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Mask and Otherness between Recognition and Concealment: Notes on the Self and the You

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ABSTRACT

From Martin Heidegger to Emmanuel Lévinas, from Hannah Arendt to Paul Ricoeur: the continental tradition of twentieth-century thought has built its narrative around the themes of otherness, crossing the theme of the mask that fulfills its function precisely in the dialectic identity/otherness (idem/alter to put it in technical terms). It is also true that when one thinks about what is a “mask” it could only be possible to wonder what lies behind it, what stands in the way. The mask itself is divisive and defensive, yet, at the same time, it exposes itself, acts (like an actor who moves freely on stage and, nevertheless, is forced to stick to the development of the script). And also about the “otherness” it could be said that it hides and reveals itself at the same time; it is the totally other and, at the same time, the overturned self (almost an “I” which is more and “other than” me, of Ricoeurian memory). It is the foreigner, but also the welcome guest, as Lévinas attests; it is at the same time the refugee, the immigrant, the pilgrim or the wanderer (to use the Nietzsche of “Human Too much Human”).

Keywords: Heidegger; Lévinas; mask; otherness; self.

1. THE MASK AS A PARADIGM OF EXISTENCE

To highlights some of the outlines, however, I would like to begin this intervention with some passages from a well-known Novella by Pirandello, *The train has whistled*, in which one of the many Pirandellian masks –

Mr. Belluca – for many years lived the unhappy condition of a “meek and submissive” employee to his boss, “circumscribed”, as some work colleagues called him.

Circumscribed, poor Belluca, within the very narrow limits of his arid job as a computist, with no other memory than open items, simple or double items or reversals, and deductions and withdrawals and settlements; notes, ledgers, rags and so on. Mobile filing cabinet: or rather, old donkey, who pulled the cart silently, always in one step, always along the same road, complete with blinders.

Well, one evening Belluca had fiercely rebelled against his head of office, and then, at the bitter reproach of this, he almost hurled himself at him, giving everyone “a serious argument to the supposition that it was a real and own mental alienatio”.

It seemed that his face, all of a sudden, had widened. It seemed that the blinders had suddenly fallen off, and the spectacle of life had suddenly opened up around him. It seemed that all of a sudden his ears were unclogged and he perceived voices for the first time, sounds never heard before. [...]

What does it mean? – then exclaimed the head of the office, approaching him and taking him by the shoulder and shaking him. – Ohé, Belluca!

Nothing, – Belluca replied, always with that smile between impudence and imbecility on his lips. The train, Mr. Cavaliere.

The train? What train? He whistled.

What the hell are you saying?

Tonight, Mr. Knight. He whistled. I heard it whistle... – The train?

Yes sir. What if he knew where I got! In Siberia... or or... in the forests of the Congo... It's done in an instant, Mr. Knight! [...]

The other clerks, at the shouts of the furious head of office, had entered the room and, hearing Belluca speak like this, had mad laughter.

Then the head of the office – who must have been in a bad mood that evening – shocked by those laughter, was on a rampage and had beaten up the meek victim of so many cruel jokes of his. Except that, this time, the victim, to the amazement and almost to the terror of everyone, had rebelled, had railed, always shouting that madness of the train that he had whistled, and that, by God, now no longer now that he had heard the train whistle, he could no longer, no longer wanted to be treated like that.

They had grabbed him by force, harnessed him and dragged him to the madhouse.

Here he still went on talking about that train. He imitated the whistle. Oh, a very plaintive whistle, how far away, in the night; heartfelt. And, immediately after, he added:

– Let's go, let's go... Gentlemen, where to? for where?

And he looked at everyone with eyes that were no longer his own. Those eyes, usually dark, without luster, frowned, now laughed at him very lucidly, like those of a child or a happy man; and phrases without construct came out of his lips. Unheard-of things, poetic, imaginative, bizarre expressions, which astonished all the more, since it could not in any way be explained how, by what miracle, they flourished in the mouth of him, that is to one who had never dealt with anything else until now. than of figures and registers and catalogs, remaining as if blind and deaf to life: a computer machine.

