The *CounterText* Interview: Jean-Luc Nancy
Mimesis: A Singular-Plural Concept

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Jean-Luc Nancy and Nidesh Lawtoo

Here, in this dialogic supplement to a *Homo Mimeticus* seminar titled 'HOM Workshop with Jean-Luc Nancy: à partir du 'mythe Nazi', held at KU Leuven in December 2018, Nancy takes the recent return of attention to mimesis, or 'mimetic turn', as a starting point to reflect on the relationship between philosophy and literature. Adopting the mimetic form of a dialogue, Nidesh Lawtoo asks Nancy to take the '*fil conducteur*' of mimesis to address his work and life in common with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, his involvement in the linguistic turn, structuralism, and deconstruction. As the dialogue unfolds, Nancy engages topics at the heart of his philosophical work, such as the subject, community, myth, fascism, and democracy, ending with his reflections on the COVID-19 pandemic and the sharing or *partage* it generates.

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NL: To pose the question of the relation between philosophy and mimesis is to reopen an ancient, complex, and ever-relevant debate, one that presupposes an agonistic rapport [*rapport agonal*] between philosophy and literature and, generally, with the arts. At least since Plato's *Republic* there is, in fact, an 'ancient quarrel' that centres around the uses and abuses of mimesis and splits philosophy and the arts apart, in competing, agonistic

fields. Not only do you belong to a generation of philosophers that overturns this metaphysical view but, in your case, the question of mimesis involves another, more personal or relational dimension based on an experience of conceptual but also affective sharing [*partage*] that entails both sharing and division – what we could render as 'con-division'. It concerns your collaboration, life in common, and friendship with a thinker who made mimesis his leading concept, or guiding thread [*fil conducteur*]: Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe (1940–2007).

In what follows, I would like to take the opportunity of continuing to 'think or rethink mimesis' (Lacoue-Labarthe 1986: 282), as Philippe used to say, in order to promote what in the ERC project, *Homo Mimeticus,* we have been calling 'the mimetic turn'.[1] This turn does not claim to be absolutely new or original. It entails rather a genealogical *re*-turn to an ancient insight into the mimetic condition of human, but also nonhuman beings, that, in the case of human animals, emerges at the crossroads between philosophy and art (literature, but also theatre, music, cinema, among others). *Homo mimeticus* finds in a Nietzschean tradition attentive to the contagious powers of mimesis an immanent genealogical starting point that aims to keep up with a heterogenous, transdisciplinary concept that continues to project its material shadow over a post-literary epoch dominated by new challenges, human and beyond the human: from affective to epidemic contagion, populism to (new)fascism, post-truth to the posthuman global wars, to rapid climate change in the Anthropocene, among other emerging problematics that are rapidly changing not only our modes of life but the very experience of being human in the twenty-first century. The project's wager is that this shared communal experience both connects and divides us via relational forms of mimetic communication we group under the ancient rubric of *mimēsis.*

I am of course delighted to have you as an ally for the mimetic turn and to pursue an uninterrupted dialogue you started at the beginning of your career with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. Let us then begin with the relationship between philosophy and literature following the thread of mimesis through your work in common with Lacoue-Labarthe, in order to touch on questions at the heart of your philosophical work – such as the subject, community, myth – and arrive eventually at your current reflections on the crisis of the present.

Mimetic Origins: Literature — Philosophy

NL: To begin in proximity to a beginning which is not an absolute origin, we could say that mimesis is a plural or, to take one of your concepts, a 'singular-plural' concept (Nancy 2009). In fact, behind its mask – often simplistically defined in terms of 'imitation' or 'representation' – lies a plurality of protean, relational, and performative facets that constitute the heterogeneous face of that philosophically-problematic creature we call, *homo mimeticus.* Can you remind us why philosophy, from the very beginning, is both interested and suspicious of mimesis, attracted and repelled by it, so to speak? What are the underlying reasons for Plato's ambivalent attitude toward both the content and form of mimesis, and what are the philosophical, but also psychological and even pedagogical motivations that lead him to criticise and expel mimetic practices and practitioners from the ideal city?

JLN: Philosophy is interested in mimesis because it demands a good mimesis, an intelligent mimesis, a mimesis that knows what it does when it imitates. Thus, one could say that for philosophy, that is, for rational thinking, there is immediately a necessity to carry out an orthopaedics of mimesis. But why? Because for philosophy, for Plato, everything that precedes philosophy – myth, poetry, perhaps what we call art in general – constitutes a domain, or even several domains and aspects, of mimesis: a relationship to figures or models. One cannot forget that Greek education before Plato, even before the sophists, was an education based on the imitation of figures, semi-historical or legendary heroes and semi-gods. For example, the figure of Hercules at the crossroads, who must choose between vice and virtue. One can say that what is essential in the cultures that precede the Greeks is that they are cultures based on the imitation of figures, behaviours, and values. And Plato's claim is that, in this respect, one does not know what one is doing. One does not know why one figure must be better than another. One does not know because it has not been determined what 'being good' is.

The question of mimesis is immediately the question of knowledge, of true and just knowledge. Thus, a knowledge that is regulated by *logos*. The main example of this is Plato's famous cave. In the cave, the prisoners see only images – imitations of things – and these imitations are themselves

shadows, not consistent realities. The philosopher is the one who exits the cave to see things in their true light. This also means that, for philosophy, it is not only a matter of seeing things in their true light but also of seeing the light itself, of seeing the sun. And when one sees the light itself, one sees nothing. Thus, in a way, if one wishes to be regulated by the sun – to continue with the metaphor – one cannot imitate the sun. One cannot imitate the source of light that produces the images or the models.

