

Signals Falling: Ecological Epistemology in Bergson, Woolf and Guattari

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To read diffractively¹ implies a certain *suddenness*. Suddenly having entered a new idea owing to an impression which “disturb[s] my whole consciousness like a stone which falls into the water of a pond.”² This new idea, then, comes about when, being immersed in the reading of text A (the water of a pond), one is interpellated by text B (the stone). Both stone and new idea arrive unexpectedly, by way of a disturbance. Reading diffractively is a methodology which wants to stay clear from classificatory reading (reading *from* and *for* an authoritative classification of ideas). Nevertheless, the methodology does not underestimate the power of classification. Classificatory reading being the institutionalized form of reading par excellence, it is clear that diffractions are also sudden owing to their *seldomness*:

Not all our ideas, however, are [...] incorporated in the fluid mass of our conscious states. Many float on the surface, like dead leaves on the water of a pond: the mind, when it thinks them over and over again, finds them ever the same, as if they were external to it.³

In this short essay I will zoom in on both incorporation and externality, attempting to give each its proper place in a possible ecological epistemology.

In ‘Three Guineas’ Virginia Woolf argues that the daughters of educated men must not prostitute their brains. “Adultery of the brain” is worse than selling one’s body, she claims.⁴ This is what it consists of:

We must ask you [...] not to avail yourself, in short, of any of the forms of brain prostitution which are so insidiously suggested by the pimps and panders of the brain-selling trade; or to accept any of those baubles and labels by which brain merit is advertised and certified - medals, honours, degrees - we must ask you to refuse them absolutely, since they are all tokens that culture has been prostituted and intellectual liberty sold into captivity [...].⁵

But even when a member of the Outsiders’ Society, taking part in prostituted culture and being intellectually captivated is as unavoidable as doing classificatory work. Maybe what is unavoidable *is* doing classificatory work, as a woman thinker, which means, however, that diffraction is at work just as well. This is at least what the opening sequence of this essay has taught us. And indeed, in ‘A Room of One’s Own,’ Woolf argues that, while staring out of the window on one morning in London, “[a] single leaf detached itself from the plane tree at the end of the street and [... s]omehow it was like a signal falling, a signal pointing to a force in things which one had overlooked.”⁶ Entering this ‘fluid mass of our conscious states,’ as Henri Bergson would have it, the leaf brought “a river, which flowed past, invisibly, round the corner, down the street, and took people and eddied them along, as the stream at Oxbridge

¹ The diffractive reading methodology is Donna Haraway’s as well as Karen Barad’s. I have developed this methodology with the philosophy of Henri Bergson in Van der Tuin (2011) and (2013).

² Bergson, [1889] (1913), p. 168.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁴ TG, pp. 191-2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

⁶ ROO, p. 83.

had taken the undergraduate in his boat and the dead leaves.”⁷ From there, a young man and a girl and a taxi-cab came together, the sight of which, to Woolf, “seem[ed] to ease the mind of some strain [...]”⁸ The effort was suddenly gone, and she had entered “some state of mind in which one could continue without effort because nothing is required to be held back.”⁹ Later she would affirm that one needs this “androgynous mind” in order to create.¹⁰

When formulating her ideas in an explicitly programmatic style, in a style that, we may affirm for the occasion, approaches Félix Guattari’s in *The Three Ecologies*, Woolf, in ‘Three Guineas,’ argues:

The old names as we have seen are futile and false. ‘Feminism,’ we have had to destroy. ‘The emancipation of women’ is equally inexpressive and corrupt. To say that the daughters were inspired prematurely by the principles of anti-Fascism is merely to repeat the fashionable and hideous jargon of the moment. To call them champions of intellectual liberty and culture is to cloud the air with the dust of lecture halls and the damp dowdiness of public meetings. Moreover, none of these tags and labels express the real emotions that inspired the daughters’ opposition to the infantile fixation of the fathers, because, as biography shows, that force had behind it many different emotions, and many that were contradictory.¹¹

This fragment not only aligns with Guattari’s claim that owing to Integrated World Capitalism, “[i]t is not only species that are becoming extinct but also the words, phrases, and gestures of human solidarity.”¹² The combination of ‘that force [which] had behind it many different emotions, and many that were contradictory’ and ‘a force in things which one had overlooked’ also captures what I find essential in Guattari: the necessity, first, to start off thought from the environment, social relations and human subjectivity *in their entanglement*, and, second, to be aware of the fact that, therefore, this entanglement is given “as a for-itself [*pour-soi*] that is precarious, finite, finitized, singular, singularized, capable of bifurcating into stratified and deathly repetitions or of opening up processually from a praxis that enables it to be made ‘habitable’ by a human project.”¹³ An ecological epistemology, therefore, strives for incorporation (a for-itself, an androgyny), while acknowledging that this, too, is but a Bergsonian ‘virtual past’ which may actualize in externalizing manners that are harmful for “the destiny of humanity,”¹⁴ of non-humanity and of the non-human in us.

⁷ Ibid..

⁸ Ibid..

⁹ Ibid., p. 84.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 85.

¹¹ TG, p. 235.

¹² TTE, p. 29.

¹³ Ibid., p. 35. Cf. p. 38.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 44.

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