“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.
We can learn much about any person’s self experiencing by observing his selection of objects, not only because object choice is lexical and therefore features in the speech of character syntax, but also because it may suggest a variation in the intensity of psychic experience that each person chooses. If we live an active life, then we will create a subjectified material world of psychic significance that both contains evocative units of prior work and offers us new objects that bring our idiom into being by playing us into our reality.

Living our life inevitably involves us in the use of objects that vary in their individual capacities to evoke self experience. In the previous chapter I stressed how some objects are endowed with our states of self during the course of our life, mnemonic objects that sometimes elicit prior states of being. They possess, in addition, a use-structure, as the employment of any particular thing brings about an inner profile of psychic experience specific to its character. Objects are also conceptually evocative as they bring to mind latent concepts.1 If I play with my son Sacha, I am engaged with...

1. The examination of how objects serve as conceptual signifiers is a vast and difficult area. Lacan’s work is in this area, particularly in his theory of the symbolic. But if we wish to think of how an object—a bank, for example—sponsors a concept/complex matrix, we would have to give priority to the signifier, which Lacan refuses to do. Lacan, however, is interested in an entirely different order of unconsciousness from the one I am studying here; it has to do with the subject’s use of an object to employ the concept latent to the thing. For the time being at least, psychoanalysts are likely to find certain philosophers of cognitive science more useful in exploring this area of unconscious thinking—particularly the work of George Lakoff, such as *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*. Although my use of the word “concept” and Lakoff’s exploration of “categories” of the mind are by no means identical, I think psychoanalysts would benefit from his analysis of the function of mental categories in what for us would be unconscious thought.
an other—my child—who evokes a set of psychical notions sponsored by the concept “child.” If I visit the National Portrait Gallery, this involves me with a different object, which for discussion’s sake I refer to as a set of notions, feelings, internal relations, and use-potentials evoked by the concept “museum.”

Yielding a latent concept, objects suggest psychologically distinct types of self experience, so that when a person employs an object it is of interest to note what is conceptually solicited. Mountain climbing, chamber music playing, snorkeling, and partygoing are different experiences involving different objects and therefore different concepts of one’s being that ideationalize psychologically different forms for being, use, and relating. So as we think of engaging with each of these objects, a different psychic notion of what we shall be doing comes to mind, which operates on conscious, preconscious, and unconscious levels.

Objects can stimulate us in at least six ways:

1. sensationally
2. structurally
3. conceptually
4. symbolically
5. mnemically
6. projectively

They possess a sensational print that will be apprehended by the forms of sensational knowing which we employ: taste, touch, sight, sound, smell. The sensational base of an object testifies to its materiality and to the body ego’s relation to it as a sensational phenomenon.

The structural integrity of an object is partly derived from its atomic specificity and a specific use-potential so that when it is employed it affects us in a manner true to its character. A bicycle is structurally different from a basketball, and using each promotes a unique inner experience.

Objects may also be selectively endowed with prior self experiences and some partly signify episodes in our past, becoming mnemetic objects.

Other objects, however, serve as containers of the dynamically projective, helping us think the different parts of our self and others by using them (i.e., reading a book on Thatcher to process a harsh part of our personality). Mnemetic objects form through a kind of associative projection, as a self state is stored in an object present at the time and part of the person’s experience, such as the sandstone figures on the Paduian street. But projective objects are ephemeral and serve to think the self (and its internal objects) by the projection of parts of the self in the here and now of everyday life.

Finally, as Lacan stresses, objects have names and are part of a symbolic order, so at any one time when we use the object, it joins and evokes other signifiers.

A swing can be apprehended sensationally, using one’s bottom (to sit on it), one’s hands (to hold the chain), and one’s feet (to push off the ground and to move back and forth). As a sensational object it also involves a proprioceptive “grasping” of it, as inner coordinates are a part of its use. An experience-structure, it promotes an inner self episode specific to the process of “swinging.” A mnemonic object for me, it can signify the absence of a two-person relation and the presence of aloneness. As a concept it promotes the ideas of movement (up and down), of play, of childhood, of pleasure, and so forth. As a word in the symbolic order it links to other signifiers (swing: the music of that era, and “swing” of mood), and inevitably to any other words that emerge in association to it.

