

Reading Winnicott

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In its first century, psychoanalysis has had several great thinkers, but from the author's viewpoint, only one great English-speaking writer: Donald Winnicott. Because style and content are so interdependent in Winnicott's writing, his papers are not well served by a thematic reading aimed exclusively at gleaning "what the paper is about." Such efforts often result in trivial aphorisms. Winnicott, for the most part, does not use language to arrive at conclusions; rather, he uses language to create experiences in reading that are inseparable from the ideas he is presenting, or more accurately, the ideas he is playing with.

The author offers a reading of Winnicott's (1945) "Primitive Emotional Development," a work containing the seeds of virtually all the major contributions to psychoanalysis that Winnicott would make over the course of the succeeding twenty-six years of his life. The present author demonstrates the interdependence of the life of the ideas being developed and the life of the writing in this seminal paper of Winnicott's. What "Primitive Emotional Development" has to offer to a psychoanalytic reader cannot be said in any other way (which is to say that the writing is extraordinarily resistant to paraphrase). It has been this author's experience—which he hopes to convey to the reader—that an awareness of the way the language is working in Winnicott's writings significantly enhances what can be learned from reading them.

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Style and content are inseparable in writing. The better the writing, the more this interdependence is utilized in the service of creating meaning. In recent years, I have found that the only way I can do justice to studying and teaching Winnicott is to read his papers aloud, line by line, as I would a poem, exploring what the language is doing in addition to what it is saying. It is not an overstatement to say that a great many passages from Winnicott's papers well deserve to be called prose poems. In these passages, Winnicott's writing meets Tom Stoppard's (1999) definition of poetry as "the simultaneous compression of language and expansion of meaning" (p. 10).

In this paper, I will focus on Winnicott's 1945 paper, "Primitive Emotional Development," which I view as his earliest major contribution to psychoanalysis. I will not be limiting myself to an explication of Winnicott's paper, though a good many of the ideas developed there will be discussed. My principal interest is in looking at this paper as a piece of nonfiction literature in which the meeting of reader and writing generates an imaginative experience in the medium of language. To speak of Winnicott's writing as literature is not to minimize its value as a way of conveying ideas that have proved to be of enormous importance to the development of psychoanalytic theory and practice; on the contrary, my effort will be to demonstrate the ways in which the life of the writing is critical to, and inseparable from, the life of the ideas.¹

Before looking closely at "Primitive Emotional Development," I will offer a few observations about matters of writing that run through virtually the entirety of Winnicott's opus. The first quality of his writing to strike the reader is its form. Unlike the papers of any other psychoanalyst I can think of, Winnicott's papers are brief (usually six to ten pages in length), often containing a moment in the middle when he takes the reader aside and says, in a single sentence,

¹In previous contributions (Ogden 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1997d, 1998, 1999, 2000), I have discussed the challenge to psychoanalysts of developing an ear for the way we and our patients use words. In the course of these discussions, I have frequently turned to poets and writers of fiction in an effort to attend to and learn from the ways they succeed—when their writing is good—in bringing language to life and life to language.

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"the essential feature of my communication is this...." (Winnicott 1971a, p. 50). But the most distinctive signature of Winnicott's writing is the voice. It is casual and conversational, yet always profoundly respectful of both the reader and the subject matter under discussion. The speaking voice gives itself permission to wander, and yet has the compactness of poetry; there is an extraordinary intelligence to the voice that is at the same time genuinely humble and well aware of its limitations; there is a disarming intimacy that at times takes cover in wit and charm; the voice is playful and imaginative, but never folksy or sentimental.

Any effort to convey a sense of the voice in Winnicott's writing must locate at its core the quality of playfulness. The types of playfulness encountered in Winnicott's writing have an enormous range. To name only a few: There are the un-self-conscious feats of imaginative, compassionate understanding in his

accounts of “squiggle games” (1971b) with his child patients. There is serious playfulness (or playful seriousness) when Winnicott is involved in an effort to generate a form of thinking/theorizing that is adequate to the paradoxical nature of human experience as he understands it. He takes delight in subtle word play, such as in the repetition of a familiar phrase in slightly different forms to refer to the patient's need to begin and to end analysis: “I do analysis because that is what the patient needs to have done and to have done with” (1962, p. 166).

While his writing is personal, there is also a certain English reserve to Winnicott that befits the paradoxical combination of formality and intimacy that is a hallmark of psychoanalysis (Ogden 1989). In terms of all these matters of form and voice, Winnicott's work holds strong resemblances to the compact, intelligent, playful, at times charming, at times ironic, always irreducible writing of Borges's *Fictions* (1944) and of Robert Frost's prose and poetry.

