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Abstract:

This article takes account of the ‘spontaneity’ of the post-colonial fiction of Gerald Murnane within the ‘dominating space’ of the philosophy of Spinoza. My use of Paul Carter’s terms here is strategic. The compact of fiction and philosophy in Murnane corresponds with the relationship of spontaneity to the dominating organization of desire in Carter’s rendering of an Aboriginal hunter. Carter’s phrase “‘a figure at once spontaneous and wholly dominated by the space of his desire’” worries Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs, who suggest that it subjugates the formation of Aboriginal desire (incorporating spontaneity) to impulses of imperialism. The captivating immanence of Spinoza’s philosophy in Murnane’s fiction, which I will demonstrate with various examples, puts pressure on the fiction to occupy the same space as the space of the philosophy. Here is a clue to why Murnane’s post-colonial themes have been little explored by critics with an interest in post-colonial politics. The desire of Spinoza’s philosophy creates a spatial textuality within which the spontaneity of Murnane’s fiction, to the degree that it maximizes or fills the philosophy, is minimized in its political effects. That is to say, the fiction shifts politics into an external space of what Roland Barthes calls “resistance or condemnation”. However, the different speeds (or timings) of Murnane and Spinoza, within the one space, mitigate this resistance of the outside, at least in respect of certain circumstances of post-coloniality. It is especially productive, I suggest, to engage Carter’s representation of an Aboriginal hunter through the compact of coincidental
spaces and differential speeds created by Murnane’s fiction in Spinoza’s philosophy. This produces a ceaseless activation of desire and domination, evidenced in Murnane’s short story ‘Land Deal’, and indexed by a post-Romantic sublime. What limits the value of Murnane’s fiction in most contexts of post-colonial politics, is precisely what makes it useful in the matter of Carter’s Aboriginal hunter.

Article:

This article suggests that an apparent lack of awareness of the influence of Spinoza’s philosophy in the fiction of the Australian writer Gerald Murnane (1939-) has created an impasse for post-colonial interpretations of his work. Novels like The Plains, along with short stories like ‘Land Deal’, are absorbed with many of the problems that concern post-colonial critics: for example, land possession, Aboriginal and settler identities, and tales of first contact. The fact remains though, that most academic readings of Murnane have framed his fiction within a more explicitly linguistic context (often derived from Jacques Derrida’s theory of deconstruction), and have failed to accept the challenge of responding to Murnane’s philosophical engagement (infiltrated by a Spinozist view of things) with the thematics of post-colonialism.

In failing to credit Spinoza’s involvement in Murnane’s fiction, however, it is almost as if post-colonial critics have anticipated a problem with using Spinoza’s philosophy to draw out the post-colonial possibilities of his literature. I will be arguing that the axioms of Spinoza’s philosophy are very useful indeed for engaging post-colonial themes. But what must also be taken into account is how philosophy takes up all the space of Murnane’s fiction: Spinoza is almost too much in Murnane. A post-colonial reading of Murnane that would draw upon the resources of Spinoza needs to specify its optimum conditions of the space and speeds (or timings) of the philosophy and the literature. A certain configuration of Murnane and Spinoza is essential to their application with regard to (and here I indicate a further narrowing of the possible terms of the engagement) a certain configuration of post-colonial circumstances. One example of such a set of circumstances may be found in an element of Paul Carter’s work. In tandem with the notion of a post-Romantic sublime itself linked to post-colonialism, I will sketch a political reading of Carter’s example in my conclusion.

