What can a novel do?

Deleuze, Spinoza, and the practice of literary analysis

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How does one do philosophy? What does it involve? Let us consider the most famous image of philosophising in the Western canon. It is a self-image, offered to us by Descartes. For Descartes, doing philosophy involves a high degree of both solitude and introspection. He writes in 1637 that, since emigrating from his native France to Holland, "I have been able to lead a life as solitary and withdrawn as if I were in the most remote desert …" [1] After withdrawing from society, Descartes attempts to distance himself from his own younger self, the credulous child who had, he tells us, accepted a "large number of falsehoods" as true. [2] Sitting alone by the fire in his dressing-gown, he asks himself: Of what can I be certain? The reality of fire, dressing-gown and embodiment itself disappear down the plughole of his reductivist cogitations, and at last he replies: "[T]hat absolutely nothing else belongs to my nature or essence except that I am a thinking thing." [3] After which he reluctantly consents to put his body and dressing-gown back on, insisting all the while that they are completely detachable from "this puzzling 'I'." [4] Cartesian philosophising, then, is an extreme form of doing battle with illusion; it is about subtracting everything that's even the least bit suspect in order to get to the truth, that evasive little kernel of certainty around which we can (perhaps) build a life, if and when we are brave enough to engage with the world again.

A very different image of the philosopher is put forward by Deleuze. Instead of a slipper-shod soliloquiser, Deleuze's philosopher is, in the first instance, someone who *cries out*: "Every time you need to cry out, I think that you're not far from a kind of appeal to philosophy." Philosophy, as Deleuze never tires of saying, is the creation of concepts, and concepts, he now tells us, are created in response to one's own cries:

> That's what it is to need a concept – to have something to cry out about! One must find the concept of that particular cry. [5]

This is a far cry from the model of dispassionate rationality we've just been considering. Philosophy, on this account, is personal, passional, urgent. It's not something you do in private, after withdrawing from the world. Rather, "[s]omething in the world forces us to think." [6] And if crying out is part of thinking, philosophy is something you do with your body as well as your mind. Further, Deleuzean philosophy does not do battle with illusion, because it is not a quest for truth. *True* and *false* are not appropriate classifications for philosophical concepts; concepts are simply more or less *useful*. [7] And they take a multiplicity of forms, because they spring from a multiplicity of cries: "There are thousands of things one could cry out about." [8] For example, one could cry out: "Everything has to have a reason!" Or one could yell: "Stop! You have to stop!" Or, more pertinently for our purposes: "What can a body do? We don't even know what a body can do!" [9]

That first cry, according to Deleuze, is the concern animating the philosophy of Leibniz. The second encapsulates the key preoccupation of Aristotle. And the third, a cry which moves Deleuze far more than the first two, is uttered by Spinoza. Spinoza's cry constitutes a sharp rebuke to Cartesianism. For Descartes, as we know, the human is primarily a thinking thing: poor pure mind, trapped in its fleshy cage. Spinoza, as we shall see below, does not dispute dualism, but he converts it into parallelism, thus managing to dispel the opprobrium with which Descartes regards the body. Mind and body are two different ways of viewing the same thing, a bit like waves and particles in quantum physics. Further, Spinoza insists, the body is easier to get to know than the mind. So in order to investigate the mind's powers we should start by examining the body. This scrutiny is long overdue:

> For indeed, no one has yet determined what the body can do … For no one has yet come to know the structure of the body so accurately that he could explain all its functions – not to mention that many things are observed in the lower animals which far surpass human ingenuity, and that sleepwalkers do a great many things in their sleep which they would not dare to awake. This shows well enough that the body itself, simply from the laws of its own nature, can do many things which *its mind* wonders at. [10]

How does it change the way we see the world to speak of the body's mind rather than the mind's body? And what does all of this have to do with literary analysis? Recall Deleuze's insistence that something in the world forces us to think. If something in the world makes us cry out and do philosophy, then the concepts thus created are designed to be applied to

things in the world, including novels. Indeed, Deleuze's own concepts are shaped by, and applied to, the writings of Proust, Kafka, Melville, Woolf, and Poe, among others. He also situates philosophy and literature on neighbouring planes with porous borders. For him, the creative exigency which fuels each praxis is quite similar: as we shall see below, something in the world forces us to write as well as to think.

Further, Spinoza's prescription of taking the body as a model is a particularly transplantable methodology. It begs to be put to work in the domain of literary analysis, because the latter is still pervaded by Cartesianism or, following Deleuze, Freudo-Cartesianism. As I shall explain below, Freudo-Cartesianism has it that novels are written by author-subjects in search of their Oedipus complexes, and peopled by character-subjects on identity-quests: redemption; remembering; recovering, uncovering and discovering former, better or more real selves. On a Spinozistic analysis, by contrast, novels are created as a result of the striving to persevere in one's being which Spinoza terms *conatus*. When opened, a Spinozistic novel is found to be teeming with human bodies, each composed of smaller, non-human bodies and constantly coming into contact with further human and non-human bodies. Spinozistic characters, like their creators, approach all of these bodily encounters as ways of maximising joy and decreasing sadness as they undergo the "slow learning" of discovering what agrees with them. [11]

In this paper, accordingly, I speculate about what would happen if one re-phrased Spinoza's cry in order to ask: What can a novel do? Part I of the paper outlines the role played by Spinoza's concept of the body in his "ethic of joy." In Part II I explore Deleuze's intriguing linkage of Descartes and Freud. I argue that Freudo-Cartesianism is alive and well in the domain of literary analysis despite the rhetoric about a crisis of subjectivity. Part III consists of a Spinozistic analysis of Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*.

