

# Obscure Openings: Intellectual Freedoms of Rousseau, Agamben and Malabou

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“Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains”.<sup>1</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s famous words, first published in “Social Contract”, sparked intense revolutionary fervour. Seeming to pose an impossibly out-of-reach idea of freedom, these words also catalysed debate often concerned with whether Rousseau idealises a nature that is free because it belongs to a primitive past (the first man) and/or a nascent state of life (birth/early childhood).<sup>2</sup> Throughout his work, Rousseau writes of how immediate sensory experiences of nature are hampered by a situation in which living beings are captured within regulating systems. He writes of the dangers that administrative machines pose to freedom, applying this to political leaders and law-makers but also, and at significant risk to himself and his writerly/artistic career, frequently aiming his critique at the learned arts and science societies of his own time. Rousseau argued that the impulse to inhibit freedom is structural to the activity of intellectual coteries that are arranged according to the views of like-minded men. While man enters the world with the capacity for full sensory engagement and activity with the world, the conventional development of a child from birth into adulthood entails measuring the self in accordance with the opinions of others. Living beings are born free but are inevitably caught in homogenising administrations that, geared only toward their own reproduction, stultify or foreclose the opening of horizons that might enable free thought.

Despite this pessimism concerning the inevitable fate of intellectual freedom within advanced societies, and despite widespread reception that has cast these beliefs as regressive or even reactionary, Rousseau's work has had a future. Rousseau was a writer of drama and a composer of music and understanding of the radically futural and prolifically fertile effects of his concept of freedom may best be found in dramatic scenes. As suggested in what follows, the future-oriented effects of his concept can be found in a scene from his philosophical writing about education, a scene that is evental or performative in both its concern with and enactment of what it means to transfer to another the idea of freedom that is at once obscure and transformational. I argue elsewhere that the fertility of this idea of freedom — a fleeting concept that ultimately remains obscure and out-of-reach — is perhaps best found in his version of *Pygmalion* (1762), a foundational melodrama that has had an enduring, long-lasting legacy.<sup>3</sup> My concern here, however, is with the dramatics of his writerly ideas of freedom and with how these ideas have had a particular valency for philosophical thought about social organisation, autonomy and the possibility of metamorphosis within an over-regulatory, machine-culture. This thought has extended in its reach to that of Hegel, Kant, Marx and Freud, to the poststructuralism of Foucault, and to the deconstructive approaches of Derrida and De Man. More recently, and via the latter thinkers, elements of this thought are discernible in the work of Giorgio Agamben and Catherine Malabou.

Rousseau addresses the question of how, and through what methods, knowledge passes from past to present and into the future, and he does so in philosophical writing that is often highly dramatic in its composition and galvanising in its effect, insofar as it rethinks, remakes and reactivates a freedom that exists *now, today*. The possibility that a nascent state of being and of thought might be momentarily glimpsed, gathered together and reproduced for further thought is fully developed in his *Emile or A Sentimental Education* (1762), a text that is focused on the transfer of knowledge taking place between a teacher and a student. The generative (intellectual) effects of this thought are dramatised in a revelatory scene. This revelation manifests, literally, as an unveiling and it takes place in a book in which Rousseau repeatedly writes of modelling the importance of an actively sensory relation to things. This dramatic action can work against conformity, institutional control and other restrictions on freedom.

The passage — worth quoting at length even if only for the way in which it models what I think of as Rousseau's manifold understanding of freedom — comes from Book Three of *Emile*. In the book's timeframe, which traces Emile's development from birth to adulthood, Emile has by Book Three reached the age of twelve or thirteen. Adolescence is, as Rousseau writes in this section's

opening, a stage of development that exists on the cusp of childhood and adulthood. Several pages in to the book of adolescence is the following passage which describes how Rousseau and his young protégé set out to observe the sunset and then of how, the next morning, they return to the same place in order to view the dawn:

One fine evening we go for a walk in a suitable place where a broad, open horizon permits the setting sun to be fully seen, and we observe the objects which make recognisable the location of its setting. The next day, to get some fresh air, we return to the same place before the sun rises. We see it announcing itself from afar by the fiery arrows it launches ahead of it. The blaze grows, the east appears to be wholly in flames. By their glow one expects the star for a long time before it reveals itself. At every instant one believes that he sees it appear. Finally one sees it. A shining point shoots out like lightning and immediately fills all of space. The veil of darkness is drawn back and falls. Man recognises his habitat and finds it embellished. The verdure has gained a new vigor during the night. The nascent day which illuminates it, the first rays which gild it, show it covered by a web of dew which reflects the light and colors to the eye. (*Emile*, 313)

Necessary to the logic of the revelation that here unfolds — that unveils itself — is that Emile sees the sunset *before* he sees, the next morning, the glowing world illuminated by the sun's return. He first observes "the objects which make recognisable the location of its setting" before finally seeing "it". This "it" only appears to be the expected glow from the star that illuminates all before it can be seen. The observation of the previous night's sunset has prepared Emile for the discernment of another "it": the "veil of darkness" that is "drawn back and falls".

What this educational scene enacts is a dramatic transferal of knowledge itself. This form of intelligence takes place not via the teacher's lecturing, expositing or informing his student. Rather, the transfer of knowledge occurs in a scene understood to be a gathering of things; this gathering is at once an observation of nature and a more-broadly sensory response to the question of what such a bringing together or formation of things entails. It includes that which the teacher and student observe together but also that which tacitly passes between them as they open themselves to and debate their responses to that which they see and attempt to grasp. The word *intellect* is commonly understood to name the power of that faculty which can comprehend and reason. Such processes are commonly associated with reading and writing, acts

which themselves are routinely construed as depending primarily on the faculty of sight. Etymologically, *intelligence* and *intellectual* derive from *inter* meaning between and *leger* meaning to read. The root word, *legere* originally meant to pick together, gather, collect. Latent within the word *intellectual*, therefore, is an activity to do with the eyes (reading) but also to do with the hands (gathering, collecting).

Strikingly, in the sunset/sunrise passage from *Emile*, the idea of sensory knowledge as a gathering or handling of things is associated with the making of the world (creation). Furthermore, and paradoxically, given the common reception of Rousseau's idea of freedom as idealising an originary state of nature, it also draws attention to Rousseau's *denaturalisation* of naturalised metaphors that associate intelligence/the intellect with light, illumination and brilliance.<sup>4</sup> This denaturalisation occurs via the picturing of and gesturing toward an obscurity, a gathering darkness. What is made intelligible, through observation of this process, is Rousseau's belief that necessary to ongoing life is an unmaking of life-giving light. In Book Two of *Emile*, Rousseau writes of how "[e]verything is good as it comes from the maker of the world but degenerates once it gets into the hands of men" (161). This idea of a universal "maker" who administers a divinity the original good of which inevitably declines echoes the apparently regressive nature of "Social Contract's" "Man is born free ...". And, throughout the book, Rousseau repeatedly asserts that the movement from birth to adulthood is necessarily a movement from freedom to un-freedom. Yet, in tension with such statements, is what takes place in the scene in which Rousseau and Emile encounter a divine good, or free handling, that is not irredeemable.

Directly following the sunset/sunrise passage, Rousseau asks "how can he [ie Emile] be touched by the beauty of nature's spectacle if he does not know the hand responsible for adorning it" (313)? The previous (sunset/sunrise) passage — with its gathering together of both a rising and a falling away of light — holds at least one possible answer to this question. Knowledge of the rising's sun's illumination of all things, and their relation to one another, entails a responsiveness to the processes of making and of adornment (the verdure gains "vigor", the "web of dew" shows itself). The revelation, the unveiling, of these things — that are gathered together before the eye via light that illuminates all space — comes about through the experience of a juxtaposition. What the previous dusk's darkening unveils is the necessity of a fall that both precedes and succeeds the brilliance of the sun's adornment of all things. If, to go back to my earlier point, brilliance and other luminous metaphors have been naturalised as standing in for human intelligence that might or might not believe itself to be free, then Rousseau's scene establishes the necessity of glimpsing a dark

