Introduction

This is Part 1 of a preliminary communication about the use of original works of fiction to explore the nature of the psychoanalytic process and to inform approaches to psychoanalytic listening. What follows is in large part based upon a recent ten-part seminar I developed in which the participants did a close reading of Virginia Woolf’s To the Lighthouse accompanied by the presentation of an analytic case.

Over the course of the past fifteen years during which I have systematically read and studied imaginative literature, I have learned far more from creative writers and their works about what I do in my clinical work than I could ever tell them as a psychoanalytic critic about what they are doing in their writings (Griffin 2004, 2005, 2009, 2013 in press). What I have discovered extends a great distance beyond the storylines that unfold, the universal themes that are articulated, and the descriptive language that animates the authors’ characters and plots.

What has expanded my capacity for analytic listening and enriched my analytic thinking comes from entering the “new worlds” (Nabokov 1980)\(^1\) that an original writer creates and participating in the “unique verbal consciousness…the awareness he or she makes” (Gass 2012)\(^2\). This is not unlike the experience found within the universes newly and uniquely created by analyst and analysand—containing within them shifting states of consciousness and conveying much about the analysand’s (and, often enough, the analyst’s) internal and relational worlds.

I have come to consider this endeavor as a kind of “sensibility training.” Here I intend to share with you something about how I am making use of my experience with one creative writer to teach analytic listening.

Listening like a Writer: What Creative Writers Can Teach Us about the Psychoanalytic Process

Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being “like this.” Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad of impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall…they shape themselves into the life…[I]f a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not

\(^1\)“[T]he work of art is invariably the creation of a new world, so that the first thing we should do is to study that new world as closely as possible, approaching it as something brand new, having no obvious connection with the worlds we already know. When this new world has been closely studied, then and only then let us examine its links with other worlds, other branches of knowledge” (Nabokov 1980).

\(^2\) In speaking of the forms that authors invent and the ways that writers’ language works, William Gass states that what is generated in original works of fiction is a “unique verbal consciousness…not the writer’s awareness…but…the awareness he or she makes” (Gass 2012, pp. 3-7).
upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style...Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.

Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sigh or incident scores upon the consciousness.

Virginia Woolf, “Modern Fiction” from The Common Reader (1925)

From the very beginning of psychoanalysis, when Freud (1912) instructed the analyst to “adjust himself to the patient as telephone receiver is adjusted to the transmitting microphone” (p. 116), we have described the process by which we take in what our analysands communicate as *psychoanalytic listening*. Over time I have come to think of this an insufficient metaphor for the multisensorial exchange between analyst and analysand that contemporary clinical psychoanalysis can now envision and experience.

We most certainly do *listen* carefully to the patterning of our patients’ associations—to the “context, contiguity, similarity, and repetition of theme” (Arlow 1987)—and to the shifts in affect and subtle nonverbal cues. But we do much more than this. Many authors, each speaking of specific elements of listening, have written about this *something more* in the past twenty years: To name a few, Arlow (1995) on attunement to unconscious fantasy; Jacobs (1994, 2007) on the use of the analyst’s inner experience; Kohut on empathic attunement; Benjamin (1995, 2007) on intersubjective listening; and Ogden (1994, 1997) on reverie and the intersubjective analytic third. Each of these contributors has written about what may be transmitted from the analysand and through which manifold channels it may be received by the analyst. Still, we call this process analytic listening.

I am not setting out to invent a new term for this process, in part because (beyond the presumptuous of such an assertion) I am not sure that any words can adequately and succinctly convey something that is virtually more complex than we can even imagine, much less name. In absence of sufficient language that *tells* us what psychoanalytic listening is, I have come to appreciate the manner in which creative writers can *show* us—through the imaginative worlds they invent and through the experience their works generate in us when reading them—something akin to the psychoanalytic process, which we can enter to explore questions about analytic listening. In earlier discussions of this subject (Griffin 2004, 2005, 2009, 2013 in press), I have tried to get my mind around this problem, but this, for me, is clearly a work in progress.
Over half a century ago, in his prescient paper on the therapeutic action of psychoanalysis, Loewald (1960) spoke of the analyst’s active role in taking in and holding what is listened for when he said the following: That the analyst is to “center upon…[the analysand’s] core of being [through entering into] an empathic relationship of understanding the child’s [analysand’s] particular stage in development yet ahead in his vision of the child’s [analysand’s] future”—this held “in safe keeping” by the analyst. In his inimitable language, he describes a complex process that entails both the analyst’s empathic attunement and her capacity to make use of imagination—to envision the analysand through the course of the emotional growth that the analytic process facilitates.

