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The scene illustrates but the idea, not any actual action, in a hymen (out of which flows Dream), tainted with vice [vicieux] yet sacred, between desire and fulfillment, perpetration and remembrance: here anticipating, there recalling, in the future, in the past, under the false appearance of a present [apparence fausse de présent]. That is how the Mime operates, whose act is confined to a perpetual allusion without breaking the ice or the mirror [sans briser la glace]; he thus sets up a medium [milieu], a pure medium, of fiction.
—Stéphane Mallarmé, "Mimique"

Perhaps, then, there is always more than one kind of mimēsis [plus qu'une seule mimesis]; and perhaps it is in the strange mirror [étrange miroir] that reflects but also displaces and distorts [déforme] one mimēsis into the other, as though it were itself destined to mime or mask itself, that history—the history of literature—is lodged along with the whole of its interpretation.
—Jacques Derrida, "The Double Session"

Often simply translated as "imitation," *mimēsis* is one of the most influential concepts in Western thought that belongs to the category of untranslatables. Originally invoked to define humans as the "most imitative" creatures, *mimēsis* is a dramatic concept located at the juncture where literature and philosophy meet, often clash, and at times reflect on each other, generating mirroring effects that inform the history of Western literature, from antiquity to modernity. More recently, mimesis has also been at the center of theoretical debates in the humanities, the social sciences, and the neurosciences concerning the role "mimicry," "contagion," "mirror neurons," and virtual "simulations" play in the formation, transformation, and deformation of subjectivity. And yet, to this day, despite the growing confirmations that

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mimesis is constitutive of a human, all too human behavior, in literary studies this protean concept still tends to be confined to the sphere of realistic representation.

In this dialogue, J. Hillis Miller and Nidesh Lawtoo join forces to both reframe and add critical and theoretical layers to this transparent picture of mimesis.[1] Complicating standard accounts of deconstruction as simply antimimetic, Miller reflects on the role *mimēsis* played in his long career as one of the most distinguished literary critics and theorists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Covering his early engagement with New Criticism and phenomenology in the 1950s, his encounter with Jacques Derrida and deconstruction in the 1960s, his development of rhetorical reading in the company of Paul de Man in the 1970s and 1980s, and his most recent engagement with ethics and community from the 1990s to the present, this interview progressively reveals how *mimēsis* is a protean concept that, under different masks, runs through the entirety of Miller's work and career and implicitly informs some of the most influential critical and theoretical "turns" of the past half-century: the linguistic turn, the ethical turn, the affective turn, the digital turn, all of which pave the way for the mimetic turn, or re-*turn* of mimesis. As the dialogue unfolds, this chameleon concept's twists and turns generate repetitions with a difference that are currently at play not only in literary texts but also in new virtual simulations and political fictions that cast a shadow on the present and future.

Restaging Mimesis

Nidesh Lawtoo There is a lot one can say about the relation between mimesis and literature, since it is arguably *the* literary concept that gives birth to Western poetics. So, I'm not going to ask you for a unified picture of what this concept means, or has meant, for literary studies and literary theory in general—if only because such pictures tend to be unfaithful to reality. Nor am I primarily interested in defining, once and for all, what mimesis "is" or is supposed to "be," for the concept challenges stable definitions or ideas that could simply be reflected in a transparent mirror of reality. Instead, to give this discussion a more specific focus or perspective, I thought we could use *mimēsis* as an "Ariadne's thread" (see Miller 1992)[2] to outline some twists and turns in the labyrinth of your protean career and, by extension, reflect on your relation to literature, literary theory, and the present transformations at play in the emergence of new media that do not simply mirror reality but bring into being phantoms of reality.

J. Hillis Miller Allow me to frame our conversation about mimesis with a brief discussion of a short prose poem by Mallarmé titled "Mimique" (Mallarmé 2018).[3] Why do I choose this passage? First, because in a very compact way it identifies the main problems that I see with the idea of mimesis; second, because this text has a history for me. It is linked to Jacques Derrida, who was invited to Johns Hopkins University in the 1960s to give seminars, in French. I went to listen to him to see if I could understand spoken French, and he gave a lecture that is part of the essay titled "La double séance," collected in *La Dissémination* (1972; see Derrida 1981a). It was about Mallarmé's "Mimique" and a passage from Plato about mimesis, not from the *Republic* but from *Philebus*. I thought it would be an absolutely wonderful seminar. And it was. It was spectacular! This "Mimique" lecture for me was really the beginning. For the rest of my life, whenever I had Derrida as a colleague at Yale, I attended his seminars; he was then a colleague at Irvine, where I also went to all his seminars, which by this time were in English. But our history, both an intellectual history and the history of an affection, goes back to Hopkins, where we used to have lunch—he would speak French and I would speak English, and whenever I tried to say something he would say, "Quoi?" meaning he could not understand me when I tried to speak French.

I turn now to that seminar by Derrida that I found so impressive and to Mallarmé's little essay. The French word *mimique* doesn't exactly mean "imitator," though it is linked to the concept of *mimēsis*. The Mallarmé text is a little prose essay about the "mime." This reminds me that at the beginning of Aristotle's *Poetics* Aristotle says *mimēsis* means the imitation in dance of some human action, what we might today call pantomime of that action. It didn't have anything to do with language, but with mime, in the sense of silent performance. The other thing one learns from this little passage by Mallarmé is that imitation—and this, again, goes all the way back to Aristotle—tends to be entangled with death and sex. Think of *Oedipus the King*; think of this passage here; think of the current US president, Donald Trump. He is a kind of parody of the Greek tragic hero, and that may be part of his attraction. Without thinking too hard about it, people recognize in him a kind of paradigm. So, Stormy Daniels is not bad for him, but makes him fit a familiar pattern. Greek tragedies teach us, however, that usually such people come to a bad end.

Mallarmé's essay, however, is about pantomime, in the literal sense. It is about Pierrot, who was a character in the Italian commedia dell'arte. There was a famous troupe called the Comédie Italienne that

performed in Paris. Mallarmé, in this crucial passage, which was published in a periodical, talks about Pierrot *assassin de sa femme* (murderer of his wife). How did he kill his wife? He tickled her to death. One finds here sex and murder combined in a wonderful way. This would be performed in mime. Mallarmé mentions Paul Margueritte, who was a famous pantomime performer. In pantomime on the stage there is no language; it's silent. And so, Mallarmé describes the scene of the pantomimist who performed Pierrot tickling his wife to death. It's not an accident, by the way, that orgasm is called *petite mort* (little death). Both orgasm and his wife's assassination are thus mimed in one action. He tickles her to death because he thinks she has been unfaithful.

