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The collected works of D. W. Winnicott

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BOOK REVIEWS

The collected works of D. W. Winnicott, edited by Lesley Caldwell and Helen Taylor Robinson, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, 4600 pp., £1335, ISBN 0199399336

Winnicott, surprised to be the defender of “the right not to communicate” (Volume 6, 433), did of course have “a great deal to communicate” (Volume 2, 358). Indeed on the evidence of the Collected Works, he seems to have been busy talking, writing, and drawing much of the time. The sheer quantity of this communication poses two obvious challenges to the editors of the Collected Works: the scholarship required to produce an authoritative text, and the question as to what to include and what to exclude.

The scholarship challenge has been met by over 40 years’ work, originating with Clare Winnicott’s plan, after her husband’s death, to gather together some previously unpublished papers and to republish others. The task has grown since in ambition and over 40 psychoanalysts and editors, working in relays, are recognised for their contributions by Christopher Bollas (Foreword). However, there is a cohesiveness to the Collected Works, derived from the clarity of the editorial policy, which seems to have evolved as the project gathered weight and direction. Robert Adès, Assistant Editor, states this policy clearly: to be inclusive and to present the texts chronologically, according to the year in which they were written, delivered, or first published. The guiding principle here is that the Collected Works are “about the analyst, about the analyst’s work” (Volume 12, p. liv, quoting Winnicott CW 2:7:8). This policy supports the reading Scarfone recommends, a reading that captures “the mode, the logic, the very movement of Winnicott’s thinking” (Volume 4, 3).

So here, in a work of prodigious scholarship, we find collected nearly all of Winnicott’s works. Volume 1 opens with teenage Winnicott’s letters home, including an exuberantly enthusiastic letter to his sister about his initial encounters with the “astoundingly controversial axioms” of psychoanalysis (Volume 1, 27). “Works”, generously interpreted, encompasses Winnicott’s own drawings and doodles, heartfelt poems and playful limericks, and numerous photographs. The Collected Works also gathers together (in book form and online) Winnicott’s previously published books, well-known and unfamiliar papers, transcriptions of his broadcasts, book reviews, fragmentary clinical notes, obituaries, letters to colleagues and friends, and a final volume of collated bibliographies and indices. The closing text is Clare Winnicott’s moving “Reflection” on her husband’s life. As such, the Collected Works bears the marks of its origin: it has the feeling of an act of loving commemoration.

I found the editing to be light-handed and thoughtfully helpful. Editorial alterations to the texts are rare, and the balance between providing informative context without cluttering the texts is well-judged: just as you wonder who Winnicott is addressing in a letter, there is the one-sentence explanation. The glosses are also emotionally adept: a moving poem by Winnicott is accompanied by a brief reference to a letter in which he stated that it “hurt coming out of me” (Volume 6, 499). In addition, composition dates have been carefully considered and justified: for example, “Fear of Breakdown” has been re-located in late 1963 or early 1964, although this date runs counter to Clare Winnicott’s memory.

The Volume Introductions and the General Introduction to the Collected Works by the General Editors, Lesley Caldwell and Helen Taylor Robinson, constitute a major work of

Winnicott scholarship in themselves. An international team (American, French, Italian, Swedish, and British) has been appointed, resulting in a complex and fascinating dialogue regarding Winnicott's ideas and significance, to which I cannot do justice here. In general, the introductions offer guides to what is to come in the particular volume, clear expositions of key concepts, and the relevant biographical, historical, and professional context. However, the editors appear also to have been granted a Winnicottian licence to approach their task in their own idiom. There are divergent emotional responses to Winnicott the man: Arne Jemstedt (Volume 9) suggests that Winnicott was always very much himself, whereas Christopher Reeves (Volume 2) casts a rather cooler eye on Winnicott's quiet accommodations to Klein's position in the early years. Winnicott's relation to language and communication are insightfully commented on by Scarfone, Ferruta, and Armellini (Volume 10), the latter highlighting the importance of intrapsychic communication in the processes of integration. Winnicott's work is variously situated in its Freudian and Kleinian lineages (a subject of no little interest to Winnicott) by many. Also, there are suggestions as to how Winnicott takes forward or revises the Freudian project: Caldwell and Taylor-Robinson point to his extension of the psychoanalytic account of symbolisation beyond a base in compensation or deprivation; Jemstedt draws attention to what he considers an over-looked concept, the "subjective object;" Bonaminio and Fabozzi make a passionate case for the "radical" shift in the analyst's and mother's function, initiated by Winnicott. Horne reflects on just how much Winnicott's method has been integrated within contemporary practice. For Groarke, Winnicott's contribution is a thorough-going revision of Freudian drive theory, displacing the drive as a prime mover of psychic life in favour of the "pure immanence of life" (Volume 11, 18). The only downside to this editorial freedom is that, if you choose to read the volume introductions as a set, there is some repetition, particularly the restatement of the facts of Winnicott's early life. This is obviously important in the initial volumes—Ken Robinson's precisely relevant account of Winnicott's "facilitating environment" stands out—but less so as we move to his mature work.

