

**Rousseau on Arts and Politics**  
**Autour de la Lettre à d'Alembert**

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## Performing Nature in the *Letter to M. d'Alembert*

When St-Preux remarks upon the natural beauty of Julie's Elysium in Rousseau's novel *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héeloise*, Julie responds, 'It is true that nature made all this, but under my direction, and there is nothing here I did not arrange' (II: 472). Julie's control over this natural environment is absolute, though the signs of her work have been removed. Similarly, Emile's tutor, in raising Emile to be a natural man, has perfect command over Emile's will and identity without Emile being able to discern a trace of this process of manipulation. The tutor is an invisible artist of human nature, as Julie is of her natural environment. Rousseau understands nature as something that can be created and manipulated by human hands, rather than as an immutable order to which humans are passively subject. Given this surprising fact, we need to question just what Rousseau means when he valorizes the natural and emphasizes the importance of following nature.

Rousseau's nature is not a given order lying outside of culture, but a dynamic, shifting space, which we fashion even as we are fashioned by it. In the *Second Discourse*, we learn that human nature is characterized by its *perfectibility*, and that we are the agents of this process (3: 26; III: 142). Thus our nature is intrinsically mutable, and we can direct the shape that it takes. Furthermore, Rousseau reminds us often that we cannot 'confound what is natural in the savage state with what is natural in the civil state' (*Emile*, 406; IV: 764). The natural and the created are not opposed, for Rousseau. What is natural may still be alterable, and some natural orders may be better and more worth creating than others.<sup>1</sup>

In order for us to be free and fully human, our will and interests must harmonize with our environment. But this is only possible when our

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<sup>1</sup>Rousseau's understanding of nature, as described here, complicates attempts to understand his claims that various states of affairs are natural. For instance, Rousseau attributes sharp differences between the genders to nature'. But from this fact, we cannot conclude with Okin that Rousseau is a gender essentialist who takes gender differences to be inevitable. See Susan Moller Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979). Nor can we conclude with Penny Weiss that because Rousseau makes normative recommendations concerning the proper roles of the genders, he therefore takes these roles to be constructed *as opposed to* natural. Penny A. Weiss, 'Rousseau, Antifeminism, and Women's Nature,' *Political Theory* 15 (1987), 81-98.

natures are manipulated and shaped into a form which enables this harmony. For instance, citizens can be free only when their own will and interests harmonize with the general will. But this requires substantive commonality between citizens, and also that citizens derive their sense of self from their membership in the whole. This identity and commonality must be actively *fostered* by the legislator, who must be capable of changing human nature, so to speak; of transforming each individual, who by himself is a perfect and solitary whole, into a part of a larger whole from which this individual receives, in a sense, his life and his being; of altering man's constitution in order to strengthen it, of substituting a partial and moral existence for the physical and independent existence we have all received from nature. (4: 68; III: 381)

Emile is not a citizen, but he too must be fashioned into a being who harmonizes with his environment. His tutor accomplishes this through careful manipulation of the situations Emile encounters, which he uses to mold him into a being with the needs, desires, interests and abilities proper to the environments in which he will find himself. The task of the tutor and the legislator is similar; both design human nature in order to liberate it within the contexts in which it finds itself.

If either the citizen or the independent man are to be free, it must become *second nature* for them to act and will in ways that harmonize rather than conflict with their environment. Their identity must be such that in doing what 'comes naturally,' they also do what is required of them by their surroundings. But this second nature does not distort or hide a stable 'first nature'. Nature is always in the process of being molded by human needs, interests and artifice. Rousseau presents the original state of nature as a mythical construct, which 'no longer exists, ... perhaps never did exist, ... [and] probably never will exist' (3: 13; III: 123).

To follow nature rather than thwart it, then, is not to succumb to a stable force, for Rousseau. Instead, it is a matter of acting in harmony with a total order, within which individuals can meet their desires and experience themselves as autonomous. Nature is order, though the order of the human realm is constantly changing. Emile has been raised in accordance with nature, although he is a fully constructed being, because his will and abilities harmonize with his environment. Natural gender relations are those which harmonize the needs and abilities of the genders. When a human order is perfectly organized, its members will not even notice that they are subject to that order, for they will act as they should 'naturally,' and hence will experience their will as uninhibited and independent. For instance, M. Wolmar, has so perfectly and totally ordered Clarens that 'at present everything works all on its own, and one enjoys liberty and harmony at the same time' (II: 372). Rousseau uses the

same sort of language to describe well-ordered social institutions and well-arranged nature. When he criticizes an institution or action for being unnatural or against nature, it is not because it is a cultural construction, but because it creates disorder, and a lack of fit between people's wills and the demands of their environment.

