

Gentle biologies: Reconceptualising Bodily Transformation and Healthcare between Catherine Malabou and Anne Dufourmantelle

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This article stages points of contact between the conceptions of biological life which emerge through the contemporary philosopher Catherine Malabou's concept of *plasticity* and articulations of *douceur* or *gentleness* in the work of the philosopher Anne Dufourmantelle. In doing so, it explores the ways in which both philosophers allow us to conceptualise biological forms and bodies as *gentle* or as having a great capacity for gentleness. The *gentle biologies* that emerge here between Malabou and Dufourmantelle describe modes of organic gentleness that have variously been lost or repressed in different social contexts, but which can ultimately be recovered and embraced through practices of (self-)care and (self-)transformation. Drawing from interdisciplinary work in the medical and health humanities, I also undertake to explore what *gentle biologies*, between Malabou and Dufourmantelle, might mean for conceptions of health and healthcare, arguing that healthcare practices constitute a site of intimacy with biological being at which modes of gentleness find themselves either inspired or occluded. Indeed, dialogues between Malabou and Dufourmantelle remain under-explored in the critical literature and real-life collaborations between the thinkers were curtailed very suddenly by Dufourmantelle's death in 2017.¹ If Malabou's and Dufourmantelle's respective philosophies simultaneously dialogue with and transgress Derridean thought,² this article explores how their post-deconstructive conceptualizations of organic life figure *gentle biologies* which beckon new understandings of transformation and care.

Malabou's interdisciplinary oeuvre investigates the capacities for transformation and metamorphosis opened by the (neuro)biological discoveries of the *plasticity* of organic life.

Indeed, an engagement with the biological is at the heart of Malabou's conceptualisation of transformation right from her early works on philosophical forms of plasticity. In her first book, *The Future of Hegel* (1996), Malabou notes the plasticity of the newly born child.³ In her introduction to her edited collection *Plasticité*, 'Le vœu de plasticité' (2000), Malabou maps the biological resonances of plasticity further, referring to the work of neurobiologist Jean-Pierre Changeux on the (neuro)plasticity of the brain; to Jean-Claude Ameisen's characterisation of the cellular development of organisms as a work of plastic art in *La Sculpture du vivant* (1999); to images of Trichoptera larvae emerging from golden cocoons in the work of the artist Hubert Duprat; to screenshots from Alain Resnais' documentary about the production of synthetic plastics *Le Chant du styrène* (1958), which begins by imagining everyday household plastic objects growing out of the ground like plants, envisaging nature as plastic and malleable.⁴ In *The Heidegger Change* (2012 [2004]), Malabou engages with the metamorphoses of insects through the zoological concept of the 'imaginal' which is '*the last stage of an organism's development toward metamorphosis*'.⁵

However, it is in Malabou's turn to neurobiology in works such as *What Should We Do With Our Brain* (2011 [2005]) and *Ontology of the Accident* (2012 [2009]), and her turn to epigenetics in *Before Tomorrow: Epigenesis and Rationality* (2016 [2014]), that biology becomes the central driver of Malabou's exploration of plasticity's capacity for transformation. Indeed, biology appears at the place in Malabou where deconstruction morphs into a new paradigm; as Malabou shows in *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing* (2011 [2005]), the synaptic plasticity of the brain allows us to see forms and (trans)formations at play within organic life very different from the forms of presence banished by Derridean deconstruction.⁶ Ian James has analysed the importance of the biological for Malabou as the mutable grounds of the epistemological 'void' within which science and philosophy necessarily coincide.⁷ He further situates Malabou's intellectual relationship with the life

sciences not purely within the domain of philosophy of biology, but rather within a rich genealogy of symbiotic engagements with biological concepts in French thought, from Georges Canguilhem to Gilles Deleuze.⁸

The question of the biological is less explicitly at the forefront of the concepts of *gentleness* in the work of Anne Dufourmantelle, a philosopher and psychoanalyst.⁹ The physicality and materiality of the body is, however, very present in Dufourmantelle's work. In *Power of Gentleness: Meditations on the Risk of Living* ([2013] 2018), Dufourmantelle sees gentleness in both the mutability and the vulnerability of the material body.¹⁰ She finds in this gentleness a connection between the body and wider ecologies of organic and inorganic beings: 'gentleness is part of an intimate connection to animality, to the mineral, the vegetal, the stellar' (PG, 13). Dufourmantelle's concept of gentleness has been influential across diverse contexts, appearing for instance in Emma Wilson's approach to filmic depictions of gentleness;¹¹ Harold Scheizer's analysis of conceptions of gentleness in the poetic works of Rainer Maria Rilker;¹² and Catherine Lanone's analysis of modes of hospitality and gentleness in *Howard's End*.¹³ However, Dufourmantelle's gentleness is yet to be elaborated fully in relation to the biological and to philosophies of biology.¹⁴

