

Technique of stream of consciousness in James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway

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“If experience consists of impressions, it may be said that impressions are experience, just as they are... the very air we breathe; this is what Henry James wrote in “The Art of Fiction”, and, to finish his thought, “Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-born particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when it happens to be that of a man of genius – it takes to itself the finest limits of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations.”¹

¹ Henry James, “The Art of Fiction”, in Major Writers of America, New York 1962, vol. II, p.p. 255,257

I have chosen to start by quoting Henry James, because his forerunner of a modern psychological novel. His theory is the theory of “central intelligence”, through which he gives the whole story. He develops his famous theory of “aspect”, according to which, in a novel, as well as in reality, a life should be seen from one point of view, through the eyes of one single person, as long as that person is not the omniscient writer, but a character in a novel. That character, therefore, is to be chosen very carefully, and should be given that kind of function in novel, that his/her role of a “central intelligence” is persuasive enough. According to that, a choice of such a character is a fatal one, because a success of the novel depends on reader’s ability to identify himself with the character, so that he can, through his consciousness experience what the character experiences.

While Henry James treats the consciousness of a character as a static one, modern writers, as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, treat it as a process, as a stream of thoughts. The inner monologue, stream of consciousness, thus, becomes one of the nature artistic devices of a modern novel.

Some thirty years after the publication of James’ novel The Portrait of a Lady, James Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young

Man and, nine years later, Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway are published. With those two writers, novel reaches completely different level of presentation, the level that no one before them dared to explore. Both of these novels are written after the First World War, after the great changes in the world. Those changes influenced human mind, and human experience, and the outcome of that can be seen in the works of those two writers. The influence of French symbolists, the already assimilated Freudian theory of man's subconscious – all that culminates in their attempt to pierce into one's mind and consciousness, and to find artistic way of presenting them to readers. The accepted tendencies in the novels at the beginning of the twentieth century are centered towards man's social life, and are occupied with social problems. And that is not what interests these two novelists. They search for new subjective values in man, as for the background for what they want to write about. In their search, they peer into the very soul of man, in order to find answers for those questions that the new social life and man in it poses before them. One's inner self the vast infinity of one's thoughts, experiences, impressions are the very essence, the smallest part of which is seen on the surface, the smallest part of which is one's social self.

Now, the main problem is how to deal with it in an artistic way. How to put one's thoughts on paper, because a writer is no more an omniscient author, he is not telling a story as it was with a traditional novel. He is supposed to give the contents of a consciousness, in which, and through which, the reality is realized. Therefore, there is no story, there is no plot anymore, in a traditional sense of the word; no more descriptions no more characterizations. A reader is somehow in direct contact with a hero, he has to identify with him in order to see through his eyes, and his mind, and that is the only way he can realize him.

Since human mind simultaneously receives infinite number of impressions, on several levels of conscious and subconscious, with various ways of receiving them – starting from senses, through which it receives them directly, - to the tiniest processes of thought, the huge problem is how to present all that with language in which there is chronological sequence? William James says that “ a stream of consciousness is like a bird flying through the air and perching for a moment, then taking wing again “ – actually what he says is that is impossible to catch the thought while it is in process, and thus – it seems – it is impossible to reproduce it. Presenting reality through

consciousness means presenting it in the moment when the consciousness is experiencing it. That means that kind of story must be given in present time, which reduces the time in the stream of consciousness novel. Nevertheless, the span of time in one's mind cannot be restricted. Through his memories, remembrances, one can bring into life events from the past, and, in the same way, think about future. Though, if a writer allows his hero to go through time without limits, that is, if the subjective time is not restricted, then the objective time must be, and since time and space are inseparable, that means that the free movement through time is restrained by restricted movement through space, and vice versa. With all this taken into account, one must admit that, after all, a writer who is presenting us the consciousness of his hero is himself the one who chooses what he is going to write about, which of those innumerable impressions he will present to us. If this is so, then, are the writers of stream of consciousness any closer to presenting a real life than those writers from the previous époques who describe by their own will something that they had imagined? The difference may not be so obvious, it is rather delicate, because these moments in objective time, described in details in their subjective time are the crucial moments in one's life,

because they bring home some important truths. Thus, I might agree with some views about modern novel being very similar to a lyrical poem – and thus called a lyrical novel.

