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Deleuze, The Dark Precursor

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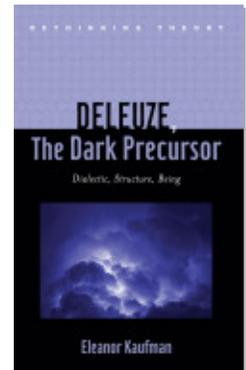
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French Thought and the Space of American Literature

IT IS SOMETHING OF A truism that America is integrally connected to the concept of vast unbounded space and, more precisely, to unbounded movement through that space. In other words, freedom of movement across virtually uncharted territory is taken as a cornerstone of a specifically American form of being. This connection of America with movement through limitless space is especially common among French intellectuals, who, from Alexis de Tocqueville to Jean Baudrillard and Deleuze himself, have made something of a small cottage industry of charting out the philosophical ramifications of American space. While briefly outlining some of these Franco-American lineages and several works of American literature that illustrate them, I aim to reverse and reorient the omnipresent emphasis on movement and vast space as definitional of an American essence. I wish to examine the way in which American space is also — and sometimes simultaneously — bound up with enclosed spaces and immobility. As we will see in the other chapters in part 3, Deleuze's work both opens this perception and, like Moses at the edge of the promised land, does not take it far enough.

In surveying the genre of French intellectual writing that unabashedly conflates America with unrestrained — and unthinking — movement, there is no better place to begin than with Tocqueville's two-volume classic, *Democracy in America*. Suffice it here to note only the points of departure for each volume, for they establish the framework for a long trajectory of French theorization of American space. The first chapter of volume 1 is entitled "Exterior Form of North America," and it provides a detailed climatic and geographical description of the North American territories. Tocqueville begins the chapter as follows:

North America presents in its external form certain general features which it is easy to discriminate at the first glance. A sort of methodical order seems to have regulated the separation of land and water, mountains and valleys. A simple but grand arrangement is discoverable amidst the confusion of objects, and the prodigious variety of scenes.¹

This reading of “general features” in “external form” and “methodical order” in a “simple but grand arrangement” provides the very formula and methodology for an entire lineage of French thinkers who take on a spatio-philosophical analysis of America. For it is precisely the “external form” and the “grand arrangement” of American space and American landscape that give rise to what are now commonplace notions about an American way of being or, more precisely, of being in movement.

Of crucial importance to this Americanness — as defined by movement through vast space — is its accompanying absence of speculative thought. Once again, this is nowhere better defined than by Tocqueville, this time in the first chapter of volume 2 of *Democracy in America*. Entitled “Philosophical Method among the Americans,” this chapter begins with the following sentence: “I think that in no country in the civilized world is less attention paid to philosophy than in the United States.”² From this provocative opening, Tocqueville goes on to explain how Americans nonetheless do have a logic all their own, but one that does not pronounce itself as philosophical. As one might suspect, this method is bound up with individualism, pragmatism, a quest for plain truth, and the lack of a sense of history,³ and it leads Tocqueville to two striking conclusions:

In the midst of the continual movement which agitates a democratic community, the tie which unites one generation to another is relaxed or broken; every man readily loses the trace of the ideas of his forefathers or takes no care about them.⁴

This disposition of mind soon leads [the Americans] to condemn forms, which they regard as useless and inconvenient veils placed between them and the truth.⁵

These statements are significant not so much in themselves but in the way they are implicitly linked together. Indeed, the implicit or explicit linkage of “continual movement” with “this disposition of mind . . . [that] condemns forms” is at the crux of many French — and American — readings of

the way Americans inhabit their spaces. There are at least three propositions here that are worth putting into question: (1) that America is somehow synonymous with continual movement, (2) that America is not synonymous with thought, and (3) that movement and thought do not go together.

These same propositions are omnipresent in twentieth-century French writings on America. An amusing example can be found in the “American civilization” installment of the popular “Que Sais-Je?” textbooklet series. In a section entitled “The Movement Factor,” author Jean-Pierre Fichou writes that “designated by the term ‘M Factor’ is this element of American culture that gives it an appearance of perpetual agitation, or incessant activity. . . . In contrast with what takes place in certain cultures that have erected contemplation into a system, the notions of progress and movement are omnipresent.”⁶ This analysis would imply that, since it possesses the notorious “M Factor,” America is not one of those cultures driven toward contemplation and, moreover, that movement and contemplation are mutually exclusive. One might be led to ask, especially in light of Baudrillard’s celebrated analysis of America, whether it is possible for an exercise-obsessed American to think while jogging — or working out at the gym.

