

Staying with troubling words

Isabelle Stengers

I have selected a very thin thread in Donna's *Staying with the Trouble*, that is, the occurrence in the text of a word which she does not comment upon, but which might maybe astonish some of her readers – those readers who would feel it contradicts the very point of her call for an actively situated knowledge. This word, an adverb, is “really”.

“Really” is the adverb experimental scientists typically use when they claim that they have obtained facts that can be disentangled from any particular situation. Some say “nature has spoken”. Yes the Earth really moves around the Sun, atoms really exist, neutrinos really have a mass. In other words, “really” extends what matters for scientist to what should matter for everybody.

Now, it could be said that scientific facts are among the series of SF which Donna lovingly enumerates. She was never an enemy of facts, rather of the manner facts are used to cut short a story, not to add to it, not to complicate or enrich it. Facts indeed make difference but the question “how does this difference matter, and for whom?” is not a matter of fact.

I would propose that when Donna uses “really”, we should listen to the intonation, to the tone, to the vibration, very different from that of a scientist.

Let's take a first occurrence, when she writes: “*The boundary that is the Anthropocene/Capitalocene means many things, including that immense irreversible destruction is really in train, not only for the 11 billion or so people who will be on earth near the end of the 21st century, but for myriads of other critters too (...) The edge of extinction is not just a metaphor; system collapse is not a thriller. Ask any refugee of any species*¹.”

The point of “really”, here, is asking that her readers accept to be touched, to not escape, to not get habituated – as Nicolas Sarkozy was when he remarked about so-called environmental problems: “It's getting to be a bit too much!” (ça commence à bien faire !)

It is in fact in her previous book, *When species meet*, that I was arrested, for the first time, by Donna's use of this adverb, really. It is when Donna tells about the

¹ *Staying with the Trouble*, p. 102.

testing experience of taking Cayenne out of the agility run before finishing it, and coldly bringing her back to her crate after a significant mistake.

She could have ignored the mistake – explained it away in the name of the other times when she did not make it – “She is still a bit approximate but she will get better”. But it would have been “*fudging on fundamentals*”², doing “as if” nothing significant had happened, and making the situation worse. To deprive Cayenne of the joy and excitement of the run may be tough love but, she writes, « *maybe that is what makes me need to be honest; maybe this kind of love makes one need to see what is really happening because the loved ones deserves it.*»³ “What is really happening” is that for Cayenne what was demanded made no sense; she was in the mist, trying to do well, but not “really” getting the point.

It reminded me the kind of mistakes which make mathematics teachers crazy, when a student seems suddenly to forget what was considered as “acquired” since many months. Unhappily many mathematics teachers yell, but do not see what is really happening – that what Haraway calls a “contact zone” has not been created, that what was seemingly acquired did not “make sense” for the student.

Making sense, obviously, cannot be generally opposed to “making mistakes”, or giving the wrong interpretation. But mathematics and agility sport have in common to dramatize a clear-cut difference between what is a mistake and what is not, that is also, to activate the feeling of realization, “she got it !”... or the reluctant “OK, back to the fundamentals”.

In *Staying with the Trouble*, contact zones are again at stake when Donna remarks that “*It is very hard for a secularist to really listen to the squid, bacteria, and angry old women of Terra/Gaia*”⁴.

About secularists, those offspring of modernity, I would like to recall Alfred North Whitehead’s remark, that moderns have replaced the question “What do we know?” by the question “What can we know?”⁵, that is, what are we entitled to know? Secularists would then be unable to really listen to critters as they cannot claim that they know what those critters mean. In other words, they do not allow those critters to induce what may be characterized as a generative event – what happens in contact zones, when we do know that we have really been transformed that even if we are unable to claim “I got what the angry old woman means”, we know that “she got us”. In contact zones, both are relevant.

² *When Species Meet*, p. 215.

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Staying with the Trouble*, p. 185, note 56.

⁵ *Modes of Thought*, p. 74, *Modes de pensée*, p. 96.

We should not say that modern secularists have eradicated contact zones with squids, bacteria or angry women, rather that they have distrusted them as dangerous or unreliable. Or reduced them to some unofficial, black market, where exchanges happen which only poets or naïve romantics will value. They may recognize that knowledge can occasionally be extracted from transformative encounters but those encounters will be reduced to sheer occasions, occasions which will be forgotten as they are replaced by a validation procedure. As they are transplanted into a new, purely argumentative, context.

I will quote a last occurrence of “really”: “*Sympoiesis is a simple word; it means making-with. Nothing makes itself; nothing is really auto-poietic or self-organizing.*”⁶ And Donna insists: “*I suggest that Gaia is a system mistaken for autopoietic that is really sympoietic*”⁷.

Here it would seem that Donna is contesting a theoretical notion, that of autopoietic systems, systems able to maintain their own “selves”, what theoreticians call their organizational closure. But the use of “really” seems to indicate that this is not a purely intellectual controversy, or a problem of perspective: either we insist on the way a being holds together by and for itself, or we insist on the way it intrinsically implies the making and maintaining of relations with others, relations which generate new ways of being alive but also interdependency – putting one’s life at risk with the others.

