

Imaginal dialogue as a method of narrative inquiry

Nini Fang

University of Edinburgh

This paper joins the discussions on imaginal dialogue with references to the relational turn in psychoanalysis. It explores imaginal dialogue as a creative, relational endeavour in evoking the unconscious materials. By describing my own imaginal dialogue with Virginia Woolf, it exemplifies the potentiality of reading as an embodied, co-constructed interplay between the reader and the text. The deepening of relational and dialogical engagement with the text not only stirs the affective depth in the reader, but also brings the reader to conjure the presence of the author as an object for relatedness in the process of narrative inquiry. Imaginal dialogue transgresses beyond the poststructuralist allowance of interpretive pluralism to relational processes of *working with* the encounters with the presence of the author as their imaginary co-inquirer. Imaginal dialogue, I argue, not only provides an alternative kind of narrative framing, but the imaginal relationship becomes the very locus of knowledge creation.

Keywords: imaginal dialogue, creative-relational, Virginia Woolf, object-relations, Fairbairn

Imaginal dialogue has an indispensable place in our daily trivia, in our conscious endeavour of crafting personal narratives, and in the unconscious wandering in dreams and fantasy. We can all relate to having imaginal dialogues, when a difficult decision is in our hands to make, with parts of oneself and voices of family and friends taking on contrasting views, defying us to know the best way forward amid the discordant internal debates. Through imaginal dialogue with these voices we journey into the past, envision future scenarios and its many possible contingencies, navigating the intricacy of intimate social relations carried forward from the past, directing the present and shaping the imagined future.

Imaginal dialogue is in our human nature. Mary Watkins (2016[1986]), in *Invisible Guests*, beckons due respect to imaginal dialogue. She argues:

[...] [E]ven when we are outwardly silent, within the ebb and flux of our thought, we talk with critics, with our mothers, our god(s), our consciences. [...] We may find ourselves as audience or as narrator to conversations among imaginal others – others not physically present but actually experienced nonetheless.

(Watkins, 2016[1986], p. 1–2)

Her work reminds us to read with caution discourses which assign prioritised ontological significance to the actual or visible others over the imaginal ones, e.g. imaginary friends, and those which reduce imaginal dialogue into a form of psychological dysfunction in need of diagnostic labelling (e.g. schizophrenic, multiple personalities). Such discourses, according to Watkins (2016[1986]), deprecate our innate capacity for imaginal dialogue and forecloses further understanding of “the multiplicity of their possible functions” (p. 5) in the human mind.

Whilst Watkins’s provocation that imaginal dialogues need “a conceptual space [...] where they can exist with integrity” (p. 5) has found some realisation, particularly in the area of counselling and psychotherapy where the therapeutic use of imaginal dialogue has accrued scholarly discussions (c.f. McNiff, 1992; Smythe, 2013; Iliya & Harris, 2015; Felipe, 2016), the potential of imaginal dialogue for narrative inquiry remains much under-conceptualised, calling for more scholarly input. This paper hopes to contribute to furthering this conceptualisation by joining the existing understanding of imaginal dialogue with contemporary psychodynamic insights following “the relational turn” (Clarke, Hahn, & Hoggett, 2008). By describing my own use of imaginal dialogue with Virginia Woolf for my doctoral inquiry, I will demonstrate its methodological potentiality as possessing a unique strength enabled by its blurring the line between fantasy and reality which makes space for the kind of narrative practices born out of relational engagement with literature.

What is imaginal dialogue?

Watkins (2016[1986]) conceptualises imaginal dialogue as dialogical interaction that is internally, hence privately, directed but nevertheless interpersonally conditioned and framed. Imaginal dialogue might take several possible forms, for example, between the self and an imaginal other, between aspects of the self, or between imaginal others with the self being the audience or witness. Imaginal dialogue anchors itself in the postmodernist premise that the nature of the self is fundamentally dialogical and that our sense of identity arises from narratively

construed “whoness” (Sarbin, 2017, p.201); it joins in the narrative turn¹ which assumes that subjective process of meaning-making is foundational to our coming in touch with our sense of narrative identity (Sarbin, 1986, 2017; Hermans, 1987; Hermans, Kempen, & Van Loon, 1992; Atkins, 2004). Indeed, what could be more natural than story-telling when the question of self-hood and identity arises? Moreover, if the self could be seen as dialogically constituted, it is then crucial to acknowledge the self also as a site of relational traces preserving elements of an idiosyncratic feel-sensing of our whoness.

