

“Is it Possible To Be Many Things at Once?” On Stanisław Lem’s The Mask

Agata Rosochacka

In the works of Stanisław Lem *The Mask* is exceptional in several respects. In particular, it is the narrative situation of the story that is special: no other work by Lem has a woman narrator, and in addition, this woman is a machine.

Much has been written about the infrequent presence of women in “Lem’s universes”¹. Feminist researchers even claim that a woman does not appear at all in Lem’s works. Rather, one can only talk about her apparent presence, and that when she appears, “«she» turns out to be that

¹ On this topic, see [Gläsnerapp; Jekutsch; Parker].

which is not" [Parker 95]. Some researchers claim that female characters in Lem's fictitious realities do not function on the same principles as men. Even in those works in which female characters seem to perform the most important function, they are not explicitly subjective. According to scholars of Lem's works, this is especially the case in *Solaris* and *The Mask*. Indeed, as Jo Alyson Parker points out, Harey – a character in *Solaris* – is at most a reflection of a woman in a man's imagination and memory, and the main character in *The Mask* is only allegedly a woman because: "*the artificial woman ends up subsumed under a rubric of artificial intelligence in general*" [97]².

Wojciech Michera, on the other hand, interprets Lem's non self-contained female characters in the context of Lacanian psychoanalysis. According to Michera, the horrifying form of *the Mask*³ does not arouse fear because it substitutes a male subjectivity: "What is frightening is in fact what makes such a reversal impossible. This «incompleteness» of femininity is a real «difference», [not] the opposite of masculinity, but something which «dispels the true opposition between masculinity and femininity»" [321].

2 The author comes to this conclusion because of the mistake resulting from the translation of the story into English. Cf. Jarzębski: "Eg. «robot» (and this is what the character of the story is called) is in English, like almost all non-personal entities, of the neuter gender, while in Lem's original it is: «machine», that is, the narrator never loses the obtained «femininity» completely". Footnote no. 5 of Jerzy Jarzębski to the quoted article by Parker.

3 For the sake of clarity of those considerations (like most of the scholars investigating Lem's story), I call the narrator "the Mask", even though she is never named this way in the story. The Mask in the title does not necessarily have to refer to the narrator, it may well be said that the "mask" is, for example, the accepted convention or reality of the setting. However, because the reader does not learn the narrator's name (or rather, they encounter many of her names without knowing the right one), when interpreting the work, I use the name "the Mask". It is therefore an interpretatively marked simplification for the functionality and communicative nature of the argument.

Referring to Lacan, Michera states that the Mask is “real otherness», the internal «difference» of an entity that can be subdued only – but only for a moment, for one step – using «theatrical representation» or «theatrical machinery», «the mechanism of a prosthetic body»“ [323]⁴.

As I have already mentioned, the narrator of *The Mask* is also uncharacteristic for Lem in another way other than her gender. The story of the Mask is told from the narrative perspective of a machine. Although it could be claimed that artificial beings are characters who often appear in Lem's works, especially the main characters of *The Cyberiad and Fables for Robots*, in the case of *The Mask*, the situation is different in many respects. First of all, robots or machines appearing in these cycles are third-person characters, and not first-person narrators⁵. In addition, these collections of works have the aesthetics of grotesque comedy in contrast to *The Mask*, the tone of which, as Jerzy Jarzębski writes, “is solemnly serious”[38]. Although *The Mask* is not as unequivocally comic as *Fables for Robots*, however, the clearly grotesque constructions of the hybrid body of the character, full of anachronisms of the represented world or various conventional and stylistic procedures, situate this work closer to *The Cyberiad* than one would initially expect from the “sol-

4 The psychoanalytic trail is one of the many interpretative trails of Michera. He devotes an extensive book length essay to the reading of *The Mask*, which is extremely rich in interpretive contexts. It seems, however, that when thinking about the gender of the narrator of *The Mask*, it is the context of Lacanian psychoanalysis that Michera singles out.

5 Apart from the Mask, the most serious case in Lem's work when we deal with a machine narrative is *Golem XIV*, where the narrative of the machine is woven into a set of texts that the researchers of Lem's work call apocryphal. The genre of *Golem XIV* is not obvious and the work oscillates between discursiveness and narrative, see [Plaza 70-98, 436-478].

emnly serious tone" mentioned by Jarzębski. What is ironic is the literalisation of the image of a female praying mantis (*femme fatale*), which is one of the main modernist metaphors.

