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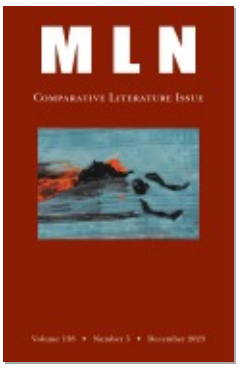

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Wilde's Mime Acts: Performing Minor Mimesis

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Abstract. Mimesis is not a minor literary and philosophical concept in western thought. Still, an immanent, marginalized, and in this sense minor conception of performative mimesis (from *mimos*, actor or performance) is currently informing the transdisciplinary field of mimetic studies. Supplementing Deleuze and Guattari's account of Kafka's "minor literature," this article focuses on Oscar Wilde's dramatizations of performative mimesis revealing that not only language is performative; human lives and bodies are also driven by "an imitative instinct." From *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde's dramatic impersonations of homo mimeticus allow him to do not only things with words (speech acts) but also to do things with affects and bodies (mime acts). In the process, he provides new steps to further the mimetic turn or *re*-turn to a minor, performative, and embodied theory of *homo mimeticus*.

Furthering attention to minor literature from the angle of what the ancients called, enigmatically, "*mimēsis*" might seem, at first sight, improbable. After all, it is well-known that mimesis plays not a minor but, rather, a major role in western aesthetics. The opposition between the major concept of mimesis and minor literature is thus at least double, for the conflict, or *agon,* concerns both criticism and theory. On the critical side, mimesis is the very concept that gives birth to western poetics in general and literature in particular. Central to an ancient quarrel between *logos* and *muthos*, mimesis inaugurates a dominant tradition in aesthetics that goes from the ancients to the moderns, Plato to Auerbach, and considers literature as an imitation,

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copy, mirror, or "representation of reality,"[1] a dominant translation that, up to the last century, restricted mimesis to aesthetic realism. On the theoretical side, the antagonism with the minor tradition is immediately redoubled by the dominant ontology the philosophical concept of mimesis brings into being. Initially theorized via the trope of the "mirror" in book 10 of Plato's *Republic* (596d), mimesis belongs to the conceptual toolbox of an idealist, vertical, and quite major metaphysical tradition that considers art at "three removes from nature" (597e) by which Plato means the intelligible world of transcendental Forms that, from ancient to contemporary idealists, constitutes true Being.

Mimesis is not simply far removed from the minor tradition; it is the major concept minor literature is up against. The conjunction at play in the concept of "minor mimesis" thus generates an aesthetic and philosophical disjunction, contest, or *agon* that in-*forms* (gives ontological form to) the most influential philosophical definition of what the minor is supposed to be—or can potentially become. As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari write in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1975), both in criticism and theory minor literature is radically opposed to the vertical Platonic metaphysics predicated on the stabilizing trope of the mirror that frames aesthetics in general and literature in particular as an ontologically decayed representation of reality. Taking Kafka's oeuvre as a case study, Deleuze and Guattari conceptualize the minor in explicit *anti*-mimetic terms. Thus, they argue that minor literature has the power to generate rhizomatic processes of becoming (other) that are "never a reproduction or imitation [*jamais une reproduction ou une imitation*]" (25). The agonism is thus clearly set: major literature contra minor literature, being contra becoming, reproductive imitation (or mimesis) contra rhizomatic transformation (or metamorphosis). This is, in a nutshell, the disjunctive antagonism minor literature reloads for a world of becoming that no longer fits dominant definitions of what literature is—or is supposed to be.

And yet, at a closer diagnostic look perhaps the agon is not as clear cut as it appears; what was true for ancient quarrels between philosophy and literature may remain true for contemporary quarrels on the theoretical value of literature and the humanities more generally. This, at least, is what the recent return of attention to mimesis and the contemporary avatars of *homo mimeticus* (contagion, influence,

[1]Erich Auerbach's debt to the Platonic definition of mimesis is clear as he writes that his "original starting point was Plato's discussion in book 10 of the *Republic*—mimesis ranking third after truth" (Auerbach 554).

mirror neurons, inclinations, plasticity, metamorphoses, among other mimetic masks) suggests. From pluralist perspectives as diverse as philosophy, literary theory, media studies, feminism, posthumanism, political theory, environmental studies, among other perspectives internal to the "mimetic turn,"[2] there is now significant evidence that underneath the straightforward opposition that divides mimesis from a minor tradition, theoretical continuities begin to reemerge in the transdisciplinary field of "mimetic studies."[3] This is especially true if we recall that mimesis is not only a stabilizing philosophical concept predicated on the rational distance of vision, as a dominant metaphysical tradition made it appear to be; it is also a dramatic concept that was first and foremost staged in theatrical and thus performative plays with the aesthetic power to generate destabilizing processes of becoming other that appeal to all the bodily senses (from *aisthēsis*, "sensation"). Often imperceptible, driven by unconscious reflexes, fashioning plastic subjects and crowds, what Deleuze and Guattari call "microimitation" (*Thousand* 241) is now internal to a theory of homo mimeticus that includes influence, contagion, plasticity and other protean subjects and affects that are currently returning to the forefront of the critical and theoretical scene.

