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# The Luxury of Self-destruction

## Flirting with Mimesis with Roger Caillois

John T. Hamilton

In 1915, at the urging of the editors of the psychoanalytic journal *Imago*, Freud composed his “Timely Thoughts on War and Death,” in which he offers some reflections on the failures of enlightened civilization and the consequent change in general attitudes toward death. Whereas, before this devastating war, it might have been simpler to evade any serious consideration of our own passing away—to “shelve” death for another day, to postpone it into the vague future—today, in 1915, given the massive scope and cruelty of the Great War, we are compelled to face death head-on: “Death can no longer be denied; one must believe in it.”<sup>1</sup> From a psychoanalytical perspective, Freud goes on to argue, the present undeniable nature of death is hardly detrimental: on the contrary, it allows life to become significant again by the very reason that its mortality is fully acknowledged. On the one hand, to experience death concretely includes the stark recognition of one’s own possible demise, which can arrive at any moment. Yet, on the other hand, to be conscious of this imminence implies that one is still alive, that one has survived—that one’s life has been preserved, at least for now. In denying death, in shunting off infinitely for later consideration, one robs oneself from the opportunity to believe in self-preservation.

Prior to the great disenchantment occasioned by the war and its unheard-of casualties, the ego did not truly believe in its own death and therefore did not believe in its own life.

Life is impoverished, it loses its interest, when the highest stake in the game of living, precisely life itself, should not be risked. *Es wird so schal, gehaltlos wie etwa*

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Zeitgemässes über Krieg und Tod” (1915), in *Gesammelte Werke* 10.344.

*ein amerikanischer Flirt*—It becomes as vapid, as inane as an American flirtation, in which it is from the first determined, that nothing is going to happen, in contrast to a continental love affairs in which both partners must constantly bear in mind the serious consequences. (343)

Leaving aside the off-hand cultural critique that contrasts American *levitas* with European *gravitas*, I would like to focus on this quick characterization of flirtation in relation to the topics of self-preservation, representation and mimesis. For Freud, back when Europeans could still afford to be insipid, the common way to imagine one's own unimaginable demise was by means of representation. Incapable of believing in one's own mortality, one essentially 'flirted' with death by being the spectator of another's death—an aesthetic device for framing and thereby representing the unrepresentable, without any serious consequences. Our own end—our mortal *telos*—could be suspended in this aestheticizing gesture. However now, in 1915, when the possibility of death has become undeniable, when we "must believe in it," when the *end* is in sight, the evasive, noncommittal gestures of the flirt are no longer viable. Instead, the adult stakes of an adulterous relationship with death become clarified: *the death of the other spells one's own survival*. Through mourning, we receive a confirmation of our own preservation, concrete proof that we have been spared, at least for now.

Freud's portrayal of flirtation as "vapid" and "inane"—as *schal und gehaltlos*—comes very close to a typically Platonic view of mimesis. For Freud, the mimetic image afforded by the death of another works as a strategy of psychic defense insofar as the idea of mimesis operates by way of a dissimilar similarity. It offers an image that corresponds to the observing consciousness, inviting identification with the reflection, while spoiling, through reflection, any complete identification. In framing the death of the other, the image makes death imaginable; a picture that corresponds to the subject's possible destruction while marking enough difference to affirm the unconscious belief in one's own immortality. We confront this contained picture and are able to blow it off like an American flirt, to flick it away with a sudden release of the fingernail from the thumb, which appears to be the onomatopoeic source of the Anglicism *flirt*. Just as the flirt imitates the serious lover, so the serious implications of one's own annihilation can be flirted away by means of imitation. Yet, what if mimesis were not such an easy game to play? What if the distinction

between correspondence and all-out identification were not so simple to maintain? What if the apotropaic gesture of flicking something off concealed a more profound fear?

