

**Is God real or only in my mind?
D W Winnicott on maintaining the paradox**

John Munro
July 2007

Is God real or only in my mind? **D W Winnicott on maintaining the paradox**

The way this question is framed pushes us to choose between alternatives: either that God is, in some sense still to be defined, objectively 'real' or God is a product of the imagination, an illusion with no reference to reality beyond the mind. What I want to suggest here is that, in resisting the choice, we may find a way of living with the question.

Nicholas Lash, in his book, *The Beginning and End of 'Religion'*, asks: "Where our knowledge of God is concerned, are we constructors, explorers or pupils?" Do we invent our gods and project them beyond ourselves, do we search for signs in the world, or do we listen and wait? The last three hundred years of European thought have eroded belief in a God who is there to be listened to. As Lash says: "If a good part of the eighteenth century remained confident that we were not only explorers but successful explorers, discoverers of God, it seemed increasingly evident to the nineteenth (from Feuerbach to Freud) that we were constructors of all our gods." (Lash 1996 p77)

My experience in working with people of faith is that we continue to live with all three ways of being: constructors, explorers, pupils. As constructors, some have learned how to construct an individual spirituality rather than simply taking on a pre-packaged religious product. We are also aware after Freud of our potential as constructors to create gods in our own image through our projections of what we most love about ourselves, and what we most hate. We may still be explorers, hoping to find in the spiritual landscape signs that God must have been here, or indeed still is present. For some, there are more signs of absence than presence. And, thirdly, in spite of our tendency to be constructors of the gods, and often discouraged explorers, we may well retain a practice of discipleship as pupils, listening, attending, praying, waiting.

In my experience, people of faith do not debate the question of God's reality as a puzzle to be solved logically and in detachment. We find the question bothering us in the midst of our daily life. We are continually moving on ground between two poles: God is 'real'/God is in the mind. Our proximity to either pole may change, but far from being a state from which to flee towards certainty, what I want to suggest is that we need to preserve that shifting ground of ambiguity as a place in which imagination and 'reality' meet. I find an essential paradox, to be accepted and not to be resolved.

In the Exodus story, when Moses saw the burning bush, he took off his sandals because he recognised he was on holy ground. A spectator might have seen a man talking to himself, in front of a bush that kept burning, but the teller of the story has Moses stepping into a liminal space, in which he hears both the great “I AM”, and his own “I am.” To force a choice between the alternatives of God being ‘really’ there or being a voice in Moses’ head is to leave the field of play and to sit as a detached spectator. The story only ‘works’ as we suspend our critical question as to what ‘really happened’ for the moment and use our imaginations to participate in the story. The paradoxical, ambiguous nature of the story enables it to be a creative space, an arena, a meeting place between self and reality.

It seems to me that the way worship, prayer and spiritual awareness may ‘work’ for people of faith is that while we are engaged in these activities, we occupy an imaginative space in which to review our lives in relation to others. In a way that is familiar those attending or performing in a play, (though perhaps not to a critic), we willingly enter the temporary ‘play’ area in order to explore who we truly are in relation to other people, and to the rest of the world beyond ourselves. Public worship can be that kind of creative space – a drama for an hour in which sacred texts are the written script from which the actors draw a live performance. If the worship ‘works’, the congregation are drawn in from being a passive audience to being participants in the play which they create in the moment. An example of the audience being drawn in to the play occurred when, in 2005, the Edinburgh University Theatre Company produced *Romeo and Juliet* in Greyfriars Kirk. The director had the audience facing inwards in the nave of the kirk, using the central space of the nave as the stage and the organ gallery as Juliet’s balcony. But when Juliet takes the drug and is placed on the plinth in the Capulet crypt, the director used a plinth set in the Greyfriars chancel. As the mourners in the play made their procession to the crypt, the whole audience was invited to join as the crowd, and we all filed up to stand round the body. There was a transition from passive observer to active participant in the drama. Something ‘happened’ to us in the course of the play. So it is in worship if the drama is engaging enough. Shakespeare’s play and the Bible both are detached enough from our current situations to enable us to stand out from ourselves, look at ourselves from a distance, and return with perhaps a new perspective on our thoughts, feelings and actions. We are drawn beyond our individual subjectivity into the shared space where we can discover something new about our lives through the interaction of the Tradition and the present moment. The logical question, ‘Is God ‘real’ or in my head?’ is held in suspension for the time of the play or worship, but forms an unspoken grounding for the play. “Is God there or is God not?” “I don’t know but

maybe we'll find out as the play progresses." "Is there anyone in the audience tonight?" I can't see beyond the footlights, but let's do it anyway!

