

Don Anselmo and the Myth of the Hero in *La Casa Verde*

From his first appearance in Piura, Don Anselmo comes into focus quickly as a mysterious, enigmatic figure. His past, his reasons for coming to Piura, and his strange behavior after arriving are all unknown factors that immediately capture the curiosity and imagination of the community. It watches in fascination as he proceeds to challenge the desert's hegemony by daring to construct a building on its shifting sands. When the structure is completed and finally stands against the barren horizon, it visibly signifies an epic victory over the forces of nature and, like a green oasis, it beckons all who would escape the thirst of the desert and the social restraints of the city.

The people of Piura want an explanation and a history for this unusual man in their midst and, because these are lacking, the community itself begins to create for him at first a motive, then a past, and eventually an imaginary reality:

New myths about Don Anselmo arose in Piura. According to some, he took secret trips to Lima, where he kept his money and was buying property. According to others, he was only the front man for a business group that had the Chief of Police, the Mayor, and several ranchers among its members. In popular fantasy, Don Anselmo's past became enriched, sublime or bloody deeds were daily added to his biography. Old Mangaches were sure that they saw in him an adolescent who years back had committed holdups in the district, and others asserted, "He's an escaped prisoner, a former rebel, a politician in disgrace." Only Father García dared say, "His body smells of surfur."

Collective voices—either disembodied or transposed by an intervening narrator—become a chorus of speculation that quickly elevates Don Anselmo's stature in the community to the level of a local legend.

But even in his exalted position Don Anselmo does not forever escape the process of victimization that runs through human society in *La casa verde*. When a mob led by Padre García burns the green house, Don Anselmo's private world also perishes in the conflagration. After the fire, his will broken, Don Anselmo sinks deep into despair. In the gutters of Piura his personality undergoes a symbolic death to emerge later only partially in the collective existence of his newly created orchestra. Don Anselmo survives but only as a remnant of his former self. The quiet, somnambulant harpist in la Chunga's brothel has little resemblance to the spirited, ambitious man who for a time, by the sheer force of his personality, prevailed over the laws of nature and society.

The decline in Don Anselmo's stature as a personality is matched by a similar decline in his status as an active character. Within the narrative line relating his story the focus passes to the orchestra, the collectivity that absorbs his identity. Now barely discernible, Don Anselmo's personality fuses with the profile of his environment; he becomes a fully generic creature, a *mangache*.

This is Don Anselmo's status as a personality and as a character when the reader encounters three highly lyric episodes that introduce and develop an earlier love relationship with the blind Antonia. A portion of the high intensity of these episodes can be traced to their unexpected recovery of strong dramatic interest in a waning character.

The basic technique used to relate this experience—a narrative voice addressing Don Anselmo in the second person pronoun—is one normally associated with interior monologue. It is not surprising, then, that many readers have seen these passages as an interior monologue given structure by Don Anselmo's consciousness.² Indeed the impression is strong that the reader has entered the subjective world of the character.

In striving to interpret this problem, a useful point of departure is offered by the analysis advanced by the author himself. Vargas Llosa has stated that the technique is not equivalent to an interior monologue and what transpires in the episodes is not a representation of Don Anselmo's psychic life.³ Rather, according to the author, the technique conveys the collective consciousness of the *Mangachería* which has been activated in the emotionally charged atmosphere surrounding Don Anselmo's death. This voice, addressing him with a series of commands, orders and creates a new reality for what is unknown. The episodes thus represent a past reality which has been reconstructed by the people of the *barrio* on the basis of a complex mixture of fact, speculation, gossip, and imagination.

If one follows the author's point of view, the consequences for interpretation are radically different from those arising if one sees the episodes as interior monologue. Depending on which view is assumed the choice will necessarily orient subsequent discussion toward one of two possible directions: either the episodes are highly and unusually explanatory of the subjective experience of an individual personality or they must be seen as a negation of the concept of individuality introducing in its place a vision of collective personality.

