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Masks and Neomorphisms in a Psychotic Girl

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The pictures we reproduce here were done by a girl suffering from an exceptional persecutory psychosis who was kept under observation from the age of 11 to 15 years. She had an unusual gift for drawing and was particularly fond of depicting masks, which she drew almost every time she was given the material. Masks figure prominently in the works we present here.

For us masks are associated with the Greek theatre and the cult of Dionysus. Dionysus himself appeared in a mask donned to conceal his living features, and the communicants at his rites wore masks when they performed their dances. Being both god and man, his power and his role were symbolized by the mask: he was the god who watches, and he was always represented full face in order to symbolize his presence. Yet at the same time he was the spirit of a savage being whose advent brought madness. He was also the god who suffered and died, the god of genius, of creation, of excess. He was god and man at the same time and was born twice; slain by Perseus, he was born again. Torn to pieces and devoured “in the flower of his childhood”, he was himself a god who tore and devoured his newborn life. All these details, of which Walter Otto has made a careful study, prompt us to consider this dionysiac mask as a fascinating archetype in terms of which we might understand the concept and the drama of alienation. In a famous work on masks Bureau also shares the view that the Greek mask is the instrument for expressing the basic emotion in harmony with the choir; it scales up the emotion and transmits it rather like the wide screen in the cinema.

But, this author continues, the mask was already in existence among the Egyptians and was used to mask the dead; it signified the return of the human spirit to the body and gave concrete expression to a fulfilment. In the pre-Columbian civilizations, the mask manifested the instincts. In Christian societies, which wished to manifest the true divine nature of man, the mask was the instrument of demons and served to isolate man and make him a prisoner; in some way it cast a spell over him. There is no break in the continuity of the line running from grotesque masks and the gargoyles of our cathedrals to the demoniacal faces we find in Goya’s paintings of the dark period.

Modern ethnologists (Griaule and his pupils) have made careful studies of masks in black Africa and their magic role. The mask enables one to discard the self, to hide, and to inspire fear. It captures magic energy (like the mana of the Melanesians). It enables one to identify oneself with a myth, a hero, a legendary figure, even a totem animal, and to share in its power. In conjunction with the demon of dance it enables one to enter into a state of possession.

* * *

The following is the medical history of our young patient:

Christine H. was admitted to our clinic at the age of 11 years as a result of a serious mental disorder which had started in early childhood and had kept her for the last two and a half years from school (where she had in any case learnt nothing) and from the society of other children, who called her a lunatic. And, indeed, this girl was in an almost continuous state of excitement consisting for the most part of demands, outbursts of anger, and vehement complaints interspersed with senseless laughter. Her speech was often incoherent and scattered with neologisms, of which we shall see examples below, her bizarre actions and thoughts, her absences and the fixed gaze that went with them, and her often incomprehensible monologues made her a true lunatic. The same complaint was voiced over and over again in her talk: “they’re torturing me, they’re tearing pieces out of my flesh, I’m nothing but a skeleton, everyone is against me, no one loves me”; she complained of being friendless, people preferred her sisters or her friends etc.; she was endlessly quarrelling, detected personal references in the least gestures of those around her, shouted out “I am jealous!” and wept and made a great fuss. She also declared: “I never have any luck, I’m afraid of eyes, I’m afraid of the hair parting, I’m afraid of lips, I’m afraid of dying.”

At school, as on her admission to our clinic, she played the fool, pretending to make telephone calls, shrieking with laughter or yelling complaints about all and sundry.
As to the background of the child (the second of three) it is pertinent to note that a paternal grandmother was an institutionalized psychopath, that her mother suffered from colibacillosis during pregnancy and was treated with sulphonamides, and that she herself had a bad fall from her bed when she was eleven months old and suffered from a frontal haematoma necessitating hospitalization for a fortnight. The child had already begun to talk but ceased abruptly, starting again only when she was two years old: the electroencephalogram was slightly altered.

Her parents were “highly strung”, appeared to be under great strain, and told us that, since being expelled from school, the child had virtually never left the house.

