

Research Article

Anna Wiktorja Potoczny*

“Give It Branches & Roots”: Virginia Woolf and the Vegetal Event of Literature

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Abstract: This article examines Virginia Woolf’s figurations of her writing process on the basis of her published diaries with particular attention to vegetal imagery and metaphor. Employing insights from critical plant studies, specifically the works of Michael Marder, and biosemiotics, specifically those of Wendy Wheeler, I investigate the image of fluid, open-ended, multiplicitous, and non-appropriative vegetal (non-)self as convergent with Woolf’s view of the writing subject. Further, I argue that writing, as presented by the modernist author, requires the suspension of conscious ideation and increased attention to the pre-conceptual and therefore bears the trace of what Marder terms “plant-thinking.” Referring to the biosemiotic concept of abductive logic, I propose that the image of writing emerging from Woolf’s diary possesses a necessary embodied, intuitive, and relational component, characteristic and continuous with semiosis that pervades the entirety of more-than-human biological life. Finally, drawing on Marder’s reconceptualisation of the event according to the specificity of the vegetal, I suggest that literature, for Woolf, constitutes just such a vegetal event – both rooted and proliferating, unfolding towards exteriority and predicated upon chance rather than the logic of finality.

Keywords: biosemiotics, critical plant studies, Virginia Woolf

“[W]hat makes anything a sign is the attention paid to it” (Wheeler, 2016, p. 44).

In her recent work *Rural Hours: The Country Lives of Virginia Woolf*, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Rosamond Lehmann, Baker (2024) pays close attention to the time when, from 3 August 1917 on, following a two-year period of convalescence, Virginia Woolf devoted herself to the everyday business of housework and detailed observations of the daily reality of country life, both of which she would meticulously record in a long-unpublished diary known as Asheham Diary (Asheham being an East Sussex cottage occupied by the Woolfs at the time). According to Baker, these curiously impersonal entries, betraying little if anything of the author’s interior life and maintaining an outward focus towards commonplace occurrences, nevertheless indicate that the period was for her a formative one, facilitating a deepening of attention as well as “a kind of fractured writing, perhaps, that owed much to circumstance” (2024, p. 6) and remained closely tied to her physical environment. Referring specifically to the Asheham Diary, the biographer posits that “[l]ike a rambling plant, it grew outwards, forming a connective tissue with” (Baker, 2024, p. 19) Woolf’s subsequent works. The botanical image strikes one as particularly fitting, strongly resembling Woolf’s own comments on her personal and published writings and the interconnections between the two. Indeed, what if we consider vegetal imagery, including the vegetal metaphor, as more than merely a figurative device, instead entertaining the possibility of a plant-like nature of writing itself, of a deep affinity between the literary and “what is commonly thought small” (Woolf, 1966, p. 107), the vegetal?

The early twentieth century was arguably a period of a dizzying shift with respect to human self-understanding, one brought about by sociopolitical circumstances and technological changes, as well as influenced by contemporaneous philosophical and intellectual developments. Among the latter, critics tend to list Henri

* **Corresponding author: Anna Wiktorja Potoczny**, Faculty of Modern Languages, Institute of English Studies, University of Warsaw, Warsaw, Republic of Poland, e-mail: a.potoczny@uw.edu.pl

Bergson's notion of vital matter, or *élan vital*, demonstrating the modernist preoccupation with the continuity between the human subject and material exteriority (for instance, Adkins 2022a). Attending to biological life specifically, in her ecofeminist reading of Woolf's *oeuvre*, Scott (2012) notes the ambiguous presence of other-than-human natural world across the British modernist tradition, with certain authors (Ezra Pound, T. E. Hulme, Wyndham Lewis) and movements (imagism and vorticism) abhorring the feminine-coded, corporeal, and primordial imagery employed or associations evoked by authors such as H.D., Djuna Barnes and, of course, Woolf. According to Scott, the consistent incorporation of the more-than-human into the (mostly women) writers' literary projects – be it in the context of trauma, maternity, queerness, or spirituality – points to the presence of a “green[er]” strand within modernism (2012, p. 14). Later works on Woolf indicate a similar kind of porosity at the core of writing as such. Chaudhuri (2021) has noted Woolf's tendency to convey her relationship with reading and the literary tradition through the image of compost-like entanglement, which contributes to an embodied view of the writing self and a profoundly tangible image of literature as such. Focusing on literature as a process, Rohman (2018) has argued for the centrality of animal embodiment as a driving force for Woolf's writing. Further, Adkins (2022b) has discussed the impersonal image of literature emerging from Woolf's late works, suggesting that she viewed a literary work as an expression of the wider, more-than-human materiality of the world. To add to these recent considerations of literature's entangled, more-than-human nature, I propose to investigate the elaborate vegetal imagery Woolf employs for her own writing process throughout her published diary alongside and together with her general reflections on literary ideation. Far beyond serving a merely ornamental function, plants are endowed here with a peculiar sort of agency, highly revelatory of the way the author conceptualised the coming-to-being of a literary text.