I. Spinoza's "ethic of joy" [12]

At the outset, I should note that when Deleuze says that Spinoza cries out such-and-such, we are to understand that Deleuze *hears* Spinoza crying out such-and-such when he reads the latter's work. Spinoza does indeed insist that "no one has yet determined what the body can do." But Spinoza speaks insistently on many subjects, and on none more insistently than the subject of God, or Substance. Deleuze is explicit about the way he massages Spinoza in the interests of his own creative venture:

> What interested me most in Spinoza wasn't his Substance, but the composition of finite modes. I consider this one of the most original aspects of my book. That is: the hope of making substance turn on finite modes, or at least of seeing in substance a plane of immanence in which finite modes operate, already appears in this book. [13]

The book in question is *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, the first of two works devoted to Spinoza. The second, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, effects an even more emphatic shift away from God/Substance and towards the human being as finite mode. This paper follows Deleuze in locating Spinoza's exploration of human powers at the heart of his philosophy.

Accordingly, I begin with Deleuze's claim that Spinoza's cry is "practically a war cry." [14] The war that Spinoza is waging is, of course, against Cartesian dualism, and the battleground is the human body. In identifying his "I" as a thinking thing, Descartes accords soul or mind an "eminent nature" and the duty to "command the body's obedience, according to the laws to which it is itself subject." This in turn places strict restraints on the body's powers, which are reduced to two: a "power of execution," which is simply the power to obey the mind/soul, and the power to "lead the soul astray, and entice it from its duties." Mind and body are harnessed together in such a way that the one is forced to suffer the actions of the other:

> This is … the principle of real action in Descartes: the body suffers when the soul acts, and the soul in its turn suffers when the body acts. [15]

This inextricable entwining means that mind and body cannot be compared, and, argues Deleuze, because they cannot be *compared* neither can be *assessed*. [16] Spinoza's "anticartesian reaction" consists in unharnessing mind and body and placing them on parallel paths. [17] In Spinoza's universe, the body acts when the soul acts, and suffers when the soul suffers. Thus, parallelism "excludes any eminence of the soul, … any transcendence of a God who might base one series on the other." [18]

If the effect of Descartes" mechanism is to "devaluate Nature by taking away from it any … immanent power, any inherent being," Spinozism is a way of "re-establishing the claims of a Nature endowed with forces or power." [19] But Spinoza does not discard Cartesianism in its entirety. He retains what Deleuze describes as the key innovation of Cartesian

mechanism: the proposition that “every power is actual, in act.” [20] That is, Spinoza follows Descartes in envisaging bodies as having actual powers, but he rejects Descartes’ attempt to restrict bodily powers to a power of execution and a power to lead astray. Describing bodily powers in this way is mere “moral chattering,” not philosophical investigation. [21] Why? Because we don’t yet know what the body can do – no one has bothered to find out. So saying, Spinoza turns his back on Descartes’ “puzzling I” and his solipsistic fireside musings. We can almost see him getting out his tool kit so that he can work out how a body is built, what its components are, what makes it go.

This is not to insinuate that Descartes is disinclined to investigate actual bodily functions and would rather sit by the fire. He isn’t and wouldn’t; he has a most inquisitive mind and a yen to find out things for himself. However, his researches into bodily structure and function are constrained by his conviction that body is always yoked to mind, and that mind is in control. By contrast, Spinoza’s “realization of the naturalist program” [22] consists in linking a mechanics of bodily action and interaction to a dynamics of affectivity: “Spinoza can consider two fundamental questions as equivalent: *What is the structure* (fabrica) *of a body*? And: *What can a body do?*” [23]

I shall now give a short summary of the answers Spinoza gives to these two fundamental questions before explaining how these responses lead Spinoza to construct an ethics of joy. First, though, we shall have to backtrack in order to put God back into the Spinozistic machine. At this point I will make an odd claim: that Spinoza’s affirmative approach to “God, or Nature” [24] is capable of making an enormous difference to the way one reads a novel. I will be developing this point further in Part III, but for the moment I would like to highlight the effect of *doubting* in Descartes and *affirming* in Spinoza. Recall that Descartes’ *modus operandi* is the deliberate magnification of doubt in order to effect a “general demolition” of all received ideas. [25] In the face of spiralling doubt, solitude and introspection, which I posited in the introduction as the conditions for Cartesian philosophy, acquire an ontological character. Because it is “subtracted from doubt,” [26] the being of the thinking which goes by the designation of “I” is radically cut off from the being of the world and of God. World and God are, of course, sharply distinct entities for Descartes: it is the goodness of the latter which allows one to relax one’s suspicions about the reality of the former. But even though God’s beneficence permits me to trust the evidence of my senses, my pedigree as a doubter has created an unbridgeable gulf between “I,” world and God. To be an “I” is to be separate, separated. Introspection becomes ontological by the same process. When I look within, I become aware of self-awareness. Self-awareness, or self-presence, serves to confirm my being; thereafter, the nature of my being is construed as self-presence. Henceforth, each “I” is configured as a discrete block of self-presence.

