

Research Article



Plastic Figures: Mimesis, Metamorphosis, Techniques of the Self

Plastik Figürler: Mimesis, Metamorfoz, Benliğin Teknikleri

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Abstract

While dominant idealist traditions in western philosophy tended to restrict mimesis to visual representations far removed from ideal Forms, a minor, yet nonetheless resilient genealogy of materialist thinkers has tended to focus on the mimetic nature of subjectivity itself. Building on the interdisciplinary field of mimetic studies sensitive to the plastic forms *homo mimeticus* can take, this essay furthers Catherine Malabou's re-evaluation of form by outlining a new materialist genealogy of four plastic figures endowed with the capacity to both receive form and give form: namely, "figura," "metamorphosis," "techniques of the self," and the "overman." Reframed in the company of ancient (Plato, Homer), modern (Montaigne, Nietzsche), and contemporary (Hadot, Foucault) theorists, the essay argues, in broad genealogical strokes, that the mirroring concepts of plasticity and *figura* traverse key moments in the history of aesthetics. My wager is that plastic figures are endowed with performative powers central to techniques of subject formation that reach from antiquity to modernity into the present, furthering the field of mimetic studies.

Öz

Batı felsefesindeki baskın idealist gelenekler, mimesisi çoğunlukla ideal formlardan uzak, görsel temsillerle sınırlama eğilimindeyken daha azınlık ama dirençli bir maddeci düşünürler silsilesi, öznel deneyiminin bizzat taklitçi doğasına odaklanma eğilimini sürdürmüştür. *Homo mimeticus*'un alabileceği plastik biçimlere duyarlı disiplinler arası mimesis çalışmaları alanına yaslanan bu makale, Catherine Malabou'nun formu yeniden değerlendirme girişimini ilerleterek hem form alabilme hem de form verebilme kapasitesiyle donatılmış dört plastik figürün yeni maddeci bir şeceresini çıkarmaktadır: "Figura," "metamorfoz," "benliğin teknikleri" ve "üst insan." Antik (Platon, Homeros), modern (Montaigne, Nietzsche) ve çağdaş (Hadot, Foucault) düşünürlerin eşliğinde yeniden ele alınan bu kavramsal çerçeve, plastisite ve *figura* kavramlarının birbirini yansıtan nitelikleriyle estetik tarihinin kritik anlarından geçtiğini geniş soybilimsel hatlarla ortaya koyar. Öne sürülen iddia şudur: Plastik figürler, özne oluşumunun tekniklerinde merkezi bir rol oynayan edimsel güçlerle donatılmıştır ve bu güçler antik çağ ve moderniteden günümüze kadar uzanarak mimesis çalışmalarının ufkunu genişletmektedir.

Keywords

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*The clay is soft and malleable.
Quickly! Hurry to fashion it on that potter's wheel
Which is forever spinning.*

Aulus Persius Flaccus, qtd. in Montaigne, *Essays*

Introduction

The field of mimetic studies is new, future-oriented, and sensitive to protean transformations informing the paradoxical logic of imitation in the digital age. Yet, it is crucial to begin by recognizing that the concept of mimesis and its multiple plastic masks (simulation, imitation, adequation, impersonation, dramatization, identification, influence, mirror neurons, epigenetic mimesis, and, as I will argue, plasticity as well) is as old as the dawn of philosophy itself. If its protean forms generated, in the past, a quarrel between philosophers and poets, specialists of concepts and specialists of affects, mimetic studies has shown that this quarrel was not as unilateral as is often thought to be; it also generated productive entanglements between plastic and mimetic subjects whose genealogy is now already informing a plurality of outputs in mimetic studies.¹ In the wake of post-structuralist deconstructions of unitary and stabilizing forms that, furthering Nietzsche and other modernist writers, find in Platonic metaphysics, if not a single origin, at least an idealist aspiration to formal unity, I now take a more down-to-earth, heterogeneous and materialist approach that traces the entangled genealogy of two conceptual counterparts of form: namely, plasticity and *figura*. Taking inspiration from the French philosopher Catherine Malabou's recent return of critical and creative attention to a type of form that is not simply fixed, universal, and immutable but, rather, plastic, protean and metamorphic, I aim to delineate, in admittedly partial brush-strokes, a genealogical sketch of plastic figures that, as Erich Auerbach has begun to

¹ Mimetic studies is an interdisciplinary field that emerged out of an ERC-funded project titled *Homo Mimeticus: Theory and Criticism* (www.homomimeticus.eu). Located at the crossroads of philosophy, literature and the social sciences its goal was to rethink mimesis for the twenty-first century. It already generated a mimetic turn, or re-turn of attention of different forms of behavioral imitation in the company of influential theorists across disciplines such as literary theory (J. Hillis Miller), continental philosophy (Jean-Luc Nancy, Gunter Gebauer), sociology (Edgar Morin), political theory (William Connolly), anthropology (Christoph Wulf), history of psychology (Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen), feminist philosophy (Adriana Cavarero), queer theory (Judith Butler), posthuman studies (Katherine Hayles), the neurosciences (Vittorio Gallese) among others who participated in *HOM Videos*, see <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCJQy0y0qCxzP4QImG2YWqpww>. For some representative outputs in mimetic studies see, *The Mimetic Condition*, ed. Nidesh Lawtoo, *CounterText* 8, no.1 (2022); *The Mimetic Turn*, ed. Nidesh Lawtoo *MLN* 138, no. 5 (2023); Nidesh Lawtoo, *Homo Mimeticus: A New Theory of Imitation* (Leuven University Press, 2022); *Homo Mimeticus II: The Re-Turn of Mimesis*, eds. Nidesh Lawtoo and Marina Garcia-Granero (Leuven University Press, 2024); *Homo Mimeticus III: Plasticity, Mimesis and Metamorphosis with Catherine Malabou*, eds. Nidesh Lawtoo and Willow Verkerk (Leuven University Press, 2025). This article is a slightly revised version of a chapter first published in the latter volume under the title, "The Three Metamorphoses of Plasticity: Proteus to Figura, Self-Care to the Overhuman."

show, run deep in the history of aesthetics, but still need a contemporary new materialist supplement.

It is true that, so far, dominant approaches to both mimesis and plasticity have tended to restrict these concepts to aesthetics; yet, joining forces with Malabou allows us to confirm that both concepts transgress the binary that simply divides art from life. As Oscar Wilde wittily yet seriously put it, “Life imitates Art more than Art imitates Life,”² with life assuming plastic, protean, and metamorphic masks that exceed mind-body dualisms. Just as mimesis originates in imitative subjects, or mimes can assume different theatrical forms, so plasticity originates in the malleable subject matter of the human soul, a materialist soul rooted in the brain, and thus in the body as well. A number of ancient, (early-)modern and contemporary precursors paved the way for this key mimetic/plastic insight shared by mimetic studies and new materialism. Considering recent turns—from the performative turn to the affective turn, the materialist turn to the neuro turn—these genealogical precursors deserve more attention they have received so far in view of promoting the plastic metamorphoses internal to the “mimetic turn,” or “re-turn.”

