

Meditation as Inner Observation: An Example from a Novel

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It seems to me from my own experience that learning to meditate is an extraordinarily difficult task. Most of my difficulties, I realize, lie within me. As suggested below, early in our childhood, our egos begin to dominate our lives. However, there is also a difficulty I find with writing and instruction about meditation: it is stated in abstract terms, with few if any concrete, detailed instances. To learn, I need both momentary details and abstract terms, the parts and the wholes. Here I review some of Virginia Woolf's writing because I think it is crammed with particular moments from her inner life, actual and imagined.

Scholars have suggested that the self is made up of movement between experiencing and watching. They begin by pointing to the learning of language: the various human languages, as opposed to the instinctive vocabularies of other mammals, are made possible by what they call role-taking. Humans can see their own experience from outside, by imagining it from the point of view of another person. Human language in actual usage is almost always highly fragmented and incomplete, and most commonly used words have more than one meaning. For these reasons, it would be impossible to understand without role-taking.

Role-taking appears to occur at lightning speed, so fast that it disappears from consciousness at an early age. In modern societies, particularly, with their focus on individualism, there are many incentives for forgetting that one is role-taking. Each of us learns to consider ourselves a stand-alone individual, independent of what others think. "We live in the minds of others without knowing it." (Cooley 1922).

How could we not know it? Children learn role-taking so early and so well that they forget they are doing it. The more adept they become, the quicker the movement back and forth, learning through practice to reduce silences in conversation to a span of time unbelievably short. A study of recorded conversations (Wilson and Zimmerman 1986) can help us understand how the forgetting is possible.

It analyzed adult dialogues nine minutes long in seven conversations (14 different people). In the segments recorded, the average length of silences varied from an average of .04 to .09 seconds. How can one possibly respond to the other's comment in less than a tenth of a second?

Apparently one needs to begin to form a response well before the other person has stopped speaking. That is, humans are capable of multiprocessing, in this case, in four different channels: listening to the other's comment, imagining its meaning from the speaker's point of view, from own point of view and, forming a response to it. Within and between each channel there are probably several movements back and forth as the incoming information is considered and processed into a response. For an example, one might imagine the other person's view of the response you are forming one or more times. These four activities must occur virtually simultaneously.

In modern societies, at least, if one is to respond quickly enough, one must split one's attention into four parts. I assume that the length of silences is greater for small children who must learn this drill. Learning to respond quickly probably takes years. Perhaps early in grammar school, most children have obtained sufficient speed. If a child takes too long to respond, undesirable

interpretations may be put upon the wait. “What are you, stupid or something?” or “Don’t you believe me?” and so on.

Self and Ego

Acquiring a human self depends on role-taking: the ability to see one’s self as another might, as well as from the inside. The problem with this process is that in order to be instantly responsive, a part of the self, the ego, may become mechanized. How can one listen to a comment, imagine the others’ point of view, decide one’s own point of view, and produce a response that allows less than a tenth of a second silence? It seems that such facility would require an internal machine that is largely automatic, using, for the most part, already prepared responses, rather than an exact response to the particular moment.

Automatized responses in conversation would require using hundreds or even thousands of stock words, phrases, or sentences, rather than exploring many possibilities. The reflexive, observing self is capable of providing a unique response to each unique situation. But such a response demands that one only listen as long as the other is speaking, leading to a delay in response. The ego is a machine, composed largely of ready-made elements. Ego responses, therefore, are usually as much or more about the self as about the other or the situation.

An obvious example of a stock response would be “Well!” or “Uhh,” to gain time. But since there is next to no time for the further response either, what usually occurs is also stock, perhaps a saying, or a favorite phrase, or phrases that he or she knows are the other’s person favorites, or some more complex response that is still mostly constructed from available stock. Couples can often get laughs by responding to each other with punch lines from favorite jokes: “You bettah off” “Can’t hurt, either.” “Do you want two lanes or four lanes” and so on.

No doubt most responses are more complex than mere truisms, however. They could involve some on-the-spot construction, but still are partially tangential. Most of us seem to have “lines” we take with particular people and situations that persist, regardless of changes in the other person or situation. My father, for example, took an authoritative line with my mother, brother and I, and we took a submissive line with him, even after my brother and I were out of his direct influence. Knowing ahead what to expect from the other person, and from ourselves, even approximately, would be considerable help in keeping silences under a tenth of a second.

The ego can be envisioned as that part of the self that is mostly automated. The self is made up of the automated part and the part that can respond to situations *de novo*, the reflexive self. It appears that the ego is in charge almost all of the time, even during dreams. (Lucid dreams would be an exception). The difficulty that many people have with learning to meditate could be caused by the domination of the ego. Meditation involves restraining the ego to give the reflexive self more time. Effective meditation moves toward being able to observe own ego, as well as experiencing it, more or less equally.

