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Critical Ethics: Witnessing Otherness in La última niebla

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Critical Ethics: Witnessing Otherness in *La última niebla*

Abstract / Resumen

La última niebla [*The Final Mist*] (1935) by María Luisa Bombal presents a female protagonist traumatized by the restrictive gender norms of 1930s Argentina. One would expect that the protagonist's increasing alienation throughout the novel and her ultimate surrender to an identity that she loathes would generate a compassionate response from readers. However, the text has generated a significant body of notably unsympathetic—and even censorious—criticism from scholars. In an effort to analyze why Bombal's novel and the protagonist's performance have been problematic for critics, I turn from literary theory to philosophy. By combining Richard Rorty's vision of a "literary culture" with Kelly Oliver's theory of "witnessing," I argue that we've been asking the wrong questions of this text. Rather than asking if the text, the author, and/or the protagonist are socially committed enough or experimental enough or feminist enough for us to care, we should be asking what this text reveals about the process of human subjectivity in general, marginalized subjectivity in particular, and how we can create more ethical relationships between self and other.

Keywords / Palabras clave

subjectivity, recognition, ethics, witnessing, Bombal, Rorty, Oliver

Critical Ethics: Witnessing Otherness in *La última niebla*

[N]ovels and ethnographies which sensitize one to the pain of those who do not speak our language must do the job which demonstrations of a common human nature were supposed to do. Solidarity has to be constructed out of the little pieces, rather than found already waiting, in the form of an ur-language which all of us recognize when we hear it.
--Richard Rorty (*Contingency* 94)

La última niebla [*The Final Mist*] (1935) by María Luisa Bombal presents a female protagonist traumatized by the restrictive gender norms of 1930s Argentina. The thirty-five page novella opens with the surreptitious marriage of the upper-class protagonist to her cousin, Daniel, after the death of his first wife. The protagonist, who remains nameless throughout the novella, narrates the story in first-person through a series of non-chronological, diary-like entries and two letters. Immediately following the dismal description of her unconsummated wedding night, the protagonist recalls walking in on her sister-in-law sharing a stolen embrace in the drawing room with her lover. The event awakens the protagonist to the emptiness of her own marriage and her unfulfilled sexuality. The diary records her struggle to construct her own meaningful story: in its pages, she narrates her marginalized status within the family and the psychological abuse of her husband, her moment of sexual self-discovery while alone in a woodland pond, and her sexual encounter with an unknown lover on a midnight walk. The reality of this encounter is eventually challenged by Daniel, leading the protagonist to doubt her own story and, eventually, her own sanity, and to resign herself to a life that is not of her own making.

One would expect that the protagonist's increasing alienation throughout the novel and her ultimate surrender to an identity that she loathes would generate a compassionate response from readers. However, the text has generated a significant body of notably unsympathetic—and even censorious—criticism from scholars. The protagonist has often been dismissed as an overly sentimental, self-absorbed, shallow dreamer by critics who conclude that she is too passive to

challenge the masculinist social order in which she exists (Adams, Alonso, Baker, Bente, Garrels, Levine, Oyarzún, and Vidal). Furthermore, this critical response is often directed at not only the protagonist but also the author and her text more generally. Scholars have both praised and criticized Bombal for her “essentially feminine” writing (Agosín, Alonso, Baker, Bente, Garrels, Guerra-Cunningham, and Uslar-Pietri). Even when these gendered descriptions are intended as praise, I argue that they do nothing to move us beyond the recognizable binaries of feminine/masculine, particular/universal, and nature/culture that marginalize the female protagonist and her experience in the first place.¹

The goals of this essay are twofold. First, I trace the history of academic response to otherness in *La última niebla*. My analysis shows that by reading through the lenses of genre and gender, many critics have failed to move beyond recognition of the novel’s peculiarity and the protagonist’s otherness. Rather than illuminating the protagonist and the text, these critical approaches create blind spots. By privileging the discourses of genre and gender, critics tend to read the novel and the protagonist as pathetically feminine, exquisitely feminine, or not feminist enough. The focus on whether or not the novel is an example of social realism, fantastic fiction, feminine writing, or feminist writing, or on whether or not the protagonist is a woman who flaunts traditional norms or lives lost in a dream world, completely misses Bombal’s insightful representation of the process of human subjectivity in general, marginalized subjectivity in particular, and the opportunity

¹ The protagonist’s identity as a self-absorbed daydreamer who is out of touch with reality was suggested as early as the 1940 prologue of the second edition of *La última niebla*, when the prestigious Spanish philologist Amado Alonso declared, “Todo lo que pasa en esta novela pasa dentro de la cabeza y del corazón de una mujer que sueña y ensueña” [*Everything that happens in this novel takes place in the head and heart of a woman who dreams and daydreams*] (my translation 11). As part of Alonso’s glowing praise for the novel, he establishes the text as essentially feminine, stating, “La autora nos presenta aquí un puro vivir del ‘alma’, una entrega afectiva a los sentimientos y a la fantasía que los alimenta. [...] Si la mujer vive para la vida afectiva del alma y el hombre para las creaciones y realizaciones del espíritu, éste es un temperamento íntegramente femenino. (¡Qué suerte, que el oficio masculino de escribir no haya masculinizado a una escritora más!)” [*The author presents us with an example of living from the ‘soul,’ an emotional surrender to the sentiments and the fantasy that sustains them. [...] If woman lives for the affective life of the soul and man for the creations and achievements of the spirit, this is an integrally feminine temperament. (What luck that the masculine craft of writing has not masculinized yet another female writer!)*] (my translation 26-27).

for a more ethical relationship between self and other.

Indeed, Bombal's protagonist prompts many of the same questions about identity formation posed by philosopher Kelly Oliver in *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*. In an effort to move us beyond contemporary theories of subjectivity based on a Hegelian notion of antagonistic struggle for recognition between an autonomous self and its others, Oliver asks, "what of the subjectivity of this so-called other? What of the subject position of those othered by these discourses of subjectivity? Surely, they don't think of themselves as mute, still to come, invisible, or nonexistent" (6). Moreover, she wonders, after acts of repeated objectification, "how are agency and subjectivity restored to survivors?" (8). Following this line of questioning, my second goal for this essay is to provide an analysis of *La última niebla* that models Oliver's theory of subjectivity. That is, to go beyond recognition of the traditional observations of genre and gender in order to "witness" the protagonist's otherness, to reconceive the other as a subject in her own right.

La última niebla provides us with a protagonist who testifies to the debilitating process of recognition through which the subject is constituted—a pathological process that eventually leads to the destruction of subjectivity and her total objectification. In an effort to analyze why Bombal's novel and the protagonist's performance have been problematic for critics, I turn from literary theory to philosophy. Ultimately, by combining Richard Rorty's vision of a "literary culture" with Kelly Oliver's theory of "witnessing," I argue that we've been asking the wrong questions of this text. Rather than asking if the text, the author, and/or the protagonist are socially committed enough or experimental enough or feminist enough for us to care, we should be asking what this text can teach us about subjectivity and otherness. Can we respond to the protagonist's otherness in a way that radically re-thinks established truths and re-examines whom we consider credible and why?

The Literary Critic as Witness: Richard Rorty and Kelly Oliver

If we accept Rorty's claim that the literary critic is the new moral adviser of a liberal society and that it is up to literature to effect freedom and equality, then we must also accept that the literary critic assumes the responsibility of "witnessing" as put forth by Kelly Oliver. In the role of Oliver's "witness," the literary critic has the ethical obligation to make herself responsible to the text by providing an analysis that opens up the possibility of response by and to the other, thereby moving us beyond the closed-off readings often seen of *La última niebla*.

In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty posits that our best hope for human solidarity in the twenty-first century lies within the realm of literature rather than philosophy or religion.² Faced with the very real possibility that we will never find (or agree on) the elusive, mystical, single Truth proffered by both philosophy and religion, the participants of this emerging culture have turned instead to literature. Rather than seeking *the* final answer that will tell us how we should live and what we should make of ourselves, literary culture seeks *infinite* answers and possibilities in books. As such, a literary culture displaces epistemological certainty with an ethical commitment to be generously oriented toward others so that we might achieve a "maximally free, leisured, and tolerant global community" ("Philosophy" 27).

