

Was this kind of return, this plastic surgery, this “lifting,” compatible with a new way of thinking?
- Catherine Malabou

Waking up from surgery is like being born again... or coming back from the dead. It always feels like I have had the most wonderfully deep sleep. Upon waking there is a tremendous flooding of consciousness, then quite often, strange senses of discomfort. Sharp pain, soft wadding, bandages and gauze expertly applied and fastened. Cotton-wool softness together with acuity of sensation. I’ve never had surgery serious enough to warrant an extended stay in hospital (touch wood). Anything that would necessitate visitors, flowers and chocolates. Each time I am unceremoniously woken up, bundled up and sent on my way. Returned home, to my own bed. At those times, being home whilst everyone else is at work feels like the very few times I had to stay home from school due to sickness. There’s something nostalgic and oddly familiar about lying in bed during the day.

Contemplating recovery, I recall Nancy Mitford’s tale of Grace de Valhubert, an English gentlewoman living in post-WWII Paris. After a miscarriage, she is forced to spend a prolonged period of time in bed. As this occurred in early spring, Mitford recounts “This was not a bad place just then. Late snow had fallen, it lay in the garden, white and brown, under a low, dark sky.”¹ There is something so tremendously sad about Grace, lying in bed, feeling an affinity with the cold, hard, partly-frozen earth outside. Yet it was ensured her bedroom “gave a sunny impression.” It was “yellow with spring flowers. The mimosa was changed three times a day so that it should be always fluffy.” Such post-op decadence, mimosa refreshed three times a day! For a spell, everyone was kind to Grace, flowers and books, then finally visitors poured into her house.

Recently Tāmaki Makaurau based painter August Ward and I met up for an early morning coffee. In true *real housewife* style, she had just returned from Sydney where she had had her implants done. Surgeons on the other side of the Tasman are far more effective and far less conservative, she tells me. Ever the raconteuse, August described after the procedure staggering across a busy street from the hospital to her hotel. I picture her in dark glasses, shoulder-robbed in a fur, gently supported by her sister, whisked through the lobby, up the elevator and into her waiting suite. Surrounded by flowers, plied with infinite amounts of ice and extra pillows for support. She shows me her compression bra, it reminds me of the models I would see on chesty schoolmates in the high-school changing rooms. Oppressive and sensible. Adorably, August scrolls through pictures on her phone of all the pretty new bras she’s planning on purchasing.

I guess the ur-story of post-op recovery is that of little Madeline in Ludwig Bemelmans 1952 picture book. Waking up in hospital after an appendectomy, she finds herself in a room with flowers. A crucial detail is a crack in the ceiling with the “habit of sometimes looking like a rabbit.”² The hospital bed has a crank, a feature that needs to be carefully explained to small readers. In contrast to Grace de Valhubert’s experience “Outside were birds, trees and sky – and so ten days passed quickly by...” One fine morning, Madeline is visited by her classmates and teacher Miss Clavel. “VISITORS FROM TWO TO FOUR read a sign outside her door.” Her petites camarades come with flowers and a vase, they admire the toys, candy and dollhouse from Papa. “But the biggest surprise by far– *on her stomach was a scar!*” What does it mean that for me, the most vivid tropes of recovery take place in Paris, France?

Continuing in this Frankish vein, for philosopher Catherine Malabou there are three versions of recovery, each represented by an animal: the phoenix, the spider and the salamander. There is no doubt in my mind that in her case, August would have to instantiate the most glamorous of these creatures. The paradigm of the phoenix is one of a never-ending cycle of consuming destruction followed by perfect regeneration and resurrection.³ For the phoenix, “Healing implies a reconstitution of wounded presence, an annulment of the defect, the mark, the lesion.” This type of recovery “refers to the metaphor of the skin that regenerates without leaving a scar.” Taking this tripartite division of recovery from Prussian philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1807), Malabou describes an “image of this return to and on the self.” The trace or the wound heals, so that a presence becomes an absence, healing is “a disappearance that presents itself.” In contrast, the mode of recovery of the spider involves “an endless accumulation of scars spun into a web, like a text “covered with

marks, nicks, scratches” ones that refuse the possibility of “taking on a new skin” without blemishes.⁴ Recovery à la salamander involves growing a new limb that is neither scarred nor identical to the one it had before. The phoenix, the spider and the salamander, such an intriguing series of models for recovery, one I first came across in US based writer Leslie Jamison’s detailed investigations into Alcoholics Anonymous and the cult of recovery.

