

Initiation in Amilibia's *Los fantasmas de barro*

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The reader of the contemporary Spanish novelist Jesús María Amilibia's *Los fantasmas de barro* (1978) is confronted with harsh and embittered social criticism of the economic deprivation, vengeance, hypocrisy, broken families, cruel punishments, and man's inhumanity to his fellow human beings prevalent during the Franco era. Admittedly, this portrayal of Spain is all too typical of the post-Civil War novel, beginning with Cela's *La familia de Pascual Duarte* (1942), and continuing through an enormous production of novelistic works in which the writers increasingly seek to express their personal views about society. Amilibia's work, however, is something more than a mere exposé of the social ills of Spain and warrants unique importance because its structure and form complement the action and demonstrate in effect the basic underlying rites which function in a given society and manifest its value system.

Los fantasmas de barro is an autobiographical novel which, on two levels of time, retraces the crucial events of the author's youth. The central action occurs in chronological order over a single year (summer 1953 through spring 1954), while the background action comprises sporadic events in the protagonist's life prior to 1953, events which are not in chronological order but which are precipitated by some relationship to the incidents of the central action. References to time before the central action are through flashbacks and are set apart from the central action by the use of italics. In many ways the episodes which comprise the central action are comparable to the steps in the rite of initiation as noted by the religious historian Mircea Eliade. Initiation, defined as social ritual as well as symbolic system, identifies a transition or transformation of the individual from one state to another. As a social ritual, it identifies the rite of passage from childhood to adulthood as a symbolic system which universally expresses a transcendental movement to a higher state of being (e.g. from the profane to the sacred, from ignorance to knowledge). Eliade in his study *Rites and Symbols of Initiation* includes the following common elements in the initiation process: separation from the maternal world (symbolized as the "death" of childhood), removal of the initiates to some secluded area apart from the society, initiatory ordeals and performance of feats, revelation of and instruction in group myths and sacred knowledge, some rite of "marking" or scarification, "rebirth" into the adult world, and, finally, a return to the group.¹ It is an experience by which the individual is enhanced, gains superior knowledge of himself and his society, and becomes a complete and responsible member of that society.

In *Los fantasmas de barro* the central action closely follows the initiation paradigm identified by Eliade. Ironically, however, the significance of the various elements and the end result are not of a positive nature. While a transformation does occur and the protagonist is educated into the adult world, it is not a

¹Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row, 1958). See also Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries: The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), pp. 190-228. It should be noted that Theodor Reik in his work *Ritual: Psychoanalytical Studies*, trans. Douglas Bryan (New York: International Universities Press, Inc., 1958), pp. 91-166, views the puberty rites of primitives in Freudian terms as the negation of the Oedipus complex, supported by unconscious homosexual tendencies.

transcendental process through which he achieves a higher state of being, nor is he spiritually or psychically enhanced in the developmental process. This study is designed to show how the initiation paradigm provides the structure for the central action of the novel, while simultaneously subverting the meaning of initiation, and thereby reflecting the distortion of the value system of the society. By using the well-known and intuited archetypal form of initiation, Amilibia, consciously or unconsciously, has demonstrated the shift from the sacred to the profane, the desacralization of the process, and, by example, the "perversion" of that previously held sacred and valued by the society, therefore by extension, condemning society itself. On the other hand, the novel itself as text, the adult recall of the events of youth, provides a second view of the initiation process, that of symbolic system, wherein Amilibia, as author through recounting the past, takes the initial step to acquire a transcendence which could result in his own psychic integration and wholeness. This second aspect which incorporates the entire text is comparable to C. G. Jung's theory of individuation.²

Common to the initiation paradigm, the central action of the novel begins with the separation of the ten-year-old protagonist Jesús Mari from his widowed mother when he is sent to a boarding school in their hometown of Bilbao. This preparatory separation widens when he is later transferred to another school for orphans in Valladolid. Jesús Mari is heartbroken and tearful at the thought of leaving his mother, and she, in turn, tries to mask her own suffering: "Hijo, van a hacer de ti un hombre, un hombre de verdad, entero y verdadero. Me duele que nos separen, pero es por tu bien, hijo, por tu bien."³ Only later in the novel does the full irony of these remarks become apparent.

