

**Trauma and Literature**  
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**Lecture - 19**  
**Malabou's The New Wounded - Part 4**

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Who, today, is this modifiable and metamorphosable subject, the site of conflict between the two plasticities—constructive and destructive—that entwine and menace its life? Before concluding, I will attempt to outline the theoretical and philosophical framework that makes it possible to glimpse this subject.

I said, at the beginning of this study, that in large measure “continental” philosophers have nothing but contempt for the “cerebral” subject. None see in it the future of the subject, the future of the very concept of the subject, while, as Gauchet has argued, it has become increasingly obvious that neurobiological discoveries are intimately concerned with “the idea of human functioning in general, which includes subjectivity.”



This is an NPTEL course entitled “Trauma and Literature” on Catherine Malabou’s book, “The New Wounded”. She spends a lot of time talking about the subject, the ontology, the subject, the functionality of the subject, her meaning by the subject, as per the final section of the book, which is titled, “The subject of the Accident”.

It is in this particular chapter, which is the concluding chapter that we find that there is a very interesting convergence between continental philosophy and neuroscience and the different kinds of discourses. The word ‘subject’ is a very loaded concept over here, and Malabou unpacks it in some details.

We will see her meaning by the subject and what she means apropos of accident is the idea of the changed subject. She made a departure from Freud quite compellingly, in which she said that, and according to Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis, there is a core fundamental proto-self, which never changes.

Despite you know what the situation is, no matter what trauma the subject encounters, that proto-self does not change. Whereas in Malabou's conception, which is a more post-structuralist conception, the whole idea of plasticity can bring about a fundamental existential change. The subject becomes very interesting, apropos of this ability for change.

We talked about how she seems to confer a certain degree, this is a paradox, but she seems to confer a certain degree of agency on trauma. Trauma as an event, which can change the subject fundamentally.

It is to question whether the site of conflict between two plasticities, constructive and destructive, that entwine and menace its life, is this modifiable and metamorphosable subject. This is the idea of plasticity, the constructive plasticity and disruptive plasticity. The reconstructive plasticity, which is the limit of quality between two different concepts of plasticity.

Before concluding, it is an attempt to outline the theoretical and philosophical framework that makes it possible to glimpse this subject. The idea of the subject is interesting, because it is a very loaded concept. She brings in philosophy, theory, and of course, neuroscience in terms of what the subject can become.

It is very interesting for us in literary studies, because we look at the idea of the subject in literature, how the subject is represented, subject as a representational activity in literature. We will see how trauma can become an interesting way to represent a subject.

For instance, if we map Malabou's theory into something like "Mrs. Dalloway", that the whole idea of the chain subject becomes prevalent, visible and that novel by Woolf. She draws on different discourses over here in terms of unpacking the subject.


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future. None see in it the future of the subject, the future of every concept of the subject. Gauchet has argued, it has become that neurobiological discoveries are intimately concerned with the idea of human functioning in general, which includes subjectivity.

This is the idea of subjectivity, which is neurobiologically underpinned. We have a very interesting convergence, a bit of neurobiology and continental philosophy in a way the Malabou theorizes. Subject or subjectivity becomes a very important part of the human functioning, the neurobiological functioning.

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author. Accordingly, the neuronal is not the other of the genealogical as Foucault thinks it, but rather its mirror image.

In his famous essay, "What Is an Author?" Foucault analyzes the figure of the contemporary author as an evanescent figure. He recalls Beckett's words—"What does it matter who is speaking," someone said, "What does it matter who is speaking"—and then comments: "In this indifference appears one of the fundamental ethical principles of contemporary writing."<sup>7</sup> Is the indifference of the subject of writing akin to the emotional indifference of the traumatized subject who has gone beyond the pleasure principle? Writing, Foucault adds, "linked to sacrifice, even to the sacrifice of life; it is now a voluntary effacement that does not need to be represented in books, since it is brought about in the writer's very existence."<sup>8</sup> "There is no one when I write". Isn't this to say with the new wounded "there is no



Malabou brings on brings in Foucault and Beckett and she later will move on to Derrida. All this philosophers will come in and we will see how she is offering an interesting paradigm to study the subject apropos of neuroscience, apropos of neurobiology, and apropos of the event of trauma that becomes the main text across this book.

This is page 206 where she brings in Foucault. In his famous essay, "What is an Author?" Foucault analyzes the figure of the contemporary author as an evanescent figure, someone who is slipping away evanescent, evaporating and not quite that.

