

THE WORK AND PLAY OF WINNICOTT

by *Simon A. Grolnick*

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Reviewed by Gerald J. Gargiulo

"It is not the voice that commands the story: it is the ear;" Italo Calvino (1974, p. 106) reminds us. Keep this thought in mind as you read Simon Grolnick's text. The book is puzzling; ambivalent in its appreciation of Winnicott and confusing in its exposition. It is a difficult text for me to situate within the psychoanalytic literary world. This is due, I believe, to the fact that my hearing of Winnicott is different from Grolnick's.

Perusing the table of contents and acknowledging the expository goal of the work, one is impressed with the breadth of topics addressed. Chapter headings cover such areas as "Winnicottian Principles," (ch. 3), "Developmental Lines Involving the Self and Its Functions," (ch. 5), "The Development of The Intermediate World and Its Relationship To Creativity" (ch. 7), and "How to Do Winnicottian Therapy" (ch. 9). While the range of perspectives that Grolnick addresses is broad, many sections of the work reflect confusion about the audience intended. Is it the educated layman, the beginning therapist, or the seasoned psychoanalyst? The text seems to be addressed to all three categories of readers. Were the text simply addressed to the interested and educated layman, many of my difficulties with it would be obviated, but not all.

Winnicott, I believe, can best be approached and appreciated as operating not within a system, even the object relations school, but rather in the tradition of the poet, someone evocative of insight, informative for thought and simultaneously reluctant to proselytize in any way. What Winnicott makes possible through his writings is a personal, imaginative exploration of human growth. This, I believe, is both his strength and yet, from a didactic perspective, his weakness; Winnicott seems to be different for every-

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one. In his discussions of the reality of play-space, art-space, life-space, Winnicott provides us with the opportunity to think about how, and where, we meet as humans. He enables us to think and experience without the intellectual awareness that we are learning. The world awaits creation, he reminds us, much as the poet Carlos Fuentes (1988) did when he wrote that "to discover is to invent is to name" (p. 186). One can fault Winnicott for his frequently poetic mode of communicating; paradoxically, one can be grateful that such an imaginative writer and thinker taught and wrote as he did.

Grolnick states, quite correctly I believe, that "for Winnicott, the process [of psychoanalysis] was in the mind of the analyst, not in the ironically more behavioral criteria of where the patient was or how frequently the patient was being seen" (p. 15). I read this to mean Winnicott's focus on the process occurring between patient and analyst, with emphasis on the depth and quality of that process, rather than on the externally identifiable criteria that is sometimes employed to define what psychoanalysis is or is not. Further, and again to the point, Grolnick states: "The patient cannot be told his story, but must be allowed to develop it and sequence it in his or her own time and place" (p. 47).

Having set himself the task of explicating Winnicott's substantial contributions to that body of knowledge identified as English object relations, Grolnick then offers the following misleading observations: "In object relations theory, which Winnicott essentially works within, the principal interest is in the internal representation of the self and the other. More recently, it involves primarily the internalized *relationship* between the self and the other...But it is acceptable within the theory to speak of the real mother and the real infant" (pp. 42-43). What is one to make of such a reading of Winnicott? Grolnick seems to have confused American object relations theory (Kernberg) with Winnicott's approach. Winnicott repeatedly makes it clear that one has to appreciate the *actual* relationship between mother and child, between analyst and patient, if one is going to understand the reality of human and therapeutic relationships. That is, it is seriously

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misleading to suggest that such a focus is merely "acceptable." While Winnicott acknowledged and employed the classical intrapsychic model, his basic area of research had to do with the intermediate area of human experience, that "place" where the me and the not-me overlap. This is the famous "transitional" arena of human play and cultural achievements. Grolnick is seriously out of focus, in my judgment, in his basic understanding of what object relations meant for Winnicott. Although Winnicott did not dismiss the ubiquity of human defensiveness, he was particularly careful not to read that defensiveness solipsistically, collapsing complicated human experiences into intrapsychic representations.

Occasionally Grolnick does convey Winnicott's sensitivity to the interrelationships between mother and child and therapist and patient. Yet all too frequently some very perceptive remarks are marred by a reading of basic concepts, which although not wrong in any clear-cut sense, miss the complexity and vitality of Winnicott's observations. Note, for example, the following: "Winnicott sees the core of the personality as being laid down prior to the formation of drives, although ultimately drive experiences are involved" (p. 70). What Winnicott (1965) said is that one cannot speak of drives unless there is an ego or self that can experience drives; that is, drives support the functioning of the ego. Before that rudimentary developmental achievement, drives are persecutory impingements, precisely because there is no cohesive self present to personalize them. As the self achieves maturational integrity in optimal development, drives are concurrently experienced as personal. (In the good-enough environment, the "environmental mother" and "object mother" are experienced and eventually integrated with minimal distortion.) When Grolnick treats such basic concepts as transitional objects and transitional phenomena, his discussions, while solid, add nothing new to our knowledge. Hence, the recurrent impression of superficiality. A notable exception to this tone is evidenced in the case vignettes; one gets the impression, in these examples, of a warm, sensitive, and caring analyst. Nevertheless, even this experience of Grolnick is marred by a subtle ambivalence toward Winnicott; perhaps a

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more competitive agenda was operative? There are two sections, in particular, where Grolnick turns on the very author he has been explicating.

I think the reader can fault Winnicott for, on one level, raising mothers to the heights, but at another, keeping them close to home and hearth. The whole issue could be passed off merely by stating that Winnicott was a man of his time and inevitably he reflected contemporary male attitudes. But Winnicott demands more criticism because he was a man ahead of his time. He consciously saw woman as one of the early primitive gods, and gave her pride in her biological and psychological creativity and empathic capacity. He felt the presence of each sex in the other, cross-identifications as he termed it. About his unconscious hatred of women, let the reader decide. (p. 128)

There are so many serious errors here as to boggle the mind. Winnicott never presented mothers as primitive gods—which is different from how children experience them. He did not try to *keep* mothers at home; he was describing the importance of the constant, consistent mother-figure in the young child's life. That children need such environmental experiences was Winnicott's firm belief. The jury still seems to out on the mother's "quality" time versus quantity of time spent with the young infant; the work of D. Stern suggests, however, that Winnicott's observations are still essentially valid. By cross-identification Winnicott means the generalized and necessary human ability, developmentally achieved, to put ourselves in the other person's shoes, so to speak, not just the ability to understand the opposite sex. Finally, Grolnick's remark about Winnicott's possible unconscious hatred toward women does not merit comment.

Occasionally Grolnick indulges in political observations that do not seem particularly germane. Note for example: Winnicott "would never have been a card carrying feminist" (p. 129). Presumably one's capacity to adapt to the environment does not mean political conformism—if it does, psychoanalysis is dead. Lastly, Grolnick makes a gratuitous attribution to Winnicott of inappropriate narcissistic feelings for those people who followed his line of thought. Speaking to this point, Grolnick notes, en passant, "While Winnicott might secretly have enjoyed this imita-

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tion, overtly he would have deplored it..." (p. 174). There is no substantiation of such an allegation, and it out of place in any serious work.

This volume appears to have been rushed to publication with little, if any, editorial assistance. It suffers from serious flaws and is, consequently, a disappointment.

REFERENCES

- Calvino, I. (1974). *Invisible cities*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
Fuentes, C. (1988). *Myself with others*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux.