The name of the Piggle: Reconsidering Winnicott’s classic case in light of some conversations with the adult ‘Gabrielle’

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On the 40th anniversary of its publication, the author re-reads Winnicott’s The Piggle – a case of ‘on demand analysis’ with a child suffering from psychotic night terrors – in light of new information about the patient. Conversations between the author and ‘Gabrielle’ explore two areas not regarded as priorities by Winnicott: the transgenerational transmission of pathology/trauma, and the ways that language, in general – and given names, in particular – organize individual subjectivity. The question raised is to what degree Winnicott – who described the treatment as “psychoanalysis partagé [shared]” due to the parents’ involvement – thought of the pathology itself as ‘shared.’ The goal is not to supplant but to expand Winnicott’s understanding of the case, borrowing insights from the work of Lacan and others.

Keywords: Winnicott, The Piggle, play, transgenerational transmission of trauma, Lacan, the name of the father, the family act, New Middle Group

A favorite anecdote has it that a child was sent to Donald Winnicott because her father complained of bad table manners. Winnicott counseled his patient to recite the following to her father:

I eat my peas with honey,
I’ve done so all my life,
It makes the peas taste funny
But keeps them on the knife.

(Anderson, 2015, p. 371)

The psychoanalyst of play, known for riding his bicycle with feet on the handlebars, would not see pathology in mere peccadilloes. When a child was actually ill, however, Winnicott recommended analysis five times per week. The tension between his belief in the healing potential of child analysis, and his trust in things sorting themselves out naturally, is illustrated,

1This anecdote, recounted by Marion Milner, was discovered by Dr Margaret Boyle Spelman in the Enid Balint archive, as described in the following podcast: Boyle Spelman, Margaret, The Work of Donald W. Winnicott’, interviewed by Berna O’Brien. Irish Forum for Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy (Podcast, Real Smart Media, Dublin, 23 April 2016), URL https://m.soundcloud.com/real-smart-media/ifpp-donald-winnicott-margaret-boyle-spelman-berna-obrien. It was cited in print by Anderson (2015).
par excellence, in the case history known as *The Piggle*. He explains in the book’s introduction:

> Once a child has started treatment, what is lost sight of is the rich symptomatology of all children who are being cared for in their own satisfactory homes. It is possible for the treatment of a child actually to interfere with a very valuable thing which is the ability of the child’s home to tolerate and to cope with the child’s clinical states . . .

(1977, p. 2)

Published in 1977, *The Piggle* is still taught in courses around the world, and has never gone out of print. Nor are its admirers limited to child analysts. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum called it “one of the great examples in English literature of an adult entering the wild, conflict-ridden world of a young child” (2003, p. 159). Best-selling graphic novelist, Alison Bechdel, who introduced Winnicott to lay readers in *Are You My Mother?* sketched herself musing: “I’m curious whether ‘Gabrielle’ might have written about her analysis with Winnicott . . . Maybe his treatment was so effective she didn’t need to write about it. She’s probably just off living her life somewhere” (2012, p. 156).

Bechdel is not the only reader so captivated by *The Piggle* as to wonder what became of the adult. Forty years after the book’s publication, I propose to reconsider the case, in light of my communication from 2015 to the present with the adult Gabrielle, which is her actual name. She has indeed been ‘off living her life’ – as a psychodynamic psychotherapist in London.

**Summary of the case**

Winnicott agreed to see Gabrielle, nicknamed ‘The Piggle,’ when she was 2 years, 4 months old, in response to her parents’ description of a bizarre personality change, and night terrors that took two forms. First, she feared a ‘black mummy’ who lived inside her and made her black. Second, she was afraid of trains and ‘the babacar’ – a made-up word her mother thought might combine ‘baby car’ and ‘black car.’ She would cry: “Tell me about the babacar. All about the babacar.” And: “Mummy, cry about the babacar!” (pp. 6–7). The night terrors began shortly after the birth of her sister, ‘Susan.’ At a later point, she fears being poisoned (p. 64) and is preoccupied with death (p. 87).

There is discussion at the outset about whether or not a full analysis is needed. The family lived outside London, making five sessions per week nearly impossible. Winnicott reminds the parents that most children outgrow such fears and difficult states, but remains open to seeing her if she doesn’t improve on her own. As the child grows more anxious, the mother tells her: “I’ve written to Dr. Winnicott who understands about babacars . . . ” (p. 7). A distressed Gabrielle reportedly pleads: “Mummy, take me to Dr. Winnicott” (p. 7).

The patient is seen on a schedule that Winnicott categorizes as treatment ‘on demand.’ It amounts to 16 sessions over several years; she is 5 years, 2 months old at termination.
During their first meeting, Gabrielle tells of the arrival of her baby sister. She picks up items in the room, asking: “Where did this come from?” Winnicott intervenes: “And where did the baby come from?” (p. 11). He introduces an oedipal theme, asking if she ever gets mad at mummy, given that “they both love the same man” (p. 12). Winnicott saw exceptional ego strength in the Piggle, alongside “elements of madness, e.g. the babacar” (p. 17). After that first consultation, the mother writes to say that she played happily for a bit, but then got worse – insisting openly that she was a baby, and refusing to be called by her own name. The issue, Winnicott tells the reader, is renegotiating a relationship with the mother that can allow for hate. The Piggle remains obsessed with the ‘babacar,’ and in the second consultation, Winnicott “takes a risk,” interpreting: “It’s the mother’s insides where the baby is born from.” She looks relieved and replies: “Yes, the black inside” (p. 24).

In the 11th consultation, he offers some explanation of the mysteries of reproduction, in clear, Kleinian terms. “The man is a robber. He robs the mother of her breasts. He then uses the stolen breast as a long thing – a wee-wee, which he puts into the girl’s baby-hole and in there he plants babies. So he doesn’t feel so bad about having been a robber” (pp. 142–3).

On another occasion, she asks about his birthday, and he returns: “What about my death day?” (p. 124), perhaps preparing the child for his own death. Gabrielle invents a game with a rolling pin in which she gets rid of Winnicott – turning helpless fear into playful aggression. Here, he underscores an important truth about therapy with children. Whereas Klein and Anna Freud felt that children’s play was important as grist for interpretation, he argued:

> It is not possible for a child of this age to get the meaning out of a game unless, first of all the game is played and enjoyed. As a matter of principle, the analyst always allows the enjoyment to become established before the content of the play is used for interpretation.

(p. 175)

At the 16th and final consultation, Gabrielle, age 5, acts shy. Winnicott says: “I know when you are really shy, and that is when you want to tell me that you love me”. He remarks: “She was very positive in her gesture of assent,” leaving him with the impression of a “really natural and psychiatrically normal girl of 5 years” (p. 198). In an epilogue written by the parents when Gabrielle is 13, they state that, despite normal ups and downs, she is thriving. They cite her strong values, independent judgment and sensitivity to others as possibly related to the experience of “being deeply understood” at a crucial moment in her young life.

Winnicott presented the case at an international conference in 1969, during which he asked a junior colleague to supervise him, instead of vice versa. Publication of the case – made possible through the coordinated efforts of the child’s mother and Clare Winnicott – occurred 6 years after his passing.

The Piggle is a text that can be read in many ways. It is a clinical history, including marginal notes in which Winnicott glosses his interventions, making it a useful primer. It also reads as a kind of epistolary novel, as the
treatment sessions are interspersed with letters from the parents describing her progress. When asked, the Piggle says she thought Winnicott was writing his autobiography. Indeed, in addition to being a case study and a novel, it is also something of a memoir, reflecting the last few years of his life as a clinician.