“Most certainly not” would seem to be the resounding conclusion of Baudrillard’s *America*, in which joggers exemplify a state of pure movement in which the only possible thought is a purely corporeal “ecstasy of fatigue.”⁷ From the outset of *America*, Baudrillard underscores how the hypermobile/hyposentient construct of America that he is looking for (avowedly inspired by Tocqueville) is precisely the America that he finds: “I went in search of *astral* America, not social and cultural America, but the America of the empty, absolute freedom of the freeways, not the deep America of mores and mentalities, but the America of desert speed, motels and mineral surfaces.”⁸ In short, all that is interesting about America is to be found on the surface, in the perpetual movement from place to place, and never in a rootedness or immobility, which in any case would not be comparable to what one finds in Europe.

What Baudrillard captures — and in an even purer form than Tocqueville — is a vision of America in which exteriority determines everything and interiority nothing. From his analysis of the “psychology of the automobile,” Baudrillard concludes that

all this creates a new experience of space, and, at the same time, a new experience of the whole social system. All you need to know about American society can be gleaned from an anthropology of its driving behavior. That behavior tells you much more than you could ever learn from its political ideas. Drive ten thousand miles across America and you will know more about this country than all the institutes of sociology and political science put together.⁹

In short, Baudrillard reiterates, in the most blatant possible fashion, the three assumptions culled from Tocqueville, namely that America equals movement (and fast movement at that) through vast space, that it is anti-intellectual, and that movement and intellect could never go together.¹⁰

Although Deleuze repeats many of the same truisms about American space and intellect, he does so in a more complicated fashion. While still equating America with movement and geography, he brings thought back into the picture, both with respect to America and with respect to movement. Moreover, he reverses the system of philosophical values expressed thus far, making the Anglo-American fashion of being-in-movement — as opposed to the French predilection for stasis and history — the more philosophically nuanced modality. Such a being-in-movement is more properly characterized by the term “becoming,” so central to Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophical lexicon. Deleuze elucidates the multilayered relationship between becoming, American literature, American geography, and France at the beginning of his dialogue (with Claire Parnet) “On the Superiority of Anglo-American Literature”:

Anglo-American literature constantly shows these ruptures, these characters who create their line of flight, who create through a line of flight. Thomas Hardy, Melville, Stevenson, Virginia Woolf, Thomas Wolfe, Lawrence, Fitzgerald, Miller, Kerouac. In them everything is departure, becoming, passage, leap, daemon, relationship with the outside. They create a new Earth; but perhaps the movement of the earth is deterritorialization itself. American literature operates according to geographical lines: the flight towards the West, the discovery that the true East is in the West, the sense of the frontiers as something to cross, to push back, to go beyond. *The becoming is geographical*. There is no equivalent in France. The French are too human, too historical, too concerned with the future and the past. They spend their time in in-

depth analysis. They do not know how to become, they think in terms of historical past and future.¹¹

Given Deleuze's emphasis in *The Logic of Sense* on Aion, the temporality that unites past and future, it is striking that in the context of American space such a temporality is denoted as being characteristically French (much in the fashion of Deleuze's derogatory quip about Bataille, cited in chapter 3). While the properly American temporality is presumably more present-oriented yet still characterized by movement, geography, and surface, Deleuze gives these qualities a positive valence rather than using them to devalue America with respect to France.¹²

Moreover, Deleuze goes on to attack the French model and to redefine what constitutes movement, suggesting that thought and movement might actually go hand in hand. He continues:

To flee is not exactly to travel, or even to move. First because there are travels in the style of the French — too historical, cultural and organized — where they are content to transport their own “egos.” Secondly, *because flights can happen on the spot, in motionless travel.* Toynbee shows that nomads in the strict, geographical sense are neither migrants nor travelers, but, on the contrary, *those who do not move, those who cling on to the steppe, who are immobile with big strides,* following a line of flight on the spot, the greatest inventors of new weapons. But history has never begun to understand nomads, who have neither past nor future. Maps are maps of intensities, geography is no less mental and corporeal than physical in movement.¹³

Here we see not only the dismissal of the past-future conjunction that was so diligently outlined in *The Logic of Sense* but also Deleuze's most extreme paean to immobility. This paean is developed in the form of oxymoronic characterizations: “because flights can happen on the spot, in motionless travel,” or the discussion of nomads who “cling on to the steppe, who are immobile with big strides.” Chapter 11 of the present volume, on Blanchot, asks what is left when you remove the second term, “travel,” from “motionless,” or the “big strides” from “immobile” (and it proposes that it is something akin to “being” itself). Yet in the context of a discussion of American space, Deleuze provides an alternative conception of what movement might entail. Instead of pertaining simply to travel,

speed, and the body, movement for Deleuze is to be thought also in terms of immobility, intensity, and mind. Following such a logic allows for a reversal of all of the three suppositions outlined above. Thus, (1) America might be linked not only to movement over vast space but also to interior movement and even to immobility, (2) America might have a substantial relation to mind and intellect, and (3) movement and mind might actually go together.¹⁴

