

Trans-formed identity. Catherine Malabou's reading of Hegel

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ABSTRACT: The article reviews Catherine Malabou's interpretation of Hegel, as a deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence and a discussion with gender theories, which disregard the body. The body appears in her interpretation as form and the Subject, as necessary alienation, as trans-formation of the body. There is a preeminence of plasticity over ontology. If the body is the place where the irreducible alienation of subjective experience is experienced, and if this alienation is not resolved in a static identity of me and you, of an ipseity and an intersubjectivity, the body is the setting in forms that are not fixed instances, but that are preserved and lost or even exploded.

KEY-WORDS: Plasticity; Hegel; Body; Gender Identity.

1. Introduction

Catherine Malabou's work proposes a way out of the sterilising reading of Hegel¹. This reading made of Hegel the cultivator of a philosophy of teleology and tautological identity, with the consequent rejection of the possibility of the irruption of something radically new, of an event. This sterilising reading also made him a problematic thinker for feminisms. Because either Hegel relegated women to the role of bearers of a norm that was in collision with the political order (in the famous interpretation of Antigone), or his philosophy represented the top of a cultural framework that described as rational, which was strictly masculine (a cultural framework on which one had to "spit", to borrow Carla Lonzi's words)². Moreover, Hegel blamed women: he hinted at a course of action to leave the comfortable place of feminine "immanence" and to venture into a struggle to exist (in the existentialist re-reading of the dialectic between lordship and servitude).

For Malabou, on the contrary, Hegel can be both a thinker of a future non-identical to the past and a prism through which to speak from feminisms. The latter is not new. It could

¹ MALABOU, C. **El porvenir de Hegel: plasticidad, temporalidad, dialéctica**. Lanús: Editorial Palinodia; Ediciones La Cebra, 2013 [1996].

² LONZI, C. **Escupamos sobre Hegel y otros escritos**. Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón, 2017 [1972].



already be read in Simone De Beauvoir's proposal³, but also in the works of Luce Irigaray⁴, Judith Butler⁵ and in Jean-Baptiste Vuillerod's recent revision⁶. Malabou's re-reading, however, combines both interpretative stakes, and this offers a renewed view of both Hegelian interpretations and feminisms: a view that places itself "between and against" biologicist essentialisms and gender constructivisms⁷. Malabou's work aims to position itself as a "new materialism"⁸, which innovates in the pillars on which it is based: it seeks to recreate Hegel, while at the same time intervening in feminisms. This article aims to recover the centrality of her interpretation of the Incarnation in Hegel, in order to think the body of women, understood as an other-identity, as a trans-identity.

2. *Masculine reason*

In the mid-1980s, Genevieve Lloyd argued how Western philosophy had identified reason with the masculine gender. Far from adding an argument for cultural relativisms, what was at stake, for Lloyd, was to review how reason had operated not only as an examination of beliefs, in pursuit of its universality and objectivity, but as an assessment of the characters that constituted a person. That is, reason was not only a cognitive criterion, an examination concerning truth, but the postulation of ideals of personality and conduct, from which femininity was either systematically excluded or represented as otherness.

Reason has figured in western culture not only in the assessment of beliefs, but also in the assessment of character. It is incorporated not just into our criteria of truth, but also into our understanding of what is to be a person at all, of the requirements that must be met to be a good person, and the proper relations between our status as knowers and the rest of our lives. Past philosophical reflection on what is distinctive about human life, and on what should be the priorities of a well-lived life, has issued in character ideals centred on the idea of Reason; and the supposed universality and neutrality of these ideals can be seriously questioned.⁹

³ DE BEAUVOIR, S. *El segundo sexo*. Buenos Aires: Debolsillo, 2017 [1949].

⁴ IRIGARAY, L. *Espéculo de la otra mujer*. Barcelona: Akal, [1974].

⁵ BUTLER, J. *Sujetos del deseo. Reflexiones hegelianas en la Francia del siglo XX*. Buenos Aires: Amorrortu, 2011 [1987].

⁶ VUILLEROD, J.-B. *Hegel féministe. Les aventures d'Antigone*. Paris: Vrin, 2020.

⁷ SAEZ, B. Plasticidad y diferencia. De la diferencia ontológica a la diferencia sexual y viceversa. *Revista de humanidades*, nr. 39, enero-junio, 2019, p. 100.

⁸ MALABOU, C. *La plasticidad en espera*. Santiago de Chile: Palinodia, 2010, p. 7.

⁹ LLOYD, G. *The man of Reason. "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. IX.

The masculine character of reason was not resolved, for Lloyd, by claiming the relativism of a supposedly "feminine truth" or by rejecting all forms of truth *in toto*. Nor was it to be solved by assuming that it was only a linguistic obstacle, which would find its end in giving rise, in speech, to the plurality of genders. For Lloyd, the generically determined character of reason in Western thought was consubstantial with its history, and to point it out was a bleeding wound that could not be made invisible thereafter.

