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## What I Talk About When I Talk About Fiction

IN A 1989 *NEW YORK TIMES* piece,<sup>1</sup> Anatole Broyard wrote that D.W. Winnicott “[is] the only major therapist I know of whose language would have pleased a poet.... Winnicott read Henry James, and perhaps everyone should ask his analyst if he has read Henry James.” Broyard, a writer and literary critic, opined on the insufficiency of the terminology and the language of theory, diagnosis, and case studies in psychotherapy. He argued that those who come to psychotherapy deserve a more imaginative “literature of the self,” a rhetoric of psychotherapy that is animated by the poetic, the lyrical, and the sublime, and that touches our yearnings for transformation, transcendence, and transfiguration. In this essay I will offer a personal reflection on this perspective through a selective rendering of my education and intellectual formation, my books, and at times, my idiosyncratic fascinations, as they have and continue to animate my just-over-a-decade practice of psychotherapy.

I discovered Winnicott in an undergraduate course on the philosophy of literature, a course organized around the major novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky, from *The Insulted and Injured* to *The Brothers Karamazov*; a formidable reading list for a single semester that I inevitably did not complete, that I still have not completed. I was 20 years old, it was winter in Montreal, and I wore a long black, thrift store coat. My brother observed that I perhaps looked a bit like Raskolnikov, the main character in the novel that moved me the most that semester, *Crime and Punishment*.

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1 “About Books; Does Your Analyst Read Henry James”

Newly transferred from a small liberal arts college in New England, where I learned among many other things, that Dostoevsky had a rare form of epilepsy that made him more preoccupied with religious and metaphysical themes, I was now an undergraduate psychology major in a department committed to the scientific study of human behavior. During the Dostoevsky course I was also in the midst of a multi-term course on abnormal psychology/behavioral problems organized around a curated collection of articles from professional psychology journals with a professor who was bearded, cigar smoking, and an expert on alcoholism, substance abuse, and addiction. In that collection was a fascinating *American Psychologist* article that I was especially drawn to, "Behavior Therapy and the Ideology of Modernity." Citing Frankl and several philosophers including Kierkegaard and Sartre, Woolfolk and Richardson (1984) wrote, "there are inherent difficulties in any attempt to fashion a meaningful understanding of existence in terms of the moral and epistemological categories provided by scientific culture" (p. 782).

The philosophy of literature professor, an expert on moral philosophy and Kierkegaard, as well as a poet, used a rich array of secondary sources to read what the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) characterized in Dostoevsky's work as *polyphony*. A beautifully evocative idea borrowed from music theory, polyphony means a chorus of unmerged voices, a plurality of perspectives, a non-linearity held together in an engaging atonality within the form of a novel. Drawing from literary and art criticism, especially painting, moral philosophy, poetry, and psychoanalysis, the professor drew attention to the multilayered ways of reading Dostoevsky.

One of those was to read Dostoevsky novels as extraordinary psychological case studies in the form of polyphonic novels. It was in this way of reading that the professor used John Bowlby and Winnicott to talk about psychological damage, a kind of Dostoevskian developmental psychopathology. In Dostoevsky's world, characters encounter other characters in ways that reveal and change them, but not explicitly. They are changed by who the others are, how they live, and what happens between them. This theme lingered in my mind, and raises the question of how to understand what happens when patient and therapist encounter each other, talking in the places and spaces where psychotherapy is conducted, over and across time.

My encounter with Winnicott in these lectures led me to read *Playing and Reality* (1971). My copy is a trade paperback with an illustrated, slightly tattered teddy bear on the cover and an opening dedication: "To my patients who have paid to teach me."

I learned in an interview with his wife, Clare (Rudnytsky, 1991), that Winnicott voraciously read the novels of Henry James when he was a medical officer in WWI, and that he and his wife read fiction aloud together. I always thought that a lovely idea. Winnicott played piano and wrote poetry, and, towards the end of his life, he was "permanently listening" to the late quartets of Beethoven and still rode his bicycle, coasting down hills with his feet on the handlebars. Reflecting on those who encountered Winnicott, Rudnytsky wrote, "My quest for Winnicott has taught me how many people's lives were changed by having come in contact with this remarkable man" (1991, p. xvi).

