

Clock-a-doodle-doo

by Willa Muir

They were all wag-at-the-wa' clocks, but of every conceivable size and shape, and they covered three walls of the room, which had a fourth wall of clear glass as if it were an enormous show-case. Every day a Woman opened a little side-door and came in to wind up any weights that had run down. She always came in just when the sunlight, having fingered its way round half the room, touching clock after clock, had withdrawn for a siesta on the floorboards before creeping back to finger the clocks on the other half of the walls. She handled the weights lovingly as if she liked feeling them, and the clocks were excited and glad to see her, so that they whirred and chimed in unison no less than twelve strokes, the maximum effort of which they were capable. A great deal of their tick-talking and clock-clacking was concerned with her and her doings, yet she never showed the least interest in their mechanism, except for the weights, and the clocks, who were proud of the cog-wheels inside their heads, especially when daylight failed and they could not see each other, were puzzled by her indifference. In the dark they lived only in their cog-wheels and so the shadow that hid each clock from its neighbour was also a shadow of fear, for if a wheel were to fail in the night or a spindle break the damaged clock could not ever show a face to the world but was as if annihilated. In the dark, therefore, they were resentful of the Woman's indifference, but they did not discuss her except to accuse her of stupidity, for they were eager to forget their fear by speculating on the nature of cog-wheels and propounding theories for their repair. Every night the discussion waxed, in liveliness until the defiance of the clocks culminated in striking midnight, after which they relapsed contentedly into the hum-drum routine of the small hours where little effort was needed.

On moonlight nights, however, the liveliness continued as long as the moonshine lasted. And on these occasions they speculated about the moon, arguing that it must be a super-clock, permanently lit-up and delivered from the fear of darkness, not to speak of its power to [47] move freely, if erratically, across the wall of the sky. One very grandfatherly clock, reputed to be the oldest inhabitant, sought in vain to discourage what he called the heresy of revering the moon; the other clocks were tired of hearing his admonitions to honour the punctual sun, which was, he said, the Author of their Being: 'He is like ourselves, only greater. He too vanishes from sight in the darkness. He too is regular in

his movements—does he not visit us daily, each in turn, to watch over our welfare and to remind us that we belong to the great cosmic rhythm of Time? Your moon is no clock-face, your moon spins round until only its edge is visible, your moon is merely the sun's pendulum.'

'Bah!' said the young, impatient clocks, and they said it loudly ten times so that the wheezing, grandfatherly clock was quite inaudible. 'Of course the moon is a clock-face. Can we not see the signs upon it although they are difficult to read?'

'Use your cog-wheels, old fool, use your cog-wheels,' added a very Clever Clock, who claimed to have twice as many cog-wheels as any of the others. 'It's face-values you're trying to foist on us, face-value wrapped up in pious sentimentality. If the sun takes the trouble to visit us it's because he thinks it worth his while. And as for you,' he addressed the young clocks, 'it's face-values you're serving too, the whole clacking of you, when you say that you admire the moon *although* you can't read its face! Admire it rather *because* it is illegible, because its meaning lies hidden in its private cog-wheels, because it is an intricate and baffling piece of mechanism, unlike your hum-drum, bourgeois sun.'

The moon shone straight in upon the Clever Clock. 'Ah! I am lit-up too!' he cried. 'Now I shall tell you the truth. The numbers on our faces are only a device to keep us marking time, to prevent us from inquiring into the nature of reality ——'

He had to break off to strike Eleven, and this made him furious; besides, in spite of his multifarious cog-wheels, his voice was not the loudest in the room. A much simpler-looking clock on his right had a fuller, more resonant chime, and the Clever Clock, aware of his superior intricacy, kicked his pendulum petulantly as far as it would go.

'I appeal to my friends on the left,' he exclaimed, as soon as the echoes had died away. 'What is this so-called Time to which we [48] are bound in slavery? Can anyone define it? Is it anything but an ideological figment?'

These words impressed the young clocks. And when the Clever Clock went on to point out that the Truth of things lay inside their own heads, and was to be discovered only by the study of their own cog-wheels, they were interested. But when the Clever Clock said that a knowledge of the springs of their own conduct would enable each of them to detach himself from routine and become an independent moon, they were elated.

'Let us make a beginning — any beginning!' they cried.

'Good,' said the Clever Clock, 'Watch me.'

He shrugged and twisted himself until he had dislocated the numbers on his face, so that they were all in the wrong places.

