

The English Novel: Interdisciplinary Approaches
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Lecture - 32
Mrs Dalloway: Textual Analysis - II

Hello, learners, and welcome back to our continuing discussion of *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf.

I promised that we would try and understand in greater detail how Septimus's nervous system and generally speaking neurological conditions and disposes him to perceive the world and how this is not just Septimus's condition but rather the novel's effort to train us in a better, more empathetic mode of perceiving reality. We first met Septimus and Rezia at the park, at Regent Park, and we observed that Rezia was deeply frustrated at not being able to explain to anyone the cause of her suffering. We also noted that Septimus was in an equally bad, if not worse, situation. And in Septimus' case, the inability to be recognized and the silent and unseen suffering was due to the experience that he had had in the First World War. and the lack of the doctors in his time to be able to see what was going on with Septimus. His doctors were unable to see him and his wife was forced to care for him while he appeared to be completely healthy. Therefore, his condition looked to these people like it was a form of laziness or a sort of choice that he was making.

This was what we had observed in the earlier instance and we are given more opportunities to understand why Septimus might be acting in the way that he is acting in this sequence. Septimus speaks and Woolf writes,

No crime, love, he repeated, fumbling for his card and pencil, when a sky terrier snuffed his trousers, and he started in an agony of fear. It was turning into a man! He could not watch it happen! It was horrible, terrible to see a dog become a man! At once the dog trotted away.

An illustration of the idea which was hinted at earlier when the narrator described Septimus' state of mind. The narrator had inferred Septimus' state of mind from his eyes which signified apprehension and the narrator had described Septimus' apprehensive eyes as imagining a state in which the world had raised its whip and no one knew where it would descend or what it would do. This was in the earlier instance. I'm describing it to recall this instance and to understand how what we see in this sequence is an illustration of that state

of apprehension and anxiety in which Septimus seems to perpetually find himself. What happens in this scene? Septimus and Resia are sitting in the park. It's a beautiful sunny day. Everyone's out and about. Everyone is playing or walking or generally enjoying the weather and obviously it seems that someone has brought their pet and there is a dog that's running about and while running around or near the bench where Septimus and Resia are sitting, a dog, a Skye terrier snuffed his trousers, that is, just brushed or touched Septimus, not even his person, but just his trousers. This is enough to produce a very strong psychological reaction. What happens to Septimus? He starts in an agony of fear. He begins to feel that this dog that has just accidentally touched him is about to turn into a man.

This is the beginning of our acquaintance with Septimus's demons. Here is a man who is living with a lot of ghosts, a lot of demons that are very real to him. They may not exist, they may not be visible to other people. The existence of these demons might not feel real to other people, but they are very real to Septimus. In fact, they are more real to Septimus than the realities in which we see Septimus as functioning, that is, the bench, the park, the dog, etc. So, this is a brief introduction to how Septimus thinks and how Septimus sees the world. Further, Septimus reflects,

Heaven was divinely merciful, infinitely benignant. It spared him, pardoned his weakness. but what was the scientific explanation (for one must be scientific above all things)? Why could he see through bodies see into the future when dogs will become men? It was the heat wave presumably operating upon a brain made sensitive by eons of evolution. Scientifically speaking, the flesh was melted off the world. His body was macerated until only the nerve fibers were left. It was spread like a veil upon a rock.

What do these sentences mean? The first half of this paragraph seems to be a logical extension of the thoughts that we would find in a mind or in the mind of a person, who is triggered into an anxiety attack by the accidental touch of a small dog on his trousers. A man who is triggered into an anxiety attack by such a seemingly innocent event is likely to think in such a way. He is seeing through bodies, he is seeing into the future. He is imagining a lot of things that don't appear to have logical basis. And he is asking questions about this very imagination. This is Septimus reflecting and struggling and generally being curious and concerned for the strangeness or what appears to him, the strangeness of the way his mind is working. But then in the last three or four sentences, the logical explanation or the likely explanation for this strange functioning of his own mind doesn't seem to hold

or doesn't seem to make sense. Therefore, Septimus is left reflecting on and ruminating on an even more otherworldly reason for why he is the way he is.

