

Winnicott: Life and Work
by [F Robert Rodman](#)

Dr. True Self

A Review by Martha C. Nussbaum

I.

Unlike Freud, Donald Winnicott is not a cultural icon, read in Great Books courses, revered and reviled. Unlike Jacques Lacan, he is not an intellectual cult figure, with a band of zealous disciples and an impenetrable jargon. There is no school of Winnicott; there are no courses in his methods. All this is as he wished it. Nobody was more skeptical of cults and the rigidities that they induced. All his life Winnicott was obsessed with the freedom of the individual self to exist defiantly, resisting parental and cultural demands, to be there without saying a word if silence was its choice. In his own writings he spoke with a voice that was determinedly his own, surprisingly personal, idiosyncratic, playful, and at the same time ordinary. One could not extract a jargon from it if one tried, and one cannot talk about his theoretical ideas without confronting live, complex human beings. That, perhaps, is why he has never had a secure home in the academy, which is so enamored of beautiful scientific or pseudo-scientific structures, and so often fearful of real people and the demands that their complexity imposes. And for these same reasons Winnicott has had an enormous influence on the practice of psychoanalysis, particularly in America.

When Winnicott burst onto the London psychoanalytic scene, an odd ruffled man exploding with ideas — he was like a Catherine wheel shooting off sparks, a colleague remarked — analysts still saw human emotions mainly in terms of Freud's account of primitive instinctual drives, with sexual gratification as their goal. Melanie Klein was already making her important contribution to Freudian theory by insisting on the crucial importance of the earliest stages of life; but she clung to Freud's hedonic theory, seeing the infant's search as aimed at pleasure, which she, apparently along with Freud, understood to be a single undifferentiated experience. (Winnicott's great contemporary, the Scottish analyst W.R.D. Fairbairn, once wrote that Klein could have avoided this error by reading John Stuart Mill.) And she insisted that the infant's psychic drama was played out inside its own subjective space, with figures that were the demonic projections of its own inchoate sense of parts of reality. The actual environment and its people were of no interest to her.

Winnicott learned much from Klein, with whom he had a close if uneven friendship. He absorbed from her the importance of the young child's fantasy life, to which, as a practitioner, he had remarkable empathetic access. (The analysis of a little girl published under the title of *The Piggle* is one of the great examples in English literature of an adult entering the wild conflict-ridden world of a young child.) But he insisted that the infant seeks from the start complex forms of relationship and reciprocity, not simply its own pleasure. And also that the infant's development cannot be understood without looking at its real surroundings — at the objects, responsive or nonresponsive, that either create a "facilitating environment" for emotional growth or cause the self to hide, its place taken by a rigid mechanical surrogate. Thus, Winnicott famously said, "there is no such thing as a baby" on its own: we are always dealing with a "nursing couple." If psychoanalysis in America has largely become a theory of emotional nurture and exchange rather than one of hedonic satisfaction, it is thanks to Winnicott.

Winnicott also situated psychoanalysis far more accurately than had many of its other practitioners, seeing it as an imaginative humanistic endeavor, akin both to poetry and to love, rather than as an

exact science with unvarying rules. To fellow analyst Harry Guntrip, who was his patient, he remarked that "we differ from Freud who was for curing symptoms. We're concerned with living persons, whole living and loving." (This somewhat unfair treatment of Freud shows the aggressive side of the gentle analyst's personality.) As for the goal of the process, it was not simply the removal of symptoms; it was also the ability to play, to be creative. "We are poor indeed," he said, "if we are only sane."

As F. Robert Rodman's fine biography makes plain, these insights grew out of a very troubled early life, followed by a successful and reasonably happy adulthood, though marred by cardiac illness, conflict with other members of the psychoanalytic community, and a series of questionable ethical judgments. Rodman, a practicing analyst, has edited Winnicott's correspondence, and this biography began as a quasi-official work co-authored with a member of the Winnicott Trust. He had the cooperation of Winnicott's widow, Clare Britton, who died in 1984, as well as numerous friends and associates. On his co-author's death in 1991, Rodman assumed the task on his own. This seems fortunate, for Rodman, though deeply sympathetic to both the man and his ideas, is free to express strong criticisms of Winnicott's ethical lapses, seeing him as "a person in conflict who expressed his genius, and also went awry, in manifold ways." With this combination of empathy and freedom, Rodman presents as balanced and insightful a portrait of the genesis of Winnicott's ideas as we are likely to have.