Child psychotherapist and Winnicott scholar, Christopher Reeves (2015a, 2015b), former Director of the Squiggle Foundation, in his thorough examination of *The Piggle*, asks what it is that can be considered curative in the case. He calls into question the efficacy of the Kleinian “commotional” interpretations – defined as those that “… intentionally promote the release of anxiety related to conflict … ” (2015a, p. 162). Moreover, he notes that, like all analysts, Winnicott listens selectively. For example, although the Piggle is afraid of *trains* and the *babacar*, Winnicott pursues the latter only, despite the fact that the word “train” appears three times more often than “babacar.” Reeves concludes that *The Piggle* succeeds in demonstrating that positive results may come from a treatment that is *intensive* but not *extensive* in the classical format. However, *The Piggle* cannot be said to represent ‘on demand’ analysis, as claimed. First, says Reeves, it’s not clear if a toddler’s demand ever can be understood apart from the parents’ wishes, and furthermore, there were times the demand was made and not met. Gabrielle had to wait on one occasion for nearly 3 months, while the parents worried she was on the brink of breakdown.

**How words use us**

Winnicott was a gifted writer with a genius for understanding the non-verbal. Even his greatest admirers, however, have noted something about the area of language that remains underdeveloped in his work (e.g. Phillips, 1988). André Green wrote famously:

> After Freud, I see two authors who have pushed their research and coherence very far on the basis of two quite different points of view and which up to a certain point converge. These two authors are Lacan and Winnicott.

(1987, p. 121)

Green, who allied himself with the British Middle Group after turning away from Lacan, felt nonetheless compelled to write: “I am not an unconditional Winnicottian … [A]n analyst who really wants to think about practice cannot dispense with a reflection on language, a reflection that is absent in Winnicott” (1987, p. 124).

It is true that Winnicott wrote: “A word like ‘self’ naturally knows more than we do; it uses us, and can command us” (Winnicott, 1960, p. 158). However, he never discussed what words like ‘self’ know, for example, how their history and usages shape subjective experience. This is in stark contrast to Freud’s collected works where, as Jacques Lacan points out: “… one out of three pages presents us with philological references” (2006, p. 424). Freud’s discovery of the relentless wordplay of the unconscious was used by Lacan (2006) to formulate his own theory of the signifier.
In Winnicott’s oeuvre, there are very few examples of his pausing to call attention to a patient’s choice of words or to underscore a double-meaning. The adult patient described in his book-length case, *Holding and Interpretation* is simply called “the patient” without so much as a pseudonym or initial. (This, in contrast to Freud’s considered naming of his patients, e.g. ‘Dora’ and ‘Ratman’ or Lacan’s naming his first patient ‘Aimée.’) Winnicott indicates in the book’s introduction that the nickname ‘Piggle’ “is a common term of endearment for a child” (p. 1). In the early sessions, he uses that nickname, but at the 6th consultation, when she is 2 years, 10 months old, he remarks: “This time I knew I must say ‘Gabrielle,’ not ‘Piggle’” (p. 77). He doesn’t say how he knew or why he wouldn’t ask the child her preference. In the 10th consultation, the Piggle, absorbed in play, muses aloud: “My sister’s name is Nathalie Susan; it’s Italian. I am Deborah Gabrielle” (p. 123). Again, the analyst lets it go – much more interested in providing words for non-verbal gestures. A typical example is in the 6th consultation when she shows off her bare feet: “You are showing me big breasts” (p. 81).

The other category that some contemporary therapists might deem underdeveloped in the case has to do with projective identification and transgenerational transmission of trauma, discussed next.

‘Not family therapy – not casework – psychoanalysis partagé’

Winnicott’s notes on *The Piggle* include these:

Share material with the parents. Not family therapy – not casework – psychoanalysis partagé (shared). No breach of confidence on their part, and they didn’t interfere.

(p. viii)

It is not clear if Winnicott had thought about ‘shared psychoanalysis’ before this moment, but obviously such a thing is feasible only with young child patients. (Recall the case of Elisabeth von R. in which Freud famously ‘shared’ with the patient’s mother the reason for her daughter’s hysterical pains, infuriating Elisabeth who proceeded to terminate treatment – Breuer and Freud, 1895, p. 160.)

Winnicott felt the need to exchange information in this case so that he could offer direction to two very worried parents. There are clues, but no full discussion about how he saw the pathology itself as partagé.

Many analysts from the second half of the 20th century forward insist on precisely a shared-pathology perspective. They have used the work of Klein, Bion, and Winnicott to discuss ways that children hold not only their parents’ conscious concerns but also their split-off affects – and illness (Skygner, 1976; Sander, 1978; Box et al., 1981; Scharff and Scharff, 1987). This is prefigured in Freud’s (1921) *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* where, in positing a ‘group psyche,’ he explores the phenomenon of scapegoating. The family, being a special case of a group, can be said to manifest a ‘family psyche.’ Winnicott understood that one member, often but not always a child, can contain anxieties – neurotic or psychotic – for
the whole. However, interest appears to be growing in the idea that children can be the unwitting receptacles not only of the pathology of parents and siblings, but also that of grandparents and ancestors as well, in what is called “the trans-generational transmission of psychopathology” (Volkan et al., 2002; Faimberg, 2005; Davoine, 2007).

Winnicott expressed no interest in a three-generational perspective, neither with child nor adult patients. For example, interviews with his former analysands, Marion Milner and Enid Balint revealed that he had explored material about their parents, but not grandparents (Luepnitz, 1990, 1992). Unlike Klein, Winnicott was a strong believer in taking a child’s developmental history, and there are clues scattered throughout the text of The Piggle that point to the parents’ unconscious contribution to the child’s problem.

For example, the mother, in her first letter to Winnicott, acknowledges the relevance of family dynamics when she writes of the Piggle: “She had a little sister when she was 21 months old which I considered far too early for her. And both this (and I would think also our) anxiety about it seemed to bring about a great change in her” (p. 6). Winnicott states in a footnote on that page: “I did not know until much later that the mother herself had experienced the birth of a sibling at this very age” (p. 6).

In a letter sent after the first consultation, the mother writes:

I think that you were right that we had been too ‘clever’ about understanding her distress. We felt very involved and guilty about not having arranged to not have a baby again so soon and, somehow, her nightly desperate pleading, ‘Tell me about the babacar’ – made us feel under pressure to say something meaningful.

(p. 20).

After the third consultation, the mother writes to Winnicott saying they, the parents, feel the child is regressing, and may need a full analysis.

Winnicott is still not convinced, and in fact, after the 6th consultation, remarks to the reader: “... I did feel that these parents had some special reason for not relying on the developmental process, which in this child might see her through apart from the provision of treatment” (p. 86).

By age 4, Gabrielle, to everyone’s relief, seems to have resumed developmental strides. The mother writes to Winnicott after the 12th consultation:

I would like to tell you – though you may know this – how much writing to you has helped me; somehow to give form to my perplexities and fears, with the knowledge that they would be received with great understanding; and the feeling of being in relation with you. I am sure all of this helped me to work through our anxieties about Gabrielle and again to find our right relationship with her.

(p. 161).

Many therapists who find Winnicott immensely useful nonetheless have felt the need to look beyond his two-generational framework. Some arrive at a multi-generational perspective via the work of family therapists such as Murray Bowen (1978) and Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1976) who speak...
of “family legacies” and “unfinished business” – although their understanding of the unconscious is never clear. Others would point out that Freud himself often alluded to grandparents, and that he would have assumed that his readers knew the full story of Oedipus, whose father, Laius, son of Labdacus, had already put the tragedy in motion when he abducted a young boy. Still others would point to the work of Jacques Lacan, in particular his seminars on the transference (Lacan, 1991) and on the ethics of psychoanalysis (Lacan, 1992) in which he introduces the term: family 

*άσγ* – a Greek word probably best translated as the family *madness* or *curse*. The analyst may use the preliminary sessions – before the patient lies down on the couch – to ask about two or more generations of family history.

A small but growing number of analysts are attempting to bring Lacan’s work into provocative contact with that of Winnicott (Ireland, 2003; Kirshner, 2011; Luepnitz, 2009, 2017; Bernstein, 2011; Vanier and Vanier, 2010). These authors vary greatly in their method and purpose for working with both Winnicott and Lacan. Some explore the comparisons and contrasts between them for heuristic reasons only, discouraging any attempt to borrow from both in clinical practice. Others see the two theories as supplementary or even complementary. Ireland (2003) describes her own work as a “Squiggle game” between these two great traditions. Not all are likely to accept the author’s term “New Middle Group” to designate those who work with Lacan and Winnicott in any way. (Luepnitz, 2017).

**How the Piggle came to disclose her identity to the author**

In the spring of 2015, I wrote to a therapist in London, commending her on an excellent paper about working in a psychoanalytic way with homeless and other socially excluded adults. I told her about IFA (Insight For All), my group of analysts who work with the homeless and formerly homeless in Philadelphia (Luepnitz, 2015). She then read my papers, including: ‘Thinking in the Space between Winnicott and Lacan’ (Luepnitz, 2009). That article contained the description of a patient who had been named for a Holocaust victim, but whose family couldn’t bear to call her by that name. The issues of naming, and of exploring three, not just two generations, were key to that patient’s recovery from lifelong depression.

In a letter dated July 11, 2015, the London therapist in question wrote to tell me she appreciated what she called the paper’s “Winnicott/Lacan dialogue”, and elaborated:

I hope you don’t mind if I add a small personal association to your discussion of the ‘given name’ and the neglect of history in the Middle Group tradition. I was a child patient of Winnicott’s nicknamed ‘the Piggle.’ My mother’s family were refugees – German-speaking Czechs. My mother’s background would have been evident to Winnicott because she maintained a very strong ‘foreign’ accent, while also expressing herself beautifully in English. Despite British reserve, people often asked her (or her children) where she was from. As you say, it seems that Winnicott restrained his curiosity in these matters. I was the first post-Holocaust child of my generation. ‘Gabrielle’ is my second name. Esther – my first name – holds the
family’s Jewish history and trauma. As you describe: “They had dutifully given her the name ‘Alvareth’ but they couldn’t say it.” Reading this theme in your paper has crystallized many thoughts that I’ve had over time about The Piggle text, my family, etc.

We proceeded to correspond throughout the year, and arranged to meet during my next trip to London. She had already told me that she didn’t remember the treatment, but emphasized: “...I have rather longed for a time when there could be robust but sympathetic contemporary discussion about some of the issues The Piggle raises (letter, 9/16/15). She later added: “... my family were troubled and sought solution by sending one child for treatment – and that didn’t resolve all the trouble!” (letter, 1/11/16). My goal was to find out what she would like future readers to know.

**Family history, mother’s side**

By way of introducing her mother, who died in 2010, Gabrielle sent me the eulogy she herself had delivered. Following are some excerpts:

It is impossible to sum my mother up, but we hope that she will emerge in the things we have chosen to remember her with today …

Friedl was born in the Czech Republic – on her birth certificate she is Bedriska – the Czech for Frederika – called Friedl. These early days were happy times – by the age of 4, she was a champion skier. At the age of 11, she was sent to school in England – from 1933, crossed Europe every term accompanied only by her younger brother Gerry. At her English girls’ school, she was amused to be told off for crossing the road to the playing fields when she had just crossed terrifying Europe, changing trains in Germany. In 1940 she traveled alone to Paris and brought her brother Tom, who was 10 years younger to England. They came in on a fake passport in which he was marked as her son. The Nazis murdered the majority of the Jews in Central Europe including her grandmother Margarthe and her aunt Gerta Esther, whom she much admired. When we celebrate the time we have had with her and those of her generation, we must bear their survival in mind.

... [D]uring the war she volunteered in London shelters for bombed out families. She was also a fire watcher for the London skyline, recounting the experience of walking knee-deep in tea when warehouses on the docks were bombed. At that time she read Philosophy at the LSE which had been evacuated to Cambridge.

She moved from London to Oxford when she married a friend of her brother, Tom’s. I understand that [this man, my father] was the first fellow of All Soul’s college (founded 1438) ever to get married ... .

In London, she trained as a child psychotherapist at the Tavistock clinic. She always loved her work ... She’d been supervised by the great Melanie Klein ... Within the psychoanalytic community, riven with splits and infighting, she was remarkably unpartisan. She engaged Donald Winnicott, an Independent, to work with her troubled toddler (Gabrielle) and the correspondence she had with him forms part of the published account of the case called “The Piggle.” This work with Winnicott was very important to her in the last months of her life ... Winnicott
said: “Let me be alive when I die.” She quoted this often and intensely alive is how she’ll always seem to me, both in body, mind and spirit …

**Meeting Gabrielle**

Gabrielle is a slender woman in her early 50s with thick, silvery hair and dark, expressive eyes. She has a clear, resonant voice, a warm, generous laugh, and an unassuming air of self-confidence. After a dinner during which we talked about our work with the homeless, we met on two subsequent days at her home in south London which she shares with her partner of 20 years, an architect.

I asked when she read *The Piggle* for the first time.

*Gabrielle:* I was in my 20s … I can remember feeling profoundly disconnected from it! Not really recognizing myself.

*Author:* It’s about some little girl, but not about you?

*G:* Yes.

*A:* Do you have even a glimmer of a memory of it?

*G:* That’s a good way of putting it: a glimmer of a memory. I remember shoes … and shelves.

In the course of the interview, she acknowledged remembering one important moment of the work, discussed later.

Before training as a psychotherapist, Gabrielle was a social worker, and unlike others in her cohort who rejected psychoanalytic thinking, she was drawn to it. She continues to use Winnicott’s ideas in her own clinical work and by no means discounts the notion of ‘on demand’ treatment, particularly with the incarcerated and homeless men and women to whom she has devoted much of her professional life. “My work at the [housing charity] left me feeling that turning up for every session is an over-rated sign of ego strength, probably on the part of both participants!” (letter 8/15/16).

She worries a bit that Winnicott’s work will be forgotten by the next generation, and was pleased to know that he remains extremely popular in the United States. American students admire the Winnicott who sits cross-legged with the Piggle and pouts, much to her delight: “I want to be the only baby! … Shall I be cross?” (p. 29). However, those same young therapists are often put off by his Kleinian interpretations, and wonder how children can make use of them. For example, in the 12th consultation, when she greedily takes the stuffing out of a dog, Winnicott interprets as follows:

> When you love me it makes you want to eat my wee-pee.

(p. 156)
I asked Gabrielle if she had a sense that these “commotional” interpretations, as Reeves (2015a) calls them, made it difficult for her to connect with the case on first reading.

G: No, I have no sense of that at all … I already had a strong view that children think a lot about sex and experience sex. So it seemed completely natural for him to be talking about those things. I mean ‘sex’ in the broader sense of: Who am I? and To whom do I belong? as well as: Who is going to eat me, and whom will I eat?

