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Book Review Essay: “The Evocative Object World” by Christopher Bollas

(London and New York, 2009)

In the influential “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena”, published in 1951, D. Winnicott introduced a concept that was destined to receive widespread acclaim; indeed, to a certain extent, it instigated radical changes in analytic technique and even in our conception of mental functioning. In that paper, Winnicott asserted that the object, the real – that is, what is outside of the subject – may be neither completely outer nor completely inner. Instead, it may occupy an intermediate space (hence transitional) in which it is both present and absent, real and imaginary, concrete and psychic, irreducible to the subject though assimilable to his or her inner life.

This paradox manifests in a real, concrete, tangible object, whose sensory configuration, form, and very existence exactly as it is and no differently offers itself to the subject as the personification of a presence, which materializes in that object although absent in reality. In short, the transitional object is a real object that activates an illusion: the fantasy that the missing object is in fact present, even when the subject knows full well the object is not truly present. In the blanket sucked by a child or the teddy bear placed under the pillow and without which the child cannot sleep, the child creates the physical presence of the mother in a very real and sensory fashion, while yet perfectly aware that the teddy bear is not the mother.

Winnicott very carefully clarifies the distinction between a transitional object and a symbol. In fact, symbols exist entirely as part of the inner life, joining two thoughts or two representations or two psychic needs. Transitional objects, on the other hand, are real and physical. Only the specific characteristics of their “reality” allow them to be used for the illusion, providing a physical presence to what is absent and filling the void left by the negative, by the transitory, by that which is no longer or which has yet to come. In another work in 1971 entitled “Playing: Its Theoretical Status in the Clinical Situation”, followed by many others on the same subject, Winnicott further developed the notion, proposing the idea that play is a dramatization of the inner life, a ritual, practice, or procedure that makes it possible to act out scenes from inner life through real, concrete, physical, dynamic objects. In effect, playing is the real activation, and the physical manipulation, of transitional objects, so that they become instruments for the dramatization or acting out of both conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions.

I believe that this was the theory that struck Green, who recognized the concept of the transitional object as providing a means to cope with the “negative”, that lack or emptiness at the base of psychic life which sets in motion a tragic and essentially doomed desire for contact with the object.

Christopher Bollas is unanimously credited for having dedicated the bulk of his attention and clinical activity to furthering our understanding of the many implications of Winnicott’s insights, formulating his own original and fertile version.

It can be said, I believe, that a large part of Bollas' research concerns the value of the world of real objects and helps explain the process through which a real object becomes the receptacle or living container of an important part of a subject's psychic life. In his works, objects come alive because they are simultaneously personifications of the inner life, receptacles of memories, desires, impulses, as well as ways of thinking, representing, and fantasizing that can only develop in the presence of the real object. The vitality of these objects, their power of expression and activation, stems from the fact that thought cannot occur without real objects, that real objects are supports to psychic life, containers of emotions and fantasies. Indeed, the real object "gives form" to thoughts and fantasies.

Psychic life structures itself upon emotions and experiences that are often so intense, or so indistinct, that they cannot be communicated, or even described to oneself. Thus, communicative spaces are needed that allow these types of overly-intense or indistinct experiences to take shape, to assume a form, a substance and a solidity. Exchanging objects means giving oneself experiences and emotions in a concrete, physical and therefore stable form that has the potential to survive over time.

Bollas adds two further elements to this very dynamic, affective way of conceiving the transitional object, an object whose reality makes it capable of filling the space between absence and presence, giving life to a third live object, which gives form to both the subject's experience and the missing object. A brooch, a painting, a pen, or a kitchen utensil in a supermarket simultaneously condense themselves, that is, the pure and simple object, the absent figures that they make present – a mother, a beloved woman, a former era – and the dark, confused emotion that those figures arouse in us.

The first element is the "unthought known" described in detail in "The Shadow of the Object". An object leaves a mnemonic trace of itself in us, which is sometimes more, sometimes less conscious. However, the object also leaves a shadow of itself, and more precisely, an indistinct but strong emotion that persists in the absence of the object itself. Although we may have no clear awareness of the connection, this shadow speaks to us of the presence of the object and of its absence, not as a remembered form, but as an emotion left inside us. My mother's skirt, my father's pen, his tie, a cooking pot or a plate allow the shadow to materialize as an actual thing at a later moment. The known emotion becomes a conscious one; that is, it progresses from an unconscious experience into a form that can be shared.

The process is not automatic. If traumatic events and negative experiences of great import have occurred, it is possible that the "presentification" of the emotion will be blocked by hate or fear, with the resulting defense mechanisms activated by the hate and fear. Working through the trauma allows the subject to approach the unthought known while an identification of the transitional object allows it to be shared.

The second element concerns the aesthetic factor that Bollas often mentions in his work. He defines the aesthetic experience as the result of being powerfully captured by an object, which provokes a violent emotion of being absorbed into it, accompanied however, paradoxically, by a sense of detachment. In effect, according to Bollas, the aesthetic emotion joins the two opposites of maximum detachment and maximum union. Once again, the transitional object shows its double nature: the present is made absent and the absent is made present. The transitional object takes the place of the missing object, thereby activating a sort of inner joy and parallel nostalgia. Winnicott calls this aesthetic emotion an "ego-orgasm", which Bollas refers to frequently, in what we could call an "intense melancholic joyfulness".

All these considerations are synthesized and refined in this last book, "*The Evocative Object World*". It could be said that all the main themes dear to Winnicott are brought to completion here in an extended form that communicates affectively and powerfully. In fact, the book approaches the themes discussed above from various different angles, a particularly interesting one being an architectural perspective. It seems that some architectural spaces, thanks to their particular characteristics, are capable of harboring otherwise inexpressible emotions, like a sort of spatial music. Some people can tell us of these emotions only by showing a place they love, which houses an emotion they cannot communicate in any other way.

But the main theme, referred to in the title, concerns evocation. Bollas' theory is simple but brilliant. It is not possible to truly remember someone or something if there is no real object that allows us to. Only the encounter with something real, says Bollas, allows the memory to unfold and, at the same time, to activate an investment in the future, if the memory is strong and inspiring. Furthermore, evocation is an activity that indicates the acceptance of the sense of time and is thus the result of having achieved something, of a successful process. Hence we speak of an elaborated mourning process, of the object's return to life in the subject's inner life.

The fascinating thing, as Bollas is constantly reminding us but which can never be over-emphasized, is that all this is made possible by an object in the flesh and blood. In essence, Bollas tells us that we need real objects and that life is made not exactly of the stuff of dreams but of the stuff of transitional objects, that is, objects capable of activating in us aesthetic, even ethical emotions along with, perhaps, emotions associated with wholeness and universality.