Artists Observing Inner Experience.

Interior monologues are often found in novels, but they are seldom detailed enough to help us envision the working of the self. For example, George Eliot, the 19th century novelist, provided them for Gwendolyn Harleth, a character in Daniel Deronda. Here are some examples from Gwendolyn’s first conversation with Grandcourt, who she ultimately marries.

In their first conversation, "she imagined various degrees and modes of opinion of herself that might be entertained by Grandcourt." Next, Gwendolyn, in her imagination, "made a brief

graphic description of him [Grandcourt] to an indefinite hearer." The first excerpt implies that Gwendolyn took the role of Grandcourt in order to try out versions of what he might think of her. The second implies that Gwendolyn took the role of some other person, an indefinite hearer, in order to describe to that other person how she saw Grandcourt (presumably his good looks and stately bearing).

A third and final example from Eliot's dialogue hints at the extensiveness of Gwendolyn's interior monologue. Gwendolyn loves riding horses; by this phase of her conversation with Grandcourt, she is already thinking that she might marry him. When they are talking about Gwendolyn's love of riding horses, during a pause when waiting for Grandcourt to reply, she "had run through a whole hunting season with two chosen hunters to ride at will." If this moment had been treated by Woolf, she might have included many images that played through Gwendolyn's consciousness, second by second, for a whole page, rather than a single sentence. Eliot and other novelists provide glimpses of the inner life from a distance; they are abstract and therefore brief.

In contrast, Virginia Woolf provided a model meditation in this sense: she seems to have observed the motions of her own ego in great detail. Of course, we can never be completely sure how much of her descriptions are factual, and how much imagined. But they at least offer concrete instances to help us better understand the nature of meditation, since they describe the particulars of a story like one that might happen to anyone.

I will focus on an incident that occurs near the beginning of *To the Lighthouse* (1927), by Woolf, the commentary on it by Auerbach (1953), and my own commentary. Auerbach was the first to analyze the monologue by Mrs. Ramsay, the protagonist of the novel, and to assert its significance. Mrs. Ramsey is certainly a portrayal of Virginia Woolf's mother.

Near the beginning of the novel, Mrs. Ramsay is measuring a stocking that she is knitting against her son James' leg. She protests his movement: "Stand still. Don't be tiresome,"

The Monologue

Below is the text of Mrs. Ramsey's interior dialogue after her warning. There are several voices but most of their identities are not clear. (I have numbered those segments that I will discuss).

1. Never did anybody look so sad. Bitter and black, halfway down, in the darkness, in the shaft which ran from the sunlight to the depths, perhaps a tear formed; a tear fell; the waters swayed this way and that, received it, and were at rest. Never did anybody look so sad.

2. But was it nothing but looks? People said. What was there behind it—her beauty, her splendor? Had he blown his brains out, they asked, had he died the week before they were married—some other, earlier lover, of whom rumors reached one? Or was there nothing? Nothing but an incomparable beauty which she lived behind, and could do nothing to disturb? For easily though she might have said at some moment of intimacy when stories of great passion, of love foiled, of ambition thwarted came her way how she too had known or felt or been through it herself, she never spoke. She was silent always. She knew then—she knew without having learnt. Her simplicity fathomed what clever people falsified. Her singleness of mind made her drop plumb like a stone, alight exact as a bird, gave her, naturally, this swoop and fall of the spirit upon truth which delighted, eased, sustained—falsely perhaps.

3. ("Nature has but little clay," said Mr. Banks once, hearing her voice on the telephone, and much moved by it though she was only telling him a fact about a train, "like that of which she molded you." He saw her at the end of the line, Greek, blue-eyed, straight-nosed. How incongruous it seemed to be telephoning to a woman like that. The Graces assembling seemed to have joined hands in meadows of asphodel to compose that face. Yes, he would catch the 10:30 at Euston.

"But she's no more aware of her beauty than a child," said Mr. Banks, replacing the receiver and crossing the room to see what progress the workmen were making with an hotel which they were building at the back of his house. And he thought of Mrs. Ramsay as he looked at that stir among the unfinished walls. For always, he thought, there was something incongruous to be worked into the harmony of her face. She clapped a deerstalker's hat on her head; she ran across the lawn in galoshes to snatch a child from mischief. So that if it was her beauty merely that one thought of, one must remember the quivering thing, the living thing (they were carrying bricks up a little plank as he watched them), and work it into the picture; or if one thought of her simply as a woman, one must endow her with some freak of idiosyncrasy; or suppose some latent desire to doff her royalty of form as if her beauty bored her and all that men say of beauty, and she wanted only to be like other people, insignificant. He did not know. He did not know. He must go back to work.)

