

## **A Bear in the Attic**

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### **Introduction**

Here is Edward Bear, coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump, on the back of his head, behind Christopher Robin. It is, as far as he knows, the only way of coming downstairs, but sometimes he feels that there really is another way, if only he could stop bumping for a moment and think of it. And then he feels that perhaps there isn't. Anyhow, here he is at the bottom, and ready to be introduced to you. Winnie-the-Pooh. (Milne, 1990:1).

And so begins the story of Winnie-the-Pooh, a story familiar to many children and their parents since the first book was published in 1926. The author, A.A. Milne, named the character after a teddy bear owned by his son, Christopher Robin Milne, who formed the basis for the book's central character and owner of the bear. The stories tell of the adventures of Christopher Robin and his bear in the One Hundred Acre Wood. In addition to serving as a constant companion to Christopher Robin, the imagined conversations between boy and bear form a large part of the Winnie-the-Pooh stories.

The considered central importance of the character of Winnie-the-Pooh was used by D.W. Winnicott to illustrate the child's first *not-me* possession in his paper presented in 1951, *Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena* and reiterated in his book, *Playing and Reality* (1990). The bear's rise to fame in the world of psychoanalysis was not without its critics, including Antony Flew who maintained that Winnicott generalised too widely about an English story book character. (Flew, 1978) My interest in such possessions lies in my day to day work of teaching and running a nursery class for three and four year olds, where objects such as those described by Winnicott are an intrinsic part of nursery life.

In order to gain a greater understanding of the role of the transitional object and its application to what I see on a daily basis in the nursery, I will start this essay by looking at the concepts of the

transitional object and transitional phenomena as presented by Winnicott. I will then continue with some reflections and considerations of Winnicott's writings taking into account my personal observations together with writings and comments by other writers as appropriate.

### **Winnicott and Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena**

In his book, *Playing and Reality* (1990), Winnicott develops his 1951 paper on Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena, restating his original position and introducing later developments that had taken place in his own thinking and assessment of clinical material.

Winnicott's original hypothesis stated:

It is well known that infants as soon as they are born tend to use fist, fingers, thumbs in stimulation of the oral erotogenic zone, in satisfaction of the instincts at that zone, and also in quiet union. It is also well known that after a few months infants of either sex become fond of playing with dolls, and that most mothers allow their infants some special object and expect them to become, as it were, addicted to such objects (Winnicott, 1990: 1).

Winnicott designates the area between the thumb and the teddy bear as the intermediate area of experience, and it is within this area that inner reality and external life can both contribute. It is also here, when the infant is between four and twelve months old, that Winnicott introduces the terms transitional object and transitional phenomena. The baby has until then lived a life of illusory omnipotence, where his needs have been satisfied and he is about to enter the world of outer reality where his imagined control is to some extent relinquished. Elliot writes that Winnicott does not view the object-world as "repressively imposed on the individual", but instead sees the child as searching for boundaries between inner and outer experiences. The transitional or 'not-me' objects such as a blanket or toy then serve as a bridge "between the inner world of fantasy and the outer world of objects and persons" (Elliot, 1994: 69).

Transitional phenomena were seen by Winnicott as becoming woven into an already existing personal pattern. The sucking of a blanket, cloth or toy, babbling or distinctive mannerisms were all seen as instances of such phenomena, which may then become essential to the infant in preparation for sleep, or to serve as a defence against anxiety. An object may also be found and used by the infant, which then becomes the transitional object and continues to be important. Winnicott noted that the parents get to know its value and carry it round when travelling, letting it get dirty and smelly, 'knowing that by washing it she introduces a break in continuity in the infant's experience, a break that may destroy the meaning and value of the object to the infant' (Winnicott, 1990: 4).

