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**The Bothersome Details of the World:
Richard Byrd, Little America,
and the Problem of Retreat**

Neil Badmington

‘I had ceased to inhabit not just the great world but the present moment. The impulse to be in it and of it I had long since killed.’
Philip Roth, *Exit Ghost* (2007, p. 1).

I

In rare moments of calm, I am writing a book about retreat. To be more specific, I am writing about *writing about* retreat – narratives in which those who have chosen to withdraw from what is often called ‘civilisation’ recount their experiences, tell of their struggles to get away from it all.¹ I am interested in what those accounts reveal about the act of retreating, about craving and crafting critical distance, and about the relationship between withdrawal and the written word. As Randall Roorda asks, in *Dramas of Solitude*:

[W]hat is the good of narrating the retreat to others? What can it mean to turn away from other people, to evade all sign of them for purposes that exclude them by design, then turn back toward them in writing, reporting upon, accounting for, even recommending to them the condition of their absence? (Roorda, 1998, p. xiii)

A frequent motif in such accounts has come to fascinate me: the interruption of the story of retreat by traces of civilisation. That which has been rejected, cast away, returns. Distance, discovered, dwindles. Retreat retreats.

I want in what follows to analyse an extreme, unsettling, and above all interrupted account of withdrawal: Admiral Richard E. Byrd’s description of a period spent in isolation in the Antarctic wilderness in 1934. The book in which Byrd tells his tale is called *Alone*, but there are, I will argue, two notable ways in which Byrd never quite manages to be alone. First, his icy solitude melts repeatedly in the face of intrusions from the modern world to

which he has apparently turned his back. Second, his written words connect with other tales of retreat, such as Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. There is chattering on and across the ice: *Alone*'s voice is not a lone voice.

Byrd's remarkable achievements have been discussed as key events in the history of Antarctic exploration and as early mass-media spectacles; I will touch in time upon some of this fine scholarship. I want, however, to light out for a *terra nova*, to set up camp elsewhere. Treating Byrd's tale *as a text*, as something woven and signifying wildly against itself, and as a vivid exemplar of the modern retreat narrative, I wish draw out onto the open ice the underlying tensions of the genre and the act of withdrawing from civilisation.

II

There is a sense in which the story begins on the night of 26 May 1926. Richard Byrd claimed just to have completed the first return flight by air to the North Pole, and he was celebrating at Spitsbergen with, among others, his great rival Roald Amundsen. 'Well, Byrd', said the apparently defeated Amundsen as the night drew to a close, 'what shall it be now?'. 'The South Pole', replied Byrd (Byrd, 1930, p. 24).²

He eventually set sail for Antarctica in October 1928 and, in January 1929, with a crew of around eighty men, established a base on the Ross Ice Shelf, near the Bay of Whales, not far from Framheim, the encampment used by Amundsen during his exploration of the South Pole nearly two decades earlier (Griffiths, 2007, p. 123). The colony lay about three-quarters of a mile from the water's edge and was called 'a city on a raft' by Byrd, because of its being located not on land but on a floating ice barrier (Byrd, 2003, p. 24). As Michael Bryson explains, in his excellent essay on Byrd:

Up to the point where the expedition was disembarking and unloading supplies onto the Barrier surface, press releases had referred to the landing site as Framheim. Byrd, at someone else's suggestion, chose the name Little America to replace the old name and to imbue the expedition with an American stamp that

he hoped would endear him to his benefactors at home. (Bryson, 1996, p. 456 n.4)

Indeed, Byrd's own account of the trip refers initially to 'Framheim' when relating the arrival at the Bay of Whales (Byrd, 1930, pp. 86, 88, 89), but then identifies the key moment at which 'Little America, the most southern American community, was formally colonized' (p. 94).³ The name swells with paternalism and empire: Little America is the child to be shaped and raised by the men, and what was forged in the northern hemisphere by the frontier spirit can be repeated here on the awaiting ice.

In November 1929, the admiral and three of his team set off in a plane for the geographic South Pole. As they passed over the site, Byrd opened a trapdoor in the aircraft and, in another colonialist gesture, released an American flag which was weighed down with a stone from the grave of Floyd Bennett, Byrd's companion from the North Pole flight of 1926. (The plane in which Byrd and his men flew to the South Pole was actually named the Floyd Bennett.) Eighteen years after Amundsen had conquered the South Pole by land, Byrd had become the first person to reach it by air. He and his crew remained at Little America until February 1930, when they partly dismantled the base and returned home.

Byrd's lengthy account of the groundbreaking expedition was published under the title *Little America* in 1930, and the book repeatedly describes the adventure as a form of critical retreat from civilisation. As Byrd puts it at one point:

In a word, we are trying to get away from the false standards by which men live under more civilized conditions. The Antarctic is a new world for all of us which requires its own standards, and these are materially different from those set up in civilization, whereby we venerate prestige, influence and associated characteristics and ignore the inconspicuous, but equally valid properties. (Byrd, 1930, p. 193)⁴

But also running through *Little America* is a sense that the retreat was not quite radical enough, that the critical distance was insufficient, for Byrd records the inability of the members of the crew ever to escape from each other:

Bitter cold and incessant storms keep all but the hardiest men indoors a greater part of the time; and even they do not care to venture very far. Consequently, men are thrown into the utmost intimacy for months on end, within the narrow restricting walls of their shacks; and the time inevitably comes when all the topics in the world have been sucked dry of interest; when one man's voice becomes irritating to the ears of another; when the most trivial points of disagreement become fraught with impassioned meaning. When that point is reached, there comes trouble. (Byrd, 1930, p. 158)

He continues, some time later in the book:

Escape, in the wider meaning of the word, is impossible. Except for a quick, freezing walk the four walls limit one's world; and everything that one does, or says, or even thinks, is of importance to one's fellows. They are measuring you constantly, some openly, others secretly... (Byrd, 1930, p. 197)

As he concluded, in a chapter entitled 'Civilization Does Not Matter', 'We had the privacy of gold fish and elbow room of sardines' (Byrd, 1930, p. 208).

