ROMANCE STUDIES:
Readings in Excess and Betrayal, from Modernism to the Present

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4. *The Shrouded Woman:* María Luisa Bombal and Peripheral Modernism

The slogan of modernism is "Make it new!" The literary strategies employed to achieve this novelty include defamiliarization and a multiplication of points of view, challenging what we expect of a novel and our assumptions about the relationship between representation and the real. In these terms, the Chilean María Luisa Bombal's *The Shrouded Woman* (*La amortajada,* 1938) is a classic modernist text that bears comparison with (say) William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930). But comparison is not copy: Bombal takes aspects of Faulkner's novel and adds her own innovations, making them new in her own way. For the story she tells is not just sporadically—as in Faulkner's text—but almost entirely narrated from the unlikely (even "impossible") perspective of a corpse, that of a woman in her coffin, in the brief transition between death and final burial. It is from this threshold that Bombal's book promises to shed new light on its protagonist's life, and on society as a whole. Moreover, the novel aims to vindicate the powers of fiction and above all the overlooked agency and creativity of those who are confined to the margins within society, or on the periphery of a global system in which it is too often assumed that everything of cultural interest and originality (not least modernism itself) comes from Europe or North America.

1. The Powers of Fiction

There is something jarring about the unorthodox viewpoint from which Bombal's novel is narrated. We should not, however, be entirely surprised. What we are reading is, after all, a work of fiction. It is invented, imagined, fabricated, made up. And all literature is, to a greater or lesser extent, fictitious in this sense. Even a realist text cannot completely hide the fact that it is a product of invention: however much it may try hard to give the impression of reality or lay claim to documentary truth, the best realism can achieve is verisimilitude, the "likeness" of truth, rather than truth itself.

Novels have always played with this inevitable gap between fictiveness and reality. When Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, arguably the first novel written in English, was originally published (in 1719), it was with the conceit that Crusoe, the book's central character, was also the book's author, recounting a true story of shipwreck and survival: Defoe's name did not appear on the title page, which declared the book to be the "Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner [. . .] Written

by Himself" (1). Moreover, the novel's preface is presented as having been written by a purported "editor," who declares "the thing to be a just history of fact; neither is there any appearance of fiction in it" (3). Yet the book's power derives not from this pretence to truth or authenticity (and still less from any fidelity to the real-life tale of the sailor, Alexander Selkirk, on whom Crusoe's story is in part modelled), but from its *in*fidelity, its creativity in presenting a quasi-mythic archetype of the solitary individual who reconstructs and maintains a "civilized" way of life in the absence of social institutions.

Similarly, the significance of (say) Gustave Flaubert's eponymous Madame Bovary (1866) or George Eliot's Daniel Deronda (1876) lies not in their potential resemblance to any identifiable individuals, but in that they are (precisely) literary characters, fictional creations that incarnate a particular intensity or set of traits, and participate in a matrix of characters and events that is specific to the novels in which they are to be found. Likewise, Honoré de Balzac's Paris, Charles Dickens's London, or Fyodor's Dostoyevsky's Saint Petersburg do not stand or fall on the accuracy with which they reproduce the traits of the "real" cities that bear those same names; to write a novel is to create a world, a milieu, more than it is to reflect or mimic one that already (allegedly) exists somewhere outside of the text.

The power of fiction resides in the fact that it is not simply mimicry—or rather, that even mimicry is more than mere copy. Again, this is one of the central lessons of modernism: that art (literature, painting, even photography or film) is never limited to reflecting or resembling the world. Moreover, the fact that a text is fiction—that it is invented or constructed, and perhaps even, unlike a realist text that strives to make us forget the fact, flaunts that constructedness—does not make it any the less "real." For it is precisely as fiction, as texts that have their own weight and materiality, that literature can have real effects in the world at large. And not the least of its effects, perhaps, is to convey the idea that there is such a world that could be subject to representation in the first place. Fiction is not simply a veil placed on the world, obscuring our view; it is centrally concerned with the interplay between "veil" and world, with the notion that the world, too, is a construction, to which fiction also contributes.

With this in mind, what did you think of the world that Bombal constructs in *The Shrouded Woman*? It is a world that the narrator depicts as she is departing it, as finally she is able to draw some threads and connections together to imagine how its various parts interact

to constitute a whole. What are the characteristics of this world? And how, perhaps, does it differ from the worlds that other fictions produce for their readers? Pause the video, and jot down some notes: maybe two or three adjectives or some central motifs. While you do that, I'll have a gin, but I'll be right back.