Rorty's utopian literary society is populated by readers (and critics/scholars) who purposefully seek out others' stories in order to combine the private quest for self-creation with the social project of living for/with others. Rorty calls these individuals "liberal ironists," explaining:

I borrow my definition of "liberal" from Judith Shklar, who says that liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do. I use "ironist" to name the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires – someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance. Liberal

² As Rorty argues throughout his oeuvre, this "literary culture" made its first appearance in the Western world alongside the modern novel, when authors like "Cervantes and Shakespeare began to suspect that human beings were, and ought to be, so diverse that there is no point in pretending that they all carry a single truth deep in their bosoms" ("Philosophy" 11).

ironists are people who include among these ungroundable desires their own hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease. (*Contingency* xv)

The liberal ironist, then, is someone who seeks to avoid cruelty by constantly questioning and examining his own historically contingent worldview or “final vocabulary.”³ This constant questioning pushes us (liberal ironists) to modify and amplify our final vocabularies in order to both create our own authentic self and to “extend our sense of ‘we’ to people whom we have previously thought of as ‘they’” (*Contingency* 192). Rorty convincingly argues that the moral admonition “because she is human” has not been enough to create social justice in democratic societies. Rather, “feelings of solidarity are necessarily a matter of which similarities and dissimilarities strike us as salient...” (192). As such, our best hope for solidarity is to expose ourselves to difference in the hope of making the dissimilar similar. Literature can accomplish this objective by putting us into contact with the final vocabularies of other people different from ourselves, thereby expanding our sense of self through an “imaginative identification with the details of others’ lives” (*Contingency* 190). Literature conveniently allows the liberal ironist to combine the “search for private perfection” (the amplification of his final vocabulary with new stories of possible selves) with “the project of living for others” (the creation of solidarity through stories that show him how his actions affect others) (*Contingency* 143).

This private/public distinction has been the most criticized of Rorty’s ideas.⁴ Critics have charged that no one person can maintain this split, freely pursuing our own interests in private but

³ Rorty defines “final vocabulary” as “a set of words which [human beings] use to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives....They are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives....It is ‘final’ in that...[t]hose words are as far as he can go with the language; beyond them there is only helpless passivity or a resort to force” (*Contingency* 73). It should be added that, in spite of the term’s connotation of immutability, Rorty does in fact believe that this vocabulary can be modified and amplified through contact with literature and people different from oneself. By communicating his theory with Kelly Oliver’s theory of “witnessing”, I show how this amplification can be achieved.

⁴ See, for example, Richard Bernstein’s *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* and Hilde Lindemann Nelson’s *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*. For a concise summary of the charges, see Rorty’s “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre” in *Pragmatism, Critique, Judgment: Essays for Richard J. Bernstein*. Finally, there is Robert

then checking these interests at the door when we enter the public square. Furthermore, these critics have charged that a literary culture is insufficient to create and sustain the climate of tolerance necessary for a democratic society to flourish. They wonder if we no longer need to agree on “the good life” and are left to pursue our own convictions, what guarantees that we help our neighbor to do the same? What motivates us to do more than simply *notice* cruelty when we encounter it? How do we ensure that human solidarity becomes an ethical obligation? I argue that the answer lies in the literary critic as witness. Rorty’s theory turns us toward literature and teaches us to notice cruelty suffered by an other. Oliver’s theory takes us beyond recognition of self and other. Her work helps us to reimagine subjectivity as something other than hostile relationships, to truly “extend our sense of ‘we’” to others as Rorty hopes (*Contingency* 192).

I suggest that if we accept Rorty’s claim that literature now occupies a privileged place to effect freedom and equality and, therefore, that the literary critic is the new moral adviser of a tolerant, democratic society, then we must accept that the literary critic assumes the responsibility of “witnessing” as put forth by Oliver in her writing on subjectivity. In Oliver’s theoretical terminology, witnessing is the very process through which subjectivity is formed and sustained. Moreover, witnessing is the ethical response of one subject to an other, and Oliver’s theory can help us answer the questions posed about the gaps in Rorty’s work by erasing the public/private split laid out in his version of subjectivity. In Oliver’s conceptualization, there is no split. Rather, the split is seen as the pathological result of the way we have conceptualized and talked about subjectivity. In Oliver’s words, “If we are selves, subjects, and have subjectivity and agency by virtue of our dialogical relationships with others, then we are not opposed to others. We are by virtue of others” (*Witnessing* 18). As a “witness” rather than a “liberal ironist,” the literary critic makes an ethical commitment to herself and the reader to provide an analysis that opens up the possibility of response by and to the

Brandom’s edited anthology *Rorty and His Critics*, which has critical essays by Davidson, Habermas, and others, along with Rorty’s responses.

other. She does this not simply because she believes that cruelty is the worst thing that we can do but because she knows that she herself cannot exist as a subject without the dialogic address and response of others.

Oliver argues that our subjectivity, our sense of self as agent, is the result of our connection to and dependence on others, rather than the antagonistic struggle between self and other that is often put forth by contemporary theorists (Judith Butler, Frantz Fanon, Nancy Fraser, Axel Honneth, Charles Taylor, etc.). For Oliver, subjectivity “is not located in a subject who takes it away from his object or other. Rather, subjectivity is the process of witnessing, of addressing oneself to others, of responding to the address from others” (*Witnessing* 223). As such, subjectivity does not require alienation or domination of the other by the self. Instead, all forms of oppression actually work to undermine and destroy subjectivity because they undermine our ability to tell ourselves—the stories of our pasts, presents, and future—to another. Oliver explains, “If the possibility of address is annihilated, then subjectivity is also annihilated. To conceive of oneself as a subject is to have the ability to address oneself to another, real or imaginary, actual or potential. Subjectivity is the result of, and depends on, the process of witnessing—address-ability and response-ability” (*Witnessing* 17). When cruelty and injustice do occur, those othered as a subject need an audience who will recognize their suffering, but also attest to something that is *beyond recognition* of their marginalized subject positions: the possibility of their personhood, a future where their negated subjectivity is viable. Oliver explains the concept as follows:

It is important to note that witnessing has both the juridical connotations of seeing with one’s own eyes and the religious connotations of testifying to that which cannot be seen, in other words, bearing witness. ... The double meaning of witnessing—*eyewitness* testimony based on first-hand knowledge, on the one hand, and *bearing witness* to something beyond recognition that can’t be seen, on the other—is the heart of subjectivity. (*Witnessing* 16)

Witnessing, then, is necessarily dialogic; it is the ability (and ethical obligation) to respond to and address others. During this process, the speaker testifies to his lived experience of objectification

and bears witness to his possibility as a subject—even if that subject is other. In turn, the listener is ethically obligated to respond in a way that enables continued dialogue and therefore avoids cruelty. “Such an encounter necessarily takes us beyond recognition ... We are obligated ... to testify and to listen to testimony—to encounter each other—because subjectivity and humanity are the result of witnessing” (*Witnessing* 90). Oliver insists that it is not just othered subjects who are implicated in and constituted by witnessing. *All* subjects depend on the address and response structure of witnessing in order to view themselves as agents. As such, the role of the witness-listener (e.g., the critic) is just as vital as the role of witness-speaker (e.g., the protagonist).

Precisely because the process of witnessing takes two—one who narrates and one who listens/responds—the listener is implicated in her response to the story of the other. In order to be an ethical witness to the other:

Vigilance in self-elaboration, self-analysis, self-interpretation is also necessary. That is to say, vigilance in elaborating, analyzing, and interpreting the process through which *we* become who *we* are, the process through which *we* become subjects and othereds, vigilance in interpreting the dialogic nature of the self and our investments in others. (“Beyond Recognition: Witnessing Ethics” 39)

Throughout her work, Oliver shows that in order for subjectivity to flourish, for ethical relationships to exist between self and others, narrating our stories is not enough because it does not take us beyond recognition, whereby the dominant culture determines which subjects will be recognized and how. On the contrary, Oliver argues that, for the listener (critic), it “is an imperative to be self-critical especially with our responses to others, most especially because there are those others whom we may not recognize. We can never stop interrogating ... why we do what we do, why we value what we value, why we desire what we desire, why we fear what we fear” (“Witnessing and Testimony” 86). Without a self-critical vigilance, our interactions with others and our readings of othered texts and characters run the risk of repeating the dynamic of domination “where what is recognized is always only something familiar to the subject” (*Witnessing* 9). Indeed, Oliver maintains

that the very notion of recognition is a symptom of the pathology of oppression and not a necessary component of subjectivity. Therefore, without vigilance: “Any real contact with difference or otherness becomes impossible because recognition requires the assimilation of difference into something familiar” (*Witnessing* 9). On the other hand, by maintaining a self-critical posture in our interactions with others, we realize that, to the extent that “recognition is necessary to subjectivity, it isn’t the kind of recognition . . . through which we recognize others only when we have understood them and passed judgment on them” (*Witnessing* 106). Rather, in order to reconstitute those othered as subjects, we must learn that to “recognize others requires acknowledging that their experiences are real even though they may be incomprehensible to us; this means that we must recognize that not everything that is real is recognizable to us” (106). Witnessing is both a dialogical and a paradoxical process. At base, it is the ability to respond to, and address, others. The witness-speaker testifies to her lived experience (her subject position in finite history) and bears witness to her possibility as an “I” (her infinite possibility of subjectivity). The witness-listener, in turn, is ethically obligated to respond in a way that opens space for the other’s possibility and therefore avoids objectification. As I suggest below, in many instances Bombal criticism has (mostly) unwittingly failed to fulfill this ethical obligation by looking for the recognizable in terms of genre and gender.⁵