II.

Donald Winnicott was born in 1896, in the west of England, to a prosperous middle-class Methodist family. According to a memoir written by his widow, his childhood was on the whole happy, but Rodman now makes it clear that matters were more complicated. Winnicott's father, a rigid man who never appears in photos without perfectly waxed moustaches, evidently imposed strict standards of behavior. The young Donald loved to play with a beautiful female wax doll, and his father so teased him about this non-male behavior that the little boy smashed his beloved toy. Shortly thereafter (Winnicott's widow reports in a fragmentary memoir) Donald decided, looking at himself in the mirror, that he was "too nice," and started to behave aggressively. One day his father heard him say "Drat!" and immediately sent him off to boarding school. If much of his life and thought was devoted to nonconformity and protection of the "true self" from invasion by the forces of conformity (including gender conformity, a topic that fascinated him), this is surely the outgrowth of his father's intrusiveness and the pain that it inflicted. In a late essay on the self, which he describes as "a protest from the core of me," Winnicott remarks that "rape, and being eaten by cannibals, these are mere bagatelles as compared with the violation of the self's core.... For me this would be the sin against the self."

In contrast with his father, Winnicott's mother is a shadowy figure. People who recall the family say little about her. But Rodman pieces the fragments together convincingly, arguing that Bessie was depressed and frightened of her sexuality. Winnicott once told a close friend that his mother weaned him early because she disliked the pleasurable feelings of nursing. Late in life, in a poem called "The Tree" (partly about Christ's suffering), he described the pain of having to keep his mother alive:

Thus I knew her

Once, stretched out on her lap
as now on a dead tree
I learned to make her smile

to stem her tears
to undo her guilt
to cure her inward death

To enliven her was my living

Here was another invasion of the self, which clearly involved forbidding himself both aggressive and sexual feelings. Not surprisingly, as far as we know, no member of Winnicott's family had a healthy sexual life. His two sisters, very attractive women, never married. Donald chose as his first wife a mentally disturbed woman, Alice Taylor, who rarely bathed and who used to commune with the spirit of T.E. Lawrence through her parrot. The marriage lasted for twenty-six years but was never consummated. Sexual impotence was a major theme in Winnicott's early life; he later connected the ability to enjoy sex fully with the idea of giving oneself permission to be aggressive. Several close associates link the strain of caring for his increasingly dotty wife with a series of heart attacks that made his health increasingly fragile.

After service on a destroyer during World War I (he spent much of his time reading Henry James), Winnicott took a medical degree at Cambridge and went into pediatrics. His interest in children had been strong for years. In a letter home from Cambridge he describes his delight in arranging theatrical games for the local Boy Scouts: it was "such a revelation of the powers of the imagination of the boys that I shall never forget that day.... Each one was absolutely different from the others, and half the charm lay there." Winnicott once estimated that during his career he had treated sixty thousand children. His rich experience gave psychoanalysis a new — and characteristically British — empirical dimension.

At the same time, no doubt owing to his own personal problems, his interest in psychoanalysis was already strong. While seeing pediatric patients, he went into training analysis with James Strachey (who wrote inappropriately gossipy letters speculating on whether "Mr. W" would "fuck his wife all of a sudden"). He graduated from the British Institute for Psychoanalysis in 1935 and began analysis with the Kleinian Joan Riviere. Here begins Winnicott's lifelong involvement with Klein's ideas, and with Klein herself. Chosen by Klein in 1935 to analyze her son Eric, Winnicott was drawn deeply into the Kleinian circle, where he never felt completely at home. Rodman depicts well the conflict between the Kleinians, so intent on theoretical purity and so insistent on orthodoxy, and Winnicott, who had a deep need to rebel and to go his own way.

