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# TYPES OF MASKS IN MARINA TSVETAEVA'S POETRY

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(Received 11 February 2015)

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## Abstract

This article attempts to demonstrate, by providing concrete examples, several fundamentally different kinds of literary masks in Marina Tsvetaeva's poetry. The very notion of a literary mask has not yet got a clear understanding, which is revealed in the border and controversial cases where the identification of a mask causes difficulty, or where the apparent simplicity of this operation is deceptive. We observed four types of masks fulfilling different functions: 1) euphemistic, 'concealing' mask; 2) auto ironic mask; 3) language involving mask, or stylistic mask; 4) transgender, or character mask. In our opinion, the distinguished models are enough to demonstrate the extreme diversity of mask devices used by Marina Tsvetaeva and raise the question of the need to build a comprehensive system describing the literary mask function.

*Keywords:* mask, life creating, lyrical role, explicitness, euphemistic function

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## 1. Introduction

The literature of modernism reflected the theatricality of life characteristic of this period, the interpenetration of life and theatre, which gave rise to a number of new synthetic art forms, up to such an extreme phenomenon as a "literary scandal" [1]. The distinguishing feature of literary life was the 'myth making' and 'life creating', which for a long time have attracted the researchers' attention and have recently been developed in a number of monographs by such authors as E.A. Bychkova [2], D.M. Magomedova [3], V.A. Sarychev [4, 5], E.A. Khudenko [6-9].

The options of 'life creating' models are numerous and range from an emphatic rejection of 'the literary' to auto-parody playing the emphasized conventional roles. If we develop an analogy with the theatre, life creating' strategies can be divided into fixed 'characters' and varying 'roles'. Moreover, in the lyrics it is often that the lyrical 'I' does not appear in one of the author's incarnations, but in the estranged, loaned image (cf. *I'm Hamlet. The blood runs cold ...* by Alexander Blok). It would be appropriate to call such lyrical roles

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‘masks’, as between them and the author’s alter ego there is obviously a certain ‘gap’. At the same time a mask “is able to transmit the mood and emotional state” [10]. It is a kind of a camouflage, compensating for the lyrical nudity of the utterance: “The paradox lies in the fact that the artistic language of the mask suggests: genuine, authentic in a person who is afraid of direct expression” [11].

The phenomenon of literary mask in the modernistic age was examined in different years by L.S. Aleshina [12], M.M. Bakhtin [13], A.V. Vislova [14], S.G. Isaev [11], K.G. Isupov [15], Y.M. Lotman [16], Z.G. Mintz [17], N.V. Mokina [18], O.J. Osmukhina [19, 20] and other researchers who studied the works of K.D. Balmont, Andrei Bely, V.J. Bryusov, N.S. Gumilev, F.K. Sologub, D.S. Merezhkovsky and others “at the level of the characters, plot, in the narration, text and genre” [11, p. 7]. The present study considers this phenomenon in Marina Tsvetaeva’s poetry and relies mainly on systematic-typological and historical-functional approaches.

## **2. Discussion**

Tsvetaeva’s repertoire of masks is extensive: literary (N. Botkina [21], R.S. Voitekhovich [22], S.I. Elnitskaya [23], I.V. Kudrova [24], E.L. Pupyshcheva [25], E.V. Titova [26], I.D. Shevelenko [27], W.L. Durlana [28]), historical (R.S. Voitekhovich [29], T. Gorkova [30], V.A. Schweitzer [31]), mythological characters (R.S. Voitekhovich [32, 33], M. Meikin [34], A.W. Dinega [35]), etc. In the general body of Tsvetaeva’s texts and within separate sets of works (cycles, collections), literary mask types are compared and contrasted to one another, being involved in complex relationships of synonymy, antonymy, gradation, etc. Together, they create a complex and self-contradictory, but at the same time indivisible image of the lyric ‘I’ (V. Losskaya [36, 37]).

