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978-0-521-47972-1 - Masks of Difference: Cultural Representations in Literature,  
Anthropology and Art

David Richards

Excerpt

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## Introduction

In the most ancient languages, the words used to designate foreign peoples are drawn from two sources: either words that signify 'to stammer' 'to mumble' or words that signify 'mute'.  
*Ernest Renan*<sup>1</sup>

Much of what follows in this book is expressed emblematically by the two illustrations drawn in 1740 by E. Beck (figure 1). They show a double obsession: the representation of other more primitive cultures and the experimentation with perspective and lines of sight. The coincidence is more than simply fortuitous, it is symptomatic.

To see these anamorphic images, one must break the conventions of figurative art. It is necessary to lay the illustration on a flat surface (not hang it on the wall) with the eye in the same plane as the figure (not at 90°) and place a polished cylinder on the grey disc below the figure. When the figure is turned through 180° and the beholder looks into the cylinder (not at the drawing at all, but its reflection), a perfectly proportioned figure representing Africa or America in allegorical form can be seen. The images encode a knowledge which is secret and which evokes the special expertise possessed by the viewer. Ignorance of the drawings' technical brilliance will result in the image remaining what it is: a gross, malformed distortion which appears to melt on the page.

The images accomplish two goals simultaneously in fulfilling the desire to see and in situating the primitive within the frame of western representation. But, in order to see and to situate these figures, one must apply to them a set of interpretive devices and techniques. The image must be distorted, tilted, inverted and then re-envisioned. To obtain that vision, one must not view the object itself but its reflection in a distorting mirror. The figure only becomes

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'known' to us through the transformation of an already encoded representation which is subject to the distortions of perspective. Equipped with the appropriate skills to render the object visible – just as an 'educated' reader brings to the literary or anthropological work the appropriate skills to decode it – the spectator is able to unlock the stylised depiction which has been imprisoned within a distorted representation.

'Africa' is an olive-skinned female, breast-plated, and dressed as a figure from the Roman carnival. She carries an indeterminate branch and the mythical unicorn is her heraldic beast. 'America' is a bare-breasted Amazon, darker skinned, barefooted, warlike with a heraldic parakeet. Now that the object has come into focus, the viewer can begin the work of interpretation as the 'primitive other' displays its mysterious and female nature. The viewer progresses from one kind of distortion (inchoate, malformed, undesirable, obscure, ugly) to another (allegorical, proportioned, aesthetic, desirable, orderly, known).

The images are an appropriate metaphor for the interpretive strategies and encoding processes, the 'tilting', 'inverting', 'applying of cylinders' kind of thing, which goes on in the making of representations of 'other peoples': the 'cylindrical' perspectives of their ways of seeing.

This book will begin with a familiar image from the High Renaissance of Italian art. My reading of Titian's *The Flaying of Marsyas* will emphasise how the picture represents ancient mythological figures of the wild, savage or primitive which are released from the painting, charged with new significances. The painting's underlying allegorical intentions shape the mass of associations into new narratives in new contexts. Central to this action of redistributing old images to new narratives is the attempt to fix, not a unique point of origins in 1570, but a primary boundary: that of the distinction between the wild, the primitive or the savage and the civilised which is focused upon the body of the primitive subject as both the vessel which contains these exemplary images and the site for the discovery of new forms of knowledge. It is upon this display of differences that my discussions of subsequent acts of cultural representation have their foundation.

The desire to make the representation of the savage fit into a narrative scheme is the subject of the next chapter, which deals with a first encounter between Europeans and other peoples in the late sixteenth century and recorded in the ethnographic illustrations of

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Jacques Le Moyne de Morgue. The discovery narrative which these images set down also elaborated many of the models which shape the anthropological apprehension of its subject. Ancient mythical images of the wild are engaged and subjected to a romance narrative strategy, but the images also display a series of radical inversions of that romance narrative. The images fall under the pressure of external events which shape a counter discourse even in the act of representation. The pictures, in attempting to show the people of another land, succeed most successfully in presenting the contemporary religious and political obsessions of a European nation in conflict.

