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“To Slip Easily From One Thing To Another”: Experimentalism And Perception in Woolf’s Short Stories

Teresa Prudente

- 1 Woolf’s engagement with the short story is to be read as more than an occasional exploration and alternative to her constant experimentation as a novelist: indeed, her short stories appear to unveil the foundation of her experiments in narrative and to provide us with an important insight into her innovative approach to writing.
- 2 From this point of view, the short stories which Woolf composed between the years 1917-1921, collected in the volume *Monday or Tuesday* (1921), testify to the writer’s crucial shift from her conventional writing in her first novels, i.e., *The Voyage Out* (1915) and *Night and Day* (1919), to more radical forms of writing. I will therefore establish in this essay a close link between Woolf’s anticipation in *Monday or Tuesday* of the major themes which were later to be developed in her novels and the narrative features specifically connected to the short story: it is in this confrontation that we can both envisage the reasons which led Woolf to choose this form as a privileged field of experimentation, and, conversely, understand how the short story allowed some of Woolf’s most important and until then subterranean issues, to emerge.
- 3 The short story has been defined since the first theorisations as a condensed form of narration in which brevity opens the way to a more intense development of the narrative elements; as Poe has underlined, the process of selection (Poe 1842: 298) which guides the author to the accomplishment of a short narrative piece functions as an essential element in determining the aspects peculiar to this form. According to Poe, it is in the limited yet profound space of the short story that impressions rather than facts can be conveyed and the sense of organic totality of the artwork is preserved from dispersion and lack of intensity. These major features defining the short story already contain several hints which suggest how Woolf’s interest in this narrative form is rooted in its potential to serve as an experimental space in which the author can escape the mere representation of “the surface, with its hard separate facts” (Woolf 1985: 79).

The work of subtraction which I will underline in Woolf's short stories anticipates the writer's later insistence on the process of selection as fundamental in writing:

So drastic is the process of selection that in its final state we can often find no trace of the actual scene upon which the chapter was based. For in that solitary room, whose door the critics are for ever trying to unlock, processes of the strangest kind are gone through. Life is subjected to a thousand disciplines and exercises. It is curbed; it is killed. It is mixed with that, brought into contrast with something else; so that when we get our scene at the café a year later the surface signs by which we remembered it have disappeared. There emerges from the mist something stark, something formidable and enduring, the bone and substance upon which our rush of indiscriminating emotion was founded. (Woolf 1958: 41-42)

- 4 In another essay, "The Narrow Bridge of Art", Woolf identifies this process of elimination of the excessive and unimportant details from prose as the most determining feature leading the novel to be transformed into a form which, in contrast with "materialistic" works, will prove more adequate in conveying human experience. In Woolf's view, the modern novel will result from the concurrence of poetry and prose and, by making "little use of the marvellous fact-recording power, which is one of the attributes of fiction", will convey "the outline rather than the detail [...] not only or mainly people's relations to each other and their activities together, as the novel has hitherto done, but it will give the relation of the mind to general ideas and its soliloquy in solitude" (Woolf 1958: 18-19).
- 5 In the crucial years following her first novels, Woolf is engaged with the first embryonic forms of these ideas, and the short stories act as flexible structures in which the writer feels free to develop her new method and make innovative issues emerge. The stories collected in *Monday or Tuesday* indeed show both Woolf's working on narrative forms which tend to essentiality rather than to the "trivial and transitory" (Woolf 1993c: 7), and her shift in the focus of narration from external reality to consciousness. The process of selection which Poe identified as the main feature of the short story, and Woolf conceived as a fundamental stage in creation, acquires in these stories a particular nature, anticipating Woolf's later confrontation with forms capable of conveying reality as a "whole made of shivering fragments" (Bell 138). As Deleuze and Guattari have underlined, Woolf's writing is structured along a dual movement which implies both a process of exclusion of the "trop-à-percevoir" (Deleuze - Guattari 342) and a simultaneous process of saturation which determines the density of her works. This two-directional path of creation, resulting from Woolf's atomistic view, suggests how the short story is conceived by her as a narrative space in which limited extension bears the potential to become expansion in depth. In this sense, the stories collected in *Monday or Tuesday* reveal Woolf's first narrative attempts at conveying the expanded and a-temporal dimension of those instants of revelation which she will later define as moments of being (Woolf 1978b). As Poe had remarked, the condensed form of the short story proves ideal in expressing such moments of intensity, by allowing the reader to be immersed into the fictive world of narration "at one sitting" (Poe 1842: 298) without interruptions, and by reproducing the ephemeral yet "immense force derivable from totality" (Poe 1842: 298). Woolf's aim at conveying instants of revelation thus finds in the short story a perfect ground of expression, which allows her to escape the duration inherent in the novel and to fully convey the essence of these moments by leaving behind "the fabric of things" (Woolf 1966: 332), those detailed descriptions of external reality that she criticized in Edwardian novels. The brief temporal parabola on which moments of being are structured finds in the short story an ideal form of