I read *Playing and Reality* with great fascination, stimulation, and delight; it was unlike anything I had ever read in the field of psychology or psychoanalysis.

The prose was poetic and the theory and concepts read and moved like a kind of modern dance: mirroring and the mother-infant matrix; the dynamic between me and not-me; the emergence of the self and the construction of the false self; paradox and the

acceptance of the paradox; transitional objects, transitional phenomena, and potential space; a theory of play, creativity, and the location of cultural objects and experience. According to Winnicott (1971), “It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self” (p. 63). My copy of this book is heavily underlined and marked, the pages worn and faded. There are three ideas in *Playing and Reality* that emerged as a kind of classic jazz trio that came together, played, and created a soundtrack for my development and practice as a psychotherapist.

First is the idea that psychotherapy is located in *potential space*, the space between the therapist and the patient, between their respective inner psychic realities and each other, an intermediate area of experience created through “the overlap of two areas of playing” (Winnicott, 1971, p. 44), an intersubjectivity. The therapist’s work is animated by his or her own capacity to play, designing a “holding environment” with reliability and trust, and facilitating and caring about the patient’s capacity to play. The psychotherapist is “directed towards bringing the patient from a state of not being able to play into a state of being able to play” (p. 44), because for Winnicott, playing is what makes life worth living. Psychotherapy is in this way a dialectical relationship that aspires to create a space where both the patient and the therapist become more personally and interpersonally playful, imaginative, spontaneous, and enlivened, to find their own prose and poetry. Part of my encounter with the humanities was a desire to engage in creative work and expression in more traditional forms, like writing fiction, writing novels, or perhaps painting, as I am especially fascinated by the expansive canvases of Abstract Expressionism. And while I did not pursue the work and life of an artist for many reasons, I saw myself as a kind of displaced artist looking for a medium, and finding that medium in the practice of psychotherapy.

Second is the idea that part of the therapist’s process is to listen to, see, and evoke the patient’s “unintegrated state of the personality,” as it is here that individual creativity resides and can appear, “if reflected back, but only if reflected back” (Winnicott, 1971, p. 75). For me, this idea reverberates with Bakhtin’s polyphony, with the reading of novels, with listening to music, and suggests conceptualizing the patient as polyphonic. The therapist listens, gathers, gives shape and form through language and tone to the atonality, the non-linearity of the patient’s presentation and suffering, and with attention to timing, reflects back to the patient these unintegrated aspects of the self. In Winnicott’s theory, these are the constituents of a genuine and authentic self and thus inextricably linked to the recovery and discovery of the patient’s capacity to play, to have a more imaginative and creative, flexible and spontaneous relationship to self, others, and the external world.

Third is Winnicott’s idea about health. “It is of first importance for us to acknowledge openly that the absence of psychoneurotic illness may be health, but it is not life... we have yet to tackle the question of what life itself is about” (Winnicott, 1971, pp. 117, 116). This a humbling and incisive idea that is vital to my practice of psychotherapy and my development as a clinician. I strive to create a spaciousness that includes the reading and study of fiction and a broader engagement with the humanities, not as a separate endeavor, but as a substantive part of my psychotherapeutic vocation. This idea has also become more alive for me in recent years through a growing interest in mindfulness meditation and Buddhist psychology, especially the books of Mark Epstein, who also

draws on the poetics of Winnicott in his own unique perspective on the deficiencies of spirit and the spiritual in Western psychotherapeutic traditions and practices.

Weaving these Winnicottian threads, I recall a patient many years ago, a painter and combat veteran, who after several years of treatment, asked if he could give me a small antique Turkish rug with a dominant red and black color scheme. He imagined it on the floor between the patient and me, capturing in concrete form that which is ephemeral, the intricacies of what happens between patient and therapist over time. He also loved fiction, always reading and being affected by novels, often enthusiastically sharing and reading quotes and passages in session.

