Zeroing in on Evocative Objects
Sherry Turkle (Ed.), Evocative Objects, MIT Press, 2007, 352 pp

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Published online: 20 November 2008
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Sherry Turkle’s collection Evocative Objects is a compulsively readable volume. In her own words, it “began with a seminar series at the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self and became a way to capture the intellectual enthusiasms of that enterprise” (p. viii). Each chapter focuses on one author’s fascination with a specific object or kind of object. The first five are an indicative sample: a cello, knots, archival documents of Le Corbusier, stars, and keyboards. Along with the unusual subject matter of the book comes an unusual style, for while the authors gathered here are mostly academics, they do not write in a typical academic manner. Instead, they reflect on childhood artifacts with starry eyes, and confess to traumas in family life with an often stunning intimacy. While it may seem remarkable that commerce with inanimate objects should provoke such a barring of souls, there is no denying the evidence: the reader somehow feels on closer terms with these authors after sharing a few pages about comic books or stuffed animals than if rifling through their diaries by night. Perhaps human interiority is less hidden than we suspect. Perhaps friendship is built not on the privileged exchange of censored inner riddles, but on a shared obsession with the mystery of publicly accessible things. Despite the intimate tone of many of the pieces, the hard kernel of objectivity required by the format inoculates the participants against any pedantic narcissism of the known postmodernist type.

Turkle’s phrase “evocative objects” is not meant as a loose description, but as a technical term. In what follows I will zero in on where evocative objects might be, and attempt to determine their possible importance. One obvious complication is that the book is not a solo-authored treatise, as if Turkle were single-handedly defining a new concept and could be held personally responsible for its development. This is an anthology, after all, and Turkle frames the work with an unusually light touch. Our sole guidance from the editor comes from an 8-page

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introduction and a final 20-page wrap-up. With 34 different authors speaking in between, there is little chance for the volume to define evocative objects with absolute precision. Hence, the reader ought to view it more like an anthology from some local music scene, in the manner of "Seattle: The Grunge Years" or "The Best of Bristol Trip-Hop." The difference is that musical collections of this sort are generally produced after the fact, in a spirit of nostalgia. The present anthology, by contrast, is apparently an attempt to launch a new intellectual sound. While many readers will join me in finding the individual chapters a pleasure to read, the success of the book depends less on its numerous moments of enjoyment than on whether the concept "evocative objects" proves viable. I will try to determine the meaning of this phrase by focusing on Turkle's opening and closing remarks, and on 10 of the 34 chapters. These 10 are selected not because they are my favorites (some of which will not appear in this article at all), but because they pinpoint additional features of evocative objects that complement those identified by Turkle herself.

Sherry Turkle on Evocative Objects

T urkle proposes a meditation not just on objects, but on evocative ones. She provides a long list of recent ancestors for this concept: Baudrillard, Derrida, Haraway, Freud, Lacan, Latour, Le Corbusier, Lévi-Strauss, and Marx are all drafted into service. Yet none of these figures is granted a dominant role for the theme of evocative objects, which suggests that Turkle is feeling her way toward something new. Indeed, we generally find the weakest moments of her chapters whenever they retreat toward some familiar academic foxhole, with my least favorite being the closing remark that evocative objects entail that "we will need to tell ourselves different stories" (p. 326). A disappointing final lesson for a book about objects: it's all just another narrative, the Emerald City is just a dream, and the crystal missed its revenge because postmodernism swallowed it whole. Yet the majority of Turkle's remarks, like the book as a whole, teach the opposite lesson, for it is objects themselves that move stories in certain directions rather than others. As Turkle herself proclaims, objects are not just useful instruments or esthetic lucky charms (p. 5). They are not symptoms of materialist excess, shallow hobbyism, or perverse fetish (p. 6). Instead, they bring philosophy down to earth (p. 8). And philosophy needs it! By my count, only two of the 35 authors included in the book are associated with university Departments of Philosophy. This is not the result of collegial narrowness on Turkle's part, but is instead a symptom of the minimal pressure on present-day philosophers to deal with the recalcitrance of objects. In other disciplines, awareness of such pressures is a basic requirement of professional honesty: it is no surprise if a neurologist takes neurons seriously and adjusts to their contours, or if a civil engineer carefully tests the load-bearing capacity of different pylons. But for post-Kantian philosophy, the temptation remains to view objects as empty productions of the human self, stripped of autonomous force. Yet the sheer concreteness of the objects found in this volume challenges the tendency of philosophy to formalize inanimate things out of the picture. For Turkle, this object-oriented shift also does the political work of removing stigma from the "concrete

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thinking" of primitives, women, and children (pp. 6–7). Her list of the liberated underclass might easily be expanded to include animals, since they too remain under indictment for insufficient powers of abstraction.

