



Byron Harmon, "Lake Louise," 1908.

Is Retreat a Metaphor?

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This lecture was presented by Catherine Malabou during the 2012 Banff Research in Culture research residency. In this talk, Malabou takes head on the significance of the concept of 'retreat' and the theoretical operations it performs, by probing what retreat and withdrawal tells us about our ontological and epistemological condition. The performance of these words is significant to their meaning: by telling us what she was planning, intending, or hoping to do, Malabou reveals her own ideas about retreat as she retreats from them, making them available to us even as she refuses to affirm them, or does so only with suspicion at her motives. And as she interrogates the metaphysics of retreat, we are reminded repeatedly of the significance of the physical and neurobiological in the philosophical, an area of research in which Malabou has played a critical framing role, and which is represented here in the form of italicized asides (from A. R. Luria and Antonio Damasio, amongst others). The double voice of Malabou's talk both repeats and challenges the double character of retreat, while Malabou's own struggle with retreat alerts us to the difficulty of thinking—and performing—it. Malabou's drift towards indifference is a productive ruse that challenges the reader to think the Being of philosophy alongside the very different Being of the brain. —Imre Szeman

I INITIALLY INTENDED to talk about Martin Heidegger. I wanted to explain the reason why, according to him, there can be no retreat without a retreat of the retreat itself, no retreat without a re-doubling, to the extent that the only gesture or move retreating can perform is to perform nothing, that is, to retreat. The only thing which retreating can do, and mean, is to retreat. *Retreat retreats*. I would have liked to explain that this sentence, *retreat retreats*, can also be formulated as "retreat is," and recall that, for Heidegger, Being originally coincides with its own retreat or withdrawal (*Entziehung*). For this very reason, retreating is a synonym to being. Every time we say something like *s is p*, it means *s* retreats from *p*, as well as *p* retreats from *s*, because the copula *is* is nothing but its own withdrawal.

Being, affirms Heidegger, has always already retreated, has always meant its own withdrawal in withdrawing, but has also hidden this retreat, it has always retreated from its retreat. It has retreated a first time from its own retreat to give way to metaphysics. Metaphysics is this long tradition, also called philosophy, through which, or within which Being hides itself under beings, and appears as what it is not, that is as a form of presence, be it God, substance, or reality—as some-

thing eternal which never withdraws. Ontological withdrawing has veiled or covered itself behind what never retreats. In that sense, Being, through or within metaphysics, has always appeared as its own opposite, as a substantial referent, as something toward which everything tends, thus as the proper name or the proper meaning for every particular being. Every particular being became a metaphor to Being, a transfer, a way toward it.

*BUT I've become a stranger since I was wounded...Everything that I learned or experienced in life has just dropped out of my mind and memory, vanished for good, leaving behind nothing but an atrocious brain ache.*¹

This would have led me to comment on Heidegger's powerful statement in his book *The Principle of Reason*: "the metaphorical exists only within the borders of metaphysics."² This would have led me also to explain that the first retreat of the retreat, metaphysics, has come to an end, has come to *its* end. This would have led me to show that the distinction between proper and metaphorical meaning has also disappeared, that there is no such thing like a "metaphor" any longer. The metaphorical exists only within the borders of metaphysics and ceases to be when metaphysics comes to its end and reveals the achievements of its own destruction or deconstruction. The meaning of Being, then, is neither proper nor figured; Being cannot be understood as a referent any longer. Being is retreating or withdrawing from its metaphysical meaning. It is withdrawing from its previous retreat. It retreats from its retreat again. And if Retreat has retreated a second time, this time from both its proper and metaphorical status, then what does retreat mean?

