

UC Santa Barbara

UC Santa Barbara Previously Published Works

Title

The Feeling of Knowing in Mrs. Dalloway: Neuroscience and Woolf

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4b51t5kv>

Author

Park, Sowon

Publication Date

2023-12-13

Peer reviewed

THE FEELING OF KNOWING IN *MRS DALLOWAY*: NEUROSCIENCE AND WOOLF

by Sowon S. Park

I.

Capturing consciousness has been the spur to many great literary ambitions but in the last three decades we have witnessed a remarkable growth in consciousness studies in many fields, and especially in the natural sciences. Disciplines as disparate as cognitive neuroscience, artificial intelligence, philosophy of mind, cognitive linguistics, evolutionary biology, anthropology and phenomenological psychiatry have found a common focus in consciousness, making it an exceptionally multidisciplinary field. Literary studies are not unaffected by the “cognitive turn”: significant emerging areas spurred on by the recent growth in consciousness studies are neuro-literary criticism and “evo” (evolutionary) literary criticism, whose messianic tones were captured in the 2002 special issue of *Poetics Today*. Entitled “Literature and the Cognitive Revolution,” it pronounced that “evo” and “neuro” approaches will “revolutionize the study of literature by overthrowing the rule of poststructuralism” (*Poetics Today* 167). To what degree this nascent field will overturn poststructuralist knowledge still remains to be seen. However, it is clear that there are unresolved and ongoing methodological issues arising from attempts to generate an integrative framework that can accommodate responses across the divide between the “two cultures.” By examining the particular case of Steven Pinker on Woolf, I will foreground the general issues. I will then consider certain neuroscientific discoveries which illuminate and provide a scientific framework for the literary methods developed by Woolf and other modernists. Though neuroscientific evidence varies vastly in its explanatory scale, Antonio Damasio’s science of consciousness has stunning parallels with Woolf’s model of mind, a link which has not been made by cognitive or evolutionary literary critics. This paper will argue for the significance of affect, offered as the “feeling of knowing,” in developing an adequate theory of consciousness that speaks across the divide between the two cultures, as well as for the centrality of Woolf to the field of consciousness studies.

II.

Towards the end of his internationally acclaimed book *The Feeling of What Happens: Body, Emotion and the Making of Consciousness*, Antonio Damasio, one of the world’s leading neuroscientists, poses this question: “[A]s a consequence of our greater understanding of consciousness, [will] we...eventually be able to gain access to each other’s mental experiences?” (305). To answer this question he proposes a hypothetical scenario. Set in the near future when a high-powered scanner is able to represent the brain at an unprecedented level of accuracy, he invites us to experience what goes on in his mind as he looks over San Francisco Bay. Damasio’s retinas, his lateral geniculate nuclei, his visual cortical regions that form the image of San Francisco Bay are all scanned, providing the patterns of neuron firings that correspond to what he sees. The spatial and temporal resolution of this scanner

is so advanced that you can see with crystal clarity the buildup of the sight before his eyes: the rapid volumetric acquisition of images provided by the scanner gives a precise and compelling measure of the raw pixels as they are developed into shapes, colours, movement and three-dimensions. In addition an equally sophisticated computer will provide you with the description of the physics and chemistry of the neural-activation patterns, yielding a remarkable set of correlates of the contents of the image in Damasio's mind.

Does this process not lay bare, objectively, the distinct, phenomenal, qualitative and subjective character of Damasio's consciousness? Have not the magnificent developments in neuroscience finally provided us with the means to gain the profoundly longed-for knowledge of the mind of another? Is this not the answer to the "What's it like to be someone else?" question, otherwise known as the W.I.L. question that has occupied most theorists in contemporary philosophy of mind? Damasio's answer is no. He points out that the advanced technology, even if perfectly realized, will give us the neural data but not the experience of that data. The immediacy and the vitality of actual perception in one's mind cannot be completely transmitted to another because the ultimate mental image in one's brain is the result of the process of the visual stimulus triggering a wave of changes in the "physical viscera" and then these bodily changes being detected by the cortex which connects them back to the initial visual stimulus. In other words, or in Damasio's words, it has undergone the "body-loop" (*The Feeling of What Happens*, 79-81). When we see Damasio's conscious processes, all we will experience is the image of that body-loop without the body-loop itself. The somatic response is uniquely his and is fundamentally irreproducible to those who do not inhabit his body.