Psychological examination revealed that in regard to intelligence the child was a borderline case (73 as measured by the WISC, a result made lower still by the failure to acquire any school learning); there were numerous perceptual errors associated with a very coarse type of perception; a serious difficulty in establishing contact with reality; uncontrolled, nebulous, confused and highly subjective thinking; disordered interpenetration of the perceived and the imaginary; and a delusional type of thought in a phantasmagoric strain (examination by Miss De Cook).

As to character and personality the patient exhibited a highly extraverted non-active hyperemotivity notable for a particularly labile temper, great impulsiveness, exceptional tantrums, and the continuous intrusion of subjective elements. Aggressive and combative despite her pusillanimity, she was constantly in quest of affection and in the end became capable of forming deep attachments; it was through this emotional attachment that the treatment was instituted which brought about an extraordinary improvement. She felt an intense need to express herself, and drawing afforded her a channel peculiarly suited to her disposition; her jitteriness disappeared, and in a state of astonishing elation she proceeded, with an unusually sure hand, to produce works of all sizes without hesitation, without going over anything twice, and without the least sign of fatigue.

We have presented elsewhere\(^1\) a study of her drawings and have singled out in particular the following features: Christine does not accept her sex, invariably she portrays herself as a boy in the world of human beings she draws. This world is made up mainly of dismembered persons: the chin of the teacher or secretary, the nurse’s bun of hair, the hair parting of the housemother, the ears of a young neighbour, the viper-like mouth of an enemy, the legs of a ghost, the calves of the laundress, a bodiless head, etc. If ever she draws a complete human being, the figure is apt to be distorted, more often than not with an aggressive intention: an enormous horn grows out of the forehead, the nose waggles grotesquely, the ears become enormous or floppy, cheeks are tattooed, the brow is furrowed with wrinkles, the mouth is stretched out inordinately like a snake, the eye turns into a fish, the neck disappears or becomes much extended, etc. Sometimes in one and the same picture she condenses individual parts which belong to different persons or are united with objects, for example: a leg with a five-branched heel is attached to a formalized drawing representing what she calls a “still” and to the easel of the blackboard. She also likes to depict people in motion somewhat in the manner of Sévérini or of Duchamp: here there is a dog growing bigger, a teacher dancing, hands clapping, a face tormented by a tic.

She does not hesitate to find a plastic equivalent for noises: throat noises, or the sound of her jaw or her muscles when she swallows. Similarly she spatialises temporal entities; there are, for example, the days of the week depicted in strictly the same way and following the same code after a lapse of several years. To this we are given the key by a coloured drawing in which Monday, Tuesday and Saturday are represented by an orange oval. She explained that there was a resemblance between them because they are next to Sunday, and Sunday is the day when they went out for a walk and put on their best clothes. And in fact Sunday is a rectangle trimmed with a decoration symbolizing the lace of the knickers she put on that day; in the same way Wednesday and Friday resemble each other because they are next to Thursday, the day for picnics. Finally, still under the

head of these neomorphisms, there is a series of curious

diagrams entitled in order: Rondoudou, because it was
like a sweet called Rondoudou; popcorn, because it
was like the rustle of a dress moved by the wind;
ilire, because it was like the town of Hyères; Gavther,
because it was like a woman servant of this name,
etc. These neomorphisms she referred to by the term
pensoirs, a portmanteau word combining penser (to
think) and passoire (a strainer). These were words
which passed through her brain as if through a
strainer; to explain what that was, or simply of her
own volition, she drew a strainer, and then every-
thing resembling a strainer: a telephone, and a toy
tumbler figure, etc. Pensoirs were painful thoughts to
which she gave neologistic names such as those
mentioned above and out of which she produced a
complex and invariable code such as occurs in certain
incorruptible delusions of insane adults. This led us at
the very outset to make a poor prognosis although
a certain caution is called for when interpreting this
sign in a child.

In a word we were confronted by a psychotic state
of the schizophrenic type involving paranoid ele-
ments (although very rare at this age) predominating
in a context of intense excitement and anxiety, and a
relative infantilism in pronounced contrast to the
excellent physical development (she had the body of
an adult woman). Occasionally an oniric pattern was
witnessed from which genuine hallucinations emerg-
ed as elements of a simple delirium.