We cannot be dialogical in the absence of any objects² for relatedness, this is what the relational turn (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983; Clarke et al., 2008) in psychoanalysis wants us to consider. That is, the dialogical capacity we take for granted would not have been possible without prior traces of social relations which spawn the subject’s future relational positionality. The dialogical self, as it now appears to me, can find a mutually enriching companion in Fairbairn’s psychoanalytic formulation of the self, which is assumed to be by nature *object-seeking*. In Fairbairn’s object relations theory, the need for relatedness marks the essence of human desire. We seek objects who can meet our needs for, hence help us retrieve a sense of, mutual relatedness with others (Mitchell, 1998, p.66–70). Mutual relatedness draws the subject into the entanglement of social relations, seizing the subject in its perpetual fascination with *who I am to/for/with/for you*. Our whoness is therefore always in the process of being defined by the social relations that the self has, remembers, desires, and creates (Rubens, 1994, p.153).

In Fairbairn’s formulation of human psychology, objects acquire their significance and meaning through being engaged relationally. The dialogical self is therefore simultaneously an object-seeking self. Precisely because the self not only seeks an object who speaks back as a “dialogical partner” (Sarbin, 2017, p.201) but one which is capable of engaging us to attend to the questions of how our subjectivity is tentatively experienced *in relation to* the other. Seeking for relatedness is

1. In addition, as Smith & Sparkes (2008) argue, the field of dialogical studies is saturated with arrays of divergent perspectives and traditions each making use of the terms ‘narrative turn’ and ‘narrative identity’ with different theoretical connotations and references. The point of this article does not lie in joining the on-going current of debates surrounding dialogue and its link to narrative identity, but in conceptualizing the use of imaginal dialogue.

2. Note that in psychoanalytic theory, the term ‘object’ is often differentiated from ‘subject’. Object refers not just to items but can also be used in relation to people. They are considered objects in the sense that they gain meaning and significance in relation to the subject, i.e. how it is perceived, experienced, ‘used’ (Winnicott, 1971) and related to by the subject. The term, ‘object-relationship’ therefore points towards the interrelation between how “... the subject constitutes his objects but also the way these objects shape his action” (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973, p.278).

what essentially differentiates imaginal dialogue from the concept of monological inner speech despite both happening in the internal, private terrain. Monological inner speech is usually referred to as the ego-centric act of talking to oneself, such as a child's thinking out loud, where the recipient is often unitary and undivided. Imaginal dialogue, on the other hand, refers to the inner discursive exchange with two (or more) parties within oneself and a sense of there being a relational other and mutual perception is always present. It is by nature socially-motivated (Watkins, 1986).

Imaginal dialogue stemmed from the recognition that the relatable object can not only be sought in the external but also in the internal landscape of the mind hosting both conscious reminiscences and unconscious traces of interpersonal experiences. The imaginal objects being sought may be a full or partial representation of someone from past experiences or an imaginal character whose existence may be partly or wholly fictionalised. Whilst it takes place privately in one's own head, the dialogical exchange between the subject and the imaginal object are not negotiated by the latter being invisible or fictitious. For example, I might hear the voices of my mum expressing doubts about a choice I am to make, even when *in reality* I know I have not informed her of anything. This would not stop me from attempting to reason with mum-in-my-head.³ It is in this sense that the imaginal object in imaginal dialogue is seen as possessing its own autonomous consciousness, i.e. I have little control over what the-mum-in-my-head might react. This seemingly having a consciousness of its own enables it to take up an autonomous position to partake in a dialogical interplay with the self.⁴ Albeit the dialogical interaction happens internally, both the imaginary object and process of imaginal dialogue are experienced as real.

Multiplicity of self re-considered from a Fairbairnian perspective

The question of self-hood cannot derive satisfactory answers without acknowledging the inherent nature of the self as multi-voiced, as if there is "an entire cast of characters living inside of us" (Bruner, 2004, p.12). It is Bruner (2004) who reminds us of a very early dialogical theorist of the past century: Sigmund Freud. Freud's psychoanalytic work explored the identity-shaping forces of the internal objects, later conceived in his tripartite model as id, ego, and super-ego. Freud recognised that each of them seemingly possesses an autonomous consciousness

3. With thanks to the anonymous reviewer who suggested the compelling example.

4. The self here is referred to, in Watkins conceptualisation, as "the experiential locus of consciousness" (Watkins, 1986, p. 2).

and disparate priorities that interlock them in a constant tension with each other. They direct the individual's thought-processes, affective experiences, and action, albeit in a largely unconscious way, shaping the story being told by the protagonist's I ('ego').