Winnicott went on to define the transitional object in terms of the relationship between the infant, the object and the mother, with the infant holding rights over the object and the mother respecting that right. The object could be cuddled or mutilated, loved or hated; it should provide comfort and never be changed unless changed by the infant; the object comes from without from our point of view but is part of the infant from the baby's point of view. It is neither a substitute for anything nor is it substituted; it merely loses its relevance over time.

Noting the paradox of the object, Winnicott wrote:

Of the transitional object it can be said that it is a matter of agreement between us and the baby that we will never ask the question; 'Did you conceive of this or was it presented to you from without?' The important point is that no decision on this point is expected. The question is not to be formulated (Winnicott, 1990: 12)

Although the transitional object appears symbolic of some form of comfort, such as the breast, Winnicott was keen to stress its actuality rather than its symbolic value. He maintained that symbolism can only be employed when the infant is clearly distinguishing 'between fantasy and fact, between primary creativity and perception' (Winnicott, 1990: 6). Winnicott also compared the transitional object concept with Melanie Klein's concept of the internal object, writing, 'The transitional object is *not an internal object* (which is a mental concept) – it is a possession. Yet it is not (for the infant) an external object either' (Winnicott, 1951/1975: 237).

Both the role of the mother and the importance of illusion are stressed throughout Winnicott's work on transitional phenomena and transitional objects. He writes that from the beginning the breast appears to the infant as under his control and the 'mother's eventual task is gradually to disillusion the infant, but she has no hope of success unless at first she has been able to give sufficient opportunity for illusion' (Winnicott, 1990: 11). Later he writes that transitional objects and transitional phenomena:

belong to the realm of illusion which is at the basis of initiation of experience. This early stage in development is made possible by the mother's special capacity for making adaptation to the needs of her infant, thus allowing the infant the illusion that what the infant creates really exists (Winnicott, 1990: 14).

### **Reflections and considerations of Winnicott's theories**

The concept of the transitional phenomena and transitional objects, as presented by Winnicott, raise many very interesting points where the disciplines of child development and philosophy appear to overlap, as one encounters the concepts of illusion and then disillusion accompanied by the emergence of the self. Clearly, for such phenomena to be successful requires a two way process between mother and child and an assumption that the mother is sensitive to her infant and recognises the importance of the transitional object. Therefore, before looking at the transitional object in my nursery I would like to consider the role of the mother, or more specifically the 'good enough' mother, in more detail.

#### ***The Good Enough Mother***

The mother's adaptation to the infant's needs, when good enough, gives the infant the *illusion* that there is an external reality that corresponds to the infant's own capacity to create (Winnicott, 1990: 12).

Although it may readily be agreed that the role of the mother, or main care-giver, is to meet the baby's needs, the concept of the good enough mother is seen as providing a facilitating

environment to promote maturational processes. Not immediately responding to a baby's needs does not necessarily create trauma, but can promote development as meeting needs immediately may inhibit independence. Expanding upon Winnicott's concept of the good enough mother, Susan Deri wrote that the mother 'intuitively knows when and for how long she can and should introduce a delay between the infant's needs and the fulfilment she can offer' (Deri, 1978: 51).

Fonagy and Target argue that Winnicott places the strength or weakness of the child's ego as 'a function of the caregiver's capacity to respond appropriately to his initially absolute dependence.' Winnicott therefore sees 'the stability and power of the infant's ego, before the separation of the mother from the self, as directly determined by the mother's ability to think about his mind.' They continue, 'Good enough mothering ensures that the infant's ego becomes autonomous and no longer needs the mother's ego support; there is an inevitable detachment from the mother as part of the establishment of a separate personal self' (Fonagy and Target, 2003: 141).

Anthony Elliot writes that for 'some commentators, Winnicott's theory romantically idealizes mother-hood and thus eliminates the complexity of maternal desire itself. In this respect, it had been suggested that the whole concept of 'good enough mothering' is politically regressive; a myth used *against* women as both fantasy and blame' (Elliot, 1994: 71).

