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Abstract
The writings of David Dabydeen, whether poetry, prose fiction or autobiographical sketches, provide an interesting example of the creative use of the technique of masking. The writer/narrator/poetic persona uses multiple masks in order both to suggest the complexity of the identity of the West Indian East Indian, and also, one suspects, to protect certain aspects of self from the kind of 'knowing' described by Lamming as his reason for the retreat into 'the castle of my skin'. It is interesting that the technique of masking which is used defensively- to discourage certain facile readings of the text of the 'self' - appears to be more prevalent in those West Indian Writers (Lamming, Naipaul, Dabydeen) who seem most aware of the non-West Indian contexts in which they live and write. Other writers, such as Walcott, Brathwaite and Lovelace, use the technique of masking differently, and certainly less self-consciously.
MARK A. McWATT

His True True Face: Masking and Revelation in David Dabydeen’s *Slave Song*

The writings of David Dabydeen, whether poetry, prose fiction or autobiographical sketches, provide an interesting example of the creative use of the technique of masking. The writer/narrator/poetic persona uses multiple masks in order both to suggest the complexity of the identity of the West Indian East Indian, and also, one suspects, to protect certain aspects of self from the kind of 'knowing' described by Lamming as his reason for the retreat into 'the castle of my skin'. It is interesting that the technique of masking which is used defensively – to discourage certain facile readings of the text of the 'self' – appears to be more prevalent in those West Indian Writers (Lamming, Naipaul, Dabydeen) who seem most aware of the non-West Indian contexts in which they live and write. Other writers, such as Walcott, Brathwaite and Lovelace, use the technique of masking differently, and certainly less self-consciously.

What is interesting about the writing of Dabydeen is that he persistently calls attention to the technique of masking in his work, to the point where the technique itself assumes a part of the burden of meaning and comments on or interrogates other aspects of the work. This is perhaps best observed in *Slave Song*, Dabydeen's first volume of poetry. In this work we are presented with fourteen poems, each of which is itself a carefully constructed mask by means of which the poetic persona inhabits the men and women – slaves and indentured labourers – who worked the sugar lands of Guyana; but these poems, in raw Guyanese Creole, are only part of the text of *Slave Song*. There is a critical/ explanatory note on each poem – often including a brief glossary of the more difficult words and expressions – as well as a 'translation' of the poem into standard English. There are also a number of illustrations: historical prints of slave and plantation life which also become part of the technique of multiple masking that controls the meaning and effect of the work as a whole.

This technique sets up several different loci of authority within the volume, several different 'texts': there is the poem itself with its
vigorous creole voice conveying aspects of lived experience and the feelings and imagination of the slave or peasant in a very powerful way. This vivid mask of suffering, of ‘pure’ energy and emotion, is then modified for the reader first by the mask of the critic/commentator and then by the mask of the translator, both insisting, it seems, on a different ‘purity’, of perspective and of expression. It is equally true, on the other hand, that the emotional integrity of the dialect voice of the poem diminishes the authority of note and of translation. The reader is thus left with a curious sensation of dislocation as the different aspects of the text suffer a partial eclipse or erasure when juxtaposed and allowed to interact. This is made clear when we sample the different levels of text pertaining to the title poem. First a stanza and refrain from the poem ‘Slave Song’:

Whip me till me bleed  
Till me beg.  
Tell me how me hanimal  
African orang-utan  
Tell me how me cannibal  
Fit fo slata fit fo hang.  
Slice waan lip out  
waan ear an waan leg –  
Bu yu caan stap me cack dippin in de honeypot  
Drippin at de tip an happy as a hottentot!

It is one thing for the critic, in a paper such as this, to attempt a critical interpretation of this passage, and something else entirely to find that the job has already been done for him by the poet – or has it? Here is part of the ‘note’ on ‘Slave Song’:

The slave addresses his Master (mentally of course). He asserts his manhood, his dignity and his instinct for survival through his surreptitious lust for the white woman, his Mistress... On one level his lust is obscene and revengeful: he can cuckold his Master by mentally degrading his Master’s wife, dragging her down to his level of existence; that is he can ‘Africanize’ her (‘totempole her cunt’, ‘leave his teeth mark like a tattoo on her throat’ – lines 32-3). He boasts that he can really act out the role of a cannibal (designated to him – line 15 – by his white superiors) by gaining life at her expense. But such lust is also life-giving in a more poignant way ...

