). In fact, there are several other intertextualities, including Hans Christian Andersen's *The Wild Swans*, in which the eleventh brother is not fully transformed back into his human form, but has a swan's wing instead of an arm, Grimm's *The Twelve Brothers* and *The Seven Ravens*.

"Mar, cielo y tierra" dates from 1940. "Lo secreto", a reworking of this prose poem (1941) is transformed into a tale of magic, mystery and pirates, with reminiscences of Perrault's *Bluebeard* on the one hand, and Barrie's *Peter Pan* on the other. The seascapes described in these stories must inevitably remind us of Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* (1837), even without any immediately identifiable 'equivalences'. A comparison of extracts from three texts, the Andersen, and two versions of Bombal's short story, reproduced below in English to facilitate the comparison, demonstrates the clear similarities in lexical choice and tone:

<p><i>The Little Mermaid</i> (1980)</p> <p>Far out at sea the water is as blue as the petals of the loveliest cornflower and as clear as the purest glass. But it is very deep - deeper than any anchor rope can reach. Many church steeples would have to be placed one on top of the other to reach from the bottom up to the surface of the water. Down there live the sea folk.</p> <p>Now, there is no reason to believe that there is nothing but bare white sand at the bottom of the sea! No, down there the most marvelous trees and plants grow, and they have such pliable stalks and leaves that the slightest movement of the water makes them move just as if they were alive. All the fish, big and small, slip in and out among the branches just as birds do up here in the air. At the very deepest spot lies the castle of the sea king. The walls are made of coral, and the long windows with pointed arches are of the clearest amber. The roof is made of mussel shells that open and close with the flow of the water. It is a lovely</p>	<p>“Sky, Sea and Earth” (1940)</p> <p>I know, for example, that in the ocean depths, much lower than the fathomless and dense zone of darkness, the ocean illuminates itself again and that a golden and motionless light sprouts from gigantic sponges as radiant and yellow as suns. All types of plants and frozen beings live there submerged in that light of glacial, eternal summer: green and red sea anemones crowd themselves in broad live meadows to which transparent jellyfish that have not yet broken their ties intertwine themselves before embarking on an errant destiny through the seas; hard white coral becomes entangled in enchanted thickets where slithering fish of shadowy velvet softly open and close themselves like flowers; there are sea horses whose manes of algae scatter round them in a sluggish halo when they silently gallop, and if one lifts certain grey shells of insignificant shape, one is frequently sure to find below a little mermaid crying. (p.9)</p>	<p>“The Unknown” (1982)</p> <p>Miles down, below the deep, dense zone of darkness, the ocean again illuminates itself. A golden light radiates from gigantic sponges, yellow and resplendent as suns.</p> <p>Numberless plants and cold-blooded creatures live within this layer of light, buried eternally in the brightness of a glacial summer.</p> <p>A profusion of green and red anemones blossom on the wide sandy lawn, amid schools of transparent jellyfish, dangling like umbrellas, which have not yet set out in quest of their wandering destiny through the seas.</p> <p>Hard white corals entwine like bushes, through which glide dark velvet fish, opening and closing like flowers.</p> <p>Sea horses there are: tiny thorough reds of the deep moving at a silent canter with radiant algae manes rising slowly round them like halos.</p> <p>And I only know that underneath certain deformed conch shells burrowed on the bottom there sits a little mermaid, weeping. (p.77)</p>
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sight, for every shell
contains gleaming
pearls, any one of which
would have done a
queen's crown proud.

La última niebla also contains several passages that bring fairy tales to mind. At the beginning of her marriage, the recently married narrator-protagonist sees a young girl in a coffin with a glass lid:

La muchacha que yace en ese ataúd blanco, no hace dos días coloreaba tarjetas postales, sentada bajo el emparrado. Y ahora hela aquí aprisionada, inmóvil, en ese largo estuche de madera, en cuya tapa han encajado un vidrio para que sus conocidos puedan contemplar su postrera expresión. (p.42)

This episode is not an essential part of the narrative, it is included because of its symbolic value. The dead girl reminds us of *Snow White*, but with the notable difference that no one will come to wake her from her sleep.

