

INTRODUCTION

An Art of Handling

OUR LIVES ARE in our own hands; this is unavoidable. But how to handle life? Might there be an art of relating to the world, and feeling our way among others? This book is about the art of tact, as it is performed in the essays of six writers: Charles Lamb, John Stuart Mill, Matthew Arnold, George Eliot, Walter Pater and Marion Milner. I will outline in this introduction my basic claims about tact, the subjects it touches upon, and the way this book is framed. I won't take up too much of your time. Not for reasons of politeness, you understand (tact, we will see, is not reducible to manners), but because, as this book is about an art of the encounter, what it has to offer must come in the showing. "We cannot spend the day in explanation," a great essayist declared.¹ Introductions know what is to come; their vantage of retrospection may sacrifice the evocation of experience even as they furnish the reader with an organized framing knowledge. A book about the tact of the literary essay can offer no systematic theory in advance, to be dutifully filled in. I will frame the concerns of this book here in the broadest terms, and from these we must go straight to our subject—to essays in critical handling—and let them teach us how to consider them.

In broadest terms: tact privileges encounters over knowledge, and an aesthetic of handling over more abstract conceptualization or observation—whether of people or objects.² The essays explored in this book describe a close and haptic attention to the moment, preferring a present ambivalence to a future perfection. Tact lends itself to political uses just where—in its refusal of assertion—it seems most impertinent to practical ends. It is a literary art that draws upon the particular resources of the essay as form; and it provides the grounds for a claim about the relationship between art and human freedom—an "aesthetic liberalism"—not encompassed by traditional political philosophy. Tact has its origins in a particular time and place, the British nineteenth century, but it is also a more generalizable and available style (it

is taken up, this book will claim, in the therapeutic practice of twentieth-century British psychoanalysis).

To dwell for a moment on the word *tact*: it has had some bad press. It may seem rather an old-fashioned term, even one best left in the nineteenth century. The word suggests a certain stuffiness, a retrograde attachment to social hierarchies, and a pedantic knowingness about the right thing to do, now all but useless in a modern and diverse world. (Think of the deadening “exact courtesy” of Mr. Casaubon in *Middlemarch*.)³ Or, what’s worse, tact might seem to survive, even to thrive, from the nineteenth century to our own time as cynical ruse—as a cover for dissimulation, and a technique of manipulation—in relationships, in politics, in business, in the media. (Think of the “deep art” of entrapment contained in Gilbert Osmond’s perfect tact in *The Portrait of a Lady*.)⁴ But these views would neglect tact’s resources, or look for it in the places where it is co-opted by the forces it has sought to oppose. For tact, in its invention and its creative instantiation in essays of the nineteenth century and beyond, was an egalitarian and artful response to a complex, modernizing world. It is opposed to modernization in the sense of innovation (as this buzzword is intoned through our own marketized environments), and so to the jettisoning of old forms for new. It maintains a grasp on the ambivalent complexity of the cultural field, the difficult conditions we all inherit, while proposing new—more just, more creative, even more vital—ways of handling established forms.

Tact has a critical edge. As it was never dominant in its own time, it made a virtue of its marginality, to challenge, impertinently, the orthodoxies that surrounded it. It is an art of redirection and revaluation, working within the terms it seeks to critique in order—by handling a shift of mode, or tone, or approach—to open up new avenues for relation. “For every mood there is an appropriate impossibility,” G. K. Chesterton remarked, “a decent and tactful impossibility.”⁵ The practices of tact I trace in this book sought to oppose to relations of knowledge as power, and a dominant liberalism of the free market founded in activities of persuasion, transaction, competition—a different, aesthetic, liberalism. Tact seeks to ensure social relations in which people are at once most equal and more individually alive. It begins with the question of whether there are other things we can do with people, with any objects of our attention, than know them. And whether coming to an answer about, or exposing the truth of, something or someone is the most useful, or the most imaginative, or the most kind thing we can do with them.