Spinoza, as I noted above, does not begin on a note of doubt; he starts his philosophical investigations with a ringing affirmation: “Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God.” [27] Deleuze’s translator Martin Joughin expresses this idea beautifully: Spinozism, he says, is “unfolded from the bare ‘simplicity’ of an Infinity into which all things are ultimately folded up, as into a universal map that folds back into a single point.” [28] God and nature are one; consequently, I am both *in* God and *of* nature. I will explain those last two claims in due course; here, it suffices to point out that Spinoza’s affirmative ontology obviates the need to go snorkelling into his inner depths in search of his “I.” This means that Spinozistic ethics is not an ethics of the subject, considered as such; it is an ethics of the finite mode, man, and man, as finite mode, folds back into the infinitude of God.

It is impossible here to offer a comprehensive account of the way the finite folds into and out of the infinite in Spinoza’s thought. Briefly, the relation between substance (God/nature) and modes (us) can be described in terms of two contrasting operations: *complication* and *explication;* or, “being folded up in” and “folding out from.” Spinoza’s substance is the ontological ground of all there is: it is “the absolute ontological identity of all qualities, absolutely infinite power, the power of existing in all forms, and of thinking all forms.” [29] Substance is, on the one hand, univocal, indivisible and infinite; on the other hand, it manifests itself and can be conceptualised under three designations: essence, attribute, mode. Deleuze uses the notion of expression to convey the interwoven nature of Spinoza’s substantial triad. Substance expresses itself in an infinity of attributes, each of which expresses an “infinitely perfect essence.” [30] (Despite the infinite array of attributes, only two are concretely instantiated in the *Ethics*: Thought and Extension.) Modes, in their turn, are forms of expression of attributes. Each mode has its own distinctive essence, but what is distinctive about it is its quantity, not its quality. A modal essence is a degree of intensity; thus, the modal essences of an attribute comprise “the infinite series of degrees corresponding to its intensive quantity.” [31] This is why it can be said that an attribute contains or *complicates* the essences of all its modes. It contains or complicates them in much the same way that a prism contains a spectrum of colours.

The nature of modal essences should become clearer as this exposition proceeds. Here it must be emphasised that essence is not equivalent to existence, and does not pre-suppose it. Existence is a matter of mechanics, of having the right componentry. Each finite mode is

> composed of a great number of parts, parts that come to it from elsewhere, that begin to belong to it as soon as it comes to exist by virtue of an external cause, that are renewed in the play of causes while the mode exists, and that cease to belong to it when it passes away ... These components are external to the mode’s essence, and external one to another: they are extensive parts. [32]

When modes take on a material existence, they are no longer *complications*, but *explications* of the attribute in question. If complication or "being folded up in" is "the inherence of multiplicity in the One," explication is "an unfolding of what expresses itself, the One manifesting itself in the many." [33] Thus, "each existing mode explicates the attribute in the relation that characterizes it, in a way extrinsically distinct from other ways in other relations." [34]

The extensive parts which correspond to a mode's intensive signature are themselves simple bodies. Spinoza asserts that simple bodies are "distinguished from one another by reason of motion and rest, speed and slowness, and not by reason of substance." [35] In other words, the difference between existents is not substantive; it is *relational*. Each mode manifests itself as a distinctive relation of motion and rest, speed and slowness, subsisting between its parts. Now, if a mode comprises a very great number of parts, and each part is a simple body, these bodies will be in constant interaction for as long as the distinctive relation in question continues in existence. And because modes are component parts of a world which is itself one vast body, they are in constant interaction with each other. This means that each mode is *affected* in "a very great number of ways." [36] For Spinoza, who eschews any form of Aristotlean classification of existents by genus or species,

> a mode is said to have affections by virtue of a certain capacity to be affected. A horse, a fish, a man, or even two men compared one with the other, do not have the same capacity to be affected: they are not affected by the same things, or not affected by the same things in the same way ... In short, relations are inseparable from the capacity to be affected. [37]

With this step, we have established an equivalence between Spinoza's two fundamental questions. What is the structure of a body? "A body's structure is the composition of its relation." What can a body do? "What a body can do corresponds to the nature and limits of its capacity to be affected." [38] The final stage in this exposition involves showing that for Spinoza a mode's affective capacity is identical to its essence or intensive signature. Thus, Spinoza enjoins us to craft a personal ethics of joy on the basis of an understanding of our own capacity to be affected. In order to explain this I must introduce one more pair of terms: active and passive affections. An active affection "can be completely explained by the nature of the affected body." [39] Variously characterised as a feeling, an image or corporeal trace, [40] an active affection arises in me as a result of my own bodily constitution. A passive affection or passion, on the other hand, although it also arises in me as feeling, image, or trace, "involves the body, but is explained by the influence of other bodies." [41]