Perhaps the most explicit crossover between the two thinkers occurs in Malabou's short, striking foreword to the English translation of *Power of Gentleness*, titled 'Philosophy in Furs' (2018), which exhibits an unmistakable admiration for Dufourmantelle's concept. She notes the non-essentialist aspect of Dufourmantelle's concept: 'To say that gentleness is not given also means that it is cultivated, that it is not "natural", even though nature can be gentle' (PG, xii). She also underscores the diversity and multiplicity of the nuances of the concept: 'For if caress, erotic games, children's bodies, fur, cats' bellies... are soft and gentle, the renunciation of the dying person who lets go is also gentle. There is gentleness in the farewell to life, [...] in abandonment, in bereavement, in renunciation' (PG, xiv). And

yet, Malabou resists connecting Dufourmantelle's gentleness explicitly to plasticity, despite Dufourmantelle's insistence that '[g]entleness is a force of secret life-giving transformation [...]. Without it there is no possibility for life to advance in its becoming. I think that the power of life's metamorphosis is sustained in gentleness' (PG, 6).

Following Malabou's comment that gentleness must be 'cultivated', my argument begins with the notion that biologies, for both thinkers, are not gentle in any essentialist sense; rather, this gentleness must be grown, leant into, practiced. First, I examine themes of letting go and softening central to Malabou's philosophy, engaging with the important work of Cristóbal Durán Rojas on notions of ease, suppleness, and *soltura* in Malabou.¹⁵ I then turn to Dufourmantelle's *Power of Gentleness*, drawing links between her elaboration of gentleness and Malabou's evocation of plasticity as a driver of transformation, as vulnerable as it is powerful. Finally, in order to imagine how gentle biologies may be *cultivated* in everyday encounters with the vulnerability of the body, I turn to emerging conceptions of gentleness in contemporary healthcare contexts.

Malabou and the Softening of the Biological

Both Malabou and Dufourmantelle, in different ways, explore the relationship between gentleness and survival. Their work interrogates, I suggest, the notion of the survival of biological life being correlated with hardness or hardiness, underlining instead the need for softness, suppleness, and plastic changeability. For Dufourmantelle, the gentleness and tenderness associated with care is key to survival (PG, 12-13). At the same time, the survival and flourishing of gentleness itself is increasingly threatened by the material conditions of survival in contemporary existence: 'Our sensory receptors are brutalized [...] There is a brutality in the conditions of material survival; there is a spiritual and emotional desert where

beings are trapped. The lack of gentleness is endemic' (PG, 62). Meanwhile, the question of survival is also at the centre of Malabou's text 'Whither Materialism? Althusser/Darwin' (2015). Here, Malabou analyses the plasticity of the biological to be found in Darwin's theories of evolution and natural selection. Her analysis here is set upon the backdrop of two competing understandings of materialism considered in the work of Louis Althusser: a teleological understanding of materialism, in which material forms and developments operate according to a logic of predestination towards a certain goal; and a second, non-teological understanding of materialism which privileges the encounter.¹⁶ Malabou's argument is that, while Darwinism has often been violently appropriated as a teleological materialism whereby natural selection is conceptualised as intentional, conscious, driven by the supposed supremacy of the fittest, a finer reading of Darwin reveals the insistence upon the variability and plasticity of his understanding of the transformability of a species (WM, 50-52).

Malabou deduces of Darwin's own references to plasticity: 'Characteristic of variability, plasticity designates the quasi-infinite possibility of changes of structure authorized by the living structure itself. This quasi infinity constitutes precisely the openness of the absence of predetermination which makes an encounter possible' (50). The central importance of the aleatory creativity of plasticity in biological formation is precisely what has been repressed and misused in applications of Darwin: 'We know the errors of "social Darwinism", which is everything but a philosophy of plasticity to the degree that it reduces down to a simple theory the struggle of the strong against the weak. For many years, particularly in France, natural selection came to be understood as a simple process of eliminating the weakest and of life as a merciless struggle for power in all its forms' (51). What might, then, another mode of survival look like, predicated no longer on the grabbing of control by 'the strong', but rather a reinstating of the unwritten plasticity, of perhaps *gentleness*, of biological life?

This interrogation of the assumed hardiness necessary for the survival of biological lifeforms resonates further in Malabou's text 'Politics of Plasticity: Cooperation without Chains' (2021).¹⁷ Malabou's argument here is that we need to found a politics of cooperation and anarchistic political organisation and mobilization which is neither grounded in any essentialist sense in the idea of biological organisms being either innately altruistic and collaborative or innately selfish and only interested in their own individual survival (PP, 16). As Malabou shows, theorizations of cooperation as a means of social survival tend towards two camps: the essentialist, biologically determinist view that species are innately programmed to cooperate for survival (this would be Kropotkin's view of 'mutual aid', as Malabou notes, in which 'he provides beautiful readings of migrating birds flying together, or associations between wolves for hunting') (20); and the non-essentialist, 'discursive' view in which beings are connected together not through biologically determined chains but rather linguistic, symbolic chains (21-22).