What Freud started, Fairbairn reconceptualised. Fairbairn criticised Freud's formulation of internal objects saying they "are not all inherently dynamic structures" (Fairbairn, 1946, p.148) in the sense that Freud's id, ego, and superego seemed too fixed and rigid, capable only of predictable patterns of interaction. Internal objects and their interactions are, in Fairbairn's account, a much more complex *dynamic* system, due to its being in continual interaction with the person's social relational circumstances. Put another way, what goes on internally has the power to influence the subject's experiences and interactions with external others and vice versa.⁵ We came to see, in the wake of Freud, the human mind as layered and split, as a repertoire filled with mostly hidden selves powered by their own distinct desires and indignation. The origin of these hidden selves is much more complex in Fairbairn's reconceptualization than in Freud's. For Fairbairn, they are hidden, forced out of the conscious awareness due to their traumatic nature with emotional pain that would otherwise overwhelm the subject if left unexpressed. Moreover, Fairbairn (1946) believes that the hidden selves are created and shaped precisely for the purpose of *realistically* preserving figments of traumatic experiences with the external objects once experienced and lived through. Though it may not be helpful to always see hidden selves or internal objects in the entity of a character, as if they could be clearly and squarely defined. Irrespective of their invisibility, we detect their presence through manifestations of voices. "They are there to be heard", as Bruner (2004, p. 12) reminds us.

To hear their voices is to hear from a unique experiential position a series of relational experiences that a part of the self has once lived, experienced, been defined and wounded by. I believe, it is in this sense that we can assert the view that the dialogical self is, in and of itself, constituted and enlivened by a multiplicity of voices that are eager to be heard, capable of influencing the story which we tell. The voices might be "urging us on, cajoling, criticizing, praising and pleading with us, seemingly at every turn" (Smythe, 2013, p.635). The self-reflexive contemplation of whoness can never be freed from the interference of these internally divided voices and perspectives, revealing how any personal meanings represented through a singular lens of the story-telling subject can only be partial

5. However, it is to great disadvantage that Fairbairn did not generate further theory on the dynamic interactions between the subsidiary selves and internalized bad objects, nor did he expand upon how the endopsychic structures play out in dynamic interaction with social contexts.

and insufficient. “An extensive self-making narrative”, Bruner contends, “will try to speak for them all” (2004, p. 12). Only that we cannot. Not without some help, either through personal therapy which attends to these hidden sides of the self, or through, in my case, an imaginal dialogue with Virginia Woolf.

Having outlined what imaginal dialogue is and can be, in the following sections I will explore how I came to imaginal dialogue, and how my imaginal Woolf facilitated the process and experience of imaginal dialogues by offering a sense of felt presence grounding me ontologically and relationally in a difficult, disorientating time of narrating depression.

In the wake of symbolic collapse

A few years on from completing my doctorate, I can finally appreciate what Helen Cixous (1993) said:

the only book that is worth writing is the one we don't have the courage or strength to write. The book that hurts us ... Writing is writing what you cannot know before you have written it ... a book stronger than the author.

(Cixous, 1993; cited in Lather, 2007, p. 4)

And not anytime before. Once I had announced to my research supervisor that I wanted to look into depression as lived experience, I never imagined myself actually finishing that book. Depression brought about, what Kristeva (1989) called, “symbolic collapse”. Re-constructing my narrative, in the aftermath, with what felt like semiotic ruins and broken pieces, which were “unsayable and unavailable for the telling” (Speedy, 2008, p. xiv), required the creative practice of making meaning of the past, as I was aware of psychoanalytically. Nevertheless, I was also confronted by a force of resistance in revisiting some archaic, emotional mess that I had tucked under the neat label of depression. The categorical ordering of knowledge that I accepted and reproduced (for the lack of a better explanation) could be heard as – “this and that were happening, no wonder I was depressed”. The “no-wonder account” (Fang, 2017) spared the subject of the labour of having to deliberate on the unsayable. However, it stripped, too, the “wonder” inherent in the process of thinking creatively and differently to the established knowledge of depression; of finding the “wonder” that has the power to surprise the self and, by surprising, gradually releases the self from the spell of psychic haunting.⁶

6. Cristopher Bollas (1987) terms this “the unthought known”. Bollas resorts to the metaphorical expression in contextualising the form of knowing, which has registered in the subject's psychical ground yet remained linguistically unavailable, as “the deep spell of the uncanny” (ibid,

But coming to relinquish the no-wonder account is to confront “a time without sequence, telling without mediation and speaking about oneself without being fully able to reflect on oneself” (Frank, 2013, p.97); or in Tamas’ words (2009), to risk being left “lost and speechless” all over again. No doubt I wanted to “write to it” (Wyatt & Gale, 2018), with the “goal” (p.120) of coming nearer and nearer to this “it” – the not yet known. But where to begin? Where do my wonders lie? Troubled by a considerable weight of uncertainty of whether I would be able to research depression after all, after a supervision meeting where I was confronted by my own broken speech, I stumbled across Virginia Woolf in the local Blackwell’s.