Gabrielle made it clear in an early letter that she had kept her identity as Winnicott’s patient almost completely confidential. She said that being the Piggle had made her the subject of some “reverential attention” over the years on the part of the few who knew. However, she said that it had also caused a certain amount of embarrassment, as many of her fellow students felt that Winnicott’s patriarchal attitudes, and his looking the other way with regard to Masud Khan’s misconduct (Hopkins, 2006) made it unseemly to have been this man’s patient at any time. She raised another source of discomfort with the case – one I did not anticipate.

G: The bit that felt increasingly uncomfortable is something no one has picked up, i.e. that there is a massively racist discourse going on. I don’t think I meant ‘black’ as a racial term, but I [as the Piggle] do associate it with everything bad and frightening.

Her parents tell Winnicott that the Piggle is afraid not only of the black mummy, but also of becoming black herself and of black people.

For young children, the absent object is by definition the bad/persecutory object, and a dark room turns presence into absence. Gabrielle agreed that ‘bad’ and ‘black’ can become linked at the level of the psyche, but as a young social worker, it was nonetheless a source of discomfort.

G: The memory I do have about reading the text in my 20s is worrying about whether I had got the bad meaning of ‘black’ from the racist discourse on race in the UK in the 1960s. I remember then telling myself: It’s OK; it’s the Queen of the Night from The Magic Flute who is a frightening character. And we listened to it a lot when I was little!

Another important cultural factor is that Jews were not considered to be white, and were often coded as black in Nazi propaganda, as Gilman (1993) demonstrates. All of these associations with racial darkness are belied by the photograph on the cover of the Penguin edition of The Piggle with which most readers are familiar. One sees a smartly dressed child with a milky complexion and sad blue eyes the size of ten pence. Gabrielle agreed, and has no idea who that child is, nor how the photo was chosen.

I asked if she had any other associations to the made-up word ‘babacar.’

G: Yes. The Baba-Yaga. I think it means ‘witch.’ And I would have known about the Baba-Yaga at that age – a witch in Russian.
The Baba Yaga is central to Slavic folklore. Although she can be both helpful and thwarting, she rides in a mortar and wields a pestle, suggesting the phallic mother. This chimes with the Piggle telling her mother, after the 10th consultation, that she imagines mum to have “a long wee.” When asked where mother would have gotten her long wee, she replies: “from the Daddy.” And where did he get it? “From his students,” answers the Piggle (p. 133). That passage led Lacanian analyst, Eric Laurent (1981) to remark that this perceptive child seems to intuit the difference between penis and phallus – the latter being not a biological given, but a signifier that can circulate.

Gabrielle stated that she had suffered over the years from – in her own estimation – not fulfilling the potential suggested by the deeply sensitive and precocious child depicted in the text. The real Gabrielle ended up having learning difficulties in elementary school, particularly around reading. That would, of course, be an apt way of differentiating oneself from two spectacularly learned parents. In any case, it’s possible that she felt like a child star who can scarcely live up to adult expectations. This, despite exceptional success on all fronts.

Our interview focused on the family’s history – the topic she had introduced in her initial letter. I asked how they were able to flee Eastern Europe. (Note her use of the present tense, below.)

G: Two things are helpful. My mother’s father is prescient – and they think him mad. He said ‘We must leave.’ Also, they were very wealthy. It’s an uncomfortable fact, because 90% of Czech Jews were killed. However, due to the wool trade, they had connections, and maybe bank accounts here, which was another rule . . . . This is sketchy in my account because it was not talked about. If they did, it was to persuade us that the Nazis were bad, and that the Brits hadn’t always been as sympathetic as they portrayed themselves as being.

A: There is a saying that Jewish children are born with tears for the Holocaust. Some families talk about it every day, and others rarely do.

G: It wasn’t a taboo. We did talk about it . . . [In] the early 1930s . . . the cousins from Brno were moving into a new house. They lived there 5 years only before they had to flee. No one believed that Hitler’s rise to power would affect their section of society.

A: Did you say at some point the family moved to France?

G: Yes, but very late – in 1940 – they had to leave in a hurry because Hitler is coming. My grandfather has a stroke and comes to England, with my grandmother. My mother had to use a passport that someone made saying her brother, Tom, was her son on this ship, which is also carrying English soldiers from the front. When she gets to England – this is always told humorously – she doesn’t know what to do with him, so she takes him to her [girls’ boarding] school, and everyone fusses over him, and he has a nice time.

A: She was 18 and he, 8. Did she tell that story with a sense of terrible danger?
A: OK – now they are safe in England. And your grandparents came too, because you wrote to me about how their giant poodles were able to come to Scotland. One was called ‘Bonny’ – not ‘Bunny’ as the dog is called in The Piggle.

We had discussed that mistake by mail, agreeing that no self-respecting dog would answer to ‘Bunny!’

A: The Piggle has a dream of all four grandparents in a swimming pool together. Do you remember?

G: Oh yes! My grandmother had a holiday home in France and we would have gone there – but the other grandparents would not have gone there, and my maternal grandfather died before I was born.

A: What else do you know about your great-grandmother Margarethe and your great-Aunt Gerta-Esther? Do you know what year they died at Auschwitz?

G: I don’t know. That’s quite important, isn’t it? I don’t know.

A: Have you ever been to Auschwitz?

G: No, I really couldn’t, but my sister has ... The knowledge I would have had at the time of The Piggle is that my grandmother Alice had a brother who was interned in France and survives and married a Hungarian woman who also survived.

A: Have you considered yourself always as the child of survivors?

G: No. Only since I’ve got older. Just that I’ve always known my story is a bit different from others.

A: You said you grew up feeling like a foreigner.

G: Yes, well my Mum kept her accent, and we had foreign ways and also eccentric ways. I was scruffy at school and my white shirts would go in the wash with something pink and come out pink.

This struck the author as yet another worry about whiteness.

Father’s history

Gabrielle’s father was born in Dublin, and he was sent to boarding school in England at the age of 11.

G: His parents were Dublin Protestants; my mother described them as ‘Anglo-English.’ One of the commonalities between my parents was that both knew a country they had lost. My paternal grandfather had worked as an engineer on the big Cape-town to Cairo railway project and lived in the Sudan when it was still an English colony. Obviously, at the time of the revolution, the foreign workers were pulled
out, during my father’s childhood. They came back to a grim and difficult life in Dublin after a privileged colonial life in Africa.

A: Was his father away for long periods of time?

G: He was, and his mother for less protracted periods, and he was cared for by an aunt. He was an only child due to a number of miscarriages, and those separations.

A: Did he talk about his childhood?

G: A bit. My paternal grandparents were extremely formal and rather embarrassed by us as children, especially our compulsive nakedness . . . My father, I suspect, walked away from Ireland and his family early on. He lost his Irish accent. Those days, there were signs that said: “No dogs, Blacks or Irish.”

A: How did they feel about your Mom?

G: I had a feeling they disapproved of her. I remember things used to go wrong . . . Once when they arrived, my mother made a custard with salt instead of sugar . . . It’s important to know that my mother described herself as totally undomesticated. The house was not clean, the children were covered in mud. Very different from the anal Protestants who cared about decorum!

Gabrielle had shown me a photograph of her mother’s father on his 60th birthday, doing a full handstand, with the family cheering him on.

A: Did you say your Dad, like your grandfather, was playful and affectionate with the two of you?

G: Yes!

A: Just as one would imagine from Winnicott’s saying in The Piggle that he was impressed at how your father let you climb all over him . . .

A: When did they marry?

G: I think 1958 and on their honeymoon there was a motor accident in France and my father breaks his back, but low down, fortunately. He was driving. He was in plaster for 6 months.

A: Well, I guess that’s one way of commenting on the fact that you are breaking a 500-year tradition of celibacy!