Short of offering a complete overview of the transformations of plasticity over the ages, this essay adopts a more limited, selective, yet still genealogically far-reaching theoretical focus: it aims to trace four metamorphoses of plastic figures that—in their double power to both “*receive form* (clay is called plastic, for example) and *give form* (as in the plastic arts or plastic surgery),”³ as Malabou reminds us—continue to in-*form* and trans-*form* new materialism and mimetic studies. Having traced, somewhat paradoxically, a diagnostic of the “plasticity of mimesis”⁴ back to Plato’s idealistic critique of artistic and political types and the impressions they make on a waxlike soul with agentic properties of its own, let me now further the metamorphoses of plastic figures throughout western history and aesthetics by taking a few and necessarily partial additional steps back—to leap further ahead. This entails revisiting unacknowledged precursors of mimetic studies that—from Greek and Roman antiquity to the Middle Ages thorough the Renaissance up to modernity—were already sensitive to “protean” subjects, plastic “figures,” “techniques of the self,” and “metamorphoses of the spirit” that articulate the complex, often paradoxical, yet productive relation between formless subjects and artistic forms with the power to transform plastic human subjects. Stepping back to Plato and Homer, before selectively retracing the contours of plastic figures via heterogeneous authors that go beyond idealist/materialist binaries—from Plotinus to Dante, Montaigne to Nietzsche—reaching into the present—via Auerbach and Lacoue-Labarthe, Hadot and Foucault—we shall trace a genealogy of four metamorphoses of plasticity

² Oscar Wilde, “The Decay of Lying,” in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, vol. 4, ed. Josephine M. Guy (Oxford University Press, 2007), 90.

³ Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, trans. Sebastian Rand (Fordham University Press, 2008), 5.

⁴ See Nidesh Lawtoo, “Plasticity,” *MLN* 132, no. 5 (2017): 1201-24; and Lawtoo, *Homo Mimeticus*, chap. 4.

that respond to Malabou's injunction to rethink form on a new materialist basis, while also paving the way for future transformations of *homo mimeticus*.⁵

Protean Twists and Metamorphic Turns: Homer to Plato

Since the dawn of mimetic studies, philosophers identified mimeticians as protean subjects, which also means that they failed to pin them down to a singular, unitary, and above all stable form. Unsurprisingly so, for mimesis keeps morphing, or rather metamorphosing (from Greek *meta*, change, *morphē*, form) into someone or something other, thereby evading the universalizing grasp of idealist philosophers. This is what Plato was quick to recognize in a minor dialogue on poetic inspiration titled *Ion* central to mimetic studies. For our purpose, suffice it to say that since *Ion* is a rhapsode, or reciter of poetry specialized in Homer, Plato's critique of the rhapsode targets, at one remove, Homer as well. Plato does so by speaking via a first person, mimetic (rather than third person diegetic) speech that breaks the fourth wall, so to speak, and, at two removes, addresses the reader as well. Thus, Socrates, expressing Plato's discontent with this formless artistic figure, quips: "you are just like Proteus: you twist and turn this way and that, evading my [the philosopher's] grasp."⁶ Plato convokes here a mythic figure called Proteus to critique Homeric poetry, thereby fighting *contra* Homer but *with* a Homeric myth in a paradox constitutive of "mimetic agonism" that already blurs the binary between philosophy and poetry.⁷ To understand this paradox, which as we shall see, runs deep in western aesthetics, it is thus crucial to remember the Homeric myth at the origins of this quarrel between the advocate of ideal forms (Plato) and the practitioner of protean metamorphoses (*Ion*).

⁵ Genealogy is here understood in its Nietzschean sense of tracing, via an interdisciplinary perspective blending philosophy with "history and philology, together with an innate sense of discrimination with respect to questions of psychology," not the single origin of values or concepts but "what has been documented, what is really ascertainable, what has really existed, in short, the whole long hieroglyphic text, so difficult to decipher, of humanity's moral [as well as aesthetic] past." Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford University Press, 1996), 5-9. It goes without saying that genealogy is necessarily partial, incomplete and fragmentary and does not aspire to a totalizing explanation. The authors selected in what follows not only share an immanent concern in reframing subjectivity from the angle of plastic figurations; they are also part of a genealogy of mimetic thinkers this essay aims to partially reconstruct. For a broader account of this genealogy informing mimetic studies, volumes I and II of *Homo Mimeticus*.

⁶ Plato, *Ion*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Lane Cooper, eds. E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (Princeton University Press, 1963), 215-28, 541^e-542a.

⁷ For accounts of mimetic agonism as a form of "intellectual contest" in which the opponent also serves as a model to be imitated and include examples like Plato and Homer, Aristotle and Plato, but also more recently, Nietzsche and Wagner, Girard and Nietzsche among others see Nidesh Lawtoo, *Violence and the Oedipal Unconscious: vol. 1, The Catharsis Hypothesis* (Michigan State University Press, 2023), 46-54; "Nietzsche contra Girard: Agonistic Steps for Mimetic Studies." *Contagion* 31 (2024): 145-176.

The myth of Proteus was well known in ancient Greece as it is dramatized in a famous book towards the beginning of the *Odyssey*. Well before we encounter Odysseus “himself,” his son, Telemachus, sets out to find some of the kings who fought at his father’s side at Troy, including King Menelaus, whose wife’s abduction, Helen, caused the war that launched a thousand ships, in the first place. With Helen at his side, Menelaus narrates to Telemachus how, stuck on an island near Egypt on their way home from Troy—mirroring and anticipating Odysseus’ home-journey (*nostos*)—“a spirit [was] blocking [him] from going home.”⁸ This spirit is no one other than the sea-god Proteus, Poseidon’s son. That is, the mythic figure Socrates convokes to account for the mimetic rhapsode’s protean metamorphoses.

In the original Homeric text, the sea-god turns out to be both plastic and mimetic, for he twists and turns to elude Menelaus’ all too human grasp. He does so via a series of metamorphoses that are not limited to human animals but include nonhuman animals and natural elements as well. Thus Homer, speaking mimetically, in the name of Menelaus, tells Telemachus that Proteus

first became a lion with a mane,
then snake, then leopard, then a mighty boar,
then flowing water,
then a leafy tree.⁹

Clearly, Homeric forms are not the same as Platonic Forms: if the latter are ideal, static, and disembodied the former are material, changing, and rooted in the earth. Hence Plato’s discontent with mimetic poetry. But note that since Plato convokes precisely the god Proteus to depict the Homeric rhapsode’s “twists and turns,” in a mimetic agon *with* and *contra* Homer, he, Plato, or rather, the mythic character called Socrates—endows the poetic figure *qua* mime with metamorphic powers that go beyond the human as well. Despite Socrates’ ironic tone, this figure that is not one, but plural is, indeed, a formidable threat to idealist philosophers oriented toward stable Forms. Thus, in the *Republic*, Socrates asks in a critical mood, making clear that mimesis *is* the very medium of metamorphosis: “Well, then, neighing horses, and lowing bulls, and the noise of the rivers and the roar of the sea and the thunder and everything of that kind—will they imitate these?” Given the repetition that leads from mimetic actors to mimetic animals to formless matters (rivers, seas) that are not even visible and intelligible but merely audible and sensible (roar, thunder), the predictable anti-mimetic answer follows: “Nay, they have been forbidden, he said, to be mad or liken themselves to madmen.”¹⁰

In the end, then, out of a maddening exasperation with poets’ metamorphic powers of transfiguration, Plato, in Book 10 of the *Republic*, framed the active, embodied, sensible, and highly plastic concept of *mimēsis* via a stabilizing visual trope: namely, a “mirror” reflecting

⁸ Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Emily Wilson (W. W. Norton & Company, 2020), 4378.

