
H-France Review Vol. 16 (November 2016), No. 274

Bernard Beugnot, *Loin du monde et du bruit: le discours de la retraite au XVIIe siècle*. Paris: Editions Hermann, 2015. Xii + 319 pp. Bibliography, index, afterword. 32 € (pb). ISBN 978-2-7056-9051-9.

Review by Ellen M. McClure, University of Illinois at Chicago.

The French seventeenth century has traditionally been viewed, not without reason, as the period where human sociability—exhibited, refined, and modeled in salons and at the royal court—reached its pinnacle. In a world sensitized to the art of conversation and the finer points of *honnêteté*, the desire of Molière’s Misanthrope to shun human company is held up as incomprehensible and worthy of mockery. Bernard Beugnot’s *Loin du monde et du bruit: Le discours de la retraite au XVIIe siècle* is an elegant, evocative effort to counter this rather noisy image of the century by gently calling our attention to its sustained, yet largely neglected, interest in silence, solitude, repose, and retreat.

In the opening pages of the introduction, the author notes that what he is setting forth is less a sustained, authoritative explanation of the meaning of retreat than a guided tour, or what Beugnot himself calls a “géographie,” of its many dimensions. The tour is not meant to be exhaustive; rather, Beugnot leads the reader through his vast corpus thematically, an approach that allows the rich complexity of the topic to emerge. Beugnot begins by reminding the reader that seventeenth-century French presentations of retreat were highly mediated by a classical tradition in which retreat and repose figured prominently. The recuperation and redeployment of *otium* through the filters of court society and the Counter-Reformation led to a particularly dense, albeit somewhat ambiguous, rhetorical field that provided ample grounds for poetic and ethical innovations such as those of La Fontaine or Théophile. In this respect, the theme of retreat provides, as Beugnot argues in the introduction, a surprisingly wide door through which to approach the interplay between crisis and classicism that characterizes this period of French history. Beugnot’s erudition allows him to explore with grace and ease the complex intertextual dynamics that are essential to a full appreciation of the topic of retreat; having established these dynamics, he then moves on to consider the common themes that emerge from the wide variety of texts, images, and authors he considers.

The first of these turns on place. Almost every author who treats the topic of retreat associates it with a place; yet whether real or imagined, such places allow writers to imagine a space freed from the constraints of social life, where diverse and even incompatible ideas and ideals can coexist. As Beugnot states, these places become a “foyer où se rencontrent et s’épousent des réalités qui au premier regard semblaient indépendantes, où se construit un monde qui forme diptyque avec celui de la cour et des salons” (pp. 96-97). The spatialization occasioned by contemplating the themes of solitude and repose against specific backdrops, whether Balzac’s castle in Angoumois or Poussin’s famous painting *Et in Arcadia Ego*, thereby become a means of imagining the soul itself. Yet here, as elsewhere in the work, Beugnot takes special care to avoid easy dichotomies and oppositions that might flatten the intricate texture of the intellectual world he has set out to describe. A section of the “place” chapter is therefore set aside for the consideration of liminal spaces, and the ways in which the *promenade* becomes “un moyen terme entre la société et la solitude” (p. 91). A garden, for example, is both a place of retreat and

a manifestation of human ingenuity and society; likewise, salons can be depicted as refuges even as they serve as highly social gathering places.

A similar attention to ambiguity characterizes Beugnot's approach to the theme developed in the third chapter, that of retreat as a vehicle for social critique. Here, once again, we encounter well-known writers, artists, thinkers, and literary characters—Molière's *Misanthrope*, Lafayette's *Princesse de Clèves*, Bussy-Rabutin, *Mademoiselle de Montpensier*, and Saint-Simon—alongside their lesser-known counterparts, such as Jacques Callot and Antoine Godeau. Beugnot traces how each of these figures deploys the concept of retreat as a means of opposing an oppressive social sphere, yet he also takes care to note that the Babylonian social life of the city and the court that such works depict is no less an imaginary construction than the pastoral idyll of perfect peaceful repose. Moreover, Beugnot convincingly demonstrates that exile itself is not a stable construct: "Le geste qui consiste à se séparer du monde est donc extrêmement polyvalent, voire ambigu, habité de contradictions" (p. 163). Indeed, the angry decision to leave the world (or the angry reaction to having been asked to leave it) is often replaced with a more positive and peaceful appreciation for the nuances of a life spent in retreat, and those who undergo exile are transformed from marginal figures into privileged inhabitants of a refined intellectual and spiritual domain. This world forms the subject of Beugnot's fourth chapter, which explores how retreat enables the unfolding of the self, the deepening of interiority, and the discovery of the pleasures of solitude at a time when what we recognize as modern individualism was just taking shape. Once again, a rich variety of authors, characters, and images are deployed to illustrate the increasingly positive view of retreat that distinguished seventeenth-century treatments of the topic from their classical antecedents. Beugnot closes this section of the work with a provocative question, asking whether the tranquility that we have come to associate with classicism might in fact be an aspirational, idealized response to the anguish occasioned by the approach of ancient and religious cultures (especially Augustinianism) to the question of time.