Coining the term *phytographia*, Vieira (2017) posits literature as “an example of porous boundary between artistic portrayals of flora and the imprints left in texts by plants themselves” (p. 218). For Woolf, plant imagery certainly seems to have been an expressive tool, helpful for conveying the workings of her mind. At the same time, I argue that the specificity of plant life continuously provided just such an “imprin[t]” (Vieira, 2017, p. 218) on how she imagined and experienced the germination of a literary work – rooted yet exuberant, unified yet multiplicitous, unselfconscious, predicated upon a period of dormancy, and inevitably open to chance. Referring to Michael Marder's work on the philosophy of plant being, I investigate the convergences between Woolf's figuration of the writing self and the philosopher's conceptualisation of plant life as multiple, open-ended, and laying no claims to identity. Further, I explore what Marder terms “plant-thinking,” together with the biosemiotic positing of meaning-making as an activity proper to all life. Specifically, I refer to the notion of thinking as non-conceptual and inconclusive, of semiosis as enabled by tactile and relational engagement with the environment, and of excess, exuberance, and creative play at the root of both organismic (including vegetal) growth and literary creation as conceptualised by Woolf, with her deep attentiveness to the liveliness of vegetation as an image (or metaphor) for the contingency of creative work. The latter consequently ties into Marder's attempt to rethink the notion of the event through vegetal life, leading me to propose that, for Woolf, the emergence of a literary work constituted just such a vegetal event: one involving germination devoid of a clearly delineated beginning of ending, followed by dissemination dependent upon chance, productive of an other whose growth remains contingent on otherness, including environmental circumstances.

Proceeding to discuss the entanglement of human and vegetal embodiment manifest across Woolf's diary, I employ Marder's proposed view of the human psyche as an extension of the vegetal soul, which, I claim, bears resemblance to the idea, put forward by biosemioticians such as Wheeler (2016), of deeper evolutionary strata, non-conscious layers within the mind, underlying and antecedent to human culture, and serving as a condition of possibility for meaning-making. Human ideation, according to Wheeler, proceeds according to a so-called abductive logic (as opposed to formal logic), driven by embodied, “enworlded” intuition (2016, p. 135). The entangled, more-than-human imaginary emerging from Woolf's diary, especially the vibrantly agential figurations of the vegetal through which the writer would convey the state of her mind, provide deeper insight into the real, material significance of plant life for her vision and experience of the creative process.

1 “The Juice of Usual Things”: Towards the Vegetal Self

Much has been written on the porous and receptive view of subjectivity across Woolf’s oeuvre, as well as the ever-present, fluid, and shifting tension between singularity and multiplicity as they pertain to a work of literature, the writing subject and, notably, the writing body (for instance, Adkins, 2022b; Chaudhuri, 2021; Scott, 2012). The seeming contradiction, or rather the determination to hold the two together, allowing them to interweave, remain essential to the writer’s literary vision, with her diary being the space where she consistently negotiates between the self and not-self, profound singularity and radical openness, fragmentariness, and unity. The organic world provides her with a strikingly productive framework for expressing that ambivalence, and I propose that the unique ontology of vegetal life – the kind of life Woolf was, after all, intimately familiar with – offered a pattern for the flourishing of the creative mind and for the maintaining of a literary community, premised upon a necessary rejection of an appropriative form of selfhood.

Throughout his highly influential work *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*, Marder (2013) repeatedly posits plant being as not only a descriptive model of thought but also an ethically desirable one. He asserts that to think of a plant, one should essentially think with the plant, doing away with objectifying generalisations and submitting oneself to the indeterminate nature of the vegetal (Marder, 2013). Discussing flowers, and specifically a sunflower, Marder notes how the ontology of the plant involves being “both one and many,” comprising a multiplicity of florets, each a somewhat independent being that nevertheless contributes to the whole of what “we know as a sunflower” (2013, p. 7). The philosopher further emphasises the provisional and non-unifying vision of identity when he claims that “the divisible vegetal psyche,” whether in humans or in plants, facilitates “fleeting collectivities” and “loose assemblages” that only seemingly form singular individuals or monolithic structures (2013, p. 44). Similarly, reflecting on the pleasant bustle and variety of her everyday life, especially social and community life, Woolf feels her conviction reinforced that “we’re splinters & mosaics; not, as they used to hold, immaculate, monolithic, consistent wholes” (1978, p. 314). The curious combination of “splinters” and “mosaics” works to create a view of necessary fragmentation as a condition for any sort of perceived totality. Simultaneously, especially when engaging with the wider society, Woolf seeks to capture moments of transitory yet not-quite-illusory commonality, as when discussing “parties,” whose only “merit” is “that individuals compose differently from what they do in private,” allowing one to “ge[t] wholes; general impressions: from the many things being combined” (1978, p. 322). Writing itself, too, works to create a real yet fleeting impression of non-assimilative totality, as when Woolf recalls thinking “something very profound about the synthesis of my being: how only writing composes it: how nothing makes a whole unless I am writing,” immediately adding “now I have forgotten what seemed so profound” (1982, p. 161). One could infer that any kind of wholeness must necessarily be fluid and processual, elusive, and near impossible to accurately pinpoint.

Interestingly, Woolf muses on her social and writing selves, clearly indicating that one constitutes more of a self than the other. Rather than a distinction between rigid individuality and dispersed multiplicity, the two forms of subjectivity she ponders on are the writing one, essentially a kind of focused, outward-looking, receptive, and affective yet impersonal mode of engagement with the world, and the social one, endowed with an identity though still fragmentary and shifting. Conceiving a plan for how to ease herself back into writing *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) after a somewhat stagnant period, Woolf concludes:

one must become externalised; very, very concentrated, all at one point; not having to draw upon the scattered parts of one’s character, living in the brain. ... [W]hen I write I’m merely a sensibility. Sometimes I like being Virginia, but only when I’m scattered & various & gregarious. Now, so long as we are here, I’d like to be only a sensibility. (1978, p. 193)

Neither of these alternatives involves a closed-off unity, since even interiority requires assembling “scattered” elements of oneself, much like when Woolf unambiguously asserts “I’m 20 people” (1978, 115). Yet to draw creatively from solitude, she aspires to become a “sensibility,” to abandon the framework of personality for the purposes of pre-conceptual sense experience, the profound significance of which I shall explore. Here, moreover, Woolf expresses a desire to remain “entirely oriented toward exteriority” (Marder, 2013, p. 66), which, according to Marder, constitutes a unique quality of plant-being, a kind of quite literal mediation between the elements, the capacity to channel one’s immediate material environment – though, notably, without assimilation or appropriation, preserving, in Woolf’s own terms, “the essential thing” (1982, p. 172), or “things in themselves” (1982, p. 126).

Stating that “to live is already to think,” Marder discusses how the very physicality of the plant expresses, or – more appropriately – constitutes thought (2013, p. 156). If vegetal being and thinking are indistinguishable from each other, and if unconditional openness to exteriority is both proper to the plant and possibly necessary for the creative process, then Woolf conveys just such an attempt at getting closer to such a mode of expression when, struggling with what would later become her penultimate novel *The Years* (1937), she reflects on “what a grind it is embodying all these ideas, & having perpetually to expose my mind, opened & intensified as it is by the heat of creation to the blasts of the outer world” (1982, p. 289). Striving to “embod[y]” her subject – to almost become the very thing she wishes to express – she feels her mind violated by the strain of social life, unwelcome as a source of anxiety at being perceived unfavourably, leading her to wish temporarily not to think or read about herself. While one should not dismiss the mental strain that seems to have facilitated her anxiety, the fact remains that Woolf consistently worked to prevent self-consciousness from intruding upon her writing, stressing the necessity to “forget one’s own sharp absurd little personality, reputation & the rest of it” (1980, p. 169) through literary pursuits and expanding one’s intellectual circle, as well as admitting “there is too much ego in my cosmos” (1978, p. 191).

The mind, however, must remain “opened,” especially since openness by no means equals exposing oneself to violation. Woolf clearly welcomed and sought the restorative influx of otherness, whether of impressions of other people or those of her more-than-human environment, and the terms she uses to convey that desire are frequently embodied, sensual, and – indeed – vegetal. Specifically, Marder (2013) posits the nutritive capacity of plants as the factor turning multiplicity into commonality. For that to happen, however, one must prevent the interference of identity, which may otherwise cause the other to be absorbed and assimilated, deprived of alterity, with the many incorporated into the one (Marder, 2013). Hence, loosening the bounds of one’s identity enables not only creative expression but, first and foremost, an ethical approach to the world (Marder, 2013). The uniqueness and the deep ethical potential of vegetal nutrition derives from the fact that “the insatiability of nutritive desire coincides, in the plant, with the nonexistence of an autonomous self to which the other would be appropriated” (Marder, 2013, p. 41). Plants therefore reinforce their other by letting the other pass through them – and the other, for Marder, includes the whole of “inorganic nature” (2013, p. 41). For Woolf, not only does writing – and living overall – flourish by virtue of just such a non-appropriated flow of alterity, but her image for the process is frequently that of plant-like nutrition. Discussing the nourishing potential of her social life, she conveys her need “to be made supple, & to let the juice of usual things, talk, character, seep through me, quietly involuntarily before I say – Stop, & take out my pen” (Woolf, 1984, p. 124). The passage seems to suggest a multitude of impressions and influences linked together into a sort of commonality without being flattened into sameness, instead serving as the condition for the emergence of a literary work, additionally made possible by the author opening herself up to external sensations, as if deliberately putting her guard down and temporarily doing away with any sort of individual interiority.

The reverse seems to have been the case as well. Celebrating the generous, nourishing potential of her close intellectual circle, she images herself as “a flower oozing honey upon which ones friends cluster” (Woolf, 1978, p. 272), implying a kind of creative vulnerability capable of inexhaustible sharing, akin to the “powerlessness” of the plant which Marder strives to endow with ethical value (2013, p. 150). One could conclude that, for Woolf, to “grow past the fictitious shells of *our* identity” (Marder, 2013, p. 13, italics in original) is, at the very least, a creatively productive endeavour, facilitating an enlivening flow of external multiplicity through an individual (yet temporarily de-individualized) mind.

2 “Steeped My Nerves Till They Quivered”: Suspending the Mind

One ought to note that for Woolf, writing is by no means merely a matter of spontaneous, creative flows, an imprint of immediate impressions mediated directly through the mind – rather, these would normally be followed by a laborious and draining process of highly deliberate “hideous shaping & moulding” (1980, p. 301), labour whose strenuousness can be glimpsed as she refers to the “constant effort, anxiety & risk” (1982, p. 233)

necessary for cultivating a new way of expression. Unencumbered receptivity, as when she decides not to commence with her work until she “feel[s] the well full” (Woolf, 1982, p. 226) needs to be complemented with a conscious, critical engagement with the text, as when she conveys her sense of being “wedged – no, buoyant – in a floating storm of scenes at the end of my book, which must be compacted & pulled out & turned” (Woolf, 1982, p. 324) (though the terms employed here indicate more of a tactile experience than a cognitive process, a question I shall address further). Rather than argue for some kind of a concept of writing devoid of artifice, I intend to focus on Woolf’s figuration of the coming-to-being and development of an idea at what I believe to be a kind of pre-conceptual stage. For the present purpose, Marder’s plant-thinking constitutes a particularly fitting conceptualisation of creative agency before, beyond, and without formal reason due to the philosopher’s attention to passive, non-conscious receptivity of plant life as well as the playful exuberance of vegetal growth and creative proliferation. Equally, biosemiotics, beyond providing the crucial insight that all biological organisms can and do communicate with the use of signs, posits instinctive, embodied encounters with the world as the basic precondition for meaning-making, a subject to be explored below.

