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The Phantom of the Ego

MODERNISM AND THE MIMETIC UNCONSCIOUS

Nidesh Lawtoo

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- "Nietzsche and the Psychology of Mimesis: From Plato the *Führer*," in *Nietzsche Power and Politics: Rethinking Nietzsche's Legacy for Political Thought*, eds. Herman Siemens and Vasti Roodt (New York: W. de Gruyter, 2008), 667–693.
- "The Horror of Mimesis: 'Enthusiastic Outbreak[s]' in *Heart of Darkness*," *Conradiana* 42.1–2 (2010): 45–74.
- "Bataille and the Birth of the Subject: Out of the Laughter of the *Socius*," *Angelaki* 16.2 (2011): 73–88.
- "The Horror of Mimesis: Echoing Lacoue-Labarthe," in *Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" and Contemporary Thought: Revisiting the Horror with Lacoue-Labarthe*, ed. Nidesh Lawtoo (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 239–259.

Introduction

> The greatest part of our being is unknown to us. . . . We have a phantom of the "ego" in our heads, which determines us many times over.
>
> —Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nachlass*

A phantom is haunting the modern world—the phantom of the ego. This ghostly presence is not confined to the darkness of the night; nor is it simply the product of the oneiric imagination of the sleeping subject, something that can be willed away, at daybreak, when the light of reason returns. Rather, the modern ego seems to be tracked, haunted, perhaps even possessed by such a phantom, during its waking daily life. This, at least, is what Friedrich Nietzsche claims as he writes that "the greatest part of our being is unknown to us. . . . We have a phantom of the 'ego' in our heads, which determines us many times over."[1] What does it mean to have a phantom in place of the ego? Does it mean that the ego copies, shadow-like, another ego from without? Or, alternatively, that an external ego has mysteriously penetrated one's head and taken control of it from within? What is sure is that, for Nietzsche, this "phantom" should not be dismissed as a rare

psychic illusion, but is symptomatic of a quite common mimetic confusion. As he explains in *Daybreak*, this phantom is born out of an unconscious process of psychic "communication" that spreads contagiously from self to others, one head to another head, depriving "the great majority" of their own thoughts, values, and opinions and, thus, turning their ego into what he calls, once again, a "phantom of the ego [*Phantom von Ego*]."[2]

Mimesis not as straightforward imitation, then, but rather mimesis as a disconcerting form of unconscious communication that troubles the boundaries of individuation: this is, in a nutshell, the single yet protean problem I struggle with in this book. Elusive, masked, always on the move, mimesis is a dramatic, phantasmal concept that changes form at will, slipping into a variety of related conceptual characters and personae. From hypnosis to identification, sympathy to trance, hysterical pathologies to fascist ideologies, "primitive" magical actions to a variety of "modern" bodily reactions, contagious affective realities to mass-mediatized virtual hyperrealities, we shall see that mimesis participates in most of the battles that are constitutive of the crisis of modernity. This book, then, does not propose a return to the old conception of "mimetic realism"[3] but rather opens up a new interdisciplinary investigation of a fragmented, slippery, and polymorphous phenomenon that haunts "the mind of modernism" as a whole.[4]

Nietzsche's warning that a phantom is taking possession of the modern ego is not an isolated, original cry from the last decades of the nineteenth century directed towards future centuries yet to come. A mimetic undercurrent in literary and philosophical modernism, which runs from Nietzsche to Joseph Conrad, from D. H. Lawrence to Georges Bataille, via a panoply of fin de siècle theories in the human sciences—including crowd psychology, religious anthropology, psychoanalysis, and different schools of dynamic psychology—sense the same phantom coming and warn modernity against the psychic, ethical, and political dangers of appearing to be oneself, while being someone other. And yet, Nietzsche comes first. And not only for obvious, historical reasons, but also for deeper, theoretical reasons. Nietzsche's thought occupies a privileged position in both the diachronic and the synchronic development that guides my entire investigation. As an introductory gesture, then, I turn to a figure that has been called "the apotheosis of aesthetic modernism,"[5] in order to articulate my approach to the old, yet always new, question of mimesis and open up an alternative door to the modernist

unconscious—a Nietzschean back door that does not hinge on a repressive hypothesis but on a mimetic hypothesis instead.

Pathos of Distance

The Nietzschean concept of "pathos of distance" provides this book with a moving frame to investigate the fundamental double-bind that mimetic affects have the power to generate in modernist literary and philosophical authors. This double bind stems from the fact that Nietzsche's concept, like the god Janus, is at least double-faced. On one side, it marks a critical, philosophical *distance* from forms of mimetic behavior Nietzsche—as well as other modernists after him—frequently denounces in modern subjects. His targets are often subjects he derogatively calls "the many" or, more often, "the herd": gregarious, unoriginal people who, in his view, are not in conscious possession of their egos and are, thus, easy prey to different forms of psychic dispossession. This is the well-known side of Nietzsche as a "master of suspicion," the psychologist who relentlessly unmasks what he considers pathological forms of behavior at the heart of modernity. On the other, less known side, the concept of "pathos of distance" points towards Nietzsche's own emotional vulnerability to the mimetic *pathos* he so eloquently denounces in others. There is, in fact, something surprising in Nietzsche's use of the Greek concept of πάθος to qualify his scornful "distance" from the multitude. As E. R. Dodds reminds us, for the Greeks the word *pathos* testifies to "the experience of passion . . . something mysterious and frightening, the experience of a force that was in [a man], possessing him, rather than possessed by him."[6] I argue that if Nietzsche is so passionately opposed to the affective force of pathos, it is because this force has already taken possession of him, in a mimetic way. This is true of that pathos he considers "his greatest danger," namely compassion, but also of what he calls the "Wagnerian pathos" and the different forms of contagious pathologies it entails.

