Facing the Masks: Persona and Self in Nietzsche, Rilke and Mishima

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"Masks! Masks! Let us blind Eros, For who could bear his radiant face?"—Rilke

In the course of a day a member of society is called upon to act a number of parts, and to help play different roles we use various kinds of masks, which reveal even as they conceal. Metaphorically speaking, the face becomes a mask. We seldom present ourselves to others fully, but mostly through the medium of a mask that conceals some part or parts of our person. Moreover, just as we put a good face on things or put up a front so as to hide what we would prefer (others) not to see, so do we use "inner" masks to conceal parts of our selves we would rather not acknowledge. At the same time, however, the choice of a particular mask signifies a part of the person and can bring out a side of the wearer's personality that would otherwise remain hidden.

Masks prompt the question of their relation to the self, especially in the context of our trying to "become"—in Nietzsche’s phrase—"who we are." Amongst literary authors who have dealt with the question of the self, several have been concerned with the nature and function of masks. For a broader than parochial understanding of the issue, I should like to consider the treatments of the self and its masks in a work by a Western writer, Rilke’s The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge, and by a Japanese, Yukio Mishima’s Confessions of a Mask. An outline of Nietzsche’s philosophical ideas about the mask, together with some props or prompts from
C.G. Jung’s notion of the persona, provides an important context for such a discussion, since Rilke was introduced to Nietzsche’s ideas (by Lou Salomé) early in his career, and Nietzsche was an even more powerful influence on both Jung and Mishima. Before turning to any of these figures, however, it will be helpful to establish a still larger cultural, linguistic and historical context.

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Japan is distinguished as a culture in which the use of masks to conceal one’s true feelings and impulses for the sake of harmonious interaction with one’s fellow human beings is perhaps more highly developed and socially obligatory than in any other. Yet the art of masking is ubiquitous also in the West—as evidenced by the fact that the words for “mask” in both Greek and Latin soon came to mean “person.” (It is significant that at the beginning of the Western tradition the person—in the strict legal sense of the agent responsible for actions and therefore rewarded or punished for them—was seen in the image of the mask rather than the head or body behind it).

The actual mask is first and foremost a surface, mediating between outside and inside. Larvatus prodeo: masked I go forth and present myself as such-and-such a figure. As it reveals, the mask also conceals: while a literal mask protects the most vulnerable part of the body (the death mask and surgical mask are special cases), its figurative counterpart conceals that aspect of our exterior which most betrays the inner life. The skin of the face is itself a medium of revelation: through facial expressions—the blush, the twitch, the sudden pallor—we may look shocked, guilty or shamefaced. Hence the attraction of a mask, behind which the eyes—“windows of the soul”—can see without being easily looked into. Yet these functions of the mask depend on its not being whole: there must be gaps in it—for without holes for the eyes and mouth it cannot be seen and spoken through. An actual mask thus allows selective expression—through dynamics of speech and gestures of the head—of the wearer’s feelings, intentions and desires.

The roots of both the Japanese and European words for masks bring us back to the face. The origins of our word “mask” are—appropriately—veiled in obscurity; several dictionary entries report: “derivation disputed.” A relatively young word (not appearing in French and English until the sixteenth century), it is presumed to come from the Latin massa meaning “paste”—whence our “mascara”—and mascara meaning “demon,” or “sorcerer.” The word’s Greek and Latin equivalents connect immediately with the idea of the person. The Greek prosōpon means “front,” “facade” or “face,” whence “mask,” “character” (in a drama) and “person”—in the original, legal sense. The image is optical, pros-ōpon meaning “at the eyes”: as front or facade, that which the eyes meet; as mask that too, but also something held at or around the eyes. In Latin the image takes an acoustical turn, insofar as the components of the word persōna, meaning “mask,” “character,” “person,” mean literally “through sound.”

The masks referred to by prosōpon and persōna were those worn by actors in Greek and Roman drama and had a transformative and revelatory function. They
served both to identify the character—often a divine personage—and to raise the actor to the plane of the universal by concealing his particular, all-too-human traits and imperfections. Being larger than the face, the mask formed a sounding board (whence the name per-sōna) to allow the actor to project his voice up to the far back of the open-air amphitheater while concealing facial expressions that might distract attention from the eloquence of the speeches.²

The Japanese word for “mask,” kamen, is composed of two characters; ka meaning “temporary,” or “provisional,” and men meaning “surface,” “front” or “face.” It thus signifies the provisional front one presents to the world, the face one puts on, and on things. In line with the Greek prosōpon, to introduce an optical element by adding the character for eye, moku, produces memoku, meaning “face” in the sense of honor, dignity, reputation. That most horrendous of catastrophes for the Japanese, “losing face,” is memoku o usinewo: to lose the mask that fronts and confronts the eyes.

