

**Trauma and Literature**  
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**Lecture - 21**  
**Malabou's The Ontology of the Accident - Part 2**

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It is generally agreed that plastic construction cannot take place without a certain negativity. To return to the example of neurobiology, the reinforcement of synaptic connections, an increase in their size or volume, occurs when connections are solicited regularly, producing what scientists term "long-term potentialization." This is the case, for instance, in learning to play and practicing the piano. But of course this phenomenon has its opposite: when they are rarely or never used these same connections diminish. This "long-term depression" explains why it is more difficult to learn to play an instrument in later years than in childhood. Construction is counterbalanced by a form of destruction. This much we know and accept. The fact that all creation can only occur at the price of a destructive counterpart is a fundamental

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This is an NPTEL course entitled "Trauma and Literature" on Catherine Malabou's book, "The Ontology of the Accident". Malabou talks about plasticity and the negative association of plasticity. In this very section, she talks about how the way plasticity is commonly consumed is how it becomes almost a counterbalance of positivity. But rarely, she says, plasticity is ever articulated as a purely negative phenomenon. And towards the end of the section, we will find how she is demanding an articulation of plasticity as a purely annihilistic or negative phenomenon.

And not something which is connected to a positive phenomenon. She says, commonly plasticity and positivity or plasticity and productivity are associated together. But she talks about plasticity as a purely destructive category. And that is something which she thinks is more connected to the idea of trauma, or the loss of the self, where a new self emerges out of the old self with you know no continuity whatsoever.

According to her is an example of plasticity and then she says, the very few examples of any at all who have this pure production of negativity, or pure production of an annihilated self or a metamorphosed self, is articulated in literature or elsewhere. Later, we will find that she talks about Kafka's book "Metamorphosis", where Malabou says it comes very close, in terms of articulating this metamorphosis of one organism to another organism.

But even so she says, that even that metamorphosis, what is retained is a human voice, what is retained, is a focalized frame of the human, the human self. So we find that she will talk about Kafka's "Metamorphosis" in some details, which will come in the subsequent section, where Malabou says it comes very close to articulating this purely negative phenomenon of plasticity as emergence of a new order, entirely a new ontological order entirely.

But even then, she says that is connected to the idea of the old human self that is not entirely disconnected. There is some retaining of a humanist frame, which Kafka does not quite manage to get rid of. At this point of time, we find that she is focusing on how plasticity is commonly considered as a connected quality to you know productivity, positivity, etc.

"It is generally agreed that plastic construction cannot take place without a certain negativity. To return to the example of neurobiology, the reinforcement of synaptic connections, an increase in the size of volume, occurs when the connections are solicited regularly, producing what scientists term long-term potentialization."

This is the case for instance in learning to play and practicing the piano. But of course, this phenomenon has its opposite, when they are rarely never used in the same connections diminished. "This long-term depression explains why it is more difficult to learn to play an instrument in later years than in childhood. Construction is counter-balanced by a form of disruption, this much we know and accept. The whole idea of plasticity as destruction, it is commonly considered to be a connected category to construction."

She gives examples of how this long term potentialization how the whole idea of the synaptic self-synapses mean the connections between neurons. They can all be that those connections can only happened simultaneously with disconnections. Connections and disconnections of neurons take place at the synapses.

Potentialization and depression happened together. In the same way, construction and destruction are connected categories. This is something which we will know. Even when common scientific and cultural parlance, this is accepted as you know a way of representing you know creativity, destructivity etc. These are connected categories creation, destruction, happening together, as connected, interconnected form in the connected plane.

This much we know and accept. The fact that all creation can only occur at the price of a disruptive counterpart is a fundamental law of life. It is something which religions and science and cultural theory, different kinds of discourses, we have this connected quality of creation, destruction happening together.

