

“Watch Yourself Think with Literature”

a lecture by Professor Karin Kukkonen,

BA in Comparative Literature

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As I was preparing the lecture for today I was wondering what kind of book I wanted to share with you. I chose a book that I was reading over the summer: Johannes Anyuru’s novel *They Will Drown in their Mothers’ Tears*. Maybe some of you have heard about the book or even read it; it was a big success in Sweden when it came out in 2017, and there was a Norwegian translation last year (*De kommer til å drukne i sine mødres tårer*, 2018). The book, I think, after the events last Saturday in Bærum, has become doubly relevant for my thinking about literature, cognition and emotions.

If you haven’t read the book, I don’t think I spoil too much when I tell you a little bit of what it’s about. Anyuru’s book centres around an attack on a comic book shop in Gothenburg by Muslim extremists. We had the Charlie Ebro attacks in 2015, and this is obviously referenced in Anyuru’s book.

This fictional attack in the Gothenburg comic book shop is told from the point of view of a young woman who is a part of this terrorist group, and whose job it is to record the attack. She finds herself in a situation with a mobile camera and a bomb vest.

I’d like to discuss Anyuru’s novel not just because it is obviously relevant for the topic it treats, but because it also allows us, I think, to show how literature can both investigate and illustrate what actually lies behind our thinking about exactly this kind of problem.

Let me start at the very beginning of the novel. This is the first sentence of the first part:

“Det är hennes förste minne: snön som vräkte ner i nykfulla slöjor över sjukhusflygarna, över parkeringen of popplarna, över väghinderen. Innan dess: egentligen ingenting.”

This is her first memory, and then you get a description of a snow-covered parking lot. Before that, nothing.

This is how the first chapter starts, and it’s already a bit strange that nothing should have happened before this moment. As we move on through the chapter, we follow the young woman as she enters the comic book shop, and as the attack and the execution of this cartoonist is about to take place. As the chapter unfolds and she records the events with the video camera, it feels strange and detached. She is described as if she experiences being somehow outside of herself – as if in a dream - while at the same moment the bomb vest is tight across her chest. So, she seems strangely detached from that situation, as if she weren’t a

central participant in it. And yet, at the same time, we have this strongly embodied moment where the weight and the tenseness of the bomb vest pulls her back to the present moment.

So, there is a lack of stability, a lack of fixity, of where we are in the fictional world, and this strangeness develops across the entire chapter until, at the end, she prevents the leader of the terrorists from executing the cartoonist and puts an end to the attack.

As we enter the second part, we find out a bit more about what's behind this really strange way of describing the terrorist attack. This young woman tells her story to a poet or journalist who may or may not be Anyuru himself. She tells him that she actually comes from an alternative future, where the attack had been successful, and it led to a Sweden where the Muslim population is subjected to massive restrictions. They are housed in something that very much resembles concentration camps: they are often given ham to eat; they are subjected to medical experiments; and they get to read the Koran in a version that's covered in blue and yellow Three Crowns.

Because of that future she decides to go back in time and prevent the attack from happening. And this is a fairly strange explanation for a novel that, apart from this figural thought – this movement of thinking - is actually written in a fairly realist fashion.

What it has is a kind of looping time structure where it's actually not quite clear what is the past, what is the present and what is the future. And this instability we observed in the physical nature of her being in this comic shop is something that quickly translates into the temporal structure of the novel itself.

Now, you might be wondering what this has to do with cognition and emotions and their relevance for literature. In order to illustrate that, I'd like you to do nothing for a minute, and by that I mean really nothing. Close your computers, don't look at your smartphones, put away what you've been writing and try to do absolutely nothing for a minute.

(silence)

It's not that easy doing absolutely nothing, is it? Because your mind is constantly moving about – at least mine is. I've been thinking about how I am going to break this silence and what is going to be the next sentence that I'm going to say. You might have been thinking about something that you left at home this morning, or what you are going to do tonight. You might be imagining just how nice it would be if summer were to last a bit longer.

All of these movements in the mind have been described in terms of the so-called “default mode network”. Psychologists have noted that when you ask people to do absolutely nothing, and you record their brains, there is a certain system of brain areas that is active. The brain doesn't go dark when you don't have a task or something particular to do. This default mode network is exactly the part of your mind that is actively churning away as you are resting and

as your “mind is wandering”, as it is also called. This stage of rest is whatever state that doesn't connect to a particular task; it is linked to this default network. As Hilde and Ylva Østby explain in this wonderful book on memory, *Å dykke etter sjøhester*, it means a sort of “basic state” of our thought, and they describe it as a free stream of memories and thoughts:

“Men hvilemodus er ikke hvilken som helst tilstand. For hva er det folk typisk gjør når de ikke tenker på noe spesielt, når de ikke trenger å konsentrere seg om en oppgave? De lar tankene vandre [...] På engelsk kalles denne hvilemodusen for “default mode network”. Mye tyder altså på at “default”, grunntilstanden, består av en fri strøm av minner og framtidsutsikter.”

