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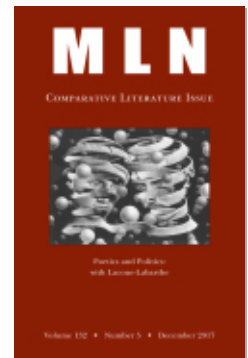
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The Plasticity of Mimesis



Nidesh Lawtoo

Repetition has become the question, what questions us. ...are we able to deal with this new urgency of repetition without seeking revenge toward it?

Catherine Malabou, "From the Overman to the Posthuman: How Many Ends?"

There is a philosophical urgency from which it is now impossible to shy away from: the obligation is on us to think or to rethink *mimesis*.

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *L'Imitation des modernes*

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 bears the traces of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's thought, a thought that continues to form, inform, and transform my understanding of what mimesis "is"—or can possibly become.

Taking my clue from the two epigraphs that frame this essay, I would like to trace a logic of repetition that is currently generating a *mimetic* turn or, better, *re-turn* in critical theory by suggesting that plasticity is one of the most recent, most innovative, but not necessarily original conceptual manifestations of what the Greeks called, enigmatically, *mimēsis*. And that consequently, Lacoue-Labarthe's penetrating thought on "the imitation of the moderns"—and thus of the ancients—opens up an alternative genealogy that sharpens the formal contours of plasticity as an emerging conceptual protagonist on the theoretical scene.

To delineate this double move, let me briefly dissociate the two sides of this Janus-faced title. On one side, the phrase “the plasticity of mimesis” indicates a certain malleability of the ancient concept of *mimēsis* itself. Mimesis has often been confined within a stabilizing conception of aesthetic “representation” characteristic of a realist poetics, an influential but restricted translation of a concept that, as Jacques Derrida and, more recently, Barbara Cassin, caution us, “one should not hasten to translate” (“Double Session” 183).¹ Supplementing homogeneous definitions of mimesis restricted to simple representation, or realism, Lacoue-Labarthe’s heterogeneous thought tirelessly reminds us that *mimesis* is a theoretical concept without a proper identity that originates in the practice of the theater (*mimesis*, from *mīmos*, actor). Consequently, it entails both visual representations and bodily impersonations, which, once enacted, dramatized, or better, mimed, by actors on a stage, generate protean affects such as identification and contagion, enthusiastic frenzy and manic (dis) possessions that continue to haunt what Lacoue-Labarthe calls the imitation of the moderns. Hence his claim in *L’Imitation des modernes* that it is philosophically urgent to *step back* to the ancients in order “to think or rethink *mimesis*” [*obligation nous est faite de penser ou de repenser la mimēsis*] (282).

On the other, related, yet less visible side, it may be the emerging concept of “plasticity” that has mimetic properties. The scientific discovery of the brain’s “neuroplasticity” is, in fact, currently forming a new picture of subjectivity as flexible, impressionable, adaptable and, in this material, neurological sense, mimetic. This view is equally at play in the philosophical delineation of plasticity as a “concept” in Catherine Malabou’s double sense. That is, in plasticity’s capacity to both “*receive form*” and “*give form*” (*Brain* 5), and, in the process, generate contradictory effects such as passive adaptations and creative formations, psychic pathologies and therapeutic cures, perhaps even revolutionary transformations as plasticity gains consciousness of itself in its dialectical progress toward what Malabou calls the “future” (*Avenir* 11).²

¹Barbara Cassin specifies that “*mimesis*” belongs to the category of “untranslatables” for it is characterized by a “prodigious semantic richness” that is not only concerned with the “identity of the object” (representation or resemblance) but also with the “identity of the subject” (mime or identification) (*Dictionary* 659). For informed accounts of mimesis not only as an aesthetic concept but also as a *conditio humana* central of critical theory, see Gebauer and Wulf, and Potolsky.

²This article follows up on a genealogical connection between plasticity and mimesis initiated in Lawtoo, “Conrad.”