This fundamental oscillation towards/away from mimetic reactions is a structuring feature that has tended to elude readers of Nietzsche who are uniquely attentive to his philosophical *logos*. Yet it has not escaped a theorist of mimesis like René Girard, who, already in the 1970s, noticed this "contradiction" at the heart of one of Nietzsche's texts.[7] This study begins by

taking Girard's realization seriously. It argues that the contradiction Girard identifies in a specific, unpublished fragment runs not only through the entirety of Nietzsche's published corpus, but also resurfaces in all the modernist authors I subsequently consider: from Conrad's take on sacrificial horrors, to Bataille's conception of contagious "communication," via Lawrence's analysis of the "old stable ego," all the thinkers of mimesis we shall encounter oscillate towards/away from different forms of mimetic pathologies that infect the ego. In a specific sense, then, this book picks up and amplifies a Girardian question in order to extend mimetic theory to the field of "new modernist studies."[8] Its general ambition is to rethink the problematic of mimesis in its ambivalent, affective, and infective manifestations so as to continue accounting for what the French philosopher and theorist of mimesis Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe calls "the imitation of the moderns."[9]

Like the Romantic figures at the origin of the Girardian system, the modernist authors I examine prove to be insightful theorists of mimesis themselves. Figures like Nietzsche, Conrad, Lawrence, and Bataille are, indeed, acute, introspective writers who are not only extremely sensitive to different forms of emotional contagion but also diagnose different symptoms of mimetic sickness with extreme clinical precision. My goal, then, in what follows, is not simply to "apply" Girard's mimetic theory to modernist texts—though Girard's insights will be central for my argument. Nor am I solely concerned with offering new readings of literary and philosophical modernists via the theoretical filter of mimesis—though we shall see that this filter is immensely productive and allows us to resolve hermeneutical riddles that have haunted critics for a while. Instead, the primary focus of this book is on unearthing a specific brand of mimetic theory that is already internal to the Nietzschean current of modernism I explore—a theory that, as figures like René Girard and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe have shown, can be made visible through an interpretative effort that takes seriously the theoretical potential of the literary works themselves.

Clearly, some of the modernist insights into the ambivalence, rivalry, and violence mimetic affects have the power to generate involve an extension of preoccupations that were already articulated by Girard in his earliest and most influential works, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1961) and *Violence and the Sacred* (1972).[10] For instance, the Nietzschean current in modernism I engage with continues to undermine the stability of the subject of

Aufklärung, characterized by faith in progress, rationality, and the capacity of the mind to control one's thoughts, opinions, and desires in the modern (post-Romantic) period. The Nietzsche-Conrad-Lawrence-Bataille axis of modernism also encourages us to explore subjectivity in relational, intersubjective terms, terms that challenge reassuring notions of originality, autonomy, and solipsistic self-sufficiency. Above all, these figures open up the boundaries of literature to a transnational, interdisciplinary context, encouraging readers to move across disciplines as diverse as philosophy, anthropology, sociology, and crowd psychology. The modernist brand of mimetic theory that emerges from this study is, thus, in a relation of continuity with its Romantic predecessors. It extends their preoccupations into the twentieth century in order to address disquieting phenomena of psychic depersonalization, affective contagion, ideological indoctrination, and the all too human violence that often still ensues.[11]

And yet, despite these similarities, important differences will also have to be signaled. Modernists writing roughly from the 1870s to the 1940s are shaped by the experience of major technical innovations, increasing urbanization, colonial expansions, the diffusion of mass media, not to speak of globalized wars based on fascist forms of collective psychology that subjugate not only individual bodies but also the entire body politic. These historical experiences shake the psychic, ethical, political, religious, and metaphysical foundations of the Western world. It is thus not surprising that significant shifts of emphasis appear in the modernist brand of mimetic theory I set out to unearth. For instance, unprecedented forms of sacrificial violence are indeed enacted in the modern period. And yet these massive outbreaks of violence do not offer cathartic resolutions to the horrors of mimesis. On the contrary, they seem to spread contagiously, generating more violence.[12] Moreover, the problematic of desire, and the rivalries that ensue, continues to be part of modernist preoccupations; but the focus is less on mimetic *desire* as such than on a mimetic *loss of the ego* instead. From Nietzsche to Conrad, Lawrence to Bataille, the experience of mimesis dissolves the modern ego in such a fundamental way that, strictly speaking, there is no ego left for intensely desiring, in the Romantic sense. As we shall see, it is as if, for the modernists, the problematic of desire is peeled off from the problematic of mimesis—and what is left over is not an ego, but a phantom of the ego instead.

The specificity of the modernist approach to mimesis will progressively

emerge from the engagement with the literary and philosophical texts themselves, and its strengths and weaknesses will have to be tested on those specific textual grounds. As Girard also recognized, "one cannot map out the way mimesis works with writers in general. Each one demands an entirely different demonstration, although a critic who is interested in the mimetic mechanism knows that ultimately he or she will unveil the same mimetic principles."[13] Indeed, variations of the same mimetic pathos of distance will emerge from the Nietzschean modernist axis I explore, and this movement will provide us with a distinctive methodology to approach the problem of mimetic dispossession in the modern period. What we must add now is that this clinical, diagnostic methodology emerges from an affective implication in the pathologies these authors critically dissect from a distance.

Mimetic Patho(-)logies

Rather than celebrating the ambivalence at the heart of modernist accounts of mimesis as a contradiction, this book sets out to reconstruct the logic informing the double movement that swings these authors back and forth from pathos to distance, and vice versa. This logic transgresses the principle of noncontradiction. It is situated at the juncture of the *both-and*, rather than at the disjunction of the *either/or*. In fact, I argue that it is only because modernist thinkers are themselves affected or, better, infected by the mimetic pathologies that haunt the mind of modernism that they can manage to effectively critique them from a distance. Out of this back-looping movement, whereby the infected subject turns upon itself in order to reflect on its pathology, emerges a method of reading that is as attentive to the logical structure of mimetic thought as to the affects that animate this thought. Given the distinctive *clinical* dimension of this approach, I have called it mimetic patho(-)logy—in the dual sense of mimetic sickness, and critical discourse (*logos*) on mimetic affects (*pathos*).