Gendered Genres: Soap Opera Melodrama, Sex Stories, and Diaries

When focusing on issues of gender and genre in their analyses of *La última niebla*, critics have often collapsed these two categories into one due to the protagonist’s proclivity for what I will call the gendered genres of the dime-store romance and the private diary. Curiously, critics tend to describe the form of the protagonist’s text and her narrative style as feminine, but then go on to

⁵ To use Rorty’s terminology, these critics have appealed to their own final vocabularies in order to find the recognizable or “presently stateable” text in the narrative, as opposed to working out a *new* final vocabulary in an attempt to move beyond recognition. For the liberal ironist, there is also an ethical, albeit ungroundable, obligation to expand one’s final vocabulary—solidarity is impossible without it.

respond to the protagonist's tale in a way that ignores gender *difference* and reinscribes women into the only plot (genre) available to them in 1930s Latin America. In *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing*, Nancy Miller argues that the literary devices typically associated with this gendered genre, which she calls "female plot," traditionally have been used to script very limited roles for women—namely wife and mother. Miller goes on to argue, however, that critics have failed to recognize that "female-authored literature generally questions the costs and overdetermination of this particular narrative economy with an insistence such that the fictions engendered provide an internal, dissenting commentary on the female plot itself" (208). In other words, the very use of these overly-determined genres (romance, diaries) and their attendant techniques can be a subversive act when used ironically by the author.⁶

In failing to question how and why the heroine's penchant for sentimentality and soap-opera style plots correspond with and diverge from the dominant narrative economy for women, critics have produced dismissive readings of the protagonist's sentimentality, her sexual fantasies, melodramatic musings, and her envy of her sister-in-law's tragic love affair. Scholars concerned with the role and representation of gender have read the protagonist as "passive, preoccupied with [her] physical beauty and dependent upon men," although they do agree that she serves to confront the reader "with the societal limitations of the Latin American woman" (Levine 160). On the other hand, scholars focused on genre and the narrative techniques of the protagonist have read her as "neurotic," an unreliable narrator lost in a fantasy world (Bente 106, 110-111). Both approaches take for granted the critics' ability to recognize difference, but it is a recognition that does not move us

⁶ Kristine Byron uses the terms "female plot" and "romance plot" interchangeably. She borrows the latter from Rachel Blau DuPlessis, who "defines the 'romance plot' as the traditional fate of female characters in novels: 'Once upon a time, the end, the rightful end, of women in novels was social—successful courtship, marriage—or judgmental of her sexual and social failure—death. These are both resolutions of romance'" (350n). I prefer the term "gendered genre" here, so as to emphasize the interchangeability of the two (gender and genre) when it comes to the representation of women in these literary roles.

beyond domination or toward otherness. Neither approach applies the self-critical vigilance advocated by Oliver.

The protagonist's diary opens with several humiliating experiences she suffers in the domestic sphere. These humiliations directly attack the protagonist's subjectivity, the story she tries to tell of her self as a desiring and desirable *I*. Her first embarrassment comes in the opening fragment where she recounts her arrival at the estate with her new husband. She is "scandalized" when the servants stare at her in surprise upon entering the house, and quickly realizes that Daniel has not informed the staff of their marriage. Daniel bluntly explains, "Mi prima y yo nos casamos esta mañana" [*My cousin and I got married this morning*] (9)⁷. As they prepare for their first night together, she notes the "mirada hostil" [*hostile gaze*] with which he looks at her. When she asks him what's wrong, he replies, "Te miro y pienso que te conozco demasiado... No necesito ni siquiera desnudarte" [*I look at you and think that I know you too well... I don't even need to take your clothes off*] (9-10). She tells herself that his aggressive behavior is natural, given that less than a year ago he went through this same wedding-night ritual with his first wife, whom he adored and then lost when she died three months later. He antagonistically demands:

—¿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," replicó, cayéndome de sueño.
 —"Te hubiera gustado ser una solterona arrugada, que teje para los pobres de la hacienda?"
 Me encojo de hombros. [...] Permanezco muda. No me hacen ya el menor efecto las frases cáusticas con que me turbaba no hace aún quince días. (10)

[*Why did we get married?*]
 [*To get married,*] I respond.
 Daniel lets out a small laugh.
 [*Do you know that you're extremely lucky to get to marry me?*]
 [*Yes, I know,*] I reply, ready to collapse from fatigue.
 [*Would you have liked to be a wrinkled old maid, who knits for the estate's poor people?*]

⁷ All translations of the novella and secondary sources are my own.

I shrug my shoulders. [...] I remain mute. The caustic phrases that used to make me so upset only fifteen days ago now don't have the least effect on me. (10)

When they get to the bedroom, Daniel discomfitingly begins to cry and the protagonist pretends not to notice, telling herself that it is “la actitud más discreta” [*the “most discreet response”*], but sensing that it is also the “más cómoda” [*“most comfortable”*] (11). She is admittedly bothered by her selfishness but unable to respond as she, too, is overwhelmed by the day’s emotional toll and her new husband’s derision.

Thomas Bente and Armand Baker have pointed to the wedding night scene as proof of the protagonist’s culpability in her own marital unhappiness and what they read as her eventual neurosis. For both critics, it is her own inaction that leads her to despair at the end of the novel. They both fail to interrogate their own expectations of and responses to the protagonist. Bente explains, “She has, unconsciously, paralleled her husband’s *temporary* sexual impotence, caused by the trauma of reenacting the wedding night with his new wife, with her own emotional frigidity, *a basic, integral part* of her own personality” (my emphasis 104). His argument compares Daniel’s personal trauma with the protagonist’s structural oppression in order to show an equal distribution of suffering, a move that Oliver refers to as a “leveling comparison.” Drawing on the work of Dominick LaCapra, Oliver shows that a leveling comparison “works to normalize horror [trauma] and level differential circumstances” (*Witnessing* 111). Such a comparison results in either assimilation or denial of past political, social, and economic differences and inequalities. Bente’s analysis does both. He simultaneously equates the personal loss of Daniel with the structural objectification of the protagonist yet distinguishes between them. We are to see the two as equally harmful to the characters, yet Daniel’s response is forgiven as a “temporary” inability to act while hers is essentialized as an “integral” condition of her personality. Bente ignores that, from the moment of their arrival, Daniel is consistently cruel and cold to his new wife, chipping away at the final vocabulary she is trying to develop for herself by mocking her subject position as woman and

lording over her his role in saving her from becoming an old maid. In following entries, the narrator highlights further humiliations when she recounts that Daniel makes her tie back her “extravagantes cabellos” [*extravagant hair*] in an effort to imitate his first wife (13). Even more painful for her are the humiliations she suffers when their sexual attempts end in his “llamándola, gritándome al oído cosas absurdas que iban dirigidas a [su primera esposa]” [*calling for her and shouting absurdities that were intended for [his first wife]*] (29). Bente, however, refuses to acknowledge the differential in social power between the protagonist and her husband.