Spinoza is celebrated in philosophy for his vision of a perfect unity to the universe. A problem arises, however, when this unity of philosophy travels into the space of a writer’s fiction and animates the post-colonial themes of that fiction. Philosophy now colonizes literature and forces a complicity between this colonization and any post-colonial interpretations of the literature. This is the situation of Murnane’s fiction. The pressures of immanence expressed by Spinoza create a geometry of the relations of philosophy and literature that subdues the politics of post-colonial interpretation. Roland Barthes notices an identical dynamic of unity and exclusion in Julia Kristeva: “Her work is entirely new, exact, not because of scientific puritanism, but because it takes up all the room in the place it occupies, fills it exactly, forcing all those who exclude themselves from it to find themselves in a position of resistance or condemnation. . . .” As Kristeva is in Kristeva so too Spinoza is in Murnane. In the Preface to Gilles Deleuze’s Spinoza: Practical Philosophy, Robert Hurley notes that “As Deleuze will say, we always start from the middle of things; thought has no
beginning, just an outside to which it is connected.” The effect of philosophy being in the exact middle of literature is an oppositional connection to the outside: politics.

However, variations of speed (or timing) between philosophy and literature mitigate this resistance of externalized politics in the circumstances of Murnane’s fiction. For Susan Sontag, speed may be linked to operations of thought. Of Elias Canetti, she observes that “He… speculates that the liveliness of Ladino, which he’d spoken as a child, helped him to think fast. (For the precocious, thinking is a kind of speed.)” In considering Spinoza’s ethics as an ethology, Deleuze argues that Spinozism “is first of all the study of the relations of speed and slowness, of the capacities for affecting and being affected that characterize each thing.” (Speed here is fastness.) Canetti’s speed, for Sontag, is a vector of the absolute velocity of thought, while Spinoza’s ethology takes into account an infinite relativity of speeds: increments of fastness and slowness. What is required in this case is an ethology of philosophy and literature. As philosophy, Spinozism itself has a speed (a speed composed of all its speeds), which may be compared to the similarly aggregated speed of Murnane’s literature.

Murnane’s fiction has been linked to slowness and delimited affective capacity by several critics. Peter Craven, for example, suggests that Murnane “writes endlessly” about “a handful of themes.” One of these themes is horse racing, which Murnane himself calls “a form of contemplation, a way of meditating on the things that almost happened but then didn’t.” Murnane’s is a ruminative literature, which constantly slips back into re-consideration. The slowness and restricted nature of Murnane’s interests is evident in a thousand examples of the organization of ideas in his texts. I take this passage from Murnane’s latest major publication, Barley Patch: “Before I began to write the first of the three preceding paragraphs, I was about to report that a few images had come to my mind while I was writing the last two sentences of the paragraph preceding that paragraph.” Such decelerated writing dulls, in Deleuze’s terms, the capacity either to affect or to be affected: it scours out a certain slowness.

Murnane’s slowness and delimited affectivity contrasts to the volatility of Spinoza’s velocities (of fastness and slowness) and to their heightened capacity for “affecting and being affected.” Slowness is in one sense a restricted range of speeds. It is both a secondary formation associated with speeds of any kind, and an absolute of speed. Speed is also absolute fastness, and an unrestricted range of speeds. Deleuze finds in Spinoza both a “flash” and “infinite velocity” —and a combination of speeds ranging from the very slow to the very fast. Slowness is twice nullified in Spinozism.

However, when Spinoza is considered in Murnane, the situation changes. Which is to say that it changes not in the sense that Spinoza is slowed down or Murnane is sped up, for example, but in the sense that the very relations of speed (or timing) are re-distributed within this created compact of fiction and philosophy. Murnane’s fiction becomes the scene for the acceleration of Spinoza’s philosophy, excepting that any clear distinction between the fiction and the philosophy is henceforth obliterated. As I will be demonstrating shortly, Murnane’s writing forces the irony that the greater the intensity of our interpretation of it, the more it becomes taken up in the singular space of Spinozism. Furthermore, the philosophy thus impelled by Murnane’s fiction takes on a greater spontaneity of speed (or timing) than Spinozism exhibits in itself. Such a collapsing of spatialities, combined with a crystallization of speed (or timing), will be the basis of the post-colonial political recuperation of Murnane’s
texts, in the context of Carter’s Aboriginal hunter, that will be developed later on in this article.