Gender, after all, is one of the things from which truly rational thought is supposed to prescind. Reason is taken to express the real nature of the mind, in which, as Augustine put it, there is no sex. The aspiration to a Reason common to all, transcending the contingent historical circumstances which differentiate minds from one another, lies at the very heart of our philosophical heritage. The conviction of minds, in so far as they are rational, are fundamentally alike underlines many of our moral and political ideas. And the aspiration has inspired, too, our ideals of objective knowledge.¹⁰

If the ideals of reason are generically connoted, the obstacle to the fulfilment of those ideals by women would not only be limited to historically contingent restrictions, which could be removed with more inclusive gender politics, but there would be something at the very conceptual core of reason itself, which would make its incorporation impossible, since and forever. Unveiling the generic connotation of reason in Western thought would affect not only particular authors or particular epochs and geographies (and not others), but would shake the very parameters of the objectivity of knowledge.

To bring to the Surface the implicit maleness of our ideals of Reason is not necessarily to adopt a 'sexual relativism' about rational belief and truth; but it does have important implications for our contemporary understanding of gender difference. It means, for example, that there are not only practical reasons, but also conceptual ones, for the conflicts that many women experience between Reason and femininity. The obstacles to female cultivation of Reason spring to a large extent from the fact that our ideals of Reason have historically incorporated an exclusion of the feminine, and that femininity itself has been partly constituted through such processes of exclusion.¹¹

In Lloyd's tracing of the veiled genericization of reason, Hegel has a prominent place. In contrast to the morally complementary character that Kant claims exists between men and

¹⁰ LLOYD, G. *The man of Reason*, p. IX.

¹¹ LLOYD, G. *The man of Reason*, p. X.

women - the one capable of abstract thought, the other of sensibility - Hegel's position on women is what Lloyd describes as "ambivalent"¹². On the one hand, femininity is defined on the basis of the division between the public sphere and the private sphere of the family - the sphere defined as intrinsically feminine. This results in the exclusion of women from the public sphere, the exclusion of women from citizenship. But this exclusion of femininity from the public sphere comes into tension with the Hegelian definition of femininity as a "principle hostile" to the public, a principle that reappears and must therefore be constantly repressed. Hegel says in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, paragraph 475:

The public thing, by giving itself its subsistence only by disturbing the placid happiness of the family and by dissolving self-consciousness in the universal, creates its inner enemy in that which it oppresses and which, at the same time, is essential to it, in femininity as such. The latter - the ultimate irony of the public thing - alters by intrigue the universal ends of government into a private end ...¹³

And he goes on to define that femininity is, on the one hand, constituted as excluded from the public thing and that, nevertheless, this exclusion must always be reiterated, because it is an essential moment of the public thing itself:

But the public thing can only be preserved by repressing this spirit of singularity, and since this spirit is an essential moment, it engenders it precisely in this way, and indeed, by the repressive attitude towards it as a hostile principle¹⁴.

Hegel's ambivalence, then, would be in establishing femininity as a principle hostile to the development of the public, which is embodied in the family (as a moment of ethicity still anchored in the naturalness of feelings and the blood bond), but, at the same time, not denigrating or seeking to eradicate this principle, but recognizing it as an essential moment, as an intrinsic and ineliminable tension between divine laws and human laws, within modern political institutionality. Masculinity and femininity are thus revealed as competing political principles, rather than as biological determinations, as impulses and tensions between more and less universal, more and less filial forms of subjectivity, more and less filial forms of

¹² LLOYD, G. *The man of Reason*, p. 77.

¹³ HEGEL, G.W.F. *Fenomenología del Espíritu*. Translation by Wenceslao Roces. México: FCE, 1971 [1807], p. 281. Own translation from Spanish.

¹⁴ HEGEL. *Fenomenología del Espíritu*, p. 281.

embodiment of desire. If femininity is the principle that can only access the universal by universalizing its particular family ties - and thus speak in the name of sisterhood as such, from its specific bond of sisterhood, or of the filial relation as such, from the projection of its own determined one - masculinity is the principle that can dissociate between the particularity of the family and the universality of its public action, in civil society and in government.

The principle of masculinity is thus revealed as a stage of self-consciousness that identifies itself with the extended community, taking the family beyond itself, dissolving it into a universality that has it as its basis, as "the power of the underworld", as a stage to be integrated and overcome in the achievement of its ethical ends. The principle of femininity, a principle of permanent hostility to public affairs and, at the same time, an articulating principle of the family as its basis, implies the persistence of a more precarious stage of self-consciousness, where ethicicity is indissolubly linked to the particularity of the bond of filiation. The feminine consciousness thus appears in a derivative, complementary position, in a second position with respect to the masculine consciousness, because the latter will tend to identify itself with the extent of the existing objective world and with its capacity for action in it. Hegel says in the *Phenomenology*, paragraph 460:

The difference of the sexes and of their ethical content remains, however, in the unity of substance, and its movement is precisely the remaining becoming of this substance. Man is sent to the public thing by the spirit of the family and finds in it his self-conscious essence; just as the family thus has in the family its universal substance and its consistency, so, conversely, the public thing has in the family the formal element of its effective reality, and has in the divine laws its force and its accreditation. Neither of the two is alone in and for itself; human law, in its living movement, starts from the divine law, the law in force on earth starts from the subterranean law, the conscious law of which it is unaware, the mediation of immediacy, and returns likewise to the place from which it had come. The subterranean power, on the other hand, has its effective reality on earth, through consciousness it becomes existence and activity.¹⁵

Feminine consciousness thus appears as a desire that only achieves universality by projecting the particularity of the bond of filiation and is thus bound to it. It is a persistence of the legislation of the "subterranean" world and its filial and divine ties and a principle hostile to the existing objective-political world, a world that is constructed on the basis of its repeated exclusion.