As Loewald’s paper unfolds, he directs us to do much more than hearing what the analysand speaks. Even more than seeing. In using “the parent-child relationship as a model,” he goes on to articulate that therapeutic action invokes all of the senses: “This ‘more’ that the parent sees and knows” is a product of what is taken in by the mother as an “image of the child as seen, felt, smelled, heard, touched by the mother.” Furthermore, while being “in tune with the shifting levels of development,” this activity on the analyst’s part must always emanate from “the viewpoint of potential growth, that is, from the viewpoint of the future.”

Here we have a description of the analytic listening that centrally involves all five senses and that requires the possession of an imagination.

The psychoanalytic literature does speak of certain of these elements of analytic listening that I have described. But how do we go about developing this kind of analytic sensibility? From our personal analyses? Yes, but many of us initially had an analysis that was informed by a classical vision of the psychoanalytic process that did not permit the use of empathic attunement, countertransference, and other intersubjective experience as avenues by which to “listen” to the analysand and facilitate emotional growth. And the use of the analyst’s imagination, well, this was often enough considered “unscientific.” To whom can we turn to develop these capacities in ourselves so that we can generate more fertile processes when working with our own patients?

For many years now I have been turning to original works of fiction and their authors to teach me how to listen and how to imagine my patients. Beginning with short stories, then novels in general, I moved to a systematic study of Modernist works—Proust, Joyce, Faulkner, Woolf, and others. Something that I read by the creative writer Wallace Stegner at the very outset of this activity has remained a guiding principle for me. In speaking of qualities he looks for in selecting creative writing students for the Stegner fellowship at Stanford, he said the following:
Ultimately, what one looks for is sensibility…and sensibility is essentially senses. One looks for evidence that eyes and ears are acute and active, and that there is some capacity to find words for conveying what the senses perceive and [most importantly] what sense perceptions do to the mind that perceives them. (Stegner 1988), p. 16; my emphasis)

Applying Stegner’s words to psychoanalytic sensibility, we are told that not only must our senses be alive, we also have to pay close attention to how the music generated by our senses play upon our minds in ways that lead to an imaginative envisioning of our patients.

Each creative writer possesses his or her own kind of sensibility, and, for me, each whom I have read instructs me about a different dimension of the analytic process. In the fall of 2012 I led a ten-session seminar on analytic listening in which we did a close reading of Virginia Woolf’s To the Lighthouse during which the participants discussed clinical vignettes demonstrating how this remarkable novel informed a fuller understanding of the patient’s self- and object worlds, captured an aspect of the transference-countertransference, and/or sharpened capacities to listen more carefully and creatively to what was being communicated. During the last four sessions of the seminar I presented an analytic case for us to apply the sensibility generated by being immersed in this novel in the preceding weeks.

Although it is difficult to convey the exact experience that this group of clinicians had during this seminar, it is possible for me to present certain passages from To the Lighthouse that were particularly meaningful to us and for you to see whether you can make use of the experience of reading and reflecting as it relates to your own analytic or self-analytic work. I have previously described this kind of activity leading to “sensibility training” as conversations between psychoanalysis and imaginative literature. Whether you think private about what you read and contemplate, write about it on the International Psychoanalysis blog, or write to me personally, I hope that you kind have your own kind of “conversation.”

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In Part 2 of this communication, I will first introduce you to certain elements found in Modernist writing that are particularly conducive to exploring the psychoanalytic process. Then I will move directly into passages from To the Lighthouse, written by Virginia Woolf, a preeminent representative of this genera.
References


