

More on stream of consciousness technique

Human Consciousness

It is obviously necessary to understand the real nature or quality of human consciousness with the focus of interest in the stream-of-consciousness fiction. The subjective note was not absent from the traditional novel and was often expressed through internal conflicts, memories and daydreams. The expression 'stream-of-consciousness' was coined by William James and used in his *Principles of Psychology* published in 1890. In 1918, May Sinclair used it for Richardson in *Pointed Roofs*. Henry Levin felt that the term was vague and misleading and Dorothy Richardson herself stated: "Amongst the company of useful labels devised to meet the exigencies of literary criticism, it stands alone, isolated by its perfect imbecility". However, William James thought that 'stream' was an apt metaphor for describing the flux and continuity of human consciousness. He was impressed by the 'teeming multiplicity' of the human minds and the vague fringes and penumbras that surrounded the process of the consciousness thought or perception. Conscious thought, according to William James, is a 'clearly lighted centre of experience' bounded by a dim twilight region. He dwelt at length on the difficulties of introspective analysis, of arresting and examining the fluidity of the human mind. He believed, "Experience is remoulding us every moment, and our mental reaction on every given thing is really a resultant of our experience of the world up to that date, every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows round it. The significance, the values of the image, is all in the halo or penumbra that surrounds it or escorts it".

The accent also insisted on "the individual flux, or consciousness which we call 'laduree' (duration). Consciousness was the continuation of an indefinite past into the living present. "He disapproved of the logical pattern imposed arbitrarily on life and character and insisted on the need to portray fluidity of human consciousness that defies the barriers of time and logic. Another French writer Edouard Dujardin discovered "the stream of consciousness" before William James wrote about it and invented a technique for his presentation in *Les Lauriers Sort Coupe's* (1888). In this work, 'there is little or no emphasis on external action and the reader is admitted directly to the consciousness of the principal character, a young man in Paris in love with a greedy actress'.

Consciousness covers the 'entire area of mental process. Psychic activity or awareness extends from the lowest level which is just above oblivion or unconsciousness right up to the highest level which is represented by formal or rational communication. Levels of consciousness can be easily distinguished: the speech level and the pre-speech level. The stream-of-consciousness fiction is largely

concerned with the pre-speech level of consciousness which lacks coherent pattern and is not rationally controlled. Human consciousness is like an ice-berg a large part of which remains hidden below the surface of the sea. Below the threshold of conscious thought of experience stands the vast region of sub-conscious psychic processes which are in an amorphous, fluid state.

The stream of consciousness novel admits the reader to the hidden recesses of consciousness and concentrates attention on what J.W. Beach calls 'passive states of mind', which are undirected by rational thought or a sense of practical need or conduct. The traditional novel ignores or under stresses ninety-nine percent of what goes on within the human consciousness in order to elucidate a definite course of external action. "The novel," according to Professor Beach, "has generally confined itself with that which interests' men on action; and the subjective moments are such as bear upon a definite line of conduct." Middleton Murry believed that the new novel presented human consciousness 'as it was before it had been reshaped in obedience to the demands of practical life' and explored 'the strange limbo where experiences once conscious fade into unconsciousness.'

The stream of consciousness fiction did not impose a coherent and logical pattern on life and dispensed with formal storytelling and characterization in order to reveal the depths and fluidity of human consciousness. Life at pre-speech level of consciousness is chaotic and incoherent; it lacks pattern or logical sequence and does not shape itself into a story. A well-made plot or story is something invented – a made-up affair. It tortures reality out of shape. The stream-of-consciousness novel presents character 'as a process, not a state,' according to David Daiches. There is no arbitrary formalization and no emphasis on superficial traits of personality or external idiosyncrasies and humours. The old fictional character, according to Aldous Huxley, was like the victim of one of Ben Jonson's 'humours,' neatly circumscribed; the new character is as uncircumscribed as Hamlet. The new novelists aimed at capturing the flux of consciousness. They revealed the richness and subtlety of psychic life.