But that was 1928-9. Byrd led a second expedition to the Ross Ice Shelf in 1933-4, explicitly to carry out further scientific work. As before, he came with a crew. As before, a base named Little America was established, partly by reclaiming and restoring the buildings from the first expedition, and partly by expanding the settlement (Byrd, 1935, p. 113).⁵ As before, Byrd published a long account of the trip, this time entitled *Discovery* (Byrd, 1935). And as before, the written narrative of the expedition repeatedly differentiated life on the Ross Ice Barrier from life in civilisation.⁶ The second trip to Antarctica differed from the first in a dramatic way, however: having overseen the reestablishment of Little America, Byrd chose to break away from his colleagues when, in March 1934, he retreated alone for four-and-a-half months to a small shack known as Bolling Advance Weather Base – Advance Base, for short – which was 123 statute miles from Little America in the direction of the South Pole.⁷ The building, which measured just 9 feet by 13 feet by 8 feet, was buried beneath the ice. All that

remained above ground were an anemometer pole, a radio antenna mounted on two long bamboo poles, and a small shelter for thermometers and a barograph.⁸ Advance Base was the first inland station ever to be occupied in Antarctica (Byrd, 2003, p. 3).

Byrd kept a diary that he called 'very detailed and voluminous' (2003, p. x) during his time in isolation, but when the account of the wider second Antarctic expedition was published as *Discovery* in 1935, Byrd's narration broke off after describing the establishment of Advance Base, and the story of the wider expedition passed for nearly eighty pages to a colleague called C. J. V. Murphy, who explained to readers how he and the other men at Little America gradually realised that Byrd was in trouble in the shack, as carbon monoxide fumes brought him close to death.⁹ When Byrd's narration resumed in *Discovery*, he wrote casually that it was 'hardly necessary' for him to add to what his colleague had just written about the terrible period in Advance Base and the realisation among the Little Americans that a rescue party needed to be sent (Byrd, 1935, p. 248).

But Byrd *did* add to the account provided by Murphy in *Discovery*, for in 1938 he published a separate volume on his period of isolation. He called it *Alone*. 'This book', he wrote in the preface:

is the account of a personal experience – so personal that for four years I could not bring myself to write it. It is different from anything else I have ever written. My other books have been factual, impersonal narratives of my expeditions and flights. This book, on the other hand, is the story of an experience which was in considerable part subjective. [...] I did not see how I could write about Advance Base and still escape making an unseemly show of my feelings. [...] I doubted that I could approach it with the proper detachment. [...] Nevertheless [...] this book represents the simple truth about myself and my affairs during that time. (Byrd, 2003, pp. ix-x)

In *Discovery*, Byrd had explained his decision to withdraw to Advance Base in terms of meteorological research, and he claimed that these plans went back as far as 1929 (Byrd, 1935, p. 155). But he also wrote there about a desire to retreat from Little America for the sake of 'the experience' (p. 162). In *Alone*, three years later, this

second explanation becomes more prominent, more probed, more pressing. Near the beginning of the book, for example, Byrd writes, in lines that recall Thoreau's desire to 'live deep and suck out all the marrow of life' (Thoreau, 2004, p. 91):

I really wanted to go for the experience's sake. So the motive was in part personal. Aside from the meteorological and auroral work, I had no important purposes. There was nothing of that sort. Nothing whatever, except one man's desire to know that kind of experience to the full, to be by himself for a while and to taste peace and quiet and solitude long enough to find out how good they really are. (Byrd, 2003, pp. 3-4)

He then adds to his explanation with lines which, again recalling Thoreau, articulate an anxiety about modernity:

It was all that simple. And it is something, I believe, that people beset by the complexities of modern life will understand instinctively. We are caught up in the winds that blow every which way. And in the hullabaloo the thinking man is driven to ponder where he is being blown and to long desperately for some quiet place where he can reason undisturbed and take inventory. (p. 4)

What Byrd sought, in other words, was 'more than just privacy in the geographical sense' (Byrd, 2003, p. 7). He wanted, he writes, yet again echoing *Walden*, 'to sink roots into some replenishing philosophy [...] and, for maybe seven months, remote from all but the simplest distractions, [...] to live exactly as I chose, obedient to no necessities but those imposed by wind and night and cold, and to no man's laws but my own' (p. 7).¹⁰

That, at least, was the plan. In the event, because of his poisoning by carbon monoxide, Byrd was able to occupy Advance Base for no more than four-and-a-half months. What strikes me about the delayed account of that retreat is the way in which – poisoning aside – the text relates the failure or interruption of withdrawal: what Byrd called 'the bothersome details of the world' (2003, p. 125) consistently bothered him during his time in the

cabin. In his distant solitude, Byrd was touched on a daily basis by modernity, by civilisation.

III

The trouble was there from the beginning. Advance Base – the cabin itself – had been made in a Boston loft and was then dismantled so that it could be brought on the expedition in convenient sections. *Alone* relates the reassembly of the remote dwelling beneath the ice and then the moment at which, their work done, Byrd's colleagues leave and head back to Little America on their tractors:

I watched until the noise died out; until the receding specks had dropped for good behind a roll in the Barrier; until only the vanishing exhalations of the vapor remained.

