

Catherine Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, trans. Carolyn Shread, Cambridge: Polity, 2012. 112pp. \$12.95. ISBN 0745652611.

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First published in French in 2009, *Ontology of the Accident* is Catherine Malabou's third book to explore the philosophical connotations of "plasticity." In her seminal *What Should We Do With Our Brain?* (Fr. 2004) Malabou demonstrated that the contemporary neuroscientific idea of the brain as plastic process has profound implications for philosophy. Neuroplastic in nature, the brain is an organ that both "gets formed, and is formative," so it is also a dynamic process that poses a major challenge to some of our basic notions about human identity (*What* 20). Thus plasticity is defined as "the relation that an individual entertains with what, on the one hand, attaches him originally to himself, to his proper form, and with what, on the other hand, allows him to launch himself into the void of all identity, to abandon all rigid and fixed determination" (80). Described in this way plasticity offers a unique model for understanding mental life as the indeterminate performance of deformation and reformation.

Ontology of the Accident builds on Malabou's earlier work by exploring how, when the neural circuit breaks down due to traumatic experience or accident, "the path splits and a new, unprecedented persona comes to live with the former person" (1). Radical changes in the psyche like this have been written about since classical times, but as Malabou observes "rarely in the Western imaginary is metamorphosis presented as a real and total deviation of being" (7). This leads to an intriguing re-reading of Ovid's Metis and Daphne myths, tales in which a "total deviation of being" is almost, but not quite, complete. In the case of Daphne, the nymph turned into a tree while fleeing from Apollo, for instance, we have what Malabou calls a kind of "destructive plasticity"—that is, a physiological metamorphosis that brings her "original" self as a nearly ravished young girl into juxtaposition with her new one: Daphne-as-tree. She remains herself but is carried over into a different form,

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much as victims of brain damage or degenerative mental illness experience psychic metamorphosis, a “destructive plasticity” which makes becoming other a kind of “incomprehensible breaking of all etiological links” to the past self (13).

As a further illustration of destructive plasticity Malabou takes up Franz Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis,” wherein poor Gregor is condemned to continue “being himself” in the hardened body of an insect. Much like the brain damaged individual, Gregor’s awakening to his new psycho-somatic self exemplifies the process of destructive plasticity, for “metamorphosis is existence itself, untying identity instead of reassembling it” (15). Here, however, the Cartesian mind/body split is taken to a new extreme, and the subject can no longer understand himself as an organic human being. Malabou’s discussion of Kafka’s parable prompts a lengthy polemic with Gilles Deleuze, who considers Gregor’s tale to be a failure because it merely re-territorialized the young man’s being, re-mapping his human, Oedipal subjectivity onto the animal—i.e., freezes his becoming-animal and halts his change in static, insect form.¹ For Deleuze, true metamorphosis (and deterritorialized freedom) would take place without any loss of self-transformation or “becoming-form” (16). Malabou is strongly dissatisfied with this reading, arguing that form and essence are inseparable in the idea of a metamorphosis that is sudden and painless. Indeed, she believes “what destructive plasticity invites us to consider is the suffering caused by an absence of suffering, in the emergence of a new form of being, a stranger to the one before” (18). Thus the painful estrangement found in Deleuze’s reading of Gregor is based on a loss of “becoming-form,” a silent re-metamorphosis to which can only be reacted. Malabou, by contrast, wants destructive plasticity to be an ontological phenomenon that can only be grasped *ex post facto* as an image of irrevocable and silent change. Looked at from the both/and standpoint of neuroscience, Malabou argues, destructive plasticity shows evidence of the brain’s ongoing process of “untying identity.” *The Ontology of the Accident* is thus primarily concerned with arguing that

¹ See Deleuze and Guattari’s *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*. In their view, “‘The Metamorphosis’ is the exemplary story of a re-Oedipalization. We would say that the process of Gregor’s deterritorialization through his becoming-animal finds itself blocked for a moment” because “the acts of becoming-animal cannot follow their principle all the way through—thatthey maintain a certain ambiguity that leads to their insufficiency and condemns them to defeat” (14-15).

“we must find a way to think a mutation that engages both form and being, a new form that is literally a form of being” (17).