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" (*Typography* 178) reveals that mimesis and plasticity are, perhaps, two sides of the same Janus-faced concept. Joining these two sides does not establish the unity of a stable identity. Instead, it generates a destabilizing repetition with a difference in which these two concepts face each other, mirror one another and, above all, reflect *on* each other. In this genealogical 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 mimetic actor. In the process, a genealogy of plasticity generates a theoretical inversion of perspective that turns Lacoue-Labarthe's untimely question, "How can psychology contribute to mimetology?" ("Typography" 101) into what I take to be its timely supplement: namely, how can mimetology contribute to psychology—and perhaps to a pharmacology internal to neurology as well? But let us proceed in order.

1. The Era of Plasticity: Malabou's Neuro Turn

While the concept of mimesis has been relegated to the backstage of theoretical discussions in the twentieth century, plasticity is an emerging conceptual protagonist that is receiving increasing attention on the contemporary theoretical scene. And rightly so, for it is 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 transform itself. That we long knew. It is rather the structure of the brain itself that changes over time, in its ability to establish new synaptic connections between neurons, which modify their capacity for transmission depending on our physical activities, cultural impressions, and life experiences. Historians Nikolas Rose and Joelle Abi-Rached summarize 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*" (*Neuro* 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” (“Plastic” 377).³ Somewhat paradoxically, then, the neurosciences are currently contributing to forming an image of the brain that supports a conception of subjectivity scholars 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 hardwires 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” (*Neuronal* 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 transform the humanities as well.

“Our brain is plastic, and we do not know it” (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)” (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). Moreover, plasticity can be passively *subjected* to typical formations that fit humans into restricted social molds, but it can also turn us into active *subjects* of creative transformations that disrupt such molds. 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

³See also Doidge; Rose and Abi-Rached “Governing.”

calls the “threefold movement of reception, donation, and annihilation of form” (*New Wounded* 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 here—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 (*Brain* 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*, 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” (80); and specifies that “the concept of plasticity” was “discovered for the first time in the preface to Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*” (*Plasticity* 8).⁴ Time and again, Malabou argues that in Hegel’s speculative thought we find, for the first time, plasticity as a concept that is not merely aesthetic and linked to the plastic *arts* but, rather, philosophical and linked to the formation of a plastic *subject*. As she puts it in her introduction to an edited collection titled, *Plasticité*: “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*” (“Overture” 8–9; my trans.). This genealogy, then, establishes an important 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.

That said, with respect to the *genealogy* of plasticity, I cannot help but to register a suspicion. For a French philosopher inscribed in a

⁴Malabou delineates the “double meaning” this “speculative word” has for Hegel in *Avenir* 19–27.

philosophical tradition 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 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—“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 *Avenir* 22; my trans.). Given the broader genealogy informing Hegel at the twilight of philosophy, we may thus wonder: Why this insistence on the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* as a 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, in order to promote what she calls, in *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, nothing less than “the style of an era” (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. And at the twilight of the idols, 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 rivalry so openly visible in plasticity’s “refusal to submit to a model” (*Brain* 6) and thus also to “imitate or to copy” (“Conversation” 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.⁵

⁵The anti-mimetic scene is classical. What Derrida says in his groundbreaking critique of Lévi-Strauss, equally applies to my critique 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” (“Structure” 263).

Phantoms, just like shadows, models, and forms are mimetic tropes. And Malabou knows it. This is why she acknowledges, in a Freudian mood, that “because plasticity never presents itself without form, plastic is always thought as a factor of identification” (*Dusk* 74). There are thus important links between plasticity and identification—and Malabou’s most recent work testifies to her commitment to critically revisiting a psychoanalytical tradition which, as René Girard, Lacoue-Labarthe, and Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, among others, have shown, cannot easily be disentangled from the problematic of the “mimetic subject.”⁶ 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” (*What* 21), Malabou is strangely silent on the concept of *mimesis* itself. This is surprising since *mimesis* is arguably *the* paradigmatic concept in formative matters, both in term of ontological *forms* and of plastic *subject* formations.