So, what is it like to use the *Collected Works*? The chronological sequencing of the texts is initially disorienting to readers used to Winnicott organised according to the existing collections of papers. However, it allows unfamiliar, early works to come to the surface, for example the fascinating *Clinical Notes on Disorders in Childhood* (Volume 1), not reprinted since 1931. This "forgotten" text carries the seeds of Winnicott's life's work, a set of preoccupations which he will elaborate and integrate over the coming years. Written for GPs "from the heart of a clinician" (Volume 1, 167), whilst he was completing his psychoanalytic training, Winnicott the doctor-trainee analyst is closely attentive to the "interaction of physical and emotional factors" in childhood illness. The first chapter addresses the importance of history-taking, advocating respectful listening to the mother's account of the child's and family's history, supported by an understanding that "emotional development is normally difficult". He includes an evaluation of contemporary debates regarding the significance of the environment in childhood illness.

The inclusive and chronological principle means that a paper which Winnicott repeatedly re-worked, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena", appears in each of its four iterations [1951, 1953, 1958 and 1971], each time in full, allowing the reader to get the feel of the whole text. Headnotes alert us to significant changes and provide the context in which the text was revisited. Winnicott's alterations carry clinical, professional, and biographical weight. The Johns (Volume 5) note Winnicott's deletion from the final 1971 version,

of the hopeful sentiment that if maternal technique were added to the concept “breast”, a bridge might be built between the positions of Anna Freud and Klein. It is to this more depressive version that Winnicott adds a bleak update: the string boy could not be cured. This late text is now preceded by Winnicott’s letter to a friend, which the editors have chosen to reproduce in its handwritten form. Having expressed the hope that he will not be thought to have “frittered away” his life, Winnicott adds in parentheses “[You see, I ought to have been killed in World War 1 like my friends]” (Volume 9, 255).

The chronological presentation of his work allows us to experiment with how we organise our reading of Winnicott. We can, for example, read “a year of Winnicott”. Say 1963—the year of “Communicating and Not Communicating Leading to a Study of Certain Opposites” and “Fear of Breakdown”, but also the year of 19 other texts: three reviews, two strikingly forthright letters—“you scotomise me” (Volume 6, 421)—working notes on clinical cases, a poem, the outline of a dream, and a sequence of worked through papers.

What emerges is a picture of Winnicott’s mind in motion, and the deep interweaving of his continuous self-analysis and his theoretical developments—“the analyst, the analyst’s work”. Having announced, in Text 7, the theme of necessary privacy in adolescence, in Text 8, “Communicating and Not Communicating Leading to a Study of Certain Opposites”, Winnicott elaborates: “silent or secret communication with subjective objects, carrying a sense of real, must periodically take over, to restore balance” (Volume 6, 438). In this paper, Winnicott notes the plight of the child whose liveliness must be devoted to the task of animating the mother. In Text 10, a talk given in September, “The Value of Depression”, he observes that analysts deal with their own depression in their work with depressive patients. Winnicott cautions against inviting a depressed person to enjoy the shimmering, green leaves of a tree because to them “the tree looks dead and the leaves are still. Or there are no leaves and there is only the black and blasted heath and the barren landscape” (Volume 6, 465). This metaphor, invoked in the service of clinical exposition, resurfaces in Text 14, the poem “The Tree”, written a month or so later. Now it is the vehicle of Winnicott’s own painful “secret communication” with his subjective objects: “Mother below is weeping, weeping, weeping”, “stretched out on her lap as now on a dead tree ... To enliven her was my living”, “It is I who die, I who die, I die, I” (Volume 6, 500). The following letter to a friend, recounting a dream and a succession of loosely organised, rather condensed thoughts, intimates that maternal depression may inhibit the child’s freedom to be destructive and damage its faith that it can cross “into the wasteland of destroyed reality” (Volume 6, 503) and find surviving objects. Clare Winnicott acknowledges her husband’s phases of confusion and doubt, out of which form and meaning emerged (Volume 12, 295). The chronological presentation of Winnicott’s texts opens up our reading to this experience, as we track the emergence of meaning from its unorganised state, its roots in communication with subjective objects, and its emotional matrix.

Reading “1963” also illuminates the relationship between “Winnicottian-Winnicott” preoccupied with the early emergence of the self and “not-Winnicottian Winnicott”, the classical analyst affirming the Oedipus complex as the cause of psychoneurosis, a theory “I do thoroughly believe in” (Volume 6, 479). In fact, five of the 21 1963 texts revolve around questions of sexual preference, sexual identification, and oedipal structure, orienting the reader to Winnicott’s classical understanding of psychoneurosis. When we turn to a paper like “Two Notes on the Use of Silence”, a brief account of a female patient’s requirement that Winnicott remain silent, we might expect to hear something typically

“Winnicottian”, say the importance of the patient’s capacity to be alone in the presence of another. However, Winnicott’s initial understanding of the required silence is thoroughly embedded in oedipal sexuality: he is agreeing to be castrated. Only in the final sentence does Winnicott suggest that, for this patient, “with an insufficient experience of omnipotent living, the Oedipus complex and all triangular relationships ... are outside the projected omnipotence” (Volume 6, 517). This reference to the centrality of omnipotence at the psychic birth of the infant may be fleeting, yet it recasts the dynamics of the oedipal transference, offering us a multi-layered understanding of the clinical case and Winnicott’s decision to comply with the patient’s demand for his silence. Thus, the chronological presentation works to loosen lazy preconceptions, and pushes us to register the process by which he integrated the classical model in which he was trained with his own, emerging, conceptualisations.