In what follows, this set of relations between movement, mind, and American space is drawn out in three variously canonical twentieth-century American writers. The first and most straightforward is one hailed by Deleuze, Jack Kerouac. It is hard to talk about unbounded movement and American landscape without signaling Kerouac's 1957 best seller, *On the Road*. And it is also easy to use *On the Road* to support a Baudrillardian reading of America. Indeed, *On the Road* perfectly illustrates the first of our truisms, that America is synonymous with continuous movement. Charting as it does a series of spontaneous and aimless road trips, this novel bolsters Baudrillard's notion that the essence of America is in an astral movement from place to place, in pure speed, and that actual locations are, for all intents and purposes, radically indistinguishable. We see this, for example, in the narrator's description of riding a bus into downtown Los Angeles: "We got off the bus at Main Street, which was no different from where you get off a bus in Kansas City or Chicago or Boston—red brick, dirty, characters drifting by, trolleys grating in the hopeless dawn, the whorey smell of a big city."¹⁵ What would seem to be of import here is not the specific big cities but the very act of moving in and out of them, a monotonous movement that defies further elaboration.

Yet through the eyes of Dean Moriarty, one of the novel's central characters, this very modality of unreflecting movement takes on its own form of mysticism. In the following passage, Dean provides a similar description of movement in America, while the narrator, Sal, gives it a spiritual gloss:

"You see what I mean? God exists without qualms. As we roll along this way I am positive beyond doubt that everything will be taken care of for us. . . . Furthermore we know America, we're at home; I can go anywhere in America and get what I want because it's the same in every corner, I know the people, I know what they do. We give and take and

go in the incredibly complicated sweetness zigzagging every side.”

There was nothing clear about the things he said, but what he meant to say was somehow made pure and clear. He used the word “pure” a great deal. I had never dreamed Dean would become a mystic.¹⁶

This passage interrogates our third proposition, the one that states that movement is not synonymous with thought, for here movement is part and parcel of a new form of “mystical” thought. For Dean and Sal, movement both reflects and induces a new form of perception.

This perception is legible in the landscape itself. So, for example, in an interesting twist that both echoes and rewrites Baudrillard, we find that Sal prefers “reading” the American landscape as opposed to a newly acquired French book: “At dawn my bus was zooming across the Arizona desert. . . . Then we swung north to the Arizona mountains, Flagstaff, clifftowns. I had a book with me I stole from a Hollywood stall, *Le Grand Meaulnes* by Alain-Fournier, but I preferred reading the American landscape as we went along. Every bump, rise, and stretch in it mystified my longing.”¹⁷ Not only is landscape readable in the fashion of a book, but it is also not-readable: it is illegible in a way that both evokes the mystical and mystifies desire. That is, contrary to appearances, movement across American landscape is by no means clearly opposite to thought. In fact, in a car trip that follows on the heels of the bus trip mentioned above, Sal embraces the road as a soulful inducement to thought: “I drove through South Carolina and beyond Macon, Georgia, as Dean, Marylou, and Ed slept. All alone in the night I had my own thoughts and held the car to the white line in the holy road.”¹⁸ That driving and thinking might go hand in hand is of course no great insight in its own right, but in the context of the most American of stories in which movement, to borrow the words of Auden, “makes nothing happen,” it becomes significant to emphasize that thought nevertheless happens (that thought indeed always happens), significant in unmasking one of the most pernicious ideologies about America, namely, that its interior landscape and daily life are impermeable to philosophical nuance.

What *On the Road* alludes to — and what another road trip narrative (of sorts), Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, makes more explicit — is that movement is not always about movement; indeed, it is often about its opposite. If movement through America is on the one hand a quest for a sort of

Baudrillardian pure speed, on the other it may be about the opposite impetus, immobility. Nabokov's controversial classic from 1955, which portrays a middle-aged man's obsession for Lolita, his preteen ward, is arguably about all manner of literary things — passion, allusion, language, and transgression, to name a few — and negligibly about travel in America, except that a good portion of the book details the narrator Humbert Humbert's yearlong aimless road trip across America with the young Lolita as his emotional and sexual captive. What, then, if not pure movement, is the function of such an unbounded crossing and recrossing of the American landscape? Arguably, it is precisely a method of stalling, of maintaining a fragile status quo in which Humbert and Lolita are absolutely alone and absolutely undetectable. It is a way of arresting a moment in time by means of a continuous catapulting through space, and here, not insignificantly, American space.