The distinction between active and passive affections defines the nature of the Spinozistic pilgrim's progress:

> The great question that presents itself in relation to existing finite modes is thus: Can they attain to active affections, and if so, how? This is the "ethical" question, properly so called. [42]

The ethical question turns out to be another rendition of Spinoza's cry. Saying that we do not know what a body can do is tantamount to saying that "we still do not know how we may come to produce active affections; and so we do not know our power of action." [43] For Spinoza, the discovery of our power of action is a two-stage process. First, we start at the level of passive affections or passions and try to maximise joyful ones and minimise sad ones. Joy and sadness are tantamount to healthful and harmful encounters with other bodies. When we combine our relation with another relation such that the result is beneficial for us, we experience joy. When we combine with bodies which have a harmful effect on us, we experience sadness. Therefore, "[a] man who is to become reasonable, strong and free, begins by doing all in his power to experience joyful passions." He does this by orchestrating good encounters and avoiding "chance encounters and the concatenation of sad passions." This is an arduous business, as Deleuze points out:

> Nobody is born free, nobody is born reasonable. And nobody can undergo for us the slow learning of what agrees with our nature, the slow effort of discovering our joys. [44]

In the second stage of the ethical journey, Spinoza's virtuous man seeks to minimise passive affections and maximise active ones. He *acts*. And in acting, he expresses his essence or intensive signature, which turns out to be nothing other than the signifier of his power of action. That is, essence is power, and power is virtue:

> By virtue and power I understand the same thing, that is …, virtue insofar as it is related to man, is the very essence, or nature, of man, insofar as he has the power of bringing about certain things, which can be understood through the laws of his nature alone. [45]

II. Reading between the lines (and the sheets) with Descartes and Freud

Before proceeding to a Spinozistic analysis of Ondaatje's novel, I need to give some account of the more conventional

mode of interpreting fiction. Literary theorists, I argue, are apt to employ a paradigm of the subject fashioned for them by both Descartes and Freud. Subject-obsessed analysis forces novels into certain pre-conceived shapes and constrains the way we view character and incident. Some novels are actually deformed by the attempt to shoehorn them into a Freudo-Cartesian "grid of intelligibility." [46] I contend that *The English Patient* suffers this fate.

This observation applies not just to literary theorists, but to readers of all kinds. We have all been acculturated by the cult of the subject. That includes me. When I was a teenager I was fond of telling anyone who would listen that I was a librocubicularist: a person who reads in bed. Everyone in my family took books to bed, and still does. But little did we realise that Descartes and Freud were probably lurking between the lines of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Great Expectations* and, when we got more subversive, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *The Naked Lunch*. We all assumed that novels were collections of statements made by subjects about other subjects, and that an authorial subject's statement-making activity was triggered by repressed desires floating up from the unconscious with its submerged family triangle, mummy-daddy-me. That is, we were wont to consider writing as "a tiny little private affair," [47] such that every novel eventually boiled down to autobiography, where the latter is understood as a kind of psychoanalytic cogitation.

Deleuze offers a novel account of the subterranean connection between Descartes and Freud in a lecture given at the University of Vincennes in 1973. Psychoanalysis, he says, is the "inheritor of a type of thinking which we could call 'Western thought,' and which says that there are individual statements." He then argues that the "form or logic" of the production of individual statements has been "fixed by the *cogito*':

> *Cogito*: this means that every statement is the production of a subject. It means that firstly; and secondly, it means that every statement splits the subject that produces it … Then every statement refers to a subject, and every statement splits, cuts, separates the subject that produces it. [These] propositions are linked up naturally, because if it is true that a statement is produced by a subject, then for that very reason this subject will be divided into the subject of enunciation and the subject of the statement. This is what the literal process (*démarche*) of the *cogito* consists of. [48]

The distinction Deleuze draws between a subject of the statement and a subject of enunciation is somewhat elusive, and the terms themselves are apt to obscure the point he is trying to make. I suggest that a subject of the statement (*sujet de l'énoncé*) is a statement-maker, a speaker, and a subject of enunciation (*sujet de l'énonciation*) is a self-aware, thinking thing. The subject who speaks and describes its actions is a composite of mind and body; the subject who thinks is mind alone. The subject who thinks recognises itself in the statement "I think." Every other statement – "I walk," "I write novels," "I read in bed" – has to be referred back to the recognition-triggering statement before I can be sure that I, as walking/writing/reading subject, actually exist. So the subject of enunciation (thinker) hides *behind* and *below* the subject of the statement (speaker). Deleuze explains this point as follows: "When I say 'I walk,' perhaps I'm not walking, but there's one thing I'm sure of, and that is that I'm thinking of walking." He then gives a gloss on Descartes" example of a statement about a unicorn:

> I'm thinking of the text where Descartes says, it may be – I see a unicorn, or I imagine a unicorn – it may indeed be that the unicorn does not exist, it may very well be that the proposition "I see a unicorn" is false. But … it's true that I think I am seeing a unicorn. At this level, a kind of disengagement of a subject of enunciation occurs … [49]

