

SPATIAL DIMENSIONS¹ IN THE FICTION OF MARÍA LUISA BOMBAL

In Bombal's award winning novel, *The Shrouded Woman* (1938), the provocative title conveys to the readers an image of a woman's dead prostrated body. But in this novel the contrary occurs. The shrouded woman is indeed dead, however, she possesses a live conscience. The action takes place during the wake of a young woman, named Ana María. The narration adheres to a chronological order of approximately twenty-four hours. Throughout the novel different characters that have been important in the heroine's life come to pay their last respects, as Ana María examines the past events of her life with them retrospectively. When the wake concludes the casket of the dead protagonist is taken to the family cemetery where the local priest conducts the final burial rites.

The very fact that the heroine is conscious takes the apparently conventional and simple structure of the text and opens it up to the vast possibilities of time and space that Ana María intuits. It is this perspective of the dead narrator that provides the shrouded woman a means of transcending the limitations of time and space, the limitations of a silent point of view, a means of freeing herself from the rational and logical. Her aim is to overcome static reality and to bypass the limits that exist between the real and the magical or supernatural: the real being the concrete fact of the death of the shrouded heroine, and the supernatural being the consciousness of the protagonist after her death. Bombal as an artist was aware of the creative work that she must construct in order to project the spatial structures of her art. This expansion from the deceased narrator's point of view, and juxtaposing the real and magical, seem limitless. Ana María is well aware, as she lies in her coffin, that the events in the real world, along with the temporal progression of time, no longer occur. She subordinates them to a total vision spatially conceived where time loses all of its sequential importance:

The sky clears and the wheel of the windmill begins to rotate heavily and regularly.

¹ For a general theoretical understanding of my approach to spatial dimensions in this article, see Joseph Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature" (1945), revised in *The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1963), 3-62; also, Frank's "Spatial Form: An Answer to Critics," *Critical Inquiry* 4 (Winter 1977): 231-252; Sharon Spencer, *Space, Time and Structure in the Modern Novel* (New York: New York University Press, 1971) 47; Arnold Hauser, "The Film Age," *The Social History of Art*, trans. Stanley Godman (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., and Random House, Inc., 1951) 240-241. Frank and Hauser believe that when certain events in time are organized according to the techniques of juxtaposition, montage, and interpolation, they lose both their sequential nature and their quality of irreversibility. They agree that simultaneity, reversibility, and juxtaposition are the writer's most effective means to escape linear time and build events into spatial episodes. Spencer uses the theories of Frank and Hauser, but goes on to demonstrate how characterization, structure, and point of view can be used to create spatial planes in modern literature.

But no longer inside her is there any trace of time that repeats its monotonous accord. The sound is completely gone now, silently, from on high, a tremendous feeling that envelops and overwhelms her.

She doesn't remember having enjoyed, ever having consumed an emotion in such a way.

So many people, so many worries and small physical difficulties always came between her and the secret of the night. Now, in turn, not any inopportune thought disturbs her. They have traced a circle of silence around her, and the beating pulse of the invisible artery has stopped that used to pound frequently and so rigorously in her temple.² (trans. my own)

By having her main character surmount the static conditions of death, through a retrospective conscious mind, Bombal rejects the restrictions of death as she does the boundaries of time and space. She views death not as an end but as a transformation and a means of renewal. By artistically juxtaposing the real and the supernatural, Ana María is viewed as embracing her past experiences in life in their totality, to reveal a world beyond the grasp of logical thinking, a past seen through the intuitive powers of her mind. Such a total spatial vision is the objective and focus of Bombal's aesthetic goal.

Julio Cortázar, one of the most renowned Latin-American writers of the Boom generation, characterizes the modern artist's desire to create "an extension without limits," in search of "that sort of final island where man would at last find himself, reconciling his inner differences and contradictions."³ This is exactly what transpires in *The Shrouded Woman* as Ana María reconciles her past life with the other characters of importance in the narration. As we plunge into the inner thoughts and differences of the main character, much of the action in the novel takes on a Bergsonian timelessness: many of the episodes are totally unhampered by any temporal or spatial orientations. We can never ascertain the border between fantasy and reality. By destroying the empirical reality and its traditional boundaries, we are carried to that "island" that Cortázar alludes to, and where more enigmatic dimensions are interjected and where a sense of spiritual unity may be achieved by Ana María. She is able to review multiple planes and perspectives simultaneously, to perceive relations with those who come to her viewing during the specific time of her wake and not through the chronological sequence of her past life.

Another way Bombal accomplishes different spatial patterns in *The Shrouded Woman* is through the allusions to nature and all its mysteries. This search for different spatial planes in nature takes on the form of a metaphysical and

² María Luisa Bombal, *La amortajada* (Santiago, Nascimento, 1968) 9-10. All future references to this text will indicate the page number in parenthesis after the citation.

