CHAPTER 4

THE PLASTICITY OF MIMESIS

Dad: “I don’t like Plato.”
Daughter (three years old): “You do like Play-Doh!”

What is the link between mimesis and plasticity? Is mimesis a plastic concept? Or plasticity a mimetic concept? Or both? Either way, the duplicity of my title mirrors a destabilizing double movement that, over the past two decades, has never ceased to form, inform, and transform my understanding of what mimesis “is” — or can possibly become. In what follows, I would like to suggest that the new concept of “plasticity” is perhaps one of the most recent, most innovative, but not necessarily original conceptual manifestations of that protean shadow we have seen the Greeks call, somewhat enigmatically, *mimēsis*. Consequently, revisiting what the French philosopher and aesthetic theorist Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe called “the imitation of the moderns” (1986) — and thus of the ancients as well — furthers the alternative genealogy of *Homo sapiens* we have been pursuing so far. It also sharpens the formal contours of this emerging conceptual protagonist on the theoretical scene from the angle of aesthetics, a sensitive, embodied and affective angle at play in homo mimeticus.

To delineate this double move, let me start by dissociating the two sides of this Janus-faced title. On one side, the phrase “the plasticity of mimesis” simply indicates a certain malleability of the ancient concept of *mimēsis* itself. This point is worth recalling, for especially in the arts though not only, we are still accustomed to framing mimesis primarily within a stabilizing conception of representation characteristic of a realist aesthetics. This is, as we have had occasion to confirm, a strikingly restricted and partial definition that does not even begin doing justice to this chameleon concept. Already in the 1980s, Lacoue-Labarthe
was recognized as developing “an entirely different thought of mimesis” (Derrida 1989, 8). Still in the process of being fully translated into English, this thought is still waiting to be furthered from an immanent, materialist, and relational perspective constitutive of the mimetic turn, or re-turn, to mimesis, now animating new mimetic studies.

What, then, does Lacoue-Labarthe’s different thought on mimesis reveal about the most recent manifestations of homo mimeticus? Supplementing homogeneous definitions restricted to simple representation, Lacoue-Labarthe’s heterogeneous thought on what he calls a concept without “proper identity,” reminds us that mimesis is a theoretical concept that originates in the practice of the theater. Consequently, it entails both visual representations and bodily impersonations, which, as they are enacted on a stage, generate protean affects such as psychic identification, emotional contagion, and ritual dispossession that continue to haunt what he calls the imitation of the moderns. Hence his claim in L’Imitation des modernes (1986) that it is philosophically urgent to step back to the ancients in order “to think or rethink mimesis” (Lacoue-Labarthe 1986, 282). This is, indeed, what the mimetic re-turn has been doing all along.

On the other, related side, stepping back remains the genealogical presupposition for leaping further ahead. From a contemporary perspective, I suggest in fact that it may be the emerging concept of “plasticity” that has mimetic (im) properties that have so far gone unnoticed. I mean this not only in the material, neuroscientific, and relatively recent sense in which the discovery of the brain’s neuroplasticity is currently painting a new picture of subjectivity as flexible, impressionable, adaptable, and in this behavioral sense, mimetic. I mean this also in the specific philosophical delineation of plasticity as a “concept” in Catherine Malabou’s double sense, as she provocatively asks, What Should We Do with Our Brain? (2008). That is, in plasticity’s capacity to both receive form and give form and, in the process, generate contradictory effects such as passive adaptations and creative formations, psychic pathologies and therapeutic patho-logies, perhaps even revolutionary transformations as plasticity gains consciousness of itself in its dialectical development toward what Malabou calls the future—l’avenir (1996).

The plasticity of mimesis, then, turns around two seemingly antithetical concepts that look in two opposed directions: one back to the past origins of western poetics; the other ahead toward the future of new theoretical destinations. And yet, my wager is that Lacoue-Labarthe’s account of what he calls “the plastic constitution of the subject” (1989, 178) helps us see that mimesis and plasticity are perhaps two sides of the same Janus-faced concept. Joining these two sides, I hasten to add, does not intend establish the unity of an identity. Instead, it generates a
disquieting repetition with a difference in which these two concepts face each other, mirror one another, and above all, reflect on each other. In this reflection, I argue that mimesis gives conceptual form to the duplicity of plasticity. It also reveals that behind this new plastic mask lies an ancient actor, or mime. In the process, a genealogy of plasticity generates an inversion of perspectives that turns Lacoue-Labarthe’s untimely question—“How can psychology contribute to mimetology?” (1989, 101)—into what I take to be its contemporary counterpart for new mimetic studies: namely, how can mimetology contribute to psychology, and perhaps to a patho-logy internal to aesthetics and neurology as well? But let us proceed in order.

The Era of Plasticity: Malabou’s Neuro Turn

While the concept of mimesis, prior to the mimetic turn, has tended to be relegated to the backstage of aesthetic and philosophical discussions, plasticity is an emerging conceptual protagonist on the theoretical scene that is currently receiving increasing attention across a number of fields. And rightly so, for it is a timely concept not deprived of empirical support. It is in fact based on recent discoveries in the neurosciences, which have shown that the human brain is far more plastic and adaptable than previously realized and remains so throughout our lives.

It is not simply the mind, or the psyche, that has the capacity to change. That we long knew. It is, rather, the structure of the brain itself, in its ability to establish new synaptic connections and modify their capacity of transmission that changes over time, depending on our activities and life experiences. Historians Nikolas Rose and Joelle Abi-Rached describe the genealogy of this discovery as follows: “By the close of the twentieth century, the brain had come to be envisaged as mutable across the whole of life, open to environmental influences, damaged by insults, and nourished and even reshaped by stimulation—in a word plastic” (2013, 48). Along similar lines, neuroscientist Alvaro Pascual-Leone and his team specify: “Plasticity is an intrinsic property of the human brain and represents evolution’s invention to enable the nervous system to escape the restrictions of its own genome and thus adapt to environmental pressures, physiologic changes, and experiences” (2005, 377). And summarizing the main insights of neuroscientists working on different problems related to brain plasticity—from post-stroke paralysis to phantom limbs—psychologist Norman Doidge writes that “many ‘circuits’ and even basic reflexes that we think are hardwired are not” (2007, xv).
Somewhat paradoxically, then, the neurosciences are currently contributing to forming an image of the brain that supports a genealogy of subjectivity thinkers in the humanities have long been advocating. The brain, we are now told, can no longer be considered on the basis of an essentialist model that hard-wires our neurons in our genetic nature. On the contrary, the brain turns out to be formed and deformed by experience, culture, and education over our entire lives. Hailed as a revolutionary discovery comparable to “that of the atom or the DNA” (1997, xvii) by neuroscientists like Jean-Pierre Changeux, neuroplasticity is currently generating a collective “enthusiasm” (xiii) that is spreading contagiously across disciplinary boundaries, establishing new dialogues between the hard sciences and the social sciences—stretching to transforming the humanities as well.

“Our brain is plastic, and we do not know it” (2008, 4), writes Catherine Malabou in *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* And thanks to Malabou’s popular book we now know, perhaps not what to do with our brain in practice, but at least that the brain is plastic in a theoretical sense that is at least double. Reminding us of its Greek etymology, *plassein*, to mold, Malabou writes: “the word *plasticity* has two basic senses: it means at once the capacity to *receive form* (clay is called ‘plastic,’ for example) and the capacity to *give form* (as in the plastic arts or in plastic surgery)” (5). This is simultaneously good and bad news, for brain plasticity makes us open to both good and bad impressions: plasticity can, in fact, be the source of therapeutic *cures* (reparative plasticity or brain regeneration), but it can also make us vulnerable to brain pathologies (traumatic wounds and neurodegenerative disorders).