“He recalls Beckett’s words - “What does it matter who is speaking,” someone said, “What does it matter who is speaking” and then comments “In this indifference appears one of the fundamental ethical principles of contemporary writing.”” Foucault refers to Beckett the whole idea of the indifference towards the author and, with Foucault, there is an interesting overlap between author and authority.

The speaking subject, speaking voice, and according to Beckett, it does not matter who was speaking. This grand indifference towards the speaking voice, towards authority, it becomes quite subversive in its own. And that connects to the post-Modernist, the post-structuralist tenants of inscription and iteration. Writing and speaking inscription and iteration.

It does not matter who does the speaking. The voice becomes more important, the text becomes more important. The textuality of the subject becomes more interesting and important rather than the original, the originality or the ontology of originality of the subjects. That is something which is departed from, or deconstructed or debunked. The myth of the ontological origin is debunked in Foucault’s versus Beckett.

Malabou is drawing on that philosophy, that tradition of thinking. The indifference of the subject of writing akin to the emotional indifference of the traumatized subject who has gone beyond the pleasure principle.

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“Writing, Foucault adds, “linked to sacrifice even to the sacrifice of life, It is now a voluntary effacement that does not need to be represented in books, since it was brought about in the writer’s very existence.” “There is no one when I write”: Is this not to say with “The New Wounded” there is no one when I live?”” As we can see how Malabou is interestingly mapping the activity of writing and the activity of the wound, wound as an activity.


One as a phenomenon, wound as an experience, wound as a, almost a representational experience. The subject begins to represent itself, represent themselves, almost as an act of writing as it were. “There is no one when I live?” She is looking at the convergence between wound and writing, between trauma and writing. The trauma as an act of inscription.

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of the contemporary author as an eminent figure. He recalls Deleuze's words—“‘What does it matter who is speaking,’ someone said, ‘What does it matter who is speaking’”—and then comments: “In this indifference appears one of the fundamental ethical principles of contemporary writing.”<sup>7</sup> Is the indifference of the subject of writing akin to the emotional indifference of the traumatized subject who has gone beyond the pleasure principle? Writing, Foucault adds, “linked to sacrifice, even to the sacrifice of life; it is now a voluntary effacement that does not need to be represented in books, since it is brought about in the writer’s very existence.”<sup>8</sup> “There is no one when I write”: Isn’t this to say, with the new wounded, “there is no one when I live?”

Accordingly, rather than critique cerebrality from a hermeneutic or genealogical viewpoint, wouldn’t it be more interesting and more urgent to place the motif of cerebral desertion into relation with that of the disinheritance or deconstruction of subjectivity? Isn’t it time that philosophy discover the cerebral psyche as *its subject*? Isn’t the subject of cerebrality the sacrificial witness of the philosophical subject?



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Malabou’s offering is an interesting paradigm. She is saying that everyone seems to, decry or criticize or critique the cerebral subjects, everyone is an anti-Cartesian

philosopher now. But would it not be more interesting to look at the idea of cerebral desertion into relation with that of the disinheritance or deconstruction of subjectivity.

In other words, she is more interested in the deconstruction of subjectivity. This is the key concept over here because she is linking the deconstruction of subjectivity with a deconstruction of the self, apropos of trauma. As in writing, the self who is writing is constantly being deconstructed.

Similarly, in trauma, the very activity of trauma, the very experience of trauma, deconstructs itself through a plastic process. Plasticity becomes a very important connection between writing and the idea of the wound.

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of the brain is the emotional and logical core where the processes of auto-affectation constitute all identity and all history.

This process is radically exposed to the possibility of an accident that might destroy it and thereby interrupt the continuity of the psychic personality. Such vulnerability is the major question of contemporary psychopathology. The study of brain damage reveals that traumas and wounds have a new signification that psychoanalysis can only ignore at the price of failing to grasp present-day psychic suffering.

This new signification is linked to negative or destructive plasticity. Its result can be characterized as a metamorphosis unto death or as a form of death in life marked by affective indifference.

Recognizing the existence of negative plasticity beyond any promise of remission or any soteriological horizon is the necessary prelude to any attempt to account for psychic suffering today. The confrontation of the etiological regimes of sexuality and cerebrality, and thus of psychoanalysis and neurology, can be fruitful only if it begins from such recognition.

In order to establish such recognition, I have attempted to elaborate the

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This is page 212, the conclusion of this book, where she talks about negative plasticity and the recognition or the acknowledgement of negative plasticity, in terms of how that can be connected to the wound itself. The idea of the wound itself, the experience of the wound itself.

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cerebrality, and thus of psychoanalysis and neurology can be fruitful, only if it begins from such recognition.