⁹ Homer, *Odyssey*, 4456-458.

¹⁰ Plato, *Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, eds. E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (Princeton University Press, 1963), 575-844, 396b.

fleeting “phantoms.”¹¹ This move marked the metaphysical line dividing the original from the copy, the idea from the phenomenon, reality from appearance, the true world from the world of phantoms and simulations at three removes from the universal, ideal, and thus intelligible Forms both new materialism and mimetic studies are up against. Plato’s metaphysical “fable” that turns the “material world” into an “illusory world” has since been inversed by Nietzsche and his heirs.¹² And yet, as an attentive reader of the Platonic dialogues, Nietzsche could not have failed to notice that Plato’s mimetic “agon” with Homer¹³ also led him to steal narrative strategies and tropes from his poetic opponent such as mimetic dialogues, spellbinding myths, and metamorphic gods, thereby blurring the materialist/idealist opposition he worked hard to set up.

Why did Plato risk this aporia? For many reasons, or rather, affects, but also to try, and admittedly fail to grasp a protean concept (mimesis) rooted in a plastic world of becoming (other) that, by definition, eludes idealist speculative Forms—as a chain of materialist thinkers will continue to confirm. This immanent confirmation becomes clearer if we jump ahead to the late Roman period via the concept of the *figura* that will reach, via Dante and Montaigne, into Humanism and the Renaissance.

Plastic *Figurae*: Dante to Montaigne (via Auerbach)

Already before the dawn of philosophy, plasticity and mimesis are entangled with the question of subject formation and protean transformations, generating a mimetic paradox that continues to inform the fundamental logic of plasticity in its double capacity to both give and receive form. What we must add now is that a few centuries after Plato, Latin, and Roman authors introduced another formal concept deeply entangled with both plasticity and mimesis: namely, the concept of *figura*.

This concept has so far made some minor appearances in mimetic studies, but it has been restricted to its stabilizing manifestations that generated discontent among post-structuralist thinkers. For instance, for the French philosopher Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “figure” (Latin, *figura*) has specifically pathological onto-political implications. It designates authoritarian leader figures who embody an essentialist racial “type,” or *typos*, and have the will to power to “impress” the plastic materiality of the subject, both individually and collectively.¹⁴ How? Via a form of passive, pathological mimesis that turns “politics” into what Nazi politician and philologist Joseph

¹¹ Plato, *Republic*, 596d.

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufman (Vintage Books, 1954), 463-564, 485-86.

¹³ See Friedrich Nietzsche, “Homer’s Contest,” ed. and trans. Christa David Acampora, *Nietzscheana* 5 (1996): 6

¹⁴ For the Platonic foundations of this thought, see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, ed. Christopher Fynsk (Stanford University Press, 1989), 43-138.

Goebbels called “the plastic art of the State.”¹⁵ Informing the onto-typology of what Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy later call the “Nazi myth,” this critique of authoritarian figures remains relevant for contemporary critiques of “(new) fascist” leaders that cast a shadow on the future of the twenty-first-century and deserves close attention.¹⁶ And yet, at the same time, what Malabou says of deconstruction’s critical stance toward form in general equally applies to Lacoue-Labarthe’s critique of *figura* in particular. In her account of plasticity, Malabou argues, that “form—formality and figurality—does not therefore open up the ideologically questionable space of ‘ontotypology’ as defined by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe.”¹⁷ Furthering this line of inquiry, we should add that *figura* has a long and complex genealogy that cannot easily be peeled off from a type of plastic subject formation that is “living, and dynamic, incomplete and playful.”¹⁸ This, at least, is what the philologist and literary critic Erich Auerbach helps us uncover.

Auerbach did not always restrict his analysis of mimesis to realism and the question of “representation” it entails—though in his seminal book, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946), this remained his main concern as a literary critic;¹⁹ as a philologist, he also linked mimesis to the question of plasticity. In an influential article titled “Figura” (1938), in fact, Auerbach takes this concept beyond realism toward plastic formal and formless matters now central to both mimetic studies and new materialism. He explains, for instance, that in its Latin origins, *figura* did not entail a stable copy, representation, or realist image of ideal Form; rather, it indicated the “outline,” “outward shape,” or better, “mold,” endowed with what he calls, a certain “plasticity.” As the German philologist puts it in the opening line of the essay: “Originally *figura*, from the same stem as *figere*, *figulus*, *factor*, and *effigies*, meant ‘plastic form’” (F, 11; my italics). Not unlike mimesis, then, which is always central to the formal making of fictions, *figura* is from the very beginning already entangled with *plastic form*.

What, then, is the link between *figura*, plastic form, and the mimetic metamorphoses that concern us? A genealogy of the concept of *figura* quickly troubles pathological association with fascist political figures and unitary ontological Forms that will later preoccupy deconstruction. In its Latin origins, Auerbach reminds us, *figura* positively in-forms, in the act of forming itself, the problematic of plastic subject matters that are dynamic and creative in nature. Originally

¹⁵ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique: Heidegger, l’art et la politique* (Christian Bourgois Éditeur, 1987), 94.

¹⁶ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, “The Nazi Myth,” trans. Brian Holmes, *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 2 (1990): 291-312; Nidesh Lawtoo, *(New) Fascism: Contagion, Community, Myth* (Michigan State University Press, 2019), 129-77.

¹⁷ Catherine Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction*, trans. Carolyn Sheared (Columbia University Press, 2010), 54.

¹⁸ Erich Auerbach, “Figura,” in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 12. Hereafter F.

¹⁹ On his direct debt to Plato’s theory of Form, specifically “Plato’s discussion in book 10 of the *Republic*—mimesis ranking third after the truth,” see Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton University Press, 2003), 554.

designating the “activity of forming” (F, 11) rather than the formed object itself, Auerbach specifies that “*figura* is more concrete and dynamic than *forma*” (16). A plastic figure, in other words, is not an ideal Form; rather, it is rooted in the formless phenomenal matters idealism is up against. Relying on a plastic terminology, he adds: “Strictly speaking, *forma* meant ‘mold,’ French ‘*moule*’ and was related to *figura* as hollow form to the plastic shape that issues from it” (13). And he adds in a language familiar to mimetic studies:

the meaning of *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.²⁰

From figure to plasticity, type to mould, the *meaning* of *figura* is indeed plastic and changes over time; yet its genealogical *use* remains deeply rooted in the question that concerns us: namely, the formation and transformation of a plastic subject matter that mimetically assumes the impression of a type.²¹ Following this mimetic thread, then, puts us not only in a position to confirm Malabou’s point that *figura* cannot be restricted to a pathological totalitarian figure alone. It also allows us to see that it in-forms the plastic problematic of the mimetic subject via transformations that are creative, process-oriented, and re-productive. In the wake of deconstruction and new materialism, there is thus considerable interest in furthering a diagnostic of subject formation via the longer genealogy of plastic and metamorphic figures Auerbach helps us open up.

