

Trauma and Literature
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Lecture – 26
Malabou's The Ontology of the Accident – Part 7

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existence.

The changes brought about by destructive plasticity result from the divergence in the movements that constitute the changes, the disorder of its directions. In contemporary neurology coldness, neutrality, absence, a “flat” emotional state, are instances of this mode of destructive plasticity that Spinoza anticipated by envisaging the existence of a destructive metamorphic power, without any possible reintegration into the thread of a life, a fate or a true idea.

Acknowledgement of the role of destructive plasticity allows us to radicalize the deconstruction of subjectivity, to stamp it anew. This recognition reveals that a power of annihilation hides within the very constitution of identity, a virtual coldness that is not only the fate of the

This is an NPTEL course entitled “Trauma and Literature” on Catherine Malabou’s book “The Ontology of the Accident”. The purpose of looking at Malabou is to look at a philosophical framework through which we can look at the convergence of trauma and fiction, trauma and philosophy, trauma and neuroscience and how these different research networks overlap with each other.

A large part of this book is spent looking at neurobiology and how neurobiology can learn and draw on the works of Spinoza. Spinoza appears very prominently in this book, especially the concept of conatus, the innate cellular drive for self-preservation, and how that becomes not just an embedded function, but also an extended function, how do we connect socially to what is around us.

It is to know how we connect cognitively to what we see and recognize around us that is determined by the concept and display of the Spinozan idea of conatus. When that disappears, that innate drive to preserve itself disappears and the self becomes more and more liquidated,

we talk about liquidation where it shutdown itself, where it stops connecting to anything around it, empathy disappears, and connection disappears.

Engagement at an emotional level disappears and instead what has produced flatness, an emotional flatness, an emotional dissipation of sorts. When Malabou talks about dissipation to a large extent and she is looking at trauma not as the usual historical model, the usual neurotic model studied by psychoanalysis, the Freudian study of psychoanalysis, but rather she is looking at trauma as a state of emotionlessness, the complete disappearance of emotion.

It is to know how the cognitive flatness that is produced out of this emotionlessness can be a more complex order of trauma. If remember the two texts which come to mind immediately are “Mrs. Dalloway” by Woolf and also “Toba Tek Singh” by Manto where in both cases in both texts, we have characters exhibiting this emotionlessness.

They are so disconnected from what is around them, they are so disengaged from what is around them. They cannot integrate themselves socially, emotionally and also existentially. If we consider the existential self as a combination of all these selves, so that has some type of impairment in terms how one can connect to what is around it.

This concept of emotional flatness, this concept of emotional lessness is something which Malabou talks about in great details. She is trying to do is trying to incorporate a philosophical framework in terms of looking at the neuroscientific, the neurobiological reading of trauma. There is this neurobiological paradigm that she draws on and she talks about Damasio or Joseph LeDoux; and LeDoux will appear here shortly.

It is to know how that kind of research that biological scientific research can draw on and converge and have very significant overlap with something like Spinoza’s idea of conatus or Spinoza’s idea of the relationship between emotion and cognition. The sections where we looked at Antonio Damasio, we studied how the ability to emote plays a very important role and ability to cognize reality.

In other words, emotion and cognition are very connected categories. When the ability to emote or empathize begins to disappear that affects the subject, not just the level of engagement with reality, but also the recognition of reality. The subject fails so begins to get interrupted in the recognition of reality. A classic case in point will be Septimus Smith from “Mrs. Dalloway”, the PTSD veteran, the post-traumatic stress disorder veteran who just begins to disintegrate with what he sees around him.

That disintegration is important because what happens with the character in Woolf’s novel is the degree of emotionlessness which appears. He completely liquidates his emotional self and that impairs his recognition of reality. This connection between emotion and cognition, which is a very scientifically proven connection is something that Spinoza seems to have anticipated in his philosophical works.