Before I go to the techniques of stream of consciousness used in Portrait and Mrs. Dalloway respectively, I would like to quote David Daiches:

“The truth about a character is the sum of his whole emotional experience, and that sum is always there, pervading and indeed constituting his consciousness. It is not therefore necessary to take a character through a series of testing circumstances to reveal the whole human truth about him; the proper exploration of his consciousness at any given moment or in a very short space of time (say a simple day) could reveal all his history and all his potentialities. For on this view a man is his history, nothing is lost, and his reaction to every new event is conditioned by the sum of his reactions to all other events. Thus retrospect is of the very stuff of present consciousness and need not be formally introduced by set pieces of retrospect or by reported memory introduced by some such phrase as “this

remanded him of..." or "he recalled that..." Development depth wise rather than lengthwise becomes the logical technique."²

James Joyce

In his review of Portrait for "The Nation ", H. G. Wells agrees with other reviewers that Joyce seems to have a "cloacal obsession ", but acknowledges that the "the value of Mr. Joyce's book has little to do with its incidental insanitary condition ", going on to offer a reading of the novel that recognizes some of the novel's more important innovations:

"Like some of the best novels in the world it is a story of an education... It is a mosaic of jagged fragments that does altogether render with extreme completeness the growth of a rather secretive, imaginative boy in Dublin. The technique is startling, but on the whole, it succeeds. Like so many Irish writers from Sterne to Shaw Mr. Joyce is a bold experimentalist

² David Daiches, A Critical History of English Literature, London, Secker & Warburg, 1963., vol. IV, p.p.188, 196

with paragraph and punctuation. He breaks away from scene to scene without a hint of the change of time and place; at the end he passes suddenly from the third person to the first...”³

Joyce himself said in one of his conversations with the poet Jan Parandowsky “Too much time has been spent in studying stars and neglecting human guts.”⁴

Novel’s organizing principle, according to Richard Ellman is the “gestation of a soul”. Although Portrait traces the trajectory of Stephen’s growth into a fledging young artist, what is perhaps most important in the novel is not the linear progression of narrative, but the formation of Stephen’s consciousness. Joyce is therefore interested in selecting only those experiences most crucial to Stephen’s development and for this reason the novel has an episodic and seemingly disjointed narrative –jumping in the first chapter, for example, from his infancy to Stephen’s experiences at Congloues to the Christmas dinner with little transitional matter. The novel is held together instead by the recurrence of certain symbols and light

³ James Joyce, A Portrait of The Artist as a Young Man, Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Editions, 1992, Preface by Jacqueline Belanger, p. 26

⁴Oto Bihalji Merin, Graditelji moderne misli u literaturi i umetnosti, Beograd, Prosveta, 1965, p.32 (my translation)

motives, the use epiphanies and the structural and thematic pattern of flight and fall.

Joyce writes in the third person until the last two pages when he passes to the first person. The story is written “ab ovo”, that is, from the early childhood of the hero, Stephen Dedalus, from his first memories of himself and the world around him till his twentieth year. The language that Joyce uses, thus, gradually expands from the fragmentary diction of an infant on the first page through the connected but limited range of expressions characteristics of a school boy to the sophistication of a fully articulate University student.