Of course, reading him this way exposes us to his repetitions: again and again in 1963, he restates his views on early emotional development, (re)finding/(re)creating his ideas in one field after another. It is this reading experience, directing us to his deepest preoccupations, which lends real credence to Angela Joyce’s assertion (Volume 6 Introduction) that Winnicott’s heart lies with the psychotic elements of his patients.

The Collected Works is a complex, hybrid text, encompassing biography and autobiography, in addition to Winnicott’s theoretical exposition. The juxtaposition of letters to colleagues, theoretical papers, and the outline of the history of his relationships within the British Society (given in the Volume Introductions), foregrounds certain insistent concerns, notably “the anxiety of influence” (Bloom 1973), or, to use Winnicott’s own words, as he might well have insisted, questions of “influencing and being influenced” (Volume 2, 109–113). He seems to be engaged in an unrelenting battle, waged across multiple forms of communication, to be himself whilst communicating with others. In the early years this is the drama of his relationship to Klein and her group, expressed most ferociously in a 1952 letter to Hanna Segal, where he warns her against getting into “an ugly state in which [she is] sitting on top of a Mount Everest of an internalised good breast”, and insists on the need for scientific humility as opposed to the certainties of political positions (Volume 4, 300). However, the preoccupation persists. In a late letter to a Jungian colleague, he writes, “I expect we are all trying to talk about the same things, and yet I feel that value can come from the fact that we try to state what we have in mind in our own languages or dialects” (Volume 9, 170).

Winnicott’s difficult fidelity to the allusive, even poetic, resonances of “everyday” English for the expression of psychoanalytic concepts—he chose to write about the fear of “breakdown” precisely because the word is vague—is often commented on. Here too one senses a fraught negotiation—what freedoms can he wrest from the words he is given? What room can he make within them for the development of his own thought? If he is delighted that with words “one can give names” (Volume 7 336), he is also, as Anna Ferruta puts it, concerned as to how to use words to name without being “impoverished or emptied by the authority of the words” (Volume 7, 16). In a brief 1968 paper, “The Use of the Word ‘Use’” (Volume 8, 249–251), Winnicott revisits his earlier use of the word “use”: “it is the greatest compliment we may receive if we are both found and used”. As a child picks up a toy to explore what it can and cannot be made to do, he tests the word. He stretches it—“use” must include “waste”. He splits it—there is use and there is “use”, a specific way of being able to

use an object. This prompts a question: what is the first kind of use that is not really using? What is the “not-use” within “use?” Finally, as if in passing, he makes a profound claim, that the arc of an entire analysis may be defined by the struggle to “use and be used”. Winnicott may assert the primacy of play in the environmental provision and in the analytic setting, but the inclusiveness of the *Collected Works* sharpens our understanding of verbal Winnicott engaged in very earnest play with language.

The editorial decisions incarnated in the *Collected Works* foreground this exploratory, testing, and creative dimension of Winnicott’s mind. And the reader offered new ways to read Winnicott, is also teased, stretched, tested. In part by distracting pleasures—how to stick to reading a serious paper, when titles such as “The Niffle”, “Ditty on Enoch Powell”, and “Cleopatra Anamnesis Imphiccough” beckon? The editors’ principle of generous inclusiveness allows us to do much more with Winnicott now; the pleasures and serious benefits of negotiation and play with his thought have been greatly expanded.

Reference

Bloom, Harold. 1973. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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Psychoanalysis in China, edited by David E. Scharff and Sverre Varvin, London, Karnac, 2014, 329 pp. £36.89. ISBN 1780490836

This collection offers instructive glimpses into the founding foreign and local psychoanalytic and psychodynamic training initiatives in China. Essays are presented predominantly by psychoanalysts, psychiatrists and psychologists from Austria, China, Norway, Taiwan, the USA and other locales who participated in the foreign trainings as teachers or students, including graduates who developed the first local training programs in China.

The book opens with “structures of mutual obligations and responsibilities lying in ruins” since “the dismantling of state collectives and the collapse of socialist morals in the 1990s (that) left young Chinese villagers in an ideological vacuum” (Hanson and Cuiming, p. 3). Researchers and clinicians offer compelling examples of how “the logic of capital” employs and disturbs cultural logics that long shaped family life, gender roles and family relationships in China.

In this “free market” context, young people in China experience social and psychological conflict between “collectivism” and “individualism.” Hanson and Cuiming found that while young men report seeking not marriage but “free love,” the responsibility of caring for elders has increasingly fallen to young women, who long for the “freedom” of lateral economic mobility: the freedom to leave one factory job for another and avoid binding job contracts.