We will immediately recognize this as the kind of critical interpretation of poetry that we all do – it is part of the way we make out living; yet we feel somewhat uneasy, perhaps, when the poet deliberately puts on this mask and grins at us from behind it. It seems mockingly to invite us to criticize the criticism, along with the poem, and in fact forces us to recognize the inevitable gap – which our critical commentary tends to paper over – between the creative utterance and the critical interpretation. Here, for instance, we are forced to reflect on whether the
slave’s cry, ‘Tell me how me cannibal/Fit to slata fit to hang’, can really
be interpreted as the somewhat sophisticated boast of gaining life at the
white woman’s expense that the critical mask offers us in the ‘note.’

By interpreting the poem the ‘note’ distances and changes it, and this
is one of the things we are forced to recognize as we contemplate the
interaction of the masks of poet/slave and critic. It also makes the
reader acutely aware of criticism as a mask: by ‘putting the critic on’,
the poet is poking fun at the critic and his techniques, as well as calling
into question the integrity of the text. In the case of ‘Slave Song’, what
is the text? Where are its limits and boundaries? If poem and critical
note tend towards the erasure or disintegration of each other, where
does one turn to find the locus of significance or meaning within the
whole thing? What is the true face behind the different masks?
Dabydeen himself has commented on the notes to the poems in Slave
Song, and in fact he has upset some readers, by dismissing the thing as
a joke:

Many of the notes are spoof notes: they are almost saying that I want to be the
critic as well as the poet... it’s just that I felt I would do the whole lot, and the
poems would almost be minimalist poems. What mattered were not just the
poems, but the notes to the poems. None of the poems uses the word ‘I’; one
inhabits a series of masks, and the notes were my way of saying, ‘Look, I am
just rendering history; look, I am the critic.’ Of course this is a complete
illusion, a farce.²

But this raises the question of how seriously one must take these
remarks; might they not simply be the features of yet another mask? As
a matter of fact some of the language towards the end of the quote
above is perhaps revealing; Note the use of ‘I’ and of ‘one’. His remark
that none of the poems use the word ‘I’, immediately followed by his
reference to himself as ‘one’ indicate a certain sensitivity about the self,
perhaps; about revealing too much of the true face behind the masks.
Then, in the direct speech that follows, he uses the personal pronoun
twice, but each represents a separate mask: ‘Look, I am just rendering
history (poem); look, I am the critic (note)’. Perhaps this is the only
‘safe’ way in which the ‘I’ can be used – to inhabit carefully defined
masks. This would help explain the urge to pass the whole complex
mechanism off as a joke; it is another way of preserving and protecting
the self, the true - true face.

In another section of the interview quoted above, Dabydeen in fact
reveals that his concern with the notes is much more than a joke. ‘I am
concerned,’ he says, ‘about the critical business that thrives upon the
expression of poverty and dispossession, which is what the Caribbean
voice ultimately is’.³ This confirms that the poet is calling attention to
the somewhat sinister role of the critic and to whose side he is really on
when the world is seen in terms of the opposition between slave and
master, black and white, colony and metropole. You will observe in the
note to ‘Slave Song’ quoted above that when the critic-mask quotes
lines from the poem in illustration of his argument, he quotes the lines
from the sanitized translation rather than from the creole language of
the poem itself (‘totempole her cunt, leave his teeth marks like a tattoo
on her throat’ – rather than ‘totempole she puss, leff yu teetmark like a
tattoo in she troat!’). This subtle but deliberate departure from normal
critical practice when quoting puts the critic firmly in the camp of
master/white/metropole – showing that the critic knows on which side
his bread is buttered, and it vividly highlights the political aspects of
the relationship between creative artist and critic. Thus the mask of
critic here, however it may conceal or protect certain sensitive aspects
of the writer’s ‘self’; it also functions to reveal aspects of the nature and
politics of criticism – and not only formal criticism, but ordinary
reader-response as well; the technique of masking reveals the reader, at
least as much as it conceals the writer.