It is no wonder that he is such a big and important figure in neuroscience today. We have people like Damasio writing books on “Descartes' Error”, “Looking for Spinoza”. There are lot of work done in Spinoza in recent times and Malabou is just extending that kind of research way up. The other thing which Malabou spends a lot of time in this book is the idea of acknowledging destructive plasticity giving it a name, giving it almost a medical legal classification.

What happens when during this very high degree of destructive plasticity when the innate character of the self, the ontology of the self so to speak just changes self becomes something else, someone else, a complete transformation. It is not just a residual lingering, a residual connection to the old self no such things, self becomes something else.

It is almost like a personality change, a character change, the self change and Malabou spends some time away talking about how that kind of metamorphoses which is wrought by a destructive plasticity that needs to be acknowledged and articulated and defined in medical legal terms. The convergence of the medical and legal is interesting over here.

She is trying to do is giving it some type of a recognition; a classification, medical recognition, philosophical recognition, a social recognition that is the whole point of this

book, that is the whole project of this book, the ontology of the accident. So, by defining the accident or something which happens outside of the parameters of recognizable reality, what she is also doing is she is trying to give it a name.

She is trying to give it an ontological framework, a medical legal classification. “The changes brought about by destructive plasticity result from the divergence in the movements that constitute the changes, the disorder of its directions.” This degree of disorientation that happens and the disorientation is a complete disorientation.

“In contemporary neurology coldness, neutrality, absence, a flat emotional state are instances of this mode of destructive plasticity that Spinoza anticipated by envisaging the existence of a disruptive metamorphic power, without any possible reintegration into the thread of a life, a fate or true idea.” The idea of the flat emotional state that becomes very important study in modern times in modern neuroscience.

In contemporary neurology what coldness, neutrality, indifference, an absence of any connect emotional or whatever to the reality around. These become very important medical symptoms and very important medical case studies. It is wrought by destructive plasticity. We have films and web series and other such things made out of these characters; characters who do not have any ability to empathize with reality.

Empathy becomes a very important study in modern times from a sociological perspective, from a cultural studies perspective, and medical studies perspective. The loss of empathy, the disappearance of empathy become very important situations and how does that affect one at a neural level, but also add up an inactive social level. One’s social self begins to disappear because that is an extension of the neural self.

Coldness, neutrality or indifference, meaning not making any connection, absence of connection. These become very important studies, flat emotional, so it is a flatness. There is a degree of cognitive flatness that happens over here. Malabou seems to be doing away she is trying to connect this to Spinoza’s philosophy of the destructive metamorphic power, when the connection goes away, in other words the innate cellular drive to preserve itself when that disappears what happens then.

The important thing at the end of this paragraph is when she talks about when such a state appears, when such a state is generated that just completely does away with any possibility of reintegration, one cannot reintegrate it to the original idea, to the true idea. It just becomes something else. It is a complete metamorphosis. We have spent some time looking at fictional representations of these kinds of metamorphoses.

Malabou had mentioned Kafka as a very good attempt to articulate that metamorphosis. Now, what that also means and this is what Malabou is almost making a project out of a very rich philosophical project is to acknowledge the potential for such destructive plasticity is acknowledged what that can do to the subject, how it can affect the subject, in medical legal terms we need to acknowledge it, we need to articulate it.

We need to this rather calibrate it in some terms, quantify, calibrate, classify in some terms and not just look at it as some different absolute monstrosity or absolute outside. This book is also an attempt to engage with that elsewhere of the accident, engage with the destructive plasticity which can emerge out of such intense accidents.

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ing the existence of a destructive metamorphic power, without any possible reintegration into the thread of a life, a fate or a true idea.