The narrator-protagonist is also a kind of Sleeping Beauty, but she will not be 'awakened' by her husband. The girl in the glass coffin acts, therefore, as a warning of the profound unhappiness which lies in store for the narrator, and symbolises the death of her hopes and dreams. In this example, a fairy tale allusion is used negatively, to subvert the reader's expectations. There is another link with fairy tale tradition, namely the Brothers Grimm's *The Glass Coffin*, in which a young girl is released from her glass prison by a poor but enterprising tailor.

The mirror scene (p.45) is again reminiscent of *Snow White*; in this case, there is someone more beautiful than the narrator, Daniel's first wife. Later in the novel, Daniel brings her 'todos los fresales del bosque diluidos en un helado jarabe' in a crystal glass, very much the kind of thing we might expect to find in a fairy tale, a magic potion. (p.78)

House of Mist, Bombal's own adaptation of *La última niebla* differs noticeably from the original in both its numerous fairy tale allusions, and the romantic 'fairy tale' ending. Helga's childhood is made tolerable by her dreams and imaginings:

It was with the people of my fairy tales and in their world that I found shelter during the night. (pp.27-28)

On her first encounter with Daniel, the man she will eventually marry, she confuses him with an enchanted prince who has been transformed into a bear (p.6). Although never mentioned by name by Bombal, this may allusion may be drawn from Grimm's *Snow White* and *Rose Red*, in which the enormous, black-headed bear becomes playmate, rescuer, then bridegroom.

Together, they look for the toad in the well, Prince Toad, with a crown, a notion that brings to mind both *The Frog Prince* (Grimm) and *The Marsh*

King's Daughter, (Hans Christian Andersen). In fact, we are explicitly told that the narrator has herself been named by her Danish mother for the heroine of this tale. Helga's aunt Adelaide is described by the servants as a witch-like figure: 'When she is not walking around with a broom in her hand, she is flying seated on top of it' (p.26). The unhappy child takes refuge in dreams, accompanying Andersen's Princess Eliza in *The Wild Swans*, his Little Mermaid, and even the 'Princess Cruel' of *The Travelling Companion*:

Twelve fairy young girls, each clad in a white silk robe and bearing a golden tulip in her hand, rode on coal-black steeds before or beside her; the Princess herself had a snow-white palfrey, the gold crown that pressed her rich dark tresses seemed made of stars, and the light gauzelike mantle that robed her shoulders was composed of many thousand various-hued butterfly wings (Bombal, p29).

Twelve beautiful virgins, all in white silk gowns, and each with a golden tulip in her hand, rode on coal-black steeds at her side. The princess herself had a snow-white horse, decked with diamonds and rubies. Her riding-habit was all of cloth of gold, and the whip she held in her hand looked like a sunbeam; the golden crown on her head was just like little stars out of the sky, and her mantle was sewn together out of more than a thousand beautiful butterflies' wings. (Andersen, p. 51)

Other references include *The Snow Queen* (p.290). Helga's cousin Teresa, going to the big ball, is described in the terms we would expect for a fairy tale princess, or Cinderella: 'I who put on her feet the tiniest little golden slippers with the highest heels I had ever seen' (p38). Even when she reaches womanhood, Helga continues to live in a world of fairy tale imaginings. Thus Daniel's home is 'the magic castle of the Bear' (p.60). Teresa's wedding ring owes much of its symbolism to traditional folk tales and ballads, Daniel is likened to 'one of those dazzling knights spoken of in my fairytales' (p.73). Though it should be pointed out that the description of his crumbling palace and Teresa decaying in her coffin might be taken from Edgar Allan Poe. The description of Helga's wedding night has much in common with the corresponding scene described in Angela Carter's narration of the Bluebeard story (Carter 1979:7-41). Jack Murray suggests a subplot in "Tan triste como ella", in which the husband 'wants to drive his wife to kill herself by hounding her with the false accusation that she has been unfaithful'. Whereas Bluebeard pretended 'to go away while leaving all the keys to the palace in his new wife's charge, telling her she may use all but one', the husband leaves a loaded gun in their wardrobe, and brings in three workmen to destroy her garden, creating the right conditions for his wife's infidelity and suicide, both of which inevitably take place (Murray 1983:71). On three separate occasions, Mariana refers to her brother Daniel as Bluebeard: 'You'll follow me to the Tower where Bluebeard lives' (p.86), 'Come on, Bluebeard, this way' (p.91), 'And you, Bluebeard' (p.191). Helga is depicted as a Cinderella figure, who cannot attend Mariana's ball because she does not have a gown. At which point, her sister-in-law takes on the role of fairy

