

Thomas Gaden, Review + Interpretation Sensory  
Something  
Thought

Words and sentences, like people, must be allowed a certain slippage. I do not mean to suggest that words, sentences (and human beings) can be said to mean (or be) anything we wish them to mean (or be). Rather, I am drawing attention to the stifling effect on imagination of our efforts to define, to specify with ever increasing precision, what we mean (who we are). Imagination depends on the play of possibilities. In this volume, words and sentences at their best will be only loosely "fastened to the page" (Frost 1929, p. 713). I will use words such as "aliveness" and "deadness," "human" and "perverse," "sincere" and "inauthentic" without defining them except—and this is a large exception—except in the way they are used in sentences. I will at different times use the words "empty," "stagnant," "stale" and "stillborn" to talk about an experience of emotional deadness. The reader might reasonably ask, "Which of

these feelings or states, if any, does Ogden have in mind when he speaks of emotional deadness? Moreover, isn't the very idea of the *experience* of emotional deadness an oxymoron?" I will ask the reader to allow me (and himself) room in which a sense of emptiness might slide into a feeling of deadness, and then into a deadness of feeling, and then back again into an experience of emptiness, picking up shadings of meaning along the way. It is important that words be used (and read) in a way that allows their accrued meanings to be altered by (and to affect) each new emotional context in which they are spoken or written or read.

It has increasingly seemed to me that the sense of aliveness and deadness of a given moment of an analytic hour is perhaps the most important gauge of the analytic process. The attempt to use language to capture/convey a sense of this delicate interplay of aliveness and deadness of human experience in the analytic setting represents a major challenge to contemporary psychoanalysis and will be a central concern of this book. Although this facet of the analytic experience will not occupy the foreground of each chapter, it is my hope that it will be felt to lie in the wings of virtually every sentence.

In attempting to capture something of the experience of being alive in words, the words themselves must be alive. Words, when they are living and breathing, are like musical chords. The full resonance of the chord or phrase must be allowed to be heard in all of its suggestive imprecision. We must attempt in our use of lan-

guage, both in our theory-making and in our analytic practice, to be makers of music, rather than players of notes. To that end, we have little choice but to accept that a word or a sentence is not a still point of meaning and will not sound the same or mean the same thing a moment later. When a patient asks me to repeat what I have just said, I may tell him something to the effect that I cannot since that moment is gone. I add that he and I might try to say something that takes as its starting point his feeling about what has just occurred.

Words and sentences, like people, are forever in motion. The attempt to fix the meanings of words and sentences turns them into lifeless effigies, immobile stained cells preserved on laboratory slides that are only barely suggestive of the living tissue from which they came. When the language of analyst or analysand becomes stagnant, it is no longer of any use in the task of conveying a sense of living human experience. What I aspire to in the use of language in the analytic dialogue is captured in A.R. Ammons' (1968) comparison of living language in poetry to a walk: "A walk involves the whole person; it is not reproducible; its shape occurs, unfolds; it has a motion characteristic of the walker" (p. 118).

What it means to bring a person, a feeling, an idea, to life in writing is to be found in the *reader's experience of reading or hearing* the words and sentences being said (written) by the writer. This is the challenge of all literature and of all analytic writing since both are fundamentally concerned with the task of using lan-

guage to capture something of human experience. If we as readers cannot sense something human, however faint, in the experience of reading an analytic paper, a poem, an essay, or a novel, then we come away empty-handed. The work of the analytic writer, like the writer of poetry or fiction, begins and ends with his effort to create in the language the experience of human aliveness. If an analytic writer contents himself with talking "about" aliveness or deadness (that "stolid word about" [Wm. James 1890, p. 246]), his efforts will certainly be in vain. This book, if it is to achieve anything of its goal of capturing something of human experience in the analytic setting, must attempt at all times to be an experiment in which the writer in the act of writing and the reader in the act of reading *experiences* a sense of aliveness that exists in the language being used. This book will be of value in the sense I am describing to the extent that the reader now and again has the experience of *feeling* what aliveness is in what it feels like to read the sentences, or as Frost (1962) liked to put it, "to say the lines" (p. 911).

