

**Trauma and Literature**  
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**Lecture - 20**  
**Malabou's The Ontology of the Accident - Part 1**

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In the usual order of things, lives run their course like rivers. The changes and metamorphoses of a life due to vagaries and difficulties, or simply the natural unfolding of circumstance, appear as the marks and wrinkles of a continuous, almost logical, process of fulfillment that leads ultimately to death. In time, one eventually becomes who one is; one becomes only who one is. Bodily and psychic transformations do nothing but reinforce the permanence of identity, caricaturing or fixing it, but never contradicting it. They never disrupt identity.

This gradual existential and biological incline, which can only ever transform the subject into itself, does not, however, obviate the powers of plasticity of this same identity that houses itself beneath an apparently smooth

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This is an NPTEL course entitled “Trauma and Literature” on Catherine Malabou’s “The Ontology of the Accident”. The very title suggests, it looks at accident as from a philosophical framework, from a neurobiological framework, from a medical framework, but also from an existential framework.

As is the case with Malabou, it is very rich and organic interdisciplinary framework is something which is very important for us, not least in a course like this, which is “Trauma and Literature”, which looks at trauma, from a variety of perspectives, the medical, existential, the political, the cultural, the neurobiological, etc.

We will always attempt to do through this interesting combination of theory and text, is how we can apply or map these theoretical perspectives onto the different texts that we study in this course.

For instance, if one thinks about something like Virginia Woolf’s, “Mrs. Dalloway”, Saadat Hasan Manto’s “Toba Tek Singh”, texts which are already covered in terms of

how a theory like this can be mapped, interestingly to offer free original readings of those texts. We already saw in “The New Wounded”, Malabou talks or spends a lot of time looking at plasticity as a phenomenon, as a neural phenomenon, as a psychological phenomenon, as a psychic phenomenon, but also as a general existential phenomenon.

She talks about how the concept of plasticity can be drawn on from neuroscience. We talk about synaptic plasticity, etc. but also how that can be interestingly mapped onto a broader understanding of plasticity, which is philosophical in quality.

We see the same kind of strand run in this book as well, “The Ontology of the Accident”, where she talks about the idea of the accident, experience of the accident as a transformation, as something which transforms the very core psyche, the very core self, of the subject, in terms of how that generates a new subject, which is unfamiliar, or shall we say, defamiliarized, or deterritorialized. In other words, the subject’s sense of space and time, begin to become almost permanently disrupted.

The production of disruption is something that Malabou talks about a lot in the spoken also elsewhere. We can see, she talks about, she takes up all these “negative concepts” like plasticity, annulation, destruction, etc. She looks at how these concepts, these experiences can be sort of viewed philosophically, theoretically, and also culturally.

This is what makes her such an important figure for the purpose of this course, Trauma and Literature. Because what she does essentially is she offers almost a critical studies perspective into trauma, rather than just medicalizing it. Rather than just looking at it as a neurobiological phenomenon.

She also I mean, takes that and translates that, or maps that onto a broader cultural framework, a broader existential framework in terms of how our understanding of the subject may be revisited with these kinds of theoretical frames.

The opening section of the ontology of the accident, which talks about how the idea of seamlessness that the seamless subject, which moves from one point to another point,

like a river, and she gives example, the analogy of river as well, the idea of the fluid, seamless subject can become permanently disrupted with an accident.

And by accident she, again she uses the term very broadly. It can be a medical accidental, it can be a deeply psychological wound. It can be a physical wound. In other words, the idea of trauma comes across as a very complex concept, in Malabou. We will just start off with the opening, and then we will see how that can be connected to the broader philosophy of this book “The Ontology of the Accident”.

In the usual order of things lives run their course like rivers. The changes in metamorphosis of a life due to vagaries and difficulties or simply the natural unfolding of circumstance appear as the marks and wrinkles of a continuous, almost logical process of fulfillment that leads ultimately to death. She starts out with a commonly consumed idea of life as something which flows seamlessly and continuously and almost endlessly.