We have encountered this duplicity before. There is, in fact, a patho(-)logy of plasticity that strangely mirrors the patho(-)logies internal to our genealogy of homo mimeticus. Moreover, plasticity can be passively *subjected* to typical formations that fit humans into restricted social molds or types, but it can also turn humans into the active *subjects* of creative transformations that disrupt such molds and stereotypes. Building on this paradoxical double structure, Malabou exploits a third etymological development of plasticity, as in plastic explosive or “*plastiquage*” (5) to argue that plasticity has the revolutionary potential to “resist,” “negate,” and ultimately “explode” the rigid capitalist structures that generate “docile” and submissive subjects complicit with neoliberal capitalism’s increasing demand for “flexibility” (12)—thereby opening up new transformative possibilities for the future. Hence Malabou’s delineation of a dialectical concept that is encapsulated in what she calls the “threefold movement of reception, donation, and annihilation of form” (2012, xiv).
And yet, if neuroplasticity is a relatively recent scientific discovery, originating in the 1940s with neurologist Donald Hebb’s realization that neurons that fire together wire together, the conceptual form of plasticity—which is my main concern in this chapter—has a much longer and complicated genealogy. And Malabou knows it. Thus, she introduces an important distinction between the notion of “flexibility” and the concept of “plasticity,” as she specifies:

Flexibility is a vague notion, without tradition, without history, while plasticity is a concept, which is to say: a form of quite precise meanings that bring together and structure particular cases. This concept has a long philosophical past, which has itself remained too long in the shadows. (2008, 13)

Neuroplasticity, then, may be a recent scientific discovery, but plasticity is a philosophical concept with a specific form in line with a past tradition of thought that has remained too long in the shadows, and that Malabou brings back to light. Building on her thesis L’Avenir de Hegel (1996), the French philosopher identifies the origins of this tradition as she writes: Hegel “is the first philosopher to have made the word plasticity into a concept” (1996, 80), and she specifies that “the concept of plasticity” was “discovered for the first time in the preface to Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit” (2010, 8).

Time and again, Malabou argues that in Hegel’s speculative thought we find, for the first time, plasticity as a concept that is not only aesthetic and linked to the plastic arts but also philosophical and linked to the formation of a plastic subject. As she puts it in her introduction to an edited collection titled Plasticité (2000): “For the first time with Hegel, plasticity reaches the essential. The philosopher snatches plasticity from its strictly aesthetic anchorage in order to attach it to a problematic space which, so far, had not been its own: subjectivity” (Malabou 2000, 8–9; my trans.). This genealogy, then, establishes an important genealogical link between the ancient aesthetic origins of plasticity and the modern question of the subject. It also opens up a space for innovative dialogues between the humanities and the neurosciences along lines that are neither reductionist nor confined to cognitive methods, and Malabou’s work testifies to the productivity of this connection. Her thought is in line with the exploratory, transdisciplinary perspectivism at play in homo mimeticus and helps us go beyond dualisms that were dominant in the past yet need to be challenged in the present and future.

That said, with respect to the past, when it comes to the genealogy of plasticity, I cannot help but to register a suspicion. For a French philosopher inscribed
in a tradition of thought that has taught her—via the filter of Nietzsche, most notably—to be skeptical of genealogies that can be traced back to single, unitary, and stable origins, Malabou seems surprisingly certain about the so-called first discovery of plasticity. This certainty is all the more striking, since Hegel—and Malabou is the first to know it—in _Aesthetics_ makes clear that his source of inspiration for linking plasticity to subjectivity is not modern but ancient, goes back to the dawn of western thought, and is rooted in what he calls “exemplary [exemplarische]” figures such as Socrates, Sophocles, and, of course, Plato. That is, “plastic individuals,” who, Hegel writes, “possessed to the highest degree this perfect plastic sense in their conception of the divine and of the human” (qtd. in Malabou 1996, 22; my trans.). Given the broader genealogy informing Hegel at the twilight of philosophy at a moment when aesthetics is beginning to develop into an autonomous area of inquiry that remains nolens volens rooted in classical models, we may thus wonder: why this insistence on the _Phenomenology of the Spirit_ as a stable point of origin when Hegel admittedly stands at the dusk of a long tradition?

We can only speculate, but let me venture a mimetic hypothesis. This certainty concerning the origins of plasticity might well be directly proportional to the broader ontological move Malabou is attempting, Namely, to displace, dislocate, or disrupt—with plasticity as a lever and Hegel as a fulcrum—the ontology of writing she inherited from her mentor, Jacques Derrida, to promote what she calls, in _Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing_ (2010), nothing less than “the style of an era” (Malabou 2010, 1). This era, Malabou argues, traces the contours of what the ontology of writing erased: namely, a concern with form. Grounding her dislocating move in the claim that écriture is “formless” whereas “form is plastic,” Malabou writes: “I realized that writing was no longer the right image and that plasticity now presented itself as the best-suited and most eloquent motor scheme for our time” (15). This era, then, marks the dusk of writing and the dawn of plasticity.

At the twilight of the idols a new start is born. Thus, Malabou announces what she calls, in a confessional mood, the birth of “a still uncertain, tremulous star, [which] begins to appear at the dusk of written form” (15). Clearly, when the theoretical stakes are so high, the model so close, the linguistic traces so intimately intertwined, the logos so imbued with pathos, and—why not say it?—the mimetic agon so openly visible in plasticity’s “refusal to submit to a model” (Malabou 2008, 6) and thus also to “imitate or to copy” (Malabou and Noëlle
2008, 2), it is understandable that a clear-cut “rupture” with one’s intellectual “origins” might appear necessary so as to dissipate old phantoms—and the impressions they have left behind.

In light of our genealogy informed by the paradoxical logic of mimetic agonism, the anti-mimetic scene is classical. What Derrida says in his groundbreaking critique of Lévi-Strauss at the symposium equally applies, at some removes, to my genealogical evaluation of Malabou: “the appearance of a new structure, of an original system, always comes about—and this is the very condition of its structural specificity—by a rupture with its past, its origin, and its cause” (Derrida 1972, 263). This rupture is nothing less and nothing more than the distancing internal to a mimetic agon whose pathos has already taken possession of the ego, generating a phantom driven, as we saw in chapter 3, by the interplay of sameness and difference—which does not mean that the phantom is deprived of original insights we can now put to use for new mimetic studies.

Phantoms, just like shadows, models, and forms, are mimetic tropes. And Malabou knows it. This is why she acknowledges, this time in a more Freudian mood, that “because plasticity never presents itself without form, plastic is always thought as a factor of identification” (2010, 74). There are thus important genealogical links between plasticity and identification—and Malabou’s most recent work testifies to her commitment to critically revisiting a psychoanalytical tradition, which, as Girard, Lacoue-Labarthe, and Borch-Jacobsen, among others, have shown, cannot easily be disentangled from the problematic of the “mimetic subject.” And yet, given Malabou’s theoretical emphasis on the paradoxical conceptual delineation of “plasticity” as something that can simultaneously give form and receive form on the basis of what she calls “models” whose paradigmatic examples are already at play in the “plastic arts” as well as in “education” (2008, 21), Malabou has so far been strangely silent on the concept of mimesis itself. This is surprising since mimesis is arguably the paradigmatic concept in formative matters, both in terms of onto-aesthetic forms and of plastic subject formations.