At first, Septimus thinks that he is triggered into these waves of anxiety because of the heat wave. It's an exceptionally hot day. People who live in London are not used to such a heat. And being directly exposed to such direct sunshine and heat is triggering the brain and the nervous system to function in unusual ways. This is one explanation. But then something else is thought and said. "A brain made sensitive by eons of evolution." How has Septimus's brain evolved? Is Septimus's brain an ordinary Londoner's brain or is there something different? We don't get a specific answer to this question. It is simply raised as a possibility. Further, the narrator speaking for Septimus writes, "Scientifically speaking, the flesh was melted off the world." What does this sentence mean and why is Septimus thinking about it? Clearly, the heat that Septimus is experiencing in the present is not enough, is nowhere near the degree of heat which might melt the flesh of the world. What kind of description is this? What might it refer to? It might refer to the experience of something that Septimus has seen during his time in the fields of World War I. There was a lot of Chemical warfare. Chemicals were used for the first time in World War I. Gases were used which had a very corrosive and destructive influence on human flesh. So, this might refer to a particularly violent and heinous form of a military mechanism, of a war weapon that Septimus had witnessed or seen or heard of or generally been placed in proximity to "flesh melting of the world". And then Septimus makes another statement without giving us specific details of whose flesh was melted off the world, how or why he remembers this. And then Septimus thinks his body was macerated until only the nerve fibers were left macerated, eroded, destroyed, shredded, made thin, made to lose its protective layers, turned inside out as it were, until only the nerve fibers were left.

Why would Septimus say this? One moment he's talking about the heat wave and speculating that the heat wave is causing his nervous system to malfunction, which is triggering anxiety attacks from pet dogs. Next moment, he is describing a kind of military, a weapon of mass destruction. He's referring to his nervous system being exposed and being triggered in extreme ways. Nerve fibers were left until only the nerve fibers were left. And then he says it was spread like a veil upon a rock. The image that we are left with is an image of a body whose protective layers have been removed and whose nervous system has been turned inside out and then this exposed nervous system has been spread like a veil upon a rock.

What is the rock word doing in this image? The image of the rock signifies a kind of inertness, a form of insensitivity. And it contrasts directly with the exposed nervous system. So, on one hand, there is a heightened and pathologically intensified degree of sensitivity to external stimuli which is because the nervous system is exposed. None of the protective or insulating layers which normally protect the nervous system or which allow the individual to filter strong reactions from weak ones. Those layers are gone. Therefore, any stimulus, any form of an external touch, sound, any stimulus from the external world has the potential to produce a full-blown catastrophic and alarming reaction and we saw an instance of this happen. There was a small pet dog brushed against his trousers and Septimus almost descended into a panic attack. But then we also see something else that this exposed nervous system is spread like a veil upon a rock. The rock is the absolute opposite of this heightened sensitivity. The rock is an insensitive thing, right? Or is it? It appears to be insensitive. The rock is frequently used in metaphors to describe insensitivity, lack of feeling, lack of change, lack of emotional or intellectual investment and so on. But does the rock merely signify insensitivity or does it signify the lack of perception of sensitivity? 19th century science made great deal of advances in geology and they were able to, a lot of scientists, philosophers and thinkers were able to come up with ways of understanding how history was compacted into stone and rock and layers of the earth. Rocks might appear to be unfeeling or sensitive things, but they register change over centuries. They represent the consolidation, compaction and the crystallization, almost like an archive of change and feelings. But on the other hand, they do signify sensitivity because a rock is in some ways the exact opposite of a human body with nervous system.

Now, what does this image achieve in describing Septimus? Septimus describes himself as on one hand being a rock and on the other hand being covered with a veil which is full of exposed nerve fibers. So, on the outside, there are exposed nerve fibers and on the inside, there's a rock. So, this basically signifies that the normal functioning of the nervous system has been completely disoriented and turned upside down. Stimuli which would normally not produce alarm cause great anxiety and other stimuli which would normally cause alarm don't produce any reaction. Septimus is a person whose nervous system has malfunctioned and reversed. Things that should attract his attention, things that should exercise his emotions and his intellect, don't. Whereas other things, things that have apparently no connection or no relevance to his mental and physical well-being, produce a great deal of anxiety. And we are given to know that this topsy-turvy, malfunctioning or not very well functioning nervous system is a direct consequence of his experience in the war from the subsequent passages.