Mallarmé writes that "the scene illustrates but the idea [*idée*]" (qtd. in Derrida 1981a: 175). That is clearly a reference to the history of mimesis that goes, via Hegel and Rousseau, back to Plato. There exists the realm of ideas, the model for the natural world, its imitation, and then what we would think of as literature, as imitation twice removed from the world of ideas. The reference to the word *idea* shows that Mallarmé is informed by this philosophical tradition. He wrote that "the scene illustrates nothing but the idea, not an actual action, in the hymen [marriage] (out of which flows Dream), tainted with vice yet sacred" (175). There is something vicious in the Dream (Pierrot tickling his wife to death), but there is something sacred in it too, as a general feature, in imitation of tragic heroes. To paraphrase: these are bad guys, but there is something sacred about them nevertheless. The Greeks thought the gods must have picked out tragic heroes like Oedipus for particular punishments. The prose poem continues: "Between the perpetration and remembrance: here anticipating, there recalling"—mimesis itself, doesn't really exist but anticipates and remembers—"in the future and the past, *under the false appearance of a present*" (175). I think that is a key feature of mimesis, and it looks like it is really there in all the complicated areas you evoke. "That is how the Mime operates, whose act is confined to a perpetual allusion without breaking the ice or the mirror" (175).

The story of Pierrot tickling his wife to death was very well known. Even the first time they saw it, the audience would have recognized it, just as a Greek audience would have recognized performances of *Oedipus the King*. And so, via this mirror, "he thus sets up a medium, a pure medium, of fiction" (qtd. in Derrida 1981a: 175), namely, something that is not really there, or happening. What I find helpful in the Mallarmé passage is that it defines imitation, *mimēsis*, *mimique* as existing in the "*false appearance of a present*" (175), which is oriented both toward memory and toward the future.

Lawtoo This is a perfect frame for our discussion, which also looks in two directions. On one side, your account of "Mimique" read in the company of Derrida reminds us of the dramatic and thus fictional manifestations of mimesis as a protean concept that, from the "beginning"—your beginning but also the beginning of literary theory—eludes unitary translations as a representation of a reality that appears to be present. On the other side, it illustrates how looking back, via the medium of a modern writer to the ancient origins of this Janus-faced concept in both Greek philosophy and tragedy, already foreshadows or, as Mallarmé puts it, "anticipates" (*devançant*) contemporary political tragedies in which the mime plays a performative, transgressive, but also sacred or, as Georges Bataille would put it, an "accursed" (*maudit*) role. We will return to this future-oriented, accursed side of mimesis and its relation to politics in the second part of the interview. For the moment, let us use this "fictional mirror" as a looking glass to reflect on your engagement with mimesis as a literary critic first.

Criticism and Mimesis: New Criticism to Phenomenology

Lawtoo In literary studies, the dominant definition of *mimesis* is still the one of aesthetic "representation" or "imitation" of an external, referential world—mimesis as realism. Translated in this simple way, your approach to literature has been consistently antimimetic throughout your career. Why did you find it important for critics and theorists to be suspicious of mimetic readings that treat literary texts as straightforwardly realistic representations of reality?

Miller The answer would be complicated, and it's partly autobiographical. Many people assume that the value of a literary work depends on the way it accurately mimics the real world. Literature, for me, began with the experience of reading Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* books, the *Winnie the Pooh* books, and the *Swiss Family Robinson*. I thought the *Swiss Family Robinson* was historically accurate. And I remember my mother saying: "No. It's a fiction made up by the author." Of course, animals don't talk in the real world, people don't fall down rabbit holes—the Alice books and the Pooh books are clearly fiction. These children's books were not amenable to a straightforwardly realistic representation of reality presupposition about literature. I think, from the very beginning of my reading life, I was coached by these books to distrust mimetic theories of literature. The Alice novels are full of puns and jokes, and I also became fascinated with wordplay. For instance, the mouse is telling his "sad tale"—on the page, it is printed

as a curling sequence of short lines in the shape of a tail—and Alice makes the mistake of confusing the mouse's *tale* with its *tail*. I found that hilarious (laughs)! And I still do. I had a special pleasure in puns as a feature of language. So, I started out with a prejudice against the idea that what is valuable about literature is the accuracy in its representation of reality.

Lawtoo This translation of *mimesis* as "representation of reality" or "realism" owes much to Erich Auerbach's book *Mimesis*, subtitled *The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (*Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur*), first published in 1946. This is a complex book that articulates different stylistic forms of realistic representation, from Homer to Virginia Woolf. Still, at the most fundamental ontological level, in the epilogue Auerbach acknowledges that his "original starting point was Plato's discussion in book 10 of the *Republic*—mimesis ranking third after truth" (Auerbach 2003: 554). This is precisely the ontology that relegates literature to an illusory "phantom" (a *fantôme blanc*, wrote Mallarmé, speaking of the "Mime" and linking it, at an additional remove, to the written page) along lines that, as you noted, are both mirrored and subverted in "Mimique." Still, to read "Mimique," or any other literary text, for that matter, in the way you do—that is, by paying close attention to the play on words—a certain training in close reading is already presupposed. How did you first encounter the work of the New Critics, and what lessons do you still retain from them?

Miller I had had no training in close reading when I taught myself to read at age five, so I could read the Alice books for myself rather than depending on my mother to read them to me. I just spontaneously enjoyed puns, perhaps with encouragement from my mother. Many literary scholars mention Auerbach, and that book was certainly important to me many years later, I think while I was in graduate school, though perhaps later. But my real introduction to literary theory was with Andrew Bongiorno, my great teacher at Oberlin College who felt that I should read not only Aristotle's *Poetics* but also the *Rhetoric*, which to some degree is about literary language. Otherwise, there was not much reflection about the Western history of literary theory at Oberlin, or at Harvard, where I went to graduate school, which was actively hostile to literary theory. The Harvard English department was radically conservative. My teachers there thought theory was a lot of nonsense! So, being the sort of person that I am, that is, naturally resis-

tant, I started reading literary theory on my own. There was a room in the Harvard Library that had the various works of the New Critics (John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks, etc.). I also encountered, read, and heard give a lecture at Harvard, Kenneth Burke. I have sometimes said that if you've read Burke, you don't really need Derrida. It's not quite true, but there is something to it. Burke was an incredible reader. He gave a lecture at Harvard about how to read. Nobody had ever said anything in my classes about reading, what you should look for or what was likely to be important. They just said: "Read *Middlemarch* by next Tuesday." Burke was different. His lecture was about words that return in a text. He assumed that if the same word or phrase occurs repeatedly, it is probably important. Nobody had ever said anything like that in classes I took. I still consider it important in careful reading. Burke is one of my heroes. So, there is a personal history behind my antimimetism besides my instinctive resistance to my Harvard teachers, which, in a way, informed my resistance to mimetic realism as well.

