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*Political Theory vs. Political Mimesis in The Early-Modern  
Literary Representation of Decision-Making<sup>1</sup>*

*Departing from a replicative understanding of mimesis, the paper re-describes the notion as the simulation, under controlled circumstances, of character-building explorative and dubitative experiences. The simulation-based ethical mimesis is used as a pedagogical instrument on the one hand by the early-Renaissance dynamic political culture, and on the other hand by the late-medieval spiritual practice of the imitatio Christi. The interaction between these two patterns generates, in the early modernity, complex fictional structures articulating the simulation of factual uncertainty with the simulation of ethical doubt. In order to make them more apparent, these structures are: a) followed in their close association with the inherently dramatic context of the representation of/training for political decision-making; b) contrasted against the emergence of the mental habits that support the rhetoric of the modern political theory and ideology. The nature and consequences of the polarization between political theory and the fictional political mimesis are exposed in the work of John Milton.*

The history of the *mimesis* concept predominantly consists of the multiple variation of the idea of the “imitation of nature” (Tatarkiewicz, 1973). It is largely ignored that the concept of *mimesis* also appears in the ethical writings of both Plato (e.g. *Laws* 7.817 b) and Aristotle (e.g. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098 a 22-32, 1171b). Actually even in those parts of their writings that, in our contemporary understanding, could count as aesthetic, the meaning of *mimesis* as the activity of convincingly replicating the appearance and/or structure of a given natural object is constantly fused with the meaning of imitation as assimilation/absorption or internalization of a moral paradigm (*The Republic* 3.397 d – see also Gebauer & Wulf, 1995: 31-2).

The two meanings became not only associated, but also hard to distinguish in the late Antiquity, when *mimesis* came to refer primarily to imitating the old masters. This principle is commonly understood as referring to the imperative of emulating the unsurpassable accomplishments of the creative artists preserved in the Hellenistic and Roman houses of fame. But the reverence for the classical times also implied the strong belief in their moral superiority, in their intrinsic nobility.

Even if still prominent during the major part of 19<sup>th</sup> century, the ethical meaning of *mimesis* was severely discredited by the modern belief in the necessary preeminence, in point of artistic excellence, of the formal innovation. Once the idea that the arts and letters should play a moralizing role in society became repugnant, the classical tradition that closely linked the study of literature to building or strengthening one’s character in preparation for future public confrontations and responsibilities fell into oblivion. Therefore, it is the purpose of the following argument to separate the school of thought that justified literature primarily by

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virtue of its preferential access to moral grandness from the caricature to which it has been reduced, and to expose at least partly the complex ethical ramifications in the rich semantic heritage of the concept of *mimesis*. Obviously, these implications are not necessarily political in nature, but we will concentrate on the representation of political decision-making in early-modern literature because it offers a most concentrated and dramatic context for the expression of moral persuasions and sentiments.

*Early modern ethical instruction between simulation and emulation*

The Italian Renaissance has been interpreted as being first of all a pedagogical revolution, a radical turn in managing knowledge as a basic resource of adaption to fluctuating external circumstances. The scholastic focus on the hierarchical organization of information and on the metaphysical legitimation of a general world-view was displaced by the imperative of training the elites of the Italian commercial republics for facing the multiple tasks of confronting high-risk social, political and economic environments (Nauert, 2006). In this view, the explorative attitude of the modern empirical sciences was anticipated by the political necessities of understanding and conceptualizing risk and uncertainty (and of consequently simulating them mainly through the empathetic hermeneutics of Greek and Latin historical and literary texts).

In the same Renaissance melting pot, the restored classical notion of moral *mimesis* (an effort of spiritual identification with an excellence of character embodied by the classical heroes), gradually acquired the spiritual and mystical overtones of the *imitatio Christi* (Eppelsheimer, 1968; Ong, 1994). The Christian perspective significantly altered the substance of the classical concept of mimesis. Even if it preserved the partition between an aspiring soul and the object of its assimilationist aspiration, the nature of the latter considerably changed, since the intended model, Christ, being both human and trans-human, couldn't be reasonably confined to a list of commendable virtues. Given His divine dimension (which, according to the "negative" or "cataphatic" theology, could be perceived only obliquely, by acknowledging the limits of the human understanding and the divine differentials), the Christ couldn't be approached simply as an exceptional but thoroughly human paradigm. Imitation as identification could function, in this peculiar but foundational case, only in the paradoxical manner of following specific norms, standards and techniques aimed at the successful appropriation of the desired model, while simultaneously subverting them through and through by a deeply rooted consciousness of the arcane and anomic, or rather meta-nomic nature of that model. A nature that could at any moment call into question its very classification as a "model" by any reasonable standards.

Being trained, in the political-mercantile milieus, for advancing into an ever-changing empirical reality, and being trained, in the monastic-intellectual milieus, for advancing into the unknown and uncharted territory of the genuine mystical experience represented, at the beginning, two separate branches of the education of early modern social elites. And, maybe, two distinct and potentially conflicting faces of early modernity itself. They could be clearly perceived in the polarization between the Machiavellian and the Lutheran visions of the realms of predictability-unpredictability and of the "natural" ratio between them.

Machiavelli was concerned with the vast number of determinations external to the consciousness. It is their hardly predictable interplay that absorbed his theoretical industriousness. Against an obscure background dominated by the works of Fortuna, human consciousness seemed rather unproblematic in its, if not luminous, at least limpid survival-driven rationality. At the other end, Martin Luther bracketed almost all serious interest in the realm of the political, social or economical concerns, considering they were marshaled by the inflexible laws of nature and, if let to themselves, thoroughly predictable. The mystery of the Unpredictable (actually, of In-determination) could occur only in the only segment of the cosmic design that he considered to have been allowed the mixed blessing of self-governing. Which was to say, the deepest recesses of the human soul.

As polar and incompatible as they seem (and actually *are*) these two visions of (un)predictability were brought, in the historical unfolding of European intellectual modernity, to a deeper and deeper mutual implication. Their fusion fostered the emergence of a concept of action equally and simultaneously implying the necessity of managing high levels of factual uncertainty, and of mastering the tensions generated by ethical doubt. It is the main assumption of the present essay that this merger can be exposed with certain clarity in the literary strategies of imitating-simulating the political decision-making seen as the office of mediating between states of cognitive and ethical ambiguity.

*Political mimesis vs. political theory. The case of Milton*

By *political mimesis* I understand much more than a reconstruction of the intellectual and psychological decision process. A fictional simulation of the political decision is an undertaking in which two lines of mimetic accuracy, the one oriented towards creating the effect of factual unpredictability and the one oriented towards creating the effect of vibrating ethical doubt, culminate into a thoroughly un-real, un-natural (and, therefore, as paradoxical as it may sound, un-mimetical) object. Such a simulation is a transgressive structure of coherence emerging from the suppression or neutralization of the borderline between the “outer” world of the interplay of objective determinations and the “inner” intersection of competing lines of ethical argument.

It is along these lines that the practices of artistic mimesis tend to evolve into a form of reflecting on politics and the political that clearly diverge, by means of values and goals, from the mainstream of early modern political theory. The main difference lies in the fact that theory aborts from the very beginning the moment of doubt. It is post-optional in its very nature: in order to function, it has to be fueled by a rhetoric of conviction and determination. In order to convey to the project that it nurtures an aura of effectiveness, it has to be fashioned according to what we could call a poetics of “sustainable illumination”. But the political mimesis is, from this point of view, pre- or supra-, or epi-optional: it doesn’t take decision as an unquestionable and transparent fact of life, it distances itself from the decision process and renders it as something essentially unfamiliar and strange.

There are important authors who transform the mimesis into a simple technology subordinated to their peculiar ideological beliefs and to the species of political theory they passionately cherish (Brecht or Sartre could serve as most relevant examples). There are, also,

political thinkers who try to import the sophistication of the political mimesis into a theoretical framework (Foucauld or Rorty could illustrate this distinct possibility). But the authors who can offer the most provocative case-studies for our mimesis-vs.-theory hypothesis are those who prove strong and divided loyalties towards both ideals of charismatic ideological self-evidence, on one hand, and of the baroque beauty of tensionally multileveled motivations of the human actions, on the other hand. It is especially relevant to witness, in the first phases of the intellectual modernity, the dramatic coexistence of these two very different patterns of thought and expression in one and the same consciousness. It is instructive to follow how an author who displays the most unequivocal support for the linear logic of a given walk of the modern political theory, tends, when turning to fiction, to withdraw to far more cautious and skeptical attitudes and appetites. Decision, which is totally distilled in the rhetoric of commitment, glides towards the center of the mental stage and becomes a theme and an object of thought in itself.

