

# Virginia Woolf, Immanence and Ontological Pacifism

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## Abstract:

In these times of pandemics, increasing social inequalities, civic unrest and the rise of illiberalism, populism, anti-European Union politics and the ‘fake news’ ideology, it is important to revisit Woolf’s pacifism and anti-war and anti-fascist activism. Woolf’s writing offers a mode of understanding emotional economies of despair at this moment of the posthuman convergence and reworking these negative passions into the building blocks of a sustainable present and an affirmative future. Approaching Woolf from a feminist neo-vitalist position as a thinker of immanence, sexed matter, and affirmative ethics, she shows us how to embody the cracks or wounds of existence in ways accountable to our times.

**Keywords:** Virginia Woolf, immanence, sexuality, pacifism, Deleuze, crack, posthuman, affirmative ethics, neo-vitalism

Woolf is inexhaustible, ever-renewing, forever ahead of us. The recent wave of neo-materialist and posthuman scholarship around her work testifies to the perennial nature of Woolf’s project. In my academic life, I have gone through a modernist Woolf, a radical feminist Woolf, an anti-war Woolf, a lesbian Woolf, a postmodernist Woolf, a sexual difference Woolf, a queer Woolf, an affect theory Woolf, a posthuman Woolf, and I am already working on an e-Woolf.<sup>1</sup> My love story with the Woolf galaxy is forever; she will have been my greatest textual passion.

This enduring attachment is intensified by the complex context in which we are approaching Woolf’s work today: in these times of pandemics, increasing social inequalities, civic unrest and the rise of illiberalism, populism, anti-European Union politics and the ‘fake news’ ideology, it is important to revisit Woolf’s pacifism and anti-war and anti-fascist activism. These values grow all the more relevant in view of the urgency of the contemporary challenges and the prevailing negativity

of our times. I have argued that we are positioned in a posthuman convergence between the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the Sixth Extinction. That is to say between advanced technological developments in robotics, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, biotechnology and the Internet of Things on the one hand, and the climate change emergency, with the likely extinction of multiple species, on the other. This means that digital, physical and biological boundaries get blurred by two parallel and to a certain extent specular forms of acceleration: the systemic accelerations of advanced capitalism and the great acceleration of climate change.

Striking a balance between these conflicting forces so as to keep the broader picture in mind is a major challenge. The posthuman convergence, with its distinctive combination of speedy transformations and persistent inequalities, is planetary and functions on multiple scales. It affects social and environmental ecologies as well as individual psychic and shared emotional landscapes. These contradictions need to be addressed not only intellectually but also affectively, and I propose to do so in an affirmative manner. This approach rests on a key ethical rule, namely that it is important to be worthy of our times, the better to act upon them, in both a critical and a creative manner. We should consequently approach our historical contradictions not as some bothersome burden, but rather as the building blocks of a sustainable present and an affirmative future, even if this approach requires some drastic changes to our familiar mind-sets and established values. I have emphasized the need to critique both humanism and anthropocentrism as a way to start dis-identifying from traditional habits of thought.

Our historical context also marks a specific affective location, an alternation of exhilaration and despair, excitement and anxiety – a manic-depressive emotional economy that Virginia Woolf illuminates and helps us understand. Negativity is not only a psychological state, but a deeper political affect that expresses itself in a decrease of our ability to affect and be affected by others. It signals a narrowing down of the horizons of existential possibility, a systemic fragmentation and a shattering of our relational capacity. These negative passions are what Deleuze and Guattari also call ‘micro-fascism’.<sup>2</sup> A shrinking of our ability to take in and on the world in which we are living because it hurts too much to do so. We have to dose how much we can take in the process of becoming-world till it gets too much, that is to say, till we reach the threshold of unsustainability. I will address this aspect directly, believing that

Virginia Woolf is both a specialist of too-much-ness and an experienced experimenter with boundary-shifting.

#### IMMANENCE

I approach Woolf from a neo-materialist position, centred on notions of immanence and vital materialism, and a feminist perspective, which stresses the embedded and embodied, relational and affective structure of subjectivity. In addition, I have also emphasized a posthuman dimension, that is to say a sense of interconnection between human and non-human entities; a mutual sense of ecological, social and affective interdependence that supports an attitude of fundamental openness and generosity towards them. There is a kind of ontological pacifism at play in this recognition that 'we' (humans and non-humans) are in *this* environment together. This is immediately qualified by the mark that 'we' are not one and the same, but differ in degrees of power, entitlement and access. Yet, we are connected. This awareness is for me the motor of the ethics of affirmation as a collective political praxis. It is the transformative moment that turns the negative charge—for instance the experience of exclusion—into a collective force capable of activating potential alternatives.