As August points out, it is telling that one recovers from both surgery and addictions, especially given that the housewives of Bravo reality television shows all too often demonstrate those to surgical interventions as well as substance abuse. Returning to Malabou, her central concern in the text I have just quoted is in fact *plasticity* (via Hegel) something she defines as “the ability to recuperate.”⁵ I thought of August when I read the following elaboration “Was this kind of return, this plastic surgery, this ‘lifting,’ compatible with a new way of thinking?” I say, why not? All of Malabou’s reflections are derived from Hegel’s provocation “The wounds of the Spirit heal and leave no scars behind.”⁶ Daring to cherry-pick from the annals of German idealist philosophy, as well as take it perhaps overly-literally, I will quote Malabou again where she says “the work of the spirit” “expresses precisely this process of recovery, healing, return, the re-knitting of the skin after the wound, in other words, the plasticity that appears as they very movement of the absolute.”

If you’ll forgive the associating, I can’t read the name Malabou, without thinking of *marabou*, the soft, fluffy material made from feathers used for trimming extravagant modes like robes or slip-on mules. Which leads me to coconut malibu, which is often mixed with Coke. I have taken a rich concoction of rum, housewife attire and serious philosophy as the governing logic of this text. Having just read Jamison’s monograph *The Recovering*, whilst in conversation with August, leading up to her exhibition of paintings at Paludal, a small art space in Ōtautahi, I am still preoccupied with its central concerns, one of which is *anti-exceptionalism*. In an interview Jamison elaborated that much of recovery is indeed “a fight against exceptionalism.”⁷ It is necessary to acknowledge that

What I’ve lived has been lived before, will be lived again, is nothing special but still holds meaning, still holds truth. The idea that a story has to be “exceptional” in order to be worth telling is curious to me. What if we looked at every single person’s story as a site of possibly infinite meaning? What if we came to believe that there isn’t hubris or narcissism in thinking your story might be worth sharing, only a sense of curiosity and offering?

The labour of recovery happens every day, yet it still holds meaning and truth. There’s no shame in thinking the narrative of your own recovery is worth sharing. This is the place where, I believe, August’s latest suite of paintings come from. A recitation in oil on board of animate surgical tools; masked and robed figures working away with gloves at the operating table; the small face tucked up in hospital blankets, elevated on a gurney; a vase of tulips carefully arranged on a bedside table. The artist is temporarily at rest, before she rises again, regenerated, her wounds perfectly healed. She emerges, triumphant, bearing new ways of thinking.

¹ Nancy Mitford, *The Blessing* (New York: Vintage Books, 1951/2010) 106.

² Ludwig Bemelmans, *Madeline* (London: Andree Deutsch, 1952).

³ Catherine Malabou, “The phoenix, the spider, and the salamander” in *Changing Difference: The Feminine and the Question of Philosophy*. Trans. Carolyn Shread. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009/2011) 74.

⁴ Leslie Jamison, *The Recovering: Intoxication and its Aftermath* (London: Granta Publications, 2018) 204.

⁵ Malabou, 69.

⁶ Quoted in Malabou, 73.

⁷ Jamison in Chris Kraus, “Big-Tent Recovery: An Interview with Leslie Jamison” *Paris Review*, March 19, 2018 <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/03/19/big-tent-recovery-an-interview-with-leslie-jamison/> Just as an aside, I would also recommend Jamison’s “Why Barbie Must Be Punished” *The New Yorker*, July 29, 2023 <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-weekend-essay/why-barbie-must-be-punished>