The clinical assumption that informs the movement of mimetic patho(-)logy is not mapped onto modernism from the outside; it emerges rather directly from the inside, out of a close textual investigation of what Nietzsche already called his "longest exercise." Here is how this self-proclaimed "philosophical physician" defines this clinical exercise in *Ecce Homo*:

> to look from a morbid perspective towards *healthier* concepts and values, and again conversely to look down from the abundance and certainty of *rich* life into the secret labour of the instinct of *décadence*—that is what I have practiced most [*meine längste Übung*], it has been my own particular field of experience, in this if in anything I am a master.[14]

Nietzsche was, indeed, well trained in the art of psychological dissection of what is "sick" in the modern ego, his critical tools all the sharper insofar as he tirelessly practiced his clinical art of recognizing the symptoms he denounces in the modern "herd" in his own self. This is not simply symptomatic of a logical inconsistency in Nietzsche's *logos*. Nor should it be easily dismissed as a sign of perspectival confusion and loss of orientation characteristic of the modernist sensibility. On the contrary, this reversal of perspectives is predicated on a lucid methodological recognition that is at least as old as the origins of mimetic theory itself. As Plato had already suggested in Book III of the *Republic*, physicians, by which he means, primarily, physicians of the soul, "would prove most skilled . . . if they themselves had suffered all diseases and were not of very healthy constitution."[15] To be sure, Nietzsche is a self-proclaimed anti-Platonic philosopher; yet he remains a Platonic philosophical physician in his assumption that "sickness is instructive . . . even more instructive than health."[16] Indeed, Nietzsche's unhealthy constitution gave him much clinical material on which to practice his diagnostic skills. This study takes this Nietzschean/Platonic realization literally as it sets in motion the movement of mimetic patho(-)logy that guides our entire investigation—a movement informed as much by the *pathos* that infects the inquiring subjects, as by the *logos* these subjects use to clinically dissect contagious phenomena from a distance.

In my diagnostic approach to mimesis I have been guided by the methodological assumption that a shift of perspectives from a personal vulnerability to mimetic sickness (or pathology) to the rigor of a *logos* that dissects different forms of *pathos* (or patho-logy) does not only entail an indecisive, back-and-forth oscillation from pathos to distance, affect to logos, and vice versa. This movement, in other words, is not linear; nor is it predicated on a safe and neat distinction between the "healthy" subject who carries out the clinical investigation and its "sick" object of inquiry. Rather, it involves a complex, patho(-)logical movement where the object of study (*pathos*) retroacts on the

subject who investigates it through the tools of reason (*logos*). It does so in two opposed ways, one disabling and the other enabling. On the one hand, the movement of mimetic patho(-)logy makes the critical observer vulnerable to the affects she or he dissects and is thus not without risks of infection. Indeed, all the authors I examine capitulate, at some point or other, to the same forms of imitative behavior they denounce in others in terms of sickness (or pathology). On the other hand, this modernist vulnerability to different forms of mimetic sickness also informs their critical logos on mimetic pathos (or patho-*logy*) with an experiential, affective knowledge that has the paradoxical effect of sharpening, rather than blunting, their clinical tools and diagnostic lenses—at least among self-proclaimed "philosophical physicians" who make this reversal of perspective their "longest exercise." Out of this feedback loop emerges the *spiraling* movement of mimetic patho(-)logy that serves as the distinctive feature of modernist mimetic theory.

Across the shifts of perspective, the same approach will always be at issue everywhere: a dual, Janus-faced approach that not only uses the filter of mimesis to offer new readings of Nietzschean pathologies in literary modernism, but also attempts to come to a better understanding of mimetic phantoms on the basis of authors who are "most skilled" in the art of psychic dissection. A characteristically modernist self-consciousness and psychic sensibility join hands with an equally typical modernist critical distance and diagnostic attitude towards modernity. Out of this conjunction of *both* pathos *and* distance, the clinical motor of mimetic patho(-)logy is set in motion: a back-looping, spiraling motion that turns hermeneutics into theoretical logos, cultural critique into self-critique. The goal of this critique of mimesis, I hasten to add, is not to reiterate ancient quarrels but, rather, to diagnose the power of mimetic pathos in a spirit of modern reconciliation.

Ancient Quarrels, Modern Reconciliations

The paradigmatic choice of two authors who, while not being traditional philosophers, are associated with modernist and postmodernist philosophical trends (Nietzsche and Bataille), and two British novelists who fall neatly within the modernist literary tradition (Conrad and Lawrence), via the literary-philosophical concept of mimesis may require a word of explanation.

Most especially since, in the Western tradition, the split between philosophy and literature, specialists of concepts and specialists of affects, is predicated on what Plato famously called in Book X of the *Republic* an "old quarrel"[17] over the value of mimetic art. Mimesis is, thus, traditionally, a locus of disciplinary disputes rather than of friendly reconciliations; it does not bring philosophy and literature together, but wrests them apart in two competing and rivalrous fields. As Nietzsche succinctly puts it: "Plato versus Homer: that is the complete, the genuine antagonism."[18] It may therefore seem misguided to lock together two literary authors and two philosophers via the very question that caused such a quarrel in the first place.

And yet an approach attentive to the paradoxical reactions mimesis generates in the modernist period immediately complicates such neat disciplinary distinctions, as well as clear-cut ruptures between modern and ancient approaches to mimesis. Already in Plato, the distinction between the philosopher and the poet is not as clear-cut as it initially appears to be, the violent rivalry between the two figures already masking an underlying, mimetic affinity.[19] And if this is already partially true of the founder of philosophy, it is certainly true of that philosopher-poet of anti-Platonic inspiration who is Nietzsche, a philosopher whose thought emerges precisely out of a struggle between an artistic celebration of what he considers to be "good" mimesis (e.g., Dionysian mimesis) on the one hand, and a philosophical critique of what he values as "bad" mimesis (e.g., Wagnerian mimesis) on the other. Conversely, on the literary front, a modernist figure of direct Nietzschean inspiration like D. H. Lawrence openly voices his discontent about such an ancient, disciplinary quarrel. Anticipating the new turn in modernist studies, Lawrence advocates the necessity for a reconciliation between literature and philosophy as he writes: "it was the greatest pity in the world when philosophy and fiction got split"; "you've got to marry the pair of them. Apart, they are no good."[20] And in order to remarry this split pair, his fictions and essays concentrate precisely on the cause of this ancient quarrel, namely mimesis.

At the most general level, then, my choice of authors indicates an attempt to consider the contagious affects that take possession of the modern ego not so much as the source of disciplinary disputes between poets and philosophers but as a productive locus of articulation between two exemplary traditions. This also means that at work in this project is an attempt to both interpret and theorize. Following Girard, I shall take seriously the

theoretical potential of literary texts (literature *as* theory), and in a mirroring countermovement, following Lacoue-Labarthe, I will also pay attention to the literary dimension of theoretical texts (theory *as* literature).[21] If we are right in claiming that mimesis, like the god Janus, is double-faced, both philosophical in theoretical conception and artistic in affective dramatization, then, in order to understand its workings, mimetic patho(-)logy will have to confront *both* its conceptual *and* its affective face, both the *pathos* and the *logos* that transect this Janus-faced concept.

