

Theory as an Object*

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To consider the question of theory as an object, I am going to reverse a trend and resort in the first instance to anthropomorphism. I am on safe analytic grounds, for in object relations psychoanalysis, the “object” is a person, invariably someone of significance to the subject. That a person should be seen as an object was offensive to second-wave feminism, which, with some justification, felt that behind the idealization of the mother was the denigration of the woman as a “sexual object.” That the feminine occupies the position of object, not subject, is endorsed in Lacan’s rereading of Freud. If we anthropomorphize theory, where does theory stand in the gender stakes?

A few months after the revolutionary moment of May 1968, Donald Winnicott, extraordinary pediatrician and important psychoanalyst, gave a brief paper to the New York Psychoanalytic Society entitled “The Use of an Object and Relating through Identification.”¹ A theme of his argument is the positive use of destructiveness, which, given the date of his presentation, suggests that Winnicott, unlike several other colleagues, may implicitly have been on the side of demonstrating youth who hoped (in vain, as it turned out) that May ’68 was “the beginning of the end.”

I am going to use Winnicott’s brief, and apparently simple, paper as a focal point. But first I need to situate myself autobiographically in the discussion about art, criticism, and psychoanalytic theory that this issue of *October* is attempting to open up. I am not an art critic or historian; the nearest I can come to understanding the problems posed by art to psychoanalysis is through literature, which is the field of my original training. My own entry into psychoanalysis came about through the exigencies of the predicament of women. When I was first interested in the position of women in the early 1960s, women did not exist, in a sense rather different from Lacan’s formulation “the woman does not exist,” though ultimately connected to that gnomic utterance. Women were classified as wives of

* This essay is adapted from a paper delivered at the symposium “Theory as an Object,” organized by Catherine Grant and Sarah James at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London and held on November 29, 2003.

1. D. W. Winnicott, “The Use of an Object and Relating through Identification” (1968), in Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1971).

their husbands or daughters of their fathers. In Sheila Rowbottom's words, they were "hidden from history."

Where they were hidden in the many discussions throughout the 1950s, and of course before, was in "the family"; for one missing woman there was a plethora of family studies. Reflecting on that obvious hiding place led me to write "Women: The Longest Revolution" (1966), in which I tried to locate women in what I saw as the chief structures of the family—sexuality with the partner, reproduction of the population, socialization of the child—all set within, and interactive with, the larger economy.² My subsequent move to psychoanalysis was highly overdetermined. Here, I will select one fact: a response that staggered me was one in which I was taken to task for not having understood that women and the family were coterminous and cognate terms. This had, of course, been my problematic. (This is excellently described in Julia Swindells and Lisa Jardine's *What's Left?*)³ Quintin Hoare wrote of my "Women: The Longest Revolution":

We are warned that this the article will not provide an historical narrative of women's position. But what, in fact, happens is that she excludes history from her analysis. How can one analyse either the position of women today, or writings on the subject ahistorically? It is this which prevents her from realizing that the whole historical development of women has been within the family; that women have worked and lived within its space and time. We may all agree that her place should not be there, but it is. Any discussion of the position of women which does not start from the family as the mode of her relation with society becomes abstract.⁴

The depth of our unconscious assumption of this equation of women and the family, the gap between women's experience of themselves and the construction of femininity, was one thrust toward psychoanalysis. *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974) took women into sexual difference, and it took the family into wider kinship laws.⁵ After writing *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, I trained as a psychoanalyst, undoubtedly for personal reasons but deliberately because I could not see how I could continue my interest if I did not have the material base—the clinical work—from which the theories arose. Because of this motive, my gut reaction to our subject, to the question of how art and criticism might use psychoanalytic theory, was to believe that the dilemma of anyone using psychoanalytic theory as an

2. Juliet Mitchell, "Women: The Longest Revolution," *New Left Review* 40 (1966).

3. Julia Swindells and Lisa Jardine, *What's Left? Women in Culture and the Labour Movement* (London: Routledge, 1990).

4. Quintin Hoare, "On Women: 'The Longest Revolution,'" *New Left Review* 41 (1967), p. 80.

5. Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (Harmondsworth, England: Allan Lane and Penguin Press, 1974).

object was that unless one has access to the clinical experience from which that theory arises, one is reduced to dealing with a static, unchangeable object. Without an underlying practice that is always changing, how can one do more than either question the theory within its own terms or apply it as it stands to the art under consideration?

