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*Ella nada a solas*: Eros, power and the pond motif in *La última niebla*

A pond of water is a central leitmotif in María Luisa Bombal's novel *La última niebla*, and is the setting for key events in the novel: the unnamed Narrator's erotic discovery of her own body, an encounter with a mysterious lover, and the death of the boy Andrés by drowning. The Narrator's solitary immersions in the pond underscore her interiority, her alienation from her social context and her central conflict: the frustrated search for ideal love. In considering the Bombalian pond, it is fair to wonder why the Narrator does not take advantage of the possibility for death and rebirth in her Jungian waters. Why is she unable to become someone who exercises power in the real world? In short, why do things turn out so badly for her?

In this essay, I explore the leitmotif of the pond to better understand the dynamics of Eros and power in the universe of *La última niebla*. In order to "see" Bombal's narrative with greater clarity, I employ the lens of George Sand's mid-19th century novel *La Mare au diable (The Devil's Pool),* another quest-type adventure that foregrounds a young woman, a recently-widowed man, a child, and the central narrative device of a pond. It is not my intention to engage in intentional fallacy or prove influence, though it is certainly possible that the Sorbonne-educated Bombal was familiar with this most-read novel of France's most popular 19th century woman novelist. The comparison is tempting because both Sand and Bombal are modern feminist writers[[1]](#footnote-0) whose writing was deeply influenced by folk tales and pre-Christian myth: Sand's tale foregrounds the Celtic beliefs and rituals of Brittany, and Bombal's novel features strong threads of the fairy tales of Hans Christian Anderson and the Brothers Grimm — influences that she made more explicit in the 1947 English-language iteration of *La última niebla*, *The House of Mist*. Both authors also explicitly reference Greek mythology, which Bombal considered to be "la base de la literatura"[[2]](#footnote-1) in general, and of her own work in particular. What makes the comparison of these two novels *interesting*, however, is that both Sand and Bombal center their narrative action around a body of still water that functions as an arbiter of Eros and is the determining factor in the success or failure of the protagonists' heroic journeys.

*La mar au diable* is different from *La última niebla* in important ways: first, it is a pastoral novel told in a traditional narrative style that portrays more familiar and, perhaps, predictable characters than does Bombal's more poetic, close first-person, cosmopolitan narrative. Also, Sand's novel was published in 1846, before the popularization of the psychoanalytic and existentialist thought that inflects Bombal's 1934 ultraist novel. Nevertheless, both are hero's journeys by female protagonists whose power (or lack thereof) is linked to a pond, and neither difference of era nor narrative style are insuperable obstacles in a discussion about the meaning of timeless symbols and archetypes.Both Sand and Bombal were gender traditionalists who believed that women's energies were best focused on the creation of successful male-female love love relationships. Sand, however, celebrates fertility in her novel, while Bombal does not. The use of archetype in the two works is also very different: Sand's female protagonist, Petite Marie, is the archetypal Princess who transforms into the Mother by taking physical risk and demonstrating a compassionate nature. Compounded with the magnetic, spiritual force of the eponymous pond, these personal characteristics permit the "re-birth" of both herself and her male co-protagonist, Germain, and ultimately their marriage. Bombal's Narrator, however, not only lacks an archetypal identity, name or history, but she also she relies solely on her own imagination to "birth" her Lover in the medium of the pond, an effort that ultimately falls short. Whereas Sand's pond inheres spiritual power that co-creates with her protagonists to help them transform spiritually and form a positive bond of Eros that translates into meaning and benefit to both them as individuals and their community, Bombal's pond is explicitly sexual but erotically challenged: her protagonist's immersions are characterized by isolation and morbidity and have symbolic meaning to her alone. Ultimately, the pond fails to help Bombal's Narrator effect her own transformation to wholeness or find happiness with her Lover, though it does provide her with the insights necessary to create art.

It serves this discussion to define the word Eros as I will apply it here. The connection with lust and love is evident, but Eros is also importantly characterized by a sense of *yearning* on the level of spirit and consciousness:

Eros is normally translated as "love"...The meaning of Eros, however, is a little broader than "sexual", as is suggested by the fact that Eros was a divine being, the son of Aphrodite. Eros is unsatisfied love containing a large element of yearning. "Desire" would not be a totally inaccurate translation.... For the Greeks the quality of Eros was considered to be a normal aspect of relationships between any two people, whether they be members of the same sex or members of the opposite sex.... [But] the central message upon which we wish to focus is that Eros is the desire to regain a lost wholeness.[[3]](#footnote-2)

The "desire for a lost wholeness" is a natural yearning that inheres the precondition of an original lack or a loss. This deficit may be physical, spiritual, emotional or all of these, but the fundamental idea is that the individual finds him or herself to be unsatisfactory "as is", and requiring a complement in order to become whole. The definition of "satisfactory" necessarily varies depending upon culture, class and the hopes of the specific person, but I use it here not to indicate "acceptable", but rather "complete". Jung viewed the circular shape of the mandala, the closed circle that a pond also forms, as the symbol for "wholeness"[[4]](#footnote-3), which, in his system of thought meant the successful merging of the unconscious with the conscious Self. Eros, then, can be considered either that yearning for wholeness achieved in cooperation with another person, or achieved through the joining of the spiritual, intellectual and physical parts of the individual alone.

George Sand tells the story of Breton peasant Germain, a young man who finds himself incomplete: he is mourning the death of his young wife Catherine, and his adventure is undertaken in order to address his lack of "the consciousness of his sentiment".[[5]](#footnote-4) Germain is in a libido-less, depressed state of which he must first become aware, and then remedy in order to be able to love and to marry again. The reader is privy to Germain's thoughts and feelings because he has told his story to his intimate friend, George Sand. Germain's co-protagonist is the poor, innocent but stout-hearted young shepherdess, Petite Marie, who, alongside him, transforms from child to woman during the course of the adventure. Her precocious wisdom and practical assistance are crucial to the successful outcome of their journey together.

