> At the London Zoo: performing animals in Virginia Woolf's *Night and day* and "The sun and the fish"

> No Zoológico de Londres: animais performáticos em *Night and day* e "The sun and the fish", de Virginia Woolf

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Abstract
Virginia Woolf grew up going to the London Zoo. It is hardly a surprise that representations of zoo animals appear frequently in her art. In her novel *Night and Day* (1919), it functions as one of the stages on which two would-be couples spend a Sunday afternoon, and in her essay, "The Sun and the Fish" (1928), it is the second of two travel destinations. I first contextualize the zoo as a site for animal performance. I next examine Woolf's characterizations of it as a stage, the cast of nonhuman animals who feature on it, and the human animals who come to watch the spectacle. While *Night and Day* centers on human-animal interactions, the final part of "The Sun and the Fish" focuses on the animals themselves.
Keywords: Virginia Woolf. Zoo. *Night and Day*. Human-animal interactions. "The Sun and the Fish".

Resumo
Virginia Woolf cresceu frequentando o Zoológico de Londres. Não é surpresa que representações de animais de zoológico apareçam frequentemente em sua arte. Em seu romance *Night and Day* (1919), ele funciona como um dos palcos em que dois futuros casais passam uma tarde de domingo, e em seu ensaio "The Sun and the Fish" (1928), é o segundo de dois destinos de viagem. Primeiramente, contextualizo o zoológico como um local para a performance animal. Em seguida, examino como Woolf caracteriza o lugar como palco, com o elenco de animais não humanos que participam e dos animais humanos que chegam para assistir ao espetáculo. Enquanto *Night and Day* está centrado em interações humanos-animais, a parte final de "The Sun and the Fish" enfoca nos próprios animais.
Palavras-chave: Virginia Woolf. Zoológico. *Night and Day*. Interações humanos-animais. "The Sun and the Fish".

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Virginia Woolf grew up going to the London Zoo.[1] It is hardly a surprise that representations of zoo animals appear frequently in her art, and that she refers to the London Zoo itself throughout the course of her writing life, from *The Voyage Out* to *The Years*[2]. In *Night and Day* (1919) and "The Sun and the Fish" (1928), the London Zoo makes more than a passing appearance. In *Night and Day*, it functions as one of the stages on which two would-be couples spend a Sunday afternoon, and in "The Sun and the Fish" it is the second of two destinations—the first is a total eclipse of the sun—in what one might call a travel essay. After I offer a brief historical contextualization of the zoo as a site for animal performance, I examine Woolf's characterizations of it as a stage, the cast of nonhuman animals who feature on it, and the human animals who come to watch the spectacle. As I show, while *Night and Day* centers on the human-animal interactions, the final part of "The Sun and the Fish" focuses on the animals themselves, and seems almost devoid of human presence.

1. Context

Zoos have always served as a site of spectacle. In their earliest origins, as menageries owned by rulers and potentates, they were, as Gordon McGregor Reid writes, "important in demonstrating an absolute royal dominion over beasts and subject humans. Exotic collections served to advertise the power, span and influence of kingdoms"[3]. Rulers from ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome to Central America, India, and Europe kept menageries, typically for the purpose of displaying colonial conquest. By the seventeenth century kings like Louis XIV created zoological gardens that resemble the zoos of today. The first modern example of a zoo is the Tiergarten Schönbrunn, or Schönbrunn Zoo, in Vienna, which was established in 1752.[4] The first Zoological Gardens in Britain, located in Regent's Park (that is, the London Zoo), were founded in 1828 by Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, who sought to "create a forum in which those interested in specifically zoological topics could study and present scientific papers"[5]. Soon,

[1] Richard Espley, "Woolf and the Others at the Zoo," 2007, p. 86; Bonnie Kime Scott, *In the Hollow of the Wave: Virginia Woolf and Modernist Uses of Nature*, 2012, p. 52.
[2] For a marvelous reading of zoo animals throughout her work, see Richard Espley's "Woolf and the Others at the Zoo."
[3] Gordon McGregor Reid. "Changed Attitudes to Nature Reflected in the Transformation of Menageries to Zoos," 2016, p. 120.
[4] Gordon McGregor Reid. "Changed Attitudes to Nature Reflected in the Transformation of Menageries to Zoos," 2016, p. 121.
[5] Nigel Rothfels, "Immersed with Animals," 2002, p. 205.