representation, which mimetically coincides with the ephemeral nature of intense perceptual experiences and is able to convey how "all high excitements are necessarily transient." (Poe 1842: 298). This emphasis on the potential held by the short story to contract time into a limited yet over-significant narrative space, stands at the foundation of Woolf's engagement with this genre, which offered her the possibility to experiment innovative treatments of time in narration. As Paul Ricoeur (1984) has underlined, Woolf's works can be understood as enacting the tension and contrast between subjective ("mortal time") and objectified ("monumental time") human perception of time, and the stories of *Monday or Tuesday* can be read as the writer's first attempts at conveying the discrepancy between these two simultaneous temporal experiences. As I will show, Woolf's treatment of time in these stories does not only involve the thematic emphasis on the contrast and interaction between external and internal reality, but also implies stylistic and structural elements which re-create in the reader a similar experience of temporal transformation.

- 6 "The Mark on the Wall" well exemplifies this double level of significance on which Woolf's writing started being structured at that point in her career. The free and only lightly related way in which thoughts are in this story connected by the narrator's voice, who is stimulated to a series of meditations by the casual remark of a sign on the wall, introduces one of Woolf's most important issues: the portrayal of the human mind not as rigid and fixed datum, but in its dynamic and contrasting nature. Woolf's intention was in fact to "record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order they fall, let us trace the pattern however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness" (Woolf 1993c: 9), and in this sense the short story allows her to transgress the conventional rules structuring the novel. Not being submitted to the requirement of a progression of the plot in time, the short story is employed by Woolf as an intensive structure in which the time of consciousness dominates narration. The remark on exterior reality from which this story moves is soon covered by the emergence of the narrator's meditations, reproducing the movement which guides the voice in the story to transcend reality and enter the abstract space of meditation: "I want to think quietly, calmly, spaciouly [...] I want to sink deeper and deeper, away from the surface" (Woolf 1985: 78-79). The surface of experience, which is the origin of the narrator's process of thought, is not however completely abandoned and erased from narration, but rather recurs cyclically in her perception, structuring the story on a temporal frame which does not proceed linearly but instead in the form of a spiral progression: "But as for the mark [...] And yet the mark on the wall [...] Ah! The mark on the wall!" (Woolf 1985: 77-83). In this sense, "The Mark on the Wall" appears revealing for the anticipation of two Woolfian major aspects: on the one hand the close connection and interaction between external and internal reality, and on the other, the treatment of narrative time not only as depicting, but rather as re-producing the time of consciousness. Woolf's emphasis on the only apparent contradiction between materiality and transcendence will become recurrent in her following novels, in which revelation is not portrayed in contrast with everyday experience, but rather as briefly emerging from the intense perception of the most minute and ordinary aspects of life. As the writer observed in "Modern Fiction", it was not to be taken "for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small" (Woolf 1993c: 9), and on this amplification of the most ordinary aspects of life she was in fact to structure her experimental novels. The experience of revelation, the exit from "those habitual