To some extent the term 'good enough mother' sounds dated, with the words not looking out of place in a 1950s childcare textbook, it also seems a little precarious to rely on intuition for the model of transitional objects to be a success. There is always a danger of idealizing the notion of motherhood, but maybe the term was intended to give some leeway to the role of motherhood, taking away the concept of the perfect mother always racing to meet her infant's needs to one who responds to her infant as she sees appropriate. The words 'good enough' will inevitably raise the question of how good is 'good enough' but perhaps as Michael Jacobs writes, 'like the transitional object, Winnicott's 'good enough' has become exaggerated in its significance' (Jacobs, 1995: 109). On that basis, I will accept the term as one used to explain a model on which to create the concept of the transitional object.

***The application of the concepts in the classroom***

In my nursery class, the children are invited to bring items from home for the various topic tables. These are proudly despatched during the week and I then incorporate them into my week's teaching activities. The items, which are duly returned at the end of the week, serve as a great way of linking home and school, and the variety of things brought in never ceases to amaze me as well as at times to tax my ability to give them the credit that their bearer feels is deserved!

As well as the goods for the specific tables, non-specific items of a more personal nature have also appeared in the class, and so I created a 'home box' into which these objects are placed. When I extended the nursery hours from mornings only to optional full days, with a rest in the middle of the day, so the items in my home box grew and so did the squares of muslin, which often look and smell as if they had seen better days. When rest time is announced, the children collect their sleeping bags from their pegs and retrieve their items from the home box. With the pieces of muslin all looking the same, I have asked the children in the past 'How do you know that this is yours?' and it has been thrust under my nose 'See, it is!' I have been told. The identity was clearly in the smell and the owner was surprised that I did not recognise it as such.

In addition to the varied nature of items in the home box, the importance attached to them and the child's treatment of them also varies widely. Some are deposited in the box when the child arrives in the morning and are forgotten about until home-time; others are cosseted or checked on during the day. Similarly at rest-time, some items are chewed; others sniffed, or rubbed against the owner's face. For other children the item may carry little significance, remaining forgotten until I periodically empty out the home box.

I will now continue by looking at the individual cases that I have observed in the classroom and incorporate comments by Winnicott and other writers as appropriate.

***The acquisition of the transitional object***

A good object is not good to the infant unless created by the infant. Shall I say, created out

of need? Yet the object must be found to be created. This has to be accepted as a paradox (Winnicott, 1965/1963: 181).

Flopsy, Susan's mother told me, was adopted by Susan when she was about six months old and she subsequently became very attached to the toy, unable to sleep without it. Although her mother felt to some extent she gave her the object, in fact it was one of a few toys which Susan had in her pram at rest time and the only one that she selected and would not be without. This would then meet Winnicott's criteria as follows:

these very objects have been adopted, not created. Yet *for the baby* (if the mother can supply the right conditions) every detail of the baby's life is an example of creative living. Every object is a 'found' object (Winnicott, 1965/1960: 101).

When Susan was about eighteen months old, the family travelled to Australia, changing planes in Dubai. Flopsy the rabbit was left in Dubai and panic ensued. The absolute importance of Flopsy was recognised by the mother and, unable to console Susan, she had another Flopsy sent out from England! I expressed surprise that Susan accepted a toy, which although the same would not have smelt the same. Her mother explained that it was the feel of the toy, specifically the ears, which had made it special. Certainly, I noticed at rest-time that Susan would gently rub the ears on her face and then chew them.

Andrew adopted his bear at about ten months old and it then became an essential toy at bedtime, which he was unable to do without. His mother, however, thought that she had given it to him as a rest-time toy. This aspect can be hard to determine because although the mother can give her child the toys, the notion of whether that toy becomes a transitional object would appear to come from the infant not the mother who in the true sense of the term can provide but not select. Andrew's mother felt the significance of Bear was now much reduced, telling me it was less precious now and more habitual. At rest-time, when Andrew has occasionally forgotten to bring Bear to school he has been happy to borrow one of my toys to lie with.