¹⁵ HEGEL. *Fenomenología del Espíritu*, p. 270.

3. *From the principle of generic reason to plasticity*

Trying to integrate and overcome the denunciation of reason as generically connoted implies thinking of other ways of revising identity and otherness (including generic otherness). To this end, paradoxically, Hegel is once again a central thinker. Malabou proposes to reread him in the light of a term that finds a first and "unexpected" formulation in his philosophy: the term "plasticity". The term plasticity is a way of thinking about the constitution of otherness in Hegel's philosophy (and beyond it), outside the link denounced by Martin Heidegger, in the history of Western philosophy, between postulating being as presence and postulating the absolute privilege of the present (that is, outside the link between metaphysics and temporality, which constitutes the "ontology of the *ens realissimum*" and its timeless presence). In the courses devoted to *Phenomenology* in 1930, Malabou states that for Heidegger,

the vulgar understanding of time constitutes the unity of the philosophical tradition he has reduced to the name of *metaphysics*. The latter obeys a certain determination of the sense of being as presence (*ουσια*, *Anwesenheit*), which again grants the present (*Gegenwart*) the privilege over the other two dimensions of time. Consequently, the past and the future necessarily appear as past *present* or *present* to come. According to Heidegger, this conception of time as a homogeneous medium in which the entity is produced - a medium in which nothing can truly come to *pass* - governs the history of philosophy from the Presocratics to Husserl. Hegel, however, distinguishes himself from the other philosophers insofar as he brings to its climax the privilege traditionally accorded to the present.¹⁶

To leave this conception, however, is not only the possibility of finding a future *for* Hegel, as a philosophy that cannot be taken for perished, but a future *in* Hegel, *in* his work, *through* his work, that opens up for us another way of thinking about identity and otherness - also generic ones - and temporality.

Plasticity is a noun that enters the French language, in which Malabou writes, in 1785, according to Robert's dictionary, and in the German language, in the 18th century of Goethe (1749-1832)¹⁷. In both languages (and we could also say in English), plasticity designates both the possibility of receiving and of giving form. The adjective "plastic" is used to describe that which is susceptible to change its form (for example, clay or wax, in Malabou's words): that

¹⁶ MALABOU. *El porvenir de Hegel*, p. 20.

¹⁷ MALABOU. *El porvenir de Hegel*, p. 28.

which can be molded, adapted, have ductility (the character of the child), that which can recover its form, resisting deformation (the plasticity of tissues or body organs in histology, for example), and even that which can give form (the plastic arts, plastic surgery). But plastic also designates that which can annihilate or explode any form, such as the type of "plastic explosives": for example, "rubber dynamite", a malleable explosive substance, composed of nitroglycerine and nitrocellulose, patented by Alfred Nobel, at the end of the 19th century. The term plasticity, which has its origins in art, with sculpture, thus shows an extension in its use and significance which, for Malabou, has not stopped increasing over time. This increase is read by her as a symptom that plasticity, far from being a concept, is still "awaiting the concept" and that this could be the right time for this conceptualization¹⁸.

In the history of philosophy, plasticity enters the scene with Hegel. For Malabou, in his philosophy we find the "first attempt to conceptualize plasticity" and it is in this philosophy that

plasticity approaches the essential for the first time. With it, those predicates that were hitherto not reserved for it are effectively inscribed in the essential, that is to say, in the very heart of essence: the giving and taking of form, the capacity of the substitute (plastic matter before its time) to transform and reform itself, to manufacture and finally to exploit¹⁹.

Hegel uses the words *plastisch* and *Plastik* to refer to Greek art in the *Aesthetics* and in particular to sculpture, the "plastic art par excellence"²⁰. But he extends their meaning to account both for a general character of the Greek people ("the Greeks possessed in the highest degree that perfect plastic sense in their conception of the divine and the human", he says in *Aesthetics* III) and for the "exemplary" or "substantial" individualities of Pericles, Phidias, Plato, Sophocles, Thucydides, Xenophon and Socrates. They are "plastic individuals", in Hegelian words. That is to say, they are those who "always engendering themselves and tending unceasingly to become what they wanted to be", are "ideal artists of themselves"²¹. The above-mentioned plastic individualities have the particularity of embodying the "corporeality of the spiritual" and therefore plastic continues to have a reference to Greek sculpture, by materializing, by embodying in them, as men of action, poets or thinkers, a "plastic character,

¹⁸ MALABOU. *La plasticidad en espera*, p. 85.

