

Winnicott's research on 'becoming' in personal psychic life: «My latest brain-child»

ANNA FERRUTA

In the paper read to the British Psychoanalytical Society in 1954 and published in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* in 1955, «Metapsychological and Clinical Aspects of Regression within the Psycho-Analytical Set-Up», Winnicott states:

The idea of psycho-analysis as an art must gradually give way to a study of environmental adaptation relative to patients' regressions. But while the scientific study of environmental adaptation is undeveloped, then I suppose analysts must continue to be artists in their work. An analyst may be a good artist, but (as I have frequently asked): what patient wants to be someone else's poem or picture?

I know from experience that some will say: all this leads to a theory of development which ignores the early stages of the development of the individual, which ascribes early development to environmental factors. This is quite untrue.

In the early development of the human being the environment that behaves well enough (that makes good-enough active adaptation) *enables personal growth to take place*. The self processes then may continue active, in an unbroken line of living growth (Winnicott, 1954, 291).

In 1965 in paper written for the British Psychoanalytical Society, «The Psychology of Madness: a Contribution from Psycho-analysis», he writes:

The practice of psycho-analysis for thirty-five years cannot but leave its mark. For me there have come about changes in my theoretical formulation, and these I have tried to state as they consolidated themselves in my mind. Often what I have discovered had been already discovered and even better stated, either by Freud himself or by other psycho-analysts or by poets and philosophers. This does not deter me from continuing to write down (and to read when a public is available) what is my latest brain-child (Winnicott, 1965, 119).

These words contain Winnicott's most significant legacy to future psychoanalysis: the theory of the subject's mind in a continual state of becoming, in contact with the other throughout the course of life, from the very beginnings to the moment of departure. This intuition found important confirmation from the elements which emerged in his researches on the first phases of the infant's life, and also from his explorations of psychoanalytic treatment in the territory of the borderline states and the psychoses, as well as in his approach to traumatic situations.

His conception of psychoanalysis is directed towards identifying the environmental and therapeutic contexts in which the subject's psychic life recovers and organizes itself according to new ways of functioning; he shows its plasticity, its potential for continual reorganization and the presence of functioning that does not evolve in a linear fashion, but transforms experiences in every phase of life.

Winnicott was aware that psychoanalytic theory would draw significant developments from his clinical investigations into the first phases of the life of the mother-infant pair and from the analysis of borderline patients. Darwin and Freud were the two beacons who enlightened him in setting out on the path of scientific study of the living being.

This biological and relational foundation of the development of the human being constitutes the founding and fertilising nucleus of his thought, which in Italy was especially taken up by Eugenio and Renata Gaddini, whom we must gratefully acknowledge as having intuited its value and made it known.

Winnicott does not mean to detach his theory of psychic functioning from what he indicates as the psyche-soma, the sensory experience from which the mind is shaped.¹

PSYCHIC GROWTH CONTINUALLY REORGANIZING ITSELF IN CONTACT WITH ANOTHER MIND

Winnicott is interested in the conditions which enable the infant to become a human being and the psychic structures to be transformed with new connections and not simply to evolve in a linear way from immaturity to genital maturity. The psyche's plasticity and growth proceed from the origin (*Home is Where We Start From*, 1986) throughout the whole course of life in the encounter with mortifying and vivifying objects, in mourning and in the continual acquisition of new territories in the subject's psychic life: *Development is my special line of country* («This Feminism», 1964a).

¹ «To study the concept of mind one must always be studying an individual, a total individual, and including the development of that individual from the very beginning of psychosomatic existence. If one accepts this discipline then one can study the mind of an individual as it specializes out from the psyche part of the psyche-soma. The mind does not exist as an entity in the individual's scheme of things provided the individual psyche-soma or body scheme has come satisfactorily through the very early developmental stages; mind is then no more than a special case of the functioning of the psyche-soma» (Winnicott, 1949??)

Winnicott is interested in deeply exploring this topic of the substantial dynamic and non-linear evolutionary unity of the human subject, a dimension to which had been introduced by the reading of Darwin which had struck him like a thunderbolt when he was a student at Cambridge: a scientist concerned with the living creature in constant transformation, interested in the interplay between individuals endowed with self-organization and their environment.

