

## VITAL SPACE IN THE HOUSE OF BUENDÍA

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There are two fundamental approaches to discussing the matter of spatial constructs as they relate to a work of fiction: a) the idea that "the book itself is but a space to be filled," thus addressing the spatial nature of the narrative process itself; and b) examining the treatment of created physical space within the fictional world of a given author.<sup>1</sup> In the case of Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, an examination of narrative as well as fictional space will show the closely integrated nature of these two aspects of the novel, as well as Márquez's ability to fuse them into an indivisible whole.

Sharon Spencer has called attention to the emergence of the modern "architectonic" novel, which departs from traditional organization of time and space. "In our time," she states, "space is conceived not as one-sided or linear . . . but as many-sided and virtually inexhaustible in its potentiality for relationships" (pp. xvii-xviii). According to Spencer, ". . . the author of an architectonic novel chooses to represent his subject either from a single exclusively maintained and often unusual perspective, or from a great variety of perspectives simultaneously focused upon the subject" (p. xxi), a process which she terms a "closed" or an "open" structure. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* exhibits a number of features that Spencer defines as characteristic of a structurally closed work, mainly that of the restricted narrative perspective, permitting the creation of a fictional world which "may claim near-total freedom from the laws of reality" and from "conventionally measured approximations of time and space . . ." (p. 27). Richness of style, an abundance of bizarre metaphors, grotesque humor and characters who change identities are other features of Spencer's closed structures, all of which are immediately recognizable in the context of Márquez's novel.

Given the closed architectonic structure of the space of the book itself, the manner in which Márquez chooses to handle physical space within his novel is also significant. Critics immediately recognized the symbolic importance of Macondo as a reflection not only of Colombia's particular history, but of that of Spanish America as a whole and even of the entire Judeo-Christian tradition.<sup>2</sup> What has not been so specifically studied, however, is the physical space of the actual house in which the Buendía dynasty rises and falls.

In his classic work *The Poetics of Space*, the phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard defines *any* house as a kind of cosmos or universe, and stresses the need to be aware of the manner in which one inhabits the vital space of one's dwelling.<sup>3</sup> An analysis of the way in which Márquez's characters interact with the spatial interiors of the Buendía house reveals a series of highly symbolic actions that relate very closely to the thematic development of the novel.

From the beginning the house is filled with an enormous number of people and almost constant activity. Successive generations of repetitive Buendías, along with friends, enemies, relations, invited and uninvited guests troop through the house, leaving the reader numb with the effort to disentangle identities and to keep track of who did what to whom where. However, a careful reading of the text and close attention to which particular part of the house is inhabited by which characters soon reveal emerging patterns previously obscured by a dizzying succession of characters and events. Bachelard's particular approach does not work for all aspects of Márquez's novel,<sup>4</sup> but his concept of the house-image as a "topography of intimate being" (p. xxxii) can be of great use in a critical analysis of this work.<sup>5</sup>

Bachelard suggests that any study of a house begin with a search for "the original shell" (p. 4). Macondo is founded and fixed in space by José Arcadio Buendía, who "... had set up the placement of the houses in such a way that from all of them one could reach the river and draw water with the same effort, and he had lined up the streets with such good sense that no house got more sun than another during the hot time of day."<sup>6</sup> Even during this early utopian and democratic age of Macondo, the Buendía house "... from the first had been the best in the village, [and] the others had been built in its image and likeness" (p. 17). However, whereas José Arcadio Buendía may have constructed the original shell, from the first the house is clearly Ursula's domain. "Thanks to her the floors of tamped earth, the unwhitewashed mud walls, the rustic wooden furniture they had built themselves were always clean, and the old chests where they kept

their clothes exhaled the warm smell of basil" (p. 18). Within the epic sweep of the novel it soon becomes evident that Buendía men and Buendía women inhabit the physical space of the house in diametrically opposite ways, just as Ursula's commitment to Macondo as a permanent location was based on birth and José Arcadio's on death. Most of the men feel the need to leave the house—either physically or by means of the imagination—but the women stay put and exert their considerable influence over the house and the family from within.<sup>7</sup> And although multitudes of people may move through the house, it functions as the domain of three particular women: Ursula, Fernanda and Amaranta Ursula. Each one is, in a sense, a monarch who rules over a kingdom, setting the stamp of her personality on the structure. All three women not only affect the architectural design of the house, but, in an interrelated phenomenon, the lives of the inhabitants as well.

