

P R E F A C E

WITH two exceptions, the eleven essays in this volume have been written since the publication of *The Scholar-Librarian* three years ago. The title essay, the exploration of “Athenæum Origins,” the chapter on Edmund Burke and Sir Joshua Reynolds, and the concluding meditation on the Gordon Riots are published here for the first time. Although all of these essays have been written for specific occasions — including the essay on “The Literature of Collecting,” which demands the capaciousness of a book such as this to accommodate its length and aspirations — these chapters fall rather easily under the three rubrics I have imposed on them: collecting, libraries, and portraiture. Because the Boston Athenæum celebrated its bicentennial during 2007, over half of the pages in this volume, moreover, are tied quite closely to recent activities at the Library: the two historical essays on the Athenæum, the chapter on the small, enigmatic bust of William Lawrence, the exploration of the photography of Thomas Kellner (our bicentennial artist-in-residence), and the title essay, which had its origins — as you will soon see — in a seminar I led at the Athenæum three years ago.

I don’t wish, however, to argue for a more schematic structure to this volume than these three divisions suggest. While each of the chapters is very much an “essay” in the original sense of assaying and exploring a particular subject, the subjects themselves and the manner in which I have treated them are obviously quite diverse. One of the most perceptive readers of *The Scholar-Librarian*, Michael Ryan, pointed out that the ten essays in that collection were “a heterogeneous lot,” but he was kind enough to add that the “connective tissue” linking those chapters was “a fascination with the material evidences of artifacts and the ways in which the tangible casts new light on the intangible.” I trust that this fascination with the material nature of such artifacts is still very much at play in

this collection of essays, particularly in those devoted to portraiture. Several of the chapters, however, strike out in different directions, especially the two essays devoted to library history and the title essay, which attempts to engage the theory and fiction of collecting in an extended conversation with each other. So *caveat lector*: although all of these essays were written by the same author, they will surely not be of equal interest to the same reader. Not everyone will share my interests in collecting, library history, *and* portraiture, but I hope that readers interested in any of these subjects will find something of consequence here.

It gives me pleasure to extend a note of gratitude to several colleagues who have provided instrumental support for this publication. My executive secretary Catherine McGrath has hovered over the textual transmission of these essays with her characteristic precision and patience. Patricia Boulos has once again displayed minor (if not major) heroism in searching for difficult images and permission to reproduce them. Kathleen O'Neill Sims has proof-read the volume and compiled a much more ambitious index than its author would ever have done. My colleagues in the Athenæum's reference department — Stephen Nonack, Lisa Starzyk, Mary Warnament, and Ann Kardos — have produced valuable materials from our own collections, electronic resources, and inter-library loan. Robert Fleck and Mark Parker Miller of Oak Knoll Press have been rash enough to commit themselves to a third collaborative venture; I thank them for their confidence and support. Five books, two keepsakes, and eleven annual reports later, my friend Scott Vile has still not lost his relish for designing handsome publications; it has, as always, been a privilege to work so closely with him. The color photographs and relatively modest cost of this book have been made possible, moreover, by the generous support of the trustees of the Boston Athenæum. I thank our trustees (and our president, Marshall Moriarty, in particular) for their continuing commitment to the intellectual vitality of our library, its members, its staff, and its director. My most profound debt, however, is to my wife, Elizabeth Morse, who remains my sharpest critic and most fervent supporter.

COLLECTING

Objects are our other selves; the better we understand them, the closer we come to self-knowledge.

Susan M. Pearce

Things, I reflected, are tougher than people. Things are the changeless mirror in which we watch ourselves disintegrate. Nothing is more age-ing than a collection of works of art.

Bruce Chatwin

“Things” were of course the sum of the world; only, for Mrs. Gereth, the sum of the world was rare French furniture and oriental china.

Henry James

THE LITERATURE OF COLLECTING

I BEGAN the conversation with a simple question. As we introduced ourselves one after the other around the table, I asked each of my colleagues whether he or she was a collector. They were surprised to be put on the spot — and yet, as they began to answer, they soon realized that I had posed a rather leading question. Like other members of the Boston Athenæum, they had been invited to join me for a series of discussions about what I called “the literature of collecting”; a dozen had taken me up on my offer. I had assumed that many of them would join these conversations because they wanted to know more about collecting as a subject of critical inquiry, and their first responses to my question were therefore understandably tentative, for they were implicitly being asked to provide their own definitions of what it meant to be a collector. Several answered that they weren’t sure. A few stated that they were not collectors per se but were interested in the subject. Two or three took great pleasure in describing, at some length, each of the categories in which they collected. One participant qualified her response: “I’ve inherited quite a bit from my parents, and I try to understand what I have and take good care of it; does that make me a collector?” One, I was delighted to learn, was a psychiatrist; another was a curator. Yet another asked his colleagues for their own opinions: “I don’t think of myself as a collector, and yet I’ve

amassed a library of over 40,000 volumes, mostly focused on political theory. I recently purchased a large barn outside of Boston to house what I can't fit into my place in the city. Am I a collector, or just a scholar who can't stop buying books?"¹

