Turkle, Sherry [Ed.]. *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007/2011.

It is the world of words that creates the world of things. . . . Man speaks, then, but it is because the symbol has made him man. . . .

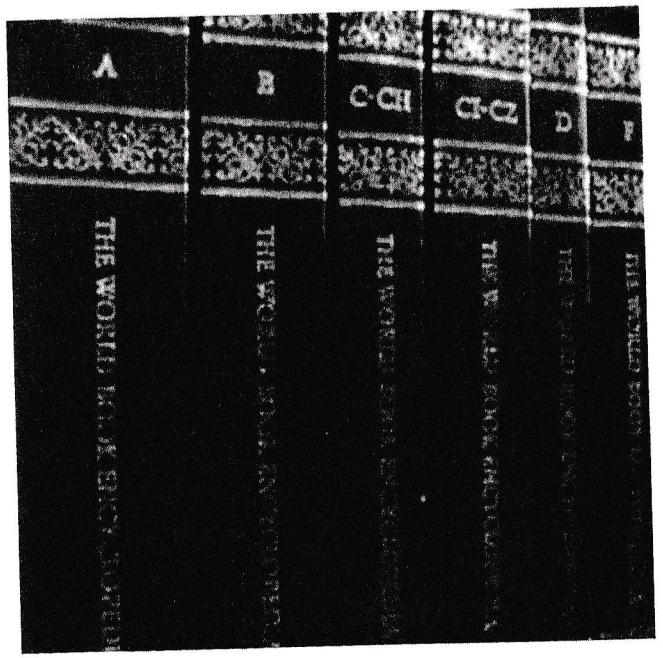
Symbols in fact envelop the life of man in a network so total that they join together, before he comes into the world, those who are going to engender him "by flesh and blood"; so total that they bring to his birth, along with the gifts of the stars, if not with the gifts of the fairies, the shape of his destiny; so total that they give the words that will make him faithful or renegade, the law of the acts that will follow him right to the very place where he *is* not yet and even beyond his death . . .

In order to free the subject's speech, we introduce him into the language of his desire, that is to say, into the *primary language* in which, beyond what he tells us of himself, he is already talking to us unknown to himself, and, in the first place, in the symbols of a symptom.

—Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*

THE *WORLD BOOK*

David Mann



How they decided, I do not know. Maybe in a moment of grace they sensed my need and chose to help me. Maybe they were just "keeping up with the Joneses," as one did in those days. Did the neighbors have a Philco, a Eureka, and a box of books, necessitating ours? I do not know how it happened, but as improbable as it looks from the distance of these years, my parents bought for us the 1952 edition of the *World Book Encyclopedia,* and, in doing so, literally gave me a world.

I came from a family of very few words. For us, living was a private matter, best tended to in silence. Speech was less a gift than a liability. In the culture of our clan, true conversation, opening oneself to another's point of view, could never have taken hold. To proclaim, "Here's what I think; what about you?" would have amounted to an act of civil war, a threat to the sovereignty of individual experience and an invitation to the other's scorn. "Better to be silent and thought a fool, than to open your mouth and prove it," warned one of the few maxims I recall hearing as a child.

It sounds oppressive, but I do not believe my family intended that we live this way. As best I can tell they had not shunned the larger culture, nor intentionally banished it from our camp. They had just arisen outside its reach, in a time and place and circumstance where little beyond the King James Bible and the iron skillet had yet found a fertile niche. The dust bowl of Oklahoma had spawned my parents, starved their spirits, and forced them out into the world where they clung to each other, to memories of simpler times, and to their silence.

My family huddled—yet we traveled, too. We moved household nearly every year, tethered to my father's military service. Travel can sophisticate a family, give them a chance to learn the meaning of their ways, open

the world to them and show them their place within it, teach them humility and grace. Our travels, though, seemed to isolate us more, to thicken the scar of our alienation. I remember as a child, my first day in England, watching a television ad for dog food "rich in doggy vitamins." We stood in the parlor of a modest B&B, proper but not prim, as a few guests sipped their afternoon tea and my parents inquired about a room. Given the prosaic matter of his sales pitch, the television announcer's tone, so intelligent and poised, struck me as funny. His way of saying "vitamin" (sounding like "cinnamon") rang in my Yankee ear as silly. I laughed aloud. The room fell silent. A spotlight of shame pinned me to the creaking floor. I can still feel my father's rage, my mother's mortification, the guests' indifferent huff, the TV spaniel's relief as she sniffed the bowl. I no longer recall my punishment—most likely a slap to the face and exile to a distant room. It was always safer to be alone.