NL: Thus, what is at stake in Plato's critique of mimesis in the *Republic* is a question of truth and of adequate representation of reality, a reality that is metaphysically ideal, far removed from immanent phenomena, and thus, for modern thinkers after Nietzsche, unattainable. Still, for Plato the stakes are not only metaphysical, as in the allegory of the Cave in book 7 and, more explicitly, in book 10, but, as he makes clear in the early books of *Republic*, also political and ethical: mimesis concerns the education [*paideia*] of the guardians, and, by extension, of a people and of a city or *polis*. With this second, perhaps minor, and lesser known but more immanent perspective in mind, you emphasise the fact that there is no mimesis without affective participation, what you also call '*methexis*' (Nancy 2016b). Can you explain the relation between *methexis* and mimesis?

JLN: Participation, *methexis*, is indeed intrinsic to the mimetic relationship, to the relation of imitation. If I want to imitate Hercules or Dionysus, I cannot just reproduce their external form; I must also embrace internally the movement and passion that are at play. It is precisely this participation which, for Plato, seemed to be susceptible of unleashing uncontrolled passions. For this reason, there is an instance in Plato, a character even, who is truly the character of participation: Eros. Eros is a strange god. He is, one could say, both unreasonable and reasonable, or that who must be brought to reason. Eros – the erotic impulse [*élan*], the impulse of desire – is thus the energy of participation. But participation with what? There is a very remarkable passage in the *Phaedrus*. In this dialogue, Plato says that beauty is the only suprasensible reality that can be manifested in the sensible. And that it is precisely by manifesting itself in the sensible that it provokes in us impulses of desire, which is at first a desire for beautiful bodies, and then leads from beautiful bodies to beautiful souls, etc. This is already in Diotima's speech at the end of the *Symposium*. But in the *Phaedrus*, there is a short, very remarkable little passage where

Plato (in the voice of Socrates) says that if *phronesis* manifested itself in the sensible, it would unleash even stronger erotic impulses. And what is *phronesis* in Plato? *Phronesis* is discernment. It is not *nous,* it is not the mind as the acquisition of knowledge, but rather discernment: living, active intelligence. And this is very interesting because the word *phronesis* belongs in the family of *phren,* which is in fact an organ, the kidney. In *phronesis* there is something extremely organic, living, vital. But for Plato, *phronesis* is at bottom the superior exercise of the mind, of thought, which often consists in distinguishing correctly between the true and the false. And he said that *phronesis* would unleash even stronger erotic impulses. Thus, there is in Plato something very complex: on the one hand, one must keep a distance from the impulse, from participation and imitation; at the same time, on the other hand, one must realise that there must be an impulse of the same kind but of a superior quality which is not limited by beautiful appearances. So even in Plato himself there is a sort of interior tension that he did not really resolve.

NL: You have already reached the palpitating heart of *homo mimeticus*. This tension between rational distance and an impulse tied to the sphere of affect, or *pathos*, which Nietzsche in a different context called 'pathos of distance', also produces a tensional movement of attraction towards those mimetic figures that Plato wanted to exclude from the city (poets, rhapsodes, sophists etc.). This contradictory movement between pathos and distance, mimetic and anti-mimetic tendencies generates a paradoxical back and forth between the pull of mimetic pathos and the push of critical distance which we consider the constitutive – I would not say form – but palpitating dynamic of *homo mimeticus*. In this sense, mimesis operates as a concept that partakes [*partage*] in the double sense in which it divides philosophy and literature, *logos* from *muthos*, distance from *pathos* while also setting them in a complex communicative relation. If we wish to go beyond ancient quarrels that simply oppose philosophy and literature, what can philosophy learn from those who practise mimesis, such as myth-tellers, poets, writers, actors and, from the immanent powers these figures mobilise: affective contagion, participation, inspiration, enthusiasm, possession, and the like?

JLN: Philosophers can learn from imitators that nothing can be done without imitation. Even the acquisition of logical, rational knowledge – as when one learns arithmetic in school – happens only if there is also movement. This movement, for example in the case of learning arithmetic,

is not only about imitating the teacher. When one learns to count, one does it with a certain rhythm [singing]: 'one plus one, two; two plus one, three; three plus one, four'. And what's in this rhythm? There is something in this readiness-to-speak [*prêt-à-dire*] that makes us wonder whether this isn't an affective, rhythmic, physical movement that traverses all of mathematics. Why are mathematicians often such extremely passionate people? Because in their subject – whether it's number, counting, or even geometry, the tracing of lines and their relationships – there is something, which our culture often misses, but which is really there: the fact that nothing in thought is devoid of a certain sensibility. For example, it is because of sensibility that Descartes can say, 'I make a long chain of reasonings. And I can examine each connection to see that it is right, that it holds up'. We picture this process as something cold, but it is not cold at all. Descartes is a very passionate type. While this is not often noticed, it is more evident in other aspects, precisely in his *Treatise on Passions,* and this passion, for Descartes, itself participates in the development of the mathematical or rational model.