Simply, naively, if I decide to retreat from others, to look from some seclusion, or solitude, or shelter, and if retreat has retreated from the distinction between its proper and its metaphorical meaning, what can I reach where and when I retreat? Nothing proper, no authenticity, I can't obtain any truth, any essential way of being, because the difference between the proper and the figurative, between authenticity and inauthenticity, between truth and falsity, between what is essential and what is not have withdrawn. If I can't get anything like a more proper kind of existence from my withdrawal, if getting into the wild does not give me anything else but the very absence of wilderness, if everywhere I go is like everywhere else, then staying where I am, here, there, with the others, consuming, logging on, playing all sorts of games, enjoying this good capitalist global nothingness, doing all this, then, amounts to living in the woods. Is this no less authentic, that is no more inauthentic, than living in a retreat?

I would have liked to dwell on these ideas but

*She had suddenly become motionless and speechless...She would lie in bed, often with her eyes open but with a blank facial expression...The term neutral helps convey the equanimity of her expression... She was there but not there.*³

I also intended to extend this reflection with Jacques Derrida's analysis of retreat and withdrawal in his powerful text "The Retreat of Metaphor."⁴ Derrida recalls the Heideggerian trajectory, the double double retreat, the metaphysical and the deconstructive one, where the metaphorical and the proper withdraw in the end. Derrida agrees that retreating or withdrawing is always a failure,

and that the frontier between authenticity and inauthenticity has become absolutely porous. Derrida shows, nevertheless, that this aporia does not equate an impossibility. We can still invent a new meaning for retreat, we can open a new possibility of withdrawing, something yet to come. One cannot distinguish between authenticity and inauthenticity, the proper and the metaphorical, but one can make a difference between them. Retreat is always retreat of the retreat, retreat from the retreat, but between retreat and retreat, a difference hides itself, which silently asks to be made. Derrida says *traced*. There is always a possibility to retrace the retreat, to insist upon the secret difference that inhabits within the retreat, which opens the space of the trace. Derrida plays with the French *trait, zug* (which you hear in *Entziehen*, or *retrait*), saying that we have to retrace the retreat in order to invent a different way to retreat, to open a gap between retreat and retreat, and so invent a new meaning of retreat, a poetic one. Poetry, Derrida says, is language freed from the distinction between the metaphorical and the proper meaning, a language that traces itself, retraces itself to make the difference between retreat and retreat appear without designating or imaging it. Foucault calls this retracing “the thought from outside.”⁵

Retreating, then, would equate travelling to the outside, an outside deprived of any contrary, of any inside.

Let me still go on mentioning what I would have said if I hadn't retreated from my project, from my own outside.

*If I, if I, no less dramatic than the oblivion that anosognosic patients have regarding their sick limbs is the lack of concern they show for their overall situation, the lack of emotion they exhibit, the lack of feeling they report when questioned about it. The news that there was a major stroke... is usually received with equanimity, sometimes with gallows humor, but never with anguish or sadness, tears or anger, despair or panic.*⁶

I would have liked to present three great figures of the retreat, three heroes, my three heroes: Maurice Blanchot, Alexander Grothendieck, and Thomas Bernhard. Each of them retraces the retreat: in not appearing (Blanchot), in disappearing (Grothendieck), and in about-turning (Bernhard).

Of Blanchot: let me just remind you of these famous words: “*un écrivain n'a pas d'existence propre*”: a writer has no proper existence.

NOT APPEARING

Grothendieck is less famous, so I will insist a bit more on his case. Grothendieck, born 28 March 1928, is a mathematician and the central figure behind the creation of the modern theory of algebraic geometry. His research program vastly extended the scope of the field, incorporating major elements of commutative algebra, homological algebra, and category theory into its foundations. This new perspective led to revolutionary advances across many areas of pure mathematics. He formally retired in 1988 and within a few years moved to the Pyrenees, where he currently lives in isolation from human society.

He refused several prizes.

In January 2010, Grothendieck wrote a letter to Luc Illusie. In this “*Déclaration d’intention de non-publication*”, he states that essentially all materials that have been published in his absence have been done without his permission. He asks that none of his work should be reproduced in whole or in part, and even further that libraries containing such copies of his work remove them.

Retirement into reclusion.

Bernhard’s autobiography is a collection of five separate volumes.

a child, an indication of the cause, the cellar, breath, in the cold.

