

Trauma and Literature
Prof. Avishek Parui
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology-Madras

Lecture - 22
Malabou's The Ontology of the Accident - Part 3

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The crisis of the mid-1980s in France was a crisis of connection, a crisis that gave social exclusion its full meaning. It revolutionized the concepts of unhappiness and trauma and provoked a social upheaval whose extent we are only beginning to measure today. The jobless, the homeless, the sufferers of post-traumatic stress syndrome, the deeply depressed, the victims of natural catastrophes, all began to resemble one another as the new international whose physiognomy I tried to describe in *The New Wounded*.¹⁰ Forms of post-traumatic subjectivity, as Žižek calls it; new figures of the void or of identitarian abandonment who elude most therapies, especially psychoanalysis.

Existing, in these cases—but, in the end, isn't it always the case?—amounts to experiencing a lack of exteriority, which is as much an absence of interiority, hence the



This is an NPTEL course entitled “Trauma and Literature” on Catherine Malabou’s book, “The Ontology of the Accident”. We saw how she is defining the concept and the experience of accident as something which falls outside the parameters of language, parameters of definition, parameters or expression.

She is almost giving a clarion call in terms of how we should resituate accident. It is not something outside, but something which happens. She talks about plasticity. Disruptive plasticity as a very important, a very crucial category, in the case of trauma, in the sense that it creates a disconnection. Destructive plasticity creates a disconnect from any erstwhile expression, from any erstwhile order of things.

This ontological disconnect is something which Malabou talks about, very vocally in this book, “The Ontology of the Accident”. Because the whole idea of the accident as something being outside of ontology is something that she is trying to deconstruct, she is trying to give an ontology to the accident.

She says that there is a form of destructive plasticity which needs to be acknowledged, as an experience as a concept, as a lived experience, something which departs dramatically, vividly, and almost completely from any erstwhile order, any erstwhile ontological order of things.

We will see how Malabou talks about certain literary and cultural examples and terms how we can see the idea of the accident or the experience of the accident as something which departs dramatically from any order of beings perform. We can understand how this is very interestingly linked to trauma.

Because the very experience of trauma, the very concept of trauma, the very event of trauma is a departure from the normative order, or creates or generates a departure from the normative order, in the sense it breaks away to such an extent that it cannot be connected again to anything that preceded it. We talk about trauma victims as changed personalities, as people with a different reconfigured expression, reconfigured ontological orders, etc.

Now in this section, she talks about how there are certain cultural examples, some literary examples which try to appropriate or try to approximate this condition. "The crisis of the mid-1980s in France was a crisis of connection, a crisis that gives social exclusion its full meaning." The idea of social exclusion is something that she talks about.

She says mid 1980s France, and she is a French theorist. She gives examples from home. It was a crisis of connection. There was this dramatic disconnect that people felt in 1980s, France. This is also the time which was sort of the heyday of post-structuralism, which of course began in the 1960s, but it continued mid-1980s.

There were social, cultural conditions, which were very resonant to the theory of deconstruction or to the theory of exclusion or disconnect. Now what that did was, and this is what Malabou is saying, it revolutionized the concepts of unhappiness and trauma and provoked a social upheaval, whose extent we are only beginning to measure today.

The idea of happiness or unhappiness and trauma, and that became a social condition and was not just a private experiential condition. It was more or less an extended shared condition right, the concept of unhappiness. We are just about to measure the beginning of that kind of a traumatic condition that the kind of an unhappy condition. Malabou talks about a kind of unhappiness.

The kind of exclusion Malabou talks about are real and social examples that she is offering. The jobless, the homeless, the sufferers of post-traumatic stress syndrome that deeply depressed, the victims of natural catastrophes, all began to resemble one another as a new international, whose physiognomy like in “The New Wounded”.

In Catherine Malabou’s “The New Wounded”, Malabou talks about the wound. The idea of the wound as a departure from the norm, as a departure from the normal normative condition.

“The New Wounded” almost has a demographic quality to it. It almost talks about population of people, a section of people, section of society, who are sort of cool sufferers and sharers of this wound. Now by wound, Malabou is not talking about just some theoretical condition.

She is talking about some very social conditions such as joblessness, homelessness, post-traumatic stress disorder victims, people suffering depressions, deep psychological depression, victims of catastrophe. Disaster survivors, they all began to resemble one another. It is almost like a community of suffers, community of co-sufferers.

This is the demography that she had mentioned in “The New Wounded”. She is trying to connect that to the idea of the accident. These are people who are not the normative citizens. These are people who are not the functional citizens, where people are seen as dissidents, seen as dysfunctional, seen as a problem, a threat, a trouble to the functioning and conditioning of a productive society.

