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Three Spheres of Catatonia in the Works of Gilles Deleuze

Abstract:

The text traces the development of the notion of catatonia in the work of Gilles Deleuze across three spheres – the individual (subjectivity), social and literary. The need for an analysis is based on (1) the author's perception that Deleuze (and Guattari's) thought on catatonia and slowness has been undervalued in many interpretations (particularly those linking the philosophers with accelerationism); (2) the recognition, in works of sociologists such as Hartmut Rosa, of the adverse effects of social acceleration. In the individual sphere, catatonia is the effect of a radical withdrawal into anti-production or the body without organs. In the social sphere, catatonia is also linked to anti-production, but since in capitalism most anti-production (or the *socius*) is included in the sphere of production (as capital), catatonia represents a special case of resistance to this tendency. Deleuze shows how these two spheres intertwine in his analyses of Herman Melville's works, especially *Billy Budd* and *Bartleby*; the title characters of these two texts are interpreted as embodiments of the catatonic as a political-revolutionary figure.

Keywords:

Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, catatonia, schizophrenia, Herman Melville, slowness

Introduction¹

One of the most visible tenets of Gilles Deleuze's work is his virulent opposition to the psychological and psychiatric thought and practice of his day. While this sphere of his writing is perhaps most visible in the collaborations with Félix Guattari – who, because of his psychoanalytical education and therapeutic expertise had an especially acute understanding of what then was the state of the art in France – it is also present in works written before and after their roughly two-decade-long collaboration. Indeed, an early formulation of an idea about the close link between the psychological and the social, which will be crucial for the critique of psychoanalysis in *Anti-Oedipus*, can already be found in Deleuze's first book, *Empiricism and Subjectivity*, and the philosopher's final work *Essays Clinical and Critical* – a collection where texts about literature intertwine with those concerning psychopathology.

Deleuze and Guattari's most known book – and one most overtly concerning psychiatric theory and practice – focuses on internal critique of psychoanalysis. This raises potential problems for anyone who would wish to engage with their thought in a timely and productive way. The very title of *Anti-Oedipus* might lead one to suspect that the book constitutes analysis of a problem which was perhaps of importance in psychoanalysis' heyday, but now, when psychoanalytic theory and practice is, at least in most of the Western world, confined to historical chapters in psychiatric workbooks, and any sign of it has been all but wiped out from diagnostic manuals, remains a parochial matter. Were it so, any serious engagement with this aspect of Deleuze (and Guattari's) thought would be anachronistic and would only yield negative results. This, however, is doubly wrong.

Firstly, Deleuze and Guattari have understood the implications of the decline of psychoanalysis to their work. As Deleuze indicates in the preface to the Italian edition of the second volume of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia, A Thousand Plateaus*, their “commentary on the Wolf-Man (‘One or several wolves’) waves good-bye to psychoanalysis”²; in fact, as Maria Nichterlein and John R. Morss note in *Deleuze and Psychology*,³ starting with *A Thousand Plateaus* we see a “radical departure from psychoanalysis,”⁴ and though the authors see this departure mostly in terms of the concepts used in the later book,⁵ the ease of leaving psychoanalysis behind indicates that the stakes of the critique were not as limited as can be surmised at first glance. Indeed, while it is true that, as Nichterlein and Morss state, for Deleuze and Guattari “Psychoanalysis . . . is the only true force to be reckoned with in psychology,”⁶ the implications of their work extend far beyond a simple critique of a localized approach. It has been suggested, for example, that Deleuze and Guattari's ideas can be used as an antidote to contemporary psychiatry, based as it is on a Cartesian model of subjectivity, and provide a useful (if radical) alternative to “the theoretical foundations and associated diagnostic and therapeutic practices of psychiatry, psychotherapy, and mental health nursing generally.”⁷

This leads to the second point – Deleuze and Guattari's positive program, which in *Anti-Oedipus* is called “schizoanalysis,” though the name is eschewed for “nomadology” (among others) in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Much

1) Much of the research on which this paper is based was conducted during my research stay at the Department of Philosophy at Paris Nanterre University, which was possible thanks to a French Government Grant (BGF Séjour Scientifique). I would like to thank prof. Anne Sauvagnargues for her generous invitation.