That our perception is generated in the body, by the body and that the bodily responses are an essential element of the rational thinking process is Damasio's thesis, which has arguably revolutionized the field of cognitive science. Along with Francisco Varela's 1991 landmark neurophenomenological study, *The Embodied Mind*, Damasio's theory of embodied cognition has established that the mind is not in the head but in the body as a whole. They are generally credited with co-pioneering the furthest reaches of the human brain, now sometimes called the "feeling brain" (or the "affective brain") and their explanations of the neural, somatic basis of the processes of one's mind which demonstrate "why mappings of the body are well suited to signifying the self in the mind" (Damasio, *Nature* 227) are reshaping traditional areas of scientific and philosophic study based on Cartesian dualism; indeed, Damasio's book *Descartes Error* (1994) is regarded by some as having solved the mind-body problem.

For all that, Damasio's conclusion that sensory perception cannot be reproduced on non-sensory grounds should not surprise us. Those of us working outside the boundaries of positivist conceptions of scientific truth will not find it remarkable that life as we experience it cannot be reduced to fMRIs (functional magnetic resonance images) of the brain, no matter how deep or how clear the resolution. What we should be surprised by is the premise—that the only valid methods for accessing another person's mental experiences are those based on verifiable injunctions. Damasio, like other scientists, makes little attempt to incorporate the study of consciousness in the field of literature, which is so rich and so full of what it is like to be in someone else's mind. But, as David Lodge has forcefully argued in his essay "Consciousness and the 'Novel'," the rise of the novel at the end of the eighteenth century marks the beginning of modern discussions of consciousness

and the novel is “man’s most successful effort to describe the experience of individual human beings moving through space and time” (10). However, in the current climate, literature is mostly overlooked as a serious field of knowledge by the natural scientists.

III.

On the other hand, recent constellations of scientific knowledge charted by those at the interface between cognitive neuroscience, cognitive linguistics and post-Darwinian neuropsychology are not without attempts to incorporate literature, and the work of Steven Pinker, the psycholinguist and cognitive neuroscientist, is representative. Unlike the majority of cognitive scientists, he recognizes literature as a serious field of knowledge: “Fiction in particular offers a precious gift to evolutionary psychology” he writes (“Consilient Study” 163). But if hopes for the opening of a vista upon a new transdisciplinarity are encouraged by the premise, they are stalled as quickly as they are conceived because Pinker, like other scientists, simply ignores the epistemological problem of aesthetic knowledge and proceeds his investigations on the premise that knowledge about literature can be ascertained with the same strategies and with the same claims to truth as other scientific investigations. Thus literature is taken as stable data about what interests the human species which can be analyzed “scientifically” for their adaptive and functional value. “[T]he people and events on display in fictive worlds presumably reflect our species’ obsessions, and provide an ecologically valid source of data about what matters to us,” he maintains (“Consilient Study” 163). In regarding literature as data, Pinker abolishes the experience of the data from the field of knowledge and thus his analyses cannot but yield profoundly reductionist explanations of literature, such as the following:

Fiction may be, at least in part, a pleasure technology, a co-opting of language and imagery as a virtual reality device which allows a reader to enjoy pleasant hallucinations like exploring interesting territories, conquering enemies, hobnobbing with powerful people, and winning attractive mates. Fiction, moreover, can tickle people’s fancies without even having to project them into a thrilling vicarious experience. There are good reasons for people (or any competitive social agent) to crave gossip, which is a kind of due diligence on possible allies and enemies. Fiction, with its omniscient narrator disclosing the foibles of interesting virtual people, can be a form of simulated gossip. (171)

Pinker’s reasoning does not take into account the most profound human experiences great literature can undoubtedly provide because he erases the phenomenological process through which any reading is performed thereby reducing the reading of literature to factual transaction of the most crudely instrumental value.