Winnicott's friendship with Klein continued strong until her death, but increasingly, in letters to her, he urges her to watch out for her school, and to realize that theoretical closure and analytical perfection are inappropriate goals. Meanwhile, in a series of papers that won increasing attention, he was challenging the foundations of her theoretical approach, insisting on the importance of the real-life mother's actual behavior and of living human interaction. After Klein's death, and to some extent before it, her school treated Winnicott coldly. (Here Rodman may be too quick to impute blame to the Kleinians. They were a doctrinaire lot, but he needed to feel that he was in rebellion against conformity-demanding enemies. It seems unclear how much of the persecution that he felt was in fact genuine.)

Working with evacuated children during World War II, he met the social worker Clare Britton. In 1944 the two began an affair that led, in 1949, to the dissolution of his marriage to Alice (he waited until his father died before taking this step) and to a long and extremely happy marriage that lasted

until his death in 1971. Plainly they did have a successful sexual relationship, and they shared a love of humor, music, and poetry. Clare was utterly different from Alice: "beefsteak," as one friend said, rather than "elderflour fritters." The couple indulged in elaborate jokes and wrote silly poems to each other during boring moments in conferences (including a lovely scatological putdown of the racist politician Enoch Powell). Another friend called them "two crazy people who delighted each other and delighted their friends." Asked whether they ever quarreled, the elderly Clare recalled that "in fact the question of hurting each other did not arise because we were operating in the play area where everything is permitted." Sometimes Winnicott would wake up in the night and say: "I'm potty about you, do you know that?"

Clare, a tough woman and a very successful worker with needy children (she eventually received the Order of the British Empire), seems also to have had a remarkable capacity for unanxiously "holding" Donald's mercurial temper, his vicissitudes, his health difficulties. After he had experienced an especially serious cardio-pulmonary illness, she found him up in a tree outside their home, sawing off a limb. Her first impulse was to get him down, to make him rest. But then: "I thought, 'No, it's his life and he's got to live it. If he *dies* after this, he dies.' But that was him. He wanted to *live*." At the opening of an autobiography that he was just beginning at the time of his death, he writes, "Prayer: Oh, God, may I be alive when I die." "And he was, really," Clare concludes.

As Winnicott's success increased, so did his confidence in his own judgment. The dark side of Rodman's story is that this confidence led to increasingly serious errors of judgment. We may already detect moral lapses in his collusion with Klein to conceal from her son the fact that his mother and his analyst were corresponding. Many such lapses follow. He analyzed Marion Milner, a close friend who was probably in love with him. He analyzed a patient who was at the time a tenant in the Winnicott house. He encouraged Clare to take up analysis with Klein while he was himself in close contact with her. He socialized with patients. In general he seems to have had little awareness of appropriate boundaries.

Most serious, however, was Winnicott's long analysis of and friendship with Masud Khan. A wealthy Pakistani émigré and self-styled prince, Khan has gradually been revealed as one of the most unprincipled and destructive analysts who ever practiced. He had affairs with some patients, and socialized with others in a show-offy way; he subjected patients to insult and humiliation; he used the therapeutic setting as a frame for his pathological self-aggrandizement, his obsessive tales of how he got the better of people. All this time he was in analysis with Winnicott, and Winnicott steadily supported him, first advancing his candidacy in the Institute, then supporting his continuation there. Rodman deals with this scandal tactfully and rather briefly, but he makes no secret of the serious issues that it raises about Winnicott's ethical judgment. Khan was the son that Winnicott never had; clearly he was very devoted, although Clare managed to keep him at a distance and prevented him from becoming the editor of Winnicott's papers.

Although Winnicott did not want or need a "school," he did need someone to support his ideas and to share their genesis. But he made an egregiously bad choice, and he stuck with it in the presence of the mounting evidence of Khan's disgraceful conduct. Noting the evident high degree of "ongoing excitement and mutual self-indulgence" in the relationship, Rodman suggests that there was a sexual component, although it seems unlikely that this element was acknowledged. Khan's patient Wynne Godley, whose account of his analysis is a key document in the unmasking of Khan, reports that Khan took phone calls from Winnicott during his sessions; once they spent his time joking about fellatio.