As lexical elements in the syntax of potential self experi-
ence, we may use each object to conjure a specific state of
self by employing it predominantly for its evocative capability
in any of the above orders. Inevitably the decision as to an
object’s use rests with the unconscious aims of a person, so
if I take my son to a park where he can swing, I may do so
because the word has occurred to me by association, or
because I am in the mood for highs and lows, or because I
saw a swing and its function (to be the object of a child’s
play) appealed to me. However, once I use the object—
either watching my son or sitting on the swing myself—it
will then evoke its print in me according to all six evocative
orders acting in a play of inner states?

Objects, like words, are there for us to express ourself.
We have before us an infinite number of things, which we
may use in our own unique way to meet and to express the
self that we are. Object selection is expression. If on a
Saturday morning I wish to play football with my son rather
than visit the Science Museum with him, it is because that
instinct I believe we have to elaborate ourself chooses the
objects “son” and “football” rather than the objects “son”
and “Science Museum.” Such a choice not only articulates
the self (as its expression); it also encounters the self with its
own integrity and forces the self to further psychic
elaboration.

For example, to play football with my son is to engage
with a child other in a physical activity that sponsors a
complex play of evocative orders. The sensations of football
are different from the sensations of visiting a museum: one
is to be played with aggressively and actively; the other is to
be the place of reflective viewing. Child and football evoke
different concepts (of competition and physical skill) than
the Science Museum (learning about technology). The words
“football” and “science” elicit associative chains of signifiers
moving in very different hermeneutic spaces. Subjectively,
“football” sponsors memories and assumptions in me that
are very different from those parts of me lodged in the
objects “science” and “museum.” These different evocative
orders conjure up different “me’s.”

Objects, as I have said in the previous chapter, often arrive
by chance, and these aleatory objects evoke psychic textures
which do not reflect the valorizations of desire. We have not,
as it were, selected the aleatory object to express an idiom
of self. Instead, we are played upon by the inspiring arrival
of the unselected, which often yields a very special type of
pleasure—that of surprise. It opens us up, liberating an area
like a key fitting a lock. In such moments we can say that
objects use us, in respect of that inevitable two-way interplay
between self and object world and between desire and
surprise.

If we were to study further the intermediate (or third)
area, I think we should find that one important characteristic
of the third area is that the individual uses things while
knowing that the aleatory vector is so prominent that he will
also be played upon by the object. If I go to a concert to
hear a favorite symphony, led by an inventive conductor,
then I shall use the symphonic object as a known structure
to fall into, for processing of my idiom. Frequently, though,
my particular unconscious use of the auditory object will be
surprisingly displaced by the conductor’s imaginative re-
shaping of the object—an occasion that, unanticipated,
throws me into previously unfelt areas in the prior processing
of self through that particular symphonic object.

We know where to find, as it were, third areas which
maximize the interplays of life. A concert, a park, a beach, a sporting event, a party with friends, will serve our need to conjure ourselves through the use of objects to be found there, just as they will delight us with the unexpected.

Forms of Self Experience

As the use of an object conjures self experience, objects "play" upon the many different somatic senses and mental faculties that constitute psychic structure. To simplify this complex issue, let us add that objects play upon different forms of self experiencing, if we are clear by this that a form of self experience is a psychosomatically distinct means of processing self states, each form fundamentally different from other forms, each constituting a capacity for the person's experiencing of his idiom evoked by the object.

Thus far I have looked at how an object is part of a psychosomatic lexicon, so that it can be used sensationally, structurally, conceptually, symbolically, mnemically, and projectively to provide a syntax for self experience. Now I shall examine the process from a different perspective. As objects have this lexical potential, are there not different forms of inner experience for differentiated use of this evocative lexicon? Some of the categories of such experience are already suggested by the nature of each evocative process, as the sensual effect depends initially, for example, on the senses.