An alternative reading for the character men is omote, meaning “outside” and again “face” in the sense of honor or reputation, and this is also the usual reading with respect to the masks used in Noh drama (see Komparu 224-39). The functions of the Noh mask are somewhat similar to those of its Greek counterpart, though it is generally smaller than the face. Its purpose is again to identify the character, and to eliminate facial expressions so as to draw attention to the carefully understated movements of the actor’s body (more than to the speech issuing from behind the mask). Something about the size and fit of the Noh mask tends to diffuse rather than concentrate the voice, making it appear to issue from no particular location. Yet the same uncanny phenomenon occurs when viewing both Noh and Greek tragedy: the mask creates the impression of a more-than-human being, and provides a screen for a range of projections from the audience’s imagination elicited by factors such as speech, body attitude and movements of the mask.

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Nietzsche first speaks of masks in The Birth of Tragedy, in the course of a discussion (in section 8) of the nature of early Greek drama.³ He argues that the function of the dithyrambic chorus in early tragedy was to generate such a pitch of Dionysiac excitement in the audience that when the tragic hero appeared on the stage his mask would conceal his mere humanity and let him appear as the God Dionysus himself. The mask also helps the actor lose his sense of individuality and allows the image of his role—which he sees “hover perceptibly before his eyes”—to play itself out through him. (Something interestingly comparable happens in Noh drama: the mask effaces the actor’s awareness of himself, and the strikingly Dionysiac music of flute and drum works on the spectator in such a way that the appropriately clothed and masked actor gives the impression of a suprahuman presence.) In this context the mask’s concealing serves its revelatory purpose for both actor and audience.

As Nietzsche’s treatment of the theme begins to shift toward the metaphorical, the significance of the mask becomes ambiguous. In Untimely Meditations he sees
it negatively, as a mere front set up to conceal the “weakened personality [characteristic of] modern man.” Since we have lost the spontaneous insight of the child and distanced ourselves from, or destroyed, our instinctual lives, “no one any longer risks his person, but masks himself as a cultured man, a scholar, a poet, a politician.” The thing to do, then, is “to look keenly, shout ‘Halt! Who goes there?’ at every mask, and tear it aside” (83-84). The following Meditation, “Schopenhauer as Educator,” opens with a classic existential account of the ways in which laziness and fear prompt us to cover our individuality with veils that conform to conventional appearances. Nietzsche elaborates upon the theme of the man who is “wholly exterior, without kernel, a tattered, painted bag of clothes…” This kind of covering, while perhaps socially obligatory, impedes self-knowledge; the masks serve to obscure the self. “But how can we find ourselves again? How can man know himself? He is a thing dark and veiled; and if the hare has seven skins, man can slough off seventy times seven and still not be able to say, ‘this is really you, this is no longer outer shell’” (128-29).

Several passages in The Gay Science pursue the analogy between masks and clothing: “it seems that we Europeans absolutely cannot dispense with that masquerade which one calls clothes” (295). While clothes conceal, they share more of the expressive function of masks through being used to present aspects of our selves and to project the appropriate image. (Again the effect is bi-directional: much of the impression a well tailored three-piece suit makes on the viewer comes from the effect it has on the wearer, from the way it draws him out—and into the part.) As for the covering, Nietzsche observes that it is not even “the wild beast of prey” in us that we wish to cover up, but rather “the shameful sight of the tame animal” that morality has turned us into. (The modern leather jacket comes to mind.)

Yet, as he begins to reflect on life more and more through the metaphor of drama and the theater, Nietzsche’s attitude toward playing roles becomes more charitable. “Only artists, and especially those of the theater, have given men eyes and ears to see and hear with some pleasure what each man is himself…only they have taught us…the art of staging and watching ourselves” (Gay Science 132-33). Histronics—in the non-pejorative sense—is now recommended: “Falseness with a good conscience; the delight in simulation exploding as a power that pushes aside one’s so-called ‘character,’ flooding it and at times extinguishing it; the inner craving for a role and mask, for appearance [Schein]…all of this is perhaps not only peculiar to the actor?” (Gay Science 316). Nietzsche is speaking here both of himself and of the actor and artist in every person. “Falseness with a good conscience” is possible as long as one has acknowledged that upon which one is putting a better face, as long as we remember we are playing a part.