The reader must do at least half the work in gaining from the language of this book a sense of what it is to be alive. "The process of reading is not a half-sleep, but, in highest sense, an exercise, a gymnast's struggle. . . . The reader is to do something for himself, must be on the alert, must himself or herself instruct indeed the poem, argument, history, metaphysical essay—the text furnishing the hints, the clue, the start or framework" (Whitman 1871, p. 992). The black and white shapes

on the page and the white space that surrounds those markings are inert. The reader must do something with them. He must actively, even passionately, engage with the words in the act of using himself to create something human of his own, in his own terms. After all, what terms, other than one's own, are there with which to create an experience that is human?

Among the most astute comments concerning what it means for an analysis to be alive has come (as one might expect), not from an analyst, but from a novelist and essayist, speaking in 1884 about the art of fiction:

The good health of an art which undertakes to reproduce life must demand that it be perfectly free. It lives upon exercise and the very meaning of exercise is freedom. The only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel, without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting. [Henry James 1884, p. 49]

James' statement about the novel (and implicitly about the relationship of writer and reader) has important relevance to the art of psychoanalysis and to the understanding of the relationship of analyst and analysand. The idea that above all an analysis must be interesting is for me both self-evident and a revolutionary conception (cf. Phillips 1996). To be interesting, the analysis must be free to "exercise," to shape itself and be given shape in any way that the participants are able to invent. The freedom to "exercise" is the free-

dom to experiment: "Art lives upon discussion, upon experiment, upon curiosity, upon variety of attempt, upon the exchange of views and the comparison of standpoints" (H. James 1884, pp. 44-45). When the analysis is alive, it unselfconsciously manages for periods of time to be an experiment that has left the well charted waters of prescribed form; it is a discussion fueled by curiosity and by variety of attempt; it is an endeavor that depends upon genuine exchange of views and comparison of standpoints. Analysis that has become a routinized form in which "knowledge" is conveyed from analyst to analysand is uninteresting; it is no longer an experiment since the answers, at least in broad outline, are known from the outset. The form of a novel and of an analysis must not be pre-scribed. To do so is to foreclose experiment:

The form, it seems to me, is to be appreciated after the fact: then the author's choice has been made . . . ; then we can follow lines and directions. . . . The execution belongs to the author alone; it is what is most personal to him, and we measure him by that. The advantage, the luxury, as well as the torment and responsibility of a novelist is that there is no limit to what he may attempt as an executant—no limit to his possible experiments, efforts, discoveries, successes. [H. James 1884, p. 50]

As is the case with the novel, the form of an analysis can only be appreciated in hindsight. For example, an

analyst does not plan to play a role in a perverse scene in an analytic relationship. The "script" or form of the perverse scenario is a reflection of the analysand's internal object world and is given shape as an unconscious intersubjective construction of analyst and analysand. Understanding of the meanings of the form is almost always retrospective and this form is indeed what is most personal to its authors. We ask a great deal of ourselves as analysts and as analysands in demanding that we not rely on "pre-scribed" form, that we attempt to be open to experiment: "There is no limit [in range, intensity and complexity of feeling and thought] to what he [analyst or analysand] may attempt." Moreover, we ask of ourselves that we be unconsciously available to be subjects in the unconscious experiment of the other. We as analysts attempt to render ourselves unconsciously receptive to being made use of in playing a variety of roles in the unconscious life of the analysand. Unconscious receptivity of this sort (Bion's [1962a] state of "reverie") involves (a partial) giving over of one's separate individuality to a third subject, a subject that is neither analyst nor analysand but a third subjectivity unconsciously generated by the analytic pair (Ogden 1994a). To consistently offer oneself in this way is no small matter: it represents an emotionally draining undertaking in which analyst and analysand each to a degree "loses his mind" (his capacity to think and create experience as a distinctly separate individual).

It is only in the process of terminating an analysis that analyst and analysand "retrieve" their separate

minds, but the minds "retrieved" are not the minds of the individuals who had entered into the analytic experience. Those individuals no longer exist. The analyst and analysand that are "retrieved" as separate individuals are themselves in significant ways new psychological entities having been created/changed by their experience in and of the third analytic subject ("the subject of analysis").