More generally, we can sense from this book that a style of thinking based on evocative objects would place increased value on fascination and sincerity, as opposed to the transcendent posture of constant ironic critique and self-reflexive miming that has forged the basic personality type of the humanities in recent decades. There is little room for double quotation marks and triple parentheses and seventeen footnotes per page if one is trying to come to grips with an apple. To be specific, it is difficult to imagine Jacques Derrida writing a feasible chapter for this book, whose entire style is a refusal of his well-worn methods of bibliographic reverie and punning hyper-collage. Indeed, Turkle's frequent appeal to “bricolage” should be welcomed, since in this volume it never seems to slide toward collage, its partial homonym (p. 4). The point of this book is not to gather numerous pop culture artifacts at random and thereby subvert linear power narratives with scattered specks of transgressive materiality. Those slogans now sleep in the morgue, and it is little wonder that almost none of the authors in this collection come anywhere near them. Instead, each of the essays tries to come to terms with a bona fide object that partially resists our mastery of it. Bricolage deserves the same status as engineering, not because building tunnels and bridges is just another form of discursive collage, but because dealing with everyday objects requires as much scrupulous integrity as public engineering (p. 7). Even cellos and love letters can bear weight or collapse during storms, with results no less severe than those of shattered bridges. There is a principle of reality at work in objects, not just a principle of narrative.

Along with concreteness, Turkle observes, evocative objects serve as companions for emotional and intellectual life (p. 5). In some cases they seem to fuse into union with us (p. 7). They are not used up by any particular purpose, but are fluid and flexible in their roles (p. 6). Pushing the emotional aspect a bit further, they even have erotic possibilities, serving as potential investments for the libido (pp. 5, 309). This becomes especially poignant in Turkle's own recollection of objects serving as stand-ins for her absent father, a taboo figure known to the daughter only from a disturbing photograph whose face had been carefully sliced away. In some cases, objects represent paradox, as already hinted by Aristotle when he defined a substance as that which can have different qualities at different times (p. 308). In many cases, Turkle finds that objects are uncanny, meaning that they are not exotic, but strange in their very familiarity (p. 8). Finally, objects serve to break down the usual boundaries between natural and created, human and non-human (p. 326).

To summarize, evocative objects tend to have the following features for Turkle: concreteness, intimacy, fluidity of roles, emotional force, libidinal charge, uncanniness, and the tendency to escape such pigeonholes as "natural," "artificial," and "inhuman." This list is no small achievement, since many of these categories are entirely missed by recent philosophy, just as objects themselves tend to be overlooked as a philosophical theme. Moreover, there is a certain originality to the list: all of the authors cited by Turkle fail to do justice to at least some of these features of objects, and hence it is not easy to choose one obvious forerunner for what this book is trying to do. The evocative object seems to be terra incognita for
human thought. At the end of the day, Freud cannot save us any more than Derrida or Foucault can; their background radiation is faint as we grapple with the axe heads and rolling pins that populate Turkle’s volume. But this incongruity with recent academic heroes is precisely what makes the book so refreshing. After decades of theory backed by no intuition, we now have a vague but powerful central intuition in search of a theory.

The Cello: All Objects are Local

The first chapter of the book gives us a vivid sense of the specific size and location that typify every object. Tod Machover not only basks in memories of his beloved cello, but also draws distinct borders around it. Compress the cello to a smaller size and we obtain the violin, with its confusing tangle of cluttered fingers. Expand the cello and we reach the double bass, which taxes the limits of the human physique (p. 14). (As a traveler I have long had the same feeling about three ex-Hapsburg cities, with Prague playing the role of manageable cello, Krakow the petite violin, and Budapest the bulling double bass.) Like some androgynous champion of ancient myth, the cello combines the range of the male and female human voices (p. 14). To play the cello is just difficult enough to suppress “internal chatter,” but just easy enough to leave the imagination free rein (p. 15).

Physicists often marvel that the universe has precisely the right range of variables to allow for the appearance of intelligent life, and in similar fashion, Machover conceives of the cello as a miracle of perfect variables of size and sound. But Machover does not remain within the organic limits of his instrument. With suddenly recalled rebellion, he sails with his cello toward the music of Sgt. Pepper, risking disapproval from his classically minded parents. He electrifies the cello, subjecting its natural androgyny to multi-track layering (p. 16). He takes it to India, land of the sitar, where it does not seem to have failed (p. 18). Later, the blunt criticisms of a teacher draw Machover’s attention to the possibilities of varying the pressure, speed, and angle of the bow (p. 17). No essay in Turkle’s collection does a better job of pointing to the complexities and potential variations found in even the most familiar of objects. If a simple cello can mimic the human torso, bridge sexual difference, and make pilgrimage to the Ganges, then it is easy to imagine an analogous drama underway in every least lamppost and stone. All objects are local, walled off from the neighboring possibilities that surround them. But every location also contains innumerable gates of passage. The monad may lack windows, but it is encrusted with doors and archways.