Furthering a mimetic turn or *re*-turn of attention to a minor conception of mimesis rooted in a theatrical, embodied, and immanent genealogy (*mimēsis*, from *mimos*, actor or performance), I now suggest that at play in performative mimesis is not only a type of subversive iteration that troubles the vertical hierarchy dividing original and copies "revealing the performative construction of an original and true sex" (Butler viii)—no matter how important this deconstruction of (major) mimesis remains for feminist philosophers already inclined toward mimetic studies;[4] nor solely a linguistic recognition of the

[2]I first use the phrase "mimetic turn" or "re-turn" (Lawtoo, "Plasticity" 1221) in a special issue of *MLN* but it is important to stress that steps for mimetic studies were taken by (post)structuralist thinkers (from Derrida to Girard, Lacoue-Labarthe to Irigaray, Deleuze to Baudrillard to Borch-Jacobsen), stretch back to include philosophical precursors (from Plato to Nietzsche), social theorists (from Tarde to Bataille), political theorists (from Arendt to Connolly to Bennett), feminist theorists (from Cavarero to Malabou to Butler) among others internal to a new theory of imitation developed in Lawtoo, *Homo Mimeticus*. See also the special issues on *Poetics and Politics*, *MLN* 132.5 (2017), *The Mimetic Condition* in *CounterText* 8.1 (2022) and on *Posthuman Mimesis* in *Journal of Posthumanism* 2.2 (2022).

[3]For accounts of mimetic studies see Lawtoo, *Homo Mimeticus* 11-40, *Violence 2* 1-34, and the introduction to this special issue.

[4]See Cavarero and Lawtoo, and the special issue on *Mimetic Inclinations* in *Critical Horizons* 24.2 (2023). For a project devoted specifically to gendered mimesis directly linked to the mimetic turn see, https://genderedmimesis.com/

performative power of language "to do things with words" (Austin) in line with a "genealogy of performativity" (Cassin 40) that finds in the sophists' quarrel with philosophy its starting point—though the genealogical links between sophistic effects and mimetic affects, sophists and poets, are numerous, profound, and worthy of further explorations. My focus on what I shall call performative mime acts tends to be on the immanent, dramatic, and affective processes of becoming other that originate in an ancient (Dionysian) conception of theatrical mimesis that goes from antiquity to modernity, were constitutive of minor literature in the past century, and are now reloaded via new hypermimetic media currently transforming homo mimeticus in the present century. True, Deleuze's and Guattari's reading of Kafka was generally understood as *anti*-mimetic, but this is simply due to their reliance on the major metaphysical (Platonic) conception of mimesis that reduces aesthetic representations to mere "simulacra" or "phantoms" far removed from ideal models.[5] An overturning of perspectives immediately ensues if we adopt genealogical lenses that reveal the immanent, relational, and affective powers of a processual conception of imitation that goes by many names and we propose to call here, the performativity of minor mimesis.

For this delicate operation, I take a genealogical step back to one of the figures that informed the mimetic turn from its modernist beginnings. I return to an early-modernist writer who will help us reevaluate the performative, affective and contagious power, or pathos, animating homo mimeticus: namely, the dramatist, novelist, poet, story-teller, aesthete, dandy and public personality Oscar Wilde.[6] A protean figure with multiple dramatic personae or theatrical masks, Wilde is often considered a precursor of gay and queer revolutions for he was also sensitive to class, power, and prison-rights—and rightly so, given his pioneering role in what was aptly called "the Wilde century" (Sinfield). Less noted as yet is that, in the present century, Wilde is arguably one of the most influential precursors of mimetic studies who dramatized the performative powers of *homo mimeticus*

[5]For an overturning of Plato's ontological critique of "simulacres-phantasms" see also Deleuze, *Logique* 296. For an informed Deleuzian study on Wilde and the simulacrum that, like Deleuze, operates with the dominant (Platonic) conception of mimesis but, under this anti-mimetic mask, can be considered as a contribution on Wilde's fascination with minor/performative mimesis, see Whiteley.

[6]I note for genealogical reasons that Wilde was supposed to be part a "modernist theory of mimesis" I first developed on Nietzschean foundations (see Lawtoo, *Phantom*). As a chapter on Wilde could not be included for reasons of space in this first book, it is only apt to belatedly *re*-turn to his performative mime acts to further the mimetic turn.

at play in both art and life.[7] My wager is that Wilde's overturning of perspectives is already dramatized in his most-often quoted, yet little examined, paradoxical claim that "Life imitates Art more than Art imitates Life" ("Decay" 90). Like Nietzsche roughly at the same time but via a distinctive performative turn, Wilde operates a mirroring inversion that introduces metamorphic processes of becoming other central to minor literature and now at play in mimetic studies as well. In what follows, I propose a double performative mime act toward minor mimesis to further a mimetic turn already underway.

Mime Act I: Toward Minor Mimesis

First Act. To this day, Oscar Wilde continues to be considered an anti-mimetic writer. And understandably so, at least if we follow a dominant aesthetic/philosophical definition of mimesis restricted to the logic of representation that starts with Plato and culminates with the aesthetic realism Wilde is up against. As a modernist writer *avant la lettre*, Wilde clearly positions himself contra mimetic realism as he claims, for instance, that as a "method realism is a complete failure" ("Decay" 85). And consistently in his protean aesthetics—be it as a dramatist, novelist, poet, storyteller, classicist, essayist, journalist, or public personality—he celebrates an anti-mimetic aestheticism predicated on a hedonistic and decadent conception of *l'art pour l'art* that is not subordinated to the logic of resemblance. On the contrary, it affirms polymorphous desires and transgressive double identities that take possession of his protean characters depriving them (and perhaps, at one remove, him as well) of a proper, essential, and narrowly moralist qualities. Wilde would thus have subscribed wholeheartedly to Deleuze's and Guattari's claim that in minor literature "becoming is a capture, a possession, a plus-value, and never a reproduction or imitation" (*Kafka* 25; my trans.). And yet, at the same time, and without contradiction, Wilde also supplements this critical insight *contra* imitation by developing a performative poetics in line *with* homo mimeticus. He does so by staging a minor mimesis that finds in states of affective becoming, capture, and dramatic dispossessions of the ego performatively at play on the side of *life* its protean principle of becoming other.

[7]On historical, contextual accounts of Wilde and performativity attentive to theatricality but less to mimesis, see Powell and Voskuil; for first theoretical steps on performative mimesis in Wilde studies see Lawtoo, "Critic."