godmother or ‘kindly witch’ (p.97), transforming Helga into a bewitching, swan-like creature, who gazes at herself, joyfully, in the mirror. This reminds Helga of an episode from *The Snow Queen*, which is inserted, in compressed form, into the description of her preparations for the ball. This serves to draw a parallel between Gerda’s search for Kay, and Helga’s rather more passive search for Daniel’s love. Mariana’s intervention has the effect of distracting Helga, just as Gerda was diverted from her quest by a kindly witch.

The references continue to the very end of the novel. Daniel ironically calls her his ‘dear Cinderella’, alluding to the night of the ball (pp.143-144). He also reminds her: ‘All your life you have lived in dreams rather than in reality (p.153). And yet the young Daniel also entered her fairy tale world, to the extent of searching for magic toad and little mermaids (p.157). In the closing sequence of the novel, Helga experiences a flashback to her childhood, remembers her mother telling her the tale of Thumbelina (p.238), and rediscovers the Tree of Life in her mother’s garden (p.245).

La amortajada also contains fairy tale references. Ana María, the narrator-protagonist, looks back to her first pregnancy and recalls both her craving for strawberries and her identification with the heroine of *The Three Little Men in the Wood*:

¿Dónde había comido yo fresas, así?
 “La niña salió entonces al jardín y se puso a barrer la nieve. Poco a poco la escoba empezó a descubrir una gran cantidad de fresas perfumadas y maduras que gozosa llevó a la madrastra...”
 ¡Fresas! ¡Eran ésas las fresas que yo quería!, ¡las fresas mágicas del cuento! (p.35)

Once in winter, when it was freezing hard, and snow lay deep on the hill and valley, the woman made a frock out of paper, called her step-daughter, and said, “Here, put on this frock, go out into the wood and fetch me a basket of strawberries; I have a great wish for some.” [...]

When she had eaten her bread they gave her a broom, and told her to go and sweep the snow away from the back door. [...]

In the meanwhile the girl was doing as the little men had told her, and had cleared the snow from the back of the little house, and what do you suppose she found?-fine ripe strawberries, showing dark red against the snow!. Then she joyfully filled her little basket full, thanked the little men, shook hands with them all, and ran home in haste to bring her step-mother the thing she longed for. (p.287)

One further point of contact between *La amortajada* and the fairy tale is found unexpectedly in Ana María’s concern with the process of ageing. This is more properly the preoccupation of the wicked stepmother than a virginal young girl, yet we note similar anxieties in the protagonist of *La última niebla*. Bombal’s heroines spend much of their time gazing into mirrors

or still waters, and like Snow White's stepmother, they are not happy with what they find. Also present in *La amortajada* is what we might denominate 'the Rapunzel motif'. In Grimm's tale, the Prince was able to climb up to her tower using the rope of her hair, eventually fathering her twin children. Thus sexual fulfilment and fecundity are all connected with Rapunzel's hair. In Bombal, unbound hair symbolises social and sexual freedom. As a young girl, Brígida has plaits that descend to her ankles. The narrator of *La última niebla* is obliged to wear her hair in a tight, repressive braid. Ana María recalls how her plaits entwined themselves around Ricardo, first in a foreshadowing of their physical union: 'Mis trenzas aleteaban deshechas, se te enroscaban al cuello' (p.20), then later, in a confirmation that they have consummated their love, 'Mis trenzas aletearon, deshechas, se te enroscaron al cuello' (p.21).

