



Walton College
The Sam M. Walton College of Business

Through the Wardrobe Door

Spiritual and Religious Analogues of Object Fascination
in Early Development of Scientific Careers

Brad Almond, Texas A&M University-Central Texas



Behold the Child among his new-born blisses,
A six years' Darling of a pigmy size!

See, where 'mid work of his own hand he lies,

...

See, at his feet, some little plan or chart,
Some fragment from his dream of human life,
Shaped by himself with newly-learned art

...

And this hath now his heart,
And unto this he frames his song

Wordsworth, "Intimations of Immortality" (excerpt)

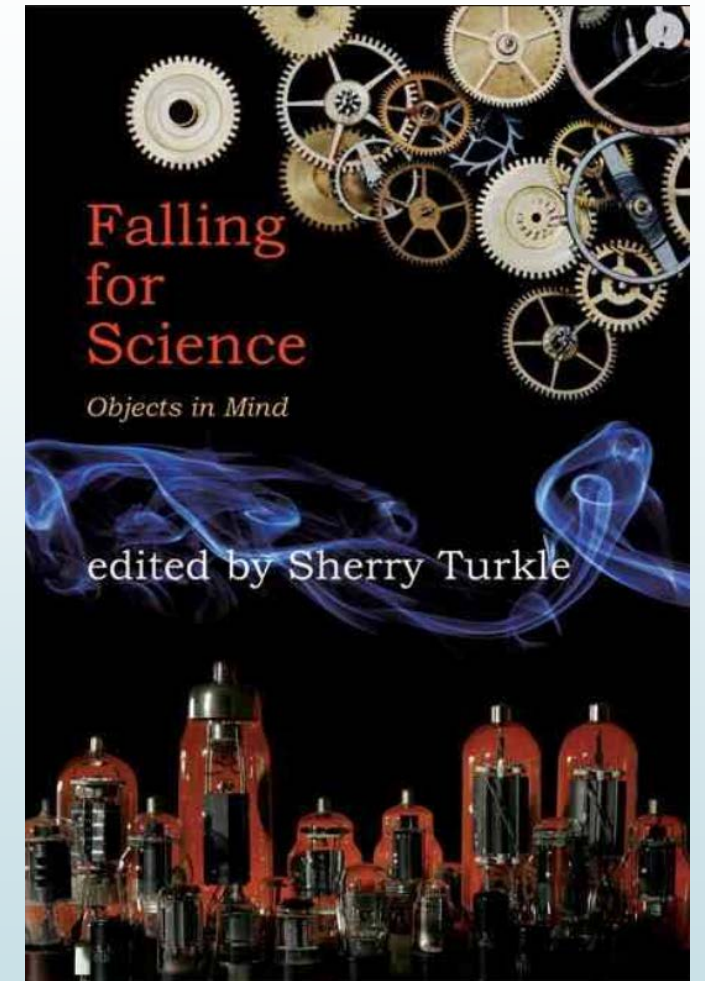


Why?

- ▶ Yochanan: “a sincere desire to link spirituality to important things in the world.”
- ▶ Continued exploration of work/self relation
- ▶ Work as good, tool, conduit, spatial/geometric relation (“fit”), love

Data: *Falling for Science*

- ▶ Like *Gig* (Bowe, 2001) and *Working* (Terkel, 1997)
- ▶ 55 essays
- ▶ Career scientists (all with MIT pedigree)
- ▶ Keys, vacuum tubes, computers, blocks, gears, playing cards, Lincoln logs, maps, prisms, clay, straws, Legos, meringue, rope, marbles, etc.



Methods

- Used ATLAS/ti version 7 (2017)
- Textual analysis of 55 essays via assigned or *in vivo* codes.
- Codes aggregated into families of similar ideas
- Iterative process

all, I could debug my programs
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it to the sine function had to be

very social child; having the computer
ras discovery and design. Now that I
plexity was constructed. I wanted no

want to do whatever I wanted for it.
ng my will upon it in some
ased me.

built tools for the machine itself,
ed the machine in the most powerful
human who was giving instructions

igs that puts knowledge to work.
t the computer contributed to my
day I met the BASIC manual, I began

gotiated design environments for

✦ imagination

✦ displacement ✦ time investiture

✦ creativity ✦ discovery

✦ complexity

✦ hunger for learning

✦ benevolence, affection

✦ control

✦ intimacy

✦ personalization

✦ thinking in terms of relationship with object

✦ exclusivity

✦ possession

✦ service

✦ self-transformation



Dimensions

- ▶ Complexity (esp. in simplicity)
- ▶ Surprise, serendipitous discovery
- ▶ Awakening and increased capacity of the imagination, microcosm
- ▶ Loss of conscious self, immersion
- ▶ Zealous free play, experimentation, tinkering, bricolage, adventure
- ▶ Achievement, control, mastery
- ▶ Integration and cognitive hyperlinking
- ▶ Cloistering, retreat, contemplation
- ▶ Personalization, identification, affection