And here is where Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe reenters the theoretical scene to 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.

2. 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 might have reminded us that Roland Barthes was not the only thinker who spoke of the malleability of “plastic” in the twentieth century.⁷ Before him, Georges Bataille spoke of plasticity too, and in relation to subjectivity, namely his own. Thus, in *Inner Experience*, Bataille speaks of his ego in terms of what he calls “a disarming plasticity [*plasticité désarmante*]” (147), which he playfully uses to turn a restricted *mimesis* linked to “slavery” into general *mimesis* characteristic of “sovereignty.” Or, perhaps, he would have started with a reminder that plasticity is already at play in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, insofar as Nietzsche understands will to power in

⁶See Lacoue-Labarthe, *Subject* 99–115, Girard 169–21, and Borch-Jacobsen. I build on this genealogical tradition in Lawtoo, *Phantom*.

⁷In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes defines plastic as a substance characterized by its power of “infinite transformation” that generates the “trace of a movement” (97). Barthes 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). While this claim is anti-Platonic in its ontology, we will see that Plato would have agreed on its material implications.

terms of “shaping forces” (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 impossible 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 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. For this is where the joint philosophical adventure of the plasticity of mimesis begins. Lacoue-Labarthe makes this point in “Typography,” a foundational essay—first published in *Mimésis Des Articulations* in 1975 and subsequently translated and reprinted in *Typography*—that inaugurates what Jean-Luc Nancy calls, not without admiration, the “great construction site of ‘onto-typology’ [*le grand chantier de l’onto-typologie*]” (“Mimésis” 109; my trans.), a site on whose foundations I provisionally anchor my genealogy of plasticity. 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.⁸ Still, given the specific perspective of my genealogical operation, I will 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 *Republic*, that is, the books in which Plato inaugurates the problematic of mimesis *not* on the basis of an ontological critique of re-presentation 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 [*Republic* 601c; 826]). Rather, Plato—or better, Socrates—starts by discussing mimesis on the basis of an account of the psychic effects of theatrical impersonations on the formation of the subject, or ego, generating

⁸Lacoue-Labarthe’s agonistic relation with Heidegger, especially the latter’s refusal to engage with the question of mimesis and Nazism, cannot be underestimated. Yet as Derrida also recognized, “what he [Lacoue-Labarthe] does remains entirely different [from Heidegger]” (“Desistance” 28). On Lacoue-Labarthe’s agonistic relation to Heidegger, see Rochelle Tobias’s and Paola Marrati’s contributions to this special issue.

what Nietzsche, writing with and against Plato, calls a “phantom of the ego [*Phantom von Ego*]” (*Daybreak* 106).⁹ It is, in fact, in the context of a discussion of the educative function of myths as they are dramatically reenacted 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 approached in *Republic*. 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*” (“Typography” 125).

Mimesis, as is well-known, comes from *mimos* (actor), and Lacoue-Labarthe insists on the theatrical origins of mimesis in order to emphasize its formative psychic power, going as far as speaking of Plato’s “psychology” (100) in this context.¹⁰ What is less-known is that at the center of this theatrical scene, Lacoue-Labarthe operates a second theoretical move that binds the psychology of dramatic mimesis to the plasticity of the mimetic 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...originally inscribe in the malleable—plastic—material of the infant soul. (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 can thus not 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. 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*” (128).

⁹For a diagnostic account of the mimetic ramifications of this phrase in Nietzsche’s corpus, see Lawtoo, *Phantom*, 27–83, esp. 27–30, 55–56.

¹⁰On Plato’s psychology of mimesis based on a theatrical model see also Havelock 20–31.