And here is where Lacoue-Labarthe re-enters the theoretical scene. In his company, we ask plasticity a question in light of an alternative, more ancient, less known, but not less destabilizing genealogy of plasticity, which, this time, has remained too long in the shadows, indeed.
Shadowing Plasticity: Lacoue-Labarthe’s Mimetic Re-Turn

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe was always the last to claim any originality for his thought and always the first to trace genealogies that offer new perspectives for future thought. Had he witnessed the return of interest in plastic subject matters, he may have reminded future-oriented theorists that Roland Barthes was not the only thinker who spoke of the malleability of “plastic” in the twentieth century. It is true that in *Mythologies* (1957) Barthes defines plastic as a substance characterized by its power of “infinite transformation” that generates the “trace of a movement” (1972a, 97). He also implicitly establishes a link between plasticity and mimesis as he defines plastic as an “imitation material” [*simili*] that no longer belongs to “the world of appearances” but to a “household material” instead (98), thereby inverting a Platonic idealist ontology that is not deprived of attention to the materiality of plastic lives, as we shall see. But it is equally true that before Barthes, Georges Bataille spoke of plasticity too, and in relation to subjectivity, namely his own. Thus, in *Inner Experience* (1943), Bataille speaks of his ego in terms of what he calls “a disarming plasticity [*plasticité désarmante*]” (1988, 147). And in a genealogical move directly aligned with Nietzsche’s chain of squanderers, Bataille turns restricted mimesis linked to “slavery” into general mimesis characteristic of “sovereignty.” Or, perhaps, Lacoue-Labarthe would have started with a reminder that plasticity is already at play in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887) insofar as Nietzsche understands will to power in terms of “shaping forces” (1996a, 58) that “impress form [*Formen aufdrücken*]” on a malleable psychic material he calls “crowd [*Masse*]” or “unshaped population [*ungestaltete Bevölkerung*]” (66). Or maybe he would have started with the Romantics, or maybe with psychoanalysis, or perhaps music—who knows? Plastic subjects circulate endlessly through the channels of his mimetic thought, and it is unwise to speculate.

What is possible to say is that for Lacoue-Labarthe mimesis and plasticity cannot be easily dissociated. Though plasticity is the hidden face of mimesis, they constitute two sides of the same aesthetic-psychic concept, a Janus-faced concept he inscribes in a tradition of thought that brings him—via Hegel and Freud, for sure, but also Heidegger and Diderot, Bataille and Nietzsche, and many others—back to the very beginning of philosophy, in Plato’s thought where the philosophical genealogy of homo mimeticus started in the first place.

What we must now add is that this is where the joint philosophical adventure of the plasticity of mimesis also begins. Lacoue-Labarthe makes this
point in “Typography.” This is a foundational essay in the revival of interest in a different conception of mimesis started in the wake of structuralist controversies, which prefigured the mimetic turn and we considered in chapter 3. It was first published in *Mimesis: Des articulations* (1975) along with essays by Sylviane Agacinski, Sara Kofman, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-Luc Nancy, among others; it was subsequently translated and reprinted in *Typography* (1989) as an agonistic alternative to Girard’s mimetic theory. This long and complex essay inaugurates what Jean-Luc Nancy calls, not without admiration, the “great construction site of ‘onto-typology’” ([le grand chantier de ‘l’onto-typologie’](#)) (2008, 109; my trans.). It is a construction site on whose foundations I provisionally reconstruct my genealogy of plasticity before taking it into uncharted territories.

A lengthy commentary to position Lacoue-Labarthe’s engagement with the onto-typographic qualities of mimesis in relation to Nietzsche, Girard, and Heidegger (his three main interlocutors) would be necessary in principle. Given the specific perspective on homo mimeticus that drives us, I will spare you the philological niceties and go directly to the subject matter in order to delineate the general contours of the seal of mimesis as it *in-forms* (gives form to) the concept of plasticity.

The question of form or formation should not generate false ontological impressions. Lacoue-Labarthe, in fact, zooms in on books 2 and 3 of the *Republic*, that is, the books in which Plato inaugurates the problematic of mimesis not on the basis of an ontological critique of representation at three removes from the ideal Forms. We will have to wait book 10 for this stabilization of mimesis via the trope of the “mirror” and the “phantom [phantasma]” of reality it generates (Plato 1963c, 601c), though this metaphysical addendum continues to cast a long shadow on western aesthetics. Rather, Plato—or better, Socrates—starts by discussing mimesis in the context of an aesthetic theory first and foremost preoccupied with the psychic effects of theatrical impersonations on the formation of the subject, or ego—preoccupations we have seen as central in the animated shadows at play in the “Allegory of the Cave” with the power of generating phantom egos in chains.

We can now continue to give aesthetic specificity to this Platonic concern from the angle of the plasticity of the mimetic subject. It is, in fact, in the context of a discussion of the educative function of myths in general and poetry in particular as it is dramatically re-enacted by actors on the stage who impersonate fictional models, exempla, or as Plato says, “types” that have the power to form the guardians, and by extension subjectivity tout court, that the question of mimesis is first introduced in the *Republic* and by extension in western aesthetics, culture,
and subject formation. As Lacoue-Labarthe succinctly puts it, the “problematic of mimetism” in these first books “is not, as is repeated endlessly, principally a problematic of the lie, but instead a problematic of the subject” (1989, 125), which does not mean that this subject is not impressed by aesthetic forms.

Mimesis, as we already noted, comes from mimos (actor or performance), and Lacoue-Labarthe is distinctive among philosophers in insisting on the theatrical origins of mimesis in order to emphasize its formative psychic power. He even goes as far as speaking of Plato’s “psychology” (1989, 100) in this context, thereby implicitly agreeing with classicists like Eric Havelock who foreground the spectators’ “emotional identification” (Havelock 1963, 44; see also 20–35) as central to the Platonic critique of mimesis. In light of what we have seen so far, we are thus in very familiar territory. What is new in our genealogy of homo mimeticus is that at the center of this theatrical scene, Lacoue-Labarthe operates a second, less visible but not less fundamental theoretical move that binds the psychology of dramatic mimesis to the plasticity of the subject. The following passage outlines the essential contours of the plasticity of mimesis in its double-faced articulation that already seals its theoretical destination:

Things begin, then—and this is what “imitation” is all about—with the “plastic” [la ‘plastique’] (fashioning, modeling, fictioning), with the impression of the type and the impression of the sign, with the mark that language, “mythic” discourses (whether they are true or not matters little [...]), originally inscribe in the malleable—plastic—material of the infant soul. (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 126–127)

This is as a scene of beginnings, yet no singular concept originates here. On the contrary, there are many “things” that are simultaneously taking form in this scene, both with and against each other: philosophy and literature, aesthetics and ethics, models and copies, subjects and objects, fictional forms and political realities, and yes, mimesis and plasticity as well.

The importance of this beginning cannot be underestimated. It gives birth to the fundamental “mimetology” that traverses Lacoue-Labarthe’s entire thought and in-forms his account of typography, the subject, the figure, fiction, myth, and the fascist horrors that ensue as mythic fictions are put into political practice—all perspectives we will further from the angle of new mimetic studies now entangled with the problematic of plasticity as well. This is why Lacoue-Labarthe speaks of a “necessary reversibility of the motifs of engenderment and of the figure, of conception, and of the plastic” (1989, 128).
This reversibility cuts both ways. On the one hand, Lacoue-Labarthe stresses that mimesis is a plastic concept in search of an identity that assumes different dramatic forms. Thus, he defines it as a concept whose essence is to “lack a stable essence,” whose proper being is, paradoxically, a “lack of being-proper” (1989, 115)—in short, an unstable, malleable, and thus plastic concept that, like the protean mimos it designates, constantly changes form, fashioning, modeling, fictioning different conceptual protagonists on the theatrical/theoretical scene. Hence the difficulty—Bataille would say the impossibility—of fixing, once and for all, the plastic contours of mimesis itself in a unitary figure, form, or configuration. On the other hand, the fact that mimesis cannot be stabilized in a theoretical form does not mean that typical psychic formations are not already at play in theatrical practice. This leads us to a second, related, but for our purpose, more fundamental sense in which mimesis is plastic in the sense that it gives aesthetic form—via mythic types, models, or figures that, as we have seen and heard, are embodied on a stage—to the material plasticity of what Plato calls “soul” and Lacoue-Labarthe calls “subject.” As Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy put it elsewhere:

Myth is a fiction, in the strong, active sense of “fashioning,” or, as Plato says, of “plastic art” [la ‘plastique’] it is, therefore, a fictioning, whose role is to propose, if not to impose, models or types [...] types in imitation of which an individual, or a city, or an entire people, can grasp themselves and identify themselves. (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1990, 297)

The political power of such fictional types on real subjects was clear to the ancients, generated phantoms responsible for what Lacoue-Labarthe calls “the horror of the West” (2012) for the moderns, and, we shall see in subsequent chapters, under different theatrical and digital masks, continues to haunt the increasingly precarious condition of the contemporaries as well.