Humbert Humbert avowedly employs movement across the United States as a means of remaining immobile, and Lolita uses landscape as a means of seeing nothing. In Humbert's words,

By putting the geography of the United States into motion, I did my best for hours on end to give her the impression of "going places," of rolling on to some definite destination, to some unusual delight. I have never seen such smooth amiable roads as those that now radiated before us, across the crazy quilt of forty-eight states. Voraciously we consumed those long highways, in rapt silence we glided over their glossy black dance floors. Not only had Lolita no eye for scenery but she furiously resented my calling her attention to this or that enchanting detail of landscape; which I myself learned to discern only after being exposed for quite a time to the delicate beauty ever present in the margin of our undeserving journey.¹⁹

A central question to be asked of this passage is why exactly is the journey undeserving? Perhaps the answer, that Humbert Humbert was up to no good ends and moreover that he and Lolita failed really to see America, seems obvious. Such an answer is virtually given by Humbert two chapters later, as he narrates the journey's end:

We had been everywhere. We had really seen nothing. And I catch myself thinking today that our long journey had only defiled with a sin-

uous trail of slime the lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country that by then, in retrospect, was no more to us than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old tires, and her sobs in the night — every night, every night — the moment I feigned sleep.²⁰

Whereas this passage merely alludes to Humbert's regret for having betrayed Lolita, it strongly asserts Humbert's regret at having betrayed the American landscape. The really shocking thing about *Lolita* is not so much the transgenerational desire it portrays but the fact that this desire is maintained at the cost of perpetual movement across the pristine American landscape. *Lolita* undermines not so much a set of sexual mores as a set of ideological truisms about how movement through American space should or should not be perceived. In rendering geography inconsequential, in making travel the same as never leaving the hotel room, *Lolita* immobilizes movement through America and suggests that, insofar as America is bound up with movement, it is equally and more provocatively tied to immobility.

One of the most intricate and expansive dynamics between movement and immobility is found in the fiction of Paul Auster. Nearly all of his novels deal in some way with a protagonist who vacillates between plummeting errant movement across the American landscape or across a particular city and totalizing immobility or confinement, usually within the space of an apartment or room. It is interesting to speculate why and how this might account for the fantastic success of Auster's fiction in France as opposed to its relative obscurity in the United States.²¹ In terms of our initial propositions, reversing the order of the second and third, Auster's work (1) makes *both* movement *and* immobility synonymous with America, (3) brings thought into conjunction with both, and (2) by implication, brings thought into an integral relation with America.

Auster's *The Music of Chance* begins with a sentence that is dramatically reminiscent of *Lolita*: "For one whole year he did nothing but drive, traveling back and forth across America as he waited for the money to run out."²² Yet Jim Nashe, the protagonist in question, moves not so much to remain immobile, in the fashion of Humbert Humbert, but in order to perceive and think. When he accidentally takes the wrong highway ramp one day (after having just inherited an unexpected sum of money), Nashe

decides to keep on going in the wrong direction. He does this as a way of contemplating the intricate relation between choice, freedom, and solitude: “It was a dizzying prospect — to imagine all that freedom, to understand how little it mattered what choice he made. He could go anywhere he wanted, he could do anything he felt like doing, and not a single person in the world would care.”²³ For Nashe, such a form of movement becomes a refuge for thought and an escape from the body:

After three or four months, he had only to enter the car to feel that he was coming loose from his body, that once he put his foot down on the gas and started driving, the music would carry him along into a realm of weightlessness. . . . Empty roads were always preferable to crowded roads. They demanded fewer slackenings and decelerations, and because he did not have to pay attention to other cars, he could drive with the assurance that his thoughts would not be interrupted.²⁴

Such is Nashe’s experience of the road trip, one where smooth movement is employed to provoke thought rather than to efface it. It might follow that if here movement is connected to thought, then immobility might somehow disrupt it. This is put to the test when Nashe falls in with a young gambler, Jack Pozzi, and loses all his money and his car in a diabolical gambling match. In this fashion, he finds himself stuck in a bizarre scenario in which he and Pozzi are confined to a trailer at the far end of their creditors’ estate, where they are forced to erect a huge stone wall in order to pay back their debt. Surprisingly, instead of uniformly resenting his confinement, Nashe is allured by its contemplative possibilities:

His money was gone, his car was gone, his life was in a shambles. If nothing else, perhaps those fifty days would give him a chance to take stock, to sit still for the first time in over a year and ponder his next move. It was almost a relief to have the decision taken out of his hands, to know that he had finally stopped running. The wall would not be a punishment so much as a cure, a one-way journey back to earth.²⁵

In his newfound immobility, Nashe soon reestablishes a routine as well as many of the same thought patterns that he had while on the road: “Nashe was not nearly as restless as he had thought he would be. Once he accepted the fact that the car was gone, he felt little or no desire to be back on the road, and the ease with which he adjusted to his new circumstances left him

somewhat bewildered. It made no sense that he should be able to abandon it all so quickly.”²⁶ The sense to be made from this is perhaps that the very ability to think movement and immobility as one and the same thing is itself a form of abandoning it all. Or, in other words, insofar as the thought of movement tends toward immobility and the thought of immobility toward movement, the experience of both as belonging to the same perceptual structure signals a radically different mode of existing in the world.

It is such a different mode of existence that Deleuze and Guattari gesture toward when they write in *A Thousand Plateaus* that “movement has an essential relation to the imperceptible; it is by nature imperceptible. Perception can grasp movement only as the displacement of a moving body or the development of a form. Movements, becomings, in other words, pure relations of speed and slowness, pure affects, are below and above the threshold of perception.”²⁷ Following from this, it is at those points where movements and slownesses intersect the threshold of perception that new thoughts are produced. Moreover, to turn these terms back on themselves, it is at the specific point where movement and immobility are shown to be *perceptually the same* that a new *form* of thought is produced. Sometimes indiscernible from madness, this form of thought is a hallmark of Auster’s writing and, I would suggest, of a certain strain of American literature that runs from the poetry of Emily Dickinson through Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* and Melville’s “Bartleby” (the subject of the next chapter), eventually to land with Auster in the twentieth century.

A final and brief example of this dynamic—where first movement equals thought, then immobility equals thought (or vice versa), and finally the perception of the imperceptibility of the difference between the two equals a new form of thought—is to be found throughout Auster’s acclaimed *New York Trilogy*. Each of the three novels in this volume recounts the story of a man who, in detective fashion, gets into the skin of another man, generally a double of sorts, by retracing his life, charting his every movement, and stalking him mercilessly. Such a pursuit entails a combination of seemingly random movement (as when Quinn meticulously maps Stillman’s daily peregrinations around New York City in *City of Glass* or when the narrator of *The Locked Room* suddenly goes to Paris to retrace the details of Fanshawe’s life there) and abiding, painstaking immobility (as in *Ghosts* when Blue is paid to follow Black, who does virtually nothing

but sit in the apartment across the street and write in a notebook, or when Quinn in *The Locked Room* decides to camp out for months in the alley across the street from the entrance to the Stillmans' apartment). Unlike Nashe in *The Music of Chance*, the characters in each of the three novels in *The New York Trilogy* are not forced into immobility, for they could easily walk away from the odd predicaments in which they find themselves. Instead, they willingly and even willfully embrace the immobility into which they are cast, for it provides access (and better access than mobility) to a world of uncharted thought. This is how Blue in *Ghosts* explains what immobility does to his ability to think:

Now, suddenly, with the world as it were removed from him, with nothing much to see but a vague shadow by the name of Black, he finds himself thinking about things that have never occurred to him before, and this, too, has begun to trouble him. If thinking is perhaps too strong a word at this point, a slightly more modest term — speculation, for example — would not be far from the mark. To speculate, from the Latin *speculatus*, meaning to spy out, to observe, and linked to the word *speculum*, meaning mirror or looking glass. For in spying out Black across the street, it is as though Blue were looking into a mirror, and instead of merely watching another, he finds that he is also watching himself.²⁸

The same effect can be read not only in the play of doubles and mirrors throughout Auster's work but also in the play of mobility and immobility, which alternate and double each other as a means of access to new speculation and insight. Here, the dynamics of immobility are such that whenever the body stays in one place, thought is sure to move to a place it has never before traveled. In this sense, where there is immobility, there is also movement, yet not unthinking movement through unbounded space in the fashion of Tocqueville and Baudrillard, but rather a movement of becoming (that may not be linked to actual physical movement) in alternation with an immobility of being. That such an interplay of thought, movement, and immobility is an abiding refrain in the work of Auster is undeniable, and that such an interplay also governs a whole strain of American literature — and a strain of contemporary French philosophy — is the ultimate stake of this argument. This will be taken up in the next chapter with the example of Melville's "Bartleby" and that story's abiding fascination for Deleuze and French philosophy.