Baker, too, refuses to see Daniel’s role, or society’s role more broadly, in the protagonist’s inability to respond and posits that all responsibility for action lies with the narrator. Baker tells us:

la “acción apropiada” habría sido esforzarse por establecer un buen matrimonio con Daniel, de ser algo más que un mero sustituto de la primera esposa muerta. Y si no logra hacer esto porque Daniel se niega a reconocerla como persona, ella quizás debiera aceptar las consecuencias de abandonar a su marido y buscar el amor en otra parte. Pero ella nunca actúa; se refugia en una situación imaginaria, lo cual produce más disociación. Visto de esta manera, la tragedia no es el resultado de ser la víctima de un destino cruel, ni de una sociedad masculina, sino de ser ella misma el agente de su propia destrucción. (414)

[the ‘appropriate action’ would have been to make an effort to establish a good marriage with Daniel, to be something more than a mere substitute of the first dead wife. And if she doesn’t manage to do this because Daniel refuses to recognize her as a person, then maybe she should accept the consequences of abandoning her husband and looking for love elsewhere. But she never acts; she takes refuge in an imaginary situation, which produces more dissociation. Seen in this light, the tragedy is not the result of being the victim of a cruel destiny, nor of a masculine society, but rather of her being the agent of her own destruction. (414)]

Neither critic assumes that Daniel has any ethical obligation to establish a relationship or to be responsive to his wife. In fact, Baker endorses “the Hegelian notion that subjectivity is the result of hostile conflict” by maintaining that it is the protagonist’s responsibility to fight for recognition from her repressive husband (Oliver, *Witnessing* 6). If *she* fails in that struggle, then, of course, she must “accept the consequences” of looking for love elsewhere. Baker’s analysis completely ignores the social and political realities of 1930s Argentina that would have made it impossible for the protagonist to simply leave a loveless marriage. Baker never considers that Daniel, as her superior, has any moral responsibility or legal obligation to extend recognition (or compassion) to his wife. In

fact, in his conclusion he outright denies that society plays any role in her tragic ending, declaring an agency that the protagonist never had domestically, socially, or legally.

In an odd conclusion of his own, Bente begrudgingly acknowledges the “social pressures” that contribute to the suffering of Bombal’s protagonists, but then goes on to say that we belittle Bombal if we focus on these constraints (105). His remarks are worth citing in their entirety, as they illustrate several of the tactics used by critics to deny one’s responsibility to an other.⁸

This study has not attempted to vindicate *entirely* the culpability of the male protagonists María Luisa Bombal created. Clearly, they are often less than exemplary fictional characters. Daniel in *La última niebla*, dispirited and mournful over the death of his first wife, indeed does contribute to the heroine’s inability to achieve a self-identity which could lead to fulfillment both as a person and as a wife-lover....

Nevertheless, as has been shown, both *La última niebla* and *La amortajada* present central *women figures* who, *by their very nature*, directly contribute to the frustrations, neuroses, and disillusionment in which they become engulfed... Criticism of Bombal’s works that minimizes or refuses to acknowledge this, risks converting the author into an avant-garde voice for female equality, ... and viewing her works as tendentious social commentary. Bombal achieved *much more*; her literature of neuroses and frustration ... achieves the highest tradition of art as a reflection of life and literature as a conveyance of the perplexities of the *human condition*. (emphasis mine 110-111)

Despite Bente’s assertion that he recognizes Daniel’s role in the heroine’s suffering, his analysis once again vindicates the male protagonist by leveling gender difference and re-centering maleness. He compares Daniel’s trauma with the protagonist’s in order to show an even distribution of suffering in history. Like Baker, Bente implicitly suggests a political equality between men and women that denies the history of subordination suffered by Argentine women at the beginning of the twentieth century. Paradoxically, he goes on to completely disassociate Bombal’s male protagonists from the female by again postulating an essential female difference or “nature” that contributes to their marginalized status. To the extent that the heroine suffers more, and is unhappy with her current

⁸ Oliver identifies witness-listeners who refuse to acknowledge their own “response-ability” or who “tell stories that cover over one’s responsibility for social injustice” as “false witnesses” (*Witnessing* 107). The critic becomes a “false witness,” when she or he fails to engage in the “ongoing process of self-critical interpretation in which the self is conceived as fundamentally dialogic and relational rather than sovereign...” (113).

situation, Bente and Baker suggest that it is only because she *chose* such a fate—or, more disturbingly, failed to win recognition from her husband.

Intriguingly, both Bente's and Baker's readings obliquely touch on genre when they insist that Bombal's text is not socially engaged literature. Instead, they focus on the novel's fantastic elements, arguing that it is a representation of female fantasy—a feminine dream world that probes the nature of existence and reality. After insisting that this is a woman's world and an essential female nature, Bente then argues that reading Bombal as a voice for women is inane and even belittling to the author: her texts are not reflections of *women's* lives and issues, but rather reflections of *the human condition*. Despite Bente's move to identify women's neuroses as part of the human condition, this last argument paradoxically hinges on women's *essential* inferiority: reading Bombal's work as critical commentary on women's lives is only belittling if women's lives do not reflect the human condition. Thus, when Bente praises Bombal for her ability to create “art as a reflection of life” he is not praising the author for her ability to represent otherness in a way that shows him something new about a particular sort of woman or human being; he is praising his own ability to find *his* recognizable feminine in her text. Bente thereby repeats the subordination of the protagonist represented within the narrative itself by both denying and assimilating gender and genre difference.

Bente and Baker are some of the most strident critics in their responses to the protagonist; however, I do not want to imply that this line of analysis is unique to male critics. Elizabeth Garrels and Linda Gould Levine, to varying degrees, also fail to bear witness to otherness in the protagonist's narrative by reading for a text that reflects their own, albeit in this case, feminist, final vocabularies. Whereas Bente and Baker read from a phallogentric tradition (the domestic sphere and marital bliss are solely a woman's responsibility), Garrels and Levine employ a feminist approach to the text. Nonetheless, Garrels concludes that the romance plot invented by the protagonist and her mysterious lover is “patéticamente convencional y limitada” [*pathetically conventional and limited*] (86)

and that “el texto nunca logra cuestionar el orden masculino dentro del cual funciona” [*“the text never manages to question the masculine order within which it functions”*] (83). Levine extends this attitude to all of Bombal’s characters, stating, “[t]hey are passive, preoccupied with their physical beauty and dependent upon men for their justification in life. Bombal makes no attempt to provide viable alternatives to this stagnant existence which constitutes the female reality” (161). These critics, too, are disappointed when they don’t find the woman *they* recognize as woman.

The protagonist’s representation of gender, however, is not the only element of the novella that has been problematic for critics. Many have also dismissed her subjectivity due to the narrative form itself: an interior monologue of twenty-nine diary-like fragments of varying length, in which the protagonist uses highly emotive, fantastical language and provides no time indicators apart from the mention of her tenth wedding anniversary halfway through the text. The focus on form shifts our attention to genre, but it is again confounded by the narrator’s gender. In “Reading Power,” Cynthia Duncan observes:

In her diary, she gives language free rein ... using words and images which vividly conjure up the strength of her emotions, but which do little to convey the precise meaning of the scene to us... *La última niebla* leaves us with the uncomfortable feeling that we are reading a text which is not directed at us. We approach the text not from a straightforward, direct path but by peering over the shoulder of a woman who is essentially writing for herself, and who uses language in a private, therapeutic way. (308)

The protagonist’s language—her use of mist as metaphor, her lack of concrete details like dates and times—contributes to the novel’s fantastic elements. As such, the text offers multiple readings of the protagonist’s reality and refuses to resolve the reader’s uncertainties. Critics have negotiated, and at times, even negated the text’s ambiguities by using their own final vocabularies. They make meaning of the protagonist and her story by imposing, rather than interrogating, their own blind spots. As a concrete example of this tendency to impose meaning rather than bear witness to the protagonist’s subjective, ambiguous language, each critic examined above dismisses the central element of the protagonist’s tale—her love affair—as an “invention” (Garrels), an “imaginary” situation/lover

(Baker and Levine), or a product of “neurosis” (Bente). Just as Daniel closes off response and therefore subjectivity to his wife when he dismisses her story out of hand, critics also close off response to the protagonist when they favor her husband’s settled, rational reading of her story. The novella itself favors no such reading.

As Duncan establishes, the majority of Bombal criticism understands the lover as imaginary, a reading that discards the protagonist’s narrative in favor of Daniel’s:

By most standards, Daniel’s story is reasonable and possible, whereas the narrator’s story appears farfetched and improbable. What determines our perception of “possible” and “probable,” however, is a socially constructed norm, which privileges the masculine and effectively silences the feminine, thereby denying the female narrator authority over her own text. (308)

The affective and oneiric voice of the protagonist, which means that her diary offers us very little in terms of concrete facts, coupled with the fact that the ontological crisis provoked by the protagonist’s tale challenges our preconceived notions of gender, leads critics to dismiss her erotic encounter specifically, and her overall tale more generally, as daydreams and hallucinations. Critics explain away the fantastic elements and interpretations of the text in favor of a stable, realist reading that maintains traditional roles and assigns blame along traditional gender lines. The text, however, never resolves these issues.