There is thus a fundamental genealogical link between Plato and plasticity that has so far received little attention. It needs to be foregrounded to supplement accounts of Homo sapiens that recognize the role fiction played in the history of civilization but left its formative and plastic properties for others to explore. This is where a chain of thinkers internal to Homo Mimeticus can make a difference. Lacoue-Labarthe, for one, who, in addition to his well-known debt to Derrida, shares a philological ear with Nietzsche, even reminds us of a tradition reported by Diogenes Laertes that links the name Plato (Platon) to
“the verb *plassein* (in Attic, *plattein*): ‘to model,’ ‘to fashion’—and also ‘to imagine,’ ‘to feign,’ ‘to simulate,’ and so on (compare French *plastique*)” (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 96), a plasticity inscribed in the saying, “Plato fashioned plastic words [Ο*ς ανεπλασεν Πλατων [ο] πεπλασμανα θαυματα ειδυς]” (96). We are now in a position to both see and hear that “Plato” was not only an exemplary plastic individual in Hegel’s sense; with his “plastic words” (96); he also played with the malleability of mimetic figures that resemble the plasticity of “wax.”

Wax is a plastic subject matter, but it is not the only one. Supplementing this classical analogy, let me exploit the resonances of a contemporary subject matter familiar to those mimetic subjects par excellence who are children. To bring our genealogy into the present, we could also speak of the plasticity of “Play-Doh.”

Play-Doh is indeed a plastic material object that speaks directly, or rather echoes, the problematic of the plasticity of the subject. Rather than offering an erudite philological interpretation of this subject matter, a personal anecdote directly drawn from life experience might perhaps best illustrate a linguistic-philosophical point on a more informal, material, yet not less imitative basis.

I owe a contemporary version of this confusion between Plato and plasticity to my daughter. A few days before I presented the first version of this chapter at a Johns Hopkins conference I had organized on Lacoue-Labarthe titled Poetics and Politics, my daughter (then three years old) interrupted a theoretical conversation I was having with my partner over breakfast—in a dramatic way. Picture the scene: early morning, two adults talking seriously, children quietly eating, but secretly listening. To express my discontent with a transcendental western metaphysics spellbound by ideal Forms you have heard me critique in chapter 2, I made a rash and rather unforgivable statement. I said, in the spur of the moment: “I don’t like Plato.” Before I had realized that this statement was only partially true, and at best incomplete, my daughter instinctively turned toward me with a personally offended look in her blue, ferocious eyes. She stared at me in disbelief with the ethical indignation of someone who just caught a big liar in the act, and then cried out, pointing her finger toward me: “You *do* like Play-Doh!!” I could not deny it. This mime of a daughter had, indeed, caught me in a theoretical double bind that delineates the general contours of my argument.

To regain my daughter’s respect, I should thus minimally specify my rash claim as follows: “I don’t like Plato for metaphysical reasons, but I do like Play-Doh. Ergo, I like Plato for materialist and quite playful reasons!”

This Socratic irony on the plasticity of Plato/Play-Doh is as linguistically playful in theory as it is materially true in practice. Children, as Socrates was the first to know, are imitative creatures in both theory and practice. Here is what
“Plato” says, as he gives voice, in mimetic speech, to his psychological concern with the pedagogical effects of mimesis on those plastic subjects:

Do you not know, then, that the begging in every task is the chief thing, especially for any creature that is young and tender? For it is then that it is best molded \[ \textit{plattetai} \] and takes the impression \[ \textit{tupos} \] that one wishes to stamp upon it? (Plato 1963c, 377ab)

So, this is the moment to echo the question with which we started: did we know that plasticity is central to subject formation? Yes, we did. This is, in fact, an ancient typographic inscription that, I do not want to say for the first time, but certainly before Hegel, snatches plasticity from its aesthetic anchorage to inscribe it in the psychic language of subject formation.

Plato’s concern in these early books is not with metaphysical forms but, rather, with the psychological and pedagogical role aesthetics in general and dramatic mimesis in particular plays in the psychic formation of plastic subjects. Fiction is not only mimetic in the idealist sense that it shadows the world; it is also and above all mimetic in the materialist sense that it forms and transforms subjects. Far from having only a spiritual, disembodied, and transcendental side, the soul—even for Plato, or better, especially for Plato—has a plastic, material, and thus immanent side, which is best molded by the formative power of fictional impressions generated by mythic and exemplary models. These impressions are especially strong in childhood, but Plato makes clear later in the Republic that they continue to shape the subject in adulthood as well, especially as it is part of what he calls “the mob assembled in the theater” (1963c, 10.604e). It is thus because plasticity is constitutive of the formation of the subject, of the polis, and thus of our political life in common that Lacoue-Labarthe will later say that “the political (the City) pertains to plasticity \[ \textit{relève d’une plasticité} \], formation and information, fiction in the strict sense” (1987, 102; my trans.). Similarly, it is on the basis of Plato’s diagnostic of mimesis that Lacoue-Labarthe speaks of subjectivity in terms of a “pure and disquieting plasticity \[ … \] which doubtless requires a subjective ‘base’—a ‘wax’” (1898, 115). A plastic view of the subject understood in its classical philosophical sense of subjectum (what is underlying or subjacent) is, indeed, internal to a most classical literary and philosophical definition of mimesis. And Lacoue-Labarthe knew it. The human soul or character (from \textit{kharassein}, to stamp or engrave) has been defined from the beginning of philosophy in terms of a waxlike plastic matter that is formed by exemplary models. And Lacoue-Labarthe equally knew it.
But there is more. Lacoue-Labarthe not only allows us to establish a genealogical continuity between mimesis and plasticity that converges on the problematic of subject formation, or homo mimeticus; he also delineates the paradoxical conceptual form that serves as the exemplary model for the double structure of plasticity to emerge on the philosophical scene. As we retrace Lacoue-Labarthe’s characterization of plasticity in its complete form, let us pay careful attention to the shift from two seemingly opposed sides of mimesis: one side conceived as passive reception of form, the other as active capacity to give form. Speaking of the poet Plato wants to expel from the ideal Republic, Lacoue-Labarthe writes that this subject is an incarnation of what he calls mimeticism itself, that pure and disquieting plasticity [pure inquiétante plasticité] which potentially authorizes the varying appropriation of all characters and all functions (all roles), that kind of “typical virtuosity” which doubtless requires a “subjective” base—a “wax” [une ‘cire’]—but without any other property than an infinite malleability: instability “itself.” (1989, 115)

A duplicity is at play here: what is plastic now is not only the concept of mimesis but also the mimetic subject itself, its subjective base, sub-stance, or subjectum on which mythic types are impressed generating stereotypes, which, as we have seen, reach into the present. The movement of this process of subject formation is not singular but double, and this double movement begins to generate a paradoxical logic that will keep Lacoue-Labarthe’s destabilizing thought on the move—reaching a genealogy of plasticity that brings it into the present.