currents" (Woolf 1958: 233) of perception, is conveyed by Woolf in her novels as closely connected to a sensitive perception of reality in its most insignificant details, thus leading the subject to feel, like Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*, "on a level with ordinary experience, to feel simply that's a chair, that's a table, and yet at the same time, It's a miracle, it's an ecstasy." (Woolf 1958: 296). In this sense, "The Mark on the Wall" prefigures the essential inter-dependence in Woolf of solid reality and abstract re-elaboration, also anticipating how this will later take the form in her writing of a dynamic narrative counterpoint between the linear progression of time and the a-temporal dimension of consciousness. This is conveyed in the 1917 story by a circular structure which, by moving from and finally returning to objective reality, portrays the mind as a "spiral stairway" (Woolf 1993b: 5) in which thoughts are assembled and re-combined in a non-sequential modality. This experiment in breaking the rule of linear progression and cause-effect links, shows Woolf's engagement with forms of writing that can convey life not as "a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged" (Woolf 1993c: 8), but rather in its "streaked, involved, inextricably confused" (Woolf 1966: 243) nature. "The Mark on the Wall" proceeds in fact through an a-linear narrative development which escapes the conventional impositions "to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest" (Woolf 1993c: 8) and allows instead Woolf to focus on the stratified time of consciousness, which finds expression in the internal expansion peculiar to the short story. This is able, as Poe remarked, to function as an organic and coherent form in virtue of its brevity which conceals a highly organized structure within which no element is wasted nor excessive (Poe 1842: 298).

- 7 The sense of totality conveyed according to Poe by the short story opens further implications in Woolf, whose conception of the organic bears very particular features. The construction of a coherent design which Poe envisages as the basis of literary creation is doubtlessly also fundamental for Woolf, who interprets moments of being as instants in which the secret pattern "behind the cotton wool of everyday life" (Woolf 1978b: 67) is revealed to the subject. According to Woolf, it is the act of writing which succeeds in crystallizing such moments of revelation, by translating into words the instantaneous flashing of a different reality and by reproducing through syntactical and formal structures the subject's temporary ability in these moments to "put the severed parts together." (Woolf 1978b: 67). Nevertheless, Woolf's emphasis on the transient nature of instants of revelation reveals how the sense of a whole is felt by her as an ephemeral experience and must thus be conveyed in writing through equally dynamic structures which reproduce not only the re-composition of reality into a coherent design, but also, as she stated in her diary while conceiving *To the Lighthouse*, the inevitable "flight of time & the consequent break of unity in my design." (Woolf 1980: 36).
- 8 This profoundly temporal conception of totality leads Woolf to the elaboration of forms which function as flexible structures within which the "infinite discords" (Bell 138) composing reality can be organically contained and simultaneously preserved in their internal dynamism. This applies also to the short story, which is employed by Woolf as a form similar to an "invisible elastic net" (Woolf 1993a: 41) which re-composes fragmentation without superimposing linearity and sequentiality to the elements of narration. As "The Mark on the Wall" demonstrates, the short story proves to function for Woolf as an ideal ground of experimentation in perception, in which reality is not only portrayed in its complex and inexplicable aspects, but even radically questioned. The ruminations carried out by the narrator's voice in this story culminate in an

overlapping of reality and unreality which suggests how the borders between the two can be understood as thin and not precisely definable: "the mystery of life; the inaccuracy of thought! The ignorance of humanity!", "these real things [...] were not entirely real, were indeed half phantoms" (Woolf 1985: 80). This state of loss of certainties originates from a casual and minute doubt which soon expands to shadow the subject's entire perception, as will later happen to the character of Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*:

What does one send to the lighthouse indeed! At any other time Lily could have suggested reasonably tea, tobacco, newspapers. But this morning everything seemed so extraordinarily queer that a question like that [...] opened doors in one's mind that went banging and swinging to and fro and made one keep asking, in a stupefied gape, What does one send? What does one do? Why is one sitting here, after all? (Woolf 1993a: 214)