At that time, I thought it was because no one else was near her shelves and I needed the space. I think now that my reaching to Woolf then, at an unconscious level, was my searching for, in a Fairbairnian sense, an object of relatedness. I felt drawn to Virginia Woolf, to that very English name, to what she stands for, as I longed for relatedness with my supervisor who I deeply admired, who, as I reflected upon later, was also an English woman of significant achievement. They had a good collection of Woolf on the shelves, but it was *Mrs Dalloway* that I reached out to. Already the title promised me a female character. It was a matter of getting to know this Mrs Dalloway.

I soon found in Mrs Dalloway a bore. I was too miserable that day to appreciate all her efforts to ensure her party would be successful. I felt an urge to exit Mrs Dalloway’s glittering world but was also caught in a need to read on. I was unwilling to succumb then for fear that it might reinforce a sense of inadequacy about where I was – a critical scholarly establishment where people around me all seemed packed with cultural capital. “I have read *Mrs Dalloway*!” Surely that would entitle me to some abstract sense of inclusion (and to feel more deserving of my supervisor?). I leaned by the shelves reading half-heartedly.

Then came Septimus – a damned presence, traumatised and tragically isolated. He entered into my mind with a sharp reminder of my own corporeal fragility. The weight of his words built on me until I had to drag my body to the nearest couch and flop down. I grew vulnerable and sensitive to the public gaze. I bought the book and went home.

p.37). The “spell” of the unthought known has a haunting and harassing quality to the subject. In Bollas’ understanding, we can only be released from the spell after we start the process of transforming it into reflective self-knowledge.

How should one read Woolf?

I announced to my supervisor that I would like to spend some time with Virginia Woolf, who, I felt, could help me find my voices. I was surprised by my certainty at that time, but now having ‘known’ Woolf a bit more, I maybe should not have been.

Woolf’s views on the practice of reading grew from her practice of writing. That is, her writing invites the particular engagement she hopes to create with her readers. In *Modern Fiction* (1984[1925]), Woolf emphatically states her view that modernist novels should be characterised by their emancipation from the Edwardian era’s meticulous preoccupation with plots. The importance of progression of a story-line, in the modernist art of fiction-crafting, recedes in order to reveal moments “of an ordinary mind on an ordinary day” perceived from a particular vantage point of a particular persona. As a novelist, Woolf’s literary vision has often shown what seems akin to the psychoanalytic preoccupation with the exploration of the past, or “the tunnelling process” as she calls it (Woolf, 1985[1953], p. 60). This can be seen as reflected in her characters’ extraordinary sensitivity to the internal, psychic pulses of an unknown origin. In her use of indirect interior monologue,⁷ such as the primary narrative mode in *Mrs Dalloway*, the voices of the characters and the author often merge into “a fusion of voices which result in a combination of perspectives” (Faini, 2012, p. 40), producing effects of polyphonic theatricality that appeals to reader’s identificatory and free associative power. Her evocative, metaphorical prose helps to stir the unconscious.

As an avid reader and keen critic, Woolf (1986[1926]) acknowledges how reading can bind the author and the reader together into a unique relationship. Ascribing great significance to the reader’s responsibility, her quest is not to lay down rules on the reader of how to read, despite the seemingly suggestive title, but to clarify her view on the nature of the textual relationship between an author and the reader that she sees as deeply *democratic* (Cuddy-Keane, 2003). On one hand, she speaks for the reader’s intellectual liberty – “everywhere else we may be bound by laws and conventions” (Woolf, 1986[1926], p. 258), but in the world of books, “we have none” (p. 258). She stresses the literary value in what a reader can bring – “to take no advice, to follow your own instincts, to use your own reason, to come to your own conclusion” (p. 258). On the other hand, she objects to the type of arbitrary criticality that “dictates” (p. 259) to the author without the least effort of

7. I am aware that there are unsettled disagreements over the appropriate naming for Woolf’s widely used narrative device, but here I adopt Anna Snaith’s (1996) reference to it as indirect interior monologue – a process when “a character’s thoughts are presented in the third person by the narrator,” as if the narrator freely “enters into the mind of the character and report his or her thought verbatim” (p. 134).

engaging with the texts in relation to an author's time, culture, and uncompromising idiosyncrasies. Woolf urges us to consider the merit and possibility of the democratic readership as one that does not abuse its liberal power over the author or authorship, but one that is capable of treating the author as nothing less than an equal, of earning the author's respects by working with and not against their texts: "Open your mind as widely as possible, then signs and hints of almost imperceptible fineness, from the twist and turn of the first sentences, will bring you into the presence of a human being unlike any other" (p. 259).