Knots: Objects are Articulated

Before reading this book I had always been bored by cellos, and had even been bored by knots. Carol Strohecker’s essay changed my attitude as effectively as the previous one. The one dissatisfying aspect of this chapter is its third-person character. The fascination with knots is mostly projected onto others, leaving the
author in a somewhat privileged stance of neutral describing authority. This preserves a bit of the artificial critical stance that the collection otherwise tends to undermine. Strohecker teaches her younger brother to tie his shoes, and later worries that he may have forgotten his gratitude for this early service. She also teaches a girl named Jill, and puzzles aloud about the girl’s lack of self-assurance. The strongest moments of the chapter come when teacherly authority gives way to a direct description of the knots themselves. “Knot lady,” as Strohecker was justly known to the lucky kids at the MIT Media lab, makes the subject interesting through her own evident enthusiasm for “chains, braids, and spirals,” “weights, textures, and colors,” “arm bends, wrist flicks, hand spams, and fingertip maneuvers,” and “repetitions, alternations, interspersals and entwinements” (p. 24). The simplest knots are translated and redescribed in terms of the most spider-like contortions of human dexterity. The troubled and gifted young Jill is a compelling figure who goes far beyond obsession-compulsion in her tendency “to designate clear anchor points for the string as she tied down new knots,” her “resort to stapling or taping down parts of the string,” and her “wish to articulate and anchor intermediary configurations” (p. 26). Most interesting of all is Jill’s “absorption with knots whose completed state involved motion,” a class of entities previously unknown to me (p. 27). Strohecker’s prose is as crisp as one could wish, especially when it depicts a knot’s articulation into segments and into shifting positions during complicated movements. Avoiding the old saw about the whole preceding the parts, Strohecker shows that an object is something segmented into discrete stages, not a hazy continuum where all blends with all. Instead, her heroine Jill is a sort of quantum theorist of knots, stapling down each step in a knot just as Bohr’s electron is taped down in a discrete orbital shell unless moving directly to the next, with energy released at every step. This chapter reminds us that objects move or develop by sudden jumps, just as Strohecker’s brother learned to tie his shoes in a sudden leap.

The Archive: No Translation of Objects Without Transformation

The third article, by Susan Yee, is included in this review partly for the sake of fairness, since its conclusions are of the sort for which I have little sympathy. Yee consults original documents in the archive of Le Corbusier. Her enjoyment of this activity is damaged by the naïve technological optimism of the curator, who boasts that the entire archive will soon be digitized. The author’s dismay is somewhat regrettable in its one-sided focus on what is lost, with no attention to anything that may be gained. “If I had accessed this drawing from home,” Yee tells us, “I would never have grasped its dimensions, I would never have known that it was stored separately, carefully rolled, that it was dirty with smudges and fingerprints” (p. 34). Not a word on behalf of the newly empowered young student unable to travel to Paris, the improved speed of access to various drawings, or the enhanced possibilities of pattern recognition through use of the new technology’s speed. Instead, we hear the one-sided nostalgia of those who believe that spaces are never created but only destroyed, along with remnants of a traditional faith in the divide between natural and artificial objects.
But while Yee’s conclusions are among my least favorite in the book, the essay remains thought-provoking. She does more than other contributors to follow the translation of objects from one medium into another. With the shift from paper to digital, it is certainly true that we lose smudges on paper, the impressive impact of scale, as well as all trace of physical closeness to Le Corbusier himself. This is admittedly of crucial importance, given that every interaction between humans and objects (or even objects and objects) is a sort of translation. No change from one medium to another will ever perfectly capture all elements of the original item. There is always caricature, distortion, or augmentation when a thing moves from one place to another. Though I personally find Yee’s minus signs too one-sided and dour, nostalgia is surely one piece of the puzzle as we consider the movement of any object into a new medium.

