

The Identity of a dying self in *The Death of Ivan Ilych* and *Mrs. Dalloway*

The purpose of this paper is to challenge, in a dialogical sense, the philosophical dimension of two performed written experiences of death as portrayed in *The Death of Ivan Ilych* and in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

In one of his diary entries, dating 1890, Tolstoy affirms:

“What one must never forget about death is that life is a constant process of dying. And by saying “I am constantly dying”, one might just as well say “I live””. (Tolstoy's complete works, 51:15)

I would like to present these texts not so much from the point of view of a critical literary analysis, but rather from the common perspective of a human being dealing with loss, suffering and death. In order to achieve this aim I would try to put in a direct, though imaginative, dialogue the upcoming thoughts, fears and remembrances of two characters, namely Tolstoy's Ivan and Woolf's Septimus. Coming from different social, cultural and historical backgrounds, such as XIX century Russia and XX century England, respectively, they seem to share some complex psychological contact points when facing unexpected life turn leading to physical deterioration and death.

“It's a good thing I am a bit of an athlete. Another man might have been killed, but I merely knocked myself, just here; it hurts when it is touched, but it is passing already – it is only a bruise.” (*The Death of Ivan Ilych*: 99)

This is a way in which Ivan describes, from the very beginning, a consequence of his unforeseen fall from the chair: he resumes this “occurrence” to a mere domestic accident of almost no importance.

As if in a response, echoed from a different epoch, Septimus reflects on the experience of loss he came through in the World War I:

““The War?” the patient asked. The European War – that little shindy of schoolboys with gunpowder? Had he served with distinction? He really forgot. In the War itself he had failed.” (*Mrs. Dalloway*: 84).

Set in a dialogical, even comparative, position the above quoted passages introduce some of the main practical issues regarding the philosophy of life and death. More concretely, they forward a conceptual dimension of the philosophy of death and underline one of the possible methods for approaching death as a process of living. Common, everyday, routine living surprisingly troubled by an unexpected painful, unpleasant, or disastrous event.

The idea of the physical fall and of the psychological fall strongly present in both quotations faintly shows a well built connection between two conceptual aspects by which a human being is usually recognized as an individual by the contemporary social science studies:

his / her outer, social identity, on the one hand, and an inner, personal self, on the other. One of the main questions, however, stated by the reading process of the above cited texts, is how, when and by which means may we actually distinguish, set aside or approximate them?

Oxford English Dictionary forwards two apparently clear definitions of *identity* and *self*, as follows:

“Identity: the fact of being who or what a person or thing is.

A close similarity or affinity.”

“Self: a person's essential being that distinguishes he / her from others, especially considered as the object of introspection or reflexive action.”

Defining the “I” besides the biological limits of human life, even besides the notion of the individual as an identity, both texts struggle to grasp an experience of someone who is dying from within; nevertheless, the self-consciousness of the character as a social identity does not seem to cease completely, for the constant interaction between soul and body, the physical and the spiritual, present in both texts, serves as a foundation for the sense of a dying self.

If the whole process of dying translates itself, according to Tolstoy, in a process of living, the clear answer to these questions seems even more arbitrary. Even when we recall the biblical statement which asserts a distinction between heart (emotion) and reason (spirit), body and soul, does it really become possible, for a human being, to disconnect his/her inner self from his/her outer expression of identity in a complex cyclical life - death system?

The Death of Ivan Ilych and *Mrs. Dalloway* both try to grasp, from within the characters' mind, the intricate non-linear process of a continuous struggle between bodily emotion and spiritual reason in attempting to find a logical explanation for the gradual loss of physical and psychological vitality, which go hand by hand:

“But this discomfort increased and, though not exactly painful, grew into a sense of pressure in his side accompanied by ill humor. His irritability became worse and worse and began to mar the agreeable, easy and correct life that had established itself in the Golovin family. Quarrels between husband and wife became more and more frequent,

and soon the ease and amenity disappeared and even the decorum was barely maintained.” (*DII*: 102)

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Septimus is constantly looking forward to rearrange his dispersed thoughts into a continuous logical state of consciousness, an attempt which proves to be a failure from the very beginning. His discontinuous bodily expression underlines big interior trauma:

“He had only to open his eyes; but a weight was on them; a fear. He strained; he pushed; he looked; he saw Regent's Park before him. Long streamers of sunlight fawned at his feet. The trees waved, brandished. We welcome, the world seemed to say; we accept; we create. Beauty, the world seemed to say. And as if to prove it (scientifically) wherever he looked, at the houses, at the railings, at the antelopes stretching over the palings, beauty sprang instantly.” (*Mrs. Dalloway*: 60).

When articulated dialogically, the above mentioned state of mind descriptions point out an interconnected way in which a sense of a stable, fixed identity has been progressively modified by a physical pain endurance, causing a kind of emotional disconnected “sense of pressure” and “weight”. An expression of the mortal self, symbolically represented by an image of the body, emotions, desires, satisfactions, habits, has been constantly undermined by the gradual deterioration of reason. Both characters experience the progressive sense of loss – emotional and spiritual – not as a theory but as a life-practice.

Aspiring towards the secular idea of progress supplied by modern scientific advance, the characters' identities become, under uncontrollable pain pressure, a secret chamber for deplorable moments of moral and mental weakness. An oppressive feeling of powerlessness to reasonably explain the precepts of mind facing a forthcoming end take a narrative control.

In the essay “On Life”, published in 1888, Tolstoy concludes that “there is no death”. He resumes this argument to the necessary separation of “bodily death” from the “foundation of life”, explaining partly human fear of death:

“ I have lived 59 years, and for all this time I have been conscious of myself in my body, and this consciousness of myself, it seems to me, has been my life.” (“On Life”, 26:402).

Since reason alone, as both texts show, fails to provide a clear justification for suffering and death, we may try to conclude (contrary to Locke), that temporal continuity of self-consciousness, associated with a direct cause-effect sense of identity, cannot always

serve as a firm foundation for the sense of self.

Even when both characters search for a medical help in order to free their bodies as well as minds from a growing pain and oppressive feeling, no scientific theories could actually give them any reply to the core question posed by Ivan Ilych:

“What is it all for?”

It is really is so. I lost my life over that curtain as I might have done storming a fort. Is that possible? How terrible and how stupid. It can't be true! It can't, but it is!” (*DII*: 112).

Curiously, Ivan's sense of identity, supported partly by his social status, partly by a continuous quest for intellectual self-perfection and reasonable thinking, becomes a powerful inner foundation for self discovery, embodied in childhood memories and intersubjective reflections on life and death.

“How do we come to define ourselves?... Maybe I didn't live as I ought to have done”, it suddenly occurred to him. “But how could that be, when I did everything properly?” (*DII*: 122-123).

Ivan's philosophical question establishes a necessary point of contact with the arbitrary quest for the connection between life and death, fundamented by Septimus' disconnected projection of personality into the outer world:

“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.” (*Mrs. Dalloway*: 59)

It does actually shows how the character is constantly struggling against suicidal impulse fully expressed in the sensorial sense of his identity as a shell-shocked soldier. Once more, the keen awareness of the social status seems inseparable from the inner perception of the oppressive trauma feeling:

“There remained only the window, the large Bloomsbury lodging-house window; the tiresome, the troublesome, and rather melodramatic business of opening the window and throwing himself out. It was their idea of tragedy, not his or Rezia's. Holmes and Bradshaw liked that sort of thing. (He set on the sill). But he would wait till the very last moment. He did not want to die. Life was good. The sun hot. Only human beings? Coming down the staircase opposite na old man stopped and stared at him. Holmes was at the door. “I'll give it to you!” he cried, and flung himself vigorously, violently down

on to Mrs. Filmer's area railings.” (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 131-132).

The dialogical fusion of heart and reason, of body and soul, sensorial and inner realities shapes the structural and thematic arrangement of both texts. The gradual process of outer physical deterioration comes hand in hand with the characters’ self-conscious perception of their inner selves. The life-practice of dying as portrayed in *The Death of Ivan Ilych* and *Mrs. Dalloway* exemplifies how intrinsically interconnected life and death are. These phenomena represent the very completeness of the human existence, revealed in its cyclical nature.

Reflecting daily on death, Tolstoy kept a diary where he used to register, day by day, his personal reflections on the end of life experience. Woolf’ reflections on death always go with an eye toward her big passion for life. In order to conclude, I would turn towards authors’ own statements on the riddles of life and death:

“Against you I fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, o Death! The waves broke on the shore.” (Woolf, in *The Waves*).

“I remember: I am sitting in the bathhouse, and a shepherd boy walked in. I asked: Who is there? – I am. – Who is I? - It's I. – Who are you? – But it's I...It is the same with *everybody*. (Tolstoy, 1892). (My italics).

Works cited:

Tolstoy, Ivan. *The Death of Ivan Ilych* (1886). *Tolstoy's Short Fiction*. Edited with revised translations by Michael R. Katz. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2008.

Tolstoy, Leo. *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 90 tomakh. Tolstoy's Complete Works in 90 volumes*. Moscow-Leningrad, 1928-58. My translations.

Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. London: Vintage Classics, 2004.

Woolf, Virginia. *The Waves*. London: Vintage Classics, 2016.