This was a bit of wild analysis on my part, and Gabrielle remarked that one should not assume that celibacy was the norm, simply because marriage was not.

A: Did your parents tell the story of falling in love?

G: My father was the friend of my mother’s brother, Tom. Tom went off to play rugby and asked mother to look after his shy friend and mother was furious because she wanted to read. She said: ‘He can come with me on a walk, but I’m going to read my
book.’ That’s how they started! It was the mid 50s. My mother was in her 30s, and he was 12 years younger, and immature for that. He went to a boys’ boarding school and men’s college and I don’t know if he’d ever met a woman!

A: What attracted them, do you imagine?

G: She was fascinated with his mind. He was learned and so was she. I think he was drawn to her large central European family, very cultured, very at ease.

Another thing Gabrielle mentioned along with the fact that her mother spoke English with an accent is that her father had a rather significant stammer, a point not mentioned in the text.

Even in the 21st century, a marriage between a woman and a man 12 years her junior is unusual; in the 1950s, it was all but unheard of. Gabrielle noted that her mother, although beautiful, was nearly twice the age of her classmates’ mothers. Also, when her parents would meet her at school, they would hug her, whereas other parents – the true English – were very reserved, even around their own children. I commented that while Winnicott is well known for his concept of the good enough mother, he never used the term good enough father. However, some students suggest that he offered up an example in The Piggle. Both parents attend the first session, and in fact it is the father who accompanies the Piggle on subsequent visits. As one who practiced family therapy for many years, this author knows how difficult it can be to convince fathers that therapy is valuable and their own participation, important. Gabrielle’s father also communicated with Winnicott between sessions in letters and phone calls which reveal him to be a fully involved parent, deeply concerned about his child’s night terrors and daytime fears. Gabrielle said that he was often writing in the sitting room, where she and her sister would play and try to snare bits of chocolate. She said she felt loved by both mother and father, and for all their eccentricities and flaws, has no major grievances about their parenting.

I pressed her on the issue of possible neglect or harm because of an article published in 1993 subtitled: ‘The Piggle: A Sexually Abused Girl?’ which argues that Winnicott was simply oblivious to what a poor, abused toddler was trying to tell him (Teurnell, 1993). The author contends that the Piggle’s symptoms are out of proportion with the birth of a new sibling. She is telling Winnicott, after all, that her body is being invaded, and in her play, begins pushing sticks through openings, and complains to her mother that her “wee” hurts. The Piggle also complains that Dr. Winnicott does not understand her, and even says: “I ought to make myself dead . . .” (p. 107). Teurnell comments that a victimized child not reporting an assault – even to a sympathetic adult – is commonplace.

I know that sexual abuse has an explosive effect upon children – mentally and bodily. As a consequence, they develop primitive defenses and functioning: confusion, loss of reality testing, de-personalization in connection with an extremely strong denial . . . The assault is not expressed in words . . . It is as if it had not happened.

(Teurnell, 1993, p. 140)
Teurnell goes on to invoke Fairbairn who observed that a child, in order to protect a good object, will identify with the bad one. She argues that the Piggle is doing just that by calling herself bad and ‘black’ and scratching her own face. As to why the treatment seems to solve the psychotic-like terrors, Teurnell writes that “… the treatment could have had a catharsis effect and that Gabrielle’s more or less indirect way of telling about the trauma gave her reality back” (1993, p. 144). The author’s tone is one of concern for the child, and indignation that Winnicott, “due to his countertransference,” could not hear this toddler saying that her body was the target of actual assault.

A response to Teurnell is offered in the same issue of the journal by Jemstadt (1993) who criticizes her account as “judicial and closed” and argues that, having reached a conclusion, she simply leaves out material that doesn’t fit her case. Teurnell identifies the father as the probable abuser of the child, and Jemstadt remarks that the father must also be then “a cunning traitor, bringing Gabrielle to the sessions, writing letters to Winnicott during the treatment, and writing an afterword to the book” (p. 148).

During our correspondence in 2015, Gabrielle wrote: “I am relieved that you mention Lena Teurnell’s paper, as I think it made ‘The Piggle’ a rather embarrassing subject for subsequent potential writers . . . . I really don’t think Teurnell’s speculation about abuse was correct; I think I would have some memory or sense of it. Which is not to say that I wasn’t a very Oedipal child, devoted to my father, so probably at pains to give the impression that we were man and wife, etc, but that is different! . . . I heard about the paper during a seminar on child protection when I was a social worker – referred to as proof of the collusion of psychoanalysis (in general) with abusive power dynamics (in particular, child abuse). There was no love lost between the disciplines in those days!”

In London, we resumed discussion of that article.

G: Yes. It felt very unfortunate. I had the feeling people saw it and just wanted to keep away from the whole Piggle thing. . . . Chris Reeves said people just didn’t know what to do about it, and stopped looking at the text. . . .

A: Are you saying that Reeves [who does not cite Teurnell in his own work] claimed people stopped reading The Piggle after they read her?

G: Or stopped writing about it. It became an embarrassing thing to engage with.

A: Ah – so she really had an impact!

G: Yes. She had a silencing impact. It may have not been her intention at all.

Winnicott, who is said to have seen thousands of children over a long career, never once mentions a case of actual or even suspected abuse. Some research suggests that roughly 20% of all female children have a sexual encounter with an adult male before puberty (Herman, 1981). Although Winnicott didn’t know these statistics, he must have seen many children who had been abused by family members or others. While Klein viewed the
domain of psychoanalysis as almost completely intra-psychic, Winnicott believed that what actual parents do has an impact. Gabrielle agreed this was the case, but nonetheless emphasized that a preoccupation with trauma became common only after his death. However, even in Freud there is more attention to abuse. In *Studies in Hysteria*, he describes “Katharina,” as seduced by an uncle – who turns out to be the patient’s father (Breuer and Freud, 1895). Much later, in the case of *The Wolfman*, he offers another key example of molestation – having admitted earlier to never giving up completely on his trauma theory. In short, criticizing the lack of attention to trauma on the part of the Middle Group is not unwarranted. Nonetheless, the present author agrees with Gabrielle and with Jemstadt (1993) that raising questions, rather than drawing conclusions, would have been more productive.

For people who see sexual trauma everywhere, nothing confirms the suspicion of abuse more readily than the statement: ‘I was not abused.’ For doctrinaire believers, ‘No’ means ‘Yes.’ Of course, denial is an enormous problem as a defense against overstimulating experience. On the other hand, no human being can prove the statement: ‘I was not sexually abused.’ Thus, it’s not impossible that Gabrielle was molested as a child, not necessarily by a family member, or even an adult. However, as a clinician with 35 years’ experience, I can say that she didn’t remind me of the women I have treated who were abused as children, as she had no experience with cutting, eating disorders, sexual dysfunction, substance abuse or suicidality. As a psychotherapist herself, she had plenty of analysis during which these issues would have been likely to surface.

People who are able to persevere, despite having been raped or seduced are called ‘survivors,’ the very term used for those who lived through the Holocaust. William Niederland, who coined the term “survivor syndrome” listed among its primary manifestations the following: fears of renewed persecution, sleep disorders, actual or apparent psychosis and altered personal identity (in Volkan et al., 2002, p. 12). I would like to suggest that Teurnell was picking up on something very real. The Piggle’s family was steeped in trauma – including the imprisonment and murder of the woman for whom the child was named.

**The Piggle’s names**

Lacan’s (2006) perspective is helpful again here: “And the subject, while he may appear to be the slave of language, is still more the slave of a discourse in the universal movement of which his place is already inscribed at his birth, if only in the form of his proper name” (p. 414). Many patients are surprised by the insights gained through exploration of both given and surnames. (To protect her privacy, discussion of the family name is not included here).