The very question of the presence of a mask in the poem is not always possible to decide unambiguously. This study makes it possible to consider some debatable cases. We begin with the poem ‘August - asters ...’ (February 7, 1917): “August - asters / August - stars / August - bunches / Of vine and rowan / Rusty - August! // With the full, supportive / Apple imperial, / Like a child is August playing. / Like a palm stroking heart / Is your imperial name: / August! - Heart! // A month of late kisses / Late roses and late lightnings! / Of star showers- / August! - Month / Of star showers!” [38]. The poem is built as a definition of the month of August that unfolded in a detailed description based on the author’s subjective associations.

The first stanza supplies a number of attributes to August, which are mixed signs of stars, flowers and fruits, one merging into another (“asters”, “stars”, “bunches of vine and rowan rusty”), and where the name “asters” serves as a transition link for the transformation of the “heaven” line into the series of “earthly” objects (plants). The second stanza personifies August and endows it with the features of an animate being that ‘plays’ with the “apple”.

There is a play on the name of the month's relationship with its etymology – 'month of Octavian Augustus' (Caesar) and 'divine' (literally). A circle of associations connected with the image of the apple was also outlined by Tsvetaeva partly in the interpretation of the poem 'Sound cautious and dull...' by O. Mandelstam (in the essay 'Poets with history and poets without history') [38, vol. 5, p. 408-409]. One should also take into account the motif of the game with an apple/ball (cf. the corresponding scene in the tragedy 'Ariadne' which clearly echoes the famous anacreontic topos) [38, vol. 3, p. 589-590] as a motif of love and courtship games that is superimposed on the myth of Eve's/Serpent's 'apple of Eden'. Hence the consequence of the 'game': August "like a palm stroking the heart". This image combines a sublimated metaphor (August causes tenderness) and erotic metonymy (metonymy heart-chest), which in turn is projected to the "apple", that 'August' is playing with.

The third stanza love theme is explicated by the word "kisses" which is embedded in a series of contextual synonyms: "roses", "lightnings", and "star showers". Repetition of the latter motif and exclamatory intonation convey the culmination of the feeling of love, revealing the euphemistic function of the figurative line and at the same time, the idea of merging sensual experiences with the perception of the beauty of the world, the Universe. The word "late" is repeated many times and, of course, is informative of the month position in the calendar, the chronology of the implied romantic relationships, and probably with a sense of something finished and the inevitability of something that happened.

In terms of Tsvetaeva's biography this text is written in February 1917, but dedicated, as it is most reasonable to assume, to the August of 1916, due to two factors. In July Tsvetaeva began a long affair with N.A. Plutser-Sarna (from the beginning of July to the end of the year almost all the poems by Tsvetaeva are dedicated to him), and in August Tsvetaeva got an unmistakable evidence that she would soon become a mother (in February 1917 she was 7 months pregnant, perhaps dating the poem by the 7<sup>th</sup> day of the month is not accidental). Hence there appears the motif of 'maturation'. Perhaps her motherhood is not associated with the love affair, but it was developing amid expectations of a baby. Similar feelings of a lyrical heroine and a number of similar motifs ("bunches", "stars") are found in the poem 'World encampment began in the darkness ...' (January 14, 1917) [38, p. 331].

Can one talk about the mask in this case if, judging by the results of the analysis (which does not seem in the least claim to be complete), one perceives quite an adequate expression of thoughts, feelings and life experiences of the author? We believe that it is possible, since a number of the essential facts (autobiographical context) cannot be restored from the text although they are reflected in it. On the surface, there is only a hymn to August, but in the symbolic depth of it one can guess some hidden intimate motifs.

It is possible to talk about Tsvetaeva's 'mask' multi-layering, because the degree of text understanding is clearly different for the direct recipient (most likely N.A. Plutser-Sarn), closest friends, a wide range of readers and a set of

connoisseurs capable of a much thorough comprehension (see J.M. Lotman's 'Text and audience structure' [39]). A special place is taken by a group of fellow writers who exchange their poetic arsenal (the poem appeared after reading O.E. Mandelstam's poem 'With cheerful neighing herds are grazing ...'). Accordingly, for different categories of readers the text will oscillate between at least two poles: 'poems about nature' and 'love lyrics'.

