

# THE STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS NOVEL

---

“The modern practice of art is somehow an improvement upon the old .... For the modern, the point of interest lies very likely in the dark places of psychology, at once, therefore, the accent falls a little differently; the emphasis is upon something hitherto ignored ....” According to William James, “Psychology is the science of mental life, both of the phenomena and of their conditions. The phenomena are such things as we call feelings, desires, cognitions, reasonings, decisions and the like”. In other words, psychology as the scientific and objective, examination of the nature and form of human reactions, is a comparatively recent development. The term “stream of consciousness” comes from psychology. It was coined by William James in 1886 and popularized in his *Principles of Psychology* in 1890. According to him, “Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows round it. The significance, the value of the image is all in this halo or penumbra that surrounds and escorts it. (Here is the “luminous halo” of Virginia Woolf) .... Let us call it the stream of thing, of consciousness, or of subjective life.”

The concept of the stream of consciousness has added a new and significant dimension to the art of prose fiction. In the words of Leon Edel, it has enlarged the scope of fiction and enriched it beyond measure. The supporters of this concept have explored a new realm of subjective experience; they have endeavoured to portray the depth and complexity of human consciousness as faithfully as possible. The presentation of the new material, according to Robert Humphrey, “necessitated the invention of new fictional techniques or a refocusing of the old ones “ ...Virginia Woolf realized that in the stream-of-consciousness novel ‘the story might wobble the plot might crumble; ruin might seize upon the characters.’ New wine could not be held in old skins, and the new novel dispensed with the accepted principles and conventions of prose fiction. I.A. Richards insisted on the need for a new form different from the solid mechanism or framework of the traditional novel.

This new genre took birth between 1913 and 1915. On the eve of the First World War three novelists, unknown to each other, were writing works which had a remarkable influence on the English fiction. In France, Marcel Proust published in 1913 the first two volumes of the eight-part work we know today as *Remembrance of Things Past*. While these volumes were in the press, an Englishwoman, Dorothy Miller Richardson had begun to write what was later on entitled *Pilgrimage*. Between the launching of these two ambitious works on both sides of Channel, James Joyce, an Irishman, began publishing in serial form a novel entitled *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In this manner, a new

type of novel came into existence what we have come to call the stream-of-consciousness novel or the novel of the silent, the internal monologue, and in French letters, the modern analytic novel, which, is not written as following thought, caught the very atmosphere of the mind. This was indeed a great coincidence. These three writers wrote separately and were unknown to each other. They were writers of altogether different talent and temperament. And yet between them they turned fiction away from external to internal reality. The great journey inward had definitely begun – a journey of exploration into the realm of feelings and sensations. Of course, the first thing to be discarded was the traditional story. A story involved a certain amount of conscious or unconscious falsification of man's experience of life. It tortured reality out of shape. It was artificial and a made-up thing. It should therefore go. And they annihilated it. According to a critic, "The new psychology has shifted the goal of the novelist." Now he is not out to point a moral or to adorn a tale. He wants to get at all that there is in any individual; in short, his purpose is psychological research. His business is to depict human life as experienced by those engaged in the business of living it. His aim is to get nearer to life. In this he is helped by the psychologist whose goal is the same. Instead of a rounded whole, the novelist is out to catch the psychological moment. This led to many interesting experiments.

According to the psychological researches, consciousness is amalgam of all that we have experienced and continue to experience. Every thought is a part of personal consciousness; every thought is also unique and ever-changing. We seem to be selective in our thoughts, selectively attentive or inattentive, focusing attention on certain objects and areas of experience, rejecting others, totally blocking others out. When a thought recurs in the mind it can never be exactly the same as it was before, Renewed, it carries with it the freshness of renewal, and the new context in which it has re-emerged. "Experience is remoulding us every moment, and our mental reaction on every given thing is really a resultant of our experience of the whole world up to that date." This is true not only for ideas, but for our sensory perceptions as the consciousness registers them. In the modern novel, here is the artistic record of a mind, at the very moment that it is thinking. It is the author who says to the reader: "Try to penetrate within it. You will know only as much as this mind may reveal. It is you not I who will piece together any 'story' there may be. Of course, I have arranged this illusion for you. But it is you who must experience it."