Wilde's move is subtle, ironic, yet not deprived of philosophical value. Given his training in classics and his claim that "the Greeks were a nation of art-critics" ("Critic" 135), it is not surprising that he turns back to the foundations of western aesthetics to overturn its fundamental ontological presuppositions. While Plato, as you will recall, relies on the figure of the "painter" (*Republic* 596e) to frame major mimesis in a stabilizing metaphysical picture structured on a vertical transcendental axis, Wilde overturns perspectives and reframes the trope of the picture to inject destabilizing and horizontal transformations constitutive of minor mimesis. Both painters and pictures are, of course, constitutive of Wilde's decadent poetics in general and of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in particular. Yet the two forms of mimesis they mediate should not be confused, for they received radically different and antagonistic evaluations within the novel itself. We are in fact told that the painter (Basil Hallward) relies on the "Realism of the method" (*Picture* 95) to represent his model (Dorian Gray) and bring his picture into being. In this major sense, then, both the method of painting within the novel and, at one remove, the method of writing the novel itself—with its focus on symbolism, decadence, arabesque narrative, free indirect speech, and other early-modernist techniques—is clearly *anti*-mimetic in aesthetic orientation.

And yet, at the same time, the picture is not unilateral; if only because the novel consistently relies on a minor conception of mimesis that is already double, for it functions both on the side of life and on the side of art. Both sides require closer scrutiny than they have received so far.[8] As Deleuze and Guattari put it: "It is absolutely futile to trace [*recenser*] a theme in a writer if we do not ask what, exactly is its importance in the work, that is, *how it functions* [comment il fonctionne] exactly (and not its 'meaning' ['*sens*'])" (83). Central to minor literature, this genealogical principle applies to mimetic studies as well. Let us thus take a closer look at the oeuvre to see how it functions.

In *The Picture* minor mimesis is first introduced on the side of an aesthetic life that is already affected by aesthetic sensations, perhaps unsurprisingly so since aesthetics is characterized by a power of affection that is not restricted to vision or language alone but includes all the senses.[9] From the beginning of the novel, there is thus a minor,

[8]For a first mimetic reading of *The Picture* see Lawtoo, "Excess."

[9]As Gilbert puts it, "there has been a tendency in literature to appeal more and more to the eye and less and less to the ear which is really the sense which, from the standpoint of pure art, it should seek to please, and by whose canons of pleasure it should abide" (Wilde, "Critic" 137). Minor mimesis, with its focus on a pathos that can be oral and haptic provides a correction to this dominant tendency.

non-representational, embodied and oral mimesis central to the very medium that fashions Dorian's malleable ego, a plastic ego modeled on *exempla* at play in both the orality of life (the dandy Lord Henry Watton) and in written art (the "yellow book," Shakespeare's plays). Together, both sides inject affective and infective "influences" (a leitmotif in the novel) whose defining characteristic is precisely to transgress the frontier dividing art and life, representational (or major) mimesis and affective (or minor) mimesis. We are already in a position to confirm a strong genealogical link between minor literature and minor mimesis. If Deleuze and Guattari claim that "Art and life are only opposed from the point of view of major literature" (*Kafka* 74), Wilde's provides a critical and artistic supplement that connects art to life. How? Via an overturning gesture he sums up, under the mask of Vivian, with the famous but little meditated principle that "Life imitates Art more than Art imitates Life" ("Decay" 90). If the end of the phrase has often been echoed to account for Wilde's *anti*-mimetic (read anti-realist) aesthetics, the beginning has rarely been taken seriously as a foundational principle central to Wilde's mimetic poetics.[10] Far from being inimical to minor literature, then, Wilde's poetics reframes mimesis in line with a marginalized yet still Greek tradition that links it to performance, drama, and theatrical impersonations that, as precursors of mimetic studies have convincingly shown and the mimetic turn now confirms, have powerful impressions on the ethical and political formations of subjectivity.[11] Hence, Wilde writes in "The Critic as Artist:" "The ethical effect of art, its importance to culture, and its place in the formation of character, has been done once and for all by Plato" (139). Traces of this minor "oral tradition" are, indeed, still at play in Plato.[12] Its genealogy goes back to the Sicilian *mimos*, a theatrical performance that gives mimesis a conceptual identity in line with Dionysian powers that are not singular but plural and fashion subjectivity for the modern(ist)s as well.[13] Taking it seriously entails

[10]Revealingly, even informed studies that stress Wilde's debt to classical aesthetic principles do not register the role of minor mimesis in his aesthetics, see Ross. For studies attentive to Wilde's engagement with classical notions of mimesis see Puchner 76-86, Chon, Potolsky 108-111, and Lawtoo "Critic."

[11]See for instance Lacoue-Labarthe, Borch-Jacobsen, Gebauer and Wulf, Potolsky, Lawtoo, *Homo Mimeticus*.

[12]See Havelock 20-35, Borch-Jacobsen's contribution to this special issue, and Lawtoo, *Homo Mimeticus*, 69-92.

[13]Dionysus is not only the god of wine and sex but also of the theater and, via Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, foregrounds a dramatic, contagious, and intoxicating imitation that occupies a key role in mimetic studies. See Lawtoo, *Phantom* 63-68.

recognizing that Wilde's poetics does not simply celebrate *l'art pour l'art* but what we should perhaps rename, *l'art pour la vie*.

