

# From Passion to Possessiveness

## Collectors and Collecting in a Symbolic Perspective

*Bjarne Rogan*

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Collecting is a pastime that has become immensely popular, especially during the last two or three decades. It is estimated that one in three persons in the adult population in western industrialized countries is or has been a collector. As a pastime collecting easily turns into an engrossing passion or even addiction, with immoderation and sometimes transgression of moral and legal rules in its wake. In popular opinion collecting, even in its moderate and normal forms, is surprisingly often referred to in terms of passion and love and compared to eroticism. So is also the case in fiction, where the collector character abounds. The aim of the article is to discuss the systematic character of rhetorical figures in this discourse on collecting. These figures, most often comparisons and metaphors, are investigated as a symbolic way of understanding the ambiguous phenomena of collecting and possessiveness. As the use of concepts like symbol and symbolism are rather unclear in the ethnological tradition, the author argues for a pragmatic use of some structuralist ideas to grasp their systematic character. This article concentrates upon symbolic perspectives on collecting, whereas the author's research project on collecting comprises topics like gender, consumption, socialization, etc., as well as the history of collecting.

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### Introductory remarks

The following discussion springs from two different but linked problems. The first is how to cope with the phenomenon of passion in cultural analysis. The second is the concepts of symbol and symbolism and their use in ethnology. Research on private collectors and collecting has confronted me with an amazingly rich forest of "symbols" (in a wide sense of the term, including comparisons, metaphors, metonomies, parallelisms...) that compare collecting to passion, love and eroticism. These rhetorical figures, used in common parlance as well as in literary texts, might conveniently be termed symbols and the use of them symbolism, and then further discussion could be dropped. However, this would be unsatisfactory for two reasons. First, there is a bewildering diversity and lack of precision in the use of these terms by ethno-

logists. Second, there is a *systematic* use of "symbols" in my material that invites for further reflexion.

The material stems partly from my own indepth interviews with circa 50 collectors, with collections ranging from bric-a-brac and "instant collectibles" to books, coins and fine art, and partly from biographical sources, written statements in collectors' magazines, etc., and – not least – fiction.

The first and longest section of the article is a presentation and discussion of some empirical finds from my study of collecting, the second discusses symbols and symbolism, and the final tries to build a bridge between the two. Before embarking on this journey, the reader deserves a quick glimpse of the passionate collectors that constitute the empirical basis for the later discussions. The first quotation is from fiction – where an American collector of Indian wicker

baskets is chatting to a casual listener – and the second from an interview with a Danish collector of folk art:

“Listen, pal, he says with a wink, you stand Brigitte Bardot next to a museum quality Tlingit [basket] and I wouldn’t see her. I got a real nice Tlingit, by the way, got it at auction for eighteen bucks. A steal. It’s worth much more. Pretty scarce” (Connell 1974:38).

“From time to time I have found something that I *had* to have, but that I couldn’t afford. I have waited as much as twenty years to have the chance to acquire certain objects. Then I have been awake all night, sitting and just looking at it. It’s just like being recently engaged to be married. There is a need for that experience – something that may make people believe that you are *erotically taken in* by the object [*object-erotoman*]. That’s what I am, actually! I may become quite excited; many times your emotional life towards such an object is more intense than towards another person. It’s not exactly the same feeling as falling in love, but the intensity is the same [...]” (Jacobsen, in Ohrt og Seisbøll 1992:73, transl. BR)

In addition to the discourse on collecting and eroticism, to be investigated here, there is a related discourse on collecting and madness, covering the whole field from frenzy to lunacy. Collectors tend to joke and flirt with their inclinations and talk humorously about their “disease” or “insanity”. A quick look in dictionaries reveals that collectors are commonly considered *passionate*, *obsessive*, filled with *immoderate desire*, or – on the other side of the Channel – *passionné*, *fervent*, *obsédé*, *forcéné*, *féroce*, *maniaque*, in their *passion insatiable* for objects – and they may suffer from *une collectionniste aiguë*. Even if this discourse may blend with the erotic one, it will seldom qualify as “symbolic”, as it is widely known that quite a few collectors only too easily transgress moral and legal boundaries and upset family economy and personal relations in their hunt for desired objects. The image of the slightly mad collector lies at the bottom of the recurrent use of them in media, in entertainment programs as well as

for advertisements. Last year French TV screened a publicity sketch for a lottery; a collector scraped a ticket, found that he had won Ff5.000 – and glued it on a wall that was already crammed with other tickets, with the comment: “Dammit, another copy of the same ticket!” The sketch works because people know that collectors’ madness surpasses most other eccentricities.

If this is a common image of the collector, then why not leave the topic to psychologists and psychiatrists, who – by the way – also take a professional interest in symbols and symbolism? The answer is that collecting is normal behaviour, actually so normal that nearly one third of the adult population in countries like the US, the UK and France takes part in it, or has done so during periods of their adult lives (Attali 1989, Belk 1995, Pearce 1995). Also, some 90% of all schoolchildren collect. This presupposes a broad definition of collecting, but there is no reason to doubt that the percentage of persons practising some sort of collecting is approximately the same in most western countries. And among one third of the population there will always be a good number of borderline cases, which does not exclude the cultural analyst from the field. (For a thorough discussion of collecting from a psychological point of view, see Muensterberger 1994.)

The reader should be warned that the following discussion will draw the portrait of a collecting male. This does not mean that only men collect. Women probably practise collecting to the same extent that men do. Still, the idea that collecting is a masculine activity prevails, among collectors as well as in society in general. This idea is especially persistent in the popular discourse on collecting and eroticism. (For a discussion of gender and collecting, see Belk 1995, Pearce 1995, Rogan 1996.)