First though, we need an exact understanding of the relationship between Murnane’s fiction and Spinoza’s philosophy. The term ‘intertextuality’, with its connotations of the friability and permeability of texts, does not quite capture the essence of this relationship. (Not to mention the fact that the notion of intertextuality has done so much heavy lifting down the years, in the service of so many variants of literary criticism, that the time may now be ripe to call its bluff anyway.) Roland Barthes’ formulation, I suggest, is much more apposite as a way of organizing a response to the ‘philosophization’ of literature in the case of Spinoza and Murnane. Barthes’ idea of an ‘externality’ to the work of Julia Kristeva (whereby what lies outside is forced to adopt an attitude of “resistance or condemnation”) transfers to Murnane’s work in the sense that his texts forecast on any but philosophical (or Spinozist) effects.

Politics is especially susceptible to this foreclosure on the outside of Murnane’s work because this category always already possesses an outsider status. There is nothing more external to thought than politics (as I will show shortly in drawing on Jacques Derrida) and there are few stronger modes of ‘internalization’ than Murnane’s texts when these are understood as an infiltration of the constraining desire of philosophy into spontaneous literature in which literature itself, on this occasion at least, is fully complicit (Murnane speeds up Spinoza). In this circumstance, politics is forced into the aporia of logic that Aristotle inspires in what (as argued in Derrida’s Politics of Friendship) is the keynote exclamation of politics: ‘O my friends, there is no friend.’

This is both the perfect exteriority of thought and exactly what is resisted in the work of Murnane, which tends to regard politics rather as Derrida sums up democracy: “it never exists, it is never present, it remains the theme of a non-presentable concept.”

Let us now start to notice how this problem of politics unfolds in The Plains, which is the shortest of Murnane’s novels, as well as being the text that has attracted the most critical attention. I have outlined above one of its most obvious traits: the slow speed at which it moves forward. But another equally apparent characteristic is the humour Murnane manages to introduce into a text that can best be described in terms of what it speaks to at a philosophical level. The Plains is the story of a film-maker, but an extremely unusual type of film-maker, and one who lives in a very strange world. First of all, he is a film-maker who never makes the film entitled The Interior that he spends all of his time writing notes towards and speculating about. Additionally, throughout the novel he is aided and abetted in this interminable project by the plainsmen and, in particular, by his patron, all of whom spend their time engaged in complicated and arcane investigations into the nature of the plains. A key element of the novel is the contrast between ‘Inner Australia’ (the plains) and ‘Outer’, coastal or ‘Other Australia’. The plains are understood by their inhabitants to offer a richer experience of the world than is possible in the coastal regions of Australia. This experience, however, is always felt to be at least one remove from the various projects of the plainsmen, which are sometimes tinged with a certain sadness. One of the most important sections of the novel is in the first of its three parts, when the nameless film-maker (who has just arrived in town) is interviewed by a number of the Landowners, one of whom will eventually employ him. (I will return to this section.)
Speaking broadly, *The Plains* is a novel about being able to see properly. Consider the following very complicated passage, for example:

I heard of a scheme for building a system of indoor aquaria and stocking each tank with fish of one species only but arranging the whole so that viewers might see, through numerous thicknesses of pellucid glass and intervals of faintly clouded water and images of clouded water in faintly clouded glass, multi-form patterns of two colours that mattered.\(^{xxii}\)

What interests me about this intricately conceived passage is the way it sets up degrees of vision from greater to lesser clarity, from the combination of clear glass and slightly clouded water, to that of (wholly) clouded water and slightly clouded glass. This movement is one entirely of affects, not of the things that have those affects. What water and glass *can or cannot do* is more important than what they *are*: something clear and something slightly cloudy, gives way to something slightly cloudy and something wholly cloudy. The likeness indicated by the adjectives is privileged over the quiddity of these things. Their affects make them the same. In similar fashion, the references to “numerous thicknesses” and “intervals” - because they indicate *degrees* of affects - take our attention away from the essence of the objects under scrutiny.\(^{xxiii}\) Now, Deleuze lingers over Spinoza’s trade as a lens-grinder in order to pin down the connection between this parergal occupation and the philosophy of his subject. Vision, Deleuze argues, is intimately related to the *pure ontology* he champions in Spinoza.\(^{xxiv}\) And in so far as *The Plains* is about vision, it allows a Spinozean interpretation of this and other similar passages, but only as one among other possible readings.