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however, Raffles's collection of animals came to amuse more than educate, and "by the middle of the nineteenth century, the Gardens resembled a public place of entertainment much more than a scientific station"[6].

2. As Stage for Animals

Since then, zoos have continued to serve as one of the primary sites of animal performances.[7] In terms of theatrical production, zoo staging consists of cages, aquariums, and open-air enclosures that display animals. Writes Lourdes Orozco, "A large part of performing with animals is to make sure that they do not leave that space, to ensure, above all, that they remain visible to the audience"[8]. To that end, zookeepers—directors, if you will—design enclosures both to match the preferences of the animals on display and to "create a safe, controlled performance"[9] space for them and their human spectators.

As this snapshot history and brief description of the theatrical framework alone indicate, it is glaringly evident that zoos are intended for *human* empowerment, enlightenment, and entertainment. I will not argue against the inherent anthropocentrism of zoos. As Jane Desmond writes, "these representatives of the wild exhibit through their performances their ultimate domination by and dependency on the humans who have captured or bred them"[10]. And yet—within this realm of animal performance, one can, as Jonathan Osborn writes, experience the zoo "as a space full of diverse bodies and contradictions"[11]. The "zoo space," he continues, "collapses dichotomies about personal experience and mediated engagement, culture and nature, care and domination, and freedom and confinement"[12]. By locating themselves within this space of performance, the "audience" can extend knowledge acquired through language to that gleaned by observing the life of animal bodies.[13]

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[6] Nigel Rothfels, "Immersed with Animals," 2002, p. 205.
[7] Karen Raber and Monica Mattfeld, "Introduction," 2017, p. 3; Nigel Rothfels, "Immersed with Animals," 2002, p. 205.
[8] Lourdes Orozco, *Theatre & Animals,* 2013, p. 46-47.
[9] Lourdes Orozco, *Theatre & Animals,* 2013, p. 47.
[10] Jane C. Desmond, S*taging Tourism: Bodies on Display from Waikiki to Sea World*, 2001, p. 151-52.
[11] Jonathan Osborn. "Zoomorphic Bodies: Moving and Being Moved by Animals," 2019, p. 299.
[12] Jonathan Osborn. "Zoomorphic Bodies: Moving and Being Moved by Animals," 2019, p. 299.
[13] Una Chaudhuri. "Introduction: Animal Acts for Changing Times, 2.0: A Field Guide to Interspecies Performance," 2014, p. 10.

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I now go on to examine the ways Woolf represents the diverse and contradictory zoo space, how she collapses its multiple dichotomies, especially between "personal experience and mediated engagement," and how, through staging animal performance, she shows that "its reliance on physicality, materiality, and embodiment makes it especially useful for venturing into areas where language is absent"[14]. What kind of non-verbal experiences do spectators have within the performance space of a zoo?

3. Night and Day: Zoos

In *Night and Day*, the zoo, along with the music-hall and art gallery, is one of the pleasurable options available to the young characters and functions also as one of the stages on which they play out their courtship. (Indeed, in this comic novel of manners, one of the key themes is performance; Shakespeare's name alone appears 45 times.) On the day that William Rodney, Katharine Hilbery, and Cassandra Otway meet up with Ralph Denham at the London Zoo, they had other options available to them—"little galleries, and select concerts, and private performances"[15]. Cassandra, who seems to have determined that Sundays are "usually dedicated to Nature," chooses, on behalf of them all, the zoo[16]. Upon their entrance, she and William, and Katharine and Rodney, separate immediately into two couples, and they perform their own choreographies, via the zoo animals, over the course of this scene, which takes place in the final third of the novel.