My earliest memories bear a feeling of separateness from the human world—and not only among strangers, but within my family as well. Ironically, what saved me from despair was that they let their silenced offspring stray. In my early years we lived mostly in rural places, where even a small child could drift untended for long stretches of the day. I climbed in trees, dawdled in streams, poked at bugs, played with clouds and gravity and angular momentum, and found comfort in this world outside human commerce.

My family caricatured the naivete that had bred them. It was the 1950s, in the USA. Our culture was young, childish, really. The world beyond our shores was frightening and dangerous, a *terra incognita* prone to dictatorship and war. Other cultures we feared as primitive, hostile, or both. Mau-Maus and Maoists. Other

governments tortured and lied. Ours was a kindly Father Who Knows Best. Over There, ideas could madden crowds and kill. Here, our own ideas seemed to protect us with their insular magic. A wide-eyed faith in progress drew us forward despite our mistrust of change. Though legally free, we cowered in conventionality, mumbling prayers to science in the callow faith that it would save our world. In a stolid but uneasy balance of centrifugal hope and centripetal fear we reeled. This culture leached into me as a child. I felt it cringing in my bones, commingling there with other urges that it opposed but could not neutralize—a playfulness with the familiar and a curiosity about all that lay beyond. What I needed was a guide, but none appeared. Indeed, my people rather disapproved. "Don't mess with that!" "Be still!" "Shut up!" "Don't ask stupid questions," they admonished.

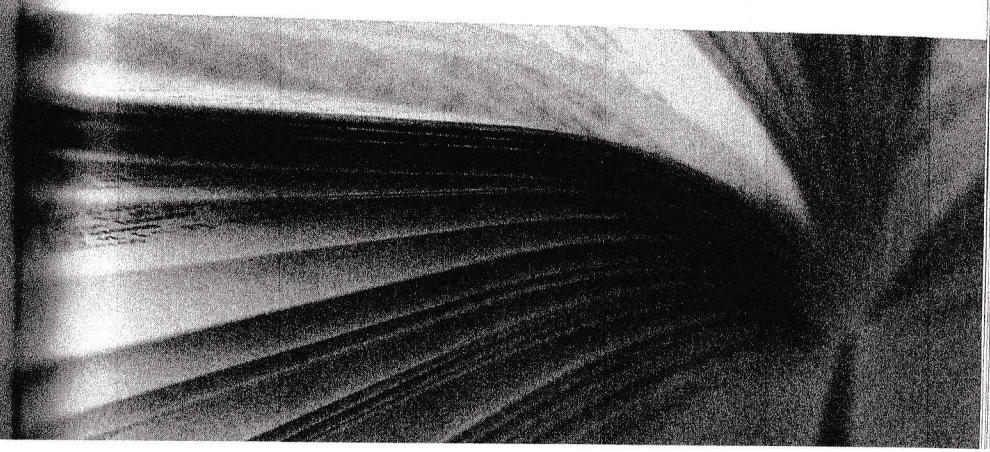
I do not remember when the box came. I must have been a toddler still. I do remember how the books looked in it, because I packed and unpacked them so many times over the years that followed. They stood at attention, each crimson spine wore a swath of blue, lined in the same gold paint in which the letter identifying each volume had been stamped. Out of their box the volumes resisted opening (like their owners), but once ajar they released a scent of glossy paper and halftone ink that to this day recalls feelings of amazement, challenge, and comfort. Gentle masters, the books offered their secrets freely and never shamed me for inquiring. Had they filed out of their box and marched onto the ceiling I would have tried to follow them. I carried them with me throughout whole days of wandering. They became my interpreters, my models, and my guides.

At first the books showed me only pictures, of other places, other times, other treaties with the elements: a water clock, an Archimedean screw, a doll sewn from a sock, another strung from empty spools, a sandaled Phoenician inscribing the precursor of our letter "H" in clay, a Ubangi girl, a spiral galaxy, an igloo, a boy on a hillside gleefully racing his homemade kite into the wind. These were pictures that I could both identify with and wonder at. They were windows of possibility opening onto a world wider than the one I knew but where I felt I could belong. Like an index to my mind, these images still appear to me when I search for words, much as they taught me words as I pored over them as a child.