This ontological pacifism can be understood through the framework of *zoe*-centred egalitarianism, to which I return to below.<sup>3</sup> This approach, which has also been admirably explored and expanded by Derek Ryan and others, focuses both on a thematic and a conceptual aspect of Woolf's work.<sup>4</sup> Thematically, Woolf's explorations of the intensity of life go well beyond the self, the individual, and even the human. I read Woolf as practising a corporeal form of materialism from a grounded and situated but also nomadic and dynamic location. She also foregrounds sexuality as an elemental, cross-species force that precedes and exceeds the inscription into a binary gender system. As I argued recently,<sup>5</sup> Woolf's sensibility is captured in the sentence from *The Waves*: 'I am rooted, but I flow'<sup>6</sup>—that is to say that living matter is materially embedded and embodied, but it flows transversally across multi-relational entities. Being alive entails multiple relational bonds to a complex system of non-human elements, such as animals and vegetables (*zoe*), earthed and planetary relations (geo), all of which are also technologically mediated (techno). Posthuman new materialism proposes a general ecology of interdependence, a terrestrial kind of materialism, that is capable of

combining a planetary with an earthy or grounded dimension. We are such stuff as *zoe/geo/techno*-bound matter is made of.

These heterogeneous assemblages of human and non-human elements expose the primacy of matter and material substances, in a manner best described as 'elemental'. The classical elements of earth, air, water and fire are central to this non-deterministic form of materialism. Woolf's relational apprehension of the world is the core of the environmental, geological, meteorological and zoological dimension of her writings. She deals with bodies, parrots, legs and arms, plants, flowers, water, the sky and the earth, the stalk, the leaf, birds, moths, and dogs, especially one dog, 'Pinkie', Vita Sackville-West's cocker spaniel that provided a model for the hero of *Flush* (1933). But Woolf does not stop at the environmental or Earth other – she also embraces the technological apparatus. There is the radio, but then there are the motor cars, the buses on Oxford Street, and taxis, many taxis. Taxis – a modernist *topos* – are for Woolf vectors of relational encounters, and they come to life not only following T. S. Eliot's depiction:

At the violet hour, when the eyes and back  
Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits  
Like a taxi throbbing waiting [...] <sup>7</sup>

Virginia Woolf's engines are alive all the time, at all hours and not for humans alone. T. S. Eliot and Woolf are worlds apart in terms of both humanism and anthropocentrism. Woolf makes a myriad of relational connections in her writings between human and non-human, raising issues of embodiment, environment, culture, nature, media, engineering, and life, time, love and consciousness. She (but is it just a she, really?), this complex multiplicity that is Woolf, enacts a transversal and multi-layered relational web of connections.

Therefore, the nonhuman dimension of Woolf's work becomes even more prominent, through heterogeneous alliances. Her writing traces non-human, a-subjective and pre-personal patterns of becoming in a chain of interrelations that constitute a distributed kind of subjectivity. This suggests that consciousness is not the prerogative of the humans alone and neither is it linked to bound, single individuals. Nor is it 'collectivized' within a dialectical scheme that posits one entity, be it a social class or even a multitude, as the transcendent category that drives the progress of world history. I do not apply to my materialism a Hegelian-Marxist paradigm of dialectical oppositions, but rather a neo-Spinozist continuum in which the vitality of self-organizing matter and

the parallelism mind-body support a relational vision of the subject. What I have called nomadic subjectivity gets actualized transversally, in-between nature/culture, male/female, black/white, local/global, and present/past, in assemblages that flow across and displace the binaries.<sup>8</sup> These in-between states are not dialectical opposites, but processes of becoming that defy the logic of excluded middles. They design alternatives to the unitary visions of the subject that are actualized in a new alliance of critique with creation, resisting the restrictive grip of dialectical reason. It is a neo-materialist immanent philosophy, which assumes that all matter is one and that it is intelligent and self-organizing (auto-poietic) as a process ontology.<sup>9</sup>

A philosophy of this kind is *zoe*-, geo- and techno-centred, and it also helps us illuminate the affective psychic sphere and the crucial influence of social and cultural forces. This new materialist approach resists the capitalization of living matter by the profit principle, which is the axiomatic rule of advanced or cognitive capitalism.<sup>10</sup> It redefines the subject away from possessive individualism into a nomadic frame of transversal relational subjectivities. Subjects are relational entities capable of mobilizing and activating connections in encounters with multiple others, human and non-human, organic and technological. Subjectivity is a matter of power understood as *potentia*, that is to say not as restrictive, but as an empowerment to relate more and better. Consciousness here is an extended entity, a distributed faculty, which aims at expanding our relational capacity, that is to say our ability to take in and on more of the world. Relationality is a matter of a geometry of forces: speed and slowness, movement and rest, affects and differential ways of becoming.