Winnicott's inimitable voice can be heard almost immediately in “Primitive Emotional Development” as he explains his “methodology”:

I shall not first give an historical survey and show the development of my ideas from the theories of others, because

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my mind does not work that way. What happens is that I gather this and that, here and there, settle down to clinical experience, form my own theories and then, last of all, interest myself in looking to see where I stole what. Perhaps this is as good a method as any. [p. 145]

There is playful wit to the words “Perhaps this is as good a method as any.” This seemingly tacked-on afterthought expresses what is perhaps the central theme of the paper as a whole: To create a “method,” a way of being alive that suits the individual and becomes his unique “watermarking” (Heaney 1980, p. 47), is perhaps the single most important outcome of primitive emotional development. In the process of coming into being as an individual, the infant (and mother) “gathers this and that, here and there.” Early experience of self is fragmented, and at the same time, it is (with the help of the mother) “gather[ed]” in a way that allows the infant's experience of self, now and again, to come together in one place. Moreover, for the infant, the bits of others (introjects)—or for the writer, the ideas of other writers—must not be allowed to take over the process of creating meaning. “My mind does not work that way,” nor does that of the healthy infant in the care of a healthy mother. The individual's own lived experience must be the basis for creating coherence for

one's self and the integrity of oneself. Only after a sense of self has begun to come into being (for the infant and for the writer) can one acknowledge the contributions of others to the creation of oneself (and one's ideas): "... last of all interest myself in where I stole what."

Winnicott then briefly discusses several aspects of the analytic relationship, with particular emphasis on the transference-countertransference. It is this body of experience that he believes is a major source of his conception of primitive emotional development. I will examine only one brief passage (two sentences, to be precise) of Winnicott's discussion of the transference-countertransference in "Primitive Emotional Development." I have selected these sentences because I find them to be of enormous importance, both from the standpoint of understanding his conception of the workings of the analytic relationship, and from the standpoint of the

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powerful interdependence of language and ideas in Winnicott's work:

The depressed patient requires of his analyst the understanding that the analyst's work is to some extent his effort to cope with his own (the analyst's) depression, or shall I say guilt and grief resultant from the destructive elements in his own (the analyst's) love. To progress further along these lines, the patient who is asking for help in regard to his primitive, pre-depressive relationship to objects needs his analyst to be able to see the analyst's undisplaced and coincident love and hate of him. [pp. 146-147]

In the opening clause of the first of these two sentences, Winnicott not only offers a theory of depression radically different from those of Freud and Klein, but he also proposes a new conception of the role of countertransference in the analytic process. He suggests here that depression is not, most fundamentally, a pathological identification with the hated aspect of an ambivalently loved (and lost) object in an unconscious effort to avoid experiencing anger toward the lost object (Freud 1914). Nor does Winnicott understand depression as centered around the unconscious fantasy that one's anger has injured, driven away, or killed the loved object (Klein 1952).

In the space of a single sentence, Winnicott suggests (by means of his *use of the idea*, rather than through his explication of it) that depression is a manifestation of the patient's taking on as his own (in fantasy, taking into himself) the mother's depression (or that of other loved objects), with the unconscious aim of relieving her of her depression. What is astounding is that this conception of

the patient's depression is presented not through a direct statement, but by means of a sentence that is virtually incomprehensible unless the reader takes the initiative of doing the work of creating/discovering the conception of the intergenerational origins and dynamic structure of depression. Only after the reader has accomplished this task does it begin to make sense why "The depressed patient requires of his analyst the understanding that the analyst's

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work is to some extent his effort to cope with his own (the analyst's) depression."² In other words, if the analyst is unable to cope with his own feelings of depression (both normative and pathological), arising from past and current life experience, the analyst will not be able to recognize (to feel in the moment) the ways in which the patient is unconsciously attempting to, and to some degree succeeding in, taking on the depression of the analyst-as-transference-mother.

Those aspects of the analyst's depression that arise from sources independent of the analyst's unconscious identification with the patient's depressed internal object mother are far less available to the patient's ministrings. This is because the patient cannot find in the analyst the depression of his mother, which for nearly the entirety of his life, the patient has intimately known and attended to. The patient is single-mindedly concerned with the depression that is unique to the internal object mother. (Each person's depression is his or her own unique creation, rooted in the particular circumstances of life experience and personality organization.)

Winnicott is thus suggesting that the analyst must cope with his own depression in order that he might experience the patient's (internal object) mother's depression (which is being projected into the analyst). Only if the analyst is able to contain/live with the experience of the (internal object) mother's depression (as distinct from his own depression) will the analyst be able to experience the patient's pathological effort to relieve the mother's psychological pain (now felt to be located in the analyst) by introjecting it into the patient's self as a noxious foreign body.

The second clause of the sentence under discussion, while introduced by Winnicott as if it were simply another way of saying what he has already said in the first clause ("or shall I say") is in fact

²*The term depression, as it is used in this sentence, seems to refer to a wide spectrum of psychological states, ranging from clinical depression to the*

universal depression associated with the achievement of the depressive position (Klein 1952). The latter is a normative stage of development and mode of generating experience (Ogden 1986), involving whole object relatedness, ambivalence, and a deep sense of loss in recognizing one's separateness from one's mother.

