

**Nidesh Lawtoo**

**Shared Voices: Nancy-Lacoue's Mimetic Methexis**

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**Summary**

What's in a voice? And if the echoes a voice generates are neither singular nor plural but singular plural, what shared voices are at play in Jean-Luc Nancy's untimely reflections on the affective participation, or methexis, animating the agonistic confrontation between philosophy and literature? As Nancy made clear in one of his last interviews: "methexis...is intrinsic to the mimetic rapport" (Nancy and Lawtoo, 2021). In order to continue the dialogue from the affective perspective of a philosophical-literary life in common, this chapter considers the relation of methexis that ties Nancy's reflections on "shared voices" [partage des voix] (Nancy 1982) to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's account of a "mimesis without model" (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989) that generates echoes of the subject. Plato's rhapsodic dialogue, *Ion*, sets the stage to hear Nancy-Lacoue's shared voices affirming a mimetic methexis that was once constitutive of the art of interpretation and is now informing the re-turn to a literary-philosophical conception of homo mimeticus.

**Keywords**

deconstruction, democracy, ethics, community, post-structuralism

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**Thinking *With* —  
Jean-Luc Nancy**

DIAPHANES

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Shared Voices: Lacoue-Nancy's Mimetic *Methexis*<sup>1</sup>

Le partage répond à ceci: ce que la communauté me révèle, en me présentant ma naissance et ma mort, c'est mon existence hors de moi.

Jean-Luc Nancy, *La Communauté désœuvrée*

Il faut *distribuer les rôles—ou partager les voix*, si j'ose dire.

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Scène*

What's in a voice? And if the echoes a voice generates are neither singular nor plural, but singular plural, what shared voices animate Jean-Luc Nancy's untimely reflections on subjectivity, community, and being in common? The answers to such questions are necessarily multiple and do not conform to univocal interpretations restricted to the logic of identity that constitute the metaphysics of the Same. On the contrary, they are animated by a voice that gave a singular tone, timbre, and relational touch to ontologies of difference that dominated the French philosophical scene from the 1970s to the 1990s, and whose echoes reach well into the present—remaining to be mediated in the future as well.

These echoes are particularly strong when it comes to the question of community, and for a reason that is at least double. First, because Nancy urged future generations of philosophers and artists to think and rethink the shared experience of being in common in a neoliberal, globalized, and mass-mediatized age prey to the Scylla of atomistic isolation, and the Charybdis of new fascist fusions. He did so in a number of influential texts over three decades that started with an article for a special issue of the journal *Aléa* titled, "La Communauté, le nombre" (1983). Nancy's article, already titled "La Communauté désœuvrée," took Georges Bataille's theory of communication as a starting point to rethink a community that is neither based on a fusional organism nor on an atomistic subject but, rather, on a space of "sharing [*partage*]" that reveals

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“my existence outside myself [*hors de moi*],”<sup>2</sup> as Nancy puts it. The article quickly turned into a book, sparking an interminable debate, or *entretien*, with Maurice Blanchot that Nancy pursued in a number of essays that spanned over thirty years: from *The Inoperative Community* (1983) to the still untranslated *La Communauté affrontée* (2001) to the *Disavowed Community* (2016),<sup>3</sup> among other texts that posited the “communal character of our existence”<sup>4</sup> at the heart of contemporary philosophical debates. Second, because Nancy was sensitive to the fact that “‘loss’ is constitutive of ‘community’ itself.”<sup>5</sup> Hence, like Bataille before him, Nancy often stressed death as the inner experience that reveals a communal existence also exposing us to our shared finitude. Or, as he put it: “Death is indissociable from community, for it is through death that the community reveals itself—and reciprocally.”<sup>6</sup>

Animated by a feeling of loss shared by a community of thinkers that each entertained a unique rapport with Jean-Luc, I welcome this volume’s timely invitation not only to reflect *on* Nancy but *with* him, for it is in the experience of relationality, or rapport, that his thought on community emerged in the first place.<sup>7</sup> In an affirmative Nietzschean spirit we also shared, I do so by recalling that Nancy was as much sensitive to the affirmative counterpart of death as to a constitutive experience that belongs to the shared foundations of community. Hence, he equally stressed that “only community can present me my birth,”<sup>8</sup> by which he meant the birth of a singular plural being who is not confined to an atomistic, autonomous subject, or *ipse*, who would preexist others perceived

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2 Jean-Luc Nancy, “La Communauté désœuvrée,” *Aléa*. no. 4 (1983), p. 34 (my translation).

3 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor, trans. Peter Connor et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), hereafter *IC* in the body of the text; *La Communauté affrontée* (Paris: Galilée, 2001); *La Communauté désavouée* (Paris: Galilée, 2014).

4 Nancy, *La Communauté désavouée*, p. 11 (my translation).

5 Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 12.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 14. I traced the continuities between Nancy’s and Bataille’s concept of community in Nidesh Lawtoo, (*New*) *Fascism: Contagion, Community, Myth* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2019), pp. 53–128.

7 The “original” starting point of Nancy’s reflections on the “inoperative community” bore the traces of the experience of a life in common as it was dedicated to the members of this community: “Anne, Claire, Emmanuel, Francine, ... Mathieu, Philippe,” including the names of the cats as well. Nancy, “La Communauté désœuvrée,” p. 11.