³ Julio Cortázar, "Algunos aspectos del cuento," *Cuadernos Americanos* 225 (1973): 406-407.

philosophical pilgrimage for the shrouded heroine. The **figura** of nature, as Lotman so aptly points out, at the basic everyday level of meaning, becomes transposed at the secondary level of language expression.⁴ This secondary level of meaning can also be understood as spatialization in Bombal's fiction. The variety and multiplicity of the allusions to nature give rise to a diversity of these images. In a scene in which the shrouded woman lies in her casket awaiting the arrival of her family and friends, she contemplates the falling rain outside that appears to take on a new spatial plane, that of being almost mystical and transcendental:

The murmur of the rain upon the forest and upon the house moves her promptly to give way, body and soul, to that sensation of well-being and melancholy in which the sigh of the water always humbled her during those interminable autumn nights.

The rain comes down delicately, obstinately, and quietly. And she listens to it fall. (8)

This harmony and union she feels with nature is experienced again by Ana María as soon as her casket is carried to its final resting place. When the casket reaches the family burial grounds she identifies with the solidarity of nature:

The sky! A grey-blue sky where the birds fly low. Within a few hours it will rain again. What a beautiful wet and unpleasant afternoon. She never had loved them as much as this, but never-the-less, this afternoon shares its dark beauty and even the light-blowing of the wind makes her rejoice as it slightly blows through the joints of the casket. (117-118)

The allusions to the surrounding natural cosmos continue to be the only vision the readers see and experience as Ana María is rhythmically being taken to her burial plot. This focus on the rain, trees, wind, etc., strengthen the concept that nature takes on a secondary plane of expression, creating a new locus that can be understood as a different level of spatial form. These **figuras** of nature in the closing pages of the *The Shrouded Woman* act much like a collage or the technique of montage, to evoke a pattern—a pattern emerging from spatial interweavings of nature and phrases independent of any time-sequence of narrative action—that will remain with the readers. Bombal's nature **figuras** represent images juxtaposed in space rather than evolving in time, in which people, events, and places relate to one another across time and space. These patterns go beyond and exist through time and logic. In the closing pages Ana María finally transcends the limitations of her grieved life to a union with Mother Earth, and thus, a new sphere of spiritual unity is achieved. The protagonist, then, possesses a feeling of solidarity toward nature that underlines the multiplicity of these scenes at the end of the novel. As Cassirer so aptly observes, "To mythical and religious feeling, nature becomes one great

⁴ Jurij M. Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1977).

society, the society of life.”⁵

There is no doubt that Ana María feels a special unity with the different forms of nature. These feelings also appear to parallel the doctrines of Taoism. This Chinese belief is founded upon a metaphysical teaching with nature: “Taoism seeks its principles and rules for human life not within man himself, but within nature. Consequently, instead of emphasizing man and society, this philosophy emphasizes the metaphysical foundations of nature.”⁶

Such a definition is consonant with the vision of María Luisa Bombal. The projections of nature in *The Shrouded Woman* are knit together, not by the progress of the narrative action, but by the continual allusion and other references that must be referred to spatially during the reading of the novel.

Much like a collage, the final scenes in Bombal’s prize winning novel are brought together, piled up, and interwoven into the final pattern. The use of collage is most evident in the organization of the juxtaposed settings in this novel. The result is a structure in which past and present are viewed spatially, seized in a timeless fusion that does away with any feeling of progression due to the use of juxtaposition. This technique spatializes the episodes by reducing time to isolated moments of perception instead of the sequential flow of the traditional novel. The meaning of the work is not to be found in Bombal’s poetic language but in the scenes that remain dynamic, maintaining a continual contrast between the past and the present so that both are blended together in one comprehensive view. In concluding one might say that the meaning of *The Shrouded Woman* resides in the reader’s ability to sense Ana María’s life and experiences as a totality, including all the relations of the characters to one another. The reader is intended to acquire this vision as he/she progresses through the novel, connecting and combining allusions and references spatially and gradually becoming aware of the pattern of relationships. Bombal created a powerful spatial form in *The Shrouded Woman*. Her intent was to have the reader apprehend her work spatially, in a moment of time, rather than as a sequence. This predominance of spatialization in Bombal’s works would be emulated by writers of future generations.

Bombal’s best-known short story, “The Tree”, published in 1939, is a story in which the heroine’s imaginative world coexists with her unpleasant marital reality, and demonstrates the desire of the author to create different spatial planes in her fiction. Bombal’s aim is to interweave all levels of Brígida’s life, which are viewed simultaneously, thereby surpassing our usual perceptions of time and space. We learn about Brígida’s childhood, adolescence, and adult life all combined together so that the events of her life appear concurrently. “The Tree” incorporates specific times in Brígida’s life as part of her imaginary and real spaces, so that these limits

⁵ Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man; An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944) 17.