Just as the image of the mask in Nietzsche is ambiguous, so his remarks on actors and role-playing are ambivalent. On the one hand, European society forces people into a particular role, determined largely by the person’s occupation. The first person singularly identifies with the primary persona, which then constricts development of character along other dimensions: “almost all Europeans confound themselves with their role…they have forgotten…how many other roles they
might perhaps have been able to play….” It is possible, however, to go to the other
extreme—Nietzsche gives “the Americans today” (!) as an example—of assuming
that a person can play absolutely any part whatsoever (Gay Science 302-03); this
leads to one’s becoming a total actor and forgetting altogether that one is
playing roles.

A major ground for Freud’s great admiration for Nietzsche was the latter’s
willfulness to face up to the seamiest side of the soul—in himself as much as in
others. As awareness of the more repugnant aspects of our nature grows, however,
prudence suggests a judicious use of masks to conceal some of the “base details”
when appropriate (cf. Gay Science 232, 239-40). So now Nietzsche writes of “the
delight in masks and the good conscience in using any kind of mask” as something
inherent in the beginnings of Western culture, as “the bath and recreation of the
ancient spirit” (132). The theme is given a crustaceous turn in Thus Spake
Zarathustra: “And verily, much that is our own is also a grave burden. And much
that is inside man is like an oyster, nauseating and slippery and hard to grasp, so
that a noble shell with a noble embellishment must plead for it. But this art too one
must learn: to have a shell and shiny sheen and shrewd blindness” (193-94).

This understanding of the necessity and desirability of masks finds its
consummate expression in Beyond Good and Evil: “Whatever is profound loves
masks.” Now the mask comes not only from the desire to keep what is within
concealed, but is formed also by external forces, projections from outside.
Everyone who knows his depths well enough will want a mask: “and supposing he
did not want it, he would still realize some day that in spite of that a mask of him is
there—and that this is well. Every profound spirit needs a mask: even more,
around every profound spirit a mask is growing continually, owing to the
constantly false, namely shallow interpretation of every word, every step, every
sign of life he gives” (50-51). In fact one need not even be profound to experience
incongruous reactions from other people that turn out to have been based on their
projections of inappropriate features on to one’s expression.

Behind the idea of the pleasure taken in masks is a deeper theme in Nietzsche’s
work which concerns a fundamental human drive to falsify and simplify the world
for the sake of control. This stems from an archaically rooted and constantly
operative—and mostly hidden—process of fantasy which conditions all our
experience. Not to take responsibility for participating in the constitution of the
world, actively to forget that our ancestors and we ourselves have been making
most of it up as we go along, to take facts as simply given and to play our parts with
undiluted seriousness, is to be cowardly, irresponsible, naive and comical. It is not
the fantasizing per se that Nietzsche objects to—it belongs to our nature—but our
pretending that we had no part in it, playing the role of the dispassionate spectator
viewing with the innocent “I.”

It is clear that for Nietzsche “dissimulation bursting forth as power” and “the
continual urge and surge of a creative, form-giving [bildend], changeable force”
(Beyond 230) constitute a fundamental human drive. This drive is neither to be
lauded nor deplored: our responsibility is to be aware of how it works through us,
and our prerogative is to let it play. Nietzsche writes enthusiastically of the
possibility of participating in the workings of archaic fantasy with reflective awareness, playing them out fully, living the myth further, dreaming the dream onwards. We may thereby become “poets of our lives” and artists of our existance (Gay Science 239-42).

The mask is finally behind one of the last questions of Beyond Good and Evil, in which the author asks whether one “does not write books precisely to conceal what one harbors?” and “whether behind every one of [the philosopher’s] caves there is not, must not be, another deeper cave...an abyss behind every ground, beneath every ‘grounding’...”7—and also, we might ask: “behind every mask, another mask?” Perhaps there is no firm face as foundation for the make-up, no substantial self. Or is Nietzsche not to be trusted in this matter?—since he ends the aphorism with the enigmatic caution: “Every philosophy also conceals a philosophy; every opinion is also a hiding-place; every word also a mask” (Beyond 229; emphasis mine).

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The issue of role-playing, and of the optimal psychological attitude toward it, is one that Jung repeatedly engaged in his discussions of the phenomenon of the persona. For Jung the persona is a mask that mediates between the psyche and the outside world, “a compromise [complex] between individual and society as to what a man should appear to be”; ultimately, it is “an arbitrary segment of the collective psyche...a mask...that feigns individuality, [whereby] one is simply acting a role through which the collective psyche speaks” (Two Essays 158, 157). Nevertheless, a protective coating for the soul that also allows expression of one’s interiority to others is a necessity: we need a membrane between inner and outer if we are not to be overwhelmed or fall apart. With no front to face the world we would be hopelessly vulnerable and our impulses would express themselves unacceptably, giving rise to aggression, rejection and alienation. We sense the danger from within, and try to employ the mask also as a defense against inner forces: but identification with the role, while comforting and easy, is ultimately unsatisfactory. We lose suppleness and subtlety; our acting becomes stiff as the mask hardens into a husk, since we are disconnected from the source of the inner drama.