8 Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 15.

outside from a distance. On the contrary, it entails a birth of a relational subject that is already other from the inside, for it co-appears, or “compears [*com-parait*],”<sup>9</sup> with the other via a mysterious form of affective communication that transgresses the boundaries of individuation generating forms of *ek-stasis*. This non-linguistic, perhaps sovereign, and certainly contagious communication is at the palpitating heart of an experience of sharing, or *partage*, that both divides and unites self and other, alter and ego, along paradoxical lines that Nancy sums up via a syntactically compressed affirmation as follows: “you shares me [*toi partage moi*].”<sup>10</sup>

It is this *partage* that both connects and disconnects self and other, *toi* and *moi*, but also *pathos* and *logos*, philosophy and literature, that I would like to interrogate in what follows. I shall do so via a concept that may not have been “proper” to Nancy but that plays an important and rarely noted role in the emergence of not only his philosophical but also his literary thought on community, and on the sharing it entails nonetheless.

### The Partage of Mimesis

Le *logos* est un partage, notre partage...

Ce partage est aussi celui de la philosophie et de la poésie.

Nancy, *Le Partage des voix*

How, then, does this *partage* operate? And wherein lies its affective power of contagious communication? Furthering a recent *re-turn* of attention to mimesis, or “mimetic turn,”<sup>11</sup> I suggest that despite the singularity of Nancy’s plural thought, or perhaps because of it, the inner experience of a mimesis without a model is always already shared. For Nancy and others of his generation, mimesis cannot be reduced to a mirroring representation or copy of ideal Forms restricted to the metaphysical logic of the Same. On the contrary, since at least the 1970s, a different thought on mimesis has emerged

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9 Ibid., p. 28.

10 Ibid., p. 29.

11 Jean-Luc Nancy and Nidesh Lawtoo, “The *CounterText* Interview: Jean-Luc Nancy. Mimesis: A Singular-Plural Concept,” *CounterText* 8, no. 1 (2022), p. 23, pp. 23–45. In addition to Nancy, contributors to the mimetic turn included areas as diverse as literary theory (J. Hillis Miller), feminist philosophy (Adriana Cavarero), political theory (William Connolly), new materialism (Jane Bennett), post-human studies (Katherine Hayles), among others, see [www.homomimeticus.eu](http://www.homomimeticus.eu).

that troubles metaphysical binaries (copy/original, appearance/reality, self/other, etc.), thereby providing alternative, more destabilizing, immanent, and affirmative foundations to rethink the problematic of mimesis from the angle of difference.<sup>12</sup> It is this mimetic tradition at the margins of philosophy that needs to be rethought today via a genealogical perspective that looks back to the shared origins of philosophy and literature in order to look ahead to future developments in the transdisciplinary field of “mimetic studies.”<sup>13</sup>

The genealogy of this ancient concept is, of course, far from new. At least since Plato, in fact, mimesis has been endowed with an affective power of participation, or *methexis*, that troubles the ontological distinctions Plato appears to set up. Mimesis in fact passes like a magnetic current across the traditionally opposed yet mirroring discourses that still tend to be grouped under the agonistic rubrics of literature and philosophy, or, to use more classical terms, *muthos* and *logos*, including dialogues on the mimetic power of *muthos*. Perhaps, then, this affective mimesis, constitutive of a subject without proper identity that I call *homo mimeticus*, even animates the communal experience of a sharing, or *partage*, from the inside-out. In its genealogical process of emergence, mimesis also generates a double movement of receptivity to *pathos* on one side and *distance* from it on the other that is at the palpitating heart of Nancy’s syncopated meditations on a “singular plural being” (*être singulier pluriel*).<sup>14</sup> That is, a shared being who “com-pears” with the other, via a relation of communication with another who is already internal not only to what the ego is (*ego sum*) but to its process of becoming other (*ego sum alterum*).<sup>15</sup> You will have guessed it: my hypothesis is that Nancy’s untimely reflections on the sharing of the subject constitutive of being in common, or community, finds its clearest manifestation not only in the shared exposure to finitude and death but also in a biographical relationship of mimetic communication. In fact, Nancy’s communal reflections cannot be dissociated from his *life* in common with a singular thinker who made the problematic of the mimetic subject its guid-

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12 Sylviane Agacinsky et al., *Mimesis des articulations* (Paris: Aubier-Flammarion, 1975).

13 See Nidesh Lawtoo, *Homo Mimeticus: A New Theory of Imitation* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2022).

14 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O’Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

15 See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Ego Sum* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979).

ing thread, or *fil conducteur*: namely, the French philosopher, poet, man of the theater, literary critic and Nancy's life-long collaborator, friend, and sharer of communities, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe.<sup>16</sup>

Nancy's friendship with Lacoue-Labarthe is truly singular in the history of philosophy. It is not only based on a community of interests but also on what in an interview Nancy calls a "sharing [*partage*] of our personal lives, which was then translated into a community of life [*communauté de vie*] of almost twenty years."<sup>17</sup> If the exceptional degree of intellectual *partage* can find some contemporary analogues in experimental thinkers who, during the same period, also opened up philosophy to the "outside" (Deleuze and Guattari come to mind), the singular plural case of the Lacoue-Nancy duo—to echo the Janus-faced appellation that was common among their shared students in Strasbourg—is, to use a phrase of a third philosopher-friend they had in common, "fascinating, admirable, and enigmatic."<sup>18</sup> Another term Jacques Derrida adds to account for this "writing *à deux*" is "impossible," alluding to another precursor the "three musketeers"<sup>19</sup> of deconstruction share, namely Georges Bataille. And Derrida's allusion to Bataille is all the more relevant insofar as the Lacoue-Nancy duo was redoubled by a more secret, inner, yet no less communicative dimension entangled with what Derrida calls "the ties of familial community,"<sup>20</sup> whose narration, as Nancy recently suggested, is best mediated via the register of "myth."<sup>21</sup>

Not unlike the community of the Jena Romantics they analyzed early in their careers, this community of life, or life in common, will take a long time to be properly evaluated, for it concerns the coappearance of entangled affects and concepts internal to not only

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16 For a special issue on the role mimesis plays in Lacoue-Labarthe's thought, including contributions by Alain Badiou and Jean-Luc Nancy, among others, see *Poetics and Politics: with Lacoue-Labarthe*, ed. Nidesh Lawtoo, *MLN* 132, no. 5 (2017).

