THE ENGLISH NOVEL: INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES

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Mrs Dalloway II: Theme, Form & Style

Hello learners, welcome back to this NPTEL course on "The English novel Interdisciplinary Approaches". I will continue our discussion of Virginia Woolf, and in particular we will move closer to appreciating the power and complexity and the great emotional core of the novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. In the previous lecture, I gave a brief introduction to the pandemic and how it shaped both personal as well as intellectually the kind of writing that Woolf was doing and how the experience of contracting the flu virus was not just a part of Virginia Woolf's medical history, but it actually shaped her as a writer and as an artist.

I ended by thinking a little bit about Virginia Woolf's reflection on the state of being ill, and what kind of implications, intellectual as well as narrative, that experience of being ill can have for the production, composition as well as the appreciation of modern literature. And we ended with this very despairing note in which Virginia Woolf writes that only the recumbent knows what is truly powerful about nature, that nature is both heartless and comforting. It was this combination of finding nature heartless and finding this heartlessness to be a source of comfort that Virginia Woolf associates as the key intellectual enrichment that the experience of being ill can bring to the reading and writing of literature.

While we read the following words and sentences and passages from Mrs. Dalloway, I will try and carry forward these thoughts on the importance and the use of the experience of being ill for literature, which Virginia Woolf has delineated in her essay *On Being Ill.* Chiefly, while we read these following sentences, we will try and remember Virginia Woolf's key points about why it is so difficult to write a literature of illness, and in particular, her point about the poverty of language. If you remember, Woolf had described that we don't have a great substantial or honest or representative body of writing about illness because language itself fails when we call upon it to describe the experience of illness. Everyone's experience of being ill is different. Therefore, we cannot describe illness

in a way that others would find true or relevant or representative of their experience of being ill. This is the challenge that Virginia Woolf described as something that faces all writers. And this is a challenge that we can see Virginia Woolf sets before herself as she writes this novel, Mrs. Dalloway. And we will find out how well and how superbly or not Virginia Woolf herself manages to surmount this great and in many ways impossible challenge that a novelist can set for themselves.

Okay, with these words, let us begin reading the first words of the novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. Virginia Woolf writes, and I quote,

> Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself. For Lucy had her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges. Rumpelmayer's men were coming. And, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning- fresh as if issued to children on a beach.

We stop there because there is a period mark. At this point, the narrator, almost out of a sense of comfort and out of a desire to care for the reader, offers this period mark as a way to take a break. Because after this point, there will be very few of these periods, which will mean that readers will have to keep up with the narrator who goes at a not less than breakneck pace. And one result of that pace is that it makes, it adds a degree of breathlessness to the experience of reading the novel. I will try and convey a sense of that breathlessness and we will reflect on how that sense of being breathless or being out of breath or not being able to breathe as correctly or as fully as one would if one were in the pink of health is actually not very unconscious, but actually a very deeply considered reflection of the kinds of physical ailments that most people were experiencing as a result of the influenza pandemic. But before I get ahead of myself, I want to briefly reflect on the opening sentences.

So, we learn that Mrs. Dalloway is a person and it seems that she has taken a decision. She has decided to buy the flowers herself. Why would she do that? Why would she need flowers and why would she decide to buy them herself? It seems on one hand like a very unimportant, very trivial decision. It is something that people think when they go about their daily lives, and it is not something that appears to merit a great deal of intellectual or moral reflection, and yet, this is how the novel begins. It's a very short but very declarative sentence. Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself. We get a period at the end of this thought and we also get a line break.

So, that is all in the first paragraph. This is a unit of thought with which the novel allows us readers to begin entering this world in which Mrs. Dalloway exists. So, why would she need flowers and why would she get them herself? The next sentence gives us clues.

> For Lucy had her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges. Rumpelmeyer's men were coming and etc., etc., etc. And then thought Larissa Dalloway, what a morning. Fresh as if issued to children on a beach. So, on one hand, we know that the person who would normally have gone to buy flowers is busy with some other work. What is that work? That work is to oversee some kind of housekeeping. Apparently, some carpenters are about to come. They are about to take the doors off their hinges, probably to clean them or to replace them or to polish them or do something.