The Glucometer: Objects Might Fuse into Humans

While a surprising number of authors in the volume share their emotional pain, only a handful give expression to physical suffering. The most dramatic of these is Joseph Cevetello, diagnosed as diabetic in 1995, who reflects thoughtfully on his personal glucometer. In a voice too friendly to be called stoical, Cevetello informs us candidly of a range of possible medical disasters that he faces. The solution is “tight control,” in which glucose levels are tested at least four times per day and entries carefully registered in a logbook, along with the maintenance of appropriate regimes of diet and exercise (p. 65). It is somewhat tiring even to read about this routine, let alone live it. It therefore comes as a relief when Cevetello detours to a cybernetic fantasy in which a computerized pancreas would properly adjust the levels of insulin in his body. The power of this fantasy is that, unlike the case of architect’s drawings, every reader must cheer for the fantasy to unfold just as futuristically as Cevetello wishes. Only the grimmest of luddites would wish for a continued parade of “[diabetes] patients in wheel chairs who had lost a foot, others walking with IV’s, and others with eye patches over one, sometimes two, eyes” (p. 65). While we almost automatically celebrate “freedom” and “choice” in human affairs, no one will envy Cevetello’s freedom in keeping glucose logbooks and peering daily into the abyss of limb or kidney loss, blindness, and impotence (p. 65). How much better to let a cyber-pancreas make the decisions for us! Nor does this sweet oblivion of automation belong solely to the future. In everyday life, our relatively small sphere of conscious decision is built on a brute stratum of automatic gestures invisibly performed by objects: such as air traffic radar that allows us to travel with ease, but also the oxygen we breathe and the medulla oblongata that soundlessly regulates heartbeat and breathing. By dreaming of a good human-machine fusion that would address an obvious medical disaster, Cevetello reminds us of all the fusions that have long since existed: human and oxygen, human and intestinal bacteria, human and language, human and planet. Human beings have never been innocent of contact with objects, any more than they are innocent of social interchange with one another. If we speak of “cyborgs” when humans are fused with glucometers and artificial limbs, then we should also speak of

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“cybobjects” when oak leaves fuse with branches and trunks, or when planets enter orbit around a star. Objects have always been fusing and un-fusing with us and with each other. Maybe it takes a fractured relationship to one’s own body, of the kind that Cvetelillo describes, to fully appreciate our need for fusion with objects and realize the futility of the natural/artificial divide.

The Radio: Objects are Political

Though I do not recall Julian Beinart ever using the word “political” in his chapter, it is the most political essay in the volume. But instead of reducing the world to human power struggles, or scoring academic prestige through vague complaints about the status quo, Beinart politicizes objects in the right way: by reminding us that some speak loudly, while others are left to silence despite being scattered everywhere around us. Instead of reducing reality to politics, Beinart ingrains politics in reality itself, simply by reminding us of how badly we oversimplify the landscape of things. As an architecture student, Beinart and his peers had felt a “benighted obligation to innovate culture, a culture produced by Western heroes working for people like themselves. Our ideal was to have Palladio’s clients, princes with whom we could act out our professional narcissism” (pp. 104–5). When reading these spirited words, even a diehard classicist would have to root against the pseudo-Palladios and in favor of Beinart’s hero, a young boy in early 1960s Durban. The boy carried a makeshift fake radio, and answered Beinart’s queries with the Zen-like words: “It can’t play music, but I sing when I carry it” (p. 105). This moment of enlightenment led Beinart on a political quest in the truest sense of the term: an effort to witness objects that had previously been left invisible, discounted as unworthy of notice. What Beinart found were “all kinds of wire bicycles... Honda motorcycles made from panels of sheet tin taken from Castle beer cans... silent wooden Sony cell phones useful only for dreamed conversations” (p. 106). Finally, he is led by jazz musicians to a black township in Johannesburg, where the box-like houses are decorated with “patterns of rectangles, circles, and half-moons... an open circle with a serrated edge [resembling] an industrial rotor hub... [a horse made of] common triangles and half-moons” (p. 107).

The lesson Beinart draws is that “we need a social environment in which we see the value of others and do not consign them and their objects to invisibility” (p. 108). The lesson I drew was related, but with a seemingly more elitist twist. The world swarms with trillions of objects, most of them always remaining invisible—and many of them deservedly so. Who demands fame for bad novels, or willingly promotes the fortunes of obnoxious people? Some objects will always be consigned to invisibility because any society, like any individual, must make decisions about what is most worthy of attention and esteem. The lesson to be drawn from Beinart’s discoveries is not that all objects are equally worthy of admiration (surely he encountered trivial junk in the townships as well), but that some of the worthy ones are shuffled off into undeserved peripheral roles. If we daydream over the illustrations of township houses on page 109, we feel a simultaneous revulsion at the drab gated communities of the dull super-rich, and share in Beinart’s contempt for
their joyless *faux* Palladio *faux* aristocracy. The discovery is not that of universal equality (the gated suburbs *are not* just as beautiful as the township homes) but a presently unfashionable contrast between real and apparent excellence, a contrast best defended by Socrates and Plato. The status quo of visible objects at any given moment will always be partially laced with sophistry, and it is this sophistry that should provoke our militant moods, not the hierarchy of objects as such. After reading Beinart’s essay I feel no especial passion (or even ability) for noticing all street objects equally, but do feel more willing than ever to go to battle for the best of them. The danger of the status quo lies not in its oppressive exclusivity, but in its generally smug mediocrity. The successful becomes the enemy of the good. Objects overshadow one another, and such shadows are inherently political.

