

Sara Strauß

“This Bright Inward Cinema of Thought”

Stream of Consciousness in Contemporary English Fiction

Gerd Stratmann (Hg.)

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List of Abbreviations

<i>A Portrait</i>	James Joyce, <i>A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man</i>
<i>At</i>	Ian McEwan, <i>Atonement</i>
fr.	French
<i>Lighthouse</i>	Virginia Woolf, <i>To the Lighthouse</i>
<i>Mrs D</i>	Virginia Woolf, <i>Mrs Dalloway</i>
<i>Sat</i>	Ian McEwan, <i>Saturday</i>
<i>To</i>	Graham Swift, <i>Tomorrow</i>

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[T]he brain's fundamental secret will be laid open one day. But even when it has, the wonder will remain, that mere wet stuff can make this bright inward cinema of thought, of sight and sound and touch bound into a vivid illusion of an instantaneous present, with a self, another brightly wrought illusion, hovering like a ghost at its centre. Could it ever be explained, how matter becomes conscious?

Ian McEwan, *Saturday*

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Introduction

The question of human consciousness has always attracted the interest of philosophers of mind, scholars and scientists, artists and writers as well as the general public. For centuries scholars from diverse disciplines and fields of research have attempted to detect whether there is a characteristic of the human mind that makes it possible to distinguish mental processes from physical phenomena of the brain. Up to the present day, the philosophy of mind struggles to find an explanation for this so-called mind-body problem. In the course of changing cultural paradigms, the human consciousness has also always fascinated artists and writers. Hence, throughout different literary periods writers have addressed the question of consciousness according to the diverse literary trends of their times.¹

It was particularly around the turn of the twentieth century that the human psyche moved into the focus of attention. The philosophical and psychological considerations of William James and the theories of psychoanalysis by Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung not only brought the topic to a wider attention of scholars and writers, but also to general public awareness. Along with changes in society and culture in consequence of industrialisation and modernisation, Virginia Woolf observed that “on or about December 1910 human character changed”.² More than ever, within this climate of change authors transferred the overall interest in the human psyche to the field of literature. The modernist period in the first decades of the twentieth century is fundamentally characterised by this turn to the subject of inner life. It was the consciousness of the characters in narrative texts which thereby received wide attention. These – at the time – new ambitions of the writers not only fostered originality concerning the contents of fiction but also technical innovation. Authors like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and others directed their efforts to the search for new literary forms to represent the unique characteristics of human thought processes and inner subjectivity in fiction. They experimented with new techniques to represent human interiority in fictional literature and increasingly employed the narrative modes stream of consciousness and interior monologue. Together with the already established

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- 1 For a chronological study of “trends in the representation of consciousness in English-language narrative discourse from around 700 to the present” see David Herman (ed.), *The Emergence of Mind – Representations of Consciousness in Narrative Discourse in English* (Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 2011).
 - 2 Virginia Woolf, “Character in Fiction”, in: Andrew McNeillie (ed.), *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Vol. III, 1919-1924* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1988), pp. 420-38, p. 421.

technique free indirect style, stream of consciousness and interior monologue experienced their heyday in the modernist period.

After a decline of interest in the human consciousness during the second half of the twentieth century, since around the turn to the new millennium there has been a resurgent awareness of the intricacies of the human mind. Whereas early twentieth-century attention concentrated on the subconscious, today, in the context of ongoing efforts in neuroscience, public awareness is raised for the interrelations between mind and brain. Thomas Metzinger observes a renaissance of the philosophical investigation of consciousness from the final decades of the twentieth century onwards.³ He considers the question of consciousness as the greatest theoretical challenge of our times:

Wie ist in einem physikalischen Universum die Entstehung von Bewußtsein möglich? [...] Das Problem des Bewußtseins bildet heute – vielleicht zusammen mit der Frage nach der Entstehung unseres Universums – die äußerste Grenze des menschlichen Strebens nach Erkenntnis. Es erscheint deshalb vielen als das letzte große Rätsel überhaupt und als die größte theoretische Herausforderung der Gegenwart.⁴

An answer to the question of human consciousness would contribute to a fundamental paradigm shift in the new millennium:

Im beginnenden 21. Jahrhundert kristallisiert sich die Frage nach den neurobiologischen Grundlagen des Bewusstseins als der neue heilige Gral der Lebenswissenschaften heraus. Gleich einer vierten 'kopernikanischen' Revolution nach Kopernikus, Darwin und Freud soll nun die Vorstellung von einer menschlichen Seele und der Willensfreiheit als Konstrukt der Neuronen entlarvt werden.⁵

Within this climate of a general cultural awareness of the significance of the mind-body problem, writers are once again increasingly addressing the topic of consciousness. In their fiction they concentrate on human subjectivity and individuality, and place the emphasis on the human mind in interrelation with the body. This thesis, therefore, examines how authors in the last three decades reconsider stream of consciousness literature⁶ in order to engage with the

3 See Thomas Metzinger, "Vorwort", in: Thomas Metzinger (ed.), *Bewußtsein: Beiträge aus der Gegenwartsphilosophie* (Paderborn: Mentis, 2005), pp. 9-12, p. 10.

4 Thomas Metzinger, "Einleitung: Das Problem des Bewußtseins", in: Metzinger, *Bewußtsein*, pp. 15-53, p. 15.

5 Irina Bauder-Begerow and Caroline Lusin, "Der englische Roman zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts: Ian McEwan", in: Vera Nünning (ed.), *Der zeitgenössische englische Roman: Genres – Entwicklungen – Modellinterpretationen* (Trier: WVT, 2007), pp. 243-58, p. 250.

6 Within the scope of this thesis the terms "stream of consciousness fiction" and "-novel" refer to narrative texts which employ free indirect style, stream of consciousness and interior monologue in order to represent the inner life of the fictional characters (for detailed definitions see chapter 3). This type of narrative fiction has also been called "the