As zoo-goers do, the young people rapidly break the "fourth wall" of the zoo theater and engage directly—and nonverbally—with the animals. It is more accurate to say that they triangulate with them; rather than communicating directly with their partners, they direct their attention to another creature to relay their feelings. Cassandra, who had indicated a scientific interest in animals ("She had once trifled with the psychology of animals, and still knew something about inherited characteristics"[17]) as her reason for selecting the zoo as the Sunday pastime, promptly forgets her initial motivation and becomes "engrossed in her

[14] Una Chaudhuri. "Introduction: Animal Acts for Changing Times, 2.0: A Field Guide to Interspecies Performance," 2014, p. 10.
[15] Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day*, 1948, p. 365.
[16] Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day*, 1948, p. 365.
[17] Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day*, 1948, p. 365.

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feelings"[18]. Alert to William's annoyance over Katharine's breaking off with Ralph and leaving him with her, Cassandra prods "some Oriental hog . . . gently with the point of her umbrella"[19]. Later, when Cassandra and William are rejoined by Katharine and Ralph, Cassandra, forgetting her own act of aggression, however mild, accuses William, who "appeared to be tempting some small reluctant animal to descend from an upper perch to partake of half an apple"[20], of "'torturing'" an "'unfortunate aye-aye'" (or lemur)[21]. Katharine, sensitive to the tension of the moment, and especially to William's jealousy over her pairing off with Ralph, picks up on Cassandra's accusation and concludes that "'William isn't kind to animals'"[22]. Like Cassandra, Katharine is annoyed with William, and uses his behavior as a way to attack him.

Repeatedly, the young people cross the divide between them and the animals, not just by prodding them, but by feeding them, as Cassandra witnesses William attempting to give an aye-aye an apple. Cassandra may be picking up on William's attempt to control the animals; feeding them treats does help to keep them on stage, "in the spotlight"[23]. This is typical zoo behavior—feeding animals to get them to move, "to *do* something"[24], whether it is to eat from one's hands or treat them like circus animals, something Katharine does as well: "[P]ink-lined trunks of elephants cautiously abstracted buns from her outstretched hands"[25] and before that she had tossed pieces of buns into bears' throats[26] as if they were circus animals. As if to "propitiate" the apes, whose cage bars he had rattled with his stick, "or to show his consideration for their feelings," William "proceeded to offer them the apple which he held"[27]. Feeding the animals becomes another way to nonverbally communicate with the other characters; in this instance, William may be trying to regain Katharine's favor and show her that he knows how to be considerate.

Through this scene, the young adults, already playing their own roles, expand the cast to include the caged animals around whom they perambulate. The human cast continues to project their own concerns—namely, what will it

[18] Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day*, 1948, p. 366.
[19] Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day*, 1948, p. 366.
[20] Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day*, 1948, p. 368-369.
[21] Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day*, 1948, p. 369.
[22] Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day*, 1948, p. 369.
[23] Lourdes Orozco, *Theatre & Animals,* 2013, p. 47.
[24] Jane C Desmond. S*taging Tourism: Bodies on Display from Waikiki to Sea World*, 2001, p. 150.
[25] Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day*, 1948, p. 368.
[26] Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day*, 1948, p. 367.
[27] Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day*, 1948, p. 370.

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take for them, that is, the humans, to be happy?—onto their companion species. After Cassandra had prodded the Oriental hog, she asks herself, "Were they happy?"[28]. The immediate antecedent to "they" is the hog, but in the following sentence we learn that she is referring to Katharine and Ralph. Four paragraphs later, Katharine asks the same question, but this time directly in reference to the animals. "'I wonder if these animals are happy?'"[29] she queries as she observes "a gray bear . . . philosophically playing with a tassel which once, perhaps, formed part of a lady's parasol"[30]—reminiscent, perhaps, of the umbrella Cassandra had earlier used to poke the hog, and possibly a reminder of the detritus that people throw into the enclosures. Or is the tassel a stage prop? When Katharine asks about animals' happiness she could as easily been talking about her fellow species, about Cassandra and William, or even herself.

Are the animals in the London Zoo happy? Animal Studies scholars and animal rights activists typically say no, zoo animals, on the contrary, are bored, frustrated, and often maltreated. That Woolf deigns to raise the question—even if animals function as stand-ins for humans—is a preliminary step toward a consciousness of what it means for animals to serve as spectacles within this context.

