

# The transformational object

---

We know that because of the considerable prematurity of human birth, the infant depends on the mother for survival. By serving as a supplementary ego (Heimann, 1956) or a facilitating environment (Winnicott, 1963), she both sustains the baby's life and transmits to the infant, through her own particular idiom of mothering, an aesthetic of being that becomes a feature of the infant's self. The mother's way of holding the infant, of responding to his gestures, of selecting objects, and of perceiving the infant's internal needs constitutes her contribution to the infant–mother culture. In a private discourse that can only be developed by mother and child, the language of this relation is the idiom of gesture, gaze, and intersubjective utterance.

In his work on the mother–child relation, Winnicott *stresses* what we might call its stillness: the mother provides a continuity of being, she 'holds' the infant in an environment of her making that facilitates his growth. And yet, against this reciprocally enhancing stillness, mother and child continuously negotiate intersubjective experience that coheres around the rituals of psychosomatic need: feeding, diapering, soothing, playing, and sleeping. It is undeniable, I think, that as the infant's 'other' self, the mother transforms the baby's internal and external environment. Edith Jacobson suggests that

when a mother turns the infant on his belly, takes him out of his crib, diapers him, sits him up in her arms and on her lap, rocks him, strokes him, kisses him, feeds him, smiles at him, talks and sings to him, she offers him not only all kinds of libidinal gratifications but simultaneously stimulates and prepares the child's sitting, standing, crawling, walking, talking, and on and on, i.e., the development of functional ego activity.

(1965, p. 37)

Winnicott (1963b) terms this comprehensive mother the 'environment' mother because, for the infant, she is the total environment. To this I would add that the mother is less significant and identifiable as an object than as a process that is identified with cumulative internal and external transformations. I wish to identify the infant's first subjective experience of the object as a transformational object,

Infant's  
Mother  
||  
total  
Environment

mother  
as  
process  
of  
transformat-

and this chapter will address the trace in adult life of this early relationship. A transformational object is experientially identified by the infant with processes that alter self experience. It is an identification that emerges from symbiotic relating, where the first object is 'known' not so much by putting it into an object representation, but as a recurrent experience of being – a more existential as opposed to representational knowing. As the mother helps to integrate the infant's being (instinctual, cognitive, affective, environmental), the rhythms of this process – from unintegration(s) to integration(s) – inform the nature of this 'object' relation rather than the qualities of the object as object.

Not yet fully identified as an Other, the mother is experienced as a process of transformation, and this feature of early existence lives on in certain forms of object-seeking in adult life, when the object is sought for its function as a signifier of transformation. Thus, in adult life, the quest is not to possess the object; rather the object is pursued in order to surrender to it as a medium that alters the self, where the subject-as-suppliant now feels himself to be the recipient of envirosomatic caring, identified with metamorphoses of the self. Since it is an identification that begins before the mother is mentally represented as an Other, it is an object relation that emerges not from desire, but from a perceptual identification of the object with its function: the object as envirosomatic transformer of the subject. The memory of this early object relation manifests itself in the person's search for an object (a person, place, event, ideology) that promises to transform the self.

This conception of the mother being experienced as transformation is supported in several respects. In the first place, she assumes the function of the transformational object, for she constantly alters the infant's environment to meet his needs. There is no delusion operating in the infant's identification of the mother with transformation of being through his symbiotic knowing; it is a fact, for she actually transforms his world. In the second place, the infant's own emergent ego capacities – of motility, perception, and integration – also transform his world. The acquisition of language is perhaps the most significant transformation, but learning to handle and to differentiate between objects, and to remember objects that are not present, is a transformative achievement, as it results in ego change which alters the nature of the infant's internal world. It is not surprising that the infant identifies this ego achievement with the presence of an object, as the failure of the mother to maintain provision of the facilitating environment, through prolonged absence or bad handling, can evoke ego collapse and precipitate psychic pain.

**TRANSITIONAL OBJECT** is created by infant. With the infant's creation of the transitional object, the transformational process is displaced from the mother-environment (where it originated) into countless subjective-objects, so that the transitional phase is heir to the transformational period, as the infant evolves from experience of the process to articulation of the experience. With the transitional object, the infant can play with the illusion of his own omnipotence (lessening the loss of the environment-mother with generative and phasic delusions of self-and-other creation); he can entertain the idea of the object being got rid of, yet surviving his ruthlessness; and he can find in this transitional experience the freedom of metaphor. What was an actual process can

Not yet differentiated by the other

object pursued to surrender to it as medium of transf. Not Desire but for function

Infant's transformation → Need Mother's cont:uned presence

TRANSITIONAL OBJECT is created by infant

Mother displaced

illusion of omnipotence

Displacing  
Mother  
↓  
Infant's  
first  
creative  
act.

be displaced into symbolic equations which, if supported by the mother, mitigate the loss of the original environment-mother. In a sense, the use of a transitional object is the infant's first creative act, an event that does not merely display an ego capacity – such as grasping – but indicates the infant's subjective experience of such capacities.