In order to explore this issue further, I am going to depart for the moment from the question we started with, and discuss some of the concepts of D W Winnicott, the British psychoanalyst. This may seem a startling departure from the question we are working on, but I hope that my purpose will soon become clear. What I want to do here is to correlate Winnicott's work on the infant's apparent question as he/she develops, "Is this Object (eg breast) real or an extension of myself?" with the question, "Is God real or an extension of myself?"

Winnicott, (1896 – 1971) perhaps best known popularly for his phrase, 'good-enough parenting', spent his life working with young children and their parents (60,000 parent-child pairs by his own estimate). From that experimental database he developed his theories of how humans first form a sense of the 'Other' (or (M)other!) beyond themselves. According to Winnicott, A baby first has the sense of being at-one-with-mother; there is no distinction between 'me' and 'not-me'. The mother brings a whole world to the child on demand, and provides a brief moment of illusionary omnipotence –the belief that the world, in the form of the mother's breast, is there for the child, and a magical belief that his/her wish brings about what he/she needs with no sense of delay. (Winnicott 1971/2005 p15). This state does not last. If it is not given adequately in the first place, the child can grow up without this essential experience of significance and so seeks to re-create that illusory sense of omnipotence in adult life, with potentially destructive consequences. If the mother attempts to protect the child from the discovery that the mother's love is not given with unbroken empathy, the child can carry the illusion of omnipotence into adult life, with equally destructive consequences.

Transitional Objects and Events

Inevitably, for every child, the illusion of continuous communion with mother is broken at some point. The child begins to separate the 'me' from the 'not-me' and becomes aware of the 'Other' – a reality in his life beyond his/her power to control. In many babies, Winnicott observed a 'transitional stage', between 4-12 months, (Winnicott 1971/2005 p8) in which an object – blanket, teddy, etc -- may become a means of discovering that the existence of the 'not-me' does not mean the destruction of the 'me' but that it is possible to survive as a self. A 'transitional object' can be the utterly reliable and loved friend at a time when doubt has entered as to the

trustworthiness of mother. Equally important, a transitional object can also be the object on which rage and frustration are vented, without the transitional object being destroyed.

Through use of a transitional object the child discovers that his/her responses of rage and of love do not destroy mother. She is able to survive the destruction wished on her by the rageful infant whose needs are not being met exactly as wished. ('Survive' in this context means, 'not retaliate'. (Winnicott 1971/2005 p122). She also survives the intense desire to possess her. A transitional object can be a means of holding the baby safe while he/she works towards accepting the existence of the external world that is not under his/her control.

The usefulness of the transitional object lies in its intermediate status, belonging both to the child's imagination and to the outside world. As Winnicott says, transitional objects are "not part of the infant's body, yet are not fully recognised as belonging to external reality." (Winnicott 1971/2005 p3). The mother does her job well when she does not 'disillusion' the child. (ibid p15). By allowing the child to believe that the object is created by him/her, and at the same time is 'given' by the outside world, the child can *use* the object (ibid p17). If the mother either insists that the object is just a stuffed doll, and could be replaced by any other, or attempts to enter into the fantasy and thereby step into the child's created space, the illusion is shattered. No other doll or teddy will do, and at the same time, this is only a stuffed object and the child knows that.

Winnicott himself applied his work to adult life. With his concepts of 'transitional objects' and 'potential space' he claimed not only that the child in playful imagination can discover self in relation to shared reality, but that throughout our lives, we need that imaginative space as a meeting place between illusion and reality. He argues that all cultural activity, including religion, is a special, playful use of time and space allowing us to discover who we are in relation to a world belonging to others as well as to us.