Discussing vegetal memory as a material “register” (Marder, 2013, p. 156) of events, quite literally stamped onto the body of the plant, Marder coins the term “non-conscious intentionality” (2013, p. 42), referring to a kind of unfolding occurring as “meanings proliferate without the intervention of conscious representations” (2013, p. 154). While the human mind only ever performs a conceptual projection of memories, the vegetal body actually preserves them (Marder, 2013). Although what follows concerns creative ideation rather than memory, I would nevertheless like to suggest that Woolf’s reflections on her writing regularly point to a certain continuity between non-conscious living and the sort of thinking that seems to precede conceptual thought (Marder’s thinking “without thinking” [2013, p. 165]). Discussing her own attempt to write “the greatest book in the world,” one consisting exclusively “of one’s thoughts,” she speculates:

Suppose one could catch them before they became “works of art.” Catch them hot & sudden as they rise in the mind—walking up Asheham hill for instance. Of course one cannot; for the process of language is slow & deluding. (Woolf, 1980, p. 102)

The entry seems to suggest that the inevitable interference of language makes the writer unable to capture the raw, unprocessed idea, causing a delay that annihilates the immediacy of the original impression. The embodied and tangible nature of the process deserves attention, since for Marder, drawing here on Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the vast majority of our – human – corporeal existence follows the very same trajectory as the vegetal being’s striving for reproduction and nourishment, a sort of objectless “pre-reflective intentionality” (2013, p. 160). Just like, according to the philosopher, unconscious movements of the body activated to perform more deliberate actions point to the predominance of a dispersed, decentred sort of thinking unmediated by conscious logic, so Woolf’s entry suggests a similarly ungraspable creative impulse that she imagines to surface exactly when she does not intentionally pursue a writing project. Neither does clarity appear to be consistently productive. Expressing her astonishment with the “shifting & vacillating” quality of the mind, Woolf reflects on her mental state as “[y]esterday broody & drowsy all day long, writing easily, & yet without strict consciousness, as though fluent under drugs; today apparently clear headed, yet unable to put one sentence after another” (1978, p. 59). As we shall see, certain suspension of the sharpness of the conscious mind might activate a different, dormant kind of creativity.

One should note that for Woolf, passive, fruitful submergence and exposure to exteriority consistently interlap with a kind of a search that does not exactly seem to have a clearly delineated object. Similarly, Marder posits plant intentionality as one straddling the distinction between passive and active through both passive growth and active seeking for nutrients – yet with no object that could be appropriated and no self that could perform any sort of appropriation (2013). On the one hand, Woolf reminisces about a generous overflow of aesthetic and sensual pleasure, affecting her on a deeply physical level, rendering her temporarily passive and plant-like:

After weeding I had to go in out of the sun; & how the quiet lapped me round! & then how full I got, to be quite just: & how the beauty brimmed over me & steeped my nerves till they quivered, as I have seen a water plant quiver when the water overflowed it. (1978, 301)

On the other hand, she discusses what may be described as a kind of creative intentionality directed towards ultimate literary fulfilment that nevertheless eludes clear conceptualisation, referred to as “it,” “something,” or “thing,” as when she confesses “I have some restless searcher in me,” then musing further: “I have a great & astonishing sense of something there, which is ‘it’ – It is not exactly beauty that I mean. It is that the thing is in itself enough: satisfactory; achieved” (Woolf, 1980, p. 62). Here, she conveys her experience through deliberately indefinite terms, such as “something,” whereas, reflecting on her literary “temperament,” she attempts to elucidate her deeply ingrained impulse “always to follow, blindly instinctively with a sense of leaping over a precipice” something that eludes linguistic conceptualisation: “the call of – the call of – ” (Woolf, 1980, p. 203). The liveliness of the writer’s senses, the suspension of fixity inherent to her creative search seem to be exactly what, according to Marder, characterises the non-identity of the plant that, importantly, constitutes the vegetal potential of human beings as well – “unrest, reflecting the plasticity and restlessness of life itself” (2013, p. 162).

Curiously, while Woolf frequently employs figurations of thinking that are either explicitly other-than-human or can be read as such to convey modes of engagement with the world which facilitate freedom from constrictive identity or self-consciousness, Marder theorises the reverse. He deconstructs the philosophical notion according to which one’s ontology relies upon one’s “manners of thinking,” a notion traced all the way back to Aristotle, according to whom a “human who thinks like a plant,” i.e. failing to follow formal logic and the principle of non-contradiction, “literally becomes a plant” (2013, p. 164). The plant, then, never coincides with itself, its lack of self-identity stemming from its heterotemporality and inextricability from its environment of growth. The “non-identity” theorised by Marder (2013, p. 162) can here be read alongside Adkins’ (2022b) argument regarding the impersonality of the writing subject that emerges from Woolf’s late works. The critic observes that the kind of impersonality theorised and implemented by Woolf, unlike the one famously conceptualised by T. S. Eliot, does not involve the writer effacing herself completely but rather allowing the external, more-than-human world to overflow and exceed her individual voice. The writing self never fully overlaps with the wider materiality of the world she channels (Adkins, 2022b).

