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PRELUDE

THE DISCUS AND THE BOW

Homer, Machiavelli, and the *Grandissimi Esempi*

Nidesh Lawtoo

From time to time, opposition to Homer
rose up from the deepest foundations of Hellenism;
but he always remained victorious.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human I*

Mimetic studies creates new concepts to diagnose the immanent patho(-)logies of homo mimeticus in the twenty-first century. Concepts, just like theories, do not come down ready-made from the sky of ideas; nor do they emerge from the solipsistic head of *Homo sapiens* considered in isolation. Rather, concepts emerge genealogically from logical and affective encounters with a long chain of thinkers generative of a productive interplay between pathos and logos. Often, in fact, new concepts emerge via agonistic intellectual confrontations with influential predecessors that are not simply antagonists or rivals but, rather, serve as models on whose shoulders younger generations can push against—with agonistic gratitude in view of going further. Over time, and not without efforts and good doses of perseverance, if a diagonal field is opened up, concepts sometimes become interwoven to form a longer chain, or conceptual network, which allows for innovative communications moving back and forth across periods, disciplines, and traditions of thought.

Following up on volume 1, the present volume connects genealogically a long chain of untimely thinkers to form precisely such a theoretical network. To broaden its ramifications, in guise of Prelude, I flesh out three additional

conceptual rings in a chain that is not meant to constrain movement or imprisonment, as in Plato's cave but, rather, to channel pathos and set new patho-*logies* in motion. Re-turning to the dawn of western myth to a foundational scene that gives birth to the concept of mimetic agonism in Homer's *Odyssey* (ca. 8th C. BC) will allow us to pick up a conceptual discus and propel it further in time, toward the Renaissance that started the re-turns to mimesis in the first place. Not without Homeric echoes, Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1513) will then provide us with a theoretical bow that fleshes out new conceptual arrows that reach into the present. But let us proceed in order by stepping back to a Homeric contest, or agon, that set mimetic studies into motion in the first place.

Conceptual Arrows for Mimetic Studies

We have already seen in volume 1 how a conceptual trilogy—namely, “mimetic pathos,” “pathos of distance,” and “patho(-)logy”—provide a theoretical matrix, or womb, out of which mimetic studies is born. These three concepts, let us stress it again, do not form an a-historical structure or universal system aimed to be mechanically applied to cultural, aesthetic, or political phenomena from the origins of culture to the present. On the contrary, they set in motion a complex contradictory double movement between attraction to pathos and critical distance to mimetic pathologies. This movement, in turn, is endowed with the theoretical power, or *dunamis*, to keep up with the spiraling transformations of homo mimeticus in its multiple and often paradoxical patho(-)logical manifestations.

What we now need to further specify in guise of Prelude is that the next conceptual trilogy informing volume 2—namely, “mimetic agonism,” “hypermimesis,” and the “mimetic unconscious”—provides three additional conceptual arrows that allow contributors to further extend the network of mimetic studies to new areas of investigation. Let us introduce these arrows individually first, before foregrounding the conceptual discus that gives them a direction, providing a resounding note that resonates throughout the volume more generally.

First Arrow: Mimetic Agonism

This is a performative concept in the sense that it itself emerges out of the agonistic dynamic it accounts for. Mimetic agonism is, in fact, meant as a productive

supplement to the Girardian concept of mimetic rivalry. If the latter's theory of desire leads inevitably to a rivalry with a model in view of possessing the same object of desire, our focus on mimetic pathos is neither deterministic nor unilateral in its diagnostic evaluation. On the contrary, it opens up a type of competitive yet creative and productive intellectual confrontation, or contest (*agon*), with predecessors that is not simply generative of pathological violence but, rather, of new creative insights and theoretical patho-*logies* instead.

First described in the context of Nietzsche's philosophical agon with his intellectual models qua educators, the beginnings of mimetic agonism go way back to pre-Platonic, and thus Homeric times.¹ A genealogical starting point can be traced back to an ancient Greek culture dominated by what Nietzsche's colleague at Basel, the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt, calls "agonal age" (1998, 160–213), a period spanning from the twelfth to the sixth century BC. Part of a noble spirit of competition at play in a plurality of contests, from gymnastic to chariot racing, dance to music, epic poetry to tragedy, stretching to include philosophy as well,² the agon was central to the education and formation of the Greeks. It informs the history of culture, and might continue to transform our education today.

One must turn to myth to find, if not an origin, at least a starting point to push the mimetic turn further. The *dunamis* or power of mimetic agonism is perhaps most famously dramatized in Book 8 of Homer's *Odyssey*, a pivotal book where Odysseus, invited at the court of King Alcinous, asks a blind rhapsode called Demodocus if he "can sing the story about the Wooden Horse" and show that he is truly "blessed with inspiration" (Homer 2020, 8.499).³ This is a *mise en abyme* if there is one. The scene is thus not deprived of mirroring effects and affects that reach—via a chain of listeners and readers—into the present: if the blind rhapsode alludes to Homer, the song also leads Odysseus to be moved to tears by pathos—though "no one noticed that his eyes were wet with tears, except Alcinous" (8.532–533). Wrapped in his purple robe, he is moved to reveal his identity that is no(t) one.

