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## Is aesthetic mind a plastic mind? Reflections on Goethe and Catherine Malabou

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**Abstract.** What is the relationship between *thinking* and *seeing a form*? In his morphological writings Goethe answers this question by saying that *seeing* is not pure passivity, but a *thoughtful look* because it invokes the *mobility* and *plasticity* of our thinking. For this reason this kind of *aesthetic gaze* is useful to understand the world of life, equally mobile and plastic. In this article, I will try to find out whether Goethe's considerations about aesthetic idea and plasticity can find a new-look in the reflections of Catherine Malabou, one of the most influential thinkers in contemporary French debate, in whose works the concept of plastic form is central.

**Keywords.** Plasticity, morphology, aesthetic mind, J.W. Goethe, C. Malabou.



The image above, titled *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, was made in 1940 by the French surrealist painter André Masson. As the title suggests, it is a representation that stretches out on the white painting canvas the immediate and intuitive process of aesthetic apprehension and of understanding the original phenomenon.

What immediately prompts our attention, and is therefore the focal point of the whole picture, is the look that connects Goethe's figure on the right to the arboreal representation on the left. A look that is not *pure passivity*, but a *thoughtful look*, which the author of

the painting reproduces graphically, proposing various reworks of the plant. The succession of leaves becomes the true *leitmotiv* of the painting: the plant is decomposed, simplified, chromatically analysed by the subject until it becomes a mental image: what Goethe defines in his scientific writings as *Urphänomen* or *pure phenomenon*. «My perception itself is a thinking, and my thinking a perception» (Goethe [1988]: 39), said the German poet in his morphological writings.

It is precisely on the particular relationship between *thinking* and *seeing a form* I intend to dwell on in this report. It is a topic certainly faced by aestheticians of all times and to which I would give my modest contribution, starting from an article by Catherine Malabou, one of the most influential thinkers in contemporary French debate, a student of Jacques Derrida and now a lecturer at Kingston University of London, in whose reflections the concept of form is definitely central.

At the beginning of the article, titled *An Eye at the Edge of Discourse*, Malabou analyses «this strange state of vision», the «vision of thought», wondering: «what is it to see a thought? To see a thought coming? To be present at its emergence, at the moment when it is still no more than a promise, plan, or sketch, but is already strong enough to live?» (Malabou [2007]: 16). What allows us to talk about the sensibility of an idea? In the platonic tradition, «seeing an idea» indicates the actual act of contemplation. «The idea», Malabou says, «by definition, is that which allows itself to be seen as an image (*eidos*) and the soul is the eye that apprehends it, in other words, receives it without ever inventing, creating, or forming it» (Malabou [2007]: 17). According to this theoretical system, the visibility of the idea is a sort of *imposition*: the idea imposes itself on the mind as something that is necessary to receive and to internalize. I wonder however: is it in this way that we can understand Goethe's gaze, the gaze that has been masterfully reproduced in Masson's painting?

The question is obviously rhetoric. The Swiss literary critic Jean Starobinski, quoted by Mala-

bou, interrogated the etymology of the French term *regard* (look or gaze). He emphasizes that its etymological root does not designate (as one could expect) the act of vision, but the repeated attempt to regain something that, by its nature, is always trying to escape us<sup>1</sup>. «When something has acquired a form», Goethe said, «it metamorphoses immediately to a new one» and «if we wish to arrive at some living perception of nature, we ourselves must remain as soft and plastic as Nature and follow the example she gives» (Goethe [1988]: 64).

The Goethean method invokes the *mobility* and the *plasticity* of our thinking and therefore it would be useful to understand the world of life, equally mobile and plastic. The concept of plasticity, mentioned by Goethe, is relevant to our considerations, because it is a key systemic principle, which can be applied both to our *being in the world* and to our *understanding of the world*, both to our *body morphology* and to *the morphology of our thought*. The plastic principle allows us to consider a living entity in its spiritual and physical unity as a new, dynamic and pre-organized structure, able to integrate necessity and causality, determination and accident. In other words, plasticity allows us to combine «the thought of a sculpture of the self with that of transdifferentiation» (Malabou [2004]: 79).