3 “Like Breaking Through Gorse”: Sensing Thinking

To further elaborate on the question of non-objectifying “foraging” and the vegetal potential of the human, I shall explore Marder’s claim that the latter’s intellectual capabilities are not unlike “the sensitivity of the roots seeking moisture in the dark of the soil, the antennae of a snail probing the way ahead” (2013, p. 27), but rather that human ideation constitutes an extension of plant vitality. Conceptualising the search for meaning as intuitive, embodied, animal- or plant-like, one could refer to Wheeler’s (2016) discussion of abduction and the general nature of semiosis that perfuses all life. The critic addresses the notion that semiosis, or meaning-making, are not essentially human qualities but rather are shared by all organisms, constituting the very driving force of the development and inventive persistence of biological life at large, an insight at the core of biosemiotics – the study of other-than-human sign systems. As Michael J. Hathaway emphasises, the claim that creatures actively interpret the world undermines the vision of said creatures as mechanistic and capable only of automatic reacting, rather than active, conscious, and informed responding, to their environment (2022). Beyond linking the two domains normally considered distinct – other-than-human creaturely life and the making of culture – the biosemiotic considerations to which I refer highlight the centrality of the knowing body and the resulting creative potential of (seemingly) pre-intellectual sense experience that supplements any kind of deliberate effort at rational reasoning. I therefore propose that the attunement to one’s own plant-thinking converges with the attunement to one’s own embodied knowledge, a subject to which I now turn.

Indeed, Woolf’s diary reveals a clear tendency on the author’s part to employ bodily terms while discussing her creative search and her literary intuition. Having had *Mrs Dalloway* copied and having put the finishing touch on *The Common Reader* (1925), finding herself “free at least to write out one of two more stories which have accumulated” – an expression suggesting both alterity and materiality of literature, as if a substance somewhat outside the writer’s control – she links creative thinking to eating, though here animal rather than plant nutrition as she writes: “I do feel fairly sure that I am grazing as near as I can to my own

ideas, & getting a tolerable shape for them” (Woolf, 1978, p. 325). Thinking appears throughout Woolf’s diary as a set of other, embodied processes – nutritive, or tactile. The same seems true for living, and if we follow Marder’s account of plant logic, the two can certainly be treated as continuous:

This progress through life is made immensely interesting by trying to grasp all these developments as one passes. I feel as if I were putting out my fingers tentatively on [...] either side as I grope down a tunnel, rough with odds & ends. (Woolf, 1978, 311)

A similar decentring of vision in favour of exploratory touch can be glimpsed when, having commented on feeling “stuck fast in that book” – the book being *The Waves* (1931) – in fact, “glued to it, like a fly on gummed paper,” Woolf proceeds to convey the sensation of arriving at a central idea (though, again, one that eludes definition at the moment of appearance):

Sometimes I am out of touch; but go on; then again feel that I have at last, by violent measures—like breaking through gorse—set my hands on something central. Perhaps I can now say something quite straight out; & at length; & need not be always casting a line to make my book the right shape. (1980, 285)

The immediacy of touch – specifically, of the path to creative discovery leading through tactile interactions with plants, gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) being, after all, a type of wildflower – contrasts here with the indirect “fishing” for a proper literary form. I propose that what Woolf expresses can be read as what Wheeler refers to as an “inarticulate sense of aboutness and a feeling for life” (2016, p. 172), which constitute a precondition for semiosis, or meaning-making. Prior to any kind of rational reasoning, one must first experience sensation; to “make sense of” things requires actual senses (Hathaway, 2022, p. 77, italics in original). The core idea put forward by Wheeler is that of the abductive logic of meaning, the term ‘abduction’ originating from the works of the American semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce. Put simply, she argues that semiosis, like life, proceeds not merely by means of formal logic (syllogism) but, to a large extent, through metaphor – and both metaphor and abduction involve the “carrying over of meaning” from one domain to another (Wheeler, 2016, p. 165). The interplay of similarity and difference structures the emergence of life at all levels of both natural and cultural evolution, forming a pattern that resides deep within human “body-minds” (Wheeler, 2016, p. 136) and continues to inform our ways of knowing. While the workings of the abductive process are largely unconscious, depending, as they do, on embodied knowledge produced by billions of years of evolution, human creative and intellectual activity nevertheless additionally requires “self-conscious effort” (Wheeler, 2016, p. 173). The nature of Woolf’s literary explorations as both passive, requiring one to put down the guard of consciousness, becoming a receptacle for ideas and impressions, and effortful at the stage of artistically processing these ideas, has been referred to above. It is suggested by a number of diary entries, such as the one when, addressing her seeming inability to work at what would later become *The Waves*, she states self-reflectively, likening a too-early interference into the process to destroying vegetation: “[t]his book would form in me could I let my mind lie asleep, calm like a tideless sea; but all this time I’m breaking my mind up; destroying the growth underneath” (Woolf, 1980, p. 249). The vegetal layer of the mind that ought to remain undisturbed evokes the “period of gestation” (2016, p. 135) that Wheeler mentions when elaborating on the twofold nature of the creative process (applicable to all kinds of human activity, including art and science alike; 2016). She notes the proved and profound value of “distractedness” and “vagueness,” positing that “too much specificity may miss what only time and process will reveal” (Wheeler, 2016, p. 135). One could here recall Woolf’s observation, quoted above, that her foggy and sleepy mind, “as though fluent under drugs,” nevertheless produced writing with astonishing ease (1978, p. 59).