Odysseus is not only *polymētis* (cunning), but also *polytropos* (of many turns), for he twists and turns assuming different roles: he is King and warrior, pirate and lover, husband and friend, carpenter and thief, sailor and liar, father and beggar, rhetorician and trickster, among other protean masks of a homo mimeticus that is both vulnerable to contagious pathologies such as violence and revenge and, at the same time, and without contradiction, is able to rely on his cunning logos to generate life-affirmative patho-*logies*. How does this mythic figure, then, reveal a paradoxical identity that is no(t) one for he is presumably

everyone? By narrating “himself,” in mimetic speech, who he “is.” Thus, he tells the journey that now bears “his” name. “I am Odysseus, Laertes’s son / known for my many clever tricks and lies” (9.21), and so on, you know the myth of that self-proclaimed “lord of lies” (21.73). Another designation would be, of course, lord of mimesis.

But the pathos of the mimetic agon does not concern only poetry and the “lies” it presumably dramatizes. During the day, in fact, the Phaeacian had organized games, which, to this day, provide the mythic model for the Olympic games. Challenged to prove his athletic skills by youngsters, Odysseus initially refuses. He does so by taking some distance from the competitive pathos internal to the challenge. As he puts it: “now I only want to get back home” (Homer 2020, 8.157). But as the agon turns rivalrous and offensive and a youngster accuses Odysseus to be “no athlete” (8.165), his agonistic strife or *Eris* is awakened. This does not mean that rivalry turns into violence. On the contrary, it turns into a contest (*agon*) to prove both his skill (*technē*) and excellence (*arête*) as he says: “you have challenged me and stung my heart. / Despite my suffering, I will compete” (8.185–186). Odysseus does so by seizing what Homer describes as “a massive discus, heavier than that used by the others.” And then, dramatizing this athletic turn, the poet adds:

He spun around, drew back
his arm and from his brawny hand he hurled.
The stone went humming [*bombēsen*] (8.188–191)

Athena is mimetically disguised in the crowd via a mimicry she shares with the owl that bears her name (Minerva) and makes her—and sometimes Odysseus as well—imperceptible during the day. We are told that she “marked the spot,” and concludes: “A blind man, stranger, could discern this mark by groping. It is far ahead than all the others” (8.197–198). A pioneering practitioner of the agon, we find in this nomadic character without a proper identity on the way home an exemplary model who, in his best agonistic moments, is perhaps still worthy of imitation today—not simply physically but intellectually as well. In any case, Athena joyfully concludes: “You can celebrate!” (8.198).

Striving to reach his natal home, in this founding scene of mimetic agonism, Odysseus’ strife (*Eris*) is, in fact, not driven by envy, “jealousy,” and “resentment” characteristic of what Jacob Burckhardt, following Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, calls “bad *Eris*” (1998, 165)—that will only reappear toward the end of the *Odyssey* in Odysseus’s violent confrontation with the suitors occupying his

home, which leads to a brutal escalation.⁴ Here, during the games organized by the Phaeacians, Odysseus' agon is animated by a noble spirit of competition driven by bad *Eris*' positive counterpart: namely, "good *Eris*," which as Burckhardt reminds us "was the first to be born" and was placed by Cronos at "the very root of the earth" (165). Indeed, if bad *Eris* is characterized by sad passions central to mimetic rivalry and violence that threaten more than ever to escalate today, mimetic agonism finds in good *Eris* its genealogical starting point to promote life-affirmative possibilities and festive celebrations rooted here on earth.

What was true in Johan Huizinga's account of "homo ludens" (Huizinga 2016) remains true for our account of homo mimeticus: the separate space of games, including intellectual games, has the quasi-magical power to contain all too human violence in order to channel it, via measured confrontations between worthy contenders, toward agonistic, productive, and ultimately creative use. That massive discus—you will have understood the *mise en abyme*—has a mirroring counterpart...in a massive concept: namely, mimesis. Collectively, contributors to this volume picked it up from our mythic past; we then used the (will to) power of the ancient agon to hurl it into the future. Titled "Discus Thrower" the image on the cover of this book outlines precisely this gesture. Michaela Lawtoo does so by not simply representing a discobolus from a stabilizing visual distance; on the contrary, she captures the destabilizing power, or pathos of throwing the discus itself via a dynamic, spiraling brushstroke that artistically performs the *re-turns* to mimesis.⁵

Still central to classical quarrels between philosophy and poetry (Plato contra Homer comes to mind), the *re-productive* dynamic of mimetic agonism continues to silently inform intellectual and creative confrontations from ancient to modern quarrels (*les anciens contre les modernes* come to mind); it resurfaces in the modernist period and, we contend, it continues to inform mimetic studies in the present period as well. After mimetic theory's obsessive focus on the jealousy, rivalry, and resentment of bad *Eris*, it seems indeed vital to recuperate its positive and forgotten counterpart: namely, the productive, generous, yet still competitive spirit of good *Eris*, which, as Burckhardt puts it, "awakens even the indolent and unskilled to industry" (1998, 165). This turn from bad *Eris* to good *Eris*, from the violence of mimetic rivalry to the creation of mimetic agonism is more urgent than ever. In times of planetary crises that include the re-turn of escalating wars, we already have ample manifestations of bad *Eris*. No scapegoating mechanisms are likely to put an end to them—on the contrary, these mechanisms are constitutive of the escalating logic of violence itself. Alternative diagnostics and therapies are thus needed. Philosophical physicians, in fact, remember that crisis (from *krino*)

indicate a medical judgment or diagnostic marking the critical decision in which a patient will live or die.

Without ignoring the violence of bad or pathological Eris, mimetic studies strives to turn to good or patho-logical Eris for vital inspiration. It is perhaps no genealogical accident that in order to “face the planetary” (Connolly 2017, 4), as William E. Connolly urges us to do, chapters in this volume turn to a type of strife rooted in the materiality of the earth. This entails, among other things, furthering a vibrant conception of mimesis that goes beyond nature–culture binaries, as Jane Bennett’s contributions to the mimetic turn also suggest.⁶ In the process, we shall propose a return to nature as a “model” to imitate, perhaps even as a “mentor” who can teach us the virtue of “measure,” as Henry Dicks’s account of “biomimicry” as a revolutionary philosophy (Dicks 2023) indicates. There are thus performative properties built in mimetic agonism to be pursued further, which leads us to the next conceptual arrow.

Second Arrow: Hypermimesis

If mimetic agonism looks back, genealogically, to better look forward to the creation of new concepts, *hypermimesis* provides its mirroring counterpart. It takes as a starting point the future-oriented concept of “hyperreality,” defined by Jean Baudrillard as a type of “simulation” that no longer rests on the logic of “imitation” or “doubling” for it entails a “generation by models of a real without origins or reality: a hyperreal” (1981, 11, 10). Defined at the dawn of the digital revolution, this world of hyperreal simulations prefigures the replacement of reality by digital simulacra that do not simply represent an external reference that would serve as a model, along the traditional lines of aesthetic realism. On the contrary, as Guy Debord was quick to note, it is the “spectacle that constitutes the contemporary model for the dominant form of social life” (Debord 1992, 17; my transl.). The implications of this overturning move are far-reaching not only for mimetic studies but for the entire history of metaphysics. As Nietzsche would say, such an overturning dissolves the very distinction between copy and original, the “true world” and what he called, in an ironic overturning of Platonism, the “*apparent one*” (Nietzsche 1982b, 486). We now live, or attempt to live, in what Morpheus, echoing Baudrillard in *The Matrix*, calls the “desert of the real.”

What we must add in this echo chamber is that an immanent philosophical tradition encourages not only to dismiss the ideal world as a fable; it also urges homo mimeticus not to forget its embodied, relational, and all too imitative nature rooted in the earth—lest we lose sight of the earthly cave in which we are

bound to live. This also means that hyperreal simulations no longer rest on the logic of mimesis understood as simple copy or representation of a pre-existing world; and yet, these simulations continue to generate all too real performative effects that operate on the brain-bodies of homo mimetics—and quite contagiously so. In the wake of artificial intelligence (AI) revolutions in which chatbots effectively simulate human language (GPT-4 being the latest version as I write), the risk that *homo mimeticus 2.0* will be increasingly dispossessed of its already limited agentic control over an ego that is not one but is a phantom ego instead will increase exponentially in the years to follow: from deepfakes to digital avatars, chatbots simulating human logos to simulacra generating all too human pathos, it should be clear to all by now that mimesis, understood in its plural manifestations that go beyond realism, is back—with a hypermimetic vengeance.

It is thus urgent to open up a new transdisciplinary field to study the insidious ways in which new AI phantoms driven by increasingly effective algorithms will take advantage of humans' all too mimetic tendency to believe phantoms that dispossess them of an already limited agentic control over a phantom ego. The proliferation of AI simulations that increasingly assume human roles, from the workspace to education, entertainment to politics is thus calling for new diagnostics of "posthuman mimesis" that are already underway animating homo mimeticus 2.0.⁷ They shall also continue to inform the plastic metamorphoses of *Homo Mimeticus III*, both consciously and, more often, unconsciously so. This leads us to the third and, for the moment, last conceptual ring in the chain we inscribe in the network of mimetic studies.

Third Arrow: The Mimetic Unconscious

For a long time, the unconscious has been limited to Freud's discovery. Still, historians of psychoanalysis have now confirmed that this concept has a long-neglected history that intersects productively with mimetic studies. Genealogical lenses reveal, in fact, that well before Freud, a number of philosophical physicians were sensitive to the involuntary nature of imitation rooted in an unconscious that is physiological, embodied, relational, and thus social in orientation. If this immanent unconscious has been mostly forgotten in the past Freudian century, under different names—be it cognitive, cerebral, or as we call, it mimetic—it is currently returning to the forefront of post-Freudian theoretical discussions in the present century.

This re-turn is, in many ways, long overdue. In the wake of influential critiques of the "repressive hypothesis" (Foucault 1976, 23-67) redoubled by

equally influential “anti-Oedipal” critiques of the unconscious staged within a familial and rather “classical order of representation” (Deleuze and Guattari 2008, 62), the mimetic unconscious has been waiting to reemerge from the shadow of Oedipus for quite some time. This is especially evident in theorists like Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari who rightly critique Freud for not seeing what a previous pre-Freudian tradition saw very well: namely, that “the unconscious itself is essentially a crowd” (2008, 33) traversed by what they call, following pioneer of mimetic studies Gabriel Tarde, “flows of microimitation” (241). Hence their claim that “*imitation is the propagation of a flow*” (241). In the wake of these and other feminist, queer, post-feminist critiques, it is somewhat surprising that whenever the question of the unconscious is concerned, scholars in the humanities tend to routinely rely on Oedipal or quasi-Oedipal models rooted in patriarchal myths or repressive legends.

