Mimesis and Poesis
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First reading: From *The Life of Apollonius*

When the plague began to rage in Ephesus, and no remedy sufficed to check it, they sent a deputation to Apollonius, asking him to become physician of their infirmity; and he thought that he ought not to postpone his journey, but said: "Let us go." And forthwith he was in Ephesus,…. He … called together the Ephesians, and said: "Take courage, for I will today put a stop to the course of the disease." And with these words he led the population entire to the theatre, where the images of the Averting god had been set up. And there he saw what seemed an old mendicant artfully blinking his eyes as if blind, and he carried a wallet and a crust of bread in it; and he was clad in rags and was very squalid of countenance. Apollonius therefore ranged the Ephesians around him and said: "Pick up as many stones as you can and hurl them at this enemy of the gods."

Now the Ephesians wondered what he meant, and were shocked at the idea of murdering a stranger so manifestly miserable; for he was begging and praying them to take mercy upon him. Nevertheless Apollonius insisted and egged on the Ephesians to launch themselves on him and not let him go. And as soon as some of them began to take shots and hit him with their stones, the beggar who had seemed to blink and be blind, gave them all a sudden glance and showed that his eyes were full of fire. Then the Ephesians recognized that he was a demon, and they stoned him so thoroughly that their stones were heaped into a great cairn around him.

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The 'Bible' (second) Reading: John 8:1-11

[1] while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. [2] Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. [3] The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, [4] they said to him, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. [5] Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?' [6] They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. [7] When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.' [8] And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. [9] When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. [10] Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' [11] She said, 'No one, sir.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.']]

Mimesis and Poiesis

What on earth do two accounts of public executions have to do with the theme for this term – Art? The contrast between the two accounts, draws attention to a contrast between different forms of art – namely Mimetic and Poetic. Mimetic, where we get our word for mime, and mimicking and so on – is simply replicating what is already there. Mimesis. Poetic, from the Greek Poiesis, refers to producing something new, generating creativity that forges a new way of locating yourself in the world.

The first account covers an incident that took place in the city of Ephesus, some time in the second century. Where the miracle worker, Apollonius, liberates the city from plague, by getting reluctant inhabitants to stone to death a helpless, marginalised, beggar. Why on earth would Apollonius want them to do that? Nobody wants them to do that to someone who is begging them for mercy.

The great hurdle facing them, is the problem of the first stone. We would certainly not want to do that anyone else, any more than the Ephesians. But Apollonius eggs them on, until eventually the first stone is cast. Once the first is cast, there is a model for the second. Once two are cast, there are more models and so on. And the account says that once the Ephesians start throwing their stones, the beggar's eyes light up like a demon. And here is the magic of the account. That the beggar was not being stoned because he was evil. He was evil, because he was being stoned. Once you attribute guilt to your target – they become evil in your eyes. They become a legitimate target for your wrath. The beggar was not being stoned because he was evil. He was evil, because he was being stoned.

Rene Girard, a social anthropologist, uses this incident to explain Mimesis – Mimetic contagion. How behaviour spreads by mimicking the behaviour of others. According to Girard, human desire is mimetic through and through – people want what other people want. Its infectious. Advertisers know this.

This leads to a situation where people are constantly imitating each other's desires which leads to conflict and competition. Girard argues that these conflicts and competitions are resolved through scapegoating, in which a group eventually turn on an individual or a group, whom they blame for their problems – and collectively sacrifice them. This sacrifice then should restore social order by uniting people against some common enemy. In Ephesus, against the poor beggar.

Mimetic can refer to a particular style of life-like art. But more substantively, mimetic art is just mimicking a genuine encounter with the other. It is a major contrast with the poetic, the poietic, the poiesis in Greek that generates art. Poesis is a full on, pan-dimensional engagement with the radically other – akin to genuine emotion. Mimesis is faking a genuine encounter. Yes, when you encounter art, literature, poetry – you can lick the jam from the doughnut. You may be moved to tears, or anger, or laughter – but without emotional engagement with the real world, this is nothing other than sentiment. Going through the motions, believing yourself engaged – but to the rest of world, merrily lost in mimesis. A poor imitation of poiesis.

Poesis happens to be a Greek word for art. But it is a 2 way street, a relation between you and the artist: *poesis* reaches into the core of your being. In this sense, art is a traumatic encounter – it opens up a space you didn't know existed, it accesses who you really are as a human – it exposes you to the universe, to otherness, to the unfamiliar. *Poesis*.