Subjectivity can then be redefined as a praxis and a process, a relational capacity to take on and cut across what are usually segregated into bound identities, classes and categories. Life in this mode is a pre-personal and impersonal force; a process ontology freed from the contingencies of bound individualism. Honouring it requires ethical accountability for the sustainability of these assemblages or transversal compositions.

## SEXUALITY

Life thus defined as self-organizing matter and intelligent living force is always already sexed, or rather sexuete,<sup>11</sup> where sexual difference is not an essentialist concept, but a dynamic verb: differing. And what differing does is to flow in a multiplicity of directions that

cannot be contained within binary dialectical oppositions but must be conceptualized as multi-directional, nomadic or rhizomic processes of sexual differing. Differing is a relational move, a dis/re-connection that operates within, as well as across all entities. That is to say, the polymorphous perverse force of sexuality as a complex multiplicity operates before, beneath and beyond the binary mechanism of capture of gender as a social system. This vital materialist vision of sexed matter, known as sexuate materialism, implies a rejection of anthropocentrism, in that it stretches the non-unitary vision of subjectivity to embrace both organic non-humans (animals and the Earth) and inorganic ones (technological artefacts, radios, computational networks, algorithms, codes, etc).

In my brief analysis of Woolf's love affair with Vita Sackville-West, which inspired *Orlando* (1928), I stress the 'shimmering intensity' of the space or 'milieu' where this desire unfolds.<sup>12</sup> Virginia Woolf captures the elemental erotic energy of living matter, not without pain, but with perception and elegance. Not only does she write about the perpetual motion of the waves, the flickering street lights and the flow of cabs on Oxford Street in London, but she brings the cosmic and the technological phenomena together in a fluctuating continuum. This captures the shimmering materiality of the world, defying partitions as well as bland linearity, in a sort of mutual seduction into 'Life'.

Woolf's molecular sensibility illustrates the point that sexuality is elemental, geological, meteorological and cross-species. Desire is a principle that organizes entire territories and draws its own affective landscapes of becoming by including non-human elements, like the quality of the light and the curve of the wind. Sexuality constitutes the transversal plane of immanence that goes beyond individual psychologies and circumstances, playing on something much more elemental, more raw: an increase or acceleration of the capacity to affect and be affected. To return to earth and at the level of socially sanctioned identities, of course, this is a lesbian love story, but at a transversal or nomadic level of non-unitary subjectivity it transcends bounded identity and socio-biographical specificity. It opens up to a trans-individual space of affirmation of the transversal and depersonalized force of desire as the vector of transformation. Exceeding the social categories, the gender labels of identity usually associated with sexual preferences, desire produces the enlargement of one's relations and capacity to experience. In pleasure as in pain, in secular, spiritual, erotic modes of desire that

combine elements from all of these dimensions, they result in decentering and opening the individual egos. Relating at such speed and scale entails not only interaction at a very deep level with other fellow human beings, but also a heightening of one's sense of perception. This quickening of the pace of life is what Vita Sackville-West was for Virginia Woolf. She was a meteorological, zoological, trans-historical force; so much so, that Virginia could barely sustain the impact of the life in Vita (whose name is Latin for life) and the intensity of her. What Woolf knew all too well is that desire as ontological, differential and vital (*conatus/potentia*) entails the depersonalization of the self, in a gesture of everyday transcendence of the ego, an expansion into radical immanence. Desire is a connecting force that links the self to larger internal and external relations. This is what I would see as an intensive queer theory: sexuate and heterogeneous intensities beyond, beneath and before the binary mechanism of gender and its phallogentric premises; sexuality is always before and beyond gender.<sup>13</sup>

It is noteworthy however that this vital new materialism, which predicates desire not so much on lack and law, but on relational affirmation and plenitude, is always already social. Therefore, desire also plays a role in the production of political beliefs and passions, in the affects that structure our social imaginary and political aspirations, including the negative ones. Notably, the instances of microfascism I mentioned earlier, that is to say the paradox of a desire that desires its own repression, its un-freedom. This is a crucial aspect of Deleuze and Guattari's work in *Anti-Oedipus* and parts of *A Thousand Plateaus*, especially in their analysis of both historical and contemporary forms of fascism.<sup>14</sup> It is the love for a strongman who promises to solve all your problems, to make the trains run on time, to restore the British Empire, and to chase away all foreigners so that white people can sit in triumphant supremacism. That is to say, the delusional, infantile, homicidal quality of a desire that desires its own extinction. Sylvia Plath exposes precisely this social and individual pathology in her anti-oedipal manifesto 'Daddy':

Every woman adores a Fascist,  
The boot in the face, the brute  
Brute heart of a brute like you.  
[...]  
I made a model of you,  
[...]