However, if the shell cracks, if we drop the mask completely, there is trouble: “The forces that burst out of the collective psyche are confusing and binding. One result of the dissolution of the persona is the release of fantasy...[from] the collective psyche...[throwing up] into consciousness materials and impulses one had never before suspected. All the treasures of mythological thinking and feeling are unlocked. It is not always easy to hold one’s own against such an overwhelming impression” (Two Essays 282). The masks, then, act as a kind of “vessel,” as something with which to hold the uprush of archetypal fantasy. With nothing there to contain the flow, the forces of the unconscious may precipitate a full-blown psychosis, or at the very least bring about a sea change in the personality. If the results are less catastrophic there are two possible responses: one can attempt “the
regressive restoration of the persona” by going back and picking up the pieces in
the effort to reassemble the original personality; or else one can set out on what
Jung calls “the path of individuation” in search of one’s true self.

On this road, however, there is a block: “[the one-sidedness of] the persona is an
obstacle to the individual’s development. The dissolution of the persona is
therefore an indispensable condition for individuation” (Two Essays 297). We are
faced, then, with the question of how to make of the persona something more than
“a semblance, a two-dimensional reality,” how to act in such a way that the
persona becomes less “arbitrary” (Two Essays 158). Jung’s characterization of
such an intentional dissolution is somewhat vague: “It is in the particular
differentiation of the persona that individuality exhibits its resistance to the
collective psyche…[This involves] selection of the particular elements of the
collective psyche which constitute the persona” (Two Essays 296). The selection is
ordinarily the responsibility of the ego—though optimally the choice would be
guided by the deeper center of the psyche which Jung calls “the Self.”

There is, however, another side to Jung, more influenced by pagan polytheism
(and by Nietzsche), whose response would be different. Immediately prior to the
definition of “persona” in Psychological Types, Jung speaks of the soul as “a
functional complex” or “plurality of personalities,” and suggests that “even in
normal individuals character-splitting is by no means an impossibility,” so that one
is therefore “justified in treating personality dissociation as a problem of normal
psychology” (464-65). From this perspective the selection of personality
components could be the dynamic work of a number of players. The ideal would be
for this plurality to play with and through the masks, donning and dropping them in
response to the current situation, inducing a flowing interaction between one’s
selves and those of others.8

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Since the texts by Rilke and Mishima have much in common, it is instructive to
look at them together. The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge (1910) was Rilke’s
first major prose work, which he completed at the age of thirty-five; Mishima was
ten years younger when he wrote Confessions of a Mask (1949), his first full-
length novel. (Mishima was an avid reader of Rilke—and so surely read Malte—
during his sixteenth year.) Both texts are masterpieces of quasi autobiography
which belong to that “in-between” genre of confessional novel and prose-poem.
They describe corresponding searches for the self in relation to death as well as
life, and suggest a retrieval of childhood as a way of gaining perspective on the
various masks that compose the person. Both first-person narratives are informed
by a powerful undercurrent of fantasy—often strangely delusional and quietly
Angst-ridden in the case of Malte, and obsessively sensual and cruel in the case of
Mishima’s protagonist—and the protagonists appear in each case to be peculiarly
susceptible to influxes from the deep, impersonal layer of the psyche which Jung
calls the “collective unconscious.”

Further, the Notebooks and Confessions both engage the problem of the self
along three dimensions—those of death, childhood and masks. The authors' treatments of the self's relation with death, and of the related phenomenon of physical illness, are remarkably parallel and make for an interesting comparison in themselves. Both novels focus long and lovingly on recollections of childhood and reflections on early memories. The authors share the view (held also by Nietzsche and Jung) that one can become oneself only through retrieving or redeeming one's childhood, on the grounds that early formative experiences continue to inform our being here now. This suggests that we are not born wearing a mask, that masks are given or shaped only later. The capacity for masks comes with the development of a vocabulary of facial expression and the acquisition of spoken language.

Though Rilke warned against viewing The Notebooks as autobiographical, the character of Malte is in a large part a persona of its author (though not primarily of his conscious personality). In a letter of 11 April 1910, the year he completed the book, Rilke wrote: “Malte Laurids has developed into a figure which, quite detached from me, acquired existence and personality, and interested me the more intensely the more differentiated it became from myself.” One is reminded of Nietzsche’s definition in The Birth of Tragedy: “the poet is a poet only in so far as he sees himself surrounded by figures which live and act before him...A character is for him not a composite of particular traits which he gathers together, but rather an obtrusively alive person before his eyes, which...continuously goes on living and acting...” (63). In Jung’s terms, Malte would be one of the “personified complexes” existing autonomously for the most part beneath the threshold of the author’s consciousness.

