Gaston Bachelard

the
poetics
of
space

Translated from the French by Maria Jolas
With a new Foreword by John R. Stilgoe

Beacon Press, Boston
I have underlined the words in this short sentence that belong to the imagination of repose. And what a quiet setting for an opium-eater, reading Kant in the combined solitudes of dream and thought! As for the passage Baudelaire devoted to it, no doubt we can read it the way we can read any easy, too easy, passage. A literary critic might even be surprised by the naturalness with which this great poet has used commonplace images. But if, while reading this over-simplified passage, we accept the daydreams of repose it suggests; if we pause over the underlined words, it soon brings tranquility to body and soul. We feel that we are living in the protective center of the house in the valley. We too are “swathed” in the blanket of winter.

And we feel warm because it is cold out-of-doors. Further on in this deep-winter “artificial Paradise” Baudelaire declares that dreamers like a severe winter. “Every year they ask the sky to send down as much snow, hail and frost as it can contain. What they really need are Canadian or Russian winters. Their own nests will be all the warmer, all the downier, all the better beloved . . .” Like Edgar Allan Poe, a great dreamer of curtains, Baudelaire, in order to protect the winter-girt house from cold added “heavy draperies that hung down to the floor.” Behind dark curtains, snow seems to be whiter. Indeed, everything comes alive when contradictions accumulate.

Here Baudelaire has furnished us with a centered picture that leads to the heart of a dream which we can then take over for ourselves. No doubt we shall give it certain personal features, such as peopling Thomas de Quincey’s cottage with persons from our own past. In this way we receive the benefits of this evocation without its exaggerations; our most personal recollections can come and live here. And through some indefinable current of sympathy, Baudelaire’s description has ceased to be commonplace. But it is always like that: well-determined centers of revery are means of communication between men who dream as surely as well-

---

1 Henri Bosco has given an excellent description of this type of revery in the following short phrase: “When the shelter is sure, the storm is good.”
defined concepts are means of communication between men who think.

In *Curiosités esthétiques* (p. 331) Baudelaire also speaks of a canvas by Lavicille which shows “a thatched cottage on the edge of a wood” in winter, “the sad season.” “Certain of the effects that Lavicille often got,” wrote Baudelaire, “seem to me to constitute the very essence of winter happiness.” A reminder of winter strengthens the happiness of inhabiting. In the reign of the imagination alone, a reminder of winter increases the house’s value as a place to live in.

If I were asked to make an expert evaluation of the oneirism in De Quincey’s cottage, as relived by Baudelaire, I should say that there lingers about it the insipid odor of opium, an atmosphere of drowsiness. But we are told nothing about the strength of the walls, or the fortitude of the roof. The house puts up no struggle. It is as though Baudelaire knew of nothing to shut himself in with but curtains.

This absence of struggle is often the case of the winter houses in literature. The dialectics of the house and the universe are too simple, and snow, especially, reduces the exterior world to nothing rather too easily. It gives a single color to the entire universe which, with the one word, snow, is both expressed and nullified for those who have found shelter. In *Les déserts de l’amour* (p. 104), Rimbaud himself said: “C’était comme une nuit d’hiver, avec une neige pour étouffer le monde décidément.” (It was like a winter’s night, with snow to stifle the world for certain.)

In any case, outside the occupied house, the winter cosmos is a simplified cosmos. It is a non-house in the same way that metaphysicians speak of a non-I, and between the house and the non-house it is easy to establish all sorts of contradictions. Inside the house, everything may be differentiated and multiplied. The house derives reserves and refinements of intimacy from winter; while in the outside world, snow covers all tracks, blurs the road, muffles every sound, conceals all colors. As a result of this universal white-

ness, we feel a form of cosmic negation in action. The dreamer of houses knows and senses this, and because of the diminished entity of the outside world, experiences all the qualities of intimacy with increased intensity.

Winter is by far the oldest of the seasons. Not only does it confer age upon our memories, taking us back to a remote past but, on snowy days, the house too is old. It is as though it were living in the past of centuries gone by. This feeling is described by Bachelin in a passage that presents winter in all its hostility.¹ “These were evenings when, in old houses exposed to snow and icy winds, the great stories, the beautiful legends that men hand down to one another, take on concrete meaning and, for those who delve into them, become immediately applicable. And thus it was, perhaps, that one of our ancestors, who lay dying in the year one thousand, should have come to believe in the end of the world.” For here the stories that were told were not the fireside fairy tales recounted by old women; they were stories about men, stories that reflect upon forces and signs. During these winters, Bachelin writes elsewhere (p. 58), “it seems to me that, under the hood of the great fireplace, the old legends must have been much older than they are today.” What they really had was the immemorial quality of the tragic cataclysms that can presage the end of the world.

Recalling these evenings during the dramatic winters in his father’s house, Bachelin writes (p. 104): “When our companions left us, their feet deep in snow and their faces in the teeth of the blizzard, it seemed to me that they were going very far away, to unknown owl-and-wolf-infested lands. I was tempted to call after them, as people did in my early history books: “May God help you!”

And what a striking thing it is that a mere image of the old homestead in the snow-drifts should be able to inte-

ON LONGING

Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection

Susan Stewart

are normally 8–16 inches long and 1 inch in diameter—in versions that are 3 feet long and 3 inches in diameter. Gigantification allows the maker to charge more for his product, yet at the same time may involve less labor because it requires less attention to detail. Similarly, Graburn writes that “Eskimo soapstone sculptors and Cordova santeros calculate that far less time and effort is spent making large, expensive carvings than the more typical small ones.” Thus the tourist aesthetic ensures that the object is continually exoticized and estranged. And, ironically, objects that are originally valued by tourists precisely because of their connections to a traditional, holistic, and paradisal culture are transformed, exaggerated, and modified by the fluctuating demands of that same tourist market.