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something altogether new: “[The analyst of a depressed patient must cope with his own] ... guilt and grief resultant from the destructive elements in his own (the analyst's) love.” Thus, the analyst of the depressed patient must also be able to live with the inevitable destructiveness of love, in the sense that love involves a demand on the loved object, which may (in fantasy, and at times, in reality) be too much of a strain for the person one loves. In other words, the analyst, in the course of personal analysis and by means of ongoing self-analysis, must sufficiently come to terms with his own fears of the draining effects of love to be able to love the patient without fear that such feelings will harm the patient, thereby causing the analyst “guilt and grief.”³

Winnicott does not stop here. In the sentence that follows the quoted passage, he revolutionizes (and I use the word advisedly) the psychoanalytic conception of “the analytic frame” by viewing it as a medium for the expression of the analyst's hatred of the patient: “... the end of the hour, the end of the analysis, the rules and regulations, these all come in as expressions of [the analyst's] hate” (p. 147). These words derive a good deal of their power from the fact that the truth of the idea that the analyst expresses his hate in these actions (which are so ordinary as to frequently go unnoticed) is immediately recognizable by the analytic reader as part of his experience with virtually every patient. Winnicott is recognizing/interpreting the unspoken expressions of hate that the analyst/reader unconsciously and preconsciously experiences (often accompanied by a feeling of relief) in “throwing the patient out” (by punctually

³*I am aware of the awkwardness of my language in discussing this passage. These ideas are difficult to convey, in part because of the extreme compactness of Winnicott's language, and in part because Winnicott had not yet fully worked out the ideas he was presenting at this point. Moreover, the ideas under development here involve irresolvable emotional contradictions and paradoxes: the analyst must be sufficiently familiar and conversant with his own depression to experience the depression that the depressed patient projects into him. The analyst must also be able to love without fear of the toll that this love takes—for if the analyst is frightened of the destructive effects of his or her love, there is*

little chance of analyzing the patient's fears of the taxing effects of the patient's love on the analyst.

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ending each meeting), and by establishing the limits of what he will provide for the patient (in maintaining the other aspects of the analytic frame). Implicit here is the notion that the analyst's fear of the destructiveness of his hatred of the patient can lead to treatment-destructive breaches of the analytic frame, such as the analyst's extending the session for more than a few minutes in order "not to cut the patient off," or the analyst's setting the fee at a level below what the patient is able to afford "because the patient was consistently exploited by his parents in childhood," or reflexively telephoning the patient when the patient has missed a session "to be sure he is all right," and so on.

Only by looking closely at these sentences can one discern and appreciate what is going on in the very living relationship between the writing and the reader, which constitutes so much of the life of the ideas being developed. As we have seen, the writing demands that the reader become an active partner in the creation of meaning. The writing (like the communications of an analysand) suggests, and only suggests, possibilities of meaning. The reader/analyst must be willing and able not to know in order to make room inside himself for a number of possible meanings to be experienced/created, and to allow one meaning or another, or several meanings concurrently, to achieve ascendance (for a time).

Moreover, it is important to note that the writing "works" (to borrow a word from Winnicott's statement of his "method") in large measure by means of its power to understand (to correctly interpret the unconscious of) the reader. Perhaps all good writing (whether it be in poems, plays, novels, or essays), to a significant degree, "works" in this way.

Winnicott's writing in the paper under discussion (and in almost all the works included in his three major volumes of collected papers [1958, 1965, 1971c]) is surprisingly short on clinical material. This, I believe, is a consequence of the fact that the clinical experience is to such a large degree located in the reader's experience of "being read" (that is, of being interpreted, understood) by the writing. When Winnicott does offer clinical material, he often refers not to a specific intervention with a particular patient, but to a "very

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common experience" (1945, p. 150) in analysis. In this way, he implicitly asks the reader to draw on his own lived experience with patients for the purpose not of

“taking in” Winnicott's ideas, but of inviting from the reader an “original response” (Frost 1942, p. 307).

Still other forms of the generative interplay of style and content, of writing and reader, take on central importance in a passage a bit later in “Primitive Emotional Development,” one that addresses experiences of unintegration and integration in early development:

An example of unintegration phenomena is provided by the very common experience of the patient who proceeds to give every detail of the week-end and feels contented at the end if everything has been said, though the analyst feels that no analytic work has been done. Sometimes we must interpret this as the patient's need to be known in all his bits and pieces by one person, the analyst. To be known means to feel integrated at least in the person of the analyst. This is the ordinary stuff of infant life, and an infant who has had no one person to gather his bits together starts with a handicap in his own self-integrating task, and perhaps he cannot succeed, or at any rate cannot maintain integration with confidence

There are long stretches of time in a normal infant's life in which a baby does not mind whether he is many bits or one whole being, or whether he lives in his mother's face or in his own body, provided that from time to time he comes together and feels something. [p. 150]

Implicit in this passage is the recognition of the analyst's anger at patients who “give every detail of the week-end,” leaving the analyst with the feeling “that no analytic work has been done.” Winnicott leaves it entirely to the reader to imagine the analyst's impulse to dump anger and feelings of failure back into the patient in the form of a resistance interpretation (“You seem to be filling the hour with details that serve to defeat any possibility of analytic work getting done” [my example]).