According to Roger Caillois, the presence of a mantis in the myths of all cultures and times is due to the disturbing analogy between a woman and a praying mantis. "The mantis devours the male during copulation – a man imagines that a female will devour him, luring him into her arms. There – an act, here – imagination [...]" [145]. Although Caillois emphasises the impending parallelism, he also discerns the distance; the difference between a deadly female insect and a woman. Exceeding this distance – equating a woman and a mantis – gives a grotesque effect, and at the same time is an ironic fulfilment of the deepest male fears and fantasies.

Modernist imagination equates a mantis to a precise and merciless machine and the myth of Pandora is invoked – "a machine made by a god-blacksmith to ruin people [...]. In literature, too, there is a concept of a woman-machine as a fatal woman; an artificial, mechanical woman who has nothing to do with living beings and is always deadly" [145].

The modernist fear of a woman-machine can be derived from the need to protect the masculine, strong subject from the destructive power of liberated femininity and against the "unnatural" mechanisation of the world. This fear results from being aware of substitutability

by women on one side and / or machine on the other. A woman-machine becomes a double enemy from this perspective, and thus one that is monstrously asymmetrical – she is in double opposition and doubly sinister.

Some other aspects of *The Mask*'s narrative situation are also interesting. The setting has features of the past world (this is evidenced by such elements as: the king, ball⁶, dresses, castle, conventions, etc.), however, this is not a concrete or even possible past. As Lem writes, the narrative of *The Mask* is set “in unusual conditions for science fiction, namely completely fantastic. That is, it is unlikely that in a kingdom with a feudal system and cultural level similar to medieval times, it would be possible to create a machine that is absolutely similar to a human” [“Preface” 12]. It is therefore an example of alternative history.

In *The Mask* Lem uses the conventions of picaresque and gothic novels, as well as horror stories, which is expressed in the narrator's style. These conventions, to some extent, also provoke the majority of the plot devices⁷. Lem uses the motive of fatal love, terrible change, a mysterious atmosphere of narrative, an antinomic pair of characters (the Mask–Arrhodes), curse, pursuit, dark crime, kidnapping and the like. Characteristic of *The Mask* style, there is also a clear fascination with the scientific discoveries

⁶ The ball is perceived by the narrator as a masquerade – the people around her are presented as dancing mannequins and their faces as masks, see [*The Mask* 14].

⁷ Modernist and later fascination with writing and narration as a kind of automat/ automatism is also an interesting interpretive context.

of the epoch, which also influenced the creation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, the modern Prometheus*⁸.

The sheer number of interpretations of *The Mask* shows that the story is readily analysed and the appealing ambiguity of *The Mask* makes it possible to look at it from many perspectives⁹. Its polysemy leads to fragmentary interpretations of the work or, vice versa, it provokes extremely broad and heterogeneous claims¹⁰. Interpretations of *The Mask* are often mutually exclusive, but if they agree on something, then perhaps it is that one of the main features of this story is its ambiguity and inconclusiveness. Jarzębski states: "I cannot quite grasp the meaning of *The Mask*; it is probably the most mysterious piece by Lem" [38]. Lem writes that *The Mask* surprised even him ["Preface" 11].

Although this work by Lem has already been interpreted so many times, it seems worth attempting to analyse it in the prosthetic context¹¹ for several reasons. Indeed, the stylistics of *The Mask*, which blurs the boundaries

8 The character of Arrhodes in *the Mask* is interpreted by many researchers in the context of the myth of Prometheus. An analogy to the novel by Mary Shelley also appears, in which the nameless and heterogeneous monster persecutes its creator, Dr. Frankenstein, similarly to the Mask, who chases Arrhodes. On the other hand, the king can be considered to represent Prometheus, as it was the king who ordered the creation of the Mask.

9 For example: For Maciej Plaza *The Mask* "is a record of the process of cognition and self-discovery. [...] it is both a hypothesis about the ontology and epistemology of an artificial being, but also a metaphor for self-knowledge, which is freed" [438]. For Jo Alyson Parker, interpreted through the prism of gender, *The Mask* is a symbol of human duality: The robot's self-division [...] is emblematic of humanity's, and its gender programming is a synecdoche for the programmed nature of all human response" [96].

10 As in the case of Michera's book, quoted above.

11 For a prosthetic interpretative perspective, see my other articles ["Prototypowa propozycja"; "Proteza"; "Potworne ciała"].

between the living flesh and the dead, impassive matter encourages us to do so. The whole setting of the work, and not only the character of the Mask, is characterised by this lack of division. The memory of the narrator entering the ball serves as an example of the ubiquitous blurring of the boundaries between the living and the dead:

“I recollectec waking at the door of the palace hall, already in this present reality, I could even recall the faint creak with which those carved portals opened even a slight grinding, and the mask of the servant’s face, the servant who in his zeal to serve resembled a puppet filled with civilities – a living corpse of wax” [The Mask 16-17].

Similarly, the obscure margin between the living and the dead is also evident in the tryst of the Mask with Arrhode in the park, where the accompanying stone sculptures recall the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea: “The garden was overcast. The royal park with its singing fountains, hedges clipped down all to one same level, the geometry of the trees, shrubs and steps, marble statues, scrolls, cupids.” [25].

In addition, the hybrid corporality which often appears in Lem’s works is generally a pretext to consider the issue of omnipotence (in utopian or dystopian backgrounds¹²). In

12 See., among others, the following works by Stanisław Lem: *Do You Exist, Mr. Jones?, Layer Cake/Roly Poly, The Futurological Congress, Wyprawa profesora Tarantogi, The Star Diaries* (esp. *The Thirteenth Voyage, The Twentieth Voyage, The Twenty-first Voyage* and *The Twenty-third Voyage*), *The Inquest and Altruizine*.

the case of *The Mask*, however, the prosthetic body provokes completely different (and perhaps more interesting) investigations. The prosthetic context allows us to capture the complex identity structure of the narrator and re-read the ambiguous ending of *The Mask*. The interpretive category of the prosthetic body is therefore most useful for those issues that appear most problematic when reading Lem’s story.

Among the many doubts that appear during any attempt to analyse *The Mask*, I am primarily interested in the basic question, one that is often asked both by the narrator herself and by the interpreters of this work: who is the Mask? Her identity is problematic in every respect. Trying to define it, I still encounter difficulties with each of the constituent elements of identity: the body, memory, name, and cultural context¹³.

Bodies

In a short summary, it is worth looking at the stages of creation of the Mask’s identity.

The initial scene of *the Mask* describing the birth of the narrator is stylised in biblical language and clearly refers to the Book of Genesis. It is clear, however, that in Lem’s story we are dealing with secondary creation – the created being formed by machines is not an organic or “natural” creation. Mechanical birth is accompanied by feelings of pleasure and fear. The character initially has

¹³ All these elements can be described by the Latin term *habitus*, whose ambiguity correlates with “the mask” in the title.

no gender and speaks in a neuter register. This changes with the next stage of the story: "And then, with a sound not heard but sensed, a tenuous string snapped within me and I, a she now, felt the rush of gender so violent, that her head spun and I shut my eyes. And as I stood thus, with eyes closed, words came to me from every side, for along with gender she had received language." *[The Mask 6]*.

A step towards gender and language is also a step into the body. The metal figure of an unknown (even to herself) creature is clothed in the body of an almost inhumanly beautiful girl. We already have an unusual situation at the beginning, for the human body is secondary to the body of the machine, just as the prosthesis is attached to it and gives it gender and language.

During the ball, the narrator meets two men who determine her fate: the king in whom she senses her creator and ruler, and Arrhodes, a sage in whom she recognises her goal. Entering the body of a woman, the narrator realises that she was called to kill Arrhodes. Under the new form, the Mask easily seduces the man and begins a dangerous game with him. However, the identity of a beautiful seducer does not erase memories of her birth as a mechanical being.

The next stage in the creation of the Mask is the gesture of opening the woman's body and releasing a metal mantis from it. In an ambiguous scene that resembles child-

birth, the character cuts her abdomen with a knife, from which a mechanical insect emerges:

“In the mirror it looked as if I intended to knife myself, a scene dramatically perfect, sustained in style to the last detail by the enormous fourposter and canopy, the two rows of tall candles, the glint in my hand and my paleness, because my body was deathly frightened, the knees buckled under me, only the hand with the blade had the necessary steadiness. [...] What horror, terror, to look at oneself thus! I dared not touch the silvery surface, immaculate, virgin, the abdomen oblong like a small coffin and shining, reflecting the reduced images of the candle flames, I moved and then I saw its tucked-in limbs, fetal-fashion, thin as pincers, they went into my body and suddenly I understood that it was not it, a foreign thing, different and other, it was again myself. “ [The Mask 29].

