

# Catherine Malabou's Plasticity in Translation

## Le concept de plasticité chez Catherine Malabou, appliqué à la traduction

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### Résumé de l'article

En traduisant *La plasticité au soir de l'écriture. Dialectique, destruction, déconstruction* (2005) de Catherine Malabou en vue de l'édition anglaise de 2009, j'ai été frappée de constater à quel point son concept de plasticité pouvait être utile pour repenser les notions conventionnelles en traduction. Dans cette autobiographie philosophique, qui décrit ses rencontres avec Hegel, Heidegger, et Derrida, Malabou introduit « la plasticité » en suggérant que cette notion, plus contemporaine, pourrait remplacer la conception d'écriture comme schème moteur de Derrida. Après avoir revu et explicité les réflexions innovatrices de Derrida sur la traduction, j'avance que les pouvoirs de donner, de recevoir, d'exploser et de régénérer la forme qui sont décrits par la plasticité modifient la modification et altèrent ainsi la transformation qu'est la traduction. Pour adapter le concept philosophique de Malabou à la traductologie, j'établis une distinction entre la traduction élastique et la traduction plastique, ce qui me permet de faire voler en éclats les paradigmes d'équivalence, qui depuis si longtemps restreignent la théorie et la pratique de la traduction. Si la plasticité sous-tend l'intervention philosophique de Malabou face à l'identité et au genre, elle pousse aussi à une re-conceptualisation féconde de la traduction, en privilégiant non seulement la « sérialité » et la « générativité » par rapport à « une esthétique de nostalgie pour » un original perdu, mais aussi en établissant des liens entre les différents discours identitaires au sujet de la traduction.

# Catherine Malabou's Plasticity in Translation

Carolyn Shread

## Introduction

This article seeks to actualize and regenerate the ways in which we theorize and practice translation by introducing a new philosopher to the field of translation studies. Catherine Malabou is a contemporary, feminist French philosopher whose innovative and prolific writing extends the tradition of continental philosophy while also engaging with both neuroscience and gender studies. Malabou's philosophical training passes through a foundational engagement with the idealist tradition and German existential philosophy. As Jacques Derrida's student and then collaborator in the co-authored *La Contre-allée* (1999), Malabou may be read, at least initially, with reference to France's most notorious recent philosopher. Yet in addition to offering us new readings of Hegel and Heidegger, Malabou's work goes beyond Derrida's articulation of "deconstruction," arguing that Derrida's formulation of the key concept of *writing* is nearing obsolescence, drawing into its dusk. According to Malabou, writing enters a penumbra as it moves towards its replacement by a term on the point of incandescence across a whole range of fields: *plasticity*.<sup>1</sup>

I shall suggest that we adopt plasticity as a productive new way to conceptualize the art and practice of translation. As I

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1 Shread, "The Horror of Translation" (forthcoming) offers further discussion of translation in regard to Malabou's philosophy.

translated Malabou's *La Plasticité au soir de l'écriture: Dialectique, destruction, déconstruction* (2005) into English, I was struck by the resonance of her philosophy for the translation process itself. In this philosophical autobiography, Malabou opens with an evocation of articulated, or transformational, masks, citing Claude Levi-Strauss' description of these artifacts at the Museum of Natural History in New York City. In the image of a mask of a mask, a plural mask composed of multiple faces that open out from one another, Malabou finds a potent metaphor to describe her successive philosophical engagements with Hegel, Heidegger and Derrida. She talks about dislocations in their systems and the split representations they offer her as a way of explaining how she came to elaborate her concept of plasticity through the periodic confrontations of their philosophies. Articulation struck me as an equally suggestive image for the processes and products of translation, a modeling of the way in which translation is not so much the masking of an original as the dislocation of a text's form, the possibility of its plastic reformulation, and perhaps this is the most accessible way to understand the notion of plastic translation I shall propose here.<sup>2</sup>

Malabou's work is not only beginning to be known in Anglophone North America, but also in other countries around the world as it has already been translated into Spanish, German, Italian, and Japanese. Widening the Anglophone public from the 2009 *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, published in the United States by Columbia University Press, Polity Press in the U.K. commissioned me to translate both *Changer de différence: Le féminin et la question philosophique* (2009) and *Ontologie de l'accident: Essai sur la plasticité destructrice* (2009) to add to the list of Malabou's works that have already been translated into English over the last five years. Given that a full appreciation of Malabou's philosophical contribution has been slow in France, it is likely that recognition of her stature as an important twenty-first century philosopher will be premised on the translation of