Pagan community rituals and beliefs are emphasized by Sand, who personifies nature as a healthy, beautiful, poetic woman in her Introduction: "[N]ature is eternally young, beautiful and generous. She pours forth poetry and beauty on all creatures and all plants that are allowed free development."[[6]](#footnote-5) Germain and Marie also experience "free development" during the course of the novel, demonstrating Sand's optimistic linking of the rise of human consciousness to the growth of plants and animals in a healthy, natural environment. In a healthy setting, nature, humanity and consciousness work with symbiotic grace; so it does not surprise us when the Devil's Pond plays a central role in the unfolding of the narrative and the development of the protagonists.

The needs of community and family are the organizing principles for the characters in Sand's tale. The young widower's Call to Adventure[[7]](#footnote-6) comes in the form of his kindly father-in-law, who tells him that he and his elderly wife can no longer care for Germain's three young children. He proposes a carefully reasoned solution: Germain must take a wealthy new wife, because the land he now farms will be inherited by his first wife's children, and only by purchasing new land can he secure the well-being of his future children. Germain should mount his gray horse (i.e., "man up") and go to court a rich widow who is receiving suitors in a nearby town. Like any hero, Germain initially resists: he is still mourning his beloved first wife. Nevertheless, accepting his father-in-law's logic and the imbalance in his family and community, he sets off. It so happens that poor Petite Marie is going in the same direction to seek work as a shepherdess, and she accepts the offer of a ride on Germain's horse. Germain's young son Petit Pierre, who had asked his father to come along on the trip and was told no, is soon found along the way, sleeping in the woods. Petite Marie advocates on Petit Pierre's behalf, and soon the trio is traveling together. The triangular geometry of these relationships will be fundamental to the success of the adults' quest.

The names of Sand's characters relate them to a spiritual and not strictly Christian framework, invoking archetypes of classical mythology and the Old Testament. Germain's name in French suggests a full-blooded relation, as in *cousin germain* (first cousin), which reflects the way in which he is fundamentally defined by his relationships to his family and his agricultural community. Sand introduces us to the handsome, strapping protagonist as he tills the steaming soil with a plow hitched to a team of newly-yoked, young oxen, preparing the soil to sow new seed, which associates Germain to *germe* (seed), suggesting that he himself has potential but is not fully developed yet. Germain is presented as a demi-God pursuing a "Herculean task"[[8]](#footnote-7); and at his side is Petit Pierre, "a child of six or seven years old, lovely as an angel"[[9]](#footnote-8) wearing a sheepskin around his shoulders that makes him look like "a little Saint John the Baptist."[[10]](#footnote-9) Hamilton notes that while Marie's name evokes the Virgin Mary, it also hints strongly at powerful pagan connotations:

Just as her name invokes the Holy Mother, it resonates phonetically with the French words — *la mare*, *la mere*, and *la mer*...and it also resonates with the English "mare" (as in female horse) and with "cauchemar" (synonymous with the incubus...an evil sexual spirit visiting a woman at night), an appropriate analogy for Germain's bewitchment [at the pond]. Echoes of motherhood (a literal holy mother in the spirit of Germain's deceased wife) correlate with the maternal medium of water, so important in the pond scene, and reinforce the nurturing qualities of Marie, who seems also to partake of the divine by a seemingly miraculous ability to produce bread and wine, the warmth of fire, and consolation." [[11]](#footnote-10)

Both Marie and Pierre have archetypal functions for Germain: Marie connects him to God through her body, as the Virgin Mary also serves as a link between mankind and God; and Petit Pierre forges a link between Germain and Marie in his role as the archetypal Child who "'unites the opposites' of the conscious and unconscious to restore balance to 'a certain one-sidedness' of Western rationality, which transgresses 'against one's instincts'."[[12]](#footnote-11) It is Petit Pierre who recognizes, before his father, that Petite Marie would make a great mother and wife: "Little father...if you wish to give me a new mother, I hope it will be Petite Marie."[[13]](#footnote-12) When the trio gets lost in the forest because of a thick mist rolling off the waters of the pond, they camp in an oak grove near the pond for the night. Marie is wonderfully able to produce wine, bread and dry tinder to create a campfire, all because she has been clever and prudent. Germain admiringly calls her a "little witch"[[14]](#footnote-13), and "a fairy of the night"[[15]](#footnote-14), appellations she rejects. Yet her prudence, forethought and eagerness to share with her companions *are* magical in the sense that they emanate from her spirit of natural compassion and love for others. The combination of Marie's spiritual power and the "maternal medium" of the pond, which will serve as both a physical obstacle and, ultimately, a spiritual aid, is the background against which the adults' spiritual rebirths can occur. Petite Marie and Germain will transform through the latter's properly directed Eros, resulting not only in a restoration of his wholeness, but will also benefit the wider circles of his family and community, a fact that is celebrated by the extensive wedding chapter at the end of the novel.

