Stream of Consciousness

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While the term ‘stream of consciousness’ was first coined by psychologist William James in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890): consciousness is an uninterrupted ‘flow’: ‘a ‘river’ or a ‘stream’ are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let’s call it the stream of thought, consciousness, or subjective life’ (243). The term quickly came to mean a narrative mode that seeks to give the written equivalent of a character’s thought processes, and is sometimes described in terms of an ‘interior monologue.’ As such, it differs from the ‘dramatic monologue’ or ‘soliloquy’ where the speaker addresses the audience or an implied receiver. Stream of consciousness style is often identified by fictional techniques such as lack of punctuation, long and sometimes agrammatical sentences, and a series of unrelated impressions. Stream of consciousness technique tries to represent a character’s general mental state before it is condensed, organized, or edited down into narrative coherence or sense. While stream of consciousness is often read as an avant-garde technique, its aims were to get closer to the ‘reality’ of human thought processes. As a narrative technique, stream of consciousness maintains affiliations with other modernist art forms, such as the visual art of German expressionism, Cubism, and modernist film.

Stream of consciousness was first used in a literary-critical context in 1918 by May Sinclair to describe Dorothy Richardson’s novels, but the term is most frequently used to discuss the modernist novels of Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Marcel Proust, and William Faulkner. The technique reflects modernism’s intense preoccupation with the creative process and tries to give form to the presumably messy and incoherent channels through which innovative literature finally emerges. Stream of consciousness also works to reflect the particularly disruptive experiences and events that marked the war-torn modernist period.

Though stream of consciousness is most commonly associated with fiction from the modernist era, precursors of the technique appear in texts such as Laurence Sterne’s psychological novel *Tristram Shandy* (1757), Edgar Allan Poe’s short story ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’ (1843), and even Henry James’ novels. The narrative technique also does not end with modernism, but persists in contemporary fiction, such as in the novels of Sylvia Plath, Clarice Lispector, Dave Eggers, and Roberto Bolaño.

James, William. *The Principles of Psychology. Vol 1*. Harvard University Press, 1983.