In the entries leading up to her affair, the protagonist reports escalating feelings of distress due to her physical isolation and emotional alienation, both of which she highlights through the use of an extended metaphor of mist. She writes:

Anoche soñé que, por entre rendijas de las puertas y ventanas, se infiltraba [la niebla] lentamente en la casa, en mi cuarto, y esfumaba el color de las paredes, los contornos de los muebles, y se entrelazaba a mis cabellos, y se me adhería al cuerpo y lo deshacía todo, todo... (16)

[Last night I dreamed that, between the cracks of the doors and the windows, [the mist] was seeping into the house, into my room, and it was blurring the color of the walls, the outlines of the furniture, and it was entwining itself in my hair, and adhering to my body and it was taking everything apart, everything... (16)]

The destructive fog represents her growing inability to hold on to her vision of self. On the night of her mysterious tryst, the protagonist recounts that she and her husband have come to stay with her mother-in-law at her house in the city. The fog has followed her and at midnight she awakes, feeling as if she is suffocating. She spontaneously asks her husband for permission to go for a walk. When he groggily mumbles, “Haz lo que quieras” [*Do what you want*], she quickly dresses and leaves the house (17). On her walk, she encounters a stranger, is instantly drawn to him, follows him to an empty house, makes love with him and returns home. For many years thereafter, she clings to this memory, catching a glimpse of him in a carriage once, and fantasizing about possible reencounters often. His imagined presence in her quotidian tasks sustains her through the bleakness of her loveless marriage. Much later, when she tries to tell her story to Daniel, he refutes it, calling her crazy and insisting that she must have dreamt it:

Grito: ¡No! Suplico: ¡Recuerda, recuerda!
 Daniel me mira fijamente un segundo, luego me interroga con sorna:
 —¿Y en tu paseo encontraste gente aquella noche?
 —A un hombre—respondo provocante.
 —¿Te habló?
 —Sí.
 —¿Recuerdas su voz?
 ¿Su voz? ¿Cómo era su voz? No la recuerdo. ¿Por qué no la recuerdo? Palidezco y me siento palidecer. Su voz no la recuerdo [...] He mentido a Daniel. No es verdad que aquel hombre me haya hablado...
 —¿No te habló? Ya ves, era un fantasma... (32)

[I scream: No! I beg: Remember, remember!
Daniel looks at me fixedly a second, then interrogates me with scorn:
 ... “Did he speak to you?”
 “Yes.”
 “Do you remember his voice?”
His voice? What was his voice like? I don’t remember it. Why don’t I remember it? I turn pale and I feel myself turn pale. I don’t remember his voice [...] I have lied to Daniel. It is not true that that man spoke to me...
 “He didn’t speak to you? You see, it was a ghost...” (32)]

Critics reading from a variety of theoretical approaches have accepted Daniel's interpretation, even though textually there is as much support for the lover's existence as for his inexistence.⁹ Duncan posits that critics tend to assign authority to Daniel because "we assign authority not on the basis of who speaks, but on the basis of whose voice and vision promises to bring the work back into the field of mainstream thinking" (315). Duncan's hypothesis certainly makes sense in day-to-day experience. However, given that the majority of Bombal criticism examined here was written in the 1980s, by which time readers were accustomed to reveling in the ontological uncertainty of Latin American fiction, this preference for a rational voice is vexing.¹⁰ As ethical witnesses, critics cannot ignore that Bombal was a forerunner, however incipiently, of this new literary language, yet her work has been forced to conform to the standards of realism.

As I move to the final section of my paper and an alternative reading of *La última niebla*, I offer a couple of reasons as to why this tendency exists. First, the protagonist's story does not uphold the agreed upon fate of women in fiction for either traditionalist or feminist critics. That is, she is not attentive or submissive enough to her husband for traditionalists (as we saw above with

⁹ Aside from Cynthia Duncan's 1998 article, the only study that I have found to fully explore the ambiguity of Bombal's novella is Kimberly A. Nance's 2000 article, "Contained in Criticism, Lost in Translation: Representation of Sexuality and the Fantastic in Bombal's *La última niebla* and *The House of Mist*." As I indicated in the first footnote, the closed reading was established early on when Amado Alonso asserted in his prologue for the second edition (1940) that "everything takes place in the protagonist's head". Nance observes, "The early and prestigious introduction proves to have been a mixed blessing, blunting the impact of Bombal's skill at weaving evidence for and against the reality of the encounter through the novel, and contributing to the willingness of many critics to accept as already obvious the same conclusion that Bombal's agent demanded that she clarify [in her translation/rewrite of the novella]" (45). As Nance argues, Bombal's English version is not so much a translation as it is a rewrite of the protagonist's tale. Indeed, I would call it a genre switch in which all fantastic elements are removed, the sex scene is expurgated, and the lover turns out to be undoubtedly a dream.

¹⁰ In 1982, the Nobel Committee awarded Gabriel García Márquez the Nobel Prize in Literature. The prize motivation reads, "for his novels and short stories, in which the fantastic and the realistic are combined in a richly composed world of imagination, reflecting a continent's life and conflicts" ("Gabriel García Márquez—Facts"). This recognition followed four decades of robust, avant-garde, nonlinear narrative production in Latin America. The first edition of *La última niebla* was published in 1935, with a second edition in 1940. Indeed, the 1940s represent an explosion in Latin American literary innovation. In addition to the co-edited 1940 *Antología de la literatura fantástica* in which Bombal was originally included, Jorge Luis Borges published some of his best-known collections in the 1940s (*El Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* and *Artificios*, later published together as *Ficciones*) and in 1949 Alejo Carpentier published *El reino de este mundo*. In the 1950s, Julio Cortázar published several celebrated collections of short stories (*Bestiario*, *Final del juego*, and *Las armas secretas*), and of course, the 1960s saw Carlos Fuentes's *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* and Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad*. By the 1980s, terms like fantastic fiction, *lo real maravilloso*, and magical realism were both familiar and celebrated by critics and the reading public.

Bente and Baker), nor is she radical enough for feminists (Garrels and Levine). Second, she does not follow the rules for narrating her fate. This last transgression leaves the text in a no man's land of literary criticism. As Donald Shaw explains in the case of genre, there is a fundamental division that has existed in Latin American narrative since the early twentieth century:

Es la división entre los novelistas que quedan básicamente dentro de la tradición realista y los que más o menos abiertamente la rechazan. Para los primeros, la realidad es, ante todo, una construcción social y el gran tema de la novela es, por consiguiente, 'la existencia del hombre en la sociedad y su conciencia de las servidumbres impuestas por el carácter social de la existencia' (R. Caillois). Para los segundos, en cambio, la realidad es algo misterioso, ambiguo y posiblemente ilusorio. Se trata de una cuestión, no de actitudes políticas, sino de confianza ontológica, de fe en la existencia de la realidad objetiva. (16)

[It is the division among novelists who are basically within the realist tradition and those who more or less openly reject it. For the former, reality is, above all, a social construction and the great theme of the novel is, therefore, 'the existence of man in society and his awareness of the obligations imposed by the social character of existence' (R. Caillois). For the latter, however, reality is somewhat mysterious, ambiguous and possibly illusory. It is a matter not of political attitudes, but ontological confidence and faith in the existence of objective reality. (16)]

La última niebla is both socially committed to challenging the status of women in 1930s Latin America and concerned with ontological questions. Initially, Bombal's social commentary was overlooked and critics praised her for breaking with the realist tradition in her portrayal of the feminine. In other words, her work was recognized as part of the incipient fantastic movement. Scholars reading from a feminist tradition, however, later recognized her work as a socio-political denunciation of women's roles in Latin American society, even if the protagonist ultimately failed in her quest for self-actualization.¹¹ Ultimately, for the realist camp, her social commentary on gender was not radical enough, and for the fantastic camp, her social commentary on gender was not universal enough. Read from either tradition, the novella violates gender or genre—or both. Reading

¹¹ Both Amado Alonso and Jorge Luis Borges applauded the fact that Bombal's work did not belong to any specific school and lacked "local color" (read: realist social commitment). Furthermore, Borges included one of her short stories, "Las islas nuevas," in the first *Antología de la literatura fantástica* (1940) that he co-edited with Silvina Ocampo and Adolfo Bioy Casares. Curiously, Bombal was the only author to be completely removed from the second edition of the *Antología* (1965), and I can't help but wonder if the novel's gendered social stance played a role in her elimination. For a discussion of the anthology and the indexes for both editions, see "Definiendo un género: La *Antología de la literatura fantástica* de Silvina Ocampo, Adolfo Bioy Casares y Jorge Luis Borges" by Annick Louis.

the lover through the “rational” eyes of Daniel may settle the issue of genre (by writing off the narrator as neurotic and placing the novella squarely in the realist tradition), but it forecloses the bold ontological questions proposed by the text in terms of subjectivity, as well as the protagonist’s more progressive demands for personhood.¹²

By approaching the text as a witness, however, we can read the diary as a constitutive act of subjectivity rather than a testament of her narcissism, neurosis, or feminist failure. Certainly, the protagonist’s writing bears witness to her objectification as a woman, but, more importantly, to her *possibility* of personhood beyond recognition, a wifely, sexual subjectivity that is larger than her recognized subject position. In other words, I argue that the protagonist’s tale confirms Oliver’s model of an interconnected subjectivity, a subjectivity that depends on the other (both intra- and extra-textually) to listen beyond what we traditionally recognize as real. Moreover, the protagonist’s tale illustrates how subjectivity is destroyed when we engage in dominant models of recognition. The question for critics should not be whether the lover is real or imagined. Rather, the question should be what do we learn about the protagonist—and about subjectivity more generally—through her ambiguous narration of a transformational moment?