¹⁹ MALABOU. *La plasticidad en espera*, p. 89.

²⁰ HEGEL, G.W.F. *Estética* III, quoted by MALABOU. *El porvenir de Hegel*, p. 31.

²¹ HEGEL, G.W.F. *Estética* III, quoted by MALABOU. *El porvenir de Hegel*, p. 33.

at once universal and individual, without any discordance between the interior and the exterior"²².

Some of this belongs irretrievably to Greece. Malabou notes, however, how the term plasticity is further expanded to characterize, in Hegel, philosophy itself. In the preface to the *Phenomenology* of 1807, he speaks of achieving plasticity in a philosophical exposition, and in the preface to the *Science of Logic* of 1831, he refers to "plastic exposition (*ein plastischer Vortrag*)"²³. This philosophical plasticity seems to describe both the ability of the philosopher to abandon himself to the content of the Thing itself, avoiding imposing the particularity of his thought on the exposition, and the ability of his interlocutor to receive this concept and to embody it or incorporate it into the particularity of his individuality. Philosophical plasticity - this kind of abandonment of the self for the sake of the concept - is, for Hegel, however, an "ideal philosophical attitude" and, to a certain extent, a lost one, due to the entrenchment of subjectivity in modernity, which would hinder it. Hegel says in the preface to *Science of Logic*:

A plastic exhibition (*ein plastischer Vortrag*) demands, itself, a plastic sense of reception and understanding (*einen plastischen Sinn des Aufnehmens und Verstehens*). But these adolescents, these plastic men, capable of quietly renouncing for themselves their own reflections and interventions, by means of which "thinking for itself" is impatient to manifest itself, auditors fit only to follow the Thing (*nur der Sache folgende Zuhörer*), as Plato imagined them, could not be staged in the modern dialogue; still less could such readers be counted on²⁴.

According to Malabou, in Hegelian philosophical terms, plasticity designates centrally the relation of the Subject to its predicates. This relation, for Hegel, does not consist in considering the Subject of the proposition as an instance that receives its accidents from outside, but as a process of self-determination of the substance. This self-determination and self-reflection of self-determination, on the part of the substance, is what Hegel will call the unfolding of the substance-Subject, or the becoming Subject of the substance. For Malabou, this unfolding of the substance-Subject (or the Hegelian relation between Subject and predicates, elevated to speculative truth), is an activity of form, so that substance is essentially "plastic". Malabou says:

²² HEGEL, G.W.F. *Lecciones sobre la Filosofía de la Historia*, quoted by MALABOU. *El porvenir de Hegel*, p. 32.

²³ HEGEL, G.W.F. *Ciencia de la Lógica*, quoted by MALABOU. *El porvenir de Hegel*, p. 33.

²⁴ HEGEL, G.W.F. *Ciencia de la Lógica*, quoted by MALABOU. *El porvenir de Hegel*, p. 31.

Self-determination is the movement by which substance affirms itself both as Subject and predicate of itself. In the *Science of Logic* of the *Encyclopaedia*, Hegel defines the 'relation of *substantiality* and *accidentality*' - or "Absolute Relation" - as "*activity-of-form (Formtätigkeit)*". Precisely this "activity" testifies to the *plasticity of substance*, both to its capacity to receive and to form its own content.²⁵

This plasticity will be read by Malabou in three stages of the Philosophy of Spirit, in her book on Hegel: Anthropology, Revealed Religion and Philosophy. In other words, plasticity will be used as a key to the interpretation of the first moment of the Subjective Spirit (especially in the *Encyclopaedia*) and of the penultimate and last moment of the Absolute Spirit (especially in the *Phenomenology*). Of particular interest here for the purposes of this article is the unfolding of the moment of revealed Religion, because it alludes to a concept that introduces a link between corporeality and subjectivity, which changes the meaning of Hegel's conception of possible identity, following Malabou's reading: the concept of Incarnation. However, in the three moments cited, "Man, God and Philosopher", respectively, are not taken as pre-constituted Subjects but as "plastic instances", in which subjectivity is constituted by self-determining itself and giving itself its temporality.

4. *Divine subjectivity as a parameter of modern subjectivity*

As we know, for Hegel, the advent of Christianity makes possible the irruption of modern subjectivity. But it is not in religion that this irruption is conceptualized, but in modern philosophy. To conceptualize it, it is necessary to show philosophically how revealed religion exposes God as Subject. Malabou says: "the modern concept of subjectivity, in its religious and philosophical significance, inscribes its possibility in divine subjectivity itself"²⁶. That is, in order to think about the possibility of modern subjectivity, we have to think about how religion posits the becoming Subject of God.

The becoming Subject of God, in philosophy, takes up and transforms the Aristotelian concept of substance, understood as "being independent of any other"²⁷ and being that has in itself its own foundation (Spinoza's *Deus causa sui*). But, in this transformation of the concept

²⁵ MALABOU. *El porvenir de Hegel*, p. 35.

²⁶ MALABOU. *El porvenir de Hegel*, p. 153.