The concept of 'holding' takes shape in this context as an experience provided by the mother in the first period of life and by the analyst in certain phases of analysis by means of the ability to hold together unintegrated aspects, to make it possible to experience previously dissociated emotions, to pass through the unknown of the fear of breakdown (Winnicott, 1963) and be able to make use of being held by someone who keeps one together with their mind's arms, and to allow one to experience oneself in relation to the other while maintaining the continuity of being in time.

From this point of view, the influence of Winnicott's way of thinking about psychic growth has been enormous and widespread. The psychoanalysis of the past thirty years has oriented itself ever more towards configuring itself as a theory of psychic functions, of their physiology and plasticity. The unconscious affective communication between two subjects, from the first relations between mother and child to the most complex vicissitudes of the analytic relationship, sets up an interweaving of formation and transformation of psychic life (Schoore, 2003, Gallese, 2014, Bromberg, 2011). According to researches by Edelman (1987) into neural Darwinism, we can state that an active psychic functioning is present in the new-born from the start and that it structures itself in relation to the encounters which confirm or disregard its mental activity.²

Winnicott holds that analysis can be the appropriate treatment for reliving with the patient her emotional states of breakdown, which needed an environment that would permit an absolute dependency if they were to be psychically experienced. With regard to psychosis, he thinks it may be a form of defence against primitive agonies:

The basis of all learning (as well as of eating) is emptiness. But if emptiness was not experience as such at the beginning, then it turns up as a state that is feared, yet compulsively sought after. The search for personal non-existence can be examined in the same way. It will be found that non-existence here is part of a defence. Personal existence is represented by the projection elements, and the person is making an attempt to project everything that could be personal (Winnicott, 1963, 94-5).

² «The quality of the maternal care, reverie (Bion) and enigmatic signifiers (Laplanche) find a transforming filter which is already there at the outset and is itself transformed in turn. The first artefacts of psychic life are the maps of motor-memory and somato-sensoriality. These contribute to founding the progressive transformation of psychic functioning. The acknowledgement of a certain degree of «specific or adequate action» in the new-born, and hence of his lesser *Motorische Hilflosigkeit*, entails a different view, a much more dynamic one, of his *Psychische Hilflosigkeit*, his state of psychic powerlessness» (Monniello, 2014, 658-659).

The originality of Winnicott's thought consists in the heuristic radicalism with which he describes the formation of states of non-integration in the new-born and the possibility of proceeding from the beginning towards a psycho-emotional and psycho-somatic integration thanks to interaction with an environment which allows the infant to experience his own omnipotence and to feel himself rooted without reservations in his own personal experiences.

This deeply Winnicottian dimension has helped to inspire relational psychoanalysis, in which the encounter with the object is experienced as the expansion of the Self. For Bollas (from *The Shadow of the Object*, 1989, to *Being a Character*, 1992, to *Cracking Up*, 1995), the encounter with objects is an opportunity for continual rebirth. Similarly, for Mitchell (1988) and the American relationists who highlight the transformative character, favourable for growth, of the psychoanalytic process which creates connections between traumatic experience and potential for development in relating. In Italian psychoanalysis this perspective which sees an element of psychic growth in relating, has also been greatly enriched (Gaddini, 1989; Nissim, 2001; Di Chiara, 1985; Ferro, 2007; Bonaminio, 2004).

Winnicott always emphasized the element of becoming in the relational matrix at the start of psychic life, and we find this throughout the psychoanalytic explorations of the past 50 years, from Edward Tronick (2007) with the child making sense, creator of the world, to Anne Alvarez (2012) underlining the child's own functions of agency.