So, we get a sense that Mrs. Dalloway is hosting some sort of a social event at her home. And in order to prepare for this social event, she will bring fresh flowers and put them at some point in her house. But the flowers are just one part of the event. We see the extent of the effort that's being undertaken, the amount of housekeeping that's being done to prepare for this evening, when we learn that the doors are being removed in order to be cleaned or otherwise spruced up for this event. So, one person is busy and Mrs. Dalloway thinks she can save some time or help her out by doing this herself. Further, she also has another motive, less utilitarian, more psychological, which is that it's a beautiful morning. She wants to go out and experience walking and seeing the world on this beautiful day. So, this is what we know so far, and then let us continue reading. More thoughts about the morning itself. And now we see Mrs. Dalloway's thoughts:

> What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her when, with the little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Burton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this, of course, the air was in the early morning, like the flap of a wave, the kiss of a wave, chill and sharp, and yet, for a girl of eighteen, as she then was, solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen.

And this goes on, but I've chosen to pause there, even though there is no period mark to indicate that I can pause. So, you can get a sense of how the prose begins to accelerate and the prose begins to move at a much higher pace. And we know that because instead of periods, we see a lot of commas and we will also begin to see a lot of semicolons.

So, the narrator demands that readers keep up and we do that to the best extent possible. But let's reflect on why Mrs. Dalloway finds this morning to be beautiful or what exactly she finds so energizing about this morning. It is not just that it is clear and sunny, although we can imagine that being clear, that is cloudless, and the sun being out have a great deal to do with the pleasant qualities of this day. But there's something more. It reminds her of her childhood.

Or if not childhood, it reminds her of something that had happened when she was a different person. It reminds her of the past. And with that memory of the past comes a sense of the future as well. If you read these sentences carefully, from reflecting on how nice the morning is when she opens the windows, Clarissa, Mrs. Dalloway begins to think of the past. She writes, "How fresh, how calm, stiller than this, of course, the air was in the early morning". So, she's remembering an earlier part of the day, and while she's remembering that earlier part of the day, we see that she's also remembering something else. After that semicolon, we see, like the flap of a wave, the kiss of a wave, chill and sharp, and yet. For a girl of eighteen as she then was, solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen".

So, a lot of things are combined into this one very short sequence of phrases. As Clarissa Dalloway opens the window and decides to buy the flowers, she remembers another morning when she had felt a sense of excitement at seeing open, clear skies, sunshine, but that sense of excitement and positivity and hope was tinged with a degree of disquiet, was tinged with a degree of foreboding, was tinged with the sense that everything that appears happy and beautiful and bright and clear will soon be clouded over with something which might be the very opposite of what one appears to feel right now.

That is, everything happy and clear will be clouded by something dark, something awful. 'Awful' is the word Clarissa remembers feeling when she was a girl of 18 and she had experienced something very calming, but yet there was in that sense of calm, there was the seed of a great tragedy. This is exactly what happens this morning. Let us go further.

> Looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling, standing and looking until Peter Walsh said, musing among the vegetables- was that it? I prefer men to cauliflowers- was that it? He must have said it at breakfast one morning when she had gone on to the terrace- Peter Walsh.

Now, the memory of the past brings with it the memory of another person named Peter Walsh. It seems Clarissa and Dalloway were both young and they had experienced

something together. Seems like they were at a place which is on the beach because we see repeated mentions of a wave the flap of a wave, the kiss of a wave. So, it seems that they were on some kind of a vacation, and he said something, that is, Peter said something. Clarissa is not sure exactly what he said, or even if it was, he who said it. But at this point, it is those words that come to her. "Musing among the vegetables, I prefer men to cauliflowers".

Was that it? So, it is the fragmentary nature, it is the uncertainty, which is in fact the proof that the memory and the feeling it evokes are powerful and true. Uncertainty is usually associated with a sense of lack of, with a kind of lack, that if we are uncertain about something, then maybe it did not happen. But here we see the exact opposite. It is the uncertainty of being able to remember the words correctly, which in fact demonstrates to Woolf's readers that this memory that Clarissa is remembering is in fact, true, that she may not remember the details of what happened, but she is remembering very accurately the feeling that those events had had invoked. And those feelings animate her this morning again. And those feelings remind her of Peter Walsh. She goes on. He would be back from India one of these days, June or July, she forgot which, but his letters were awfully dull.