With that the things of the world shrank to nothing.
(2003, p. 51)

Byrd is alone. His companions are not even distant specks. Retreat appears to have occurred – and retreat does not get much more remote and removed than this.

And yet, the withdrawal is interrupted immediately by 'the things of the world'. When his colleagues have disappeared from view, Byrd begins to tidy the shack. 'The main responsibility', he writes, '[...] was the meteorological instruments, which, so far, were running smoothly. Every hour I took time out to inspect them, a practice I wanted to become a habit. Already I was regarding them with the warm, covert look reserved for good companions' (2003, p. 52). While these new 'companions' are not human, they are marks of modernity, physical manifestations of the civilisation from which Byrd has sought to withdraw. They are more than just 'things of the world'; they are things of the *modern* world. And they are, in Byrd's own formulation, meant to become a 'habit'.

In measuring the weather, furthermore, these sophisticated technological devices introduce a measure of the outside, the distant, within the remote walls of the shack. As Michael Bryson has pointed out (1996, p. 444), Byrd was unable to experience the

polar landscape, to commune with nature extensively during his time at Advance Base. Although the cabin in the wilderness recalls Thoreau's experiment at Walden Pond, Byrd's experience is significantly different: Thoreau can reject civilisation and embrace nature because the Concord climate permits it, but Byrd 'must to a great extent reject nature along with civilization, and construct a viable, microcosmic world out of his tiny habitat. [...] Unlike Thoreau, who can live *off* the land, Byrd can only live *within* and despite the land, drawing from his carefully supplied stores' (Bryson, 1996, p. 444). The quest for an 'outside' – a space beyond modern civilisation – ends with Byrd effectively trapped inside; when he does venture out on his short 'daily walks' (Byrd, 2003, p. 114), he risks disorientation and death.¹¹ His relationship to the surrounding environment, therefore, becomes one of scientific cataloguing, technological scrutiny, through the instruments which sit above the surface of the ice (and which could sit above the surface of the ice precisely because they were not human):

Meteorological and auroral observations occupied a substantial part of the day. The following meteorological records were made: a continuous mechanical registration of barometric pressure, temperature, wind direction and velocity; twice daily readings of maximum and minimum thermometers in the instrument shelter topside and twice daily visual observations of the barometer. The four instruments themselves exacted constant attention. In addition, I stood four or five auroral watches daily whenever the sky was clear enough for such displays. The intensity, structural form and direction of the aurora were noted, for subsequent comparison with the observations of observers who watched simultaneously at Little America. So I never had reason to complain of nothing to do. (Byrd, 1935, pp. 168-9)

When I read these lines, I do not see retreat or critical distance from civilisation; I recall, rather, Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936), which was released in cinemas between Byrd's stay in Advance Base and its subsequent inscription in *Alone*, and which placed the twitching human body at the service of machinery which must not be neglected. A 'substantial part of the day', to use Byrd's phrase, is

overseen, shaped, by an array of demanding devices.¹² Life in the shack is lived beneath machinery, in every sense of the phrase, which means that there is a fundamental tension in Byrd's project: he wants to be 'outside', to escape both Little America and 'Big' America, and yet his life at Advance Base advances American civilisation on more than one front.

Just as a clock keeps watch over Chaplin's film, the technology at Advance Base preserves the standard of time, keeps Byrd synchronised with civilisation while he is in his cabin. *Alone* records initially how, not long into the period of isolation, Byrd's relationship with time itself began to change.¹³ At one point, the book reproduces his diary entry from 31 March, which is prompted in part by Byrd's discovery that he has forgotten to bring his clock with him to the shack:

It's been a deuce of a job to wake up without an alarm clock. And this is puzzling, because I've always been able to fix in my mind the time at which I should awaken, and wake up at that time, almost to the minute. I was born with that gift, and it has stood me in good stead when I dash around the country on lecture tours, leaping from hotels to trains on split-second schedules. But now the gift has simply vanished, perhaps because I am putting too much pressure on it. At night, in the sleeping bag, I whisper to myself: Seven-thirty. Seven-thirty. That's the time you must get up. Seven-thirty. But I've been missing it cleanly – yesterday by nearly an hour, and this morning by half an hour. (2003, pp. 61-2)¹⁴

But help is at hand. On 12 April, the same journal records the way in which the correct time is relayed to Byrd with care and precision during a radio conversation with Little America:

Dyer gave me a time tick, which he had picked up from either the U.S. Naval Observatory or Greenwich, I've forgotten which. 'When I say "now,"' Dyer warned, 'it will be 10:53 o'clock. You have thirty-five seconds to go ... Twenty seconds ... Ten seconds ... Now.' One chronometer, I found, was running 2 minutes, 10 seconds fast, the other 31 seconds fast, the third was 1 minute 20 seconds slow. I noted the facts

in my records. I must know the exact time in order to synchronize my observations with those at Little America. After that I carefully wound all three chronometers. (Byrd, 2003, pp. 99-100; see also Byrd, 1935, p. 257)¹⁵

Although the explorer has travelled far from civilisation, precise, measured time is preserved and nourished by the modern phenomenon of the airborne time signal.¹⁶ Not only are the various time-keeping devices reset, moreover: Byrd even measures how inaccurate their measurement had become, how far they had wandered from the standard. Modern time for modern times.

As this incident reveals, Advance Base, for all its terrifying remoteness, was linked to Little America by radio. What *Alone* describes, in fact, is regular, planned connection between Byrd and his colleagues, who often used the airwaves to relay news from civilisation to their leader. It is here, I think, that Byrd's retreat is most interrupted, most marked by traces of the world that has apparently been rejected.

