

**Trauma and Literature**  
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**Lecture - 23**  
**Malabou's The Ontology of the Accident - Part 4**

This is an NPTEL course entitled “Trauma and Literature” on Catherine Malabou’s book, “The Ontology of the Accident”. We have a theoretical overview. Malabou, is a philosopher working on the post-structuralist tradition. She comes from that legacy of philosophers, the Darwinian legacy of post-structuralism. And what that does to trauma studies is it makes trauma.

It defines trauma as an ontological, experiential, as well as an epistemic condition. Trauma is not just a medical condition, but it gives a philosophical framework to trauma. In doing so what it also does is it admit the absence of any philosophical framework on trauma.

For instance, in this particular book, “The Ontology of the Accident”, Malabou spends a lot of time talking about how there has been no definition of the accident, in a philosophical ontological framework. This absence of definitions, absence of acknowledgement or rather, this aporia around the accident, is something she wants to address in this very book.

This book can be seen as something of a manifesto to define and acknowledge and appreciate and articulate what an accident is. An accident is something that is normally Malabou says is outside the event. It is outside the knowledge of the event, outside the knowledge of experience. That is why it is an accident. But what she is saying is, and again, this is coming from a post-structuralist position.

She is saying, can we have an ontology of the accident. It is to define the accident. We have an epistemic space and interpretative space and location for the accident. “The New Wounded”, do have a similar kind of argument, where she looked at wound or

trauma, not just as a medical condition, not just as a biological condition, but also as some kind of a cultural epistemic condition or ontological condition.

Malabou did bring in Deleuze, Gilles Deleuze, another very famous French philosopher. Deleuze's concept of deterritorialization means one's sense of space is disturbed. Territory and space territorialize to still have the sense of space or to occupy space and deterritorialize the deterritorialization is an event that basically disrupts our experience of space, disrupts our navigation with space.

Space is connected to another concept, which is time. Space and time, and normally they work as a compound together. Our sense of space is also always connected to a sense of time and in this, we can use another concept from Russian formalism and even from the philosophy of literature and that is chronotope. Chronotope is a concept that was propounded by Mikhail Bakhtin.

Mikhail Bakhtin is a Russian formalist philosopher who brings a lot of this new concepts into literature. Carnavalesque, chronotope, polyphony, heteroglossia. All these concepts come from Bakhtin. And essentially, if we take a look at chronotope, what Bakhtin says is a literary device, which connects space and time.

It is to connect this to the idea of space and time that Malabou is talking about, or examining in her book, "The Ontology of the Accident". When she brings in Deleuze and mentions deterritorialization, what she is saying is the event of the accident, it disrupts our sense of space and time. In other words, it deconstructs or, shall we say destroys the known, consumed chronotope.

The chronotopes, that we consume in our mind, our sense of familiar space and time which are custodian in quality, something which we experience on an everyday basis, that gets interrupted that gets disrupted by an accident. The challenge that it brings through this entire discourse is how, how do we define something which disrupts the definition.

It is to define the indefinable, something which is outside the parameters of definition and give a name to it. Malabou talks about monstrosity in “The Ontology of the Accident”.

The reason why she brings a monstrosity is because the very location of the monster is outside the parameters of recognition, the parameters of known knowledge or the known markers of knowledge. The monster is something that is outside the knowledge system, outside the epistemic system.

The monster by definition is deterritorialized. That the monster occupies a different chronotope altogether. The idea of the monster is very complex. It is not just always a biological physiognomy condition. It is also in a great sense an epistemic condition, something we do not know, something outside the known boundaries of knowledge, the limits of knowledge.

In other words, what accident is, the accident can be defined as a monstrosity, as a monstrous event, something which is outside the known and accepted and consumed quality of event or that landscape of an event. In a very direct and literal sense, there is a spatial-temporal quality about the event. An event is something which takes place. There is the territory it takes place, at a particular point in time.

The space-time conjunction is always working with an event. In a very literal sense, the accident is an interruption of a chronotope. An accident is an interruption of known parameters of space and time. Now the reason why this is very interesting to trauma studies or especially in a course like this, which looks at literature and trauma is that it brings us to another very important category in trauma, and that is representation.

There are some question that rises regarding how one represents trauma, articulate trauma, describe trauma, share trauma or is trauma shareable at all, is trauma something that can be articulated at all or is it by definition, something outside the parameters or articulation, something outside the parameters of sharing of knowledge.