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2 In my successive engagements with the work of Bracha Ettinger and Catherine Malabou, I find my own transformational mask, hinging these two thinkers to develop a practice and theorization of feminist translation. For a description of Ettinger's psychoanalytic theory and the concept of metramorphic translation see Shread (2008).

her works and the creation of an international space of reception for her interventions, starting in the United States where she has taught and lectured regularly since 2007 and the U.K. where she has taught since 2011. Critical reflections on the way French theory was introduced into North America through English translations from the 1970s, for instance Claire Goldberg Moses' article "Made in America: 'French Feminism' in Academia," remind us of the impact of receiving cultures in translational exchanges, and most especially the way in which translations often serve the needs of discourses in the target culture. Similar interests and influences are no doubt at work in my own project to discuss Malabou's work in a North American context as a means of encouraging the wider circulation of her texts. Like the "French philosophy" of her predecessors, translation may thus prove to be integral to the acknowledgement of the significance of Malabou's thought.

Similar to earlier transfers of Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, this new importation of French theory into North America is a feminist project firstly on account of a determination to give Malabou her due as a key figure in contemporary philosophy. Her work has significant implications for reconceptualizing one of the key tools of feminist thought and queer theory, namely gender. In bringing gender and queer theory into conversation with the speculative tradition, Malabou transforms the terms of the field; moreover, in challenging the established notion of difference to change in *Changer de différence*, she speaks directly to one of the core concepts of feminism. All of these innovations are of interest to the theorization of "feminist translation" whose implications and practices I seek to extend.<sup>3</sup>

Keeping a keen eye on women's positions and contributions, Malabou speaks directly to our modern condition, our interactions with new technologies, and the failings, stresses, and hopes in global politics, societies, and economies as they

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3 This research was undertaken while I held a Research Associateship at the Five College Women's Studies Research Center in South Hadley, Massachusetts, USA in Spring 2009. I would like to thank Laura Lovett, EB Lehman and all the associates for their questions, inspiration, and support in the preparation of this paper.

impact the community and the individual. Just as the new methodologies and epistemological insights that have emerged from investigations in the interdisciplinary field of women's studies have proved their resonance for a great many disciplines, translation studies will benefit from turning its attention to Malabou's philosophical contribution.

### *Plasticité* Plasticity

Responding to what she called *l'appel insistant d'un mot* (Malabou, 1999b, p. 7), in 1999 Malabou organized an interdisciplinary colloquium at Le Fresnoy,<sup>4</sup> on the theme of plasticity. Taking her term from Hegel's philosophy where it first began to play its role as a concept,<sup>5</sup> Malabou made it the core of her doctoral thesis and has subsequently sought to respond to the ways in which plasticity has become an increasingly important theme in contemporary science, art, and thought. Consequently, the participants in the colloquium, whose contributions were published in 2000 as a magnificent tribute to the power of *ce désir d'incendie lexical* (Malabou, 1999b, p. 7) ranged from artists and neuroscientists to molecular physicists, musicians, writers and filmmakers. Why such a breadth of fields? Because, according to Malabou, plasticity is becoming the new "motor scheme" of our time. Returning to Kant, Malabou follows the meaning he gave to scheme as "procédé général de l'imagination pour procurer à un concept son image" (Kant cited in Malabou, 2000, p. 209). In other words, a motor scheme is more than a metaphor, more than a notion, more than a concept; it is one of the inescapable means through which we think, understand, and model the world. Malabou's bold claim is therefore that in place of Derrida's attention to writing, "plasticity gradually asserted itself as the style of an era" (Malabou, 2005, trans., p. 1).

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4 Le Fresnoy is a teaching, research, and production arts center housing the *Studio national des arts contemporains*, in Turcoing, France: <<http://www.lefresnoy.net/>>

5 "Mais c'est Hegel qui, le premier, engage le mot en son avenir conceptuel" (Malabou, 1999b, p. 8).

To explain the multiple connotations of plasticity, we must return to the French word *plasticité*, in which some of the conjunctions are more evident. Just as in English, plasticity connotes both the giving and receiving of form, and is therefore associated with what are commonly called in French, *les arts plastiques*, the plastic arts, such as sculpture or modeling. Plasticity thus works in terms of both hard and malleable materials: the marble to which the sculptor gives form or the clay the potter molds. Of course, many of the techniques used in the plastic arts combine processes of giving and receiving form. Plasticity is also associated with modern technological interventions on the body, as in plastic surgery. We see plasticity at the intersection of art and medicine in the performance work of St. Orlan, who has put her multiple cosmetic surgeries up for viewing as spectacle, artistic project, and cultural critique.