The strong autobiographical element of Mishima's Confessions of a Mask is evident if one reads it in conjunction with Sun and Steel (Taiyō to tetsu), a more explicitly — though not straightforwardly — autobiographical text written toward the end of Mishima's career. The title of the former work suggests not a confession about using a mask, but rather that the mask itself is doing the confessing — and not necessarily about its being a mask. That homosexuality is the thing being masked is not what is important: the real issue is the presentation of desire in general and the conforming of its expressions to socially acceptable modes — a predicament more acute for a Japanese than a Westerner. As in Malte, where the bulk of the text concerns the attempt to "accomplish" childhood, the drama of Confessions of a Mask is set on the stage of childhood and youth, "a stage on which time and space become entangled" (15).

The book opens with a series of childhood recollections (Freud would say fantasies of childhood memories) from the first few years of life. The earliest image, a source of constant torment to the protagonist, is of his encounter at the age of four with the young night-soil man, whose calling engendered a "feeling like a remarkable mixture of nothingness and vital power" (9). Somewhat later, the spectacle of the youths at the festival carrying the shrine — which encloses "a four-foot cube of pitch-blackness...[a] perfect cube of empty night"(31) — and running amuck through the garden of his childhood home assails the young observer with "recurrent waves of frozen silence and meaningless roaring" (33). The most horrifying aspect of the spectacle, however, is the expression on the faces of the
riotous young men—"an expression of the most obscene and unrestrained drunken ecstasy in the world." This kind of polarity informs the entire book, and suggests its author as the paradigmatic Dionysiac artist who, in Nietzsche's words, "has identified himself with the primal unity, its pain and contradiction" (Birth 49).10

Just as for Freud the drives and desires of childhood are (even when successfully repressed) "immortal," so Malte realizes at the onset of adolescence that "the infinite reality of childhood... would not cease" (Notebooks 171). Yet it is necessary to respond to the call of childhood memories, fantasies and dream-images in order to effect the retrieval. On returning to his home town on the event of his father's death, Malte is beset by influences and associations that had not yet been mastered, that were still unfinished: "So one's childhood also would still, in a way, have to be accomplished, if one did not want to give it up as forever lost" (140).

At the beginning of the notebooks Malte writes that he is "learning to see," a process that involves the realization of the face as mask: "each person has several [faces]. . . . [Some] put their faces on, one after the other, with uncanny rapidity and wear them out. . . . their last is worn through in a week. . . . and then little by little the under layer, the no-face [das Nichtgesicht], comes through, and they go about with that" (15-16). There is always the danger of losing the mask, having the persona dissolve—as in the nightmarish spectacle that immediately follows these reflections. A woman on the street has suddenly collapsed forward into her hands: "The woman startled and pulled away too quickly out of herself, too violently, so that her face remained in her two hands. I could see it lying in them, its hollow form. It cost me indescribable effort to stay with those hands and not look at what had torn itself out of them. I shuddered to see a face from the inside, but still I was much more afraid of the naked flayed head without a face" (16). The pressures of life can form the face into a mask, which then becomes the person so well that the self fuses with, comes to be, its masks. Then even the inside of a torn-off mask is an easier sight to bear—at least it is something—than the remnants of what the mask has been covering.

Malte's first encounter with the literal masks was, it turns out, a complex and traumatic experience.11 He has discovered a room in the family home containing numerous large closets filled with a variety of extravagant costumes and accessories: "It was then that I learned to know the influence that can emanate directly from a particular costume itself. Hardly had I donned one of these suits, when I had to admit that it got me in its power; that it prescribed my movements, my facial expression, yes, even my ideas" (91-92). Most of us are aware, if only subliminally, of the effect of our attire on the ways we act and on the ways others react to us, and we regard our dress as a freely chosen mode of "expressing ourselves." Thus the boy may not seem—at least at first—to protest too much when he says: "These disguises never went so far as to make me feel a stranger to myself: on the contrary, the more varied my transformations, the more convinced did I become of myself." But the demonic aspect of the power of masquerade—mask as masca, demon; persona as complex and autonomous personality—soon manifests itself.
With Malte’s first discovery of masks—“I had never seen masks before, but I understood at once that masks ought to be”—comes Dionysus in his nightmarish aspect. Made awkward by layer upon layer of clothing and swaths of scarves around the mask, the boy knocks over a table of valuable ornaments and bottles of scent. Panic sets in—common in that archetypal experience of impending punishment for childhood transgressions—and the more he struggles to divest himself of his costume the tighter it clings. He rushes to the mirror:

While I strove in boundlessly increasing anguish to squeeze somehow out of my disguise…[the mirror] imposed on me an image…a strange, unbelievable and monstrous reality, with which, against my will, I became permeated…I stared at this great, terrifying unknown person before me, and it seemed to me appalling to be alone with him. But at the very moment I thought this…I lost all sense, I simply ceased to exist. For one second I had an indescribable, painful and futile longing for myself, then there was only he: there was nothing but he. (94-95)

Such is the power of the strangely impersonal person behind the mask—and it is horrifying to discover that he or she is other. If identification with the mask can alienate one from one’s former self, shattering the persona, there may well be nothing in-between, behind or beneath. Thus we find Malte, two decades later, writing in his little room in Paris: “I sit here and am nothing” (28).

This experience of Malte’s had been preceded by his special delight (not unusual for boys his age) in putting on women’s clothes, in “being a slave-girl about to be sold, or being Jeanne d’Arc”—in adopting the appearance of the other sex. The Mishima boy’s first thespian experience is almost as traumatic, and is prefigured also by his introduction to the image of Jeanne d’Arc—this time masked (Confessions 11-12). Since in his favorite picture book the Maid of Orleans is portrayed masked in an armored helmet, he takes her for a man. The eventual discovery that the young knight—who has been the object of his subsequent fantasies of imminent heroic death—is really a woman masquerading as a man is devastating. Shortly thereafter, on being taken to the theater to see an exotic woman magician named Tenkatsu, the boy is seized by the desire to “become her.” Towards this end he takes to dressing up in women’s clothes—an inverse masquerade. However, when he presents his impersonation of Tenkatsu for the first time in public, the reaction of his mother to his extravagant costume and make-up is less than enthusiastic, and he is ordered stripped of his masquerade by a maid—“like a chicken being plucked of its feathers” (19). In taking on the role of his next idol, Queen Cleopatra, he reverts to indulging his fantasies and dressing up in secret.

Shortly after this episode the protagonist gains some respite from the oppressive atmosphere of his immediate family by spending time at the home of two girl cousins. Yet he finds that in this household he is all the more required to “act like a boy”: “The reluctant masquerade had begun….I was beginning to understand vaguely…that what people regarded as play-acting [engi] on my part was actually the expression of a need to return to my essential nature, and that precisely what appeared to be the natural me was a masquerade” (27). As Mishima’s
protagonist becomes a youth, his desire has long been projecting itself in images of vivid and predominantly sadistic homosexual fantasy. On realizing his difference from his peers in this regard he denigrates his penchant as “fantasy” rather than as a genuine manifestation of his life—but the pressure of his true desire against his denial engenders deep despair.

The scene for the second half of the book is set by the opening sentence: “Everyone says that life is a stage” (101)—an idea of whose truth the boy is deeply convinced. An account follows, one of the most psychologically penetrating in any literature, of the gamut of roles, masks, disguises and other forms of “autohypnosis” by which the young adolescent dissimulates his desire in order to conform to the expectations of the social group. The masquerade proceeds smoothly at first, as when in the presence of his rather prudish schoolfriends he affects the jaded air of a man of the world. But the sustained pretense of being in love (undeclared) with the sister of a classmate turns out to be exhausting: “Between the intervals of these mental efforts I was making toward artificiality I would sometimes be overwhelmed by a sense of their hollowness and, in order to escape, would turn shamelessly to a different kind of fantasy. Then immediately I would become quick with life, would become myself, and would blaze toward strange images” (121). And then with consummate artistry the player would abstract the feeling from the (homosexual) image that fired it, and transfer it to the figure of the girl as the “natural” stimulus for sexual passion—“and again I deceived myself.” The mask that was at first turned towards others now faces inward as well.

As Mishima’s adolescent develops, three factors begin to complicate the situation: he begins to feel attracted for the first time to boys younger (rather than older) than himself; he realizes that he is deceiving himself about his desire for death in the same way that he is dissimulating about his sexual desire (love and death intertwine as a theme throughout Mishima’s subsequent writing); and he embarks upon a feigned love affair with the young and beautiful Sonoko. This last ploy exerts such pressure on the masquerade as to bring about an interchange of true and feigned personalities, a reversal of normal youth and incipient invert, a volte-face of mask and face: “My ‘act’ has ended by becoming an integral part of my nature....It’s no longer an act. The knowledge that I am masquerading as a normal person has even corroded whatever of normality I originally possessed, ending by making me tell myself over and over again that it too was nothing but a pretense at normality” (153). This is a moment of truth comparable to Malte’s experience with the mirror: the loss of the sense of a solid person behind the mask and separate from the role.