On a trip to New York in 1969, Winnicott suffered a particularly serious cardiac crisis after a bout of the flu. Identifying himself with Cathy in *Wuthering Heights*, he wrote that he longed to come home before dying. He lived for another year, but in a weakened condition. During this period, amazingly, Winnicott continued to see patients; he wrote and delivered new papers, broaching significant new themes, such as the importance of recognizing the social rigidity of gender norms and the mixture of genders in all human beings.

Most impressively, he continued to correspond generously with strangers. Rodman himself, a young analyst just out of the army, received a four-page commentary on his first article. A troubled man from Oklahoma, writing to Winnicott out of the blue, got a helpful three-page letter about the roots of aggression. The analyst Alan Stone, who met him at this time (and found Winnicott unable to walk without stopping), reported that

he held me in the center of his attention (or so it seemed to me) in a way that I have never experienced with any other human being. It was not that he made constant eye contact, or that he interjected the traditional psychoanalytic hum of empathy, or that he was selflessly accepting. As we walked he spoke of his own ideas, he reacted and responded with dignity and originality, yet all the time I felt recognized and encouraged — I was in a "facilitating environment."

Not all of Winnicott's correspondence was good-natured. To an analyst enamored of simplistic biological explanations of human phenomena, he wrote: "There seems to be no playing in what you write, and therefore a lack of creativity. Perhaps you reserve your creativity for some other area of your life, in friendships for instance, or in painting, I don't know."

He died in January 1971, after watching an old movie comedy on television.

III.

Winnicott's main ideas emerged gradually over time, in a series of papers rich in clinical content. He never wrote a tidy summary of them, and it belies the nature of his thought to attempt such a summary. Still, one can at least sketch the narrative of infancy and childhood as he saw it, being careful to remember that, for Winnicott, particularity is everything and that, as Rodman emphasizes, he is the heir as much of Wordsworth and Emily Brontë as of Freud and Klein.

While Freud saw human beings as driven by powerful instincts that need to be tamed if morality and culture are to be possible, Winnicott had confidence in the unfolding of the developmental process, which would produce moral awareness as an outgrowth of early struggles if things went well enough. He believed (against his own experience, perhaps) that development usually goes well, and that mothers are usually "good enough." Mothers are preoccupied with their infants early on, and attend to their needs well, enabling the self to develop gradually and eventually to express itself.

At first the infant cannot grasp the mother as a definite object, and thus cannot have full-fledged emotions. Its world is symbiotic and basically narcissistic. Gradually, however, the infant develops the capacity to be alone — aided by its "transitional objects," a famous phrase invented by Winnicott for the blankets and stuffed animals that enable children to comfort themselves when the mother is absent. (He loved Charles Schulz and wondered whether Linus's blanket reflected the influence of his ideas.) Eventually the child usually develops the ability to "play alone in the presence of its mother," a key sign of growing confidence in the developing self. At this point, the child begins to be able to relate to the mother as a whole person rather than as an extension of its own needs. (Winnicott always

spoke of mothers, and Rodman makes one of his strongest criticisms at this point: he seems to have had a blind spot for the role of the father until close to the end of his life. At the same time, he did increasingly stress that "mother" is a role rather than a biological category, that real mothers have aspects of both genders, and that analysts typically play a quasi-maternal role.)

Like Klein, Winnicott thought that this stage typically led to a painful emotional crisis. For the child now understands that the very same person whom it loves and embraces is the person against whom it has directed aggressive and angry wishes (when needs are not met automatically). But instead of Klein's somewhat forbidding concept of "the depressive position," Winnicott articulates this insight in terms of the concept of the developing "capacity for concern," showing how genuinely moral feeling bootstraps itself into existence out of the child's very love of its mother and the awareness that its aggression has projected harm. He thus was able to see morality as operating in tandem with love, rather than as a forbidding set of quasi-paternal demands. He stressed the crucial role of the imagination in coming to grips with this crisis: the child develops the capacity to imagine its mother's feelings, and thus becomes capable of generous and reparative acts.