²⁷ MALABOU. *El porvenir de Hegel*, p. 150.

of substance, Hegel adds several elements, which aroused the objection of the theologians of the time²⁸. On the one hand, he introduces negativity into God. On the other hand, he makes God a concept subject to logical necessity, which allows itself to be thought entirely by human rationality. Finally, God is a Subject-substance capable of speculative reflection on its externalization, on its alienation: the result of this reflection is the concept of representation and the exposition of its limits. Let us proceed point by point.

In the Hegelian exposition of the Christian Trinity, one of the moments becomes central: that of *kenosis* or the incarnation of God the Father in the Son. *Kenosis* is the Greek term for the divine Incarnation, the becoming Christ of God and his worldly life (the "Passion"). In Greek, the word *kenosis* refers to emptiness, to annihilation. Luther translated it in German as *Entäußerung*, or separation from oneself by externalization (with the negative edge of the German prefix *ent*) and could also be equated with alienation. Beyond philology, *kenosis* is interpreted by Hegel dialectically, as a process of necessary externalization of the divine substance from itself, for the sake of becoming a Subject: the Father-substance self-determines, splits itself into another distinct from itself, which is its Son, and the Spirit reconciles this splitting of the divine essence. But this is not only true for God. Although the incarnation exists only once, it is the rule for every Subject to experience the necessary alienation from itself. What is central to this process of *kenosis* in Hegel's interpretation is that, as Malabou states, it is taken as the paradigm of all subjectivity and thus "negativity is constitutive of all subjectivity"²⁹. Negativity is constitutive not only of divine subjectivity but, paradigmatically, through it, of all and of any Subject becoming. Malabou writes: "Hegel confers on negativity the status of a truth proper to God, insofar as God has to produce himself"³⁰. Just as the divine substance differentiates itself internally and necessarily, so does any Subject experience it:

From this *Entäußerung* or 'alienation', Hegel makes a *logical movement* constitutive of the development of the divine essence. Indeed, God necessarily goes out of himself by self-determining himself and thus, like every egoity, experiences the experience of judicative partition.³¹

²⁸ BOURGEOIS, B. Le Dieu de Hegel: concept et création. In: De Koninck, T. *et. al.* **La question de Dieu selon Aristote et Hegel**. Paris: PUF, 1991, p. 285-320.

²⁹ MALABOU. **El porvenir de Hegel**, p. 157.

³⁰ MALABOU. **El porvenir de Hegel**, p. 155.

³¹ MALABOU. **El porvenir de Hegel**, p. 155.

What is the theological objection to Hegel? The introduction of negativity produces a necessary partition of the essence of God, which would be determined to alienate itself as a constitutive logical moment, and not as an offering, a promise or an event. The becoming-Subject of God (as well as the other becoming-Subjects encompassed by the concept of Subject), supposes an externalization, a necessary going out of oneself, which transforms possible predicates, possible futures, into necessary logical moments. Theologians see in the becoming Christ of God, on the contrary, an overabundance of the divine essence, a generosity and an exuberance of its possibles, and reproach Hegel for giving the divine essence an initial poverty. The divine essence would be destined to make up for its lack by becoming incarnate in the Son. God would not become Man out of goodness or love, but out of necessity, which would contradict divine freedom. God would not, moreover, take an inferior nature, the human nature, as an act of generosity, but there would be between the two natures, the divine and the human, a "differentiated unity"³². Malabou writes:

Indeed, by chaining God to the necessity of the concept, Hegel would deprive him of the mystery of his coming; in other words, of his transcendence. Amputated from the superabundance of his possibles, God would be reduced with them to being, without being able to give himself or promise himself.³³

The becoming Subject of God would be to become subject to the concept of Subject and to its logical necessity, it would be to chain oneself to the logical becoming of the concept, or to turn it into a being without promise, without creative freedom, without a future as a possible future, in the sense of indeterminate. The God turned concept of Subject is a God who suppresses mystery, in order to become comprehensible by human reason.

But the transformation of God into a paradigmatic concept of Subject would not only affect all possible Subjects, and obviously God himself as a concept, but also Hegel's philosophy. It would be Hegel's philosophy itself that would be tied to the conceptual logical becoming in an eternal present, with no possible disruptive and unexpected event. Without promise. It would be Hegel's philosophy itself which, by applying the paradigmatic concept God/Subject to Spirit in general, would be mutilated of the future. This is why Malabou reads the Hegelian transformation of Hegel's concept of substance-Subject in a different way. What there would be in God (and in every Subject) would not be an original passivity, a logical lack

³² MALABOU. *El porvenir de Hegel*, p. 174.

