

FROM *DIE TRAUMDEUTUNG* TO THE SQUIGGLE GAME: A BRIEF HISTORY OF AN EVOLUTION

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It is often possible to retrace the history of a new concept or a new technique, identifying precursor and reflections that would lay the foundations for the birth of something “new”. This also applies to the “squiggle game” of Donald W. Winnicott, one of the Winnicottian “creations” in which the distinctive signs of its fatherhood are more evident as, at the same time, are evident several debts to other scientists: from Freud’s interpretation of dreams, through Jung, Klein and Fordham to Milner’s “free drawings”.

KEY WORDS: Die Traumdeutung; squiggle game; free drawings; history of psychoanalysis; Donald Winnicott

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It is often possible to retrace the history of a new concept or a new technique to identify precursors and reflections that (often unintentionally) lay the foundations for the birth of something “new”. This applies to the “squiggle game” of Donald W. Winnicott (1968), probably his “most famous technical innovation” (Phillips, 1988, p. 15). Although the distinctive signs of his paternity are evident in this creation, at the same time, it is also indebted to several other scientists or theorists. Throughout this paper, I will trace the historical reconstruction of the origins of the squiggle game from Freud’s contribution, through Jung, Klein, Fordham and Milner. What will be outlined is an original and personal historical line, in the sense that it is “just my way of understanding psychoanalytic history” (Meltzer, 1975, p. 289).

A first illustrious historical debt may be identified in the dream. The interest in dream has ancient roots, but a decisive period for the development of knowledge about it was between 1860 and 1896, when

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research on this topic led to the discovery of almost all of the concepts that would later be found in the work of Sigmund Freud. In 1896, when Freud began his own “self-analysis”—as he defined it in his letters to Wilhelm Fliess—it was based mainly on the analysis of his own dreams (Anzieu, 1975). According to the Viennese master, dreams were the manifestations of the primary process, and through the study of the dream-work it was possible to explore the unconscious: “a type of thinking which is essentially non-verbal [but rather figurative and worked in images] and is, therefore, of necessity falsified by being put into words” (Rycroft, 1975, p. 155). In order to know more about dreams and the unconscious—since daylight thinking was of no use in that shady realm—Freud developed the method of the analyst’s free-floating (evenly-suspended) attention vs the patient’s free associations. Freud also realized that there were elements (equal for everyone) to which patients couldn’t associate. He came to believe that those elements were symbols, the result of a primary process that—through displacement—manages to overcome dream censorship and to discharge psychic tension. Faced with a multitude of symbols, some of which were universal, he individuated a limited number of symbolized elements: sensations, parts of the body, and primary objects (Freud, 1899).

Dreams were fundamental to Carl G. Jung’s self-analysis, also (see Jung, 1913–1930, 1961), which began on December 12th, 1913 and continued until 1919. Indeed, it could be said that “at every crisis period in his eventful life, a dream or a vision provided essential sources for furthering a solution” (Fordham, 1978). It may be useful here to open a parenthesis to remember that when Jung was a young psychiatrist at Burghölzli, he undertook some experimental researches on the word association task (see Jung, 1906). And while at the beginning of these studies his interest was aimed at the traumatic memories described by Pierre Janet (1890) as subconscious fixed ideas and the source of dissociations—so named by Janet—memories split off from consciousness (Bacciagaluppi, 2017),² at a later time he expanded the connection to the traumatic memories of which Freud spoke (Breuer & Freud, 1892–1895; Freud, 1896a, b, c)—it was then that Jung gained interest in psychoanalysis. Back to Jung’s self-analysis: it consisted in liberating and allowing the emergence of unconscious fantasies in the conscious mind—which must actively co-operate in order to understand symbols and make them a living experience. To achieve this aim, he resorted to techniques of introversion that may be related to the method known as “active imagination” (Jung, 1936; see also Swan, 2008). This involved either telling himself a story and writing down everything that came to his mind in relation to that story; or writing down and drawing or painting every visual expression of the Self that occurred in the dream that he could recall upon awakening. Parenthetically, according to Jung, the