I do not intend to examine the distinct forms for self experience in detail, but some discussion is necessary to make my point clear. For as we process our units of experience in different ways, we may represent an episode visually, linguistically, somatically, sonically, gesturally, or interpersonally. Each of these basic forms for self experience obeys its own peculiar laws of unconscious representation.

Each form gives rise to many types of communication homologous with it: visualizing lends itself to painting, wording to writing, gesture to dance, and so forth.

We might say that specific modes of representation (e.g., writing, speaking, dancing, painting) are the expression of form potentials. Painting is only a potential forming of experience. So too are dancing, writing, and musical composition. Each form potential is neurologically, cognitively, and psychically distinct, with a profile composed of many unique features. To paint, dance, poeticize, or compose an experience is to select a mode of representation with its own unique aesthetic. Which mode one chooses not only results in a different type of representation; it also suggests an entirely different experience in self expression.

Artists are gifted only in their exceptional use of otherwise ordinary human capacities, usually because they know more about the intelligence of form.² Note how Barbara Hepworth, the English sculptor, credits her forming ability to her sense of the landscape which characterized her childhood.

All my early memories are of forms and shapes and textures. Moving through and over the West Riding landscape with my father in his car, the hills were sculptures; the roads defined the form. Above all, there was the sensation of moving physically over the contours of fulnesses and concavities, through hollows and over peaks—feeling, touching, seeing, through mind and hand and eye. The sensation has never left me. I, the sculptor, am the landscape. (1)

Hepworth links the sculptor's representational medium with her physical movements over the contours of her childhood landscape. The roads apparently defined the form. The traveling car provided her with a sensation of

² In Frames of Mind, Howard Gardner argues that there are multiple intelligences; he examines in convincing detail the separate intelligences that go into linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily kinesthetic, and personal intelligence. In my view it is only a short step from this argument to the notion that there are distinct types of unconscious thinking.
moving over and through the land contours, and that sensation (a combination of several senses) became a psychic structure that now generates its own form. As Hepworth runs her hands over a piece of stone, giving it contour with her chisel and mallet, and opening up apertures for the play of light, she reshapes the object world so that external reality now bears the mark of psychic structure, the object a token of the work of two realities.

Alexander Calder believes his sense of form derives from another object: "I think that . . . the underlying sense of form in my work has been the system of the universe, or part thereof . . . . The idea of detached bodies floating in space, of different sizes and densities, perhaps of different colors and temperatures, and surrounded and interlarded with wisps of gaseous condition, and some at rest, while others move in peculiar manners, seem to me the ideal source of form" (561). This is not to say that Calder's works represent the universe—or that Hepworth's sculptures represent West Riding or Cornwall. But both artists do say that certain features of the object world have had profoundly evocative effects and have in a way constituted transformative self experiencings, such that by the time of artistic maturity (or capability) they are presenting the subjective effect of this evocative object.

Remarks such as those by Hepworth and Calder are often taken to mean that art imitates the natural world. But clearly Hepworth and Calder find metaphors of their own body and sensibility "in" the natural world, landscapes that are always partly dreamscapes, that objectify their personal idiom and in turn serve as a continuous point of reference with an evocative potential to it. In other words, Hepworth's idiom finds a metaphor of its form intelligence in the landscape, while for Calder the universe objectifies his own forming intelligence.

Choosing a form is like taking a journey. Do I travel through experience in the form of dialogue, of poetry, of dance, of painting, or of music? A form potential is a collecting structure for the representation of inner experience. To my mind, the choice of form is a kind of psychic route, as each subject, possessing many different forms for the collecting of experience, renders himself in a different medium, so that playing with the forms means simultaneously being played by them. The choice of representational form is an important unconscious decision about the structuring of lived experience, and is part of the differential erotics of everyday life.

