

Virginia Woolf's "Monday or Tuesday": An Approach

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In 1921, Virginia Woolf publishes a collection of short stories entitled *Monday or Tuesday* which comprised different impressions of the everyday life, or the life of Monday or Tuesday. "Monday or Tuesday", the story which gives title to the collection seems to mark a borderline as far as technical experimentation is concerned as well as a point of inflection in Woolf's literary career. The story is the literary reflection of Woolf's concerns with literature, explicitly posed in her essay "Modern Fiction" (1919): at this point, Woolf started to experiment with the fragmentation of the subject by means of achieving different perspectives offered from a multiplicity of angles and filtered through voice and vision, through language and imagery, through words, elements which convey beauty in themselves.

Virginia Woolf (1880-1942) has been considered to be one of the major British writers of the twentieth century in the western literary canon. Her novels are widely known and read in most countries in the world, and they constitute a significant part of university and high school curricula for students of English literature. Critics have also focused on her life and work as one of the main exponents of British Modernism to such an extent that it proves a hard task to study any aspect which has not been touched on yet by scholars.

Her works have been translated into most of the European languages as her reputation as a writer has increased. However, her short fiction has often been neglected both by the critics, reading public and by translators: on the one hand, short fiction, in spite of the growing interest it is now arousing in scholars, continues to be an underrated art and is still seen as a "minor genre" when it comes to be compared to the novel, especially if the writer in question is the author of masterpieces such as *Mrs. Dalloway*, *The Waves* or *To the Lighthouse*. On the other hand, most of Virginia Woolf's short fiction has a highly experimental quality: she often

rehearsed in her short pieces many of the innovative techniques she would distil for further development in longer works, such as the interior monologue and similar experiments as far as the narrative voice is concerned, the treatment of time and space, the possibility of dialogue as a defining device and the development of what later came to be known as “moments of being”, this being one of the intrinsic and defining features of each one of her short stories.

The above mentioned experimental quality of this kind of fiction obviously represents an extra difficulty for the critic to the already complicated prose of this writer. Woolf herself was aware of the newness and innovation of this kind of writing, which may have aroused opposition. In this respect, she returns a letter to Ethel Smith acknowledging the complexity and strangeness of “Monday or Tuesday” and “Blue and Green”, the latter being a story which reached the border of complexity and represented the limits to which Woolf could go as far as experimentation was concerned:

You are perfectly right about Green and blue and the heron one [i.e. “Monday or Tuesday”]: that’s mainly why I won’t reprint. They are mere tangles of words; balls of string that the kitten or Pan [Ethel’s dog] has played with ... Green and blue and the heron were the wild outbursts of freedom, inarticulate, ridiculous, unprintable mere outcries¹.

Any reader should bear in mind those words which probably allude to the reception of her short stories, and which on the other hand, point to the fact of their being not on the whole comprehensible or readable - as other pieces of writing - but the expression of a writer seeking freedom from literary convention, experimenting and subverting traditional genre, form and content.

Its experimental character is the very essence of “Monday or Tuesday” and therefore, the first thing to be apprehended, should be the awareness of its being different to what had been done before. Woolf herself points out that “they don’t see that I’m after something interesting... And there was Roger [Fry] who thinks I’m on the track of real discoveries”². She might be implying that her narrative works on, at least, two levels: the lineal structure, undoubtedly confusing and unusual and, on the other hand, what is under surface, the workings of a new form, especially latent in the specific disposition of words and the references to what is left unsaid, im-

plied beyond writing. The fact that it was Roger Fry - one of the most talented, open-minded members of the Bloomsbury group - who perceived “something interesting” in her stories may also be significant³.

Indeed, they were utterly different in form and content from the more traditional *The Voyage Out* (1915), and incomprehensible beyond all question if compared with *Night and Day* (1919), the novel which she published in the same year as “Monday or Tuesday” in a collection which bore the same name, and which represented, according to some critics, a step backwards as far as innovation was concerned.