'That is the first step towards illegibility,' he announced, 'the first step on the road to freedom. *A nous la liberté!*' And he struck Twelve on a high, tinny note of exultation, with both his hands pointing to the number One. 'Now I shall withdraw into myself and

meditate on my cog-wheels,' he said. 'I have already made several important discoveries _____,

'Do tell us,' buzzed the clocks. But at that moment the moon fled behind a cloud-bank and the clocks began to be a little fearful at the return of darkness. The Clever Clock felt their fear creeping into him, and muttered 'Fools!' so savagely that the clocks did not dare to address him again that night.

Now the Clever Clock had really discovered something. By listening very intently to himself he had discovered that his cog-wheels were interlocking and moved each other. But which of them was the *primum mobile*? He groaned in private over the difficulty of his task. 'If I could only be quit of this nonsense of striking the hours!' he reflected. 'What I want is Pure Horological Thought . . . [Muir's ellipses]' He fell into a kind of trance, murmuring to himself: 'I am I. I am my cog-wheels.' This so refreshed his self-conceit that on the morning after, when the other clocks looked uneasily at his face, wondering what the Woman would say, he tick-tocked and clack-clacked more arrogantly than ever. 'She won't dare to say anything. She is a mere servant of the cog-wheels. Does she not handle our weights simply and solely to minister to the cog-wheels?' he declared, and was proved right, too, for the Woman did not look at his face at all. [49] He was a clock who could run for months at a time without her, and she disregarded him. 'In any case,' said the Clever Clock, after she had gone, 'she is stupid. And so are most of you — all of you. Marking time is all you're fit for. Not one of you is capable of becoming a free agent, except myself. However, when I am a moon I shall be lit-up for ever, and I shall be famous when you are all on the scrap-heap.'

'No, no!' cried several young clocks, so young that they were almost watches. 'We want to be lit-up too!'

'How can you take him seriously?' growled the grandfatherly clock.

The Clever Clock interrupted him. 'We must free our terminology from the materialism of content, if we are to discover the laws of Pure Horological Thought,' he said rapidly, impressing his audience once more.

At that moment the finger of the sun touched him, giving him a warm, tickling sensation which was so pleasant that, even while reminding himself how much he despised sensation, he forgot momentarily to continue talking. As the sun slid over him the carved detail on his case stood out clearly, and one could see what a very fine clock he had been meant to be. Twelve little wooden figures stood in niches around the clock-case, and an angel with a little trumpet was perched on the very top. There could be no doubt that his intricate machinery had been planned to set these figures in motion, but something must have gone wrong, for they were gathering dust, and looked a little forlorn. And the Clever Clock, pondering his cog-wheels, had never even suspected that what they really needed was the adjustment of a minute pinion to set the little figures dancing. There was

a tiny screw loose in the Clever Clock, but he was too busy boasting and studying Pure Horological Thought to observe anything of the kind.

He felt restless again when the finger of the sun left him. The Daily Dope! he muttered to himself, sneering at the travelling beam of light. And he shrugged himself so hard that his numbers fell into confusion; one of them even came off and tinkled on to the floor. That delighted the Clever Clock.

‘Now I am well on the way to become unintelligible,’ he said. ‘I an unique among clocks!’

‘But you are still marking Time,’ retorted the grandfatherly [50] clock, for at that moment the Clever Clock had to strike Two along with all the others. This so exasperated him that with a violent kick he dislodged the balancing weight from his pendulum.

‘Now I am Really Unique,’ he gasped, somewhat out of breath, since his pendulum was clacking wildly. ‘Now I can swing from one extreme to the other as much as I like! There is no other clock like me in the whole universe. Clack-clack! Clack-clack! CLACK! Not one of you can do this! Clack-clack-clack-clack!!’

‘Oo-oo-oh!’ cried the young clocks, feeling excited. ‘What marvellous high-kicking!’

And that night, when he was lit-up, the Clever Clock set all the others to shrugging and kicking in imitation of him, crying at top-speed:

‘This is — clackety-clack — this is the Horological Renaissance!’

When the Woman came in the next day her foot struck against a little pile of discarded numbers and a pendulum balance. Also, she could hear the Clever Clock clack-clacking at furious speed. She reached up and took him from the wall and blew the dust off the little wooden figures.

‘Watch me!’ said the Clever Clock to the admiring young clocks. ‘Now I move from the wall as I promised you. This Woman is the servant of my will.’

And he went out in her arms and the door shut behind them.

[‘Clock-a-doodle-do’, *The Modern Scot* 5 (June 1934) 46-50 (original page numbers are inserted above); repbd: Moira Burgess (ed.), *The Other Voice* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1987) 168-72]

Taken from *Moving in Circles: Willa Muir's Writings* by Aileen Christianson
pages 201-205