Wilde's overturning of perspective on mimesis sets a genealogical precedent for minor literature and is more philosophically subtle than most commentators have acknowledged so far. Its orientation is Janus-faced: it looks back to ancient dramatic principles only to better anticipate modernist and still contemporary principles on the role mimesis plays in the affective formation and immanent transformation of life. Schematically put, on one side, the dominant tradition of mimesis predicated on the logic of representation that is visual (or Apollonian) in nature sets up an aesthetic distance between art and life that preserve both the autonomy of art and the autonomy of the subject (or *subject of Aufklärung*); on the other side, the minor tradition of mimesis Wilde proposes furthers a behavioral (or Dionysian) imitation on the side of life that rests on the logic of affect or pathos that is embodied in nature and allows for fluid continuities between art and life—for both good and evil.[14] Consequently, Wilde dramatizes powers of minor mimesis that are not simply false in the sense that they do not faithfully represent reality according to the laws of Apollonian representation that stabilize identity according to the logic of the same. Rather, they are animated by what Deleuze, again echoing Nietzsche, also calls the "powers of the false [*puissances du faux*]" that inject Dionysian metamorphic transformations in the ego, leading the I to be "another [*Je est un autre*]" (*Cinema 2* 153). Paradoxically, then, these minor mimetic powers stem from a text that convokes the dominant trope of mimesis as a picture, representation, or figuration of reality—only to better overturn its fundamental aesthetic and philosophical presuppositions by depicting a metamorphic disfiguration of the ego from a double perspective.

Minor mimesis, then, is always Janus-faced as it looks simultaneously to both life and art generating troubling mirroring continuities between the two sides. On the side of life, Dorian is indeed fashioned by mimetic influences that are predicated on the logic of mimetic *pathos* (Deleuze, echoing Spinoza, says affect) and include psychic forms of imitation that operate below conscious awareness on an unconscious that has mirroring reflexes more than dreams as a via regia. Deleuze speaks of the molecular unconscious; others speak of the cerebral unconscious; we propose the term, "mimetic unconscious."[15] Indepen-

[14]On Apollonian and Dionysian mimesis in Nietzsche see also Lawtoo, *Phantom* 163-165, and Siemens' contribution to this volume.

[15]See Lawtoo, *Phantom* and *Violence 2*.

dently of its designation, this modernist unconscious includes psychic phenomena like influence, contagion, and simulation that, within the novel, lead to the excess of Dorian's aesthetic life and to his moral decay. On the side of art, a mirroring inversion ensues insofar as the aesthetic picture does not simply represent Dorian's appearance but, rather, registers the impressions of the unconscious transformation of his plastic soul. What Deleuze and Guattari say of the tropes of "the picture or photo" that are "constant" in Kafka designating "states or figures of desire" (*Kafka* 51) that transgress the logic of pictorial representation, applies to Dorian's picture and, at one remove, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as well. What Wilde's picture adds is that not only "states of desire" but also figures of minor mimesis (impressions, influences, contagion, plasticity) play a key role in the logic of metamorphosis, which does not mean that mimesis needs to be territorialized with an Oedipal triangle predicated on the logic of mimetic desire.

This is the moment to stress that Wilde's theory of minor mimesis cannot be territorialized with Oedipal triangles of Freudian, and, more recently, Girardian inspiration that provide a transhistorical universal structure, or form, to account for the relation between mimesis and desire. On the contrary, it proposes steps for immanent, materialist, and embodied processes of unconscious imitation that change historically, open the ego to socio-political forces outside, and find in a Dionysian and highly contagious dramatic *pathos* the source of mirroring and embodied effects that operate on the side of life. In *The Picture* there are multiple manifestations of Dionysian microimitations that induce metamorphoses in malleable and plastic characters: from Dorian's spellbound imitation of Lord Henry that leads him to become an "echo" (*Picture* 183) of somebody else's soul to Sybil's dramatic impersonation of Shakespearean models whereby she "often mimicked death on the stage" (257), from Basil's homoerotic suggestibility to Dorian, which brings about "an entirely new mode of style" (177) to Dorian's Dionysian and orgiastic parties animated by intoxicating "drums" (281), among other plastic figurations of mimetic pathos,[16] minor mimesis occupies a major role in Wilde's famous novel.

[16]Interestingly, the plastic, and in our sense, mimetic implications of literary figurations are already at play in the etymology of the concept of "figura" itself. As Auerbach notes, "Originally *figura*, from the same stem as *fingere*, *figulus*, *factor*, and *effigies*, meant 'plastic form'"; and paving the way for deconstructive philosophers like Lacoue-Labarthe, Auerbach specifies that for the Greeks, "*typos,* 'imprint' and *plasis*, *plasma*, 'plastic form,' were often rendered by *figura* as the radical *fig-* suggested. From the meaning of *typos* developed the use of *figura* as 'imprint of the seal,' a metaphor with a venerable history running from Aristotle….to Dante (*come figura in cera si suggella*)" ("Figura" 11, 15)—or, we should specify, back to Plato as well (see Lawtoo, "Plasticity").

And yet, it is the picture itself that comes closest, not to representing, but rather, to registering the unconscious states of plastic imitation and the metamorphic (dis)figuration it entails. Central to the novel and crucial to tracing processes of becoming other, *The Picture* is a pivotal early-modernist text that leads from minor literature to mimetic studies. Dorian is, in fact, painfully aware of what he calls the "horrible sympathy that existed between him and the picture" (*Picture* 89). Sympathy is, of course, a mimetic affect for it entails a sharing (*sym*) of affect (*pathos*) that troubles individuation and transforms a plastic and porous ego. Calling attention to a Dionysian *sym-pathos* that blurs the boundaries dividing the picture and his soul, self and other, and, by extension, art and life within the novel and, at one remove, in Wilde's life as well, Wilde relies on free-indirect speech to come as close to the aesthetic pathos of mimesis as possible while retaining a narrative diegetic and critical distance. Since this oscillation or tension between proximity to pathos and critical distance, or pathos of distance, constitutes the palpitating heart that sets mimetic studies in motion, the passage is worth quoting in full:

> Might there not be some curious scientific reason for it all? If thought could exercise its influence upon a living organism, might not thought exercise an influence upon dead and inorganic things? Nay without thought or conscious desire, might not things external to ourselves vibrate in unison with our moods and passions, atom calling to atom in secret love or strange affinity? But the reason was of no importance…For there would be a real pleasure in watching it. He would be able to follow his mind into its secret places. This portrait would be to him the most magical of mirrors. As it had revealed to him his own body, so it would reveal to him his own soul. (*Picture* 89)

Clearly, this magical mirror qua picture transgresses the laws of imitation based on realistic representation. It registers subliminal atomistic vibrations that entangle the pathos of hedonistic influences and the pleasure of intoxicating Dionysian experiences, generating a vibrant mimesis that is of materialist orientation and permeates what Jane Bennett, joining forces with the mimetic turn, would call "an atmospheric of mimetic inflection" (*Influx* 33): not only "moods and passions," but also "atom calling to atom" in a magical sym-pathetic affinity that inclines the subject, as in a Lucretian *clinamen*, toward the simulacrum, generating material revelations that blur the porous boundary between body and soul, psyche and soma, ego and alter ego. This unveiling should not be confused with a metaphysical unconcealment predicated on the (Heideggerian) logic of *aletheia*. Rather, it calls for an experimental (Nietzschean) aesthetics based on immanent (Dio-

nysian) experiences that open up lines of flight from the moralistic strictures of Victorian society. In the process, it provides an Ariadne's thread to "secret places" in the labyrinth of Dorian's unconscious, a mimetic unconscious that considers the mind or soul in a mirroring relation with the body and does not call for Oedipal interpretations but for physio-psychological explorations instead.

From the perspective of minor mimesis, then, Dorian's Dionysian experimentations in the labyrinth of the unconscious is more future-oriented than previously realized. It operates on neurological mirroring principles that, although Wilde/Dorian considers "of no importance," have found "curious scientific reasons" in recent years and are currently generating a neuro turn in the humanities. For instance, the discovery of mirror neurons in the 1990s (first in monkeys and then in humans as well) is based on mirroring neuronal reflexes that connect movements perceived to sensations registered via what Vittorio Gallese calls "unconscious mimesis" (94). While this discovery is now well-known and has already generated considerable debates in the humanities, especially in connection to René Girard's theory of mimetic desire and rivalry,[17] its more direct link to mimetic studies is only now receiving attention.[18] The discovery of mirror neurons, in fact, confirms molecular processes of unconscious imitation, which find important anticipations in marginalized social theorists and precursors of mimetic studies like Gabriel Tarde. In *The Laws of Imitation* (1890), for instance, Tarde considered the widespread realization among advocates of the mimetic unconscious that "'there is in the nervous system an innate tendency for imitation' ['*il y a dans le système nerveux un tendance innée à l'imitation*']" (148; my trans.). On the shoulders of Tarde, in *A Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari take a first step toward minor mimesis by introducing the notion of "microimitation" that reframes "*imitation [as] the propagation of a flow*" (241). Far from being restricted to a dominant idealist metaphysics that reduces imitation or mimesis to the logic of the Same, genealogists like Deleuze sometimes recognize, like Nietzsche before them, that imitation can equally be constitutive of immanent processes, or flows, of becoming different. Yet, as they do not theorize mimesis as such, their diagnostic of imitative flows and the affective contagion it entails needs to be reframed in the transdisciplinary context of mimetic studies to which Wilde now also belongs.

[17]See Garrels.
[18]See *Violence 2*, 159-196.

A broader genealogical reframing consists in reinscribing Wilde in an immanent modernist tradition that goes from Tarde to Nietzsche, D. H. Lawrence to Conrad, Bataille to Arendt, Cavarero to Connolly to contemporary advocates of the mimetic turn or re-turn who recognize that an unconscious imitation central to the modernist dissolution of the ego continues to open up subjectivity to social and political transformations at play in the present as well.[19] The mimetic unconscious not only leads humans to respond to the affects of the others via mirroring mechanisms that may have been dismissed as magical in the past century, yet turn out to be based on an imperceptible pathos that can be registered from a scientific distance in the present century; it also leads *homo mimeticus* to respond to images, including moving images that may be epistemically false, yet are endowed with the mimetic powers of the false. What Deleuze and Guattari say of the process of becoming animal internal to minor literature applies to the process of becoming homo mimeticus as well, unsurprisingly so since the latter is a mimetic animal: "all forms dissolve…to the benefit of non-formed matter of deterritorialized flux…nothing else than movements, vibrations" (*Kafka* 24), mimetic vibrations that are currently generating genealogical bridges between new materialism and mimetic studies.[20] Wilde's supplement to the minor tradition is that he puts mimesis to narrative, dramatic, and theoretical use to set this vibrant and deterritorializing process in motion. What ensues is a picture of vibrant-mirroring-unconscious processes of becoming other rather than as a static image that represents an *imago* of the ego as the same. Minor mimesis is thus not a form with clear contours; on the contrary, it deforms the very contours of individuation. Microimitation is not based on the mirroring logic of representation; rather, it generates mirroring-vibratory-contagious reflexes that trigger processes of metamorphic transformation.

In sum, what we take home from this first genealogical mime act to shift minor literature toward mimetic studies is the following point: Deleuze and Guattari's general reliance on the *major* metaphysical conception of mimesis as representation leads them to set up a rigid opposition between vertical trees and horizontal rhizomes that do not account of the embodied, affective, and relational "mimetic inclinations" (Cavarero and Lawtoo) that cut across this binary. Genealogists are now in a position to see that there is no reason to set up a

[19]See for instance Lacoue-Labarthe, Borch-Jacobsen, Connolly, *Aspirational*, and Lawtoo, *(New) Fascism*.

