Homo Mimeticus

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The shadow, the “genealogy,” and the empty spaces are Nietzsche’s [paths].

—Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, *The Structuralist Controversy*

The “Allegory of the Cave” continues to cast a long shadow on our *vita mimetica*, a hypermimetic life that, perhaps more than ever, informs, disinforms, and transforms daily practices in the digital age. And yet, before we look more closely into present pathologies, genealogical lenses urge us to take another step back to theoretical precursors of mimetic studies who rethought mimesis in past century and still need to be supplemented by a theory of homo mimeticus for the present century.

Although the Platonic dream of leaving the cave behind to contemplate the blinding light of the sun via a *vita contemplativa* still dominates traditional philosophical trends out of touch with the magnetizing sphere of pathos, the immanent foundations of mimetic studies remind us that a plurality of shadows continue to be cast on all-too-human lives nonetheless, including philosopher’s lives. This is perhaps most visible at the very birth of a transdisciplinary type of philosophical discourse at the margins of institutional power that, starting in the 1960s, became paradoxically central in the Anglophone world and now, with a spatiotemporal deferral, returns to haunt the foundations of continental philosophy in Europe and around the world as well.
That the shadow of mimesis cannot be dissociated from the birth of what became known as “poststructuralism,” “French theory,” or more generally, “theory” can be traced back precisely in space and time. As the literary critic Richard Macksey put it to the distinguished French scholars who had crossed the Atlantic back in 1966 to participate in a transdisciplinary symposium held in the then newly founded Humanities Center at Johns Hopkins University and organized with the intention of introducing a new method of interpretation in the humanities known as “structuralism” in the United States: “There is no Symposium without its shadow” (1972, 319). With these ominous words, Macksey, in the company of the co-organizers Eugenio Donato and René Girard, drew the legendary Johns Hopkins symposium, The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man, to a close. A lot of water has flowed under the bridge since this event shook the foundations of what the humanities are, or were supposed to be, back in 1966. And in the meantime, the human sciences, as well as the humanities centers that host them, have continued to move even farther to the margins of institutional power—thereby remaining truthful to the decentering trajectory that was already at play in that founding theoretical event that was the symposium.

And yet, the shadow of what became known as The Structuralist Controversy (1972), continues, to this day, to haunt, phantomlike, the heterogeneous world of theory, philosophy, and the arts, generating doubling effects that transgress the arbitrary walls that so often still divide the human sciences in an increasingly specialized, territorial, and precarious academic world. It is, I believe, this spirit of affirmative transgression, playful intellectual freedom, and rather tenacious resistance to power that, fifty years later, led me to join a plurality of scholars and return to that mythic liminal space which was then still called the Humanities Center, and where the theory of homo mimeticus originated in the first place. I did so to retrace the moving contours of a shadow that—attempts of violent exclusions notwithstanding—continues to animate what we still call “the humanities,” despite the awareness that the centrality of the human has long been decentered, destabilized, and deterritorialized by nonhuman forces we shall attend to as well.

Having been haunted by shadows, phantoms, and related figures for some time, I could not resist the temptation to outline, in broad and admittedly partial strokes, the silhouette of the shadow of the symposium by asking a double-faced question. At the most general level, and at the risk of schematizing the outline somewhat, this question could be formulated in the following, paradoxical terms: could it be that the 1966 Hopkins symposium was an event that cast a shadow so long on the present and future of the humanities because, in the space between spectacular presentations, it silently contributed to transforming our
understanding of a concept that defined the languages of criticism since their beginning in classical antiquity: namely, *mimēsis*? And if this genealogical hypothesis is correct, which remains to be proved, what form, or perhaps movement, does this shadow trace in the contemporary moment? Answering these questions in light of our genealogy of the *vita mimetica* urges us to evaluate the powers of mimesis that, over two millennia later, re-turn to haunt not only philosophy but the humanities, opening up the transdisciplinary field of new mimetic studies.

How does mimesis haunt the present? Via shadows that continue to give theoretical substance to homo mimeticus and we shall have to trace to the end.

**The Mimetic Re-Turn**

A shadow is a classical mimetic trope, but since its contours are, by definition, moving and destabilizing, we should be careful not to offer a unilateral answer at the outset that would fix, once and for all, mimesis in an immutable form. The shadow of the symposium was obviously not one but plural in its manifestations. It can thus not be framed in terms of a classical aesthetic conception of mimesis restricted to aesthetic realism and the representation of reality it entails—let alone as a degraded mirroring representation far removed from ideal Forms.

After all, Ferdinand de Saussure’s insight into the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign that informed structuralism in its different disciplinary manifestations marked a radical break with a type of criticism confined to what Roland Barthes, in his contribution to the *Structuralist Controversy*, called “the totalitarian ideology of the referent” (1972b, 138) central to realism. Despite the controversy the symposium generated, the participants tended to agree at least on one point: namely, that what were then still called—in a patriarchal language soon to be decentered—the “sciences of man,” could no longer rest on a stabilizing, homogeneous, and transparent rendering of mimesis understood as representation, copy, or mirror of reality that dominated the language of criticism from classical antiquity to, say, the nineteenth century. And yet, this does not mean that a minor conception of *mimesis*, already at play in heterogeneous, destabilizing, and shadowy manifestations, was not secretly replayed with significant differences. A genealogical concern with the *vita mimetica* was in fact already implicitly informing the participants’ theoretical engagements with the human and social sciences, establishing different, perhaps more playful, certainly more
unstable, protean, and transgressive models of mimetic criticism for the twilight of the twentieth century—now stretching to the dawn of the twenty-first century as well.

During the symposium, mimetic appearances were masked but manifold: from Roland Barthes’s account of structuralist activity in terms of a “homology” (1972b, 136), predicated on what he called an “activity of imitation,” or “mimesis” (1971, 1197), to Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic conception of the subject as a “divided essence,” which is the effect of a “repetition of […] symbolic sameness” (1972, 192); from Georges Poulet’s phenomenological account of “mimetic criticism” (1972, 65), attentive to what he calls a “possession of myself by another” (61), or, alternatively, “mimesis” (65), to Jean-Pierre Vernant’s classical concerns with the “ambiguity of the pharmakos” (1972, 277) that centers on a dramatic actor, or mimos, from which mimēsis derives its conceptual identity; from Guy Rosolato’s reframing of myth not as “representation, a sort of copy of the outside world” but, rather, as a “duplication” of “sender” and “addressee,” destinateur and destinataire (1972, 202), to other supplementary doublings and redoublings that troubled the stability of an original and autonomous form or identity, introducing heterogeneous differences in place of homogeneous sameness, it would be possible to show that the problematic of mimesis did not only follow, shadowlike, most of the presentations; it also preceded them, informing and transforming the different and still original challenges to the metaphysical “status of the subject,” which, as Macksey recognized, was a “recurrent preoccupation” during the symposium (Macksey, Girard, and Hyppolite 1972, 319–320).

The shadow of mimesis looms large on the decentering of the subject at play in The Structuralist Controversy in general and what become known as poststructuralism in particular. But given my genealogical focus, I would like to retrace its emergence from a specific perspective partially in line with the phantom of homo mimeticus that, as we saw and heard in preceding chapters, is currently returning to reanimate the contemporary theoretical scene, albeit under different masks and conceptual personae. After stepping back to the origins of consciousness and language with Nietzsche and then re-evaluating the dawn of philosophy with Plato, read along with Nancy and Cavarero, I will now take my cue from two participants who, in many ways, were located at the structural antipodes of the controversy and occupied opposed, agonistic, perhaps even rivalrous theoretical positions. They provide, in fact, the Scylla of sameness and the Charybdis of difference my theory of homo mimeticus pushes against—to gather speed to sail toward future-oriented destinations. The names of these precursors, you will have guessed, are René Girard and Jacques Derrida.
At first sight, the differences between these two French thinkers far outplay the similarities. Starting from their respective contributions, “Tiresias and the Critic,” that prefaced the symposium, and “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” that marked its culmination and launched deconstruction on to the international scene, Girard and Derrida not only consistently promoted opposed languages for criticism; they also developed radically divergent methods of interpretation that split their respective theories in competing, antagonistic, and seemingly incommensurable sides: if mimetic theory centers human subjectivity in general and desire in particular within a triangular structure Girard will defend to the end, deconstruction decenters the all-too-human desire for such structures from the beginning; if Girard believes in violent sacrificial referents that always rest on a metaphysics of presence, Derrida sets in motion the play of signifiers that are already absent, thereby unmasking presence as a metaphysical illusion; Girard is looking back to the origins of culture, Derrida looks ahead to the forward movement of the trace; the former is a theological literary critic with philosophical reach, the latter is an atheological philosopher with a literary sensibility. In short, as the slogan goes, mimetic theory focuses on imitation and sameness; deconstruction, the counterslogan echoes, is attentive to writing and difference.

