

INITIATION AND SYMBOL IN R.L. STEVENSON

TREASURE ISLAND REVISITED

What is the significance of initiation in modern times and the role played by literature in conveying its rituals? Setting out from the concept itself, it may be useful to remember that *initiation* is a late Latin calque of *in-ire* and so the etymology reveals the condition of the individual going into a reality, acquiring an inward knowledge of it. With the process of initiation the subject becomes *in-dividual*, undivided from his own principle. The initiatory epiphany consists therefore in a profound ontological mutation in the novice, who experiences a symbolic death, that is separation from his previous status and a new birth¹.

In traditional societies, from the simplest archaic types to the more sophisticated ones, initiatory rites were fundamental in preserving cultural values and balancing the relation to time. As knowledge was retained of divine origins, initiation was a performance acted within the horizon of transcendence.

The rationalization of the sacred witnessed by modern societies has generated a turn in the field of initiation too: the patterns have a ritual-like quality, yet the group merely aspires at imparting the practical knowledge or the 'know-how'. Although religious communities still perform century old rituals, society as a whole has ceased to ascribe a sacred significance to its future projects and models: the seer and the *sophos* have been left far behind with the Greek *paidéia*² and the medieval mystic is part of our cultural archeology.

Yet initiation appears to be a vaster field than the mere performative one, which presupposes a novice going through a ritual under the guidance of a master or hierophant. The progress of individual conscience can take place by getting into contact with sapiential texts or literary works with sapiential value. Whereas in the past, the direct access to these texts was a privilege reserved to a limited group of lettered community members, in modern societies, thanks to the spreading of literacy and print, the religious ritual retrieves in front of the initiation through reading, and the texts retained sacred are in competition with secular books. This type of initiation can develop in educational institutions, with the professor acting as mediator between the 'novice' and the text, but

¹ M. ELIADE, *The Quest*, University of Chicago Press, Illinois, 1969, Ch.VII.

²B. PARODI, *Fenomenologia dell'iniziazione*, in *L'isola iniziatica e il magistero di Eliade*, Palermo, I.S.A.C., 1986, pp. 36-42.

can also be carried out privately, connecting to the truths expressed in books and discovering one's own humanity by identification with the heroes. In this personal, intimate form of initiation the hierophant is the author himself, guiding his reader in a self-knowledge directed quest. The initiatory role of literature results thus as one of its most enduring dimensions, and even when self-knowledge is acquired within a secular context, the stages of this process and its symbols follow those of an initiation into the mysteries of the sacred.

Stevenson's celebrated book could be integrated into the lineage of the millenary old *topos* of the journey, whose protagonists exhibits a wide typology of characters, from Ghilgamesh and the argonauts in search of the Golden Fleece, to Ulysses, Aeneas, Dante the pilgrim of eternity, Ahasverus the Wandering Jew, Don Quixote, the Flying Dutchman, up to modern heroes like Robinson Crusoe or Huckleberry Finn. The exploration of time and space, of the world of the living and the world of the dead is definitely the expression of an ontological necessity: trying to find out who we are and why we are here. The various phases of inner progress are as many adventures in self-becoming and the treasure in store for the hero consists in his coming to terms with human condition, for the initiated is not the one who knows, but the one who assumes knowledge into his way of living.

Before inquiring into the various symbols articulated in Jim Hawkins's journey, let us enumerate the main types of initiation, identified by anthropologists and historians of religions: the first category is that of the collective rites marking the passage from childhood to adolescence or to adulthood. They were analysed at the beginning of the 20th century by Arnold van Gennep in an essay which has become famous³. He defined them as *rites of passage*. The second type of initiation regards the admission to a well-defined society or group, usually comprising only members of one sex, called by specialists *Männerbünde*, respectively *Frauenbünde*. The third type is the initiation which aims at the *unio mystica* and is the privilege of the few individuals with a mystic vocation.

The initiatory journey detectable in *Treasure Island* displays examples of the first two categories of rites: after this voyage Jim Hawkins becomes an adult and a full member of a *Männerbund*, which is the society of the English gentlemen, true to law and loyal to their king. It should be added that Jim's separation from childhood does not include any knowledge of the other sex and women are only vaguely present in the book: Jim's mother has little consistency as a character and a rather functional role and Long John Silver's companion is barely mentioned. History of religions ascribes the original creation of the *Männerbünde* to the paleolithic hunters, later in history evolved into groups of warriors with distinct signs, strict rules and cruel rituals⁴. The animal hunters thus became man hunters with a *Weltanschauung* centred on an aggressive approach

³ A. VAN GENNEP, *I riti di passaggio*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1992.