This intrinsically creative dimension of the subject in continual transformation, not closed in a definitive and performative conceptual schema, echoes through numerous essays of one of the most creative and interesting contemporary thinkers, Ogden, who has analysed of the trace of this conception in the language used by Winnicott in describing psychic functioning. Ogden observes that, in contrast with Freudian language based on nouns such as preconscious, conscious, unconscious, repression, etc., «Winnicott's language seems to be all verb: "feeling something", "getting to know their dreams", "screaming", "possessed", and so on» (Ogden, 2001, 313). The use of verbs seems to indicate the fact that he is concerned with processes of transformation, psychic work, a movement between internal and external realities to produce transitional phenomena as an expression of the subject's personal creativity, always maintaining the continuity of being in time.

THE QUALITIES OF THE OBJECT AND THE SUBJECT'S PSYCHIC WORK

The conception of the analytic process in which an individual becomes himself («*Sum, I am*», 1969) gradually expanded at the expense of other views where the analytic process/journey was conceived as an investigation in search of repressed representations or traumatic events, or as a free-for-all of narrative reconstructions. Winni-

cott is interested in the subject's becoming an individual, in the transition between external and internal worlds.

The processes of subjectivation as Winnicott understood them entailed the valorisation of the objects encountered for constructing the self but at the same time the valorisation of the psychic work performed by the subject who to some extent deposes them from their representational throne and sets itself up in their place, using a selection of their attributes to construct itself. This process of subjectivation gives value to the intrinsic qualities of the objects, which do not dissolve in the abstraction of a disembodied symbolization, but equally do not condition the subject to an interminable dependency on them, making them available to be used, beginning with the analyst.

The process of subjectivation can only intervene in an intersubjective space, in places which the subject has not constructed but found, which have been transmitted to her, starting with language: it is a movement towards the other, with the body and speech, with desire. It is a matter of moving to a plural, cohesive space as an intersubjective matrix for subjectivation. The important thing, observes Green (1995), is the trajectory, *le trajet*, how one arrives at the object³: what is needed is a route, a space-time in which the subject can become what it did not know it could become. The imprisonment of the subject within its own solitary psychic world, or in the cages of an external reality which demands submission, is avoided by means of a psychic work which produces a new reality, fruit of the subject's creativity in using material which it recognizes outside itself in order to create something personal: in this way the subject takes on a form and becomes. The relationship is not used to highlight the object's developmental and imaginative qualities, but to foster and reinforce the independence of the subject which, by relating, attains a legacy of experiences from which to start developing:

If time is allowed for maturational processes, then the infant becomes able to be destructive and becomes able to hate and to kick and to scream instead of magically annihilating that world. In this way *actual aggression is seen to be an achievement*. As compared with magical destruction, aggressive ideas and behaviour take on a positive value, and hate becomes a sign of civilization, when we keep in mind the whole process of the emotional development of the individual, and especially the earliest stages» (Winnicott, 1946b, 98, italics in original).

This aspect of Winnicottian theory valorises the function of using the object to construct a sense of self in order to achieve the ability to feel oneself existing to and utter

³ «The journey expresses the dynamic quality of experience, entailing a movement in space linked to time. I would venture to say that Winnicott is here developing an alternative to Freudian drive theory which embeds the dynamic dimension itself, and change itself, in the space in the move from the source to the object. Let's remember, the transitional space is not simply «between two people»; it is a space in which the future object is in transition, at the end of which it takes possession of an object created in proximity to a real external object before having reached it» (Green, 1995, 22, translated by the translator of this article).

a strong *I am*. Winnicott speaks of the insult which external reality represents for the subject when it demands submission and extinguishes spontaneity, creativity, and even the sense of the real (Ferruta, 2003).

In Winnicott's thought, alongside this profound awareness that psychic growth requires an available object with which to be in relation, there is the reflection on the importance of experiencing encounters with an otherness, with not-me objects which may be subjectified through the feelings and emotions they arouse. The transitional area is an area of passage between what is perceived and what is symbolized, where what is important is the dimension of a sensory experience which nourishes subjectivity. The object is important in this area for its perceptual characteristics, and the subject for its transformative work on itself as creator of experience.