**The Axe Head: Objects are Historical**

An object does not just exist in the present moment, but is the result of a long trajectory of incidents. By the same token, it faces another long trajectory of events yet to come, though these are not yet decided and hence more difficult to speak about clearly. David Mitten’s chapter reflects on a 5,000-year-old Native American axe head stored at his grandfather’s Ohio farm. Thanks to his skillful account, the axe head is not just a human historical narrative redolent of the oppressed subaltern culture that made it; the axe head is much bigger than that. It is an object both human and non-human, built primarily from hard gray limestone formed from sediments at the bottom of a sea. Eventually, “these sediments were compacted, lifted, and squeezed over...millions of years” in order for the stone as we know it to emerge (p. 120). The stone was gradually thrust upward and exposed to erosion. It was slowly driven by glaciers beyond the present-day shores of Lake Erie. Tossed mercilessly by waves beneath the ice, it was gradually smoothed into the shape of an oval. Streams then cut at the ground, probably exposing the stone to a passing group of hunters, who painstakingly shaped it into the axe-head we know today. It was then fastened to a wooden handle with rawhide thongs, and finally put to work by humans. Cracks and grooves on the axe-head bear witness to its history. Later, the axe head was found by Mitten’s ancestors, and will pass (we are told) to his daughters after his own life has ended.

The dark thought frequently occurs to me that murder is not merely a crime against an individual being, but also an affront to the millions of years of family history that preceded the individual creature. Every violent death is a tragedy stretching across the millennia. To kill a person would be to retroactively tinge his or her ancestors with sorrow, with a hint of impending familial doom. After reading Mitten’s piece, I now feel a similar grave melancholia even when considering the fate of stones and wood-chips. To smash a stone with a hammer without good purpose would amount to a desecration of countless primordial reef sediments and ancient glacial floes. As Mitten well knows, the story even stretches back beyond the scope of his essay to the formation of the earth and the sun, and to the debris from which both of these emerged. Some future comet now spinning in the distant Oort Cloud may eventually play a role in vaporizing Mitten’s
axe-head, not to mention Ohio as a whole. This does not yield the lesson that “everything is connected to everything else,” but only that everything could be connected to everything else. Until that happens, an object is linked only to its own actual history.

The Stuffed Bunny: Objects have Personality

We now come to Murray the Stuffed Bunny, one of the more lifelike objects found in the book. My one disappointment here, as with the article on knots, was to find that Murray was the private obsession not of author Tracy Gleason, but of her younger sister Shayna. While the critical observer’s distance may seem conducive to untainted description, it blunts the raw emotional force found elsewhere in the volume. It is all too easy to outsource sincerity to a child. This caveat aside, Gleason does a fine job of bringing Murray to life. He begins as a typical stuffed animal, thrown carelessly into the air and used to dry Shayna’s tears. When the girl begins preschool and the bunny is not allowed to join her, she imagines ingeniously that Murray attends a different preschool, and even identifies the precise church where this supposedly occurs. To ease even further their daily separation, Murray is invested with powerful eyes and ears that detect Shayna wherever she might be. He can even read her mind at a distance. A year or so later, Murray is finally identified as a native speaker of “Bunny language,” a strange foreign tongue for which the remarkable Shayna even prepares vocabulary tapes and grammatical worksheets. Eventually, his homeland is identified as a utopia reasonably dubbed “Bunnyland,” whose festivals display a curious regularity, occurring every Sunday and on alternate Wednesdays.

While reading this delightful article, I could not help pushing it to the point of strangeness. Though Gleason’s tale is the true and amusing story of a young girl and her stuffed animal, alternate scenarios are conceivable. For instance: what if the girl were an outright psychotic, in the manner of Freud’s Judge Schreber, and believed in Murray’s powers just as literally as Schreber believed in his birds and impregnating sunbeams? Or in a more familiar twist, what if Shayna were the only person who realized the truth about Murray’s abnormal psychic abilities, while the foolish adults only pretended to play along with something that turned out to be real—as in Dostoevsky’s early tale of a man convinced, and rightly so, that he was the victim of an international military conspiracy?

There is much to be gained by taking Shayna’s claims literally, if only for experiment’s sake. At the end of the day, none of us truly believes that Murray the Bunny attends preschool or reads the mind of his girl companion—not even Shayna herself. But is the lesson here that the inner life of objects is merely whatever we arbitrarily project onto them? Hardly. Notice that Shayna’s conceptions of Murray develop over time, precisely because she begins to recognize gaps in her own previous theories (his daytime activities, native language, and homeland had never been accounted for). Now, it is surely good parenting to let Shayna have her fun and not contradict her games with stern refutations of animism, as only a sour-faced puritan would do. But in an ideal world devoid of hurt feelings and stunted
development, the proper scientific attitude would perhaps be not to humor the little
girl, but to launch an assertive counter-model to her theory of Murray, falsifying it
not with drab and obvious objections ("Humph. Nonsense!") but with a better
theory of his secret life. The point would not be to debunk children's myths in favor
of hidebound scientific fact, but rather to drive such fact onto the same plane as
myth, since our theories have as many gaps and magical powers as Shayna's Theory
of Murray does.