Jo Alyson Parker interprets this scene “as a literalisation of the Lacanian «mirror stage»“ [100]. Płaza emphasises: “The pupating of the Mask is often interpreted as identity tearing into the conscious and unconscious” [447]. According to Jarzębski it is divided into “what is biological, animated, emotional - and what is absolute, mechanical, determined” [40]. Most interpreters, however, seem to agree that the gesture of cutting the body is a step towards freedom and towards an autonomous identity, as it is a gesture of rejecting false skin.

One can, however, have doubts about this. Lacan sees the confrontation with the image seen in the mirror as allowing for the emergence of fragmentary members of the body of the first unified “I” from chaos. In Lem’s story, however, the “mirror scene” is not a moment of unification, but separation. What is more, this separation does not give rise to a uniform sense of the narrator’s identity, but rather she passes the next stage, one that does not necessarily lead to unification. Questions about who she is, her doubts, and her ambivalent feelings do not diminish. The cutting of the body would therefore require another interpretation. First, however, let us consider the subsequent development of the story.

The metallic mantis, endowed with extraordinary strength and tracking abilities, begins to chase after Arrhodes. Aware of her destiny, she also tries to resist it and find out to what extent she is a programmed machine whose aim is to kill, and to what extent she is a free-resi-willed entity. The ambiguous ending of the story does not give a definite answer to this question. The narrator finds Arrhodes when he is dying and does not find out whether she would have found the strength to oppose the programme that is inscribed into her and save her former lover. In the final scene, in an atmosphere of relief and calm, the mechanical narrator holds the dying Arrhodes in her arms.

The narrator goes through several stages, and experiences subsequent changes and incorporations. Which of the

incarnations of the Mask is the “right” one? Scholars generally think that it is the metallic form of the mantis, and that the woman’s body is only an outer shell. However, if the body were merely an outer disguise, something that can be easily separated, and an object clearly separate from the Mask, it would not affect her perception or identity. However, the mechanical narrator can feel the body in which she enters, which she articulates while describing it from the inside:

“I was experiencing, in its totality, my nakedness, the breasts, belly, thighs, neck, shoulders, the unseen feet, concealed by costly clothing, I touched the topaz in gold that pulsed like a glowworm between my breasts, I could feel also the expression on my face [...]” [The Mask 7-8].

At the same time, the Mask can present her body as seen from the outside remarkably well, although in the scene cited here, she had not yet had the opportunity to look in the mirror.

The mask experiences the woman’s body in an ambiguous way: both situating herself inside it – as herself, and from the outside – as an object. This duality also applies to the bodily emotions that she sometimes accepts as her own and without referring to them as the subject of vivisection, and sometimes she sees them as imposed, foreign and instilled together with the programme, as is the case with the blush:

“I felt that I was blushing. The blush did not belong to me, it spread on my cheeks, claimed my face, pinkened my ear lobes, which I could feel perfectly, yet I was not embarrassed, nor excited, nor did I marvel at this unfamiliar man, only one of many after all, lost among the courtiers—I’ll say more: I had nothing whatever to do with that blush [...] the blush seemed part of the court etiquette, of that which was required, like the fan, the crinoline, the topazes and coiffures” [The Mask 12].

The relationship between the body of a woman and the metal body of a praying mantis is not as unambiguous as it might seem. It is difficult to use clear concepts of a whole and addition here. In order to describe a woman-machine, a language blurring border between the interior and exterior is needed. The narrator’s body is characterised by a certain lack when it is only the body of a mechanical insect. This lack is related, among others, to gender: as a metal being, and before entering a woman’s body, she has no gender, but after ridding herself of human corporeality, her gender remains, albeit without a physical manifestation. This is connected to love and the erotic longing for a beautiful woman’s body. Michera also mentions this lack and refers to the context of Lacanian psychoanalysis. When the identification does not have a sufficiently reliable foundation on which the subjective structure could rest, it starts “the alienating process of subject separation. This particular object [which becomes the identification reference] Lacan describes as *petit ‘a’*. The effects of this change are catastrophic, because ‘*a*’ introduces «lack», «absence»

or rather «the presence of lack», «a bit of non-being» – «death» into an identifying relationship. This is the point at which the subject sees his incompleteness and the flaw caused by *a*, which is what he/she lacks, and what he/she expects to fill the source gap with. This «stitching» can, however, be done only temporarily by masking the «crack» and putting a «prosthesis» in its place, because *a* (as a lack, towards which the entity builds its identity) is not something that can be understood; it is only possible to confront it – it only exists as a relationship” [Michera 329].