Is there something more in this passage, however, that makes the emphasis on vision specific to Spinoza’s philosophy? For me, yes there is. The stress on affects that I have just pointed up convinces me that it is precisely a Spinozean ontology that is under construction in Murnane’s text. It is what water and glass does or does not do that is crucial, not what they are; and to this extent we are dealing here with things that are like the modes as described in Deleuze’s work on Spinoza. Modes are to be defined by their affects, for Deleuze, and here vision too is a problem of affects. But if this passage is Spinozean, it is nevertheless an uncharacteristic (*very compressed and greatly accelerated*) version of Spinoza’s thought. Spinoza talks about both vision and modes-as-affects, to be sure; but never like Murnane does here!

Murnane’s texts express the Spinozean philosophy with which, in the sense of space if not of speed, they are one, in a highly extravagant form. The further one delves into Murnane’s fiction, the more it proposes further combinations of Spinoza’s ideas, combinations that are often as heavily involved as the one linking vision and the modes that I have discussed. Spinoza’s philosophy is turned inwards, *involuted* (as a shell is), in Murnane’s fiction.\(^{xxv}\) However, it would not be accurate to say that this is a result of Murnane’s literary technique, or the like, moving against the grain of Spinoza’s philosophy. What is in novels and short stories like *The Plains* and ‘Land Deal’ is a complication of Spinoza that works entirely with the elements already in place in his own philosophy. In other words, Murnane does not overtake Spinoza. And nor does Spinoza effectively overtake Murnane; because (in the end) it is Murnane we are reading. This is what I mean by the two of them taking up exactly the same space.
I want to focus now on the manner in which *The Plains* speaks to the possibility of post-colonial community or communities. The sense of a pure ontology that I have found in Murnane will henceforth become more directly appropriate to the post-colonial field, through the ‘local truths’ of agreements and good encounters. Murnane’s novel is not concerned directly with the membership of any given community; rather, it indicates, in a Spinozean way, how we might think about their formation, and their subsequent existence. It suggests both the strategy of constituting a community through local encounters between bodies, and the possibility of a balanced power relation within a specific community, (if not across different communities). To this extent, *The Plains* can be brought into general dialogue with current anxieties around the idea of community in the Australian post-colonial context. I have already noted that Murnane’s text is a complication of Spinoza in respect of the combination it proposes of vision and the modes. Here, the complication takes the form of a refusal to individuate even one encounter. Whereas Deleuze’s reading of Spinoza points to the ever-present actuality of encounters involving bodies, *The Plains* always stops at the brink of these.

This theory of community in Deleuze’s reading of Spinoza turns on the definition of a ‘common notion’, which depends itself on their definition of an individual. Like Spinoza, Murnane’s fiction comprehends individuals as bodies made-up of other smaller bodies, and so on, for all practical purposes, to infinity. To this extent, we lack an essential or fixed nature, and are characterised by our relations with other individuals. The complexities of other individuals’ bodies (bodies within bodies) can interact with the flux of our own in countless ways. Spinoza captures one of the radical aspects of this idea of individuals-as-bodies, when he explains that we can change within ourselves beyond all recognition. “For it comes about at times that a man suffers such changes that it is difficult to say he is the same [man]…. ”

Likewise, Murnane in *The Plains* writes that “no thinker has seriously entertained the possibility that the state of a man at some moment in his life may be illuminated by a study of the same man at some moment said, for convenience, to have preceded the moment in question.” And Murnane is with Spinoza in seeing this as a consequence of our dependence on the body, which must therefore be acknowledged as the key to a human’s life. Deleuze was fascinated by a utopian sentence of Spinoza’s: “We do not know what the body can do. …” The following line from *The Plains*, one of the Landowners speaking, approximates this sentiment: “But do we know what our own bodies are leading us towards?” In fact, we might even say that this line is more Spinozean than Spinoza’s! because what a body can do is determined precisely by the encounters with other bodies it has. That is, as well as indicating the potential of the body in broad terms, the Landowner could also be alluding here to the other bodies in our life’s path. The importance of this line is not that we now know the answer, but that we know more accurately the circumstances under which we do not know it.