2) Deleuze, *Two Regimes of Madness*, 310.

3) Nichterlein and Morss, *Deleuze and Psychology*.

4) *Ibid.*, 22.

5) *Ibid.*

6) *Ibid.*, 6.

7) Roberts, “Gilles Deleuze: psychiatry, subjectivity, and the passive synthesis of time,” 202.

like in the case of psychoanalysis, schizoanalysis is a multifaceted blend of a theory of the subject, a new psychiatric practice – actually based on Guattari’s own practices at the La Borde clinic – and political theory. As a theory of the subject, it counters the psychoanalytic understanding of the unconscious as a theater by reimagining it as a factory populated by “desiring machines.” Some examples of texts analyzing the stakes of this theory for the philosophy of psychiatry have already been given, notably Nichterlein and Morss’ *Deleuze and Psychology*; another example is Aaron Schuster’s *The Trouble with Pleasure*, where the author suggests that Deleuze and Guattari’s work on schizophrenia amounts to a “serious attempt at founding a new clinical anthropology.”⁸

As a new psychiatric (or at least psychotherapeutic) practice, it rejects the interpretation of the unconscious in terms of the Oedipus complex (in fact, any interpretation whatsoever) to make room for “discovering in a subject the nature, the formation, or the functioning of his desiring-machines, independently of any interpretations.”⁹ This shift means that instead of forcing the patient into a preordained “normal” subjectivity (as Deleuze and Guattari believe psychoanalysis does)¹⁰ the role of the psychiatrist – or the “schizoanalyst” – is to free the desiring machines from the confines of an Oedipal subjectivity (“normal” or otherwise).

Finally, the political theory offered by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* traces how different social systems lead to different kinds of subjectivity or form different kinds of subjects, with Oedipal subjectivity being the effect of capitalism. While it is not the place here to give an exact summary of how that happens (I offer a few remarks on the three systems in the discussion of the social sphere of catatonia), it is important to note that this general idea binds the three aspects of schizoanalysis together – if a given social system (e.g., capitalism) produces certain versions of subjectivity (e.g., Oedipal subjectivity), then those tasked to “normalize” subjects (e.g., psychoanalysts or psychiatrists in general) will reinforce the fit between the system and the subject by changing the latter. Schizoanalysis as a practice seeks to reverse this process: by introducing or reinforcing the tendency in the patient to produce another subjectivity (so-called “schizophrenic” subjectivity), it loosens the fit between the subject and the system, thus acting in a revolutionary way.

This threefold characterization of Deleuze and Guattari’s positive program must be kept in mind when analyzing the particular aspects or concepts it introduces. Such is certainly the case with the concept of catatonia – it signifies at once a clinical state (“psychiatric illness”), a type of subjectivity, and a position towards the social system. As such, it cannot be analyzed solely from the clinical perspective, because the clinical perspective is, for Deleuze and Guattari, only a symptom of more important processes occurring on the subjective and societal level. Moreover, as suggested by the title of Deleuze’s last work,¹¹ the clinical perspective has a special connection to the literary; this will be the focus of the analyses of the third “sphere” of catatonia identified in this text.

However, before I begin those analyses, I would like to address a possible concern about the isolated analysis of catatonia proposed in this article. In Deleuze’s texts (as I show in the next section), catatonia is described as only one “pole” of schizophrenia – the “slowness” pole always connected to the “speed” pole. It therefore might seem strange to omit the discussion of the other pole. I believe there are two reasons for choosing the path proposed here – one linked to the dynamics of the interpretations of Deleuze, and second to wider cultural and social concerns.

Firstly, many interpretations of Deleuze’s work have hitherto often leaned toward the “speed” side of his thought, underscoring the focus on terms like “deterritorialization”; even calling him (along with Guattari)

8) Schuster, *The Trouble with Pleasure*, 155.

9) Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 322.

10) See for example the fragments where Deleuze and Guattari ridicule the psychoanalytical method, “Say that it’s Oedipus, or you’ll get a slap in the face.” (*Anti-Oedipus*, 45).

11) Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*.

one of the founding fathers of contemporary accelerationism. This is especially true of general accounts of accelerationism (positive or negative), including for example Williams and Srnicek's "MANIFESTO for an Accelerationist Politics,"¹² which builds one of its arguments around Deleuze and Guattari's concept of deterritorialization; Benjamin Noys' critical account of the accelerationist movement;¹³ and Andy Beckett's more popular introduction to it in *The Guardian*.¹⁴ It seems that regardless of the merit of such interpretations, balance requires the interpretative pendulum to swing in the other direction. Even such critics of the accelerationist interpretation, such as Andy Culp, who calls it "too tarnished to rehabilitate,"¹⁵ often neglect the subjective and political meaning of slowness and catatonia. The theme of slowness is of course (at least implicitly) present in some interpretations, especially those concerned with Deleuze's work on literature, particularly on the works of Beckett¹⁶ or Melville.¹⁷

The other reason – which cannot be analyzed in the current paper – is more general and concerns the current socioeconomic state of the world and its effect on the psychology of subjects and their subjectivity as such. Many thinkers from different domains, perhaps most notably theoretically-minded sociologists such as Zygmunt Bauman or Hartmut Rosa, have pointed to the fact that the increased speed or "liquidity" of our lives has problematic consequences on a societal and individual level. For example, Rosa characterizes the social logic of modernity as "dynamic stabilization," meaning that – in very simplified terms – in order to remain stable, modern societies need to change at an increasingly accelerating pace. The problem is that currently acceleration has "run up against its psychological, political, and planetary limits,"¹⁸ which leads to a generalized crisis of the modern subject's relationship to the world (which Rosa dubs the "crisis of resonance").

Looking for ways to counter these effects of acceleration – especially ways that would not preach a retrotopic "return" to a seemingly idyllic past where "values" or "authorities" or "hierarchies" ensured one's bearings in the world – is thus an important task, where the social meets the individual and the clinical. I believe that Deleuze's concept of catatonia, interconnecting the three spheres, might prove a useful tool for those who seek such a countering.

Three Spheres of Catatonia

The notion of catatonia first appears in Deleuze's work shortly before he met Guattari, in the *Logic of Sense* published in 1969, where, while analyzing some aspects of Melanie Klein's thought (including the notion of "partial objects"), Deleuze says, seemingly in passing, that in schizophrenia one can find a "duality of complementary poles ... between reiterations and perseverations, between jaw-grinding and catatonia, for example. The first bears witness to internal objects and to the bodies they break to pieces – the same bodies which break them to pieces; the second manifests the body without organs."¹⁹ I cite the fragment in its entirety, because it

12) Srnicek and Williams, "#ACCELERATE: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics," 135–155.

13) Noys, *Malign Velocities. Accelerationism and Capitalism*.

14) Andy Beckett, "Accelerationism: how a fringe philosophy predicted the future we live in."

15) Culp, *Dark Deleuze*, "Breakdown, Destruction, Ruin," § 1. (Note: using an unpaginated Kindle edition I reference the chapter title and the paragraph number).

16) See for example Wilmerand and Žukauskaitė, eds., *Deleuze and Beckett*.

17) See for example Herer, "Bartleby and His Brothers or the Art of Political Refusal," 129–140.

18) Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of our Relationship to the World*, Chapter XIV, § 2 (Note: using an unpaginated Kindle edition I reference the chapter and the paragraph number).

19) Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 189.

indicates that all the most important pieces of the psychological aspect of Deleuze and Guattari's theory of catatonia are already present in this early sketch – catatonia is described as one of the two opposite but complementary “poles” of schizophrenia, it is also linked to the body without organs. Both of these ideas will be expanded upon in *Anti-Oedipus*, where the body without organs becomes one of the most important concepts. What is important to note is that this first mention of catatonia occurs in the typically psychological context of the individual. While this sphere would be crucial for the development of the notion in Deleuze's later work, especially with Guattari, it was soon to be joined by two more.

The first one is the social sphere. This is to be expected, since the very idea behind *Anti-Oedipus* is to show how – contrary to what psychoanalysis claims – it is the social sphere that shapes individual psyches, and not the other way around. Catatonia is thus as much a social phenomenon as it is an individual one; such is also the case with the body without organs, which finds its analogue in the notion of the *socius*. As I will try to show in what follows, the links between catatonia, the body without organs, and the *socius* have important implications for capitalism, and especially the way in which anti-production is managed in that particular social system.