⁴ M. ELIADE, *Histoire des croyances et des idées religieuses*, Payot, Paris, 1976, Ch.I.

to life. The interminable history of human wars is the result of this mentality and the fabulous prestige of 'the hunter' has been maintained down to our time. The identity between war and hunting is vividly present in *Treasure Island*: one needs only to cast an eye over the chapter titles to realize it⁵: *Powder and Arms*, *Council of War*, *The First Blow*, *The Attack*, *I strike the Jolly Roger*, *In the Enemy's Camp*, *The Treasure Hunt*. The two *Männerbünde* in conflict in the book are both 'warriors', or rather 'hunters' and what differentiates them is their social status, their use of language, their loyalty or disloyalty to the king, their attitude towards death and homicide, their manner of dressing, their flag (the Union Jack or the Jolly Roger), their songs and their drinking habits. Part of Jim's initiation is learning to distinguish between the two opposite *Männerbünde*: the pirates' group and the lawful group represented mainly by the doctor, the squire and the captain. Jim is from the very beginning on what could be called 'the side of justice' and he never ceases to be on that side. He is nonetheless appreciated and accepted by the pirates, particularly by Silver who risks the «black spot» in order to defend Jim against the other «sea dogs» (Chapters 28 & 29). Stevenson ironically introduces a considerable degree of ambiguity as to the identity of the two groups: both are treasure hunters, both fight and kill, both pretend to be honourable Englishmen. The gentlemen behave like pirates and the pirates pretend to be well-bred and well-meaning like gentlemen. Actually they are called «gentlemen of fortune». (See not only Long John Silver's delusive behaviour, but also Ben Gunn's aspirations for bourgeois decency and religious piety).

Every initiation is preceded by the acknowledgement of the members of a community that a young boy or girl is apt to undergo the ritual. In this sense we have plenty of evidence that Jim is immediately 'recognized' both by the pirates and the gentlemen as trustworthy and apt to enter their groups. Right at the beginning of the book Bill Bones accepted Jim as «a sharer in his alarms» and promised him «a silver fourpenny on the first of every month if I would only keep my weather-eye open for a seafaring man with one leg» (p.3). Further on, after the encounter with Black Dog, the old buccaneer delivers Jim the secret about the chest and the treasure and tells him: «I'll share with you equals, upon my honour». Black Dog himself likes Jim: «half sneering, patted me on the shoulder, told me I was a good boy, and he had taken quite a fancy to me» (p.10). Doctor Livesey and Mr Trelawney accept Jim at once in their society while they compliment and dismiss Mr Dance, the adult (p. 37). The squire assures Jim: «You'll make a famous cabin-boy, Hawkins» (p.40). When the squire sends a letter from Bristol addressed to Dr Livesey, he adds «To be opened, in the case of his absence, by Tom Redruth, or young Hawkins» (p.42), proving once more his full

⁵Reference edition: R.L.STEVENSON, *Treasure Island*, London, Penguin Classics, 1994.

confidence in the boy. As for John Silver he tells Jim when he first meets him: «You're a lad, you are, but you're as smart as paint. I see that when you first came in» (p.51).

The first important step in the passage rites is the candidate's separation from his parents, which also represents the first painful test. This is also clearly manifested in Stevenson's book: Jim's father, a pale figure, dies before the beginning of the adventure. Jim's separation from his natural father is not particularly highlighted, but when, after the funeral the old buccaneer also dies «I burst into a flood of tears. It was the second death I had known, and the sorrow of the first was still fresh in my heart»(p.21). Speculations could go on about this reaction of the boy for whom the buccaneer is the first guide in the sea-adventure world.

The separation from the mother is more marked and Jim realizes it in a fit of jealousy at the sight of the boy left with her as an apprentice:

It was on seeing that boy that I understood, for the first time, my situation. I had thought up to that moment of the adventures before me, not at all of the home that I was leaving; and now at the sight of this clumsy stranger, who was to stay here in my place beside my mother, I had my first attack of tears (p.45).