Malabou characterizes both of these paradigms, whether grounded in essentialist biological determinism or social constructivist discursivity, as theories of *chains*: they tie organisms and societies into fixed organisations in which '[t]he confrontation between discursivity and essentialism thus appears as a competition between different modalities of chaining. That mutual aid can hold people together without chaining them is alien to both of them. Be it ontological, biological or discursive, the concept of chain is always normative, securing an order of concatenation that prevents improvisation, invention and spontaneity' (24). The route for leaving behind this deadlock between the essentialist and the discursive, Malabou argues, is not through leaving behind the biological, but precisely through seeing it for what it really is: plastic. Drawing from recent scientific innovations and discoveries in the life sciences, Malabou shows how biology can no longer be seen as the ossified architectures of fixed genes: 'The current development of epigenetics, the insistence upon the malleability of

the genome, the central role of brain plasticity, have displaced and debased the vision of biology as a deterministic science, dealing with codes, programmes, immanent laws and chains. Biology has deconstructed itself so to speak' (24-25). What is at stake here is precisely an understanding of biological life's capacity for resistance and transformation. Looking at the COVID-19 crisis, Malabou is discontent with purely Foucauldian readings of the biopolitical captures of bodies during the pandemic, as this reduces bodies to passive pawns of political management: 'There exists a biological resistance to biopolitics [...]. Life is not the passive, blind, obscure dimension of being' (27).

In this way, then, both in her analysis of Darwin's evolutionary theory and of anarchistic conceptions of cooperation and mutual aid, Malabou's philosophy diverges from the image of the biological based upon a genetically determined, ruthless quest for survival, and rather opens the biological to unexpected (trans)formations and assemblages, seeing within epigenetic life the potentiality for freedom. How, then, can this potentiality be accessed or activated? How might the chains Malabou seeks to escape be *softened*? Indeed, Durán's work on Malabou approaches precisely these questions. Durán offers his own reading of Malabou's non-teleological materiality, as it evolves across Althusser, Darwin, and her own plasticity: 'Matter generates its own possibilities and in doing so, forms a posterity that it cannot see coming; it offers up its possibilities without knowing what to expect and without full knowledge of the direction in which it is headed. [...] formation must free itself from itself in order to give itself a future'.¹⁸

In *La Soltura del cuerpo* (2018), *The Looseness of the Body* (my own translation), Durán examines Malabou's philosophical elaboration of plasticity in relation to his concept of *soltura*, which can carry in the Spanish senses of 'ease', 'looseness', 'facility', even 'skill', but also connotations of free movement, liberation, and (linguistic) fluency. For Durán, this *looseness* he finds in Malabou's plastic-biological body, is central to the possibility for

transformation. Durán's formulation is striking: 'toda transformación crece en el momento en que se deja ir' ('all transformations grow the very moment they are released' [own translation]).¹⁹ The link here between *letting go* and transformation is boldly underlined. Elsewhere, Durán underscores the centrality of themes of letting go, relaxation, and indifference to Malabou's thought, focusing in particular on her reading of Hegel in *The Future of Hegel*: 'At the heart of *Aufhebung* lies a "giving up" or a "letting go" that means abandoning its self-chosen position'.²⁰ Durán notes in particular Malabou's reference to the image of a hand relaxing, releasing an object from its grasp.²¹ For Durán, it seems, there is no plasticity or transformation without a degree of (self-)abandonment or letting go.

I now turn to Dufourmantelle's concept of gentleness or *douceur* – which might also be translated as *softness* – to explore how a *softening* of the biological might entail precisely an approach to these transformative moments of (self-)abandonment and letting go between Malabou and Durán.²² As we will see, Dufourmantelle shows that this *softening* must be practiced, recovered, or learned.

Dufourmantelle and the Embrace of Gentleness

In *Power of Gentleness*, Dufourmantelle sets out to outline a philosophical concept of 'gentleness' or *douceur*. The text is composed of short, vignette-like meditations on gentleness, each approaching the concept through a different context or in relation to different imagery. Katherine Payne and Vincent Sallé note in their translators' introduction the multitude of meanings contained in the French *douceur* in excess of the English 'gentleness', from 'sweetness or softness' to 'ease in movement, smooth transitions, and a soft touch' (PG, xvii-xxii).