³³ MALABOU. *El porvenir de Hegel*, p. 155.

leading to the movement of exteriorization, as the theologians (and Hegel's critical philosophers) denounced, but a plasticity of substance, in the double meaning of reception and donation of form. Malabou writes:

The patient study of the concept of 'alienation' indeed shows that if God receives the form of subjectivity, if he subjects himself to the Subject, he gives at the same time to subjectivity the form he receives from it. By alienating himself, God imprints on subjectivity a particular kind of unfolding by externalisation. The form of its development is given. Alienation must also be understood from the double point of view of a receptivity and a spontaneity of God.³⁴

The Hegelian transformation of the concept of substance-Subject strips the concept of God of two filiations: on the one hand, the Greek filiation of the concept of substance, understood as foundation and basis, as a substantial principle that would remain impassive to its declinations. The Hegelian substance-Subject is always already in transformation of itself, it is always already in the process of self-differentiation of itself. On the other hand, the Hegelian substance-Subject departs from the Roman term of person, understood as that agent who possesses a formal and abstract freedom, in a juridical sense. Reason understands the divine essence as that process of self-transformation: what the representative vocabulary of religion designates as Father, Son and Spirit is, for reason, a chain of declensions of the necessary exit from itself, an essential intra-trinitarian difference. Reason understands the divine essence as that which is neither impassible, nor substrate, nor formal agent, but as that which, to quote Hegel, "by its own mediation" "begets that which is innate (*der Eingeborene*)"³⁵.

This divine essence, as the paradigmatic becoming of the Subject, means that the attitude of the faithful towards this logical God is not one of waiting before his promise or of bewilderment before his mystery, but of dispossession of the immediate essence of each individual, of dispossession of the will of each of the faithful and of enchainment to negativity, as the true event³⁶. Malabou says:

In the *Encyclopaedia* Hegel considers faith as the movement by which the believer "dispossesses himself (*entäußert*) of his immediate nature-

³⁴ MALABOU. *El porvenir de Hegel*, p. 157.

³⁵ HEGEL, G.W.F. *Lecciones sobre la Filosofía de la Religión III*, quoted by MALABOU. *El porvenir de Hegel*, p. 177.

³⁶ Fidelity to the event refers to BADIOU, A. *El ser y el acontecimiento*. Buenos Aires: Manantial, 2003.

determinity, as well as of his own will, and chains himself, in the pain of negativity, with this example [Christ]". Through this alienation, the believer repeats the *kenotic* movement.³⁷

Alienation thus appears as the very thing of modern subjectivity, in the time after Christianity. Christ cannot be set up as an exemplary individuality, comparable with the Greek exemplary individualities, because he appears as a unique, unrepeatable event of the incarnation of the divine substance. But also because the Christian God, in contrast to the Greek gods, presents himself as a God distanced from himself, as a God who distances himself from himself and who effectively becomes a different nature by becoming human and finite. The Christian subjectivity will be the paradigmatic subjectivity, the sample of the experience of alienation that all modern subjectivities will undergo and its atonement.

This brings about a change in art. The Christian God can no longer be embodied in that arrangement and harmony of content and form that was visible in Greek sculpture, but ushers in the time of painting, of Romantic art, which attends to the singularity of the expression of particular persons (and generally disappoints). There are no longer ideal types of individuality, but contingency of worldly life and disarrangement between subjective interiority and artistic expression. In other words, there is a privileging of accidentality. This privileging of accidentality changes the concept of phenomenon: the phenomenon is the sensible and momentary appearance of other than itself. This appearing, this representation (*Vorstellung*) is not figurative, it is not a fact of consciousness, which figures God, where God is not; but God re-presents himself as a worldly phenomenon which inaugurates the temporality in which he is inscribed, which temporalizes himself. The modern world thus appears not as the substantial Greek unity, but as a connection (*Zusammenhang*) of phenomena, which appear and are denied, in reciprocal determination. Malabou writes:

If the *Greek* conception of the 'activity-of-form' (*Formtätigkeit*) implies thinking self-determination from the *essential becoming of the accident* - made sensible by the 'exemplary individualities' - it seems that the modern concept of plasticity is in solidarity with a thought of self-determination as *accidental becoming of the essence* - becoming which constitutes the profound meaning of the Incarnation. *Kenosis* is the movement by which, by positing himself outside himself, by alienating himself, God fulfils his essence and thus becomes the predicate, the accident. What characterizes the modern meaning of subjectivity is the relation that the Subject maintains with itself through the mediation of its *other*.³⁸

³⁷ MALABOU. *El porvenir de Hegel*, p. 170.

³⁸ MALABOU. *El porvenir de Hegel*, p. 216.

If this interpretation were possible, three central questions arise: on the one hand, Hegelian substance is impossible to identify with the ontic register of the things of the world³⁹ (i.e. an ever-present hiatus opens up between substance and its becoming Subject). Substance is the plastic process of giving itself forms in the world, of temporalizing itself in them and, at the same time, of reshaping these forms and even annihilating them. Substance, Subject and world are not identified and substance reappears in Hegelian philosophy as the concept that cannot be obliterated by the sovereignty of the concept of Subject, but always accompanies it (script in writing), as substance-Subject. Or, in other words, between substance and Subject there is no relay, but dialectical identity. On the other hand, the accident, or the predicate of substance, becomes necessary only *a posteriori*, recovering contingency as constitutive of being. That is to say, there is an essential becoming of the accident, *a posteriori*. But there is also an accidental becoming of essence, because its sensible becoming institutes difference in it and necessarily determines it. And finally, the sensible becoming of substance, the incarnation of substance, is essential, is constitutive of essence, so that Hegelian philosophy can be reread not as a philosophy that dispenses with, but renders the body, taken as a body in-formation, ineliminable.