manifest content of the dream does not conceal a latent content: it is a representation, in symbolic form, of the internal world (structures and unconscious processes, both archetypal and personal) of the dreamer, so that “The dream is a little hidden door in the innermost and most secret recesses of the soul” (Jung, 1934, p. 144). This view of the symbol as a bridge between conscious and unconscious, and that of the dream as something that is revealing more than concealing refers to the Freudian assumption that every symbolization in a dream would always be defensive. Today, this viewpoint is shared by most psychoanalytic theorists (Mertens, 1999, 2000), and Jung, himself, was the first to indicate this path. Such distinction is due to the fact that contemporary theorists conceptualized symbolization as a psychic mechanism that implicates the processes of displacement, condensation, and plastic representation. But compared to Freudian theory, today the processes of displacement and condensation are considered antithetical: while through the first—better conceptualized as “substitution”—the information-processing is deferred, through the second—better conceptualized as “overlap”—the information-processing is accelerated. It follows that the mere process of displacement/substitution constitutes a pure defense operation. As we shall see, among the psychoanalyst who thought that the dream is not a disguise but an expression of the dreamer’s inner reality there was Marion Milner.

Going back to the previous discussion of Jung’s self-analysis, one can infer that, for the Swiss psychiatrist, drawings are useful methods of graphically representing the nonverbal symbolic images—or rather, the best possible representation—of one’s own (relatively unknown) internal world. Such techniques, derived from self-analysis, were adopted by Jung even in his clinical work with patients:

But why do I encourage patients, when they arrive at a certain stage in their development, to express themselves by means of brush, pencil or pen at all? (Jung, 1929, p. 48)

[Here the aim is the same as for the dreams (i.e., to produce a stimulus)]:

The creative activity of imagination frees man from his bondage to the “nothing but” [*nichts als*] and raises him to the status of one who plays.... My aim is to bring about a psychic state in which my patient begins to experiment with his own nature—a state of fluidity, change, and growth where nothing is eternally fixed and hopelessly petrified (Jung, 1929, p. 46).

During such patient activity, the therapist’s job is to avoid interfering and provide holding rather than actively intervening.

From this journey into his unconscious, Jung drew the notions of Anima, Self and individuation, and he also experimented with the collective unconscious and the archetypes. The methods he used for this journey were the active imagination, the dream's amplification, the drawings and the paintings of unconscious images—methods that later became therapeutic. Therefore, we can say that it was a "creative illness" (Ellenberger, 1970, p. 672) transformed into therapeutic methodology; an unsurprising fact if we consider that "every theoretical or creative elaboration always represents the painstaking result of the introspective analysis of its author" (Carotenuto, 2007, p. 84).

In the second half of the 1920s, Melanie Klein (1926, 1927, 1929), one of the first to treat children psychoanalytically, started to consider their play activity and their drawings as an equivalent of the dreams of adults, that is, a symbolic reproduction of fantasies, desires and experiences, a spontaneous, continuous and unaware representative activity of unconscious mental content (such a view of the dream underlies the idea of a continuous stream of unconscious contents that accompanies every subject's activity). Klein pointed out that what children express in play can be understood in its totality only if we use the method elaborated by Freud for revealing the dreams. It is important to remember that in order to fully understand the material brought by the patient during the whole session—material which includes but is not limited to children's play—she takes into account not only the symbolism which is only a part of it, but also all the means of representation, the mechanisms employed in dream-work, and the interconnection of all phenomena. Klein realized that often the children represent in their play or their drawings the same thing which had appeared in a dream that they had told us in a previous session; in this case the play activity and the drawing mostly provide associations to their dreams. Such repetitions in different forms of the same material—or better, the repetition of the same material using different media such as the narration of the dream, toys, drawings, etc.—allow the analyst to interpret each individual phenomenon and reconnect it to the unconscious and the analytic situation. It is clear that

If we examine these means rather more closely—take, for instance, drawing (...)—we shall see that their object is to collect material in some other way than that of association according to rule, and that it is above all important with children to set their phantasy free and to induce them to phantasy" (Klein, 1927, p. 347).