The *World Book* was my Rosetta Stone. Its pictures came to life in my mind, parsed into nouns and danced through grammar to the music of verbs. By the time I was four it had taught me to read. Not through my family but through these volumes language became a part of me, the book of the world opened to me and I myself opened to the world as I might otherwise never have done.

As a physician and psychoanalyst, I have had many teachers, but the *World Book* was my first, the one that taught me how to learn. Today I help others through their own, similar transitions, from alienation to belonging in the world, from chaos to conversance. Often, like the *World Book,* my comradeship is silent. And, like the *World Book,* I try to be available with images and words for the experiences that have silenced those who seek my help. I must work to grasp their feelings; I often fail (the book of my soul resists opening), but I am grateful for the chance to try.

David Mann teaches at Harvard Medical School and practices privately in Cambridge, Massachusetts.



I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory—this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me it *was* me. . . .

And suddenly the memory revealed itself. The taste was that of the little piece of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray (because on those mornings I did not go out before mass), when I went to say good morning to her in her bedroom, my aunt Léonie used to give me, dipping it first in her own cup of tea or tisane. The sight of the little madeleine had recalled nothing to my mind before I tasted it; perhaps because I had so often seen such things in the meantime, without tasting them, on the trays in pastry-cooks' windows, that their image had dissociated itself from those Combray days to take its place among others more recent; perhaps because of those memories, so long abandoned and put out of mind, nothing now survived, everything was scattered; the shapes of things, including that of the little scallop-shell of pastry, so richly sensual under its severe, religious folds, were either obliterated or had been so long dormant as to have lost the power of expansion which would have allowed them to resume their place in my consciousness. But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.

—Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*

THE ROLLING PIN

Susan Pollak

If I close my eyes, I can almost go back to my grandmother's kitchen. The fragrance of pot roast permeates the air, redolent with caramelized onions, potatoes, and carrots. I can see 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. This was Grandma Tilly's healing elixir, which could soothe any pain and still the rivers of my childhood tears and adolescent rage.

A shaft of sun on the kitchen table illuminates the sugar bowl and the flowered, blue plastic tablecloth. The light reminds me of the serenity of Vermeer's interiors and of his women, completely absorbed in their domestic tasks. I see my grandmother in her apron, her hair the purest, softest white. She is legally blind but is holding her beloved rolling pin. Even though she can see only shadows, she is still cooking for us, baking the most delicious sweets.

To think about my grandmother, with her rolling pin and her fragrant kitchen, is to meditate on loss. She was the stable anchor in my life, mediating between an absent, depressed father and an irrational, erratic mother. Thankfully, she lived behind us so I could escape to her kitchen when I needed solace. I remember the sheer joy of climbing over the stone wall that separated our houses and bounding into her kitchen, feeling both free and deeply connected.

I was nine months pregnant with my first child when she died. Even though she was seriously ill, she was holding on, waiting for the birth of her first grandchild. We were hoping, praying, that she would be able to cradle the child in her arms. Every day felt like a race between birth and death. Tilly, a union organizer with a will of steel, seemed in control of her death.

The baby was breech, and my doctor informed me that unless it turned I would need a Caesarian section. Days before the baby's due date, my grandmother died. I spent the night weeping, mourning her loss and the fact that my children would never know her warmth and her kindness. During that night of grief, the baby turned, its head pointing down, ready to be born.

My grandmother has been dead for nearly fifteen years, but when I make cookie dough with my children I use her wooden rolling pin with its chipped red handles. I exert gentle pressure and roll the dough back and forth. I add flour and flip it over to the other side. This tactile ritual takes me back to the warmth of her kitchen, the aromas of her cooking, and the comfort of her presence. As I bake, I often tell my children stories about Grandma Tilly. The loss is still present but now bittersweet. I miss the comfort of her world, yet I am deeply grateful that she was such a presence in my life.

As I use her rolling pin and feel its texture and weight against my floured hands, I think of the hundreds of pies and cookies it helped create. It anchors me in the past, yet continues to create memories for the future. The object becomes timeless.