The problem with legends is that they do not need to be historically true to continue informing or disinforming the public imagination. As the historian of psychology Henry Ellenberger has shown, the mythic appeal of the “Freudian Legend” (1970, 547) rests on the romantic myth of a single heroic figure that overcomes insurmountable resistances to access the repressed truth of his Oedipal desires. This is a legend that had the power to impress many in the past century. Its mimetic effect was subsequently redoubled as influential successors generated influential repetitions with linguistic differences that cast an imaginary spell on generations spell-bound by the linguistic turn. As Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen has convincingly shown in a series of books genealogically entangled with mimetic studies, psychoanalysis—in both its Freudian and Lacanian variants—was born out of the initial fascination with and subsequent foreclosure of “affective mimesis” (1991, 70).⁸ While not repressed in the Freudian sense, it is this affective-hypnotic-suggestive—and we should now add—neuronal mimesis that now *re*-turns onto the theoretical scene. The mimetic turn, in many ways, entails a genealogical *re*-turn to the hypnotic-affective-contagious tradition of the mimetic unconscious that does not have dreams but mirroring reflexes as a *via regia*. While the Oedipal/repressive hypothesis has come under severe attacks in recent years, untimely theoretical figures now allow us to leap ahead to recent discoveries, or rather, rediscoveries of mirroring principles they had anticipated in the first place.

Such serendipitous genealogical connections will be pursued in more detail in the Coda to this volume. A brief anecdote will suffice here. We were honored to have the neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese as a keynote speaker for the conference at the origins of this volume. Along with Giacomo Rizzolatti, Gallese was

part of the team in Parma who discovered mirror neurons in the early 1990s. He has since developed a theory of “embodied simulation” (Gallese 2017) with significant implications for aesthetics, the phenomenology of intersubjectivity, and the humanities in general.⁹ The talk, titled “Narrative as Body,” was a success. It drew a large virtual public eager for new dialogic connections between the neurosciences and the humanities that go beyond ossified nature–culture divides.

Right after his presentation, I sent Gallese a personal email of thanks and took the occasion to mention why I got interested in mirror neurons in the first place.¹⁰ Genealogical lenses reveal that Nietzsche, in aphorism 142 of *Daybreak* titled “Empathy [*Mitempfindung*],” had actually anticipated the theory of embodied simulation. As I showed in *The Phantom of the Ego*, he did so via a phenomenological account of unconscious mirroring reflexes that blur the boundaries between self and other generating a sym-*pathos* (feeling with) at play in empathy and other shared affective experiences, including aesthetic experiences (Lawtoo 2013, 38–43). This was thus the ideal occasion to hear the response from one of the participants in what many consider a revolutionary scientific discovery.

The response was genealogically illuminating. Revealing his philosophical knowledge, Gallese not only confirmed he was familiar with that specific section of *Daybreak*; he was also happy to confirm that it describes “something similar to embodied simulation” as he specified: “it prefigures the inner imitation [*innere Nachahmung*] of [Theodor] Lipps.” Lipps had indeed been the figure that, along with Nietzsche, had been originally convoked to account for this mimetic reflex.¹¹ The mirroring effects of this genealogical connection were striking. A scholar of mimesis can only dream of such a specific intellectual correspondence. Gallese himself concluded: “Impressive! There is nothing that is really new!” [*Non c'è mai nulla di veramente nuovo!*].

For those afraid that the neurosciences are anxious to replace the humanities, this genealogical anecdote suggests that there is no need to worry. In this case, the opposite is true: science can draw sustenance from the long tradition in the humanities that precedes it, paves the way for it, and, sometimes, anticipates revolutionary discoveries. Independently of the controversies mirror neurons generated and will continue to generate, it is becoming uncontroversial to claim that humans are eminently social creatures who resonate with other humans and nonhumans. As sociologist Hartmut Rosa puts it, the discovery of mirror neurons “does not necessarily lead to a kind of scientific neuro-reductionism that traces all consciousness, communication, and social processes back to neurological processes” (2019, 150). On the contrary, these processes introduce intersubjective resonances that arguably gave birth to *Homo sapiens*, are not

deterministic in their reciprocal orientation, and can both be “obstructed” from a critical distance and “amplified” (151) with pathos to generate broader societal transformations. The new relational concept of resonance, in other words, is not only a new conceptual mask of mimesis; it also rests on similar intersubjective, affective, and mirroring presuppositions that will have to be explored in more detail in *Homo Mimeticus III*.¹²

Hence the need for mimetic studies to deepen genealogical connections between philosophy and neuroscience, untimely discoveries and timely (re)discoveries in order to go beyond body–brain dualisms we shall return to in the dialogue with Gallese that concludes the volume. In the end, what Gallese suggests is an insight valuable for mimetic studies more generally: rather than making radical claims about one’s originality in a way characteristic of previous mimetic theories, it is more productive to step back to untimely predecessors who may have been marginalized, yet open up paths on the long journey of homo mimeticus that deserve to be pursued in the present. In the process, contributors pick up conceptual arrows from the past in order to propel them further into the future. Let us take a look at the virtues internal to these paths and arrows.

