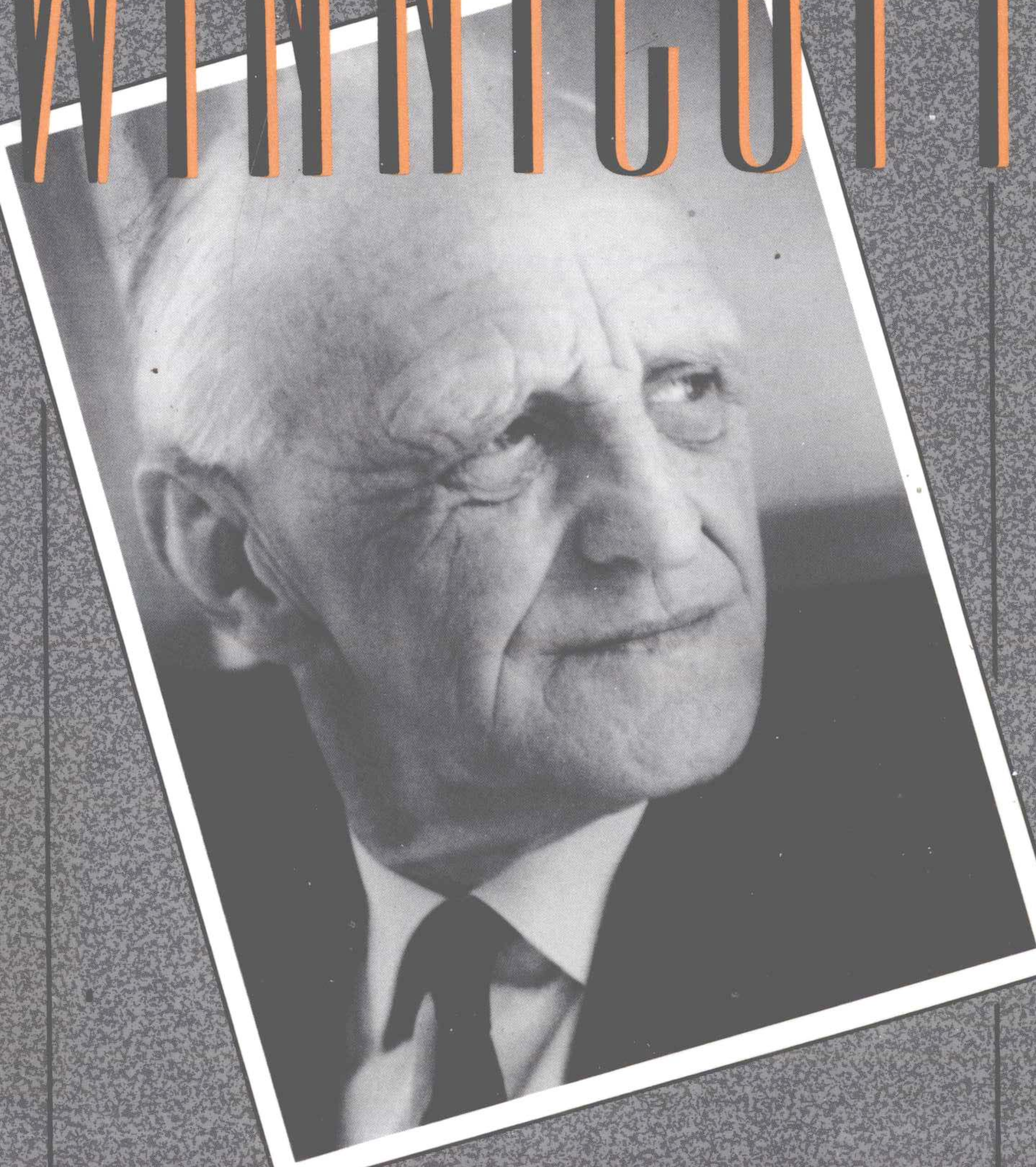
ADAM PHILLIPS

WINNICOTT



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Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Printed in the United States of America
This book has been digitally reprinted. The content remains identical to that of previous printings.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Phillips, Adam.
Winnicott.

Bibliography: p.
1. Child analysis. 2. Winnicott, D. W. (Donald Woods), 1896–1971. I. Title. II. Series
RJ504.2.P48 1989 155.4 88-28390
ISBN 0-674-95360-6 (cloth)
ISBN 0-674-95361-4 (paper)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is the result of several years' learning and teaching psychoanalysis, in which innumerable debts have been incurred. I owe a great deal, in particular to Masud Khan and Christopher Bollas from whom I learnt versions of psychoanalysis that were inspiring and intelligible.