They also point out that we spend about half of our waking hours engaged in this kind of mind wandering of working through the resting state. This includes, of course, when you remember things, when you plan, or when you imagine things. It's what happens and what *can* happen.

For the study of memory, as this book underlines, the default mode network and this resting state is quite central. In fact, it shows that memory is not something like an archive; you don't experience something and then file it away and pull it out again as if it were the same kind of document when you remember something five or ten years later. What happens is that you enter into this process of looping thoughts where you reconstruct the past from the present moment. The processes at work in remembering, imagining and planning are very similar when it comes to what is happening in your brain. They seem to be resting states, but slightly more purposeful when you are trying to remember something; it is different from this experiment of doing nothing, of course, but memory comes out of exactly that churning of the mind. Literature, I would argue, brings to the fore exactly that default state, which can be quite amorphous and difficult to catch when you are just sitting and doing nothing.

I think it is brought beautifully to the point by Anyuru himself later in the book. When the young woman tries to write down the story in order to explain, she says:

“I don't any longer believe that time is a straight line. I do not believe that this story, or the story that any human being can tell, has one beginning. It has always many. And nothing actually ends.”

“Jag tror inte längre att tiden är en rak linje. Jag tror inte att den här historien, eller någon historia som en människa kan berätta, har en enda början uten flere. Och ingenting tar egentligen slutt.”

This looping nature of time takes us away from the idea that there is a linear progression; in fact, we are constantly, from the present moment, looping into the past and moving into the future. It means that there are always many beginnings if you continuously reconstruct the memory – continue to reconstruct that first moment as you remember it.

The study of literature helps, I think, to pinpoint the specifics of how language can give shape, give form, exactly to this churning of the mind. If we look again at the very first sentence, “this is her first memory”, it is written in the present tense, which is relatively unusual for narrative prose. It is usually written in the past tense, the idea being that something happened before, and it’s now brought up again and just retold as it happened by the narrator. Anyuru puts it in the present tense because this is something that is remembered as it unfolds. This is something that is continually constructed as it happens; it is, so to say, “live memory”. The choice of the tense signals this to readers from the very beginning, and the training in literary studies and close reading allows you to pick up on such little details in the literary text.

If we look at the second example, we have a description of a very personal and intimate experience. In fact, a physical state of being:

“Hon upplever att hon ser sig själv utifrån som i en dröm. Bombvästens remmar spanner över bröstkorpen.”

And yet, it is told from a third person perspective. I think this very much gives rise to the instability and tension that you don't quite know where you are: are you with her, so she knows what she is doing? This kind of destabilisation can be very nicely traced in the tension between the third person perspective and the fairly strong emphasis on the physical state that the body experiences.

And of course, this observation about the nature of time and the nature of the story can in many ways be taken as Anyuru saying explicitly what the narrative does. There is more than one beginning: there is the beginning on the first page of the first part, but then we have to go further back in order to explain what just happened, and that is not the only beginning either. The nature of memory and time in Anyuru’s novel is exactly not a straight line, and this is the experience that reading this narrative puts you through as a reader as well. So, we have a correspondence between the explicit statement of the narrator and the kind of narrative system or narrative logic of the novel as a whole.

Reading, quite generally speaking, has often been linked to this default mode network in psychological research. You probably know the phenomenon that when you read a novel, and you suddenly realise you don’t know where you are, you haven’t really been paying attention to the last couple of sentences. That is an instance of mind wandering while reading. And quite often, it will have to do with you connecting something from your personal life to what the character is experiencing, or you might imagine how the story develops – how it could go on – or you might just get a strong visual sense of the place where the events happen. This is actually part and parcel of the reading process; that it’s not only a reflection of this default mode network in the text itself, but your very engagement as a reader runs through these loops from past to present to the future. In fact, as you develop your reading skills as literary critics, it becomes easier, I think, to catch yourself in these moments, and to see what bit of text it actually links to – it actually relates to – and you get these experiences where you sort

of redouble your attention. In a way, to refer to the title of the lecture, you can” watch yourself think” where the literary text actually allows you to see how you put things together in your mind.

There is a long way, I think, towards that kind of skill, but you have come to the right place to acquire exactly that kind of skill. More generally, Anyuru’s novel – as do many others – underline the need to have complex narrative, and the need to also be able to analyse and communicate complex narratives. In Anyuru’s novel we realise that the motivation for an action like that might not lie in the past, might not lie in the biographical story of whoever performed the action, but it might lie in the imagined future of that action. I think this is a very interesting way to recalibrate a lot of the fairly single-track, one-dimensional narratives that very quickly come up in the media in response to these events.

Literary analysis, I think, allows you to pinpoint the specifics in these processes, and the link to psychology then allows you to argue why literature might, perhaps, be the best way to get at what many musicians have called “the mess inside”. With the help of the literary text, we can explore and trace the specifics of this mess that is going on inside as your mind is churning between memory, imagination and planning.

As you study literature, you will very often encounter the mess inside, and that is, I think, part of the joy of studying literature, and you will also get many opportunities to watch yourself think.