A ‘Common notion’ is what two or more bodies (and, on a secondary stratum, the minds associated with those bodies) have in common. When it encounters another body with which it agrees, a body is able to increase its power twice over: first, by virtue of the agreement itself; and second, through the ‘common notion’ it is generally able to form with that body.

All bodies enjoy a certain relation of motion and rest (what Spinoza calls extension). A body increases its power when its relation of motion and rest agrees with the relation of the body it encounters, and when it becomes active through the better understanding of that agreement, which is the part of the ‘common notion’. On the other hand, a body loses power when its
relation of motion and rest does not agree with that of another body it encounters - in the extreme case, this leads to death. All the bodies involved in an agreeable or good encounter necessarily benefit from it, because increase in power relies, in the end, on the ‘coming-together’ of everybody. Here we have the theory of sociability and community entwined with Spinoza’s concept of the ‘common notions’. “It is no longer a matter of utilizations or captures, but of sociabilities and communities,” writes Deleuze. Such an increase in power (agreement plus the ‘common notion’, leading towards further action) can also be called composition, and its opposite decomposition. Ultimate decomposition is death, but the acme of composition can be regarded as a full ethics of community life.

The practical face of composition is activity. The more active we are able to be, the nearer we approach the ideal of composition; and we can increase our capacity to act by maximising both the number of good encounters we have, and the sensitivity of our body to the effects of these encounters. (This second requirement is the most difficult to fulfil; as the obscure trigger for the recognition of a ‘common notion’ it is not easily explained.) How are we able to heed the first demand then? Spinoza points out that all bodies, despite their possible lack of agreement on a specific level, nevertheless have extension (motion and rest) in common on the universal level. This allows us to judge which encounters will be favourable to us, and which will not, because the universal ‘common notion’ adds to our knowledge of the nature of all bodies. It has a very practical function, akin to the biological - not abstract or mathematical - nature of all the ‘common notions’. Spinoza’s universe is therefore not only atomic (capable of producing an infinite number of encounters, random or planned), but unified - practically - through the universal ‘common notion’.

How does all this come together in The Plains? Murnane’s text is also characterised by atomism and unity. There is one long section in The Plains where seven figures, designated only as 1ST LANDOWNER, 2ND LANDOWNER et cetera, talk around a bar while the film-maker listens. There is a form of unity here to the extent that there is no differentiation through proper names, but there is also atomism as an effect of the numbers used to designate the speakers. The following passage from this section is characterised by its interplay of unity and atomism in a particularly interesting way:

I thought at first that they were talking only of women. But then I distinguished three quite separate conversations, each advancing steadily. Sometimes one or other topic occupied them all, but usually each man divided his attention among the three debates, leaning across the man beside him or leaving his stool for a moment to engage some opponent along the bar.

The topic is initially seen as unified, before the film-maker perceives it as atomic. All the while, the Landowners themselves switch back and forth between the unity of common speculation on one of the three topics, and what might be described as a multiple or atomic approach. I understand both these aspects of the passage as related to Spinoza’s philosophical system, in which universal unity provides an umbrella for atomic connections - good or bad encounters. In this sense, The Plains is a practical text, underwritten by Murnane’s peculiar ability to set forward in such a tight space two expressions of the one philosophical element. And in tandem with this, Murnane’s text hints at a solution to the problem I passed over in the above: how to think about the obscure trigger required for the recognition of a ‘common...
notion’. “I composed my face,” relates the film-maker “to register a variety of powerful emotions.”