In the uses of the souvenir, the other side of separation is restoration—here the false promise of restoration. The souvenir must be removed from its context in order to serve as a trace of it, but it must also be restored through narrative and/or reverie. What it is restored to is not an “authentic,” that is, a native, context of origin but an imaginary context of origin whose chief subject is a projection of the possessor’s childhood. Restoration can be seen as a response to an unsatisfactory set of present conditions. Just as the restoration of buildings, often taking place within programs of “gentrification” in contemporary cities, has as its basis the restoration of class relationships that might otherwise be in flux, so the restoration of the souvenir is a conservative idealization of the past and the distanced for the purposes of a present ideology. We thus might say that all souvenirs are souvenirs of a nature which has been invented by ideology. This conclusion speaks not only to the display of Victorian sea shells under glass but also to the broader tendency to place all things natural at one degree of removal from the present flow of events and thereby to objectify them.

The only proper context for the souvenir is the displacement of reverie, the gap between origin/object/subject which fields desire. Whereas the collection is either truly hidden or prominently displayed, the souvenir, so long as it remains “uncollected,” is “lost,” removed from any context of origin and use value in such a way as to “surprise” and capture its viewer into reverie. The actual locale of the souvenir is often commensurate with its material worthlessness: the attic and the cellar, contexts away from the business and engagement of everyday life. Other rooms of a house are tied to function (kitchen, bath) and presentation (parlor, hall) in such a way that they exist within the temporality of everyday life, but the attic and the cellar are tied to the temporality of the past, and they scramble the past into a simultaneous order which memory is invited to rearrange: heaven

and hell, tool and ornament, ancestor and heir, decay and preservation. The souvenir is destined to be forgotten; its tragedy lies in the death of memory, the tragedy of all autobiography and the simultaneous erasure of the autograph. And thus we come again to the powerful metaphor of the unmarked grave, the reunion with the mother with no corresponding regeneration of the symbolic.

**Part II. THE COLLECTION, PARADISE OF CONSUMPTION**

**Context Destroyed**

The souvenir involves the displacement of attention into the past. The souvenir is not simply an object appearing out of context, an object from the past incongruously surviving in the present; rather, its function is to envelop the present within the past. Souvenirs are magical objects because of this transformation. Yet the magic of the souvenir is a kind of failed magic. Instrumentality replaces essence here as it does in the case of all magical objects, but this instrumentality always works an only partial transformation. The place of origin must remain unavailable in order for desire to be generated.

All souvenirs are souvenirs of nature, yet it is nature in its most synthetic, its most acculturated, sense which appears here. Nature is arranged diachronically through the souvenir; its synchrony and atemporality are manipulated into a human time and order. The pressed flowers under glass speak to the significance of their owner in nature and not to themselves in nature. They are a sample of a larger and more sublime nature, a nature differentiated by human experience, by human history.

In contrast to the souvenir, the collection offers example rather than sample, metaphor rather than metonymy. The collection does not displace attention to the past; rather, the past is at the service of the collection, for whereas the souvenir lends authenticity to the past, the past lends authenticity to the collection. The collection seeks a form of self-enclosure which is possible because of its ahistoricism. The collection replaces history with classification, with order beyond the realm of temporality. In the collection, time is not something to be restored to an origin; rather, all time is made simultaneous or synchronous within the collection’s world.

The souvenir still bears a trace of use value in its instrumentality, but the collection represents the total aestheticization of use value. The collection is a form of art as play, a form involving the reframing of objects within a world of attention and manipulation of context.
Like other forms of art, its function is not the restoration of context of origin but rather the creation of a new context, a context standing in a metaphorical, rather than a contiguous, relation to the world of everyday life. Yet unlike many forms of art, the collection is not representational. The collection presents a hermetic world: to have a representative collection is to have both the minimum and the complete number of elements necessary for an autonomous world—a world which is both full and singular, which has banished repetition and achieved authority.

We might therefore say, begging forgiveness, that the archetypal collection is Noah's Ark, a world which is representative yet which erases its context of origin. The world of the ark is a world not of nostalgia but of anticipation. While the earth and its redundancies are destroyed, the collection maintains its integrity and boundary. Once the object is completely severed from its origin, it is possible to generate a new series, to start again within a context that is framed by the selectivity of the collector: "And of every living thing of all flesh, you shall bring two of every sort into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every sort shall come in to you, to keep them alive. Also take with you every sort of food that is eaten, and store it up; and it shall serve as food for you and for them." The world of the ark is dependent upon a prior creation: Noah has not invented a world; he is simply God's broker. What he rescues from oblivion is the two that is one plus one, the two that can generate seriality and infinity by the symmetrical joining of asymmetry. While the point of the souvenir may be remembering, or at least the invention of memory, the point of the collection is forgetting—starting again in such a way that a finite number of elements create, by virtue of their combination, an infinite reverie. Whose labor made the ark is not the question: the question is what is inside.