The analysand's experience of the death of the analyst prior to the planned ending of a fruitful analysis<sup>1</sup> represents not only an experience of enormous personal loss, but, as important, an experience of a type of insanity. The analyst's death forecloses for the analysand the possibility of fully retrieving his mind (a mind that has not been exclusively his own personal possession for some time). The aspect of mind that has (in part) been "lost" is the mind that has been generated and developed intersubjectively. It is a mind that can be appropriated by the analysand only gradually in the course of an uninterrupted analytic experience. The death of the analyst represents a violent disruption of "the place where [the analysand] lives" (Winnicott 1971a). The (impossible) responsibility of the analyst to stay alive for the entirety of the analysis is a heavy one and constitutes one of the strains of the profession

1. The idea of a "fruitful" analysis is to be differentiated from the illusory conception of a "completed" analysis that has been brought to a successful termination after the transference conflicts and distortions have been successfully "resolved."

that I think has not been sufficiently recognized. We underestimate the pressure generated by the analyst's (largely unconscious) knowledge that he (along with almost every parent) has implicitly promised what he cannot possibly guarantee—to stay alive long enough for the analysand (or child) to retrieve/create a mind of his own capable of generating a separate place in which to live that is outside of, and yet never completely separate from, the shared mental space in which he has grown up.

The art of analysis is an art form that requires not only that we struggle with the problem of creating a place where analyst and analysand might live, but also requires that we develop a use of language adequate to giving voice to our experience of what life feels like in that ever shifting place. We ask of ourselves (and of our analysands) that we attempt to speak in our own voice with our own words, for this is a very large part of what allows analysis to be a human event. "The execution belongs to the author alone; it is what is most personal to him. . . ." Paradoxically, it requires a great deal of training and experience to be able to talk in a way that feels and sounds spontaneous, unpracticed, uncontrived, undictated by analytic convention or prescription. This is not simply a matter of the analyst's growing, over the course of time, to feel more familiar with, and comfortable in, the role of analyst. An analyst at any stage of his career may come to substitute for the sound of his own voice and the choice of his own words the stale formulaic sound of "accepted" technique as

defined by an affiliation to a school of analytic thought or by a conscious or unconscious imitation of or identification with his own analyst(s), supervisors, or other analysts whom he currently respects and admires.

It is a very great achievement indeed for an analyst to develop the capacity to "simply talk" to his analysand. The idea of "simply talking" might be thought of as the analogue to Freud's (1912) instruction to the analyst: "Simply listen" (p. 112). So often therapists and analysts speak in a "therapeutic voice" (parodied in an often disconcertingly accurate way in films such as *Annie Hall* and *Sex, Lies and Video Tape*). Such stiff therapeutic tones are like those heard in no other form of human discourse.

Learning to talk with patients with a voice of one's own and with words of one's own requires that one learn to hear and to use "the *living* sounds of speech" (Frost 1915, p. 687): "the vital thing then in all composition, in prose and verse . . . is the ACTION of the voice. . . . Get the *stuff* of life into the technique of your writing. That's the only escape from dry rhetoric" (p. 688). It is also the analyst's only escape from dry "therapeutic" rhetoric, or dead language. The analyst's speech must be the creation of a person who is alive in that moment. Living human speech is as difficult to come by in the analyst's spoken use of language as it is in written prose or verse.

Some years later, Frost (1929) expanded on the idea of "living sounds of speech":

Everything written is as good as it is dramatic. . . . A dramatic necessity goes deep into the nature of the sentence. Sentences are not different enough to hold the attention unless they are dramatic. No ingenuity of varying structure will do. All that can save them is the speaking tone of voice somehow entangled in the words . . . for the ear of the imagination. [p.713]

In this passage, Frost's word "dramatic" is itself dramatic. It is a word that is unexpected and conveys a good deal of what Frost calls the "fetching" (1918, p. 694) use of everyday words, somehow transformed into newly made words (words "fetched" from their customary place). The word "dramatic" has been newly made here so that it no longer means histrionic, hysterical, shocking, flashy, glamorous, theatrical, and the like. It seems more to suggest that the language is personal, unique to the person speaking it, particular to the situation in which it is spoken and to the person to whom it is spoken. As a result, "dramatic" speech (quite the opposite of being staged) is a highly revealing and intimate use of language in that one has offered and entrusted to another person something that one has made *for him* to use as he will. It is a use of language that is risk-taking in that it asks something of the listener in the process of making something for him. In being alive and present in one's language, in having "one's speaking tone of voice somehow . . . entangled in the words," the speaker asks that an

aspect of himself be recognized "by the ear of the [listener's] imagination."