James Hamilton states that the pond acts as a hermetic vessel that disorients the travelers in time and space, and forces them together:

The mysterious area, a stagnant body of water surrounded by oak trees and holly, entraps Germain's group in a mysterious manner, compressing space, intensifying emotions, and distorting time. Configurations of movement and the interplay of elements join to disorient the travelers and to provoke new ways of thinking and feeling...[Germain's] repeated returns to the campfire site while trying to find a way out of the hollow point of 'the unconscious process of creating a new psychic center' necessary to individuation.[[16]](#footnote-15)

The pond and its encircling oaks is a kind of druidic gate, a liminal place between the regular world and the spirit world. It is also a "stagnant" pond, that is, a place where water is backed up or repressed; time is detained there, the narrative clock slowed, and the forward progress of the protagonists delayed. The stagnancy of the pond, ironically, acts as an antidote to Germain's own similarly represeed libido: it is here that he begins to feel an awakening of lust for Marie and almost steals a kiss from her while she innocently sleeps. But tortured by *what he almost but did not do*, he passes a sleepless night afraid that he might lose his inhibitions while unconscious. Germain passes this first test by sensing his awakened libido but still acting rightly; and, after rejecting the rich widow, he returns to the pond looking for his son and Petite Marie. A "hag" tells him to beware: "It is an evil spot and you must not approach it without throwing in three stones with your left hand, while you cross yourself with the right...If anybody were unlucky enough to spend the night here...[h]e must walk and walk, and though he went two hundred leagues into the forest, he must always return to the same place."[[17]](#footnote-16) She tells him that the drowning of a child is the origin of the pond's curse, and for a moment Germain fears that Pierre is lost; but he takes courage, an important step forward for him, and finds Marie hiding with Pierre from the libidinous farmer who tried to rape her. Germain's ability to remain calm, and his robust physical defense of Petite Marie against the farmer is proof that the "child" who "died" at the pond is none other than Germain's interior Child. Hamilton remarks on the laborer's awakening: "...something within Germain has died at the pond through evil. It is the untried innocence of Germain, the immature boy within who shows himself to be unequal to adversity. With the conscious reaching out to Marie in desire, any pretense of innocence necessarily dies in order to make way for a healthy development, the forging of character through fire and sacrifice."[[18]](#footnote-17) Germain and Petite Marie leave the Devil's Pool transformed: Germain, having faced his Shadow and reencountered his virility, becomes a Lover and *mari* (husband) to Petite Marie; Petite Marie transforms from child to woman by defending herself from her employer and protecting Petit Pierre, but also by insisting that Germain demonstrate the qualities of optimism, courage and respect that she demands in a husband. Eros demands that the man equal the woman's bravery and optimism so that they become equal halves of an eventual whole. The pond forces the two characters together so that they may contemplate each other as potential mates, but Petite Marie is the stronger character because she demands that Germain "man up" and, in that way, she mentors him.

There is a reciprocal geometry that is necessary for the proper functioning of Eros in Sand's story: the human triangle formed by the two adults with the Child between them[[19]](#footnote-18) couples with the elemental triangle of the campfire, the Devil's Pond and Germain's libido to turn the Devil's Pond into a "sacred space"[[20]](#footnote-19), a kind of alchemical pressure-cooker, where both adults are made more powerful and their relationship — and happy ending — is made possible.

The pond where Bombal's unnamed Narrator goes to escape from the suffocating routine of the house and the stifling relationship with her husband Daniel is a man-made *estanque*, not a natural body of water as in The Devil's Pool, and has no explicit magical powers. It may be an agricultural utility for her husband's *hacienda*, or possibly just a decorative addition to the garden that is managed by the gardener, whose youngest son Andrés is charged with skimming fallen leaves from the water's surface with his net; the latter is an ordering, or civilizing, activity that demonstrates that the control that the Narrator's dispassionate husband Daniel extends even to her pond retreat. Two principal pond scenes describe stages experienced by the Narrator in her adventure: the first is the recognition of her own body and the start of a reconnection of body and mind; and the second is the deep dive into her own unconscious, and the disappointing discovery that the symbols of her unconscious cannot survive in the world "above the surface". Fundamental to our discussion, however, is that while Bombal like Sand sees woman and nature as deeply intertwined, the Chilean's natural world is not the "beautiful woman" that Sand's is: nature is always lurking, and has the potential to give pleasure, or inflict punishment and death.

Time and place are as vague as the Narrator's identity in *La última niebla*: the location of the pond relative to the house is defined only by being on Daniel's land and under his control. The dream-like quality of the unnamed Narrator's account, told subjectively in the form of a journal written in the the historic present tense, has an atmosphere of eternal now. The only indications of the passage of time are descriptions of how the the Narrator and her husband Daniel change physically over the course of their ten years of marriage, or the passing mention of a season. This marriage of cousins is not founded on Eros, but is undertaken because of Daniel's fear of being alone after the death of his first wife, the Narrator's fear of becoming a spinster, and the implied idea that marriage is the best way "para vivir correctamente".[[21]](#footnote-20) Their marriage come to be just before the story begins out of a feeling of *dread*, not yearning; and the marriage is the hermetic context for all that takes place. The settings are bipolar: Daniel's isolated *hacienda* somewhere in "the south" and his mother's home in "the town"; inside the house and outside in the garden. Importantly, however, all the action of the story happens within the boundaries set for the Narrator by her husband and his family, and this includes the pond. Though the pond is where the Narrator goes to escape the meaningless routines of the household, it still within the circle of control, so the parameters for the Narrator's adventure are inescapable and unnegotiable: "No me siento capaz de huir. De huir ¿cómo, adónde? La muerte me parece una aventura más accesible que la huida."[[22]](#footnote-21) Detention of time and the limitations of settings in *La última niebla* emphasize the "no exit" quality of the Narrator's situation, rather than serving an active transformative function.

Uncertainty of time, place and identity in *La última niebla* is a device that enhances the subjectivity of the narration, and the dream-like feeling of the aquatic Bombalian landscape. For Marjorie Agosín, water and the power of subjective imagination and creativity in Bombal's narratives are not "meras vias de evasión. Todo lo contrario, la imaginación, al igual que el agua, son abordadas como metáforas de dinamismo, de actividad y de superficies volátiles. Así, las protagonistas que sueñan, que se ensimisman no representan un escape sino un estar en el mundo, un sentir del mundo desde el código de la invención imaginativa."[[23]](#footnote-22) For Agosín, Bombal's waters have a double and seemingly mutually contradictory power: "el desrealizador pero también el realizador que le brinda [a la Narradora] el autodescubrimiento de su yo." How do we evaluate this "way of being in the world"? If it is not an escape, for as we have already seen, there is not escape, does it provide the Narrator with the power to transform herself or the world around her? The yearning of Eros for wholeness can be a solo journey of individuation through the joining of the conscious and unconscious selves, I have already noted; but this power is not one that is able to modify the material reality of the Narrator.