Turning now to the mask of translation, here’s how the passage
quoted above from the poem ‘Slave Song’ is rendered by the
translator-mask:

Whip me till I bleed/Till I beg./Tell me I’m an animal/An African orang-utan/Tell
me I’m a cannibal/Fit only for slaughter or hanging/Slice one lip out/One ear
and one leg –

But you can’t stop my cock dipping in the honeypot,/
Dripping at the tip and happy as a hottentot!

What is immediately clear is the way in which the translation
emasculates the poem; the power and authority of the poem (which
even the critic-mask dutifully recognized) is subtly located in the
authenticity of the Creole voice, in the desperate breath that carried the
sounds, in the vital coarseness of the sexual threat in the refrain. Here
in the translation the poem’s emotional power is tamed and
trammelled, much like the ‘charter’d Thames’ and ‘charter’d streets’ of
Blake’s London, so that we find the translator identified very much
with the oppressor, perpetrating a subtler form of the enthralment of
the natural energies of the black man – the chain and the whip replaced
by the measured and standardized language and tone. Note the way in
which the wild, functional coarseness of the creole refrain becomes
simply obscene in this rendering.

–Another accomplishment of these interacting masks within the
volume is to displace or disguise the creative mind behind the entire
contrivance. It is hard to believe in any close relationship – let alone
complete identity – between the voice in the poems and those in the
notes and translations; where then is the persona, the writer? If the
technique of these multiple masks was intended to distract attention
from the vulnerable self of the persona, then in a curious way it has failed: the reader is forced in the end, to be aware of the distractingly manipulative intelligence behind the work. When one reflects, for instance, that the simile ‘happy as a Hottentot’, particularly when applied to a dripping penis, does not seem an image that would be native or natural either to the slave in Guyana or to the aloof translator, one is forced to glimpse a different persona, fleshed out perhaps by one’s knowledge of David Dabydeen the scholar of Africa and of eighteenth and nineteenth-century England, having mischievous fun at the expense of reader, critic and linguist.

Some of the techniques in *Slave Song* are reminiscent of Pope in the *Dunciad,* and Dabydeen exhibits the same complex intellectual playfulness, though towards a different end. It is possible to see Dabydeen as conducting an elaborate post-colonial critique of traditional notions of the integrity of the text, of the relationship between text and critic, and of certain assumptions concerning the supremacy of standard forms of language. It is clear that the critic-mask, for all of its sophisticated use of language and the techniques of interpretation and explication, is constantly being interrogated by the recalcitrance of the language of the imagination as expressed in the dialect. At the same time the attempt to defuse or detoxify the raw energy of the poetic voice calls into question the whole enterprise of literary criticism when applied across racial and socio-economic divides such as those highlighted in this work.

Similarly, the translations offered convey not so much a clarification of the meaning and intent of the ‘dialect-poet-mask’ as an assertion or re-assertion of the power relationships between users of standard and those who speak dialect. And here again the interference works both ways: the translator may feel that he is performing a service for the poem by making it more widely ‘available’, but the experience of the juxtaposition of poem and translation makes clear that what is available is a pale shadow of the real thing – the poem wearing a mask that makes it acceptable, but at the same time attenuates its power and effect. The poem, for its part, interrogates and subverts the translation by its originality and energy. Dabydeen himself has pointed out the power of the Creole:

> Creole has its own native strengths and you can convey certain experiences very powerfully in a way that English could not be used... There’s a kind of crudity in Creole – and my use of it was influenced not by living in a village in Guyana, but by [discovering] in Cambridge that Mediaeval [English] alliterative expression was beautifully barbaric, and this provoked memory of my native Creole, its ‘thaw and sinew’, its savage energy, its capacity for savage lyricism.

This awareness of the power of the Creole, set alongside the pallor of many of the translations, surely indicates the extent to which we are...
involved, in this volume, in a game of masks intended to heighten our awareness of the power of poetry and dialect and to subvert any colonial assumptions we might have about the superiority of English language and culture – of the 'text' of English literature as primary and unassailable.