The effectiveness of play depends on maintaining the paradox of illusion and reality, suspending the question of what is 'really there'. Winnicott recognised that in the exploration of the relationship of self to the external world, a 'Transitional Object' may act as mediator of that realm of exploration. The teddy, which the child knows is cloth and stuffing, is at the same time the child's closest confidant and bearer of the child's longings. The transitional object, at the same time imaginary and real, allows the child to become a self inhabiting a world not entirely of his/her making.

Rather than resolving the paradox – is it real/is it in my mind – Winnicott argues that,

“the essential feature in the concept of transitional objects and phenomena (according to my presentation of the subject) is *the paradox, and the acceptance of the paradox*: the baby creates the object, but the object was waiting there to be created and to become a cathected object....In the rules of the game we all know..., we will never challenge the baby to elicit an answer to the question: did you create it or did you find it.” (Winnicott 1971/2005 p119)

Winnicott applies his interpretation of childhood play to all imaginative cultural activity, and his psychoanalytic theories have been used to a limited extent in literary criticism. They may also help us to interpret religious and spiritual experience.

In addition to the concept of transitional objects and events, two other ideas used by Winnicott can help us understand what is ‘going on’ in religious and spiritual life.

Potential space. Accompanying the concept of the transitional object is Winnicott’s idea of ‘potential space’. By using the word ‘potential’ Winnicott implies that the space is not physical but imaginative, a ‘potential’ space between the internal awareness of the self and the objects of the outside world. (cf Buber’s notion of the realm of the ‘Between’ – “On the far side of the subjective, on this side of the objective, on the narrow ridge where *I* and *Thou* meet, there is the realm of 'between'.” (Buber 1949 p55)). The potential space is an imaginative play area where we can explore what we bring subjectively in relation to what is coming to us from outside. We need to create an imaginative space in order to look at ourselves, but the paradox, of which Winnicott is aware, is that the space is also given. There is middle ground between subject and object, where the unanswered question of the ‘objective reality’ of the object does not interfere with the play. The question of what is ‘really there’ is suspended. Winnicott extends into adulthood his use of this intermediate area of experience which is temporarily allowed to be unchallenged.

“It is assumed here that the task of reality-acceptance is never completed, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience which is not challenged (arts, religion etc.) This intermediate area is in direct continuity with the play area of the small child who is ‘lost’ in play.” (Winnicott 1971/2005 p18)

Object-relations developing into **object-use**. Winnicott belongs in the tradition of British psychoanalysts, Ronald Fairbairn, Harry Guntrip and others, who developed object-relations theory. This theory assumes that the self does not relate to the other as an independent entity but as a mental construction created by the self. The self is in this way self-relating rather than engaging with the reality of the other. The self, longing for a 'real' relationship with another person, is trapped in isolation, in a pseudo-relationship with him or herself. Winnicott develops the theory by contrasting object-relating with object-use. By 'use' Winnicott means that the self begins to express destructive rage towards the object and discovers that the object survives that destructive rage. 'Survival' in this context means 'not retaliate'. (ibid p122). In that process, the internalised fantasy of the other is destroyed, and a real relationship between self and the external other can begin. As Winnicott puts it,

"The subject says to the object, 'I destroyed you', and the object is there to receive the communication. From now on the subject says, 'Hullo object!' 'I destroyed you.' 'I love you.' 'You have value for me because of your survival of my destruction of you.' 'While I am loving you I am all the time destroying you in (unconscious) *fantasy*.' (ibid p121)

This is not a once-for-all experience, but is repeated as our fantasies of the other are continually destroyed when we encounter the person who is able to absorb our rage without acting out retaliation in return.