Literary and cultural critics have for some time been attuned to the way power is linked to knowledge, and how ruses of power structure the most ordinary social relations. A brilliant suspicion has exposed the ways social encounters are symptomatic of broader relations of domination. A version of tact is used to explain how this happens. It restrains people, even without their knowing it, from asking difficult questions. What is most decorously assumed

is most deeply coercive; what goes tactfully unsaid is empowered: the most normative assumptions are privileged by latency, and all the more naturalized for a lack of open discussion. “Disciplinary power constitutively mobilizes a tactic of tact,” as a seminal account of such processes has it.⁶ Moreover, we know that works of literature often understand the smallest moments of social interaction, on the micro level, to be part of the enforcement of a society’s most sweeping and insidious relationships of knowledge to power, of identity definitions, status hierarchies, and regimes of control.⁷ Tactful speech knows, and withholds, too much. These are compelling diagnoses, and all too persuasive; while frequently invigorating in their style and acumen, they are disheartening in their message. After such criticism, what forgiveness?

But what of the tact that provides the conditions for trust: the relation of collaborative hope that makes new demands on the world?⁸ There has been less attention to the suggestion that social relations also could be imagined from, as it were, the inside out: that small, tactful moments of handling could contain within them claims and assumptions from which to demand new relationships in a shared world.⁹ This requires a clearing, at least provisionally, of established means and ends, and so a renewed insistence on mediation, considered not as technology but as a quality of attention: on the qualities and distributions of spaces and experiences *between* people, rather than focusing on identitarian knowledge about the constitution of individual subjects. Such demands do not deny the history and conditions of a given encounter, but they widen the sphere of the virtual, the “as if,” in remedy to certain regimes of subjectification and interpellation. They prefer an attention in the moment to shared predicaments, to the knowledge of predicates of identity.¹⁰ Tact proposes an oblique and distantiating mediation (Lamb calls this an “honest obliquity”) where things seem all too clear, too direct, and too close to the knives. Especially in situations where everything has become too traumatically personal for communication to continue, or where the acceptance or rejection of an abstract truth has become a matter of life or death.

There can be violence in an epistemological approach to others.¹¹ Claims to knowledge of the inner experience of another can be more coercive than kind, and so demands for empathy may intensify rather than attenuate violence. The practice of tact, through the ways it doesn’t want to know, provides a means of preferring the potential of the borderline to the policing of identities (an activity that can be well or ill intentioned.) The essays explored in this book seek to evoke—to describe and perform—the kinds of relation that the need to know obstructs. Although the essayists are very different from one another, and each evokes the process according to his or her own idiom and vocabulary (Lamb, for instance, endorses relations of theatrical “illusion”; and Arnold, of a critical “disinterest”), they all seek to describe the promise of a tactful unknowing. “Barriers to clarity can in themselves be modes of communication, expressions of human bonding,” Richard Poirier has proposed.¹²

Tactful essayists seek to thicken the medium between people, to open a creatively neutral or virtual space (at the boundaries of assumptions about subjectivity and objectivity, the personal and impersonal, truth and fiction) to overcome fixed lines of opposition, and to put new possibilities for relation in play.

Each chapter of this book is devoted to an essayist. By approaching the essayists through an exploration of their performance of tact, the chapters offer revisionary accounts of their subjects, who vary in canonical fame. By way of such handling, we apprehend, for instance, the profundity of Lamb's sociable philosophy, the surprisingly aesthetic essayism of Mill, Arnold's egalitarianism and the reasons for his abandonment of poetry for prose, Eliot's essays in outrage, Pater's practical and radical suggestions for liberalism, and Milner's centrality to British psychoanalysis. This book offers neither an exhaustive nor a strictly progressive account of the tactful essay: other essayists might have been chosen (many others do appear, from Montaigne to Ruskin to Barthes to Wojnarowicz); while of those who were chosen, some of them were not only essayists—and some of them were not often tactful. The book proceeds chronologically, to make a claim about a practice of its period; taken together, as an essay collection, its chapters build in consort a picture of the techniques of a sustained art of tactful handling, and the way the essay form provides its resources.

Aesthetic Liberalism and Modern Life

"Use," though, to what ends? It should be difficult to define the aims of tact, since it is exercised by the task of evading ends that have been (tactlessly) imposed on a given encounter. I describe tact's aims through the concept of "aesthetic liberalism": in order to link a variety of experience (aesthetic) with a claim about human freedom, and the relations by which people might live together (liberalism). They are tricky words to handle; both are notoriously elusive of definition. Critical and political theory has tended to be suspicious of the "aestheticization" of freedom. The aesthetic has seemed the sphere into which political freedom is translated only so it may be betrayed.¹³ But to discuss the aesthetic encounter is to pose foundational questions of freedom: questions of what is subjective and what is objective, of the way a new encounter is conditioned, of the line between the real and the virtual, and of the experience of one's own aliveness in creative contact with the world. Tactful essays seek to render this experience open and somehow more available to us, as active between us. They assume our aesthetic experiences are inextricable from questions of freedom—from our actions in and claims on the world.