As with *What Should We Do With Our Brain*, in this volume Malabou relies heavily on the writings of the neurobiologist-theoretician Antonio Damasio, someone who is also a champion of Baruch Spinoza’s understanding of the mind as an affective organ that is the locus of all being. Damasio’s reading of Spinoza naturally focuses on the *Ethics*, wherein the idea of the *conatus* is developed as the brain’s capacity for survival through auto-adaptation. For obvious reasons Malabou regards this vital adaptivity of the brain as crucial, and she even puts forth her own definition of Spinoza’s *conatus* as “the aggregate of dispositions laid down in brain circuitry that, once engaged by internal or environmental conditions, seeks both survival and well-being” (*Ontology* 24-25). The role of the *conatus* in Spinoza is, then, “to ensure this unity, to incarnate it, in the true sense of the word” (26). But here again Deleuze enters the dialogue, arguing that the capacity for “affect” (to feel emotions) never remains the same and often can, in effect, become inhibited (e.g., by mental illness, ageing, or neurological disorders like autism). The very structure of the *conatus* can thus be altered, according to Deleuze, and this is what he calls the “elasticity of the *conatus*” (qtd. in Malabou, *Ontology* 36). Malabou rejects this term as imprecise—the brain is *plastic*, not “elastic,” because it both receives and creates form; elasticity here is less helpful than a “destructive plasticity” which “allows us to radicalize the deconstruction of subjectivity” (37). Since this *conatus* is always vulnerable to irrevocable transformation, as with those suffering severe brain damage or Alzheimer’s Disease, she asks us to imagine “a metamorphosis that is a farewell to being itself” (37).

As another example of how destructive plasticity works to undo identity, Malabou suggests that even the experience of sudden ageing and senility, of becoming alien to our younger selves, we experience the self as a divergence from “original” being. As in Marguerite Duras’ *The Lover*, she observes, the writer’s “style is based entirely on suppressing links and causal connections” that escape the aged writer’s awareness (*Ontology* 61). Duras’ reliance on *asyndeton*, narration filled with gaps and ellipses, is the result of a faulty self-understanding that unravels the path towards accident and non-becoming. It is at this point that Malabou deftly appropriates both Hegel and Freud in order to recuperate the ontological predicament of such “accidental selves.” In Hegel’s

notion of “negative possibility” (an absolute negation that finally leads to affirmation) she finds a concept comparable to Freud’s denegation (*Verneinung*, acknowledging by denying), for in both of these terms there is an “affective and intellectual gesture” which defines the ontological mode of destructive plasticity (74-76). As repression or denial, the affective-intellectual “gesture” of denegation reveals by concealing (as evidential negation), forming lives that are forever “touched by the accident through a perpetual reserving or withdrawal of self-presence” (79). This denegative reservation represents, in her view, the psyche’s ongoing (and unsuccessful) attempt at a total “rejection from presence” (81). Yet, one wonders, does her outline of being as perpetual reservation and negation, suggest that identity resides only in the aftertaste of accidental experience? Or, in other words, is this “farewell to being” in fact not also a farewell to all identity or self-essence? Wherefore, then, the *conatus*?

Finally, *Ontology of the Accident* is an ambitious attempt to think through the problems posed by brain trauma, and in particular as regards such as a deconstructive “form” of being. Destructive plasticity then is concerned with the problem of the self’s nature as a highly fragile and damageable physiological/psychological form. Thus her claim that destructive plasticity can be understood as a radical deconstruction of the subject—since the organism’s instinct for self-preservation is directed at the formation of a new self—is interesting from a number of disciplinary standpoints. For example, Malabou suggests that the Spinozian *conatus* is a process of radical mutation needed for survival—a plastic horizon where problems like psychosis or addiction can be understood as a dramatic movement away from self-identification. Destructive plasticity thus teaches us that completely static forms of life are impossible, but it also indicates that things like history and literary tradition are never ossified and closed off to re-interpretation. The problem of loss arises in Malabou’s reading of “The Metamorphosis,” for her argument that Gregor’s accidental transformation epitomizes the idea of plasticity as a constant deconstruction of identity seems to imply some basic lack of agency. As Ruth Leys points out, if “this tendency to accident or change is ineluctable, we don’t have to worry about bringing about self-transformations or alterations or resistance” (par. 3) since plasticity is inherent in all forms of becoming.

It would seem then that, as a disruption being, destructive plasticity allows us to imagine identity in “formalist” terms as a perpetual deconstruction of (former) *forms* of being/becoming. Thus one may want to begin the book with its remarkable ending, for only on the last page does the author raise the decisive question of whether “the history of being itself consists perhaps of nothing but a series of accidents which . . . disfigure the meaning of essence” (91). This departing question is central to Malabou’s entire project, I think, for it asks whether plasticity is fundamentally a breaking and “untying of identity” through accidental affects, or whether it is a process that enables identity. Clearly these are not mutually exclusive, but in the former Malabou would (despite herself) be aligned with the nomadic schizo-analysis of Deleuze. If, however, plasticity is that which enables our continuous re-fashioning, our steady reformation of identity, one might well ask why plasticity needs to be described as a tool for the “deconstruction of subjectivity”? We can only seek answers to these questions in future volumes, but on its own this short book is commendable for the questions it raises about plasticity in ontological literary criticism.

Works Cited

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