The Sense of Mind

It is now possible to maintain that each of these unconscious means of thinking (in the initial experiencing and in the acts of representation) is a form for rendering all experiences available to the self. Further, as these different systems are coterminous with one another, the subject is an opera of unconscious forms, experiencing and representing life in dense inner textures of psychic apprehension. It is of interest that when Freud considered the different unconscious statuses of visual images, words, and feelings in The Ego and the Id, he addressed something of the issue we now face—namely, the nature of a deeply unconscious internal place for the intermodal registrations and representations of reality.

He believed that we have internal perceptions which "yield sensations of processes arising in the most diverse and certainly also in the deepest strata of the mental apparatus." I think such sensations of processes are inner senses of the workings of the different parts of the mind, a sense of their coterminous thoughts of reality—arguably a Freudian basis for a concept of the sense of self. "Very little is known about
these sensings and feelings," he continues, "... they are more primordial, more elementary, than perceptions arising externally and they can come about even when consciousness is clouded." While Freud is aiming to identify what elsewhere he terms endogenous perception, I think he defines our inner sense of the aesthetic work of the mind. He concludes: "These sensations are multi-locular, like external perceptions; they may come from different places simultaneously and may thus have different or even opposite qualities" (21–22). Very close to arguing that we possess a "multi-locular" sense, derived from a psychic reality constituted from the many different forms of experience, in the Ego and the Id, Freud later emphasizes the work accomplished by the unconscious ego in the construction of psychic reality, and to my way of thinking, this process—the work of the unconscious ego—suggests a theory which addresses the synthetic arrangements of the multi-locular sense.

The great mass of our psychosomatic ego work will never reach consciousness. When it does, it will appear in psychic life through the modes we use to represent the dense texture of our inner experiencings. The representational unconscious is hermeneutically dynamic: it is a making meaningful of the world. But the work that characterizes the unconscious ego is the nonrepresentational unconscious that selects and uses objects in order to disseminate the self into experiencings that articulate and enrich it. The aim here is not to create meanings or to interpret reality as such, but to negotiate with reality in order to gain experience of objects that release the self into being.

The unconscious ego possesses the logic that chooses the subject's forms of experience, which I have called the eros of form. It determines what form will contain and process specific mental contents. If an analysand dramatically enacts a fear of castration by compulsively checking that all the doors in his house are shut, then the ego chooses the dramatic form to represent this mental content. However, this specific mental content could also have been represented (alternatively) in the verbal form (with a patient frequently altering the word "door"), in the visual category (by dreaming of doors), in the somatic register (by flushing red in the face and having an anxiety attack when opening doors for his business partner, for example), etc. The intelligence particular to this unconscious process is that skill in choosing the forms by which to live particular units of experience. Sensing which combination of forms to assemble to process an episode or which forms of representation to utilize for subsequent renderings is the most important task accomplished by this intelligence and is its pleasure. Clearly, pathology in the ego will reflect itself in the repetitive selection of certain forms for such self-experiencing, just as psychic well-being is reflected in an ego skill that facilitates the diverse experiencing and expression of the subject's idiom.

In this chapter I have outlined a differentiation of the evocative potential of any object, in order to consider more carefully the processive effect of an object when solicited in any one moment of use. Naturally an object may be subjected to any combination of formal uses in the effort to express the self through the finding of experience. I have also considered some of the ways in which the subject uses the object, guided by a conviction that the radical difference of forms of representation suggests equally distinct means of psychic apprehension and process. If I have been successful in sketching these two places in the dialectic—the ego's range of unconscious forms for selected self experience and the object's intrinsic range of human use functions—then I may have added to our appreciation of what I mean by psychic text(ure): how the ego chooses not only what aspect of an object to use but also what subjective mode to employ in the use. Add to this the aleatory arrival of objects and the urgent demands of the instincts then I believe we gain an even
greater realization of the density of the ego’s aesthetic accomplishment in the setting up of self-experience, just as we have previously admired its skill in constructing the dream.

