

## THE NOVEL OF SPINOZISM: AN INTRODUCTION

---

SEAN WINKLER

### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to familiarize the reader with *Spinozist literature* as introduced in the writings of Gilles Deleuze. I contend that the reception of Spinoza's philosophy among literary writers exhibits more than just an interest in his work but something of value to understanding his philosophy. In fact, Spinozist literature may offer a way of broadening our understanding of Spinoza's concept of *common notions*, a crucial element of his thought that saw little explication in his own writings. The purpose of this essay, then, is four-fold: 1) *historical* – to situate Deleuze's reading of Spinoza in a historical context, 2) *archaeological* – to speculate on factors motivating Deleuze's reading of Spinoza, 3) *conceptual* – to determine how common notions figure into Deleuze's reading, and 4) *evaluative* – to characterize Spinozist literature as a way of experimenting with common notions and comment on the potential significance of such a literary genre.

### 1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to familiarize the reader with so-called *Spinozist literature* as introduced in the writings of Gilles Deleuze. It is my contention that the reception of Spinoza's philosophy among literary writers, in certain instances, exhibits more than just an interest in his work but, rather, something of value to the understanding of his philosophy. I will argue, specifically, that Spinozist literature may offer a way of broadening our understanding of Spinoza's concept of *common notions*, a crucial element of his thought that saw little explication in his own writings.

The relationship between Spinoza's philosophy and literature has garnered some attention in the past few years<sup>1</sup> but the first philosophical engagement with

---

<sup>1</sup> The relationship between Spinoza and literature has figured into the research of Simon Calder, Moira Gatens and Michael Mack among others. For another more general overview of Spinoza's

this relationship can be found in the work of 20th Century French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze. On two occasions, Deleuze relates Spinoza's philosophy or *Spinozism* to specific types of literature. The first can be found in "On Spinoza", a brief section from his *dialogue* with Claire Parnet entitled "On the Superiority of Anglo-American Literature". The connection is described most explicitly in the concluding lines of the essay where Deleuze and Parnet state:

What Lawrence says about Whitman's continuous life is well suited to Spinoza: the Soul and the Body, the soul is neither above nor inside, it is "with," it is on the road, exposed to all contacts, encounters, in the company of those who follow the same way [...] the opposite of a morality of salvation, teaching the soul to live its life, not to save it.<sup>2</sup>

The second reference appears in his final collaborative work with Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, in Chapter 3 on "Conceptual Personae".<sup>3</sup> Deleuze and Guattari argue:

There is such force in those unhinged works of Hölderlin, Kleist, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Kafka, Michaux, Pessoa, Artaud, and many English and American novelists, from Melville to Lawrence or Miller, in which the reader discovers admiringly that they have written *the novel of Spinozism* [my emphasis]. To be sure, they do not produce a synthesis of art and philosophy. They branch out and do not stop branching out. They are hybrid geniuses who neither erase nor cover over differences in kind but, on the contrary, use all the resources of their "athleticism" to install themselves within this very difference, like acrobats torn apart in a perpetual show of strength.<sup>4</sup>

---

relationship to literature, see Mack Michael, "Spinoza's Non-Humanist Humanism", in Lord Beth (ed.), *Spinoza Beyond Philosophy*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2012, 28–47.

<sup>2</sup> Deleuze Gilles and Parnet Claire, "On the Superiority of Anglo-American Literature", in Habberjam Barbara and Tomlinson Hugh (trans.), *Dialogues*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1987, 62.

<sup>3</sup> "The conceptual persona is the becoming or the subject of a philosophy, on par with the philosopher, so that Nicholas of Cusa, or even Descartes, should have signed themselves 'the Idiot,' just as Nietzsche signed himself 'the Antichrist' or 'Dionysius crucified' [...]. *The role of conceptual personae is to show thought's territories, its absolute deterritorializations and reterritorializations.* Conceptual personae are thinkers, solely thinkers, and their personalized features are closely related to the diagrammatic features of thought and the intensive features of concepts". That is, a conceptual persona is a figure which, as it were, navigates a philosopher's system of thought and even expresses aspects of that system through its personal qualities. Deleuze Gilles and Guattari Félix, *What Is Philosophy?* Burchell Graham and Tomlinson Hugh (trans.), New York, Columbia University Press, 1994, 64, 69.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