Either way, the opposition could not be more clear-cut. It opens up a binary that, to this day, tends to generate antagonisms that continue to latently structure debates on the relation between mimesis, language, and culture. And yet one of the major lessons of the symposium was that, as always with such oppositions, a closer diagnostic look reveals that underneath the first layer of straightforward discontinuity, underlying continuities begin to appear, shadow-like, from the interstices of competing theoretical positions. Rather than dismissing such appearances as an illusion, I would like to replay these competing accounts of sameness and difference in slow motion, as one replays scenes from two radically different but equally classic movies of the same period. My goal is to see and feel, from the shadows reflected on the screen, if two traditionally opposed conceptions of mimesis can paradoxically be used to supplement one another in view of furthering new mimetic studies in the twenty-first century.²

I suggest that looking back, genealogically, to both Girard’s and Derrida’s contributions to the symposium and related texts of that period reveals that these opposed figures are theoretical doppelgangers, perhaps even “rival brothers”
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(McKenna 1992, 12), whose agonistic stance reveals important continuities characteristic of mimetic agonism. If these precursors find in a Janus-faced conception of mimesis an original starting point for their critical and theoretical languages for the human sciences that was influential for the (post)structuralist turn informing French Theory in the 1960s and 1970s, I argue that they still provide genealogical steps to further the mimetic re-turn half a century later in the 2010s and 2020s. My wager is that once provisionally joined via a genealogical operation that is attentive to what Nietzsche calls “a knowledge of the conditions and circumstances of their [values but also theories] growth, development and displacement” (1996a, 8), Girard’s and Derrida’s mimetic reflections generate a series of destabilizing redoublings that not only provisionally bridge the gap that divides their critical languages; they also pave the way for double-faced diagnostics of the all-too-human tendency to imitate relevant for our contemporary, hypermimetic times.

From the empty spaces in between sameness and difference, then, we shall see that a humanities center once opened up transdisciplinary perspectives that now tend to be disseminated at the margins of an increasingly specialized academic world. And yet contemporary problematics that tend to spill over disciplinary boundaries—from the rise of conspiracy theories to (new) fascism, brain plasticity to cultural adaptations, gender and racial oppression to the need for nonhuman sympathy in the age of the Anthropocene, among other perspectives explored in this book—cast a shadow on the contemporary human and social sciences, projecting the silhouette of a constantly changing figure of homo mimeticus each generation of critics and theorists must retrace for their own times. But let us start our genealogy with a double conception of criticism first.

Mimetic Criticism: Two Interpretations of Interpretation

Unlike many of his generation, René Girard never shared a preoccupation with the linguistic sign as such. He was more interested in the referential reality of mimetic desire and the violence it generated than in arbitrary relations between signifiers and signifieds. Yet, already at the time of the symposium, which he co-organized with Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, Girard’s theoretical foundations were clearly grounded in synchronic and diachronic presuppositions he directly inherited from structuralism.\(^3\)
Starting with his contribution to the structuralist controversy titled “Tiresias and the Critic,” Girard, in fact, frames his account of the subject within a triangular conception of mimetic desire, which, as his title makes clear, finds in Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex* a synchronic, universal, or, as he puts it, “coherent structure” or “structural model” (1972, 19, 20). As he explains: “What Oedipus needs, is to do away with both his *Self* and his *Other*—equally imaginary, at least in part—through an abandonment of their sterilizing interplay in the constantly reforming structure of his relationships” (17). Imaginary oppositions, sterilizing interplay, structure of relations: the critical language Girard mobilizes clearly bears the traces of structuralist influences but also introduces a hierarchy that orients his own theoretical priorities. His driving *telos* in reading *Oedipus Rex* and other canonical western texts—from Greek tragedies to romantic novels, from Shakespeare to the Bible—that tend to be structured in triangular relations is precisely not to follow the interplay of constantly reforming structures of relationships between self and others. Rather, it is to stabilize their structural movement by dispelling the *méconnaissance* of seemingly opposed figures and recognizing that the desire of the other is already internal to the desire of the self. This is, in a nutshell, Girard’s theoretical starting point.

The continuity between self and other is already implicit in the title of Girard’s first book, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (1961), which in the English translation bears the revealing subtitle: “Self and Other in Literary Structure.” In Girard’s interpretation, both self and other, be they fictional or real, are entangled in the same imaginary structure of mimetic relations whose interplay they do not control but controls them instead, their desires in particular. Self-knowledge, for Girard, must thus begin by dispelling this imaginary difference in order to recognize the underlying sameness at play in the mimetic desire that structurally ties the self to the other in the first place. Girard’s structural model is well known and can be summarized as follows: at the origins of human desire we find nothing original, nothing proper, but mimesis instead. This also means that desire does not originate in the self but is centered in the other; not any other but an admired other, a hero, model, or mediator who directs the subject’s desire toward the object the model desires—and voilà, a structure has already taken form: that is, a triangular form that frames the subject, the model, and the object, often a woman, in a relation of mimetic rivalry that leads to violence and sameness rather than play and difference. It is thus with this structure in mind that, in “Tiresias and the Critic,” Girard sets out to “attract,” as he says, “Oedipus’s attention to the ambiguous signs from which this structure may finally reveal its outline” (1972, 17). His goal in outlining this triangular structure
is to “unmask” what he calls the “false assumption of absolute autonomy” (17) characteristic of heroes of western knowledge who, like Oedipus, do not see the shadow the model casts on their egos.

This advice applies, first of all, to the mythic hero within the text that provides the Oedipal content for interpretation, but formal attention to Girard’s critical language indicates that a doubling rhetorical operation is already at play, reaching outside the text as well. “Tiresias and the Critic,” in fact, is also mimetic in the sense that it draws inspiration from the play the critic is commenting on, redoubling its formal address: it is parabolic in form, prophetic in tone, and, as the title suggests, exploits the metaphorical potential of the Oedipus myth to introduce implicit performative continuities between mythic characters inside the text and the critics he addresses outside the text.

Remember the context. Girard presented its first version as a paper at the 1966 Hopkins symposium, so his talk about the self was addressed to referential others listening to his talk in view of generating mirroring effects: if Tiresias is in a position of a seer who warns Oedipus of his hubris within the text, the mimetic critic might be tempted to redouble the warning for his listeners hors-texte. Tiresias’s advice to Oedipus, whom Girard considers the “the first Western hero of Knowledge” (1972, 17) is thus Janus-faced, for it is also a prophetic advice Girard, impersonating “the critic,” implicitly addresses over two millennia later, to those heroes of western knowledge present at the symposium. From a position twice removed from this mythic scene, then, we can already see that this doubling shadow in Girard’s intervention crosses the line between self and other, but also fiction and reality, mythic knowledge and scientific knowledge, tragic heroes of the past and theoretical heroes of the present—a point that Girard confirms, as he sees in Tiresias nothing less than a “striking symbol of the changes that have occurred in our disciplines” (18)—changes, we should add, that are still ongoing today.

This mythic parable, then, makes us wonder: does the dramatic interplay between Oedipus and Tiresias generate effects of self-recognition among the distinguished audience present at the symposium? Put differently, does the outline in “Tiresias and the Critic” set up a mirror that might dispel the méconnaissance of the opposition between self and others for contemporary heroes of western knowledge, including, perhaps, Girard’s own knowledge of mimesis?

There are a number of clues that point in this direction. As the choice of the case of Oedipus indicates, the emphasis on desire and imaginary méconnaissance suggests, and the identification of Freud as someone who “saw infinitely more in Oedipus than all Rationalists combined, beginning with Aristotle” (Girard
1972, 19) confirms, Girard is delineating a triangular structure he inherits directly from psychoanalysis, both in its classical and linguistic formulations. As I have argued in more detail elsewhere, psychoanalysis is a “science of man” Girard seeks to overturn by positing the primacy of mimesis (or identification) over desire (or object cathexis). This overturning is not without theoretical purchase. It explains, for instance, why the subject’s relation to the model becomes “ambivalent”: if mimesis orients desire and thus the subject desires the same object that the model desires, the triangular structure obliges a mimetic rivalry with the model/opponent over the contested object—which can be a person, but also a symbolic position, one of fame or prestige, including academic prestige, for instance—is likely to ensue, which does not mean that alternatives relations between self and others are not possible, as we shall see. Crucial to retain for the moment is that on the shoulders of Freud, Girard infers this structure from the classical case of Sophocles’s Oedipus Rex. And repeatedly in his career, he confirms the supposed veracity of this structure via interpretations of other Greek tragedies, but also Shakespeare’s plays, romantic novels, as well as religious rituals and myths, which turn around what Girard calls the “stationary axe [l’axe immobile]” (1965, 307) that stabilizes the so-called “sterilizing interplay in the constant reforming structure of relationships” (1972, 17). A stable axle, or center, is thus provided that stabilizes the destabilizing interplay of mirroring relations.