The scenery of Jim's initiation is the island surrounded by the sea. In any mythology the waters mark the beginning and end of every cosmic event and also symbolize a new virtual cosmic order, the latent seeds of a new life⁶. Two essential moments in the book are connected with the water symbolism: Jim overhears Silver's plan during the voyage (which is a turning point in the plot) and he asserts himself as a valid seaman and fighter against Israel Hands - the climax of his initiation - at sea. The unknown island has all the prerogatives of a sacred place apt for an initiatory epiphany, as land circled by waters, where land stands for the beginning and end of every form of life, granting the hero's inner change. Jim witnesses murder on the island, losing completely his innocence, he participates in his first battle and has his first wound there. Also it is on the island that he meets Ben Gunn, one of the guides or hierophants in his initiation. As far as the relation with time is concerned, waters are linked with timelessness, whereas land stands under the sign of restless time. Actually in the book the voyage is related by Jim in a concentrated manner and without precise time references. Yet, as soon as they approach the island Jim overhears John Silver's plot and time becomes urgent and active.

⁶M.ELIADE, *Traité d'Histoire des religions*, Paris, Payot, 1964, Chs.V and VII.

Traditionally speaking, an initiation consists in a series of rituals and oral instructions meant to turn the novice into a fully responsible member of his community who has a complete knowledge of the basic cultural values of his group and also the capacity of acting according to them. The knowledge Jim acquires during his initiation ranges from learning how to know people, evaluate their behaviour and assert his own personality according to the others, up to the experience of death. At the beginning of the book Jim lives in terror under the authority of Billy Bones, or is threatened by Pew, the blind pirate: «Take me in straight, or I'll break your arm. And he gave it, as he spoke, a wrench that made me cry out» (p.19). He is deceived by Long John Silver who proved himself «too deep, and too ready, and too clever for me»(p.51). He doubts the captain at the beginning and declares «I assure you I was quite of the squire's way of thinking, and hated the captain deeply» (p.58); he hears the squire promising that he'll be «as silent as a grave» about their plan and then the same character admitting in front of the captain that he was wrong in taking all those sailors in their team: «I own myself an ass». Later on the doctor confesses to Jim: «That man Smollett is a better man than I am. And when I say that it means a deal, Jim» (p.118). The hero witnesses, hidden in the apple barrel, the corruption of a young sailor who accepts to be on John Silver's side. Before facing Ben Gunn he is terrified with the idea of cannibals, then he is moved to comprehension: «I now felt that the poor fellow had gone crazy in his solitude» and suddenly recognizes in Ben Gunn an ally. This is an important moment in Jim's initiation in human character and his intuitions are of the illuminating kind: «At this I had a happy inspiration. I began to believe that I had found an ally, and I answered him at once» (p.94). When he goes back to «the faithful party» he is asked by the doctor to evaluate Ben Gunn in a manly way, as an adult like judgement is already expected from him:

«Is this Ben Gunn a man? » he asked.

«I do not know, sir», said I. «I am not very sure whether he's sane» (p.118).

As the protagonist comes to know and appreciate the others better, he has the courage to speak ironically to Israel Hands (p.153) and announce bluntly:

«I've come aboard to take possession of this ship, Mr Hands; and you'll please regard me as your captain until further notice»(p.155).

When Jim is alone on the schooner with Israel Hands he is already mature enough not to let himself be deceived by the apparently submissive behaviour of the coxswain: «Now, the coxswain's

hesitation seemed to be unnatural; and as for the notion of his preferring wine to brandy, I entirely disbelieved it. The whole story was a pretext... » (p.159). Jim has become shrewd himself and has the courage to tell Hands:

«You've broken your trust; you've lived in sin and lies and blood... »(p.161).

After taking the ship to a safe place and 'cleaning' it of the two pirates, Jim arrives by chance in the enemy's camp. By then he is already initiated in the secrets of sea adventures, as he has steered a ship and killed an enemy (Israel Hands). He is able to tell Silver, whom he was quite afraid of before, in a «quite excited» manner:

...here you are, in a bad way: ship lost, treasure lost, men lost; your whole business gone to wreck; and if you want to know who did it - it was I! I was in the apple barrel the night we sighted land, and I heard you, John, and you, Dick Johnson, and Hands, who is now at the bottom of the sea, and told every word you said before the hour was out. And as for the schooner, it was I who cut her cable, and it was I who brought her where you'll never see her more, not one of you (p.177).