My use of Winnicott's article is by way of a self-reproach to this simplistic first reaction—a reaction also born of irritation with the often unwarranted superiority of the postulates of cultural studies. It is also by way of a small critique of the prevalence today of so-called relational analysis, particularly in the United States. Winnicott writes, "I propose to put forward for discussion the idea of the use of an object. The allied subject of relating to objects seems to me to have had our full attention."⁶ My framework is implicit in Winnicott's—I am interested in the difference between "use," "relating" (which includes inter-relating), and "identification." When does another discipline—art, history, or literary criticism, for instance—"use," "relate," or "identify" with the theory that is its object?

What prompts Winnicott's thought is a widespread clinical phenomenon—the overcoming of which I would consider to be central to the distinction between full-blown psychoanalysis and psychoanalytical therapy. In this all-too-frequent conclusion to a treatment, analyst and analysand collude to avoid an underlying psychosis or madness by finding a psychoneurotic resolution.

In such cases the psychoanalyst may collude for years with the patient's need to be psychoneurotic (as opposed to mad) and to be treated as psychoneurotic. The analysis goes well, and everyone is pleased. The only drawback is that the analysis never ends. It can be terminated, and the patient may even mobilize a psychoneurotic false self for the purpose of finishing and expressing gratitude. But, in fact, the patient knows that there has been no change in the underlying (psychotic) state and that the analyst and the patient have succeeded in colluding to bring about a failure. . . . Although we write papers about these borderline cases we are inwardly troubled when the madness that is there remains undiscovered and unmet.⁷

Despite appearances, the patient has been engaged in a self-analysis feeding off only his own thoughts and has been unable *to use* the analyst. By and large, people can use food or use the teaching they are offered—but they cannot necessarily use the analyst. The analyst, for Winnicott, includes not only the person of the analyst, but also the analytic technique and the analytic setting. Although his own work is dedicated to not producing metapsychologies, had someone pointed it out to him, I believe Winnicott would have been prepared to add the analytic

6. Winnicott, "The Use of an Object and Relating through Identification," p. 86.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

“theory” to his triad of setting, technique, and person. For Winnicott is often confounded by his own simplicity. Nearly halfway through this paper he writes, “I am now ready to go straight to the statement of my thesis. It seems I am afraid to get there, as if I fear that once the thesis is stated the purpose of my communication is at an end, because it is so very simple.”⁸

When Wilfred Bion formulated his complex concept of the mother-infant interaction in the formation of thinking, Winnicott commented that if Bion wanted to express his observations in that complex way, so be it, but it was what he, Winnicott, had been saying very simply while not being understood for years by the Kleinian group to which Bion belonged. My own explanation is that Winnicott’s simplicity is often harder to hold on to than Bion’s complexity because Winnicott turns the obvious on its head—making it just the obvious upside down. But the obvious upside-down makes one see differently. The argument we are considering here is a case in point.

The person, the technique, the setting, and the theory are then the “analytic object.” But, of course, behind this amalgam lies another: the person of the mother, her technique, her setting, and the theory that she represents and in which she is embedded. The transference of this primary infantile constellation to the clinical conditions cannot, I believe, be ignored when the destination is instead the academy and its wider intellectual context. (I do not have the opportunity here to consider the implications of the time and conditions when this transference, which in fact is not of the mother but of the parents, was of the Oedipal father rather than the pre-Oedipal mother.)

Winnicott tends to move effortlessly between the original figure and its repetition in the analyst; for him, there is the mother and her reincarnation in the figure and context of the analyst. I want to try and *not* move between them, but to hold them in a tension of coexistence. The artist and the critic, like the patient, experience the object—that is to say, the original mother and her theory and, in our focus here, psychoanalytic theory—not as separate points but simultaneously.