Now he spoke of blue fronts of snowy mountains, raised to the sky; he spoke of slimy cetaceans which, voluminous, on the bottom of the seas, made a comma with their tails. Things, I repeat, unheard of. [...]

Gentlemen, Belluca, he had forgotten for many and many years – but just forgotten – that the world existed.

Absorbed in the constant torment of that unfortunate existence of his, absorbed all day in the accounts of his office, never a moment's respite, like a blindfolded beast, yoked to the rod of a *nòria* or a mill, yes sir, he had forgotten for years and years – but really forgotten – that the world existed.

Two evenings before, he threw himself to sleep exhausted on that sofa, perhaps due to excessive tiredness, unusually, he was unable to fall asleep immediately.

And, suddenly, in the deep silence of the night, he had heard a train whistle from afar.

It seemed to him that his ears, after so many years, who knows how, suddenly became unclogged.

The whistle of that train had torn him apart and suddenly carried away the misery of all those horrible distresses of his, and almost from an uncovered tomb he found himself wandering yearning in the airy void of the world that opened enormously all around him.

He instinctively held on to the blankets that he threw on himself every night, and he ran with his thoughts behind that train that went off into the night.

There was, ah! there was, outside that horrible house, outside of all its torments, there was the world, so much, so far away, to which that train was going... Florence, Bologna, Turin, Venice... so many city, in which he had been as a young man and which still, certainly, that night sparkled with lights on the earth. Yes, he knew the life that was lived there! The life he once lived there too! And that life went on; he had always followed, while here,

like a blindfolded beast, he turned the shaft of the mill. He hadn't thought about it anymore! The world had closed for him, in the torment of his home, in the arid, bristly anguish of his computisteria... But now, behold, he was returning, as if by violent pouring, into his spirit. The moment, which struck for him, here, in this prison of his, flowed like an electric thrill through the whole world, and with his imagination suddenly awakened he could, behold, he could follow it through known and unknown cities, lands, mountains, forests, seas... This same thrill, this same heartbeat of time. There were, while he lived this "impossible" life here, many and many millions of men scattered all over the earth, who lived differently. Now, in the very moment that he was suffering here, there were the solitary snowy mountains that raised their blue foreheads to the night sky... Yes, yes, he saw them, he saw them, he saw them like this... there were the oceans... the forests...

And, therefore, he – now that the world had returned to his spirit – could somehow console himself! Yes, occasionally rising from his torment, to take a breath of fresh air into the world with the imagination. (Pirandello, 1956-1987, pp. 588-594)

Here: reality happens and, in its occurrence, it imposes itself on the conscience of man who opens up to it. And with the reality that happens, the mask falls and the stature of the man who becomes aware of himself stands out clearly: a consciousness that is only possible in front of others. But what does it mean "reality happens"? What is the meaning of a such an event as the one described by Pirandello in his Novella? The imposition of reality manifests, on the one hand, the inescapability of what happens – its character as an event, or event – on the other hand, the need for attention with respect to the experienced event: the magnificence and exceptionality of the experience.

Luigi Pirandello is echoed by Jean-Paul Sartre, the existentialist philosopher and great writer. He reflects the experience of everyday life in the metropolis, with its subways, its buses, the loneliness of individuals in the crowd, the disintegration of the individual accelerated in the years between the two wars and his being "abandoned under millions of looks". One could say, like one of the protagonists of the novel *Il rinvio*, that the gaze of the other, as well as being disturbing, is also a guarantee for my existence, the proof that I am not a nullity, that I am a "value" and I "am" worth something.

The "humanistic" turning point of the postwar period will be in Sartre's opinion based on the consideration that it is precisely the absence of foundations or values that encourages man to build his own ends by himself. And this necessity that engages the individuality of every man will no longer see the individual "alone in the face of his choices, isolated in an

essentially hostile social universe”: his choice will be in the sign of a social relationship, albeit not necessarily harmonious.