It was his sayings one remembered, his eyes, his pocket-knife, his smile, his grumpiness, and when millions of things had utterly vanished, how strange it was, a few sayings like this about cabbages. So, we get a sense that between the time when she remembered that there was a sense of something awful in the sense of calm, when she remembers admiring the comforting lapping and the kissing of the waves, which she associates with Peter Walsh saying something very unremarkable, but very strange and therefore very memorable about cabbages. Between this cabbage's remark and this morning, when she remembers that remark, a lot of things have happened. Millions of things had utterly vanished. Millions of things, a lot of different things had utterly vanished.

So, we get a sense that there was a great deal of hope that this relationship had evoked, a hope for other things to emerge, to unfold. Maybe the relationship hadn't gone quite as well or in the way that they had expected it to and this has a great deal of power to shape Clarissa's thoughts today. And yet, despite this power, despite the regret at things not having gone as the way they might have. She remembers his comment about cabbages. It is the detail of this cabbages remark and it is the texture of memory that stays with Clarissa and not so much the theoretical or the more intellectual fact of what might have been and what has not come to pass. After this memory, we return to the present when we are told what Clarissa is doing. Woolf writes, and I quote,

> She stiffened a little on the curb, waiting for D'Artagnan's van to pass. A charming woman, Scrope Purvis thought her (knowing her as one does know people who live next door to one in Westminster); a touch of the bird about her, of the jay, blue-green, light, vivacious, though she was over fifty, and grown very white since her illness. There she perched, never seeing him, waiting to cross, very upright.

So, we see, we get a sense of where these events are unfolding. We get names, Westminster. The word Westminster allows us to situate what we've read so far on a particular place, on a particular point on the planet and Westminster is the seed of political power in England. So, in terms of a colonial history of the world, this is the centre of colonial power. Clarissa is a resident, this person who lives in Westminster. Westminster is close, is where the British Parliament exists. It is the primary borough of London. It is where the institution and the power of Englishness and the English nation as a political, financial, cultural and literary force begins its existence.

So, Clarissa Dalloway is embedded in the seat of English institutional power in one sense, in a theoretical sense. If one looks only at the facts, this is where Clarissa is. This is where we see her. On the other hand, we also see that the fact of Westminster, the fact of British Parliament, all this information about the history and the geography and the fact of where England was and what England had become in the geopolitics of the world, all of this information is not more important or is at least as important as the psychological impact that living and breathing in that space has on Clarissa's mind. And one manifestation of that psychological impact is the way Clarissa stiffens on the curb, waiting for D'Artagnan's van to pass, and she's aware of how her neighbour, Scrope Purvis knows who she is and she is even able to speculate what he is thinking about her. And this person is thinking of her like a bird. And why this person thinks of the bird as a blue jay? Because Clarissa was over 50. She had grown very white since her illness, and she perched. There's a degree of grace, even though there is a great deal of vulnerability and there is a great deal of mortality to this figure. And then Clarissa notes further, and I read from Woolf's words.

> For having lived in Westminster how many years now? over 20 - one feels, even in the midst of the traffic, or waking at night, Clarissa was positive, a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause, a suspense (but that might be her heart, affected, they said, by influenza) before Big Ben strikes. There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. Such fools we are, she thought, crossing Victoria Street.

A lot happens in this passage. Living in Westminster, Clarissa acknowledges that it's a great privilege to be able to live in such comfort. And yet there is something very particularly disconcerting, something that throws off, something very disorienting about this privileged life. What is it? A particular hush or solemnity, an indescribable pause or suspense before Big Ben strikes. So, Big Ben is a clock tower which marks the hour through striking. So, it marks the time through the striking of a big and loud gong. So, as time passes, the Big Ben announces the passage of time through hourly gongs and chimes, through its strikes. The first strike is warning, right? And this is how Woolf's narrator describes the sound that's produced from the Big Ben, which is a centralised clock tower, and how this sound has a very jarring and turbulence-inducing impact on the minds of people around it, and this includes Clarissa. What is that impact? After it booms, the first is a warning. It is musical. And then the hour, and that is irrevocable.