Irrespective of the starting position of a reader, she prompts us to suspend quick judgement and prior assumptions in order to meet the author, to get to know and engage the author in a democratic dialogue during the reading process as an active, relational undertaking. Cuddy-Keane (2003, p.120) emphasises Woolf's repeated metaphor of "journeys" in describing reading as a process-oriented practice. If reading is a journey, a reader would be better rewarded with what an author can offer to read with a traveller's curiosity and not a tourist's anticipation – to open the mind to the unexpected and unfamiliar in the text.

"One must write from one's deep feeling", she once said (Woolf, 1985[1953], p. 57). One must then read from a place of reciprocal openness to deep feeling and to what it evokes, stimulates, and challenges and see what becomes. Reading, in this light, becomes a reflexive, interactive practice that allows the reader's speaking back to the texts as it occurs. And, within that, I would accept that my "narcissistic moments of identification" (Armstrong, 1995; cited in Cuddy-Keane, 2003, p.126) with Woolf's texts may be an inevitable and "essential response to texts and a prerequisite of critical reading" (Armstrong, 1995; cited in Cuddy-Keane, 2003, p.126). As it now appears to me, such identification goes beyond the reader's one-sided act of projection and appropriation. It arises as the "rhythm" of the unfolding text pulls the reader in, taking the reader somewhere "far deeper than words" (Woolf, 1977[1926], p. 247). In those moments, reading has the effect of jolting the reader out of their sense of separate consciousness into a poignant series of identifications and associative ruminations through the moments the author creates and pulls the reader into experiencing⁸ – the reader and the text become united by a shared rhythm. Such identification, as Cuddy-Keane (2003) remarks, is better seen as "a movement toward a relational engagement with the voice, or rather voices, in the text" (p.127).

8. Taking further Anzaldúa's "radical relationship with words" (p. 54), Keating (2012) reflects on the effects of words as deeply grounded in our materialistic reality. Seeing metaphorical expressions as embodying metaphysical truths, she argues that words have the power of creating and materialising certain realms of reality – "words embody the world; words are matter; words become matter" (p. 52).

Relational engagement with the voice(s)

“Mr. Dalloway, ma’am” Clarissa read on the telephone pad, “Lady Bruton wishes to know if Mr. Dalloway will lunch with her to-day.” Learning that she has been excluded from Lady Bruton’s invitation to lunch, Clarissa Dalloway mutters to herself, “fear no more”, a line from Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline* which has caught her eye earlier on Bond Street. Woolf describes the shock of Lady Bruton’s invitation make “the moment in which she had stood shiver, as a plant on the river-bed feels the shock of a passing oar and shivers: so she rocked: so she shivered” (Woolf, 1992[1925]: 54). “Fear no more” is to emerge too in Septimus’ mind, signalling an intersection of two separate planes of consciousness. In a later scene, we find Septimus “lying on the sofa in the sitting room” (Woolf, 1992[1925], p. 135) after a visit to the psychiatrist. “Fear no more, says the heart in the body; fear no more” (p. 136), the words entered his mind interrupting its fantastical daydreaming. The smile on his face stirred feelings of the uncanny in Rezia, his wife, who was there with him. “It was not marriage; it was not being one’s husband to look strange like that, always to be staring, laughing, sitting hour after hour silent, or clutching her and telling her to write.” If he wishes, so should she write it down – “That man, his friend who was killed, Evans, had come, he said. He was singing behind the screen” (p. 136). Woolf has established Septimus and Clarissa to be each other’s alter-ego. In the exteriority of text, she an MP’s wife, he a shell-shocked veteran, are worlds apart, who never meet. But where they do meet is in the interiority of the reader, through the reader’s tapping into the rhythm of the unfolding texts to gradually juxtapose voices that were previously separate, and through the reader’s feeling body that gathers, amplifies, and reproduces the intensity of affects as they are evoked and fictitiously felt by each of the characters.