You have certainly experienced, in the subway, in the foyer of a theater, on the train, that sudden sensation is unbearable of being spied on from behind. You turn around, but the curious one has already lowered his nose to the book [...]. It is very easy for me to tell you what that gaze is: because it is nothing, it is an absence (and not a presence); here, imagine the darkest night imaginable. It is the night that looks at you. But a dazzling night; the night in full light, the secret night of daylight. I am bathed in black light [...]. What anguish to suddenly discover that gaze as a universal center from which I cannot escape. But what a rest, too! I finally know that I am. I transform to my use and to your greatest indignation the word imbecile criminal of your prophet, that “I think, therefore I am” that made me suffer so much – and I say: you can see me, therefore I am. I no longer have to bear the responsibility of my sticky dissolving: he who sees me badly makes me be, I am as he sees me. (Sartre, 1977, pp. 384-385)

For J.-P. Sartre, the consciousness thrown into the world is structurally conditioned by everything that surrounds it: the other, the world, is the antagonist, the danger, the Being-in-itself. My conscience (Being-for-itself) lives in it, however, it would be empty and vain without that (Bodei, 1997, p. 134): the gaze of the other, as well as disturbing, is therefore a guarantee that my existence *exists*.

With the “I think”, in opposition to Descartes’s philosophy, as well as Kant’s philosophy, we reach ourselves in front of the other and the other is as certain for us as we are certain of ourselves. In this way man, who grasps himself directly with the “cogito”, also discovers all the others, and discovers them as the condition of his own existence. He realizes that he cannot be anything (in the sense that a man is said to be witty, or that he is bad, or that he is jealous), if others do not recognize him as such. To obtain any truth about me, I must obtain it through the other. The other is essential to my existence, as well as the knowledge I have of myself. In these conditions, the discovery of my intimacy reveals to me, at the same time, the other as a freedom placed in front of me, which thinks and wants only for me or against me. Thus, we immediately discover a world that we call “inter subjectivity” and it is in this world that man decides what he is and what others are.

Choice is possible in a certain sense, but what is absolutely not possible is not to choose [...] man finds himself in an organized situation, in which he himself is engaged; he engages the whole of humanity with his choice and cannot avoid choosing [...]. In any case, whatever he does, it is impossible that he does not take full responsibility in the face of this problem [...] he chooses himself in the presence of others and you choose yourself in the presence of others. (Sartre, 1993, pp. 64-65, 68-69)

The philosophical references that could be suggested are many, starting from the considerations of Hannah Arendt, of *The origin of totalitarianism*, to the Lévinas of *Totality and infinity*. Yet it seems significant, once again, to have recourse to literature.

In her novel *La storia di lei*, Elsa Morante inserts “a real story, indeed a sort of fairy tale or parable”, which is tremendously significant of the dramatic possibility that man has to frustrate himself and reality in a single shot. In the artistic field, De Chirico’s metaphysical painting appears as evidence of the impossibility for men to escape the absurdity of existence.

I will bring you “l’énigme d’une journée” one of these days; for the painting by M.lle Laurencin I thought today of the title of “mystère d’un moment” because the various things represented there appear in all the unexpected of certain moments in which the intimate essence of the objects appears to us in all the meta-physical reality. The similarity that exists between these imaginations that I have and the things as they appear in life can be compared to the similarity that exists between the physiognomy of a person, who sees himself in a dream, and the physiognomy of the same person in his reality; and at the same time it is not the same person. I am therefore convinced that I have shown a new path in art. (de Chirico, 2008, p. 601)

2. THE MASK OF TOTALITARIANISM, OR THE DENIAL OF OTHERNESS

The twentieth century was crossed by an era – the consequences of which, perhaps, have not yet completely disappeared – in which what becomes distinctive is the loss of reality and the other, the cancellation of difference as a factor of perturbation with respect to the affirmation of a Absolute self. Totalitarianisms are – to quote Adorno – a system in which the law of unity applies, of the “programmed” elimination of the different, of the non-convergent in power (Adorno, 1994, pp. 62-63). The penalization of deviations, the manipulation of consciences, as well as the forced cultural leveling, are clear indications of how the Nazi-Fascist and Communist totalitarianisms and the American-style social conformism have reduced the plurality of men to mere gender difference.

