The Stream of Consciousness

Although most people think of "stream of consciousness" as a literary term, it actually derives from the psychologist William James (brother of the novelist Henry James). In Chapter II of *Talks To Teachers On Psychology; And To Students On Some Of Life's Ideals* (1899), titled "The Stream of Consciousness," James wrote:

> Now the immediate fact which psychology, the science of mind, has to study is also the most general fact. It is the fact that in each of us, when awake (and often while asleep), some kind of consciousness is always going on. There is a stream, a succession of states, or waves, or fields (or of whatever you please to call them), of knowledge, of feeling, of desire, of deliberation, etc., that constantly pass and repass, and that constitute our inner life. The existence of this stream is the primal fact, the nature and origin of it form the essential problem, of our science. So far as we can see the states or fields of consciousness, write down their several natures, analyze their contents into elements, or trace their habits of succession, we are on the descriptive or analytic level. So far as we ask where they come from or why they are just what they are, we are on the explanatory level.

There are several things worth noting about James’s metaphor beyond the obvious irony that something constantly taking place "in each of us," waking and sleeping, should translate into a literary style that most of us find difficult to follow.

One is that the metaphor makes our mental lives into a container within a container. The mind is a kind of space through which there is moving a constant stream, a stream containing thoughts, feelings, desires, etc. The stream is what Lakoff and Johnson would call a "container substance," while the mind through which the stream flows is a "container object." The difference between these two kinds of container is like the difference between the bathwater (container substance) and the bathtub (container object).

This double-container characterization of the mind provides a way of thinking about introspection, the familiar sensation of observing our own inner states of thought, feeling, etc. We can "watch" the stream of our own mental states because the stream passes through the mind. But there's also a problem here: if I can observe the stream of my thoughts and feelings, how can the stream itself "constitute" my "inner life?" Isn't my activity of watching, of observing the passing stream, also part of my inner life? The stream would seem to be "in" my inner life, but not the whole of it.

This is a problem for psychology (and perhaps philosophy) rather than literature. But the ball we should keep our eyes on here is the existence of the problem itself. The problem arises from the very effort to characterize and understand consciousness - in the case of psychology, to study consciousness scientifically. And it so happens that the rise of this effort roughly coincides, in history, with the rise of those long modern prose narratives that we usually have in mind when we use the word "novel."

To put the point another way: In the Western world of the 17th and 18th centuries, three developments took place simultaneously. Science became a more or less systematic effort to know the world through direct observation; philosophy became a more or less systematic effort to explain the relationship between the inner and the outer (aka the individual observer and the outer reality that is observed (by ordinary people as well as scientists); and long prose narratives began appearing that by their method, and sometimes by their subject matter, explored the relationship between the inner life (aka "consciousness") and the outer (aka "reality").

Psychology itself was in some ways the byproduct of these developments, at least the first two of them. And to this day, the relationship between mind and world remains at the center of philosophy, together with the relationship between mind and brain. The two relationships might be said to intersect in the modern interdisciplinary enterprise known as "cognitive science."

Our interest lies mainly in the last development, though. What it shows us, for one thing, is that the "stream of consciousness" literary technique developed by Woolf and others in the early 20th century, as radically innovative as it might at first glance appear, is really an extension of techniques and thematic concerns stretching back over more than three centuries. It also highlights, more broadly, the interdependence between literary culture and the general culture in which literature is embedded, including the culture of ideas. The scientific and philosophical developments of the 17th and 18th centuries helped produce a cultural conception of the self as an "inner space" within the individual; novelists took up, explored, and promoted this conception, and in doing so helped establish the conception as reality; and in successive generations, later novelists both solidified and further investigated the reality through the development of more highly refined methods for rendering it in words.

It's all too easy to assume that these refinements represent "progress" - the literary equivalent of the steady advancement that science has made in describing the features of the physical world. There are various reasons to doubt that assumption, but they'll have to wait for another blogpost.

For now, though, consider how the following passage from Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* anticipates Woolf's stream-of-consciousness writing in *Mrs. Dalloway*:

> Lately during the loneliness in which he found himself as he lay facing the back of the sofa, a loneliness in the midst of a populous town and surrounded by numerous acquaintances and relations but that yet could not have been more complete anywhere - either at the bottom of the sea or under the earth - during that terrible loneliness Ivan Ilych had lived only in memories of the past. Pictures of his past rose before him one after another. They always began with what was nearest in time and then went back to what was most remote — to his childhood — and rested there. If he thought of the stewed prunes that had been offered him that day, his mind went back to the raw shrivelled French plums of his childhood, their peculiar flavour and the flow of saliva when he sucked their stones, and along with the memory of that taste came a whole series of memories of those days: his nurse, his brother, and their toys. "No, I mustn't think of that...It is too painful," Ivan Ilych said to himself, and brought himself back to the present — to the button on the back of the sofa and the creases in its morocco. "Morocco is expensive, but it does not wear well; there had been a quarrel about it. It was a different kind of quarrel and a different kind of morocco that time when we tore father's portfolio and were punished, and mamma brought us some tarts...." And again his thoughts dwelt on his childhood, and again it was painful and he tried to banish them and fix his mind on something else.

Here we have many of the ingredients that will go to make up Woolf's novel: for example, the idea that the "innerness" of the self produces a radical loneliness for the individual (Sally Seton "had read a wonderful play about a man who scratched on the wall of his cell, and she had felt that was true of life - one scratched on the wall"), and the effort to capture both the fluidity of memory ("his mind went back"), and the felt quality of sensory experience (the "peculiar flavour" of the shrivelled prunes and "the flow of saliva when he sucked their stones").
But Woolf gets at the idea of loneliness, and captures the experience of fluidity and sense experience, in ways very different from Tolstoy’s. The most obvious difference is that instead of reporting one or two examples of memory’s fluidity here and there, she immerses us in the memories of her characters and takes us back and forth in them. She plunges us directly into what would be better described, not as the “stream,” but as the “ebb and flow” of her characters’ consciousnesses.

It makes for some tough reading, but it gives us - to come back to James’s language - a more “immediate” experience of her characters’ inner lives.