Starting with *A Thousand Plateaus*, when much of the psychological language is shed and the schizo gives way to the nomad as the “hero” of the story, it is in the descriptions of the “war machine” that most of the mentions of catatonia can be found. Here, catatonia is usually present in examples of the nomads' “speeds and slownesses.” While the milieu remains predominantly social or political, this shift – along with the intensification of references to literary characters – also signals the next sphere where catatonia will make an important appearance, namely Deleuze's texts concerning literary works.

As I will try to show, this last sphere – present in some of the *Essays Critical and Clinical* as well as earlier analyses of and allusions to Chretien de Troyes, Kleist, Beckett, Mme de La Fayette and especially Herman Melville – remains in the sphere of pure literary imagination, but it nevertheless has crucial repercussions for the analysis of catatonia on the individual and sociopolitical level. It becomes more and more difficult to show what this type of catatonia actually is, as it seems that Deleuze is now much more interested in “how it works” and “what it does.” In this way it can be interpreted as a culmination of both Deleuze's interest in schizophrenia and his machinic methodology developed earlier with Guattari.

While the aim of the description above was to explain the reason behind choosing three spheres in which catatonia will be analyzed, it also included what amounts to an attempt at periodization. Of course, such attempts are usually problematic; in this case, as I indicated several times, in Deleuze's work it is difficult to show clear-cut *caesurae* between different phases of the analyses of catatonia – this is why I decided to talk about interconnected “spheres” – the individual, the social/political, the literary – rather than phases. But the chronological style of the analysis also had merit – it helped to prove that the notion of catatonia, even if it has never been in the forefront of Deleuze's thought – has been important for a large part of his career, with and without Guattari.

First Sphere – the Individual

Deleuze and Guattari's opposition to the psychoanalytic vision of the subject is clear from the very first paragraphs of *Anti-Oedipus*. While their famous attack is radical and laced with profanity – seeming perhaps scandalous to the point of being juvenile – in fact they hit Freudian theory at its strongest, the most revolutionary point, namely the *id*.²⁰ The psychoanalytic misunderstanding of the unconscious – claiming that each one of us has an *id* of his or her own, that even though the psyche has been extended beyond consciousness, it still remains quite classically limited to the individual subject – is not so much false as it is historically and socially

20) Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 1.

localized. For Deleuze and Guattari, this type of subjectivity is not so much the source of culture or civilization, as it is the effect of certain, namely capitalist, socio-political circumstances. Building on these theses, the authors present a theory that not so much seeks to replace Oedipal subjectivity, but to show the conditions of possibility of this (or any other) subjectivity.

In the shortest possible terms, these conditions can be described as machines joining together and disbanding in different fashions on the body without organs. Machines can constitute themselves in two ways. The first one is a molar way, shaped by an external referent which forces them to conform to a certain law or function, as in the case of the organism or oedipal/neurotic subjectivity or imperial/paranoiac social formations; later, they will use the term “plane of transcendence” to describe such a constitution.²¹ The second one is the molecular way, in which the machines simply couple and decouple in a process of a constant flow whose direction is decided only by the forces (or, strictly speaking, desires) animating the machines themselves; later Deleuze and Guattari will describe this process as occurring on a “plane of immanence.” Oedipal subjectivity is the result of the first of these constitutions, but the same machines are at play in both – as Deleuze and Guattari say, “they are the same machines, despite the fact that they are governed by two different regimes.”²² The second constitution describes schizophrenic subjectivity which (from the point of view of the Cartesian or Freudian subject which we are accustomed to holding) is simply a dissolution of any subjectivity whatsoever. It is this type of subjectivity that I will focus on from now on.