Finally the young man’s hypothesis that his lack of erotic interest in Sonoko may be a mask for his true desire for her is exploded by the overwhelming fantasy of a ritual murder (modeled on his favorite image of the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian): “Your heart quivers under the rush of primitive, mysterious excitement. The deep joy of the savage is reborn in your breast. Your eyes shine, the blood blazes up throughout your body, and you overflow with that manifestation of life worshiped by savage tribes” (176). This experience becomes more explicitly archaic and
archetypal, but from that high point on, the life-force of the protagonist seems gradually to ebb—down to the last, studiedly anticlimactic episode.

This final, downward movement of the book recalls Malte’s concern about whether the retrieval of one’s childhood, the recollection of one’s personal biography, is sufficient for becoming one’s self. “Is it possible that one believed it necessary to retrieve what happened before one was born? Is it possible that one would have to remind every individual that he is indeed sprung from all who have gone before…?” (Notebooks 29). Both Nietzsche and Jung would say Yes.

After—and presumably on account of—Malte’s traumatic thespian experiment, there is hardly any mention of the theater until near the end of the notebooks, where a piece of the mosaic of imaginative reconstructions of events he has read about in historical texts is given a theatrical turn (194). The next fragment begins: “Outside much has changed. I don’t know how. But inside and before you, O my God, inside before you, spectator, are we not without action? We discover, indeed, that we do not know our part, we look for a mirror, we want to rub off the make-up and remove the counterfeit and be real. But somewhere a bit of our disguise still sticks to us that we forget… And thus we go about… neither existing, nor actors.” The distinction between the inner and outer realms (a favorite theme of Mishima’s, too) occupied Rilke throughout his work and is particularly well developed in Malte. At times the two realms appear incommensurable; often the conventional understanding is reversed—insofar as Rilke encourages us to penetrate to the inside of external things, and to realize that the dimensions of the inner realm extend, paradoxically, beyond the farthest reaches of the outer. We may use masks to hide inner events from ourselves; but within the inner realm, before that presence which Rilke here calls “God,” they are useless and laughable.

The next fragment, which describes a visit to the Roman amphitheater at Orange, transposes the play of personal life on to a more cosmic stage. On entering the ruins, Malte has the sudden impression that a play is taking place, “an immense, superhuman drama.” He sits down in shock and sees the entire theater as “the strong, all-disguising ancient mask, behind which the world condensed into a face” (195).

* * *

Let me attempt a concluding, if not conclusive, summary of the various views we have entertained concerning the self and its masks. The early Nietzsche, under the influence of the Dionysiac aspects of Schopenhauer and Wagner, began with a radical view of persons as masks of a greater power. He considered human beings to be “images and artistic projections for and of the true creator [the primordial artist of the world],” and held that we have “our highest dignity in our significance as works of art” (Birth 52). As for the masks we use in playing our parts in everyday life, Jung and Rilke and Mishima would follow Nietzsche in holding that they are necessary, that they reveal as well as conceal, and that they are formed as much by projections from outside as by desires from within. None of them appears to take quite as much delight as Nietzsche in using masks (though Mishima comes close); none employs them in such a variety of styles in his writing.
There seems to be agreement, further, that complete identification with the masks is stultifying: one either becomes nothing but a blank screen for the projections of others—all husk and no kernel—or else loses oneself in a play of mirrors looking for the actor who is not a reflected image. The novels both offer a program for getting behind the masks, which involves a retrieval of childhood as a period antedating the acquisition of masks in any form. Malte ends with a paraphrase of the parable of the prodigal son—a persona of the protagonist, presumably—who returns home in the attempt to reappropriate his “pre-mask” self, to “learn to love” and to “draw near to God” (215). While Rilke’s understanding of God, which embraces rather than excludes the nothingness of death, is far from any traditionally comforting Christian conception, it has an affinity with Jung’s notion of “the Self.” The early Rilke and Jung (at least in his monocratic mode) both appear to suggest that a move behind the masks will disclose a central presence that can direct and give authority to the playing out of one’s roles.

The ending of Mishima’s book is poignantly bleak and—in a way typical of the modern Japanese novel—it leaves things open, and the masks still in place. One might expect to find a typically Japanese understanding of the self and masks in Mishima; but while his study of classical Chinese and Japanese literature was comprehensive and thorough, Confessions of a Mask was written after a decade’s intensive reading of a number of Western authors in depth. As in Malte, there is the confrontation with the immortal images of childhood—but the retrieval pushes even farther back, beyond birth, in the attempt to reconnect with a primordial manifestation of the life force—which, paradoxically, is also a force of death, a nothingness, an emptiness. However, it is not just the young Mishima’s enthusiasm for The Birth of Tragedy that made the Dionysiac images of the “mixture of nothingness and vital power” so crucial in Confessions. Mishima was influenced also by Zen thought, a central tenet of which is that behind the person there is absolutely nothing. Perhaps Mishima’s protagonist could learn to play with masks by realizing that behind them is nothing but—in one of Zen’s more silently striking images—“one’s face before one’s parents were born.” The youth’s realization that what he had taken to be his true self was only another mask is consistent also with Nietzsche’s idea that it is only when the various masks cohere, or are compounded, into a unity that the actor appears or the person is composed.