The most striking of these books is for me *The Cellar (Der Keller)*, whose subtitle is *Eine Entziehung*, or *une retraite* in French, strangely translated into English as *An Escape*, which is not quite accurate. *Entziehung* is the same word as the one Heidegger uses about Being, which is translated as withdrawal. When he was 15, Bernhard left school and became an apprentice at a grocery store in the poorest area of Salzburg. He called this his retreat. “One day as I was walking to school—a walk which took me along the Reichenhaller Strasse—I decided not to go to the grammar school but to go to the labour exchange instead. The labour exchange sent me that very morning to Podlaha’s grocery store on the Scherzhauserfeld Project, where I began a three-year apprenticeship without saying a word about it to my family. I was now fifteen years old.”⁷ Bernhard presents this *Entziehung* as “a move to the opposite direction”: “I did not just want to go in a *different* direction—it has to be the opposite direction, a compromise being no longer possible.”⁸ And again: “that morning I did an about-turn and ran for dear life in the direction of Mülln and Lehen. I ran faster and faster, leaving the whole deadly routine of recent years behind me, leaving absolutely everything behind me, once and for all.”⁹

These three turns of the negative have oriented my intellectual life for a long time: *desœuvrement*, or unworking in Blanchot, nothingness in Grothendieck, and contradictory negativity in Bernhard. Or, to use other names: neutrality, nihilisation, dialectics. For me, the move to the outside was a tension between these tensions, making three different versions of the retreat emerge in conflict and unity with one another: sending words without a face, stopping conceptual activity, and transforming oneself into someone else, into the very opposite of oneself—for instance, transforming a writer into a grocer’s apprentice.

I would have told you how much I hoped I would be able to achieve my own suspension and transformation one day, making concepts disappear, retiring from them, withdrawing from my own ideas, finding a way to labour without writing. I still ask myself those questions: Will I one day be able to withdraw? To cease writing? To do my about-turn? Will I find my way of retracing the retreat, just like my three heroic figures?

But what is this I wanted to say?

*what would I do, what could I do, all day long, I mean between the bell for waking and the bell for sleep? (Pause.) Simply gaze before me with compressed lips. (Long pause while she does so. No more plucking.) Not another word as long as I drew breath, nothing to break the silence of this place.*¹⁰

Will I have the will? Blanchot's, Grothendiek's, and Bernhard's retreats are voluntary ones. They all proceed from a decision, however difficult and painful. In order to make a difference, to invent, create, or retrace the retreat, you have to want it. Deconstruction has never deconstructed will. And will is always, in a way or another, a will to power. In order to enter neutrality or burn your works, or become an apprentice in going the opposite way, you still have to want it. To be powerful enough to want it.

In *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot talks about suicide, and asks: "Is suicide possible (*le suicide est-il possible*)?"¹¹ The answer is that suicide, in a way, has nothing to do with the concept of "possibility" "The weakness of suicide lies in the fact that whoever commits it is still too strong."¹² In the end, "one cannot 'plan' to kill oneself."¹³ I can't say I want to kill myself, but I can say I don't want to appear. Respect my will, don't take pictures of me, don't try to render me visible. Invisibility is my decision. In that sense, retreating is perhaps akin to dying, but it does not amount to committing suicide. Grothendiek presents retreat as a political gesture. He declares that he does not see the interest in going on doing mathematical research to the extent that this research doesn't help poverty, exploitation, and injustice. In that sense, to stop doing math still belongs to the mathematical ontological power, to the power of the event. It is not a suicide either. Bernhard is firm and determined on this point: "Two possibilities had been open to me, as I can still see clearly today: one was to kill myself—and I was not brave enough for that; the other was to quit the grammar school without further ado. I did not kill myself but got myself an apprenticeship. Life went on." "I did not want to throw myself off the Mönchberg—I wanted to live," Bernhard writes. "And so that morning I did an about-turn and ran for dear life in the direction of Mülln and Lehen."¹⁴

And I wanted to talk about all this. And then

"what would I do, what could I do, all day long, I mean between the bell for waking and the bell for sleep?"¹⁵

Last month, as I was preparing this paper, I felt my arm falling. I felt that someone or something in me *didn't want* anymore. Didn't want to retreat, if retreat meant something voluntary. Or, more exactly, couldn't retreat, couldn't want to retreat any longer.