Acknowledgement of the role of destructive plasticity allows us to radicalize the deconstruction of subjectivity, to stamp it anew. This recognition reveals that a power of annihilation hides within the very constitution of identity, a virtual coldness that is not only the fate of the brain injured, schizophrenics, and serial killers, but is also the signature of a law of being that always appears to be on the point of abandoning itself, escaping. An ontology of modification must shelter this particular type of metamorphosis that is a farewell to being itself. A farewell that is not death, a farewell that occurs within

“Acknowledgement of the role of destructive plasticity allows us to radicalize the deconstruction of subjectivity, to stamp it anew.” The interesting vocabulary used by

Malabou is medical in a sense of using terms such as destructive plasticity, but also it heavily draws on critical theory vocabularies of destruction or deconstruction of subjectivity.

This is a default thing that happens here as well, the very Derridan idea of subjectivity. When we were studying “The New Wounded” that Malabou is one of the finest philosophers who can sort of connect the Derridan critical theory along with very hardcore medical science of brain damage, wound, trauma, etc. It is a very rich philosophical and research framework.

Those who are interested in trauma studies, it is a very new kind of way, new perspective in trauma where one bring in deconstruction, one bring in a critical theory, but at the same time one is situating it in very practical medical terms so that becomes a very good frame to study. But the idea away, the project away, the invitation away; so acknowledge the destructive plasticity and given a name.

It allows us to radicalize the deconstruction of subjectivity, to stamp it anew. To give it a name, give it a stamp, so radicalize it; so to give it a radical reconfiguration. This recognition reveals that a power of annihilation hides within the very constitution of identity, a virtual coldness that is not only the fate of the brain injured, schizophrenics, and serial killers, but is also the signature of law of being that always appears to be on the point of abandoning itself, escaping.

In other words, this is a very innovative approach. Malabou is saying that emotional coldness, this destructive plasticity, this virtual coldness is not necessarily always the cause, the result of brain damage is not necessarily always the cause of injury or trauma or blunt force trauma or any such thing. But it is a potential which is always already there in all of us. Some things can trigger it.

It is not just that serial killers have it or schizophrenics have it or brain injured have it or other people have unfortunate tragic accidents have it, but it is a potential, it is a signature of law of being, so it is part of who we are. It is part of our being, the ontology of being. In other words, this is why we begin to wind up with this book, but what Malabou saying is the

ontology of the self and the ontology of the accident can be interestingly mapped onto each other.

That mapping is important, that mapping is something we wish we ought to do instead of keeping those completely aside or disconnect them. We can map one onto the other and that can bring about research in our understanding of self, understanding of trauma, understanding of injury, etc. It is something which is part of the signature of the being, there is that always appears to be on the point of abandoning itself, escaping, and this play is again very Derridan.

It is that part of the being, it is that part of self which is always on the verge of escaping from itself. That part, that component of the self which is always trying to abandon the self, that potential to abandon the self, that potential to abandon or escape the original self or to move away from the original self that potential is always already there. This kind of perspective is in destructive plasticity reveals we always carry the potential to shut down ourselves and become something else.

We always carry the potential to completely do away with the core ontology of who we are and become a different self, a complete reconfiguration as well. It is always in a point of abandoning itself, always in a point of escaping from itself. That verge is important, that proximity to abandon the self, the proximity, the potential to do away with the original self is always already there.

It is almost embedded in our system itself and we are hardwired to a certain extent, and we are configured to de-configure ourselves in other words. We configured to shut down ourselves, the sad potential is always there. Malabou is saying that Spinoza's idea of conatus is a very important concept because there is almost a Newtonian quality to it. There is an action towards self-preservation.

It is an action, a drive to self-preservation, but that also produces the counteraction of liquidation, the contraction of shutting down the self. That potential is also there and that potential needs to be acknowledged and articulated in recent studies in trauma. An ontology

of modification must shelter this particular type of metamorphosis that is a farewell to being a self.

The point in the self which can say farewell to itself that should be articulated, that should be acknowledged. It must be sheltered within the idea of a self. A farewell that is not death.

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CATHERINE MALABOU

life, just like the indifference of life to life by which survival sometimes manifests itself. Today we see that all trauma survivors, whether of biological or political trauma, show signs of this kind of indifference. In this sense, we must take destructive brain plasticity into account as a hermeneutic tool to understand the contemporary faces of violence.