A quest for meaning and identity through the experience of perfect love is the engine that drives Bombal's Narrator to the pond for her repeated and solitary immersions, but in this effort she has no allies. Unlike Germain, she has no framework of family or community supporting her or challenging her to transform for the collective good. Daniel, like Germain, has lost a beloved wife, and married the Narrator without Eros. Further, the Narrator, who seeks her "yo" in the pond, does not pertain to any of the archetypal categories of femininity that might provide her with a way of establishing a recognizable "yo" outside the pond and within her social context. Antonio Aiello describes the Jungian archetypes and feminine stereotypes outlined by Bombal in her novels, and notes that in *La última niebla*: "Cada personaje feminino nos remite a realidades distintas: la Narradora, la difunta esposa de su marido, sus hermanas, Regina y la suegra de la narradora; realidades que devienen en estereotipos distintos de la mujer, de los cuales se diferencia la protagonista, aunque estos pueden verse como una probabilidad de la cual no estuvo exenta."[[24]](#footnote-23) The Narrator is apart from the other women in the novel not only because she is the subjective voice that tells the story, but also because of her outsider status: she is *not* Daniel's dead wife, the Princess, the "mujer perfecta" (Bombal 7), and therefore lacks the power of eternal youth and beauty; she is *not* the dominant Mother archetype with her implied power of fertility; she is *not* the Spinster like her sisters, who as benefactresses of the poor have at least the power of charity; nor, finally, is she the Adultress like her sister-in-law Regina, who exercises raw sexual power. The Narrator does not pertain to any of these archetypal categories, and, by consequence, is denied the powers they inhere. She lacks name and history, has no job, her fate to "llevar a cabo una infinidad de pequeños menesteres".[[25]](#footnote-24) The buffer against loneliness that her presence provides Daniel inhibits him from taking his own hero's journey, nor does she insist that he "man up" as does Petite Marie to Germain. Silent, solitary and stuck (*estancada*), she spends long hours in the pond (*estanque*) over the course of ten years of marital routine.

The Narrator explicitly emphasizes her own physical powerlessness throughout the novel: "Mi cansancio en tan grande que en lugar de contestar prefiero dejarme caer en un sillón." "Estoy extenuada." [[26]](#footnote-25) "Hay días en que me acomete un gran cansancio..."[[27]](#footnote-26) But, after discovering her sister-in-law Regina and her lover embracing in the living room, and, later, their barely concealed exchange of passionate glances in the great room, their palpable sexuality overwhelms her. The Narrator feels as if "me hubieran vertido fuego dentro de las venas", and immediately leaves the house to seek relief in the waters of the pond, since she cannot direct this energy at her disinterested husband. The choice of words suggests a passivity and emptiness in the narrator: it's as if they "pour fire into [her] veins", a fire that is theirs and second-hand to her. She is an empty vessel waiting to be filled. She is overcome by "una extraña languidez"[[28]](#footnote-27) and feels that she is about to pass out. Overcome, she strips and immerses herself in the pond where she discovers her physical self —auto-erotically:

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

No me sabía tan blanca y tan hermosa. El agua alarga mis formas, que toman proporciones irreales. Nunca me atreví antes a mirar mis senos; ahora los miro. Pequeños y redondos, parecen diminutas corolas suspendidas sobre el agua.

Me voy enterrando hasta la rodilla en una espesa arena de terciopelo. Tibias corrientes me acarician y penetran. Como con brazos de seda, la plantas acuáticas me enlazan el torso con sus largas raíces. Me besa la nuca y sube hasta mi frente el aliento fresco del agua. (B 9)[[29]](#footnote-28)

The discovery of her body and its erotic potential is a first step toward becoming, and the pond is part of this awakening, performing the role of a lover who kisses, caresses, and penetrates her. She notices that her form assumes "proporciones irreales" as she "buries" herself in the soft sand. Here, our eye is directed towards the meaning of different gazes: under Daniel's gaze she is imperfect for not being his deceased wife; gazing at herself in the mirror at the house, she is "angustiada" because she sees her hair going dark, her former loveliness now flawed. But the pond transforms her self-directed gaze from critical to admiring: "No me sabía tan blanca y tan hermosa". Still a collection of physical parts, however, Eros has yet to make her whole, or allow her to discover her "yo".

All of Bombal's protagonists are part woman and part myth, and all have some sort of wound or hidden problem that is the source of their perpetually problematic and painful love lives. The character Yolanda of the story *Las islas nuevas*, for example, bears the stump of a wing on her shoulder, which is why she won't allow the character Juan Manuel to get close to her, unwilling that he should see her imperfection. Speaking to her friend Manuel Peña Muñóz about Hans Christian Anderson's Little Mermaid and Yolanda, Bombal said: " No son totalmente humanas. La sirenita está enamorada de un príncipe, pero no puede consumarse ese amor porque es una sirena. Necesita una gran prueba, un gran sacrificio a costo de mucho dolor, para llegar a ser amada."[[30]](#footnote-29) Like Yolanda and la Sirenita, the Narrator is not fully human, either: nebulous as the eponymous mist, her face is not described to the reader; she is nameless, often silent, and prefers the pond and imagined memory over the companionship of other people. But unlike the little mermaid, the Narrator does not suffer physical pain: her pain is psychic, existential. Bombal's Narrator accepts her variety of suffering, powerlessness and invisibility, as the price for "being loved", that is, being the *object* of the male erotic gaze. She does not submit to physical suffering, however, to become a *subject* of erotic yearning as Regina does by shooting herself. An active "yo" is required to be the hero of a successful quest.