From the notion of an exterior consciousness, a situation results wherein the validity and causality of the experiences ascribed to Don Anselmo are in serious doubt. Such a view must allow that the nucleus of Don Anselmo's story occurs within a collective-subjective context in which the reality presented is unverifiable. It is exactly this thought that opens the second of the three episodes with the phrasing: "Things are the way they are, reality and desire become mingled . . ." (p. 323).

Even though the episodes incorporate a number of details appearing to be fragments from an objective reality—the deathbed exchange between Don Anselmo and Padre García, for example—their immersion within such a context makes their validity as objective experience questionable. This presentation of character and human action through a subjective framework which defines existence in terms of what other men attribute to it is a distinctive feature of what Vargas Llosa calls myth. With this meaning, the author has acknowledged a conscious effort to exploit a mythical dimension in the story of Don Anselmo.⁴

The three episodes themselves contain no internal evidence which conclusively indicates whether they should be read as interior monologue or as the collective voice of the *Mangachería*. Nevertheless, this study takes the view that the novel as a whole supplies a number of correlates that make the latter interpretation more consistent with the dynamics of its entire fictional world. Although the techniques are different, the episodes narrating Fushia's past and Lituma's encounter with Chapiro Seminario display the process whereby another individual or a collective body reconstructs the course of a past reality only partially known to the participants. Quite as prophetically, collective and disembodied voices within the community have already appeared in a variety of contexts to add their own interpretation to the events of Don Anselmo's life. The mythmaking process itself has also been seen with regard to other characters

as a predominant feature of the collective life of the Mangacheria. Reshaping the past to suit its needs and desires, the *barrio* has created its own military celebrity in Sanchez Cerro and its own saint in Domitila Yara. Little wonder, then, that the mystery and accomplishments of Don Anselmo's life should be expanded and transformed into a new projection of the *mangache* spirit.

It is important to note, moreover, that the legendary stature Don Anselmo acquires in the Mangacheria has more than local significance and, in effect, engages more dimensions of myth than suggested by the author's earlier definition or by critics addressing this question. From what the reader learns of Don Anselmo through many modes of presentation, he is not at all unlike an archetype. Modeled rather closely on the hero myth as it has been formulated by Lord Raglan, Don Anselmo's life exhibits many of the distinctive features of the universal prototype.⁵

From the outline provided by the English critic and allowing only those variations accepted in his analysis, the basic pattern of the archetypal hero can be steadily traced with regard to Don Anselmo.⁶ Although mystery surrounds Don Anselmo's life and background before his appearance in Piura, statements made by la Selvática in the epilogue strongly imply that he was (8) reared in a far country. (9) His childhood undisclosed, Don Anselmo's story begins (10) with his arrival in what will be his future "kingdom" shortly after he has reached manhood. In the estimation of the people he becomes (13) a hero through the performance of miraculous feats which demonstrate (11) his power over the elements. His victory over an animated, hostile desert closely parallels the hero's traditional and symbolic struggle with a dragon.⁷ Assuming the qualities of a rain god, and after the defeat of his adversary, Don Anselmo creates an oasis in the midst of desolation.⁸ The music emanating from his harp conveys (15) a tantalizing invitation to freedom and a new order of experience for sterile lives entrapped by the conventions of society. For Antonia, he strives to create reality itself by giving her the names through which she might possess it. For a time, Don Anselmo (14) reigns uneventfully until he comes to be regarded (16) as the cause of both a natural and a moral plague. Losing favor with his subjects he is (17) driven from his throne. Later, having lived (19) on a sacred hilltop (the tower of the green house), he meets (18) a mysterious death (19) in an upper chamber.⁹ There is (21) no mention of his burial but it is said that (22) his memory will be worshipped at shrines.¹⁰

With such features defining the archetypal pattern of his life, the process by which the past and reality are reconstructed by others reaches its ultimate condition. What may appear to be primarily a problem of narrative reliability in characterization becomes now a formative principle with bold implications in the story of Don Anselmo. Through the collective memory and imagination of the people, the essence and portrayal of Don Anselmo's life lose meaningful contact with objective reality. His individuality has no real extension; it is only a circumstantial phenomenon which eventually dissolves in the generic world of myth.¹¹ His legacy to the Mangacheria will be a never-ending search for the truth and meaning of his existence.