It has a starting point. It has a middle point and just goes on. And then ultimately it reaches its destination of death, the death as destination at the end, eventual destination. There is this temporal, teleological, eschatological quality about life. But the important thing here is what she is trying to foreground is that the way we commonly consumed the idea of life is through a seamless fluid process of beginning, middle and end.

It has a genesis point, the point where the subject is born, then the subject’s growth area, the subject grows absorbing experiences around themselves. And then obviously, in the end, the subject dies or comes to an end a closure a conclusion. There is a logical, teleological, temporal quality about the whole life system over here. And that is how we commonly consider, commonly conceive or consume the idea of life.

In time, one eventually becomes who one is, one becomes only who one is, bodily and psychic transformations do nothing but reinforce the permanence of identity, caricaturing or fixing it, but never contradicting it. They never disrupt identity. The

most important phrase over here, the most important part over here is the opening phrase in the usual order of things.

This is how the usual order things go, that the subject is born, the subject becomes a personality through an absorption on processing of experience. In the end, subject comes to a closure, comes to an end. And that is the end of the subject, the end point. We find that everything happens from the subject reinforces the permanence of identity.

Identity, as we can see in Malabou already, is a very complex phenomenon, is a process of becoming, and it constantly becomes something. We can see there are sufficient hence already in the Malabou's dropping that the whole idea of becoming and re-becoming to become can be disrupted through an event of unbecoming, which is the trauma.

That is where the trauma comes in, an interruption. I mean, we talked about interruption when we looked at, "Mrs. Dalloway" or "Toba Tek Singh". How the subject is essentially interrupted. And suddenly, everything the subject had before comes to an end and a new subject is born out of it. And the new subject does not really have, necessarily have to be connected to the old subject.

The experience or the idea or the concept of seamlessness can be disrupted, can be deconstructed, and that is where the idea of plasticity comes in. And as Malabou would go on to theorize that subsequently in this book. The normal idea of identity, the normal idea of life is a process of continuous becoming.


The subject becomes and reinforces the whole ideal personality and the subject becomes the personality and everything around the subject, the entire experiencing in the world around, it serves to reinforce the idea, the concept or the structure of the subject as it were. But never contradicts it, never contradicting it. And then again, this is where the idea of plasticity or trauma would come in. They never disrupt identity in normal circumstances.

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This gradual existential and biological incline, which can only ever transform the subject into itself, does not, however, obviate the powers of plasticity of this same identity that houses itself beneath an apparently smooth surface like a reserve of dynamite hidden under the peachy skin of being for death. As a result of serious trauma, or sometimes for no reason at all, the path splits and a new, unprecedented persona comes to live with the



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The idea of the dynamite, a reserve of dynamite hidden under the peachy skin. There is always this latent quality of destruction, the latent quality of explosion of the subject where the subject can become something else entirely.

And that can have necessary no connection to what a subject otherwise is. At the beginning of this line, where she talks about the gradual existential and biological

incline, where incline obviously means an addition, just going up in time. The subject will absorb more experience, will become more will become fuller with experience and then of course, the final end will come the subject will become, and go into death.

But the whole idea of the subject could in a way, normally is considered to be in incline, a steady and stable incline. She talks about plasticity in a way that can disrupt this idea of incline this identity, the identity of incline, inclination just goes on from a certain position and it has a linear process.

Linearity of the subject in other words can be disrupted by the always already potential of plasticity, which acts or which is there as, house of dynamite, a reserve of dynamite. As a result of serious trauma, and this is the first time the word trauma comes in. As we can see, Malabou talks about disruption as a cognitive condition, disruption as a psychological condition.

It is not something which just happens from the outside, but also something which happens inside the subject. And it almost has, it is a combination of centripetal and centrifugal fields, where the subject becomes something else. The trauma comes from the outside. In that way, it is centripetal, but also subject connects to the trauma in a way, which is very plastic.

And that makes it centrifugal. It is a dual process of centripetal and centrifugal fields that Malabou seems to be hinting over here. She goes on to say, as a result of serious trauma, or sometimes for no reason at all, the path splits and a new unprecedented persona comes to live with the former person, and eventually takes up all the room. Now, what is interesting over here is the spatial metaphor that Malabou uses in the end of the sentence, takes up all the room.