For Mill, whose 1859 *On Liberty* offers one of the seminal texts of liberalism, an aesthetic conception of human freedom is just what a liberal society ought to ensure: the aim of a liberal society is to guarantee for everyone the

conditions for a creative relation to one's own life, for "spontaneity" and "experiments in living." Although (as chapter 2 explores) their style of tact diverges from Mill's rational method for attaining it, all of the essays considered in this book stand for some version of this demand—for a vivid stake in the world, from which they might make claims upon it. For Arnold this is the definition of criticism—as a way to the sense of the "creative activity [which] is the great happiness and the great proof of being alive"—and he wanted an education system that would make everyone a critic. Pater calls it the "freedom to see and feel," which provides grounds for political freedoms. For Milner it forms the experiential "baseline" from which we gain our own mind and relate to the world—with which it is often the work of psychoanalysis to increase or restore contact. Such freedom has its painful rigors—and its enemies. A tactful perception assumes this aesthetic liberty is always vulnerable; it is to be protected as well as encouraged—whence Lamb's care for the dignity in the most eccentric and minor of social fictions. The history of liberalism, as another essayist, Lionel Trilling, pointed out, contains "the paradox . . . that liberalism is concerned with the emotions above all else, as proof of which the word happiness stands at the very center of its thought, but in its effort to establish the emotions, or certain among them, in some sort of freedom, liberalism somehow tends to deny them in their full possibility."¹⁴ (This is why, for Trilling, the question of liberalism must be addressed in aesthetic, literary, terms.) An aesthetic liberalism is compromised by just those attempts to ensure it through a total finalizing knowledge of it—whence the condemnation by Arnold's and Eliot's essays of the places in their culture (including political controversy, novels, religion, and poetry) where what Eliot calls "spontaneous impulse" is stifled in the name of liberty.

An aesthetic liberalism complements and challenges, as chapter 2 argues, liberalisms of individualistic market competition or even rationalist debate. It must also, with Arnold in chapter 3, propose a picture of education founded in shared experience before instrumental criteria (of employability, say, or test results.) What Arnold termed "modern problems" provide these essayists with these challenges to tact. The nineteenth century in Britain, it is often pointed out, was the great age of liberalism, and it witnessed a dialogue and contest between its varieties.¹⁵ After the shock of revolutionary wars in America and France, after enlightenment challenges to "old society" custom, tact emerged in Britain as an aesthetic and ethical response to the beginnings of urban modernity, as the first decades of the nineteenth century experienced unprecedented rates of growth in population and urbanization and an increasing confusion in social valuation.¹⁶ In the decade before Lamb began his *Essays of Elia*, England experienced an 18 percent increase in its population, a figure that is slightly higher in London. The first half of the nineteenth century experienced a spurt in the growth of urbanization, with the urban population increasing at more than twice the rate of the population as a whole.

Thirty-four percent of the British population lived in urban areas by 1801; by 1851 that figure had risen to 54 percent.¹⁷ This social confusion was at once anxious, as the “truth” about other people could not be grasped as firmly as before, but also full of potential, as many different truths, and ways of handling people, became plausible.

Faced with such a predicament, one might opt to become more or less knowing. Social confusion could be forestalled with more comprehensive systems of classification; whether in the exact and exacting utilitarian systems of James Mill or in the stricter sorts of positivism and scientism found later in the century. The social codes that proliferated in Victorian Britain, its ever more regulated etiquette, are part of our familiar conception of the time, and testament to its social strains.¹⁸ But instead, the Romantic essay sought to succeed the conduct book, presenting social conventions as forms to be creatively used, not doctrine to be obeyed. As Theodor Adorno has put it, “the precondition of tact is convention no longer intact but still present.”¹⁹ Social convention remains, but it is no longer felt to be total and totalizing; there are gaps in it, room for the maneuver by which one might make social forms one’s own.