If we are the creators of nature, then we must ask how this creating is accomplished. Throughout Rousseau's writings, his central means of creating nature is through successive performances or *stagings*. One of the most notable features of *Emile* is the way that the tutor raises his pupil through a series of such staged performances, which are carefully orchestrated so as to shape his identity in specific ways. Memorable examples include an incident with a gardener who lets Emile use a corner of his land, which is designed to form Emile's ideas on private property, and a story of an entire neighborhood getting involved in acting out a scene designed to cure a young boy of his demanding nature. Similarly, in *On the Government of Poland*, Rousseau describes elaborate rituals designed to be performed by and for the citizens of Poland, in order to form their nature and inculcate patriotism and commitment to common interests, values and ways of life. In describing these rituals, Rousseau dwells upon what must be *displayed* and what must be *seen*. The tools for fashioning identity, which include festivals, games, ceremonies and competitions, are designed to be *witnessed*.

Hence the well-ordered society and the independent man are both works of art. Like Julie's Elysium, they are the product of careful design and manipulation. But the manipulation of human nature is itself accomplished through the use of works of art, namely staged spectacles. Thus the human realm is an artistic product at several levels. The context which shapes human nature within a culture is not a given environment but a set of staged performances. Our nature is shaped by the performances we witness, and because of this nature, our actions automatically constitute further performances, which in turn help to construct the nature of those who witness us. By acting in accordance with our nature, we perform as we were designed to by the legislator or other director of human nature, and we partake in a performance which helps execute that design. Human nature, for Rousseau, just *is* this cycle of performances, this work of art.

The problem Rousseau faces is that the designing and manipulation of human nature must be hidden if it is to be successful. It is integral to realizing our nature that we be free, and our freedom depends on our having been constructed so that what we do and will naturally harmonizes with our environment. However, if we discover the fact that we have been manipulated into being a certain way, then we will cease to experience ourselves as autonomous, and will instead feel constrained by

an alien will. In his autobiographical writings, Rousseau often describes moments where his own knowledge of the workings of human nature enslave him in just this way. He also points out that Emile will cease to be free if he ever discovers the role his tutor plays in designing his environment so as to design his will. Emile enjoys independence because he experiences his environment as naturally harmonized with his needs and abilities, but if this natural harmony is revealed as the product of an alien will it will be destroyed. The legislator, similarly, must work covertly at reconstructing human nature, never revealing that through their everyday, habitual practices, citizens are participating in staged performances under his direction. This orchestration of mundane practices is, according to Rousseau, the 'heart of political practice,' to which the legislator 'attends in secret *while appearing* to limit himself to the particular regulations that are merely the sides of the arch of which mores ... [are] the unshakable keystone'(4: 165; III: 394).

Our autonomy depends on two factors: we must be *the source* of our own actions, rather than being coerced, and our environment must harmonize with our nature so that our abilities are adequate for realizing our will. But the latter is only possible at the expense of the former, and hence the fact that our identity has been manipulated must remain masked.<sup>2</sup> Thus a society must pretend to itself that its members act as they do by choice, but at the same time, it must implement educational institutions that foreclose the possibility of choice. Both the use of performance for the purposes of designing identity, and the masking of this use, are equally integral to enabling freedom and the full realization of human nature.

Women play a crucial and interesting role in this process of constructing nature, for Rousseau. While everyone is an unwitting participant in all sorts of staged performances, using performance to shape identity is women's explicit and defining task. The formation of identity occurs mostly through childhood education, and through the daily habits and practices which shape morality and sentiment. But a woman's twofold role is to raise children and to guide her husband's mundane practices. Women are thus the keepers of their society's

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<sup>2</sup>This masked manipulation of identity and practices is not only necessary in a society of citizens; once again, when we turn to *Emile*, we discover that the tutor is required to function in much the same manner as the legislator. The tutor must never let on that he is responsible for staging Emile's environment, thereby manipulating his will and inducing his experience of autonomy. Instead, 'the child ought to be wholly involved with the thing, and [the tutor] ought to be wholly involved with the child—observing him, spying on him without letup and without appearing to do so, sensing ahead of time all his sentiments, and forestalling those he ought not to have' (189; IV: 461).