In other words, the adults in the story think that Murray is simply a toy made of
natural fabric at a specific factory, and merely play along with all the secret powers
projected onto him by an adorable but naive child. But Murray, like all objects, does
in fact have secret powers never guessed by humans, even if Shayna's own
theoretical suggestions are unlikely to hit the mark. The stuffed bunny may have a
faint smell noticed only by dogs, or deflect high-frequency vibrations that only
beetles can detect. There may be genuine sinister overtones in his tiny eyes that only
a future avant garde playwright (like Shayna, perhaps) will be able to fathom. His
physical surface may seem relatively solid, but under a microscope will be seen to
consist of tangled continents of fibers that harbor various dust grains and micro-
crystals. Behind the charming story of childhood make-believe, there is a trace of
something disturbing in the tale of Murray—because none of us have a clue as to
what objects really are. To think they are nothing but fabricated toys made of well-
known atoms is to ignore their mysteries as detected by children, animals, bacteria,
imminence things, and even by great scientists stunned at various moments in the
history of science. Objects have personalities that always remain partly outside our
grasp, even when we view ourselves as their masters.

The Rolling Pin: Objects Link Memories

By filling different places and times of our lives with specific objects, we can use
them later to play our memories like a church organ. This seems like a distinctly
Proustian idea, and Susan Pollak does cite Proust in her chapter on the rolling pin.
Pollak's story is moving enough. She confesses to childhood despair in the home
of "an absent, depressed father and an irrational, erratic mother," but is relieved to
report that her grandmother lived directly behind them, providing easy escape from
the dark atmosphere at home (p. 226). Many readers will (like me) share Pollak's
memories of a grandmother's fragrant kitchen providing a childhood anchor. Like
Proust's famous madeleine, the grandmother's rolling pin conjures up a prose
poem of recollections. The rolling pin not only flattens dough that is then flipped,
but also triggers memories of the aroma of "caramelized onions, potatoes, and
carrots... The golden lemon sponge cake, made with nearly a dozen eggs, just
emerging from its worn silver Bundt pan. And I can smell the cups of steaming
black tea with sugar" (p. 226). My God, how I want to be in that kitchen myself
this very instant... After reading a comforting description of this kind, no reader
will deny that "evocative objects can hold the vast structure of recollection,"
that "this is more than poetic construction," or that "objects can have a profoundly
healing function" (p. 228).
Objects may be partly autonomous and individual, but they can also summon the worlds to which they once belonged. They not only have a history that gives them their present shape, as with the axe-head, but can also revive the times to which they once belonged. A song can briefly reawaken a dead love, and a specific physical place might turn the calendar back 20 or 30 years. In this sense, objects are interrelated in a web of associations—but not all objects at all times. It takes special objects, evocative objects, like a madeleine or a rolling pin, for the symphony of memories to begin. To state lazily and fashionably that “everything is connected” would be to deprive specific objects of their specific powers. Our experience shows the opposite: namely, that one object evokes certain things and not others, and that some objects evoke nothing at all. Yet between certain objects there are bridges, footpaths, or resonant intervals that awaken vanished times.

Rocks: Objects Disorient

“Gaze at a stone and it disorient,” writes Nancy Rosenblum in her dazzling chapter (p. 254). With either modesty or tough-mindedness, she adds that she is “not of a metaphysical temperament.” Yet few works of metaphysics are able to inspire as much cosmic wonder as Rosenblum’s discourse on “the power [of rocks] to provide an effortless, esthetic experience of mystery” (p. 255). One rock “contains deep space. There is movement inside. Its meaning comes not just from contour but from the forms within. Looking at the holes is like looking at the stars. It is a world within a world” (p. 254).

While Rosenblum has a remarkable ability to sense the strangeness of rocks in any time or place, she also advises us that the effect is heightened through improved presentation:

As early as the Neolithic period in China, ritual objects were placed on pedestals “to lift them into the realm of the sacred.” Even the pedestals themselves are legible: bumps on the ones for stalactites refer to the “mountain teats” through which the milk of the earth flowed. Others are decorated with clouds, suggesting the remarkable notion that rocks are “cloud roots” (p. 255).