17 Philippe Choulet and Jean-Luc Nancy, "D'une mimesis sans modèle: entretien avec Philippe Choulet au sujet de Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe," *L'Animal: Littératures, Arts et Philosophies* no. 19–20 (2008), p. 107 (my translation).

18 Jacques Derrida, *For Strasbourg: Conversations of Friendship and Philosophy*, ed. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), p. 9.

19 *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 10.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

21 For Nancy's autobiographical reflection on "life in myth" at play in his collaboration with Lacoue-Labarthe, see Mathilde Girard and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Proprement Dit: Entretien sur le mythe* (Paris: Lignes, 2015).

shared literary-philosophical but also to political, psychoanalytical, and ontological discourses, or *logoi*. In fact, it is relatively well-known that Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe's intellectual careers find a shared starting point in a number of co-authored books that go from their philosophical interpretation of Lacan in *The Title of the Letter* (1973) to their genealogy of Romanticism in *The Literary Absolute* (1978), from their account of the mimetic logic, or mimetology, of Nazism in *The Nazi Myth* (1981) to the edited volume on *Retreating the Political* (1981, 1983), among other texts in common.

However, a systemic account of this shared literary-philosophical starting point is still missing in the voluminous secondary literature on Nancy that has been expanding over the past decades. More important for us, and less known, is that this shared experience of thought, or *logos*, is redoubled by a less visible, more private, and intimate, yet no less shared experiential affect, or *pathos*, whose conjunction provides perhaps a *coup d'envoi* that will set these singularly unique, yet shared philosophical-literary careers in motion. My contention is that the shared experience of a mimesis without a model located at the juncture where literary *pathos* meets philosophical *logos* plays a key role in the singular plural compearance of Nancy's corpus. If only because it channels an affective participation, or, to use one of Nancy's terms, a "participatory mimesis [*mimesis participative*]"<sup>22</sup> whose will to power of communication contributes to his singular plural thought on community, being in common, and related subjects.

The haunting presence of a different thought of mimesis that informs (gives form to) Nancy's never-ending dialogue with Lacoue-Labarthe and the redoubled "dialogue on dialogue" it entails is explicitly staged in *Scène* (2013).<sup>23</sup> Part of an agonistic confrontation on the Aristotelian concept of *opsis* (mise-en-scène or spectacle) that pivots around the problematic of mimesis and related concepts (figure, type, representation, mime, etc.), *Scène* stages on one side Lacoue-Labarthe's career-long suspicion of the theater's spectacular properties—predicated on the logic of representation—

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22 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le Partage des voix* (Paris: Galilée, 1982), p. 64 (my translation).

23 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Scène. Suivi par Dialogue sur le dialogue* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 2013). Interestingly, the first dialogue, "Scène," is followed by a second dialogue, titled "Dialogue on Dialogue," which was originally titled: "Dialoguer: un nouveau partage des voix." This is a confirmation that *Le Partage des voix*, published three decades earlier than *Scène*, plays a pivotal role in Lacoue-Nancy's shared genealogy. Hence my focus on that text.



in favor of the sobriety of voice, and on the other Nancy's more baroque appreciation of visual figurations. This *differend* on mimesis (voice contra spectacle, echo contra figure, sobriety contra effusion etc.) should not be underestimated, for it has broader aesthetic and, especially, political and ontological implications constitutive of Lacoué-Labarthe's onotypology, which culminate in his critique of fascist and Nazi figures—a critique he shares with Nancy.<sup>24</sup>

The agon on mimesis is thus not clear-cut, for it is predicated on a mirroring logic that requires a hermeneutical effort in order to be foregrounded. A close reading of *Scène* would in fact reveal that the visible agon they stage is predicated on a more imperceptible but, in my view, more fundamentally shared communication in which Nancy echoes Lacoué-Labarthe on mimetic *lexis*, for instance, while the latter corrects his echo's different repetition, and so on.<sup>25</sup> Predictably, this dialogue generates a spiraling regress that brings the contenders to the verge of “making a scene [*faire une scène*],” triggered by what Lacoué-Labarthe, thinking of René Girard, calls “the suffocating economy of rivalry.”<sup>26</sup> Still, such a scene never spectacularly appears in the dialogue, despite, or rather because of, the shared mimetic *dia-logic* of the agon at play. As Derrida jokingly put it in the context of another, more playfully tragic dialogue in his final scene of *adieu* to Strasbourg and his friends, when Lacoué-Nancy restart the dialogue, one can only say: “Ok, here we go... [*c'est parti*].”<sup>27</sup>

Short of reconstructing the unending conversation between Nancy and Lacoué-Labarthe on a plurality of mimetic subjects, I continue a dialogue with Nancy that was interrupted by his death by taking some additional steps on the path of an ongoing genealogy of *homo mimeticus* that Nancy actively contributed to in his last years.<sup>28</sup>

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24 On the relation between mimesis, politics, and myth in both Lacoué-Labarthe and Nancy, see Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoué-Labarthe, “The Nazi Myth,” *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 2 (1990), pp. 291–312; Jean-Luc Nancy, “For Philippe: The Conversation Resumed (Ten Years Later),” *MLN* 132, no. 5 (2017), pp. 1140–1150; and Nidesh Lawtoo, “The Power of Myth (Reloaded): From Nazism to New Fascism,” *L'Ésprit Créateur* 57, no. 4 (2017), pp. 64–82.