morality and identity. It is up to them to 'preserve the love of the laws of the state and concord among citizens' (3: 10; III: 120). While the legislator is the mastermind who designs a social order, it is women's job to institute and maintain this order through their own performances, creating citizens with natures enabling their participation in the general will. The true republican must 'imbibe the love of the fatherland ... with his mother's milk' (*Poland*, 19; III: 966). *Emile* is addressed to mothers, though the figure of the mother quickly disappears in this work (a point to which I will return shortly).

As we should expect given my discussion so far, a woman governs her husband and children, and shapes their identity, by *appearing* in various performances which produce a needed effect. In describing how a woman protects morality and creates patriots, Rousseau repeatedly returns to the *sight* she presents and the actions she *displays*. In the *Letter*, he asks, 'Is there as sight in the world so touching, so respectable as that of a mother surrounded by her children, directing the work of her domestics, procuring a happy life for her husband and prudently governing the home? It is here that she shows herself in all the dignity of a decent woman' (87-8; V: 80).

It is the woman as *spectacle* rather than as agent who has the ability to properly manipulate human nature. Rousseau notoriously argues that women's moral worth and identity resides in how they appear rather than in how they act. Women must not only be faithful, they must appear so, according to the *Emile* they must present a spectacle of faithfulness, if they are to successfully shape their husbands moral sentiments and maintain his sense of union and identity with his family (361; IV: 697-698). While concern with appearances is a dangerous fault in men, it is essential to women, who do not choose their activities based on their intrinsic worth or pleasurable-ness, but on how they appear while performing them. Women are by nature relative beings, whose substantial identity lies in how they are perceived. We can now see why this centrality of appearance to women's nature is integral to Rousseau's account of women's more general social role. If she is to be the shaper of identity, the one responsible for molding morals and cementing unions, then it is the spectacle she presents and the effectiveness of her performances that will determine her success in carrying out these defining tasks of her gender.

Rousseauian citizens are not only created through the use of performance, but they actually perform their nature. They act by carrying out staged roles but they have no separate, genuine identity distinct from these roles. Men, however, perform unreflectively, and need not concern themselves with how they appear. On the other hand, a woman's performance of her gender identity—chaste wife, nurturing mother—is

essentially a spectacle for the eyes of others, and she must treat it as such. She exists in the reception of her performance, and thus her attention to the effect she produces must be explicit and studied, and no mere product of unreflective habit. She must turn herself into a work of art in order to create other works of art in the men and children whose nature is formed through beholding her. Sophie successfully embodies her gender role because of her conscious use of artifice in designing herself as a spectacle which will manipulate the desires and sentiments of others: 'There is no young girl who appears to be dressed with less study and whose outfit is more studied; not a single piece of clothing is chosen at random, and yet art is apparent nowhere. Her adornment is very modest in appearance and very coquettish in fact' (394; IV: 747).

This passage reminds us of the central use of deception that a woman must make. If her artistry is revealed, it will cease to be effective, for the reasons we have already seen. Thus like other works of art, such as the Elysium and the staged situations, Emile encounters, all signs of the woman's artistry must be removed from the *persona* she displays. However, this reveals an important tension in woman's position. In being defined by her appearance, woman has an essentially public identity. But since feminine identity is by definition performed and manipulative, public displays of femininity serve as public reminders of men's subjection to alien wills. As a result, women must be both on display and at the same time hidden in the private realm. No public recognition of their role as performers is possible without jeopardizing freedom and order within a harmonious society. In several of his works, Rousseau emphasizes that women must avoid public recognition of all sorts. In the *Letter*, he writes admiringly of the ancients, who 'refrained from exposing [women] to public judgment.... They had as their maxim that the land where morals were purest was the one where they spoke least of women, and that the best woman was the one about whom least was said' (48; V: 44-45).