On this reading, the *cogito* exacts a heavy price for the self-certainty it provides: the subject knows it is a subject, but this piece of knowledge bisects the knower into thinker and speaker. Cut, split, separated, the knowing subject re-enacts its mutilation at every turn:

> There is a dualism at the level of thought and the object thought. There is a dualism at the level of soul and body, there are as many dualisms as you like. And if we ask, What is the source of all the Cartesian dualisms? – it lies in this scission internal to the subject, between the subjects of the statement, which allow no conclusion, and a subject of enunciation, which is subtracted from doubt: "I think." [50]

Deleuze then proceeds to accuse Descartes of Freudianism *avant la lettre*. The *cogito*, he asserts, is "an Oedipal apparatus, a sublimated Oedipal apparatus ... the Oedipal machine at the level of thought." [51] He argues that the Freudian paradigm of the subject, adopting the logic fixed by the *cogito*, effects another series of intrasubjective scissions:

> [P]sychoanalysis is the thing that says to us, "Come here, lie down, you're finally going to be able to speak in your name," and which, at the same time, withdraws in advance all possible conditions for the production of statements, precisely because it has subordinated all production of statements to the splitting of the subject of enunciation and the subject of the statement … [52]

The subject/patient lies on the analyst's couch and makes statements, utterances. But how does the analyst decode them, decide what the patient is really saying? Answer: she does it by scission. She splits the form on the couch into a speaker and a receptacle of hidden or repressed desires. Or: into a mouth, which talks, and a theatre of the unconscious, where family dramas are staged night after night. These primordial Oedipal tableaux are responsible for the shape of my desires. I try to keep the playhouse closed, sealed off, but bits of repressed material keep erupting into my dreams and – or so the analyst hopes – into my speech as I lie on the couch. So where Descartes gives us the speaking self and the thinking self, or the self-describing self and the self-aware self, Freud gives us the speaking self and the *desiring* self.

At this point one might object that Deleuze's critical elision of Descartes and Freud is now largely irrelevant. Everybody knows that, for the purposes of literary analysis, the subject is dead, or at least in deep decline. However, if one looks closely, it seems to be a case of the subject is dead, long live the subject. A number of thinkers point to the persistence of the "familiar ego-logical understandings of subjectivity and intersubjectivity" [53] in contemporary theory, and literary theory is not exempt from this judgment. For example, Vicky Kirby argues that "inadvertent Cartesianism" [54] is one of the hallmarks of contemporary feminist scholarship, and indeed of postmodern scholarship in general:

> Although human identity underpins what we mean when we say "the subject," the exact nature of this identity is not included in the crisis of identity. For it is the unified subject of humanity who interrogates "the subject" and who decides the limit of the question's calculation. It seems that the subject of the anthropological, the self-present identity of humanness to itself, is the closed container within whose limits the breaching of limits (difference) can be risked. [55]

For his part, Cary Wolfe highlights the limitations of attempts by cultural theorists such as Homi Bhabha to clothe liberalism's "self-serving abstraction of the subject of freedom" with cultural specificities:

> The problem with this mode of critique is that it often reinscribes the very humanism it appears to unsettle, so that the subject, while newly "marked" by critique, is marked by means of a very familiar repertoire … [56]

In a similar vein, I would like to argue that Freudo-Cartesianism is still embedded in literary theory. For obvious reasons I will focus on readings of *The English Patient*. The first reading under consideration, by Annick Hillger, uses Deleuzo-Guattarian theory to posit Ondaatje as a "nomad writer." Hillger interprets nomad writing and thinking as a means of breaking with "identitarian logic" and of mapping an encounter "with the world outside." [57] But the interpretation of nomadism offered by Hillger is very literal: nomadism is moving around; sedentarism is having a home. That is, some subjects wander with no fixed trajectory; others want to return home. Hillger quotes some remarks by Deleuze and Guattari on the nomad subject, but does not attend to their attempts to move beyond subjectivity itself. Thus the subject, as discrete parcel of self-presence, retains its force in a project ostensibly designed to highlight Ondaatje's critique of subjectivity.

An even more interesting reinscription of the Cartesian subject occurs in two interpretations of *The English Patient* by Rufus Cook. Cook's first piece uses Ondaatje's reference to "imploding time and geography" to fashion an insightful account of the novel's innovative "narrative compressions." He highlights the novel's "fractured," "discontinuous" style, [58] its multiple slippages and daring experiments in chronological disjuncture. [59] He notes that Ondaatje fractures the space-time of his characters' existence and endows them with the capacity to "fill in the gaps, to supply the missing links in an experience" [60] as well as to "dissolve boundaries and distinctions." [61] The Spinozistic tenor of this kind of reading is most apparent when Cook engages with Ondaatje's idea that human beings are "communal histories, communal books," quoting from the English patient's final interior monologue:

> We die containing a richness of lovers and tribes, tastes we have swallowed, bodies we have plunged into and swum up as if rivers of wisdom, characters we have climbed into as if trees … I want all this to be marked on my body when I am dead. [62]

Despite the Spinozism of this first reading, however, Cook's second reading of *The English Patient* travels in the opposite direction, directly back to the realm of the subject. The novel is now said to be concerned with "mimesis," or "representation." The patient's speech about borderless bodies and his and other characters" endeavours to enter into relations of composition with other bodies are portrayed as somewhat dangerous attempts to merge into, identify with, or "assimilate" other subjects. Cook supplements his own commentary with quotes from Foucault's article, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." [63] Unfortunately, he completely misreads the latter and takes Foucault to be condoning, rather than condemning, the identitarian search for pristine beginnings and unfractured wholes. Ondaatje's characters are said to be "searching for some way of … getting back to the inviolable identity of their origin." [64] In other words, they are depicted as seeking the source of their I-ness, just as Descartes did more than four centuries ago.