Thus, the lack filled by a prosthesis does not offer the whole, but rather creates excess; this is the case with the Mask when a woman’s body accompanies her. This body does not bind her identity, but introduces an additional sense of a heterogeneous structure. It introduces a discourse of doubt and undermining, while at the same time it is impossible to meet the need to separate the self from the additions.

Jacques Derrida’s “parergon” corresponds to this simultaneous occurrence of lack and excess, the inability to separate the inside from the outside, and the independent, from what is an auxiliary construction. In *Truth in Painting*, Derrida devotes a lot of space to discussing the concept of parergon taken from Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Parergon appears in the text of the king’s philosopher when he writes about a frame of a painting and the clothes of stone figures, but he also uses parergon to refer to examples that accompany theoretical writing and are helpful for thoughts that are not independent.

In Derrida's interpretation, parergons are not within what they accompany, but this accompaniment is not without an effect on their interior. Parergon touches, presses, searches, and puts pressure on the boundaries. Parergon is needed when a body (or a thought) needs help and is not able to affirm itself completely, but needs some support. For Derrida, parergon resonates with two other concepts: supplement and prosthesis. All three of those concepts are characterised by a vague establishment of the border between the internal and external. In Derrida's text, parergon is the ratio of "the concept to the non-concept", it is placed on the frame of the body as a "prosthesis" [Prawda 92]. Parergon appears against a disability "which demands to be supplemented by a prosthesis" [92] or in the form of a wheelchair thanks to which "one pushes forward something which cannot stand up, does not erect itself by itself in its process" [93].

Parergon, supplement and prosthesis are synonymous for Derrida, however, in the context of the body, it is the concept of prosthesis that is characterised by a particular adequacy. For the machine, the body of a woman is a prosthesis based on the parergon principle. It is not a prosthesis of a particular part of the body or a specific sense or experience, but a prosthesis that is a frame for the whole body, for the whole of her existence and identity. When describing the body of the Mask, the concepts of prosthesis and parergon will be used interchangeably (as well as the concept of supplement, which is most general of them) constantly thinking about their adoption/juxtaposition.

In the context of corporeality, then, the Mask is not just a prop which can be abandoned, easily exchanged for another, or cleanly separated. The body of a beautiful girl is a prosthetic mask whose belly hides a metallic mantis. It is also the role of the mistress, which the character plays for Arrhodes in the early stages of the story. The prosthesis is a convention (both social and literary), which the characters of the story are subject to. But the prosthetic mask is not just the character’s identity related to the role of a lover, a beautiful girl, a seducer, a participant of balls and trysts. The narrator cannot unambiguously state that her real, hidden self is identical with the figure of a mechanical praying mantis and that it consists of a programme that is written into her, a task to perform, a chase and a murder. The metallic insect emerging from of the woman’s body is also a mask. This is evidenced by the etymological meaning of the word used by Lem to describe the praying mantis – larva (Polish “larwa”) used to mean, among other things, a mask¹⁴.

The character has many identities, memories, desires, and reflexes associated with them. She perceives all of them as masks, however, and tries to distance herself from all of them, seeking herself under the shells of these characters. Both the figure of the girl and the praying mantis are imposed on her, and the narrator, while trying to oppose them, is still uncertain whether her behaviour is part of the programme that is inscribed in her. She is not the only one who this issue concerns. The ontological uncertainty associated with the mask concerns us all. Am I myself

¹⁴ “Larva, mask, monster, phantasm, Latin *larva*” [Brückner 290].

and do I have free will? Or do I maybe succumb to social, cultural, bodily, and linguistic conventions and coercion? Maybe someone/something imprinted my beliefs on me, designed my decisions or my fate a long time ago¹⁵?

It is this subjective identity insecurity associated with the ontological consequences of the mask's body that makes the monk she meets on her chase call her his sister, while covering his eyes¹⁶. She is equal to him in ignorance: "however much we may differ, your ignorance, which you have confessed to me and which I believe, makes us equals in the face of Providence" [*The Mask* 40]. The provincialism professed by the monk means faith in providence, that is, God's constant care and not leaving people to fend for themselves. However, faith in provenance can also be perceived ambivalently. It means the belief in participating in a plan, which will not be understood, and so it does not allow for full freedom of action.

Memories

It is difficult to talk about the body of the Mask in isolation from her memories. In the history of memory there are many body metaphors, including a metaphor of memory as a stomach, memorising by eating the scriptures, embodying the Bible, and also a physically painful memory that is burning in the body¹⁷.

15 As Parker writes: "Is our own free will as spurious as that of the machines that do our bidding? In effect, intelligent mechanisms bring to the fore our difficulty in defining the nature of the subject; indeed, they problematize the very notion of the subject as such." [94].

