



Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia
Roger Caillois (1938)
Translated by John Shepley

From whatever side one approaches things, the ultimate problem turns out in the final analysis to be that of *distinction*: distinctions between the real and the imaginary, between waking and sleeping, between ignorance and knowledge, etc.—all of them, in short, distinctions in which valid consideration must demonstrate a keen awareness and demand for resolution. Among distinctions, there is assuredly none more clear-cut than that between the organism and its surroundings; at least there is none in which the tangible experience of separation is more immediate. So it is worthwhile to observe the condition as pathology (the word here having only a statistical meaning)—i.e., all the facts that come under the heading of mimicry.

[...]

There are reasons more immediate, and at the same time less to be suspected of sophistry, that keep mimicry from being taken for a defence reaction. First of all, it would only apply to carnivores that hunt by sight and not by smell as is often the case. Carnivores, moreover, do not generally bother with motionless prey: immobility would thus be a better defence, and indeed insects are exceedingly prone to employ a false, corpse-like rigidity. There are other means: a butterfly, in order to make itself invisible, may do nothing more than use the tactics of the *Satyride asiatique*, whose flattened wings in repose appear simply as a line almost without thickness, imperceptible, perpendicular to the flower where it has alighted, and which turns simultaneously with the observer so that it is only this minimum surface that is always seen.

The experiments of Judd and Foucher have definitively resolved the question: predators are not at all fooled by homophony or homochromy: they eat crickets that mingle with the foliage of oak trees or weevils that resemble small stones, completely invisible to man. The phasma *Carasius Morosus*, which by its form, colour, and attitude simulates a

plant twig, cannot emerge into the open air without being immediately discovered and dined on by sparrows.

Generally speaking, one finds many remains of mimetic insects in the stomachs of predators. So it should come as no surprise that such insects sometimes have other and more effective ways of protecting themselves. Conversely, some species that are inedible, and would thus have nothing to fear, are also mimetic. It therefore seems that one ought to conclude with Cuénot that this is an “epiphenomenon” whose “defensive utility appears to be nul.” Delage and Goldsmith had already pointed out in the Kallima an “exaggeration of precautions.”

We are thus dealing with a *luxury* and even a dangerous luxury, for there are cases in which mimicry causes the creature to go from bad to worse: geometer-moth caterpillars simulate shoots of shrubbery so well that gardeners cut them with their pruning shears. The case of the *Phyllia* is even sadder: they browse amongst themselves, taking each other for real leaves, in such a way that one might accept the fate of a sort of collective masochism leading to mutual homophagy, the simulation of the leaf being a *provocation* to cannibalism in this kind of totem feast.

[...]

This tendency, whose universality thus becomes difficult to deny, may have been the determining force responsible for the present morphology of mimetic insects, at a time when their organisms were more plastic than they are today, as one must suppose in any case given the fact of transformation. Mimicry would thus be accurately defined as *an incantation fixed at its culminating point* and having caught the sorcerer in his own trap.

No one should say it is nonsense to attribute magic to insects: the fresh application of the words ought not to hide the profound simplicity of the thing. What else but *prestigious magic* and *fascination* can the phenomena be called that have been unanimously classified precisely under the name of mimicry (incorrectly as I see it, one will recall, for in my opinion the perceived resemblances are too reducible in this case to anthropomorphism, but there is no doubt that once rid of these questionable additions and reduced to the essential, these facts are similar

at least in their origins to those of true mimicry) phenomena some of which I have reported above.

[...]

Recourse to the magical tendency in the search for the similar can only, however, be an initial approximation, and it is advisable to take account of it in its turn. The search for the similar would seem to be a means, if not an intermediate stage. Indeed the end would appear to be an *assimilation to the surroundings*. Here instinct completes morphology: the *Kallima* places itself symmetrically on a real leaf, the appendage on its hind wings in the place that a real petiole would occupy; the *Oxydia* alights at right angles to the end of a branch because the arrangement of the spot representing the middle veining requires it; the *Clolia*, Brazilian butterflies, position themselves in a row on small stalks in such a way to represent bell flowers, in the manner of a sprig of lily of the valley, for example. It is thus a real *temptation by space*.

[...]

I know where I am, but I do not feel as though I'm at the spot where I find myself. To [those schizophrenic subjects] space seems to be a devouring force. Space pursues them, encircles them, digests them in a gigantic phagocytosis. It ends by replacing them. Then the body separates itself from thought, the individual breaks the boundary of his skin and occupies the other side of his senses. He tries to look at *himself from* any point whatever in space. He feels himself becoming space, *dark space where things cannot be put*. He is similar, nor similar to something, but just *similar*. And he invents spaces of which he is "the convulsive possession."

All of these expressions shed light on a single process: *depersonalisation by assimilation to space*, i.e., what mimicry achieves morphologically in certain species. The magical hold (one can truly call it so without doing violence to the language) of night and obscurity, the *fear of the dark*, probably also has its roots in the peril in which it puts the opposition between the organism and the milieu.

Minkowski's analyses are invaluable here: darkness is not the mere absence of light; there is something positive about it. While light space is eliminated by the materiality of objects, darkness is "filled," it touches

the individual directly, envelops him, penetrates him, and even passes through him: hence "the ego is *permeable* for darkness while it is not so for light"; the feeling of mystery that one experiences at night would not come from anything else. Minkowski likewise comes to speak of *dark space* and almost a lack of distinction between the milieu and the organism: "Dark space envelops me on all sides and penetrates me much deeper than light space, the distinction between inside and outside and consequently the sense organs as well, insofar as they are designed for external perception, here play only a totally modest role."

The assimilation to space is necessarily accompanied by a decline in the feeling of personality and life. It should be noted in any case that in mimetic species the phenomenon is never carried out except in a *single direction*: the animal mimics the plant, leaf, flower, or thorn, and disassembles or ceases to perform its function in relation to others. *Life takes a step backward*.