We can delineate this double movement now animating the two drawing hands of homo mimeticus as follows. On the one hand, it inaugurates the ontotypology Lacoue-Labarthe tirelessly denounces as a source of plastic vulnerability to totalitarian figures whose will to power, as Nietzsche also warned, can be violently impressed on what he called Masse, or “unformed populations” (1996a, 66). This passive mimesis entails a plasticity that is disquieting for political reasons, for it is based on an aestheticization of politics that renders subjects—especially in a mass but not only—docile, and easily subjected to fascist leaders (old and new) who erect themselves as figures of authority along typographic lines Lacoue-Labarthe, echoing Bataille, will later qualify in terms of “restricted mimesis.”8 In our language, there is thus a pathological politics of mimesis we shall return to in part 3. On the other hand, this passage already entails—in embryo—an active, creative, productive, or better re-productive supplement, which Lacoue-Labarthe endorses...
for poetic or aesthetic reasons. This “general mimesis,” as he calls it, in-forms a
typical virtuosity of a plastic subject who is not one, for it is deprived of proper in-
dividual qualities; yet, paradoxically, it has the power to put this plasticity to pro-
ductive use by playing all characters, roles, and aesthetic figurations whose formal
properties he defines, once again, in terms of “an absence of proper qualities—or
if you will, as a plasticity” (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 124).

So, Plato is playing with Play-Doh, after all. And in the process, a paradox-
ical figure is taking shape. Reception of form and creation of form, passivity
and activity, docile malleability and plastic virtuosity: the structural similarities
between mimesis and plasticity are now becoming visible, the contours of this
Janus-faced concept marked. Mimesis, just like plasticity, is the property of a
subject without property, a homo mimeticus whose defining characteristics are,
indeed, to receive form and give form. A mimetic, yet not simply realistic aes-
thetics is thus already inscribed in the formation of the subject in a way that is
double: it is both the subject of a passive reception of form (the subjective base,
or “wax”) and the subject of a typical virtuosity to give form (the plastic subject
who assumes different “roles”). As Lacoue-Labarthe puts it, furthering a decon-
structive genealogy on the way to gaining a semblance of material substance:
“the true distinction passes instead through the difference between activity and
passivity, which embraces the difference between, on the one hand, matter/re-
ceptacle/matrix/malleable wax, and, on the other, seal/imprint/stamp/stylet”
(1989, 126, n.126), which is exactly what the passage from restricted to gen-
eral mimesis, reception of form and creation of forms, formalizes. In short, the
duplcity of plasticity shadows the duplicity of mimesis, generating a spiraling,
paradoxical double movement that blurs the line between active and passive,
copy and original, subject and object, inside and outside, and triggers a mirror-
ing interplay that turns stable oppositions into destabilizing equivalences.

Does Malabou know this? If she does, she doesn’t say it. Her only reference
to Lacoue-Labarthe I could find is critical. In a characteristic agonistic move,
it marks a clear-cut demarcation from mimetic models, which is not deprived
of patho-logical value and which I qualify as romantic agonism, for it is intent
on erasing the traces of models in view of promoting an original view. Thus,
in Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing, Malabou splits Lacoue-Labarthe’s Janus-
faced account of the plasticity of mimesis in two, and reveals only the passive,
restricted, and politically problematic side. As she puts it, her own conception
of “formality and figurality—does not [...] open the ideologically questionable
space of ‘ontotypology’ as defined by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe” in whose in-
terpretation, Malabou continues, “form is the most suspect of all metaphysical
concepts” (2010, 54). True, Lacoue-Labarthe is extremely suspicious of mimetic figures for the ontotypology they presuppose and the totalitarian politics they lead to. And this Nietzschean suspicion turns into a virulent critique as fictional figures that erect themselves as authoritarian political leaders who rely on the power of “mythic identification” (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1990, 296) to generate horrors on a massive scale. This is a lesson that, as we shall confirm in part 3, remains constitutive of the banality of evil with respect to both historical fascism and what I call, (new) fascism.

But politics is clearly only half the story. The other half concerns poetics. That is, an active, productive, and creative mimesis qua “formative force [force formatrice]” that is central to Lacoue-Labarthe’s mimetology, if only because there would be no “virtuosity” of mimesis were actors—and the plastic subject they embody—not given any aesthetic forms to play with in the first place.

Plastic Plays: From Restricted to General Mimesis

While playing with Plato, Lacoue-Labarthe can help us, if not to fully answer, at least to address a fundamental question that Malabou’s dialectics of plasticity does not clarify: namely, how does restricted plasticity as passive reception of form turn into a general plasticity that has the power to give form? At first sight, the paradoxical logic of this trans-formation based on what Lacoue-Labarthe calls an “identity of contraries” (1989, 252) does not seem deprived of dialectical power to turn negative into positive, passivity into activity, perhaps even leading to an explosive future. And yet Lacoue-Labarthe insists that this logic is not dialectical: “Nothing can hold it,” he says, “and in particular no dialectical operation, despite its strange proximity to speculative logic” (253). This mimetic logic, then, does not progress from negation to recognition to a sublation of contrasting difference into the sameness of the Self qua self-consciousness. On the contrary, it is based on a “hyperbologic” that constantly unsteadies the opposition between active and passive, wax and seal, giving and receiving form, generating an endless circulation “without resolution” which, for Lacoue-Labarthe, “is nothing other than the very logic of mimesis” (260). In our language, this mimetic logic, or patho-logy, requires some material, digital, and transdisciplinary supplements this book aims to provide, but, in substance, continues to inform and transform homo mimeticus in the twenty-first century.
Lacoue-Labarthe delineates the formal contours of his hyperbologic in the sequel to “Typography,” *L’Imitation des modernes* (*Typographies II*) (1986), specifically in what he calls “the ‘matrix’ text [*texte ‘matriciel’*] of the modern re-elaboration of the question of *mimesis*” (Lacoue-Labarthe 1986, 10) that informs the whole book: a chapter titled, “Le Paradoxe et la mimésis.” We are thus back to the problematic of the actor as a paradigmatic embodiment of the plasticity of the mimetic subject. But the theoretical perspective on the theatrical scene has changed. This time, the focus is not on the effect of the actor on the plastic mass of spectators who are passively subjected to a model they identify with (restricted mimesis). Rather, the focus is on the plastic actor as a virtuoso mimetician who generates artistic characters not deprived of formal qualities (general mimesis). We have thus moved from a passive mimesis receptive to forms to an active mimesis generative of forms via a paradoxical (hyperbologic) movement that turns an absence of proper qualities into its very opposite: namely, a potential excess of protean transformations.

What the great actor imitates, if I schematize the paradox to the extreme, is not nature, let alone natural models. Rather, the actor imitates nature’s creative force itself and, by doing so, Lacoue-Labarthe says, “supplements a certain deficiency in nature [supplée à un certain défaut de la nature], its incapacity to do everything, organize everything, make everything its work—produce everything” (1989, 255). The foundations of this mimetology are different, for they rest on an Aristotelian rather than Platonic account of mimesis. It is in fact well known that Aristotle, contra Plato, famously redefines mimesis in the *Poetics* as “a representation of an action [*mimesis praxeôs*] which is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude […] in the mode of dramatic enactment, not narrative” (Aristotle 1987, 37). In a mimetic agon with Plato, who, as we saw, critiqued mimesis for the irrational and contagious *pathos* it generates, Aristotle is indeed intent on defending poetry by stressing both its philosophical value on the side of logos and its cathartic properties on the side of pathos.¹¹

So far, so good. Less known is that Aristotle returns to mimesis in *Physics* with the following supplement, as he writes in book 2: “generally art in some cases completes what nature cannot bring to a finish, and in others imitates nature” (8.199a, 340). For Lacoue-Labarthe this second definition whereby imitation does not simply copy or represent nature but, rather, finishes its process of creation, provides what he calls the “generative matrix-scheme” (Lacoue-Labarthe 1986, 23) of what he calls, oxymoronically, the imitation of the moderns. Far from being simply opposed to the imitation of the ancients, as a simplistic framing of the *querelle* between *les anciens et les modernes* tends to suggest, “one can
be Modern with the Ancients, thanks to the Ancients, just as one can be against them,” as Marc Fumaroli notes (2001, 37; my trans.). Lacoue-Labarthe would concur. In his genealogical reconstruction, he also specifies that the moderns, with and against the ancients, are driven by a different, more affirmative, and creative imitation. This modern imitation is not a passive reproduction or representation of any object but, rather, is at play in an active production or dramatization of a subject who imitates not nature itself but its power of creation.