Auerbach's (1953) chapter on this incident, *The Brown Stocking*, makes the vital point that it takes place within what could only be a few seconds of time. He proposed that Woolf was representing human reality as made up predominately of interior experience.

Judging by the substantial content of the monologues, they must be occurring at a very rapid pace, most of it much too fast to notice in awareness. As Auerbach puts it, "A sharp contrast results between the brief span of time occupied by the exterior event and the dreamlike wealth of a process of consciousness which traverses the whole subjective universe." He goes on to say that Woolf's focus on what might be seen as a few random moments caused something "new and elemental [to appear]: nothing less than the wealth of reality and depth of life in every moment to which we surrender ourselves without prejudice."

The first interior monologue was clearly labeled by Woolf as a Mrs. Ramsay's recollection simply of what another person said. But in the second monologue, three more voices or points of view appear, all difficult to identify. The voice I have numbered as 3 is identified as belonging only to "people." (But was it nothing but looks? people said.) The point of view from which comment #2 came is not identified at all: Never did anybody look so sad. Finally, the section concerning William Banks, # 4, Auerbach found the most puzzling: "Nature has but little clay like that of which she molded you." And "But she's no more aware of her beauty than a child." This section, although it begins with a comment Banks made to Mrs. Ramsay in a telephone conversation, as it expands to his own thoughts and actions, seems to belong in his consciousness rather than in Mrs. Ramsay's.

Although Auerbach extends his appreciation of the first monologue to the second, the latter appears much more enigmatic to him, to the point that, as Mr. Banks shook off "the insoluble problem of Mrs. Ramsay," so Auerbach appears to give up on the problem of identifying the voices in the second monologue. But even with these doubts, Auerbach's overall impression of the monologues is highly appreciative. His chapter ends with the suggestion that they may well

penetrate to the level of that which is universal in all humanity. I agree with this judgment, but I also will try to explain the occurrence of voices in the second monologue that Auerbach found puzzling.

The Voices

In the second monologue, two identified and one unidentified points of view appear. The first identified point of view is that of "people." That is, in section # 3, Mrs. Ramsay appears to take the role of "people" in asking the question: But was it nothing but looks? "People" also raise several other questions, some of which not clearly located in time and space. Mrs. Ramsay appears to start answering the questions that she attributed to "people", beginning with the sentence: "For easily though she might have said -- how she too had known or felt or been through it herself, she never spoke." Mrs. Ramsay is imagining questions that "people" might ask about her, first from their point of view, and then responding to the questions, from her own point of view. She is not engaging in an inner dialogue, however. She allows the voice of "people" to raise several questions about her, but her response is not part of a dialogue with the people who raise the questions. She simply thinks to herself how she has never responded to such questions.

Similarly with the unidentified voice I have numbered as 2. ". Never did anybody look so sad." Who is speaking? It appears that Mrs. Ramsay is visualizing herself as she might be seen by another person or persons, perhaps by "people" as she labels this viewpoint in the paragraph immediately following. But in the case of the assertion #2, Mrs. Ramsay doesn't label the speaker or viewpoint. Why not? We need to remember that these thoughts are occurring with great rapidity, since she has many, many thoughts within a few seconds.

Note that many of the associations within this segment go unlabeled. Who is the person, real or imagined, who might have died the week before they were married? Could it be an earlier suitor of Mrs. Ramsay's? Woolf's treatment suggests that inner speech is different than outer speech in many ways. Since it occurs so rapidly, many of the associations would be difficult for anyone other than Mrs. Ramsay to follow, because they depend on non-logical associations, and/or unlabeled references. Again, as in section 3, Mrs. Ramsay doesn't talk back to the point of view that is observing her sadness; there is no dialogue.

The cadenza that is Section 4 is a dialogue, or at least it begins with what seems to be an actual dialogue, a phone conversation between herself and William Bankes. But the phone conversation seems to be taking place not from Mrs. Ramsay's point of view, but from Bankes.' This difference of point of view may be heralded by the fact that Woolf has enclosed the whole section within parentheses.

The section starts with a compliment that Banks pays to Mrs. Ramsay, that "Nature has but little clay like that of which she molded you." But within this quotation a feeling of Bankes' is noted, that he was moved by her voice. The section goes to comment on how he sees her as Greek, and so on, and his feeling that it was incongruous to be phoning her, that her face had been assembled by the Graces. Then, following the series of compliments, both external and internal, Bankes states, either to Mrs. Ramsay or to himself, that yes, he would catch the 10:30 train, which is what the phone call is ostensibly about.

The point of view is obviously not Mrs. Ramsay's, but Bankes'. How could this be? Woolf has shown that Mrs. Ramsay imagined a sequence of events beginning with an actual compliment to

herself, but then going on to carry through the compliment to a sequence of thoughts and activities as they might have occurred to Bankes.