Jesús Mari is fortunate because he begins his separation by spending the summer of 1953 at a seaside camp in Santóna. This experience is healthy, pleasant, and stimulating, and serves as a contrast to the San Pedro school in Valladolid where he is sent in September. The rest of the central action focuses on the first year of his stay at this school run by the clergy for some four hundred orphans and boys from broken and impoverished homes. As is common to initiation rites, this seclusion constitutes a break with the past, especially with the maternal world, and a period in which education is received from a group of elder male members of the society. That the elder males responsible for the young boys' welfare are clergymen is not inappropriate for they are the traditional representatives not only of God, but also of society and its system of values. What becomes apparent, however, from the outset is that the clergy, both priests and brothers, of this charitable institution are far from being the models of superior moral conduct and the appropriate guides for their charges.

While Jesús Mari has been well acquainted with economic suffering in his family life, his initial encounter with the Prefect and Rector at San Pedro sets the tone for the total suffering and sadism which becomes the basis of his education for the next six years. The Rector Padre Zabala tells the boys that, even though the school is short on economic resources, "Prendemos que el día que salgáis de aquí a enfrentaros con la vida estéis preparados para saber defenderos tanto material como espiritualmente" (p. 84). Each boy is then separated into an age group, given a haircut, and assigned a clothing number and a straw mattress cot. His belongings are searched and he is stripped of his treasured memories of home—photographs, mementos, and the like. Customarily

²See C. G. Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, Vol. VII of *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (New York: Pantheon, 1953), pp. 152, 171-85.

³Jesús María Amilibia, *Los fantasmas de barro* (Barcelona: Plaza & Janés, 1978), pp. 14-15. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically within the text.

each is then subjected to a form of hazing where questions are tossed at him and his failure to answer correctly results in an unmerciful beating from the Prefect Padre Andrés. Other boys are similarly trounced and bloodied for even showing sympathy to their fallen companions. These cruel beatings which border on the sadistic constitute one type of the continuing initiatory trials which are so prevalent in the school.

While fasting signifies a normal initiatory ordeal, extreme and prolonged hunger becomes an all-pervasive and continual trial at San Pedro. The normal fare is almost meager and hunger increases in intensity when the denial of food is used as a punishment for some sin or disobedience, deserved or not. In one incident, two boys are caught fighting over a piece of bread, and as a punishment are required to sleep outside on a freezing November night clothed only in their underwear. Their deaths from the bitter cold cause hardly a stirring of remorse or concern from the priests, while the rest of the boys accept unquestioningly the lie that they had been transferred to another school.

The malady of chilblains is universal when the boys are forced to endure the cold weather without proper food, heat or heavy clothing. In the spring they appease their hunger by eating the flowers off the trees around the school, and when they steal sugar beets from a disabled truck, their hunger is intensified since the punishment is to forego dinner for a month. Examples abound of evidence that physical suffering is a daily reality at the school.

In speaking of initiation in primitive societies, Eliade notes that "for every traditional society, suffering has a ritual value, for the torture is believed to be inflicted by superhuman beings and its purpose is the spiritual transmutation of the victim. Torture is, in itself, an expression of initiatory death."⁴ In this regard, the action of the novel does seem to fit the paradigm except for one important element—there is an absence of the purpose, "the spiritual transmutation of the victim." In no way do the physical ordeals experienced by the boys enhance them spiritually, nor is there any suggestion that this is the implied higher goal. The idea of superhuman beings, representatives of the gods, is a cruel mockery since these clergymen seem to derive a sadistic pleasure from inflicting physical abuse on the boys.

Jesús Mari recounts how his first friend, Berto, a frail and sickly boy, collapsed during the exercise period, was brutally kicked and beaten by Padre Andrés, and, as a result, later died. No one seemed to care that the "elders" were responsible for the child's death. This is only one of many examples of the absence of any sensitivity or concern for the physical welfare of the boys.