One may find the association between Spinoza's philosophy and literature surprising considering that Spinoza rarely mentions literature throughout his corpus – there are, of course, exceptions; Ovid's *Metamorphosis* comes to mind<sup>5</sup> and when he does, it is not clear that these references are in any way consequential to his thought. This near-omission of art on top of the rationalistic quality of Spinoza's philosophy have led some scholars to question whether art can be accounted for in Spinoza's philosophy at all.<sup>6</sup> Others have offered a more qualified stance in this regard but, nevertheless, caution the attribution of contemporary, particularly post-Romanticist, categories to his system.<sup>7</sup>

History, however, seems to demand a closer look at Spinoza's relation to art, particularly literature, given his tremendous influence therein. Ever since the 18th Century, his thought has inspired a vast number of literary ventures, the earliest of which were underground anti-religious texts. *Traité des trois imposteurs* [*The Treatise of the Three Imposters*], for instance, was initially to be entitled *La Vie et l'esprit de Spinoza* [*The Life and Spirit of Spinoza*] in its 1711 release but even after its title change, the short biography of Spinoza was still included. 1722 saw the publication of *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe* [*Letter from Thrasybulus to Leucippus*], arguably composed by Nicolas Fréret, which was also strongly influenced by Spinoza's philosophy.<sup>8</sup> The *Pantheismusstreit* [Pantheism Controversy] in Germany at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th Century saw Spinoza as the central figure of debate and while this event was vastly influential on philoso-

---

<sup>5</sup> Steven Nadler provides some interesting anecdotes about Spinoza's exposure to Greek and Roman poetry, drama, philosophy, etc., under the tutelage of Franciscus Van den Enden: "Van den Enden would have had his students read the ancient classics of poetry, drama, and philosophy – the literary legacy of Greece and Rome – as well as neoclassical works of the Renaissance [...]. They would also have read the great epics, tragedies, comedies and histories of antiquity [...]. He frequently had them rehearse dramatic speeches as a way of developing their eloquence in Greek and Latin. This was not an uncommon practice in Dutch schools in the seventeenth century [...]. It is fairly certain that Spinoza participated in the Terence productions [*Eunuchus*, along with 'a Greek farce']". Nadler Steven, *Spinoza: A Life*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, 109–110. Meinsma Koenraad, *Spinoza et son cercle: étude critique-historique sur les heterodoxes hollandais* [*Spinoza and His Circle: Critical-Historical Study of the Dutch Heterodoxy*], Roosenberg S. and Osier J.-P. (trans.), Paris, J. Vrin, 1983, 186–188. Also Meininger Jan and van Suchtelen Guido, *Liever Met Wercken als met Woorden: De Levensreis Van Doctor Franciscus Van Den Enden*, Weesp, Heureka, 1980, 24–43.

<sup>6</sup> See Morrison James, "Why Spinoza Had No Aesthetics", in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 47, 1989, 359–365.

<sup>7</sup> This cautionary stance can be found in de Deugd Cornelius, *The Significance of Spinoza's First Kind of Knowledge*, Assen, Royal Van Gorcum, 1966, 82–83.

<sup>8</sup> Moreau Pierre-François, "Spinoza's Reception and Influence", in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, Garrett Don (ed.) and Ariew Roger (trans.), New York, Cambridge University Press, 1996, 414.

phy, it held powerful sway over literature in figures such as Mendelssohn, Lessing<sup>9</sup> and Goethe. Eliot,<sup>10</sup> Shelley and Coleridge would also experiment with Spinozism in the United Kingdom while Emerson<sup>11</sup> and Melville<sup>12</sup> drew influence from his ideas in the United States. Literary authors' attraction to Spinoza did not waver in the 20th Century either as writers like Borges, Malamud and Yalom<sup>13</sup> all continued to find a well of inspiration in his thought. Of course, some studied his philosophy only to have vague, or no, traces of it appear in their original work (i.e., Kafka) but others expressed their interest more overtly even to the point of crafting entire narratives around his ideas (i.e., Malamud's *The Fixer*).

But what, if any, connection can be established between all of these works? Each of these authors drew inspiration not only from Spinoza but from a variety of different sources, philosophical and non-philosophical alike, not to mention their own creativity. Do these authors, then, share a pantheistic worldview with Spinoza? Do they all experiment with a kind of mind-body parallelism? Or, is it simply

<sup>9</sup> See Jacobi Friedrich, "Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Herr Moses Mendelssohn", in *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, DiGiovanni George (trans.), Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994, 173–251.