To have one's attempts to speak "dramatically" (intimately and personally) go unheard and unused is no small event for either analyst or analysand. When the analyst's words go unheard, it is an isolating, frustrating and disappointing event. When the analysand's words (and the aspect of himself that is entangled in his words and speaking tone of voice) go unheard by the analyst, it is a far more serious matter: it is a reflection of the fact that the analyst, for the moment, is no longer able to provide "an imagining ear," a living human presence to be with and to be talked to. The analysand's self-protective withdrawal will almost certainly follow (for example, in the form of acting-in or acting out, somatization, reliance on manic, paranoid, and autistic defenses, and so on). Such is the nature of human discourse: a lapse of this sort on the part of the analyst is painful, but not tragic. It is part of the rhythm of analytic discourse and of all other forms of human discourse. However, if this pattern continues unabated and unexamined in an analytic setting, something far more destructive to the analysis is set in motion. When the analyst is unable to analyze the unconscious thoughts, feelings, and sensations (often manifested in the analyst's reverie experience) that are preventing him from listening freely and imaginatively, a gulf between the analyst and the analysand grows. Until this state of affairs is recognized and folded into the self-reflective work of the analysis, either through counter-

transference analysis, or through the patient's successfully bringing the matter to the awareness of the analyst, genuine analytic work has come to an end. Such impasses often require that the analyst seek consultation or further personal analysis.

As will be discussed in later chapters, I believe that the analytic task most fundamentally involves the effort of the analytic pair to help the analysand become human in a fuller sense than he has been able to achieve to this point. This is no abstract, philosophical quest; it is a requirement of the species as basic as the need for food and air. The effort to become human is among the very few things in a person's life that may over time come to feel more important to him than his personal survival.

Again, I will turn to a poet and playwright to provide language with which to convey a sense of the way in which the survival of the individual is quite different from *the experience* of being alive. Goethe's *Faust* (1808) is for me one of the most powerful expressions in literature of the battle for life as a human being. The complexity of *Faust* is lost when the protagonist is viewed as a man who "makes a deal with the devil" in which he trades his soul for unrestricted access to life's pleasures (many of which are "forbidden" sensual pleasures). The opening scenes of *Faust I* to my mind present a far more interesting and complex character and dilemma. We are introduced to Faust as a man who is in a state of deep despair after having devoted his life to studying "Philosophy, Law, Medicine—and what is

worst—Theology.” “Yet I am a wretched fool/and still no wiser than before.” “I get no joy from anything.” “No dog would want to linger on like this.”

It takes some time for the reader/audience to get a sense of the sources of this despair. Faust has studied in vain and has come to view God as useless to him, not because he wants to become more than human in order to gain access to pleasures forbidden to mortal men. Quite the contrary. What Faust longs for is to be a mortal man (the very thing he feels that God has denied him). Mephistopheles fails to understand this and offers him unending earthly delights (“You can sample whatever you like”), but Faust is not in the least interested in the prospect of being able to “snatch what suits [his] passing fancy.” Faust yearns not for a privileged place outside of human experience and time, but rather seeks a place within it: “Let’s plunge into the torrents of time/into the world of eventful experience” (p. 45). Faust goes on:

and I’m resolved my most inmost being shall share in what’s the lot of all mankind that I shall understand their heights and depths, shall fill my heart with all their joys and griefs, and so expand myself to theirs and, like them, suffer shipwreck too. [p. 46]

Faust feels that he has not experienced what it is to be human (“the lot of all mankind”) and uses the words “their” and “them” in a way that reflects his feeling that he occupies a position outside of humankind.