Critical to all initiation rites is the imparting of sacred knowledge to each member of the group, and in the novel spiritual education forms a continual part of the boys' lives. They are lectured on Christian values, the need to acquire grace and to enrich their souls in order to prepare themselves to endure the harshness of this life as well as to be worthy of the hereafter. All suffering is justified by the refrain: "Dios aprieta pero no ahoga." The boys are sent on a five-day retreat and hear lectures filled with the horrors of sin and the fear of hell, reminiscent of the stories told in tribal initiations wherein boys are frightened by bullroarers and told that they will be destroyed or sacrificed to the deities. The chalet where the boys are taken is comparable to the "hut in the bush" where, as Eliade observes, "the young candidates undergo a part of their ordeals and are instructed in the secret traditions of the tribe. And the initiation-cabin symbolises the maternal womb. The death of the neophyte signifies a regression

⁴Eliade, *Myths*, p. 207.

to the embryonic state, but this must not be understood only in terms of human physiology but also, and chiefly, in cosmological terms."⁵ This experience takes the boys to the depths of their spirits, symbolizing a death of the profane state. Once they have made their confession, they emerge from the experience with a brief, though profound, sense of devotion and religion. This abnegation of the material life of the present world is fully acceptable in the context of the religious environment.

It also turns out, however, to be a negative force and the worst perversion of their initiation process. Indeed, no matter what sermons and advice the priests preach about sin, it is the clergymen themselves who are the occasion and perpetrators of sin at San Pedro. It is a priest who causes Jesús Mari to learn about and experience his first masturbation, a sin which he is then required to confess to another priest. It becomes readily apparent that homosexual favors form not only the rule, but also the only sure means toward alleviating the physical suffering of beatings and hunger. Jesús Mari describes in detail the ecstasy the priests experience from masturbation with the young boys and does not fail to note that the normal motivation on the part of the boy is some treasured food. Even the protagonist finds his hunger so severe that he succumbs to selling himself for a sandwich. On the other hand, one "punishment" for homosexual trysts is a transfer to serve in the library of the Rector himself, a man not above accepting such favors on a daily basis. The ironic perversion is blatant since the miscreant now escapes hunger and physical abuse.

Thus, when Eliade states that "initiation is equivalent to becoming spiritually mature; and this, throughout the entire religious history of mankind, is an ever-recurrent theme—the initiate, he who has known the mysteries, is the man who is *informed*,"⁶ the reader has difficulty in discovering the true spiritual maturity that the boys derive from their initiation proffered by the clergy at San Pedro. Perhaps the most ironic twist of Eliade's view of initiation is demonstrated in the personal experience of Jesús Mari himself. The protagonist learns his most important lesson in his initiation not from a priest, but from his classmate Pedralba who recommends that he replace another as an altar boy. This assignment leads to his discovering the means of survival at the school, and under Pedralba's protection he achieves a safe position free from hunger and abuse. While serving dinner at the chalet, Jesús Mari realizes that misery is restricted only to the students. The priests sate their carnal appetites with sumptuous meals topped off with cognac and cigars, not to mention, the presence of some eight lovely young women presumably undergoing a "testing" of their calling to the religious life. In one scene Jesús Mari and Pedralba gorge themselves not only on the leftovers from the banquet table, but also on the sacristy wine and sacramental wafers and, as such, unceremoniously highlight the parody of the communion ritual. The protagonist summarizes this final event of the novel: "Ahora sé que, de no ser por Pedralba, por lo que me enseñó, yo no hubiera podido sobrevivir allí los cinco años de encierro" (p. 246).

The imparting of knowledge which prepares an initiate for adulthood is normally a beneficial and edifying experience. It is designed to train the boys in the rituals and sacred knowledge of their society and thus the importance of Jesús Mari's great lesson could not be more ironic. The sacred loses instead of gaining in importance since religion and its accompanying rituals and sacred significance are desacralized and debased. The position of altar boy functions less as an opportunity to serve God than as an opportunity to survive starvation, punishment, and the perverted pseudo-religious environment.