Let us consider a case of a different kind - the poem 'At fifteen': "Klink-sing, preventing the oblivion, / in my heart the words 'fifteen years old'. / Oh, what for I grew up that big? / There is no escape! // Yesterday among green birches / I ran free in the morn. / Yesterday played without hairstyle / Yet yesterday! // Distant spring bells from the belfry / Said, 'Run around and lie down!' / And any cry was allowed to the naughty girl, / And every step! // What lies ahead? What bad luck? / In all is hype and, oh, all is ban! / - To the sweet childhood I said goodbye, crying, / at fifteen." [38, p. 144] The poem is not dated, but is included in the book 'The Magic Lantern' (1912), published by the author on the eve of the birth of her first daughter, and on the eve of her own twentieth anniversary. Unlike the previous poem, with its sophisticated style and a hidden subtext, it does not leave any outstanding issues. Perhaps the only issue that can excite the reader when reading the poem is a question of the relationship between the author and the lyrical heroine: if there is any? But the ending leaves no doubt (although hypothetically 'I' can be a symbol of a different character).

It is not always the case that the young Tsvetaeva writes on her own behalf. She frequently writes on behalf of a boy or a young man (at least three poems in the 'Evening Album' are written on behalf of male characters, two of them - on behalf of V.O. Nilender), sometimes she is 'reincarnated' in other female characters. Not every mother in her poems is M.A. Maine-Tsvetaeva, and not every family scandal is an illustration of Tsvetaeva's life, as some readers naively believed. In case of such transformations some traces are usually found. Here there are no such traces, and therefore there is no need to doubt while interpreting 'At fifteen'.

For the nineteen-year-old author, the events that happened more than four years ago are almost a remote past. Despite the fact that we agree that in the main part of the text and in the end there is one and the same person, the distance between these two 'I' is significant, moreover it is text building: the text is written solely to show the difference in thoughts and feelings at 15 and 19. Since most part of the text is represented by thoughts and feelings which are remote enough for the author, one can say that the fifteen-year-old 'I' of the poem is a lyrical mask of the heroine.

What is the attitude of the 'I' in the ending to the 'I' of the body (that is, to himself in the past)? Obviously, it is sympathetic, tender, and fairly ironic. This, of course, is not a parody in the full sense of the famous 'Prayer' (with a plea for death at the age of seventeen), but it still has an element of parody on herself. Pointe at the end of the poem shows that Tsvetaeva has already experienced the idea that "there is no salvation!" the more so because, as we know, her life came to the most serene time and waiting for the baby filled her

with a most joyful anticipation. Incidentally, we note that the former of the studied poems is coloured with nostalgia, not depression due to similar circumstances. The same thing happens again in 1924 (see the cycle 'Under the shawl'). However, during her pregnancy Tsvetaeva sometimes gave in to the fear of possible death, but eventually she overcame it (cf. 'Do not take my blush ...').

Thus, if in the 'August - asters ...' the mask is the rhetorical structure of the text crushing the structure of the audience into groups with varying degrees of comprehension. In the poem 'At fifteen' the mask is a 'delaminated' visage of the lyrical heroine, her image four years ago. What purpose does this mask serve? On one hand, to separate herself from the 'naïve' view of the world, and on the other hand, to give this naive view of the world a possibility to speak out, because even this 'joke' has its share of truth. Partially, the fifteen-year-old girl's fears were justified: the entire collection of 'Magic Lantern' by Tsvetaeva reflects the shock experienced by her when her debut collection got a portion of criticism (especially on behalf of V.J. Bryusov).