This difference in purpose is the reason why the scrapbook and the memory quilt must properly be seen as souvenirs rather than as collections. In apprehending such objects, we find that the whole dissolves into parts, each of which refers metonymically to a context of origin or acquisition. This is the experience of objects into-narratives that we saw in the animation of the toy and that becomes, in fact, the "animating" principle of works such as Xavier de Maistre's *Voyage Autour de Ma Chambre*: "Mais il est aussi impossible d'expliquer clairement un tableau que de faire un portrait ressemblant d'après une description." In contrast, each element within the collection is representative and works in combination toward the creation of a new whole that is the context of the collection itself. The spatial whole of the collection supersedes the individual narratives that "lie behind it." In an article on the aesthetics of British mercantilism, James H. Bunn suggests that "in a curio cabinet each cultural remnant has a circumscribed allusiveness among a collection of others. If the unintentional aesthetic of accumulating exotic goods materialized as a side effect of mercantilism, it can be semiotically considered as a special case of eclecticism, which intentionally ignores proprieties of native history and topography." The aesthetics of mercantilism, which Bunn places within the period of 1688–1763, is thus in an important way the antithesis of the aesthetics of antiquarianism. The antiquarian is moved by a nostalgia of origin and presence; his function is to validate the culture of ground, as we see in works such as Camden's *Britannia*. But the mercantilist is not moved by restoration; he is moved by extraction and seriality. He removes the object from context and places it within the play of signifiers that characterize an exchange economy. Because the collection replaces origin with classification, thereby making temporality a spatial and material phenomenon, its existence is dependent upon principles of organization and categorization. As Baudrillard has suggested, it is necessary to distinguish between the concept of collection and that of accumulation: "Le stade inférieur est celui de l'accumulation de matières: entassement de vieillards papiers, stockage de nourriture—à mi-chemin entre l'introjection orale et la rétention anale—puis l'accumulation sérielle d'objets identiques. La collection, elle, émerge vers la culture . . . sans cesser de renvoyer les uns aux autres, ils incluent dans ce jeu une extériorité sociale, des relations humaines." Herein lies the difference between the collections of humans and the collections of pack rats. William James reported that a California wood rat arranges nails in a symmetrical, fortresslike pattern around his nest, but the objects "collected"—silver, tobacco, watches, tools, knives, matches, pieces of glass—are without seriality, without relation to one another or to a context of acquisition. Such accumulation is obviously not connected to the culture and the economy in the same way that the collection proper is connected to such structures. Although the objects of a hobbyist's collection have significance only in relation to one another and to the seriality that such a relation implies, the objects collected by the wood rat are intrinsic objects, objects complete in themselves because of the sensory qualities that have made them attractive to the rat. James found the same propensity for collecting intrinsic objects among "misers" in lunatic asylums: "the miser" *par excellence* of the popular imagination and of melodrama, the monster of squalor and misanthropy, is simply one of these mentally deranged persons. His
intellect may in many matters be clear, but his instincts, especially that of ownership, are insane, and their insanity has no more to do with the association of ideas than with the precession of the equinoxes. Thus James concludes that hoarders have an uncontrollable impulse to take and keep. Here we might add that this form of insanity is, like anal retentiveness, an urge toward incorporation for its own sake, an attempt to erase the limits of the body that is at the same time an attempt, marked by desperation, to “keep body and soul together.”

Although it is clear that there is a correspondence between the productions of art and the productions of insanity in these cases, it is equally clear that the miser’s collection depends upon a refusal of differentiation while the hobbyist’s collection depends upon an acceptance of differentiation as its very basis for existence. Thus the “proper” collection will always take part in an anticipation of redemption: for example, the eventual coining-in of objects or the eventual acquisition of object status by coins themselves. But the insane collection is a collection for its own sake and for its own movement. It refuses the very system of objects and thus metonymically refuses the entire political economy that serves as the foundation for that system and the only domain within which the system acquires meaning. Baudrillard as well concludes that because of the collection’s seriality, a “formal” interest always replaces a “real” interest in collected objects. This replacement holds to the extent that aesthetic value replaces use value. But such an aesthetic value is so clearly tied to the cultural (i.e., deferment, redemption, exchange) that its value system is the value system of the cultural; the formalism of the collection is never an “empty” formalism.

Inside and Outside

To ask which principles of organization are used in articulating the collection is to begin to discern what the collection is about. It is not sufficient to say that the collection is organized according to time, space, or internal qualities of the objects themselves, for each of these parameters is divided in a dialectic of inside and outside, public and private, meaning and exchange value. To arrange the objects according to time is to juxtapose personal time with social time, autobiography with history, and thus to create a fiction of the individual life, a time of the individual subject both transcendent to and parallel to historical time. Similarly, the spatial organization of the collection, left to right, front to back, behind and before, depends upon the creation of an individual perceiving and apprehending the collection with eye and hand. The collection’s space must move between the public and the private, between display and hiding. Thus the miniature is suitable as an item of collection because it is sized for individual consumption at the same time that its surplus of detail connotes infinity and distance. While we can “see” the entire collection, we cannot possibly “see” each of its elements. We thereby also find at work here the play between identity and difference which characterizes the collection organized in accordance with qualities of the objects themselves. To group objects in a series because they are “the same” is to simultaneously signify their difference. In the collection, the more the objects are similar, the more imperative it is that we make gestures to distinguish them. As an example of this obsession with series, consider Pepys’s library:

Samuel Pepys, who arranged and rearranged his library, finally classified his books according to size. In double rows on the shelves the larger volumes were placed behind the smaller so that the lettering on all could be seen; and in order that the tops might be even with each other, this neat collector built wooden stilts where necessary and, placing those under the shorter books, gilded them to match the bindings! Subject and reference-convenience were secondary in this arrangement, except insofar as the sacrosanct diary was concerned, and this, which had been written in notebooks of varying size, Mr. Pepys, reverting to reason, had bound uniformly so that its parts might be kept together without disturbing the library’s general arrangement-scheme.

Pepys’s collection must be displayed as an identical series (the stilt arrangement) and as a set of individual volumes (“so that the lettering on all could be seen”). The necessity of identity at the expense of information here is an example of Baudrillard’s suggestion that formal interest replaces real interest. That this is often the motivation of the bibliophile is also made clear by the buying of “books” that are joined cardboard bindings decorated to look like matched sets of volumes, yet in fact are empty.