The prompt criticism and enthusiastic interest of Geoffrey Summerfield and Hugh Haughton made the writing of this book possible, as did the assistance of Eileen Joyce. The book has benefited from a variety of suggestions from Alex Coren, Morian Roberts, Charles Rycroft, Michel Gribinski, Richard Poirier, Michael Neve, Jimmy Britton, Geoffrey Weaver and George Moran. I would also like to thank Madeleine Davis and the Winnicott Publications Committee for their support of the project, and the librarians of the New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center for their help. The editors of *Raritan* and the *Nouvelle Revue de Psychoanalyse* have given invaluable support to my work.

My own sense of what psychoanalysis is about evolved in conversation with the person to whom this book is dedicated.

London, June 1988

'The first lesson that innocent Childhood affords me is – that it is an instinct of my Nature to pass out of myself, and to exist in the form of others.

'The second is – not to suffer any one form to pass into ME and become a usurping Self in the disguise of what the German Pathologists call a FIXED IDEA.'

S. T. Coleridge

'I have followed my inclination rather than consulted my ability.'

Ralph Waldo Emerson

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Introduction

> 'Health is much more difficult to deal with than disease.'
>
> *D. W. Winnicott*

In a talk given in 1945 to the sixth form of St Paul's School, Donald Winnicott described his experience, as a schoolboy, of discovering Darwin's *Origin of Species*:

> I could not leave off reading it. At the time I did not know why it was so important to me, but I see now that the main thing was that it showed that living things could be examined scientifically with the corollary that gaps in knowledge and understanding need not scare me. For me this idea meant a great lessening of tension and consequently a release of energy for work and play.[1]

Darwin had examined living things to explain their relation to each other. He realized that gaps in the evolutionary record were merely interruptions in the historical evidence for the continuity of species. Just as Freud would later describe the repressed histories of the individuals he treated, Darwin had reconstructed the invisible histories of species. Gaps in the evidence were openings, and both Darwin and Freud had been able to tell persuasive, apparently coherent stories about them. Winnicott implies by his remarks that he needed to be able not to close the gaps, but to find a way of examining them. They could be potential spaces for the imagination. He was to be preoccupied, as we shall see, by

the idea of gaps, those 'spaces between' where there was room for the play of speculation.

In the master-plot of human development that he worked on for over forty years, Winnicott tried to explain how the individual grows, through dependence, towards a personal way of being, how he becomes at once ordinary and distinctive according to the sense he has of himself, and how the early environment makes this possible. Growth was this ongoing task of psychosomatic integration. He was to stress the need for continuity of care – 'good-enough mothering' – to sustain what he called the 'going on being', the 'life-line' of the infant, at the earliest stages of its life. He would talk, enigmatically for a psychoanalyst, of instinctual life as a possible 'complication' in the individual's more fundamental needs for relationship. He would regard illness as the inhibition of that potential spontaneity that for him characterized the aliveness of a person. And he would come to think of psychopathology as originating from the breaks in continuity, the distractions in a person's early development: gaps caused by the intrusions and deprivations and natural catastrophes of childhood, most of which he saw as resulting from failures of parental provision. There were things the child had experienced but could not make satisfying sense of, and so find a place for in himself. For the infant who waits too long for his mother, for example, 'the only real thing is the gap; that is to say, the death or the absence, or the amnesia.'[2]

In Winnicott's view experience was traumatic for the child if it was incomprehensible, beyond the child's grasp. The onus was on the mother, at first, to present the world to the infant in manageable doses. And the onus on those helping mothers and infants, Winnicott believed, was to protect this process. 'If it be true, or even possible,' he writes, 'that the mental health of every individual is founded by the mother in her living experience with her

infant, doctors and nurses can make it their first duty not to interfere. Instead of trying to teach mothers how to do what in fact cannot be taught, paediatricians must come sooner or later to recognize a good mother when they see one and then make sure that she gets full opportunity to grow to her job.'[3]

Winnicott's work was devoted to the recognition and description of the good mother, and the use of the mother–infant relationship as the model of psychoanalytic treatment. And he often took for granted that what mothers did naturally, 'what in fact cannot be taught', was a model for the skill of the psychoanalyst.