To Virginia Woolf, "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." She believes that the task of the novelist is "to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little of the alien and external as possible." She aimed at recording the myriad impressions received by the mind ... trivial, fantastic and evanescent. "Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness." Virginia Woolf permits her characters to reveal the inmost recesses of their consciousness. The psychic involutions of Clarissa Dalloway, Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe lead to a new spiritual insight or vision. James Joyce also tries to capture the stream-of-consciousness of his characters wherein ideas and images 'shift and flow and merge with an intricacy beyond the power of intellect to follow.' Sometimes a sudden and fleeting spiritual illumination comes to them. In What

Maisie Knew, Henry James discloses the awareness and sensibility of a child and her 'confused and obscure notation' of external incidents which she cannot fully understand. Dorothy Richardson places the reader within the consciousness of Miriam Herderson in *Pilgrimage* and portrays personality as a series of psychic relations. William Faulkner makes bold sally into the consciousness of an idiot in *The Sound and the Fury*.

Association of Ideas

Human consciousness is characterized by flux as well as privacy. It is essentially egocentric and 'to a great extent the material of any one consciousness are an enigma to the other.' Each person has his own private sense of values, relationship and associations. Moreover, according to J.M. beach, "our psyche is such as imperfectly integrated bundle of memories, sensations and impulses, that unless sternly controlled by a dominating will, it is at the mercy of every stray mind of dominating will, it is at the mercy of every stray mind of suggestion.... The moment we relax, the moment we let go control of our will and our attention we fall back into the welter, the chaos of our natural complicated selves." When concentration is relaxed, the mind shifts restlessly from one thing to another associated with it. The stream-of-consciousness novel has to communicate the flux as well as the tone and texture of private consciousness.

The movement of psychic processes below the speech level is determined by the principles of free association. The pattern of association depends on the individual's past experience and presents obsessions and future dreams or aspirations. According to Robert Humphrey, three factors control association: first, memory, which is its basis; second, the senses, which guide it; and third, imagination, which determines its elasticity. The process of association is strictly private or egocentric and is conditioned by memory, impressions sometimes bob up unexpectedly to the level of consciousness and break the continuity of the psychic process. The association of ideas and fancies thus becomes freakish and often lacks logical sequence. To make the psychic flux intelligible, the writer has to provide explanatory clues and hints.

The stream-of-consciousness writers sometimes use figurative language, rhetorical devices and expressive symbols and images to portray the flux and privacy of human consciousness. "This use of rhetorical figures." according to Robert Humphrey, "is a feature of stream-of-consciousness writing which stems naturally from the attempt to reproduce the broken, seemingly incoherent, disjointed texture of the process of consciousness when they are not deliberately screened for direct communication." Sometimes the novelist is compelled to use private symbols or images expressive of the individual's private sense of values or predilection. "Both image and symbol tend to express something of the quality or privacy in consciousness; the image by suggesting the private emotional values of what is perceived (either directly or through memory or imagination); the symbol of suggesting the truncated manner of perceiving the expanded meting." (Humphrey)

The process of psychological association is very well illustrated by Molly Bloom's stream of consciousness in *Ulysses*. Molly lies in bed at night. The striking of the clock, the sight of the wallpaper and lowering of the lamp are the only external stimuli. The flux of her consciousness at the pre-speech level is rendered with great art and skill by James Joyce. An extract from her long monologue is reproduced below with comments within brackets.

"..... quarter after (a clock nearby has reminded her of the time) what an unearthly hour I suppose they are just getting up in China now combing their pigtails (her imagination carries her off to China) Let me see if I can doze off 1 2 3 4 5 (she tries to count herself to sleep) what kind of flowers are these they invented like the stars (she notices the flowers on the wall paper), the wall paper in Limbard Street was much nicer (at her former dwelling), the apron he gave me was like that (her husband's gift) I only wrote it twice, better lower the lamp and try again so as I can get up early remembers it is already late)" Thus, Molly Bloom's fancy continues to stray.

Similarly, in Virginia Woolf's short sketch "The mark on the Wall" we have the reveries of a woman who allows an unidentified mark on the wall to provoke a train of ideas. From the mark, her consciousness wanders to thoughts on the uncertainty of life to Shakespeare, to tables of precedence at court, to remain and relics of the past and back to the mark which turns out to be a snail.