The question lies in what is the recognition talked about over here. The recognition of negative plasticity, the recognition of annihilation, the recognition of disruptive plasticity, the end of the cell, the destruction of the cell. This is very post-frightened revision of Freud. According to Freud, the core sexuality, the core subjectivity that that cannot be mutated.

Whereas Malabou is proposing entirely different paradigm over here. She is saying negative plasticity is capable of fundamentally changing or altering or mutating the subject, and this recognition of the mutable subject, the recognition of the negative plasticity which can create the mutable subject as a very urgent recognition. It is a very urgent acknowledgement.

And it is the, it is that awareness or that acknowledgement can actually bring in a very interesting and very healthy synthesis of psychoanalysis and neurology, modern neurology or materialist neuroscience. Psychoanalysis can be converged together can be brought together with the awareness and the acknowledgement of the possibilities of disruptive plasticity.

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In order to establish such recognition, I have attempted to elaborate the concept of the *material event*. Conceived as an accident or threat of destruction, this material event—which goes beyond the Lacanian triad of the symbolic, the real, and the imaginary—results as much from the contingency of its occurrence as from the internal work of the drive, work that demands a new understanding of the contingency and the necessity of the death drive.

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She goes on to say, in order to establish such recognition. It is an attempt to elaborate the concept of material event, conceived as an accident, or threat of destruction, this material event which goes beyond the Lacanian triad of the symbolic, the real, and the imaginary results as much from the contingency of its occurrence, as from the internal work of the drive. Work that demands a new understanding of the contingency and the necessity of the death drive.

It is not just a purely internal thing. It is not just about a drive ridden thing, as in Freud, but rather, it is a contingency. According to her, she means that complexity traversed itself, the subject connects to the material conditions around it.

In other words, what is interesting is how Malabou is proposing a departure from the desired drive, the death drive, proposed by Freud, and theorized by Freud. She is looking at how the whole idea of the drive as a contingent and as an emergent condition is something which is conditioned and contingent too the material qualities around the subject, the material surroundings of the subject.

As a result of which she talks about the idea of the material event, the trauma as a material event.

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To insist on the role of destructive plasticity beyond all horizon of redemption does not amount to denying the possibilities of new therapies. This is not a matter of despair or pessimism. I am simply arguing that, before interrogating the hypothetical possibility of a “beyond of the beyond” of the death drive, before asking how to treat or how to heal, it is important, according to the most elementary logic, to inquire what those who suffer are suffering from.

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“To insist on the role of disruptive plasticity, beyond all horizon of redemption, does not amount to denying the possibilities of new therapies. This is not a matter of despair or pessimism. I am simply arguing that before interrogating the hypothetical possibility of a beyond of the beyond of the death drive, before asking how to treat or how to heal, it is important according to the new most elementary logic to inquire, with those who suffer are suffering from.”

According to our previous session, what they are suffering from is the phenomenal experience of an experience less subject, or the experience of a memoryless subject. This is something which one needs to be aware of. Malabou is saying is, you know destructive plasticity does not necessarily produce pessimism. They get medical treatments for this people, but we must recognize first, what they are suffering from. This whole annihilated cell, the whole nihilistic cell, where this cell just evaporates and disappears.

There is no template, there is no pre-cell that you can connect to. There is no access to the past, and hence the idea of memorylessness. These become very important categories of study for Malabou. She proposes or we need to be aware of what they are suffering from before we can offer them therapies or you know redemption, medical redemption, or medical treatment.

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*Conclusion* 213

This is why we have had to spend so much time profiling the new wounded. Our inquiry revolves around the identification of evil. Defining the characteristics of today's traumas—characteristics that turn out to be geopolitical—is indeed the prolegomenon to any therapeutic enterprise.

The destructive event that—whether it is of biological or sociopolitical origin—causes irreversible transformations of the emotional brain, and thus of a radical metamorphosis of identity, emerges as a constant existential possibility that threatens each of us at every moment. At every instant, we are all susceptible to becoming *new wounded*, prototypes of ourselves without any essential relation to the past of our identities. Alzheimer's disease is a particularly important example of such loss. A form of life appears that bids farewell to all the subject's old modes of being.

This type of transformation unto death—this survival without sublation



This is page 213, where she further qualifies the destructive event. The disruptive event that whether it is a biological or sociopolitical origin causes irreversible transformations. It is a very important concept, a very important phrase, irreversible transformation. One cannot come back from the emotional brain.

The emotional brain is something that neuroscientists talk about a lot today, especially someone like Joseph LeDoux. And we have seen how Malabou has mentioned LeDoux as well as Damasio. Because in the Damasio's work is famous for the equation, but an emotion and cognition. The emotional brain becomes a very interesting concept.

