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## Introduction, rehearsal and repetition

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*Mimesis* and *repetition* are the basic terms of this book, and its basic argument is that *mimesis* turns – somehow, at some time – into *repetition*.

This statement could be developed in at least two ways, which seem like two alternative ways of describing and analysing the phenomenon of *mimesis*:

- (1) The turning of *mimesis* into *repetition* is the result of a historical process that slowly invests *mimesis* with temporal dimensions. Modernity, which can be localized as starting in the eighteenth century, is here of decisive importance; the modern development of *mimesis* results paradoxically in its fulfillment and disappearance, meaning that similarity gives way to difference.
- (2) *Mimesis* is inherently and always already a *repetition* – meaning that *mimesis* is always the meeting-place of two opposing but connected ways of thinking, acting and making: similarity and difference.

In this book I am using the second way of thinking about and discussing *mimesis*, which implies that I am always inclined to find movements of difference even in those versions of *mimesis* that suggest similarity; and even in the oldest versions of Plato and Aristotle. I do not want to discard a historical approach, however, and I am actually using one, in the simplest way possible, by arranging my four studies chronologically and not wanting to exclude a historical development between them. That means, however, that I have avoided the question of the historicity of the concept: the problems involved seemed overwhelming.

The attempt to write a full-scale history of *mimesis* has, of course, been made in the classic work by Erich Auerbach of 1946 called, simply, *Mimesis*.

Writing on *mimesis* within the tradition of literary analysis and textual analysis, one has actually to come to terms with both Plato

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and Auerbach, so to speak: Plato for being the nearest you can come to one responsible for the Western tradition of thinking, in which *mimesis* plays such an important part; and Auerbach for being a paradigm for the analysis of textual *mimesis*. Plato is the first author we have all read, whether we know it or not, and Auerbach happens to be the first author that I read as a literary student who left a lasting impression.

Auerbach notably presents the history of *mimesis* in twenty chapters in chronological order, basing each on a piece of text and discussing its *Darstellung*, its representation of reality, as an integration of style, morality and reality. I find now that his way of writing history is exemplary as he subordinates history to literary texts, and always bases his analysis on the reading of this text. Yet there are only a few of these analyses that I can follow, and no conclusion that I can accept; and I cannot share Auerbach's idea of a levelling of styles as the very idea of history, or his integrative pathos. The one example from Auerbach that I discuss in my first chapter confirms the suspicion that, despite my admiration for his scope and reading procedures, his view of the very concept in question, *mimesis*, is simplifying in a way that makes him blind to differential movements. From my perspective Auerbach makes his most interesting observations on the mimetic play of similarity and difference *not* in terms of representation, but in terms of *figura*, of figural style and figural interpretation.<sup>1</sup>

Recently another admirable effort has been made to make history out of *mimesis*: a book by Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf called, again, *Mimesis*, and broadly subtitled *Kultur – Kunst – Gesellschaft* (Culture, Art, Society). The authors call their approach "historical anthropology," and they manage to present an outline of the transformations of *mimesis* from the beginning, from archaic imagery up to modern imagination and further on into a post-historical time of *simulacrum*, where a totalizing *mimesis* coincides with its disappearance: nothing is left to imitate when all is imitation and the original is finally gone. The historical cesura comes with "modernity," here located in the aesthetic thinking of Diderot, Lessing, Moritz and Kant. Lessing is singled out as the thinker who introduced *time* into mimetic representation: "Time is discovered by Lessing as

<sup>1</sup> As elaborated in *Mimesis* and especially in the essay "Figura," in *Neue Dantestudien* (Istanbul, 1944).

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the decisive characteristic of poetry,"<sup>2</sup> a "rediscovery" of "time as constitutive for poetry" that allows for his definite giving up of "similarity as the principle of Mimesis" and his modern introduction of "the idea of trace in its stead."<sup>3</sup>

Gebauer and Wulf's excellent analysis and the attractive perspective on *mimesis* as the beginning and end of our civilization – attractive for giving the impression of evolutionary purpose – has some drawbacks. Historicity has its costs. The major one is, in this case, that every thinker before Lessing has to be allotted temporal innocence in order to give Gebauer and Wulf the chance of letting Lessing discover the importance of time for aesthetics. And this I would call a result of a combination of analytical blindness with historical construction: it is an observation and a thesis that should be difficult to combine with the analysis of historical texts. Time is, after all, a constant problem of aesthetics already discussed by Plato and Aristotle, not to mention Augustine. Similar difficulties arise in the analysis of other concepts, used by Gebauer and Wulf as emblems of modernity: "trace" can be "traced" way back, even *simulacrum*, modern as it is, can be derived from an ancient discussion of similarity and difference – the word itself apprises us of that.