The short sentences, these short sentences are almost two to three words. These short phrases punctuated by semicolons and periods, out it boomed. Three words, period, first a warning, comma, musical, semicolon, then the hour, comma, irrevocable, period. The staccato pace of these very short sentences describes a sense of how psychology itself is interrupted and punctuated by events and forces that are outside one's body. The person who experiences the boom of the Big Bang as a warning and then as the irrevocable passage of time, the irrevocable marker of time being passed and time being lost and time being irretrievable. This is a reminder of mortality. This is a very despairing but also musical marker of the mortality of all human life. And the quality of the psychological experience is what the narrator wants to convey through these sentences. What is the quality of the psychological experience? Now, in the wake of the influenza pandemic, we've just had two references to how Clarissa has survived the pandemic.

She has been ill. Her heart is weakened by the influenza pandemic. And in the previous lecture, we saw how Virginia Woolf herself repeatedly had heart problems, the nerves of the heart. She had arrhythmia, she had a problematic pulse, and she was deeply and painfully affected as a human being by the problems that influenza caused on her cardiovascular as well as her respiratory mechanisms.

We see that reflected in the way Clarissa experiences the passage of time and in particular how that passage of time is marked by the clock tower. It is before the clock actually strikes there is a clock in Clarissa's body and in Clarissa's mind which can anticipate that booming intrusion into her psychological space. We can see the trepidation, we can see the anxiety,

we can see the foreboding that this anticipation conveys in the sentence in the words like a particular hush or solemnity. An indescribable pause, a suspense.

The sense is that something bad is about to happen, but we don't know exactly when. And therefore, in order to be prepared, in order to ensure that we have some protection against an event that we cannot control; in order to protect ourselves, we hold our breath. That is what Clarissa does. Clarissa holds her breath. That is the suspense. Because she knows at any time now, the clock tower is going to start booming. The first will be a musical warning, and then there will be a very despairing note, there will be a very irretrievable and uncontrollable sense that time is lost, that the hour which Big Ben is marking, that gives everyone listening a sense that some hours, some amount of life, some possibility for doing something, for living, for growing.

Some such possibility is irretrievably lost. Now, the question is, do people like Clarissa need these reminders? Are people not aware in the wake of this devastating pandemic that death is all around them? Yes, they are. People like Clarissa and everyone, most people living in London, most people reading this novel were very much aware that time passes and that as time passes, every second we lose some possibilities. Therefore, these repeated reminders, such as is conveyed in the booming of the Big Ben clock tower, does not really serve any material purpose.

In fact, it might be counterproductive. Instead of being a healthy reminder of the passage of time, instead of trying to help people organize themselves around a public and universal idea of time, as opposed to psychological and personal ideas of time, These repeated reminders of mortality, these repeated reminders of the indifference of a public world to one's psychological rhythms and psychological pace, these repeated reminders can feel like a sort of assault and they can feel a sort of violent intrusion on one's very humble and very meek efforts to simply continue one's existence given the many constraints to health and well-being in early 20th century London. So, this is a small indication of what will become much more widespread later in the novel.

Let us read on. Now, at the end of this passage, Clarissa conveys the opposite of the sense of foreboding, anxiety, intrusion and a sense of mortality. Despite Big Ben reminding people that time was being lost, Clarissa, like many others, was able to counterbalance this despairing sense with a great deal of hope and optimism in life. This is what the rest of the paragraph conveys. Clarissa is full of hope and energy, while walking on this street in

London, seeing a lot of tradespeople, shopkeepers, neighbours, people up and about their business in Westminster, fills Clarissa with a great deal of hope. Clarissa writes:

> For it was the middle of June. The war was over, except for someone like Mrs. Foxcroft at the embassy last night, eating her heart out because that nice boy was killed, and now the manor house must go to a cousin; or Lady Bexborough, who opened a bazaar, they said, with a telegram in her hand. John, her favourite, killed. But it was over, thank heaven- over. It was June.