The Linguistic-Mimetic Turn: Nancy avec Lacoue-Labarthe

NL: Let us now deepen our inquiry into the affective, experiential, and relational side of mimesis. In your case, as I was mentioning at the outset, this side is necessarily linked to your relationship of collaboration, of life in common [*vie en commun*], and of friendship with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, who made the heterogeneous concept of 'mimesis' the main thread of his entire work. I'm thinking of *L'imitation des modernes* (1986) but also his foundational essay, 'Typography', included in *Mimesis des articulations* (1975), among other texts some of which included in the English collection, *Typography* (1998 [1989]). Since the most significant theorists of mimesis from Plato and Aristotle onward demonstrate that one cannot easily disassociate the conceptual from the affective, *logos* from *pathos*, did this experience of con-division [*partage*], work, and life in common play a role in your intellectual relation with Philippe?

JLN: Oh! Yes, of course. From the moment I first met Lacoue-Labarthe there were many intellectual links between us. We both had read Derrida and Heidegger. This was the essential: it was before May '68, and I can tell

you that finding someone in Strasbourg who was interested in Heidegger and Derrida was somewhat exceptional. One could say that, back then, the distance between Paris and the provinces was much larger. So, we had these intellectual interests in common. But evidently these intellectual elements wouldn't function together without there being in each of us a certain type of passion, a kind of passionate engagement with philosophical labour. But each one's commitments were very different. Philippe's was literary from the beginning. He had already written literary texts. He showed me his first writings early on, which dealt with issues of mimesis as well. On my part, I wasn't entirely on the side of literature, even if I don't see philosophy as an entirely abstract exercise either. My figure of imitation, precisely, had been Hegel. But a Hegel that had been transmitted by someone who is not well-known, Georges Morel, who was a Jesuit, and who had a completely passionate reading of Hegel. I discovered in Hegel, let's say, a kind of impulse and permanent gushing [*bouillonnement*] in the movement of coming outside oneself to return to oneself (Nancy 2001 [1975]). And I think this is what really made me go into philosophy. So, there was always an affective element. But before that, I'd been strongly interested in the possibility of the interpretation of sense, as I discovered that one can interpret a text in many ways, even starting from the interpretation of biblical texts and the different interpretive registers, etc. For me, this was the first revelation. But I had not yet found a philosophical corpus where I could recognise a certain, let's say, 'instrument' to work on: it turned out to be Hegel. And for Philippe it was literature. And it remained this way throughout our collaboration.

For example, a little later Philippe discovered Schelling, and so we would do a kind of play-acting all the time: he was Schelling, and I was Hegel. Then, after Schelling, he was carried more towards Hölderlin. This is to say that, for Philippe, in literature there was something which was there, which was always present, precisely in the mode of literature as the possibility of a mimesis that does not present itself as mimesis in the first place. I did not have this sense of literature at all. I had read a great amount of literature, but I don't know why I liked it. I also participated in the stories I read – I read a lot of Balzac, Stendhal, etc. – but I would say that, for me, the enjoyment was more cinematographic: like the great panoramas of Balzac. Whereas for Philippe it was different. For him, literature was more lyrical, poetical. But

I would say that in both cases, it is a way of being sensitive to the question: 'How to say existence? How to say the truth of existence?'

NL: Mimesis is, thus, a shared concept that was more on the side of Philippe's literary, but also aesthetic, preoccupations with deep philosophical implications as well. Building on Nietzsche, Diderot, Heidegger and other modern thinkers, often read in the company of Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe developed a paradoxical notion of a mimesis without a model – drawing on the theatrical origins of mimesis (from *mimos*, mime) he spoke, toward the end, of a *mime de rien* – to think the impropriety of the modern subject. At the same time, and to step back a little, given that you co-wrote your first texts – for example on Lacan, *The Title of the Letter* (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1992 [1973]) later on Romanticism, *The Literary Absolute* (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1988 [1978]), as well as several essays on politics – did mimesis push you to open philosophy to its outside and start a dialogue with other disciplines, especially the human sciences?

JLN: Yes, in part. But I would say that this is part of a whole movement from that time. Since 'other disciplines' means mostly, I think, linguistics, semiotics, and everything on that register. This was the period of what was called the 'linguistic turn'. And later, but much later, I asked myself: 'but why did this linguistic turn happen?' Since, in fact, neither Philippe nor I were prepared for that. And it is undoubtedly through Derrida that we discovered it. And afterwards effectively there was Lacan, but Lacan was a bit more on the periphery. But why did we get caught in this whole linguistic turn? I think it is because, at a certain moment, there was a kind of distancing from signification. In general, from all significations. I think that, up to this moment, we were mostly in a culture that employed signs with a certain security. One spoke about 'man' [*l'homme*], for example. But it is enough to take up the word 'man'. At some point, to speak of 'man' became the opening of an enormous number of questions. What is 'man'? Then, in fact, we discovered that already a long time ago, Kant had said that the question 'what is man?' has no answer. No one ever told me this in my philosophical pre-history. Yet, 'humanism' was taken as a word whose meaning goes without saying. So, for example, when I was very young, in philosophy class, we read Sartre's *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* [1946]. In the end, no one really knew what this meant. It had consequential significations. And, at some point – actually

in many ways, at the same time – linguistics showed that perhaps it was necessary to take up each word and interrogate it on the way it produced its meaning, if it was legitimate or not. For example, I remember the whole question of the 'shifter' [*l'embrayeur*]. For me this was a kind of revelation. The subject – the 'I' – is the shifter of the proposition; this is to say that 'I' does not mean anything. And from that, there followed a number of reflections, of questions about the subject, about the presence to oneself, which completely traverse Derrida as well as Lacan and many others.