They, in turn, wanted to know exactly what I meant by "the literature of collecting," which I think of as two interlocking textual enterprises: both the scholarly literature devoted to collecting, and the focus on collecting in English and American prose fiction of the past half century or so. The scholarly literature on collecting has become a growth industry within both England and the United States. As a body of knowledge and opinion, it is much more assertive, self-confident, and even tendentious than the other forms of scholarship in which I normally traffic. Nearly everyone, it seems, has a strong sense of what collecting is, what it isn't, and why it matters. I, on the other hand, have attempted to approach the subject of collecting with a certain amount of circumspection, and what I offer here — as I did around our table in the trustees' room three years ago — is in many ways exploratory in nature. My primary ambition is to create an extended conversation between critical theory and prose fiction: between a general theory of collecting as it has been expressed in the work of Walter Benjamin, Jean Baudrillard, Susan Stewart, Susan Pearce, Werner Muensterberger, Thomas Tanselle, and others, and fictional accounts of collecting in the work of John Fowles, Susan Sontag, Bruce Chatwin, Ian McEwan, Evan Connell, and Tibor Fischer — and with a nod, as always, to Henry James. My audience is ideally a broad one, for I want to engage the readers and purveyors of critical theory in this intertextual conversation while also reaching out to the intelligent general reader. I have therefore situated myself at a cultural crossroads: between literature and theory on the one hand, and between professional critics and the informed general public on the other. I shall, eventually, reach several conclusions about collecting that are consistent with my comfort level as a scholar (and as a collector), but my own focus is primarily on the complexity of thought and expression to be found in these scholarly and fictional texts, and on the ways in which these two enterprises illuminate each other.

Jean Baudrillard: Collecting as System

I consider the founding document in the literature of collecting to be Jean Baudrillard's essay "Le Système marginal: la collection," first published within *Le Système des objets* in 1968.² My colleagues at the Boston Athenæum resisted Baudrillard at every turn, finding his essay to be dogmatic, illogical, inconsistent, melodramatic, and sexist — and so it is. But Baudrillard also manages, within the space of a few pages, to raise virtually all of the issues that inform critical discussions of collecting as well as the various fictions devoted to it. If his essay needs to be taken with a good pinch of Gallic salt, so much the better, for it is ultimately more provocative than it is systematic. Consider, for instance, Baudrillard's third sentence: "It ought to be obvious that the objects that occupy our daily lives are in fact the objects of a passion, that of personal possession, whose quotient of invested affect is in no way inferior to that of any other variety of human passion" (7). It ought to be obvious, but is it? "Passion" can mean many different things — and be generated in various degrees. Personal possession may well constitute a passion for many people, but does it do so for all of us? And even granting this assertion, isn't Baudrillard exaggerating the importance of "the objects that occupy our daily lives"? Surely some of these objects are more significant than others in producing the passion of personal possession; surely our quotient of "invested affect" in such objects is also based on some system of aesthetic or cultural differentiation. Baudrillard, however, is not to be distracted: "Indeed, this everyday passion often outstrips all the others, and sometimes reigns supreme in the absence of any rival." What is characteristic of such a passion, moreover, is that it is "tempered, diffuse, and regulative: we can only guess at its fundamental role in keeping the lives of the individual subject or of the collectivity on an even footing, and in supporting our very project of survival." How can a passion that "outstrips" or "reigns supreme" also be tempered and regulative? How does a passion for the objects that occupy our daily lives support the grand "project of survival" for individuals and "the collectivity" alike?

Many of these questions are eventually resolved, as when, for instance, Baudrillard introduces a crucial distinction between the things we use and the objects we “possess.” Possession, he argues, cannot apply to an implement (a refrigerator, for example) “since the object I utilize always directs me back to the world.” Possession refers to an object once it is “*divested of its function and made relative to a subject*,” for while that object retains its status as “a resistant material body” it is also, simultaneously, “a mental realm over which I hold sway, a thing whose meaning is governed by myself alone. It is all my own, the object of my passion” (7). The objects we possess, in other words, are profoundly related to Baudrillard’s conception of subjectivity. All such objects (or “pieces”) participate in “a mutual relationship” in so far as they refer back to us, and they thereby constitute themselves as a “*system*” on the basis of which “the subject seeks to piece together his world, his personal microcosm” (7). Any given object can either be utilized or possessed — but these two functions are mutually exclusive. The first function enables us to assert “practical control within the real world” whereas the second allows us to engage in the “enterprise of abstract mastery whereby the subject seeks to assert himself as an autonomous totality outside the world” (8).