Jim addresses the pirates in their own style, because by this time he has assimilated their language as well: «The laugh's on my side; I've had the top of this business from the first; I no more fear you than I fear a fly» (p.177). He is also able to bargain for his own life using terms that would be convenient for his enemies:

Kill me, if you please, or spare me. But one thing I'll say, and no more; if you spare me, by-gones are by-gones, and when you fellows are in court for piracy, I'll save you all I can. It is for you to choose. Kill another and do yourselves no good, or spare me and keep a witness to save you from the gallows (p.178).

Initiation goes by degrees and steps. So does Jim's experience with violence, blood, and death. The world of manly violence is first suggested to him by the old sea-shanty Billy Bones used to sing so often, which will turn into a leit-motif of his initiation : «Fifteen men on the dead man's chest -/Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum!».

The song and the «dreadful stories» Billy Bones used to tell at the *Admiral Benbow* gave Jim a first contact with the universe of the «true sea-dogs» that «made England terrible at sea» (p.5). Then he gradually meets more of these «true-sea-dogs» with suggestive names and maimed bodies: Black Dog has two fingers missing from his left hand, Pew is blind, Long John Silver has one leg. At one point our hero holds the basin as the doctor opens the old buccaneer's vein:

«Are you afraid of blood?» the doctor asks him and he is able to answer: «No, sir»(p.13).

Jim faces different forms of death: his father's death, caused by disease, that is a natural, unavoidable death (probably hastened, as he says, by Billy Bones' presence), while Billy Bones dies of a stroke he could have avoided. The hero witnesses Pew's death by a violent accident. He hears about the disappearance overboard of Mr Arrow, the mate, one dark night, a rather mysterious, not fully accounted for death. Jim's knowledge of the different ways of dying is basically mutated by «the first blow» on the island. This time he has no doubt in calling Silver «a monster»:

Just before him Tom lay motionless upon the sward; but the murderer minded him not a whit, cleansing his blood-stained knife the while upon a wisp of grass. Everything else was unchanged, the sun still shining mercilessly on the steaming marsh and the tall pinnacle of the mountain, and I could scarce persuade myself that murder had been actually done, and a human life cruelly cut short a moment since, before my eyes(p.89).

At the beginning of the fight with the pirates, the protagonist is no longer shocked by the loss of human lives and, when Tom Redruth passes away in the sound of a prayer and is covered by the captain with the British colours, Jim learns that ritual dignity alleviates the tragedy of human death. The hero participates in his first fight and is forced to shoot at the others like a warrior. His light injury on the knuckles is noticed by the doctor who «pulled my ears for me into the bargain» (p.135), is a ritual act of attesting him as a fighter.

Jim's experience with death is complete when he kills Israel Hands. He does it in self-defence, in a spontaneous gesture, but the reaction he has at the sight of the dead body proves his having grown into a warrior or hunter at this point:

He rose once to the surface in a lather of foam and blood, and then sank again for good. As the water settled I could see him lying huddled together on the clean, bright sand in the shadow of the vessel's sides. A fish or two whipped past his body. Sometimes, by the quivering of the water, he appeared to move a little, as if he were trying to rise. But he was dead enough, for all that, being both shot and drowned, and was food for fish in the very place where he had designed my slaughter (p.167).

Jim fully realizes now that the law of hunting is 'kill or be killed': «I was no sooner certain of this than I began to feel sick, faint and terrified» (p.167). He himself was hurt, that is initiated in being killed as well, the blood he had seen around since the beginning of the story is now his own, running hotly over his back and chest.