Lawtoo The orthodox, textbook definition of *mimesis* as "representation" remains a dominant translation in literary criticism, but as your framing account of "Mimique" already indicated, it is not the only one. In fact, *mimēsis* has consistently been recognized as what Barbara Cassin (2014: 659–74) has called an "untranslatable" concept, a mimetic, chameleon concept that, since the beginning in Aristotle's *Poetics*, and before him, in Plato's *Republic*, means many different things: a mode of direct dramatic speech (opposed to an indirect narrative diegesis); a mode of theatrical or dramatic impersonation, a translation that, by the way, reminds us of the theatrical origins of mimesis Mallarmé convokes (from *mimeîsthai*, "to imitate," from *mîmos*, "a mime" or "actor"); or the contagious emotions the mime generates via the medium of words, but also via mimicry and gestures, generating a state of enthusiasm or psychic dispossession in what Plato (1963: 604e), under the mimetic mask of Socrates, calls the "mob assembled in the theater"—among other protean meanings.[4] Perhaps we could even say that there is a phenomenology of consciousness embryonically at play in Plato's take on mimesis in the first books of *Republic*, a phenomenology attentive to a certain blurring of the boundaries between self and others, the actor and the audience, fiction and reality, what spectators see outside and what they feel inside.

To follow up on the genealogy of exemplary figures you encountered early in your career, worthy of notice with respect to mimesis is

the Belgian-born critic Georges Poulet. He saw mimesis at play not only in theatrical spectacles, or pantomimes, but also in the relation between the reader and the literary text. Reading, in his view, is a mimetic activity not in the sense of referential realism but, rather, in the phenomenological sense that when I read a book "I am thinking the thoughts of another" (Poulet 1972: 59). Perhaps I identify with that other so fundamentally that I even become, for an imaginary moment, that other, as he suggests, quoting Rimbaud's "*je est un autre*" (60). Since you were close to Poulet early in your career while you both taught at Johns Hopkins University, what was then, and what is now your take on this criticism of consciousness or, as he sometimes called it, "mimetic criticism" (65), in which the barriers between self and other, inside and outside, blur during the experience of reading?

Miller Like you I'm interested in what really happens between me and a literary work I read. Now I would say that it is language creating an imaginary world that bypasses the question of consciousness or merging of consciousnesses. I started off as a physicist, and there might still be a bit of a scientist in me, for I note that there simply isn't any evidence for this fusion. In so-called rhetorical reading, instead, I can cite you passages of which I can at least say what I think they mean, and we can talk about that. But when Poulet says, "I identify myself with Mallarmé or Baudelaire," it's a subjective experience he has, and I don't have. For me, that was already a problem.

The first summer I went to Hopkins, which had teachers very much superior to those I had at Harvard (figures like Leo Spitzer, for example, in Romance languages), I picked up quite by accident the most recent copy of the *Hopkins Review*, and I found there an English translation of the introduction to the first of Poulet's books, *Études sur le temps humain* (1949). I thought this was a wonderful essay. When I discovered that he was my colleague in another department (Hopkins was very intimate, because it was so small), I sought him out, and he became a very close friend. That essay in the *Hopkins Review* was typical of Poulet's linguistic genius. He was one of the best readers I have ever known, in the sense of speed and of remembering everything nevertheless. So, I started reading Poulet. I wish more people would read him now, for the essays that he wrote are fantastic. He had a way of reading the entire works of Flaubert or Mallarmé, including the letters, and so forth, almost overnight and of weaving citations into essays of his own, which in his early books always had to do with some version of Descartes's *cogito*, "I think, therefore I am." He thought

there were innumerable versions of the cogito, for example, the gum chewer's cogito: "I chew gum, therefore I am." Poulet's essays are masterworks in a certain critical genre associated with the so-called Geneva school. That genre weaves quotations without reference to their original chronology in the author's work, without reference to the unity of the works from which they are drawn, and without all that much attention to the linguistic peculiarities of a given quotation. I still immensely admire Poulet's work. It was tremendously helpful to me at that stage of my own efforts to write criticism.

What do I think is wrong with Poulet's work? Well, the idea that integrity of individual works of literature, that is, the plot, the action, can be ignored—taking passages from here and there with little attention to the plot is, in my view, a kind of falsification. As I said earlier, in my own beginning there was a fascination with the language of literature. That didn't interest Poulet all that much. He didn't really talk about the quotations. He just assumed you could read them and understand them. What actually happens when we read a work of literature like *Middlemarch*, or any other text? I think the idea that there is a coincidence between my consciousness and the consciousness of George Eliot is imaginary. I don't know what it would have been like to be George Eliot. That issue doesn't interest me as much as reading *Middlemarch* and seeing what is going on in the words on the pages of the novel.

Deconstructing *Mimēsis*: Derrida to De Man (via Girard)

Lawtoo Mimesis, we are beginning to see, challenges binary oppositions like self and other(s), inside and outside, as Poulet noted, but also, you'd later add, origin and copy, speech and writing, poison and therapy, parasite and host, among other binaries. This blurring was radicalized during your second major phase as you encountered the thought of Jacque Derrida and you became, along with Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, and others, one of the most influential advocates of the so-called Yale school of deconstruction. At the outset you mentioned Derrida's lecture on "Mimique" as a decisive beginning, but I assume you had already encountered Derrida's writings before actually meeting him.

Miller Yes, I encountered Derrida's work at first through a colleague of mine at Hopkins named Eugenio Donato. He knew everything that was going on in Paris and advised me to read Derrida. I read some of his essays in a French journal called *Critique* before Derrida had come

to the famous Hopkins colloquium, where he gave the "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" as his lecture (see Derrida 1972). And I must give Poulet credit. I couldn't go to that lecture because I had a class to teach. After the class, I encountered Poulet in the yard outside, and he said: "I have just heard the most important lecture of the conference." Remember there were famous people at that conference, including Jacques Lacan, René Girard, Roland Barthes, and others. But Poulet recognized that Derrida's talk was something special. It was Derrida's first American lecture and the beginning of his lengthy career as a teacher in the United States. I read the lecture later in manuscript before it was published. It had to be translated into English for that, of course. The designated translator, who was the wife of a professor of philosophy at Hopkins, found the Derrida essay so abominable that it was very hard to persuade her to do the job! Derrida was already controversial.

It is worth noticing that, for several reasons, Derrida is a world writer in English, not in French. In China, where he is widely read, people mostly don't read French—they read him in English. To some degree deliberately on his part, Derrida became best known through English translation of his work. He has been lucky in having very good English translators. Sure, they miss all sorts of wordplay that are really untranslatable. You must go back to the French. I started reading him in French and have always read him in French.