We can see how this concept can be connected very quickly, to a text like “Mrs. Dalloway”, which we have covered, or even for the matter to “Toba Tek Singh”. We

have covered in this course, in terms of how the wounded and the depressed and the people who suffered an accident, they can be seen as embodying and exhibiting a condition that is a departure from any normative condition or any normal functioning condition before.

Forms of post-traumatic subjectivity, as Žižek calls it, new figures of the void or of identitarian abandonment, who elude most therapies, especially psychoanalysis. She is quoting Žižek and she is saying that this embodies, or this is example of post-traumatic subjective. The idea of the subject, the experience of the subject, subjecthood of the self. This is a post-traumatic subjectivity.

It is almost like a spatial condition, or shall we say, a spatial temporal condition; post-traumatic, after trauma. The subjectivity almost has a territorial quality. It is like space of people, a space of the mind, which is one of unsettledness, as it were. These are new figures of the void, or of identitarian abandonment, and complete abandonment of identity, and almost post-identity.

It is a post-trauma, post identity, almost a liquidation of identity, a closure of identity, so to speak, who allude most therapies, especially psychoanalysis. This elusion, the eluding any kind of therapy, especially psychoanalysis is almost outside the medical parameters, the medical practices of cure and coercion, if we could add that as well.

These are the people that Malabou is identifying as embodying the accident, embodying the trauma, the wound, and the wounded people. She talks about wound or accident, not just as a medical condition, but a social cultural conditions which inform deeply the psychological situatedness or the, de-situatedness of these people.

Because at some level, there is a deterritorialization. These are people, these are subjects who have been deterritorialized in the sense that they do not, and they are no longer rooted in any territory. They are not rooted in any space. This deterritorialization is an important phenomenon of trauma.

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EXISTING, IN THESE CASES—BUT, IN THE END, ISN'T IT ALWAYS
the case?—amounts to experiencing a lack of exteriority,
which is as much an absence of interiority, hence the
impossible flight, the on the spot transformation. There
is neither an inside nor an outside world. Consequently,
the modification is all the more radical and violent; it
fragments all the more readily. The worst dissensions of
the subject with the self, the most serious conflicts, do
not even look tragic. Paradoxically, they are signaled by
indifference and coldness.

Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* is the most successful,
beautiful, and relevant attempt to approach this kind of
accident. Blanchot puts it well:

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“Kafka’s metamorphosis is most successful, beautiful and relevant attempt to approach this kind of accident”. It is transformation to something else. This section is directly related to the content or the philosophy of this course, “Trauma and Literature”.

We have the Kafka’s “Metamorphosis”, and Malabou is attempting a reading of it in a way which is interesting, because the story talks about an accident, a transformation, a deterritorialization. The subject becomes something else, for that matter.

But what is also interesting equally is how Malabou is bringing the idea that this is not a complete transformation because the subject is still speaking. There is still some residual connect with the earlier subject. The figure has changed, the body has changed, and the physiognomy has changed. But there is some residual ontological order left, which lends its voice to the new subject, right.

The post-accident subject still retains to certain extent, the older voice. In that sense, the metamorphosis is not a perfect example of the accident, is not the perfect example of trauma or “The New Wounded”. But then it comes very close to approximating that condition through a literary device.

She is quoting someone called Blanchot and then she is saying that how the metamorphosis becomes interesting, but in a sense, it is still an inadequate and incomplete example. Blanchot puts it well.

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Ontology of the Accident

The state in which Gregor finds himself is the same state as that of a being unable to quit existence, one for whom to exist is to be condemned to always fall back into existence. Becoming vermin, he continues to live in the mode of degeneration, he digs deeper into animal solitude, he moves closer still to absurdity and the impossibility of living. But what happens? He just keeps on living . . .¹¹

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We can see living, in this reading living becomes an existence, which is just terrible, terrifying and traumatic, in a certain sense. He is unable to quit existence. He becomes something else, but he still retains existence, he still exists in a certain sense. The keyword in this section is absurdity.

Those of us who read absurd theatre would know that is, becoming something else to an absurd process is something which comes quite close to what Malabou talks about, at least symbolically into becoming a different organism, becoming a different personality.


Something like Ionesco's “Rhinoceros”, where people become rhinoceros because and that just becomes an embodiment of boredom and inaction and passiveness and numbness to a certain extent. Kafka's “Metamorphosis” seems to approximate that kind of a condition. And again, that is connected to the theory of metamorphosis, the theory of accident that Malabou is proposing over here.

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similarity of living, but what happens: the just keeps on living . . .¹¹

Metamorphosis is existence itself, untying identity instead of reassembling it. Gregor's awakening at the beginning of the story is the perfect expression of destructive plasticity. The inexplicable nature of his transformation into an insect continues to fascinate us as a possible danger, a threat for each of us. Who knows if tomorrow . . .