And I said I do, I do.

[...]

There's a stake in your fat black heart

And the villagers never liked you.

They are dancing and stamping on you.

They always *knew* it was you.

Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.<sup>15</sup>

Desire, the movement of ontological relational forces that aspire to connection and immanence, is repressed by microfascism; in its place arises a sick social body deprived of relational force and empathic know-how. This is what Deleuze and Guattari called a cancerous social body of fragmented and self-contained, self-referential toxic units. Patriarchy is one such pathological social body, where women are expected to hold up a mirror to the patriarch, as Woolf writes in *A Room of One's Own*, so that he can reflect himself twice the size, possibly more.<sup>16</sup> Microfascists are molecular molarities produced by complex assemblages that give desire a belligerent, violent, repressive determination. This reduction is precisely what ethical, anti-fascist subjects need to be on guard against. Proliferating microfascists install war machines everywhere, saturating the social, psychic and environmental spaces with destructive drives, as Virginia Woolf noted in her anti-fascist pamphlet *Three Guineas*.<sup>17</sup> The movement of the microfascist assemblage is not that of creating connections, but that of sealing off, molarizing self and others. The 'fascist inside you' is the totalizing organism that destroys relations and instils suspicion and hatred. It moreover tends to xenophobically scapegoat all the others – notably the sexualized (women, LGBTQ+) and racialized (Black, Indigenous, decolonial) others – who have to carry the blame for the anxieties and sense of failing of the dominant subjects. This scapegoating practice is loaded with epistemic and social violence and it takes place at the expense of pursuing adequate understanding of the conditions of our freedom and un-freedom.<sup>18</sup> Spinoza defined the ethical life as an adequate understanding of the condition of our bondage; adequate understanding, *not* delusional fantasies. What adequate understanding reconnects us to is the relational energy, the ontological desire to persevere in one's life alongside a multitude of others. Returning desire to its affirmative structure is a way of learning to live the non-fascist life, that is to say, a life guided by the ethics of relational affirmation against the stream and in spite of our times of violent dis-aggregation.



So let us explore further the connection between affirmation and what I am calling ontological pacifism. Material vital philosophies of life as relational becoming foreground the fact that matter, the world and humans themselves are not dualistic entities structured according to the dialectical principle of binary oppositions, but rather materially embedded subjects-in-process circulating nomadically across multiple clusters of human and non-human others. This is not a way of denying differences, but of dismantling the hierarchical structures within which they have been codified. All vital matter or substance being one and immanent to itself, it is intelligent and self-organizing in both human and non-human organisms. All matter is driven by the ontological desire for the expression of its innermost freedom (*conatus*). As argued above, vital neo-materialism relocates difference outside the dialectical scheme, as a complex process of differing within a common matter. This can be seen as an updated Spinozism<sup>19</sup> and a democratic move towards radically immanent forms of becoming, but also a kind of ontological pacifism based on *zoe*-, geo- and techno-centred egalitarianism.<sup>20</sup> We are all part of the same matter, vital, intelligent, and self-organizing, and individuation occurs as a set of modulations within this shared materiality. We are in this together, but we are not one and the same. We differ. This vital neo-materialist self-organizing matter is differential; it is a dynamic process of differing and it has a strong ethical punchline.

#### AFFIRMATIVE ETHICS

If one is to honour one's constitutive, non-unitary, multi-layered and pluri-directional materialist vital relationality to all that matters and lives, then one has to build an ethics on the basis of ontological pacifism. It needs to be an ethics that honours *zoe*-, geo- and techno-centred egalitarianism. This is where Nietzsche's notion of *amor fati* becomes crucial: we have to be worthy of what happens to us and rework it within an ethics of relation.<sup>21</sup> We need to be able to take in and on as much of the world as possible, even, and especially, when the world is sick, toxic and in love with microfascism, when taking it in, as Spinoza pointed out, is like taking poison.

The COVID-19 pandemic underlines this aspect: it is a human-made disaster due to systematic abuse of the ecological balance and the lives of multiple species. The pandemic foregrounds the importance of human/non-human interaction, both its destructive components and its generative potentiality. Paradoxically, the contagion has resulted in an

increased use of technology and digital mediation, as well as enhanced hopes for vaccines and bio-medical solutions. It has thus intensified the humans' reliance on the very high-tech economy of cognitive capitalism that caused the problems in the first place. Moreover, the blatant inequalities exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic such as the disproportionate loss of lives among women, LGBTQ+ people, ethnic minorities and socially underprivileged people brings home a reality that feminist, postcolonial and race thinkers had stressed before: that the 'human' is neither universal nor neutral but shot through with power relations organizing access to privileges and entitlements. 'We' differ along multiple axes, including the degree of 'health' and a disposition to illness as a structural form of vulnerability. That again Virginia Woolf knew all too well.<sup>22</sup>

