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Lightly Swimming

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Essays on consciousness and the contents of consciousness are generally written in conventional prose. Academics and scholars tend to write that way and in the present tense or the past tense and sometimes in subtle mixes of tenses. Literary styles may also be appropriate to such writings and consciousness writing (in literary fiction) seems both relevant and appropriate. The two principal forms and techniques of consciousness writing are interior monologue and free indirect style. Interior monologue represents the thoughts of a character as if narrated by a character as “I.” In free indirect style the thoughts of a character are represented as reported speech in the third person, past tense (after Lodge, 1992). An author may use one or both forms, and combinations of the forms together with conventional styles of narration. William James’s “stream of consciousness” is implied in this essay.

Writers write, many will insist, because they cannot help themselves. At Sounion, a bus ride from Athens, there are the remains of a column, lapped by the ocean, and chiselled darkly into the marble is the inelegant but artistic word BYRON. Paul Auster (1992) begins an essay (“Native Son”) with these words:

America swallows up its poets, hides them away, forgets them. Except for the few who become famous (often those of meagre talent), the poet with no axe to grind or vogue to follow can expect little but neglect—or, at best, the admiration of his peers. No one is to blame for this. We are simply too vast, too chaotic to notice everything that passes before our eyes. Much of the finest poetry written today is published by small presses and seen by no more than a few hundred readers. (p. 140)

Auster might as easily have written “writers” for “poets” because writings are works of art—like poems and pictures and sculptures and music and even graffiti. Often, writings are the extended consequences of solitary ideas alighting as if from nowhere—or are the results of intentional reasoning—and they may be inspired by contrary or paradoxical notions: a quirky sentence in a text, a particular television news item, or an overheard fragmented conversation on a busy side-

walk. Sometimes complete sentences arise innocently from the writer’s busy brain and whirl about demandingly until the scribe scribbles them determinedly on something. Frequently, wordless images will appear in the picture-show theatre of the mind—and be so compelling as to cause the writer to attempt their capture, to fix them with those symbols that we call words. Some of the fleeting amalgams of images and words rushing by in the “stream of consciousness” become rounded up and written down, and sometimes, if the writer is good enough, a *reader* of those written words will also be able to see something of the imagery that came first into the mind of the journeyman writer. Writers want that to happen, especially the fiction writers and the poets; they want the *reader* to see the images that the writer’s words may trigger or engender or inspire: whether or not the idea is fully in their awareness, the writers want to share contents of consciousness with readers.

Shapiro, Grace, and Gross (2002), in discussing transpersonal psychology—a major field in the transpersonal domain—showed that the notion of “consciousness” is important to scholars and researchers. Defining consciousness has always been a huge difficulty for all who ponder the mystery. It was William James (1890/1950) who thought about and wrote about consciousness as a “stream” and the

notion has long been associated, too, with a particular genre: consciousness writing. Lodge (1992) offers this explanation:

The stream of consciousness," was a phrase coined by William James, psychologist brother of the novelist, Henry, to characterise 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, noted for its interiorised 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 some relief from the daunting hypothesis by offering us imaginative access to the lives of other human beings, even if they are fictions. (p. 42)

Because researchers and scholars exploring that which is transpersonal are concerned with consciousness and with the contents of consciousness, there may be good reasons for them to make some explorations via so-called consciousness writing. While the form and process are best known in literary fiction, they also lend themselves to essays that appear as "subjective" or biographical. Whatever writers use to construct language—the syntax or grammar, all of the lexical and rhetorical tools in their armamentarium—they employ one style or another, including mixes of styles. Style may not seem everything to a writer but without a defined or a developing style the writer may experience

being at sea in a tumult of words as symbols in which there is little sense of control or discipline. A variety of styles will always be available to writers. When the writer gets the syntax right and employs a relevant and appropriate style, meaning and often accompanying imagery will jitter into the awareness of the reader and may even enable the reader to enjoy a range of experiences: aesthetic ones, happy and sad and fearful and excited feelings, and the reader may become aware of profound feelings that move him or her to tears, thanks to the writer having written particular arrangements of words. For the writer, the task, magically, is to organize words in ways such that these diverse symbols, these many disparate parts comprising the writing, become not only an emerging whole, but may seem ultimately to the reader to also be a whole which is much more than the sum of the word parts when even some of the those words seem almost to *be* that which they describe.