More pertinently for this discussion, his model has no room for literature which does not entertain nor offer any obvious adaptive value. Modernism does not fit into the evolutionary logic and thus remains, for him as with evolutionary critics, a mystifying scientific puzzle. Pinker’s response is to deplore it. He despairs of the downhill turn the humanities and the arts have taken in the last century, the origin of which can, apparently, be traced back to a single statement made by Virginia Woolf that is to be found in “countless English course outlines”: “In or about December 1910, human nature changed” (*The*

Blank Slate 404). Pinker not only misquotes Woolf but takes her hyperbolic gambit for discussing character in fiction as a hypothesis which must be verified in the literal sense. So he does not shy away from solemnly concluding: “Woolf was referring to the new philosophy of modernism that would dominate the elite arts and criticism for much of the twentieth century, and whose denial of human nature was carried over with a vengeance to postmodernism, which seized control in its later decades. The point of this chapter [The Arts] is that the elite arts, criticism, and scholarship are in trouble because that statement was wrong. Human nature did not change in 1910, or in any year thereafter” (404). That human nature did not change in a biological sense has patently very little to do with Woolf’s theory of representing character in fiction. But rather than widening the scope of literature as biological adaptation and considering modernist innovations and achievements from a literary perspective, Pinker denigrates and dismisses the major literary achievements of the twentieth century, revealing little more than deep-grained, C.P. Snow-like ideological prejudices against the humanities. For example he asserts: “The study of literature in modern universities strikes many observers (insiders and outsiders alike) as being in, shall we say, critical condition—politicized, sclerotic, and lacking a progressive agenda.... Fiction has long been thought of as a means of exploring human nature, and the current stagnation of literary scholarship can be attributed, in part, to its denial of that truism.... its distrust of science (and more generally, the search for testable hypotheses and cumulative objective knowledge) has left it, according to many accounts, mired in faddism, obscurantism, and parochialism” (“Consilient Study” 163). The assumption that science is alone in seeking to produce general laws and cumulative knowledge effectively stultifies the consilience he attempts.

In addition, it might be reasonable to expect a cognitive neuroscientist linguist specializing in consciousness to take a reasonable interest in the phrase “stream of consciousness,” but in *The Blank Slate* this phrase is just another way of saying bad writing. He despairs of modernist style which he summarizes thus: “omniscient narration, structured plots, the orderly introduction of characters, and general readability were replaced by a stream of consciousness, events presented out of order, baffling characters and causal sequences, subjective and disjointed narration, and difficult prose” (410). Not for a moment does he consider the idea that by cutting loose from “orderly introductions of characters and structured plots” and tracing the “ordinary mind on an ordinary day” (*E4* 160) Woolf recreated not just a knowledge of the mind or the world but mind in the world as it is in the process of being constituted by the world, as Pat Waugh has convincingly argued in *The Arts and Sciences of Criticism* (see also Waugh in this volume), which is precisely what Pinker had also been arguing for in the preceding chapters. By divorcing the data of fiction from the experience of that data, Pinker’s methodology distorts the fundamental principles of the act of reading and overlooks the opportunity to build on the convergences.

Pinker’s appropriations are particularly unfortunate because one of the very aims of his book is to illuminate the phenomenological nature of human consciousness, precisely the field in which Woolf made giant strides. But his reading of Woolf is that she based her theory of art on a “false theory of human psychology—the Blank Slate” which not only led to the current “malaise of the arts and the humanities” as he sees it, but culminated in Alan Sokal’s famous 1996 hoax article, “Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity” in *The Social Text* (Pinker, *The Blank*

Slate 410). All of modernism and postmodernism was a mistake in Pinker's view—one big hoax.

So is the idea of convergence even desirable when the methods and the standards of the natural sciences are automatically assumed to be a way of improving the non-scientific "soft" disciplines? How can consciousness scientists process what they regard as speculative, evidence-free observations if they take their epistemological goal and their conception of truth only from the empirical sciences? And how can we rely on analyses of literature offered by scientists whose "critical theorising and practice, whose textuality and linguisticity, whose readerliness and imagination, are as poor as that?," as Valentine Cunningham sums it up (108). It is difficult not to see today's scientists, including those informed by post-positivist quantum theories and those with accumulated literary competence, as versions of Mr Gradgrind in *Hard Times*, whose mantra is "Now, what I want is, Facts....nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else....Stick to Facts, sir!" (Dickens 15). But facts without an understanding of the experience of facts in relation to consciousness can only amount to the Gradgrindian blindness that Dickens satirized.