The Platonic tradition consistently expresses concern over the erasure of difference latent in mimetic affairs. Socrates, for example, ridicules Cratylus for taking mimesis to denote the production of a perfect similarity uninterrupted by difference. Socrates writes: What if an image of Cratylus himself was created—a perfectly identical image endowed by the gods with every particular physical, emotional and rational attribute? Would we still be speaking of an image of Cratylus? Or not, rather, two Cratylói? (*Crat.* 432b – c) As the reduplicated form of the word μίμησις itself suggests—and as Cratylus should notice—the split between the first and second phonemes, *mi* and *mē*, marks a difference held together by similarity. According to Socrates, Cratylus is “ridiculous” because he fails to recognize that the postulate of correspondence includes a certain measure of dissimilarity. The philosopher tries to scare his interlocutor straight by conjuring not an image, but rather a true *Doppelgänger*, who can effectively undercut the foundation of a singular, non-exchangeable subject. All the same, mimesis remains a threat insofar as it flirts with complete identity, including the notion of a singular, indivisible, unrepeatable individuality. In the extreme case of absolute similarity—a case to which Cratylus’s argument ultimately must lead—there would be no more difference, no more distinctions, which are necessary for preserving the stability of personal identity.

This threat of mimesis is of course nowhere more pronounced than in Plato’s *Republic*, where the guardians must be shielded from the seduction of poetry, from the way poetry comes on strong, inducing its audience into becoming someone else. The guardians might lose their capacity to protect the city, should they be lured into identifying with the representation. They might become weak or impotent, in a word: they might become feminized. He who plays the coward might become one. “Beware,” Socrates seems to warn, “lest you become the mask you’re wearing!” Noteworthy is the first example that Socrates offers to demonstrate the danger of mimesis: The story from Hesiod, in which Kronos castrates his father Ouranos (*Theog.* 137ff; in *Rep.* 377e – 378a). Thus, the very thought of mimesis conjures images of disempowerment and the violent destruction of virility, of

parricide and regicide. Face-to-face with mimesis, both the sovereignty of the subject and the subjectivity of the sovereign are dismantled.

In two early essays, “La mante religieuse” (“The Praying Mantis”) and “Mimétisme et Psychasthénie légendaire” (“Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia”), which appeared in the Surrealist journal *Minotaure* in 1934 and 1935, respectively, Roger Caillois develops a conception of mimesis that harkens back to as well as diverges from this Platonic tradition. On the one hand, we find the same scenarios of threat—castration, weakening, and depersonalization—that Socrates had feared. According to Caillois, mimesis is debilitating. By means of a strong similarity that touches on identification, mimesis dissolves the border between the individual and its environment; hence the “psychasthenia” or the “weakening of the soul” that afflicts the subject. On the other hand, Caillois displaces the phenomena of mimesis from the human to the insect world. Throughout his association with André Breton and the Surrealists, Caillois sought a biological basis for artistic practice, especially for the surrealist practice of “automatic writing.” In general, Caillois exhibited a strong interest in non-human forms of creativity, in an aesthetics emancipated from human forms of subjective, rational agency—perhaps an aesthetics of flirtation.

Regarding mimesis, both the psychasthenic effects and the creative but non-subjective instincts could be discovered in the mimetic behavior of insects. Caillois’s study on “mimicry” opens with a Socratic warning: “Prends garde: à jouer au fantôme, on le devient”—“Beware: Whoever pretends to be a ghost will turn into one!”<sup>2</sup> The preservation of life depends on maintaining the differences, borders, and forms, whereby the organism enjoys autonomy. As in Freud, mimesis contributes to self-preservation when it is upheld as a system grounded in dissimilar similarity. However, what Caillois observes among the insects is that mimesis or mimicry transgresses these very borders and therefore leads to self-loss. Caillois departs from the conventional biological research of his day to claim that insect-mimicry has nothing to do with self-preservation. On the contrary, it often works against it. Caillois cites various scientific sources that show how mimetic behavior

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<sup>2</sup> Roger Caillois, *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader*, C. Frank, ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 91. All subsequent citations from Caillois’s work are from this edition.

threatens the organism. “Numerous remains of mimetic insects are found in the stomach of predators. [...] Conversely, some inedible species, which therefore have nothing to fear, are mimetic. It seems we must therefore conclude with Cuénot that this is an ‘epiphenomenon,’ whose ‘usefulness as a form of defense appears to be nil.’” (96f.) Accordingly, natural camouflage does not serve any defensive purpose, nor does it present any attempt to distract. Among insects, mimesis loses its use value.