Representative Quotations

- I am deep in concentration, unaware of the passage of time, or of the beautiful day outside the window. I am immersed in the work of design and experiment, constructing the walled city of my imagination. I am in the moment and in my body, fully engaged as I fashion tunnels, courtyards, and underground chambers from the plain wooden shapes...As I extend my construction, I extend my world of safety...My blocks give me solace. (*Sarah, blocks*)
- I knew this, I thought. This was baking. Basic ingredients, heated, separated, and cooled equals planet...Literally overnight, geology made sense to me...I love the rocks. The minerals have become my friends, almost my children. I watch them, even when I don't have to. (*Selby, chocolate meringue*)
- One day my curiosity overwhelmed me. In secret, I took my dad's screwdriver and opened the console. I was surprised to find...that the world of the game, that I had seen as so simple and clean...was underneath, a world of great complexities. (*Ji, Atari 2600*)



Representative Quotations, cont'd

- ▶ The amount of time I spent with maps freed me from physical dependence upon them. I could quote route numbers and street names from memory for cities I had never been near...By the time I was nine, maps and routing were an integral part of my life...The maps offered an infinite number of possible routes, possible fantasies. And they offered me...a world of mastery and control. (*Stephen, maps*)
- ▶ My direct experience with functional abstraction organized my understanding of the natural world. I see the relationship between branches of science—for example, between physics, chemistry, and biology—in terms of layers of abstraction. (*Nelson, BASIC programming language*)
- ▶ That ring of keys opened more than a trunk or box or suitcase; it opened my mind to a world where many things are locked and the keys aren't made of metal. (*Eric, keys*)



Object Fascination

- ▶ Unique relation that exists between person and focal object that amplifies the significance of both
- ▶ Etymology of word goes back to ancient Rome and Greece; includes many different attributions regarding its source: magic, the devil, imagination, romantic love. (Degen, 2012)
- ▶ Historically closer in meaning to modern *possession*: to be fascinated was to be infected or corrupted by, and thus to be under the control or influence of something else. Universally negative until 15th century (denoted evil: “evil eye,” witchcraft, demons, etc.)
- ▶ Current usage relates to viewer responses to works of art (Silvia et al. 2015), glitter/glam/taboo (Schmid 2009; Connor 1998), and horrific events (Rimé et al. 2005)
- ▶ Like similar concept complexes, lines between antecedents, dimensions/types, and consequences can be blurry.



Through the Wardrobe Door

- ▶ Based on C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*
- ▶ Wardrobe = everyday object, portal, boundary of known and unknown world
- ▶ Accompanied by surprise, time compression, rapid / discontinuous maturation, radical reorientation of identity
- ▶ These everyday objects functioned as "wardrobes"



From Luther's *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount* (1530)

- ▶ *"Only look at your tools, your needle, your thimble, your beer barrel, your articles of trade, your scales, your measures, and you will find this saying written on them... 'My dear, use me toward your neighbor as you would want him to act toward you with that which is his.'"* (emphasis added)



From "The Elixir," by George Herbert (1633)

All may of Thee partake:
Nothing can be so mean,
Which with his tincture—"for Thy sake"—
Will not grown bright and clean.

A servant with this clause
Makes drudgery divine:
Who sweeps a room as for Thy laws,
Makes that and th' action fine.



Spiritual and Religious Analogues

- ▶ Relates to spirit / mystical experience: supersedes time and space, transcends or empties self (kenosis)
- ▶ Sustains “intimations of immortality” (Wordsworth)
 - ▶ Many lament the loss of sense of wonder and awe from childhood, but for these few it is sustained in certain domains
- ▶ Secular icons:
 - ▶ Bring inspiration by firing the imagination
 - ▶ Connect present sensory stimuli to larger, more significant one within established tradition/practice
- ▶ Secular sacraments:
 - ▶ Channels of common grace (natural, intellectual, moral, creative)



Extensions



- ▶ Athletes?
- ▶ Musicians?
- ▶ Craftsmen?
- ▶ Professionals (engineers, architects, surgeons, etc.)
- ▶ Academics (Roger Lundin and silent e)
- ▶ Further implications?

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Limitations

- ▶ Retrospective construction may have forced narrative cohesion, interpretation
- ▶ Perhaps limited to particular dispositions, intelligences



References

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