25 Lacoué-Labarthe and Nancy, *Scène*, pp. 70–75.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

27 Derrida, *For Strasbourg*, p. 18.

28 To minimally contextualize my dialogues with Nancy, I should say they started orally at KU Leuven as part of the *Homo Mimeticus* project. The first took place in December 2018 in the context of a conference devoted to Nancy's work on myth titled “HOM Workshop à partir du Mythe Nazi.” For the “original” audiovisual recording, see Lawtoo, *HOM Videos ep. 5. Philosophy and Mimesis*:

I shall thus be strategically selective in my genealogical perspective. I take a starting point that is double, as it stages the shared problematic of mimetic methexis from both the side of affective experience or *pathos* and the one of conceptual thought or *logos*—without setting up a binary between these mirroring perspectives. After all, *pathos* and *logos* are part of the same Janus-faced argument about the mimetic experience of communal methexis.

Schematically put, on the side of *pathos*, I briefly recall that in our dialogue Jean-Luc reflected on the role of affective participation, or methexis, at play in his life in common with Philippe. He considered it vital for the development of his own communal thought, which is also a thought on a community among singular plural subjects. Nancy, in fact, stated that “he didn’t think much about it [a shared, communal subject] before”<sup>29</sup> his encounter and *partage de ... vie personnelles* with Lacoue-Labarthe. He then proceeded to articulate the centrality of this affective *partage* for his relational account of the subject, community, and literature, in both written and oral communications. On the side of *logos*, I now supplement this perspective by turning to a short but this time more ancient and well-known Platonic dialogue titled *Ion* in which the problematic of mimetic methexis first enters the philosophical scene. In the process, this dialogue, which Nancy brilliantly analyzes in *Le Partage des voix*, generates a “sharing of voices” that is broader in scope and is constitutive of the agonistic relation between Plato and Homer, staging philosophy contra literature in general. At one remove, this game of mirroring dialogues may also reveal what I call a mimetic agon between Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe. I hasten to add that mimetic agon cannot be reduced to the logic of mimetic rivalry.<sup>30</sup> If only because instead of generating resentment, violence, and sad passions, it affirms a joyful, re-productive, and creative mimetic communication that animates Nancy’s untimely reflections on being-in-common.

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Jean-Luc Nancy, 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7je\\_FSOQDYU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7je_FSOQDYU) (accessed May 8, 2022); for the French written version, see Jean-Luc Nancy and Nidesh Lawtoo, “Mimesis: Concept singulier pluriel. Entretien avec Jean-Luc Nancy,” *L’Esprit Créateur* 61, no. 2 (2021), pp. 147–167. I here refer to the English translation in *CounterText*. See also note 64 for the sequel to this dialogue.

29 Nancy and Lawtoo, “Mimesis: A Singular-Plural Concept,” p. 33.

30 I discuss the difference between René Girard’s theory of mimetic rivalry and mimetic agonism in Nidesh Lawtoo, *Violence and the Mimetic Unconscious: vol. 1: The Catharsis Hypothesis* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2023), pp. 45–57.

As we turn to see, and perhaps hear, these mimetic reflections, which are also reflections on mimesis, are as much on the side of philosophy as on the side of literature. They rely on both *logos* and *pathos*, and they are equally at play in written traces and experiential bonds—all of which are constitutive of the singular plural voice of a communal methexis at play in *homo mimeticus*.

### Shared Enthusiasm: Socrates Contra Ion

Chez Platon, une compétition s'instaure  
entre le philosophe et un autre.  
Nancy, *Le Partage des voix*

In *Le Partage des voix* (1982), Nancy reloads the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry via an interpretation of a short Platonic dialogue, titled *Ion*, on the nature of literary inspiration.<sup>31</sup> Ion is, in fact, a rhapsode, that is, a professional reciter of oral poetry who is specialized in dramatizing and thus interpreting Homer; he just won a contest, or agon, at the festival of Asclepius.<sup>32</sup> In the context of this theatrical-philosophical scene, Plato, under the mask of Socrates, admits to Ion at the outset that he is “often envious of you rhapsodists” (530b); and putting this envy to productive use via what Friedrich Nietzsche, echoing Hesiod, calls “good Eris,” Plato redoubles the agon as he sets out to “assume the place of the overthrown poet and inherit his fame.”<sup>33</sup>

The stage for what I call a mimetic agon, in which the envied model leads to a desire not to suppress but to surpass him or her in thought or *logos* is thus clearly set. Ion, in fact, serves as Plato's antagonist for a philosophical-literary contest that stages Socrates

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31 Plato, *Ion*, trans. Lane Cooper, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (New York: Pantheon Books, 1961), pp. 215–228; hereafter *Ion* followed by in-text line number.

32 On agon in Greek culture, see Jakob Burkhardt, *The Greeks and Greek Civilization*, ed. Oswyn Murray, trans. Sheila Stern (New York: St Martin's Press, 1998), pp. 160–213; and Friedrich Nietzsche, “Homer's Contest,” trans. Christa Davis Acampora, *Nietzscheana* no. 5 (1996), pp. 1–8.