This is a condensed account of a wide-ranging theory, but it already reveals how deep the différend with Jacques Derrida goes. As is well known, Derrida’s theoretical operation is not only opposed to Girard’s; it also implicitly challenges the metaphysical foundations, or center, on which his mimetic theory rests. Writing contra structuralism in general and Lévi-Strauss in particular, Derrida, in fact, dislocates precisely such an immobile axle on which coherent structural models that traverse the entire history of western metaphysics rest—from Plato to Rousseau, Saussure to Lévi-Strauss, informing Girard’s mimetic desire as well. Derrida’s outline of two models of interpretation at the end of “Structure, Sign and Play” brings this theoretical difference into sharp focus. It is worth quoting in full, for it has significant implications for that critical practice par excellence, which is interpretation. As Derrida puts it:

There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of freeplay [jeu]. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering, a truth or an origin which is free from freeplay and from the order of the sign, and lives like an exile the necessity of interpretation. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms freeplay
and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology [...] has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of the game [fin du jeu]. (Derrida 1972, 264–265)

The driving telos of these agonistic interpretative activities staged at the symposium could not be more clearly opposed. On the one hand, Girard, not unlike Lévi-Strauss, focuses on structural homologies (or mimesis) and dreams as an exile of interpreting a foundational truth located at the center (or origin) of relations to stabilize the subject in a structure (or form) deprived of play. On the other hand, Derrida focuses on the heterogeneous movement of writing traced by the freeplay of signifiers on a linguistic chain that sees no end to the game and destabilizes a belief in origins, presence, and centers altogether. As Derrida anticipates in his opening paragraph, the structural method takes the form of a “rupture” (247). Yet, he immediately adds, playing with a mimetic trope, that it also paves the way for a “redoubling” (247). A mimetic rupture thus redoubles with a difference that deconstructs, or decenters, a western metaphysics characterized by logocentrism, phonocentrism, and ethnocentrism, all of which are structured around a center or a stabilizing axle—including, of course, Girard’s axle.

Why, then, attempt to bridge these antagonistic methods of interpretation? Because, as the mimetic redoubling on the side of both deconstructive ruptures and structuralist axles suggests, mimesis is a protean concept that flows, like a river, in between opposed theoretical banks. And as we look down from this bridge that we are attempting to—build sounds too stable; I should rather say—bricoler, we might catch a glimpse of a fluttering shadow appearing and disappearing on a moving surface. This shadow is obviously not simply realistic, for a river is not a mirror and reflects no stable imago. Yet it generates illuminating inversions of perspectives that are not deprived of patho(-)logical moments of self-recognition. Whether they reach into the present and anticipate future reflections on homo mimeticus is what we turn to find out by considering how a pharmakon turned into a pharmakos—or perhaps the other way round.
Derrida’s playful association between the structuralist rupture and the redoubling at play in deconstruction was, of course, not accidental. Writing, as a concept, is already inscribed in the doubling structure of mimesis, if only because from Plato to Rousseau, Saussure to Lévi-Strauss, Derrida reminds us, time and again, that western metaphysics has conceived of writing as a copy, simulacrum, or shadow of speech.

Already in *De la grammatologie*, first published in 1967, and thus already completed at the time of the 1966 symposium, Derrida shows that this logocentric bias informs Lévi-Strauss’s account of the “Leçon d’écriture” among the Nambikwara he famously narrates in his founding anthropological memoir *Tristes tropiques* (1955). According to the anthropologist, this scene of origins reveals that writing and imitation are clearly intertwined in the sense that the Nambikwara of Brazil who started to trace “undulating lines” on the sheets of paper they were given, Lévi-Strauss tells us, were simply “imitating” (qtd. in Derrida 1967, 180; my trans.), or of you prefer, shadowing his own anthropological use of notebooks. As Derrida comments, the chief who senses the power of writing, in Lévi-Strauss’s narrative or myth of origins, “mimes writing [mime l’écrire] rather than understanding its linguistic function” (178). At the “origins” of this mythic scene, then, is what Derrida calls, in a redoubling linguistic play, an “imitation of writing” (185). Imitation or mime has here all the negative connotations of a false, illusory, and debased copy or shadow inherited from western metaphysics we have seen at play since Plato relegated it to a dark cave in the *Republic* and degraded writing to a mere a copy of speech in *Phaedrus*. But it is not only that. In fact, in Derrida’s interpretation of interpretation, this writerly imitation of yet another imitation sets in motion the destabilizing interplay of doubling and redoubling that makes the search for stabilizing mythic origins vain in the first place.

Mimesis, for Derrida, is thus both a metaphysical concept to deconstruct and, at the same time, and without contradiction, the very doubling concept without proper identity that allows him to carry out his deconstructive operation. Hence, in a section *Of Grammatology* titled “Imitation” devoted to Rousseau’s “Essay sur l’origine des langues,” Derrida specifies that “imitation cannot be evaluated via a simple act” (1967, 290), for it “redoubles presence, it adds to it by supplementing it [l’imitation redouble la présence, s’y ajoute en la
suppléant)” (289). In 1967 this was a groundbreaking move that did much to set the mimetic turn in motion and would shape the practice of interpretation for decades to come, which also means that by now the move is familiar.

This improper imitation or mimesis is, of course, mirroring the doubling structure of that “dangerous supplement” that both adds to and replaces speech: namely, writing—écriture. Hence this time in “Plato’s Pharmacy,” published in 1968, which is an admirable deconstruction of Plato’s relegation of writing to the secondary status of a shadow of speech in *Phaedrus*, Derrida echoes, in a reproduction of the phonocentric metaphysical view he critiques, that “writing can only mime” (1981b, 107), for it has no essence, no stable identity, no origins that are proper to itself. A view subsequently redoubled in the “The Double Session,” this time via a reading of Stéphane Mallarmé’s short prose poem “Mimique,” in the claim that “writing in general is interpreted as an imitation, a duplicate of the living voice or present logos” (Derrida 1981a, 185), and so on in a series of admirable readings. The chain of Derrida’s texts establishing an explicit genealogical link that ties writing to phantoms, not only to critique logocentrism but also to affirmative-ly inscribe mimesis in the doubling logic of the “supplement,” the “pharmakon,” the “trace,” “iteration,” and related double-faced deconstructive concepts are numerous, canonical, and there is little need to insist on the destabilizing theoretical flow this chain of conceptual signifiers generated in the last decades of the past century.

What still needs to be fully bridged in the present century is the mirroring interplay Girard and Derrida implicitly generated on seemingly opposed, yet no less imitative interpretative sides. For there is a mimetic agon that both opposes and connects these two precursors of mimetic studies in productive ways that still need to be traced to further a new theory of homo mimeticus. To return to the shadow reflected in the river under the genealogical bridge I am in the process of bricoler, we could notice that not unlike desire for Girard, writing for Derrida has no “essence,” nothing “proper” to itself, for it is always already doubled by mime-sis. As Andrew McKenna perceptively argued, Girard’s anthropological theory of mimetic desire is “inextricably bound up with the questions Derrida poses to phi-loso phy in terms of what is proper and improper to language” (McKenna 1992, 4). My genealogical approach agrees with McKenna’s re-evaluation of Derrida and Girard as “frères ennemis” (12), an enmity I consider constitutive of the mimetic agonism that gives birth to new theories more generally, old and new.

Where our interpretations differ without necessarily being antagonistic is on the question of method as well as in our respective theoretical goal or telos that orients them. At the level of method, my aim is to provide a genealogical ac-count of the movement of emergence or development of these two mirroring and
competing theories in order to test both their strengths and limits, using them to supplement each other. At the level of *telos*, from the space in between that both divides and unites these competing theories of interpretation, I aim to open up a new theory of mimesis to continue giving philosophical substance to a mimetic turn. This re-turn is informed by both Girard and Derrida’s theories, but, as the preceding chapters already made clear, is not restricted to French (post)structuralism. On the contrary, an affective, embodied, and intersubjective conception of homo mimeticus goes beyond linguistic principles by engaging with more recent developments in feminism, political theory, new materialism, film and media studies, and the neurosciences, all of which are now informing new mimetic studies.

If we turn to supplement both Girard and Derrida from a genealogical perspective attentive to the “growth, development and displacement” (Nietzsche 1996a, 8) of theories, we should specify that both mimetic desire and mimetic writing are not only tied to violence in general but also to a rivalrous violence directed against the figure of the father in particular. The patriarchal shadow of the father looms large on both theories of interpretation. We already noted how Girard’s theory is structured on a mimetic confrontation between self and other, involving a rivalry between fathers and sons modeled on triangular mythic structures that harken back to *Oedipus Rex*. What we must add is that Derrida’s deconstruction of logocentric metaphysical binaries is equally rooted in a familial scene. For instance, in a section of “Plato’s Pharmacy,” subtitled “Family Scene,” Derrida writes: “the father’s death opens the reign of violence. In choosing violence—and that is what it’s all about from the beginning—and violence against the father, the son—or patricidal writing—cannot fail to expose himself, too” (Derrida 1981b, 146). Family triangles, rivalries, and patricidal drives: genealogical lenses are beginning to reveal important mirroring symmetries between Girard’s interpretation of desire and Derrida’s interpretation of writing. To be fair, we should therefore ask a symmetrical question we already asked Girard: is this theoretical claim about father and sons based on an Oedipal myth?

