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# Ordinary? Affects? Swimming with Kathleen Stewart and Others against the Tide Race of Representation and the Heresies of Names

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## Ordinary? Affects? Swimming with Kathleen Stewart and Others against the Tide Race of Representation and the Heresies of Names

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**ABSTRACT** This essay describes instances in the rhythmic play with affect in the reading of and performances with Kathleen Stewart's *Ordinary Affects*. It offers an engagement with the work that both troubles and is troubled. It celebrates this engagement and delights in the opportunity to read, read around, and read again and again words that flee from identification and representation and come to life in moments of tears, smiles, and writings living in the temptation and allure of the unknown. This was written with a visit to Edinburgh in mind and Robert Frank's *The Americans*, alongside Stewart's *Ordinary Affects* in my shoulder bag. **KEYWORDS** Deleuze; Spinoza; Affect; Becoming; Assemblage

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*Flying into Edinburgh, reading Kathleen Stewart's opening lines, "Ordinary Affects is an experiment, not a judgement." He sensed a creeping feeling of being blown away by the scariness of flying; being encapsulated, the unfathomable height, and the imminence of immediate unimaginable death; beside him her words generated a beautiful enlightening and radically new optimism.*

I circle this text. I have used this imagery before. I first encountered the phrase in the title of an essay by Elizabeth Anne St. Pierre and I feel comfortable in using this appropriation here.<sup>2</sup> In sensing the complexities of my writerly apprehensions and ambitions I am becoming-hawk—soaring, eyes sharply focused, alert to the changes in the wind, jumping to the slightest shift in the landscape, my line of flight is minutely attentive to the heterogeneities and inconsistencies of this assemblage in making text my prey. With Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari I know that these multiplicities are not the matter of a logic of reason; they seethe in intensity in the reeling of my senses. Here there are no Kantian transcendental conditions of possibility,

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experimentation is always prior, there is no need for interpretation, connections can be made, associations are always possible, this is the new empiricism that Deleuze conjures from the work of David Hume.<sup>3</sup> Here it seems the differentiating relations that are always emergent from and with these circlings are somehow always just beyond the terms used to convey them. Hume's associations challenge, by continual effervescent displacement, the violence of social partialities. The new empiricism that Deleuze recognized and explicated in his reading of Hume is premised upon turning knowledge into belief and in promoting a logic of becoming and relational multiplicities.<sup>4</sup> In this respect Deleuze describes multiplicities in terms of the entanglement, connection, and bifurcation of lines; for him these lines are "true *becomings*" that are distinct from unities, individuations, and the histories from which these are developed. "That is, the concept exists just as much in empiricism as in rationalism, but it has a completely different use and a completely different nature: it is a being-multiple, instead of a being-one, a being-whole or being as subject."<sup>5</sup>

*On his journey he had also been looking again at Robert Frank's images of America from a bygone age. Something in these pictures and Jack Kerouac's writing about them had stirred his affect. Reading Kerouac's Introduction to the book: "The humor, the sadness, the EVERYTHING-ness and American-ness of these pictures!"<sup>6</sup> seemed to have some resonance with the ordinariness of affect about which Stewart writes. Something in affect touched him; a smile crossed his face as he placed the books side by side in his bag and prepared to leave the plane.*

These relationalities and multiplicities are understood in terms of the associational. Associations of the kind that Deleuze develops from his reading of Hume are used to trouble causal condensational proclivities wherein metaphorical tropes attempt, through strategies of representational equation and unification, to attach, distil, and establish meaning rationally. In this associational empiricism, the promotion of metonymic processes that act to displace such fixities by not naming and by offering exploratory and experimental associations in meaning is used to locate inquiry diffractively into and about the always-not-yet-known. This is how I have come to have a sense, a kind of knowing in constant action, of Kathleen Stewart's notion of "ordinary affects."

