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METAMORPHOSIS AND MYTH IN MODERN ART

MARY HOLMES

That painstaking and continuous destruction of the Renaissance world of space and individuality to which science most recently has devoted itself constitutes a matricide from which we all obliquely suffer, not because the death itself is wrong or unnatural but because our acceptance of it is incomplete. Space and time have shrunk to a pinpoint or to an unreal number, and their contraction shrivels us to two-dimensionality that permits no graver illusion than the cinematic. In these cramped quarters the effulgence, the very shift and movement and disruptive contour of individuality is sliced and quieted into predictable patterns of accident and lust. The loss itself is not tragic. If it should be wept, the weeping must be tempered with the recognition of inevitability. We are not willing, even if we were able, to abandon the complex of techniques and thought, of machines and their rich products that constantly instruct us in the new role. Nor is the role a new one. It is rather the other, the Renaissance madness of individual powers that fitted us awkwardly, demanding of us more diversity than we had, more elasticity than we enjoyed. With relief, we feel it slip from us to transform itself into the sentimentalities of commercialism where individuality is bought and sold, learned and travestied, confused with eccentricity or fad, cultivated in the warm damp intimacy of the radio announcer's plug. Reduced and castrated, it has become 'personality,' a commodity powerless and welcome, incapable of mystery but convenient as a toy or a medium of exchange. Now it can be played with and exploited safely, brought near without pain, cuddled or derided indifferently.

But those worshipful sources of vitality that once it embodied are not tricked. They have withdrawn from the plaything to permeate the world, and in the withdrawal, regained an ancient strength. The Thing has become again portentous, as it was for primitive man. The rock, the tree, the chair, the apple and the lion are no longer that, alone. Their innocence is violated in dreams and memory, the chair returns to haunt us when the person who occupied it has vanished from our minds, the taste of the apple releases experience locked within us, the lion roars in nightmares with our father's face.

Neither innocent nor constant are the objects that accompany us. They may loom before us in terrifying symbol, the trumpet that is

phallus, the spiked circle of femininity that is a crown. A psychological metamorphosis pervades the visible world, dissolving it and recreating it before our astonished eyes. The guileless cloth, the rope, the grained wood waver and darken to reshape themselves as instruments in our endless passion. We have learned again to approach devoutly the mystery inherent in the non-human, treating with a reverence lately accorded man alone, the benign or hostile objects of his environment. Nor is our psychological involvement the single cause of this apotheosis, this awesome potential of metamorphosis. Physics also has taught us our strict atomic kinship, the ambivalence of energy that binds together the observer and the observed, the playful impermanence of chance configurations to which we give definition and name. But by the grace of probability there go I, and by that same grace, there may I yet be. We may say with St. Francis, our sister the star, our brother the atom, or declare our least cell the universe. Our most fanciful metaphors are excelled by the sober scientific descriptions of form alterations in objects moving at the speed of light. We no longer dare assume that the apple is only apple, the lion only beast. A new hagiology linked with primitive animism, but supported by the latest research, makes of any painting a fetish or an icon, created in loving fear, approached with fearful love.

This protean animation liberated from individuality to diffuse the universe returns to invest mankind with the same power that elevates the inanimate. But the casual human face, the familiar form, prey to every emotion, to intimacy, to time, cannot sustain the mysterious. It is too limited, too dangerously recognizable. It may look like Uncle Harry and the mystery dissolve in laughter. Men as they appear to us, stained with variability, mortal, are less capable of deification than their simplest possessions. We know the face too well. We have learned it in the countless reflections provided for us in glass and chrome, we have seen ourselves approaching and all man with us, clear or distorted in a thousand windows, mirrors, facades, in the inundations of photographs, in the movies, in the city's congestion. We have become inured to the surprise of the face itself, it cannot move us. Time-harried and time-bound, the most inscrutable face appears open, because mortal, beside the occult and ageless face of the animal, the blind metallic gaze of the machine. And yet we cannot, despite the recognized pressure of psychological and structural kinship, we cannot yet, feel the same involvement with the thing that we feel with the shape of man. The day may come when the ego is sufficiently stilled, when the cool statistical world suffices, but it has not come. Art still must bear, in its shadowed figures of men the greatest

burden of our doubts and question. People may fail us, but in the human shape we still find our greatest satisfaction.