unmaking of brilliance that brings with it the appreciation of un-freedom. It is, moreover, crucial to the formation of this concept that the grasping of freedom *and* un-freedom takes places within a triangulated scene, made-up of student, teacher and that absolutely divine other, the sun. This scenic drama thus comprises an interplay. It is a gathering and a scattering, a reaching toward and a drawing back or falling away. It is through such scenic writing that Rousseau models his concept of freedom, the effects of which are obscure yet potentially transformative in that they generate further activity. This activity is oriented, and extended toward, that which is out of reach at the same time as it involves recognition of an inevitable receding or falling away of all things.

This is an experience of creation itself as a simultaneous making/un-making. For Rousseau, such an experience — which entails awareness of an activity — is necessary preparation for the development from adolescent to adulthood and, potentially, toward free-thinking citizenship. An education begun in enlivened awareness of being, and of being's relationship to the world, is the ideal entry-point for citizenship, whereby the adult will better negotiate social systems and the relations of things and beings to one another. *Emile's* idea of freedom is here future-oriented, insofar as it models something for a boy who might reproduce it into the future. My aim in dwelling on Rousseau's version of educational and, indeed, intellectual freedom — as it appears in *Emile* and other dramatic-philosophic writings — is not simply to pose an argument against the commonly received idea that his thinking is regressive. My concern is also to show how elements of his thought have anticipated the work of two latter-day intellectuals, in particular. In the thinking of Agamben and Malabou, we can see an engagement with knowledge that similarly entails a handling, gathering and formation of obscure things. Both Agamben and Malabou engage with what it means to write, and to continue writing, within a long-standing intellectual tradition that, sometimes pessimistically, sees itself as being at the end of intellectual innovation. At work in both writers, furthermore, is a reading of the necessary disappearance and/or deformation of things. Such un-makings are understood as necessary to re-forming or trans-forming thought and to opening intellectual horizons. Discerning [what I'm calling here] obscure openings, even when such openings appear only as they are disappearing, these thinkers gather together and re-invigorate concepts harking from a range of disciplines.

In *What is an Apparatus?*, Agamben re-orient's Foucault's thinking about modernity's regulatory apparatuses—the administrative forms of governmentality within and through which living beings are subjected to disciplinary mechanisms of power. What Agamben essentially does in this book is reconfigure the meaning of the Foucauldian apparatus according to new sets of disciplinary questions. He does so by combining questions

of etymology, including the meaning of Foucault's root word for apparatus (*dispositif*), with his enquiry into the theological underpinnings of *oikonomia*, the divine administration of things. In the process, Agamben implicitly asks about the possibility of free (intellectual) activity from within an all-pervasive mediated system in which subjects are caught. There has emerged a massive conglomeration of convergent systems, Agamben writes, that render the subject "docile" or *desubjectified* (2009, 20) and therefore unable to act, unable to think. This situation is, for Agamben, "nothing less than a general and massive partitioning of beings into two large groups or classes: on the one hand, living beings (or substances), and on the other, apparatuses in which living beings are incessantly captured" (2009, 13).

It is in view of this situation—in which resistance to machinic capture appears unimaginable—that Agamben turns back to a long durational, pre-modern theory of the apparatus and via which he posits his idea about divine *oikonomia*. The latter relates to the Foucauldian apparatus (*dispositif*) but is specifically rendered as a Christian Trinitarian structure through which God's immaterial will is dispensed to mankind and the material world. Agamben's argument is that divine *oikonomia* is foundational to the way politics has evolved in Western economies. This idea is fully developed in *The Kingdom and the Glory* (2011). In *What is an Apparatus?*, however, the potential of Agamben's idea of *oikonomia* is posed in relation to questions of time and, particularly, in view of what it means to write, think and act now. Implying his own intellectual and cross-disciplinary activity, with its reaching back to Aristotelian and medieval theories about the divine ordering of things, Agamben makes an argument for the importance of a "contemporary" capable of discerning "obscurity", a darkening or receding horizon. It is this subject's "disconnection" or "out-of-jointness" with the now that enables him to discern and grasp the nature and structure of the contemporary. Through this method, Agamben implicitly pits the contemporary's active gathering and handling of obscure things against the "triumph of *oikonomia*"—"that is to say [the] pure activity of government that aims at nothing but its own replication" (2009, 22).