*"Edinburgh feels so far from the sea. . ." He was so used to Cornwall and the immediate elemental vibrancy of living with the sound and the smell of the breaking surf, the westerly wind tearing at his clothes, the pervasive*

*damp saltiness in the air. That morning, by chance, he had glanced at a map of Scotland and was slightly startled to see that Edinburgh was actually close to the sea. And yet. . . and yet. . . “It feels so far from the sea,” “Something throws itself together in a moment, as an event and a sensation; a something both animated and inhabitable.”<sup>7</sup>*

My circlings have been incessant and it has taken me some while to write this essay. My circlings have all been event(ful) but my event(ual) line of flight into the writing is only now, in this moment, as, apparently out of nowhere, I begin to type these words:

Ordinary affects?

Ordinary affects?

In this circling, something kept troubling me about this phrase, about the title of Stewart’s book: it still does. It is only now, as I write these words in their plural form that a realization is emerging. This is the becoming of my essay. Even as I sit here typing the words “ordinary affects,” my concern that the italicized “s” does not *show* means that it does not *tell*, does not tell in the way that I want it to. So when I presented an earlier version of this essay at the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry in May 2015, I felt I had lost something by not being able to express the italicized *s*. So, it is the plural form that is troubling me. I shall write to that.

With Stewart I am caught by the ordinariness of affect—the ordinariness, to me, of affect. There is a sense of self that is (re)cognized in affect; beginning with a tapping of these keys, a simultaneous knowing of what will appear on the glowing screen emerges. With Deleuze and Guattari, I cannot shift affect from its close and intensive entanglement with concept and with percept<sup>8</sup>; it is as if in going about this life I can only live with sense, as if my knowings are made up of my continual movement in moments. Increasingly, like Baruch Spinoza’s conative bodies, in Humean associational multiplicity, I can only sense space and time in terms of encounter and as event. I have been poring over Frank’s pictures of 1950s America and I sense he was captured in similar ways as he traveled from place to place, his camera always at hand. In appropriation and furtherance of Gaston Bachelard, I want to write in and with a “poetics of space” and time<sup>9</sup>: I sense this is where expression and ordinary affect might coalesce.

*He had been spending time in Edinburgh with Jonathan. Together they had presented a paper at the university using their critique of the “auto” in*

*autoethnography as a means to open up a more posthuman way of theorizing their approach to collaborative writing as a method of inquiry.<sup>10</sup> Walking to the session, they talked about “firing up” the group of students, post docs, and colleagues who were curious enough to come along and check them out. He sensed their mutual enthusiasm: it felt good to be working together again. He felt happy and almost indulgent in the space they seemed to create together. Engaging these theorizings as practice and bringing posthuman sensibilities into their work seemed to generate an energetic life force: a bodily sense of vibrant animation and tense activation was palpable. He kept thinking about going to the pub afterwards, having a laugh and hanging out and keeping those fires burning.*

I will use Stewart’s words to help animate this inquiry: “The notion of a totalized system, of which everything is always already somehow a part, is not helpful (to say the least) in the effort to approach a weighted and reeling present.”<sup>11</sup> I love this. I love the ordinariness of the expression. It is simple, direct, and so necessary. And so, as I repeat the words “a weighted and reeling present,” I feel the forces and energies that are compelling me to write, I sense the necessity of abandoning all else and of becoming in space and time; in my sensing of something similar I am drawn to Virginia Woolf’s words: “I feel that by writing I am doing what is far more necessary than anything else.”<sup>12</sup> My line of flight is weighted, the reel is drawing me in and I sense the increasing velocity of the hawk in a descending line of flight. In this I am drawn by Deleuze and Guattari’s critique of “hylomorphism.”<sup>13</sup> I revel in their challenge to the structural ordering and control of systems that are projected in advance by external agencies as a means of organizing these systems in particular ways. I want to write in ways that try, as Stewart suggests, “to slow the quick jump to representational thinking and evaluative critique.”<sup>14</sup> Hylomorphic tendencies lean with great imposition and exert pressure upon contingencies, ambivalence, (dis)organization, and what might be perceived to be chaotic features. Mark Bonta and John Protevi have described with great clarity Deleuze and Guattari’s use of Gilbert Simondon’s concept of hylomorphism as “the doctrine that the order displayed by material systems is due to the form projected in advance of production by an external producing agent, a form which organizes what would otherwise be chaotic or passive matter.”<sup>15</sup> Through strategies of “territorialization,” Deleuze and Guattari demonstrate that hylomorphic tendencies lean on and exert organizing principles and forces that are anathema to the “body-without-organs,”<sup>16</sup> they attempt to displace, organize, and override what Jane