And yet things are not so clear-cut. A split, divided concept can easily multiply identities. And indeed, in fin de siècle Europe, states of psychic confusion between self and other(s) tend to mask themselves under a panoply of different conceptual personae. These conceptual masks include emotional contagion, enthusiasm, crowd behavior, and psychic depersonalization, but also compassion, sympathy, mimicry, automatic reflexes, hypnotic suggestion, hysteria, trance, participation, and identification. Mimesis, as the modernists understand it, constantly transgresses disciplinary boundaries, all too easily coming to mean different things to everyone who approaches it through different theoretical lenses. This transgression of boundaries is particularly accentuated at the turn of the century, at a time when mimesis and the psychic confusion it entails split into a multiplicity of emerging disciplinary perspectives (or *logoi*). Hence, the phenomena I treat under the heading of "mimesis" can no longer be confined to a dual literary/philosophical tradition, but must extend in order to include multiple, and at times conflicting, interdisciplinary traditions. Not only philosophy and literature, but now also emerging new disciplines in the human sciences such as sociology, religious anthropology, crowd psychology, psychoanalysis, psycho-physiology, and different schools of dynamic psychology attempt to account for the disconcerting phenomenon that leads the ego to confuse itself with a multiplicity of other egos.

Mimesis is, indeed, a protean, mimetic concept that changes name, identity, and appearance as it crosses disciplinary borders. It challenges the all too comfortable temptation of limiting oneself to one of its disciplinary manifestations, while ignoring its other protean masks, under the false pretense that they do not respond to the official name, "mimesis." This multiplicity of identities is, of course, not new. From the very beginning of mimetic theory in Plato's thought, mimesis operates as a concept without

a fixed, stable essence and is difficult to define.[22] But in the modernist period, this concept continues, perhaps more than ever, to be in search of an identity. Called "imitation" by social psychologists, "contagion" by crowd psychologists, "trance" by religious anthropologists, "identification" by psychoanalysts, "hypnotic suggestion" by pre-Freudian psychologists, mimesis is a chameleon concept that changes color if set against different disciplinary backgrounds. It is then no wonder that this mimetic concept, as it moves through the modernist period, has so far largely escaped critical attention and has remained unexplored. In addition to its unfashionable association with copying,[23] mimesis is, indeed, seriously at odds with still dominant tendencies in the humanities to compartmentalize knowledge in specific fields of disciplinary specialization—a tendency that was not yet solidified in the period that concerns us.[24]

An attempt to track the phantom that takes possession of the modern ego requires a flexible, dynamic approach that troubles disciplinary distinctions and does not lose sight of this chameleon-like phenomenon as it crosses over into another field of knowledge. Consequently, this book takes the trouble to situate specific mimetic affects against the disciplinary, historical, and theoretical backgrounds that are most directly linked to the phantom of the ego's particular appearance in a particular text and author, at a particular historical moment. It is only by doing so that the phantom that haunts modernism can be made to appear. And as we shift from Nietzsche's writings of the 1870s and 1880s to the Bataille of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, via Conrad's texts of the first decade of the twentieth century, and Lawrence's writings of the 1920s, we shall see that this background will be constantly moving, presenting the phantom that concerns us in a kaleidoscope of constantly changing light.

This last point should make clear that despite the author-oriented dimension of this study, a mimetic approach to subject formation does not allow an exclusive understanding of four heroic, original authors considered in isolation, but must take into consideration the larger theoretical and historical context from which their conception of the subject or ego emerges.[25] If the *pathos* that runs through their writings is truly singular and must be understood on the basis of a hermeneutical effort that is as attentive to the "literary" dimension of their work as to the personal "confessions" expressed through this work, the *logos* they rely on in order to dissect mimetic *pathos*

is borrowed from a variety of disciplinary traditions that emerge, for the first time in a systematized way, in the modern period. Hence, as we move historically from Nietzsche to Conrad, Lawrence to Bataille, spanning a period of nearly a century, these four writers—who are, of course, also voracious and eclectic readers—will urge us to deal with an impressive array of theories and theorists of subjectivity. These include, but are not limited to, research on hypnosis (Jean-Martin Charcot and Hippolyte Bernheim), crowd psychology (Gustave Le Bon, Gabriel Tarde, and the "heir" of this tradition, Sigmund Freud), religious anthropology (Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Jane Harrison, and Émile Durkheim), as well as much-neglected figures who develop different models of dynamic psychology (from the American dissident psychoanalyst Trigant Burrow to the French philosopher and psychologist Pierre Janet).

I engage with such a heterogeneous set of theorists not only because they are integral to the heterogeneous cultural phenomenon that is modernism,[26] but also because they are already internal to the literary and philosophical investigations of the primary authors I examine, providing them with the conceptual logos to develop a distinctive modernist brand of mimetic theory. If mimetic patho-logy is not concerned with applying a stabilizing meta-theory of mimesis from the outside, it pays considerable attention to the different strands of mimetic theory that in-*form* (gives form to) modernist thought from the inside. From Nietzsche's psychological critique of modernity to Conrad's concerns with colonial power, from Lawrence's critique of Freud to Bataille's focus on the birth of the ego, we understand little of their diagnostic insights if we do not consider the theoretical foundations on which their conception of the ego relies.

What we must add now is that since this ego is not a rational, fully conscious, volitional entity, our inquiry calls for an investigation of yet another key modernist discovery: the so-called discovery of the unconscious. Girard is indeed right to say that "in imitation there is always some degree of 'unconsciousness' involved."[27] We shall go further and say that mimesis provides an alternative door to the much-discussed question of the unconscious, offering us a new key to solve its riddles. And here is where the *mimetic* unconscious enters the modernist stage.