The symbolic death performed in the traditional rites has been interpreted either as a *regressus ad uterum* or as a *descensus ad inferos*: the candidate is supposed to spend a while isolated from the others, either in the heart of the woods or in a specially built hut, where he is said to be 'eaten up' by a monster, for instance. When he comes back he is considered completely regenerated. Jim's initiatory journey comprises both types of performance. Up to the crucial moment of his initiation Jim contemplates the events around him hidden in particular places, invisible and protected, like in his mother's womb. At the beginning of his adventures, for instance, he watches the arrival of the pirates and Pew's violent death hidden under the bridge arch, next to his fainted mother (end of Ch. 4). Then, before going to Bristol, Jim has to stay at the doctor's house isolated from the world. Furthermore, his hiding in the apple barrel (Ch. 11) during the voyage is another form of *regressus ad uterum*, which symbolizes death: by finding out the real intentions of Long John Silver his innocence vanishes completely, so the credulous child dies in him for ever. After the first battle, Jim leaves the camp on his own. His sea adventure is a *descensus ad inferos* which starts in the evening at «the white rock» and ends the morning after, when he wakes up in his coracle, with the sight of «the beautiful white canvas» of the Hispaniola which «shone in the sun like snow or silver» (p.149).

Between these two moments marked by whiteness, Jim performs his descent in «absolute blackness» (p.139) accompanied by the whole Christian inventory of hell: the terrible sound of the rollers «running along all the external coast, thundering and thundering by day and night»,(p.137), the «great banks of fog» coming from the south and southeast, the glimpse of Skeleton Island, the sight of the Hispaniola, «the Jolly Roger hanging from her peak», standing up clearly «in that unbroken mirror»⁷. The boy recognizes Silver in one of the gigs and «all at once, there began the most horrid, unearthly screaming, which at first startled me badly, though I had soon remembered the voice of Captain Flint, and even thought I could make out the bird by her bright plumage.»(p.138).

In this atmosphere there are only «two visible points»: «the great fire on shore, by which the defeated pirates lay carousing in the swamp. The other, a mere blur of light upon the darkness, indicated the position of the anchored ship» (p. 140). Further on the ship «loomed before me like a

⁷The symbolism of life, death and the mirror in J.BALTRUŠAITIS, *Le miroir*, Ed. Elmayan et Seuil, Paris, 1979, Chs.II, III, VIII.

blot of something yet blacker than darkness» (p.141). When Jim approaches the ship he recognizes Israel Hands and the pirate whose red-night cap is like a blood spot against the blackness around. Jim hears oaths flying «like hailstones»(p.142), is impressed by their «furious, encrisomed faces» (p.144) and muses: «how busy drink and the devil were at that very moment in the cabin of the *Hispaniola*» (p.144).

At this point the protagonist cuts the cable of the schooner. The act corresponds to breaking the umbilical cord and is, in terms of initiation, a *kratophany*, that is the manifestation of the force the candidate is ritually invested with. His performance is accompanied by the two shanties sung on the shore like two ritual songs. One is the leit-motif with the «Fifteen men on the dead man's chest» and the other «a dull, old, droning sailor's song, with a droop and a quaver at the end of every verse...But one man of her crew alive/Was put to sea with seventy-five»(p.143), which predicts Jim's being at one point the only man alive on the deck, after killing Israel Hands.

Soon after, he experiences a ritual death, when his coracle is violently pushed in the stream:

I lay down flat in the bottom of that wretched skiff, and devoutly recommended my spirit to its Maker. At the end of the straits, I made sure we must fall into some bar of raging breakers, where all my troubles would be ended speedily, and though I could, perhaps, bear to die, I could not bear to look upon my fate as it approached. /So I must have lain for hours, continually beaten to and fro upon the billows, now and again wetted with flying sprays, and never ceasing to expect death at the next plunge. Gradually weariness grew upon me; a numbness, an occasional stupor, fell upon my mind even in the midst of my terrors; until sleep at last supervened, and in my sea-tossed coracle I lay and dreamed of home and the old 'Admiral Benbow'(p.145).

When Jim wakes up he is tormented by thirst. In most mythologies the dead suffer from thirst as they have been cut off from the font of life. As we have suggested before, the initiatory journey in *Treasure Island* is also a *kratophany*. In a traditional context the *kratophany* is possible because of the ritual connection with the sacred. Natural elements and circumstances assist the novice in his difficult moments and this proves the 'response' of the sacred evoked in the ritual. When the adventure begins, Jim has the awareness of his being elected and invested with the role of the saviour: «I understood that the lives of all the honest men abroad depended upon me alone»(p.65). Further on he adds: «by an odd train of circumstances, it was indeed through me that safety came»(p.78). The pure, innocent child destined to bring salvation, the *Cosmocrator*, is not only a Christian myth. The advent of the saviour is always announced by an epiphany of the light, like the birth of a star, for instance. Jim's revelation concerning his saving mission is confirmed by the

