Review Essay

Mimetic Faces: On Luiz Costa Lima's
The Control of the Imaginary

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In his Afterword to *The Control of the Imaginary* Jochen Schulte-Sasse elaborates a critique of mimesis that apparently goes against the very heart of Luiz Costa Lima's argumentation. For Schulte-Sasse artistic imagination in modernity "can no longer be perceived as mimetic in the sense of an artistic appropriation of reality" (220). Art as revelation is fully dependent upon the existence of a transcendent anchor for human life. The post-Enlightenment practice of art, founded as it is on expressiveness, has a negative function insofar as it resists "the atrophy of thinking by the conditioning force of instrumental reason" (220). Mimesis can only work in favor of the legitimation of social power: "If modern art is indeed institutionalized in such a way that our commerce with it is compensatory in nature, then any effect a socially relevant, i. e., mimetic content might have will a priori be defused by its mode of institutionalization" (219). In my opinion, however, Costa Lima's elaboration of the notion of mimesis allows for a different interpretation of this problematic.

In *Mimesis e modernidade* (1980) Costa Lima offers a definition of mimesis that can function as the framework for his intellectual enterprise: "Mimesis, presupposing a similarity with the real understood as the possible, is a means for the self-recognition of the community, that is, an instrument of social identity" (21).[1] The link between mimesis and community will give us a privileged point of entry into *The Control of the Imaginary*. The book itself, as I see it, responds to endemic problems in Latin American critical circles regarding the political function of art, and in particular the contribution of literature to the constitution of social identity. By studying mimesis, Costa Lima does not want Latin American literature to fall into the trap of devoting itself, and therefore limiting itself, to the hopeless task of reproducing moralizing recipes for social and political redemption under the pretext of a recourse to the real, understood as the reality of oppression. On the other hand, and precisely by studying mimesis, Costa Lima wants to free literature, from a theoretical perspective, into the full scope of its intrinsic possibilities, up to and including a fundamental resistance to the understanding of its capacity as merely compensatory in nature. Mimesis, in the sense in which Costa Lima understands the term, does not primarily bespeak an appropriation of reality in the work of art, but an entrance into, and a dwelling in, the order of the real.[2]

In "Critical Fanonism" Henry Louis Gates Jr. identifies a situation of impasse or double bind which clearly plagues theoretical thinking about what he calls the "colonial paradigm" (457):

> You can empower discursively the native, and open yourself to charges of downplaying the epistemic (and literal) violence of colonialism; or play up the absolute nature of colonial domination, and be open to charges of negating the subjectivity and agency of the colonized, thus textually replicating the repressive operations of colonialism. (462)

In my opinion, Costa Lima's concern with mimesis represents a sustained attempt to break out of this impasse. He himself mentions the importance of mimesis for the postcolonial world:

> Mimesis is also a question for those of us who live in the periphery [*para quem tem a periferia como seu lugar*]. . . Since, traditionally, mimesis is translated out of *imitatio*, our mimesis becomes imitation of an imitation, taking us to value our cultural products according to their conformity with metropolitan patterns. Or, if we are rebellious to them, according to their disconformity. . . . In both cases, the assessment of colonial mimesis does not depend upon the matter on which it feeds— let us provisionally call it "life," or "reality"—but upon the metropolitan pattern, which dictates how "reality" must be "imitated" or interpreted. (*Mimesis* 2)

Whether we are for or against "metropolitan patterns," Costa Lima is telling us, we remain caught in the spiderweb of imitation and all its dependent problematic. Whether we decide that the colonial subject can or should develop a discourse of resistance or we deem such a subject entirely exhausted by colonial oppression, it is still mimesis understood as *imitatio* that rules our thought and forces us to follow ourselves into a dead end.