At first sight this seems to be the case, but the mirroring reflection is not as neat. Derrida, in fact, specifies that “the discourse we are holding here is not in a strict sense a psychoanalytical one” (1981b, 131). And in a decisive moment in his “genealogy of writing” (75) in “Plato’s Pharmacy,” which does not rest on the Greek myth of Oedipus as framed by Freud, but on the Egyptian myth of Thoth as dramatized by Plato in *Phaedrus*, Derrida continues: “In distinguishing himself from his opposite, Thoth also imitates it, becomes its sign and representative, obeys it and *conforms* to it, replaces it, by violence if need be” (93).
Underneath violent oppositions, then, often lurks the shadow of imitation. And yet this shadow does not simply reproduce sameness but produces differential genealogical reflections instead.

In this mythic interplay of family scenes concerned with fathers and sons, the shadow-line between self and other is blurred, and it is no longer clear who, exactly, is the subject of imitation. Let us thus apply the same distinction between inside and outside we started with, which, of course is not as watertight as it sounds. Inside the text this subject is a mythic figure, to be sure: Thoth for Derrida, not unlike Oedipus for Girard, stands as a hero of western knowledge of mimetic practices, be they linked to writing or desire, on which their theoretical logos rests. But to redouble our mirroring question hors-texte, and involve the pathos of philosophy in our discussion, we should also ask a second, more destabilizing and troubling question: namely, does this paradoxical movement of opposition between mythic fathers and sons such as Oedipus and Laius, Thoth and Thamus, cast a formative shadow on the symposium in general and on new heroes of western knowledge such as Girard and Derrida in particular?

Let us continue to outline the moving patho-logical contours of this shadow reflected on the moving surface of the river of mimesis. In Plato’s retelling of the Egyptian myth of Thoth in Phaedrus, who is at the origins of theories of writing, not unlike in Sophocles’s dramatization of the Oedipus myth in Oedipus Rex at the origins of Oedipal theories, the mimetic subject (Thoth, Oedipus) needs to be violently excluded from the city in order to have pharmacological effects. Thus, in “Plato’s Pharmacy,” Derrida asks a question that was certainly not lost on Girard: namely, “how can this supplementary parasite be excluded by maintaining the boundary, or, let us say, the triangle?” (1981b, 102). Derrida’s answer, he continues—and keep in mind that we are in 1968, that is, two years after the symposium but also four years before the appearance of Violence and the Sacred (1972), the book in which Girard first formulates the theory of the scapegoat—should sound familiar to mimetic theorists: via a ritual expulsion of a pharmakos or scapegoat. Thus, he, Derrida, writes:

The character of the pharmakos has been compared to a scapegoat [bouc émissaire]. The evil and the outside, the expulsion of the evil, its exclusion out of the body (and out) of the city—these are the two major senses of the character and of the ritual. (1981b, 130)

Mimesis, triangles, violence between fathers and sons, and now ritual expulsions of scapegoats as well. That is, the theory he, Girard, is most known for,
begins to appear, like a fluttering reflection in the genealogical mirror confronting two mimetic antagonists.

The symmetries, we can now see from our precarious bridge, have been doubling and redoubling, troubling the distinction between mythic heroes within the text and heroes of knowledge outside. So, it should be legitimate to ask: are these simple linguistic coincidences? The arbitrary product of the play of signifiers? Or, more probably, do these doubling effects bear genealogical traces of the emergence of two opposed, yet intimately entangled methods of interpretation?

Before pursuing this *bricolage* over this precarious and thus perilous bridge, a methodological warning is in order. It is certainly not my intention to deconstruct a binary opposition between two methods of reading on the basis of a pharmacology, which, as Derrida was the first to know, has never been stable—no exercise was more widespread for some time and further reproductions are not necessary for our genealogy; nor is it my ambition to establish a unilateral, patrilinear genealogy between fathers and sons, mimetic origins and differential copies—for it is precisely the unitary figure of a single, unitary origin, or father, the threefold genealogies at play aim to erase. Rather, I am gesturing toward what Derrida calls “an obscure economy,” which, he says at the end of “Structure Sign and Play,” momentarily “reconciles” (1972, 265) without necessarily sublating in a dialectical move what he had previously called two opposed critical activities. And I do so by taking my clue from an untimely observation Derrida made in the Q&A during the symposium: namely, that deconstruction is not synonymous with “destruction”; rather, “it is simply a question of being alert to the implications, to the historical sedimentations of the language we use” (271). And, he adds parenthetically, “(and this is a necessity of criticism in the classical sense)” (271). Another classical name in line with a figure that directly informs Derrida’s interpretative method would be, of course, genealogy.

Mimetic Genealogy: From the *Pharmakon* to the *Pharmakos*

With Derrida’s genealogical reminder that the language we use bears the traces of historical sedimentations, let us return to the competing interpretations the shadow of mimesis generated during the symposium to bring it closer to our theoretical preoccupations. We have seen that Girard infers his conception of
mimetic desire that blurs the boundary between self and other, generating violence and sameness in place of difference, from a classical Oedipal, and thus psychoanalytic, myth. But genealogy points to more than one origin, which, even in the case of theoretical origins, might not be deprived of a productive form of intellectual contest. This contest, as we had occasions to see, does not fit the triangular structure of mimetic rivalry and the psychic pathologies it generates; it is rather constitutive of what I call mimetic agonism and the new theory of imitation it brings to the surface. Let us thus look at the theoretically productive, differentiating, and patho-logical, rather than violent, undifferentiated, and pathological effects of mimetic agonism. This involves continuing to stage the dynamic interplay where sameness and difference, violence and writing, the pharmakos and the pharmakon meet, sometimes cross swords, yet productively reflect on each other.

On the side of violence, the theory of the scapegoat qua pharmakos on which, for Girard, the foundations of ritual, religion, and culture tout court rest, originates in a reproduction of a hypothetical founding murder of the primal father that can easily be traced to Freud’s Totem and Tabu (1913) but is now tied to classics of mimetic theory like Violence and the Sacred (1972) and later The Scapegoat (1982). In these and other studies, Girard argues, with Oedipus still as a paradigmatic example but with a broader anthropological tradition to support his interpretative claims, that in different traditions, the scapegoat or pharmakos is both sacred and accursed insofar as it operates according to the paradoxical logic of what Girard calls a pharmakon (poison and remedy)—which does not mean that pharmaceutical models of interpretation were not already at play before. In a rare genealogical backward glance, Girard briefly acknowledges a precursor toward the end of Violence and the Sacred:

Philosophy, like tragedy, can at certain levels serve as an attempt at expulsion, an attempt perpetually renewed because never wholly successful. This point, I think, had been brilliantly demonstrated by Jacques Derrida in his essay, “La Pharmacie de Platon.” He sets out to analyze Plato’s use of the term pharmakon. The Platonic pharmakon functions like [exactement comme] the human pharmakos and leads to similar [analogues] results. (Girard 1977, 296)

Girard and Derrida may be opposed in theory, yet genealogical lenses reveal that they share a number of fundamental principles in practice. Girard is often antagonistic to his intellectual models, from Plato to Nietzsche, from Freud to Marcel
Mauss to Georges Bataille, erasing traces of influences that betray a still romantic “anxiety of influence” (Harold Bloom’s term) that is, strictly speaking, not constitutive of mimetic agonism but of what I call “romantic agonism” instead—the romantic anxiety being directly proportional to the desire for originality that leads not so much to creative misreadings but to erasing the traces of influence altogether. While this romantic agonism applies to his relation to Derrida’s thought as well, rare passages like this suggest that Girard’s parabolic warning to Oedipus—and at one remove, to contemporary heroes of knowledge—concerning the fragile opposition between self and other spills over beyond the text into the real world and casts a shadow on theoretical and quite referential others as well. Autonomy, as Girard is the first to know, is indeed, a myth. And this applies to theoretical autonomy as well. Hence the need of a genealogical approach that explicitly acknowledges precursors in order to open up the transdisciplinary field of mimetic studies.