Recalling another of Spinoza’s concepts - parallelism - it is here as if mind or intellect (the speculations of the Landowners) do not have to dominate over the body. The mind does not subjugate the body, because The Plains insists on the (bodily) possibility of the ‘common notions’, and the body does not have power over the mind, because the ‘common notions’ are determined to be inclusive, communitarian. Parallelism is “a correspondence between autonomous or independent series.” Murnane’s text contains a Spinozean model, in which the body and the mind finally proceed together. The body, with all it can do, might lead the mind, but it is not above it. Deleuze encourages the Spinozist to “engage in a comparison of powers that leads us to discover more in the body than we know, and hence more in the mind than we are conscious of.”

The impulse towards community that I have just outlined in The Plains, using the practical concept of the ‘common notions’, would seem to constitute a fertile link between Murnane’s fiction and general questions in post-colonial politics. At an earlier stage of this paper, I pointed out that this was the only plausible way of using his novels and short stories in a post-colonial context, because the element that makes them useful in this regard cannot easily be separated from Murnane’s texts: that is, Spinoza cannot be taken out of them simply. The net effect of this is to make it difficult to apply Murnane to specific problems of post-colonial politics.

I want to conclude this paper, however, with a reading of a particular political moment in an as-yet unresolved debate within post-colonial studies, in order to show how a general connection only between this field and Murnane can be brought to bear on a specific problem. Or more to the point, how this specific problem takes us very quickly to this more general theme, which implies that the general analysis I am about to offer here may have a wider application across many particular concerns. Furthermore, in making clear what is going on here, I want to introduce the notion of a post-colonial sublime, which could replace the familiar Romantic sublime as a more useful way of reading Australian literature. In order to make these related arguments clearer, I will be referring to Murnane’s short story ‘Land Deal’.

In their article ‘Uncanny Australia’, Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs take issue with Paul Carter’s view of a colonial rendering of an Aboriginal hunter as ‘“a figure at once spontaneous and wholly dominated by the space of his desire.” Carter reads this description as a template for his theory of ‘spatial history’, while Gelder and Jacobs object to this connection because it produces ‘spatial history’ as something that captures the ‘spontaneity’ of Aboriginality in the ‘desire’ of the imperial project. I want to suggest, however, that it is possible to read this passage more sympathetically if we relate it to the main point I made at the beginning of this paper. I argued there that the difficulty of using Murnane’s fiction in a post-colonial situation is a consequence of the fact that Spinoza occupies his texts in a complete manner. The two inhabit exactly the same space. Previously, this was a problem to overcome for the post-colonial critic; but now it presents us with the idea of two things in action within just one determinate border. Later on, I extended this point by saying that the Spinozean complications of Murnane’s fiction are actually more intensive.
because relatively faster) complications of Spinoza’s philosophy, ones inherent in it, but only as latent possibilities. Here, we might say that Murnane is merely both an excuse and a ‘trigger’ for Spinoza’s perfect doubling in him. Spinoza is in Murnane as he is in himself; with the addition that he is in Murnane far more intensively than he is in himself. The speed advantage he enjoys over Murnane is greater when he is in Murnane than when he is read simply alongside him.

To this extent, therefore, Murnane’s texts provide a model of inhabitation that resembles that of Carter’s Aboriginal hunter. They, like he, are both spontaneous (endless circulating, intensive, adopting many possible speeds or, more precisely, becoming faster and faster), yet dominated (circulating within themselves). In this way, we can put a positive cast on what I initially proposed as a problem. In the passage from Carter, it is certain that we are looking at a specific issue, but one that responds to what has so far prevented us from fully realising Murnane’s potential inside the post-colonial field by allowing a new slant on our use of speed as an ‘answer’ to what was seen before as the problem of space.

(No longer a mere solution, speed is now more an expression of, or echo of, space.) Carter’s Aboriginal hunter is complicated in much the same way as Spinoza is complicated in Murnane’s fiction. Spinoza’s philosophy of our ‘free’ relations to the world is nowhere better expressed, therefore, than through his presence in Murnane’s fiction. His novels and short stories make this obvious for us in post-colonial Australia! This will become less abstract if we turn to ‘Land Deal’.