[20]See Bennett, "Mimesis" and Lawtoo, *Homo Mimeticus*, 255-276.

blockage for alternative conceptualizations of minor mimesis. On the contrary, the reflections internal to Wilde's magical mirror makes us see and feel that a minor theory of mimesis can be put to productive and affirmative use to account for flows of unconscious processes of becoming other that are as constitutive of minor literature as they are of mimetic studies. These flows, or lines of flight, also open up both literature and mimesis to the political—which leads us to the second act toward performative mimesis.

Mime Act II: Performative Mimesis

Second Act. As Deleuze and Guattari make clear from the very first pages of *Kafka*, their definition of minor literature does not rely on marginalized languages, or *langue mineure*. It is rather a question of what a "minority does in a major language [*langue majeure*]" (29). Kafka's Prague German, his Jewish heritage, and Czech influences, they claim, inject nomadic, deterritorializing tendencies into his use of High German that make it stutter, so to speak, not unlike Irish writes like James Joyce and Samuel Beckett do with English, and in the case of Beckett, French as well. Wilde can now be aligned with this Irish-British-French genealogy in minor literature. Closer to the "exuberance" of Joyce than to the "dryness" (*sécheresse*) of Beckett (*Kafka* 35), Wilde's intensive use of the epigrammatic style finds in the dramatization of minor mimesis a key transgressive, ironic, and destabilizing principle at play in the mimetic turn more generally.

If authors central to mimetic studies so far have tended to stress a tragic view of life, Wilde provides a balancing corrective in his Janus-faced ability to dramatize both tragic and comic pathos. Of course, tragedy remains central to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and culminates in "the simplicity of pathos" (*De Profundis* 116) that drives *Epistola: in Carcere et Vinculis* as well as *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. And yet, consistently in his oeuvre, Wilde relies on the compressed form of the epigram to channel crystals of patho-logical expressive content via paradoxical mirroring inversions imbued with both tragic/comic affect (or *pathos*) and logical thoughts (or *logos*) at play in his performative poetics.[21]

[21]Camille Paglia overturns Nietzsche's categories of Apollonian and Dionysian mimesis to account for Wilde's style as she writes: "His epigrams turn language from the Dionysian Many into the Apollonian One," for, she claims, "the epigram thwarts real dialogue" as it is based on a "rhetorical self-containment" that generates "Aristocratic solitude" (118). We shall see that the Apollonian/Dionysian binary cuts both ways as Wilde relies on the mirroring (Apollonian) self-contained form of the epigram to introduce multiplicity of (Dionysian) meanings that transgress self-containment and work in favor a protean conception of performativity.

Wilde's comic vibrations are most visibly at play in the comedy of manners and offer an important supplement to what Deleuze and Guattari consider a key, and often neglected, characteristic of Kafka's minor literature, namely, his gay ability to laugh: "it is an author who laughs, profoundly joyous of a joy for life [*joie de vivre*]" (75), they write. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) in particular, Wilde stages this *joie de vivre* via a dramatic performance that is not only linguistic but also embodied, nor solely subversive of metaphysical ideals but also productive of affective contagion. In the process, Wilde's performative mimesis provides steps toward a gay science of mimesis that is not opposed to the tragic one but supplements a joyous principle to a Janus-faced homo mimeticus. He does so via mirroring mimetic pathologies that trigger a contagious laughter for spectators and readers to feel with pathos, while also stimulating a revolutionary, perhaps even anarchic thought, or *logos* that reaches into the present.[22]

Once again, what Deleuze and Guattari say of Kafka's steps toward minor literature mirrors what we could say of Wilde's steps toward minor mimesis and the dramatic performances it foregrounds: "Never has there been a more comic author from the point of view of desire" (*Kafka* 77). It is true that Wilde's aesthetic of joy is most clearly at play from the angle of a performative mimesis that appears to channel homoerotic desire within a seemingly conventional, familial—perhaps even Oedipal—marriage plot. Still, if triangles of mimetic desire and the rivalry that ensues are constantly alluded to, the play never conforms to the territorial and violent logic of mimetic desire as René Girard understands it. Thus, a triangular structure of desire does not turn rivals into "enemy brothers" qua "monstrous doubles" (Girard 143) but, rather, reveals doubles as mirroring and competitive yet still friendly brothers. Moreover, affective fusions do not generate what Girard calls a "crisis of difference" or "nondifferentiation" (56) constitutive of his mimetic theory. On the contrary, theatrical confusions generate mirroring interplays predicated on the logic of *sym-pathos* that blurs the boundaries between self and others on stage while also channeling comic pathos offstage in contagious ways registered by mimetic studies from Plato to Nietzsche, Wilde to Tarde. In short, if the telos of the play is a territorial and rather conventional genealogical practice such as marriage, the plot itself is imbued with troubling, deterritorializing, and perhaps even revolutionary mirroring effects that have received renewed attention at the twilight of the past century.

[22]For a recent genealogy of anarchism by a philosopher contributing to mimetic studies, see Malabou, *Au Voleur*.

The laughter triggered by Wilde's most famous play testifies to gay pleasures that are constitutive of the troubling logic of queer desire and have done much to revitalize Wilde studies in the 1990s. As Jonathan Dollimore puts it in *Sexual Dissidence*: "not only are Wilde's conceptions of subjectivity and desire anti-essentialist but so too—and consequently—is his advocacy of transgression. It is as if deviant desire rather than creating a new integrity of self, in part, just disperses the self" (14). If this desire is mimetic, then, it is not because it conforms to heteronormative Oedipal roles. Rather, it is mimetic in the sense that it decenters subjectivity revealing, among other sexual transgressions, that "gender is an act, as it were, that is open to splitting, self-parodies" (Butler 146), including of course splitting of identities that are constitutive of *homo mimeticus*.