Another meaningful contribution, of a more general cultural order, was offered by Surrealism, which had the social and creative aim of liberating mankind from a positivistic, rational and bourgeois perspective with the

purpose of encompassing a wider reality, inclusive of the unconscious dimension. The sur-reality resided in attributing to dream-work the same quality of presence, solidity and definiteness typically attributed to external reality. The compelling influence of Freud's (1899) *The Interpretation of Dreams* is noticeable here, to such an extent that, according to René Magritte (1938), "Surrealism demands for our waking life a freedom comparable to the one we enjoy when we dream" (p. 104). The definition of the surrealist movement is provided in the *Manifeste Du Surréalisme*, where we read:

Psychic automatism in its pure state, is the proposal to express—verbally, and by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought. It is dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.

...Surrealism is based on the belief in a superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought. It tends to ruin once and for all, all other psychic mechanisms and to be a substitute itself for them in solving all the principal problems of life (Breton, 1924, p. 26).

On an aesthetic level the means used for liberation are automatic writing, written improvisation and mediumistic communications; while from a pictorial point of view the means are automatism, editing and frottage, or rather, "the rubbing by pencil of a rough surface to produce random patterns" (Chilvers and Glaves-Smith, 2009, p. 609).

Some years later, in 1938, Marion Milner—who knew the surrealist movement, we know that towards the end of the 1930s she visited a painting exhibition of two English surrealists who made extensive use of automatic drawing: Reuben Mednikoff and Grace Pailthorpe (Maclagan, 1992), also a psychoanalyst—was shocked to discover, almost by chance, that sometimes it is possible to make sketches or drawings, allowing eye and hand to be free to do exactly what they wish, without consciously seeking a preordained result, without any inclination to draw "something". Milner thus began to look at drawings in the way Freud approached dreams, which—among other things—are composed of images, visual images, which have a quality of being "truly real" (Milner, 1957) and have deep/primitive roots (Kris, 1952); and she realized that by implementing this "free" method, as she termed it, moods and ideas, represented by the signs of the pencil on paper, could emerge, which, on a conscious level seemed to be totally absent. Therefore, free drawings were permeated by the structure of affects and thoughts (conscious and unconscious) of whomever produced them. It is interesting to know that Milner's study of "image"—which she defined as "the surest way to find out what I wanted" (Milner,

1957, p. 128)—was certainly deeply influenced by Jung (1921) according to whom the image “is a condensed expression of the psychic situation as a whole (...), an expression of the unconscious as well as the conscious situation of the moment. The interpretation of its meaning, therefore, can start neither from the conscious alone nor from the unconscious alone, but only from their reciprocal relationship” (pp. 613–614). It should also be noted that often times Milner used the word image interchangeably with the word symbol.

This self-analysis mediated by free drawings was not Milner’s first analytical experience. In 1928, she underwent Jungian analysis with Irma Putnam, although many years later, when she was asked about this first analysis, she answered vaguely: “I saw a Jungian two or three times a week for three months” (Dragstedt, 1998, p. 434). Further on her own Jungian analysis, Milner (1969) noted that “most of the work, which included the study of dreams and free associations, centered on the discussion of my problems in terms of Jung’s eight character types, classified according to the relative predominance of one of four ‘functions’: sensation, feeling, intuition, and intellect, with a possible extraverted or introverted bias on each level. Most of the figures in my dreams were seen as personifications of these attitudes. I found the mere fact of talking as I wanted to a valuable experience, but obviously it could not go very far in so short a time. There were no transference interpretations” (p. xxv). Also, this research and subsequent reflections upon her drawings, were eventually used by her as a kind of internal dialogue, even in the analysis [she] started in 1938 with Sylvia Payne (Sayers, 2002).

What Milner discovered about free drawings was consistent with what the psychoanalyst Herbert Silberer (1909) described as a “functional phenomenon” (p. 200), that is, the phenomenon by which, in dream images, it is the emotional state of the dreamer that is represented, and not the content of thought. It is interesting to observe that for Milner the dream is “a witness of a state of being; in fact, as an attempt at symbolization, rather than as a symbolic language to be decoded” (Milner, 1975, p. 275), but it is also a compromise between desires and (past and present) repressed or denied experiences, and the defense mechanisms that are available to the subject. In the manifest content of the dream it is possible to find “the dreamer’s wish for direct contact with his own sense of being” (p. 277).