This brief description might lead us to think that Deleuze and Guattari introduce a simple dualistic hierarchy between molecular (=good) and molar (=bad), but the case is more complicated. Indeed, even a molecular process may deteriorate in two ways, as it is reliant on a delicate equilibrium between its two poles. The first pole is that of the already-described desiring-machines, the vessels of desiring-production. The second pole is that of the body without organs, the non-productive surface on which machines operate – there is a constant “opposition of the process of production of the desiring-machines and the nonproductive stasis of the body without organs.”²³ The schizophrenic constantly moves between those poles, and any move too far toward one or the other means a breakdown of the schizophrenic process. In particular, as Eugene W. Holland explains, “Taken to the extreme, anti-production can prevent the formation of any organ-machine connections whatsoever, thereby bringing about complete withdrawal onto what Deleuze and Guattari sometimes call the ‘full’ body-without-organs: this is the condition known in psychiatry as catatonia.”²⁴

Catatonia, in this sense, is a failure, a “price” one has to pay for fighting an “active internal struggle against the organs.”²⁵ *Anti-Oedipus* shows it as “closing the body without organs around itself and silencing [the] desiring-machines. Catatonia rather than neurosis, catatonia rather than Oedipus and castration – but it is still an effect of neuroticization, a countereffect of one and the same illness.”²⁶ It is the state of absolute removal from the world caused by a radical reaction to the Oedipalizing practices of the social sphere, embodied, for Deleuze and Guattari, in the psychoanalyst who repeatedly tries to “cure” the patient by interpreting their symptoms instead of seeing them as machines; a reaction to being made a subject in the Freudian sense of the term. Tired of banging their head against the wall, the catatonics cease all movement and force themselves into a stupor: “sickened by the utensility of Oedipus ... [they] reach the wall and rebound against it, sometimes with

21) See for example Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*

22) Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 288.

23) *Ibid.*, 9.

24) Holland, *Deleuze and Guattari's Anti-Oedipus. Introduction to Schizoanalysis*, 33.

25) Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 150. It would perhaps be better to say “the organism” instead of “organs” here.

26) Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 363.

an extreme violence. Then they become immobile, silent, they retreat to the body without organs ... totally desert-like, where all desiring production is arrested, or where it becomes rigid, feigning stoppage....”²⁷ These images are multiplied also in *A Thousand Plateaus*, where Deleuze and Guattari provide a full “dreary parade of sucked-dry, catatonicized, vitrified, sewn-up bodies.”²⁸

However, this is not the whole story – right after the fragment cited above, Deleuze and Guattari add that “the B[ody] w[ithout] O[rgans] is also full of gaiety, ecstasy, and dance.”²⁹ In other words, the catatonia – understood as privileging the anti-productive pole of schizophrenia, the body without organs – can be read not only as a breakdown, but as a means to a breakthrough, an intermediate step between dismantling one (e.g., Oedipalized) subjectivity *en route* to a new, molecular one. In this sense, provided that it is used as part of a process of careful experimentation, catatonia can be understood as a moment of respite from a too-established selfhood.

Second Sphere – the Social

For Deleuze and Guattari, psychoanalysis serves as a subject-forming practice that is part of a multitude of such practices generated by capitalism; in this sense the process of neurotization or Oedipalization that the catatonic resists is first and foremost a social process. If we add to this that catatonia is linked to the pole of anti-production, it is understandable to look for the social dimension of catatonia or at least its social equivalent. As I will try to show, this link is not as simple as it might seem at first glance. While catatonia is indeed anti-productive, it cannot be simply equated with what Deleuze and Guattari see as anti-production on the level of the capitalist society – contrary to what we have seen at the level of the subject.

As I mentioned earlier – and to put it very simply – the body without organs has its social analogue in what Deleuze and Guattari call the *socius*, which serves as a surface on which production occurs, but also is the opposite of production: “Forms of social production, like those of desiring-production, involve an unengendered nonproductive attitude, an element of antiproduction coupled with the process, a full body that functions as a socius. This socius may be the body of the earth, that of the tyrant, or capital.”³⁰ While this analogy is in itself limited,³¹ it is close enough for understanding the role catatonia can play in this process. In each of the three social systems whose historical succession Deleuze and Guattari describe (or project) in the third chapter of *Anti-Oedipus* – the savage, the barbaric (imperial) and the civilized (or capitalist) – some surplus value is produced. The surplus value in savage and barbaric systems is then accumulated – in other words it returns to the *socius* – the earth or the despot – in the form of specific goods (then ritually wasted) in the first case and gold in the second.³² In the capitalist system, any surplus value returns to the *socius* – in other words, to capital – but is then again used in production. As Eugene W. Holland says, commenting on this process:

Capitalist anti-production thus culminates not in the transcendent glory of, say, the Palace at Versailles, but in the morbid greed of what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as the “politico-military-industrial complex,” among other things. For what the production and especially the realization of surplus-value

27) Ibid., 135–136.

28) Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 150.

29) Ibid.

30) Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 10.

31) For a discussion of these limitations, see Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 281; Holland, *Deleuze and Guattari's Anti-Oedipus*, 136.

32) For a more thorough analysis of this process, see Holland, *Deleuze and Guattari's Anti-Oedipus*, 64–65.

require, given the inherent tendency of capitalism to over-produce on a continually larger scale, is a vast system of anti-production installed at the heart of production itself to keep its wheels turning by absorbing over-production.³³

In other words, neither consumption, nor destruction, nor any other form of anti-production can escape the regime of productivity.

It should now be clear why I am suggesting that catatonia in the social sphere cannot equate with anti-production. As we have seen, according to Deleuze and Guattari the catatonic rejects becoming an Oedipalized subject – which, in the social sphere, means that he or she refuses (of course, not consciously but, so to speak, structurally) to participate in the system of creating surplus value whatsoever, even in the form of anti-production. Leisure, destruction or consumption of any kind is in any way unavailable to the catatonic body. While Deleuze and Guattari do not make this point themselves, it seems that this forms an avenue for grasping the political value of catatonia as that of resistance. If, according to Deleuze and Guattari, capitalism can turn any activity into surplus value, then the only way to resist is not to participate – of course bearing in mind the lesson of carefulness which I describe at the end of the last section.

If there are any pointers to how this understanding of catatonia can be developed, they can perhaps be found in the “Treatise on Nomadology,” the twelfth plateau of the second volume of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. There, as I mentioned earlier, the nomad is often depicted as moving so slowly as to enter into a catatonic stupor. For example, as Deleuze and Guattari write, “The nomad knows how to wait, he has infinite patience. Immobility and speed, catatonia and rush, a ‘stationary process,’ station as process.”³⁴ Here, “catatonia and rush” are so close, they are almost indiscernible; what is important is that the exterior slowness of the nomad, his or her immobility, does not mean that they are not operating at a fast speed; only this speed is imperceptible, as we can imagine, to the state apparatus.

A full explanation of the difference between the state apparatus and the war machine would exceed the confines of this paper. What I would like to point to is that already in the “Treatise on Nomadology,” when Deleuze and Guattari point to examples of “rush and catatonia,” they touch upon the third sphere in which catatonia is analyzed within their – in fact, mainly Deleuze’s – oeuvre, namely literature.

Third Sphere – the Literary

What is most interesting about Deleuze’s analyses of catatonia in literature, is that it seems that he has found there the most “positive” of the appraisals of catatonia. While working up from previous assessments – and connecting the individual and social aspect of the condition – Deleuze, especially in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, seems to have resigned from many of the concepts he has used with Guattari, including the almost scholastic dualisms of production/anti-production, machines/body without organs or state apparatus/war machine, and uses an almost ascetic conceptual repertoire – seemingly more focused on simply describing the processes he encounters than interpreting. This, of course, can be read as a stripped-down version of the methodological practices of schizoanalysis, only used in the realm of philosophy of literature; thanks to such an approach, the depictions of catatonia are among the clearest in his works.

As I have suggested above, while the theme of catatonia occurs in Deleuze with reference to quite a few writers, including Kafka, Kleist, Beckett, Mme de La Fayette or Chretien de Troyes, if there is a single text it

33) Holland, *Deleuze and Guattari’s Anti-Oedipus*, 79.

34) Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 381.

makes a really important appearance, it is the analysis of Melville's *Bartleby*. Interestingly, it is not just the scrivener himself, but also Billy Budd – the hero of Melville's last novel – who are mentioned in this context. It is to those two characters that I will devote the rest of this text.