33 Nietzsche, “Homer's Contest,” p. 5. Nietzsche specifies: “We do not understand the strength of Xenophanes’, and later Plato's, attack on the national hero of poetry if we do not also think of the monstrous desire at the root of these attacks” (p. 4); a desire, or rather mimetic drive, that is not simply driven by jealousy and resentment (bad Eris) but by the drive to excel (good Eris).

contra the representative of a Homeric culture that was central to the education of the Greeks and that Plato seeks to overturn and replace.<sup>34</sup> How? By staging a mirroring contest confronting Socrates's dialectical *logos* contra Ion's oral practices of "dramatic 'imitation' or 'impersonation'" that operate on the emotional register of *pathos*, a mimetic *pathos* that, as Erik Havelock also shows, trigger a "personal identification by which the audience sympathizes with the performance."<sup>35</sup> Contra this oral literary tradition, Socrates argues that Ion, and at one remove Homer, is dispossessed of any "knowledge [*epistēmē*]" (*Ion* 532c); he even lacks mastery of a poetic "art [*tekhnē*] of poetry" (532c). Instead, if Ion can interpret and impersonate Homer (and only Homer) so well, it is because he is driven by a "power divine" (533d) that renders him "divinely inspired" and "enthusiastic" (533e)—that is, *en-theos*, in the god. According to this mythic reconstruction of the origins of poetic inspiration that will cast a long shadow on romantic theories of genial originality, Plato suggests that when Ion is reciting Homer, he is participating in the god of music, Apollo. He is thus possessed by a mysterious power divine that passes and communicates through him, reaching the audience as well—hence his success on the agonistic literary stage.

How does such a contagious communication work? Within the dialogue itself, to account for this contagious power, Socrates convokes the allegorical trope of a "magnet" or "Stone of Heraclea" (533d) that "does not simply attract iron rings" but "also imparts to the rings a force enabling them to do the same thing as the stone itself" (533d). Hence, the magnet forms a long chain that goes from Apollo to the Muses to the poet (Homer) to the rhapsode (Ion), reaching to affect the audience in the theater and generating a form of enthusiastic intoxication Plato compares to the Dionysian maenads.<sup>36</sup> Thus reframed, Ion turns out to be a "middle ring" (536a), a medium, or *passeur*. As Nancy puts it in his penetrating interpretation of this Platonic dialogue, Ion is both held and possessed by a contagious power of inspiration that ensures what he calls "the

34 Plato's *Ion*, trans. Andrew Miller (Cambridge, Mass.: Hackett, 2018).

35 Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), pp. 21, 26.

36 I first discussed *Ion* in relation to Dionysian mimesis in Nidesh Lawtoo, *The Phantom of the Ego: Modernism and the Mimetic Unconscious* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), pp. 58–64; for readings of *Ion* in line with *Homo Mimeticus*, see also Niki Hadikoesoemo, "Altering Bodies: Thinking of Intervention through Impersonation," *Performance Philosophy* 5, no. 2 (2020).

passage of communication”<sup>37</sup> whose primary characteristic is to be shared—or as Nancy will later say, in common.

Written in 1982, at a transitional moment of passage from a period of intense work in common with Lacoue-Labarthe to Nancy’s work on community based on the paradoxical logic of partage, *Le Partage des voix* is a singular plural text that operates on more than one level. There is, indeed, more than one voice that is shared between the lines calling for a discerning interpretation, or *hermeneia*. Of course, the sharing that gives the title to Nancy’s essay is, first and foremost, the one of Ion, the rhapsode, who gives voice to Homer, interprets him for the audience, and makes Socrates’ conjure the mysterious trope of the magnet to account for an interpretation that is not one, for it is not based on any art or *techné*. Confronted with this “riddle” (532c), Nancy takes the Platonic/Socratic metaphor of magnetism literally as he notes that “the characteristic of magnetism ... is that it communicates its force.”<sup>38</sup> This is a communicative force, or power, that passes through a “sharing of voices” that is first and foremost poetic as it connects and disconnects the rings in the poetic chain that are, to be specific, “unchained” [*dechainés*].<sup>39</sup> In fact, the rings are not chained into one another but, rather, adjacent to each other, each singular in their poetic powers but magnetized by the same force they share and that shares them.<sup>40</sup> At one remove, Nancy also notes that the partage goes beyond poetic principles for it passes across the literature-philosophy divide. As he puts it, as often in Plato’s dialogues, a “competition” or agon is playfully staged “between the philosopher and another.”<sup>41</sup> This agon, then, does not simply oppose the *pathos* of poetry to the *logos* of philosophy in order to submit the former to the latter. On the contrary, Nancy specifies that it is a question of “showing that the philosopher is better *in the domain of the other* [i.e., poetry], or that he is the

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37 Nancy, *Le Partage des voix*, p. 75.

38 Ibid., p. 61.

39 Ibid.

40 For a compelling account of *Ion* inspired by Nancy and attentive to both the mimetic agon between Plato and Homer and the uniqueness of poetic voices, see Adriana Cavarero, “The Envid Muse: Plato versus Homer,” in *Cultivating the Muse: Struggles for Power and Inspiration in Classical Greece*, ed. Efronini Spenzou and Don Fowlers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 47–67. I join Cavarero’s and Nancy’s interpretations of *Ion* to give an account of Plato’s critique of the *vita mimetica* in Lawtoo, *Homo Mimeticus*, chapter 2.

41 Nancy, *Le Partage des voix*, p. 59.

truth of the other.”<sup>42</sup> And Nancy adds that Socrates “envies not so much the prize but the art of the rhapsode himself.”<sup>43</sup> There is thus a mirroring agonistic relation characteristic of mimetic agonism between Socrates and Ion, the philosopher and the poetic “other” that Nancy designates as playing the “role of a rival—or a double.”<sup>44</sup> That is, a figure who is also characterized by a strange “dispossession or depropriation” of identity, for as Nancy specifies in a revealing phrase, “he has nothing proper”, yet his competence remains “singular”<sup>45</sup> nonetheless.