*A: Your parents named you ‘Esther,’ for a relative who died at Auschwitz, but they couldn’t say it. ... Any idea how they chose ‘Gabrielle’?
G: Yes. I was named after Gabrielle D’Estrée – the mistress of Henri Quatre of France. There is a risqué painting in the Louvre of one woman holding the other woman’s nipple with a baby being bathed in the background. My Mom loved Henri IV.

A: ‘Paris vaut bien une messe!’

G: That’s right!

A: Do you know who she was?

G: Mother greatly admired Henri Quatre. I don’t know anything about his mistress.

Henri IV was involved in France’s bloody religious wars of Protestants against Catholics, until his assassination in 1610. His beloved mistress, a highly intelligent woman named Gabrielle D’Estrée, is credited with convincing him to convert to Catholicism and promote religious tolerance. She is said to have accompanied him, even while pregnant, to the battlefield. When she died in childbirth at age 26, he gave her a Queen’s funeral. It is of some interest that the Piggle’s mother – forced, as a Jew, to flee to a predominantly Christian country – named her firstborn after a famous and famously Catholic woman. At first glance, it’s a choice that seems to erase any trace of Jewishness.

A: They... couldn’t bear to call you, ‘Esther,’ but it does seem intriguing that you are named for Gabrielle D’Estrée.

It seems plausible that Estrée is the return of the repressed ‘Esther.’ Esther is also the name of the biblical queen who had to hide her Jewishness from her husband, the Persian king. Gabrielle seemed intrigued by this connection, and revealed that at age 8, she decided to be called ‘Esther’ at school. Apparently, she continued to be called ‘Gabrielle’ at home. I asked later, in a letter, when and why she had reverted to calling herself ‘Gabrielle’ as an adult. She replied:

I reverted to being Gabrielle both at home and at school when I went to university at 18. One big disadvantage of ‘Esther’ was reading Dickens’ Bleak House for A-level exams... The main protagonist of that vast novel is called Esther [Summer-son] who is an especially insipid and saintly character, even for that great national treasure of misogyny... Going to university meant joining a college which had been men-only until the previous year (there were 18 girls, 250 boys when I joined). I think I felt I needed to have my entire identity – home and school/ feminine and feminist – and all my wits about me!

(letter, July 7, 2016)

And what about the name by which she is known to psychoanalysts around the world? According to the Oxford English Dictionary, ‘piggle’ is an old spelling of ‘pickle.’ ‘To be in a piggle/ pickle’ is to be stuck in a bad
situation. Gabrielle herself told me she thought it might have reflected the attempt of a toddler to say ‘Gabrielle.’ She imagined it was that, conflated with the nickname of her father.

G: He was ‘Piggy-Dog.’

A: Your Dad?

G: Yes.

He apparently enjoyed drawing cartoons for the children, and she was pleased to share a favorite during the interview. As a child, she had helped bake him a dessert, and he wrote: ‘Thank you for the lovely cake’ with a charming drawing of himself as a very fat pig eating, in great bites, the whole thing.

Gabrielle refers to herself during the treatment as “Pigga” several times, making their nicknames similar.

It is dismaying that Winnicott used her actual name, Gabrielle, in the published text.

G: I don’t know why he wouldn’t disguise it. It doesn’t make much sense to have kept it.

Before we met, Gabrielle had made available to me roughly 100 unpublished letters and drawings. Among them is a letter dated March 17, 1967, in which Winnicott explains to the parents his reasons for not disguising her name.

On Wednesday evening I talked about ‘the case’ at the British Psychoanalytical Society meeting . . . One thing I realised was that when we come to publishing this material we will have to use other names . . . I could not bring myself to alter the names Piggle and Gabrielle and I said this out loud. It is surprising how one alters one’s feelings about a child if one alters the names. I am of course devoted to Gabrielle in a funny sort of way and how could I help it since she gave so much of herself to me in those treatment sessions! It was a very rich experience for me and I lose something very important if I change Gabrielle’s name.

Every therapist who has written about patients knows how difficult it is to disguise anything about them. Each name and nickname, every freckle, cowlick and lisp keep the person real to us. On the other hand, professional standards require that we use pseudonyms for the people in our care. It should be pointed out, moreover, that, seeing as the book was published 6 years after Winnicott’s death, his widow and the Piggle’s mother clearly declined the available option of disguising her name, at least at that point. Were they all being reckless in this matter?

G: When I read your work, it made me say in my mind to Winnicott: ‘Yes, you kept my name because you get attached to names, but you don’t do anything with it. If it’s very important to the work that’s been done together, then keep it. But just to keep it, sentimentally?’
It does seem to be the worst of both worlds. On the other hand, most readers would surely assume that whatever the Piggle’s real name was, it certainly was not ‘Gabrielle.’ Some might argue that hiding her name in plain view – as in Poe’s *The Purloined Letter* – made it the ideal disguise.

Before our meeting in person, I asked Gabrielle about the 10th consultation in which the Piggle, while busy playing, declares: “I am Deborah Gabrielle.” I wrote to ask if ‘Deborah’ were another one of her actual names, or if it was a disguise for ‘Esther.’ She replied: “‘Deborah’ is indeed a pseudonym for Esther, and I have no idea how it would have been chosen.”

This seems peculiar indeed, given that ‘Gabrielle’ was not disguised, while the name ‘Esther’ – which the family never called her – was. In person, we discussed the fact that the family not only couldn’t say the name of the victim who perished at Auschwitz; they couldn’t even write it.

One factor may clarify this odd choice. The period during which Gabrielle was being called ‘Esther’ at school, corresponds with the publication of *The Piggle*. There was, thus, some practical reason – in addition to unconscious ones – for disguising ‘Esther.’

Before leaving the issue of names, it is important to highlight one transference-related signifier. Masud Khan apparently felt the Piggle’s transference to her analyst was not very intense (Reeves, 2015a). Other readers, in contrast, are struck by how early on the Piggle seemed to get down to work, and eventually to express a full range of transference emotions, from love and envy to cathartic hate. How can we understand what is framed as her own initial ‘demand’ to see him? Clearly, she is troubled by an immense feeling of loss, following the birth of ‘Susan.’ In the first consultation, she tries to break this down for her therapist. “I was a baby. I was in a cot. I was asleep” (p. 10).

And suddenly there was a new baby who took over the family – with her own cot! There has been a loss that gets focused on the cot. Mother has proposed seeing someone who can help with this loss. Children know from playing games that one can either lose or win. Perhaps the signifier helped foster the transference because, having lost her cot, she could go to Win-a-cot.

On hearing this suggestion, the grown-up-Piggle replied with a very enthusiastic: “I like that!”

**Listening to Winnicott**

Gabrielle had never, as an adult, heard Donald Winnicott’s voice. I offered to play a CD of his BBC lecture from 1949, titled: ‘The World in Small Doses.’

Although she was delighted to hear him, and her face lit up as she listened, the voice was not familiar. She responded with characteristic humor.

\[G: \text{I see what people mean by saying his voice was high-pitched. It’s slightly nasal.}\]
\[\text{He sounds like the Queen.}\]

\[A: \text{Some say he sounded feminine.}\]
‘Camp,’ I would say.

A: Do you mean gay?

G: ... A certain kind of gay. Quentin Crisp ... .

VOICE OF WINNICOTT: When a child of 2 or 3 says: ‘I want to fly like a bird,’ we don’t say: ‘Children don’t fly!’ We pick them up, and swing them around ... .

A: What are you thinking?