The squares of muslin appear to follow Winnicott's rules more closely for two children in my

class, Len and John, who both acquired their muslin squares at about six or seven months old. The material which serves as a protective layer between mother and baby at feeding times had been clutched and held. The material would have had both the smells of the mother and the feed, and so the familiar smells would appear to fall into the intermediate area between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived. The muslin squares would also support Gaddini's findings as follows:

It became clear from our studies that the infant's security blanket substitutes for the wrapping blanket that mother used to protect him when nursing, the bit of nylon and linen which the child manipulates while going to sleep is a remnant of the mother's robe, which might have caressed his cheek or other uncovered parts of his body (particularly around the face and oral area) during feeding (Gaddini, 1978: 113).

For both children the squares of muslin became essential possessions which became older and greyer and smellier as time progressed. John's were replaced and washed over time and he sometimes brings a few of them to school, which, although would no longer have the smells of babyhood and feeds; hold some sort of comfort and maybe memory. For John, perhaps with the washing, the importance of the muslin squares decreased from about the age of three although still playing a role as perhaps a 'comforter' rather than an essential part of him.

Although the objects described above are personal to each child, they all represent something which provides comfort, is neither the self nor the mother, is the first 'not-me' object and the child had the control over it and in a sense over their mother in that she needed to ensure the object was there in order to settle her child to sleep. For all the children, the objects, when taken out of the home box, are immediately taken to the face and for Len, in particular, the muslin squares have a thoroughly soporific effect upon him.

### ***The naming of the transitional object***

Although some of the children's special toys have familiar sounding names like Andrew's bear is Bear, Susan's rabbit is Flopsy, many of the objects and particularly those attached to muslin squares have completely unfamiliar names, such as muzzy, or diddy. Such naming would support

Winnicott's findings.

The infant starts to use organized sounds (mum, ta, da) there may appear a 'word' for the transitional object. The name given by the infant to these earliest objects is often significant, and it usually has a word used by the adults partly incorporated into it. For instance, 'baa' may be the name, and the b may have come from the adult's use of the word 'baby' or 'bear' (Winnicott, 1990: 5)

The early words or phrases were also seen as important in their own right by writers including Martin Weich who argued that the words were carried by the child as if they were transitional objects. Weich felt that 'Winnicott tended to stress the physical concreteness of the transitional object, along with the sensory modalities of touch, smell, vision, and taste, while he paid little attention to the auditory sphere' (Weich, 1978: 413).

### ***The sensorial nature of the transitional object***

As the child sucks and plays, what is mouthed and the skin and cloth textures available to him become interrelated and connected (Barkin, 1978: 516).

Leonard Barkin noted that whereas Winnicott and Phyllis Greenacre thought that odours were important in maintaining the continuity of the object, other writers including F. Busch, in a paper in 1974, found textures more crucial arguing that when the texture of a blanket was changed by washing, it was rejected (Busch, 1978: 516). The material chosen was also seen as determined by the season, as Gaddini writes, 'It is interesting to note that our statistics indicate that babies born in autumn and winter more often have woollen objects, while spring and summer babies more often have linen or nylon objects;' (Gaddini, 1978: 113).

Greenacre linked the timing of the acquisition of a transitional object with the physical changes in the baby, writing that during the first nine months of life:

The subcutaneous tissue increases rapidly in thickness, while the rate of growth of the body as a whole is decelerating.....it is an intriguing thought that the infant develops an internal protective blanket of fatty tissue, which is a forerunner of the security blanket that he soon

finds for himself and can accept or dispose of according to need (Greenacre, 1979: 122).

From my observations in the class, the smell of the muslin squares has been key to their identity, and also appeared to be the main attribute giving rise to its soporific effect. It was harder to determine whether the smell or the feel of Andrew's bear carried the greatest importance and it could possibly have been the combination. For Susan, as noted above, the feel of the rabbit had been and continues to be the overriding sense which was important to the continuity of the object. It is interesting to note that gifts of toys are chosen by adults for their aesthetic qualities, which seem to have little bearing on an infant's choice of transitional object.