It occurred to me, while I was preparing this presentation, that I couldn't omit what I had learned while exploring the neuroscientific field, the domain of neuropathologies in particular. All brain lesions, neurobiologists say, provoke to different degrees disturbances in the inductors of emotion, and the identities of neurological patients are characterized by disaffection or coolness. A bottomless absence. To the extent that every trauma induces disturbances within the core of the "self," all post-traumatic changes of personality present such disaffection or desertion.

Such a disaffection appears as a non-voluntary retreat. So I wonder if all of us are not doomed to retreat in this unintentional way, which is indifference. Unconcern. Absence of care.

"what would I do, what could I do, all day long, I mean between the bell for waking and the bell for sleep?"

Elliott was "thoroughly charming but emotionally contained...He was cool, detached, unperturbed even by potentially embarrassing discussion of personal events."¹⁶ When he is confronted with images

designed to provoke strong emotions—buildings collapsing during earthquakes, houses burning, people wounded in bloody accidents or on the verge of drowning—Elliot flatly declares that he does not feel anything. The images cause no reaction whatsoever.

The emotional life of brain patients is extremely impoverished. Most striking is their cold-blooded manner of reasoning—a phenomenon that, according to neurologists, directly threatens their ability to *decide*, that is, to evaluate the different options in play when it comes to making a choice. Only the emotional apparatus makes it possible to lend weight to various solutions that call for a decision. If this apparatus remains mute, decisions become a matter of indifference: everything is just as good as everything else, so nothing is worth anything. The disturbance of cerebral auto-affection produces a sort of nihilism in the patient, an absolute indifference, a coolness that visibly annihilates all difference and all dimensionality.

The difference between this and the three heroic figures of retreat I mentioned previously

The stroke suffered by this patient...produced damage to the internal and upper regions of the frontal lobe in both hemispheres. An area known as the cingulate cortex was damaged along with nearby regions. She had suddenly become motionless and speechless...She would lie in bed, often with her eyes open but with a blank facial expression...The term neutral helps convey the equanimity of her expression...She was there but not there.¹⁷

"I have often used the term 'neutral,'" Damasio affirms, "to convey the equanimity—or absence—of such an expression."¹⁸ After recovering the ability to speak, she "was certain about not having felt anguished by the absence of communication. Nothing forced her not to speak her mind. Rather, as she recalled, I really had nothing to say"...To my eyes Mrs. T. had been unemotional. To her experience, all the while, it appears she had had no feelings."¹⁹

No less dramatic than the oblivion that anosognosic patients have regarding their sick limbs is the lack of concern they show for their overall situation, the lack of emotion they exhibit, the lack of feeling they report when questioned about it. The news that there was a major stroke...is usually received with equanimity, sometimes with gallows humor, but never with anguish or sadness, tears or anger, despair or panic.²⁰

So the only authentic retreat is the one which is totally deprived of authenticity, that is, of any relationship to will. The only possible retreat is the non-conscious one.

On many occasions, Antonio Damasio compares the disorientation of his patients to that of Winnie from Beckett's *Happy Days*. Winnie asks:

...what would I do, what could I do, all day long, I mean between the bell for waking and the bell for sleep? (Pause.) Simply gaze before me with compressed lips. (Long pause while she does so. No more plucking.) Not another word as long as I drew breath, nothing to break the silence of this place.²¹

Winnie is the incarnation of *wakefulness without consciousness*.²² Theatre of absence. Indeed, it is quite possible that consciousness can be absent from the state of wakefulness: "Patients with some neurological conditions... are awake and yet lack what core consciousness would have added to their thought process: images of knowing centered on a self."²³

The theatre of absence is the privileged expression of affective impoverishment and destructive metamorphosis. Its rhetoric comprises figures of interruption, pauses, caesuras—the blank spaces that emerge when the network of connections is shredded or when the circulation of energy is paralyzed. This theatre is what Gilles Deleuze calls the theatre of exhausted identity.²⁴ Such identity is the possible born after the exhaustion of all possibles. I wish I could have told you about Heidegger, about Derrida, Blanchot, Grothendiek, and Thomas Bernhard. I wish I were able to talk about difference. The way in which difference helps retracing the retreat and prevents its redoubling to equate pure failure.