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case, for instance, in learning to play and practicing the piano. But of course this phenomenon has its opposite: when they are rarely or never used these same connections diminish. This “long-term depression” explains why it is more difficult to learn to play an instrument in later years than in childhood. Construction is counterbalanced by a form of destruction. This much we know and accept. The fact that all creation can only occur at the price of a destructive counterpart is a fundamental law of life. It does not contradict life; it makes life possible. As biologist Jean Claude Ameisen notes, the sculpting of the self assumes cellular annihilation or apoptosis, the phenomena of programmed cellular suicide: in order for fingers to form, a separation between the fingers must also form. It is apoptosis that produces the interstitial

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It does not contradict life, it makes life possible. As biologist Jean Claude Ameisen notes the sculpting of the self assumes cellular annihilation or apoptosis. Cellular annihilation, cells must be able to kill themselves in order for the self to emerge. The self is obviously a very complex construct. It is a neural category, it is a biological category and equally it is an inactive cultural category.

There is this embedded quality of the self, the biological, the cellular, the neural quality of the self. And equally, there is an inactive quality of the self. The self as a performance, the self as a cultural construct, the self as something which happens in culture. This outward looking and inward looking things simultaneously operative in the idea and experience of the self.

She is quoting a biologist, Jean Claude Ameisen, who says that cellular annihilation or cellular destruction is what makes life possible. Cells must be able to die. Cells must be able to destroy themselves in order to regenerate. And that is how the self is created. The human organism, the human body, the human cell system can only emerge and evolve with destruction.

If destruction is not there, there can be no creation or recreation or regeneration. There is an example given. In order for fingers to form a separation between the fingers must also form. For an infant to have fingers, fully formed fingers, cells must separate away from each other, cells must die away from each other, cells must disconnect from each other, for the gaps between fingers to form.

For fully formed fingers, the gaps between fingers must also form. This is a very direct and biological example of cellular annihilation connected to cellular creation. The created fingers of a particular hand, it must only happen it can only happen when the fingers holds up gaps between them. Cells between fingers must go away.

For the very formation of fingers, is contingent on the disruption of cells that disconnect ourselves and that disconnect quality is something which we always see happening.

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*Ontology of the Accident*

void that enables fingers to detach themselves from one another.

Organic matter is like the sculptor's clay or marble: it produces its refuse and scraps. But these organic evacuations are absolutely necessary for the realization of living form, which ultimately appears, in all its density, at the cost of their disappearance. Again, this type of destruction in no way contradicts positive plasticity: it is its condition. It serves the neatness and power of realized form. In its own way it composes the life force. In psychoanalysis, as in neurology, a plastic brain or plastic

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It is apoptosis that produces the interstitial void that enables fingers to detach themselves from one another. Apoptosis or cellular suicide is something which creates or produces the interstitial void, interstitial meaning between the fingers. The void between the fingers can only be produced, where by cellular suicide, though when cells kill each other.

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Organic matter is like the sculptor's clay or marble: it produces its refuse and scraps. But these organic evacuations are absolutely necessary for the realization of living form, which ultimately appears, in all its density, at the cost of their disappearance. Again, this type of destruction in no way contradicts positive plasticity: it is its condition. It serves the neatness and power of realized form. In its own way it composes the life force. In psychoanalysis, as in neurology, a plastic brain or plastic psyche is one that finds the right balance between the capacity for change and the aptitude for remaining the same, between what is to come and memory, between the giving and receiving of form.

It's an entirely different matter when it comes to the possibility of explosion, the annihilation of equilibrium,

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And then she goes on to say that, you know even in the next paragraph which should be on your screen. Even in psychoanalysis, disrupted plasticity, it does not contradict positive plasticity. Destruction it does not contradict construction. It is this condition. Destruction, construction of cells happen together. Destruction and construction of cells happen together in psychoanalysis.

She goes on to say, it serves the neatness and power of realized form in its own way it composes a life force. In psychoanalysis as a neurology, a plastic brain or plastic psyche is one that finds the right balance between the capacity for change and the aptitude for remaining the same between what is to come and memory between the giving and receiving of form.

Becoming and unbecoming memory and you know appearance of memory, emergence of memory, remembering and emergence are happening simultaneously in psychoanalysis as well as in neurobiology. As we can see Malabou spending a lot of time here talking about a certain kind of disruptive plasticity, which is almost welcomed, which has been articulated in several ways.

