

Manuel BECERRA

THE MASK AND THE MIRROR

Je est autre

RIMBAUD

Imagine a person facing a mirror. Then imagine this person puts on a mask. What we witness here is two characters making a third: a dramatic voice. For the poet, creating a character—real or fictitious—and speaking through this character is like putting on a mask in front of a mirror. A monologue has begun.

According to Eliot, a poet has three voices. The first is the voice of the poet speaking with himself; the second is the one addressing the audience; and the third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse.

Let's focus on this last voice.

Robert Browning was one of the best to perfect the mode of the dramatic monologue in which the poet assumes the identity of a character.

Marcel Schwob does this masterfully in *The Children's Crusade*; and of course, we must mention Edgar Lee Masters in *Spoon River Anthology*, one of my favorite books of poetry.

The use of the third person comes with a feeling of freedom. The character created is much more distant from the poet than the lyrical character, who is usually identified with the author.

The mask gives the poet the sense of ease and security he needs to say what he might not say in another situation. The mask gives voice to thought.

Among the reasons for which an author uses this dramatic mechanism is the impossibility of speaking for himself. What can sometimes not be said with an exposed face can be conveyed through the Other.

In another sense, by assuming the form of the Other, the Poet comes to know himself. It's undeniable that the author puts parts of himself in his characters. The Other serves as a mirror. The things we dislike in the Other are the things we dislike about ourselves.

Now, if the Poet is an instrument in the service of poetry, an instrument through which his story can be written with the tools of inspiration and a process of daily work, then what happens when he creates a character? It's a game of mirrors.

In every poem, there's more than one voice. The author, the reader—his own “first reader”—and the lyrical character all speak. When the Poet speaks for himself, he starts to talk about the Other. I speak about *myself* because I'm speaking about *you*.

The Poet builds a character, and this character is the one who dictates every trait, who creates his own how and when. Simultaneously, a form of self-acceptance happens through the Other.

The Poet is all ears. He believes he can hear the ocean inside a shell—he lies to himself, pretends, and ultimately believes it. Maybe this isn't possible? He's attentive to all invisible signs in the search for his characters.

The Poet is a pretender, as Pessoa says, and even pretends pain, the pain he really feels.

Let's return to our first character, who is still in front of the mirror. Is it possible that under the first mask, he'll find a second, and under the second, a third, even more foreign, and so on to infinity, until he doesn't even recognize his own face?

Each new face is a circumstance. Behind each story, there's a character, and each poet is inhabited by more than one self. Each poet is a chorus of voices.

One takes possession of the character and the character takes possession of us. In this way, we give life to our characters. I am, for example, my fifteen-year-old father leaving a small town for Mexico City, and I'm my mother and Emily Dickinson (*I'm Nobody. Who are you?*). I am Julia Pastrana and Kaspar Hauser and Emmett Till. I am Buffalo Bill. I am Chet Baker playing his golden trumpet. I am Judith painted by Gustav Klimt. I am Yasujirō Ozu. I'm Nobody, in short.

I is Other.

Translated by Kathleen Archer