- 9 In "The Mark on the Wall" the process of questioning reality is ignited by an apparently small detail of perception, the subject's sudden spotting of a sign on the wall, which in fact condenses two major Woolfian issues. In the first instance, the assonance between the two terms nail/snail (Woolf 1985: 77, 83) introduces Woolf's constant work on "this power of suggestion which is one of the most mysterious properties of words" (Woolf 1993c: 140), anticipating how the writer will later develop the meta-semantic potential of language in her writing. Furthermore, it is the act of observation which in this story gives rise to the chain of thoughts which soon stimulate the subject to transcend objective reality and be immersed into the abstract dimension of meditation. This act of looking will become central in Woolf's novels, in the form of a process of focusing on reality which paradoxically culminates in the appearance of the different reality of consciousness, as happens to the main character in *Orlando*: "he opened his eyes, which had been wide open all the time but had seen only thoughts" (Woolf 1993b: 64). This intent observation of reality does not lead in Woolf to a more solid perception of the external world, but rather to a wider spreading of doubt which urges the subject to exit his state of transcendence and cyclically go back to objective perception: "Here is something definite, something real. Thus, waking from a midnight dream of horror, one hastily turns on the light and lies quiescent, worshipping the chest of drawers, worshipping solidity, worshipping reality, worshipping the impersonal world which is proof of some existence other than ours. That is what one wants to be sure of" (Woolf 1985: 82).

- 10 In this sense the 1917 story opens the way to Woolf's confrontation with the dualities real/unreal and visible/invisible which were to become central in her writing. The alteration in perception which she will extensively explore through the character of Septimus Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway* is in this story anticipated by the portrayal of the subject while crossing the borders of objective reality. As Elizabeth Bowen commented, this ability to explore the threshold between solid reality and hallucination, is one of Woolf's most prominent features: "There is a touch of hallucination about "reality"; creative Orlando was right, so was his-her creator. Virginia Woolf's vision conferred strangeness, momentarily, on all it fell on. [...] The bus, the lamp-post, the teacup – how formidable she found them, everyday things!" (Bowen 1960: 46). Woolf's attitudes to transfiguring everyday objects and unveiling the hidden significance behind phenomenal reality find a fertile ground in the short story, in which the writer feels free from the realistic canon dominating the novel at her time. The possibility of avoiding strict reference to reality and conveying instead the subject's oscillations

between objective perception and subjective re-elaboration allow Woolf to work on an intensive use of language, in which every single words is endowed with multiple levels of significance. Many years after Woolf, Raymond Carver will theorize this potential inherent in short fiction with words similar to those employed by Bowen in praising Woolf's work: "It's possible, in a poem or a short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things – a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman's earring – with immense, even startling power" (Carver 33). The power of subtraction peculiar to the short story allows this form to be centered on essentiality and words can thus release their hidden meta-semantic potentialities, by escaping "anything that stamps them with one meaning or confines them to one attitude, for it is their nature to change" (Woolf 1993c: 143). In this sense, the short story functions as a condensed form in which the visible and the invisible overlap and the "sunken meanings" of words can "remain sunken, suggested, not stated" (Woolf 1993c: 140). In virtue of their brevity stories can be understood as highly allusive forms, in which, as Carver remarks, the untold becomes as significant as what is narrated:

"What creates tension in a piece of fiction is partly the way the concrete words are linked together to make up the visible action of the story. But it's also the things that are left out, that are implied, the landscape just under the smooth (but sometimes broken and unsettled) surface of things" (Carver 34).