Deleuze says that “Melvillian psychiatry constantly invokes two poles: monomaniacs and hypochondriacs, demons and angels, torturers and victims, the Swift and the Slow, the Thundering and the Petrified.”³⁵ It is clear that both *Bartleby* and *Billy Budd* (albeit to a lesser degree), represent the second pole, that of “angels or saintly hypochondriacs, almost stupid, creatures of innocence and purity, stricken with a constitutive weakness but also with a strange beauty... They can only survive by becoming stone, by denying the will and sanctifying themselves in this suspension.”³⁶

Bartleby's catatonia reveals itself in two distinct settings. The first one is that of the office, where the scrivener, who at first does “an extraordinary quantity of writing,”³⁷ starts to softly decline more and more work, using his famous “formula,” “I would prefer not to.” Deleuze notes ten major occurrences of the formula,³⁸ with each time the scrivener moves farther and farther along the line of excluding himself from the usual responsibilities his occupation requires; in the meantime moving into the office and refusing to leave or take any other job the narrator tries to offer him. The formula, as Deleuze notes, is not in itself a conscious refusal, but rather points to an impossibility of saying either yes or no. Any of these options would signal a will that is absent in *Bartleby*; even though the formula uses the word “prefer,” it actually makes any preference and non-preference redundant. Reduced as he is to a pure passivity, the scrivener “can survive only by whirling in a suspense that keeps everyone at a distance.”³⁹

Bartleby's behavior is certainly disconcerting to the narrator, but also revolutionary with regards to the office as a whole. His refusals disorganize the office itself and, as Deleuze puts it, “With each instance [of the formula] one has the impression that the madness is growing: not *Bartleby's* madness in particular, but the madness around him, notably that of the attorney, who launches into strange propositions and even stranger behaviors.”⁴⁰ *Bartleby's* unwillingness has the double effect of, on the one hand, weakening the will of the narrator, who only manages to get rid of him by moving his whole office out of the premises, and on the other hand, by creating a strange bond between the attorney and the scrivener, one forcing the former to visit *Bartleby* even when he finally ends up in prison.

It is this strange bond that Deleuze seems to be referring to when invoking the notion of brotherhood, for example when saying that *Bartleby* is “a brother to us all” at the end of his essay.⁴¹ The story itself ends with the words “Ah *Bartleby*! Ah humanity!”⁴² as if the scrivener had a special relationship with all humanity; Deleuze hints to this relationship when he claims that “even in his catatonic or anorexic state, *Bartleby* is not the patient, but the doctor of a sick America.”⁴³ It seems that *Bartleby*, through the disorder he brings into the office of the attorney, “cures it” from the overly vertical (paternal) power relationships that haunt it and models it more into a horizontal society of brothers – America as it should be, “freed from the English paternal

35) Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 78–79.

36) *Ibid.*, 80–81.

37) Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor and Selected Tales*, 11.

38) Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 70.

39) *Ibid.*, 71.

40) *Ibid.*

41) *Ibid.*, 90.

42) Melville, *Billy Budd*, 41.

43) Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 90.

function.⁴⁴ Or, to put it in the language that Deleuze and Guattari used in *Anti-Oedipus*, Bartleby, the hero of anti-production, forces a regime change – the office used to work as a hierarchical, molar machine and the scrivener’s contagious catatonia made it revert toward a body-without-organs which gave it the possibility to change into a more molecular milieu. However, the attorney’s actions, although shaped by Bartleby’s influence, stopped the process in its tracks. After that, in prison, Bartleby refuses to speak to his former employer – the bond has been severed.

And it is prison that marks the second setting where Bartleby’s catatonia reveals itself; his simple and tragic fate is to refuse life altogether and starve himself to death. It seems – to continue with the vein of interpretation that was sketched out above – that without a healthy dose of organization given by the office setting, Bartleby withdraws too far into his catatonia, too far into the body without organs, so that he himself becomes one of those sad, crippled bodies who Deleuze and Guattari cite as a warning in the plateau I referred to above.