The polarised position I had originally assumed (albeit much unconsciously), as I first entered into *Mrs Dalloway*, placed Clarissa’s narrative directly in opposition to that of my own, so her troubles (to ensure her party a success) were assessed on their relevance to those of mine. The perception of the gulf between our worlds rendered me a suspicious reader who brought all the differences to the event of reading whilst managing just about enough to track the surface plots in which I felt I had no part. However, what I would not have expected was that I would soon be challenged out of this superficiality of reading as the movement of the texts tossed me on the tides of affective forces as Septimus’ voices arrived, destabilised my thinking process, and stirred pain. Reading on, I became sensitised to the dimension of feelings shared between Septimus and Clarissa as signalled by their shared passion for Shakespeare’s “fear no more”. Their separate subjectivities dissolved into possible psychological lenses that I could possess to orientate a particular style of thinking, speaking, and feeling. A linear identity of

Clarissa, as initially conceived, became problematised as the eerie quality of Septimus' unhinged realities amplified that of her hidden madness.

This is dialogism⁹ in a Bakhtinian sense, which represents an epistemological mode of understanding multiplicity of voices (or “heteroglossia”) within which each voice is read as “a part of a greater whole” (p.428). In dialogism, a voice is liberated from the frame of singular subjectivity just as “fear no more” passes through and amongst bodies. The ontological instability of characters enables the dynamic reading process of “attaching, collating, negotiating, assembling – of forging links between things that were previously unconnected” (Felski, 2015, p.173). As textuality became conditioned by shared affectivity, Clarissa's voices began to *speak to me* in a much more relatable manner. I began to wonder how it has all really been like for her, who has truly known her, seen her? Who cared to? What would she say if she could just say it?

News of Septimus' death broke and reached Clarissa. “She felt somehow very like him – the young man who had killed himself.” Could it have been her? Been me? “She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away while they went on living” (p.170). I stopped to take a deep breath, to feel my body once again. Septimus' death not only pronounced a private vision of Clarissa's own, his death rippled out of the text and reached somewhere in me that I did not recall visiting before – haunting poignancy that was first a feeling, an affective intensity arising from an unknown origin. Words come later.

Imaginal dialogue with my (imaginary) Woolf

It is Rita Felski (2015) who reminds us of the co-constructive relationship between reader and text. In her words, “texts cannot influence the world by themselves, but only via the intercession of those who read them, digest them, reflect on them, rail against them, use them as points of orientation, and pass them on” (p.172). In imaginal dialogue, the dialogical, collaborative relationship can also be created between reader and author by the reader's seeking to relate to the author as much as to the text through immersion in the relational reading practices which nurtures feelings of understanding, solidarity and warmth towards the author. Words

9. For Bakhtin, insights have to come from a close examination of the constant interaction between voices which are capable of “conditioning” other voices. That is, the intersubjective phenomenon joined in by disparate subjectivities. How each voice will condition others, moreover, is a matter of “what is actually settled at the moment of utterance” (1981[1975]), p.428). Essentially every utterance reveals a particular ‘accent’ produced by the social force and an ‘intention’ which reflects the particular way of being of the speaker.

can have “materialising force” (Keating, 2012, p. 52) and create presence. Reading relationally, a particular style in which words are conceived, rhythm of language, modes of speaking all contribute towards the reader’s intuitive-emotional conjuring the presence of the author. That is, our engagement with the text is not free from this imagined presence of the author, so we may ‘pronounce’ the text in certain way that we imagine the author would do – even when we have not met the author in life. Our styles of language in dialogical relation to the text are also conditioned by the sense of the author’s spectre so we do not simply speak back to the text but do so as if the author is there to perceive us.

As mentioned, writing, for Woolf, is a relational act that seeks to invite the reader’s democratic solidarity and spontaneous talking back. It conveys, in Fairbairn’s term, a desire for mutual relatedness. Writing, in this light, requires the author to envision and sustain a sense of imagined readership who is capable of being dialogically empowered and relationally engaged for the writing to unfold more unreservedly. The reader, by virtue of reciprocating with the author’s object-seeking quest, embodies the author’s imaginary friend who not only listens but speaks back (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 68). Similarly, for the reader, my speaking back to Woolf fundamentally challenges, animates and re-imagines my relationship with the author who thus breaks from the historical status as an unliving configuration to be given a new life as a dynamically felt presence dialoguing with me in fantasy.¹⁰ In imaginal dialogue, the reader not only re-creates the texts (Fish, 1980) but actively and creatively exploits the relational potentiality of *working with* the presence of the author as their imaginary co-inquirer.