But the monster does manage to weave a cocoon. A cocoon which slowly becomes a text. The text is *The Metamorphosis*, and this metamorphosis is completed by us, the readers. The circle of plastic possibilities in some senses closes here again. The narrative voice is not entirely that of an insect. This invisible butterfly has a non-bestial voice, the voice of a man, the voice of a writer. What is a metamorphosis that can still speak itself, write itself



“Metamorphosis is existence itself untying identity instead of reassembling it.” It is untying of identity and sort of reassembling it. “Gregor’s awakening at the beginning of the story is a perfect expression of destructive plasticity.” This is the, Malabou picks this as a literal example of destructive plasticity. “The inexplicable nature of this transformation into an insect continues to fascinate us as a possible danger, a threat for each of us, who knows if tomorrow...”

The transformation into an insect. This is degeneration, which has been created by destructive plasticity. The complete erosion of the self, the erosion of the old ontological order and becoming something else entirely, right.

The inexplicability of it, the absurdity of it is something which is more fearful in a certain sense and, that is scarier. There is possibility of danger, this constant production of the possibility of danger. The empathy that we have, is also a threat for us.

Through a symbolic spiritual process we will become a different organism altogether. This is something which Malabou says. It is a very good example, a very close example. It approximates the metamorphosis to a large extent. But this is where the caveat comes in.

Malabou says it is not the perfect example because there is still they retain the old humanist voice, which still continues to speak and she makes becomes a little

metafictional over here, and she says that, well, the spider, the insect manages to cocoon, and weave something around and give a structure to its existence. And a structure is a story, *Metamorphosis* by Kafka.

We are becoming metafictional over here. But the protection of the story is something that the voice manages to have it. It manages to tell a story. This is what Malabou is saying. But the monster does manage to weave a cocoon, a cocoon which slowly becomes the text. The text is the metamorphosis. And this metamorphosis is completed by us, the readers.

There is a sense of completion, but it is also a connection. We can see, there is a textural quality or transformation and Malabou's foreground in that quality as well. The fact that the spider or the insect manages to tell a story or be part of a story. It retains a certain structural comfort. That structural comfort is closed by the text. Text is metamorphosis.


When we are reading it as readers, we ascribe a certain kind of meaning to it. That meaning completes the structure in a certain sense. A circle of plastic possibilities in some sense, closes here again. Plastic possibilities come together under the circle. The narrative voice is not entirely that of an insect. There is this humanist quality to it.

The human is retained at some level. The narrative voice retains the humanist quality to it, which gives it a story like structure.

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But the monster does manage to weave a cocoon. A cocoon which slowly becomes a text. The text is *The Metamorphosis*, and this metamorphosis is completed by us, the readers. The circle of plastic possibilities in some senses closes here again. The narrative voice is not entirely that of an insect. This invisible butterfly has a non-bestial voice, the voice of a man, the voice of a writer. What is a metamorphosis that can still speak itself, write itself, that does not remain entirely unique even when it experiences itself as such? As Kafka writes in his letters, art is no salvation. Yet it can preserve. After all, one can't help recognizing Daphne's bark in Gregor.



“The invisible butterfly has a non-bestial voice, the voice of a man, the voice of a writer. That voice is important, that disembodied voice is important. The body of the man has disappeared, but the voice retains. In that sense, it manages to re-embody itself as a humanist spirit. What is of metamorphosis that can still speak itself, write itself, that does not remain entirely unique, even when it experiences itself as such?”

The fact that it is able to narrate itself, able to describe itself is an indication that it is not a metamorphosis in a fuller sense. There is some kind of a connect to the earlier self. There is some memory lingering from the earlier cells spilling over into a story. And that spilling over from memory to story is important over here. Because at the end, it does tell us a story, Gregor Samsa becomes an insect.

That becomes part of the story. The textual weaving happens. “As Kafka writes in his letters, art is no salvation. Yet it can preserve. After all, one cannot help recognizing Daphne's bark in Gregor.” Daphne was a Greek illusion. It is about metamorphosis, it is about transforming itself to something else.

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CATHERINE MALABOU

If Deleuze's reading of *The Metamorphosis* is unfair when it concludes that Kafka "fails," it is not entirely wrong. On the one hand, Deleuze recognizes the effectiveness of the "becoming-animal of Gregor, his becoming beetle, junebug, dungbeetle, cockroach, which traces an intense line of flight in relation to the familial triangle but especially in relation to the bureaucratic and commercial triangle."¹² The result of the metamorphosis is precisely a being in flight, one who constitutes a way out in the self, forming "a single process, a unique method that replaces subjectivity."¹³ On the other hand, Deleuze



The next section where Malabou talks about Deleuze's, Gilles. Deleuze's reading of Kafka's "Metamorphosis" and Deleuze's said that Kafka fails in the story to talk about metamorphosis in a fuller sense. Malabou seems to agree at least partially with Deleuze's reading of "Metamorphosis".