The shadow under the bridge is now becoming visible, its movement of emergence perceptible. In one of those legendary footnotes that spans over numerous pages, Derrida, in “Plato’s Pharmacy,” convokes an anthropological tradition that goes from James Frazer to Marcel Mauss, and enlists a literary tradition that includes Sophocles and Shakespeare (1981b, 130–132, n. 56), after which, he, Derrida continues to sharpen the theory of the pharmakos qua scapegoat as follows:

The city body proper thus reconstitutes its unity, closes around the security of its inner courts, gives back to itself the word that links it with itself within the confines of the agora, by violently excluding from its territory the representative of an external threat or aggression. That representative represents the otherness of the evil that comes to affect or infect the inside by unpredictably breaking into it […] The ceremony of the pharmakos is thus played out on the boundary line à la limite between inside and outside, which has as its function ceaselessly to trace and retrace. (133)

Were it not for the last sentence, even for an experienced reader of both Derrida and Girard, it would be difficult to identify who, indeed, is the subject of such interpretations. Genealogical lenses reveal that the differential movement of the trace emerging from the dynamic of mimetic agonism in-forms the pathology the scapegoat is supposed to cure—and vice versa. In fact, both the movement of the pharmakos (scapegoat) flowing across binaries like inside/outside, poison/
remedy and the violent exclusion outside that like a *pharmakon* (poison/remedy) reconstitutes the unity of community inside, join hands to compose a Janus-faced conceptual configuration. And what we see is a transgressive conceptual feature of a deconstructive interpretation of the trace qua *pharmakon* on one side, and a mimetic reading of the scapegoat qua *pharmakos*, on the other. Which also means that Tiresias’s critique of Oedipus was, in a subtle sense still in need of a redoubling interpretation, also a prophetic self-critique for the critic.

What form, then, does this shadow take? The interplay of these two opposed methods of interpretation outlines a chiasmic, mirroring reflection that is inscribed in the very doubling structure of the *pharmakon* of mimesis itself—if only because *mimēsis*, Derrida reminds us, is “akin to the *pharmakon*” (1981a, 139). And what we see from our genealogical bridge is that in the passage from the logic of writing to the one of mimesis, writing is endowed with a referential, material substance it previously lacked (via Girard), and mimesis finds a therapeutic solution to an ancient Oedipal riddle thanks to the equally ancient paradoxical structure of the *pharmakon* (via Derrida). The agonistic interplay of writing and mimesis, in other words, does not simply generate a shadow that reproduces sameness in place of difference. On the contrary, it generates a differential sameness that is inscribed in a paradoxical logic of mimetic agonism. And this logic is classical and equally shared by both Girard and Derrida, a trace that leads us to our third man—for it takes three to form a triangle.

The Third Man: Jean-Pierre Vernant

There is, in fact, a critical figure who has remained in the shadow of our genealogy so far; yet his genealogy precedes and supplements both the copy and the model along classical pharmacological lines that should now sound quite familiar. In his contribution to the symposium titled “Greek Tragedy: Problems of Interpretation,” the classicist Jean-Pierre Vernant provided a reading of Greek tragedy in general and of Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex* in particular that left important traces on both Girard’s and Derrida’s seminal theories of the *pharmakos* qua *pharmakon*.

Vernant’s reading is historical and philological in orientation, attentive to the details of the cultural background Greek tragedies presupposed in general, and frames *Oedipus Rex* in particular against the ritual context of the Athenian Thargelia. That is, an agrarian festival of purification that culminated with a
ritual expulsion qua sacrificial killing that brought out what Vernant calls the “ambiguity” of the “pharmakos.” As Vernant explains, during Thargelia, “at the moment when the impurities of the past season are expelled at the entrance into the new season, there is, at Athens, the expulsion of one who is called the pharmakos” (Vernant 1972, 277). This sacrificial figure in recent years became exemplary of the “bare life of homo sacer” (Agamben 2005, 125), which Giorgio Agamben traced back to transdisciplinary precursors of mimetic studies like Georges Bataille.

For our purpose it suffices to say that for Vernant, “this paean [...] is characterized by its ambiguity” (1972, 276–277). And thinking of Oedipus Rex, he adds: “It is no accident that the tragic poet has placed this paean at the beginning of his tragedy” (277). Oedipus, for Vernant, is precisely such a pharmakos who occupies a double, ambivalent position, for he is both the savior of the city and the embodiment of an impurity who “must be expelled” for the benefit of the community. He equally reminds us that the Greeks could expel “as a pharmakos a person who has committed no crime, but who has risen too high, has too much good luck” (277), thereby pointing to jealousy, envy, or what Nietzsche would call ressentiment characteristic of the bad Eris, as the ambivalent affects already at play in this ancient ritual expulsion.

We seem, once again, to be brought back to a classical psychoanalytical scene as a via regia to the psychic life of the subject, including its unconscious, conflicted, and ambivalent Oedipal drives. And yet Vernant is quite firm in his opposition to psychoanalytical readings of Oedipus Rex. Thus, he says that “the Oedipus in the tragedy may have complexes, but he doesn’t have an Oedipus complex—that is obvious” (1972, 293). He gives interpretative philological reasons to support this strong claim. For instance, commenting on the famous passage in which Jocasta says that “in dream [...] many a man has lain with his own mother” (Sophocles 1959, 52, ll. 980–983), Vernant states that this is of “no importance” for at least three reasons: first, because this claim is “not much of a censure” (1972, 293)—Jocasta tells Oedipus, “don’t fear it!” (Sophocles 1959, 51, ll. 980)—and thus the text does not really dramatize a repressive hypothesis; second, because nothing in the tragedy indicates that Oedipus “had any feelings at all for Jocasta” (Vernant 1972, 293); and last, Vernant stresses that in the play, Jocasta never occupied the symbolic function of Oedipus’s “mother” in the first place (293; see also 294–295). Thus, agreeing with Lévi-Strauss, Vernant adds that “what the Freudians have to say about the Oedipus myth constitutes a new myth” (293); that is, a reproductive myth that emerges from a circular process of citationality insofar as Freudian critics “cite the myth itself, but the myth has this meaning only because Freud labeled it a complex” (294)—in an
endless regress that continues well into the present, despite the growing doubts concerning Oedipal theories of the unconscious.¹⁰

For Vernant, then, psychoanalytical and psychoanalytical-inspired readings of Sophocles’s classical tragedy reveal more about modern critical and theoretical interpretations and the changes in the human sciences they reflect than about the tragic play itself—which is the genealogical hypothesis we have been pursuing from the beginning. At an additional remove, we might now supplement this anti-Oedipal insight by saying that conflicts of interpretation reveal something about the oppositions, rivalries, perhaps also jealousies at play between heroes of western knowledge themselves. This also means that mirroring reflections are not deprived of innovative inversions of perspective whose linguistic traces are still visible for genealogists of mimesis to retrace.

But more importantly, genealogy, we should not forget, is not only concerned with the critical language of the past; it also opens up new theories for the human sciences to pursue in the present and future. Let us recall that Derrida ended “Structure, Sign and Play” with a question he addresses to future generations to which, nolens volens, we belong. “Here there is a sort of question,” he writes, “call it historical [or genealogical], of which we are only glimpsing today the conception, the formation, the gestation, the labor” (Derrida 1972, 265). This is, in a sense, still our question. And in a clear allusion to Nietzsche, Derrida specifies that he is thinking of the “business of childbearing” (265), that is, a maternal rather than a paternal business. If Derrida ends the theoretical event that was his talk with this embryonic insight, he does not say more.

A lot of water has passed under the bridge since. Perhaps, then, the time is now ripe for others to give this insight a push, so to speak. This will allow to bring our genealogy of homo mimeticus into the world out of an alternative conception of the unconscious that remained in the shadows in the past century but is increasingly difficult to ignore in the present century.

**Birth of the Subject: Out of the Mimetic Unconscious**

For a long time and up to the twilight of the twentieth century, the problematic of mimesis entangled the language of criticism in rivalries with father figures that, somewhat obsessively, lead to violence and death. Pushing with and against this tradition, the passage on our genealogical bridge brings us back to maternal
forms of communication that lead to life and birth vital to opening up new interpretative paths at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

As we already saw in previous chapters, the difference between these two perspectives are numerous: if patriarchal genealogies tend to privilege vertical, universal, and violent hierarchies that are located in the head of the vita contemplativa, maternal genealogies are sensitive to horizontal bonds of sympathy that are embodied, intersubjective, and open to the sense of a vita mimetica; if the former postulates ideal, abstract, and transcendental forms that serve as models or origins, the latter is inclined to start with material, immanent, and relational affects that give birth to subjectivity; if mental and theoretical anxieties of originality tend to haunt father figures (pater semper incertus est), bodily, fluid, and practical experiences incline maternal figures toward relational dispositions that give birth to the ego (mater semper certa est); if the former follows the eternal law of the logos with the tendency to exclude bodily pathos, the latter is attentive to both the horizontal interplay between the logos and the pathos constitutive of mimetic patho(-)logies that go beyond good and evil, for they have both pathological and patho-logical effects.

I thus let go of the thread of patriarchal rivalries that lead to violence and death and turn to re-evaluate a more maternal perspective attentive to sympathy and birth that already oriented the previous chapters. This life-affirmative perspective opens up a passage between the language of mimetic criticism and contemporary (human) sciences in an effort to give birth to a different yet still imitative conception of the subject. Having started this genealogical section with the birth of homo mimeticus at the level of the development of the species, or phylogenesis, I now narrow the focus and consider its birth at the level of the development of the child, or ontogenesis—which also means that the mimetic unconscious that gave birth to homo mimeticus is also the womb out of which each individual subject is born.