Dufourmantelle begins: 'Gentleness is an enigma. Taken up in a double movement of welcoming and giving, it appears on the threshold of passages signed off by birth and death'

(PG, 1). This bi-directionality of 'welcoming and giving' recalls Malabou's primary description of plasticity as an instance of both the *giving* and *receiving* of form.²³ Dufourmantelle offers one definition (among many others) of gentleness as 'an active passivity that may become an extraordinary force of symbolic resistance and, as such, become central to both ethics and politics' (PG, 5). She goes on to suggest that gentleness is not innate, but rather 'a way of life that has required development over millennia' (5). Gentleness, then, has known its own plastic evolution, coming to be via processes of meticulous refinement, sculpting and shaping. And yet, Dufourmantelle specifies that gentleness is also something that only 'visits' and cannot be definitively owned: 'We never manipulate it or possess it. We must accept entering its tides, treading its hollow paths, getting lost so that something unprecedented may arise' (81).

Dufourmantelle's gentleness shares with Malabou's biological (neuro)plasticity a political power for resistance. Dufourmantelle refers to characters in literature, such as Herman Melville's *Bartleby*, whose gentleness acts to undermine power formations surrounding them: 'Their gentleness does violence to a world where the rules of consensual servitude are the coordinates. An excess of this gentleness is dangerous. Better than any searchlight, it reveals faults, desire, manipulation, or conversely, goodness' (46-47). This sense of gentle resistance is evocative of the image of the plastic-resistant brain at the centre of Malabou's *What Should We Do With Our Brain?*, in which Malabou advocates for inhabiting the brain's plasticity to reject or resist domination. Malabou is clear here to differentiate between plasticity and flexibility: flexibility, Malabou points out, is often imposed upon plasticity, privileging neoliberal, capitalist schemas of adaptability, employability, and exploitability over plasticity's more anarchic capacity for malleability, resistance, and even subversive explosion.²⁴ We hear a similar opening of the danger for exploitation in Dufourmantelle's gentleness in which '[t]here is within [gentleness] the

possibility of being manipulated, even if we cannot disentangle ourselves from the feeling that it belongs to what is most alive in life. Lavishing it on others or receiving it, even simply recognizing it, fundamentally means acquiescing to it' (PG, 47). Opening oneself to gentleness, as to one's plasticity, it seems, runs a certain risk.

Indeed, gentleness is something that has been met with violence and endlessly repressed: 'Gentleness is troubling. We desire it, but it is inadmissible. When they are not despised, the gentle are persecuted or sanctified. We abandon them because gentleness as power shows us the reality of our own weakness' (PG, 6). And yet Dufourmantelle attributes to gentleness no less than the transformative potential of life itself (no doubt also a reason why it is so feared and repressed):

Gentleness is a force of secret life-giving transformation linked to what the ancients called 'potentiality' [*puissance*]. Without it there is no possibility for life to advance in its becoming. I think that the power of life's metamorphosis is sustained in gentleness. When the embryo becomes a newborn, when the cocoon blossoms into a butterfly, when a simple stone becomes the stele of a sacred space in the gardens of Kyoto, there is, at the very least, gentleness. From listening to those who come to me and confide their despair, I have heard it expressed in each personal experience. I have felt its force of resistance and its intangible magic in the secret of what is called 'transference'. But I undoubtedly perceived it as a child in the tangible relationship to all things. (PG, 6-7)

In the final part of his quote, Dufourmantelle is referring to her own clinical practice as psychoanalyst. There is, then, a relationship between care, therapy, and gentleness.

Gentleness, Dufourmantelle seems to suggest, is somehow revealed and nurtured in the therapeutic process, evolving in the space of 'transference' between patient and caregiver. In

a following section titled 'Taking Care', Dufourmantelle makes the link between care and gentleness explicit:

In the beginning animals and humans go through the same stages. Without care, does a newborn survive? Doesn't it need to be protected, surrounded, spoken to, thought of, or imagined so it can truly *enter* the world? What does it become with an absolute lack of gentleness? A mother's care of the small mammal is another expression of the envelopment of what has not yet finished growing and finds itself threatened in its integrity. The study of early attachment indicates that the baby's body, like that of the animal, retains in memory all the intensities (and all the deficiencies) that have been lavished upon it. Any serious attack will endanger, now or later, its capacity to survive. (PG, 12)

Gentleness, for Dufourmantelle, is life-giving: 'Gentleness comes with the possibility of life; with uterine envelopment that filters emotions, sound, and thoughts; with amniotic fluid; with the touch on the other side of one's skin; with closed eyes that cannot yet see; with breathing still protected from the aggression of the air' (96). Further, this primary gentleness of survival lives on at a cellular level: 'The touch of gentleness undoubtedly sleeps in each one of our cells, beckoning us to return, impossibly, to this lost world that rocked us long before maternal arms did' (96). Dufourmantelle also outlines the opposite of the care of/as/for gentleness, implying that we currently are living in such a careless environment: 'We don't know what the lack of gentleness causes. Words trampled; bodies mistreated, left lifeless, sucked dry; sad passions—but above all charred emotions, pure existential ashes that cannot be brought back to this side of life' (61).