There follows a summarized interpretation of this
case. The hereditary and prenatal background was
unfavourable and aggravated by the head injury in
early infancy. Abrupt weaning from the bottle may
have provoked an oral fixation in this little girl who
was extremely greedy for dainties and virtually
obsessed by sweets. Backwardness in speech ham-
pered communication and retarded the development
of social intercourse, and, at the same time, fostered
fixation to a certain infantilistic life in a magic world
from which she was to emerge only slowly and never
completely. Her excited state and her intolerable
behaviour made her live the life of an outcast, about
which she subsequently had feelings of guilt partic-
ularly after the birth of a younger brother. Pre-
puberty temporarily reactivated her refusal of her
sex. In sum, at this point of her development, her
behaviour would appear in general to imply the
refusal of a loveless, dangerous and hostile universe,
and regression to an early utopian infancy. She had
her being in her derealizing phantasms, there was no
end to lived time; it was then she created a new
universe which she described in her autistic lan-
guage interspersed with paralogisms and neologisms,
and afterwards there appeared her oniric episodes
with hallucinations and delusions. In the Clinic
her withdrawal from her accustomed environment
allowed a partial deconditioning to be achieved, and
this we took to be the first favourable sign. The
effect of drug treatment, physical development, life
in a strictly controlled medical environment in which
all problems were solved as soon as they cropped up,
his deep attachment to certain personnel, the sur-
roundings, the atmosphere of sympathy and shared
experience we have described elsewhere and which
appears to us to have a very broad effect on the
development of the character and of the psychotic
core, the cultivation of singing, dancing and especi-
ally drawing—all these enabled her to attach greater
value to herself, to express herself, and to rid herself
of most of her problems. The days now seemed to
pass quickly whereas before, she said, they seemed
to be long, long, long... She was no longer ashamed
of her body and of her breasts in particular: “That's
how I shall be able to give babies milk later”. The
Château became a “haven of security” after being the
“theatre of terror” to borrow Binswanger's terms.

She no longer believed in “pensoirs”, she said;
actually she still drew them but she called them
“carnival masks”, which was at one and the same
time a denial and an exploitation of her cathartic
style of drawing.

In a word the progressive acceptance of a loving,
understanding and protective universe enabled this
favourable development to take place. She left our
Clinic 7 months ago and is living a more or less
normal life in Paris, travelling alone by bus to school,
and behaving normally in her family and with her
neighbours.

Here we present twelve of her drawings done freely on
large sheets of canson drawing paper with oil crayons.
Plate 1: Dismemberment – Condensation

This plate conveys very well the “dismembered universe” of this preschizophrenic. In one and the same plate she has combined an “invented candle” (the word “invent” frequently occurs and expresses a certain awareness of the creative process, its independence of reality, and the satisfaction afforded by the performance of an act yielding a concrete result). “It makes me laugh”, she added in order to dedramatize a frightening memory and to dominate it. Next to it are legs, the calves of a member of the clinic staff. This woman’s tendency to obesity suggested to her this moniliform shape and the rolls of fat. The lower extremity, however, is not in the least suggestive of a foot and actually condenses a hand, a bird’s claw, and Snow-White’s heel.

The puny silhouette on the right is Odile B.—a little friend who had just been admitted in an extremely emaciated condition as a result of mental anorexia. The head is already a mask and we shall find it again in a variety of versions in other drawings. Finally at the bottom left there is a striped rectangle with rounded sides and ends. This is the “stiff”: She knows that a “stiff” is a dead man but also, as far as can be judged by her associations, a shroud and a bier. Here again we have the expression of a fear of death and its dramatization through humour.

Plate 2: Magic

Here we enter the domain of the pénitents and take part in a real magic ceremony. The special and very obvious care taken with symmetry is a characteristic of the graphic ritual and is found almost invariably in all her drawings. The picture creates the impression of an altar at which some black mass is about to be celebrated. The two candles, which are both bent at the same angle, are inclined over a kind of prayer rug which is a stylized and angulated eye. In the middle are two horse-shoe figures: this is the pénitent “legs on the train”, bodiless legs resting on diminutive feet, a phantasm derived one evening from seeing on TV the frightening spectacle of a man’s legs dangling as he moved along the roof of a coach. From that time onwards this image, like all the other pénitents, pinned down and expressed an extreme anxiety.