Several forms in different kinds of discourses, scientific, neuroscientific cultural, theoretical, existential phenomenological all kinds of discourses have room for disruptive plasticity, as long as it is connected to construction, as long as it is connected to do positivity or productivity.

Now she says there is almost no room at all, there is almost no articulation or theorization at all, when it comes to pure plasticity when it comes to pure destructive plasticity. A destructive plasticity which does not retain any positivity, which does not retain any connect to any old earlier form, but which emerges as a new form entirely, as a monstrous new order.

So for that kind of plasticity, for that kind of destructive plasticity, there is hardly any theory. There is hardly any articulation. This book does in some sense, is to make an effort or attempt to articulate that destructive plasticity in philosophy, neuroscience and different other discourses.

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It's an entirely different matter when it comes to the possibility of explosion, the annihilation of equilibrium, the destruction of this capacity, this form, this force, this general identity. Terrorism versus apoptosis. As I said, in these instances no one calls it plasticity any more. Even if the destructive and disorganizing explosive power is present virtually in each of us, ready to manifest itself, to take body or self-actualize at any moment, it has never received a name in any field whatsoever.

Never has the power of ontological and existential explosive plasticity for subjectivity and identity been

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And then she goes on to say, it is an entirely different matter when it comes to the possibility of explosion, the annihilation of equilibrium, the destruction of this capacity, this form, this force, there is a general identity. As long as destruction is balanced with construction, as long as destruction comes as a counterpoint to construction, destruction is welcomed, theorized, articulated, you know given a shape, given a form, given a definition of sorts.

But she says it is an entirely different matter, when it comes to the possibility of explosion. It is you know the explosion of the old self and the birth of an entirely new self, which is completely disconnected from any earlier self, any prototype as it were. And that kind of explosion also entails the annihilation of equilibrium. So there is a complete loss of balance in some sense, there is no balance at all.

Equilibrium is entirely destroyed, when this kind of explosion happens. The destruction of this capacity, this form, this force this general identity. The last word over here is interesting identity. It almost becomes some kind of a post identity experience, where a new identity is formed, which does not retain any atom or any connector or any residual legacy of the earlier identity.

This new identity, which comes out of which emerges out of explosion is something which is entirely new, a different ontological order, a new ontological order entirely. Malabou says there seems to be some kind of an aporia. An aporia of course is a gap,

a gap in knowledge, a gap in definition. It is like a fault line that cannot be crossed in some sense.

There seems to be some kind of an aporia about the definition of this kind of explosion, or the pure plasticity which comes out of explosion, which is not really a game of balance and counter-balance. It is a game about annihilation of balance, annihilation of acuity entirely. So for that, experience is hardly in definition given or hardly any concept offered.

Terrorism versus apoptosis, in this instances, no one calls it plasticity anymore. The word plasticity is not used, because the word plasticity almost always retains some positive implications and positive connotation. Even if the destructive and disorganizing explosive power is present virtually in each of us, ready to manifests itself to take body or self-actualize at any moment, it has never received a name in any field whatsoever.

This is the, almost the project of this book. The aspiration of this book is to give the ontology of the accident, or to ontologize accident in some sense, and the word accident can be replaced with trauma. We find how this neatly fits in, in a course like this, because what Malabou is saying is that trauma by definition is undefinable, because it resides outside of the parameters of possibility.

If we can at least attempt to locate it, if you attempt to give it a name, if you attempt to give it some shape, some form, some definition, some concepts that helps us in terms of understanding or engaging with it. The idea of trauma as elsewhere, the idea of trauma as a different kind of space and time, a different kind of identity, a different sense of self that emerges readily in Malabou's study, or recursively in Malabou's study.

First, she is saying you know, we have an idea of plasticity, we have an idea of destruction, which we commonly consume and almost welcome sometimes some kind of a counter-balancing force, some kind of a counterpoint to production, and positivity.



But what if we have an experience of destruction which is explosive in quality, which explodes away all possibilities, all original identities and instead opens up a possibility of you know a pure annihilation, pure destruction, which is not connected, which does not have to connect itself to any old ontological order. She says there is no definition for that. There is no name for that. There is no theory for that.