Indeed, the most radical answer to the question of what is behind the masks comes from Nietzsche’s analysis—this word taken in its strongest literal sense—of the personality. In the final decade of his writing, working increasingly under the crazed eye of his patron Dionysus, Nietzsche performs the painstaking alchemical opus of dissolving the unitary “I” behind the masks into a series of multiplicities—first into a community of persons, then a plurality of drives (Trieb— the “instincts” of psychoanalysis), and finally into a polycentric force-field of interpretive energies. While the ultimate answer to the question of “Who speaks?” behind the masks is: “the interpretive energies of will to power,” Nietzsche’s intermediate answers are psychologically more thought-provoking: “this particular perspective, such-and-such a drive, the person who is so-and-so.” Nor is there any one person behind the masks: the stage of the world drama provides no
there any one person behind the masks: the stage of the world drama provides no firm ground on which a solid ego can take a stand; there is no independent actor, director or producer behind the *dramatis personae*. To suppose that there is, is to succumb to the tendency (which Nietzsche shows to be gratuitous) to posit a speaker behind every speech, a doer behind every doing, an actor behind every action. *Au fond*, the abyss alone speaks. The drama is all—and it is no more possible to separate the faces from the masks than the players from the play.

NOTES

1/ Two other Japanese novels available in English translation which deal with the topic are *Masks (Onna men)* by Fumiko Enchi, and *The Face of Another (Tanin no kao)* by Kôbo Abé. Of the two treatments, Abé’s is philosophically the more interesting and engages several of the themes of the present essay.

2/ Nietzsche maintains that the Greeks “made facial expressions and easy movements impossible for the actor and transformed him into a solemn, stiff, masked dummy,” because they wanted to dictate to passion “a law of beautiful speeches” (*Gay Science* 80).

3/ For a differently motivated discussion of the theme of masks which provides copious references to the topic in Nietzsche’s works, see Kaufmann 2: 137-41.

4/ I have modified Hollingdale’s translation to retain the phrase “risks his person,” which is more in keeping with the original phrasing.

5/ This Dionysiac experience has its mythical and ritual background in the close relations of the God to masks; cf. Otto, especially the chapter entitled “The Symbol of the Mask.”

6/ See, especially, *Dawn* 74-76, *Gay Science* 116-23, and *Beyond* 88, 105, 151, 213-14. Nietzsche’s conception of this kind of fantasy activity has its precursors, surprisingly, in Kant’s understanding of the transcendental imagination—that “art hidden in the depths of the human soul”—and in its elaborations at the hands of German Idealists such as Fichte and Schelling.

7/ Translation modified; Kaufmann renders *Abgrund* as “abyssally deep ground,” which negates Nietzsche’s point that there is no ground.

8/ For an account of the issue of the multiple self in Nietzsche and Jung, see Parkes, “A Cast of Many.”

9/ Mishima’s choice of the first-person narrative style is significant in the light of the prevailing popularity of the *shishōsetsu*, the confessional “I-novel” in which the author puts himself into the work with minimal disguise. While the details of the life of Mishima’s protagonist are congruent with the author’s, however, Mishima was an inveterate player with masks both in his writing and his life—and so his consistently vehement insistence on art as an absolutely autonomous realm suggests an ironist’s “playing” with the form of the I-novel.

10/ Mishima read *The Birth of Tragedy* with great enthusiasm toward the end of the war. The conjunction of overwhelming din and sudden silence is characteristic of the Dionysiac experience. “Deathly quiet pandemonium,” Nietzsche calls it in the “Dionysus Dithyrambs”; cf., also, Otto, ch. 7.

11/ Masks turn up again several times (35-40, 70, 162-64).

12/ Translation modified, in order to retain the “play acting” (*engi*) of the original, and the idea of the boy’s “return” to his essential nature.

13/ Translation modified so as to preserve the connotation of masking in connection with the hollowness of the protagonist’s pretences.

14/ See, for example, Nishitani. For some of the congruences between Nietzsche’s understanding of the self and Zen’s, cf. Parkes, “Nietzsche and Nishitani.”
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