"If Deleuze's reading of the metamorphosis is unfair, when it concludes that Kafka fails, it is not entirely wrong. On the one hand, Deleuze recognizes the effectiveness of the becoming animal of Gregor. His becoming beetle, junebug, dungbeetle, cockroach, which traces an intense line of light in relation to the familial triangle, but especially in relation to the bureaucratic and commercial triangle."

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an intense line of flight in relation to the familial triangle but especially in relation to the bureaucratic and commercial triangle."¹² The result of the metamorphosis is precisely a being in flight, one who constitutes a way out in the self, forming "a single process, a unique method that replaces subjectivity."¹³ On the other hand, Deleuze also sees "the exemplary story of a re-Oedipalization"¹⁴ in this metamorphosis, a trajectory that remains trapped in the family triangle: father–mother–sister. "Given over to his becoming-animal, Gregor finds himself re-Oedipalized by his family and goes to his death."¹⁵ Gregor's death returns the metamorphosis to the order of things, in some senses annulling it. The family will not have been metamorphosized and Gregor will not have stopped recognizing the family, calling, naming his

“The result of the metamorphosis is precisely a being in flight, one who constitutes a way out of the self, forming a single process, a unique method that replaces subjectivity. On the other hand, Deleuze also sees the exemplary story of re-Oedipalization in this metamorphosis, a trajectory that remains trapped in this family triangle, father-mother-sister given over to this becoming animal, Gregor finds himself re-Oedipalized by his family and goes to his death.”

“Gregor’s death returns the metamorphosis to the order of things, in some sense annulling it. The family will not have been metamorphosized. And Gregor will not have stopped recognizing the family calling namely his father, his mother, his sister.” In other words, the oedipal structure, the kinship structure, there have been no kinship structure is retained in metamorphosis.

It becomes an act of re-Oedipalization and because of Deleuze it is interesting to relate this to Deleuze’s own theory of deterritorialization followed by reterritorialization. There is a deterritorialization, there is a departure from the earlier order. But it is also a weaving back to an old order, reterritorialization. It is reclaiming the territory. It is reclaiming the lost space and time.

It is reclaiming a structure to a certain extent. That familial kinship structure returns in the and especially with Gregor’s death. It goes back to the order of things to a certain extent.

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in this metamorphosis, a trajectory that remains trapped in the family triangle: father–mother–sister. “Given over to his becoming-animal, Gregor finds himself re-Oedipalized by his family and goes to his death.”¹⁵ Gregor’s death returns the metamorphosis to the order of things, in some senses annulling it. The family will not have been metamorphosized and Gregor will not have stopped recognizing the family, calling, naming his father, his mother, his sister.

But Deleuze attributes the “failure” of the metamorphosis to the fact that it concerns an adventure in form, the adventure of an identifiable animal. Gregor becomes a beetle. For Deleuze, a true metamorphosis would be a metamorphosis that, despite its name, would have

“But Deleuze attributes a failure of the metamorphosis to the fact that it concerns an adventure in form, the adventure of an identifiable animal. Gregor becomes a beetle. For Deleuze, a true metamorphosis would be a metamorphosis that, despite its name would have nothing to do with the becoming form.”

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Ontology of the Accident

nothing to do with a becoming-form. According to him, “as long as there is form, there is still reterritorialization.”¹⁶ This is why the “becoming-animal” is not “becoming *an* animal”: the first is an arrangement; the second is a form, which can do nothing but freeze becoming.¹⁷

I do not believe that the problem of the limit of metamorphoses as traditionally conceived derives from the fact that they present themselves as the journey from one form to another. It is not form that is the problem; it's the fact that form can be thought separately from the nature of the



According to him, as long as there is form there is still reterritorialization. This is the fact that it has a form. It is an insect, it is a different form from the earlier human form. But it still has a form. And that having a form always creates a potential possibility of reterritorialization. It can go back and reclaim a structure or restructure itself as Deleuze's put it and re-Oedipalize itself into some kind of a kinship network, a libidinal kinship network.

This is why the becoming animal is not becoming an animal. The first is an arrangement, the second is the form, which can do nothing but freeze becoming, right. Becoming animal is a process of unbecoming. Becoming an animal as a product. It becomes a structure. It goes back and reclaims the structure. And in the process, it frees us becoming.

The transformation stops, because there is a form that has appeared, there is a form that is fixated, is frozen. That form may be different from the earlier form. But then it is still a form. In that sense, it can then recreate a territory around it, recreate a kinship network around, recreate a libidinal system around it. And that is why, according to Deleuze, the Kafka story is a failure of destructive plasticity.