Mrs. Ramsay knew that Bankes was an admirer of hers, and she also knew his habits quite well. Into the cadenza she has put her knowledge of him (for example, his habit of watching workingmen at a construction site when gathering his thoughts). She is thinking of the problem of Mrs. Ramsay and her beauty from the point of view of an admirer of hers.

She is imagining herself from Mr. Bankes' point of view, just as Woolf, in the two monologues, is imagining the world from Mrs. Ramsay's point of view, a world within a world. Just as Mrs. Ramsay was able to plausibly construct the world from Mr. Bankes' point of view, because she knew him well, so Virginia Woolf was able to plausibly construct the world from Mrs. Ramsay's point of view, since she knew so well the model (her own mother, Julia Stephen) on whom Mrs. Ramsay was based.

When Woolf's sister Vanessa read *To the Lighthouse*, she wrote to Virginia "...you have given a portrait of mother which more like her than anything I could ever have conceived possible. It is almost painful to have her so raised from the dead. ...as far as portrait painting goes you seem to me to be a supreme artist..." (Lee 1997, pp. 473-474).

Note that Mrs. Ramsay's interior monologue does not approach objectivity toward herself, since the contents are virtually all either complimentary or neutral. However, there is one negative element in the monologue. It comes at the end of the segment 3, when Mrs. Ramsay is considering how "people" might see her. This segment, until the last word, is in the interrogative mode, but is also uniformly positive, to the point of being worshipful. "People" seem to be puzzling over Mrs. Ramsay, who she really is, what she is like inside, but in doing so, comment on "her beauty, her splendor" and many other of her wonders.

The commentary goes on in this adoring vein until the end of the last sentence: "Her singleness of mind made her drop plumb like a stone, alight exact as a bird, gave her, naturally, this swoop and fall of the spirit upon truth which delighted, eased, sustained—*falsely perhaps*." The last two words suddenly reverse the tone. After perhaps twenty or thirty highly complementary comments on herself, "people" insert a negative one, that Mrs. Ramsay's ability to delight, ease and sustain might be false. If objectivity can be measured by the degree it contains both negative and positive views of the self, the one negative element suggests that Mrs. Ramsay's thoughts about herself are not completely subjective.

Woolf as an Objective Reporter

At first glance, it would appear that in these monologues, Woolf might be slyly making fun of Mrs. Ramsay, that is, her own mother. The headlong torrent of thoughts and associations, the carelessness about identification, the ambiguity of reference, and above all, the self-referential content would seem to portray Mrs. Ramsay as both slipshod in her thinking and egotistical. The Bankes cadenza particularly might be cited as evidence in regard to this latter judgment, since Woolf has imagined her mother imagining an admirer's wholehearted, if puzzled adoration of herself.

On the other hand, it seems more likely that no such judgment of the mother was intended. Rather, as implied at the end of Auerbach's chapter, perhaps what Woolf was seeking was to portray the quality of consciousness that is universal. This quality, Woolf's treatment of Mrs.

Ramsay's monologues seems to imply, is that our rapid and private inner dialogues are rife with ambiguity and self-reference.

In her diary, Woolf stated that she was consciously attempting to describe inner reality, as much as a scientist as an artist. Here is a note she wrote when working on her first novel, 19 years before writing *To the Lighthouse*.

I ... achieve symmetry by means of infinite discords, showing all the traces of the mind's passage through the world; achieve at the end, some kind of whole made of shivering fragments; to me this seems a natural process; the flight of the mind (Sept., 1908, in Bell 1972).

How might Woolf have discovered inner dialogue? Although I don't know that this point is ever made in her writing about her work, it is likely that Woolf made her discovery of inner worlds by examining her own trains of thought. All of us sometime realize that we have jumped from one topic to another without any obvious connection between them. Or our partner in conversation may point out such a jump to us.

What Woolf might have done is to patiently investigate the route by which she got from topic A to topic B, perhaps in many different instances. Although Woolf never was psychoanalyzed, this is also one of the methods of psychoanalysis. With enough time and patience, it might be possible to trace at least sequences in one's own interior monologues in this manner.

The writing of *To the Lighthouse* may have served as a self-analysis for Woolf. Many years after, in her "Sketch of the Past", she noted:

It is perfectly true that she [her mother] obsessed me, in spite of the fact that she died when I was thirteen, until I was forty-four [i.e. the year that she wrote *To the Lighthouse*]. ... I wrote the book very quickly; and when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I no longer see her (Lee 1997, pp. 475-476).

Following Auerbach's hint about the universality of the lightning fast inner monologue, perhaps Woolf was not ridiculing her mother, but only seeking to portray herself, her mother, and all other humans in their inner life. Her depiction of concrete instances of inner life, alive with particular details, may help us better understand the nature of meditation, other human beings and ourselves.

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