Another characteristic of his techniques is that he “breaks away from scene to scene without a hint of the change of time and place”. For example, at the beginning we read about a little Dedalus who is listening to his father telling him a story and realizes that “a nicens little boy named baby Tuckoo” is he himself; and on the fallowing page, before we are aware of it, we see little Dedalus in the Conglowes Wood College. He also tends to suddenly quit something he is writing about and interpolates another episode, and then goes back to the previous one- like when we read about that schoolplay in which Stephen is taking a part, then, he shifts, and we read about

Stephen's arguing with his friends about his favourite writer and poet, and then, again, he goes back, and we are in the middle of that schoolplay. Joyce proceeds in this fashion through the whole novel.

The narrative parts in the novel are followed by dialogues, dialogues by narrative parts. In those narrative parts, though they are written in the third person, we learn about Stephen's thoughts, feelings, in those parts Joyce presents to us Stephen's stream of consciousness. In the dialogues, we also learn about Stephen, but now we can hear his voice, he is actually speaking his mind. Some of those dialogues are extraordinary, and if one reads them thoroughly, one can find answers to many questions that one poses to himself when he reads Joyce. Critics agree, more or less, that Portrait is an autobiographical novel, and that Joyce is actually writing about his own development as an artist. In his search of himself as an artist, Joyce adopts the view, developed in the late nineteenth century of the alienation of the artist. The artist had to be outside all conventions, all normal society, and this not only because those conventions and that society as Joyce found them in Dublin represented a "paralysis", a dead set of gestures having no meaning in terms of genuine human experience, but because the artist must be outside society in order to

be objective if he is to adopt the peculiar microcosm's view which is the way Joyce solves the modern problem. For, instead of using quasi-poetic techniques persuasive to the reader while he reads, Joyce sought a method of presenting a limited tract of time and space as microcosm, as a small- scale model of human life, to which all attitudes are possible, depending on your own point of view. The artist's function is thus not to render his own personal viewpoints, but to take all points of view and to construct in his fictional world an enormous interrelating, punning, kaleidoscopic verbal universe, which, it might almost be said, presents everything as also everything else. Thus "the artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails".⁵

In Stephen's development there are the moments of clarity and enlightenment. Those moments Joyce calls "moments of epiphany", which are "a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or gesture or in a memorable phrase of the mind itself". For Stephen and Joyce, the epiphany is the sudden "revelation of the whatness of a thing, an image, sensually apprehended and emotionally

⁵ James Joyce, A Portrait of The Artist as a Young Man, Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Editions, 1992, p. 166

vibrant, which communicates instantaneously the meaning of experience”. As Dorothy Van Ghent observes, while “ minor epiphanies mark all the stages of Stephen’s “ understanding” , major epiphanies, occurring at the end of each chapter, mark the chief revelations of the nature of his environment and of his destiny in it” . Perhaps the best example of such a moment is at the close of the Chapter four, where Stephen’s witnessing of the girl wading in the sea gives rise to a moment of spiritual clarity that fills him with a sense of his artistic vocation, and he says,

“To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life! A wild angel had appeared to him, the angel of mortal youth and beauty, an envoy from the fair courts of life, to throw open before him in an instant ecstasy the gates of all the ways of error and glory. On and on and on and on”.⁶

And later on, when he is absolutely certain of his own destiny and artistic calling, he denounces,

“I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it calls itself my home, my fatherland, or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as

⁶ibid. p.132

freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defense the only arms I allow myself to use- silence, exile and cunning”.⁷

Novel finishes at the beginning of Stephen’s new life, “Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race”⁸

⁷ibid. p. 191

⁸ibid. p. 213

Virginia Woolf

“What is meant by reality? “, Virginia Woolf once asked and replied: “It would seem to be something very erratic, very undependable- now to be found in a dusty road, now in a daffodil in a sun. It lights up a group in a room and stamps some casual saying... “

9

Virginia Woolf displays a notable affinity with the Impressionist vision in her concern with communicating the texture of experience, and in the way in which she creates something of permanent relevance out of the apparently diverse and insignificant elements of a fleeting circumstance. She captures the essence of things with delicate artistry. E. M. Forster calls her “a delicate and subtle artist in words who upheld aesthetic and spiritual values in a brutal materialistic age”.¹⁰

She writes in the third person, and uses “in medias res” technique. The story of her novel is put in a single day, in twenty- four hours in a life of a woman, Clarissa Dalloway. At the beginning of the novel we learn that Mrs. Dalloway is to give a party, and we see her

⁹Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway, Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Edition, 1996, Preface, p. 3

¹⁰ibid. p.5

preparing for it. As she moves about London shopping, every encounter she has produces a response colored by the whole texture of her earlier experience, so that, as we follow her stream of consciousness we learn all of her previous history, or all that matters. She incessantly shifts focus from the mind of one character to another, enabling her readers to receive “a myriad impressions” from a variety of different angles. From all these intensely personal perspectives, the narrative effectively achieves objectivity and illuminates the possibilities of communication. In her review of Dorothy Richardson’s work The Tunnel, Woolf says:

“The method, if triumphant, should make us feel ourselves seated at the center of another mind, and, accordingly to the artistic gift of the writer, we should perceive in the helter- skelter of flying fragments some unity, significance or design”.

For Mrs. 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”.¹¹

¹¹Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway, Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Editions, 1996, p.69

Although she writes about a single day in her heroine's life, we learn not only about that single day, but through Clarissa's memory, about her past life, what it was like, then, what it is like at the moment, and finally, what it is to be sometimes in the future. Her technique is brilliant, exquisite, fantastic. She herself explains it in the following words:

“Examine for a moment an ordinary mind of an ordinary day. The mind receives myriad impressions- trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpest of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms, and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there, so that, if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he must, if he could base his work upon feeling and not upon conviction, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it” .¹²

¹²Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway, Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Editions, 1996, Preface, p.7

We learn about Clarissa Dalloway not only from her own thoughts, but from thoughts of all other characters, from their inner monologues, from their thinking about past and present. We also learn about themselves. It is incredible how Virginia Woolf brings all those people into connection, how we see them from many different points of view. For example, when Peter Walsh is sitting on a bench in Regent's Park and sees a little girl, "who has been picking up pebbles to add to the pebble collection which she and her brother were making on the nursery mantelpiece, plumped her handful down on the nurse's knee and scudded off again full tilt into a lady's legs". – in the next paragraph we realize that a lady is actually Lucrecia Warren Smith" ... when the child ran full tilt into her, fell flat, and burst out crying".

And then, the sense of time- with how extraordinary skillfulness Virginia Woolf deals with the sense of time. Chiming clocks mark the passing of the actual day while the past impinges constantly on the thoughts of the protagonists so that in a very few pages an entire lifetime is spanned. Different people hear Big Ben striking the hour, and they are in different places, and different things are happening to them. At that very moment- while "the leaden circles dissolve in the air". For example "It was precisely twelve o'clock; twelve by Big

Ben; whose stroke was wafted over the northern part of London; blent with that of other clocks, mixed in a thin ethereal way with clouds and wisps of smoke and died up there among the seagulls- twelve o'clock struck as Clarissa Dalloway laid her green dress on her bed, and the Warren Smiths walked down Harley Street".¹³

Or, for example, how Mrs. Woolf deals with memories – different people remembering same events from their lives –the events they experienced together. At the beginning of the novel when Clarissa calls to her memory that incident of Sally Seton when she forgot her sponge, and ran along the passage naked. That grim old housemaid, Ellen Atkins, went about grumbling- “Suppose any of the gentlemen had seen? “ Indeed she did shock people”. (And that same old housemaid, Ellen Atkins, from Bourton, we see again at Clarissa’s party) ; and then, at Clarissa’s party, Sally Seton remembers that same incident- “ Never should she forget running along the passage naked, and being sent for by Miss Parry! “

Or, one more example, - the old lady whom Clarissa sees in the room opposite her house, at that crucial moment, when she heard about the young man killing himself, that old lady actually appears

¹³Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway, Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Editions, 1996, p.57

before that- at one point earlier in the novel we also see Clarissa watching her, and thinking about her. So, everything in the novel is connected, and almost every character is connected somehow to every other character, not to mention the great parallelism between Clarissa and Septimus Warren Smith.