How, then, might gentleness be cultivated, recovered, or enacted? As if in echo of Durán's *soltura*, if understood as 'ease', N. A. Weston comments: 'though gentleness appears as a kind of ease, it is not easy'.²⁵ Indeed, this question also resonates in Arne de Boever's

reading of Malabou's (destructive) plasticity in relation to questions of care; for de Boever, Malabou's *What Should We Do With Our Brain?* articulates a 'care of the brain' rooted in the text's manifesto-like conclusion that we need to embrace explosion and rage, whereby this care might indeed entail a '*care for rage*'.²⁶ Might this *rage* not also signal the kind of letting go and allowing oneself to fall apart or explode that Durán outlines? We hear this also in Dufourmantelle's alignment of gentleness with an openness to pain and suffering: 'Gentleness sometimes informs the decision to consent to the worst: to mourning, for example' (PG, 98). Further: 'Might gentleness be deadly? Yes, in melancholy as in sleep, snow, water: all the way to complete self-oblivion' (99).²⁷ Following on from Dufourmantelle's notion of the care needed to support gentleness, and the 'ease' or 'skill' we might hear in Durán's *soltura*, I propose approaches to the skill of gentleness to be found in practices of care and healthcare.

Practicing Gentleness: Approaches in Healthcare

Gentle biologies, then, between Malabou and Dufourmantelle, nurture this gentleness through careful plastic sculpting and shaping. The plasticity of biological life in and of itself does not automatically result in gentle modes of being; rather, this plasticity must be *lent into* in a particular way in order to sculpt and form gentleness, and to activate its potentialities within biological life.²⁸ What, then, might a *leaning in* to gentle inhabitations of the biological look in practice, and what might the implications be for (self-)care and healthcare?

I have argued elsewhere that dialogues between contemporary French philosophies and biomedical science invite us to transform conceptions of healthcare and clinical spaces. My focus here has been how contemporary French philosophers invite us to re-imagine healthcare practices and environments. I have explored how Malabou's work on 'destructive plasticity' and brain injury invites a new thinking of clinical space beyond Michel Foucault's

conception of the clinic in *Birth of the Clinic* (1963); whereas Foucault's clinic participates in the construction of normative bodies, Malabou's destructive plasticities, I argued, call for healthcare environments which allow these constructions to be relaxed, and for forms of alterity emerging within the posttraumatic self to be embraced rather than repressed.²⁹ I have also explored how the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy's autobiographically-inspired philosophy of heart transplant in *L'Intrus* (2000) might enable the conceptualization of clinical environments welcoming of strangeness and otherness rather than the same.³⁰ Across these different philosophical approaches to clinical environments and hospital architectures, I suggest, emerges a common thread: philosophical engagements with medicine and biology, in different ways, bear witness to the biological body's sense of its own otherness or alterity. In doing so, I have suggested, these engagements call for transformed conceptions of care and healthcare environments. In the final section of *Power of Gentleness*, 'A Gentle Revolution', Dufourmantelle notes: 'Gentleness is what allows us to reach out to this stranger who comes to us, in us' (PG, 104).

The question of gentleness in healthcare and clinical contexts is central to the project 'Employee Gentleness in Care Settings', headed by David Holman, Clare Mumford, Maurice Nagington, and Leo McCann. This study examines practices of gentleness in two UK care homes, arriving at different conceptions of what gentleness means in practical terms in healthcare settings through interviews with caregivers and patients.³¹ As if in echo to Dufourmantelle's acknowledgment of the philosophical reticence to conceptualise fully gentleness—a concept which '[exists] in the margin of concepts patrolled by the grand history of thought' (PG, 2) – Holman et al.'s study noted how 'there is very little written about what it means to be gentle when caring in a professional role' (EGCS, 4). The study begins with a definition of gentleness:

Being gentle combined guiding people to achieve specific things (such as talking about emotional difficulties, or even something as simple as washing and dressing) with maintaining a close relationship with clients. The most important aspect of being gentle was taking a soft and slow approach. This included a wide range of behaviours such as:

- Speaking in a soft and quiet manner
- Softly touching hands or the lower arm
- Keeping an open posture (i.e. not crossing arms)
- Sitting or crouching down to talk with clients
- Generally not rushing care delivery or decisions. (EGCS, 4)