In other words, taking in the world means processing the sickness, the negativity that comes with being part of it. This is neither acquiescent passivity nor naïve fatalism. This is a radical, embedded, practical ethics of transforming the negative into something sustainable, a process that we can only achieve together communally and collectively. It is a practical ethics devoted to the cooperative construction of affirmative values by reworking negative affects, events and encounters together. Of course, repugnant and unbearable events that make us ill do happen. Affirmative ethics consists, however, in reworking these events together in the direction of positive relations. It is the opposite of resignation. It is an empowerment to act, which assumes that every event contains within it the potential for being overcome and overtaken since every actual contains the seeds of the virtual. This profound ontological optimism is what irritated Hegel so much when it came to Spinoza, or Badiou in relation to Deleuze.<sup>23</sup> The moment of the actualization is the moment where the transcendence of the negative is collectively enacted.

The ethical subject, a subject who does not coincide with the liberal individual but is always a transversal collective assemblage of human and non-human factors, is one who is devoted to pursuing the affirmative life by cultivating the collective ability to grasp the freedom to depersonalize the event and transform its negative charge. The social, the physiological, the environmental, the political and the individual levels intermingle and produce affirmative coalitions. This is why, for Deleuze, the affirmative life is also the antifascist life – our ethics must guide our politics.

The point about life as non-human, as *zoe*, as geo- and techno-centred, is that its monstrous energy not only creates and constructs but also destroys. Virginia Woolf says, 'I meant to write about death, only life

came breaking in as usual'.<sup>24</sup> 'Of course', argues Deleuze, 'all life is a process of breaking down'.<sup>25</sup> This is why poor health, sickness and death are very much part of this discussion. According to the ethics of affirmation, healthy relations are not the ones of the bovine, advanced capitalism-backed, fitness conscious so-called 'healthy lives'. That gross crafting of superficial optimism is the ideology of capitalism. Healthy life is the life that pursues affirmation, in spite of and across all difficulties. It is a life that understands and connects to pain and is capable of adequately understanding it in order to transform it. Deleuze expresses this notion through the concept of the crack, in which the fully ideologically sealed, perfect health is suspicious.<sup>26</sup> It is much better to be slightly cracked, slightly wounded, to be marked, visibly or invisibly by the pain of dealing with the intensity of life. This is why so many beautiful pages of both Deleuze's and Woolf's work have to do with illness, depression, addiction, burning out, and cracking up. To dismiss these practices as merely self-destructive is to miss the point. They rather express and bring to the point of implosion the complexities and inbuilt paradoxes of subjects as complex transversal assemblages. By de-pathologizing these cases, we can approach them not so much as indicators of disorders or failings, but, rather, as markers of a standard condition. That position is the human subject's enfleshed exposure to the irrepressible and at times hurtful vitality of life, and hence also their familiarity with or proximity to pain, to the crack, the line of unsustainability. Affirmation is not the denial of pain and vulnerability, but rather a different way of processing them. It is the very intensity of affectivity that often leads us to implode into the black hole of negative, ego-indexed forces, which are likely to hurt the embodied entity.

Thus, the ethical challenge, as Nietzsche recommended, consists in cultivating a social project of joyfully confronting the overwhelming intensity of life as both human and non-human (*bios* and *zoe*), processing the sense of too-muchness, and honouring its intensities by actualizing them together in sustainable ways. This approach implies taking in the world together as singularity, force, movement, through assemblages or webs of inter-connections with all that lives. The subject is an autopoietic machine, fuelled by targeted perceptions, and it functions as the echoing chamber of *zoe*. This non-anthropocentric view expresses a profound love for Life as a cosmic force, but this Life is depersonalized beyond the self in a secular manner—this includes the Earth others as well as the technological others: the taxis, the earthworms, the dogs, the radio waves and the ocean waves. It is the shimmering materiality I analysed

above. This is just one life, not my life. The life in 'me' does not answer to my name: 'I' is just passing through. Deleuze's work on death rests very much on Maurice Blanchot's insight in *The Instant of My Death* that death is something that is very much part of life. This is an understanding of death as both personal and impersonal, as the event which marks our consciousness with a sense of limits. The limitation of our time is the event which has already taken place.<sup>27</sup>