Frederick J. Hoffman gives a brilliant analysis of these varying levels of fictional writings in his book *Two Decades of Criticism*. This technique plunges us into varying degrees of depth. First, the traditional. This method accepts all the conscious controls of speech and thought and experience. It uses all the recognized systems of communication. Within the limits of this method of writing, almost all types of behaviour can be described and such description is within the comprehension of ordinary readers.

Second, the level of the preconscious (Freudian) or of conscious reverie, in which the chief difference from logical discourse is the former's greater fluidity, and its less obvious attachment to the rules of sentence – structure and workmeanings.

This is Le monologue interieur of Dujardin in which his "entire book is a quotation from the mind of the hero only with the quotation marks removed." Emma's self-reproach in Jane Austen's *Emma*, or the musings of the father and the mother in Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*, or the concluding portion of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* or Raskolnikoff's mental reactions just before he decides to give himself up in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* – are all on this level of the preconscious or conscious reverie narration. The most important thing to be noted in this method is that the reverie makes a constant reference to the work, a-day world. This method is widely employed by all kinds of novelists who do not want to make the space-time reference all too evident and yet indicate a release from the unconscious.

Third, the level of the subconscious. At this level of writing much of the control of the conscious mind over the will is lifted. The control, though apparently

lifted or suspended for the time being, is nevertheless present and indirectly guides the flow of thought and the formation of imagery. This may be likened to the “benevolent despotism” of the analyst over the flow of thoughts of the patient in a clinic of psychoanalysis. At this level of writing dream is often effectively employed, as it is in psychotherapy, but the flow of the psychic life is not governed by the mechanisms of the dream world. In this type of narration consciousness is pushed away and as such the author’s own suggestion is employed to maintain the “rational space time continuum.” The best illustrations of this method are to be found in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, as also in William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* and *The Sound and the Fury*.

Fourth, the level of the unconscious. At this level the narrative style and content both try to free themselves completely from rational control and give a verbal rendering of the behaviour-pattern of the psychical unconscious. The rational controls, however removed and attenuated, are not completely done away with. They appear in the form of a mentor or a censor to “distort rather than to impede the flow of unconscious expression.” On this level the artifices of a dream-work are widely used. Freud calls this “secondary elaboration.” We find a good deal of this in *Ulysses*, but the best example of this technique is to be found in Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*.

Space and Time

Another important characteristic of stream-of-consciousness fiction is its freedom from rigid notions of Time and Space. Modern novelists are preoccupied with the problem of Time and Space. David Daiches says that they are experimenting with the baffling problem. Virginia Woolf remarks in her diary:

“1926, Tuesday, November 23rd.

.... Yet I am now and then haunted by some semi-mystic very profound life of a woman, which shall all be told on one occasion and time shall be utterly obliterated: future shall somehow blossom out of the past. One incident – say the fall of a flower – might contain it. My theory being that the actual event practically does not exist – not time either. But I don’t want to force this. I must make up my serious book.

Psychic processes, before they are rationally controlled for communication, do not follow the chronological sequence. Human consciousness at the pre-speech level swings away freely in time and space. The past, present and future intermingle inside it. “The stream-of-consciousness technique is a means of escape from the tyranny of the time dimension,” according to David Daiches. He believes that “retrospect and anticipation constitute the very essence of consciousness at any specified time.” The past impinges upon the present and conditions it. The present holds visions of the future. Consciousness becomes a jumble of vague memories, immediate preoccupation and dim aspirations. Memory and flashbacks mingle the past with the present.

Bergson insisted on fluidity or 'duration' which is independent of external time and spoke of 'the continuation of an indefinite past into a living present.' External time is indicated by the ticking or chiming of clocks or the ringing of church bells. Marcel Proust said that "memory by introducing the past into the present without modification, as though it were the present, eliminates precisely that great Time dimension in accordance with which life is lived."

Memory recalls the past and disrupts the time sequence. The mind also swings away in space to distant scenes and thus the movement acquires a wide sweep. The concurrence of the past and present, or of scenes widely apart in space, within the consciousness, is known as time or space montage. Montage is a cinematic device based on the simultaneous representation of associated images or the scenes. In the works of Robert Humphry montage shows 'a rapid succession of images or the super-imposition of image on image or the surrounding of a focal image by related ones.'

