

Casting faces

Ryszard Sawicki

I took the face out, carefully, trying not to damage the reflection, a little fragile and warm still. The plaster mask cooled slowly in my hands, as I looked at its interior. I could see the imprint of the eye brows and nose, forehead and lips. I could see myself from within.

I was overwhelmed by a strange feeling. Probably not because I had made the first ever plaster cast of my own face and could see something I had never looked upon before (no mirror could offer such a perspective), but also because I had read Paz's poems about the process of permeation. His words speak of touch, and the aftermath of touch, the kind I was experiencing having removed the mask in the cool, empty room which served as my workspace that night.

"Abre tu ser" rang in my ears. Open your being and awake. Learn to exist, shape your own face, own bone structure. Posses features which will then reflect another. Which will see me.

It's as if a man was discovering, submerged in water, the shape of his own body. Water, flowing around him, pressing with greater force than air, making him tangible to himself. Sometimes more so than human hands could.

Paul Valery also wrote about this. "He thought that a ship should somehow be shaped by its learning the seas and as near as formed by the waves. But familiarity in point of fact depends on our substituting our thinking of the sea with thinking only of its influence on a given body - far enough to achieve different actions, actions which resist the process, and that we are now only dealing with a balance of forces, both borrowed from nature, where they dice with one another uselessly". That's how he wrote about Tridon, the ship builder.

And once more, the letters of Octavio Paz return. "Abre la mano, senora. Abre tu ser, despierta, aprande a ser tambien, labra tu cara, trabaja tus fasciones, ten un rostro para mirar mi rostro y que te mire".

The need for reflection, a tangible reflection. There is in man such a need. Or at least it happens. "There are moments when objects need human hands", as a Polish author once said. There are also moments when a man becomes an object to his own self, his own mask. Own cast.

The mask cooled, the warmth of skin evaporating. It was becoming itself. I was in it, touching it with my fingers, caressing the drying plaster. But there was less and less of me in the mask. More and more alien matter. More and more of the cold, late evening around me, in the big, poorly heated house.

The poems of Paz swelter. Saturated with Spanish sun. They are alive, trembling - touched. Like objects come alive, formed and animated. Sculptures... such as Galatea.

“Mis ojos te descubren, desnuda... tus nalgas en plena noche”. These poems must be read in the original (anyway, like all poems, perhaps - in their mother tongue... or at least experienced, sound wise, in their “native” form).

If I mistrust the eyes, then I must use hands to test. “Dormir, dormir in tu o mejor despertar”. Sleep, sleep in you or better yet: wake.

A cold evening, my mask in my hands. It was a difficult moment. Hard to familiarise yourself with one's own face - from within.

I can see, therefore I believe, I touch therefore I know. I must touch to be certain, to convert suspicion, which I difficult. How am I to know what I look like from within?

I then lit a candle, turned off the electric light. To feel the warm flame, perhaps? I was dreaming. Touching the flame, then the plaster mask again. I didn't want to put it down so as it would not deform while drying. It was a little frail, as I had used too few layers of plaster bandage.

“Dormir ... o mejor despertar”. Is it really better to wake? Or not - to fall asleep? Is it not better to put down the mask, at the end of a hard day? Maybe it will dry on its own as intended, will not bend out of shape? And me - can I bid the evening farewell? Ready myself for the coming day. Filled with work, which allows me to toy with masks, with drawings. Filled with work on texts, which I translate into English, to support myself and be able to paint, draw without the need to chase sales of canvases, which are so hard to shift anyway.

“Abierta: lengua que lame... por el arcaduz de sangre”. Open: the tongue which licks through blood lines. “Abra la mano senora”.

In which tongue would this sound such, touch so? I doubt if in anything other than Spanish.

“Abro los labios... yo lengua”. I open my lips... I am tongue. I am all in the body. In my own flesh. Tangible.

But no, the mask lies before me. Mocking me. The flame from the candle is warm. The mask - cold. Cold though so recently removed from my face. Already cold. Though damp still, soft and pliable. Or rather - still so cold, because still damp.

“Mi cuerpo en tu cuerpo”. My body in yours. Through you I exist. “Por el arcaduz de hueso”. I need not be more than I already am. I wish to be less. No desire to touch your mask. “Por el arcaduz de hueso”. Too far: through the vessels of bones - I reach too far.

It's enough to see, not always necessary to touch. What drives the search for texture? Though the eyes witness faithfully enough. Though the day is bright.

But that night I saw little beyond that which was plucked from darkness by the flame. I couldn't see the recently framed drawings, fragments of face. Hat. Smile. The room was only me and the mask. The walls moving away. Walls of darkness.

The drawings on the walls were only visible as white shapes. Faded. Blurred outlines of human forms, meaningless shadows.

Close your eyes, keep them shut beneath the eyelids. As the lips are shut. Close yourself. I will shut you up in my eyes, in my lips. Sleep. Absent. With all of you, sleep inside of me.

Let me sleep inside myself.

But I couldn't sleep. Couldn't tear myself away from the mask. Let it go. As if it were the only evidence of my having a face. As if couldn't reach up to the real thing. As if the gesture was not enough. As if touch was not meant to be enough. After all, I couldn't argue with language about whether it was still inside me. Or check if one hand could reach the other. I held the mask in my hand. As Tridon had held the rudder of his ship. Though not like Paz had held his "sun stone". Dear Octavio, you do not know what it is like with masks, I said to him. How it is with drawings, you don't know either. As you don't know the touch of cold in an unheated house.

Are the forces we discover within ourselves of nature? Or ours, alien to it? Can the forces of nature not be united with those of men? Can we not free ourselves of such?

The force which I discovered in my own mask I did not want to call my own. Its cooling flesh I did not want to call mine. Its hardening frailty, the turning of flesh to stone... I felt it as many a being had felt in Ovid's stories. With the exception of the nymph Ciane, perhaps, as she had turned to water.

"Mas rapida que la fiebre": you wake within me, I within you. Once more: lips returning to the centre of lips. This works faster than fever. More sudden the waves of chill and heat than waves in a storm. Cold fronts followed by warm.

They touch delicately, drip to the sides, collecting slowly in the bodies cavities. Thick, thickening. Thickening moments. Moments of thickening.

It's the drops of fingers hitting the shoulders lightly, falling on the breasts, against the thighs and feet. Huge clocks dripping slowly, painted by time. On a Spanish shore. A Mexican shore. On my Californian shore, which is now so distant.

"Oyme como quien oye llover ni atenta ni distrada". Do not pay attention. Not as carefully as the drops of rain touch. Though without distraction, listen without care. Listen to yourself at night, for who else will hear you? As you dry out? If you were to crumble, falling to the ground. If you cracked.

"Abierta". The pot cracks, the wine spills. Hot. "Langua que lame... por el arcaduz de sangre". The tongue which licks through the blood lines. "Mi cuerpo en tu cuerpo". Through you - I was. How am I meant to be - only through me? Even without these hands, from the sketches, which cannot be seen? I touch, but am not. I am not

in the mask. Not as mad as befits. To believe, I cradle myself in my own hands. Holding my own reversed image.

The knowing, which comes only with replacement of our understanding of the seas with their influence on a given body (our body) so far that we now face forces which are opposed - is a fragmentary knowing. Like all singular types of encounter. Until we meet in the void, in suspended time, we will know little about one another. Balanced forces must exist between hand and hand, but one cannot depend on those of strangers'.

I touch therefore I am? Hardly.

translated by Marek Kazmierski