CHAPTER TEN

Finding, Receiving and Recognizing the Absent

In one of Freud's first definitions of repression (in his letter to Fliess dated 6 December 1896), he said it was a 'failure of translation'. What, then, should one say of translation itself, which is always defective, if not that it is always in danger of bringing in a *surplus* of repression? Or worse: a double repression, that of the author's maternal language and that of the translator's.

Every translator is aware of this, or should be. He always hesitates between 'overtranslating', marked by a concern for readability and good style, and 'undertranslating', overridden by literalness, and absolute faithfulness to the original text. In the first case, the translator is only willing to submit to the demands of his own language, even of his own style; in the second case, he wishes to follow only the language and style of the author. Can one transpose or trace? In fact, whatever choice he makes, the translator is always the agent of *in other words*: even the copyist, who claims to withdraw any personal intervention is a deformer. After all, why should the translator be the only one to avoid the tricks played by the unconscious? But it is difficult to admit that the *operation* of translating could suffer no loss, or castration. For this loss to be acceptable, some advantage must result from it.

It is a pity that psychoanalysts are not interested in problems of translation. For they are at the core of practice. And Winnicott, of whom we shall again speak, raises them more than anyone else: did he not base his whole enterprise on the fact of not *translating*? But whether one wants it or not, translating is always at stake in interpretation and even in listening. One could also say that any new theorization of analysis springs from a dissatisfaction with the preceding 'translations'. It is not that other analysts have not understood, but that they 'translate wrongly . . .'; or, if they translate correctly, they come up with a lifeless body: rows of private words concerning what animates them and is circulated between them.

The difficulties against which a translator stumbles are rarely triggered by those passages or words which are problematic to the author for their ambiguity or complexity.[1] On the contrary, what checks the translator is more often what goes without saying to the author, what

he sees as obvious, as something rooted both in his maternal language and in the grounds of his thinking. This is when, stumbling against a precise obstacle in translation, the gap between the two languages reveals the presence of a sensitive point and a specifically cathected area deriving its meaning from the author's personal world.

With *Playing and Reality*, the difficulties begin with the very title: the French word *jeu* is obviously not equivalent to 'playing'. First because, unlike English, French does not have two terms to designate 'games' with rules and 'playing' without rules; we speak of *jeux* both in the case of adults engaged in a game of football or Go and of a small child shaking a rattle or babbling at his teddy-bear. Perhaps we are not totally mistaken, for the absence of explicit and recognized rules does not imply the absence of any rules, even if they are unnoticed by the observer or the player. The fact that what a child seems to be doing is 'nonsense' does not enable us to conclude that he is engaged in 'pure playing activity', that he is not *making a rule for himself* by playing. The well-known game of the cotton-reel interpreted by Freud (1920*g*), but only after it had caught his attention, is striking evidence of this: how many observers could have seen it without noticing any of its sequences!

The fact is that Winnicott, who is English, very English (which among the psychoanalysts in Great Britain is rarer than one imagines) considers essential the distinction between a 'game' strictly defined by rules regulating it and 'play', which develops freely. And it is enough to remember the emotion, almost a feeling of panic, which seizes us (children or adults) when we do not follow the rules (it is not so much a question of transgression as one of putting aside – not so much 'you're cheating' as 'that isn't the game!'), to see how such elements as organization and mastery in games are used to avoid what is terrifying or unsettling about the rules of the game.

A second reason for Winnicott's orientation, a more original and revealing one, makes the translation of 'playing' by *jeu* inadequate. 'It is obvious that I am making a significant distinction between the meanings of the noun 'play' and the verbal noun 'playing' (1971*a*). One could say that his entire book is dedicated to making the reader aware of such an 'obvious' fact and having him draw the consequences. And first, the reader-psychoanalyst. For there is no doubt, at least in my opinion, that Winnicott's growing insistence on the function of 'playing' which led him to write about it in the last book published during his lifetime is derived as much from his critical judgement of a certain conception of analytical practice as what he learnt of his 'therapeutic consultations' with children. It is his own

very personal experience of analysis which prompted his viewpoint of a double difference between 'game' and 'play' on the one hand and 'play' and 'playing' on the other. For him, they are not just linguistic subtleties. If psychoanalysis were not a 'game', it would not have interested Winnicott; and if it could have been reduced to 'play', it would have been Kleinian! But to understand this, we must once again lend an ear to the hardships of translators . . .