The overturning of perspectives is significant; it also reloads an ancient quarrel between the ancients for the moderns from an original perspective that finds in theatrical mimesis its starting point and now informs new mimetic studies as well. We have in fact moved from a critique of passive mimesis and the pathological impressions it generates (Plato) to the creative power of mimesis to supplement nature itself (Aristotle). And yet, the agon is not as clear cut as it appears to be for a reason that is, once again, double. First, recall that Aristotle and Plato disagree in their evaluation of mimesis as representation but fundamentally agree that humans are imitative creatures who imitate with their bodies as in ritual dance or dramatic actions—hence their shared insistence on “dramatic mimesis.” And second, the form of the mimetic paradox Lacoue-Labarthe infers from the founders of philosophy is essentially the same. At the heart of this mimetic “supplement,” we find the same lack of proper qualities Lacoue-Labarthe, on the shoulders of Derrida, described via Plato in “Typography”: this subject has no essential, proper, and thus natural properties; the subject is pure and unstable plasticity; a mime without qualities. Yet, precisely because of this lack of essence, or property, this subject is simultaneously endowed with a formative, plastic, and re-productive gift to assume all kinds of forms. On the shoulders of a long genealogy of thinkers, Lacoue-Labarthe calls this supplementary gift by different names: the “gift of impropriety,” the “gift of nothing” the “gift of nature,” or the “gift of mimesis” (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 259)—which, as we now know, is also the gift of plasticity in both its capacity to give form and receive form.

Who, then, is the subject of plasticity? Are we authorized to say that this energy that supplements nature, reproduces nature’s creative force, and stems from a plastic/mimetic subject that is ultimately rooted in a human, all-too-human nature? And, by extension, that what used to be called the plasticity of the soul can now be called—to use a more immanent, contemporary term—the plasticity of the brain? These questions take us to the limit of Lacoue-Labarthe’s mimetology and deconstruction more generally—and encourage us to go beyond them on the basis of the genealogy of homo mimeticus we have been tracing to chart future directions of investigation.
Plastic Power, Material Impressions

When it comes to *phusis*’s plastic force, or power, the French philosopher usually deals with the concepts of “soul,” “psyche,” or “character,” rather than with the brain itself. As Jane Bennett points out, Lacoue-Labarthe’s “poststructuralist” ontology restricts the reach of his materialism of the soul to human mimesis and does not fully tap into *phusis*’s “non-human” creative possibilities (Bennett 2007, 1198). This critical observation is faithful to the driving *telos* of Lacoue-Labarthe’s account of general mimesis, which always posits a *poiesis* already at play in a mimetic supplement to *phusis*. Deconstruction is not quite a materialism and should not be confused with it. On the contrary, it needs a materialist supplement our theory of imitation sets out to provide.

And yet this does not mean that the two deconstructive and materialist perspectives cannot or should not be joined in order to push reflections on the materiality of mimesis further, toward the theory of homo mimeticus we are proposing. The influences, as we shall see in chapters 7 and 8, can go both ways and productively so. For the moment, it suffices to say that there is an unusual passage in “Paradox and Mimesis” where Lacoue-Labarthe roots the plastic force of the actor in the materiality of the “brain.” There, he recognizes that what is at play in Diderot’s account of the great actor is not a state of (Platonic/Romantic) inspiration characteristic of the man of “sensibility” who is dispossessed of its soul via a form of “enthusiasm” first denounced by Plato in *Ion*, as we noted in chapter 2. On the contrary, Diderot promotes the value of “judgment [entendement]” over “sensibility [sensation]” (1992, 365) or, to put it in our language, critical distance over bodily pathos. Interestingly, Lacoue-Labarthe considers this patho-logical perspective in terms of what he calls “the affirmed superiority (in the physiological register) of the brain over the diaphragm” (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 258; emphasis added) necessary for the actor to assume different phantasmal forms. From mimesis as a phantom of reality to mimesis as a phantom of the ego, the perspective is overturned from transcendence to immanence, metaphysics to physiology, yet an ancient, modern, and still contemporary homo mimeticus continues to be at play.

Now, the “physiological register” Lacoue-Labarthe convokes in order to root the actor’s plastic power in the “brain” is in line with Diderot’s materialism but also finds a supplement in another thinker of mimesis who casts a long shadow on *L’Imitation des modernes* and continues to give genealogical substance to our theory of homo mimeticus as well. Nietzsche is, in fact, a self-proclaimed
“physician of culture” whose diagnostic of plasticity as “energy,” “power,” or “dunamis” (Lacoue-Labarthe 1986, 97) directly in-forms Lacoue-Labarthe’s account of the plasticity of the moderns. Already in the second of the Untimely Meditation (1874), Nietzsche in fact speaks of the importance “to know exactly how great the plastic power of man [sic], a people, a culture is (2007, 62). He defines “plastic power” as follows:

I mean by plastic power [plastische Kraft] the capacity to develop out of oneself in one’s own way, to transform and incorporate into oneself what is past and foreign, to heal wounds, to replace what has been lost, to recreate broken moulds. (62)\textsuperscript{16}

Plasticity, then, not only renders the subject, especially if part of a mass but not only, malleable, passive, and pathologically suggestible to authoritarian types (restricted or pathological mimesis); it also has a formative, active, and therapeutic power that recreates molds and heals wounds (general or patho-logical mimesis). Plasticity deforms, then, but also forms, and transforms what in the sphere of the physiological register goes under the rubric of the “brain,” generating creative possibilities that turn what is foreign and exterior into what is intimate and interior, the wounds and weakness of the past into the health and strength of the future. This therapeutic power, in short, is plastic, metamorphic power insofar as it is creative, vitalist, and affirmative brainpower.

Can we go as far as to say that this natural gift located in the actor’s plastic “brain” is ultimately a neuronal gift? Again, Lacoue-Labarthe does not say this. Far from it. Yet he paradoxically comes close to saying it nonetheless. After all, on the shoulders of Aristotle, he constantly reminds us that “mimesis is the most primitive determination of the human animal” (Lacoue-Labarthe 1986, 50) and sets out to root this faculty in “an imitation of phusis as a productive force” that also animates “poiesis” (1989, 256); and on the shoulders of Plato, he roots the instability of mimesis in a poetics that, as we have seen, is founded on the material “plasticity” of the subject qua homo mimeticus. True, this subject without proper qualities is endowed with a disquieting plasticity that is both receptive to forms and creative of forms, is mediated by aesthetics, and is rooted in what Lacoue-Labarthe generally calls “nature,” and only once “brain.” I thus take the risk—and thus responsibility—to add a materialist supplement of my own to broaden the reach of new mimetic studies; namely, that at the formal and conceptual level, this mimetic paradox also captures the double movement of what now goes under the rubric of synaptic plasticity. That is, a supplementary gift of
nature at play in the brain, which leads neurons not to have any proper function, or essential role; and precisely for this plastic reason, we can now suggest, they can paradoxically assume a multiplicity of roles.