If the poem 'August - asters ...' veiled an intimate content, 'At fifteen' allowed entering into the hidden polemic: the child (likewise a clown, or a holy fool, etc.) is allowed to say more than an adult is allowed, and by the time 'Magic Lantern' was published Tsvetaeva had already been a married lady.

A special case of the literary mask is a speech mask, narrative style. It can serve as a means of differentiation within the text. Thus, according to B.V. Tomashevsky, in drama this is a common technique of differentiation and stratification of characters: characters from the lower classes – often negative heroes, and villains – speak in a special way (but the style can shift towards loftiness; 'the wrong' can carry the imprint of sacredness) [40].

Another case of using narrative devices is represented by the author's narration, especially when there is no separate figure of the narrator. In this case, we, according to the concept of group Mu, do not deal with a local device but with the convention (other examples of convention are metrics, rhyme, etc.) [41]. In this case, the author is faithful to himself up to the end of the text. The twentieth century gave many examples of such speech masks (cf. individual styles of I.E. Babel, M.M. Zoshchenko, A.P. Platonov and others). Can one talk about the mask in this case?

It is a complicated question. On one hand, such an extraordinary use of words undoubtedly creates a 'mask' as an individual and to a certain extent artificial image; on the other hand, this image is not alien to the author, nor borrowed by him, the author created it; it is the result of the author's personal development. If this is a 'mask', it has neither classifying values nor properly 'masking' ones, on the contrary, this is the maximum explication of an individual, unique part of the author's personality, it is the author's art 'face'.

Here we come up against the most basic questions of art that cannot be solved in one article, the more so as it covers a special issue. Therefore, we consider only a particular case when this kind of speech mask is 'exfoliated'

from the author's 'face'. The studied example is also debatable, it is a lyric poem by Tsvetaeva 'Red bull-calf' (1928).

It consists of only 88 complete metric lines (with the final comma - 89), which are more graphic due to the techniques of ladders and column (in some cases supported by internal rhyme, which creates an ambiguity of the metric division). In other words, it is the amount of 22 quatrains. Essentially, this is a big lyric poem, not a small one. 'Red bull-calf' is less than 'New Year's', 'From the sea' and even a fragment of 'Siberia'.

The poem 'Red bull-calf' is close to 'New Year's' (in the early edition of which there are 194 lines) due to the common obituary theme: both are written to the death of a hero. But if in the 'New Year's' the individual style does not create a 'mask', in reference to 'Red bull-calf' one can talk about 'mask devices', for Tsvetaeva resorts to folk styling. Why does it happen in the 'Red bull' but does not occur in the 'New Year's'? The answer is partly contained in the text of the 'New Year's'. Tsvetaeva seeks neutral – 'angelic' language, the otherworldly language, in which there is no difference between the German and Russian-speaking poets (we should remember that the 'New Year's' is addressed to Rainer Maria Rilke).

On the other hand, the hero of the 'Red bull-calf' is a former military man, a Civil War participant, who fought against the Bolsheviks, that is (from the point of view of the author of the poem) fighting for the ancient foundations of Russia. This can explain the use of traditional folk forms. If the 'New Year's' expresses a personal attitude, the 'Red bull-calf' is an attempt to speak about the national tragedy in the language of the traditional forms of national culture.

One way or another, but the 'Russian style' familiar to us through Tsvetaeva's fabulous and epic poems ('Lanes', 'Tsar Maiden', 'Fine fellow', 'Yegorushka') in the 'Red bull' is markedly contrasted to the historical plot, not fabulous, or mythological. 'A gap' is formed between the tale style and a documentary one, a modern fable, which suggests that the author, in this case, puts on a folk 'mask'.

The paper gives no opportunity to speak in detail about the poetics of this lyric poem, approaching in its genre features to the traditional elegy (as I.A. Brodsky defined the genre of the 'New Year's') [42], one has only to note that the fable material that is available in the text, is subject to the general lyrical situation of the hero's 'funeral' (not in church, but in poetry).