Our example of choice, manifesting both a historical antecedence and a structural exemplarity, is the polarization between the political-theoretical and the political-fictional (or, according to the terms of the present inquiry, political-*mimetic*) in the work (and the mind) of John Milton. As a father figure of all European revolutionary artists/intellectuals, Milton deserves, in the present context, the utmost attention. As far as the post-optional nature of the theoretical discourse is concerned, there could be no example more unequivocal than Milton's passionate defense of the death sentence that the Parliament passed on king Charles I (Peacy, 2004; Raymond, 2003). His attitude on this extremely sensitive ethical and political matter is archetypal for the revolutionary ethos of the modern age. Milton's political tracts expose the very essence of theory as a display of unfettering certitude *cum* fortitude. A paragon to all the polemic and apologetic literature that he authored during the puritan Revolution, Milton's *Eikonoklastes* (1649) could be especially seen as based on a psychological technology of obtaining a sustainable state of inner non-contradiction leading to a "sustainable" (or, in the epochs vocabulary, "divinely inspired") ideological bliss. Written against the royalist *Eikon Basilike*, a book propagandistically attributed to Charles I himself, Milton not only avoided the slightest expression of moral doubt, but also energetically tries to dissipate it in the consciousness of those of his potential readers still appalled by the recent beheading of the monarch:

Thus in a graceless age things of highest praise and imitation under a right name, to make them infamous and hateful to the people, are miscalled. Certainly, if ignorance and perverseness will needs be national and universal, then they who adhere to wisdom and to truth, are not therefore to be blamed, for being so few as to seem a sect or faction. But in my opinion it goes not ill with that people where these virtues grow so numerous and well joined together, as to resist and make head against the rage and torrent of that boisterous folly and superstition, that possesses and hurries on the vulgar sort. This therefore we may conclude to be a high honour done us from God, and a special mark of his favour, whom he hath selected as the sole remainder, after all these changes and commotions, to stand upright and stedfast in his cause /.../ (Milton, 1847: 446)

But once we moved to Milton's most acclaimed and resistant literary accomplishment, his theological epos *Paradise Lost*, we will discover the full-fledged representation of exactly those moral pangs precluding the political decision that he completely evacuated from his ideological-theoretical endeavors. Actually, the first two books of the epic poem offer, in opulent biblical garments, a most elaborate simulation, almost unique in the fictional literature of the European early modernity, of a fundamentally unpredictable field of experience: the amorphous and still uncharted territories of the Inferno where the Demons have been thrown by the armies of God's faithful Angels. This perceptually-mimetic reproduction of utter conditions of factual uncertainty and risk is superseded by the reconstruction of an institutional process of political decision: the workings of the Parliament of the Demons, which replicate the epoch's deliberation procedures with surprising accuracy. The objectified political debate being, in its turn, doubled by the reconstruction of the ethical torment that swipes the individual consciousness of the arch-decision-maker, Satan himself:

/.../ Horror and doubt distract  
His troubl'd thoughts, and from the bottom stir  
The Hell within him, for within him Hell  
He brings, and round about him, nor from Hell  
One step no more than from himself can fly  
By change of place  
(IV.18-23)

This split between theory and mimesis is relevant for two main walks of the transformation of the classical-Christian ethical ideal of the *imitatio*. Both political theory and political mimesis are telling for an advanced process of de- or non-personalization of the very notion of ethical model. The classical hero or the Christian saint is actually a set of norms that is completely construable as a "person", as a coherent, accomplished, vibrant human character. But this personalizing quality of the model begins to fade at the wake of modernity. On the one hand, political theory, as illustrated in the Miltonian revolutionary polemics, accounts for a highly paradoxical process: an intense personalization of the discourse, an intensely emotional (to wit visceral) approach of the ideas leads, in compensation, to the almost complete de-personalization of the "model". This one is no more anthropomorphic, it is not measured against the inner balances and rhythms expected to underlie, at least ideally, a human consciousness. The model is abstract, it is a set of pure notions and ideas. So that, to put it in a nutshell, the personalization (in the sense of emotional overcharge) of the medium brings about or is simply simultaneous with a thorough impersonalization of the message. Just consider under this angle the seminal Miltonian rejection of the theological legitimation of the monarch as legitimately embodying, i.e. personalizing, the political power. The very classical notion of ethical mimesis is thereby profoundly altered, since the effort of imitation is no more directed towards the identification with the deeds and attitudes of a larger than life personality, but with a corpus of ideas, or rather with the belief in a principle of abstract self-structuring.