The collection is not constructed by its elements; rather, it comes to exist by means of its principle of organization. If that principle is bounded at the onset of the collection, the collection will be finite, or at least potentially finite. If that principle tends toward infinity or series itself, the collection will be open-ended. As an example of the first type, William Carew Hazlitt’s suggestions for the coin collector hold:

There are collectors who make their choice and stand by it; others who collect different series at different times; others whose scheme is
miscellaneous or desultory. To all these classes increased facility for judging within a convenient compass what constitutes a series, its chronology, its features, its difficulties, ought to be acceptable. To master even the prominent monographs is a task which is sufficient to deter all but the most earnest and indefatigable enthusiasts: and, as usual, no doubt, collections are made on a principle more or less loose and vague. At any rate, the first step should be, we apprehend, to reconnoitre the ground, and measure the space to be traversed, with the accurate cost.^{31}

As an example of the second type, consider C. Montesor’s suggestion that children collect clergymen’s names: ‘There were the coloured clergy—Green, Black, White, Gray, etc. The happy clergy, in the state of—Bliss, Peace, Joy, etc. The virtuous clergy—Virtue, Goodenough, Wise, etc. The poor clergy, who possessed only a—Penny, Farthing, Ha’penny. The moneymen clergy; these were—Rich, Money, etc. The bad clergy—Shy, Cunning, etc.’^{32} Here we might also remember Walter Benjamin’s project of collecting quotations, a collection which would illustrate the infinite and regenerative serticals of language itself.

Any intrinsic connection between the principle of organization and the elements themselves is minimized by the collection. We see little difference between collections of stones or butterflies and collections of coins or stamps. In acquiring objects, the collector replaces production with consumption: objects are naturalized into the landscape of the collection itself. Therefore, stones and butterflies are made cultural by classification, and coins and stamps are naturalized by the erosion of labor and the erasure of context of production. This impulse to remove objects from their contexts of origin and production and to replace those contexts with the context of the collection is quite evident in the practices of Floyd E. Nichols of New York City, a collector’s collector. Rather than exhibit his many collected items according to type, Nichols would group objects together so that they told a story: ‘For instance, with miniature cat, mice, whiskey glass, and whiskey bottle, he dramatizes the proverb, ‘One drink of moonshine whiskey would make a mouse spit in a cat’s face,’ and ‘To miniature camels he attached a number 5 needle, the wire being shaped so that when it was pulled away from the needle, the camel mounted on the traverse section of the wire passed completely through the eye of the needle.’ Nichols’s practice exemplifies the replacement of the narrative of production by the narrative of the collection, the replacement of the narrative of history with the narrative of the individual subject—that is, the collector himself.

Whereas the space of the souvenir is the body (talisman), the pery (memory), or the contradiction of private display (reverie), the space of the collection is a complex interplay of exposure and hiding, organization and the chaos of infinity. The collection relies upon the box, the cabinet, the cupboard, the seriality of shelves. It is determined by these boundaries, just as the self is invited to expand within the confines of bourgeois domestic space. For the environment to be an extension of the self, it is necessary not to act upon and transform it, but to declare its essential emptiness by filling it. Ornament, décor, and ultimately decorum define the boundaries of private space by emptying that space of any relevance other than that of the subject. In a suggestive essay on the etymology of the terms milieu and ambience, Leo Spitzer traces the notion of authentic place as moving from the classical macrocosmic/microcosmic relation between man and nature, in which space is climate, protector, and affecting presence; to the medieval theory of gradations, in which social position becomes the natural place of being; to the late-seventeenth-century notion of the interior: ‘It is in such descriptions of an interior setting that the idea of the “milieu” (enclosing and “filled in”) is presented most forcefully; we have the immediate milieu of the individual. One may remember the voice which paintings of the same type enjoyed in the preceding century—intérieurs depicting the coziness and comfort of well-furnished human dwellings. . . . The world-embracing, metaphysical, cupola that once enfolded mankind has disappeared, and man is left to rattle around in an infinite universe. Thus he seeks all the more to fill in his immediate, his physical, environment with things.’^{33}

If this task of filling in the immediate environment with things were simply one of use value, it would be quite simple. But this filling in is a matter of ornamentation and presentation in which the interior is both a model and a projection of self-fashioning. The contradictions of the aesthetic canon are contradictions of genealogy and personality: harmony and disruption, sequence and combination, pattern and variation. Consider Grace Vallois’s extensive advice in First Steps in Collecting Furniture, Glass, and China:

There is to me something distinctly incongruous in seeing a large Welsh dresser (never originally meant for anything but a kitchen) occupying the entire wall of a little jerry-built twentieth century dining room, and adorned with the necessary adjuncts of everyday life, biscuit boxes perhaps, and a Tantalus stand. Sometimes the dresser is promoted to the ‘drawing room’ so called, and thrusts its grand, simple old lines, among palms in pots, an ugly but convenient Sutherland table for tea, or crowning atrocity, one of those three-tiered stands for cake and bread and butter. These things may be convenient, but they do not go
with the old dresser! . . . It is not necessary to have everything of the same period, that, to my mind, is dull and uninteresting. An ancestral home is necessarily built up bit by bit, each generation has added something and left their impress in the old house. I like to see Jacobean chairs living amicably with Sheraton cabinets, and old four posters sharing floor space with 17th century Bridal chests, and 18th century Hepplewhite chairs. That is as it should be, and appeals to me far more than a perfect 18th century house, where everything inside and out seems to speak of Adam.35

Ironically, Booth Tarkington’s parody of collectors in The Collector’s Whatnot contains a similar essay by one “Angustula Thomas” on “pooning,” or arranging, the collection. Angustula advises: “Don’t adhere too closely to periods. If you have acquired a few good pieces of Egyptian furniture of the Shepherd King Period for your living-room, they may be easily combined with Sheraton or Eastlake by placing a Mingg vase or an old French fowling-piece between the two groups; or you may cover the transition by a light scattering of Mexican pottery, or some Java wine-jars.”36 These texts, either “sincere” or parodying, imply that possession cannot be undertaken independent of collection and arrangement. Each sign is placed in relation to a chain of signifiers whose ultimate referent is not the interior of the room—in itself an empty essence—but the interior of the self.