Winnicott then provides the reader with a major revision of analytic technique. He accomplishes this so subtly that the reader is apt

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not to notice it if he is not attending carefully to what is going on in the writing. Nothing short of a new way of being with and talking to patients is being offered to the reader, without preaching or fanfare: “Sometimes we must interpret⁴ this [the patient's giving every detail of his week-end] as the patient's need to be known in all his bits and pieces by one person, the analyst.” The

phrase “sometimes we must” addresses the reader as a colleague who is familiar with the clinical situation being described, and who has very likely felt it necessary to intervene in the way Winnicott describes. Perhaps the reader/analyst has not fully named for himself what he has been experiencing and doing with his patient. The language does not debunk the angry resistance interpretation that the reader/analyst has either made or has been inclined to make in response to feelings of frustration and sense of failure. Winnicott, by means of the language with which he addresses the reader, provides *an experience in reading*, one that helps the reader undefensively gather together his own unarticulated experiences from his own analysis and from his analytic work with patients.

Moreover, the simple phrase “very common experience” conveys an important theoretical concept (again without calling attention to itself): primitive states of unintegration are not restricted to the analysis of severely disturbed patients; such states regularly occur in the analysis of all our patients, including the healthiest ones. This writing “technique” does not have the feel of manipulation of the reader; rather, it feels like a good interpretation—a statement that puts into words what the reader/analyst has known all along from personal experience, but has not known that he has known it, and has not known it in the verbally symbolized, integrated way that he is coming to know it.

The second paragraph of the passage being discussed is remarkable:

There are long stretches of time in a normal infant's life in which a baby does not mind whether he is in many bits or

⁴*It seems that Winnicott is referring here to silent interpretations that the analyst formulates for himself in words in the moment, and may at a later time present to the patient.*

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one whole being, or whether he lives in his mother's face or in his own body, provided that from time to time he comes together and feels something.

This sentence is distinctive, not only for the originality of the ideas it develops, but also for the way in which its syntax contributes in a sensory way to the creation of those ideas. The sentence is constructed of many groups of words (I count ten) that are read with very brief pauses between them (for instance, after the words *time*, *life*, *mind*, and so on). The sentence not only refers to, but

brings to life in its own audible structure, the experience of living in bits (“from time to time”), in a meandering sort of way, before coming together—for a moment—in its final two bits: “he comes together,” “and feels something.” The voice, syntax, rhythm, and carefully chosen words and expressions that constitute this sentence—working together as they do with the ideas being developed—create an experience in reading that is as distinctively Winnicott as the opening paragraph of *The Sound and the Fury* is distinctively William Faulkner, or as the opening sentence of *Portrait of a Lady* is uniquely Henry James.

The reader of the sentence being discussed is not moved to question how Winnicott can possibly know what an infant feels, or to point out that regressions in the analyses of children and adults (whether psychotic, depressed, or quite healthy) bear a very uncertain correlation with infantile experience. Rather, the reader is inclined to suspend disbelief for a time, and to enter into the experience of reading (with Winnicott), allowing himself to be carried by the music of the language and ideas. The reader lives an experience in the act of reading that is something like that of the imagined infant who does not mind whether he is in many bits (experiencing a floating feeling that accompanies nonlinear thinking) or one whole being (experiencing a “momentary stay against confusion” [Frost 1939, p. 777]). Winnicott's writing, like a guide “who only has at heart your getting lost” (Frost 1947, p. 341), ensures that we will never get it right in any final way, and we do not mind.

Subliminally, the pun on *mind* allows the clause “a baby does not mind whether he is in many bits or one whole being” to concentrate into itself different overlapping meanings. The baby “does not

mind” because the mother is there “minding” him (taking care of him). And he “does not mind” in that he feels no pressure to be “minded,” that is, to create premature, defensive mindedness that is disconnected from bodily experience. The writing itself, in punning, deftly and un-self-consciously, creates just such an experience of the pleasure of not minding, of not having to know, of not having to pin down meaning, and instead simply enjoying the liveliness of a fine experience in the medium of language and ideas.