What we must add is that what was true for *The Picture of Dorian Gray* remains true for *The Importance of Being Earnest*: performative mimesis is not restricted to a doubling of reality and the (deconstruction of) binaries it entails (copy/original, true identity/false identity…). It is also generative of double lives—what Deleuze and Guattari would call a "doubling [*dédoublement*] of both subjects" (*Kafka* 61)—on which Wilde's gay science of minor mimesis based on life imitating art finds its major composition of expression. Based on double lives, Apollonian surfaces, Dionysian pleasures, but also *double entendres*, mirroring inversions, and comic yet troubling destabilizations of identities based on the logic of the same (in terms of genealogy, class, gender, and sexuality), *The Importance* is Wilde's most accomplished experimentation with a gay science of mimesis that is performative in nature, generates contagious effects based on all too imitative instincts, and opens up performative possibilities for creation and flight that are as personal as they are political. Hence, they require a closer scrutiny at the intersection between performativity and mimesis internal to the play itself.

Within the play, the subversive practice of "Bunburying" based on the impersonation of a second, presumably "false" identity, generates possibilities for double lives in the country and the city for a *homo duplex* that is already more than double but quadruple. In fact, the play stages the mirroring double lives of both Jack/Earnest and Algernon/Earnest dramatized by actors who literally perform the mimetic principle that *Je est un autre*. And yet, Bunburying is not only a mimetic means for the male protagonists to get in touch with forbidden homoerotic desires that can only be linguistically alluded to in the play. It is also a source of mimetic pleasure itself for this transgressive practice allows characters to multiply identities in a series of redoublings that find in

the performative power of language, but also of acting more generally, its revolutionary potential.

Let us recall that in his seminal *How to Do Things With Words*, J. L. Austin stressed how performative speech acts, contrary to constative speech acts, do not simply "describe" or "report" an action; rather in performative speech acts "the uttering of the sentence [say, "I promise" or 'I declare you husband and wife'] is, or is part of, the doing of the action" (5). Words not only describe things; they also *do* things. Influential during the linguistic turn, this definition of the performative, continues to inform queer and transfeminist studies that stress the constructivist, linguistic, and discursive dimension of subject formation in general and sexuality in particular. As we have seen, this remains a productive line of inquiry that deconstructs essentialist binaries in performative terms Wilde helped prefigure almost a century before the linguistic turn. That said, when it comes to the performative powers of fiction, speech act theory still betrays an ontological bias that favors language and meaning over affect and sensations. Hence it does not capture the whole embodied and contagious spectrum of performative powers at play in art in general and in the theater in particular. For instance, Austin states that "a performative utterance will, for example, be *in a particular way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in a soliloquy" (22). This may be true at the level of meaning or intelligibility, which is "the particular way" Austin has in mind as he defines, in a rather classical (Platonic) move, the actor's mimetic language as "used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use" (22).

And yet, didn't deconstruction trouble precisely these ontological binaries between parasite and host, outside and inside, copy and original passed down since the dawn of metaphysics?[23] As Derrida aptly recognizes, the figure of the "mime" ("Signature" 325, n.13) and the non-serious performative communications it entails (poetry, rhetoric, sophistry) is at the center of an exclusion that goes from Plato to Austin and returned with a poststructuralist vengeance in the past century. More recently, Barbara Cassin returns to supplement Austin's speech act theory via a "genealogy of performativity [*performatif*]" (40) that finds in sophistry a privileged starting point and gives due credit to the power of mimetic fiction—most notably Homer with/contra Plato—to reveal how "being is an effect of saying" (62). Nietzschean

[23]On Derrida's critique of this passage in Austin, see Derrida, "Signature" 325; on the host/parasite deconstruction, see also Miller; on the parasite's link to mimesis see Miller and Lawtoo.

in its overturning of perspective that is perfectly in line with mimetic studies' desire to go beyond "ancient quarrels" (Lawtoo, *Phantom* 8-12)—most notably Plato with/contra Homer—Cassin's "logological" account of *speech* acts remains nonetheless very bound to the performative powers of "logos" understood as "discourse" but also "language," "words," "literary genres" (Cassin 81-82) as a privileged medium of communication. As such it still requires a *patho*-logical supplement that gives more credit to the immanent powers of bodily, gestural, and affective pathos to generate performative effects.

While deconstructive critics have done much to destabilize and overturn the parasite/host binary in the past century, mimetic studies should add that fictions—from novels to poetry, drama to film, TV to new digital media—especially when dramatized by actors or mimes (though not only) have all too real performative effects on bodies and minds that go beyond truth/falsity, host/parasite, fiction/reality binaries, yet have the material, immanent and contagious powers to mimetically transform subjectivity in the modern and contemporary age. Take for instance the performative dimension of acting already internal to the name "Ernest" that provides a duplicity on which moral qualities of sincerity and transgressive practices of double lives are played out. If Gwendolen claims that the "only safe name is Ernest" (*Importance* 15) one should not hasten to condemn this perspective as superficial, frivolous, or vaporous. In fact, throughout the play the name is said to "produce vibrations" (15) that are as linguistic as they are material, as much based on doing things with words (or performative speech acts) as on doing things with mimesis (or performative mime acts).

If speech acts informed the linguistic turn and are by now well-known, mime acts currently inform the mimetic turn. They go beyond life and art binaries and are not restricted to intelligible linguistic meanings that slide on a chain of signifiers. Rather, mime acts include the more generalized sphere of embodied affects, sensations, and mirroring actions and reactions that as Plato well understood, are magnetizing in nature and lead art or fiction to form and transform reality or life of subjects living a "*vita mimetica*" (Lawtoo, *Homo Mimeticus* 69-91). Despite his emphasis on writing, Derrida, as a careful reader of Bataille, was well placed to recognize that one may "communicate a movement, or that a tremor, a shock, a displacement can be communicated" ("Signature" 309). Nietzsche, before Bataille went further as he placed such bodily forms of mimetic communication at the

"origins of language" (*Gay* §354: 297-300).[24] Now, as a classicist and dramatist well-versed in the performative powers of theatrical fictions in the formation and transformation of subjectivity that already preoccupied Plato for ethical and political reasons at the dawn of mimetic studies,[25] Wilde is indeed well positioned to take performativity beyond linguistic principles. This entails entangling the pleasure principle that drives his hedonistic aestheticism with hypermimetic, yet all too real mirroring principles at play on bodies and minds, as well as in the body politic more generally.