moonrise: «Just then a sort of brightness fell upon me in the barrel, and, looking up, I found the moon had risen, and was silvering the mizzen-top and shining white on the luff of the foresail»(p.72). Every essential move in the story is determined by Jim: he is the one who finds the map, discovers the plans of the mutineers, meets Ben Gunn and saves the ship for his mates. His providential role is acknowledged by his friends, who at the end of the adventure consider him the only person apt to «write down all the particulars about Treasure Island, from the beginning to the end» (p.1). As a saviour he does not act according to common logic, but urged by an order beyond human motivation. Thus he takes 'mad' decisions like going ashore or leaving on his sea-adventure without telling anybody. These symmetrical 'mad' enterprises, which are not approved of by the community of men, are confirmed by circumstances, for more than once he says:«I was right, as appeared later»(p.135). Jim's singular actions are supported by nature, just like the brave deeds of the fairy-tales' protagonists. For his sea adventure he finds «an admirable opportunity»(p.136), «a night out of ten thousand for my purpose» and furthermore: «if fortune had not again particularly favoured me....»(p.142). When he cuts the cable of the schooner, for example, he is clearly favoured by the darkness, the breeze, the position of the ship, the streams etc. Jim's luck is opposed to his enemies' bad luck. Israel Hands declares «I don't have no luck, not I»(p.165). In mythological terms, Hands fails because he does not believe in the force of life, in the immortality of the soul. For him «dead men don't bite» (p.161), whereas for Jim «you can kill the body, [...] but not the spirit»(p.158).

Archaic symbols which guide initiation reveal the correspondences between macro- and microcosm and the polarity of human reality. The protagonist of any form of initiation has to attain a full comprehension of the ambivalence of human notions, and of the paradoxical nature of the cosmos. In *Treasure Island* Jim experiences the ambiguity of human character and he also learns that death and life are part of one and the same reality and that killing a human being can be murder or can be a saving act.

Stevenson's *Treasure Island* belongs to a consistent inventory of adventure books the past century can boast with teen-agers as protagonists. This remark is not restricted to the English and American literature. In an interesting essay entitled "Le roman initiatique en France au temps du romantisme" Léon Cellier considered Jules Verne's novels from the same point of view⁸.

The 19th century adventure novel is the fruit of the Romantic attempt at 'romanticizing' the world as Novalis put it, in order to recapture the originary sense (*den ursprünglichen Sinn*), the

⁸«Cahiers Internationaux du Symbolisme», IV, 1964, pp.22-40.

mystery, the dignity of the unknown (*die Würde des Unbekannten*). It is a form of returning to the origins, of evoking the intense experiences of the beginnings. Every cultural moment establishes its own beginnings and Stevenson, together with other authors of adventure books settles the beginning in the period of the geographical discoveries and the literature which turned historical experience into myth. In the prologue entitled *To the Hesitating Purchaser*, we find out that the book is made of «sailor tales to sailor tunes,/Storm and adventure, heat and cold, /... schooners, islands, and maroons/And Buccaneers and buried Gold/ *And all the old romance*, retold /Exactly in the ancient way...».

At the individual level, returning to the origins means recuperating childhood. Children have a mythical form of thought and J.Huizinga has largely demonstrated in his *Homo ludens* how deeply the ludic aspect of human behaviour is anchored to the mythical one (for instance children's games reproduce scenarios of ancient rituals). The child's play, just like the ritual, implies a «sortie du Temps», as Eliade calls it, a way of abandoning the linear, implacable time of history and entering a fabulous, imaginary time which is only apparently historical. The same «sortie du Temps» is performed by fiction. Stevenson's often quoted claim that «fiction is to grown men what play is to the child» may have in the context two main interpretations: a nihilistic one, following the Leopardi-Nietzsche line and equating creative work to a self-turning wheel, whose beauty and meaning resides in its playful gratuitousness (*il fanciullo che si trastulla con i mondi*), but also an interpretation which takes into account the mythical dimension of 19th century fiction and allows us to suppose that Stevenson was well aware of the role of fiction as a precious deposit of mythical thought in a world which was ever more hastily and drastically trying to cover and sink its sacred poles.