Novels are rich artifacts of Winnicott's potential space, of culture, and at its best, the novel does tackle the question of what life itself is about. The semester before the Dostoevsky course in my undergraduate years, I took a lecture course on the 20th century novel. One was Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a powerful and slim volume that came alive again many years later when I found myself at the Veterans Administration treating Vietnam veterans and, later, veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan. During the time we were reading *Heart of Darkness* in that course, a line from the novel was spray-painted on a brick wall in my neighborhood, known as the student ghetto, near a pizzeria and my favorite used-book store, The Word, that specialized in literature. The phrase was the culmination of that novel and of the film *Apocalypse Now*: "The horror! The horror" (Conrad, 1971, p.79). For some 10 years a central feature of my work as a psychotherapist was listening and gathering trauma narratives and finding ways to work therapeutically with veterans' stories, their suffering, their horror, and their damaged relationship with self, others, and the world; and sometimes, their own heart of darkness.

This course was also my introduction to Henry James. We read *The Ambassadors*, and I remember perhaps for the first time in my reading life that I felt a significant grief and loss when I read the final page. These characters and the prose of Henry James were no longer part of my everyday life, as I needed to move to the next novel on the syllabus. I still have my Norton Critical Edition of this novel, the spine now broken in several places, the pages also heavily underlined, and excavating this artifact from my books and reading history for this essay made me smile. A pervasive and central theme in many of Henry James' works, and inevitably, in his own life and personality, emerges early in this novel in a passage where Lambert Strether, the middle-aged American through whom the story is told and who travels to Paris, gives a speech to Little Bilham:

Live all you can; it's a mistake not to. It doesn't so much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life. If you haven't had that what have you had?... I see it now. I haven't done so enough before — and now I'm old; too old at any rate for what I see (James, 1964, p.132).

The speech goes on for at least a page with those beautiful Henry James sentences, his liberal use of the semicolon and dashes, drawing on description and metaphors, unpacking, expanding and deepening, moving back and forth into the interior of the characters, back into speech, dialogue and action. It has been more than 25 years since I first read this passage, this novel, and now I am closer in age to Strether than Little Bilham; and with that, I experience a deeper poignancy, a reflectiveness about what it means to be open to this life, about aging and regret. Henry James became known as "the Master" for his depictions of the psychological subtleties of the inner life, giving language to inner monologues and their tensions with action, relationships and the out-

side world — the very stuff of Winnicott’s potential space.

Reading and studying Henry James and Dostoevsky led me to another American in Paris, someone who, like Winnicott, immersed himself in Henry James novels and had a signed photograph of the John Singer Sargent portrait of Henry James hanging above his writing desk (Leeming, 1994). My next great fascination was the novelist, author, and public intellectual, James Baldwin. I read both *Another Country* and *Giovanni’s Room* during this period in my life, the latter on breaks during the summer I worked the night shift at the GM factory my dad worked at all his adult life, making plastic parts for automobiles. These Baldwin novels are also extraordinary psychological case studies about love, sexuality, race, cultural conventions, depression and suicide — and, the question of what life itself is about. Baldwin’s psychological approach to the novel is articulated and given context and form through his prose and style in part developed through the language and tones of preaching, his voracious reading and study of the literary canon, the improvisational music of jazz and the blues, and complex vicissitudes of his own personality and character in the social, cultural milieu of the 1950s and 1960s.

Baldwin had an unfinished essay on *The Ambassadors* (Leeming, 1994). “Live all you can; it’s a mistake not to,” is a familiar theme in literature and popular culture, as well as psychotherapy, but what gives the Strether speech its power and force is being contextualized in a more than 300-page novel, a narrative created through James’ own psychological style and aesthetic of story, plot, and characters. In his 1927 lectures *Aspects of the Novel*, E.M. Forster (1970) articulated a new and emergent language for talking about literature and the novel, which included a discussion of *The Ambassadors*. Borrowing the terms “pattern and rhythm” from painting and music, Forster favored the idea of the rhythmic relation of story, plot, characters and causality in the novel as a whole, an aspiration to model itself after musical forms, that the novel is “not completion. Not rounding off but opening out” (p. 170), into something larger, perhaps something beautiful, strange, and new. Forster, an accomplished novelist who was fascinated and influenced by music and music theory, also co-wrote the libretto for Benjamin Britten’s opera *Billy Budd*, transforming the Herman Melville novella into music.