The shift from object-relating to object-use is not confined to childhood. The experience of falling in love, and the discovery of how to love the other person when that feeling of being 'in love' has gone, seems to me a shift from object-relating to object-use. We begin to experience the man or woman 'of our dreams' (revealing phrase!) as a real human being with whom we can be angry as well as confluent and in the process become our real self. Perhaps if Winnicott had found a term other than 'use' it would be easier to accept. The term, 'using someone' has a distinctly disturbing tone, but this is far from Winnicott's meaning. He seems to mean that you can't form a relationship until you are prepared to acknowledge that there can be no love for a person without hate. Otherwise we are not discerning the things about the other person that frustrate and enrage us. No real contact with another person is unbrokenly idyllic. Winnicott's observation is that, far from ending the relationship, the expression of rage, and the ability of oneself and the other person to survive, is the beginning of contact between two persons.

God and Winnicott's Concepts

Object-relating and Object-use. Taking the last idea first, to talk of 'using' God may seem irreverent, but can release us from an obsequious attitude, the 'fawning etiquette of unctuous prayer". Wink continues, politeness in prayer is "utterly foreign to the Bible. Biblical prayer is impertinent, persistent, shameless, indecorous. It is more like haggling in an oriental bazaar than the polite monologues of the churches." (Wink 1992 p301)

The Psalms are a prime example of 'object-use'. There is no holding back, filtering out the things that we dare not say for fear of the consequences. Human hateful rage is fully expressed, sometimes in the midst of a psalm expressing God's loving care. For example, towards the end of Psalm 139, expressing the comforting and uncomfortable presence of God, the psalmist suddenly bursts out:

"O that you would kill the wicked, O God,
and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me –
those who speak of you maliciously,
and lift themselves up against you for evil!
Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord?
And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?
I hate them with perfect hatred,
I count them my enemies." (Ps 139:vv 19-22 NRSV)

And, as it were having got that out of the system, the psalmist continues calmly as in the first verse, "Search me and know my heart...and lead me in the everlasting way."

Or take Psalm 137. At the end of the grieving lament of an exiled people – "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion" – the grief is expressed in pure rage against the oppressors:

"O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!
Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!" (Ps 137:8,9)

In both these examples, in Winnicott's terms, the psalmist is 'using' God as the hearer of a confession of hatred, without any holding back. We should be clear that the 'use' is not simply that the psalmist has a cathartic outburst of hatred and then feels better – until the next time the red mist descends. Such a rant might well be an example of 'object-relating' in that

the person is raging against internalised figures of hatred. Object use, on the other hand is an engagement with an object or person in the external world, testing out the response of that object and believing that the response is trust-worthy. As a child discovers that rage against mother does not destroy mother, nor does a 'good-enough' mother retaliate destructively against the child or indeed the child's enemies, so the psalmist who rages before, or against, God trusts that such an expressed longing for destructive vengeance is not met with a destructive response by God either against the psalmist or against the psalmist's enemies. In other words, a 'good-enough' God does not 'act out' destructive fantasies any more than a 'good-enough' mother acts out the destructive feelings she may well have at times towards her child!

The death and resurrection of Jesus have also be interpreted with this concept. Brooke Hopkins, in his essay, 'Jesus and Object-Use: a Winnicottian account of the Resurrection Myth' (Hopkins 1993), sees in the resurrection story:

a "clear analogue to Winnicott's account of the destruction/survival paradigm. Like the mother whom the infant believes it has destroyed but who is always there, continuing to love, like the object of the subject's destructive fantasies which remains constant despite them, Jesus is depicted as harbouring no urge to retaliate, no urge to pay back those who betrayed and even murdered him. His attitude is one of infinite forgiveness....It is Jesus' quality of 'always being destroyed' that makes him an object in Winnicott's terms, that can be *used*, that is experienced as something external, something independent, 'wholly other'." (Hopkins 1993 p225)

But, we might ask, what if there 'really is' no external God, no 'wholly other', and that what we experience is a subjectively created illusion? What Winnicott offers is the possibility of suspending the question of God's 'existence' in order to look at how we can 'use' God. The question of God's existence can polarise thought into the alternatives of objective reality (external, shared, reality in Winnicott's terms –Winnicott 1971/2005 p19) or subjective (inner) experience – God is either real or in my mind. What Winnicott offers is a way of understanding how people do in fact make use of God, even, I think, when they deny his existence.