Leonard Woolf decided to compile, posthumously, eighteen of the stories written by his wife, some of which were never published during her lifetime. In the foreword to the collection, *A Haunted House and Other Short Stories*, he alludes to Virginia Woolf’s need to free herself from the harness of convention, which she did in some of her short stories:

All through her life, Virginia Woolf used at intervals to write short stories. It was her custom, whenever an idea for one occurred to her, to sketch it out in a very rough form and then to put it away in a drawer. Later, if an editor asked her for a short story, and she felt in the mood to write one (which was not frequent), she would take a sketch out of her drawer and rewrite it, sometimes a great many times. Or if she felt, as she often did, while writing a novel that she required to rest to rest her mind by working at something else for a time, she would either write a critical essay or work upon one of the sketches for short stories⁴.

The title of the short story, “Monday or Tuesday” is apparently unrelated to what comes afterwards in the narrative. There is nothing in the text which could be directly related to that expression. However, the phrase “Monday or Tuesday” does occur somewhere else in Virginia Woolf’s writing, and in this respect the publication date of the story could be useful for overall perspective. According to a postscript in a letter that Virginia Woolf wrote to her sister Vanessa Bell on 31st October, 1920⁵, the writer seems to have planned the expression “Monday or Tuesday” as a title for the collection to be published in 1921 before she actually wrote the story of the same name:

I’m getting doubtful whether I have time to write the story called Monday or Tuesday - if not, I don’t know what to call the book.

Probably in the same period of time, Virginia Woolf was rewriting her essay “Modern Novels” for inclusion in *The Common Reader* (1925) as “Modern Fiction”, which is one of her most emblematic essays. “Modern Fiction” deals basically with what Woolf thought to be the basis of the new literature being produced, as opposed to more traditional literary tendencies. Issues such as the task of the writer, and of the artist by extension, subject-matter and literary techniques are central elements to the essay:

They [James Joyce and other young writers] attempt to come closer to life, and to preserve more sincerely and exactly what interests and moves them, even if to do so they must discard some of the conventions which are commonly observed by the novelist. [...] Let us not take for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what it is commonly thought small⁶

It seems clear that, in coming closer to life, anything would be suitable stuff for fiction, not just events in themselves, but mere impressions or perceptions, as is the case in “Monday or Tuesday” where “nothing happens”:

The mind receives a myriad of impressions - trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls different from old; the moment of importance came not here but there.⁷

The expression “Monday or Tuesday” is unusual enough to occur in two texts, although different in their nature, written roughly in the same period and, therefore, the idea of a mere coincidence should be discarded. It seems obvious that, to Virginia Woolf, the subject of “modern fiction” should be ordinary life, things considered unimportant by traditional writers or, in her own words, “the life of Monday or Tuesday”. That was initially intended to be the title of her collection of short stories, probably because they would deal with everyday life, with those ordinary perceptions otherwise discarded by more traditional points of view.

The short story “Monday or Tuesday” is constructed upon ordinary, everyday images, perceptions and thoughts coming from different angles, with no coherent shape or sequential order, because that is the way in which they occur:

Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and circumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?⁸

This paragraph seems to justify the apparently chaotic arrangement - or disarrangement - of elements in some of Virginia Woolf’s writings, but it applies especially to “Monday or Tuesday”. The translator has to bear in mind that the story is to differ a great deal from more conventional pieces belonging to the same genre. What is more, most of it is not going to have a linear meaning, is not going to “make sense” in the conventional use of the phrase, and is even going to subvert the most traditional constrictions of earlier writing:

[...] if a writer were a free man, and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy [...].⁹

Woolf is, however, aware of the implications that freedom from convention would have. She is probably alluding to publishing houses and editors, a problem that Woolf herself did not share with other writers, since the Woolfs owned the Hogarth Press and were publishers themselves.

In this way, “Monday or Tuesday” is as free from convention as possible, deals with ordinary experiences and perceptions, and subverts the traditional conception of fiction and even of literary genre, as will be seen later on. The short story puts into practice the literary issues idealistically posed in “Modern Fiction”, but using a different narrative vehicle: this time the essay is to be substituted by the short story, the pamphlet is to become art itself.