Bennett recognizes, animates, and describes as the “distributive agency” of assemblages.<sup>17</sup> In employing the associative and affective qualities of Spinoza’s conative bodies, Bennett offers resonating connection with Stewart’s ordinary affects by demonstrating in her work “the power of a body to affect other bodies [which] includes a ‘corresponding and inseparable’ capacity to be affected.”<sup>18</sup> So in sensing with Bennett that agency is always distributed and being distributed, that, as living with the madness of these entanglings of representations and realities (language and matter), Spinoza’s conative body is more and more in its becoming a singularity in the heterogeneities and complexities of what Bennett refers to as “agentic assemblages.”<sup>19</sup>

*“That crazy feeling in America when the sun is hot on the streets and the music comes out of the jukebox or from a nearby funeral. . .”<sup>20</sup>*

In the evocation of Kerouac’s visually arresting writing, I sense something of what Stewart attempts to convey when she describes the “surge that starts things. A cracking open, like a kernel that splits and becomes fecund. A crackling. A flashing up.”<sup>21</sup> Both writers give a sense of the capacity of the ordinary to function in affect. In quite different ways, the aesthetic sensitivity and force of their words animate the intra-active power to affect and be affected. And within the immensities of these distributed and distributing agencies, there are also, inevitably, multiplicities. In shifting relationality from the individualistic rationality of Cartesian arborescence and in arguing for the vectoral complexity and multiple lines of flight of rhizomatic profusion and potent proliferation, Deleuze and Guattari take Hume’s critical engagement with René Descartes and show how belief and the tentative and temporary event(ful) (act) of knowing offers practices of constant experimental displacement, of *making* connections, of bringing life into the world, of creating concepts as events. This multiplicity, these interconnections, this relational multi-dimensionality forms a cartography of forces, vectors, and lines that are recognizable in the always transmutational form of the assemblage—in the smoothing of space in which human agency is only one small part. “Puppet strings, as a rhizome or multiplicity, are tied not to the supposed will of an artist or puppeteer but to a multiplicity of nerve fibers, which form another puppet in other dimensions connected to the first.”<sup>22</sup>

*In Edinburgh everything seems built. He felt overwhelmed by great, grey Georgian buildings, tall and stained, frightening and imposing in their looming rectangularity. He felt cocooned by the quiet, ominous*

*shroud of oozing, mizzly sky coming down to the land. Nature entangling with discourses of architecture; becoming increasingly visible. The presence of Stewart again as he engaged with this “weighted and reeling present.”<sup>23</sup>*

And so when I first read Stewart’s book, for a while I found it hard to move beyond the opening chapter, the chapter she calls “Ordinary Affects,” the chapter in which she offers her sense of what ordinary affects might be and could be. I really like this chapter, I am drawn to what she says and I have a sense of agreement with her words. With her words I am saying “yes,” I am picking up other books. I continue to make connections, sense associations, and want to link what she says here with how I have a presence in relation to affect. And it is affect that I sense a need to engage with here.

*“Or the picture of a chair in some café with the sun coming in the window and setting on the chair in a holy halo I never thought could be caught on film much less described in its beautiful visual entirety in words.”<sup>24</sup>*

In relation to “affect” and “affection,” Brian Massumi points out in his translator’s introduction to Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, “neither word denotes a personal feeling,” affect “is an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act.”<sup>25</sup> In a later essay he emphasizes this point further by distinguishing between affect and emotion:

An emotion is a subjective content, the socio-linguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point inward defined as personal. Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized. It is crucial to theorize the difference between affect and emotion. If some have the impression it has waned, it is because affect is unqualified. As such, it is not ownable or recognizable, and is thus resistant to critique.<sup>26</sup>