Imitating Winnicott’s own delay, it has taken me some time to get to the central point—the point of reversal, the turning upside down of our understanding. It is this: the usual explanation of human destructiveness is that it is either innate (Klein) or alternatively that it is in response to, or triggered by, a violence experienced by the subject from the external world. However, what Winnicott suggests is that it is destructiveness that creates the external world as external. His question is not, What is destructiveness? but, What does it do? He argues from observation that if we are to develop the capacity to use an object, we must first destroy it. We can only use it once we are not totally identified with it, or even in a state of relationship or interrelationship with it. What we are therefore destroying is the object who is us, or is related to us: I try to kill the theory that is the same or

8. Ibid., p. 89.



Shellburne Thurber. West Newton, Mass.: Office with brown couch and abstract ceramic wall piece. 2000.
Courtesy the artist.

nearly the same as me. If I am lucky, the theory is strong enough to withstand my assaults and will still be there for me to love and appreciate when my destructiveness is (temporarily) over. But the main point is that though the theory may be, to all extents and purposes, the same before and after my attempted destruction of it, when it survives it will be in a different place. It will be other than me, an external object, which it always was—but not to me before I tried with all my worth to destroy it, and it still survived.

I want to argue, as Winnicott did not, that there is also a destructiveness that comes through an identification with an external trauma and that this, if it is too powerful, prohibits the development of the courage to destroy the object in the necessary way Winnicott described. Why, I want to ask, is the patient who cannot destroy and hence use his object so afraid of madness? I shall explore Winnicott's suggestion and its further implication for our topic.

The world is already there for all of us, but we—baby, patient, artist, or critic—first believe we have created it. Such a belief persists even if most of us try not to acknowledge it. I remember my own elderly mother, when she lived by the sea and I visited her, exclaiming in an ecstasy of joy at the sunlight and the waves: “*I made this.*” Such a statement was, of course, both absolutely mad and completely right—she had done nothing of the sort, *and*, at the same time, she *had* created it *as a shared reality*, as a series of interrelationships: she, my mother who had “created” me, could share the world that had also “made” us both. It is this shared reality I want to emphasize. It is not Winnicott's focus, and my suggestion that this shared reality heralds the use of an object differs somewhat from his. I do not believe that, when my mother went on the solitary walks along the beach that she loved, she believed she had made the world. The important point for me is that the world that was and is (we hope) always there, becomes shared. “Sharing” and “relating” are words to which we give a positive valence, but I want to renounce such connotations here. In this mad moment of believing one creates it, a moment not of object use but of object relating, there is ecstasy, the ecstasy of a moment of creation, an ecstasy that has to pass, for otherwise it can only be sustained in the isolation of mania or in the endlessness of some analytical treatments in which the patient has identified with the process but not used the analyst/setting/technique and theory.

What we have here is a particular type of sharing that can be witnessed in the need for the analyst to collude in a failure of the analysis. The analyst created the patient, and the wonderful theory of psychoanalysis made them both. Analyst and patient in this scenario thus stand in a relationship of “simple equation” to each other. It is not, I believe, as Winnicott (here relating too deferentially to Klein in order to disagree with her) argues, a matter of projection entirely. There is an ecstatic, primitive sharing. As an artist, that ecstatic moment may happen when one is actually alone, but the experience is internally peopled—someone, some audience who is the same as oneself as created object, is there in the sensation of excitement, in this *jouissance*.

From this ecstasy of object-relating, however, the move that is often not made, or not sufficiently made, is to object use. For this, Winnicott stresses, the environment needs to be such that the subject—baby/patient/artist/critic/my mother—is helped to develop a capacity to use the object. The theory—here psychoanalytic theory—has to be good enough to help those who would use it to develop the capacity to do so through first allowing their destructiveness. Here I would separate out Winnicott's concepts "environments" (as in his notion of the "facilitating environment") and "object." Empirically, the environment is an "object," and the object is the environment, but as concepts they are not identical—it is different to be part of one's environment and to take one's environment as an object—say of love or hate. The good-enough theory helps the person who would use it to do so, to turn it from environment, from the context that helps, into an object that can be used. So the ideas of psychoanalysis form an environment, a context. If they are related to, they remain thus; if they are destroyed, they can be used as an object.