Bombal offers another clue to her fascination with the wounded woman in her conversations with Muñoz with offers yet more insight on the importance to her of gazes:

“Siempre hay que leer a los clásicos”, me decía. “Sobre todo la mitología griega, que es la base de la literatura. Allí están los argumentos de peso, los verdaderamente interesantes que son los dramáticos. Tienes que escribir cuentos basados en los mitos: mitología moderna, esa es la clave... Ya ves, todas mis heroínas se inspiran en el mito de la Medusa."[[31]](#footnote-30)

As the story goes, Medusa, the beautiful daughter of a Gorgon, is raped by Poseidon God of the Sea in the Temple of Athena, enraging the goddess such that she transforms Medusa (the victim) into a creature hideous to look upon, who has live snakes on her head instead of hair. Her gaze turns others to stone. Perseus later beheads Medusa by protecting himself with a mirrored shield that forces Medusa to look upon herself, neutralizing her furious power. Ironically, once deprived of a body, the head of Medusa becomes Perseus's most powerful weapon against his enemies. The Medusa myth is profound and will not be discussed fully here, but it seems clear that Bombal sees Medusa as the woman for whom *all* gazes are problematic: no one can look upon her with love, she cannot look on others without turning them to stone, and she is made impotent by being forced to gaze upon herself. Raped, she is changed from beautiful woman into hideous mask. I suggest that the Narrator's repeated immersions in the pond can be seen an attempt to correct the Medusa story and amend these different, problematic gazes. The first step is re-attaching the Narrator's head, which, previous to the pond scene, she looks at critically, but in her first immersion she can see herself with admiration and compassion. The Narrator seeks this wholeness *in herself*, more than the connection to another: a head connected to a body, the yearning of Eros connected to unreally long legs that might liberate her, an imagination married to the material world. The first immersion in the pond can be seen as a rediscovery of the lost Medusan body, and the repeated returns to the pond as a continued effort to heal the deep wounds the Narrator has been dealt. Surrounded by the obliterating mist that "attacks" her. she cries out a protest: "¡Yo existo, yo existo...y soy bella y feliz! Sí ¡feliz!, la felicidad no es más que tener un cuerpo joven y esbelto y ágil."[[32]](#footnote-31) Against the background of the violated and beheaded Medusa, these lines resonate more sympathetically. The observation that her limbs seem longer in the water strikes us as odd, since normally ones' legs would look shorter to a person standing in water. Defamiliarization stops us here, and makes us look: the Narrator's legs are longer because she has accepted the Call to Adventure and is about to take a journey.

For Carl Jung, this first immersion in the pond would be the content of a revealing dream, a diving into the symbolism of the unconscious, that, once observed ("ahora los miro"), becomes the first step of merging unconscious symbols with dreams in order to develop an integrated personality. According to Jung, all authentic art and symbol emerge from this Jungian pool of the unconscious; while the Narrator is ostensibly trying to assemble her physical Self, she is also assembling the creative Self who is the author of the story. The desire of Eros for wholeness is realized in the writing of the story with the purpose that someone else will read it — and understand or feel something in the experience of art.

In a Joseph Campbell-style framework, the start of the Narrator's Initiation occurs at the moment she leaves her known limits (the house) and ventures into a potentially dangerous realm where she is unsure of the rules (the pond). Agosín argues with the much of the early analysis of Bombal's Narrator as an alienated, neurotic and irrational character, and asserts that, within the context of her mental universe, she displays the characteristics of a hero:

"[L]o que nos interesa es ver como la protagonista se enfrenta con su universo, cómo lo ordena, y cómo se desliza por el único mundo que para ella es real: el mundo de la mente. Veremos que desde este ángulo, la tan aceptada visión de la protagonista como personaje pasivo cambia radicalmente, pues si aceptamos los movimientos de la fantasía y la fuerza de la memoria, aceptamos también la noción de que el personaje de *La última niebla* es un viajero dinámico.[[33]](#footnote-32)

Within the hermetic context of the Narrator's mental universe, she is still capable of a heroic journey; that is, not all journeys take place on roads, some occur in the mind.

The geometry of the Narrator's world is distinct from that of Sand's characters with their symmetrically interlocking and spacious triangles — and her geometry works against her. Bernadita Llanos sees the house of the *hacienda* and the pond as the two ends of a bipolar structure in which the Narrator travels, the poles representing civilization and barbarism respectively. Echoing Saúl Sosnowki, Llanos regards the first entry into the pond as representative of the Narrator's "...immersion in a formless and diffuse world. The fact that [this rebirth] takes place in the water highlights the return of the unconscious and renewal through the 'water of life' in a kind of rebirth ritual. On the opposite pole stands the still and tomblike house, which embodies "social regulation and sanctioned morality."[[34]](#footnote-33) The baptismal notion of rebirth is not religious for Bombal, it should be noted, but rather part of the bourgeois social contract. Religion, almost entirely absent from the novel, is obliquely mentioned only during a visit to Daniel's mother's home in the "city" after the Narrator's first immersion, when "Daniel, ligeramente achispado, promete restaurar en nuestra casa el oratorio abandonado"[[35]](#footnote-34), implying that the younger generation has abandoned formal religion, but will restore the chapel for the sake of the elder to whom such antiquated practices still matter. I accept and adjust Llanos's civilization-barbarism duality by calling it a tension between extinction and the potential for existence. The Narrator's difficulty in discovering either how to "be" or "not to be" leaves her in an existential limbo that is summarized in her remark upon seeing Regina in the hospital after the latter's suicide attempt: "Puede que viva." The Narrator does not benefit from the sturdy elemental and relational triangles that activate the fruitful Eros of Germain and Petite Marie's world: at best, her geometry is a straight line between two points. She has no supporting cast of family or community who compel her to transform. She is alone.