⁶ John M. Koller, *Oriental Philosophies* (New York: Charles Scribner Sons, 1970) 235.

of time and space dissolve, and the past, present, and future experiences of the heroine, Brígida, are rearranged and coalesced. Time is stopped and the protagonist's memories are examined from a single point of reference in her concrete and illusory worlds.

Bombal's story moves back and forth through time and space, juxtaposing and superimposing levels of experience. Temporal structure is not sequential but free-floating and unstable, the imaginary world co-existing with the protagonist's unpleasant marital reality. Moving back and forth in time, and also through the conscious mind and the depths of the unconscious, the heroine recalls parts of her life that are psychological and subjective. Using the music of Mozart, Beethoven, and Chopin to indicate shifts in temporal and psychic perspectives, the main character is in a concert hall listening to the musical pieces of classical composers and at the same time is reenacting her childhood and adolescence experiences. Bombal is able to reveal a much larger reality that encompasses this type of temporal and spatial setting:

The pianist sits down, coughs from force of habit, and concentrates for a moment. The cluster of lights illuminating the hall gradually dim until they glow like dying embers, whereupon a musical phrase rises in silence, swells: clear sharp, and judiciously capricious...

For in truth Mozart leads her, transporting her onto a bridge suspended above crystal water running over a bed of pink sand. She is dressed in white, tilting on one shoulder an open parasol of chantilly lace, elaborate and fine as a spider's web.

"You look younger every day Brígida. Yesterday I ran into your husband—I mean you ex-husband. His hair is now completely white."

But she makes no reply, unwilling to tarry while crossing the bridge Mozart has fabricated toward the garden of her youth.⁷

The simplicity of Bombal's language conceals its synchronic elaboration, subverting the temporal sequence even as it moves continually through its temporal medium of the concert. The depiction of objects gives way to the depiction of perception: the musical notes become the chronological action and flow of the present, the bridge a continuum in which past and present are eradicated, the white clothing and parasol symbols of past innocence and childhood.

Bombal's knowledge of Jungian psychological theories in her fiction is consistent with her desire to create spatial structures. Jung's work with the subconscious levels of the mind made psychic time and space relative occurrences. The obvious juxtaposition of these two phenomena (the psychic and the physical)

⁷ Richard and Lucia Guerra-Cunningham, *New Islands and Other Stories by María Luisa Bombal*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1982) 52. All future references to this text will indicate the page number in parenthesis after the citation.

is brought out when Mozart's music finishes and the protagonist is led back across the bridge of the yesteryear of her childhood to the present time and action in the concert hall:

But at this moment Mozart takes her nervously by the hand, drawing her into a rhythm second by second more urgent telling her to retrace her steps across the garden and into the bridge at a pace that is almost like fleeing. And after stripping her of the parasol and the transparent crinoline, he closes the door on her past with a note at once firm and sweet—leaving her in the concert hall, dressed in black, applauding mechanically as the artificial lights rekindle their flame. (53-54)

Jung's conception of synchronic levels of mental experience, of the coincidence of time and space, underlines Bombal's spatial understanding and presentations of the subconscious content of the modern mind as portrayed in her main character, Brígida.

In addition to using a spatially-structured narration that contrasts experiences that are discontinuous and dissonant, 'The Tree' can also be seen as a spatialized structure through the use of the multiple sign systems of art, myth, and religion which are based upon the system of verbal language but also give meaning in other secondary ways. Jurji Lotman, among other prominent semioticians, maintains that these secondary sign systems go beyond the level of the system of natural verbal language and create a new level of meaning which can be understood and interpreted as spatialization. The pattern or figure around which Bombal's heroine finds refuge is a large rubber tree. It is in this plane of relation that Brígida transcends the limitations of her failing marriage to a realm where a sense of spiritual unity can be accomplished. The rubber tree is portrayed in an impressionistic atmosphere created by intensity of language and tone. It casts shadows that undulate on the walls like cold, moving water; its foliage, reflected through the mirrors in the boudoir, create an illusion of a green and infinite forest. The reader is powerfully held within the figure of the tree, which comprises a unique and original world, complete in itself:

It is the tree outside her dressing-room window. She had only to enter the room to experience an almost overpowering sense of well-being. How hot the bedroom always was of a morning! And what harsh light! By contrast, in the boudoir, even her eyes felt rested, refreshed. The faded cretonne curtains; the tree casting shadows that undulated on the walls like cold, moving water; the mirrors reflecting foliage, creating the illusion of a green and infinite forest. How enjoyable that room was! It seemed a world submerged in an aquarium. And how that huge rubber tree chattered! All the birds in the neighborhood took refuge in it. It was the only tree on the narrow, falling street that sloped from one side of the city directly to the river. (55-56)