She talks about trauma as elsewhere. She talks about trauma as a deterritorializing experience which completely deterritorializes your sense of space, time, identity, everything. She says you know, is it possible for us to define the deterritorialization, to define the deterritorializing experience of trauma and this book becomes an attempt to ontologize that in some sense.

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CATHERINE MALABOU

granted an identity. Approached but avoided, glimpsed often enough in fantasy literature but never connected to reality, neglected by psychoanalysis, ignored by philosophy, nameless in neurology, the phenomenon of pathological plasticity, a plasticity that does not repair, a plasticity without recompense or scar, one that cuts the thread of life in two or more segments that no longer meet, nevertheless has its own phenomenology that demands articulation.

Phenomenology indeed. Something *shows itself* when there is damage, a cut, something to which normal,

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And then she goes on to say, it never has the power of ontological and existential explosive plasticity for subjectivity and identity being granted on identity. That identity has never been granted, because in some sense, it is post identity. It is outside of the parameters of identity. It is outside the parameters of language and possibility. In that sense, it becomes an elsewhere to knowledge systems.

It becomes an elsewhere or shall we say an epistemic elsewhere. Epistemic is knowledge, elsewhere is outside the fields of knowledge, the boundaries of knowledge. The epistemic elsewhere quality of trauma is something that Malabou is highlighting. That is always outside of the non-parameters of knowledge and

definitions and classifications, etc. It has an aporiatic quality. It is an aporia. It is an elsewhere.

It is never been granted an identity of sorts. Approached, but avoided glimpse often enough in fantasy literature. And she will talk about Kafka's "Metamorphosis" later, but never connected to reality, neglected by psychoanalysis, ignored by philosophy, nameless in neurology.

The phenomenon of pathological plasticity, a plasticity that does not repair, a plasticity which without recompense or scar, one which cuts the tread of life in two or more segments that no longer meet nevertheless has its own phenomenal logic that demands articulation. It has its own phenomenology. It has its own phenomenal frame that demands articulation.

It is very clear, about the kind of plasticity Malabou talks about is a purely destructive plasticity, which cuts into any tread of life. There is no connect to life as we know it. It is almost like a detextualization. Malabou was almost talking about life as a textual form, as a textual progress. Life is a river, life is a text. Life is a series of inscriptions.

Inscriptions are completely deinscribed. We will see how that idea of the textuality of life, the textuality of otherness will come into being when Malabou talks about Kafka's literature, the fantasy literature of Kafka, especially "Metamorphosis", which is something which we will see subsequently.


But at this point of time, she talks about the phenomenon of pathological plasticity, which is nameless in neurology. Even in medical classification, there is no name for it. In philosophical classification, there is no category for it. Psychoanalysis does not deal with it at all. But this is the idea that Malabou talks about, something which cuts the tread of life in two or more segments that no longer meet.

They are completely disconnected. There is pure production of disconnect in some sense, and that has one phenomenology that demands articulation in some form as Malabou say. This being the project of this book, in some sense.

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Phenomenology indeed. Something *shows itself* when there is damage, a cut, something to which normal, creative plasticity gives neither access nor body: the deserting of subjectivity, the distancing of the individual who becomes a stranger to herself, who no longer recognizes anyone, who no longer recognizes herself, who no longer remembers her self. These types of beings impose a new form on their old form, without mediation or transition or glue or accountability, today versus yesterday, in a state of emergency, without foundation, bareback, sockless. The change may equally well emerge from apparently anodyne events, which ultimately prove to be veritable traumas inflecting the course of a life, producing the metamorphosis of someone about whom one says: I would never have guessed they would “end up like that.”



“Phenomenology indeed, something shows itself when there is damage or cut. Something to which normal creative plasticity gives neither access nor body. The deserting of subjectivity, the distancing of the individual, becomes a stranger to herself.” This production of uncanny and again, you can see how this can be interestingly mapped onto something like “Toba Tek Singh” or even “Mrs. Dalloway” for the matter.