The eponymous heroine of *La historia de María Griselda* is portrayed as a fairy-tale princess, kept prisoner because of her husband's obsessive jealousy, 'aislada en un lejano fundo del sur' (p.54). This idea is emphasised, with the repetition, 'la que mantiene secuestrada allá en un lejano fundo del sur' (p.56). After Silvia's suicide, María Griselda faints, and is then described in terms strongly reminiscent of Snow White in her glass coffin or Sleeping Beauty in her marble palace. Marjorie Agosín maintains that *La historia de María Griselda* as an inverted fairy tale, based on *Snow White*. This is incontestably true, particularly when we find the following variation on the mirror sequence:

¿qué cree Usted que me contesta cuando le pregunto, quién es más linda, si María Griselda o yo?
Te dirá que tú eres la más linda, naturalmente.
No, me contesta. ¡Son tan diferentes! (p.50)

The young woman's beauty and goodness are not rewarded, but rather alienate those around her, causing the death of Silvia, the profound unhappiness of Anita, and madness of Alberto (Agosín 1983:141-149). Verity Smith points out the links with Patient Griselda, as well as the *The Frog Prince* (Smith 1991:146). In fact, there are also elements of Andersen's "The Marsh King's Daughter", mentioned explicitly in *House of Mist*, (p.13). In this tale, the daughter of the Marsh King is under an enchantment. By day her human characteristics prevail, by night she becomes a frog. As a human, she is wild and savage, in her frog shape she is kinder and gentle, so much so that her Viking foster mother says:

I could almost wish that thou wert always my poor dumb frog-child; for thou art only the more terrible to look at when thy beauty is on the outside. (p. 426)

In fairy tale tradition, girls are often isolated and victimised because of their beauty. However, the stories end on a happy note when their patience and forbearance is rewarded, as in Grimm's *Mother Hulda*, for example. This does not happen with María Griselda, who is driven to the extremes of apologising for her beauty. In her case, it is not just her beauty that isolates

her, but her different character. As Joyce Thomas explains, with regard to fairy tale heroes and heroines:

Even when she is in the company of others, the protagonist is isolated by virtue of his/her different nature. His/her mental and emotional isolation in turn leads to the physical: almost always, s/he faces the challenge alone or in the absence of the society from which she came. (Thomas 1989: 20)

Even more relevant for this discussion is Thomas' observation that such characters, unable to or prevented from engaging with human beings, are able to enter into relationships with the worlds of nature and the supernatural (p.22). The presence of different birds and animals in *La historia de María Griselda* might lead us to classify it as an Animal Helper Tale. But even these benign creatures incur Alberto's resentment and are punished for loving María Griselda. The frog is hurled through the air by her mother-in-law, and her doves are butchered by a jealous husband in much the same way as the garden in "Tan triste como ella" is destroyed by the protagonist's husband. Just as in many fairy tales, the villainous stepmother, witch or ogre wishes to literally devour a child or a maiden, Alberto yearns to consume María Griselda, to possess her absolutely.

Most, if not all of Bombal's stories, contain fairy tale motifs. These are used in different ways, depending on authorial intentions, and producing different effects, in accordance with the readership that Bombal has in view. As we have seen, the most obvious procedure entails the insertion of textual citations, such as the extract from the tale of the 'Princess Cruel'. Another approach involves the incorporation of an extract from a fairy tale, regardless of its original context, as for instance with *The Three Little Men in the Wood*. The third and most subtly complex technique involves the creation of precisely the kind of atmosphere that readers have grown to expect in a fairy tale, at least one authored by Perrault, Grimm or Andersen. This is achieved through several means: a judicious choice of lexical items, the absence of allusions to specific times or spaces, the inclusion of references to fairy tale narratives or to characters who possess attributes we identify as belonging to fairy tale personages. For example, Brígida and the narrator of *La última niebla*, are undoubtedly constructed as Cinderella figures. Joyce Thomas points out:

the protagonist 'is first presented as holding a pathetic, decidedly unheroic, role. Usually s/he is a Cinderella figure placed at the bottom of the family and societal hierarchy and compelled to perform the most menial, debasing chores or excluded altogether from any meaningful task, because so little is expected of her or him. (Thomas 1989:18)