The language that Winnicott uses in describing the infant's coming together in one place is surprising, in that the “place” where coming together occurs is not a place at all, but an action (the act of feeling something). Moreover, the infant, in “coming together,” does not simply feel, he “feels something.” The word *something* has a delightful ambiguity to it: “something” is a concrete thing, the

object that is felt; and, at the same time, “something” is the most indefinite of words, suggesting only that some feeling is being experienced. This delicate ambiguity creates in the experience of reading the flickering of the feeling-world of the infant, a world loosely bound to objects, loosely localized, experienced now in the body as objectless sensation, now in the more defined and localized sensation of feeling an object, now in the mother's face.⁵

The unexpected turns, the quiet revolutions occurring in this early Winnicott paper, are too numerous to address. I cannot resist, however, taking a moment simply to marvel at the way in which Winnicott, the pediatrician, the child analyst, nonchalantly jettisons the accrued technical language of fifty years of psychoanalytic writing in favor of language that is alive with the experiences being described:

... There are the quiet and the excited states. I think an infant cannot be said to be aware at the start that while feeling

⁵*The role played by the word something in this sentence is reminiscent of Frost's use of nouns to simultaneously invoke the mysterious and the utterly concrete and mundane—for example, in lines such as “Something there is that doesn't love a wall” (1914, p. 39), or “One had to be versed in country things/Not to believe the phoebes wept” (1923a, p. 223), or “What was that whiteness?/Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something” (1923b, p. 208).*

this and that in his cot or enjoying the skin stimulations of bathing, he is the same as himself screaming for immediate satisfaction, possessed by an urge to get at and destroy something unless satisfied by milk. This means that he does not know at first that the mother he is building up through his quiet experiences is the same as the power behind the breasts that he has in his mind to destroy. [p. 151]

The infant has both quiet and excited states—everyone who has spent time with a baby knows this, but why had no one thought to put it this way? The baby feels “this and that” [there is ease in the language, just as there is ease in the baby's state of mind-body], and enjoys the “skin stimulations of bathing” and “cannot be said to be aware ... that [in the quiet states] ... he is the same as himself screaming for immediate satisfaction ...” How better to describe the feeling of continuity of identity over different feeling/meaning states than with unobtrusive alliteration of S sounds—sixteen times in one sentence—in words

carrying a very wide range of meaning, including: *states, start, skin, stimulation, same, screaming, satisfaction, something, and satisfied?*⁶

Winnicott continues:

Also I think there is not necessarily an integration between a child asleep and a child awake Once dreams are remembered and even conveyed somehow to a third person, the dissociation is broken down a little; but some people never clearly remember their dreams, and children depend very much on adults for getting to know their dreams. It is normal for small children to have anxiety dreams and terrors. At these times children need someone to help them

⁶*Of course, I am not suggesting that Winnicott planned, or was even aware of, the way in which he was using alliteration, syntax, rhythm, punning, and so on to create specific effects in his use of language—any more than a talented poet plans ahead of time which metaphors, images, rhymes, rhythms, meters, syntactical structures, diction, allusions, line lengths, and so on that he will use. The act of writing seems to have a life of its own. It is one of the “rights and privileges,” as well as one of the pleasures, of critical reading to attempt to discern what is going on in a piece of writing, regardless of whether the writer intended it or was even aware of it.*

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to remember what they dreamed. It is a valuable experience whenever a dream is both dreamed and remembered, precisely because of the breakdown of dissociation that this represents. [p. 151, italics in original]

In this part of the paper, Winnicott speaks of the importance of the experience of the child's dream being conveyed “somehow to a third person.” Every time I read this sentence, I find it jarring and confusing. I attempt to account for a third person in the apparently two-person experience of a dream (not yet the child's creation or possession) being “conveyed somehow” to a third person. Is the third person the experience of the father's symbolic presence even in his absence? Perhaps, but such an idea seems too much an experience of the mind disconnected from the bodily feel, the sense of aliveness that one experiences, when engaging with a child in spoken or unspoken conversation. A dream can be unobtrusively inserted into a conversation or into playing, sometimes wordlessly, because the child *is* the dream before the dream is the child's.

Thus, from this perspective, the three people are the dreaming child, the waking child, and the adult. This interpretation is suggested by Winnicott's language, but the reader, once again, must do the work of imaginatively entering into the experience of reading. The language quietly creates (as opposed to discusses) the confusion that the reader/child experiences about how many people are present in the act of conveying a dream to an adult. The reader experiences what it feels like for a child to be two people and not to notice that experience until an adult gives him help in "getting to know ... [what are becoming *his*] dreams." "Getting to know" his dreams—the expression is uniquely Winnicott; no one else could have written these words. The phrase is implicitly a metaphor in which an adult "makes the introductions" in the first meeting of a waking child and the child's dreams. In this imaginary social event, not only is the child learning that he has a dream life, but also the child's unconscious is learning that "it" (who, in health, is forever in the process of becoming "I") has a waking life.

