

Joanne Brown Symposium on Violence and its Alternatives

Bowen Island, October 2001

This year's symposium featured Stephen K. Levine from the Faculty of Social Sciences and the program in Social and Political Thought, York University. Professor Levine brings a background in social thought, arts therapy, philosophy and anthropology to the questions of violence and poesis in the arts and trauma in life. His background in poetics and the theatre provided a foundation for fifteen invited academics, psychologists and social praxis individuals to discuss violence and its alternatives. His paper written for the symposium is entitled "The Coming of Dionysos: Trauma, Mimesis, Poesis". A selection from his review "Mimetic Wounds: Trauma and Drama in Psychotherapy and the Arts" (a review of Trauma: A Genealogy, by Ruth Leys, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2000) is printed below.

If we recognize the *dramatic* origin of mimesis, then perhaps our understanding of the mimetic character of trauma can itself be re-configured. In drama, mimesis is both conscious and enacted; there is thus none of the opposition between *blind* enactment and *conscious* recollection that structures the trauma discourse. In fact, one might say that trauma is a form of *failed* mimesis; in trauma, imitation is reduced to identification, and the distance which is necessary to recognize the mimetic performance is abolished.

The distinction between imitation and identification is important, for it leads to a new alternative for therapeutic practice. Rather than having to choose between abreaction and recollection, between a blind enactment which "repeats" an identificatory act and a specular representation which claims to "integrate" the traumatic event into the conscious narrative of one's life—an impossible alternative, as Leys shows—there emerges the possibility of *conscious enactment*, in other words, the dramatic re-presentation of the traumatic event, its shaping in artistic form. Artistic or poetic mimesis is always a kind of shaping. Mimesis is in fact an interpretative practice; its "repetition" is always a "re-interpretation." This is clear to anyone who has worked in theater; it is absurd to think that theatrical performance is a literal reproduction of anything whatsoever. Moreover, each production "differs" from every other even in the performance of

the "same" work; indeed, successive performances of the same production will always differ as well.

Mimesis is not identification. The same is not the identical. Mimesis cannot be thought within the logic of identification in which one is either oneself or another. If there is a concept which can capture the essence of the mimetic process, it is that of *resemblance* rather than identification. This means that a mimetic or imitative act is neither identical with nor different from its

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"object" (and of course without the logic of identity there can be neither subject nor object, at least not in the traditional sense of these terms); rather it is *like* what it imitates. The mimetic performance resembles its object; it thus obeys the logic of resemblance rather than that of identity.

This is, in fact, the basis of Plato's well-known rejection of mimesis. The poets must be banished from the just city, since their *poiesis* is based on *seeming* rather than on *being*. That is, the mimetic basis of poesis renders it the antagonist to philosophy, which

requires knowledge of what is, not the imitation of what only appears to be. The fact that Plato was unable to banish mimesis from his own thought (since, among other things, he gives what purports to be a mimetic re-presentation of Socrates' dialogic encounter) is evidence enough that this distinction, on which the very project of philosophy in the classical sense is based, is itself suspect. The advent of phenomenology was merely the last step in the restoration of the realm of appearance, a restoration which was already present in every work of art.

The discourse of trauma is traumatizing because it repeats the traumatic structure: the tear between being and knowing in which no mediation is possible. Leys herself unwittingly repeats (as trauma invariably does) the terms of this discourse by her "close reading" of the relevant texts. As Borch-Jacobsen was later to say about his own early analysis of Freud: "...this is what the strategy of deconstruction is all about: you take a theory and use its own conceptuality to highlight its internal contradictions, aporias, etc. But when you engage in this kind of parasitic activity, you obviously run the risk of becoming yourself a victim of the conceptuality you feed upon" (Borch-Jacobsen, 1997, p.216). Though genealogy is not exactly (not mimetically) deconstruction, this description applies to Leys' analysis as well. Despite her critique of memoro-politics, she repeats the theoretical aporia contained in the traumatic conception of mimesis.