Beugnot's last chapter explores the deployment of the discourse of retreat and solitude by religious figures and in religious spaces. By placing his careful analysis of the spiritual aspects of retreat at the end of his work, he quietly, yet provocatively, indicates that the deployment of the rhetoric of retreat by spiritual and religious figures was itself highly mediated by ancient and secular writers, images, and texts. Beugnot opens his analysis with a warning: he is not interested in cataloguing the nuances of each religious movement in seventeenth-century France, but rather in indicating what he calls, in terms that recall his earlier evocation of "géographie," "les dominantes d'un paysage" (p. 213). Beugnot's subtle readings serve to complicate any easy association of spirituality and solitude; instead, they use the theme of retreat to point to the impossibility of drawing clear lines between the religious and the secular during a period characterized by the development of human interiority.

In the book's conclusion, Beugnot reiterates one of the dominant, and perhaps surprising, themes of his study: that retreat, so often associated with calmness, stasis, and removal from social forces, is itself ambiguous and deeply connected to the worlds, both imaginary and non-fictional, it seeks to escape. Beugnot's repeated refusal to advance a theoretical framework or a hermeneutic explanation for the preponderance of references to retreat in seventeenth-century France conveys his recognition, sustained by his subtle and elegant readings, that art can never be reduced to an uncomplicated window on history. The final pages of the book recognize the resonance that the theme of retreat carries with the preoccupations of our own times all while calling on scholars to take up his invitation to examine the topic more closely.

Yet a careful reader of the conclusion might notice that Beugnot's description of our own times refers to the end of the century and the millennium, and that his reference to recent works that describe the French seventeenth century as a century of crisis cites Theodore K. Rabb's *The Struggle for Stability in Early Modern Europe*, which was published in 1976 (p. 264).^[1] The reader may also, at this point, realize, if she hasn't already, that the book never cites works published after 1999. The mystery behind

these puzzling details is partially solved by the book's afterword, which is tucked between the table of illustrations and the table of contents. Entitled "Vingt ans après," the afterword explains that the book, which grew out of a dissertation written in 1962 that was never defended but served to establish the author's lifelong fascination with the topic, was originally published by PUF in 1996, when it received relatively little attention. The present volume, then, is a slightly altered re-edition of the volume published in 1996; a footnote indicates that "seules ont été ajoutées de rares précisions bibliographiques" (p. 301). Beugnot acknowledges that an entirely new book would be needed to account for the scholarly work devoted to the problem of retreat produced during the twenty years separating the first and second editions of his own study; he then proceeds to offer a broad overview of the more significant developments in the field during this time. While this brief, yet helpful, survey acknowledges many important conferences, articles, and books that have been published in the last twenty years, it is worth noting that, as in the book itself, work produced by scholars in the United States is almost completely overlooked. Readers tantalized by Beugnot's inviting presentation of the topic of retreat would, I imagine, also enjoy Juliette Cherbuliez's examination of exile or Nicholas Paige's masterful account of the emergence of interiority, neither of which are cited in Beugnot's bibliography.[2]

The evidence of recent scholarly interest in the subject of retreat presented in the afterword somewhat undermines Beugnot's original goal of attracting attention to a heretofore neglected topic all while justifying his lifelong conviction that the study of retreat could shed new and valuable light on seventeenth-century French culture and thought. It is a testament to Beugnot's elegance, erudition, and gentle interpretive touch that a book written twenty years ago still serves as an inviting guide to a landscape that has too often lain in shadow, generously indicating pathways for further scholarly exploration.

NOTES

[1] K. Rabb, *The Struggle for Stability in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

[2] See Juliette Cherbuliez, *The Place of Exile: Leisure, Literature, and the Limits of Absolutism* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2005) and Nicholas Paige, *Being Interior: Autobiography and the Contradiction of Modernity in Seventeenth-Century France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000). Interestingly, Domna C. Stanton's important article "The Ideal of *repos* in 17th Century French Literature," *Esprit Créateur* 15 (1975): 79-104 is cited in Beugnot's bibliography, but is not directly engaged with or referenced in the book itself.

Ellen M. McClure
University of Illinois at Chicago
ellenmc@uic.edu

Copyright © 2016 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.