In our historical context, reviving mimesis means first of all breaking away from *imitatio*, therefore in a sense repeating a gesture begun but not totally carried out by European Romanticism. Mimesis in poststructuralist times is, for Costa Lima, the figure of a break. In the first chapter of *The Control of the Imaginary* Costa Lima retraces the history of mimesis as *imitatio* in order to show that *imitatio* was in fact forgotten as a regulative idea after "the passage from an aristocratic, estate society to a national, class society articulated by the scientific spirit" (45). If expression replaces imitation for Romantic poetics, it is clear that "the romantic cult of individual expression transformed itself into the immanentist aesthetics that dominated uncontested the first sixty years of the present century" (45). Now that immanentist aesthetics have reached a fundamental crisis (a crisis which Costa Lima finds all the more evident "after the vogue of structuralism"), it is time, he thinks, to return to the old concept whose erroneous translation ruled several centuries of Western poetics. This

schema already hints at the fact that what is at issue is not so much a return to mimesis as a return of mimesis. In other words, it is not that we return to mimesis, but that mimesis comes back to haunt our accomplished immanentism.

The return of mimesis depends then upon the breakdown of modernity: the exhaustion of the expressionist poetics which are a corollary of a subject understood as *res cogitans*. "From the moment when the originally Nietzschean and later Freudian critique of the doctrine grounded in *cogito ergo sum* was disseminated, . . . the conditions were created under which precisely what mimesis implies could be rethought" (133): "In concrete terms, mimesis is a strategy directed against the indissolubility of the presence of the 'self'" (133).

As a strategy against fixed selves, mimesis is first of all a rendering of difference and not of identity. For mimesis to become expressively productive "the mimetizing object must elicit not only the indispensable element of the mimetized agent's identification but also that agent's own recognition—not necessarily a conscious recognition—of the *resistance* that is being presented to it: recognition of the mimetizing source's *difference*" (185).

The emphasis on difference, no doubt surprising to the traditional theory of mimesis, indicates that a source other than Aristotle is being put to use. The source is Freud, to whose notion of identification Costa Lima refers briefly but decisively. According to Freud, there are three basic possibilities for identification: identification with a rival object, implying the desire to take his or her place; identification with a love object, implying the desire to be possessed by her or him; and an identification, more mysterious, which "entirely leaves out of account any object-relation to the person who is being copied" (Costa Lima 49).[3] The existence of this third kind of identification grounds the whole mechanism upon the mere desire of putting oneself somewhere else: this third identification is what Walter Benjamin would refer to abstractly as "the mimetic faculty." What Costa Lima here emphasizes is the fact that what is essential in identificatory mimesis "is not its nature as copy or substantive trace but the process of transformation that is in operation" (49). "What is decisive in the constitution of mimesis . . . is the creation of a *staging*, which is not so much the repetition of a model as *the organization of a response to that model*" (50).

Under these determinations it is hard to see how Schulte-Sasse could have taken it for granted that a defense of "the mimetic nature of art" was equivalent to a defense of the "artistic appropriation of reality" in the subjectivistic, agential sense. Rather, following the logic of Costa Lima's admittedly abrupt articulations, we could say that mimesis is for him a displacement into the other, in which the other, which only appears in the form of a wound, forces a response which, far from being an attempt at appropriation, is first of all a pure staging of desire: the pure form of staging.[4]

This is not to say that Costa Lima's theory of mimesis runs counter to that of Aristotle. It does not run counter to it, but it is not identical with it either: "Obviously," he says in the preface to the English edition, "there can be no way to recuperate . . . and restore the Greek sense of mimesis, for the very mentality of modern times, and within it the way that *physis* is conceived, has dramatically changed" (viii). But there is a crucial aspect of the Aristotelian notion of mimesis which, although repressed and forgotten in the traditional understanding of mimesis as *imitatio*, is precisely what is recuperated in Costa Lima's notion of mimesis as a staging: "Aristotelian mimesis presupposed a concept of *physis* (to simplify, let us say of "nature") that contained two aspects: *natura naturata* and *natura naturans*, respectively, the actual and the potential. Mimesis had relation only to the possible, the capable of being created—to *energeia*; its limits were those of conceivability alone" (22). However, the field of conceivability, which sets the stage for the deployment of mimesis, does not coincide with the field of desire. Conceivability here is desire mediated by the possibility of expression, the possibility of construction of a socially articulable *mimema*. As Costa Lima's intention is to speak about mimesis as articulated in the literary artwork, he calls "the fictional" the artistic product of mimesis. The fictional is for Costa Lima the artistic mimema.