The *OED* credits Dugald Stewart with the first use of “tact” to mean a practice of sociability in 1793. Stewart observed that the French found a need for tact—for a person’s capacity to “feel his way” among others—in the context of the immense upheaval of the French Revolution and the ensuing Terror. Stewart implies that modern social changes, if they are not to become violent, require a less certain and knowing way of handling others. One must get up close and feel things out. Tact emerged as a stylistic approach to the incorporation of difference in social interaction, and an ethic and aesthetic of nonprescriptive inclusiveness. Stewart’s student, Sydney Smith, in delivering his wildly popular lectures on moral philosophy at the Royal Society from 1804 to 1806, remarked on the novel but increasing use of touch as a metaphor specifically for the nuance of social interaction. He notes that people formerly relied on metaphors of taste to describe a person’s sensibility, but that “we have begun, though of late years, to use the word tact; we say of such a man that he has good tact in manners, that he has a fine tact exactly as we would say he has a good taste.”²⁰ In this period, the word “tact” shifted registers from *politesse* to politics, changing its meaning from a knowledge of what is fitting in a hierarchy of taste to a democratic social practice for uncertain times.

The word really caught on: by 1814, a reviewer in the *British Critic* could call it a “cant word . . . of the present year,” distinct enough to distinguish later from earlier emendations in Walter Scott’s *Waverly*.²¹ Before long, tact was commonplace, shorn of its novelty and immersed in everyday language. At a time when people were living in closer proximity than ever before, and among ever more different people, tactful essays proposed a new mode of feeling one’s way in society, which depended less on knowing other people, and placing them in hierarchical categories of status, and instead inventing new ways to

value others and to live with them. The urban scene, then, provides a metaphor for the complexity of modern social life most broadly, and the question of how people are to live together in it: tact addresses liberalism's central question. And as the nineteenth century wore on, these inventions increasingly became the basis for answering questions about how people might best influence one another: that is, they became the basis for theories of education. As Parliament debated the nature and scope of a national education (culminating in the Education Act of 1870), the essayists discussed in this book were experimenting with the question of what educational experience might look and feel like at the level of person-to-person interaction.

The Tact of the Essay Form

Tact, as chapter 1 will demonstrate, has an originating scene in Romantic essays, which offered mimetic accounts of city encounters; but it became generalizable as a style, and more closely aligned with a literary form than with a place and a time.²² By the 1860s, Arnold had borrowed from the street life of the Romantic essayists to bring their approach to bear on national projects of education and public discourse. Eliot insisted on the rigors of tact in her essays in cultural criticism, which would inform and shape her later career as a novelist; while Pater in his *Renaissance* took from Arnold the principles of tact in order to imagine a world made from them. Milner would adopt the particular desire for freedom for which tact stands in her personal essays and therapeutic practice.

This diverse continuation was made possible by analogizing tact to its home in that most flexible of genres—the essay form. The reflective, experimental, personal essay flourished in the British nineteenth century. The essay, claimed William Hazlitt in 1815 “is in morals and manners what the experimental is in natural philosophy, as opposed to the dogmatical method. It does not deal in sweeping clauses of proscription and anathema, but in nice distinctions and liberal constructions.”²³ The word “liberal” here offers the sense of a generous expansion of experience, but also, as chapter 2 explains, a political stance and a claim about freedom. Essayists reflecting on the essay form often claim for it a capacity both for seeking and conveying a sense of freedom. Alexander Smith in 1863 put the matter bluntly: “The essay-writer is a chartered libertine, and a law unto himself.”²⁴ And this freedom often begins in the confidence, even the impudence, that knows when to reject the proper and disciplined approach to a subject, to try out alternatives, provisionally or virtually, to put them in play in order to break free of an injustice or an impasse.

“In the realm of thought,” Theodor Adorno would claim in 1958, “it is virtually the essay alone that has successfully raised doubts about the absolute privilege of method.”²⁵ Great claims are made for essays. Can this fluid and

fluent form be pinned down to a set of identifying criteria? I don't think so; the essay spends so much of its time in the margins of other forms, or exceeding what it proposes as its own boundaries. But there are some general activities or principles that the essay form lends itself to, and which we will observe at play in the chapters that follow. The essays considered in this book take their liberty to start from anywhere, simply from the place where we find ourselves. Against propriety, Lamb admires street life, and Leigh Hunt takes an observation of pig driving as the beginning of his reflection on tactful grace, while Pater begins his *Renaissance* in his own experience before launching its history from the wrong century. These essayists follow the lead of Montaigne in demanding the right to begin from the resources they find at hand.