G: He has an upper class voice, but not upper-upper; it’s conversational. I thought he might be more formal.

A: But he is speaking to mothers.

G: Doesn’t matter. If you think of the broadcasts during the war: they were patronizing. This has a degree of intimacy. It’s not [Here she imitates the tone of a drill sergeant]: ‘THE BABY WILL NEED TO BE HELD ABOVE YOUR HEAD TO HAVE THE ILLUSION HE CAN FLY!’

[Much laughter.]

WINNICOTT’s VOICE: ‘The mother succeeds not because she is clever – like the philosophers – but because of the devotion she feels for her own baby.’

G: [laughs hard] Oh the yawning sexism! It immediately makes me think: What about my mother who studied philosophy and became a mother! ... I guess nowadays he’d be less sexist.

Winnicott was telling women to relax and trust their instincts.

G: Yes, so it’s not surprising he would imagine ‘treatment on demand.’ ‘Feeding on demand’ was a big debate when I was born, and now it’s gone the other way. Now they say: Babies need schedules so you can get them into a crèche.

Winnicott maintained a Rousseauian trust in ‘nature’ – a concept each culture defines according to its needs.

G: And the politics get completely erased, don’t they? ‘TODAY WHAT IS NATURAL IS ...’

[More laughter.]

Not only her mother, but also her grandmother had intellectual ambitions.

G: Alice started an architecture degree, and apparently, the story is that my grandfather who was 20 years older and just getting to know her, forbade her and said it was not suitable for a woman, which was always told to me with great amusement rather than outrage.

D: Your mother felt no outrage about that?
Gabrielle’s said sibling rivalry was expressed not in fearfulness, as the Piggle’s was, but in exceptional ‘naughtiness.’ For this, at age 6 or 7, she was sent for treatment to Anna Freud in Vienna for a consultation, while the family was still living in Czechoslovakia.

Gabrielle was thus the second generation of children in the family sent for analysis – and with another great name.

Having listened to the BBC broadcast both before and after the interview, this author would describe Winnicott’s voice as ‘respectful’ and ‘engaging’ but not ‘intimate.’ Of course, only one of us had had the experience of sitting on the floor and playing with him. It seems possible that Gabrielle’s hearing intimacy in his recorded voice was based in memory.

**More reflections on the treatment**

All of the commentaries on *The Piggle* acknowledge that the treatment had a salutary effect on a potentially very disturbed little girl (e.g. Teurnell, 1993; Charles, 1999; Kahr, 2015; Reeves, 2015a, 2015b; Bürgin, 2016).

It seemed important to ask Gabrielle in person about her present-day feelings for Winnicott and about their work together.

*A*: Do you have any warm feelings for Winnicott?

**G**: Yes, I think so. That’s a good question. I’ve spent some time wondering what the encounter has to do with me . . . . I grew up thinking there was nothing wrong with me, but when I’ve gone back to the text, I feel I must have been very troubled.

Most troubling was her preoccupation with death – that of her parents (p. 87) and of herself as well. On this question, Gabrielle asked my opinion.

**G**: Why do you think a child says: ‘I ought to make myself dead’?

Such a comment can be an expression of oedipal guilt, of course. However, those who have treated depressed and suicidal children may have noted that the younger the patient, the more likely it is that he or she is expressing the death-wish of one of the adults.

*A*: We know from the text that the Piggle quoted mom saying: “Life is difficult” (p. 52). I don’t know if you picked up that she was either depressed herself or at least terribly burdened.
G: Well, what you’re saying refers back to Esther. We should have been dead! The intention was to kill the family – to kill all the Jews, and it was almost completely successful ... You could get pulled off a train and shot.

Reeves (2015a, 2015b) does not refer to the family’s history, but he does mention that Winnicott ignores the child’s stated fear of trains. In fact, Winnicott actually admits to drowsiness and making only ‘vague’ notes while the Piggle is talking about trains! (p. 115).

Whatever made Gabrielle fall ill, she was herself again by age 5, and despite the learning difficulties mentioned above, and the normal setbacks of everyday life, has thrived since in love, work, and play.

A: Do you have a sense that those 16 sessions saved you?

G: [laughs]. It sounds a bit ungrateful but no, I don’t! ... It was perhaps owned more by my mother than by me.

A: Do you believe that she believed it saved you?

G: Yes! I do – yes!

There is another aspect of The Piggle that moved her.

G: What did strike me – maybe not at first but later – was not Winnicott having deep conversations with a child, but a mother having deep conversations. For example: “Do you love me?”

The discussion in question is about “liking” rather than “loving,” but it shows the mother listening carefully, responding playfully (pp. 49–50).

I asked Gabrielle to talk about the one session she remembers:

A: Do you remember saying good-bye to Winnicott?

G: No. I remember killing him with the rolling pin. I felt quite guilty – the fantasy of killing him. I knew he had been unwell and that I was making him play very hard. I felt something around the sadism involved in that.

Later, with regard to having forgotten so much, she said:

G: You are picking up that I am quite well defended and dissociated.

A: Yes, but you welled up when you spoke of Winnicott’s actual death.

G: Yes, you noticed; there was something there.

A: What exactly are you feeling right now?

G: Very sad. You know, we’ve talked about people leaving and people dying, but this really is the bit that feels sad [she tears up again]. You and I have recently lost our mothers, and I’m in touch with that. I think Winnicott and my mother are very
connected as well … Perhaps it’s something about how much the therapy of one member, one little member of a family, was supposed to sort everything out.

\( A: \) And in her view, it did … Your mother believed Winnicott saved you – and then he was gone.

To add to the sense of loss: her parents separated shortly after Winnicott’s death in 1971, and eventually divorced.

“Tell me all about the babacar”: What the transgenerational adds to a reading of The Piggle

The interpretation of the babacar as the mother’s insides seems cogent, but there is more to her ‘insides’ than the womb. The mother’s psyche is also a vital and mysterious and productive part of her interiority. Indeed, it has been said that the mother’s unconscious is the baby’s mind.

If all first-time mothers are anxious, surely a 40-year-old woman giving birth to her first child in a new country, separated from her roots, would experience a heavy mixture of joy, relief, and trepidation. In addition, the Piggle’s father who – for better and worse – had also left behind a country, culture, and religious tradition – was an only child, after many miscarriages. Winnicott (1986) argued elsewhere that “only” children have unconscious guilt over the subsequent babies their greedy fantasies have killed off, and actual miscarriages might augment this. In a letter to Winnicott, the father writes that the Piggle “seems to be suffering greatly from what was once called a ‘sense of sin’” (p. 36) which might be a projection of his own unconscious guilt over those bested ‘rivals’ and other things left behind.

The Piggle’s mother experienced violent jealousy of her younger brother, patently preferred as a boy. She hints at having re-experienced this when ‘Susan’, her younger daughter, was born. The Piggle may have triggered the mother’s own bad objects, experienced as persecutory and ‘black.’

This not terribly unusual set of family dynamics took place in the context of flight from actual persecution, where murderous fantasies became real on a scale the world had never before known. The parents’ anxieties about the identity of their firstborn, Jewish child became manifest in the naming and unnaming of her as Esther, Gabrielle (i.e. not-Esther), Estrée, and so on.