In this book I prefer to present *mimesis* and mimetic problems in terms of similarity/difference or as the meeting-place for these opposing phenomena or movements; and as including other members of the mimetical family such as proximity and distance, presence and absence. *Mimesis* is *never* a homogeneous term, and if its basic movement is towards similarity it is *always* open to the opposite. Perhaps modern theorists become modern by emphasizing the differential movements and possibilities of what earlier was called *mimesis*. But they have also been clever at finding the traces of difference in history. Heidegger, for instance, when discussing Greek, specially Platonic *mimesis*, insists that the concept is directed towards truth, but based on the *distance* from truth; imitating "representation" (*Nachahmung*) is not what it is about. On the contrary; *mimesis* is based upon the fact that the artist *cannot* reproduce the truth as similarity. It is wrong, according to Heidegger, to associate *mimesis* with

- 2 Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf, *Mimesis. Kultur – Kunst – Gesellschaft* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1992), p. 275: "Die Zeit wird von Lessing als das entscheidende Merkmal der Dichtung entdeckt."
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 283f.: "Die Ähnlichkeit als Prinzip der Mimesis wird definitiv aufgegeben und der Gedanke der Spur an ihre Stelle gesetzt."

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“primitive” imitation (*Nachbilden*). It is rather a question of “doing-after: production that comes afterwards. The *mimesis* is in its essence situated and defined through distance.”<sup>4</sup>

Heidegger’s follower H.-G. Gadamer also emphasizes *mimesis* as a productive relation of knowledge and truth, and discusses “recognition” (*Wiedererkennung*) as the best word to characterize a mimetical sense of knowledge (*Erkenntnis*).<sup>5</sup> Heidegger’s “doing-after” (*Nachmachung*) as a definition of *mimesis* is, like “recognition,” more productive than imitative. It is close to *repetition*, as the concept and term that inherits the burden of *mimesis* when we come to modern times, and that we find in the different strategies of repetition used by, for instance, Nietzsche, Freud and Deleuze – to mention only a few of those whom I am *not* discussing. Instead I concentrate on “*repetition* (in the Kierkegaardian sense of the term),” to use a phrase from Paul de Man that will be much in use in my last chapter, which deals with *repetition* in the versions of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Derrida and de Man himself.

Modern theorists have become modern not only with their emphasis on repetition as difference rather than as similarity, but also in their linguistic orientation. The linguistic *turn* is the well-known *signum* of modern philosophy and literary theory, most often expressed as a discrepancy of meaning and reference. Linguistic signs refer to a reality *beyond* their own reality; but literary language, more than any other language, makes a problem of exactly this *beyond*, and of the relation between meaning and reference. The conventional and, therefore, unstable relation between sign and signified makes way for the unpleasant experience of never knowing for sure. Or, as it has been put by Paul de Man: it is “not a priori certain that literature is a reliable source of information about anything but its own language.”<sup>6</sup>

Modern as it is, this experience has famous antecedents: Plato’s dialogue *Cratylus* has, after all, the nature of the linguistic sign as its theme. My chapter on Cervantes’ *Don Quijote* will expose similar

4 Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche* (Pfullingen: Neste, 1961), vol. 1, p. 215: “Es ist daher irrig, wenn man der *mimesis* die Vorstellung des ‘naturalistischen’ und ‘primitiven’ Nachbildens und Abschilderns unterlegt. Nachmachung ist: nachgeordnetes Herstellen. Der *mimesis* wird in seinem Wesen durch die Stelle des Abstandes bestimmt,” etc.

5 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, vol. 1 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1990 [1960]), pp. 118ff.

6 Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minnesota University Press, 1986), p. 11.