### ***The mother as the transitional object***

Sometimes there is no transitional object except the mother herself (Winnicott, 1951/1975:232).

Not all the children in my nursery have had a transitional object to which they are especially attached and some mothers have said to me that they feel as if they are their child's comforter. They stay with their child to help them to sleep and if their child wakes at night-time they are needed to help their child return to sleep. Similarly, Jacobs writes that some mothers say 'that they themselves must have been the transitional object, since their children do not appear to have one.' he continues that 'if the transitional object is a substitute for the mother then this makes sense' (Jacobs, 1995: 106).

However, not all writers are happy with the concept of the mother as the transitional object, Renato Gaddini argues:

the mother herself is the greatest consolation ever wished for: it is only when she is *not there in person* that the child 'creates' the transitional object....it is the reunion with the mother as primary object that the child evokes when he feels lonesome and helpless (Gaddini, 1978: 128).

***The universality of the transitional object***

What I called transitional phenomena are universal and it was simply a matter of drawing attention to them and to their potential for use in the building of theory (Winnicott, 1990: 40).

Fonagy and Target note that others ‘point out that transitional objects may be peculiar to Western, particularly white Anglo-Saxon culture....where physical contact with the mother is curtailed’ (Fonagy and Target, 2003: 140). This would appear to be the case with Alison, a little girl in my nursery, who had spent the first year of her life living in Sri Lanka. Speaking to her mother, the culture was that the child stayed with her mother at all times and if there was any form of transitional object it would appear that the mother existed as that object.

In his book on Winnicott, Michael Jacobs noted that the writer, Sylvia Brody, questions in her 1980 critique of Winnicott’s work whether attachment to the transitional object was as universal as he implied, referring to research which showed that children brought up in rural areas, had more physical contact with mothers, and much less use of transitional objects. Jacobs continued that other findings have suggested that ‘the infants who use transitional objects are weaned earlier, have mothers with less prior experience of babies, and are played with more intensively by their fathers’ (Jacobs, 1995: 105). Brody summed up her findings on transitional objects and transitional phenomena writing:

There is a lack of agreement about their universality, since they are more prevalent in families of upper and upper-middle socio-economic status. The degree of attachment to them seems inversely related to maternal nurturing. The mother’s approval or disapproval of such an object also seems a key factor- it is therefore questionable how much the infant creates this experience (Jacobs, 1995: 106).

Although, as mentioned in my introduction, Flew was critical of the central and universal position given to *Winnie-the-Pooh*, the criticism has to some extent been countered by Alfred Flarsheim who argued that it was Milne’s imagery that was central to the life of all children and Winnicott merely gave ‘Milne priority for having recognized and written about transitional

phenomena' (Flarsheim, 1978: 507).

### ***The neglected child***

an infant may be so disturbed in emotional development that the transition state cannot be enjoyed, or the sequence of objects used is broken (Winnicott, 1951/1975:232).

I would now like to consider Jane, a little girl who I had previously taught in the nursery. Jane had suffered severe neglect in her first year of life and, although happy and settled with her adoptive parents, experienced difficulties making the transition from her home into the nursery. Reluctant to participate in the nursery activities, Jane clearly needed more support than had initially been considered necessary, and so I allocated one member of nursery staff to be with her at all times. Working with her parents, I tailored her times in the nursery to link with that particular nursery practitioner. She gradually settled and over the year started to link more readily with the children and other members of staff, and I was then able to gradually increase her hours. Unlike many of the other children, Jane, had no interest in one special toy and had no form of transitional object.

Winnicott writes how separation can affect transitional phenomena:

If the mother is away over a period of time which is beyond a certain limit measured in minutes, hours, or days, then the memory of the internal representation fades. As this takes effect, the transitional phenomena become gradually meaningless and the infant is unable to experience them. We may then watch the object becoming deattached (Winnicott, 1990: 15).