There was an Esse Esse who, for his horrendous crimes, one day, at dawn, was taken to the gallows. He still had about fifty steps left to the point of execution, which took place in the same courtyard as the prison. And in this crossing, his eye by chance landed on the crumbling wall of the courtyard, where one of those wind-sown flowers had sprung up, which grow where

it happens and feed, it would seem, on air and rubble. It was a miserable little flower, made up of four purple petals and a pair of pale leaflets; but, in that first rising light, the Esse Esse saw, to her amazement, all the beauty and happiness of the universe. And he thought: If I could go back, and stop time, I would be ready to spend my entire life in the adoration of that little flower. Then, as if doubling, he heard his own voice within himself, but joyful, clear and yet distant, coming from who knows where, shouting at him: Truly I tell you: for this last thought you had about death, you will be safe from hell! All this, to tell you, took me a certain interval of time, but there it lasted half a second. Between the Esse Esse that passed among the guards, and the flower that appeared on the wall, there was still, more or less, the same initial distance: just a step. "No!". Esse shouted to herself, turning back furiously, "I don't fall back, no, in certain tricks". And since he had both hands hindered, he crushed that flower with his teeth. Then he threw it to the ground, stamped it underfoot. And he spat on it. Here, the story is over. (Morante, 1974, pp. 604-605)

Beyond the effectiveness of this text, what emerges is the denial of what happens, as Mario Luzi said, in some verses of his *Book of Hypatia*: "From ignorance to certainty there is an intermediate moment of foreknowledge in which it is still possible for the mind to deny what happened" (Luzi, 1978, p. 79).

Prescience, as Luzi understands it, is the prejudice that is constituted as the hermeneutic principle of every event. For this reason, in the face of the event of reality (what happens as unexpected, as unplanned), what urges is a sort of simplicity which can allow us not to put anything between us and what happens.

3. MASK AND OTHERNESS, BETWEEN VEILING AND RECOGNITION

The thematic couple, mask and otherness, finds in one of the most important thinkers of the twentieth century, Martin Heidegger, the one who, perhaps more than any other – fully grasping the nihilistic spirit of our age – has rethought the being of man and the meaning of being in terms of an absolute finitude: absolute because it characterizes the being that we are and the very truth of being as a permanent difference from the entities present in the world and, therefore, as impossibility, hiding and oblivion. The giving of being and the fulfillment of man, in fact, lie precisely in this event of retraction, which would then be the mysterious root of nihilism, by virtue of which, in the meantime the truth of being is "lost" (as Nietzsche, upon others, would have described it speaking of our age as a

final outcome of the long history of an error); in reality it is preserved and given as the very mystery of “nothing”.

In the Heideggerian perspective, this movement takes place in wandering – or rather wandering, as the German philosopher himself calls it – an absolutely insuperable condition for man in his relationship with being and, ultimately, as the event of “to be himself”. To “err” or “wander” is not just the opposite of the truth, but it constitutes its secret heart. And in fact for Heidegger if we intended the truth as it was attested in the course of the classical-Christian tradition, that is to say as an “adaptation” of the intellect to the thing, we would risk to miss its original ontological dimension; we would reduce it to the comparison and correspondence of two already pre-determined entities (the intellect and the thing) – precisely missing or forgetting the truth as the truth of being itself, which always differs from the entity.

