

Catherine Malabou

Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction.

Trans. Carolyn Shread.

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A few years after his death, Derrida is not simply in the air. Like a specter, he blows through the philosophical landscape, whirling and catching in his path, and exposing everyone to the conflicting currents of his own reflections. What does it mean for us, today, to come after Derrida?

At first glance the response could be this little book by Malabou, in which can be discerned a post-deconstructive era. In the foreword Clayton Crockett warns that in her doctoral thesis on Hegel, Malabou informed Derrida about her re-valuation of the Hegelian notion of plasticity: ‘Malabou takes her notion of plasticity from Hegel’s description of the subject as plastic in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*’ (xi). However, in my view, a confrontation with Heidegger seems much more important for Malabou, especially with respect to her thinking of *Being* as a power with ‘the ability to change form and generate new forms in a manner that is consistent with plasticity’ (xiii).

The principal feature of plasticity is autoplacity, a sort of special power well suited to annihilate classical and modern schemes of thought, and, at the same time, something that can replace Derridean *writing*. After deconstructing Western metaphysics or onto-theology, Crockett argues, it appears ‘that the most pervasive, profound and problematic spirit of what we call the West is Christianity, and the need for its deconstruction coincides with what has been called “the return to religion” in contemporary society and thought’ (xvii). But what is really involved in a deconstruction of Christianity? Derrida was conscious of the enormity of this task, and he remained firmly anchored in the Western tradition. His notion of *writing*, for example, appears structured in a very traditional manner.

At the outset of ‘Variations I, for Jacques Derrida’ (Chapter 1), Malabou tells us that her book outlines a movement by which the concept of plasticity gradually asserts itself as the style of an era. Though grateful to Derrida for his teaching, in retracing the intersections between dialectic, destruction and deconstruction, Malabou thinks that in our global era it is time to replace *writing* with plasticity. In order to explain her personal intellectual portrait, her self-portrait—the book has the form of an intellectual autobiography—Malabou invites us to consider it as a sort of transformational mask (faces) built of the profiles of Hegel and Heidegger, Hegel and Freud, Heidegger and Lévi-Strauss, and Hegel and Derrida. We are asked to see it as constructed from the ideology of structuralism (Lévi Strauss) and the two logics of negation, particularly circulating in the thought of Hegel, Heidegger and Derrida. Afterwards, Malabou analyses three motor schemes: plasticity (Hegel), time (Heidegger) and writing (Derrida).

It is interesting that Malabou reminds us that Derrida reproaches Hegel for “denouncing the being-outside-of-itself of the logos”, while he is developing a concept of the negative that is but a prelude to the gathering and closure of the self in presence, without gap or difference. As well as on several occasions Derrida himself defended, even reclaimed, an “unreserved Hegelianism” in counterpoint to Lévi Strauss’ enthusiasm for full origin’ (5).

Plasticity, from Greek *plassein*, means to take or receive form, to mould or to give form. As a scheme by which to think and to do philosophy, plasticity has a twofold advantage. First, it involves, between destruction and deconstruction, a sort of ‘fratricidal hand-to-hand battle of presence and the absenting of presence, the present and its withdrawal’ (8). Second, it can signify both the achievement of presence and its deflagration, its emergence and its explosion. Thus: ‘It is therefore able to situate itself perfectly in the in-between of metaphysics and its other, playing to perfection the part of concept that is some sort of mediator or smuggler’ (8). A bit later, Malabou emphasizes the constant semantic extensions of ‘plasticity’ (including synthetics and explosives). To be sure, plasticity comes after metaphysics and, according to Malabou, appears in many different domains of human activity. Derrida himself spoke of deconstruction as a movement of changeover at work from the beginning. In his view, ‘the movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures’ (10). Yet his notion of *writing*, Malabou holds, is out of date. Today, it is preferable to engage in a dialogue between ‘the three logics of dialectic, destruction, and deconstruction [which] always fit together with one another, constantly exchanging their mobility regimes and speaking one another’s languages’ (21). In light of her *plastic reading*, which aspires to be a sort of metamorphosis of deconstructive reading, Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, with its original circulation of change, exchange and substitution, is the first example of *ontological* plasticity: ‘there is perhaps no reason to talk of the plasticity of Being—as if plasticity were some kind of quality—but of saying that Being is *nothing but* its plasticity’ (36).

In Heidegger’s footsteps, once again, Malabou introduces the important notion of ontological economy: ‘Western thought proceeds from an initial change—exchange of Being for essence, understood as beingness (*Seindheit*)—which prepares its own metamorphosis and gives rise to the other change—the exchange of being for its own essence (*Anwesen*). This *absolute ontological mutability* governed by a lack of outside, is the economic space in which Heidegger’s thought unfurls’ (44, emphasis in original). To be sure, at the level of social and economic organization, metaphysics and capitalism could coincide. Obviously such a statement opens up a vast research project in connection with Hegel and Heidegger, provided alterity is thought without the aid of transcendence.

In the epilogue, Malabou summarizes her book as follows: ‘I believe that I have shown how, from a philosophical point of view, plasticity refers both to the process of temporization at work in the heart of subjectivity (Hegel) and absolute ontological exchangeability (Heidegger) and also how, from the scientific viewpoint, plasticity characterizes a regime of systematic self-organization that is based on the ability of an

organism to integrate the modifications that it experiences and to modify them in return' (61). But with Derrida now no longer in the picture, the value and the sense of Derridean *différance* is lost. We should remember that in *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida once wrote: 'Not only is *différance* irreducible to every ontological or theological—onto-theological—reappropriation, but it opens up the very space in which onto-theology—philosophy—produces its system and its history. It thus encompasses and irrevocably surpasses onto-theology or philosophy' (*Speech and Phenomena: and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, Northwestern University Press 1973, 129ff.).

In the book's afterward, along with her intellectual autobiography, Malabou revisits the figure of flight, and tells us about the impossibility of fleeing—for a continental philosopher of the twenty-first century—towards the outside, while there is no outside. Here is her final suggestion: 'The only possible solution to the impossibility of fleeing would thus be formation or transformation, that is to say, in the first place, the constitution of closure in a form that changes it into an equivalent of flight, by way of bypassing, avoiding, and displacing the prohibition of transition or transgression' (65-6). A little later she emphasizes, 'I name plasticity the logic and the economy of such a formation: the movement of the constitution of an exit, there, where no such exit is possible' (66). Put differently, to think plasticity means to render possible the appearance or formation of alterity where the other is absent. Plasticity is the form of alterity without transcendence. And finally, in order to explain her method, she concludes, 'to think of plasticity is to think about an imminent disruption, a sudden transformation without any change of ground, a mutation that produces a new form of identity and make the former one explode' (67). Differently from the graphic metaphor, the notion of plasticity reveals itself to be more consistent with neurosciences: the plasticity of the brain is radical in that we create our brain. And, in our global era, in the wake of deconstruction, we need 'to bring the trace up to date' (77). It is the last farewell to Jacques Derrida.

But, perhaps there remains the impossibility of fleeing oneself, what Heidegger calls 'fleeing' (*Flucht*) of Dasein. We are once again returned to Heidegger: *das Man* is incapable of saying simply what *is*; of saying *what* this *is*, that a thing *is*.

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