After a long period dominated by patriarchal cultures located in the ideal mind of white, male, free specimens of Homo sapiens that critiqued mimesis from the angle of the vita contemplativa, a change of perspective is in order to inaugurate a new theory of imitation on more affirmative foundations. For this delicate operation, it is wise to join forces with a minor tradition of previously marginalized voices located at the crossroads of continental philosophy, feminism, gender, and LGBTQ+ studies that have begun to reconceptualize the problematic of birth, or natality from the perspective of a vita mimetica. This entails, among other things, reworking the patriarchal stereotype of the subordinate mother and endowing it with relational, embodied, affective and
conceptual perspectives that provide a corrective to androcentric conceptualizations of the mimetic subject. The Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero occupied a privileged perspective for us not only because she posited, in genealogical continuity with Hannah Arendt, the category of “natality” at the origins of sentiments of “public happiness” vital to promoting “surging democracy” (Cavarero 2019); she also promotes an alternative, relational, and affectively inclined conception of the subject that is already located in a relational of genealogical continuity with homo mimeticus.

Cavarero and I, in fact, fundamentally agree that the subject, far from the autonomous, disembodied, and purely rational and immutable ideal erected by the dominant western tradition, is an embodied, affective, developmental, plastic, and above all relational subject that is, from birth onward, structurally inclined toward the other—the mother in primis but any caretaker as well—via a relational affective bond of sympathy (sym-pathos) between subjects we call “mimetic inclinations” (Cavarero and Lawtoo 2021). Furthering this genealogical connection in view of going beyond patriarchal inclinations that still inform poststructuralist theories of mimesis, I now return to a stereotypically patriarchal, androcentric, and at times frankly misogynist thinker who orients my genealogy of homo mimeticus. Despite his numerous flaws that we shall continue to critique, Nietzsche helps us account for mimetic inclinations that have tended to remain in the shadow but are not only already internal to his thought; they also help us explain why the subject is constitutively, consciously, but more often unconsciously inclined toward the other in the first place. There is in fact an immanent, relational, sympathetic, and I am not the first to argue, feminist perspective on the fluidity of mimetic pathos internal to Nietzsche’s genealogy. It supplements both Girard’s and Derrida’s by foregrounding maternal birth rather than patriarchal death as the genealogical horizon for mimetic studies of the future.

For Nietzsche birth was not simply a linguistic metaphor concerned with past, classical tragedies, but also a physical, immanent, and embodied reality that paved the way for a future-oriented theory of homo mimeticus. It is, in fact, well known that, from The Birth of Tragedy (1872) onward, Nietzsche multiplies references to the language of childbearing—from wombs to pregnancy, from miscarriage to birth—to give an account of the emergence of tragic art out of mimetic principles such as visual representation and bodily impersonation rooted in classical mythic figures like Apollo and Dionysus. Somewhat less known is that, starting with Human, All Too Human (1878), Nietzsche also paves the way for a genealogical account of the birth of a relational, communal, and porous ego that flows—from the space in between sameness and difference—out of playful
maternal, nonverbal, yet still mirroring forms of mimetic communication. He does so with characteristic untimely foresight, which continues to anticipate timely developments in the human and social sciences, but also aesthetics, feminism, political theory, and the neurosciences. If we have seen in chapter 1 how this applies to his account of the birth of *Homo sapiens* at the level of the species (phylogenesis), a full genealogy of homo mimeticus needs to consider how this hypothesis concerns the development of the child as well (ontogenesis).

Like many nineteenth-century philosophical physicians, Nietzsche thought that the largest part of human mental activity remains unconscious, not in the Freudian interpretation of the unconscious based on a repressive, Oedipal hypothesis. Rather, it is unconscious in the pre-Freudian, but also post-Freudian realization that actions and reactions are triggered by involuntary habits, automatic reflexes, and mirroring repetitions of gestures that, from birth onward, bridge the gap between self and other via what we have seen him call an imitation or mimicking of gesture. The passage is now worth quoting in full:

> Older than speech is the mimicking of gestures [*Nachmachen von Gebärden*], which takes place involuntarily [*unwillkürlich*] and is even now, despite a general repression of gestural language [*Zurückdrangung der GabärdenSprache*] and a cultivated mastery of the muscles, so strong that we cannot look upon facial movements without innervation of our face (one can observe that feigned yawning evokes a natural yawning in someone who sees it). The imitated gesture led the person who was imitating back to the sensation that expressed itself in the face or body of the person being imitated. Thus people learned to understand one another; thus the child still learns to understand its mother. (Nietzsche 1995, 216:143)

Imitation, for Nietzsche, is Janus-faced in a double sense, for it is as past-oriented as it is future-oriented; it concerns the species as well as the individual. If we have seen in chapter 1 that this embodied communication is “older than language” because it allows language and consciousness to come into being, as humans tap, at the level of the species, into a social network of nonverbal communication that is not fixated on father figures, this is the moment to stress the role of maternal forms of mimetic communication in the development of the child. Derrida may have drawn on the business of childbearing metaphorically. Nietzsche does so literally, as he gives an account of the birth of the subject, out of the unconscious reflex of mimesis.
Clearly, this mimetic unconscious is not based on a triangular hypothesis that has desire as its *via regia*—for it focuses on imitation itself as the psychological, or better psycho-physiological source of bodily actions and reactions that cannot be repressed and thus go beyond the repressive hypothesis. Nor does it inscribe mimesis in the differential movement of a linguistic chain of signifiers that brackets a referential material presence—for this bodily imitation of gestures generates an immanent, intersubjective, and nonverbal communication that is rooted in the “innervation” of our “muscles,” which, for Nietzsche, are at play or rather wired in an immanent body he considered the “great reason” (2005, 30). Imitation, for Nietzsche, is thus a manifold protean process that goes beyond nature/culture, self/others, mind/body dualities while being rooted in the great reason (*logos*) of bodily affect (*pathos*). This mimetic and unconscious dynamic, as I have been arguing for some time, is thus, strictly speaking, *neither* Girardian *nor* Derridean in its affective and conceptual configuration.

And yet this does not mean that our genealogical approach to mimetic studies is simply opposed to mimetic theory or deconstruction. Quite the contrary. Like a bridge, this genealogical reconstruction emerges from the space between these competing approaches: it builds starting from the opposed banks of sameness and difference, and, by doing so, pushes with and against these banks in order to cross over and go beyond them, in an exploratory mode, toward uncharted territories. On one side, Girard restricted the contagious power of mimesis to desire, rivalry, and the violence discharged on a *pharmakos* destined for a sacrificial death at the origins of culture. Nietzsche, in a balancing diagnostic move Bataille, Derrida, and later Lacoue-Labarthe, will be quick to follow, stretches to include the more general economy of mimesis itself in its life-affirmative power or *pathos* to give birth to a phantom subject. On the other side, Derrida called our attention to the supplementary properties of mimesis qua *pharmakon* that disrupt the hierarchy between model and copy, origin and shadow, truth and lies, models and simulacra.

With Nietzsche I shall now ground this destabilizing move in an immanent, physio-psychological, referential, yet equally destabilizing account of unconscious mimesis by pointing out that *feigned* yawning generates *real* yawning. The simulation of an action, in other words, generates an authentic reaction. In this playful overturning of perspectives, the aim is not to deconstruct yet again the arbitrary binary relation between truth/falsity, action/reaction, inside/outside, original/copy; nor is it to show that the copy precedes the original—though both deconstructive moves remain useful tools in the critical box. Nietzsche’s point is also and above all that a simulation has the power to trigger a deeply felt bodily pathos via a mirroring
reflex that opens up the subject to the other on the basis of an embodied, relational, and mimetic conception of the unconscious.

This also means that the mimetic principle we inherit from a Nietzschean tradition goes beyond sameness and difference, in the sense that it exceeds both the linguistic economy of the sign and the psychic economy of desire by zeroing in on mirroring actions and reactions that link physiology to psychology, what I see and what I feel, via a patho-logical loop that finds in an involuntary imitation, if not a grand via regia, at least an immanent path to the unconscious. Thus, an involuntary imitation of a gesture “led the person who was imitating back to the sensation that expressed itself in the face or body of the person being imitated” (1995, 216:143). For Nietzsche, the mimetic unconscious goes beyond the pleasure principle, for it rests on reflex principles that, like yawning, cannot be repressed by consciousness and are in this sense un-conscious. I involuntary mimic your facial and bodily expressions, and via a mirroring mechanism Nietzsche calls “psycho-motor induction,” the expression of the other seen outside from a distance is mirrored and transformed into an inner pathos felt by an ego that is already open to alterity.