In this respect affect—as a prepersonal intensity, a force that does not denote a personal feeling—exists as a singularity that comes to life in multiplicity and as assemblage. So, for Deleuze and Guattari, it is not to talk of *affects*, as these name and are suggestive of objects or complete wholes that can be represented

as existent and (in line with emotions) as something identifiable that is in and of the body; rather, it is to say that “affect goes beyond affections no less than the percept goes beyond perceptions. The affect is not the passage from one lived state to the other but man’s nonhuman becoming.”<sup>27</sup> Robert Hurley comments on such “becoming” by suggesting that “Deleuze opens us to the idea. . . that the elements of the different individuals we compose may be nonhuman *within* us. What we are capable of may partake of the wolf, the river, the stone in the river.”<sup>28</sup> It seems that in this complex relationality—where assemblages live in constantly shifting formation and where the agentic forces that influence these changes are distributed along lines of heterogeneity, contingency, and ambiguity—processes of composition and decomposition are always at play. And in the ordinary, amongst the everyday, the processes are often overlooked.

*“The faces don’t editorialize or criticize or say anything but ‘This is the way we are in real life and if you don’t like it I don’t know anything about it. . . .”*<sup>29</sup>

In his reading of Spinoza’s account of the power to affect and be affected, Deleuze describes how “when a body ‘encounters’ another body, or an idea another idea, it happens that the two relations sometime combine to form a more powerful whole, and sometimes one decomposes the other, destroying the cohesion of its parts.”<sup>30</sup> Woolf, in vividly recounting her experience as a young child of an incident of sexual abuse, offers an account of these compositional energies and forces that suggests the conditions of possibility for the emergence of what she describes as certain “instincts” about her emergent sexuality and the ethical and affective sensibilities associated with it. She concludes that “(i)t proves that Virginia Stephen was not born on 25th January 1882, but was born many thousands of years ago; and had from the very first to encounter instincts already acquired by thousands of ancestresses in the past.”<sup>31</sup> Deleuze argues that these (posthuman) processes of composition and decomposition, describing the rhythmic play of forces smoothing and striating space, have a tendency to go unnoticed in everyday (human) relationality. What are noticed, he contends, are the *effects* of these always transmutational compositional energies and forces; we sense what might be happening to our bodies or our minds and remain unaware of the conditions that might bring these complex and always shifting happenings into play. In this critical engagement with human consciousness Deleuze asserts that “as conscious beings. . . we experience *joy* when a body encounters ours and enters into composition with it, and *sadness* when, on the

contrary, a body or an idea threaten our own coherence.”<sup>32</sup> As Stewart herself says of ordinary affects: “Their significance lies in the intensities they build and in what thoughts and feelings they make possible.”<sup>33</sup> However, it is here, in the space of so-called reflective, interpretive, and critical human relationality, that there is a sense in which consciousness takes effects and reverses them as causes and allows them to be understood in terms of actions: the joyous or sad person will act in particular ways.

*“What a poem this is, what poems can be written about this book of pictures some day by some young new writer high by candlelight bending over them describing every gray mysterious detail, the gray film that caught the actual pink juice of human kind.”<sup>34</sup>*

Michel Foucault asks us to consider the conditions of possibility for any discursive construction of reality and to bring into focus the ways in which, in time and space, subjects are constituted.<sup>35</sup> This approach seems particularly important in the context of this inquiry. In this way, I sense the “young new writer” writing “minor literatures”<sup>36</sup>:

(W)riting stands against psychology, against interiority. . . giving. . . a possibility of becoming more than his or her nominal self, of trading the insistent solidity of the family tree for the whole field of desire and history. The romance of the individual life is exceeded, deterritorialized, escaped.<sup>37</sup>

Through writing in experimentation against the majoritarian influences and proprieties of dominant and dominating forms, this “young new writer high by candlelight,”<sup>38</sup> is engaging in what Foucault advocates as an escape, a “get[ting] free of oneself,”<sup>39</sup> which offers a problematizing challenge to Enlightenment individualism, humanist notions of the subject, and the forms of arborescent thought which they promulgate. As Stewart says, from “the perspective of ordinary affects, things like narrative and identity become tentative.”<sup>40</sup> Within such approaches, to talk of affects is to talk of effects and of the forms of individual human consciousness that give them life. There is a danger that in the pluralization of affect there is the tendency to suggest that affects exist in some recognizable form, that they differ, and hence can be named and ascribed to individuals, perhaps in the way that is done with emotion(s). In this manner, affects can be used to represent, describe, and construct subjectivity, agency, and human action in terms of unitary selves that can be identified in particular ways.