The several creative experiments done since 1938, the analysis of the content of the drawings and the self-analysis of her own mental processes that accompanied those creative experiences brought forth her book *On not being able to paint* (Milner, 1950; see also Letley, 2014; Stefana, 2018a) in which there are, in embryo, all the original contributions that Milner gave to psychoanalysis (Milner, 1969, 1987; see also Stefana, 2011, 2018b; and

Charles, 2012)—a book which Jung probably would have regarded as a product of a successfully conducted active imagination (Gordon, 1978). The free method was used by Milner even in the psychoanalysis of children, and sometimes adults; indeed, she encouraged the use of this type of drawings as a way of expressing and communicating those disturbed feelings for which her patients had no words (Milner, 1969; Giannakoulas, 2010). Such communications can thus lie on a “piece” of external reality such as making drawings, playing and the telling of dreams; such creations become emotionally significant as a result of the process of symbolization, and then had the characteristic of “real existence in the outer world and at the same time, in their content and their form, came entirely from herself and her inner world, they were a non-discursive affirmation of her own reality” (Milner, 1969, p. 242; see also Milner, 1950, 1952).

There is another contribution that must be mentioned in this short historical reconstruction of the origins of the squiggle game, (i.e. the one by Michael Fordham from London). Fordham was a Jungian analyst—Jung’s friend—who, in 1940—influenced by Klein’s hypotheses about primary unconscious fantasies—formulated an original conception of the processes of maturation of the Ego from the archetypal matrix of the original Self. Fordham (1944) was the author who in the field of Jungian studies gave the greatest contributions to the technique of drawing in the analysis of children. In his book, titled *The life of childhood*, starting from Jung’s ideas and from his own clinical experiences, he claimed that dreams and drawings are means of communications and reflections of the child’s internal world, and for this reason they provide the analyst with information about the child’s psychopathology and his early environment. Sometimes Fordham asked the child-patient to draw the dreams that he reported during the session, using their representation on paper as the start of the therapeutic work.

On this basis lies the contribution of Winnicott who, it should be noted, had Klein as a supervisor, was a friend of Fordham (who, as we said before, was influenced by Klein’s ideas, to the point that some of his colleagues accused him of being more Kleinian than Jungian), and kept with Milner a close and multiform relationship (he was not only her friend but also her supervisor and analyst). Between the end of 1962 and 1965, or rather around the same time, Winnicott started to put into words his thoughts on the squiggle game, “a number of topics emerge[d] into view, showing [his] formidable capacity to engage and grapple with new and surprising issues. This period began with a fuller acceptance from Anna Freud. It proceeded into Jungian territory, where Winnicott produced a complex narrative that interconnected himself, Jung, and Sigmund Freud” (Rodman, 2003, p. 284).

The fact that in many cases the psychotherapeutic consultation [a diagnostic interview distinct from psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, but at the same time therapeutic] consisted of a single meeting, inspired Winnicott to develop—also starting from the reflections on theory and practice elicited by the reading of the aforementioned authors—a technique which allowed him to establish a dialogue with the patient about deeply unconscious themes, so that he could make the most of the first session(s). This technique, called “squiggle game”, is a useful method that creates a connection with children who come to us for a consultation, and it allows us to assess their ability to interact with the situation offered to them (in this sense, therefore, every consultation represents a [trial for] therapy). Winnicott (1968) described the technique in this manner:

At the right time (...) I say to the child: “Let’s play something. I know what I would like to play and I’ll show you.” I have a table between the child and myself, with paper and two pencils. First, I take some of the paper and divide the sheet in half, giving the impression that what we are doing is not that important, and then I begin to explain. I say: “This game that I’d like to play has no rules. I just take my pencil and go like that ...” and I probably close my eyes and do a random squiggle. I carry on with my explanation and say: “You show me if that looks like anything to you or if you can make it into anything, afterwards you do the same for me and I will see if I can make something with yours” (p. 326).