Marcel Proust gives us deeper insight into the nature of the evocative object. In *Remembrance of Things Past* he describes an epiphany evoked by a madeleine, a small, scalloped cake: "dispirited after a dreary day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. . . . A shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses."[1]

This humble cake set into motion Proust's masterpiece on memory and loss. His poetic understanding

of the power of the senses to evoke a state of consciousness is unmatched:

> But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest, and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.[2]

Evocative objects can hold the "vast structure of recollection." This is more than poetic construction—objects can have a profoundly healing function. The British psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott developed the idea of the "transitional object." We think of the child's teddy bear or the "blankie" as a link to the love and comfort of the mother, but Winnicott also located the capacity for tenderness and caring in such objects. What is less known, but germane to the purpose of this essay, is that they are also the basis of symbolism and creativity: "In this way I feel that transitional phenomena do not pass, at least not in health. They may become a lost art, but this is part of an illness in the patient, a depression, and something equivalent to the reaction to deprivation in infancy. . . .[3] The object can hold an unexplored world, containing within it memory, emotion, and untapped creativity.

As a psychologist, I inhabit multiple worlds. Through transference and countertransference, I have a special relationship to the stories, dreams, and objects of others. Working with my patients, I become both translator and participant/observer of their inner landscape. When a case deeply engages me, the objects and stories of others assume weight in my world, inhabiting my thoughts and imagination.

The Case of Mr. B.

Mr. B., a fifty-year-old married man, entered treatment to work on an abusive and traumatic relationship with his parents. He was a novelist, but had been unable to write for a number of years. During the course of treatment, his father died after a long illness. The father, a distant, tyrannical alcoholic, never let his son know that he loved him. Although Mr. B. had written a number of books, his father had never made an effort to read them.

A number of months after his father's death, Mr. B. was visiting his mother. During the visit, they returned to the town where Mr. B. had grown up. Out of nostalgia, he looked for the bakery that made his favorite treat, a thin cake covered with chocolate and vanilla frosting, called a "half-moon." One of Mr. B's fondest childhood memories was of his father surprising the family with a box of these cookies. Remarkably, the bakery was still in business, and Mr. B. bought a box of half-moons for himself and his children. Because he had grown up in difficult times when money was tight, his own father bought day-old cookies, which were often broken and stale. Mr. B had never tasted the cookies either fresh or whole.

To his taste buds, there was something wrong about the moist, intact cakes. He saved them, waiting for them to become stale. After a few days, the texture was "right"—the frosting hard, the cake dry—and he could savor and re-create the lost tastes of his childhood.

Never underestimate the power of an evocative object. The incident with the cookie—the finding of a lost object and sharing it with his children—gave him access to the "vast structure of recollection." Entering this forgotten world of smell and taste was a pathway to new memories. Some symbolic essence of childhood had been recovered. As Mr. B. grieved, he was able to recover positive feelings about his father that had eluded him for the two years of our treatment. For months after the death he had experienced a profound terror. He had

recurrent nightmares where he would look for his father in vain, searching in attics and basements, only to find the house in ruins, littered with shards of glass and shattered bricks.

The re-finding of the cookie corresponded to a turning point in Mr. B's grief. This sweet was a concrete and positive link to his past, an evocative object that was both sustaining and stabilizing. Mr. B. was able to recall acts of generosity and to develop a deeper understanding of his father's need to live in a drunken haze. He was able to tell his children stories about their grandfather. The cookie had become a gateway, connecting him to "enduring and faithful" memories. It became a way to integrate what was positive and "sweet" about his father. Slowly, with hesitation, Mr. B. began to write again; he began a novel about childhood.

Toward the end of *Remembrance of Things Past,* Proust makes a connection that Winnicott would wholeheartedly endorse: "Ideas come to us as the successors to griefs, and griefs, at the moment when they change into ideas, lose some part of their power to injure our heart."[4] Proust's stymied protagonist is able to give up his fruitless search for his lost mother, which frees him to act. As his pain is transformed into ideas and images, he begins to write.

My patient experienced a parallel process. When he had mourned, remembered, and worked through all that he had not received from his father, his rage and paralysis subsided and he was able to write again. Winnicott would agree that a return to health is also a return to creativity. The evocative object holds more than memory; it holds healing potential. We create our objects and are inspired by them. As I found with my rolling pin, and my patient with his cookie, the evocative object is transitional in the fullest sense of the word—it can bring together generations, anchor memory and feeling, and evoke attachments that have long been forgotten.

Susan Pollak is a Clinicial Instructor in Psychology at Harvard Medical School.