Throughout this development, it is crucial that the mother should provide the child with a "facilitating environment" that allows it to express itself, even its destructiveness and hate, without getting the message that the mother will thereby be destroyed. Remarkably, mothers usually accept their children's hate and are not destroyed. (This ability was also an essential part of the good analyst's equipment, as he saw it. After Harry Guntrip talked at him aggressively for half an hour in a session, Winnicott said, "You see, you talked very hard at me, and I am not destroyed.") Most of the time this process goes reasonably well. It will go awry if the mother is too fearful or depressed (like Winnicott's mother), or if she too rigidly demands conformity and perfection in herself and in her child (like Winnicott's father).

One marvelous document concerning the latter sort of failure is Winnicott's analysis of a young male medical student, known as B, published in the volume *Holding and Interpretation*. (Rodman dislikes this case, but I have always found it especially rich.) Married to a man whom she saw as demanding perfection in everything, B's mother wanted to be a perfect mother and, hence, to have a perfect baby. This meant that she did not want her baby to be a real baby, needy, messy, crying. B got the message that his own needs were inappropriate and that the only way to achieve anything was to be quiet and "good." Nor could he, like most young children, gradually develop the capacity to release his mother from her need to be perfect by attending to her as an imperfect human being. This suppression of himself led to rigidity and emotional paralysis in later life. A competent intellectual "False Self" had developed capacities to cope with the world, but the needy childlike "True Self" had gone underground and remained at an infantile level, rather than gradually developing capacities to relate emotionally and to express itself in the world. B could have sex, but only with a woman whom he saw as an undifferentiated object, predictable as a masturbatory fantasy; he could not remember people's individuating features. "I feel that you are introducing a big problem," B says to Winnicott. "I never became human. I have missed it."

In the analysis itself, the patient repeatedly expects perfection from Winnicott, and is terrified by the space created by the analyst's own evident human imperfection. "The alarming thing about equality," he remarkably observes, "is that we are then both children and the question is, where is father? We know where we are if one of us is the father." Winnicott points out that in a good personal relationship there is an element of "subtle interplay" that pre-supposes an acceptance of human imperfection. Love means many things, "but it has to include this experience of subtle interplay, and

we could say that you are experiencing love and loving in this situation." We might say (if oversimply) that for Freud, our cultural and personal problem is how to transcend the human. For Winnicott, it is how to bear the exposure of being imperfectly human. Play, art, and love come powerfully to our aid, but there remains "the inherent difficulty in regard to human contact with external reality."

Winnicott's theoretical writings emphasize empathy, imagination, and the highly particular transactions that constitute love between two imperfect people. One might have arrived at these ideas without being able to translate them into analytic practice. According to Harry Guntrip, who was analyzed by Fairbairn and then by Winnicott, Fairbairn had this problem. His theories spoke of the importance of a "personal relationship of genuine understanding" between therapist and patient, and when he discussed his ideas outside the office the two men communicated well. In the analytic setting, however, Fairbairn became rigid and formal, imposing theory-based interpretations rather than seeking out the core of the person. Winnicott was entirely different. He quickly attained a more satisfactory insight into Guntrip's idiosyncratic emotional history, because he did not insist on seeing everything in terms of a pre-established theoretical construct. And he was able to create for the sixty-year-old analyst, a man of personal courage and powerful intellect, a "holding environment," so that Guntrip's need for constant activity and talk ceased, and he could enjoy simply being himself. "I could let my tension go and develop and relax because you were present in my inner world," he wrote in his journal.

A pediatrician first and always, with adults or with children, Winnicott was always willing to play, to respond to the moment, to surprise, to adopt unconventional methods if they seemed right. (All too often, he wrote, the patient brings his False Self into analysis and the analyst addresses himself to that, because it is easy to talk to a False Self.) Sometimes he sat on the floor; sometimes he offered a cup of tea; sometimes he held a hand. Sometimes sessions were daily and sometimes months apart. In the case of "the Piggie," a little girl named Gabrielle who was two and a half when she began to see Winnicott and five when she finished, we have Winnicott's own detailed notes of every session. The sessions were held on demand by the child, often months apart, and sometimes included participation by the parents (sophisticated and analytically aware) as well as letters and phone calls from them.