Before going on to discuss the fictional and several related notions, I would like to comment briefly on Benjamin's essay on the mimetic function. Although Costa Lima does not refer to it explicitly, there are grounds to argue that it is a major text in the genesis of Costa Lima's version of the concept. In any event, it will give me the chance to point out several crucial implications of *The Control of the Imaginary*.

The human capacity to see resemblances, Benjamin says, "is nothing other than a rudiment of the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else" (333). This old compulsion, which we have already seen invoked in Costa Lima's notion of mimesis as staging, is undergoing, according to Benjamin, a historical change: "The direction of this change seems definable as the increasing decay of the mimetic faculty" (334). This decay, in Benjamin's idiolect, does not testify to an absolute waning, but rather to a transformation, much like what happens to his notion of artistic "aura" in the age of mechanical reproduction.[5] The transformation of the mimetic faculty follows the lines of a progressive abandonment of cosmology as an "ethical" discipline. "Nevertheless we, too, possess a canon according to which the meaning of nonsensuous similarity can be at least partly clarified. And this canon is language" (334).

Benjamin's notion of nonsensuous similarity, developed from the idea that "the whole of language is onomatopoeic" (335), has been misunderstood, but most of all disregarded in the context of an appreciation of mimesis. I will argue that it is of extraordinary importance: it gives us the possibility to lay the radical claim that mimesis "under conditions of modernity" is still a means to enter the order of the real. Benjamin does not claim that nonsensuous similarity is a referential function in the conven-

tional sense. On the contrary, its meaning is circumscribed, as it can be understood as merely the material field of mediation "between the spoken and the signified but also between the written and the signified, and equally between the spoken and the written" (335). Benjamin's strongest thought comes in this:

> The mimetic element in language can, like a flame, manifest itself only through a kind of bearer. This bearer is the semiotic element. Thus the coherence of words or sentences is the bearer through which, like a flash, similarity appears. For its production by man—like its perception by him—is in many cases, and particularly the most important, limited to flashes. It flits past. It is not improbable that the rapidity of writing and reading heightens the fusion of the semiotic and the mimetic in the sphere of language. (336)

It follows that mimesis does not seek an appropriation of reality, but that it forms the conditions under which the real—in a flash—can come into the mimetic exchange. Schulte-Sasse maintains that one of the premises of the mimetic notion of art is "the effacement of the materiality and arbitrariness of language" (224). He is clearly operating under the notion of mimesis as *imitatio*. In Benjamin's, and Costa Lima's, understanding, the materiality of language becomes crucial to mimesis, for it is there that the possibility of nonsensuous similarity resides. Nonphenomenal materiality, to use an expression coined by the late Paul de Man, is the key to the mimema's, or, if you will, the fictional's presencing of the real.[6]

Costa Lima follows Jean-Paul Sartre in considering the imaginary "one of the two forms of thematization of the world" (the other one being the perceptual) (ix). "Between mimesis and fictional precipitation," that is, between mimesis and the mimema, "lies the imaginary" (ix). The imaginary, in concordance with the mimetic faculty's desire to be always somewhere else, thematizes things as absent. This is what Costa Lima names "the negation of the imaginary," in a subjective sense: it is the imaginary that negates. But it is precisely because this negation by the imaginary concretizes into the mimema, "because the fictional concretizes in a text that materializes in a signifying organization," that the fictional can be considered a negation of the imaginary's negation: the materiality of the fictional is radically upheld, and it is indeed only thanks to it that the fictional can be considered "a critical use of the imaginary" (ix).