“You are your synapses.”⁴⁰ Joseph LeDoux’s famous phrase would thus not only mean an assimilation of the being of the subject to the constructive plastic formation of their identity, but also the identification of being

A farewell that occurs within life, just like the indifference of life to life by which survival sometimes manifests itself. She is making a very key distinction of way between farewell to the self and death. This is not death, this is not a biological shutdown. This is not a cellular shutdown as well. This is more of an existential shutdown and a reconfiguration.

It is something which is part of the life and it is the indifference of life to life by which survival sometimes manifests itself. In other words, there are certain occasions where one can only survive by shutting down oneself. We can only survive by bringing an end to what we are, not at the level of suicide, not the level of killing oneself, but at the level of completely changing about who we are at a very fundamental embedded level.

It is sometimes ironically the only way we can articulate agency, the only way we can articulate some kind of engagement with reality. Today we see that all trauma survivors, whether of biological or political trauma, show signs of this kind of indifference. This

indifference sometimes becomes not a rejection of life, but rather this becomes a rerouting of life, this becomes a new way of finding life, a new way of finding or engaging with reality.

This indifference sometimes becomes political in a certain sense and Malabou talks about not just biological, also political trauma. The indifference of the past, the indifference of oppression. The indifference can sometimes be a very key instrument of agency. The trauma survivors, people who suffered, very tragic experiences due to political migration, political trauma, etc., choose to be indifferent to that, choose to be indifferent to the memory of oppression.

That indifference to the memory of oppression can sometimes be the only available agency that to the subject. The only thing they can do in the face of such oppression is be indifferent to it. It becomes an instrument to articulate agency on certain occasions. In this sense, we must take destructive plasticity or destructive brain plasticity into account as a hermeneutic tool to understand the contemporary faces of violence.

This is where it becomes important and almost textual in quality, a hermeneutic tool, an interpretative tool. We need to take a look at brain plasticity not just as a medical phenomenon, not just as part of the brain damage, but also part of our textual reading of identity or textual reading of the self. Destructive plasticity can help us to interpret that subject's situatedness medically as well as politically.

It is to question why the subject chooses to articulate indifference and what are the factors informing the indifference. This kind of engagement will help us understand the complexity around the subject, the complex political reality, the complex material reality, the complex cultural reality on subject. We begin to get a fuller understanding of the subject's situatedness.

We can see how the framework Malabou is offering in a sort of bringing in the political, the medical, the legal, the existential because if we try to map this onto let us say migration trauma. If we try to map this on to let us say survivor's trauma, people who survived genocides, people who survived brutalities of migration and xenophobia and they choose to

be indifferent to that, they choose not to talk about it, they choose not to articulate it. There is this quality of shutdown.

There is this quality of liquidation that is there. It is a choice sometimes. In other words, what Malabou is saying is that we need to take a look at brain, this destructive plasticity sometimes as an articulation of agency, as articulation of what the subject wants to do in the face of oppression, not talk about it, not engage with reality, not be keen to connect to the emotional level, but rather to generate and produce indifference which can be potentially subversive in quality.

So, I choose not to talk about it, I choose not to engage with it, I choose not to remember the political oppression I face. And this choice in certain sense can inform my identity, can inform my existential political identity. A study of such indifference can become a hermeneutic tool, an interpretive method through which we can study the subject and also subject's situatedness and the complex political medical reality around them.

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“You are your synapses.”⁴⁰ Joseph LeDoux's famous phrase would thus not only mean an assimilation of the being of the subject to the constructive plastic formation of their identity, but also the identification of being as the possibility of its own neuronal destructive plasticity.