The Mimetic Unconscious

For a long time, European modernism has been viewed through a distinctly Freudian lens. That slant has been enormously productive in many ways, unsurprisingly, since the "fit" of Freud to both canonical and noncanonical modernist texts can be very close. These Freudian tendencies, for all their innovations and explicative power, share an idealist bias that can be traced back to Plato. My goal here is a different one. Informed, I would hope, by all that Freudian readings of modernist literature have brought us, I aim to recover some of what Freud and his successors have blinded us to: modernism without Freud or, better, modernism through a pre-Freudian, but still emphatically psychological lens. Rather than with Freud as the father of modernism, I begin with Nietzsche's antimetaphysical reorientation of philosophy, his insistence that psychology informs philosophical reflection, the detachment of psychological analysis from its metaphysical overlays, a residual tendency, I would argue, in Freud and Freudian-influenced renderings of modernism.

Given the success of this approach in literary studies, it is not surprising that psychoanalysis has been the most trodden path to approach the question of the modernist unconscious, especially since the unconscious has been loudly proclaimed to be a Freudian "discovery."[28] And yet, outside the confines of literary studies, historians of psychology have demonstrated, for quite some time now, that the concept of the unconscious is far from being Freud's original invention and has a long and complicated history, a history that cannot be dissociated from the mimetic phenomena that haunt the modern period. As Henri Ellenberger puts it, in his monumental *The Discovery of the Unconscious* (1970), at the turn of the century, hypnosis, rather than dreams, functions as what he calls, mimicking Freud, the "*via regia* to the unconscious."[29] And in the process of recovering this neglected (some would say suppressed) tradition, Ellenberger sets out to retell the long forgotten pre-Freudian history of dynamic psychology, from its magical origins in Anton Mesmer's "animal magnetism" to Hippolyte Bernheim's "hypnotic suggestion," via Jean-Martin Charcot's "*grande hystérie*" to Pierre Janet's "psychology of the socius."[30] In the wake of Ellenberger's historical reframing of the unconscious, other historians and theorists have continued

exploring this pre-Freudian road. Thus, figures as diverse as Marcel Gauchet, Raymond Saussure, Jean-Michel Oughourlian, Ian Hacking, Sonu Shamdasani, and Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, to name a few, have stressed the importance of the model of hypnotic suggestion to access a pre-Freudian model of the unconscious, a model that did not rely on a repressive hypothesis but on what Borch-Jacobsen calls a "mimetic hypothesis" instead.[31]

Due to this confrontation of psychoanalysis with its prehistory, old debts were brought to the fore; old battles that were thought to have been won by Freud were reconsidered from a more impartial historical perspective; old mimetic concepts (such as the "riddle of suggestion") that psychoanalysis never managed to fully dissipate reappeared on the forefront of the analytic scene. This historical reevaluation of hypnosis and related concepts entails a rediscovery of the unconscious that is currently dismantling received Freudian notions about the psyche; and the recent "Freud wars" on both sides of the Atlantic testify to the liveliness, virulence, and timeliness of this debate. I take it to be a positive sign that the echoes of these theoretical and historical battles are now beginning to be registered in literary studies as well. In fact, modernist scholars informed by recent developments in the history of psychology have begun to propose a correction to "Freudocentric" approaches to literature. For instance, Judith Ryan's *The Vanishing Subject* opened up modernist concerns with the dissolution of the subject to a more inclusive, pre-Freudian psychology.[32] More recently, Mark Micale, in his wide-ranging introduction to *The Mind of Modernism*, extends this innovative line of inquiry: building on both Ellenberger's and Ryan's studies, Micale provides a historical "map" that urges critics to "move beyond Freud" in order to include what he calls a "gallery of physicians, psychiatrists, and psychologists whose work was known to and resonated with artists and intellectuals between 1880 and 1920."[33] *The Phantom of the Ego* contributes to these post-Freudian theoretical developments in literary and philosophical studies by considering the specific, and thus far largely neglected, role mimetic reflexes play in the modernist dissolution of the ego. It also opens up psychological approaches to modernism to a wider, Nietzschean interdisciplinary tradition that roots the unconscious back in the immanence of bodily affects.

It is well known that Nietzsche paves the way for many of Freud's major intuitions and has often been considered an unacknowledged precursor of psychoanalysis. Less known is that Nietzsche's immanent approach to

the unconscious is truly pre-Freudian in the sense that it is predicated on a psycho-physiological model of the psyche that has hypnosis—or as Plato used to call it, mimesis—as its *via regia*. This model has nothing to do with a repressive hypothesis. Neither does it propose a universalist account of familial dramas based on an idealist topography of the mind. Rather, the Nietzschean unconscious roots the ego in the immanence of bodily, psycho-physiological reflexes, mimetic reflexes that are not under the volitional control of consciousness and are, in this sense, *un*-conscious. Paradigmatic manifestations of this bodily unconscious—or as the historian of psychology Marcel Gauchet calls it, "cerebral unconscious" (*inconscient cérébral*)—include contagious reactions such as yawning, laughter, and mimicry, but also hypnotic swoons, hysteria, somnambulism, sympathy, compassion, suggestibility, suggestion, identification, and mass behavior.

Although Freud struggled with some of these psychic issues, the difference between the Freudian and the Nietzschean underlying theoretical assumptions are many and fundamental. For instance, if Freud constantly uncovers "repressed" sexual contents of Oedipal configuration, modernists discover a variety of altered states of consciousness of multiple mimetic orientations. If the Freudian unconscious is based on solid (metaphysical) structures rendered intelligible via the abstractions of a metapsychology, the Nietzschean unconscious concentrates on the fluid (physical) affects unmasked by the clinical observation of genuine physio-psychology. Above all, the modernist unconscious is not located in a solipsistic model of the psyche interrogated in isolation, but emerges from intersubjective forms of lived, affective communications experienced in daily social situations. This account of the unconscious is thus not private but social; not egocentric but relational; it does not claim to have a universal, transhistorical validity, but is self-consciously informed by the historical conditions of modernity. Finally, this model does not frame the ego in an ideal topography of the mind or a mirror image of oneself, but opens up the boundaries of the ego to the immanent experience of becoming other. As we shall have occasion to see, the contagious affects that have the power to turn the ego into a phantom, to deprive it of its rational presence to selfhood, rendering it open, for better or worse, to the influence of others, open up an alternative road to the modernist unconscious. Given that "mimesis" in its modernist, patho(-)logical manifestations will serve as our Ariadne's thread to find our way in the

labyrinth of the pre-Freudian unconscious, I shall call this new modernist unconscious the "mimetic unconscious."