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linguistic problems, including their relations to questions of identity. And the unreliability of signs has never been better expressed than by Shakespeare, for instance when he makes the jester, Feste, of *Twelfth Night* (iii: 1) show off his capacity as “corrupter of words” by telling Viola that *reason* cannot be yielded without words, “and words are grown so false, I am loath to prove reason with them” – as if making an early linguistic turn of the question of the reason of reason, as it was later discussed by, for instance, Leibniz and Heidegger. Feste declares that “*words are very rascals, since bonds disgraced them,*” thereby providing us with something like a motto for the linguistic aspects of the never very stable relations between sign and signified.

Shakespeare’s jester even seems like an early version of the jesting spirit of today’s philosophy, as personified by Jacques Derrida. *Repetition* is a major trace in his philosophy, to be followed in my last chapter. *Repetition* (and, later; *iteration*) are instrumental in his deconstructive strategies, meaning that these terms seem more important to me than his analysis of *mimesis*, developed in a couple of articles in the 1970s. As can be studied in “La Mythologie blanche” (1972) as well as in “Economimesis” (1975), Derrida regards *mimesis* as a version of classical metaphysical ontology, based on analogy, resemblance, similarity. Reading Kant (in “Economimesis”), however, opens the way for difference: Derrida’s Kant finds “true *mimesis* between two producing subjects and not between two produced things,” meaning that “true *mimesis*” is actually a “condemnation of the imitation” and a tribute to the creative imagination of the artist.<sup>7</sup> Like Heidegger, Derrida finds classical *mimesis* based in *physis*, while the modern, starting with Kant, has traveled into imagination. Derrida’s own repetition is neither *physis* nor imagination, neither imitative nor productive, but a linguistically motivated mechanism working within all versions of *mimesis*.

The argument so far seems to indicate an ontological turn: the historical approach to *mimesis* outlined by Auerbach and emphasized by Gebauer and Wulf with the cesura of “modernity” has – after Nietzsche and with Heidegger and Derrida – turned into different mimetic orders; and into a mimetical order of difference. Perhaps this ontological turn in favor of difference could be summarized in J. Hillis Miller’s excellent formula as “two forms of repetition.” One would be

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Economimesis,” in *Mimesis – des articulations* (Paris: Flammarion, 1975), pp. 67ff.

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heading for similarity, the other for difference.<sup>8</sup> Hillis Miller is able to use his differential repetition as a tool for literary analysis in a way that has been an inspiration for me – although my application is to the theory itself, rather than the literature. This ontological and rhetorical turn has so far been presented in contrast to the historical approach, but should not, I hope, be regarded as a- or anti-historical. I would like to emphasize here what is likely to disappear in the analyses to come: that the ontology (and methodology and rhetoric) of *mimesis* could (or should) open the way to aspects of temporality that are embedded in historical time, but are nevertheless conspicuously absent from the historical approach. I am thinking of the reversals of “making new” studied in the chapter on Cervantes; the momentary presence cultivated by Rousseau, and, above all, the instant or *momentum* prefigured by Plato, conceptually developed by Kierkegaard and explored by Heidegger, Derrida and de Man.

Walter Benjamin provides Hillis Miller with some beautiful sentences to characterize differential repetition, and Benjamin would perhaps be the best specimen of a modern thinker obsessed with the possibility of evoking a time within time, a momentary presence miraculously combining similarity and difference. Benjamin finds his inspiration for this in Proust, among others, and, since it is a commonplace that Proust in *A la recherche du temps perdu* demonstrates the power of temporality to differentiate and dissociate a traditional *mimesis*, thereby announcing literary modernity, I would like to finish this introductory rehearsal with some Proustian observations. I certainly do not want to deny the important rôle played by Time in *A la recherche*, in every possible way. Then who would deny the instrumental importance of temporality in installing distance in mimetic similarity when we come to Lessing, Rousseau, Cervantes, Augustine, Aristotle? In any event, this powerful differentiating temporality coincides interestingly with what is more or less a cult of similarity in Proust’s work, and this very coincidence of the “two forms of repetition” is what Benjamin tries to pin down.

“Zum Bilde Prousts” (“To the Image of Proust”) is Benjamin’s effort to fix Proust in one of his “dialectical images,” an essay written in 1929. And *Ähnlichkeit* (similarity) is his decisive term, used to tell us that Proust cultivates a “frenetic” and “impassioned cult of similarity,”

8 J. Hillis Miller, “Two Forms of Repetition,” in *Fiction and Repetition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).