Among Latin poets, Auerbach enlists Lucretius, Cicero, and Virgil, who, from different perspectives link *figura* with mimetic concepts such as simulacrum, ghost, and phantom. But it is of course in Ovid that, as he puts it, “we find the richest source for *figura* in the sense of changing form” or “metamorphosis” (F, 21). In the *Metamorphoses* (8 AD), in fact, Ovid reloads the protean powers of mimesis by switching the focus from the sea-god Proteus that had triggered Plato’s discontent, to the god of dreams, Morpheus, out of which mimetic meta-morphoses are born. Ovid in fact writes approvingly of “‘Morpheus, the skillful artificer and imitator of [man’s] shape [*simulatoremque figuras*]; nature builds up forms from other forms’ specifying in the process that ‘the soul...passes through various forms [*migrare figuras*]’” (22). Far from being modelled on a unitary and unchanging Form, the soul goes through a plurality of mimetic figurations that find in “nature” a metamorphic foundation that turns form into a reproductive tool of transformation and simulation.

The spiraling loop that goes from imitation to *figura* to plastic metamorphoses rooted in ever changing forms could not be more clearly outlined. Convoking the typographic language of

²⁰ Auerbach, “Figura,” 15.

²¹ Commenting on Lucretius’ use of *figura*, Auerbach notes that it designates the “plastic figure shaped by man,” including the “important transition from the form to its imitation, from the model to the copy, [which] may best be noted in the passage dealing with the resemblance of children to their parents.” Auerbach, “Figura,” 16.

impressing a seal that will later inform Lacoue-Labarthe,²² Auerbach adds, in fact, that in Ovid there is also a “fine example of the imprint of the seal:” ““And as the soft wax is stamped with new *figurae* and does not remain as it was nor retain the same forms, though it remains itself the same”” (F, 22). In addition to sealing the connection between plasticity and mimesis already central to Plato, then, Ovid—for whom, Auerbach specifies, “*figura* is mobile, changeable, multiform and deceptive” (23)—reveals an interplay of sameness and difference. This dynamic interplay, in fact, leads to metamorphoses of the spirit in which the protean subject matter keeps assuming new figures, while its plastic substance remains the same. In sum, our genealogy of plastic figures reveals that one does not need to wait for Hegel or deconstruction, let alone contemporary neuroscience, to find confirmations that plasticity and mimetic subjectivity are constitutive of *homo plasticus/mimeticus*. Poets deeply concerned with giving new forms to ancient *figurae* already paved the way. As Auerbach recognized: “it is the poets who were most interested in the shades of meaning between model and copy, in changing form, and the deceptive likeness that walk in dream.”²³

If we further our genealogy, in the wake of Roman literary authors, it is perhaps Dante who, in *The Divine Comedy* (c. 1321), goes furthest in shifting the concept of plasticity from aesthetics to subjectivity via the plastic concept of *figura* as a medium of impression enabling the emergence of new forms. This might initially surprise given his Christian, and thus idealist foundations. In fact, in Canto XII of *Purgatorio*, for instance, as he ascends the mount in the company of his spiritual Roman guide, Virgil, Dante the protagonist sees sculptures of Christian figures cut in “white marble” that are so realistic he considers them superior to the ancient Greek sculptor, Polykleitos. And yet, to delineate these figures sculpted in the plasticity of marble via the medium of his poetics, Dante convokes what is by now a familiar ancient trope: he says that they are formed “as a figure is stamped in wax [*come figura in cera si suggella*].”²⁴ It is true that Dante uses the plasticity of the wax metaphorically here, to account for the plasticity of the white marble figures formed by Giotto’s chisel—at least if we consider these figures as *already* formed. Yet, it is also true that a philological understanding of how *figura* operates as a dynamic, formative, and transformative force *qua* “act of forming,” reveals that Dante’s focus is on the artistic process of impressing a plastic material figure, rather than on the static aesthetic product or form. Put differently, his double focus on both figure and wax delineates the double process of giving and receiving form, rather than the final and static form itself. We are thus back to the matrix figure

²² Lacoue-Labarthe’s concept of “typography” predicated on the impression on a type arguably finds in Auerbach a major unavowed source of inspiration. See Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography*, and Lawtoo “Plasticity.”

²³ Auerbach, “Figura,” 21. Central to mimetic studies, Malabou also stressed the importance of literature in her account of plasticity in general and the emergence of plastic form in particular as she states: “I think that plasticity and literature share this common destiny: they invent the form that they are.” Malabou, *Plasticity*, 315.

²⁴ Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia*, a c. di Natalino Sapegno (La Nuova Italia, 1991), X.28-45; *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (Fields, Osgood & Co, 1871), X.28-45.

central to both new materialism and mimetic studies out of which the mimetic subject is transformed— via a plastic subject matter.

Now, given Dante's focus on the language of impression, it is not surprising that he develops this sculpting analogy further by taking it beyond aesthetics to the sphere of subjectivity. He does so in psychological, or should we say, quasi-neurological terms for he stretches the plasticity of wax impressed by an aesthetic figure to the plasticity of what he calls the "brain." Here is how Dante compares his beloved Beatrice to an image that is now already impressed in the reader's imagination along new materialist lines:

*Sì come cera da suggello,
che la figura impressa non trasmuta,
segnato è or da voi lo mio cervello.*

As by a signet is the wax
Which does not change the figure stamped upon it.
My brain is now imprinted by yourself.²⁵

Just as the plasticity of wax is impressed and formed by the figure on a seal, so the plastic brain is materially impressed and transformed by the beloved's voice. Even in its Christian conception of *agapē* central to the Middle Ages, love not only informs the psychic life of a disembodied, abstract, and ideal soul; rather, it delineates a material figure that makes plastic impressions on the embodied "brain" of the mimetic subject. The rhyme between *suggello* and *cervello*, seal and brain, is unfortunately lost in translation; yet its "original" formal/material function is precisely to generate a lasting impression in readers and listeners' brains, *performing* in life what it appears to simply *represent* via art.

Dante's artistic seal, then, doubles the impression of a memorable diagnostic phrase proving his formative point via a performative artistic practice that operates on the plasticity of the readers' brains. No wonder that contemporary neuroscientists interested in going beyond narrow two-cultures divides do not hesitate to bring up the example of Dante as a precursor of neuroscientific insights. As Vittorio Gallese puts it, commenting on different lines from *The Divine Comedy*:

Both art and science are among the most distinctive expressions of human creativity. Both enable us to make visible the invisible. Art, however, does it in a much less prosaic way. This is also why it is perhaps more appealing than science. This example also clearly shows that almost always someone else in the past got it right before us. As scientists we should learn a little more humility.²⁶

The example impressed in Gallese's memory is different, but the point remains the same: artistic forms not only have transformative powers operating on our brains; they also have the power to anticipate scientific insights. In a mimetic genealogical reflection, we can only add that the

²⁵ Dante, *Divina*, XXXIII: 79-81, 216.

²⁶ Hannah Chapelle Wojciehowski, "Interview with Vittorio Gallese," *California Italian Studies* 2, no. 1 (2011): n.p.

humility we expect from scientists should be mirrored by philosophers and critics as well as we deepen formal dialogues across two-cultures divides.