Similar conditions shape the texts discussed in chapter 3, where the romance conventions of representation of other peoples are similarly adapted to new historical conditions: those of slavery, 'race' and the growth of empire. But here the texts are fashioned as much by the conditions of authorship as by the perception of their savage subjects or external political forces. The first text, Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*, makes implicit connections between the narratives of discovery and the discourses of sexuality. In the second text, which is situated in the same place but written by Captain John Stedman one hundred years later, romance tropes struggle to enunciate the facts of miscegenation, colonial violence and the crisis of male self-fashioning. The conventions of representation of other peoples begin to fragment as the allegorical images and narratives inherited from the Renaissance become insupportable or inadequate to the task of rendering the actuality of an imperial history.

Although many of the ancient images and romance themes persist in an altered form into the late eighteenth century, the next chapter examines how these transformations contribute to an emphasis upon the primitive's role in constructing historical narratives. Walter Scott's narratives are founded on the premise of the primitive's exemplary status both as a point of origin and as an anachronistic presence fated to imminent extinction. This theme is explored further in the next chapter which positions evolutionary and philological schemes of cultural history against the new 'narrative' constructions of the 'primitive'. James Frazer's research emphasised the necessity for the accumulation of 'facts' about other peoples. In this respect James Frazer, and the other Victorian evolutionists with whom he is compared, enacted a similar gathering of images to that examined in the Renaissance, not with allegorical intent, but in the spirit of scientific enquiry. The twentieth-century modernists and

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anthropologists discussed in the next chapter effectively stripped this endeavour of its scientific content and redirected the primitive materials towards new goals of definition of the self and art.

Thus far, this book will describe a narrative of sorts: a linear scheme of progressive accumulation, structuration and narration which is followed by a collapse or decay of narratives to allow a new process of accumulation, structuration, narration. There is an underlying historical rhythm: that of the *making* and *unmaking* of cultural representations. All these representations, however, are predicated upon a vision of a world which is indelibly divided: discourses obsessed with the assigning and demarcation of manichean boundaries between that which is savage and that which is 'cultured'.

In my discussion, I emphasise the ways in which the paintings, literary texts and ethnographies construct through their compositional strategies a structure for the processing and enunciation of the anomalous materials of otherness. The debt of literature and painting to anthropology is a major feature of that discussion, but my purpose in this book is not just to write about the well-documented theme of the savage in art and literature.<sup>2</sup> I hope also to demonstrate that the artistic, literary and anthropological rendering of the savage subject is constructed out of discourses of mutual dependence. Anthropology has provided literary texts with images, exotic colour, themes and theories about history, evolution and development but the literary and figurative have, in their turns, radically shaped anthropological discourses. Anthropology is every bit as heterogeneous in its representations as either literature or painting.

But Beck's illustrations afford us one further metaphorical insight: however we see them, either as perfectly proportioned cylindrical projections or as blurred smearings on the flat page, 'Africa' and 'America' cannot escape the force of their representation. They are forever rendered up to representation within this perspective. What act of will, violence or compassion will free 'Africa' and 'America' from the enclosing quotation marks?

The final chapters of this book will attempt to examine that question. The representation of other peoples can be maintained only so long as the subjects of study remain in that condition designated by Renan, as 'stammerers', 'mutterers' or, most likely, 'mutes'. Cultural representations in literature, art and anthropology have, historically, been founded upon the assumption that its discourse is unknown to the subjects of its analysis. Predicated upon, on the one hand, the illiteracy of its subjects and the remote and

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hidden nature of its work on the other, anthropology has been supremely and uniquely free to apply itself to an uncontested sphere of special, secret knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Much the same is true in the cases of both literary texts and paintings derived from or dependent upon anthropological insights.

The final chapters of this book will be concerned with postcolonial writings and anthropological and critical theories which have turned the discourse of representations against itself, to insist upon a new visibility, and to articulate, to repulse or to redefine the terms of discourses which are ostensibly 'about them'. The final chapters will discuss the work of writers from Africa and America who have laboured under the shadow cast by Beck's anamorphs and it will focus upon their deconstructions of cultural representations: Soyinka, Achebe, Okri, Marlene Nourbese Philip, Neil Bissoondath and others.

My discussion here focuses on two related but distinct movements. Both challenge the compulsion to see other peoples within the charmed circle of western cultural representations; both challenge the history of western cultural representations' capacities to misrepresent. In the first, contemporary critics and writers are engaged in unravelling, not only those falsifications, but the very premises of identity, language and culture upon which they are based; the hegemonic constructions are met with the deconstruction of their codes, 'presence' is confronted by 'absence', language by silence. These writers step out of the orders of discourse made for them by others into the incalculable space of the ellipsis.

