The Mask: An Essay

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There is a purely psychological and negative notion of mask: something behind which the face of man hides. The mask is what appears to others; behind it, concealed and protected, the authentic being remains conscious of his own difference. We wear a mask in order to appear different from what we are. The mask is the appearance; the face, experienced from within, is the reality. Judgment thus inscribes itself within the perspective of self-consciousness. It is true that we choose a mask because we know it represents a character, but that is where our relationship with this new appearance ends – in this knowing, this consciousness of how the character will appear to those who will see it. Our own consciousness will only be in touch with the mask’s dark and shapeless interior, drawing from it a guarantee of detachment and freedom. If a situation requires it – that is, if our interest in that situation requires it – we will show ourselves to be happy: but it will be only a mask. Actually, authentically, we will be sad. Viceversa: let there be a funeral, and we will wear the mask of sadness as a mourning cloak, despite the fact that we may have every reason to be cheerful. Thus an heir’s tears, under the mask, are laughter: “heredis fletus sub persona risus est”. But see then how, in upholding such a notion, we can only determine what we are as the opposite of what a mask is.

If we then apply the corresponding reasoning to other people, we will be moved, as the saying goes, to discover the face under the mask: namely, to interpret their behaviour. But the only datum is the mask before us: in order to reconstruct someone’s authentic self we can but start from his choice of this particular mask (and not another). Tartuffe wears the mask of devotion, but he is not devout. What is he, then? To call him a hypocrite is simply to repeat the formula. It is equivalent to saying, also in a literal sense, that he is someone who “wears a mask”. Our only option then is to call him “not devout”. Far from being able to define the mask from the fact that it hides the person, we are on the contrary reduced to defining the person as what is made to be by the mask, thanks to the latter having been chosen and shown.

Even starting from a naïve distinction between being and appearing, simple psychological dialectics lead us to regard the notion of mask as bearing on the being of consciousness in a constitutive manner. This is the context that in our culture surrounds the metaphor of “putting on a mask”. But the same expression has had a meaning of its own, has designated a human behaviour. The psychological figure – despite the fact that, as we shall see, it retains the structure of this expression – is but a fossilized extreme, laid by actual gestures which may have been gestures of worship, a technique of government or education, spectacle or celebration. In these gestures, we find an object we call “the mask”; across them all we find a fundamental attitude, namely man’s participation in beings other