For anyone familiar with Christine’s drawings, the arrangement of the elements suggests the top of a face, the candles marking the upper edge, the arcs of the circle representing eyes, and the trapezium being the naso-buccal cavity.

Plate 3: The Man House

Here we have a good example of the autistic meanings which the child discovered both in the outside world and in her own productions:

What we have here appears to be simply the figure of a man drawn in a childish manner. Christine, however, described it coldly as a house, and, in the course of the conversation, she showed us that she was perfectly capable of drawing a house by drawing six of them placed here and there on the sheet. Be that as it may, she pointed out the details starting with the hat: The hat is the roof, the feather is the TV aerial, the eyes are the windows, the eyebrows are the gutters, the mouth is the front door, the buttons are the staircase, the ears are the back doors, the nose is the chimney on the roof.

Plate 4: Animism

And here is an introduction to the Masks presented in a humorous way.

Like all objects to her way of thinking, the map of France has a life, a spirit, a face: this is an illustration of the infantile animism, well described by Piaget, which persists a long time in games in the implicit beliefs of children approaching the age of 4 or 5 years. The two pipes sticking out of the large mouth are plainly intended as a joke. But, let us make no mistake about it, the Christian mask is there all right with its eyes of concentric circles like onion rings (eyes for weeping, and Christine wept copiously and loudly at every opportunity), eyes surrounded by a black armoured sheath—warlike eyes—and, below, the big ferocious mouth with lips (shaped like a viper), the top lip marked with crosses, and the lower lip supplied with a fringe of circles, which is of course a standard form of decoration.

The background of the map is completely filled with a very rich green which harmonizes with the grey of the drawing paper she chose.

Plate 5: Terror

Here we have a mask which depicts evil with all the intensity of which the artist was capable. One feels that a great deal of anguish went into its composition, so much indeed, that the very symmetry has been perturbed; the axis has been tilted, and since the bottom of the figure is displaced to the right, the mask tends to topple over to the left. Six images of the shark type leap out of this mask with jaws wide open, and the spines covering them actually form a fringe round the whole figure.

Two eyes are not sufficient, and so they are duplicated, two of them being surrounded by a black circle, and the two others by a sawtooth pattern. The centre of the eyes is no longer made up of the usual concentric circles but contains instead a spiral,
the symbol of eternity—the eternity of hell. There is even a fifth eye below the mouth. The sea monsters are violently coloured in red; the ground colour of the mask is a deep violet.

The periphery of the picture is decorated with endless volutes which issue from the mouths of the sharks and represent tongues ending in a fork like those of vipers.

Plate 6: The Enemy

Here is a mask belonging to the vengeful series. It is named: Monique D. "I don't like her—she often annoys me".

Actually Monique was a 13-year-old girl like herself, quite devoid of ill-nature, but prone to spectacular outbursts of epileptoid rage which were rather frightening for a hypersensitive friend. She liked joking and teased in a harmless enough way, but Christine was terribly susceptible, and in any case her likes and dislikes transcended logic and formed an immediate datum usually linked to a memory, a resemblance, or an intuition of a magical kind. This mask was an aggressive reprisal, a piece of sympathetic magic.

First of all, although it represents a female face, it is bearded and moustached, which is a familiar enough way of ridiculing a portrait, bust, or other representation towards which one wishes to show hostility. But, for Christine, the snake was the symbol of evil above all others. Here everything is serpentine; the two locks of hair, the lips, and the sinuous form running along the outline of the top of the face. The hair is made of saw teeth, an instrument of aggression. The eyes harden into a square enclosing other concentric squares which particularly accentuate the round pupils. This is not the gaze of a human being, it is the stare of a monster, and indeed the monster appears whole and complete at the base of the nose, recalling, on the one hand, the presence of "legs on the train" and, on the other hand, the cyclops with a triangular head in which only a single menacing eye appears. The nose itself repeats the concentric pattern but this time in a circular manner.