An Illustration of Consciousness Writing

He knew he would remember much because the Bellinger flowing by was means enough, at least for him. Once in it the flow would open lines to memory and real connections to imagination. The river was like that. Perhaps it was like that for everybody who got into the flow or perhaps it happened only in this river and only on hot days. He would keep it in mind.

Over the salad-green lawn he went, carefully watching for any lone snake in the still-damp grass where it remained shady. Snaky days became warm early and hot in no time. Although it was barely mid-morning when he stepped down to the grey metalled road the heat smote him in the face heavily. It reminded him of being hit by a fist inside a pillow glove. Like that, he thought, gasping *ah!*

For him memory was as odd a thing as could be imagined. It was also sometimes certain and sure and at other times memory faltered, usually in the short term, but sometimes the old images looked a bit ragged around the edges too. Despite age and accompanying occasional confusions most of his memory was instantly available, or so he thought, and it was also as clear as crystal—as shining, as sparkling as flickers of early morning sunlight twinkling downstream on the dark surface of the river. He supposed that the flickering of light was universal and that it would probably be a reasonable sort of general description of the universe. How could that be explained to some-

body from a different universe? “We have light here: it shines and beams and glows and illuminates and flickers. Is it like that where you come from?” What would the other being say—assuming that were possible? Probably: “Yep, we’ve got that stuff too.” Something like that, he supposed. Humans seemed always so anthropocentric and that kind of thing seemed absolutely like a human signature, a *Homo sapiens* footprint in the cosmos. Could the other guys not be anthropocentric also? Perhaps they could be in their own particular ways.

The heat was a stifling blanket descending—and it kept coming down. He had had to interrupt his thinking because extreme heat made him concerned about animals trying to survive extreme weather. At least there was no desert here. Here there was abundant growth and rich forests. There were subtropical rain-forest creeks. There was everything that most creatures needed—but now global weather was extreme and here the heat was stifling. There were billions of microbes in the baking soil. There were infrequently seen birds trying to survive. Brush turkeys continued to stalk his garden like black peacocks. Wallabies still bounded across the early morning lawns. They had that thick fur though. Night and dawn were better for them. Bandicoots liked the night and the fruit bats always worked in the cool dark. In September the damp air flashed greenly with fireflies. That green glowing seemed hot to his mind. He was projecting his own concerns onto creatures more sensibly adapted than he was. He would have to be more aware about that, more knowing.

He went slowly over the timber bridge, by his reckoning feeling about 150 years old and wilting, then he carefully stepped down to the water on the other side of the river, shedding years. He again wondered about snakes in places various—they could appear suddenly, even on a reasonably clear path at any time of the day or night and in all kinds of weather. Strangely, and although predicting the manifestations of snakes, he knew, would never be a science, exact or otherwise, there certainly were (in his experience, anyway) days that were undoubtedly snaky. On a snaky day there would be early heat in the air, usually dry heat, but not invariably. He would walk extremely carefully on those days, obsessively so, and use his eyes excessively—and sometimes he’d have been correct: there would have been a snake and he’d have avoided it. The snake usually reacted in much the same way. Neither of them

had been looking for trouble. There was that time in far-off Durban when he damned near shot himself coming out the back door to find the black mamba—because the mechanism was faulty and the shotgun discharged as he closed the breech. Damn, that was close. What was it old Daniel Defoe wrote long ago: “the good die early, and the bad die late”? He knew he wasn’t entirely bad or completely good but somewhere in between as most people surely were and he knew that he was continuing to amass experiences of many kinds. What could one do with amassed experiences all so varied, if not use them—but how *best* to use them if they were to be used at all? That was the question. Well then—there were various answers to that but he knew exactly which one he invariably wanted to employ because it was obvious, easy and wonderfully compelling: to write from one’s experience, ones *experiences*, rather. Indeed, yes—and not forgetting to do it creatively. There were probably many other answers to the question, but the writing one worked for him.

It was still warm, the river, from yesterday’s comfortable run down the valley although at first it seemed cool on his skin and then in no time at all it was acceptably cooling and soothing because one’s whole entire body would be in it, moving, and the water moving too, against one or with one if one—who is this silly *one*? Never mind that for now. There were conventions in all things. There had been only storm rains to keep it moving moderately and the fresh running through the black rock rapids bubbled brightly and went rushing away to the dark of the forest downstream. The mainstream flow swirling through the rocks looked full and felt good once he got close to it and could feel its swirl against his legs. More years fell from him and seemed swept away flowingly, like flowers cast memorially. The lower the river was the slower it travelled and the more it was warmed on its passage. Today the fresh was pointing to the left, to port as you might say, pushed that way by the channelling mainstream that came out angled in a metre-deep trench through the bedrock. On days when the river got up higher the fresh was conducted across to starboard, to the right, and sparkled a lot more—more widely, more expansively, the front of it waving from side to side like a big questing creature. And in the early morning it was also a beautiful white from the rapids.