People tend to reduce Derrida and deconstruction in general to formal concepts ("deconstruction is this or that"), because that's the easiest thing to do. But Derrida, among other things, was an absolutely brilliant reader of literary texts. For example, Derrida read my essay on Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener." Then in a seminar he made a casual three- to four-sentence remark about "Bartleby" that was absolutely brilliant. I had to say to myself: "You're right, Jacques. I hadn't noticed that!" So, to think of Derrida as simply a theoretician is a mistake. He is a great reader of Heidegger, of course, but also of Melville and of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. In his reading of Defoe's novel, for instance, he was really interested in Robinson Crusoe as an image of isolation, not in his relation to Friday. In these late seminars, Derrida said (I paraphrase): "Between me and other people there is no real communication whatsoever. We are enclosed within our own subjectivities." That is eloquently affirmed in a passage in a very late little book titled *The Taste for the Secret* (1997), a book that is important to me for its somewhat bleak but exuberant rigor. Derrida knew he was going to die and said what he believed in the face of death. What he says is

essentially a kind of solipsism. To put it in terms of your topic of mimesis, Derrida says that you can't really imitate other people by imitating what is going on in their consciousnesses because you have no access to what is going on in their consciousnesses.

Lawtoo You once mentioned that you can't imitate a great critic like Poulet, and this certainly applies to Derrida as well. Before returning to deconstruction to discuss its (anti)mimetic status, let me change perspective for a moment and introduce another protagonist in our theoretical reflection on mimesis also associated with your period at Johns Hopkins in order to frame your relation to intellectual models more generally.

You mentioned René Girard, who, like Poulet, was your colleague at Hopkins. With Eugenio Donato and Richard Macksey, Girard also helped organize the famous 1966 "Structural Controversy" conference that, as you reminded us, launched Derrida on the North American intellectual scene and inaugurated the so-called turn to poststructuralism. Girard in many ways never fully let go of structuralism as he developed a theory of mimetic desire that leads to rivalry and violence: insofar as I identify with a model and desire what the model desires, Girard argues that rivalry with the model for the possession of the same object must necessarily ensue. This is a powerful literary theory of mimesis that goes beyond realism, but your relation to models seems different and does not appear to neatly fit the Girard's model. How would you characterize your relation to Girard, and what is your take on his mimetic theory?

Miller René Girard and I were exact contemporaries at Hopkins. We were assistant professors, so we didn't have very much income, and we both lived in an area of Baltimore near the university, in brick row houses a few houses apart. Girard had an end house, as did we—a big deal because end houses had more windows. I read Girard and he read me. Primarily because of our close locations, because neither of us had tenure, because we were publishing our first books, and we were therefore in exactly the same professional situations, there was, between us, a friendly rivalry—just as Girard says would happen. I will give you an example of this. We both had applied for Guggenheim fellowships, which are a big deal. And I saw the mailman coming down to deliver a special delivery letter to Girard's house. And I thought: "Oh . . . he's got the Guggenheim!" (laughs). And, then, the delivery truck came and stopped in front of my house and delivered a special delivery letter

to me too. So, we both got Guggenheim fellowships at the same time. That made me feel much better than if he had and I hadn't! But the episode was living proof of mimetic rivalry.

It seems to me, however, that Girard exaggerates a little on the evidence from that. I don't think I'm hiding anything, even from myself, but in my relation to Derrida, Paul de Man, Shoshana Felman, and others, there was very little mimetic rivalry that I was aware of. I thought Derrida was great, and I would write my own books as best as I could, nevertheless; same with Paul de Man. I can give you another example, about de Man. De Man was giving a graduate seminar on irony at Yale. There was a limit of twenty-five students, but the room was full of other people, including faculty members such as myself. Unlike Derrida, de Man didn't have his seminars written down, so you never quite knew what was going to happen—I'm not sure de Man himself knew, either, exactly where he was going to go. At the beginning of these great seminars on irony, which were essentially on Friedrich Schlegel, he told the crowd of students: "I should tell you that this course will not help you pass your qualifying exams. In fact, it might actually get in the way of passing those exams!" He meant that you'd have to start thinking, so that you'd become incapable of giving the kind of standard answers required to pass the graduate qualifying exam that authorized you to write a PhD dissertation. "So," he added, "I suggest that you all leave." Nobody left. It was a joke but a risky one, as well as being an ironic introduction to seminars on irony. I, for one, would have expected at least some students to get up and get the hell out of there!

Remember also that de Man managed magically to get an appointment as a full professor at Yale, essentially with no publications. *Blindness and Insight* (1971) was in press but it wasn't out yet. What was the justification? First of all, his notorious genius as a teacher. Then, I must say, also as an administrator. He became chair of the French department at Yale and championed women in that department early on, so that under de Man's leadership women finally started to get tenured positions there. The same applies to Jews. Shoshana Felman, who succeeded in getting tenure under de Man, is of course Jewish—actually Israeli. She is absolutely brilliant as a scholar and teacher in a way that she might well seem threatening to conservative male professors.

I mentioned that de Man had no publications. The exception is of course those notorious writings for the nazified *Le Soir* Belgian newspaper. Very few people knew about them at that point. I certainly didn't. If you looked at the French or English departments at Yale at

the time, you might have wondered: "Where are the tenured Jews?" Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, and Leslie Fiedler—not a big percentage. The Yale English department was pretty much still a bastion of white male Protestants. Nobody ever said anything about this. It just somehow went on happening whenever new appointments were made. De Man turned that around. There is no evidence I ever saw of any anti-Semitism on his side. It would have been easy for him to go along with the pervasive anti-Semitism.

This doesn't mean de Man didn't write those articles for *Le Soir Volé*. My explanation, such as it is, would be that casual anti-Semitism at that time in Belgium, with its mixture of Flemish- and French-speaking history and tensions, was "natural," in the sense of ideologically taken for granted, as to some degree it was and is in the United States. That by no means excuses what de Man wrote. Such anti-Semitism made the Nazi Holocaust possible. Anti-Semitism is different in different countries: the German form is not the same as the Belgian form, the French form, or the English form of anti-Semitism. Dickens was an anti-Semite. Fagin in *Oliver Twist* is a caricature of the Jewish racist stereotype.

There is no doubt that both de Man and Derrida had incredible charisma as teachers. I attended seminars by both and counted both as friends. My relation to de Man was different in various ways from my relation to Derrida. Socializing at Hopkins and at Yale was done at lunchtime. Oddly enough, the three of us rarely had lunch together. De Man had lunch separately with Derrida. I had lunch separately with each of them. If you think we talked exclusively about literary theory at those lunches, you're wrong! We talked mostly academic gossip, I'm sorry to say (laughs). Here was my opportunity to learn about Friedrich Schlegel, and I missed it! We didn't talk about our research and teaching at lunch. The lunches had a different purpose: friendly socializing. Having those two colleagues at Yale and, earlier, at Hopkins was a big piece of luck for me. I tried to learn from their classes as much as I could, while attempting to develop my own thinking about literature.