## The Novel without a Story

During the first two decades of the present century, Hardy, Conrad, James Bennett, Galsworthy and Wells were all very popular novelists. Wells might have been more interested in World Order, popular science and sociology, but he had written *Kipps* and *Tono-Bungay*. Henry James, in short, wanted to make his main concern the inside rather than the outside of his characters, and replace the primary interest

of the story by the charm and fascination of the carefully analysed reasoning and to feeling which motivated a few figures. This meant to a great extent the narrowing of the broader human interest of the novel to a more specified and specialised study of motives and idiosyncrasies of character. Wells, on the other hand, pleaded for and practiced a mere continuation of the Dickensian tradition of story and character. He was above everything else a storyteller and was at his best when the spirit of Dickens walked in company with his eager and inquiring mind. Henry James had attacked Wells and Bennett directly thus: "If Mr. Bennett's tight rotundity then is of the handsomest size and his manipulation of it so firm, what are we to say of Mr. Wells who, a novelist very much as Lord Bacon was a philosopher, affects us taking all knowledge for his province and as inspiring in us to the very highest degree the confidence enjoyed by himself; enjoyed, we feel, with a breadth with which it has been given no one of his fellow craftsmen to enjoy anything. If confidence alone could lead utterly captive, we should all be huddled in a bunch at Mr. Wells' heels, which is indeed where we are abjectly gathered, so far as that force does operate. It is literally Mr. Wells' own mind, and the experience of his own mind, incessant and extraordinarily various, extraordinarily reflective, even with all sorts of conditions made, of whatever he may expose it so, that forms the reservoir tapped by him that suffices for his exhibition of grounds of interest.

The new technique of novel has relegated the importance of the story to the background. Dr. Sisir Chattopadhyaya has interpreted the experiences of the modern novelists. According to him, there is the death of the story in modern fiction. James Joyce's expression of experience took a different turn as also a different form. The early years of his life were passed in Dublin. Almost blind from his childhood, he lived in the world of sound, in that clamorous town of Dublin, Joyce wanted to catch the immediate and the present – he called it "an epiphany." Unlike Proust, he wanted to express the immediate consciousness as reality. The opening lines of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, clearly demonstrated that there was something strikingly new – a clear departure from the traditional method of novelistic narration:

*"Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo*

*.....*

*His father told him that story: his father looked at him through a glass, he had a hairy face.*

*He was a baby tuckoo. The moocow came down the road where Betty Bryne lived; she sold lemon plate.*

*O' the rose blossoms*

*On the little green place.*

*He sang. That was his song.*

*O! the green wothe botheth.*

When you wet the bed, first it is warm then it gets cold. His mother put on the oil-sheet. That had the queer smell. His mother had a nicer smell than his father. She played on the piano the sailor's hornpipe for him to dance. He danced:

Dorothy Richardson's novel also expresses the insistence upon the immediate consciousness as reality. In her, this insistence is instinctive and somewhat irrational, and has a peculiar feminine touch. She is quieter and less dramatic, and her vision of life is rather limited. The conversational tone of the opening lines of her novel may be noted:

*"Miriam left that gaslit hall and went slowly upstairs. The March twilight lay upon the landings, but the staircase was almost dark. The top landing was quite dark and silent. There was no one about. It would be quiet in her room. She could sit by the fire and be quiet and think things over until Eve and Harriet came back with the parcels. She would have time to think about the journey and decide what she was going to say to the Fraulein."*

We find that this new thing which may be called artistic subjectivism affected prose fiction at a critical phase of its development. These novelists came forward boldly and asserted that the presentation of his immediate consciousness was the primary job of a serious novelist, as this alone bore the stamp of permanent value. They contended, not without obvious effect, that a full, bare and fearless exploration of the self was the surest way to avoid self-deception. In this they did not run counter to the practice and tradition of the great novelist whose enduring works became enduring by rendering their own consciousness of life itself. Not the stories they related, but the comprehensive attitude to life conveyed through those stories gave their works an enduring and permanent value. These new novelists now went to the logical end. Why not annihilate, they argued – and demonstrated in novels they produced – the mechanism of the story once and for all? A story, they seemed to suggest, invariably involved a certain amount of conscious or unconscious falsification of our awareness and experience of life. Life very seldom falls into a pattern and shapes itself into a story. A plot is basically something invented, artificial and a made-up affair. It tortures reality out of shape. Life is chaotic, incomplete and confusing. Why should it become so well-knit, logical and order than in a novel? So, in order to keep the novel closer to reality, the illusory objective pattern and the framework of the novel must be annihilated. The story must die to enable the novel to gain a new lease of life.