Holman et al. present three different forms of gentleness identified in their data from care homes: 'Enquiry-based gentleness', 'persuasion-based gentleness' and 'comfort-based gentleness' (EGCS, 12). The enquiry-based gentleness encourages the patient respectively to express concerns and worries; the persuasion-based gentleness encourages the patient to cooperate in necessary tasks central to their care, like eating; and the comfort-based gentleness refers to a set of approaches geared towards soothing aspects of the patient's suffering, ranging from affirming in dialogues with the patient that their feelings are valid to simply being with the patient (12-13). Unsurprisingly, an obstacle to gentleness in healthcare contexts was found to be employee workload: gentleness of care was more likely to be tangible in environments of managed workloads (15). Further, strikingly, the research underlines 'emotion management' as central to gentleness in care: 'employees also recognised the potential problems that feeling strong emotions might have for their ability to deliver care and their long term well-being. Thus, a key part of being gentle is an ability to

feel and express appropriate emotions whilst ensuring that these feelings are not too strong and do not last too long' (9). This management and shaping of emotional response suggests gentleness not as an open and unlimited passage of affect between caregiver and patient, but rather as a disciplined sculpting of response, leaving space to the patient through caregiver's conscious receding, retreat, or letting go of their own emotional response. Holman et al.'s study, I want to suggest, resonates with Dufourmantelle's assertion that gentleness must be invited and practiced and Malabou's notion that gentleness is 'cultivated'.

Forms of gentleness are also to be found elsewhere by Nagington, Holman, Mumford and McCann in hospice contexts. If gentleness is to be found in the body letting go into death—Malabou notes that 'the renunciation of the dying person who lets go is also gentle' — what are the implications for palliative care? ³² Nagington et al. conceptualise a 'hospice gaze' in contrast to Michel Foucault's 'medical gaze'. Whilst Foucault's medical gaze entails the subjecting of the patient's body to circulations of power at play in the medical encounter, the 'hospice gaze' in contrast denotes a 'cooperative and gently laconic way of seeing, listening and knowing [which] sits in the gaps of more identifiable forms of care and resists patients' bodies and minds being conformed to so called "efficient" practices'.³³ Whilst this study does not explicitly centre gentleness as concept, there are references to the gentle throughout, from the 'gently laconic' approach cited above, to the 'slow and gentle attunement of staff with patients' in opposition to efficiency-drive hospital and palliative rhythms, to the 'eye contact and a gentle hold on Jonathan's hand' when Jonathan, a patient, is approached for his consent to take part in the study (3). The hospice gaze approaches death in way diametrically opposed to that of Foucault's hospital. Whilst Foucault's medical gaze operates on the corpse as a passive fount of knowledge, by which '[d]eath is not [...] a failure of medical power, but an opportunity to extend it' (2), the hospice gaze rather '[re]constructs] death in keeping with the patient's own knowledge about themselves',

creating meanings surrounding death in an open-ended and personal way with each patient, rather than reducing death to a merely biomedical phenomenon to be undergone (7).

Indeed, if the forms of gentleness Nagington et al. see as essential to the modes of care surrounding death favour the production of meaning and knowledge surrounding death for a particular patient, Steven Miller suggests conceptions of death between Dufourmantelle and Malabou which glimpse more destructive metamorphoses which go beyond meaning. In a footnote, he aligns Dufourmantelle's experience as a psychoanalyst of a patient who had lost their memory in a car accident with Malabou's concept of the 'destructive plasticity' occurring in brain traumas, in which '[r]ather than the end of life, "death" becomes the name for a radical metamorphosis. [...] this metamorphosis is the only death worth of the name, because, rather than simply putting an end to a life that is otherwise left intact, it transforms this life beyond recognition'.³⁴ Nancy Nisbet's own brief engagement with Dufourmantelle via her co-written work with Derrida, *Of Hospitality* (2000), further suggests such a 'radical metamorphosis' in her use of Dufourmantelle in theorizing mutation via Malabou's plasticity and Alain Badiou's *Event* as the 'a trace of the multiplicity of life itself' alongside a 'gradual transformation and appearing of the Other inscribed within the self'.³⁵ If Malabou and Dufourmantelle, brought together, demonstrate the importance of understanding the physical, biological body in terms of its often unrealized and even occluded capacities for *gentleness*, then, their gentleness insists also upon the biological body's practiced opening or hospitality towards transformation and alterity.

In turning towards the medical context—a context often associated with non-gentle operations of control in Foucauldian critiques of the biopolitical management of the body—we have glimpsed not only the historical obstacles against gentleness in clinical contexts, but also the pockets in which gentleness flourishes, as in Nagington et al.'s reading of the hospice. Indeed, what would it mean to put these latter studies in contact with Malabou and

Dufourmantelle, exploring the evocations of alterity, transformation, and resistance which haunt their *gentle biologies* within real clinical contexts? Indeed, there is currently relatively little practical engagement with Malabou and Dufourmantelle in clinical contexts.³⁶ Gentle biologies as a concept might show us not only that forms of healthcare need to be gentle, but also point towards the ways in which healthcare contexts can practice, sculpt, and *cultivate* forms of gentleness, as well as the effects of this gentleness on the body in contexts where gentleness has historically been denied or occluded, allowing for powerful and even subversive modes of gentle expression, creativity, and resistance.