Despite taking issue with critics’ readings of the lover as imagined, Duncan does not advocate that we read the lover as “real.” On the contrary, her thesis is that the text is ambiguous on purpose. Duncan returns the text to its fantastic roots, observing that it:

carefully lay[s] the groundwork for doubt and hesitation not only on the part of the fictional character but on the part of the reader, as well. . . . Ironically, *La última niebla*, unlike much of

¹² In a beautiful article on the ethical responsibilities of the collaborator in the preparation of memoirs of trauma, Bettina Stumm reflects on the difficulties of relating to survivors *beyond* their “victimhood or vulnerability;” that is, relating to their personhood and not their subject position (779). Basing her argument on Oliver’s work, Stumm explains, “Ethical witnessing can be seen as a practice of navigating the connections between selves who exceed their identity markers, roles, and subject positions in relationship with each other. In its focus on an infinite encounter with another’s personhood rather than recognition of his or her subject position, ethical witnessing demands a deeper and more complex relationship with vulnerable subjects than a politics of recognition allows. Where recognition of the victimization, marginalization, or oppression of others can help us to become more aware, understanding, and empathetic of suffering, it can also hinder our ability to witness and relate to people *otherwise*, beyond their experiences of trauma” (780).

the criticism it has engendered, does not focus on the task of separating the real from the imagined or the dreamed; instead, it permits us to see that the “real” is an arbitrary category whose meaning can shift and slide, depending on who is telling the story and how much power or authority that person is assumed to have. (305)

That the lover is real or dreamt, the protagonist’s story true or imagined, does not matter on a phenomenological level. The protagonist is not testifying to the “empirical facts” of her story, but rather witnessing to something that may be unimaginable and destabilizing according to traditional gender norms, but that makes “all the difference” in her ability to survive as a marginalized subject (Oliver, *Witnessing* 1). Her encoding of an active and equal female sexuality is no more a fantasy than that of the dominant culture’s encoding of female passivity and subservience. The novella’s fantastic elements provoke an ontological crisis that questions what we consider possible for women, whom we consider credible, and why.¹³

More than social critique, however, the protagonist’s writing is an act of witnessing. Her story of self is directed at an addressee, someone who will aid her in the process of subjectivity, someone perhaps imagined or unknown, but still desired. As Oliver establishes:

[M]y experience of myself comes through the narratives that I construct in order to tell myself and my life to another, especially on a mundane everyday basis. I construct and reconstruct my experiences for another, even if I don’t ever actually tell them the narrative that I have prepared for them. It is the bearing witness to the other itself, spoken or not, that gives birth to the *I*. (206-07)

The protagonist’s ability to conceive of female resistance and an active female sexuality, whether imagined or enacted, gives her the strength to resist her own objectification. The act of writing the diary is an exercise of agency in her own self-creation. Oliver refers to this auto-narrative act as the “inner witness.” Drawing on the work of Dori Laub, she explains: “[P]sychic survival depends on an

¹³ I am not arguing that the text belongs to the fantastic genre, but rather that it breaks with the realist tradition that preceded it and exhibits nascent elements of what will become the fantastic. Namely, at some point in the text, both the reader and the character vacillate between a rational interpretation of the lover (both she and Daniel drank before bed, she dreamt the entire scene) and an irrational interpretation (she had sex with a stranger whom she met on a midnight stroll and who may or may not have been blind and/or a ghost). Both Duncan and Patricia Espinosa H. (“*La última niebla* de María Luisa Bombal: Excentricidad, desacato y eroticidad en el devenir identitario femenino”) explore the use of the fantastic in relation to Todorov’s definition. Duncan and Nance examine how the novel provides equal evidence for both interpretations and refuses to resolve the text’s ambiguity.

addressable other, ... an 'inner witness'. The inner witness is produced and sustained by dialogic (and I would add nonlinguistic forms of communicative) interaction with other people. In order to think, talk, act as an agent, the inner witness must be in place" ("Witnessing and Testimony" 83).

Conceptually, Oliver sees the inner witness as the intersection between subject position and subjectivity, which means that the inner witness is both constitutive and constituted. She explains:

If one's subject position is the socio-historical position in which one finds oneself, and one's subjectivity is the structure of witnessing as infinite response-ability, then the inner witness is where subject position and subjectivity meet. If the inner witness is on the one hand the ability to address oneself or to be self-reflective that is 'learned' through addressing and being addressed by others, and it is also 'learned' in a particular historical and social situation, then it is going to be both a prerequisite for a sense of agency per se and a governing factor in the particularities of and restrictions on that sense of agency. We internalize our relationships with others, which empowers us with a sense of our own agency but can also leave us with a sense of the limitations of our own agency if we are in marginal or oppressed social positions or power relations. ("Witnessing and Testimony" 84)

Bombal's protagonist certainly reveals the limitations of her subject position: she is an upper-class, married woman who lives in relative isolation on a country estate in 1930s Argentina. Her agency is undeniably circumscribed by these social conditions. As such, the protagonist knows that "wife" is the only role available to her, and yet her efficacy in that role has been foreclosed by her husband.

The protagonist resists this normative violence and cruelty with her own account of her possibility, the story she narrates to her inner witness. That her agency takes the form of a soap opera heroine need not obviate her active resistance to the genre's predetermined roles for women. As Oliver (and decades of poststructuralist theory) points out, agency is always shaped and circumscribed by our particular historical and social circumstances. The protagonist will necessarily draw upon the identities and discourses available to her. Nevertheless, if we pay attention to her repetition *with a difference*, we can appreciate that her use of these genres is potentially transformative rather than "pathetically conventional and limited" (Garrels 86). As Oliver explains:

No two iterations of social norms are the same because of the differences in their temporal positionality. ... The performative element in any activity, that is, the doing of it, both enables and challenges the constative element, what is done or said. It is the tension between our

historical positions, which may be fixed at any one moment, and the process of history or experience that makes transformation possible. Subjective agency is the result of the tension between subject position at any one moment and the infinite responsibility that is subjectivity. (*Witnessing* 141)

Although transformation is inherent in the performance of witnessing, Oliver warns that performativity alone is not enough. Indeed, we have seen in the above analysis of the novella's critical reception that the protagonist's resistant tale is not enough to bring about change. Because the process of witnessing is dialogic, the listener-critic is implicated in her response to the performance of the other. By examining the passages of the novella that deal with the lover, we can see how the pathology of recognition has thwarted the protagonist's attempt at self-determination both within the text (in her relationships with other characters) and within the criticism (scholars' responses to these scenes). Moreover, we can see how these responses could have been different.

On the night of her misty midnight stroll, the protagonist meets a stranger in a deserted plaza and follows him to an empty house, save for the furnished bedroom.¹⁴ She narrates:

Una vez desnuda, *permanezco sentada* al borde de la cama. Él se aparta y me contempla. Bajo su atenta mirada, *echo la cabeza hacia atrás* y este ademán me llena de íntimo bienestar. *Anudo mis brazos* tras la nuca, *trenzo y destrenzo las piernas* y cada gesto me trae consigo un placer intenso y completo, como si, por fin, tuviera una razón de ser mis brazos y mi cuello y mis piernas. ...

Lo abrazo fuertemente y con todos mis sentidos escucho. ... *Lo estrecho, lo estrecho* siempre con más afán...