Bombal's Narrator yearns for chaos, blurred edges, and a return to the primordial energy, which, left to itself, might have the power to overcome the sterile works of man.

¿Porque en otoño, esa obstinación de hacer constatemente barrer las avenidas?

Yo dejaría amontonarse sobre el césped y los senderos, cubrirlo todo con su alfombra rojiza y crujiente que la humedad tornaría luego silenciosa. Trato de convencer a Daniel para que abandone un poco el jardín. Siento nostalgia de parques abandonados, donde la mala hierba borre todas la huellas y donde arbustos descuidados estrechen los caminos.[[36]](#footnote-35)

The Narrator's desire for the pond and garden to "go natural" is a response to the order Daniel imposes at the *hacienda,* which is itself a reflection of his repressed erotic energy; but it also reveals her tendency toward morbidity. She does not yearn for a garden of Eden, new, bountiful and innocent; rather, her object is an autumnal atmosphere of neglect that more accurately evokes Dante's Dark Wood[[37]](#footnote-36), a place both untended and nameless, where one might become forever lost on the ever-narrowing paths, evidence of one's existence erased. Llanos notes: "Every natural element is an extension or reflection of the self in multiple ways: the water in its various states, the earth, the trees, the sky, the wind all are inextricably linked to this disembodied subjectivity in which the sexual drive is not directed to men or to hegemonic culture but to the self."[[38]](#footnote-37) She wishes to lose her Self, in other words. Daniel has the garden tended, the leaves skimmed off the surface of the pond; this cleaning up of nature is uncongenial to the Narrator, who treasures the imagined memory of the unknown lover braving a storm to come and save her. Her Unknown Lover's house also has an abandoned garden, its gate latched with a rusty chain that the Lover is able to open only with difficulty, emphasizing the obstacles that must appear on the path to Self realization. The fecund rot of nature is a mirror of the Narrator's unsatisfied yearning.

The Narrator at times seems to *be* Eros, not just governed by it. Bombal's association of wings and birds with her protagonist illustrates this. Her second immersion in the pond occurs after her tenth wedding anniversary with Daniel and by this time, she is forgetful of her Unknown Lover's appearance. But upon discovering that she has lost her straw hat, the one that she wore on that night, she is ecstatic: "Una felicidad intensa me invade, que debo apoyar mis dos manos sobre el corazón para que no se me escape, liviano como un pájaro...Algo nos une para siempre. Algo material, concreto, indestructible: mi sombrero de paja."[[39]](#footnote-38) The Narrator strives toward wholeness, unifying her dream experience with the lover with the material world represented by the straw hat, which is like a nest for her bird-like heart. Only when walking can she access her world of dreams: "Cuando estoy quieta, todos [los sueños] se quiebran las alas sin poderlas abrir."[[40]](#footnote-39) This mysterious connection of women with wings and birds appears other times in *La última niebla*, and markedly in *Las islas nuevas* in which the heroine Yolanda has a physical imperfection: the stump of a wing. "Esa ala como un estigma que la condenaba a la soledad..."[[41]](#footnote-40) The modern image of a chubby Cupid with wings is only a Romantic cartoon of winged Eros, who birthed himself from an unfertilized egg in the Greek cosmogony.

At the beginning there was only Chaos, Night, Darkness, and the Abyss. Earth, the Air and Heaven had no existence. Firstly, black-winged Night laid a germless egg in the bosom of the infinite deeps of Darkness, and from this, after the revolution of long ages, sprang the graceful Love (Eros) with his glittering golden wings, swift as the whirlwinds of the tempest. He mated in the deep Abyss with dark Chaos, winged like himself, and thus hatched forth our race, which was the first to see the light.[[42]](#footnote-41)

Imagined as Eros, the Narrator and her yearning for disorder makes even more sense. The dual personality of the Narrator, then, is that of the dismembered Medusa, whose Eros was robbed from her by rape, and Eros itself, trying to break free of its cosmic shell into Being — without history, without help. As a woman writer of daringly erotic fiction for her time, Bombal was indeed a "germless egg", a being without precedent in Chilean society. Her Narrator similarly strives to birth herself through her mating with the pond and with her mysterious, dark and silent Lover.

The Narrator's second immersion in the pond takes us even deeper into this quandary she faces in trying to materialize the imagined into the real, and her Self into Being:

De costumbre permanezco allí largas horas, el cuerpo y el pensamiento a la deriva. A menudo no queda de mí, en la superficie, más que un vago remolino; yo me he hundido en un mundo misteriosos donde el tiempo parece detenerse bruscamente, donde la luz pesa como una sustancia fosforescente, donde cada uno de mis movimientos adquiere sabias y felinas lentitudes y yo exploro minuciosamente ese antro de silencio. Recojo extrañas caracoles, cristales que al atraer a nuestro elemento se convierten en guijarros negruzcos e informes.[[43]](#footnote-42)