Once again, Nietzsche is not alone in relying on a mimetic model of the psyche to diagnose the modern ego. The Nietzschean current in modernism I explore pursues his patho-*logical* investigation of mimesis on the basis of the same psycho-physiological assumptions. Given the tremendous popularity of theories of hypnosis at the turn of the century, psychological concerns about contagion, depersonalization, suggestion, affective communication, and crowd behavior moved freely across linguistic, national, and disciplinary frontiers, informing not only *mass* opinion but also *public* opinion: that is, an opinion generated by the power of mass media to generate consensus (from Latin, *con-sensus*, to feel with) from a distance.[34] It is thus not surprising that despite their different disciplinary affiliations and national belongings, we find among European modernists of literary and philosophical orientation similar preoccupations with states of psychic dissolution symptomatic of what Nietzsche calls "the phantom of the ego." From Nietzsche's "genuine physio-psychology," to Bataille's contagious "communication," via Conrad's horror of the "crowd," and Lawrence's critique of psychoanalysis, we understand little of the modernist dissolution of the "old stable ego" if we do not take into consideration the model of the mimetic unconscious that makes such a dissolution possible in the first place. One of the goals of this book is thus to recuperate this mimetic tradition in order to open up modernist studies, as well as mimetic theory, to a more inclusive line of investigation; by doing so, we shall reveal a conception of the unconscious that has been much neglected in our past Freudian century, but that haunts the mind of modernism nonetheless.

In this sense, then, this study looks back to the history of the *pre*-Freudian unconscious in order to propose an alternative genealogy of the modernist ego and the mimetic unconscious that animates it. And yet, turning backwards also allows us to better see what lies ahead. In fact, this Nietzschean current in modernism is in line with contemporary *post*-Freudian developments in mimetic theory that have recently established that automatic reflexes and influences are much more fundamental to the formation of the ego than past Freudian approaches had realized. Empirical studies in developmental psychology have, in fact, demonstrated that newborns are, quite literally, imitative from the very beginning: records of mimetic reflexes so far being set by thirty-minute-olds! As developmental psychologist Andrew

Meltzoff summarizes it, "newborn imitation . . . demonstrates that self-other connectedness and communication exists at birth. *Humans imitate before they can use language; they learn through imitation but don't need to learn to imitate.*"[35] This is indeed an empirical confirmation of the Aristotelian realization that what "distinguishes man from other creatures [is] that he is thoroughly mimetic."[36] And the discovery of "mirror neurons," as well as of the human brain's ongoing "plasticity,"[37] gives additional neurophysiological explanations to this well-known philosophical lesson, opening up new interdisciplinary possibilities that are vital to stimulating the promising dialogue between "mimesis and science."[38]

These are revolutionary discoveries that involve a Copernican turn away from ego-centric approaches to subject formation and cast serious doubts on the monadic conception of the Oedipal (or linguistic) subject that has dominated the past, Freudian century. And yet, in a sense, these discoveries are far from being *new* discoveries. A historically informed account of the unconscious demonstrates that they are important empirical confirmations of well-known modernist realizations. Gabriel Tarde, for instance, in *The Laws of Imitation* already based his account of the interpersonal social bond on the mimetic hypothesis that "there is, in the nervous system, an innate tendency towards imitation."[39] And virtually all the modernists we shall consider, writing from the 1870s to the 1950s, share the untimely and, at the time, still unfashionable realization that the ego is not born in isolation but in a relation of mimetic and unconscious communication with others. For them, imitation is not a consequence of learning and development but its fundamental presupposition: it is because newborns are imitating from the very first hours of life and automatically respond to facial expressions and gestures that they learn to understand the affects, intentions, and thoughts of privileged others (what Pierre Janet calls *socii*). From Nietzsche to Tarde, Conrad to Lawrence, Bataille to Janet, we shall repeatedly confirm that it is through an unconscious process of imitation characteristic of the "psychology of the socius" that the subject emerges as a relational, affective, and mimetic human being. Well before the empirical sciences, then, modernist writers attentive to the bodily forces that shape our psychic lives urge readers to rethink the foundations of the ego in relational, intersubjective terms.

This theoretical imperative is more timely than ever. In fact, if empirical research on imitation has now convincingly shown that the ego is not

a solipsistic, mythical monad nor the precipitate of a narcissistic image reflected in a mirror, but rather responds mimetically to the affects of the other from the very first hours of life, then, if we want to understand how humans come into being, much more theoretical attention needs to be given to the formative function of these intersubjective, unconscious, responses that give birth to the ego—out the *pathos* of the other. One of the aims of this study is to focus on mimetic phenomena that turn the ego into a phantom of the ego in order to provide the missing link between the modernist, pre-Freudian unconscious and the new, post-Freudian unconscious that is currently emerging on the theoretical scene.

The realization that the ego emerges from an unconscious communication with the other does not fit easily within psychoanalytical accounts of ego formation in terms of Oedipal triangulations or specular identifications, yet it comes as no surprise to a genealogical approach of Nietzschean inspiration that roots the modernist unconscious back in the immanence of bodily reflexes. The authors I now turn to consider all agree that the experience of mimesis, in its polymorphous manifestations, informs the subject from the very beginning, and that it is through such bodily, affective relations, where imitation plays a decisive role, that the ego is born as a relational, communicative being. Their intuition that the ego is formed *by* the other, *through* the other, in a relation of unconscious communication *with* the other, is theoretically ahead of their times and testifies to the modernity and relevance of their approach. Opening up a line of inquiry that contemporary psychology is barely beginning to explore, these authors are *modern* in the sense that they manage to make our understanding of the psyche *new*. They also call our attention to the empirical fact that mimetic relations are the very condition that brings the ego into life as a relational, affective being. Thus understood, the ego is not a subject that precedes the experience of communication but, rather, a much more elusive, porous, and malleable entity that emerges from a type of mimetic communication that challenges the boundaries of individuation.

Furthermore, for the modernists, it is clear that such a relational ego open to the pathos of others in childhood continues to respond automatically to affects that are not under the control of consciousness in adulthood. This realization allows modernist writers to supplement current empirical approaches by considering mimesis outside of the objectifying walls of the laboratory and to account for the subjective, cultural implications of

unconscious forms of mimetic behavior in the modern world. Extending the study of mimesis from individual bodies to the entire body politic, modernists explore the wider social, political, ethical, and philosophical implications of the power of the mimetic unconscious to infect and affect subjects in a world increasingly haunted by the power of affective contagion to turn selves into others, egos into phantoms. If the modernist insights into the patho(-)logical sides of imitation remain important for us today, it is also because we are barely beginning to foresee the unconscious phenomena our illustrious predecessors tried to warn us against.