If, on the other hand, we go back to the primitive Greek sense of *aletheia*, that is to the unveiling of entities (thinking this sense even more radically than the Greeks themselves did, at least starting from Plato), then we will show the mysterious sense for which the unveiling of entities (truth as adaptation) necessarily implies and is permanently based on a “veiling” of being, which as veiled must remain as it is in order to safe its own truth, and which can never be adequate by an intellect. Here lies the original ontological meaning of the error: ultimately it coincides with the fact that being, withdrawing into concealment with respect to the revealed entity – that is, according to traditional language, with respect to the “true” entity – is thought of as an essential “non-truth”. But it is a non-truth that should in no way be mistaken with a deception or a falsehood, but must be interpreted as that veil that allows the genuine custody of being. Let’s hear it from Heidegger’s own words, taken from a conference dating back to 1930 and entitled precisely *On the essence of truth*:

Conceived from the point of view of truth as revealing [something that comes out of concealment and manifests itself as an entity], the veil is then non-disclosure [the very being that withdraws from the entity] and therefore is non-truth authentic and more appropriate to the essence of truth. (Heidegger, 1987, p. 149)

This means that, while man, with his own ontological behavior, leaves the entity from time to time – which always manifests itself within a horizon of calculability and worldly concerns – at the same time is to veil the totality of being, that is to say, the giving of being itself as the incalculable, the indeterminable and the elusive. And it should be noted that according to

Heidegger these two movements are not simply opposite and alternative to each other, but they belong to each other. Heidegger continues:

The veiling of the entity in its totality, the authentic non-truth, is older than any evidence of this or that entity. It is even older than the very letting-be [the being], which, while it reveals, already holds veiled and behaves in relation to the veil. What does letting be guarded by this reference to veiling? Nothing less than the veiling of what is veiled in its totality, of the entity as such, that is to say: the mystery. It is not a particular mystery relating to this or that thing, but the only fact that in general the mystery (the veiling of the veiled) pervades and dominates as such the being of man. (Heidegger, 1987, p. 149)

Here is the greatness, but also the “stop” of the Heideggerian gaze: on the one hand he pays attention to the mystery as that which is not part of our calculation, that is, to that dimension of truth that coincides with being itself; but on the other hand he identifies the mystery only with the veiling of what is veiled, without being able to see that, together with this, indeed even more than this, the mystery lies precisely in the unveiling of the veiled (which instead for him means the entry into the realm of the calculable), that is, in the manifestation of being that hides itself precisely in the entity that shows itself.

Being-there [that is, the being of man], as it exists, preserves the first and broadest non-disclosure, the authentic non-truth. The authentic non-essence of truth is the mystery. [...] But speaking in this way of non-essence and non-truth impacts beyond measure the usual way of thinking and gives the impression of a forced juxtaposition of imaginary “paradoxes”. Since it is difficult to eliminate this impression, it is necessary to give up this way of speaking, which is paradoxical only for the common doxa (opinion). For those who know, however, the “non” of the original non-essence of truth as non-truth refers to the not yet experienced context of the truth of being (and not only of being). (Heidegger, 1987, pp. 149-150)

If the essence of truth is the manifestation of the entity, the permanent remaining hidden of the being is in turn veiled – it is “mystery” –, and therefore it will also withdraw with respect to essence (as non-essence) and with respect to truth (as non-truth). This is precisely the ambiguous domain of erring or wandering: getting lost in the calculable being forgetting the being that remains veiled, but also ensuring that non-essence and non-truth continue to precede, hidden and forgotten, every essence and every truth.

But in its taking measures, humanity is diverted from the mystery. That insistent turning to practicable reality and this persistent turning away from

the mystery mutually imply each other. Indeed, they are the same thing. [...] Man's restlessness, which pushes him to move away from the mystery to turn to practicable reality, and which makes him pass gradually from one object to another of current reality, without noticing the mystery, is wandering [Irren]. Man errs. It is not that man falls into wandering [Irre], but he is already always moving in wandering [...]. The wandering, for which man goes, is not something that, so to speak, passes close to man and into which he sometimes falls, as in a hole; on the contrary, wandering is part of the intrinsic constitution of being-there in which historical man is involved. (Heidegger, 1987, p. 151)

These are the same terms of the great Jewish tradition, for which erring as a sin means severing the relationship with the mystery. But here the mystery itself is no longer a presence because it too withdraws from our existence, so much so that a few lines further down Heidegger will say that erring, which he had previously said to be not noticing the mystery, is precisely “the domination of the mystery in wandering” (Heidegger, 1987, p. 153). From this alone, according to Heidegger, freedom can be born: a letting-being that is always, at the same time, a letting-being veiled.