Without Daniel's intervention, she would have been doomed to a life as a dependent relative, occupying her time by knitting for the poor. In *House of Mist*, Helga was destined to earn her living as a seamstress since her illegitimacy posed an insurmountable obstacle to a suitable marriage. Later, when she considers leaving Daniel, he suggests mockingly: 'So perhaps it is to the linen room of the convent that you expect to offer your talents?' (p.142). And the Cinderella treatment is certainly meted out to Brígida, who

is seen by her family, and husband, as quite insignificant. Again, following Thomas' analysis:

His/her deficiency is further reinforced in the use of superlatives and extreme contrasts accorded him/her. S/he is not simply 'young' but 'youngest'; [...] If other family members are doers, s/he is a dreamer, a fool, a simpleton'. (Thomas 1989: 19)

Such a description might have been written with Brígida in mind, 'la menor de seis niñas todas diferentes de carácter' (p.108). 'Es retardada esta criatura' (p.108), according to her father, 'Es tan tonta como linda' (p.109), according to everyone who knows her, 'tonta, juguetona y perezosa', in her own estimation (p.111).

In *House of Mist*, aunt Mercedes plays the kind of stereotyped role we have come to associate with wicked stepmothers, cousin Teresa occupies the place normally filled by a step-sister, sister-in-law Mariana takes on the mantle of fairy godmother, while Daniel is the enchanted prince. And yet, despite the presence of these elements, fairy tale discourse in Bombal is somehow nullified by another, more pessimistic discourse. As Verity Smith has observed:

Elements from different fairy tales are introduced in a fragmentary way, as though it were part of the author's intention to destroy the power of fairy tale discourse by making it disjointed and incoherent. (Smith 1991: 146)

For Vladimir Propp (1968), characters are defined and categorised through their roles or functions, many of which can be paired in binary oppositions, for instance the hero and the false hero, or the hero and the villain. In Bombal, however, there is never a clear-cut villain; the nearest her narratives have to a villain is the character who should meet the description of hero, that is, the husband. A similar dichotomy can be seen in that Bombal's female protagonists are always striking rather than conventionally beautiful, slightly built, with dark hair, while their rivals or antagonists are usually golden haired beauties, like story-book princesses. One example is Sofia, Ricardo's English wife, in *The Shrouded Woman* (p.105). These women never triumph, but then neither do the so-called heroines. This blurring of roles is an essential element of Bombal's subversive technique. Bombal creates a fairy tale atmosphere and characters then proceeds deliberately to mislead the reader, confounding expectations, destroying the myth of the happy ending.

In most fairy tales, the female protagonist is, at least to begin with, a victim. Through her own efforts, or through the intervention of some magical agent, she triumphs, and is rewarded. In Bombal, the heroine does everything that is required of her: she is beautiful, kind, loving, and she does marry. In the English novel, *House of Mist*, there is even a happy ending. But in the Spanish-language narratives this is not the case. Love does not overcome all obstacles. Consequently, Bombal's narratives are profoundly pessimistic, one of the main features they have in common with Onetti's writings.

There is profound irony in all of this. In Bombal, fairy stories are associated with childhood and security, thus all of the women characters who resort to them do so out of a deep-rooted desire to escape. Paradoxically, their means of escape is also indicative of their low status, the low esteem in which they are held, treated as dependent children, confined to the home. This is of course, an identical relationship to that in which Onetti places his female protagonist, the wife in “Tan triste como ella”.

Fairy tale motifs in Onetti

If fairy tale elements are more likely to occur in women’s writing, Onetti’s use of these motifs comes as something of a surprise. Nevertheless, Onetti follows the example of his precursor Horacio Quiroga in turning fairy tales upside down, as occurs, for example, in “El almohadón de plumas”.