He examined, in particular, the paradox of traumatic experiences that were formative by virtue of their eluding the self, and the mother's role in facilitating in her infant a self available for personal experience. But Winnicott was to use the concept of the Self in an idiosyncratic and sometimes mystifying way that was not obviously compatible with traditional psychoanalytic theory. 'A word like "self"', he writes, 'naturally knows more than we do; it uses us and can command us.'[4] We will gather from the contexts in which he was used by this powerful word that he was asserting the presence of something essential about a person that was bound up with bodily aliveness, yet remained inarticulate and ultimately unknowable: perhaps like an embodied soul. 'At the centre of each person', Winnicott writes, 'is an incommunicado element, and this is sacred and most worthy of preservation.'[5] This Self that he will describe as 'permanently non-communicating' fits uneasily, of course, with the notion of psychoanalysis as primarily an interpretative practice.

The individual's Self was endangered, above all, Winnicott believed, by precocious adaptation to the environment. In *The Origin of Species* Darwin had noted what he called the 'intermediate' or 'transitional gradations' in the devel-

opment of species, and the role of the environment in this process. He had realized the value, for survival, of individual diversity and variation, but also the need for the organism to comply with the demands of its environment. Organisms had to conform and adapt but also individuate prolifically in order to increase their chances of survival. Innovation and adaptation were mutually necessary, as those who were finally unable to adapt to their environment would not survive. In Winnicott's theory of human development it is the mother, as the first environment, who 'actively adapts' to the needs of her infant. In Winnicott's terms the child has a natural right, initially, to use the mother ruthlessly for the recognition and gratification that his development requires. 'Without someone specifically orientated to his needs,' he writes, 'the infant cannot find a working relation to external reality.'[6] In time the mother will gradually limit her availability and so 'disillusion' the child, and the child will become concerned about the consequences of his ruthlessness. But Winnicott, as we shall see, is committed to an idea of 'natural' processes of development – derived from Darwinian biology – that the mother can adapt to and foster by her responsive attention. The word 'natural', as we shall also see, does a lot of devious work in Winnicott's writing. It could betray him sometimes – when he refers, for example, to 'the part the woman plays in nature's comic opera'[7] – into a sentimentality that he was otherwise fiercely suspicious of.

The first relationship, in Winnicott's account, was one of reciprocity rather than overwhelming conflict or submission. But if the mother was unable, for reasons to do with her own development, to adapt to her infant's needs and was, herself, intrusively demanding, she would foster a precocious compliance in the child. To manage the demands of the mother, and to protect the True Self of personal need and preoccupation, the child would construct what Winni-

cott called a False Self. By introducing a language of reciprocity into the story of early human development Winnicott revised part of Darwin's account. He reverses the Darwinian equation by suggesting that human development was an often ruthless struggle against compliance with the environment. And this struggle was enacted in his writing where we find innovations in psychoanalytic theory and technique followed by explicit assertions of the continuity of his work with a more orthodox psychoanalytic tradition. We will see, in fact, a certain disingenuousness in the way Winnicott disguises his radical departures from Freud. 'Mature adults', he wrote, 'bring vitality to that which is ancient, old and orthodox, by recreating it after destroying it.'[8] With blithe defiance Winnicott recreated, often beyond recognition, the work of everyone who influenced him.

Compliance was a crucial issue for Winnicott because of the fact of dependence. The infant relies on the mother's firm attentiveness for his survival. And the mother in turn depends upon the people around her that she needs. There is, as Winnicott once famously said, no such thing as a baby: 'If you show me a baby you certainly show me also someone caring for a baby, or at least a pram with someone's eyes and ears glued to it. One sees a "nursing couple".'[9] Winnicott would derive everything in his work, including a theory of the origins of scientific objectivity and a revision of psychoanalysis, from this paradigm of the developing mother–infant relationship. He would elaborate what it was in the mother that the child depended upon, and this would lead him to questions that were rarely addressed in psychoanalytic theory: what do we depend on to make us feel alive, or real? Where does our sense come from, when we have it, that our lives are worth living? Winnicott approached these issues through the observation – one of his favoured words – of mothers and infants, and what became in time the 'transitional space' between them. And

he would be committed to linking these observations with insights derived from psychoanalysis. As the first paediatrician in England to train as a psychoanalyst, he was uniquely placed to compare his observations with the always reconstructed, retrospective histories of psychoanalytic treatment.