Now, the rock image continues and Septimus is described thus:

But he himself remained high on his rock, like a drowned sailor on a rock. I leant over the edge of the boat and fell down, he thought. I went under the sea. I have been dead, and yet am now alive, but let me rest still, he begged (he was talking to himself again-it was awful, awful!) and as, before waking, the voices of birds, and the sound of wheels chime and chatter in a queer harmony, grow louder and louder, and the sleeper finds himself drawing to the shores of life. So he felt himself drawing towards life, the sun growing hotter, cries sounding louder, something tremendous about to happen.

Now, two things to note again in this long passage. First, the image of the rock, to which we have now added the image of water, probably the sea, but also more importantly than seawater is the image of drowning and the image of surfacing, going underwater, being close to death and dying in fact, and then resurfacing, emerging from that zone where death exists to the area of life. This is another metaphor now that Septimus's incredibly rich imagination is placing before us and asking us to combine in order to best understand what is going on with Septimus. So, what goes on in this image of drowning and surfacing, of dying and then being resurrected?

Septimus says that first he was high on a rock and he was peering, he was leaning over the edge of the boat and looking down into the sea. There's a sense that he shouldn't have done that. There's a sense that while he was on the rock, dry, on dry land, away from the water, away from the sea, he should have looked above and not below. What does this mean? What is the sea? What is dry and what is wet in the life of Septimus? Now one possible way of understanding these metaphors is to think of the experience of military service as creating a kind of boundary, as establishing a spatial boundary between individuals who for all factual purposes, live in the same space. So, everyone in that park, Regent Park in London, Everyone is in England. However, Septimus has had a different experience. Septimus has been in the war and these experiences put him in a radically different psychological condition from that of everyone else in the park around him. There is a sense that having served in the military, Septimus occupies a different realm. And now having returned from the war, having ended military service now that the war is over, and having come back to England, He is in a different space, not because he has returned from the fields where the First World War was fought and is now transported to London. No, not because of the physical movement, but because of the change in his occupation and the change in his physical and mental being.

So, the experience of war puts him in a different space. And when he returned, when he stopped being a soldier and he became a civilian, he entered a different space. And it was on that space, that dry edge of the boat, being a civilian is like he is on the edge of a boat. And the sea describes the psychological and the mental space of pain, uncertainty, fear of death, the struggle for survival that he had known as a soldier. But while he was on dry land, while he was safe, instead of forgetting and looking ahead, he kept peering down into the dark, dangerous and uncertain and unsafe possibility. And because of this constant staring and his curiosity, it seems he has slipped and he has fallen back into that sea. This is one way to understand this difficult experience of transitioning to the peacetime life of a civilian from the experience of war and that of a soldier. That is one. Now, having fallen back into the pain and the trauma of military service, it seems he has resurfaced.

This is one way to understand the metaphor of falling back into the sea. Another way is to think of him as having survived the war without without death or an obvious physical disability. We know that we can say that Septimus does not suffer from an obvious visible or physical disability because of the number of times Lucrezia and his many doctors constantly say that there is nothing wrong with him. So, the fact that he has resurfaced, that he has been dead but is now alive, means that he has survived the war. He has emerged intact on the other side of the war. This is another way in which the war can be seen as a sea. When one is in the war, one is drowning, as if one is drowning in the sea, but that state of drowning, of not knowing whether one will emerge safe, is similar to the experience of being on the fields, on the killing fields of World War I. And so, Septimus, who has now left those fields behind, is like someone who had almost died but is now alive. But the detail and the intensity and the repetition of these metaphors of these hallucinations of death and dying mean that Septimus does not really believe that he is alive. Even though he is alive, there is a part of him which is dead. And this describes the state of being alive and dead at the same time, which the novel wants us to understand and which the novel has been anticipating. To be fair, if one remembers all of those scenes of Clarissa, all of those repetitions of Clarissa, feeling less material, being weak, being pale, and reflecting on the mortality that awaits everyone.