Ursula's sphere of influence is the kitchen, in accordance with her function as the central nurturer of the family members. It is during her time that the alchemist's laboratory is added on to the original structure, a room in which her husband and sons give themselves over either to extravagant fantasies or to hours of painstaking, non-productive work. From the beginning this room is a refuge from reality. In spite of his perilous influence, Ursula's hospitable and generous nature leads her to incorporate the gypsy Melquiades into the family, and to construct for him a room contiguous to the laboratory. In this magic space time can choose to stand still for years, certain people can become invisible and others can return from death, as Melquiades himself does on repeated occasions. The laboratory and the gypsy's room are realms of the imagination and as such, accessible to only a chosen number of Buendías, which significantly never includes any of the women.<sup>8</sup>

After the establishment and consolidation of Macondo and of the Buendía family, Ursula feels the need for an enlargement of the original dwelling: "... [she] fixed the position of light and heat and distributed space without the least sense of its limitations" (p. 60). Unconsciously she transforms the modest former structure into a mansion and just as unconsciously draws up a restricted guest list for her housewarming, both of which indicate that Macondo's democratic beginnings are over. Ursula replaces her simple, home-built furniture with imported crystal, Oriental rugs and the fateful pianola because she now feels the need to provide a *proper* place for her daughters' courtship. These social pretensions bring tragedy to the family by

introducing Pietro Crespi into the house, as luxurious an import as the rest of the new furnishings.

Ursula's perennially open and generous reign over the house marks the establishment and rise of the Buendía family, but even in its golden age there is little sense of family togetherness. The tendency to create boundaries and to exist in spaces that are walled off from each other can be seen on the return of José Arcadio, the firstborn son; entering the house, he encountered "... Amaranta and her friends sewing on the porch, Rebeca sucking her finger in her bedroom, Ursula in the kitchen, Aureliano in the workshop, and ... José Arcadio Buendía under the solitary chestnut tree ..." (p. 91). Ursula epitomizes the matriarchal nature of the Hispanic family: her sons may go out into the world, but they all come home to die by their mother.<sup>9</sup> When José Arcadio is banished from the house for the transgression of Ursula's rules, the blood of his fatal wound nevertheless seeks her out in the kitchen, carefully "hugging the walls so as not to stain the rugs ..." (p. 130). At the height of his power Colonel Aureliano Buendía for a time separates himself from house and mother by means of chalk circles and hammocks instead of beds, but ultimately returns to seek simplicity and peace in the confines of Ursula's world.

So strong and enduring is her matriarchal influence that Ursula's daughter Amaranta never succeeds her in the function of wife, mother or ruler of the house. Her stunted psychological development is reflected in the vital space which she most characteristically chooses to inhabit: rarely found in the kitchen, she spends most of her time embroidering on the porch. Closely examined, a porch is not a room but a kind of passageway—in Bachelardian terms neither inside nor outside—thus exemplifying Amaranta's inability to cross thresholds or to commit herself to either a particular room or a definitive life-role.<sup>10</sup>