In what sense is it critical? This question introduces the last aspect of Costa Lima's work that I want to comment upon before concluding this review with some critical remarks. Because the fictional is a critical affirmation of the imaginary, it is not primarily concerned with issues of truth. Or rather: its aletheological import is not one that goes through the choice between truth and falsehood. As a critical affirmation of the imaginary, and thus as a material opening into absence, the fictional interrogates or even solicits every truth. Costa Lima says that it "takes the appearance of a 'game' that

does not contain the choice between true and false" (ix), just as Benjamin had asserted that "play" is the school of the mimetic faculty in the ontogenetic sense (333). Herein resides the threat of the fictional, and therefore the cause of what Costa Lima identifies as the "veto," the "prohibition" or the "control" of the imaginary by the dominant discourses through history. It can now be stated that the translation of mimesis as *imitatio* is not innocent: the verisimilar depends on what is, the actual, understood as the true, and so the traditional theory of mimesis, by putting the mimema under the sway of truth, forces mimesis to abandon its critical use, which radically depends upon imaginary conceivability.

I started my presentation of Costa Lima's text by quoting a definition of mimesis which seemed to give it a preeminent function in the constitution of social identity. The link between mimesis and community still needs to be developed. It is here that I find Costa Lima's efforts objectionable, in the sense that I believe that he falls back upon mimesis as *imitatio* precisely where it is most important that he resist it.

If "mimesis . . . is a process whose concretization is established under the form of fiction" (53), the limits of fiction depend upon psycho-social meaning. Costa Lima refers to the socialization theories of Marcel Mauss and Emile Durkheim, who had tried to establish that "to be socialized is . . . to internalize classificatory networks that locate the individual along the different scales . . . within the social environment. Mimesis is, first and foremost, one—or *the*—mode of learning socialization, that is, a mode of internalizing social values" (viii). It is in this context that we must understand the previously-quoted remark to the effect that mimesis operates as an instrument of social identity.

We can see the need for this sort of gesture: without it, it would be difficult for Costa Lima to ground politically his critique of traditionally understood mimesis. The "new" mimesis, the one that Costa Lima is defining, by breaking away from *imitatio* as well as from a poetics of immanentist expression, would open the way to a new understanding of literature that would be in agreement with changed social expectations. This fact is particularly important for societies trying to get rid of an oppressive colonial heritage. Thus, even if mimesis is "the production of difference" (ix),

> it is, however, not an idiosyncratic difference similar to an idiolect but a socially recognizable, potentially acceptable difference. Recognizable and acceptable according to the expectations engendered in the members of a given community by the criteria of classification in force of that community. (ix)

But we also see that this gesture creates a new impasse--or better, it returns us to the oldest of problems, which we can summarize as the conflict between logos understood as social authority and ethos understood as the habitation of a given community. "The criteria of classification" of any given

community ultimately depend upon the most obvious of all imitations, the imitation of authority. By invoking socialization as the limit of fictionality, Costa Lima unexpectedly reintroduces mimesis as *imitatio*: the fictional, at the end of Costa Lima's theory, must still be proper, in the sense of conforming to social expectations. But the proper, even within rapidly changing or even revolutionary societies, will not be dissociated from property, now understood not only as the control of the means of production, but also as the control of the very site of social territoriality: the site of ethics.

Vince Gugino has recently demonstrated that this problem, which I take to be fundamental not only for Costa Lima's work, but also in terms of its importance for any attempts at a postmetaphysical literary and political thinking, is quite intractable within the frame of a theory of mimesis.

After showing the probable etymological origin of mimesis in a constellation of terms meaning "change, exchange and substitution," Gugino remarks:

> As exchange and the entire ensemble of the associations of exchange (imitation, copy, representation, etc.), *mimesis* is not itself exchanged. *Mimesis* does not enter into the transaction, but walks off unaltered. This not-being-affected is the source of Plato's horror of *mimesis* and of his acceptance of its power. The power of *mimesis* is the possibility of exchange without reciprocity, an exchange which is instead unilateral, appropriative and ruling. (126)

It is mimesis which defines property, not the mimetizing object or the mimetized agent, since "adequation and assimilation of that which has been made like occurs as an appropriation of the differences of the material or being entering into the mimetic exchange" (128).

