The art of medicine

The novelist as voice hearer

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For the novelist David Mitchell, writing a novel is a kind of "controlled personality disorder...to make it work you have to concentrate on the voices in your head and get them talking to each other". We are all novelists, claimed the philosopher, Daniel Dennett, a swipe perhaps at Sigmund Freud's idea of the unconscious as inherently "poetic" but mainly alluding to the idea of the brain as a parallel processor, running off multiple "drafts" that shape us into the narrative selves we become. But most people aren't literally novelists. Summoning voices with such intensity, living in the head for years at a time, would for most of us disorder our personalities, to say the least. But novelists control absorption or creative dissociation. They harness the power of the inner voice to create imaginary characters whose thoughts and feelings entangle with those of real readers. The novelist plays with the distinction between reality and fantasy without inner voices becoming uncontrolled hallucination.

Might greater reflection on the voices of the novelistic process contribute to a richer understanding of auditory verbal hallucinations, or voice-hearing? The assumption that voice-hearing is inevitably a feature of psychiatric disorders, notably schizophrenia, is now changing; voice-hearing can be a feature of grief, spiritual insight, and voluntarily dissociated states such as meditation; it might follow traumatic events, disrupted processes of memory, abusive experiences, prolonged stress, or sensory deprivation. Persecutory voices might arise out of conditions of anxiety or hypervigilance or out of ruminative or obsessional thinking. During transitional life experiences, the inner dialogue orienting the self might break up into punitive or admonishing, as well as comforting and conciliatory voices. If voice-hearing arises in many modes and dimensions, then examination of these different experiences can enhance our understanding. Novels—fictional worlds built out of voices—have much to offer.

Mitchell's focus, unlike Dennett's, is on voices rather than narratives. Virginia Woolf too suggested that people are "mosaic" rather than monad: well before individuals begin to build an autobiographical self, they are able to model other minds in their own, to separate themselves as thinkers from what is being thought. So, as I write this essay: if I pause and turn my attention inwards, my thoughts may appear as a pale echo of my own voice, but "I" may seem unlocatable, oddly outside and inside at the same time. Whose is the voice "I" hear? Is it "me" or "mine", something not me, but that I own? If I listen too hard and for too long, I risk losing ownership of, let alone identity with, my voices; I may feel more like a ventriloquist's dummy than a self. Or I may retain ownership but lose agency, hearing "my" voice disconnected from me, expressing alien content that seems not my own. One's sense of self is evidently at times a precarious achievement.

Writing a novel is, in some ways, not simply losing control of one's voice, but also of a sense of the assumed relationship between oneself and one's voices. Samuel Beckett's oeuvre is a self-conscious performance of such perplexity, whether he creates characters out of voices that are his, or whether they, the voices, author him: "Who says this, saying it's me? ...It's the same old stranger as ever." For James Joyce's Leopold Bloom, too, he thinks how continuously we "walk through ourselves", encountering the voices of characters we've met, never quite knowing whose thoughts we're "chewing". Even getting lost in a novel, as readers, is to find ourselves decentred, hearing the voices of others and our own played back through the new and strange. Charles Dickens, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Joseph Conrad, Beckett, Woolf, Evelyn Waugh, Muriel Spark, J M Coetzee, Hilary Mantel, and many other novelists who have reported experiences that some might indiscriminately construe as voice-hearing, have reflected on how composition summons but facilitates control of voices that may express unacknowledged aspects of the self, expanding yet threatening to dissolve its boundaries.

Most documented of all is Woolf, whose letters, diaries, talks, memoirs, essays, and fiction offer a wealth of representations and reflections. In *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), Woolf fictionalised the psychotic voice-hearing that she herself associated with early experiences of violation and loss: childhood sexual abuse, patriarchal bullying, early deaths of parents and siblings. But she displaces her experience onto the war veteran, Septimus Smith, and sets the novel in 1922, the year of the publication of the British Government's first official report on "shell shock". Septimus's inability to communicate his memories and felt horror is compounded by the "violators of the soul", his term for his doctors, with their reductionist preoccupation with eating and rest for exhausted "nerves", their refusal to listen to his "message". The doctors don't listen to what the voices are trying to communicate, so Septimus kills himself. Woolf's own suicide in 1941 occurred when, convinced she could no longer write and therefore "communicate" her own message, she left a suicide note to her sister intimating that the voices had returned but, because no longer communicable, no longer within her control.