## Passion and eroticism in collecting

### *A note on collectors and collecting in fiction*

In his anthology *Breasts* (1993 and earlier ed.) Ramón Gómez de la Serna presents an artful, subtle and condensed sketch named The Collector. In spite of its brevity, it communicates many themes for an analysis of collecting; a creative

gaze and a sense of aestheticism, the play aspect and the thrill of the find, a good portion of passion and a tinge of madness, an erotic loading and a certain possessiveness, a male and masculine activity with a stamp of absurdity, irrationality and futility – and the perishability of the collection. Here in a slightly abridged version:

"There is a lady asking for you, Sir", says the female servant to the collector of breasts [...]

"Let her in", says the collector, while adapting his position in the office chair in order to find a suitable angle and distance for the examination, as if adjusting his opera glasses.

The woman had delicate features and slender arms. Everything about her was graceful, but her breasts were so opulent that they seemed to greet the collector even before she had the time to reach out her hand with well-groomed nails.

"What can I do for you?", he asks.

"Well, to be honest ... You are a collector of breasts, aren't you? Well, here are mine ..."

The collector regretted not having his collector's glasses at hand to put them immediately on his nose, but compensated by leaning backwards in the chair [...]

The woman who offered her breasts unbuttoned her dress, like a wet nurse demonstrating the quality of her milk to the doctor.

The collector, who was used to demonstrations like this, touched the breasts that were offered him, carefully like a jeweller, while smiling entranced.

"Exceptional breasts for my collection! You bring me magnificent breasts. Unforgettable! You see ... It is important for me to have the possibility of looking at them when I want to, when I call them to my mind ... I cannot encase them in an album. On the other hand, I can call for you when I need these two beautiful items of my collection ..."

"You won't deceive me?", she said with coquetry.

"No ... They are the best of my collection .... I shall give them ten marks on a certificate that you can show everywhere ... Take care of them, take good care of them. The most beautiful breasts in my collection have disappeared or deteriorated from one day to the next."

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*Också en trofé*

An American trophy collector. From an American magazine, reproduced in *Samlarytt* no 3-4/1959.

"I shall be careful with them, if not for any other reason than to offer them to you again ... Nobody treats them so gently and with so much tenderness as you do ... I am very satisfied ... Your certificate will always fill me with pride ..."

[...] The collector wrote in a ledger: “[Name, adr.] ... Buxom and delicate at the same time ... No drooping: The only breasts to my knowledge that, even if copious, don’t have any trace of wrinkles or shadows, nor yet the slightest shadow of a beginning ruin and drooping [...] They are so serene and so beautiful that one does not feel the need to touch them” (de la Serna 1993:28–30. Transl. BR).

Authors of fiction are free to conjecture and interpret phenomena and invent realities that the researcher may perceive but hardly can document in a traditional way. The researcher may use fiction as a gateway to the popular interpretation and comprehension of phenomena. It may serve as his eyepiece to a symbolic world that is perhaps closed to those who use only traditional tools and sources. I shall rely heavily on fiction to be able to discuss symbolic aspects of collecting, aspects that are visible in my ordinary sources but most often more elusive and less direct than in the case of the Danish collector quoted above.

Before the 19th century collectors appear only sporadically in fiction. But with the rise of modern consumerism, industrialization and the spread of tastes and activities formerly reserved for the upper classes, collecting spreads to broader strata and increasingly finds its way into fiction. The most celebrated “collector novels” of the 19th century are *Le cousin Pons* (1847) by Honoré de Balzac and *Bouvard et Pécuchet* by Gustave Flaubert (1880/81), but the phenomenon of collecting is encountered in prose and poetry on both sides of the Atlantic. Around the turn of the century, a series of great American collectors – often called “robber barons” because they vacuumed Europe for art and antiquities – are portrayed in the novels of Theodore Dreiser, Henry James and Frank Norris. In afterwar years, American novelists like Evan S. Connell, Bruce Chatwin and Susan Sontag have depicted and analysed collectors, and so have also English John Fowles, French Georges Perec and German Nobel prize winner Elias Canetti. The list is far from exhaustive.

The collectors described are almost exclusively men. Collecting appears as a male and even virile activity. The quotation from de la

Serna presented a collector of female breasts; Fowles’ collector changes from butterflies to a woman, and Sontag’s includes a beautiful woman in his collection of art and antiquities. The corollary of strong passions is chaos and destruction, and collecting offers no exception. Fowles’ collector ends up by killing his “item”, whereas Canetti’s burns his collection. Sontag’s novel is constructed around the volcano metaphor, with all the excesses, outbreaks and disasters that this implies.

“Passion and eroticism” turn out to be a central theme in these literary interpretations of collectors, as well as in other material. This overall theme may conveniently be presented in “phases”: 1) Passion and desire, 2) Hunt and conquest, 3) Eroticism and power, and 4) Loss of control and transgression. In the following paragraphs these subthemes will be seen as symbolic representations, and not as sexual or other compensation. Admittedly, the latter interpretation would not contradict popular belief, but it may easily revert into pseudo-psychoanalysis (and is no longer in accordance with modern psychoanalytic understanding of collecting; cf. Formanek 1994)

For my literary examples I shall concentrate upon two novels, Balzac’s *Le cousin Pons* (1847) and Sontag’s *The Volcano Lover* (1992). There is a century and a half between them, and their authors’ positions are as different as can be; on the one hand a French male realist – called the founding father of literary realism – looking at his own time; on the other hand a female American feminist and psychoanalytically oriented postmodernist looking back at history. But they are both “symbolists” in their interpretations of the collector. A few words will be appropriate to situate their novels.