III "The slow effort of discovering our joys": A Spinozistic analysis of The English Patient

To begin this section, I would like to rewind to Deleuze's remarks on the grand Freudo-Cartesian collusion to simultaneously assemble and split the subject. Deleuze's exposition prompts a number of questions: Who makes statements? Who writes novels? Why do they write them? What are novels about? Answers to these questions are provided in Deleuze's aesthetic philosophy, which is both thoroughly anti-Cartesian and thoroughly Spinozistic. But I am not going to explore Deleuze's aesthetics, which has been expertly considered by numerous commentators; [65] instead, I'd like to speculate on what (Deleuze's) Spinoza might say in this context. Deleuze's second work on Spinoza, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy,* gestures towards a Spinozistic theory of aesthetics. First, Deleuze there describes Spinozism as a way of life, a praxis, and suggests that artists are more likely to be practising Spinozists than philosophers, who are wont to view his ideas through the prism of theory. Second, he states that artefacts can be Spinozistic bodies: "A body can be anything; it can be an animal, a body of sounds, a mind or an idea; it can be a linguistic corpus …" [66]

But despite the fact that this reading is inspired by Spinoza's cry, I would like to make one connection between Spinoza and Deleuze at the outset. It relates to the third question posed above: why do people write novels? The Freudian response, you will recall, concerns the idea of the subconscious as Oedipal playhouse. For Freud, the writer, like other artists, is a neurotic who plunders his or her subconscious for images, images which relieve readers of fiction and other art consumers of the burden of their own repressed desires and fantasies. [67] For Deleuze, by contrast, the unconscious is a factory. Nothing is reproduced, represented or dramatised there; everything is *produced*. This is the idea informing Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of desiring-production. For Deleuze and Guattari, desire is not the preserve of the family triangle, mummy-daddy-me; rather, something in the world, just about anything in the world in fact, awakens desire. Nor is desire related to lack, what one lacks; it is constructive, constructivist. Desire makes you make things, and as you make them, new desires emerge from the creative process. [68] Claire Colebrook glosses desiring-production as "the creative striving of life in general." [69] And that sounds interestingly similar to Spinoza's concept of *conatus*, which is another way of explicating a mode's essence, its will to organise good encounters and maximise its power of action: "The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing." [70] All this to suggest that for Spinoza, artistry is simply one form of existential striving among many. What else can a novelist do but write novels?

I would now like to return to the odd claim I made in Part I. I stated that Spinoza's affirmative approach to "God, or Nature" is capable of making an enormous difference to the way one reads a novel. What I had in mind was this: While subjectivity is "subtracted from doubt," modality is attained through affirmation. A Spinozistic mode is simultaneously a degree of God's infinite perfection and a piece of nature. As Moira Gatens observes, this means that, unlike the closed-off Cartesian subject, a mode is "radically open to its surroundings." [71] Robert Hurley fruitfully explores the ramifications of this idea:

> The environment is not just a reservoir of information whose circuits await mapping, but also a field of forces whose actions await experiencing. In a human sense, it can be called the unconscious, or at least the ground on which the unconscious is constructed. Which of these actions are we capable of experiencing? What is a walk in the forest …? And what individual do we compose when we "think like a mountain"? [72]

Accordingly, if we consider the possibility that novels are written by, for, and about modes, reading will become a way of affirming interconnectedness rather than a way of reinforcing disconnectedness.

Environment is a powerful presence in Ondaatje's novel. It is a field of forces, a plenitude of bodies. There is wind, whacking into a walk of cypresses and "entering the sleeves" of Kip's shirt. [73] The English patient relates the story told by Herodotus about an African tribe that marched out to make war on a particularly fierce wind, dressed in full battle regalia. There is rainwater, beloved by Katharine and Hana, who walk out to greet it as one would a lover and harbour its moistness in their bodies for as long as possible. Kip, on his motorcycle, rides "deeper into thick rain," then finds himself sliding along "the skin of rainwater" on a bridge. [74] There is desert sand, capable of burying cars, people, beasts, indeed entire armies, in a fingersnap. Ondaatje's sense of the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman bodies is exquisitely conveyed by the journey of a ladybird which lands on Kip, crosses from his fingernail to Hana's wrist, and then, at her instigation, toils up the charred body of the English patient:

> The patient turns to face her as she comes in. She touches his foot with the hand that holds the ladybird. It leaves her, moving onto the dark skin. Avoiding the sea of white sheet, it begins to make the long trek towards the distance of the rest of his body, a bright redness against what seems like volcanic flesh. [75]