Radio is often mentioned in all three accounts of Antarctic exploration written by Byrd, and what can be heard in the background of those texts is a strange ambivalence towards the technology, a kind of recurrent interference. This ambivalence – an oscillation between embrace and regret – went back as far as Byrd's first Antarctic trip of 1929. Technology played a key role in that expedition – Tom Griffiths (2007, p. 123) and Robert N. Matuozzi (2002) have both identified this as one of its key distinguishing features – and radio was the primary technological innovation. Douglas Mawson and Ernest Shackleton had used radio to some extent during their earlier voyages around the continent, but Byrd, as Michael Bryson has pointed out (1996, p. 456), significantly extended its employment. So central was wireless technology to the first expedition, in fact, that the radio department at the base commanded most of the power generated, which led to the imposition of a strict limit on the number of electric lights elsewhere in the camp (Byrd, 1930, p. 156). This drain on resources was perhaps because the *New York Times* and the *St. Louis Dispatch*, financial backers of the expedition, had 'agreed to furnish the expedition with the most modern radio equipment available, at considerable expense to themselves' (Matuozzi, 2002, p. 224). The raising of the radio towers was what Byrd called 'a romantic accomplishment of itself' (Byrd, 1930, p.

158), and *Little America* soon offers a clear celebration of the place modern technology in the first expedition:

It gives one a strange sense of power to realize that within these bare walls, hung with cumbersome winter clothing, is a force that puts us within one-eighth of a second of New York City.

And that outside, in the aircraft, is a second power that can carry us easily and at great speed over this formidable Continent. (Byrd, 1930, p. 163)

But while radio is a 'blessing' (Byrd, 1930, p. 301), it is also a burden, a curse:

The radio beyond doubt has ended the isolation of this ice cap. As a practical thing, its help is priceless. But I can see where it is going to destroy all peace of mind, which is half the attraction of the polar regions. (Byrd, 1930, p. 91)

This ambivalence became even more apparent during the second Antarctic trip of 1933-4. Above all, the link between the reborn Little America and civilisation was a full, formal, material part of proceedings, for the expedition was funded in part by a lucrative deal with CBS and General Foods which led to groundbreaking live broadcasts from the encampment into eager American homes.¹⁷ These popular instalments, Stephen D. Perry explains (2014, pp. 81-2), were to the 1930s what the television broadcasts of the Apollo moon missions were to the 1960s and 1970s, and they aired at 10pm on 59 CBS stations between 15 November 1933 and 6 February 1935, either on Saturdays (during the first half of the expedition) or Wednesdays (from May 1934 onwards). C. J. V. Murphy, Perry reports (2014, p. 92), was in the habit of ending early episodes by saying, 'We now return you to civilisation'.

The regular, public contact between Little America and 'Big' America was no mere afterthought: the entire expedition relied for its very existence and survival upon commercial sponsorship, upon modern capitalism. When Byrd describes the preparations for the voyage in the early pages of *Discovery*, he writes:

We had, therefore, a sound plan, excellent objectives and a personnel trained in Antarctic field methods; all we lacked was money. And in the years of Our Lord 1932-1933, it will be recalled by men not necessarily with long gray beards way down to here, money was rather hard to get. A sense of doom and discouragement was withering the spirit of the country; and even rich men felt themselves so overpoweringly beset that I could not bring myself to ask former benefactors, with one or two exceptions, to come to our help. (Byrd, 1935, p. 9)

But, he adds, '[w]e also had another asset – a story to sell' (p. 10), and the rights to tell that story were sold to CBS. 'We are forever indebted for such generous support', Byrd concludes. 'The money from the broadcasts kept life breathing in the expedition when the pulse had all but stopped' (p. 11).¹⁸ But the chilling price of this life, of course, is the death of pure and absolute retreat from modernity. Retreat breathes, but with the civilised lungs of capital. There is an embedded contradiction: Byrd can break free only if he agrees to remain attached.

The radio waves travelled from civilisation to Little America as well: 'Petersen each day copied and distributed news flimsies from the world radio press', Byrd reported (1935, pp. 192-3).¹⁹ As C. J. V. Murphy put it in summary, in his contribution to *Discovery*:

The sounds of the outer world were always there to hear [in the new Little America]. Dyer had only to throw a switch to bring into the shacks the note of Big Ben striking the hour in London and sending tiny shivers down your back with its world-filling authority of empire; or else, with a simple turn, evoke out of the same atmosphere the sounds of our crooning countrymen weeping expensively into the curded milk of love. (Byrd, 1935, p. 194)

The place of modern technology in Byrd's exploration of Antarctica is beyond doubt and has been discussed widely (Griffiths, 2007; Bryson, 1996; Matuozzi, 2002, for example). What is of primary concern to me here is not the technological achievement itself – remarkable though it is – but, rather, the

manner in which technological incorporation and innovation established a rich, regular, and reversible connection between civilisation, Little America, and the remote Advance Base. Retreat is interrupted – from beyond, from outside, from home, from afar. With this in mind, I want now to tune in a little more precisely to Byrd's account, in order to listen at length to how radio interferes with retreat.