The second theme of the final chapters examines the ways in which contemporary writers work – to a degree – within constructed models of representation in order to repossess the cultural materials they contain and to re-present them in different terms. In this discussion, cultural materials are made to function according to different criteria, given new meanings, new histories, new identities. The conclusion is firmly optimistic, although its material is often horrific, because these writers offer an alternative vision to that hegemonic cycle of accumulation, structuration and narration: a new construction outside the history of misrepresentations.

I have called this book *Masks of difference* because the mask seems to me to have exemplary qualities as a conceit or metaphor for discourses which attempt to characterise the cultural identities and differences which epitomise the representation of savage or primitive peoples. But the mask has other more potent and challenging

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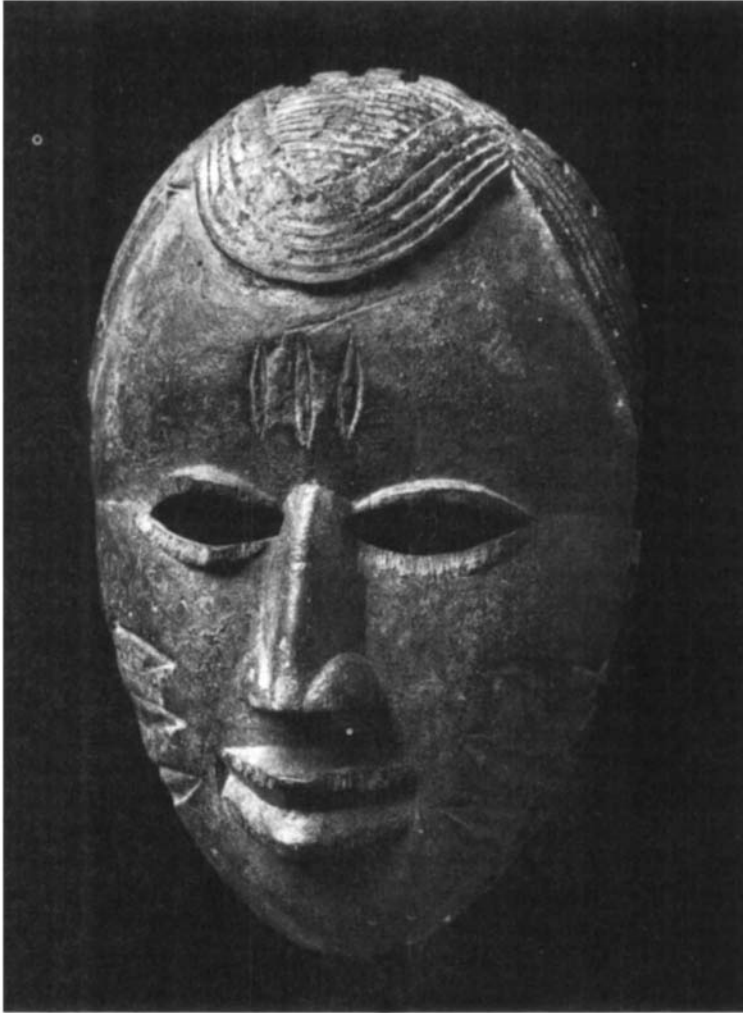
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2 *Egungun face mask in wood, from Oyo, Nigeria*

possibilities; particularly so in view of the African writers under discussion in the final chapters.

This book is an extended meditation, speculation or conceit on the image reproduced above (figure 2) which acts as an insistent alternative to Beck's anamorphic drawings. The mask is made of wood and is a little over seven inches in length. It comes from