A contemporary British novelist and essayist, and perhaps a literary heir to James Baldwin, Zadie Smith (2006) lectured about the reader of fiction and novels at *The New Yorker Festival*, “A novel is a two-way street, in which the labour required on either side is, in the end, equal. Reading, done properly, is every bit as tough as writing — I really believe that.” In Smith’s analogy of the reader as an amateur musician, he or she must play the sheet music that is the composition, the novel, must bring to life the rhythm and tempo, the musical phrasing, the style and aesthetic of the novel’s story, plot, and characters. For me, reading and discovering great fiction is an art to cultivate; it is “about the need to discover and explore the secret pleasures of the self through reading and thinking” (Toibin, 2004, p. 151). This is what I discovered: reading novels is an act of the creative imagination that enlivens my relationships with myself, language, others, the outside world, and my practice of psychotherapy.

However, our patients are not novels, works of fiction, or poems. They come to us suffering, and I believe we have a duty to help. The history of psychotherapy is in part about the different ways we think about helping our patients, this is what ties all psychotherapists together. This is also where we find the tension between science and art in the field of psychotherapy and its practitioners. In my work, I have had to confront my aversion

toward the scientific study of human behavior, toward empirical research on psychotherapy, and the word cluster descriptions that have come to dominate talk about psychotherapy: empirically validated/supported treatments or evidenced-based treatments.

I have been trained in cognitive processing therapy (CPT) and prolonged exposure for PTSD, and I have found them, if lacking in poetry, compelling and useful. But in many ways, these treatment models bring us back to Winnicott's question about health. The reduction of PTSD symptoms on various self-report measures may be health, but it is not life. Working with veterans I have developed a critical irreverence toward manualized treatment models and the social construction of evidence-based treatments. Having used them, I see both their value and the broader ethical imperative to actively evaluate and develop treatments, but as with Zadie Smith's analogy of the novel as sheet music for the reader to play, these treatments, these research based narratives of psychotherapy, still have to be played in session. It is in the playing that I can find my own poetics, pattern, and rhythm.

I took yet another undergraduate philosophy of literature course with the Dostoevsky professor, and I wrote a paper on the E.M. Forster novel, *A Room With A View*. I wrote about Baedeker travel guidebooks in Lucy Honeychurch's first visit to Italy, to Florence, and how the Baedekers can present a most narrow view of a place, of what to see and pay attention to, of deciding for you what is important and why; and, how living through a travel guidebook inhibited personal discovery, risk, spontaneity and serendipity in travel, in seeing a place, the presently experienced place beyond the one carefully constructed in the Baedeker. Manualized treatments feel, in part, like travel guidebooks for the practice and provision of psychotherapy.

Reading great novels, fiction and poetry, nourishes, cultivates, and opens up my sense and use of language, the primary vehicle of exchange in psychotherapy. And as E.M. Forster (1970) envisions the novel aspiring to be like music, "a type of beauty which fiction might achieve in its own way.... Expansion. That is the idea the novelist must cling to. Not completion. Not rounding off but opening out" (p. 170), I also aspire to create such a language in the practice of psychotherapy.

Conducting a psychotherapy is like reading a novel. Empathy and warmth are correctly discussed as qualities of the therapeutic alliance and development of the psychotherapist, but what about imagination? We begin with a polyphonic patient's presenting concerns and through inquiry and clinical process, through what the patient says and does not say, through the emergence of Winnicott's "unintegrated state of the personality," we contextualize our patient's suffering into a larger narrative of the very stuff of novels: story, plot, characters, and an evolving sense of the architecture of causality; we must imagine the patient's life, bring alive a developmental history, a present life lived outside our office. In her 1957 memoir, *On Not Being Able To Paint*, the psychoanalyst, writer, and dear friend of Winnicott, Marian Milner wrote:

Certainly seeing with one's own eyes, whether in painting or in living, seeing the truth of people and events and things needed an act of the imagination; for truth was never presented whole to one's senses at any particular moment, direct sensory experience was always fragmentary and had to be combined into a whole by the creative imagination (p.14).

A psychotherapy also has its own "pattern and rhythm" weaving back and forth from the past to the present; in the narration, talking, dialogue, and inquiry, where themes, images, metaphors, relationships, and the patient's unconscious emerge

in repetition and variation; in the reflections, interpretations, silences, and spaces between sessions; all these given power and force by the form of psychotherapy collaboratively constructed by therapist and patient, in Winnicott's potential space. And like a novelist, a poet, a painter, a composer, a chef, a psychotherapist cultivates a style and tone, a rhythm and tempo, a language that is his or her own, cultivated through his or her own character and personality, as a self and a psychotherapist, distilling various influences and experiences.