Transitional States and Potential Space. The value of the concept of the transitional state is that there is a third area, a cleared 'potential space' in which the child can explore imaginatively and begin to experience the ground between internal and external reality. The word 'potential' indicates that this is not a physical but an imaginative space. Winnicott's argument is

that throughout life, we retain the need to explore that potential space of the 'Between' in which the question of what is real and what is in the mind is temporarily suspended. Throughout life, this intermediate experience "is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work." (Winnicott 1971/2005 p19)

In my experience of a parish, many people attached more or less to a congregation seem to 'use' God much as they once used a 'transitional object'. 'God' is both imaginary and real, and that to dissolve the paradox into certainty either way is to stop 'using' God.

I find it fascinating that Richard Dawkins, in a book arguing for atheist certainty, has one wistful passage on the 'imaginary friend'. He quotes A A Milne's poem, 'Binker'. Binker, the child's secret friend, the reason he never feels alone:

"Well, I'm very fond of Daddy, but he hasn't time to play,
And I'm very fond of Mummy, but she sometimes goes away,
And I'm often cross with Nanny when she wants to brush my hair. . .
But Binker's always Binker, and is certain to be there." (Milne 1927, p15)

Dawkins connects Milne's Binker with a story of a child who had such a friend, a 'little purple man'. Just before the girl was to go to kindergarten, the friend announced one day that he would not be visiting her anymore. She was growing up and wouldn't need him, but he promised he would come back to her if ever she *really* did need him. Many years later, at a time of personal crisis, the little purple man appeared to her in a dream, opening the bedroom door and pushing a pile of books into the room. The woman interpreted this as a sign that she should go to university, and so she did. Dawkins goes on:

"The story makes me almost tearful, and it brings me as close as I shall probably come to understanding the consoling and counselling role of imaginary gods in people's lives. A being may exist only in the imagination, yet still seem completely real to the child, and still give real comfort and good advice" (Dawkins 2006 p349)

Dawkins normally deals with only two options -- God is imaginary or real -- and yet in this passage, he comes close to accepting that God may be imaginary *and* real. This is my own position at present, except I would elevate 'imagination' from being an internal function of the mind, to being the space where subject and object meet for play, for drama, for creative life that for a time lets us celebrate our finite freedom. Far from being a

psychological phenomenon, imagination is the realm of Being – at least if we accept that the way we come to ‘be’ at all is in and through relation, rather than as separate individuals.

In working with people of faith, I seek to protect the paradox, looking creatively for that ‘potential space’ in which to review our hopes and fears. The temptation to resolve it can be strong, resulting either in fundamentalist or atheist certainty, either the delusion of a magical state in which words of prayer bring about the desired result, or a disillusionment that there ever was a magical time when the child felt omnipotent. In both positions it seems to me, there is, curiously, a false possession of omnipotence and omniscience. The believer who finds in the Bible an answer to his or her human question, and who trusts that God will answer his or her prayers, claims omnipotence and omniscience by proxy, whereas the atheist who is certain that God does not exist claims omnipotence and omniscience as a human ‘work in progress’. Neither position, it seems to me, makes room for the actual experience of constructing, exploring and listening/attending/waiting which is part of spiritual life.

Over fifty years ago, the philosopher Anthony Flew, in his essay, ‘Theology and Falsification’ retold a parable by John Wisdom, of two explorers coming upon a clearing in the jungle:

“In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says, "Some gardener must tend this plot." The other disagrees, "There is no gardener." So they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. "But perhaps he is an invisible gardener." So they set up a barbed-wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds. (For they remember how H.G. Wells's *The Invisible Man* could be both smelt and touched though he could not be seen.) But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give cry. Yet still the Believer is not convinced. "But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves." At last the Sceptic despairs, "But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?" (Flew 1955, p98-9)

Flew famously says of the claim that there is a gardener: “A fine brash hypothesis may thus be killed by inches, the death by a thousand qualifications.” He challenges the believer in God with the question whether

there is anything, any event of suffering, any atrocity so enormous that would “constitute a disproof of the love of, or of the existence of, God.” The implication is that, if nothing can disprove the claim that God exists, the claim itself has no substance.