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” (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 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 form*—via mythic types, models, or figures that 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 in “The Nazi Myth”: “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” (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” for the moderns,¹¹ and, we are now realizing, continues to haunt the contemporaries as well.

There is thus a fundamental link between Plato and plasticity. Lacoue-Labarthe even reminds us of a tradition reported by Diogenes Laertes that links the name Plato (*Platon*) to “the verb *plassein* (in Attic, *plattain*): ‘to model,’ ‘to fashion’... (compare French *plastique*)” (“Typography” 96), a plasticity inscribed in the saying, “Plato fashioned plastic words [*Os aneplasse Platon [o] peplasmena thaumata eidus*]” (96). “Plato” was thus 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.” Supplementing this classical analogy by exploiting the resonances of a contemporary subject matter familiar to those mimetic subjects par excellence who are children, we could also speak of the plasticity of “Play-Doh.”¹² This

¹¹See Lacoue-Labarthe, “Horror” and Lawtoo “Frame” 98–108.

¹²A personal anecdote might help illustrate this formal linguistic point on a more informal, material basis. I owe a contemporary version of this confusion between Plato

Socratic irony on Plato's/Play-Doh's plasticity is as linguistically playful in theory as it is materially true in practice. Children, as Socrates was the first to know, are mimetic 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 and mimetic 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 [*plattetai*] and takes the impression [*tupos*] that one wishes to stamp upon it? (*Republic* 377b; 624)

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 aesthetic or metaphysical forms but, rather, with the psychological and pedagogical role dramatic mimesis plays in the psychic formation of plastic subject. 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 mimetic impressions generated by mythic models. These impressions are especially strong in childhood, but Plato makes clear later in *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" (10.604e; 830). It is thus because plasticity is constitutive of the formation of the subject, of the *polis*, and thus of the political that Lacoue-Labarthe will say that "the political (the City) pertains to plasticity [*relève d'une plasticité*], formation and information, fiction

and plasticity to my three-year old daughter. A few days before I presented this paper at the Johns Hopkins workshop on Lacoue-Labarthe, she interrupted a theoretical conversation I was having with my spouse over breakfast—in a dramatic way. Picture the scene: early morning, two adults talking seriously, children eating, but secretly listening. In order to express my discontent with a Platonic transcendental metaphysics concerned with ideal Forms, I made a rash and unforgivable statement, as I said: "I don't like Plato." Before I realized that this statement was only partially true, my daughter instinctively turned around, stared at me in disbelief with the ethical indignation of someone who just caught a liar in the act, and cried out: "You *do* like Play-Doh!!" How could I deny it? We had indeed been playing with Play-Doh the day before. This mime of a daughter had caught me in a theoretical double bind that, I now realize, delineates the general contours of my argument. To regain my daughter's respect, I should thus specify: "I don't like Plato for metaphysical reasons, but I do like Play-Doh. Ergo I like Plato for materialist and quite playful reasons!"

in the strict sense” (*Fiction* 102; my trans.). Similarly, it is on the basis of Plato’s mimetology that Lacoue-Labarthe speaks of *subjectivity* in terms of a “pure and disquieting *plasticity*. . . which doubtless requires a subjective ‘base’—a ‘wax’” (“Typography” 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 *kharassein*, to stamp or engrave) has been defined from the beginning of philosophy in terms of a wax-like 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; he also delineates the paradoxical conceptual form that serves as *the* exemplary model for the double structure of plasticity. 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 says in “Typography” that this mimetic subject is an incarnation of what he calls

mimetism 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 property than an infinite malleability: *instability* itself” (115).