When an object takes on a strictly subjective status, “its destiny is to be collected.” It ceases to be merely an individual carpet, table, compass, or knick-knack, instead taking on a meaning that is “entirely up to the subject.” The result, in Baudrillard’s view, is that “all objects in a collection become equivalent” thanks to that process of “passionate abstraction we call possession.” But this state of “embodied abstraction” also dictates that “a single object can never be enough”: there will always be a succession of objects and, at the extreme, “a total set marking the accomplishment of a mission.” The possession of an object of whatever kind is therefore “always both satisfying and frustrating.” Our everyday environment also remains “an ambiguous territory,” for in ordinary life “function is constantly superseded by the subjective factor, as acts of possession mingle with acts of usage, in a process that always falls short of total integration.” And yet — on the other hand — the collection offers us “a paradigm of perfection, for this is where the passionate enterprise

of possession can achieve its ambitions, within a space where the everyday prose of the object-world modulates into poetry, to institute an unconscious and triumphant discourse" (8).

This may sound rather grandiloquent, and in the pages that follow Baudrillard's timbre descends to a much more mundane pitch. Collecting, he goes on to argue, is essentially a form of regressive behavior. For a child, "collecting represents the most rudimentary way to exercise control over the outer world: by laying things out, grouping them, handling them" (9). This active phase of collecting tends to last between the ages of seven and twelve, after which it normally disappears; "later on, it is men in their forties who seem most prone to the passion." Baudrillard therefore sees collecting functioning as a "powerful mechanism of compensation during critical phases in a person's sexual development." It runs counter to active genital sexuality, and it differs from fetishism in that it is not equivalent to a sexual practice. It should not be seen as a pure and simple substitute for sex, however, but rather as a "regression to the anal stage, manifested in such behaviour patterns as accumulation, ordering, aggressive retention and so forth." Such behavior can, indeed, produce satisfaction that is "every bit as intense" as sexual fulfillment, and it is precisely the "boundless passion" that can be invested in this "game" that lends this regressive behavior its "sublimity" and reinforces, for Baudrillard, the opinion that "an individual who is not some sort of collector can only be a cretin or hopelessly sub-human" (9).

Baudrillard's next move is to stipulate that collectors partake of the "sublime" not by virtue of the objects they collect, but by virtue of their fanaticism, a fanaticism that is identical "in the case of the rich man specializing in Persian miniatures, or of the pauper who hoards matchboxes" (9). It is therefore mistaken for us to attempt to distinguish between the collector as connoisseur ("one who adores objects because of their beguiling singularity and differentness") and the "straightforward collector" who simply wishes to place his acquisitions into a set or series (10). Pleasure springs from the fact that, in either case, possession relies on two very different factors: the absolute singularity of each item, and the possibility of envisaging a set or series of similar items. The first proposition

“means” that each item “is equivalent to a human being, and eventually [to] the subject himself”; the second implies a Derridean “prospect of limitless substitution and play.” I find both of these conclusions to be strained, to say the least, but Baudrillard is on firmer ground when he stipulates that the “quintessence” of the collection is qualitative whereas its material organization is quantitative. Having said this, however, he moves from a vision of the collector fondling and scrutinizing his objects in “a certain intimate delirium” to his conclusion that “there is a strong whiff of the harem about all this, in the sense that the whole charm of the harem lies in its being at once a series bounded by intimacy (with always a privileged final term) and an intimacy bounded by seriality” (10).

The collector therefore becomes “the sultan of a secret seraglio.” Ordinary human relationships, which are the “site of the unique and the conflictual,” never permit such a fusion of “absolute singularity and indefinite seriality.” This in turn explains why ordinary relationships are such a continual source of anxiety whereas the realm of objects offers comfort and security. The object one possesses is therefore “the perfect pet,” a dog reduced to a single aspect of itself — fidelity, for example (10-11). This is why “*one invests in objects all that one finds impossible to invest in human relationships*” (11). This is why we quickly seek out the company of objects when we need to recuperate. But then, in an enigmatic *volte face*, Baudrillard immediately repudiates this view:

But we should not be fooled by such talk of recuperation, nor by all that sentimental literature that celebrates inanimate objects. We cannot but see this reflex of retreat as a regression; this sort of passion is an escapist one. No doubt objects do play a regulative role in everyday life, in so far as within them all kinds of neuroses are neutralized, all kinds of tensions and frustrated energies grounded and calmed. Indeed, this is what lends them their “spiritual” quality; this is what entitles us to speak of them as “our very own.” Yet this is equally what turns them into the site of a tenacious myth, the ideal site of a neurotic equilibrium. (11)