But indifference suddenly fell upon me, from the other side of my retreat, the non-different one, the neurobiological one. Indifference appeared to me as the contemporary form of retreat, a retreat which is undecided, involuntary, non-chosen. A retreat within coolness and unconcern. A retreat indifferent to itself. It also appeared to me that such an indifference is not proper to brain patients only, but that we all share it, in a way or another.

Perhaps because we know that voluntary retreat doesn't make any difference any more. That nobody cares about Blanchot, Grothendiek, or Bernhard today. Because retreat doesn't impress or frighten or appear as something striking any longer. We have always already involuntarily retreated anyway, retreated into indifference, our indifference, and the indifference in which we are held. The indifference of failure. We have already retreated in our failure: nobody reads our books, nobody listens to us, we will remain in the shade of oblivion. And we are indifferent to it. Indifference to ourselves is our strange answer to the world's indifference to us.

Once upon a time there were famous retired people like Blanchot, Grothendiek, or Bernhard. There were famous thinkers of the withdrawal of being and of the end of metaphysics.

There were famous thinkers of the retreat of metaphor and of the poetry to come, and of the difference a little trace can make.

I wish I could still believe in the trace, and go in the opposite direction, I wish I could still invent something out of the disappearance of proper and figurative meaning but

Jimmie suffered from Korsakov's syndrome which entails a profound and irreversible loss of memory. This pathology is sometimes also called "transient global amnesia" (TGA). Jimmie, Sacks writes, "both was and wasn't aware of this deep, tragic loss in himself, of himself."²⁵ He had the very strong feeling of "something missing" but did not know what precisely it was and, for this reason, displayed a strange and profound indifference to his own "disappearance" ("Are you miserable?"—"I can't say that I am." "Do you enjoy life?"—"I can't say I do..."²⁶). At a certain point, Sacks wondered whether it would be valid to conclude that Jimmie had lost his soul: "was it possible that he had really been 'desouled' by a disease?"²⁷

NOTES

- 1 A. R. Luria, *The Man With a Shattered World*, trans. Lynn Solotaroff (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 100 [Translation significantly modified].
- 2 See Martin Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*, trans. Reginald Lilly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996). The text comes from Jacques Derrida's reading and translation of Heidegger's *Der Satz vom Grund*. See *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 226 n. 29.
- 3 Luria, 101-02.
- 4 Jacques Derrida, "The Retreat of Metaphor." *Enclitic 2* (1978): 5-34.
- 5 See Michel Foucault and Maurice Blanchot. *Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside / Michel Foucault as I Imagine Him*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman and Brian Massumi (New York: Zone Books, 1987).
- 6 Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error; Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 64.
- 7 Thomas Bernhard. *Gathering Evidence, A Memoir*, trans. Carol Brown (New York: Vintage International, 1985), 141.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 146 and 150.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 153.
- 10 Samuel Beckett, *Happy Days* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 21.
- 11 Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 102.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 103.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 103.
- 14 Bernhard, 146.
- 15 Beckett, 23.
- 16 Damasio, *Descartes' Error*, 34-35.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 101-102.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 72.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 73.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 64.
- 21 Beckett, 21.
- 22 Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2000), 90-92.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 90.
- 24 See Gilles Deleuze, "The Exhausted," trans. Anthony Uhlmann. *SubStance* 24.3 (1995): 3-28.
- 25 Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat* (New York: Picador, 2011), 35.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 36.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 37.

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