In the last chapter of *What is an Apparatus?*, Agamben directly addresses the problem of *desubjectification* by invoking the time of the contemporary, which he presents as an "ungraspable threshold" (48). "Of whom and what are we contemporaries" Agamben asks in the opening of "What is the Contemporary?" (39), introducing as he does so his rendering of the now as a dramatic or eventual encounter with an evanescence. "[I]f we try to objectify and fix this caesura within chronological time, it reveals itself as ungraspable" (48). The contemporary is, for Agamben, the fleeting discernment of a barely discernible obscurity that appears at the same time as it vanishes, or moves

away, from the sentient beings who strive to see or to touch it. It is paradoxically those who experience disconnection from their own moment who have the capacity to truly see and respond to these fleeting shadows. It is those, writes Agamben, who are out-of-joint with, or who experience the irrelevance of, their own time who are most “capable of perceiving and grasping” its obscurity (2009, 40). Disharmony with the present is felt by those who refuse to be blinded by the “lights of [their] own century” and who “neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands” (2009, 40). The drama of Agamben’s language, with its allusion to Hamlet’s “time out-of-joint”, opens the possibility of seeing shadowy form in darkness, of perceiving that which is an “ungraspable threshold” (2009, 48).

This is not to say that the capacity to see darkness implies a felt absence or the melancholy loss of light. Like the “off cells” in the retina that become active once they adjust to darkness, the discernment of obscurity is the opposite of passivity in that it requires the eye to become active (Agamben 2009, 44). This act of looking into shadows or darkness, moreover, entails becoming directed toward an object the distance of which impresses itself on the spectator. In tension with the coercive structure of advanced capitalism, and its technologically determining apparatus, is the picturing of a universe that reaches toward but ultimately recedes from human reach and explanation. In the context of Agamben’s earlier, implicit invocation of Hamlet—he who calls a time “out of joint”—the scene resonates theatrically. As for Rousseau’s gathering of teacher and student at dusk/dawn, the scene is also cosmic-ontological. Agamben writes:

In the firmament that we observe at night, the stars shine brightly, surrounded by a thick darkness. Since the number of galaxies and luminous bodies in the universe is almost infinite, the darkness that we see in the sky is something that, according to scientists, demands an explanation. It is precisely the explanation that contemporary astrophysicists give for this darkness that I would now like to discuss. In an expanding universe, the most remote galaxies move away from us at a speed so great that their light is never able to reach us. What we perceive as the darkness of the heavens is this light that, though traveling toward us, cannot reach us, since the galaxies from which the light originates move away from us at a velocity greater than the speed of light.

To perceive, in the darkness of the present, this light that strives to reach us but cannot—this is what it means to be contemporary. (46)

Discordance with one's own time can be thought of as a kind of intellectual freedom insofar as it enables the appearance of this obscure opening, this darkening horizon. As in Rousseau's tableaux of the sunset and then sunrise, Agamben's theatrical scene evokes more than the act of looking. It also dramatises the idea of grasping, handling. Agamben names an activity discerned and generated by those capable of abiding disharmony. This version of contemporaneity does not amount to freedom from machinic operations of power. Rather, it opens an activity that is generated by those who do not allow themselves "to be blinded by the lights of [his] century" and who strive "to get a glimpse of the shadows in those lights" (45). Agamben's activity—set in motion through attention to obscure things and enabled via the melding of disparate disciplines (philosophy, theology, philology)—offsets the triumph of a generalising and all-pervasive *oikonomia*.<sup>5</sup>