It is therefore the very notion of mimesis as a staging that comes under question: "Mimetic space, as field, theatre or stage, or as *chora* . . . presents a question of where exchange happens and at the same time becomes that 'where' or space created by mimetic exchange itself" (132). The spatialization of mimetic exchange comes to be seen in late Greek metaphysics, and in the subsequent philosophical tradition, as the political place. Costa Lima, as we have seen, agrees with this determination. But if the political place, the site of community, comes under the sway of mimesis, and if mimesis, as the staging effect, is the name of the non-participating appropriation (even if the mimetized agent is not itself effecting it, as we saw earlier), then it is clear that mimesis is also the field of determination of the ascendancy of the logical as ruling principle. Costa Lima may not be wrong in relating mimesis to networks of psycho-social meaning. But by placing that relation under the logos of socialization, Costa Lima's theory of mimesis cannot be but logocentric.

Is it possible to pull mimesis apart from logos as absolute appropriation? Or, as Gugino asks, "can any political order exist without *mimesis*?"

(121). Whether the question is answered positively, as does Gugino taking his point of departure in Anaxagoras' notion of *methexis* ("participation"), or in the negative, as Costa Lima clearly implies, we must be aware of the fact that "reviving mimesis" is a double-edged enterprise. If on the one hand it allows for some leeway in the attempt to renew literary theory, if it can be made to become a central concept in the critical project of evaluation of works of art, and if it can, up to a certain point, threaten acquired modes of thinking whose exhaustion has become manifest today, is it legitimate to assert that a revived mimesis can inaugurate a radical break in literary thinking?

I have postponed until now confrontation with a question that was already announced earlier. It has to do with Costa Lima's historical schema: having ourselves reached the accomplishment of the Romantic poetics of expressiveness, mimesis returns as a necessary task for thinking, but it should not return as *imitatio*. Why does mimesis need to return? Presumably, only because mimesis is the unthought in immanentist poetics. At the end of modernity, we must think modernity's unthought: that is, we must think the sense out of which modernity arises. For Costa Lima, breaking away from modernity cannot mean starting anew. It means precisely thinking about the break. How does the break figure in mimesis?

Commenting upon what he calls "*the* first theory of literature" (76), that of Friedrich Schlegel, Costa Lima remarks that Schlegel rejected the possibility of a reunification of poiesis and mimesis. Schlegel held fast to a notion of poiesis as the "unconscious figuration" of genius (86) making it impossible "to overcome the conundrum that the postulation of autonomous art has never overcome: the fact that the poietic product has no say about its own circulation and, therefore, about the way its social function is construed" (86).

But Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has shown that poiesis as the figuration of genius is in fact perfectly consonant with the Greek notion of mimesis. He refers to Aristotle's *Physics* B 194a, "*hé téchnè mimeitai tèn phusis*" ("art imitates nature") and to B 199a: "On the one hand, *téchnè* carries out (accomplishes, perfects, *épitélei*) that which *physis* is incapable of setting-into-work (*apergasasthai*); on the other hand, it imitates" (*L'Imitation* 23-24). This demonstrates the existence of a double conception of mimesis: mimesis can be restricted, and that would organize the reproduction of the given by or in nature; and mimesis can be general:

> It does not reproduce anything given (it does not reproduce at all), but
> . . . it *supplements* a certain default in nature, its incapacity of making,
> organizing, working—producing all. It is a productive mimesis, that is,
> an imitation of *physis* as productive force or, if you prefer, as *poiesis*.
> (24)

But this general mimesis, given that it organizes the field of the Romantic poetics of productive genius, poses the need for the unconscious field of

figuration—the poet, or the comedian—to come as close as possible to the pure possibility of itself as precisely a field of figuration: in other words, the mark of genius would be the radical dis-appropriation of itself. This is what Lacoue-Labarthe calls the "law of improperty/impropriety" (*impropriété*) which is "the very law of mimesis" (27).