Lawtoo Gossip and irony—this sounds like an effective antidote against mimetic rivalry! We are getting further away from mimesis translated as a simple debased copy of a referential world and, at one additional remove, of transcendental ideal Forms. Yet, there is perhaps a different, more complex sense in which this improper, untranslatable, and destabilizing concept continues to be at play otherwise in

deconstruction, namely, as that mime "*under the false appearance of a present*" Mallarmé dramatizes in "Mimique," as your opening frame already suggested. This point is also admirably made in the second framing text you quote, Derrida's (1981a: 191) "The Double Session," as he writes of the mime's "strange mirror that reflects but also distorts one *mimēsis* into the other, as though it were itself destined to mime or mask *itself*." Let us return to this framing scene.

Derrida shows via a detailed analysis that the figure of the mime in Mallarmé's text, and by extension, mimesis in a Western tradition that goes from Plato to Rousseau and beyond, does not imitate any referent on the other side of the looking glass. He does not break the mirror to access a reality that is already present prior to representation but appears and disappears "through gestures and plays of facial expressions" (Derrida 1981a: 198), like a phantom or a mask. This mirroring doubling and redoubling shatter unitary definitions of mimesis and are repeated with a difference in "Plato's Pharmacy," which is also included in *Dissemination*. There, Derrida (1981b: 125) argues, for instance, that mimesis, under the mask of writing, "plays within the simulacrum" as it is "the mime of memory, of knowledge, of truth." And he famously adds, in a diagnostic, Nietzschean mood, that in its ambivalence, its improper nature, in its destabilizing qualities that go beyond good and evil, poison and cure, "*mimēsis* is akin to the *pharmakon*" (139).

Seen from this perspective, could we perhaps say that *mimēsis*, now understood in its protean manifestations (copy and imitation but also phantom and simulation) can, in the hands of deconstructive or rhetorical readers, be turned against a Western Platonic metaphysics that reduces writing to an imitation twice removed from ideal Forms? And if so, couldn't we speak of deconstruction as subversive mimetic practice? A reading practice that fights *contra* mimetic realism *with* performative mimetic strategies?

Miller Yes, deconstruction is a subversive mimetic practice. That would be a way of reading deconstruction. But one must be very careful, partly because Derrida and de Man are not identical, and neither of them is identical with me. There is a place where de Man quite truthfully, I think, does not lay claim to the term *deconstruction*—it's Derrida's term, he says. I wouldn't use any longer the word *deconstruction* either. This is because it has been taken over so much by the media, and they think (falsely) they know what it means. It's now a common word, a word whose time had come. It's even used as a name for a

demolition company whose sign I once saw: "The Deconstruction Demolition Company." Many people use the word *deconstruction*, including high-level writers for the *New York Times* who have never read a word of Derrida, much less of de Man. So, I would prefer to use de Man's term *rhetorical reading* to designate what used to be called *deconstruction*.

As Derrida says *deconstruction* echoes Heidegger's word *Destruktion* in *Sein und Zeit* (1927). *Deconstruction* is very deliberately the modification of a Heideggerian term. Heidegger (1962: 41) is speaking at the beginning of *Sein und Zeit* of his overall "task of destroying the history of ontology" (*Aufgabe einer Destruktion der Geschichte der Ontologie*). I suppose Derrida means by changing that to *deconstruction* either that *Destruktion* has a positive as well as negative side (*con* as well as *de*) or that Western ontology is indestructible. It always rises from its ashes, as in Heidegger's own *Sein und Zeit*, which isn't as far beyond metaphysics as he might have wished.

If Derrida was in any sense an academic philosopher, it was as a specialist in Heidegger, though he registered to write a thesis on Hegel. There is a character in Dickens who keeps bringing King Charles's head into any conversation. Heidegger was Derrida's King Charles's head. Each seminar had, sooner or later, a section on Heidegger. Of course, he was most often contesting Heidegger, as in replacing *Destruktion* with *deconstruction*, but he saw Heidegger as a great philosopher who needed contesting. You have to read Heidegger carefully in order to do that. Derrida was an exceedingly good reader of Heidegger. If you look at the manuscripts of his seminars, you will find that sometimes they are explicitly about Heidegger but that in any case Heidegger always comes in sooner or later. In Derrida's seminars on death, friendship, community, and so on, Heidegger is his King Charles's head and always appears.

Recalling Heidegger's collaboration with the Third Reich, I should also add that Derrida did not suffer as much as you might have thought he would during the war for being Jewish. He somewhere calls himself a "little black Jew from Algiers." I have never really understood how he survived, for the Nazis exported a lot of French Jews and exterminated them. He made his way from nowhere into to the famous Lycée Louis-le-Grand, and then into the École Normale Supérieure as student and then teacher, a very big deal in the French educational system. It was clear to everyone that he was exceptionally smart. I should have thought he might have been a conspicuous target for deportation to a concentration camp. Perhaps his notoriety protected him.

This takes me back to your question on the relation between mimesis and deconstruction, or rhetorical reading. Rhetorical reading pays attention to figures of speech and other narrative features in a given text. Such reading assumes that the work may be coherent but also may not be coherent. It may contradict itself. Anybody, me included, would like something I read to be coherent, to be an organic unity so I can say straightforwardly what it means. It's both disappointing and troubling when in a given case the text is not coherent. Showing such incoherences in particular cases is, in effect, what Derrida did, as a reader and teacher. By doing that, in a certain sense he took revenge on the École Normale. The central courses there were in philosophy. *Normale*, by the way, means that it was an institution that trained teachers, as in "normal schools" in the United States. Every year the École Normale would have examinations on a major philosopher, say, Feuerbach or Hegel. The teachers were simply supposed to repeat what Hegel, or whoever, said and pass it on to the students. Those teachers were officially called *répétiteurs, repeaters.* The convention was, "Don't think for yourself. Just repeat to the students what Hegel or Kant says so they can do well in the examination." Derrida, however, would point out that these supposed repetitions by his colleagues didn't really say what the philosophers being studied actually said. The latter was his duty to teach. Derrida's readings of Hegel, or Feuerbach, or other philosophers show that they didn't actually say something fully coherent and that their thought tends to depend, for example, on figures of speech. One big thing I learned from Derrida, for example, from the great essay *La Mythologie Blanche* (1971), is the meaning of the word *catachresis*—a word I had never heard of until then. The word means a locution that is neither literal nor figurative, such as "face of the mountain," "leg of the table." That such locutions tend to be projections from the human body is highly significant. We project our body parts into nature. Such locutions are very much a part of Western idiomatic language.

So, I agree that deconstruction is a reading practice that fights against mimetic realism—that is, the assumption that a text hangs together as an accurate picture of reality. It's not just a mimetic strategy but a performative strategy that is complex and contradictory. One of Derrida's constant locutions would be not only that A contradicts B but that B is both added to A and replaces A—it supplements it. He claimed that French was his main language but as an African Jew from Algiers he was not a Paris French-born speaker. He was never a professor in France, not because he was Jew, I think, but because they were afraid of what he was saying.