In this perspective, death is not the teleological destination of life, a sort of ontological magnet that propels us forward: death is the event that has always already taken place at the level of consciousness. We know that we are mortal, that as an individual death will come in the form of the physical extinction of my embodied self. But as event, in the sense of the awareness of finitude, of the interrupted flow of my being-there, death has already taken place. Death is implacable in its presence and immanent to every human life; our life is synchronized with death from the word go. This is not nihilistic or the Heideggerian indexing of life on the horizon of death, but a making friends with the impersonal necessity of death. It is an ethical way of installing ourselves in lives as transient, slightly wounded visitors. We build our lives and our homes on the crack; we live to recover from the shocking awareness that this game is over even before it started. The proximity to death suspends life, not into transcendence, but rather into the radical immanence of just a life, here and now, for as long as we can and for as much as we can take.<sup>28</sup>

Life is beyond pleasure and pain, but is a process of becoming, of stretching the boundaries of endurance. There is nothing self-evident or automatic about being alive. It is not a habit, although it can become an addiction. One has to 'jump-start' into life each and every day; the electro-magnetic charge needs to be renewed constantly. There is nothing natural or given about it, as Virginia Woolf shows in her essay 'On Being Ill'.<sup>29</sup> Life, in other words, is an acquired taste, an addiction like any other, an open-ended project. One has to work at it. Life is passing and we do not own it; we just inhabit it as a time-share location. We live in an increasingly violent world where some people kill in the name of the 'right to life' and others kill legions before daring to kill themselves, while a lethal virus can threaten us all. It is a world that lets thousands of war and economic refugees drown at sea rather than extending to them the most basic rules of human hospitality. In contrast to the mixture of apathy and hypocrisy that marks the habits of thought that sacralizes life, vital materialist philosophies cross-refer to a somewhat darker but more lucid tradition of thought that does not start

from the assumption of the sacred, inherent, intrinsic worth of life and which accepts the difficulties, the pain and struggle of life in order to find collective remedies to it. Stressing the difficulty of life, the hard labour of it, is a way of being worthy of the intensity that inhabits an ethical project in which life is the pursuit of an affirmative ethics. That is to say, the transformation of the negative and the ability to take in and on more and more of the sick world in which we happen to be living.

#### THE CRACK

The crack designates the generative emptiness of death as part of the swarming possibilities of a vital materialist system. The overcoming of death as silence and the activity of maintaining proximity to the crack is how Deleuze, and I would argue Woolf also, justifies the activity of thinking critically, clinically, creatively. We think to infinity, against the terror of insanity, through the horror of the void, in the wilderness of mental landscapes fit only for werewolves. We think with and against the shadow of death dangling in front of our eyes. But thinking in this intensive mode is also a gesture of affirmation of and hope for sustainability and endurance, not in the mode of liberal moderation but rather as a radical experiment with thresholds of sustainability. This is neither pietistic indifference nor nihilistic self-destruction but the only way to honour life as intensity.

In his *Abécédaire* Deleuze discusses with Claire Parnet the question of the limits of sustainability in terms of addiction. Reminiscing on his own early alcoholism, Deleuze praises the importance of both experimenting and learning to stop in time. He argues that the limit or frame for the alterations induced by alcohol is to be set with reference not so much to the last glass, because that is the glass that is going to kill you. Instead, you need to stop at the second to last. The second to last glass is the one that has already been and thus is going to allow you to survive, to last, to endure—and consequently also to go on drinking again later.<sup>30</sup> A true addict stops at the second to last glass, one removed from the fatal sip or last shot. A death-bound, microfascist entity, however, usually shoots straight for the last one. That gesture prevents or denies the expression of the desire to start again tomorrow, that is to say, to repeat that second to last shot and thus to endure avoiding the black hole into which the subject dissolves. Addiction is not an opening up, but a narrowing-down of the field of possible becomings. But this negative mode of relation also expresses an affirmative truth, namely that life is pure intensity.

Learning to experiment with the second to last glass is a very pragmatic and realistic ethics of how to deal with the sense of cracking up under the multiple forces and intensities of a life that gets too much. This is why alcoholism, like all addictions, is an addiction to the too-muchness of life, not the courting of death: it determines the need to drink anew and drink again. Or rather what Deleuze calls 'of having drunk anew', stopping at the second to last step, in order to triumph over the too-muchness of the present.<sup>31</sup> The ethical position with relation to alcoholism, as in other similar states of self-destruction, is to take equal distance from two related pitfalls. One is the moralistic condemnation in the name of a belief in the intrinsic value of life. The other is the altruistic compassion for what is perceived as the alcoholic's inability to make something of themselves. Both these attitudes were painfully on display in the many obituaries published after Woolf's suicide.<sup>32</sup> The other charge made against her was her pacifism and anti-nationalism, of course, particularly by many imperialist and nationalist women. But these voices miss the point that states of alleged self-destruction are a subject's way of coping with life; they are modes of negotiating with the ethics of endurance, in a life defined as *zoe*, constantly dealing with the line of cracking up. This is the opposite to the moralist condemnation of negative pathological states; it is a way of recognizing the cost we are prepared to pay to live with and in intensities. It assumes that life is negotiations with intensities and with the pain of those intensities. Ethics consists in reworking the pain into thresholds of sustainability: cracking, but holding it, still.