Elsewhere, with the figure of the actor or mimos in mind but paving the way for a future theory of imitation Nietzsche continues in a fragmentary mode:

compulsion to imitate: an extreme irritability through which a given example becomes contagious—a state is divined on the basis of signs and immediately enacted—An image, rising up within, immediately turns into a movement of the limbs—a certain suspension of the will. (1968, 811:429)

Compulsion to imitate, contagious examples, mirroring movements and sensations, insights into the minds of others: these are indeed direct manifestations of the mimetic unconscious. Once well known in the pre-Freudian modernist period, this genealogy has remained in the shadows during the time the language of criticism confined mimesis to aesthetic representations and restricted the unconscious to Oedipal dramas. And yet the mimetic unconscious is currently re-turning to haunt the human sciences and, at an additional remove, the humanities as well. If it lends empirical substance to the shadow of the symposium, it also provides steps to develop the field of new mimetic studies.

What was true at the level of phylogenesis remains true at the level of ontogenesis: our goal is to open up new perspectives to account for the psychic, aesthetic, social, and political transformations of homo mimeticus to come.
Nietzsche’s untimely meditations on unconscious mimesis at the twilight of the nineteenth century provide a solid starting point, or Stoßpunkt, to develop a new theory of imitation at the dawn of the twenty-first century. It reveals that the humanities are at the origins of an immanent conception of affective mimesis the neurosciences are now confirming empirically and shadowing theoretically. We already alluded to the discovery of mirror neurons in the 1990s by Giacomo Rizzolatti and his team who opened up new “perspectives on imitation” for the twenty-first century. This discovery is now well known and transdisciplinary connections between “mimesis and science” are now in place, though they tend to be restricted to Girard’s mimetic theory.

Now, while interdisciplinary dialogues between mirror neurons and Girard’s theory of mimetic desire have been productive, there is a more direct genealogical connection that has remained in the shadows and now needs to be foregrounded. I concur, in fact, with Vittorio Gallese, as he notes that “these results [of mirror neuron theory] suggest that prior to any triangular mimetic relationship, the main object of infants’ mimesis is the affective behavior of the ‘other’” (2011, 97). Mimesis does not need to be framed in a triangle to articulate relations between self and others, if only because as we have seen, the mother in primis and then a network of social communication, not an Oedipal father, gives birth to consciousness. If Girard’s Freudian genealogy leads him to compulsively posit triangular forms of desire and rivalry with father figures, the mimetic unconscious finds in intersubjective forms of mirroring communication that have what Sarah Blaffer Hrdy calls “mothers and others” as primary models an alternative starting point for a new theory of imitation for the future.

Rather than hastening to conflate a theory of mimetic desire predicated on a triangular form with a theory of mirroring reflexes that operate in self/others networks of communication, genealogical lenses encourage us to open up a less-traveled, untimely, yet for that reason future-oriented route. Here we have in fact yet another confirmation that the discovery of mirror neurons lends empirical credibility to a mirroring principle Nietzsche and other modernist figures in the humanities and social sciences described with impressive diagnostic precision a century earlier: namely, that the simple sight of gestures or facial expressions seen and felt individually or collectively triggers an unconscious reflex in the subject to reproduce such gestures/expressions and, by doing so, lead to a un-mediated understanding of the intentions that triggered them. Cooperation can emerge on such mimetic foundations. Reframing Nietzsche’s
physio-psychological diagnostic in more contemporary neuroscientific parlance, Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia sum up their discovery as follows:

In humans, as in monkeys, the sight of acts performed by others produces an immediate activation of the motor areas deputed to the organization and execution of those acts, and through their activation it is possible to decipher the meaning of the ‘motor events’ observed, i.e., to understand them in terms of goal-centered movements. The understanding is completely devoid of any reflexive, conceptual, and/or linguistic mediation as it is based exclusively on the vocabulary of acts and the motor knowledge on which our capacity to act depends. (2008, 125)

While existence of a MNS in humans has been confirmed as a neurological fact via single-neuron measures already a decade ago (Mukamel et al. 2010), its interpretation did not fail to generate controversies—unsurprisingly so, for they call for a transformation of long-standing philosophical ideals of what Homo sapiens is or is supposed to be. Some claim that advocates of mirror neurons are mounting an attack on rationalist accounts of free will, intentionality, and autonomy central to a long-standing rationalizing and, let’s face it, frankly patriarchal philosophical tradition that is not ready to let go of the autonomous subject of Aufklärung in full possessions of its rational thoughts, free deliberations, and often violent actions; others argue that mirror neurons, while not providing the only key to the riddle of consciousness, confirm ancient philosophical and aesthetic principles on the centrality of habitual forms of imitation central to learning, understanding, and collaboration by establishing nonverbal communicative bridges between self and others that open up the ego to external influences in ways already prefigured by homo mimeticus.

Either way, the specific role the MNS plays in our cultural understanding of human cognition, agency, intentionality, consciousness, beliefs, herd behavior, as well as violence and the unconscious, is currently being discussed and is far from being resolved. It is thus likely to continue triggering passionate debates between traditionally opposed cultures like the humanities and the hard sciences, which benefit from dialogic and agonistic confrontations we shall return to from related psychic-aesthetic-political perspectives constitutive of new mimetic studies.
Genealogical Steps for New Mimetic Studies

A genealogy of mimesis with a focus on the present, then, urges new generations of theorists to go beyond the “two-cultures” binary opposition that arbitrarily divides disciplines that were not clearly opposed in the long history of this transdisciplinary concept; it also encourages us to continue bridging traditionally divided insights to set up an informed mirror for critical self-reflections in the present and future.

Such a genealogical mirror generates an inversion of perspectives that continues to be Janus-faced. On one side, it reveals that the empirical sciences should perhaps be more modest in their claims of priority; they would also benefit from engaging with the humanities so as to join forces to account for mirroring reflexes outside the confines of the lab on the basis of a long genealogy of mimesis that, as we have seen, goes back to Plato, and is aware of the power of actions to trigger unconscious reactions in both individual and social life. Important exceptions among neuroscientists already exist and inform our theory of homo mimeticus. On the other side, if the humanities prove to be more open to dialogic conversations with the empirical sciences of our time, new generations of scholars might discover ways of supplementing quantitative approaches by remaining faithful to the qualitative, historical, and discerning power of interpretation constitutive of a humanistic vocation—if only because this scientific discovery, as it should be clear by now, is actually a re-discovery of mirroring principles that already informed the genealogy of the mimetic unconscious we have been resuscitating.

Compare, for instance, Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia’s 1990s discovery to Nietzsche’s 1888 claim on communication: “One never communicates thoughts: one communicates movements, mimic signs, which we can then trace back to thoughts” (Nietzsche 1968, 809:428). How does this nonverbal communication “trace back” movements into thoughts, bodily gestures into mental cognition? Nietzsche’s diagnostic, as we have seen, is specific and finds in mimesis the missing link between body and gestures. Thus, he qualifies his mimetic hypothesis about the origins of communication predicated on the “imitation of gestures” as follows: “The imitated gesture led the person who was imitating back to the sensation that expressed itself in the face or body of the person being imitated” (Nietzsche 1995, 216:143). What we must add now, is that the movement of mimetic communication follows the logic of the supplement in the sense that it transgresses the line dividing self/other, inside/outside, copy/original. It also
supplements it by remaining rooted in physio-psychological mirroring principles that bridge movements and sensations and can be delineated as follows: the sight of the other’s external gestures or facial expressions triggers an automatic reflex within the subject (inside) to unconsciously reproduce, shadowlike, the same facial expressions (outside); this unconscious mimesis, in turn, gives birth to an inner sensation (*pathos*) that originates within the subject but is already shared (*sym-pathos*) with the other, generating a sympathetic understanding of the other as interior and exterior to the ego—both the same and different. This shared communication, or *Mitteilung*, of two subjects, imitating and being imitated, both united (*mit*) and divided (*teilung*), is the source of a dynamic interplay that gives birth to individual difference—out of mimetic sameness.

Thus reframed, mimesis is an originary experience in the sense that it engenders homo mimeticus via an unconscious communication that is already double. For Nietzsche, we have already seen that this is true at the level of the evolutionary development of the species (phylogenesis). Now he confirms this point by tying this mimetic principle to the development of the individual (ontogenesis). And as we already heard, Nietzsche joins phylogenesis with ontogenesis and adds the following genealogical supplement to his account of the origins of language: “Thus people learned to understand one another; thus the child still learns to understand its mother” (1995, 216:143–144). Much has changed since the emergence of *Homo sapiens* as a species around three hundred thousand years ago. Still, the principle that gives birth to it, for Nietzsche, remains essentially the same: every new birth re-enacts the eternal return of a mimetic experience that gives birth, each time, to a uniquely differentiated relational subject qua homo mimeticus.

In the beginning, prior to violence and writing, mimesis is thus replayed first and foremost in the smiles and countersmiles that tie a child to its mimetically inclined other or exemplary *socius*: namely, a significant other (parent, model, friend, lover, etc.). This *socius*, as we have seen at the level of phylogenesis, is not necessarily one, as it includes a plurality of maternally inclined figures—from mothers to aunts, sisters to grandmothers, as Hrdy convincingly shows. But she also includes maternal fathers and uncles, brothers and grandfathers that played a key rearing role in traditional societies. As stereotypes are beginning to change in modern societies as well, new roles open up that allow males to be increasingly inclined toward newborns. At the level of ontogenesis, Nietzsche also anticipates insights into developmental psychology that show how “self-other connectedness and communication exists at birth” (Meltzoff 2011, 59). Either way, this mirroring communication generates an affective flux
of becoming other based on a repetition with a *différance*, for it is inscribed in the temporal differing and deferring movement not of language alone but of an embodied, immanent, and relational consciousness.