¹ Malabou gives the lecture 'The relation between habit and the fold' (2017) as 'tribute' to Dufourmantelle, noting that it is derived from material co-developed whilst teaching together, which they had been due to collaborate on further before Dufourmantelle's death earlier that year, *YouTube*, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EglV1eVTrpU>>, accessed 19/05/2024. Malabou also dedicates *Pleasure Erased* (2020 [2020]) to Dufourmantelle, citing specifically her work on gentleness, *Pleasure Erased: The Clitoris Unthought*, translated by Carolyn Shread (Cambridge, UK; Hoboken, NJ: Polity Press, 2022). Steven Miller calls for further exploration of Dufourmantelle alongside Malabou in a footnote, 'Translator's Introduction: The Risk of Reading', in Anne Dufourmantelle, *In Praise of Risk*, translated by Steven Miller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 189.

² For analysis of how Malabou's work responds to and moves beyond Derridean deconstruction, see Ian James, *The New French Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 83-109; and John Nyman, 'The "Image of Thought" at Dusk: Derridean-Husserlian Responsibility, Destructive Plasticity, and the Manifesto', in *Thinking Catherine Malabou: Passionate Detachments* (London; New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2018), 57-73, 62. Malabou and Dufourmantelle come close to meeting, yet do not overlap explicitly, in Nancy Nisbet's exploration of mutation via Malabou's plasticity and conceptions of hospitality emerging from Dufourmantelle's co-authored work with Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality* (2000), 'Conceiving of a Subject of Mutation: Event, Plasticity, and Mutation', *Mosaic*, 48:2 (2015), 197-209.

³ Malabou's initial overview of definitions and cultural understandings of plasticity surveys many biological applications relating to organic life's capacities for education and evolution: 'We speak of the plasticity of the

newborn, of the child's plasticity of character. Plasticity is, in another context, characterize by "suppleness" and flexibility, as in the case of the "plasticity" of the brain. yet it also means the ability to evolve and adapt. It is this sense we invoke when we speak of a "plastic virtue" possessed by animals, plants, and, in general, all living things', Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality, Dialectic*, translated by Lisabeth During (New York: Routledge, 2004), 8.

⁴ Catherine Malabou, 'Ouverture: Le vœu de plasticité', in *Plasticité*, edited by Catherine Malabou (Paris: Leo Scheer, 2000), 6-25 (12; 20-21; 16-17; 10, 14).

⁵ Catherine Malabou, *The Heidegger Change: On the Fantastic in Philosophy*, translated by Peter Skafish (New York: SUNY Press, 2012), 86.

⁶ Catherine Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction*, translated by Carolyn Shread (New York; Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2010), 57-59.

⁷ 'The void has its place insofar as it makes possible the intrication of biological life and the transcendental—the thinking together of the neuronal and the mental without any recourse to a breach, separation, or spit between mind and body', Ian James, *The Technique of Thought: Nancy, Laruelle, Malabou, and Stiegler after Naturalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 195.

⁸ Ian James, 'Introduction', in Catherine Malabou, *Plasticity: The Promise of Explosion*, edited by Tyler Williams (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 1-12, 5.

⁹ For an overview of Dufourmantelle's life and works, see Steven Miller, 'Translator's Introduction: The Risk of Reading', in Anne Dufourmantelle, *In Praise of Risk*, translated by Steven Miller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), ix-xxiii.

¹⁰ Anne Dufourmantelle, *Power of Gentleness: Meditations on the Risk of Living*, translated by Katherine Payne & Vincent Sallé (New York: Fordham, 2018); hereafter PG.

¹¹ Emma Wilson translates Dufourmantelle's *douceur* as 'tenderness or softness', 'The Love Song of Nelly and Marion: Céline Sciamma's *Petite maman* (2021)', *French Screen Studies*, 23:2-3 (2023), 198-211, 200.

¹² Harold Schweizer, 'On Gentleness: Rilke's Hands', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 45: 4 (2022), 77-92, 80.

¹³ Catherine Lanone, 'Invitation and the Ethics of Hospitality in *Howards End*', *ÉA*, 72:4 (2019), 400-415, 406.

¹⁴ Carla Freccero identifies animality and human-animal relations as a central theme in Dufourmantelle's *Power of Gentleness*, however suggests that the animal functions often as 'only an analogy', 'Book Reviews: Anne

Dufourmantelle, *The Power of Gentleness: Meditations on the Risk of Living*, trans. Katherine Payne and Vincent Sallé, *philoSOPHIA*, 9:2(2019), 139-143, 142.