What went on between the mother and her infant was to be the source of Winnicott's most striking and characteristic insights. But it would be part of his incompatibility with Freud that these insights – the connection, for example, between infantile ruthlessness and adult sexuality – were rarely linked up by him with the place of the erotic in adult life. Fathers tend to turn up in his writing in brackets or parentheses. His most important theoretical contributions to psychoanalysis – transitional phenomena, primary creativity, ruthlessness, the anti-social tendency, the True and False Self – are never described in terms of the difference between the sexes.

Freud, though, had paid little attention in his work to the nursing couple or the details of infant care. He had invented a setting and treatment that were unwittingly reminiscent of early maternal care and he had also, of course, written of the dependent relationship recreated in psychoanalytic treatment. While he had acknowledged the significance, for later development, of the helplessness of the human infant and its precocious immaturity at birth, he had not given this helplessness the centrality it was later to assume for child analysts and the object-relations theorists who thought of themselves as continuing his work. It was the Oedipus Complex – the three-person relationship – not the infant's early dependent vulnerability, that Freud saw as the crux of psychoanalysis. Though he worked out an essential pre-Oedipal schema of development, he put relatively little emphasis on the first relationship with the mother. And he tended to assume a certain developmental achievement in his patients that Winnicott would have questioned. From

his case-histories it seems that Freud believed his patients had more or less successfully negotiated the 'long period' of helplessness and entered into the disappointing rigours of incestuous desire.

Freud was interested in the adult's struggle with incompatible and unacceptable desires which he saw as the transformed derivatives of the child's desire for his parents. This desire, that Freud referred to as infantile sexuality, was the precursor of and paradigm for adult sexuality. Out of a profound ambivalence, in Freud's view, the individual constructed an always precarious sexual identity, whereas for Winnicott, out of an always paradoxical involvement with others, the individual gathers the sense of a self he was born with as a potential. Where Freud was concerned with the individual's compromised possibilities for satisfaction, for Winnicott this is only part of a larger issue of the individual's possibilities for personal authenticity, what he will call 'feeling real'. In Winnicott's writing culture can facilitate growth, like the mother; for Freud it prohibits and frustrates like the father. In Freud's view man is divided and driven, by the contradictions of his desire, into frustrating involvement with others. In Winnicott man can only find himself in relation with others, and in the independence gained through acknowledgement of dependence. For Freud, in short, man was the ambivalent animal; for Winnicott he would be the dependent animal, for whom development – the only 'given' of his existence – was the attempt to become 'isolated without being insulated'. Prior to sexuality as the unacceptable there was helplessness. Dependence was the first thing, before good and evil.

In the *Three Essays on Sexuality* (1905) Freud gives his account of the child's earliest developmental needs, the blueprint for all the competing psychoanalytic stories of human development that were to follow. In the first essay he makes a simple distinction that was to be important in

the psychoanalysis of children. 'Let us', he writes, 'call the person from whom sexual attraction proceeds the sexual object and the act towards which the instinct tends the sexual aim.' The first object of desire, Freud goes on to say, is for both sexes the mother. But the object, who is at first the mother, Freud claims is merely 'soldered on' to the instinct. That is to say – and this is more obviously true of adult sexuality – there is for Freud no necessary connection between the instinct and its object, for which substitutes can easily be found. In this view the child's, and later the adult's, primary commitment is to the instinct and its satisfaction, not to a specific relationship. In fact, in Freud's view, the infant turns to the mother almost grudgingly out of the inability to be self-satisfied. In other words, dependence was imagined by Freud as a concession on the part of the infant. He comes, in a state verging on disappointment, to a belated awareness of the mother, who is literally an object to relieve the tension born of desire. The infant is conceived of as originally an omnipotent, exploitative hedonist.[10]

With the advent of child analysis, and in particular with the work of Melanie Klein, the earliest stages of this object-relation with the mother came into focus in psychoanalysis for the first time. Instead of the discrete separation of subject and object, of the infant and its mother, the relational matrix became the object of attention. Different accounts of the child's emotional life began to emerge and more specific questions were asked about the place of the mother in the infant's world. Considering children's play as analogous to the free-associations of adults, Klein applied her version of the classical psychoanalytic technique to the treatment of very young children. She interpreted their play and constructed unprecedented and revealing pictures of what she called the child's internal world. Stressing one aspect in particular of infantile sexuality, the infant's

sadism, she was the first to formulate, though often in a dense psychoanalytic language of her own, the passionate intensity of early emotional life. As we shall see, her theories of primitive emotional development, and the significance of the child's destructiveness in the process, were to be crucial for Winnicott. His work, in fact, cannot be understood without reference to Klein. It is a continuous, and sometimes inexplicit, commentary on and critique of her work. The importance of the internal world and its objects, the elaborate and pervasive power of fantasy, the central notion of primitive greed – all these ideas Winnicott takes over from Klein and uses in his own way. As we shall see, they evolved different narratives of the developmental process and the mother's contribution to it. But her stringent theoretical positions, and the collusive devotion of her followers, provoked him without dispelling his own idiosyncratic approach.