16 The origin of the word "mantis" also testifies to the "kinship" of the narrator with the monk - Latin *mantis religiosa*, literally: praying.

17 Cf. [Butzer 195; Assmann 113].

A special case of memory is the memory experienced through an extension of the body, a mediated and prosthetic memory. This type of memory, like a prosthesis, is actually located in the body; it consists of sensual memories produced by the experience of the mediated representation.

After entering the female corporeality, the Mask retains the memory of birth as a mechanical being, at the same time, however, she is flooded with memories associated with the character which she incarnates. So we can talk about the narrative memory of the narrator and her mediation is the woman's body:

“But as Angelita I had been raised in the sweltering heat of the South and, looking back in that direction, I saw white walls with their chalky backs to the sun, withered palms, wild dogs with scraggly fur by those palms, releasing frothy urine on the scaled roots, and baskets full of dates, dried up and with a sticky sweetness, and physicians in green robes, and steps, stone steps descending to the bay of the town, all the walls turned away from the heat, bunches of grapes strewn in piles, yellowing into raisins, resembling heaps of dung, and again my face in the water, not in the looking glass, and the water pouring from a silver jug—silver but dark with age. I even remembered how I used to carry that jug and how the water, moving heavily inside it, would pull at my hand” [The Mask 18].

What particularly important in this passage is that the memory retained by the narrator is connected with the body. She remembers not just childhood images, but also sensory experiences: scents or the weight of a pitcher. Childhood memories as the countess overlap with the memory of birth as a machine. Subsequent memory does not supersede the previous one and is not an unambiguously artificial material.

As Alison Landsberg writes, prosthetic memory, like an artificial organ, often marks trauma. The body of a woman and the sensual memory associated with it become such a trauma for the Mask, because of which she cannot unequivocally find a stable identity. Landsberg also calls this type of memories “prosthetic” to emphasise their usefulness and the fact that they can become helpful tools in articulating ethical relationships with others [20-21]. The Mask’s own identity exploration and her ethical dilemmas (related to her assignment to murder Arrhodes, inscribed in her programme) are possible only thanks to the experience of the body and the creation of prosthetic memory.

For Celia Lury, body prosthetics and memory prosthetics are also closely related. Both the perceptual prostheses (and therefore the memory prostheses), as well as the mechanical prostheses (and thus the body prostheses), create the possibility of “self-expansion” and extension. Writing about the criteria of creating an individual identity, Lury states:

„These [criteria] include embodiment, that is, individuals are constituted as such through the recognition of their possession of a unique body [...]. However, having a (recognisable) body has historically not been sufficient to define an individual. Continuity of consciousness and memory are also necessary for a person to claim separate status as individual.” [7].

The mask does not meet the requirements of a unique body or a continuous, uniform memory. In Lury’s terminology, there is no chance of individual identity, but she is rather an experimental identity, one that arises in a prosthetic body and memory. Memory associated with the female body of the Mask is also not homogeneous. The narrator has many different stories and each of them is equally possible and felt as her own:

“And who was I? [...] each [...] dragged after him his personal past like the long, raised dust that trails a desert wagon, turn for turn, whereas I had come from such a great distance, it was as if I had not one past, but a multitude of pasts, [...] was it possible to be many things at once? To derive from a plurality of abandoned pasts? My logic, extracted from the locoweed of memory, told me this was not possible, that I must have some single past, and if I was the daughter of Count Tlenix, the Duenna Zoroennay, the young Virginia, orphaned in the overseas kingdom of the Langodots by the Valandian clan, if I could not separate the fiction from the truth, then was I not dreaming after all? “[The Mask 9].

The inability to make a decision about her past is connected with the inability to confess her identity. When the narrator in the body of a beautiful woman seduces Arrhodes, she measures herself with her free will, examines whether she can tell him who she is and what she was created for. This honesty is not possible, and her language refuses to obey her. She can only tell Arrhodes things that do not go beyond the convention of romance. But there is also a second reason why the Mask cannot confess her identity:

“I did not tell him that night who I was, not wishing to lie to him and not knowing the truth myself. Truth cannot contradict itself, and I was a duenna, a countess and an orphan, all these genealogies revolved within me, each one could take on substance if I acknowledged it, I understood now that the truth would be determined by my choice and whim, that whichever I declared, the images unmentioned would be blown away, but I remained irresolute among these possibilities, for in them seemed to lurk some subterfuge of memory—could I have been just another unhinged amnesiac, who had escaped from the care of her duly worried relatives?” [13-14].