Mrs. Dalloway opens with the interior monologue of the middle-aged woman who walks leisurely through a London street. She thinks of preparations for her party in the afternoon and admires the fine morning. Then there is a memory flashback, and she thinks of her life at Bourton 20 years ago and recalls Peter Walsh who loves her. Time montage and a free association of ideas and images determine the flow of her consciousness. The past, present and future intermingle in her egocentric consciousness. Later on, we move in space from the consciousness of Clarissa Dalloway to that of admirable effect in the Tenth Episode in Ulysses. He represents eighteen unrelated scenes taking place in various parts of Dublin at the same time.

To sum up: through *duree* (durational or psychological time), Bergson asserted a disbelief in the surface reality of life and stressed a time in which the clock is artificial and mental time is natural. In Bergson's "duration of time," one is in that stream of on-thinking impulse, which constitutes life. One is "inside, from a window, which is an intellectual and rational process. Bergson's idea of reality conceived the world as a flux of inters penetrated elements unseizable by the intellect. This anti-mechanical mode of thinking places all time – all the past, as well as the present moment – in what one critic has called "one concentrated now."

Bergson's theory of time was appealing for several reasons. Based, like modern physics, on the relativity of historical and philosophical truths, the time theory in literary terms, signifies the relative nature of human experience. Most modern novelists, but especially Proust, Conrad, Woolf, Joyce, and Faulker, deny absolutes in human relationships; and the structural formation of their work, in its emphasis on fluctuating time, mirrors this belief in the non-absolute quality of experience and history.

Technique

The revelation of the deepest recesses of consciousness requires a special technique. According to Robert Humphrey, “direct or indirect interior monologue, omniscient description and prose soliloquy have proved to be, in the hands of the most skilful writers, capable of carrying the strange and awkward load of human consciousness into the realms of legitimate prose fiction.”

Edouard Dujardin, who first used the interior monologue in his novel *Les Lauriers Sort Coupe's*, defined it as “the speech of a character in a scene, having for its object to introduce us directly into the interior life of that character, without author's intervention through explanations or commentaries – and like every monologue it is a discourse without listener and a discourse unspoken. But it differs from the traditional monologue in that, as regards its substance, it expresses the most intimate thoughts, those closest to the unconscious, as regards its spirit; it is discourse before any logical organization, reproducing thought in its original state and as it comes into the mind, as far its form, it is expressed by means of direct phrases reduced to the minimum of syntax” Dujardin believed that the unspoken speech of a character expressing his inmost thoughts is akin to poetry. The description of the interior monologues as “a speech and poetry” is, of course, misleading. Robert Humphrey suggests a simpler definition: “Interior monologue is the technique used in fiction for representing the psychic content of processes of character, partly or entirely unuttered, just as these processes exist at various levels of conscious central before they are formulated for deliberate speech.” It is a fine technique for representing the fluidity and freakishness of psychic processes at deeper levels of consciousness.

In the direct interior monologue, the author effaces himself almost completely and offers no guidance or explanatory comments. He puts himself inside the consciousness of his leading characters who reveal their streams of consciousness directly. Flaubert insisted that “the author ought to be in his work like God in His creation, invisible and all powerful. Let him be felt everywhere but seen nowhere. “Henry James similarly advised novelists ‘not to state but to render, not to narrate what is happening but to let it happen.’ James Joyce echoing Flaubert, described the artist as one who like God ‘remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.’ The direct interior monologue is a candid self-revelation and the appearance of the author is scarcely perceptible. Unlike the dramatic monologue, it is not conditioned by the presence of a listener or reader and is not bound by conventional syntax and diction.

The indirect interior monologue gives to the reader a sense of the author's continuous presence. It is, in the words of Humphrey, “that type of interior monologue in which an omniscient author presents unspoken material as if directly from the consciousness of a character, with commentary and description to guide the reader through it.” “The use of the third person point of view permits the

introduction of descriptive and expository material. The author interfuses directly between the character's psychic and the reader.

Omniscient description and soliloquies have been used effectively by stream-of-consciousness writers. The author sometimes assumes the role of an omniscient narrator. Dorothy Richardson gives an impressionistic description of the depths of Miriam's consciousness in *Pilgrimage*. Virginia Woolf and James Joyce also use conventional methods. The former, sometimes directly introduces us to her characters and then drops out of sight. In *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* there is a great deal of straightforward description or narration.