The metaphorical language of this passage, without the slightest evidence of strain, is carrying a heavy theoretical load. First of all,

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there is the matter that as Freud (1915) put it, the unconscious "is alive" (p. 190), and consequently, "getting to know" one's dreams constitutes no less than the beginnings of healthy communication at the "frontier" (p. 193) of the unconscious and preconscious mind. As the waking child and the dreaming child become acquainted with one another (i.e., as the child comes to experience himself as the same person who has both a waking life and a dream life), the experience of dreaming feels less strange (other to oneself) and hence less frightening.⁷

It might be said that when a dream is both dreamed and remembered, the conversation between the conscious-preconscious and the unconscious aspects of mind across the repression barrier is enhanced. But having put it in these terms, the reasons for the enjoyment to be taken in Winnicott's writing become all the more apparent. In contrast to the noun-laden language of the preconscious, conscious, unconscious, repression, and so on, Winnicott's language seems to be all *verb*: "feeling something," "getting to know their dreams," "screaming," "possessed," and so on.

Having discussed the infant's early experience of coming together (in health) from his experience of living in bits and pieces (unintegration) and from a variety of forms of dissociation (e.g., the dissociation of dreaming and waking

states), Winnicott turns his attention in “Primitive Emotional Development” to the infant's experience of his earliest relations with external reality:

In terms of baby and mother's breast (I am not claiming that the breast is essential as a vehicle of mother-love), the baby has instinctual urges and predatory ideas. The mother has a breast and the power to produce milk, and the idea that she would like to be attacked by a hungry baby. These two phenomena do not come into relation with each other till the mother and child live an experience together. The mother

⁷*Even as adults, we never completely experience dream life and waking life as two different forms of the experience of ourselves as one person. This is reflected in the language we use in talking about dreams. For example, we say, “I had a dream last night” (that is, it happened to me), and not “I made a dream last night.”*

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being mature and physically able has to be the one with tolerance and understanding, so that it is she who produces a situation that may with luck result in the first tie the infant makes with an external object, an object that is external to the self from the infant's point of view. [p. 152, italics in original]

In this passage, the language is doing far more than is apparent. “... The baby [at this juncture] has instinctual urges and predatory ideas. The mother [with an internal life quite separate from that of the infant] has a breast and the power to produce milk, and the idea that she would like to be attacked by a hungry baby.” The deadly seriousness (and violence) of these words—instinctual urges, predatory feelings, power, attack—plays off against the whimsy and humor of the intentionally overdrawn images. The notion of a baby with “predatory ideas” conjures up images of a scheming, mastermind criminal in diapers. And in a similar way, the notion of a mother who would like to be “attacked by a hungry baby” stirs up images of a woman (with large breasts engorged with milk) walking through dimly lit alleys at night, hoping to be violently assaulted by a hoodlum baby with a terrible craving for milk. The language, at once serious and playful (at times even ridiculous), creates a sense of the complementarity of the internal states of mother and infant, a complementarity that is going on only in parallel, and not yet in relation to one another.

In the sentence that immediately follows, we find one of Winnicott's most important theoretical contributions to psychoanalysis, an idea that has significantly shaped the second fifty years of the history of psychoanalytic thought. As the idea is rendered here, it is to my mind even more richly suggestive than it is in later, more familiar forms: "These two phenomena [the infant with predatory urges and ideas, and the mother with instinctual urges and the wish to be attacked by a hungry baby] do not come into relation with each other till the mother and child *live an experience together*."

"*Live an experience together*"—what makes this phrase remarkable is the unexpected word *live*. The mother and child do not "take part in," "share," "participate in," or "enter into" an experience together;

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they *live* an experience together. In this single phrase, Winnicott is suggesting (though I think he was not fully aware of this as he wrote it) that he is in the process of transforming psychoanalysis, both as a theory and as a therapeutic relationship, in a way that involves altering the notion of what is most fundamental to human psychology. No longer will desiring and regulating desire (Freud), loving, hating, and making reparations (Klein), or object-seeking and object-relating (Fairbairn) constitute what is of greatest importance in the development of the psyche-soma from its beginnings and continuing throughout life. Instead, what Winnicott starts to lay out here for the first time is the idea that the central organizing thread of psychological development, from its inception, is the experience of being alive and the consequences of disruptions to that continuity of being.

The specific way in which Winnicott uses language in this passage is critical to the nature of the meanings being generated. In the phrase "live an experience together," *live* is a transitive verb, taking *experience* as its object. Living an experience is an act of doing something to someone or something (as much as the act of hitting a ball is an act of doing something to the ball); it is an act of infusing experience with life. Human experience does not have life until we live it (as opposed to simply having it in an operational way). Mother and child do not come into relation to one another until they each *do something* to experience—that is, they live it *together*, not simply at the same time, but while experiencing and responding to one another's separate acts of being alive in living the experience.