The law of mimesis would then be paradoxical: itself a law of dispropriation, it posits itself as absolute propriation. This is in agreement with Schelling's interpretation of Greek tragedy. For Schelling the tragic hero—and Oedipus as its prototype—would "manifest his freedom by the very loss of his freedom" (47). Hölderlin would take this interpretation and place it at the very origin of speculative dialectics. With it, and in virtue of their fundamental functioning through the edifice of transcendental idealism, mimesis and the mimetic exchange come to be "accomplished onto-theo-logy" (39). Which also means that they touch the very limit of ontotheology, and therefore the point of its catastrophe. Lacoue-Labarthe recognizes in Hölderlin's concept of "caesura" ("the pure word, the antirhythmic interruption" [68]) the place where that catastrophe is named as such: a place of interruption, the figure of a break.[7]

Mimesis returns, at the end of modernity, as the unthought in modernity. Mimesis is unthought because its catastrophic stance will not let itself be thought. As accomplished ontotheology, mimesis remains the task for thought: the mode of its return is not that of a resurrection. Rather, mimesis returns because, like Antigone's brothers, it has never been properly buried. Mourning for mimesis has not come to an end. Mourning is still unaccomplished. It will cause political disruptions. It already has. At the limit of modernity, insofar as the work of mourning is uneffected, mourning remains the task for thought. Thought cannot be but mourning: following the law of mimesis, which says that we cannot return to the proper unless we disappropriate ourselves from whatever has us haunted, that is, inhabited: for we still are, if posthumously, the mimes of *kurios*, as Parmenides would have it.

Notes

1. Costa Lima's project has a prolonged life: it encompasses *Mimesis e modernidade* and the trilogy of which the book under review here is the first volume: *O controle do imaginario, Sociedade e discurso ficcional, O Fingidor e o censor*. Cf. also *A Aguarrás do tempo. Estudos sobre a narrativa*. The recent English edition of *The Dark Side of Reason. Fictionality and Power* translates essays from *Sociedade* and *Fingidor*, and includes some new material. For reasons of space I will limit myself to the discussion of several key concepts as they are articulated in *The Control of the Imaginary*. A fuller treatment would call for references to, for instance, chapter 5 of *Sociedade* and chapter 5 of *Fingidor*. I would also have liked to comment on Roland Sousa's Translator's Introduction to *Control*, but have not managed to do it in the space assigned to me.

2. The most provoking recent contributions to the debate on mimesis that I know are to be found in René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*; Jacques Derrida, "La double séance" and "Economimesis;" Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "Typographie" and *L'imitation des modernes*; Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, in particular the first volume; and Vincent F. Gugino, "On Ethos." See also in general Agacinski et al., *Mimesis desarticulations*.

3. The references are to the Freudian notion of identification as developed in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*.

4. Lacoue-Labarthe also talks of mimesis as staging: "c'est essentiellement le théatre—le fait du théâtre ou la théâtralité—qui rend raison de la fonction générale de suppléance dévolue à l'art" (*L'Imitation* 25).

5. Cf. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction:" "That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art" (221); he talks about the "decay of the aura" and its transformation in 222 *passim*.

6. De Man develops the concept in "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant." See comments in Gasché and Redfield.

7. "La césure du spéculatif" is the name of the essay where Lacoue-Labarthe basically develops the concept. But see also *La fiction du politique* 41-47. Cf. also the related concept of "disaster" in Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, especially: "The disaster, unexperienced. It is what escapes the very possibility of experience—it is the limit of writing. This must be repeated: the disaster de-scribes. Which does not mean that the disaster, as the force of writing, is excluded from it, is beyond the pale of writing or extratextual" (7).

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