A duplicity is here at play: what is plastic now is not only the concept of mimesis, but also the mimetic subject itself, its subjective base, substance, or *subjectum* on which mythic types are impressed. The movement of this process of subject formation is once again double; and this double movement begins to generate a paradoxical logic that will keep Lacoue-Labarthe’s destabilizing thought on the move. On the one hand, it inaugurates the onto-typology Lacoue-Labarthe tirelessly denounces as a source of plastic vulnerability to totalitarian figures whose will to power, as Nietzsche also sensed, can be violently impressed on what he called “*Masse*” or “unformed populations” (*Genealogy* 66). This passive mimesis entails a plasticity that is disquieting for political reasons for it renders subjects 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.” On the other hand, this passage already entails—in embryo—an active, creative, productive, or better re-*productive* supplement, which Lacoue-Labarthe will continue to endorse 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 individual qualities; yet, paradoxically, it has the power to put this plasticity to productive 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” (“Typography” 124).¹³

So Plato is playing with Play-Doh, after all; and in the process, a paradoxical figure is taking shape. Reception of form and creation of form, 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 whose defining characteristics are, indeed, to receive form and give form. 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: “the true distinction passes instead through the difference between *activity* and *passivity*, which embraces the difference between, on the one hand, matter/receptacle/matrix/malleable wax, and, on the other, seal/imprint/stamp/styler” (n126 126). This is exactly what the passage from restricted to general mimesis, reception of form and creation of forms, formalizes. In short, the double structure of plasticity shadows the double structure of mimesis, a spiraling, paradoxical structure that blurs the line between active and passive, copy and original, subject and object, inside and outside, and triggers a mimetic 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 and, in a characteristic move, marks a clear-cut demarcation from mimetic models, a “mimetic patho-*logy*”¹⁴ that is not deprived of hermeneutic violence.

¹³In the context of a discussion of “the fabulous plasticity of humans,” the ethologist Boris Cyrulnik gives a definition of culture that echoes Lacoue-Labarthe's definition of mimesis as he states: “As for culture, its plasticity is so great that we could say that its only permanent trait is change!” (198; my trans.).

¹⁴I call “mimetic patho-*logy*” a creative form of “mimetic rivalry” (Girard's term) in which the subject affected by the force of *pathos* and the pathologies it entails (envy, resentment, revenge, etc.) develops a diagnostic *logos* to dissect this *pathos* from a distance. See *Phantom*, 3–8, 27–83.

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 suspect 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 interpretation, she continues "form is the most suspect of all metaphysical concepts" (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 erect themselves as authoritarian political leaders who rely on the power of "mythic identification" ("Nazi Myth" 296) to generate mimetic horrors on a massive scale. 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.

3. 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 *transformation* based on what Lacoue-Labarthe calls an "identity of contraries" (*Typography* 252) does not seem deprived of dialectical power to turn negative into positive, passivity into activity. 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 "hyperbolic" that constantly unsteadies the opposition between active and passive, wax and seal, giving and receiving form, generating an endless circulation which, for Lacoue-Labarthe, "is nothing other than the very logic of mimesis" (260).

The formal contours of hyperbolic are most incisively articulated in the sequel to "Typography," *L'Imitation des modernes* (*Typographie II*), and is at the center of "the 'matrix' text of the modern re-elaboration of the question of *mimesis*" (10) that structures the whole book: a chapter titled, "Le Paradoxe et la mimésis."¹⁵ We are thus back to the problematic of the mimetic 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 (hyperbological) 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, "*supplément* a certain deficiency in nature [*supplé à un certain défaut de la nature*], its incapacity to do everything, organize everything, make everything its work—*produce* everything" ("Diderot" 255). The foundations of this mimetology are different for they rest on Aristotle's *Physics* rather than on Plato's *Republic*.¹⁶ But the form of the paradox is essentially the same. At the heart of this mimetic "supplement" we find the same lack of proper qualities Lacoue-Labarthe described in "Typography": this subject has no essential and thus natural properties; s/he is pure and unstable plasticity. 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 with different names: the "*gift of impropriety*," the "*gift of nature*," or the "*gift of mimesis*" (259)—which,

¹⁵*L'imitation des modernes*, in my opinion Lacoue-Labarthe's best book on the subject of mimesis, is regretfully still untranslated in English in its complete form. Selected chapters, including the essay on Diderot, have been translated and included in *Typography*. When available, I will refer to Christopher Fynsk's excellent English translation in *Typography*; otherwise I will quote and translate from *Imitation*.