The paragraph concludes: "The mother being mature and physically able has to be the one with tolerance and understanding, so that it is she who produces a situation that may with luck result in the first tie the infant makes with an

external object, an object that is external to the self from the infant's point of view" (p. 152). The unstated paradox that emerges here involves the idea that living an experience *together* serves to *separate* the mother and infant (to bring them "into relation with each other" as separate entities, from the infant's perspective). This paradox lies at the heart of the experience of illusion: "I think of the process as if two lines came from opposite

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directions, liable to come near each other. If they overlap, there is a moment of *illusion*—a bit of experience which the infant can take as *either* his hallucination or a thing belonging to external reality" (p. 152, italics in original).

Of course, what is being introduced is the concept that Winnicott (1951) later termed "transitional phenomena" (p. 2). The "moment of illusion" is a moment of psychological "overlap" of the mother and infant: a moment in which the mother lives an experience with the infant in which she actively/unconsciously/naturally provides herself as an object that can be experienced by the infant as the infant's creation (an unnoticed experience because there is nothing that is not what is expected) or as the infant's discovery (an event with a quality of otherness in a world external to the infant's sense of self).

In other language, the infant comes to the breast when excited, and ready to hallucinate something fit to be attacked. At that moment the actual nipple appears and he is able to feel it was that nipple that he hallucinated. So his ideas are enriched by actual details of sight, feel, smell, and next time this material is used in the hallucination. In this way he starts to build a capacity to conjure up what is actually available. The mother has to go on giving the infant this type of experience. [pp. 152-153]

What Winnicott is attempting to describe (and succeeds in capturing through his use of language) is not simply an experience, but a way of experiencing that is lighter, more full of darting energy than other ways of experiencing. The initial metaphor with which he introduces this way of experiencing involves the image of mother and infant as two lines (or is it lives?) coming from opposite directions (from the world of magic and from the world of grounded consensual reality), which are "liable to come near each other." The word *liable* is unexpected, with its connotation of chance events (of an unwelcome nature?). Is there a hint of irony about accidents serving as a port of entry into the "real world"?

For Winnicott, the maternal provision is even more complex than that of creating a psychological-interpersonal field in which

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the infant gains entry at the same moment into external reality, internal reality, and the experience of illusion. In "Primitive Emotional Development," he states that the mother's task at this stage involves protecting "her infant from complications that cannot yet be understood by the infant" (p. 153).

Complications is a word newly made in this sentence. In Winnicott's hands, *complications* takes on a rather specific set of meanings having to do with a convergence of internal and external stimuli that have a relationship to one another, one that is beyond the capacity of the infant to understand. A few years later, in speaking of the mother's efforts "not to introduce complications beyond what the infant can understand and allow for," Winnicott (1949) added that "in particular she tries to insulate her baby from coincidences" (p. 245). *Coincidences* is a word even more richly enigmatic than *complications*. It is a word with a long and troubling history in Western myth and literature. (Sophocles' version of the Oedipus myth represents only one instance of the ruin that "coincidence" can leave in its wake.)

Winnicott does not explain what he means by *coincidences* or *complications*, much less how one goes about insulating babies from them. His indefinite, enigmatic language does not fill a space with knowledge; it opens up a space for thinking, imagining, and freshly experiencing. One possible reading of the words *complications* and *coincidences* (as Winnicott is using/creating them) that I sometimes find useful goes as follows: Coincidences or complications from which a baby needs to be insulated involve chance simultaneities of events taking place in the infant's internal and external realities at a time when the two are only beginning to be differentiated from one another. For instance, an infant who is hungry may become both fearful and rageful while waiting longer for the mother than the infant can tolerate. The mother may be feeling preoccupied and distraught for reasons that have nothing to do with the infant, perhaps as a consequence of a recent argument with her husband, or a physical pain that she fears is a symptom of a serious illness. The simultaneity of the internal event (the infant's hunger, fear, rage) and the external event (the mother's emotional absence) is a coincidence that the infant cannot understand. He makes sense of it by imagining

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that it is his anger and predatory urges that have killed the mother. The mother who earlier wished to be attacked by a hungry baby is gone, and in her place is

a lifeless mother, passively allowing herself to be attacked by the hungry baby, like carrion available to be consumed by vultures.

Coincidence leads the infant to defensively bring a degree of order and control to his experience by drawing what was becoming the external world back into the internal world by means of omnipotent fantasy: "I killed her." In contrast, when a mother and child are able to "live an experience together," the vitality of the child's internal world is recognized and met by the external world (the mother's act of living the experience together with the child). Winnicott does not present these ideas explicitly, but they are there to be found/created by the reader.

A note of caution is needed here with regard to the license a reader may take in creating a text, and that caveat is provided by Winnicott himself. It is implicit in all Winnicott's writing that creativity must not be valorized above all else. Creativity is not only worthless—it is lethal in a literal sense in the case of an infant when disconnected from objectivity, that is, when disconnected from acceptance of external reality. An infant forever hallucinating what he needs will starve to death; a reader who loses touch with the writing will not be able to learn from it.