<sup>10</sup> For two excellent articles on this topic, see Gatens Moira, "Compelling Fictions: Spinoza and George Eliot on Imagination and Belief", in *European Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 20, 74–90 as well as Nemoianu Virgil, "The Spinozist Freedom of George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*", in *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 34, 2010, 65–81.

<sup>11</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson's relationship to Spinoza's philosophy is a minor but, nevertheless, interesting one. Apparently, in an address to the Harvard Divinity School in 1838, Emerson sparked a controversy for having appeared sympathetic to Spinoza, ensuing a series of public debates. To date, the only summary of these events can be found in Adler Adam, "Emerson's Hidden Influence: What Can Spinoza Tell the Boy?", Honors Thesis, Georgia State University, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> See Hart Alan, "Melville and Spinoza", in *Studia Spinozana*, vol. 5, 1989, 43–58, as well as Hauser Helen, "Spinozan Philosophy in *Pierre*", in *American Literature* vol. 49, 1977, 49–56. I would also note the interesting parallel between the central plot element of *Billy Budd, Sailor* (Billy Budd's striking Claggart) and IVp59 and its Scholium of the *Ethics*: "[N]o action, considered solely in itself, is good or evil [...]. The act of striking a blow, insofar as it is considered physically and insofar as we look only to the fact that a man raises an arm, clenches his fist and violently brings his arm down, is a virtue, conceived as resulting from the structure of a human body". Spinoza Baruch, *Spinoza: Complete Works*, Morgan Michael (ed.) and Shirley Samuel (trans.), Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2002, 351.

<sup>13</sup> Borges wrote a number of poems about Spinoza and even intended to write a book about him entitled *Clave de Baruch Spinoza [Key to Baruch Spinoza]*. For more on Spinoza's influence on Borges, see Abadi Marcelo, "Spinoza in Borges' Looking-Glass", in *Studia Spinozana* vol. 5, 1989, 29, 32. For more on Bernard Malamud's *The Fixer*, a novel in which Spinoza's philosophy plays a central role, see Cook Thomas, "A whirlwind at my back ...': Spinozistic Themes in Bernard Malamud's *The Fixer*", in *Studia Spinozana* vol. 5, 1989, 15–28. In fact, the subject of Volume 5 of *Studia Spinozana* is *Spinoza and Literature*. In the case of Irvin Yalom see *The Spinoza Problem: A Novel*, New York, Basic Books, 2012.

a matter of historical coincidence (i.e. the rise of German Romanticism, German Idealism, etc.) that inspired such interest among literary writers?

In this essay, I have confined myself to Deleuze's, albeit cryptic, references to this notion of *Spinozist literature* or *the novel of Spinozism*. This is not only for the sake of economy but for the purpose of developing a hypothesis as to what may distinguish literary works that simply make reference to Spinoza's concepts from those that actually express his philosophical point of view. If there is a defining feature to his reading, it requires paying close attention to the way in which he sees certain writers as "installing themselves within the difference" between art and philosophy. With this in mind, I will contend that if there is such a thing as properly Spinozist literature, it is, above all, an experiment with *common notions*, the tool of Spinoza's second order of knowledge, or the kind of knowledge which negotiates between the imagination and reason, between experience and philosophical inquiry. The purpose of this essay, then, is four-fold: 1) *historical* – to situate Deleuze's reading of Spinoza in a historical context, 2) *archaeological* – to speculate on factors motivating Deleuze's reading of Spinoza, 3) *conceptual* – to determine how common notions figure into Deleuze's reading, and 4) *evaluative* – to characterize Spinozist literature as a way of experimenting with common notions and comment on the potential significance of such a literary genre.

## 2. Historical Background – Acosmism and Deleuze's *Expressionism* Thesis

As discussed in the Introduction, the idea of Spinozist literature is an unusual one given the nature of Spinoza's philosophy. Indeed, why not speak of Platonic or Nietzschean literature? That is, why not relate a philosopher with a more overtly literary style to literature? The irony of Deleuze's having come up with such a genre can be felt even in one of Spinoza's earliest works, the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*. A large part of this text is dedicated to identifying and dispelling different forms of fictions that corrupt human rationality.<sup>14</sup> And although the actual term, *fiction*, only appears a handful of times throughout the

---

<sup>14</sup> "[T]he less men know of Nature, the more easily they can fashion numerous fictitious ideas, as that trees speak, that men can change instantaneously into stones or springs, that ghosts appear in mirrors, that something can come from nothing, even that gods can change into beasts or men, and any number of such fantasies [...]. [A]fter it [our soul] has formed some fictitious idea and given assent thereto, it cannot think it or fashion it in any other way, and is even compelled by that fictitious idea to form all its other thoughts so as not to conflict with the original fiction [...]". Spinoza, *Complete Works*, *op. cit.*, 16–17.