Seeing the self as multi-voiced as dialogism invokes, each fictitious creation can be seen as representing a hidden voice within the author’s own psychological constellation.¹¹ Each voice possesses a particular psychological profile, reflecting a particular context of social relation from a unique viewpoint. In dialogism, each voice gives rise to a dynamic assemblage marking the connected yet discordant terrain of the self; all together they express multitudes of social relations, idiosyncratic meanings, impressions and affective experiences as complex as a human subjectivity can be. Coming to experience, and listen to, the voices arising from different characters across different stories generated in me an idiosyncratic sense of Virginia Woolf that is as unique as the reader’s imagination. Put another way,

10. Gloria Anzaldúa’s work on post-shaman aesthetics feels particularly relevant here in my attempt to describe how ‘words’ can generate trans-dimensional access to the fantastical dimension of consciousness (Keating, 2012).

11. Similarly, reading with a psychoanalytic underpinning generates an understanding that fictitious creation of plots or characters can be read as partially inspired by, or emerge from, an “unstemmable unconscious” (Bowie, 1987, p. 6) origin in the author’s psyche.

the relational engagement with the voices constitute figments of my imaginary Woolf. It is a presence akin to that of an imaginary friend as it engages me further in the dialogical exchange beyond the written texts. Woolf, the historical author, had in mind an imagined reader that she wished to write to. Similarly, shaped by the emotional process of reading, the reader is engendering a sense of an imaginary Woolf that she can relate to. It would therefore be unsatisfactory to conclude the creation of this imaginal relationship as purely catalysed by the reader's projection and transference as a one-sided process. The imaginal relationship is of a co-constructive nature, so "while the person is creating an imaginal figure, the imaginal figure is also creating the person" (Hermans et al., 1993, p. 215). Gary Shteyngart, in an interview by Lois Oppenheim (2015, p. 172) puts it even more playfully, "[...] I had imaginary friends. I had imaginary friends quite a bit, to the point where I became imaginary friends."

Through the working of imagination, words have the power to open potential pathways through which the reader comes to meet their imagined author. The imaginal relationship of the dyad can be creatively explored by those who dare to, in Bowie's (1987) words, "indulge in *as if* thinking" (p. 6; italics added). Children who have an imaginary friend know this – imagination is the magic that brings things to life. Imaginal dialogue allows me to indulge in this "as if" world-making. In relation to my imaginary Woolf, I could not help but be absorbed in the psychological complexity her words brought alive, "as if" her voices were addressing me, inviting me to join in and play along. "What could be more formidable than that space?" (Woolf, 1992[1927], p. 296), my imaginary Woolf, referring to Lily Briscoe's painting, pondered. "*That space* in the centre – circumvallated by a height of entangled lines – stares right at you, into you", I replied. What could be more formidable than complete emptiness, I thought. What is *actually* on Lily Briscoe's canvas¹² is something that pertains to the historical Woolf; what my imaginary Woolf and I are looking at here is my private visualisation of the painting.

Taking the "as if" further, I wish to also differentiate how the nature of imaginal dialogue with my imaginary Woolf is distinct from the form of textual analysis enshrined within the literary academy. In both avenues, intensive and original textual engagement with, and analysis of, the work, the author, and the historical contingencies and the interrelations amongst them are required. For the former, the desire for relatedness extends towards the sense of the author, the imaginary

12. As Goring (2012) points out, in *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf leaves a scope of ambiguity of what Lily's painting actually looks like. Whilst detailed description is dedicated to the process of painting, little definition is given to what is on the canvas, allowing for the reader's own creative visualisation of the painting.

Woolf. Just as the voice of the author is not value-free, cultural and historical contingencies necessarily furnish the details of my imaginary Woolf. Respect is crucial. For example, in referring to psychoanalytic insight, my understanding of her ambivalent relationship with psychoanalysis necessarily mediates my tone of voice so that it is tentatively explored. Working with an imaginary Woolf takes imaginative capability similarly required in a child's creating an imaginary friend; it also takes acknowledging the autonomy of the imaginary companion. At times, I ventured to speak for her, to represent her views the way I interpreted them. At times, she would fall silent. In those moments I wondered if I had crossed her line. Had I talked too much? It is true that one too can feel a bit insecure with one's imaginary friend. Nevertheless, moments of insecurities slowed me down and helped me reflect on the issues of interpretive sensitivity.