Aside from these initial associations, the field that has been transformative for Malabou's thought is neuroscience. Malabou seeks to innovate continental philosophy through her observation that despite the absolute resistance of many European philosophers to discoveries in the sciences over the last twenty years, this confrontation and the ensuing productive discussion is unavoidable. Offering a Kantian update in a 2009 article in the newspaper *Libération* entitled "Pour une critique de la raison neurobiologique," Malabou argued "il est temps de cesser de nous protéger de la science, qui contient à l'évidence beaucoup plus d'enseignements philosophiques aujourd'hui que la philosophie." The insights of brain plasticity, coupled with the regenerative possibilities of stem cells, form the basis of the social and political analysis Malabou draws out in *Que faire de notre cerveau?* (2004). Countering clichéd views of science being a domain of determinism, and the brain a central organizing computer, in this book Malabou reads recent scientific research to suggest, *a contrario*, that the organizational structures and functioning of the brain offer us, above all, a model of freedom.

A further connotation of *plasticité* which is obscured in English, is the association with *plastiquer*, that is, to blow up or bomb using plastic explosives. Plasticity is indeed an explosive concept—not only in terms of its impact on philosophical

thought, but also in its engagement with destructive events. In *Ontologie de l'accident: Essai sur la plasticité destructrice*, Malabou interrogates the formative impact of the destructive event, looking to literature to describe the transformative moment at which identity is breached, unhinged, re-articulated. This concern with the event that precipitates a decisive change was also the subject of her 2007 book *Les Nouveaux blessés: De Freud à la neurologie, penser les traumatismes contemporains*, in which she explores the negative, annihilating aspects of plasticity by staging a confrontation between psychoanalysis and neurology.

So plasticity combines the molding of giving and receiving form with the explosive rearticulation to which form may equally well be subject. An alternative way to approach plasticity is to look to that which it is defined against: “‘plastique’ s’oppose à ‘élastique’, ‘visqueux’ ou encore à ‘polymorphe’ dont on le croit trop souvent synonyme” (Malabou, 1999b, p. 312). Plasticity is not elasticity, nor is it flexibility, and this distinction is critical for this intervention in translation studies. Malabou’s distinguishing of the polymorphous from the plastic may be a welcome step for those who reacted against Derrida’s deconstructive texts precisely on account of an anxiety about the deferral of meaning, the infinite slippage of the signifier in the graphic model. Malabou’s material formalism palliates the arduous task of deconstruction. Yielding to transformative movements, while offering an obstacle to total reformulation due to material constraints, the plastic offers a more limited rescripting of meaning. In *L’Avenir de Hegel*, Malabou makes these distinctions clearly in her definition of plasticity:

By analogy to a malleable material, children are said to be “plastic.” However, the adjective “plastic,” if it is certainly opposed to “rigid,” “fixed,” and “ossified,” is not to be confused with “polymorphous.” Things that are plastic preserve their shape, as does the marble in a statue: once given a configuration, it is unable to recover its initial form. “Plastic,” thus, designates those things that yield themselves to being formed while *resisting* deformation. (Malabou, 1994 trans., p. 204)

Malabou’s working through of plasticity founds her claim that it is the new motor scheme of our era, a role in which it supercedes

Derrida's analysis of the graphic trace of writing. Where Derrida's *œuvre* constitutes a breathtaking *grammatology*, or science of writing, Malabou looks at the discoveries of recent neuroscience and submits that the plastic is now the conceptual reflection of our time and that as the relevance of writing as a motor scheme fades, the plastic comes into focus as a more pertinent scheme. In *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, she writes:

The constitution of writing as a motor scheme was the result of a gradual movement that began with structuralism and found its mooring in linguistics, genetics, and cybernetics. A pure linguistic image, the image of the gap or difference, gradually established itself as the scheme of an ontological organization. [...] Yet today we must acknowledge that the power of the linguistic-graphic scheme is diminishing and that it has entered a twilight for some time already. It now seems that plasticity is slowly but surely establishing itself as the paradigmatic figure of organization in general. (Malabou, 2005 trans., pp. 57-59)

Shifting from writing to plasticity, Malabou explains that the graphic associations of the trace are replaced by "the geographic or political metaphor of *assemblies, forms, or neuronal populations*." Furthermore, since "synaptic fissures are certainly gaps, but they are *gaps that are able to form or take shape*," she claims that "*plasticity forms when DNA no longer writes*" (Malabou, 2005, trans., p. 60). In other words, the genetic script of neuroscience, which seemed to imply an oppressive determinism, is replaced by an opening, by possibilities of freedom, thanks to new understandings of the formative possibilities of brain plasticity.