*Ethics*, fictions that lead us to anthropomorphize God, to construct moral values, etc., remain the central target of Spinoza's philosophy from beginning to end.

In the years following his death, however, critics of Spinoza raised the issue as to whether or not his purely rational system did not invent a host of new fictions of its own. In his lecture entitled "A Note on Eternity, Time, and the Concept", Alexandre Kojève addresses one of the central puzzles that arises from this quality of Spinoza's thought. He states:

[Spinoza's] *Ethics* is made in accordance with a method of which an account *cannot* be given in *human* language. For the *Ethics* explains everything, except the possibility for a man living in time to write it [...]. [It] proves the impossibility of its own existence at *any* moment whatsoever. In short, the *Ethics* could have been written, *if it is true*, only by God himself [...].<sup>15</sup>

Kojève's portrayal is a striking, indeed, troublesome portrayal of Spinoza's *Ethics* but it is not a particularly unique one. In fact, it is reminiscent of a criticism of his philosophy that is rooted in the philosophy of late 18th and early 19th Century Europe, particularly in Germany surrounding the alleged *atheism* and, subsequently, *acosmism* of Spinoza's philosophy.

The late 18th Century in Germany was the time of the great *Pantheismusstreit* during which Spinoza's philosophy both rose to great popularity as well as great disdain. His conflation of God with Nature put the legacy of his thought severely on trial; Moses Mendelssohn and G. E. Lessing are the most well-known of these cases. The hostility towards Spinozism lay in the contention that the idea of God in Nature, or pantheism, was effectively no different than atheism. If the light of reason could render human nature, the laws of physics, even the nature of God itself within the grasp of a total, rational system of knowledge, was it correct to say that one was still speaking about God? Faith, piety and, perhaps the direst, morality had no place in this system. The reaction was not only to accommodate a space for these next to reason but to reject the Enlightenment rationality and philosophy that Spinoza's thought seemed to epitomize. This is most evident in the writings of F. H. Jacobi who intended to do away with what he saw as the ills of rational

---

<sup>15</sup> Kojève Alexandre, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. Queneau Raymond and Bloom Allan (ed.) and Nichols, Jr James (trans.), Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1969, 120.

knowledge and philosophy with his notions of *non-knowledge* and *non-philosophy* and by replacing reason with faith.<sup>16</sup>

While this debate alienated Spinozism from theology, it seemed to draw it only closer to 18th and early 19th Century German philosophy as is quite evident in the following words from Hegel: “thought must begin by placing itself at the standpoint of Spinozism; to be a follower of Spinoza is the essential commencement of all Philosophy”.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the stories of German Romanticism and German Idealism cannot be told without Spinoza. But these movements arrived more than a century after Spinoza’s death by which time the world of philosophy had changed drastically. Kant’s *Copernican Revolution* and the birth of transcendental philosophy transformed the very sense, even possibility, of metaphysics, putting Spinoza on trial under a considerably different light. This time, it was not the rejection of reason but the re-appropriation of the power of reason that seemed to draw thought like Spinoza’s into question. Salomon Maimon – a disciple of both Kantian and Spinozist philosophy –, in a response to the *Pantheismusstreit*, pin-points a damning consequence of Spinoza’s having stretched the limits of pure rationality:

It is inconceivable how one could turn the Spinozistic system into atheism since these two systems are the exact opposites of each other. Atheism denies the existence of *God*, Spinozism denies the existence of the *world* [...] Spinozism should be called “acosmism”.<sup>18</sup>

Hegel’s words are almost identical in *The Encyclopædia Logic*: “the world is determined in the Spinozist system as a mere phenomenon without genuine reality, so that this system must rather be seen as *acosmism*”.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, when Kojève says that the *Ethics* does not explain its own composition, he says a great deal more. That is, Spinoza’s system seems to render the existence

---

<sup>16</sup> Jacobi Friedrich, “Jacobi to Fichte”, in *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, di Giovanni George (trans.), Québec, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994, 500–501.