Winnicott underlines that what is proposed to the child is an invitation to play. If the child feels like drawing or talking rather than using toys or doing something else, it is important to be flexible and indulge him, as the child is free to refuse our offer to play. It is important to create an atmosphere perceived by the patient as comfortable and nonjudgmental, in which he can feel free to communicate (in all possible forms) and simply to be; the result is that with the squiggle game one can range from the free association of words to the free association of drawings. It is worth remembering that, according to Winnicott, play is a deeply serious business, it starts as a symbol of the child’s trust in the therapist, and the capacity to play represents an achievement in his/her emotional growth (see Winnicott, 1989). An interesting fact is that Winnicott (1971a, b), believing that play—as a creative activity—is akin to dreaming and to living (not to fantasizing), used the squiggle game as an instrument to “fish for” the dreams of the patient:

It will be observed that it is my intention in these interviews to get to real dream material: that is the dreams we had and those we can remember. The dream [that gleans information from the external and internal reality] contrasts with fantasy [an escape from reality], which is unproductive, shapeless, and to some extent, manipulated (1971a, p. 32).

From this point of view, Winnicott's aim was ambitious: to combine the (often brief) meetings with contact and depth (the more useful if intense). As he had learned from the authors who had preceded him, an experience communicated by means of a graphic medium enables the patient to come closer to his/her internal emotional reality (the one which is contained in the squiggle/drawing), through a path less arduous and threatening, compared to a classical consultation in that, behind the symbolism of drawing, many other things that could not be expressed in another way and not yet put into words, can be hidden or left obvious (Günter, 2003). Winnicott's most original contribution resides in having said to the patient "I'll do a bit and you'll do a bit" (a creation/experience which engages both individuals, sometimes "in parallel," and sometimes separately, "in turn"), based on a dynamic vision of both the encounter and the creative process. The next evolutionary step—I think—resides in those variants of the squiggle game that I have named "games of reciprocity" (Stefana and Gamba, 2018) which continue in the direction indicated by Winnicott for a creative co-construction of a working space, but which have added something new—for instance, the "Let's do this together" (a creation/experience which engages both parties reciprocally).

Coming to the end of this historical reconstruction, it must be clear that the squiggle game is Donald Winnicott's creation; at the same time, however, he was indebted to several colleagues who either preceded him or accompanied him on a part of his life's journey.

It is as if the most salient contributions that led to the squiggle game were almost summarized in the history of Marion Milner. Her "free drawings" represent the connecting link between Freud's *Die Traumdeutung* and Winnicott's *squiggle game*. Such a debt to Milner was never acknowledged by Winnicott, and it is interesting to note that Milner was not the only one Winnicott did not acknowledge. Indeed, according to Peter Rudnytsky (1991): "Winnicott's lack of recognition of those who came before him, in pursuit of his commitment to his own inner development exacted a human toll on Ferenczi's followers, particularly on Michael Balint. To his credit—after Balint reminded Winnicott several times of the painful consequences of his evasive statements about the similarities between his work and that of others—Winnicott wrote: 'I have realized more and more as time went on what a tremendous lot I have lost from not properly correlating my work with the work of others. It's not only annoying to people but it's rude and it has meant that what I've said has been isolated and people have to do a lot of work to get at it. It happens to be my temperament, and it's a big fault'" (pp. 86–87; quoted by Gurevich, 2016, p. 336). However, on reviewing *On not being able to paint*, Winnicott reported a lesson that he learned from that text:

...each student must create what is there to be taught, and so arrive at each stage of learning in his own way. If he temporarily forgets to acknowledge debts this is easily forgiven, since in place of paying debts he re-discovers with freshness and originality and also with pleasure, and both the student and the subject grow in the experience (Winnicott, 1951, p. 392).

NOTES

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2. Jung overlapped these with the emotionally charged complex of representations identified by the German psychologist Theodor Ziehen through the word association test invented by the English statistician, psychologist and naturalist Francis Galton.

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