Orientation toward a fading light similarly adumbrates Catherine Malabou's threefold concept of plasticity, a motor-schema that emerges at the "dusk of writing" (2010). Rethinking Hegelian dialectics, after the evental moments of both Heideggerian ontology (a being-toward-death) and Derridean deconstruction (with its emphasis on archi-writing and trace), Malabou's plasticity-concept gives new, dramatic form to persistent questions geared toward thinking, writing, reforming thought and subjectivity. It also engages with, and then departs from the supposed end, or twilight, of the historical subject. While Malabou has spoken of the impossibility of foreseeing the end of capitalism, she has also avowed her belief that there is "promise in the program" (Vahanian 9) and her work is focused on the possibilities opened via understanding of the plasticity of form. The word plasticity, deriving from Latin *plasticus* and Greek *plastikos*, refers to that which both moulds and can be moulded. Malabou makes optimum use of these etymologies—indeed, root-words are, arguably, the plastic, motor-schemas at work within her language of formation, reformation and deformation. For, Malabou finds her plasticity-concept in Hegel's substance-subject. There is, for Malabou, a plastic event that emerges when Hegel writes of an historical being who schematises himself into existence via habitual self-sculpting. What Malabou finds and remakes in Hegel is a plastic subject capable of giving and taking form but also vulnerable to the destruction of form.

Essential to Malabou's idea of plasticity is that it contains elements of annihilation as well as reformation. For Malabou, the word *plastiquage*—French for explosion—refers to elements within a form that anticipate its own destruction. Capable of metamorphosis, the subject of plasticity contains both creative and destructive potential. Unable to spring back to the form from which she emerged, this subject is instead permanently exiled from the place

that preceded her transformation. Supple but not elastic, she countenances the possibilities of freedom and then suffers the limits catalysed by her plastic, shapeshifting nature. This sculpted being comes to life amidst the proliferation of technological apparatuses that at once enable her emergence and continue to restrict or to determine her future. Her suppleness means that she is ready-made for adaptability to the neoliberal apparatus that demands both compliance and pliability of its subjects. Yet, her plasticity anticipates a subjectivity capable of resisting systemic demands, insofar as it carries latent elements capable of exploding and thus revolutionising form.

The plastic subject is thus one who discerns, reaches for and handles that which already contains elements of its own reformation and annihilation. This re-sculpting of the historical substance-subject revisits but also departs from Hegel in that, for Malabou, plasticity's emergence marks not the end-of-history thesis (as it did for Hegel) but rather anticipates a departure point. Important to Malabou's concept of plasticity is the notion of *voir venir*, which literally translates as "to see (what is) coming" but also means, in the French vernacular, wait and see. *Voir venir* thus carries a double meaning. It implies both to know what is likely to happen (based on what has happened already) and also to not know what might be coming (2005 13). This unclear beginning—which is not unlike Agamben's obscure contemporary—can take place through the soldering of old onto new forms. Malabou's reading of Hegel is thus itself a plasticity, one that is formed and forwarded through the melding of Heideggerian metaphysics with Derridean deconstruction as models of thought that have shaped her own thinking. The thoughts of these thinkers become, at the same time, discursive-events, temporal contingencies, that pave the way for Malabou's own reading of plasticity.

In *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing* (2010), Malabou performatively maps the nonlinear nature of this imaginative process whereby she discerns, grasps and remoulds the potential plasticity of each of her three, influential models. In doing so, she posits "plasticity" not only as that which moulds and is moulded but also as a simultaneously anticipatory and retroactive concept. "It is therefore in the capacity of a new pure historical image," writes Malabou, "that plasticity, as a still uncertain, tremulous star, begins to appear at the dusk of written form" (Malabou 2010, 15). In theatrical language Malabou (re-)dramatises an Hegelian scene, setting in motion in doing so her departure from a written legacy that has imagined being's historical end. Malabou writes:

But in the end is there even a dusk? Isn't the very notion of dusk a transformative mask? Dusk may be the metaphor of dialectical sublation, the famous sunset, which, at the end of the introduction to

the Elements of the Philosophy of Right, determines the takeoff of meaning. (15)