From the other perspective, that of the subject, this shift, according to Winnicott, is one of the most important and most difficult in human development. From the side of the subject, the subject needs to destroy the object in order to make the object into the external object it already is in itself, but is not yet for the subject.

Before looking at both the capacity to destroy and the act of destruction, I want to gloss Winnicott's account. The artist or critic is helped by the theory of psychoanalysis to develop the capacity to destroy that theory so that she or he can make use of it as a theory independent of the artist/critic. It may help to formulate this so that psychoanalysis, while still an environmental object to which the artist/critic relates in the ecstasy of a shared relationship (or in Winnicott's terms, into which she/he projects her/his own feelings), can become, through its destruction, no longer an environment-object, but instead a use-object. What is the artist/critic doing when she/he destroys the environment-object or, very worryingly, when she/he avoids doing so and continues instead to relate as though theory and its should-be user had the same experience? What are the limitations of relating? Why does relating to theory not move to using it—what is the fear of madness that is being avoided?

My mother's joy in her creation of the environment-object took only superficial account of my own or the object-environment's reality. There are other people, but not with their own reality. The patient, in sharing the language of the analyst, has not grasped the analyst's own reality; the artist/critic relating to psychoanalytic theory, in speaking its language, has not seen its very different reality from her or his own. This, to me, is not projection: it is an identification that denies any differentiation, even that differentiation made by the marker of identification itself.

Destroying the environment-object creates not a new object but the subject's ability to use it. Psychoanalytic theory does not change from within itself, but it looks and behaves differently because the artist/critic can use it; the used

analyst/mother is not in herself different from the one that facilitated the baby/patient's capacity to use her—but she looks and behaves differently, so one can say “good-bye,” knowing one does not know everything about her but taking with one all that she continues to mean beyond even the parting of the death that in time must happen.

Does this mean that the artist/critic has to leave psychoanalytic theory in order to live her or his own creative life? To think about that question, we need to turn to the key action in creating the theory as object to be used—the moment (or rather many moments throughout a lifetime) of destruction. Winnicott was an ardent opponent of Freud's hypothesis of a death drive; in fact I believe his repudiation of it was emotionally driven by a hatred of Melanie Klein's rendition of the death drive as primary envy and innate destructiveness. Freud's death drive is a deathliness that drives the subject back to a quasi-inorganic state of stasis—by the time it is destructiveness and aggression, it has fused with that other equally great force, the life drive. In fact, Winnicott's “destruction” of the object could be one empirical reading of this latter effect: it is a loving destructiveness, or, as he puts it, a destructiveness without anger.

First, what does the environment-object do to facilitate the subject so that she/he can destroy? The analyst in this phase of the patient's development makes sparse interpretations, and these are made only to indicate the limits of the analyst's own understanding of the patient, the mother's of the baby, the psychoanalytic theory's of the work of art and/or its creator. Primary maternal preoccupation needs a mother not to have boundaries that separate her from her baby—and without boundaries she is necessarily mad. However, the mother withdraws from her mad sharing with the baby, in which it is as though they were having the same experience: all babies are the same—the same stomach cramps, the same milky pleasures. The theory withdraws from thinking it can understand all creativity; it respects that every artist/art object has a different take on the same human experience. Conversely, the same setting, same technique, same theory, same analyst, same mother are not entirely the same for each patient/baby. What is destroyed is what, many years ago, writing from a very different place, I called “identity”: when the sun shines, I am not necessarily shining too.