With respect to this position, contemporary thought wonders if and what could be a different path: if there is, that is, the possibility of recognition and where is the place where such recognition takes place. It takes place in the relationship with otherness, since is precisely the relationship that constitutes the place where truth dwells and it is possible to find the other and find oneself, a place where one can meet with the other-from-oneself and the other-of-itself.

This inseparable circularity between truth and relationship is part of the imprinting that constitute the foundation of our being, for which a decisive paradigm shift is required: from a truth conceived and transmitted as a-temporal and a-spatial content (dogmatic paradigm) or as intimately oriented to praxis (moralistic paradigm) to a truth perceived and transmitted “within a relationship”. (Salonia, 2007, pp. 152-153)

It is Martin Buber who in 1923, in an essay entitled *Me and you*, identifies the answer to overcoming loneliness – the existential condition of modern man – in the interpersonal and community relationship: “Man becomes I in contact with you”, and again, paraphrasing the Johannine prologue “In the beginning is the relationship” to indicate how the relationship is at the origin, it is the you that constitutes the I, is the encounter that gives meaning to his humanity (Buber, 1993, pp. 79, 72). The relationship, in fact, is not a mere psychological-sentimental attitude, but “an original ontological structure”, as Poma writes in the introductory essay to Buber’s work (Poma, 2004, p. 15).

In confirmation of this originality of the relationship, the Bible, in the text of Genesis we read as follows: “And the Lord God said: ‘It is not good for man to be alone: I want to make him a corresponding help’” (*Genesis* 2,18). It is extraordinary to think how the relationship is precisely a thought of God who recognizes in the solitude of man a non-good and how it is the initiative of God to create the woman, to invent the relationship that is companionship, comparison, help, conflict and dialogue.

It is in the mature surrender to the other that one grows in the relationship, and in surrendering oneself there is always both the risk of not being understood, of not being listened to, of being used, and the possibility of finding a You willing to understand, to feel as *leghein*, to dialogue, to enhance, to confront.

Of all the affairs of existence, it is the relationship that is the most difficult and tiring, especially when, wanting it to remain over time, it requires care, attention, a healthy dose of transfers and self-affirmations.

Certainly, there is the danger that the dyadic relationship expires into relativism, a fact that occurs precisely when the triadic dimension of the relationship is forgotten or overlooked, a dimension made up of diversity, novelty, storytelling, interpretation (Stern, 1987). Daniel Stern, speaking of the development of the child, writes that around the age of 2-3 the self-narrative (or verbal) arises, a necessary phase of the child’s development, because it is in knowing how to speak that he begins to differentiate himself from the other. The language of an individual, the way he speaks, the way he uses grammar say a lot about that individual’s identity and relational competence. Stern, speaking of the triadic dimension of the relationship, argues that the story without the other becomes narcissism; You and I without a story is symbiosis; Me, you and story is maturity, precisely because telling yourself to another means not only talking about yourself, but also about something else and about others. Stern seems to echo Jacques Derrida who writes on the importance of the mediation of the third, which is co-original, because it does not belong to either the I or the You, and is necessary for the maintenance of the relationship itself. Without this mediation one would fall into fusion and solipsism (Derrida, 2008). The third cannot and must not be reduced to either the You or the I. The tertium in the relationship becomes an unavoidable word, indispensable for the relationship to remain or become healthy.

As Buber says, man is always relational and, if you want to understand his specificity, you need to be able to grasp the relational texture. If it can no longer be relational, it means that something in its development has not worked. It may not be intentional, in the sense that it is not aware of what it feels and what it wants, but our being in relationship always has

our intentionality in itself, that is, what we want and where we want to go. But the awareness of one's intentionality is an even higher step. Emmanuel Lévinas, in *Totality and infinity*, shifts the focus from simple relationality, identifying the key word of his philosophy in the idea of visage. The Face is a question, an appeal, an epiphany of the Other, recalling an ethic of responsibility and value. Whoever is willing to welcome the face renounces possession and accumulation. The subject who welcomes the total otherness of the face is not aimed at himself and his knowledge, he is consecrated to service. And, however, unlike modern thought, here there is no dialectic but mere delivery to the event: an event that is relationship with Others, in which the Ego and the Other do not remain linked in their relationship but are self-absolving, so as to free themselves from any objectivistic claim.