In order to construct this narrative of interiority it is necessary to obliterate the object’s context of origin. In these examples, eclecticism rather than pure seriality is to be admired because, if for no other reason, it marks the heterogeneous organization of the self, a self capable of transcending the accidents and dispersions of historical reality. But eclecticism at the same time depends upon the unstated seriality it has bounded from. Not simply a consumer of the objects that fill the décor, the self generates a fantasy in which it becomes producer of those objects, a producer by arrangement and manipulation. The rather extraordinary confidence with which Vallois addresses her audience, which is assumed to have access to the “controlled variety” of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century antiques that she “likes to see,” is the confidence of the managerial classes, whose own role in the production of history is dependent upon the luxury of the collection of surplus value. Here we might consider the structural meaning of the “flea” market as dependent upon the leisure tastes and discarded fashions of the host culture: the market economy. Similarly, Balzac’s original title for his novel of collecting, Cousin Pons, was Le Paria. As we know from the antics of that poor relation, the economy of collecting is a fantastic one, an economy with its own principles of exchange, substitution, and replicability despite its dependence upon the larger economic system. Balzac’s narrator tells us: “The joy of buying bric-à-brac is a secondary delight; in the give-and-take of barter lies the joy of joys.”37 The term a-bric-a-brac, which we might translate as “by hook or crook,” implies the process of acquisition and exchange, which is the (false) labor of the collector. Herein lies the ironic nostalgia of the collection’s economic system: although dependent upon, and a mirroring of, the larger economy of surplus value, this smaller economy is self-sufficient and self-generating with regard to its own meanings and principles of exchange. Whereas the larger economy has replaced use value through the translation of labor into exchange value, the economy of the collection translates the monetary system into the system of objects. Indeed, that system of objects is often designed to serve as a stay against the frailties of the very monetary system from which it has sprung. The collection thereby acquires an aura of transcendence and independence that is symptomatic of the middle class’s values regarding personality.

When one wants to disparage the souvenir, one says that it is not authentic; when one wants to disparage the collected object, one says “it is not you.” Thus Spitzer’s model of the self as occupying the interior in conjunction with objects is not a completely adequate one, for the contained here is the self; the material body is simply one more position within the seriality and diversity of objects. Private space is marked by an exterior material boundary and an interior surplus of signification.

To play with series is to play with the fire of infinity. In the collection the threat of infinity is always met with the articulation of boundary. Simultaneous sets are worked against each other in the same way that attention to the individual object and attention to the whole are worked against each other. [The collection thus appears as a mode of control and containment insofar as it is a mode of generation and series.] And this function of containment must be taken into account as much as any simple Freudian model when we note the great popularity of collecting objects that are themselves containers: cruet sets, pitchers, salt-and-pepper shakers, vases, teapots, and boxes, to name a few. The finite boundaries these objects afford are played against the infinite possibility of their collection, and, analogously, their finite use value when filled is played against the measureless emptiness that marks their new aesthetic function. ]

In other cases, categorization allows the collection to be finite—indeed, this finitude becomes the collector’s obsession. The New York Times for March 16, 1980, carried an account of a man who was (and probably still is) searching for three antique Tiffany postal scales; he
owns six of the nine that are said to exist and has paid a special finding service to look for the missing trio of scales. William Walsh’s *Handy-book of Literary Curiosities* recounts a comparable story:

There is a story of a wealthy English collector who long believed that a certain rare book in his possession was a unique. One day he received a bitter blow. He learned that there was another copy in Paris. But he soon rallied, and, crossing over the Channel, he made his way to the rival’s home. “You have such and such a book in your library?” he asked, plunging at once in medios res. “Yes.” “Well, I want to buy it.” “But, my dear sir—” “I will give you a thousand francs for it.” “But it isn’t for sale; I—” “Two thousand!” “On my word, I don’t care to dispose of it.” “Ten thousand!” and so on, till at last twenty-five thousand francs was offered; and the Parisian gentleman finally consented to part with this treasure. The Englishman counted out twenty-five thousand-franc bills, examined the purchase carefully, smiled with satisfaction, and cast the book into the fire. “Are you crazy?” cried the Parisian, stooping over to rescue it. “Nay,” said the Englishman, detaining his arm. “I am quite in my right mind. I, too, possess a copy of that book. I deemed it a unique.”

This story is, by now, a legend of collecting (Baudrillard, via Maurice Rheims, recounts it as happening in New York). It is an account of the replacement of content with classification, an account of the ways in which collection is the antithesis of creation. In its search for a perfect hermeticism, the collection must destroy both labor and history. The bibliomaniac’s desire for the possession of the unique object is similarly reflected in the collector’s obsession with the aberration. D’Israeli records that Cicero wrote thus to Atticus requesting his help in forming a collection of antiquities: “In the name of our friendship suffer nothing to escape you of whatever you find curious or rare.”

The collector can gain control over repetition or series by defining a finite set (the Tiffany postal scales) or by possessing the unique object. The latter object has acquired a particular poignancy since the onset of mechanical reproduction; the aberrant or unique object signifies the flaw in the machine just as the machine once signified the flaws of handmade production. Veblen’s critique of conspicuous consumption similarly concluded that the handmade object’s crudity was, ironically, a symptom of conspicuous waste. “Hand labor is a more wasteful method of production; hence the goods turned out by this method are more serviceable for the purpose of pecuniary reputeability; hence the marks of hand labor come to be honorific, and the goods which exhibit these marks take rank as of higher grade than the corresponding machine product . . . . The appreciation of those evidences of honorific crudeness to which hand-wrought goods owe their superior worth and charm in the eyes of well-bred people is a matter of nice discrimination.” Thus a measured crudity of material quality is presented in tension with an overrefinement of significance. This tension is further exaggerated by the juxtaposition of the unique and singular qualities of the individual object against the seriality of the collection as a whole.