The mythic scene of the mimetic agon is beginning to delineate itself; the echoes can be heard. Beneath the agonistic division between Socrates and Ion and, at one remove, Plato and Homer, also lies a contemporary sharing of voices between literary-philosophical doppelgängers that are singular plural. Nancy, for one, notes that what “Ion” (and we should now be suspicious of univocal identifications) stages in this scene of “partage” is “an originary difference of poetic genres or voices—and maybe underhand, a sharing [*partage*] of poetic and philosophical genres.”<sup>46</sup> This is indeed a *partage* in the double sense that it both divides and connects along paradoxical lines constitutive of mimetic agonism, if only because “Plato” partakes in the power he seeks to oppose via the mimetic genre of the dialogue. Thus, Nancy adds: “It is not an accident if Plato plays the poet.”<sup>47</sup> There is, in fact, an ambivalent relation that continues to tie philosophy to literature in the very medium of their opposition. Or, as Nancy puts it elsewhere: “philosophy, literature, each mourning and desiring the other (the other as such, the other as same [*l’autre même*]), but each also competing with the other in fulfilling mourning and desire.”<sup>48</sup> This relationship is, indeed, a classical scene of competition, which does not mean that it is necessarily an Oedipal, rivalrous scene nor that this scene of mirroring agon between philosophy and literature is disconnected from the present.

Rather than framing this competition within a familial triangle, let us return to the paradigmatic example of *Ion* to ask a more

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42 Ibid.

43 Ibid., p. 55.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid., pp. 66, 60.

46 Ibid., p. 66.

47 Ibid., p. 65.

48 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Expectation: Philosophy, Literature*, trans. Roberto Bononno (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), pp. 27–28.

general literary-philosophical question: What force allows for such a *partage des voix*, the *partage* that is as much a *participation* in the same flow of magnetic contagion as a *division* via uniquely separately connected rings. This is the same *con*-division that, in the same years, will become central to Nancy's thought on singular plural beings and communities as well.

### The Impropriety of Mimesis: Nancy avec Lacoue

Protée peut prendre tous les rôles,  
dans la philosophie et dans la poésie  
Nancy, *Le Partage des voix*

The answer, which should be clear to readers familiar with this classical yet always new mythic scene of contestation between philosophy and literature, should not come as a surprise. This contagious force endowed with the power of *partage* is not proper to *Ion* alone, for its defining characteristic is to be shared. This force is constitutive of a "*partage* of poetic and philosophical genres"<sup>49</sup> that are both divided and shared, shared-divided (*partagées*), and is nothing less and nothing more than the improper question of "mimesis." As Nancy puts it: "one must conclude that the rhapsode is here the representative of the singularly complex problematic of *mimesis*."<sup>50</sup> This is not a mimesis that passively copies the original poet via the visual schema of representation predicated on the logic of the same long familiar from the myth of the cave and the idealist metaphysics Plato articulates via the trope of the mirror in book ten of the *Republic*. Rather, it is a complex poetic mimesis animated by a magnetic transitive "force" or *pathos* of "participation" (*methexis*). First staged and theorized in *Ion*, this *pathos* is essential to grasp the contagious powers of mimesis that go from Plato to Nietzsche to Bataille, and beyond.<sup>51</sup>

Bringing this tradition into the present and closer to home, Nancy specifies that this type of mimesis is characterized less by a "figuration" than by a paradoxical "receptivity that gives rise to an

49 Nancy, *Le Partage des voix*, p. 66.

50 Ibid., p. 70.

51 On the links between Plato's *Ion* and modernists like Nietzsche and Bataille, see Lawtoo, *The Phantom of the Ego*, pp. 52–68.

activity.”<sup>52</sup> And in a passage that is worth quoting, he qualifies this mimetic paradox as follows:

[It is] an active creative, or re-creative mimesis, or alternatively, it is a mimetic creation, but effectuated via a *mimesis* that proceeds from *methexis*, from a participation itself due to the communication of enthusiasm—unless mimesis is not the condition of this participation.<sup>53</sup>

There is thus an undecidable, paradoxical, and above all re-productive mimesis at play in this ancient agon between philosophy and poetry. Be it Plato contra Homer, Socrates contra Ion, or closer to home and between the lines, Nancy contra Lacoue-Labarthe, this agon is mimetic because it is not only based on simple opposition but also continuity, not only on distance but also on proximity, generating a sharing of voices that exceeds the logic of mimetic rivalry.<sup>54</sup> In fact, this partage between philosophical and poetic voices does not lead to any violence, let alone sacrificial exclusions of the poet as a *pharmakos*, as is already the case at the end of the *Republic*. Rather, in *Ion*, the magnetic force sets in motion a productive form of sharing that oscillates from *logos* to *pathos* and back. This playful oscillation is not simply generative of pathologies but of what I call patho-logies that is, critical *logoi* on *pathos* that are already constitutive of Platonic dialogues themselves. The genre of the Socratic dialogue, in fact, partakes in the mimetic register that Plato opposes in theory but relies on in dramatic practice. And he does so to generate with and contra Ion/Homer a protean discourse characterized by mythic allegories, exemplary heroes, dramatic contests among other literary-philosophical devices that are constitutive of the birth of philosophy itself.

Thus reframed, mimesis is not only an ancient concept internal to Platonic dialogues. It is also a modern concept internal to contemporary dialogues on a mythic dialogue. Now is the moment to register explicitly what has remained implicit so far: the *partage des voix* Nancy theorizes within his interpretation of the dialogue *Ion* is already redoubled by a shared mimetic experience of partage between literature and philosophy that operates in his own

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52 Nancy, *Le Partage des voix*, p. 62.