Several days after bidding farewell to his colleagues and taking up residence at Advance Base, Byrd established radio contact with Little America for the first time.²⁰ He describes himself at this point as '[e]xcited', adding that 'if any contingency truly disturbed me, it was the chance of losing radio contact with Little America. Not on my account, but on the expedition's account more generally' (2003, p. 65). Two weeks later, however, his tone is different, ambivalent:

It's really comforting to talk this way with Little America, and yet in my heart I wish very much that I didn't have to have the radio. It connects me with places where speeches are made and with the importunities of the outer world. (2003, p. 87)

But the curiosity about 'the outer world' was evidently strong, for, on 6 May, Byrd used the radio to ask his colleagues about the state of the American stock market. This, he writes, 'was a ghastly mistake':

I can in no earthly way alter the situation. Worry, therefore, is needless. Before leaving [home] I had invested my own funds – carefully, I thought – in the hope of making a little money and thus reducing the expedition's debt. This additional loss, on top of ever-mounting operating expenses, may be disastrous. Well, I don't need money here. The wisest course is to close off my mind to the bothersome details of the world. (2003, p. 125)

What *Alone* shows, though, is the way in which that closing-off is never accomplished: 'the bothersome details of the world' are broadcast regularly into Advance Base through the radio equipment, sometimes on specific request. Whether Byrd embraces or doubts the technology, the connection between Advance Base

and Little America, and Little America and the United States, cuts through the period of retreat and its subsequent inscription in the pages of book.

The way in which radio linked the isolated Byrd to the wider world becomes even more apparent in the book's account of how, in May 1934, an attempt was made to celebrate Byrd's achievement back in the United States:

I was informed that on Saturday Little America was broadcasting a special program to the Chicago World Fair; would I mind adding my greetings? Certainly not. It was agreed that I should spell out in code, 'Greetings from the bottom of the world', which message was to be picked up and relayed by Little America's more powerful transmitter. I reduced the message to dots and dashes and practiced religiously. When Saturday came, Charlie Murphy broke the news, just before the broadcast, that New York now wanted me to spell, 'Antarctic greetings', instead. 'I'm given to understand', he said sententiously, 'they intend to translate the damn thing into fireworks.' (Byrd, 2003, pp. 158-9)

As on the occasion of the very first broadcast between Advance Base and Little America, Byrd records a sense of thrill when describing the imminent link-up:

As excited as an actor making his debut, I sat at Advance Base listening to the broadcast from Little America; and, when somebody said, 'We shall now attempt to make contact with Admiral Byrd', I reached for the key and worked it furiously. But it went for naught. Dyer reported a few minutes after that he had heard it clearly, but Chicago hadn't heard anything. 'No doubt the fireworks went off anyway', he observed dryly. (2003, p. 159)

Even though this particular media event falls flat, the eager attempt to send greetings 'from the bottom of the world' to Chicago, from Little America to 'Big' America, from the wilderness to civilisation, marks again the failure of complete separation and pure retreat.

Byrd likens himself here to an actor; what he does not say is that his drama is the dying of distance.

IV

What strikes me about *Alone* is, to borrow a distinction from Jacques Derrida, the gap between what the text *declares* and what it *describes* (Derrida, 1976, pp. 217-8). The title of the text connotes privation and critical distance from civilisation, and Byrd refers to his being 'cut off from human beings' (2003, p. 183). This is the book's *declaration*. Its *description* of life at Advance Base, however, is rather different, for *Alone* records repeatedly how Byrd was in regular, welcome contact with human beings, both directly (when in radio conversation with Little America) and indirectly (when receiving news of the stock market via his colleagues in the main base, for instance).

When that connection with others fails, as it does towards the end of the stay at Advance Base, the author records a sense of terror: 'This is bad, very bad, I said to myself; I'd sooner lose an arm than have anything go wrong with [the radio generator] [...] Bent over with weariness and despair, I concluded finally that my world was falling to pieces' (Byrd, 2003, p. 233). As he lies near death and awaiting rescue in temperatures of around 80 degrees below zero, moreover, Byrd relates how his focus falls upon his link with Little America:

Everything that remained of me was centered upon the radio. I kept up the weather data, made the observations, and wound the clocks; but all this was automatic. Whatever else that was truly alive and reasoning was devoted toward keeping the channel of communication open, not merely on my account, but on account of the men bound for Advance Base. From the beginning I had loathed the radio; now I hated it with a hate that transcended reason. Each day it left me helpless for hours. If I had smashed it with a hammer, as I was more than once tempted to do, I might not have suffered nearly so much. (2003, p. 268)

Byrd attempts to explain his not destroying the radio in altruistic terms – ‘But there was a moral aspect which restrained me. [...] [A]s long as men were proposing to grope in the darkness between me and Little America, there could be no letup’ (2003, p.268) – but this does not alter the fundamental fact that his retreat was punctured and punctuated consistently by contact with the outside world, with civilisation. This wireless contact is even described twice as a kind of ‘meeting’ (2003, pp. 281, 287).

What *Alone* broadcasts, in other words, like Byrd’s two other accounts of Antarctic exploration, is radio’s disruptive duality: it is necessary for survival and it saves Byrd’s life in the end, but its invasive presence marks the return of the modern, mechanical world from which the Little Americans have withdrawn. Writing of his time as a geologist on the first Byrd expedition to the Antarctic, Lawrence McKinley Gould claimed in summary that ‘individual isolation was about the most unattainable thing’ in the encampment (Gould, 1931, p. 31). *Alone*, against all odds, tells a strikingly similar story. Out in the bleak Antarctic wilderness, in a tiny subterranean cabin, waves are welcomed into retreat. Byrd was never quite alone.

V

This would appear to be true in a wider sense, too. The more I explore narratives of withdrawal, and the more I write about writing about retreat, the more I feel that the long and varied story of withdrawal from the world is at once the story of being interrupted. Byrd’s disruptions, as disruptions, are typical, nothing new. There is across time a tendency, to put things in a somewhat Derridean manner (1976, p. 34), for the *outside* to erupt within the *inside*, within the apparently distant and different, within the shack, the cabin, the cave, the woods, the desert. The precise form of that outside is historically specific, of course, but its bare bothering endures.