In his book *Jouer avec Winnicott*, Green (1995) claims that the psyche is a structure for intermediation between the organism and its environment: the objectualising and de-objectualising functions represent this continual movement between the creation of objects and the withdrawal from them, until the subject himself disappears. In this respect, Green fully endorses the concept of the journey of psychic work understood not as timely insight but as the construction of psychic reality through a process of symbolization which entails a trajectory between internal and external worlds:

The dream is not only the attempt to realize a desire (even if we take the simplest formulation about the dream). We can consider it not only the overcoming of an obstacle which has not been possible to overcome in reality, but also as an example of the negative which introduces us to the idea that the negative is a work, not a state (Green, 1995, 69, translated by the translator of this article)

THE INTEGRITY OF OBJECTS

It is here, when we face this contradiction about the presence/absence of the object in the mental life of the subject, that we are helped by Bollas's (2009) concept of the integrity of objects. Emotional experiences are linked to the objects which put them in motion. According to Bollas, we construct our idiom via our understanding of forms, configuring our life by choosing objects that have a completeness.

The integrity of an object has the potential to set up processes of evocation. Objects have their structure and beauty which must be respected, and precisely because they have this integrity which renders them vital and energetic, or they can put themselves at the disposal of an encounter with other objects as a source of emotions. Then the processes of deconstruction happen, previously constructed configurations dissolve, and new forms are produced with a renewed integrity and completeness. This constructive-deconstructive-constructive process (Bollas, 1995) is healthy and vital precisely because we are moving into the field of encounters between objects, persons, and con-

figurations which have their own structure which holds them together. This integrity of objects is also possessed by abstract configurations, even Pollock drip paintings, or Klee's drawings of an emerging form, in that they are produced by a living, integral organism, their maker. They function as evocative objects which activate the processes of subjectivation, like stories, drawings, music, which have their own integrity of unitary, dynamic, vital functioning, and for this reason can be used by the subject for creative? processes, also constantly assimilating and reorganizing the structure of new experiences. The object is not merely a container for the subject's projections but has its own distinct structure, its own completeness which renders it a dynamic and functional unity: when the subject uses it to elaborate and articulate the Self, it enters into contact with the completeness of the object which has an autonomous life of its own, what we indicate as «beauty», and has no need of the other's intervention in order to exist, like the work of art which continues to live separately from its maker. And so begins a journey towards the creation of a genuinely new completeness, the representation of a Self which functions with enough cohesion for the individual to survive in a shared world with a beauty which constitutes its own communicative and autonomous cohesion.

The constructive-narrative techniques are stories we tell with our patients, formed from the interpretations in the analytic sessions and deferring the moment of absence and emptiness. The space, empty of signifying constructions, constituted by a solid and renewable relational context, can give life to the becoming of new integral objects which are the fruit of these encounters. The analytic technique consists in the shared ability to draw a solid and changeable picture which is ready to become many stories. A psychodynamic theory of subjectivation (Bollas, 2009) allows the basic fault (Balint, 1967) to be confronted and, at the same time, allows the construction of a secure base that is necessary for continual transformations in contact with the internal/external context.

Thus, in analysis we share the possibility of allowing ourselves to be used by the patient for the construction of her Self and being ready to function as the living object which opens the way to the encounter with not-me objects with their perceptual-sensory force of attraction, which is not intrusive or alienating but endowed with their own significance conferred by the subject as they come to form part of its interior world. What is needed is to enlarge the mental container so that it can accommodate a dynamic plurality in relating and set up that permanent interior dialogue between many states of the self which is waiting to be able to express them, sometimes leaving some of them silent.

TO CONCLUDE

Perhaps we have not sufficiently assimilated Winnicott's interest in promoting the movement of the human subject from unprepared dependency to relative dependency, to independence, as a movement towards constructing the self in relation to the other

without losing it or losing its perceptual-sensorial traces and the dimension of otherness. Psychoanalytic thought has often oriented itself more towards either the idealization of dependency or towards a form of independence entrusted to a thinking immersed in a disembodied symbolic. Many years of psychoanalytic practice have not yet succeeded in dissipating the fear of dependency and making subjects approach the seashore of endless worlds where children play with the water, according to the lines by Tagore used in the epigraph of «The Location of Cultural Experience» in *Playing and Reality* (1971). Dependency still causes fear instead of being passed through and then left behind, so that we can enjoy a condition of freedom even when in the presence of the other.