53 Ibid., p. 71.

54 For Nancy's reflections on how he and Lacoue-Labarthe put this mimetic agon to productive philosophical use, see Nancy and Lawtoo, "Mimesis: A Singular-Plural Concept," pp. 31–33.



communal experience of thought and life with Lacoue-Labarthe. In foundational works like *Typographie* (1975), *Le Sujet de la philosophie: Typographies I* (1979) and *L'Imitation des modernes: Typographies II* (1981),<sup>55</sup> as well as in the works in common with Nancy already mentioned, Lacoue-Labarthe, in fact, made an original interpretation of mimesis without proper models the guiding thread of his entire literary-philosophical career. Lacoue-Labarthe's account of the "impropriety" of the mimetic subject, its "plastic" malleability, and the "paradoxical" ability of the actor to turn a "restricted" (or passive) mimesis into a productive, "general" (or active) mimesis characteristic of Denis Diderot's "paradox of the actor" in particular and of the "imitation of the moderns" in general, finds in Plato's theory of mimesis a key genealogical starting point.<sup>56</sup> As Lacoue-Labarthe sums it up, "Plato, in his way, knew this very well: the mimeticians are the worst possible breed because they are no one, pure mask or pure hypocrisy, and as such unassignable, unidentifiable, impossible to place."<sup>57</sup> And yet, at the same time, and without contradiction, "theatrical mimesis" also "provides the model for a general mimesis" that "reproduces nothing given" but entails "an imitation of *phusis* as a productive force, or as *poesis*"<sup>58</sup> that is of Aristotelian inspiration and that Lacoue-Labarthe finds in Denis Diderot's *Le Paradoxe du comédien*, the matrix text for the imitation of the moderns.

All this and more is clearly echoed in Nancy's interpretation of "Plato's rhapsode," a protean character that "enchanted Philippe," as Nancy puts it, precisely for its anticipation of the modern insight that "the actor has nothing proper to itself."<sup>59</sup> It is thus no genealogical accident that Nancy not only quotes Lacoue-Labarthe's account of "Diderot's Paradox" a few pages later;<sup>60</sup> he also leans on this paradox to give mimetic specificity to his genealogy of shared voices.

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55 Lacoue-Labarthe's theorizations of mimesis are regrettably not available in their entirety in English as yet, but the essential texts are collected in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Subject of Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Trezise, trans. Thomas Trezise et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); and, especially, in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, ed. Christopher Fynsk, trans. Christopher Fynsk et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989).

56 See Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography*, pp. 96–138.

57 Ibid., p. 259.

58 Ibid., pp. 257, 255–256.

59 Choulet and Nancy, "D'une mimesis sans modèle," p. 111.

60 Nancy, *Le Partage des voix*, p. 72, n 52.

Nancy, in fact, tells us that this dispossessed subject has “nothing proper [*rien en propre*]”<sup>61</sup> to itself. And paradoxically, precisely because of this “absence of proper capacity” or “*déappropriation*,”<sup>62</sup> this (dis)possessed figure enters into an enthusiastic state of creative receptivity that is both passive and active, restricted to copying a model (Homer) and reproductive of a magnetic spell that generates (Dionysian) bonds. In the passage I just quoted, Nancy even opens up the hypothesis that “mimesis could be the condition of this participation”<sup>63</sup> in the first place, thereby entangling mimesis and methexis in the sharing of voices he performs both philosophically and poetically.<sup>64</sup>

It would be useless to deny it. There is, indeed, an echo of the subject, or a mimetic phantom, animating the paradoxical voice (passive/active, dispossessed/possessed, copying/creative, reproducing/producing, etc.) of that *mime de rien* who is masked as Ion: a “Proteus,” Nancy specifies, “who can assume all roles, in philosophy and in poetry.”<sup>65</sup> At this stage, the identity masked under this protean figure appears unmasked. Still, at a closer interpretation its identity is actually undecidable. For instance, our *hermeneia* makes us wonder: Is this virtuous play of poetic and philosophical roles “proper” to Lacoue-Labarthe’s mimetology, as Nancy’s implicit yet numerous and unmistakable references to the paradox of mimesis suggest? Or is it “proper” to Nancy, whose mimetic agonism has led him to aspire, in a mirroring move of “appropriation,” to be better in the domain of the other by “exappropriating”<sup>66</sup> this mimetic thought in writing? Or a shared intermixture of both?

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61 Ibid. p. 66.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid., p. 71.

64 Ibid. The full passage establishes a link between hermeneutics and rhapsody via the link of a “‘knowledgeable’ [*savante*] mimesis” (p. 78) and reads as follows: “*Hermeneia* is *mimesis*, but an active *mimesis*, creative or re-creative, or again it is a mimetic creation, but effectuated by a mimesis that proceeds from *methexis*, of a participation itself due to enthusiasm—unless mimesis is not the condition of this participation” (p. 71). See also Nancy, “The Image: Mimesis and Methexis,” trans. Adrienne Janus, in *Nancy and Visual Culture*, eds. Carrie Giunta and Adrienne Janus (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 73–92.