NL: Shifting to this question of the 'subject', or 'I', let us pursue this common relationship between you and Lacoue-Labarthe, but also other thinkers of mimesis such as René Girard and Jacques Derrida. Lacoue-Labarthe says in an interview that he was initially interested in mimesis through the mediation of René Girard's first book, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (1965 [1961]). Girard's mimetic theory pays attention to the mimetic desire that is involved in relationships with models, above all in triangular relations. Often in Girard these triangles involve love relationships, which in a different configuration are constitutive of your life in common as well, but perhaps we can return to this side of the story elsewhere.[2] How did you avoid mimetic rivalry with Philippe but also with Derrida? Or better, how did you put this rivalry to work for thinking? How did you make it productive rather than destructive?

JLN: This is the question that Maurice Blanchot once asked us – in fact, he wrote it. It's in a little note, I remember, where he wrote: 'But how do you work together without destroying each other?' And yes, that impressed us very much since we had never met Blanchot. By then, he had already stopped seeing everyone. At most he spoke a little to Roger Laporte, and Laporte told Blanchot things. . . . In fact, indeed, there are many who, seeing the books and articles from afar, say to themselves, 'but how do they do it?'

   I've never had a complete answer for this. Yes, evidently there was rivalry, necessarily! One cannot do this as a couple. . . . If one works – let's say on a field that is more or less common – one has to be not only as good as the other but better than the other. There were moments like that, even a sort of tension, especially in Philippe, because he was very mistrustful. He would assume that I wanted to do more than him, to do better. But I

just think that what we produced is a very complex affective rebalancing that involved – precisely – the women and children. This was a kind of construction, a manipulation of affective and personal arrangements and so on, which completely formed part – I am persuaded of this – of our intellectual and philosophical arrangement.

But there was one aspect which was, let's say, properly intellectual: each of us had ways of functioning and abilities that were very different from each other. Philippe was much more intuitive; he grasped things. But for the same reason, he tended to doubt more, and so he was prone to keeping things from moving forward. I was more energetic and like, 'OK, we need to make it move forward'. For example, we discussed *The Literary Absolute* for I don't know how long. We started talking about it one summer, and we had to start really working on it the next summer. We read many things; we translated the texts, but that still did not add up to a book. And from this point of view, I had the impression that Philippe did not advance at all. And I remember very well that, one night that summer, I realised where we were at and I said to myself: 'This is not possible, we have to do something.' So, I made a plan. And the next morning, I showed it to Philippe, and I told him 'Here's the plan, now we have to –'. He said: 'Ah OK. Good, then let's follow the plan'. And then we just divided the work because we did not write all of it together.

Our collaborative writing depended on the occasion. For example, the work on Lacan was remarkable because we had decided to do a seminar with young people, as well as colleagues from all disciplines. We all had to give presentations on the main figures of what back then was called structuralism. We distributed the presentations: there was Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Kristeva; and then there was Lacan. And nobody wanted to do Lacan. The other colleagues, who were mostly literature scholars and linguists, said 'No, this is for you, the philosophers, because we...'. Yet we did not know Lacan! So, together we sat down with the text. I don't remember how we chose this text, 'L'Instance de la lettre' [1957], because choosing it presupposes the preliminary task of at least looking at all the various texts. We could say this was a kind of zero-degree of work that was absolutely shared. We would read the first sentence of the text and say: 'What does this mean?' And we really did not know! We went on like that, and we slowly discovered how Lacan functions, his way of introducing thoughts, which were also very unusual for us. So here, in a certain way, I would say, in relation to Lacan, there was no difference between the two of

us. This is not by chance, since what was at stake was neither literary nor completely philosophical, but between the two extremes. And we really enjoyed finding all these references in Lacan, how he referred to Descartes, to Hegel, to Plato, etc.

Sharing Voices: From the Subject to the Political

NL: Following Nietzsche, I call this agonistic, competitive, yet intellectually productive and creative form of intellectual mimesis, 'mimetic agonism', to distinguish it from the simply violent and destructive consequences of 'mimetic rivalry'. In our language, mimetic agonism does not generate only affective pathologies like ressentiment, jealousy, and rivalry, but also, and above all, 'mimetic patho-*logies*', understood as emerging critical diagnostics and clinical discourses (*logoi*) on the affective power (*pathos*) of mimesis. I found it strongly at play in Nietzsche's intellectual relations with his models, both dead (Plato, Schopenhauer) and living (Wagner), but each mimetic agon must be studied within a specific contextual configuration (see Lawtoo 2013: 1–83). You have just provided a brilliant illustration of its productive *modus operandi*.

Mimesis, then, we fundamentally agree, discloses a conception of subjectivity that is not understood as an autonomous, present, and purely rational substance; rather, the subject, for both you and Lacoue-Labarthe, was improper, unstable, and open to affective relations, influences, and expositions characteristic of a singular-plural being. When you speak about relation, about being-with, you are in an explicit discussion with Heidegger and his conception of *Mitsein*, as well as with George Bataille's communication, to which we will return. But did this relationship of thought, work, and life in common with Philippe also cross over to your conception of the subject as being always already in a relation with the other, without being fused with the other but in a certain relation that you later call, in *Being Singular Plural* (Nancy 2009 [1996]) a connection of sharing and division [*partage*]? In other words, has this mimetic experience that you share with Philippe – redoubled by the impropriety of mimesis, which is always relational – animated your philosophical reflection on the question of a singular-plural subject?