ABSTRACTS AND KEY WORDS

Winnicott's research on the continual 'becoming' of personal psychic life. «My latest brain-child». The interest in the primitive areas of the mind was a constant in all Winnicott's clinical and theoretical research: his attention centres on the aspects of the psyche which always offer developmental potential, both in the infant and in the psychotic adult. Meeting an alterity that is not annihilating and able to get in touch sets in motion creative abilities of psychic growth. «My latest brain-child» is an expression that refers both to the inexhaustible spirit of research into relational psychic functioning and to the «unfinished» quality of Winnicott's theoretical construction.

KEY WORDS: Dependence, independence, object quality, psychic plasticity, relation, subjectivation.

LA RECHERCHE DE WINNICOTT SUR L'AVENIR DE LA VIE PSYCHIQUE PERSONNELLE «MY LATEST BRAIN-CHILD». L'intérêt pour les zones primitives de l'esprit a accompagné Winnicott tout au long de ses recherches cliniques et théoriques: son attention se porte sur les aspects de la psyché qui ont toujours un potentiel de développement, chez le petit enfant comme chez le psychotique. La rencontre avec une altérité non anéantissante, et capable d'entrer en contact, met en mouvement des capacités créatrices de croissance psychique. «My latest brain-child» est une expression qui renvoie à la fois à l'esprit inépuisable de recherche sur le fonctionnement psychique relationnel et à la qualité de «inachevé» de la construction théorique de Winnicott.

MOTS-CLÉS: Dépendance, indépendance, plasticité psychique, qualité des objets, relation, subjectivation.

LA INVESTIGACIÓN DE WINNICOTT SOBRE EL DESARROLLO DE LA VIDA PSÍQUICA PERSONAL «MY LATEST BRAIN-CHILD». El interés por las áreas primitivas de la mente ha acompañado a Winnicott a lo largo de su investigación clínica y teórica: su acción se centra en los aspectos de la psique que siempre presentan posibilidades de desarrollo, tanto en el niño como en el psicótico. El encuentro con una alteridad que no sea aplastante, sino capaz de ponerse en contacto, pone en marcha capacidades creativas de crecimiento psíquico. «My latest brain-child» es una expresión que se refiere sea a la inagotable actividad de estudio sobre el funcionamiento psíquico relacional, sea a la calidad de «no terminado» de la construcción teórica de Winnicott.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Calidad de los objetos, dependencia, independencia, plasticidad psíquica, relación, subjectivación.

WINNICOTT'S FORSCHUNGEN ZUR ENTWICKLUNG DES INDIVIDUELLEN PSYCHISCHEN LEBENS «MY LATEST BRAIN-CHILD». Das Interesse für die primitiven Bereiche des Verstandes begleitete Winnicott während seiner gesamten klinischen und theoretischen Forschung: Seine Aufmerksamkeit konzentrierte sich auf diejenigen Aspekte der Psyche, die immer ein Potential zur Entwicklung zeigen, beim kleinen Kind ebenso wie beim Psychotiker. Die Begegnung mit einer Alterität, die nicht vernichtet und die in der Lage ist, eine direkte Verbindung herzustellen, setzt kreative Fertigkeiten zum psychischen Wachstum in Gang. ‚My latest brain-child‘ ist ein Ausdruck, der sich sowohl auf den unerschöpflichen, auf die relationale psychische Funktionsweise gerichteten Forschergeist bezieht, als auch auf die Eigenschaft des Unvollendeten des theoretischen Konstrukts Winnicotts.

SCHLÜSSELWÖRTER: Abhängigkeit, Beziehung, Objekteigenschaft, psychische Plastizität, Unabhängigkeit, Subjektivierung.

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Anna Ferruta

Viale Bianca Maria, 5

20122 Milano

e-mail: anna.ferruta@spiweb.it

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(Translated by Adam Elgar, BA, MSc)