In his fictional world – his *La Comédie Humaine* consisted of some one hundred novels – Balzac sets up what he called a sociological, anthropological and psychological inventory of virtues, vices and passions of his day, in order to give an exhaustive description of contemporary customs and usages. For a materialist (he excels in the description of objects) and a lover of modern society like Balzac, the collector was an ideal protagonist in a world of things. For him, collecting was both a means to realize aesthetic

values and an arena for greed and evil. In short, the collector was the ideal tool “to chart virtues and vices” and “to collect the most important data about passion”, as his program of literary realism ran.

For Susan Sontag also, the collector is a medium for saying something about man and society. Her protagonist moves from a purely aesthetic collecting project to a state of egoism, selfishness and insensibility to the suffering of others, his strongest passion being the emotional attachment to things. Persons (who, as a consequence, are never named) and things become indistinguishable and perish. The quest for the beautiful may end in hell, especially for collectors, who in the last resort collect themselves. Passion, possessiveness, betrayal, oblivion and destruction are her themes.

Two authors, two different literary traditions, and two different attitudes. For progressive and materialistic Balzac, collecting serves as a neutral activity to depict both positive and negative aspects of society. For postmodern Sontag, describing collectors is a means to unveil inhumanity, crumbling and decay, and a lack of coherence and continuity. Still, their metaphors and images are sometimes surprisingly similar – especially when it comes to collecting, passion and eroticism.

#### *Love, passion and desire*

“I fell smack in love with an old bread tray formed like a pig”, recounted a female collector of antiquities (F, b. 1942). Not only female collectors use such terms. Norwegian men, who do not too often use terms like *love*, *covet*, *long for*, *desire*, *infatuated with* when the object is another person, surprisingly often fall back on these terms when talking about their collections. “Love makes blind”, as the saying goes, and this is no less true for passionate collectors:

“If you are just passionate, you do one blunder after the other. If you are driven by love only [and lack knowledge], you get so infatuated that you do what I did, when I made a fool of myself by buying that tobacco box [a “Norwegian antiquity” that turned out to be a recent Russian box]. Nothing but love for the design! I lost my head completely. [...] On the other hand,

if you didn’t fall in love from time to time, if you never made any mistakes [...] If you keep going all life with a safety net, you will miss the thrill. [...] Love was so great that I didn’t heed my intuition” (M, b. 1948).

Collectors’ declarations of love are so numerous that we hardly need support from fiction on this point. However, passion and desire being the ubiquitous emotions of our two novels, greeting the reader from nearly every page, a passage from each would be appropriate:

“Paris is the city of the world that conceals most eccentrics [i.e. collectors], people with a religion in their heart. The eccentrics of London always end up by getting tired of their love affairs, just as they get tired of living. In Paris, however, the monomaniacs cohabit happily with their fantasies. You see them all the time, people like Pons and Elie Magus. They are dressed like paupers [...] They don’t seem to care about anything, not about women, not about the warehouses. They seem to stroll at random, evidently without a penny and apparently absentminded and stupid [...] But these men, they are millionaires, collectors, the most passionate people in this world” (Balzac 1847/1956:135, transl. BR).

“As a child he collected coins, then automata, then musical instruments. Collecting expresses a free-floating desire that attaches and re-attaches itself – it is a succession of desires. The true collector is in the grip not of what is collected but of collecting. [...] With the Cavaliere any passion sought the form of, was justified by becoming, a collection” (Sontag 1992:24, 27).

In Sontag’s *The Volcano Lover*, fire-spitting Vesuvius serves both as the ominous background and as a potent metaphor for the uncontrollable collector’s mania. The use of the volcano metaphor for a collector’s passion is not new. In my interviews several respondents have used corresponding “eruptive” images. Best, however, is a French collector of sad-irons and founder and chairman of an international collectors’ club, *Le club des amis des fers à repasser anciens*. He tells that he became a passionate collector at

the age of 58, when his wife offered him an old iron. At the age of 74 this passion was still “a volcano which never stopped erupting since that time” (Bayart 1982). Indeed an appropriate metaphor, ten years before the publication of Sontag’s novel.

### *Hunt and conquest*

“Envy the adventures we have while on The Hunt. [...] But mostly envy us for The Thrill of The Find” exclaims an American “pack rat” or collector of bric-a-brac and curiosities (quoted after Belk 1995:72). An essential constituent of collecting is the hunt, and most items in most collections carry their proper history – of how they were conquered and incorporated in the collection. When interviewing collectors much of the conversation, sometimes the bulk of it, is about the acquisition of the various items: the unexpected find, the good buy, the shrewd bargaining, the clever bidding at the auction, the poking around at the flea market, the thrill of finding more than the dealer, etc.

The collector’s narrative is a predictable one: how and where they found the various items, how much they paid for them, and their real value and scarcity – in short: the treasure hunt. The following two cases, told by a knife collector (M, b. 1943), are typical, though the style a bit more juicy than the average:

“This knife [a precious 19th century item, handle carved in walrus tooth, engraved silver ornaments, signed by the artisan] – I came across it in Drammen. It was a steal! [...] I got it from a second hand dealer who didn’t know what he was selling. He had to have a thousand crowns for it, he said. Man, he must be off his nut, I thought – all I can do is conclude the deal faster than the devil! I put the bill in his hand quick as lightning.”

“This one [19th century knife, patriotic romantic style, handle and sheath carved in pukkenholtz] I got it from an antique dealer [...] He rang me up from a restaurant in Oslo. He was broke and half drunk, and needed money for a thorough soaking. [...] I jumped into the car, met him at the restaurant and got it for five thousand crowns. Then he could go on quenching his

thirst with pints of beer. [...] Today you’ll have to pay three or four times as much for it.”

These narratives shift between the humorous and the serious, even the solemn. Some may imply a breach of rules, legal or moral, others may even have unintended religious overtones – like the collector who threw away his crutches during the hunt:

“My chum Peter is at least as crazy [a collector] as I am. [...] First time we met was in a container [where both of them were hunting for objects]. One afternoon we had a car trip – Peter, me and my dear Liza – who is just as mad as me. I suffer from sciatica, and that day I needed crutches because my left leg wouldn’t come along. Before the trip Liza had whispered to Peter, without me hearing it: “Just wait until he sees a container. That’ll heal him.” When we came down the Wergelandsveien we spotted two containers, side by side on the sidewalk. I stopped short, got out of the car and ran for the containers – without my crutches!” (M, b. 1947).

Several respondents tell how they look out dealers who are *not* specialists in their own collecting fields, how they circle around in the shops, pretending to ignore or not take any genuine interest in those objects that immediately catch their attention – things that “speak loud to me” (M, b. 1948). No respondent, however, has described this play better than our two novelists. Balzac’s narrative of how Pons conquered Madame de Pompadour’s fan shows how the author – himself an ardent collector of antiquities – must have been a cunning and devious customer in antiquarians’ shops. He describes the collector in his element, having discovered the desired object and entering a hand to hand combat for it, depreciating it and concealing his own knowledge of its real value. “Much experience is required to do a bargain like that”, he states; “It’s a combat face to face, where you look straight into the other’s eye. And what a glance they have, these Jews and dealers from Auvergne!” (Balzac 1847/1956:35–36, transl. BR). To close this section on cunning and cautious hunters, we will leave the floor to Susan Sontag:

"That tremor when you spot it. But you don't say anything. You don't want to make the present owner aware of its value to you; you don't want to drive up the price, or make him decide not to sell at all. So you keep cool, you examine something else, you move on or you go out, saying you'll be back. You perform a whole theatre of being a little interested, but not immoderately; intrigued, yes, even tempted; but not seduced, bewitched. Not ready to pay even more than is being asked, because you must have it.

So the collector is a dissembler, someone whose joys are never unalloyed with anxiety. Because there is always more. Or something better" (Sontag 1992:71–72).

### *Eroticism and power*

"The unmarried collector [...] sorts his mistress-esses according to style, period, or his artistic temperament", states Maurice Rheims in his essay on the strange life of objects (1959:21–22). Also, some collectors may themselves be quite outspoken on the subject of their relation to objects, cf. the Danish collector quoted in the introductory paragraph. But even if many of them talk openly about their collector's mania, overt erotic overtones are not so frequently heard in their own narratives. But some join in, like this collector of old silver and antiquities:

"To be hunting for an object and then get it – the comparison is a little hackneyed perhaps – but it's like being out fishing. It's exciting to hook the fish. Once you've got it into the boat, it's over. It's very much like that. It's sort of an orgasm. Suddenly it's over" (M, b. 1940).

When we turn to fiction, the material is overwhelming. There is but a short step from the passionate conquest of the object to the erotic conquest, if we are to believe numerous literary descriptions. de la Serna's collector of female attributes was described in an artful, allegorical form, whereas others are more direct. Balzac was of the opinion that the sum of passions in man was constant; a person with a very strong passion for collecting could hardly harbour other forms of love. Alternatives were scarce for unmarried Pons, "a person with beauty and refinement in his soul, but whose ugly appear-

ance forbid any success with women" (1847/1956:7, transl. BR). We encounter a similar compensational idea in Sontag – "Obsessive collectors – natural bachelors" (1992:19) – and with several other authors. But both Balzac and Sontag pursue their play on words so far that the reader gets in doubt whether collecting is to be understood as compensation or as an erotic experience in itself:

"[Elie Magus] melted by the sight of a great work of art, like a libertine who is tired of women comes to life when seeing a young, beautiful girl and indulges in the hunt for flawless beauties. This Don Juan of paintings, this devoted admirer of perfection [...] lived in a harem of beautiful paintings."

"When [Elie Magus] came across a work of art to his taste, his life changed; a haul was to be done, a transaction to be carried through, a great battle to be won. By hook and crook he went to work, and no tricks were left untried in order to bring home as cheap as possible the new woman of his harem."

"Pons and Magus carried in their hearts the same jealousy. [...] To get the chance to inspect the collection of [Pons] filled Elie Magus with the elated sens of happiness that is experienced only by a woman chaser who manages to enter the bedroom of the beautiful mistress that his friend tries to hide from him" (Balzac 1847/1956:131, 134, 137, transl. BR).

With Balzac, comparison alternates with metaphor. With Sontag, collecting and eroticism merge:

"Correggio's art. And Venus's groin. You can really possess – even if only for a little while. [...] There are so many objects. No single one is that important. There is no such thing as a monogamous collector. Sight is a promiscuous sense. The avid gaze always wants more."

"Collecting is a species of insatiable desire, a Don Juanism of objects in which each new find [...] generates the added pleasure of score-keeping, of enumeration. Volume and tireless-

ness of conquest would lose some of its point and savior were there not a ledger somewhere [...] the happy contemplation of which at off-moments counteracts the exhaustion of desire that the erotic athlete is condemned to and against which he struggles.”

“He yielded gratefully to the experience of satiety. Inevitably, some of his collecting zeal began to abate. [...] The collecting desire *can* be enfeebled by happiness – acute enough, erotic enough happiness – and the Cavaliere was happy, as happy as that” (Sontag 1992:71, 202, 180).

The collector and Don Juan are male social roles. No wonder, as only men are expected to openly show passion, to desire and to conquer. The erotic aspect of collecting may be given a concrete meaning, as in the case of the collector who kept “a ledger” of his memories of erotic adventures (cf. Belk 1995). As a metaphor it may represent an anthropomorphization of the object (cf. the Danish collector), or it may mean an objectification of the woman – as in Sontag (1992:138): “So the old man collected the young woman; it could not have been the other way around.” But in any case, the harem and the Don Juanism of objects are metaphors that can be applied to any collector and any collection. Every collector wants more – just like any Don Juan. And all collections consist of series of objects – like a harem. Vittorio Fellini hit the mark when he let his male collector in *Citta della Donne* collect women’s underpants!

A harem connotes more than eroticism. It also means power and control. “There is hardly a more absolute ruler in a secret harem than a man amidst his objects”, says Baudrillard (1969:125). It is a common interpretation that collecting attracts because the collection represents a closed universe where its master rules unconditionally. The collector God imposes order and system in his little private world.

The collector bestows economic and moral value on his objects, simply by incorporating them in the collection. The collector must have a certain position, self-esteem and self-confidence. A status of connoisseur transfers a corresponding status to the objects. Thanks to their traditionally strong position in the world of

production and economic values, men more than women have a status that conveys connoisseurship. “... collecting was still a virile occupation”, Sontag writes (1992:22); “It stemmed from a lordly sense of himself that Catherine – indeed, all but very few women – could not have.” Allegedly, men confirm their own images through their collections, just as they may strengthen their self image through erotic conquests. This argument leads to the mirror metaphor: a collection functions as a mirror where the collector sees what he wants to see (cf. Rheims 1959, Baudrillard 1969, Stewart 1984, Clifford 1988, Pearce 1995). That this image may contribute to an understanding of the self that is not only agreeable, is a topic for the next paragraph.

### *Transgression, loss of control and chaos*

To collect is a passion that may end up as a vice. Many respondents compare collecting to alcoholism, gambling or drug addiction: the passion may be controlled, but there is also a chance that economic and moral rules are broken and fortunes lost. To start with the most concrete risks, we shall listen to the advice of an experienced collector of curiosities:

“You must make a few deals with yourself and keep control over your collecting. If you know about markets coming up, put aside money beforehand, as I do. You must be strict with yourself. It’s like alcohol. I know many persons who went to the dogs because they couldn’t draw the line. [...] That’s why I have managed a fairly long life both as a user of alcohol and as a collector. [...] You can’t let love surpass reason too often. Then you’ll squander everything. You must draw the line” (M, b. 1948).

Good advice of course, but temptations lurk everywhere for a collector. Newspapers are all too full of reports on thefts, faking and court trials where collectors are implicated, and the narratives of the (male) respondents abound with stories of purchases where months’ wages are spent – sometimes even of “innocent borrowing”. “They are willing if needs be to risk prosecution to have an old cup, a painting, a rare object”, Balzac wrote in 1847 (1956:135).



"Every collector is potentially (if not actually) a thief", is the harsh comment from Susan Sontag 150 years later (1992:73). "There seems to exist a special morality for collectors, who are driven by an irresistible desire to complete the collection", wrote August Strindberg (1910) and went on: "Even the most upright among bibliophiles is a potential danger to himself and to others"; "Yes, I had to have that folio, or die", is the Strindbergian collector's concession to the judge on the accusation of theft. When passions are strong, temptations become numerous.

But the collector's transgression has consequences beyond these breaks of formal rules and of social decency, consequences of a more abstract and personal kind. Sontag is strongly preoccupied with destructive and self-destructive aspects of collecting, and her protagonist moves closer and closer to the edge of the vomiting crater. The volcano metaphor works on several levels; Vesuvius is the unique and unownable object that the collector is constantly longing for; and it stands for the collector himself, unpredictable and destructive in his passion; it also reminds us of the uncontrollable forces of Passion itself; and it conveys an image of the collector's self-contempt in rare moments of self-examination, including a longing for self-destruction. A collector balances on the border of the unknown, of his own destructive forces, of his own abolition:

"Like passion, whose emblem it is, it can die. [...] The river of fire, after consuming all in its path, will become a river of black stone. Trees will never again grow here, ever. The mountain becomes the graveyard of its own violence: the ruin the volcano causes includes its own" (Sontag 1992:7).

The very excessiveness of the collecting passion makes the collector a self-despiser, she claims; the collector is preoccupied with the idea of preservation and conservation and at the same time he is a thief and a robber; he is a lover of beauty and an extreme materialist. These contradictions give collectors a divided consciousness – which may lead to a longing to be purged by a consuming fire, for a holocaust that may relieve him of his collection. Or so goes her

argument (1992:187) – not without a strong resonance of both Freud and Baudrillard (1968:149–50). Similar thoughts may be traced in other novels; Canetti's book-collector ends up by burning his collection, and Fowles' collector kills his most desired object, the girl. But to quote Sontag again: "... should such an angry collector survive his fire or fit, he will probably want to start another collection."

The collector's self-contempt at moments may of course be due to the clash between his sense of aesthetics and his strong materialism, as Sontag proposes. However, collecting seems to offer precisely a socially acceptable form of materialism in modern consumer society, according to recent research (Belk 1995), and this is probably another reason why collecting is considered good entertainment. Perhaps Walter Benjamin, himself a book-collector, offers a better clue with his idea of collecting as a dialectic process between order and chaos:

"For what is this possession [the collection] other than chaos, where habit has become so much a part of it that it appears as order? You have heard about people who fell ill by the loss of their books, and about others who have become criminals through their activity. Any order in this field is nothing but an existence on the edge of an abyss [...] Thus, the collector's existence is dialectically extended between the poles of disorder and order" (Benjamin 1972, transl. BR).

All passion approaches chaos, Benjamin states, collecting however the chaos of memory. Contemplating his books when unpacking his library, he observed that chance and destiny were overwhelmingly present in his collection. Any collection requires systematizing, i.e. order, but it also serves as a monument of the arbitrary life of the collector. Through the memories that are conveyed by each object, the collector is constantly confronted with his past – a past that in the case of Benjamin was marked by chance more than planning, by disorder more than order. As a collector, he found himself hovering above the abyss of memory.

In my field work I have met two or three collectors who actually have signalled a certain

weariness – in one case almost distaste – with their collections. The latter one was strongly addicted to collecting, a person for whom collecting was far more important than what he collected. During a two hours inspection of an enormous collection that literally filled attics, basement and garages, or rather five or six very unsystematic collections ranging from consumer's everyday items to old paintings, from advertisement posters and old tin cans to vintage cars, my cicerone gradually became less enthusiastic. At the end of the visit, he suddenly looked at me with a weary gaze that told more than words, adding: "Sometimes I get a feeling of dullness and fatigue. It's too much!" (M, b. 1957).

We have apparently moved away from our main subject, eroticism. But Sontag takes us back. In her symbolic world, the collector's self-understanding and feeling of satiety and excess has a parallel in eroticism:

"Like sexual feelings, when they become a focus of dedication or devotion, and are actually lived out in all their vehemence and addictiveness, so the feeling for art (and beauty) can, after a while, only be experienced as excess, as something that strains to surpass itself, to be annihilated. To really love something is to wish to die of it. Or to live only in it, which is the same thing. To go up and never have to come down" (Sontag 1982:340).

We have now moved – analytically – through the different phases of the collector's passion; from the falling in love and the desire for the object, through the hunting and the conquest to the erotic aspects, to end up with loss of control, chaos and self-examination. Before the final discussion of this figurative or metaphorical world – or should we call it symbolic? – we must decide what we mean by terms like symbolic and symbolism.

## Some remarks on symbols and symbolism

To those who believe that the debate on symbols and symbolism may be based on a few simple definitions one may retort that every definition

is relative, states Daniel Fabre. He compares the researcher of symbolism to an explorer of regions increasingly unknown, sometimes hesitating to move on and constantly in search of instruments to find his bearings in a strange territory (1989:61). The following brief outline, with all its biases and shortcomings, is a necessary step in this study – in order to understand a rather obscure part of the history of our discipline, and to make clear my own position in relation to a long and sinuous history of symbol studies. It is, to quote Fabre, a search for instruments to find one's bearings.

### *Concepts and traditions*

The cultural analyst who wants to bring order into the use of concepts like symbol, symbolism and symbolic understanding, is likely to break his neck for obvious reasons: there are so many different definitions and traditions, disciplinary as well as national; disciplines have borrowed from each other and made adaptations; and there is a lack of unanimity even within the various disciplines. The problem is not only the concepts and the vocabulary, but also a lack of consensus as to what is actually the object of study. There is a tradition – not least within European ethnology – for a restricted acceptance of symbolism, aiming at the analysis of various elements of culture, or "symbols", with an immediately expressive or communicative content. And there is another acceptance of symbolism, or symbolic understanding, that is much wider, implying the study of the attribution of meaning through the culture's classification of the objects in the world (Lenclud 1991). In this wide acceptance of symbolism, at least, we are still "explorers in a strange and unknown world".

Another important opposition in studies of symbolism is that of meaning versus function, or very schematic: what symbols say and what symbols do. In the first case, the analysis deals with contents, logic or structural properties of the symbolic systems, which are studied in a cognitive or communicative context. In the second case, the studies concentrate on social, religious and political functions; the symbolic systems (where rituals play an important part) are investigated in their instrumental aspects

and interpreted in relation to organisation and domination. The latter trend in symbol studies has found its most fertile soil in Durkheimian anthropology of religion and in functional anthropology in the Radcliffe-Brown tradition (Lenclud 1991). As the present study of collecting focuses on meaning and structural properties, nothing more will be said here about the functionalist approach.

Linguistics and semiotics (semiology) have furnished the cultural disciplines with the concepts of sign and symbol. The two mutually different *sign*-concepts, handed down from F. de Saussure and W. Sanders Peirce, seem to be the only concepts that are not subject to much disagreement. But as we move on from sign to symbol definitions start to diverge, even between and within the various semiotic traditions, for instance as to the relationship between sign and symbol, whether the symbol is an arbitrary or a partly motivated sign, etc. All the divergent symbol concepts in semiotics, literary theory and language philosophy (cf. Eco 1984) taken into consideration, the confusion around these two concepts in our own discipline is hardly surprising. Readers of recent issues of *Ethnologia Europaea* will have met with circumlocutions like “the signs/symbols which ...”, “the motives/symbols of the flag ...”, “the most prominent signs and symbols ...”, etc. – in otherwise recommendable articles. On a more official level, this somewhat awkward state of affairs became evident last year when German ethnologists arranged their biennial conference, the subject of which was announced as: *Symbole – zur Bedeutung der Zeichen in der Kultur* (“Symbols – On the Meaning of Signs in Culture”). The arrangers had to coin a title where both sign and symbol appeared, and the reality behind this is more than a terminological problem.

However, my material on collecting, as discussed on the preceding pages, does not lend itself to an analysis of sign and symbols in a restricted sense (whatever they are), so I shall not undertake the risky task of proposing (pragmatic) workable definitions. Also, as I find no support in traditional semiotics for an analysis of the systematic symbolic aspects of my material, I shall look to competing anthropological

theories. This means that I will include metaphors, allegories and other rhetorical figures in my conception of symbolism as a mode of thinking, in accordance with most anthropological theories but contrary to e.g. Eco’s semiotic symbol theory (1984).

Traditions from psychoanalysis have also had their impact on our discipline’s pragmatic use and understanding of symbols and symbolism. (I here disregard the oldest psychoanalytic tradition of investing symbols with one single, universal meaning, as opposed to the relativist interpretations of anthropology.) This double heritage from linguistics and psychoanalysis uncovers a considerable paradox. Both traditions would contend that the basic meaning of a symbol is an object, an activity, an expression etc. that represents something else. But whereas the paramount interest from the linguistic/semiotic point of view is interpersonal communication, the psychoanalyst is mainly interested in the opposite function, the symbol as a substitute for something else that is hidden to the individual, its function being to conceal repressed ideas to his consciousness. In short, we have to do with either communication or censorship, or with conscious versus unconscious use of symbols. Both traditions have had their impact on and been practised in ethnology/anthropology, another reason why some of us have felt it difficult to reach a deeper understanding of the field. Even if part of my material from fiction is influenced by psychoanalytic ideas, a further investigation in this direction will imply a discussion of unconscious symbols and (sexual) compensation. This perspective is by no means irrelevant when it comes to understanding collecting, but to force the overall material into a compensation theory would mean undue reductionism.

The sign vs. symbol complex, a major concern in the tradition of the restricted acceptance of symbolism (see above), is only one part of the linguistic lesson to anthropology. The linguistic basis lead to a perception of symbolism as a *system* of symbols, rather than a series of isolated symbols (as in the old Freudian tradition). This insight found its utmost expression in structural anthropology, as demonstrated by Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose analysis concen-

trated upon the formal and logic organisation of symbols more than on the content of meaning in the separate symbols. Precisely this systematic aspect of symbolism has attracted my attention, as it gives an opportunity to discuss the systematic character of the metaphors that I have met in the material on collecting. Structuralism, taken as a philosophy or as a scientific method, has been subject to severe criticism for a couple of decades, and rightfully. But as "a way of seeing things", to quote Edmund Leach, structuralism can still contribute to the study of culture.

#### *The metaphoric/metonymic principle – a structuralist approach*

I have so far ignored one important element of the history of ethnology, viz. the discourse on primitive thought. Classification is indispensable for research, but at the risk of distorting perspectives or losing certain aspects. Ethnological research, not least in museums, have tended to systematize cultural material in categories, under headings like agriculture, costumes, food and diet, crafts and trades, etc. But there was a series of phenomena that escaped classification, or rather were put together in one box: objects, words and deeds, attitudes, ideas and conceptions that referred to beliefs, superstition, symbolism – or whatever this heterogenous leftover category was called. That symbolism is an aspect that intersects all empirical categories is a modern insight.

Researchers were of course children of their time, and the heritage from evolutionism was tenacious. Habits, opinions and popular interpretations that did not fit in with scientific thinking was far into the afterwar period seen as a sign of irrationality, something that marked "The Other", whether a native in a primitive culture or a primitive (= peasant) in our own culture. Collected popular culture material indicated that humanity was divided in two: those who thought rationally, and those who thought symbolically.

The ethnologist's burden until fairly recently has been this idea of a division between two ways of thinking; the researcher's tool was the logical, rational way of thinking, as opposed to the prelogical or symbolic way, represented by

his object of study. But it became increasingly difficult to maintain that humanity was divided in this way. Slowly it became clear that everyone, modern western man included, has the potential for both ways of thinking. But the researcher had been so well trained to repress symbolic thinking in his own mind, to the profit of rational thinking, that he was blind to the symbolic thinking in his own, civilized world. "The savage mind" or "la pensée sauvage", to borrow an expression from Lévi-Strauss, was everywhere.

This leads us to the provisional conclusion that symbolism is an alternative way of comprehending and interpreting the world. The great paradox for the researcher is that even if he acknowledges the existence in himself of a symbolic way of thinking, he has to formulate this insight by means of a logical, scientific language. But his best ally is the artist and author of fiction, who is free to do "research" and interpret things his way.

Yet we have not explained how symbols work. Let us lend an ear to the structuralist's explanation of the systematic character of signs in culture. When a concrete phenomenon – an object, an action, a narrative ... – may be perceived in a symbolic sense, i. e. as representing something else that it obviously is not from a realistic point of view, this must be due to some sort of similarity that makes possible a comparison of the two. This similarity cannot reside in substance, nor in form, as these are different by definition. There remains, however, the possibility for similarity or identity in structure, that is a structure that may repeat itself in different types of substance. Without endorsing all ideas and principles of structural anthropology (several of which must probably be discarded today), it seems appropriate to draw the attention to one of their basic postulates: that metaphorical cross-references between dissimilar cultural phenomena is possible only because their structures are identical. (NB: postulates do not only belong to prelogical thinking, as it used to be contended!)

The structuralist claimed that it is with culture as it is with natural languages, because language is part of culture: both are governed by a set of rules (a "grammar") and a system of

classifications. The crown case is the similarities between eating and sexual behaviour. Rules, as much as biology, classify between what is eatable and not, and other rules tell us how and when and where to gather, prepare and eat the food. In every culture there is a “food grammar”, as specialised and refined as any grammar – and dining etc. is a way of communicating, like talking. The paradigmatic axis (the “vertical” list of alternatives or interchangeable items) offers the metaphors, whereas the syntagmatic axis (the “horizontal” sequence, including proximity and context) caters for the metonymies. The same applies to the “grammar” for sexual comportment, with rules for what is permitted and what is not, who you can have a relation to, etc., i. e. distinctions that belong to culture, not to nature.

These two fields – of eating and of sexuality – are commonly referred to because they appear to be identical in structure. They have so many similarities that metaphorical cross-references are very common. This had been observed for a long time, in psychoanalysis as well as in functionalist anthropology. But it was structural anthropology that proposed an analysis that was far more sophisticated than that of Frazer, Radcliffe-Brown or Freud. Behind this analysis hides another postulate, viz. that the human mind, which creates all these systems and classifications, is in itself an entity that creates similar structures in all its products – be it languages, eating, sexuality, dreaming ... – and why not collecting?