IV.

Nevertheless, the idea of convergence remains alluring if only because when it comes to the W.I.L. question, there are so many overlaps and coincidences whether it is approached logically, neurobiologically or literarily. Damasio's investigations into the "What's It Like" question may have been on neural, physical and material grounds but his conclusion extends, not alters, the conclusion Thomas Nagel logically came to in his celebrated 1974 philosophical essay which posed the question: "What is it like to be a bat?"—i.e. it may be possible for a human to know what it is like for him to behave as a bat behaves which not the same as what it is like for a bat to be a bat because of the differing perceptual systems.

Woolf has a simpler phrase for the W.I.L. question: she called it "creating character." "My name is Brown. Catch me if you can" so Woolf wrote of the long odyssey that the writer embarks on when attempting to convey what it feels like to be someone else (*E3* 420). The epistemological problem of the knowledge of the mind—a perennial preoccupation for both novelists and philosophers—was Woolf's abiding obsession and her contributions were as profound as they were radical. "How, then...did one know one thing or another thing about people, sealed as they were?" (*TTL* 57-8) wonders Lily Briscoe as she sits close to Mrs Ramsay, the "sacred inscriptions" of whose heart she longs to learn. Martha Nussbaum has considered this question in exemplary detail in "The Window: Knowledge of Other Minds in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*." She argues that Woolf reconstituted the question of other minds by depicting "repeatedly, both our epistemological insufficiency toward one another and our unquenchable epistemological longing.... Virginia Woolf tackles a venerable philosophical problem. I believe that she makes a contribution both to our understanding of the problem and to its resolution" (731). The question of knowledge that Nussbaum examined is one *between* Woolf's characters. And to this another dimension might be added: the question of knowledge between the reader and Woolf's characters, an area to which Woolf's contributions are no less significant.

The chief task of the novelist, Woolf stated, was to convey the mind receiving “an incessant shower of innumerable atoms, composing in their sum what we might venture to call life itself” (E3 33). Novels should not merely provide the data that a character is processing in the mind—the shower of atoms—but express the experience of that data, to “record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall” (E3 33). So Woolf represents to the reader not just the information of what a character may see, hear, smell, taste and touch but the process of what it feels like to have that sight, sound, smell, taste and touch and the kind of thoughts and memories they trigger, making us acutely aware that while only some mental processes are conscious, all mental processes are physical. This produces in the reader a perceptual mimesis of consciousness which approximates the process of the sensations and cognitions of lived experience.

Likewise, Damasio’s discovery about how the body-loop functions in the normal mind was that the feelings generated by the body are an essential part of rational thought. Rationality requires feeling and feeling requires the body. So the body and the mind are actually indivisible. He asserts that we live inside this contradiction of anatomical reality: rationality produced from the flesh. Long before Damasio, Woolf wrote continually of mind depending upon flesh. For example, in “On Being Ill” (1930) Woolf observed that although

literature does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind; that the body is a sheet of glass through which the soul looks straight and clear... On the contrary the opposite is true. All day, all night the body intervenes; blunts or sharpens, colours or discolours, turns to wax in the warmth of June, hardens to tallow in the murk of February. The creature within can only gaze through the pane—smudged or rosy; it cannot separate off from the body like the sheath of a knife or the pod of a pea for a single instant. (4)