Is there, though, another way of being in the clearing? What if we suspend the question of whether or not the word, ‘gardener’ has an objective reference? A clearing can be a space for imaginative play in the forest whether the space was ‘cleared’ by someone or not. The two explorers entered into problem-solving mode but, whatever their beliefs or not in absent horticulturalists, they could have also gone into other states of being such as wonder or joy, After days of hacking through dense undergrowth, picking leeches of their skins and swatting mosquitoes, here is a clearing where they can breathe pure air and see the sky. They could take in the beauty of the sunlight shafting onto the tree-trunks as if from high windows onto the pillars of a cathedral. The colours of the flowers as much as their alleged arrangement could begin to occupy their attention.

If one of the explorers had broken the silence with a speculation as to whether there was a gardener, the other might reply, “For the moment does it matter? We can discuss that later, but right now I simply want to be quiet to take this in.” One explorer is still in the world of subject and object, the other has already stepped into the potential space of the clearing, the realm of the Between.

As they stand there, in that paradoxical space both given and imaginatively created by the two explorers, it is all there for them -- specks of scattered sunlight caught by the dust, the darkness of the forest beyond, calls of the birds; the sudden movement of an animal unafraid when the explorers are still for so long, the awareness of purposelessness as they stand there doing ‘nothing’, the feeling of participating in the scene rather than observing it, the awareness of their heartbeat, their sense of one another in the immensity of the great jungle.....their reminder of their feelings both of love and of hate towards one another, the smell of their sweat mingled with that of the jungle.... the sound of some animal killing another not far away, the association in their mind of what they had heard that morning on their radios of the killing of children in an Afghan village, and their reflection on what it is in humans that can attempt to justify that act....and so on.

Instead of debating whether a gardener exists or not, the two explorers have entered into the scene and are no longer observing it. One of them takes off her shoes and feels the ground through her bare feet. The other looks surprised and then joins her. An observer on the edge of the clearing

who, unknown to the explorers, had been following them through the jungle, struggles to stifle a cynical laugh at this 'new age' behaviour, but to the barefooted explorers, this seems like holy ground.

In this moment, one of Buber's "eternal moments", the spell might be broken. The word 'God' might occur to one of the explorers, but once spoken, it cannot be put back in the box. It changes things. It might be said as a prayer, offering up the scene and its associations as a priest would offer up the host. It might be said as a question, or even as an exclamation. But however it is said, the word changes things. The jungle scene cannot be seen as it was before the word is spoken. In Winnicott's terms, the rules of the game are broken by the word, 'God' which seems to force us, "to elicit an answer to the question: did you create that or did you find it?" (Winnicott, 1971/2005 p119).

Patrick White's novel, *Riders in the Chariot*, illustrates reluctance to name the source of what is experienced. Miss Hare, a solitary eccentric with a tangible connection both to earth and to spirit, resists naming when pressed to do so by the hardened Christian, Mrs Jolley:

"Are you a Christian?"

'Ah,' sighed Miss Hare, 'It would not be for me to say, even if I understood exactly what that means.'

'I am,' said Mrs Jolley. 'I attended the C. Of E. Ever since I was a kiddy.'

And would batter somebody to prove it.

'I mean,' persisted the housekeeper, 'didn't anybody bother with your religious education?'

Miss Hare was too embarrassed to answer.

'So as you can believe. You do believe in *something*, don't you?'

Miss Hare hesitated. Then she said, very slowly:

'I believe, I cannot tell you what I believe in, any more than what I am. It is too much. I have not proper gift. Of words, I mean. Oh yes, I believe! I believe in what I see, and what I cannot see. I believe in a thunderstorm, and wet grass, and patches of light, and stillness. There is such a variety of good. On earth. And everywhere.'

'But what is over it?' Mrs Jolley had to burst out.