There is a lot of studies that take place, especially in memory studies. There is traumatic memory, cannot be defined, cannot be recollected. The subject, the human subject, resists that kind of memory. There is also narrative memory, something which can be put into a narrative.

In other words, what Malabou's book is interesting for and there are many reasons why it is interesting. But immediately for this course, it looks at a very interesting relationship between trauma and narration, trauma and representation, trauma and articulation. Because normally we find trauma or accident as something which is outside these concepts, these categories, representation, narration, articulation, etc.

If one manages to weave that in, it is either to make an attempt or an effort to represent trauma, to articulate trauma, to narrate trauma. This whole idea of narrativizing an experience or narrativizing an accident is something that Malabou always gives a clarion call.

It is almost like a summoning or an invitation for a different kind of language, which is traumatic language, which is the language of the accident. We find that there is a lot of interesting overlap, one can figure out between this and the school of French feminism, where this whole idea of a creature feminine, writing the body or writing the female body as a resistance towards the phallogocentric principles of writing is something similar as well.

The phallogocentric principle of writing is a combination of phallogocentric and logocentric male logic. The male logic idea of writing is something that dominates the discourses of writing normally speaking. The whole idea of a creature feminine, the big French feminists, Irigaray, Cixous, Kristeva.

They sort of devised this idea of a different kind of writing process, different kind of representation of matrix, which will break away, which will depart from and in the process deconstruct the main logical principle of articulation and a creature and

representation and inscription. There is an interesting overlap to be made between that school of feminism and Malabou's idea of trauma.

The connecting factor again is post-structuralism. The connective factor is again deconstruction because both Malabou and the French feminists appropriate the post-structuralist perspective into language, rationality, representation, narration, body, even to trauma.

When we deconstruct these concepts, we are essentially breaking away from an earlier model of inscription, which is a main logical model. We can see, if this whole thing is mapped into something like "Mrs. Dalloway", we find that that novel becomes a graphic example of this, a perfect representation of this alternative representation.

Because what we see in "Mrs. Dalloway" is the Septimus' stream of consciousness. There are passages where pages moves from one thought process to another thought process in a very fluid way. There is no normative chrono-normative way in which the thoughts are connected. The meaning of chrono-normative is the rationality of time, here.

The stream of consciousness that Septimus embodies all the time recursively in "Mrs. Dalloway" is essentially a very fluid free-floating distributed phenomenon. Whereas if we contrast that to the male doctors, the male medical practitioners in "Mrs. Dalloway", who are deliberately in that fictional frame of Woolf who are deliberately very alpha male.

They always rely on rationality, they always rely on rational representations, always rely on a very robust principle of representation, where everything must be black and white, everything must be classified, everything must be diagnosed and dictated. And there is a lot of coercion in that as well. They are trying to control Septimus' body, trying to confine him, a sort of confine control coercion logic is something which they keep drawing on in the treatment, "treatment of Septimus."

Now leaving aside everything else, leaving aside the medical, biological situation, the politics, and language in “Mrs. Dalloway”, it is to see how representation works, how inscription works, how articulation works.

Septimus’ thought processes are articulated in a stream of consciousness technique, which is a clear departure, a dramatic departure from the phallogocentric principle of representation, which is appropriated by the doctors or appropriated by the dominant discourse of medical science at that point of time.

Many of the things can also be seen as a very strong feminist critique of the male medical practice of rationality and coercion and confinement in “Mrs. Dalloway”. And that kind of control, the rest cure is a process through which the subject, the suffering subject, is forced to rest.

There is an irony to it that made one to rest, confined one to a room or space or house, and asked to rest there. And one’s mobility is compromised, the agency is compromised, things are taken away from one, and one is basically under surveillance all the time.

This kind of a cure system has a different kind of representational method, or representation category, whereas with Septimus we find that and the irony is he is the male soldier. He is someone who has fought a battle, survived a battle. He is an actual hero. But then we find there is a symbolic emasculation that Septimus suffers from.

The big men in that system are the doctors whereas Septimus the once big man is now shrunken into some kind of a boy child who is constantly admonished and constantly schooled at and at the end he jumps and kills himself as a final resistance to the entire phallogocentric logical principle around it. As we can see that whole idea of Malabou, the fluid phenomenal trauma, the fluid phenomenon of the accident, which is something outside the parameters of event. It can be mapped onto so many texts we have done so far.