Entonces él se inclina sobre mí y rodamos enlazados al hueco del lecho. Su cuerpo me cubre como una grande ola hirviente, me acaricia, me quema, me penetra, me envuelve, me arrastra desfallecida. A mi garganta sube algo así como un sollozo, y no sé por qué empiezo a quejarme, y no sé por qué me es dulce quejarme... (énfasis mío 20-21)

[*Once naked, I remain on the edge of the bed. He stands back and looks at me. Under his attentive gaze, I throw my head back and this gesture fills me with an intimate well-being. I lace my arms behind the nape of my neck, I cross and uncross my legs and each gesture brings with it a feeling of*

¹⁴ The protagonist's diary contains two transformative erotic encounters that have been well-studied: one in which the protagonist escapes from the oppressive sphere of her estate home into the telluric sphere of a woodland pond and discovers her own sexuality, and one in which she flees the oppressive domestic sphere in the city and enjoys a surprise sexual encounter with a stranger. The first sex scene, that in the pond, occurs early in the text (in the second fragment), but after the humiliating experiences that open the novella. Although the pond scene has generated two distinct interpretations, either a moment of reconnection with or alienation from her own body, I will focus on the urban encounter as the questions concerning the novel's genre and the protagonist's subjectivity hinges on the lover.

intense and complete pleasure for me, as if, finally, my arms and my neck and my legs had a reason for being.

...

I hug him strongly and with all my senses I listen... I squeeze him, I pull him in each time with more urgency...

Then he leans over me and we roll, entangled, into the empty bed. His body covers me like a great, seething wave, it caresses me, it burns me, it penetrates me, it enfolds me, it sweeps me along, faint. Something like a sob rises to my throat, and I don't know why I begin to moan, and I don't know why it's sweet to moan... (my emphasis 20-21)]

The lover's *attentive* gaze initiates this scene and stands in contrast to Daniel's *hostile* gaze, which initiated the protagonist's tale at the novella's opening. Her lover's gaze corroborates the protagonist's sense of self as a desiring and desirable woman, whereas her husband's gaze attacks and damages her subjectivity. Nevertheless, many critics read this scene through the lens of contemporary theories of subjectivity, theories in which the other's gaze initiates our awareness of self as subject, and quickly gives way to antagonistic relationships with both the self and the other. As Oliver explains in "Beyond Recognition: Merleau-Ponty and an Ethics of Vision," the ways we theorize recognition is directly related to the way we understand vision and the gaze:

From Hegel's master-slave struggle to Freud's account of castration and envy, from Sartre's accusing look of the other to Lacan's evil eye of the gaze, vision [in these theories] creates a sense of lack or alienation. It seems that what we see when we recognize ourselves in or against the other is the empty void between us that alienates us not only from others but also from ourselves; and we spend the rest of our lives in the futile and violent attempt to fill that gap. (132-33)

Despite the protagonist's role as an active subject who engages, directs, and delights in the gaze before initiating physical contact, and despite the protagonist's emphasis on the physical and emotional well-being she derives from being seen with attentive eyes, many critics read this scene as further proof of the protagonist's self destruction and alienation (from both her self and the world).¹⁵

¹⁵ Three notable though markedly different exceptions to this tendency are Lucía Guerra-Cunningham in "Visión de lo femenino en Bombal: Una dualidad contradictoria del ser y el deber-ser," Joyce Tolliver in "'Otro modo de ver:' The Gaze in *La última niebla*," and Susan Lucas Dobrian in "La textualización del deseo: El amante desconocido en tres novelas."

In *Three Authors of Alienation: Bombal, Onetti, Carpentier*, Michael Adams argues that the protagonist's alienation arises from personal, internal sources (15) and indicates a schizoid or schizophrenic personality disorder (34-35). Like most critics, Adams never considers that the erotic encounter is possible, even though we experience it through the narrator's eyes and, until Daniel challenges her story, there is no question in her mind or the reader's as to its occurrence. On the contrary, critics' interpretation of the lover and his role within the text underscores my argument. Their readings of the lover as make-believe reveals how dominant theories of subjectivity lead us to stereotype the protagonist as passive and neurotic based on gender, which in turn leads us to ignore the novel's incipient fantastic elements, which reinforces our stereotypes of otherness and keeps us from moving beyond recognition to the protagonist as a subject in her own right.

For many critics, the lover is an imaginary character within an otherwise realist text (Adams, Agosín, Alonso, Baker, Bente, Dobrian, Garrels, and Levine). In other words, the novel is not a fantastic novel, but rather a realist novel with a marginalized female narrator who, in sympathetic readings, has no other strategy but to retreat to a protective dream world, or who, in judgmental readings, is a delusional female narrator who willfully escapes to a fantasy world. In both cases, reading the lover as a fantasy either limits the protagonist to a passive role as victim, or it blames the protagonist for neurotically creating her own unhappy ending. Both readings excuse the reader from the uncomfortable task of critical vigilance, of examining whom we consider credible and why, and whose version of reality is the most ethical and livable for those we have deemed other. Analyzing the love scene, Adams states, "her experience of love did not help her to establish contact with herself but, instead, allowed her to create a false self, building a world around this self. The only way to explain her passivity is to consider that the object of her desire is her fantasy world rather than real experience, which is forbidden her by the form of her external existence" (28). Despite acknowledging that subjectivity is "forbidden her" by the social factors of her existence, Adams

insists that her alienation at the end of the text largely arises from internal factors: “[S]tarting from an unhappy marriage, the protagonist moves away from the real world into herself, through a process of increasing fantasy, and then is forced to retreat from this created world to face the realities of aging and emotional barrenness” (16). Adams allows that Daniel was the initial alienating force in her life but concludes that her “response to her initial loss of self is to create a myth that allows her to increase her alienation by erecting a fantasy, false self. Sustaining this self makes conflict with reality inevitable” (28). I contend, however, that her tale is not an attempt to create an alternative fantasy, but rather an alternative reality. The objective of the story that she tells her inner witness—and that she eventually tells Daniel—is to *escape* her alienation and the male-driven fantasy world of passive, sexless wives who stay in “their place” because they are only too happy to have a place (rather than being “pitiful spinsters,” as stated by Daniel and implied in Adams’s “realities of aging and emotional barrenness”). Her story is her attempt to connect with others and bring about an alternative female subjectivity. Her story, however, is blocked, denied, and ridiculed at every turn both within the text and within the criticism.

Even in her own love story, critics insist that the protagonist is nothing more than a passive observer who relegates her own body to the position of other (Adams, Garrels, Levine). Again, this interpretation subscribes to the notion of Hegelian subjectivity and the Lacanian gaze by insisting that all seeing, or all vision, necessarily implies subjection and subordination—even when what is seen is one’s own body or the body of a desired loved one. This pathological conceptualization traps us in a world of alienation: we have no choice but to see and be seen by one another, and yet we can never enjoy the gaze of the other, nor offer the other a loving gaze. We can never have a gaze of mutual affection. Someone must always be subject to the other. Throughout the scene, however, there is give and take between active and passive roles for both the narrator and her lover, but it is the passive, receptive (female) roles that are generally highlighted in the criticism. Adams admits that

there is communication between the two but dismisses it as an *invalid* form of communication, therefore concluding that the encounter is not real: “The communication is at an *emotional* level and *corresponds to the wishes of the narrator*. The physical contact is described in terms of *her gratification alone*” (my emphasis 26). Adams reinscribes the protagonist in the passive sexual role offered to her by the dominant ideology: she is not allowed to be in control and at the center of her own sexual narrative, and she is not allowed to narrate it on her own affective terms. Like critics who maintain that the onus is on the protagonist to “win” recognition from her husband, here the onus is on the protagonist to tell her sex story in the “right” way in order for it to be recognized as real.¹⁶ In both cases, our dominant models for understanding vision, recognition, and subjectivity color our understanding of what we read—and whom we recognize.

This is precisely why Oliver argues for the double meaning of witnessing, for both testifying to what we see, but also bearing witness to what is yet to exist. In her alternative model of subjectivity, Oliver argues:

The problem, however, is not with vision *per se*, but with the particular notion of vision presupposed in theories of recognition or misrecognition. In these theories, what makes all intersubjective relationships struggles or hostile encounters is not their emphasis on vision, but the presupposition that space is empty and that vision both traverses and fails to traverse that empty space. What we cannot see on this notion of vision are the elements that connect us to others and the world. Yet, these are the elements that make vision possible, light, air, matter, that fill the space between us. (“Beyond: Merleau-Ponty” 133)

In Oliver’s theory of vision and subjectivity, the emphasis is on connected rather than antagonistic subjects. In the narrator’s version of what took place that night, there is no hint of alienation.