In minor literature everything is political, write Deleuze and Guattari, thinking of the revolutionary potential of a productive conception of desire; and this equally applies to Wilde performative mimesis he dramatizes. The powers of mime acts to generate double identities open up possibilities for becoming other by marrying across class boundaries and engaging in homoerotic pleasures beyond heteronormative sexual boundaries. Still, to this day, critics trace latent Oedipal/structural meanings predicated on the "Name [*nom*] of the father" (Craft 147) under more manifest mimetic meanings. If we resist the reflex of interpretation predicated on dominant models of the unconscious and continue to explore the aesthetic surface Wilde takes the trouble to dramatize, it becomes apparent that the paradoxical movements of double lives cannot be restricted within triangular Oedipal/linguistic structures that equally inform what Deleuze and Guattari call "sad psychoanalytical interpretations" of Kafka (*Kafka* 17)—although the power of Wilde's gay science of mimesis is that it renders even these interpretations both joyous and gay. Rather, double lives redouble identities generating mime acts of affective contagion that proliferate on a horizontal/rhizomatic (rather than vertical/arboreal) plane of immanence, blurring the boundaries between main characters and minor characters, masters and servants, aristocrats and working people in mirroring/hypermimetic ways endowed with revolutionary potential.

The master-servant dialogue at the beginning of the play is exemplary in this respect for it already subverts a number of social hierarchies that will be destabilized in the middle and recomposed ironically in the end. A few lines into the play and a cascading effect of mirroring inversions are immediately staged: the servant (Lane), in fact, disregards the master (Algernon) playing the piano as he says, "I

[24]I discuss in more detail Bataille's theory of mimetic communication in Lawtoo, *Phantom* 209-280, and Nietzsche's genealogy of language in Lawtoo, *Homo Mimeticus* 43-68.

[25]See also Borch-Jacobsen's contribution in this special issue and Lawtoo, *Homo Mimeticus*, ch.2.

didn't think it polite to listen, sir" (*Importance* 1), admits to drinking champagne which servants "invariably drink" "due to the superior quality of the wine" (2), among other working class subversions that, Wilde implies, should serve as a "good example" (2) for the aristocracy to imitate in life. If the play has been read from the top down as "a reactionary political poem which takes aristocratic style as the supreme embodiment of life as art" (Paglia 134), the opening mime act suggest the opposite is true: it makes clear that the mimetic interplay between masters and slave subverts rigid hierarchies via embodied practices that endow these lines with a revolutionary potential transgressing, from the bottom up, what has been read as a "Platonic form of aristocracy" (134).

The subversive power of imitation is thus staged from the beginning—as a "good example" for the Victorian audience to imitate as well. Interestingly, this so-called example is called "Lane," perhaps in a linguistic allusion to the narrow roads or lanes in the countryside where the practice of Bunburying takes the protagonist. Redoubling the mimetic practices of class subversion, the name introduces lines of flight equally connected to Victoria Station, the deterritorializing locus of cosmopolitan transition, social movements, and speedy modernization that is at the supposed "origin" of Jack's confusion of identity without proper origins. This minor lane in the background, then, already introduces nomadic lines of flight staged in the foreground that flow between the fractures of class/gendered/sexual structures the plot pursues, beginning middle, and end. The philosophical potential of the play's plot (or *muthos*) in particular and Wilde's gay science of mimesis in general consists, then, not only in bringing mimesis back on the side of the theatricality of life within the sphere of his dramatic art; his training in classics, hedonistic sensibility, theatrical practices, and performative personality (from Latin, *persona*, mask worn in the theater) led him to enact mimetic, or rather, hypermimetic principles at play in a dramatic life as well. Not unlike his fictional alter ego, Bunbury, Wilde will eventually die in Paris. Whether he did so in earnest, we do not know. Still, Dorian Gray's fictional point is not without resonances for Wilde's life as well: "the whole book seemed to him to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it" (*Picture* 105).

More than interpretations that look for meaning below the surface, Wilde's hypermimetic poetics encourages future critics and theorists in mimetic studies to scrutinize aesthetic surfaces for destabilizing mirroring effects that operate performatively on the side of life. If

mimetic studies will continue to require an aesthetic education based on the close reading of art, it also encourages new practices of mimetic experimentation to capture the contagious effects of a plurality of mime acts now massively at play in hypermimetic lives—imitating art but not only. As Wilde ironically puts it, under the mask of Lady Bracknell: "Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square" (*Importance* 17). A linguistic machine staged for producing laughter is endowed with a contagious pathos not deprived of critical logos. Wilde's dramatic patho-logies continue to generate mirroring inversions that shake the foundations of our mimetic education. His gay science of mimesis not only still makes us laugh with a laughter that communicates itself contagiously from self to other, fiction to life; it also paves the way for future developments on the centrality of mimesis and its protean avatars (mimicry, simulation, contagion, mirror neurons, plasticity, performativity etc.) central to a plurality of perspectives that are currently advocating a mimetic turn, or *re*-turn of minor mimesis attentive to the powers of imitation on the side of life.

Wilde's contribution to mimetic studies, I have argued in two mime acts, is Janus-faced: he looks back to dramatic principles constitutive of minor literature in the past century to better look ahead to hyper-mimetic principles center stage in the present century. Whether this self-proclaimed artist as critic can still serve as an example (among others) for critics as artists to further mimetic studies in the present and the future, remains to be seen.

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