5. *Attachment to the body*

In a confrontational text with J. Butler on interpretations of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, originally published in 2010, Malabou claims that it is possible to identify form and body in Hegel⁴⁰. The body is a form, both received and modelled. Far from being the empirical datum of nature, which must be put at risk, in order to become a Subject, in the classical readings of the relation between lordship and servitude, for Malabou the body is a "formed form" and an "opera"⁴¹. The body is an activity of the individual, which shapes him through work and language, and from which it is impossible for him to detach himself completely.

For Malabou, the structural separation between body and consciousness, which runs throughout the *Phenomenology*, must be questioned on the basis of hypotheses other than those

³⁹ MALABOU. *El porvenir de Hegel*, p. 187.

⁴⁰ BUTLER, J. Y MALABOU, C. *Che tu sia il mio corpo. Una lettura contemporanea della signoria e della servitù in Hegel*. Milano: Mimesis/Eterotopie, 2017 [2010]. Text: "Ma cos'è formare il corpo?".

⁴¹ BUTLER, J. Y MALABOU, C. *Che tu sia il mio corpo*, Text: "Slegami". Own translations from Italian.

usually found in the history of philosophy. In the light of plasticity, the Subject in Hegel should no longer be read as the effect of the self-affection of substance, but as the irreducible exposure of alienation, which puts in check any attempt to speak of a possible existent "self". Malabou says:

Indeed, the separation between consciousness and body that seems to structure the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is perhaps less the expression of the classical Platonic-inspired philosophical attitude of degrading the body than a deconstructive gesture *ante litteram*, which denounces the impossibility of self-affection. Contrary to Kant, Hegel does not conceive of the individual Subject as a unity differentiated between its empirical form and its transcendental form. Consciousness is not for him the place of permanence and self-identity, of constancy through the iridescent flow of experience. It does not coincide with ipseity. Ipseity and self-affection are not for Hegel the necessary data of subjectivity. From the outset, the empirical form and the transcendental form of the 'I' are estranged from each other, and the body is in any case the *locus* of this distance. It has no status as the 'I' of consciousness; divided from the beginning, it can neither be self-affected nor touch itself. The body is thus, from the beginning, the outside, the very outside of the Subject, 'outside itself', the structure of *hetero-affection*.⁴²

The body thus appears as a *datum* of nature, but also as what we make of it, how we sculpt it and work it. But the consciousness of the body that the individual forms (and the body that he forms, in turn) appears to him as foreign, external, as if it could be transferred to another or come from another. The body appears as a structure of necessary hetero-affection that

never resolves itself into the unity of a me. In fact, writes Hegel, the "me" – "my body, my consciousness" – does not exist. The first person is a philosophical fiction, a possible version, but a version, of the individual subject.⁴³

The identity of the self appears as a disjunction and the testimony of this disjunction is the radical separation between spirit and body. This disjunction takes the form of a madness, of a disorder. This disorder, which is the immediate - and permanent - feeling of self, is analyzed by Malabou in the section "Anthropology" of the *Encyclopaedia of the philosophical sciences*, in the relation of the baby to the mother:

Isn't "That you be my body" the first express request of the baby, before any words? On the other hand, "may you be my body" is not the mother's answer

⁴² BUTLER, J. Y MALABOU, C. **Che tu sia il mio corpo**, Text: "Slegami".

⁴³ BUTLER, J. Y MALABOU, C. **Che tu sia il mio corpo**. Text: "Ma cos'è formare il corpo?".

after the birth of the baby: may you be my youth, my extension? Hegel's "Anthropology" gives an unexpected role to the mother's double body and assimilates this duality also to a kind of madness. The first madness is that of being (in) the body of the other. Thus, "may you be my body" is the origin of self-consciousness, which, in fact, will no longer overcome this split. It will rightly seek to detach itself, but it will find it difficult to overcome forever the alienation that this detachment leaves the master and the servant.⁴⁴

If the body is the place where the irreducible alienation of subjective experience is experienced, and if this alienation is not resolved in a static identity of an I or a you, of an ipseity and an intersubjectivity, the body is the putting into forms that are not fixed instances, but a movement of (trans)formation. The body is the setting in forms that are preserved and lost or even exploded. The body is in the process of formation and dissolution. This gives plasticity, the continuous activity of formation, an ontological privilege over being, in Malabou's reading. That is to say, there is a "recognition of the primacy of the formative activity over being"⁴⁵, which, on the one hand, makes it possible for the which, on the one hand, makes of every essence a changing essence, and then, which places the body as the privileged place of this *mise en scène*. Identity, as Malabou thinks of it, is thus a (trans)formative, (trans)formed and materialist identity, whose privileged focus is on the materiality of a body, taken as both *datum* and work.