Physical and mental processes are "adrift" and the Narrator immerses herself in her Unconscious where all is quiet and time appears to stop. Detention of time in *La mare au diable* is imposed on Sand's characters in order to compress them into evolution; here, however, the pond's underwater, eternal space is sought out by the Narrator herself, because she is actively exploring her own being. Bombal's "antro de silencio" summons to mind the Platonic cave, where illusions are projected on the wall and thought to be real, and then even further back, to the Cosmogonic Egg from which winged Eros originally emerged. The Narrator gathers up shells and crystals which, when brought up into "our element" turn "blackish and formless". From a Jungian perspective, the Narrator discovers that she is unable to integrate the symbols of her Unconscious with her personality. From an artistic perspective, her beautiful unconscious symbols cannot be born into art without rotting. The Narrator is frustrated, until she sees a horse-drawn coach approach in which she sees the dark face and blue eyes of her Lover. Naked as a naiad, she emerges from the pond and finds she cannot call to him: "[P]ero mi impulso se quebró en una especie de grito ronco, indescriptible. No podía llamarlo, no sabía su nombre." Offering a slight smile and a wave, the man leans back and disappears into the forest. We are reminded that Bombal's protagonists, according to her, are not fully human: here, the Narrator has returned to a primordial state and cannot vocalize in human words, only in a hoarse shout. The phrase "no sabía su nombre" resonates interestingly. The first and most obvious interpretation is that she did not know his proper name; but the second meaning of *nombre* is "noun" or "word", suggesting that one of the costs of going deep into the Unconscious is the possibility of losing touch with the world of word-objects. All symbols have become intimate, too personal, inexpressible to others.

Almost immediately after the departure of the Unknown Lover, the gardener's son Andrés, bumps his boat into her hip, thus calling her back to the world: she, covering her naked chest with her arms, excitedly asks him to confirm the sighting, and he does so. But it is now clear to the reader, though not to the Narrator, that Andrés does not understand what she is really asking of him. He gives her the practical advice that she get out of the pond because she looks pale, and then continues his interminable ordering work, "barriendo las hojas secas que el otoño recostaba sobre el estanque..."[[44]](#footnote-43) The Ultimate Boon, in a Campbellian sense, passes so quickly we might miss it: seeing her lover pass by in a carriage and smile at her and having the event confirmed by another person, the Narrator is able for a brief instant to integrate the dream world and the real world. This moment passed, however, her decline begins. Soon, Andrés, her only witness to the reappearance of the Unknown Lover, drowns in the pond: "[S]e extrae, dos días después, su cadáver amoratado, llenas de frías burbujas de plata las cavidades de los ojos..."[[45]](#footnote-44) Andrés, like the Narrator's crystals and shells of the unconscious, emerges from the pond blackened and dead. Her only witness gone, the Narrator can no longer sustain her yearning, and she gradually weakens until even her attempt to commit suicide by throwing herself in front of an ambulance is thwarted and futile.

The characters in George Sand's *La mar au diable* experience transformation and arrive at an unequivocally happy conclusion to their adventure, whereas the isolated Narrator in *La última niebla* experiences an ambiguous outcome. Abandoned by the Unknown Lover, who was a fantasy in any case, the Narrator's story ends where it began, in the rain, seeking "una especie de inconsciencia" that would allow her to throw herself under the wheels of a car. Her unconscious world defeated in its effort to materialize her dreams, she appeals to it to seek extinction and fails even in that. Nevertheless, despite her apparent defeat, something *has* happened: the imagined experience has become a rich text, endowing the Narrator with a history that she did not possess at the beginning of her adventure, and suggesting a possible identity for her. To paraphrase the Rolling Stones, Bombal's Narrator doesn't get what she wants (perfect love), but she does gets what she needs — an artistic representation of her experience in the form of the novel. In Sand's tale, the pond is the magical mediator that works with the characters to resolve their internal conflicts and achieve happiness; but the positive outcome very much depends on a framework of human and elemental relationships that not only support the transformation of the protagonists, but also demand it. Bombal's solitary Narrator depends wholly on the pond for her transformation, a dynamic that does not bear personal fruit for her in the form of a lover, but does in the form of a poetic narrative.

George Sand's pastoral novel suggests a possible lineage for Bombal's Narrator in her pagan Breton foremothers, and a continuity between their ponds — places of transformation and ritual, gateways between the material and the spiritual world. Bombal's Narrator reaches still deeper than Sand's country folk, revealing herself as primordial: a Medusa yearning for wholeness, her Eros not invested in the continuance of terrestrial fertility and natural human relationships, but rather aimed at purposefully reconnecting her head, dreams, and imagination to her female body and its deep well of erotic energy. She struggles to birth her Self from the cosmogonic Egg of the pond, without the benefit of collaboration with others and absent of the traditional defining goals of women, which hold children and family as the highest values. In this, her first novel, Bombal captures the struggle of the solitary woman artist striving to create meaningful art out of the chaos of the mind, and her is the fierce battle of a woman to direct her Erotic energy towards herself, not others, and become whole in the healing waters of myth.

Annotated Bibliography

Agosín, Marjorie. *Las deterradas del paraíso, protagonistas en la narrativa de María Luisa Bombal*. Senda Nueva de Ediciones, 1983.

Marjorie Agosín is one of the foremost Bombal scholars. The introduction of her book offers a summary of her ideas about Bombalian protagonists in general, and gives a brief summary of how the following central themes relate to Bombal's: imagination, magic, mythology, the natural world, hidden and oppressive social influences, alienation and frustrated love. The first chapter offers a jumping-off point for analyzing the trajectory of the narrator of *La última niebla* as a "hero's journey" in the monomythic structure devised by Joseph Campbell.

Aiello, Antonio. "Arquetipos y estereotipos femeninos en la novelística de María Luisa Bombal". *Divergencias. Revista de estudios lingüísticos y literarios.* Volumen 5 Número 1, (Verano 2007), pp. 3-13.

Alighieri, Dante, Robert Hollander, and Jean Hollander. *Inferno*. Anchor, 2002.

Cantos 1 and 2 acquaint us with the mysterious Dark Wood which I use for comparison to Bombal's "abandoned garden".

Aristophanes, Translation by Eugene O'Neill, Jr., "Birds". Perseus Digital Library. lines 690–699

These few lines about the birth of Eros inspired me to see Bombal's winged protagonists as self-generated seekers of truth.