This remarkable document shows us many things about Winnicott as therapist, but nothing more than his utter respect for the child's world of objects. Almost his first remark, in notes of the first session, is: "Already I had made friends with the teddy-bear who was sitting on the floor by the desk." And throughout the analysis, we sense that Winnicott's poetic capacity, his willingness not to be "only sane," enables a degree of entry rare for any adult into the unhappy child's world, with its "black mommy," its "Sush baby," and the terrifying "babacar." "To say that he understood children would to me sound false and vaguely patronizing," said one obituarist. "It was rather that children understood him." Such was his respect for his young patient that he refused to get ahead of her. "Importance of my not *understanding* what she had not yet been able to give me clues for," he writes.

But understanding was not the whole of it. As both the Guntrip analysis and the treatment of Gabrielle show, he also made both children and adults feel the presence of a good mother, before whom they were free to emerge. Rodman suggests that these great gifts were not unconnected to Winnicott's ethical failures. He sometimes felt, apparently, that he had moved beyond the need to consider normal ethical rules. Since he could on occasion defy convention with brilliant success, he trusted his own idiosyncratic judgment too far.

One can find much to criticize in Winnicott's ideas, as well as in his practical judgment. His account of the role of the father is grossly deficient, perhaps as a result of the fact that he never completely worked out his intuitive ideas about the malleability of gender and the relationship between rigid gender norms and the False Self. His ideas about the True Self sometimes verge on an excessive romanticism, as when he suggests that any communication with the outside world involves a deformation of a True Self, which is fundamentally incommunicado. At other times he more plausibly suggests that the True Self, if all goes well, will develop capacities for communication and reciprocity. But the mark of his childhood remained, and he repeatedly stressed (excessively, to my mind) the artificiality of the social, the radically asocial nature of all that is authentic. (Here he really is Brontë's heir.)

I am also unconvinced by Winnicott's constant connection between self-assertion and "hate," a word that he used too loosely. A person who has been repressed by demands for conformity might indeed hate those demands, and might feel the assertion of the self as a form of aggression; and such, clearly, was Winnicott's personal situation. But in the more benign case in which the capacity for concern and social interaction develops in partnership with love, self-assertion (and the sexuality that he linked to it) may take a wider range of forms. Winnicott implicitly acknowledges this, in his insightful remarks about art, culture, and play, but these notions remain inconsistently integrated into his writings.

These are trivial matters, though, in comparison with the rich re-orientation that Winnicott gave to the theory and the practice of analysis. He was a poet among theoreticians, as he was a compassionate doctor among analysts. If one can derive many related insights from the reading of his favorite authors, such as Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and Henry James, he was able to formulate these insights into guidelines for the therapeutic treatment of unhappy people, giving psychoanalysis a hopeful face, one that emphasized people's capacities for love and society's capacity for "holding" diversity, play, and freedom.

Indeed, one may learn many things about contemporary political life by posing systematically the question of what it would be like for society to become, in Winnicott's sense, a "facilitating environment" for its citizens. In thinking this idea through, one would come upon an enriched conception of the meaning of liberal "individualism": not selfishness, but the ability to grow and to express oneself; not solitary self-sufficiency, but "subtle interplay"; not the transcendence of human passions, but the secure "holding" of human need and imperfection.

In the end, the really important thing for Winnicott the theorist was the genuine flourishing of each person, and the same was true of Winnicott the doctor. At the end of his analysis of Gabrielle, as the five-year-old prepares to leave him, he remarks, "So the Winnicott you invented was all yours and he's now finished with, and no one else can ever have him." The two sit together, reading an animal book. Then he tells her, "I know when you are really shy, and that is when you want to tell me that you love me." And he records: "She was very positive in her gesture of assent."