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south-west Nigeria, from the district of Oyo in the Yoruba homelands. This mask is of a type less commonly found than the more widespread *idan* or *paaka* types, in that it is made to fit very snugly over a person's face rather than on top of the head. It is ancient and shows signs which situate it as having been made at a place close to Oyo, the Yoruba king's (the Alafin's) capital city, since the facial marks and incisions which the mask bears are those of an ancient Oyo lineage. The mask is associated with the *egungun* cult. *Egungun* refers to ancestors who control human destinies on earth. Remembrance of the ancestors is vital to the success of human endeavours; to ignore them will result in witchcraft, plagues and social dissolution. *Egungun* masks are made by the Yoruba to participate in festivals which remember and celebrate the ancestors. The *egungun* masked festivals are still the most widespread of the many masked festivals the Yoruba enjoy but the cult with which this mask is associated dates from the end of the sixteenth century and evolved out of a massive dislocation of peoples. The *Igboho*, or exile, saw the forced removal of peoples from Ife, Nupe and other areas of Yorubaland and their gathering at old Oyo under the dominion of the Alafin. These diverse groups and lineages required a homogenising influence to which they could demonstrate their shared allegiance and *egungun* provided such a sense of collective identity. The mask is therefore a powerful source of Yoruba cultural identity and cohesion linking an ancestral past with a contemporary circumstance of dislocation.<sup>4</sup>

We have already crossed the threshold into ethnography. How rapidly the mask's enigmatic presence unravels. It spills its meanings at the merest touch.

Throughout the history of the *egungun* mask's existence as an object of exegesis, which is roughly the timespan covered in this book, its remarkable clarity has been utterly obfuscated. Not allowed to be what it most clearly *is*, its expressiveness has been covered by another mask which renders it invisible. Nor is it 'mute', on the contrary, the mask 'speaks' clearly enough what it is. A great deal of this book will document the failure to see the mask 'at face value' as it were; to see, not the thing itself, but a kind of portrait of otherness; that the true, challenging, productive and beautiful difference of the *Ara Orun*, who control human destinies on earth, is masked by other differences which have been contrived to express all manner of theories, obsessions, wishes, desires and hatreds.

The book has three main ambitions: to describe those 'masks of

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difference'; to document the historical conditions which produced the cultural representations of other peoples; to discuss responses to those cultural representations by the peoples whose identities the masks of difference 'masked'. This book will attempt to uncover how the mask has itself been masked and, finally, to see how the mask is reclaimed and remade by those to whom it properly belongs.



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## Chapter 1

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### The satyr anatomised: Venice 1570

Lear: I'll teach you differences!<sup>1</sup>

The painting shows the moment of the satyr's death. Seven figures in a sylvan setting with two dogs. Marsyas hangs inverted from a tree while two figures begin the work of flaying. To the left another figure holds the *lira da braccio*; to the right a satyr carries a pail, an older man contemplates the action and a faun looks out of the painting at the viewer.

*The Flaying of Marsyas* (figure 3) was one of Titian's late works, possibly from the 1570s although critics have disputed that the painting may also be the work of Palma il Giovane.<sup>2</sup> His source for the painting was Ovid's myth and a fresco on the subject by Giulio Romano in the Sala delle Metamorfosi in Mantua.<sup>3</sup> Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* tells the myth of the Phrygian satyr Marsyas, an accomplished musician who challenged the god Apollo to a musical duel for supremacy in the art.<sup>4</sup> Marsyas played the pipes, whereas Apollo played the lyre; the agreement was that whoever won the contest would be able to do whatever he wished to the other. Marsyas lost the contest and his skin, as the penalty Apollo inflicted upon the satyr was that he should be flayed alive.

The identification of the figures in Titian's painting is no easy task since Apollo would seem to appear twice in the painting, both holding the lyre and flaying the satyr.<sup>5</sup> Alternative identifications point to the figure with the lyre being either Olympus, Marsyas' pupil, or Orpheus, the chief practitioner of Apollonian art.<sup>6</sup> The seated contemplative figure is less problematic since most critics agree that this is Midas. But here again, another identity is offered for this figure, that the figure is Titian's self-portrait. The identifica-

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3 Titian, *The Flaying of Marsyas*, c. 1570

tion of Midas with Titian himself is founded on the similarity of this figure and the *Self-Portrait* in the Prado.<sup>7</sup> Certainly, Titian frequently showed himself in his paintings, in the *Pieta* and in the *Allegory of Time Governed by Prudence*.<sup>8</sup> In these respects, the painting offers a multiplicity of identifications in its presentation of its figures; identity is masked and plural.

Interpretation of the painting centres upon its allegorical significances in Christian-platonic terms. Within those doctrines the painting symbolises variously but consistently a set of triumphant humanist ideologies. The victory of Apollo 'represents the triumph of divine art', a personification of a 'state of divine harmony', of 'the soul liberated from earthly bonds' by the rhapsodic power of Apollo-