Lawtoo I ask this question about deconstruction and mimesis for genealogical reasons that, I think, with all due proportions, we partially share and I consider constitutive to what, in an ERC-funded project titled *Homo mimeticus*, we started to call a mimetic turn. Your interest in phantoms and simulacra is in line with figures like Derrida who inform your deconstruction of binary oppositions like the one of "critic and host," to echo one of your most famous essays (see Miller 2005), but also with Gilles Deleuze, whose notion of the simulacrum as a repetition without origin you borrow in *Fiction and Repetition* (1982). Despite their differences, both Deleuze and Derrida find a common ally in their critique of Plato's transcendental metaphysics in Nietzsche's immanent notion of the phantom, a concept that has been haunting me as well.

From my perspective, to put it very briefly, for Nietzsche, the phantom and mimesis are two entangled concepts that inform his diagnostic of modern subjectivity, most visibly in a kind of psychic vulnerability to imitation at play in what he disparagingly calls the "herd" or the "crowd" [*Masse*], which turns the modern ego into what he calls in *Daybreak*, a "phantom of the ego [*Phantom von Ego*]" (Nietzsche 1982: 61).[5] I tried to show that this transformation of ego into a phantom or simulacrum without origins, for Nietzsche, finds in mirroring mechanisms rooted in the body, what he also calls "physio-psychology," important mimetic principles that blur the boundaries between the body and the psyche, nature and culture, and are only now beginning to be rediscovered in the hard sciences. I'm thinking of mirror neurons and brain plasticity, but I'll return to the neurosciences in more detail.

I know you have been critical of reductionist approaches in the humanities that subordinate reading to the neurons that fire in the brain, and it's a criticism I fundamentally share. What I find worthwhile in Nietzsche, among other theorists of immanent forms of mimesis, is that he was not a reductionist and absorbed scientific ideas of his time in his philosophy—most notably, research on biology, psychology, and physiopsychology—along lines that seem to me future oriented. Since you started your career in science, I'm wondering if you consider it worthwhile to join the insights of a deconstruction of mimesis with mimetic theories in the empirical sciences in order to problematize a nature/culture binary that no longer seems to hold in the age of the Anthropocene and, by doing so, perhaps rethink the contemporary implications of the ancient idea that we are, for better and worse, the most imitative creatures—what I call, for lack of a more original term, *homo mimeticus*?

Homo Mimeticus: Pros and Cons

Miller My granddaughter, who has a PhD degree from Brandeis University in neuroscience, tells me that neuroscientists by no means all believe in those mirror neurons. Why are they attractive to so many nonscientists and to the media? Because they solve the problem of intersubjectivity. It means that you and I are connected via these mirror neurons and that I have direct knowledge of what you are thinking and feeling. I have a strong prejudice that comes from my training in science. I read a lot of essays by humanists that try to establish a link between science and literature. I find that many of them talk and talk about literary theory without giving any specific examples of literary works to which that theory might apply. They manipulate some neuroscientific concepts at a very high level of abstraction. My problem with this is that literary theory concepts must have some basis in literature. When I read these essays, I would like to see some literary examples or citations that might prove that what they are saying makes empirical sense. Often, they don't do that. It would be like doing astrophysics without any actual data from the stars. I could say anything I wanted, like "the moon is made of green cheese!" That's why I started with an example from Mallarmé. Here is a piece of language by a very distinguished writer who gives us some evidence of what mimesis is about. So, I urge you to give me examples. And that doesn't mean that there might not be proof that Deleuze or Nietzsche were right along the lines you mention.

As for the fragility of the nature/culture binary, I agree. There is certainly a lot of evidence for that. I agree that humanists should take science seriously. There is a tremendous amount of serious scientific work that is coming out every day, sometimes work that disqualifies received scientific belief. One has to be very careful, as in the case of mirror neurons. For a while they were very popular and there has been some evidence for them, for example, those experiments with monkeys, but belief in them may well be reinforced by wishful thinking. The jury is still out on those mirror neurons. A big difference exists, by the way, between saying that certain neurons in my brain fire when I see someone move or bend over and saying that seeing those movements causes me involuntarily to move or bend over.

Lawtoo Yes, I completely agree, and I appreciate your friendly warning. It's a contested and fast-growing area, and the existence of a mirror neuron system (MNS), as they now call it in humans, has caused a lot of debate since their accidental discovery in macaque monkeys in

the 1990s. Let me provide some more context to reframe my question and foreground the underlying reasons that motivate it.

The initial discovery at the University of Parma by Giacomo Rizzolatti, Vittorio Gallese, and others was indeed that these motor neurons, which are responsible for movement, fire not only as the monkey moves the arm but also at the sight of movement, especially goal-oriented movements such as grabbing, holding, pointing, and so on. For evolutionary reasons, the next hypothesis was that mirror neurons could be present in humans as well, but the initial evidence based on fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) scans was not all that reliable, indeed. So, yes, a good dose of suspicion is in order, especially given the tendency among some cognitive approaches to reduce complex human processes such as reading to the neurons firing in the brain. I didn't find that kind of reloaded phrenology all that useful to understand what happens when I close read a literary text like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, for instance, let alone to decode the enigmatic meaning of "the horror"—to give just a literary example important to both of us.

That said, since research has been moving quickly in the past years—and at the risk of getting in trouble with your granddaughter, who, contrary to me, is a real scientist!—I should say that the neuroscientists I talked to while at Hopkins, who were not enthusiastic supporters of mirror neuron theory, pointed out that the latest and, to them, convincing evidence of the existence of mirror neurons in humans does not come from fMRI images but from measures of single-neuron activity (see Mukamel et al. 2010). As I read more in the area I discovered that even recent neuroscientists who have written strong critiques of mirror neurons agree that "there is no theoretical pressure to abandon the idea that mirror neurons support imitation in a broader sense of associations between actions, as in observational learning" (Hickok 2014: 199). The debate now turns around the evaluation of the specific role they actually play in imitation, learning, understanding, sympathy, and so forth. It's not all that clear, and that discussion is likely to continue.