Throughout this book we were struck by the frequent use of participial nouns. 'Playing' is but one of them. It is true that English not only allows their use but employs them often. But here they figure in several chapter headings, and especially when the author wishes to break away from traditional usage: 'fantasying', 'dreaming', 'living', 'object-relating', 'interrelating', 'communicating', 'holding', 'using', 'being', etc. All these terms indicate *movement*, a process at work, a capacity – not necessarily a positive one, as for example in the case of 'fantasying' which Winnicott sees as an almost compulsive mental activity, the opposite of imagination – and not the finished *product*. Thus the existence of dreams and their manipulation in analysis do not attest to the capacity to dream.

Now Winnicott himself was trapped by what he denounced. It is *because* he realized this that he wrote *Playing and Reality*. What happened? In 1951, Winnicott published an article which was immediately noticed and soon considered to be a classic. In it he describes a kind of object which, even if it had not escaped the notice of mothers, had never been named or given a status in psychoanalytic literature – the author, we can even say the inventor, called it the *transitional object*. Although only one part of his article is concerned with a description of this object, its emergence and its uses, and although he also spoke – in the title and elsewhere – of transitional *phenomena*, and orientated his argument towards the existence of a third area, which ensures a transition between me and not-me, loss and presence, child and mother, and, finally, although he emphasized that the transitional object is but the tangible sign of this space of experience, Winnicott's discovery was very quickly limited, by those who adopted it, to that of an object. Another object! And one that can be noted as a precursor of partial objects, close to the fetish object, an object whose samples should be examined with more care, whose use should be dated and circumscribed, whereas it is what was above all of *clinical* interest to Winnicott that makes his discovery valuable to any psychoanalyst whether or not he deals directly with children: the intermediate *area*, an area not only neglected by psychoanalysis but whose conceptual tools – both

theoretical and technical – prevent it from perceiving and therefore from *bringing into being*.

It was in response to such a misunderstanding that, in my opinion, Winnicott took the 1951 article as the starting point of his book. The starting point: this time, without any ambiguity, he goes from the transitional *object* to the transitional *space* and ensures that the reader himself follows the same movement. Thus the book begins with a fairly old article; but some passages have been suppressed in the new version, such as his comparisons with fetishism, which confirm our hypothesis that one should not focus one's attention on the *status* of the transitional object. Finally, new arguments are added to the text which emphasize the development of Winnicott's thinking. The point of arrival indeed throws light on the whole itinerary.

This point of arrival is to be found in the author's last text, published after his death (cf. 'Fear of breakdown', 1974). Winnicott's theoretical investigation was marked by his encounter with what in psychoanalysis are 'the limits of the analysable', borderline cases between neurosis and psychosis which defy the analyst in his power and his being, and defy more profoundly the limits of *any* organization, be it neurotic or psychotic. This is clearly said in 'Fear of breakdown': 'The ego organizes defences against breakdown of the ego organization, and it is the ego organization that is threatened.' And: 'It is wrong to think of psychotic illness as a breakdown, it is a defence organization relative to a primitive agony.' An 'unthinkable' agony of which Winnicott outlines the modalities (failure of 'indwelling', in the body, loss of sense of real, feeling that one is falling for ever etc. . . .); and underlying agony which any attempted restructuring tries to oppose and any psychopathological syndromes try to contain; an agony which evokes, beyond castration, an ever-open breach or an endless fall, the double image of a break and a chasm which is contained in the term 'breakdown', although it has today lost some of its force, an agony where the disappearance of the subject is experienced in the imminence of death, or, we shall add, in the 'overfullness' of pleasure.[2]