65 Nancy, *Le Partage des voix*, p. 84.

66 To add the voice of a middle man who informs both Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy on the improper logic of mimesis, Derrida, in dialogue with both, elaborates on the logic of “exappropriation” as follows: “What I wished to say with exappropriation is that in the gesture of appropriating something for oneself, and thus of being able to keep in one’s name, to mark with one’s name, to leave in

These, as Lacoue-Labarthe would put it, are improper questions, if only because the logic of mimesis is itself based on a logic of impropriety. Later, in *Scène*, for instance, Nancy speaks of a “mimesis” that pleases them both (“la *mimèsis* qui nous ‘réjouit’”) in terms of a “participation in or by a sharing [*partage*]” whose characteristic is to put the subject “outside of itself [*hors de soi*]—identical and different, or neither simply identical nor simply different.”<sup>67</sup> The echoes with Ion are strong, the doublings of identity visible; yet no univocal identifications are tenable when both the thought and experience of mimesis are so intimately shared. As Lacoue-Labarthe prefigures in the second epigraph to this essay, “*distributing* [*distribuer*] *of roles*”—say, between the philosopher and the poet—can only lead to “*sharing* [*partage*] *of voices*.”<sup>68</sup> What we can tentatively say, then, is that this magnetic interplay of sameness and difference, philosophy and rhapsody, *logos* and *pathos*, is not destructive but productive, not based on a mimetic rivalry but on a mimetic agon. As I tried to show elsewhere, this mimetic agon reloads a patho-logical paradox of mimesis that—via a long chain of thinkers that goes from Plato to Nietzsche, Derrida to Girard, Lacoue-Labarthe to Nancy, Adriana Cavarero to Catherine Malabou among others—continues to channel a magnetized mimetic *pathos* that reaches into the present.<sup>69</sup> Under different masks and a conceptual persona characteristic of a *homo mimeticus* that is returning to haunt the philosophical and artistic scene, this paradox, in fact, directly informs the mimetic turn to a different, more embodied, and participatory theory of mimesis already prefigured—between lines still in need of interpretation or *hermeneia*—in Plato’s untimely dialogue.

In the end, after focusing the attention on the immanent fact that all affects are mimetic and contagious (or mimetic *pathos*), Ion equally registers an oscillation toward / away from mimesis that I group under the rubric of *pathos* of distance and locate at the palpitating heart of *homo mimeticus*. Ion’s recitation of Homer is, in fact, both unique, and *pace* Socrates, based on a poetic *techné* after all, for he can control the mimetic *pathos* he triggers in spectators from a *distance*. Thus, Ion specifies that he gives spectators

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one’s name, as a testament or an inheritance, one must expropriate this thing, separate oneself from it.” Derrida, *For Strasbourg*, p. 24.

67 Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *Scène*, p. 32.

68 Ibid., p. 76.

69 See Lawtoo, *Homo Mimeticus*.

“very close attention,” adding, “for if I set them weeping, I myself shall laugh when I get my money” (535e). And yet, at the same time, and without contradiction, Ion is thoroughly possessed by a magnetic power that is not proper to him and dispossesses him of his “proper” identity, generating a magnetizing *pathos* that is shared via communal forms of con-division. At the heart of mimetic, participatory matters, there is thus a *pathos* of distance at play in mimetic subjects. As Nancy also notes “[Ion] is capable of ‘participation’ and of simultaneously keeping at distance, and this singular capacity of doubling proceeds itself from the absence of proper capacity”<sup>70</sup>—and this *pathos* of distance, or *partage*, is also constitutive of a singular plural ego that is not one, for it is a phantom ego exposed to being in common.<sup>71</sup>

This inner experience, I could only begin to show, is constitutive of the life in common Lacoue-Nancy affirmed together with many others in Strasbourg at the twilight of the last century. It is also the palpitating heart of a new protean theory of mimesis vital to facing shared communal catastrophes at the dawn of the twenty-first century. If the myth of the singular plural origins of community are only now beginning to be told by drawing on the oral tradition of the dialogue,<sup>72</sup> their philosophical relevance to account for Nancy’s *logos* on community, and mimetic studies more generally, still needs to be followed up.

Within the limit of this essay, I wanted to show that in the alternation of voices at play in a pivotal text like *Le Partage des voix*, it is indeed no longer clear *who* exactly speaks: the philosopher or the poet, the specialist of the *logos* or the technician of *pathos*, Nancy or Lacoue-Labarthe? Or, perhaps, a *passeur* shuttling back and forth between the two? What is certain is that Lacoue-Nancy’s intimately shared mimetic *methexis* blurs the very line dividing

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70 Nancy, *Le Partage des voix*, p. 74.

71 On the genealogical link between the phantom of the ego and community this article furthers, see Lawtoo, *The Phantom of the Ego*, pp. 295–304.

72 After conducting the 2018 interview on mimesis, Nancy and I agreed to return to the personal side of his life in common with Lacoue-Labarthe and the sharing it entails via “a different medium.” Nancy and Lawtoo, “Mimesis: A Singular-Plural Concept,” p. 44, n 2. We did so in the summer of 2020, in between pandemic lockdowns during a two-day video interview with Nancy, while also adding the voices of Claire Nancy, Jean-Christophe Bailly, Michel Deutsch, among others. For a prelude of this still inedited video, see Nidesh Lawtoo, “Jean-Luc Nancy: The Community of Strasbourg (A Prelude),” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wZhbbWS3tdA&t=25s> (accessed August 7, 2022).

concepts from affects, *logos* from *pathos*, philosophy from rhapsody. As Nancy concisely puts it in a chiastic mirroring phrase that sums up the paradox of shared voices not only at play in Plato's dialogues but also in his unending dialogues with Lacoue-Labarthe, "a philosophical rhapsody allows for a philosophy of rhapsody."<sup>73</sup> And what is Nancy's unclassifiable thought if not *also* a philosophy of rhapsodies, on the muses, intoxication, love, the body, and the arts more generally?

In their process of their mimetic communication, Lacoue-Nancy's duet generated a long chain that goes not only from the Muses to the community of spectators. It also connects, like a magnetic flow, singular plural beings at the heart of an inoperative-cooperative community of thought that, as this volume shows, continues to be passed on in the present—inspiring, and perhaps magnetizing, future generations as well.

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73 Nancy, *Le Partage des voix*, p. 79.