Goethe’s framing of Faust’s dilemma in this way captures for me what is most basic to the therapeutic task of psychoanalysis: the effort to create conditions in which a particular type of discourse might take place in which the analysand and the analyst attempt to enhance their capacity to take part in “eventful experience,” to experience a full range of “the joys and griefs, the heights and depths” of human emotion.

Although the capacity to be human in this sense is viewed by Faust as “the lot of all mankind,” Faust does not yet understand (or, perhaps more accurately, cannot bear the thought) in these opening scenes that the *inability* to be fully human is itself an aspect of “the lot of all mankind.” All mankind is excluded to varying degrees from “eventful experience” and in the desperation and frustration that we share with Faust in our efforts to become more fully human, we each make our own silent (largely unconscious) “deals” with ourselves. These “deals” (which in technical terms might be called “pathological solutions”) are not made for the purpose of becoming super-human (which is to become non-human), but for the purpose of becoming more fully human. However, in unconsciously making these “deals” with ourselves, we unwittingly enter more deeply into the non-human—that is, into forms of substitution for life that superficially appear human, but ultimately do not feel either human or alive. For example, as will be discussed in Chapter 3, the perverse individual attempts to bring himself to life by means of compulsively scripted forms of sexual excitement only



to find that instead of creating life for himself, he has imprisoned himself in an internal and external object world that is an unchanging imitation (and often a bitter mockery) of living human experience.

Perverse individuals are by no means the only people who enter into unconscious deals with themselves. The unconscious deals we all make with ourselves are psychological events in which we, for example, trade freedom for safety, aliveness for certainty. Of course, the safety and certainty that we secure for ourselves are illusory, but we rely heavily on our illusions. For example, we are, I believe, incapable of both maintaining our sanity and genuinely experiencing our own mortality. Regardless of the enormity of the effort that we might make, we involuntarily avert our gaze at the last moment. In that instant of turning away, we (in fantasy) become immortal and omnipotent and to that degree become less fully alive in the unbearable intensity and immediacy of the present moment.

From this perspective, every form of psychopathology, however extreme or however subtle (and universal), might be thought of as representing a form of unconscious self-limitation of one's capacity to experience being alive as a human being. The limitation of the individual's capacity to be alive may be manifested in a multitude of forms including a constriction of one's range and depth of feeling, thought and bodily sensation, a restriction of one's dream-life and reverie-life, a sense of unrealness in one's relations to oneself and to other people, or a compromise of one's ability

to play, to imagine and to use verbal and non-verbal symbols to create/represent one's experience. We not only accept, but embrace these and other limitations of our capacity to be alive when the prospect of being more fully alive as a human being is felt to involve a form of psychic pain that we are afraid we cannot endure. In embracing these forms of psychological deadness, we sacrifice a part of ourselves for the survival of the whole, but find that the "whole" has been sapped of a good deal of vitality in the process.

When I attempt to find words to describe our relationship to ourselves in our efforts to avoid entering into these unconscious "deals" with ourselves, I am reminded of Faulkner's (1946) terse, darkly humorous description of Caddie, the female protagonist of *The Sound and the Fury*: "Doomed and knew it" (p. 10). (Caddie is not even given the benefit of a pronoun in this casually damning verdict that is spit out in four monosyllabic words.) We as analysts are somehow dimly aware of the way in which we are "doomed" (or at least ill-fated) in our strivings to become fully human and in our efforts to assist the analysand in his attempts to do so. Nonetheless, it is in this effort to become more fully human that we are alive as analyst and analysand; it is in this experiment that the art of psychoanalysis lives.

In the chapters that follow, I explore the ways in which the analytic experience is a fabric woven from the warp and the woof of aliveness and deadness, of reverie and interpretation, of privacy and communication, of individuality and intersubjectivity, of the seemingly

ordinary and the deeply personal, of a freedom to experiment and a groundedness in existing forms, of a love of imaginative language for itself and the use of language as a means to a therapeutic end.

---

**2**

---

**Analyzing Forms of Aliveness  
and Deadness**