The thesis put forward in the article is that 'breakdown', feared because it would always be a threat in the future, has in fact already occurred in the past. But – and this is the central paradox – it has occurred without finding its psychical place; it was not deposited anywhere. It is not a trauma buried in memory as profoundly as is postulated. Nor has it been repressed in the sense of a trace inscribed in a relatively autonomous system of the psychical appar-

atus. To even talk of splitting, with what this implies in terms of the active presence of an irreducible internal element, kept apart, would in my opinion be a mistake. Even if Winnicott used classical concepts, it seems they were not quite adequate for what he wanted to clarify, it seems that the very idea of an unconscious, imposed on Freud by the psycho-neurotic functioning does not appear to Winnicott to account for the dimension of *absence* which he sees as a necessary void in the subject. I shall willingly suggest that if the Freudian topography of the agencies and the psychical places can describe the intrasubjective conflict, for Winnicott this appears as secondary, as a construction where the self – the subject – is already mutilated. Our entire conception of psychical reality has been modified by this.

Something took place which has no place. What determines the functioning of the apparatus is beyond its reach. The unthinkable makes what is thought. What has not been experienced, what escapes any possibility of being memorized is at the pit of being (with Winnicott the word *being*, sometimes written in capitals, enters the world of psychoanalysis and it is all too easy to avoid the problem of its appearance by simply calling it pejoratively 'mysticism'). Or again: the lacuna, 'the gaps' are more *real* than the words, memories, or fantasies which try to hide them. In a sense, all analyses, especially perhaps those which 'work well' and in which, contradictorily, 'nothing happens', make us perceive a deserted space, a vain and laborious filling-in, which is interpretative on one side and associative on the other. This gap, once again, is not just a gap in speech, a 'rubbing out', the cravings of censorship, the latency of the manifest. It is, through its presence-absence, 'witness of a non-experienced'; a demand, too, for it to be recognized for the first time, for one to encounter the gap at last so that what could be given no meaning can be given life. 'It is through non-existence that existence can begin.'

This is where the few pages added to the original text on transitional objects take on their full value: the chosen example of a session enables us to grasp, through an operation which was as astonishing to Winnicott as it was to his patient, a mutual experience, the weight which formulae such as the following can suddenly take on: 'The real thing is what is not here.' 'The negative is the only positive.' 'All I have got is what I have not.'

The explicit, 'positive' theme of *Playing and Reality* is play. For the book is in praise of the capacity to play (just as today some, less sincere books are in praise of madness...). And the reader cannot but be enchanted to see a psychoanalyst (who are usually so 'disenchanted', so ready to tear apart our collection of *illusions*) recall with subtle

candour that, for example, 'The natural thing is playing, and the highly sophisticated twentieth-century pehenomenon is psychoanalysis'. Throughout the book, there arises the simple question: 'what makes us feel we are "alive" apart from an always slightly submissive adaptation to the environment?' A question that neurotic organizations can lead us to avoid in the set sequence of fantasying, but with which a subject with 'something psychotic' inevitably confronts us.

Everyone will have to appreciate for himself, first through personal resonance, the answers put forward by Winnicott, often less in the 'summaries' at the end of his chapters than in the very movement of a sentence or a paragraph – in the moments and the inventions ensuring the *passage* from one space to another, like playing or poetry, or again in the description of a session. We would just like to warn the – continental – reader against two tempting criticisms which, though contradictory, reduce the scope of this book to a mere nothing: seeing Winnicott's 'genius' as so unique, so full of intuitions that it could not be integrated into psychoanalytical thinking and would generate at most a few applied imitators; or, the reverse temptation, i.e. to substantivize the author's concepts so as to show their limits or 'preanalytical' nature: 'what is the self' and the 'search for the self', is then asked, if not the re-appearance of the myth of a soul vowed to search out the truth and whose wholeness would ignore the irreducible schize? What is this 'primary creativity' which is supposed to be more fundamental than the sublimation of instincts, if not a nostalgia for the immediate, erasing the necessary mediation introduced by representation? What is this 'good enough' mother which transforms an analyst into a nanny (I actually heard this), excludes the 'Name-of-the-Father', and desexualizes analysis? Inevitable, already stereotyped objections which an analyst has to face each time he leaves the trodden path, and recognizes in himself and *in* analysis this 'area of formlessness' which he discovers some day in his patient.