In other words, if the absence is too long the transitional object no longer functions as providing the illusory support. It would appear that in this case the failure of good enough mothering in the first year of life affected attachment to objects and people in the subsequent years.

Recognising Jane's difficulties in developing her play and accompanying language I followed the learning support teacher's advice in developing non- directive play and language sessions.

This aspect links with Winnicott's view that there was a direct development from transitional phenomena to playing.

When we witness an infant's employment of a transitional object, the first not-me possession, we are witnessing both the child's first use of symbol and the first experience of play (Winnicott, 1990: 96).

### ***Other forms of transitional object***

In the introduction to the book *Pedagogical Desire*, Jan Jagodzinski argued that the teacher could also become a transitional object to the student – 'affectionately cuddled, excitedly loved – but also mutilated and then eventually discarded' (Jagodzinski, 2002: xv). However, as Shaw writes, we 'cannot teach teachers to be transitional objects, because phenomena of this sort are chosen not imposed, as much schooling is' (Shaw, 1995: 93).

If a teacher can be a transitional object, then that is what I was to Mary last year. Mary always experienced difficulties separating from her mother, as she had in her previous playgroup. She was passed to me in the morning in a process which went from holding on to her mother and sniffing her collar to clinging to me. She was just three when she joined me and within the year we had managed to move her from being physically passed from her mother to me to being able to walk in to the nursery. In my absence, although she experienced difficulty separating from her mother, she didn't cling to the other member of staff in such a manner. This behaviour could be explained if I was seen as the transitional object.

One may also argue that a sibling could be cast in the role of the transitional object, loved and hated, attacked and hugged, but maintaining a presence when needed. This concept was considered by Vera Fahlberg, when writing about siblings within the fostering and adoption process. Although not stating that this would necessarily occur, Fahlberg wrote of the importance of keeping siblings together to minimize the trauma of parental separation or loss and that, particularly in the case of younger children, they may become transitional objects to one another in a placement. (Fahlberg, 1994) Although the notion of a sibling as a transitional object may occur in some instances, the trauma or loss may, however, be too great to sustain the sibling in

the role of the transitional object.

Within the realm of illusion, one could also draw upon the imaginary friend as a transitional object, occupying a space between the self and the outside world. Jacob, a four year old boy in my class, has three imaginary friends, one he told me about so convincingly, as well as drawing a picture of him, that only after speaking to his mother did I know for certain that he was imaginary. Jacob had not, to his mother's knowledge, had any form of transitional object as a baby and the imaginary friends emerged just before his third birthday. Although not exactly fitting Winnicott's transitional object, Jacob does have rights over them, he controls them, they could be loved or hated and they provide solace at a time when there are many changes occurring in his life as he makes the transition to school, to separating from his mother and meeting an outside world where he may feel he exerts little control.

It may be that patterns set in infancy, albeit at an unconscious level, are returned to in later life. The need for an object to bridge the transitional space between the individual and the external world is once again sought and used to gain control, reduce anxiety and assist the adult to move beyond an area of safety into the wider world.

In an article on '*Transitional Phenomena*', Robert Young considers transitional objects which can function as adult security blankets noting that:

The Filofax or a comparable notebook - gives the illusion that one has one's life under some sort of control. In my case it literally acts as a container, a portable file for all sorts of bits of paper, reminders, addresses, phone numbers, tickets - all of which would be routinely mislaid if it were not for this lovely leather portmanteau. How otherwise can we explain the proliferation of such products and the ludicrous prices people are willing to pay for what is fundamentally a utilitarian object and some bits of paper with holes punched in them? (Young, 2010).