These are some of the multiple ways in which Malabou argues for the dawning of a new paradigm for thought by exposing the current relevance and productivity of the term plasticity. The aim of this article is to explore the implications of plasticity within translation, one particular field, but a field that is particularly invested and experienced in the processes, modes, and effects of both linguistic and cultural change. It may also be, conversely, that the practice of translation has something to contribute to the elaboration of plasticity as a concept. In order to explore these mutual implications, I turn now to a brief description of some of the ways Derrida's philosophic deconstructive method



contributed to unsettling established views of translation before discussing the manifestations and possibilities of plasticity within translation studies.

## Philosophies of Translation

Unlike Derrida, whose many texts on translation produced a rethinking of translation that is still a matter of contemporary debate and that is arguably the most obvious area for discussions of the intersections of translation and philosophy, Malabou has not spoken about translation. Or, rather, she has not spoken about it yet; for one might well envisage her intervention given both her philosophical heritage and the fact she has already formulated descriptions of plastic reading. Indeed, it may be that ultimately it will appear that Malabou, like Derrida, has spoken about nothing but translation.

My purpose is to articulate the ways in which plasticity talks about translation since it is the nature of a motor scheme that its range of application is vast, requiring elaborations by theorists across many fields. To my knowledge, no one is yet working on the implications of Malabou's philosophic thought for translation studies. While translation is the main theme of Jean-Paul Martinon's recent book *On Futurity: Malabou, Nancy, Derrida* (2007), his presentation excludes translation studies' scholarship from the discussion. In Martinon's book translation is a trope, rather than a working practice that has elaborated a complex and significant theoretical discourse. Despite Martinon's intricate reading of the philosophy of Malabou, Nancy, and Derrida, translation studies scholars may be disappointed that he takes translation as his topic without consulting any translation theorists other than the obligatory reference to Walter Benjamin's iconic text, "The Task of the Translator" and Andrew Benjamin's *Translation and the Nature of Philosophy: A New Theory of Words* (1989), which keeps his work in the camp of philosophers talking about translation, rather than engaging with translation studies. One of my intentions therefore is to initiate an engagement between the longstanding philosophical discourse on translation and the multitude of approaches to translation that make up the field of translation studies.

Since its inception in the 1970s, translation studies might be said to start from a powerful and enduring popular Western notion that defines translation as a derivative version of an original. In this dominant view, translation is devalued, seen as a repetition of an original referent. This understanding of translation tends to promote a status of invisibility through the common view that the better a translation, the less evident it is. From this perspective, the ultimate goal is a translation that offers direct access to original without the bother of a foreign language or culture. Moreover, there is no acknowledgement of the role of the translator as agent of change. This prejudice continues to evacuate translators' names from the covers of the books they translate, writes their contracts as "work for hire" and explains the insistence on the fabled neutrality of the translational act. These conceptions have proven to be highly resistant to attempts to challenge them, despite their deleterious effects on both the agents and customers of translation. They are the commonly shared, baseline understandings of translation that continue to overshadow discussions about the nature and possibilities of translation.

Even institutions that might be expected to challenge these preconceptions continue to perpetuate them. For instance, while both the American Comparative Literature Association and the Modern Language Association in the United States finally turned their attention to translation, making it the presidential focus of both of their conferences in 2009, the paratextual message of the covers of books in the MLA *Text and Translations* series implicitly re-inscribes this translational model, despite its best intentions. Almost all the texts and translations in this series employ a similar design for their covers: the "source" and "target" texts invert color pairings, so that, for instance, while the "original" French might use a tan background offset against a green border and font, the English translation takes the same green offset against a tan border and script. Standing out against these complementary color choices, the covers of both the English and the French texts share a single identificatory illustration, as much as to suggest: a translation is no more than a change of language, a complementary shift in the background color, but the core image, the *meaning of the text* remains the same, and in fact

is not changed at all. This repeated image promises the same text and translation, a shared identity despite translation. Is this really what translation does?

The dominant models of translation, both popular and academic, remain the host of approaches that revolve around equivalence. There are many different equivalency theories in translation, traversing the spectrum of linguistically-based to cultural studies approaches to translation. While theorists may have tinkered with exactly which elements of the translation should be equivalent to their corresponding terms in the original—whether at the level of the word, meaning, effect, or function—the overarching, and still predominant, understanding is that the goal of translation is to achieve the closest possible match. In this model, which is entirely predicated on the primary text, an ethics and discourse of accuracy and fidelity has built up around the multiple ways in which equivalence is practiced, with a view to ensuring that translators remain in their place as invisible conveyors of the secondary term.

In conversation with, and inspired by, both feminist and post-colonial critiques of conventional translation models and practices, Derrida offered a dramatic reformulation of translation in his essay “Des Tours de Babel” (1985). The implications of deconstruction spoke heresy to the established truths of translation: that the original is hermetic and must not be altered; that a translation must be faithful copy of the original; that both text and translation must effectively convey the same effect or play the same function. More than anything, Derrida unsettled the debate by arguing that it is the original that depends on the translation, and not vice versa. To suggest that the original owes anything—let alone its life and very survival—to translations is to turn the table on the most sacred rules of the traditional translation contract. It is to alter the economy, the aesthetics, the ethics, and the practices of translation. Yet these were the implications of Derrida’s philosophy for translation. Arguing for a conception of translation that celebrates seriality and generativity in place of the conventional narrative of nostalgia and deference for a lost original, Derrida shifted the ground of translation.

Derrida's re-reading of Walter Benjamin's foundational essay, "The Task of the Translator," deconstructed common practices and theories of translation, radically altering the status of translation within the canon and revitalizing the translator as agent, now empowered with a new mission with regard to the text and her translation. While the consequences of Derrida's alternative translational economy have yet to be accepted within a large part of the field of translation studies, my purpose is to place Malabou within that revolutionary heritage by exploring the ways in which plasticity might contribute to a further reconceptualization of translation.

### Introducing Plasticity to Translation Studies

In a typically deconstructive move, Malabou finds in the concept of plasticity, the coexisting power to give, receive, explode, or regenerate form. How then might plasticity help us refresh our understanding of translation? The conventional equivalency-based translation theories described above all fit what I term an *elastic paradigm of translation*, as opposed to *plastic translation*. Debates in translation studies almost invariably center on the question of how far the translator stretches the text: is it a literal, word-for-word, adaptive or free translation? Are compensatory strategies, whereby a loss in meaning is supplemented by additions to the text, legitimate or do they over-extend the translator's remit? What are we to think of the deliberately abusive or resistant translation advocated by post-colonial translation theorists following the provocative call of Lawrence Venuti to re-establish parity among the power differentials manifested in translations through his much debated "foreignizing" techniques that import and highlight the foreign? Faced with the pressure to produce a "fluent" translation, when might a translator be justified in privileging the foreign over the domestic, resulting in a less immediately readable text? How do readers view translations designed to challenge their world-view through deliberate difficult and uncanny reminders of linguistic and cultural difference? Over and over again the question asked is just how elastic can a translation be? And in every instance the first and determinant term of the binary is the text to be translated, rather than the texts that it becomes in translation.

In an elastic translation paradigm, the key structural issue is that of flexibility and the legitimacy of varying degrees of elasticity. So long as this paradigm prevails, the underlying assumption remains the same, since elasticity is predicated on the ability of a translation to revert to the original form. Elasticity can only be measured against a fixed point: the original presence assumed to lie behind the translation's representation. This deference to the original as the first and last term, the immutable essence, not only misconstrues the mobility, the inherent mutability of the "source," but also amounts to a refusal to allow translation to take place.

Plastic translation alters the debate decisively. Contrasting traditional elastic translation to a new vision of plastic translation allows us to move forward with the liberation Derrida effected in translation through a deconstructive reading of the relation of "original" to translation. Malabou's concept of plasticity offers us new tools for envisioning an alternative relation between translation and "original," a relation that eludes the essentializing equations of 1:1 identity by rethinking both the being of a text and the mode of change that is translation. Whereas Derrida's deconstruction of identity emphasized the difference inherent to iteration, the fact that identity is never self-coinciding, and hence that a fixed referent or original meaning which would determine translation is an illusion, Malabou's plastic model of identity opens up the articulations at work within identity, the articulations that reflect what she describes as "ontological transformability" or "ontological mutability" (Malabou, 2004a, trans. pp. 269 and 287). As an art that is all about the exercising of change, this plastic conception of being as becoming is precisely the place of translation.

To restate my argument, this time in terms of a model of differing economies, I might say that elastic translation deals in exchanges revolving around a metaphysical essence, the original while plastic translation recognizes the "migratory and metamorphic" (Malabou, 2004a, trans. p. 269) movements of being itself, and hence the inevitability of translation. Thus, although in an elastic model there may be an appearance of change, this surface impression overlays "the loop of a generalized

equivalence where everything is of equal value" (*ibid.*, p. 272). In this economy no real translation takes place, just refashioning: "Man, stamping his seal everywhere, would be made master of the infinite fashionability of essences, and engage in [...] a series of metamorphoses in which one and the same form would be reformed, and the same pathway followed" (*ibid.*). Following Malabou, if we take the example of the metamorphoses of the gods in Greek myths, it is only the external form (or the background color of the MLA text) that changes, never the nature or substance of the God (or inset illustration), however many metamorphoses occur.

How then does this differ from the economy at work in plastic translation? By letting go of the illusion of a fixed referent in the original—the gold standard of the translation economy if you will—plastic translation practices an alternative economy, an economy that recognizes "the economic law of being: each thing, beginning with being itself, is constantly exchanged with itself, moved between presence and presence, value and value, and properness and disappropriation" (*ibid.*, 2004a, trans. p. 278). Understanding change through the different economies it mobilizes allows Malabou to draw out the distinctive features of plasticity as a descriptive for change. In doing so, she shows how plasticity changes change, and this in turn implies a change in our conceptions of translation, a remolding into plastic translation.

## Changing Change

Returning again to Derrida may help clarify the intervention that Malabou makes in her philosophical appropriation of plasticity. Plasticity moves us from the idiom of the deferred trace of writing to the difference of form, as Malabou explains:

I have always been surprised to notice that, in his article "Differance," Derrida doesn't sufficiently honor an essential yet banal signification of the world [*sic*] "difference": "change," "variation," or "variant." To be different, according to the dictionary, is, among other possibilities, to be changed, unrecognizable, modified, transformed. A differentiation can thus also designate a transformation. But this sense does not appear clearly in Derrida's text. He writes: "We know that the

verb *différer*...has two meanings which seem quite distinct...the action of putting off until later [...] Second: “to be not identical, to be other, discernible, etc.” The signification of transformation, of becoming other, by metamorphosis for example, stays in the shadows. “Differance” is never characterized as a change in form. (2007a, p. 439)

So Malabou’s work is to draw out the types of transformation that precipitate “differance” through changes in form. In an article entitled “Again: ‘The Wounds of the Spirit Heal, and Leave No Scars behind,’”<sup>6</sup> which describes her response to Derrida’s questions to her during her thesis defense, Malabou unpackages the notion of recovery as a form of change. She offers “three paradigms of recovery: the paradigm of the phoenix, the paradigm of tissue, and the paradigm of the salamander” (Malabou, 2007b, p. 30). In the resurrection of the phoenix she reads the dialectic; in the spider or the silk-worm’s tissue she recognizes the wounds, cuts, and traces of the deconstructive text; in the regenerative powers of the salamander, she sees the possibilities of the post-deconstructive plastic. Three modes of change, the last of which is premised on the insights of biologists who recognize that the condition of possibility of regeneration is a “deprogramming” or “de-writing,” the plasticity that enables cells to “modify their program, to break away from their text” (Malabou, 2007b, p. 36).

Let us consider these paradigms briefly in the field of translation studies to see what they offer. In the phoenix, we see the ultimate elastic translation, raising the spirit of an original text over and again from the ashes of its translations; the deconstructive spinning spider recognizes the absence of a referent and reworks the translational web afresh every morning; the salamander loses its tail, but grows another one. This last translation is the plastic vision proposed by Malabou when she speaks of “a completely new conception of transformation” (Malabou, 2004b, Eng. trans. p. 11).<sup>7</sup> This plastic split puts a new light on the infuriating “black box” model of translation, in which

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6 This article was retranslated and revised in *Changing Difference*.

7 In the context of this quotation, Malabou is talking about rethinking our socio-political governance, but her point can be extended into all

something mysteriously goes in and something other comes out. For what if the black box is not the mystery of exchange, nor the scandal of the deconstructive cut, but rather a manifestation of the synaptic genius of translation? The ability of translation to regenerate. This then would be how the practice of translation changes change.

To illustrate how this regenerative scheme works in practice, I will start with the way in which plastic translation might deal differently with the languages of a text and its translation. One underlying assumption of equivalency theories is that a translation forms a binary of languages in the place of original monolingualism, despite the fact that the monolingual conceit is but another manifestation of the particular power dynamics of our era. Plastic translation more readily acknowledges multilingualism not just in the translation, but also in the source text. For instance, I recently translated Haitian writer Marie Vieux-Chauvet's *Les Rapaces* (1987) from French into English. In the process, what emerged from the French in the English was a suppressed Kreyòl language and culture that sits well in a new transnational frame where speakers commonly shift "de l'anglais au créole comme on change de vitesse" (Laferrière, 2007, p. 89).<sup>8</sup> As a colleague in Haiti now prepares a Kreyòl translation of the French the question we ask is what French might remain behind as traces of its hierarchy and status within the Haitian social, political and cultural scene? Certainly the French will emerge differently in the Kreyòl to the way the Kreyòl reengendered the English, yet in both instances the effect differs from Venuti's definition of resistance, since it in fact accords with the multilingual practices and experiences of its readers. It is the plasticity of translation that allows the text to return to an originary multilingualism, to become in a process of change through its own internal mutations, which in this instance release and reposition a repressed language and culture.