Brígida's description of the tree seems paradoxical: it seems to transcend the physical attributes of any ordinary tree but at the same time it encompasses it, it is unequaled and yet limited. This search for a different plane suggests a

transcendental and spiritual journey toward the refuge of the tree archetype. These and other mythical and religious sign figures of the tree have been studied by Lucia Guerra-Cunningham, who observes:

The tree is perhaps one of the most symbolic elements in all cultures, and because of this the variety of meanings it connotes: firstly, it represents the *axis mundi* in its growth, proliferation, generation, and regeneration that is translated ontologically as an "absolute reality," because its vertical image constitutes, besides an axis between the subterranean world, the terrestrial, and the celestial, at the same time it is associated with life, knowledge, and death (tree of life, tree of science, and the crucifixion). On the other side, according to Carl G. Jung, the tree also represents physical growth, psychological maturation, and the cosmic union of male (phallic symbol) and female (proliferation). The rich symbolism of the tree requires then that one not limit its specific connotations to the vision of the world offered in the book.⁸ (trans. my own)

These secondary sign systems of myth and religion change the meaning of everyday language to new expressions, thereby creating a new plane of meaning. Erich Neuman in his study on the feminine archetypes also points out that the tree with its vegetation, growth, and proliferation is associated with the fertility of the woman: the archetype of the Mother, like the archetype of the Tree of the World, protects, feeds, and sustains the cycle of life. In this short story the figure and pattern of the tree therefore constitute a model suggesting an existence that transcends a life destroyed by a marriage in which love, passion, and the desire to procreate do not exist, and yet is limited to those outside influences that alienate Brígida. The spatial projection is constantly changing and is inherent in the *figura* which Bombal attempts to portray with a much larger reality. The use of this type of spatial relativity now becomes thematic as well as structural in this story. In several episodes Bombal wishes to present scenes with the *figura* of the tree that go beyond the readers usual perception of time and space with a multiplicity of perspectives. Thus, Brígida describes the tree that is always changing, which portrays her feelings and emotions in terms of spatial patterns:

It was then she heard a banging against the windowpane.

She went to the window and opened it, not knowing how or whence her courage came. It was the rubber tree, set in motion by the storm, knocking its branches on the glass—as though calling her to witness how it twisted and contorted like a fierce black flame under the burning sky of that summer night.

Heavy rain soon began to lash its cold leaves. How lovely! All night long she could hear the rubber tree like a thousand tiny rivers sliding down imaginary canals. All night long she heard the ancient trunk creak and moan... (59)

Just as the tree pattern has served as a spatial plane for the spiritual and

⁸ Lucia Guerra-Cunningham, *La narrativa de María Luisa Bombal* (Madrid: Editorial Playor, 1980) 55-56.

psychological refuge of the main character, it also determines her ultimate return from her ahistorical reality. The rubber tree is felled "with a single stroke of the ax," and suggests the impossibility of any further spatial expansion which Brígida has previously associated with this figure. She looks out on the street from her room and sees,

...that the room almost brushes against a shiny skyscraper. On the ground floor, shop windows and more shop windows, full of bottles. At the corner, a row of automobiles line up in front of a service station painted red. Some boys in their shirtsleeves are kicking a ball in the middle of the street. (64)

With the removal of the tree, and all its planes, Bombal is now able to reveal and emphasize the tree's multidimensional existence in her heroine's life to that of the world outside her bedroom. Just as Brígida projected the figure of the tree in her mind as it moved through space, she now fractures this illusory enclosure and sees the factual world before her. The story ends at this point, suggesting the possible contradiction between real space and its illusive representation.

In conclusion, much of the literary criticism of María Luisa Bombal's novels and short stories to date recognizes and acknowledges the exceptional poetic quality of her style. Other studies have examined at great length the thematic and the structural aspects of her works, as well as her distinctive characterizations. Very little investigation, however, has been done in the use of spatial patterns in her writings. Her fiction, although small in quantity, is a significant contribution to twentieth century Spanish-American letters. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of her works is the manner in which they express her vision through the artistic use of time and space.

The two best-known fictional works of Bombal that have been discussed here are the products of a mind that endows space with meaning. Bombal's female characters portray the same philosophical and mundane stance: each feels imprisoned within a hostile environment which she seeks to transcend by fantasized travel. The heroine's escape depends upon the mind's intercession, which transforms time and place into a timeless, limitless sphere. Bombal's management of multiple aspects of time and space as non-sequential, illusory, with shifting vantage points, the blurring of the animate and inanimate, and the transmutation of objects and symbols anticipates the techniques and vision of the Spanish-American writers who follow in the fifties and sixties. Perhaps the greatest fictional achievement of these later artists was to produce narrations that give us a new view of ourselves, the world, and life itself, seen from the relative position of our place in space and time.

Tony Spanos
Weber State College