The other thing to note in this passage is the sense that something tremendous is about to happen. Rezia says,

It is time. The word time split its husk, poured its riches over him, and from his lips fell like shells, like shavings from a plane, without his making them, hard, white, imperishable words, and flew to attach themselves to their places in an ode to time,

an immortal ode to time. He sang. Evans answered from behind the tree. The dead were in Thessaly, Evans sang, among the orchids. There they waited till the war was over, and now the dead, now Evans himself. For God's sake don't come, Septimus cried out, for he could not look upon the dead.

Now, we get a very clear and vivid answer or explanation or the closest possible thing to an answer or explanation that the novel or the narrator can offer for what is going on in Septimus's head, which Rezia cannot see, which Septimus's doctors are unable to see. and which nonetheless is so real for Septimus and so overwhelming that it has disabled him. And it is the brilliance of the narrator in being able to capture these internal psychological wirings, these short circuits as it were, these sparks between different aspects of Septimus's mind and the ability of Virginia Woolf as a writer to imagine these sparks, these connections and to describe them for us. which help us understand what PTSD or shell shock or mental disability or this acute and chronic mental health problem might feel like. This is not an accurate description. This is not factual. This is an imagined description. But still, what does it get at and what does it signify? It reminds us that Septimus has certain memories. He has seen some things which he cannot quite get over. What has he seen? He has seen a lot of death, a lot of dead people, a lot of dead soldiers. And he was with people who fought this war, and a few of them survived. But the majority of these young men, like himself, did not survive. And they did not see what he is seeing now. They could not. They are no longer there. They fail to enjoy any of the joys and the pleasures of peacetime.

And Septimus, while he is in the lap of nature's luxury, while he has the opportunity to enjoy everything that peacetime offers, the only thing that Septimus can think of is those dead people, those people who were alive when he knew them, but are now dead, killed by the war, and who now put everything that he sees, the beautiful park in London, the shadow and the memory of these dead soldiers cast a deep and dark cloud over this sunny day in Regent Park. But it is not just the memory of dead that bothers Septimus. There is something more specific. There is an individual, Evans, and we can only speculate, but it seems that Evans was someone Septimus knew, perhaps a soldier, a colleague, a brother, maybe a friend, someone with whom Septimus built a relationship because of their experiences in the war.

We also can speculate that this Evans probably did not survive, that Evans is no longer alive. And Septimus longs to share some of this pleasure, some of the satisfaction with Evans. And not just that, but Septimus constantly hallucinates, sees Evans's image or presence, or to use a more pedestrian word, ghost. Septimus sees Evans's ghost because

Septimus misses Evans. Septimus cannot get over the grief that Evans's absence continues to cast on Septimus's life. Septimus dreads seeing Evans. Septimus says, "for God's sake, don't come". He believes that Evans is going to come out from somewhere. And he starts crying. And he says that because he could not look upon the dead. So, Septimus imagines Evans, who has in fact died, has come back to life and is about to walk towards Septimus while he's sitting on that bench in Regent Park. And this is where Septimus's reverie stops and something happens. What happens? We will read briefly.

But the branches parted. A man in grey was actually walking towards them. It was Evans. But no mud was on him, no wounds. He was not changed. I must tell the whole world, Septimus cried, raising his hand, as the dead man in the grey suit came nearer.

We will soon find out who this so-called dead man is. It is Peter Walsh, the man that Clarissa has remembered in her earliest thoughts while she walked down Bond Street. We know that Peter Walsh was a friend of Clarissa's. They knew each other when they were very young, when they were 18. When Clarissa was 18 and she was at an unnamed vacation spot, a place with waves, it was at that place where something happened in her relationship with Peter. That relationship is marked with regret, but it is more importantly, it is marked with a sense of foreboding. Peter is walking now in Regent Park, and he is walking in the direction in which Rezia and Septimus are sitting. It is Peter who is wearing a grey suit, and it is this man that Septimus mistakes for Evans. Septimus even observes, that there is no mud on him, no wound. Evans looks very different from what Septimus remembers of Evans. So, we can see that this is a hallucination. Septimus sees the ghost of Evans when the figure of Peter is walking in their direction. We'll stop here and we'll reflect on what hallucinations mean and how hallucinations help us better understand the world in which this novel is set in the next lecture.

Thank you.