Malabou moves on the same «accidental» territory of Goethe in the attempt to outline the *ontology of plasticity*. She aims to sketch a new and not naïve way of philosophically rethinking the relationship between human mind, body and accident, beginning with the concept of plasticity, the theoretical support of her whole argument<sup>2</sup>. «In philosophy, art [...], genetics, neurobiology, ethnology and psychoanalysis», the French thinker writes, «plasticity appears to be an increasingly more functional operating scheme» (Malabou [2000]: 7).

It is not my intention here to examine the philosophical investigations which led Malabou

<sup>1</sup> Cfr. Malabou (2007): 16.

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. Bhandar, Goldberg-Hiller (2015); Hope (2014).

to elaborate the concept of plasticity on the basis of an original and innovative reading of Hegel. I intend, first of all, to analyze the notional spectrum of the term; secondly, to *weigh* the philosophical scope of this term and *set it in motion* to see if it can lead us to *speculative plasticity*. Finally, I will try to find out whether Goethe's reflections on aesthetic idea, cited by Malabou but never discussed with accuracy in her writings, can find a new-look in her reflections.

With reference to the first point, it is interesting to note that, although the expression πλαστική τέχνη has Greek origins, the derivative term plasticity enters the French language only in 1795. The age is the same for the German term *Plastizität* which, as the Brockhaus dictionary indicates, appears at the time of Goethe and since its entry into the spoken language has been exported far beyond its original area.

The birthplace of plasticity is in fact the domain of art: it is the art of shaping, manipulating a ductile substance (like wax, clay or paper-pulp) in order to create a three-dimensional preparatory model for a work of art or even as an artistic activity to itself. Aesthetics was concerned with this concept mostly referring to that definition, the fulcrum of a key text of eighteenth-century reflection, the *Plastik* of Herder (1778). However, *plastics* are also called, in the physiochemical field, those materials that at some stages of their manufacture are ductile enough to be molded, thanks to the effect of temperature or pressure (such as PVC, rubber, polycarbonate or polyvinyl). In the medical field, the term has taken still another meaning, indicating the surgical reconstruction of human tissues, performed for therapeutic or aesthetic reasons.

In his *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes, one of the philosophical references of Catherine Malabou, analyzes the word «plastic», saying that it is more than a substance: it «is the very idea of its infinite transformation; as its everyday name indicates, it is ubiquity made visible. [...] the trace of a movement. [...] Plastic is, all told, a spectacle to be deciphered: the very spectacle of its end-products» (Barthes [1975]: 97). This citation is interesting for

us because it focuses not on the plastic material in itself, but rather on the *quality of being plastic*, its *versatility*, in French its *souplesse*. According to Malabou, plastic is in fact what «directly contradicts rigidity. It is its exact antonym. [...] According to its etymology [...] the word *plasticity* has two basic senses: it means at once the capacity to *receive form* [...] and the capacity to *give form to reality* (Malabou [2004]: 5). To explain the second of the two indicated senses (the act of giving shape to the real), the French thinker refers to some «professionals of plastic arts»: the sculptor and the plastic surgeon. Malabou merely calls into question these two professional figures without discussing an aspect that, in my opinion, is relevant to our argumentation: their way of shaping is, in fact, very different, because a sculptor, as Michelangelo already suggests in his *Rime*, «sees» and «frees» the form from marble or wood<sup>3</sup>; a plastic surgeon instead «produces» a new form by cosmetically altering the body and «adding» sometimes foreign material to human flesh (this is the case of prosthesis or skin grafts).