- 11 Woolf's engagement with the short story tends to deploy this potential to convey not only the surface of experience but also the unfathomable nucleus behind phenomenal reality. This applies not only to Woolf's portrayal of the subject's perceptual experiences, but also to her conception of the self as a dynamic and uncircumscribable phenomenon. The story "An Unwritten novel" testifies not only to Woolf's conception of the self as unlimited and never completely definable, but also raises the fundamental issue of the creation of characters in fiction, which Woolf will later expand in her essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", by partly drawing on this story. The encounter with an anonymous woman on a train which Woolf cites in her 1924 essay to exemplify how human beings escape rigid definition and cannot be conveyed through the limited and stereotyped characterisations of realistic novels, directly refers to this short story. In "An Unwritten Novel" the narrator starts a series of speculations moving from the observation of a woman sitting in front of her on a train; from a few details of the woman's appearance and behaviour the narrator builds up a complex imaginary plot, which includes a female character probably named after Alan Bennett's eponymous character in *Hilda Lessways*. In "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" it is indeed this novel which Woolf takes as a key example of how Edwardian novelists build their characters not moving from a true observation of human nature, but rather starting from their egocentric points of view:

But we cannot hear her mother's voice, or Hilda's voice; we can only hear Mr. Bennett's voice telling us facts about rents and freeholds and copyholds and fines. What can Mr. Bennett be about? I have formed my own opinion of what Mr. Bennett is about – he is trying to make us imagine for him; he is trying to hypnotize us into the belief that, because he has made a house, there must be a person living there. With all his powers of observation, which are marvellous, with all his sympathy and humanity, which are great, Mr. Bennett has never once looked at Mrs. Brown in her corner" (Woolf 1985: 330).

- 12 In Woolf's view, detailed descriptions of external reality are employed by realistic novelists to provide their characters with an "air of probability" (Woolf 1993c: 8), and

this concern about a faithful representation of phenomenal reality is what prevents their works from conveying a true exploration of human nature in all its contradictory and subtle aspects. The other reality which Woolf intends to bring to the foreground in narration, the ever-moving and inexplicable reality of consciousness, requires that these conventional rules of the novel are abandoned in favour of more flexible and dynamic forms of narration. These involve not only, as previously observed, a different treatment of narrative time and a stratified use of language, but also a less falsifying conception of characters. "An Unwritten Novel" well exemplifies how in Woolf's view the true novelist is aware that his narrative representation of human nature can only be partial and fictive: "Most novelists have the same experience. Some Brown, Smith, or Jones comes before them and says in the most seductive way in the world, "Come and catch me if you can." [...] Few catch the phantom; most have to be content with a scrap of her dress or a wisp of her hair" (Woolf 1993c: 319). The woman in the carriage from which the short story moves, functions as "almost a symbol of human destiny" (Woolf 1985: 106) and is in the end revealed to contradict completely the narrator's fantasies about her. The dramatic and complex plot which the narrator builds around the amplification of few details is in fact destined to fall to pieces when the woman's true situation is revealed, and this final reversal leads the narrator to meditate on the overtly fictive nature of her creations: "Well, my world's done for! What do I stand on? What do I know?" (Woolf 1985: 115). This revelation does not however undermine the principles of narration, but rather incorporates within writing the awareness of how limited representation is when confronted with the truly inexhaustible nature of human life. In this sense, "An Unwritten Novel" anticipates Woolf's confrontation in her novels with the "thousand disagreeables" (Woolf 1993b: 4) composing human consciousness and her attempt to convey these without restraining them into a mystifying linearity and intelligibility.

- 13 The confrontation with the other always involves in Woolf the awareness of how what we perceive and understand is only a part of what is truly concealed in human nature. For this reason, alterity proves fundamental in stimulating the subject to that active fragmentation in thought which leads not only to uncertainty but also to a more productive and original process of thinking, as happens to Lily in *To the Lighthouse* when she is unable to formulate a final judgment of Mr. Banks:

How did it work out, all this? How did one judge people, think of them? How did one add up this and that and conclude that it was liking one felt, or disliking? And to those words, what meaning attached, after all? Standing now, apparently transfixed by the pear tree, impressions poured in upon her of those two men, and to follow her thoughts was like following a voice which speaks too quickly to be taken down by one's pencil. (Woolf 1993a: 40)