Women's performances must be masked and silenced, and yet they must be explicitly designed to be seen. Rousseau's solution is to restrict women to the private domain, allowing them to exercise their power only within the home. They must continue to perform and be watched, but a society can never directly attend to or acknowledge what it is that they do. Women are dangerous, because it is essential that they successfully carry out their role, while at the same time they can destroy a social order by making this role public and explicit. It is no accident that when Rousseau turns directly to the topic of child rearing in *Emile*, the mother quickly disappears, and is replaced by an overtly fictional tutor, a being with no life or responsibilities of his own and superhuman predictive abilities. Dwelling upon this clearly mythical character cannot

threaten our everyday social world.

Although it has taken a long time for me to turn to it directly, the central importance of Rousseau's *Letter to M. d'Alembert on the Theater* to my discussion should by now be quite clear. At first glance, it may be surprising that Rousseau would write a work violently attacking the theater. I have argued that for him, staged performances are the primary tool for shaping human nature and individual identity so as to enable freedom and social harmony. The public theater institutionalizes this crucial social function, and can serve as an effective tool for molding sentiments and influencing the will, as Rousseau repeatedly points out. So why not embrace it as able, when well-managed, to serve as a powerful instrument of human liberation? The problem with the public theater is twofold, and both parts follow fairly directly from my discussion so far. I will discuss these in turn.

First of all, in being a public institution, the theater makes explicit what ought to remain implicit, what should never be attended to directly, namely the manipulation of sentiment through staged performance. Just as the feminine must be relegated to the private sphere, the official, public recognition of the theater is dangerous. It acknowledges the general malleability of will and moral sentiment, thereby threatening our experience of autonomy. Unfortunately, Rousseau cannot make this criticism directly, without calling attention to the very manipulations of identity through art whose secrecy must be protected. Thus he is reduced to criticisms which make this point indirectly, through contradicting what he asserts elsewhere. He writes of the actor, 'I do not precisely accuse him of being a deceiver but of cultivating by profession the talent of deceiving men, and of becoming adept in habits which can be innocent only in the theater, and can serve everywhere else only for doing harm (80; V: 73).

Since Rousseau devotes so much time in other works to describing how just these skills can be used to promote liberty and harmony, we need to read this statement as obliquely suggesting an almost opposite critique, namely that the actor's very being calls attention to these skills and their possible uses. We go to the theater to put our sentiments temporarily in the hands of others. Within the course of a couple of hours, we are carried from rage to joy to fear. There is no pretense that we are the source of these feelings—we sit passively in a dark theater, and relinquish control. The theater is not only a place to *see* but a place to *be seen*, an arena of universal performance, where the art of appearing is the focus of attention and the measure of success. In other words, the institution of the public theater is a grotesque imitation of the process by which our identity is in fact constructed. Its true nature and functioning cannot be disguised, and are in fact given public

recognition, and it is therefore a threat in calling attention to the mechanisms it mimics.

The second problem results from the fact that the theater has only bounded and temporary control over us, giving us experiences which are intentionally out of step with the rest of our lives. This means that the way we are changed when we enter the theater is unnatural. I have suggested that 'the natural' is that which is an integral part of a total order whose elements are in automatic harmony with one another. Our experiences in the theater, however, are designed to compete with the order that governs the rest of our lives. The theater thus perverts and challenges our natural lives, and the harmony that they potentially enjoy. Rousseau complains ironically, 'Is it not a well-balanced harmony between the spirit of the stage and that of the laws, when we go to the theater to applaud the same Cid whom we would go to see hanged at the Grève?' (69; V: 64)

The theater is unnatural and subversive, not because it manipulates us with performances, which is what culture does anyhow, but because it *can* change us into beings who do not harmonize with the order that rules the rest of the human realm. The sentiments it induces are not integrated with the needs of everyday life, and it thereby threatens to undermine the harmony that ought to exist between the wills of individuals and the demands and possibilities of their environment. Like the rituals instituted by the legislator, theatrical performances stimulate shared sentiments in their audience, but these are not sentiments which promote or are incorporated into a general will capable of providing a stable nature for its participants. Hence unlike the everyday performances which hold together a society, theatrical performances do not create human nature but rather *subvert it*.

Both these threats that the public theater poses apply only to a state such as Geneva, whose citizens (according to Rousseau) experience themselves as autonomous and enjoy social harmony. A state governed by *amour-propre* will have no innocence to lose when the mechanisms of performance are revealed. Likewise, a state which is not well-ordered, and whose citizens have not been properly constructed, will not be threatened by a public theater, for such a state has no genuine, fully realized *nature* of its own to be subverted.