The most striking fairy tale element in “Tan triste como ella” is the hedge of thorns, which is open to multiple interpretations. In the first instance, we might consider the religious implications of the *cinacina*. Readers might ascribe too much importance to the *cinacina* because of Murray’s and Adam’s use of the term ‘Jerusalem thorn’ (Murray 1983: 70, 74, 78; Adams 1975: 60). Balderston goes even further in his translation, using the term *pyracantha* (Balderston 1990:xii). In fact, the *cinacina* is a species indigenous to the River Plate region, *Parkinsonia aculeata*, traditionally used for protective hedges:

Otras especies indígenas también pueden utilizarse con buen resultado. En grandes cercados de chacras y quintas se emplearon, en el siglo pasado, dos especies indígenas, el “uña de gato” (*Acacia bonariensis*) y el “cina cina” (*Parkinsonia aculeta*). Eran cercados defensivos; resultaban impenetrables, sobre todo los de uña de gato, a causa de las espinas. (Lombardo 1969: 49)

Uruguayans in the interior use the Indian name *ñapindá* for the *cinacina*, although Lombardo registers this vocabulary item for the *uña de gato*.

Even discounting the Jerusalem connotation, there are undeniable religious implications in the way that the wife impales herself on the thorns, in what Millington describes as ‘a sort of self-inflicted crucifixion’ (Millington 1991: 209). At the same time, we might well consider them a distorted, twisted version of the Holy Family. Like the Virgin Mary, she is already pregnant with someone else’s child before she marries Joseph. Add to this the information we are given about the oldest *pocero*, how he has posed as a priest, the occasional references to prayers, the incomplete *Ave Marias*, and the husband’s enactment of the role of betrayer Judas and it all adds up to a definite religious subtext. How we decode it is, of course, another matter. I would suggest that the *cinacina* is a reminder of the hedge of thorns in *Sleeping Beauty*, though a version in which Onetti perverts/subverts the usual fairy tale conventions, turning them upside down - like Bombal - in order to demythify and destroy the reader’s expectations of a happy ending, a ‘dream come true’.

Interestingly, another, lesser known fairy tale also has a hedge of thorns. In the tale *Sweetheart Roland*, in the Grimm collection, a beautiful young maiden is pursued by her vengeful stepmother, a wicked witch. At one point, in order to evade capture and certain death, she transforms herself into a beautiful flower, and stands in the middle of a hedge of thorns. However, the witch is obliged to dance to a magic tune, and dances herself to death on the hedge. As in *Sleeping Beauty*, the hedge protects the girl, keeping her safe for her beloved.

One feature common to the traditional story and “Tan triste como ella” is the isolation of the protagonist, mentioned above in the context of Bombal’s protagonists and singled out by Max Lüthi as ‘one of the governing principles in the fairytale’ (Lüthi 1984: 42). Onetti’s protagonist could not be more cut off, confined to her house and garden. Like the typical fairy tale heroine, Onetti’s character seems to have little or no control over her own life, as we see when her husband decides to destroy the garden. Yet we might interpret her pulling the trigger of the gun as a belated attempt to take control of her own fate.

Bettelheim has suggested that ‘the central theme of all versions of *The Sleeping Beauty* is that, despite all attempts on the part of parents to prevent their child’s sexual awakening, it will take place nonetheless’ (Bettelheim 1978: 230). This would certainly fit in with “Tan triste como ella”. Despite being confined to the safety of the house and garden, ‘cuando el mundo vino a buscarla’ (p.124), the woman becomes pregnant, either by Mendel or the man she is to marry. Later, she engages in an almost animalistic sexual relationship with one of the *poceros*.

In “Tan triste”, the woman lives in what was her childhood home, the one place where she felt truly happy and secure. But this space has gradually been taken over, firstly by the husband, then the child, and finally by the well-diggers. The garden, originally a place of innocence and comfort, has become a place of punishment.