Virtues for Homo Mimeticus

The mimetic turn aims to be innovative and forward oriented. Still, a modesty in genealogical matters cautions us against claiming that the re-turns to homo mimeticus operate a full-blown paradigm shift in theorizations of mimesis—at least not in Thomas Kuhn’s sense of “scientific revolution” (Kuhn 1996). In fact, for Kuhn, who theorized the latter in the first place, such a shift entails a radical break with previous theories that are “replaced” and rendered “incommensurable” with the new theory. Such epistemic breaks characteristic of scientific revolutions, for Kuhn, find in figures like Kepler, Newton, and Einstein their paradigmatic examples in the hard sciences. These are of course exemplary thinkers still worthy of imitation. Already for the moderns, they generated imitations that went beyond nature and culture oppositions.

Given the imitative tendencies of *Homo sapiens*, we can thus understand that it has been tempting for humanists of the past to align themselves with grand paradigmatic shifts operated by the like of Kepler and Darwin—the case of Freud as the self-proclaimed “Darwin of psychology” comes to mind.¹³ More

recently, among mimetic theorists, René Girard played with the same *topos* as he considered that despite his theological focus on Christ as the ultimate scapegoat he operated, paradoxically, within a “Darwinian perspective” (2007, 96). This led him to accept Michel Serres’ denomination of “Darwin of the human sciences” with an immodest, “why not?” (2007, 96)—perhaps unsurprisingly so, given the numerous affinities between Girard and Freud.¹⁴

Renaissance of *Grandissimi Esempli*

Mimetic studies is rooted in a-theological foundations very much in line with both evolutionary theory and more recent epigenetic developments in the biological sciences we shall return to in volume 3; yet it chooses an alternative path in line with a different attitude and *ethos*. In fact, genealogical lenses on the long and complex history of mimesis urge theorists of the present to cultivate “the virtue of modesty” (Nietzsche 1997, 17)—Nietzsche’s advice in volume 1 comes to mind. For this reason, we opted for stressing *re*-turns to mimesis that propose not so much a *paradigm* shift but, rather, a paradigmatic *shift of emphasis* or, better, of *perspective*. If a revolutionary break might sometimes (very rarely) take place in the hard sciences, we argue that the humanities benefit from shifts of emphasis that retain selective continuities with the past to foreground perspectival changes—sometimes quite radical ones—in the present and future.

There is much to be learned from the past, but there is also much to add to it. While shifting perspective from dominant accounts of aesthetic realism to the fundamental philosophical, but also anthropo-logical, psycho-logical, neuro-logical realization that humans imitate with their brains as much as with their bodies, individually as well as collectively, subjectively as well as technologically, contributors trace genealogical continuities with exemplary theories of mimesis of the past that serve not only as models to passively imitate. Rather, they can inspire contemporary practitioners of good *Eris* to go further than they did in a spirit of agonistic gratitude—what William Connolly also calls “agonistic respect” informing relations of “affective modes of communication” with “Double[s]” (2022, 123, 112) not far from home. Hence the importance of stepping back, selectively, to influential precursors in view of pushing against their shoulders to provide new conceptual foundations, reorient the field, and open up new areas of inquiry to be pursued in the future.

A field called mimetic studies could not fail to realize the importance of imitation, not only as an *object* of study but also as a problematic that informs the all too human *subject* of study. While a romantic anxiety of influence made

it sometimes difficult for modern and contemporary theorists to acknowledge influential models, or precursors, whose traces are erased via what we call romantic agonism, the chapters that follow recuperate a pre-Romantic awareness of the importance of models to imitate with an agonistic difference characteristic of mimetic agonism. After the Greek agonal period recuperated by Burckhardt and Nietzsche, this agonistic culture finds, perhaps, in the Renaissance some of its most influential representatives. This was already suggested in the reference to Montaigne in the Introduction as a key genealogical link between the ancients and the moderns in matters of patho(-)logies.

After the Greeks, it is arguably in the Renaissance that key figures in mimetic studies find the theoretical *élan* that propels this field into the future. This should not come as a surprise. After all, it is in the Renaissance that the Greek immanent spirit was reborn as philosophical and literary texts were rediscovered, including the Homeric poem with which we started. As Henry Dicks also notes in his contribution to this volume, in this period we witness a shift from a “theomimetic” conception of mimesis based on the imitation of God that dominated the medieval period toward an “anthropomimetic” tradition predicated on the “imitation of the ‘most excellent’ being in nature, namely man”. This does not mean we should limit mimetic studies to anthropocentrism for nature will become a source of imitation as well. To confirm this genealogical shift of perspective that, in different, often imperceptible ways, informs many essays that follow, paving the way for “posthumanist,” “planetary” and “biomimetic revolutions” already underway,¹⁵ let us thus engage with another renaissance thinker of mimesis who is deeply aware of the virtue of imitating what he called the “greatest examples” (Machiavelli 2020, 17), including, of course, Homeric examples.¹⁶

That Machiavelli has Homer in mind is clear, but what hero should be taken as example to imitate is less so. In chapter 18 of *The Prince*, in fact, Machiavelli outlines two methods of fighting that go beyond human and animal qualities. Ideally, if all men were “good,” properly human means of fighting should operate by “law,” but since humans are a “sad lot” for Machiavelli, he advises the prince that it is necessary to fight by “force” (2020, 55) as well. The explicit example of this duality is, indeed, Achilles who “was sent to be reared by Chiron, the centaur,” a mythic figure whose human–animal duality embodies Machiavelli’s principle that “the prince must know how to make a good use of the beast as well as the man” (55).