<sup>17</sup> Hegel G. W. F., *Hegel’s Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 3, Haldane E. S. and Simson, M. A. Frances (trans.), London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968, 257.

<sup>18</sup> Maimon Salomon, *Lebensgeschichte*, 217. This translation is from Melamed Yitzhak, “Why Spinoza is not an Eleatic Monist (Or Why Diversity Exists)”, in *Spinoza on Monism*, Goff Philip (ed.), New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 211.

<sup>19</sup> Hegel G. W. F., *The Encyclopædia Logic, Part I of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze*, Geraets T. F., Harris H. S. and Suchting W. A. (trans.), Indianapolis/Cambridge, Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1991, 97.

of the world impossible. The *Ethics* voices a single concept (substance) which can only be spoken of in eternity and, according to this model, time and the world of becoming seem to be illusory. Thus, in spite of seeing Spinoza as the “commencement of all Philosophy”, Hegel asserts that the absolute nature of the Concept must be given in time and without some kind of limits to purely *a priori* reasoning, the world dissipates into nothing more than a fiction. But the question does not end there; Spinoza’s host of metaphysical, physical, psychological and, most importantly, ethical propositions would be incoherent and the *Ethics* a kind of *work of fiction*.

But Deleuze’s thesis in *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* suggests that the difficulty in relating *a priori* reasoning to the world stems from overlooking the role of a very important notion within the text of the *Ethics*, namely, the verb *exprimere* [to express]. Spinoza never explicitly accounts for this term but it can be found in forty-six places throughout the *Ethics*: twenty-two in Part I, ten in Part II, nine in Part III, none in Part IV and five in Part V. In spite of the fact that Spinoza never defines it, though, for Deleuze, some of the most important definitions in the text cannot be properly understood without it. Note, again, that reference to expression is always through the verb *exprimere* (*expressa, exprimatur, expremere, exprimerem, exprimet, exprimit, exprimunt, exprimuntur*).<sup>20</sup> That it is never referred to in the substantive goes to show that it is always used to articulate relationships between terms. In fact, expressive relationships always manifest as a series of *triads* for Deleuze from *substance-attributes-essence, perfect-infinite-absolute*, all the way down to the level of *finite modes*. For Deleuze, expression denotes the logic which makes the conception of absolute infinity possible along with the unfolding of the world from within this absolute. For Deleuze, then, many of the most important elements of the *Ethics* would be incomprehensible in its absence.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> These numbers comes from Pierre Macherey who, himself, found the tabulation for the occurrences of *exprimere* and other important Spinozistic concepts in Boscherini, Emilia Giacotti *Lexicon Spinozanum*, 1970 and Gueret, Robinet and Tombeur’s *Ethica: Concordances, Index, Listes de Fréquences, Tables Comparatives* [*Ethica: Concordances, Index, Lists of Frequencies, Comparative Tables*], 1977, the latter of which also contextualizes terms. Macherey Pierre, “The Encounter with Spinoza”, in *Deleuze: A Critical Reader*, Patton Paul (ed.) and Joughin Martin (trans.), Oxford, Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997, 144, 158.

<sup>21</sup> Deleuze Gilles, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, Joughin Martin (trans.), New York, Zone Books, 1990, 13–22.



### 3. Archaeology – Spinoza and His Myths

In the *Expressionism* text, however, Deleuze makes reference to Émile Lasbax's *La Hiérarchie dans l'univers chez Spinoza* [*The Hierarchy of the Universe in Spinoza*], Lasbax being one of the few other thinkers Deleuze considers to have addressed the meaning of expression in Spinoza at any length,<sup>22</sup> along with Fritz Kaufmann<sup>23</sup> and André Darbon<sup>24</sup>. A closer examination of this text reveals some compelling insights that may have held sway over Deleuze's own position. In the Introduction to Lasbax's text, he gives us a surprising anecdote about the end of Spinoza's life. Not long before his death, so it goes, Spinoza divided his manuscripts into two parts: one that he gave to friends for later publication and others that, in his final days, he destroyed.<sup>25</sup> Although we do not know the entirety of Spinoza's destroyed works,<sup>26</sup> we can speculate somewhat to their content based on correspondences between Leibniz and Tschirnhaus, the latter with whom Spinoza shared some of his unfinished manuscripts.

Two in particular yield evidence of some surprising topics from the early versions of the *Ethics: medicina corporis* [medicine of the body] and *Transmigrationis* [transmigration]. The former, while never given any sustained treatment, is not surprising as it is mentioned in the final version of the *Ethics* (EV Praef) and elsewhere throughout Spinoza's corpus (TdIE 15).<sup>27</sup> The latter, however, receives no mention at all.<sup>28</sup> This in mind, we can say that there are parts of Spinoza's thought that we do not know about. Lasbax ruminates on this point, leading him to wonder the following: what if, "what we know of Spinoza [is] comparable to, say, that which we would have known of Plato if he had taken care to remove...all of the mythical presentations from his dialogues?" If Leibniz, for instance, had removed

<sup>22</sup> Although Deleuze sees Lasbax as, "hav[ing] pushed furthest the identification of Spinozist expression with Neoplatonic emanation". *Ibid.*, 353n16.

<sup>23</sup> See Kaufmann Fritz, "Spinoza's System as a Theory of Expression", IN *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 1, 1940, 83–97.

<sup>24</sup> See Darbon André, *Études Spinozistes*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1946.

<sup>25</sup> Lasbax Émile, *La Hiérarchie dans l'univers chez Spinoza* [*The Hierarchy of the Universe in Spinoza*], Paris, Félix Alcan, 1919, 5.

<sup>26</sup> Regarding Spinoza's destroyed writings, we do know of, "a Treatise concerning the Rain-bow [...]. [but] some Men of great note [...] (at the Hague) [...] did not advise Spinoza to publish it: Which perhaps gave him resolve to burn it half a year before he died [...]. He had also begun a Translation of the Old Testament into Dutch [...]. He had finished the five Books of Moses [...] when some few days before he died he burnt the whole Work in his Chamber". Colerus John, *The Life of Benedict de Spinoza*, Unknown (trans.), London: D.L., 1706, 74–75.

<sup>27</sup> Spinoza, *Complete Works*, *op. cit.*, 363, 6.

<sup>28</sup> See Stein Ludwig, "Appendix II", in *Leibniz und Spinoza* [*Leibniz and Spinoza*], Berlin, Georg Reimer, 1890, 283. Cf. Lasbax, *La Hiérarchie ...*, *op. cit.*, 6.

and destroyed all of the allegorical content from his *Theodicy*, what we would have been left with of his system would be nothing more than a skeletal *panlogism*, a criticism, which we saw in §2., is often leveled against Spinoza. “[O]ne must not deprive *Leibniz*,” he says, “any more than Plato of his myths”.<sup>29</sup> So then, he asks: “[W]here are the myths in Spinoza?”<sup>30</sup>

This begs the question, of course, does Spinoza really *need* myths? His sustained critiques of fiction and, of course, Scripture in the *Theological-Political Treatise* would seem to suggest that attributing myths to Spinoza would not only be superfluous but inaccurate and misleading. But while Lasbax’s speculations are admittedly fanciful, is it possible that this notion of Spinozist myth may have held some sway over Deleuze in formulating the concept of Spinozist literature? It is perhaps this along with the less controversial claim that there is something unfinished in Spinoza, some story that remains to be told.

Deleuze’s own archaeology, here, is certainly less speculative. Deleuze suggests that this unfinished element is not myth but the common notion, a discovery that Spinoza had still yet to fully develop by the end of his life. If we examine Ep. 60 to Tschirnhaus, we can surmise that, while he developed the concept around 1661–1662, as late as 1675, Spinoza intended to write a treatise about the common notion that he was never able to compose.<sup>31</sup> We see evidence for this both in this correspondence with Tschirnhaus as well as in the *Ethics*. However, Spinoza suggests quite plainly that there was still more work to be done on common notions. He writes:

[W]e should discern whence the notions called secondary derived their origin, and consequently the axioms on which they are founded, and other points of interest connected with these questions. But I have decided to pass over the subject here, partly because I have set it aside for another treatise [...]. (EIIp40s1)<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> “[I]l ne faut pas dépouiller Leibniz, plus que Platon, de ses mythes!”; “ce que nous connaissons de Spinoza serait comparable peut-être à ce que nous saurions de Platon s’il avait pris soin... de retrancher de ses Dialogues tous les exposés mythiques [...]”. Lasbax, *La Hiérarchie ...*, *op. cit.*, 4–5.