Rather, she delights in both the gaze and the touch, the long-awaited and much-desired recognition-

¹⁶ Hernán Vidal also insists on relegating the narrator to the predefined roles of woman as passive lover and adoring mother, disregarding narrative moments that contradict his interpretation. For a perceptive reading of Vidal’s *misreading*, see Joyce Tolliver’s “‘Otro modo de ver:’ The Gaze in *La última niebla*,” p. 107. As Tolliver points out, Vidal’s reading literally erases the authorship of the narrator when he writes his own masculine version by misquoting the narrator.

as-witnessing, that she receives from her lover.¹⁷ Citing Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Oliver incorporates both vision and touch in her reconceptualization of subjectivity. Breaking down the myth of a self-contained, self-sufficient self versus other, Oliver proposes a concept of vision as “touching eyes,” a model in which self and other are literally open to one another due to the senses:

[T]he body itself mediates the relationship between subject and object, self and other. The body is both subject and object “because a sort of dehiscence opens my body in two, and because between *my body looked at and my body looking*, my body touched and my body touching, there is *overlapping encroachment*, so that we must say that the things pass into us as well as we into the things.” (my emphasis, *Witnessing* 199)

The narrator interprets the experience and records it for us as bodies that intertwine, cover, caress, enfold, and, yes, penetrate. Her role is clearly one of active desire, she is a desiring being who enjoys her sexuality and takes pleasure in her body, enabled only by a loving encounter with another. Nevertheless, the protagonist has been roundly chastised by critics for this need to be seen, for discovering her “reason for being” in the gaze of the other. However, if we are honest about subjectivity, none of us can exist without the other. To the extent that subjectivity only occurs in dialogic relationship with the other—be that relationship hostile or loving—our reason for being is *always* the other. This mutual dependence is why we desperately need to rethink dominant notions of subjectivity. Oliver’s work helps us to imagine “... vision as a means of connection and communion. Rather than the alienation and conflict at the heart of either Sartre or Lacan’s notions of the gaze, with Merleau-Ponty we find wonder at the gap between us, the distance that enables us to relate to each other” (“Beyond: Merleau-Ponty” 134). The protagonist’s narrative of connection, told to her inner witness, helps her to survive many years of an oppressive marriage in which recognition is

¹⁷ Joyce Tolliver, to my knowledge, is the only critic who maintains that the protagonist creates a mutual and affirmative gaze: “It may seem that the protagonist then puts herself back into the position of object, finding her pleasure in the [“attentive look”] “atenta mirada” of the young man, again finding the justification for her corporality, for her very existence, in the appreciative gaze of her lover. But in fact, the protagonist is in control of the gaze here, manipulating the dynamics of the gaze and determining what it is the man will look at. She is not merely an inert object of the gaze; in reality she actively invites his gaze and takes pleasure in it. It would not be quite precise, however, to say that the protagonist is now subject of the gaze—nor is she its mere object. Rather, what happens here transcends the subject/object dichotomy” (115).

continually denied her, her sexuality is continually negated, and her story of self is continually attacked.

Although the inner witness is resilient, it is not self-sustaining. As we see at the end of the novella, subjectivity ultimately requires a response from an other. Oliver explains:

Without an external witness, we cannot develop or sustain the internal witness necessary for the ability to interpret and represent our experience, which is necessary for subjectivity and more essentially for both individual and social transformation. And if subordination is taken to the extreme of objectification, then the possibility of address, of witnessing, is destroyed and with it the possibility of subjectivity. Only when someone else listens to me can I listen to myself. (*Witnessing* 88)

After Daniel undermines the protagonist's tale and after her own attempt to relocate her lover's house raises more questions than it answers, she finds it increasingly difficult to maintain the narrative that she has constructed of herself as a desirable and desiring woman, worthy of being loved. Despite the fact that this innovative text provides readers with as many reasons to believe the protagonist's tale as to doubt it, the protagonist herself is ultimately unable to maintain the narration she has told throughout the text and she succumbs to the role that Daniel and society have scripted for her.¹⁸ In her last entry, she tells us: "Lo sigo para llevar a cabo una infinidad de pequeños menesteres; para llorar por costumbre y sonreír por deber. Lo sigo para vivir correctamente, para morir correctamente algún día" (43). [*"I follow him to carry out an infinity of trivial tasks; to fulfill an infinity of enjoyable frivolities; to cry out of custom and to smile out of duty. I follow him to live correctly, to die correctly one day"*(43).] Years of humiliation, culminating in the protagonist's inability to indisputably verify her story after Daniel's scornful denial, finally destroy her ability to continually reconstitute herself in her

¹⁸ The emphasis on vision and recognition throughout the protagonist's tale has been commented on by Dobrian, Nance, and Tolliver. Nance and Tolliver specifically address the implications of the lover's possible blindness. Given that the narrator later learns that her lover may have been blind, Oliver's reconceptualization of vision is particularly poignant; recognition is not simply a matter of sight but of touch, of two bodies opening to one another and to the light, air, and matter that fills the space between them. I do not believe, therefore, that the lover's blindness (and thus the interpretation that the protagonist was never "seen" by anyone) explains the protagonist's suicide attempt. Not only was she told by the servant that the master of the house was blind, she was also told that he had died. Her suicide attempt could be despair at the death of her lover, and the now foreclosed possibility of ever confirming his existence, or simply her fatigue of trying to maintain a sense of self that finds no support or corroboration from anyone else.

diary, through her inner-witness alone. Rorty reminds us, “There is nothing to people except what has been socialized into them—their ability to use language, and thereby to exchange beliefs and desires with other people” (177). Therefore, all human beings share a particular type of pain:

They can all be humiliated by the forcible tearing down of the particular structures of language and belief in which they were socialized (or which they pride themselves on having formed for themselves). . . . Getting somebody to deny a belief for no reason is a first step toward making her incapable of having a self because she becomes incapable of weaving a coherent web of belief and desire. It makes her irrational, in quite a precise sense: She is unable to give a reason for her belief that fits together with her other beliefs. She becomes irrational not in the sense that she has lost contact with reality but in the sense that she can no longer rationalize—no longer justify herself to herself. (177-178)

Ironically, it is the protagonist’s surrender of her “irrational” female plot and acceptance of Daniel’s “rational” masculinist version that ultimately makes her irrational—in the sense that she can no longer justify herself to herself.

As I have developed above, literary critics have failed to interrogate their own theoretical blind spots, failed to be self-critical in their approaches to and assumptions of gender and genre in *La última niebla*. In leveling gender differences and failing to differentiate between fantasy and the fantastic when it comes to genre, the protagonist’s subjectivity and her narrative techniques have been dismissed as implausible and unbelievable. She is reduced to female stereotypes: either neurotic and hypersexualized or passive and victimized. To a certain extent, critics have read to confirm what they already know about gender in Latin America in the first half of the twentieth century, or what they expect to see from Latin American genres. By failing to acknowledge the lack of power inherent in the protagonist’s subject position, and by ignoring the possibility of her story of self, critics repeat the very pathologies of recognition that relegate the narrator to passive object in the first place. That is, within both the context of the novella and contemporary theories of identity and subjectivity, the onus is on the narrator to win recognition—to earn her subjectivity—from both Daniel and the reader/critic.

Although the protagonist is ultimately humiliated beyond her ability to reconstitute herself as a subject, we can choose to approach the text with critical vigilance and the ethical obligation of witnessing, which will allow us to see that which is beyond recognition in her narration. Contrary to the majority of Bombalian criticism, the narrator is not passive and she does offer us an alternative description of female subjectivity that challenges traditional masculinist notions of Latin America in the 1920s and 30s. Moreover, her tale offers us alternative conceptualizations of vision, recognition, and subjectivity. In this reconceptualization, the onus is not on the protagonist to “win” recognition from the dominant group that has oppressed her in the first place; the onus is, firstly, on Daniel and then on the literary critic to respond in an ethical, loving way that opens up the possibility for seeing the protagonist’s otherness. Her diary bears witness “to something that in one sense did not happen”—her experience of self as an active sexual being, desiring and desirous—“but that in another made all the difference to what happened” (Oliver, *Witnessing* 1). By recording the fantastic in her diary, the protagonist found the strength to survive a lifetime of cruelty. As we have seen through the application of Oliver and Rorty’s theories, our ethical obligation as liberal ironists and literary critics goes beyond simply noticing cruelty when we encounter it. We are obligated to see beyond recognition, to question the norms that dictate whom we consider credible and why, to connect with others in a way that allows them to exceed their subject positions and live lives that they deem worth living.

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