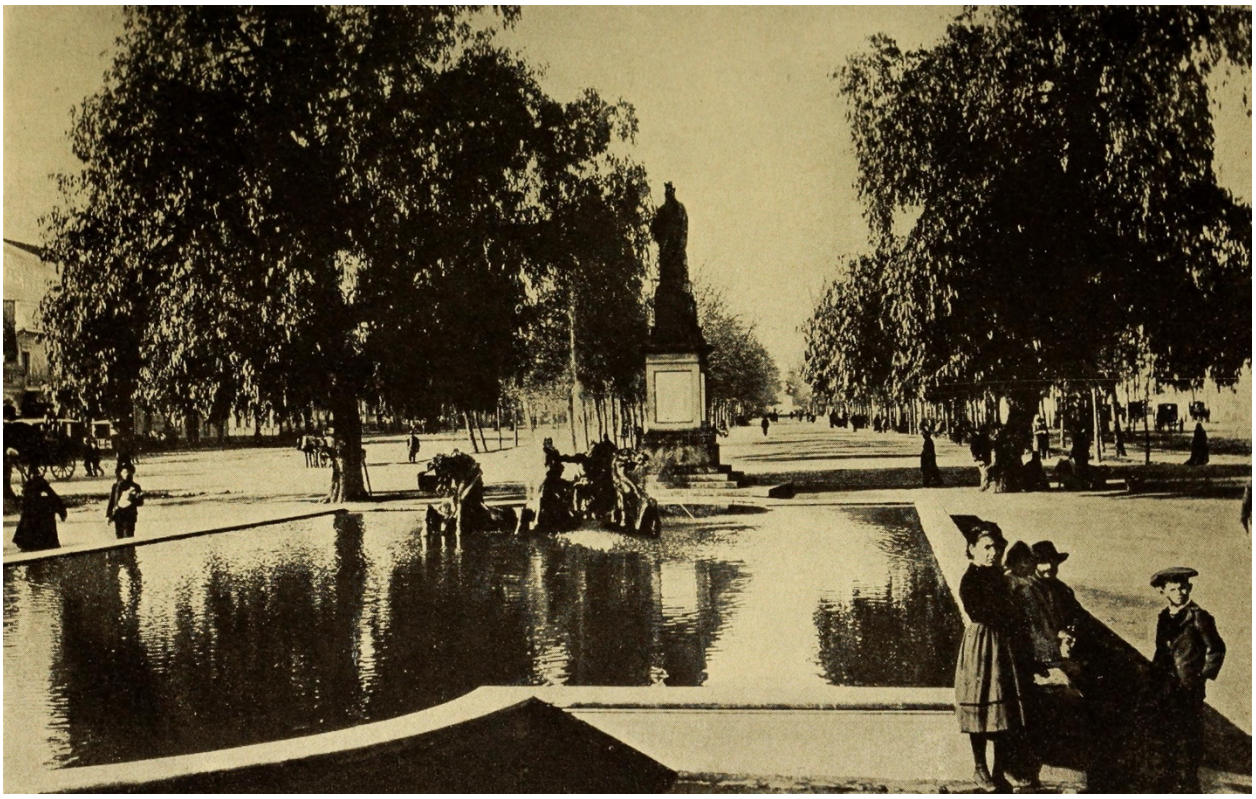
Bombal lived a full and tumultuous life across both North and South America, as well as a stint in France, with distinguished literary friends (including Pablo Neruda and Jorge Luis Borges), multiple marriages and love affairs, suicide attempts, and would-be murder. She tried to shoot herself in the neck in the home of a former lover, a pioneer Chilean pilot, using one of his guns to do so, but she survived, and was left with a distinctive scar. A decade or so later she shot the pilot himself (with her own pistol), but he lived, and she was briefly jailed. Her final years (she died at 69, though her literary production had dried up decades earlier) were marked by alcoholism and cirrhosis. From the time of the English engraver William Hogarth, who documented the "craze" of the early eighteenth century, gin has been associated with dissolution and social decay.

For a relatively short novel (little more than a hundred pages long), there is a lot in *The Shrouded Woman*. This is, after all, a world that encompasses an entire life: that of Ana Maria, a middle or upper-class woman in Chile at the turn of the twentieth century. Some of the key terms that may have occurred to you could include family, class, and gender as categories that organize and structure that world; or love, money, and land as what is at stake in the interactions within and between those categories.

2. Gender and Agency

Above all, this is a woman's world, a world perceived and felt in terms of gender. Such is the hold of gendered expectations that they do not disappear even with death: dead or alive, a woman remains subject to the gaze of others; indeed, "she takes delight in submitting herself to the gaze of all, so perfectly still, serene and beautiful" (158). There is something decorative about women (particularly, middle-class women) in this world, as they are described as "turn[ing] over and over in their heart some love sorrow while sitting in a neatly ordered house, facing an unfinished tapestry" (226). They are not allowed to have a vocation of their own, to fulfil whatever potential they may have. The dominant tone for much of the novel is frustration or disillusion, a sense of what might

have been. Ana Maria imagines that others see her "as a woman tormented by futile anxieties, worn down by many sorrows, and withered by the sharp air of the hacienda" (157). No wonder that death comes as a relief. In death, she is no longer faced with the gap between her own sense of agency and the passivity with which she is expected to accept her destiny as more object than subject. In death, she finally *is* the object she had always been presumed to be, and all that remains to her is acceptance, forgiveness.