After the death of her husband Ursula is supplanted as ruler of the house by her great-granddaughter-in-law, Fernanda. Both the apogee and initial decline of the Buendías corresponds to the reign of this aristocratic outsider, whose asphyxiating influence gradually annihilates Ursula's vitality.<sup>11</sup> Having been raised to be a queen in a tomb-like house, Fernanda subscribes to values and a life-style that are diametrically opposed to those of the Buendías. Illustrative of the change of mistress of the house is the substitution of the symbols over the entrance: "The aloe branch and loaf of bread that had been hanging over the door since the days of the founding were replaced by a niche with the Sacred Heart of Jesus" (pp. 200-01). Bearing a

crested gold chamberpot, Fernanda's refusal to share the family bathroom is a graphic example of her reluctance to integrate herself into either the house or the family structure. Ironically, the house fights back. All three of Fernanda's children have tragic experiences in the bathroom: Meme's lover Mauricio is shot and crippled, José Arcadio (the Pope) is drowned in his perfumed tub and Amaranta Ursula is seduced by Aureliano after her emergence from a bath. Totally useless as a nurturer, Fernanda rarely frequents the kitchen and is incapable even of boiling water for coffee. She has two characteristic vital spaces within the house: the stately dining room in which she presides over her Bohemian crystal and silver candlesticks, changing into a ritual mass the simple meals which during Ursula's time had always been eaten in the kitchen, and her bedroom, a refuge from reality into which she retreats to write surrealistic letters to her children and to her invisible doctors. In her bedroom she can also wear again the ermine robe and gilt cardboard crown with which she had originally entered Macondo.

Amaranta Ursula, the last Buendía matriarch, differs from her predecessors in that she was born and raised within the house instead of coming in from the outside. The formation and education of various Buendía children within the spatial confines of the house is very significant. As Bachelard observed, "... the house we were born in has engraved within us the hierarchy of the various functions of inhabiting. We are the diagram of the functions of inhabiting that particular house . . ." (p. 15). Members of the first generation of children (José Arcadio, Aureliano, Rebeca and Amaranta) were virtually ignored during their formative years because their parents were too involved in their own activities. Some children are entrusted to Indian servants, resulting in an initial inability to communicate in the family language, or, if illegitimate, denied knowledge of their real identity, with even more disastrous results. In the case of Amaranta Ursula and Aureliano, they were reared during the deluge, in an atmosphere of total unreality and isolation. Their favorite plaything was the tiny, mummified remnant of Ursula, and they learned about life outside Macondo only through Aureliano Segundo's interpretation of an *English* encyclopedia. By the time Amaranta Ursula takes over the house, the foundations have been undermined by greed and the inhabitants reduced to one, the solitary Aureliano to whom the boundaries of reality are the enchanted space of Melquíades's room.

Amaranta Ursula has the warm and generous nature of Ursula,

but also her mother Fernanda's incapacity to adapt to Macondo, as seen by her inability to eat the local food. Under the influence of her life-giving spirit the house is re-opened and restored to its former splendor, but the rejuvenation of the outer shell is only a cosmetic measure which alone cannot halt the decay of the inner core. Like Macondo and the family, the house has not recovered from the dual onslaught of a deluge and a drought of biblical proportions. With the invasion of insects, vegetation and incestuous love, the foundations crack and the timbers give way.<sup>12</sup> Amaranta Ursula and Aureliano lose all consciousness—or need—of outside space and retreat more and more into the inner recesses of each other and of the crumbling house. Room after room becomes useless and uninhabitable, and they exist in what Bachelard terms “. . . a sort of prequake, in a house about to collapse beneath the weight of walls which, when they too collapse, will have achieved definite burial . . .” (p. 176). In the throes of their destructive passion, they contribute to the annihilation of what is left of the house and the family, until Aureliano, bereft of both Amaranta Ursula and of their son, returns to the ultimate solitude of the magical room to seek out the parchments on which Melquiades had foretold the final, cataclysmic destruction of house, of family line and of Macondo itself.