Arguing similarly in relation to the treatment of subjectivity; St. Pierre says: “But the concept subjectivity is often bandied about as if it is a synonym of identity and so is often pluralized—subjectivities—which implies that there are unique wholes that can be pluralized.”<sup>41</sup> Multiplicity and difference both precede and trouble the categorization of affect and, indeed, the human subject as unitary and whole. Therefore, the use of the plural form tends to confuse the orientation of ordinary affect within the multiple, experimental, and differentiating possibilities of posthuman worlds of always re-distributing agentic forces and energies.

*On the train journey from Edinburgh to Stirling, he felt tense; the dampness of his palms and the slight tremors in his chest brought to life the sense of anticipation and excitement that was washing over him. He had been invited to run a seminar there, to talk about creative research and pedagogic practices through working with concepts as events. Despite the palpability of his nervousness, his love of train journeys—the rolling rhythms of the engine and the coaches, and the zen-like simplicity of looking out at the Scottish countryside and losing himself in dreams for a while—was unusual and deeply satisfying. Earlier he had recalled reading Doreen Massey’s observation of a train journey from London to Milton Keynes; her sense was that she was not travelling through space, “since space is the product of social relations you are also helping, although in this case in a fairly minor way, to alter space, to participate in its continuing production.”<sup>42</sup>*

In a similarly critical vein I am wondering just what is “ordinary”: I am thinking that “ordinary affects” could be *sub*-ordinary or *super*-ordinary in the affective multiplicity of relational space. An ordinate is a line. Ordinates are lines between points, co-ordinates bring these together: if I attempt to co-ordinate with something or someone, I think of “bringing into line,” of matching, of attempting to diminish sub- or super-ordinary differentiations. These ordinations are rhythmic, they exist within what Nigel Thrift describes as “processual sensualism.”<sup>43</sup> As lines they constantly co/sub/super ordinate; they are what Deleuze and Guattari call “intensive ordinates”<sup>44</sup>—they have qualities of singularity, they are molecular instances that exist as the “conceptual personae” that fleetingly come to life as part of the never-ending elemental process of concept creation.<sup>45</sup> The rhythmic play of these intensive ordinates can be partly characterized and described through the use of the prefixes “co,” “sub,” and “super,” but such usage is tentative and is not employed to suggest any sense of permanence or fixity. Rather, such usage operates almost like an inflection, it is there to infer, to

suggest, and to make real for a moment, perhaps to make *extra*-ordinary: the briefest instant of becoming.

Kathleen Stewart describes “potential” in the following way:

The potential stored in ordinary things is a network of transfers and relays.

Fleeting and amorphous, it lives as a residue or resonance in an emergent assemblage of disparate forms and realms of life.

Yet it can be as palpable as a physical trace.

Potentiality is a thing immanent to fragments of sensory experience and drams of presence. A layer, or layering to the ordinary, it engenders attachments or systems of investment in the unfolding of things.<sup>46</sup>

There seems to exist a huge potency, a kind of extraordinariness in ordinary affect, in relation to the power to be affected. In writing of Spinoza, Deleuze argues that “all power is inseparable from a capacity to be affected, and this capacity for being affected is constantly and necessarily filled by affections that realize it.”<sup>47</sup> According to such a view, the highly rhythmic intra-active play between different forms of action and the concomitant territorialization of space is hugely influenced by the relative ordinariness of affect. As Rosi Braidotti argues, such “power formations not only function at the material level but are also expressed in systems of theoretical and cultural representation, political and normative narratives and social modes of identification.”<sup>48</sup> Woolf described what she perceived as the pervasive ordinariness of her life as containing “a large portion of this cotton wool, this non-being” and then noticed that “something happened so violently that [she] remembered it all [her] life.”<sup>49</sup> It is, therefore, valuable to speculate with Braidotti as to whether Woolf’s “remembering” of particular aspects of the materiality of her life were the discursive consequences of certain “political and normative narratives and social modes of identification”<sup>50</sup> that were entangled with significant representational influences in her life. Recognized by Foucault, Braidotti, and others, Spinoza sees power as a correspondence in multiple relationality between *potentia*, the influential productive power of affect, and *potesta*, the reciprocal capacity to be affected. As Deleuze points out, this “correspondence” is an ability or *aptus* that can be used to conceptualize power in rhythmic relational multiplicity and not, as Braidotti’s view of power seems to suggest, one in which *potesta* can be understood as a “restrictive” force.<sup>51</sup> It is here that Stewart’s sense of ordinary affect as “a point of impact, curiosity, and encounter”<sup>52</sup> is so significant and appropriate in offering resistance to Braidotti’s interpretation.