¹⁶Aristotle writes in Book 2 of *Physics*: "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 paradox is the "generative matrix-scheme" ("Diderot" 23; trans. modified) still at play in the imitation of the moderns.

as we now know, is also the gift of plasticity in *both* its capacity to give *and* receive form.¹⁷

Who, then, is the subject of plasticity? Are we authorized to say that this energy that supplements nature, re-produces nature's creative force, and stems from a plastic/mimetic subject is ultimately rooted in human nature? And, by extension, that what used to be called the plasticity of the soul can now be called the plasticity of the brain? These questions take us to the limit of Lacoue-Labarthe's mimetology—and encourage us to go beyond them. When it comes to *phusis's* plastic force, he usually deals with the concepts of "soul," "psyche," or "character," rather than with the brain itself. As Jane Bennett rightly points out, Lacoue-Labarthe's "post-structuralist" 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.¹⁸ 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*. There is, however, 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*. On the contrary, Diderot promotes the value of "judgment [*entendement*]" over "sensibility [*sensation*]" (Diderot, "Paradox" 365), visual *distance* over bodily *pathos*, and affirms what Lacoue-Labarthe calls "the affirmed superiority (in the physiological register) of *the brain* over the diaphragm" (*Typography* 258; my emphasis) necessary for the actor to assume different phantasmal forms.¹⁹

¹⁷On mimesis as a "supplement" that serves as structural inspiration for Lacoue-Labarthe, see Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 289–97. While this dangerous supplement goes from the moderns all the way back to the ancients, the structural matrix of this paradox emerges at the juncture of "savage" and "structuralist" thought and can (should) be traced further back to Lévi-Strauss's account of the Polynesian *mana*. As he puts it, outlining its "symbolic content *supplementarity*," *mana* is a "simple form" with "zero symbolic value [*valeur symbolique zéro*]" "capable of becoming charged with any sort of symbolic content whatever" (qtd. in Derrida, "Structure" 261; Derrida's emphasis).

¹⁸See Bennett's contribution in this special issue. I am very grateful to Jane for accepting my invitation to engage with Lacoue-Labarthe's thought and for friendly debates on both the limits and the potential of Lacoue-Labarthe's materialism, in both personal encounters and in our vitalist reading group qua assemblage. Many thanks also to William (Bill) Connolly, Naveeda Khan, Anand Pandian, and Emily Parker for participating in a stimulating discussion.

¹⁹Despite its inversion of Platonism, Diderot's mimetology remains of Platonic inspiration. Thus, he compares the mimetic actor to the mimetic trope of the "looking-glass" that represents a "perfect type" or "vast specter [*grand fantôme*]" the actor "copies," or "imagines," as an "unmoved disinterested onlooker" ("Paradox" 366).

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 mimetic thinker who casts a long shadow on *L’Imitation des modernes*. Nietzsche is, in fact, a self-proclaimed “physician of culture” whose diagnostic of plasticity as “energy,” “power” or “*dunamis*” (*Imitation* 97) directly in-forms Lacoue-Labarthe’s account of the plasticity of the moderns. Already in the second of the *Untimely Meditations*, Nietzsche in fact 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” (*Untimely* 62).²⁰ Plasticity, then, not only renders the *Masse* malleable, passive, and pathologically suggestible to authoritarian types (restricted mimesis); it also has a formative, active, and therapeutic power that recreates molds and heals wounds. 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 power insofar as it is creative, vitalist, and affirmative brain power.