The original Sleeping Beauty is awoken and set free by a noble prince who battled his way through the hedge of thorns to rescue her: This princess is a prisoner in her palace, trapped within the hedge of thorns and the thicket of social constraints. Where the traditional fairy tale heroine is usually rescued from danger and despair, Onetti’s female protagonist has no hopes of salvation (Barchilon 1975: 29). For Ruth B. Bottigheimer:

The single most pervasive image evoked in the popular mind by the word fairy tale is probably that of a maiden in distress leaning from a tower window and searching the horizon for a rescuer. (Bottigheimer 1987: 101)

Onetti’s female protagonist looks down on her garden as her partner discusses his demolition plans with the workmen who have been contracted to obliterate her haven: ‘Ella los miraba desde el piso alto’ (p.125). Her only possible rescuers are the *poceros*, and they are themselves the agents of her disempowerment, degradation, and finally, her destruction. If women draw their power from Nature, then by concreting over the garden, her

husband, more ogre than rescuing prince, has killed her as surely as if he had strangled her with his own bare hands.

For Bruno Bettelheim, one of the most important characteristics of the fairy tale is the happy ending. In *Sleeping Beauty*, the prince and princess live happily ever after. Onetti's characters do not. Traditionally, evildoers are punished and virtue is rewarded (Bettleheim 1978: 230). But the woman, who critics have tended to perceive as victim rather than villain, is never compensated for her suffering. Nor are we given any indication that the husband will be punished for his cruelty. Though arguably, his suffering began when he first fell in love. Finally, although fairy tale narrative tends to be linear and Onetti is noted for the fragmentation of his narrative, the chronology of the woman's decline into death is clearly marked.

Conclusion

There are many more features of Onetti and Bombal that we might compare and contrast. In terms of narrative structure; for instance, both authors coincide in their use of flashback. Both make ample use of recurring themes and motifs, among them infidelity, adultery, betrayal at all levels. Highly significant is the dream for both writers is the dream and the daydream (Odber de Baubeta 1996: 81-93). Or we might consider pathological jealousy to be a driving force in the characters of both authors, the husband in "Tan triste como ella", the protagonists of *La última niebla* and *House of Mist*, Ana María in *La amortajada*, Alberto and Silvia in *La historia de María Griselda*. There is also the highly significant 'mirada' or gaze: Bombal's female protagonists spend much time contemplating their reflections in mirrors or pools of water (Garrels 1991: 81-90; Tolliver 1992: 105-121). Onetti's character gazes at her husband in an attempt to understand his reactions, his rejection of her: 'A escondidas ella le miraba los ojos (p.121), while he either averts his eyes, or views her with incomprehension; this is not the phallic gaze. Or there is the incest motif that Murray distinguishes in "El árbol" and which is hinted at in "Tan triste como ella' (Murray 1983). But, for the present, I hope that I have signalled some of the numerous points of contact between Onetti and Bombal, preoccupations held in common and expressed in similar ways. For Bombal, the woman is always 'the other', and there can be no genuine understanding between this 'other' and her oppressor, no matter what efforts she may make. Onetti seems to share this view: 'todo había sido conversado tantas veces, comprendido hasta donde uno cree comprenderse y entender al otro', and yet the abyss of incomprehension, resentment and finally hatred can only grow wider (Onetti, p.126). There is no sense of any sympathy or pity for the obsessive husband, consumed by his own humiliation and jealousy. Instead, there is compassion for the wife trapped behind her hedge of thorns, the woman who feeds her child one last time before ending her life. One could suggest that this story is narrated from the woman's point of view, that Onetti, unexpectedly, is writing the feminine.

One major feature common is their subversion of the fairy tale tradition. Where they may differ is in the way they use the tradition. In her English writings Bombal opts for the conventional happy ending in a conscious attempt to please a public whose expectations and tastes have been pre-conditioned by romantic books and films. And yet, writing for *hispanoparlantes*, Bombal demonstrates first the potentially subversive force of the fairy tale, how it may be used to construct an escape, an alternative reality, then proceeds to show how this fragile reality proves no more satisfactory. In this pessimistic, nihilistic vision she moves very close to the ground occupied by Onetti. There is little to choose between growing old in loneliness or isolation, or abandoning one's child for the solace of death.

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