The beast, however, is already double and opens up an ambivalence in the Homeric example in question. Thus, Machiavelli famously specifies that the prince must choose to imitate both “the fox and the lion” for it is “necessary to be a fox to recognize traps and a lion to frighten off the wolfs” (55). Both

qualities, he later specifies, the prince “must imitate [*necessarie imitare*]” (62). This is an indication that not only foregrounds the centrality of mimesis in learning and education along classical humanistic lines; it also anticipates a type of mimesis that goes beyond culture and nature. The examples of the fox and the lion, in fact, trouble the binary dividing human from non-human animals; they also place the latter as models endowed with animal instincts for humans to imitate culturally, but also by drawing on the “beast” in them.¹⁷ Now, if the force of the lion is an attribute characteristic of wrathful Achilles that is not deprived of violent pathological implications, it seems that it is the patho-logical cunning of Odysseus Machiavelli has in mind as he speaks of the cunning of the fox.¹⁸

Interestingly for Machiavelli, the fox’s cunning method of deception is explicitly based on chameleon-like qualities of “pretense” that are partially lost in translation; yet, once they are rendered in the original color of “simulation,” they turn out to be well known to mimetic studies. As Machiavelli puts it: “The man who enjoyed the greatest success was the one who knew best how to use the fox. But it is necessary to know how to do a good job of coloring [*colorire*] over this character, and to be good pretender and dissembler [*gran simulatore e dissimulatore*]” (56). Simulation and dissimulation are indeed not only the specialty of a mythic hero who is “no one [*outis*]” and is thus endowed with “cunning” [*mêtis*]—an intentional and playful homophony that performs the cunning of a *grand simulatore* also called Odysseus we shall return to.¹⁹ Both simulation and dissimulation that color this character are also, and above all, eminent mimetic qualities Machiavelli considers worthy of emulation. Mimesis of mimesis via a paradigmatic mimetic example: this is, in a nutshell, the formula that emerges from the patho(-)logical examples Machiavelli convokes from antiquity. Which also means that if we further their paths from antiquity to the Renaissance into the present a discerning evaluation of both the pathos and the logos still worthy of imitation today is required.

If these mythic examples come from the past, with some caution, we can still pick up their conceptual arrows of knowledge in the present to shoot them further into the future. Here is how Niccolò Machiavelli describes the process of creation based on the imitation of *grandissimi esempi* in chapter 6 of *The Prince* that paves the way for the examples we have just discussed:

Since men almost always walk along the paths beaten by others and proceed to act by imitating them [*e procedendo con le azioni loro nelle imitazioni*] and since they cannot always stay on others’ paths or attain the level of skill [*virtù*] of those you imitate [*tu imiti*], a prudent man

[*sic*] should always enter the paths beaten by great men [*sic*] and imitate those who were the very best, so that, if his [*sic*] own talent (*virtù*) does not measure up to theirs, at least it will give off something of its odor. (2020, 17)

Prudence is indeed an underrated quality of the mimetic fox with the power to supplement the brute force of the lion. What was true of theoretical virtue for a Renaissance theorist like Machiavelli who imitated ancient models to address modern transformations, might still hold true for theoretical virtue in mimetic studies prudently addressing contemporary metamorphoses—provided we understand what the connection between “imitation” and “virtue” actually entails. As Nietzsche reminds us via an interrogation that finds inspiration in past virtues while being aimed, like an arrow, toward future readers: “how to nourish yourself so as to attain your maximum of strength, of *virtù* in the Renaissance style, of moraline-free virtue?” (1980, 52). Let us find out by considering the mimetic paths re-turning to Renaissance virtues.

Paths for Renaissance Virtues

With the untranslatable concept of *virtù* (Italian translation of the Greek *aretē*) Machiavelli certainly does not mean a moral virtue predicated on the imitation of Christian figures. Neither does he suggest imitating the character or soul of these models themselves, via what a Roman and later Romantic tradition called “sublimity” understood as “the echo of a great soul” (Pseudo-Longinus 2005, IX: 98). Rather, the focus of imitation is directed at the “actions” [*azioni*] of exemplary models endowed with a type of excellence, strength, or skill [*virtù*] trained via a plurality of crafts or, as Henry Staten calls them, “*technai*.”²⁰

Not unlike *technē*, *virtù* as Machiavelli understands it, is immanent, embodied, practical, and material in its orientation. It is thus the technical excellence internal to the actions of exemplary figures that is the object of imitation, not the moral character or soul of the exemplar. If we apply technical virtue to the art of reading central to the theory we pursue, we can already see that the metaphor of walking along a path opened up by predecessors remains down to earth, allows for movement, and provides the *re*-turns to mimesis with an immanent goal or telos; it also strays from passive notions of imitation, for following up on a path presupposes an ability to walk with one’s own legs in order to travel further. As Nietzsche will later put it in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “One repays a teacher poorly if one always remains only a student” (2008, 68).

