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LOST IN SPACING?

A review of Catherine Malabou and Jacques Derrida, *Counterpath: Travelling with Jacques Derrida*, trans. David Wills, Cultural Memory in the Present, Stanford Ca.: Stanford University Press, 2004.

Counterpath: Travelling with Jacques Derrida is decidedly difficult to read. A work of collaboration between the late Jacques Derrida and one of his former students, Catherine Malabou, the latter of whom appears to be captaining this ship, it is hard to decide whether this text subverts, disrupts, interferes with, meddles in, hinders, or obscures its own reading. Wherever one's judgement falls, this writerly intervening is calculatingly incalculable. For the central theme and trope of this work is, as its subtitle indicates, travelling, which is to say, the passage from point-A to point-B. And as anyone acquainted with Derrida's thought will know, the passing of the passage is, for Derrida, never direct, never to the point: step/not (*pas*).

Under Malabou's initiative, Malabou and Derrida set out on their course both to draw out travelling as a theme in Derrida's thought and biography but also to show how Derrida's thought and biography deconstruct the very notions of travelling and passage. Where the typical travel narrative (exemplarily, for Malabou, the *Odyssey*) "always presumes to accord a privilege to the *present*" with "the possibility of recounting [the passage]...*derived* precisely from that" (26), for Derrida, according to Malabou, the true arrival (the *arrivant*, as Derrida sometimes calls it), without which there would be no travel, would come without deriving from a non-place and must possibly not arrive (142). Lacking definite points of departure and arrival, and therefore a determinate itinerary, there would come to be in travel, as Malabou puts it with precision, "an irreducible indigenusness to derivation in the country of arrival" (285). The suggestion is that any intending, any meaning, must be exposed to continental drift and perpetual derivativeness (supplementarity, non-originarity), even if this derivativeness itself is not derived from some home-base or homeland.

As one might expect, Malabou and Derrida explicate these structures of travel or

counter-travel by allowing both of their separate but interweaving texts to perform these structures, in addition to reconstituting them thematically and theoretically. The result is a nearly baroque work: at once playfully intricate and decadently extravagant. As translator David Wills—who does a fine job translating this difficult text more replete than usual with puns, neologisms, and an often highly stylized syntax—explains to us in his Translator’s Note, the French work was first published (in 1999) in a series entitled *Voyager avec...* (Travelling with...), which includes volumes on Ernst Jönger, Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust and others. Malabou’s and Derrida’s entry in this series plays with this format by including Derrida’s own very intermittent responses to Malabou’s text, written on postcards “on the fly,” as it were, while she was writing her text and he was (you guessed it) travelling. Similar to his writing in “Circumfession,” his meditative, confessional and chatty responses to her text are thus interpolated by the places he visits, and contain a mixture of biographical material specialists will find interesting along with some valuable improvised reflections on a few of the issues Malabou’s text raises. But Derrida’s missives are not the bulk of the work.

Malabou’s contribution, “The Parting of Ways: Drift, Arrival, Catastrophe,” which is the bulk of the work, consists in gleefully but patiently excavating Derrida’s corpus for travel motifs (voyage, odyssey, passage, postcards, sending, deferral, derivation, arrival, borders, home, foreigner, hospitality, etc.). Often she displays these motifs simply by citing a series of passages from diverse texts without commentary, but not without logic, creating a suggestive Benjaminian montage that riffs on a particular trope, concept, or name (see Chapters 7, 8, 13, 15, and 16, which consist almost entirely of quotations). The onus, however, is left to the reader to tie together what the discovery of these threads in Derrida’s corpus ultimately means.

This latter strategy, which the sleeve calls “readerly,” is taken to its extreme end by what feels to me to be the most contrived (writerly) device of the work: the fact that Malabou’s text has been, as she tells us in the Note to the Reader, “randomly arranged” (xviii). In other words, the order in which her text is laid out, mapped in what she calls “Contents (Random Order),” is not the “original,” “logical” order in which it was written, which is mapped in “Contents (Logical Order),” included in an Appendix. “The reader,” Malabou thus explains in the Preface, “is free to undertake a continuous reading of the whole in the [random] order in which it appears, or to follow the [logical] thread of one particular pathway at a time, or else to follow no particular thread but rather to saunter here and there, carried along by their desires or by their driftings drives” (30). The intention here is clearly to keep the reader and reading open to the aleatory possibility of alterity. But the effect, on me anyway, was the opposite: at times, it

feels as if alterity is being forced on you, like a calculated encounter with the incalculable; at other times, one is left simply stupefied. Derrida has taught us that one must risk stupefaction in order to be open to alterity, but that does not mean that all stupefaction (or anything aleatory) is an experience of alterity.¹ Stupefaction can also be a stupor in which one is blinded not *by* alterity, but *to* it. So, for instance, just as one settles into a discussion about metaphor in Chapter “19,” the text abruptly gives way to Chapter “20” about deconstruction and America. I am sure that if one tried, one might (but might not) discover a connection between the two that would not have been noticed had one followed the logical development of Malabou’s text. But, of course, one could do that with any two themes in a corpus, especially Derrida’s. That is the peculiar self-contradiction of this device: *you* end up left alone with *your own* devices—precisely what, I take it, the device was intended to disrupt.

To be sure, Malabou’s text demonstrates a remarkable intimacy with Derrida’s corpus and thought and is enviably skilful in working with them. She is, moreover, amply convincing in demonstrating that Derrida has often described the undecidable spacings in his analyses with travel images and that these reveal a quite consistent but hitherto unthematized thinking of travel in Derrida’s corpus. The sleeve does not exaggerate when it enthuses that Malabou “makes it seem as though Derrida has never written about anything but travel.” Even Derrida himself exclaims in one of his postcards how “insanely economical” this motif is for capturing the logic of his thought (41).

Still, it is a peculiar project to offer a deconstruction of travel and to cast it as, to use Marian Hobson’s terminology,² the lexeme of spacing *par excellence*. Even Derrida seemed to have trouble taking it seriously when Malabou first proposed it (3). However, where Derrida quickly learned how effective travel was for unifying so many of the concepts dear to him (home, foreign, border, passage, arrival, hospitality, etc.), I’m not as convinced by the value of this economy. If travel is valuable for being a kind of inter-nominal hub to concepts like home, foreign, and border, then its value, its import, ironically, *derives* from them in a way. It is true, as Malabou might counter, that “home” and “foreign” are only possible as traces of an indeterminate travel-spacing. But as Derrida also always insisted, spacing (travel) is indissociable from the differences to which it gives place, and meaning is produced and altered only in the negotiation between these two irreducible but indissociable orders. It is difficult to decide whether by foregrounding and elevating travel (spacing) to the extent that she does in both

¹ On the de-limitation of the aleatory, see Jacques Derrida, “The Deconstruction of Actuality” in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*, ed. and trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford CA: Stanford UP, 2002), 94, 96.

² Marian Hobson, *Jacques Derrida: Opening Lines* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

the thematic and performative aspects of her text, Malabou courageously risks or in fact verges on losing us in the counter-travels of spacing. Perhaps the difficulty of that decision is the point. The reader will have to decide.

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