Her discourse is in fact constituted by an opposition between a “close reading,” in which she identifies with her texts, and a critical analysis, in which she maintains the specular distance necessary for the practitioner of genealogy.

To go “beyond” the structural opposition of mimesis and anti-mimesis, it is necessary to “restore” the original place of mimesis as the essence of poiesis. Thus conceived, not only must trauma be envisioned differently (and perhaps even the concept of “trauma” will have to be incorporated within a broader category of social suffering) but therapeutic practice will have other alternatives than the mere “pragmatism” of techniques which Leys’ demonstration of the inadequacy of trauma theory leads her to recommend at the end of her book.

Mimesis/poiesis/catharsis—the ancient terms need to be “repeated” and therefore understood differently in order to become the basis of contemporary therapeutic practice.

One way for this to happen is to re-vision the healing practices of traditional cultures from the point of view of an understanding of dramatic performance as enacted in Greek tragic theatre. There is a relationship (of resemblance not identity) between traditional performances of healing and dramatic enactment on the tragic stage which enables the concept of catharsis to be used in both a therapeutic and a theatrical sense. The *mimesis of poiesis* produces *catharsis*—the classical formula holds true, provided we do not interpret it within the antinomies of classical thought.

The key to a therapeutic practice based on the arts lies in a re-thinking of the concept of mimesis which is at the heart of poiesis. How can we understand mimesis without reducing it to a form of identification? Perhaps if we think it from the point of view of poiesis itself, it will appear differently

than when it is conceived in terms of a philosophical analysis based on the logic of identity. Poiesis has a logos of its own. The poetic is not without thought; but its thinking is embodied. Thus the corporeal logic of poiesis requires the bodily presence of performance in order to be realized. Poiesis is performative. That is why we can speak of the performance of healing; for poiesis to occur, it must be enacted.

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As long as we operate within a logic of identity in which thought and being, mind and body, self and other, stand in opposition, we will always fall back into the antinomies of blind identification and specular representation, immediacy and distance. The whole project of contemporary thought is to overcome these antinomies by developing a mode of thinking differently, a way of thinking the middle realm “between” the oppositions of traditional philosophical logic. The works of such thinkers as Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze, Derrida, Serres, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy could all be thought of as performances resembling each other in the staging of a post-representational world, a world which “repeats” (differently) the pre-philosophical worlds of traditional cultures in which poiesis is recognized to be a form of knowing, the tragic wisdom achieved only through an acceptance of suffering which leads to responsibility.

This is not a recommendation of primitivism nor an attempt to return to the Greeks (or turn to the Orient). Such an identificatory mimesis can only end in unwitting self-parody. Rather we need to look at post-modern performance and the performance of post-modernity to see how poiesis “repeats” itself today. In this sense, the critique of the metaphysics of presence needs to be continually repeated, if we are to develop a poietic phenomenology, free of all fundamentalisms, that can lead to a theory, a way of seeing, capable of responding to the trauma of our times.

To be neither victim nor executioner, we need to move into the middle realm in which we can play out our lives differently. Trauma is not only a mimetic wound; it is a wounding of mimesis itself. The identificatory incorporation of suffering can only be overcome by a mimetic embodiment in the performative or playful mode. Drama and trauma are thus indissolubly linked. Trauma is itself drama but in the form of a blind enactment of suffering. To overcome it is not to achieve a specular differentiation which provides a vantage point from which trauma can be surveyed and mastered. Rather, the catharsis of healing comes only through a poietic mimesis in which I can enact my suffering without becoming it.

If psychotherapy has indeed been wounded by the discourse of trauma, then we need to re-play this discourse differently. Otherwise therapy itself will indeed become the trauma from which we seek to escape. It remains to be seen whether therapeutic discourse can regain a poietic dimension or whether it will remain hostile to the arts. In that case, we can only hope that the spirit of poiesis will find another stage on which to perform its healing act.