I should also say that, since mimesis has been a constant concern in the humanities, with all due precautions, we could perhaps join the discussion. And this leads me to your second point about examples. I couldn't agree more. For me the decisive factor that generated an interest in the neurosciences in the first place came from the examples I found in modernist literature and theory. This happened well before I had even heard of mirror neurons. I was writing a book on modernism and unconscious forms of imitation that were at the

center of pre-Freudian theories of hypnosis, suggestion, and crowd behavior in the 1880s and 1890s and later informed modernist literary texts as well. For instance, I found narrative dramatizations of unconscious imitation at play in D. H. Lawrence's account of the mirroring relation between crowd and leaders in the political novels, or in Joseph Conrad's narratives of the double dealing with mirroring actions and reactions at play in gestures, facial expressions, tonality of voice that leads to secretly shared affects. The passages I have in mind don't prove the existence of an MNS but provide interesting linguistic frames and contexts to think about the wider psychological, ethical, and political implications of unconscious mimetic reflexes. Reading those texts would take up too much space here, but let me at least mention two theoretical examples that will bring us back to our discussion. The French sociologist Gabriel Tarde (2001: 148), for instance, writing in the 1890s already said in *The Laws of Imitation* that "there is in the nervous system an innate tendency to imitation [*tendance inneé à l'imitation*]." Nietzsche, who relied on French, physiopsychological theories of hypnosis and imitation, goes even further. In *Daybreak* (written in1881), for instance, he offers the foundations for a theory of empathy (*Mitempfindung*) based on an immediate understanding of the other's emotion via facial mimicry. As Nietzsche (1982: 89) puts it, "[We] produce the [other's] feeling in ourselves after the *effects* it exerts and displays on the other person by imitating [*nachbilden*] with our own body the expression of his eyes, his voice, his walk, his bearing (or even their reflection in word, picture, music). Then a similar feeling arises in us in consequence of an ancient association between movement and sensation." These are just some of the passages that led me to start first reading and then writing about mirror neurons. They seem to anticipate, by over a century, what neuroscientists now call "simulation theory" (as opposed to what is known in theory of mind as "theory theory")—what Vittorio Gallese, one of the discovers of mirror neurons, also calls "embodied simulation."

But what I take to be the important point for our topic is the following: since the immediate context of my preoccupations with what I call the mimetic unconscious was the one of fascist psychology in the 1930s and 1940s, my immediate worry about mirror neurons—and this is why I brought them up in the first place—is that they might not only help understanding or empathy, as Rizzolatti, Hickok, and other neuroscientists pertinently suggest. They might also trigger unconscious reactions that could be put to irrational, violent, and (new) fascist use, especially as subjects are part of larger mimetic groups like crowds or virtual publics. Just because collective forms of mimetic

communication are difficult to measure in a lab doesn't mean that they are not spectacularly at play in real or virtual life. If my MNS is unconsciously activated by the sight of a goal-oriented gesture (pointing, grabbing, etc.), then such reactions might play a bigger rhetorical role than is commonly assumed in the success of the accursed leaders we mentioned at the beginning who rely heavily on the skills of the mime (facial mimicry, tonality of voice, bodily gestures, etc.) to influence the mimetic unconscious of the crowd—something I addressed in a short book titled *(New) Fascism* (2019). At one remove, since Nietzsche mentions not only gestures but also their representations in "word, picture, and music," the MNS might also be at play in all kinds of virtual simulations (e.g., films and videogames) that rely on visual actions to "trigger" (this time both in the technical sense of neuronal discharge and in the literal sense of pulling the trigger, a tendency central to cinematic fictions and, in a gun-oriented culture, all too often reproduced in real life as well) automatic reactions—a hypothesis that is currently being explored at the crossroads of film studies and the neurosciences. This was the broader context I had in mind, and perhaps we can return to some of these issues in the guise of conclusion.

Miller I agree with what you say about the psychic vulnerability of crowd psychology that we are seeing so much of these days, as in Trump's tweets, rants, and raucous rallies. What those around you believe is clearly catching. But this would be also part of the question of how to get people to believe lies. Just say 'em loud enough where a lot of people can feel the togetherness of hearing them at the same time. According to the latest report I have seen, Trump tells an average of seven public lies every day. I had thought it was a mere five.

The *Partage* of Community

Lawtoo Your recent turn to ethical issues concerning communal sharing, or *partage*, in *The Conflagration of Community* (2011), among other books, builds on Jean-Luc Nancy's relational conception of the subject that continues to blur the boundaries between singular and plural experience, self and others, what I feel and what you feel, while at the same time preserving a division in a "sharing" that is also simultaneously "shearing" (*partage*). We're getting closer to the political implications of mimesis you mentioned at the beginning, reappeared in the middle, and will allow us to move toward an end. Given that the concept of community in the twentieth century has been recuperated by totalitarian regimes interested in promoting an organic, totalizing, and fascist conception of community in which fascist/Nazi leaders

introduced mimetic sameness in place of difference in order to generate horrors on a massive scale, I wonder: what can a deconstructive or rhetorical approach to community propose both on the side of a critique of mimetic sameness and on the side of an ethics of sharing, *partage*, and sympathetic forms of solidarity open to difference?

Miller I found community a challenging topic for two reasons. On the one hand, I feel that the normal human situation is to live in a community. This means being surrounded by people who more or less agree with you and with one another in their spontaneous evaluations of things. This implies an ethics of sharing. But one has to recognize that along with sharing goes shearing (a double meaning present in the French word *partage*). The danger of community solidarity is fascism, a looming threat in the United States today. That is what is behind Donald Trump's opposition to immigration from Moslem countries: "Send them all home or make their lives so unbearable here that they decide on their own to go home." Trump asserts that if we are to make America great again, everybody ought to be like everybody else (middle class, white, Protestant Christians). We ought to get rid of people whose skin is darker. That's a fascist tendency. We know what that led to in Germany. It scares me to death that people who voted for Trump tend to want to have that kind of monolithic community, whereas the United States was founded in the name of diversity ("all men [!! What? No women included?] are created equal"), and with a commitment to the separation of church and state, as opposed to the British commitment to an officially established religion, the Church of England.

Why this fear of immigrants? Because white working-class Americans feel threatened. A certain community homogeneity of our nation-state is being challenged. I can understand that fear. The United States, however, was made from the beginning on the basis of immigrants speaking different languages. My ancestors, like Trump's, were German speakers from Germany. There is nothing new about that. Moreover, to divide a mother or father from her or his child, to put the child in this camp and the mother or father in another, and then to send the mother or father back where they came from, as Trump and his administration are doing—that's really cruel. Or to send people back to countries like Guatemala or Venezuela, where horrible things could happen to them as enemies of the regime, that's not at all humane. Trump and his people doing this are supposedly Christians. Have they read the New Testament? Jesus was pretty clear about how we should love our neighbor, whatever his or her ethnicity. The Near

East in Jesus's time was not entirely unlike the United States today, or indeed the Near East today, too. In both there was a mixture of different peoples that challenged organic ideas of community. Jesus tells in the Gospel of Luke the parable of the Good Samaritan. Samaritans and Jews generally despised one another. The Samaritan helped a traveler who had been robbed, beaten, and thrown in a ditch. A Levite and a priest had already passed the victim by, leaving him to die. We should emulate the Good Samaritan if we are Christians.

Mimetic Truths / Simulated Lies

Lawtoo Communities are now increasingly entangled in virtual simulations. In your most recent writings you have observed that the age of literature is probably coming to an end as it is speedily replaced by new digital media in the age of the internet, iPads, iPhones, Facebook, Twitter, and so on—what you call "prestidigitalization." These new media do not seem to rely on an old referential notion of mimetic realism. Instead, they bring into being mimetic or, as I call them, hypermimetic simulations that can be totally disconnected from reality yet generate performative effects in the audience and users nonetheless.