If Donna uses “really”, here, it may be because that is at stake is something else entirely than a controversy between different perspectives. It matters! It matters for the way we may be touched by the unravelling of relations – the relations that make the corals’ worlds. Or by the deliberate destruction of relations, as in the case of the slave plantations which Anna Tsing so powerfully characterize - where not only humans but also plants were systematically removed from cross-species entanglements, indeterminate encounters and thus from their capacity to make history. Plantations indeed meant to reduce both plants and slaves to pure autopoietic selves in a well-controlled environment. It matters also when we remember the vital importance for non-modern peoples of the practices which made a person, as composed by their relations with, and their obligations towards others, be them humans, non-humans, or spirits.

I thus read Donna’s use of “really” as a call for her readers to accept being touched, and forced by the touch to think and feel. “It is really happening, please do not use your many protective strategies to put it at distance. Think and feel we must”. “Really” then calls us to consent to the world, as William James would

⁶ *Staying with the Trouble*, p. 58.

⁷ *Id.* p. 180, note 38.

say, consent to be affected, interrupted in the course of our business-as-usual academic concerns.

I have alluded to contact zones, but we may also think of “tentacular affects”. When it is a question of becoming the host for such an affect enthusiasm is out of place. Consenting is not embracing, it is accepting an encounter, well aware to be a host may also mean being a prey. Haraway writes “*The host is the habitat for the parasite, the condition of life and ongoingness for the parasite; this host is in the dangerous world-making contact zones of symbiogenesis and sympoiesis.*”⁸

The danger is obvious when biology is concerned, but the need not to indulge in enthusiasm also matters as Donna has now added symanimogenesis to sympoiesis and symbiogenesis. Which means that contact zones may create connections involving beings which both secularists and religious believers explained away as mere superstition, as not “really” existing – spirits, ancestors, ghosts and so on. In other words she has addressed the question of what we call “animism”.

However, she does not use the adverb “really” here. She does not insist that spirits really exist in order to shake the entrenched scepticism of secularists. She rather borrows from anthropologist Viveiros de Castro an adjective: “sensible”. “*Animism is the only sensible version of materialism,*” he wrote to her.

In contrast with “really”, “sensible” is underlined, explicitly challenging both secularist and religious habits of thought. But just like “really”, “sensible” may also challenge the habits of Haraway’s readers. Usually it seems to mean what can be characterized as reasonable, wise, commonsensical, maybe a bit down-to-the-earth - not exactly what one would associate with her. Her craft is usually associated to the unfolding of the many intricate layers of meaning, disturbing or troubling what claims to make obvious sense.

I would propose that, with the occurrence of the adjective “sensible, we are asked to think with another proposition, that of “situated worldling”. It is such a situated worldling practice Donna refers to about the Navajo art of weaving. She writes: “*Weaving is neither secular nor religious; it is sensible. It performs and manifests the meaningful lived connections for sustaining kinship, behaviour, relational action for humans and non humans. Situated worldling is ongoing, neither traditional nor modern.*”¹⁰

In another chapter situated worldling is implicit when Haraway quotes Tom van Dooren: “*The brand of holist ecological philosophy that emphasizes that*

⁸ *Id.*, p. 179.

⁹ *Id.*, p. 88 and 165.

¹⁰ *Id.*, p. 91.

*‘everything is connected’ will not help us here. Rather, everything is connected to something, which is connected to something else. While we may all ultimately be connected to one another, the specificity and proximity of connections matters — who we are bound up with and in what ways.*¹¹”

But the practical and political consequences of situated worlding, as well of the choice of sensible, and not really, appear when she writes: *“Animism cannot be donned like a magic cape by visitors*¹².”

This remark occurs when she is telling about the “Never alone” Inuit online game, where spirits helpers actively intervene. But, she remarks, “they favour their kin” and she herself dies quite early in the game. I think that it is why she will not say that Inupiat helper spirits “really exist”. She knows that when modern scepticism crumbles, it may leave the place for the also very modern idea that if spirits “really” exist, anybody can relate with them, they are available to help anyone. It matters that we resist the dream of becoming an animist in general, independently of the sensible connections which situate us. Animism in the singular is our modern category. In the plural, they would refer to groping, experimental and pragmatic and always situated worlding arts. Dangerous ones also – as not all contacts are with helpers, as what sustains you may also feed on you, make you its prey. Caution and protections are required.

Sensible materialisms, in the plural, require, Donna writes, stories demanding *“a certain suspension of ontologies and epistemologies, holding them lightly, in favour of more venturesome, experimental natural histories*¹³.”

Natural histories here belong to SF, not to what we are entitled to know. They are not by the categories of epistemology and ontology, categories correlated by philosophers and anthropologists when they characterize what makes sense for different peoples around the world. But they do not abolish them. Holding lightly our own categories, as we do with a groping stick, as we have to do when telling SF stories, is not giving them up. It is rather depriving them of the power to define, which is what we do when we hold tightly a stick. It implies that “making sense” is not an auto-poietic, closed performance. But neither is it a free for all adventure – the stick we hold, however lightly situates its holder.

Situated worlding as an art of performing and manifesting lived connections thus demands that we acknowledge that we are situated but not prisoners of what situates us. Materialisms – which now include all worlding processes to which the prefix “sym” refers – do no longer side with secularism, but neither do they

¹¹ *Id.* p. 173, note 2.

¹² *Id.*, p. 89.

¹³ *Id.*, p. 88.

communicate with a romantic, encompassing feeling of being at home within the world. Reclaiming animism is not returning to some kind of lost saving holist truth. Donna being Donna, it is not surprising that it requires learning to “stay with the trouble”. Which also means – please, let us be sensible, we *really* are situated.