Because mimicry fulfills no purpose, it can be understood as a “luxury”; and because it can even lead to a loss of the physical self, it can also be regarded as “dangerous”: “We are therefore dealing [...] with a dangerous luxury” (97). Caillois submits the case of the Phyllidae, whose bodies imitate leaves and thereby encourage other Phyllidae to ingest them: “This could almost be viewed as some sort of collective masochism culminating in mutual homophagy—with the imitation of the leaf serving as an incitement to cannibalism in this particular totem feast.” (97)

By imitating a leaf the insect becomes a leaf. By mixing in with its environment, it breaks out of the boundaries that define individuality. Caillois famously names this the “luring appeal of space,” in which the individual is no longer the origin of movement. Lost in space—dissolved into space—the mimetic insect is only one point among others, a point, moreover, whose movement is determined by another source. In order to describe this process, Caillois turns to the theories of the psychoanalyst Pierre Janet and the phenomenological psychiatrist Eugène Minkowski, who link the phenomenon of psychasthenia to a concept that expresses a will to be devoured by space, which for Caillois is nothing more than a “depersonalization through assimilation into space.” (100) Here, mimesis does not denote artistic activity in the traditional sense of the word, but rather an experiential process that is oddly passive. In this way Caillois combines the mimetic-metamorphic phenomenon observed among insects with psychical and physiological paralysis among humans. Ultimately, the mimetic drive should be regarded as an instinct of self-forgetfulness or self-loss—an instinct just as strong, if not stronger than, the instinct of self-preservation.

This does not mean, however, that for Caillois mimesis is an entirely negative concept. Precisely because mimicry blends the individual into its environment, it also serves as a basis for community. One can say, that mimesis creates the common, insofar as the common is the non-private. During his time in the Collège de Sociologie Caillois developed his theory of community in connection with the work of his colleague Georges Bataille. According to Bataille, community is not based on the rationality of the useful, but rather on the irrationality of the useless, that is, not on the instinct of self-preservation but rather on the instinct of self-loss. In his important article on the “Notion of Expenditure,” Bataille employs the theory of the gift that Marcel Mauss developed in relation to the phenomenon of the potlatch in order to distinguish two kinds of consumption: between productive consumption, which aims at the preservation of goods, property and lives; and wasteful or luxurious consumption, which finds its purpose only in itself.<sup>3</sup> Luxury is grounded in the principle of loss. It is expenditure without compensation, without purpose. And the wasteful expenditure of goods, which certainly reached undreamt-of proportions among North American tribes, makes these goods sacred—a literal “sacrifice,” the *sacrificium* that is performed by a loss of property, a loss of what is privately one’s own. For this reason, sacrifice is the basis for community, just as, according to Bataille, the degradation of the Crucifixion established the Christian *ekklēsia*.

For Caillois, the “dangerous luxury” of mimesis is a sacrifice precisely in this sense, for it destroys the self as property. In his study on the “praying mantis” Caillois indicates, how this is disclosed among the insect in the act of lovemaking. Caillois’s memorable description seems itself to be motivated by a Cratylism, by a mimesis in language: the praying mantis, “la mante religieuse” is the “religious lover,” “l’amante religieuse” par excellence. As it has been observed since Antiquity, in the act of copulation, the female mantis, in one sudden movement, flicks off her lover’s head and devours him. *L’amour* spells *la mort*: the male creature is lost in a momentary *Liebestod*. What Caillois finds especially remarkable is that the male mantis, even after the decapitation and in a certain sense after its death, is capable of displaying what Caillois calls the “objective” (that is,

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<sup>3</sup> Georges Bataille, “The Notion of Expenditure,” in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, A. Stoekl, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 116–129.

“non-subjective”) “lyrical meaning of the praying mantis.” In brief: even “when dead, [the mantis is] capable of simulating death” (79). In contrast to Freud, mimesis does not preclude a concrete confrontation with death, but rather discloses that the levity of amorous flirtation forecloses neither the gravest consequences nor the most ecstatic promises. In the blink of an eye, in the flick of a finger, flirtation can always lead to the luxurious danger of self-expenditure, not by losing its mimetic energy but precisely by maintaining it and intensifying it, without purpose, without end.