The genre, significantly chosen to develop for the first time those innovative conceptions as mentioned earlier, is going to differ from the traditional short story which had been written so far. As an obvious consequence of the intention of directly representing the nature of experience itself, chaotic and heterogeneous in itself, the modernist short story, and Virginia Woolf’s in particular, is to reject the traditional conception of plot, of the well-wrought tale, constructed to achieve eventually a “unity of

(l. 8), “for ever desiring -” (l. 11), “- for ever desiring truth” (l. 14), “- and truth?” (l. 16, 27), “-truth?” (l. 34).

All of these expressions are introduced as a sort of coda, or even conclusion after the different perceptions described in the story. It is significant that all of them are either preceded or followed by a dash, as a sort of afterthought which, paradoxically, is the underlying subject-matter that gives shape to “Monday or Tuesday”: the narrator’s anxious and agonic search for truth.

The second paragraph starts by progressively developing this last element: “Desiring truth, awaiting it, laboriously distilling a few words, for ever desiring -” (ll. 8, 9.). The -ing forms mark a process which seems to be endless, stressed by the adding of “for ever” (l. 9). On the other hand, they also leave the agent of the action unknown, although the narrative voice may correspond to the narrator’s. “Laboriously distilling a few words” (ll. 8, 9) introduces a key aspect to the narrative. On the one hand, and due to the sequential order, “words” seems somehow to be coupled with “truth”, as a factual reflection of the narrator’s desire and search. It may not be adventurous to assert that the anxiety to find the right word, namely poetic truth would correspond to the task of one who somehow uses words as a daily instrument of work: a writer. Could the narrative voice, therefore, be characterised as such¹²?

What comes in brackets is going to produce a disruption in the narrative: the narrator interrupts his thoughts on the problems of aesthetic creation and introduces a different perspective, a different focaliser. This time it is not going to be the heron offering an aerial perspective, but an unknown focaliser introducing perceptions apprehended by the senses: “a cry starts to the left, another to the right. Wheels strike divergently. Omnibuses conglomerate in conflict” (ll. 9 -11). These sensations are especially related to the semantic field of sound: “cry, strike, conglomerate in conflict”, all of them suggesting the idea of a rush, of the movement of a city, probably offered by the point of view of a passer-by.

The language used differs a great deal from what has been previously recorded. These impressions are arranged in syntactically simple utterances, lacking the elaboration of the previous part of the discourse, giving the impression of an anxiety to provide as much information as possible with few words. The sequence works, therefore, in the guise of stage directions, very similar to them both in language and in function. In

spite of their brevity, they succeed in defining in a clear and rapid way space and time in the story, working as a traditional description would. The setting seems to be a large city, for its number of cars and omnibuses, “conglomerating” in a traffic jam; the time therefore could correspond to the rush hour.

Before actually continuing with the factual description provided by the “stage directions”, the typography of the dashes marks again the narrator’s comments on the nature of truth. The brackets reopen again defining more clearly the space and time frame within the story: it is midday, the sun is shining and children are probably coming out of school. As was earlier mentioned, the information in brackets provide what a traditional description would do in terms of function, but in fact, because of their belonging to a different literary genre - drama - it works by introducing one genre within another one - the short story, or even poetry, as discussed above.

The tenses used in the stage directions belong also, as in the rest of the text, to the simple present. This points out to the idea of those actions taking place repeatedly every day, any day, ordinary events and ordinary habits which make up every day routine, every day existence.

The closing of the second paragraph is of a slightly different nature. Typographically, the next lines are not presented in brackets, but they are also quick descriptive assertions separated by semi-colons, descriptive strokes which keep on sketching the spatial frame. Again, the focaliser provides a vision which is obviously apprehended by the senses, being on the one hand predominantly visual (“Red is the dome; coins hang on the trees; smoke trails from the chimneys”, ll. 14, 15) or they reproduce the different sounds heard in the street, introducing also the direct speech of an ironmonger: “Iron for sale” (l. 16). This description, however, and unlike the previous one, is interiorised by the particular vision of the focaliser by using metaphors: “Red is the dome” may refer to the sun reflecting on a cathedral’s dome, “coins hang on the trees” might refer to the light filtering through the leaves of a tree, in the particular perception of the focaliser. Finally, the paragraph ends with the narrator’s rhetorical question on truth, typographically preceded, as usual, by a dash.