Two similar settings can be found in the case of Billy Budd; he too first is shown in the environment of the ship *Bellipotent*, where he is a well-liked and dutiful sailor, and then is seen in his imprisonment and death at the gallows. Having been falsely accused by the Master-at-arms John Claggart of mutinous intentions, Billy Budd suffers from a fit of stuttering, which he finally ends by hitting Claggart so unfortunately as to kill him – all that in front of the captain who, regardless of all his fondness for Billy, is forced to have him sentenced to death. He suffers his fate in catatonic dignity, underscored by his last words, “God bless captain Vere,”⁴⁵ as if absolving the officer from guilt; the catatonic state is so intense that when he was hanged, “no motion was apparent, none save that created by the slow roll of the hull in moderate weather.”⁴⁶ In other words, the sailor’s catatonia is stronger than death, which would itself produce some movement in the hanged person; we should remember that already in *Anti-Oedipus* Deleuze and Guattari hint that “it is not death that serves as the model for catatonia, it is catatonic schizophrenia that gives its model to death.”⁴⁷ It is as if Billy Budd was catatonic beyond death, at a state of “zero intensity.”⁴⁸

Deleuze mentions Billy Budd a number of times, but usually only in passing; most attention is given to his stuttering, which is, for Deleuze, akin to Bartleby’s formula – it somehow reaches the limit of language, invents a new language of its own. Since linguistic matters are not of primary concern in this text, I can only point to Deleuze’s text on this subject⁴⁹; instead of reconstructing these arguments, I will point to an interpretation of Billy Budd’s death, a theme only glossed upon in Deleuze’s texts; I can thus only try to sketch out a possible “Deleuzian” way one could read this fragment.

Contrary to Bartleby’s death, which – if my interpretation above is correct – signaled the end of any political or revolutionary role his catatonia might play, Billy Budd’s was, paradoxically, only the beginning of his political role. Earlier, the sailor had been a zealous – even uncritically so – servant of the King, even though he did not seem ideologically or emotionally invested in his service. His only relationship to mutiny – in mutinous times in which the novel is set – was the false accusation that led to his unfortunate strike. However, through and after his death, Billy Budd becomes a Christly figure, at once denounced in official navy press as a mutineer and “scoundrel,”⁵⁰ and praised by regular sailors in song and material memory, as they distribute

44) *Ibid.*, 85.

45) Melville, *Billy Budd*, 354.

46) *Ibid.*

47) Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 329.

48) *Ibid.*

49) Deleuze, *He stuttered*, in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 107–114.

50) Melville, *Billy Budd*, 360.

between themselves chips from the boom on which he was hanged, as if they were “piece[s] of the Cross.”⁵¹ It is as if Billy Budd’s catatonia survived him, and the effects it had on the – again, as paternalistic and vertical as possible – community of the navy and sailors in general have made it possible to engender new machinic connections. Limited as it was – Melville comments drily that “everything is for a term venerated in the navies”⁵² – the effect of Billy Budd’s catatonia was as contagious as Bartleby’s.

Conclusions

The above analyses suggest that catatonia plays a unique role in Deleuze and Guattari’s system, as it provides a moment of respite from a given form of subjectivity – a “back to the drawing board” moment, so to speak – being a state where the investments of the desiring machines are withdrawn from the world. As such, catatonic states can be seen as attempts (conscious or not) of resistance toward a social order that enforces a certain unwanted subjectivity; as Deleuze’s examples suggest, usually it is a hierarchical, molar or Oedipalising one. The importance of catatonic slownesses in the political and literary texts analyzed above shows that any accelerationist interpretation of Deleuze (and Guattari’s) work is at least problematic if not outright wrong, and, moreover, hopefully points to the need of further analysis of these themes in order to establish if (and how) their reflections on slowness and catatonia prove useful for thinking alternatives to today’s more and more costly “dynamic stabilization” of the socio-political order.

Finally, the treatment of catatonia in Deleuze’s last texts suggests that no serious political analysis of his thought can be accomplished without taking into account both the clinical and the critical (in the sense of literary criticism or even philosophy of literature) aspect of his thought. For Deleuze, literature is about becoming – a becoming that is political and searches for new forms of subjectivity and new forms of being-together, sometimes referred to as “the people who are missing” or “still to come.”⁵³ This is why the full individual, clinical and political stakes of his thought – on catatonia or otherwise – can be grasped only by engaging with his writing on literature.

51) Ibid., 361.

52) Ibid.

53) Deleuze, *Critical and Clinical*, 4.

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