Like you, I'm thinking of that deplorable spectacle dominated by actors, which is contemporary politics, and we have had recent, quite worrisome examples both in Europe and in the United States of the success of mimes to galvanize crowds. There is thus a political urgency in coming to grips with the power of mimesis. This is accentuated by the emergence of new digital simulations that produce simulacra without origins that are having real mimetic consequences on the present and future. In your view, what should a future pharmacology of mimesis be attentive to diagnosing, as the line between reality and simulation, copy and origins, but also truth and lies is increasingly blurred in the digital age, a hypermimetic age in which critics seem, *nolens volens*, also to be the hosts of digital simulations that can be put to both therapeutic and viral use?

Miller This is a huge topic that would require a book-length essay to deal with all adequately. We should always remember that literary works, like video games and the other genres of digital media, also give access to entirely imaginary worlds that could be called "simulacra without origins." You can encounter Dorothea Brooke, the heroine of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, only by reading *Middlemarch*, or meet Captain MacWhirr only by reading Conrad's *Typhoon*. Nevertheless, the new digital media are taking over from literature. Whenever I wait

in a doctor's office at least one-third of the people also waiting there are holding cell phones. I doubt if they are reading the e-text of *Middlemarch.* Instead, they are either playing videogames or using Twitter or Facebook. Doing this so habitually is bound to have some effect on their beliefs and behavior. What we are seeing now is a new form of the power of what you call "simulation" to produce signs that are not copies of anything. They lead people nonetheless to think, feel, and behave in certain ways.

A short way to talk about this is to refer to the distinction between truth and lies. It is difficult to keep track of what really happens because of Trump's lies. If he says publicly five or seven times a day things that are not true, many people nevertheless think they are true. Human beings have an immense ability to believe things that are not true. A lie that is really a lie and is nevertheless believed can be an efficacious speech act. If Fox News or Donald Trump says a given person, Hillary Clinton, say, is a criminal and ought to be locked up, it's a lie. Even so, a lot of infatuated people believe that lie because the president of the United States uttered it. Believing the lie, they are prepared to act on it. The new media are extremely dangerous because they have the strange power of making untruths effective in the real world.

What can we do about this? I have been working on a book project titled *What Happens When I Read, Watch, or Play*. The aim of this project is to develop some studies of segments of particular literary works based on rhetorical readings and then try to transpose those skills to the study of videogames. I'm not a specialist, and I might need some help in doing this, but one thing I do know is that many videogames are full of gratuitous violence. They are very violent and may inure people to violence. The same thing goes for television. For various reasons, I don't use Facebook. For one thing, if I did use Facebook, I wouldn't do anything else—and I've got other things to do.

So, the prestidigitalization I spoke of is inducing a major and very rapid transformation of human civilization. This includes negative changes, such as the erasure of boundaries between truth and lies. I believe *NBC Evening News* presents more or less an accurate picture of reality, but do I really know that is the case? I don't have empirical evidence for that presumed accuracy, except other reports, such as those in the *New York Times*, which in turn are subject to the same dubiety. I believe that Fox News is full of lies because my progressive websites say it is, but I don't really know this firsthand. It's unsettling to live in a world in which you can't really check whether the moon is green cheese or not. This problem will not go away. Or it will go away

once climate change reaches a species extension climax. At that point we won't be around to care about truths and lies anymore.[6]

Lawtoo We are indeed facing planetary challenges that require a transformation in the way we read, teach, and think. This applies not only to literary texts, theatrical plays, or pantomimes but also to the new digital milieu that, despite its different virtual masks, continues to play the role of a mime who sets up, for better and worse, what Mallarmé calls a "pure medium of fiction." For worse because the mimetic pathologies we have been diagnosing are real, all too real. But perhaps also potentially for the better.[7] After all, we're conducting this interview via Skype, using the strange mirror of virtual mimesis, if not to go through the looking glass, at least to continue reflecting on possible cures. To conclude this dialogue, what would be your advice to readers of the future?

Miller There are two things I would recommend. One is to learn Chinese. I don't know it and much regret that ignorance. Having been to China quite often, I know it's an important language in which all sorts of important and fascinating things have been written, including an abundance of poems, novels, and plays, but also much else, scholarship on Western literature and theory, for example. China is becoming increasingly important for us as a world power with which we must contend.

When I gave lectures on literature in China, which I did over many years, the students in my audiences, who were often English majors, nevertheless often had not read the books I was lecturing about. They had seen the film adaptations instead. That leads me to my final point. The second recommendation I'd make to those trained in literary studies would be to urge them to try to figure out how to apply rhetorical reading to interpreting videogames, Facebook, Tweets, emails, and other forms of prestidigitalization.[8] It's not all that easy to make such a transposition. Films and videogames differ from literature in not using primarily words. Film studies is a serious field, but I don't think it is often based on transpositions of rhetorical techniques of reading. Not too many film scholars, good as they are, do that sort of thing. That's for me the future. I'm an old-fashioned reader of Conrad's *Typhoon* (1902), but not because there is tremendous social import in literature. These days, people are not reading English literature; they are playing videogames. So, it's important to study such games rather than simply play them. This seems to me a crucial way to go in the humanities these days.

Notes

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1. This interview was conducted via Skype in May 2018 as part of an EU-funded project titled "*Homo Mimeticus*" (www.homomimeticus.eu/). It is a considerable extension, clarification, and rewriting of the original oral interview recorded on Skype and then transcribed by Nidesh Lawtoo. The filmed (redux) version of this interview conducted on Deer Isle, Maine, in September 2018, titled "The Critic as Mime: J. Hillis Miller," is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=oM-TSY2nX-4&t=928s.

2. For a comprehensive bibliography to Miller's publications from 1952 to 2004, see Wolfreys 431–45.

3. All references to the French original are to the online version Mallarmé 2018 (no pagination); the English translation is quoted from Derrida 1981a: 175.

4. For an informed account of the theatrical origins of mimesis in Plato's *Republic*, see Havelock 1963: 20–35.

5. On the role mimesis plays in Nietzsche's account of the "phantom of the ego," see Lawtoo 2013: 27–83.

6. On Miller's twilight reflections about reading in the age of the "Anthropocene," see Cohen, Colebrook, and Miller 2016: 126–93.

7. This interview was conducted before the COVID-19 crisis of 2020. If the virus revealed the pathological dimension of mimetic contagion, the antiracist protests manifested how *pathos* can be put to therapeutic or patho-*logical* use. Both entangled patho(-)logical phenomena would require a different interview to be conducted. For preliminary reflections on the role of mimesis in the interplay between epidemic and affective contagion, see Lawtoo 2016: 91–125, and 2020.

8. For Miller's latest position on the changing role of literary studies in the digital age, see Miller 2017.

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