But Ondaatje is not just interested in interactions between humans and "natural" bodies: consider the sequence where Kip, a sapper, defuses a huge "Esau" bomb sitting in a pit of muddy water. Kip's body is draped around the body of the bomb, and "his thighs braced the metal casing, much the way he had seen soldiers holding women in the corner of

NAAFI dance floors." [76] Whether the connection concerns weather, machinery, artworks, or human-to-human contact, Ondaatje is entranced by the rhythms of relational identity. And he seems intuitively to endorse Spinoza's interactive ethics. All of the characters, instinctively or as a result of harsh experience, seek out those encounters which maximise their powers and avoid encounters having the reverse effect. In particular, Hana and Kip constantly enter into relations of composition with elements of their environment. They are practical poets, adroitly finding ways to elevate joy and decrease sadness. Alone in the villa after her patient has drifted into a morphine-laden sleep, Hana plays hopscotch in the dark:

> She leaps up and in midair turns so she lands facing the other way, then skips forward even wilder now down the black hall, still landing on squares she knows are there, her tennis shoes banging and slamming onto the dark floor – so the sound echoes out into the far reaches of the deserted Italian villa, out towards the moon … [77]

Even the English patient, so badly burned that he acquires a fleshless anonymity, continues the slow effort of discovering his joys, savouring a plum which Hana places in his mouth, and at one point feasting on condensed milk from a tube.

Of course, some encounters have mixed effects on a body's existential powers. This is the case with Hana's encounter with the English patient. Sick of assembly-line nursing – cleaning and dressing wounds, shovelling food into the mouths of dying soldiers, closing the eyes of dead ones – Hana takes on the burned man as her private patient, tending to him with the full extent of her empathic powers. Thus they keep each other alive. But the relation also threatens to deplete Hana's existential force. It is Caravaggio, the thief who lost his thumbs in a failed robbery, who sees this most clearly. In words which are astonishingly close to Spinoza's own, he tells her:

> You have to protect yourself from sadness. Sadness is very close to hate. Let me tell you this. This is the thing I learned. If you take in someone else's poison – thinking you can cure them by sharing it – you will instead store it within you. [78]

Remarks such as this suggest that *The English Patient*, like Spinoza's *Ethics*, could be described as an "ethology." Deleuze defines the latter as a text that, "with regard to men and animals, in each case only considers their capacity for being affected." [79] The misery and madness of war, the spartan and dangerous conditions in the villa, Kip's bomb-defusing and Caravaggio's life-risking thievery, and the love affair between Katharine and Almasy can all be seen as explorations of the structure of personhood and the limits of affective capacity. How is a person assembled, how disassembled? How much can a body take – and what is its point of decomposition? It is also arguable that Ondaatje's conception of virtue is very close to Spinoza's. Recall that for Spinoza, the ethical question in relation to finite modes is: "Can they attain to active affections, and is so, how?" [80] In the novel's closing chapter, Ondaatje has Kip admire Hana's powers of action, her self-made quality. She is

> someone who has made her face with her desire to be a certain kind of person. He still likes that about her. Her smartness, the fact that she did not inherit that look or that beauty, but that it was something searched for and that it will always reflect a present stage of her character. [81]

By saying that *The English Patient,* as ethology, has more to say about human *conatus* than about the travails of the "I," we are investing Ondaatje's novel itself with a greater affective capacity. We are acknowledging Ondaatje's ability to give us a sharper sense of the dynamic potential of our own bodies. And we are recognising that his novel has the power to enter into compositional relations with its readers, boosting joyful affections and helping to banish sad ones. If the body of *The English Patient* can do this, we can say that it lives up to Deleuze's highest expectations of literary desiring-production:

> [L]iterature … exists only when it discovers beneath apparent persons the power of an impersonal – which is not a generality but a singularity at the highest point: a man, a beast, a stomach, a child … literature begins only when the third person is born in us that strips us of the power to say "I" … [82]

And a few concluding words

In closing, let us circle back to Descartes and his fireside meditations. It is a curious irony that the retiring philosopher who turned solitude and introspection into ontology bequeathed an idea that embedded itself in our culture and, still today, deeply affects the way we interpret ourselves and our world. On the other hand, the philosopher who urged us to reach out and embrace relational, interactive existence has gone largely unheeded. This, however, may be set to change. Spinoza has been embraced by the "deep ecology" movement. [83] If his interactive ethics is able to propel us towards more vigorous and dynamic alliances with our world, what could it do for the process of reading and writing novels?

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[1] Rene Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, in *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff & Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 35.

[2] Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*, p. 17.

[3] Descartes, *Meditations*, p. 54.

[4] Descartes, *Meditations*, p. 20.

[5] Gilles Deleuze, Lecture notes on Leibniz, 15/04/1980, online: http://wwww.webdeleuze.com (accessed 21/04/2004).

[6] Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London & New York: Continuum, 1994), p. 139.

[7] Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy*, trans. Graham Burchill and Hugh Tomlinson (London & New York: Verso, 1994), pp. 27-8.

[8] Deleuze, Lecture notes on Leibniz.

[9] Deleuze, quoted in Charles J. Stivale, “Summary of L’Abecedaire de Gilles Deleuze,” online: http://www.langlab.wayne.edu/CStivale/D-G/ABC1.html (accessed 13 April 2004).

[10] Benedict Spinoza, *Ethics*, in *A Spinoza Reader*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 155-6, my italics.

[11] Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Zone Books, 1992), p. 162.

[12] Genevieve Lloyd, *Spinoza and The Ethics* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 83.

[13] Deleuze, *Expressionism*, p. 11.

[14] Deleuze, *Expressionism*, p. 255.

[15] Deleuze, *Expressionism*, p. 255.

[16] Deleuze, *Expressionism*, p. 256.

[17] Deleuze, *Expressionism*, p. 227.

[18] Deleuze, *Expressionism*, p. 256.

[19] Deleuze, *Expressionism*, pp. 227-8.

[20] Deleuze, *Expressionism*, p. 228.

[21] Deleuze, *Expressionism*, p. 255.

[22] Deleuze, *Expressionism*, p. 229.

[23] Deleuze, *Expressionism*, p. 218.

[24] Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 198.

[25] Descartes, *Meditations*, p. 76.

[26] Deleuze, “Dualism, Monism and Multiplicities (Desire-Pleasure-Jouissance),” Seminar of 26 March 1973, trans. Daniel Smith, *Contretemps*, 2 (May 2001), p. 94.

[27] Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 94.

[28] Martin Joughin, “Translator’s Preface,” in *Expressionism*, p. 5.

[29] Deleuze, *Expressionism*, p. 198.

[30] Deleuze, *Expressionism*, p. 119.

[31] Deleuze, *Expressionism*, p. 198.

[32] Deleuze, *Expressionism*, p. 201.

[33] Deleuze, *Expressionism*, p. 16.

[34] Deleuze, *Expressionism*, p. 214.

[35] Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 125.

[36] Deleuze, *Expressionism*, p. 217.

[37] Deleuze, *Expressionism*, p. 218.

[38] Deleuze, *Expressionism*, p. 218.

[39] Deleuze, *Expressionism*, p. 218.

[40] See Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, p. 48.

[41] Deleuze, *Expressionism*, p. 218.

[42] Deleuze, *Expressionism*, p. 218.

[43] Deleuze, *Expressionism*, p. 224.

[44] Deleuze, *Expressionism*, p. 262.

[45] Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 201.

[46] A Derrida-ism; see Caputo, John, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), p. 120.

[47] Stivale, “Summary of l’Abecedaire de Gilles Deleuze.”

[48] Deleuze, “Dualism,” p. 94.

[49] Deleuze, “Dualism,” p. 94.

[50] Deleuze, “Dualism,” p. 94.

[51] Deleuze, “Dualism,” p. 94.

[52] Deleuze, “Dualism,” p. 103.

[53] Vicky Kirby, *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal* (London & New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 152.

[54] Kirby, *Telling Flesh*, p. 152.

[55] Kirby, *Telling Flesh*, p. 153.

[56] Cary Wolfe, “Introduction,” *Zoontologies: The question of the Animal*, ed. Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. xii.

[57] Annick Hillger, “‘And this is the world of nomads in any case’: The Odyssey as Intertext in Michael Ondaatje’s The English Patient,” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 33.1 (1998), p. 23.

[58] Rufus Cook, “‘Imploding Time and Geography’: Narrative Compressions in Michael Ondaatje’s The English Patient, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 33.2 (1998), p. 109.

[59] Cook, “Imploding Time,” pp. 110-1.

[60] Cook, “Imploding Time,” p. 113.

[61] Cook, “Imploding Time,” p. 114.

[62] Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient* (London: Picador, 1992), p. 261.

[63] Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, trans. Donald Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).

[64] Cook, Rufus, "Being and representation in Michael Ondaatje's 'The English Patient'," *ARIEL*, 30.4 (1999), p. 47.

[65] See, for example, Smith, Daniel, "Introduction: 'A Life of Pure Immanence': Deleuze's 'Critique et Clinique' Project," in *Gilles Deleuze: Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Smith and Michael Greco (London & New York: Verso, 1998), pp. xi-lvi.

[66] Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, p. 127.

[67] See Sigmund Freud, *Complete Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, 6th ed. (Sydney: Allan & Unwin, 1979).

[68] See Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

[69] Claire Colebrook, *Understanding Deleuze* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2002), p. 99.

[70] Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 159.

[71] Moira Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 110.

[72] Robert Hurley, "Preface," in Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, p. ii.

[73] Ondaatje, *Patient*, p. 277.

[74] Ondaatje, *Patient*, pp. 294-5.

[75] Ondaatje, *Patient*, p. 207.

[76] Ondaatje, *Patient*, p. 210.

[77] Ondaatje, *Patient*, p. 15.

[78] Ondaatje, *Patient*, p. 45.

[79] Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, p. 27.

[80] Deleuze, *Expressionism*, p. 218

[81] Ondaatje, *Patient*, p. 300.

[82] Deleuze, "Literature and Life," *Essays Critical and Clinical*, p. 3.

[83] Hurley, "Preface," p. ii.