- 14 The narrator in "An Unwritten Novel" underlines how knowledge and understanding of the other is never completely accomplished but rather takes the form of an endless process in which, similar to Carver's remarks on the short story, what is concealed acts as a subterranean level of infinite re-definitions. In this sense, like "The Mark on the Wall", Woolf's 1920 short story proceeds by following a spiral-like epistemological and temporal progression in which the profound knowledge achieved by the narrator at the end of the story is circularly connected to her initial observations on the mysterious nature of human beings: "Five faces opposite – five mature faces – and the knowledge in each face. Strange, though, how people want to conceal it! Marks of reticence are on all those faces: lips shut, eyes shaded, each one of the five doing something to hide or

stultify his knowledge" (Woolf 1985: 106). Woolf had already underlined in "The Mark on the Wall" how human beings tend to hide their inner nature when confronted with the others, and in particular with strangers, and her remarks in this story opens onto several levels of interpretation:

Suppose the looking-glass smashes, the image disappears, and the romantic figure with the green of forest depths all about it is there no longer, but only that shell of a person which is seen by other people – what an airless, shallow, bald, prominent world it becomes! A world not to be lived in. As we face each other in omnibuses and underground railways we are looking into the mirror; that accounts for the vagueness, the gleam of glassiness, in our eyes. (Woolf 1985: 79)

- 15 What is perceived from the outside is only the "shell" of the subject and this necessarily falsifies the complex and multi-levelled nature of interior life. In this sense, Woolf again insists on the importance for writers to focus on consciousness and leave "the description of reality more and more out of their stories" (Woolf 1985: 80). The surface of appearances does not coincide with the dynamic and contradictory essence of human beings; in spite of this, Woolf does not seem to prefigure in this story forms of writing which erase the duality external/internal by focussing exclusively on consciousness, but rather to anticipate innovative narrations structured on the very interaction between these two simultaneous realities. "The Mark on the Wall" suggests in fact how the subject's process of self-knowledge is centred not only on self-exploration but also on that dynamic confrontation with the others, which makes the subject experience a prismatic fragmentation of the self; according to Woolf "the novelists in future will realise more and more the importance of these reflections, for course there is not one reflection but almost infinite numbers; those are the depths they will explore, those phantoms they will pursue" (Woolf 1985: 79).
- 16 In this sense, the stories collected in *Monday or Tuesday* anticipate Woolf's later emphasis on the process of self-knowledge conceived not as an autonomous act of self-exploration but rather, as Paul Ricoeur (1996) has theorized, in terms of an infinite process necessarily involving the confrontation with alterity. This also raises the important question of how Woolf perceived the technique of first-person narration, which she widely employed in short stories in contrast with the third-person narration of her novels. The short form appears in this sense to allow Woolf to explore the I-centered narration which she preferred to avoid in novels; however, the first-person voice is not to be understood as coinciding with the author's voice nor are the short stories to be read as autobiographical pieces of writing. Though sometimes moving from remarks which could be easily read as autobiographical, the stories in *Monday or Tuesday* perfectly adhere to the canon of narrative fictive re-configuration. The first-person narrative voice present in some of the stories can thus be understood not as Woolf's alter ego, but rather as a bodiless and abstract voice which anticipates the writer's confrontation with "abstract mystical eyeless" (Woolf 1980: 203) forms of writing. This process of abstraction, particularly evident in the two stories "A Haunted House" and "Monday or Tuesday", demonstrates Woolf's implementing with that universal character potential in the short story, according to Poe (Poe 1846: 164), and reveals one of Woolf's major innovations in writing: "I daresay it's true, however, that I haven't that 'reality' gift. I unsubstantise, willfully to some extent, distrusting reality – its cheapness" (Woolf, 1978a: 248). First-person narration does not function for Woolf in these stories as a means of expression of that "damned egotistical self" (Woolf 1978a: 14) that she had in fact deplored in other writers, but rather as a technique which

allows her to convey that process of fusion of the subject with an extra-corporeal reality which was to become central in her novels.