The ethical life means learning to endure more, learning to live and to pursue the affirmative by processing more and more of the negativity of the times, pursuing together affirmative relations, projects and encounters. Affirmative ethics is a way of putting 'active' back into activism. It gives us a politics that is guided by an ethics of joyful affirmation of our ability together to transform the negative. In other words, for an ethics of sustainability it is always already a question of life and death, and learning to dose and to experiment is part of the process of learning to live otherwise and intensively. It is a question of rhythms and dosages, styles of repetition, and coordination or resonance; experiments in how much of the negative we can transform together to construct alternatives. It is a matter of unfolding out and enfolding in the complex and multi-layered forces of *bios-zoe* as a deeply inhuman force. This is the opposite of the microfascist scapegoating and superficial toxic optimism that relinquishes people of all responsibilities by blaming

others and appealing to a strongman who is going to solve all their problems. Cultivating affirmation of *potentia* is a way of shaping ethics in the direction of non-fascist, relational sustainability. Ethics does not aim at mastery, but at the transformation of negative into positive passions.

Obviously, this means that it is impossible to set one standard that will suit all; a differential approach becomes necessary. What bodies are capable of doing or not doing is biologically, physically, psychically, historically, sexually and emotionally specific: singular and hence partial. Consequently, the thresholds of sustainable becomings also mark their limits. In this respect, the statement 'I can't take anymore', far from being the lament of a failing subject, is an ethical statement. It is the lyrical lament of a subject-in-process who is shot through with waves of intensity, like a set of fulgurations that illuminate self-awareness, tearing open fields of self-knowledge in the encounter with and configuration of others. Learning to recognize thresholds, borders or limits is thus crucial to the work of the understanding and to the process of becoming. 'I can't take anymore' is the recognition of a limit, acknowledging the importance of the pursuit of affirmation *until* one can no more. We do need sustainable relational systems as experimental ethical systems, experimenting with how much of this world we can take. We need to deal with the crack in a non-moralistic, pragmatic manner – the soft, aching pain of the soul that Virginia Woolf describes with such precision – in order to try to achieve some sustainability, some balance. For people like Woolf caught in the passions of the mind, an overdose of writing is a sort of addiction, as is the compulsion to go on reading. The boundaries between these and other 'normalized' life support systems is therefore one of degrees, not of kind. If life is not a self-evident category, if 'how much can I take?' is an ethically viable question, then whatever gets you through the day and night is an ethically neutral practice, a statement which points to your own patterns of sustainability. Accepting the need for existential props is a suitable way of handling our experimentation with the intensive, as well as an exemplification of the problem of how to be an ethical subject-in-becoming, until one cannot do so any longer.

#### SUICIDE

Commenting on suicide, Deleuze – who will himself choose this way to terminate his own existence – put it very clearly: you can suppress your own life, in its specific and radically immanent form, and still affirm the potency (*potentia*) of life as *zoe*-, geo- and techno-centred

processes of impersonal becomings.<sup>33</sup> This is especially true in cases where deteriorating health or social conditions may seriously hinder your power to affirm, to joyfully endure and to co-construct social horizons of hope. This is no Christian affirmation of Life nor transcendental delegation of meanings and values to categories higher than the embodied self. Quite on the contrary, it is the ethics of radical immanence; the intelligence of immanent flesh that states with every single breath that the life in you is not marked by any signifier and it most certainly does not bear your name. An awareness of the absolute difference between intensities, or incorporeal affects, and the specific effect on affective embodied subjects is crucial to the ethics of affirmation and to the ethics of choosing one's own death. Death is the unsustainable, but it can generate affirmation. Deleuze, following Blanchot, links the act of suppressing one's failing body, as in suicide or euthanasia, to an ethics of assertion of the joyfulness and positivity of life, which necessarily translates into the refusal to lead a degraded existence. This notion rests on a fundamental distinction between personal and impersonal death. The former is linked to the suppression of the individualized ego, the latter is beyond the ego: a death that is always ahead of me. 'I' may die, but the life in me goes on. As André Colombat comments in the context of Deleuze's suicide:

[death] is the extreme form of my power to become other or something else. Death is an absolute and dynamic fissure that does not define the 'possible' but that which will never end, the virtual that never gets accomplished, the unending and unceasing through which 'I' lose the power to die.<sup>34</sup>