Winnicott shared with Klein a fundamental belief in the decisive importance of the earliest stages of development. But from the very beginning, he claimed, the infant sought contact with a person, not simply instinctual gratification from an object. The infant starts life as a profoundly sociable being: he clamours for intimacy, not only for relief of tension – for relatedness, not simply for satisfaction. In fact satisfaction is only possible in a context of relatedness to the mother. 'It is not instinctual satisfaction', he writes, 'that makes a baby begin to be, to feel that life is real, to find life worth living.'[11] It was maternal care, he believed, that made it possible for the infant self to be enriched, as opposed to overwhelmed, by instinctual experience. It was the mother's essential role to protect the self of her infant; instincts served the self, in Winnicott's view, they did not constitute it. It was 'the self that must precede the self's use of instinct; the rider must ride the horse, not be run

away with.'[12] It was the 'mother's job' to ensure that this happened.

Freud had said that the rider must guide the horse in the direction in which the horse wants to go. He was prescient in his sense that his insistence on the central and subversive importance of sexuality would threaten everyone's allegiance to psychoanalysis. Initiated by Klein, and reformulated by Winnicott, it was to be part of the contribution of what became known as the British School of object-relations theorists, to translate psychoanalysis from a theory of sexual desire into a theory of emotional nurture. It was as though the adult had been usurped by the infant. With the arrival of Melanie Klein in England in 1926, with the work of John Bowlby and Winnicott himself with children evacuated during the war, and with the insights derived from Anna Freud's version of child analysis, a new picture emerged in psychoanalysis of the significance of early relationships for the individual's development. Just as women were being encouraged to stay at home again after their crucial work during the war, coercive and convincing theories about the importance for children of continuous mothering, of the potential dangers of separation, began to be published which could easily be used to persuade them to stay there.[13] In British psychoanalysis after the war there was not so much a return to Freud, as there had been in France with the work of Lacan, as a return to Mother.

II

Under the aegis, though not the leadership, of Winnicott, a Middle Group emerged within the British Psychoanalytical Society. Strongly influenced by child analysis, but not exclusively allied with the work of either Klein or Anna Freud, these analysts – of whom Masud Khan, Charles Rycroft, Marion Milner, John Klauber and Peter Lomas are

the most distinguished – formed no school or training of their own. Committed to pluralism rather than hero-worship, their work coheres around a more eclectic developmental model. Coming, broadly speaking, from an empirical rather than a dialectical tradition, their work is characterized by an interest in observation and empathy, a suspicion of abstraction and dogmatism, and a belief in people's ability to make themselves known and be understood. Their theoretical papers refer continually to clinical work; there are few dazzling feats of interpretation or knowingness, and concern for the patient is expressed without irony. Imagination was a necessary term in their more or less shared conceptual vocabulary. Although obliquely influenced by Existentialism, the Middle Group tended to draw their redescriptions of Freud from biology, ethology and literature rather than from linguistics and continental philosophy. Darwin, rather than Hegel or Nietzsche, was a presiding spirit in their work. There was no radical intent in their theory-making. In their writings they did not make comprehensive theoretical assertions, nor was the tone one of shrewd enlightened dismay about the human condition.

For Winnicott, and those who were influenced by his work, psychoanalytic treatment was not exclusively interpretative, but first and foremost the provision of a congenial milieu, a 'holding environment' analogous to maternal care. What Paul Ricoeur has called the 'hermeneutic of suspicion' in Freud's work, is replaced by the attempt to establish an analytic setting in which the patient does not undergo authoritative translation – having his unconscious fed back to him, as it were – but is enabled by the analyst, as Winnicott wrote, 'to reveal himself to himself'. To begin with, the analyst is a certain kind of host: psychoanalysis, he wrote, 'is not just a matter of interpreting the repressed unconscious [but] . . . the provision of a professional setting for trust, in which such work may take place'.[14] Interpreta-