What are the institutional conditions that allow some bodies to enter the scene and not others? Is this taking shape a repositioning of the classical idea of faculties, the preposition of the idea of an active, historically changing agent, capable of taking on the work of forming and distinguishing itself? These questions take a back seat in Malabou's analysis, which is committed to gender as a changing essence, to a trans(formative) identity and to a break between form and stability, between form and presence, this presence being understood as an undefined present. What Malabou aspires to, with the help of Hegel, is a strong repositioning of the body as a place in relation to which it is impossible to dislocate oneself completely and, at the same time, as an obstacle to any constitution of a self-referential self. It aspires to trans identity, as an opening always open to a different temporality. Malabou writes: "the bodies that count are, for Hegel, the bodies that take form, that enter the stage and, as you said [in reference to Butler C.A.F.], 'to enter the stage means to take form'⁴⁶. But to take form is not to take a

⁴⁴ BUTLER, J. Y MALABOU, C. **Che tu sia il mio corpo**. Text: "Ma cos'è formare il corpo?". For a comparison of the baby-mother relationship, from a materialist perspective, see ROZITCHNER, L. **Materialismo ensoñado**. Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón, 2011.

⁴⁵ BUTLER, J. Y MALABOU, C. **Che tu sia il mio corpo**. Text: "Ma cos'è formare il corpo?".

⁴⁶ BUTLER, J. Y MALABOU, C. **Che tu sia il mio corpo**. Text: "Ma cos'è formare il corpo?".

definitive figure, but to assume the body as a strange and transfiguring place, as a place that cannot be appropriated, nor can it be abandoned.

Hegel, says Malabou, is "the thinker of this explosion, of this plastic demolition of the 'I'" ⁴⁷. Hegel would thus not be a thinker of the climax of the Subject as self-affection and, if you like, as self-ownership, but the author who dilutes self-referentialities in the face of absolute knowledge and who privileges the abandonment of self, hetero-affection, to the fiction of sovereignty. Malabou writes:

When self-consciousness internalizes its own finite, mortal condition, when it understands that it forms only its own mortality, that finitude is a plastic adventure, it dissolves itself. The link between consciousness and the self is broken. When the spirit appears, consciousness disappears and with it the "you" and the "me". No one can say "may you be my body", because there is no more "I" or "you", nor is there any more even a "body of mine". Absolute knowledge, separated forever from the form of self-affection, exposes an anonymous body without hermeneutics.⁴⁸

6. Conclusions

Malabou's analysis allows us to rethink the Subject in Hegel, dismissing it as a Subject of self-affection and as a Subject of will. In his reading, which de-anthropologises the German's philosophy, Hegel appears as the thinker who makes it possible to exploit intersubjectivity, rather than construct it. This has an impact on identity, particularly gender identity, which is of particular interest here. Because Malabou's reading, from plasticity, taken as *pathos* and method, allows us to think sexual difference anew, exploiting binarisms and destabilizing any identity collective. But it does so without this leading to renouncing the body, as a place to which one is tied in some way, in the process of life, and which can be taken neither as pure biology, nor as an exclusive social construction. The body is a biological *datum*, but it is not only that: it is also the determination in which plasticity, which is not metamorphosis, which is not incessant change and without intelligibility of forms, but dialectics of trans-formation, unfolds. The body is thus not the matter to be put at risk, in order to exist, but the matter that allows and resists ductility.

In her "new materialism", Malabou reposes the body as the privileged site of the alienation that every Subject undergoes and transits, in order to exist. Hegel is central, in this

⁴⁷ BUTLER, J. Y MALABOU, C. **Che tu sia il mio corpo**. Text: "Ma cos'è formare il corpo?"

⁴⁸ BUTLER, J. Y MALABOU, C. **Che tu sia il mio corpo**. Text: "Ma cos'è formare il corpo?"

deconstructionist reading of both the metaphysics of presence and gender theories, because he thinks of the Subject as alienation, as an exit from the self and as a necessary passage through otherness. The body is, at the same time, a structure of hetero-affection and a work, outside the Subject and a formed form. There is an evident tension in this double meaning: is the body the place of the disarrangement of any position that allows one to speak of oneself or is it the work of a sculptural agent? Is the form a new face of the subject-maker of the self? Does the idea of will, or at least of agency, not surreptitiously re-enter there? If there is a disarrangement between consciousness and sensibility, is form not a way of stabilizing, at least temporarily, subjectivity in a presence? What are the bodily forms that are recognized as such by the Subjects? What are the conditions of possible appearance of these forms? What happens to the unformed bodies?

Malabou's analysis makes it possible to dismiss reason as a continuous, generically spun history, to render it instead secondary to an aesthetic, in the light of the *pathos*/method of plasticity. Gender thus appears as a shifting and trans essence. It is a constant negation, the singular work of deconstruction and reconstruction, of becoming otherness, which does not dispense with the body, but occurs above all in it. Hegel's centrality lies in the fact that he allows us to think about the transmutation of identities, placing the emphasis not so much on dialectics, as a foresight of the future, but on negation, taken as a process of change, of precarious stabilization and possible explosion of the figures of the world.

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