The next paragraph presents a change in the setting and situation. Two simultaneous perspectives are presented, filtered through the eyes of

the same focaliser; on the one hand, there is a description of a setting which is fixed, static. By contrast, the paragraph closes with a collection of images and perceptions taken from different angles and different settings, all taking place at the same time. The expression “while outside” on line 21 provides the key for the spatial frame: “while” underlines the fact that what has been previously described and what comes rightly after are simultaneous in terms of time. “Outside” makes a clear distinction in terms of space location: the description of the preceding lines may correspond to some place “inside” a building where the focaliser is also situated: the “outside” may refer to the recollection of descriptive images of the street.

The paragraph opens with a particular description offered by the focaliser who, again, interiorises the images perceived through his eyes using codified language: “Radiating to a point men’s feet and women’s feet, black or gold-encrusted” (ll. 17, 18), “the firelight darting and making the room red” (l. 20), and the use of -ing forms points to a process taking place in a particular moment or period of time. The focaliser directs his eyes to the floor of a room, where it is possible to see the shoes of the people there, either black for men or more colourful for women. The room seems to be illuminated by a fire, whose flame leaves red reflections on the objects seen there and which provides a contrast between light and darkness (“black figures and their bright eyes”, l. 21).

The focaliser’s perception is interrupted by a sequence presented in brackets similar to those in previous paragraphs. It is endowed with the same nature as the preceding ones, namely to provide a substitute for a traditional description of place, time and situation. This time they are not going to be stage directions, but fragments of conversations in direct speech which may probably have been heard - or overheard - in the room: “- (This foggy weather -Sugar? No, thank you - The commonwealth of the future) - “, (ll. 18, 19). “This foggy weather” points directly to a precise location of the action in terms of space: it may be referring to London, widely regarded as “the” foggy city. “Sugar? No, thank you” is even more exact; the action may be taking place in a coffee-shop where people are having their morning tea. Finally, politics are a recurrent topic in everyday conversation, so “the commonwealth of the future” would be an assertion quite likely to be heard in a coffee-shop.

“While outside” (l. 21) is the mark to present, as has been argued earlier, a group of images which are simultaneous to the scene described in

the coffee-shop. The focaliser offers an account of the sight which a window to the street presents: “while outside a van discharges, Miss Thingummy drinks tea at her desk, and plate-glass preserves fur coats -“ (ll. 21, 22, 23), the rush of the street, a break at an office and a shop. The sights are described in the simple present, again as the usual sight of every day, any day in London, with a generalising perspective reflected in the language by the lack of definite articles (“plate-glass preserves fur-coats”, l. 23) or the allusion to “Miss Thingummy” (l. 22), an educated and slightly archaic variant for “Mrs.-what’s-her-name”.

The next paragraph presents a conglomerate of adjectives and past participles functioning as predicative complements of a subject which is not explicit in the text and has to be supplied by association. The sequence is especially complicated, not only for the ambiguity which the elision of the subject provokes, but also because it works in terms of rhythm, stress pattern, internal rhyme and oppositions. Sandra Kemp¹³ suggests for this paragraph the influence of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose poems were first published in 1918. Virginia Woolf wrote to Janet Case on 23 July, 1919:

Have you read the poems of a man, who is dead, called Gerard Hopkins? I liked them better than any other poetry for ever so long; partly because they’re so difficult, but also because instead of writing mere rhythms and sense as most poets do, he makes a very strange jumble; so that what is apparently pure nonsense is at the time very beautiful, and not nonsense at all¹⁴.

The first line of the paragraph has an alliteration of the sounds /f/, /l/ and /t/ (“Flaunted, leaf-light, drifting at corners, l. 24), a device which is repeated in the next one with the sounds /l/, /s/ /d/ (“wheels, silver-splashed, home or not home, gathered”, l. 25), /s/ and /k/ (“scattered, squandered in separate scales, swept up” l. 26) and /n/ (“down, torn, sunk, assembled”, l. 27), together with a rhythmical stress pattern. The paragraph ends with the narrator questioning on truth, which opens the possibility of considering the whole sequence as a reference to the nature and state of it.