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that the world of *A la recherche* is “a world in the state of similarity governed by ‘correspondances,’” and that the author of this world could only be an author dominated by nostalgia “for a world displaced (*entstellt*) in the state of similarity.”<sup>9</sup> The German *Ähnlichkeit* already indicates a kind of similarity that includes difference, and this differential aspect is emphasized by calling the “state of similarity” *entstellt*, meaning not only displaced, but also corrupted, disfigured.

I cannot fully explore Benjamin’s meaning here – doing that would mean going into what he calls a *Lehre vom Ähnlichen*;<sup>10</sup> I can only indicate the relevance for Proust and for a modern idea of *mimesis*. And Benjamin is certainly not the only one to have observed the importance of *Ähnlichkeit* – similarity with a difference – for Proust. Georges Poulet, in his study of Proustian “space,” declares *juxtaposition* to be the central device when Proust establishes his “world” of affinities and relations.<sup>11</sup> His observation was developed by Gérard Genette in several essays, prominently in “*Métonymie chez Proust*” in 1973. Genette uses terms like *rapprochement*, *analogie* and *concomitance* to establish the intricate and interwoven relations between metaphor and metonymy that he regards as typical of Proust. The “fundamental tendency of Proustian writing and imagination,” according to Genette, is “the projection of the analogical relation on to a relation of contiguity” making metaphor, in the shape of a “following of comparisons” (“*comparaisons suivies*”), a *rapprochement* of two impressions or sensations by way of *analogie*, into the central figure of style and world for Proust.<sup>12</sup>

Proust, then, famed for his break with all traditional *mimesis* and his revolutionary use of temporality, is caught using versions of similarity as the very tool for installing temporal difference. If one were to single out one word from his work, used to initiate those endless *comparaisons suivies* that make up his text, it would simply be “*comme*”: “like.”

9 Walter Benjamin, “Zum Bilde Prousts,” in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt-on-Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 1: 1, p. 313 (“Prousts frenetische Studium, Sein passionierter Kultus der Ähnlichkeit”), p. 320 (“Es ist ein Welt im Stand der Ähnlichkeit und in ihr herrschen die ‘Korrespondenzen’”), p. 314 (“Heimweh nach der im Stand der Ähnlichkeit entstellten Welt”).

10 Walter Benjamin, *Lehre vom Ähnlichen* (“The Lesson of Similarity”), a metaphysical essay from the beginning of the 1930s, later developed into *Über das mimetische Vermögen* (“On the Mimetical Capacity”).

11 Georges Poulet, *L’Espace proustien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), especially ch. 9.

12 Gérard Genette, “*Métonymie chez Proust*,” in *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), pp. 53ff.

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Chains of elaborate comparisons, grown into metaphors, or at least given an air of metaphoricity, are established as Proust's method of *Recherche*; and this mingling of comparison, metonymy and metaphor may be regarded as his version of what I put broadly as a coincidence of similarity and difference.

It may seem far-fetched to use these efforts to find a formula for what is typical of Proust as a first and introductory argument in the theory of *mimesis*. Proust seems not to belong to the mimetic tradition at all, obsessed, as he was, by the difference produced by time. What interests me is his use of the mechanisms of similarity to establish this difference. His "impassioned cult of similarity," in Benjamin's words, even seems like the condition and purpose of the differentiating movements of his *Recherche*. His *comparaisons suivies*, mingling metaphor with metonymy, concentrate those "two forms of repetition" that Hillis Miller found in the novelistic tradition and that I am tempted to stretch to the tradition of *mimesis* in its ontological, as well as its historical, version.

Proust seems just as interested as his commentators to find the formula for this enigmatic mixture. Notably he (i.e. the narrator of his novel) invokes the concept of metaphor – and thereby substitution and similarity – at crucial moments in the development of the protagonist (i.e. Marcel). When he first ponders the paintings of Elstir – a major influence on the writer-to-be – he imagines he has found one of those "rare moments when one sees nature as it is, poetically"; and the painting that evokes this insight is "one of the most frequent metaphors" said to be used by Elstir: a comparison of "earth to sea, suppressing all borders between them."<sup>13</sup>

"Metaphor" here has apparently to do with similarity, even with the obliteration of a primary difference between earth and sea. Much later in the novel, at the decisive moment in the last part when Marcel has defined his mission (i.e. to write) and sits alone pondering how to go about it, we meet "metaphor" again. As with Elstir, it has to do with finding the correspondence of similarity between the basically different, finding "the qualities in common between two sensations,"

13 Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu* (Paris: Gallimard Pléiade, 1991), vol. 2, p. 192: "Mais les rares moments où l'on voit la nature telle qu'elle est, poétiquement, c'était de ceux-là qu'était faite l'œuvre d'Elstir. Une de ses métaphores les plus fréquentes dans les marines qu'il avait près de lui en ce moment, était justement celle qui comparant la terre à la mer, supprimait entre elle toute démarcation."