In other words, in a vital neo-materialist perspective, the emphasis on the impersonality of life is echoed by an analogous reflection on death. Life being an impersonal, or rather an a-personal force – *zoe* in its magnificent indifference to the interests of humans – also means that death is no less so. Death is not a failure or the expression of a structural weakness at the heart of life, it is part and parcel of its generative cycles. 'I meant to write about death,' says Woolf, 'only life came breaking in as usual'. Woolf concludes, in one of the multiple suicide notes she left behind, by thanking Leonard for the love and happiness he had given her:

I feel certain that I am going mad again: I feel we cant go through another of these terrible times. And I shant recover this time. [...] So I am doing what seems the best thing to do. [...] I dont think two people could have been happier till this terrible disease came. I cant fight it any longer [...] What I want to say is that I owe all the happiness of my life to you.<sup>35</sup>



The life in ‘me’ does not, indeed, bear my name; ‘I’ does not own it; ‘I’ is only passing through. And right now, at this particular point, ‘I’ has reached the uttermost boundary of sustainability. ‘Everything has gone from me’, writes Woolf, ‘but the certainty of your goodness’.<sup>36</sup> On this gesture of affirmation, of the profound goodness of life, she steps out. The rest is the ‘roar which lies on the other side of silence’.<sup>37</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 See Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019); and *Posthuman Feminism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022).
- 2 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 215.
- 3 For an introduction to *zoe*-centred egalitarianism, see Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).
- 4 Derek Ryan, *Virginia Woolf and the Materiality of Theory: Sex, Animals, Life* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).
- 5 Braidotti, *Posthuman Feminism*.
- 6 Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Hogarth Press, 1931), p. 86.
- 7 T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (1922), in *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), pp. 51–76 (p. 61).
- 8 Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006).
- 9 Braidotti, *Transpositions*, p. 47.
- 10 Benjamin Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010); Yann Boulan-Moulier, *Cognitive Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).
- 11 Luce Irigaray, *Speculum de l'autre femme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974).
- 12 Rosi Braidotti, ‘Intensive Genre and the Demise of Gender’, *Angelaki*, 13.2 (2008), 45–57. Also see Braidotti, *Transpositions*, pp. 144–203.
- 13 This thesis is defended more fully in Braidotti, *Posthuman Feminism*.
- 14 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).
- 15 Sylvia Plath, ‘Daddy’, in *The Collected Poems*, edited by Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), pp. 222–224 (pp. 223–224).
- 16 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, edited by David Bradshaw and Stuart N. Clarke (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), p. 27.
- 17 See also Virginia Woolf's comments on Hitlerism in her short essay ‘Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid’.
- 18 As argued by Genevieve Lloyd in her remarkable study of Spinoza, *Part of Nature: Self Knowledge in Spinoza's 'Ethics'* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

- 19 Yves Citton and Frédéric Lordon, *Spinoza et les sciences sociales. De la puissance de la multitude à l'économie des affects* (Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2008).
- 20 Braidotti, *The Posthuman*.
- 21 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, translated by Josefine Nauckhoff, *Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
- 22 Virginia Woolf, 'On Being Ill', in *The Essay of Virginia Woolf: Volume 4, 1925–1928*, edited by Andrew McNeillie (New York and London: Harcourt, 1994), pp. 317–330.
- 23 See Peter Hallward, *Out of this World* (London: Penguin Books, 2006).
- 24 Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Volume 2: 1920–24* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 167.
- 25 Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations: 1972–1990*, translated by Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 154.
- 26 Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, edited by Constantin V. Boundas and translated by Mark Lester with Charles J. Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).
- 27 Maurice Blanchot, *The Instant of My Death*, translated by Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000). See also Braidotti, *Transpositions*, pp. 204–262.
- 28 'Immanence: A Life' is the title of Deleuze's suicide note, one of the most beautiful texts on what it means to live and to die, and to prepare death in life and as life. See Gilles Deleuze, 'Immanence: A Life', in *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*, translated by Anne Boyman (New York: Zone Books, 2001), pp. 25–34.
- 29 Woolf, 'On Being Ill', pp. 317–330.
- 30 Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Abécédaire*, 3 videotapes (Paris: Sodaperaga, 1996). English release: *From A to Z*, DVD, translated by Charles J. Stivale (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012).
- 31 Deleuze, *Negotiations*, p. 160.
- 32 See for an overview: Sybil Oldfield, *Afterwords: Letters on the Death of Virginia Woolf* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005).
- 33 Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*.
- 34 André Colombat, 'Deleuze's Death as an Event', *Man and World*, 29.3 (1996), 235–249 (p. 241).
- 35 Virginia Woolf, *Leave the Letters Till We're Dead: The Letters of Virginia Woolf, 1936–1941*, edited by Nigel Nicolson (London: The Hogarth Press, 1980), p. 481.
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, edited by Bert G. Hornback (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), p. 124.