It should come as no surprise that Rousseau's treatise on the dangers of the public theater contains lengthy discussions of women's proper place, and in particular, the importance of restricting displays of femininity to the private sphere. We have seen that women's essence is theatrical, and that women and theatrical performances play the same necessary but dangerous role, which must be hidden if order and freedom are to be protected. Marshall comments that 'theater is especially

dangerous for women, according to Rousseau, because it plays upon their already theatrical nature.<sup>3</sup> But it seems more pertinent to say that the theater is dangerous like a woman. Throughout the *Letter*, Rousseau insistently uses the term 'indecent' to describe both the public theater, and the woman who displays her femininity in public forums. The theater and the indecent woman are guilty of the same crime, namely displaying publicly what ought to be used covertly. The indecent woman is a mocking imitation of the virtuous woman—her actions are exaggerated, her clothing and makeup are flamboyant, she seduces in public. In short, she reveals the artistry that goes into the performance of feminine identity. The men who are helplessly attracted to her are thus forced into awareness of the fact that their will can be directed and shaped by alien wills. She and the public theater are both living demonstrations of how volatile and how little under men's control their own will and passions are. Rousseau's fear is that the unmasked use of art to refashion sentiment will create chaos, destroying the fragile social harmony of a state like Geneva, which must be carefully arranged and maintained.

Within the *Letter*, Rousseau offers little justification for his leaps from the topic of the theater to the topic of indecent women—the link between these is, for him, self-evident. The question of the proper behavior of woman is equivalent to the question of how performances and staged spectacles ought to be regulated. He describes the theater as women's domain, and claims that its institutionalization 'extend(s) the empire of the fair sex to make women and girls the preceptors of the public, and to give them the same power over the audience that they have over their lovers' (47; V: 43). Rousseau's grounds for claiming that there is a literal link between the power of the theater and the power of women are flimsy at best—the existence of actresses, the frequency with which stories of romantic love are the subject of plays. The link is primarily a metaphorical one. 'A people will always perish from the disorder of women,' Rousseau warns (109; V: 100). The stage is a source of similar disorder, because it sets up an alternative, microcosmic order of human affairs. This alternative order mockingly imitates and displays the means by which our sentiments are constructed, and demonstrates the fragility and contingency of our normal sentiments.

Rousseau devotes the last part of the *Letter* to describing more appropriate uses of performance and artistry. Returning to the suggestions he makes in his other political works, he argues that instead of establishing theaters, where one group of people performs explicit

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<sup>3</sup>Harold Bloom, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, (New York: Chelsea House, 1980), 269. My emphasis.

fictions for another, performance must be integrated into the practices of all citizens. Instead of performances being opposed to or outside of the order of everyday life, they must constitute its fabric and give it its form. Public balls, funeral rites, and public ceremonies awarding various achievements are all among the staged performances in which Rousseau encourages general participation. Through these practices, our nature can be molded via habituation, so as to promote harmony, order and unity. The participants in these rituals are performing their identity even as they are both creating it and witnessing it. Through participating, the actors are turned into members of a genuine, substantive 'we.'

Rousseau desires that such public rituals go forward with a maximum of display. In these shared staged events, it is through seeing and being seen that a common identity is fostered. But here there is no gap between the performer and the audience, or between the performance and the reality of everyday life. The performances *just are* the routines of everyday life, the embodiment of the natural order, rather than a challenge to that order. Since the performances shape the identity of the performers, the performances become habitual and are experienced as voluntary. Thus their staged, directed nature disappears. When staged spectacles shape a whole social order rather than artificial part of it, they can create rather than thwart nature.

Rousseau ends his *Letter* with a rosy picture of a utopic Geneva, which is constituted by an interplay of staged spectacles that break down the boundary between performer and audience. The arranged nature and manipulative function of these rituals is carefully hidden. Married women are still excluded from participation in these public activities, for their femininity and all it suggests must not be openly displayed. Rousseau writes of his proposed public balls, 'I wish that in general all married women be admitted among the number of the spectators and judges without being permitted to profane conjugal dignity by dancing themselves; for to what decent purpose could they thus show themselves off in public?' (129; V: 118)

In this utopia, those who are overt performance artists—which is to say, women and actors in institutionalized theaters—have been carefully removed from the public sphere. It is thus that the spectacle of everyday life can continue in blissful innocence of the true conditions of its existence.

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