It will be seen that, although destruction is the word I am using, the actual destruction remains potential. The word “destruction” is needed, not because of the baby's impulse to destroy, but because of the object's liability not to survive, which also means to suffer change in quality, in attitude.⁹

The theory is vulnerable. Like the mother, it may not survive. However, theory and mother, I would argue, have first to withdraw their identification with the artist and baby. The mother does not feel and understand the baby's pain for

9. Ibid., p. 93.

all time; the psychoanalytic theory may have a model of art, but it may not grasp what stirs *this* aspect of *this* artist. This is what Winnicott describes as the analyst's allowing the patient to know the limits of the analyst's understanding. If the analyst shows her limitations, the patient can recognize these and use different aspects of her. So, too, the artist and the theory. For example, I got a shock when I first opened American critic Barbara Johnson's 1998 *The Feminist Difference*: for each work of fiction that she was analyzing, she had used an often substantially different branch of psychoanalytic theory.¹⁰ But, in fact, treating the theories as different manifestations of the same human/theoretical thing (the unconscious, psychosexuality, death) was very enriching. "My mother treats my brother differently from me" can—admittedly with difficulty—be a deeply rewarding experience, particularly as it is rarely the whole truth. The point is not any preference but that she and each of us are different; the world is a various place.

Psychoanalytic theory, despite a new surge to the recurrent clarion call of its demise, has so far survived; survived not only those who hope it will not do so, but also those who start by relating to it. If she/he is not to stay relating but move to using, this will happen:

The subject says to the object: "I destroyed you," and the object is there to receive the communication. From now on the subject says: "Hullo object!" "I destroyed you." "I love you." . . . "While I am loving you I am all the time destroying you in (unconscious) *fantasy*."¹¹

And conversely the mother/analyst must know when the baby is able also to be destroyed as an environment object and used as a different child. This recurrent moment of destruction-and-survival is the moment of the birth of fantasy. In other terms, imagination can take over from hallucination; perception and the "I" starts here.

The neonate can see well for a few days after birth, then less well, and finally well again. Is this a precursor of primary relating/primary identification (baby in its environment, which it sees well); destructiveness (baby destroys environment-object, which it no longer sees so well); use of the object/perception (environment survives and becomes an object to be seen/used by the eyes)? We know that in groups, or in mass action, each individual subject regresses from perception to identification so that all act as one. I would suggest that the movement is from the underlying progression away from identity, via destructiveness, to perception and then a regression back again. Art—and not criticism or analysis—can take either route: regression to being the same as the theory, or using and perceiving the theory from different points of view. If the theory is used, then—and only then—will it, like the

10. Barbara Johnson, *The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

11. Winnicott, "The Use of an Object and Relating through Identification," p. 90.

mother/analyst, contribute to what the subject is doing: “the object develops its own autonomy and life, and (if it survives) contributes-in to the subject, according to its own properties.”¹² The notion of the destruction of the theory should not be etiolated to some benign notion of play. It may be without anger, but nevertheless there is, and has to be, a real risk, which is often realized, that the object will not survive, that it cannot change. It is not only the object’s strength, its ability to survive because fundamentally it is a good theory, or “good enough” theory, that is at stake in the nature of the subject’s destructiveness. The exceptional artist takes more-than-average risks; chances the possibility of the nonsurvival of the object, not withdrawing just in time, but possibly when it is nearly too late. Art in which the artist is the same as his/her creation is object relating; art that withdraws, fearing that its destructiveness will kill the object, stops short of greatness.

Earlier, I mentioned one line of my own relationship to psychoanalysis: it was in realizing how the family in which the woman was inserted and lost bore the mark of sexual difference; we bear kinship with us wherever we go. It is not the only scenario. I met the artist Mary Kelly in a Women’s Liberation group not very long after 1969. I still feel the construction of *Post-Partum Document* as though it were born from all our bodies at that time, much as my own *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* sprang Athena-like from all our heads. It was a period of profound collectivity. Mary has moved on from *Post-Partum Document*—I myself from *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*.¹³ I hope we have been destructive of psychoanalytic theory (though I know I have very often only related to it); it has obviously survived our, and other, more powerful attacks not only in the generic sense that it is bigger and stronger than we are. It has survived in the sense that matters: its survival can only be assured by the fact that it has changed, though certainly not utterly. Whoever uses it and does not regress to relating to it, be they clinician, artist, critic, historian, or patient, will help it change and thus survive, or survive and thus change and, in turn, will bear its contribution in themselves and in their work.