The narrator prefers to remain undecided towards this multiplicity of herself, despite the fact that the multiplicity makes her fight with her own memory. Choosing a specific story from the ones that she carries within herself would mean accepting the programme that was written

into her and fleeing the battlefield. The Mask prefers to struggle with herself than to agree on one narrative, one name and one memory, and therefore on an individual identity. On the one hand, the Mask wants to reach her true, single entity, on the other, however, she senses that deciding on any one identity would be disastrous for her.

The last scene does not allow us to ascertain whether the Mask would kill Arrhodes or not – and thus determine the most important (as it might seem) element of her identity. It does not allow for a determining of the possibility of making free decisions. This ending inclines most scholars to define *The Mask* as an undecidable work. However, describing the identity of the Mask with the help of the concepts of a prosthetic body and prosthetic memory, makes the ending less vague. Ignorance becomes a saviour, delights and allows for an empathic accompanying in Arrhodes’s agony (stylised as pietà). After his death, when it was impossible to unambiguously resolve the identity of the Mask and separate it from the “programme”, ignorance brings calm. At the end of the story, the Mask seems to understand that only a prosthetic identity is possible for her and only thanks to this identity can she protect herself against a single convention. The search for identities related to their multiplicity – the inability to separate the self from additions, prostheses – end when the narrator understands that the Mask is not a homogenous structure in which the foundational “I” is possible, as it is always subjected to a parergonal game, a chain of supplements, and prosthetic stitching.

Stories

The process of the Mask's search for her identity would not be possible without a certain gesture. Since the Mask cannot look deep into her own head and the inwardly directed analysis turns out to be in vain, the narrator, parallel to the gesture of vivisection, makes a gesture from herself the world – telling a story. The narrative work of the Mask is closely related to the narrator's prosthetic memory discussed earlier. Mediated memory can in fact lead to the adoption of narrative models, linguistic conventions, and even entire narrative sequences. Dmitry Buck claims that the Mask needs auxiliary constructions to express herself, she “makes past events «literature»” [119] in the “process of moving from events to stories told about them”[118]. According to Michera “exceeding this threshold initiates the process of «doubling» the subject; a process that – as it turns out – is endless and must lead to madness” [88]. The use of narrative or plot devices has an impact on the formulation of our memories. Sometimes, entire fragments of “foreign” stories are used and internalized as one's own. This associative activity of memory can be done in a conscious way, for example when the narrator clearly refers to cultural memory to convey personal experience, while comparing one's own situation to a situation remembered from a novel or film. However, this also happens when the narrator is not aware of the mediation of the elements of her story, and when talking about the past experienced by her, she uses a prosthetic experience.

Harald Welzer claims that the incorporation of inauthentic experiences into the story of one's own history is a natural procedure for the functioning of memory in an attempt to express it. Memory, as he writes, reaches "the existing elements of reality without difficulty, which from the point of view of the present seems to «fit» their own past" [57].

The use of "artificial" material when formulating one's own past into a story is particularly helpful in the context of traumatic experiences. I interpret the lack that accompanies the Mask as resulting from trauma. This lack is also a weakness, a disability of ignorance about herself: about how she was created and the scope of her freedom, which point to her identity. In the face of this ignorance, the Mask takes a specific course of action. Her story is not only a first-person narrative, it is also accompanied by a recipient we learn about only twice [see. *The Mask* 30 and 43].

As Płaza writes, the Mask's narrative should be "broadly understood as a process of self-discovery and gaining self-understanding – is directed to a higher meaning that cannot be revealed within this narrative" [450]. In the case of the Mask, we can talk about a certain auto-biographical gesture of the narrator: "The narrative of a woman-machine becomes not only her self-textualisation, «self-biography», but an autobiography told entirely for the use of viewers-listeners" [Michera 88]. By suggesting the existence in a specific setting of a listener

or listeners, the character speaks towards a specific recipient. Thus, the world of the story and the world of listeners is separated. This separation is characteristic of an autobiographical story. The gesture of confession is a parergonal movement, because it reaches towards the world, trying to point to its limits, and at the same time, by using narrative and language, it situates autobiography externally rather than internally.