And then, even where a conventional beginning is made and a path seems laid out, the essay demands the privilege of digression to perform a handling in the moment. Arnold veers from an analysis of political discourse to remark on the ugliness of Anglo-Saxon surnames; Pater makes his own uses of just about everything he writes about. A performative break from convention, allowed in the digressive prose of the essay, is a technique of tact. The brevity of the essay encourages such digression. It is a transient form, good for describing dreams and visions, glimpses of other worlds and ways: from Lamb's essay "Dream Children" to Pater's shadowy portraits of Leonardo and Michelangelo. The tentativeness of the essay form means it does not have to be burdened by the need to be taken seriously; it may ease itself from under the weight of established customs and truths. The essay has a knack for breaking bounds with decorum (as Arthur Symons says of Lamb, discussed later). It often handles dangerously heavy subjects with a light touch—"antinomian," but with "unsunged hands," in Pater's words—and so can find its way to moments of new seriousness in seeming to lower the stakes. Most of all, the essay is formally lacking in a concerted narrative: any final end towards which tension is raised and in which resolution, and its value judgments, are expected. The essay is on its guard against eschatologies of all kinds. People and artworks may be the objects of our handling, but we do not know their ends; to imagine that we do may found a tactless attempt to coerce them.

The essayist Walter Benjamin's distinction between what he calls the "story" and the novel is useful here. The story is related to the world: it offers us its company, and a manner of handling it, a "counsel" in living. Its resistance to final definition, to being like "information," "understandable in itself," allows for its being made creative use of; its resonance exceeds its form. Lamb's essays, we will see, are full of stories in this sense—opposed to the purposes of a (Benthamite) information economy, richly suggestive, and offered for use in living. For Benjamin, the novel, conversely, through its structure of suspended definition, of holding back before discharging its full meaning in final satisfaction, isolates the reader from others, in a greed to reach the end, towards a sense of privately possessing its truth. The reader "is ready to

make it completely his own, to devour it.” This is because of the novel’s temporal logic, which assumes things are judged from their ends, according to which, as Benjamin summarizes, “a man who dies at the age of thirty-five . . . is at every point of his life a man who dies at the age of thirty-five.”²⁶ For Benjamin, the end of a novel is a “figurative death,” by which “remembered life” replaces “real life.” This logic feeds a hunger for definition and information, to the detriment of the nuance of lived experience.

Now, the terminology of this distinction is less important (one might think that the story is that part of a novel most invested in ends) than the attitudes it evokes. Geörgy Lukács makes a similar claim for the essay in his consideration of its form. For Lukács as for Pater, Plato is the first essayist.²⁷ Lukács opposes the form of tragic drama to the essay form, which he ascribes to Plato’s dialogues: “a tragic life is crowned only by its end, only the end gives meaning, sense and form to the whole, and it is precisely the end which is arbitrary and ironic here, in every dialogue and in Socrates’ whole life.” The essay keeps questions open, and allows a person to maintain an “elusive essence” against demands that a meaning and role be finally fixed.²⁸

The essays explored in this book distinguish themselves by such an attitude, which is strangely both elusive and open. They lend themselves to a particular, tactful, style of thought and approach to new encounters, which is unknowingly provisional, virtual, and experimental. “Essay” after all means just this, a try-out. The formal features of the essay lend it in particular to tact, but a poem, novel, or play may be tactful too. The argument of this book does not seek final generic boundaries.²⁹ What makes the essay form comport well with a tactful style is its recurring concern with a moment of an encounter: of a voice or style meeting the world, meeting the reader. It is free to focus on such moments *as* moments, to be repeated, varied, replaced, and ever needing to be achieved again. All the essays considered in this book, whatever else they are about, take as their subject the conditions of the encounter, of how the world is met and handled. The essay is a genre interested in its own framing, and—through its evasiveness—in proposing alternatives to frames already given.

The Frame of this Book

In building its picture of tact, this book is framed by many phrases and philosophies: from Georg Simmel’s sociology to Roland Barthes’s criticism, to Stanley Cavell’s moral perfectionism, to Eve Sedgwick and Leo Bersani’s queer theories, to Jacques Rancière’s work on the pedagogy of ignorance. I have begun from the claims of the essayists this book studies before seeking resonances in other (often later) works. But there is one theoretical approach that has framed this book’s attention more than others, and that is psychoanalysis: as it was invented by Sigmund Freud, but in particular as it was developed in

Britain in the twentieth century by the “middle group” of analysts, who include Donald Winnicott and Marion Milner. I will conclude this introduction with a brief account of this approach and indicate why this book turns in its last chapter from five nineteenth-century essayists to a twentieth-century psychoanalyst.

