

NAMES

Locked Room, the narrator confesses how he faked government census returns, parodying the activity of a novelist:

Most of all there was the pleasure of making up names. At times I had to curb my impulse towards the outlandish – the fiercely comical, the pun, the dirty word – but for the most part I was content to play within the bounds of realism.

In all three stories the impossibility of pinning the signifier to the signified, of recovering that mythical, prelapsarian state of innocence in which a thing and its name were interchangeable, is replicated on the level of plot by the futility of the routines of detection. Each narrative ends with the death or despair of the detective-figure, faced with an insoluble mystery, lost in a labyrinth of names.

9 The Stream of Consciousness

Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself. For Lucy had her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges; Rumpelmayer's men were coming. And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning – fresh as if issued to children on a beach.

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen; looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling; standing and looking until Peter Walsh said, "Musing among the vegetables?" – was that it? – "I prefer men to cauliflowers" – was that it? He must have said it at breakfast one morning when she had gone out on to the terrace – Peter Walsh. He would be back from India one of these days, June or July, she forgot which, for his letters were awfully dull; it was his sayings one remembered; his eyes, his pocket-knife, his smile, his grumpiness and, when millions of things had utterly vanished – how strange it was! – a few sayings like this about cabbages.

VIRGINIA WOOLF *Mrs Dalloway* (1925)

"THE STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS" was a phrase coined by William James, psychologist brother of the novelist, Henry, to characterize the continuous flow of thought and sensation in the human mind. Later it was borrowed by literary critics to describe a particular kind of modern fiction which tried to imitate this process, exemplified by, among others, James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf.

The novel always was, of course, notable for its interiorized rendering of experience. *Cogito, ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I am") could be its motto, though the novelist's *cogito* includes not only reasoning but also emotions, sensations, memories and fantasies. Defoe's autobiographers, and Richardson's letter-writers, at the beginning of the novel's development as a literary form, were obsessively introspective. The classic nineteenth-century novel, from Jane Austen to George Eliot, combined the presentation of its characters as social beings with a subtle and sensitive analysis of their moral and emotional inner lives. Towards the turn of the century, however (you can see it happening in Henry James), reality was increasingly located in the private, subjective consciousness of individual selves, unable to communicate the fullness of their experience to others. It has been said that the stream-of-consciousness novel is the literary expression of solipsism, the philosophical doctrine that nothing is certainly real except one's own existence; but we could equally well argue that it offers us some relief from that daunting hypothesis by offering us imaginative access to the inner lives of other human beings, even if they are fictions.

Undoubtedly this kind of novel tends to generate sympathy for the characters whose inner selves are exposed to view, however vain, selfish or ignoble their thoughts may occasionally be; or, to put it another way, continuous immersion in the mind of a wholly unsympathetic character would be intolerable for both writer and reader. *Mrs Dalloway* is a particularly interesting case in point, because its heroine also appeared as a minor character in Virginia Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915). There a more traditional authorial narrative method is used to give a very satirical and prejudicial portrait of Clarissa Dalloway and her husband, as snobbish and reactionary members of the British upper class.

Here, for instance, is Mrs Dalloway in her earlier incarnation preparing to be introduced to a scholar called Ambrose and his wife:

Mrs Dalloway, with her head a little on one side, did her best to recollect Ambrose — was it a surname? — but failed. She was made slightly uneasy by what she had heard. She knew that scholars married anyone — girls they met in farms on reading parties; or little suburban women who said disagreeably, "Of course I know it's my husband you want, not *me*." But Helen came in at that point, and Mrs Dalloway saw with relief that though slightly eccentric in appearance, she was not unkind, held herself well, and her voice had restraint in it, which she held to be the sign of a lady.

We are shown what Mrs Dalloway is thinking, but the style in which her thoughts are reported puts them and her at an ironic distance, and passes silent judgment on them. There is evidence that when Virginia Woolf began writing about this character again, it was originally with the same quasi-satirical intention; but by that time she had become committed to the stream-of-consciousness novel, and the method inevitably led her into a much more sympathetic portrait of Clarissa Dalloway.

There are two staple techniques for representing consciousness in prose fiction. One is interior monologue, in which the grammatical subject of the discourse is an "I", and we, as it were, overhear the character verbalizing his or her thoughts as they occur. I shall discuss this method in the next section. The other method, called free indirect style, goes back at least as far as Jane Austen, but was employed with ever-increasing scope and virtuosity by modern novelists like Woolf. It renders thought as reported speech (in the third person, past tense) but keeps to the kind of vocabulary that is appropriate to the character, and deletes some of the tags, like "she thought," "she wondered," "she asked herself" etc. that a more formal narrative style would require. This gives the illusion of intimate access to a character's mind, but without totally surrendering authorial participation in the discourse.

"Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself," is the

first sentence of the novel: the statement of an authorial narrator, but an impersonal and inscrutable one, who does not explain who Mrs Dalloway is or why she needed to buy flowers. This abrupt plunging of the reader into the middle of an ongoing life (we gradually piece together the heroine's biography by a process of inference) typifies the presentation of consciousness as a "stream." The next sentence, "For Lucy had her work cut out for her," moves the focus of the narrative into the character's mind by adopting free indirect style, omitting an intrusive authorial tag, such as "Mrs Dalloway reflected"; referring to the maid familiarly by her first name, as Mrs Dalloway herself would, not by her function; and using a casual, colloquial expression, "cut out for her", that belongs to Mrs Dalloway's own style of speech. The third sentence has the same form. The fourth moves back slightly towards an authorial manner to inform us of the heroine's full name, as well as her pleasure in the fine summer morning: "And then, *thought Clarissa Dalloway*, what a morning – fresh as if issued to children on a beach." (*Italics mine.*)

The ejaculations, "What a lark! What a plunge!" that follow superficially like interior monologue, but they are not the mature heroine's responses to the morning in Westminster as she goes out to buy flowers. She is remembering herself at the age of eighteen remembering herself as a child. Or, to put it another way, the image "fresh as if issued to children on a beach", evoked by the Westminster morning, reminds her of how similar metaphors, of children larking in the sea, would come to mind as she "plunged" into the fresh, calm air of a summer morning, "like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave," at Bourton (some country house, we presume), where she would meet someone called Peter Walsh (the first hint of anything like a story). The actual and the metaphorical, meandering sentences, each thought or memory triggering the next. Realistically, Clarissa Dalloway cannot always trust her memory: "Musing among the vegetables? – was that it? – 'I prefer men to cauliflowers' – was that it?"

Meandering the sentences may be, but they are, apart from the licence of free indirect style, well-formed and elegantly cadenced.

Virginia Woolf has smuggled some of her own lyrical eloquence into Mrs Dalloway's stream of consciousness without its being obvious. Transpose these sentences into the first person, and they would sound far too literary and considered to pass for a transcription of someone's random thoughts. They would sound indeed like *writing*, in a rather precious style of autobiographical reminiscence:

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it always seemed to me when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which I can hear now, I burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as I then was) solemn, feeling as I did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen . . .

The interior monologues of Virginia Woolf's later novel, *The Waves*, suffer from such artificiality, to my mind. James Joyce was a more resourceful exponent of that way of rendering the stream of consciousness.