Additionally, there seems to be a tight link between vegetation and recuperation, as when the writer decides “I am going to wrap my brain in green dock leaves for a few days” (Woolf, 1982, p. 338), or when, longingly imagining herself hiking through the countryside, she visualises her “brain laid up in sweet lavender, so sane & cool, & ripe for the morrows task” (Woolf, 1978, p. 123). Plants figure here as a means for regenerative suspension of self-conscious cognitive activity. Beyond haziness and semi-conscious ideation, Wheeler proceeds to juxtapose Pierce’s abductive logic and what François Jacob refers to as “night science,” a kind of inquiry that follows intuition rather than traditionally understood logic, frequently encountering dead-ends, guided by premonitions of something being “there” rather than by a clearly conceptualised aim, an aim

which only becomes known when actually arrived at (2016, p. 137). Another one of Woolf's vegetal figurations seems to illustrate something akin to Wheeler's claim that "[t]he path of inquiry is a wandering one" (2016, p. 136). Referring to her diary, the writer expresses her "hope that this book is now a natural growth of [hers] – a rather dishevelled, rambling plant, running a yard of green stalk for every flower" (Woolf, 1977, p. 150). Regardless of whether we understand the flower here as referring to a laboriously attained creative insight within the diary itself or as an illumination pertaining to works yet to be written (since, after all, Woolf did consider the diary a kind of rehearsal space for her published writings; see 1978, 319), the implications of the entry are multifold. First, she imagines an intimate connection between writing, her own mind, possibly her own body ("growth of mine"), vegetation, of course, as well as the immediate environment, as she then adds that "[t]he metaphor comes from Asheham" (Woolf, 1977, p. 150). Similarly, biosemiotics posits all these as deeply, materially entangled, as "culture, nature, environment, and mind are intertwined, living and communicative sign systems" (Wheeler, 2016, p. 4), with the mind being necessarily "embodied, enworlded and relational" (Wheeler, 2016, p. 135). Second, like the "dishevelled" and "rambling" plant, the path to creative proliferation does not follow a linear trajectory, instead roaming persistently, like a stalk that may or may not produce a flower at any given moment. The plant-like nature of writing – diary-writing at the very least – may additionally stand for the inherently intuitive and instinctual character of all kinds of human inquiry, given rise to by semiosis proper to all life.

While Wheeler discusses semiotic freedom as an evolutionary inheritance, to be found at all levels of organismic life, Marder demonstrates the link between human and vegetal freedom. He identifies "certain spontaneous and unexplained enjoyment" (2013, p. 142) as the site of the latter, the non-finality and non-teleology of the plant by virtue of which it points exclusively to itself, free from the task of expressing any kind of universal truth. The beauty of the plant cannot be measured against any sort of ideal standard or put to any utilitarian uses, refusing to follow the logic of productivity (Marder, 2013). Drawing from Friedrich Schiller's work on material and aesthetic freedom and play, Marder argues for an immediate connection between the two, with the uninterested enjoyment characteristic for other-than-human playful activity providing the basis for the freedom of human imagination, frivolously producing images by "sensuously receiv[ing] such externally produced impressions" (2013, p. 146). The philosopher then proceeds to posit, after Schiller and Nietzsche, that such imaginative play requires the bracketing of formal cultural standards of expression, manifesting certain wild abandon. Admittedly, one could question to what extent Woolf, a representative of high-brow literary avant-garde, was willing to suspend her scrutiny of form. Nevertheless, a level of playfulness, a kind of fanciful flight of the imagination were apparently involved, since she reflects, as if following the workings of her creative mind from a distance, on how her "imagination picked up used & tossed aside all the images & symbols [she] had prepared" (Woolf, 1982, p. 11). A similar kind of frivolity characterises the plant, which, as Marder indicates, produces redundant elements – buds, "roots, branches, flowers, and leaves" (2013, p. 144) – that do not necessarily serve any higher, productive aims, such as the preservation of the species. Introducing corrections to the typescript of *The Waves*, Woolf expresses a wish for freedom from rigour, a kind of freedom that can be provided either by pursuing a literary flight of fancy or, alternatively, by roaming freely over the countryside: "to seek relief from this incessant correction (I am doing the interludes) & write a few words carelessly. Still better, to write nothing; to tramp over the downs, blown like thistle. as irresponsible" (1982, 34). The exuberant dissemination of thistledown serves as an image of the freedom of the creative mind, a potentially aimless sort of pleasure to counterbalance more structured work. The two seemingly pointless yet joyful activities, curiously juxtaposed as if closely connected, seem to correspond to the two kinds of play discussed by Schiller and Marder. Continuing the previous reflection, the writer points to her new preferred use of images, liberated from a pre-prepared sequence, never exhausting their own meaning: "not in set pieces, as I had tried at first, coherently, but simply as images; never making them work out; only suggest" (Woolf, 1982, p. 11). Suggesting implies the living, open nature of the sign, suggesting something unspecified to an equally unspecified recipient. To successfully produce new meanings, semiosis requires just such relational openness to the world.