<sup>30</sup> “[O]ù sont les mythes dans Spinoza?” *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>31</sup> “As for your other questions, namely, concerning motion, and those which concern method, since my views on these are not yet written out in due order, I reserve them for another occasion.” Spinoza, *Complete Works*, *op. cit.*, 913. Cf. Deleuze Gilles, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, Hurley Robert (trans.), San Francisco, City Light Books, 1988, 120n16.

<sup>32</sup> Spinoza, *Complete Works*, *op. cit.*, 266.

This other treatise is not the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*.<sup>33</sup> What we realize, then, is that if there is a crucially undeveloped part of Spinoza's thought, it lies with the common notion.

#### 4. Conceptual Analysis – Developing the Common Notion

The common notion first appears in IIp38c of the *Ethics*. As Spinoza states:

[T]here are certain ideas or notions common to all men; for (by Lemma ii.) all bodies agree in certain respect, which (by the foregoing Prop.) must be adequately or clearly and distinctly perceived by all. (EIIp38c)<sup>34</sup>

It is later defined in EIIp40 as synonymous with reason and supplanted by the only real example of proportional numbers, an example that Spinoza had used since his earliest writings and that he himself considered inadequate (TdIE 24; KV II § I; EIIp40s2).<sup>35</sup> Whatever the case may be, it is a pathway from the imagination, or knowledge from experience, to rationality, or an understanding of concepts. Deleuze portrays this transition through common notions as follows:

[T]his 'common notion' is itself necessarily adequate: it belongs to the idea of our body as to that of the external body; it is then in us as it is in God; it expresses God and is explained by our power of thinking. But from this common notion there follows in turn an idea of the affection that is itself adequate: the common notion is necessarily the cause of an adequate idea of the affection that is distinct only in "its reason" from that idea of the affection from which it began.<sup>36</sup>

In other words, common notions are the first way in which our knowledge can "express" our relationship to higher orders of reality.

This becomes clearer if we understand what problem Spinoza had intended the common notions to resolve. As far back as the *Short Treatise*, he was preoccu-

<sup>33</sup> Contrary to Samuel Shirley's point that, "This is Spinoza's incomplete essay, *On the Improvement of the Understanding*", Deleuze contends that this is mistaken insofar that, "in order to give the common notions their place and function, it would have been necessary for Spinoza to rewrite the entire *Treatise*". Shirley, ed. and trans., *Complete Works*, op. cit., 266n3 and Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, op. cit., 121.

<sup>34</sup> Spinoza, *Complete Works*, op. cit., 265.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 8, 62, 267–268.

<sup>36</sup> Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy*, op. cit., 150–151.

ped with the issue of knowledge through the use of categories such as genera and species (KV I § VII).<sup>37</sup> Spinoza contended that although these categories may be useful, they do not articulate the nature of a thing according to its real properties, only generalizations that are abstracted from our encounters in experience. Thus, they do not express anything about our relationship to the divine. This is particularly problematic for Spinoza at the level of ethics. We find this as early as Part I of the *Short Treatise*, where he raises the issue of how sin and disorder can arise within a perfect God. For Spinoza, of course, the mistake is not with God but in our own mind, namely through understanding good or bad experiences in absolute terms, that is, as signs of good and evil. This same theme is central to the majority of Part IV of the *Ethics* as well as his correspondence with Willem van Blijenbergh.

But unlike, say, Descartes where the true conception of individuals lies in clear and distinct ideas, individuals in Spinoza's system are modal variations of a single absolute individual, that is, infinite substance. Thus, they cannot be adequately understood through themselves alone. The role of the common notion, then, is to provide an epistemological tool that would allow us to make the transition from conceiving ourselves as distinct from the world to seeing ourselves as continuous with all things. The common notion provides us with a way of differentiating essences not through abstraction but, rather, through a shared relation which allows them to enter into an encounter in the first place. Indeed, this is, for Deleuze, a forward-looking element of Spinoza's thought, "where the relations no longer depend on their terms";<sup>38</sup> it is where our knowledge becomes *expressive*. Even when experiencing a sad passion, there is the recognition that such a passion can only come about through something shared in common with another body (i.e. *motion and rest*). This is the sense in which we can say that "all bodies agree".