You are confronted with the uncomfortable other, confronted with yourself, confronted with beauty. Not a beauty that is nice to look at look, but a beauty that changes to the way you look at everything else, changes the way you see everything else, changes the way you encounter everything else. Art.

And this manner of engagement is precisely what Jesus presents to a violent crowd in that Biblical account of a stoning. To see your own life in that of the person you would punish. Then imagine looking that person in the eye, as they stand rightfully condemned at the centre of the crowd. The problem of the first stone. In Jewish law, the problem of the first stone – that nobody wants to throw – is solved. The accuser is the person who has to throw the first stone. And what does Jesus say? Let whoever is without sin cast the first stone. That demonised person becomes the mirror – to show you who you really are. I am an expert at refusing to see who I really am – and I'm pretty sure, I am not the only such expert in Cambridge.

And if I am an expert in condemning others, and refusing to face up to myself – what on earth am I going to see if I wonder around an art gallery? Observing, objectifying, keeping beauty at a safe distance from who I really am. No matter how profound or how beautiful or how perfect, regardless of my technical appreciation and my interpretive competence – keeping art enframed, up there, away from the core of my being is sentimental. It licks the jam out of the emotional doughnut. No emotional engagement. Just mimesis. Miming a genuine encounter. A denial of *poiesis*.

You can see this in all walks of life. In the management styles of neoliberal capitalism – that cannot ever be based on novelty, but solely on more-of-the-same decisions that have already been made in the past. Mark Fisher – thank you to Max for this reference writes of bureaucrats in such a setting: They themselves can make no decisions. Rather they are permitted only to refer to decisions that have always already been made.

In the humanities, where minor tweaks to prevailing theories, where more-of-the-same research is heralded as major breakthrough and cutting-edge insight.

And, of course in the arts – where poetic, ground-breaking, world-changing emotion is unwittingly reduced to sentimentalism, where you get to laugh, cry and weep, but where there are no positive real-world consequences. Emotion displaced by sentiment, Poiesis by Mimesis.

So I think of the Chapel in the upstairs of a 19th Century Jamaica holding bay for victims of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Upstairs, white-skinned worshippers sing hymns based on the bible, the most politically subversive collection of literature in history. Downstairs, beneath their feet, are cells full of the victims of radical injustice. Upstairs, sentiment but not emotion. Mimesis but not poiesis. Where was Jesus? He was downstairs.

Or think of reports of holocaust survivors, who – in freezing cold trains on their way to the concentration camps, report waiting in Munich where people are herded onto the trains to the sound of music from the nearby opera house. Inside the opera house, sentiment but not emotion. Mimesis but not poiesis. Where was Jesus? In the opera house, or the cattle trucks?

And while we distance ourselves from this kind of behaviour, you see it in behavioural patterns universally, including under our own noses. The processes by which we can demonise someone, and then get others to join us. Manipulate others into throwing the first metaphorical stone – then just sit back and watch the fireworks. Character assassinations. How quickly and how easy it becomes to declare others racist, or sexist, or xenophobic – without ever stopping to consider whether we might be guilty of all those things.

As we celebrate epiphany, it is worth reflecting on what kind of encounter we have with the beauty of the infant Christ. Mimetic or Poietic engagement. Do we just like this kind of music, and reading and visual art? Or does this infant hold a mirror up to who you really are? And when he points that mirror back at you – what if you don't like what you see? How long will it take before you start throwing stones? At the end of term, we will revisit how to overcome those pesky moral barriers to throwing stones at others – and to see just how easy it is.

The Jesus account shows what genuine poiesis looks like. It invites us to see the Other, the human who stands at the far side of voodoo demon we have imagined. The Jesus account breaks down an old world, and invites us to inhabit a new world, with a new worldview. Emotion. Poiesis. Art.

Intercession

God of Light and life – as we celebrate a belated epiphany – show us what it means to see you, and to be seen by you.

Show us what it means to see who we really are reflected right back at us, in all our ugliness and failure, in all our god-given beauty.

Show us how to face up the fantasies we have spun about ourselves, and the fantasies we have spun about others. Help us to see your face in the other. Help us to see your beauty, in those we have come to detest.

By your grace, free us from fakery, from self-images that are not who we are. Free us from the joy and satisfaction that comes with demonising others.

Confront us again with your beauty, so that our response will make real world differences, to real people. May our encounter with you bring life to others, so that those who are lonely find company, those who are ignored are heard, those who are mistreated find justice.

May the image of the infant Christ do its work on us, so that we might truly become the bridge by whom Christ may come to others.
 To the glory of your name.