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other fields of human activity. This essay was retranslated in *Changing Difference*.

8 For a more detailed description of this process, see Shread (2009) : "La traduction métramorphique: entendre le kreyòl dans la traduction anglaise des *Rapaces* de Marie Vieux-Chauvet." I use Kreyòl here to distinguish Haitian Kreyòl from the many other Creole languages.



I would be remiss in discussing plasticity in translation if I were not to comment on the process of translating Malabou's book which gives rise to this concept. And yet here it is not so much what I as translator might have done to her text that I wish to describe as a second instance of plastic translation. Rather what stands out from this translation experience is what the text did to me. It is the voice of Malabou that altered me, rather than vice versa. From my first encounter with Malabou, when I translated "An Eye at the Edge of Discourse," it was I that was changed. I fell in love with Malabou's voice and this proximity, this transformation of presence, this performance of Malabou, impacted my own writing—not just in her translation, but outside, in my other writing worlds. I felt my language mutating, regenerating. Was it the parroting, the parody, the mimicking for which translation is scorned and so widely derided as an academic pursuit? Or was this change the unacknowledged process that draws translators to their practice? For all that we sign contracts to deliver a true and faithful text, we make no promises as to our own exchanges, our own affective and psychic compulsion to emerge from each translation altered and different to ourselves.

### Plasticity and Feminist Translation

At this point one might ask where in this discussion did we leave the opening proposal that plasticity offers a valuable contribution to conceptions of gender and to new theorizations of feminist translation? The answer lies in Malabou's reformulation of notions of identity and change. For if, as she claims, "it is not (or is no longer) a matter of sculpting an identity or unrelentingly transforming everything —*plasticity, again, is not flexibility*—but of entering into the errancy of genres and reaching the point where every genre and essence leave themselves" (Malabou, 2004a, trans. p. 285), then plastic gender is very different from commonly understood elastic conceptions of gender. In contrast to conceptions of gender that see it as a progressive reformulation of the assumptions of biological sex in terms of a series of roles and identity choices, but again always in terms of the elastic relation to an originary fixed point, plasticity offers an anti-essentializing view of gender. This move is the insight that aligns Malabou's work with the work of queer theorists such as Judith Butler with

whom she co-authored *You Be My Body For Me* (2009). As she explains,

Today, the concept of plasticity tends to become at once the dominant motif of interpretation and the most productive exegetic and heuristic tool of our time. [...] Today, *new metamorphic occurrences* appear that impose themselves at the level of social and economic organization, at the level of "genre" or of the sexual identity of individuals, that show that the privileged regime of change is the continued implosion of form, by which form revises and reforms itself continually. (Malabou, 2007a, p. 439)

While in *Plasticité au soir de l'écriture*, there is no more than a footnote to the effect that this theorization has important implications for a rethinking of gender, it recurs as an increasingly important theme throughout Malabou's texts and is central to *Changer de différence*, suggesting that this is an area to be mined by theorists eager to draw out of plasticity its liberating consequences. And we are talking about consequences, for even as Malabou argues that plasticity is the image of our era, she also observes that we do not yet know it, that we have not yet assumed the plasticity of our brain. This is the main thrust of her argument in *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* "The brain is a work, and we do not know it. We are its subjects—authors and products at once—and we do not know it. 'Humans make their own history, but they do not know that they make it,' says Marx, intending thereby to awaken a consciousness of historicity" (Malabou, 2004b, trans., p. 1). There is a highly pragmatic horizon in Malabou's work. When she asks what we should do with our brain, it is because a plastic understanding acknowledges that there is something to do. What then am I to do with this concept of plasticity? What new avenues does plasticity offer feminist translation? Where feminist translation has begun to be synonymous with identity markers, the identity politics that wears its politics in its obvious distortions to the text, Malabou's plasticity returns feminist translation to the regenerative impulse from which it emerged in Canada in the 1980s, endorsing the intuition that transformative creativity is the essence of both text and translation.

## Conclusion: *Traductrice, plasticienne textuelle*

In her conclusion to *Le Change Heidegger*, Malabou questions why it is that a plastic understanding of change is not more widespread, why the metaphysical paradigm is so enduring. She links this question to Heidegger's infamous comment in his interview in *Spiegel* that philosophy cannot produce immediate changes in the world, and then goes on to suggest, echoing Heidegger, that the plastic practices of change are the purview of a rare creativity:

Philosophy cannot, of course, *cause* upheaval in the effectivity or actuality of the present of the world. But it paradoxically enough only owes the impossibility of its doing so to its *power of metamorphosis*. Why does philosophy, Heidegger asks in *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, remain unable to initiate an immediate mutation of the condition of the world? "Because philosophy is the direct concern of the few. Which few? The ones who transform [metamorphose] creatively, who unsettle things." (Malabou, 2004a, trans. p. 275)

In the translator, I see the practitioner of that creativity. Not always and not in every case of translation of course, but at least as the horizon of possibility that translation studies theorists have sought to articulate and develop in their translational practice. It is this possibility that explains an enduring fascination with translation, for this is an art that bears witness to the plastic possibilities of the human: translation enacts and embodies plastic change and bucks the repeated attempts to limit transformation, despite the multiple discourses that have sought to set the terms of exchange.