The reason why it is such a rich theoretical textbook for us. Even if we take a look at Katherine Mansfield's "The Fly". We find that the big man in the story, the boss is someone who wants to control trauma, someone who wants to give a very phallogocentric, investment into the trauma that he wants to cry, he wants to shut the system, he wants to shut his door and look at a photograph of his dead son and then cry.

In other words, he wants to bring the accident into this very male logical principle of catharsis and articulation and representation. And that does not work. The entire story is about the failure of that phallogocentric project, the failure of the masculinist project of controlling the trauma, controlling event, controlling experience of that system.

The last sentence of that story for the life of him he could not remember. The loss of memory is a final act of defeat, the final example, the final articulation of defeat. We have how the normative form of representation, the masculinist form of representation of trauma, an event and experience does not work in the face of a real trauma.

The disappearance of that logical system is something that Malabou also talks about. Malabou talked about Kafka and the whole idea of metamorphosis, how, in that particular story of Kafka, Gregor Samsa, the human subject becomes something else, becomes a different organism, an insect.

The transformation or the metamorphosis into something else, is something which symbolically according to Malabou, symbolically it captures the transformation to a different body, which is how the entire idea of accident works. We become something else, we become a different organism and become a different system altogether.

It is interesting how Malabou uses Deleuze in that session, if remember, to say that even that representation of Kafka is an incomplete representation because a human humanist voice is retained to a certain extent. The retention of the human voice, the

retention of the humanist voice, is something that makes the project of trauma, the project of transformation into a failed project as such.

Malabou is a very important philosopher for us, especially in trauma studies and especially in a course like this, where we are looking at literature as a special form of representational trauma, and how the literary language could be a very important medium of representational trauma, how the literary language can defamiliarize reality and the idea of defamiliarization is interesting.

Because what it does is it takes reality as we know it, and it sort of recodes it. It reconfigures it. That is why literary language is metaphorical. That is why literal language is figurative in quality. That is why literary language is self-reflexive in quality. And all this equation, subtle flexibility, figurative quality, they are all investment in the project of defamiliarization.

In a very direct sense, in a very sort of literal sense, literature could be a very important medium of representative trauma. Literature can be a very important medium of articulating the absence of logic or absence of this normative idea of livelihood.

Because if we define trauma, if we define, accident or something, which is outside the parameters of the knowledge system, outside the parameters of lived reality, literature can be a very strong medium to represent that because by default, as a medium, literature, defamiliarizes reality. We were looking at a very interesting welding of literature and trauma, which is what this course is all about.

Malabou is one of the most is one of the key philosophers, who can bring in the discourse of psychoanalysis and deconstruct it, or can bring in the discourse of language and deconstruct it. And who can bring in post-structuralism and look at trauma, as a fluid distributed phenomenon, rather than something just happens on the head, and affects us biologically.



Rather, she looks at trauma as an experience, which has not just an embedded quality, but also an extended quality, an active quality. Trauma as performance. The question is what happens through a sense of embodiment, when trauma happens. And by embodiment, it is a very fluid movement between the inside and outside. The biological, embedded, cellular neural body, and the enactive self, which negotiates with the social environment, the enactive self, which negotiates with the cultural environment around it.

In “Mrs. Dalloway”, we find that the Septimus’ disconnect to whatever is around him is because of his trauma. It just not affects one internally or biologically or at a cellular neural level, but also at an enactive extended level. It is a connection between the embedded and the extended, this constant dialogue, the constant fluid movement with inside and outside is the real experience of trauma.

And that is where Malabou’s philosophy of deconstruction, post-structuralism, trauma, the ontology of the accident. They all come in as very useful tools for us, looking at this entire experience of, uncanny experience of being outside the normal parameters of knowledge through the lens of literature. Literature becomes the lens through which we can look at these reconfigurations of reality.

If we look at trauma as a reconfiguration, it recodes reality as we know it. This representation is a very complex medium that literature is capable of offering. Malabou philosophizes it. She gives a philosophical framework to this medium. It is the reason why she is such an important philosopher for us.

This course deals with just the relationship with trauma or how one looks at literary representations of trauma. This is a theoretical summary of Malabou’s two books, “The New Wounded” and “The Ontology of the Accident”. We sort of look at how as a philosophical framework she is offering an interesting and robust guidelines for us, students of literature to look at trauma.