However, it would be feasible to consider that the whole paragraph may be referring to the nature of the perceptions described in the preceding paragraphs, to the different sights and sensations which have been gathered and interiorised by the different angles that the various focalisers have

experienced, “gathered” at a certain stage of perception, “scattered” in the different arrangements which occur in the text, recollected “home or not home”, fragmented by the different possibilities of visualisation and therefore “squandered in different scales”, “assembled” in the act of writing, representative all of them of life and truth.

The last paragraph provides the key for decoding some of the elements which have been scattered through the whole text and which are going to put together to make them fit to the frame of “Monday or Tuesday”. The narrator is going to give details about the nature of the story and to unveil him/herself as a character; it is the writer looking for truth, for the right word, sitting by the fire (“now to recollect by the fireside on the white square of marble”, ll. 28, 29), reading a book (“from ivory depths words rising shed their blackness, blossom and penetrate”, ll. 29, 30), falling asleep and leaving the book aside (“fallen the book” l. 30) and letting the mind fly in search of new perceptions (“or now voyaging, the marble square pendant, minarets beneath and the Indian seas, while space rushes blue and the stars glint”, ll. 32, 34), summarising sights which are going to be recollected in this final effort to communicate.

The narrator eventually becomes a character in the story, recollecting by the fire the previous sights described in earlier paragraphs, provoked by the reading: “from ivory depths words shed their blackness, blossom and penetrate” (ll. 29, 30). The narrator’s characterisation takes place in terms of setting - the fireside -, thoughts - the writer’s search of truth - and perceptions - those earlier provided from different angles -, but not physically. This fact is underlined by the use of impersonal verb forms which do not correspond to a specific person: “now to recollect”, “fallen the book”, “or now voyaging”.

The paragraph ends paradoxically with a literal reluctance to closure, “or now, content with closeness?” in a rhetorical question which leaves the paragraph open, not only by its form, but also by the ambiguity provoked by the use of the word “content”, which changes the meaning of the sequence according to each one of the possible positions of the stress.

Finally, “Monday or Tuesday” ends as it had earlier started: “Lazy and indifferent the heron returns; the sky veils her stars; then bares them” (ll. 35, 36). The third person narrator retakes the figure of the heron coming

back from his flight, of the sky showing the stars, completing the vital cycle, endlessly returning to the same point only to begin again incessantly.

From all that has been said, it would be possible to argue that the structure of “Monday or Tuesday” is arranged in a multiplicity of levels. On the one hand, there is a “time of the story”, the actual period of time in which what has been narrated takes place, and “a space of the story”, the place where the story is told. On the other hand, there exist a number of focalisers imagined by the narrator, which offer fragmented perspectives taken from different angles. Finally, the narrator questions himself on the nature of truth, on the difficulty of literary creation, which points to the narrator’s characterisation as a writer. These concerns cannot be located in terms of time or space, since they are thoughts and intuitions supposed to develop in the artist’s mind, only made explicit by a device of the narrative.

The first level, the place and time of the story, is only made clear in the last paragraph. There appears a figure sitting by the fire, reading a book, and letting the imagination fly literally by either borrowing the eyes of a heron - traditionally regarded as a symbol for the imagination - and crossing space or using different focalisers which offer a multi-perspective of ordinary life in a city such as London.

The use of this variety of vision belonging to different fields - an aerial panoramic view from the sky, the rush of a town, the overhearing of different conversations - gives the story a fragmented appearance due to the juxtaposition of perceptions apprehended by the senses - sight, sound, smell - and taken from different angles of vision, which are not “symmetrically arranged” as in traditional writing, but violently put together in a chaotic and disordered appearance, just as they occur in everyday, ordinary life, linguistically reflected by the use of the simple present.