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liberating their “common essence” from the “contingencies of time.” Metaphor is truth and “truth does not start until the writer takes two different objects, establishes their connection . . . and encloses them in the necessary bonds of a good style.”<sup>14</sup> Metaphor is the truth of similarity hiding in a world of difference.

This may have little to do with the actual state of this world and its history, but it summarizes a poetical impulse: the poetics of metaphorical similarity used to show a world of difference. Such a poetical impulse is not only relevant to Proust, but a vital paradox in the tradition of *mimesis*. I like to think of it as one of the reasons for *mimesis* in the shape of similarity being so amazingly long-lived when all the evidence favors difference, so to speak. Again, Proust can be used as a witness. In his *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, written as a rehearsal for the big novel, he writes in the conclusion of imagining a boy within himself and known only to himself. This *garçon* has an eye and an ear sharp enough to notice “between two impressions, between two ideas, a very subtle harmony that other people do not notice.” This “harmony” is called the “general” (something I want to translate as “similarity”); and the boy can live only in the “general”; “he dies immediately in the particular” (may I read it as “difference”?). And this boy, declares Proust, “only he should write my books.”<sup>15</sup>

My suspicion is that this mimetically sensitive boy, not very fit for the real world, but yearning for the state of similarity, has already written unbelievably much, and is still about to write.

- 14 *La recherche*, vol. 4, p. 468: “la vérité ne commencera qu’au moment où l’écrivain prendra deux objets différents, posera leur rapport . . . et les enfermera dans les anneaux nécessaires d’un beau style. Même, ainsi que la vie, quand rapprochant une qualité commune à deux sensations, il dégagera leur essence commune en les réunissant l’une et l’autre pour les soustraire aux contingences du temps, dans une métaphore.”
- 15 Marcel Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), p. 302: “Et je pense que le garçon qui en moi s’amuse à cela doit être le même que celui qui a aussi l’oreille fine et juste pour sentir entre deux impressions, entre deux idées, une harmonie très fine que d’autres ne sentent pas”, p. 303: “Il n’y a que lui qui devrait écrire mes livres.”

## I

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 Plato's "Mimesis"
 

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### Criticism

Plato rejected the poets.

The best-known *locus* for this dramatic gesture is the dialogue *Republic*, the tenth and last book, where Plato has Socrates reach the conclusion that "we can admit no poetry into our city save only hymns to the gods and the praises of good men."<sup>1</sup> "Our city" refers to the ideal community – *polis* – that Socrates has already sketched with the assent of his young listeners; except, in the first book, he gets some resistance from one Thrasymachos, who makes a scandalous speech in praise of injustice. This gives Socrates the opportunity to develop the connections between the true and the right and the good; his pedagogical zeal brings him on to epistemology and to statecraft, finally to poetry – and thereby to poetics and aesthetics.

The reasons poets cannot be accepted into the ideal community are both epistemological and moral, but whatever the reason they have a word in common: *mimesis*. Plato uses the word with a primarily visual significance; *mimesis* suggests image, a visual image related to imitation, re-presentation. Poetry delivers a poor and unreliable knowledge, according to Socrates – and still in the tenth book of *Republic* – since it is a second-hand imitation of an already second-hand imitation. The philosopher comes closest to first-hand knowledge of real reality: he can see the form or ideas or ideal form of things and can therefore disregard imitations. When the carpenter makes his platonic couch he has taken a step away from ideal form.

<sup>1</sup> I follow, but in some cases modifying, the English translations of Plato in the Loeb Classical Library editions (1925–35), here by Paul Shorey. References will be given in my text in accordance with the pagination introduced by Stephanus in 1578. This quotation is from 607A.