¹⁵ Cristóbal Durán, 'Attached to Detachment: A Materialist Indifference in Catherine Malabou', in *Thinking Catherine Malabou: Passionate Detachments*, Thomas Wormald and Isabell Dahms (eds.) (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 95-108; Cristóbal Durán Rojas, *La Soltura del cuerpo: indferencias de la diferencia en Catherine Malabou* (Santiago de Chile: Ediciones Metales Pesados, 2018). Given the difference in the presentation of Durán's name across these two publications, I will henceforth use Durán for ease of reference.

¹⁶ Catherine Malabou, 'Whither Materialism? Althusser/Darwin', in *Plastic Materialities: Politics, Legality, and Metamorphosis in the Work of Catherine Malabou*, Brenna Bhandar and Jonathan Goldberg-Hiller (eds.) (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2015), 47-60, 49. Hereafter WM.

¹⁷ Catherine Malabou, 'Politics of Plasticity: Cooperation without Chains', in Dan Swain, Petr Urban, Catherine Malabou, and Petr Kouba, *Unchaining Solidarity: On Mutual Aid and Anarchism with Catherine Malabou* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2021), 15-28. Hereafter PP.

¹⁸ Cristóbal Durán. 'Attached to Detachment: A Materialist Indifference in Catherine Malabou', in *Thinking Catherine Malabou: Passionate Detachments*, Thomas Wormald and Isabell Dahms (eds.) (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 95-108, 97.

¹⁹ Durán Rojas, *La Soltura del cuerpo*. With thanks to Deborah Madden for advising me on the Spanish text.

²⁰ Durán, 'Attached to Detachment', 101.

²¹ Durán, 'Attached to Detachment', 101.

²² Katherine Payne and Vincent Sallé, 'Translators' Note', in Anne Dufourmantelle, *Power of Gentleness: Meditations on the Risk of Living*, translated by Katherine Payne and Vincent Sallé (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), xvii-xxii.

²³ See Malabou's evocation of the 'synthetic alliance between the giving and receiving of form and the powerful rupture or annihilation of all form', *Plasticity at the Dusk*, 23.

²⁴ Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do With Our Brain?*, translated by Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 12.

²⁵ N. A. Weston, 'Power of Gentleness: Meditations on the Risk of Living by Anne Dufourmantelle (review)', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 56:3 (2019), 658-661.

²⁶ Arne de Boever, *Narrative Care: Biopolitics and the Novel* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 80.

²⁷ Dufourmantelle, *Power of Gentleness*, 99.

²⁸ Indeed, Thomas Wormald has shown persuasively that plasticity in Malabou 'designates merely ontological possibility as the malleable substance of existence, which is not inherently progressive or good in itself', and must therefore be consciously 'put to work [...] through the phenomenon of habit', Thomas Wormald, 'Sculpted Selves, Sculpted Worlds: Plasticity and Habit in the Thought of Catherine Malabou' (2014). *Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository*. 2398. <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/2398>, 52, 53.

²⁹ Benjamin Dalton, 'The Plastic Clinic: Catherine Malabou's Architectural Therapeutics', *Essays in French Literature and Culture*, 58 (2021), 191-210.

³⁰ Benjamin Dalton, 'Jean-Luc Nancy and the Hospital: Imagining Clinical Environments of Strangeness and Multiplicity', *Nottingham French Studies*, 62:3 (2023), 297-313.

³¹ David Holman, Clare Mumford, Maurice Nagington, and Leo McCan, 'Employee Gentleness in Care Settings', [online], <https://www.alliancembs.manchester.ac.uk/media/ambs/content-assets/documents/research/gentleness-report-march-2017.pdf>. Accessed 19/05/2024, 4. Hereafter EGCS.

³² Malabou, "Philosophy in Furs", xiv.

³³ Maurice Nagington, David Holman, Clare Mumford, and Leo McCann, 'Theorising the hospice gaze: A Foucauldian collaborative ethnography of a palliative day care service', *Society Science & Medicine*, 291 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114470>.

³⁴ Miller, "Translator's Introduction", Footnote 10., p. xv, provided in "Notes", 189.

³⁵ Nisbet, 'Conceiving a Subject of Mutation', 207.

³⁶ Notable exceptions include Emilia Sanabria's engagement with Malabou in her analysis of sex hormones and reproductive technologies, *Plastic Bodies: Sex Hormones and Menstrual Suppression in Brazil* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 201; and Malabou's own collaboration with Xavier Emmanuelli, co-founder of Médecins sans frontières, Catherine Malabou and Xavier Emmanuelli, *La Grande exclusion: L'urgence sociale, symptôme et thérapeutique* (Paris: Bayard, 2009).