Rejecting realistic approach to life as not being realistic enough, Virginia Woolf finds herself facing a problem what reality really is. In searching for reality, for the essentials of life, she comes to the conclusion that we experience the true reality in those moments that flesh through our conscience and enlighten our whole inner-selves and the outer world, like a lightning. Those moments she calls “moments of vision”, and they are similar to Joyce’s epiphanies.

This “moment of vision” for Clarissa Dalloway is when she hears about Septimus’ suicide. For a second, she consents to what he did, she even envies him, because, “Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate, people feeling the impossibility of reaching the center which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded; one was alone. There was embrace in death”¹⁴, but then, seeing through her bedroom window the old lady undressing

¹⁴ibid. p.121

herself, and going to bed as if nothing happened, she realized that life goes on, and that her life, as it is, deserves to be lived. She is happy.

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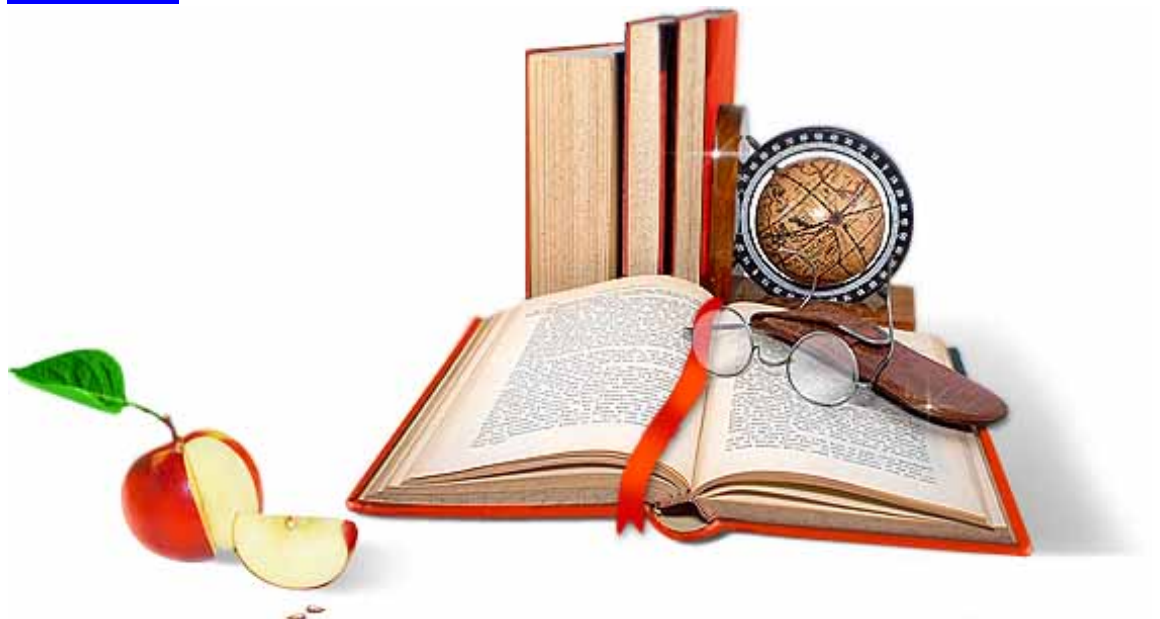
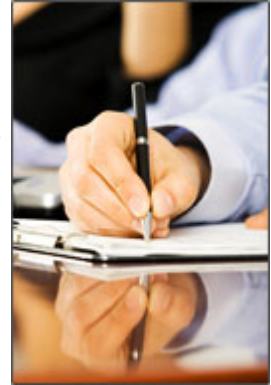
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