Bombal, María Luisa. *La última niebla*. Rayo, 2009.

The primary text that I am discussing. Published originally in 1934, Bombal's first work is considered by some to be the first work of magic realism.

Hunter, James. "Eros and Wholeness". *Journal of Religion and Health*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Fall, 1983), pp. 175-190.

Hunter's essay is a foundation for understanding the mythic origins and function of Eros, and provides an understanding of Eros as connected to, but not fully defined by, sexuality.

Jung, C. G., and Marie-Luise Von Franz. *Man and His Symbols*. Doubleday, 1964.

M.-L. Von Franz compiled and edited Jung's major work, started by Jung and finished by Franz and a team of Jungian colleagues after Jung's death. Franz's chapter 3, "The Process of Individuation", outlines Jung's ideas about the search for the Self, the relationship with the Shadow, and the function of animus/anima in men and women as seen in art, dreams, folklore and religious myth.

Hamilton, James F. "Sand's La Mare Au Diable, Awakening through 'evil' and the hero's journey." *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 36.1 (2007): 45-60.

Hamilton applies the the thought of Jung and Joseph Campbell to The Devil's Pond by George Sand, tracing the development of the character Germaine from a depressed widower, to hero, to lover, allowing him to achieve wholeness with himself, his community, and the cosmos through the initiation he experiences at The Devil's Pool. Hamilton's thinking provides a framework for understanding Sand's novel and analyzing *La última niebla.*

Llanos M., Bernardita. "María Luisa Bombal, or the Feminine Writer." *Passionate Subjects/Split Subjects in Twentieth-century Literature in Chile: Brunet, Bombal and Eltit.* Bucknell University Press, 2009.

Llanos provides invaluable information about Bombal's literary and personal biography, as well as interesting analysis of the pond scenes of *La última niebla*, and ideological conflict in the Bombalian oeuvre.

Muñóz, Manuel Peña. "María Luisa Bombal: Testimonio de una amistad." *Biografía y textualidades, naturaleza y subjetividad: ensayos sobre la obra de María Luisa Bombal.* By Macarema Areco and Patricio Lizaba. Ediciones UC, 2015. 45-69.

Muñoz's narrative of his enduring friendship with Bombal reveals her ideas about her own influences and the nature of her heroines.

Sand, George. *The Devil's Pool*. Trans. Jane Minot Sedgwick and Ellery Sedgwick. Little Brown, 1901.

One of Sand's most popular works, *La mare au diable* (*The devil's pool*) was originally published in French in 1846, and is the lens through which I will analyze *La última niebla*. The two works have in common an intriguingly similar system of symbols to talk about the heroic adventures of their protagonists, and, given Bombal's French education and familiarity with French, I find the comparison interesting and fruitful.

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1. I use "feminist" here to mean women writers who place women protagonists at the center of their narratives. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Manuel Peña Muñóz, "María Luisa Bombal: Testimonio de una amistad", *Biografía y textualidades, naturaleza y subjetividad: ensayos sobre la obra de María Luisa Bombal*. Ediciones UC, 2015, 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. James Hunter. "Eros and Wholeness". *Journal of Religion and Health*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Fall, 1983), 176-177. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. "[R]oundness (the mandala motif) generally symbolizes natural wholeness...The round table, incidentally, is a well-known symbol of wholeness and plays a role in mythology — for instance King Arthur's round table, which itself is an image derived from the table of the Last Supper." Carl G. Jung. and Marie-Luise Von Franz. *Man and His Symbols*. Doubleday, 1964. 215. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. James F. Hamilton. "Sand's La Mare Au Diable, Awakening through 'evil' and the hero's journey." *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 36.1, 2007. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. George Sand. *The Devil's Pool*. Trans. Jane Minot Sedgwick and Ellery Sedgwick. Little Brown, 1901, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Joseph Campbell describes this stage of the mythic adventure as when an external or internal pressure forces the hero to face the beginning of a change in his/her status. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Sand, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Sand, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Sand, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Hamilton, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. Hamilton quoting Jung, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. Sand, 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. Sand, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. Sand, 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
16. Hamilton, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
17. Sand, 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
18. Hamilton, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
19. The Child archetype inheres magical qualities because, while child-like, s/he displays adult-level understanding of important ideas and/or spiritual matters, like a Maggie Simpson in the cartoon series *The Simpsons*. The Child unites male and female, God in Heaven and Mother Earth, like a kind of spiritual electrical conductor. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
20. The *temenos* (sacred space) acts as the stage for sacrifice. In the context of Germain...something within[him] has died at the pond through evil." Hamilton, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
21. Bombal, 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
22. Bombal, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
23. Marjorie Agosín. *Las deterradas del paraíso, protagonistas en la narrativa de María Luisa Bombal*. Senda Nueva de Ediciones, 1983, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
24. 2. Antonio Aiello. "Arquetipos y estereotipos femeninos en la novelística de María Luisa Bombal". *Divergencias. Revista de estudios lingüísticos y literarios.* Volumen 5 Número 1, (Verano 2007), 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
25. Bombal, 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
26. Bombal, 2-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
27. Bombal, 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
28. Bombal, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
29. Bombal, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
30. Muñóz, 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
31. Muñóz, 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
32. Bombal, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
33. Agosín, 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
34. Llanos, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
35. Bombal, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
36. Bombal, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
37. Dante Aligheri, Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander. *Inferno*. New York, Anchor. Cantos 1.2 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
38. Llanos, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
39. Bombal, 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
40. Bombal, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
41. Bombal 147, Interview with María Luisa Bombal [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
42. Aristophanes, Translation by Eugene O'Neill, Jr., "Birds". Perseus Digital Library. lines 690–699 [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
43. Bombal, 23 [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
44. Bombal, 25 [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
45. Bombal, 34 [↑](#footnote-ref-44)