4 “A Dangling Thread”: Literature as a Vegetal Event

How does such a suggestive, lively image come to be? Woolf immediately proceeds to add: “[t]hus I hope to have kept the sound of the sea & the birds, dawn, & garden subconsciously present, doing their work under ground” (1982, p. 11), thereby implying certain spatial logic structuring the creative mind and the emergent work – with something of vital importance taking place “under ground” (1982, p. 11). The only partly controllable quality of the emergence of fiction does not, therefore, exclude certain material groundedness – rather, either a work of literature itself or literary imagination at work (or both) possesses a deeper stratum, with the very materiality of the author’s physical environment driving the process on a certain level. As I have demonstrated above, Woolf viewed the coming-to-being of an idea, a “spurt” (1982, p. 103) of creativity, as an only vaguely foreseen occurrence amidst the slow process of working at and seeking something largely undefined. As Marder suggests in an interview with Prudence Gibson, “an artist should let expression grow and develop until the process is interrupted by an act it has been preparing all along” (2018, p. 32) to arrive at a mode of creativity that aligns with plant-thinking. Indeed, both interruption and growth figure across Woolf’s diaries as occurrences facilitating writing – the former, for instance, when, mentioning how she would postpone writing another novel, she expects that “[o]ne day, all of a rush, fiction will burst in” (1982, p. 74), and the latter when, referring to *The Waves* still taking shape in her mind, she resolves: “I am going to hold myself from writing till I have it impending in me: grown heavy in my mind like a ripe pear; pendant, gravid, asking to be cut or it will fall” (1980, p. 209). Both hint at a certain encounter with otherness, either as an influx as if from the outside or as something fruiting within, transgressing the boundary between the internal and the external. I now turn to literature as an occurrence – or rather an event. In an article titled “What’s Planted in the Event? On the Secret Life of a Philosophical Concept” (2016), Marder reconceptualises the philosophical notion of the event according to the logic of vegetal life. I propose that such a reformulation converges with Woolf’s accounts of the growth of a literary work – applicable, perhaps, to all literature, perhaps even to all art.

According to most of contemporary philosophy, an event constitutes an unforeseen arrival or, equally, unforeseen lack thereof, “an irruption of the future” (Marder, 2016, p. 4) whose manifestation, however, has been conceived of as uprooted, the trajectory leading to and the origin of the outcome obscured by the outcome itself. An appearance cut loose from and absorbing what came before, endowed with unambiguous finality, like “birth, death, and an encounter with the other” (Marder, 2016, p. 3), the concept of the event as hitherto posited has excluded plant-life. Unlike the human animal (as well as the majority of other-than-human animals), plants face each other while remaining rooted, expanding indefinitely and inexhaustibly while still bound to their life-source (Marder, 2016). The plant “develops *in and as the middle*, in the absence of a clearly demarcated origin” (Marder, 2016, p. 5, emphasis in original), simultaneously putting down roots and growing outwards. One could here recall Woolf’s attempt at shaping an authorial sensibility that remains rooted and vulnerable to exteriority at the same time, phrased as a question or a problem: “[h]ow am I to get the depth without becoming static?” (1982, p. 152). Specifically, a vegetal event is an “event of and as growth” (Marder, 2016, p. 5). The nature of such growth is twofold, involving the exuberant moving outside of itself of a living being, which simultaneously expands itself, yet whose “core” remains mostly unaltered (Marder, 2016, p. 5). Further, vegetal expansion, what Marder terms *excrecence*, encompasses “quantitative change” (2016, p. 5) as well as qualitative one, a sort of becoming-other of the plant. Since a plant has no strictly delineated self and perpetually directs itself towards its other, its appearance is necessarily forever incomplete, never attaining a final shape (Marder, 2016). Conceiving further ideas while still working on her novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Woolf remarks on plant-like proliferation of the news from a point of origin selected seemingly at random:

As usual, side stories are sprouting in great variety as I wind this up: a book of characters; the whole string being pulled out from some simple sentence, like Clara Pater’s, “Don’t you find that Barker’s pins have no points to them?” (1980, p. 106)

With the “sprouting” of stories, creative thinking figures as a single impulse giving rise to a differentiated abundance of novelty. More importantly, however, what seems central to the process is a kind of unfolding, not from any unambiguous source or beginning but rather out of an overheard sentence producing a “string” of a narrative. Woolf’s well-known method, which she elsewhere describes as “dig[ging] out beautiful caves

behind [her] characters” (1978, p. 263), consists of just such qualitative expansion that does not break away from its source.

An encounter with literature, including one’s own creative capabilities, is necessarily an encounter with otherness and with life. Thinking herself becoming “more & more poetic,” Woolf refers thus to either her mind or what she calls her soul: “perhaps I restrained it, & now, like a plant in a pot, it begins to crack the earthenware. Often I feel the different aspects of life bursting my mind asunder” (1978, p. 304). Whether one wills it or not, then, the unrestrained proliferation of the mind’s creative capacities is akin to the proliferation of a plant, vegetal growth towards the other – once again, life, variously understood, either as different elements of the material environment or in any other broad sense, including communal life. Woolf’s numerous diary entries mention “life break[ing] in” (1978, p. 234), productively distracting the author from interiority and provoking vivid accounts of her community or other external occurrences that clearly cannot be kept separate from personal reflection. Indeed, as Marder insists, rootedness “in the other as much as in ourselves” (2016, p. 6) constitutes a condition of possibility for our flourishing, with the opposite – excessive growing inwards – being a natural and cultural pathology. Above, I have already discussed Woolf’s perception of receptivity to exteriority as indispensable for the creative mind to go on inventing. I would like to further emphasise the spatial terms she employs to convey her perception of the process, for instance when she reflects: “I use my friends rather as giglamps: Theres another field I see: by your light. Over there’s a hill. I widen my landscape” (Woolf, 1980, p. 316). The kind of expansion through the other – here specifically one’s literary community – aligns with what Marder refers to as an “out-growth,” a manifestation of “vegetal vitality” necessary for us all to “keep growing” (2016, p. 6). A similar kind of spatial unfolding occurred for Woolf in the midst of city life, suggesting that any kind of stimulating environment, whether “natural” or social, facilitates creative proliferation originating as if outside the subject herself: “London itself perpetually attracts, stimulates, gives me a play & a story & a poem, without any trouble, save that of moving my legs through the streets” (1980, p. 186). Marder poignantly claims that outward growth has been devalued throughout most, if not all, the history of Western thought, posited as “a meaningless profusion of materiality,” leading to the breaking of a link between “meaning and matter” (2016, p. 6). Discussing the peculiarity of diary-writing, Woolf notes the creative significance of such careless spreading(-itself) of writing, additionally motivated by the very material means employed:

Still if it were not written rather faster than the fastest typewriting, if I stopped & took thought, it would never be written at all; & the advantage of the method is that it sweeps up accidentally several stray matters which I should exclude if I hesitated, but which are the diamonds of the dustheap. (1977, pp. 233–234)

The accumulation of these valuable “stray matters” (Woolf, 1977, p. 234) that would not have happened had the author stuck rigorously to a singular vision suggests that, for her, a work of literature went beyond a “singular unfolding of a particular universality” (Marder, 2016, p. 7). Characteristic of human or animal growth, which proceeds alongside a predictable trajectory, actualising the potential already inherent at the moment of conception, such a model of maturation does not overlap with that of plants which, on the contrary, exceeds the logic of potentiality by developing “branches, leaves, flowers, or fruit” (Marder, 2016, p. 7), all contingent on environmental factors rather than encoded somehow in the seed. Similarly, Woolf assumed such unforeseeable developments when planning *To the Lighthouse*. Admitting that the theme, to her mind, “may be sentimental,” she adds: “I think, though, that when I begin it I shall enrich it in all sorts of ways; thicken it; give it branches & roots which I do not perceive now” (Woolf, 1980, p. 36). Growing unpredictably, like a vegetal being, a work of literature emerges from a mind suffused with and nourished by environmental stimuli: “[t]he sun is flooding the downs. The leaves of the plant in the window are transparent with light. My brain will be filling” (Woolf, 1982, p. 56). The writing process as imagined here resembles the growth of a plant insofar as it does not follow a pre-planned pattern, only “a loose plan for development, eventful and highly responsive to the environment” (Marder, 2016, p. 8). Similarly, the germination of a seed follows the (non-)logic of chance, since for an event to occur, a degree of uncertainty must interfere with the scheme of linear unfolding (Marder, 2016). At one point, Woolf expresses her appreciation for the random quality of the creative mind that serves as a source of her enjoyment of writing, saying: “I like to toss my mind up & watch to see where it’ll

fall” (1982, p. 86). The progress of what would become her final, posthumously published novel *Between the Acts* (1941) is, too, expressed as a kind of momentary happening, a step towards the not-yet-conceptualised future shape of the work: “I think I see a whole somewhere – it was simply seized, one day, about April, as a dangling thread: no notion what page came next. And then they came” (Woolf, 1984, 193). To refer again to Marder’s comment (Gibson, 2018), then, the growth of a literary work, predicated upon quiet, partly implicit workings of a creative mind, occurs as an irruption that cannot exactly be planned for – a vegetal event.

5 Conclusion

Vegetation appearing throughout Woolf’s personal writings is, I suggest, both metaphoric and materially significant, especially if one considers Gregory Bateson’s positing of metaphor as a form of knowing and as a “pattern which connects,” one that traverses the distinction between other-than-human biological life – here specifically vegetal growth – and human thought, revealing the continuity between the two (Bateson, 1979, p. 13; see also Borden, 2017 and Wheeler, 2016). Woolf’s literary – as well as tangibly encountered – plants do not direct meaning outside themselves, do not merely stand for the creative process but rather firmly put down roots at the very core of writing, with the literary carried over into the realm of the vegetal and *vice versa*. The emergent vision, then, is that of a text inextricably embedded in its material environment, or “*the environment*,” as Timothy Morton has proposed (2010, p. 3, italics in original). At the same time, however, I hope to have demonstrated the significance of the pre-textual, or the suspension of the conceptual and the linguistic as one essential point of convergence between plant-thinking and literary thinking.

While I do not wish to unambiguously claim that Woolf’s overall perception of subjectivity, community, and the development of a literary work was directly and specifically influenced by engagement with the vegetal, there are clear indications that both physical and imaginative intimacy with plants constituted a crucial element of her mental landscape. The writer’s deep attention to vegetal life, as demonstrated by her diary entries, was part of what gave birth to numerous of her unique insights into the workings of the literary mind that posit the process of writing as something arguably plant-like, creatively generous, and multiplicitous, growing toward and responsive to exteriority, embodied, relational, and open to chance. Woolf’s encounters with the vegetal other hint at a non-appropriative relation, at submission of authorial mastery to the logic of the plant. One could therefore wonder whether, despite the marginalisation of the other-than-human throughout much of the history of Western thought, and especially the marginalisation of plant agency (Marder, 2013), art and literature have constituted sites where the specificity of vegetal being could find its full expression.

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