The resolution of this paradox lies in disguise, in the assumption of the mask that at once conceals and asserts the protagonist, the hero. Through the mask, man may again become the immortal god, sloughing off all the incidents of his limitation. He is not himself and yet is that, supremely. The mask is the chosen and permanent face that covers the actual, necessarily different one, compounding an ambiguity that it at once epitomizes and resolves. It confines and defines the gesture of personality and yet is blandly indifferent, even hostile, to individuality, since the mask may be assumed by anyone. It is anonymous, yet contained and unequivocal, resisting the implied intimacy of identity by its calm transcendence. Its duality is complete, that is simultaneously attack and defense, revelation and concealment, fearful and fear-provoking. No sophistication is great enough to withstand its power. It holds for everyone the fascination of the hidden, the threat of the deceitful, the wisdom and power of deception that may be playful or dangerous but cannot be completely comprehended. Masked, man becomes unknowable, his least action liturgical, the heady secret of his metamorphosis uniting him with the gods.

It is not then surprising that the mask more and more clearly manifests itself in our society on all of its levels, in the comic strip as in cosmetics, in the deliberate obfuscation of professional language and the jargon of the hepcat, in psychiatry and the streamlined steam engine. We accept or embrace its ambiguity, that answers to our own, its deified incomprehensibility that makes bearable our confusion. In the comic strip, mask and metamorphosis provide the major excitement, even the only one, and define the form, whether in the eyeless face of Orphan Annie endlessly spinning on Fortune's wheel, from poverty and pursuit to fabulous wealth and safety, or in **Superman** and his various avatars, where, before our astonished gaze the greatest metamorphosis occurs, the feckless and impotent (and incidentally the literary-intellectual) becomes the deathless and all-powerful, hopelessly loved by beautiful women and dedicated to the Good, the deus, not *ex* but *in machina*. In architecture we accept, as readily as primitive man accepted, the towering fantasy of bird head or bear above the frail human body, the dark dazzling onyx of the first story facade, indifferent to the timid brick or carved stone cornices that recklessly show themselves above. It is typical that in literature, our most admired authors have assumed the deepest disguise. That their glossaries, when they are provided, themselves need glossing, is but a slight indication of the profundity of our addiction

to the secrecy of the mask. Neither in literature nor in life will we permit its destruction unless it is to reveal another in its place. As Mezz Mezrow observed, in **Really the Blues**, the language of hot jazz changes the instant it becomes intelligible, and no less surely the language of the psychologist changes for the same reason, though he may imagine that he is defining afresh words debased by popular usage. The mask of language is retained at any cost, for any reason, defending against the instantaneous and voracious communication system the inviolate liturgy of the initiate. So also, the cosmetic mask of sexuality and youth protects the movie star and the clerk against the assault of individuation and of time. We see around us, settling over every object the smooth, closed, resistant ambiguity of streamlining, that defies our recognition and turns the quaint, separate shapes of the stove into the icebox, into the washtub, the car, the sofa, the ashtray, with ceaseless magic and urbanity that mocks the tangled fixity of ourselves, our souls and bodies. Painting, perhaps because of its long bondage to idiosyncratic appearance, most scrupulously cultivates the mask, reticently withholding from the observer all but the darkest testimony, hiding or transforming the familiar, by devices of abstraction or calculated interpenetration concealing the disparate individualities it once struggled to describe. The mask, used frankly or subsumed throughout each form, more sharply defines the painting of the first half of the twentieth century than any other single characteristic. Since the first use of collage, (perhaps the most important single step in the development of modern art), painting has striven to achieve the mysterious self-containment of the icon, and the mask, both through its indelible association with religion and as a technique of ambiguity, satisfies that need.

The preoccupation with the masked figure in the work of Philip Guston is but one instance of this prevalence. That Guston has had the wisdom to perceive the emergence of the mask as deeply associated with the problem of personality conception, and that he has had the imagination to engage himself with that problem, raises his work above that of many of his colleagues who intuitively or faddishly employ the mask as a prop or style without attempting to explore its significance. Like the sorcerer's apprentice they have been taken in by their own magic, often to their comic ruin. In Guston's paintings, particularly of the last two years, (although the theme is stated as early as the WPA murals) the utilization of the disguise acts to clarify the new meanings inherent in impersonality, and to pose again the possibility of right action, through ritual. Through the potency of symbols completely compatible with the science of our day he orders

our confusion and agony, imposing on them the calm of ceremonial significance that makes them tolerable. It is the loss of dignity from which man suffers, not the loss of individuality, and in these later paintings we are afforded at least a glimpse of a new configuration in which dignity is restored. Upside down, devoted to an endless performance of irrational celebration and conflict, it is man's very ambiguity that we may worship, the inexplicable mystery of survival against insuperable odds, against the will and action of the celebrants, who are ourselves. Armed with the weapons which they have made, as they have made the battle and the enemy, they turn upon each other to destroy the villain within; the masks they have contrived to frighten the world terrify them, alone. But with the sobriety and intensity of the children that they are, they shape a new dagger and a new crown, hear music in cacophony, invest the least stone with their own invincible power.