The Buendía house thus clearly functions as a metaphor of the family and of the town, and, by extension, of the novel's fundamental theme of human solitude. From the time the initial structure is built, architectural space is used symbolically not only to house but to reflect the rise and fall of the Buendía dynasty. As all of them are afflicted with congenital solitude, the Buendías may occupy the same building, but there is no true co-habitation until the doomed love of the last pair. Different characters seek out different rooms in the house and shut the doors on each other. But more than just a mirror of the family, García Márquez has constructed a house which increasingly has a life of its own, and whereas successive generations may alter its architecture, the house reciprocally shapes the character and destiny of its successive inhabitants. As the family's destiny declines, there is a progressive reduction in vital space and rotting of the core until the last Aureliano has turned so far inward that only destruction is possible. As Bachelard observed, “Intimate space loses its clarity while exterior space loses its void, void being the raw material of the possibility of being. We are banished from the realm of possibility” (p. 218).

In looking at the way in which García Márquez has chosen to



treat spatial constructs in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, one becomes aware of the fact that Spencer's concept of a tightly-closed narrative structure finds its echo in the progressively restricted vital space within the novel itself. The Buendías go from a domination of space to a loss of control thereof. Condemned to solitude and an inability to love each other, they are equally unable to love the house or to achieve intimacy within its walls. As its function increasingly becomes that of a refuge from reality and from life, the house is doomed to destruction, for as Bachelard said, "... one must live to build one's house, and not build one's house to live in" (p. 106).

## NOTES

1. Sharon Spencer, *Space, Time and Structure in the Modern Novel* (Chicago: The Swallow Press, 1971), p. 13.

2. Fanny Carrión de Fierro, "*Cien años de soledad*, historia y mito de lo americano," in *Lectura de García Márquez* (Doce estudios) (Quito: Centro de Publicaciones, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador, 1975), p. 185.

3. Tr. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).

4. Bachelard, for example, imagines a strictly European type of architecture, stressing the importance of verticality and of cellars (realms of fears and of the subconscious) as well as attics, where "fears are easily rationalized" (p. 19). The Buendía house, located in a tropical American environment, is one-story, totally horizontal, and makes use of porches and patios, which are not physically enclosed spaces but nevertheless belong to the main structure. The other area of difficulty is that Bachelard chooses to focus only on "*felicitous space*" and "*images that attract . . . hostile space* is hardly mentioned in these pages" (pp. xxxi-xxxii). The Buendía house is, of course, a mixture of felicitous and hostile space, with the latter generally predominating. Notwithstanding these *caveats*, Bachelard's basic approach to fictional space is still viable in the context of Márquez's novel.

5. Bachelard defines the related term "topoanalysis" as "the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives" (p. 8).

6. Tr. Gregory Rabassa, 15th Printing (rpt. New York: Avon, 1971), p. 18.

7. Bachelard had already observed that the care which women give a house rebuilds it from the inside: "... we become conscious of a house that is built by women, since men only know how to build a house from the outside . . ." (p. 68).

8. Jean Franco noted that Melquiades' room is "like the space of literature itself,"

and that the “alchemy of literature . . . salvages what society cannot use, but it is available only to a minority of those who, like Aureliano Babilonia, are prepared to risk of deciphering its meaning.” “The Limits of the Liberal Imagination: *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Nostramo*,” *Punto de Contacto*, 1, No. 1 (1975), 14.

9. “Todas estas mujeres de Macondo se dan cuenta del escurridizo poder matriarcal que la hembra primitiva ejerce sobre sus infantiles varones. La esposa es la dueña indiscutida de vidas y destinos dentro del hogar y su palabra es ley para hijos y descendientes.” Carrión de Fierro, p. 192.

10. The Spanish, *corredor*, conveys this impression better than its English counterpart, *passageway*.

11. “Fernanda’s cloistered passion built an impenetrable dike against Ursula’s torrential hundred years” (p. 319).

12. Ursula had prophetically foreseen the gravest dangers to house and family before she died: “She started an endless, stumbling, deep prayer that lasted more than two days, and that by Tuesday had degenerated into a hodgepodge of requests to God and bits of practical advice to stop the red ants from bringing the house down, to keep the lamp burning by Remedios’ daguerreotype, and never to let any Buendia marry a person of the same blood because their children would be born with the tail of a pig” (p. 316).