It would be relatively straightforward to demonstrate how ‘Land Deal’ plays with many of the elements of Spinoza’s philosophy, and turns Spinoza in on himself. (One might start, in this respect, with the idea that the land, as “by definition indivisible”, is similar to the one substance “God or nature” described in Spinoza’s philosophy.) However, what makes this short story a really remarkable Spinozean text, in my view, is the case it puts forward for a certain method of existing within what might be called a system of life. ‘Land Deal’ is about the reactions of an Aboriginal group to the objects used by John Batman to purchase some land; its members are intrigued by the seeming transference of goods previously only dreamed of: that is, possible things, into the actual world. This leads them to decide that they must be dreaming. Being able to query the reality of their ‘actual’ - really only possible - goods like this, however, is a recognition in itself that they are dreaming, which leads them directly to the conclusion that they must be in another race’s dream, one instigated chiefly by Batman; when one is genuinely dreaming one does not know it. (Being inside a dream makes them necessarily dreamers, but not after the fashion of the conventional sense of dreaming.)

From this point, the upshot of the story is that ‘freedom’ results from staying inside the system, maintaining the crucial distinction between the actual and the possible. “Almost anything was possible except, of course, the actual.” While a few “hoped that we would somehow awake to be convinced of the genuineness of the steel in our hands and the wool round our shoulders,” the narrator gives more force to the observation that “as characters in a dream, we might have been much less at liberty than we had always supposed. But the authors of the dream encompassing us had apparently granted us at least the freedom to recognise, after all these years, the simple truth behind what we had taken for a complex world” [emphasis mine]. Apparent lack of power is accompanied by a certain increase in power: it is now up to the “strangers” to recognise the dream they are part of. Much like the Aboriginal hunter, the Aboriginal group here is ‘dominated’ (by space, one might say) yet
- or thus – spontaneous, intensive (by speed, one might say); while, by contrast, Batman’s party is ‘spontaneous’ yet - or thus - dominated. To go outside a world system is to become imaginary beings. I would contrast this with Gelder and Jacobs’s more limited understanding of difference, which leads them to attack Carter’s ‘spatial history’ as it is expressed in the colonial rendering of an Aboriginal hunter. They are blind to the Spinozean reading of remarkable, internal difference I am making here. Extreme intensiveness (a ‘saturation of meaning’) is itself a form of difference, as the mathematician Kurt Gödel’s discovery that all complete systems are inevitably inconsistent proves. Difference here is thus like inconsistency.

Models of the Romantic sublime have become a popular point of reference for Australian writers like David Malouf (for instance, in Remembering Babylon). What I propose, by contrast, is a version of the sublime that does not frame itself as a break with a system, but as a sort of ceaseless exploration within the system it inhabits. One that is ultimately not a negative recuperation of difference. From whatever Spinozean perspective we approach Murnane’s fiction, it is evident that his novels and short stories stress Spinoza’s own preoccupation with working inside his system of thought, in order to explore its most distant reaches with the greatest attention. His device: ‘be cautious’. His method: to ravel and unravel thought; to develop a series of differential encounters within the system; to be complete and therefore inconsistent. And, while most obvious in ‘Land Deal’, this idea of the sublime appears to be at work in all of Murnane’s fiction, to the extent that it is over-determined by Spinoza in a way that resembles Spinoza’s own understanding of working from the inside of his system, of finding ‘freedom’ like that.

Through Murnane, Spinoza maximises Spinoza.