JLN: Oh yes, certainly. In any case, I did not think much about it before. Yet, indeed, if there is anything which very soon became a sort of common

motif – I would say a central motif for both of us, even if each one added different perspectives to it – it is precisely the subject. I cannot even remember where it came from, how it came about. Certainly, there were two figures. There were two different problematics of the subject. I think that, on Philippe's side, it is more about the split of the subject with itself. It is a split that could refer to Lacan but which, in Philippe, was also from the start a literary split, one could even say, a tragic split. Philippe had a very tragic vision of life and of himself. This is also why tragedy interested him so much. On my side, in contrast, this problematic of the subject is what I found also in Hegel, but it came before that. It is more of a model for which I don't have a name. It is not so much tragic, but more about the subject as being outside itself – always outside itself. And thus, evidently, in relation with the other. Philippe was not interested in this. Philippe was even mistrustful of 'the Other', very mistrustful of Levinas, who he found very pious, very religious.

This sends us back to our entire history and our personalities. Philippe's education was somewhat Calvinist. It is a bit curious because his is not a Calvinist family at all. His mother was of Calvinist origin, whereas his father was a Catholic. But through his mother's Calvinism, a certain tragic vision introduced itself in him. And I, on the contrary, had more of an open, Catholic culture – I would even say baroque, flamboyant. Philippe always reproached me a lot for this, but at the same time he really liked it. He really liked the aesthetics of it all. This made it possible for us to find ourselves in absolute agreement to make all the possible efforts to destabilise the subject.

We inherited the subject as a kind of evidence. One never spoke of the subject but simply said: there is a subject, there is a certain presence to oneself. This is why Derrida played a decisive role for both of us, in *Voice and Phenomenon* (Derrida 2011 [1967]), which is at the heart of his analysis of the Husserlian subject, of the interior, silent voice through which the subject speaks to itself, by which it communicates its presence to itself and the truth of this presence. There is a passage which I always, always have in mind. And I think it was the same for Philippe. Husserl says that the subject hears itself in an instant, an *Augenblick*. And Derrida exclaims: 'But this *Augenblick* has a duration!' This duration is what Derrida will call '*différance*' with an 'a'. And this I think is a kind of minimal core that, if you like, we received from Derrida and with which we are absolutely in agreement. In Philippe, for example, this was developed, in *L'écho du*

sujet (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989 [1979]), to take one of his titles. Philippe was immediately attentive precisely to this echo, to this return [*renvoi*] to oneself to the interior of the subject that occupies the duration and the distance of the *Augenblick*; whereas on my part, I tended more towards the fact that the subject is always in a relation between or with a plurality of subjects.

Community, Contagion, Pandemics

NL: A relation of the self to the other, but also a relation to being in common. We are approaching the central part of this interview which directly touches on your conception of community, a community that (inspired by Blanchot) you call 'inoperative' [*desoeuvrée*] (Nancy 1991 [1986]). The inoperative community is in opposition to the fascist community but also the communist community; it is based on a sharing and distancing [*partage*] that we have identified at the heart of your theory of the subject but has broader political implications. The *partage* of con-division is perhaps also related to what we are currently living today in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

But given that we are following the long thread of mimesis to retrace a lesser known genealogy of the 'com-pearing' [common appearing] of some of your major concepts, one last question in common with Philippe. You co-wrote an essay entitled, 'The Nazi Myth' (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1991) where you and Lacoue-Labarthe inquire about the power of myth to generate collective fascist emotions that spread contagiously within the crowd. By drawing on Plato, Nietzsche, Freud, and others, you define myth as 'a mimetic instrument, an instrument of identification.' You even write: 'It is, in fact, *the* mimetic instrument par excellence' (1991: 298). Do you think this mimetic instrument, as employed in the Nazi myth during the 1930s, risks being revitalised, recharged – I say 'reloaded' (Lawtoo 2017) to evoke the new digital media – by extreme right movements in Europe, the US, and other parts of the world today? I group these heterogeneous movements under the rubric of '(new) fascism' (Lawtoo 2019), again for lack of a more original term but also to signal at least two points: first, that the general rubric of 'populism' is perhaps inadequate to account for authoritarian leaders that promote racism, hypernationalism, militarism, organic communities, spectacular lies, insurrections on democratic institutions, etc.; second, to indicate

genealogical continuities and discontinuities with historical fascism via the perspective of mimetic concepts such as contagion, community, and myth which draw on the genealogy we're tracing. In fact, new media continue to play a massive role in mimetic, or perhaps hypermimetic, processes of mass identification.

JLN: We could say this: fascism, at bottom, is always the reverse of democracy. Democracy is the government of the people, but it is always much more than a political regime because, with respect to its central term – 'the people' [*le peuple*] – democracy does not know what it is, where it is, how it is. If you are in a monarchy, you know where you are. If you are in an aristocracy, you also know. But in a democracy, where is the people? Democracy is necessarily a postulation in the Kantian sense: the postulation of the people. Recall the French Revolution: 'The French people declare...'. Evidently, this people does not exist; the people postulates itself. And I would say, to be a democrat you must maintain that the people is not there, that one has no people [*on ne l'a pas*]. When everything is going badly, when this weakness.... Because it is a kind of constitutive weakness of democracy, a weakness in the sense that, if there is no leader, where is it? how does it work? All the questions about representation pose themselves.