This taking-off point returns me to the specific question of what intellectual freedom is today. It is through the discerning and grasping of a transformational latency — a plastic obscurity — that Malabou launches her departure from Hegel. This opportunity has, furthermore, arisen via her imaginative extension of plasticity beyond Hegelian dialectics and toward scientific discourse, bridging in the process core humanities and science disciplines that have, since at least the mid-eighteenth century, been seen as methodologically distinct. Malabou's venture into neuroscience and, more recently, into the science of epigenetics and cloning does not leave behind but rather solders neo-Hegelian dialectics onto contemporary debates about the plasticity of living form / bodily matter (Malabou 2012; 2016). In this way, her thought might be understood as cognate with Agamben's conceptualisation of the contemporary.<sup>6</sup> With its echo of an out-of-joint Hamlet and via the picturing of a cosmo-ontological scene, Agamben's contemporary implies the inscription of the dramatic, the possibility of action itself, within a written, intellectual legacy. Agamben's out-of-joint contemporary has been invoked and activated in an essay that, in bringing together various disciplines (philosophy, theology, philology, theatre), itself performs spatial and temporal crossings. In writing and in teaching their cross-disciplinary intellectual practices, Agamben and Malabou remake what appears, or re-appears, to me as a Rousseauian scene — one that imagines, gathers together and then scatters obscure things.

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Masters and Christopher Kelly point to the impossibility of accurately translating this phrase in their introduction to "Social Contract". The original, French form of this phrase — *L'homme est né libre, et partout il est dans les fers* — translates as 'Man *is/was* born free and everywhere he is in chains' (my emphasis). They then explain that Rousseau's idea of freedom can be understood in either of two ways. While 'Man *was* born free' confirms the interpretation that, for Rousseau, original man lived in an ideal state in that he was not bound by civil societies, laws and obligations. By contrast, they write, 'Man *is* born free' implies that every being *is* born with a natural freedom to choose whether or not they obey others. (Rousseau, "Social Contract", xiii)

<sup>2</sup> Although, Paul de Man discusses how "Rousseau is one of the group of writers

who are always being systematically misread”. “The Rhetoric of Blindness: Jacques Derrida’s Reading of Rousseau”. In *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (1971)

<sup>3</sup> In *Pygmalion* (1762) — now routinely cited as the first melodrama — Rousseau activates a version of the intellectual freedom he professes in the ‘Social Contract’ and elsewhere. As set out in my nook *Living Screens: Melodrama and Plasticity in Contemporary Film and Television* (2015), Rousseau remakes for a new time an old, Ovidian story in which an artist brings his sculpture — an object made with his own hands — to life. Rousseau’s *Pygmalion* is about metamorphosis. It also enacts this process through its innovative handling and re-purposing of an old story, anticipating as it does so the promise of cross-disciplinary or — as I argue in relation to the present digitally-networked apparatus — transmedial metamorphosis. The basic structure of Rousseau’s inaugural melodrama has migrated through time and space and, in Pygmalion-like fashion, continually mutated as it has moved from theatre directors to prose-poets and novelists to film-makers and now to those working with televisual and other digital formats. In this way, as I argue in *Living Screens*, the thought about intellectual freedom enacted in Rousseau’s melodrama continues to speak to the question of how we see, hear, grasp, handle and remake sounds and images. Within this apparatus, in other words, there abides a contemporary obscurity, a latent plasticity through which we might, once again, be transformed.

<sup>4</sup> In his essay “White Mythology”, and drawing on Hegel’s description of a sunset, Derrida writes of the ways in which the sun, in enlightenment thinking, has provided “natural” metaphors. This naturalised metaphor, Derrida writes, is already metaphoric. (1982, 270)

<sup>5</sup> This conceptualisation of an “activity” that offsets a generalising system is cognate with the idea of gesture that Agamben develops in *Means Without Ends: Notes on Politics* (2000).

<sup>6</sup> In a recent essay, however, Malabou writes of how Foucauldian and Agambian accounts of living matter, biology, the *biopolitical* “leave aside everything in biology that is not related to the training of bodies or the regulating of conduct that instead reveals the reserve of possibilities inscribed in the living being itself” (2016, 431).

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