Between centre and absence: this is one of Michaux's titles, which could evoke Winnicott's project, a risky, fragile attempt, always in danger – like playing, which he uses, among other human activities, as a landmark rather than as a model – of falling back into a reality whose only quality is to be there or to merge into the projected surface of an internal reality, of a fantasmatically closed system which would feed nothing but itself. The self is not the centre; neither is it inaccessible, buried somewhere in the folds of being. It is *found* in the *in-between* of outside and inside, the ego and non-ego, the child and his mother, the body and the word. Potential space is difficult to

outline in a new topography. And yet the limits of the only two spaces over which we have any hold and which we try to control – the external and the internal – designate its place – absent, not there. We no longer quite have the Freudian drama in which the figures of the Father and the Mother confront each other, a great theatre of shadows indefinitely represented, disguised, doubled, reimagined in fantasy. Neither is it the Kleinian receptacle, the ego-bag, of good and bad objects destined to an endless dialectic of introjections and projections. In Winnicott there are no repeated scenes, neither is there a *combinatory* in which the same elements would *permutate* within the circle, but a *playground* with moveable boundaries, which *makes* our reality. A piece of string, the rhythm of one's breathing, a face, a look which makes you certain that you exist, a session where one is alone with someone: *not much*, *hardly anything*, just what happens to me when I can take it in. Then what is found is no longer a precarious substitute for what is lost, what is shapeless is no longer a sign of chaos (on the contrary, an impression of chaos is the anxious repudiation of what is shapeless), the mind no longer functions as an organ separated from the body. From *jeu* to *je*: such is the movement, continuously being taken up and reinvented, for nothing is linear about its progress.

The potential space evoked in *Playing and Reality* – and which is already present in the reading – makes us aware of a reality which we usually perceive *out of lack*. We develop a bond with the author, a renewed (and kept) promise of an encounter. It's up to us not to miss it.

Winnicott or a refusal to translate, we were saying, at the beginning. Yes, but, just as keenly, the desire to hear, between the words, in spite of the words sometimes, what from the mother, indefinitely commands our speech.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Boundaries or Confines?

At first one is tempted to set, *from without*, limits to what is analysable, in two apparently very different modes: limits to the extension of the psychoanalytical method and interpretation beyond the frontiers defined by the framework of the analytical setting (so called 'applied' psychoanalysis) and limits to the scope of the psychoanalytical technique, according to the psychopathological organizations concerned (the problem of 'indications' and 'counter-indications'). In fact, these two problems, which have been discussed so much over the last few years without, in our opinion, any rigorous theoretical formulation being reached, are less heterogeneous than would seem at first glance, for they both concern the legitimate use of the psychoanalytical tool. For example, when one asks under what conditions a psychoanalyst may allow himself to treat social or aesthetic facts – a matter that does not concern analysts only – is it so different from trying to determine, adopting precise criteria, those cases that may or may not fall within the range of psychoanalytical treatment, which, in this instance only analysts would be competent to consider? In both cases, it is a question of setting limits to the psychoanalytical field, and deciding what intrinsically oversteps it.

Concerning the second problem – that of indications – one has to acknowledge the extreme variety of opinions held among even the most experienced analysts. Were one to add up their diverging answers, the following paradoxical result would be obtained: *all* psychopathological organizations can be tackled by psychoanalysis; *not one*, not even the most 'classical' neurosis, is really accessible at its roots. For example, obsessional neurosis, which was for a long time considered as the exemplary type and model for analytical investigation and treatment, is today considered by more than one analyst as so tough that it could be irreducible. Similarly, an analyst, though an enterprising man, recently questioned the 'analysability' of hysterics (Masud Khan, 1975) who are at the very source of psychoanalysis itself. On the other hand, more and more analysts are taking into analysis, often with success, psychotic patients who have undergone the most shattering treatments in psychiatric environments. Finally, it has turned out that an analysis that 'doesn't work' with one analyst