Fascism, I think, is truly what happens at the moment when there is a kind of weakness in democracy, which is also certainly connected to the entire history of technology, of the development of societies since the nineteenth century. Here, through a sort of return, they claim: 'here is the truth of the people'. Thus, at this moment, the people [*le peuple*] is given a figure. Now, this figure can be a race, it can be a headman, a leader with an entire programme. But, at that time [the early twentieth century], it required a large amount of representations, but not in the sense of political representation, not as delegation, but on the contrary, in the sense of the image that truly makes the thing present. For example, the main fascist symbol is the fasces that the Roman lictors used to carry. This is an entire program, if one reflects on it. The Roman lictors were a guard of honour who accompanied the grand magistrates; this was a symbolic guard, but they were also efficacious! The lictors carried an axe inside the rods that make up the fasces, and at any given time they could follow the magistrate's orders and use their axe to cut anyone's head. So, it is extremely striking to

realise that the lictor's fasces is present in so many places where one does not notice it. There is one in the coat of arms of the French Republic! Emmanuel Macron made an amusing attempt to cover the fasces in the emblem with something else. . . . Not long ago a Swedish friend of mine told me that she discovered that the emblems of the Swedish police have fasces! So, the lictor's fasces is at the same time the power of the grand magistrates which is here, present, but somehow mediated in its effectivity.

So, there you have it. Do I think we can even talk about neo-fascism? Yes. Perhaps. What is 'new' about fascism today is that we are not any more in an epoch of images and symbols. The lictor's fasces belongs in a society where classical culture was more present. Today, there is no classical culture any more, so I think no one cares about the lictor's fasces. But even still, something has been happening for a while in France, where extreme-right movements – and this has been passing over to at least a part of the *gilets jaunes* – sing 'La Marseillaise'. When I was young, the song for demonstrations, the chant of protest, was 'The International'. And 'La Marseillaise', – the national anthem, precisely – had already been somewhat relativised and placed at a distance. Gainsburg made a beautiful Reggae version of 'La Marseillaise'. I don't know if you have heard it. [JLN sings] '*Aux armes et cetera*' [Laughter]. And when Gainsbourg did it, it was not unanimously accepted; many people in France were not happy about it, but even still, it happened. It's as if, at this moment, democracy had been able to play a little with itself and its symbols. But soon, very soon, people started lamenting the fact that the French Republic seemed to have lost its symbols. But to say that it has 'lost its symbols' might mean something completely accidental and exterior. Or it might be, on the contrary, something that nevertheless manifests a true presence.

NL: The fascist movements of the past and the new fascist phantoms of the present develop often in a way that is almost 'contagious', with an affective and infective (will to) power, or mimetic *pathos*, that spreads from the self to the other very quickly via a form of what I call 'mimetic communication' (Lawtoo 2013, 209–82). Georges Bataille already discussed this in an essay entitled 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism' (Bataille 1979) and his diagnostic of the communal movements of 'attraction and repulsion' generated by leaders who are 'totally other' [*tout autres*] seems to me still perfectly relevant today (Lawtoo 2019: 53–127). Even if you are most

known for your engagement with Heidegger, you have been extremely attentive to Bataille in your rethinking of community, above all in questions regarding the formation of fascist communities and affective contagion and fusion that pertains to it.

JLN: Yes, and Bataille was truly the only one – in any case the first – to see this well. He saw that there is an enormous affective power in fascism because, we could say, democracy is cold. Democracy says: 'So, you pick your deputies, you build your constitutional system, and. . . '. From this we can say that democracy and fascism are the two faces that Rome – perhaps for the only time in history – managed to integrate effectively for some time, since this figure fell apart and gave way to the Empire. But the great Roman Republic, of which the Romans were so proud, is the republic, which is at the same time present, because Rome is the she-wolf with her two cubs, the emblems, the armies, the magistrates and lictors, and at the same time, it is the people. It is Rome's phrase: *senatus pupulusque romanus* (The Roman Senate and People). Now, this worked precisely because Rome was a certain form of grand civil religion whose object – its god, if you want – was Rome itself. But this didn't hold for long. On the contrary, Rome went into a sort of monstrous, religious and philosophical mess that – almost at the same time, we could say – resulted in Empire and Christianity. And in fact, the one ended absorbing the other. Except that what the Empire developed at first was not at all fascism, but all of a sudden it had the need to give a body, an individuality, a presence to supreme authority. The Republic was the only one that did not have a need for this.

NL: Let us return to your communal concepts. You are well known for having developed a conception of the 'inoperative community' (Nancy 1991 [1986]) that, in many ways, is opposed to an organic, fusional, contagious form of community as envisioned by fascism but also by communism. Could you remind us of your definition of the community that, thanks to your long, perhaps interminable, conversation with Blanchot – mediated by Bataille – became a central philosophical concept since the 1980s and 1990s, extending for more than thirty years now up to *The Disavowed Community* (Nancy 2016a [2014])? To this day, community continues to be much discussed on the contemporary philosophical scene.