Septimus does not recognize himself. He knows, he had some earlier cell, but it is so distant from what he is at the moment. It is connected to his PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder. But the idea is to become a stranger to yourself. That is something which Malabou talks about as well, who no longer recognizes anyone, who no longer recognizes herself, who no longer remembers herself this idea of re-membering.

The ability to member yourself again to your past life that disappears entirely. “Toba Tek Singh” is a very good example of that. The ability to re-member and reconnect and recognize reality is something which is disrupted dramatically in “Toba Tek Singh”. Malabou talks about this kind of experience.

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deserting of subjectivity, the distancing of the individual who becomes a stranger to herself, who no longer recognizes anyone, who no longer recognizes herself, who no longer remembers her self. These types of beings impose a new form on their old form, without mediation or transition or glue or accountability, today versus yesterday, in a state of emergency, without foundation, bareback, sockless. The change may equally well emerge from apparently anodyne events, which ultimately prove to be veritable traumas inflecting the course of a life, producing the metamorphosis of someone about whom one says: I would never have guessed they would "end up like that." A vital hitch, a threatening detour that opens up another pathway, one that is unexpected, unpredictable, dark.

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"These types of beings impose a new form on their old form without mediation, or transition, or glue, or accountability. The glue is important over here as a metaphor. It is not really a seamless transition, it is not connected as a glue to the earlier condition. It is not accountable to anything that preceded it in some sense. Today versus yesterday, instead of emergency without foundation, barebacked, sockless."

There is a nakedness to it, sockless barebacked. The change may equally well emerge from apparently an anodyne events, and this is interesting anodyne being dull. It does not really have to be a dramatic, extreme event. It can produce, it can emerge out of dullness, and we will see how Kafka's literature is a good example of that. There is no external shock in Kafka as long as their people are coming back from a war or they are completely shattered by the traumatic encounters they have had.

It is a constant absorption of dullness in Kafka where the anodyne quality, which can equally produce this transition, this complete disconnect from the earlier self, which ultimately proved to be veritable traumas inflecting the course of life, producing the metamorphosis of someone about whom one says, "I would never have guessed, they would end up like that, they end up like that."

They become something else. "I would never have guessed they would end up like that." His inability to predict how that particular self would emerge is something exactly what Malabou talks about over here. And increasingly, the really interesting

original thing that Malabou was offering here is that these kind of transitions or shall we say, this metamorphosis from doing another self entirely.

This can come not necessarily due to trauma or extreme encounters or extreme experiences, but through dull, ordinary quotidian experiences as well. The anodyne quality is important as well as something which should be also regarded as something which can produce the possibility of this kind of metamorphosis, the anodyne quality, the dull, the dullness of life, the lack of any impact, the lack of any event that can produce boredom or misery.

This can produce a transition as well. If one looks at Modernist literature, Kafka, or Eliot's early poetry, there are instances or indications of this kind of changes. "Prufrock" being a good example of that as well. So for whom about whom one would say, I would never have guessed, that would end up like that.

"A vital hitch, a threatening detail that opens up another pathway, one that is unexpected, unpredictable, dark." The unpredictability, the unexpected quality, the darkness of this transition is something which is highlighted by Malabou. This can be connected to aporia, as a fault line that does not have a name. One cannot classify it as a boundary.

It is just a dark passage, you just step into it, and then it becomes something else. It cannot be predicted, it cannot be explained, and, it cannot be accounted for. It cannot be connected in other words to any prototype, or any early experience that had preceded it at some form.

But what is clear already in this section, is this is a project of Malabou in this particular book, "The Ontology of the Accident" to ontologize the accident, and would look at it from some kind of an elsewhere. Accident as an elsewhere category needs to have a name as well, needs to be given some kind of an engagement theoretically as well as philosophically.

The project of this book is to look at destructive plasticity as what it is but not as something connected to productivity, not something connected to positivity. But as

purely destructive plasticity. It demands a name, it is granted a name, and that is the product, that is the aspiration. That is the idea which informs this book by Malabou.