Within this context, humans also seem to serve as spectacles. When William is alone with Katharine, he longs to keep a distance between her and himself, one that "separates the devotee from the image in the shrine," and finds that that is easier to do in the zoo rather than "seated in a drawing-room, . . . with a tea-tray between them"[31] (as will happen in this chapter). Within this atmosphere he can gaze upon her—but not he alone. He also sees the "camels slant[ing] their heavy-lidded eyes at her," "giraffes fastidiously observ[ing] her from their melancholy eminence," and "silvery fish . . . ogl[ing] her for a moment, pressing their distorted mouths against the glass"[32]. Contra John Berger's famous claim that "nowhere in a zoo can a stranger encounter the look of an animal"[33], Woolf represents animals looking at the strangers in their presence. More accurately, from the perspective of Ralph, Woolf shows animals—camels, giraffes, and fishes—observing Katharine. It may be that, once again, the characters, such as Ralph is here, are projecting their own activities—Ralph can't keep his eyes off

[28] Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day*, 1948, p. 366.
[29] Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day*, 1948, p. 367.
[30] Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day*, 1948, p. 367.
[31] Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day*, 1948, p. 368.
[32] Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day*, 1948, p. 368.
[33] John Berger, *About Looking*, 1980, p. 28.

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of her—onto the animals. It may also be that, as Berger writes, "At the most, the animal's gaze flickers and passes on. They look sideways. They look blindly beyond. They scan mechanically"[34].

Yet all the same—within the hothouse, a "locus of murky atavistic desire"[35] as Richard Espley writes, that encloses William and Katharine, Woolf includes a moment of wonder, with Katharine

> marvel[ing] at the purple circles marked upon the rich tussore wings of some lately emerged and semi-conscious butterfly, or at caterpillars immobile like the knobbed twigs of a pale-skinned tree, or at slim green snakes stabbing the glass wall again and again with their flickering cleft tongues[36].

The atmosphere of the zoo seems to decenter humans and render them colorless and insignificant; here, "human beings tended to look pale and to fall silent"[37]. In this part of the performance, no words are necessary.

This quiet moment ends—as moments in Woolf's writing often end—abruptly, with a sudden shift; here, "with the mocking and profoundly unhappy laughter of monkeys"[38]. The object of the monkeys' mocking and unhappy laughter is unclear, but Woolf may be suggesting that the young people themselves, like the animals whom they're observing, are on display as well. The monkey's laughter is echoed later by Katharine's uncontrollable laughter at William, who offers an apple to the apes.[39] Is Woolf, in moments, showing human animal and nonhuman animal behavior of a piece? If, as Osborn writes, "animal bodies at the zoo invariably become subject to human choreographies," so too, then, do "human trainers, architects, caretakers, and visitors also become subjected to animal choreographies"?[40] In their encounters with nonhuman animals, the human animals intensify their engagement with their fellow species and more freely express their feelings of frustration, jealousy, passion, malevolence, and aggression. Within the confines of a zoo, the human characters enter a theatrical space that enables them to reveal their own rawer emotions, and frees them to contemplate the larger questions—namely, on happiness—of their own lives.

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[34] John Berger, *About Looking*, 1980, p. 28.
[35] Richard Espley, "Woolf and the Others at the Zoo," 2007, p. 87.
[36] Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day*, 1948, p. 368.
[37] Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day*, 1948, p. 368.
[38] Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day*, 1948, p. 368.
[39] Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day*, 1948, p. 371.
[40] Jonathan Osborn. "Zoomorphic Bodies: Moving and Being Moved by Animals," 2019, p. 307.

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To be sure, the London Zoo scene is primarily anthropocentric; the human characters may intermingle with the nonhuman characters on display, but their concerns and feelings are still center stage. That is not the case with Woolf's representation of the London Zoo in "The Sun and the Fish," in which she features the lizard and fish tanks. In this scene, there is no specified character present—only a plural first-person narrator who seems so indeterminate as to be disembodied. As if seeing through the eyes of a stage designer, the narrator states: "For forests, they [the fishes] have half a dozen bamboo canes; for mountains, sandhills; in the curves and crinkles of a sea-shell lie for them all adventure, all romance"[41]. Unlike the London Zoo scene in *Night and Day*, human passion and romance, in "The Sun and the Fish," seem unimportant; in this essay, "All human passion seems furtive and feverish beside this still rapture"[42]. The "still rapture" of this sentence is the scene of one lizard "mounted immobile on the back of another, with only the twinkle of a gold eyelid or the suction of a green flank to show that they are the living flesh, and not made of bronze"[43]. The mating in "The Sun and the Fish" is between two lizards, not two humans. The fishes, on the contrary, do not require mates; they "themselves seem to have been shaped deliberately and slipped into the world only to be themselves. They neither work nor weep. In their shape is their reason'"[44]. Note the emphasis on "they": "themselves" (twice), "they, and "their." The fishes play the central roles. As Eileen (Xiaoxi) Yu writes, Woolf "establish[es] the fish as an independent existence"[45]. Their perfection lies in their sheer embodiment. Throughout this scene, the narrator describes the fishes in superlative terms: "sublime," "perfect" (twice), and "majestic" stand out here:

> There the inhabitants perform forever evolutions whose intricacy, because it has no reason, seems the more sublime. Blue and silver armies, keeping a perfect distance for all their arrowlike quickness, shoot first this way, then that. The discipline is perfect, the control absolute; reason there is none. The most majestic of human evolutions seems feeble and fluctuating compared with theirs.[46]

Jane Desmond writes, "Animals always reveal their difference from ourselves even when they are performing their similarities"[47]. If in this passage

[41] Virginia Woolf, "The Sun and the Fish," 1950, p. 217.
[42] Virginia Woolf, "The Sun and the Fish," 1950, p. 217.
[43] Virginia Woolf, "The Sun and the Fish," 1950, p. 216-217.
[44] Virginia Woolf, "The Sun and the Fish," 1950, p. 217.
[45] Eileen (Xiaoxi) Yu, "The Sun's Eclipse and Fantasy of the Eye: Feminist Vision in Virginia Woolf's 'The Sun and the Fish,'" 2017, p. 9.
[46] Virginia Woolf, "The Sun and the Fish," 1950, p. 217.
[47] Jane C Desmond. S*taging Tourism: Bodies on Display from Waikiki to Sea World*, 2001, p. 175.

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the fishes seem to perform with militaristic precision, in the following their variety is emphasized, with

> some so round, some so thin, some with radiating fins upon their backs, others lined with red electric light, others undulating like white pancakes on a frying pan, some armoured in blue mail, some given prodigious claws, some outrageously fringed with huge whiskers . . .[48].

In contrast, underneath "our tweed and silk is nothing but a monotony of pink nakedness"[49]. As Jocelyn Bartkevicius writes, "Londoners . . . conceal their animal bodies with garments that signal social and economic status. In so doing, they forget that they have animal bodies"[50].

Citing the animal studies art historian Steve Baker, Una Chaudhuri writes that we come to animals "'as a reminder of the limits of human understanding'"[51]. In *Night and Day* Cassandra was drawn to the Zoo because she had a prior, if minimal interest in and knowledge about animals (and one, presumably, drawn from books). She and her friends did not seem to learn anymore about them than they knew going in. However, in staging their encounters on the pages of her novel, Woolf is addressing another audience, her readers, who can observe the human characters' interactions with the animal performers and learn about the "the psychology of [the human] animals." Readers can see how both human and nonhuman animals may share "inherited characteristics"[52], including laughter, frustration, happiness and unhappiness, and curiosity. In "The Sun and the Fish," Woolf homes in on a gift that other animals—in this case, fishes especially—offer to the human species: "their radical otherness, their ultimate unknowability"[53]. The animal performers on the stage of the zoo extend that opportunity to all who seek it.

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[48] Virginia Woolf, "The Sun and the Fish," 1950, p. 217-218.
[49] Virginia Woolf, "The Sun and the Fish," 1950, p. 218.
[50] Jocelyn Bartkevicius, "Thinking Back through Our (Naturalist) Mother: Woolf, Dillard, and the Nature Essay," 1999, p. 44.
[51] Una Chaudhuri. "Introduction: Animal Acts for Changing Times, 2.0: A Field Guide to Interspecies Performance," 2014, p. 11.
[52] Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day*, 1948, p. 365.
[53] Una Chaudhuri. "Introduction: Animal Acts for Changing Times, 2.0: A Field Guide to Interspecies Performance," 2014, p. 8.

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