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” (*Imitation* 50) and sets out to root this faculty in “an imitation of *phusis* as a productive force” that also animates “*poiesis*” (“Diderot” 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 mimetic subject without proper qualities is endowed with a disquieting plasticity that is both receptive to forms and creative of form, is mediated by aesthetics and is rooted in what Lacoue-Labarthe generally calls “nature,” and only once “brain.” I thus take the risk—and responsibility—to add that, at the formal 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

²⁰For Lacoue-Labarthe’s full commentary of this passage and its relation to Nietzsche’s account of history, see *Imitation* 97–101; see also Didi-Huberman 59–64.

in the brain which leads neurons not to have any proper function, or essential role; and precisely for this plastic reason, we can now add, 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 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 (“Brain” 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. I am thus 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”—and luckily so, for this subject would amount to being “no one.” As patients failing to recover from brain damage remind us, there are material limits to plasticity that no hyperbolic can possibly supplement. Still 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 that the paradox of mimesis served as a model for the paradox of plasticity to take form.

Lacoue-Labarthe, for his part, will continue to speak of this natural or plastic gift in terms of *poesis* or auto-*poesis*. Thus, he understands “plastic force” as “the faculty of ‘self-growth’ and self-accomplishment [*La force plastique est la faculté de ‘croître par soi-même’ et de s’accomplir par soi-même*]” (*Imitation* 98; my trans.). This individual conception of artistic creation as a natural force is, once again, not original. 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. This creative inter-play between *phusis* and *poesis* is mysterious and masked, yet the language Lacoue-Labarthe mobilizes belongs to the classical register of eroticism. 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" ("Diderot" 260). The paradigmatic model of this squandering natural gift, the gift of general mimesis, that is, the poetic gift is, of course, the lover, but for the moderns it is also what Lacoue-Labarthe, echoing Diderot, calls "'genius'" (259). And this time, Malabou equally knows it.

4. A Pharmacy for Plasticity: Diagnosing Mimetic Patho(-)logies

We are now in a position to step back to see how deep the continuities between plasticity and mimesis go. These structural continuities hinge on a paradox based on a logic of the supplement that turns passive form into active formation and that remained too long in the shadows indeed. Let us listen to Malabou's distinction between flexibility and plasticity with this broader genealogy in mind: "To be flexible is to receive a form of 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" (*What* 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 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 (*Plasticity* 49). Impression and form; figure and rhythm. The traces may no longer be visible, but the echoes are still audible. They are increasingly accentuated as Malabou conjures one of Lacoue-Labarthe's privileged poetic trope—the "caesura"—to identify not the gap between poetic phrases but between neural "synapses" instead: "Between two neurons," she writes, "there is thus a caesura, and the synapse itself is 'gapped'" (*Brain* 36). To be sure, any impressions left by models must have been erased for plasticity to come to consciousness; yet some unconscious echoes of the mimetic tradition that gave birth to it from the spaces between remain to be heard.

These echoes signal the return of a haunting repetition of mimesis that shadows plasticity, but important differences remain to be signaled—and in this *différend* 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 future. The philosophical task she sets herself is thus to endow the concept of plasticity with consciousness so that its explosive potential can potentially erupt in the future. The idea is noble in theory and should be pursued in practice; in the process, we should also not forget that revolution 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 [*césure du spéculatif*]”²¹ that supplements the logic of dialectics with a hyperbolic that does not lead to any progress of consciousness, let alone self-consciousness but, rather, to a radical instability of the subject which is unconsciously open to both revolutionary and fascist politics. As always with mimesis, Lacoue-Labarthe specifies, “the stakes are moral” (*Typography* 264); but since a conception of “sovereignty” (264) is at play, he adds that “there is also a politics involved” (265). Significantly, Lacoue-Labarthe ends his diagnostic of the plasticity of mimesis by reminding us that when actors are at play on stages that appeal to plastic subjects assembled in a mass, there always lurks the danger of what he calls “mimetic epidemic or contagion, that is to say, the panic movement that is the dissolution of the social bond” (265). This philosophical physician, in other words, 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, pathological side: namely a “restricted mimesis” in which the plastic subject is passively formed by fascist types that dissolve the social bond, exploding, in the process the creative potential of ethical, political and fictional formations.²²