For it is the symbol of the masked child that Guston presents to us, repeatedly, and it would be difficult to imagine one more capable of embodying our beliefs. The fearful adoration of the child, inherited from Rousseau and Freud, dominates our thinking, and reverses, as all of our truths reverse, those axioms which the Renaissance held to be self-evident. In the Renaissance, children were treated as little men, with the same consistency with which we treat men as little children. In the twentieth century the child has waxed large enough to darken the whole sky of our psychological world. For knowledge of ourselves we turn to the infant with the fanatical devotion of the Magi, finding in the child we were, the fatality of our lives, in the children around us the redeemers or the destroyers. We have extended the command to become as little children to the belief that we are little children and all our later reactions are but screens, fabricated to shelter the delicate and terrible creature who was our beginning and our end as well. We do not change or grow but only assume a series of false faces to beguile or assault the world, donning them like an armour in whose magic closeness we may suffocate, or healthily discarding them, only to seize another when the moment of their usefulness has passed. The sad beautiful face of love is hooked lightly over ears still pressed against our mothers' bodies: reason is at best a paper hat. Encased in dark timelessness, the child accompanies us, whimsically defeating our cherished plans or dispensing unearned grace, relentless and unalterable. We may tie the torn white bandage over his eyes, but to still his onanistic trumpeting, though they shatter us, is not in our power. We are performers enacting perilously

the drama of our execution whose inexorable end we have ourselves contrived.

Not only for the meaning of psychology does the masked child suffice as symbol. The fears and insecurities that riddle our world are contained in it as well, the convulsive face of disaster that hangs before us, swelling larger with every issue of the newspaper, every utterance of the advertiser. The union of fear and the mask is an early one; by its very nature of concealment and ambivalence it provokes fear, yet it is the frightened only who put on the mask. The trusting go undisguised. As primitive man, in a world of uncertainty and animistic terror, carved for himself the semblance of his own dread, we long for the frightful image. Fear feeds on fear, as love on love. Yet the mask is capable of transforming, through distillation and choice imposing a limit that destroys ambivalence as it creates it. Chaos may lie beneath it, but in the mask is comprehension. Our pursuit of the mask is a flight from chaos at the moment or through the act of embracing it. Fear also settles around our conception of the child. Even while we dread his parasitical power, we picture him as shaken by a thousand terrors greater than our own. From his first agonizing breath, the knife that severs him from his true world, he enters a realm of nightmare peopled by monstrous giants, the door of the dark closet slowly opens onto watchful emptiness, the ominous houses file down the street and he dares not turn his head. At the sight of his fear our own subsides, would trickle into laughter, but the mask rebukes us, stating again the terror in ourselves.

On a deeper level of personality comprehension toward which we move but which we have as yet not openly advocated, the masked children of Guston's paintings provide an allegory, even a discipline of ritualized action. The most exalted spiritual struggle of man has always been the effort to free himself from the petty limitation of self-love, through which he squanders his happiness blindly and painfully. It is only through the patient stripping off of the layers of self, the enamoured attitudes of fear and desire, that he may escape the bondage. Not in the contrived masks, successively assumed, of self-conscious individuality, but in the most complete knowledge and acceptance of himself may obliteration of self-consciousness occur. It is a long and crafty battle, that begins in detachment and ends as detachment freely reinvolves itself without loss.

Implying this, throughout Guston's paintings the figure of the bystander recurs, unmasked, or in the act of unmasking, often a little withdrawn from the group, sometimes, as St. Paul, converted in the very midst of the celebration. And yet his assertion of spiritual direc-

tion is never complete. If his face is uncovered, he contrives for it the pseudo-mask of self-conscious gesture, the ancient comfort of the child whose fingers grasp the genitals, the half-concealed reassurance of the adult who covers the face, the nose, the mouth with his hands as though to re-establish a threatened self-sufficiency by feeding on his own flesh. It is the gesture of insecurity and frightened rejection that erects a veritable barricade against the world and attempts to find in his own body the security of personal love. In Guston's paintings the bystander still picks his nose, but the long struggle of unmasking has begun. He still quails, before his own prophetic act, yet the day may come when the mask may be dropped, because its fearful or playful necessity has been dispelled. The self, more unfathomable than any disguise, will be nakedly acceptable. The question, "If this be not I, Who then may it be?" will be answered.