What is the relation then, between imitation, *virtù*, and the type of future-oriented innovation that mimetic studies aims to foster? Again, let us be ambitiously modest and follow up on the paths opened up by worthy predecessors. This entails looking for secret passages that have been left untrodden for decades, or perhaps centuries, yet might provide shortcuts that allow long-distance runners to leap ahead into the present. In the process, we might even open up new paths of our own—or, to switch metaphor, pick up arrows of predecessors and shoot them high up in order to reach distant targets.

The Sweet Note of an Ancient Bow

This is, indeed, what Machiavelli also suggests, albeit between metaphoric lines in need of strong interpretations. In fact, he abruptly shifts metaphor from a “path” to a “bow” to give speed and intensity to a conceptual arrow. He does so in view of describing the action of what he calls a “prudent archer” whose exemplary virtue worthy of imitation might help us propel the re-turns to homo mimeticus further into the future. Here is how the passage continues:

And he [*sic*] will do what prudent archers do when the spot they want to hit seems too far away: knowing the strength [*virtù*] of their bow, they aim much higher than the target they have chosen, not because they expect their arrow to reach such a height, but to be able to hit their target by aiming above it. (Machiavelli 2020, 17)

Prudent archers must imitate the prudence of the fox if they expect their arrow to reach a distant target in space and, perhaps, in time as well. In its future-oriented trajectory, this image captures nothing less than the gesture we aspire to reproduce: if we aimed high in mapping the new transdisciplinary field of mimetic studies, we also adopted a modest position by prudently following ancient paths first breached by exemplary predecessors that traverse the history of culture. This also means that from different angles, contributors to this volume, by training and exercise, “know the *virtù* of their bow.” From excellence to skill, *techne* to strength, power to will to power, the *virtù* we imitate actively from exemplary theoretical actions of the past rests on the intimate “knowledge” of how far we can stretch the bow of knowledge.

Inspired by fox-like figures whose journey home (*nostos*) already oriented volume 1, Machiavelli’s double metaphors of the path and the bow account for the virtue of an imitation that is already yours. Notice, in fact, the narrative shift from the diegetic and gendered-biased “he” to the mimetic and gender-balanced

“you” [*tu imiti*], perhaps to performatively induce a virtuoso imitation in the Prince he is addressing and, at one further remove, in you, the reader, as well. What is certain is that this Renaissance spirit will continue to animate the actions promoted in the *Homo Mimeticus* trilogy. The conceptual arrows that follow are thus shot high, not to reach the world of ideas located in imaginary worlds behind the world. Rather, they are shot high for the practice of mimetic agon re-turns to *grandissimi esempi* to further their thoughts and reach new targets down to earth. Our goal, as the double metaphor suggests, is thus both modest and ambitious: modest because we follow up on the paths of exemplary models; ambitious because we shoot high to explore new paths for mimetic studies to come.

In the end, having picked up the arrow of mimesis, we needed a strong bow to shoot it further. And what bow could be stronger than an ancient mythic bow central to a long journey home with which we started? Remember that in the *Odyssey*, after the Phaeacians ship Odysseus back to Ithaca overnight, having (almost) re-turned home, he engages in what his son Telemachus calls the “contest of the bow” (Homer 2020, 21.112). Penelope, in fact, challenges the suitors to string Odysseus’s old bow and shoot an arrow through twelve axles. A final agon is thus staged at the end of a long journey home. All the suitors engaged in the agon naturally fail to even string the bow. Only Telemachus comes rather close, paving the way for the protean “Foreigner,” “dressed as a beggar,” lord of camouflage tricks who espoused prudence as a virtue. The colors changed by the prudent simulation; the agonistic spirit remains unchanged.

To narrate this special dramatic moment, Homer convokes a musical language that is inspired by Apollo. That is, the god of archery, but also, as we know, the god of music. Here is how an inspiring voice tied to a long chain that goes from Apollo to the Muses, reaching via Homeric rhapsodes to a magnetized audience and readership tells, or rather sings, the story:

So he had tricked [*polymētis*] them all.
 After examining the mighty bow
 Carefully, inch by inch—as easily
 As an experienced musician [*aoidēs*] stretches
 A sheep-gut string around a lyre’s peg
 And makes it fast—Odysseus, with ease,
 Strung the great bow. He held it in his right hand
 And plucked the string, which sang like a swallow-song [*chelidoni ei-
 kelē audēn*],
 A clear sweet note. (21.406–413)²¹

The final trick of this figure of many turns who is no(τ) one is, of course, a mimetic trick: it consists in turning the bow into a lyre, and, conversely, the lyre into a bow. The string of the lyre inspired by the Muse is thus entangled with the string of the bow at play in the agon, just as the fox cannot be entirely dissociated from the lion, or the discus from the bow. Together, they generate patho(-)logies that still need to be disentangled, for the pathos of the bow and the violence it generates is not the same as the pathos of the lyre and the agonistic contest of which it is part. And yet, at the instant in which Odysseus' destiny, after twenty years of navigation, is about to turn, they are paradoxically joined in a single string. And it is this double string that strikes the note of a return home. For is it an accident that this "singing" (*aiese*) marks precisely the *re*-turns of "swallows" (*chelidoni*)? That is, migratory birds par excellence whose collective journey always leads them back home, in the end.