The story of a phantom taking possession of the modern ego was once well-known in fin de siècle Europe. This phantom was even seen as constitutive of European history, a mimetic history concerned with the emergence of crowd behavior, the power of suggestion, and a general awareness that the laws of imitation informed both personal and public opinions. Yet, over time, not without violent struggles, and at great theoretical and practical costs, the emergence of a supposedly more "scientific" approach to the psyche imposed a single road to the unconscious and took possession of a century enthralled with the myth of scientific progress. The result is that in the past Freudian century, the history of this mimetic phantom—with its legendary power of possession, its magical generation of an ego that is not one, and its alternative key to open up bodily back doors to what was once called the soul—was all too quickly dismissed as a fiction. *The Phantom of the Ego* returns to tell this long-forgotten history. And in an ironic reversal of perspectives characteristic of the modernist Weltanschauung, it suggests that these so-called fictions turn out to be based on empirical facts, while the "scientific" approach is now revealed to a fable.

Diagnostic Program

Chapter 1 offers an alternative genealogy of Nietzsche's thought that roots the modernist ego back in the immanence of the mimetic unconscious. I argue that the German philosopher's most discussed concepts (from the Dionysian to slavery, from mastery to the will to power) emerge out of Nietzsche's affective implication in different forms of mimetic sickness he denounces in others (from hysteria to compassion, mimicry to hypnosis).

This is, indeed, a "contradiction" (Girard's term) that Nietzsche does not manage to fully resolve and that runs through the entirety of his thought, from *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) to *Nietzsche contra Wagner* (1895). Consequently, the critiques Nietzsche addresses to his models are also inevitably attacks upon his own mimetic ego.

Yet this is what Nietzsche himself is ready to avow, and this avowal is constitutive of his diagnostic, perspectival method that informs his critique of modernity. Nietzsche's affective vulnerability to mimetic pathology has patho-*logical* relevance insofar as it lays bare a typically modern vulnerability to contagious affects that have the power to turn the ego into a mere phantom of the ego. In a second moment we shall thus see that Nietzsche's mimetic rivalry with his major intellectual models (Plato, Schopenhauer, and Wagner) is not only personally disabling, but also theoretically enabling insofar as it allows him to articulate an untimely critique of the mimetic pathologies that infect not only his ego but also modernity as a whole. Above all, his "psychology of 'looking around the corner'"[40] diagnoses a modern world haunted by the hypnotic will to power of charismatic leader figures who can take possession of masses of egos and generate unprecedented forms of horrors. In short, Nietzsche turns his mimetic sickness to productive theoretical use and offers a rich starting point for an alternative genealogy of the modernist unconscious.

Chapter 2 considers how Conrad extends this Nietzschean critique of the pathological effects of the mimetic unconscious towards the field of postcolonial studies, stretching—through the mediation of Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*—into the present. Late nineteenth-century disciplinary discourses as diverse as crowd psychology, hypnotic theory, and evolutionary anthropology tend to project mimetic, irrational affects onto subordinate "others," such as children, women, and racial others. Conrad, like Nietzsche before him, is not immune to this ethnocentric and patriarchal bias. A close reading of "An Outpost of Progress" (1896) and, especially of that milestone in literary modernism, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), demonstrates that Conrad is steeped in fin de siècle mimetic prejudices against women and Africans. Consequently, the much-discussed critiques of Conrad's "racism" and "sexism" must be radically reconsidered in the light of the mimetic theories and prejudices that already inform his work: Conrad's sexism turns out to be mimetic sexism, his racism, mimetic racism.

Yet Conrad, like Nietzsche before him, does not simply reproduce dominant stereotypes. On the contrary, he re-presents them (i.e., presents them again) only in order to better critique them from a distance. Thus, in a second moment, he unmasks how the dominant colonial subject of *Aufklärung* is imbued by the mimetic, irrational pathos he initially projects onto subordinate others. The mimetic subject, for Conrad, is not only the "primitive" other but is also and above all the "modern" ego. Consequently, the terms of the race debate, famously defined by the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe in "An Image of Africa" (1977), need to be reframed in the light of Conrad's mimetic critique of modernity. A close investigation of the formal structure of *Heart of Darkness* makes us see that the white male subject of *Aufklärung* is radically vulnerable to mimetic forms of subjection not only in childhood but also in adulthood, as the modern subject is impressed by the power of mass media to inform both mass opinion and public opinion. This process of in-formation—what social psychologist Gabriel Tarde calls "imitation" and Lacoue-Labarthe calls "typography"—is responsible for rendering the white, male subject of ideology vulnerable to "atrocious phantom[s]" like Mr. Kurtz, endowed with the will to power to put colonizing theories into practice and for the ethico-political horrors that, as Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) reminds us, continue to ensue. For Conrad, then, the horror of modernity must be reconsidered in the light of what I call "the horror of mimesis."

Chapter 3 shows that Nietzsche and Conrad are not alone among modernists to advocate the centrality of the mimetic unconscious. D. H. Lawrence's later period marks a theoretical shift from the much-discussed problematic of desire to the so far unnoticed problematic of mimesis. I argue that questions that have been central to Lawrence studies from the very beginning of his reception—such as Lawrence's implication in authoritarian forms of will to power, his fascination with primitivism, fascist psychology, and the dissolution of the "old stable ego"—must be reconsidered against the generalized background of the mimetic theories that inform his writings of the postwar period, from the so-called political novels (*Aaron's Rod* [1922], *Kangaroo* [1923], and *The Plumed Serpent* [1926]) to his books on the unconscious (*Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* and *Fantasia of the Unconscious* [1921/1922]), as well as the anthropological essays collected in *Mourning and Mexico* (1927) and the posthumous papers *Phoenix* I & II (1936/1968). These

theories include anthropological accounts of sympathetic magic (Frazer, Lévy-Bruhl), philosophical accounts of mimesis (Nietzsche, Plato), and different schools of dynamic psychology (Burrow, Freud). This transdisciplinary reframing is important for mimetic theory because it helps us theorize *both* the violent effects of affective contagion emphasized by Lawrence's predecessors (or "bad mimesis") *and* the vitalizing, communal function of affective participation (or "good mimesis"). It also reveals that the same model of the mimetic, or as he also calls it, "vertebral unconscious," is constantly at work in Lawrence's critique of the modern ego. His much-discussed quarrel with Freud will be reconsidered in the light of this pre-Freudian realization.