Now an illustration: Mrs. A came to see Mrs. B, a therapist, for a limited period of time. Mrs. A set this time limit for perfectly good external reasons. However, it soon became clear that she did not believe Mrs. B (or anyone) could take very much of her. During her therapy, she moved into Mrs. B’s neighborhood, and in her strictly self-timed sessions she occupied the consulting room as though it were her own home. She said whatever came into her head with apparently no resistance or censorship whatsoever. She did not like any interruption to the ceaseless flow of her talking. Her body was as uninhibited as her mind. Sometimes she brought Mrs. B the accomplished paintings in which she portrayed her sense of despair.

Winnicott starts his reflections with the clinical observation that a treatment can end with a collusion between the therapist and patient such that they

12. Ibid.

13. Mary Kelly appeared on a panel with Juliet Mitchell at the symposium for which this paper was written.—Ed.

have managed a neurosis and avoided a psychosis. The mechanisms of projection to which he refers when describing the “relating” to the object condition confirm his statement that it is a psychosis that is missed. I want, however, to call it madness—the madness that André Green wishes to reinstate when he describes passions and their vicissitudes; the madness that Winnicott finds necessary in the mother whose “primary maternal preoccupation” allows her to be at one with her baby.

In fearing that Mrs. B could only stand her for a precise fifty-minute session for a fixed period, Mrs. A was referring to her madness—which was real enough: it was an ecstatic at-oneness of art work and artist, not a projection but a relating without boundaries of you and me, self and other. Patient and analyst will certainly collude consciously to avoid this ecstasy of madness, this *folie hystérique*, to end the analysis before it has begun. But the irony is that this collusion achieves exactly what it aims to avoid: the *folie*, the ecstasy, the relating that is preserved within the confines of a termination of an analysis that has not happened; an analyst who has not been used and therefore has not “contributed-in” to the patient. Mrs. A’s initial self-restrictions on the amount of time she gave herself were masked by an identification with the analysis. She allowed herself the same fifty-minute sessions that the process allowed her: she and it were to be one and the same thing. One day it would have to terminate before it had started, so this, too, she identified with/related to from the outset. This “mad” solution was agreed to because the fifty-minute sessions, the termination, were what the psychoanalytic theory offered. Although Mrs. B was aware of this and of the implications of the predetermined termination, the very expression of the problem “tied her hands” as an analyst: she did not have time to deal with the issue. Another patient followed Mrs. A’s session; Mrs. A had to return on a fixed date to her own country.

It looked as though the analyst did not have time in the future, but the issue, in fact, was that Mrs. B did not have time *in the past*. The lack of time instigated by Mrs. A was a communication not that there *would* not be time but that there *had* not been time. This was not just a complaint in the transference about a mother who had not had enough time for her baby, but a message about a baby and mother actually not being there for each other: it was this that was to be reenacted. Mrs. A was unconsciously warning Mrs. B that she was to be an adoptive mother, who could not know Mrs. A from birth. This had not been literally the case, but it was a powerful fantasy that Mrs. A lived by for reasons beyond the scope of this essay. What Winnicott’s distinction between relating and use enables us to see is that although *relating* demands a presence that is actually there for the one who relates, *use* transforms this into a knowledge that it may not be there for the user, but that it exists anyway.

What is important is that an adoptive mother *can* know a baby from birth or conception, and a birth mother may well not. The former will have been used, the latter not. The same is true of a theory. The use of psychoanalytic theory by non-clinicians is an adoptive use, as was mine in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, where I

wanted to use psychoanalysis to understand something about sexual difference. Thus, Winnicott's brief but important paper has enabled me to flesh out my self-reproach that to change a theory one must have access to the material from which it arose. But it has done more than this; it has helped me reflect on a distinction between the art of an artist who is identified with his product and one who sees it as an object external to its creator because she has risked destroying it.