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iv This article concludes a cycle of work initiated in a paper delivered at ‘Deleuze: A Symposium’ presented by the Department of English, The University of Western Australia & the English and Comparative Literature Programme, Murdoch University at The University of Western Australia, Perth, Australia on 5-7 December 1996. It builds, most recently, upon a book chapter published in 2008. See Patrick West, “‘A World the Shape of an Eye’: Gerald Murnane’s The Plains and Benedictus de Spinoza,” Fact & Fiction: Readings in Australian Literature, eds. Amit Sarwal and Reema Sarwal (New Delhi: Authorspress, 2008).


viiSee Barthes 19.


xSee Barthes 19.


xiiQuoted in Julie Szego, ‘A Lifetime Journey into the Geographies of the Soul,’ *The Age*, Insight, 14 November 2009 3.


xvSee Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* 125.

xviSee Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* 129.

xviiSee Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* 130.

xviiiSee Barthes 19.


xxiiSee Murnane, *The Plains* 42.

xxiiiSee Murnane, *The Plains* 42.


xxvSalusinszky finds a basically Derridean aspect to Murnane’s fiction, but is unable to exploit it for any political purpose, let alone a specifically post-colonial one. This has something to do, I suggest, with the too great facility with which he reads the deconstructive tropes in Murnane. Derrida is merely a ‘patina’ on the surface of Murnane’s texts. By contrast with Spinoza, there is no further real complication of Derrida beneath the surface of Murnane’s fiction. To draw on Derrida is to make a
too obvious, shallow reading of Murnane. See Salusinszky, Gerald Murnane and
Salusinszky, ‘Murnane, Husserl, Derrida: The Scene of
Writing.’ xxvi See Spinoza Part IV, Proposition 39, Note 167.
xxvii See Murnane, The Plains 84-85.

xxviii Quoted from Deleuze. See Deleuze, Spinoza: Practical Philosophy 17 and
Spinoza, Ethics Part III, Proposition 2, Note 85-88.

xxix See Murnane, The Plains 50.

xxx More generally, we could say that the Landowners are true Spinozists!

xxxi See Deleuze, Spinoza: Practical Philosophy 126.


xxviii Some of Murnane’s texts use proper names and some do not. In this respect, his
fiction as a whole can be seen to work inside a similar tension to that produced by
Spinoza’s famous formula “God or nature”. There is in both cases a slippage back
and forth between the proper name and another idea of the world and our place in it.
See Spinoza, Ethics Part IV passim.


xxvi See Gilles Deleuze, Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza, trans. Martin
Joughin, first paperback ed. (New York: Zone, 1992) trans. of Spinoza et le problème

xxvii See Deleuze, Spinoza: Practical Philosophy 90.

xxviii Quoted from Gelder and Jacobs. See Gelder and Jacobs 155 and Carter 351.

xxix At the beginning of the paper, speed (which empirically requires fastness and
slowness) was set against space (which enjoys no such relativity) as a way of
distinguishing Spinoza from Murnane, to allow us to think about ‘Spinoza-in-
Murnane’ for the purposes of post-colonial theory. At this point, however, and more
directly, speed is set within space to allow for the difference in Murnane to come
through as spontaneous (through accelerating speed) and remarkable, because
internal (dominated through singular space). In the first instance, speed had no need
to apologise to space; now, however, the two are somehow reconciled.

xli We are not dealing here with a specific instance that merely illustrates a general
theory - rather, it holds my complicated general theory within itself.

xlii See Murnane, ‘Land Deal’ 59.

xlili See Spinoza, Ethics Part I passim, Part IV passim.

xlii The link to Thomas Hobbes should be clear by now, although I have no room to
explore it here. See Edwin Curley, Behind the Geometrical Method: A Reading of
Spinoza’s Ethics (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1988) 102-07, passim for a reading of
Hobbesian politics and, in particular, Spinoza’s relation to
it. xliv See Murnane, ‘Land Deal’ 56.

xliv See Murnane, ‘Land Deal’ 60.

xlvi See Murnane, ‘Land Deal’ 58.

xlvii See Murnane, ‘Land Deal’ passim.


For a review of Remembering Babylon that critiques Malouf’s interest in the Romantic sublime in detail see Peter Otto, ‘Forgetting Colonialism (David Malouf, Remembering Babylon),’ Meanjin 52.3 (spring 1993): 545-58.

Works Cited


Otto, Peter. ‘Forgetting Colonialism (David Malouf, Remembering Babylon).’ Meanjin 52.3 (spring 1993): 545-58.