Peter France’s history of hermits offers some delightful examples from the remote and pre-modern past, from a moment and a climate far removed from that of Richard Byrd. The early Desert Fathers, he notes, sometimes became so famous, such objects of fascination, that their precious retreat was disturbed by ‘invasions of the curious’ (France, 1996, p. xi) and they were

forced to find innovative ways to address the problem. Abbas Simon, for example, when he heard that a nobleman was coming to visit him, went outside and began pruning a palm tree. The nobleman arrived with a group of people and shouted, 'Old man, where is the anchorite?', to which Simon replied, 'There's no anchorite here'. The group went away (France, 1996, p. 28). Meanwhile, Saint Antony of Kiev, who is not to be confused with the more famous Saint Antony of Egypt, was forced to dig another cave in an even more remote location in Russia to escape those who kept pestering him for advice (France, 1996, p. 54).

Henry David Thoreau built a cabin instead of digging a cave, but, like the Desert Fathers, he also faced interruptions during his time in retreat, although not most significantly from people: he tells his readers quite clearly that his plan was never to avoid social contact. The common misperception of Thoreau as an isolated anchorite was perhaps the fault of Ralph Waldo Emerson. In his published eulogy for Thoreau, which was based on a funeral address given in May 1862, he described his friend as a hermit (Emerson, 1883-93, p. 426), even though *Walden* contains a chapter entitled 'Visitors', a statement that its author was 'naturally no hermit' (Thoreau, 2004, p. 140), and the announcement that 'I had more visitors while I lived in the woods than at any other period of my life' (pp. 143-4).²¹ The chapter entitled 'The Village', meanwhile, features the following statement:

Every day or two I strolled to the village to hear some of the gossip which is incessantly going on there, circulating either from mouth to mouth, or from newspaper to newspaper, and which, taken in homoeopathic doses, was really as refreshing in its way as the rustle of leaves and the peeping of frogs. As I walked in the woods to see the birds and squirrels, so I walked in the village to see the men and boys; instead of the wind among the pines I heard the carts rattle. In one direction from my house there was a colony of muskrats in the river meadows; under the grove of elms and buttonwoods in the other horizon was a village of busy men, as curious to me as if they had been prairie dogs, each sitting at the mouth of its burrow, or running over to a neighbor's to gossip. I went there frequently to observe their habits. (p. 167)

As Stanley Cavell puts it, in his book on *Walden*, Thoreau was by no means invisible in the woods: he was, rather, ‘a visible saint’ (Cavell, 1992, p. 11).

What Thoreau did seek to avoid, however, were the sights and sounds of modernity, or what, like Byrd, he repeatedly called ‘civilization’ (Thoreau, 2004, pp. 30, 31, 34, 35, for example); this anti-modernity is one of the qualities which sets Thoreau apart from the pre-modern Desert Fathers and brings him closer instead to Byrd’s Antarctica – a closeness which turns uncanny when it is recalled that Walden Pond was actually formed ‘when the last glacier to cover New England slowly melted away’ (Department of Conservation and Recreation, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2007, p. 1).²² The cabin was to be an escape from ‘the chopping sea of civilized life’ (Thoreau, 2004, p. 91) where Thoreau could live differently and deliberately, in tune and touch with nature instead of modernity and its machinery. What he calls a ‘tonic of wildness’ (p. 317) is needed to correct the way of the world, to restore a connection with authentic human existence, to forge an alternative to those mechanical ‘lives of quiet desperation’ (p. 8).

But what *Walden* actually inscribes, to my mind, is a series of moments at which ‘the chopping sea of civilized life’ seeps into the space to which Thoreau has withdrawn. The lives of quiet desperation turn out to be desperately noisy. *Walden* is a book of interruptions.

Leo Marx recognised this many years ago in *The Machine in the Garden*, where he considered how, in the formulation of the pastoral ideal, American writers from Hawthorne to Hemingway have turned their attention to ‘the machine’s sudden appearance in the landscape’ (1964, p. 16) as a ‘counterforce’ to ‘an idyllic vision’ (p. 25). The most notable invasion of machinery in *Walden*, Marx points out, is the arrival of a train in the serene landscape, just when Thoreau is sitting still in solitude and reverie.²³ All at once there is movement, noise, modernity:

At first the sound is scarcely audible. Thoreau casually mentions it at the end of a long sentence in which he describes a series of sights and sounds: hawks circling the clearing, a tantivity of wild pigeons, a mink stealing out of the marsh, the sedge bending under the weight of reed-birds, and then, as if belonging to the very tissue of nature: ‘and for the last half-hour I have heard the rattle of the railroad cars, now dying away

and then reviving like the beat of a partridge, conveying travellers from Boston to the country.’ It would have been very difficult to contrive a quieter entrance, which may seem curious in view of the fact that Thoreau then devotes nine long paragraphs to the subject. (Marx, 1964, pp. 249-50)

In Marx’s account, this interruption is part of the development of the pastoral ideal: the appearance of the train as a counterforce in the idyll belongs to *Walden*’s gradual movement towards disclosing ‘a way of coping with the forces represented by the encroaching machine power’ (Marx, 1964, p. 260). With time comes balance, healing, ‘a figurative restoration of the form and unity severed by the mechanized forces of history’ (p. 262). Or, to put things differently by returning to the discussion of Virgil and Hawthorne with which Marx begins his book, ‘the conflict aroused by the counterforce is mitigated’ (p. 31). The dramatic interruption occurs, then, but it reveals the beginnings of a shift, an ambivalence towards technology. The train is a noisy counterforce, but *Walden* eventually, for Marx, moves towards mitigation. That is the heart, the spirit, of the pastoral ideal.