With this humility well impressed on the brain let us thus note a last step in our genealogy of early modern plastic figures: a few centuries after Dante, as the Renaissance rediscovered the classical period, it recuperated both Roman and Greek diagnostic of the plasticity of subjectivity. A major influence on Nietzsche, Michel de Montaigne was also a careful reader of Plato and of the Roman authors mentioned above; he is thus a key ally for mimetic studies in general and for diagnosing plastic subject formations in particular. In his famous concluding essay “On Education,” for instance, Montaigne draws directly from Plato’s concern with the education of the plastic soul that arguably anticipates insights about the plastic brain.²⁷ He does so by reminding modern, and at one remove, contemporary readers that the soul, or as Dante called it, brain, is not unlike clay. And yet, Montaigne adds an original touch. He does not rely on the well-known trope of the seal and the wax. Instead, he develops an alternative metaphor that captures the dynamic process of plastic transformation via an experiential movement. Thus, he quotes the Roman poet Aulus Persius Flaccus saying:

*Udum et molle lutum est; nunc nunc properandus et acri
Fingendus sine fine rota*

The clay is soft and malleable [*humide et molle est l’argille*].
Quickly! Hurry to fashion it [*le pétrir*] on that potter’s wheel
Which is forever spinning [*la rue agile*].²⁸

Indeed, the soul has remained plastic and subject to dynamic transformations over millennia; neuroscientist attentive to the power of what Malabou calls “epigenetic mimesis”²⁹ confirm an ancient point. Humanists like Montaigne, in fact, provide an ancient image that captures the dynamic interplay of formless subject matter (call it clay, soul or brain) and formal craft (call it art, *techne* or education) putting them in creative touch on the spinning wheel of human nature-culture. Again, lost in translation, Montaigne’s rhyme between a formless natural material (*argille*) and an artistic formal ability (*agile*) does not simply represent a plastic figure from a stabilizing distance within the text; rather, it goes beyond nature and culture, performing plastic metamorphoses on the brains of readers outside the text. Thus, this time drawing on Cicero, who was himself drawing on Plato, Montaigne quickly returns the wheel as he writes: “a belief is like an impression stamped on our soul: the softer and less resisting the soul, the easier it is to print anything on it.”³⁰

²⁷ See Lawtoo, “Plasticity.”

²⁸ Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech (Penguin Books, 2003), 1:26, 183.

²⁹ Catherine Malabou, “Epigenetic Mimesis: Natural Brains and Synaptic Chips,” in *Life in the Posthuman Condition: Critical Responses to the Anthropocene*, ed. S. E. Wilmer (Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 280-88.

³⁰ Montaigne, *Essays*, 1:27, 200.

The outline of the diagnostic of *figura* is clear, though the form is far from stable: beliefs, habits, models, and culture more generally, for a long genealogy that goes from Plato to Lucretius, Dante to Montaigne, not only inform the mind; they also form and transform a “soul,” a mimetic-metamorphic-plastic soul that a new materialist tradition now roots in the formal (im)properties of a plastic brain. The more plastic the subject matter, the mimetic paradox goes, the stronger its ability to assume new forms and be transformed in the process. How? By sculpting not only plastic matter but also that plastic *subject* matter that is ourselves.

Sculpting the Self: Plotinus to Hadot (via Foucault)

A genealogy of the Roman concept of *figura* unearths a materialist tradition sensitive to the power of artistic figures to give a protean form to the self *qua* plastic brain. Another way of framing this immanent process whereby the mimetic subject is transformed via the figural language of sculpture is currently grouped under the rubric of “techniques of the self.” Commonly associated with the last phase of Michel Foucault’s career, as he turned to ethics to advocate for a “care of the self” or “*souci de soi*” rooted in classical Greek and Roman figures, it has not been sufficiently stressed that this “care” presupposes a mimetic malleability of a metamorphic “self” that was already central to both Greek and Roman traditions and reaches, via aestheticism, into modernity.

In the last decade of his life, Foucault’s history of sexuality returned him to the very conception of the subject he had previously contributed to erasing. His goal, however, was not simply to reinstall “man” as a sovereign figure of authority; rather, it was to reveal the aesthetic foundations of a relational, plastic, embodied, and we should now add, mimetic self. His overturning genealogical move was deft and forceful: in characteristic Nietzschean fashion, Foucault shifted the focus from the dominant (transcendental) Platonic question of “self-knowledge” (*gnothi sauton*) restricted to the *theoria* of a *vita contemplativa* oriented toward ideals Forms to the marginalized (immanent) question of “care of the self” (*epimeleia heautou*) central to a Socratic, Stoic, Epicurean, Cynic, as well as early-Christian ethical practices of self-transformation animating a *vita mimetica*. On these immanent philosophical foundations, and in a modernist spirit close to the aestheticism of Baudelaire—but also Nietzsche and Wilde—Foucault asked an untimely question: namely, whether “the life of each individual could not be a work of art”?³¹

The question did not fail to generate accusations of aestheticism, but the goal of Foucault’s care of the self was not to restrict life within the self-enclosed confines of *l’art pour l’art*. On the contrary, it was to open the confines of aesthetics to plastic and metamorphic transformations of the self in the spirit of what we could call *l’art pour la vie*: that is, the power of art to form and

³¹ Michel Foucault, “À propos de la généalogie de l’éthique: un aperçu du travail en cours,” in *Dits et Écrits 1976-1988*, eds. Daniel Defert and François Ewald (Gallimard, 2017), 1436. For a link between Foucault and Wilde via technologies of the self, see also Nidesh Lawtoo, “Wilde avec Foucault: Technologies of the Self in *Epistola*,” *Textual Practice* 39, no.9 (2025).

transform human life, or *bios* along the immanent lines pursued so far. For Foucault, in fact, this shaping of the self *qua* work of art relies on what he calls a “*technê tou bio*,” or “art of life,” (*art de vie*)³² operating on a plastic material that is not simply passively subjected to power; it can also actively take hold of a plurality of “technologies of the self” whereby individuals “transform themselves.”³³ Unsurprisingly, this transformative operation is not deprived of mimetic principles. Foucault, in fact, specifies that its “*dessin* [plan but also drawing] was to give to their lives certain values, to *reproduce certain examples*, to leave behind an exceptional reputation.”³⁴ Again, this *dessin* of reproducing examples is not based on a passive, or realistic mimesis restricted to static ideal Forms; rather, it actively *re-produces* living figures *qua* exemplars with a reputation worthy of active imitation. Foucault’s last turn to ethics, then, does not entail a return to the problematic of the subject his early work had done much to dissolving during the (post-)structuralist turn; rather, genealogical lenses reveal that the care of the self, for him, is based on immanent techniques of transformation that operate on a plastic, relational, and embodied self in line with the mimetic turn and the immanent tradition we pursued.