The inscription of a death drive in the brain as an emotional coldness is thus not only visible among those with brain injuries, schizophrenics, serial killers, trauma victims and all the other figures of social exclusion; it is also potentially present as a threat in each one of us. Contemporary neurobiological discourse would benefit from a more radical meditation on Spinoza's formulation that “no one has so far determined what the body can do.”⁴¹

Malabou mentions Joseph LeDoux who is famous for his works for synapses and there are lots of books of LeDoux like the “Emotional Brain” and “Synaptic Self”. Both are innovative works on the idea of neurons and how neurons produce electrochemical reactions, which produce emotions, which then produce personality and a sense of self.

It is very rich book. It brings in the medical neuroscientific study of emotions, and then also looks at emotion from a slightly more philosophical framework. And by bringing these two frameworks together, it offers a very complex and full understanding of what we are and the idea of the self, the authentic emotional self. This is LeDoux that Malabou is now quoting: “You are your synapses.”

Joseph LeDoux’s famous phrase would thus not only mean an assimilation of the being of the subject to the constructive blast information of the identity, but also the identification of being as a possibility of its own neuronal destructive plasticity. If we look at synapses, synapses are those face’s this joins nodal points between neurons. Neurons connect and disconnect to synapses and LeDoux research in neuroscience is that emotions are produced through synapses.

It is not so much between neurons, it is between synapses what happens in that synaptic space as well determines how emotions are produced and processed and that informs how we behave and which by extension informs who we are at a social, cultural level, also political level. So, by bringing in LeDoux, by citing LeDoux, by drawing on LeDoux what Malabou is going to say is it not only sufficient we will look at constructive plasticity or constructive formation of neurons.

It is also important for us to understand the destruction of neurons. How neurons destroy from each other or disconnect from each other the synaptic zones and if synapses determine how we behave, if synapses determine our emotional self, it is equally important for us to understand the configuration and deconfiguration of synapses; how they disconnect or get disjointed from each other at a synaptic space, synaptic level.

The inscription of a death drive in the brain as an emotional coldness is does not only visible among those with brain injuries, schizophrenics, serial killers, trauma victims and all of the figures of social exclusion, it is also potentially present as a threat to each one of us. So, as we mentioned a while ago, it is possibility a potential that we always already carry in us the possibility of emotional coldness.

A complete systemic shutdown, which is not dead by the way, it is not suicide by the way, it is just an emotional shutdown, a coldness or flatness at a cognitive level. It is not just the figures who have suffered medical injuries or social injuries or social exclusion, but also people quote unquote normal people and whatever that normalcy means or entails but that quality of emotional coldness, that quality of disconnect, that quality of disjointedness is always already there in all of us.

In a very medical biological level it is there and what Malabou is saying here is it is time for us to acknowledge and articulate at a social, functional, ontological level, give it a name, give it a classification, acknowledge it, something which we always carry us all the time as normal functioning selves. Contemporary neurobiological discourse would benefit from a more radical meditation on Spinoza's formulation that no one has so far determined what the body can do.

This is the idea of the uncertainty about the body that the fact that we do not quite know what the body can do or more importantly in this particular case what the body can undo, so the undoing and doing go hand in hand, destruction and construction go hand in hand. The focus in neuroscience, the focus of philosophy, especially philosophy around cognition has been around the constructive self and how the self construct itself cognitively.

But what Spinoza had anticipated and that is reason why it is so important for us today and how Malabou is connecting Spinoza with contemporary neurobiology is how the idea of the deconstructive self is also important for cognition. In order to study emotion, we must be also able to calibrate and understand and interpret emotional coldness, emotional flatness or emotional lessness.

In other words, at a philosophical level absence must also be studied, absence must also be articulated, absence must also be acknowledged in our understanding of the self. So, self is not just about presence, it is not just about the production of presence, self is also about the production of absence at a very cold ontological level and a study of the production of absence, emotionlessness not just as a passive reaction to trauma.

Emotionlessness as an active production against trauma is something which we ought to study for a fuller understanding of how trauma affects us medically, neurally as well as existentially. It is a very rich framework.