He would step in from the sloping gravelled bank and wade so far until the mainstream pushed him out

of control and then he might dive, barely a teenager again, eyes open to see the coloured sand and gravel made more clear by rounded pieces of singular white quartz—or he would breast it in the strong morning sunlight feeling the caressing cool as it swept up his protective old T-shirt ballooning it for moments while the swirl tried to shove his hat off. He always wore a hat and T-shirt and old tennis shoes as well as a fancy pair of black trunks he once bought for a float in the Dead Sea. There was nothing dead about this river: it was full of life—even the exposed bedrock pieces that made the rapids had small creatures ambling about on them. Dressing up to have a swim always made sense in New South Wales. There was the roasting sun and there were spiky creatures with spines that broke off in your foot. He often thought the same thing repeatedly: the river is more than its surface, moving. This marvellous live thing has length and width and depth. It was necessary to be *in* it, it was essential to penetrate that surface to experience it properly. There were a few magic places in the windowed house where if he stood, barely breathing, and squinted a bit, he could just glimpse the upriver bend beyond the bridge, see also the bridge in front of him, see the pool as well, and, straining his eyes to the right, see the green top of it rolling down to the next bend through the forest. He was surely the only human standing in one of those cosmic places where so much of the river could be seen in one breadth of seeing. It was quite the same, he decided, as having divine powers. Why else had seeing been bestowed upon us? –But that was from up there in the house. Once you were *in* it the experiencing was penetratingly different.

In the late summer days of humid February and contained by a few airy metres above the water there were white butterflies that moved slowly, bobbing gracefully, even languidly, and they sometimes came lower toward the surface but never touched, never landed and there were whirring dragonflies, heads down like dipping helicopters, always really close to the water, seeming to touch it every so often and they all flew about like that, whenever he glanced at the water, all through the day. Although they all moved endlessly and were busily alive they also all seemed movingly embedded in the supporting air. The butterflies reminded him of other ones, yellow, so much quicker, that bounced, bobbed and weaved for most of the late summer days up there over his garden, stationed in different, waterless air and they in turn

reminded him of the Welcome Swallows cutting through their other pockets of air down at Richardson's, the next bridge along the road. The swallows seemed to be feeding on the wing but there was surely some free time too, some need for flighted games perhaps, an ego-like thing that compelled flying displays—even under the bridge they swooped and then dashed straight up before breaking away like Air Force acrobatic teams. The yellow garden butterflies bobbed differently and so surprisingly fast, changing direction, seldom solo and almost always there were two, three or four of them—and sometimes more than that. At such frantic rates of climb and darting manoeuvre they were hardly feeding and what they seemed to be doing in their 10 to 20 metres of altitude and airspace—never higher, strangely—around the gardens was being intent on mating and maybe evading mating. Was that like flirting? They were really fast. Maybe the gardens were a sort of butterfly reserve or a trysting place, a pick-up joint for yellow butterflies. –And maybe the Welcome Swallows were mating too. Would they do that in winter, which was when he saw them being most active? He didn't think so. Were those yellow butterflies choosing to mate in the late summer, in the hot and humid February? He simply didn't know the answers. He had lived there for 20 years—longer than he had lived anywhere in the world—and although he had learned a few things in that time he really knew very little. In the house he sometimes reflected on a river-stone paperweight on his table when he paused in his writing and he would see laminations and striations and little pinprick holes and think “mudstone” or maybe “sandstone” and wonder why the original strata were not all parallel...and he would always enjoy the colour and the clean surface untarnished. How had it come to be? For all his varied experience he knew how little he really knew about anything but he daily thanked God that he was able to see the world.

The butterflies and the remembered swallows also reminded him of the big pool next to “Jasmine” below Richardson's where several hundred years ago, it seemed, he and the Gestalt group always swam and after the last session of the day there were often one or two who did some “river-work” there...those who were “blocked” or stuck in “resistance” and they were invited to pose for themselves appropriate liberating questions then dive deep to the bottom and stay there till they had their answers and after a while they'd burst

up to the surface, gasping. Those were the days of express-like ways to super-quick awareness. How useful the wise river could be! River-work always succeeded, spectacularly.