More generally, a pedestal decontextualizes a rock and thereby “points up the resonance of a single natural object, bringing home individuality, a thing complete in itself” (p. 256). The rock also flips reversibly between nature and culture, though the author does not describe this in detail.

By breaking free from all of it contextual uses, a rock (or any object) becomes a private font of mystery, disorienting us with internal movement and internal forms. The rock is placed beyond our powers to fathom it. This has a dizzying effect on our normal use of the rock as an item for throwing, crushing, removing, or collecting. To decontextualize an object means, in part, to remove it from its human context. The rock becomes a cosmic messenger signaling to humans from the clouds and stars, forbidding the reduction of objects to productions of human language.
Apples: Objects are Laced with Qualities

It is hard not to like Susannah Mandel, a devotee of the fruit that once drove our race from Paradise. The opening sentence of her essay could be innocent words from a Girl Scout's diary, but could come just as easily from a decadent novella by J.-K. Huysmans or George Bataille: “As far back as I can remember, I have had an unusual fondness for apples” (p. 262). Mandel hides apples in pockets, stacks them like candies, and bites them furiously in subways, libraries, and museums. No essay in the collection expresses a greater degree of sheer pleasure in objects (and there is plenty of competition for this honor). Advising the reader to bite an apple with the closed eyes of one about to kiss, Mandel promises that you will “relish at once the cool solid weight of the ripe fruit in your hand, and the smell and sound and taste of the smooth skin breaking, and all the sweet juices leaking out” (p. 263). While reading all these drunken passages, the reader feels a coldness in the throat and a new density in the lips. There is nothing stupefying about such pleasure; indeed, the full panorama of world history is one of its ingredients: “Shakespeare ate my apple! And the Romans when they first came to the gloomy, rainy island of England... Fashions may change, but the tang of an apple in an American living room is, must necessarily be, the same as the tang of an apple in 1194” (p. 263). The mocking precision of the date sends me to Wikipedia’s article on that year, where I find only further mocking trivia: “the Danes attack Estonia”; “the Yellow River of China experiences a major course change”; and in this year came the deaths of the kings of Sicily, Poland, and Navarre. In all of these cases apples were surely not far from the scene, and there are no grounds for challenging Mandel’s conviction that they tasted largely the same then as now. This, after all, is a meticulous author attentive to “the apple’s glossiness of skin” and the power lodged in the density of its flesh and color (p. 264). With an eye that unnerves in the same way as Merleau-Ponty’s, Mandel contrasts solid-colored fruits and flowers (which “flame up in the gaze but [don’t] hold it”) with their striped counterparts (which “catch your gaze and keep it”). And in a final disturbing touch, we are told that “apples’ stripes are labyrinthine” (p. 265).

Like Machover’s opening chapter on the cello, these reflections liberate the apple from its limited range of lazy human uses, and grants vital reality to the most hidden strata of its material life. But whereas Machover mainly drew outlines around the cello and looked for places where it bleeds into or recedes from its neighbors, Mandel’s approach to the apple is more internal, focused on the life of an apple’s textures and stripes within, and not on a border dispute with the pears, oranges, and tangerines lying without. Now, notice that none of the stripes or textures of an apple are hidden. Indeed, they are so patently accessible that the author makes us taste them in absentia merely by hinting at them. Yet the subtleties of an apple are normally muffled by our focus on this object as an obvious whole to be handled or consumed. By bringing to apples an attitude normally restricted to fine wines (“aromas of currant and cinnamon with a hint of tobacco,” etc.) Mandel makes us wonder about the applicability of this method to every possible object: cotton shirts, cement blocks, traffic cones, or glue. Surely each of these objects is also laced with a multitude of qualities hidden in principle from no one, yet generally escaping the gaze of all but the sickest of connoisseurs.
Conclusion

Earlier, I summarized Turkle's own contributions to the volume. Her remarks suggested that evocative objects are notable for their concreteness, intimacy, fluidity of roles, emotional force, libidinal charge, uncanniness, and irreducibility to familiar schisms such as natural/artificial and human/inhuman. From the 10 selected chapters just described, some additional key attributes were gathered: localization, articulation, imperfect translatability, possible fusion with us, political status, historical lineage, personality, triggering of memories, ability to provoke disorientation, and multitude of specific tangible qualities. While on the surface this may seem like a hopeless laundry list, it is easy to boil these terms down to a handful of key features. Namely, evocative objects seem to be characterized by their autonomy, richness, and depth.