Genealogical lenses indicate that, among contemporary philosophers, he was not alone in doing so. The classicist Pierre Hadot, whose definition of “philosophy as a way of life” directly informs Foucault’s account of “care of the self,” confirms that imitation plays a key role in the formation of this self. Thus, Hadot writes that figures like Epicurus were considered a “model one had to imitate.”³⁵ The same, he adds, applies to the skeptic philosopher Pyrrhus who “contends himself with living and attracts thus disciples who imitate his way of life.”³⁶ The examples could be multiplied, but the point remains the same and allows us to add a relational supplement to the process of plastic figuration traced so far: if imitation *in-forms* techniques of care of the self, it follows that the *souci de soi* does not entail a solipsistic concern with an autonomous, self-contained and sovereign ego considered in isolation. On the contrary, as Hadot puts it: “the care of the self [*souci de soi*] is thus indissolubly a care of the city [*souci de la cité*] and care of others [*souci des autres*]”³⁷—a relational mimetic insight that applies to Foucault’s technologies of the self as well. Put in the language of mimetic studies, the relational dimension of the *technê* of imitation is reproductive, social, and political in nature. It provides an instrument, or chisel, this *soi* can actively use to give form, sculpt, or transform, a plastic subject matter that is both artist and artistic work, formless and in the process of transformation—both at the same time: this self can thus paradoxically both *give form* to itself and *receive form*. We are thus back to the fundamental paradox of mimesis, which is mirrored by the paradox of plasticity and reaches, via Malabou, into the present. But we are now able to see that the paradox is relational in orientation

³² Foucault, “Généalogie de l’éthique,” 1434.

³³ Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, eds. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, Patrick H. Hutton (The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 18.

³⁴ Foucault, “Généalogie de l’éthique,” 2107, 1443; my emphasis and translation.

³⁵ Pierre Hadot, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie antique* (Gallimard, 1995), 194; my translation.

³⁶ Hadot, *Qu’est-ce que*, 174.

³⁷ Hadot, *Qu’est-ce que*, 68.

as the process of giving form to the self is entangled with the form of other lives with whom it comes into being, as a metamorphic, immanent, and social subject.

Genealogy, we have learned, is the art of tracing surprising associations. This entails following the traces wherever they take us provided they further our understanding of the plastic figures at hand. Interestingly, and in another paradoxical turn, the focus on sculpting the materiality of the plastic self now central to new materialist thinkers invested in revitalizing form as a concept and practice, finds another precursor in an idealist philosopher close to the Platonic discontent with formless subject matters with which we started. Hadot's ethics of the *souci de soi* that inspired the late Foucault is, in fact, genealogically indebted to the founder of Neoplatonism: the Greek-born, Roman philosopher Plotinus.

Convoicing the aesthetic language of the beautiful, which, as for Plato before him, rests on an idealist metaphysics, Plotinus relies—more explicitly than any other philosopher and artist considered so far—on the metaphor of the sculptor giving material form to a plastic conception of the self qua statue. As he puts it in *Enneads* (c. 270 AD) in a passage worth quoting at length:

Go back inside yourself and look: if you do not yet see yourself as beautiful, then do as the sculptor does with a statue, he wants to make beautiful; he chisels away one part, and levels off another, makes one spot smooth and another clear, until he shows forth a beautiful face on the statue. Like him, remove what is superfluous, straighten what is crooked, clean up what is dark and make it bright, and *never stop sculpting your own statue*, until the godlike splendor of virtue shines forth to you.³⁸

The metaphysical binary is by now familiar: model versus copy, ideal Form versus formless matter, universal versus particular, transcendence versus immanence. At first sight, then, the genealogy of plastic figures brings us back to the idealist metaphysics that restricts mimesis to a debased copy, shadow, or phantom of an ideal reality. Unsurprisingly given that Plotinus is the founder of a school called Neoplatonism. And yet, formal lenses reveal, once again, a different picture or sculpture: the material language of sculpting a plastic self balances Plotinus' idealist metaphysics with what we could call an aesthetic physics sensitive to the process of formation or transfiguration. The sculptor, in fact, is engaged in a labor that puts the *technē* of mimesis to immanent work on that plastic subject matter that is the self, “chisel[ing] away,” “level[ing] off,” “mak[ing] one spot smooth” etc. It is only by doing so that mimesis brings a plastic figure into being.

What, then, has true Being for Plotinus in the end? The ideal ontological Form mimesis reproduces—as an idealist tradition from Plato to Plotinus and beyond posits? Or, rather, the plastic aesthetic figure in the process of becoming—as a materialist tradition from Lucretius to Montaigne and beyond suggests? This agonistic confrontation between idealists and materialists reenacts what

³⁸ Plotinus, *Enneads*, I 6.9, qtd. in Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus or the Simplicity of Vision*, trans. Michael Chase (The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 21. Hereafter, *P*. This genealogy could be furthered by considering to Late Neoplatonic philosophers, like Proclus' theurgy for the image of “seal” (*sphragis*), and their influence on both Byzantine and Islamic thought. I am grateful to the external reviewer for signaling this connection.

Plato called a “battle of the gods and giants”³⁹ that traverses the entire history of metaphysics in general and in-forms the plastic birth of the mimetic subject. It also reminds us that Socrates’s father was a sculptor, opening up a more down-to-earth, materialist perspective to reframe Plato’s idealist metaphysics from the angle of a *techne* of *mimesis* already internal to mimetic studies.⁴⁰

Commenting directly on these lines by Plotinus, Hadot echoes Plato’s idealist metaphysics, but he does so with a materialist difference as he writes: “Art must not copy reality: in that case, it would only be an inferior copy which is the object of perceived by our senses” (*P*, 20). Sculpting the self can thus not be reduced to a passive imitation of the phenomenal world, itself a copy of ideal Forms, restricted to the aesthetic realism Auerbach relies on in *Mimesis*—granted. But then, in a paradoxical phrase, Hadot adds: “The True function of art is ‘heuristic’: through the work of art, we discover, or ‘invent’ [*invente*] the eternal model, the Idea, of which the sensible reality is a mere image” (20). The idealist ontology is once again familiar, but the ambivalence Hadot introduces via the verb “*inventer*” between “inventing” or “discovering”⁴¹ opens up the agon between two antithetical lines of investigation which redoubles the battle of the giants. At stake is not only materialism contra idealism but also a battle between modern and ancient interpretations. On the side of the ancients, we could indeed follow etymologism and translate “*inventer*” as “discovering” thereby suggesting that the sculptor (or philosopher) working on the plastic and still formless material (or self) finds a pre-existing transcendental Form that was already there all along and now serves as the “original” model in the first place for the philosophical-artist to simply reproduce. Sculpting the self by modelling it on a Form would thus reinstate the idealist metaphysics via a plastic material figure. Conversely, from a materialist but also modern perspective, we could be inclined to read *inventer* in its contemporary French meaning of “to invent,” thereby opening a more troubling interpretation. In fact, if the mimetic copy “invents,” that is, creates or produces the model “itself,” it is the ideal model or Form that turns out to be dependent on the plastic material for its proper “Being” to emerge as an abstract idea. This second, more troubling interpretation would pave the way for deconstructions to come in which the “copy” brings the “original” into being, while at the same time adding a materialist supplement to it via the formal language of sculpture.

The entire history of western metaphysics hinges on this etymological hesitation and its overturning implications. While Hadot is eventually faithful to Plotinus’s idealism as he simply states that “the work of art is an attempt to imitate this idea” (*P*, 20-21), both the mimetic turn and the new materialist turn would favor the second, more immanent interpretation. Interestingly, in the end Plotinus himself, despite his undeniable idealist tendencies, uses the *techne* of writing to put *mimesis* to performative use on plastic subjects living in this world. Thus, formalist lenses

³⁹ Plato, *Sophist*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, trans. F. M. Cornford, 957-1017, 246ab.

⁴⁰ See Herny Staten, “Techne vs. Mimesis in Plato’s Republic: What Socrates Really Says about Homer,” in *Homo Mimeticus II: Re-Turns to Mimesis*, eds. Nidesh Lawtoo and Marina Garcia-Granero (Leuven University Press, 2024), 71-91.