Beyond this artistic practice, in translation we also glimpse the poignant insight that Malabou offers us:

Those who "transform creatively" deliver transformation from stupidity (stupidity as such as well as their own), and create the conditions of visibility of the subdued revolution of the reality—the everyday, affective, technological, philosophical, and economic reality—of the destruction of metaphysics. This reality is one that can only appear to some people, because it takes an entirely novel gaze, cast under a wholly new light, to understand it: *we started a revolution without at all realizing we were*. (Malabou, 2004a, trans. p. 279)

Is it not then because it is never a sufficient copy, but rather because of its revolutionary intent, that translation has for long been called upon to keep in its place? Is it not that it fails, but rather, that it can see too much, that makes translation so dangerous, so suspect, and so damaging an occupation? To understand this is no small thing for those who for so long have had their lot cast among *les belles infidèles*. Unfaithful, yes! Not to an original essence, but to the groundings of metaphysics, the claims of presence, the refusal of plasticity. In recognition of this potential then, to signal the ambition alive in every act of translation, I sign *traductrice, plasticienne textuelle*.

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**ABSTRACT: Catherine Malabou's Plasticity in Translation** — Translating Catherine Malabou's *La Plasticité au soir de l'écriture: Dialectique, destruction, déconstruction* (2005) for its 2009 English publication, I was struck by how suggestive

Malabou's concept of plasticity is for a reworking of conventional notions of translation. In this philosophical autobiography of her encounters with Hegel, Heidegger, and Derrida, Malabou introduces "plasticity," suggesting that the more contemporary notion of plasticity supersedes Derrida's proposal of writing as motor scheme. Reviewing and developing Derrida's innovative discussions of translation, this article argues that the giving, receiving, exploding, and regenerating of form described by plasticity changes change, and therefore alters the transformation that is translation. Adapting Malabou's philosophical concept to the field of translation studies, I make a distinction between elastic translation and plastic translation, which allows us to break free of paradigms of equivalence that have for so long constrained translation theories and practice. While plasticity drives Malabou's philosophical intervention in relation to identity and gender, it also enables a productive reconceptualization of translation, one which not only privileges seriality and generativity over narratives of nostalgia for a lost original, but which also forges connections across different identity discourses on translation.

**RÉSUMÉ : Le concept de plasticité chez Catherine Malabou, appliqué à la traduction** — En traduisant *La plasticité au soir de l'écriture. Dialectique, destruction, déconstruction* (2005) de Catherine Malabou en vue de l'édition anglaise de 2009, j'ai été frappée de constater à quel point son concept de plasticité pouvait être utile pour repenser les notions conventionnelles en traduction. Dans cette autobiographie philosophique, qui décrit ses rencontres avec Hegel, Heidegger, et Derrida, Malabou introduit « la plasticité » en suggérant que cette notion, plus contemporaine, pourrait remplacer la conception d'écriture comme schème moteur de Derrida. Après avoir revu et explicité les réflexions innovatrices de Derrida sur la traduction, j'avance que les pouvoirs de donner, de recevoir, d'exploser et de régénérer la forme qui sont décrits par la plasticité modifient la modification et altèrent ainsi la transformation qu'est la traduction. Pour adapter le concept philosophique de Malabou à la traductologie, j'établis une distinction entre la traduction élastique et la traduction plastique, ce qui me permet de faire voler en éclats les paradigmes d'équivalence, qui depuis si longtemps restreignent la théorie et la pratique de la traduction. Si la plasticité sous-



tend l'intervention philosophique de Malabou face à l'identité et au genre, elle pousse aussi à une re-conceptualisation féconde de la traduction, en privilégiant non seulement la « sérialité » et la « générativité » par rapport à « une esthétique de nostalgie pour » un original perdu, mais aussi en établissant des liens entre les différents discours identitaires au sujet de la traduction.

**Keywords:** Catherine Malabou, plasticity, deconstruction, feminist translation, change

**Mots-clés :** Catherine Malabou, plasticité, déconstruction, la traduction féministe, le changement

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