The movement of mimetic communication, then, follows a supplementary logic in the sense that it transgresses the line between self and other, inside and outside, my affect and your affect. At the same time, it also remains rooted in physiological, mirroring reflexes, which according to Nietzsche are constitutive of the birth of subjectivity, language, and consciousness. His genealogical lenses are thus not only looking ahead to new empirical discoveries in the neurosciences that also claim that a good part of human communication is based on an unconscious neuronal simulation of gestures and expressions. With the benefit of hindsight, we notice that he also introduces a mimetic principle that goes beyond the self and other dichotomy to crack the riddle of how we understand each other’s affects, beliefs, and intentions—the so-called theory of mind—on the basis of an hypothesis that is not fully confirmed yet, but that contemporary neuroscientists now consider a “fair bet.”

Significantly, even critics who convoke an ancient Platonic trick as they consider mirror neurons as a “myth” now agree on the truth of the ancient Aristotelian lesson that humans are the most thoroughly imitative creatures—a homo mimeticus that learns not only its lessons, but also language and culture, via “imitation.” Despite the misleading title of his book, Gregory Hickok for instance, in *The Myth of Mirror Neurons* (2014) agrees that mirror neurons are not only present in monkeys but in humans as well, thereby contributing to disseminating a view of “*homo imitans*” (2014, 184–206). Yet he insists that “something else” is needed to “enable mirror neurons to support lofty human behavior such as language,” namely “imitation” (189).

Mirror neurons bring us back to mimesis, then. But since Hickok does not dispute that mirror neurons are present at birth, the argument is caught in a chicken-and-egg circularity. Thus, after some twists and turns, Hickok concedes that “there is no theoretical pressure to abandon the idea that mirror neurons support imitation in a broader sense of associations between actions, as in observational learning” (199). And in a move that validates the myth he had appeared to initially expel from the order of scientific *logos*, he concludes: “mirror neurons will no doubt have a role to play in our models of the neural basis of communication and cognition” (241). The myth turns out to be constitutive of the *logos* in the end. This is, after all, an old story we have traced as far back as Plato. Mimesis, then, is an originary experience in the sense that it gives ontogenetic birth to the subject via a communication that is already doubled; it is replayed in
smiles and countersmiles that do not rest on the arbitrary logic of the linguistic sign but on the intimately felt experience of a flowing pathos.

In the end, genealogical lenses reveal that mimesis is, paradoxically, at the origins of human understanding and communication, not of what humans are, but of who they can potentially become, individually and collectively, once caught in fluxes of mimetic communication with others. This immanent conception of mimesis, we have seen time and again, is not predicated on a mirror that sets up a unitary ideal or narcissistic imago that amplifies the already notable ego of Homo sapiens. A quote by Nietzsche we have already encountered may be worth echoing here: “The whole of life would be possible without, as it were, seeing itself in a mirror [...] however offensive this may sound to older philosophers” (1974, 354: 297). Nietzsche may be thinking of Plato’s reference to a mirror to frame the movement of mimesis in visual/theoretical phantoms predicated on a static image of Being. Yet, despite his powerful overturning of perspective, Platonism is not dead. Under a more recent mask, this “ontological structure of the human world” (Lacan 1999, 2) may continue to implicitly inform other contributors to the symposium—most notably Jacques Lacan who, as we shall see in chapter 5, was no stranger to mimetism.

Closer to home, in part 1, I have argued that an immanent, relational, and antimetaphysical approach suggests that an embodied intersubjective dynamic of becoming all-too-human rests on mirroring principles that, as we have seen time and again, go back to the dawn of culture, reaching back to the pre-history of Homo sapiens. In the process, it opens up a relational and eminently social conception of a phantom ego vulnerable to external influences, be they good or bad. Which also means that, in our genealogy, language and consciousness do not exist prior to mimesis; rather, it is the mimetic unconscious that serves as the relational matrix, or womb, out of which both language and consciousness are born.

Since imitation was arguably central to the development of a network of communication out of which an original imitative species expanded, we can perhaps go further and offer the following extravagant hypothesis: namely, that the mimetic unconscious played a key role in the “evolutionary bridge” that made the emergence of the “genius of the species” possible. Romantic phantasies aside, there is no genius born in isolation. On the contrary, it is the genial ability of humans to engage in a network of mimetic communication that made the emergence of an original, cooperative, often credulous, conformist and destructive, but also highly innovative species possible. Which also means that Homo sapiens perhaps needed its affective and intuitive counterpart, homo mimeticus, to...
reveal its full originality, in both its pathological and patho-logical manifestations. No wonder that Nietzsche privileged the image of the bridge to talk about humans as imitative creatures suspended between inside and outside, self and others, but also between linguistic signs and referential gestures, the human and the nonhuman, models and copies, origins and shadows, sameness and difference, past origins and future destinations.

The Mimetic Bridge

To be sure, this is an admittedly fragile, precarious, and unstable bridge, or passarelle, still in progress, suspended over a river of becoming that does not mirror a unitary and stabilizing reflection, but a moving and fluttering shadow instead. Yet, as we continue to cross over this textual and referential bridge, our genealogy also offers a supplement to two sides of mimesis that have been opposed in the past but that transdisciplinary operations urge us to join in the future. What emerges from this oscillating back-and-forth movement is a reflection of/on homo mimeticus as radically indeterminate, intersubjective in origins, affectively exposed, suggestible to unconscious influences, cooperative in disposition, and dangerously at play with torrential forces that far exceed our human, all-too-human strength. It also calls attention to mimetic metamorphoses currently underway triggered by external models—be they real or fictional—that have the power to take possession of the ego, generating phantoms or shadows with real material effects still in need of genealogical diagnostics.

As we stand on the bridge we have reconstructed and look back to the shadow of the symposium on the shoulders of a genealogy that harkens back to the birth of Homo sapiens in view of charting possible destinations for homo mimeticus, we might still wonder: is this shadowy birth monstrous and violent, as Derrida and Girard suggested? Or innocent and life-affirmative as Nietzsche’s gay science implies? Genealogical bridges do not offer unilateral answers but Janus-faced principles instead. On one side, a type of herd consciousness—triggered by the contagious power of gestures that are prior to language, reason, thought, operate massively on the mimetic unconscious, and are often triggered by what Nietzsche called “masters,” or alternatively, “actors”—continues, perhaps more than ever, to be our accursed share. But on the other, life-affirmative side, Nietzsche turned to makers of shadows like artists, or, more generally, writers for
theoretical inspiration. In fact, he considered these untimely figures as “heirs” of an excessive and squandering art of mimetic communication, part of a long chain that turned affective sameness into creative differences. As Nietzsche puts it in the book that provided the life-affirmative spirit to start our genealogy since the beginning, namely *The Gay Science*, and with which I end part 1:

Those who are called artists are these heirs; so are orators, preachers, writers—all of them people who always come at the end of a long chain, “late born” [*Spätgeborene*] every one of them in the best sense of the word and, as I have said, by their nature, squanderers [*Verschwender*]. (1974, 354:298)

These untimely figures form, indeed, a “long chain.” If the myth tells us that this chain originates in the Muses, we have both seen and felt that it magnetizes a number of exemplary writers of mimesis that, from antiquity into modernity, continue to inspire contemporary theorists as well. Our aspiration in tracing this genealogy is to be a worthy heir and innovator in this long philosophical and artistic tradition of squanderers. It is thus with an eye and ear to aesthetic insights and impressions emerging from an understanding of the plasticity of the subject opening up possibilities for chameleon metamorphoses that cut across the distinction between human and animal mimicry that we further new mimetic studies in part 2.

What we have seen in this part is that looking back to the role of mimesis in the emergence of homo mimeticus makes us see and feel that the shadow of protean forms of imitation continue to loom large on our present and future as well. Whether these marginal artists and writers will remain in a position to squander differential, oppositional, and life-affirmative interpretations in the indeterminate future that lies ahead, for the humanities, humans, nonhumans, and the planet more generally, remains difficult to foresee—for the river of sameness is becoming increasingly difficult to contain within opposed margins. Still, the chance to bridge critical sides and reflect on the moving shadow generated by the interplay of sameness and difference cast on the river of becoming other that carries us into the future reminds us of the power of a gay science of mimesis to face the indeterminate destination of homo mimeticus. In passing over this precarious bridge, we also saw—from the spaces between—a moving reflection of a humanities center that once served as an exemplary institutional model out which mimetic studies was born. Who knows? With some chance, a new transdisciplinary field could now be in the process of being reborn.