### The search for the transformational object in adult life

Our  
collective  
search  
+  
hope  
invested  
in various  
objects

I think we have failed to take notice of the phenomenon in adult life of the wide-ranging collective search for an object that is identified with the metamorphosis of the self. In many religious faiths, for example, when the subject believes in the deity's actual potential to transform the total environment, he sustains the terms of the earliest object tie within a mythic structure. Such knowledge remains symbiotic (that is, it reflects the wisdom of faith) and coexists alongside other forms of knowing. In secular worlds, we see how hope invested in various objects (a new job, a move to another country, a vacation, a change of relationship) may both represent a request for a transformational experience and, at the same time, continue the 'relationship' to an object that signifies the experience of transformation. We know that the advertising world makes its living on the trace of this object: the advertised product usually promises to alter the subject's external environment and hence change internal mood.

Ego  
memory  
based  
object-  
seeking

The search for such an experience may generate hope, even a sense of confidence and vision, but although it seems to be grounded in the future tense, in finding something in the future to transform the present, it is an object-seeking that recurrently enacts a pre-verbal ego memory. It is usually on the occasion of the aesthetic moment, which I describe in the next chapter, that an individual feels a deep subjective rapport with an object (a painting, a poem, an aria or symphony, or a natural landscape) and experiences an uncanny fusion with the object, an event that re-evokes an ego state that prevailed during early psychic life. However, such occasions, meaningful as they might be, are less noteworthy as transformational accomplishments than they are for their uncanny quality, the sense of being reminded of something never cognitively apprehended but existentially known, the memory of the ontogenetic process rather than thought or phantasies that occur once the self is established. Such aesthetic moments do not sponsor memories of a specific event or relationship, but evoke a psychosomatic sense of fusion that is the subject's recollection of the transformational object. This anticipation of being transformed by an object – itself an ego memory of the ontogenetic process – inspires the subject with a reverential attitude towards it, so that even though the transformation of the self will not take place on the scale it reached during early life, the adult subject tends to nominate such objects as sacred.

Hope  
↓  
Grounded  
in future  
tense

Aesthetic  
contact  
↓

These  
are  
regarded  
sacred.

Although my emphasis here is on the positive aesthetic experience, it is well to remember that a person may seek a negative aesthetic experience, for such an occasion 'prints' his early ego experiences and registers the structure of the

Not only  
Positive

unthought known. Some borderline patients, for example, repeat traumatic situations because through the latter they remember their origins existentially.

repetition of trauma

In adult life, therefore, to seek the transformational object is to recollect an early object experience, to remember not cognitively but existentially – through intense affective experience – a relationship which was identified with cumulative transformational experiences of the self. Its intensity as an object relation is not due to the fact that this is an object of desire, but to the object being identified with such powerful metamorphoses of being. In the aesthetic moment the subject briefly re-experiences, through ego fusion with the aesthetic object, a sense of the subjective attitude towards the transformational object, although such experiences are re-enacted memories, not re-creations.

seeking to re-experience the transformational object's cumulative effect on the self.

The search for symbolic equivalents to the transformational object, and the experience with which it is identified, continues in adult life. We develop faith in a deity whose absence, ironically, is held to be as important a test of man's being as his presence. We go to the theatre, to the museum, to the landscapes of our choice, to search for aesthetic experiences. We may imagine the self as the transformational facilitator, and we may invest ourselves with capacities to alter the environment that are not only impossible but embarrassing on reflection. In such daydreams the self as transformational object lies somewhere in the future tense, and even ruminative planning about the future (what to do, where to go, etc.) is often a kind of psychic prayer for the arrival of the transformational object: a secular second coming of an object relation experienced in the earliest period of life.

The self as transformational object

It should not be surprising that varied psychopathologies emerge from the failure, as Winnicott put it, to be disillusioned from this relationship. The gambler's game is that transformational object which is to metamorphose his entire internal and external world. A criminal seeks the perfect crime to transform the self internally (repairing ego defects and fulfilling id needs) and externally (bringing wealth and happiness). Some forms of erotomania may be efforts to establish the Other as the transformational object.

Failure to be disillusioned from this relationship  
↓  
Psychopathologies

The search for the perfect crime or the perfect woman is not only a quest for an idealized object. It also constitutes some recognition in the subject of a deficiency in ego experience. The search, even though it serves to split the bad self experience from the subject's cognitive knowledge, is nonetheless a semiological act that signifies the person's search for a particular object relation that is associated with ego transformation and repair of the 'basic fault' (Balint, 1968).

It may also be true that people who become gamblers reflect a conviction that the mother (that they had as their mother) will not arrive with supplies. The experience of gambling can be seen as an aesthetic moment in which the nature of this person's relation to the mother is represented.

??  
Addictive =  
Looky for comfort of the object / substance / void fill.

### Clinical example

One of the most common psychopathologies of the transformational object relation occurs in the schizoid self, the patient who may have a wealth of ego

void fill.