Freud is famous for inventing a technique of interpretation. The seemingly inconsequential or recalcitrant aspects of someone’s life (their dreams, or slips of the tongue or physical symptoms, like a tic, or a persistent cough) are interpreted and given a meaning, which would reveal something previously hidden about the patient’s inner self, personal history, desires, and traumas. But also, by proposing a listening encounter that encouraged his patients to freely associate—to think out loud, to say whatever came into their heads, without suffering judgment or ordinary social consequences—Freud invented a way to take people seriously without taking them personally. Through his clinical setting, Freud created a frame for an experience in which a person might come freely to new relations, ideas, and assumptions, which might, in the most fortunate cases, liberate the patient from the ones (the “symptoms”) that caused intolerable suffering. As many critics have pointed out, however, Freud can appear far from tactful in his case histories. Freud’s zeal for interpretation at times appears to impinge on any freedom of association. Psychoanalysis has seemed coercive to many critics—as bullying people into offering evidence from their private lives for a prefabricated dogma about sexuality, which, far from liberating anyone, only reinforces already unequal power relations.³⁰

Winnicott, in a 1954 paper, explicitly addresses these two sides to Freud’s work, the interpretative and the situational. Freud’s technique could be divided into its hermeneutic method, by which “material presented by the patient is to be understood and to be interpreted,” on the one hand, and into “the setting in which the work is carried through,” on the other.³¹ This framing function of the “setting,” Winnicott remarks, had more rarely been attended to, and only acknowledged broadly as something supplementary—as merely the “art” of the clinician. But Winnicott emphasizes how revolutionary was Freud’s invention of a clinical setting for therapy, in which at a stated time, a number of times a week, Freud put himself at the service of his patient and would be reliably there, awake and attentive, in a room dedicated to the analysis. In this situation, “the analyst is much more reliable than people are in ordinary life; on the whole punctual, free from temper tantrums, free from compulsive falling in love, etc.” The analyst does not take desires and dreams of the patient personally: “the absence of the talion reaction can be counted on.” This is a world without retribution. Most therapeutically, the analyst simply “survives,” by showing up week after week, unperturbed by fantasies, loves and hatreds.³²

The “setting” is not just a matter of place and time, but also of how the analyst handles the patient: somehow personally and impersonally at once, with a care that allows the boundaries of subjectivity and objectivity, the personal and impersonal, truth and fiction, to be held in suspension, in a safe-enough environment. Winnicott calls this process “holding,” and analogizes it to the care of a mother for an infant. In this environment, the patient has a chance to “reveal himself to himself.” Such holding grants patients, if all goes well, a freedom to play, to experiment with their relationships to the world. It cultivates what Winnicott calls “illusion,” and a “transitional area of experiencing,” a mediating area between subject and object, which separates and joins people at the same time.³³ The “first human aesthetic,” claims the analyst Christopher Bollas, is the “aesthetic of handling” an infant receives from its mother, and from which it is encouraged to develop a fundamental connection to and a “style of being” with others in the world.³⁴ Plenty of adults, this version of psychoanalysis assumes, have not had a chance at this development because their environment has not been good enough. A tact of handling provides the conditions in which it may occur.

The theory of transitional and middle spaces, and their relationship to creativity and mental health, is one direction of travel for tact after the nineteenth century. The middle group put a tactful, essayistic sensibility—what Pater called a “beautiful way of handling things”—to therapeutic use, and they produced a theoretical elaboration of the kinds of experience tactfulness encourages. Chapter 6 explores the connection between aesthetic experience and a clinical tact. Milner was an essayist before she was an analyst and, like others in the middle group, deeply influenced by Romantic and post-Romantic British literature. She played a central role in conceiving of the idea of transitional experience: it was, we will see, through her own drawing practice that she was able to describe the experience for which Winnicott would later coin the term.

But there are other directions too. I have tried to keep in mind various contexts and afterlives for the tactful essay while writing this book, and the different modes of handling they may require. Tact touches on questions of education and whether it is measured by experience or results; on criticism and its relationship to close or distant, depth or surface reading; on the relationship between liberal politics and identity politics; and on the relationship between art and method.³⁵ And it touches on the question of social mediation now, when technology promises to make interactions—and all manner of choices about other people—more efficient, by providing as much knowledge as possible in the advance of a new encounter. In writing a criticism of tact, I have sought evocation before information. I will consider this book successful if the reader, taking it into her own hands, makes her own uses of it.