**The Play Work of Psychoanalysis**

The analyst and his patient are engaged in a highly complex process of bringing what is unconscious into consciousness. Taking for granted these models of the mind and of technique that aim to conceptualize the differing valorizations of that movement from unconsciousness to consciousness, I now wish to add a different perspective—one that would be meaningless were it not attached to the other views of the movement toward meaning, but one which may enhance our appreciation of certain types of work within an analysis.

I refer to a special type of mutually unconscious work conducted by both participants in a psychoanalysis. Although I shall discuss this further in the following chapters, in considering how objects evoke differing states of self in the subject who uses the object, it is pertinent to stress that both analyst and patient are constantly evoking differing elements in each other. When an analyst speaks to a patient, he may have a clear idea in his mind exactly what he wishes to say to the patient, and it may make perfect analytical sense. But we know only too well that the analysand will be affected by virtually every interpretation in quite unique ways (and how could it be otherwise?). Each interpretation evokes associations, categories of thinking, and self-states just as it promotes a subjective movement in the analysand that will ultimately deliver more of the analysand’s idiom of thinking than the analyst’s originating contribution.

At the moment of commenting on a dream image, or asking a question, or forming an interpretation, when the analyst quite rightly may assume he is objectifying the analysand’s disseminated subjectivity, he is immediately launching the patient, and the analysis, into a new vector of associative play and work, as his comments evoke complex affective, ideational, memorial, somatic, and cognitive workings in the analysand.

So although, as I have argued, each ego possesses its own aesthetic intelligence, when engaged in human interaction it recognizes a place of intercommunicating that it knows quite well, where the effect of the other’s evocations of one’s self, rather than being placed into an evolving meaning, is open to the diverse effect of such an action. The ego knows, as it were, that units of meaning are always dispersed and scattered through the mental actions we term displacement, substitution, and symbolization. This is its habitat. Its language. And in the interactions of two subjects both possess egos that work upon each other in exactly this way; specifically, any subject who receives the other’s word and presence is open to evocations of self that cohere and then scatter in the disseminations ordered by the ego that processes the meanings of life. As such, any two egos know that to communicate with one another is to evoke each other, and in that moment, to be distorted by the laws of unconscious work. To be touched by the other’s unconscious is to be scattered by the winds of the primary process to faraway associations and elaborations, reached through the private links of one’s own subjectivity. To know the other and to be known as much an act of unconscious evocation that parts the subjects and announces the solitude of the self as it is an act of intelligent comprehension in which one can put one’s knowing of the self and the other into coherent thought and structure of language.

In Chapter 4 I shall discuss how certain lasting psychic structures are formed in a psychoanalysis. To understand my emphasis on the unconscious factors contributing to such structures, it is important to bear in mind the means by which two subjects evoke one another, inaugurating a recip-
rocal engagement in simple and complex self experiencing, in which both participants engage in moments of deep experiencing and episodes of reflective objectification. This is what I term play work, to honor the to-and-fro of work and play, of reflecting and experiencing, that takes place between the two participants in a psychoanalysis.

But now an interlude, as I consider just how our idiom informs the other and leaves a trace of its character.

"Something—which we could call ruminativeness, speculation, a humming commentary—is going on unnoticed in us always, and is the seed-bed of creation," writes Helen Vendler: "Keats called it a state of 'dim dreams,' full of 'stirring shades, and baffled beams.' " She quotes Wordsworth:

Those obstinate questionings
Of sense and outward things
Falling from us, vanishings,
Blank misgivings of a creature
Moving about in worlds not realised (226)

In moments of consciousness we are partly aware of these dim dreams that stir within us, even though such inner senses lack the memorable precision of the dream content. Our inner world, the place of psychic reality, is inevitably less coherent than our representations of it; a moving medley of part thoughts, incomplete visualizations, fragments of dialogue, recollections, unremembered active presences, sexual states, anticipations, urges, unknown yet present needs, vague intentions, ephemeral mental lucidities, unlived partial actions: one could go on and on trying to characterize the complexity of subjectivity, and yet the adumbration of its