Plate 7: Security

This is the fetish mask, the mask affording safety. Admittedly the centre is occupied by a monstrous and terrifying face with huge eyes staring out of the head (paranoiac eyes), sawtooth hair (with a double row of teeth), ears in the form of horns, a beard which is itself a third horn, and arms outstretched like a scarecrow, etc.

But below, on either side, there are these strange figures christened 'dinosaurs': these are borrowed from the terminology of a young friend, Claude V., two years her junior, who liked to identify himself with this prehistoric animal, and also with the elephant, the rhinoceros, and the hippopotamus, in a word with all the pachyderms, "because they have a thick skin and cannot be killed". Thus they are protective figures, transposed here as pledges of security—and the two characters above them suggest some magician or Nostradamus standing there to deal with the monster.

Plate 8: The Girl Friend

Next to the masks of vengeance we have the mask of friendship. This is Marie-Françoise P., a girl friend, whom she wished to flatter and beautify. At another time she said it was the face of Anne, a teacher in the Clinic.

This is, it is true, one of the most successful of her productions and the best balanced. The basic shape is a round form, slightly flattened in the vertical axis; and the same desire for roundness is to be seen in the eyes, the ears, and the two locks of hair sprouting above and below them. The mouth does not extend beyond the outline of the face as in the aggressive faces. The hollow of the cheeks is occupied by multi-coloured squares which bring a note of gaiety into the slightly chill azure forming the ground colour of the mask.

Plate 9: The Mask Bell

This topical picture, the Easter bell, betokens a return to animism. The holiday is approaching, and thoughts are turning to having fun and above all to sweets. The bell itself is a sweet such as can be seen in the windows of all the sweet shops. It opens and the clapper drops down like a greedy tongue. The mask is present in its customary but never stereotyped pattern: while never changing her style she was able to ring an infinite number of changes on the same theme. In hundreds of drawings there is not a single repetition.

Like most of the others, the last three masks have something of this dynastic appearance where special significance attaches to the eyes: it is not the "god who looks" but rather a projection of the fear of being looked at, and looked at with malevolence, by eyes from which a kind of fearful magic emanates. The double circle denoting them is sometimes itself surrounded by an irregular oval form (Nos. 9 and 11)—perhaps to capture this look, or to enclose it within a protective barrier (equivalent to the magic circle)—a notion she expressed by saying "I am afraid of eyes, I am afraid of lips ... ."

The lips also return in various forms as we shall see.

Plate 10: Defence by Flattening

One of Christine's methods of defence was, as it were, to roll out the threatening mask, flattening it along the horizontal axis in the case of the upper figure, and along the vertical axis in that of the lower middle figure. The first one is deprived of its
horns, and therefore rendered harmless, topped with blond tresses yet dangerous all the same because of the pendent lips. The second central figure, which has a blue crest and is extended downward by long spines, has three eyes, two of them rendered harmless by an enclosing sheath, and a third protruding from the middle of the nose. The lips are kept within the face.

The harmonious pink and very luminous green express the colourist’s buoyant feelings.

The two motifs at the side, of the “legs on the train” type, balance the composition and fill up a dreaded vacuum.

Plate 11: The Captured Look

In this composition of three masks the top face seems to dominate the two others.

The eyes appear to be contained by the irregular oval but the double nostrils, which are so prominently displayed, could be the equivalent of eyes. The little horns almost disappear next to the enormous pointed ears, which normally betoken the fear of hearing bad things.

The two lower figures depict masks with feet looking like vases but represented as inanimate objects and therefore rendered harmless.

Plate 12: Pencil Sketch

Less attractive in aesthetic terms, this last mask, drawn in pencil, suggests a peevish humour. The outsize ears, each nestling a snake, are evocative of an unpleasant conversation that has been overheard. There is good reason, then, to think that we are no longer in the presence of the aggressor but of the victim of aggression.

For once the lips do not extend beyond the mouth; they even look as if they might be ready to sketch a smile. At this time Christine was much improved and ready to leave the Clinic.