Alameda de las Delicias, Santiago, Chile, 1912

In life, however, in the world that *The Shrouded Woman* constructs, women very much have agency, even if they have limited opportunities to exercise it. It is this sense of untapped (or insufficiently tapped) female agency that accounts for the fact that the women in this novel can never quite be pinned down, as they threaten to overcome or escape the limits set by their social roles. Hence "the ancestral rebellion of all the bourgeois women in the world" (192) and the fact that "there is always something that escapes out over everything!" (198). Femininity, in Bombal's novel, is a line of flight, an unpredictable surplus that breaches every mould until finally death arrives ("How well does the body mold itself to the casket!" [249]). But the fact that this is a novel narrated

from the grave suggests that, at least for a while, not even the tomb can contain a woman such as Ana Maria.

No wonder then that the women characters in *The Shrouded Woman* are, on the whole, so much more interesting and lively than the men. At times, even the dead woman narrator is more vivacious than the living men who surround her! Her memories present to us striking figures such as her "extraordinary daughter" Anita, who chooses perversely to marry a "good-for-nothing" husband (191); her daughter-in-law Maria Griselda, "not of the same social class" (186) but who enchants all the men (even "the great river was in love with Maria Griselda" [196]) and unwittingly provokes tragedy wherever she goes; and her former lover's wife Sofia, who finally reveals to her "that sentiment called friendship" (238). For the tragedy of what Ana Maria calls "this sad world" (256) is that the women are cut off from each other as much as they are sidelined from the world of the men. What haunts this novel is loneliness, the fact that the women are turned against each other, and suffer and rage on their own.

3. A View from the Margins

Now that she is leaving the world that she depicts, the book's narrator can also take some critical distance from it. Repeatedly the novel suggests that life is somehow beyond the grasp of the living: it is only "now [that] she understands" we are told of the corpse in her coffin; "Must we die in order to know?" (176). As the mourners arrive and approach—her father, her siblings, her first love, her husband, her children, her in-laws, her priest—she evaluates their role in her life, her relationships with them, silently settling accounts and freeing herself of her "terrestrial anxieties" (248). For she sees with "clarity and transparency" even as those around her are "unaware that she could see them" (157).

She is paradoxically then both at the centre of things and to one side. On the one hand, she is the reason that everyone is gathering; her dead body is the still centre around which the funerary rituals turn. More broadly, she is the link between all the various characters who come in and out of her memory: she is daughter, sister, lover, mother, wife, and so on; often they interact through her or because of her. On the other hand, in both life and death she is often also on the margins. Everything will continue without her: she senses that "things are already changing; life is pursuing its course in spite of her" (250). But above all as a woman (even a privileged woman) she has always somehow been on the

sidelines: her lover deserts her on the excuse he has to go to Europe "to study scientific farming" (165), to prepare for his expected role as landowner and businessman; she ends up in an unsatisfying if complex marriage with someone she apparently did not choose ("Child, kiss your fiancé," she remembers her father telling her [221]) and for whom she is "only one of [his] many passions" (225). Circumscribed and frustrated, she describes what she has had as a "small life" (238).

Yet there are advantages to such marginality. Just as, on the threshold between death and life, she can finally understand what eludes the living, so also even her relative powerlessness allows her to see through many of the pretensions of the men on whom she is far too dependent. "It occurs to me," she reflects, "that possibly all men once in their lifetime long to make some great renunciation; [. . .] to tear to pieces a butterfly, in order to feel themselves masters of their own destiny" (166). Ultimately, the male sense of mastery and entitlement is also an illusion, generated only by futile sacrifice and heedless petty violence. Though in life she has long nourished hatred of those who kept her on the sidelines, now she feels only something closer to pity: "How could she hate a poor being," she thinks of her husband, "destined as she herself had been to old age and sadness" (230). In the end the hierarchies of master and mastered, centre and margin, come to seem precarious and equivocal, rather than absolute.

More generally, in addition to its reflections on the unexpected insights afforded a view from the margins, we might also think of this novel as an instance of modernism on the periphery, which both acknowledges the realities of global cultural hierarchies—there is surely a reason why Bombal felt the need to translate it herself into English, seeking a readership that a text in Spanish would be unlikely to attain—and at the same time offers a gentle critique of presumptions that the so-called centre is where all progress and innovation is to be found. There is agency and invention even where it is least expected—from women in a patriarchal society, from the apparent stillness of the grave. Similarly, somewhere like Chile, seemingly remote from the metropolis, might also be a place to experiment with aesthetic form and point of view.

works cited

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Faulkner, William. *As I Lay Dying*. New York: Vintage, 1987.

Image:
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alameda_de_las_Delicias,_Santiago_1912_(cropped).jpg

Song: "Once in a Lifetime" (Talking Heads)