In the mentioned cases, in which we can identify two «demiurges of matter», the coincidence of the two previously mentioned characteristics of plasticity is not so easy to perceive. This peculiar coincidence, however, becomes evident if we take into consideration organic bodies, able to be shaped from the outside and, at the same time, to be the engine of this shaping action, in a constant play between creation of new configurations and annihilation of existing forms; this is, in other words, the body's ability to «negotiate with its own destruction»<sup>4</sup>, to recreate its formal qualities in relation to the events. «This gradual existential and biological incline, which can only ever transform the subject into itself», states Malabou, «does not, however, obviate the powers of plastic deflagration of this same identity that houses itself beneath an apparently smooth surface like a hidden reserve of dynamite» (Malabou [2009]: 9): a destructive and explosive potential, evident in the

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. Buonarroti (1967): 250.

<sup>4</sup> Malabou (2005): 57.

French word *plastigage*, a term which indicates a «plastic bomber», a substance made of nitroglycerin and nitrocellulose which can cause violent detonation, the disintegration of form and its transformation into the absence of form<sup>5</sup>.

Thus, plasticity can be defined as the «synthetic alliance between the giving and receiving form on the hand, and the powerful rupture or annihilation of all forms on the other» (Malabou [2005]: 52).

This consideration might already be the sign of a close relationship between Malabou's concept of plasticity and the Goethean concept of *pure phenomenon*, meaning the original plant painted by Masson or any other perceptible idea. Interested as a young man in natural sciences (especially in Botany and Osteology), the German poet tried to elaborate an empirical theory that would allow him to get beyond the range of individual experimental data, seeking a general law able to explain the malleability, plasticity and variability of life. This is an attempt to understand «the lasting, the permanent, the archetypal form with which nature plays» (Steiner, in Ferrario [1996]: 332) in the multiplicity of natural forms; but this model can be created by our mind only eliminating, in a spontaneous and not predetermined way, all the qualities that statistically tend to vary more. Reinterpreting Malabou's words, one can say that the archetypal idea shares with organic matter the fact that it «is like the sculptor's clay or marble: it produces its refuses and scraps. But these organic evacuations are necessary for the realization of living form, which ultimately appears, in all its density, at the cost of their disappearance» (Malabou [2009]: 12). An *unnatural selection* that does not contradict plasticity, but it is a condition of it: according to Malabou, this kind of selection is functional to «the neatness and power of realized form» (Malabou [2009]: 12).

The conceptual path which led Goethe to the formulation of the «pure phenomenon» is too long and complex to be traced here. I shall just refer to the essay titled *Fortunate Encounter*, in which Goethe tells of his memorable encounter

with Schiller after a session of the Jena Naturalists Society. The two thinkers had accidentally left the room at the same time and interlaced a dialogue on the subject of the conference.

*We reached his house, and our conversation drew me in – wrote Goethe. – There I gave an enthusiastic description of the metamorphosis of plants, and with a few characteristic strokes of the pen I caused a symbolic plant to spring up before his eyes. He heard and saw all this with great interest, with unmistakable power of comprehension. But when I stopped, he shook his head and said, «That is not an observation from experience. That is an idea». Taken aback and somewhat annoyed, I paused [...] I collected my wits, however, and replied, «Then I may rejoice that I have ideas without knowing it, and can even see them with my own eyes» (Goethe [1988]: 20).*

Those who are familiar with Goethe's thought can understand that the object of discussion between the two poets concerns the *visibility* and *ideality* of an original plant. When Schiller mentions the «idea» in reference to Goethe's attempt to «graphically» translate the «mental image» of the plant, he does not refer to Platonic idea (as Goethe mistakenly thought), but to the aesthetic idea developed by Kant.