This means that Marx’s brilliant, persuasive book is ultimately uninterested in the interruptions *as interruptions*. Because *The Machine in the Garden* sees these moments as necessary points on the path to mitigation, it tends to leave them aside *as interruptions* once it has moved on to the higher level of healing and incorporation. (The ghost of Hegel can haunt more than one Marx, it seems.) The interruptions to Thoreau’s retreat, that is to say, are passing events on a journey to somewhere else.

I would want to stress the interruptions as interruptions, however, because there is a sense in which *Walden* describes in detail a phenomenon which affects many modern narratives of retreat, such as Richard Byrd’s *Alone*; Richard Proenneke’s accounts of building a cabin in the Alaskan wilderness in the late 1960s and retreating there in solitude, only to find his days marked by signs of technological modernity (Proenneke 1999, 2012); Everett Ruess’s dispatches from the deserts of the American West in the 1930s (Rusho, 2007), in which civilisation is dismissed but then quietly embraced, particularly in the form of the postal system; or, from 1968, Edward Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire*, in which the desire ‘to evade for a while the clamor and filth and confusion of the cultural apparatus’ (Abbey, 1990, p. 6) is described

alongside consistent contact with American culture, notably in the form of radio.²⁴ When Thoreau describes the surfacing of ‘civilized life’ within the woods, when he relates modernity’s marking of the day, he is describing a difficulty faced often by those who retreat: leaving a way of life behind is never easy, never pure, for the simple reason that traces of what has been abandoned tend to invade the experience and the environment of withdrawal. Flight finds itself up against the rejected; distance becomes a distant dream.

It would be possible, perhaps, to survey all of these interruptions and explain them away as inevitable occurrences. Casting off a culture is not straightforward: you can flee, but it catches up, catches you out. I do not think, however, that it is sufficient simply to shrug and say that interruptions happen. I want, rather, to know why such resurfacings occur again and again, often in dramatic ways, in written accounts of retreat. Why detail the interruptions? Why do they happen at the level of the signifier, in the record? Why do they come through in the ink, make it through from life to writing?

My turn to the term ‘signifier’ offers a clue to the direction of my conclusion. Ferdinand de Saussure proposed in the *Course in General Linguistics* that meaning depends upon difference (Saussure 1974), and Jacques Derrida, in his radical rereading of Saussure in the late 1960s, reformulated matters to suggest that meaning depends upon the trace of otherness (Derrida 1973, 1976). If a signifier becomes meaningful only by being different from other signifiers, then every signifier bears the necessary trace of other signifiers. ‘Without a retention in the minimal unit of temporal experience’, Derrida concludes, ‘without a trace retaining the other as other in the same, no difference would do its work and no meaning would appear’ (1976, p. 62).

In the light of these propositions, it seems to me that retreat, if it is to signify, must be a retreat *from something* – civilisation, in the case of Byrd, Thoreau, Proenneke, Ruess, Abbey, and many others like them across the decades. Without that *something*, without the initial, troublesome presence of civilisation, retreat has no real meaning, no real significance. (The verb ‘to retreat’ can technically be intransitive, then, but this is deceptive.) Retreat depends for its meaning upon a *difference* between states, places, conditions, ways of living. The significance of Richard Byrd’s period at Advance Base, to return to my primary example, relies upon its *not being* life in the United States: Little America is Little America because it is not ‘Big’ America;

wilderness is wilderness because it is not civilisation. Retreat depends upon difference.

This necessary contrast resonates in Byrd's account in the form of interruptions, which are uttered traces of otherness, summoned reminders of elsewhere. 'The distancing has to be symbolized in some way', as Roland Barthes puts it in his discussion of anachoresis (Barthes, 2013, p. 25), and Byrd's interruptions are, I would argue, an attempt to symbolise such critical distancing. When Byrd reports hearing from 'Big' America, he gives significance to Little America. And when he reports hearing from Little America or 'Big' America while he is alone in his frozen cabin, he makes his retreat meaningful. The outside is required to live inside and to write the experience.

This strikes a fatal blow to any hope, any belief, that retreat can be pure, utter, complete. (My phrasing here is not accidental: etymologically, a retreat can be a blow executed by the pulling back of a weapon.) Shifting the focus away from Byrd's Antarctic writings as simple slices of history or early episodes in the history of mass-media spectacles opens up a new vista, a new continent of significance. Reading instead for the contradictory moments at which Byrd's accounts skate away from themselves allows for the unfolding of a new understanding of withdrawal with wider implications for related tales of critical distance. Retreat *retreats*, retreats from itself. Withdrawal depends upon and secretes the trace of what has been left behind; it must mark itself as a withdrawal *from something*. The bothersome details of the world are recorded because they have a founding function; retreat is therefore impure and undone at its heart. Richard Byrd, far from home in a tiny cabin beneath the Antarctic ice, needed civilisation to know and write retreat.

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NOTES

¹ I will enlist the term ‘civilisation’ often in this essay to describe the condition from which Richard Byrd and others sought to withdraw. My use of the term – *their* term – should not be taken as an endorsement of its connotations.

² Byrd’s claim to have beaten Amundsen in the race to fly over the North Pole in May 1926 has been contested on many occasions, and I have no interest in taking sides here. For an overview of the controversy, see Rose, 2008, pp. 123-43.

³ For more on Byrd as a coloniser of the ice, see Griffiths, 2007, p. 123 and Bryson, 1996, p. 437. For a map of Byrd’s base, see the insert between pp. 232 and 233 of Byrd, 1930.