## Towards a conclusion

### *Collecting and structure – and so what?*

Collecting covers a broad range of practices (from the taxonomic to the aesthetic way of collecting) and of activities (chasing, systematizing, exhibiting, studying ...), of aims and motivations, and of types of objects collected. No single, isolated symbolic expression can possibly capture this broad and varied field of activities. As shown in the first section, there is actually a surprising world of images associated with collectors and collecting, in everyday parlance and in popular opinion as well as in the artist’s fictional world. These rhetorical

figures are remarkable for three reasons: their high number, their systematic character, and because of all the cross-references between collecting and sexuality, or eroticism.

A close look at the discourse on collecting has revealed a long series of coherent and mutually interdependent metaphors and comparisons. In human experience these images represent elements that go together in a syntagmatic chain: passion and desire – chase and conquest – a concentration on what is unique and an unquenchable thirst for the series – masculinity and virility – power and egoism – satisfaction and satiety – transgression and destruction – and (perhaps) self-examination; things allowed and things unwarranted, things coveted and odious things – according to cultural rules.

The discourse on collecting links together two apparently very different fields of human activity. The act of collecting material objects is continually being compared to sexual comportment and referred to in terms of relations between the two sexes. Such linking represents a form of experience and a manner of expression that used to be associated with prelogical or symbolic thought, but that we now acknowledge as our own way of thinking also. And we might as well accept the formal explanation proposed by the structuralist, viz. that these cross-references are possible only because the human brain has structured these two fields of experience, as well as the language that we use to express them, in the same way.

However, formal structure can explain only why this linking is possible. But why do we select just eroticism as a parallel to collecting, and not other important spheres of activity? Which categories do the two fields have in common that are so important? Are there some basic human needs that find their expression primarily in these two spheres? And how to explain its almost universal character, as we find the same linking in most (or in all?) western cultures and languages?

So far we have concluded that the elaborate discourse on collecting and eroticism may be defined as symbolism, or symbolic understanding, at least in a formalist and structuralist meaning of the term. It is a recurrent problem,

however, with analyses of formal aspects of culture that they very often push ahead of them the most interesting questions. I shall not pursue a lengthy (and probably speculative) discussion of these questions. I will instead close with a few remarks on the ambiguity of collecting, which may contain fragments of an answer.

### *Collecting – an ambiguous activity*

There can be no doubt that *passion* and *desire* lie at the core of both collecting and eroticism. To insist on the role of passion in an erotic affair would be a waste of time. But the relationship between passion and collecting is worth while expanding on. We may contend that against passion for sexual gratification stands the collector's passion for possession. It is commonly thought that collecting represents the quintessence of possessing and the collector the embodiment of a possessor. By definition, a collector's item should be neither for practical use (in that case he is a user or a hoarder) nor *only* an economic investment (in that case he is an investor). An object is collected precisely because it is useless (= aesthetic or symbolic), and its function in a collection is simply to be possessed. "It was no longer the chase that obsessed him, but the sheer joy of ownership", says Sontag (1992:180). Baudrillard is outspoken on this point:

"Let us admit that our everyday objects actually are the objects of a passion – the passion for private possession. The emotional strength of this passion is by no means inferior to our passions for people. We experience this passion every day. Sometimes it has complete mastery over us, in the absence of other passions. As a passion our possessiveness is kept in balance, unclear, controlling – and we are hardly conscious of its basic role for the equilibrium of the individual and the group, even for the will to live. As such, [...] the objects are a mental fence that marks the borders of my kingdom; I am their ultimate meaning [...]" (Baudrillard 1968:120, transl. BR).

Thus passion and possession go together, just like passion and eroticism. In one case passion for objects, in the other passion for persons. The

one may be as strong as the other, and this gives a platform for metaphors.

This dichotomy object–person is an important one. Let us return a last time to the images used, in fiction as well as in everyday language. There are 150 years between the author who wrote about the collector who "stared at the paintings as a lover looks at a mistress" (Balzac) and the modern newspaper journalist who wrote about a collector that "He collected stamps, while the rest of his classmates collected girls" (*Aftenposten* 28.4.1995). And Susan Sontag does not even bother to name her characters. People and things merge, and this is a central characteristic of all images used in the discourse on collecting and eroticism.

There weighs a basic ambiguity upon collecting, which may be explained as a clash between society's norms and the collector's practice, with reference to the oppositions people–things, immaterial–material and animate–inanimate. The discourse on collecting insists upon a basic similarity in our behaviour towards what is animate and what is inanimate. In spite of our humanistic ideals that make a sharp distinction between people and things, the collector overtly and publicly shows strong emotions for what is material and inanimate. According to our cultural norms (and also our logical, scientific thinking), emotions should be directed towards living creatures and spiritual values, not towards dead things. Still, in the emotional life of the avid collector distinctions between people and objects seem to be wiped out.

Because the collector openly defies society's ideology and norms (but not its mentality) through his materialism, he has become a focus of interest. To some, he plays the role of the clown; he is the fool who is accepted because he reminds us of our hypocrisy, that we are materialists without acknowledging it. Others will despise him and consider his activity (sexual) compensation or fetishism. But the majority seem to respect him and his activities because they feel a resonance of their own relationship to things, even if the difference in degree may be considerable. I venture that an important reason for the collector to attract so much attention is to be found in our ambiguity to materialism.

But can collecting be reduced to possessive-

ness and materialism only? Certainly not! In one of her novels, Tove Jansson lets the character Hemulen (collector of beetles and of stamps) complete a special collection. When realizing what had happened, his reaction was dismay and deep consternation for having become *only* an owner of stamps and not being a collector any longer! Collecting is also play, creativity and aesthetic practice – other characteristics that it has in common with eroticism. There seems to be no simple and unambiguous answer to our question why two important fields of human experience may symbolize each other.

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