And so, from different perspectives, in a virtuoso reenactment of an ancient agon, contributors joined forces, drew back their arms, and aimed high. The arrow, not unlike the discus that preceded it, went humming on its course, from antiquity to modernity, reaching into the present—and mimesis re-turned to regain its ancient power, or pathos. If you listen carefully in the pages that follow, perhaps you can still hear the distant echo of this humming resounding—in the chorus of voices singing swallow-songs, propelling homo mimeticus toward the future.

A strong bow,
A virtuous string,
A clear sweet note.

Notes

- 1 In "Homer's Contest" Nietzsche specifies that the focus of the agon is not on the individual genius who creates in (romantic) isolation. Rather, the focus is on "several geniuses, who incite each other to reciprocal action as they keep each other within the limits of measure" (1996, 5). For a detailed and penetrating discussion of agonism in Nietzsche see Siemens 2021; for the difference between mimetic rivalry and mimetic agonism see Lawtoo 2023, 45–57.
- 2 As Emily Wilson notes, by 566 BC the civic/religious festival of the Panathenaia was instituted "which included a poetic competition featuring performances of the Homeric poems" (2020, xviii). For an account of Plato's quarrel with Homer in the context of an agonistic "oral culture" see Havelock 1963, 61–86, 134–164. See also Borch-Jacobsen's chapter in this volume.
- 3 For a compelling reading of this Homeric scene by an ally in mimetic studies see also Cavarero 2000, 17–31.
- 4 See also Kehoane and Kuling who pursue the patho(-)logical diagnostic of homo mimeticus in this volume.

- 5 The editors warmly thank Michaela for using her inimitable *techne* to perform this spiraling gesture.
- 6 For Jane Bennett's first engagement with mimesis via the mediation of Lacoue-Labarthe and Lawtoo, see Bennett 2017; in her more recent work, Bennett develops a conception of the "porous I" or ego open to a "mimetic" sympathy (Bennett 2020) that is genealogically and productively entangled with mimetic studies (see Lawtoo 2022, 255–275).
- 7 See Lawtoo ed. 2024 as well as Hayles and Lawtoo 2022.
- 8 Furthering insights internal to key rings in the chain of mimetic studies (most notably, Girard and Lacoue-Labarthe), Borch-Jacobsen also supplements a psychological tradition attentive to hypnosis to the mimetic turn. See Borch-Jacobsen 1992. For a further genealogical link between Nietzsche, Freud, and Girard, see Lawtoo 2023, 81–100, 129–135. For a return of attention to identification as central to both the feeling (or pathos) of attachment in art "which is not the opposite of critical or reflective thought" (or distance) see Felski 2020, 83, 79–120.
- 9 For a rich study on the role of embodied simulation in film, see Gallese and Guerra.
- 10 The following quotes are from an email communication between Gallese and Lawtoo, 22 April 2022.
- 11 See Lawtoo 2013, 257. For a re-evaluation of Lipps' theory of empathy from a perspective on homo aestheticus that resonates productively both with homo mimeticus and embodied simulation, see Dissanayake 1992, 140–157.
- 12 While the connections between mimetic studies and resonance theory are many a point of divergence could be the following: for Rosa "resonance" is the "solution" to the pathologies of modernity and the "acceleration" it entails (Rosa 2019, 1); a long genealogy in mimetic studies reminds us that there are pathological resonances just as there are mimetic pathologies. For a chapter that pursues the links between resonance and mimesis see Mathijs Peters' contribution in *Homo Mimeticus III*.
- 13 For an informed historical reframing of Freud's "self-canonicalization" as the "Darwin of psychology," see Borch-Jacobsen and Shamdasani 2021, 1–24.
- 14 See Lawtoo 2023a, 33–80.
- 15 See Lawtoo ed. 2024; Connolly 2017; and Dicks 2023.
- 16 As Peter Ahrens Dorf notes: "even though Machiavelli never explicitly mentions Homer in the *Prince*, he unmistakably singles out Homer for praise as a fellow, effective, teacher of princes" (2016, 15); specifically "through the example of Achilles" he stresses "the importance of imitating the harsher qualities of beasts and not simply the finer qualities of men" (15–16). Let us take a closer look.
- 17 In *Homo Mimeticus III* we shall return to a mimesis that goes beyond nature and culture via contemporary developments in epigenetics.
- 18 Registering this implicit shift of examples to "imitate," Ahrens Dorf also notes that "the Homeric hero who excels at deception is Odysseus himself" (2016, 22) and proceeds to indicate that "Odysseus also exhibits a leonine ferocity against his enemies" (22), a point that confirms the patho(-)logical double sides of *homo mimeticus*. See also Ahrens Dorf 2016, 23–29.
- 19 As Jean-Pierre Vernant points out: "the two syllables *ou-tis* can be replaced as another way of saying *mêtis*. In Greek *ou* and *mè* are the two forms for negation, but if *outis* means no one, *mêtis* designates deception [*ruse*]" (2007, 80; my transl.).

- 20 See chapter 2 in this volume. For a more general account of the way a “mimetic tradition” can store technical skills learned by “pure imitation” across generations, from tool making onward, informing a techne theory that goes from Plato to Kafka, see also Staten 2019, 77.
- 21 The editors thank Carlos Carvalhar for his assistance in checking Wilson’s excellent but free translation of *The Odyssey* against the Greek original version for this crucial passage.

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