⁴¹ As Hadot’s translator notes, “the French word “*inventer*” derives from the Latin, *invenire*, “to discover” (*P* 10, n2). In modern French it simply means “to invent.”

attentive not only to what he says but to how he says it note that he addresses the reader in a direct mimetic speech that reaches into the present as he writes: “never stop sculpting your own statute.” What is rhetorically at play in this formal imperative is not simply a constative speech act based on mimetic realism; nor is it only a “performative speech act” in which “the uttering of the sentence is, or is part of, the doing of the action.”⁴² Rather, I call a performative speech act that operates not only via linguistic actions but on mimetic bodies, “mime-acts.” And I do so to indicate the metamorphic powers of mimesis on the side of life—which leads us to the last metamorphosis that goes beyond mimetic and anti-mimetic principles.

The Fourth Metamorphosis of Plasticity: Nietzsche’s (Anti-)Mimetic Parable

Given the previous genealogical steps that go from antiquity to the present, it is perhaps not surprising that, in the modern period, the metamorphoses of a mimetic/plastic subject were best dramatized in a parabolic form by the philosopher-poet who countered Plato’s discontent with formless mimetic subject with which we started. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883),⁴³ Nietzsche dramatizes three metamorphoses of the spirit that served as a the immanent, down-to-earth, model for a genealogy we could also have called, to make a Nietzschean echo audible, the four metamorphoses of plasticity.

Much has been said about “The Three Metamorphoses [*Verwandlungen*] of the Spirit” that open Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophical poem—a text that defines the human as something that needs to be overcome via the figure of the “Over-human” (*Übermensch*). This concept has caused much confusion in the past century; it was in fact misappropriated by fascist and Nazi ideologues that erected it as a totalitarian figure of authority in-forming the Nazi myth. Still, a focus on mimesis quickly reveals the anti-fascist, creative, and life-affirmative drive that animates this philosophical parable. That a mimetic paradox is central to Nietzsche’s conception of metamorphosis is already indicated by the book’s subtitle: “A Book for Everyone and Nobody.” In a paradoxical performative mime-act, this title addresses both mimetic (everyone) and anti-mimetic (no one) tendencies in readers, while also pointing to a (anti-)mimetic paradox we are by now familiar with. For Nietzsche, in fact, the metamorphic “spirit” oscillates, pendulum-like, between mimetic pathos and critical distance as it leads both to conformity and individualism. This pathos of distance generates what Georges Bataille will also call an “attraction and repulsion” toward a form(less) will to power with the transgressive potential to turn “no one” into every “everyone” and vice versa—for both good and ill.

Reloading the paradox of mimesis, which, as we have seen, mirrors the paradox of plasticity in its ability to both give and receive form, the three metamorphoses Nietzsche dramatizes in

⁴² J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, eds., J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Harvard University Press, 1975), 5.

⁴³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Graham Parkes (Oxford University Press), 2005. Henceforth Z.

Zarathustra also hinge on mimetic and anti-mimetic processes that go beyond human figures, including nonhuman animals that we have encountered at the outset of our genealogy and now pave the way for that future-oriented figure of the “Over-human.” Thus, not unlike Plato under the mask of Socrates (but with an inverted message), under the mask of Zarathustra, Nietzsche tells the story of “how the spirit became a camel, and the camel a lion, and the lion at last a child” (Z, 23). These all down-to-earth, plastic figures that, unlike idealist conceptions of the Spirit, are *not* caught in process of “going up” but of “going under,” do not lead to linear progress but to cyclical transformation. This also means that it is only because the spirit is not restricted to the imitation of unitary Forms to start with, or unifying dialectical syntheses, that it can go through metamorphoses in the first place. As they recapitulate, *in nuce*, the genealogy of plastic figures we have traced, let us briefly summarize them in guise of conclusion.

The first metamorphic figure depicts the spirit as a herd animal: namely, a camel embodying a restricted mimesis that is impressed on flexible and docile subjects. It is thus a figure that passively receives form from others but does not actively give form to itself—if only because the camel *con*-forms to other members of the herd, blending in with others as part of an homogenous group Nietzsche often critiques as a “crowd” or “mass.”⁴⁴ Being like “everyone,” the camel is no one, for its ego is but a shadow or phantom of other egos. The first metamorphosis of the spirit into a camel represents thus a typical process of passive mimetic con-formation that, both in its animal and all too human manifestations, traverses Nietzsche’s entire corpus, is herd-like and docile in nature, is representative of Christian moral values, and he generally critiques it as sick or pathological. Drawing on Nietzsche, Foucault would later qualify this camel-like figure as a “docile subject” subjected to the spell of a network of power-knowledge that turns “the soul” into what he calls, in a famous overturning of Plato, “the prison for the body.”⁴⁵

And yet, for Nietzsche, as for the genealogical precursors from which he draws, mimesis is never unilateral; it goes beyond good and evil, activity and passivity, receiving form and giving form. We are in fact told that “the heavy and the hardest are what its [the camel’s] strength desires” (Z, 23). There is a mirroring (and thus inverted) relation between the “heavy” mimetic burden on one side and the “strength” of the mimetic figure on the other. Being no one in particular, this plastic figure has the potential to actively imitate selective others in view of becoming, perhaps not everyone, but at least someone. Thus, passivity turns into activity, receiving form from others into giving form to the self via an empowering and transformative educative process, Montaigne, anticipating Nietzsche, already outlined for us—which leads us to the second metamorphosis of a spirit which, as these animal figures suggest, cannot be dissociated from the body, forming a spirit-body.

Contrary to the camel, the lion appears to be thoroughly *anti*-mimetic at first. Thus, it emerges from the “loneliest desert” (Z, 23) where it is not inclined to conform to any moral or social

⁴⁴ See Nidesh Lawtoo, *The Phantom of the Ego: Modernism and the Mimetic Unconscious* (Michigan State University Press, 2013), 68-84.

⁴⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Vintage Books, 1977), 30.

impressions or types imposed from the outside. On the contrary, the lion is driven by an aggressive (will to) power that is—perhaps due to the burden of education—down-to-earth in orientation. Let us not forget that, as a classical philologist, Nietzsche is likely to have remembered from his lessons in philology at Pforta that the lion corresponds to Proteus' first metamorphosis, with which we also started. He would have certainly known that it is the animal constantly associated with Homeric heroes Plato is up against, such as "lion-hearted Achilles" or that "mountain lion trusting its strength"⁴⁶ whose name is no one, or Odysseus. Force, power, or will to power that is rooted in a Homeric world of becoming is needed vital to transgress typical idealist Forms imprinted with the stabilizing values of the past across generations of docile subjects. Hence the shift from a herd-like, passive, Christian animal to an individual, active Homeric animal indicates both an overturning of perspective and a re-turn to a Greek world of becoming that informs, the metamorphosis of the sprit-body.