So, the death and devastation that they associate with the war is over. This is June. June refers to the beginning of warm and clear and sunny days in London. And this June coincides with the cessation of death and destruction that was associated with the First World War. And a little bit later, we see a further insistence. These opening pages of the novel swing between a sense of optimism, hope and energy that Clarissa derives from simply walking around and looking at people on this very clear morning in June in Westminster, London, and a sense that despite everything being so sunny and beautiful and clear, there is a sense that all of this might come to naught, i..e. here is a sense that everything that is beautiful and clear and full of life will one day be clouded over by death and devastation. And that sense comes partly from Clarissa's own recent bodily memory of having been sick and being recovered, but it also builds the novel's narrative prism.

The novel teaches us as readers how to perceive suffering, how to perceive suffering when suffering is something that the narrator herself struggles to describe and not so much because the narrator is incompetent or less capable, but rather because there's something fundamentally incompatible between the mechanics of this literary form, that is to say, the modernist novel, and the experience of suffering. So, the novel teaches us how to read its characters and how to perceive one character who will shortly be introduced whose name is Septimus. But before that, let us read one more passage about how Clarissa struggles and juggles the sense of both being hopeful and optimistic, along with an awareness that death lurks around the corner, no matter how sunny life may appear to be. Wolf writes, and I quote,

> That she held herself well was true, and had nice hands and feet; and dressed well, considering that she spent little. But often now, this body she wore, (she stopped to look at a Dutch picture). This body, with all its capacities, seemed nothing- nothing at all. She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown. There being no more marrying, no more having of children now, but only this astonishing

> and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond Street, this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa anymore, this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway. Bond Street fascinated her; Bond Street early in the morning in the season; its flags flying, its shops; No splash; no glitter; one roll of tweed in the shop where her father had bought his suits for fifty years. A few pearls; salmon on an ice block.

So, we see a great contradiction in this passage. On one hand, in the midst of life, there is a sort of, if not death, then there is a kind of invisibility, there is a kind of annihilation, there is a kind of dematerialization. Clarissa has a sense that everything that appears to be so full of life around her is also actually immaterial. This immateriality emerges from her experience of inhabiting the body into which she was born, the body which has recently been sick and disabled, the body which has recovered, the body which enables her to feel the pleasure of this beautiful clear morning. It is this body which also gives her the sense that the world around her is immaterial. What is immaterial about this world? On one hand, very little. The London that she describes, Bond Street, and the shops that she describes are very material.

There are a lot of very sophisticated and attractive materials being produced and traded on these streets. And it's not that Clarissa herself doesn't enjoy these materials or is not attracted to or is blind to the beauty and value of these materials. We learn that she passes shops with paintings, with glitter. She passes a roll of tweed, which is on display in a shop where her father had bought his suits for 50 years. So clearly very privileged, well-to-do people. Not everyone has an experience of buying suits from one place for 50 years. So clearly a very material universe. In addition to the role of tweed, there's also the sight of pearls. There's also salmon on an ice block. So fresh salmon being cut on an ice-block.

Clearly people who live and shop on these streets are very privileged, and Clarissa is both grateful to having the opportunity to appreciate and engage in this kind of privilege, but also coupled with the sense and in the same breath, and this is key, in the same breath, Clarissa notices that this is immaterial. Where does the sense of immateriality come from? I refer to the experience of inhabiting a recently sick body. But the sense of immateriality also comes from a collective vision of the place of culture in nature. Nature ultimately conquers all. This is what Woolf had written in the essay *On Being Ill*. So, even though human beings have created this very elaborate establishment of Bond Street with its shops, with its parliament, with its politics, with its literature, with people who walk on these streets and write novels about it, all of this is in a way from the perspective of a longer history of nature, a longer history of the earth.

From the perspective of this long history, Bond Street, London, Westminster, Mrs. Dalloway, both the individual and the novel, they are immaterial. This is the sense with which I will stop. We will continue exploring this novel. We will read more and we will see how this description so far has prepared us to encounter a very, very important character in this novel, Septimus Smith. We will encounter Septimus in the next lecture.

Thank you!