According to Henry James, to tell the reader is to abandon the whole task of writing a novel. James does not tell, instead he shows by putting us in direct contact with the mind of characters who people his novels. By coming directly in contact with the mind of the people in the novel the reader is in a position to judge for himself, the author need not explain anything. James very often keeps in the

background. He narrates very little in the accepted sense of the term. In his later novels almost, all that happens is reflected in the consciousness of one or two of the characters. Their minds become “burnished reflectors,” and sometimes the mind of one character reflects the entire story.

Henry James himself characterized this method of “revelation of the story” and illumination of the situation and character through the mind as the point of view. He elaborates his theory with great care in the Prefaces. He tells us about Roderick Hudson (1976) that “the centre of interest throughout Roderick is in Rowland Mallet’s consciousness, and the drama is the very drama of that consciousness.” He goes on with his explanation, “the beautiful little problem was to keep it connected intimately with the general human exposure, and thereby bedimmed and be fooled and bewildered, anxious, restless, fallible, and yet to endow it with such intelligence that the appearances reflected in it, and constituting together there the situation and the ‘story’ should become by that fact intelligible.” This may be taken as a complete statement of the Jamesian technique.

Henry James constantly puts the reader in contact with the mind of his characters. The recorded talks of James’ characters are detailed and minute, yet it would be difficult to say how much of these are real in life. No moment in the brain of this or that character is fully transferred to paper. Rather, the recorded thoughts that are before the reader, are pruned, selected, and edited and even interpreted for him. Just as in the dramatic monologues of Browning no matter who speaks at the moment, Bishop Blougram or Andrea, it is basically Browning himself she speaks; similarly, in the novels of Henry James no matter who is thinking at the moment, the expression of all thought is inevitably in the personal style of James himself. In the Preface to *The Portrait of a lady* (1831), James comes very near describing the stream of consciousness technique. The Jamesian point of view given us an inner vision of a particular mind, and we are taken to the realm of consciousness. In James’ later novels especially, we are in contact with some mind or other, but very seldom with a whole mind in all its complexity. His purpose is to isolate from the whole stream of consciousness the current he required. He made his novels from the selected and edited thinking of his people. Yet he is perhaps the first novelist to study seriously the problems of consciousness and its novelistic expression. He is certainly a path-maker, a pioneer for those who came after him and carried the technique to his logical conclusion. (Sisir Chattopadhyaya).

## Turning Inward

According to Leon Edel, Dorothy Richardson, Marcel Proust and James Joyce turned fiction away from external to internal reality, from the outer world to the hidden world of fantasy and reverie ....’ The stream-of-consciousness fiction reflected the tendency towards subjectivity and introspection, and a growing interest in the inmost recesses of human consciousness.

The close of the nineteenth century in England witnessed the rapid disintegration of Victorian life and values. "In a transitional state of civilization," according to David Daiches, "objectivity (i.e., community of belief) ceases to exist and in fiction of the subjectivity." Several prominent writers of this age of transition turned their back on external reality and the ugly world in which they lived. They turned to subjective experience and dived deep into human consciousness. They retreated from 'the great without' to portray 'the great within' as Wyndham Lewis put it. This escapist attitude was a reaction against the naturalistic movement and its excesses. The naturalists, led by Emile Zola, prided themselves on their objectivity; they explored the material realities of life and social environment, endeavoured to represent them as faithfully as they could. Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy failed to look within and gave a solid and arbitrarily stylized picture of life. The 'tight rotundity' of their works as highly distasteful to Henry James who reacted strongly against 'the closer notation, a sharper specification' of character, life and action in their well-constructed stories. Virginia Woolf described them as 'materialists' and felt that their narratives left her with 'a strange feeling of incompleteness and dissatisfaction'. She was an ardent admirer of James Joyce: "In contrast with those whom we have called materialists, Mr. Joyce is spiritual; he is concerned at all costs to reveal the flickerings of that innermost flame which flashes its message through the brain, and in order to preserve it, he disregards with complete courage what seems to him adventitious, whether it be probability or coherence..." To Dorothy Richardson, likewise, the concreteness and objectivity of the English realists seemed superficial and unconvincing. She found in 'The Ambassadors' by Henry James 'the first completely satisfying way of writing a novel' and strong to capture the internal realities of the human mind and soul 'within the close mesh of direct statement'.

Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, ever dissatisfied with superficial objective realities, were opposed realists. They were interested in the flux and complexities of human consciousness and tried to render this internal reality in terms of art. They agreed with Henry James that 'experience is never limited, and it is never complete' and desired to explore the hidden recesses of consciousness. They annihilated the illusory objective pattern or framework of the traditional novel.