Neurons, we are in fact told, do not have essential properties that are fixed in our genetic nature, but are plastic, open to transformation, and endowed with the capacity to “rewire.” Neuroscientist Paul Bach-y-Rita, for instance, argues that due to synaptic plasticity “any part of the cortex should be able to process whatever electrical signals were sent to it” (qtd. in Doidge 2007, 18). Alvaro Pascual-Leone, another specialist of neuroplasticity, is more moderate in his diagnostic, as he argues that “formation of new pathways is possible only following initial [cultural] reinforcement of preexistent [genetic] connections” (Pascual-Leone et al. 2005, 379). And yet, he agrees that “ultimately, plasticity is a most efficient way to utilize the brain’s limited resources” (396). Neuroplasticity is a burgeoning area of scientific inquiry, and these statements will certainly not be the last words on the matter. What is certain is that the culture/nature binary is indeed deconstructed by the problematic of neuroplasticity, which should play an important role in metamorphoses of the future.

Now, I am not suggesting that what Lacoue-Labarthe calls plastic subject can be reduced to a plastic brain, for it is the dynamic interplay between the brain and the soul that interests philosophical physicians; nor that plasticity opens possibilities for endless transformations that allow us to “become everyone,” as enthusiasm for deconstructive possibilities led Lacoue-Labarthe to perhaps too hastily suggest in theory—and luckily so, for this subject would amount to being “no one” in practice. As patients failing to recover from brain damage remind us, there are material limits to brain plasticity that need to be recognized and that no hyperbologic can possibly supplement. Humans are plastic creatures to be sure, yet as any parent has experienced, there are innate predispositions as well that, already at an early age, are resistant to change; and if you try to learn a new language in your thirties and forties, you may notice that not unlike Play-Doh this plasticity tends to diminish over time—which does not mean that, with some nomadic training, it cannot be kept at play. What is certain is that the neurosciences are beginning to catch up with (and lend empirical support to) the ancient paradox concerning the plasticity of the mimetic subject and the physiological laws of impropriety it entails. And what genealogical lenses supplement, in the sphere of theory, is the following insight: the paradox of mimesis served as a model for the paradox of plasticity to take form in the first place.

Lacoue-Labarthe, for his part, will continue to speak of this natural or plastic gift in terms of poesis or auto-poiesis. Thus, he understands “plastic force” as
“the faculty of ‘self-growth’ and self-accomplishment [s’accomplir par soi-même]” (Lacoue-Labarthe 1986, 98; my trans.). This individual conception of artistic creation as a natural force is, once again, not entirely original, nor is it meant to be. It is based on a romantic account of poesis that not only reproduces nature but rather re-produces the creative force of Being itself, thereby supplementing nature’s creative abilities. Or, to put it in Spinozist language, it is based on an imitation of natura naturans rather than natura naturata. This creative interplay between phusis and poesis whereby the subject reproduces the creative power of nature is mysterious, masked, and perhaps still of romantic inspiration in its creative appropriation of Aristotle’s aesthetic categories.

Yet Lacoue-Labarthe also adds a modernist touch, for the language he mobilizes belongs to the experiential and perhaps transgressive register of erotism. Thus, he speaks of “A pure gift in which nature gives itself up and offers itself in the most secret essence and intimacy, in the very source of its energy,” a “pure gift,” he specifies thinking of Bataille, “of no economy or no exchange” (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 260). The paradigmatic model of this squandering natural gift, the general gift of a heterogeneous mimesis that is not restricted to a homogeneous exchange, for it plunges in the secret intimacy of Being, squanders its energy in the matrix of a secret essence in general via a sacred being in particular is, for Bataille, the lover—but that is another story.17 In Lacoue-Labarthe’s portrait of the moderns, he insists that we are confronted with the figure without a proper being he calls, echoing Diderot, a “genius” (259).

And this time, Malabou equally knows it.

**Homo Plasticus: Patho(-)logies of a Mimetic Brain**

Our genealogy gave us sufficient distance to step back and see how deep the continuities between plasticity and mimesis actually go in the history of western philosophy in general and of aesthetics in particular. Homo mimeticus, as it turns out, is also a homo plasticus. These mirroring continuities hinge on a paradox based on a logic of the supplement that turns a passive form into active formation and that has remained in the shadows so far. A genealogy of mimesis attentive to the interplay of sameness and difference help us foreground this patho(-)logical paradox in order to go further.
Let us now listen to Malabou’s distinction between flexibility and plasticity with this broader genealogy of *homo plasticus* qua homo mimeticus in mind. As she puts it: “To be flexible is to receive a form or impression,” but “what flexibility lacks is the resource of giving form, the power to create, to invent or even erase an impression, the power to style” (Malabou 2008, 12). And with a nod to this romantic source of “creation,” which was indeed erased, she adds: “Flexibility is plasticity minus its genius” (12). Plasticity, in its double power to give form and receive form, has genius; and a plastic reading should be attentive to plasticity as a source of cures and therapies, good and bad impressions. Thus, Malabou urges us to retrace what deconstruction supposedly erased, that is, what she calls the “impression,” “form,” but also the “figure,” “contour,” and “rhythm” of plasticity (2010, 49).

Impression and form; figure and rhythm. The traces may no longer be visible, but the echoes are still audible, if only because Lacoue-Labarthe has insisted on delineating the conceptual contours of mimesis in those very same terms. The echoes are accentuated, as Malabou conjures one of Lacoue-Labarthe’s privileged poetic trope—the “caesura”—to identify not the gap between poetic phrases of romantic inspiration but between neural “synapses” of material origins instead. Still, to genealogists, echoes reverberate across linguistic and materialist binaries, as Malabou writes, for instance: “Between two neurons there is thus a caesura, and the synapse itself is ‘gapped’” (2008, 36). To be sure, any impressions left by genial models must have been erased for plasticity to come to consciousness, yet some unconscious echoes of the mimetic tradition that gave birth to a dialectical consciousness remain to be heard between the spaces created by writing.

These echoes signal the return of a haunting repetition of mimesis that shadows plasticity, but important differences remain to be signaled—and in this *différénd* lies, perhaps, an original supplement to plasticity. For Malabou, in fact, this caesura between neurons is based on a logic of “negation” or “resistance” that is clearly Hegelian in nature and leads to a progressive dialectical development of self-consciousness oriented toward a potentially revolutionary and anarchic future. The philosophical task she sets herself is thus to endow the concept of plasticity with consciousness so that its explosive potential can erupt in the future. The idea is noble in theory and is not deprived of political potential in practice, especially in times of crises under the shadow of tyrannical leaders that call for revolutionary resistance on multiple fronts.

At the same time, dialectical progress is not the only possible future for plasticity. Lacoue-Labarthe, in fact, in a mirroring countermovement, had outlined what he called a “caesura of the speculative” (1989,
208–235) that supplements the logic of dialectics with a paradoxical mimetic logic, or hyperbologic, that does not lead to any progress of consciousness—let alone self-consciousness. Rather, it leads to a radical instability of a plastic homo mimeticus that is unconsciously open to both revolutionary movements and fascist impressions. As Plato had already indicated in his founding myth of the cave that Lacoue-Labarthe echoes, once we are subjected to types, be they good or evil, “the stakes are moral” (264). But since a conception of “sovereignty” (264) is already at play in the vita mimetica, he adds that “there is also a politics involved” (265), which unsurprisingly will turn out to be a hypermimetic politics, as we shall see in part 3.