The soliloquy presents psychic processes directly without the intervention of the author. It is, according to Himpfrey, 'less candid and more limited in the depth of consciousness that it can represent than is the interior monologue The level of consciousness is usually close to the surface.' It differs from reverie, which is a silent, unspoken soliloquy. The soliloquy is actually spoken or uttered, and a formal audience is assumed. Hence it is more stylized than the inchoate, unspoken material of the deeper levels of consciousness. The soliloquies of Hamlet and Othello are highly organized monologues. There are 'the end-products' of the stream of consciousness, not the stream itself, illogical and disordered. Lady Macbeth's broken utterance in the sleep-walking scenes are closer to the real stream of consciousness. The former soliloquy is sometimes used in combination with the interior monologue in stream of consciousness fiction. The advice is used skillfully by William Faulkner in *As I Lay Dying* and by Virginia Woolf in *The Waves*.

Waldo Frank used verse to express psychic processes in *Rahab*. This medium is obviously unsuitable for the presentation of the formless and unorganized material of the hidden recesses of consciousness. The Flux of mental life is sometimes suggested by typographical aids. The use of italics and the absence of punctuation are used as signals for changes in time and focus. William Faulkner puts interior monologues in italics. Virginia Woolf uses parentheses to indicate shifts in the levels of consciousness. James Joyce dispenses with punctuation marks to suggest the fluidity of pre-speech levels of consciousness.

The flux of consciousness lacks form and coherence. It has no logical sequence and is apparently chaotic. It is necessary to impose order form on psychic contents and processes to make them significant and intelligible. This involves careful selection and organization and rigid artistic control of intractable material. Writers rely on the unities, musical structure, cycle schemes and symbolism to impose a formal pattern on their work.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf strikes a compromise between clarity of form and the formlessness which characterizes the stream of consciousness. She adheres to unities of time and place; the action does not exceed 24 hours and takes place in London. 'Virginia Woolf passes from one consciousness to another, from one group to another, exploring the significance of their reactions, following the course of their meditations, carefully arranging and patterning the images that rise up in their minds, bringing together with care economy, a select number of

symbolic incidents, until a design has been achieved And experience is seen as something inexpressible yet significant." The rise and fall of tides furnish a symbolic design to *The Waves*. In *Ulysses*, James Joyce provides a tangible pattern. The work is burlesque or *Odyssey* and employs the Homeric pattern, Symbols and motifs. The external action has a limited span Eighteen hours And takes place in Dublin. Professor Beach describes it as 'nothing more or less than a symphonic poem, characterized by a vigorous and insistent development of theme.' Ezra Pound describes it as musical sonata with a theme, counter-meeting, development and finale. Sometimes the leitmotiv is emphasized through a recurring image or symbol. Dorothy Richardson uses no complex formal devices and the presentation of a single consciousness gives sufficient unity and pattern to her work. Miriam's consciousness is of a single consciousness gives sufficient unity and pattern to her work. Miriam's consciousness is haunted by a vague symbol – 'a tiny little garden.' This image or motif runs throughout *Pilgrimage*.

Conclusion

The aggressive novelty of the stream-of-consciousness fiction has often baffled critical opinion. Wells detested its 'copious emptiness.' Herbert Read was distressed by the 'terrible fluidity' and the disintegration of form and structure in the works of Joyce and Proust. Yeats looked at the genre with alarm and Wyndham Lewis felt that Joyce and the disciples of Bergson were menacing Western culture by abandoning themselves to flux and disintegration. I.W. Beach states that the stream-of-consciousness technique is applicable only to neurotics whose consciousness is given order to 'the chaotic May sensations and associations undirected by the normal will to rational conduct.' The new genre disregarded rational thought and the commonly accepted syntax and diction. It flouted the rules of grammatical construction and evolved a strange cryptic medium of expression. Hence the stream-of-consciousness fiction is sometimes dismissed as essentially morbid or unwholesome, altogether destitute of artistic beauty and merit. However, it cannot be disputed that the psychological novel has added a new province to fiction. It has explored a new realm of experience and revealed the amazing depths and fluidity of human consciousness. It has thrown light on the deepest recesses of the mind and depicted psychic processes with remarkable art and skill.