The functioning of memory in the autobiographical narrative is of a prosthetic nature. A supplemental prosthesis appears when something that should be full is not. It fills the gap, but through its varied nature it gives more. Such is the case with memory. The memory of one's own history and the willingness to honestly express oneself are repeatedly thematised by the narrator of *The Confessions* by Rousseau (in the context of which Derrida writes about the supplement ["It's dangerous"]). Memory is, however, prone to mistakes and gaps [Rousseau 221]. This kind of literary activity tries not only to recall the story, but also to create a story about oneself. It tries to be a story about past identities, which in the case of *The Mask* becomes extremely clear and literal.

Both prosthesis and autobiography are invoked to fill a lack and to support what is mutilated. The prosthesis responds to the need for a body that is not full. An autobiographical story, on the other hand, is an attempt to complete the memory marked with gaps and an attempt to express the self and the fusion of the self that hopes to

achieve fullness thanks to one’s story. The autobiographical desire for expression results from mutilations that demand compensation: narrative, fictional, figurative and intertextual. The doomed attempt to speak about oneself results from the need to express the past self. Janet Verner Gunn compares this attempt (following Merleau-Ponty) to a phantom limb:

“The amputee continues to experience the «presence» of the limb which has been removed, neither as a result of self-delusion nor as a result of a conscious decision to ignore a painful experience. The phantom limb results instead from the self’s prior commitment «to a certain physical and inter-human world» and its continuing «to tend towards [that] world despite handicaps and amputations»... In light of this fundamental gesture of resistance to mutilation that autobiography displays – to the mutilation of temps perdu [lost time] every bit as much as to the mutilation of jambe perdu [lost leg] [...]” [168].

The Mask’s autobiographical act would therefore be a prosthetic act in this context – an act that replaces the amputated full identity (including the woman’s body), a credible memory about oneself, a cultural activity that is a prosthesis of an authentic identity: the identity of the narrator. David Wills literalised the metaphor of prosthetic autobiography in his book entitled *Prosthesis* published in 1995. It is a discursive statement about the textual and physical nature of prosthesis and

a cultural autobiography about Wills through the prism of his memory of books, poems, paintings, and films. It is also an attempt to reach a personal memory that is related to the figure of his father who stood on two legs: one that was his own and the other which was a prosthetic one: „the oft-repeated «I» should always be read as a prosthetic «I», one forced into a combination of natural and unnatural relations, with a father's leg, wooden or otherwise, or with text; no «I» that is not related to an event of prosthesis, to an event writing” [19].

According to Marek Zaleski the prosthetic supplementation of the story in an act of literarisation is “the stamp of the «deadness of the text», the deadness contrasted with a green tree of life. We live in the prison of language and the very fact that something is mediated by it determines that the author receives a mask instead of a face” [81].

The mask in Lem's title can also refer to the gesture of prosthetic autobiography, which we can interpret by referring to the figure of a prosopopeia. It is a rhetorical figure used to recall the statements of people who cannot take the floor themselves (objects, animals, absentees and the dead).

The Greek origin of the word also indicates its connection with the mask: *prosopon* means a face (or a mask) and *poiein* means action or dramatisation.

Paul de Man investigated a close relationship between prosopopoeia and autobiography in his article entitled *Autobiography as De-facement*. According to de Man the structure of the autobiography „implies differentiation as well as similarity, since both depend on a substitutive exchange that constitutes the subject” [921]. Associating mutilations with writing – either read or created – is characteristic of his work. In *Excursion* William Wordsworth writes about the life of Thomas Holm: „story of a deaf man who compensates for his infirmity by substituting the reading of books for the sounds of nature” [de Man 923]. De Man claims that „these figures of deprivation, maimed men, drowned corpes, blind beggars, children about o die [...] are figures of Wordsworth’s own poetic self” [924].

The autobiographical story of the narrator of Lem’s work is therefore the Mask herself, who tries to prosthetically complete the crippled entirety of identity. It is a prosopopoetic figure associated with the mask, facial deformity, and an autobiographical story of what is dead or non-living. The narrator of *The Mask* is therefore a literal example of a literary prosopopoeic autobiography in the sense of de Man.

Lem’s *The Mask*, which emerges from the above interpretation is a story of a pursuit of identity. The pursuit is carried out in two parallel gestures: separation (of the “proper” and prosthetic body, her “own” and prosthetic

memories, individual identity, and her complementary prostheses, external names, essence based on free will and free from influences); and construction through the story, giving herself a specific shape and identify herself in her autonarration. Both pursuits fail – the narrator does not gain a full, comprehensive form. However, the final scene of *the Mask* testifies to the discovery of a delightful, but also calming prosthetic identity and the consent of the narrator at the end of the story to place herself in its frame.

Translated by Aleksandra Sokalska-Bennett

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