There seems to be a finite space of the subject, subject inhabits a finite space of selfhood. Selfhood seems to be described over here as a space, a finite space. This is a space of selfhood, which is supposedly unique, supposedly linear, and supposedly seamless in quality and what happens due to trauma or sometimes for no reason at all. This is where the absurdity of accident comes in as well.

A new unprecedented persona is generated, is almost like a recreation or a new birth of the subject. And that comes to live with the former person, and eventually takes up all the room. There is a, there does seem to be a territorial quality about trauma here as well, in terms of how the new subject which emerges, takes up the entire territory of the older subject, and that becomes the entirely new subject.

The old subject gets completely pushed into oblivion. There seems to be a very dramatic disruption or a very dramatic disconnect between the old and the new subjects. This hiatus, this disruption is where the trauma has produced. In other words, what we are looking at here is trauma, not necessarily as a passive process, but trauma as an active, regenerative, almost perversely productive process.

It produces a new persona, which has no connection whatsoever with the earlier persona. This disruption, this lack of seamlessness between the older and the earlier, newer persona is something which becomes the space of trauma. That is where the trauma as a process comes in. It takes up all the room.

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CATHERINE MALABOU

unrecognizable persona whose present comes from no past, whose future harbors nothing to come, an absolute existential improvisation. A form born of the accident, born by accident, a kind of accident. A funny breed. A monster whose apparition cannot be explained as any genetic anomaly. A new being comes into the world for a second time, out of a deep cut that opens in a biography.

Some metamorphoses disrupt the snowball that one forms with oneself over lived time, that big round ball: full, replete, complete. These strange figures rise out of



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An unrecognizable person who is present comes from no past, whose future harbors nothing to come, an absolute existential improvisation. This phrase is interesting, existential improvisation. It has, it seems to have a permanent ad hoc condition, a permanent ad hoc quality, is almost a state of permanent suspension between different kinds of subject positions. The unrecognized persona comes into being from no past.

There is no teleological or temporal connect. It is the suddenness of the subject which has been dramatized over here. There is a suddenness of subject which is produced due to trauma, and that sudden subject produced out of the trauma has no bearing whatsoever with the idea of the earlier subject and it is completely disconnected from that. A form born off the accident, born by accident, a kind of accident.

This is where the word 'accident' comes into being. It is how Malabou uses the word 'accident'. We are trying to make a connection here, but it seems similar to the way Butler used the word 'gender'. It is a process. Accident is an event as well as a process. Accident is an experience as well as the process. There is the new subject that becomes the accident.

It is born off the accident, it is born by the accident, but also equally it is the accident. It is a kind of accident, a process of unbecoming. That becomes the ontology of the accident. The accident over here becomes interesting because it almost becomes a transitive verb, as we can see. I mean, it becomes a process of unbecoming.

There is a dark comic quality to it as well as Malabou goes on to say. It is a funny breed, a monster whose operation cannot be explained as any genetic anomaly. A new being comes into the world for a second time out of a deep cut that opens in a biography. But the word 'biography' is interesting over here, because it almost has a textual quality to it.

This is where we find Malabou is such a complex and rich philosopher because she is almost getting a textual analysis of trauma in a certain sense. The writing of one's life, the inscription of one's life becomes interesting. And that becomes connected with trauma because the way the life is written as a textual and scripted process that changes almost permanently due to the trauma.

The idea of the biography comes in. And a new being comes into the world, almost through a textual process. We have a very interesting correlational over here, but in the textual and dramatic processes of unbecoming. A new text emerges and opens in a biography. And as a deep cut that opens in a biography. The process of writing



someone's life, the textualization of someone's life is disrupted permanently and deeply.

It is like a second coming, it is like a second birth. Malabou is using all this very interesting metaphors, but only to highlight the traumatic, the disruptive quality of the accident, which is the, what the entire book is all about.