That we do not have a body but are a body is a fact of our existence she captured, as well as produced, which is one of the reasons her prose feels so alive. Feelings and thoughts are never immaterial: they are formed through the body. She begins *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) with the squeak of Rumpelmayer’s men taking the doors off the hinges, triggering in Clarissa the physical sensation of plunging into open air 30 years before when she burst open the French windows at Bourton, the memory of which feels like being flapped and kissed by the waves of the sea. Woolf presents physical sensations as vehicle for knowledge, undercutting the presumed opposition between reason and emotion. And emotions are suffused with highly discriminating responses to what is of value to each character. The following is Clarissa Dalloway’s famous “feeling of knowing” from *Mrs Dalloway*: “Only for a moment; but it was enough. It was a sudden revelation, a tinge like a blush which one tried to check and then, as it spread, one yielded to its expansion, and rushed to the farthest verge and there quivered and felt the world come closer, swollen with astonishing significance, some pressure of rapture, which split its thin skin and gushed and poured with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores. Then, for that moment, she had an illumination; a match burning in a crocus; an inner meaning almost expressed... the moment” (MD 24). What may seem like contradictory cognitive processes—thinking and feeling—in the conceptual scenography of the “two cultures” are reshaped into a continuum of “feeling of knowing” in Woolf, as they are in the experiments of Damasio.

The novel ends with Clarissa, whose talent is “knowing people by instinct,” feeling very much like Septimus, feeling that she knows him, not through various facts but through her bodily responses to those facts: “Always her body went through it, when she was told, first, suddenly” (*MD* 133). Septimus, who cannot translate his sensations into emotions—who cannot feel—cannot think rationally either.

But the feeling of knowing does not lead to complete knowledge between the characters in *Mrs Dalloway* (nor does it in the experiments of Damasio). Clarissa’s roman-ticized interpretation of Septimus’s death as a glorious act of defiance is a reconstruction which bears little relation to reality: after all, Septimus wanted to live. In this sense, the novel confirms the radically subjective nature of our perceptions. But even as the question of knowledge between the characters is dealt with profound skepticism, Woolf offers one of the most successful answers to the W.I.L. question. By incorporating feeling into epistemology, Woolf guides the reader’s mind through the structure of the somatic responses that gave rise to the thoughts of the characters; this in turn creates “as-if” responses in the reader as to how another mind thinks, how another body feels.

V.

Recent neurobiological breakthroughs have provided us with a solid framework for understanding the workings of the phenomenology of consciousness of an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. And while there are serious unresolved issues involved in bringing the concepts and methods of one discipline—whose difference is chasmic—into a working relation with the concepts and methods of another, on the “feeling of knowing,” at least, accounts of consciousness have converged across the divide promising a new ground, even if they were developed on either side of the two cultures.

Works Cited

- Cunningham, Valentine. “Figuring Out.” *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature*. Eds. J. Schlaeger and G. Stedman. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2008. 95-112.
- Damasio, Antonio. *Descartes Error*. New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1994. 227.
- . *The Feeling of What Happens: Body, Emotion and the Making of Consciousness*. London: Heinemann, 1999.
- . “The Person Within.” *Nature* 423 (May 2003).
- Dickens, Charles. *Hard Times*. 1854. London: Methuen, 1987.
- Jackson, Tony E. “Issues and Problems in the Blending of Cognitive Science, Evolutionary Psychology, and Literary Study.” *Poetics Today* 23:1 (2002). 161-179.
- Lodge, David. *Consciousness and the Novel: Collected Essays*. London: Secker and Warburg, 2002. Nagel, Thomas. “What Is It Like to be a Bat?” *Philosophical Review* 83 (1974).
- Nussbaum, Martha. “The Window: Knowledge of Other Minds in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*.” *New Literary History* 26 (1995). 731-753.
- Pinker, Steven. *How the Mind Works*. New York: Norton, 1997. 162-178.
- . *The Blank Slate*. London: Penguin, 2002.
- . “Toward a Consilient Study of Literature.” *Philosophy and Literature* 31:1 (April 2007).
- Waugh, Patricia. “Revising the Two Cultures Debate.” *The Arts and Science of Criticism*. Eds. P. Waugh and D. Fuller. Oxford: OUP, 1999.
- Woolf, Virginia. *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*. 6 vols. Ed. Andrew McNeillie (vols. 1-4) and Stuart N. Clarke (vols. 5-6). London: The Hogarth Press, 1986-2011.
- . *To the Lighthouse*. 1927. London: Penguin, 1992.
- . *On Being Ill*. 1930. MA: Paris Press, 2002.
- . *Mrs Dalloway*. 1925. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Edition, 2003.