The narrator disrupts the narrative thread by gradually introducing, by means of a process of variation of the same theme, his own vital thoughts and concerns, which makes it possible to identify him with a writer. The obsession is put in terms of a quest-myth for truth, identified with a search for the right word, the perfect referent. The task of the writer is to represent, to reflect the “sublime” through his artistic creation, that is, to find beauty and truth in a perfect referent which would perfectly match object and thought. These “digressions” appear typographically marked from the rest of the narrative by a dash, and syntactically differentiated by

the use of -ing forms which both point to a process, emphasised by the constant use of the expression “for ever” and cannot be subscribed to a particular agent.

Finally, the narrator introduces and closes the story by describing, in the guise of a traditional third person narrator, the figure of a heron respectively beginning and ending his daily flight. The repetition of this figure in an ordinary vital cycle, the exact reproduction of elements and syntactic structures both at the opening and closure of the story, the use of the simple present to describe daily events give the story a circular structure literally underlining the subject-matter of the story, “the life of Monday or Tuesday”, of an ordinary day, an endless search, an endless return.

“Monday or Tuesday”, in this way, may be taken as a point of inflection in Virginia Woolf’s creative process. More traditional narrative techniques have been left behind, her concerns about literary creation, explicitly posed in “Modern Fiction” are interiorised and converted into fiction in “Monday or Tuesday”. She had started to experiment with the fragmentation of the subject, by means of achieving different perspectives offered from different angles, through voice and vision, with language and imagery, with words, in themselves conveying beauty regardless of their referents.

She had also started to question herself on the “proper stuff of fiction¹⁵”, which she said was everything and nothing at the same time. She also thought that small matters were the expression of big issues, a macrocosm reflected in a microcosm, that the ordinary life of Monday or Tuesday could reflect the concerns of truth, beauty and the process of literary creation.

NOTAS

1. Virginia Woolf to Ethel Smith, *Letters*, IV, 16 Oct. 1930, p. 231.
2. Woolf, Virginia (1959). *A Writer's Diary*. Leonard Woolf ed. London: The Hogarth Press, p. 31.
3. Roger Fry was an eminent art critic open to the challenges of innovation. Along with Clive Bell - Woolf's brother-in-law - and Leonard Woolf among others, Fry organised the Post-Impressionist exhibitions (1910 and 1912) held at the Grafton Galleries in London, a fact which largely contributed to the spread of the Post-Impressionist painters (Cézanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Picasso among others) in Britain.
4. Woolf, Virginia (1967). *A Haunted House and Other Short Stories*. Leonard Woolf ed. London: The Hogarth Press.
5. VW to VB, *Letters*, II, p. 445.
6. Woolf, Virginia. *The Collected Essays of Virginia Woolf*. Leonard Woolf ed. . London: The Hogarth Press, 1966. *CE* henceforward.
7. *CE*, quoted supra.
8. *CE*, quoted supra.
9. *CE*, quoted supra.
10. James Joyce first proclaims his theory on the "epiphanic moment" in *Stephen Hero* (1904).
11. All references henceforward belong to the following edition: Woolf, Virginia. *A Haunted House and Other Short Stories*. Leonard Woolf ed. London: The Hogarth Press, 1967.
12. Virginia Woolf has often used in her works the voice and figure of the writer to express her own struggle with language to find the right word, the exact referent of thoughts. A language which has been inherited, and therefore not invented, does not seem to be the suitable vehicle for this purpose, as Bernard points out in his final monologue in *The Waves* (1931):
 "What is the phrase for the moon? And the phrase for love? By what name are we to call death? I do not know. I need a little language such as lovers use, words of one syllable such as children speak when they come into the room and find their mother sewing and pick up some scrap of bright wool, a feather, or a shred of chintz. I need a howl, a cry. When the storm crosses the marsh and sweeps over me where I lie in the ditch unregarded I need no words. Nothing neat. Nothing that comes down with all its feet on the floor. None of those resonances and lovely echoes that break and chime from nerve to nerve in our breasts, making wild

music, false phrases. I have done with phrases. How much better is silence [...]”.

Woolf, Virginia. *The Waves*. Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1992, p. 227.

13. Woolf, Virginia. *Selected Short Stories*. Edition, introduction and notes by Sandra Kemp. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1993, p. 110.
14. VW to JC, *Letters*, II, p. 379.
15. *CE*, quoted supra.

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