- 17 In this sense, most of the features that I have underlined in *Monday or Tuesday* appear to be closely connected to Woolf's later development of the same themes and forms of writing in her novels. It is significant to observe how Woolf, though widely experimenting in her short pieces of writing, always felt the need to transfer these innovations to her novels rather than explore the short form further. An illuminating insight into Woolf's position on this issue comes from an entry in her diary in which she directly connects one of her short stories to the conception of her first radically innovative novel, *Jacob's Room*: "& happier today than I was yesterday having this afternoon arrived at some idea of a new form of a new novel. Suppose one thing should open out of another – as in *An Unwritten Novel* – only not for 10 pages but 200 or so – doesn't that give the looseness & lightness I want; doesn't that get closer & yet keep form & speed, & enclose everything, everything?" (Woolf 1978a: 13). The practice of short writing had doubtlessly taught Woolf how to free her forms from the rules of strictly sequential writing and how to "slip easily from one thing to another" (Woolf 1985: 79), thus conveying the disordered and unpredictable dynamism of the human mind. The short story does not however appear to provide Woolf with the temporal extension and the sense of development that she needs in order to fully deploy her narrative issues. The intensive character of short fiction allows Woolf to experiment with modalities of representation of the simultaneous and a-linear time of the mind, but also appears to avoid that fundamental confrontation with the passage of time which was to become central to her novels. Woolf's aim to convey "everything" in her writing unveils her engagement with forms that can implement the potential of prose to express both the "ordinariness" (Woolf 1958: 18) of everyday life as well as the momentary "flight of the mind" (Bell 138). This emphasis on the temporary quality of moments of being points out how fundamental it is for Woolf to reproduce these instants of revelation not as absolute experiences separated from the linear flowing of time, but rather as "embedded in many more moments of non being" (Woolf 1978b: 70). In her view, "the real novelist can somehow convey both sorts of being" (Woolf 1978b: 70) and it is this attention to the interaction of an extensive and an intensive perception of time which explains Woolf's constant experimentation with the form of the novel. According to Woolf, it is this genre which holds the potential to reproduce human experience fully, by adding to the density of poetry and short prose, the awareness of how life is essentially rooted in time:

The novel is the only form of art which seeks to make us believe that it is giving a full and truthful record of life, not the climax and the crisis but the growth and development of feelings, which is the novelist's aim, he copies the order of the day, observes the sequence of ordinary things even if such fidelity entails chapters of description and hours of research. Thus we glide into the novel with far less effort and less break with our surrounding than in any other form of imaginative literature. We seem to be continuing to live, only in another house or country perhaps. (Woolf 1958: 141)

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RÉSUMÉS

Les nouvelles que Woolf composa entre 1917 et 1921 marquent un tournant dans son écriture, le passage de la forme conventionnelle de ses premiers romans à de nouvelles structures narratives qui préfigurent la méthode expérimentale de l'auteur. Woolf utilise la forme brève comme un champ privilégié d'expérimentation dans lequel le temps "alinéaire" (Ricoeur) entre dans la narration et sape la ligne chronologique du temps. A travers la tension entre éléments contradictoires qu'elle met en œuvre, cette forme condensée répond à un double mouvement d'"inclusion" et de "saturation" (Deleuze et Guattari) qui lui permet de devenir un espace d'expansion, un territoire infini de dilatation interne et stratifiée. En cela, la nouvelle fonctionne comme une expérience de la perception qui interroge la nature de la réalité. Cela va de pair, chez Woolf, avec la recherche de formes d'écriture flexibles qui recréent la nature insondable de la réalité et évitent toute définition stable des personnages. C'est l'expérimentation que l'on trouve

dans *Monday or Tuesday* qui sert de base à l'innovation dans les romans, dans lesquels Woolf intègre les concepts de durée et de narration, tels qu'ils ont été redéfinis dans les nouvelles.

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