On the other hand, what we have called political mimesis is also clearly removed from the classical ethical mimesis. Political mimesis is rather the skill of building the virtual environment that offers the consciousness a vivid representation of the factual uncertainty and the ethical doubt under which real life decisions have to be taken. This is to say that the moral experience, though obviously incompatible with the notion of logical non-contradiction and self-consistency central to the discourse of theory, is equally incompatible with the classical idea of the spiritual magnetism exercised by the noble characters. The moral experience cannot rest in the absorption of a preexisting model, because there can be no preexisting model anymore. The advancement in the field of empirical experience and of ethical emotion is tentative and explorative. In other words, if the mimetical engineering was successful, if the fictional environment was able to convey a sense of the unexpected, of the unpredictable and the morally ambiguous, this could only erode the belief in an aprioristic model and substantiate the vision of an ethical coherence pattern gradually *emerging from* experience. Like the political theory, the political mimesis is equally marked by a paradox. On the one hand, the growing cultural awareness of the fallibilities and inner conflicts of classical models of virtue generates an ever more finely tuned and calculated fictional reproduction of the complex determinations that surround or constitute the political decision-making. But, on the other hand, this substantial increase in the replicative rationality of the means of representation goes hand in hand with a tendency of emotional dispersion as far as the ends of the representational process are concerned. The tentative, explorative and emergent representation of the ethical experience and decision-making directly contradicts the principles of the classical ethical mimesis, because what is considered fundamental and formative from the perspective of a high moral pedagogy is not the absorption of a pre-existing spiritual pattern (that is to say, of a personal model, of a model configured around a strong belief in the consistency and irreducibility of the human person), but the process through which consciousness develops the kind of moral fiber necessary to confront the impersonally-merciless pressures of real-life incertitude and doubt.

#### *A final starting point*

The above observations are not meant to contain the problem of the common origins and the diverging evolutions of political theory and political mimesis to the intellectual world of the early modernity. Quite the contrary, my approach means to open another perspective on understanding the relationship between mimesis (seen as the fictional simulation of external and internal decisional environments) and the sphere of the moral experience (including the famous “ethics of authenticity” – Taylor, 1992). Even a quick survey of Milton’s efforts to represent, resorting to a form of intellectual (both conceptual and *conceptualized*) baroque, the intricacies of political decision-making, should warn us against the rather narrow psychological positivism of the contemporary study of literature-as-simulation (Currie, 1990; Walton, 1990; Stone & Davies, 1995; Goldmann, 2006; Knight, 2006).

At the same time, I would expect the dramatic distinction between the theoretical-ideological and the ethical-mimetic practices of the Miltonic cogito to awake the interest in exploring the complexity of the latter against the manifest unilateralism of the former. The least the perception of the said complexity could do is make us reluctant towards that

discourse of the contemporary philosophical main-stream which unproblematically and pejoratively identifies simulation with moral deceit, while presenting a spiritually-hollow modern society creeping under the brutal domination of all-pervasive simulacra (Baudrillard, 1994; Agamben, 1999; MacIntyre, 2007; Žižek, 2002). In my understanding, the literary study of the political mimesis should avoid the dead-end of shallow and self-reproductive anti-simulation theories. And connect the exploration of mimesis-as-simulation to that rich interference of pragmatic incertitude and ethical doubt emerging, for instance, from such an implicitly Miltonian work as Max Weber's "Politics as a Vocation" (*Politik als Beruf*, 1919/1991), with its stress on the cardinal distinction between the "ethic of ultimate ends" (*Gesinnungsethik*) and the "ethic of responsibility" (*Verantwortungsethik*).

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