Imaginal dialogue as a method of narrative inquiry

I came to explore the method of imaginal dialogue in response to the question of narratability of trauma. How do we narrate trauma, when the intensity of emotional registers disrupted the ordinary capacity to make sense of the experience? Trauma, after all, lives in, as Stolorow (2007) ruminates, "an intersubjective context in which severe emotional pain cannot find a relational home in which it can be held" (p.10). I was, in searching for voices in Virginia Woolf's fiction, searching for a relational home in which I could come to meaningfully engage with parts of myself that bore reminder of grievous experiences. The emergence of emotional responses ignited by relational engagement with the voices mobilise a self-reflexive inquiry surrounding their historical origins and their relation to the continuous now.

Through imaginal dialogue with Woolf, I was inquiring into compelling mysteries of depression with a re-vitalised spirit of curiosity and fascination; often I was surprised, when least expected, by the hidden voices in me that emerged out of the blue. My imaginary Woolf spoke in such ways "as if" to acquaint me with the hidden, conflicted parts of the self, so we could begin to think about their meanings. She spoke "as if" to invite me to wander into the similar dilemmas engendered by the uncertainties between self and others, love and hate, loss and belonging. Her deep feeling called out to me, arousing deep feeling somewhere in me that were eager to be heard. The author's voices gained a personal signification when they are heard intently in relation to the reader. Her voices pulled me along into a joint venture of the two of us probing into, working through, rethinking the unresolved inner crisis situated in the tapestry of the most intimate relationships

in which we were encapsulated. Imaginal dialogue with my imaginary Woolf has been a gift. Apart from offering me the chance to dismantle my pre-conceived prejudices of the historical author, it also, as the resonance with her voices was registered psychically, enabled me to become more conscious of complex emotions of my own. We were bound in the commonality of deep feeling across time and space, the same way “fear no more” bound Clarissa and Septimus.

My discussion thus far on imaginal dialogue and its methodological imperative in many ways chimes with Rita Felski’s (2015) evocative questioning of how and why we read. For Felski, our motives to read shapes our “thought style” (p.2) – the way we conceive thoughts. If a reader positions themselves as a literary critic, their reading would inevitably be conditioned and confined by an attitude of critique. This attitude, as Felski observed, is often characterised by “a spirit of sceptical questioning” or “outright condemnation” (ibid). That is, the work (and pride!) of a critique seems to lie in claiming to know something that the author does not; to be a step ahead of the author; to talk about or at (and never with) the author. If this does not sound right, she encourages us to think – what else might we do differently?

It is not my intention to set up imaginal dialogue as a polemic against literary criticism; I know that imaginal dialogue cannot afford a high horse. It emerged, in my case, from a personal place of brokenness, from my failure to detach myself from the texts, my voices from the imagined author’s. Imaginal dialogue is socially-driven as it is a creative, relational practice. Any author who writes from deep feeling does not deserve anything less than a reader who is willing to engage with deep feeling, not resisting them, and certainly not “suspicious reading” (Felski, 2015). However, by describing my imaginal dialogue as emerging from a need for relatedness, I also hope to invite caution against infusing every line with sentimental overflowing in order to remain alert to the moments when deep feeling startles, evokes, stirs – so we can rise and write to those moments.

My imaginary Woolf took on an identity as who I perceived the historical Woolf to be – she grew as my understanding of and textual engagement with Virginia Woolf deepened. Her words would not have the same power over me (Keating, 2012) if I had read from a distance. And I feel for sure that my imaginary Woolf would shut the door on me if I approach her in a spirit of ubiquitous criticality (Felski, 2008, 2015). She played with me perhaps because I have chosen to relate to her (although that is for her to say). Within the *creative, relational* potentiality imbued within the dialogical relationship my moments of wonder were found. As the dialogue flows, a set agenda vanishes, leaving only the desire to feel more deeply, process more relationally, to wonder more freely guiding us forward and towards the sense of the true and the meaningful. Relationship, ultimately,

becomes the very way of knowing, the locus of knowledge creation.¹³ Imaginal dialogue challenged me to replace the wish for compelling research findings with an underlying sense of reverence for Woolf, the author, and also for my imaginary Woolf – for where we have journeyed together.

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13. This is aligned with Gergen’s (1982, 1994) position that, through uniting postmodernist criticism and social constructionist epistemology, the individual has long been situated at the centre of knowledge in the western logic whilst negating the social processes encompassing most aspects of discursive functioning. The fundamental point of Gergen’s social constructive stance challenges social scientists to shift away from the taken-for-granted, individualist knowledge to an understanding that centralises and appreciates social relations which *constitute* the on-going liveliness of the so-called “I”.

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Address for correspondence

Nini Fang
 Counselling, Psychotherapy and Applied Social Sciences
 University of Edinburgh
 Medical School, Teviot Place
 Edinburgh, EH8 9AG
 UK
nfang@ed.ac.uk