JLN: It is true that the starting point is, as you say, the organic conception of community. Now, this organic conception was extremely present in

Rousseau. What Rousseau wanted, what he was after, was a truly social body. I remember that in the 1970s – precisely with Philippe – we often spoke of the motif of a social body and of the problem of conceiving society as a body. Because if it is a body, everything is integrated in a unity whose end is itself a body. And a body is made to live as a body. But, in a society, individuals cannot be members as they are in a body, because then the arm is reduced to its function as arm and, if I am the little finger, I cannot do as many things as, for example, the eye can. Thus, the question of the body, of organicity, is perhaps the biggest question posed by democracy. Because up to this point, the social body was *one* body: it was either the body of a King – which itself has *two* bodies, as Kantorowicz (1957) well showed – or is the body of a god. And, perhaps, Rome's success is that, for a while, Rome was itself like a body. But this did not last. So, what totalitarianisms have taught us is that trying to incorporate society is a total catastrophe, because then one reduces everyone to the status of members, of functions, of organs. The organs make the organism function. Kant already made very well the distinction between organism and organisation with respect to the French Revolution. He said, 'The French Revolution is a large people that seeks to organise itself'. But he knew that, precisely, 'to organise itself' is different than 'being an organism'.

But our situation now is further aggravated in this respect, because what can be considered a body – that is to say, national unity, but not very nationalist, a good nation having its identity, a representation of itself, the French Republic and this woman, Marianne, with her Phrygian cap, and a certain circulation of sentiments, of affects, of values that holds this fabric together – all of this only exists today as remainders at the interior of a global ensemble in which something like France, Belgium, or Italy are not very important. They are only pieces at the interior of extremely complex, powerful, and enormous connections of technology and economy. So, one can understand very well that people feel lost in relation to it. They are not only lost because of economic phenomena, like a loss of purchase power – this is what ignited the insurrection in France for the Gilets Jaunes in 2018 – but, more profoundly, they have the feeling that they are lost.

I know someone, a friend, an old friend, very refined, not a philosopher, a writer – but with a very refined culture – who ended up becoming almost extreme right-wing. He started saying, 'I can't stand what they're doing to France. Look, France is lost'. And yes, in a sense, one can say, high schools

don't teach history, literature, or French culture any more. And I was forced to respond: 'Yes, but France is not very important to me'. I know very well that I am completely French, that I owe much to France, but evidently this is not what I live off. I mean that for me as, perhaps, for many intellectuals and artists, there is a kind of intellectual fabric and we are used to circulate among thinking, works, that can be now Japanese, now Amerindian, etc. But this is a privilege that, in fact, the majority of people in our country does not share. Even if there is an intermediary phenomenon like tourism – many more people now want to visit countries that they would never have visited before. But this is not enough.

So, effectively, there is something which, unfortunately, mostly takes the shape of what Nietzsche (and Scheler afterwards) called ressentiment. It is surely not by chance that it is the epoch between Nietzsche and Scheler that ressentiment became the object of such analyses. Ressentiment, I would say, is when one cannot stand a situation any more, which is not a personal situation but a situation that, at bottom, sustains relationships. Today, one needs an energy and a disposition, again stupidly international, to avoid being profoundly wounded by the fact that all at once there is poverty, there is terrible ugliness, there are phenomena that make cities unbearable, there are health issues, issues of trust despite all progress – despite progresses in health, in speed, in communication. There is the feeling of lack, a lack of bonds, of connections. And this feeling causes ressentiment because, again, it is one or the other: either one projects oneself completely to the outside; and then, forcibly, one is a philosopher or an artist. Yet in doing so, one gets detached from the society where one is inserted. Or else, one gets more and more wounded, badly. . . . I don't know how to get out of this. Moreover, it must be added that we are now in a civilization that feels itself lost because it knows everything that it has caused: Where are we going? What is this promised human happiness?

NL: This incertitude with respect to the future has increased dramatically in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis since the beginning of 2020. Doesn't mimesis the way we defined it, an affective force of con-division, remain central for this form of viral contagion? I mean this not only because the virus reproduces itself in mimetic ways through the reproduction of RNA, but also because viral contagion generates an affective contagion (fear, anxiety, ressentiment for that matter) which bears directly on our life in common and its impossibility. A life in common that is more

con-divided [*partagé*] in its double sense, in that we all live the global crisis and the pathos it generates, itself amplified by old and new media, but that we experience in very different ways according to nations and regions, but also socio-political barriers such as class, race, gender, professional status, etc., that divide us. What are your current reflections in the midst of this virally contagious pandemic with respect to the mimetic concepts such as subject, community, sharing, that we have been discussing?[3]

JLN: It seems to me that the COVID-19 pandemic serves as a magnifying glass for our planetary contagions. We have the same fears, the same expectations – the end of capitalism and the beginning of ecological cleansing or, on the contrary, threats to freedom – and everything is extremely expected, repetitive, and codified. At the same time, it is a contagion that is developing less perhaps because of the severity of the sanitary risks than because of the important differences between countries, governments, and opinions. All of a sudden, the world seems deprived of direction or support. All of a sudden, states become important again. All of this moves slowly towards a tomorrow which will be complicated and conflictive in various ways, since it will be mixed with ecological problems that are still awaiting our attention – and all of this will take place in what, as it seems, will be a very problematic economy.

But the interesting question is whether something can produce a different contagion: something new that I will call spiritual, as this is where things must go. I would like to say through the spirit of a world [*l'esprit d'un monde*] [see Nancy 2020]. It was through the plagues and the wars of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that Europe invented humanism and capitalism, classical art, the thoughts of reason, and experience as well as literature. Machiavelli described the plague in Florence at the same time as he developed a concept of the modern state. However, he and the others of his time did not have behind them a history that had run out of breath [*essoufflée*]. . . .