And yet, like Nietzsche and Conrad, Lawrence is not only looking backwards, towards a pre-Freudian tradition; he is also looking forwards, towards contemporary post-Freudian developments. I shall argue that Lawrence continues to be central in our postmodern period because he gives us the theoretical tools to understand why, exactly, a culture that privileges the eye over the body, mimetic representations over mimetic impersonations, continues to be haunted by what he calls "phantasmal consciousness." This realization is of theoretical value because it challenges dominant accounts of the ego in terms of specular identification (Lacan), anticipates anti-Oedipal critiques of psychoanalysis (Deleuze and Guattari), and foreshadows postmodern concerns with simulacra of the real (Baudrillard). Who would have thought that this often marginalized modernist is so theoretically ahead of his times in his diagnostic of mimesis? Lawrence is an untimely Nietzschean thinker who will indeed help us engage with cutting-edge theoretical developments, extending the modernist insights into mimetic theory to our mediatized, postmodern world.

Chapter 4 pursues this interdisciplinary investigation of the phantom of the ego by showing how Georges Bataille, one of the most celebrated precursors of the postmodern death of a linguistic subject (the subject of the signifier), is above all a modernist thinker who offers us an account of the birth of an affective subject (the subject of mimesis). Critics still tend to read Bataille through surrealist, postmodern, or deconstructive lenses, and quite rightly so, since he is conventionally associated with such contexts. However, in this chapter, I shall transgress conventional approaches to Bataille in order to reinscribe his heterogeneous thought into the modernist, transdisciplinary,

pre-Freudian, and above all, Nietzschean tradition to which he belongs. If it is true that among postmodern quarters Bataille's heterogeneous thought still tends to recuperate him within a "metaphysics of the subject," I argue that the central concept of his thought (i.e., "sovereign communication") needs to be reread in the light of the modernist tradition of the mimetic unconscious that transgresses precisely such metaphysics. More precisely, Bataille, following one of the leading philosophers and psychologists of his time, Pierre Janet, considers that significant others (or *socii*) are from the beginning constitutive of the formation of the ego. For him the ego emerges from a nonlinguistic form of contagious "experience" that he misleadingly calls "interior" but that opens the ego to its affective outside.

As this study draws to an end, we shall progressively realize that at the origins of the ego there is no secret essence that is already interior to oneself, but a mimetic communication with an other who is neither fully interior nor exterior insofar as this unconscious communication transgresses the boundaries of individuation. From his early writings of the 1930s to some of his major theoretical texts of the 1940s and 1950s—*Inner Experience* (1943), *Guilty* (1944), *On Nietzsche* (1945), and *Eroticism* (1957)—Bataille shows that the ontological distinctions between "self" and "other," "interior" and "exterior," "private" and "public," which modernist figures have been questioning all along, no longer hold by the beginning of the postmodern period, a period haunted by the phantom of fascism and Nazism. Directly informed by the ethical and political horrors of modernity his predecessors had foreseen, Bataille returns to the foundations of subjectivity in order to open up new theoretical possibilities for what the ego could possible become. He may even offer a possible answer to the much discussed question, "Who comes after the subject?"[41]

Proposing an alternative to celebrated accounts of ego formation in terms of a specular identification with an image (or *imago*), Bataille advocates a model of unconscious communication that gives birth to the ego via the pathos of the other (or *socius*). Like his predecessors, Bataille continues to be critical of the pathological effects of imitation. But in his patho-*logical* countermovement, he also develops a gay science of mimesis that focuses on vitalizing and life-affirming forms of communications—sovereign communications like laughter that tickle the ego into being as a relational, mimetic being. After the much-discussed death of the linguistic subject, Bataille

then turns to advocate the birth of a bodily ego—out of the laughter of the other. He does so in order to unmask the relational and communicative foundations that animate the process of subject formation along immanent, psycho-physiological lines that contemporary developments in the neurosciences are now beginning to rediscover. Finally, Bataille also offers an answer the question, "Who comes after the subject?" by echoing the Nietzschean realization that behind the mask of subjectivity lurks not so much the ego but the phantom of the ego.

In the end, then, the Nietzschean account of the mimetic unconscious will turn out to be more untimely than previously realized. It anticipates, by more than a century, cutting-edge insights into the dynamic of mimetic reflexes, affective communication, and the ongoing malleability of the human brain. The discoveries of "mirror neurons," of newborn imitation, and of the brain's neuroplasticity are decisive confirmations of mimetic principles our authors have been dissecting all along. Their diagnostic findings about the mimetic unconscious will thus have to be reevaluated in light of these empirical confirmations. For modernists of Nietzschean inspiration, in fact, as for contemporary developments in mimetic theory and the empirical sciences, the ego is a more malleable material than previously realized and continues to be formed, informed, and deformed by different types of personal, social, and political impressions. These impressions require close diagnostic operations because, for better or worse, they give form to an ego that is not one, but is animated by someone else. As we shall see, this phantom easily takes possession of the modern ego because it is through a phantom that the ego is born. Articulating the theoretical implications of this mimetic realization is what this study sets out to do.

The book ends with a coda that articulates the continuities and discontinuities between René Girard's mimetic theory and modernist mimetic theory. What emerges from this study is that in the modernist period the problematic of mimesis can no longer be restricted to the problematic of mimetic *desire* (and the rivalrous-violent triangles it entails) but must be supplemented by a more generalized investigation of the impersonal workings of what I call mimetic *pathos* (and the patho(-)logies it entails). This coda draws the conclusion of this theoretical realization. It also fleshes out some new lines of inquiry concerning the life-enhancing side of mimesis, the experience of community, and an ethics of mimesis that is aware that the

other is both external and internal to the ego. These lines of inquiry have their origins in modernism, but they stretch in order to affect our own hypermimetic, postmodern times. As such, they call for further explorations by mimetic theorists yet to come.