Like a meditation practice, I read fiction as part of my development as a self and a psychotherapist. In a recent *New Yorker* article on bibliotherapy at The School of Life, a London-based collective committed to the education of the emotions through the humanities, Ceridwen Dovey (2015) quoted the British novelist and author, Jeanette Winterson: "Fiction and poetry are doses, medicines. What they heal is the rupture reality makes on the imagination." Updating, or perhaps postmodernizing Broyard's query about Henry James that began this essay, one might ask, perhaps one should ask, does your therapist read Haruki Murakami? ▼

## COMMENTARY

WHILE FIRST READING THIS ESSAY, I recalled the initial sessions with a then-freshman named "Emily," a college student with whom I have worked for the last three years. Emily introduced herself by declaring a passion for literature and an intention to become an English major. To the former English teacher in me, her love of literature and poetry was endearing and notable; however, soon her poetic language and focus on literature began to fog up the picture. After a few sessions, my countertransference was slight irritation and a growing impatience to meet "her." I had a similar experience in relationship to this author. Initially, I was grabbed by the opening paragraph and excited to read the author's thoughts on literature, and how influential writers had informed the process of "transformation, transcendence, and transfiguration" in his experience of psychotherapy. Yet as the essay progressed, I found myself slightly irritated, but also noticed I was hungry for more. The irritation was related to the sheer amount of literary references, and the hunger was wanting to get to know the author as therapist and how his passion for art and artistry showed up in the consulting room.

The essay is, at different turns, a retrospective on the author's educational path, a distillation of ideas that have influenced this author, and a musing on the ways that being an artist and a psychotherapist merge. This is an ambitious task and it created a wish in me to have a conversation. Yet, a conversation implies a degree of informality, and I could not quite tell if the author wished to have a more intimate or more formal relationship with the intended audience.

On second reading, I grew less irritated and more appreciative that the author identifies a number of great writers, and draws the connection between favorite pieces of literature and how these works of art shape his work as therapist and supervisor. I am left thinking that there may be two potential essays lurking, one a more formal, didactic essay, and the other a more personal story. My personal preference would be to read the latter. For example, after the discussion on Winnicott's "classic jazz trio," I want to know more about the author's work with the combat veteran who wanted to give him a small Turkish rug. I would have been interested to read how the author related the concepts of "potential space," "the dynamic unconscious," and the question of "what life itself is about" to this particular patient.

At the end, I felt that the author and I shared an important perspective: that conducting therapy can be like reading a novel. However, I had never put this concept into words the way the author does: "we contextualize our patient's suffering into a larger narrative of the very stuff of novels: story, plot, characters, and an evolving sense of the architecture of causality; we must

imagine the patient's life, bring alive a developmental history, a present life lived outside the office." At an instinctual level, I knew that being an English teacher was a natural precursor to being a therapist, however this author puts that abstract knowing into words. My initial association with Emily remains salient; I find myself hoping I will get to meet this person.

—Diane Christie Shaffer, PsyD

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As I began reading this essay, I immediately reflected on the author's courage in calling it an "essay" and insisting that articles on the psychotherapeutic enterprise ought to be not just personally revealing, but more literate, poetic, even playful.

Although intuitively alerted that I was possibly going to be treated to an exceptional intellectual enterprise, I was unprepared for what followed: a long and complicated prose poem integrating the author's intellectual development—especially through literature but including art and music—his way of conceptualizing and practicing his work as a psychotherapist and educator, and his life as a person.

This essay ought to have a short forward warning that it is written for the serious reader, to be studied, not perused or approached casually. It is probably an essay to be read several times.

I am most often impatient with articles that go on and on, telling me more about "woodchucks" than I will ever find useful. Brevity usually can be good enough, but my marked copy will show underlining especially when the writer describes his efforts to think about and integrate his cognitive-manual-science style with his dynamic-unconscious side, and when he advocates playfulness as an essential ingredient in the good life, well lived.

One of his heroes, Winnicott, illuminated the importance of the "good enough." This essay is more than good enough. It probably belongs in the *New York Review of Books*, but it is an important kudo for *Voices* to have it appear first in the journal celebrating the "person who is the therapist."

—Vin Rosenthal, PhD

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