The collection is often about containment on the level of its content and on the level of the series, but it is also about containment in a more abstract sense. Like Noah’s Ark, those great civic collections, the library and the museum, seek to represent experience within a mode of control and confinement. One cannot know everything about the world, but one can at least approach closed knowledge through the collection. Although transendental and comprehensive in regard to its own context, such knowledge is both eclectic and eccentric. Thus the ahistoricism of such knowledge makes it particularistic and consequently random. In writings on collecting, one constantly finds discussion of the collection as a mode of knowledge. Alice Van Leer Carrick declares in the preface to *Collector’s Luck* that “collecting isn’t just a fad; it isn’t even just a ‘divine madness’: properly interpreted, it is a liberal education.” Indeed, one might say inversely that the liberal arts education characteristic of the leisure classes is in itself a mode of collection. The notion of the “educational hobby” legitimates the collector’s need for control and possession within a world of infinitely consumable objects whose production and consumption are far beyond the ken of the individual subject. Although the library might be seen in a semantic sense as representing the world, this is not the collector’s view; for the collector the library is a representative collection of books just as any collection is representative of its class of objects. Thus, for the collector, the material quality of the book is foregrounded, a feature parodied by Bruyère: “Of such a collector, as soon as I enter his house, I am ready to faint on the staircase, from a strong smell of Morocco leather; in vain he shows me fine editions, gold leaves, Etruscan bindings, and naming them one after another, as if he were showing a gallery of pictures! . . . I thank him for his politeness, and as little as himself care to visit the innhouse, which he calls his library.”

Yet it is the museum, not the library, which must serve as the central metaphor of the collection; it is the museum, in its representativeness, which strives for authenticity and for closure of all space and temporality within the context at hand. In an essay on *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, Eugenio Donato has written:

The set of objects the Museum displays is sustained only by the fiction that they somehow constitute a coherent representational universe. The fiction is that a repeated metonymic displacement of fragment for
totality, object to label, series of objects to series of labels, can still produce a representation which is somehow adequate to a nonlinguistic universe. Such a fiction is the result of an uncritical belief in the notion that ordering and classifying, that is to say, the spatial juxtaposition of fragments, can produce a representational understanding of the world.44

Thus there are two movements to the collection's gesture of standing for the world: first, the metonymic displacement of part for whole, item for context; and second, the invention of a classification scheme which will define space and time in such a way that the world is accounted for by the elements of the collection. We can see that what must be suppressed here is the privileging of context of origin, for the elements of the collection are, in fact, already accounted for by the world. And we can consequently see the logic behind the blithe gesture toward decontextualization in museum acquisitions, a gesture which results in the treasures of one culture being stored and displayed in the museums of another. Similarly, the museum of natural history allows nature to exist "all at once" in a way in which it could not otherwise exist. Because of the fiction of such a museum, it is the Linnaean system which articulates the identities of plants, for example, and not the other way around. The popularity of tableau scenes in the natural history museum and the zoo further speaks to the dramatic impulse toward simultaneity and the felicitous reconciliation of opposites which characterize such collections.

In her book on collecting, which she wrote for children, Montiesor recommends that "every house ought to possess a 'Museum,' even if it is only one shelf in a small cupboard; here, carefully dated and named, should be placed the pretty shells you gather on the seashore, the old fossils you find in the rocks, the skeleton leaves you pick up from under the hedges, the strange orchids you find on the downs. Learn what you can about each object before you put it in the museum, and docket it not only with its name, but also with the name of the place in which you found it, and the date."45 Thus we have directions for the homemade universe; nature is nothing more or less than that group of objects which is articulated by the classification system at hand, in this case a "personal" one. When objects are defined in terms of their use value, they serve as extensions of the body into the environment, but when objects are defined by the collection, such an extension is inverted, serving to subsume the environment to a scenario of the personal. The ultimate term in the series that marks the collection is the "self," the articulation of the collector's own "identity." Yet ironically and by extension, the fetishist's impulse toward accumulation and privacy, hoarding and the secret, serves both to give integrity to the self and at the same time to overload the self with signification. Bunn, in his article on British mercantilist culture, has suggested that this surplus of significance can, in fact, saturate the collector: "Although the chance removal of a cultural token cauterizes its source, it also overwhelms unintentionally the semiological substructure of its host."46 For an example of this process by which the host is overwhelmed, we might remember the haunting picture of Mario Praz at the conclusion of La Casa della Vita; gazing into a convex mirror which reflects a room full of collected objects, Praz sees himself as no bigger than a handful of dust, a museum piece among museum pieces, detached and remote.

The boundary between collection and fetishism is mediated by classification and display in tension with accumulation and secrecy. As W. C. Hazlitt wrote, "The formation of Collections of Coins originated, not in the Numismatist, but in the Hoarder. Individuals, from an early stage in the history of coined money, laid pieces aside, as (nearer to our day) Samuel Pepys did, because they were striking or novel, or secreted them in the ground, like Pepys, because they were thought to be insecure."47 In the hoarder the gesture toward an incomplete replacement (the part-object)—the gesture we saw at work through the substitution of the souvenir for origin—becomes a compulsion, the formation of a repetition or chain of substituting signifiers. Following Lévi-Strauss's work on totems, Baudrillard concludes that the desire and jouissance characterizing fetishism result from the systematic quality of objects rather than from the objects themselves: "Ce qui fascine dans l'argent (l'or) n'est ni sa matérialité, ni même l'équivalent capté d'une certaine force (de travail) ou d'un certain pouvoir virtuel, c'est sa systématique; c'est la virtualité, enfermée dans cette matière, de substitutivité totale de toutes les valeurs grâce à leur abstraction définitive."48 In the collection such systematicity results in the quantification of desire. Desire is ordered, arranged, and manipulated, not fathomless as in the nostalgia of the souvenir. Here we must take into account not only Freud's theory of the fetish but Marx's as well.