The irreversible transformations of the emotional brain, and thus of a radical metamorphosis of identity emerges as a constant existential possibility that threatens each of us at every moment. At every instant, we are all susceptible to becoming new, wounded, prototypes of ourselves without an essential relation to the past of our identities. Alzheimer's disease is a particularly relevant, particularly important example of such loss.

A form of life appears that bids farewell to all the subjects, old modes of being. This is where we stop and this is where we wind up this book. But as we can see, Malabou says that you know, this is not necessarily or medically pessimistic thing. This is something which can be perhaps be treated with medical technology and medical science.

But what she is proposing is a more existential approach to this condition of memorylessness, a more existential approach to the condition of trauma where she very clearly says that this is an irreversible transformation. And that the emotional brain is so shocked, so traumatized that it cannot come back. And in its inability to come back lies also the inability to connect to or have any access to the past.

It just becomes a pastless, memoryless persona, in some sense a timeless persona. This timelessness is not healthy or transcendental timelessness. This timelessness is

more nihilistic in quality, is more negative in quality, and is more disruptive in plasticity. And that destructive plasticity is what makes us self a pastless self, and this is what she says, we are all susceptible to becoming new wounded.

This whole idea this whole ontology, the experience of new wounded is qualified along these lines by Malabou. Prototypes of ourselves without any essential relation to the past of our identities. We just become identity as person, we just become someone a persona, which is a prototype of ourselves.

This prototypical production of ourselves is something which has no sense of past, no sense of the seamless continuity which makes us what we are as a self and subject. We are looking at a post-subject phenomenon in a certain sense. She mentioned Alzheimer's disease as a very real condition of this memorylessness, which is again completely compromises the subject's navigation with space and time.

The subject is not aware of what they are, you know in terms of the identity. This production of identitylessness is the most fearful production of trauma, the most disruptive potential of trauma, the production of identitylessness. And that is something which Malabou says is something which we should recognize as philosophers as people who are interested in neuroscience and people who are interested in trauma studies.

A form of life appears the bids farewell to all the subjects, old modes of being right. The entire possible subject the entire pastness of the subject disappears entirely, and the subject becomes an originless subject in a certain sense. It is in the sense a post-subject. The old subject is disappeared completely. We have something which the subject cannot even recognize.

It becomes a cognitive crisis, it becomes an existential crisis. And of course, it becomes a psychological crisis in the phenomenon of memorylessness. Malabou is a very important philosopher, looking at the convergence of "Trauma and Literature", as we are under this particular course.

We can just look at “Mrs. Dalloway” by Virginia Woolf. And we can see how interestingly, Malabou can be mapped onto her reading, perhaps an original reading of Woolf’s novel. She is someone who is offering a more post structuralist view of trauma. She is someone looking at a very interesting possibility of convergence between continental philosophy and neuroscience and neurobiology.

She says that all these phenomena are neurobiologically underpinned. But at the same time, the neurobiological underpinning should not distract us from the fact that this is a very clear case of loss of subjectivity.

And again, just to reiterate, subjectivity becomes a very loaded concept, very complex concept for Malabou because that brings an abstraction, that brings an effect, and also brings in material reality, the material medical condition, which is one of loss, which is one of compromised, which is one of shock, which is caused by the event of trauma.

We can see, she qualifies the event in a broad way, the disruptive event to trauma it could be biological, and it could also equally be sociopolitical in origin. The politics of trauma is in a more inactive extended, perhaps spectacular form, where the loss of identity can also be a political loss of identity. This kind of a theory where, you know medicine and politics meet together.

We have a similar sense of identitylessness is something which we can read very interestingly. This model can be mapped very interestingly, into something like partition literature, where it was equally, it was medical as well as political and equal degrees. The medical loss of memory and the political loss of memory were almost convergent were almost simultaneous, almost synchronous in partition narratives.

We can see how Malabou is a very interesting philosopher to map onto partition narratives for instance, the stories by Saadat Hasan Manto. Toba Tek Singh would be

a very good case in point. She is a very important philosopher, very key theorist of trauma today.

She is one of the very interesting figures who help us connect, you know the discourse of trauma, the experience of trauma, the understanding of trauma, through a literary, theoretical, philosophical lens, which is the study of this particular book. We conclude Cathy Malabou's "The New Wounded".

It is recommended to read it in its entirety for the purpose of this particular course we have studied some selected passages. Other books by Malabou such as "The Ontology of the Accident" is also recommended. She has got an essay on plasticity, and some critique on Freud as well, which is something that we could very easily and usefully apply to our readings of literature.