Beyond this, epistemological orders can also be said to parallel ontological ones<sup>39</sup> and, thus, in holding a link between imagination and reason, this also holds insight into the relation between the concepts and the world of experience, the very challenge that yielded the acosmism problem in the first place. Thus, when Deleuze says that he wants to make, "substance turn on finite modes",<sup>40</sup> I believe

<sup>37</sup> Spinoza, *Complete Works*, *op. cit.*, 57.

<sup>38</sup> Deleuze Gilles, "Spinoza: The Actual Infinite-Eternal, The Logic of Relations", Duffy Simon (trans.), lecture presented at the University of Paris VIII, Paris, France, 10 March 1981, <http://www.webdeleuze.com/php/texte.php?cle=42&groupe=Spinoza&langue=2>. Cf. Duffy Simon, *The Logic of Expression: Quality, Quantity and Intensity in Spinoza, Hegel and Deleuze*, Hampshire, Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006, 50.

<sup>39</sup> This position is held by Deleuze and has been more recently defended in Melamed Yitzhak, *Spinoza's Metaphysics: Substance and Thought*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013.

<sup>40</sup> Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy*, *op. cit.*, 11.

he's trying to say that he elaborates the common notions as both the proper epistemological starting point of Spinoza's project but also a bridge between different orders of reality.

An understanding of this position is nicely put in the words of Ferdinand Alquié who raises the following question in *Nature et vérité dans la philosophie de Spinoza* [*Nature and Truth in Spinoza's Philosophy*]: "What is it that [...] allows Spinoza by reasoning to make knowledge pass on the side of pure truth and also of salvation?" To which he responds, "It is, in my opinion, the elaboration of the doctrine of common notions and their radical distinction with general ideas".<sup>41</sup> But Deleuze takes this position one step further:

Reason would not [...] "find" itself, were its first effort not traced out in the frame of the first kind of knowledge using all the resources of the imagination. If we consider their origin, common notions find in imagination the very conditions of their formation.<sup>42</sup>

The common notion, then, is a bridge between encounters and concepts, between imagination and reason. This concept holds some important insights for detractors and admirers of Spinoza alike who have sought a kind of *flesh* to his philosophical system. Deleuze's project, in many ways, was to give it that flesh that for so many, it never possessed and, in that way, to see if this very challenging ethical position of Spinoza's was possible. What would life look like as a Spinozist?

## 5. Conclusion – The Project of Literary Spinozism

So I have shown you what I believe to have driven Deleuze's reading of Spinoza. It is my contention, then, that his expressionist thesis is continuous with this idea of literary Spinozism. The defining feature of such a literary genre would be the use of literary imagery to experiment with common notions such that, "the concept as such can be concept of the affect, just as the affect can be affect of the concept".<sup>43</sup> This is not only an epistemological exercise but an opportunity to experiment with Spinoza's ethical position in which goods are only conditioned by

---

<sup>41</sup> "Qu'est-ce qui...a permis à Spinoza de faire ainsi passer la connaissance par raisonnement du côté de la pure vérité et même du salut? C'est à mon sens, l'élaboration de la doctrine des notions communes, et leur distinction radicale d'avec les idées générales". Alquié Ferdinand, *Leçons sur Spinoza* [*Lessons on Spinoza*], Paris, La Table Ronde, 2003, 53.

<sup>42</sup> Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy*, op. cit., 294.

<sup>43</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, op. cit., 66.

relations of power. Thus, I believe that Deleuze intended these types of literature to be, not reducible to, but helpful insights into developing Spinozism as a practical philosophy through the translation of concepts into affections and discovering new ways of living.

This relation between concepts and affects returns in Part V of the *Ethics* where Spinoza introduces a method by which our common notions lead us to the adequate idea of God and then in a process of association with our memories, leading us to see God in all of our experience. Thus, we transform our intellectual understanding of God into an intellectual love, the final outcome of Spinoza's philosophy. This starts out, however, by first seeing the world according to common notions.

It is with all this in mind that an investigation into Deleuze's conception of Spinozist literature should be understood. Literature can offer a platform for understanding the way in which individuals experience common notions and how to expand those notions into understanding higher orders of reality. I do not take Deleuze's claims, here, to be discontinuous with his prior work on Spinoza, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* and *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, whereby he not only intends to render Spinoza's metaphysics of the *absolute infinite*<sup>44</sup> comprehensible but also to understand it as a practical ethics. Perhaps, this is the purpose of Spinozist literature and, if this is correct, maybe Spinoza deserves his myths after all.

---

<sup>44</sup> Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy*, *op. cit.*, 28.