Woolf likened the precariousness of writing to madness, walking out exposed, without protection, onto an illuminated ledge, over a dark and unknown sea. But she also felt there was something "mystical" about her voices, bringing the possibility of a new interpretive frame, "a message", that might allow the recovery of meaning and an expanded feeling of integrity. When the self shatters and reason fathoms no simple or linear cause, turning voices into the characters of a world allows for externalisation and therefore control of intense but often unfelt emotions, whose acknowledgment

and expression open a path for their reintegration. Since the 19th century, fascination with dissociation, and the notion of an "intelligent unconscious" manifesting as a voice bearing truths that the self is unable to face, has provided an impetus for themes and formal motifs of fiction: from the materialisation of Jane Eyre's anger in the ravings of the mad Bertha Mason, to the birth of the double, the inner voice that is externalised in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

But novels are more than simply thematisations of voice-hearing experiences: their formal use of voice reminds us how our inner lives are also a performance of auto-ventriloquism. The "voices" we hear as our own in the flow of thought, of inner speech, are often internalisations of the dialogues through which we have become selves: the prohibitions, taboos, reproofs, encouragements, that set up a kind of diasporic babble within, a "Sunday park of contending orators" in T S Eliot's words. One of the first fictional characters in English was Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, a survivor, living alone for 27 years after the trauma of shipwreck. Like his author, Crusoe is saved by his ability to allow his inner voices to speak to each other. "Better than sociable", he describes his time on the island. Voices allow externalisation of emotion; imaginary friends, they provide Crusoe with "a great deal of comfort within". Only once does a voice bring terror: his parrot startling him out of sleep, mimicking his master's despairing cry, "Poor Robinson Crusoe". Why terror? It is his voice but now owned by another, an alien tormentor with its own agency liberated into the world.

However, the idea of *vox* or *vocare* that is invoked by Defoe implicitly incorporates the idea of to call or invoke: in its Latin etymology, voice is an invocation addressed to the other. What Defoe implies, and perhaps all novelists intuit, is the way that inner voices are always in some way poised to become characters, oriented as they are towards intentionality, response, and the attribution of agency. In building the disembodied vocal command or commentary into a "character", the novelist takes control of the processes of inner speech. Since the Greeks, the disembodied voice is understood to carry authority, to command obedience. Pythagoras's followers, the Acousmatics, were hidden behind a wall and allowed only to hear their master's disembodied voice. So Pythagoras recognised the uncanny fascination of the voice that can be heard but not seen or located. Only recently, however, has it been professionally acknowledged that encouraging voice hearers to suppress or ignore their voices can be counter-productive; that anti-psychotics are a blunt instrument in controlling voices. It can, therefore, be instructive to reflect on how novelists build their voices into characters to both control them and build a sense of connective intimacy with readers. Perhaps helping distressed voice hearers to build voices into characters might help to mitigate the uncanny power of the disembodied voice to subvert the self's sense of its own agency.

Portrait of Virginia Woolf, 1927 (photo)/Private Collection/Prismatic Pictures/Bridgeman Images

Virginia Woolf (photograph dated 1927)

Just as novels offer insights into voices, so do some theories of the novel concerned to understand fictional "voice". It was after reading Dostoevsky that Mikhail Bakhtin developed his concept of "double voicing", in which the author works another voice into a discourse, one that maintains its own intentions and position in the world. In fiction, he argued, a ghostly trace of another is heard through every voice: through tone, mimicry, and stylistic nuance. As Woolf depicts Mrs Ramsay's flow of inner speech in *To the Lighthouse*, for example, she is "instantly annoyed" by an alien voice calling out "we are in the hands of the Lord". "Who had said it?" the text asks. Does the alien voice of Victorian religiosity simply pop up in her thoughts, or does she speak it aloud? It is impossible to know: fiction reminds us how the self is interwoven with the world. Inner and outer flow across the membrane of the self. Like Bakhtin, Woolf's fascination with the possibility that novels might illuminate the nature of inner voices began with her reading of Dostoevsky. She knew that in life, as in fiction, voices influence us in varied ways. They might be tenants or strangers to whom one extends hospitality, setting them talking to each other; or they might be guests who refuse to leave, who take over and threaten the host. Novels transport the self beyond its safely policed boundaries, exposing the precarious harmony that is the polyphony of consciousness. They remind us, as Clarissa Dalloway thinks to herself, that to live, even for a moment, is dangerous.

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Further reading

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I am Co-Investigator, Hearing the Voice project.