There's the big pool here too, he kept thinking. We used to call it the Champagne Pool because there were bubbles in front of the rapids and you had only to dive under, eyes open, to have a champagne experience, tickled.

In the water swimming or floating in and out of sunlight and shadows—particularly in the changing lights of mid or late afternoon—he sometimes imagined himself upstairs in the house, writing and pausing between sentences and when pausing glancing out the window to see the white top of the water and lines of light across its surface, depending on the time of day. When he was in the river swimming he would sometimes look up to where his writing window was and even seem to see himself sitting there thoughtfully looking out and down to the water—even imagining then that he could also see himself down there in the river as well. He knew too that being too free with his well-connected imagination was wildly narcissistic but he ignored that because he knew that in the years of being alive—butterfly, bird, water dragon, man—the contents of all lives lived were also lenses, windows on the world, the universe, everything. One had to be not only there, but fully present too. The imagination was not something to be stifled, or even attenuated. It had always made sense to use what could be used. It had always seemed almost a duty.

If he timed his river visits well he sometimes had the place almost to himself. He allowed his “own” high river banks to remain well covered in everything growth-full that might deter crazed fishermen from plunging along them or up and down them struggling with—snakes for example—or other unknown horrors. But that seldom worked well because the fishermen (one seldom saw a fisherwoman) would simply scramble over his stone river wall and invade his garden—over the gravity wall he had intended as a stone fence, coming in determinedly from the road and then marching with profane aplomb through his private paradise. Damn—the nerve of some people! “The River” was popular with visitors, naturally, who often turned up in droves (it was everybody's river—nobody had personal swimming rights except all the creatures of the natural world who lived in it, on it, over it), especially in the summer holidays.

Thus, having exclusive use of the river—and on a hot Saturday afternoon—was a surprise to him. Where were they all and was there something demanding (tennis perhaps) on TV to have kept them away? For then he could do exhibitionistic laps and he could swim in place at the edge of the mainstream, his face in the water, his soaked hat keeping the sun off his head, seeing down to the bottom of the flow where there were snags and sunken logs in the gravel, sometimes the flash of a small fish going by. When he floated he sometimes had the company of little fish that flopped about on the mainstream surface, always the mainstream rather than the smaller flows burbling through the rapids running right across the river and curiously the bright silver flashing of the fish reminded him of his cabin boy days on the old *Benclough*—and the time when she was hove to on a still Caribbean, the south part of it, near Venezuela and because it was deep there and the boy was fascinated—more than fascinated: in thrall, to and by the deep ocean—he begged some empty flat cigarette tins from the crew, opened them out, skipped some over the rails into the sunlight to see them flutter down to the fearsome dark, reflecting the sun briefly, winking then dwindling to the black abyss—yet here the deepest pools were only three metres or so except there by the rapids (the stepping-stone rapids also much used by hopelessly addicted fishermen who absolutely had to hop over and across if they could without slipping and falling or hooking themselves in one of his riverside trees because they always paused and perched and tried, unbalanced, to cast a lure) and just below the same rapids, if it were quiet enough and not too many people going by in cars or walking he could prop himself on part of the bedrock right in front of the rapids and hang out there getting buffeted and patted and massaged on the back because he had to face downstream bracing himself, his feet up against another big broken part of the bedrock so he wouldn't be swept away. Then in the later afternoon with the light patterns changing constantly shade from the garden trees high up on the starboard bank and the big 80 metres eucalypts casting blurred shadows he could sink down a bit in the swirl of green water and see what life there was in that narrow zone 200- or 300-millimetres above the surface (the yellow butterflies had more degrees of freedom): there were the dragonflies and other kinds of fly that reminded him of his trout fishing days—fly fishing in the Snowy, all over New South Wales and

before that in Africa. Exciting it all was but deadly for the fish—and that was why he stopped fishing altogether. In that narrow band of air he could see there was a wonderful variety of winged small life moving constantly, drawn to the moving water, flitting in and out of the dappled light.

There was something moving on him, on his arm. He bent his head solemnly, straining to see politely and without fuss, without making too great a demand on focus. Now his chin rested on the top of his T-shirt where squinting he could also see part of the faded green design where the words “Gestalt Training Centre, Wollongong” remained a solemn, teasing and faded emblem. Somehow a tiny green spider had manifested on his left forearm, plodding through and across and along his curved hairs, seemingly unconcerned and perhaps blown down from the banks or possibly even brought to this unexplained and surprising meeting, midstream, an unexpected traveller along what must have been an oceanic river, and so feeling compassion and care flow through him he floated away considerately to the port-side bank, arm up dry to the dry shore and let him—or possibly her—off where the wee beastie might be safer, perhaps—although in this wild world who could say if the spider might have been happier left alone? He remembered that days ago in midday heat he had met a snake swimming toward him—not that he knew what it was until close because there was only this odd little upstart head like a periscope that made him veer to starboard to find out and of course it was a black snake—gasp—but only a metre or so long so hardly a monster yet and it seemed that the snake had much the same idea because of its breaking away to starboard too and so it came for a closer look and they each in their own odd ways checked each other out, in passing (in the man’s mind, at least) and then resumed their courses and swam on. Mutual curiosity. Perhaps that was how one should exchange courtesies with snakes, both on land and in rivers: simply smile and nod politely and keep going (although *that* water-borne snake had not smiled). Meetings with snakes were otherwise fraught, he mused in the embracing water. For really, there had been no problems at all with the young black snake—it seemed almost a congenial encounter. Four metres of thick red-bellied black snake in the water—that would have been somewhat different. Up above on the river-side edge of his lawn where he frequently sat there was very often a single water dragon who began the season

a surprising orange and had only two or three bars of it left but in the early days of spring and summer when the stinging flies were hunting tasty humans, this little dragon became almost tame, using the man’s boot as a hunting perch. He sometimes fed a kill to the dragon and chatted a bit, casually swinging his leg, the dragon looking up at him, unblinking, while boot riding. The dragon was most friendly, he thought. He knew that reptiles weren’t invariably bad—even the younger goannas (who ate big snakes for breakfast) were decent enough not to single him out for a snack. Respect, the man thought guardedly, (and always keeping a sensibly safe distance), respect was the key.

Now in the late afternoon and during the third—or was it the fourth—swim of the day with the surface water quite warm and the lower levels of the river deliciously cool and still nobody—amazingly—arriving to join him the sun had turned widely and now was casting its late afternoon light through the old trees high on the crest of the hill downstream and he remembered that of course it was the end of February and the light at that time of year was always wondrous because when the late sun glowed reflectively on the downstream surface the soft colours made the river’s surface in long stretches seem like beaten gold, like gold leaf with some soft green there too. What might that look like from beneath the surface, eyes open, looking to heaven? Drunk with words he could see that the lights of the late afternoons of late Februaries were seemingly beyond words.

He swam again through the swirling fresh, remembering the little spider now further removed in its great travels, and from the corner of his eye, splashing through the surface he saw in clear light a bigger perch jump, not once, but some five or six times, high like a trout and coming upstream toward him but on the far side of the river in the sunlight and he thought of seeing salmon running in the bigger rivers and greater torrents of Vancouver Island, long ago, and trout in the Cowichan, in the Princes Pool downstream from the cabin in the woods long ago, and then he made a slow breast-stroking swim toward the shadowing rapids and changed halfway to the old side-stroke that his father used when they all went swimming in the Cowichan in the mid-’30s and by 1937, when swimming too in the Blyde, high in the Transvaal, long ago also, and then he got to the rapids again and was about to perch himself there once more for the cool refreshing feelings offered by the familiar river of

the '80s and '90s and the new century present and so without realizing it at first he felt the rapid's effervescence running giddily up his legs, the lighted bubbles at the head of the pool by the rapids that so irresistibly enabled he and Olejay to call that part of the river the Champagne Pool, so then he stopped, remembering images, and then turned around carefully again, remembering his way anew into that layered ambient place that seemed less well remembered a mere 20 years before, that lively zone of filled space now unmistakably visible immediately over the water in '04, immersed in the luminance of it, the luminosity of whirring life, the greens of designer bodies, the translucent blues of wings, the congregation of tiny creatures blurring without collisions, the multi engagements of the aerial micro-world there in the river's aura—something he was a part of and also in—because when he used his eyes gratefully he saw that he was seeing a divine world transparent, a filled thin space he could both see and also be part of seeing into and through life that was only as high as his head in the water in that long lighted place like a glowing portal that was simply a living layer of the earth and an ambient window too, that was filled with flying life flying in and out and along and through a long lens of afternoon air just above the surface of the river on a late sunny afternoon in February and so he continued moving about in it instead of sitting and watching apart from it all because he knew he could never be separate from any of it and then he also knew that he knew much more because he could see he was lightly swimming in light—

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