*He sensed a strange, almost limp feeling of homesickness as he looked forward to his flight back home to Cornwall. A few days earlier, as he drove to the airport at the beginning of his journey to Scotland, he felt deeply immersed in the beautiful emergent clarity of the onset of spring; the physicality in presence of the freshness of new green shoots, a slight warmth in the air, and the evenings growing perceptibly longer. Picking up his car from the airport in the early evening would give him just enough time to drive home, park on the cliff overlooking the sea, and then, in a slowly accelerating walk down to the beach, revel in the finding of another self, there in the growing dusk and in the welcome intensity of the sunset.*

Ordinary affects?

Consistently being suffused with affect tells me that life is lived on planes of immanence. Sensing the force of death on the fragility of spirit has told me that affect can also be extra-ordinary. In the worlds of sense that inhabit and irrevocably constitute those appearances of presence that I tremble to call “me,” “I,” and, in solidarity, “us,” sensing is the moving from absence that consistently lives as pulsing, transmutating, energetic life force that makes the self real. Affect is arresting; it reels me in, it brings me into line. Affect pulls me up short. Affect tells me that subjectivities, feelings, emotions, and, I suppose, affects, are part of a representational artifice—a category of difference that populates worlds of humanist and phenomenological centrism. Living in affect helps me to understand *dasein*, Martin Heidegger’s “being-in-the-world,” as a trope, a discursive construction that needs to be rumbled, troubled and ultimately exposed.<sup>53</sup>

Whilst I have been purposive in my reading of Stewart’s *Ordinary Affects* (I have prepared a conference presentation, I have been writing this essay, I have been circling these texts), the most profound experience I have felt in my reading and frequent re-reading echoes what Roland Barthes has said of “literature as work”—that it “is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text.”<sup>54</sup> Literature as work has brought to life for me Deleuze and Guattari’s contention that to have a life a book is a map not a tracing: “it is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real.”<sup>55</sup> John Rajchman’s warning about the representational attractions inherent in the conventions and social partialities of an adherence to the search for “transcendental conditions of possibility” directs us, as does Stewart’s book, to an awareness of the Humean empiricist principle that experimentation is always

prior and that “we must always *make* connections, since they are not already given.”<sup>56</sup>

Lastly, *Ordinary Affects* has helped to rescue me from and partly cure me of an attachment to what Lauren Berlant refers to as “a relation of cruel optimism.”<sup>57</sup> Stewart’s graphic evocation that “Everyday life is a life lived on the level of surging affects, impacts suffered or barely avoided. It takes everything we have”<sup>58</sup> has prompted me not to think of my own writing as an object of desire—something that is a fixed point of achievement always just out of reach, something that I lack and that is difficult to attain. Rather, it has prompted me to think of my own writing in terms of Spinoza’s *conatus*—the deeply ingrained and intensive tendency to exist, in which desire is not to assuage need or to address deficiency, but is productive, about growth, and never mired in the fixities of representational conventions and critical interpretation. So, instead of setting up the writing in a way that makes it an obstacle to my own flourishing, I am reading these words again, easing my way into the writing, feeling myself into it, sensing that it is simply something that I do, something that is there, and something that allows for mischief and productive experimentation. In reaching this conclusion of sorts and in acknowledgement of my reading of Stewart’s book, I will draw a line from Hurley’s preface to Deleuze, in which he talks of Spinoza’s work as implying “acts of understanding performed with the *maximum perspective possible*.”<sup>59</sup>

I like that: that is what I will do. ■

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#### NOTES

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