Jenny Shaw drew parallels between Winnicott's transitional objects of blankets and toys and choosing subjects at senior school, writing, 'Moments of anxiety occur throughout life and our

ways of dealing with them become more sophisticated, but the early experiences of maternal failure which we all experience, and have to find a solution to, lay the ground for the later strategies.’ She continues, ‘Though school subjects are not at first seen like a teddy bear – there’s a lot of playing safe and avoiding risk in their choosing’... and this culminates ‘in the sex-stereotyped subject choice that has become a ‘problem’ in education’ (Shaw, 1995: 12).

### **From transitional objects to culture**

Before concluding this paper I would like to briefly touch on how Winnicott saw the transitional space develop from housing the infant’s first ‘not me’ possession to the adult’s world of culture. For Winnicott, the transitional objects and transitional phenomena belong to an area which transcend the outer world of objects and the inner subjective world and so effectively create a psychological space, an ‘illusion’. Within this space the infant develops the imaginary world of play, which continues as an intermediate area allowing the creative aspect of the child to progress unimpeded. Winnicott then saw the creative energy within this space as developing into the cultural life of man, being, it would appear, an area of experience between the individual and the environment. The leap from the transitional phenomena of the infant to the cultural experience of man has inevitably gathered criticisms, not least because the link can appear tenuous. In addition, an area of experience housing a concept as wide as culture can be open to a multitude of interpretations, which, by the very nature of the subject, cannot be verified. Nevertheless, the progression raises an interesting theory linking life in the cradle to an adult in an art gallery.

### **Conclusion**

A concept generated through observations and yet one in which he was reluctant to give examples, Winnicott’s writings on transitional objects have been criticised as much for being ambiguous and dependent upon the writer’s interpretation as for their sweeping generalisations. It would appear, however, that Winnicott was very aware of the difficulties surrounding the

concepts he created, as may be seen in his conclusion to an article on ‘The Location of Cultural Experience’, in which he wrote that his hope was that he had begun to answer his own question on where cultural experience was located.

Winnicott also drew on the paradoxical nature of the transitional object, maintaining that the object that was created by the baby would not have been created, as such, if it had not already been there. Once created, the success of the object was dependent on the infant remaining unchallenged and able to inhabit an intermediate area where the object belonged neither solely to inner fantasy nor solely to the external world, but in a transitional space between the two. This position would continue until the infant was ready to ‘decathect’ the object, as it lost its meaning and its purpose. Transitional phenomena were, for Winnicott, neither subjective nor objective but contained elements of both and the concepts of reality and fantasy, which by definition appear to oppose each other, may be seen to enhance the other and provide a base on which internal and external reality are built. The idea of a transitional space operating as an area which simultaneously separates and joins internal and external existence carries a certain credence, but the move from transitional phenomena to adult culture is more difficult to ascertain.

Nevertheless, and despite the paradoxical nature of Winnicott’s concepts, I have found his writings persuasive and elucidating in my work with young children and have been surprised by how closely some of the objects I have seen in and out of the class resemble Winnicott’s transitional objects. It delights me to think that the young infant is able to link the inner world of fantasy with the outer world of objects and, although I do not feel that a transitional object is essential for all children, I have no doubts about the importance that such an object can play, as the baby moves from total dependence to the beginnings of independence. As Sharpe writes:

The transitional object assists the child to come to terms with the reality principle or requirement that it defers immediate gratification – negotiating the fine line between absolute illusion, where reality is disavowed and illusions are required to develop relations with others (Sharpe, 2008: 97).

I find it harder to equate Winnicott’s transitional object with Shaw’s choice of school subjects,

but I do agree that the infant could learn a pattern of behaviour which could be repeated in later life. So for the adult, as for the child, there can be a blurring of boundaries between reality and illusion, where quasi-animated possessions are found and created, where the senses of touch or smell prove as important as sight. Objects may serve as a defence against anxiety, giving a sense of power in a world where such feels denied.

I would like to finish with one last quote from Winnicott:

what I am referring to...is not so much the object used as the use of the object (Winnicott, 1975, xii)

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