All of this serves to suggest what 2 and a half-year-old Gabrielle was carrying when she entered Winnicott’s consulting room. Despite her tender years, the Piggle – unencumbered by her mother’s heavily accented English or her father’s stammer – becomes the spokesperson for the family’s unspeakable pre-history. She begins separating out a mind of her own in the process of the treatment. Why could the parents themselves not have helped her individuate? In traditional thinking, it is the father – or another adult – who helps the mother and child separate. Lacan (2006) coined the evocative phrase: “le nom du père” – the father’s no or name – that fosters the necessary interruption of the child’s complete jouissance with the mother. The Piggle’s mother described her daughter as “clingy,” yet agrees to give her breast to this already weaned child—when she is nearly 4 years
Reading their conversations, it is hard not to hear them clinging to each other.

The mother is able to see Winnicott as the expert, the good father, the one who knows. Why was this figure so crucial? One possibility stems from the fact that her husband was 12 years her junior, and might have fallen fatefully into her own intrapsychic category of younger brother. He happened to be a friend of her younger brother, Tom – the one sent with a fake passport listing them as mother and son. The Piggle says out of the blue one night: “I don’t know who is Uncle Tom and who is Daddy” (p. 62). Perhaps this was confusion partagé.

It is possible that the only way to thank so salvific an analyst is to help immortalize him through writing. The unpublished letters show Gabrielle’s mother not merely cooperating with the preparation of the text, but acting as the driving force behind it.

According to Gabrielle, while her mother lay dying, the doctors announced there was no more medical intervention possible. Friedl asked: “I don’t suppose Dr. Winnicott is still alive”? It would seem that he became a counterpoint to the titanic evil figure she had fled, Adolf Hitler. However, Winnicott was also one who, while respecting individual fathers, was prone to mocking paternal/phallic protocol, as illustrated in the opening anecdote, where he sides with the child.

On the topic of history, some would argue that, although millions of children were (and are) the daughters and sons of political refugees, each infant psyche is unique. Many children had night terrors, but the babacar was hers alone. Bion (1967) aspired to listen to the patient “without memory or desire.” In defense of that position, I would add that all analysts – working with adults or children – risk distorting a patient’s truth by making too much sense of it. (The present author, accordingly, has chosen not to correct subtle contradictions – or fill in gaps – in the interview.)

Other clinicians believe that psychoanalytic treatment begins with history. Freud and most contemporary Freudians fall into this category. A good example comes from Ira Brenner’s Foreword to The Third Reich in the Unconscious. Brenner describes a patient who “repeatedly provoked and narrowly escaped entanglements with the law and was eventually jailed at the very age his father had been during his capture by the Gestapo . . . .I felt it imperative to help the analysand reconstruct in great detail his parent’s Holocaust experience as well as his own childhood fantasy life” (2002, p. xiii). Some who value Winnicott’s insight that: “There is no such thing as a baby” – only what he called “nursing couples” – contend that there are likewise no “nursing couples” outside of a social/temporal order (Eichenbaum and Orbach, 1983). Genealogical facts do not take the place of evenly hovering attention and analytic reverie. However, history – as rendered by the patient – becomes part of that reverie.

One aspect of intergenerational transmission that is difficult to teach is precisely how it occurs. How do parental anxieties become the child’s?

A glimpse into that process is offered by the matter of the mother’s singing. Winnicott comments to the reader:
There was a song that was associated with the Piggle’s babyhood, but when the parents sang this recently she cried bitterly and said: ‘Stop. Don’t sing this song.’ … The song she didn’t like was a German parting song and was evidently closely related to the mother’s intimate relationship with her baby.

(p. 13)

In a footnote, he quotes the mother saying: “For a long time she had tears in her eyes when someone hummed the tune. We have now given it new words . . . Sometimes she likes it now, sometimes she calls ‘Stop!’ when someone sings it” (p. 13 n).

Winnicott seems to imply that the Piggle – whose place has been usurped by the new baby – is finding unbearable a song she heard when she was the only one.

One wonders if anyone who had fled Eastern Europe in the 1930s, having given up her mother tongue, could sing this tune without communicating abject sorrow. It is arch, but irresistible to ask if, faced with a child with psychotic night terrors, singing a non-parting, non-German song wouldn’t have been the better choice, since a frightened parent can unconsciously coach a child’s fear. (The song, ‘Muss ich denn’ with the motif ‘Must I go?’ was played at her mother’s funeral.)

A signature characteristic of trauma is the inability to mourn, because survival becomes all. The task of grieving is often passed on to the next generation, and children become the designated mourners (sometimes called ‘memorial candles’). The very young have no ability to reject this function – although the more perceptive child may try to hand it back to the adults. (“Cry, Mummy . . . because of the babacar!” p. 18).

This is not to criticize the parents. One wonders what it might mean to cope perfectly with one’s Holocaust history. The point is simply that among the curative factors, Winnicott’s treating the split-off anxieties of the parents, stored in the child through projective identification, might rank higher than has been acknowledged. Furthermore, the unpublished letters show that Winnicott closed many of his letters to the family with: “love, DWW” or “Love to all 4.” Perhaps, in addition to the brilliant analytic play therapy, a positive outcome was fostered by 4 years of love letters to a family in pain.

It’s easy for contemporary readers to say: ‘Had this been my patient, I would have done analytic couple therapy, and let the 2-year-old play.’ According to Gabrielle, both adults had already had individual analysis (by someone other than Winnicott). Nonetheless, addressing psychotic anxiety directly, once they had become parents themselves, might have been literally unbearable.

It seemed relevant to ask whether Gabrielle’s second (i.e. adult) analyst hadn’t come to a similar conclusion. Apparently, the topic was not discussed. She did mention that she gave that analyst a copy of The Piggle, on saying good-bye – confirming the view of Winnicott and her parents that, despite her uncertain sense of relationship to it, she knows herself to be co-author of that captivating and vital text. Reeves (2015b) argues, moreover, that Gabrielle influenced Winnicott as much as he did her, noting that he
turns further away from interpretation, insisting in his final writings that psychotherapy is, above all, about therapist and patient playing together. (See also Anderson, 2014). Finally, with regard to names, it may be of interest that, despite having read the case many times, this author did not, until last year, react consciously to the fact that my first name and hers meet in the text: “I am Deborah Gabrielle.” However, in a Lacanian light, one sees how letters and words insist. We are guided, ruled, hounded, and enchanted by them, often all unawares. One cannot rule out a connection between the repeated experience of seeing our names juxtaposed and the fact that we ultimately met, in what seemed like pure serendipity.

At dinner, we toasted our parents’ good judgment in giving us beautiful, if contested, names.

In a letter dated July 24, 2016 – after our meeting in London – Gabrielle, encouraging me to write about the case and our interview, added:

I certainly love the fact that you and I meet in the [Piggle] text, Deborah Gabrielle. We meet again in print here, 40 years on, thanks to our shared commitment to the homeless.

Repetition with a difference.

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Translations of summary


El nombre de The Piggle: Reconsideraciones sobre el caso clásico de Winnicott a la luz de algunas conversaciones con “Gabrielle” adulta. En el 40 aniversario de su publicación, la autora relee “Psicoanálisis de una niña pequeña (The Piggle)” de Winnicott —un caso de “análisis por demanda” con una niña que sufre de terrores psicóticos nocturnos—a la luz de nueva información acerca de la paciente. Las conversaciones entre la autora y “Gabrielle” exploran dos áreas no consideradas como prioritarias por Winnicott: la transmisión transgeneracional de la patología o trauma, y las maneras en que el lenguaje, en general —y los nombres de pila, en particular— organizan la subjetividad del individuo. La pregunta plantecada es si Winnicott, quien describió el tratamiento como “psicoanálisis partagé [compartido]” debido a la participación de los padres, pensaba que la patología misma era “compartida”. El propósito no es suplantar, sino expandir la comprensión que tenía Winnicott del caso, tomando prestado insights de los trabajos de Lacan y otros.

References

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