⁴ For further notable references to Little America’s difference and distance from civilisation, see Byrd, 1930, pp. 20, 101, 148, 192, and 221. See also the whole of Chapter 10 of the book: ‘Civilization Does Not Matter’.

⁵ For a detailed summary of the differences between what the men called old Little America and new Little America, see Byrd, 1935, pp. 182ff. For an account of the size of the second Little America, see p. 113 of the same text.

⁶ See, for example, Byrd, 1935, pp. 21, 97, 126, 163, and 249.

⁷ Like ‘Little America’, the name ‘Advance Base’ evokes the colonialism of the American frontier. Indeed, a caption beneath one of the photographs in Byrd’s account of his *second* voyage to Antarctica refers to (the new) Little America as a ‘frontier settlement’. See the top image on the unpaginated photographic plate immediately before p. 121 of Byrd, 1935.

⁸ All of the information about the location and construction of Advance Base in this paragraph is taken from Byrd, 1935, p. 167. For a photograph of all that remained above ground, see the unpaginated plate immediately before p. 153 of the same text.

⁹ Murphy was well placed to pick up the narrative: he had already published the first book-length celebration of Byrd (Murphy, 1928) and, according to Lisle Rose (2008, p. 290), ‘helped Byrd crank out *Little America* in four months’ in 1930.

¹⁰ While this plan to retreat from modernity into the remote wilderness might not, in seeking such separation and dissociation, appear immediately to be a form of *critical* distance (in that critique involves enlisted judgement, not a refusal to engage), I read in the references to ‘people beset by the complexities of modern life’ and being ‘caught up in the winds that blow every which way’ an implicit understanding of Advance Base as a critical distancing.

¹¹ I am thinking in particular here of the terrifying incident (Byrd, 2003, pp. 116-18) in which Byrd ‘decide[s] to take a longer walk than usual’ (p. 116) outside on the ice, becomes lost, and fears that he will never find his way back to Advance Base.

¹² Edward Abbey’s later account of a far warmer retreat, *Desert solitaire: A season in the wilderness*, also contains an account of checking the weather station during a period of withdrawal from modern life (Abbey, 1990, p. 38).

¹³ Once again, Edward Abbey describes a very similar experience in *Desert solitaire* (Abbey, 1990, p. 11). The phenomenon is not confined to non-fiction, either: Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*, for example, provides a memorable counterpart in the realm of fiction when it describes Hans Castorp’s adjustment to life, to a new sense of time, in the remote sanatorium (Mann, 1999).

¹⁴ The importance of the alarm clock at Advance Base is also described in *Discovery*, where the reproduction of a diary entry from the day on which Byrd watched his colleagues leave (28 March) offers a possible explanation for the absence of the object from the retreat: ‘Boxes, loose clothing, books, and odds and ends past counting are strewn about. I haven’t the faintest idea where anything is. I’ve searched conscientiously for the alarm clock and the cook book, and the suspicion is growing that I left them at Little America. It would be an ironic joke if, in the pretentious planning for every contingency, we forgot these most commonplace and vital necessities’ (Byrd, 1935, p. 166).

¹⁵ This corrective signal was, I presume, also used to set the wrist watch that Byrd mentions keeping with him in the shack (2003, pp. 58, 108, 156, 168, 173, 234, 252).

¹⁶ The Greenwich Time Signal had been transmitted for the first time just a decade earlier (McIlroy, 1993).

¹⁷ For more on the CBS broadcasts, including a fascinating reconstruction of their lost content, see Perry 2014. In his archival

account of Byrd's first two Antarctic trips and the earlier flight to the North Pole, Robert N. Matuozzi (2002) has argued persuasively that the mass media actually *shaped* Byrd's adventures, rather than merely reporting them. Matuozzi also discusses the involvement of Paramount film crews at Little America during the first and second expeditions – a phenomenon which I will not discuss here because my concern is radio broadcasting.

¹⁸ CBS and General Foods were not the only commercial enterprises to support the second Byrd expedition to Antarctica. For details of other donors, see Chapter 1 of Byrd, 1935.

¹⁹ Tom Griffiths (2007, pp. 123-4) points out that the 1929 expedition also involved broadcasts in both directions and that news of Byrd's historic flight to the South Pole was relayed immediately to crowds in New York's Times Square (p. 127).

²⁰ While Little America was able to broadcast speech to Byrd, he was able to send only Morse code in response. He claims in *Alone* that his knowledge of Morse code was slight (2003, p. 65).

²¹ Might Emerson have been thinking, when he described Thoreau as a hermit, of an article published in the *Liberator* on 4 November 1859, in which Thoreau was described as 'the hermit of Concord' (quoted in Salt, 1968, p. 140)? This common perception of Thoreau's life at Walden has been corrected by, among others, Salt, 1968, pp. 75 and 77, and Howarth, 1983, p. 36.

²² *Walden*, in fact, as Eric G. Wilson has pointed out, is fascinated with ice (Wilson, 2003, pp. 50-68), but Thoreau makes no reference to the frozen provenance of the lake. Damian Walford Davies's engaging 'hydrographic' reading of Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' (Walford Davies, 2012, pp. 20-42) has persuaded me that what I will tentatively call a 'glaciographic' analysis of Byrd's *Alone* remains to be sculpted. I do not have the space here to let this possibility crystallise, so I shall leave it, for now at least, on ice.

²³ Edward Abbey's *Desert solitaire* effectively rewrites this scene with a jeep instead of a train (Abbey, 1990, pp. 42-3).

²⁴ I do not have space here to discuss Proenneke, Ruess, or Abbey in any kind of detail, but I plan to consider them at length, and Thoreau much more extensively, in the book of which this essay is a fragment.