Another aspect of *Slave Song* worth mentioning in connection with the use of masks is the half-dozen illustrations scattered among the poems. These extend the technique of the multiple masks in that they provide a curiously incongruous commentary on the text(s), both visually and in terms of the strange dissonance between some of the pictures and their captions. Most of these are engravings dating from the eighteenth or early nineteenth century and depicting aspects of slave and plantation life in the Caribbean. Apart from the historical resonance in these pictures, which fits in well with the theme of slavery, they also suggest a strangely vicarious mentality – looking at slave and plantation life filtered through the pre-conceptions and prejudices of white master which cause the images to be oddly stylized and bereft of overt emotional content.

The picture of the slave tied to a wooden frame for execution is an example of this: the illustration is meant to seem factual, or rather, technical; the faces of the humans are devoid of feeling and the tone of the caption reinforces the mask of emotional detachment. But the illustration appears in Dabydeen's text opposite the poem 'Slave Song' that we have been examining above; and what we tend to see in this context is not so much an execution as a sexual defilement: the standing figure seems about to attack the genitals of the victim – it is a brutal rape or castration (it is unclear whether the figure is male or female), suggesting the punishment awaiting the slave in the poem for daring to dream of defiling the wife of his white master.

The illustration captioned simply: 'A piece of sugar cane' is in fact a piece of cane cut in longitudinal section to reveal infestation by some kind of worm or parasite; it is a horribly phallic image of pestilence and decay, and is juxtaposed with the poem 'The Canecutters' Song', where the canecutter is again dreaming of illicit sex with the white woman. Again the picture 'reads' like a sternly negative and minatory image not only of the consequences of the dream but of the whole life and livelihood of the canecutter.

There is a similar oddness in the picture captioned: 'A Female negro slave with a weight chained to her ankle': the chain is indeed fastened around the woman's ankle, but the weight is being placed by her on the side of her head. As with the poem/note/translation, the oddness of the image causes the observer to look behind the image itself and to speculate about the motives of the mind that created it. Again it is a question of the mask concealing or obscuring meaning while at the same time revealing aspects of the human agency behind/within it – a
simultaneous attraction and repulsion akin perhaps to Walcott's reaction in 'A Far Cry From Africa', to the mixture of ancestral bloods within him. In any case this double movement indicates perfectly the relationship between blacks and white masters, between metropole and rural periphery and between the reader and the several masks in this work.

In the picture of the 'Suriname Planter in his Morning Dress' the caption masks the fact of the other human figure visible in the picture, that of the female slave that gives the planter his status, identity and worth, as she pours him a morning beverage in the background. This slave's nakedness above the waist also reveals, perhaps, something about the Suriname Planter, whose own masculine chest is glimpsed almost down to the waist. As with the other pictures the physical deployment of the bodies appears at the same time to be mysteriously suggestive and overtly revealing – as with all the other masks, the interest here is in what the image conceals as well as what it reveals.

Much of the effect of *Slave Song*, then, is to be found within the gaps between the various masks used to project/conceal the persona or the creative mind responsible for it. It has to do, as we have seen, with various aspects and levels of textuality, with post-colonial criticism, with intellectual games; but since *Slave Song* is the young poet's first publication, it may have to do as well with a natural diffidence, an uneasiness about the casual revelation of self by someone who has written elsewhere about his tough struggle to make it as a scholar and a writer among the Asian immigrants in London. The apparatus of notes, translations and pictures has to do too with the necessity simply to contain and manage the enormous energy of the poetic voice from the Indian villages of Guyana – a voice hardly heard before, a compound and complex voice for whom the frail poet must serve as messenger, translator, apologist, explicator... It is a voice filled with the quality of 'dread', with accumulated animosity, with the desperate need for an audience. The masks are multiple channels for this voice and for the vital optimism of a poet who yearns to be all things for the sake of his people and for the sake of his art:

...I do hope that I can be intensely Guyanese, or intensely Berbician, or English, or European. In other words, one has the possibilities of inhabiting different masks intensely. I'm not just saying, take one mask, put it on, throw it away, then take another one...
NOTES

3. Ibid, p.75.
5. Interview in *Journal of West Indian Literature*, op. cit., p.76.
6. One of them, that of the Suriname Planter, is by William Blake and, along with three of the others is from *Narrative of Five Year’s Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Suriname, in Guyana, 1776*.
8. David Dabydeen interviewed by Frank Birbalsingh op. cit., p.120.