Winnicott's conception of the infant's earliest experience of accepting external reality is as beautifully rendered as it is subtle in content:

One thing that follows the acceptance of external reality is the advantage to be gained from it. We often hear of the very real frustrations imposed by external reality, but less often hear of the relief and satisfaction it affords. Real milk is satisfying as compared with imaginary milk, but this is not the point. The point is that in fantasy things work by magic: there are no brakes on fantasy, and love and hate cause alarming effects. External reality has brakes on it, and can be studied and known, and, in fact, fantasy is only tolerable at full blast when objective reality is appreciated

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*well. The subjective has tremendous value but is so alarming and magical that it cannot be enjoyed except as a parallel to the objective.
[p. 153]*

This passage has muscularity to it. After acknowledging what is already self-evident ("Real milk is satisfying as compared with imaginary milk"), the passage seems to break open mid-sentence: "... but this is not the point. The point is

that in fantasy things work by magic: there are no brakes on fantasy, and love and hate cause alarming effects." External reality is not simply an abstraction in these sentences; it is alive in the language. External reality is a felt presence in the sounds of the words—for instance, in the dense, cold, metallic sound of *brakes* (which evokes for me the image of a locomotive with wheels locked, screeching to a halt over smooth iron tracks). The metaphor of a vehicle without the means to be stopped (a metaphor implicit in the expression *without brakes*) is elaborated as the sentence proceeds: "... love and hate cause alarming effects." Love and hate are without a subject, thus rendering the metaphorical vehicle not only without brakes, but also without a driver (or engineer).

The modulating effects of external reality can be felt in the restraint and frequent pauses in the first half of the sentence that immediately follows: "External reality has brakes on it—, and can be studied and known—, and—, in fact ..." Having been slowed, the sentence—and the experience of internal and external reality—unfolds in a more flowing (which is not to say bland or lifeless) way: "... Fantasy is only tolerable at full blast when objective reality is appreciated well."

Winnicott returns to the subject of illusion again and again in "Primitive Emotional Development," each time viewing it from a somewhat different perspective. He is without peer in his ability to capture in words what illusion might feel like to a baby. For instance, on returning to this subject late in the paper, he says that, in order for illusion to be generated, "... a simple *contact* with external or shared reality has to be made, by the infant's hallucinating and the world's presenting, with moments of illusion for the infant in which the two are taken by him to be identical, which they never in fact

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are" (p. 154). For this to happen, someone "... has to be taking the trouble [a wonderfully simple way to allude to the fact that being a mother to an infant is a lot of work and a lot of trouble] all the time [even when she longs for even an hour of sleep] to bring the world to the baby in understandable form [without too many complications and coincidences], and in a limited way, suitable to the baby's needs" (p. 154). The rhythm of the series of clauses making up this sentence heaps requirement upon requirement that the mother must meet in creating illusion for the baby. These efforts on the part of the mother constitute the intense backstage labor that is necessary for the infant's enjoyment of his orchestra seat in the performance of illusion. The performance reveals not a hint of the dirty grunt work that creates and safeguards the life of the illusion.

The humor of the contrast between illusion as seen from backstage and from an orchestra seat is, I think, not at all lost to Winnicott. The juxtaposition of the passage just quoted (something of a job description for the mother of a baby) and the paragraph that follows (which captures all of the sense of wonder and amazement a child feels on seeing a magic show) can hardly be a coincidence: "The subject of illusion ... be found to provide the clue to a child's interest in bubbles and clouds and rainbows and all mysterious phenomena, and also to his interest in fluff Somewhere here, too, is the interest in breath, which never decides whether it comes primarily from within or without ..." (p. 154). I am not aware of a comparable expression anywhere in the psychoanalytic literature of the almost translucent, mystifying quality of imaginative experience that becomes possible when the full blast of fantasy is made safe by the child's sturdy grasp of external reality.

Concluding Comments

Winnicott, in this, the first of his major papers, quietly, unassumingly defies the conventional wisdom, which holds that writing is primarily a means to an end, a means by which analytic data and ideas are conveyed to readers, much as telephones and telephone lines

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transport the voice in the form of electrical impulses and sound waves. The notion that our experiences as analysts and the ideas with which we make sense of them are inseparable from the language we use to create/convey them, for some analysts, is an idea that is strenuously resisted. For them, it is disappointing to acknowledge that the discourse among analysts, whether written or spoken, will forever remain limited by our imprecise, impressionistic—and consequently confusing and misleading—accounts of what we observe and how we think about what we do as analysts. For others, an appreciation of the inseparability of our observations and ideas, on the one hand, and the language we use to express them, on the other, is exciting, in that it embraces the indissoluble interpenetration of life and art, neither preceding the other, neither holding dominion over the other. To be alive (in more than an operational sense) is to be forever in the process of making things of one's own, whether they be thoughts, feelings, bodily movements, perceptions, conversations, poems, or psychoanalytic papers. The writing of no psychoanalyst better bears witness than that of Winnicott to the mutually dependent, mutually enlivening relationship of life and art.

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