The fetishized object must have a reference point within the system of the exchange economy—even the contemporary fetishization of the body in consumer culture is dependent upon the system of images within which the corporeal body has been transformed into another point of representation. As Lacan has noted, the pleasure of possessing an object is dependent upon others. Thus the object's position in a system of referents—a system we may simultaneously and variously characterize as the psychoanalytic life history or as the points of an exchange economy marking the places of "existence"—and not any
intrinsic qualities of the object or even its context of origin, determines its fetishistic value. The further the object is removed from use value, the more abstract it becomes and the more multivocal is its referentiality. The dialectic between hand and eye, possession and transcendence, which motivates the fetish, is dependent upon this abstraction. Thus, just as we saw that in its qualities of eclecticism and transcendence the collection can serve as a metaphor for the individual personality, so the collection can also serve as a metaphor for the social relations of an exchange economy. The collection replicates Marx's by now familiar account of the objectification of commodities:

> It is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.

In this passage we find a description of the process by which the alienation of labor emerges—the abstraction of labor within the cycle of exchange, an abstraction which makes the work of the body perceivable in terms of its signifying capacity. This estrangement of labor from its location in lived relations is perceivable in the operation of the souvenir as the souvenir both mourns and celebrates the gap between object and context of origin. It is, in other words, by means of the alienation of labor that the object is constituted. Yet Marx's model of the process of fetishization focuses upon the inversion by which the self as producer of meanings is seen as independent of that production. We must extend this description a degree further in order to see the final stage of this alienation, a stage in which the self is constituted by its consumption of goods.

What is the proper labor of the consumer? It is a labor of total magic, a fantastic labor which operates through the manipulation of abstraction rather than through concrete or material means. Thus, in contrast to the souvenir, the collection presents a metaphor of "production" not as "the earned" but as "the captured." The scene of origin is not a scene of the transformation of nature; it is too late for that. Nor is it simply a scene of appropriation, as it might be through the exercise of the body upon the world. We go to the souvenir, but the collection comes to us. The collection says that the world is given; we are inheritors, not producers, of value here. We "luck into" the collection; it might attach itself to particular scenes of acquisition, but the integrity of those scenes is subsumed to the transcendental and ahistorical context of the collection itself. This context destroys the context of origin. In the souvenir, the object is made magical; in the collection, the mode of production is made magical. In this belief in fortune we see a further erasure of labor. As Veblen noted in The Theory of the Leisure Class, "The belief in luck is a sense of fortuitous necessity in the sequence of phenomena." The souvenir magically transports us to the scene of origin, but the collection is magically and serially transported to the scene of acquisition, its proper destination. And this scene of acquisition is repeated over and over through the serial arrangement of objects in display space. Thus, collected objects are not the result of the serial operation of labor upon the material environment. Rather, they present the seriality of an animate world; their production appears to be self-motivated and self-realized. If they are "made," it is by a process that seems to invent itself for the pleasure of the acquirer. Once again, an illusion of a relation between things takes the place of a social relation.

The souvenir reconstitutes the scene of acquisition as a merging with the other and thus promises the imaginary paradise of the self-as-world even as it must use the symbolic, the narrative, as a device to arrive at that reunion. But the collection takes this movement even further. In its erasure of labor, the collection is prelapsarian. One "finds" the elements of the collection much as the prelapsarian Adam and Eve could find the satisfaction of their needs without a necessary articulation of desire. The collector constructs a narrative of luck which replaces the narrative of production. Thus the collection is not only far removed from contexts of material production; it is also the most abstract of all forms of consumption. And in its translation back into the particular cycle of exchange which characterizes the universe of the "collectable," the collected object represents quite simply the ultimate self-referentiality and seriality of money at the same time that it declares its independence from "mere" money. We might remember that of all invisible workers, those who actually make money are the least visible. All collected objects are thereby objets de lux, objects abstracted from use value and materiality within a magic cycle of self-referential exchange.

This cycle returns us to Eliot's distinction between "old leisure" and "amusement." Crafts are contiguous to preindustrial modes of production, and thus use value lies at the core of their aesthetic forms; analogously, the production of amusement mimes the seriality and abstraction of postindustrial modes of production. For example, one might think of square dancing, like bluegrass music, as an imita-
tion of the organization of mechanical modes of production in its patterns of seriality, dispersal, and reintegration. Within contemporary consumer society, the collection takes the place of crafts as the prevailing form of domestic pastime. Ironically, such collecting combines a preindustrial aesthetic of the handmade and singular object with a postindustrial mode of acquisition/production: the ready-made.

Metaconsumption: The Female Impersonator

This ironic combination of preindustrial content and postindustrial form is only one in a series of contradictions under which the collection operates. We must look more closely at the type of consumerism the collection represents. In presenting a form of aesthetic consumption, the collection creates the conditions for a functional consumption; in marking out the space of the ornament and the superfluous, it defines a mode of necessity. And yet it is not acceptable to simply purchase a collection in toto; the collection must be acquired in a serial manner. This seriality provides a means for defining or classifying the collection and the collector’s life history, and it also permits a systematic substitution of purchase for labor. “Earning” the collection simply involves waiting, creating the pauses that articulate the biography of the collector.