⁵Eliade, *Myths*, p. 198.

⁶Eliade, *Myths*, p. 197.

In the cycle of one year, the protagonist has completed a sizable portion of the initiation process.⁷ Separated from the maternal world he has endured the ordeals of hunger and wears the scars of physical abuse, has encountered death in both literal and symbolic terms, has learned doctrine and the secrets hidden behind the façade of the doctrine, and has discovered how to survive in an environment which has indeed transformed him into "another." The total and absolute distortion of the purpose of the initiation process can not be more bluntly presented than when the narrator summarizes: " 'Estamos haciendo hombres', decían. ¡No, hombres, no ! Estaban haciendo, hacían, ratas de alcantarilla, pervertidos, resentidos, amargados, delinquentes. . . . Y Dios como testigo . . . allí todo se hacía en nombre de Dios" (p. 166).

Obviously there has been nothing transcendental about the experience at San Pedro; in fact, quite the opposite is true. It is almost a parody of Eliade's perception of initiation: ". . . the mystery of initiation discloses to the neophyte, little by little, the true dimensions of existence; by introducing him to the sacred, the mystery obliges him to assume the responsibilities of a man."⁸ The protagonist's "introduction to the sacred" has demonstrated that his elders have feet of clay, and that the patriarchal world as exemplified by the clergy is a desecralized one which is neither spiritually, physically, nor psychologically satisfying. The priests as pseudo-psychopomps are hypocrites who have twisted religion and their roles to victimize the boys. They pay lip service in the most stringent terms to the avoidance of sin while they themselves are the archsinners who abuse and tempt their charges to "sell" their bodies and souls for a piece of bread. Instead of upholding the values of Christianity, they debase them; sadism, homosexuality, hypocrisy, and cruelty reign in lieu of the virtues of charity, love, and sensitivity. Instead of finding enlightenment, a sense of purpose, spiritual maturity, and redemption, the boys encounter only fear, pain, apathy, and anger. The double standard of conduct makes these elders a cruel parody of the traditional role models and guides to assist in the molding of adults. In essence, the entire process of the rite of passage is perverted and the boys are corrupted and betrayed. They are prevented from experiencing a rebirth to a higher state of being but rather are exposed to a situation in which religion as practiced by the clergy is a deceitful lie which of necessity fosters cynicism and even calls into question a belief in God.

Up to this point, initiation, as social ritual, has been limited to the author's boyhood experiences of 1953-54, experiences which display an almost total perversion of the initiation process. Amilibia as narrator is bitter in his recall of his treatment at San Pedro and condemns those who made him and the four hundred other boys suffer such psychic as well as physical pain. Moreover, when one views the novel as the product of an adult creator, one discovers that another type of initiation process emerges, i.e. initiation as symbolic system, in which there is a transcendence to a higher state of one's potential being and the attainment of a knowledge of self. Amilibia's work is an anamnesis, and it is only through this act of recollection that he can heal his psyche (see pp. 10-12).

Re-creating his experiences in vivid terms provides the author, as an adult, with a means of participating in the second initiation process. It is now Amilibia as the adult author who is involved in a transformation of self since memory,

⁷Since *Los fantasmas de barro* is the first novel of a trilogy, the initiation process is not complete. While this novel speaks to the separation and the transition of initiation, the second novel, *Los españoles todos* (1978) and its sequel *Yo, periodista: historia de más miserias que grandezas* (1979) cover the final stages of reincorporation.