Before describing these features, we should deal with a more obvious one: evocative objects are evocative. The emotional resonance and libidinal cathexis portrayed in many of these chapters is never directed randomly toward shards of gravel or boring stacks of paperwork. The objects in question have been hand-selected by the authors for their charismatic power. The title Evocative Objects is by no means redundant: not all objects are evocative. This might suggest that we are dealing purely with a matter of human psychology. Someone might say that it is we who decide where to project our interests, and we who imagine an emotional drama in the things that actually belong to our own inner lives. Yet this is clearly not how things work. True enough, one person's evocative object is another person's meaningless junk (though while reading this book it is difficult to remain unmoved by the passions of others). But it is not the case that the object itself contributes nothing. If I the reader have now become more interested in cellophones or apples, it is not through mere emotional contamination by the authors who write about these things. It is because, thanks to these authors, the cello and apple themselves now display alluring features that I had previously missed. Objects gain and lose evocative power constantly for us, as we discover new chambers in them or become disillusioned over time. It is true that no object is evocative without a person who finds it so, yet it is equally true that this person needs an object worthy of the experience. If we start with a relation between human and object, and reduce the object to a projection of the human's interior, then we count the subject twice and the object never. If a pitiless observer remains unmoved by your stuffed bunny or your glucometer, it does not mean that you are trapped in your own naïve mental life, but simply means that they are deaf to a music that you are lucky to hear. This music comes from the object, not from you, even if you are the only one able to hear it. Surely even the dullest of objects are laced with songs and legends that await their bards. The phrase "evocative objects" implies a realist turn in how we view the world. To evoke means to unlock features slumbering in the objects themselves. In closing, let's return to evoke three such features as cited above.

Evocative Objects are Autonomons

While the chapter on the glucometer might seem like a case of cybernetic fusion between human and machine, this description would actually be more fitting for the
author’s futuristic dream of an automated pancreas freeing him of constant decision. The glucometer no more fuses with the diabetic than his friends or pets fuse with him. He and his glucometer may be close, they may interact frequently, but they do not more or less melt together the way he and the invisible cyber-pancreas would.

Our healthy bodily organs are a good example of this: though my heart and kidneys are important objects for me, they are by no means evocative ones. Evocative objects fascinate and even seduce, but they actually fuse into me less than non-evocative objects do. This echoes Martin Heidegger’s famous tool-analysis, in which tools tend to remain invisible unless and until they fail. There is nothing evocative about a smoothly functioning tool. Our lungs and our highways are also autonomous from us, but we do not notice this, since we are too busy reducing them to one-sided servants of our practical actions. But the difference between non-evocative and evocative objects is like that between our familiar home city and a strange exotic one where nothing is taken for granted any longer. This autonomy of objects was missing from recent theory in the humanities.

Evocative Objects have Richness

They are not only different from us, but also different from themselves. Many of the essays in this book bring objects to life by splintering their unified image into countless strata of qualities. A rock is just a rock, until it is raised on a pedestal and you feel its swarming inner infinites. An abysmally dull apple is broken up into an avant garde theater of stripes and textures. A cello is no longer just a unified bulk carried to school by ambitious 10-year-olds, but shatters into numerous virtual planes addressed by distinct angles and pressures of the bow. Objects invite connoisseurship, because they open up the arena of variation in which the connoisseur is needed. All red wines are not alike, and neither is every chair. If objects are viewed as nothing but blank screens onto which human linguistic fantasies are projected, we miss the tension in objects between their identity as one thing and their swirling manifold of spots and stripes where the connoisseur finds points of entry. This richness of objects is missing from recent theory in the humanities.

Evocative Objects have Depth

This is another way of saying that they have personality. We never fully master them. Even young Shayna, Queen of the Stuffed Bunnies, cannot just invent arbitrary properties at random and ascribe them to Murray; she must enter into dialogue with this stuffed object and negotiate over what can and cannot be said about it. To ascribe irrelevant traits to the bunny would be just as big a failure as for Tolkien to introduce blipanes into his elvish wars, or for J.K. Rowling to turn Harry Potter into a heroin addict, or for an engineer to design a suspension bridge made of gelatin. We humans never know exactly what an object is capable of, and must enter into a kind of dialogue with it. When this happens, we are dealing with an evocative object. Stated briefly, an evocative object is one in which style counts for more than content. This might sound like an insult if said of a politician or singer, but when

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aimed at an object it is the highest possible praise. When something consists only of its tangible content, we can exhaust it with a list of features, and it becomes much too easily known. Once objects become evocative, they become as unfamiliar as new people or new planets. This depth of objects is missing from recent theory in the humanities.

Though I detest self-reflexive ironies of every sort, it must be said that the book *Evocative Objects* is itself evocative, since it does intellectual labor of a sort that is fascinating but difficult to specify with total precision. All of the essays may be read quickly and pleasantly, and many are worthy of multiple re-readings. It is a book that would have been difficult to imagine appearing much earlier than it did, and this is often a good sign for intellectual works. Turkle never specifies her plans for evocative objects, but one suspects that she will not be left alone with her 34 talented colleagues. There may be something in the air.