Tsvetaeva shifts the canonized forms of XIX century toward folk laments, to which the sad elegy belongs in ancient literature. Once, Tsvetaeva sounded indignant in her letters to K.B. Rodzevich that the brilliant classical scholar F.F. Zelinsky tells his Hellenic tales in the language of Russian folklore [43], but in the 'Red bull-calf' she essentially resorts to similar operations, putting on a tragic 'mask' which is not ancient, but a Russian folk one.

What tools does she use? For example, the diminutive suffix '-ok' ('bychok' – the young of the bull), '-ochka' ('kostochka' – a small bone; 'yamochka' – a dimple; 'mamochka' - Mom), '-ik' ('sadiik' – a little garden). Fable elements (the theme of transformation, prophetic dream, etc.) refer to the

fabulous epic motifs. A special role is played by the material world of the poem, its attributes (in particular, the motif of the candles). The characteristic folk techniques include multiple repetitions, reminiscent of the dance-rhythms: "... "Houses", 'Houses', 'Houses', 'Houses' <...> Stentorian, stentorian, stentorian, stentorian <...> bull's, bull's <...> Road! Road! Road!". Tsvetaeva uses typical metric forms, which are considered traditionally to have an expressive folk aura (in particular, trochaic metre especially against the background of the framing of an accentual verse rhythm).

Thus, the mask can be not only 'hiding' (as in the first case), 'revealing' (the second case), but also 'attaching' (third case), since in the 'Red bull' the fabulous folk style is a means of initiation to the national language, a demonstration of the community with the same culture (this is one of the functions of any sublanguage formations: slang, argot, jargon, dialect, etc.).

Perhaps the simplest case of Tsvetaeva's literary mask can be found in the poems written on behalf of man. A bright example is the poem "Evening album" (1910), written on behalf of Ellis (L.L. Kobylinsky) and V.O. Nilender. These include such poems as 'The descendant of the Swedish kings' and 'The three' representing monologues by Vladimir Nilender in childhood and at the time of meeting with the Tsvetaev sisters. The poem 'The Kremlin', in our opinion, is Ellis's monologue.

Even this 'simple' case has its controversial aspects. After all, we can say that there is no 'mask' at all; there are only the characters' monologues, which should not be projected on the author of the poems. Similarly, as inspector Khlestakov's monologue cannot be considered a representation of Gogol, one cannot identify monologues of male characters with the lyrical speech of Tsvetaeva's heroine. Being monologues they play a certain role in building a book by Tsvetaeva, where the Wizard (Ellis) and Sage (Nilender) act as first-line characters.

Yet we tend to talk about two planes of such texts. Indeed, within the frame of the book 'character' interpretation of such texts seems urgent. But any lyric text can be considered separately, outside the context of the book, and then the ratio of the 'speaker's' position and the author hidden behind comes to the fore.

To some extent, the character always expresses the author's position (cf. Flaubert's famous maxim, asserting his identity with Emma Bovary). Playing someone else's 'role', the author like an actor in Stanislavsky's school puts into his acting the content of his emotional memory. A striking example is a repulsive image of Hamlet in Tsvetaeva's poetry of 1923 reproducing elements (for example, the motif of 'chalk'), which until recently – in 1922 – characterized Tsvetaeva's lyrical heroine in the most elevated way.

### 3. Conclusion

It is possible to consider other types of Tsvetaeva's masks (in particular, animalistic), but the above models are enough to demonstrate the extreme diversity of mask techniques. Summarizing the interim results of our reasoning, we list the types that we considered according to their functions: 1) a euphemistic mask; 2) auto ironic mask; 3) language involving mask; 4) transgender (character) mask. A further study of Tsvetaeva's mask types can follow the path of refining the classification, and the way of statistical research in relevance of various mask types for different periods of her work.

### Acknowledgement

The work is performed according to the Russian Government Program of Competitive Growth of Kazan Federal University.

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