Yet, as the Homeric references already suggest, anti-mimesis is not the final drive, or pathos, that propels the human toward new metamorphic destinations. Going beyond pathos and distance, mimetic and anti-mimetic drives, Nietzsche adds that in order to move from critique to creativity, aggression to innocence, a last metamorphosis is still needed. As he puts it: "To create new values—that even the lion cannot yet do" (Z, 24). And pointing to a life-affirmative, innocent, and future-oriented plastic figure, Nietzsche proposes the child as a still formless subject to go beyond all too human types that have a stabilizing Form as a unitary model. As he puts it: "innocence the child is and forgetting, a beginning anew, a play, a self-propelled wheel" (24). From the wheel of education that gives form to plastic clay we are thus back to the wheel in which the subject gives form to itself.

Our genealogical reframing of the concept of *figura* comes here full circle, yet this is not a closed circle but one that opens up endless transformations of the sprit-body. If we are indeed far removed from the caricatures of the *Übermensch* endowed with the will to power to impress docile subjects with the stamp of an authoritarian figure or type, as Lacoue-Labarthe feared, we are back to the conception of figure linked to "dynamic formation" and "play," as Auerbach, but also a long tradition from Dante to Montaigne, Plotinus to Hadot and Foucault, foresaw. An heir to the ancients and a precursor of contemporary philosophers, Nietzsche is well-placed to seal the samp of our genealogy of plastic figures and root the metamorphoses of the sprit back into an innocent body and soul-brain. That is, mimetic soul-brain that is not simply passively subjected to what Montaigne called the "wheel of education" that gives form to it from the outside-in; rather, it actively self-propels this wheel into motion from the inside-out generating a transformative interplay between a formless subject and exemplary forms, cultural influences and the plastic subject matter at hand.

Children are, of course, mimetic-plastic figures par excellence that can be impressed, camel-like, from the outside; yet, this does not mean that they cannot actively create, play, or re-produce new beginnings that are self-propelled from the inside—for the distinction between the inside and

⁴⁶ Homer, *Odyssey*, 6.130.

the outside, passivity and activity, receiving form and giving form, inner experience and outer transformation is precisely what our genealogy of plastic figures blurs in the end. Although the brain remains plastic throughout our lives, it is indeed in childhood that what Malabou calls “the plastic art of the brain”⁴⁷ is most intense. Already prior to birth, she reminds us that “embryonic stem cells” have the (im)propriety to “differentiate into all the specialized cells.”⁴⁸ Also known as “pluripotent cells” they have the mimetic power, or will to power to generate a reproduction of cells based on biological processes of mimetic repetition. After birth, “the sculptor’s chisel” is also fully at work, via a neurological phenomenon known as “apoptosis” or “cell death” which is intense in the first six months and is responsible for what Malabou calls “the progressive sculpting of the definitive form of the [neuronal] system.”⁴⁹ Perhaps more than any other plastic figure encountered so far, then, children are also endowed with the paradoxical powers of receiving form and giving form that seal the productive connection between the paradox of mimesis and the paradox of plasticity we have been delineating.

Conclusion

As the mimetic turn continues to further a return to the materiality of form, we can already foresee new generations of scholars who will continue to trouble dualist oppositions between activity and passivity, body and spirit, self and others, copy and model, art and life, and increasingly, online and offline, algorithmic influence and bodily influencers at play in forming and transforming *homo mimeticus* 2.0 in the digital age, for good and ill.⁵⁰ While this genealogy of plastic figures looked back to classical figures that are regrettably predominantly male, let us not forget that Malabou is also a feminist philosopher who is currently reconfiguring a liberating notion of “gendered mimesis” that is not simply passive and reproductive of male Forms but active and generative new metamorphic figures.⁵¹ “Doomed to mimic a double mastery” embodied by her mentor and model, Jacques Derrida, Malabou, like Irigaray before her, does not shy away from the genealogical evaluation that “feminine authority looks like a mime” in a patriarchal world dominated by vertical, phallogocentric models that lead the “woman philosopher” to “a miming of male mastery, a manner of speaking and acting to which ‘woman’ could bring nothing ‘proper.’”⁵² Think of the type of

⁴⁷ Malabou, *What Should We*, 19.

⁴⁸ Catherine Malabou, “From the Overman to the Posthuman: How Many Ends?” in *Plastic Materialities: Politics, Legality, and Metamorphosis in the works of Catherine Malabou*, eds. Brenna Bhandar and Jonathan Goldberg-Hiller (Duke University Press, 2015), 70.

⁴⁹ Malabou, *What Should We*, 19.

⁵⁰ For first steps in this direction see *Mimetic Posthumanism: Homo Mimeticus 2.0 in Art, Philosophy and Technics*, ed. Nidesh Lawtoo (Leiden: Brill, 2024).

⁵¹ For a more detailed account of the role of gender mimesis in relation to Malabou see Lawtoo and Verkerk, *Homo Mimeticus III*, 26-29, 315-317.

⁵² Catherine Malabou, *Changing Difference: The Feminine and the Question of Philosophy*, trans. Carolyn Shread (Polity, 2011), 106. Hereafter CD.

mimicry at play in “Woody Allen’s Films,” specifies Malabou in a way that confirms the theory of *homo mimeticus* (CD, 106).⁵³

And yet, at the same time, and without contradiction, Malabou immediately specifies, that this mime or *mimos* is never simply passive and reproductive; rather, the gendered mime has the disquieting power of turning passivity into activity, receiving form and giving form, realizing in the metamorphic process that “woman is no longer the victim of mime; she becomes its subversive instance” (CD, 123). Plastic figures, she will also say, have explosive powers that dissolve traditional Forms in view of mimetic metamorphose to come. Adopting this subversive instance to the genealogy of the spirit *qua* plastic brain in question, we should at least note that the child—as its ungendered name already suggests (*das Kind*)—remains ontologically open to plastic metamorphoses of the spirit-body that are currently “changing difference,” “transforming mime into a voluntary and liberating pastiche” (123). Its forms to come will thus inevitably surprise us as the plasticity of mimesis sets the stage for metamorphic transformations that cut across ontological binaries (spirit/body, self/other, model/copy, male/female, human/nonhuman) in order to give new forms to a protean, metamorphic, and plastic figure we called, for lack of a more original term, *homo mimeticus*.

A metamorphosis, in the end, does not simply replace previous stages, just as the butterfly does not simply replace the caterpillar. Rather, a metamorphosis entails an embodied, biological, physiological but, for Nietzsche, also psychological, aesthetic, political, ethical, and spiritual reorganization of the spirit that retains the critical powers internal to previous stages, including mimetic stages, by putting them to creative and life-affirmative use. If the child’s innocence retains the anti-mimetic qualities of the lion to propose a “new beginning,” the trope of the wheel also points to an affirmative *re*-turn to a mimetic education that is not simply passive, docile, and doomed the repetition of the same Forms that caused discontent in the past. Rather, as the reference to play already suggests, this *re*-turn is active, joyful, transformative, and creative of plurality of differences currently animating a process of becoming other in the present and future.

The potter’s wheel of education is forever spinning, generating mimetic turns and re-turns that reach into the present, making lasting impressions on new generations as well. It is in such a spirit of playful affirmation that this essay encourages readers to put both formal and formless principle to use. As the clay is soft and malleable, let us hurry to fashion it on that potter’s wheel, by turning and re-turning it—generating in the playful process repetitions with a difference that will keep forming and transforming plastic figures to come.

⁵³ On the connection between Malabou, mimesis/plasticity and Woody Allen see also Lawtoo, *Homo Mimeticus*, 129-155, 191-223.

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