Systematic allusion to a mythical prototype does not make *La casa verde* a coherent allegory. But these features do significantly expand the limits of the novel by offering, through implication and association, deeper and more universal insights into the essence of man's eternal struggle against nature, society, and himself.

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NOTES

Mario Vargas Llosa, *The Green House*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 90. Hereafter, references to this edition will be found in the text.

²For the most lengthy discussion of this interpretation, see, George R. McMurray, "The Novels of Mario Vargas Llosa," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 29 (September 1968), 329-340.

³These ideas, and the concept of myth attributed to the author were originally expressed to me by Vargas Llosa during two tape-recorded interviews which took place in Seattle on October 31, 1968 and in Pullman on December 11, 1968. For a published version of the author's views on this topic, see Wolfgang Luchting, "Vargas Vicuña, a technical predecessor of Mario Vargas Llosa?" *PNCFL* (Mass.), 14 (1968), 128. For further discussion of the Anselmo-Antonia episodes, see José Miguel Oviedo, *Mario Vargas Llosa: La Invención de una Realidad* (Barcelona: Barral Editores, S.A., 1970), pp. 153-155.

⁴In "Los mitos y lo mitizante en *La Casa Verde*," *Mundo Nuevo*, No. 43 (January 1970), pp. 56-60., Wolfgang Luchting questions the author's definition of myth as a collective re-creation. Luchting's point is well taken but I cannot agree with the further argument—when applied to Don Anselmo—that the novel encloses only individual details and elements of "mature" myths. In subsequent discussion, I shall attempt to show how an interpretation relating Don Anselmo's characterization to hero myths does, in fact, demonstrate a coherent *pattern* of mythical features that is quite complete and traditional.

⁵Lord Raglan, *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956).

⁶For the format of Raglan's presentation of archetypal features within the hero myth, see *The Hero*, pp. 174-175. The numbers included in my text correspond to Raglan's ordering procedure.

⁷As Don Anselmo's heroic struggle reaches its victorious conclusion, descriptions of the green house refer evocatively to its "emerald skin" (*piel esmeralda*) and "scaly reflections" (*reflejos escamosos*) whereby the specific mythic design under discussion here is reinforced and enriched by metaphorical language. (The English translation, p. 84, by rendering *reflejos escamosos* as "fleeing reflections," does not adequately convey the meaning of the original.)

⁸For Raglan's discussion of how rainmaking or an equivalent demonstration of power over the elements "is the most unvarying characteristic of the divine king," see *The Hero*, p. 190.

⁹Feature twenty of Raglan's format states that the hero is not succeeded by his children. While la Chunga's role in the novel apparently contradicts this point, it may be still partially applicable insofar as both characters, for unknown reasons, seem to have renounced the relationship.

¹⁰*The Green House*, p. 384.

¹¹This interpretation, together with the previous discussion of Don Anselmo's symbolic death, indicates that two kinds of symbolism are involved in his portrayal as a character. Before his rebirth into the collectivity of the Mangachería, Don Anselmo undergoes a death of personality which is symbolic in the sense that it is not literal. The event offers a partial parallel with Jum's experience of Christ-like crucifixion. In both cases, the thematic issue is a loss of personal identity. With regard to Don Anselmo, however, the combined events of his life compose a portrayal given in terms that are both existential and archetypal. Each of these levels offers independent thematic meaning but, for both, it is impossible to separate real events from the projections of the Mangachería.