

Christopher Bollas

BEING A CHARACTER

*Psychoanalysis and
Self Experience*

"In this extraordinary book, Bollas depicts how the unconscious enters into the experience of self and structures the meaning of our inanimate and human environments. For Bollas, the self can be a generative asylum that allows the individual to play with and sample aspects of reality. With great skill and charm Bollas brings a fresh perspective to many central issues in psychoanalysis such as character formation and the creative process. *Being a Character* demonstrates again that Bollas is among the most original of contemporary psychoanalytic authors."

Arnold H. Modell, M.D.

"*Being a Character* is an extraordinarily rich and original book about what human subjectivity feels like, how it makes a world, how the world makes it... Christopher Bollas is one of the most stimulating and useful writers about psychology working in the English language today."

Robert Hass

"An original interpreter of the Winnicottian legacy, Christopher Bollas brilliantly illuminates the realm of psychic creativity – the individual making of meaning. Few other psychoanalytic writers have been able to range so widely between conscious and unconscious, theory and subjective experience, reflection and emotion."

Jessica Benjamin, Ph.D.

"Christopher Bollas is that rarest of psychoanalysts who can blend the cool linear scientific ego seamlessly with the flowing warmth of poetic self to evoke the ineffable complexity of lived experience. In *Being a Character* he takes us on a journey along the frontiers of self knowledge that becomes at the same time a deeply penetrating excursion into the depths of subjectivity. After immersing myself (my self) into Bollas's multifaceted world and self, I resurfaced enriched and enhanced."

Ernest S. Wolf, M.D.

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Introduction

We are all familiar with that arresting moment when a particular scent seems to call us from some remote village in our childhood, almost as if we can reach through the past and touch the essence of a distant self experience. Sometimes we will hear a piece of music that was popular during a very special time of our life and this too seems to elicit within us not so much a memory as an inner psychic constellation laden with images, feelings, and bodily acuities. However much we may try to tell someone about what is happening to us—"Oh, that smell, it's a flower that was in my garden when I was a child!"—we shall fail to convey the texture of our inner experience.

But we can learn something about the nature of all self experience from such intense evocative moments. For without giving it much thought at all we consecrate the world with our own subjectivity, investing people, places, things, and events with a kind of idiomatic significance. As we inhabit this world of ours, we amble about in a field of pregnant objects that contribute to the dense psychic textures that constitute self experience. Very often we select and use

objects in ways unconsciously intended to bring up such imprints; indeed, we do this many times each day, sort of thinking ourself out, by evoking constellations of inner experience. At the same time, however, the people, things, and events of our world simply happen to us, and when they do, we are called into differing forms of being by chance. Thus we oscillate between thinking ourself out through the selection of objects that promote inner experience and being thought out, so to speak, by the environment which plays upon the self.

In this respect, then, the objects of our world are potential forms of transformation. When we select any series of objects—such as listening to a particular record, then telephoning a particular person, then reading from a particular book—we transform our inner experience by eliciting new psychic textures that bring us into differing areas of potential being. By studying the structural effect of an object's impact on the self, which means thinking more about the different potential transformational effects of an object, we will be able to deepen our understanding of the nature of human life. Thus I have found it rather surprising that in "object relations theory" very little thought is really given to the distinct structure of the object which is usually seen as a container of the individual's projections. Certainly objects bear us. But ironically enough, it is precisely *because* they hold our projections that the structural feature of any one object becomes even more important, because we also put ourself into a container that upon re-experiencing will process us according to its natural integrity. For example, if I put a feeling of joy derived from early adolescent skills in baseball into a piece of music—such as Schubert's C Major Symphony—and if that same week I project an erotic response to my girlfriend into Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, then encountering these objects in adult life may elicit the self experiences stored in the objects; but equally, the musical

experience and the literary process are different types of object, each with its own "processional potential," by which I mean that employing the one or the other will involve me in a different form of subjective transformation, deriving from the integrity of the object's structure. It is my view that psychoanalysis, among other disciplines, can be enriched if we develop a philosophy of the object's integrity which enables us to consider what forms we choose for the psychic texture of the self.

Having looked carefully at how we are brought into particular psychic states by choosing special objects of effect, I turn my attention in the first part of the book to the psychoanalytical situation, because it is where two people, occupying this most interesting space, select narrative and mental objects to bring about inner states in one another. If a patient tells me about having lunch with her mother and describes the meal in graphic detail, I am brought into the experience of eating, and if then she tells me about taking a flying lesson, I am put into a different imagining. In this book I argue that most of what transpires in a psychoanalysis—as in life itself—is unconscious. The psychoanalyst, although expert in the deconstruction of particular symptoms, transference enactments, and mental processes, is nonetheless fundamentally excluded from the patient's inner experience. This should not be news to the clinician. It was, after all, one of Freud's major points about the unconscious that it could only be known by derivative, and if we extend his theory of unconscious processes to self experience, then its essence is only fractionally knowable by the subject's own consciousness, and thus less conveyable to the other. But as they work upon preconsciously designated tasks, the analyst and the patient engage in tens of thousands of unconscious communications that each will only partially understand as crucial to the patient's use of psychoanalysis. In time the two participants create psychoanalysis together,

and quite profound changes occur in both people, although we have paid more attention to the mutative shifts in the analysand than to those in the analyst. That is, no doubt, as it should be. But I devote several chapters in this book to an examination of just how analyst and analysand unconsciously work together to develop new psychic structures which the patient can then use to radically alter his or her life.

The second part of the book contains individual, free-standing chapters that echo themes established in Part I and they may be read in any order. Each essay is an effort to put a very particular kind of self experience into words, whether it is the cruising homosexual's odd experience in a place of promiscuity, the tragic madness of the female cutter, the demented ferocity of the Fascist state of mind, or every person's self experience as a member of his or her historical epoch, which I call generational consciousness. The reader will note that I periodically narrate my own life history and my own nature to investigate or to argue a particular topic. I believe this is because, at certain moments, I have needed to conjure my own self experience in order to write about a topic—to be informed from within, so to speak, rather than to think about the particular self state by discussing a patient. After all, Freud suggested this form for the writing of psychoanalysis in his *Interpretation of Dreams*, a work which includes his own dreams together with those of his patients in an evolutionary dialectic that supports the construction of his theories. I think this is a unique literary form for the writing of psychoanalysis, enabling the reader to participate in that unconscious movement that contributes to a psychoanalyst's clinical practice and informs his creation of psychoanalytic theory.

Of course, Freud knew that he left himself open to a particular kind of reading which would disclose his self deceptions, but the revelation of such blindness is a crucial feature of this literary form. Naturally I am well aware that

my essays leave me in a similar position, but if we are to open up the writing of psychoanalysis to bring it closer to the nature of psychoanalytic practice—and to the to-and-fro of blindness and insight—then it is a literary risk well worth taking.