⁸Eliade, *Myths*, p. 200.

i.e. his novel *Los fantasmas de barro*, may very well be the route, a kind of "camino de perfección," along which he is able to emerge into full consciousness and achieve that transcendence toward psychic wholeness denied him as a child. In essence, one must consider the entire text (both the central and background actions as well as the prologue) and the actual experience of anamnesis as a manifestation of the psychic process that Jung has termed individuation. Nor Hall has commented that "memory makes initiation—and individuation, the modern parallel—possible. For psychic growth it is essential to throw oneself into the flow of unconscious life, not to forget, not to diminish, not to demean or degrade as 'mere' fantasy one's adventures in the other world. When the initiate returns to this world . . . it becomes important to share the experience with others who are capable of understanding."⁹ The "other world" for the author is the past; the pleasant memories of his loving parents who suffered, but who never denied him love, and the terrifying memories of his education and life under the guardianship of the clergymen who spoke of God's love but never showed it. The contrast could not be more starkly drawn.

Even though Jesús Mari has survived the initiation process as social ritual, he is still embittered, critical, rebellious, and disbelieving in the "myths" of religion and the "elders" who have guided him. By including the interspersed flashback scenes of the background action, the reader discovers that only by way of memory has the protagonist been able to maintain his identity with the past (that time prior to 1953), a past comprised of sincerely loving memories of his parents.

His deceased father, a brave but broken man, was always a source of integrity and admiration to him as a child. His valorous conduct and participation in the Civil War as a liberal had left him lame and unable to find any steady employment. While prone to take solace in drink, he was still a man of principles, was true to his friends, and spoke his mind in spite of being jailed on several occasions. On his death bed, the father offered his son a capsulized version of his ethics on life. While it will be difficult, Jesús Mari should always try to be his own man—free, honorable, true to himself, to his ideas and to his beliefs. He should never sell himself because, in the end, it is never worth it. The contrast between this advice and that which the boy learned from the clergy is obvious. While the father did not believe in God and therefore refused the last sacraments, he is without doubt ethically superior to the attending priest who tried to convince the son that his father had died in a state of grace.

On the other hand, Jesús Mari's contact with his infirm and self-sacrificing mother through her letters and occasional visits provides him with the additional emotional support to endure the harshness of the school. Her embrace alone makes him feel like a human being again, and with the knowledge of her love he can sustain any abuse which the clergy may offer. Thus, the positive nature of the humanizing effect of parental contact and memory stands in sharp contrast to the negative experiences at the school. The background action of the flashbacks serves to solidify this contrast and to add psychological depth to the characterization of the protagonist.

Amilibia needs to recall both the positive and negative aspects of his youth, to criticize, to rebel against the "dioses de sus primeros años," to expose the injustices of a society which has twisted its set of values. He also needs to impart something of himself, to recount his own life, to relive through memory and thus recapture his original state of wholeness. In speaking of initiation, Maud Oakes comments that "The very heart of the mystery lies in the paradox that in

⁹Nor Hall, *The Moon and the Virgin: Reflections on the Archetypal Feminine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 28.

order to live an individual life instead of a collectively-oriented, ego-centered life, there must be a reconciliation of opposites on the plane of experience. Only a great novelist or poet can create the impression that the paltry affairs of personal life are worthy to be seen in the light of such a universal symbolism. Yet it is so, and the mystery of initiation weaves its eternal thread through our lives and on into the shadows of death."¹⁰

The novel *Los fantasmas de barro*, while sharply condemning the clergy, education, charitable institutions, and, by extension, government and society in general, offers more than social criticism. The archetypal structure of the initiation paradigm (Eliade's social ritual) and its obvious perversion, combined with the psychological need to recall the past in an attempt to find wholeness (Jung's individuation), is what gives the novel its universality. As such, the novel as a personal chronicle of self-introspection becomes an attempt to unite and put into balance the two opposing and antithetical forces of the past which have formed the protagonist-narrator-author. It is this very element of self-introspection which causes a deep response in the reader for it communicates with the collective unconscious. In one sense the reader duplicates the trajectory and reflects on the personal and ontological changes that constitute the formation of every human life. There emerges a one to one relation in a reflective anamnesis retracing the emergence from childhood and the continued struggle to reach that higher state of being.

¹⁰Joseph L. Henderson and Maud Oakes, *The Wisdom of the Serpent: The Myths of Death, Rebirth, and Resurrection* (New York: George Braziller, 1963), p. 73.