The Kantian definition of *aesthetic idea* can be found in §49 of *Critique of Judgement* which, at the time of this conversation, Goethe did not know yet, but he later read and appreciated, fully agreeing with Schiller. Here the aesthetic idea is defined by Kant as «a representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking, though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., concept, to be adequate to it» (Kant [1790]: 192). According to Schiller, the original plant of Goethe is a good example of aesthetic idea, because «it does not belong to any *taxonomic* category, but it is above and beyond it, as an *archetype* of *ideal* nature which contains in itself the creative potential of all *forms*» (Nani [2001]: 34)<sup>6</sup>. It is a *symbolic representation*, in the higher sense of the term *symbol*, because the *thought I see* represents the general «not as a dream

<sup>5</sup> Eadem (2005): 26.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. Schmitt (2001).

or shade, but as a vivid, instantaneous revelation of the Inscrutable» (Goethe [1833]: n. 200).

According to Goethe (as for Kant) the aesthetic idea is a *regulatory principle*, which, if appropriately used, allows us to not lose orientation in the multiplicity of forms: this kind of idea is not the mental equivalent of any empirically existing form, but something that can only be *seen* by intellect through the creative power of imagination, qualifying itself as intrinsically plastic. It is a *matrix of form* (Allegra [2010]: 80) or a *hypotyposis*, as Malabou emphasizes referring to Kant: it is a *trace* that emerges in incarnate forms never clearly revealing itself or an *image* that can be altered by the discovery of new factual entities (for example, in Botany, by the discovery of unknown plants). Therefore, Nature is plastic, as the idea that can grasp it. This latter is able to give *figure* to the visible without fixing it in a static image, but combining historicity and dynamism. This peculiar figure is for Malabou an «embryo of form, which exists without existing, which starts to live, and which scrutinizes everything even as it hides itself» (Malabou [2007]: 23).

But there is more. This archetypal form, confesses Goethe, is already «a type of ideal [...] For the observer never sees the pure phenomenon with his own eyes; rather, much depends on his mood, the state of his senses, the light, air, weather, the physical object, how it is handled, and a thousand other circumstances» (Goethe [1988]: 24), in other words on what Malabou defines the *ontology of the accident*.

It is interesting to note that the Greek term for accident (συμβεβηχός) derives from the verb συμβαίνω which has a lot of meanings like to *agree with*, to *correspond*, but also to *happen* and to *occur*. If the two first meaning are connected to the Goethean principle of a permanent bond between Nature and its observer, the two other lead us back to an expression that Catherine Malabou defines in her works as synonymous of plasticity: *voir venir*<sup>7</sup>. Also Derrida, who, as we know, was Malabou's academic guide, points out that

«plasticity is not a secondary concept or another concept that would add itself to *voir venir* [...] It is the *same* concept [...] Because of its own dialectical self-contradiction and mobility, *voir venir* is in itself a plastic concept, it allows plasticity to come to us» (Derrida [1998]: 8). Thus, the two concepts are *interchangeable*.

I deliberately decided to maintain this expression in French because it could be translated into English only by means of the periphrasis «vision of something that is coming to us». This expression is characterized by an intimate ambiguity, on which I would focus my attention. The *voir venir* indicates the *act of vision* which *sees* what is coming, namely what we can *anticipate* or what we guess on the basis of what we see (for example our capacity to depict future evolutionary changes of species), but it also indicates the capacity of seeing what is unexpected and unpredictable. *Voir venir* is therefore the ability to account for plastic novelties and indicates a mental vision that opens to the contingent and the unthinkable.

At the end of my argumentation, I want to direct my attention once again to the questions posed by Malabou and quoted at the beginning of this article: «what is it to see a thought? To see a thought coming? To be present at its emergence, at the moment when it is still no more than a promise, plan, or sketch, but is already strong enough to live?» (Malabou [2007]: 16). Now I can answer that «seeing a thought» coming, shaping itself and emerging in our mind is possible only if we are aware of the plasticity of our world; it is possible only if we have ourselves a mobile and plastic gaze and, at the same time, if we accept (without hesitation) every natural changes, also the *unexpected* events of life.

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<sup>7</sup> Cfr. Martinon (2007): 27-68.

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