The fundamental question of existence is man-with-man, that is, relationship, mutual belonging, reciprocity. The latter is a fact that has no equal in nature and leads to the affirmation that the root of all reciprocity is in the recognition of otherness: no longer, therefore, the "we symbiotic" typical of the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century, but of the "we relational", a new dialogic reality that in many respects still needs to be thought, constructed and lived.

In this fluid society of ours, there is a real back and forth between the identity of us and the heterogeneity of the Ego and the Alter-Ego, the irrepressible root of all reciprocity. And it is on this dimension of interrelation that belonging is based, as a contemporary declination of belonging and belonging to the world, as belonging to oneself and belonging to the other.

The relationship in reciprocity presupposes a decision and is born in the movement of welcoming the other, it grows by opening itself to the You and to the infinity of the other: this first possibility of opening establishes every other opening, including the gnoseological one, since the experience of the other, and therefore of the infinite, is irreducible: it is the experience *par excellence*.

Absolute experience is not a revelation: a privileged manifestation of the Other, a manifestation of a face beyond form. Ambiguous form of a supreme presence that dominates those who welcome, that comes from above, unexpected, and therefore teaches its newness. The face is a living presence, is an expression, every moment undoes the form it offers, an adequate form to present oneself as the Other to signify and have a meaning; it is meaning without context. (Lévinas, 1977, pp. 64-65)

However, this dialectic today risks to be not productive, since the man of "nowadays" lives as if he were threatened by the dominance of his own selfhood and the tyranny of otherness.

The dialogical We of the encounter risks being translated into a useless and equivocal sentimentality, into compensatory paternalisms, into spiritualistic, sensualistic or hedonistic encroachments. The attempt to let the “We” live is not in itself a guarantee of a true encounter. There is always the possibility of the meeting’s fall, its setback, its failure. When “my” world has to become “our” world at all costs and the other is reified, we arrive at a decline in narcissistic egoity, which is a symptom that never sleeps in our societies, which welcomes more monolithic certainty than a dialogic truth.

As Bauman recalled in an interview on identity in 2002, taking up a poster posted on the walls of Berlin after the war, there is a mosaic that characterizes our daily life:

Your Christ is a Jew. Your car is Japanese. Your pizza is Italian. Your democracy Greek. Your coffee Brazilian. Your vacation Turkish. Your numbers Arabic. Your alphabet Latin. Only your neighbor is a foreigner. (Bauman, 2003, p. 20)

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RIASSUNTO

Da Martin Heidegger a Emmanuel Lévinas, da Hannah Arendt a Paul Ricoeur: la tradizione continentale del pensiero novecentesco ha costruito la sua narrazione intorno ai temi dell'alterità, attraversando il tema della maschera che svolge la sua funzione proprio nella dialettica identità/alterità (idem/alter per dirla in termini tecnici). È anche vero che quando si pensa a cosa sia una "maschera" non si può che chiedersi cosa ci sia dietro, e cosa si "frappone". La maschera stessa è divisiva e difensiva, eppure, allo stesso tempo, si espone, agisce (come un attore che si muove liberamente sulla scena e, tuttavia, è costretto ad attenersi allo sviluppo del copione). E anche dell'"alterità" si potrebbe dire che si nasconde e si rivela allo stesso tempo; è il totalmente altro e, allo stesso tempo, l'io rovesciato (quasi un "io" che è più e "altro da" me, di ricoueriana memoria). È lo straniero, ma anche l'ospite gradito, come attesta Lévinas; è allo stesso tempo il rifugiato, l'immigrato, il pellegrino o l'errante (per usare il Nietzsche di "Umano troppo umano").

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