NL: Let us hope transformations to come will give future generations to catch their breath. For that a life-affirming metamorphosis is urgently in order. To conclude and think ahead to the uncertain future of *homo mimeticus*, we began with Plato's ambivalent attitude toward mimesis by distinguishing between two forms of it: the irrational, affective mimesis, and that which concerns the imitation of good models. The notion of an organic, erotic, and even orgiastic community, we have seen, is indeed very capable of

triggering mimetic pathos (violence, ressentiment, fear etc.) in the masses, at a rhetorical level, and this pathos is disseminated by contagion, a double affective/viral contagion that is entangled in the political, economic, and social pathologies we are encountering now. Is the sharing that you propose at the palpitating heart of the inoperative community perhaps capable of being, or mobilising, a form of good mimesis, a therapeutic patho-*logy* that could serve as an antidote, or *pharmakon*, to the mimetic pathologies that plague us?

JLN: For that to be possible, it is necessary that the sharing be the sharing of something that is not a thing – it is not the sharing of a cake. There is no cake, or even a plate. Either we go back to religion and thus, manifestly, the thing to share – the cake – is given as a divine message, or we come to understand, I would say, the finitude of sense in general. I am always asking whether future humanity could not be a humanity that finally understands and assimilates the fact that sense is a circulation that takes place but which, in the end, is never accomplished. If we can make a culture with that, and thus something that can be shared, it must somehow have the form of a cake, but which? What kitchen could make it?

For example, literature, great literature as we used to know it, does not exist any more. Why doesn't it exist any more? Because it seems that what connect us with one another are the horrors that the twentieth century was capable of committing – evidently, we have an enormous amount of literature about so many peoples, the Jewish, the Armenians, so many others. Or else, which I find striking, is what happens in someone who I think is a great contemporary author, Roberto Bolaño. I don't know if you have read *2666* (Bolaño 2008). It's a formidable book. It's a book that makes you feel that there is someone who is here, who thinks and, precisely, who manages to practice a truly literary mimesis of the world we live in, despite the fact that for the most part the book is about horrible things. There is a very long chapter, a central one, which is all about these deaths of women in Mexico – a real story, deaths that have not been solved yet. The first chapter is at the same time very amusing and very cruel, about university students who get together and run seminars about an unknown author who they can't find. So, it is a little about all the ridicule and sterility of the academic world. North American writers are not bad at this genre, either. In reading it, you notice it is set against the background of a great disenchantment. You know, when you read Balzac, there is an enormous amount of scepticism, surely,

but at the same time there is also a sort of enjoyment. It agitates, it agitates all of society. Today, the one who enjoys agitating society to the limit, with mordacity, is Michel Houellebecq. But Houellebecq is so dominated by this mordacity, wickedness, cruelty. . . .

NL: And perhaps to finish on the affirmative side, given that the times demand it from us, can mimesis play a role in making things perhaps a little better in a post-literary epoch dominated by the new media that take part of the mimetic turn?

JLN: Yes, but on the condition that there are no figures. These are not figures. Indeed, this would take us back to Philippe, who came to have total hatred for the figure. Philippe posed well the problem of a mimesis without a model. It might be that democracy is also this, a mimesis without a model. And for that reason, we need something at a given moment. Now, can we invent a model that is not a figure in the full, identificatory sense? For example, Lars Von Trier's *Melancholia*. This is a film which I find admirable because it's as if it gave shape to a kind of despair – but in fact, by the end of the film, it is not made clear what it is. It might be that the kid and his aunt will come to find something that is completely other. But at the same time, *Melancholia* is not a popular film.

NL: As you have shown, mimesis is a singular-plural concept that allows us to cover a multitude of themes at the heart of your work but also of our times – perhaps more than ever. The dominant tendency in the past century was to compartmentalise this protean concept in rivalrous disciplinary perspectives that still often opposed literature and philosophy but tended to agree in framing mimesis in a metaphysical figure frozen in a mirror, representation, or copy of the world. In the context of this special issue of *CounterText* our aim has been different. We wanted to overturn perspectives and analyse the immanent movement of an embodied, relational, affective, or minor mimesis whose double movements sharing and dividing, constitute the palpitation heart of *homo mimeticus*.

Many thanks for helping us affirm a mimetic turn – via the circulation of meaning that you have con-divided [*partagé*] – which is at the same time a *re*-turn of mimesis in the post-literary epoch for future generations.

JLN: Ah yes, you are right. That is true. My pleasure.

Translated by Daniel Villegas Vélez

Notes

1. For a list of transdisciplinary outputs promoting a mimetic turn, see http://www.homomimeticus.eu/publications/

2. Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe's communal life in Strasbourg in the late 1960s and 70s was not only based on their work in common; it also entailed a 'chiastic' love relation with their respective partners that led to a 'community of children and of life' [*communauté d'enfants et de vie*] (Girard and Nancy 2015: 15). Still little known in the anglophone world, this communal experience cannot be detached from Nancy's philosophical thought on community and still needs to be narrated in detail or given voice – for it belongs to the register of 'myth'. I shall return to this mythic community elsewhere with a different medium. A Prologue is available here, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wZhbbWS3tdA&t=256s

3. This question and answer were supplemented via email in May 2020, two months after the Covid-19 lockdown closed national boundaries in ways that imposed physical distance but did not prevent virtual communications that allowed for shared pathos.

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