To be sure, this is a “different thought of mimesis” (Derrida, “Desistance” 2) whose echoes are only now beginning to fully resonate; but like all mimetic thoughts it is already shared. Lacoue-Labarthe is, in fact, giving voice to an ancient Platonic lesson central to that other formidable reader of Plato and mimetic model par excellence who *in-forms* both Lacoue-Labarthe’s diagnostic of mimesis and Malabou’s account of plasticity as “something that allows play within the structure” (“Sovereignty” 44). 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,

²¹See “The Caesura of the Speculative” in *Typography* 208–35, esp., 234–35.

²²For an account of Lacoue-Labarthe, myth, and the new fascism of Donald Trump, see Lawtoo, “Power.”

have the power to “inscribe themselves . . . in the wax of the soul *in intaglio*, thus corresponding to the spontaneous, autochthonous motions of psychic life” (104). 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” (71)—that gives conceptual form to the paradoxical structure of plasticity.

As we have seen, mimesis traces the contours of a disquieting plastic concept whose undecidable double-structure cuts 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*, that is, critical *logoi* on mimetic *pathos*. Or if you prefer Plato’s terminology, plasticity, like mimesis has the structure 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 “Typography” 132). Interestingly, contemporary physicians have been following precisely this ancient advice. Alvaro Pascual-Leone, for instance, echoes a Platonic diagnostic as he writes: “Plasticity is the mechanism for development and learning, as well as the cause of pathology” (“Plastic” 396). And Jean Pierre Changeux, a major influence on Malabou, as he retraces the discovery of synaptic plasticity in *Neuronal Man*, 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” (33).²³

In the end then, pharmacology and neurology might not be as opposed as they appear to be. And who knows? If these often opposed *logoi* on mimetic *pharmakoi* turn to face each other, they might not simply mirror each other but actually reflect *on* one another.

On one side, Malabou 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, thereby opening up transformative possibilities for the human sciences, if not to explode, at least to offer some “resistance” (*What* 68) to passive subjections to dominant pathologies. Political resistance is, indeed, much needed in a neoliberal world that demands increasing docile adaptation to new fascist leaders that risk turning the

²³ “[W]e are today on the eve of Platonism,” writes Derrida, and he adds: “Which can also, naturally, be thought of as the morning after Hegelianism” (“Plato” 107–8).

ego, once again, into what Nietzsche already called “phantom of the ego” (*Daybreak* 105). And Malabou’s plastic work on mimetic subjects par excellence such as trauma, epigenetics, crowd behavior, and the unconscious offers timely occasions for a mimetic turn, or return of mimesis, especially in light of Malabou’s recent realization that “every act of shaping, repairing, remodeling” at play in plasticity “illustrate[s] the return of repetition” (“Overman” 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 of this question; it is also the subject *that* questions—and this questioning subject leads us through the other side of the looking-glass.

On the other side, and on the shoulders of an ancient genealogy of philosophical physicians, Lacoue-Labarthe’s untimely question makes us wonder if *plasticity is nothing less and nothing more than a contemporary repetition of an ancient pharmakon*, a mimetic pharmakon whose logical and pathological effects always escape grand dialectical narratives of progress or coming to consciousness—including political progress and consciousness. In fact, 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 mimetic repetition continues to be in urgent need to be “thought and rethought” (Lacoue-Labarthe, *Imitation* 282)—if only because the 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 original. As he puts it, in a confessional phrase: “I’m only a messenger, a spokesman. Let’s say, a ‘*passseur*’” (*Phrase* 102). And yet these passing phrases encourage us to overturn the new form of plasticity. And what we find underneath is the formative imprint of an old pharmakon that captures, in one single figure, the two sides of the plasticity of mimesis.



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