'That!' Miss Hare cried. 'That!' I would rather you did not ask me about such things.' (White, 1961/1974 p58)

Is there any language, then, which would be appropriate for use in the clearing, and would preserve the paradox of that potential space between subjectivity and objectivity? In both states of certainty, (God is either 'real'

or in my mind), words are required take a referential load they cannot bear. For believers, the word 'God' is not descriptively adequate, as is recognised by Jewish aversion either to speaking or writing the word. The word is not adequate either for atheists as the 'god' whose existence they reject is the one they do not know.

In the state of 'unknowing' I am advocating, silence would seem to be an appropriate response. But silence has word as its context. We need words that are not constrained by the need to *refer* to things or objects. In an essay using Winnicott to interpret the poetry of Robert Frost, Richard Poirier discusses the inversion of the commonsense notion that "words are the signs of things". To say that "things are the signs of words" should not be completely strange to those who accept that, "When all things began, the Word already was" (John 1:1 New English Bible), and the implication for Poirier is that 'things' or 'objects':

"become endowed with magic and with meaning. Because of this, 'things' or 'objects' then entitle us to speak in all kinds of ways that would be plain silly if language had to do with the object only in a referential way. This is not to say that the 'things' or 'objects' do not exist. It is to say, rather, that for a child or a poet they exist in a form of verbal and creative opportunity. Poetry is in a sense the area of performance where a residue of the infant's sense of omnipotence, the infant's illusion of totally creative power over 'things' and 'objects', confronts and must negotiate with the so-called reality principle." (Rudnytsky 1993 p222)

For 'poetry' we could also read 'prayer', used as a language to liberate things and people rather than to describe them. Whatever words the explorers use, once they have uttered the word, 'God', they have a choice. Either they may step onto an unending treadmill of explanation of what they mean by the word, or in that jungle clearing they can allow their imaginations to play with words, shaping and reshaping the scene, so that they themselves take on some of the character of the Gardener. Whether or not they ever name the word 'God' again does not matter much to me, compared to the creative act of speaking a word in that clearing that will liberate the scene and themselves.

Is God 'real' or in my head? I don't know, ie I do not have a 'thinking' answer but I do have the way I learned in childhood, and still need to use as an adult; I keep playing with words and images in the clearing of my life-along-with-others. The criticism from parents in my childhood that I am '*just* playing with words' no longer inhibits me from stretching my imagination to try to grasp the meaning of it all. I play with words not to refer to a God-Entity at all, but use words in their poetic (making) power to

create a reality which I also experience as gift. Does 'gift' imply a giver? Like Miss Hare, I would rather you did not ask me about such things! It seems enough to experience life as gift, and beyond that to accept a state of 'unknowing.'

Books cited:

- Buber, Martin, Pathways to Utopia, 1949 quoted in *The Way of Response; selections from his writings*, edited by N. N. Glatzer. New York: Schocken Books. 1967, p55,
- Dawkins, Richard, *The God Delusion*, Bantam Press, London 2006.
- Flew, Antony, & Alasdair McIntyre, eds., *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, London, SCM 1955.
- Hopkins, Brooke, *Jesus and Object-Use: A Winnicottian Account of the Resurrection Myth*, published in Peter L Rudnytsky, ed., *Transitional Objects and Potential Spaces, the Literary Uses of D W Winnicott*. Columbia University Press, New York, 1993.
- Lash, Nicholas, *The Beginning and the End of 'Religion'*, Cambridge University Press, 1996
- Milne, A A. *Now We are Six*. Richard Clay (The Chaucer Press) 1927. 1971 printing p 18.
- Rudnytsky, Peter L, (ed) *Transitional Objects and Potential Spaces, Literary Uses of D W Winnicott*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1993
- Wink, Walter, *Engaging the Powers*, Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress, 1992
- Winnicott, D W, *Playing and Reality*, Tavistock, London, 1971. Edition used, Routledge Classics 2005
- White, Patrick, *Riders in the Chariot*, first published Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1961. Quotation from Penguin Modern Classics, 1974