A genealogy of mimesis, then, leads from aesthetics to politics without necessarily passing via an ascending dialectical metaphysics. As the genealogical trajectory of this book indicates, this immanent development is still very much our telos. Significantly, Lacoue-Labarthe ends his diagnostic of the plasticity of mimesis by reminding us that when actors are at play on theatrical stages that appeal to plastic subjects assembled in a mass and chained to magnetizing figures, a danger always lurks behind the scene: namely, the danger of “mimetic epidemic or contagion, that is to say, the panic movement that is the dissolution of the social bond” (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 265). We have seen in recent years that epidemics have contagious effects we thought we had long left behind, yet return to haunt the body politic, threatening to dissolve the social bond in pathological ways we shall return to in chapter 9.

It is perhaps no accident that this philosophical physician ends his account of “general mimesis” defined by a healthy, active, and creative process of giving form to the plastic subject, with a general reminder that this formation can quickly morph into its other formless, contagious, and pathological side: namely, a “restricted mimesis” whereby the plastic subject is passively formed by fascist figures who impress types on homo plasticus. This is indeed the risk of a life-negating pathological pathos that dissolves the sym-pathos on which the social bond rests, exploding in the process the creative potential of ethical, political, and fictional formations.

To be sure, this is a “different thought of mimesis” (Derrida 1989, 2) whose echoes are only now beginning to fully resonate in new mimetic studies. And like all echoes, this voice is already shared. Lacoue-Labarthe, in fact, gives voice to an ancient Platonic lesson central to that other formidable reader of Plato and model par excellence who in-forms both Lacoue-Labarthe’s diagnostic of mimesis and Malabou’s accounts of plasticity as “something that allows play within the structure” (Malabou 2015a, 244). We have already encountered this precursor
who, for many of his generation, seemed to embody the romantic (im)properties of a genius who can now be supplemented as well.

Here is how Jacques Derrida diagnoses this structural play as the plasticity of mimetic types takes form in “Plato’s Pharmacy”: “The imprints (tupoi) of writing,” for Plato, writes Derrida, have the power to “inscribe themselves [...] in the wax of the soul in intaglio, thus corresponding to the spontaneous, autochthonous motions of psychic life” (1981b, 104). A genealogical model had already outlined the plastic form that for Plato always makes an intaglio in the waxlike plasticity of homo mimeticus. Mimetic, written, and plastic forms are, indeed, intimately tied and cannot be easily disentangled, if only because it is the pharmakon of mimesis—and the “malleable unity of this concept” it entails (71)—that gives conceptual form to a paradoxical play of plasticity that reaches into the present, which does not mean that this genealogical interplay between nature and culture, souls and brains need to be restricted to a linguistic economy, as our longer genealogy of homo mimeticus already outlined.

As we have seen, mimesis traces the contours of a disquieting plastic concept whose undecidable double face looks both ways as it is both the locus of origins and copies, presence and absence, passive formation and creative transformation, pathos and logos, political pathologies and diagnostic patho-logies. Or if you prefer Plato’s terminology, plasticity, like mimesis, has the (im)properties of what Lacoue-Labarthe, echoing Derrida, echoing Plato, calls “a pharmakon that must be handled delicately,” for, says Socrates in book 3 of Republic, “it is obvious that such a pharmakon must be reserved for physicians” (qtd. in Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 132).

Like Derrida before him, but with a distinctly theatrical focus, Lacoue-Labarthe tended to restrict the general economy of mimesis to a household of language. And yet, as modernist physicians of the soul like Nietzsche made strikingly clear, the “whole economy of [his] soul” (1974, 338) is traversed by an immanent bodily pathos that operates on the nervous system of homo mimeticus generating forms of preverbal communication that go beyond good and evil. Interestingly, contemporary physicians of the soul have been following precisely this genealogical trajectory. Alvaro Pascual-Leone and his team, for instance, echo a patho(-)logical diagnostic, as he writes: “Plasticity is the mechanism for development and learning, as well as the cause of pathology” (Pascual-Leone et al. 2005, 396). Nietzsche, but also Plato, would not have disagreed. On the contrary, they develop a Janus-faced aesthetics on the basis of this pharmacological lesson. Closer to homo plasticus, Jean-Pierre Changeux, a major influence on Malabou, as he retraces the discovery of synaptic plasticity in Neuronal Man
Homo Mimeticus: A New Theory of Imitation

(1983), joins past and present diagnostics, as he writes: this new science “was to take shape only with the arrival on the scene of a very old discipline concerned with poisons, drugs, and medicines: pharmacology” (Changeux 1997, 33).

In the liminal twilight of philosophy, there might not be an essential difference between the dusk of writing and the dawn of plasticity, after all. They both shine through with a mimetic light projecting different facets of homo mimeticus now attentive to the patho(-)logies of homo plasticus as well. In the end, then, pharmacology and neurology might not be as simply opposed as they appear to be at first sight. And who knows? If these often-opposed logoi on the plastic power of mimetic pathos turn to face each other, they might not simply passively mirror each other; they can now also actively reflect on one another in productive patho-logical ways.

On one side of this Janus-faced logos, Malabou convincingly shows how contemporary neurology can indeed help scholars in the humanities give material substance to the concept of writing by inscribing linguistic traces in the materiality of the brain. This perspective opens up transformative possibilities for the human sciences, if not to completely explode, at least to offer some “resistance” (Malabou 2008, 68) to passive subjections to dominant pathologies now proliferating in an increasingly precarious, interconnected, and damaged planet. Political resistance is, indeed, more needed than ever in a neoliberal world that demands increasing docile adaptation to (new) fascist and authoritarian leaders endowed with a will to power that not only risks turning the ego into a phantom via the use of new algorithm media; they also threaten escalating violence to the extreme by resuscitating the phantom of nuclear catastrophes. Malabou’s plastic work on mimetic subjects par excellence such as trauma, epigenetics, crowd behavior, and the unconscious, offers timely contributions to the mimetic turn.

The re-turn to mimesis is already at play in Malabou’s realization that “every act of shaping, repairing, remodeling” at play in plasticity “illustrate[s] the return of repetition” (2015b, 71). And in a mirroring move, she adds: “repetition has become the question, what questions us” (71). Mimesis, I have argued, is not only the subject that questions; it is also the subject of this question—and this questioning subject leads us through the other side of the looking glass.

On the other side, we have been pushing against the shoulders of an ancient genealogy of philosophical physicians that considered plasticity and imitation two sides of homo mimeticus. Lacoue-Labarthe’s untimely question makes us wonder if plasticity is, perhaps, nothing less than a contemporary repetition of an ancient pharmakon. That is, a more embodied, affective, and material pharmakon whose logical and pathological effects always escape grand dialectical
The Plasticity of Mimesis

narratives of progress or coming to consciousness—including political progress and enlightened consciousness. If the double diagnostic of plasticity echoes an ancient pharmacology of mimesis that blurs the line between activity and passivity, giving form and receiving form, theatrical figures and fascist figures, *logos* and *pathos*, therapy and sickness, this repetition with a difference continues to be in urgent need of diagnostics—if only because the dark reality of political pathologies that render the plastic masses prey to the mimetic unconscious risks exploding the fictional logic of plasticity coming to consciousness.

Lacoue-Labarthe’s mirroring reflections never claimed to be fully original. As he puts it, in a confessional, theatrical, but also hermeneutical phrase: “I’m only a messenger, a spokesman. Let’s say, a ‘passeur’” (Lacoue-Labarthe 2000, 102). The message has been well received; the role of the *passeur* is now replayed. Hence the echoes can be heard in the *re*-turn to homo mimeticus. From the space between passing phrases, aesthetic impressions, and protean subjects our genealogical gesture took the apparently simple form of play. While playing with Play-Doh, daughter and dad, overturned in passing the new form of plasticity. And what we found underneath Plato is the formative imprint of a complex Janus-faced figure: an old *pharmakon* that captures the two sides of what we called, for lack of a better phrase, the plasticity of mimesis.