Furthermore, the collection cannot be defined simply in terms of the worth of its elements. Just as the system of exchange depends upon the relative position of the commodity in the chain of signifiers, so the collection as a whole implies a value—esthetic or otherwise—severed from the simple sum of its individual members. We have emphasized aesthetic value here because a value of manipulation and positioning, not a value of reference to a context of origin, is at work in the collection. Thus, just as we saw that the material value of the souvenir was an ephemeral one juxtaposed with a surplus of value in relation to the individual life history, so the ephemeral quality of the collected object can be displaced by the value of relations and sheer quantity. Every coin dissolves into the infinite meaning of face, the deepest of surfaces, yet every coin also presents a point of enumeration; the accumulation of coins promises the amassing of a cyclical world that could replace the world itself. In the face of an apocalypse, gold and antiques are gathered, just as we earlier saw Crusoe deciding to take the money after all.

And on the other side of this scale of values, we must consider collections of ephemera proper—collections made of disposable items such as beer cans, cast-off clothing, wine bottles, or political buttons.

Such collections might seem to be anticollections in their denial of the values of the antique and the classic as transcendent forms. Yet such collections do more than negate. First, through their accumulation and arrangement they might present an aesthetic tableau which no single element could sustain. For example, collections of wine bottles or cruets placed in a window mark the differentiation of light and space. In this way, they, too, might function as “intrinsic objects” like the nails and glass fragments collected by the wood rat. Second, collections of ephemera serve to exaggerate certain dominant features of the exchange economy: its seriality, novelty, and abstraction. And by means or by virtue of such exaggeration, they are an ultimate form of consumerism; they classicize the novel, enabling mode and fashion to extend in both directions—toward the past as well as toward the future.

Kitsch and camp objects offer a simultaneous popularization of the antique and antiquation of the fad; they destroy the last frontier of intrinsicality. Baudrillard has suggested in a brief passage on kitsch in *La Société de consommation* that kitsch represents a saturation of the object with details. Yet this saturation would be a feature of many valued objects, including both souvenirs and “classic” items for collection. Rather, it would be more accurate to say that the kitsch object offers a saturation of materiality, a saturation which takes place to such a degree that materiality is ironic, split into contrasting voices: past and present, mass production and individual subject, oblivion and reification. Such objects serve to subjectify all of consumer culture, to institute a nostalgia of the populace which in fact makes the populace itself a kind of subject. Kitsch objects are not apprehended as the souvenir proper is apprehended, that is, on the level of the individual autobiography; rather, they are apprehended on the level of collective identity. They are souvenirs of an era and not of a self. Hence they tend to accumulate around that period of intense socialization, adolescence, just as the souvenir proper accumulates around that period of intense subjectivity, childhood. The seriality of kitsch objects is articulated by the constant self-periodization of popular culture. Their value depends upon the fluctuations of a self-referential collector’s market, just as all collections do, but with the additional constraint of fashion. Furthermore, whereas objects such as hand tools had an original use value, the original use value of kitsch objects is an elusive one. Their value in their context of origin was most likely their contemporaneousness, their relation to the fluctuating demands of style. Hence kitsch and camp items may be seen as forms of metafashion. Their collection constitutes a discourse on the constant re-creation of novelty within the exchange economy. And in
functions to erased the true labor, the true productivity, of women. Yet this erasure forms the very possibility of the cycle of exchange.

If we say that the collection in general marks the final erasure of labor within the abstractions of late capitalism, we must conclude by saying that kitsch and camp, as forms of metaconsumption, have arisen from the contradictions implicit in the operation of the exchange economy; they mark an antisubject whose emergence ironically has been necessitated by the narratives of significance under that economy. It is only by virtue of the imitation that the popular classes have the illusion of having at all. The imitation as abstraction, as element of series, as novelty and luxury at once, is necessarily the classic of contemporary consumer culture. This imitation marks the final wrestling of the market away from the place we think we know, firsthand, as nature.

their collapsing of the narrow time and deep space of the popular into the deep time and narrow space of the antique. They serve an ideology which would jumble class relations, an ideology which substitutes a labor of perpetual consumption for a labor of production.

The term kitsch comes from the German kitschen, “to put together sloppily.” The kitsch object as collected object thus takes the abstraction from use value a step further. We saw that the collection of handmade objects translates the time of manual labor into the simultaneity of conspicuous waste. The desire for the kitsch object as either souvenir or collected item marks the complete disintegration of materiality through an ironic display of an overmateriality. The inside bursts its bounds and presents a pure surface of outside. The kitsch object symbolizes not transcendence but emergence in the speed of fashion. Its expendability is the expendability of all consumer goods, their dependence upon novelty as the replacement of use value and craftsmanship.

Camp is perhaps a more complex term. The American Heritage Dictionary (what title better speaks to a nostalgia for standard?) tells us that the term has obscure origins, but has come to mean “an affectation or appreciation of manners and tastes commonly thought to be outlandish, vulgar or banal...to act in an outlandish or effeminate manner.” In all their uses, both kitsch and camp imply the imitation, the inauthentic, the impersonation. Their significance lies in their exaggerated display of the values of consumer culture. Fashion and fad take place within the domain of the feminine not simply because they are emblematic of the trivial. We must move beyond any intrinsic functional argument here that would say that the subject is prior to the feminine. Rather, the feminine-as-impersonation forms a discourse miming the discourse of male productivity, authority, and predication here. And the further impersonation of the feminine which we see in camp marks the radical separation of “feminine discourse” from the subject. This separation has arisen historically as a result of capital’s need to place subjects heterogeneously throughout the labor market. And thus this separation has resulted in a denuding of the feminine, making the discourse of the feminine available to parody. The “eternal feminine” presents a notion of the classic, a notion of transcendence necessitated by the political economy: the camp is its parody. And this parody reveals the feminine as surface, showing the deep face of the feminine as a purely material relation, that relation which places women within the cycle of exchange and simultaneously makes their labor invisible. The conception of woman as consumer is no less fantastic or violent than its literalization in the vagina dentata myth, for it is a conception which