

“OUT FROM BEHIND THE MASK”

Politics and the Literary Scholar

By Rebecca Mark

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I remember a moment. Caught. The poem was “Transcendental Etude” by Adrienne Rich. I held my breath. I read these words:

**But there come times—perhaps this is one of them—/
when we have to take ourselves more seriously or die;**

I was 21, a student at SUNY College at Purchase and very much in love. With a woman and coming out. Adrienne Rich’s words were my siren call. Here now at this moment in America, I think “Yes. **There come times—perhaps this is one of them—/ when we have to take ourselves more seriously or die.**” Listen. Even as we speak, the mind-numbing dislocation of real fake news threatens the delicate, indescribable neural link between language and meaning. Our ears are filled with the boots of fascism. The new order trumps our inalienable rights like a rampaging megatron severing our basic human trust that there is a direct connection between word and truth. I tell the baby “eye” and I point to my eye with my finger. I tell the baby, “This is your eye”. I do not tell my baby “Mouth” this is your mouth and point to my eye. Against the war cries, we must work hard to hear the poly-rhythmic beat of aesthetic beauty and human communing across difference. We must work hard to hear the words of our poets. We must work hard to repair our blasted linguistic neurons, to heal the thread between spoken word and desire. *Transcendental Etude* continues with the words:

No one who survives to speak

**a new language, has avoided this; the cutting away of an old force that held
her
rooted to an old ground
two women, eye to eye
measuring each other's spirit, each other's limitless desire,
A whole new poetry beginning here.**

We do not read to find out what we already know; we read to enter a profound linguistic mystery, a whole new poetry beginning here. Poetic language insists on being connected to the earth, the material world, the body; poetic language rebels against abstraction, poetic language is inherently political. It rebels against that which does not serve life.

Poetry allows us to try on the face and skin of others. Oscar Wilde writes that, “Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.” Many years ago I taught a course on masking traditions throughout the world. The students came to class masked. They had to be masked to the extent that no clothing or personal items would give them away. For the first fifteen minutes of the class, as we began our discussion, we stayed masked. The play of identity, the power of embodying multiple stories, of multiple personas, broke down seemingly intractable boundaries between us. Whitman writes:

OUT from behind this bending rough-cut mask,
(All Straighter, liker Masks rejected—this preferred,)
These lights and shades, this drama of the whole,
This common curtain of the face, contained in me for me, in you for
you, in each for each,

(Tragedies, sorrows, laughter, tears--0 heaven!

The passionate teeming plays this curtain hid!)

As a reader, as a teacher of literature, I reject all Straighter, liker Masks, and prefer what Whitman knew to be the bending rough-cut mask of the Six Nations of the Confederacy, what they called the “grandfather masks”. These bending rough-cut masks were the masks carved out of the wood by those who would become the communities’ healers or medicine men. I do believe that in today’s world our poets, novelists, and playwrights and yes you for you, in each for each, are our culture’s medicine people.

As readers, English Majors, Teachers of English Literature, the teeming world of business and commerce, reduces us to one identity in the public’s mind. We become in their cringing fear of us tiny punctuation marks, frail waifs, our hair in tight buns, wearing horned rimmed glasses or corduroys or A line skirts, and slumped over the newest edition of *Ulysses*. We are vilified as the grammar police just waiting for our poor friends to accidentally split their infinitives, be tripped by the passive voice, or deploy “that” when they should have said “which”. In their reduced version of us, we are holding on to a bottle of sherry for dear life, petting our old cats to the beat of the Brandenburg concertos wafting from record players in our wood-paneled libraries, while we still type on typewriters. They reduce us because we are so much the opposite.

Rough cut masked storytellers craft, weave, stencil, chisel, sign, paint, language that sings and dances new meanings into the world, language that pours off the tongue caressed by the wetness of desire. We are subversive carriers of an ancient art so wildly important, that when we, Clark Kent like, reveal the multiplicity and duplicity of our masked super hero selves, we are holding the key to all mythologies. Readers never go

through life with anything as boring as one identity or one change of clothes. James Baldwin once so accurately wrote, “Love takes off masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within.” Love does this and when we read we love.

To use language to erase the ecological diversity of our environment and our imaginations, is to commit murder. We must trust each other to embellish and imagine and amplify, and fabricate, and weave, but not to lie. Prejudices impose extreme simplicity, binaries that deny the reality of our lived linguistic experience. Even black and white, young and old, male and female, she and he, do no justice to our perceived and felt world. The reader of Randolph Keenan experiences human beings with every skin tone in every chapter. The reader of Dickens finds old people of every sort and size and young people who are wiser than their years. The reader of Melville knows that the one who chooses not to work might be the one doing the most important human work. Reading and writing open our minds— the detail becomes as important as the grand scheme, the motley fool more interesting than the hero, the vein of the maple leaf lying flat wet on the sidewalk full of more coded information than a grand document of American history. As Ursula K. Le Guin tells us in *The Birthday of the World and Other Stories*, “I never knew anybody . . . who found life simple. I think a life or a time looks simple when you leave out the details.”

So students of English, when you are applying for a job tell the boss, that you dance comfortably with nuance, shade tone, gradation, distinction, and degree. You like to look at traces as well as billboards. You are a detective who can discern the cellular structure of an idea in the shards of broken glass. You are comfortable with contradictions, inconsistencies, paradoxes, ambiguities, and you can still spell these

words and know what they mean. You tolerate flaws, shortcomings, weaknesses, and tricksters. You wait with patient page turning bated breath to see if the clown might save the day.

Those of us who read literature, poetry, fiction, do so because we are seekers, we are looking for a moment that Jane Wagner *In Search of Intelligent Life in the Universe* calls the goose bump experience, a dazzling moment of grace, epiphany, or just simple kindness. We are rescue workers clawing through the debris of contemporary rubble and hoping to find a breathing human being in the pile who we can free to live a full and exuberant life.

As we defend ourselves against the onslaught of greed and violence, we know right here, right in our hearts, in the imagination of our souls, that the pursuit of the poet, the grass reed song of the bard, the story that cannot be passed on, always has and always will save not just our humanity, but our democracy from the stultifying simplicity of type, other, enemy—cookie cutter categories that will lead only to dead bodies on a field. The eyes of the bending rough-cut masks heal, invite, enrich, enliven, entice, and tear down walls. I will end with the words of Whitman:

As on the road or at some crevice door by chance, or open'd window,
Pausing, inclining, baring my head, you specially I greet,
To draw and clinch your soul for once inseparably with mine.